

T U L A N E
R E V I E W



fall 2016

THE TULANE REVIEW

fall 2016

editor in chief
SIONA KALIL

art editor
JORDAN SWATE

poetry editors
MARIE 'BIZ' THOMAS & SAM MOULTON

prose editors
TESS RILEY & ANDREW FERLAND

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Capstrake

Second Day

How often in

when we made our boat

Your legs were still

in their room

will you be forgetting me

the way I will still

Or for me that is true

we could be made all the way

I want to keep you

the tapping me

We could make a world

and we might make our

like others

and we might make

and we might make

Would we be right

without this of Africa and the sea?

Would we be

how to come about together

how to run the dolphins off

how to tell off

when the wind comes

her call, power across the sea

how we reach

when we need to hate

from right to left

Let this hold be strong

Let this hold be strong

Lapstrake

Sarah Key

How will we fit

when we make our boat?

Your big wrist next

to skinny mine

will you snug against me

for a carvel-built skiff?

Or if we go clinker-built

we could lapstrake all the way.

I want to overlap you

overlapping me.

We could make it work:

a breast might poke out

here or there

your bad toenail might

catch my tender heel.

Would we be airtight

without ribs of African mahogany?

Teach me, love,

how to come about together

how to run the doldrums off

how to fall off

when the wind creeps

her cats' paws across the sea

how we reach

when we need to hide

from raging seas.

Let our hold be strong

bone over bone.

Of Wine and Rivers

Jennifer Slavinkas

A knot of unsalted bread and half glass of wine on a rough table, pierced from the light through the window says more than the landscape, muted light not enough to dazzle, just enough to sustain.

Softened greens awash enter memory enough. Language, a city traversed and wandered through and somehow lost and held by the shuttered windows, the inlaid stones crafted and set by others long since vanished. But to say language as water over river pebbles, is closer. Sound written on the body, anatomy of word, remembered and moved, a translation of what was said, conditioned by bright sound, enough to hold and yet, as the softest light, enters memory as something far away. Distance, the space between now and what has past is lovely, a room. A window, a glass. And yet, the distance of future, what awaits us is only a visage, uneasy, to be cleared with water, rain, language.

A room entered into, a table set. Stone walk, stone beneath river.

What is there to say about loving when we can barely touch it, what is there to say about hope when it, like language, mutates and bends to our own will, even.

What is seen is known, in a moment of translucence. What is seen is met with love and a rendering of communion, with the cypress tree, with the olive tree, with the river and with the light itself. And that, it seems, is enough.

Pain Sculpts

Stephen C. Middleton

Pain sculpts an outsider
But is only a component
In an outsider's art –
Stone, lonely drawings
Or Mississippi mud

A permanent glare
Just there
A quizzical stare
Mistaken for an idiot grin
This distance unplanned but
A griot would understand

Carnival masks the schism

What did Henry Darger know
Of anatomy & murder?
Son Thomas made skulls (initially)
To scare his grandfather

Forensic declensions
What cataclysm
Spawned or spurned

The chasm when
They speak of technique,
Learning

Some urgency
Burning
Burnished or twisted.

The Dangers of Translating Poetry

Martin Ott

The translator left her mark in each book, desire itself a draft, moniker massaged into

skittering prose, hidden messages. *The folded page is another clue.* The challenge, at

first, was to turn lesser talent into legendary lore-slingers, but before she knew it she

desired to knead letters into paste. The book's binding is made to break. She was the

pool's reflection, her own madness

unmade tome to tome with pyrotic passages ignored by sloppy editors. *Ego is the engine*

we misunderstand most. She imagined generations incanting his crumbs, the telltale of

who she was

fed into brain and blood, desire to be in between, the gasp of a living draft. *The art of*

reading is to transform.

Adolescent Idiopathic Scoliosis

Claire Dockery

For all we know, a daughter's spine curves
when her mother steps on sidewalk cracks.

But stand up straight, to be safe. That slouch will do you no favors.

Eleven degrees of unknown influence: this bend is more than a C, not quite
an S. The next year, seventeen. These tracks should be crowbar and
crucifix, beam where the heart hangs, not so pliant.

Each vertebra, a Jenga block, phantom scent of metal,
swell of foreign tongues, their unexpected stresses
diverging from the origin. Their mark is permanent:

The curve can only worsen from here.

Three more degrees means a brace. If ineffective, the rod.

The screws. The scar. I am swayed too easily.

I think of stems bending, wonder what sunlight I've grown towards.

Las Meninas--Ars Poetica

Phillip Barron

To see is a relationship, the object and the subject seeing. Visuality is somewhere between. Do you see? Not the seeing I mean, it's the meaning left to see, left at the syllogism's end. What should it be? Conclusion. Concussion. Red cross thoughts on a canvas we don't see, we only watch. The painting makes the case that painting is a language, when subject views an object that seeing has two places. The poem is a language. A poem lives in its resemblance to itself. A copy of a poem is the poem. A painting is identical to itself. There is only one, others merely copies. Identity then is a premise, painting without knowing which game of make believe to believe.

Las Meninas

Phillip Barron

the mirror sees visibility, a history of itself, from the iris to the palette clinched in wanting to make it new, to inflict Seville, to stand in from the frame, to mix the innocent canvas with the limits of painting is infinite, the relation of language to painting is infinite, it all revolves around the self, the I

THIS EMPTY BODY DANCED

Kathleen Gunton

-Carolyn Kizer: Cento

Why have you followed me here?
So you may write this poem?
This empty body danced on the river bank
Where streams of light and winter join
The blue view—
Made with such love!

In meditation the spirit rouses, flutters.
We sang “Be still and know that I am God.”
Words heard a thousand times.
I lift and listen. I eat God’s peace.
I have been blessed.
(What you have known within.)

The present is this poem, O my dear.

-Kathleen Gunton

~~PASSIVE~~ AGGRESSIVE EMAIL TO MY COLLEGE PROFESSOR

Jae Nichelle

8:00pm

Professor,

You gave me a C on my paper because you are “tired of reading the same arguments from me.” But here’s the thing—I have only received flowers as apologies. Bowling pins. Cut down for sport under feet of playground tomboys. I have only been loved once. By a ship that knew it was sinking before I climbed onboard. I’m not so good at letting go—I may still be underwater. My Twitter is most active on Sundays when I feel like yelling at no one and everyone. And you are always asking the same questions. You did not teach me to see grass as just as alive as I am, but now that I do I wonder why it is so easy for me to keep ripping it apart. I envy those who have their own grass and run on it. I did not even notice until I looked down and saw pavement, which does not whimper between my fingers like I need it to. I don’t think you’ve noticed that my fingers write unattached from my body and though they do not see the world in only one way, they cannot help but feel it as such. You say you are tired of reading the same arguments from me, but I am tired of having the same fights with you.

May You One Day See the Beauty in a WeedBouquet,
Student

8:27pm

Student,

You are not as tragic as you would like to believe. I have never been loved, but I have been Rocky Road ice cream dates on a blanket in the grass, which could never feel as alive as I did. Even fingers know that flowers bloom in multiple forms—have you never held a young child? Or must you first stop being one?

May you one day learn to unwrap yourself,

Professor

8:29pm

Professor,

No one eats that ice cream anymore and you know you've never
been on a date.

I'm telling my mother,

Student

When I left you

Jennifer Slavinkas

When I left you the slow young mountains of Arkansas took you over

The part of you saved grew into her arms

Because there was a time when I saw the shimmer of love

Deep there, between the pages, lost in Wittgenstein's city of language

You knew the way by touch

Where as I was left uncaring about my own shine, my wan deft words

Given them over to you and her, because you never belonged to me

Or if you did, it was more than I could bear,

The weight of your words on paper, in a song without chords

And from the time the photo was taken

Of you smiling into my lenses, fingers pressed between the pages of a book

To save your place, I knew not the persimmon tree, not the line of our laundry

Side by side drying from the damp of adventure, not the coffee spilling into the fire

Could bring me back and take me over

I knew that as I left you I would save that soul, the sense of beginning

So you would find it again in her eyes beneath the sky of the Ozarks

In the folds of the sheets of the bed she made

Because without knowing of her, I felt she would be there,

Standing in the doorway, waiting to take you in, not over.

To Market

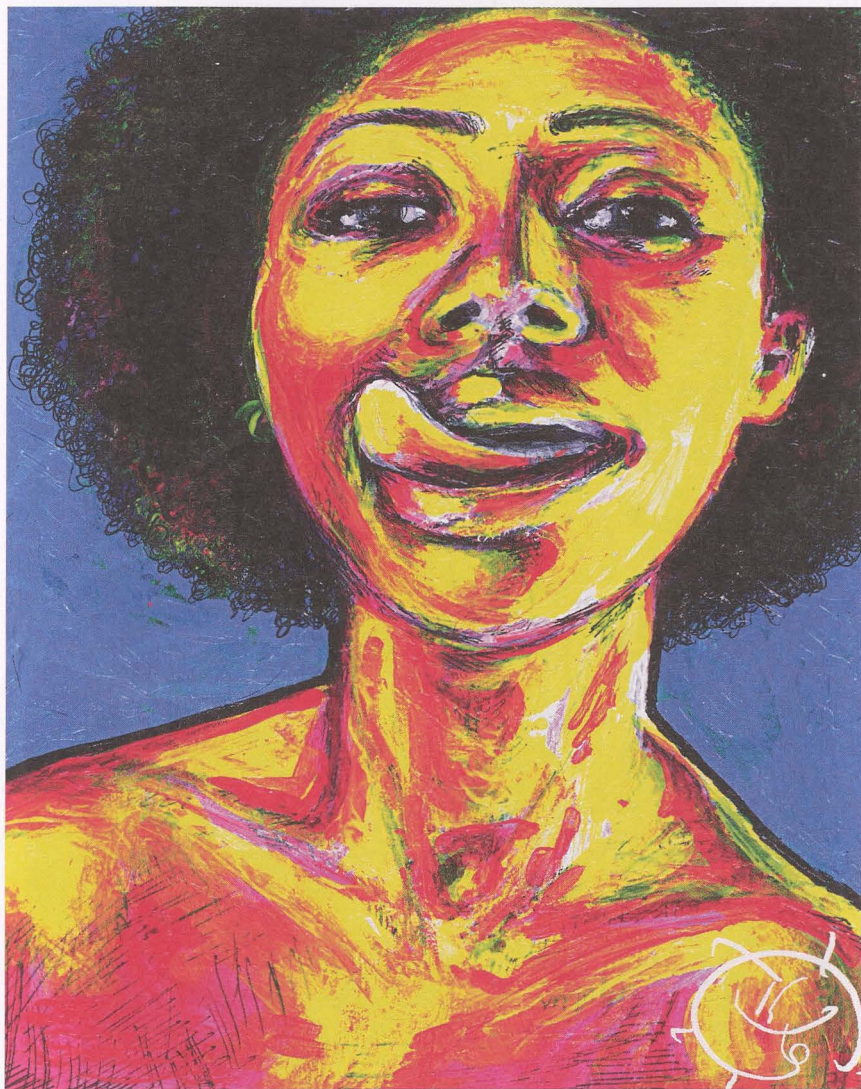
Oliver Sanderson

Life's getting harder, she said, spoonfulling her cocaine,
hat-hiding from: the sun and the lights, inside, she decides: *no makeup*
today.

God loves her, she knows it.
Her oil-gold eyes scream apathetic,
but no one looks there anyway.

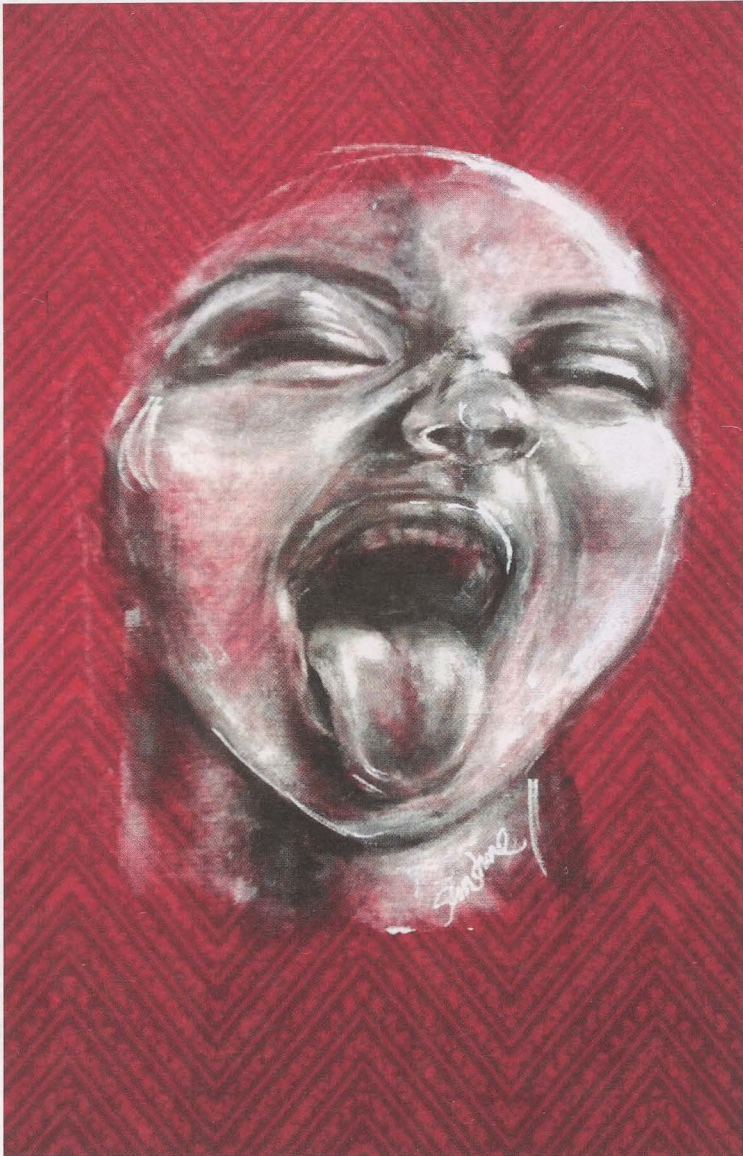
Eyelash, shoes and fingernail, drip
crimson like worthless carpets, clothes she's filled,
the sanguine sadness following her, uneventful

What more is there? she muses in the market, to no one in particular.



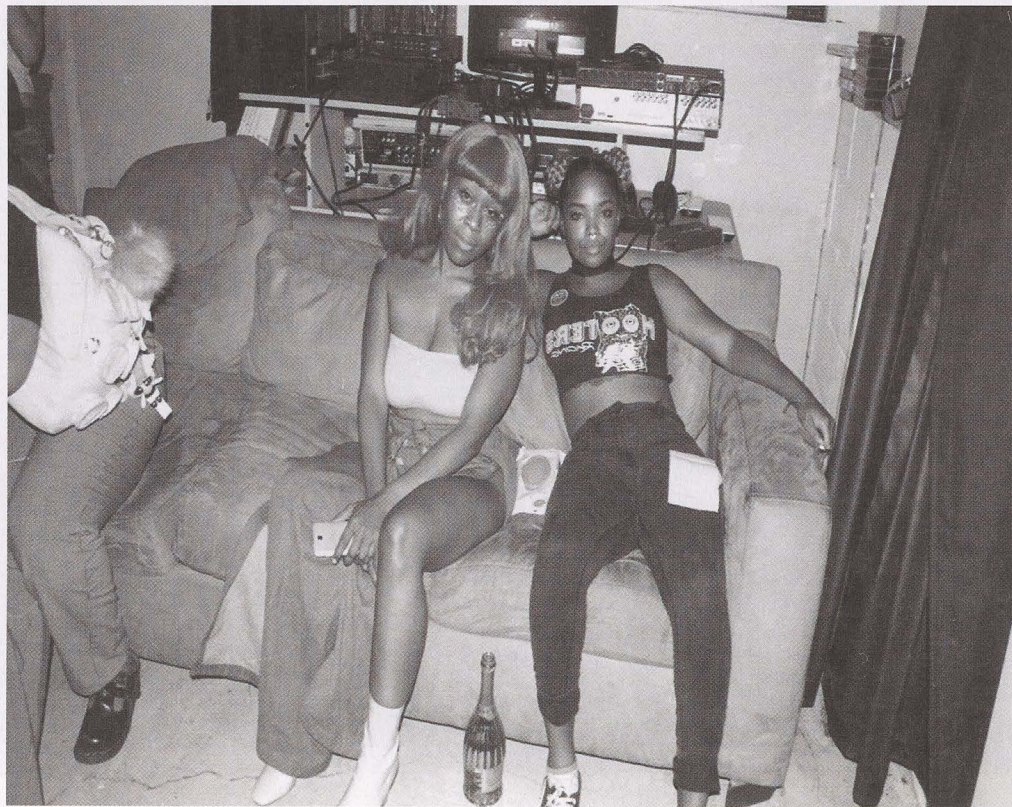
Delicious

Sunshine Best



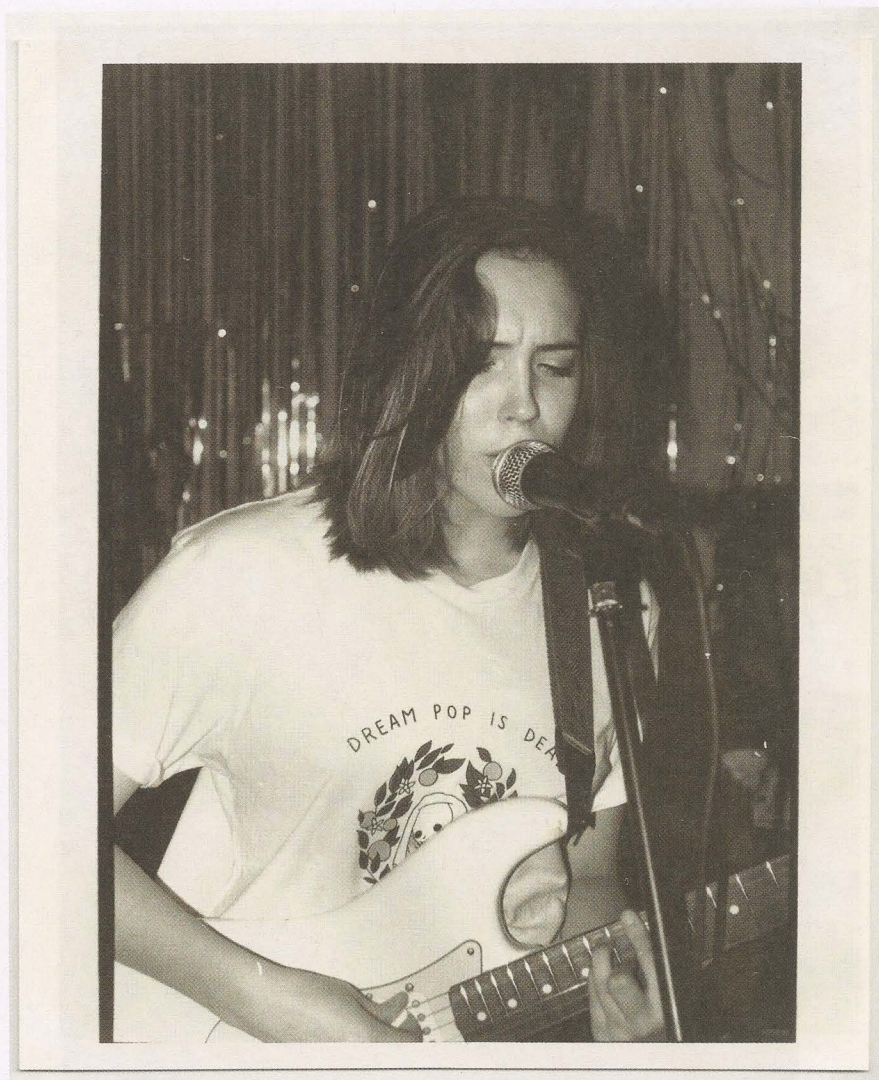
Tasting the Wind/Raindrops/Snow- flakes

Sunshine Best



The Girl's Room

Mia Greenberg: Film, 6"x3.66",
2016



Soccer Mommy

Mia Greenberg; Film, 8.21"x10.42", 2016



Beautiful Women

Mia Greenberg: Film, 5"x8.2", 2016



Paloma

Harleigh Shaw: Film, 7"x7", 2016



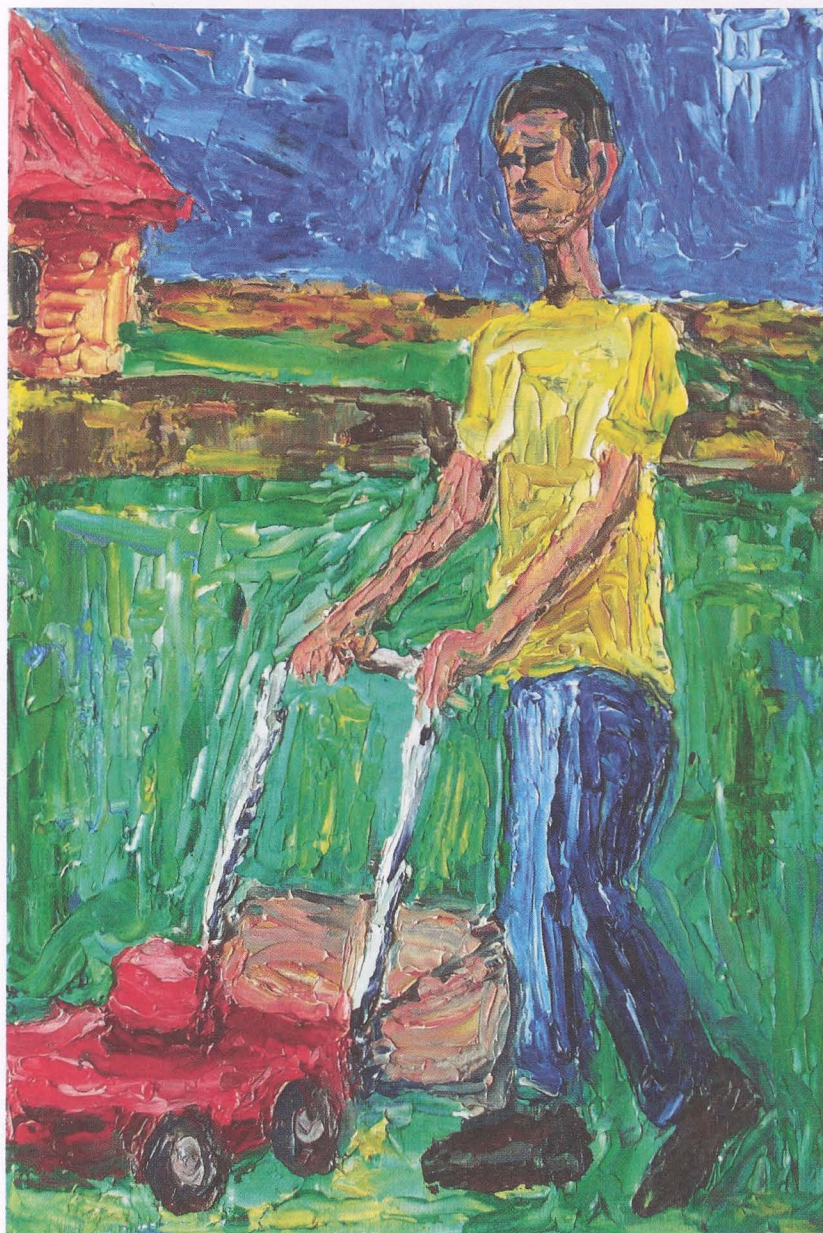
Untitled

*Harleigh Shaw: Film, 7"x5",
2016*



Andrew

Harleigh Shaw: Film, 8"x10", 2016



The New World, Lawnmower

Allen Forrest: Oil on canvas panel, 8" x 10", 2016



The New World, Django

Allen Forrest: Ink, 12"x9", 2016

The Owl

Ryan Kelley

Celeste

Edward Bane first saw Celeste just before dusk at the Forks of the Road Market. She was a tall, sad-eyed mulatto whose father had been a congressman in Louisiana. She was born on a large cotton plantation near Baton Rouge and had just come to Natchez that morning. Celeste was a remarkably pretty girl and her old missus had brought her into the house to cook when she was still a small child. She had just turned fourteen when her old master came to her room for the first time. She pretended to sleep as he sat the lamp beside the bed and watched her, his eyes almost glowing in the fading flickers of the wick. After some time he dropped to his knees beside her bed and began uttering the Lord's Prayer in a sort of sniffing, coarse whisper. Her old master's sojourns into her room continued on an almost nightly basis for over a year. Sometimes he would touch the girl's hair, running it under his fingers and staring at it in a sort of awe in the lamplight. The following spring, on a trip to Tennessee, he purchased a hat with silk ribbons for the girl. There was a terrible argument that night in the big house. The next morning the overseer came to the kitchen and told Celeste to grab her clothes and come with him. He drove her to the landing where a ship waited to take her to Natchez. She never saw Baton Rouge again.

"Have you eaten?" Edward asked her on the ride home.

"No sir. Not since last morning," she said. The moon was bright and he could see her face as she looked down at the floor of the carriage.

"We got some food at Beau Saule—that's the name of your new home. I'll have Taffy get you something to eat when we get there."

Celeste looked at the dust the carriage kicked up over the wide road. She turned and looked out at the fields of cotton that stretched along the road for miles. She tried holding her breath, but she could feel it again. Something in her chest was struggling to pull its way out of her. She closed one hand tightly around the other and bit her lip. She began to cry.

"Now, you better hush up that foolishness before you meet your new mistress or I'll have to give you something to cry about," Edward said after a few minutes.

Missus was a large Scots-Irish woman with bark-brown eyes and long bay-colored hair that she wore in ringlets down to her shoulders.

"She looks dirty," Missus said when Edward brought Celeste into the front parlor. "And a frail little wench, for sure."

A wooden tub was set up in the kitchen that night after the Bane's retired to their room. Taffy handed her the lye and told her to scrub everywhere.

"Missus don't stand for no dirt anywhere in her house. Makes her crazy as all get out," Taffy said. Taffy sat down on a small stool near the floor. She was a large woman, larger even than the missus, and her weight enveloped the stool.

"How old are you, child?" Taffy asked her.

"Fifteen, far as I know," the girl answered.

"You're a thin little thing. We'll have to fatten you up some. I got some ash cakes just made this morning—we'll start fixin' that up." Taffy sat her hands on her knees and looked the girl over. "You're high-colored, too. I should have knowed that. Master likes them high-colored girls."

Celeste ran her hands over her face. She listened to the sounds of the woods outside for one long second. She curled her legs towards her stomach and slid down into the tub until the water covered her face. She exhaled and listened to the sound of the air leaving her body underwater. The water was warm and for a few moments she didn't feel anything at all.

Silas

Silas told the others that his mother had faced north when she birthed him. It was an omen, he said, that one day he would be free from Beau Saule for good. He had lived there since he was a lanky little boy. Master purchased him from a trader named Greer who said he came from a select stock of bucks that had been bred specifically for strength and stamina for three generations. He

grew to be a broad-shouldered man with thinning hair and dark, sunken eyes that stared holes through the other slaves. The other field hands were half afraid and half in awe of him. Legends grew up around him. It was said he once killed a deer from fifty yards by throwing a pebble through its head. Silas had run away with two slaves from the Marlborough plantation when he was still a young man. The three had been crossing a creek bed on their second night running when two shots hit Silas' companions straight between the eyes. Old Issac was with the white men when they fired. He said there was a low, mournful kind of hoot owl in the woods just before they fired.

"It followed us back to Beau Saule," Old Issac told the others. "Some kind of conjure on that owl—some kind of conjure on Silas, too."

Silas never talked about that night with anyone, except one time with Master the next day. Master walked Silas out to the old poplar tree at the far end of the fields.

"You know what that is, Silas? That's the whipping tree," he said. "You' my hardest worker, Silas. You don't want me to have to beat you now, do you? That's what you gonna make me do if you run off again."

Silas looked at him with cold eyes and nodded. They both knew Silas would never be whipped. Celeste arrived years later, when Silas' hair had started to gray. He first heard of her from stories Taffy would tell in the quarters at night. Celeste was a clumsy girl and Taffy complained about the added work her mistakes made at the big house.

"She awkward as everything, but she's about the prettiest little high-colored thing I ever seen" she said.

Silas wanted to see the girl for himself. At night he climbed the willow near the well behind the big house. Missus took a bath every evening and it was Celeste's job to fetch water at sundown. He watched the girl there in the twilight as she struggled with the water buckets. Her small body twisted as she brought the filled oaken buckets back to the house. She always made several trips a night, each more tiring than the last. There was strength in her small frame, though. Every time she emerged from the dark door of the house she carried herself with a grace Silas had never

seen, though he didn't call it grace. Her head was held high on the return trips, her small hands folded into each other holding the empty buckets. Her neck was long and her shoulders thrown back, walking more gentle than any of the white ladies Silas ever saw. The hem of her dress was long, covering her feet so that there seemed to be no gait to her movement, as if she were a phantom floating through the door and out to the well.

His nightly sojourns to the willow continued until late spring. One night he mustered the courage to follow her shade figure through the back doorway of the house and into the kitchen. He waited for her as she made the last trip upstairs for the night. The flame in the kitchen lamp grew low as he listened for her near the staircase. Celeste met his eyes at the foot of the stairs. Her shoulders stiffened. He half expected her to scream.

"You know who I am?" he asked.

Her eyes were cold. Her jaw tightened. "I know. You're that crazy man tries to run away every other month."

Silas smiled and rubbed his head. "I'm the one," he said.

They began to talk nightly in the kitchen. Sometimes Silas would help her fetch the water from the well for Missus. One night he told her about hearing the owl the night his companions were killed.

"No good come from an owl," Celeste told him. "My old missus used to turn her shoes upside down when she heard one calling at night."

"The owl protects me," Silas said.

"Nobody going to protect you if Master finds you here," Celeste told him. Her eyes darted to the door.

"No trouble to talk to a housemaid," he said.

"Master is particular about me," she said. "Can't nobody protect me from that."

One night Silas asked Auntie Yankey for a powerful spell to help him protect Celeste from misfortune. Auntie Yankey spent a week preparing a particularly powerful gris gris bag. She ground

the bone of an owl and mixed it with spices. She spilled the entire mix into a flannel pouch and mixed the oils into it. The final touch was a small pebble that she had seen Master toss out of his boot a few months earlier. She rubbed oil onto the stone and sprinkled dirt from the forest boneyard where the slaves were buried. On a small piece of parchment she drew an owl with a lump of coal. She blew into the bag to breathe life into it and quickly sewed it shut.

"This will be a powerful talisman indeed," Auntie Yankey said gravely.

Celeste wore the gris gris bag around her neck on a thin leather strap. A few days later Missus found a pair of barn owls nesting in the kitchen chimney and Celeste knew the bag was working.

Taffy placed a broom at the foot of the front door once the owls had been scared away. "That's a bad omen, Missus. Owls bring death."

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Taffy," said Missus. "You're a civilized, baptized, Christian. I won't hear of you spouting off such savage nonsense."

The broom stayed at the foot of the door.

News of the failed Union assaults on Vicksburg reached the plantation a few days later. In Natchez, a list of casualties was read—among them was Edward Bane Jr, oldest of the three Bane children. Master headed north to bring the body back for burial under the willows at Beau Saule. Celeste held the gris gris bag and prayed every night in bed while he was gone. He returned three weeks later with a pine box. Master dug the grave himself that night. Simon, the middle son, read a passage from Corinthians and the overseer helped lower the body into the ground. Master lined the slaves up around the wooden marker so each of them, in turn, could cry over his grave. Celeste watched Master's face. Something had changed in his eyes. They were wild now—desperate, like the eyes of a coyote Celeste had seen run out of a burning forest when she was a child.

He came to her that night, leaving the lamp burning on the table beside her bed. He sat down on the bed, his weight pressing down on her feet. His shoulders hunched forward and he sighed.

"I used to walk this land before there was anything, when there was just the black pit of God's creation. At night there were just the sounds of the forest. Squealing, howling animals in the distance dragging their dinner back to some unknown burrow."

Master watched the flame burn the wick on the lamp. He tilted his head to take it in.

"It was just me and the rotting leaves out there in the forest," he said. "I always wondered what was hidden under there. Shadows that were alive before civilization. Shadows before the Indians. There were people before the Indians—maybe there were shadows before them."

Master stood and lifted the glass shield from off the oil lamp. He ran his hand through the long flame. He touched her forehead and studied her for a moment before grabbing the lamp and retiring for the night. Celeste exhaled and let go of the gris gris bag she had been clutching under the covers.

Master made no more trips to Celeste's room until word reached Natchez that Pemberton had surrendered Vicksburg. Silas and Celeste talked in hushed tones that evening in the kitchen. He asked her to run away with him that night.

"I'm—I'm not ready yet. In a few days," she said. "I promise."

Celeste knew the look in Master's eyes when he came to her that night. Master sat the lamp on the table and went right to her. He had only just started when he saw the bag hanging from her neck. Later, after Master had pistol-whipped her by the well, she begged Master to throw her down into the water. Master looked past her—out towards the rows of slave cabins. He was calm as he walked to Auntie Yankey's cabin and fired a single shot into her head. He tried to do the same to Silas, but the man was as quick as he was strong. Silas wrapped his hands around Master's throat and buried his knees into his chest as they struggled on the dirt floor. It didn't take long.

Simon Bane was a preternaturally vicious and cunning young man. He and the overseer found Silas in Jefferson County three days later. They hung him from a poplar tree in the middle of the night.

Silas spit one last word just before he was strung up: *owuhl*.

The ride back to Beau Saule the following night was a quiet one. The wagon turned onto the lane that cut directly towards the big house and Simon tilted his head.

“You hear something, Boss?” the overseer asked.

“For a minute I thought—no, no, it was nothing,” he said.

The Yankees came a few short days later. They streamed over the landing at Natchez like a plague of whooping locusts. Most of the slaves at Beau Saule drifted to the contraband camps over the next few days. Missus begged Celeste to stay—and for a while, she stayed to look after William. William was the youngest of the boys—barely three-years-old. Missus had stopped caring for the boy entirely by that time. Her daily house cleanings had stopped as well. Each day, just after sunrise, she took a pail of water and lye to the two stone markers by the willow. She spent most of the day talking to the stones and rubbing them softly with an old kitchen rag she dipped into the pail.

William had trouble sleeping most nights and it was Celeste who stayed up with the child. One night she held him in the parlor as he fell asleep. Celeste looked down at the child and, without a thought, placed her hand on his face. Soon the small mouth and nose were covered. The child began to struggle. Celeste drew her hand away and placed the child on the ground. She walked through the door of Beau Saule and kept walking down the wide dirt lane until she found the Mississippi. It was the middle of the night. The sky was as dark as the water. She walked in until the current began pulling her away. Her dress billowed up around her and she began to sink down. She didn't feel anything at all.

William

Simon spent the remainder of his life trying to bring Beau Saule to within a pallor of its former splendor, but the old shadows hovered along its dirt roads and forest passages. Missus insisted on keeping the rooms of the big house exactly as they had been when her husband had died. During the days, she kept the curtains in the upstairs drawn tight. Even as he grew up, William was a wayfarer in his own home.

William spent radiant summer days with his dead brother's

cavalry saber leading charge after charge against the Yankees of his mind that populated the fields and forests of Beau Saule. In quiet moments the boy walked among the wooden markers in the slave cemetery. Sometimes he would sit in the cemetery under the canopy of trees and try to imagine the slaves. If he closed his eyes he could almost see their smiling faces and bright, funny clothes as they sang and danced in the fields.

There were new workers in the fields now—sharecroppers and white hired hands from town. The overseer was now an old, tired man with a sneering smile and sharp, eagle-eyes. The workers looked down at the ground when they talked to him. William's mother said the overseer was one of the last old-breed southern gentlemen. Sometimes when he would go into town, the overseer would bring William butterscotch candy.

When William was not yet 13-years-old, he heard the overseer talking to a man from town who had come to buy Simon's favorite red roan. They were looking at the horse and William was crouched in the hayloft.

"Mr. Simon sure hates to part with her, but it has to be done," the overseer said. "The Bane's have suffered mighty since that crazy buck up and murdered Mr. Edward, God rest his soul. And that fat wench Mr. Edward killed the night he died, they say she cursed the whole family. If you go in for that sort of thing."

William ran to the cemetery and stayed there for a long time after the men had left. The sun sank down and threw strange shadows along the rough-hewed markers. The shadows of the happy slaves began to twist at strange angles in the boys mind. The broad, toothy smiles of the singing, jolly slaves began to sneer at him.

William stumbled up the small slope at the center of the cemetery. It had rained that morning and the grass and the wooden markers were still damp. William walked to the closest marker. Oliver. Male. Aged 35 years. He closed his eyes and felt the sweat crawl down over his temples. The forest was alive with insects and the movement of animals. Somewhere far off he heard the low moan of an owl. He unsheathed the saber. Oliver. Male. Aged 35 years. He raised it over his head and brought it down onto the marker. He lashed at it until the marker was a pile of debris

on the ground. When he was finished he moved to the next grave. Nan. Female. Aged 29 years. He raised the saber again and started to work.

Simon was waiting for him at the back door when he returned home. He took off his work gloves and and held them at his side in one hand.

“Where you been boy?” he asked. “You missed supper and you got mamma worried.”

William told his brother what he had done.

That was the night Simon told William about their father’s death. He made the boy promise never to tell any of it to their mother and to stay away from the cemetery. William promised that he would.

Their mother, who everyone still called Missus, by that time had stopped coming to the first floor of the house entirely. She spent most of her days sitting in the lone third-story room that looked out over the eastern edge of Beau Saule. Her mourning clothes were put away a few years after her husband’s death—replaced with a dress of cornflower blue. The neighboring farmers always tipped their hats to her as they passed. At social gatherings the ladies of Natchez talked of her in quiet tones with hands clasped to their chests, lamenting that such a fine, noble woman had lost so much “in defense of her people.” She remained there in the third story, fading and cracking with time—the canvas image of a glorious past.

Simon married a young, nervous woman whose father had been a prominent merchant in Natchez before the war. After the wedding, Missus started coming downstairs once a day to have dinner with her new daughter-in-law. The following spring, thirteen years to the day after her husband’s death, Missus sat by his grave. In the evening she walked into the forest to look in on the slave cemetery for the first time in many years. The smashed markers sent the woman into hysterics. She ran to the house and spent the remainder of the evening weeping into her pillow.

“Those darkies,” she mumbled. “Those poor little darkies.”

William found her in a stupor the following morning. Simon sent for the doctor, but there was nothing to be done. She was

dead by nightfall.

William left for school in Tennessee the following year. He took one last look at Beau Saule as the carriage carried him down the dirt road.

"I killed my mother," he thought to himself.

William went into the railroad business in Memphis after college and was a wealthy man by age 30. He married and had eight children—four boys and four girls. He told each of them at age eight about the slave that brutally murdered their grandfather and about the curse of the owl that haunted the family.

"Vigilance is our saving grace," he told his children. "Especially in these times, when there are so many who want to change our ways of life. Vigilance is the only thing that will keep us from ruin."

One by one his children grew up and melted away from him. His wife died in middle-age and William was left alone in his mansion on Adams Avenue. He kept his brother's sword on the mantle above the fireplace and often looked at it on those nights when the wind seemed to be swirling with a particularly ominous moan. He always tilted his head to one side and listened for the owl.

The owl never came.

Harry

The house on Adams Avenue went silent after Harry's mother died. Her nervous energy had brought a modicum of life to the caverns of the mansion. She had always been an active reader and it was through her that Harry learned to love Shakespeare and Tennyson and Pope. He found something in Tennyson that sparked his imagination when he was still just a boy. Harry lifted the cavalry saber off the mantle when his father was away on business. The sword kindled some nascent spark inside of him there by the dim fires of the hearth. He was Ulysses sailing into the sun. He was Lancelot among the willows, gazing on the Lady of Shalott. He was half a league, half a league more with the Light Brigade.

He piled his books into a small suitcase the day he left home for school in Kentucky. His father shook his hand and said he regretted that he could not see him off at the train station. Harry took one

look back as the car pulled away. It was morning and the house was dark. He watched his father close the door and disappear into the rooms beyond. Harry knew he would never return to Adams Avenue.

At school he studied engineering. He had a steady hand and found drafting work as an architect's assistant. He stopped for lunch three times a week at a bright, clean diner that served sandwiches. The owner was a kind German immigrant named Victor. Victor's daughter, Helen waited tables. She was a tall, auburn-haired girl, just a year older than Harry. He tried talking with her for months before she said more than two sentences to him. Harry learned later that her shyness was the result of a stutter. In the spring Harry and Helen took a walk on campus together.

"I-I've always just stuttered," she said.

Harry wrote to his father the following winter. He and Helen were going to be married in the summer.

"Your news is a disappointment," his father wrote to him. "Your mother's soul, God bless it and keep it, would not rest if she knew all of our sacrifice and labor had come to fruition with a son who married a German waitress."

It was the last time Harry would communicate with his father.

The war came in April and Harry enlisted. Victor held a small dinner in his honor the night before he left. Helen and Harry sat at a corner table when everyone had gone.

"D-Did your father write to you?" she asked.

"He hasn't written in months," Harry said.

Helen's eyes looked downward and her face darkened. "All that f-for a st-stammering waitress."

Harry lifted her chin up and met her eyes. "You're much more than that," he told her. "We decide who we are—every day of our life, every moment in time."

It was a long time before Harry saw Helen again. Harry landed in France in the summer of 1918. In Brest, the soldiers proposed marriage to the pretty Red Cross canteen workers. An

old widow was in charge of the kitchen. She kept a close eye on the unwed women working under her. One night Harry asked her about a row of figures on shelves along the back wall. She stepped on a chair and pulled a handful down for him.

"Some handsome English captain took a favor to one of my girls," she said. "He started carving these figures for her out of shell casings," said the widow.

Harry held the figures up to the light. They were intricately carved—most of them made from empty .303 British rifle cartridges.

The old woman handed Harry a large figure. "Look at this funny one. It's an owl of some sort," she said. "And it's the gloomiest looking owl I ever seen. Glad that's the last one he made. I'd hate to see them get any gloomier than that one."

Harry sat the owl on the table and cleared his throat. "What happened to the captain?"

"He went to the front," said the old woman. "We never heard nothing from him after that."

Just before he left for the front in September, Harry dreamed of the strange engraved owl from the canteen. He knew it was the same owl that his father had told him of for so many years. It was a gray morning. Harry stared up at the sky and felt the air hanging heavy all through the camp. His breath was heavy in his ears. He crossed his arms over his chest and tried to prepare himself for what was coming.

The hills around Verdun had already consumed a generation by the time Harry arrived. Four years of life and death had piled on top of itself until there was little left of the precise, cut-angle trenches of 1914. Little remained of the young men from Leicester and Bristol who built the trenches. When the doughboys dug in they found leftovers of life the trenches had not yet swallowed whole—rusted tin cups split open at the tops, shards of clay, rotting food that had mouldered into the earth. Sometimes the trenches would spit back more gruesome items—skulls opened at the sinuses, bits of carpals and femurs, and grime and filth of indistinguishable origin.

Harry finally went over the top in late September. His company

pursued the Germans through miles and miles of countryside, stopping occasionally when a machine gun or shell burst cut through their lines.

At mid-morning on the third day, while the company advanced on a rail line, two German machine guns opened fire at 600 yards. The company retreated towards some abandoned enemy trenches and arrived just as the gas attack started. There was a table in the trench where Harry landed. He secured his mask and watched through its round panes as a corporal dove under the table. Harry watched him writhe through a foamy green haze. His suffering continued for agonizing minutes. Harry slid away to the other side of the trench. The gas parted near the table and Harry saw it. The coal-black figure of an owl—a cast iron clock too heavy for the Germans to take in the retreat.

Helen and Harry married after the war and moved to Lexington. Harry told his only son, also named Harry, about the owl shortly before the boy left for the Pacific in 1942.

“Pop, I don’t even think they have owls in the south Pacific,” his son told him.

For two and a half years Harry kept watch for the owl from the little house in Lexington. Harry Jr.’s wife gave birth to a son shortly after her husband shipped out. She named the baby Charles—Chuck for short. In the evenings, Harry would bounce his grandson on his knee before putting him to bed. Harry scanned the newspapers for every last bit of information he could find. When the papers no longer satisfied him, he would walk to the backyard at night and look out towards the woods that stopped at the edge of the property line, cocking an ear upwards as though he were listening for something. The sounds of the owl started quietly, with an almost imperceptible call coming from someplace deep in the woods. Each night for forty nights the owl’s low, mournful wails continued, increasing in volume and length until they stopped entirely. A few days later a Marine in full dress pulled into the driveway, but Harry already knew.

When Chuck graduated from high school, his grandfather gave him the Silver Star Chuck’s father had earned on Saipan in the hours before his death. Chuck took it with him to Vietnam.

Harry didn’t stand in the backyard and listen for the owl when

Chuck was away. He was old now and could feel the life leaving him. The last time Harry heard the owl was shortly before Chuck came home. The owl began calling, almost imperceptibly, from the far side of the woods. The wails increased in the following days. Harry grew concerned. He walked through the woods every morning looking for where the sound of the bird was coming from, but found nothing. Helen followed him to the woods one morning. It was December and Harry had left the house without a jacket.

"Do you hear that?" he asked her.

"I don't hear anything, Harry," she said.

A winter storm hit on the thirty-ninth day of the owl's wailing. Chuck had made it to New York and was waiting to fly home. On the fortieth night, Chuck called his grandfather from the airport in Covington. The roads were bad. He would make the drive the following morning.

"And everything is fine with you?" Harry asked his grandson. "You're all right?"

"Far as I know, granddad," Chuck said.

"And you're not going to risk a drive tonight? No matter what?" he asked.

"No granddad, I'm not," Chuck said. "I have to go. I don't have any more change for the phone."

Harry and Helen lay in bed that night. Harry could still hear the owl in the woods. He grabbed Helen's hand and laced his fingers between hers. They lay on their backs like that for a long time.

"You're acting awfully fresh tonight," she said.

The sounds of the owl were growing louder in his ears. He closed his eyes. "It's all been like some wonderful dream," he mumbled.

"I think you need to sleep," she said. She tried rolling over on her side.

He grabbed her hand tighter and brought it to his lips. "Don't go to sleep just yet, okay?"

She smiled and turned back towards him, nestling her nose into his shoulder.

He exhaled and closed his eyes. He felt something inside himself flying.

“Let’s stay here for a little while longer,” he said. “It’s like a dream.”

Chuck

They buried Harry Bane just a few days after his grandson Chuck came home from Vietnam. Harry’s only surviving sibling, a sister from Tennessee, came to the funeral on short notice. She sat in the front row, sobbing into a cornflower blue handkerchief and mumbling about a race of true gentlemen disappearing from the earth. Over casserole that evening Helen told the assembled family members about her husband’s last days. She told them of his worry over the safety of his grandson and the sounds he seemed to be listening for from somewhere far off. His grandfather’s sister—already sallow-faced—grew almost translucent at Helen’s words. She took a bus back to Tennessee that night.

Chuck knew what his grandfather had heard. He had seen the owl ten months earlier—looking just as his grandfather had described—on the nose of a Huey he climbed into one morning in Quảng Ngãi. It was black with dark yellow eyes, with “The Nite Owl” written under it in an ornate, cursive script. Chuck hesitated before climbing in, but a nudge from the marine behind him kept him moving. The door gunner was a wild-eyed man with a mouth full of tobacco juice whose friend had been killed the week before. They passed several hundred yards west of a small hamlet. The villagers—women, children, and old men—were making their way along a half-flooded dirt road after going to the market that morning. The gunner had fired short bursts into the woods and fields as they flew and nobody batted an eye. Nobody protested when the gunner opened up on the stream of civilians filling the road, either. Chuck craned his neck out the open side of the the helicopter. For a split second he saw a mass of bodies face down on the ground, some of them moving. The chopper banked and Chuck lurched forward. For a brief moment, Chuck felt himself begin to float out of the helicopter. The gunner grabbed him by the collar and pulled him upright.

“Be careful,” the gunner laughed. “You aint no paratrooper.”

In the woods behind his grandfather’s house a day later, Chuck thought about the Nite Owl for the first time since he left Vietnam. A cold December rain started to fall just after sun-up and it pressed down steadily on him throughout the morning. He watched the water bead and roll down the hood of his poncho and onto his nose. After five nights with no word from him, Helen called Chuck’s mother. On the ride home, his mother asked him what he had been doing out there. He said he didn’t know.

Eight years passed before Chuck settled down with a nurse from Cincinnati. Three years later their only child was born, a son named Brian. Life seemed to soften for Chuck after that. For the first time in years, Chuck felt himself begin to relax. He rarely thought about the owl anymore until Brian joined the army after high school.

The owl—black with yellow eyes just like the one on the chopper—swirled into his dreams at night. He pursued it through nightmarish landscapes—under blood skies and over desolate red rock. When the dreams were particularly vivid, Chuck could still hear the echoes of the owl in his ears right after he woke.

The dreams continued for months. Just before Thanksgiving, Chuck heard an owl while tracking a white-tail through a dry stream bed late one afternoon. He followed the low, mournful call to an open field on high ground overlooking the the river. The owl sat silhouetted against the gloam, fifty yards away on the limbs of a rotted out old oak. Chuck lowered his sight on the animal. It turned and faced him, it’s eyes shining in the twilight. Chuck felt his finger ease against the trigger and then stop. He lowered the barrel of the rifle and watched the bird until it was too dark to see it anymore. Chuck turned and looked down at the river. It seemed bottomless. Endless. Chuck sat down on the ground. He buried his face in his hands and wept.

Brian

One night when he was five years old, Brian’s father told him a story of an owl with gigantic wings and yellow eyes that swooped down and carried little children away, never to be seen again. Brian laughed at the story.

“Monsters aren’t real,” he said. “And I’m brave anyway.”

It was only in the years that followed that he realized his father was afraid of owls. On summer evenings he would look through the living room window at his father standing on the back deck as the twilight began to fade over the hills behind the house. He stood straight with his shoulders back, his feet set firmly into the ground as if he were waiting for some unseen hammer blow from the hills. And he was listening, always listening. The rest of the story came out in pieces, usually in the evening after his father had a few pours from the whiskey bottle that sat on the refrigerator. Brian never believed in curses. At the airport in Covington, though, he did take one look over his shoulder as he boarded the plane for basic. The owl wasn’t at Parris Island or Camp Pendleton. For the first few weeks in Al-Anbar, Brian didn’t think about it at all. The work was grueling and at night he slept well. One night in mid-April, a feeling came to Brian that he couldn’t quite explain. The feeling came to him gradually. It started as a gentle tug in his chest. At first he could cross his arms and take a few deep breaths to make it go away. As the nights went on, however, he felt it begin to grow, as if someone had grabbed him by the chest and was pulling something out of him—like a bird flying away with the end of a bed-sheet. Sometimes he lay awake in his bunk all night staring up at the ceiling.

One night he told the smiling translator from Ramadi about the owl. The translator, who had spent his life in study, had been a professor of comparative religion at a large university before the war.

“Hmm, owls,” he said, stroking his mustache. “The ancient Arabians believed owls carried off children in the night. Then there is the al Sada—the death owl that cries over the graves of the dead when their murder has not been avenged. Then there are the Avesta—the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism. Those texts say the owl is a protector. Warriors would rub themselves with owl feathers to protect themselves from harm before leaving for battle. Babylonians had owl amulets to protect pregnant women. And then, of course, there is the Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva, and her pet owl. Yes—many ways to look at it. I would not worry. Your owl is just a thought. And in the end, our lives are merely the contours of our thoughts.”

Brian started wearing owl feathers a few weeks later. The pulls in his chest stopped. For two months, there was no sign that anything was wrong. He kept the feathers down long stretches of desert highways and in back alleys. He wore them all the way into Al-Karmah. He didn't loose the feathers until July. One late afternoon he caught the back-end of a 130 millimeter artillery round IED. A Lance Corporal named Buckram set it off. He never found his feathers and he was never sure if he caught what he felt fly out of him during the blast.

He thought about the explosion for a long time afterward. He met a little blonde in glasses one night at a bar on Vine Street a year after he returned home. She sat down at the table where he was drinking alone.

"I like your beard," she said.

He pointed to the tattoos covering her arm. "I like your sleeve," he said.

They were married two years later. His wife's maid-of-honor was a spacey redhead she knew from high school named Leah who sold handmade stuffed animals online. Hunter, a boy with blonde hair like his mother, was born nine months after the wedding. The nightmares started soon after Hunter was born.

In his dreams the owl was made of shadow. It swooped in through the window of the unfinished nursery where Hunter slept. The owl circled above the crib, it's yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. The shadows of the bird wrapped themselves around Hunter and both owl and child disappeared.

Brian's hunting trips to the creek grew slower. His walks in the woods beyond the creek bed grew longer. Sometimes he didn't get back home until hours after dark. He wandered through the trees in a sort of half dream. When night fell he stumbled through all the noises of the woods until he found his way back to the creek bed and his truck.

One night the lights were off downstairs when he came home. He could hear his wife and Leah laughing in the nursery. He stood in the hallway and watched the two women for a few long seconds before he was noticed.

"Oh, hey baby," his wife said, craning her neck down the hall.

“Come see how the nursery looks.”

The room was decorated, top to bottom in owls. There were owls in the wallpaper, owls on the bedclothes, owl-shaped pillows and a wooden owl-shaped clock hanging on the wall.

“Isn’t it just delicious?” his wife asked. “Leah even made a special stuffed animal just for him.”

Hunter stood in the center of the crib. He clutched a dark brown plush owl with yellow eyes.

“I forgot something in the truck,” Brian said. He turned and walked out of the room and down the stairs.

The child grabbed the animal by the throat with both hands. He raised it over his head and let out a forceful coo. His face reddened.

The two women looked at each other and laughed. The front door opened and closed downstairs.

“Oh my,” said Leah. “He’s going to be a strong boy.”

The child’s face continued to darken. He was squeezing the owl’s throat now. He kept squeezing. Harder. Harder.

SUNDAY'S CHILD

James Kincaid

**Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child works hard for a living,
Saturday's child is loving and giving,
But the child who is born on the Sabbath day
Is bonnie and blithe and good and gay.**

My friends, my gay friends, have widely differing origin stories, stories about how they “knew” and when. Ramon talks (endlessly) about undressing for gym next to Michael in high school; Teddy waited until college when his roommate made it all crystal clear to him; Tri (that's his name) tells of his seventh-grade play and finding ways to hug and fondle cast members, puberty and groping skills arriving for him at the same mo-moment, twenty minutes into the first rehearsal for “Robin Hood and His Merry Men.”

Me, I knew I was gay before I knew what “gay” meant, was attracted to boys be-fore I was able to make distinctions between boys and girls. I guess that doesn't make sense. What I mean is that there was no origin apart from my origin. Got it?

One great advantage of being gay at age 3 or 4 is that it's easy as hell to induce other boys to cooperate – girls, too, in another sphere. What I mean is you can play house and paper dolls with the girls without getting beat up. Even better, you can play dress-up games with boys that involve lots of handling. Actually, with boys, you don't even need very elaborate games, no games at all. “Hey, let's take off all our clothes!” works nine times out of ten.

Of course, that golden time cannot last. At a point along about

five years old, someone's parents will notice and protest, at first only mildly, but soon with considerable vigor. They might not go so far as to beat you up, but they'll tell your parents, who will. From then on. . . .

The hardest times for me were along about fifth and sixth grade, when I was just reaching double figures in age and my dick was able to twitch a little involuntarily, coming to life slowly and irregularly but stirring, you bet, just like the blossoms of spring, tra la. These times were so very often tough, but they could also be rewarding. Rewarding? That's not the word I want. Not like anybody gave out prizes, not to me. I guess what I mean is that there was more to it than just getting beat on.

I know it's trite to start a story with, "I can remember it as if it were yesterday!" and you don't care about the fresh memory anyhow, just wanting me to hurry along to the sex part. And it's not the freshness of the memory that matters to me anyhow but its loneliness. It's all by itself there in my store, on the top shelf, uncrowded and beautiful.

It started at recess, when Ralph (not his real name, since the real Ralph might possibly read this and come after me with attitudes altogether different from those guiding him when we were 12)-----when Ralph, I was saying, hung around me a little bit, not friendly. He called me, "shitass," actually, his only words being, "Hey, shitass!" Later, he knocked on our front door and grumped some more at me. One of Ralph's many attractions was his grumpiness, his ability to come at you while seeming to retreat, to pull you in while knocking you to the ground.

This particular autumn day we spent down by the river, the clogged-up-with-offal Ohio River, throwing dried-up horseweeds at one another, playing spear-chuckers, and climbing trees. I think I was tempted to offer Ralph a boost or just do it, shove his butt (gently) up to the next branch. But I was too scared even to allow that temptation to become formulated into words or images.

"Hey, dickhead, you climbing up or what?"

He jumped down, wrestled me to the ground, knelt atop me and pretended to spit on my face. All of this while frowning contemptuously.

I managed to spin him around and found myself on top, a position I was so little used to I had no idea what I might do, what was now required. What I was thinking was that I hadn't managed that, couldn't have managed that. Ralph had spun me, pretended that I had done it, pretended to be the submissive one. Anyhow, there he was under me, frowning, of course, but making no move to unsettle us.

I don't need to tell you I wasn't tempted to pretend-spit on him. What I did, though I still can hardly believe this, is dive down with my head and nuzzle his cheek with my own, not daring quite to extend my tongue for some ear-action, but spending what seemed like an hour there, rubbing softly, as happy and heated as I'd ever been. It was probably only ten seconds, I suppose, and, even if it were longer, it was me who broke it off, pretending I was biting off his ear, a lame cover but good enough. I've thought a lot since about those seconds, returned to them often over the years. I guess I wish I had stayed with him, on him, longer, but even in my most goony reveries I know it's best I didn't.

I had risked a lot, but he had risked more. It wasn't fear that made me cut short our cuddling, but respect for Ralph. That sounds idiotic or self-indulgent, or both, I suppose. But it's so.

After a while, the sun warming us some (not a lot) we made our way to the river's edge. I wanted to suggest swimming, as I knew Ralph had once done that, flaunting parental regulations and good sense, skinny-dipped close to shore but for a long time. He'd told me that, igniting in me all sorts of raging images, of course. He could have been lying, bragging, only that wasn't like Ralph. Anyhow, I contented myself with cowardice, promising myself that I'd get him into joint skinny-dipping sometime in the future, knowing that time would never come---and not just because the season was getting late.

But we did take off our shirts, found some soft dirt, and basked there on the bank, letting what warmth there was come to us. I don't know how it happened, which one of us arranged it (if either did), but after a while we somehow were touching. It was just our arms and shoulders, lightly grazing, moving ever so slightly with our breathing, breathing that became deeper and deeper as we leaned together.

I have no idea how long we were there, none. Long enough for the sun to become much warmer, the sun or Ralph and me. Maybe we didn't need the sun.

At some point I realized that our hands were clasped. They just were. On our backs, eyes closed, we had managed this much daring intimacy. It wasn't that Ralph had done it or I had done it. We had done it, and we held onto one another there in the waning sunlight, pledging to honor a feeling we couldn't speak and couldn't sustain.

There's was no need to put a name to what we had found, risen toward. I don't want to name it now. It's not words I fumble toward but Ralph's hand. It's almost as if I can reach back through so many years, keep trying, fumbling, feeling – stretch out a little more – and there it'll be.

FISH OUT OF WATER

Deb Jannerson

The body had been struck only once.

The victim's dark hair was sticky with blood. Curls folded over the wound completely, turning the side of her head into a canopied swamp. For the next photo, the paramedics had exposed the gash, a dent roughly two inches deep in her scalp. The injury was jagged but narrow, the work of a sharp weapon in a juvenile hand. Though they had stayed hooked to her ears during the fall, her rectangular glasses were marred with hairline cracks.

The next sheet in the stack was the official death report. Paige Knoll, 31, Kirkland.

"The girl was kind of a shut-in, from what I understand." Chief Hunter leaned back in his office chair and spread his knees. "Her place backs that up. Tons of junk. Food trash, sci-fi memorabilia."

Nell scanned the medical record for mental illness, but Page Knoll's only noted condition was type 1 diabetes. "Occupation?"

"Nothing formal, as far as I can tell. Carpentry hobby; sold her own stuff independently. Most her business was done online or at conventions, pretty much the only times she left the building. The events were more nerdy shit, but I guess everyone needs a cabinet." Hunter motioned to Nell to keep flipping through the folder. She felt his eyes on her as the AC tickled the back of her bare neck.

The first photo of the crime scene showed a hall lined with greasy black trash bags, drawstrings barely holding. The leftmost two were speckled in red. The next setting was a ransacked bedroom. Several desks and dressers, along with the bed, had been upended and emptied. Rogue drawers tilted on the layer of plush toys littering the floor. Lastly, the kitchen. Half the room was a sea of shattered glass and plastic action figures, a dead pet fish cradled in a curvy fragment of bowl. There were more searched drawers and a delivery bag of groceries that had never been put away. Nell's throat tightened, but her hands stayed steady.

"Looks like a burglary."

"It does, doesn't it? Only there's no sign of forced entry, or even struggle before she was bludgeoned. She knew the person. That's where you come in." The next two reports were mostly blank, awaiting Nell's insights. Celeste Knoll, 52, mother. Jim Lake, 29, friend. "To start, two other people had keys to her place."

Nell had her coat on before he finished talking. Finally. Even quizzing traumatized loved ones was more comfortable than the precinct. Switching to freelance was the best career move she had ever made.

The men outside the glass snapped their heads up as she stood. "Anything else I should know?"

"She was recently engaged."

#

"James Lake?"

"No." The man glowered at her. His arms were going pale, folded tightly over a brown t-shirt that simply read Shiny.

"Is Mr. Lake--"

"I'm Jim Lake. It doesn't stand for James."

By now, the motion to extend her right arm was automatic. Jim stared at it for a long moment, then shook Nell's hand with obvious reluctance. Nell had a flashback from her days as a high school counselor. It's too early for this surly shit.

"I'm Detective Jang. The police probably told you I was coming. I have a few questions to ask you about Paige."

Jim looked away, his hardness thawing. "Come on."

Apart from the oak-and-glass display case in the hall, Jim's home was sparse. She followed him throughout a tidy replica of Paige's apartment, stopping at the small kitchen table. Jim took an oversized armchair, leaving Nell with a dainty stool. His voice sounded decades older when he spoke again. "I already told the cops what I found."

"I know." Broken suspects were easier than defensive ones,

but it took a second to adjust. "It must have been horrible for you. I just need you to go through it one more time, make sure there's no detail they might have missed. It'll help us get justice." Nell was embarrassed for herself as she said it, but she knew it was the right choice. Jim nodded, his eyes distant in memory.

"I always fed River when she was away." The betta fish. Nell remembered its drying blue skin, its eyeball wide and blank. "I thought she was gone. She was supposed to jet off to Nashville that morning." Jim put a hand over his eyes, rubbing surreptitiously. "People talk about knowing something's off, knowing something bad's gonna happen. I didn't, at all. Seems wrong. But the door looked normal. The hall light was left on, but she does that sometimes. Did that."

"What time did you arrive?"

"About one, I think?" He had placed the 911 call at 1:17 PM. Check. "I didn't notice the glass at first, only her. I called her name, shook her shoulders. I thought she'd passed out or something; something bad, but not..." He trailed off.

"And how would you describe your relationship?"

"I'm her best friend. Have been for years. We started the local RPG network. I was gonna be her bridesmaid, her dude of honor." The smile playing at his lips told Nell this was Paige's neologism. "I'm the only one who even sees her anymore, really, since--" His eyes snapped up. "You know about Watts, right? Tell me you've been talking to Watts."

Jim's initial interview had been riddled with irate comments about Paige's paramour. "Watts Winslow, her fiancé?"

"It's been six months. What does she know about the guy, really? Besides that he has money and gives good Skype."

Nell raised an eyebrow but held back. He would be more forthcoming if he offered the information himself. "Yeah, they met six months ago. Not even met, really. His family's got a software business out in New York. He reached out online about her woodwork. Furnishing, office gear; you get the idea. And, well..." He waved a hand at the wrist. "They started talking. Pretty soon, it was every night. Paige stopped coming to meetings, didn't have me over for games. Every evening, Chinese take-out and gabbing with

Watts.”

“It doesn’t sound like you like him.”

“I just don’t know him! And neither does she. He flew out last week, finally, for their first real date. Took her to dinner inside the Space Needle. And proposed. I mean, that’s batshit, right? Only an unstable guy does that for some girl he just met. It’s not like...” He broke off, looked away. “It’s not like, you know, they’ve been hanging out for years. Or something.”

Knew it.

“Well, Jim, I appreciate you talking to me.” She filled the silence, not acknowledging what he had revealed. “If you think of anything else--”

“Hey, but, there’s something you should know.” Jim reached out a hand as if to touch Nell’s arm, then hesitated, it hovering like an awkward bird. “She’s not--she wasn’t--sick. Everyone’s gonna say that, but they’re wrong.” He shifted, the flat cushion squeaking under his weight. “I mean, you’ve seen her place, right? She was... quirky. But she knew where everything was.”

It was time. “Jim, there’s one more question I need to ask: Were you and Ms. Knoll ever intimate?”

“We were very close,” he replied, not missing a beat. Something flashed in Jim’s eyes, and Nell thought, He didn’t misunderstand. He’s not a stupid man.

“Thank you.”

“They don’t suspect me, do they?” Anger reanimated Jim’s face. “Because, I called them. I wouldn’t, if--and Paige is--” He took a deep breath and looked away, spent. “You should talk to Watts.”

#

Celeste Knoll was a frail mouse of a woman, prematurely gray with exhausted eyes. The afternoon sleepwear was a hallmark of depressed mourning, but her face and hair looked clean. “She told me by email. Can you believe that? My own daughter.”

“Do you still have the message?”

Celeste blinked in surprise but moved toward her computer. One look at the old machine revealed that Celeste did not share her daughter's technological savvy.

An uncusomized homepage was open to an email from PaigeDaMage@gmail.com. "Hi, Mom. I have some news. Watts is in town, and he took me out to a fancy dinner last night. Aaaaand, he asked me to marry him. I'm engaged! He's working on creating a permanent position for me at Winslow & Co. Hopefully we'll be ready to start our new lives this time next year."

celestefritschenknoll@yahoo.com had replied, "PAIGE!!! Can you send a picture of the ring?"

Hmm.

"I was trying to act happy for her," Celeste said hastily, following Nell's gaze. "I was going to take her to lunch and, you know, try to make her look sensibly at what she's doing. I thought friendly was the way to go, at first."

"You sound like someone in my line of work."

A lopsided smile came and went. "Would you like some water?" Celeste made strides toward the sink, not waiting for a response. For so squirrely a woman, she was graceful on high heels. Though clearly expensive, her footwear had seen better days, and the left heel featured a thin, brownish crust.

Nell scrolled down. PaigeDaMage had responded quickly: "Everyone's asking me that! Not yet. It's awesome, but he spent way too much. I'm saving it for the wedding."

The glass's clink held purpose, perhaps anger. "I hadn't seen her in weeks. Kept waiting for her call. Instead, I heard from the Seattle PD."

Nell turned from the desktop and wrapped her hand around the cup. "I'm sorry. You and Paige were close, from what I understand." A small, experimental lie.

"Of course!" Celeste stared at her lap. "She was my only child. All I had."

"Did you manage her affairs while she traveled? I understand you kept an extra key to her home."

“Oh, we’ve always done that. In case of an emergency.” Celeste let out a harsh chuckle. “A lot of good it did. But no, I didn’t take care of her things. That would be her friend, Jimothy.” It doesn’t stand for James. “Have you been to see him?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Frankly, I’m surprised they sent you here. I don’t know how to help you find the animal who did this.”

Nell knew when she was being dismissed. “I have one more question, please. Did you ever suspect that your daughter was worried about her safety?”

“From her boyfriend?”

“From anyone.”

Celeste stared at the wood panel between them, at the glass of water that stood untouched. Her home was grander than Jim’s, but everything seemed to sit under a layer of dust. “No,” she said finally. “But I did wonder about the man she was seeing. She was evasive about him, you know? And now this... it’s just fishy.” Blue skin, wide eyeball. “If he’s so great, why wouldn’t she introduce us?”

Nell’s colleagues had often teased her about her “baffled look.” Luckily, Celeste was no longer watching her at all.

Why wouldn’t she introduce us? Celeste didn’t know Paige’s relationship had been solely long-distance. Most likely, she wasn’t even aware that Paige and Watts had met on the internet. And if Paige hadn’t seen fit to tell her that, she probably knew little about her daughter’s life, despite the key she held as an emblem of control.

#

At the first stoplight, Nell looked up Winslow & Co. From the About page, she learned that the business run by Paige’s beloved was three generations strong, a family inheritance.

At the second light, she radioed the precinct. “How’d it go?” Hunter’s voice filled the stale air around her windshield.

“Interestingly. Both parties are secretive as hell. And they both cast aspersions onto the fiancé.”

"The software tycoon?"

"Correct."

"We'll be calling him, in any case. Think they're onto something?"

Nell hesitated. She glanced back at Watts' smarmy grin, his rich-kid demeanor, and sighed. "No."

"Go on."

"Hunter, you saw what they did to her place. They were looking for Paige's valuables, possibly presents from Watts himself. Software Boy doesn't need the money. And if he did, he would have known to take her dolls."

"Come again?"

Nell signaled and made a face as the truck beside her sped up. "Collectibles, Hunter. Action figures."

There was a stunned silence, and then: "You don't miss a goddamn thing, Jang." She allowed herself a secret smile. "Hey, speaking of. The new forensics kid is checking out the deceased's stuff right now, if you want a look. First lab."

"How's it going with him?"

"Eh. Appears pretty competent, under the shitty attitude."

#

The forensics worker had his space tricked out in blacklights, like the college dorm he had probably lived in one year prior. "So far, I only have what they found on her person. Clothes, phone, glasses, purse. Already checked for prints."

"I'd still like a look, if you don't mind. Hunter recommended the same."

"Did he?" Nell knew what was coming next before it left his leer: "Guess you can give it, ya know, your female intuition."

Only law enforcement can make asking for help sexist.

He had Paige's iPhone plugged into the computer, and it spit windows and records onto the screen as Nell approached. Forensics

often didn't look further than a victim's phone. More than one perp that year had been apprehended for sending their victims threatening texts. They forgot that an electronic communiqué held record outside their own brains.

For a clutterer, the other contents of Paige's purse were no-nonsense. A blue ballpoint pen with a rubbed silver logo that said "Comic Con." A small key ring, front door and car. A Tyvek medical pouch. Nell unzipped the final item to observe a glucose meter beside a lumpy, Velcroed storage pouch. Nell poked the bulge, expecting the hard plastic of a syringe top, but she didn't find it.

Instead, a piece of delicate jewelry spilled out of the flap. A fine gold chain formed a necklace, adorned with a single charm.

The object was heavy, hollow, and trapezoidal. It took Nell a second to make sense of its shape, of its painstakingly carved details. A Chinese character adorned the front, bordered in tiny red jewels. Just above the square base stood a single English word: LOVE.

A silver take-out box. Of course. Paige Knoll was not the sort of fiancée you honored with a simple diamond ring.

She knew where everything was.

Can you send a picture of the ring?

Everyone's asking me that.

Paige's killer had torn her messy sanctuary apart looking for a well-hidden engagement treasure. Instead, like a ring, Paige had kept the gift close to her body, where she could glance at it all the time.

Nell thought of the crossed arms of a lovesick gaming partner, protecting his underbelly. The wild eyes of a mother whose life had run empty. I can handle either of you.

A sea of faceless figures like mannequins, potential murderers in the web of Paige's halted life. A knickknack-filled home marred with blood and glass. An iridescent, lifeless fish. I can handle all of you.

Justice would be served.

On Psychedelics, Quitting Cigarettes and Finding My Voice

Rachel Veroff

“I didn’t even know how much I was hurting until the shamans healed me.”

Fly, fly high

let the earth touch the sky.

— “Canciones de Medicina, Mantras y Icaros,” Songbooks of the Pachamama Church: Queen of the Forest

I stubbed out one cigarette and impatiently lit another while I waited at the abandoned bus stop, in the lush, fading daylight of late summer. I had taken a train from Grand Central and then a bus, and then another, more rural bus to get to the small town of Milton, in upstate New York. From there, one of the shaman’s attendants would come fetch me. But whoever this person was, they were apparently running on hippie time. Meaning, they were running very late.

I sucked on my cigarette, poised tautly between my active fingers, and surveyed the belongings I had brought for the trip: one camping tent (borrowed), one backpack full of “white, loose-fitting garments” (as per instruction), blankets, a yoga mat (borrowed), my writing journal, and about a million budding ideas (mine). I had been told that Ayahuasca was a medicine with spiritual properties, and so, I was hoping this experience would tell me where to take my writing life to next.

A sleek white Prius turned onto the mountain road as I hastily disposed of my cigarette. I didn't want the healers to know I smoked. I'd been a closet smoker since I was 14 years old—when I first began to experiment with substances that could calm my jangling nerves. In college I smoked because it helped me get through late-night papers. And when I lived in France, I smoked because it was the style. Now, still, as a working woman in New York, I continued to smoke because I felt that it looked good on me. I was 28 and competitive about my smarts: a fast talker, fast walker, manic, broody thing. I punctuated everything with cigarettes.

The shaman's attendants who welcomed me into their car turned out to have also come up from the city.

"Wait, you came here by yourself?" a radiant young acupuncturist named Shanti* asked me. She was bedecked in crystals. "Good for you," she said, and squeezed my hand encouragingly.

The property that would be hosting us for the three-day ceremony was expansively majestic. There was one large house for meals, and ample hills and trails for solitary walking. A white ceremony tent had been erected in an open field of dewy grass below, and the sky was a great bowl of dusty purple jewels above.

As people prepared themselves for the first night, I circled in and out of the big house, finally choosing to set up my personal tent far away from all the others. I had fasted. I had put on my white clothes.

When the sun began to set, people carried their pillows and blankets down to the ceremony tent, to sit on in the grass. For a while everyone was very busy arranging their mats and cushions in two long rows, with an aisle down the middle. It felt, a little, like we were about to have a sleepover.

Looking at the others, I realized what I had brought was sparse: just one large Indian tapestry, which I'd bought in Paris a few years before. The cloth was hand-dyed a striking lilac color and printed with an image of Ganesha. When I unfurled it, everyone around me came over to admire the color, and I had to explain that I'd bought it on a whim, when I was living in a little French apartment that I was very happy in. A long time ago. This tapestry had always felt like from another planet to me. Especially now, since it was one

of my only mementos from that time in my life. I felt sad to express all of this outloud. The shamans were also preparing their seats. Their place was on a bench at the top of the tent, before an altar. The altar was strewn with flowers, beads, crystals, songbooks, and images of religious icons from around the world. Particularly pre-Christian images, but the Mary of Guadalupe was in there too. The more experienced students (there were 20 of us altogether) would sit closer to the shamans. I was new, so I was told to sit near the end.

People seemed to be taking a long time getting situated and comfortable. That was my impression, anyway. Perhaps I was impatient. Then, the shaman's wife, a woman named Sitora, sang a forest song to us. She had a lovely singing voice. Although, to be honest, the words in the songbooks did not make sense to me. I followed along by candlelight:

All that I am
and all that we are
shining in love
like an infinite star.

I confess, I've always found the words in religious songs a little banal. My attention drifted towards the other people, many of whom were settling into meditative poses. Sitora sang:

One with the all
all becomes one
all has been here
since creation begun.

Attendants began to come around, offering eye drops. The drops were made from a special oil harvested in the forest in Peru, and they burned like fire. They also cleared your sinuses, but Jesus

Christ they burned. I had to hide my face from the others as the drops brought flaming tears to my eyes.

Break down the walls
of illusion and fear
seek for the truth
and the truth shall appear.

Then the attendants came around with burning sage to bless us. Next, were small jars of a powder called rapé—made from ground up tree bark—and little bamboo flutes. The attendants wanted to use the flutes to blow powder up our noses. To clear our air passages, they urged, gently. Around me, the tree bark was making people cry, cough and spit in discomfort. I shrugged and surrendered. For the first two days, all this powder did was make my throat and ears itch terribly.

All that I am
all becomes one
shining in love
like the infinite sun.

Next, we drank the medicine. The shamans drank first, and then each of the students stood up, one by one, to go kneel before them. I was frightened of the main shaman, so I went to Sitora. She smiled, searchingly, benevolently, at me, and handed me a glass of dark, thick green brew. I did as the others and downed it in one gulp. Then I went back to my mat, settled into my lotus pose, and waited for the “work” to begin.

So follow the pathway that lies where you go
Look for the truth in the things that you know.

That first night I did not meditate properly. When the medicine took a hold of me, I slumped forward like the sack of unhappy

flesh I was. I buried my face in my hands. I re-lived my rape. I re-lived a nightmare job I'd had that year, where my boss was obsessed with me, verbally abusing me, and spying on my emails. I re-lived every time I was ever rejected by a man I loved—every time my writing had been rejected for publication—and countless other injuries and traumas.

Around me, people were puking loudly into bowls. The sounds were awful. A woman began to wail. She stood up, tugging at her clothes and hair, flailing and screaming like she was being shaken by an invisible force. She writhed and contorted. She humped the air. Attendants went to calm her, but she couldn't hear them. She literally somersaulted away, landed spryly on her feet—pulled her hair and screamed. Holy shit, I whispered from the puddle that was my hallucination in the corner. I wondered if she was a dancer. It took three attendants to restrain her. The next day, this woman would explain to us how, as a child growing up in Russia, she did not receive a good or honest education. She was not taught to love herself. But she was descended from Mongol lineage, and she was convinced that what happened to her that night was a battle between her ancestors. She felt, somehow, politically and culturally liberated. She had been reborn as a free warrior again.

...seek for Jah wisdom so high and so pure

Carry it with you through all you endure...

And it was true, she was a dancer. In any case, dance was what had brought her to New York.

...there is no other way

"All are one" is the essence of living...

So that first night, even as this woman screamed, the shamans sang to us, and the night sky burned like wasps and velvet all around us. I spent the entire ceremony slumped in an uncomfortable heap over my crossed legs, with my forehead on the ground, breathing raspily.

...and all that I am...

Larala lararai lairai larai...

I did not purge—meaning I did not vomit or shit. A few people tried to get me to move into a better posture, but I wouldn't. That night, I was a corpse. Eventually, as the sun was coming up, the young Indian woman next to me put her arm around me and whispered that she felt we had been friends for a long time. Her accent was delightfully Indian, and we put our faces close together, as if we were, indeed old friends. Everyone else had gotten up to stretch and play in the tall grass a long time before. I saw Shanti, the sweet blonde acupuncturist, surrounded by a group of beautiful men. The shaman's altar had apparently been abandoned for breakfast.

Wow, I shut my eyes against the hurt and the sadness.

I began to cry. I wanted to tell this girl my story. But then an attendant shushed me. "There is no talking here," he scolded. He meant inside the ceremony tent. We ate a beautiful meal together, up on the hill by the farmhouse. The meal was prepared by everyone: chicken broth, full of herbs, sustenance, and comfort. We were like children as we cooked. Happy, peaceful and new. I thought about sneaking off for a cigarette at least a hundred times, but something about the atmosphere inspired me to resist. I was intrigued by the main shaman and Sitora, his wife, so I made a point of sitting across from them for the meal. Marcio was the man. He was from Brazil, but he spoke unaccented English. He wore a gold ring in his ear, but otherwise, there was nothing about his clothes or face that seemed out of the ordinary. He was perhaps 45. I knew that he had an ex-wife who was also a shaman, and a daughter who was 12. I knew that the person he'd recruited to carry this particular batch of plants from Peru was a 25-year-old college drop-out from Oakland named Miles*. When I took the seat across from Marcio, near the head of the table, he looked up at me, surprised. I realized that what I had just done was bold, and, perhaps, disruptive. But he allowed it.

He let Sitora tell the story of how they met and fell in love. She had been living in New York, content with her 5th Avenue job, her gym membership, and gossipy lunch dates with friends. She started attending Ayahuasca ceremonies for spiritual reasons when

she was in her late twenties, and eventually, she found herself in one of Marcio's. The moment he saw her, he fell in love with her so completely, that he found it difficult to concentrate on leading the ceremony. A week later, Marcio had whisked Sitora away to his house in Colorado, which is apparently some sort of sacred sanctuary. Sitora is Persian by origin, and she felt strongly that she had found her calling in healing sick people with this ancient medicine. So she quit her 5th Avenue job, which she loved, and devoted herself to studying shamanism. Now she leads ceremonies with Marcio, and they are going to have a baby together. I found Sitora to be very, deeply pretty. Personally, though, I still hadn't caught on to why everyone kept talking about sickness and healing. What I wanted to talk about was the time I spent living on a farm in France.

"I'm writing a book about it," I blurted. And I tried to tell Marcio about an art residence my friend was currently building in the forest above Girona, Spain. I got the feeling that my stories were too long and complicated for Marcio's taste. But I wanted him to like me. In the same way that a child wants approval from teachers and parents. So I did what I always do—I just went on telling stories. Unfortunately, this did not go over as well as it usually did. During that whole meal I only got one laugh out of him. After a while, I was forced to swallow my disappointment and sit in slightly injured silence. Once I'd stopped talking, Marcio began to dole out pearls of wisdom—all about letting go of unnecessary baggage, and living as one with nature. Finding purpose in life. His inner circle nodded along in seriousness, at the head of this long table on the hill, beneath the blue and whorling sky. I nodded along as well. Although, to be honest, my mind also wandered away towards a few other thoughts I was having, too. The second night of ceremony, everyone informed me, was going to be more intense than the first. The purging would be less bodily and more spiritual. I had not purged the first night, so I didn't know what everyone was talking about. While the others prepared themselves, I snuck out the back of the house and down to a solitary bench, hidden by some trees. The bench overlooked a verdant, mirror-like pond. Here, I sat down, happily, alone. I lit a cigarette. I did not feel good about the cigarette. I was embarrassed by how out of context the money-crisp, flashy packet of Marlboro Lights looked in nature. And there was, of course, no ashtray in sight—which meant I would have to throw the butt away inside the house.

I hoped it wouldn't smell. On top of everything, my throat and ears still itched from the tree bark powder up my nose. I tried to suppress a hacking cough. When I finished my cigarette, I lit another, out of spite. At sundown, the 20 of us again gathered our belongings and walked down into the field. This time, I wasn't dressed in white. I didn't care. Although, arranging our mats beneath the ceremony tent, I did try to sit close to the shamans again. They gently pushed me further down the row. I felt certain that I was ready, this time—for enlightenment to come. The chanting started, and the attendants began to distribute the medicines. The eye drops that burned: I accepted willingly. I almost said no to the pretty little nose-flutes of tree bark powder, rapé, but the attendant leaned close to me and whispered, "The clogs take longer to unblock when you're a smoker." This was Miles, the young man who had personally transported all these illegal medicines from the forests in Peru.

I'd thought I was being discreet about my smoking, so the fact that everyone knew upset me. I acquiesced, and tilted my face upwards, close to Miles's. He puffed his cheeks and shot the brown powder up my nose with an artful, puff! Tears sprang into my eyes, and the itchiness became unbearable. I clawed at my throat with all my fingers. My nose became so clogged that I was forced to breathe through my mouth. I was massively unhappy. When the Ayahuasca started to take effect, I again tried to stay seated upright in the lotus pose. A lot of people were getting up and pacing around, uncomfortable. They kept leaving to shit and puke in the grass outside the tent. The Russian dancer who had made a scene the night before was sleeping on her mat next to me, with a dark cloud shadowing her face. I kept waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. At the top of the tent, Marcio and Sitora were singing a duet. Something about the wind in the forest and ancient voices. Sitora strummed her guitar and sang the sacred hymns and chants. Listening, I began, ever so slowly, to feel the wind from the forest, too. It was coming from her song. From the repetitiveness of it. The song was, in all honesty, quite beautiful. I felt bad that I hadn't listened properly the night before. After a while, Sitora and the shamans stopped singing. In the silence, people fidgeted and sniffled. Nobody looked good. I opened my mouth to venture: "That was a lovely song—" But Marcio raised his hand in annoyance: "No talking." Sitora nudged him gently. Begrudgingly, he called out across the tent, "Fine, what was it about the song?" "Oh," I said, embarrassed. "It was just..."

I searched for the right words. "I was truly experiencing the song."

And then I leaned forward to elaborate: "The bit about the forest. Wow! It made my brain flow, like, entirely t—!" "That's enough," Marcio cut me off with his hand again. I was convinced he didn't like me. I crumpled. Everything about this experience was awful, I felt. And being interrupted hurt my feelings. Who did this macho Latin guy think he was, anyway? Cavalierly interrupting women. I became indignant about every job I'd ever had where I was interrupted and dismissed by men. I pouted. I did more than that, actually. I also became tremendously embarrassed. I was convinced I didn't belong there, was not welcome there. I was too disruptive to the space. And nobody liked my stories, either. My stories required far too much attention. It slowly dawned on me that everyone there was working on deep, intensive therapy, and meanwhile, I would not shut up about things like, "Hey listen, I was sexually assaulted by someone whose opinion I admired—"

And: "Hey listen, my brother lives at home because he can't hold down a job—"

"Hey listen, I spent my early twenties broke and hitchhiking around France, just because I hated the place I came from so much, I wanted to run away forever—"

And: "Hey, so, have you ever been harassed or spied on by an employer? Did you know that's not okay? That it's not okay for people to treat you like that?—"

"Also, have you ever been to Burning Man?—"

"Have you ever been made to feel inadequate because you did not go to private school?—" —I mean, I realized, finally (with horror), that I had not shut up since I'd arrived there. All of a sudden my embarrassment about this fact overcame me. I threw myself forward onto my mat, in a pose of utter, miserable prostration. People around me moved their mats backwards in annoyance, and, after a while, I left the tent to go pout by myself in the field and forest. "I don't belong anywhere!" I wept, trudging miserably in the darkness. And: "I am a fountain of nonsense!"

Oh God, I thought. Tomorrow is going to be awkward. I did not know what to do. I grew so mad at myself, because I had failed

to understand what everyone was doing there, that I spent the rest of the night in the wilderness alone, in the nightmare of my own self-loathing. “Why can’t I shut up?” I asked the beetles in the sky. I thought about my friend who had recommended these shamans in particular to me, and I thought about all the ways in which she was a better writer than me. It was this friend who had advised I try the upright meditation pose—something I still had not achieved. Eventually, I resolved to return to my place in the ceremony tent. To show contrition, to try my best, and then to excuse myself as graciously as possible, as soon as it was morning. I would apologize for all the ways in which I’d damaged the space, and then I would just leave. Kindly and politely. Someone would need to drive me into town, but then I would be free to deal with the long, lonely journey home—in my own way. I would be fine like that. I always was fine on my own. I finally made it back to my mat as the sun was coming up. I did the lotus pose. I did it. Finally. I cannot explain to you what this felt like, except that mostly, it was difficult.

The ceremony finished. People’s faces looked like ashes. And still, I had not purged. I spent the next day avoiding Marcio and wondering who to ask for a ride back to town. Every time I had to walk past any of the shamans, I gave them a wide berth and held my head up high. Marcio watched me do this all day long, but he said nothing.

Shanti, the pretty blonde who had collected me in town to begin with, looked like she was busy canoodling with one of the more handsome shaman’s attendants. I didn’t want to trouble her. On the other hand, the young Indian woman who had reached out to me the first night seemed pensive and withdrawn. I decided not to bother her either.

The Russian dancer was all contentment and transformation, so I did spend some time swinging with her in the hammock. But her English was not good enough for conversation, and, eventually, I left her, too. I took frequent smoke breaks at the pond. It was at the pond that I fell into conversation with another secret smoker, a man named Daniel* who was a sculptor and a teacher. We discovered that we had mutual friends who had recently been at Yaddo, the famous writing residence nearby.

“You know,” he explained with firmness, “A lot of people here are working on art projects, too. Not just you.”

I flinched a little, and then I nodded.

“Is that your Ganesha?” he asked, gesturing down into the field below, where several of us had spread our blankets to air out around the ceremony tent. My pink-purple tapestry from India (by way of Paris) was by far the largest and most vibrant. I became painfully self-conscious that even my belongings had turned out to be the loudest of the weekend. I nodded miserably.

He considered the scenery for a while. Then he laughed, as if everything about that weekend had been light-hearted hilarity. And he asked: “Is it true you came here on the bus?”

His laughter helped, somehow. It helped me laugh about my own ridiculousness, too. And as the day wore on, I slowly softened, and I resolved to stay for the third and final ceremony. I brought myself to this resolution only after a great deal of private pacing, huffing, grimacing, hand-wiping and sighing. But once I’d made up my mind to stay, I felt much better.

I approached Marcio, who was standing in the field, addressing his attendants.

“I’ve decided to join you,” I announced.

He smiled—not like you might expect a serious shaman to smile—but honestly, he smiled, just genuinely, like himself. And he laughed, confused: “But you are already with us!”

And then he made fun of my hat, which was a Brooklyn Nets baseball cap. That was the moment we finally got to be friends. The moment of opening was, truly, the moment he made fun of my hat.

If you’re wondering why I wore a baseball cap to an Ayahuasca ceremony, well, it’s probably because have a deep-seated, primal need for intelligent people to laugh at my jokes. This is a kind of addiction that runs even deeper than cigarettes, and whether or not it’s a healthy impulse to pursue is a whole other story. Honestly, though, the reason I tell jokes and stories is because I am, quite simply—painfully and absurdly—alive.

Preparing for the third night of ceremony, I did a lot of pacing back and forth—between the house and my personal tent (which had, honestly, nothing in it) and the meditation bench.

I bought a small prayer rug from Miles. It had been woven by the indigenous forest people in Peru, and Miles explained to me how the patterns in the colorful threads were meant to be read as music: zigzagging up and swooping down. These rugs were the original songbooks.

“Oh my god,” I said.

He chuckled and sent me on my way.

That night, I arranged my mat at the end farthest away from the shamans. This was to show that I’d learned, now, how much more I had to learn. I was dressed respectfully in white and proudly wearing a crystal pendant—which Shanti had lent me for the ceremony.

I placed my new prayer rug carefully in front of me so that it extended over the edge of my Indian tapestry and out, onto the grass. This was entirely improvised but I was pleased to see how the blue-purple of the Peruvian prayer rug complimented the lilac of my Ganesha. It was a joyful, riotous meeting of all the world’s forest cultures, and in that moment, I could not think of anything more beautiful.

Then an incredible thing started to happen. I wretched. And I did not just cough up bile. I also coughed up phlegm—all the loose congestion in my lungs—which I must have been carrying around inside of me for years, without even realizing it.

I coughed up glob after glob of thick, suffocating mucus, swirled with trailing rainbows of tree bark dust. I gasped to look at it. And when I gasped, I was startled by how much air rushed in. It was as if the actual wind of the forest had been wriggling its way up my itchy, protesting nose, for two whole days, and now—finally!—it had found clear passage out of my open, thankful throat.

It was exactly like Plato’s parable of the prisoner in the cave, except that I had not been looking at shadows my whole life: I had been trying to breathe oxygen through quicksand. I had been living without air. I breathed this in now in deep, bracing gulps.

“I have GOT to quit smoking,” was the last thought that went through my mind before I entered my first ever astral state.

I blissed out. In a perfect lotus pose, and I was not aware of anyone around me for I don’t know how long. For as long as the shamans were

singing. All I saw were wind and stars and lapping waves, distant shores and beauty. All I saw was music. This was because the chants were so wonderfully nasal and repetitive. I bathed in this for hours:

I wanna be free, so free

like a flower and a bee

like a bird in a tree

like a dolphin in a sea.

I wanna fly high, so high

like an eagle in the sky

and when my time has come

I wanna lay me down and die.

And when my time has come

I wanna lay me down and fly.

And when I came down I saw that all 20 people were looking at me, enthralled by whatever celestial visions had been passing across my face. Behind them, were the shamans. Even Marcio was looking at me. I had good posture for the first time in the entire weekend. I blinked my eyes, startled.

And then I had a massive series of revelations, which I'm still reeling from.

At this point in the story, I need to pause. What happened to me that day was like an awakening. But I struggled for a long time with how to represent what follows next. You see, the two previous nights had ended with speeches from the shamans. The third night ended in me leaping violently backwards from my mat, terrified and sobbing. And everybody watched me sob. I think that they were touched, or mesmerized—or just quietly respectful.

I wept with gratitude, and I wept in mourning for how immensely lonely and difficult my journey just to get this far has been. I wept with the full power of my recently healed lungs. Clean, clear liquid snot streamed out of my nose, like it's supposed to. It gushed into my hands, and I could not believe how much my snot looked just like water. For the first time in years, I was crying unimpeded by a stuffy nose.

Never before in my life had I realized that I smoked cigarettes because I hated myself. Was strangling myself. I shuddered with deep convulsions of joy, and the attendants performed rituals over me, like burning sage and whispering chants from the forest.

They said, "You are beautiful." And the shamans were whispering amongst themselves: "She is healing. Yes, she is healing."

Then another revelation came: I have a voice, I thought. I have a voice that I fill with my lungs. And this is the voice with which I must write. I became astonished at how bad all my writing up until that point in my life had been. I saw it all so clearly now. All my life, I had been afraid to use my fullest voice.

Especially when fighting to be taken seriously in professional contexts in New York, I had trained myself to make my words tiny and my arguments loud. I had contorted my voice to be shrill and pointy. I did this because I wanted to be heard, but I was embarrassed to use my true voice. My true voice is wonderfully feminine. It has the power to draw people in, even when I whisper. Because there is more strength in one moment of silent breath than in most words, I think. I have found tremendous peace and wisdom in this single revelation.

There is a passage in *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf in which she mourns for all the talented witchy women writers in history who died on sides of highways, pulling their hair out because they were so gas-lit and mistreated by society that they never got a chance to do their best writing. I, too, mourn for all these swallowed voices.

Even today with modern feminism: imagine a female CEO leading a board meeting with a voice so soft and lilting that people need to lean in to hear her. Imagine a rape survivor filing a police report without fear of being swept under the rug. Imagine Hillary

Clinton standing up to speak about world peace—and not shouting into the microphone. Then imagine America listening to her anyway. This is a vision I hope to see achieved in my lifetime, and perhaps it will come around. Perhaps we will crack the glass ceiling, not with a drill but with a song.

It has now been six weeks since I had a cigarette. Quitting isn't easy. I have been experiencing some insomnia and increased anxiety. But every time I feel like reaching for a smoke, I remember what that moment felt like, and what it means to breathe freely. What it means to love yourself. Being alive can be so frightening sometimes, but why should I try to stuff my feelings back down inside my throat, when my feelings are as beautiful as these?

I am learning, oh so slowly, to sit with myself—with all my mistakes, and all my doubts and all my splendor—in peace. And it's from this place of peace that my most mature writing grows. In any case, that is what Ayahuasca has taught me about being a good writer.

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Contributors

Phillip Barron is a poet working at the intersection of poetry and philosophy. His first book of poetry, *What Comes from a Thing*, won the 2015 Michael Rubin Book Award and was published by Fourteen Hills Press of San Francisco. His writing also appears or is forthcoming in *Philosophy and Literature*, *New American Writing*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Janus Head*, *Orion*, and *Radical Philosophy Review*. He teaches in the Philosophy Department at Sacramento State.

10 Bio Fun Facts about *Sunshine Best*

1. Her friends call her the 'Dreadlock Nomad'
2. Traveled to or lived-in several countries to-date.
3. Self-taught visual artist.
4. Art is her first love.
5. Doesn't have to be sad to paint.
6. Fascinated by human faces and their stories.
7. On the fence about humanity in general.
8. Favourite colours and food preferences tend to be seasonal.
9. Does not like Chocolate.
10. Yes, Sunshine is her real name.

Claire Dockery is a Tulane senior majoring in German and Economics and minoring in English. She grew up in Chicago and Las Vegas and enjoys techno music, poorly constructed robots, and various snack foods. She hosts a bi-monthly radio show on WTUL New Orleans.

Graphic artist and painter *Allen Forrest* was born in Canada and bred in the U.S. He has created cover art and illustrations for literary publications and books. He is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's Reed Magazine and his Bel Red painting series is part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection. Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

Mia Greenberg started doing film photography in 7th grade so that she could spend lunchtime developing photos in the dark room rather than watching kids get food all over themselves. Four

years later, she still spends the majority of her time taking photographs, mostly documenting the Nashville punk/underground music scene.

Kathleen Gunton is a poet and photographer. She believes one art feeds another and is committed to literary journals. Centos from her collection in progress have been published in Rhino, Studio One, Rock & Sling, West Trestle Review, and Perceptions—to name a few. Her photos have graced the cover of Thema, Flint Hills Review, Arts & Letters, Potomac Review, and Broad River Review among others.

Deb Jannerson is a New Orleans-based poet and novelist. Her debut collection of poetry, *Rabbit Rabbit*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2016 and is available wherever books are sold. She has been shortlisted for the William Faulkner—Wisdom Award and received 2nd place in the Pen2Paper Writing Competition. Her fiction, poems, and social commentary have been featured in four anthologies and over a dozen magazines. Learn more at debjannerson.com and facebook.com/DebJannersonWrites.

Ryan Kelley is a writer and documentary filmmaker from New York. His film *Dixie*, recounts the controversial history of the confederate anthem “Dixie’s Land,” and premieres on public television stations across the United States in February 2017. He is currently filming a documentary on the electoral college and writing a book on the history of blackface minstrelsy in American culture.

Since cataloging her book collection in third grade, *Sarah Key* has been smitten with storytelling as an art book editor, cookbook author, poet, essayist, and teacher. With eight essays on the Huffington Post, she has also had numerous poems in journals from Poet Lore to Tuesday; An Art Project and inclusion in two poetry anthologies. The students she tutors at a Bronx community college are her favorite teachers.

James Kincaid has published about thirty-five stories and some novels: *A History of the African-American People* by Strom Thurmond (co-authored with Percival Everett), *Lost, You Must Remember This*, and *Wendell and Tyler* (a new adult trilogy). He has taught at Ohio State, Colorado,

Berkeley, Southern Cal, and is now at Pitt.

Stephen C. Middleton is a writer working in London, England. He has had five books published, including *A Brave Light* (Stride) and *Worlds of Pain / Shades of Grace* (Poetry Salzburg). He has been in several anthologies, including *Paging Doctor Jazz* (Shoestring), & *From Hepworth's Garden Out* (Shearsman, 2010). For several years he was editor of *Ostinato*, a magazine of jazz and jazz related poetry, and *The Tenormen Press*. He has been in magazines worldwide.

A veteran and long-time resident of Los Angeles, *Martin Ott's* most recent book is *Spectrum*, C&R Press, 2016. He is the author of seven books and won the De Novo and Sandeen prizes for his first two poetry collections. His work has appeared in more than two hundred magazines and a dozen anthologies. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ottpops> Blog: <https://writeliving.wordpress.com>

Harleigh Shaw is a 19 year old artist from South Florida and currently studying Studio Art, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Art History at Tulane. She likes photography because it helps her reveal to her subjects the novel force she finds within them. It is also an excellent facilitator of communication in that sense. It's a tool to depict the world as she would like it to be--undermining socially constructed principles and fragmenting perils of humanity through exploring the beauty and basic goodness in everyone who comes into her life.

Jennifer Slavinskas is a southern writer. She has an M.F.A. from the New College of California, San Francisco. She has been published in various journals including *Lyric*, *Angle*, and *Fiasco*. She enjoys the works of Paige Cannon, M. Mara-Ann, Jamen Howe, Jill Stengel, Sharon Coleman, and Lyn Hejinian among others. She has published two chapbooks, "Saying No. 3," from a+bend press, and "El Gallo," from Nada Press. She presently divides her time between Vilnius, Lithuania and Dallas, Texas.

Submission Guidelines

The Tulane Review accepts poetry, prose and art submissions.

Poetry and prose submissions should be sent electronically through Submittable at our site, tulane.review.edu. Please submit no more than five poems and limit prose submissions to 4000 words per piece.

Art should be submitted electronically to Submittable at our site, tulane.review.edu, in high-resolution format. Please include dimensions and media form.

Please include a cover letter with biography for all submissions.

