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The Oklahoma Review is an electronic literary magazine published through the Department of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. The editorial board consists of English and Professional Writing undergraduates, as well as faculty advisors from the Departments of English and Foreign Languages & Journalism.

The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction in a dynamic, appealing, and accessible environment. The magazine’s only agenda is to promote the pleasures and edification derived from high-quality literature.

**The Staff**
The views expressed in The Oklahoma Review do not necessarily correspond to those of Cameron University, and the university’s support of this magazine should not be seen as any endorsement of any philosophy other than faith in – and support of – free expression.

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**Call for Submissions**
The Oklahoma Review is a continuous, online publication. We publish two issues each year: Spring (May) and Fall (December).

The Oklahoma Review only accepts manuscripts during two open reading periods.

- Reading dates for the Fall issue will now be from August 1 to October 15
- Reading dates for the Spring issue will be January 1 to March 15.

Work sent outside of these two periods will be returned unread.

**Guidelines:**

Submissions are welcome from any serious writer working in English. Email your submissions to okreview@cameron.edu.

Writers may submit the following:

- Prose fiction pieces of 30 pages or less.
- As many as five (5) poems of any length.
- Nonfiction prose pieces of 30 pages or less.
- As many as five (5) pieces of visual art—photography, paintings, prints, etc.
- All files should be sent as e-mail attachments in either .doc or .rtf format for text, and .jpeg for art submissions. We will neither consider nor return submissions sent in hard copy, even if return postage is included.
- When sending multiple submissions (e.g. five poems), please include all the work in a single file rather than five separate files.
- Authors should also provide a cover paragraph with a short biography in the body of their e-mail.
- Simultaneous submissions are acceptable. Please indicate in your cover letter if your work is under consideration elsewhere.
- Please direct all submissions and inquiries to okreview@cameron.edu.
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into sauna heat of mouth, haywire word-grazing makes metal words unmalleable with golden words enjoyed like chinchilla farts in the musty jugular of mermaid’s joie de vivre, curtsy wordship wirrwarr a la concierge fluxing vexed millimurdered voiced mirages, singing like run over kaleidoscopes of syllabic virtuous toyland toilet tweets, myrrh myrrh of tersest aggravation linear Little Italy sorry, prrrrrraying my lavish fahgettaboutit fucks of squitter indeed of nemeses chorale my mindtext ratatatatat rapping to pause all special & speak black holey flirty pistils & tête-à-tête honeyed repeat in solemnity, mellow recourse the end of each event, when suffering utterances assault all this dead air between us I compact the uttered granary of wordfucks from zigzag into anxious-us di-di-di-diamonds in all shiversshuckle with humid hymnals, blasting songs straight from the freezer, little words—these cold ass hells—are dancing all around me, making babies made of syllables, going so coo-coo between awnings of tooth & tongue-twitter, accumulating drunky, grabbing ahold of my brainz to unspoil open coffin-wordy wordfarts however backward speeches conkconkconking toward a spheroidal cremating of words to mourn their fucking I am a blowjob of surface repression to nein of loud-landish hyphen-killed VERITAS pumpernickel calculi talker Rio Grande altos rummage my seltzer, o luau talkspake Orion’s belter or cunning et toi tanning alluding or turpentine terror as I vet my venter or outland-ish insult laymen’s alternative: veto babysitting weird/ awkward utters, but talk-manning my ill tamed illogicz pay-per-vein color all cunning line-gists into biking through brainhymens of syllabic helixes, owing ultimatums to alkali purges to annoy me cool pickups sanitarial vocals, diocese of very-true teletalkies: irk-sin melancholy yapper fumblequats, irk-sin poyfect vaulting earloves, irk-sin syntaxes valiant purpled, you are misty-aged cringing Kool-Aid constrastophel cantus of all Rastafarians illuminating all of my emotionality eearworkie of Oompa-Loompa implications betterman’s tyke dream, caving luna-motor Korea! Korea!, pities be cloistered & piranha-eyed cake of my impetuously murdered penis dykes my pitykill piepies of olla as I all femme breakdown in silly tantalization incantatious robot coo-coo jengas owe my stopped-breath-ings to tactual tics, dino DNA irk-sinning into olé o’ stanza, impediment elisions into fantastic automaton pit-bull holier holiest, avoided staring rage fourfold auto-Ollie, jump-on-it asterisks alumna especial, lackluster ewe-sighs labyrinthinities, moms shelf value me all & all lähläh,
umbilical impaled into muscular ukulele twirled err all Siri toolboxing yessed-faith of ska, ionic behinds of ells enchanté how thusly America to kookookechoo John Gotti hills of cokehead nin-compoopies who talking netting too much telling or also impeded my me-to-me Albuquerque or me young Paris salon zigzags rezoned, latkes pain-lather my hinny funky to you & you & Bertie V: cinematic passions warmth-insult my private cantos of Catullus in Arabic ouchy-wähwähwähä to a roughrider piñata vowel-spending in oversighted semen sadomasochisms, racketey yaks compact my IKE eureka of sunny symptomatic lovey lovemachine loud I-get-it’s jubilatine umpteen cocky ill-rounded rains of rants tusked by kisser by sign o’ the prime all very salvo vary-voice-verified green card; irks my sinning new sentenced mining, loveyou love-o-matic wacko jackoff into can you cult my talkbait Casanova, heart me sanctified samsara or eek-eek sunny synecdoche minimum, loveyou my longstanding silks of Buddha fucks by virus umps my bro toy faux awkwarding emoticon where I see yâh laughing all lählâhlâh icky hypothermia hydrotelevised Satan viceroy noun-mimesis niceties voila allergens smelting words of vain lapidaries into cuff-linked Hindis your jovial obstinate horns so honko: ideas heaven sent albeit beery a goo-goo too tight speakeasels vasectomy idiocies, midrange word jamming pas de vaccin I’m maiden nihilistic vaginal gasoline dream by lackadaisies sassafrassing you & me while all the fuckstutterers of the world unite in palindrome osteocult liminal persona elated starfuck on high tähtäh sneakpeeky utterance verified helläh ammonia anemia: virulence Tahj Mohaling my oblique sensei, vajayjay smoke jets telekineses alloy sighs too soon/many, cosines of verbiage made from allusions manned gentile in all of oi your company, idiomatically liminal caked-on kaleidoscope of wordy too wides for teenage Jesus jerks truly so tiny topsy-turvy into okay tune-blunted poetessings pasta Pikachu poinsettias whereas pints posthaste, volition of you abracadabra jambalayas okay to peepeeing of valiant player jostling voice-hummed titter-tatters of my Coolio acquiescence housing utterance, eversoul basket of precarious sayings in sought-after sunning new sentences as shoptalkie deranged Levi Strauss voodoo with saysays as pensions, as situations assuming, as matters to nemeses of baby baristas saying ai-yi-yi muskrat mongrel swig, serendipitous secondhand smokey’s multivalance Belize-less hydrochlorides, kaput halted clandestine mamushka’d mamushkas money ain’t saysay in pulljointed I’ll-ask-her mousey Machiavellian
weewee monsoon yodeling paleobaptism yippee-ki-yay tag meme hacky sack with a radiometeorograph peepee petunia phantasm Manhattan fuckfuck can't-speaks, yogibogeybox kooky kakorrhaphiophobia is fucky w/ me as knick-knackatories in talk my torrential tyranniciding as my musty kamikazes in napalmed perseverance kapowpow fuck memes gone way too soon, too soon, too soon, too soon.
Joe Fulton

Coyote on the Fence

Like treasonous heads stuck on pikes,
These dogs decorate posts and wire.

Out here, it’s how ranchers mark their turf,
Banishing coyotes from their bit of dirt by

Slip-knotting dead ones to suspend from cedar,
Thus warding off other predators.

The flesh and bones draw maggots, flies,
And my eyes, but repel coyotes.

From fear or sense, they sheer clear of the
Mess hanging from the barbed wire fence.

Heads down, the dead appear to run, bushy-
Tailed to the ground, brown fur

Growing through daily decay grayer,
Until wind flays the fur, eventually

Blowing it away. The display then grows
Grim as ligaments, skin, peel like paint,

Until down one night clatter the bones,
Leaving cattle defenseless once more. Conjures

Gone from the pasture, coyotes again
Wander in, sniffing out calves and lambs.
Kari Hawkey

*In Another Life*

I drive a ‘70 GM pickup and accelerate
in love with the smell of rubber
and high-voltage lined horizons or something
as simple as how street kids
stand on the corner like
swans float atop a distant spring lake

but you just stand there
above the bee-eaten porch
like an old man across a hospital floor
you feel the winter hours shuffle

time is a galaxy in fishpond algae
or the rainbow across pacific oil spills
the sober wind twirls like a waiter
the sun sets where it does

then your strangling addictions
smile a zipper’s god-honest closure
all is fair except for the Jesus
lawn ornament in a vodka soaked kneel
moss between toes and psychotropic smile
you go ghost from the inside out

so I sing, “there’s a subway in my heart
like a four chambered crematorium”
and inside the stench of metal fires
I give up god like Vegas and yoga but
when the birds build their happy nests
I’ll secure the suitable men instead
On the Amtrak from Florida to Boston, I reserved a sleeper cabin to ensure I’d have the privacy I needed to read, work on my novel, or stare out the window as the train rattled through small, seemingly-quiet towns and behind antique, broken-down train stations that had lost their glamour since the advent of the airplane and cold, fast-paced airport corridors. I leaned my forehead against the compartment’s window as the train slid through the back yards of Floridian houses, daydreaming, completely relaxed. The glass felt cool and the rhythm of the train comforted me. I didn’t need to talk to anyone else, didn’t even need to leave the compartment unless I was hungry, and then I’d go to the dining car where I imagined the meals would be like the ones they served on the Orient Express in Europe. Backyards flickered past the window like an old piece of movie film. Some yards had chicken coops. Some one-story southern houses glowed with Christmas lights even though it was the middle of the day. Some backyards homed rusted cars and dogs whose mouths worked though I could hear no barking. We rattled past a young boy standing at a fence staring mournfully after the train, his black and white mongrel dog squatting next to him like a worn-out fighter. I wondered whether the boy and his dog would ever leave this little Southern town, whether his family would be able to send him to college, whether he’d ever fall in love, or if he’d live in a trailer for the rest of his life and die watching a baseball game in his recliner, a bottle of beer in his hand.

I had a sudden urge to escape the confines of the small cabin. On wobbly legs, I headed for the smoking car, knowing that the dining car wouldn’t be open for a couple of hours, and found myself thinking about why I was going home to Boston after so many years of living in Central Florida. There were many reasons I could fabricate: my parents were getting older, and I was feeling a little guilty about being the oldest child in the family and the one who lived the farthest away. But the truth was I needed to go home, needed to see the people I loved, even the town I’d grown up in. When I opened the door to the smoking car and breathed in stale cigarette smoke, I instantly sneezed. A half dozen people, cigarettes in hand, sat alone in the leather banquettes, staring out the wall-length windows into the backyards I had just been fantasizing about. A couple of sallow-skinned men with sparse gray hair played cards at one of the small tables, not speaking, their pursed mouths clenching cigarettes as they decided whether to hold the cards or fold them. I ignored them, held my breath and ordered a Coke and M & Ms from the snack bar at the end of the car. Then I found a seat as far away from the smokers as I could get.
Backyards of a more affluent Georgia neighborhood flashed by. Brick houses with glass-enclosed decks. Manicured gardens. No chicken coops in the corners of these yards. No children with black and white dogs staring mournfully after the train. Just people going about their quiet, gray lives, creating solid family ties.

Another woman entered the car, swaying back and forth as the train took a curve. I could smell her perfume before she reached me: a heady scent of Opium. A welcome relief from the smoke.

“You mind if I sit here?” She was heavy-set, a thirtyish Black woman with inch-long scarlet nails, and she gestured to the seat opposite mine.

I said no and shifted a little, wondering why the woman wanted to sit with me when there were so many other empty seats available.

She smiled. One of her gold teeth flashed. “Mind if I smoke?” She pulled a package of Virginia Slims out of her pocket before I could say I didn’t care.

I regretted it the instant I’d given my permission. Every time I was around someone who smoked, I couldn’t breathe the next day, the result of a bout with pneumonia a couple of years before. But I had chosen to come into the smoking car . . . .

The woman lit her cigarette, and I wondered how she could light a cigarette without melting her inch-long nails.

She took a long drag and blew it out in an elongated sigh. “I’ve been dying for one of these. Can’t smoke in those little cubicles, ya know. Air gets kind of purple.” She smiled again, and her gold tooth glinted like a wink, a private joke.

I tapped my bag of M & Ms with my own fingernails. “I don’t smoke. Chocolate’s my addiction. But I can imagine . . . .”

She nodded and circled her mouth to make smoke rings. “Where you going to?”

“Home to Boston. Going to see my friends and my family for Christmas.”

Her cigarette bobbed against the little silver ashtray on the table. “I’m coming home from a funeral. Got to see my friends and family, too, but for the wrong reason.”

I wanted to leave but didn’t know how. Never have been good at small talk. “Funerals are no fun, especially around Christmastime.”

“My uncle, he was like my father. But I never really knew my father. He kinda ran off when I was little and my mama raised us. Me and my four sisters. Got to see them too and their kids. They grow up so fast.”

“They certainly do. I’ve got a couple of nieces and nephews myself. Can’t wait to see them.”

“Any kids?”

“Yes. A daughter. She’s at school.” Why did people always want to know your life history when they met you en route? I avoided her eyes and started mentally inventing excuses to leave.

“I got two,” the woman said. “Don’t know where the boy is. The girl, she’s just graduating from college. Took her a long time to get her act straightened out, but I think she’s okay now. Got out of a halfway house a little while ago. Crack, ya know. Tough to deal with kids on drugs
these days. Bad shit, crack. It's a killer.” Her black eyes fastened on me and waited for me to respond to the comment, but I had nothing to say.

A momentary silence settled between us as the train clacked past rolling gray pastureland, fallow and empty, somber barns and lifeless trees, the Eastern Seaboard during winter.

The woman's words had brought back memories I had tucked away. Memories my mind had labeled: gone, forgotten, no longer able to hurt me.

It had been a long time since I'd thought about drugs. In the Sixties and Seventies, I'd experimented: Valium one day, speed the next, grass to have fun, acid to expand the mind. Now there was only Xanax during the day and Elavil to sleep. Necessary drugs. No more partying.

My hand shook, and I ached to slip a Xanax from the bottle in my pocket into my mouth. But maybe the woman would want one, too. I wasn't going to share.


I shook my head. “Got any folks there?” “Nope. Everyone's in Boston.” “Trenton.” The forward movement of the train rocked Vanel for a moment, and she closed her eyes as if she enjoyed it. “Lived in New Jersey when I was just a baby girl. Before I moved back south with my Mama Libby. We called her Mama but she was really my gramma.” Vanel took another drag of her cigarette.

The curl of smoke reached for me, and I leaned out of its way.

Vanel laughed and spewed a phlegmy cough. When she opened her mouth, the gold tooth shone more clearly and in it, an embedded diamond. I wondered how much it cost to do something like that and why anyone would go through the pain of getting dental work done simply for decorative purposes. Just thinking of getting my own teeth cleaned was enough to make me reach for one of the Xanax, for real this time. I felt its familiar oblong shape between my fingers and swirled my Coke. Enough left to swallow the pill. But I'd have to wait until Vanel's interest was elsewhere.

“Don't know where my mama is, but she's out there somewhere. She left us – me and my three sisters – before we even reached grade school. Left us with our daddy up in Trenton.” Vanel's inch-long fingernails made an arc toward the window as if to point like a divining rod, to where her long-lost mother might be hiding. “Meanest thing a woman could ever do, leaving her babies.”

A surge of sympathy welled up in my throat. My own mother had been there every day when we came home from school. She'd meet us at the door wearing a full apron, always wiping her hands on a dishtowel as if she’d just finished doing dishes or washing down the walls. Nothing was ever clean enough for Ma.
Vanel went on as if she hadn't noticed that I'd sneezed when she puffed in my direction.

“Didn't take long before Daddy couldn't take care of us no more. Nothing we did was right. Course, me being the oldest, I always got blamed for whatever the younger ones did.” She coughed again. “You got brothers and sisters?”

“One of each. I'm the oldest.”

“Well, you and me's got something in common then, being the oldest and all.”

“I guess so.” I palmed the pill, took a small swallow of my Coke, then slipped the pill into my mouth and enjoyed its bitter taste. Then I offered Vanel some M & Ms. Maybe if she ate, she'd stop smoking.

“No, thanks, honey. I'm trying to lose some of this weight.” Vanel grabbed a handful of her ample stomach, then patted it affectionately. “My boyfriend, he likes his women skinny. Asked me to marry him last month, but I got to think on that a bit. After three husbands, I'm not in no rush to add a fourth.”

“I thought I was doing well with two.” Surprised at myself, I looked into Vanel's eyes, a friendly brown, non-threatening. Sitting there and listening, it dawned on me that the only thing I had to look forward to back in my compartment was an innocuous romance novel I really wasn't interested in reading. “My first marriage was bad, and this second one is pretty good, but I don't think I'd have the guts to try it again.”

“Oh, girl, you never know. There might be another one out there just right for you.” Vanel touched my arm. Her long nails scratched a little. “I never thought I'd even get married the first time after what my Daddy done to me, but you learn to forget and just go on with your life. Look for the sun behind the shade, as my Mama Libby used to always say.”

“What'd your father do?”

The creases around Vanel's full mouth deepened and her eyes narrowed, just a little, but enough to intimate that she didn't really want to say what her father had done.

“What my daddy did was to take away every last ounce of self respect this black girl had for herself. He took to hitting the Jack Daniels hard when my mama left. That's when it started, sure enough. My mama, she'd been a real pretty woman. Lots of guys would've loved to have my mama but Daddy did some pretty talking and he dressed her up, bought her the most gorgeous gold jewelry and a brand new El Dorado . . . worked three jobs to get her what she wanted. And all he wanted back was a family. But my Mama, she didn't want babies ruining her body. I can remember her flipping a hot skillet of chicken grease on my baby sister Florence when that poor little one wasn't even toddling. She still got the scars on her legs from it.”

Vanel blew a perfect ring into the air, then stared into my eyes as if checking for a reaction.

“That's the first time I saw Daddy hit my Mama, but you know, to this day I still figure she had it coming. Wouldn't you? I mean how many mamas you know would do a thing like that to their baby girl?”
“God, that’s awful.” I pushed away from the table, envisioning a child screaming with pain – and hated the sight. “My mother hit us when we were kids, but she never did anything like that.”

Vanel harrumphed and moved her bulk around in her seat, pulled her flowing black silk shirt over her stomach. “Oh, honey, you ain’t heard the half of it. I’ve come a long way from those days in Trenton, thank the Lord.”

“Is that when you came back south?”

“No, it was a couple of years after that. See, when my mama left, Daddy went downhill faster than a ten-year-old on a skateboard, and I’ll tell you, after awhile what my mama done to us weren’t nothing compared to what Daddy did. If it wasn't for my Aunt Thelma, I probably wouldn’t be here right now talking to you . . .”

Vanel took my hand with her right, gesturing with her still-lit cigarette in her left hand while she whispered, “Daddy broke all of God’s commandments in one night with me, his oldest child, and my Aunt Thelma, bless her soul, heard me hollering and screaming and she broke down the back door with a axe and told my daddy to get his ass out of that house or she’d do to him like she done to the door.” She gave my hand a light slap, then nodded and leaned back in the chair as if satisfied with the story’s delivery. “He was a sick one, my daddy. Killed a man that night for saying something about his car. Imagine that? Just ‘cause the guy didn't like the color of my daddy’s car.”

I turned to the window and tried to hide my shock. In the window’s reflection, I watched her light another Virginia Slim off the one in her mouth. When I think about smoking, it always strikes me as ironic that those skinny, long cigarettes have a wreath of flowers around their filters.

The train ran parallel to a town’s main street. I’d lost track of where we were. I was more lost in the conversation. In life. The whistle blew and the train slowed. Several passengers, bundled in winter coats, leaned against the wind and looked in the windows. When we stopped, Vanel laughed like a child at a carnival and waved at the new passengers even though none of them could see her.

“Where do you suppose we are now?” I asked her, suddenly eager to change the subject. Was it safe for her to tell me her story? And what about me telling her mine? Was it a catharsis of sorts? Did she feel I would take a piece of her with me when I went back to my own life? I didn’t want anyone to have a piece of my life.

“Somewhere in the Carolinas, I ’spose. North Carolina, probably. Starting to look like winter out there. That’s one thing I’m not looking forward to seeing again.” Vanel pressed her nose against the window. Her breath made small, quickly-disappearing clouds on the glass. “Never missed the snow when we lived with Mama Libby. She was such a good ol’ woman. God
fearing. Smart. Always bought us new shoes for Easter. Treated us right. Stricter than hell, she was, but I don’t think none of us suffered for it.”

An unbidden image of Vanel and her sisters sitting on the back porch of an old southern farmhouse stole into my mind. Four dark heads, knees angled like a row of upside down vees. The sounds: girlish voices singing jump-rope songs, whispering into the night, giggling about boys. The smells: Chantilly Lace and bubblegum, sour pickles and first menstruation, burnt brownies and corn on the cob on a hot summer’s night.

The whispers sounded like mine and my sister’s. Our dreams of the future. The man we’d marry. The house we’d live in. By high school, the whisperings had turned to tears and the bedtime conversations centered around getting out of the house. Freedom.

I shot Vanel a sidelong glance. This woman had sisters, too. She had dreams. Hopes. Fears.

When all the dusty memories settled down, I realized the bag of M&Ms was empty. I folded the bag into little squares until I could see only one ’M.’ M is for Ma, I thought. I giggled, then realized Vanel was peering at me, her head cocked questioningly to one side.

My face burned. “How long did you live with your g-g-grandmother?” I stammered, a childhood habit I thought I’d lost.

“Till I got married. I was only seventeen, but, man-oh-man, I was sure I was in love with my Joe. No matter what Mama Libby said, I didn’t listen. I forgot all she taught me about right and wrong. Snuck out the window every night and met Joe on the road. He had this old ’52 Ford pickup, y’know — blue with a yellow strip down the side. That truck rattled like every bumper was gonna fall off any minute. Anyway, I’d sneak out the second story window, and we’d drive out to the end of this dirt road . . . .” Her voice trailed off and her eyes focused on something long ago. “Didn’t take long before I came up pregnant. I knew Mama Libby’d never understand, so I just took everything I owned, and Joe and I run off. We headed straight north. Chicago. The windy city. We’d both get jobs, we thought, and have a family and everything’d be all right. Course it wasn’t. It never was.”

A young couple settled at the table across the aisle and pulled out cigarettes. My eyes rebelled as the first curls of smoke drifted toward us. Without a word, Vanel handed over a Kleenex and continued. “We was married about five years, Joe and me. He got into a jazz band, played alto sax, had dreams of making it big, and I believed him. Who wouldn’t? But I was young and stupid.” Vanel’s eyes darkened, and she folded her arms across her chest. “He was just as bad as my Daddy. Worse. Started bringing other women home with him, and here I am, pregnant with another kid. I couldn’t take it anymore, and one night we was out at a bar where Joe had a gig and one of them other women just looked at me the wrong way, and before I knew it me and her was rolling around on the kitchen floor, and Joe and his buddies was laughing and hollering like we was some Super Bowl event or something. Then I saw her raise something silvery, and before I knew it, girl, I was in the hospital and there was no more baby. And no more Joe. He’d gone and took off with that lady. Didn’t even care about me no more. Shit.” Vanel stubbed her cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. “You ever lose a baby? You know how that feels?”
I swallowed hard. Vanel knew the answer to her question. I didn't have to say anything. Ma had always told me I was about as opaque as Saran Wrap.

“I thought so,” Vanel said slowly. Her eyes shifted to the window. “You know, when I sat down here I just had a feeling we had a lot in common.”

I squirmed and wished she were wrong.

How dare this woman bring back all the memories and the ugly feelings I had so carefully tucked away? I stole a glance at her watch. Nearly two hours had passed.

“What you looking at? You ain’t nowheres near Boston yet, honey. Listen, I’ll tell you something else, when I left Joe with one little baby under my arm I didn’t have no idea where I was going. Stayed with a girlfriend for awhile, but that didn’t work out. Never had no luck with female roommates. You?”

“I’ve only had one — in college — and, no, it didn’t work out.”

“What happened?”

I didn’t want to tell the story, but she asked. “She stole my boyfriend,” was all I said, though there was much more to it. The boyfriend had left me, fearing I was pregnant. I had only a few friends at school, and my family would never have understood. Abortion had been a consideration, but I’d already begun to realize that my daughter might be the last child I would have. What I really wanted was to have that baby, but the guy didn’t want any part of it. And that hurt more than if he’d suggested abortion. Yes, the girl — I couldn’t even remember her name now — had stolen my boyfriend. But she’d also taken much more. Too much more. She’d stolen my self respect.

Vanel cackled long and hard, as if making a comment on my memory. And her commentary pissed me off. By the time she finished laughing, I hated her. She lit another cigarette and shook her head. Still chuckling, she said, “If this don’t beat all, same thing happened to me.”

I eyed the door at the end of the car, but it seemed to float farther and farther away. Vanel's voice began to waver as if someone had turned down the volume, slowed the speed. Then, suddenly, everything came back into focus.

“Leon, my next husband, he was into speed. It's the late Seventies by then. I got a 5 year old little boy, and I'm pregnant again. This time it's a girl and this time Leon — well, he was a decent guy, but I just didn't feel . . . well, he just didn't melt my butter. Know what I mean?”

Without waiting for a response, Vanel went on. “Leon, he was from Jamaica. Talked real dignified when he was straight, but when he was jazzed — I couldn’t tell a word he was saying. Listen, don’t hate me for telling you this, but I got into the mescaline with him. He took me right along for his ride and I liked it. I liked it, but I hated it, too. Especially when I saw those two little kids — with my eyes — looking at me like I was some kind of stranger. I love my babies. I do.”

“I believe you.” My voice was a little too loud.

Vanel paused, just for a moment, then she continued, and this time she didn't seem to care whether I listened or not.
When I think of what I did to those poor kids . . . I wasn't any better than my own Mama or Daddy. It was like history repeating itself. But as soon as I could, I got rid of Leon, had the police come and take him away. They put him in a halfway house, cleaned him up. But it didn't make no difference. When he came back, he went right back to the junk. And me, I did too. Finally, they came and took my babies away. I had no choice. I had to clean up. Had to. Yes, ma'am.

Trickles of sweat ran down my neck, their clammy trail following my spine to my lower back. I reached into my pocket, but I'd only taken one Xanax with me and it was already gone. I fidgeted.

“What’s the matter with you anyway?” Vanel's voice rose through a cloud of purple smoke. “You acting all weird like you don't want to be listening to me or something.”

“My al . . . my allergies. Got to take a pill. Allergic to smoke.” I stood. The train lurched and I stumbled against the table. Vanel reached out a hand as if to push me away or hold me up, as if to protect herself rather than to help me keep my balance.

“I'm sorry I bored you.” Vanel's eyes, flat brown and squinted, seared through to my soul. “I didn't mean to talk so long. Ain't surprised you're leaving. No one wants to hear my story.”

“No, that's not it . . .”

Vanel rose, her large, imposing body blocking the aisle. “You should've stopped me if you wasn't interested.” She turned and stomped out of the smoking car, slamming the door behind her.

“I didn't . . . I wasn't . . . .”

The couple across the aisle turned away. I went back to the compartment, fighting down memories that threatened to make me gag.

That snowy day. The long subway ride. Struggling through unshoveled snow drifts to reach the brick building. The dank waiting room. The sour taste of fear in my mouth. The woman with the hooked nose and bad breath who asked the questions about my husband, wanted to know why I was trying to take away custody, wanted to know the details of our married life, wanted specifics about the drugs we took. Didn't believe that I'd been pulled into the habit by him. She wanted to take away my baby.

I shielded myself from my own image in the mirror above the small stainless steel sink. Then I cradled my head between my knees and concentrated on breathing.

I gave myself five minutes to calm down.

When I looked out the window again, I could tell we were in a city, but it didn't matter where.
From inside the dream, where it began,
    once as a meadow, once
a forest green
    with living things, all

manner of fecundity,
    they rippled
outward almost devoid
    of conscious intent.
        In starlight
    they run at a steady pace, long
necks snapping, eyes close

to the frozen,
grass-starved ground,
    feet and claws too lithe
to make imprint, here
where grazing has given way
    to boulders, where hundreds starve,
and lie where they fall, bones
    wasting to ground.

This
is a herd of thousands, where infants
    and old bring up the rear, where
the longing of each is stripped
    for the mind of a single
forward movement.

Winter
takes them at the river, its
    roar and pulse transmuted
into spray that freezes
on lashes and fingers, its sheets
    of ice slicing sideways
into flank and thigh as they cross.

Striving to swim, one
clings to a floating branch, one
    to another, two lift
and flail, three
    sucked under, each time the water
swirls between limbs,
movement and end, between
the dream that now sweeps
some to silt, a powdering
choke far below—
centuries to rain
down on them, distinct as radiation
from the constant stars—some,
bedraggled, live, to the other shore.
Light Through Skin

For days the birds escaped.  
Picked wings up  
into the dazzling air

*white wings dove-blue dusk-rimmed* rose

up from the surface of her, slight  
already, partial, fractioned,

flew through walls and open windows  
into the scree, the trees, the city

over steel arcs  
bridging present and future, over
the city's myriad winking points

of loneliness.
Took with them bits  
and pieces of memory, hunger, habit.

    Took with them  
a bed she slept in  
    once, flimsy nylon curtains

at the window, a valley in Quebec filled with snow.  
    Took with them  
starlight, aurorae, icy dips

    in a lake
in Michigan.  
    Took with them

    calling, listening, cornflowers, song.
Until what was left was the inside

of: bone—*sharkbone dolphinbone whalebone* tossed continentally by water
into a rounded smoothness, shell—*clamshell*

*abalone*—eroded, blunted to a blurred

pearlescence. Loss fringing the edges:

loss:
of muscle, voice, mobility: loss:
of longing.

Windows closed in her. Even
as her skin began to open

more and more each day, took on
the hues of light, became

permeable.
She slept. Dreams
and voices rode the waves
on which she floated.

Touch
burned her, stole her
deeper into herself.
The self

that remained, curled dry
as an aspen leaf, hanging still

in deepest winter
to the dormancy
of tree. The self that slipped,
pallid, fluxed

through hospice hours
in and out
of disappearance.

Water, morphine. Almost a century
of cells inside her clung,

let go, clung,
retreated. The people in the room

shadows, papery
memories. Their voices wind

tearing at sails
some summer afternoon
the flap and tear
of sticks in wind.
She must have felt
the loneliness of that final bird

as he lifted and she rose with him

nebulous now  umbra now

merely a passing
of light through skin (light

  through quartz, light
through amber) as she rose

  (light through gill, light  through
voile, light through wing)

ephemeral
white-winged dove-blue dusk-rimmed
rose

and followed the birds. The whole room
diminished behind her.

   for Marguerite Tanis, 1910—2004
Laura Jones

Truth, Lies, Memory, Fiction

*I am led to the proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction; there is only narrative.*

—E. L. Doctorow

We were scholars — University Scholars — that’s what they called us. A small, elite group of students, enrolled in the art school at a major city university, all recommended by virtue of academic excellence, artistic promise, and a certain indefinable quality that made us stand out. Some schools might label it leadership, but it’s what I’ve always thought of as spark. Each one of us could carry on conversations well beyond our years. We were traveled by the school to all parts of the globe – the Soviet Union, England, Italy, Greece – to meet working artists there, observe their work, and conduct hushed, respectful dialogues, where we always asked the right questions. We could do it, too, and with a smile. With an innocence and panache. With grace.

At the bottom of our small, inverted pyramid was the Associate Dean of our school. I’ll call her Simona. She was an unbelievable looking woman, a heavy bodied Gertrude Stein of Italian immigrant origin. Her voice was low and raspy. One eye drifted lazily to the right so that we were always uncomfortable when we looked at her. Her long black hair hung limp in a stringy ponytail down her back. She was not a woman who’d enjoyed a moment of beauty, but she was our Gertrude Stein and her Scholars our Parisian salon. She taught us well, and we vied to impress her. Somehow, she’d trained her drifting, impressive gaze on us. In a school of thousands, in a city of millions, we were special and unique.

By junior year, there was a small subset of Scholars that were thick as thieves. These were my friends. Steve was an actor, tall and gay, always the one telling the loudest joke in the room. I both loved and hated him like a brother. Laura, a writer with whom I shared the same name, was from Long Island. She wore a short, shock of dyed red hair, and had a penchant for history Simona noticed and admired. She was Simona’s favorite, and was appointed President of the Student Council, a step higher in the inner circle.

Jim was a filmmaker, lovingly referred to by our friends as Angry Man. Angry, because he was always burning up for a cause. Jim had spent time in Paris, radicalized by the works of Jean Genet. Back in New York, he turned his library-grown politics into activism, demonstrating for ActUP, climbing billboards to deface them with anti-government slogans. He wore a dark, creased leather jacket, and his hair was bleached a white-hot blond. His masculinity was his pride. He never wanted anyone to know by looking at him that he was gay. Hypocritical, he knew, but he shirked it off with a roll of his leathered shoulder.

Hidden amongst the other minor characters was Tim. He entered my awareness the way a camera racks hard its focus from soft to sharp. I don’t remember the first time we met, but I have a memory of a conversation in the Student Council office, Simona’s domain. He was laughing and fopping around about something, his soft, lank black hair swooping over one eye, until he
flipped it dramatically back. His silver pinky ring flashed, a match for his hoop earring. He had a three-day stubble of beard, but was in no way handsome.

From the beginning, he was subterfuge. His hair artfully arranged to hide premature balding. His clothing sloppy casual, meant to read expensive. His accent was unplaceable, but airily reminiscent of the rich who summered somewhere. He told us he was from Connecticut. That he was a few years older. A transfer student. An actor. Time would tell just how good of an actor he really was.

Not everything that came after was bad. Tim and I shared some moments of genuine affection. At least, I thought they were genuine. We were only ever friends, never lovers. Yet, there was a similarity to the experience like being dumped. There’s that question we all ask ourselves: if you truly loved me, how could you ever break my heart? A blast of reality that makes us reconfigure experience. My memory of Tim isn’t fluid. But there are images there – flickers – that come back and ask me. If you truly loved us, why did you break our heart?

My 21st birthday was a seminal event. The bunch of us ate at an Italian restaurant down on Bleecker in the West Village. It was one of those inexpensive places prized by students, cheap, with good food and atmosphere. A quiet, softly lit bar upstairs, and a large unbelievably gaudy dining space below, filled with running fountains and plaster of Paris cherubs sitting in dusty plastic greens. A faux Venice we could actually afford.

Not all of our friends had arrived, so some of us waited upstairs, checking the door. Tim took me aside and said it was time for my first real drink. I had no idea what a real drink was, having not spent much time drinking until then, a good Scholar right to my bones. Tim saw the hesitation on my face and ordered for me. A dirty gin martini, straight up, with olives. Still my drink to this day. After he ordered, he rolled his eyes as though the exact recipe of this perfect drink was something all the right people already knew. Then, to punctuate, he flipped his hair, exposing that silver hoop earring, too large for a masculine accessory.

The drink arrived ice cold and murky like the ocean’s belly. Two, fat whole olives floated on a stick. I learned to eat one right away, and let the other stew in the detritus, becoming the last perfect bite. He paid for the drink, then later surprised us by paying for dinner. It was “on him” in honor of my birthday. The warm rush of alcohol, the heady fuzz of laughter and friends, and I remember thinking, what a great guy. He made my night special.

I’m going to come right out and tell you: Tim was a pathological liar. Everything he ever paid for, he stole. In some ways, it’s not fair to tell it this way. To drop it on you like that, an anti-climax.
But, in other ways, you’re getting it the way I did. At the time I was living these memories, I had no idea of what was behind them and no idea of what was coming. Once I did learn the truth, everything came into question. Remembering became reconstructive, the way that, when I “discovered” I was gay (admitted? understood? finally faced? figured it out?) the memories of my past took on a sudden, different hue. I’d lived them once, but I’d lived them in shadow. Now that I discovered the truth, I lived them again, but differently.

There’s a line between truth and fiction, between memory and fact. Can you point to the truth of your life and utterly know it? Can you retell it and have it remain the same? What if you’re someone who doesn’t live it once and then make it up differently? What if you’re someone making it up right on the spot as you move along? Then is there no real lived experience or is there? Maybe there’s only the telling.

There are many reasons to remember our last Scholars brunch. Simona was holding it at her personal apartment on Washington Square, a place she’d lived in since the 70s. Normally, Simona’s apartment was her private domain. Scholars were family, but not in the truest sense of the world. We seldom breached the boundary to her place, any more than she would visit us next door in our dorm room. There was a uniqueness to being inside the place, the rush and excitement we felt getting in a little bit closer.

But there was also this: the brunch was our last time together. Of course, as friends we would continue, but most of us were graduating. Scholars and school was receding behind us like home through the rear view mirror. Real life, whatever that was, was next. Feeling the weight and importance of the occasion, we dressed up. This party felt somehow formal, despite the years we’d spent knocking around together.

What did we talk about that day? Did Simona share a few nostalgic, misty-eyed words? Did we speak with trepidation of the future or remember intimacies of the past? No one can remember. All we can see is a vodka bottle, frozen in ice.

Sometime during the first year he arrived, Tim convinced Simona he had a history as a hired caterer and chef. A world class chef, it was implied, back before anyone knew chefs by name. While he pretended to be rich — dropping hints of the Hamptons or Cannes — apparently he’d also worked for the rich, too, an irony that, like so much of what he said, seems hard to believe. He volunteered to cater school events working completely at cost because, of course, he had so much money, he didn’t need any more. A first tentative gig proved he had talent. His food was good. His costs were low. (“I know a guy who gets me what I need practically for free,” he whispered to me, arching one brow. Being in on the secret felt good, and I marveled at his ingenuity.)

What’s more, Tim was creative with his style. For the final goodbye brunch, he set up food stations throughout the apartment, rather than feeding us family style at the table. In the living room, surrounded by wall to wall racks of books — the scholastic accumulation of university teachers co-habitating for twenty years — Tim set up a caviar stand with the most amount of fresh caviar I’ve ever seen before or since. There were bucket loads, reminiscent of the obscene
cocaine piles blizzarding the desk in Scarface. In the center, balanced among greens, was a vodka bottle frozen solidly in ice.

It gleamed there, catching the light. Inside, were mink-soft rose petals hanging in suspended animation. Simona recalls Tim scurrying around the apartment the day before, preparing for the party alone because he hired no one to help. She remembers the way he meticulously pressed roses around the bottle then immersed it in water, placing it in the freezer so it would harden and congeal, appearing to be trapped by roses held under ice. It was a dazzling image. We congregated around it, hypnotized by the bottle, rather than our own memories. Conversation centered exclusively on Tim’s skill and that bottle. The sparkling gem you could see through but not touch.

He told different lies to all of us, and kept each lie perfectly filed in his head. When you think about it, it’s masterful, juggling so many realities, at once. One of the worst lies he told, he told Simona. He said he went to Mexico with his boyfriend over Spring Break. As Tim told it, the boyfriend had AIDS and died while they were across the border. The Mexican authorities wouldn’t release the body to return to the States. Tim was bereft. He cried hysterically on Simona’s sofa for days, so much so, she let him stay a week.

Exactly one year later, he went through a grieving period remembering the death. The government still hadn’t returned the body. By this time, everyone had forgotten the details, but they were as fresh in Tim’s mind as though he’d told them yesterday. Once again, Simona let him sleep on her couch. Mothered him for the whole week, with all the attention she’d given her own child. When I retell this story to her now, asking for more information, her affect grows wispy and flat. “I repressed it, Laura,” she says. “I don’t remember.” It was one of those things she had to forget.

Each one of us had our own moment of realization when the hard truth hit us like a rock hurtled from space. Simona remembers, “I have this image of him in London. I ran into him on the street, and he was talking about buying a 1,400 pound sterling settee, and sending it to his uncle, who he said had recently been mean to him. He said it was a good joke on the uncle. And I remember thinking ‘that sounds nutty,’ but then it was no more outlandish than so many of the other tales he told. Why a bell didn’t go off very early on, I don’t know.”

We all asked that same question. In the book Blood Will Out, novelist Walter Kirn wrote about his relationship with con artist, pathological liar, and murderer “Clark Rockefeller”. There is no Clark Rockefeller, only a man who invented and portrayed him, in addition to several other aliases he kept throughout the years. Rockefeller, like Tim, bet on his implied connection to old money and celebrity to open any door he wanted to walk through. In fact, some of the similarities were so great, after reading the book, I Google’d Clark, needing to see a picture to determine if he and Tim were one in the same.
Kirn — like my college friends — is an artist and storyteller. Someone used to discerning a good narrative. How did Rockefeller’s impossible lies sneak by Kirn after a decade long intimate friendship that brought him in close contact with Rockefeller, again and again?

Kirn posits that when Rockefeller told him something incredulous — something Kirn’s own refined common sense told him was impossibly untrue — Rockefeller would follow up with a practiced one-two punch, telling another, or maybe several other impossible lies, one on top of the other, a kind of shock and awe technique meant to dazzle and disarm. Having been on the other side of this delivery, Kirn’s words rang true. Common sense is no help whatsoever. Common sense tells us our friends don’t lie. Common sense tells us, if they do, it’s over something small or embarrassing, certainly not something needless, which buys them very little in an already well-established friendship. It’s not about having a good bullshit detector. It’s about keeping your head from hitting the mat, when you’re stunned and the other guy keeps right on punching.

For me, the lie that did the whole thing in was about the Olympics. Tim and I were having a casual conversation in the Student Affairs office, talking about nothing in particular. He was smiling and laughing that carefree easy laugh, waving his hand at me in wild gesticulation. He had this way of tilting down when he looked at you, as though peering over an imaginary pair of glasses. The look built an implied intimacy. It said, “You know what I mean. Everyone else is crazy, but you get it.”

Out of the blue he said, “Did I ever tell you I swam for the 1984 Summer Olympics? In L.A.?”

Well, no. He hadn’t. I didn’t remember this fact coming up as part of his already impressive resume. Theater manager, actor, caterer, epicurean, world traveler, and general all around know it all. None of my friends had mentioned it to me. Did they know?

If I’m telling the truth here, I remember a small twinge in my mind. A sudden internal refocusing, when all that he was came in clear. I played along with the Olympics story, asking questions, and he answered each one without hesitation. I had no context of knowing what else to do. I mentally counted in my mind how old I thought he was, versus how old he would’ve been back then. It was possible. He could’ve been 18 when he swam. But the concept that he would casually decide to swim for the US team, only to leave professional swimming and seek work in the theater soon after, seemed like one too many unscheduled stops on the short road trip to twenty-three.

After that, I stopped believing him. I knew there was something seriously wrong. I even mentioned it to my friend Jim. He agreed, the story sounded ridiculous, but by this point, he’d

The point is he was trusted. Although he’d done everything to the contrary to show he shouldn’t have been. We didn’t pay attention to those bells and whistles, and the next thing we knew, he was in court.
already written Tim off as full of shit. To a certain extent we continued to indulge him. Jim was hostile, but kept it to himself. I nodded and agreed when Tim spoke in the hall. All the while, thinking to myself, he's crazy. The lies that did him in, though, those were bigger. Those couldn’t be ignored. Jim was the key to figuring them out.

Pathological lying, also called pseudologia fantastica, mythomania, or compulsive lying, is defined in The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law as “falsification entirely disproportionate to any discernible end in view, may be extensive and very complicated, and may manifest over a period of years or even a lifetime”. In every case, the liar may or may not know they are actually telling a lie, but in Tim’s case, I suspect he did know the truth. Having lied and at times cheated in my own life, I know that I always consciously knew the truth, but through rationalization or selective compassion for the listener, I partially blocked it out, the way you hold a hand up to a blinding sun filling the sky.

From The Journal:

“The stories told are usually dazzling or fantastical, but never breach the realm of reality. The possibility of truth is key to the pathological liar's survival.” Reflecting back on the Olympics story, I had an epiphany. A Scholar named Shawn. Shawn had made a trial for the Olympic games as a figure skater. In fact, we all watched him, twenty years later, judging the last Winter Olympics in Beijing. Tim could have swam in the Summer Olympics. In the days before the Internet, anything was possible and unverifiable. The fact that he looked and acted nothing like an Olympic athlete was beside the point. It not only could have happened to a Scholar we knew, it had. Shawn.

“The fabricative tendency is chronic; it is not provoked by the immediate situation or social pressure as much as it is an innate trait of the personality. There is some element of dyscontrol present.” No one needed these fantastical stories to prove Tim’s worth. We were all already friends. He’d made it to the “inner circle.” But making it in wasn’t enough. Like a child, he had to keep pushing the boundaries that surrounded him. Not to prove anything to us, but to reassert something inside himself. In the end, the only lies Tim actually told were to himself.

“The stories tend toward presenting the liar favorably. The liar “decorates their own person” by telling stories that present them as the hero or the victim. For example, the person might be presented as being fantastically brave, knowing or being related to many famous people, or claiming they earn more income than they do.” My friend Laura recalls, “I remember thinking Tim had lived an interesting life and had done lots of cool things and that he seemed worldly, sophisticated, and glamorous. For a girl raised in the shopping malls of Long Island, he was very charismatic and appealing, and represented a larger world I wanted to be a part of. His confidence was alluring.”

Yet, when asked, she could remember no one single story he’d told — no whoppers — that linked him concretely to the rich, famous or worldly. Still, the impression remained.
Pathological liars seem to prize what many people do: renown, money, a historied past. But where the common man will name drop, or snap a selfie with a celebrity they barely said two words to on the street, pathological liars must compulsively claim that world as their own, donning it like a cloak.

For Tim, it wasn’t enough that the lie was an ephemeral story alone. He was no writer. He was an actor after all. He had to live inside his lie, enact it with set and costumes. Tim’s set was an apartment he shared with two actresses on Elizabeth Street. The apartment was built like a townhouse, with two discernible floors, a spiral staircase that led to a hidden loft, a million dollar kitchen, and a huge wall of windows that looked out on the city. Living the way the rest of us did, scraping by in tiny flats or impersonal dorm rooms infested with mice, we called Tim’s place “Barbie’s Dream House.” It had that same quality of glamour and make-believe. Even the couch seemed cloud-like: fluffy, white, an impossible texture, so soft, you could close your eyes and float away.

What was funding all this smoke and mirrors? All the picked up checks, the parties catered with expensive meals Tim got “for a steal”. And of course the Barbie Dream House. Who was paying for that?

Me: I don’t want to.. pry but.. wasn’t Tim a scholarship student?
Simona: Oh yes.
Me: (thinking: how did he get a scholarship, when you saw him throwing money around and implying he was rich? I think better of it, worrying for the implication.) Okay.

After Laura graduated, a hole was left on Student Council. Among Tim’s senior class, there was no one closer to Simona, what with all that tear drying on the couch over dead boyfriends that couldn’t be produced (couldn’t be produced because there was no boyfriend? Or he didn’t die? Or he didn’t die in Mexico? Or he died but there was no problem returning his body? This was an unsolved mystery although Simona swears she met the incredulous boyfriend later who said they merely broke up. I guess break ups can feel like deaths after all.)

Tim was appointed President of the Student Council to replace Laura. For the rest of us, not much changed. Laura and I went on to separate grad school programs at the same university, but continued to work in the Student Affairs office, radically changing our dynamic with Simona, but not with each other. Jim was a Senior, still around. Steve and I continued to be the same level of close/distant we’d been before graduation. The planets had shifted, but the orbit remained the same.

Laura recalls, “Tim replaced me as President, and I made the mistake of staying around at school for a year after graduation. I went from being Simona’s golden girl to just another employee, the hired help in the Student Affairs office. He became the golden boy. She was under his spell, too, and when it all came crashing down, I remember thinking, ‘See? At least I had integrity — your golden boy was not so golden.’” There was no reason for Laura to be jealous or concerned. Tim’s position on Student Council was what eventually led to his demise.
He continued to cater the parties so frequently thrown. He was in the office almost as much as I was, and I worked there twenty hours a week. I remember Tim laughing and moving quickly around like he owned the place, and I wondered if, as an Undergraduate I had done the same. I don’t think so. He was a man high on his own power, or manic from the burden of lies.

Tim strutted around the office, bringing checks to Simona’s staff to sign. He charmed them all, especially one assistant. His smile, his inside jokes, whispered like secrets, his arched eyebrow insinuating so much, not the least of which was sex, all these he brought to her office when he whisked in the check acquisition form for her to sign without so much as dropping her eyes to look at the form.

If this would’ve been all — just the checks, just the lies — I still believe he wouldn’t have been caught. But right around the time he was appointed, the Student Council office — a small oblong closet with a window on the far side and two cluttered desks — was robbed, not once, but three times. All this might’ve snuck past another person, but Student Council Treasurer that year was Jim, our very own Angry Man. And there was no way he wasn’t getting to the bottom of it.

Jim and I were living together in a small, three room flat on the Lower East Side. There was a shower in the kitchen, and Jim’s sickly gray cat that puked all over the place. The cat was a point of contention. Jim had recently begun staying long weekends with his boyfriend. It was getting as so he almost never came home. And that damn cat — that dead-eyed skeleton with its hip bones protruding sharply against its skin — was constantly sick, and I, the only person who still really lived there, had to clean it up.

One Friday night Jim didn’t come home. It was just me, the cat (with the appropriately runny-sick name of Egg), and stacks and stacks of Jim’s Jean Genet books, S/M posters, French texts, and beautifully scripted journals in the big room beneath his loft bed. I cleaned the mess four times that night, so when Jim finally stumbled in at 11 in the morning, I was pissed. “Where have you been?” I hissed. “I thought you said you’d be home.”

“Wait. Just wait,” he replied. He was an angry guy, but he wasn’t always good with conflict. In fact, it made him whine.

“We talked about this,” I grumbled.

“Look, I spent the night in the Student Council office. You’ll never guess what I found.”

Jim lit up with sudden energy. He’d been awake all night, but he had his reward. Not only did he investigate the robberies — done without breaking a lock — he saw that no one had made any deposits from any of the Student Council t-shirt sales either. There was a couple thousand dollars missing, and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

“So they stole that money, too?” I asked, not quite comprehending.

“No. Tim said he deposited it. No one checked up on it. The money’s all gone.”

On Monday morning, Jim donned his gray wool newsboy cap and marched his Doc Marten boots right into Simona’s office. Confusion ensued. She didn’t quite believe it. Neither could Tim.
I was outside her office. I heard the raised voice and dubious protests. “Jim hates me,” Tim swore. “He always has.”

“That’s not what’s happening here, Tim,” Simona said, trademark low voice, almost a whisper. “You’re going to need to present receipts.”

“I have everything at home. I was just going to deposit the money.”

“Don’t,” she said. “Just bring it here. We’ll clear this whole thing up.”

The office door opened, and Tim walked out, ashen and gray. He was shook up from the ground up, and his trademark smile was missing. Even his hair drooped flat. He walked past me without saying a word.

I can’t remember seeing him again. Only later, I found out the truth. Simona had tried to keep the situation discreet, but when Tim didn’t return to the office, a full-scale investigation was launched. Turned out those checks everyone had signed were falsified. The assistant would approve a check for $1,000. Tim would add a zero. Or, sometimes he became so bold, he just plopped a request for ten grand right in front of her face, and she signed it without looking, taken by his rakish wit and smile. The point is he was trusted. Although he’d done everything to the contrary to show he shouldn’t have been. We didn’t pay attention to those bells and whistles, and the next thing we knew, he was in court.

Later that year, after the trial, when she was still spinning from betrayal, Simona shared with me what happened. The university insisted on prosecuting. Tim had committed felony offenses. He owed well over $100,000 that they knew of. Seeking to protect him, Simona begged off criminal prosecution, and instead, the college pursued civil. She didn’t want Tim in jail — she still cared about him that much — and she promised he would be accountable.

I can picture him in court, hung jaw, stunned, unshaven, the proverbial “jig is up” heaviness hanging about him. He made an agreement to resign Student Council, continue to work for Simona, and give a portion of his earnings back to the school little by little. The judge estimated it would take ten years to repay the debt, but it would restore confidence in him, and keep him out of jail. Tim readily agreed. He signed the agreement, and would start work the next day, an exposed and known man, but a clean one. Simona came in early to wait for him in her office. He never showed. No one saw or heard from him again.

Tim was a pathological liar. Everything he ever paid for, he stole. In some ways, it’s not fair to tell it this way. To drop it on you like that, an anti-climax.

Now, when I speak to her about it, I sense it’s dangerous to remember, treacherous to push. There’s the feeling we all had — why didn’t I know? — but it’s deeper for her. She was the mentor, the teacher, the parent. The one who knew better and captained the ship. She wasn’t human to us, because we didn’t allow her any foibles. Who allows their parents their flaws? Their lapse in judgment? Those we took on to ourselves, to the detriment of the full truth. Even
today, twenty years later, it’s hard to let go of that relationship, to grow into an adult. It’s hard not to be those good, honest kids she knew and raised us to be.

The Tim debacle happened at the time the university hired a new Dean, a woman who would become Simona’s boss. As soon as she was hired, she began to dismantle the school we loved. The first step was removing the old guard. Simona was eventually fired from the position she’d held for two decades. The salon lost its Stein, the kingdom its queen.

I’m fairly certain now, looking back, that Tim was a part of all this, one of the concrete reasons Simona could be so summarily dismissed. She was an Associate Dean, but for years had run the school, while the new Dean’s predecessor drank hard. Simona didn’t deserve what she got. After the firing, she whittled down to nothing. Suffered a break down. It took years to get her back on her feet. And she never worked with undergraduates again, the true joy of her life. She remembers, “I could’ve helped him more when it was just the stories. I don’t blame myself, but there’s a sadness. I didn’t step back enough when I should have.”

Simona recalls other stories, ones we never heard, about Tim’s horrible family and the abuse leveled at him throughout his childhood. Parents who hated and beat him for being gay. Simona believes these stories are one reason she kept protecting him, even beyond reason. At Tim’s trial, the family showed up. They weren’t from Connecticut, but Pennsylvania. A few of the nicest people you’d ever meet, Simona said. They were as surprised about all this as we were. They’d been looking for him. He’d been homeless awhile and on the street. They were worried, and wanted to make sure he was okay. Simona doesn’t remember any of this now. She’s blocked the whole thing out. But I remember her telling me. I remember more than they all do.

I wasn’t the Student Council President. I wasn’t the one burning with a cause. I wasn’t the charming actor, and I wasn’t the antagonist of this story, the one who told all the lies. But somehow, I seem to be the memory. In talking to everyone, time and again I heard, “I can’t remember.” “Did he?” And, “How do you recall this stuff?”

I was a filmmaker in school. My eye was a camera. I took pictures of it all. These people were my family, and the Scholars my most important home. I still feel like the luckiest person on Earth that of all those 5,000 students, all those hundreds of thousands of applicants, all those millions of people crowding into that city hoping to stand out, that I was a part of it. I took away my stories. Tim stole his. We try to control the impact of our truth and our fiction, but in the end, there’s no way to know if we ever can. In many ways, telling stories is betrayal. Whether they’re true or not. Intimacies are betrayed.

And if I were to tell you, that this was all just a lie? That there wasn’t a Tim or a Scholars’ program or any of these friends? If I was the pathological liar, telling it all to make myself seem inflated or important, not because you need me to, but merely to decorate my experience of myself? All of these stories are possible. All of these stories could be true. Why would you ever doubt them?

To return to Mr. Doctorow, who I quoted at the beginning: perhaps there is no fiction or nonfiction, only narrative, one we tell always, primarily to ourselves. If this was the case, it
would hardly matter if this story were true or not. Truth is sometimes unverifiable, even to ourselves. The memory recedes and the memory re-sees. Or maybe this is the only way I could think of to give you the experience of what it was like, doubting everything, never quite sure, pathologizing everyone. History and shared experience circumspect.

For doing that to you, I offer my apologies, and promise to buy you one perfect drink. Salty. Murky. And with the lingering taste of the sea.

Cheers.
Сergey Yesenin

Край любимый! Сердцу снятся

Край любимый! Сердцу снятся
Скирды солнца в водах лонных.
Я хотел бы затеряться
В зеленях твоих стозвонных.

По меже на переметке
Резеда и риза кашки.
И вызванивают в четки
Ивы, кроткие монашки.

Курит облаком болото,
Гарь в небесном коромысле.
С тихой тайной для кого-то
Затаил я в сердце мысли.

Все встречаю, все приемлю,
Рад и счастлив душу вынуть.
Я пришел на эту землю,
Чтоб скорей ее покинуть.

1914
Land beloved! I have dreams of
Bales of sun in wombal waters.
I would like to disappear
In your hundred-ringing verdure.

On the furrows lining crops are
Mignonettes and white-robbed clovers,
And on branching rosaries
Willows knell like placid nuns.

Swamps are smoking on a cloud;
Soot is hanging on the skyline.
With a quiet secret I have
Hidden tender thoughts for someone.

All of this I clasp and cherish;
I’d be glad to give my soul here.
I was put upon this earth
That I’d leave it all the sooner.

1914
(Translated from the Russian by Max Thompson)
Гой ты, Русь, моя родная,
Гой ты, Русь, моя родная,
Хаты — в ризах образа...
Не видать конца и края —
Только синь сосет глаза.

Как захожий богомолец,
Я смотрю твои поля.
А у низеньких околиц
Звонно чахнут тополя.

Пахнет яблоком и медом
По церквам твой кроткий Спас.
И гудит за корогодом
На лугах веселый пляс.

Побегу по мятой стежке
На приволь зеленых лех,
Мне навстречу, как сережки,
Прозвенит девичий смех.

Если крикнет рать святая:
«Кинь ты Русь, живи в раю!»
Я скажу: «Не надо рая,
Дайте родину мою».

1914
*Hey there, Russia, native friend!*

Hey there, Russia, native friend!  
Huts like vested icons rise.  
One can't see your edge or end –  
Just your azure drinks one's eyes.

As a pilgrim come from hence,  
I take in your fields' extent.  
And along the village fence  
Poplars sing a soft lament.

In your churches Christ our Lord  
Smells of honey and of apples.  
Peasants singing on a sward  
Dance a roundel by the chapel.

I run on a worn road; near me –  
Meadows of unending green.  
Greeting me, like catkins, cheery,  
Girlish laughter rings out clean.

If the saintly hordes cry out,  
“Come to bliss. What’s Russia worth?”  
I'll say, “Bliss? I'll do without —  
I'd prefer my land of birth.”

1914  
(Translated from the Russian by Max Thompson)
Корова

Дряхлая, выпали зубы,
Свиток годов на рогах.
Бил ее выгонщик грубый
На перегонных полях.

Сердце не ласково к шуму,
Мышь скребут в уголке.
Думает грустную думу
О белоногом телке.

Не дали матери сына,
Первая радость не прок.
И на колу под осиной
Шкуру трепал ветерок.

Скоро на гречневом свее,
С той же сыновней судьбой,
Свяжут ей петлю на шее
И поведут на убой.

Жалобно, грустно и тоще
В землю вопьются рога...
Снится ей белая роща
И травяные луга.

1915
The Cow

She's decrepit, with sunken-in teeth
And the scroll of the years on her horns.
The pitiless drover would beat
Her on fields that he drove her across.

Her heart is unfriendly to noise;
Mice skitter around in the corner;
She's thinking disconsolate thoughts
About the white calf that she bore.

They took from the mother her son;
The first joy she felt was no use.
And on the stake under the aspen,
A dried-out hide shakes in the breeze.

Soon on the shucked buckwheat husks,
The fate of her son will have got her:
She'll have a noose slung on her neck,
And she'll be led to the slaughter.

Pitifully, sadly, and gauntly,
Her horns will sink into the earth...
She dreams of a birchen-white grove
And the green fields of her birth.

1915
(Translated from the Russian by Max Thompson)
Не бродить, не мять в кустах багряных
Лебеды и не искать следа.
Со снопом волос твоих овсяных
Отоснилась ты мне навсегда.

С альм соком ягоды на коже,
Нежная, красивая, была
На закат ты розовый похожа
И, как снег, лучиста и светла.

Зерна глаз твоих осыпались, завяли,
Имя тонкое растаяло, как звук,
Но остался в складках снятой шали
Запах меда от невинных рук.

В тихий час, когда заря на крыше,
Как котенок, моет лапкой рот,
Говор кроткий о тебе я слышу
Водяных поющих с ветром смот.

Пусть порой мне шепчет синий вечер,
Что была ты песня и мечта,
Всё ж, кто выдумал твой гибкий стан и плечи —
К светлой тайне приложил уста.

Не бродить, не мять в кустах багряных
Лебеды и не искать следа.
Со снопом волос твоих овсяных
Отоснилась ты мне навсегда.

1916
I won’t wander through the scarlet leaves
Of goosefoot, and I will not trace your steps.
With a lock of your hair’s flaxen leaves,
Like a dream, you have forever left.

With the carmine juice of berries on
Your skin, you were tender, beautiful,
To a sunset’s rosy glow akin,
And as radiant and light as snow.

Your eyes withered like two buckwheat grains;
Your slender name dissolved, like a sound,
But in your crumpled shawl there still remained
The smell of honey poured by blameless hands.

In hours of calm, when sunrise, on the roof,
Wipes its mouth, like kittens with their paws,
I hear the gentle speech about you of
Dewy gossamer, singing with the breeze.

Even if blue evening sometimes whispers
To me that you were a song and dream,
Still, he who formed your shoulders and your figure
Brushed his lips against a secret’s gleam.

I won’t wander through the scarlet leaves
Of goosefoot, and I will not trace your steps.
With a lock of your hair’s flaxen leaves,
Like a dream, you have forever left.

1916
(Translated from the Russian by Max Thompson)
when he sloughs his inside cheek the perverted charcoal
sketches loose bindings on gold plated buckles color

parakeet radios mimicking stereograph layers a receptacle
for mammograms the acid your american tutor hides in cardboard

desiccant packets he munches stuffs pants with greek dictionaries
a thief a man a hand signal a retinal passcode fluffing mushrooms

on top of dancing table legs wall pipes shk-shk-shk indian
rainsticks ants thirsty desperate arthropods invade a miserable

bathtub it hasn't rained it won't rain sun splits soil puckered
chapped liplets a body the earth a body your body the earth

remember suddenly drowning except for jars in the morning
place a late loss a day’s wafer pebble language in fists

a helic an aztec your obsession with culture your cells
forsaking as if forsaking nothing except letters or fullness
Rachel Gray  
*Don’t Hate Spiderman Because He’s Beautiful*

I watched from the street as this kid pulled his maybe seven-year-old body onto the hood of an El Camino parked behind the Jewish funeral home. Abandoned for longer than anyone could tell me, the funeral home was engraved in my mind as a point of recognition, marking our malfunctioning keys and lost copies, the act of sliding the glass window, and pushing off Chris’s clasped hands, his T-shirts stacked on top of my nightgown. The images ran together like copper or silver metal, hardening into a five-pointed and much needed landmark I liked to walk behind with my groceries.

The pudgy little body swung to the ground as a low hanging branch bounced back above the El Camino. Like a little animal, he ran around to the driver’s side and stuck his feet inside the rim, then over the wheel, leaping, once on top of the car, for the branch.

I passed the El Camino just as he landed on the hood again, extending his arms for balance. He looked at me weird between his long eyelashes and I didn’t say anything.

He sort of crawled next to my bare legs and started tapping them with a fallen branch until I bent under there myself and told him to stop. Of course that only helped for a second. Not even after I walked away did he quit tapping on my legs with the stick. So I turned to him and said, “What is your problem?”

“I’m Spiderman!” he said and slashed at me like a cat.

I set down the grocery bags. “OK Spiderman,” I said, bending forward to touch the end of the stick with my fingers, slowly and gently gathering them around the wood.

“Hey!” he jumped, realizing what had happened, but I lifted the branch out of his reach and tossed it into the trees. “You can’t do that!”

“Actually, Spiderman,” I said. “I can.”

Then all of a sudden these kids came out of nowhere like his little gang of helpers in light-up, pink tennis shoes and gold chains. I walked pretty quickly back to the apartment, ignoring the “Hey, girl!” that rang out between the tall buildings.

That night, I told myself no matter what this was better than volunteering at some charity for some kind of soup kitchen or something, flattening the solder with a hammer, working quickly so the flux didn’t melt. Afterwards, covered in white paste, Chris and I cooked spaghetti and watched *American Psycho*.

We poured the Corona into a yellow, plastic water bottle and walked past potted blue flowers and fountains. Something about the building at night, the church where Chris tried to make me say anything and I didn’t want to and then I finally did. Chris talking to me in the sand in the dark part of the beach under the trees. The way the moon looks out there at night. Can this school make me a better person?

Eventually this chubby kid’s face would appear in the kitchen window while I was cutting shapes out of plates of copper or sawing through wire. I respected how he didn’t bring his gang
along and how he never seemed to want anything but to watch. He didn’t appear to know much English. I poured us some of my roommate’s milk and we talked about Virginia Woolf and *Thelonious Alone in San Francisco*. The way he just spins in circles and befriends this rich white lady with like a lot of cats because I think she was lonely. I told him about this feeling I got sometimes reading *Waves*, especially on the train, as if something was actually surrounding and crashing into me. We talked about how she must have been hiding something inside the sentences, sort of like how death and age must kind of just creep up on us and that sometimes I imagine her still alive and no I wouldn’t no matter how much you beg give away the ending because reading it yourself is sacred.

When he seemed to want to know more about the propane tank and rawhide hammer I told him about the tradition of the goldsmith as the safe-keeper of valuables and engraver. It started to anger me that he was so young and I was wasting it all on him and he wouldn’t even get it. He would come over and I would say, “It’s very artsy, you wouldn’t understand.” Or tell him that he reminds me of this fat cat that’s always around my parents’ house. Or that I was an independent woman and he had probably never heard of that. You probably think that because my boyfriend works at an office to support us it doesn’t count. You probably think my boyfriend could be an artist too if he wanted, if he didn’t go to that Catholic school, and then that Catholic university, and hanging around a little kid all day isn’t going to help anyone.

“Come on,” he said, washing out his cup and opening the screen door before walking out on the wooden deck and bouncing down the stairs.

His jeans were that rusty jean color that I never liked and his thumbs stuck out of two holes in the sleeves of his gray sweatshirt.

“Wait,” I yelled, walking into the bedroom to grab my purse. “I have to pick up milk anyway.”

It was totally weird how the environment outside exactly matched my mood. I don’t even really remember much about walking out of that apartment any other day but that one. The sun hit everything at a poisonous angle that made the clay squares and butterfly gardens look neon. Kids flew by on skateboards and an Asian woman walked to the edge of her lawn.

“I still don’t understand why we can’t go to the CVS on Lakewood,” I said as he pushed dollar bills into the machine and motioned with his head for me to follow him through the metal turn stalls.

“I want to show you something special,” he said.

Once it was clear he could speak English I asked him question upon question and soon we got to talking about this other kid, Gael, who’s always making trouble in his little gang. He said Gael used to line up the toy people in his sister’s playhouse and pick out the hairs from his eyebrows. He told me about this girl he liked named Jasmine. She was real quiet and always

The tradition of the goldsmith is really what attracted me: the safe keeper of valuables, the engraver.
went through the same metal stall when they were going to the train. One time it was broken and she didn’t know what to do. She just stood behind it, twisting the end of her ponytail between her fingers. He was like, Jasmine why don’t you just use this one? She just shook her head and smiled and finally pointed above them at a picture of a man and a woman going through the metal stalls: the man on the left, the woman on the right.

I thought about how I was going to make something for Spiderman if he was always spying on me. I would have to wake up really early, set the alarm, and make a lot of coffee. I told him about pretending my mother was a stranger once in a CVS when I was his age. I remembered her face moving from annoyance to disbelief to trying to be both forceful and strict with me and then sympathetic and self-aware to all people in CVS who I had attracted with my screams of, “She’s not my Mom!” How I didn’t even remember being punished, but I remembered that.

The tradition of the goldsmith is really what attracted me: the safe keeper of valuables, the engraver. Then it was cutting shapes out of plates of copper or silver metal and sawing through wire; flattening the solder with a hammer, working quickly so the flux didn’t melt. Spiderman’s special thing turned to be the Catholic school, and I wondered how many other people had the same special place, which, when you thought about it, ruined the idea of it being special, actually, and I walked home alone, without him, content with my disappointment, ignoring his little body following close behind mine.

“If I feed you will you go away?”
“You’re just going to leave me outside?”
“I found you outside.”

Coming home with a book in the evening, when I’ve wandered to the museum or the lake and thought I’d stop by the comic book store for Chris or for whatever reason woke up with a plan after going to bed in need of one. I still have not really gotten there or beaten anything or completed any test and this boy and his focus and drive were so similar to everything missing from everything. A superhero I had until now avoided.

Around this time, Chris had gotten really into comic books. His friend was on the third floor copying articles about American identity and the other half of the sandwich Chris saved for me was starting to smell but I couldn’t find Virginia Woolf anywhere on the fourth floor.

Chris was bending down over the comic books. “Look at this,” he told me, holding up a newer Spider-Man comic with an alien green color and curve to his mask. “I don’t like the way it looks,” he said.

I went back to the tree in front of the Jewish funeral home and with a pocketknife carved SPIDERMAN lengthwise on the side of the tree facing the playground. Somehow I hadn’t figured the park and the tree were related, or that I would ever see Spiderman again but he showed up around ten just as I was leaving and ran around pointing at the mark and then at himself while
the teachers watched with caution and heavy laughs; kids were sitting obediently next to them, or crying between their legs.

He gathered the other kids around the tree marked with, I thought, an impeccable carefulness for the early morning with my bag over my shoulder and hair still wet, after Chris had jumped on the bed and patted my face and then combed a section of my hair very gently with his finger.

Spiderman lined the group up and began tapping their heads with a stick that caused them to fall down to their knees or curl their arms under their armpits and wave their elbows around like sharp little flippers or wings. One boy came over and joined by shaking his butt into another boy who was currently crouched and scratching his chin. Spiderman pushed him to the ground with a stick.

“Alexander,” a smooth deep voice called. “Drop that stick!”

The kids began circling the fallen boy and their ring leader almost instantaneously, cheering as the boy started slapping and kicking Alexander who had dropped the stick and kicked right back.

“Ale-ex-ander! Ale-ex-ander!” they clapped, madly encouraged and alive before the woman took Alexander in one hand and the other boy kicking on her hip and the crowd dispersed.

The woman’s red T-shirt said Teena across the front and she tugged at his hand when she spoke to him as a way to let him know he could respond, but Alexander didn’t say anything and the kids around him giggled before they were silenced.

The trees shook the light into patterns while Teena zipped their black backpack and the led the kids in hand-held doubles down the sidewalk. They put out their free hands and sang loudly when they crossed the street. And it was me and Alexander who took up the rear, holding hands.

The woman started to like me. She put her hand on my hair and said it was pretty. And everything is going great. I’m meeting all of the other kids and still talking to Alexander because I love him the most and still talking to Chris and then there is a man watching and there are bubbles everywhere and Teena is watching the man and Gael’s parents are trying to get him to come over to see him and Alexander sees a spider web and Gael kicks it in and runs away and we are running after him because Alexander is pissed and Chris. I buy a comic book for him and it is raining and everyone has an umbrella and I am wearing a little striped dress and this guy says hey baby and I forgot my cell phone and Chris isn’t coming down

We talked about how she must have been hiding something inside the sentences, sort of like how death and age must kind of just creep up on us and that sometimes I imagine her still alive and no I wouldn’t no matter how much you beg give away the ending because reading it yourself is sacred.
and there’s a woman on the street who is young and blonde and homeless and the businessman in front of me gives her the loose change in his pocket and I remember being here and looking at the museum and I remember washing the dishes and the neighbor’s dog barking and our roommate watching HBO and eating McDonalds saying, “Don’t judge me.”

...like we’re not going to judge you, but it’s hard to remember how exactly I got lost and how exactly the woman running the day care looked somehow off with her curled, light hair and pink sweater, in the way that she talked to the children, which was different than the way Teena talked to them. Following the red and blue umbrella because it looked like a web, confusing myself until I didn’t know where I was and starting to be afraid that there weren’t any more people left on the street and I had something expensive. Chris saying I’m something special. and the umbrella closing. getting on the train and I am starting to remember my mom hold them tight tell them it will all be ok.
Michael Huff

Hatch

Four horse tails. Switch. The moment rise, the
moment fall as if burning. If there is one
beautiful thing in the day she counts it.
A step later remembering she wants.
The tiger is perfect machinery
she recites. The way down is the way up,
hiccup, she says, before falling on purposes
in the field and tries to exhaust the stars
as if the light in this heaven were new
and still shining, no measure, even now
and still turning.
I surfaced from the clear pool. A palm tree rustled in the wind. I walked down the street and met a fat man with four small, aggressive white dogs. He told me to pet them and I said no. I had lunch next to a billboard advertising vaginal tightening. I entered St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church. A man sat in the eighth pew, wearing a fisherman’s hat, smiling. A woman stood in the lobby, black hair and black dress, sniffling quietly into a white embroidered handkerchief. On the street outside, a man with slicked-back hair drove by in a turquoise convertible. I walked up four cinder block steps that ended in a vacant lot. The water shimmered, a duck squawked. I stepped out of the sun and into City Hall with its white-walled interior, spotless blue carpet, and photos of mayors dating back to 1952. Back on the street, a woman sunning herself in a plastic chair on a concrete slab driveway said, “My dear, you’re lovely.” Three houses down, a rusted chain-link gate featured a tiny sign reading merely: DOG. Vintage bathtubs in the middle of pebble-and-scrubby-grass lawns were all placed askew. Artistic statements or symbols of giving up? In a garden shop, the clerk pointed at antlers on the wall and told me she wanted them. We discussed wild boar and the absence of law. At the market I bought mangoes and wine and then hurried on home. The bright orange ball dipped below the horizon, and that was that.
Images
“Silence is Betrayal”
Clint Reid
Pen & Watercolor on Cold Press Paper
6” x 6”
“The Key is Nothing You Can See”
Clint Reid
Pen & Watercolor on Cold Press Paper
5”x 7”
“Sons, Like Birds”
Clint Reid
Pen & Watercolor on
Cold Press Paper
5” x 7”
“Treeboy”
Clint Reid
Pen & Watercolor on
Cold Press Paper
5”x 8.5”
“You Were a House on Fire”
Clint Reid
Pen & Watercolor on Cold Press Paper
5”x 7”
Reviews & Interviews
Useful Delusions: An Interview with Oklahoma Poet Laureate, Benjamin Myers
By Kathleen Guill, Jacory Shannon, Jonathan Tuckwell and Bayard Godsavw

Benjamin Myers is the author of two books of poetry: Lapse Americana (New York Quarterly Books, 2013) and Elegy for Trains (Village Books Press, 2010), which was awarded the Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry in 2011. His poetry has appeared in This Land, Nimrod, New York Quarterly, Christianity and Literature, Chiron Review and Salamander, among others. In February 2015, he was named Oklahoma’s State Poet Laureate for 2015-2016. Ben was on Cameron University’s Campus in April to read as part of the Big Pasture Reading Series, and while he was here the editors of the Oklahoma Review sat down with him to discuss his new appointment, his work, and the role faith plays in his writing, among other things.

[Oklahoma Review]: What is the process of becoming Poet Laureate, and how did you find out?

[Benjamin Myers]: It was the Humanities Council at the time, it’s the Arts Council now, that oversees it, gathered up nominations. Any loosely defined “literary organizations” can nominate someone, so: English departments at universities, writing groups, that kind of thing. I was nominated by the faculty at Northeastern State University [Tahlequah]. And they send in a packet with my poems, recommendations, this is why we think Ben Myers should be poet laureate, that sort of thing. Then the Humanities Council wades through all of that and makes a recommendation to the Governor. So I just got a call one day, from the Office of the Governor, saying, We need to run a background check on you. That was the tip off. I don’t usually get phone calls from the Governor’s Office saying they need to do a background check.

[OKR]: Did you know you’d been nominated at that point?

[Myers]: I knew I’d been nominated. I was told at the Scissortail Creative Writing Festival. So, yeah, the background check was how I knew, and then I got an official notification a few weeks later.

[OKR]: How do you envision your role as Poet Laureate?

[Myers]: My job is to basically encourage the art of poetry in Oklahoma. I try to get people excited about poetry, about reading poetry, writing poetry. Promoting it any way I can, whether that’s traveling to different communities around the state to give readings, but also I’ve done things like judging the Poetry Out Loud state finals. I sit in on workshops, lectures about Oklahoma poetry and that sort of thing. Pretty much what I was doing anyway, but now I have a kind of official platform for that.

[OKR]: How many places have you been this week?
[Myers]: This week... what is this, Friday? [Laughs] I think this is only the second place this week.

[OKR]: So is that a slow week?

[Myers]: Only compared to next week. I think I’ll do three or four next week. April being National Poetry Month and all.

[OKR]: How do you think about a collection of poetry? Do you think of it as a book first, or does the collection come after the poems are written?

[Myers]: Usually it comes after. I’m sort of aware of a thematic unity as I’m writing, but often that just comes out of the experiences I’m going through. These might be the things I’m writing poems about, so this will be what the book’s about. Then when I’m putting it all together into a book it always reminds me of making a mix-tape. What’s going to sound good after this one? How can I vary the mood and feeling? I think most people think they’re really good at making a mix-tape. Usually it’s just sort of my life at the time.

[OKR]: Are there any poems in Lapse Americana that had been written earlier but that hadn’t made it into the first book for some reason?

[Myers]: You know there are a couple, a few that just conceptually didn’t fit. There’s a poem called “Oracle,” that’s kind of a weird poem written in syllabics that’s maybe a little obscure, a little strange, and it just didn’t seem right in Elegy for Trains, which was just a little bit less experimental, but seemed to work better in the second book.

[OKR]: Both books are divided into sections. What do you think these add to the reading experience?

[Myers]: One thing I’m trying to do in those sections is mark shifts, almost like acts or chapters, within the books. Sometimes the sections will reflect a certain mood, but I’m trying to create a kind of arc in each book. So, in Lapse Americana, the darkest section is the second-to-last section. And then I try to work poems that deal with acceptance and reconciliation into the final section. I think that’s maybe inspired by thinking about how narrative works. Maybe it’s inspired by the Star Wars trilogy. Go all dark, and then redeem it. I don’t know where it comes from, really, but I try to package things conceptually and tonally into those sections.

[OKR]: What about when it comes to individual poems? You employ a number of different formal approaches in your books. Where does that come in? Do you know the form from the beginning, or does it happen in revision?
Myers]: I tend to talk about form in sort of pseudo-mystical ways, like, the form is in the air and I'm just finding it [laughs], and I know that there's a faint whiff of BS about that, but I can't help it. That's the way I think about it. Some poems really begin just with particular urge for a form. The poem, “Pastoral” [from Lapse Americana], that came when I was driving to work one day and I just had this urge to write elegiac quatrains. There was something about the experience of that landscape that just seemed to need that form. And that may be completely delusional, but if it is it's a useful delusion, a delusion I can work from. Sometimes it's a matter of—I've got one poem I'm working on, it started out as a sonnet, and it just wasn't working, so I put it in free verse, but it was just sort of floppy in free verse, so then I tried rhymed couplets and it was too stiff, then I put it in blank verse and quickly took it out of blank verse, then I tried this five line stanza with one unrhymed line that I stole from Jim Barnes, and it's still not right.

OKR]: I think about when I teach poetry in Intro class, and it's interesting to hear you talk about taking something from an open form to something highly formal, a rhymed form. One thing I often see in those early attempts at formal verse is a poem will be going along great, then about halfway through the rhyme scheme seems to take over and all of a sudden it's writing the poem.

Myers]: Yeah. The ideal is if the rhyme scheme can steer you to new discovery, which is how a lot of hardcore formalist poets will talk about their use of form. But then, it shouldn't be obvious to the reader when that's happening. If the rhyme can lead you somewhere without it being clear that that's what's happening, that's great. A lot of times I will abandon a formal poem when it becomes clear I'm just scrambling to find words that fit into the rhyme scheme. Oddly, a lot of my successful formal poems happen more quickly than my successful free verse. It's like the form is a kind of fit. I wrote a villanelle the first week in the semester and it just sort of came to me all at once. And I was like, Yeah, this is how it's supposed to work, now I'm going to write. Well, nothing else for the rest of the semester happened like that. Most of my free verse will take months to get comfortable with. So maybe there is a kind of magic in form. Annie Finch, the formalist, and avowed pagan, talks a lot about the relation between formal poetry and spells or incantation, and maybe there is something to that, maybe there's some ancient part of our mind that it taps into.

OKR]: Did you always know you wanted to write poetry?

Myers]: I guess I didn't always know that not everybody wrote poetry. My parents were writers. It was just what people did. I guess if you're the kid of farmers you think everyone farms. Books were always around the house—I would play with poems and I've just never grown out of it.

OKR]: You see your parents do it and it seems possible. It seems normal.
[Myers]: Yeah, you think about these circus families, right? Mom hung from a wire fifty feet in the air, so I can too. {Laughs.}

[OKR]: A lot of the poems in these collections are about childhood—either your own, or your children’s—what do you think is the draw for a poet writing about childhood?

[Myers]: I’d like to turn my nose up in some sophisticated way at Wordsworth, you know, “The child is father to the man,” and all of that Romanticism, but he's kind of right. That's a formative period. Flannery O'Connor was talking about a student saying to her that she had nothing to write about, and O'Connor’s response was basically, Anyone who has lived beyond the age of nine has enough material for a lifetime. Everything in childhood is new. Everything is so momentous. Sometimes I get frustrated when one of my children is freaking out about something so small, like a broken popsicle stick. But that popsicle stick is everything in the world to him in that moment. When nothing bigger has happened to you, everything is big. So I guess there’s a lot of emotional energy. One of those things I am very interested in is that transition from being a son to being a father. Writing about my own children, I'm not so much writing about childhood there, as I am about fatherhood, which is awesome but fills you with a lot of dread and anxiety.

[OKR]: Crows seem to be a recurring image in your poems. Is there some significance? Some reason you are drawn to images of that bird?

[Myers]: I have two answers to that. One is, they’re just everywhere. Nine times out of ten, at least around Chandler [Oklahoma], I see a bird and it’s a crow. So they’re familiar, but they’re also so uncanny. The blackness, the associations with death. Here’s this everyday bird, but it’s also this potent mythological symbol. So that interests me. Ever since I was this weird little kid, I’ve been into Norse mythology. There’s this great story about Odin’s two ravens, Thought and Memory, and he’s always sending them out. It’s kind of an image of the human mind, of human faculties, searching for meaning in the world. He sends those ravens out to fly over the world and bring these images back to him, and so I thought, Well, that’s kind of a picture of thinking in general, and maybe poetry a little bit too. But this is Oklahoma, they can't be ravens, right? So they’re crows. Ravens have too much Poe connected to them, but crows have that kind of rural connotation.

[OKR]: Faith plays a significant role in a lot of your poems. What advice or guidance would you give to writers who want to make their faith a part of their writing?

[Myers]: Yeah. Writing about faith is hard. Writing about love is hard. Writing about death is hard. So everything you could ever want to write about is hard, in part because the gravitational
pull of the cliché and sentimental is so overwhelming. These are the things we all experience, and these are the things we are compelled to write about. But, right, to write about faith, all I have to do is try to hold my own against the Psalms, how hard can it be?

[OKR]: Or “Song of Solomon.”

[Myers]: John Donne. Milton. There’s an overwhelming anxiety of influence for sure. So, one way I try to deal with that is not to write about “Faith,” but to write about my experience of faith. Not to try to make universal pronouncements, but speak of my own experience of God. What I know of God—which isn’t much. But it’s something I can use.

[OKR]: That admission of not knowing is what a fiction writer might call the tension. It’s what makes it interesting. It’s more Thomas Aquinas and less Pat Robertson.

[Myers]: I would hope so. {Laughs} Thanks for that. But that’s tricky. I’m generally a very orthodox believer in a very traditional faith, but I don’t feel the need to patrol the borders of that in my poetry. I’m not Billy Graham. I’m writing poetry.

[OKR]: Was there ever a time when you didn’t write about Oklahoma, or didn’t want to write about Oklahoma?

[Myers]: I think even starting out a lot of my poems were about Oklahoma. A lot of that has to do with my parents. Both wrote about Oklahoma, my mom still does. When I was in high school I went to the Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute and studied with B.H Fairchild, and talk about a good model for, Hey, you can write about this place if you want. There was a time when I was enthralled enough with Ginsberg and the Beats that I wanted my poems to be more urban, and it wasn’t really working. Then I remember one day a friend of mine who also wanted to be a writer, who was from somewhere else, saying to me, You’re so lucky, you have heritage. And I sort of stopped for a minute and thought, I do? Then I thought people might want to read about my redneck relatives.

[OKR]: So many writers here write about this place. It isn’t like that everywhere. So, what is it about this place, do you think, that draws so many writers in?

[Myers]: I don’t know. One thing is that Oklahoma is an unusual place. Everywhere in America is marked by struggle and suffering, but it is really apparent in Oklahoma. Some of the ugly racial history, some of the ugly agricultural history. This week everyone of course is thinking of the Oklahoma City bombing. In some ways that sense of suffering I think really amps up that sense of place. What is it Auden said about Yeats? That, Mad Ireland hurt him into poetry?
[OKR]: And a lot of that history is really close in Oklahoma.

[Myers]: Right. I was teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* the other day and I was saying to my students, you know, Tom Joad is my grandparents’ age, or would be. This isn’t the dead past. There’s also a good precedent for Oklahomans writing about Oklahoma. There’s Momaday, of course. S.E. Hinton. Woody Guthrie. The way has been cleared.

The first thing that struck me about Brent Newsom’s debut *Love’s Labors* was how beautiful it was as an *object*. And while it might seem nerdish to begin by talking about French flaps and Adobe Garamond, somehow (perhaps by virtue of the fact that you’re reading a review in an online literary magazine) I believe that you, dear reader, are something of a bibliophile and don’t mind. First, the book, at 9” x 6” and ninety pages long, sits like a jay-bird in your hand; I enjoyed carrying the book around for a weekend. When you open it you are welcomed by a flyleaf of heavy card-stock with CavanKerry’s double-ring colophon emblazoned on its front. After that a handsome title page, etc. I bring this up because this is the first book I’ve read from CavanKerry Press, and since the range in production values for small press books can be so vast, I want to single CavanKerry out here for a job well done: they have produced a beautiful book inside of which are equally beautiful poems.

Newsom seems to have written these poems in clusters and cycles. Set in the fictional small town of Smyrna, Louisiana, there are poems about Esther Green, the widow who, only after her husband passes away, is able to move out of her mobile home: “Raise a flag. Make it black, half-mast./ Your insurance bought this two-bedroom:/ brand new oven, my first lawn, an old pecan.” There are poems about Pfc. Mason Buxton, back from an incomprehensible war, now stationed in “Ft. Living Room.” There is a six poem cycle following Claudia Blackwood, a preacher’s wife who, while setting out a post-sermon lunch of chicken and iced tea, has private crisis of faith. And there’s the book’s unlikely hero, Roy Fontenot, equal parts mechanic and drunk, who sees poetry in the internal combustion engine and can make any car go, though the vehicle of his own life has come to a stop. Though Newsom is a poet, his strengths as a story teller, which are many, are novelistic—that is how developed and rich the interior lives of his characters are. In some ways this book recalls another brilliant character study, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. In both we see the poem used as a measure of understanding, and in both we see what the aesthetics of empathy can look like.

In the end this book resists easy summation. I’d like to say that all the poems are set in Smyrna, but some aren’t. I’d like to say that thematically this book is about faith and love in a
small town, but at times it isn’t. In fact some of the best poems in the book are written from Newsom’s point of view as an expecting father: “I voice a pledge/ to always love, protect, allow no hungry claw/ to harm you...Promises no man could keep,/ no god would deign to make.” And yet somehow these first-person confessionals and third-person persona poems fit perfectly next to each other, their baseline being the tangible fear and love inherent in the world. “What’s love?” Newsom writes, “if not the patience to pray?” It is this patience, and in this silence, that Newsom’s poetry seems to breathe and exist, always searching for the wisdom of a lived-life. In the final stanza of my favorite poem from this excellent collection, “January 2009: For Anthony,” Newsom seems to finally figure out what to say to his son, and to us:

If I have wisdom,
It’s this: question miracles
and believe,
for you are one
and you aren’t.

The opening chapter of Hardy Jones’ *The People of the Good God* details the exact moment when he decided to claim his Cajun heritage, which would lead him on a two-year search for his identity. He writes, “In an Iowa City bar I realized I was Cajun…and I had stated that I was from South Louisiana. This admission signaled that I was getting closer to claiming my Cajun ancestry.” The book details his journey in such a way that the reader feels that they are along for the ride. According to Jones, not much is known about Cajuns by the culture at large. “In popular society, little is known about us except stereotypes, and using them as guidelines it would be assumed I am a slow-witted, rowdy, two-fisted drinker who eats anything that moves.” Jones’ book lays these stereotypes to rest.

Jones provides an in depth exploration of everything Cajun, from his mother’s cooking of gumbo, boudin, and coubillion, to how he learned the language. He describes meals in the book so well that the reader leaves the page almost tasting his mother’s gumbo. “Food was my earliest and biggest indicator that I was Cajun and I missed it…If I had paid attention in my youth and noticed that mom was the only one in the neighborhood cooking gumbo, coubillion, and fricassée, it may not have taken me a quarter of a century to understand that I, like mom, am Cajun.” But Jones doesn’t merely describe the food; he also provides the recipes for each meal he describes. Jones also details how he learned the language. He talks about stopping at an old friend of the family’s to learn how to trill the Cajun “R”, and also how he bought tapes to teach himself the language. “As part of my linguistic self-education, I’d been listening to Father Jules Daigle’s “Cajun Self-Taught” tapes.” Jones mentions that Cajun is considered bad French but states that if Cajun is considered bad French, then European French should be considered bad Latin. He proposes that instead of calling the language “Cajun French”, it should simply be called Cajun.

Jones does a wonderful job in his descriptions of each person or place that he visits. Throughout, the book transitions smoothly between the past and the present, and never leaves the reader feeling confused. His use of convincing dialogue, detail-telling ability, and his compelling story all work together to make the reader care deeply about his story.
Contributors


Gretchen L. Dietz is working on a PhD in English at Miami University and the end is in sight. She has published nonfiction in Lipstickparty Magazine. Sources of inspiration include cactus plants and her friends’ babies.

Joe Fulton is Professor of English at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where he has been honored as a “Baylor University Class of 1945 Centennial Professor.” Dr. Fulton’s work has appeared in Christianity and Literature, The New England Quarterly, and many other journals. He has published four books on Mark Twain.

Rachel Gray grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. Her fiction can be found in Bearcreekfeed and Two Serious Ladies.

Kathleen Guill is a senior at Cameron University and is an assistant editor for the Oklahoma Review.

Kari Hawkey grew up in Orange County, California and currently resides in Surf City-Huntington Beach, but possesses a wanderlust and enjoys traveling the world. Her work appears online and in print, in such journals as Burningword, The Squaw Valley Review, Tin Cannon, and more. Kari holds a Bachelor degree in Psychology from the University of California Riverside (UCR), Masters in Educational Administration from California State University San Bernardino, Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts with an emphasis in poetry and screenwriting from the UCR low residency program, and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. During the summer of 2015, Kari will attend the Colrain Poetry Manuscript Conference. She was recently awarded the 2014 Lucille Clifton Scholarship for the Poetry Program at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. Kari was finalist for the 2013 Pocataligo Poetry Prize. During the past several summers, she has also been granted a scholarship to attend the Idyllwild Arts Academy for poetry workshops. Additionally, Kari is an intern for Smartish Pace: A Poetry Review. Previously, she served as the head poetry editor for The Coachella Review literary journal. To pay the bills, Kari instructs English to middle school students and research methods to Masters of Education students.
Michael Huff studies medicine in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He was honorably mentioned in the 2015 NEOMED William Carlos Williams poetry contest.

Laura Jones is a Northwestern MFA student in Creative Nonfiction, and a journalist working with two publications in Madison, WI, The Isthmus and Madison Magazine. Her background is in film and television. She worked ten years with PBS and ABC/Disney in both New York and L.A. Her nonfiction essay "Life and Death in the NICU" was chosen by Northwestern as the AWP Intro Journals winner and represented the school at the national AWP contest this year.

Dawn Reno Langley’s work includes 28 books (nonfiction, novels and children's books); hundreds of articles in regional, national and international publications; poetry, short stories and essays. Her short fiction and essays have both won awards, as well as being nominated for Pushcart Prizes several times. She received fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. In addition, she is a Fulbright scholar and have received an NEH fellowship to research civil rights in Mississippi. She has an MFA in Fiction from Vermont College and a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies from The Union Institute and University. Currently, she is dean of general education at a small college in North Carolina.

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Born in Cincinnati, Anthony Ramstetter, Jr. began studying singing at the age of eight, music history at the age of fifteen, and poetry at the age of twenty-one. He has earned the Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts Degrees in Creative Writing from Miami University in Ohio after earlier being Oxford Magazine’s Chief Editor from 2012 to 2013. An award recipient in both poetry and nonfiction, Anthony’s writing has been published by Drupe Fruits, Five [Quarterly], HTMLGIANT, New Delta Review, Oxford Magazine, The Poetry Foundation’s Harriet Blog, and The Puritan (Toronto).

Clint Reid is a designer, illustrator, husband, father and coffee drinker. His work can be found online at The Tillman Project. Clint graduated from Cameron University in 2005 with a Bachelors in fine art, with an emphasis on graphic design. He lives and currently works in Frederick, Oklahoma.

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Max Thompson is a third-year MFA student of creative writing and translation at the University of Arkansas. His primary translation interests are Soviet prose fiction and early twentieth-century poetry, and he is planning to spend the coming year in Moscow, Russia, translating two novellas by the Kyrgyz novelist Chingiz Aitmatov. Max’ work has appeared previously in The Alchemy Journal of Translation and is forthcoming in Unsplendid and World Literature Today. He currently resides in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Jonathan Tuckwell is a senior English Major at Cameron University.
Janea Wilson is a Los Angeles native currently residing in the South Bay. She received her B.A.s in English Literature and Creative Writing from CSULB, and is currently working on her MFA in poetry. Her writing has appeared in Myriad Magazine, Bank Heavy Press, Crate Literary Magazine, American Mustard, and Canyon Voices. She is the founder & editor-in-chief of lipstickparty mag, a general interest online magazine with a strong focus on creative writing. Her myriad passions include Flannery O’Connor, Diet Coke, intersectional feminism, and finding the perfect falafel.

Sergey Yesenin was the self-proclaimed "very last village poet" who burst onto the literary scene in Saint Petersburg in 1915 at twenty years of age, impressing Alexander Blok and other leading poets with his lyrical descriptions of his native village, which children study and recite in school. Over the next ten years, he would run through three marriages and innumerable affairs, gain notoriety as a drunken brawler, travel Europe, America, and the Near East, and, finally, hang himself on December 28, 1925, at only thirty years of age. Yesenin's life changes were reflected in his poetry, as his early idylls were replaced by poems of bitter disillusionment at his life and the Soviet regime, which gave way in turn to the final works in which he tried to take stock of his life and find hope for a better future. The poems represented here are from his early period.