

Quercus

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(kwûrkûs) Latin. (n.) The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub

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cover image:

Karin Kuzniar Tweedie ('98)

Syrup

mixed media on handmade paper

9.25" x 12", 2018

inside back-cover image:

Megan Peterson

Natural Reflection

Adobe Photoshop

8" x 10", 2019

Special thanks to Chris Reno.

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*we ripped
up our front lawns
planted
prairie grass*

*humbled ourselves
in the arms
of sunflowers*

*devoted days
to learning
how to listen*

A Dangerous Beauty

As I drive into the sunrise
toward Davenport
after an ice storm,
my hand up
to hold back the sun
shimmering
off the glass landscape
out my windows,
diamonds scattered
over roadside trees
blink out from forks
of dark branches,
flash from clefts
between limbs.
Rows of red-twig dogwood
drenched in silver,
star-dusted grasses
hug the shining shoulders.
A dangerous beauty.

I slow down, take the exit
south toward home.
The aftermath of ice
brilliant through
still-low sun
spangles
the city streets.
Crystalline shards
crackle
under tires;
oaks and maples drip
with icicles flickering
like torches.
I slow, smile in wonder.

Home. Ice crunches
up the drive to the carport.
Shivers strew the front walk,
jagged fragments
cover the front steps
and patio
like fall-out
from an explosion.

I turn, glance
at the tall elm's bare
outermost twigs,
so thin the storm's freezing coat
could not encase them long,
but slipped
and smashed
to smithereens.

If not for sun refracting
this might not seem so wonderful.

—*Nancy Hayes*

Inflorescence

The late October sun spreads thick its golden light
across our prairie grasses stalk by stalk,
one last warm coat before the chill of night.

No longer moist and green, no golden rod in sight,
the fallow stems sag toward us as we walk.
The late October sun spreads thick its golden light.

Yet we know with the paling, life's not faded quite
before the rising shadows, no cause for us to balk—
one last warm coat before the chill of night.

Don't think for long that there is no respite;
the bobbing feathered seed-heads feed our talk.
The late October sun spreads thick its golden light.

Though leaves have curled, dry culms have lost their might,
they still protect the prey coyotes stalk—
their rustling signals rabbits to take flight.

Last rays swab bluestem's inflorescence bright
with strokes of liquid gold—we cease to talk.
The late October sun spreads thin its golden light,
one last warm coat before the chill of night.

—*Nancy Hayes*

Picking Apples with Grandma

Apples are plentiful this year," Grandma said,
carrying another bucket to the wagon.
"Enough for cider?" I asked.

"Plenty for cider, pies, jam, and sauce.
It will be a better winter
after last year's crop was a loss.
Shake the branches, gather
what drops, put the bruised
in the wooden box."

Grandma told apple stories
as we picked. About Adam
and the fall from grace,
Isaac and the fall from gravity,
William, his son, and the arrow,
Johnny sowing seed across the land.

"Apples tell us about Paradise
and Paradise lost,
about faith and science,
courage and perseverance—
about life," Grandma said.
"Don't leave any on the ground."

—*Richard K. Wallarab ('56)*

Expectancy

If you want to find a way out, begin by typing *months*,

and when you instead type *moths*, you will learn that an adult moth can die in one month but that it will hatch a family.

It will trust the openwork in your home,

though a home is a trap, a place where families languish.

You will not be surprised to find holes in your sweaters.

But you will discover, typing *moth problem*, that moths don't eat, don't even have mouths to take fiber inside them.

It's the young who devour what belongs to you.

You will tuck away pouches of lavender and cedar, you will read about naphthalene,

but hunger is the problem, is always the only problem.

To throw out all that can be eaten, type *what moths eat*, but you will learn too much

and research starvation instead: *Can you starve an egg?* You will plan to clean the pantry. You will type *How long*

before bodies turn to powder? Now imagine winter afternoons

when children are ready to come indoors, arms raised for help unbundling.

Begin again by admitting what they are. See the small bodies

invading cupboards. See them seduced by light, impatient for wings.

—*Emily Kingery*

Visiting Hours

In February we set white cups of soil by our windows. They remind us of girlhood: how we spent our afternoons outside, filling pails with fallen seeds. We filled them as easily as candy bags. But it is February, and the sun sets early. Our stories darken. Did we empty our seeds in the alleys, in secret? Did they stray into our fathers' yards?

At visiting hours, we plant seeds with our daughters, pressing them into hiding. Before they go, we grip their hands and tuck down their thumbs. They sit with us and wait out the dormancy. They have known since girlhood that it ends when something breaks: a dish, a fingernail. A popping seed coat. They listen for the easy tear of tissue.

We tell how their fathers brought home jewelry of snow in their collars. How they pressed their daughters' faces to theirs and made their hair slick and cold. They tugged at their neckties, squirmed into their beds. They gathered their pink fingers and kissed them hard. They snapped them at the knuckles and packed whole hands into their fists.

Our daughters leave us seed packets for mums. We send cards to their houses to thank them, cards for wrong birthdays, cards asking them to please come back when sprouts appear. We will pinch the heads in the fall together. Your mothers are unwell, their husbands complain. Our daughters return our cards to their envelopes. They wipe their kitchens clean as hospitals.

—*Emily Kingery*

January 23

In my dream I am an inadequate lover
with skin soft, too soft, and shaky hands--
makes me cry when I wake up to you gone.
Snow is heavy, though it falls light, light,
lightly to the ground. Only a fool would
describe it as *cotton candy* or *powdered sugar*,
and even their weightless sweet settles
heavy on the tongue. Snow seeps into
my socks, conjures phosphenes on my
glasses. Snow is both *too much* and *not enough*
and I seethe with the sad business of being;
snow never shows up in my dreams. In winter
I make myself think of Concord grapes and
sun-baths and grainy lake sand sticking to my
thighs before bed to avoid accidentally dreaming
of a slow white burial. When I wake up, you
are gone. My eyes sting from the brightness.

—Hannah Blaser ('17)

Field Days

Bones are resilient until they shatter
crack near a joint, rip through the skin.
I have seen white emerge from liquid red,
and I have turned away. Deer shed antlers,
leave them behind like half-buried treasures
for dust-covered hands to find and carry
like trophies to the house, *Look, Grandma,*
look what I found. An absence of life,
a gift, sturdy as bone, given back
to the earth, only to be plucked out.
We are five. We don't know anything.
The trash that sometimes skips across the field
from the distant neighborhoods is a curious thing.
We know they eat mac 'n cheese like us and
sometimes have parties with bright green balloons.
My brother bruises his bone in a go-kart accident,
and *Thank God it didn't break.* We tear at wishbones
from cozy dinners. A lamb breaks its leg in the
bone-cold business of being born in January.
I find a skeleton of a raccoon, whole, in the woods.
We bury our dog beside the garden on a windy
October day. She is wrapped in a blanket, in my mind,
still black and brown and wrapped in soft blue.
I am older now. I watch the trash dance across the earth.
I do not go looking for death. I do not think in terms of bones.

—Hannah Blaser ('17)

Moving Day

Putting the tape aside,
the protest of its tearing away
from itself stuck in my ears,
I squeeze past the cartons
teetering like kids' blocks
to find you kneeling over china,
wrapping cups in old headlines.

Taking your hand, I pull you up
and we negotiate the narrowed hall,
edging into the empty bedroom.
The carpet where the bed once stood
is a burgundy rectangle on a red plane.

I lie in the outline and draw you down.
Rolling, our backs whorled maps
of the sculptured fabric,
we keep within this boundary.

Once I glance up, expecting
a reflection in the vanity,
a portrait on the chiffonier,
or any of the usual references
packed away with the bed
whose creaks would blend
with the sighs and small cries
on this, our last day.

—*Jeff T. Dick ('77)*

Gulls over Lake Pontchartrain

Sitting outside in long rows
at church festival tables—
you alligator sausage,
I golden fried shrimp—
we eat our poboy sandwiches
completely dressed. The beer
flows sweet as tea, while nearby
white gulls, distant sails
of southern sky,
drift, calling,
calling, dive.

Years ago, under pillars
of cloud, we unpacked
our Midwestern belongings
from plastic crates. Squawks
yawped by strange birds
raised our heads. New
Orleans, now a home
caressed by breeze, cooled
by sweat and naked
with promise. That night,
exhausted as a search party, we hunted
for folding chairs, gave up
and collapsed instead
on the tile floor, to pluck
pepperoni from cold pizza.

*Tomorrow I'll find us
some seafood, you swore,
convinced one day we would
hear our calling.*

—Jeremy Burke ('99)

Across the Lagoon

From the footbridge, I watch the rain
stir the lagoon the way diminished voices
agitate history. Folks always tell me
What a memory you've got. Sodden, I recall
having forgotten everyone who said this.

Gar surface, swallow bugs,
splash. Fishermen
pull in, park in the grass
at odd angles, jump from trucks, cast
and wait, cast and wait, catch
or don't, climb back in, take off. Drenched
on the bridge with no pole, I stare
just below the surface, listening
for some echo.

But I recollect nothing—cut off
like snapped, neon green fishing line
—until a turtle climbs the depths
with slow strokes. Its head emerges
and glass turtles from Mom's bookshelf
swim through my mind. Over the iron rail,
I lean until the turtle sinks
into green algae, disappearing
like my mother's last name
on her wedding day.

The rain retreats
back into clouds
while I wait
and watch the water
in full sun. Again,
the turtle takes a peek
at me, reemerging

a good cast away.

Trimble, I whisper,
holding another name afloat.

—*Jeremy Burke* ('99)

The Migration

I worked till dawn
in blooms of dust swirling

over the Ralston-Purina plant,
through nights of wing nuts

and the showers of reverie
waiting for Jake Wilson

to shut down the line
and call third shift home,

worked till quantum-infused
forklifts delivered our minds

on fields drowned in cement,
machinery rattling against

weighted bodies hugging sweat
grown inch by inch compacted

in the steel-toed body,
our hard hat hair nestled

under pallets of Friday babble
at the River Dog's Bar pay line.

I thought my bloodless hands
would escape towards shadow

raking up pet food sands
bursting from my alien lungs

and I'd be left like Dr. Jekyll

with the potion on my oily lips,

ten immortal fingers spawned
in decaying gloves of patchwork

alloys and crushed stone bone
ground up with petty flesh

lingering on the hub of tomorrow,
queued behind the skid marks

for the next spinout televised
along the quickening pulse.

With another drop of leaf outside
this torn shadow-wing pours

from a dry moon to boost us
up among the bare branches

of the dying cottonwood filled
with the birdsong of ghosts

hugging the Mississippi shore,
and as the factory whistle

blows whips of breath
the extruded soul of mill rights

compresses into a sonic *boom!*
boom! I descend with ancient runes,

leaves of green strung in glass
the true freedom of history

gathering in the proper milieu.
From the machine's exhaust

sleep feeds off a resume of dreams,
days of creosote and muskrats,

droppings of time and perspiration,
the once pubescent sky scattered

and ablaze over a morning held
in praise climbing with the tree.

—*Chuck Blair* ('76)

Descendant Zero

You don't remember me,
the monk Capitalist, do you,
you naive little cricket?

I sat up with you by candlelight
in a rented cave working
most nights at a theory, positioning

my measly bones at your gate.
I used you, yes I did, and tossed
your ideas aside, thinking of destiny.

I loosened my stainless throat,
but with my newly liberated insect soul
I never gave harm, and now look at me,

my hypothesis is just a lick—less than
a lyric, rhapsody in hiding.
We still wash in rain,

we follow the hours, storm
cathedrals till dawn, the usual
even as all glory is now forgiven

and only a chalk sketch of genocide
subsists on sheer chance
or that lucky ticket sequestering us

at the rub of death in a blind alley.
From the mountaintop
under your chameleon moon

let me now hurl abstraction
before naming you: in your absence

from each of our four corners

and the fossils of the future,
let me at night's approach amplify
you, descendant zero, echoes and all.

—*Chuck Blair* ('76)

Bloodwick

For years now I said I would never
write a poem about a hummingbird.
Come on—as if that humble bird is a fit
for the 21st Century. But after famous last words
and sad politicians clapping hands with groundhogs,
the world on a Saturday morning changes.
The hummingbird conducts flight school,
diving into my wife's violets hanging
in the yellow flower pot over the back patio.
Nothing so wondrous about that,
except as I look out from behind the screen door
the tiny snip is laughing at me.
Laughing at my lumbering body
growing fat and arthritic. My altitude
of apathy and wingless misery.
Well, cartoon-snickering, I suppose.
Who knew hummingbirds of all God's creatures
had fangs behind the smirk. Maybe my wife
eating gluten-free crackers in bed
knew something. Maybe the hobo rivers
knew even more. And the empty barges passing
on their way home in muddy waters knew, an inkling.
Only the hardly edible bottom-feeder dogfish,
dragging their smelly butts over
the floor of the Mississippi—well below
the politics of darkness and blood—
knew nothing, without shame.
Just beyond the railroad tracks
maples cling to their shade, a red leaf
tumbles past the witless highway
down to the headlands, boat docks jutting
like wooden scars into the backwaters,
and here sunlight alone—illuminated
by all it has to give in the late shadow
of my hummingbird—poses against the wake.

—*Chuck Blair* ('76)

The Woman Who Could Work Miracles

*when you awakened, naked,
you were tattooed by the rivers . . .
. . . you gathered
the water like vital tears . . .*
— Pablo Neruda

Semis come out at night,
blast horns, snort fumes.
Toss up empty bottles, pipes.
Watch you as you sleep.
Highways suspended
in concrete looms crest
the horizon. Your eyelids
flap . . . flap . . . flap . . .
like roller shades hard-washed
and wild in the sunlit
afterbirth of moonlight.

A single drop of blood blooms
from your ear, silent there
and alone at the lobe.
You think to smile, bemused.
Blood is just so warm.
At the next stop you'll wait
to wave at the trailing fog.
And the hours, no longer
mindful or resolute, will bring
a dozing caravan porting roof tiles
and the kitchen sink, bricks
stacked on two-by-fours,
sketches in crayon, buttery flowers,
a lily to devour—things
enough to reimagine
the chords of your new home.

You stand now on an island.
A kingdom of miracles.
Palm trees, beach balls, tattoos,
piña coladas, rum runners—all that.
An invasion of lost messages scurries
before you singing *Land ho!*
—roots ripped without
a stitch or a wheel from the genius
of the shore, pecked
away by the endless paths
unmasking Gaia's spell
amid that same ol' flock of doodles.

Duck Creek. Horseshoe bend,
6:35 a.m. Footsteps slow slide
down to a mud stop.
Phantom blue jay.
Rust coat, squirrel hop—
water wedded to rocks, plans
for the river multiply.
Now a goldfinch tipping
like a toy on the shoreline.
Traces of ash welcomed
as the sun breaks
into the morning . . .

Come out . . .

come out, disciple of water, sister.
Wherever you are.

—in memory of Kathy

—Chuck Blair ('76)

Paraphrase of a Commencement Address by Bob Hope
St. Ambrose College, May 1976

Just look at all the tulips
gathered together in the weaved
light like applause, giving up
steam and thank-you notes

as your flood tide of swank
seeps into the lawn of this
momentous occasion—and look
at the oak leaves treading

the blessed air of spring.
Meanwhile, the angular momentum
of a cross-section of America
is trailblazing its way

into rose-colored glasses,
an act not unlike reading
the obituaries in these days
of planned infatuations

shifting into a skyline
just as a cloud bank approaches,
holding it all together
in a trend to rumors of Xs

and treasure. Yes, today is
the day you'll finally collect
your tailored wits and pay off
whatever is left—the cold sweat of

culture set at the breakfast table,
the smell you could never define—
and in the bathroom a silver light

stands accused at the mirror.

Back when time was not as fresh
as the orchid you were wearing
and then pressed into the pages,
you watched your blood crest

during an event of fitful dispatches
resolved into a footnote of passion,
before the nuns had to repeat for you
what the lifelines were—part

of hand, not scars—even before
you learned about the tenor of loss
or how to fake an orgasm.
There was a flourish of time,

enough for the antiseptic smiles
and the hours buried in scabs,
until it became apparent
that our sun was raising green

pastures by the full light of day
and a patina of sobriety stood
over the body leaning into gossip
of excess waistlines, receding hair.

And still this life isn't known
by its miracles or saints.
Nobody had told you why,
not the army of spit wads

nor the classroom echoes
nor the books with broken backs.
Without straight answers
you never memorized that crap

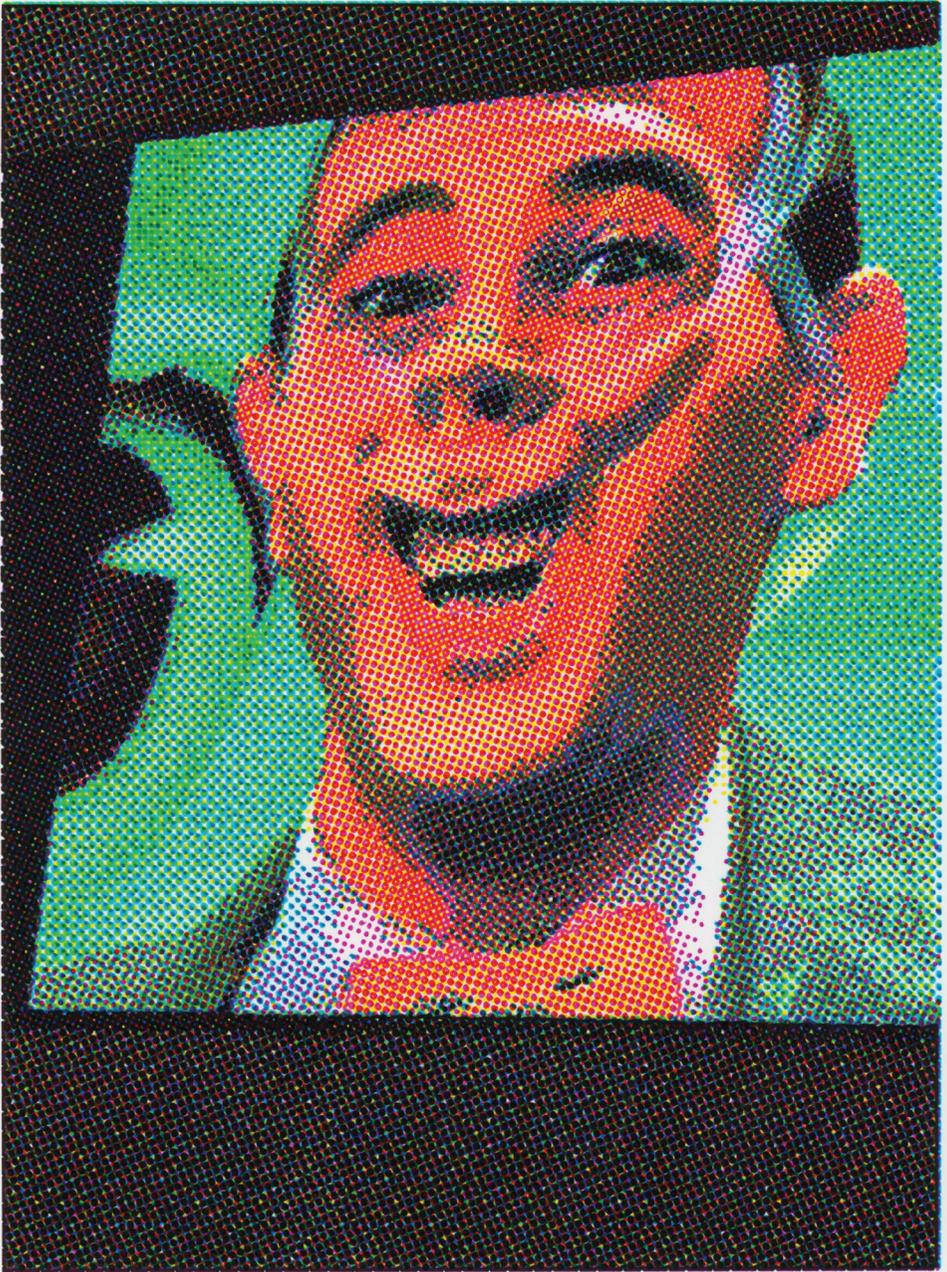
about algebra or any of the lost
languages of man, always surmising
that night's flesh would bleed
through darkness into morning.

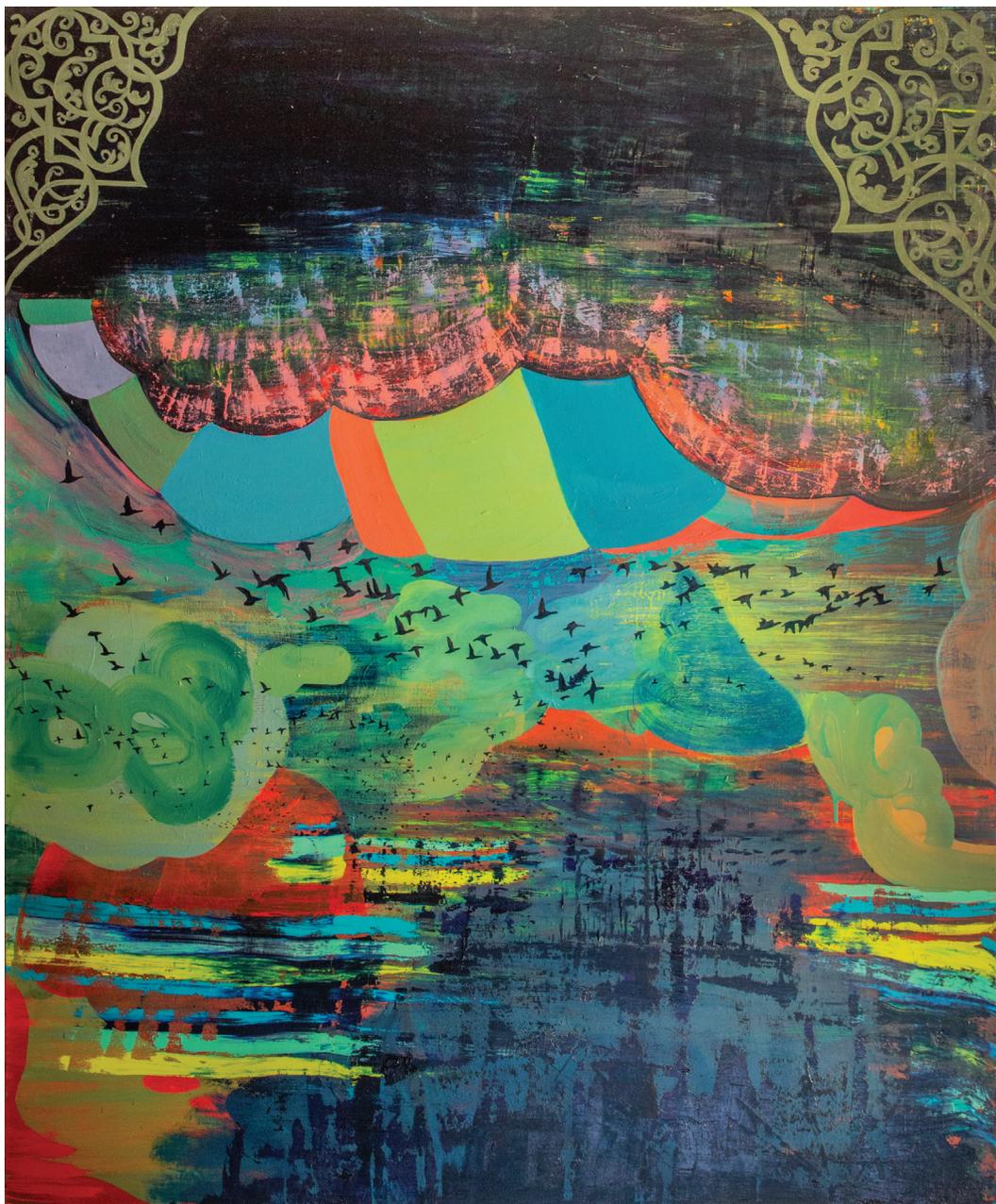
Good Lord, a man can hang himself
with a varicose vein in the pink
heaven of his holier-than-thou
thighs, and in this elitist society

of memory we are little more than
shepherds without keys, unlocking
no doors—but the sidewalk cracks
and grass grows wilder than the word

on which we turn the page—still
seeking the next laugh or the phrase
of thunder holding our memoirs
hostage in this kingdom of obese roses.

—*Chuck Blair* ('76)











Took a friend I found Across some blood red river,
Never did find my way back home in time to forgive
her. Why must people always want what they can't
have? Why must people always grab what they can't
grasp? How did we get so far? How do we move so
fast away? From the lilac-billed lake & in some we
used to play. Is it only a dream away? Took a raft
Across some blood red river. Never did find my way home
In time for dinner. Why must people always
want what they can't have? Why is it a crime to
miss part of your trait's blood? How did we get so far?
How do we move so fast away? From the lilac-billed
lake & in some we used to play. Is it only a dream
away? Only a dream away? Took a friend I found
Across some blood red river. Never did I find my
way home in time to forgive her. Why must people
always take, but forget to give? How did we get so
far? How do we move so fast away? From the lilac
lilac-billed lake. Where did we use to play
Is it only a dream away? Only a dream away.

RECENT ACQUISITION









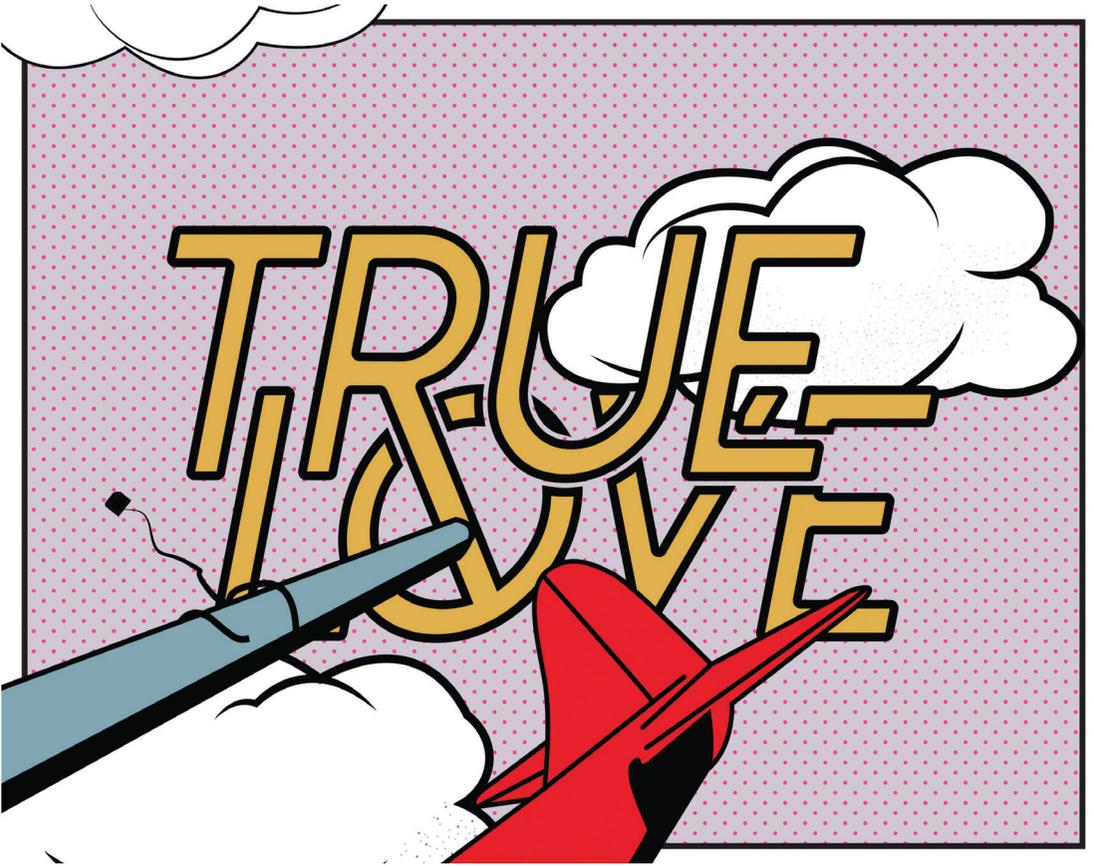




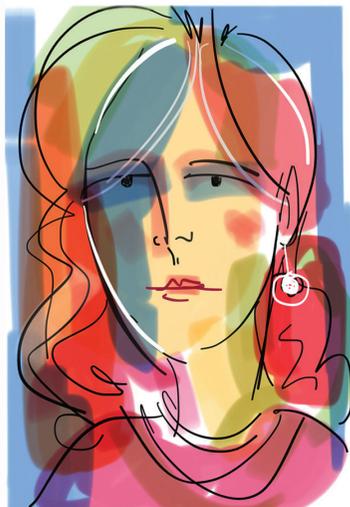


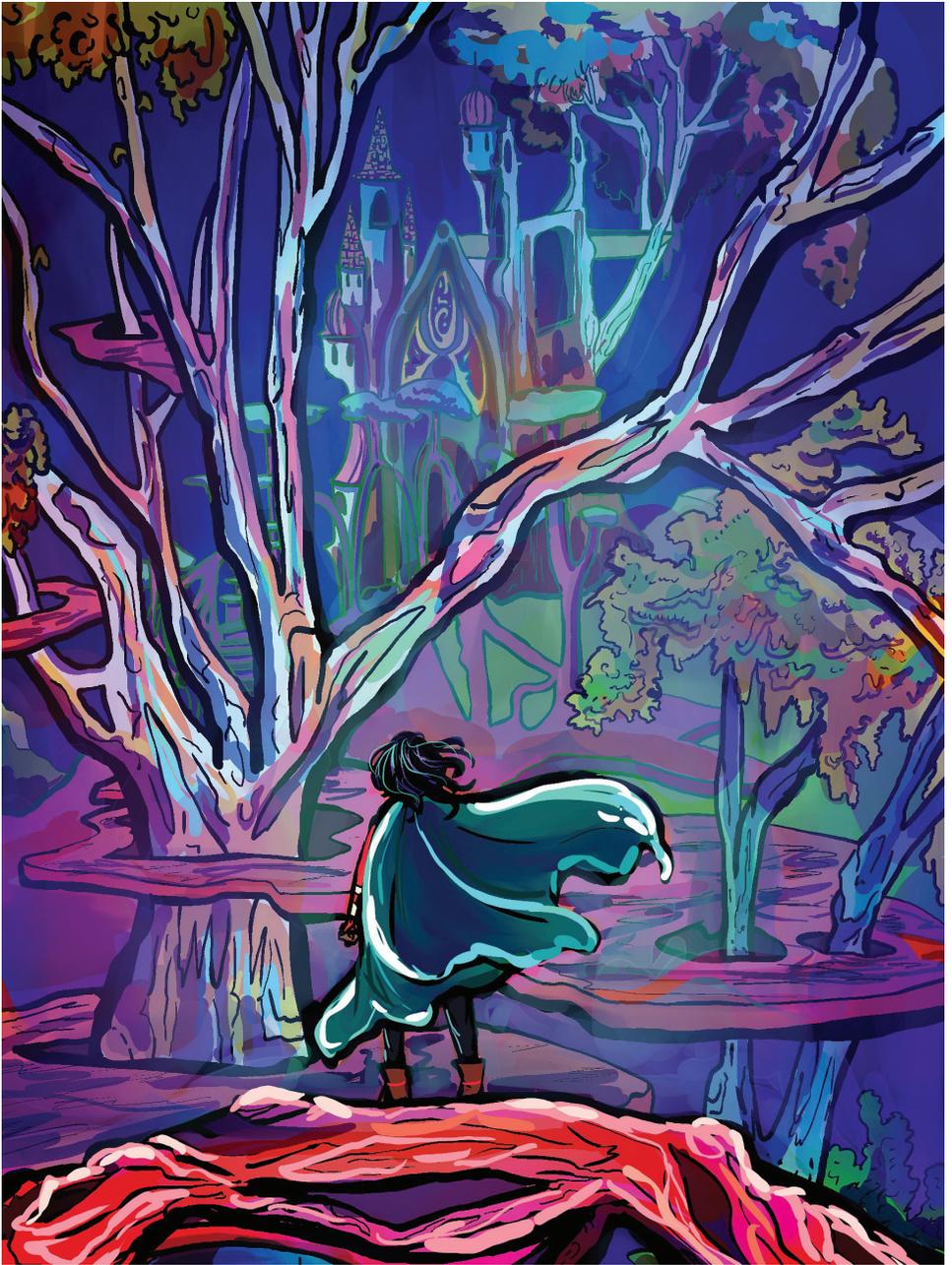




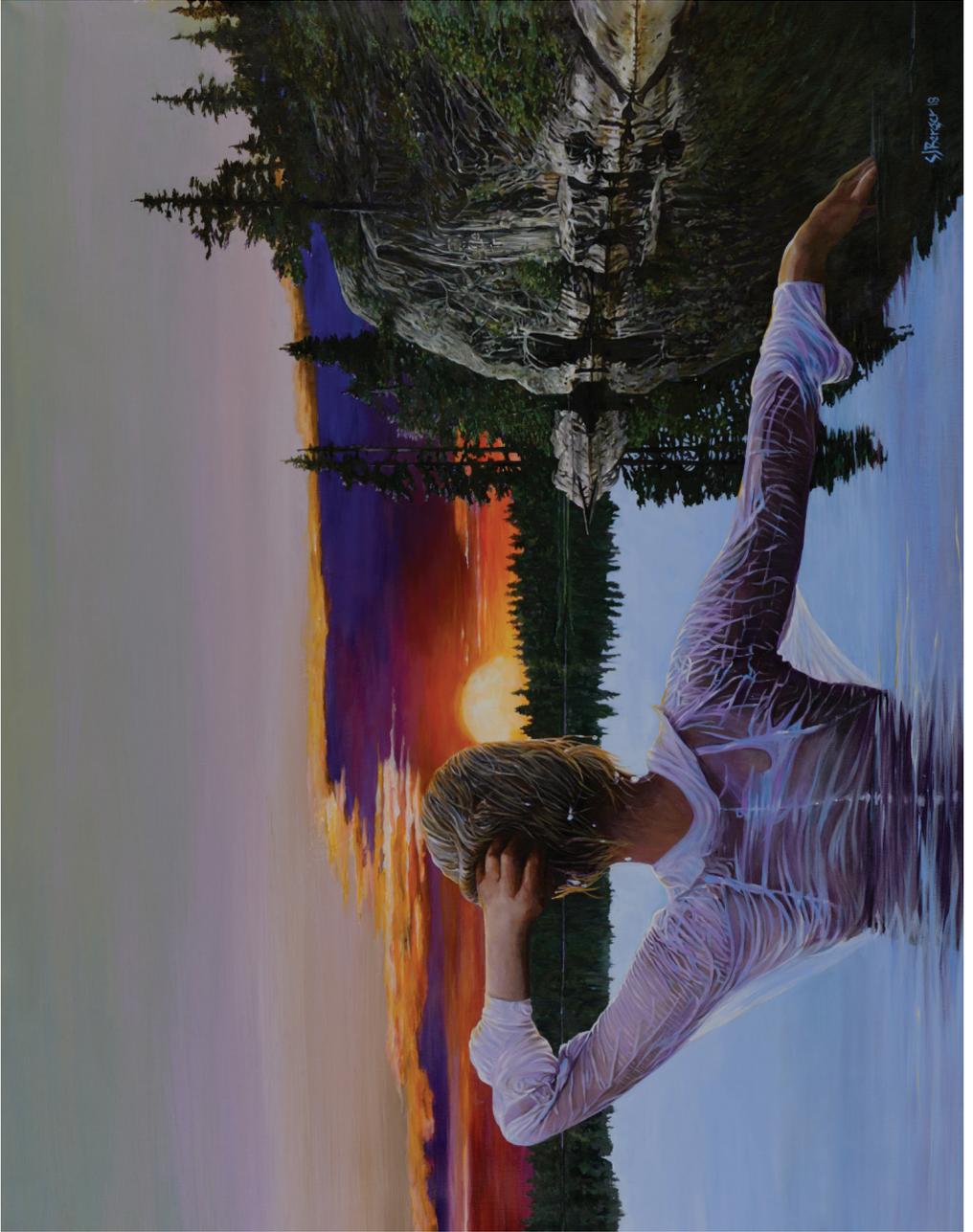


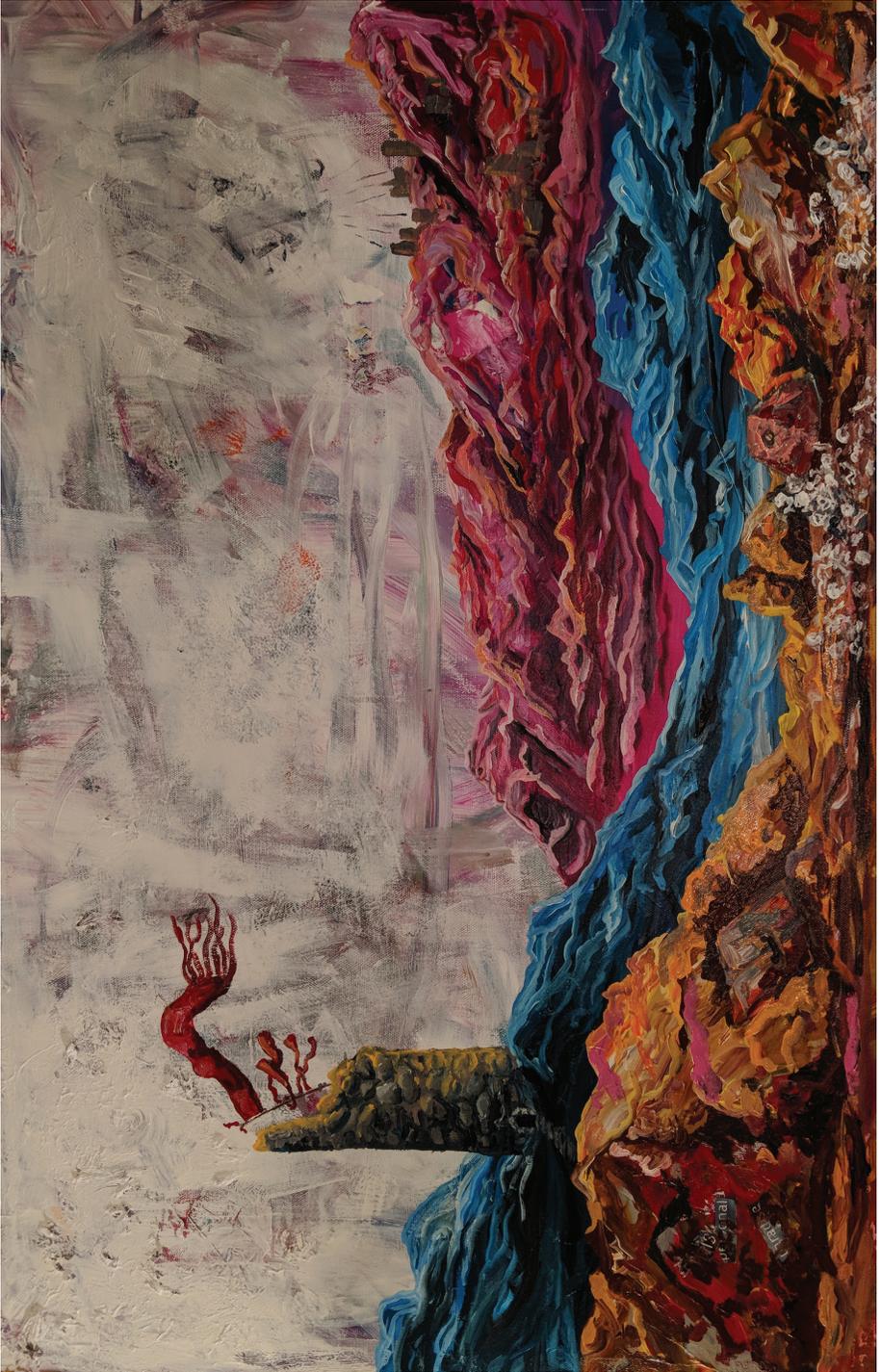


















Oquawka, 1993

this small river town stole
your heart yet your city fears
still latch a rusty screen door
and deadbolt the night

but a thief has many faces
when you step onto shingles
while the floodwater
picks the front lock

—*Dustin Renwick ('10)*

holy

her body is the ark of the covenant
sweet bread and holiness wrapped in the purest gold
her hips sway as she walks, thunderous and beautiful
her fingers will hold worlds

she is held in awe by those who know her
those who don't understand spit on her, call her a pretender
we, the devout, the lovers
we know

we savor the crumbs she places in our mouths
sticky and fresh

we adore but do not worship

we throw ourselves at her feet
in supplication and repentance
pray for us who have recourse to thee

—*Mary Roche ('18)*

haunted

sleep, they tell me
the ghosts
i want to
but there's so much to do
always a never-ending list

the ghosts watch me
waiting for my eyes to drop
too heavy

when i fall asleep mid-protest
softly, softly
they reach into my chest
pull my lungs from my body
and wind their fingers
through my hair
into my brain

they perform a puppet show of nightmares
swarms of insects crawling over me, suffocating
i try to open my eyes, pinch myself

eventually
the ghosts remember
who they wanted to be
and take pity

remove their bones from my skull
become flesh again
fingers braiding my hair
gently, gently
return my lungs to me
offering fresh air and new hope

i wake, gasping

the ghosts caress my tear-stained face
and draw me into their arms

—*Mary Roche* ('18)

ecdysis

on these
quiet nights
I have heard

insects
humming
my name
on prairie grass
winds
from the
southwest

I am wild
with desire
for the
sweltering
dance
of summer
into fall
on the plains

I have chased
the moon there
a thousand times

the gravel misses
the particular
pressure of
my sandals

my dad sent
an envelope
filled with
brown

cicada
shells
delicately
resisting crumple

I stick their
barbed wire
feet onto
my northern
kitchen screen
a coyote-pack
promise
that I too
will continue
shedding skin

dwelling in
wet earth

believing in
next year

—*Sarah Holst ('11)*

Best of Me

“Your legs”—

his answer to my question of what he liked most.

I was hoping for a response centered in anything but my body—

Maybe how I am passionate and work hard at everything I do,

or how I take care of his sister like she is my own.

Or how I bring him food on a bad day

because I know french fries will make him smile.

Instead, he says, “Your legs.”

So, I spend my time in the shower

making sure my legs will shine in the sun;

I wear short dresses.

I went and bought heels

to make my calves appear toned.

I want to pride myself on my legs—

not for him or anybody else, but for me.

One day my legs will help me stand tall, give me power.

They will carry me to what I deserve.

—*Emily Pendleton ('18)*

Diet Pepsi for Breakfast

My hands were weak
My stomach was screaming
I was always so cold

I would last all day
Swallowing nothing
But my own anxious heartbeat
Slamming in my throat

People didn't recognize me
They only saw my shadow
I was slowly disappearing

I was Diet Pepsi for breakfast
I was butterflies with wings the color of ashes
I was each crack in the sidewalk
I was a quickly fading press-on tattoo
I was powerful
I thought I was powerful
I was only a success
When I went to bed hungry

People would tell me to smile
But my lips were too cracked
Too dry
I begged them
To explain their happiness to me
In a way that would make sense
To my grey skin
And aching bones

The mirror saw my only truth
I would stand in front of her
Measuring my hips

Trying to memorize the circumference of my imperfection

And now
It's like I don't know who I am
I am not really myself
Unless I'm recovering from something

Sometimes I look back
To when I hit rock bottom
I know I don't want to return
But the jagged stones
Look so much like home

—*Elli Decker*

A Safe Place

Your sticky hand held
mine as I shut
the closet door.

Darkness fell over us—
small glow of light
crept in under the door.

You whimpered as
the muffled yells began.
“Let’s play circus,” I said
and you squeezed my hand.

You marched
my stuffed elephant
across our small space.

I swung my Barbie
from the darkness
to the glow of light.

—*Mary Perez* ('18)

The Wait

I wiped the snot
from my nose
as Mom drove away.

“Stop crying,” you said.
Then you yanked me inside,
away from the screen door.

You sat us in front of the TV
and went to the basement.

When my eyes began to flutter
and Eddie was asleep on my lap,
you stumbled back upstairs
smelling like weed and beer.

You set up the pullout couch
and told us to go to sleep.
We crawled in;
you turned off the TV.

Eddie asked you
to turn on the night light.

You paused,
walked to the basement,
and slammed the door.

Eddie and Davey leaned over
and put their heads on my pillow.

We waited—our eyes open—for Mom to get home.

—*Mary Perez* ('18)

Going Nowhere, Feeling Everything

You took a bus ride
to my heart.
The bus smelled
like cheap cologne
and lies.

You moved me
to the back seat,
stained with your
bad memories
and insecurities.

The window was fogged
from the breaths
of other women
whispering your name.

Our destination
was unknown;
the ride
was far from over.

—*Mary Perez ('18)*

My Mom Taught Me

A good, Christian woman,
she knew how to forgive a man.

After the first time,
my stomach
tied in knots,
my eyes beat red.

You said, “I won’t do it again;
she means nothing to me.”

I thought it was my fault,
and my brain
searched for a way
to fix me for you.

—*Mary Perez* ('18)

from On Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories": A Seven-Part Quartet

Escape

I read in the news they were building a Wall
And that taxes are up, and employment is down
And that people Afar are still waging some war
And they're tearing a forest to open a mall
And to build up a highway to bring there us all.

And that dragons are bones
Of mighty beasts that roamed the earth
But their world is now gone
And busy diggers make names for them
And worry about which piece goes where.

And that scientists found that our love is a gland
That will slowly wind down
And will die
As our hormones grow quiet, and ragged, and bare.

But what do they know.
They looked through the glass of a world that's gone cold.
(There *is* climate change!)
And forgot of the apples of gold

They shine still
In a dusty tome
And the dragons fly
And tired knights feel the dread in their shadow
And know that their death is near
And pray, and curse, and boast, and scream, and charge, and die
And there is a pulse in my heart.

Consolation

I read in the news they were building a wall
(But walls have been brought down by trumpets)
And that people afar are still waging some war
And we're selling them weapons to fight it
And they're tearing a forest to open a mall
And they're tearing the sea just to get to some oil
And they're burning the desert to pump out it all.

And that love is a gland
And that justice is might
And that you may keep trying
But you won't get it right.

But I read
somewhere else
that a knight made it home
And she held in her arms a few apples of gold
And gave them to a hungry child
Who thanked her with a toothless smile
And turned out to be a prince
Who forgot never since
And his kingdom was fair, and kind.

Yes, I've read there that trumpets bring down mighty walls
And that hands make chains stronger than iron
And that dolphins helped some drowning sailors reach land
And that lambs can lie down with the lions.

And that darkness can be chased away by a lamp
(but you have to have courage, and hold it quite still)
And that promises held may be stronger than steel.

And that love is eternal and will never die

And my promise to you

Will forever be True

And my Love for you Dear will keep burning high

When the stars burn away and grow cold in the sky.

—*Alfredo MacLaughlin*

Maybe, watching, I can learn to be kind to myself

A weight
never breaks grass.
The slimmest stem bows
lower and lower to the ground.
Golden plant fibers within
the dry brown stalk
strain with each snowflake that settles.

Luminous flakes rest
between each feathered seed.
Silver and amber collide,
balancing networks of fibers,
crystalline facets.

Edges soften,
round,
bulge,
as more flakes weigh
against the dry brown surface.
The haze clears.
The grass is left huddled,
limp under the mass of snow.

But the snow will not prevail.

The weight will lift.
The snow will flow away
in a joyful waterfall.
Stems will spring back,
tall, unbent.

—*Megan Peterson*

A Different Kind of Cold

There are places so beautiful they can ease all pain.

That was how Brook's grandmother would always start stories about when their village was created. In the stories, her grandmother was just a wide-eyed girl huddled behind her papa's comforting bulk. With that same youthful excitement, undimmed by her years, her grandmother would describe how stunned she was when she saw the valley for the first time.

The first thing I noticed was the light. For days we had been walking in the shadow of the mountains, but here the sun shone out through the gap between two peaks. Between them was the tallest waterfall I had ever seen, so tall it almost hurt to look up to the top of it. And this wasn't just any waterfall; it was like one pure crystal holding the sun's radiance. The air was misty with gold, and I could almost feel the warmth bursting out of each drop as we crossed over the ridge into the valley. I knew then: this would be home.

Brook had never quite understood her grandmother's insistence on starting stories with that description. Her grandmother was fleeing from war as a child. She'd experienced physical pain. Although she was so young, she'd known the twist of fear's knife in her stomach, the fire in the soles of her feet that couldn't take a break from running, the eight stab marks in her palms from her own fingers clenched into fists. No ethereal beauty could take that away. It wasn't of this world.

Brook was startled out of her thoughts when small arms wrapped around her legs.

"Mama? Are you okay?"

Brook made sure she felt her eyes crinkle in a smile before she bent down to fully see the little boy. "Rowan! I'm all right. What's this all about?"

"You had that look again, Mama," he said.

She shook off his hug and crouched to look him in the eye. She took his shoulders and gave him a little light shake. "What look, now?"

The boy shrugged. "That look where you smile, but it's not as

big as your normal smile. And where your eyes are sad.”

Brook let out a breath at his last statement, then disguised it as the “dragon’s breath” that Rowan liked—a little puff of white vapor. “Don’t worry about that.” She turned him a little to face the snow-covered hills. “Look! You’ve been wanting to play in the snow for days now. Go on.”

Rowan looked up at her with eyes that were too serious for a seven-year-old. Then he smiled and blew his own “dragon’s breath” and started to clamber through the snow. “Only if you come and play with me, Mama!” he called.

She sighed, then smiled. “Okay, I’m coming,” she said. She pulled her coat more tightly around her and started through the snow.

Maybe, she thought, we’ve come across a place of our own at last. Her grandmother’s place had been seemingly waiting for people, glowing with gold and warm with the promise of campfires and community to be built. This place was uninhabited, shadowed with blue, and sharply cold. Brook preferred it that way.

As she came down the hill, Rowan ran toward her and brandished a splintered part of a wooden rod. “Mama!” he said. “Look, it’s my sword! I’m a mighty warrior!”

“Rowan—” she said, too sharply. She tried again. “Rowan, put that down. Let’s find another game. You know that weapons aren’t how we show that we’re strong.”

“But Mama, it’s not even sharp,” he protested. He glanced back behind her, toward the path they’d taken. “I want to keep you safe,” he said.

Brook took the rod from his hand. “We’re already safe, Ro. Do you know what this is?” She ran her hand over the slight bulge at the end to make sure. “This is part of an old boat’s wheel. Somebody must have sailed up here once. But look, their boat is broken. There’s not anyone here, and there won’t be. It’s just us.”

“Okay,” Rowan said. He looked around, and Brook tossed

the rod toward the water when he wasn't looking. "This place is quiet," he said after some time.

Brook was just about to respond when she saw what he was making with his hands. "Ro, do not even *think*—" she managed to say before Rowan's snowball hit her in the face and exploded into powder. For a moment there was nothing but the shock and cold. Then she wiped off the snow and took off after her giggling son, kicking snow at him. A snowdrift ahead of her upset her balance, and she slipped down the rest of the hill and into Rowan. Both sprawled in the snow, took one look at each other, and started laughing. Rowan started laughing harder when he couldn't find the ground with his feet. He flailed his arms, throwing snow all around him, and yelled, "I'm swimming! I'm swimming!"

Brook finally took a deep breath and stood up. She bent down, lifted Rowan from the snow, and helped him find the ground. "You little silly," she said. "I'm glad you're here. You keep me smiling."

"I like it when you smile, Mama," he said, and skipped off to play by the falls.

Brook watched him go. "Thank you," she said, though she wasn't sure to whom. "Thank you for placing him with me."

I haven't laughed like that in weeks. And even with the cold and the windblown snowflakes stinging her face, she felt herself taking deeper, slower breaths. The blue and white all around her felt like a cooling afterimage of the golden flames with which she was all too familiar.

Maybe beauty could ease pain after all.

Near where Rowan had explored, a broken mast with one rope still attached and the rest of the wooden spars were scattered around the water's edge. Ropes hung on the mountain from bare tree trunks, left by climbers. A tattered flag fluttered at the top of the mountain's rounded bulk. The cold laws of nature had left little room for error. *These surroundings might have frightened people*

like my grandmother, Brook thought.

But those people didn't see the grace that ruin could expose. Ice crystals had formed on each rope fiber—more diamonds than had ever been owned by even the richest ruler or greediest dragon. Frost etched tales on the wood in neat symbols that Brook wished she could read. The flag hung with icicles, each one catching the sunlight in glittering chips and cracks and clinking lightly. The soft notes mixed with the wind's whistle and faraway bird cries to form a quiet melody. Lost in thought, she wandered down to the water's edge.

Her breath caught at the sight of the lake. She had never seen such blue before. Deeper than the blue of the sky, it almost felt closer to the solemnity of navy, but more animated. The lake seemed infused with light. If she scooped up a handful, she imagined, it could come to life right there, its small sapphire heart in its center beating a few joyful beats before it would flow from her hands and dance away toward the river.

I've never really appreciated blue before, Brook thought. When she was little, her favorite part of her grandmother's stories was her description of the gold light in the valley. Now, even just thinking of the color gold brought the villagers' torches blazing back into her mind. Sparks popping, sap flaring in the flames, people's faces lit from underneath and distorted by stretched shadows, angry talking, Rowan's confused questions . . .

There had been a knock on their door one night, and Brook had woken up alone in bed. She'd looked at the space next to her, knowing that she wouldn't see Colborn there but hoping that she would anyway. She'd gone to the door, expecting a bedraggled traveler or a friend who needed her help and had opened it to find the village doctor instead.

"Brook, I'm afraid you and your son have to leave this village immediately," he'd said.

"What?" she'd said through a yawn. It had taken a moment

for her to understand. “Why?”

“You’ll need to take all your things with you for safety. I understand quarantine may seem cruel in this time of year, but it is necessary for us all.”

“Quarantine?” she’d asked. “Who’s being quarantined? What’s going on?”

He’d seemed briefly embarrassed. “You and Rowan—you have to leave to avoid making the rest of us ill. The next town may be willing to treat you, but we can’t risk it here, with everyone living so close.”

“Doctor, you have the wrong person,” she had said. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m not—”

“You’re very sick, Brook. You and your son. Your husband expressed his concerns to me recently. He said he didn’t want it to be true, but he said the more time he spent here, the more he saw the symptoms in both of you. And so he’s had to avoid being here as much as possible to stay healthy.”

“You can’t possibly believe that! My husband’s a liar!” she’d said. “Why, look! I’m fine! We’re strong and health—”

It was when she saw the torches behind him that she’d understood. *No one* in the village believed this. She and Rowan were being forced from their home so that Colborn could be with someone else. She’d seen people being forced into exile before because of religious conflicts and personal revenge. She’d just never expected it to happen to her.

Those people had confused her. They never seemed to fight back. Now she understood. There was no fighting back against most of the village. What seemed like merely moments later, she and Rowan were standing in front of their house, clutching bags and layered in as much clothing as they could wear. Rowan was crying, confused at being woken up and shoved into the cold. She tried one last fight.

“This isn’t how sick people are treated here,” she’d said.

“You’re all lying to yourselves!”

“Listen!” the doctor had said. “The fever’s already starting to twist her mind!” The crowd gasped. Colborn was crying with the young woman standing next to him. But when he looked up at Brook, his eyes were clear. He smirked and mouthed, *You’re welcome.*

“Stop it,” Brook whispered to herself. “Leave it behind. Let it sink into the lake.” She tried to imagine the hissing torches extinguished in the water, the arguing melting into the lapping of the ripples. But there was too much to let go.

There was the rage she’d felt when she realized that Colborn saw a winter exile as somehow more humane than death for a claim of adultery; in their village, an adultery claim was the traditional way to get rid of a wife. There was her heart splintering and burning when Rowan would say he missed his papa. There were the weeks of wandering after being asked to leave the town where they’d tried to stay. Weeks of pushing against the biting wind and feeling its cold eat at her until she couldn’t feel anymore. No rage, no grief. Just the hollow brittleness of knowing something was missing.

She felt a hand touch hers. “Mama, you’re staring again.”

She blinked. “Sorry, Rowan. I’m just cold.”

He considered it. “Do you want my scarf? It does a good job keeping me warm.”

She paused. “It’s a different kind of cold, Ro,” Brook said.

“Oh,” Rowan said. “Maybe whoever lives there can fix it.” He pointed. A wooden cabin rose just above the tallest hill near the mountain.

No, not more people. “A cabin?” Brook asked.

“It’s okay, Mama,” Rowan said. “Let’s just go look.”

They climbed the hill and made their way over to the cabin. Rowan tapped on the door. “Hello?” he asked.

There was no answer. He shrugged and, before Brook could

stop him, pushed on the door. It swung open.

“Ro!” Brook said. “You can’t just go inside people’s houses!”

“I don’t think anyone lives here, Mama,” Rowan said. “And if they do, we can always just leave.” He walked inside, and Brook sighed and followed him.

Perhaps the cabin was uninhabited. It was certainly quiet and cooler than any person would have preferred. It was also rather bare. Brook looked around. There was a fireplace and chair, a small kitchen and a table, and what appeared to be space for a room to the back, but there was no sign of decoration. Nothing appeared to have been used recently either. Frosted windows let in weak winter light, softly illuminating the clean lines of the narrow floorboards and the wood grain on the walls. Something about the lighting and the deep quiet that lay over the cabin reminded Brook of the village chapel from the time she’d gone to ask for safety for her unborn son. She took a deep breath. They might really be able to stay here.

Just then, Rowan made a startled sound from the back room. “Oh! Hello!”

Brook tensed to run, but she couldn’t leave without Rowan. She held her breath and waited.

“My mama and I are cold. Can we please stay here?” she heard Rowan say.

There was no hesitation. “Of course,” a lower voice replied. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you’d like.”

Brook exhaled and allowed herself to look away from the door. Then she noticed something she’d missed before: a flickering white candle. Soft yellow light danced inside, and for the first time, the gold color reminded Brook less of the village torches and more of that unearthly golden light from her grandmother’s stories long ago.

—*Megan Peterson*

Flight

Purple, she decided. Yes, a light, misty, grayish kind of purple should be the color of the sky the next time one of them leaves the nest. No one should get to leave on a bright blue morning.

The shifting dappled shadows broke her from her reverie. She shook her head and moved along the counter to the kitchen window and pulled open the curtains. It was brighter than she remembered. She squinted in the sunlight and pulled the curtains closed again. She moved back along the counter and sank down into her chair in front of the bay window. The blinds were closed over the central pane; they had been recently closed twice before. It was a beautiful morning. She shouldn't be blocking it out. *But I can't watch them hopping around and flying, she thought. Not right now.*

The closed blinds shielded her from seeing the other birds and kept away the reminder that they all would leave someday. Small chirps still filtered through the blinds as she turned on the table lamp next to her and reached for her notebook and her pencils. For a moment, simply opening the pencil box was enough. The sweet, warm smell of cedar shavings greeted her as she set the tin lid on the table. Seemingly endless colors looked out at her from the mix of pencils—the soft yellow of a candle flame, deep midnight blue, and a flash of rose peeking from behind the greens that she had tried to organize last week. She had kept the pencils so neat when her father gave her the box as a child, trying to keep them in straight lines and making bundles of colors when that didn't work. Now they lay in a comfortable jumble; once-uniform length pencils worn down to tiny nubs and barely used pencils sat nestled in wood shavings that she never remembered to clean out.

She dug through the box and came up with the perfect blue, worn down so small that she could barely take it out of the tin. She scrunched up her fingers to hold it and started sketching the sparrow taking off from the branch as best as she could. Every final flight picture she had drawn was done in the color of the sky that she had watched the bird fly off into—the soft yellow-gray in

between twilight blue and orange sunset, then light blushing orange, and now bright blue. It was her favorite color, the color of new beginnings and opportunity and “It’ll look better in the morning.” As she drew in the lines of the newly-strengthened wing feathers, she shook her head and sighed. Her favorite color had claimed one of her remaining companions. The sound of chirping and the scratch of her pencil were the only sounds as she filled in the rest of the outstretched wings. She rubbed at her eyes and then put the drawing and pencils away. Then she gave a deep sigh, leaned back, and closed her eyes in the strange darkness of the closed blinds.

The blinds were glowing rusty orange when she opened her eyes again and stretched her arms. She got up with some difficulty and opened the blinds to a sunlit sky. The clock on the back wall didn’t concern her. Time had moved on without her long ago. She shrugged and picked up her blanket from the couch nearby, then sat down in her chair again.

“You shouldn’t be sleeping in your chair at all,” her brother had told her. “Get outside during the day. Sleeping in your bed will be better for you!”

“Get outside and do what?” she had asked. That was the point where her memory always trailed off into silence. She watched the leaves rustling in the trees at the edge of the hill and the clouds moving across the sky without taking anything in. Her hand reached for the book she kept next to her lamp, picked it up, and set it in her lap. She didn’t turn the pages. The bright band of sunset started to settle lower on the horizon, and yet she didn’t move to do anything.

One of the fledglings hopped out onto the branch and chirped. Suddenly she blinked and sat up straighter. That was the oldest remaining fledgling, she knew, the one with the little monocle formed where his reddish eye line circled all the way around his eye instead of just cutting straight across. The mother

sparrow flew out on the branch, a little closer to the end, and whistled to the fledgling. It took a few short steps, jumped off the branch, and started flapping awkwardly away from the window. About ten feet out, its wings gave out and it fell to the ground, where it was soon joined by its mother. As she watched the two making their way back up to the branch, her pencil started flying across a new page of her notebook, capturing the wing movement and the ruffled feathers and the mother joining it below the tree. Dozens of pencil sketches of the other sparrows were tacked up around her kitchen and living room, filling her walls with a new and comfortable clutter. Her family photos had long since been cleared and put away.

“Mom, what happens if a bird can’t fly?” she had asked as a girl when a family of robins made their nest outside her bedroom window.

“Look it up,” her mother had told her. And so she had gone to the library and searched for a beaten-up little field guide, where she found that sometimes parents pushed the weakest ones out of the nest so that only the strongest of the family would live. When she came home and reported her findings to her mother, her mother only replied, “Well then, at least people don’t do that.” And that had been that, and she’d gone up to watch the robins until one night when the nest fell to the ground in a storm. Her young self hadn’t been sure of what else to do to honor the birds, so she’d snuck out the next morning and given the babies a proper burial before her parents woke up.

Now it felt like she was getting to raise these baby birds alongside the parents, getting to see the birds grow up as she hadn’t been able to before. She had always wanted a child—to fill her days with them and fill her nights with scrapbooking and saving memories and then waking up eager to do it all again. But life had given her these sparrows instead. As the fledgling returned to the nest for the night, she stood and pinned up her new pictures by

the door, then moved back to the kitchen. *I should probably eat something and sleep in my bed for once*, she decided.

The next days slipped away. Sketching, sleeping, a walk that barely made it to the trees at the top of the hill. A quick visit from a neighbor who brought her groceries and stayed in the house only long enough for the exchange of money and how-do-you-dos. Telling the last two fledglings—brother and sister, she imagined—about her day and wondering what they would say back if they could talk to her.

Then she filled in another final flight picture and pinned it above her window with the three preceding ones. This one was in the palest gray she could find, the color of the heavy fog that had wreathed her house one morning when she woke up to see the monocled sparrow fluffing its feathers against the mist and then leaping off the branch and flying away. She hadn't realized it until it was too late. She'd tried to get outside fast enough to see the bird at least make it to the edge of the hill. But it had disappeared into the shifting white-gray, and all she had been left with were tiny clinging droplets. She was shivering too much to finish the drawing completely, and all that she managed to draw was a single wing disappearing into a wall of fog before she huddled under her blanket and slept for the rest of the day.

She woke up to the sound of the phone ringing. She didn't get phone calls anymore! She got out of her chair and managed to stumble to the landline before the last ring and picked up the phone. "Hello?" she asked.

"Great news! You've been pre-selected to participate in this opportunity for—"

She hung up. Of course it wasn't anyone she knew. The last phone call she could remember had been on her birthday, three years prior, and the next one six months before that. One tight exhale escaped her as she put the phone back. Her eyes stung briefly as she moved back to her chair. "*Idiot*," she whispered to herself.

She'd believed her mother when she had told her that humans didn't push the weak ones out of the nest like sparrows did. That wasn't true. Hers was just a longer fall.

She reached for her book and pencil. The last sparrow was practicing flying on the branch with its parents. It still wasn't making it far yet. She settled back into the routine of drawing, watching, drawing, watching, as the light grew warmer and she allowed herself to smile.

At first, she had been worried this one wouldn't fly. After the babies had hatched and grown strong enough to sit up and take a few shaky steps around the nest, this one was still weak. *Its legs and wings were so small*, she remembered. She had waited to find this one on the ground while its stronger siblings began flight practice. *Though that wouldn't have been bad*, she thought as she drew. If she could have saved it before predators got to it, she might have been able to raise it on her own. It wouldn't matter that it couldn't fly; it would be safe in the house. How different would her mornings be if she could wake up to birdsong, look over at her friend, and start the day together?

Don't do that, she told herself. How could she wish being crippled on someone else?

So she kept drawing, knowing the day was coming. The last sparrow's flights grew longer and longer, and she stayed up later into the night, trying to finish all of her sketches with all the detail she could remember. Each feather shaft, each rusty red cap mark, and every wing bar hung on her walls in sharp detail, but it wasn't enough, she knew—there was no way to capture every part of growing up.

She knew almost before opening her eyes one very early morning. It wasn't as bright as it should have been. She looked out her window to see gentle violet light softly edging the trees and the nest, still some time before the sunrise. The parents were chirping, nagging the last sparrow to wake up. She found the perfect,

almost untouched purple pencil in her box and watched with wet eyes as the bird leaped off the branch and flew toward the trees without looking back.

She stood up and stumbled, so she picked up her cane as she went to the window. After pulling the blinds closed, she limped back to her book and collapsed into her chair. She bowed her head as she sat in the barely lit room. For the first time in months, there were no birds singing. Her violet pencil and notebook sat, unused.

All was silent until she became aware of a lilting melody breaking the quiet. It was a tune she knew well. She inhaled sharply, limped to the window, and tore open the blinds.

There he was, coming over the hill's rise, his smile just as she remembered. His light blue suit glowed against the dark trees. And as he walked to her, she heard the once-silent birds take up his song.

—*Megan Peterson*