



CHEAT
RIVER
REVIEW

Fall 2015 | Issue 5

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David Kozinski

Chateau Country

It is one of those moments that tugs
incorporeally at the innards
like late afternoon
the back yard at Kentuck Knob in October

or dinner after a long day
at Cape Henlopen; sex barely wiped
from fingers breaking
crab shells, extracting the meat
with what looks like a dentist's hook.

Because they are stood in or walked through
they can't be held on a screen
or printed on paper
let alone relived
even dreaming. The gravity of softest light

redefines the hues of leaves, borrows
ten minutes and shortens each time
it is remembered.

A hired hand sweeps up the shells,
collects empty cans and glasses.

The drive is quiet
on deer-crossed roads
winding up, falling back.

The tune of the radio—violin and vibraphone—
is all you take home.

David Kozinski won the Delaware Literary Connection's 2015 spring poetry contest, judged by B.J. Ward. He received the Dogfish Head Poetry Prize, which included publication of his chapbook, *Loopholes*. He has been the featured poet in *Schuylkill Valley Journal*. Publications include *Apiary*, *The Broadkill Review*, *Confrontation*, *Fox Chase Review*, glimmertrain.com, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Poetry Repairs*, *Margie*, and *The Rathalla Review*. Kozinski has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize twice. He will conduct a poetry workshop for teens at the Montgomery County (PA) Youth Center this autumn. He has been a featured poet at numerous venues in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. He lives in Wilmington, Delaware, with his wife, actress and journalist Patti Allis Mengers, and Maya— a saucy, 5year-old feline.

Sean Webb

Sinkhole

Rewards of living well: a house, a yard, presorted standard US postage paid mail. Then come the voles, and follows, the vole holes. Then fall, then winter, then the rains of April.

And then one night, a giant sinkhole opens in your driveway. Big enough to fall into on your bicycle while you are waving at your elderly neighbor who is out edging his sidewalk.

But before that can happen, you stretch yellow caution tape around 4 pine stakes, and while so doing, suddenly think of a friend across town who loves the Allman Brothers

and Blue Oyster Cult, even though she's a generation removed. You remember then how sometimes her heart closes up and she lives in darkness, like a vole, but sadly—she knows better.

Sean Webb received an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop and has been the recipient of numerous honors and awards for his work including fellowships from The Arizona Commission on the Arts and the Utah Arts Council, and a nomination for a Pushcart Prize. In 2005, he was selected by Grace Paley to serve as Poet Laureate of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. and in 2014, he won the *Passages North* Neutrino Prize. His work has appeared in many publications including *the North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Quarterly*, *The Greensboro Review*, and *The Seattle Review*.

Kathryn Merwin

The Hanged Man (A Reading from the Pictogram)

Dear swallow, dear street-lamp, dear
child eyes, open: the wildfire,

curling around a stone slab,
a tree trunk, a branch crashing

into dirt: I've been trying to write
it all down, but words fail, so I puncture

holes in the setting, the story, the snow
last Tuesday night, the way

it swirled as if to pull us
inward, as if to keep the night

away. Dear breathless boy, dear
frequency, dear Redhawk revolver: I imagine

you in shades of blue,
rippling and translucent,

taking skies aboard a ship of rain,
thunder dripping through your lips,

but only static comes, dips in waves,
only my voice in the dark, and you,

silent in shadow, watching.

The Native Vein

The history books, emptied
into the waves, leak now into someone

else's home. Remember when we carved
arrows from rock, when the boat split apart,

still cradled by the waves: we
could be still. They wrote

about the day we broke soles.
The way it settled on their shoulders

like a debt. They wrote in the color
of your hair. They wrote with the hand

of time, labels upon a stack
of sound-blurred negatives. Your mother

and father still live together
in your face. You woke

in the rush of their sweltering
letters, thorns in your palms

like an elegant messiah. You,
bathed in a blood so blue, I drew up an atlas

on the thinnest of my skin, and left fingerprints
to mark the places you'd breathed. We went

with the drum of salvation in our ears,
water-logged skulls full

with what might have been. You spill out
like bronze before it turns cold. Bubbling

& burning
& spreading

like water: bathing the world
in the color of water. We will never

let this language
run clear.

Kathryn Merwin is a native of Washington, D.C. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Barely South Review*, *burntdistrict*, *Slipstream*, *The Sandy River Review*, *The Blueshift Journal*, and *Jabberwock Review*, among others. In 2015, she was awarded *Jabberwock Review*'s Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize for Poetry and attended the *Virginia Quarterly Review* Writers' Conference. She serves as co-editor of *Milk Journal*.

Shivani Mehta

Requiem

The ghost children are asleep on the landing again, the outlines of their overlapped bodies as blurry as watercolors. They come and go as they please. I always know they are back when the lights flicker once, twice, during dinner. We stop eating, forks suspended halfway to our mouths. Silence is a room in our house. More than anything, the ghost children want to be real. They play hide and seek like living children. Sometimes in the evenings, they rest their heads on my shoulder, deflating balloons coming back to earth. At night lying in bed, we hear words like canticle, saints, resurrection spoken in childish murmurs. The ghost children know they don't belong here, they are the children we didn't have. Forgive our trespass they whisper and are gone.

Shivani Mehta was born in Mumbai and raised in Singapore. Her first book of poetry, a collection of prose poems, is out from Press 53. Her work has appeared in numerous journals including the *North American Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Midwest Quarterly Review*, among others. Mehta is a (recovering) attorney, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband and 4-year-old twins.

Valerie Fox

Her dress shows she has abstained

Her dress shows she has abstained
from productive employment.
For a pretense she has pockets.
She has ideas.
She won't throw them out.
They exist and not just in her thoughts.
In her house her closet her box, drawer or chest, maybe in there.

It takes her more or less time each season to develop aesthetic nausea.
She reserves days, lines them up, like people she hates.
She has this saxophone idea playing and plying
near the end of her song-life.

She can carry water with bare hands.

Valerie Fox's work has appeared in numerous journals including *Juked*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Sentence*, *West Branch*, *Apiary*, and *Ping Pong*. Her books include *The Glass Book* (Texture Press) and *The Rorschach Factory* (Straw Gate Books). She also published the book of poems, *Bundles of Letters Including A, V and Epsilon*, which is a compilation written with Arlene Ang (Texture Press). Much interested in collaboration, she is recently part of a group of Philadelphia artists combining dance, word, and visual arts in projects known as "Variable Space."

Darren Demaree

Nude Male with Echo #109

Frenzy the pasture.
If I'm there,

what happens next
should be hysterical.

I've been that lost
before. I've counted

the grass that cannot
grow past my mouth.

Darren Demaree is the author of *As We Refer To Our Bodies* (2013, 8th House), *Temporary Champions* (2014, Main Street Rag), *The Pony Governor* (2015, After the Pause Press), and *Not For Art Nor Prayer* (2015, 8th House). He is the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology. Darren currently lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and children.

Erin Traylor

To You, Holy Mess

Little home on a hill, on sand.

Walls always coming down.

One day, your front door

became the side.

Erin Traylor recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from Salisbury University in Maryland. Her work has appeared in *Red Earth Review*, *Permafrost Magazine*, and *Germ Magazine*. She serves as coeditor of *Milk Journal*.

Tom Montag

These Hills

These hills,
the trees like fire.

We wish
for glory and this

is what we get.

Tom Montag lives with his wife, Mary, and four cats in the biggest red house in Fairwater, Wisconsin. He is most recently the author of *In This Place: Selected Poems 1982-2013* (a finalist for the Midwest Independent Publishers Association's award for books of poetry published in 2014). In 2015, he was the featured poet at *Atticus Review* (April) and *Contemporary American Voices* (August). Other recent poems will be found at *Hamilton Stone Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Mud Season Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Third Wednesday*, *Town Creek Poetry*, and many other journals.

Alexandra Hunter

Night Farmer

Robert Milling poured himself another capful of Canadian Hunter whiskey and carefully navigated the combine through his fifth cornfield of the night. He loved farming at night, and, since he was albino, had to, to protect his sensitive skin from the sun. He felt comfortable at night, slightly buzzed from healthy gulps of his sinner's juice. Sometimes he didn't even perform the reaping, threshing, or winnowing that the combine was capable of, just drove slowly through the growing corn, wheat, oats, rye, or barley and admired the empire he had built, in a way similar to what Caesar must have done, while looking on his faithful Romans, but in this case, it was corn.

It had been his father, Gordon's farm, and his grandfather Herbert's before that, but Bob (as his friends and compatriots called him) knew it was he who expanded the farm into what it was today—an empire. The farm and everything else he had built: the biggest John Deere Tractor in the world, entire neighborhoods of houses for non-farmers and several other lucrative business ventures. This would be his legacy.

If only my boys wanted it.

Startled, the thud of corn stalks being run over brought him out of his reverie.

Damn it. Must have had a little too much tonight.

As he overcorrected the wheel, he ran over even more stalks of corn. Sweating now, and in a panic that he was ruining hundreds of dollars' worth of profit, he shut off the engine and called his wife.

"Barb. Yep, it's me. I'm in field five, and I need a rescue," he said into his walkie-talkie on the dashboard. "No, not that kind of accident," he said, referencing the time he tried to drive his motorcycle over a well, misjudged and ended up landing inside the well, still upright on his motorcycle. Thankfully, workmen had been around to lift him out, but it was a dangerous stunt neither of them could forget.

"Jeez, Bob, this really has to stop, eh? Hang tight, I'll be there soon," Barb said.

"10-4," Bob said.

"10-4," she responded.

<p

Bob felt a tiny twinge of guilt. His wife of forty years really was a saint to put up with him. Unfortunately, he only had these loving and insightful thoughts when he was three sheets to the wind, and at that point, Barb, could hardly stand the sight of him.

When Barb pulled up to the John Deere Combine, she found her husband hanging drunkenly around the pole that held up their sign “Warning: KEEP OUT CANADIAN GOVERNMENT, PRIVATE PROPERTY.” He seemed like an aging, ghostly, male-stripper as he twirled the pole, concentration evident on his face.

The next morning, Bob woke with a pounding headache and a strong desire to wear the sunglasses his doctor had prescribed after his eye operation to block out any possible sunlight.. Reaching for the sunglasses and a cigarette, he covered his sweaty white body with the comforter. He loved smoking in bed. Especially hungover. Plus, he felt like smoking in his bed was against some sort of rule, and he cherished the feeling of slightly, but not really, breaking the rules.

Bob looked at himself in the mirror.

Man, I'm sweating like a drag-queen in the lingerie section.

His aquamarine eyes were rimmed red. The bags that were now a constant fixture on his face seemed deeper, more carved in. His graying, curly afro a constant reminder that he used to look better, in the seventies, when he was just like one of those Beegees. Getting old was for the birds.

Bob heard footsteps on the stairs near his room.

“Wakey, wakey,” Barb said, carrying in a tray with bacon, eggs, sausage and applesauce. I bet someone is hungover!” She smoothed back his hair affectionately. Barb had spiky black hair and purple horn-rimmed glasses that gave her the essence of a feminine Buddy Holly. To save herself from this distasteful comparison, she wore several different shades of purple and lavender. Today, she had on a royal purple corduroy coat and lavender trousers.

Bob smiled at her and went for the applesauce first. He ate applesauce with every meal as he felt it aided his digestion in his advanced years. At his age, he couldn't afford to play around. He also drank two liters of Pepsi every day, but justified this with the belief that carbonated drinks were also good for the workings of the stomach (and if anyone suggested this might be a contributing factor to his type two diabetes, he would stubbornly and swiftly ignore them).

“You know,” Barb said, “You could really just call Jeffrey and talk to him. You don't need to continue this ‘night farming’ or whatever it is that you like to call getting smashed out in the field. The amount of corn you have ruined in the last week—” she shook her head. “The farmhands will only believe it is meddling boys and crows for so much longer. Crows certainly don't come out at night.” Her fingers fidgeted nervously with the frills on the side of her apron. Her tongue darted out of her mouth and across her thin, painted lips.

“Jeffrey loves you, Bob,” she said. “He just craves your approval so much that sometimes he wants to keep things from you until he can get them sorted out first.”

Jeffrey was the baby of her three sons, and the one she loved most. He was the nicest and the most charming, the one who still sent her flowers on Mother’s Day. Barb knew Bob saw himself most in Jeffrey, too, even though he had chosen to move to Florida, while her other two boys, David and Herbie, stayed with them in Ontario and farmed. Jeffrey had multiple clearing and hay-delivering businesses in New Smyrna Beach, and had built a life for himself in Florida, while the other boys mooched off their father’s success.

Bob had to find out from his brother, Hugh, a week ago that Jeffrey had brokered a deal to sell his land in Canada to the Turkish government so they could build a wind farm on it.

Hugh had called Bob and rightly said, “You know, brother, I just thought W.W.B.M.D. (What Would Bob Milling do) you know? And I just knew I had to call you about it, see what you thought.”

“I don’t know, Barb,” Bob said, “It just cuts me deep that none of my boys seem to have any time for me anymore. What is it with kids these days?”

“I’m sorry, Bobby,” Barb said. “Jeffrey will come around.” She grabbed one of Bob’s very pale, calloused hands and held it in hers, her painted purple nails a sharp contrast to her husband’s translucently white ones. “But for now, you need to get your bum out of bed and get to work.”

They had built the office as an extension to the house thirty years ago. The beginning with him had not been easy—Hell, her whole life with him had not been easy. First, living in New Zealand to conceal her growing belly when she was just twenty, then trying to convince everyone that her big, bouncing baby boy of nine pounds was premature, lest any of the neighbors figure out she was pregnant before the wedding. On top of all of that, there was trying to be sheep farmers in a foreign land with no friends for miles and never enough to eat. Never mind having to come back to Canada with their tails between their legs and live with Bob’s scary mother for all those years. God rest her soul. During all of his hair-brained ideas, she tried to tell him he was just a simple farmer and should try to stick to what he knew. But simple was never good enough for a man like Bob. He was always looking for the next big thing. The next thrill. The next damn well to drop down into.

“Barb, can you come in here?” he yelled, covering the telephone mouthpiece with his hand and waving his other arm wildly like he was drowning and flagging down a lifeguard in the ocean. Turning the stove to simmer, she started in his direction. When she got close enough to his desk, he handed her the phone without preamble.

“You gotta deal with this one babe. I can’t,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi, this is Jordan with Windfarming Global, to whom am I speaking, please?”

“I’m Bob’s wife, Barb.”

“Great. Well, I suppose we should inform you that your husband has been very cooperative with us up until this point. We are prepared to transfer another million dollars to the Canadian government, which would, in turn, be doled out to your husband in his plans to make a wind farm, in Picton, but now he is saying he doesn’t have the money to pay us this month on the loan. I just want to verify with you that this is correct?”

“I will have to get back to you,” Barb said and hung up the phone.

“All my life Bob. All my damn life I have stood by you. Through your disgusting affairs with those imported Danish women working on our farm. Through all of your hairbrained schemes: raising sheep in New Zealand, raising damn emus in Canada, wind farming for God’s sake! And through all of it, I have been the whipping boy. I’m always the one cooking the dinner and delegating your business deals that almost break us every time. There was the John Deere people when you just had to build the biggest tractor in the world—”

“But I built it, didn’t I?” he asked.

“What about in China when you wouldn’t stop teasing them about eating dogs. In their own damn country. We almost lost the emus and ostriches that were already on the boat over. And almost got deported. You know how they get with their pride!”

“But it all worked out, didn’t it?” he asked.

“I don’t want to deal with it anymore. I want to retire.”

Bob watched his furious wife simmer and felt like a cad. Barb was right. In every assertion, she had been correct.

“Come on, Barb,” he said, “We’re a team. Everyone calls us B&B. Bob and Barb. I chose you, all those years ago, back in ‘68 instead of that silly, busty Peggy-Sue, because I knew you had what it takes to be my general. My right-hand man, Barb. Plus, you loved my albino ass when no one else would, when they called me Casper the Farmer.”

“You chose me because I was pregnant with David,” she said, running her hand through her short spikes of hair. Her big green eyes filled with tears bigger than the amethyst teardrop earrings he had gotten her for her birthday, which she wore as a testament to his fleeting, powerful generosity.

“Look at us now, Barb. Look how much we’ve both grown.”

Believe me, Barb, he willed silently in his mind.

As he gazed at his wife, he pulled on his giant belt buckle and rubbed his belly. This was their mating signal for each other: his intoxicating pull on the belt buckle. Barbara’s eyes softened. He grabbed her in a bear hug and pulled her close for some sweet, sweet loving.

A few weeks later Bob sat in the giant John Deere, with a bottle near his slack lips. He thought about how he hadn’t heard from his boys lately, how he seemed to disappoint his wife, how Jeffrey had been keeping the secret about selling off his Goddamn inheritance land to a bunch of Turkeys.

As the engine hummed, he heard a loud THUMP! THUMP!

He came to in front of his own farmhouse, a passenger in the back of a cop car.

“Okay, sir, time to get out and go to bed,” said a young man in uniform. Bob felt strong, smooth hands pull his drunken, pale body from its slump and felt the motions of walking to the door.

“Oh, dear God! What happened to him?” Barb shrieked.

“Your husband crossed over several fields and roads, too, and into Farmer John Osborn’s land. He ran over two cows with the tractor and killed ‘em. I’m real sorry. I—ah, I think he just needs to go to sober up, eh.”

“Jesus Christ,” Barb said.

“I think I’m a cow murderer,” Bob said to no one in particular. He felt himself stagger inside and the blessed release of sleep.

Late, the next morning, hung-over and ashamed, Bob sat in his office, pretending to work on important business deals. He heard a knock on his office door, and his seven-year-old granddaughter, Shelby, ran into the room.

“Grandpa, Grandpa,” she shouted, with all the enthusiasm of the young and vibrant, her blonde pig-tails trailing behind her as she ran towards him. As the little girl tumbled into him at top speed, she giggled uncontrollably and pulled on his thinning hair as she climbed on his lap.

“Hi, pumpkin,” he said to her.

Just then, he saw his daughter-in-law, Julie, a woman he despised more than heartburn. David's wife left much to be desired. He knew for sure that his wussy son let this woman make all the decisions.

"Hey," Bob grunted.

"Look, I'm here to ask you if maybe we could have a family get-together, or something. Jeffrey called from Florida and is coming up." Julie played with the ends of her dark, curly hair.

"Why do you guys all care now, all of a sudden?"

Julie looked young and thin and still fresh from the years of physical labor. "Bob—"

"All right, fine," he said, not wanting a lecture from anyone, let alone Julie. His head had been hurting all day.

"All right," she said, turning to go. She looked at him, possibly in the first time in the ten years they had known each other, with something more than a little concern in her eyes. "Heard you killed two of farmer John's cows. Calm it down on the drinking on the tractor, ok?"

Later that night, Bob glided the combine through his shiny cornfields, and felt, for the first time in a long time, a feeling better than pain. He was hopeful, optimistic that his sons might still love him. As he navigated the clean rows of perfect, gleaming corn, he knocked back some capfuls of Canadian Hunter. Feeling slightly woozy, he laid his head back on the headrest, setting the combine to auto-pilot.

The pain in his head, masked by months of excessive hangovers, thrummed to life. A clot in his brain exploded. His final thoughts as he drifted down the rows and rows of gold and green, into the deep sleep that eventually claims every human being, were of his ashes being poured into the seed of the combine, so that he may live forever, peacefully, among his corn.

Alexandra Hunter received her MA in Writing from Coastal Carolina University. She is from Orlando, Florida, and does NOT spend all her free time at Disney—though there is nothing wrong with that. Currently, she works as one of those annoying perfume girls who tries to harass any innocent Macy's shopper in her wake into buying an outrageously expensive glass bottle of stinky water.

Diane Payne

Spirit In The Sky

1.

It's late. After eight hours of stocking shelves, she's physically exhausted, but not tired enough to sleep. She likes it when the neighborhood is quiet, wishes it'd stay quiet in the morning so she could sleep in longer. The night air feels crisp. No humidity. She lights her pipe. "Light my pipe," she laughs, imagining herself to be Sherlock Holmes. "Wouldn't be stocking shelves. I'd be solving mysteries." She likes talking to herself at night, but doesn't realize she talks to herself while stocking the shelves, pumping gas, walking to her car.

She hears the loud wails from some cats a few yards away, then sees a large owl fly off with a kitten.

"Damn, that ain't right."

2.

Unable to sleep, he gets out of bed and turns on the music. He starts singing along, feeling energized. "*Goin' up to the spirit in the sky.*"

He cranks the stereo, then hits replay. "*He's gonna set me up with The spirit in the sky*"

Hits replay again. Stops singing and tries to hear the lyrics so he gets them right: *Never been a sinner I never sinned...*

He steps outside, baffled. He's always liked this song, but now he's not so sure. Now the song sounds like it may be religious.

He hears a loud cry and sees a kitten being carried off in the sky by a large owl.

"Damn, that ain't right."

Diane Payne is the MFA Director at University of Arkansas-Monticello. She is the author of *Burning Tulips*, *Freedom's Just Another Word*, and *A New Kind of Music*. She has been published in hundreds of literary journals.

Joe Halstead

Masks

It's the Fourth of July. I still have my Wayfarer sunglasses on even though I just woke up. Shanti Ghaleb (fellow Dramatic Writing student) is in bed next to me, naked, her nostrils stained blue from the Adderall we snorted last night, and I'm living in New York, but it isn't like I'd imagined it'd be because I hate my fucking face, because my friends and family are back home forgetting me, and because I'm doing everything I can to kill myself except actually killing myself since I'm too much of a chickenshit.

I get out of bed, pull on my boxers and walk into the kitchen looking for an Advil or an Ibuprofen. I take a shower and then stare at myself in the mirror. I keep thinking my nose is too big and my skin is too bad and my teeth are too crooked for New York, and that I might drop out of NYU in the fall, not because I can't find the right financial aid but because I'm too ugly. I walk back into the bedroom. Shanti is awake now, just sitting there on a pile of pillows watching some music video on her MacBook and I don't know what to say. I'm just happy she's still here, that she hasn't left.

She mentions something about a fireworks party at an apartment in Chelsea, way up Chelsea, and so, tonight, we walk up to Chelsea, and Shanti knows the girl who lives in the apartment, so we get in, no problem. Jay Z is blasting, polyethnic twentysomethings are dancing, a video of an off-balance washing machine is playing nonstop on a projector screen and I'm standing in the corner, drinking an expired Four Loko, wishing desperately for a Xanax, because I think everyone's looking at me with disgusted expressions and it touches something in me, defines in some way who I am and what I need to become.

I find Shanti sitting on the couch between a girl named Ajdani and a pet piglet I've never seen before wearing a small diamond tiara and I ask if I can borrow her makeup.

"Yeah, sure," Shanti says. "I understand. It's whatever you want."

I take the makeup and walk to the bathroom and then open the YouTube app on my iPhone and search for “how to make a mask out of makeup.” I apply Shanti’s darker shade of foundation to the sides of my nose and then contour it with her bronzer. I use her tweezers to pluck my eyebrows, making them slimmer and sharper. After another forty-five minutes, I watch how-to videos on how to mimic and assume the form of pack animals.

I look in the mirror. I don’t recognize myself. And I know that masks aren’t reality. I know they’re a stand-in for something else, something deeper. But still, I, I feel new.

I wipe my lips with a napkin and then open the door of the bathroom and walk out to the patio. Shanti’s not there. The fireworks explode in the sky. One girl, maybe, says, “ohhhhh.” A tan guy, shirtless, takes out a baggie of prescription pills, offers me one.

“What do you do?” he asks.

The sky gets dark again. “Go to school.”

“Yeah? Where do you go to school?”

“I go to school at—” I pause. “Um, actually, now, I’m nothing.”

The guy thinks about this for a minute. “I’m gonna take a shower, then get ready, OK?” he finally says. “Ajdani’s ‘supposedly’ having an orgy tonight.”

“Yeah? Cool.”

He walks away into the apartment. I take the pill and then I’m lying on someone’s bed, confused, because it’s real fucking dream stuff, and I see Shanti and the guy standing at the end of the bed, and he has his dick out, full-erect, purple helmet and all. And, beneath them, a dark clump of people, everyone naked, and it’s hot and I’m concentrating on staring at faces in the clump, squinting to make their faces come into focus, but it’s too dark. And then I’m naked and thrusting in slow motion to Jay Z, all those faces begging me to fuck them, to just fuck them, but I can’t hear them even though there’s no music now, or maybe just the hum of traffic in the distance, and then all those faces are suddenly wearing my old face.

And then I can't remember my own name.

Joe Halstead is a writer living and working in West Virginia. His work has appeared in *Five Quarterly*, *Sundog Lit*, *The Stockholm Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, and others. He just finished a novel. Find him @joehalstead.

Russell Richardson

Bird in the Works

A small sparrow, ruffled and skittish, had entered the office overnight. I came into work and found this quivering featherball on the floor below my open window with the torn screen. After someone saw me squatting and whispering, the whole staff gathered to see.

The secretary wanted maintenance to remove the bird. We ignored her. She paced a circle, fretting about the boss's imminent arrival.

The skinny programmer said it might be hurt, or diseased.

The sales guy said, "Let's grill it." He preened for approval from the normally cute, now grimace-faced woman beside him. She went to her desk and fluidly sat, legs-crossed, and shook her hair, parting it without using her white-boned hands.

Our network administrator swept at the bird with a broom and wastebasket, but more rattled noise than gained on quarry. The bird scampered under my desk, vibrating in shadow, safe from its attacker's swinging silhouette.

I, too, contemplated this before.

The graphic designer proposed that we leave the door open, wait for the bird to fly away. He wore giant-ringed plugs in his earlobes. Without the plugs, he looked like a disappointed elephant.

Skinny, now crowding me, chewed a fingernail. Pointing his frames northward of his nose, he asked if birds carried rabies.

“Sure,” I said. “Like bats.”

What do I know? It chirped like a cricket to me.

He mumbled around his finger something like, “. . . and fleas on the carpet,” which cracked me up.

He suggested that we lure it out with birdseed, did anyone have any.

We stood and drank coffee, thinking about the bird but doing nothing.

The front door opened. My co-workers slyly withdrew from me.

Upon his arrival, the boss received full appraisal from the secretary. He winced at her, then cast around, asking, “Where did a bird come from?”

All present stayed silent but looked sideways to me. Skinny finally said, “There’s a hole in Russell’s screen,” and everyone feigned alarm.

The boss approached me at a leaning angle and asked, “Did you leave your window open last night?”

I said, “Yes,” and this commenced a tirade on the prevalence of neighborhood crime and the office equipment’s value—dear reader, be spared.

Done with me, the boss summoned sales guy to his elbow for instruction. The latter took his jacket from the closet and stood by the desk. Opposite him, the boss gripped the desktop with both hands. They nodded to their count: One, two.

Heaved up went my computer monitor, telephone, planner, files, pens, and desk itself, and out rocketed the bird, around the diving sales guy, bolting across the room and into the far-wall window. There sounded a thud, gasps, and the creature dropped to the carpet.

The staff, like an amoeba, moved to that side of the room.

When sales guy lifted it by a wing, its head swung from its body. He released it into a wastebasket, knotted the plastic bag insert, and carried it out to the dumpster. He came back, dusting his hands.

The boss, satisfied, gave me another lecture for the group's benefit. Then everyone returned to their normal routines.

I retreated to my area and closed the window. I righted all the things that were disturbed, and then sat with knitted fingers, imagining the bird's journey to a nest in the sky. I wished for more sky and more birds, a bevy of birds in the heavens forever. An irrational thing in me had been unsettled. After a week of being unable to shake the idea of the office as creeping death, I called in and quit.

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Sam Slaughter

Slugs

My mother locked the door on us at eight-thirty. We weren't allowed in until noon—for forty minutes for lunch—and then we were back out until five-thirty when my father got home. If we had to pee, we went in the bushes behind the shed.

Mostly, my brother and I swam and played around in the pool. We'd see who could drink more chlorinated pool water before throwing up. We'd beat each other with noodles until there were so many welts that it seemed we'd run through a cloud of angry hornets. We'd read from the pile of books my mother had left on the picnic table for us. Sometimes we threw the books at each other. Once, Dale, who was a year younger than me, got hit in the eye and it forced my mother to emerge from her crypt-like bedroom—the only place we had air conditioning—and take him to the doctor. He got to stay inside for a week.

It was August and we'd spent the entire morning in the pool. Our fingertips were pruned, but we began to sweat the moment we got out. I was standing by the side of the pool waiting for Dale to finish peeing—I could hear him spelling out his name and imagined that he was spelling it out on the plants, as well—when I saw a pair of slugs on the pool's wall. I watched them slide along, bit by bit, leaving little milky trails behind that quickly dried in the sun. I'd never seen one before, though I had watched my father eat escargot once on a cruise ship and I knew they were vaguely related.

Dale finished up and came to stand next to me. I pointed.

“Look,” I said, “Slugs.”

“Let's kill them,” he said.

Dale walked over to the shed, punched in the lock combination, and pulled the two barn-style doors open. He came out a moment later with a canister of Morton salt.

“Dad uses this whenever he sees slugs.”

I was older, but my father never taught me these things. He told me instead that I was soft. When he went to Home Depot, he took Dale. When he needed help raking, he asked Dale.

“Why?” I asked.

“It dries them up,” Dale said. “And makes them bubble.”

I’d learn words like desiccate and osmosis later on.

Dale opened the spout and shook the can at the slug. The salt hit like hail on the side of the pool. Most dropped to the ground, but some landed on the slugs. We waited. After a moment, Dale poured more salt in his hand, took a step closer, and threw the salt Spider-Man web-style at the lead slug, coating it. It began to bubble almost immediately, curling in on itself before extending and curling back again.

Dale let out a yip of delight. He threw salt on the other slug. Soon, the first had fallen to the ground. It continued to writhe in the grass. I hadn’t been around death before—I wouldn’t find out that our pet rabbit, Sasha, hadn’t actually been taken to a farm for another two years—and this was all new to me.

I wondered if the slugs were married. I wondered where they came from, where they were going. I couldn’t see their eyes and they didn’t make any sounds, but I wondered what they were thinking.

The other slug fell. Dale clapped, watching with wide eyes.

“Isn’t this great?” he asked.

I felt ill. They told us in school killing was wrong, and that’s exactly what this was. Killing wasn’t discussed with yard pests in mind, and at our age they didn’t talk about torture. They did talk about mercy, though.

I looked around and picked up a rock. They would still die, I thought, but they wouldn’t have to feel more pain. I brought the rock down on one slug, then the other. Over and over I pounded them into the dirt. They wouldn’t hurt anymore, I

was saying to them in my head. Slug snot coated the edge of the rock. After a minute, I heard Dale yelling at me.

He'd backed up, like he did after I hit him with the book. I stood, rock in hand. He put his hands up. I looked from him to the rock, dropped it, and began to cry.

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Troy Copeland

Myself That I Portray—Look Away

“Look Away, Look Away”
A Reflection in Three Acts

I

The stars streaked past the cockpit. The cargo we carried could turn the tide of the war. But the reptiles were on us. Damn those starships and their swarms of mecha! There was nowhere to hide. Not for long, anyway. As we snapped out of hyperspace, I hoped that the deflector shields would hold. They had to hold. I gripped the throttle and pulled hard. The engines roared. We were evasively looping and corkscrewing into the orbits of the Kavarus moons. Fire from the pursuing fighters raged around us in a hail of bolts. Come on...come on I thought. If we could just get to Kavarus, we could outmaneuver them. At the very least we could hide. And though we wouldn't have long, maybe for a moment we could just settle down and talk things over. There were girls on board, after all. Maybe there would even be time to work out the complications of love and sex. Looking over to where she sat in the co-pilot's seat, I saw Jenna flipping switches, pulling levers, checking gauges. She glanced in my direction once. Twice. Then, holding my gaze with those hazel eyes, she brushed her disheveled spill of blonde hair out of her face and smiled.

“Think you can get us there, boy?” She was in high school. Tenth grade. I wondered what classes she was taking. What was she doing right now? What would she think if she knew that in another galaxy—far, far away—she was helping me save the universe?

“I'll get us there. You just keep those shields up and the engines roaring.” I laughed. “Blake, Chris...you boys keep those cannons blasting, will ya?”

No, wait. I didn't laugh; I barked. Men barked in war. And I, well, I was in seventh grade. I was a *man*. Meanwhile, explosions rocked the *Raptor*, threatening to tear the bird apart. This was no journey for boys. No boy would survive it. Jenna shook her head, rolled her eyes. “You're so silly.”

Or that's what I thought she would have said.

She loved me, see. At least I hoped she did.

That's why somewhere between then and the end of advanced mathematics, I was determined to save us. Save us all, not just Jenna. Well, especially Jenna. But, despite what Ali would say, that was another matter altogether. With characterization and conflict, setting and plot, I was going to get us through to ever after. At least we were going to get as far as the forested continents of Kavarus.

Pausing in my writing, I glanced up at Mrs. Harris, perched like a great snowy owl on her stool behind the podium. She scrutinized me for a moment, then looked away. She thought I was actually paying attention to my peers as they worked out their assigned equations at the chalk board. Textbook and notebook were open. A few equations had been hastily solved. But I had not done the homework. I almost never did the homework. For that I was going to earn a B+ for the year, probably. And while this was not good enough given my bitter rivalry with the top students in my grade, it was acceptable, given the more pressing matter of finding ways to save the world, the galaxy, the universe...Jenna. I gripped my pencil, concentrating.

Now, where was I? We were flying like hell to Kavarus...enemy mecha in fierce pursuit, their motherships not far behind. I was at the throttle—the pilot. Jenna, my co-pilot. Somewhere back in the hold, a talisman. It was that special something that the reptiles begrudged us. Something that could save humanity from annihilation.

“Troy!”

Her whisper cut through dimensions, snatching me back into the time and space of shared realities. Back to Manchester, Georgia, and the classroom. Ali Adams. She sat in the desk immediately ahead of mine. As usual, she'd been watching when I wasn't looking. In fact, she was turned half way around in her seat. Her brownish legs crossed, she placed her notebook perpendicular to mine and pretended to peruse my equations. We played our roles well. So far as the great owl was concerned, we were collaborating academically.

Pretty, popular and powerful. That was the “Ali” she most often played. But quirky. While she was a part of the clique that was destined to inherit Manchester High School's social dais—sure to claim the thrones that her older sister, Lauren, along with Jenna and their other friends, would first have to abdicate and bequeath—she was also kind of strange. I didn't know how to define it, really. I

just sort of understood and accepted it. When Blake and Chris and the other popular white guys gave her hell sometimes, called her “Bug” and claimed they would never date her or “give her the time of day,” it made sense. Then again, it didn’t. They were lying, I knew. It was what they were supposed to say. But I still didn’t understand why. I only pretended to know.

Once I was captured by the reptiles, you see. My mind had been altered by their implants.

Besides, those were broader concerns. More immediately, I was irritated that Ali, like no other, strove often to wrangle my attention when I least wanted to be distracted. She had asked me earlier about the story I was writing. She knew that my stories almost always involved people I knew. “What are you writing, now? Am I in there?” Mischief lit her eyes.

“No!” I snapped. I lied. “Well, maybe.”

“Oh, but Jenna is most certainly in there, right?” She snickered.

“No!”

“Yes, she is. That’s her name right there.” Ali planted her tanned finger on Jenna’s name, giggling. “Troy loves Jen-na...”

“That’s not Jenna Polanski, though...” I lied again.

“Really? Then who is it?”

“Some girl I made up. You know...a character?”

“Then let me read it.”

“Wait until I’m finished!”

“Please!”

“No. Leave me alone.”

“It *is* Jenna. Jenna Polanski. You’re so in love. I’m telling her when I see her.”

“What? You don’t even know her. She’s in high school.”

“Are you crazy? *Everybody* knows *her*. Besides, my sister is in high school. And she knows her. They hang out.”

“So...I don’t care.” I frowned. Ali was up to something. She was always up to something. “Will you turn around? For crying out loud. Turn. Around.”

Here’s the thing. Of course, Ali was in the story. Ali was always in my stories. My cast of characters was never complete without her. Whatever I imagined of Jenna was the promise that marked the discovery of a new world. Broad sailed vessels had arrived, at last, upon the shores of puberty. But Ali? Ali was part of the very self upon which and through which I had made the voyage. I have recently found a passage in one of my old notebooks in which I referred to her as a princess. It appears that I imagined that she had signed her name to a journal entry: Princess Ali Adamson of Arus. The entry reads as if it was supposed to have been a prologue of sorts. In fact, it seemed that I imagined that it was *her* account of *another* interstellar epic that inspired the tale I was always trying to tell. And that’s fitting. Ali started it all, you see. If anyone is to blame for my vaguely preternatural, surreal sense of self, it is she.

It occurs to me that my last chance to be normal must have been way back in *first* grade. Ali shared her crayons with me. There’d been a moment of indescribable horror when I realized that I didn’t have my own. They were at home. You know how it is. You can’t *color* without your crayons. And *coloring* is quite simply the universal language of children. Before you can write, you color. It’s how you say who you are. It’s how you demonstrate your capacity to imitate and interpret the shared realities of the world. There before me was the white page drawn in bold black lines. And I could not perform. I could not enact the ritual and bring the dead blank spaces to life. I could not *color*. Not without Ali’s help. In those days, she had a sweet, deeply dimpled smile not yet acquainted with mischief. At least that’s the way I remember it though I can no longer imagine a time when Ali was not compelled by mischief. Regardless, she pushed herself closer to me, moving the big box of colors into the space between our hands. I remember she had a cookie dough complexion where others were pinkish or pale. I remembered that her hair was neither yellow nor brown nor black. She was a “dirty” blonde. She later told me herself, exasperated that I never knew how to describe her. And she was part Cherokee, she said, which accounted for her complexion. She always wanted me to get that part right, too.

The friendship that evolved between us bore the stamp of the paranormal. It was not right, they said. It was something about the way that we colored the world through play and laughter. With Lego blocks and sand, with walks around the playground at recess, with our conversations, we were always coloring—imitating and interpreting the shared realities of the adult world in our own way. Ours was a world within a world. I think it was *that* world and its origins

that I was always trying to restore in my stories. It was the Eden of possibilities that marked both the genesis and apocalypse of narrative—the ouroboros of my growing facility with symbols and signifying, nothing less.

My love for storytelling grew out of it. Perhaps it was love itself that I sought to capture in all its unspeakable and inexpressible brilliance and travesty. Words both create and destroy spaces and distances. Where Ali gave me crayons, I gave her stories. In the exchange, we acknowledged that whoever and whatever we were or could be to one another was bound up in imagination and feeling.

Not all my childhood narratives were set in outer space. However, most of them took place in other realms. Davaar, for example, was not so much “out there” as in a different dimension altogether. Davaar was always my version of Middle Earth or Narnia. Steeped in Medieval and Renaissance European culture, its humans were an integrated, multi-racial people united in their struggle to survive against goblins, trolls, orcs and dragons. There was always a dark lord—not a “black” lord, mind you, but a “dark” lord—who was figuratively or literally inhuman. This lord always threatened to raise an army of fell creatures to conquer Davaar, to enslave or massacre its people. Only my friends and I, armed with magical talismans forged when the world was young, could defy him. Through a portal conjured by a wise old wizard, we were usually torn out of Manchester, Georgia, and thrown into the midst of these violent fairytales.

In Davaar, I often cast Ali as a thief. Interesting. According to my notes and drafts, I always imagined her with a cloak and hood, knee high boots and lots of concealed daggers. Stealthy, swift, devious, covert, mysterious. Sometimes, in the style of the *Dungeons and Dragons* cartoon, I fancied that she could pull her hood over her head and literally disappear altogether, walking the world like a wondrous wraith who might just materialize at my side when I thought I was otherwise alone. In my dreamlike worlds, she most personified the very essence of the dream. And why not? Somewhere in my string theory multiverse of epics, there must have been a big bang. There must have been a psychic expansion of potentials that were still swirling, settling into realities construed through the gravity of my experiences. And while Ali was neither the catalyst nor the explosion, she and others like her were the cosmic artifacts of the event.

I don't remember whether I got us to Kavarus that day. I have found nothing in my old notebooks to suggest it. If so, I don't remember how. And I don't remember if Ali actually turned around as I bade her. If she did, it wasn't for long. By the time we were teenagers, she had a vested interest in doing whatever I did not want her to do. And I never had any choice but to respond exactly the way she wanted me to respond. This is probably why Mrs. Harris, far more astute

than she seemed, eventually moved me across the classroom...away from Ali. To save me from myself.

And then again, that might not have been it at all. Perhaps Mrs. Harris hoped to save Ali.

I still remember the field trip that Blake Hughes's mother chaperoned. Blake Hughes lived down the street from Ali. The summer before first grade, she had been his "girlfriend." Blake and his best friend Chris Faulk were blonde-haired and blue-eyed little league baseball players. And while they respected and even admired my athletic second and third cousins, they were absolutely contemptuous of me. Besides, Ali didn't color with my cousins. Roughly ten years after the state of Georgia finally desegregated public schools in compliance with a Supreme Court decision that was almost twenty-six years old, that made *me* the apocalyptic sign for which they had been told to watch. I was the villain.

I'm fascinated by the fact that in all the stories that were actually set in Manchester, in all my most realistic attempts at fiction—I imagined myself the "black lord" against whom these would-be heroes arrayed themselves. An imminent conqueror. I was the enemy...the adversary. But that wasn't until after fourth grade. By then, I had been ruined by knowledge. Drawn inexorably into history by the tractor beam of shared realities, I'd donned the armor and helmet of blackness. Thus, I began to unwittingly understand why Blake's mother had spoken harshly to Ali when she plucked a brilliant yellow wildflower from a rolling wave of April lawn and placed it decorously in my afro. "*Stop that!*" Mrs. Hughes said. "*Stop!*"

I remember that Ali seemed hurt and confused for a moment. But then she smiled. It was strange, that smile of Ali's. Even then. We were often hurt and confused. And often she just smiled at the joke she so precociously understood but could not share. All I know is that in our world it made sense to color that way...in our world our God was not going to burn us in Hell for playing together on swing sets and jungle gyms. But that's not what Blake, Chris, Todd, Jay and that crowd said. That's not what they told us that their parents said. If not the tone itself, it was the look on Blake's mother's face. She was insulted. She was disgusted.

I wish I could forget some things. I wish I could forget that in 1980's Manchester, Georgia, there was still a privately owned recreational center next door to the public elementary school. Blacks weren't allowed there. When the final bell rang at three o'clock, the game of integration was over. The white kids walked over to the recreational center to play until their parents picked them up.

Sometimes Ali would go with them. I wish I didn't remember how those boys chided me, then. "See...you can't go with us. You can't go with *her*. We're *white* and you're *not*. Why can't you *understand* that?"

They were right. I should have understood, but I didn't. It was Ali's fault. She was my learning disability. Had I not been so stupid, I might have saved us both some pain. However, I was stupid and Ali was weird. Obviously. There was something wild about her, even then. Infected with the revolutionary qualities of her much older, countercultural siblings, there was something that would never be tamed in this girl. As we walked she sometimes told me, "Don't listen to them! They don't know what they're talking about."

"But what *are* they talking about?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "They want to make me go with Blake, and I don't want to."

"What does it mean to 'go' with someone?" I imagined some fantastic journey.

She looked at me and smiled. There, see? It was that smile again.

"They *think* we go together."

"Well, is that why they say we're *going* to hell? I don't want to."

"Of course, not, silly. Let's play."

II

White girls. Bah. At some point, I had to face it. Ali was a white girl. Whatever else might have blended into her ancestry—Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw or Seminole—she was a white girl. Plain and simple. Together, we were a mythical chimera outside of a history we were too young to fully appreciate. It seems we were trying to escape that history and enter it at the same time. Like we were trying to be real through make believe. Costumed minstrels singing and dancing our way through the circus of culture.

If not for Ali, I would have been someone else. I would have been a different, less complicated me. I would have better understood my place, accepting the world for what it seems—performing societal roles like a flat character without appreciation for all the contradictions and ironies in the script. I would have grown up in the South without becoming a Southerner.

I could be wrong, though, for blaming her. Maybe it wasn't entirely Ali's fault. I think I must have been a victim from the beginning. That's what Blaze told me

when I was older. He was a Vietnam veteran, Blaze. A self-styled Black Muslim, Rastafarian, Nationalist Militant. A little league coach. A mentor.

“Firing ranges...,” he said once, pacing the floor of the crowded barbershop. “We need to organize the community to build more tutoring programs, recreational centers and *firing ranges!*” There was a war coming, he told me in confidence, when my father wasn’t around to censor him. A race war was coming if not already upon us. And I was already a casualty of the white devil’s brainwashing if I didn’t eschew the seductive, mind numbing evil of the white female. He explained that I had been envenomed by the white devil’s media from earliest childhood.

If Blaze was right, the fault might largely lie with Marcia Davis and whatever I was watching on television back in kindergarten. Marcia was ethereal. A complexion like cream. Long dark straight hair. Big blue eyes. A sprite, a fairy, an elf. And I was distinctly honored to be the boy with whom Marcia chose to spend the vast majority of her time. So honored that, at our kindergarten graduation ceremony, she wanted me to escort her. It was only natural, she said. And I agreed. Who else belonged at her side but her knight, her champion, her best friend? But it wasn’t to be. Our parents said no for reasons they would not explain no matter how much we cried in our childish absurdity, demanding explanations. *It wasn’t normal.* That was the gist of it. In fact, I can’t remember now whether it was before or after we were told how abnormal we were that she took my hands one day, turned them this way and that, and said, “See? Your palms are white. Just like me. We’re not so different. We’re the same, really.”

Actually, I had never noticed that there was anything extraordinary about the palms of my hands or Marcia’s complexion. She was beautiful, to me, though I didn’t know exactly what that meant. I still didn’t know what it meant when I met Ali a year later. I have to wonder whether I know what I mean even now. They were both simply...beautiful. No disrespect to Blaze, but that wasn’t true of every white girl I knew. And it’s been true of *many* black, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern girls since. Somehow, the brainwashing schemes of the evil media scientists had partially failed. Likewise, to some extent, the traditionalist parents of the integrated white kids were wrong about the utter depravity of my soul. There was hope! As I recall, beauty was more of a feeling than anything else. More deeply personal than fun.

Fun was physical. It was dirty, sweaty, wild, sometimes—if not often—violent. Fun was dangerous. You could fall and scrape yourself bloody having fun. Ah, that’s where we were *all* the same. White, black, boy or girl—we all bled red blood. And, if while having fun, you didn’t bleed, you came out of it coated with dust sealed to a greasy grime by sweat that you *tried* to take to bed with you unless your mother made you bathe it off. Fun. It was all that snaggle-toothed,

tomboyish, wild and corn-silk haired Deanne wanted. I could never push her high enough on the swings or fast enough on the carousel. She wore me out that little girl.

“Push!” She screamed. “Give it all you’ve got! Push! Faster!! Harder!! Come on, boy!!” I found myself avoiding Deanne. In retrospect, I don’t think that I considered her very “civilized.” But no matter how I avoided her, she was ever the huntress scouring the playground for me. “Troy! I want you to *push!!*”

I perceived no beauty in my relationship with Deanne. So, I think that what I meant by beautiful is that my time with Marcia was surreal. It was beyond the ordinary. Special. Magical. The stuff of swords drawn from stones, sea faring vessels sailing on clouds. Fantasy.

Even so, I asked my dad about the palms of my hands. He shook his head, “She’s wrong. Your palms are tan. Light brown. And that’s because it’s the side of your hands you use. Just like the bottoms of your feet.”

These were, perhaps, early signs of my mental disability. I only dimly understood that I had asked a question I shouldn’t have asked. I knew that Marcia and I were talking about things we shouldn’t have been talking about—things that weren’t normal. And no explanation could assuage that deep hurt and anger I felt when my rival, an action figure of a boy, escorted my angel into that auditorium the evening of kindergarten graduation. Had I known that was the last time I would ever see her, that she would move away and I would only vaguely remember anything of our having been children together, I might have done more to treasure that moment—our brief and shining instance of perversity—when she turned to look for me in the procession, found my wounded expression and smiled a sad, sweet smile. As I was beginning to discover, it was beautiful.

So, there, I’ve located it. It was Marcia’s fault. But I’m still not sure. The history of my abomination might be older still. My big sisters used to sit for this blonde girl named Dawn. Dawn was eight or nine when I was four or five. Imagine that. I don’t remember much about her. To my mind, boys and girls weren’t really different, yet. Anyway, she spent two of the first memorable summers at my house. Thus, I once associated summers with her. Long, bright, hot, humid days. A season of water hoses, pools, bees, birds”fun. In a neighborhood in which I was beginning to discover the world—a neighborhood full of pretty, tough, rambunctious girls—Dawn was a pretty tomboy. She fit right in.

Part genie, part protector, she followed me around the house, the yard and, when I wasn't feuding with my friends, the neighborhood. I don't remember much beyond that. Always imagining things, I'm almost certain, now, that I did more of the following and that she was simply smart enough to convince me that I was leading. Given the fact that my sisters were responsible for us both, the job of keeping an eye on me had probably been delegated to her. Either way, she was my partner, my cohort, my sidekick. I do remember that. A blonde, female Jim and her afroed Huck.

The very last time I ever recall playing with Dawn I was holding her hostage with a water gun. We had been having fun. The battle spent, the spoils won, she had allowed herself to be captured. Sometimes, she withdrew into a pensive, self-absorbed state. It was as if she would retreat into some hidden, mysterious place she couldn't trick me into thinking I had led her. But that day she did. Sort of. It was strange. It's still strange when I think about it. She directed me to a hole in the cement of the brick wall of my parents' house.

"Squirt it in here," she said.

I didn't understand. It seemed pointless.

She sighed. "Let me show you." She took the gun from me and placed the barrel right up to the hole. She pulled the trigger. "See? It's fun. Let's stuff the hole with stuff and squirt water in." She seemed truly proud of herself and I, perhaps for reasons I still don't understand, could not get enough of firing that pistol into the hole as she giggled.

"Why?" I asked her. I remember that much.

"Whaddaya mean? Because it's fun," she grinned. I might have told my family about what we had done in passing. I'm not sure. Maybe she told hers. In any case, Dawn quite suddenly stopped coming over. Go figure.

So, yeah. Maybe it was Dawn's fault. I might have been normal if not for her. But for all I know, Dawn was yet another symptom. The sickness might be traceable to the fact that my oldest sister was co-captain of the high school cheerleaders. When a certain, long haired, long legged, bright smiling best friend and co-captain showed up at our house to practice from time to time, I was absolutely charmed. By what, I don't know. Well, maybe I do. Now that I think about it, sometimes when they would practice a cheer—just because it was "so cute"—the friend would look directly at me, holding my gaze in a hypnotic trance

as she performed. See? White girls. Devils. That's what she was, too. A Manchester High School Blue Devil. Soon enough, my sister sent me away to play somewhere else. When you're that young, you're drawn by something other than sex—an inherited configuration of actions and reactions, perhaps, that is deeper than conscious thought—something closer to instinct that contains what we can later label according to socially constructed experiences and performances such as sex and love, fun and beauty. Race.

One windy day I followed my father's gaze to two flags streaming and rustling against the sky over downtown Manchester. "That one represents the United States of America," he said, pointing. "You're an American, of course. America is the greatest nation on Earth. The stripes represent the thirteen original colonies of England. Those colonies rebelled and became the first thirteen of the fifty United States. Georgia was one of those. Our family has been Georgian for, oh, over a hundred years."

He paused there. "That other flag. It's the state flag. It's Georgia's own flag. See? It's a cross that looks like a sideways X? That's the battle flag of the old Confederacy. Georgia was part of another nation, too. That nation was the Confederate States of America. There was a war between the United States and the Confederate States." He seemed to be talking more to himself than to me at this point. "The United States were in the North. The Confederate states were in the South. So, in a lot of ways, it was a war between Northerners and Southerners. The Northerners won. They burned Atlanta to the ground."

"Why? Why were they fighting?" I asked.

"Long story. But the short of it was that the Southerners owned slaves. When the Northerners won the war, the Southern slaves were freed."

"What's a slave?"

"Someone who can't do what he wants to do. Someone who can only do what he's told."

"Why?"

"But black is a color. We're not black."

“No, we’re not. And they’re not really white, either. It’s like we’re all these shades of brown if you think about it. Black and white were colors that meant someone was from Europe or Africa a long time ago.”

“So, are we Africans?”

“No, not anymore. Our ancestors—our great, great, great grandparents were Africans. And white people aren’t Europeans anymore, either. We’re all Americans. We’re Southerners. We’re Georgians.”

“But we’re black and they’re white?”

“Why, of course we are.”

“What does that mean?”

Most of our wars were waged outside, in the grass and dirt. Beneath the sun. For most of them were not exceptionally smart. I could beat them in the classroom, too, and I did. Often. In fact, among the most popular white dudes, only Blake and Chris aced the IQ tests as I did. Whatever their parents told them after that, whatever they thought they understood about me and where I belonged, things changed. We stopped fighting each other. Fierce competitors, we formed an alliance. We were special. We committed ourselves to doing everything better than everyone else. Among the white boys of our grade, we were kings.

Well, they were white. *I* was the black guy.

I saw less and less of Ali. She melted away. Meanwhile the treaty between Black, Chris and me transformed the social dynamics of the playground. In addition to intelligence quotients and grades, we were bound by dust and sweat and blood and triumph. Whom one hated, we all hated. Whom one bullied, we all bullied. An axis of sorts. The less “smart,” the weaker, those who could not catch or throw or kick or tackle—those who could not punch or wrestle. Some of them became fans, literally following us around in entourage.

Blake invented a game called “Trip.” The rules were simple. Within a small, four-sided boundary, all who dared enter had to try knocking or throwing everyone else to the ground. Because the one left standing “won,” Blake, Chris and I, and those closest to us, always arranged it so that one of us remained standing. We eliminated everyone else, then took dives, basically, for the chosen winner. It was the game that most reified status among the lions at recess. We

were ridiculous. We were kids. And in our own way, we were just imitating and interpreting the world. Coloring.

In time, I gained status I didn't seek. From third grade on, particularly to the white kids in my grade and younger, I was "cool." I didn't do anything to deserve it. However, largely because of Carl Weathers, Billy D. Williams, Mr. T, Eddie Murphy, Michael Jackson and Prince—and later because of hip hop—I simply could not be a mere nerd no matter how hard I tried. Always one of only three or four blacks assigned to those accelerated elementary school classes, I seemed to enjoy a Calvinist sort of predestined acceptance. This changed me.

Ali, however, did not tolerate my transformation. Besides the fact that the school placed her in another accelerated class, I think maybe this is one reason she disappeared. I'd see her sometimes in passing. I'd remember the coloring books, Lego blocks, and swing sets. Still, between third grade and seventh grade, she and I rarely, if ever, spoke. The one notable time we did, we were alone in a fifth grade hallway. As we passed each other, I assumed the mocking, derisive tone of my fellows. "Why, if it ain't Ali Anne Appleseed?" She looked up at me with genuine hurt in her eyes—none of her typical mischief this time. This was not the kind of clowning that she understood or cared to understand. So, she turned and ran away from me. She *ran*. I didn't sleep well for days.

I don't know if Blake and Chris ever forgave Ali for being herself. But eventually, Whitley, Mallory, Ami—the white belles—seduced her into their exclusive coven. She was pretty, after all. They feared her, though. They never really trusted her. She was smarter than they. She was more imaginative. She was only playing a role—always playing a role—and they knew it. She never thought culture was anything other than theater. A waking dream.

That's why she laughed so much, I suspect. Ali had never been a slave. I sometimes mused that, according to whatever it was supposed to mean to be Black, some days she might have been as "Black" as me. I think that many of my friends and relatives of African descent would have agreed with that assessment. Ali, though, had never been a slave. She never did anything that she did not want to do. I did. So did Blake and Chris and those other guys. Certainly Whitley, Mallory and Ami did. Increasingly obsessed with power and popularity, we all paid close attention to what it meant to be normal. That's why Chris and Blake insisted that she was weird. A kid could be relatively fat—as I was. He could wear glasses—as I did. He could be a nerd, even. And if *he* and *his* friends were committed to being the best at everything they did—neither one necessarily the best at all things so long as they were all collectively "superior"—*he* could even be "Black." He could be different. The other. Unique. In fact, if he did so, his

“Blackness” became his gift, his boon, the signifying quality of his justly earned “individuality”—his right to idiosyncrasy and eccentricity. He could be both a person *and* Black.

Imagine the possibilities.

III

Ali didn’t care. That was the thing. Her physical attractiveness and her parents’ socioeconomic status allowed her to be weird if she so chose. But she didn’t choose to do that, either. She was never predictable. There is a pattern to being weird in any socially recognizable way, see. That’s why so many people so wholeheartedly embrace it. For them, it’s simply another way to be normal. In fact, for many, they talk of their “weirdness” in terms of that which makes them more normal than anyone else. But Ali refused to be a part of anything that language could define. She was always playing. And surreal though it was, she was always having fun.

I think that’s why she was so interested in whatever I was writing. In my world of invented realities, I did with words what she did with living. I was creating and recreating spaces to live out the impossibilities of being me. But she had a way of calling bullshit on that, too. Science fiction, fantasy, epic adventures? She endured it, found it interesting or she laughed, “Whatever you’re writing, make me that girl in the magazine you guys were looking at the other day. Write a story about the swimsuit model. I want to play her.”

I lacked the skill to write parts for Ali. The person she actually was? I couldn’t make that stuff up.

I still remember that bright, hot, September day that she walked out of the windblown middle school recreational field and forced herself into tears. I was standing with the guys. *The* guys. There were as many of us black as white by then. And not all the Blacks were of African descent and not all the Whites were of European descent. After fighting and competing through years of recess, P.E. and report cards, our hierarchies were established. Like I said, I had somehow become “cool.” And I still don’t know what that meant. But there I stood with the fellas. And Ali, bored with whatever Whitley and Ami and all of them were doing, was in tears, whimpering about how some really squat, unattractive, goblin of a dude was “bothering” her, “following her around,” making her feel “uncomfortable.” The fellas stalked off looking for this guy. I didn’t move. I spun a football in my hands, watching Ali. When “my boys” were out of hearing, she

dried her tears, and stepped a bit closer. She colored the distance between us with suggestion and innuendo. “See, Troy,” she grinned. “Boys do things for me.”

I used to say that I never fictionalized the romance between Ali and me because there was no romance. We never dated. But that didn’t matter with any of the others. From Dawn to Jenna and beyond, I never dated any of them. In time, the mere appearance was enough to upset a lot of adults, mind you. But we never *dated*. Even so, I contrived romantic scenes with Jenna and her friends—the older girls for whom my overtures of romance were never remotely possible and most purely fantastical. I dressed up in GAP, Izod, Members Only, Ralph Lauren, etc. and attended high school football games half hoping to impress Jenna when I never had to impress Ali. And by that time it was okay, really. Most people didn’t know that Jenna wrote me letters, too. And no one would have cared, particularly. It was all a game. Nothing “real” was going to come of it except a somewhat farcical imitation of the social play of courtship. A play within a play. Furthermore, by then I was more than just “one of the Black guys” even as being “the Black guy” had afforded me the distinction of being “more than Black.” Irony. Paradox. I was, perhaps, one of the many wheels within wheels of a story that ultimately satirizes itself.

By the time I was a freshman in high school, the senior clique of popular, wealthy white girls knew me. Jenna’s friends, they greeted me with hugs, told everyone I was their friend. Imagine that. And while some of their reptilian boyfriends hated me and sometimes threatened to hurt me, none of my friends and I really believed that they would. Hurt me for what, after all? Playing?

We weren’t entirely right about that. The town was still highly segregated. Racially charged. The masquerades of history and the masks of discourse still precipitated dangerous turns in the game. To harass me, the occasional redneck stole my book bag or slashed my tires. By the time I was a senior, the father of a friend pulled me aside and warned me to be careful, to watch my step, because he had overheard “certain parents” of some of the younger girls in the area discussing me as an ongoing problem that had to be “solved” by any means.

“Be careful,” he told me. “These people are dangerous. I wouldn’t want you to have an unexplained accident down some stretch of country road, if you know what I mean.”

That still awes and numbs me. By then I’d won every class and student body election for which I’d campaigned. I was both Senior and Student Body President. In fact, by then I’d been voted “Mr. MHS” by the faculty.

The “Black Lord,” indeed.

You see, for all the real tragedy and travesty of it all, there was a powerful, unshakable fantasy at work. Like a spell, I sometimes imagine that it grew out of the soil—something older and stronger than the geo-political region spiraling through dynamic hoops of antithesis and synthesis in each and all of us. In more ways than I was ready to understand as a child, it was my own self-delusion that sustained it all. But it was also theirs. And none of us was particularly responsible for all that happened when the wizardry of wonder tore us out of history’s continuum and propelled us into colorful absurdities that were no less meaningful than the “realities” that plagued us.

So, as inveterately “colored” as I am, I’ll make this claim: Deep in the heart of Dixie, we are dreamers all. And our dreams breed realities that are both definitively and only tenuously black and white, male and female, straight and gay, God fearing and Godless—Southern. We don’t begin to become real people until we know and love the surreal composition of jarring juxtapositions and blurred distinctions by which we are compelled to be inherently imaginative—spiritual. Living contradictions.

That’s why I wrote. Now, I know. I fought to tame and ride that dragon of inconsistencies which embodied all that I would ever be. Through *fictional* worlds, I more fully engaged the contradictions of the *real*.

Ali always knew that I was at least as weird as she. Recognizing a kindred spirit, she issued the call to adventure—one child to another—and I joined the dream.

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Katharine Monger

Pobrecita

We stepped out of a roaring apartment party full of whiskey and X and stumbled along an alleyway until we found a road that looked a little bit like the path home. We walked it off in the rain, like in those bad romantic comedies, but we didn't kiss. Years later, we will each find the woman we are meant to hold; and she and I will still be friends, the way lovers ask of each other as the end draws near.

We were alone in Dublin. The others would return on Monday from weekend trips to Edinburgh, London, Cork. Before they'd left, they'd whispered about us, smiled at us like they knew something we didn't. But as I held her hand through the narrow streets, his hand was reaching for me from across the ocean. Years later, he and I will not be friends.

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We quickly gave up on trying to cover our hair with our coats. She smiled as we weaved around groups of drunken men who whistled, who called out, who asked if we missed dick. She whispered to me in Spanish, though she knew—at least when she was sober, she knew—that I didn't speak it, that I didn't understand her when she talked like that, stop talking like that. She stiffened every time we crossed a street, like she was afraid I would dart into the embrace of oncoming traffic.

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When we passed by the darkened windows of a café, I imagined stopping to ask her if she remembered what I didn't realize until later: that she'd almost touched the palm of my hand when she'd asked me if I'd wanted more water for my tea.

"Was it a date?" I imagined asking her.

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"*Pobrecita*," she said as we made our way up the apartment steps, through the vacant rooms.

"*Pobrecita*," she said again, collapsing on the crumpled duvet.

I made sure she had water, then curled up at the foot of the bed, an apathetic cat. I faced the open window, the moon, stillness. As she slept, I imagined wondering what he was doing back home. I imagined being jealous of his female friends. I imagined missing him in the way that I should, not simply because it was easy, not simply because I was supposed to. I imagined wanting to marry him. I imagined wishing that I wouldn't have to go home.

As she slept, I imagined that I wouldn't have to break her heart.

Katharine G. Monger is part of Washington University in St. Louis' MFA Program's inaugural creative nonfiction cohort ('17). She holds an MA in rhetoric and composition from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, as well as a BA in creative writing from The University of Iowa. Monger is Nonfiction Editor of WUSTL's literary magazine, *The Spectacle*. She has been previously published in *Apeiron Review*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Sonora Review*, for which she was a finalist for the 2015 Essay Prize.

Rachel Michelle Hanson

Invasives

In an unusually cold June, the sky lets loose water that splatters a rocky dirt, disintegrated Moenkopi, on boat bows and sandaled feet, and a thin fog rests above the river. I look out from beneath a raincoat, hood pulled over my Cubs baseball cap, and feel my hair curl around my ears. Chels jokes about the cold. I shiver then force a smile and joke back that it's too bad we can't put up a liquid tent right now. "We gotta embrace the suck!" Travis yells so loud that Little Sean jumps in fright. The rest of us guides chuckle and then quiet into our own thoughts, arms wrapped around ourselves to keep warm as we gather together on my boat. We stare at nothing in particular, feeling a little tired, a little hung-over. I look over to one of the motor rigs, the kind of boat I usually take down river, and envy the faint line of tobacco smoke rising from the motor-well, the boatman careful to keep his freshly rolled cigarette dry. It's been a year since I've smoked and I miss it every single day. *One smoke won't hurt*, I think, but then the sound of tires and engines distract me and I momentarily shake off the desire as I look to see which outfitter is arriving. It's ours. The vans stop next to the boats and we all sit up and make to greet passengers who are clean, donning rain gear and awkward hats, looking a little like REI advertisements. One passenger approaches with his fishing rod and I slowly shake my head and tell him it will be difficult to catch trout below the Paria River because it's flowing hard into the Colorado, turning it muddy just a mile downstream.

Some trout were introduced to Lake Powell by helicopter back in 1966 by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (now the Bureau of Fish and Wildlife), three years after the Colorado was held behind the Glen Canyon Dam, forcing it to flood side canyons, filling caverns and covering ruins. Maybe trout had managed to slip through the spillways into the river, ravenous for the native fish struggling in their water, now cold and clear. Though really it was Fish and Wildlife who brought the trout to the Lees Ferry, backing vans down to the water and dumping invasives in the river by the hundreds. At least that's what the old guys tell me.

Trout survive. I mean, those slippery bodied creatures can dominate like a mother-fucker. The Browns have devastated the native populations in Bright Angel Creek, too. Still, I'll not have one killed cruelly in my presence. Little pisses me off faster than seeing a fisherman toss a trout on the beach to die slow. I'll

make an issue out of it. I'll hand him a knife. Point out a rock on which to bash the poor thing's head. The fishermen, for I've only seen the men treat creatures this way, don't like it when I take issue. Sometimes they mock me for it. Sometimes I toss their fish back in the river. I understand that for the sake of the natives the trout have to go. But not unmercifully.

Surprisingly the native Humpback Chub and the Flannelmouth Suckers have held on, despite the cold and predators. Oddly enough, it's the Fish and Wildlife studies, the fish-kill trips, that saved them. Of course, the chub don't live throughout the Colorado anymore, instead spawning in the Little Colorado River and living all around the confluence. But the trout and carp, hungry for the natives, stalked the babies. So the waters were shocked and all the species brought to the top. The natives tagged and released, the invasives sent back into the river by way of a massive meat grinder. Even so, some of those invasives still live in the area.

The passenger is dejected when I tell him he'll have no luck, but he perks up despite the rain. "It's unusual to get rain this time of year, isn't it?" he asks. "Yes, but we need whatever water we can get out here in the desert. It's not exactly pleasant, but I think of it as a good thing." He smiles, says he's from California and thinks of it as a good thing, too, but then boards the boat furthest from mine. My boat fills with people from the Midwest, a family of four, all shivering in their ponchos. I secure my bowline, the rain dripping off the brim of my hat, and in the middle of the river a trout breaks through the surface, briefly, then gone.

Rachel Michelle Hanson earned her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Utah and she recently completed her PhD in English and Creative Writing at the University of Missouri. Her work can be found in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Storysouth*, *So to Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*, *South Loop Review: Creative Nonfiction + Art*, *South Dakota Review*, *Arcadia*, *Storyscape*, and other journals.

