

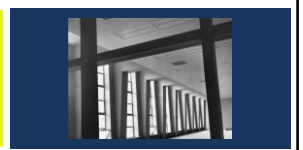
# Marquette Literary Review

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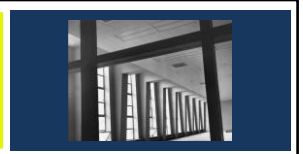
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## Ginger Snaps

Jahnvi Acharya

I am sitting at the kitchen table watching my boyfriend's mother bake peanut butter cookies.

"Phyllis," I say. "Let me help."

"That's alright," she says, and smiles at me. Her smile is so much like Connor's that I almost fall in love with her, too.

A silence falls between us. It is a comfortable silence, one that rarely exists in my own home. My parents are in constant disagreement, the kind of disagreement that drags you into it if you happen to be there. That's one of the reasons I was so quick to accept when Connor invited me to spend Christmas in Sheboygan with his family, instead of my own. I know I will pay for it when I finally do make the trip home – my mother is always telling me that I lack the basic selfless nature of a good Indian woman, and that I am far too independent for my own good. But the thought of spending my holiday learning how to cook traditional Indian food is so much less appealing than getting to know Connor's family. Besides, I think I'm making progress – although I always see them when they visit Connor at school, this has been the first time I've really had a chance to get to know them, and they really seem to like me – especially his mother.

"Peanut butter cookies are Connor's favorite," she tells me.

"So you make him peanut butter cookies every time he comes home?"

"I think he would prefer that," she says with a laugh. "But it gets so boring baking the same thing again and again. I rotate between chocolate chip, peanut butter, oatmeal, and ginger snaps."

"Oh, I love ginger snaps!" I exclaim. She smiles at my enthusiasm and bends down to check on the cookies in the oven.

"Looks like they're done. Would you like one?" she asks as she pulls the first batch out of the oven.

I don't really like peanut butter cookies, but I feel like it would be rude to refuse. "Sure," I say, and take one. I wait until it is just cool enough not to burn my throat, and bite into it. It is divine.

Connor walks into the kitchen. "Your mother is a fabulous cook," I say.

"I know," he says, and he gives her a hug before he sits down at the table by the cookies.

"You should probably start getting your things together," she tells Connor. "Dad wants to leave as soon as the cookies are done."

"I don't have a lot of stuff," says Connor. "I'll be ready in 20 minutes, tops."

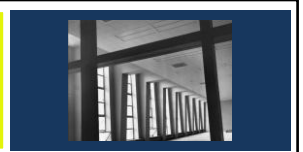
Phyllis picks up a few cookies, still warm from the oven, and puts them in his hand. She pushes him towards his room. "I'm going to hold you to that," she says.

"What about her?" Connor gestures at me.

"I'm all packed," I say with a smirk. "Did it this morning?"

Connor throws me a dirty look and grabs a few more cookies from the table before he heads to his room.

"You should learn from her," says Phyllis.



I spend most of the three hour drive back to Chicago munching contentedly on my very own bag of peanut butter cookies – despite my initial misgivings, they really are the best cookies I’ve ever tasted. Phyllis seems pleased that I’m enjoying them so much, and I in turn am satisfied that I have made a good impression on Connor’s family. Three weeks is a long time to spend with a boyfriend’s family, I reflect, but I think on the whole it was a success. Phyllis has made numerous mentions of me visiting again the next time Connor comes home, and even Connor’s father, a reclusive man by nature, seems to enjoy the prospect of having me back soon. Somewhere in the past three weeks, I feel like they’ve begun to think of me as family.

When we reach campus they drop me off at my apartment first. “Thank you for everything,” I tell them. “I had a wonderful Christmas.”

Despite the cold wind, Phyllis gets out of the car to hug me. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot more of you,” she whispers to me.

“Hurry up, it’s freezing!” Connor complains from inside the car.

Phyllis shakes her head at him before giving me a final squeeze and climbing back into the car. I stand on the pavement with my duffel bag and wave until their van disappears and there is nothing but the snow and the twinkly street lamps to keep me company.

By the time Easter Break rolls around my mother has successfully guilt tripped me into spending it at home – the excuse that I need to study for midterms doesn’t hold up under her dogged questioning. I don’t relish the thought of spending a week within earshot of my parent’s constant bickering, but I console myself with the thought that I only have to put up with it for a few days.

Connor helps me load all my things into my car, and then we climb the stairs to my apartment so I can make sure I haven’t forgotten anything. “I’m going to miss you,” he says fretfully.

“I know,” I say. “But it’s less than a week. Not like winter break.”

“But I saw you every day of winter break! Every day for the past eight months, practically. You’re my favorite person, you know.” He smiles at me, not his regular smile but a silly, crooked smile I’ve only ever seen him smile at me.

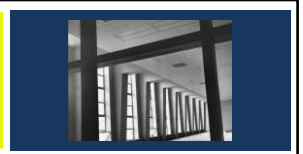
I stand on my toes and kiss him. “Come home with me then.”

“I can’t, I have to go to mass with my family. You know how involved we are at the church, what with my mom being the secretary and everything.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say, recalling how out of place I had felt when I attended Christmas Mass with Connor and his family. Although they were very accepting of my being a Hindu, I had felt vaguely blasphemous the whole time. When everyone but me had stood in line to receive communion, the congregation had looked at me curiously, and for a second I am glad I won’t be spending this break with Connor, too.

Connor lifts me up off the ground and hugs me so tightly that for a second I can’t breathe. “Hurry back to me,” he says.

The holiday passes uneventfully. Apart from watching a few old Bollywood movies with my parents I manage to avoid spending too much time with them lest I be



drawn into an argument; instead, I catch up on homework and reading assignments in my room, so that I can spend as much time as possible with Connor when I get back to school. I am anxious to see him – aside from a few texts Connor and I haven't spoken the whole week. He says he's been busy with his family and church, and despite my nonchalance at our farewell, I really do miss him.

I plan to leave bright and early on Monday morning but my mother delays me, insisting on packing countless Tupperware containers with homemade food for me to take back with me, and I only arrive at school late Monday night. I unload my car quickly and call Connor as soon as I am in my apartment, but he sounds sleepy and tells me he will see me tomorrow.

The next day, I deliberate lengthily on what to wear. I am going over to Connor's apartment and I want to look as pretty as possible because he hasn't seen me in a week. I finally settle on a dark knit skirt and blue shirt that I know he likes. When I see him he is wearing the same color, and I feel foolishly happy, as if we are cosmically connected or something.

"I missed you!" I say.

He smiles at me, but it is not my smile. He takes my hand and leads me up to his apartment. "I have something for you."

When we get to his room he pulls out a large Ziploc bag full of ginger snaps from his duffel. "My mother sent you cookies," he says.

I am flooded with childish happiness. "I can't believe she remembered!" I say.

"I told her it was too many," he says worriedly.

"No, it's perfect! Tell her I said thank you," I say. Then I notice a smaller Ziploc bag on his desk. I gesture towards it. "Your bag is so much smaller than mine," I say teasingly.

"No," he says, "those are for Nina."

"Nina?"

"She's a transfer student in one of my classes. She likes them too."

The knowledge that I am not the only one his mother bakes ginger snaps for fills me with a kind of sick dissatisfaction, and soon after the exchange I feign a headache and leave his apartment.

Over the next few weeks, I hear more and more about Nina and Connor spending time together: they study for tests, they take walks around campus. They discover that Nina's apartment faces Connor's and it makes me uncomfortable to think that she can see us together, although I never see her at her window or say anything about it to Connor. For his part he doesn't seem all that interested in her and I never actually see her as a threat, but it still bothers me when he sends me a text saying "Come over! The pizza is here :)," and it's obviously not for me.

"I told you I was studying tonight?" I text back.

"Sorry," he replies. "That was for Nina. She's not doing anything so we're hanging out. Good luck on your test!"

I don't reply.

When I see Connor next I ask why he and Nina have been spending so much time together.



“She doesn’t have a lot of friends,” he tells me. “I mean, she just transferred here.”

“She can’t make other friends?”

“I don’t know. She never talks about having other friends here. I think I might be the only one.”

“Isn’t that kind of sad?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s not a bad thing to have just a few really good friends.” He takes my hand and smiles, but I don’t feel reassured.

“Fine,” I say.

“It’s not a big deal,” he says, but his smile falters.

It is the week before finals and Connor and I are sitting on the floor of his room doing homework.

He breaks the silence suddenly. “You remember when we first started dating, you said if we broke up we wouldn’t be able to stay friends?” he says.

“Yeah.”

“Did you mean that?”

“Yeah, why?”

His face contorts like my reply has physically hurt him, and he looks at me wordlessly.

“Are you breaking up with me?” I ask incredulously.

He doesn’t say anything. His silence squeezes the air out of my lungs.

I stand up. “I’m leaving.”

“Don’t go,” he says.

“You want me to stay here and keep doing homework like nothing has happened?”

“I don’t know,” he says helplessly. “I just don’t see this going anywhere, you know, I think I need to be with someone more like me.”

“More like you?”

“You know...I mean, you’re not white, for one. You’re not even Christian.”

I feel like I’ve been slapped. “You’re breaking up with me because my *skin* is a different color than yours?” My voice comes out much higher than I want it to be.

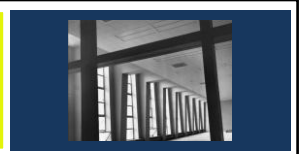
“Don’t take it like that,” he says. “You know what I mean. We have nothing in common. Think about it.”

I slam the door behind me and regret it immediately.

A few months after the break up, I wake up to a loud knocking on my front door. I open it to see Connor holding a cardboard box filled with a jumble of things from our relationship – a Valentine’s Day card I gave him, my shampoo and toothbrush, pictures and ticket stubs from various dates.

“I’m sorry to just show up like this,” he says awkwardly. “I know you like to sleep in. I just...I’m moving out, and I thought you might want your things back.”

I take the box from him and look through it. I desperately want the box to represent us, to say something grand and meaningful about our relationship; but as I look



through it I realize he has given me every shred of evidence that I was ever a part of his life. It hits me that the only person this box represents is me, and how much I wanted our relationship to work. I hold up the Valentine's Day card. "My things?" I say acidly.

His eyebrows draw together. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize...I didn't know. If you would want that stuff too. I didn't know if I should keep it."

"I see."

He looks at his shoes, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, as if he's waiting for me to say something.

"How's Nina?" I ask. I have to know.

He looks up, surprised. "I don't know, actually. I think...I think you were right about her. She was kind of pathetic. We haven't talked in a while."

"I thought you were her only friend?"

"Yeah, I think I was." He shrugs. "Oh well. She'll deal."

Now it's my turn to be surprised. I'm thrown by the fact that I feel sorry for Nina, a girl I could hardly stand just a few months ago, and I realize don't want to be talking to Connor anymore. I start to nudge the door closed with my foot.

"I also brought you these," he says, and sticks his hand out. He is holding a bag of cookies. He looks at me expectantly.

I force a smile. "Your mother sent these?"

"Yeah. I mean, she sent them for me," he says apologetically. "But I know how much you like them..." he trails off.

I don't know what to say. I wonder if I should tell him how shallow and insensitive he is, or if I should refuse to take the cookies. "Tell her thank you," I say. "I'll drop your things off later."

"That's okay," he says. "Take your time."

After Connor leaves I try one of the cookies, but it feels dry and mealy in my mouth and I spit it out. I am disappointed, but not surprised. I have learned to expect disappointment from Connor.

I leave the bag of ginger snaps on the kitchen table until they go bad, and then I feel too guilty to leave them there any longer and I take them to the dumpster to throw them out. As the lid of the dumpster closes I think about a few months earlier, about Phyllis telling me "I'm sure we'll be seeing more of you." I remember that day in the kitchen, and I wish I had never met Connor, because I don't think I will ever be able to eat ginger snaps without remembering. And I really did love ginger snaps.



**IT IS WHAT IT IS**

Benjamin Schmitz

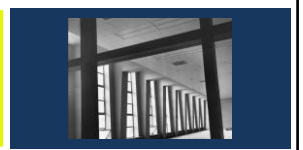
It is what it is,  
that is, unless it isn't.  
It may seem like it did,  
but aha! it just didn't.

Maybe it could—  
Then again, it couldn't.  
You thought that it would,  
yet, alas, it wouldn't.

Perhaps *before* it was,  
until you realize it wasn't.

Well, yes, it really does,  
though in the end, it doesn't.





**My Friend Cried**

Benjamin Schmitz

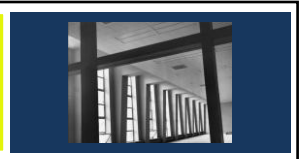
My friend cried  
when he heard the news.  
The election had come  
and gone—  
Another term for a  
tyrant.  
Empty promises and  
broken dreams.  
Education reform  
my ass,  
he said.

My friend cried  
as the streets  
of Caracas revealed  
a further fragmented  
society: Leftists on the  
impoverished side, conservatives  
on the less impoverished side.  
The crime rate  
will rise again;  
It already dwarfs Chicago,  
D.C., Baltimore. Combined.

My friend cried  
interpreting  
the symbol of a nation,  
The Tower of David:  
Looming over a country once filled with  
optimism,  
bursting with oil.  
Representing what  
Could have been,  
but now simply a  
high-rise slum.

My friend cried  
for his family  
back home. Six more  
years of waiting:  
For change, for freedom,  
for another chance.  
Unfazed by manipulative  
rhetoric and Bolivarian  
extremes, the situation  
seemed impossible.  
Still they remained loyal.

My friend cried  
tears of joy  
upon spread of the news.  
Disease has stricken  
the Dictator.  
Patriots and  
ex-patriates were  
head over heels  
with joy.  
Hugo Chávez is Dead.  
There is hope for Venezuela.



## The Sound of an Island

Lara Johann-Reichart

“People say you never truly leave home but it’s a bunch of crock.” Alice stared at the ceiling fan, watching it go round and round with no care or diverging course to face.

“They’re talking about memories.” Alice’s sister, Charlotte sat by Alice’s feet which were covered in a white blanket. She looked down at her own tan and dirty feet pressed against the pristine floor.

“But those fade and facts become confused. It’s all distant.”

“It happened though. Home will always have happened.” She looked over to Alice whose eyes reflected Charlotte’s own unwillingness to back down. Charlotte wanted to refuse anything Alice had to say, she just wanted to make it easy on her. Simpler is better, she always thought.

“That’s just it though – it’s the past and it’s gone. It’s over and you just have to keep on going without it.”

“But don’t you think a part of it will always, in some way, affect you? Like a scar or an inside joke, something kind of goes with you.” Charlotte didn’t get why this had to be a deep conversation, like they had to come to some sort of revelation. Life is life, you grow up and you live and try this and that, and that’s it. She wasn’t about to dissect it, she was a bit worried to try.

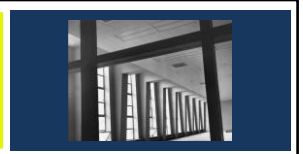
“I don’t know.” And Alice really didn’t. She wanted to, God knows, she wanted to. There’s nothing more disillusioning than admitting to not knowing. It’s daring to face the potential of nothing; no great escape, nirvana or happily ever after; not even Hell or torment. But there was truth in not knowing and that’s what Alice couldn’t shake away from.

“I hope it does. I guess hope is all you can do.” Charlotte knew what Alice was getting after, they were sisters after all. Sometimes she could finish Alice’s thoughts before Alice even had them. But she vowed not to lose hope, or question hope, because that was the end. Hopeless is when you give up.

The two sisters grew up on Blackhawk Island – an island that was more or less a swamp with a glorified name. Rock River sort of twirled around it and cabins weaved in and out of the river’s ebbs and flows. Anyone that bothered to drive around it would look at its dusty cabins and wooden bridge and think it was pretty in that poor way. Kind of like if you took a black and white picture of some of the ‘island folk’ and put it in a nice frame, some people might call it art because it captures a beautiful tragedy.

The thing about Alice and Charlotte is that they never saw the tragedy in it. It was just beautiful. It was their Never Ever Land and their jungle paradise. Even though they were right in the middle of the Mid-west, sometimes they thought monkeys or alligators lived on the island too. The big oak trees in the summer covered the sky and rustled how they would in Brazil. The water was deep and the dirt was dark. It was never some black and white photograph.

Every summer it was really hot; the type of hot where you could fry an egg on the pavement. Now the problem Alice and Charlotte had is that they lived on an island but



they couldn't swim in the river, even on those horribly hot days. Rock River was not only wide and deep, but it had undercurrents. And like any sensible parents, their parents said strictly every summer, 'Don't swim in the river.'

Of course like all kids, one time they didn't listen and they paid for it. It was an overcast day and they snuck around the bend where there weren't any fishermen to catch them, and they stepped on their tip toes into the river. Their fingers crisscrossed around each other's and they slowly descended into the water. It didn't take long before they were up to their neck then past. They could barely touch the rocks on the surface, but when they did, the rocks felt covered in slime with jagged edges. The two sisters looked at each other, their necks strained back, mouthing words because water filled their ears. The thing, though, is the river didn't get them. It was deep, sure, but that day the current was lazy. This surprised them, which scared them, because they weren't sure what their intention was to get into the river in the first place. They had expected the river to take them and they jumped in willingly. Yet they found themselves to be okay. They made it across the river and sat on the bank in a proud, confused daze.

That's when hell broke loose. That's when from across the river their dad saw them and dragged his fishing boat off shore all the while yelling and cursing. It didn't take long before he was right next to them, grabbing them by their arms, and tossing them into the boat.

"Well, we wouldn't have gone in the river if we had somewhere else to swim!" Charlotte's blue eyes looked translucent when the sun reflected off of them. She glared at her dad across the boat with his hand on the motor, grasping it so tightly his knuckles were striped with red and pure white.

"You have the nerve to make an excuse?" He didn't yell, rather, it looked like he was about to have a heart attack. He had told them story after story about kids drowning in the river. "Damn it, grown men have drowned in that river."

"I'm just saying, if we had a pool we would of never in the first place."

"That's all she's saying, Dad," Alice tried to help persuade, but her dad and Charlotte just stared at each other, seeing who would back down first.

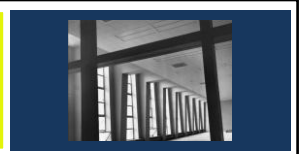
A week later the pool showed up in the back of their dad's pickup. If they hadn't of wanted the pool so badly they might have felt guilty about how they got it. If their dad hadn't been so afraid he might have saved the money for a new roof. Either way, it arrived. Charlotte and Alice lugged the box of plastic lining to the hole they'd dug. With ropes and every set of hands between them and their parents, they got the pool standing. What was left was to hold it in place as it filled with water. As luck would have it, at that precise moment the sky got all grey and black, like their marble sink. The leaves from the oak trees sounded like pages of a book sitting in front of a fan. The rain came down hard.

"Least the pool will fill up faster!" Charlotte's eyes were practically screaming with excitement.

"But my feet are sinking in the mud." Alice arched her back letting rain wash her face as the black mud accumulated around her calves.

"Now wipe your feet off before you come inside," their mother rolled her eyes as her two daughters kicked mud at the pools lining. "You'd think I had two boys. I'm going inside."

"I think you two can take it from here," their dad shot a glance at the two as he followed their mother into the cabin.



The water started filling fast – two feet then three. Soon it was just Charlotte and Alice and a half empty pool guzzling the rain. But fill it did. That night the pool overflowed with rain, and due to the wind, leaves and branches too. It didn't matter though because that entire August Alice and Charlotte would run through the thick mud that covered their backyard and dive face first into their very own pool. Every day and every night they'd jump in; it didn't matter if it was morning or if they were swimming in the pitch black, there wasn't going to be a moment wasted.

One night after bedtime they snuck out to go for a swim under the stars. Their pale feet sprinted across the backyard and slowly climbed up the pool ladder. Slowly, Alice dipped her body into the cool water; however, Charlotte jumped right in, sending a giant wave across the pool.

"I don't know how we lasted this long without a pool," Alice floated on her back to stare straight at the stars.

"Can't believe dad caved."

Even though it was night and they were in the middle of an island in the middle of nowhere, man it was loud. Birds chirped, water rushed, leaves blew, their splashes echoed, it was like an orchestra.

"I love it here, Charlotte."

"Me too," her eyes lost focus in the sky. "Do you ever wonder where we'll end up?"

"I don't ever want to leave Blackhawk." Alice dove under the black water and re-emerged across the pool.

"But you do. You got to wonder what else is out there. People and buildings and mud."

"Mud?"

"Like if it looks different depending on what country you're in. Maybe it's more red in the south or it's really crumbly in Asia or maybe mud everywhere is the same. Don't you want to know? We're staring at these stars right now, but maybe if we were in Africa there would be different ones. Or if they were the same, maybe they'd look different. Closer or farther, perhaps. There's so many things we have to find out."

"I want to know those things too. I just would want to come back."

"Well, this place will always exist. You'll always have been here and memorized every nook and cranny."

"You don't want to live here?"

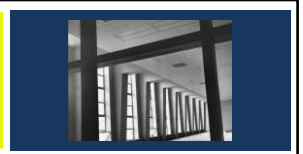
"Now I do. But I want to see and taste and hear every other place too. Don't you?"

"For a bit."

In September they'd swim some more but October came and the wind that blew from the marsh and across the river became cold. The oak trees lost their leaves and the Rock River froze on the edges. The pool was drained and put away for the ensuing winter.

When summer ended it wasn't Charlotte and Alice anymore. It was Charlotte and school and basketball games and friends and dates and sneaking out to parties and then Alice.

"Charlotte, can you give me a ride back from the game tonight?"



“I’m going out with Jan and Tim, can’t you get dad too?”

Charlotte took every opportunity to escape Blackhawk. But Charlotte had the car and Alice the school bus, and the years apart became apparent. Alice faded into the background like the pool collecting dust in the shed.

“Charlotte, let’s go ice skating,” was January.

“Charlotte, I need help with my Algebra,” was March.

And April and May were other pleas that went ignored. Alice would see Charlotte sometimes at school and maybe at home, if it was a school night. The island started getting lush again and Alice couldn’t wait because summer meant school was out and the pool would be back up. That meant Charlotte would want to go swimming.

“I’m leaving, Alice.”

“Can I go with? I need a new swim suit.”

“No, I’m not going into town. I’m going past that.”

“So you really going to make me ask what the heck that means?”

“I’m going to be eighteen in two weeks and I don’t want to spend it here. Look around Al, no one leaves. It’s disgusting.”

“It’s not disgusting.”

“Well, it’s sad. Don’t you want more?”

Alice hadn’t really ever thought about it besides that one time when they swam at night. Even then, it didn’t sound so appealing.

“I just want to see something else, move on.”

“But it’s summer.”

“Oh come on Alice, there’s more than swimming in our backyard for the next three months.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“Jan has relatives down in Florida.”

“Grandparents?”

“Cousins.”

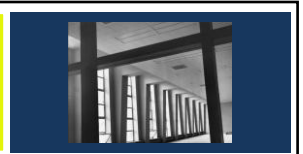
“So you’re just going to leave and I’m going to be stuck here by myself.”

“You have friends, and you can make friends. I need to do this.”

The following weeks Charlotte and Jan bought plane tickets for Fort Lauderdale. They’d be back in August Charlotte promised. And Alice’s parents promised to put the pool up in a week or two. “Just make friends and use your imagination in the meantime,” Alice’s parents reasoned.

Alone and bored Alice decided she didn’t need a sister or a pool to swim. She didn’t need Ft. Lauderdale or the curiosity of what stars or mud looked like in Africa to be happy. She was happy right here. Or she used to be until everyone found lives outside of the island; until she was expected to as well. She pulled on her red swimsuit with the black stripes along the side and ran barefoot across the grass like hot coals were underneath her. She ran down the paths that spun around cabins and oak trees until she reached the corner of the island that was completely isolated. She tapped her toe at the surface, took a step, then another until she was up to her waist. The river was as purple as ever and the current was just like that day her and Charlotte crossed it.

She dove underneath, opening her eyes to the colors. Sometimes it was a dark lavender but at other times, when the sun shined through the shade of the oak trees, it’d reflect off the river and it was like a mirror.



As Alice floated down the river she got so caught up in motion she didn't even realize Blackhawk was becoming just a dot in the distance, confusable with a boat or if you were as imaginative as Alice, the Lockness monster or maybe a dolphin, had Blackhawk Island connected to the Ocean, which Alice thought it might. Instead of going across the river like that one time, she was moving along with it like a boat or fish. She had so much speed, she didn't even have to try.

All of a sudden Alice's leg started to cramp up and it got as straight as the black stripes on her swimsuit. She pushed her arms harder but kept finding her mouth and nose barely above the surface. "Noo-o-o," she verbalized when she could. She kicked what she could and bobbed her head up and down violently. Her neck muscles tensed and pulsated as she stretched and stretched to air. The purple water wasn't like a mirror at all anymore but like a vortex that was filled with swirling sand and sediments. She kicked and kicked but soon found herself punching and shoving the current away from her. But no matter how much she punched and shoved it felt like she was falling and the river kept getting bigger and deeper.

"Dad," she thought, she screamed. Where was he with the boat? Where was he to yell and curse? The water was rough and pulling on her. Her feet scrambled for a rock or surface or anything to stand on. Her arms reached and reached but water kept filling her mouth and nose. She coughed but soon her coughs were surrounded by water. "Hell-l-p," but her plead was lost and everything became black.

The next feeling Alice experienced was the touch of ice. She realized the ice stemmed from her feet. Cold, unbelievably cold. She felt cloth wrapped around her but it didn't seem to do anything because underneath was pure ice. Her eyelids were closed but they were being illuminated by a yellow. She wanted to cry but she didn't have the energy.

"Alice," she heard her mother's voice. She heard her dad's throat clear. Beeping sounds.

"Come on, Al."

She opened her eyes to see her family breathe sighs of relief.

"Alice," Charlotte hugged her.

"How'd I get here?"

"A kayaker found you, saved you."

Alice slept more after that. The whole family did. On the last day in the hospital Charlotte helped Alice dress.

"I need to ask you something. I just need to know why."

"I was in the river?" Charlotte nodded. "I just wanted to swim."

"Were you trying to kill yourself? I mean, for God's sake, why else would you go in there?"

"It wasn't like that," Alice's eyes welled up. "I honestly just wanted to swim."

"The day I leave is the day you decide to jump in the river? I just feel so guilty and that you did that because of me and --"

"No, Charlotte. It wasn't you or anything. I just wanted to swim." Tears fell down her cheeks. "I just wanted to be in the river, just being a part of it." Alice closed her eyes and stretched her lungs as far as she could before exhaling. "It's not just that you are leaving, but everything's changing. But the river is the same, it's always the same. And I thought I could handle it, it didn't seem that tough. I wasn't trying to kill myself."



“You just can’t do things like that.”

“It was dumb, I know.”

“No, not just the river thing. But trying to hold onto things that can’t be held. You can’t just swim in the river because you loved growing up along it. And you can’t just try to hold onto life at Blackhawk because you don’t want to let go.”

“So you’re just saying to let go of it all? Just cause you want to move on and see everything. I’m not like you, I don’t want to leave.”

“Well you don’t have a choice. It’s not like when I leave, I’m gone completely. Damn it, Alice, you don’t have to hold onto something forever to have it.

“That doesn’t make any sense. You say that but you don’t even know. You’ll leave, never come back, and it’ll just be some fact about you that you grew up here. And it’ll all be gone. All the magic of it.”

“No, you’re just saying that because you’re scared. You’re scared about leaving so you cling on and cling on. And you practically killed yourself because of it. Do you have any idea how selfish that is? It would have ruined mom and dad. Damn it, it would have ruined me. It would have been my fault. I would have lost my best friend, my sister. There’s only one of you.”

“I told you I wasn’t trying to.”

“You almost did.” Charlotte took a deep breath and sat on Alice’s bed. “We’re growing up. It’s scary and it’s awful. We’re not going to see each other all the time and we’re not going to be home as much.” She looked at Alice and saw hopelessness. “We’re going to remember how easy and beautiful it was here. I promise we won’t forget. We’re always going to love it here. Blackhawk will never stop being a part of us. But, Alice, we can’t stay here forever. Let me let go. Let go yourself. It’ll be okay if you do.”

Alice wanted to believe her. God, she really wanted to. But she knew one day Charlotte would leave, Alice would, the whole island would change into a memory. It would all be gone; it’d vanish. And those memories would fade; each summer would get lumped into the summers of their childhood and bit by bit disappear. It wasn’t Charlotte’s fault any more than time’s, it wasn’t about blame, it was inevitable. She had to begin to let go. The river let her go, she thought maybe she ought to let it go too.



**Cellar Door (sonnet)**

Bobby Elliott

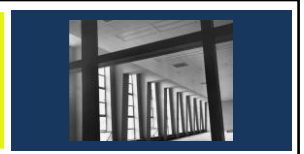
I scavenge books—cut verses into keys—  
jingle them in my pocket so I know  
when I can't quite crack my identity  
I need the one labeled *Mercutio*.

Quotations from writers I'll never meet  
attached around a ring I'll never lose.  
To break the lock that binds my brother's feet  
I only need to rattle *Sonny's Blues*.

Under my nose Carver, Chekhov, Cheever  
speak to me with brassy, smoky voices.  
I need one more key before I leave here—  
engraved and golden is the word *Joyce's*.

Dead authors: words won't rust inside my mind.  
Bequeathed to me, the keys you left behind.





Musings

**Alexandra Othman**

"Your best one yet," they say.

But they don't get it. They don't really understand.

They don't see me as I often sit in front of my easel, my creative mind blocked by some unknowable force.

It's a sick joke the world has played when an artist has no art. I laugh. Ha. And it laughs back at me. Ha!

"How pathetic," he chides, stepping from behind. The echoes of his laugh still bounding around the room.

A black, faceless thing. Slender, gangly arms, swinging like pendulums. He's no stranger, but no familiar face, either.

Claw by claw he slowly wrings his hand around my neck. The force of each nail digs at my skin, nearly drawing blood. I can feel the pressure in my veins as my heart leaps wildly in all directions, completely oblivious to the cage of bones attempting to hold it still.

"Do it," he whispers. Goosebumps slither across my skin.

"Unrest lives within the walls of your heart. Pound, pound, pounding. Slice through your chest and leave yourself bloodless. Take my breath away. Try to enrapture; I'm waiting." His cool breath dances on my face, giggling. He slides something sleek and icy into my hands. Edge, pointed and biting, leaving a whimpering red trail. I turn the tool around in my fingers. Something so familiar suddenly so playfully dangerous.

My thoughts become muddled, running circles. He's merciless, and he won't stop staring at me. His eyes flood the room. Slow and deliberate, he nods encouragingly. The object no longer feels like deadweight, rather its faithful and sympathetic. Poignant. Savage.

I plunge, deep and searing. And once the gash is large enough, I use my hands to tear away flesh. As I pull back piece by bloodied piece, I can hear the frantic cries of my heart grow louder. I'm so close. So close. I feel everything pulsating within me, every cell is electrified. This is what it means to be alive! To empty yourself, to give everything to the art.

The foolhardy bones are the only thing stopping me from an ingenious creation. I rip the frantic ribs from their post, heaving them into empty space. Just like that. Just like that! One, two, three. One, grab. Two, Rip. Three, gone! All gone. Just like that it's *all* gone. I'm all empty. It's just me, my terrified heart, and my cackling friend.

"Go on," he shrieks. "Go on, go on!" He shouts and chants and whispers and grumbles. It's a sound, a flurry, flying. It's swirling and suffocating, egging. It goes on and on until I blindly swipe at the thickening air. My hands cause luminescent streaks in the bleak. He then recedes to the shadows. But close. He's always close.

It's silent, except for the pleading of my helpless heart. It knows and it cries, but the sound goes shrill in my ears. It's just an annoying little hum. Its high pitch stabs at me, and I'm angry. Blithering, redly angry. I twitch with anticipation, and feel the sweat roll down my back. I reach in and cradle the squirming mass. It's warm and slick, pathetically weak. With ease it's tugged from its home, and as if just realizing the reality of its situation, thrashes intensely. From it bursts a siren of a wail, and I squeeze harder to keep it trapped. Harder and harder, it almost hurts. With no warning, it ruptures, and there is crimson gore soaring. It's everywhere. The canvas, the floor, the shadows, the me.

And I laugh and I laugh and I laugh.

It's disturbing and beautiful, a lovely contradiction. I can't breathe as I laugh but I don't care because the friendly shade is hugging everything. It feels so pleasant, and I slap the frightened ground. It quivers and declines my touch, but I'm too filled with happiness to care.

He once again emerges, but this time alone and hysterical. His hands never leave the air as he circles and howls, his tongue tasting the air and the red. He sweeps the room in an instant, and then plunges into my open, accepting chest, taking the blood with him.

I stand.

I gather myself, piece by piece. I'm put together again.

I step back and look, softened brush still in my hand.

A filled canvas.

My best one yet.



**wet.**

Charlie Mohl

I'm connected to the mermaid  
at the hips      Like normal  
women living this far inland  
she gnaws on my pillow  
thread count stifling    siren songs  
which waft into my flatmates'  
sleepy ears through thin plaster  
Like a Baroque fountain spurts  
dirty water at uneven intervals  
    she's trying to fix me  
up with horny satyr friends

I need a whole desperate  
bucket brigade to keep her



## Overcoats

Chrissy Wabiszewski

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
They called me the hyacinth girl.”  
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

-“The Wasteland” – T.S. Elliot

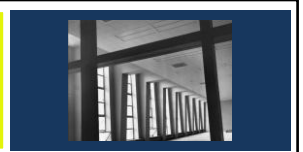
The windows in the car were fogged completely over by the time they pulled out of the neighborhood. After a glance at her husband, the woman in the passenger’s seat reached over to turn on the windshield defrosters. The blast of warm air swept the condensation from the glass in a semicircular arch that inched its way towards the edge of the window and the roof of the car.

The passenger window remained fogged. The woman used her gloved hand to recreate the arch on her side, clearing a round whole to peer out. The houses in their neighborhood flitted past, all similar in size and shape but with enough differentiation that they seemed like disordered dominos; one falling into the next seamlessly but with little differences.

The car and the ride were smooth and silent. Neither made much noise except to stir the air. As they drove, leaves outside rose in small flurries twisting and turning before returning to the ground in the wake of the car. The man’s hair ruffled slightly by the silent whirl of the car’s heater and the woman’s black mink coat waved in the warm air. It began to rain as they reached the busier streets and soon the leaves on the asphalt no longer rose when the car splashed through them but stuck in stubborn solidarity to the water and the ground.

The scene changed from the varying sameness of the neighborhood to the sameness of commercial sites on the edge of town. They passed a few shopping centers and chain restaurants as the rain began to fall harder on the car, blurring the hard edged lines of parking lots and neon signs.

At a stoplight, a bar on the corner was pulsating through rain flecked windshield. The woman cleared her window of fog again and peered at the shapes that moved in hushed shadows against the gloom. A woman stood outside, the end of her cigarette bloomed red out of the darkness of the overhang she stood under. A man came out and joined her. In the rain he took off his coat and held it above their heads. She held up her cigarette to his mouth and he inhaled igniting the spark just as the red light turned to green and they moved on. She imagined his hand on the small of the other woman’s back and how warm it would be against the cold.



The woman in the car looked over at her husband. His jawline, the silhouette of his nose. His eyes dark, looking straight forward. She remembered when they used to smoke how he would let the clouds of it billow out of his nose like a dragon to make her laugh. They quit together, but last week she smelled the familiar darkness on his jacket. She wasn't sure if he would still make her laugh with his dragon breath.

As they pulled into the parking lot in front of the town's theatre the man reached over to turn off the heater. Her white silk skirt had been rising in billowing folds in the current and as the air died it settled back on her thighs. She smoothed it down with both her hands and then laid them on her knees. Her hands were warm on her bare skin. He parked the car, turned it off, and turned to the back seat to reach for a large umbrella with a curved handle. It was black. He looked at her.

"All right, here we go."

"It's certainly raining," she said.

He nodded. Then in what seemed like one movement he turned, opened his door, and opened the umbrella outside, its wings unfolding in a swoop and the spindles unfurling like a clenched hand. He stood up under it and shut his door.

She waited for him. Her hands were in her lap and she turned them over to look at the pale skin of the undersides of her wrists and she clenched her palms into fists, watching the long tendons move. It reminded her of a dream she had some time ago.

She lived under a grand piano at the mall, and her heart beat dully in her chest as the pianist came to play. He sat at the black lacquered instrument and played but the melodies were soundless. She would lie on her back with her head between the pianist's black-soled shoes and look up at the smooth undersides of his wrists. Slowly she began to learn the patterns his tendons made as his hands flew over the keys. In the silence of her deaf dream she heard in a deeper part of her brain Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and could pick out the rise and fall of chopsticks from the quick alternating movements of the pointer and middle finger's neighboring tendons. She felt very alone with her his music so she climbed up to the top of the piano and peered through the crook of the pianist's elbow at the sheet of music, but felt even more alone when she realized that what she had thought was Für Elise wasn't Für Elise at all, but some song she had never heard of and could not imagine. She climbed down and went back under the piano. She lost herself trying to remember the rest of the dream.

Fog had collected on the glass again and she swept her hand over it to peer out for her husband. But he was not outside her door, which was locked. She looked farther out into the rain and could see him trotting towards the theatre without her and he looked much smaller than he did in her memories.

She walked into the theatre trailing a river of dripping rain water in her wake. Her husband was just inside the foyer, his overcoat draped over his arm with the umbrella's shepherd's staff handle hanging used and now unused from his wrist. He was talking to a man in a blue suit. His mouth formed the shapes of words and sounds tumbled out, but the distance between them prevented her from making out just what he was saying. She slowed her pace



with each step closer she took towards him to delay the forming of those sounds into speech, speech directed away from her. Just as she reached him he turned around, surprised to see her sopping wet. Her mink was matted in thick rivets and the white silk of her skirt clung to her legs, sheer now and revealing the sweeping lines of her black lace underwear. The man he was talking to moved away silently, embarrassment rising in his cheeks.

Her husband looked at her.

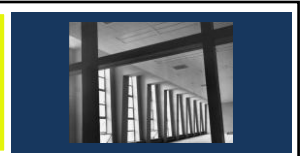
"Where is your umbrella?" He said.

She shrugged her shoulders and took his coat and the umbrella from him.

"There was one in the passenger side door," he said. His fists balled up and the woman imagined some strange, unknowable pattern of tendons appearing on the smooth skin of his wrists.

"I'll go check the coats." She took the umbrella and his coat gently from him.

Turning away, she walked with precise measured steps to the counter across the lobby and it was as though the theatre was silent, waiting prematurely for the show to start. She would take her time. She hung the umbrella over her wrist and took his coat in both hands, swinging it in a deaf movement around her shoulders, pulling it close. She brought it up to her nose and breathed in the smell of him. Aftershave, rain, cigarettes. One long breath until she finally reached the coat check. She let the air out of her lungs in a sweep, like the car heater, clearing the air before her from the fog of his scent. Then she took off his coat, then her coat, and gave them both away.



## Hook

Bobby Elliott

I'd seen her around the store a few different places. First she's reaching up for this big box of pasta and her shirt's creeping up, already too small as it is, and her hips are showing and her stomach pokes out a little and I'm looking at her. I can't help it. I'm not some peeping Tom. She was noticeable is all. She's dark for this side of town. I know that's not something you're supposed to say, but that's the fact. I'm not saying she should stay on her side—I'm not saying that—but she caught my eye being her color grocery shopping on the west side at eight p.m. on a Thursday. That's it.

I had the next day off. There's still things to be done at home and Friday off would give me three blank days to do them. I'd be missed, but I got a stick up my ass. I never take a day to myself, not even with bronchitis. I don't need to ask. I earned it. Hell, I thought I might even spend the whole day in bed and eat Oreos and watch TV. I haven't done that since I was a kid playing hooky.

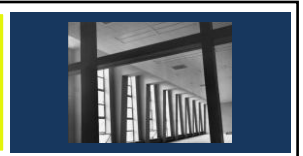
You ask a kid like me what their favorite class is and they always say recess or lunch. Not me. I'd always say hooky. Oh, my mother would smack me. Her friends asking a little dough ball like me what subject I like best and me saying something like, "Well, Mrs. DeAngelo, I really like playing hooky." Oh man, would she slap me. Always made sure I felt her ring finger cracked the back of my skull. It got a laugh, though. It always got laugh.

I think I liked telling that joke more than I liked skipping school. I didn't want to lie. There's one thing I can't stand in this world and it's a liar and a cheat. It got so I started to skip just so I could tell that joke with a decent heart. There's something they can't teach you on a chalkboard. Purity of heart. They can punish you for cheating or stealing, but those aren't matters of the heart. Those are school things. I schooled myself in matters of the heart. Lying, even harmlessly, seems like a side effect of a weak heart. A Hail Mary. Desperate is something I'm not.

Skipping school, going to work, these are measures of my heart, at least. Work isn't like school, though. I'm somebody at work.

I got us six new water coolers last year. Summer months it can get up to one-twenty in the warehouse. Men need to stay hydrated in heat like that. It's a safety issue. Safety's another one of these bugs of mine. It's not a popular virtue. It's not one you see played out in movies or television. I watch more TV now with Tammy gone. No one I ever watch is proud of the amount of safety precautions they took in an episode. But I'm smart enough to know the difference between TV-life and real-life. I don't get those mixed up. Tammy used to watch these shows and feel like she was a part of them. One of these stupid women's shows could wreck her whole week. I couldn't say a word—hell, I couldn't cut a fart—when one of her shows were on. She was a different person when they were done. She'd snap out of it after some time, but the next night she'd sit on the recliner again and wait for something on the TV to make her feel something. She let those things affect her.

Not me. I can't get caught up in delusions like that. I'll watch it, sure. I can't watch much at a time, though. I have to move. I can't sit for that long. I always say if you look around and can't find anything to fix, you're not looking hard enough. Lately though I'll give myself a break and I'll watch one of her shows now and I can picture how she's gonna be afterward. How she's gonna act. Crazy or crying or completely lifeless over some fake-person's death while sitting in



some new apartment. I don't have that problem. I know what's real. I say, "Brian, there's goofy stuff out there—most things that just don't make any sense. Make what sense you can in this life."

Above my workbench is a sign. Today I wrote the number "107." One hundred and seven days I've made sure there wasn't one preventable accident. That's a matter of the heart for me. It's got something to do with being honest. An honest day's work. Taking seriously what it is you do. Knowing that what you do is important. The salaries in the office don't know what it's like working in there. Burning sweat dripping into your eyes all day. Working like that sopping wet. I'll bring two extra shirts with me to work just to keep dry. The thing you need most on a day like that is water. I was still sweating in the grocery store. That's partly what's got me so goddamn nervous around this girl.

She's reaching for this box of bowtie pasta and her shirt's coming up and her tights are—you know—tight and I'm this pit-stained, gray-haired guy walking behind my cart and I crash into one of these little stands on the side of the aisle. I don't know what they were selling. Air freshener or hot sauce. And it makes this bang and she looks at me and I'm standing there with my cart in my gut. I don't know what to say. I almost ask if she needs me to reach the box for her. Picture that. I'm on my tiptoes trying to reach these noodles with my belly hanging out and all of the sudden she's not hungry anymore.

I just smile this dumb smile and keep moving along. I think that's the end of it. I grab a box of rice and I'm gone.

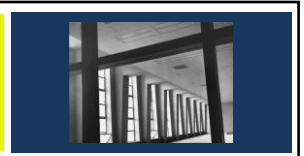
Who do you think I'm walking toward five minutes later? She's got her head in the cooler digging now for some eggs and her ass is sticking out and I'm thinking, Jesus Christ, I'm thinking she's gonna think I'm following her around the store. I wasn't. I honestly wasn't. But her butt's in the air and her shirt's coming up and I'm some dope staring at her again. What am I supposed to do? She knows what she's doing when she puts that outfit on and walks into the store. Come on.

I could've just walked past her. She wouldn't have seen me. I could've gone right along to the potato chips. I needed some potato chips. I wanted to keep walking. But that's not what I do.

She stands up straight and opens a carton of eggs. She's actually inspecting these eggs. She picks one out and turns it over in her hand. Me? I'll take whatever's there. But not her. Those eggs aren't good enough. This girl knows she deserves better eggs. She's got a face that demands good eggs. She's not even looking at me but she's saying, "Come on, Old Man. If you got something to say—say it."

I don't know. I wanted to say something to her. I haven't talked to anyone like this girl in ages. I mean, this girl is a knockout. An absolute knockout. She's probably thinking who's this old codger following me around? But this girl doesn't make you feel like that. She's got these big, almond, doe eyes. Her hair runs a little past her shoulders and she tucks some of it behind her ear like she's waiting for me to say something into it. She's teasing me. This girl's teasing me. I get cocky and I refuse to walk away from these eggs. I don't even want any eggs.

When Tammy and I were still together, can you imagine the beating I would have taken for talking to a girl like this? She could be have been standing right next to me all night and she'd still check my coat pockets for phone numbers at home. I bought a twenty-five cent tube of cologne in a movie theater bathroom and she accused me of meeting someone on the way there.



How the hell do you even swing something like that? She knows I don't have it inside me to pull that, but she'd accuse me all the same. I think that's part of what made us work when we did. She'd accuse me of wrongdoing and I'd tell everything I could to straighten it out. That's passion, I think. I don't think that's happiness, but it worked. After her marriage and after mine, that's what worked. That working made us happy, I know that. Wanting to be honest with one another so passionately we'd break each other's noses. That's not happy, but it worked for a time.

This girl, I couldn't break this girl's nose. It's as fragile as one of these eggs in her hand.

I go to say something, but my voice gets grizzly and catches halfway through. Now I gotta clear my throat and she's looking at me. Jesus, what in the hell am I doing? "Are those expired?" I say.

"I don't think so."

She's looking at the box, turning it all over look for the expiration date and I don't care if they're expired or not. I couldn't give a shit about the eggs. But that's the way this girl is. That's what I'm saying. She's looking for an expiration date like she works there.

Finally she finds the numbers. "You still got two weeks," she says. She gives me this little smile and would you believe it she hands me her carton of eggs? These are her eggs and she just hands them over to me. There's these eggs between us and I don't know what to do next.

"Well those are yours," I say. I'm rolling now. I'm feeling good.

"There's more here," she says and raises her eyebrows like *duh*. "I'm sure I can find some that aren't expired."

She's smart. This girl's quick, I mean.

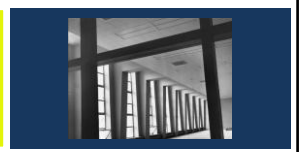
Well, I don't know what to say. I'm standing there thinking and now she's the one who couldn't give a shit about the eggs.

"Thanks," I say. "Thanks. If not, track me down and steal these puppies back."

She says okay, she'll be sure to do that, and gives me this lippy smile, She looks at me and goes back into the cooler. I take that as my cue to leave and just like that I'm gone. I'm thinking to myself goddamnit I'm staying in bed, watching TV, and eating Oreos tomorrow. I've done all the work I need to do. I can't even remember anything that needs to be done at home. I can't remember anything that needs fixing. I can't remember a single name of a man I work with. Everything seems just fine the way it is. I'm leaving everything the way it is and I'm taking the day—maybe the whole weekend—and I'm not doing a thing. I got sunshine coming out of my ass. That's what this girl can do to you. Have you ever met a girl like that? I didn't need another thing from this girl.

I'm heading up to the checkout counter. I'm strolling through the frozen foods with hardly anything in my cart. I'm not hungry or looking for anything else but I look in this freezer as I'm going by and I see that fisherman. Gorton's. The guy in the yellow slicker with that burly, gray beard. On the box of fish sticks. I stop right there. I'm looking at him and I think to myself, I haven't paid this guy any mind since I was six or seven years old, why am I looking at him now? My freezer used to be filled with this guy. I can't decide why he's got me so mesmerized right now.



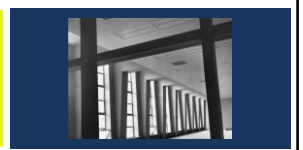


Looking at this guy is making me incredibly sad, but I can't look away or make sense of why. I suddenly think of this big man my mother introduced me to when I was a kid. Kid or not, this guy was big. I'm staring into this freezer and I'm thinking of this guy's widow who married him a month before. He says he's going out fishing the next morning and he wakes up before she does in their brand new house and packs a lunch for himself and writes her a note that he'll be back later with fish to eat and he signs it xoxo. She wakes up to find this note and is spilling over with the happiness his handwriting provides and she sifts all day through the fish recipes of new cookbooks, dog-eared the ones she thinks he'd like.

At three o'clock she can't sit any longer. She picks one based on what few spices are waiting in the new rack. She starts beating this batter—eggs, flour, milk, paprika, oregano, pepper—and she's beating it and beating it. It's keeping her occupied. She wants him to see her there when he walks through the door. Standing, whisking, waiting.

It's co in the fridge when it starts to get dark and at ten she phones the police. They go out on the water and they don't see anything and don't know what to tell her except that they can't find him or his boat. By this point she's already made up her mind that he's left and isn't coming back. She always knew he had it in him, she just wouldn't let herself believe it. This woman curses this guy, her husband, and spends the night thinking of ways to kill him if she sees him again. It makes her more upset and nauseous, but she can't seem to help it. In the morning even before the sun's fully up the police call her again and say he's washed up on the shore a mile from where his boat was anchored.

I'm staring into the freezer thinking of this guy and what it feels like to be splashing around right next to your own boat with no one around to hear what it sounds like to drown. No one around to lend a hand or an oar. I look back to the girl by the eggs. I feel it, this thing between us, the egg in her hand.



**All We Will Ever Know**

Christopher Avallone

Brooklyn to Florence,  
a return trip before  
air travel killed the ocean liners.  
Was it a fight against the tides of  
the time? Perhaps your fare was free—  
as ballast on an empty ship.

Your father, my ancestor, he was a  
shopkeeper. Provolone and prosciutto  
hung from the rafters—tied up with the  
same hemp twine that we use today—  
on that day he walked into the shop.

A sad, hanging sign said “for sale.”

And did he ever say *why* the shop was so  
cheap?

A withered life outlived the life it  
created

and had no one to pass all it had onto.  
Perhaps

the old shopkeeper saw your father in all  
his

shame—too old for the Great War and  
jobless in a

new land with a few kids, too—and saw  
a worse

life than his own.

But the neighborhood broke your  
windows

And threatened your family. Is that why  
you left?

Your father fought and thought,

And maybe he had to run. You went  
too.

A few years in the old country was  
enough.

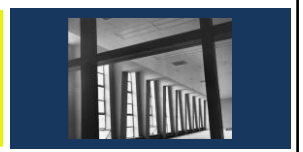
Spontaneously, you arrived on our  
shores again,

and the old shop was a new shop once  
again.

So you went hungry and had nothing.

Back and forth you went, and that’s all  
we know

of your early years.



## A Slice of Life

Kelley Meyerhofer

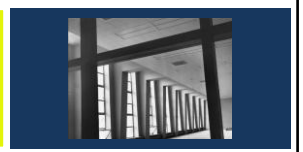
To occupy my down time while working there, I invented a game to play. Every person that walked through the doors, whether it was an employee or customer, I would categorize by pie flavor.

A slice of strawberry rhubarb pie will at first bite taste sweet until a pucker tickles the tongue. Dakota, my first friend after the freezer fiasco, was straight-up strawberry rhubarb. She was always the first to ask me how *my* day was, covered when someone else – usually me – messed up, and never complained of the early five A.M. shift. As I got to know her, I noticed bruises on her arms. I found out that they were from her abusive boyfriend and a relationship she could not escape. It was from her that I learned no matter what obstacles one faces in life, a positive attitude plays a role in the outcome.

Cherry pie is very routine. We bake it at the shop *every* day and it sells *every* day. The old lady who stops by every Sunday and buys a slice of chicken pot pie and small decaf is the epitome of cherry pie. When I see her '96 Buick pull up, I start heating up the pot pie and as she waits for it to warm, she pulls out \$6.07. It is our routine every Sunday at 11:30. I broke the routine one day and asked her if she ever wanted to try something different. The lady told me that she and her husband came here every Sunday after church for chicken pot pie. Even after his death, she has followed this routine for five years. It provides her comfort, the same way that cherry pie does for many. She did take me up on my offer, though, and added a slice of pie to her order. Can you imagine what flavor she chose? Cherry, of course. It was her husband's favorite.

Another customer that was easy to categorize was a man that came into the shop last summer. I asked him if he was ready to order and he made a motion with his hand as if he were writing. Confused and slightly annoyed, I asked him again. He followed with the same game of charades. Boss noticed the man and got some paper and a pen; he told me that the man could not talk. The customer wrote out his order and I continued with some follow-up questions like "Is that for here or to go?" We had an entire conversation in writing. I never got the man's name, but I always remember him for the fact that others would not even notice. People like him are cranberry pie – often forgotten and misunderstood. Most assume cranberry pie is very sour when it is actually quite delicious when warmed and served a la mode. When dealing with cranberry people, they require patience, but the extra time is well worth it.

Though most of the customers I have dealt with have been kind, a few stick out in my



mind that I would classify as lemon meringue. When making this type of pie, the temperature must be constantly monitored and the meringue must be beaten in a special mixer. It's a lot of extra work just as the high-maintenance lemon meringues of the world require. I remember my worst lemon meringue encounter: Jim Teskoski. He phoned in a complicated catering order but before hanging up asked for my name so he would "have someone to blame when the order was screwed up." The day after he picked up his order, I was working the counter when I saw him storm through the entrance. Cutting in line, Jim informed me that he had found a pit in his cherry pie. I stood there, awed that he had taken the time out of his day to deliver me a plastic baggie with the lone cherry pit. Needless to say, I did not tell him that my name was Kelly and *I* should be the one to blame. Whenever I am having a bad day, I tell myself that I don't want to be remembered as the type of person who would let a minute detail – a silly cherry pit – ruin my day.

I feel that working there has also made me a lifetime observer. Strawberry rhubarb, cherry, cranberry, lemon meringue ... these are just a few of the personalities I've witnessed. I sometimes worry about if I had never gotten the job. I know that I would still be the reluctant pre-teen afraid to mess up. Afraid to address strangers. Afraid to ask for help. The lessons I have learned at the shop... I wasn't expecting. But it was *exactly* what I needed to grow up. Some call it a reality check. I prefer a slice of life.



**On...**

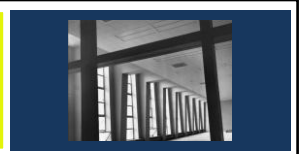
Jahnavi Acharya

**On Breakfast**

Wait until you are very hungry  
And order the most expensive thing on the menu  
And ignore the disappointment in your stomach.

**On Choice**

It is possible to change blue into green  
By adding yellow  
But the thing is  
It is no longer blue  
And if it is green that you want  
Why did you buy a tube of blue paint in the first place?



## The Fosters of Gooseberry Island

Benjamin Stanley

*Gooseberry Island rests between Michigan's North Manitou Island and Wisconsin's Washington Island in Lake Michigan and is home to the prestigious boarding school Bellevue Academy. Originally given the name Grossier by explorer Jean Nicolet for its rough climate and uncouth French loggers and fur traders, the island was re-named in 1823 and became Gooseberry Island. The change was a translation error.*

### The Foster Manor

The Foster Manor, an ivy-strangled limestone castle, had two wings that shared a cavernous entrance hall in the center. From above it looked like a wide “v” and had merlons and crenels along the top. Two long windows above the heavy oak front door had collected a layer of dirt through years of neglect that made the entrance hall dim even when the sun hit it in the afternoon. When it rained, the dirt washed down to the corners of each sill and dripped stains like black tears.

Peter Alphonse Winston Foster, a thin fourteen-year-old boy with dark brown hair and green eyes, stepped out from the back seat of a black limousine and walked up the front steps under the weeping windows. Two stone lions guarded the entrance on each side and had shields that bore the Foster crest – a single chevron with two horns carved above it and one horn carved in the center below. On a tablet beneath each shield it read *Si Fractus Fortis*. A pigeon landed on the door handle with a letter tied to its foot.

Peter's mother snored in the parlor as his black Allen Edmonds shoes clicked on the entrance hall's polished hardwood floors. She slept on a couch with a pillow under her head and a tumbler tipped on its side against her chest. Her skin stretched tight across the contours of her skull and she wore a pearl necklace that seemed yellow against her skin. A few bills spilled out from her studded gucci purse on the floor and licked loose strands of wiry gray hair that fell over her face and dangled against the carpet.

The manor had a large collection of paintings and faded pictures that catalogued over a century of Foster victories and the most historically significant were hung on the parlor walls. The others collected dust in unused corners of each wing. In Peter's favorite, *Remember the Maine*, his great-great-great-grandfather Monroe Alphonse Foster charged the Spanish alongside Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill. Monroe raised his sword in the hot sun, the blade stained red with Cuban blood.

He moved the tumbler from his mother's chest and set it down on the coffee table next to an empty vodka bottle.

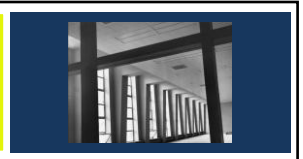
“Good afternoon, Mother,” he said. “Today, I had a very good day at school. I hope you're feeling well.”

She didn't stir.

Peter was the exception to Bellevue Academy's strict on-campus living policy. Headmaster Cocteau had decided to grant Peter a waiver, officially citing the proximity of his family manor (he was the only student born and raised on the island). But Cocteau's alleged affair with Peter's mother may have played a larger role.

Peter cleared his throat.

“I'm going up to my room now for a period of approximately three hours, after which I will prepare for dinner,” he said. “During the aforementioned three hour period, I



plan to A – complete my homework – B – read three chapters in Robert Louis Stevenson’s timeless classic *Treasure Island* – and C – practice the bagpipe.”

She snored and he went back across the wood floor and up the spiral stairwell in the center of the main hall. A thin strip of red carpet ran down the stairs that left the wooden edges exposed and the stairs wound in a full circle between each level. He stopped before a portrait of his father, A.W. Foster, outside the study on the second floor. His father rode a rearing white stallion and had a full mustache and wide-brimmed hat.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Peter said. “I pray that one day when I am grown, sir, I will behave in a way that reflects great credit upon you and our family’s good name, sir.”

A.W. left Peter the entire estate – he didn’t believe in divorce, but had never forgotten the alleged affair – and in his will he placed heavy emphasis that Peter be presented with his old pocket watch after the funeral. Peter found a letter folded inside the watch. He kept it in his breast pocket and the letter in his wallet. It read:

Son,

My greatest regret is that I did not drink more brandy. Take care to mind the facilities of the manor and remember to shoot the crows on sight. Nothing is worse than crows.

Disregard most everything your mother suggests about your behavior and decisions. She is not a Foster by blood and is frail and timid. Drink more brandy, smoke more cigarettes, act by impulse. Fortune favors the unflinching, son. Conduct yourself in a way that reflects credit upon our family’s name. Don’t be a nancy.

Your honorable father,

A.W. Foster

Peter saluted the painting.

The study had a great bay window that faced the courtyard from behind A.W.’s mahogany desk. Peter’s ancestors gazed upon him from the burgundy walls with identical mustaches that curled downward at each end. Their chests swelled with pride and Peter rubbed his own sunken sternum.

He took off his blazer and put it on the elephant-husk rack A.W. had fashioned upon his return from a safari in Kenya the previous fall – just days before his death in Alaska. His father’s leather office chair had been padded with two phone books so he could reach the crystal brandy jar on the desk’s left-hand corner. He poured himself a double – neat. In the top-right drawer there was a pack of cigarettes and he flicked one into his mouth, then snapped a matchbook with two fingers to light it.

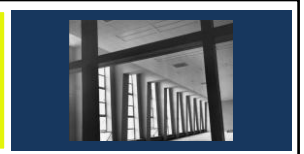
He took the watch out of his breast-pocket, clicked open the face, and dangled it at eye-level on its sterling chain. The hands ticked on Alaskan time. He clicked it shut and slid it back into his shirt.

A reading lamp craned over the desk and Peter turned it on and opened the letter from the pigeon with a knife. From bottom to top, the knife was the same length as his forearm, and had *Si Fractus Fortis* burned into the ivory handle. He found it in a leather sheath on the trophy room mantle a week after the funeral.

He put on his father’s glasses and held the pages to the light. Smoke swirled around his face.

Paw,

Delayed by Cocteau. Two Bandits detained. Push back an hour.



–Frank Kelly

The Bandits, or properly, the Crescent Creek Bandits, were a group of students from the Academy that rebelled and caused trouble. Mostly, they vandalized school grounds or pulled pranks and didn't mind getting caught – attention from wealthy and far away parents, good or bad, was still attention. Peter formed the group and led it. They called him Paw because of his initials and joined to fight “authority” – which they defined loosely and applied with angst-driven zeal to any situation they saw fit. Eight new members were to be initiated that night at Chequamegon Point and the bandits would camp there for the ceremony.

He threw the letter aside and slid down from the chair. A.W. had only two records in the house – Gustav Mahler's *Quartet for Strings and Piano in A minor* and Hank Williams' greatest hits. He put on the latter and Cigarette ash fell on his sleeves, so he rolled them up and loosened his tie. The courtyard rippled with a breeze.

The bloodroots had blossomed early, and tickled the feet of marble greeks caught in vulnerable positions tilling earth or pointing skyward with a translucent dignity that lost definition when the wrinkles in their clothes weathered. Untamed Kentucky bluegrass spilled over his grandmother's careful landscaping and blurred the yard. She had invested many grueling hours watching the landscapers work with thousands of her husband's inherited dollars from the sun room. Tea and wine had never been consumed more righteously. It was her life's work.

A crow stood on the stone atlas fountain and pecked at its wings. Peter reached beneath the desk for his father's side-by-side double barrel shotgun and loaded two shells. With one eye closed, he steadied his aim and the cigarette glowed from the side of his mouth. He fired twice before signaling the dogs with a whistle.

Two Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, Long John and Old Henry, ran barking to retrieve the bird and brought it in through a dog flap installed in the east wing sun room. They clamored through the reverberant main hall and tracked dirt on the center stairwell's carpeted steps. Long John presented the bird and Peter gave them both a biscuit. He rang a bell.

Walter, a disheveled old man wearing cracked glasses and a stained tuxedo, entered the study. An undone bow-tie dangled from his neck.

He gave Walter the crow.

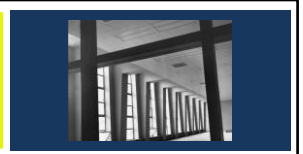
“Toss this out,” he said.

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

Twelve years earlier, Walter saved A.W.'s life in a Singapore opium den. A Chilean assassin put a Colt .45 to the back of A.W.'s head as he stepped on Walter's favorite wooden pipe. Walter slit his throat with a machete. The thin, sunken-eyed opium addict's blade-wielding skills impressed A.W., and he offered Walter a job at the manor – he needed someone to guard his two-year-old son while negotiating terms with nefarious arms-dealer, Pedro Medina, in South America. Walter acted as the house butler, but always carried a knife. Peter suspected that he never broke his opium habit.

The dogs panted and whined while Peter paced behind the desk. Walter turned to leave.





“Also, run down to *Butterman’s*,” Peter said. “Fetch me a flask, two packs of cigarettes, mosquito repellent, marshmallows, graham crackers, hot dogs, and chocolate bars. I’m camping at Chequamegon Point tonight.”

“Yeah. Okay. I think I can do that for you.” Walter turned. “Wait, could you, like, say all that again?”

Peter wrote the items on a piece of stationery with the Foster crest watermarked in its upper-right corner and handed it to Walter.

“Be ready to depart at six fifteen.”

“Yeah. Cool. Okay.”

Walter shuffled out the door, and Peter went up to the third floor – to his room. He changed into jeans and a red flannel shirt. A picture of his mother in a frilly white dress stood on his desk. He knocked it over, stepped over the broken frame and put his father’s watch in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. The picture lay cracked with glass shards in a halo above his mother’s face. Her skin was wrinkled in rings that faded from the corners of her eyes and the lines could be counted to find her age in worry, like a tree that was too fragile to find light in an over-grown forest so it was cut and carried off to be burned. He picked up the picture and closed his eyes. *His mother’s red cocktail dress swirled around oak and leather. His ancestors closed their eyes on the wall. Cocteau kissed her against the desk. Asshole.*

#### The Headmaster

Cocteau leaned against his desk and lifted his glasses to rub his eyes. His right hand rested on a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

“Where were you meeting Foster?”

Two boys sat in front of him and rested their feet on canvas backpacks he caught them throwing out their dormitory windows with a bed-sheet rope blowing in the wind. They looked away.

The headmaster smiled under his palm. Forty years before he sat in those chairs with Tommy Tannehill. Wild brown hair. Ties always loose. It was all boys back then. Lots of trouble. The headmaster was a World War Two vet named Mark Hammel. Made everyone call him Major. *Yes, Major. No, Major.* He bent down with his hands on his knees and got in their faces. Real close. Stared them down for an hour. Hit knuckles with rulers. For an hour. Old school. Never sold out Dan Uhle for the cigarettes and dirty magazines. Scrubbed the bathrooms with toothbrushes every night for two weeks.

One boy had a hat on and chewed gum.

“Spit that out,” Cocteau said.

The boy stopped chewing and leaned forward. He looked Cocteau in the eye and pushed out pink centimeters with his tongue until his mouth emptied and a sticky wad slapped the floor.

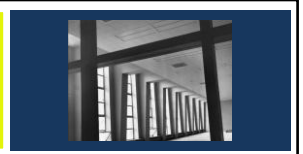
“Real tough guys.” He kicked their feet off the backpacks and shook out the bags on the floor. A small two-man tent. Flashlights. Firecrackers. Cigarettes. Hotdogs stolen from the mess hall freezer. Pocket knives. A slingshot. Matches.

“Going Camping, then?”

The boys didn’t answer. Cocteau put the dangerous items on his desk (sling shot, cigarettes, firecrackers, knives and matches).

“These are mine.”

The hotdogs thawed and leaked preservatives on the floor.



“Those you can keep or throw away.”

One boy raised an eyebrow. Cocteau walked to the window behind his desk and sighed.

“I’ll call your parents again. Never makes a difference though, Does it?” He went back in front of his desk and leaned in close to their faces with his hands on his knees. “You ever cleaned a bathroom with a toothbrush?”

Explosions echoed through the hallway outside his door – lady fingers. He ran to the door and pointed at the boys.

“Don’t move a muscle, got it?”

They didn’t answer.

“I’m serious this time.”

More explosions. He went into the hallway and locked his door behind him.

### Chequamegon Point

Walter parked the black Foster limousine at the head of Chequamegon Trail and Peter got out with a canvas Buck Scout pack too large for his thin frame. The trail stretched two miles along Gooseberry Island’s western coast to Chequamegon Point – a secluded cliff-top 117 meters above the water – and Peter walked the trail through old cedar forests and tall-grass prairies. Local children and teenagers knew the point well for its usefulness in concealing acts of notable rebellion and experimentation – weed, booze, sex, fireworks, fist-fights, craps, fires, cock-fights – and the Bandits camped there, but not without contest.

The public school “natives” – led by a fat boy named Dirk Modesto who had several missing teeth – often fought them for control of the point, but the island’s population was small and the boarding school had a much larger, wealthier student body than Nicolet Middle School. It became habit to bring weapons every time they camped.

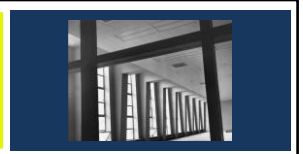
Peter left the trail and smoked a cigarette on the lakeshore. Sunlight reflected off the water and the breaking waves. The waves crinkled like tinfoil under the red glow of oven coils. He thought about his mother cooking pot-roast the night before his father left for a dogsledding expedition in Alaska to find a rare gem lost in a plane crash in the late sixties.

His mother worked in the kitchen and A.W. waited with Peter in the parlor. They listened to Hank Williams and A.W. smoked a cigar. She watched A.W.’s face as he chewed, and covered her own when he spat it out. She left the table and cried in the bathroom.

Four days later, a bolt of lightning smote her husband from the summit of what is now called Mount Foster (it was renamed a month after his death). A.W. raised both arms in triumph over the limp corpse of a man-eating Kodiak he had slain in a territorial battle and a white flash of electricity surged through his muscular body. He fell and never rose again. Peter’s mother didn’t cook anymore.

Peter stamped out his cigarette and went back to the trail through a thin forest of cedar and oak trees. The trail rose on a steady incline for a half mile and switch-backed up a steep hillside.

At the top, the other kids arrived in packs of two and three and set up tents in a circle around the ash-stained stone fire-pit. Peter set his pack by a large boulder near the edge of the cliff and assembled his tent. Amelia Mallory and two other girls had already



arrived and sat on logs around the pit and talked. She wore a raccoon hat and her curly brown hair framed brown eyes and red lips.

Frank Kelly, a handsome, wavy-haired boy in Peter's class, rode into camp on his silver mountain bike and stopped by Jim Smith's tent. Jim adjusted his square-framed glasses and wiped his forehead. He didn't camp often and needed help hammering in his yellow tent stakes. Frank dismounted, unsheathed a hatchet from his belt-loop and used the blunt end to drive the stakes into the ground.

Frank also had a khaki Buck Scout pack and had *CCB* sewn on the top flap. He and Peter had been part of troop 126 two years ago, but were forced to give up scouting after they threw fire crackers into Scout Master Henry's tent on a weekend survival-training trip. Henry was a veteran of the Tet offensive who wore bandanas and smoked lucky strikes. He woke screaming and cried in the woods.

Peter waved at Frank as he walked his bike over with an eye on the girls.

"Glad you could make it, Frankie."

They shook hands and Frank gave him a casual salute.

"I didn't think they'd come."

Frank nodded to the girls, who smiled back and giggled.

"Amelia's good outdoors."

"Guess that's true." Frank flipped out the kick-stand and set his bike next to the tent. The camp filled with kids setting up their tents and unpacking their supplies.

"Your note said two got caught?"

Frank nodded.

"Duke and Edwin. We had a little trouble getting past Cocteau, but Fletcher tossed some lady fingers in the west stairwell. Kept him busy for a while. We went back and broke them out of his office."

"How long are you clear for?"

"Until we get back." Frank turned and spat. "They know we're gone, but they don't know where, and Cocteau won't call the cops. Parents are too stiff about reputation."

"Good work." Peter knelt down and unpacked.

They unrolled their sleeping bags inside the tent. Frank brought a radio and an air rifle along with his gas lantern. At the Academy he hid the rifle under a loose floor-board in his dormitory closet. They put the lantern in a small backpack and brought the gun over to the fire-pit.

A few muscular bandits cut down dead trees and sawed them into logs that decreased in size in groups of four. Frank and Peter chopped notches into them with hatchets and stacked them in a square around the stone circle. Two boys sword fought with sticks and Peter sent them into the woods to collect more kindling.

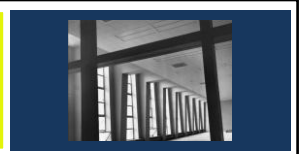
By the fire pit, Amelia whittled a stick with a small pocket knife. Peter chopped at the logs next to her. He liked the way she looked in her hat. Her brown hair curled out from under it and bounced around her shoulders.

"What're you whittling?" He stuck his hatchet into a stump. She smiled and kept her eyes on her hands.

"A knife."

Peter scratched his head.

"But you've got a real knife."



“Just something to do.” She ran her fingers along the stick. He rolled up his sleeves and drank from the flask. A crow landed on the rock by his tent and he grabbed the air rifle. He missed and it flew into the woods.

The boys brought back enough wood to make three large piles, and Peter helped them snap the branches in roughly equal segments with Frank. They put a pile of dry grass on the ground in the middle of the square and stacked kindling on top of it inside the logs. Frank whistled with his fingers and the Bandits sat down in a semi-circle. Peter stood on a large rock before them. He took a swig from his flask and cleared his throat. Amelia sat in front.

“Welcome back Bandits and wannabes.”

He nodded to a young group of five boys and three girls sitting together behind the rest, unaccustomed to the outdoors. They still wore their blue and silver uniforms and the boys loosened their crested ties while the girls rubbed their legs in pleated plaid skirts.

“Tonight will hopefully end in an initiation,” he said. “Whichever of these scrubs is strong enough to last the night will become a Bandit.”

The older boys and girls grinned. Peter swayed and struggled to concentrate. He needed to urinate.

“If any of you wanna back out, do it now.”

One wannabe stirred, but none left.

“Good.”

He couldn’t remember the rest of his speech and squirmed around on the rock. The Bandits watched him and Amelia smiled.

“Bandits,” he said. “What do we say?”

The boys and girls responded in unison.

“Fortune favors the unflinching.”

“Frankie, light it up.”

Frank held a stick that had an old shirt wrapped around the end and doused it with a can of gasoline, then lit it on fire. He shoved the stick underneath the logs and kindling and lit the grass, which crackled and smoked until a flame roared and spread upward. It sent a wave of heat throughout the camp. The fire grew higher and hotter until the flames licked the air twenty feet above their heads. The Bandits cheered, and the hopefuls smiled. Their knees shook and they put their hands by the flames.

“Alright, wannabes, run down to the creek and get some water.”

They left the fire together and whispered.

The creek was down at the base of the hill, and the Bandits had some time to talk. They gathered around the rock, and when the wannabes were out of site, Peter stepped down.

“Alright, listen up,” he said. “Split up into groups of four.”

Frank went to Peter’s right side and Jim stood at his left. The other bandits walked around and made groups and talked with each other. Peter’s chest jumped when Amelia waved off her friends and joined his group. She smiled at him.

“Okay,” he said. “Same drill as last time. Stay in your groups and spread out along the canyon. Scare them, confuse them, make them do stuff. Whatever you want. I’m giving them the same riddles so don’t tip them off about the cave. When everyone’s inside we’ll make them Bandits. Got it?”

They saluted Peter.



“Got it.”

The bandits went off into the woods toward the canyon. Peter’s group hid just out of view and waited for him. He put an old brown map on the rock with riddles written on the back, then sipped from his flask and stumbled into the forest.

#### The Headmaster

The stairwell was empty and Cocteau picked up shattered firework cartridges from the floor. He checked the hallways above and below, but found no one and radioed the disciplinarian on his way back to the office.

“Edgar, fireworks in the west stairwell. Search the grounds. Students out of dorms.”

His radio clicked and static echoed off the hallway walls.

“Copy.”

His heels clicked on the polished marble floors and stopped before the door to his office. The radio dropped by his feet. Static buzzed from the floor.

The door had been removed and his papers were scattered on the oriental rug. The bags and the boys were gone, and so were their knives and matches. Cocteau grabbed what was left of his thinning hair and closed his eyes. He picked up the radio.

“Edgar, meet me in the garage. We’ve got students off the grounds. Tell the dorm supervisors to get a head count while we’re gone.”

“Copy.”

#### The Canyon

Peter’s group took the north-east trail from Chequamegon Point and followed it to Crescent Creek, which ran south and fed Hart Lake in the Island’s center. The river had cut a thin canyon that split the northern half of the Island, and an old covered bridge was built over it a mile south of the North Point Ferry. It was a mile hike to the bridge from Chequamegon point, and once they hit the river, they went north through the canyon.

Amelia’s flashlight flickered and died, and a cold, thin darkness settled over the woods.

Peter took the light and hit it against his hand. It came on and he handed it back to her. Their hands touched and she blushed.

“Thanks,” she said.

“No problem.”

Jim and Frank brushed past them and walked along the creek’s bank. Peter shook his head and caught up with them. Amelia followed at his side.

Their breath steamed over their flashlights and Jim’s voice echoed off the canyon walls.

“The cave’s before the bridge, right?”

Jim’s teeth chattered and Frank shivered.

“After the bridge,” he said.

With the night had come a change in weather. The temperature dropped twenty degrees, and the Bandits were not dressed for it.

Peter climbed over the trunk of a fallen tree and ducked beneath the branch of another that was rooted in cracks on the canyon wall. Amelia followed him and slipped on the trunk but Peter caught her hand and helped her down.

“Watch your step,” he said.

Her hand lingered in his.



“Sorry, I’m usually not this clumsy.”

“It’s tough when it’s dark.”

He stayed behind with her while Jim and Frank walked ahead up-river. His right arm dangled at his side and it bounced against her hand as they walked. She moved closer to him and he put his hand in his pocket. Her face looked pale in the moonlight, but he could tell she wore red lipstick. She smiled at him.

“Do you think you’d ever cheat on anyone?” He said.

“What do you mean?”

Her wide, worried eyes glistened and he shook his head. He hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

“Why don’t you go ahead with Jim and Frank.” Peter stopped walking and shined his flashlight in the woods.

“Why?” Amelia blushed.

“Nothing, I’ll meet you at the bridge. I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

She bounced on her heels as he crunched through the forest.

“Peter,” she called.

“Yeah?” He said, hidden in the trees with his light turned back toward the river.

“I really like you.”

The wind howled between them.

“I know.”

Dry leaves and twigs snapped under his boots, and Amelia stood by the river and waited for his flashlight to turn back her way.

#### The Headmaster

Cocteau and Edgar sped down the road toward the Chequamegon Nature Preserve and Edgar scratched his thick, hairy neck. His big, calloused hands searched the new stubble for ingrown hairs.

“So do you have any idea where they went?” Edgar said.

Cocteau’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

“I think they were going camping.”

“In the preserve?”

“You didn’t grow up on this island,” Cocteau said. “There’s only one place kids go when they don’t want supervision.”

“Well, those boys aren’t from here either.”

“Foster is.”

Edgar shrugged and the car slowed.

“Roll down your window,” Cocteau said. “The trail head is around here somewhere. I can’t see it. Did you bring flashlights?”

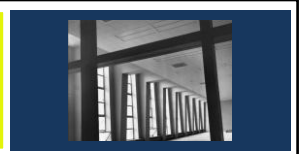
Edgar nodded.

#### The Woods

Peter stumbled through the forest to find a place to piss, but he got turned around in the dense undergrowth and couldn’t find a decent clearing. Amelia’s flashlight lingered in the woods for a few minutes, then disappeared when she went back to meet up with Frank and Jim. He couldn’t remember which direction he came from. The woods were cold and unfriendly, and he was drunk. He had been alone for a long time.

A few twigs snapped behind him.

“Amelia?” He shouted and shined his flashlight around him. “Frank?”



He walked toward the noise, but saw nothing. The forest spun and he steadied himself on a tree at the crest of a steep ridge that sloped down into a dark clearing fifty feet below.

They would come looking for him soon. With one hand holding him steady against the tree, he unzipped his pants and unleashed a clear stream that pattered against the ground and drizzled down the ridge toward the clearing. In his pocket he found his lighter and pulled out a cigarette. His hand slid off the tree while he tried to light it and his knees locked and unlocked and he swayed. Urine sprayed off his zipper onto his hands and chest.

“Damnit!”

He bit down on the cigarette butt and tried to correct the stream, but lost his footing and tumbled down the ridge. His body, limp and covered in piss, rolled through the trees and slammed against them like a pinball until he reached the bottom and cracked his head on a fallen log.

He struggled to lift his head. Two headlights rolled past and a rush of wind followed in their wake. He wandered all the way to the road. The wind licked drops of sweat on his forehead.

“Paw!” Amelia’s voice called out far away from behind the ridge. “Where’d you go, Paw?”

He smiled, then he passed out.

#### The Headmaster

Edgar leaned out the window and squinted. Something rolled through the trees ahead of them. Cocteau shined his flashlight through the other window and scanned the line of trees on the opposite side as they rolled past.

“Hold on, stop. I think I saw something,” Edgar said.

“You find the trailhead?”

“I don’t think so, but there was someone rolling down that ridge back there.”

Cocteau slammed on the breaks and gunned it in reverse.

“How far back?” He said.

Edgar’s full torso would out the window, his calloused hands gripped the door.

“How far back, Edgar?”

“Here. Stop here.”

Cocteau backed the car onto the gravel shoulder and followed Edgar who ran toward a log at the base of the ridge. Peter’s limp body was crumpled against it, blood trickling from his forehead, with a broken cigarette hanging from his mouth.

“Jesus.” Cocteau muttered with shaking hands.

They turned him over and slapped his face. He was covered in piss and booze.

“Peter,” Cocteau said. “Peter, wake up.”

“He’s got a pulse,” Edgar said.

Cocteau sat on the log and lifted Peter’s torso into his lap.

“Come on Peter, wake up.”

A small high-pitched voice called out from the top of the ridge. Flashlights shined through the trees above them.

“Paw!” Amelia called.

“Who’s that?” Cocteau shouted. He shined his light at the top of the ridge. The lights above them clicked off and whispers and *shhh*’s echoed through the trees.



“Amelia?” Cocteau said. “Is that you? Who’s with you?”

There was a long pause.

“No.” the voice responded.

“Damn it, get down here right now, all of you.” Peter stirred in his arms.

“I’ll go round ‘em up,” Edgar said and started up the ridge.

“I’m taking him to the hospital,” Cocteau said. “I’ll send a car to pick you up.”

Edgar disappeared over the ridge and Cocteau dragged Peter into the passenger’s seat and got in on the other side. He tore off his white undershirt and ripped it into long strips that he wrapped around Peter’s head to stop the bleeding. Peter’s eyes opened and narrowed.

“Don’t touch me!”

He flailed his arms and pressed his back against the door. The empty flask fell out of his pocket and rattled on the floor.

“You!” Peter said with glazed eyes that wandered in his head. Cocteau wondered if he thought it was a dream. Peter wiped his forehead and his hand turned red with blood.

“What did you do to me?” Peter screamed and pulled the ivory-handled knife out of its sheath on his belt. He lunged at Cocteau with the blade.

“Bastard!”

“Peter stop!”

Cocteau grabbed his hand and knocked the knife out. Peter fell forward and hit his head on the dashboard and went unconscious again. The headmaster wiped blood on his pants, and lifted the boy’s body back into his seat, then strapped him in and tightened his bandages. He wiped the blade and threw it on the back seat.

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White dividing lines blurred together on the road. The wheels hummed against the pavement.

“You know,” he said, his voice tired and low. “I never slept with your mother, Peter.”

Peter’s head slumped unconscious against the window.

“She couldn’t handle being alone all the time,” He said. “Your dad drank too much when he was back.”

The radio glowed green in the dark and the hospital lights shined on Peter’s bloody face.

“You probably didn’t notice.” The car slowed. “She wore long sleeves and turtle necks.”

The blinker clicked and he turned under the overhang above the emergency room entrance. He shifted into park.

“I think you’d better come back and live at school for a while. I’ll have a talk with your mother.”

Brandy and blood stains painted the boy’s shirt, and Cocteau sat in a pool that dripped from just below his ribs. He clutched his side.

“There are better ways to be a man, Peter.”





**A Fish**

Christopher Avallone

Protandrous hermaphrodite,  
your life is an odd one.

As men you are always smaller, subservient  
when you grow you grow into motherhood.

To live the experiences of a man and  
then of a woman, or in your case,  
male-fish and female-fish,  
it must be something else.

Is it a grand event?  
Do you swim up to the surface  
and cast away the fetters of one sex and assume those  
of another?

And what about that moment in between,  
is it a short glimpse of freedom?