Here lies the end of another year. For many of our staff members, these are the last pages of Dialogue we will ever put into publication and as we move closer to graduation, the changes this magazine have made in us are becoming clearer.

Sharing experiences with you all during campus events, release parties, magazine and poster distribution and discussion about Dialogue has been a blessing. Spending time in the office engaged in unforgettable conversations inspired by your work and your questions are moments we cherish.

This issue also represents the close of the college journey for many jury members, writers, artists, and readers. To all the graduates, we would like to extend a special thanks for the blessing you have been as you contributed to the shape and scope of our magazine.

We have successfully released four more issues that have been added to our archive, continuing the tradition. But more than that, we have worked together with a wide body of contributors to create conversations. Through those conversations, the meaning of Dialogue has transformed as our vision and mission changes to fit our network of supporters.

While we all enjoy the scattered days of beautiful weather and anticipate our summer plans, Dialogue has begun planning new possibilities. Though it is difficult to look forward and to accept the coming changes, this time of transition allows us to create new dreams for the future.

We hope to be a transparent magazine, one that invites anyone and everyone to participate in your own way. There are many ways for those returning in the 2013-2014 school year to get more involved in Dialogue.

Your voice matters, so join the conversation!

- Apply to be a part of our team or one of our juries.
- Submit your work.
- Attend our events.
- Get on our mailing list by emailing us or visiting our booth next fall at Cokes & Clubs.
- Visit our website.
- Pick up a copy of one of our print magazines.
- And join the conversation by starting your own.

~ Heather Tills, Editor-in-Chief
CALVIN COLLEGE'S JOURNAL OF COMMENTARY AND THE ARTS

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OF BOBBERS AND CASTING

BEN DEVRIES

Oscar brought the tackle box and the minnow bucket first, and set them at the edge of the sandy skirt that fronted the lake.

“Dad lettin’ you use his stuff?” said Sam, squinting against the white, white sun.

Oscar ignored his younger brother, who was sitting in the sand and balancing on his thigh an empty ice-cream tub, and returned to the house. Minutes later, he was back, two fishing rods quivering in his hands and his bare feet as close to the sand as they could get without actually touching it. He lowered the butts of the rods to the lawn. Thumbed the bill of his Cubs hat.

“So you coming with me, Sammy, or what?” he said.

Forty yards out, a speed boat trailing tubers roared by. Sam, sand-scaled and with shoulders a pasty, sunscreened white, cocked his head at him.

“What?”

“I said do you want to come fishing.”

“Is Dad goin’?”

“Nah, him and Mom are busy. But they said I could go if I took you.”

“Does he know you’re usin’ his stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Pedal boat?”

“You bet, Sammyboy,” Oscar said, grinning.

Sam got to his feet. Swept the sand from his swimsuit. Then he bent again for his ice-cream tub.

“So you want to go?”

“No really.”

Sam waded out knee-deep and filled the tub, the wake of a passing pontoon boat floating the bottom of his suit like the petals of a flower. The water sparkled.

“Why not?” Oscar said, tearing grass with his toes.

Sam shrugged, splashing back to the skirt. He crouched beside a narrow ditch he had dug in the sand and emptied the tub into it, watching the water swirl brown and then vanish.

“Come on, Sam. Please.”

Sam’s shoulder blades sawed beneath his skin as he scooped an extension to the ditch.

“If I go,” he said, his voice even, “you let me play your Gameboy when we get back.”

“No way.”

“I get to, or I’m not goin’.”

Oscar glared at the minnow bucket.

“Guess I’m not—”

“Fine.”

Sam straightened, brushing his palms, and stepped from the sand onto the lawn.

“Here, take the poles.” Oscar thrust the rods at his brother and then bent and hoisted the tackle box and minnow bucket and swayed toward the pier.

“Hey, only one of these’s got a bobber,” Sam said.

The pedal boat, a toyish, white-and-blue watercraft with a foam-sheathed tiller, bobbed
against its nylon mooring at the end of the pier. Opposite it, their father’s Lund gleamed on the boatlift, and after depositing his burdens, Oscar negotiated the metal bars of the lift and climbed into the boat and retrieved Sam’s lifejacket from one of the in-floor storage compartments. He tossed it at Sam and told him to put it on.

“Where’s yours?” Sam said, holding it with distaste. “Mom and Dad make you wear yours.”

Oscar shrugged, stepping back to the pier, and said that he swam fine without one. He waited until Sam had slid the vest over his bare chest and buckled it, before lowering himself to the pier and reaching with a foot to hook the pedal boat and draw it close. He jerked his head toward it, and Sam boarded with the poles. The tackle box and minnow bucket followed.

“Can I steer?”

“I think I’d better,” Oscar said, sliding free the mooring and slinging it into the boat. “Just in case. I need you to hold the minnows.”

He stepped into the boat, and it bucked, spinning the stern until it was beneath the pier and he had to reach back to push them away. They slid into the shallow water, parallel to the shore. Waves rolling. The sun flashing. Oscar slouched in his seat and maneuvered the tackle box into the crease of his waist and pinned it with his left hand and grasped the tiller with his right. They pedaled. The pale blue siding of the cottage and swath of green lawn slipped slowly behind them and soon vanished behind a line of trees.

They hugged the shore, pedaling against the flow of traffic and working their way around a wooded point lined with houses and cottages, before which sunbathers in hammocks and folding chairs lounged in sunny patches. Piers where pontoon boats bobbed. Here and there rafts from which children jumped and dove. Oscar wiped his forehead with his Bulls jersey and blinked at the sun. His brother huffed beside him, the minnow bucket sloshing in his lap, his skinny, white legs pumping in time with Oscar’s skinny, white legs. Sweat dripping from both noses. Two boys close in age and pale and lonely as pilgrims in their little boat, which neatly chopped the water.

Beyond the point, the water dropped, and bulrushes, peopled by straw-legged egrets and paddling ducks, grew in forests along the bank. Oscar swung the boat outward to deeper water—and then inward again when a channel, wide enough for two boats to pass unhindered and bracketed by retaining walls, appeared. A buoy with SLOW NO WAKE printed on it rocked at the channel’s head. More houses, tethered boats, people. The sun still hot and the trees on either side too far apart to mitigate it. His mouth open and panting, Oscar nodded to a pair of kayakers wearing sunhats and slicing through the water, and they smiled at him and his brother and said hi and continued into the lake.

“We should get these little guys in the water,” Sam said between breaths, nodding at the minnow bucket. “There’s not much left.”

“Almost there.”

Ahead, the channel elbowed and then narrowed considerably, the shoreline trees pressing close and lily pads choking the surface. The water tinted green. Shallow. Oscar stopped pedaling before they reached the elbow, and Sam stopped too, and they coasted into it.

“Here, hand me that bucket, Sammy,” Oscar said, setting the tackle box between his feet and motioning for the minnows.

Sam passed it to him, and he eased it into the water and held it there for several seconds

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before lifting it out and letting the water drain through the holes in its lid. Then he brought it into the boat and set it at Sam’s feet.

“You can get one yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, here, give me the pole with the jig.”

Sam frowned and passed it to him. “Why d’you always get to cast?”

“Because.”

He drew the pole back and released sidearm. The whine of unspooling line. The plop and concentric circles where the jig struck. He counted to five, then began to reel. Beside him, Sam bent over his knees, trying to bare-hand a minnow because Oscar forgot the minnow net.

“Hard to catch,” Sam said. “Ah!” He drew his fist from the bucket, the tip of a tail twitching between his middle and ring fingers. “I always feel kinda bad about killin’ them.”

“Gotta be a man about it, Sammyboy,” Oscar replied, in a voice that sounded only halfway kidding. He pulled the bouncing, neon-yellow jig from the water. “Here, you want me to hook him?”

“Nah, I got it.”

Oscar shrugged and cast again, watching from the corner of his eye as his brother gingerly pushed the barb of the hook through the minnow’s tiny fish skull.

“Okay. At least let me cast for you,” he said.

“I told you I got it.”

Sam wiped his hand on his pants, then cocked his arm and cast. The minnow and bobber struck water fifteen feet from the boat, and the minnow sunk, and the bobber, after seesawing for a moment, became erect—a yellow point almost invisible against the glare on the water.

They sat.

“Fish don’t seem to be biting today,” Oscar said, and leaned over to splash water on his face.

“Wish you’d let me cast,” Sam said dully.

“You wouldn’t like it.”

“Yes, I would. Somethin’ to do.”

“Don’t catch as many.”

“Bet you do. Bet you catch more. Bet that’s why you won’t let me.”

On shore, a hidden leaf blower blustered hollowly. Sam reeled in his line and checked his bait and sighed and cast again.

“Bored,” he said. “Hot.”

Oscar pressed a hand visor-like to his forehead, squinting. “Let’s try closer to the lily pads,” he said.

He gathered his line and his bait, and after a moment, Sam did the same, and the two pedaled into the shallower water where shade from nearby trees dappled the surface and where the ragged-edged lily pads floated above their slender, umbilical-cord roots. Here and there beneath the pads, oblong shadows lazed.

“You can see them down there,” Oscar said excitedly, wriggling his old jig from its hook and then flipping it over the side of the boat. He unclasped the tackle box and began navigating with his fingertips the nest of hooks and plastic bags within. “Give you something fresh to
“Bite,” he said. “A nice, new, stinky jig for you. Mmm-mmm.”

Sam rumbled but said nothing. Cast his long-dead minnow along the weed line and settled into his seat.

His first hit came a minute later.

“Hey!” he said. “Hey! Hey!”

Oscar’s new jig leaped from his fingers and dropped to the bottom of the boat. Beside him, his brother was rigid, perched at the edge of his seat and gripping the fishing pole with two hands. Eyes fixed on the yellow bobber bouncing nervously at the end of his line.

“Don’t lose him.”

“I’m not gonna.”

The bobber ducked under, and Sam pulled up hard and started reeling. A silver-gold flash beneath the surface. Moments later, he lifted a small, pale bluegill into the pedal boat.

Oscar eyed it, then bent to retrieve his jig. “Just a little one.”

“More’n you caught.”

Oscar leaned and spat over the side, then watched as his brother put the tip of his thumb in the tiny, gasping mouth and began to work the hook.

“Grab the thing,” Oscar said. “Grab it like you mean it.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not, Sammy.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, it’s still flopping around. Don’t be afraid to hurt it—just be a man and grab it.”

“It’s fine, Oscar.” Sam pulled the hook from the bluegill’s mouth and showed it to his brother. “See?”

Oscar shrugged, threading the jig onto his own hook. “Could’ve been easier.”

“I don’t care,” Sam said, releasing his fish. “Leave me alone.”

Oscar adjusted his hat and resumed casting. Sam fished another minnow from the bucket. Looked at it, silvery and flopping between his forefinger and thumb. Then he tossed it overboard.

“What’d you do that for?”

“I’m done.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He attached his empty hook to an eyelet on the rod and wound the line tight.

“I like fishin’ with Dad more.”

“Don’t be such a wimp.”

Glaring, Sam slumped into his seat, his arms folded over his lifejacket and his bobbered fishing pole squeezed between his knees. Oscar looked at him and sniffed, then threw out his line a few more times and reeled it in empty and said, “Man, where are all the fish?”

Behind them, the kayakers returned, sweating and laughing. The white, white sun.

Oscar shook his head, his lip curling, and cast again.

“Can we go back?” Sam said in a low, angry voice.

Oscar jerked the tip of his rod, ripping the jig from the water and skipping it toward the boat. Watched it sink. “Yeah,” he finally said. “Yeah, let’s just go back. It’s not worth it if all that’s biting are these little bluegills.”

Sam made no response—just hoisted the minnow bucket into his lap, leaned his pole
against his seat, and waited while Oscar spun his reel's crank handle. The jig near the surface now and moving fitfully toward the boat. It was within three yards of the rod's tip when the water rippled and the fish took the bait and dove.

"Jeez!" Oscar said, rising so quickly that he almost fell from the boat. He hauled up on the rod, attempting to set the hook, to reel, and to adjust the drag knob simultaneously.

"Oscar, sit down!"

"Shut up, Sammyboy!" Oscar said, smiling wildly. He braced his feet on either side of the tackle box and reeled. The line, dimpling the water's face, zigzagged.

"It's a lunker!" he trumpeted. "It's huge!"

"Sit down!"

"It's almost here!"

The fish exposed itself in a brilliant flash of yellow, and Oscar pulled upward, his rod bending double on itself, and swung the fish into the boat. It landed with a wet slap on Sam's thigh. Sam screamed.

"Oh, it's fine. Be quiet."

Oscar eased himself into his seat, reeling in slack and the fish flapping against the bottom of the boat, where Sam had swept it. He grabbed the line and hoisted his catch. Round, black eyes. Spiny dorsal fin. A belly the color of a tangerine. Maybe eight inches.

"What is it? A bluegill?"

"Big bluegill if it is," Oscar said, grinning. "Nah, I think it's a rock bass." He swung it at Sam, who squealed and shied away, and Oscar laughed and caught the fish on its backswing. Grabbed it like he meant it. Folding its dorsal fin beneath his palm. Giving it a squeeze. He bounced his eyebrows at Sam and then started on the hook.

It was buried deep, and behind the fish's eye. Oscar grimaced, staring down the fish's gullet and trying to work the barb from the white inside of its mouth. A wet popping sound, the click of tiny bones. The fish's mouth stretched to accommodate Oscar's knuckles. Then Sam started moaning.

"It's eye," he whimpered. "It's eye."

Oscar looked at Sam—then at the bass. The barb of the hook had punctured its pebble eye, and blood was leaking down its scales and onto his hand. He tried to pull it out, but the hook resisted him, and the mangled eye sucked inward, and more blood squirted out. He felt himself getting sick.

"Take it out, Oscar, take it out."

"I'm trying."

He tugged again, and this time the fish convulsed in his hand, and he released it, watching it spin pathetically on the line, its tail twisting upward like the hook that transfixed it. Blood pumping from its socket. Pearling on its scales.

"Oscar, take it out. Please. The fish, Oscar. Take it out." Sam was crying.

Oscar reached again for the fish, still spinning, but when his fingers encircled its body and felt its muscles clenched and hard, he couldn't, and he let it go.

"I can't, Sam. I'm trying. I can't," he said.

"Oscar, please, the fish."

"I can't, Sam. I can't, I can't, I can't."

He was crying too, now, and he laid the rod across his knees and lowered the fish into
the water where the blood pouring from its eye diffused into a streamer-like cloud.

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t,” he said, pulling line from the spool and feeding it to the fish. Watching it turn and thrash. Watching its tangerine belly flash like copper foil beneath the water’s verdigris surface.

Or like a sun that’s slowly burning out.
Between vast valleys of twisted trees
rises a swath of privileged green
picked free of weeds and stripped of briars
and dabbed with fuschia florets.

The land lies in submission to level, manicured lawns
upon which manicured maidens in white dresses swoon jejunely,
holding thin umbrellas to shield them from time’s tow
and tuning their hearts to young men’s clear A.

The men sink their black heels into the tender sod,
align their hips,
tighten their grips,
and make straight their shots,
earning light sighs and heavy handshakes.

At dinner the ladies chirp prettily,
sipping fizzing spritzers
from miniature bird baths.

The men bark about bones long buried,
accruing interest in the ground,
and howl at gentrified jokes
shared with big-chested pride.

And when they dance,
the men drop their voices
and raise their partners’ porcelain hands
to capricious lips
then suspend their fragile bodies in box steps,
like photos in a frame.
And when the women weary 
and men bore of routine turns, 
they pairs unparcel 
and process to the illuminated, billowing tent 
hand in hand, 
the image of nature meets nurture.

And just at the moment that day submits to dusk, 
the figures file into their light. 
Leaving us again, alone 
to watch from the woods, 
to watch from the grey.
CASEVAC

TYLER SLAMKOWSKI

You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
Would rouse God to relent.
-Richard Eberhart

The roving skyline, a bee swarm
Beating blades high above
A jungle where none swim
But the eternal floaters.

They thrust upward, floating in the heavens
Like whirlybirds
Innocently pursuing
A sanctuary.

We hear the congested whirr
Of skids atop the tropics,
The fuselage loaded with John-Does
Spit on by commies and scrub-clad fanatics.

And some nights, on doleful Michigan shores
They gather little girls, rotoed free
By the steel hummingbirds to nests.
And I hide.
Relapse
Libby Huizenga

Dry-cleaned and beat-dry
hoping their pressed cummerbunds impress,
the timpani play late night symphonies.
Outside caffeinated eternity
where inside slurpers suck espresso,
masochists
drinking black and slurring honey
but apologizing later in a bee vomit binge,
again promising to one day tell those turtlenecks:
You take your coffee with cream and
crave ease like the sheeple
and find a tie less suffocating
than a scarf

Dendrites
Libby Huizenga

I achieved
Lobotomy entire
To speak without knowledge
Of the Leviathan
roped to prove
I am God
Cords formed of
Nerves detached
To lasso, loose
Beads on my abacus
I obsess over
Scatter
And attempt consent
But my lesion obscures
And I cast to
Legion
Oscar reached into a drawer of his crowded desk, pulling out a guillotine-style cigar clipper—a bad joke from a second uncle—and beheaded the tip of an expensive Cuban cigar, hands shaking slightly. He put the other end to his lips and struck a light, puffing smoke into the dark room until his body relaxed enough for him to sit back and cross his legs. He tossed the clipper to the desktop without looking at it and allowed himself to savor the woody flavor of the cigar and the pleasant stinging on the edges of his tongue.

He breathed deep and coughed a little. The house would be empty for hours. He should write. He should write it down before it got away from him—before it ate at him or slipped away mockingly. The pen lay at the edge of the wide desk, out of reach. He uncrossed his legs. Crossed them again. Smoke mushroomed above his head. The lights seemed to dim before his half-open eyes. Their little beams streamed toward him...

Watch. This is what happened. The spin and flow of images exactly as they were...concentrate. The clock hands spin counter, and they glow, and they are gone like the details of a spinning wheel—the sun’s mirror-rotations flash like a lightning storm, and then a voice somewhere close saying, “Men scarcely know how beautiful fire is...”

Oscar stood on a knoll, knees bent slightly and arms akimbo because there is no other way to stand before such grisly carnage. He kept his mouth firmly shut. Great black birds made of the field a feast, their knees bent too, choking down their chosen cut and making a fuss. Feathery fights broke out as he scanned the terrible writhing of that endless field. Not all of the writhing belonged to the birds, he realized. Stick figures moved jerkily around in the dirt, slapped the ground in helplessness. Oscar’s knees buckled to the ash and straw coating the ground. There, before him amid the rubble and waste stood a crow, smaller than its brothers—an outcast unable to fight with the rest—and yet he had in his curved beak his spoils. An eye. Yellow. It stared up at him from the beak.

Oscar reeled as the crow flung itself at him.

He jerked awake to find the fat cigar burned low. A small cylinder of ash dropped to his lap, and he slapped at it so that it scattered like dust. Then he noticed in his other hand the feather. A greasy, black feather stuck between his fingers. He held it on his lap, staring at it.

“You should be more careful with your smokes,” said a man standing in the corner of the small, wood-paneled office. He was dressed garishly; the sickening green and gold patchwork of his frilly suit contrasted starkly with the stern look on his brow. Oscar knew him. The Guest. The man of the stories. Of the golden fire.

“That’s a good way to burn the house down,” the man insisted.

Oscar jammed the cigar in his wide mouth and spoke around it. “I thought these stories—these places we make—weren’t real,” he said, waving the feather in the man’s face.

“Wherever did you get an idea like that?” said the man.

Oscar sputtered a moment. “Why...how are you here?”

The guest shook his head, long yellow hair fluttering about his shoulders. “You invited me in when you opened yourself to these stories. Opened a vein with your pen, asking for brilliance. Signed that age-old contract, and all that.” A grin full of perfect teeth. “You brought me,
paid for me...” he bowed deeply, mockingly. “And I am here. Only, ever at your service.”

Oscar sat forward in the chair, sweat soaking his back and brow. He could still smell the burning field. It moved fitfully in his mind. Thousands of fallen creatures, arms stiff and wide and helpless to the fearless birds and their hunger. Had he written that? What did he mean by it?

“Your wife,” said the man, stepping forward and inspecting the feather on the desk. After a moment he snatched it up. “Her name...?”

“Jane.” Oscar puffed away furiously, trying to disappear behind the smoke. “She’ll be away for a while. She’s at a dinner meeting with the other members of her firm.”

“Ah, a lawyer.” The black crow’s feather twirled between the man’s thumb and forefinger—a spinning souvenir from that other place—that blank canvas one of them had filled with blood. He grinned. “I imagine you don’t want her to meet me.”

“I didn’t want to go to that field,” said Oscar. “I didn’t mean to go back. I just wanted...I wanted.”

“To see your masterpiece,” said the Guest.

He shook his head. “Oh,” he whispered, “I just didn’t think it was real. The things we created and then—”

The man waved Oscar’s mutterings away. “All scarecrows,” he said. “Have you ever been on a jury, Oscar?”

“Once,” he replied, stopping to spit bits of tobacco and wrapping to the floor. The cigar had burned to a stub; the tobacco stained his teeth. He tossed it to the desk beside the clipper and looked around for something to do with his hands.

“I’ve been on many juries,” said the man. He put the feather to his lips as if imitating Oscar and his cigar. “It’s an interesting place to stand—an onlooker on the sidelines, and yet judgment in our hands. Tell me, Oscar, have you ever known the man or woman you were judging?”

“No. Of course not.”

The man took the black feather from his lips and breathed, and smoke poured forth, a steady stream of it curling from his nostrils and mouth. “One day a man sat on trial who had set fire to his brother’s estate. He said he hadn’t known that the fire was real. He said he couldn’t feel the heat of it, even after it left wicked burns on his arms. He wept bitterly before us and confessed that he couldn’t feel the tears on his face. He cried and said he couldn’t stop lighting fires, even after everyone told him they would always burn. It was just so beautiful, he said, the work of his hands.”

Oscar had pushed his chair as far back as it could go and huddled down. The smoke pouring from the man’s mouth left the upper half of the room in a haze. He couldn’t see. “I understand you now,” he shouted. The smoke had become so thick that he had to shout through it. “You’re not real. You’re can’t be here!”

He had to wave his arms. The smoke around his head was taking flight and batting him around the face and chest. Millions of black feathers tickled his skin and burned him terribly.

“I’m the jury you never saw,” said the voice. “Standing to one side, making my judgments. I’m the great black bird tap, tap, tapping at your window and the smoke in your chimney; I’m the answer at the bottom of every bottle, a collage of red and green images that carry you away to writhing fields of smoke and feathers.”
Yellow eyes stared at him from all sides. They were all around, winking, winking. Oscar screamed.

“Without me your stories would fail. Your words collapse. Without me you’d be nothing more than a scarecrow.”

Oscar screamed again and thrashed, fighting desperately, scratching and clawing at the birds on his outstretched arms.

He woke to find pen in hand and the house on fire.
Ann Parkin, A NEW JOURNEY, Photography
James Li, VERTICAL ESCAPE, Photography
Joanna Bayliss, PULSE, Mixed Media
Victoria Haugen, LEAP BEFORE THE STORM, Digital Photography
Ashleigh Vandekopple, PICKING POSIES, Ink on Paper
Anonymous, MR. ELTONS PENCIL, Sharpie and Pencil on Paper
Anonymous, WESTERNIZATION, Pencil on Paper
Joanna Bayliss, *Disquiet*, Acrylic on Canvas
John Michael LaSalle, THE DANCER, Pencil and Pen on Paper
Jisoo Kim, At Bosung, Korea, Digital Photography
THE CITY AT DAWN
GABE GUNNINK

Turgid dirges rise from far-flung steeples.

People stumble into sunlight
   that filters through lingering smog,
   falling like snow,
   grey on caramel skin.

Spindles and spires pierce the sky,
and fresh light drips down like yolk,
   along the rough sides of towers,
   pooling on the sidewalks,
   among cigarette butts.

The city smells of lavender choked by car exhaust—
coriander, cayenne, and cardamom mingle with
iron, cement, and smoke—
and over all, the bittersweet aroma of sand.

My hand strokes the sandstone at my side.
My eyes squint into the blinding backdrop
   of tawdry dawn.
My nose tingles with cinnamon and soot.
My ears drink in the one-winged song.

I call the city home.
The city calls me home.
JAMES VANDEN BOSCH

Edmund Clerihew Bentley
Was amused by his name; consequently,
He invented a form
That’s still living and warm
That abuses such names, although gently.

WILLIAM J. VANDE KOPPLE

There was once a fine-arts magazine
With a budget so terribly lean,
That they ran only works
Full of quips and strange quirks,
And a few lines were almost obscene.
JEFF WINKLE

A Reformed surfer girl (it was told to me-
I’ll repeat it to you, anecdotally)
Had a Calvinist streak
In her Valley Girl speak
“Depraved? Oh, fer shure, like, totally.”
I saw the best hopes of my generation destroyed by security, discarded on sidewalks and trampled by oxblood leather shoes marching to and from financial gain and advancing careers; heard dreams of travel and painting and music give dying, breathless gasps at the manicured hands of respectability and stable income, throttled by the same minds and hearts that had nurtured them through scholarships, grade point averages, and honors projects with promises of a better future, promises that were replaced with revisionist memories of the good ol’ days; smelled the pungent wreck of weeks, fifty hours bloated with commuting and overtime and desk-chair-induced weight gain, weeks made mangy by florescent over-il lumi nation and middle-of-the-night anxiety that tweaks muscles and lays eggs of ulcers; tasted the decay of dialogue as prepared, professional smiles kept confessions and wonderings and honesty trapped behind polished teeth, as opinions calculated to please slipped past lips, as rank and manipulative ambition infected mouths and words and speech; I felt the tide of my generation, which had once pushed us toward shores of self-determination and authenticity, turn and pull us away, out into the frigid, eternal ocean of loans and mortgages, insurance and car payments, into the monotonous expanse of a tolerated life—

and I realized we have forgotten the smell of dry prairie grass, crackling in the wind beside a rutted and sun-beaten gravel road;

the smell of pine trees just after a rainstorm, when clear and tiny drops slide down needles and splash their scent upon a cheek or a hand;

the feeling of getting wonderfully muddy—socks soaked brown and shoes made squishy, flecks of dirt caked into hair;

the coolness of wet sand beneath heels and toes; the heat of a bonfire that dries the ocean from our bodies, leaving salt to stretch sun burned skin and crisp sun-bleached hair;
and we have forgotten the accomplishment of splitting wood,
or writing a poem,
or weeding a garden,
or thinking on a porch swing late
into a warm night as fireflies
flit and flicker;

we have forgotten
how to notice;

we have forgotten
what we appreciate;

and we have forgotten that we once wanted to save lives, to barge into a
burning building at the front of an attack hoseline or administer CPR
on the shoulder of a snow-slick freeway;
compose heartbreaking melodies and perform them on street corners or
sold-out arenas; design sailboats and saw, sand, and fiberglass them
into seaworthy reality;
craft stories and poems that win Pushcarts and Pulitzers and make their way
into coffee shop conversations and living room discussions;
start homeless shelters and salve broken minds, soothe drug-induced
paranoias and Iraqi flashbacks;
guide expeditions down the Colorado River and lead rope teams up
Mt. Rainier;
glaze pinchpots and learn fresco, see our charcoal sketches displayed in
galleries and our performance art enacted in Millennium Park,
draft off-the-grid cabins and learn to lay foundations, erect frames, run wiring,
and install plumbing—
I saw these naïve desires and childish dreams dismissed as my generation settled down in impersonal offices designed for efficiency and low overheads, where they picked up the duties of the last employee—let go for restructuring purposes after twenty years—and became impersonal pieces removed from decisions and big-picture planning, performing on schedules established by superiors and contracted commitments;

and I saw the rise of new aspirations—visions of radical offices with gyms and showers and slides between floors, of competitive positions at innovative startups that offer unlimited vacation policies to boost creativity, where employees enjoy the good life, where happiness is a measure of efficiency, and where deferred dreams dry up quietly—

I saw the best hopes of my generation forgotten for the sake of practicality,

for the sake of maturity,

for the sake of adulthood,

for the sake of the real world,

for the sake of exaggerated obligations,

for the sake of still-distant responsibilities,

my generation fled from uncertainty,

the uncertainty of sacrificing a 401(k),
the uncertainty of wasting a good education,
the uncertainty of scarce and unpredictable income,
the uncertainty of days that are more than repetitions,
the uncertainty of unending, unpaid, but enjoyable work,
the uncertainty of valuing experiences more highly than resume-building,
the uncertainty of neglecting a potentially productive afternoon just to sit and watch a thunderstorm,
the uncertainty of pushing toward a goal we set ourselves, toward accomplishments that we can raise above our heads and claim as our own, as more than just a side-effect of a secure career and a stable life—

my generation succumbed to the tide that drags us into the doldrums of conceded hopes, the tide that dragged our parents' generation and our grandparents' generation into lives of compromised desires, the relentless tide that has dragged every generation since Adam's into disappointment,

the tide of complacency!
Failure!
Debt!

I want to feel the rain again—to really feel it, soaked through and shivering and very much alive;

I want to test our hopes against reality;

I want to try.
GOODBYE, I
JOSHUA EPPERLY

Sunday, April 6

My brothers and I live here as caretakers of a manor with no lord. We sweep debris from the floors and snip creepers from the walls in hopes that one day, Merestead Abbey will be resurrected to the pre-Henry VIII glory it once held. It is a process of both outward and inward renovation; for when we tidy up the cloisters and the sanctuary, we are also making room for unification with the risen Lord. This edifice is a derelict place, but not beyond hope. Yet others think of it differently.

The woodland community floods in from the outside like a plague of Mosaic proportions. Wood mice, stonechat, grey squirrels, and bats have found their ways through all entrances as if on a frontal assault against us eight Cistercians. I’m almost expecting ballista constructed from twigs and clay. This morning, when I was sorting through the scriptorium’s journals and historical records, I heard the strategizing of small furry things and soon discovered them to be a family of Russian minks. To my distress, they were making nesting from the writings of earlier occupants! I shuffled closer to their nook, unsure of what to do next, and they whisked away through a gap in the stonework.

Being an ex-forester, I do appreciate the status of nature. I do follow Bernard of Clairvaux’s call to learn the Holy Scriptures through the beeches and oaks. But could not man and nature just appreciate each other from the windows of their respective homes?

Monday, April 14

Each coming day here is like another rock dropped into our communal yoke. Prior Morgan has taken to announcing the growing list of concerns as soon as the last notes of our liturgies settle into the sanctuary’s ceiling. Of today’s concerns: the foxes burglarized our chicken hut last night, our rafters are rotting from termite infestation, and my Russian mink friends have found yet another entrance into the abbey. I should also mention that the northeasterly end of our plot has fallen siege to Japanese knotweed. It’s hard to imagine that barley once carpeted these fields before a combination of slow thaws and emigrating rooks triggered the cockchafer blights. Pesticides took care of those pesky beetles, but now that they’re gone, this knotweed is marching from Hendal Creek to the fields to claim the niche of pest. Writing this down, I just now realize the irony of eight Cistercian pacifists flinging themselves into an ecological war zone.

As all Cistercians of this generation do, I had decided to take a stab at saintliness after reading Thomas Merton’s autobiography. Such spiritual heights he had reached after all those drunken lows at Cambridge! Admittedly, my decision was partly a desire to hide from everyone I had failed. In fact, the year I completed my Observership at my hometown’s monastery, the local crime statistics reported that there were more attendees of brothels than churches. Having escaped the disease in Watford’s streets, I now brood over the disease in the soil I till each afternoon. Instead of slipping into that weightless tranquility that Brother Powell and Brother Patel boast of, I consider the earthworms and woodlouse beneath my feet. What have they accomplished in all their integrated mineral management? They were unable to combat neither cockchafer nor knotweed. Disease still clots up the veins of my wheezing little world.
Friday, April 18

“Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards — for our vineyards are in blossom.”

The author of Song of Solomon wrote this verse as an allegory for the vices that prevent agape union. However, I imagine that hunters have instead brandished it as a call-to-arms against foxes, raccoons, or any other “vermin” that wander into their tracts. I as well have mistaken this verse, and it now holds additional significance in my heart.

Our “vermin” aren’t ruining vineyards, but instead are doing a splendid job of raiding our chicken coops. As if graduated from the uppermost schools of espionage, these foxes undermine everything we’ve done to trip them up. They’ve chewed through at least four series of chicken wire netting, they’ve dug holes into the covered runs, and they’ve merrily disregarded the scents we’ve laid around the perimeters. To date, twelve of our prized egg-layers have met their fates in the jaws of these bandits. So I astutely reasoned that if all cultures have linked foxes to “trickery” in folklore, then foxes were bad and I, the defender of hens, was good! Tuesday, like King Nebuchadnezzar, I set off with steel in hand against my self-appointed enemies. Today, God has dismantled my hubris, but unlike Nebuchadnezzar, I am not now ambling in pastures with the oxen.

This little morality play began when I found a rusty foothold trap hanging on a peg in the goat shed. I was unsure of what Prior Morgan or the others would have to say about using this instrument of death, and I was certain that Brother Powell would disapprove outright. Yet in my bravado, I slung it over my shoulder and followed a fresh set of fox’s prints through the damp woodland floor and into the mire.

Slogging through the marshes, the sense of being a displaced creature crept upon me. The fox knows which rotten logs hold up against foot traffic, the moorhen knows which pools of water store the most delectable snails, but I barreled over all these subtleties with the gracefulness of Elmer Fudd. Eventually, the tracks petered out where the blankets of sphagnum moss met the sandy foothills. Recalling how foxes prefer to burrow in such dry, craggy areas, I roved up the slope and soon found a squeeze-hole tucked underneath some overhanging siltstone. I hid the trap in a hole in front of the doorway and resigned myself to revisit it in a few days’ time.

During this afternoon’s manual labor, I returned to my little enterprise. Instead of finding a felled beast, I only found a fox with her hind leg mangled in the trap’s steel jaws. Sprawled like a doormat before her own den, she pawed the dirt with her front legs as if vying for purchase. Her auburn eyes emanated that confusion that overtakes all creatures when they realize their lifeblood is draining.

I had bested nature’s trickster with trickery just as reprehensible — ambushing it in front of its own home. Although the taxpaying everyman would claim that I had an intrinsic right to take this fox’s life, and even if in taking this fox’s life more hens were spared, I still felt unclean. In a landscape with eons more perspective than man, I was judged by a different audience. Sprouting oxlips flowers stared at me with their iris-like stigmas. The sun poised above me on the tiptop of its zenith and a parliament of rooks cawed their verdicts. “Guilty!” the whole creation resounded.

After the fox’s blood emptied into the soil, and even after her two little kits poked their heads out to comprehend their mother’s ordeal, I could not will myself to smash her head with a rock. I chose restrained mercilessness over brutal compassion and skulked back down to where my brothers were tilling the fields.
The following liturgy of the hours was a prison for my conscience rather than a celebration of freedom. As Prior Morgan stood before us in his white habit and directed us to “silence our souls before the Trinity”, I stumbled through a labyrinth of thoughts. I attempted to pray away this labyrinth but couldn’t bear to face the gaze of the Divine Presence, and so retreated back into it. Images of the fox’s confusion awakened memories of my nephew Liam’s confusion when he would visit me in Watford. He saw that remote mysticism I had achieved through observance of the Rule of Saint Benedict and believed me wise enough to conquer his schizophrenia. But I merely responded with the same ignorance that drove me to snare that fox. When he revealed to me the voices that governed his reality, I considered his diseased brain and gave up. Instead, I only muttered Catholic platitudes and handed him my grandfather’s antique pocket watch so that he might sell it for therapy. This he misplaced during a delusional onslaught two days later and was involuntarily committed to a psychiatric ward in Eastbourne a day after that. And that was the end of the matter.

I recall the few sheepherders from Crockham Woods who climbed up to our abbey this morning. They stumbled into our foyer like road-weary travelers and we invited them to join us for breakfast. Over toast and cheese they shared with us the problems that beset their community: everything from overgrazed pastures to the teenagers who refuse to attend catechism class. They came to us as if on a pilgrimage, believing that our little hilltop commune could deliver them from all their strife. How can I serve them when, in my insular egotism, I do not exemplify the Only Begotten but am rather a brute who understands neither the workings of creation nor the suffering of my kin? Risen Lord, have mercy on me, for I do not what I want, but the very thing I hate.

Sunday, April 20

When Prior Morgan decided that we were to restore this edifice back to its original state, the whole Cistercian order was righteously confused. During a time when most scapular-clad men are setting aside their inner quiet to squabble over the future of the Catholic church, the thing anyone least expected was for a Prior and his brethren to plop themselves into a remnant of the past and call it “good”. I myself applaud Prior Morgan for his bold move, for I just now see what a rich vein of history we have tapped into here. If I could, I would bypass the College of Cardinals and give him that vied-for throne in the Lateran Basilica.

During today’s monastic interval, I leafed through the scriptorium’s mildewed journals and records and found a volume titled *East Sussex Under Fire: The Air Raids of World War II*. It was shoddily constructed, but its contents more than made up for its binding. I’ve known that Trappists have been informally occupying local abbeys for the last few centuries, just as I’ve known that these lands were blitzed during a 1944 *Luftwaffe* campaign. But my heart did leap when I found an entire fourteen pages dedicated to the Trappists of Merestead Abbey! I devoured this passage two times over. I had no idea that this very abbey – more specifically, the aging barrel tunnels down in our cellar – had been the staging grounds of something greater. On February 17, 1944, five Trappists, forty-three sheepherders, and a generous proportion of their animals had found refuge in those very tunnels while firebombs scorched the lands above.

An East Grinstead refrigeration company merely four kilometers from our abbey had converted its premises into a munitions factory. That alone placed the town and everything within a ten-kilometer radius squarely in the crosshairs of the *Luftwaffe* campaign. At 9:25am that wintry morning, air raid sirens sliced through the Scots Pines and the quiet streets of East
Grinstead. A half hour later, 4,300 civilians who hadn’t known anything beyond the bounds of their small existences got caught up in hell on earth. Families ran to the River Brede and clogged it with their charred bodies. Fire swept across the dry heath and engulfed the surrounding forests in a matter of minutes. A bomb was dropped onto East Grimstead’s Whitehall Cinema, collapsing the roof and killing all twenty-six attendees.

Amidst this ubiquitous evil, the Trappists and sheepherders of Crockham Woods were experiencing another reality in Merestead Abbey’s tunnels. Here, the authors commend a certain Prior Helsby as “an unassuming hero who exercised quick decision-making in a moment of crisis”. Evidently, even before the fire began raining down, he had guided the entirety of the nearby Crockham Woods to the transepts of Merestead Abbey as if he were some sort of commissioned officer. Many of the sheepherders had lugged along their chattel to accompany the Trappist’s black Holsteins, all of which they corralled into the tunnels with them. Page 144 even included a brief interview with Prior Helsby. Of what happens in their subterranean hideaway, he explains (and I paraphrase):

_We all huddled together there in the barrel room. I don’t know how long. The sirens and that endless “thumping” of the bombs made it impossible to follow the passage of time. I was certain that all things aboveground had already been torched. But the risen Lord descended to meet us in that darkness. In the crowded tunnel, I heard the inhaling and exhalation of the Holy Ghost. It was a breathing formed from our many voices: our prayers, our sobbing, the meowing sheep and the racket of the cows - everything. Despite the bombardment’s totality, I envisioned this breathing rising up through the soil and overcoming the burning landscape. Somehow - and I know this sounds odd - somehow, I knew that everyone else was seeing the same thing._

_The barrel room sheltered us for the duration of the raid. Once the rattles and tremors ceased, we ventured from our den. We stepped from the entryway of our abbey - which by God’s mercy was spared - and into a charred nightmare. Save for a few clumps of still-standing conifers, the site almost reminded me of the shores of a volcanic island after an eruption. I separated from the rest and went down to Hendal Creek, just northeast of Merestead Abbey. I had spent countless afternoons pacing along its banks and wished to inspect its health. It had become a winding, black snake... a phantom of its former self. I spotted a blown-off arm bobbing in the murk. It was carried through a riffle and then disappeared around the meander. I thought of the child that once hugged his mother with that limb and wept. I had no doubt that the Holy Ghost had somehow diffused into my shell-shocked reality, which made this horror all the more difficult to accept._

When I had absorbed all I could from Prior Helsby’s interview, I shut the book and felt a desperate need to walk in circles. As I paced around my sun-lit cell, I felt the Triune God filling, drip by drip, both my ongoing present and my ever-changing past as if both were of the same vessel. Prior Helsby, a man far more venerable than myself, had endured the firestorms of World War II and yet experienced the nearness of the Holy Ghost. But the _Spiritus Sanctus_ had only provided him enigmatic messages in a vivid reality of evil. I as well, sixty-three years after that day, have seen the far-reaching spread of disease and have only been provided answers that shift in the sand.

Brother Powell and I decided to revive the past by strolling down to Hendal Creek and inspecting it as Prior Helsby once did. For me, Hendal Creek was only the frontier at which Japanese knotweed tapered off - I hadn’t yet known the creek for its own sake.

Upon bursting through thickets of knotweed and young-growth ash, we encountered
a creek that we both agreed would be better described as a “freight engine”. We have never seen such an unremarkable thing pull off such a spot-on impersonation of the Heathrow Express. Its current was straight, driving, single-minded, and it was as if the entire waterway had passed a threshold to become “industrial” nature. Also to note – about fifteen metres of forest on either side of the embankments were now inundated by silt-laden water. If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say that the upstream heating and air-conditioning industries had channelized Hendal Creek to send their waste as far away and as fast away as natural drainage allowed.

Brother Powell, an ecologist at heart, holds an almost comical interest in the comings and goings of the very small things. Crouching on the balls of his feet, he strained his gaze downward into the murky waters and pointed out two or three inundated passageways in the hillside. “See those?” he asked, and I nodded uncertainly. “Mr. and Mrs. Mink spent months digging those burrows out,” he informed me, displaying his peculiar habit of referring to rodents as well-to-do married couples. “Now they’re all underwater. Do you suppose Russian minks have homeowner’s insurance?”

Noticing the earnestness of his pug-like face, I almost laughed. Instead, I tried my hardest to answer in equivalent solemnity. “If they did,” I said, “perhaps they’d also have lawsuits to raise against those fellows up in East Grimstead.”

He nodded, warily. “This isn’t all too different from what Prior Helsby saw in 1944, is it?”

Silence was my answer. The abbey bells chimed from the southeast. I envisioned the wise Prior Morgan up in the belfry, signaling the time all us wanderers to return for Sunday Vespers. Brother Powell and I treaded down the bushwhacked path from whence we came, both praying soundlessly over everything.

**Wednesday, April 23**

Throughout this last week there’s been a tugging at my soul. Sometimes it’s so forceful as to throw me prostrate into the dirt, but usually it’s just enough to pull me out into the world that I’ve regrettably grown to vilify. The “insular egotism” that I wrote of a few entries ago – isn’t concerning oneself over creation’s workings a most natural remedy for it? I’ve found that the simple goings-on of squirrels and warblers are drawing me into an orbit around the Divine Immanence.

This tugging has led me to relocate the site of my early-hour Vigils from a bench in the cloister to a beech in front of the east wall. Between a roof of ancient boughs and a floor of crisscrossing roots, I’ve found a proper place for contemplation. The arrangement of these Vigils is as follows: first, a recitation of the Laudate psalms in pitch dark. Second, a prayer for all God’s children who fear the coming dawn. Then a surrendering to the praises that fill the grey beyond as the sun stirs the woodlands awake. I end my Vigils with the Lord’s Prayer to accompany the new life that each new first light reveals.

At 4:30am this morning, I sat against the beech in a womb of silent darkness. Slowly yet unmistakably, the unfolding creation lifted the veil from my eyes and the plugs from my ear canals. Long before any rodent could lay claim to the first sounds of day, the birds proclaimed territories from their thrones in the evergreen spires and their shanties in the gorses and ferns. A call and response sonata of one pipit to another, a warbler’s chip chipping within the chatter of inter-tree politics, a redpoll’s adrenaline-fueled swee-e-e as she plunged from pine to lesser pine. As the half-light swelled into dawn, the remaining woodland dwellers emerged to display
their own secret sonatas. Do the badgers and squirrels naturally synchronize to one another's routines, or have they achieved this only through prior dress rehearsals?

But one woodland drama distinguished itself from the rest of the group. In the distance, I spotted four minks traipsing through the old-growth graveyard on the fringes of my young-growth sanctuary. Fallen over one another in great lumps, those Scots Pines are our plot's plainest memorial of the 1944 Luftwaffe strike. With sudden shrill cries, none other than a brigade of golden eagles dive-bombed into view. While one ill-fated mink was airlifted away in a flurry of talons and feathers, the others dashed underneath the nearest downed tree. Within this burnt wooden corpse, they found refuge from their antagonists, and the eagles took flight again in silent resignation. Last week I would have claimed that that downed tree had been degraded from the “disease” of war. Just how much do I really know of “disease” anymore?

And now I'll quote that clichéd old dog of a phrase, “You can't see the forest for the trees.” I've been guilty of this to the first degree. I've pored over every flake of bark in every tree in this forest, evaluating each flake’s “disease” or “health” like a nearsighted physician. I have simplified communities into collections of autonomous individuals who only happen to occupy the same place, and have inevitably separated myself from everything good. Reality cannot be divided into categories – whether physical or metaphysical. The whole material world is saturated with the risen Lord.

Sunday, April 27

Another divider fell today - the very roof over our heads. While we were tending our fields, our chickens, our goats - everything except the innermost room of our tabernacle - the roof simply fell as if it had reached the end of its patience.

During the moment of collapse, we were in the southwestern region of our plot, busy with the minute specifics inherent to owning farmland. As I was introducing another handful of barley seed to their old friend topsoil, a loud crash sounded from the direction of Merestead Abbey. Setting our tools aside, we scurried towards the abbey in a perfectly straight line. I was anticipating something big, but nowhere near as big as the gaping hole and the mountain of displaced limestone that met our eyes! Whatever the cause had been – hairline cracks, chemical weathering, decades of wind and rain – it didn’t matter. The place we thought would always remain was now comparable to the ruins of Babylon.

Upon processing the situation, we each proceeded to mock the strived-for serenity of the Cistercian order. Brothers Clarke, Kaur, and Patel wept in the pews, while brothers Rees and Davies laughed of it as one would at an awkward joke. Meanwhile, Brother Powell stormed back outside, surely to inform “Mr. and Mrs. Mink” that our “burrow” had been buried, too. Prior Morgan, most surprisingly, ripened like a turnip and belted out lines like, “My God! The table! What about Eucharist?” and “How are we to worship you, O Lord, if you’ve taken away our temple of worship!” I myself sidestepped this man I once believed to be enlightened and climbed to the tiptop of the offending rubble. Craning my neck upwards, my eyes met the sunlight streaming through what once had been the most westerly side of the tented roof. Whatever had happened, I strangely felt as if it were of utmost importance. It was as if some great barrier had been removed.

Amidst tonight's solemn supper, Prior Morgan announced that we should take to a vote regarding whether we should return to Watford. He and Brother Kaur were “yay” and the rest of us “nay”. We fell silent again and prodded at our vegetable soup.
What do I now make of this as I write here in my cell? Simply – and peacefully - I don’t know. After these last twenty-one days at Merestead Abbey, I’ve seen everything I thought I’ve known become only things I now know as “thoughts”. And through all of this, my ego, my will, my “I” has been swept away down some nameless street – at least for now. Even as I scrawl my last words before retiring to bed, I look at that lonely symbol I scrawl – the “I”, that is – not as the lens through which I see the world but only as the ninth character of the Latin-script alphabet.

Tuesday, April 29

Our friends from Crockham Woods traipsed up to Merestead Abbey again and shared with us all the problems they forgot to mention on their last visit. Bluntly, they asked us if any of this concerned us at all.

“Now that we’ve resigned ourselves to our abbey’s decay,” Prior Morgan replied, noticeably defeated, “the Lord has allowed us to reach our targeted yields. We’ll be selling our food in the marketplace tomorrow. We hope this will be the first step in understanding your community’s needs.”

Yes, it’s true – Merestead Abbey is decaying. I had to formalize that fact on paper, for I’ve spent my entire Postulancy here in denial of it.

After sorting our honey, bread, and goat cheese into their jars and packaging, Brother Powell and I revisited Hendal Creek. There we sat side by side along the bank, he studying the goings-on of the waterway, I studying the goings-on of the soil on the toes of my boots. Suddenly, breaking my vow of silence for the seventeenth or thirtieth time, I confessed: “I killed a fox last week. Out of pride, anxiety, fear – I don’t know.” I glanced over at him, but he was still rapt in the water. “It makes me doubt my ability to serve.”

Brother Powell turned his gaze to me and crushed me with the weight of its empathy. Then, pointing beyond us, he muttered, “Look”.

I directed my eyes to where he pointed and in that moment saw Hendal Creek differently. But I didn’t just see it differently, it truly was different. Its waterline had receded, its current had relaxed, and its murkiness now allowed a meager penetration of light. A few flashes of silver dashed by underneath the surface – fish who were only now being revealed to me. The creek was no longer the Heathrow Express, but rather an object traveling through time and space with neither track nor bearings. Only the breathing of the Spiritus Sanctus sustains it within each moment. It is this breathing that orients us all to the reality of the Triune God. In ways beyond all comprehension, it has filled my past, present and future. I have no other choice but to be swept away by it.

For everyone I’ve failed, from vagrant minks to my poor nephew, I’ll wake up tomorrow as God external spills light into my cell and God internal beckons my eyelids to lift. I’ll wake up and set off towards Crockham Wood with the fruits of our labor in hand, my “I” left buried in the rubble of Merestead Abbey’s sanctuary.

Let’s see what’s next.
Sydney Carrick, RAINBOW AROUND THE SUN, Digital Photographraphy
Anna Hanchette, Bulerias, Porcelain Painted on Stoneware
Ashleigh Vandekopple, UNTITLED 1, Mixed Media
Ann Parkin, A STORMY PAST, Digital Photo
Joanna Bayliss, KYPHOSIS STUDY #2, Acrylic
Anna Hanchette, YANNICK, Embroidery Dyed in Wine
UNTIDY
Geneva Langland

Some scientists feel it their utmost mission to strong-arm order into the swirl of neutrons and neutron stars that is our universe; other scientists feel that to shoehorn the chaos is to confine it, to belittle it, to disrespect it. Perhaps these humans, embracing their measliness in the face of a sequoia, have understood what science really means.

This world is a teeming, steaming mass of life all crawling over itself to thrive and bear fruit. Each bit of life carries inside it a beautiful chain of organized chaos, tiny fragments of nitrogen and carbon coding the secrets of living. Sometimes one creature’s code gets mistyped and something miniscule in its stitchery gets changed, and somehow this creature is just a little better at living than its neighbors. Generations ebb and flow, and more of the creatures bear the tiny, inherited typo, because all their parents were better at living than the rest. And life on Earth has changed. Just like that.

And it’s all one glorious, messy muddle, because God promises us nothing tidy. Some of us dedicate our passion to attempting in our small ways to understand this writhing, joyous jumble. When we accept this mantle, we acknowledge that we will receive no easy answers. Our wonder feeds our exploration, and our exploration, our wonder.

As biologist Barbara Kingsolver says: “I’m a scientist who thinks it wise to enter the doors of creation not with a lion tamer’s whip and chair, but with the reverence humankind has traditionally summoned for entering places of worship: a temple, a mosque or a cathedral. A sacred grove, as ancient as time.”
Socialized and Digitized
Gabe LePage

The group was atomized; think fries like lies lined up, each equal but separate, all mushed myopic, lounging tropical, they organized their fly ties topical. Relationships in rows; they’re literate, it flows. Lives lied were compartmentalized—a honey hive unauthorized and standardized. The comb dispersed, and individuals were shot—down one by one—their hearse rehearsed.

Spatula
Julia Hawkins

scraping slowly
along the curve
swirling, circling, constant
in motion
yet confined
tilting and whirling
in orbit
round sugar stars
creating peaks
and craters
deep caverns
where fires are lit
in hungry bellies
every last little smear
CALLING BACK
Michael Kelly

She rocks back and forth in her faded, burgundy La-Z-Boy chair watching reruns of NCIS. Meanwhile, she incessantly pets her golden retriever because she blames herself for not taking him out more that day. She’s been sitting in the living room alone with the lights off since sunset because she was too tired to get up and turn on the lamp in the opposite corner of the room.

Why bother? She can see the TV just fine!

Her husband is captaining an oil rig off the coast of Nigeria to support her, and her son is off at college so that he can have the income to continue where his father leaves off. Until then, she stares at the pixelated images traveling across the screen. The phone rings; she doesn’t move. Then she hears her son’s voice on the answering machine. She smiles and walks hurriedly over to the phone; however, she’s too late. She calls him back immediately because she thinks that he must finally have some free time, but for some reason he doesn’t answer. She leaves him a ninety-second message and stands by the phone. She’s sure he’ll call back.

She waits, staring and still, as if with any sudden motion she might scare the phone call off without hope of hearing it again.

It rings. She answers smiling, but he can’t see.

They talk for exactly an hour, and she never once thinks that for the entire length of the conversation he’s been staring at the clock. He lets her share her stories, despite his lack of interest, and then exchanges some of his own because he knows it’ll make her feel like everything’s ok. He just wants her to be happy.

She says, “I love you.”

He’s accidentally silent. “Uh, love you, too, Mom!”

Putting the phone back in its base, she lets out one sniffle and gives a tightlipped smile to her dog, laying patiently at her chair where she left him. Her eyes are wide as the TV flashes with scene cuts portraying Caitlin Todd’s final moments before her Season 2 death, while the aging mother thinks, it’s sadder the second time.
Ginger Ale
Trenton Heille

An empty bottle on a park bench was an invitation;
I blew across the rim and heard it sing
back to me in plainsong.

I held the bottle up to my eye, and tinted the world;
green clouds in a green sky, green skin on my hand:
amphibious animal.

It's strangeness stuck in a catch of breath.

In the Straw
Trenton Heille

Her father found us in the bedroom, tangled sheets our second skin against the draft
from an open window. I pushed my head and shoulders through, thinking about
moths cocoons, and the look of skin rubbed raw in patches where that shiver comes
from,

which then was everywhere, with my feet bleeding against the frozen path to the barn.
November is unkind, leaving dirt sharp as teeth on those uncalloused places,
but I hardly felt the pain through the swarm of locusts in my chest;

they beat a whirlwind in me, and I whirled hay in giant circles through the barn. The
strands spun, then hung like blonde stars in the black above my head. I feared the
furnace in my neck and chest would set alight the whole damn thing, but I hid

my needle in the hay stacks, lying naked like a dead man, freshly hanged.
Normal people do not dream of ruling a college dishroom. Normal people dream of exotic beaches, sexy women, or playing the nose flute naked in front of a mob of squalling kindergartners. But I was under the impression that the normal life was the boring life. Thus, I decided to dream big and do the best at whatever I did.

My empire began in the Commons dining room’s labyrinth, a room eternally stewing in its own noxious vapors and sweltering heat. Garbage and the refuse of society are shoved into this room and are forced to deal with each other in a battle for supremacy. The weak do not survive long in this place.

I was shoved into this hell as a freshman, not fully understanding how intense this warzone I was thrust into would be. But I soon recognized the truth. I knew it immediately after looking into the cold, dark eyes of the other hulking, experienced student workers who were with me. They looked me over with the grim efficiency of a butcher looking over a cow to see if it was ready for market. Apparently I was still too thin.

“Get to position three,” one of them grunted. I blinked at her in confusion.

“I’m new—” I tried to explain, but she had already moved on, leaving me to my own fate.

Before I was completely floundering in inadequacy, I was taken under the wing of a fearsome Italian full-timer, an aged man, with silvery hair pulled back into a pony tail and several missing teeth. He had one of those names that took a day and a half to say and even longer to learn. So he gave me an offer I couldn’t refuse, telling me to simply call him ‘Don’.

That was all that I got from my mentor, for he constantly mumbled and growled under his breath while he was ‘explaining’ to me how to do my job. The other student workers laughed at my plight. But I chose to ignore their smirks. Their grins awoke the warrior within me. I would endure this hell. I would master it. And then, I would be the one laughing, rubbing my superiority into their grimy faces! But alas, it was not to be this night.

I tuned out my mentor, who seemed content to mumble to himself in his own little world, and turned my attention to the guardian of the dishroom. It was a huge silver beast that sat in the middle in the room, which all the workers circled in wary worship. Then it lurched, sending out a gout of steam and a low rumbling which made the room shiver. I almost lost my footing (though that was due to the small pool of water I suddenly found myself standing in—the discharge of the monster before me).

As I regained my balance, I stared in wonder as racks of dishes—our paltry offering to the beast—went on a conveyor-belt into the beast’s wide mouth, only to come out of the beast’s opposite end paradoxically clean! This mystery astounded me, giving me a newfound respect for the beast in front of me and the dishroom in general. That wonder swiftly evaporated into the hot mist of the dishroom as soon as the work began.

Position three was the lowest of all the jobs in the dishroom. Position one was in charge of putting away cups, silverware, trash, and anything else she could get her hands on. She was the first line of defense against the oncoming hordes of ravenous students and their leftovers.

Position two loaded everything that position one could not handle, mainly plates and other platter-like dishes. All position three did was stack the trays the dishes came on in.
preparation for their own departure. And if it was busy (which it invariably came to be), position three would have to catch the leftovers of position two. Thrice leftover, the lowest of the low.

At first, I struggled to keep pace with the fury of the dish storm, but I was no match for it. I grimly tried to hold my ground, throwing plates slick with unidentifiable sauces on the line, juggling four bowls and a tray and trying to find room for them, all the while praying that I would stay standing. I barely managed. But that was the night my dream fully awoke. Destiny was calling, and I vowed to become the ruler of this nightmarish citadel.

Four days a week, every week, was all that it took to accomplish this feat. In a month, I memorized every rule, such as what things had to be thrown away (paper, plastic, bones, and anything too large to be thrown into “the grinder” (a particularly nasty minion of the silver beast who ground up the wasted food into compost)). I understood every little facet of the dishroom. Every secret. Every dish told me their particular story, letting me govern them.

As such, I was the fastest dish-putter-awayer on campus. I could unload entire trays by myself. I could even do all three positions by myself. All the newcomers would stare in amazement at not only the machine, but me as well. My amazing skills enchanted them, and they pledged to become my servants, loyal vassals during the long semester battle against the oncoming horde.

I thought I was very successful, with my own little court, cut off from the students by my own little conveyor belt and window, through which the students sent their due taxes. We even started addressing ourselves in royal terms. Then, rebellion struck.

The serfs rose up, doing things that shouldn’t be done, putting things into their cups. Everyone knows that cups are for liquids. Not mashed potatoes. Not whole apples. Not things. Liquids. Do you know how hard it is to get mashed freaking potatoes out of a cup? Believe us, it’s ridiculously hard.

So we imposed a glaring edit, posting it at the borders of my kingdom: ‘THROW SILVERWARE IN CHUTE, PLEASE’ along with other edits showing correct procedure. But we forget the illiteracy of our subjects, and the rebellions continued. Yet there were some scribes in the enemy’s midst, writing abhorrent messages of “This food tastes like crap” in flowing ketchup, hoping to overthrow us.

In addition to insurrection in our own kingdom, we were forced to deal with a neighboring kingdom, known as “Johnny’s.” Thus a bitter rivalry was formed. They were continually trying to come into our domain for their own use, and continually we beat them back in a never-ending cycle of fury.

Unfortunately, our kingdom could not last, truly crumbling when some guy invented something called ‘democracy’ and a new “community tray” was formed. Originally, the customs of the land made individuals use their own tray. But this political revolutionary thought it was economically unfriendly, so individual trays were banned for the more inviting ‘community trays.’ And we were helpless to stop this. This plan was disastrous for the dishroom, making what used to be many trays of minimal loads into minimal trays of a massive magnitude of dishes. We adapted, never really regaining our former glory.

Slowly I became aware I was turning into a juggler, an amusing fool with no real talent. I was gradually losing my speed, my knowledge. No one was willing to watch what it did, call it art. No longer did I remember the secret lore of dishwashing. So my once-loyal minions
dethroned me. I was no longer a king, only a figurehead, who was forced to ask others for guidance, or placed on the throne only in the direst of times, when no one else was available. I had become disposable, thrown, at least metaphorically, into the slew of ever-running mix of water and discarded food the grinder sucked into its greedy maw. Disheartened, I did what all who lose hope inevitable do: I turned to my rugged mentor for advice.

I shall never forget what he told me: “Nreh frueh hrm nff rekh neh frizm frehm.” To this day, I have no idea what he was talking about. More than likely he was talking about his case of finger-fungus or making fun of my pitiful attempts. But he said those words with the most gentle smile I had ever seen on his grizzled visage. That smile gave me a new dream: the dream to be like Don.
A Toast to Not Making a Scene

Chelsea Tanis

At the light I wonder about lighters wonders.

Horseflies and the Hollywood blacklist.

But sometimes, when the red is too red, I shriek like I mean to murder,

HERE’S MUD IN YOUR EYE,

then laugh.
Through the frosted pane
I ask the old chauffeur
if he wants to cuddle later, because when that ruby bubble pops, my eyes and lips will have to be told a secret before spilling their own.
THE FIRST RULE of Hunting

JOSH DELACY

Daisy howled the whole length of Used Car Road, and Mitch turned down his pre-hunting playlist to let dog excitement and dirt road crunching and old truck rattles fill the cab. After six miles of Daisy yowling and Mitch grinning, we spilled out of his truck and into the pre-dawn cold, and Mitch let Daisy explode from the truck bed. She raced every which way, sucking in all the good scents of sagebrush and dust and Autumn air and replacing them with the foulest farts I’ve smelled in my life, even though Mitch said Daisy’s way past her prime now, and I should’ve been there when she was a pup and ate that whole package of cookies off’ his dad’s kitchen counter.

We buttoned up new layers and shrugged on orange hunting vests, loaded our shotguns and stuffed shells in our pockets. On my first few hunting trips, Mitch had given me his gun and he had made do with an old .410, but ever since my parents’ Christmas present that year, we both carried semi-auto 12-gauges, although mine was newer and nicer. Mitch delivered the customary, “If I die, the keys are in my right front pocket,” and then he squatted next to Daisy and held her protesting head in his hands. “You got this, girl? Yeah, you do. Find us some birds.” He kissed the top of her head and let her squirm away. She raced off, and then we stepped into the brush.

That first step off the road is beautiful. It’s the step that takes us out of our routine, away from our jobs at my family’s hardware store and into a world where we make our own paths and shoot our own guns. That first step is terrifying and empowering, and with that first step, the morning’s 4:30 wake-up was worth it.

We hurried forward, frosted plants crackling underfoot, anxious for the blood to start flowing and keep us warm. Once Daisy realized we had started out, she raced in front and forgot to hunt. She leaped the small sagebrushes and careened around the larger ones like a madwoman, her legs working faster than her nose.

When we were far enough from the road and warm except for our fingers—fingers never really heat up when you’re carrying a cold shotgun—we slowed our pace and spread apart, and Mitch had Daisy hunt between and little ahead of us. She settled into her groove: nose to the ground, working quick but thorough, the dawn showing up like gold on her fur’s white patches. Mitch and I shouted encouragement and unnecessary commands from time to time.

We talked back and forth as we went, stories about work and college, gossip about Mitch’s messed-up family down south, plans for the jobs we would find once we got our degrees and the recession ended. He wanted to stay up here, he said, but it would be cheaper back home, and sometimes you just can’t get around money. “My Dad’ll keep us on at the store ’til we get something better,” I said. “Don’t write off Washington before we’ve even graduated.” Going for birds might not give you the most meat, but I think being able to talk and walk while you hunt puts it way above deer hunting.

After about an hour in, Daisy had given us a handful of points, but whenever we set up in position and tossed a rock into the brush, no birds flushed out. The scent was always old. Mitch didn’t exactly glare at Daisy when she gave us a false point, but he never shouted any “Find the birds! Good girl!” for a while afterward, either.

We made our way up over a rise of hills, Mitch and I each working one side of a draw
with Daisy scouting out the middle. We reached the top without excitement, aside from spotting a few songbirds that neither the law nor the cardinal “only shoot what you’ll eat” rule allowed. Between the now-risen sun and the effort of tramping uphill, we had both worked up a sweat, so we both stripped off our jackets and stuffed them into our vests’ back pouches, where they mixed with the smell of dead bird that never seems to go away, even between one hunting season and the next.

As we looked down on the land falling away in front of us, land grooved with dozens of tiny valleys, Mitch pointed to a grove of trees not more than a mile ahead. “Quail are shit today,” he said. “Let’s try for grouse a while.” On a typical hunting trip, we would have taken at least three shots by the time we had gone this long and this far, and unless we were both having really off days, we would have had a bird nestled in one of our back pouches—usually mine, since whenever we couldn’t tell who had actually brought down the bird, Mitch gave me the credit. So we made our way down the back side of the hills and crossed the plain that separated us from the trees, a plain entirely devoid of birds. Daisy’s couldn’t find even a hint of a scent. “The grouse will be worth it,” Mitch kept saying.

The grove was at least new country. Open land littered with stunted sagebrush and patches of clumpgrass changed into a dense mess of black cottonwoods, hawthorn, and some sort of low-growing bush that kept tying itself around our ankles and tripping us up. We couldn’t see more than a few dozen feet in any direction, so we’d call out every so often to keep track of where the other was: “Where’s the dog?” or “I’m still over here” or—after a solid half hour—“Mitch! Mitch, get over here! There’s a grouse up here—don’t spook it!”

Grouse are dumb. This one, perched on a branch not more than a dozen yards from me, was more than dumb. It completely ignored Daisy, tail whipping back and forth and running in tight circles beneath the tree, then rearing up with her nose stretched high and her front paws batting the air. The bird gazed down at us, as Mitch as hurried into position beside me and we raised our guns. It ruffled its feathers and closed its eyes.

Another rule of hunting: only shoot the bird in the air. That’s just basic sportsmanship. I broke a branch off the nearest bush and tossed it at the grouse. The stick hit the tree and the bird cracked open one eye. After a second throw, it flew. I tracked the bird’s lazy route above and behind us, keeping the gun barrel in pace with its flight, and then Mitch’s orange hat filled my vision. I snapped my gun up as Mitch fired, a hail of pellets snapping through leaves and twigs. He shot again and Daisy bolted through the brush, searching for a bird she wouldn’t find.

Mitch cussed and called her back. Without having to say a word, we decided another chance at the grouse was worth more bushwhacking. On a slow hunting day, any chance at a bird is worth taking. The grouse had disappeared in the trees, so we guessed the rest of its route and plowed through the underbrush until, almost at the edge of the grove, we saw it.

This time, the grouse spooked right away and flew straight, flapping slow and away from us. They say you don’t aim a shotgun so much as point it, since you’ve got a wide spread and not enough time to line up a perfect shot. But this bird was slow. I lined up the beads, breathed out halfway and held it, and squeezed the trigger.

The grouse tumbled from the air.

I hollered and Daisy bolted after the bird. Mitch and I raced after her, and by the time we made it into the open, the dead grouse was already flopping in Daisy’s mouth as she pranced
back to us. It was a hen, hit in the back and the wing—a solid hit, and from far enough away that the meat wasn’t mangled at all. Mitch smiled and said it was a good bird, but after hours of disappointment and a few missed shots, it’s hard to act like you aren’t a little jealous.

“When a bird’s still warm, right there against your back—that feels pretty damn good,” I said. Mitch cursed at me and grinned. He called Daisy and knelt down next to her. “You’ve gotta help me out, girl. My reputation’s on the line, here. Best shot in the county, and a schmuck got the first bird.” I could usually gauge Mitch’s mood by his bragging: best shot in the nation, best shot in the state. He had lowered himself to the best shot in the county on a few trips, and once to “best shot on Front Street” when—twice in one hour—he had lined up a perfect shot only to find his safety still on. Best shot in the county after just a few missed birds surprised me, so I didn’t rib him anymore.

I wasn’t just trying to get a rise from Mitch, though—the feel of a bird really is pretty good. So after another hour with the sun at its peak and sweat soaking through our t-shirts, I still kicked every sagebrush we passed and carried my gun at the ready. Daisy was still birdy, too, and she just about bounded as she hunted. Mitch trailed a little behind us, still blaming the tree that kept him from even seeing my grouse the second time. I refused to let him spoil my mood.

We hunted in a wide arc around Mitch’s truck, which I guess was a good two or three miles away, and at the edge of another grove, we stopped for a late lunch of beef jerky, trail mix, and dog food that Daisy wouldn’t finish. She never did eat more than a few bites on a hunting trip, but Mitch always brought a full quart bag every time, just in case.

As we ate, Mitch spied a wasp’s nest nearly a foot in diameter, hanging from a nearby tree. He traded his bag of raisins, nuts, and melted chocolate for his shotgun. “I need to shoot something today,” he said, and he did.

It’s amazing how loud a shotgun roars when you don’t have adrenaline running through you. I flinched and Daisy leaped up, ready to retrieve whatever Mitch had just killed. But the nest didn’t so much as sway. Mitch fired again and it still didn’t move. He jammed two new shells into his gun and stuffed his trail mix into his pocket. “Let’s go.”

The shots had inspired Daisy, and she leapt back into hunting. But I trudged, feeling guilty about the bird in my vest. We kept on our arc for another mile, but then, without comment, we both started veering toward the truck. My legs ached and I felt the first tingling of a sunburn. The trail mix and beefy jerky had left my mouth dry, and even though the real heat of the day had passed, I wished I had another water bottle. Neither Mitch nor I bothered to check even the largest, most likely sagebrushes anymore. Daisy kept hunting at a trot, but dust and heat and hours of use had dried out her nose.

We kept at it until Mitch stopped. “Hold up.” Daisy was a little ways ahead, poking her head into a bush. Mitch thumbed off his gun’s safety.

“Do you see it?” He pointed off to his right, but all I saw was a stunted, dead tree with a pair of chipmunks playing around its roots. “We each take one?”

Even if our shotguns somehow didn’t obliterate the chipmunks, there wasn’t even a mouthful of meat between two of them. I shook my head. “I’m okay.”

Mitch shrugged and raised his gun, and this time I plugged my ears. He fired, and a patch of bark exploded into dust and splinters and the chipmunks darted away. Mitch swore and ran two steps and fired again. The chipmunks raced across the ground and Mitch chased after them, trying to line up a clean shot for his last shell. Daisy tore off after them, coming from
almost directly behind Mitch. He stopped and aimed, and Daisy passed him just before he fired.
The gun blasted, and Mitch screamed.
He dropped his gun, and I realized I was running toward him. Daisy skidded to a stop, looked at the remaining chipmunk and then at Mitch. Face white, he sank to his knees, hands limp at his sides. Daisy trotted back to him with her tail wagging.
I slowed to a walk, and then I stopped. I let Mitch hold his dog and hide his tears. She licked his face once and then squirmed free, ready to hunt some more.
Mitch and I sat in the dust in silence. Neither of us looked at the other. He started to speak, then stopped. “I’m not working tomorrow,” he finally said. “Your dad let me go.” Mitch rubbed his hands into the dusty ground. “He had to downsize. I’m not mad at him.” Daisy circled around us, happy and oblivious.
“I’m sorry for ruining the trip,” Mitch said.
I guessed at how much I needed to cover rent and food and gas for the next few months. “I’ll talk to my dad.” I figured I had enough saved up to keep me going a while at part-time. Mitch nodded, his fingers curled and forgotten in Daisy’s fur. After a while, he stood on trembling legs and picked up his gun, and he followed me back to the truck. Daisy hunted beside us all the way.
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