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Oval is a literary magazine published annually by the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM), the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, and the University of Montana Department of Creative Writing. Each volume is printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper by the University of Montana Printing & Graphics.

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Dear reader,

*Oval* is named after The University of Montana promenade where students come together with equal representation for their ideologies and creativity and have fun. Like the location for which it is named, our goal is to provide a continuing nexus point and springboard for undergraduate writers and artists wishing to share their craft with others.

This is no easy task. The late John Updike said, “Writers take words seriously - perhaps the last professional class that does - and they struggle to steer their own through the crosswinds of meddling editors and careless typesetters and obtuse and malevolent reviewers into the lap of the ideal reader.”¹ It is my wish that you too can experience the journey of these young artists, authors, and poets who have navigated their work through the hazards of publishing and still have entire worlds left to explore.

Thanks to everyone who submitted to us for the opportunity to share your work with the world. Special thanks to my editors and our talented board members. I wish you all the best in the years to come. To Robert, our Faculty Advisor, and Ryan Fish, the Founding Editor, thank you from the entire staff.² This publication would not be possible if not for your hard work. Finally, *Oval* would like to thank everyone who guided and assisted us along the way: Sue Samson, Dean Bonnie Allen, Kathy Hendricks, Marlan Rinehart, Casey Charles, Prageeta Sharma, Ken Price, Carol Hayes, Molly Collins, Josh Peters-McBride, Tonya Smith, Craig Lesley, Lorilee Evans-Lynn, Aspen Torrez, and Abi Halland.

Regards,

Andy Smith
Editor

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¹ The New York Times (17 August 1986)
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### Robert S. Whilde
Miriam shakes her head when she picks up Israel from school. She doesn’t say anything. Just shakes her head real slow like the first time David called and said he wouldn’t be coming home for the night. They drive down the wide suburban streets. Fall has left most of the trees spindly and naked, but a few cling to their leaves as if it is a fight they can win. A cloudless day, but the sky still looks more grey than blue.

At home Miriam puts Israel in the back yard and locks the door behind him. He walks outside. Superdog licks his cheek and tries to knock him down by driving his head into the boy’s sternum. But Superdog bores easily and soon enough he is in the corner digging furiously.

Israel paces the yard. Brown and yellow leaves cover the ground, rotting. The air is thick and mildewy, not assaulting enough for Israel to plug his nose, but not sweet enough for him to breathe deeply. He turns on the hose and floods the flowerbed. Then he puts his thumb over the end and tries to spray Superdog. It won’t reach.

Hearing footsteps, Israel runs to the fence. Maybe it’s Eli. He puts his face up against the wood, peering through a crack. Mr. Conway walks by, slowly, carrying his purple leash. Sophie died over a year ago, but he still walks every day, carrying her leash like she has run just out of view. She was seventeen when she died and dragged her back legs most of the time. Superdog tried to play with her once, but she just lay down and Mr. Conway had to pick up her hips before she would move again.

Israel watches the old man walk out of sight and then sits on the step waiting for something to happen. After what seems like forever he hears footsteps. This time they are quick. He runs back to the fence. He is careful not to rub his face against the wood, remembering the time he struggled with Eli for the widest crack in the fence to watch a tow truck haul away the car that had run into the oldest tree on the block. He wound up with a splinter in his cheek and missed the whole thing. Instead Miriam dug tweezers into his skin for a half an hour. By then the only thing left to see was the scar on the tree, which turned out to be fatal.

Israel doesn’t see anyone. He hears the back door swing open. “Izzy, you out here?”
Israel runs around the corner to see his brother, Eli, standing on the top step, still in his school clothes. His khakis are too long and bunched up around his ankles. A beige yamulka is clipped to his head. His navy blue polo has something written in the upper right hand corner that Israel can’t decipher.

“What’d you do?” Eli asks

“I hit Derek Harmon in the head,” Israel says, unsure if he should be proud.

“With what?”

“My backpack. A rock. A rock in my backpack.”

“Did it bleed a lot?”

“Yeah, he got it all over his shirt and dripped it all the way down the hall,” Israel says. “Does Mom look mad?”

“Mom always looks mad when she’s cooking.”

Eli sails off the top step and wraps Israel in a headlock. He rubs his knuckles back and forth on Israel’s scalp. Israel wriggles away. Across the yard Superdog barks once and whines. The boys turn to see a squirrel limp in his mouth. He lays it down gently and stares at it until it tries to run and then he scoops it into his jaws, carries it around and puts it down again. The squirrel limps away and Superdog pounces.

Eli runs over and grabs the dog around the neck while the squirrel lies in the leaves. Its leg the only thing moving, pedaling some imaginary bicycle.

“Get the shovel,” Eli yells.

“Why?”

“We have to put it out of its misery.” Superdog yelps and struggles against the boy’s grip.

Israel runs around the side of the house and returns with the shovel.

“Now hit it really hard,” Eli says.

Israel looks at the creature. Its legs are in the air, its mouth open, and he can see its two long front teeth. The squirrel is screaming, a scream that Israel can feel like a needle on the soft part of his head.

“Kill it.”

Israel raises the shovel and brings it down with a thud.

“Once more, to make sure.”

He does it again, closing his eyes as the spade comes down. Superdog whines.

“Go put it in the trash.”

Israel picks it up and carries it to the big blue trashcan. The squirrel looks the same dead as it did alive, except blood has seeped out in a thin line around its nose and down toward its mouth.
Round black eyes bulge out of its head. “I’m sorry,” Israel whispers, then shivers as he drops the carcass in with yesterday’s scraps.

Onion soup. Green beans. And toast. Israel breathes through his mouth. He pushes the bowl to his left. “Dad, guess what. I killed a squirrel today.”

It’s the first night David’s been home for dinner in four days. Miriam barely looks at him.

“I had to put it out of its mystery,” Israel says.

David smiles a weak and apologetic smile at his youngest son.

The phone rings. Everyone quiets, waiting for the caller ID to recite the name. Miriam got the device so phone calls wouldn’t ruin dinner. This way they know if it is worth getting up.

“Hart-son, Sal-ly.”

Miriam lets out an angry sigh. “You need to tell your mom to stop calling during dinner.”

David closes his eyes like he is trying to remember something.

“Hart-son, Sal-ly.”

“Just because you don’t talk to your mom doesn’t mean she can call while we’re trying to eat.”

The ringing stops.

“Maybe you should give her your work number,” Miriam says.

David stares at her and lets his lips fall open like maybe he will say something, but nothing comes.

“We learned about Abraham and Isaac at school today,” Eli says.

David turns towards his son.

Israel stares at the brown cloudy liquid in his bowl and looks like he might cry.

“Did you know God asked Abraham to kill his son? He asked him to kill Isaac, just to see if he would.”

Israel looks up from his food.

“And Abraham was going to. He took Isaac up to this mountain, put him on a rock and just as he was about to swing God told him he didn’t have to.”

“He was going to kill him with a shovel?” Israel asks.

“No. He had this big knife, like the ones they sacrificed lambs with.”

Israel’s eyes get big.

The phone rings, but Eli just talks louder.

“God stopped him at the last second. Right before he cut his head off.”

“Hart-son, Sal-ly.” Miriam clenches her jaw and glares at her husband.
“Just think. What if God had been a second late?”

“Hart-son, Sal-ly.”

“What if Abraham killed Isaac and God was like, oh, you didn’t have to do that?” Eli says.

“What if Abraham had said he wouldn’t do it?” Israel asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe God would have killed him. Maybe God wouldn’t have let him be Jewish,” Eli says.

Everyone is quiet for a moment.

“Is something wrong with the food?” Miriam asks her husband.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Me neither,” Israel adds.

Eli slurps happily from his spoon.

“You should eat a little something anyway,” Miriam says to both of them.

Israel eats the last bite of his toast and stares at the rest of the food. He puts his head on the table. “I can’t.”

“Don’t be childish,” Miriam says.

“I hate onion soup too,” David says and leans his head close in to Israel. “And Green beans.”

“Maybe if you came home for dinner more often we could have something you like.”

David’s head is almost lying on the table.

“And I had to pick your son up from school today because he hit a boy in the head with a rock.”

“I didn’t know it was in there,” Israel says.

Miriam rolls her eyes. David nods to his son.

“Maybe if you were around a little more…”

Eli gets up, like he is an actor that had just been cued to go offstage. Israel follows. Miriam doesn’t take her eyes off David.

“I guess since Dad won’t eat, the kids don’t have to.” Miriam throws her arms in the air.

Israel and Eli sit in their room, silenced by their parent’s muffled voices.

“Is that story true?” Israel asks, once the only sound coming from downstairs is dishes against the metal sink.

“What story?”

“The one about Abraham.”

“It’s in the Torah.”

David comes into the boys’ room to tuck them in.

“Is Mom really mad?” Israel asks.

“I’ve been working too much.”

There is a long, heavy silence. Both the boys stare at their father.
“Maybe I’ll be home again tomorrow.” They all know it will be at least three days.

David tucks Eli in first, like always. He sits on the edge of the bed and looks at his eleven-year old.

“I’m doing a report on the brontosaurus,” Eli says and holds the book he is reading out to his dad.

“Why the brontosaurus?”

“He only eats plants. He was the nicest dinosaur, even though he was so big.”

David looks at the pictures of the creature, and back at his son. Then he kisses Eli on the forehead and pulls the blankets up to his chest.

Israel’s bed is in the opposite corner of the room. David sits down. “How you doing, Bud?”

“I really didn’t know the rock was in there. I thought it was empty. I thought I was hitting him with an empty backpack. I swear.”

David smiles and puts his heavy hand on the boy’s shoulder. They sit in silence for a moment.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“If God asked you to, would you kill me?”

David’s eyelids droop and almost close.

“God would never ask me to kill you.” David kisses Israel’s forehead and pulls the sheets up to his chest. “Never.” He gets up to leave.

“But what if he did?” Israel asks.

David stares into his son’s pleading eyes. “Goodnight guys, I love you.” He switches off the light and closes the door behind him.

Israel stays awake until he sees headlights send shadows dancing across the ceiling, and hears his dad’s car pull away.

Israel isn’t allowed to go to school the next day. A one-day suspension, the principal decided.

He eats breakfast with Eli, before he goes to school. Eli lets him try on the yamulka. It looks too big on his head, but he likes the way it feels.

“Mom says I’m going to this school when I turn ten,” Israel says, posing in front of the mirror, trying to look Jewish. “Then we can walk to school together.”

“You know, you have to learn a whole new alphabet,” Eli says.

“I already know the alphabet.”

“You have to learn a different one, the Hebrew alphabet.” Eli points to the symbols on his shirt. “See, this is Hebrew.”
“What does that say?”
“Yashira.”
“What does that mean?”
“It’s the name of the school.”
“Say something else in Hebrew.”
“Shalom.”
“That’s an easy one. I know that.”
“But I can read it in Hebrew.”
“Can you write it?”
“Yeah.” Eli writes it slowly on a napkin.
“I can read it,” Israel says, “it says shalom.”
“That’s cheating.” Eli takes the yamulka from Israel’s head and clips it in his hair. He punches Israel in the arm. “Bye, Izzy.” He grabs his backpack and rushes out the door.

Israel takes the napkin to his room and practices writing the word. Now he knows how to read and write Hebrew. “Shalom,” he says aloud.

He flips through the dinosaur book he stole from Eli’s backpack.
He likes the stegosaurus the most.

Miriam spends almost all day in bed, looking for a job. She’s been at it for three and half months now. Israel passes her room on the way downstairs. The TV is on too loud. He peers through the doorway. The newspaper, still in its blue plastic bag, lies on the floor next to the bed. Israel stands on his toes and sees Miriam’s stringy hair poking out of the top of the blanket. He kicks the doorframe, but his mother doesn’t move.

Israel bores by noon, ready for Eli to come home. He goes to the backyard. He throws the ball for Superdog, but the dog won’t fetch. Remembering yesterday, he goes around the corner of the house to the big blue trashcan. He wonders if the squirrel is still in there, if he really killed it, if it is really dead. He flips the lid and there it is, legs sticking in the air, mouth open, blood dried around its triangle nose. He picks it up by a front paw and flings it into the yard. Superdog runs over, licks it a few times and tries to nudge it back to life.

“It’s dead.” Israel says to the dog. “I killed it.” He doesn’t want to look at it anymore so he grabs it by that same front leg and flings it over the fence, into the neighbor’s yard. Then he runs inside and slams the door.

Eli gets home at four, but he has a lot of homework because he left his dinosaur book at home. Israel sits with him at the kitchen table trying to convince his brother that the stegosaurus is better than the brontosaurus.

“Look at its cool spikes.”
“They’re not that cool.”
“And the stegosaurus has two brains; the brontosaurus only has a one tiny one.”
“How do you know that?”
“I read it in your book.”
Eli slugs Israel in the bicep. “Don’t steal stuff out of my backpack.”
Miriam gets up at seven and makes the boys spaghetti with marinara. She sets two plates in front of them and goes back upstairs without saying anything.
“Does dad still live here?” Israel asks his brother.
“I don’t know.”
Israel practices writing Shalom a few more times before bed.

When Israel walks home from the bus stop, he finds his dad’s car in the driveway. Inside, Eli is at the kitchen table, reading.
“Where’s Dad?”
“He’s upstairs,” Eli says without looking up. “He doesn’t live here anymore.”
“What?”
“He’s packing. He’s moving out for real.”
Israel walks to the bottom of the stairs. “I’m going up,” he whispers to his brother. Eli flips a page of the dinosaur book.
Israel climbs up the carpet staircase slowly. He tries to steady his breathing. Once he gets to the top step he crouches down and peers around the corner. He looks into his parents’ bedroom. Miriam is in bed weeping softly. David packs.
“I’m sorry,” David says to the heap of woman in bed. He sighs heavily. “A thousand should get you through the rest of the month.” Israel watches his father count out the money and set it on the dresser.
“Let me get settled and then we’ll figure stuff out with the boys.”
David leans down to zip up the suitcase, full of all the clothes he never wears. It is all that was left in the closet.
Israel crawls down the stairs. He pulls a chair up next to Eli.
“You’re right; he’s packing.”
“I know,” Eli says.
“Do you think he’s sad?”
“I don’t know.” Eli flips the page.
“Mom’s sad,” Israel says. “She’s crying.”
“Mom cries all the time.”
They look at the pictures of the pterodactyl. David appears at the bottom of the stairs, suitcase gripped in his left hand.
“So you’re moving out for real?” Eli says.
“I was thinking we could order pizza and watch a movie before I go.”
“Where are you going?” Israel asks.
“I’m going to live in an apartment close to my office.” David stares into the eyes of his youngest son. He swallows hard.
“Why?” Israel asks. He won’t take his gaze off his father.
“We’ll still see each other all the time,” David looks from Israel to Eli and back. Israel waits for an answer. His mouth is partway open, and his head tilts back to look David in the face.
David begins to say something but is cut off in the first breath.
“What kind of pizza are we going to get?” Eli asks. “Israel gets anchovies,” Eli says as he pokes the air around Israel’s midsection.
“And then we have to watch Beauty and the Beast.”
Israel clutches his chest. “Noooooo,” he yells like it would be worse than death. “Not Beauty and the Beast.”
David smiles at Eli. He sets down the suitcase.
They order a large cheese pizza and rent Jurassic Park from the Blockbuster on University. Every time a new dinosaur comes on screen the boys find it in the book and recite facts about it.
“That’s a triceratops,” Eli yells. “It charged its enemies with its horns.”
“And it only eats plant,” Israel adds.
Eli put his head down and rams it into the side of Israel’s arm.
“Like that.”
“Ow,” Israel yells. His pizza falls cheese-side down onto the carpet.
“Just think how bad it would have hurt if I had three huge horns.”
David picks up the pizza and rubs his shoe back and forth on the dirty carpet. He throws the piece away and puts the book on the counter.
By the end of the movie all three agree that raptors are the coolest dinosaur. And for a while everything feels almost normal. But the suitcase is still at the bottom of the stairs and they pass it on the way to go to bed.

When the boys are tucked in, David sits down next to Eli. Eli hands the dinosaur book to his dad, open to the page on raptors.
“I think I’m going to do my project on them.”
“What about the brontosaurus?”
“Maybe he’s too nice.”
David flinches. He kisses Eli on the forehead, and gets up.
“That was a really cool movie,” Israel says as David sits on the edge of the bed.
“Yeah it was.” David looks into his son’s big brown eyes. “I love you, kiddo.” He stands up to leave.

“Dad?” Israel asks.

“Yeah?”

“If God asked you to stay, would you?”

David hangs his head. “Good night, guys. I love you.” He switches off the light and closes the door behind him.

Israel stares at the ceiling. He shivers, but isn’t cold. He hopes David will walk back in, unpack. He hopes the car doesn’t start. Slowly, he gets out of bed and walks to the window. Leaning his forehead against the cold glass, he stares down at the driveway. He sees exhaust forming in the air. The Maxima pulls away. Israel watches it coast down the street, past the trees from which the strongest leaves have dropped to rot with the rest. And he wonders why God would ever ask a dad to kill his son. And he wonders if God will ask anything ever again.
When earlier the needle
bent and then straightened
sharpened on denim
delivered a blow

The syringe in my vein
looked up baring his fangs
with a chuckle, a sneer, said
“You’re all mine now, junky.”

Heroin draining into my
red (so red) vein
Like coffee sucked up and
shot into a worm.

So yes, then to dreamtime
and the sweet-smelling shot
soothing the cerebrum
My brains and balls blasted

With pure poppy cum
and the visions all pouring
A syringeful of dreams
sucked up by my skull

And played on fast forward
Till the sights flew so fast that
The clocks were all melting and
I had become as one outside of time.
The dying heart throbs to connect
air to lips as the limping deer,
gutshot, makes her way from glen
To drift...as my aching mind.

Snow red as a blackbird’s wing,
The doe goes down a swift release
of air from lungs as a bullet brings
quick closure in the wood.

Winter and a tiny death, though calamitous
to fawn—remember, now, that
Man and Beast must share
the Earth and Sun.

The riotous spin of axis and blood,
Hellish gathering of wood and food,
Despite the cacophonous din of man
This life is sometimes still and good.
Immigrants
ashleyloyning
Memorial Day

all the movies on tv today are about war

all sizes

guns cannons flamethrowers (you know
all the necessary flowers flags
and trappings)

yesterday walking the trail
i met a man who forgot
it was monday

used to be called decoration day

bullets parades dead

how come I didn’t think of that
It was Holme who introduced me to Olivia. Olivia was already in love with him, but Holme couldn’t love anyone and only tried with other men. It didn’t take long for me to fall in love with her. Even though it took some time for her to love me back.

It didn’t take long for me to forget the old group from college and willingly admit its end, leaving those memories in crates to gather mildew in the spare bedroom. That was the unspoken agreement. When it ended, and everyone knew it would, we would just walk away. Forever was never in any of our vocabulary.

Peach expatriated to Paris, Greenly was sickly thin and addicted to sleeping pills and Miranda had simply disappeared. I still talk to Brady now and again. He’s dating the model he sells cocaine too and teaching physics at a Jesuit high school in San Diego. He told me a while back that Holme was apparently back in the closet and married. With kids.

We were drifting at altitude in an oversized DC-10 when Olivia woke up. I was studying the pictures in my Rolling Stone and licking the last taste of beer from my cup.

“We’re still in the air?” she asked.

“You weren’t asleep for that long,” I said.

During her nap, I saw her eyes darting around behind their lids and I wondered what she was looking for.

“I could see your eyes moving around.”

“No one can sleep on a plane.”

She hadn’t been sleeping well for a while. She used to sleep with a smile, and sometimes I’d wake myself up just to see it. She had a tragic face, naturally and effortlessly suntanned. She kept it tight when she slept now, like something in her dreams had left her with an impossible responsibility.

“Have a drink, then. Maybe it’ll help.” I said.

“Avi. The baby.”

“I’m sure a little alcohol at the early stages of fetal development won’t hurt,” I said.

She’d only been pregnant for six weeks and I didn’t really know anything about the little glob growing inside her. I felt guilty; it wasn’t even supposed to have happened. We weren’t married, but it just didn’t seem right to get rid of the baby. We never made up our minds and now I could see a tiny lump and we both knew it was too late.

“Sometimes I doubt what kind of father you’re going to be.”

I wanted to be a good father. Maybe if I could raise a kid right, there would be at least one optimistic human being in the world.

“I’m not going to be a pedophile, at least,” I said.

“Well, I quit smoking,” she said.
“I’ll be a good father,” I said, but I could tell everyone around us was getting uncomfortable with the conversation.

We were landing when she woke up again. It was a long flight, but we left early and the city was pale and indistinguishable as we lowered into a time that was neither evening nor afternoon.

“Does it feel weird coming back?” I asked Olivia.

“It feels right.”

“I feel out of place. Like everyone in the city is looking at me and recognizes me and wonders where I’ve been.”

“Like coming home,” she said.

I looked at her just in time to catch a sleepy smile fade from her eyes.

“I’m glad you’re happy to be here,” I said.

“Are you not?” she asked.

“I’m happy wherever you are,” I said. I could never tell if she was rolling her eyes at me. “It’s the truth,” I reassured her.

“I’m sure, Avi. And you keep me rooted in the world. It’s stabilizing.”

“Stabilizing?”

“Stability, Avi. You’re stable.”

Stable, I thought. Solid. Rooted. I couldn’t make the word sound good.

“You belong,” I said.

“To you,” she answered, and let the tiny muscles in her lips pull, labored and ungracefully at one corner of her mouth. But her eyes did nothing.

We got the invitation to Holme’s fortieth a few weeks ago. It was addressed to me and I wondered what kind of lengths his wife went through to find my name and number, probably written on some tiny yellow post-it and shoved into the pages of a book just-in-case, and knew that Holme must have gotten rid of Olivia’s altogether. I wondered who else he’d gotten rid of.

“I wonder if he’s gained weight or anything,” she said after she saw the invitation hidden in my desk. “I mean, not like he would let himself. He’d put a gun in his mouth first,” she said.

“Holme’s probably different,” I said.

“Holme is the one person who wouldn’t change. Not like Peach or Greenly, they lost their fun, their dedication.”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of dedication,” I said.

“He was always dedicated to,” she stopped—she didn’t mean fun, Holme was bigger than fun, he was a symbol to her, to all of us, of something more—“life,” she said. And I thought she was right.

“He’s got a wife now. Brady said he has kids.”

“He would never let life get the better of him,” she said.

“You’re pregnant,” I said, “what does that say about our life?”

“It says,” she said between the lines of the invitation she was rereading, “we’re going to this party.”
“He probably won’t even want us there,” I said, but Olivia had already put the invitation on the refrigerator and marked the date on our calendar. I relented but I told her that we would fly in the day of the party, make an appearance and fly back the next morning. She squealed and let her fists wave in front of her clenched eyes.

It was the squeal I loved, the way Olivia used to lose control of everything in and outside of her when she was happy. We would leave places early so we could make love on a couch, biting each other’s lips so we didn’t make too much noise.

It was a good time to be poor, to have no responsibilities other than a few classes and getting laid. Holme was great at it. We’d go to his nightclubs, places like The Manhole and Erector Set’s. Everyone would get drunk and laugh at the men Holme would bring home, covered in glitter but almost no clothes. Holme relished the attention and made his flaws handsome, so he could control how people saw him. His early graying hair and his coy, flirty shoulders were irresistible to most men and all women.

It didn’t bother me that Olivia looked at him, because everyone did. It didn’t bother me that she was in love with him, because everyone was. No one was looking for permanence and when we stopped laughing at Holme, he found other people who did. Olivia wanted to cling to Holme, but no matter how hard she tried, he saw only old novelty where I saw refreshing idiosyncrasy.

Our hotel room was fifteen minutes from Holme’s apartment. Inside, I could see Olivia in the mirror, standing in the bathroom, her head surrendered into her shoulder as she put on earrings I hadn’t seen before. She flirted with herself and beamed at the mirror with impish animation, squirming in a pink dress that fell all over her curves.

“Who are you getting all dressed up for, beautiful?” I asked.

“I haven’t looked beautiful in a very long time,” she said.

“You’ve looked beautiful since before you were born.”

“If only this lump were either obviously a baby, or not there at all. It just looks like belly fat now.”

“But I know it’s our beautiful baby and it’s sexy.” And it was. Olivia in pink, sparkling from the ears, red in the lips, was somehow dragging me inside her in a way I hadn’t felt since I used to clumsily look for the button near her belt with shaky fingers.

I pulled her toward me as she walked by and she threw her palm into my shoulders, locking both arms at her elbows.

“Now?”

“Yes, now. You’re stunning.”

“Why are you so uncontrollable? So deliberately inconsistent?”

“I haven’t seen anyone as beautiful as you look right now,” I said.
“You’re going to need to be stable for the baby, Avi.”
“I will. Now lift your dress so I can see you.”
“We’re late.” She swung her purse onto her shoulder and dazzled me as she floated toward the door.

It was my pants, I thought. She said that pleats were not flattering on me. I rolled up my sleeves like I was debonair, because I thought she liked it when I got my hands dirty. I followed her out of the door and into the elevator. She had called down to the lobby while I was in the shower and a taxi was already waiting.

“We have no idea what Holme is like, now. We have no idea if anyone else we know will even be there,” I said.

“Holme is exactly the same. He is a rock,” she said.
“He’s a gay man with a wife and kids.”
She popped a sigh from her tongue. With the sound of a kiss and then the labored exhale.

The building ascended into the dark where I lost it in the stars. It seemed to frown at me and I frowned back. Nothing about it reminded me of Holme and I looked at Olivia three steps ahead of me, heels clicking.

It was only when the apartments Olivia and I had lived in were filled with people that they ever felt like a home. The crates we used as seats and the couches that smelled like asphalt were part of an aesthetic. A romantic current only completed when it was too crowded to realize how poor and dirty we were, when the music was too loud and we were all too drunk to see how slow we were moving.

Then the quiet—the awful and disorienting quiet—swept through and left Olivia and me with each other, so we followed the houses out of downtown, as they spread like bread crumbs further and further away from where we came.

Holme’s apartment, I knew, would not look like the old one-room, one-baths we had wandered through. It had a family, it was a home and I didn’t care to see it. Mine was fine enough. It had a wine cellar in the basement, an upright piano in the living room and a table Olivia kept set just in case the neighbors stopped by. That was a Home. It was our home. It was not what we would find on the thirty-second floor of this building.

As it turned out, Holme’s apartment covered the entire top floor and had a view only money can buy. It extended for miles, it seemed, in a sea of hardwood and glass that spit the light back at you in crystalline hues.

The books had never been pulled off the shelves and the furniture, which couldn’t possibly be found in any store, had never been sat in. More than a hundred people were scattered throughout what seemed like a page torn from the interior decorating text book. I had trouble discerning faces among the razor suits, hairspray, starch, and stingingly white teeth. I looked at the invitation one more time. It said nothing about this being a black tie event.

I glanced at Olivia, the color in her dress and on her lips screaming in the
murmuring room, and down at my olive Dockers and faded brown shoes. I stopped myself from walking backwards out the door. A woman appeared from around a corner and greeted us through a practiced smile.

“You must be Holme’s friends.”

“Yes,” Olivia said, “from college.”

I nodded and waited for something to erupt. The woman’s overreaching smile looked permanent and painful.

“You must be Holme’s wife,” Olivia said.

“Yes, you mean Homestead, of course.”

“Homestead?” Olivia asked.

“Why yes. Homestead.”

“Not Holme?”

I twisted my face toward Olivia and tried to fandangle my eyebrows into an encouraging pose, but I think it looked more like I was having a stroke, because Olivia quickly diverted her stare back at the statue in front of us.

“Homestead and I have been married for eight years now.”

“Eight years,” Olivia repeated. “I didn’t know Holme had it in him.”

“Indeed,” the woman said, “I’m Missy.”

“I’m Olivia and this is my friend Avi,” she motioned with her head. Her hands rolled and released the hem of her dress.

“We’re going to have a baby,” I said.

Missy nodded. Olivia sighed and I think I almost cried.

“Homestead will be arriving shortly,” she said. Then Olivia and I were left to sort through the wreckage.

It was silent while we tried to unfreeze ourselves from our positions near the door. It kept repeating itself in my head, and everything in the room felt heavier. I was, maybe, nineteen the last time Olivia and I were friends. I watched her eyes fall to the ground and I tried to catch them, but I only put my hand on her shoulder and ushered her, as bravely as I could, into the room.

We kept to ourselves for another twenty minutes. We ate shrimp and sushi. I clawed my way through glasses of champagne as Olivia shifted her weight back and forth. I said nothing to Olivia who only licked her lips and leaned on a desk by a window.

When the phone rang, the room hushed. Olivia, who already had sunk below herself, didn’t even raise her head.

“Hello?” Missy said into the phone.

Oh yes, dear. Dinner is ready.

Of course. For your birthday. Lobster. Lobster and Steak.

Ok, darling. I’ll see you soon.

It was no surprise, but I hated knowing exactly what the other side of that conversation was like. And it was worse realizing that Olivia knew too.

Hello honey. Is dinner ready?
Oh yea? Is it something special?
You are so terribly good to me. I’ll see you in five minutes. I’m on my way up.
“He’ll be here in five minutes, everybody. Find a place to hide,” Missy said.
Olivia and I slid behind a bookcase. I saw men crouch behind couches so their suits would not touch the ground. I saw women put themselves in corners.

Olivia and I were alone in the shadow and chilly quiet of the bookcase. She put her arms on my hips and her head on my chest. I lifted my hand to her head, but let it fall back down because I knew that Olivia didn’t want to be touched. She only wanted to touch something close to her. All I could do, I thought, was be as close as I could so all she ever had to do was touch me and all I ever had to do was be touched.

We heard the door open and Missy come to her husband and greet him. In unison, everyone jumped out of their hiding places and harmonized an insincere surprise!

He didn’t look that different. He was dressed nicer of course but he didn’t seem like he aged at all: his hair was still gray in all the right places, his shoulders still ripe with a tender vulnerability. Holme walked through the room with the same eyes he always had. For a moment, I was relieved.

I could feel the heat from Olivia’s arms, though they hardly grazed mine. Her cheeks were rosy with what might have been coy nervousness or anxiety, and her eyes blinked like a vibrating piano string.

Holme wasn’t walking toward us, he wasn’t even facing us. He was ushered through a crowd by handshakes and dainty kisses.

“Do you want to say hi now?” I asked.
“No.”
“We’ll wait.”
“Those eyes,” she said.
“He really hasn’t changed,” I tried.
“Those smiles,” she said.
“Maybe a little, but he looks good.”
“We were meant for us.”

My shoulders dropped. She wasn’t angry, she wasn’t sad. She was just observing the numbing truth.

“They were. Not anymore.”
“They were ours.”
“Homestead,” I said.
“We’re leaving,” she said after she had already started walking.
“But we’ve come all this way. We should at least shake his hand. Say something fake. Something encouraging.”
“It’s over,” she said.

I’m not sure whether he saw us when we drifted by him. If he did, he didn’t
say anything then, and he hasn’t since. I’m sure my phone number is still there, just-in-case. I sometimes try to think of scenarios that would make him call, but I have never been able to think of one.

After the party, Olivia and I went right up to our room. The cab ride back to the hotel was much shorter than the one there and I wished it lasted a little longer. Instead of leaving the door open for me to watch this time, she closed the bathroom door behind her to take her makeup off, to put her earrings away, to wonder, I thought, whether she knew all along what would happen.

But when she came out, she hadn’t done anything. It was twenty minutes and I had almost fallen asleep. I wanted to stay up and spend the time thinking of something to say. But by the time she came out, I was only half-conscious with my legs dangling off the bed with my shoes still on.

“You’re still dressed,” I said.

“So are you,” she said. “I’m going to the hotel bar.”

“To drink? Really?”

“No, I just don’t want to take my dress off yet.”

“Ok, do you want me to come?”

“No. Thank you. You should get some sleep.”

The room echoed with the sound of the electronic lock in the door. Then, after the thick, weighted silence there was only silence. Olivia wanted to be alone. I could understand that. Even though she should be with someone, someone who still loves her, who won’t change unless she wants change. But, if Olivia wanted to touch me, I thought, she would have asked. I fell asleep after a while, leaving a spot on one side of the bed for when she came back.

I woke up into dark, my head a sandbag. I reached over to nothing but sheets. I didn’t believe it until I turned the light on. The room was just how I left it, my shoes on the side of the bed, my watch on the nightstand. Shit, I said to the pillow. Shit. Shit. Damn it, I thought as my head cleared and the recognition pulled me into lucidity. God damn it, Olivia.

The chairs were stacked in the bar, no bartender, no vibrant and neon light from the TV, only drab gloom lit up by a woman in a pink dress, hunched over her glass with fog in her eyes.

“Olivia,” I said.

“Don’t, Avi.”

“It’s late. Are you drunk?”

She picked up her glass and slammed it back down like she was proving its innocence.

“Christ, Avi. Ginger ale.”

“You’ve been here for five hours sipping ginger ale?”

“You got me pregnant,” she said.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean too.”

“I know,” she said, relenting, almost as if she meant it.

“I love you,” I said.
I was going to walk away, to end the conversation, to let Olivia feel air until she needed to touch something solid, but she picked her head up.

“Avi, say what you mean to say.”

“I mean to say I love you. Or, I still love you. I’ve always loved you.”

She laughed from the throat, coming up from her gut as if the baby was laughing too. It was a laugh I hadn’t ever heard before and I hoped I would never hear again.

“You want to tell me that I’m so-o-o-o beautiful and you want to make love to me.”

“I want to ravish you, darling.”

“You want to take me right here.”

“No, Olivia.”

“Take me right here, Avi. You want to rip my clothes off! You want me more than you’ve ever wanted me before.”

“I want to kiss you. On the mouth. On your eyelids. Your fingers.”

“You want to make me scream.”

“I just love you.”

“To make me cum.”

“I love you,” I said.

The fog in her eyes wisped away to wherever fog goes after it lifts from the ground. I stepped forward, maybe to cradle her. Maybe to tell her that everything would be ok. Maybe to say that we would have this baby. But before I could wrap myself into her, she sucked in air as if she were out of breath, and it was a crushing laugh, disorienting and hollow.
Old Rag Mountain

Single pink laurel blossom
against green thicket
while spring thunder
from across the valley

I waste poem with words!
brief meditations on an empty pane of glass

— you are a line drawn in charcoal on distant planes;
a bold and sudden gust of wind through leaves of grass;
imprint of a body on a body in an empty bed;
disturbance of a street-lamp;

— i cover you in grey film;
transcribe you onto unforgiving sheets of lead;
pull you into moments that do not contend with day-light, or convenience;
mediate your fingerprints in bird baths;
but you will never come
and i
the negation of being

and what, in the absence of all hope
is left, but the negation of being,
something less solid, indirectly
embraced and empty, complacent, or aching
for room to roam free, unbound
by the lackless epithet of wanting
more and needing, the always so
untouched and changing, the
blankness of outstretched fingers
groping dull space or two lips
poised and waiting? what could be
left, but the dull phone ringing and
the white walls breathing and
sweating out this fever dream on wet
sheets or the couch set cold
and stained, wine tainted, like
water color red balloons.
as fading light strains to read the lines
that fingers trace in dust on mantlepieces,
covered in grocery list regrets and
dime store longings, the almost,
as if anything could be better than
this street lamp yawning.
I would roll you in thin papers
and smoke you whole,
to feel you in my veins, to know
how you taste while burning,
watch you grow cold,
ash grey
and fall.

but I don’t
smoke.
i want to drag you raving

in these
hallowed streets

bare hallucinating
angels, unpiece

your taut frame
&rise

hollow out your bones
&fly
Not Venice, but Bangkok

marie garrison
Boys in a Fig Tree,
Namibia
Schoolgirl & Her House, Namibia

carmine leighton
The Tree
chelsey von ehrenkrook
Sweating Shoes

patrick gill
My grandmother in one of her elaborate hats. Silly or fancy? Fancy if expense is the distinction. Just one element of a fashionable wardrobe: cashmere scarves, fake eyelashes (she wore them every day, my mother claims), Chanel perfume. She is holding a drink (scotch?) and perched on her cream colored couch. She kept a beautiful house – antique furniture, fine paintings, a baby grand piano. Rose bushes in the front, a sun room and a red tile patio in the back.

Dinner at her house – she loved to entertain. “Who wants to say grace?” I am only five years old. I say “Grace.” We all laugh, even Grandma Opal with her staunch table manners (Elbows off the table!)

By the time I was old enough to keep memories of her, her own were slipping away. “Do you want a tuna sandwich?” she repeated to my sisters and me. She couldn’t remember our answers – early onset Alzheimer’s clogging the pathways between her neurotransmitters, like cholesterol in the arteries of a heart.

Upset in her car, lost five blocks from home while returning from the neighborhood grocery store. My older sister’s name was remembered. Mine and my twin sister’s were not. “She doesn’t do it on purpose,” My mother tells us. “She can’t help it.”

Retirement checks in the mail from Dain Bosworth long after she stopped working there. She had been Montana’s first female stockbroker. She shook hands with President Reagan. Here she is in a flat-colored photograph standing in front of the Great Wall of China on a rainy day.

Her second husband and the alleged love of her life – my dad’s father – died young of a heart attack. She left White Sulphur Springs, moved to Billings with my dad, age 12, and my uncle, age 8. “Marvin looked like Dan Rather,” she would say when the CBS evening news came on.

Years later, I learn that many of her years in Billings were scarred with alcoholism and loneliness. She had an affair with a married man – one of Billings’ wealthiest landowners – that lasted several years.

My uncle’s name was the last to disappear from her memory. He was a caretaker for 15 long years, even the last five, when she was just a beating heart and a pair of blinking eyes behind thick glasses. Effectively mute, barely eating, sometimes grinding her teeth. We didn’t know what to do. We gave her gum.
Our Living and Sleeping

At the day, The thick. The day is that so, a thickening draught, sorrows, pastures during [all season spelling dissolution to once-fertile pastures of hot clay.

Night rises slowly, cowing crops and budding plants to hide inside their shrouds.

Their shade deepens, the heavy price of living deepens the darkening. Thick enough I lost myself, to not know myself at the present state.

The varmint who knew the snare, a sleek weasel makes his wildly-made home in a timbered region by the Bitterroot River. A lush weather, frostier hanging, nodding cold what the North people want without doubt.

I consider it and feel quite familiar among the presence of bellowing cattle cold but I harbor a certain kind of distaste for its flakiness.

When I'm in the cold, I suddenly start to grow close to dying fading to the white with the snow.

An immediate distaste must be the product of preservation.
Slopes have been made, skis trotting cross-country geysers upon the Rockies but the cold was ever-close and made me sick in a way.

Desert cold I could try possibly, if needed.
Line me up with a transport across the wide sea of the continental desert and introduce my senses to the border, a flung corrido to bring beamed climate.

I spot the first macaw. What a dilettante I resemble saying anything of these places. Places I had no true-blue relation to.

Looming desires, overgrown Aztec roof combs preceding the mestizaje, cigarette smell Mexico City lung cancer.
I will state my case. A mist of the region is the whole my bare young conscious being knows.

A mist steams and waxes, plumes upward more and more.

It rises like the stained urban skeletons, browned bottles, match booklets, powdery lining at garbage sites dispensing their collective memories, if there is a sort of conception.

Gone to the gutter.
To the gutter, the economy to the gutter?
The gutter and putrefied? With slinking worms

and the same rot inciting Man’s stiff-necked corruptive tendency
to eliminate pliant paradise of fragrance or leaf?

No doubt I cannot proceed
as an animal of a voice.
To handle my business this way means
translation of a few busy musings

that unite only crumbling in unison
sprinkled sacrifice fastening

as wisps here but stamped to dreaming memories

we share. Jung.

A surprising excitement registers (at last!)
when the day hums around again

and my pores are warmed.

The point I enter at when I finish any brand of discourse
a tunnel of knifing vision
supposed to size things up and assure everyone
the meaning of what I said was real and lasting, of an electronic

perfected form that satisfies fast
like a dollar bill in your hand

on a rainy day when you have nothing to eat
cause you don’t want money, but

you’re tired of hunting for pigeons.
A cherishing tomb made it—canyon stoop
takes across with the highway reaching fast spiraling cars, the railway ties, the bronze going and going between brick and lamppost.
Mountain bluebird peels wings, desecrates the light’s cap into strips of maggot dribbled metal, warm ore burnt hot, turned to ember by the stanchion driving beneath it, a dull fuse. Flag came up, was the trailing tip to the bluebird feather tasseled with dirt and the railroad car sat round the bend.

Sat at the edge of ravening Hellgate smothered brown to not prosper, a bluebird beats, a chuck staggers from it and it becomes chicken, flails dirty pinion, sharply swiping to a suburban clarinet and relieved it has been, itself finding this town a painterly wasp on which it crisply dines. Storms are less finite, conglomerate desecrate the swollen lamp in commemoration for the feast tonight sudden to ring sharp in ear of jealous robin, parched tadpoles and junk suckers, cannibal wasps, heaving hungry muskrats, and the hungriest man still found inhabiting timber, the paintbrush Williams park.
A warm day hobos meet the bird, learn its pecking linguistic learned from the chicken for which its voice was bartered. There lies what rapture! Gleamed hobo smiles at the lesson gained made so he, dressed in withering bags will prosper going to gain his meat from chickens on the prairie to which he will hike if the turned river freezes, for he carries public disdain, packaging and meandering his words
as he goes the public trail. Splattered with rainy globs, he waits. Ducks are flanked he would feed the crumbs of local bread, but he cannot imagine the energy it takes to feed the flock. The bluebird might be fed trash sack dog food and be satisfied without giving singly songs then fly and forget the land it desecrates. He likes an empty return, endless lacking reciprocities, to keep himself the abused solitary the stanchion shut down. And he sees the cities ugliness, and the ducks remind him

we are knotted into a spidery web shifting and shaping, that bends him into tragic sleeping bag’s madness to which he fatally succumbed, and to which he compares the starving flock. His hands feed him cereal bites, glaze burns open through the cloud lands on the canyon interstate sparkling tape rainbow-bent, an animus into globular pit. Become dual brethren, brother or sister, and complete, twirling the potted gold children are adults, who weep kindly and smile the rain visible on the gold, and, too the rainbow. Water and gold go as one, wet with each other, stained into the mind. Nature is teaching men in the park, him, natural images face to face, till minds swarm, cough killing skeleton companions, thereby causing the bluebird to tremble in its wisdom. Nature symbols cut each other to teach the blessed hobos their failing sense. If this one particular man learned his wisdom, he might

feed the bluebird that blindly carries on its symbolic life of gestures and desire circumstance and circumference, the latter
depending on the weather, since he projects as he flies his routes of trading visions to gangly wayfarers, to himself. The canyon becomes a sarcophagus, will remain, and piles with trash and glass, hopefully wishing itself desecrated to the bird anus like the town, bathed a dung heap against smokestacks and glinted fume.

The bluebird, messenger, waits diligently clucking, snapping along the telephone rubber, grating its tongue when foot travelers pass drunken. It laterals the line, a clown, and it waits to watch men elapse the heart-shaped balloon yet again launched at passing by a child. Rain hits dog food the bird cannot scavenge but generously leaves to decay or be eaten.
Fuerza de la Buddha

marie.garrison
And since, I’ve unlearned
Many dull Sundays

Of being possessed: cinematic seat shift
And the supplemental dead-leg
Pew hours

Emily Dickinson’s head rises
Off mine, and I wonder
If I read the apples

Downward sun, the orchard fuming
Cider, and the apples midnight
Red, sky-plump as manzana skin
Lining the undulate hills

The apples and the night

Or perhaps I was sleeping
When I nearly broke

Finding the night daily
And I, needing to break
By words

As a boy I was terrified
Luther passed among those girls he didn’t know
Scotch Ale, though none could appreciate the campfire biscuit
aftertaste. I’m a smokejumper you know, he tells
the small one with the bitter
face: you must be
Dangerous.

A smile builds on Luther

Mr. Terminus spills from the cracked wall, next to my ear,
You shouldn’t be here— Luther
you aren’t, eventually they’ll know.
Girls don’t know my
raven smile.
— All the girls with prettier eyes
not seeing Luther, the cracked wall.

She leaves with his ale, laughing.
Another girl passes and Luther
can’t impress himself...
running fingers over the cracked wall.

I know the cold bullets.

the lead in Luther’s gut.
Like every boy the fire
Was to enticing,
Its spell
Too mesmerizing
The flame it was too captivating
To listen to
Our parent’s
Warning.

Like every boy the fire
Stood off
At a distance
The flame it called us
From a distance;
And that we did listen
By a fault of adolescence
We were
Scolded and
We were sentenced.

Like every boy the fire
Burned
My fingers tips,burned
My hands till they
Were sooted and deformed—
But, like every boy
I too
Was warned
Constellations

It fell from your careless gesture
Off the table, the jar of coins
Above the broken glass we measured
The constellations you had divined.
Night on the Road

It’s been too long since
I last saw the Darkness
and did not shudder or
weep in despair

The Lady peered around
the Mountain—her full round face
illuminating the eternal plain
and I remembered—

—the timid and eerie islands
of light that swim in the Distance
and beckon—but not so much
as the Queen and Her mask of gold and white

—the haunted skeletal trees that
reach, desperate, up to the twilight, as
the Primal mind sends signals,
Tip-toeing from spine to eyeball

—Deer dancing in corners, behind
shotgunned and isolated park signs
—Memories, in abandoned attics
rattling chains and bent highway reflectors

—Old houses and mountain silhouettes,
glassy lakes, pools of moon-on-Earth,
music for My eyes—loneliness, beauty
and snow.
Peru or Park City?
Islands sink in the sand
Records skip as much as the
Living dead
Western family values
Targeting my epoxy stutter
Willful radio strains
Primitive ego addicts align
All are one tonight
Bellowing read faces stumbling
Like porcupines on
Sensory overload Sunday
We’re all looking, not comprehending
Not picking up where we left off
Merely precipitating
Packrat imaginations
My body crashed
delicately, disconnecting a crystal
sea. Memory reassured me
I was home, but black and white
submerged swimmers whispered hints
of an ice–capped island.

Overhead, plasma is stricken
with luminescent hues.
Green glowing curtains dance
an enchanting greeting.

These creatures before me–
tusked, webbed, whiskered–
would ring bells for centuries
the way they did now.

Bells ringing, or songs
hummed. One bop on the head,
a walrus perhaps?

My father, instead.
"Your alarm is chiming."
Clock, nail-clasped to the sterile wall
ahead that blood coffee nightstand,
it ticks
away. We sink
bourbon down, clattering rocks,
slapping the metronome night.

Bottomless breaths, unwinding hands
without rhythm, we want
silence, but we hear
ticks.

We know the black hole inside
the nightstand. Shove it up
the back of our skull.

Our left temple.

The roof of our mouth.
    Under the chin.

    Pooooow.

See shards and time slowly
fall over the nightstand, over
ticks.
Duane spit out the window of the ‘95 Chevy. Though it was late September, he left the window down. To hell with the Fed who didn’t know how to dress for a proper prairie fall. The dented and mud flecked pickup truck rumbled down the two wheel track path that made up the road. In some places the road was deeply rutted, nearly high centering the truck. Other times prairie dog holes and small sagebrush and little remnants of snow obscured the way. Duane Langston took the entire road the same speed.

G. Michael Huxley sat crouched at the other window, one hand on the oh-shit handle, the other scratching Duke, the Australian Sheppard, who sat between them.

“And the property extends to that fence Mr. Langston?” said G. Michael Huxley.

“To the ridge” Duane motioned with one fleck of a finger, beyond the further ridge. He was not interested in small talk with a man with one letter for a first name.

“Oh, right right. I remember the map now.”

G. Michael Huxley was not a rancher. He did not have a good coat. His vehicle was made in the last ten years, and was clean. But still, he had said “Mr. Langston, I’m here to evaluate your property” with all the seriousness of one who’d scrutinized a working man’s livelihood before.

G. Michael Huxley made a note on the clipboard on his lap. Duane distrusted people who needed clipboards outside an office. They got in the way, clipboards. Papers always fluttering, sliding along bumpy pickup seats, they were not practical. And practical was to be admired. Duane wrote notes on his hands with a pen.

“Where is the cow herd?”

“At the upper creek, Mr. Huxley” said Duane as he shifted the chew in his lower lip with his tongue.

“Please, call me Mike.”

Duane looked straight ahead. The Fed’s man pretended to be sincere, but Duane could read through his professional bullshit. This Fed couldn’t be trusted. None of them could. From the sheriff that locked him up for drinking on the way home in high school—on a desolate highway that he could kill only himself on, as he well remembered arguing—to this man in the cab with him, they were all crooked. Duane had long known G. Michael Huxley would come before long.

They had come for his cousin Clay’s place a few years back. The Feds controlled the markets and the banks. They made it impossible to make a
decent living anywhere but behind a desk and below a boss. And Duane wouldn’t to stoop to that. So he had refused to pay the Feds any more of the money he earned through blood and sweat. What services had he ever got from them? Piss poor schooling in a one bar town. There was never any talk of him getting scholarships. There were no college recruiters at the football games.

“Deer season doesn’t open for another month does it?” said G. Michael Huxley, looking at the .223 that stood next to Duke, resting on the floor board barrel down. Duane’s eyes joined G. Michael Huxley’s on his Remington.

“It’s for coyotes” he said, “and dogs that run.” The Chevy shuttered on a particularly big rut.

“Dogs? Like wild dogs?”

Duane did not appreciate being scrutinized by a man who let his fingernails grow longer than the tip of his finger. His own sister didn’t grow hers that long. Problem dogs had to be shot.

“One of my cows is worth nine hundred bucks alone, thirteen hundred if she had a calf, and thousands over her life. A stray dog scaring her into barbed wire fences and prairie dog holes isn’t worth shit to me.” Duane spit again out the open window and looked at that Australian Sheppard between them.

“I see.”

Duane shot him a look. “I’d shoot Duke in a heartbeat if he got to runnin.” Roscoe, the collie before Duke, had been a great dog, one of Duane’s favorites of all the mutts he’d owned. But he just never did get better at “stay.” Duane wiped the snot off his mustache with his Carhartt sleeve. G. Michael Huxley looked down at his clipboard and wrote scribbled. The Fed’s were probably looking for any reason to put Duane away. Tax evasion or otherwise. They’d just keep at it till he was dead or broke or worse. Duane’s knuckles paled on the steering wheel.

Fencing tools clanged and rumbled in the truck bed. An endless amber cloud rose from the mud flaps.

“I used to have a Chevy like this. A ’94, blue” said G. Michael Huxley. Duane kept his eyes on the horizon.

“Never could get the radio knobs to stay on either” G. Michael Huxley half smiled and turned a bare stub on the dash. All that was left of a knob. Duane looked at the stub.

“Epoxy.” Duane grunted, but did not make eye contact. “Epoxy works, usually.”

He had been there at Clay’s hearing. Tax evasion. Two years. The tax man came out to the old ranch. The Fed’s had an auction. Clay’s gun collection went for a good price. They leveled the old barn. He had written one letter
to Clay while he was still inside. I did what I could, but I couldn’t keep the guns. I did manage to get Blackie. I’ll keep him with Zip and the other horses. I’ll buy you a beer when you get out. There were six houses on the old ranch now. He didn’t get a letter back.

The barn loomed before them, the only structure for five miles in any direction. Duane sat in the parked truck, unwilling to make the first move. He was not going to give this Fed-man a tour out of generosity.

“Are we going to go into the barn, Mr. Langston? Or would you rather me do my evaluation of your assets without any explanation from you?” The razor burn on his slight double chin jiggled as he spoke. Duane met his pale eyes for a moment before opening the truck door.

G. Michael Huxley first walked up and down the side of the barn that had a lean-to off the roof, and was keeping the hay dry. The pencil pusher puffed on a cigarette as his pen twitched in his hand while he counted rows of round bales. Duane didn’t smoke, he chewed. Had since he was thirteen. Men who used their hands, who needed their hands didn’t smoke. You could fix fence, mechanic, flip through porn and jack off, all while getting your fix from snuff. Real working men didn’t smoke. Duane stood by the door to the barn, and spit.

Inside the barn smelled sweet and dusty. Shit and mud. Hay and cobwebs. Duane took a deep breath. G. Michael Huxley began to scribble, looking at the cooler that held the bottles of Nuflor and syringes Duane used to doctor the cattle. He examined the piecework on the saddles carefully. He took note of the state of the building. Duane watched the son of a bitch as he looked carefully, and even knocked on the wall in a few places. As if that’s where Duane had stashed the bags of hidden cash he had horded from under-the-table transactions.

Up in the loft sat all the antiques that had belonged to his granddad and great granddad when they had homesteaded this place back in the ’30’s. He rummaged through and put invented price tags on heirlooms. He said things like “Did you record these on your last return, Mr. Langston?” Duane only glared from the barn floor.

The calves were hard to see in the bright lowering sun. When they moved to the back of the barn, the two others calves got up and trotted out the entryway that led to the outside section of the sick pen. One of the calves though, struggled to get up, and fell back down over and over. Duke tormented it, barking and jumping to lick at it, until exhausted it only laid and stared at them with wild eyes. Duane leaned on the pen’s fence and looked at it with furrowed brows.

“What’s wrong with it?” G. Michael Huxley said with genuine concern of someone who doesn’t work with cattle.
“Shit. Everything. Its legs won’t hold it. It won’t eat. Can barely breathe. But mostly it just has I-wanna-die-itis.”

“And you’ve tried doctoring it?”

“You think I wouldn’t have tried everything I have for it?” He looked the Fed-lackey up and down. “I brought her in from the pasture two weeks ago. I’ve brought her water in a bucket twice a day since.”

“What does the vet have to say?”

“What do you think Mr. G. Michael Huxley? Do you think I have money for a vet if you’re out here assessin me?”

Duane Langston met G. Michael Huxley’s eyes. Duane wondered if this man knew how old his coat was. G. Michael Huxley looked away and made a note on his clipboard.

“You can call me Mike.”

Duane looked back to the calf laboring for breath. “No, this one aint getting better. Sometimes they just need a bullet.”

Parole came eighteen months into the sentence. Duane drove for eight hours cross-state. He had a twenty-four pack in the back, and a month’s wages to spend on a good night on the town. They spent it all. Clay drove all the way home, happy to be out and free. They didn’t talk about the ranch much that ride.

Out back, G. Michael Huxley played twenty questions with Duane and his equipment. He asked the make and model of the tractor. Had Duane’s father bought the swather attachment new? He asked how old the bale mover was. Where was the title for the truck? When had he bought the baler? Was there any more equipment? What about in the shop back at the house? Where were the manuals? G. Michael Huxley made little scratching notes next to the list of assets Duane was supposed to have. Duane watched his biggest investments get jotted down as “liquefiable assets” and “action items.”

“Why do you even fucking ask all these questions if it’s all there on your little papers?”

“Because it’s protocol. I have to make sure you’re not lying to us anymore Duane. Can I call you Duane?”

“No.”

When they got back to the truck, Duane realized his jaw muscles ached.

The herd was at the creek, just as Duane knew they would be. The S Lazy J ranch was not big, but it could support the eight hundred head on a good year. The Black Anguses were hard to see in the shadows of the cedars. Only their slow plodding and the twitch of yellow ear tags gave them away.

“You have how many head of cattle here Mr. Langston?”

“Seven hundred sixty eight.” He had sold some to his neighbor the week
before. Cash, in case he needed it.

“I see” he said, making a note.

Duane took another pinch of chew as he looked out at the herd that he and his father and sister and Clay had worked, doctored, and helped calve since the cows were calves themselves.

“Do you have any other live assets besides your cow herd Mr. Langston?”

He wondered if they would count the pack of barn cats as “live assets.” Knowing the feds, they’d sell them off too. “No. Just the cattle.”

“No horses? My records indicate you own five registered quarter horses.” His long fingernails flipped through his clipboard papers that apparently held tabs on all of Duane’s material possessions. He wanted to rip the clipboard out of G. Michael Huxley’s hands.

“Unless you wanna pull them out of the dead pile in the gulch west of the house and sell um as dog food, I suspect they aint worth much.”

“They all died, Mr. Langston?” He said it as if he were back in grade school and being scolded. He was not buying into it.

“West Nile. Is that legal? Can my horses have died from that West Nile Virus or do you want to autopsy them just to see?”

“No” said G. Michael Huxley, and he made a note on his clipboard.

Clay tried ranch hand jobs. He worked for Duane for a while. Then the Marsh’s up the road. He slept on Duane’s couch for a few months before he found a cheap trailer to rent. To proud to be a squatter. He started driving a “PILOT CAR FOLLOW ME” truck during the summer to make a bit more cash for rent. He came out to ride Blackie less one month, then not at all the next. That fall, Clay started a job at the feed store, keeping stock. He wore a uniform that had his name in little gold letters above the pocket.

The sun was just over the West hills when they made the circle back to the house. Duane parked the truck, and waited for the stranger to get the hell out of his truck. G. Michael Huxley paged over his clipboard.

“I’ll have to come back out tomorrow to go over the house and more of the outbuildings.”

Duane imagined doing this all again tomorrow. He thought of all the items in the house. Things that were Mom and Dad’s. Writing off Mom’s coveted crystal china as just an “instantly liquefiable asset.” Sold off just like Aunt Gina’s china. Tossed out just like Clay’s life had been. Auctioned off to pay for some government program for yuppies in California. He tensed when he imagined this stranger going through his bedroom, finding the magazines in his bedside table, peering into the crawl space and going through the freezer. But mostly, he thought of the hollow in Clay as he put on that uniform each morning. He knew it would come to this. He knew he was too far into this to go back on it now. He had known the Feds would come to him before long.
“I have to work tomorrow. I actually have to get things done. I can’t be your guide.”

G. Michael Huxley read the defiance in his voice.

“Mr. Langston, you are under investigation for tax evasion.” He said it with a slow, grating emphasis that Duane tensed at. “I don’t need you to take me out to further property tomorrow. I will take account of your assets with or without you.”

Duane stared out the bug smattered windshield. He clenched his fist.

“But I had hoped you’d be a bit more cooperative than your cousin.”


“I think for record’s sake, I had better go out and verify those horses. Maybe call a vet out to get a blood sample” said G. Michael Huxley.

“The virus won’t be alive in a dead horse, Huxley.” He said through his teeth. He felt the sick in his stomach like he was slipping.

“All the same” he said, “I’d like to be thorough.”

The drive out to the dead pit in the gulch was a silent one. The Chevy bumped along the darkening road. Duane spit out the window every few minutes. G. Michael Huxley stared through the rock chips at the open prairie.

The gulch was a deep wash-out on one branch of the creek. It was indistinct from all the other rills and ravines in the landscape except for one large Russian Olive tree that stood like a living tombstone to the carcasses of the livestock and furniture it overlooked. Duane stopped the truck and shut it off. G. Michael Huxley got out and walked to the gulch. He looked striking and out of place in his slacks against the grass and yucca. He didn’t belong. Langstons belonged here. Duane told Duke to stay in the pickup as he got out.

Duane’s throat was like drying mud. He would not be end up like his cousin. Not like Clay, brains spattered all over the trailer ceiling. A pistol in one hand, a note with FUCK THE FED’S in the other. The horses were dead; it didn’t need to be questioned. His sister needn’t be investigated over five new horses that were getting fat and growing hair over their brands. At least those she should have.

Duane felt for the .223. He grasped it, the cold barrel, he told himself, made him release. But hadn’t he burned those tax forms for a reason? Either way the day ended, it would be in jail time. He couldn’t let G. Michael Huxley ruin another Langston. He pulled out the rifle with two hands. He felt around in the side compartment of the door for a cartridge. His hands shook so bad, he dropped more shells than he put in. Clay, hollow-eyed, stroking Blackie clouded his eyes.

“Mike” he said, with a crack in his voice, “look this way.”
dragged blues and silvers into your hair;  
Pushing along low-hanging clouds.  
Chasing us.  
I dropped indications of childish fears  
Into your palms --  
droplets of golden frost.  

But honestly,  
It was nothing she couldn’t have devoured.  
Nothing she wouldn’t have torn apart.  
She took us by our coats  
And tore at our hearts;  
Pouring us into cold landscapes,  
Seeping into our souls.  

We stood in subtle ecstasy;  
Unable to call these gray mountains  
Home.  
But nonetheless,  
feeling contempt  
with the wind swallowing us whole,  
with our souls being ripped to pieces.  

Today the wind showed no mercy.
The angle of my hip, jutting.
Sharp.
The rolling hills of my tiny rib bones, so tender.
I stare at flesh on bone.
No less, no more than the day before.

The best body in the land, he told me
As he held me up and caressed the skin upon my bones.
The thrill and the pain.
The pain I no longer feel.
Beauty in smallness,
I am loved, desired.
But I am afraid and
Euphoria seems too close to death.

What sickness in this world makes me beautiful?
I live four houses from the Dairy Queen, the luckiest kid on the planet. My friends are jealous. It is my treat, I say, and then ask my mom for money. I know all the best things on the menu. Avoid the Nerds Blizzard but the Peanut Butter M&M is superb. I am the connoisseur of soft serve. The owner knows my dog’s name and the ice cream girls recognize us. I am the kid who knows to ask for “mistakes,” so our second round is on the house.

My room has a Grasshopper Green ceiling, Sky Blue floor, Lilac walls and Bubblegum trim. I chose the paint colors, Crayola brand. I am living in a crayon box. Vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows to spy on Bill, the neighbor with the conspicuously neat lawn and mustache. Barbie world is in the West, Littlest Pet Shops is in the North, and a Good Will collection of dress up clothes is in the closet. Oversized blue crepe prom dress and silver shoes with pink pompoms, graduation gowns.

There is tension in Barbie world. I have only one Ken doll and the sixteen ladies are forever quarrelling. Domestic squabbles so loud there are noise complaints from the other dolls. Ken has only swim trunks and one dress shoe. You can’t take him anywhere decent and the ladies make sure he knows it. My mother said no Barbies. But my grandfather makes sure I have the seventeen. He makes sure Barbie has career options, as mother or hairdresser.

My best friend Andrea and I spend our time dissecting garlic cloves. We eat zucchini straight from the garden, the dirt crunching between our teeth. We invent a way to make perfume. Squish flowers in water, put in mason jars and shake. Add whole petals for aesthetic appeal. Dean is remodeling our basement, we give him daisy perfume. To us he looks like a cross between Hulk Hogan and our gym teacher. Daisies are a more masculine flower. He keeps the jar on his truck dash; we are so proud. We play “Midgets on Crutches,” hobbling around the yard with croquet mallets under our armpits, screaming.

Our club house sits on stilts and has a porch. We hole up in the stifling, eight square feet and scribble graffiti on a Titanic poster, give Leo a mustache. We write news stories about how my mom’s boyfriend Rob violates his goldfish. We spend more time outside when Rob is over. We show off on the swing set while the neighbor boy Frank glowers from across the alley. I have a golden retriever and he threatens to blow her up.

It is the last summer before school becomes a bad word. The one before I learn I should be shaving my legs. The one before I find out only losers play with toys. The last summer before I stop playing with makeup and start having to wear it. The one before Andrea moves away.
Wreckage,
Rock Springs, Wyoming
Once, climbing
an old gray mountain, you far distant
a whiff of fear mingled with the laurel of
the promise of my love to you
me born of man sun still low in the morning
sky feeling not the trail before
me, but around the bend

and I came to the cliffs
beyond the trees in warm light
looked down there oaks sycamores
lined the hollow
still my mind on you I closed my eyes

I awoke the sun lower air cooler
night closer
coming down the old granite
with deer bear finch pine
stream
all love

And I longed for your arms.
Speaking of

i.

owl and wolf sat by a lake
in the clear dark
didn't even try to count the stars

ii.

"I wonder," said owl
wolf grinned toothily
she howled loud

iii.

as it got toward morning
stars faded singly pink
tinged an edge of the sky rising
tROUT dimpled the lake

iv.

I once sat near a lake
with my love
and until the sun rose
our stories were hardly more fantastic
Visiting Grandparents

Farmland cleared for development, a dogwood stripped clean of its autumn fruit by squawking.

ravenous Grackles—Desolation—Disillusionment: the state of my heart as I enter the door.

Greeted by familiar smells, a handshake and a kiss as always. I reciprocate and smile, stomaching the sting of falsehood. His gaze lingers long like snowdrifts do in springtime, wisdom perceiving discrepancies between eyes and lips; thought and speech. We sit and chat;

my daughter dances. Countless porcelain knick-knacks tremble in fear. I flinch, though nothing is broken.

He straightens in his seat, “I’d like to show you my mushrooms—never seen anything like them.”

The backyard freshly mown, save for a swath beneath the Poplar where mushrooms gather,

spared the sun by the shade of the tree, and the blade by the impulse and wonder of an aged man.

Viewed from above, a heaping platter of pancakes; from below, a miniature ivory forest. He grins then turns and walks to the Persimmon, picks one and places it in my hand, “You’ll like it—it’s sweet.”

I sink my teeth in and wince, discovering there the butt of his joke. Moisture is sucked
from my mouth, lips pucker like prunes. He laughs and squeezes my shoulder.

“They’re no good ’till after a frost, come back and try one then!” I spit

and despite the foul taste and contortions, a light returns... a blade of grass... a smile.
have you ever slept in the badlands
where hearts are pigeonholes
eyes are plucked
by clucking hens
trees whimper to little ones
old grandfather trees
notches, hearts carved
rusted shaver blades
buried treasures
letters and bottle caps
buried, a day behind
cigarette butts burn wristwatches
flames lick boiling fat
old men try to make it
with young girls

in the badlands
sleep never comes easy
ashes cover clouds
blues submit to smoking guns

orange trees once grew,
days hung low hung heavy
ripe days,
as if sunrise
was a berry

they tell stories
in the badlands
how waters use to flow
‘bout gentlemen and ladies
silver lining and prostitutes
‘t was a mans world’
an author exclaims, laughing
‘Gave up the one I love
wrote a poem ‘bout it:’
forgot
her
name
she
left
me
moonlight
forgot
to
wave
(goodbye)'

beautiful, were the badlands
generals made dolls
from Indian eyelids
and toothpick trees,
it all happened.
god laughs,
stands to their side
go to sleep god whispers
pats his new dollies head
brushes their hair
go to sleep
in the badlands.
In shallow nights made for thy lovers muse
Our shifting beings find their way to
Each others arms and lie in deafening
Solitude. Transcribing scriptures of pale
Stars, undressing pentimentos; fleeing
Thoughts, caught by sky born branches, tickle goose
Pimpled forearms. Forlorn desolation
Seeps within our starry eyes, seeing ease
In a too huge moon, a too simple moon.
Great one eye peering down at dewy leaves
Gleaming sands, souls and two careless murmurs

Still we trace tomorrow ’round our palms, sub
Vast vaulting ceilings of the cosmic sky
Hanging low. The sacred fruit of the trees
Of Eden, sinking down to smother our
Ecstasy. I smell thee, my perfumed love,
And I lay my head on your breasts, drawn near
By fleeting notes of your bodily harp
I join you and pluck your tender strings, and
Our melody is heard across windless
Countryside.

From heaven bound steeples, priests
Listen to sins ageless concerto, while
Poets compose songs of hate and love, and
Toss them to embers, where their essence is
Carried to a humluous God’s stoop.
And dogs howl at shipless sailors, heaving
Signs of grief at our masterpiece, shouting:
‘Every goddamn song of man will be played
On such a harp come Judgment day.’
We look
To violet ribbons waltzing 'round smoky
Ballads, as mornings petals begin to
Fall upon the whimpers of every heart.
And in the field where dawn was born we lay
As one, (I swear I heard you wish for me)

So I look to you
And you look to me

And we care not to speak a worldly sound.
Ockham half convenes
Atop a hill of slack
He will gladly cut you some
For the monkeys on your back
Grinning and Thinking and Sharpening
And Sharpening and Grinning and Thinking
Spit and grit whirl assumptions
A stew of fat and costs and shit
Red flags flying everywhere and always
The rule of thumb goes thumbs down
And you’re left with five stars in your cereal
And all over your long sleeved shirts
Keep it simple. Keep it serious.
Science never boasts a sense of humor
Science gives monkeys serious haircuts
And shoots them into space
ASHLEY LOYNING // is a freshman at The University of Montana studying Art Education. She was born on a Leo/Virgo cusp and loves coffee, sushi, cats, and windmills. Her dislikes include the sound of keys jingling or bike bells, spicy foods, and mustaches.

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LENA VIAL // is a junior at The University of Montana studying English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. Experiences growing up on a farm in Eastern Montana around a close-knit family and a few dozen cats serve her as an endless source of inspiration to write about the sorts of topics and types of people and emotions she grew up around. When she is not reading or writing for class or pleasure, she can be found wandering the back alleys and trails of Missoula, Montana, going for long drives, or at home cooking with friends.

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