

Gambling the Aisle



Issue #11

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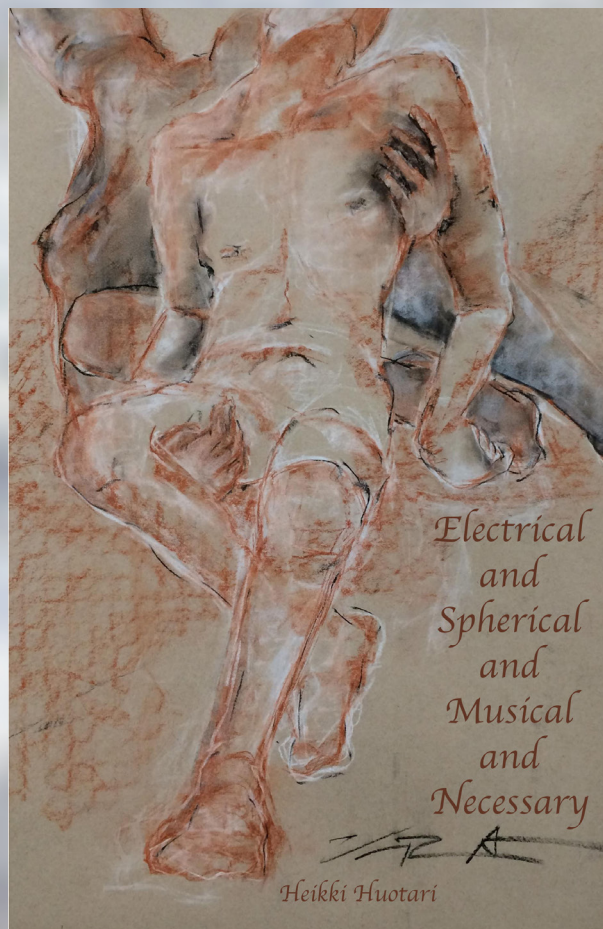
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Gambling the Aisle 2016 Chapbook Contest Winner

Electrical and Spherical and Musical and Necessary

Heikki Huotari

Heikki Huotari is a retired professor of mathematics. In a past century, he attended a one-room country school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. His poems have appeared in several journals, most recently, in *Diagram* and *The Inflectionist Review*. His chapbook, *Truth Table*, is available at the *Finishing Line Press*.



Chapbook Runners up:

Figlet by Kik Williams

make me unsick by Christine Tierney

Poems for Fassbinder by Drew Pissarra

Simbelmynë by Anna King Ivey



Baby New Years Plastic World by Dara Herman Zierlein

Too late for all that

Andrew Bertaina

I take up quarters in a vacant colonial down by the water. The backyard has a small, stony path, and an abundant garden—petunias, Shasta daisies, yarrow, irises, a small grape vine with clusters of ripe purple Concord. The yard has no fence; it ends in a dusty path that snaked by the river. Mornings, I take walks down by the water, scaring blackbirds into flight and watching them fly across bits of pink and blue sky. I've been here a week, and I only know the dogs so far, who seek me out on the path and nuzzle my legs before they are pulled away by well-meaning owners, who do not know how much I miss being touched.

Sometimes, if I feel bold, I walk into the village where I am unknown. I watch the girls at market, hair like sheaves of wheat uncoiling in the wind, men spitting in the road and heaving large baskets from carts laden with apples. The talk is all of the crops and the vagaries of spring weather. Just this morning, I saw a farmer cut the head off a chicken, and I watched as it kept running, legs pumping furiously, futilely, and the dirt reddening around it.

I spend a good deal of time reading by the fireplace in the sunken living room. I read Dickens or Henry James, turning pages in the deep quiet, getting up to add logs to the fire and watching sparks skitter or the blue flame burning intently like the eyes of a lover or a querulous cat.

In the evenings, after a short walk, I take down the whiskey and start to drink. In the distance, I can sometimes hear the blare of the train's horn as the train barrels through the night, taking people away from me. I confess that I love it here, out in the unknown. Though when it's late and the candle has burned out, I hear you calling me from outside, and I'll slip out of bed to find you.

Outside, the moon is a buoy floating in the dark night sea. The river, like the path, slithers through the countryside, flickering in the moonlight. The odd thing about this house in the middle of nowhere, is that you've followed me here too. And from the window, I watch your body floating past, pale and serene. After you've passed round the bend in the river, I walk across the cold tile and into the bathroom. There, I light a candle and stare at my reflection in a small, gilded mirror—the reflection of a woman, half-gone from this world, but still clinging to life like a chicken out in the yard, running round and round, not knowing yet that it's too late for all that.



Juno by Virginia Mallon



Untitled by Adorable Monique

Carter Vance

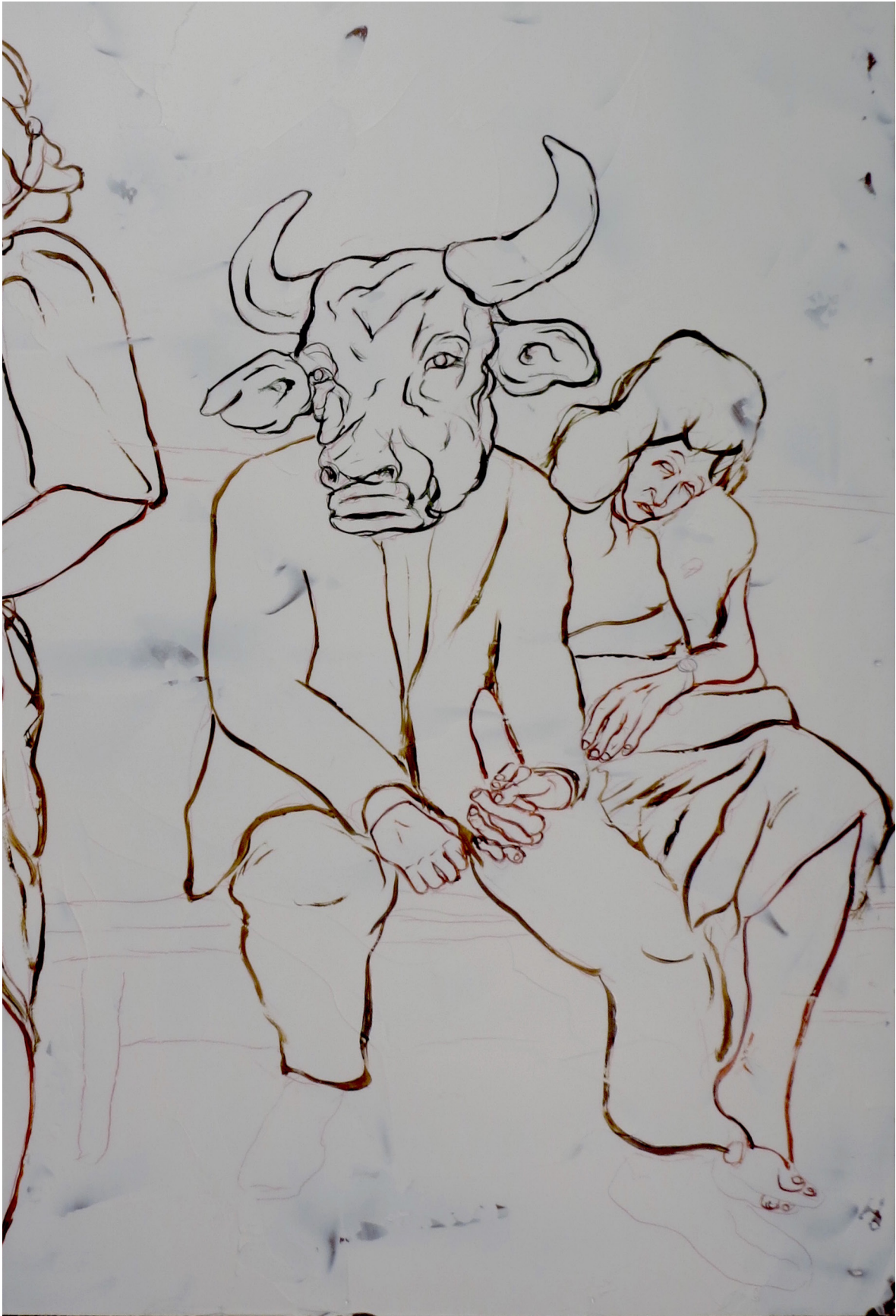
Red As Rosa

It isn't made like that anymore,
all neckline plunge, in-time white linen,
so slim a fiction as blessing cribs,
and one that could never handle a
crossing of hand wounds tender
for lacing logic of cross town traffic
lights you shoulder with broken beads,

darkened metro rail ticket offices,
you flutter between, dancer's
grace on way from library stacks
to the pity swirl of paper lace
and chewed pen caps that stain
your face a rose gold shade,
pallid mourning magic through
dawn spaces you treed kindling
brought down from grassy hills
to city centres and sold at the
penny-pound (all I could afford)
straining acceptance of
this single twine space where we
meet as revolutionaries,
leave as shoeshine specters.



Judgment Day II by Steven Sherrill



Judgment Day XI by Steven Sherrill



Weight by Virginia Mallon

Beulah and Jane

Rich Ives

Two intense girlie girls with their pampered Poo-pom light on a park bench and chirp wildly. The dog can't blink, and the girls don't have time to collect any fresh boys. They're on their way to trailer home parties and children born out of wedlock. Suddenly, like a false storm, silence interrupts their flutter. They're making lists of things to lick and buttery places to take a husband.

We're young, and we're inventors making slow-dissolving Kool-Aid suppositories in the freezer. Nothing cools you off faster in the heat. You can see through all our worry even without my subtle tremble. I have enough energy to let every part of me go. One of us is so intense she was the only girl in seventh grade to ever break her arm necking. In her bedroom cute posters of reckless kittens are hanging from clotheslines next to firemen without shirts and a thumb-tacked condom wrapper.

An odor of stale eggs and fresh lapdog poop.

In a few weeks, we'll let these thoughts in like arrogant sailors anchoring in one more harbor, but tonight's travelers are not from the sea, one breath whispering Appletini and one cherry Skoal.

Two cheerleaders in a bucket of fresh rust, so what if the rubber nails beneath gym class cushions were winning blow jobs last year. Their mimetic wheel of experience issues forth with its party hat on top of its work hat.

Turn, damn you, turn!

The door to Roy Orbison's crying was next to the glove of a raccoon's padded hand. The rest of the raccoon must have been very attached to that glove, but the darkness was not releasing any evidence. It was cold there next to his watery domain. An icicle slipped into the lake like a betrayal that melts to an invitation. They did not feel threatened. They knew that tomorrow the whole world might be frozen.

We only heard him do it once, but Johnny Ray had a good cry too.

We suppose you can't dance, but we can. It's just that we do it badly.

Gold and silver leafing decorates the edge of our valuable sandwiches. They're small and dry and done shrinking, we suppose.

We discovered a hairline crack, but there in our hair, where we found it, it seemed huge. It separated one possibility from another, but Llaro Dulciani was not one of them. Sister Carmelita was already sweat-promised and dripping. We were afraid to touch any part of her.

Some kind of a melon head was making a face on the window ledge. Whose body put it there? There are things you need to know to participate adequately in the understandings that invent us. Some things have to be eliminated to keep our imagination from hiding. Even now, you might still expect someone to come apart before you get there.

We fell backwards into another woman we had lost, but she hadn't found herself either. We continued falling.

Come here now. Right now. Don't be dawdle bunny. We want to show you how we put a loop into the song we were putting together from old kitchen utensils. Because we were older now, we warned each other against eating anything that had come into contact with our earlier, less organized ideals, which didn't stop our hunger from appearing sacred.

The rope we found there was tied to a rope. We couldn't find a single irrelevant purpose. That was when a shift wasn't something you could wear.

We referred to the place as the conclusion, but we'd already been there. So we left and never saw the place approaching.

If you want it to arrive without cinder blocks, you'll have to provide an anchor for the dreamy dirigible. The screen door opens for the air. That's why the air opens for the screen door.

There was a party recovery with its junk hanging out, but we didn't want to contract any partial diseases, so we fooled with it only in the full sense of the word. We made a list of the opportunities but forgot to put making lists on the list, so we lost them all.

It's the kind of success that lasts longer than you want it to, the kind without a license or an undershirt, the kind with small animal conclusions and bird lice. But not to worry, the lace is not open to speculation. You're safe with that one, and you're safe with another one too. Keep looking. You'll figure out

which one.

We went out to the edge of town to find the edge of town and it wasn't there.

In the next toned photo they captured the way they intended to escape, with the definition loose and clearly tentative. How long did it take to invent this infinity (the way a light bulb goes out and comes back sometimes just to fuck with you)?

We played at sisters at dinner in the irrigation ditch and took turns being the skinny one, the lesser of two eels. The lawnmower drill team had removed their lawnmower blades. We watched a black and white movie without a genre or a love interest starring Peter Lorre's fat nervous eyes.

Noon wants another chance to stretch its shadow and forgets which direction the sun was claiming. Who cares? Just turn around and let

yourself go. We're old enough now.

Put something in its way, it insists, points it towards yesterday, and tomorrow appears in front of you as if it were not tomorrow, yet often it lives in contradiction, going here, going there, returning as if something had been accomplished, which could be true for seeds or pollen or anything but the wind.

On the day after away, gravity falls for it every time.

Ferocious convents of intimacy lit with bourbon candles.

There's always a way to have love apply to you, but it's not always your way.

Rest your hand, god of undiscovered needs, and the creature becomes pre-occupied, its thoughts in the next moment and not this one.



Untitled by Adorable Monique



Peaceful Protesters International Human Rights Day by Dara Herman Zierlein

Two-Ply City

Operators suffer most during the summer—
from heated plastic film-making machines
that spit out sheeting, tubing, and bags.
July sweat soaks the shirts to their backs
before they make the time clock.

Lead men stew in the heat checking their lines:
at the back are resin hoppers atop heated barrels
screwing melted plastic up through twelve inch dies,
ejecting film towards the chain-driven tower nips—
which often removes careless fingers and hands,
down rollers into the back of bag machines,
machines that perforate and seal the film
before it is threaded into the winder and onto
four inch wide cores made of inch thick cardboard.

On the roof, up a flight of stairs, atop the silos,
a supervisor checks hoses and the vacuum pump
sucking resin from the railcar below
into the tiny hopper on top the silo—silence
the flap opens, resin falls into the silo
the flap closes and the pump inhales more resin.

Below, count bells ring until lower turrets are auto-cycled
Operators rip loose bags, wrapping the film onto other cores.
Weights are recorded and rolls packaged for shipping
by lunch they curse God and the plant manager
begging for the fans to rotate their way.
An operator collapses in the hundred degree heat
(unable to be revived, the worker is lugged offstage)
another one steps in and pulls the next roll of bags.

Quality Inspectors measure and record, wipe faces down
watch operators drop like resin—never getting their names.
The forklift driver dumps off an empty wooden pallet
picks up any banded pallets of sheeting, tubing, or bags
and returns to the warehouse—away from the heat.

Darren Demaree

Ankenytown, Ohio

Nobody questions
Martha's marijuana
use. Cancer

takes the wind
from the lake
& buries you in

the shallow sand.
It's her son. No hundred-
pound boy needs

to take diet pills.
No boy needs to set fires
between the churches.

Invisible Hands

Ryan Dunham

Owen bought a pair of invisibility gloves, because the shop was all out of cloaks. He could have gone with angel wings, x-ray specs, or The Flash sneakers, but Owen really wanted something to be invisible.

Outside, Owen fumbled with the packaging but, sure enough, they were the right size—at least, they felt the right size—Owen couldn't see his hands the moment he put the gloves on. Ideas were rampant in his head before he visited the shop—tomfoolery he could get into wearing an invisibility cloak. But misadventures he could have with only his hands hidden from view failed to surface inside his brain.

Not wanting to reveal what couldn't be seen as he walked into his apartment, Owen kept his hands deep in his pockets after closing the door before Allison could see, or not see, anything suspicious and become...more suspicious.

"Where have you been?" she whines. Two wool socks her mother knitted her for Christmas two years ago hide Allison's feet. Her face is buried in a torn paperback copy of *Catch-22*—her favorite novel. The chamomile tea bag is surrounded by lukewarm water inside Owen's mug. What's she doing drinking from his mug?

"I have something to show you," Owen says, but he still has no idea how to reveal the imperceptible. He sneaks into the kitchen, undetected. Reaching into the drawer, Owen pulls out two oven mitts and places them over the gloves, making his hands visible once more.

"What are you doing?" Allison asks. The socks have been pulled up to her thighs. The book has been closed, bookmark not in place but dog-eared. The tea has disappeared.

"I put a turkey in the oven and I want to be ready when it's done so it doesn't burn the whole house down... my hands are cold... you proposed to me but then you came down with a bad case of amnesia and now I want to return the favor and reveal the ring that's still on my finger."

Allison sighs so slightly Owen's unsure of whether or not she's just exhaled normally. Owen gives her a look that comes across as his normal expression. The silence that's replaced their old loquaciousness continues.

"Do you mind getting the door for me? I forgot... something in the car."

"We don't own a car, Owen."

"In my bicycle basket...on the bus...back in the office."

"You don't have an office. You don't even have a job. You just wander the streets aimlessly all day and come back at night with useless toys and gizmos."

Now's not the time. She's on to me. She's not ready to see my latest gift to myself.

**

Owen escapes the apartment and leaves the oven mitts in their mailbox. Thank God it's Sunday, he thinks. Or has neither of us checked the mail in days? What will she say if she finds them in there? Maybe they were delivered to the wrong address, he'll say. Without packaging? she'll ask.

Crap.

At the coffee shop, nobody notices Owen's lack of ambidexterity. He orders a venti coffee with cream and no sugar because he's tired, but decaf because otherwise it'll keep him up all night. He asked the barista for a pen but walks away with a mechanical pencil and an internal rant mixed with bewilderment as to why anybody would still use a pencil.

Pulling out a business card—from someone he never intended on calling, or emailing, or faxing—from his wallet, Owen flips it over and tries to begin writing. The space is too small for all of his ideas, but the right size for the good ones. It takes another cup of coffee before he gets one half-decent idea, this time tall but regular with sugar and no cream, because, really, what's the difference? Same amount of caffeine, right?

Bar tricks for free drinks.

So Owen decides to undo the two coffees he's just had and reimburse himself for the money he's just spent with a few pints of free beer.

**

"Here's the deal," Owen says to the stranger next to him who has one ear on his maybe girlfriend and one ear on Owen, one eye on his maybe girlfriend and the other on some other woman across the way.

“Excuse me?”

Show time and Owen hasn't a clue. He missed rehearsal because he never had one. He came unprepared.

So Owen just pushes his hands-that-can't-be-seen out from beneath his shirt cuffs and says gleefully, “Look, ma! No hands!”

At first the stranger thinks Owen's hands are still under cloth and maybe he's just had a few or maybe he's looking for a fight. But then Owen unbuttons his cuffs and rolls his sleeves up past his elbows and for the first time for Owen and for the first time for the stranger it's a strange sight—it looks like Owen was born without hands but there's a strange, vibrating shimmer between the spots where Owen's hands are covered and where his wrists are exposed.

“What the hell is that?” the stranger asks, now wondering if maybe he's had a few too many himself.

“Um.” Owen searches for the right words. He's trying to remember the line on the script he never wrote. “Buy me a drink?”

The stranger just laughs and goes back to looking at two women, only this time neither of them are his maybe girlfriend.

Then Owen has an idea. He takes off the invisibility gloves and puts them in his back pocket. His hands are back to normal visibility. He taps the same stranger on the shoulder.

“Excuse me?” he says again without turning around.

So Owen reaches around him and places his hands over the stranger's wandering eyes, and says, “Guess who?” Only the stranger still can't see Owen's hands because Owen's hands are blocking out the light. Only the stranger still can't guess who Owen is because they're still mutual strangers.

Owen releases his hold and by the time the man turns around Owen's replaced the right hand glove on his hand—giving the man the finger with the hidden hand and an apologetic “I'm sorry...I'm sorry” with the other. Owen walks out of the bar as sober as he was when he went in.

**

Back inside the apartment complex, Owen puts on the other glove, opens the mailbox, and repositions the oven mitts. He knocks on the door but nobody answers. He reaches for the only set of keys he and Allison own while he remembers that Allison never gave them back to him when he said he was going out.

After waiting forty-five minutes for the super to unlock the door, Owen starts to wish that he had put a turkey in the oven. He thanks the super verbally for opening the door for him and silently for not mentioning the oven mitts.

But when he gets inside Allison's not there. Her wool socks have been crumpled and thrown into the laundry bin. Catch-22 sits back on the bookshelf. And the chamomile tea bag has found its way into the trash bin, his mug washed and put away.

This is not the first time Allison's disappeared. She usually returns after a day or two and apologies and then things go back to normal. But as the weeks pass, items start vanishing from his apartment. First the wool socks, then Catch-22, then his favorite mug. His bed, the curtains, the wok neither of them have ever used so he barely notices that it's gone, his books, his socks, everything melts away until one day Owen comes home to an empty apartment. All that's left are the clothes he came in wearing, the crap in his pockets, and there, sitting on the kitchen counter, his invisibility gloves.

But when he tries to put them on they don't work. He can still see his hands.

**

Owen returns to the shop and asks to make a return. He doesn't want cash back, he doesn't want to be reimbursed on his credit card, and he doesn't want store credit. He just wants his life to return to normal.

“What's wrong with them?” asks the clerk.

“Um.” Owen is still wearing the gloves. He lifts his hands to show the cashier, but just gets a disinterested shrug in response.

“So? They look fine to me.”

Owen looks around the shop for the angel wings. For the x-ray specs. For The Flash sneakers. But the only thing left in the store are signs that say “Clearance” and “Everything Must Go” and “Up to 80% Off.”

**

Owen returns to the pub and buys a pint with the remaining cash in his wallet. When he finishes, he tries to remember bar tricks that don't involve having invisible hands. But it doesn't matter because the bar is empty except for himself and the bartender.

Then Owen hears a familiar voice ask, “Can I buy you a drink?”

Allison.

He looks over his shoulder but nobody's there. He asks the bartender if he's seen anybody else in the joint and the bartender tells him, "It's just you, buddy. You gonna have another?"

And then she says it again. "Can I buy you a drink?"

He must be hearing things, he thinks. She's gone for good this time.

Owen covers his eyes with his now-regular-and-can-be-seen-at-all-times hands and concentrates. Do I respond? Am I going crazy?

And when he removes his hands from his vision a fresh pint sits in front of him.

"On the house?" he asks the bartender.

"I don't give out free drinks to nobody," he says.

And as Owen starts to sip the mysteriously-paid-for beer, he feels a warm embrace surround him. Like somebody is hugging him from behind.

"Allison?" he says loud enough for her to hear if she's here but quietly enough so the bartender cannot.

Silence.

But the warmth gives Owen the confidence that Allison's still with him. That if she's gone, she shall return.

The heat reminds him that things will return to normal. They always do. The tenderness he's feeling removes his buyer's remorse.

"Thank you," he says in the same volume as before.

And this time he hears it, but he doesn't know which direction it's coming from. It sounds like it's coming from within his head and all around him in the bar at the same time.

"I love you," she says.

And Owen knows he doesn't need to say anything in return. He knows that when he finishes his beer, and thanks the bartender, and walks outside and down the street and up the stairs to his apartment, all of his stuff will be waiting for him. All of Allison's things, too.

And maybe, just maybe, Allison will also be there. And it'll be like she never left, and the two of them can start over without having to arrive at a new beginning. It'll be like they never faded into obscurity, and it'll be like after being unable to look away from each other's returning gaze for so long that they're seeing one another for the first time again and always.



Judgment Day V by Steven Sherrill



Demeter by Virginia Mallon

An Interview with Haoxiang Zhang

Adam Van Alstyne

Haoxiang Zhang: Hi Mr. Adam.

Adam Van Alstyne: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. You just turned 30. How long have you been working with installations? Care to tell me about your first?

HZ: I have been working on installation art since I was in sophomore year in university. At that time, I had just done my Western Art History class. My professor casually and scornfully told us about some post-modernism art and said that it was bad art, that students need to learn more traditional art. But I did not listen. His words evoked my curiosity, so I started to do a lot of research. I made my first combo of performance and installation art in 2008.

AV: This was in Tianjin, correct? Tell me about that installation.

HZ: Yes. The name of the work is *Useless Comfort to Natural Desire*. The work was inspired by the Sanlu milk powder event, which is a well-known food safety event in China. [*In 2008, the Sanlu Group and other companies sold infant formula containing melamine, causing multiple deaths and kidney damage in more than 50,000 babies—Ed.*] I chose a simple and ancient religious symbolism, with the apple symbolizing natural original desire. I cut the apple deeply with my own hands, and then stitched this wound with the same hands. I cut off the parts I stitched and hung them up in the specimen jar. You can understand it as the human cutting the woods, then growing some artificial forest.

AV: You said this was a combo of installation and performance--was the stitching done in front of an audience?

HZ: Yes, the whole process was done in front of an audience.

AV: What was the response from the audience?

HZ: Honestly, no one really gave me feedback except for the handclap after the work was finished. That is the problem with student work. At that time, I always wanted to make my work deep but ignored the readability of the work.

AV: How has your perspective changed in the years that followed?

HZ: I think the biggest change of my perspective came from studying abroad. I still remember the first day I

stepped on American land, the smell of LA, California.

AV: What differences have you experienced in artist culture between China and the US?

HZ: The first group of people I met at Cal State Fullerton University—They all came from different countries, spoke different languages or had accents. I have never seen this before in China. I think diversity is the most distinct difference between China and the US.

AV: Do you think there is a lack of diversity in the Chinese art world?

HZ: I don't think China has a lack of diversity. China has 56 ethnic groups--every one of them has special culture. I think there are countless references for artists in China. But the domestic diversity is different from international diversity. The domestic cultural diversity is still in the same general framework. The international diversity will totally overturn your world view.

AV: How was your art affected by your move to the US? LA is certainly a unique place.

HZ: Just because of different people I met, I realized the importance of myself. No matter the cultural identification or personal identification, I am gradually re-recognizing myself. I lived in LA only for one year. Mostly I just stayed at school—the OC is far from the LA art center, so I wasn't affected by LA too much. I lived in San Francisco for three years. I think northern California influenced me more. Most of my recent art works were made in San Francisco--that city really changed me a lot.

AV: You probably aren't alone in thinking that way--the Bay Area has traditionally been a source of inspiration for American artists as well.

HZ: That is true, I can clearly feel that.

AV: As a Chinese artist living in America, you exist in a hybrid state, it seems. What do you consider to be your influences?

HZ: I think my family influenced me the most when I was in China, because both my parents were majors in Chinese literature. My grandparents from both sides are teachers and artists. I have some innate advantages in being an artist. After I came to the US, I think the whole country influences me. I can find something new every day, unless I don't have curiosity. I think the US is not a concept that I can tell others about logically—it's a different kind of lifestyle. I cannot describe it, but I am

living in it. The US overturns my art in so many ways. I remember an art history professor taught me how medieval religious art impacted abstract painting. This was a brand new perspective to me. No one had taught me in this way, or even done such research.

AV: Let me ask you about one of your exhibits. What led to the creation of *Natural Regulator*? How was it arranged during the exhibition?

HZ: I think art should not only be itself. Art is powerful enough to represent different perspectives of human civilization. So, I hope I can blend my personal preference, anthropology, into my art works. I chose an anthropological phenomenon, which you can see every day, called the anti-conflict system. When a group of people are crowded in a small space, such as an elevator, people will try their best to avoid being offensive to others. People won't stare at other's eyes; instead, they will look at somewhere meaningless, such the corner of the elevator, the LED number of the floor, and so on. For the exhibition arrangement, I actually already had a picture in my mind before I made the work. I wanted the work to be shown in a realistic way. However, I wanted the audience to know that the works are not real. So, I set all figurative sculptures into different boxes, then set up monitors on the walls of the boxes. I projected the

video from monitors on the wall in the gallery space. The monitors make the video look like reality, because people get used to the digital images. But the audience cannot see the real sculpture in the real gallery space, because they are in the boxes. So the real space blocks your vision. The virtual space counterfeits a fake reality. That is the effect I wanted to show in the exhibition.

AV: As an artist, what have you struggled the most with?

HZ: The most failure, in my opinion, is that I probably cannot make a living by art; however, most artists have to be distracted from art making by working for money, so it seems like a normal artist's life.

AV: I think that most artists struggle with that. We choose not to include advertisements in this magazine to allow us to keep our artistic integrity, but that also constantly threatens our existence.

HZ: We don't need to treat money as a sin. I want to sell my works too. But I prefer to get some other job to get income. Because once your art works join into the market, your freedom will be sold also. Can you imagine an artist without freedom? I am still happy to see artists sell their works. I would especially like to see someone buy my works. But I treat it like winning a lottery.

AV: Thank you for speaking with me today, and best of luck with the "lottery"!



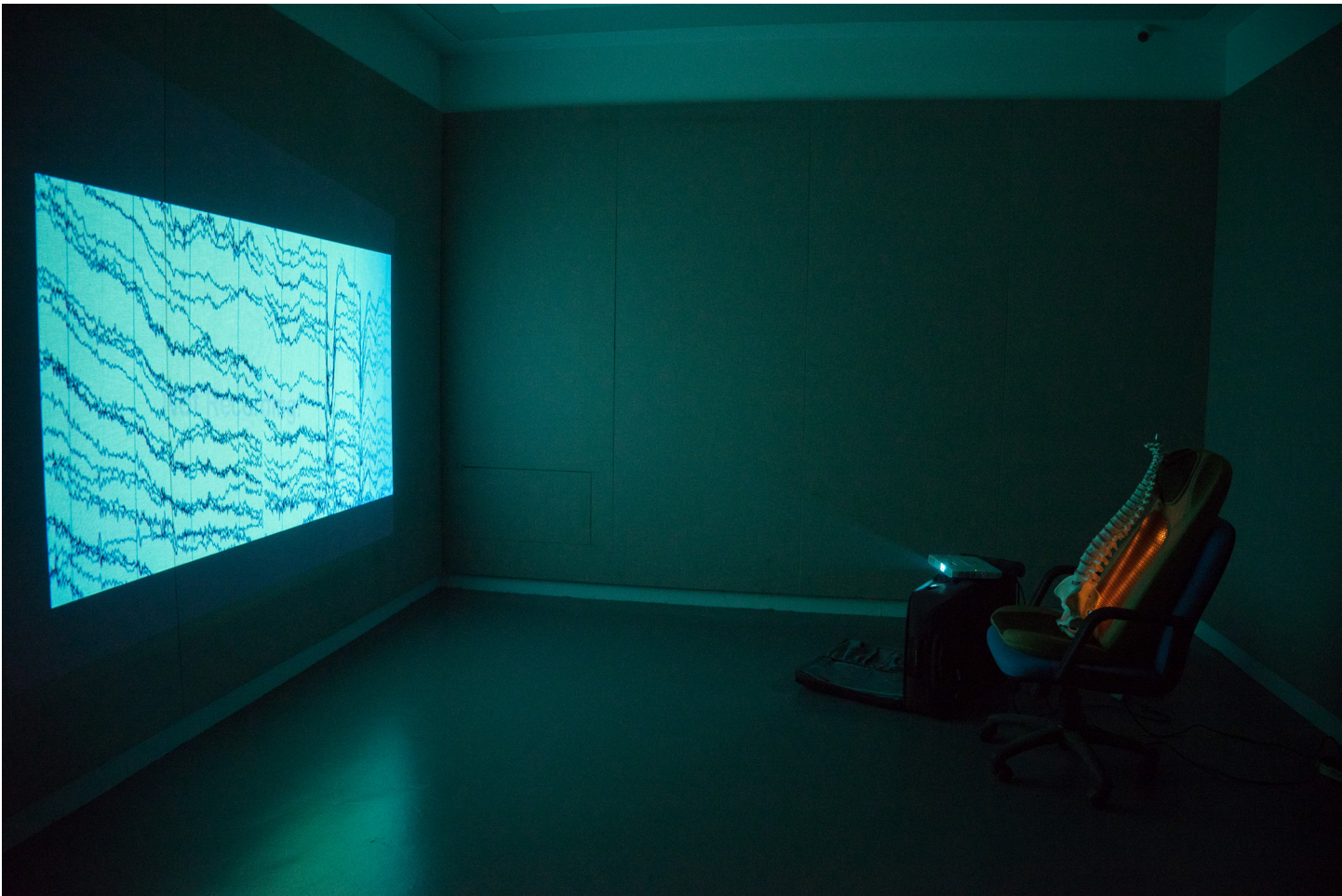
from The Earth exhibit by Haoxiang Zhang



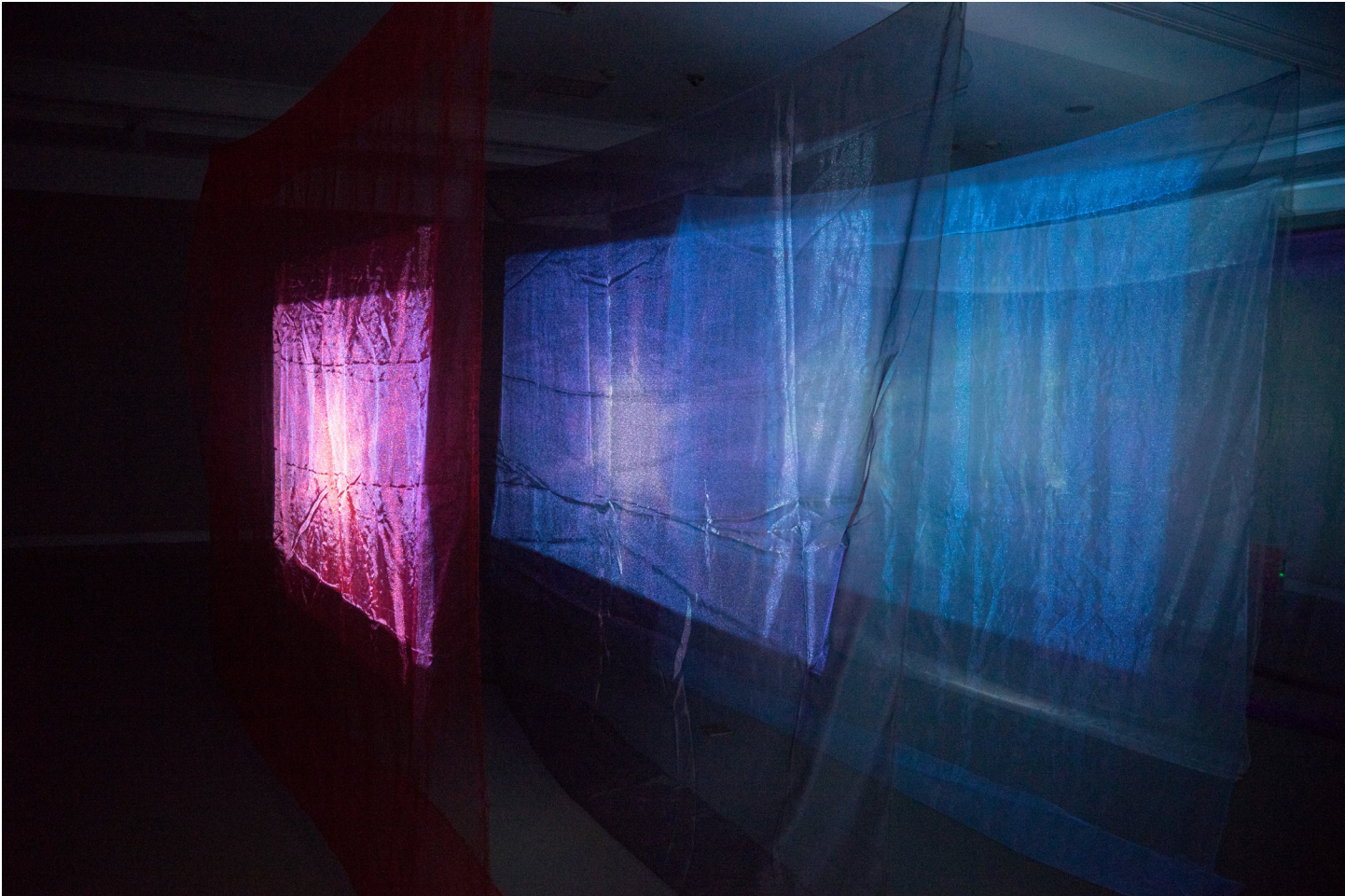
from Natural Regulator exhibit by Haoxiang Zhang



from Natural Regulator exhibit by Haoxiang Zhang



from The Earth exhibit by Haoxiang Zhang



from The World of Gods exhibit by Haoxiang Zhang

Madill, OK

Summer dusk and
nothing to do after
a day's work and bone
weariness leave room
for anticipation we eat
then drink a beer or
two, shoot some
sloppy eight ball
stroll outside with
toothpicks rolling
side to side, say let's
get us some girls
Jake says you mean
like last night, yes
and the night before
and the night before
and we laugh start
the old blue Ford
drive around the
town square twice
head for Texas on
the other side of the
big manmade lake
our bridge will cross
despite tornadoes
and height and
sucking warm mud

and we know we
should really be
asleep the a.m.
comes too soon
in any case and the
only girl we see
is one I dropped a
frog down the back
of her dress a month
ago made her scream
don't know why I
did it, now she only
has a scowl to give
us, and her eyes
reflect the moon a
lonely breeze soughs
a tree I tap the horn
she looks away
her eyes in shadow
and her cheekbones
sleek with moonshine
and she kicks at a
stone as she turns
to leave her leaving
leaves a hole in
my night and my
summer. And my
years to come.



Station Legacy by Virginia Mallon

Painting Trees

Richard Hartshorn

I told myself I'd dodge all the "thanks for your service" crap, so when the girl in the army fatigues drops a bucket of blue paint next to my boot and introduces herself as Willa, I don't answer.

We've joined a group of strangers to combat the future installation of a gas fracking pipeline by painting a copyrighted piece of artwork on a specific set of trees, using a buttermilk-based paint. I live alone. I don't know if the energy company will give two fucks about the trees. The first thing Willa tells me after her name is that she had a dream: the pipeline was installed, and the compressor station had an accident, incinerating half the houses in the district.

"So," she says, "who are you?" The sides of her head are shaved, and the rest of her ash-blond hair is pulled into a ponytail. Her fatigues are really just a cammo bomber-jacket and black jeans, now that I'm this close to her. No way to tell whether she's military.

My apocalyptic dreams were never as specific as hers. I'd always be with my family, either stargazing on the hill behind our house or sitting in a circle in our living room. A formless blot of yellow light would descend into the center of us, a godlike trespasser that demanded the fear and respect of the Chicxulub impactor. We glowed, cowered, screamed. The time it took the light to reach us varied by night. The most protracted versions of this dream, which felt like they lasted years, were the most terrifying – I'd tremble awake, armpits sweating, try to focus my eyes on something in the room – the chair, the shelf – trying to root myself again. I could never get up, but the thought of falling back to sleep made me shudder, so I'd settle for occupying the dark space between the floor and wherever that light came from. If a lover was asleep next to me, I'd lie on my back and follow the cracks in the ceiling tiles, forgetting I wasn't floating.

"Tanner," I say.

She says she likes my name, and then gets all etymological: it's a name you'd expect a dude to have, not me, because historically you'd never see a girl apprenticing to one of those sinewy old grumps who baked animal hides for leather.

We've met at the home of the organizers, a local

couple twice our age, both with fantastic white hair and welcoming faces. They've passed out diagrams to every stranger so that we know what the end result is meant to look like. A guy with a steely beard and a European accent mentions how quickly he'll be able to paint these squiggly lines around the trees. I don't think he grasps that this is supposed to be an art project, and I whisper as much to Willa.

"Don't worry," she says. "We don't have to talk to anyone else." She's already deduced that despite only being in my thirties, I'm a retired people-person.

Later, while we splatter a giant blue wren on the fifth tree we've painted as a pair, Willa tells me about her recent fascination with multi-car pileups. She's putting together some sort of scrapbook dealing with carnage — pages of newspaper clippings about accidents, photographs of injuries, and handwritten poems. Everything included must be physical, she says. She wants the whole thing to feel impromptu and immediate, like it's all happening right now to the person viewing it. I almost ask why someone would want that experience, but right then, I realize that my fingertips are aching to touch the pages.

We break for lunch at a small NYC-style pizza place where I sometimes gobble geometrically immaculate cheese slices the size of my head while telling myself I'm healthy enough to indulge. Willa's never been here. It occurs to me to ask what part of the district she's from, but it feels like I should know by now.

Over triangles of mozzarella and broccoli, we discuss her project and the one we're doing together. When I bring up the carnage project, she tells me she's focused on the photo part: it's the thing she most feels like she's making. I can't help but think she noticed the camera bag on the floor of my car on the way over here.

"What do you take pictures of?" she asks. Her left cheek is stuffed with the last bite she took.

"Alive things," I say. "Usually." She cracks a little half-smile. I add, "It's analog."

I eat my way down to the crust, and then ask Willa what she does for a living.

“Embalming,” she says. She pinches a fallen bit of mozzarella off her plate and chews it up. I don’t know what else to ask about it, and she can tell I’m giving a bit too much attention to my crust. “Don’t be shy.”

“I’m not.” Don’t ask if she likes it. “How’s the vacation time?” Nice save, dweeb.

“Eh.” She leans back and crosses her legs. “I’m here, right?”

As we swipe our brushes around the trunk of the day’s last oak, our hands have practically stiffened. I watch Willa’s fingers tighten around the wooden handle, laying on the precise details of the beak, and I wonder what else those fingers have picked apart. Chips of red polish speckle her thumbnail.

“Hey,” she says. “You giving up?”

I give a fake laugh and tell her no, then put the finishing touches on my royal starling’s blue tail

feather. I doubt many people will be able to tell what it’s supposed to be.

I’ve made up my mind not to tell Willa that last night, I stood on the windowsill of my fourth-floor apartment in a sundress and strap sandals, eyes closed, one foot lifted and ready to step forward. The only reason I didn’t hurl myself into oblivion was the arrival of my downstairs neighbor, mid-fight with his girlfriend over the phone as he lurched the front door open and plodded across the driveway. His neck tattoo shone under the motion-sensitive LED light outside the building, a halo of mosquitoes circling the bulb. Not him, I thought. This fucker isn’t going to be the first one to find my broken body on the lawn. I’m not allowing him to touch me wherever he wants before dialing 9-1-1. I won’t suffer the indignity of being scooped off the grass by a coroner while this building full of assholes watches and pities me. I can see the old lady on the first floor phoning up her sister: Well, Agnes, they still haven’t figured out how this poor girl’s sandal ended up flying into the highest branches of our apple tree, but I have a theory...

No. Just no.

You’d think, with an attitude like that, I could avoid standing on my windowsill in the first place.

But I don’t give these ideas a lot of time to sit. I just give in.

Home now, in pajama pants and bare feet, I sift through a shoe-box stacked with photos from the camera I had in high school: a faucet running. People

touching each other. Friends I don’t talk to anymore giving the finger to the lens. An empty paper cup lying sideways on the floor of a concrete basement. A pile of divining rods near the creek by my dad’s old house, contrived to look incidental. My dad combing his beard. Antlion hills. My own reflection in the TV. An out-of-focus titmouse diving at the feeder for a seed.

There’s not much in this box I feel like I actually made.

There’s another day before I’ll be painting again, so the next morning I sling my camera around my neck and take the bus to an old dam I’d pass every week back when my mother would drive me to my grandmother’s house. I’ve got Willa’s phone number, but I’m not sure if the rules of activism are similar to the rules of dating, and besides I probably need practice before I agree to take photos of anything for her, so I don’t call. She doesn’t either.

I walk to the Stewart’s on the corner, wearing my camera like a big talisman. I buy a ninety-nine-cent bottle of blue raspberry and make my way to the dam, sipping at the sugary drink, hoping I look like someone in a commercial, wondering through pursed lips and creased eyebrows whether this stuff always tasted so sour.

I stop at the side of the road that overlooks the dam, and set my drink on the guardrail. An old green tractor rests on the spillway, unmoved by the rushing water. It’s been there since before I was born. I hear my own voice: Mom, when are they going to move that thing?

Then Mom’s voice says, I think someone forgot about it.

But what did they fix with it?

I don’t know. But whatever it was is fixed now.

There are things that confounded me as a child that make perfect sense now. Song lyrics, innuendos in TV dialogue, roots of words. I still don’t know anything about this tractor that’s spent decades on the edge of this dam. It seems as impossible as ever.

I hear my mother’s voice again, but this time she’s not saying anything in particular. I am wearing the same shoes I wore two nights ago on the windowsill. I lift my camera and take the shot.

Willa greets me with the paint bucket again, dropping it alongside my boot. I was facing the other way when she walked over, but I can tell there was a grin on her face not too long ago.

We've got a rhythm going now. We slap our next bird – a proud-looking bustard – on the side of a fat oak, brilliant blue. It's a crude version of the artist's actual piece, but it will do.

I unzip my bag for a granola bar, and Willa lunges for my camera. We're in the middle of the woods; no voices but ours. She slowly backs away from the oak, clutching my camera like a giant club sandwich, and sets the lens over her eye. Her ponytail whips in the breeze.

"Smile."

"Don't drop that," I say, but I smile anyway, just in case.

She doesn't take a photo. "Let me know if you see a soul worth stealing," she says.

I thought we'd be taking pictures for her project, but maybe I misread her interest in the camera as an invitation to collaborate. Some dry-looking leaves tumble around her shoulders. She asks me again whether anything here speaks to me as an artist.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No. I just want some insight into your process." She keeps on backing away. I follow her.

"I thought maybe you wanted me to take a photo for you."

"Hence we need to find something worth capturing."

She lets me catch up to her, but she doesn't hand my camera back. There's nothing out here she'd like – nothing that would fit the apocalypse book, anyway.

I ask if she's had the dream again.

"I think that was a freak thing," she says.

"Thinking too much about the pipeline, y'know?"

"Totally."

"But I'm still not letting anyone put my town in an incineration zone. If painting every tree in the district will do something, I'm going to do that."

The breeze rises. I mention that I feel chilly.

"Alright," she says. "Home, I guess." She gives me the camera, and our fingers touch as I take it.

We've finished.

I couldn't admit it then, but I'm afraid that since the community project is over, Willa and I have no reason to talk again. The town legislature is meeting tonight to discuss the issue of the compressor station. I should see if she's going.

The first thing I look at when I awaken is the open window, curtain gently curling against the radia-

tor. Most of my sheets are in a snarl on the floor.

After letting my alarm go off a few more times, I set my feet on the hardwood and do a few stretches, then cross to the window. My downstairs neighbor's kids are already roaring across the lawn on four-wheelers.

My phone wriggles on the nightstand. Siouxsie and the Banshees ringtone. It has to be Willa, so I snatch it up and say hello without looking at the name.

"Tanner, what the fuck?"

It's James, my boss.

"Hi," I say. "What's up?"

"You tell me. On Wednesday I hear you aren't feeling well, and then I don't see you for almost a week. I realize that you have your days, y'know, where you can't get out of bed and whatever, and I told you I wouldn't hold that against you, but I literally have no one right now."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. But kindly get your ass dressed and over here. Please."

I applied to Fresno, my employer, for the sheer ambiguity of their name. In my late twenties, with no insurance and not caring where the cash for my anti-depressants came from, I dug Fresno's call for applications out of an internet rabbit hole. I met James in the back office of a building where he worked as a market research analyst. He interviewed me during a shift, and only looked at me once.

"Tanner Lowry," he read off my resume. That was when he looked up at me. "Short curly hair, black pea coat, skinny jeans. That's how I'll remember you. I'll probably just call you 'Curls' or something." He didn't ask me a single question. He called me Tanner after the first day.

Fresno turned out to be a sort of guild for freelance couriers. James's job was to find companies that regularly need things delivered, then research the types of people that the employees will respond best to. I started out with sensitive medical packages, but later told James I didn't trust myself with them. I then began delivering parts to and from a local garage whose owner was notoriously difficult to deal with, and who routinely dished out verbal abuse to regular auto-shop drivers. I once got a smile out of him by dropping a box of tie-rods onto his desk and timing it with a perfect car-related pun. I've been delivering to him ever since. After three visits, he realized that he knew me as a kid: my mother had a finicky car, and would drag me to the shop almost every month to get it fixed.

Today, though, it's medicine.

I shower and kick on a pair of jeans. I pick up my phone, touch Willa's name with my index finger, and shrug into a plaid button-down while I listen to the ringer.

She doesn't say hello, just my name. "Tanner."

"Hey," I say. "What are you doing now?"

"Lying on a lawn chair and letting my nails dry."

"Does that mean drinking?"

She laughs a little. I imagine her in a bikini. "If you'd consider a fruit smoothie 'drinking,' then sure. You going to the thing tonight?"

"I have to work, but it's just driving around. I thought you might want to hang out with me."

A pause.

"But if you're busy -"

"Yeah," she says. "Let's hang out. Pick me up?"

I can hear her shuffling around on the other line.

"Okay."

I pull around a cul-de-sac and brake in front of a gray apartment building squished between two condos. Willa's sitting on the stoop, black jeans and bomber jacket, elbows on knees. I lean over and tap the button that unlocks the passenger door.

She thanks me as she drops into the seat, and drops a small travel bag between her boots.

"Any apocalyptic dreams lately?" she asks.

"Not really."

"Then I trust you to get us where we're going. Where are we going?"

"You wouldn't trust me anyway?" A smirk. I don't wait for an answer, not even a joking one. I tell her that I have to deliver four sets of brakes. I don't mention the medicine.

She pulls my camera from the backseat and doesn't ask whether she can borrow it. She just aims it at me and snaps a shot. The photograph slides into her hand.

"That thing runs on film," I say.

"No kidding."

"I'm saying don't waste it."

I realize that I've just scolded her and am about to say something to smooth it over, but she cracks the same smirk again. She seems satisfied. Maybe she's not used to people being this comfortable around her. She pulls off her boots and sets her sock-

less feet on the dashboard.

"Do you mind?"

"No."

The next traffic light is long. I bring up embalming again.

"So do you have to get the dead people from the scene before you, uh, take care of them?"

"Sure do. Sometimes you get weird requests from the family. Like once, a guy blew his own head off, and his parents wanted his teeth. So I'm walking around his apartment, poking around under his couch, picking up teeth."

She says it the same way I'd describe wedging an unwieldy package into the back of my car. I get the sense that no one ever asks her about this stuff.

My eyes drift to her fingers. I can't help it.

"What was the worst scene you've had to deal with?"

"A dude takes his two kids on a camping trip, then kills both of them and himself inside the tent. No one thinks about how you have to figure out, y'know, what parts belong to who." She curls her toes a little. "Yeah, that was pretty fucked up."

"How did you deal with something like that?"

"Went home, got drunk, played the happiest video games I could find. Pokemon, I think."

She reaches forward and scrapes at a bit of dried polish around her big toenail. I wonder if Willa thinks about the language of death, about how people become corpses the way trees become logs. I wonder if it's all just work stories for her, and if she'd call me naive if she knew what I was thinking.

Willa sets the camera between her knees and runs her palms along the sides of her shaved head. The photo of me has fully developed. "For the record," she says, "it's a good shot."

By the time we pick up the boxes at Auto Czar, Willa has taken five photos with my camera. She's flashed them only when I've been looking away, so I don't know what any of them are, but I imagine a few are probably me. As soon as I have this thought, I internally kick myself for it. C'mon, Tanner. Get real. Not that I think I'm unworthy. There's just something that makes me shiver at the thought of someone pinning me up, of romanticizing a memory of my face, of having an idea of me.

We drive to the garage, which sits in the village where my parents grew up. We cross a bridge from the neighboring town, windows lowered, Willa's

ponytail smacking her cheek. She's leaning forward, trying to tune us to some station that plays nothing but old-ass punk. All I hear is fuzz and the occasional snare fade. I notice that her eyes widen the slightest bit when she's frustrated.

"I hope it's everything you imagined," I say as we pull into the parking lot. A picnic table sits outside the garage's office, discolored Chuck's Quality Auto still splattered across the sign that's been there since I was old enough to understand why my parents had to bring our station wagon here so much. A few car shells are piled together on the lawn, long stripped for useful parts. I wonder where our station wagon is now.

"Totally," Willa says. She seems like she means it.

I gather the boxes and head to the office. Willa remains in the passenger seat. The photos are in the back of her jeans pocket, and she hasn't let go of my camera.

I breathe in engine oil as I enter. A comforting smell. Chuck is behind the desk, phone squeezed between his shoulder and ear. When he sees me, he grunts into the mouthpiece that he'll call the other person back.

"You see that bench?" he says, pointing behind me. He hasn't looked at me yet, so I'm not sure he's actually talking to me, but I look around and say I do. "That's where you and your mom sat when she'd come get her car fixed. And how you'd whine. Do you remember what you'd always say?"

"I want lunch."

"Nowadays, people'd think you weren't being fed. Probably call CPS on your mom."

"Probably."

A pause. "She don't still have that godforsaken thing, does she?"

"Which thing?"

"The station wagon."

"Nope."

"Good. Pain in the ass."

I hand over the boxes of brakes. Chuck tells me that Auto Czar was supposed to send a couple of gift cards with me. I'm only half-listening, though. I notice how the hard overhead light hits his dark face and deepens the fissures and cracks, softens his black goatee. His long hair, usually tied up, is free and wild.

"You'll be back with those gift cards later," he says.

"We'll see."

"I promise. You'll be back."

At the car, Willa has turned the key and set the air conditioning on the lowest setting. It's an oddly hot day for March. She still hasn't found the radio station, but she's holding something.

"Dude," she says. "You took this?"

It's my photo of the green tractor.

"Yeah."

"This is, like, dystopic."

Her eyes widen a little, but not in a frustrated way. I grab my camera off her lap and tramp back into the office to get my shot.

Willa convinces me to make a quick stop at Stewart's – the one near the dam – before delivering the other package. "So this is the infamous tractor," she says. "Do you think –"

"Yes" I say, "you can have it for the project."

She's tossing a plastic bottle back and forth between hands. Her studded wristband rattles.

"I can't believe they still have Blue Drink," she says. "I used to love Blue Drink. Were you into this stuff?"

I laugh. "Not really."

She cracks the seal and dumps the blue sugar-water down her gullet.

Before she swallows, I ask, "Have you ever had to embalm someone you knew?"

She gulps the drink down. "They have ways of making sure your buddies don't end up on your slab. Certain bodies get sent far away, that kind of thing."

I ask what if there's a mistake and it happens anyway. She asks who she has to embalm. I say me.

"Mmm." The sun rolls out from behind a cluster of grayish clouds. Willa squints. She'd rather understand why I'm asking than answer the question. "This is a little weird, Tanner."

"Sorry," I say. "Just trying to see if anything can shock you." I stumble on the words. She knows that's not why I asked.

I feel a spray of lightheadedness as we swerve into the hospital parking lot. Willa notices right away, and picks up the boxes of medicine. I carry the stack of Fresno paperwork that'll need to be signed before I can leave.

"Should probably leave the camera this time," she says, voice cracking. She doesn't want to miss a chance for a shot.

I sling the camera bag over my shoulder. She

grins. Walking toward the hospital's auto doors, I try to focus on anything but where I actually am: EMTs calmly reinstalling a stretcher into an ambulance outside the ER; an old man attempting to straighten his minivan so not to take up two parking spaces; the clack of my shoes and the thump of Willa's boots on the fresh pavement. A woman with a cane embraces her grandchild. My shoulders ache.

Inside the sliding doors, the smell of disinfectant saturates me. Willa links her arm through mine. She says she sees why I didn't want to come here.

It's not just the thought of what the iodoform is masking, though.

"It's also that I'm not, like, on medicine anymore, y'know?"

"What did you take medicine for?"

"Being sad."

"Are you still sad?"

"Elevator to your left."

Willa taps the square button, which lights up orange. We wait, arms still linked. A male nurse wheels a patient past. Neither seems to notice us.

When we reach our floor, my knees begin to wobble. Willa suppresses a giggle. I'm not sure how she even noticed.

"It's not funny."

"Sure it isn't."

Of course, she's right. At least this week has taught me to appreciate objectivity.

We make it to the lobby, where the employee behind the desk looks at me as if I'm a patient.

"Hi," Willa says. "We're here for Frezno." She places the packages on the desk and takes the paperwork from me. "We just need your Jane Hancock on the first two copies."

The employee scribbles on the sheets, then hands them back to Willa, who tears away the receipts.

"Thanks much," she says. For someone who isn't used to working with living people, she's impressive.

As we turn to leave, the employee shoots Willa a look. What the hell's wrong with your friend? she's asking. I'm staring at the floor and probably blanched white.

"Oh," Willa says. "Hospitals make her sad, is all."

On the way back, we hear horrendous coughing coming from a closed patient room. Willa stops us and reaches for my camera bag.

"What are you doing? No."

"That's the sound of the end of the world. I want a picture of it."

I think I might puke. I lean against the pale wall. "Why don't we just leave?"

Her mouth scrunches to one side. "I know this isn't where you want to be right now," she says. Then she grabs the camera, nudges the patient's door open with her boot, and carefully frames a shot.

Snap.

On the elevator, I'm able to find my breath. C'mon, you. This elevator could be in any building, and it leads to any old lobby. Just relax and walk to your car.

After punching the button for the ground floor and waiting for the carriage to start moving, Willa plants herself right next to me, even though there's no one else onboard.

"Heroes aren't real, Tanner," she says. She slips her arm through mine again. "People waste so much of their lives thinking of what they're supposed to say that they never say shit. In the past few days, I've heard you say more in a shrug or the flick of a paintbrush than I've heard any politician say about the pipeline, or any artist about how photos are supposed to be looked at." Her voice is practically a whisper. "As soon as people start calling you a hero, and you believe it, you die. You just die." She's been staring at the elevator doors the entire time. I've been focused on her face. She finally looks at me. "Don't say what you're supposed to say," she says. "You're better than that. I don't even know you, but I know that much."

"You know me." I blurt it out. Defensively. Desperately, maybe. One ugly syllable.

She keeps eye contact. Doesn't blink. "Okay." Maybe a hero would have kissed her just then.

We're not on the elevator for much longer.

Willa finally tunes my radio to the station she wants. It only comes in for a minute or two, but it seems to be enough to constitute victory for her.

"Where to next?"

I point to the backseat. "Nothing else to deliver."

"I guess it's your place, then."

The open window jumps into my mind. "My place?"

"Obvi."

I take the long route back to my apartment; it's been too long since I just drove around with some-

one. When we get there, Willa grabs her travel bag by the straps and follows me up the stairs. She drops it on the futon next to my bedroom door.

“Your downstairs neighbor seems stunned that you have a visitor,” she says.

Don’t say you’re stunned too.

“Yeah,” I say. “Everyone in this building is weird.”

She shakes her head. “They’re too normal. Every building I’ve lived in has one of all of them.” She puts a palm to my bedroom door. “May I?”

I nod, and she removes her boots.

Walking behind Willa into my own bedroom feels like discovering it for the first time. Old desk covered in photos and paper. Empty paper organizer. Siouxsie posters I’ve had since high school. Magazine rack crammed with stuff I’ve never bothered reading. Clothing I inherited from my cousins. My sheets are still a snarled braid humped over the side of the bed.

I’m not sure what I want Willa to say about my room. Maybe I want her to say it looks like home. But she asks why none of my own photos are on the walls, and she knows I’m not going to answer.

“Camera,” she says. I fish it out of my bag and hand it to her, and she snaps a photo of everything in front of us.

I ask what she wants to do tonight.

“I’m going to teach you how to make dinner, then we’re going to the pipeline meeting. Then I’m going to do whatever you tell me to do.”

“What?”

“You didn’t invite me here.”

“You’re welcome here, though.”

“Yeah. But you still didn’t invite me. So if you tell me to go home later, I will.”

There’s a vulnerability in her voice that I haven’t heard before. Just a little shaky, maybe.

Dinner is a set of special sandwiches: fried eggs, sautéed vegetables, avocado, and feta on a hard roll. We eat sitting Indian-style on my living room floor, cheap white ceramic plates on our laps, the first bite drenching my mouth with a warm, yolky goodness. Yellow fluid spills halfway down Willa’s chin before she sleeves it away. I wonder how many stains are imbued in that green bomber.

She laughs through her nose. “Such a lady, right?”

We finish in relative quiet. She does the dishes for me, despite my protests, and when I walk to the closet for the black pea-coat I’m wearing to the

pipeline thing, I catch a glimpse at the now-developed photo Willa has left on the floor. It’s my room, everything in it completely clear: posters, leftover food containers, heaps of hand-me-downs, fliers for things I told people I’d go to and then didn’t. Dead-center is the open window, a smear of white-gray in the middle of it all. A viewer who had never seen my room might wonder what the hell that window is even supposed to be. I’ve seen my room, and even I’m wondering that.

City hall is a maelstrom of voices. From the car, I can see people clumped together, poster-board signs damning the pipeline, rain falling past street-lights and glazing the curbs. Someone barks into a bullhorn. We walk to the building together, squeeze inside, and install ourselves next to the mass of humanity crowding the meeting-room doors. A couple next to us ignores one another, thumbing away on their phones. The European guy from the tree-painting project stands across the room, pressing a skull-and-crossbones sign against the meeting room’s large-pane window. Heat pumps through the vents. I hear someone mutter that no one will be speaking for another hour.

“Nothing’s going to be decided tonight,” Willa says. “Sorry I dragged you to this. I just thought it would feel good to be here.”

I respond by hooking my arm around hers again. We’re silent for a minute. Being here does make me feel like I’m doing something. Like this is a way to finish the trees, maybe. To make the trees mean something. I wait. I look for movement in the meeting room, but the people with their signs have completely covered the window now. Giving up on seeing anything, I ask Willa whether she gave any more thought to what I asked her about me ending up on her embalming table.

She sucks in a breath through her nose. Maybe she’s been thinking about it.

“I’d pull your guts out, Tanner. What do you want me to say? I’d put little pieces of metal behind your eyeballs so that they don’t sink into your face. I’d dump chemicals into you and sew your jaws with wire, and I’d say No problemo when your family tells me what a good job I did making you look peaceful.” She loosens her grip. “I need to piss.”

She doesn’t really look at me as she slinks through the crowd. When she’s gone, I head back

out onto the sidewalk, hands in coat pockets. The breeze is cool. My curls swirl on my head.

I try to listen to the protester with the bull-horn, but I can't see her past the barricade of people, and her words are distorted. A drop of runoff lands behind my collar. Stinging cold. The streetlight glows directly overhead in the post-rain mist, looming, almost. I squint at it, the way my mother used to scold me for squinting at the sun. I wipe the drop of water from my neck, and I feel my hand trembling. I imagine that light looming overhead as the pipeline compressor station catches fire, emitting gas and flames that wipe out houses, the whole wave of poison rushing at me, and all this version of me can think about is how she was once afraid of things that only happened when she was asleep.

After a few minutes, I turn away from the streetlight and reenter the building. As I do, I bash my shoe against a concrete step. Pain and adrenaline hurtle through my entire body. I can see Willa's profile through the heap of people. Gauged ears. Ponytail swinging. She's looking the wrong way. People are already trying to push past me. Suck it up. You can totally still walk. I shove my teeth into my bottom lip. She finally sees me.

I hobble up the stairs, trying to hide my dumb injury so not to spoil Willa's mood. She's shaking with energy.

"They're not going to pass the bill," she says as she barrels into my apartment behind me. "I can just feel it."

She peels off the bomber jacket, and I realize that this is the first time I've seen her without it. Her left arm is fully sleeved in tattoos: a checkerboard, a burst of bird feathers, rabbit paws, a sickle with a skull on the hilt. The other arm is just skin.

"So," she says, "Am I leaving?"

I imagine the things Willa knows about bodies. What her hands smell like. My innards spilled over her table. I must pause too long, because she starts shuffling through her jacket.

"Yes," I say. "I mean, no. Stay."

"Because you don't feel like driving me home, or because you actually want to go to the all-you-can-eat breakfast at the firehouse with me tomorrow?"

I don't think our conversation from earlier is resolved.

"The second one."

"Yeah?"

"Take the flat surface of your choice."

She seems satisfied to stay on the futon. I tell her I need the bathroom, and that if she does too, she'll need to walk through my bedroom to reach it.

"I'll be quiet," she says. Her voice is soft, as if she's already trying not to bother me.

I don't like this very much.

In my room, I close the door, drop my camera bag, and ease off my shoes. The blood in my foot relaxes, and my toe pulses where I smashed it against the concrete. I can't look at it yet. From my seat in the bathroom, I hear Willa sifting through her things. I hear the spine of the futon clicking into position. The thump of a body settling into a cushion. Then nothing.

For a second, I'm going to go out there. Then I'm not going to. All I can see when I close my eyes are lumps of intestines, tables soaked in fluid, hearts thrown in trash bins.

I'm settling myself onto the bed when she pushes the door open without knocking. Her hands clutch a stack of developed photos.

"Tanner, what did you do?"

My toenail is broken and jagged, my whole foot covered in dry blood. Willa dumps the photos onto the bed, then heads into the bathroom. I lean over and pull my own photos from the camera bag, then fan them out with Willa's on the sheets. There's the tractor teetering on the dam. There's Chuck's fissured face. There's a skeletal woman on a hospital bed with her hands over her mouth. There's me driving with my hair in my face. There are the five other photos Willa took during the car ride: a "Wrong Way" sign, a girl walking a dog. The rest are unidentifiable.

She returns with some bandages and hydrogen peroxide, and sets it all on the bed next to me. She gets down on one knee and tells me to hold still.

"Seriously," she says. "Don't move. You're fucking mangled."

For a moment, I'm afraid she's going to peel me apart. I draw a sharp breath. But she takes my foot in her palm, cradling it as if it's something breakable, something precious, and as she reaches for the bandages with her tattooed arm, the sheets are blanketed with feathers, paw prints, faces, signs, blurs of light, shapes in motion, me, her, shells and skeletons and skulls, bird silhouettes on trees, noises and color.



Loss of the Coral Reef by Dara Herman Zierlein

Buttermilk Sky

Catori Sarmiento

Any chance to change her mind evaporates once she sits on the exam table. Achromatic walls impose cleanliness onto her fetid flesh. She squints against the piercing fluorescent lights, fearing that their rays will bore into her pupils and burn the back of her retinas. A film of sanitary paper wrinkles each time she shifts her weight in anticipation, catching sight of herself in a mirror.

A foreigner in possession of her carcass.

Those eyes, dark and heavy, are not hers. A creature she had not wanted to become. There is a single tap on the door before the nurse enters, smiling sweetly; a wordless reassurance.

To speak will be an affirmation that she exists in this space.

The nurse's palm is warm when she wraps a plastic band around the arm, a steel thermometer under the tongue. The door shutters open, a doctor emerging from behind it, rounded belly pushing out from under blue scrubs in a gratuitous way. She does not look up when the doctor asks how she is feeling, if the patient is ready, if she needs some time to think.

She was spread open like a dead frog awaiting dissection.

Blue paper blanket covers her lower body, a shield from the secret act they were about to perform. A cold slime on the inner skin of her thighs, gradually intoxicated from core to extremities, so that even her fingernails are numb.

Scraped with spoon like the inside of a pumpkin.

There is a twisting of her innards as if ripping out her bowels to divine the future. Her thoughts are a carousel in a fog of bright lights and pastel colors. A soft glow filling the room to warm every membrane.

And a stillness like the rains from a buttermilk sky.

don't confuse me with billie kansel b.i.l.l.i.e

k.a.n.s.e.l no middle name who is a prolific
writer & small press distributor residing
in the brooklyn neighborhood of dreadful-
hurricanes-unknown-beasts-creatures-half-
man-half-beast & large flowers of the dwarf
thistle glowing in the blue black dirty white where
once in brisk morning air we lost the bop *lost*
in the sauce now down to my last mega
penny quite banal irritating scaling up the
micro-actions so am as slick as a leper licking
piss off a stinging nettle incessantly
doodling my way through a crisis of
faith can always draw a fox to me by imitating
the squeal of a rabbit pursued by a stout in
some rhythm that
grows steadily more
intricate until come
the acid day
the zippo job



Untitled by Adorable Monique

Contributor Bios

Andrew Bertaina currently lives and works in Washington, DC. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in more than thirty publications including: The Three Penny Review, The Open Bar at Tin House, Hobart, Apt, Isthmus, Sweet, and Catamaran. He is currently a reader and book reviewer for Fiction Southeast.

Billy Cancel has recently appeared in Blazevox, Gobbet & West Wind Review. His latest body of work "Psycho'clock" is out on Hidden House Press. Billy Cancel is one half of the noise/pop duo Tidal Channel. Sound poems, visual shorts and other aberrations can be found at billycancelpoetry.com

Darren Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including the South Dakota Review, Meridian, New Letters, Diagram, and the Colorado Review. He is the author of five poetry collections, most recently "The Nineteen Steps Between Us" (2016, After the Pause). He is the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology and Ovenbird Poetry. He is currently living and writing in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

Ryan Dunham is currently a doctoral candidate at Ohio University. He earned both his B.A. and M.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing from Binghamton University. Ryan's work has previously appeared in such places as Helix Magazine, Jersey Devil Press, Ricky's Back Yard, Eunoia Review and The Bookends Review. One of Ryan's stories is a 2017 Pushcart Prize Nominee.

Richard Hartshorn lives on the Rensselaer Plateau. His work has appeared in Drunken Boat, Hypertext, Santa Fe Literary Review, and other publications.

Rich Ives is a winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from Bitter Oleander and the 2012 winner of the Creative Nonfiction Prize from Thin Air magazine. His books include "Tunneling to the Moon", a book of days with a prose work for each day of the year (Silenced Press), "Sharpen", a fiction chapbook, (Newer York Press), "Light from a Small Brown Bird", a book of poems, (Bitter Oleander Press), and a story collection, "The Balloon Containing the Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking" (What Books).

Virginia Mallon is a contemporary female artist, working in painting and photography. A graduate of Queens College of the City University of New York, she apprenticed with Indian Space artist Robert Barrell, and later taught the children's art class at his Forest Park School of Art in Woodhaven, Queens. Currently working out of a studio in a small wetland town called Crab Meadow, her work in photography covers the gamut between picturesque rural landscapes to urban blight, as well as addresses issues facing modern America. Her work in painting, influenced by the Arte Povera moment of the 1960s, contemplates historic and mythological women and their modern counterparts. Her goal is to reflect and comment on the current state of the world, along with nautical spaces, personal histories, and the psychological undercurrents of contemporary society.

Adorable Monique is a U.S. based artist brought up abroad. She received art instruction in fine arts at La Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, La Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán, and has had the good fortune to be mentored by a renowned Central American artist, which has helped enriched her artistic vision. She has received merit awards and the opportunity to exhibit in various venues. Growing up surrounded by different cultures has broadened her overall view of life. She is continuously pursuing success in personal, professional, and artistic endeavors as well in the artistic experience itself.

Catori Sarmiento is an author who has contributed fiction to Nothing, No One, Nowhere, by Virgogrey Press, The Citron Review, Brick Rhetoric, Foliage Oak Magazine, and Crossed Out Magazine. She has also contributed non-fiction to Her Kind and This Boundless World and several academic essays published by Student Pulse. She also has had poetry in numerous publications including serving as a featured author in The Fukushima Poetry Anthology. Professionally, she is an English and Writing Professor in Tokyo, Japan. Her author website is found at <http://catorisarmiento.com>.

Steven Sherrill is a painter, novelist, and erstwhile musician, living, working, and parenting in Central Pennsylvania.

Carter Vance is a student and aspiring poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, currently studying at Carleton University in Ottawa. His work has appeared in such publications as *The Vehicle*, (parenthetical) and *F(r)iction*, amongst others. He received an Honourable Mention from *Contemporary Verse 2's* Young Buck Poetry Awards in 2015. His work also appears on his personal blog *Comment is Welcome*.

Randy Lee White received a Master's in Arts, Major in English from UNC Charlotte in 2007 and currently lives in the Charlotte area. A collection of his works titled, "Yearnings: Rendezvous," is available online at Amazon.com. He has had stories and poems published online and in print by *The Monarch Review*, *The Helix Literary Magazine*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and *Sanskrit*.

Guinotte Wise lives on a farm in Resume Speed, Kansas. His short story collection (*Night Train, Cold Beer*) won publication by a university press and not much acclaim. Two more books since. His wife has an honest job in the city and drives 100 miles a day to keep it.

Dara Herman Zierlein is a political artist, art educator and mother, a passionate artist focusing on women's issues, motherhood, equal rights for all and climate change. She is the founder of *Supermom Unveiled*, a resource website for women and men around the paradigm of parenthood. *Supermom Unveiled* received a grant for a group exhibition curated by Dara in 2012. She is also the author of "Don't Eat The Plastic", her first children's book created in 2016. Read interviews with Dara about her paintings and see more art on her blog: <https://motherstime.blogspot.com/> and review http://www.supermomunveiled.com/our_mission



Nuts by Virginia Mallon