BLACKBIRD
Editor in Chief: Jack Apollo George

Deputy Editor: Morag McKenzie

Prose
Editor: Morag McKenzie
Reading Board: Alexander Chaballier, Garrett Griffin, Ishan Guha, Kyle Kysela, Hannah Nash, Xhesika Pasholli, August Rosenthal, Elana Schrager, Aaron Slater, Isabelle Stillman

Poetry
Editor: Edward O’Brien
Reading Board: Mariangela Bucci, KJ Davidson-Turner, Christina Denbow, Corinne Leblanc, Peter Lindholm, Katie O’Neill, Cecily Proctor

Design
Editor: Lilly Kustec
Board: Nick Kaye, Henry Linehan

Visual Arts
Editor: Tamir Williams
Board: Elisa Berger, Cole Bortz, Juliette Gobin, Kelsey Lee, Ennissa Martin, Phoebe Mitchell, Jack Ravery, Surya Tubach

Online (The Orchard)
Editors: Elli Itin, Isabelle Stillman, Wendy Walcoff
Board: Christian Bonaventura, William Griffin, Henry Linehan, Morag McKenzie, Aaron Slater

Shadow Member: Enrique Dupleich Rozo
## Contents

Prose and Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chswayo Mphanza</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mama Working Overtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Granny Remembers the Chicago Blizzard of ‘67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gettin’ a Fade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>David Ullmann</td>
<td>The One Billion Dollar Picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>John Sheftall</td>
<td>Images for a Hometown Jazz for the Seas and the Streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Elana Schrager</td>
<td>Moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Tom Canaday</td>
<td>Vicodin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Nathan LaBarba</td>
<td>Think About Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Alex Newhouse</td>
<td>The Song of a World Aflame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Isabelle Stillman</td>
<td>The Moores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Edward O’Brien</td>
<td>Braille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>August Rosenthal</td>
<td>Highway Dance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visual Arts

29  Kelsey Lee
33  Elisa Berger
34  Kristina Pallova
35  Daniella Silva

Cover: Nick Kaye
Frightening Bird: Henry Linehan
Cheswayo Mphanza

After Livelinks - the hottest place to meet the coolest people.

Welcome to Livelinks.
Press # to set up your age, location, greeting and meet local singles.

Age:
I’m 13 21 and afraid confident.
A miniature of a boy man working steady minimum wage jobs that yield and console me only to divulge and devour me again at 8am is when I wake up for school 5am when the silence of city streets sound like a lullaby hope trying to push through before day breaks.

Location:
I live on the south side of Chicago in a two-bedroom apartment with my mother whose hands have grown coarse and coiled after decades of kneeling and cleaning the homes of millionaires.

And my brother, whom I share a dilapidated bunk bed with—which always breaks during winter, so I sleep on the couch:

flat overlooking the lake and skyline of downtown, which glows like a poor man’s heart when you place a quarter of change into his subdued palms.

Greeting:

My father left me before he taught me how to love a woman, but my mother showed me who to love:

I’m looking for my mother to teach me what my father couldn’t—a woman who can take care of herself, knows how to cook my favorite dish herself, but will always leave enough space to hold me love me without needing me.
Mama Working
Overtime

10:00pm:

Bones shift in crackling order, waking at the funk of night’s alarm clock. Still tender in age, they furrow from their rest to layer black skin onto what is barely a corpse of a woman

Houdini’s coffin trick could not out weather a routine practiced by a woman who finds necessity in giving her soul to the nightman.

The cleansing hour approaches and she melts into cold, muddy waters giving false transfusions of waking.

Skin wrinkled with days rest finds a way to be smoothed out over fabric sinking into her skin.

11:30pm:

Chicago streets can cut silence
by means of death. Can stop lakefront winds from giving by the harshness of terror.

Waiting late hours at bus stops is kin to waiting for coroners who quarantine bones and leave just fleshy skin hanging loose in air pumped bodies.

Marauders may lurk in search of penny food from fools who dare encroach on their nightly hours.

She has learned to ignore them, or her soul has taught them that a woman who waits this late at night offers and suffers the same as they do.

They have learned to wait with her. Protect her bones further from critters who have learned to wait in shadows.

Her final transportation approaches She has learned to take the bait gracefully now.

12:45 am:

Her second transition offers no marauders and night critters to caress and compromise her journey.
Just silence remixed with the yawning of vermins waking and raking their daily trails of bread from train tracks.

They have offered her dinner, but she rather dine on hunger and let it marinate until it dissolves into afterthoughts of a good meal.

Silence can be dangerous if not heard correctly. She used to be afraid until the pangs of waiting numbed her bones to let silence pass.
Granny Remembers the Chicago Blizzard of ’67

Hell,
I’ve been cold before
Black folk always been cold,

since this city birthed us in alleyways
and nursed us in kitchenettes and
shanty towns scattered over
a black belt of a city looped
in beggary and destitution

Since, like a good mother,
this city smothered our poverty
into project buildings, overflowing
with her infants who steadily
got adopted by cemeteries that
never honored their names

I inherited my fathers cold
long before I knew love
could give me the warmth
to shroud me

Ain’t nobody cold like a factory worker,
whose hands have been scaffolding
the backbone of a city that constantly
gives birth to stillborn conveyor belts of change

The type of cold that leaves a man too weak
to say “I love you” to his wife and children
‘cause his throat too sore and deprived
of the quenching taste of stability
to say those sharp things

And y’all just go on eating in monotone silence, careful not to scrape the plates
‘cause you wanna give the man
some type of peace his life
can’t afford him.

And he a good man

A hardworking man that landscapes
and outlines future blueprints for
generations too ahead of him

Yeah, I know cold

The cold that makes a woman wish
she never loved that hard

Wish she was strong enough
to work with her man,
but her bones turn to mercury
every time she places a foot
at the door of marginalized opportunity
A woman who forgot time been
making her frail and lonesome,
but she still believes in the beauty of patience

This cold ain’t nothing

I come from a family of icebergs,
we don’t melt easy, chile
Gettin’ A Fade

Metropolitan Barbershop, 4654 South Parkway
Owned by Mr. Oscar J. Freeman

Like most black boys,
the ‘shop be where we become
conditioned and pressed into being men

Can’t read, but we know barbershop poles
be calling like sirens to a sea of tender heads
matching coarse minds in need of grooming

Grown folk always be gossiping
‘bout what woman they laid with
after a night of gin and reefer
and how good of a lover they be
to women who be afraid to be touched,
but love to be held

Learned ‘bout protection
from men who plant seeds
into various fertile soil,
but forget to water them once they bloom
But always,
they be quick to give advice
to eager boys with baby hair
that don’t need no further trimming

I was taught how to love a woman from gettin’ a fade

Barber said:

“A relationship like a haircut
More time you take to get it right,
the better it looks once its over

Gotta be careful around the edges and ears
‘cause the buzz of infidelity is always hanging on the side -
waiting to burn ties that have not been knotted into promise

Trim the lies off and always
leave enough space for truth

Fold back your ears
from getting hurt, but
let them go when she needs to be heard

Better use a razor than a clipper to
line out your future, ‘cause it’s sharper

Taper your past
If you leave it boxed in,
it will always come back untamed

And once you’re done,
don’t forget to neutralize any present bumps from spreading into chaos by moisturizing and shampooing your love as often as you can”
I remembered that generic axiom my Dad would tell me. “If a man gives you a day’s wage, give him a day’s work.” So I got my ass off the wall I was leaned against in the Museum of Fine Arts and walked over to some elderly couple chatting around a Jackson Pollack. “Quite frankly, I think it just looks like kindergarden art,” the woman commented, scratching her pale chin with a silk glove. “You folks have questions about any of the pieces?” I asked. The man scrunched his forehead. “So how would you say the inter-war jazz sentiments influenced Pollack’s work” he asked. I followed with some well-rehearsed explanation of Pollack’s influences and contributions to art that entirely disregarded his initial question. He nodded and I resented my boss for not letting me curate the Greek art exhibit like I requested.

It was then, inexplicably, that a maintenance employee walked over to a blank portion of the wall and placed a small piece of paper over two hooks that extended from it.

I waited for a lull in the conversation to go inspect the new piece and discovered a bank note, for a whopping one billion dollars. It looked like a normal bill, with an image of Herbert Hoover and the usual symbols and writing printed.
into its cotton-linen fibers. No information on the artist or piece were presented. Modern art is typically cryptic; but even in this field, the one billion dollar bank note stood out as aloof.

From what I could tell, there was nothing preventing someone from taking it.

I pondered whether it was some minimalist critique of capitalism, a reexamination of mundane objects, or even a practical joke by the maintenance staff to mock back-bay, pseudo intellectuals desperate to derive meaning from anything. Did the Federal Reserve even print such large denominations?

When my boss came over to grace me with a 30-minute lunch break, I asked her where the new piece came from.

“"We bought it," she responded, and walked away, reminding me that the museum does not value their temporary curators, 2 months out of college, very highly.

I ate across the street in Muddy River park, watching families skirt past a group of hoboels. How they could use a billion dollars. There had been no recent auctions so locating the bill’s origins would be difficult. I took out my laptop and looked up One Billion Dollar art piece, scrolling through the annals of google with no success but remembered that I had to delete all the unneeded commas in my application for Classical Studies graduate program scholarships to compensate for my B-laden transcript. I needed to leave my job and apartment: two bedrooms and one belligerent drunk who demonstrates not even the shallowest respect toward the border between mine and his side of the fridge.
Walking back, I ran into Cassey, a fellow curator who makes my knowledge of art look like a five-year-old’s understanding of string theory.

“Did you see the new piece,” I asked her.

“Yeah, I did,” she responded, stroking her silky blue hair and musing “it is a mystery, no one knows the artist or even anything about it. It strikes me as some lament at the monetization of everything around us. I think it is really stellar!”

“You know, I think the oddest part is that there is hardly anything preventing someone from taking it,” I said.

“Ha. You’re great,” said Cassey, shaking her lip piercing as she giggled, “that’s what you think about. You are really a manifestation of the exhibit. We see art and all we can think about is the economic benefits we can derive from it.”

Back at the exhibit, a horde of museum-goers gathered around the bill.

“I don’t get it?”, “Is it real?”, “Is it a political statement,” “Especially relevant given the debacle over the Affordable Care Act,” “I don’t think it means anything,” they chimed. My boss told me to reject any questions or direct any particularly insistent individuals to her. People are taking this way too seriously, I thought, It’s probably not even a real bill.

That evening, Boston.com posted an article, entitled, “Mysterious and valuable piece shocks the MFA.” And a portion read, “There appears to be no alarms, locks, or
When I arrived the next day, a motley crew of tattooed youngsters and curious tourists had already gathered outside.

I watched reporters come in, snap pictures, and interview visitors. A professor of social psychology at Boston University I had taken a class with before, commented “I think this a giant psychological experiment about the diffusion of entitlement in a mob where no one person feels confident enough that they, out of all people in the world, are the most deserving of it because even the most deserving assumes someone else will have a more compelling case.”

It sounded like the opening page of his syllabus when I took “Cooperation and Competition: the development of social behavior,” with him.

A group of Harvard undergrads examined the bill with lasers and announced, “We have verified to a 99 percent confidence level that the bill is legitimate legal tender under the United State’s laws. It appears to be a specially customized currency note, issued by the Federal Reserve upon request of an influential citizen or for extremely uncommon purposes.”

Everyone cheered. A group of colorfully clad activists coalesced at the side and began to discuss how the money, which they declared a democratically-owned property, should be distributed.

“No investment yields a better return than educating a
female and thus I think we should donate the bill to an organization we feel has done so most successfully.”

“A very valid point but personally I work for the ACLU and we are understaffed, overworked, and overstressed to the point where we lack the energy level necessary to fight the progressive legal battles that are so important for—”

“We are not giving any of this money to lawyers!”

And this went on for hours as tourists gawked at the bill feeling a temptation mitigated only by the threat of becoming the city’s most hated asshole.

That night I surfed the web, looking to see what people were making of this whole ordeal. A group of influential Bostonian activists, calling themselves the “tribunal” set up a website. They planned to lead the allocation of the money, but promised to resign should they lose democratic consent. Needy individuals posted pleas - A single mother laid off, an impoverished paraplegic, someone who lost their home in the Great Rim fire.

The Sigma Delta fraternity chapter of Boston College had the balls to write, “Give it to us so we can buy beer for the craziest three day ragger of eternity!”

The Economist posted a piece on their blog about how the stunt was a provocative act of grandstanding that could lead to a very irresponsible allocation of resources.

Jay Leno did a sketch that night where after days of deliberation the Tribunal gets stressed out decide to use the bill as the rolling paper for a joint.
My roommates snores boomed through the paper-thin walls of our apartment. I opened his door, shook him awake, and asked him to lie on his side so I could try to get a few hours of sleep before a dreaded day at the office.

The next day I could hardly enter the museum. A crowd hundreds large huddled around the building shouting slogans and holding signs.

An insurgency brewed, with a more radical crowd gathering in the corner holding signs that read “Don’t spend the money in this twisted system. Start a better one.” They wanted to fund an intentional living community instead of spending the money in the conventional economy.

I ate my lunch at Muddy River park as per usual and as I munched down a dry, hastily-crafted sandwich, a homeless person walked over to me from the bush he had just urinated in.

“Hey man. I get it, everyone’s favorite interruption – homeless guy asking for money. But how you doing today?,” he asked, stretching the wrinkled skin around his lips with a smile.

“Fine,” I said.

“Well, you know, it has been real hard for me these past few years, I was attacked by some guys a few years ago, lost some of my hearing, and can’t walk good no more. I worked at Sabbados over downtown - you ever been there? I used to make a mean pork sandwich- anyways had to quit cuz I couldn’t hear orders no more. You know, my wife and I, we don’t do drugs, we don’t drink, we don’t
smoke cigarettes. Ok we do smoke cigarettes and you know I used to do drugs, I mean if it was me your age, it wouldn’t be no sandwich in my hands brother. You know what I’m saying? So anything you can give to help me out is a blessing.”

I reach into my pocket and handed him two quarters.

“God bless you sir,” he said and shakes my hand. “You enjoy the sun. It’s a beautiful day to be alive.”

He began to walk away. “Wait, excuse me, what is your name sir?” I asked. “Richard,” he told me. “Hey Richard, what would you do with a billion dollars?” “Just buy my wife and I a house you know. Why you ask? Got a billion dollars in that pocket?” He grins. “Come with me,” I instructed. We walked to the museum and pushed through a dense crowd to the front entrance. I pulled Richard through the hall by his hand. “Richard, I am about to show you a billion dollars. You can’t have all. But they’ll give you some and you will get that house.” He looked confused, yet interested. I imagined that this would inspire the Tribunal by showing them an equally worthy recipient who lived right across the street, entirely ignorant of this phenomena in the world of modern art.

But as soon as I entered the room and he saw, from shirts people wore and the signs they held, that their was actually a billion dollar asset in that room, I realized I had underestimated the desperation of someone who lives in muddy river park.

He rammed through a crowd of Tribunal members wearing similar cloths that costed them twice as much. He picked up the bill and darted to the exit shoving aside enraged
utopians who yelled at him to come back.

A slender man pealed himself off the ground after a particularly loud fall and chased him out of the museum and I followed closely.

A woman, shaking frantically shouted, “don’t hit him.” And he did not. The skinny vigilante caught up to Richard outside but would not tackle or trip him.

“Many people need that,” he shouted, “don’t be greedy.”

“Shut up,” Richard muttered besides him, sprinting and out of breath, “money don’t go to who need it. It goes to who earned it.”

The chaser eventually wrapped his arms around Richard, trying to arrest the his escape in a harmless, almost loving, embrace. Yet Richard just dragged him along, scrapping the man’s knees until he let go and watched Richard sprint way into the distance.

“Come back,” I shrieked, but he was too far to hear.

I needed to get back to my apartment. They might blame me for bringing him and the museum would fall into chaos so by boss might not notice I left.

Back home, my roommate munched cornflakes from a tupperware container, “Hey man. Might need another few days for the rent,” he told me.

“I’m sure the landlord will let it slide just this umpteenth time,” I replied.
I turned on my computer and clicked on Safari. The front page of Boston.com read “1 Billion Dollar art mystery ends with two shocking twists.” Richard had been arrested for trying to purchase a BMW with a fake billion dollar bill.
Columbus, Georgia—you stand defined by a river recently set free, whose dams once spawned mill-towns, spun shotgun shacks into a new South, but now fuel a rafter’s urban mecca, your municipal hope for renewal; turbines overturned, the past released—but now the steady drone of cascades compete with the sermon from the black lady you left homeless at the corner of Broadway and 13th;

still deaf to lips moist from fried-chicken grease sending smoke from a Newport menthol above your steaming streets, sticking to the stucco of your historic homes, she waits patiently outdoors as they renovate their past to greet a future of spotless linoleum floors.

And soon the mourning dove’s somber coo fades to the heat of afternoon; summer comes piggy-backed by the breezes that precede your storm, bowing Georgia pines in audible acquiescence to your might, then loitering in the parking lot of Country’s Barbeque.
Here green breeds everywhere on your red-clay earth
that full green of loblolly, a witness to contrast
purple abstractions of student art, like the loam
taste of resin scratches the back of the throat
and blossoms
your bouquets of decaying magnolia.

The weight of your humidity rubs eyelids within
a running car of burning leather
baking minds until later, after sunset
shadows your valley in hues of blue-pink pastel
and crickets commence late-summer dirges,
the inside AC dries sweat to red-necks,
cools us down for a night of late-summer urges
as we pour one out to your bright future
from a tepid Natural Light.
City nights
    alert with
    rough metallic motion
moonlight casting glows over
    wet roads and
puddles rest like
    petals
on flower-beds

a homeless man stands
    alone
the shadows are friends, they
whisper secrets about the day-
light behind his back,
    only they know
its darker side

as far off
ocean spits up rocks
    and goes out
calm as motion:
that lull of earth
    cradled
by a pale weathered face
drawing the tides and
rocking

fragile egg-shells of gulls
perched on the turbulence
of waves
they screech for heat
in vain
as sun makes way
for clouds of rain
to fall and feed the sea
with water moving

Flow on, says the jazz-man,
eyes closed,
lips pursed
mouth filling with embouchure
casting form as sound,
so air goes out
a note
that empties high
over red lights
on 115th
as a boy
strolls home,
each sneaker step
through sidewalk foam
summons the sea

and the moon’s retreat
behind the halo
of the city streets
II.  
The girl looked down at her fingers. They were short and cracked, the top layer of skin breaking up to expose the layers beneath. She peered into the cracks, following them down through the thinness of her skin, through the spasming pinkness of the muscle beneath, through the tide of blood that pushed its way its way around her body. She watched as the crack grew, splitting the diamond layer of bone, boring holes in the marrow of her substance. And into the crack she dropped a wish, a flutter of hope that floated through the space. And she watched as bone hardened, and blood pulled out and in, and muscle knit itself together, and skin grew smooth and soft. Her fingers were still short. The girl looked up.

III.  
If you ever see a granite walker, you’re probably one yourself, or close to becoming one. They live in the highest reaches of the mountains, in the forgotten spaces in valleys, on the open slabs of sticky rock that wallpaper that land we call the wilderness, the backcountry. Find a green and clear river, frothing with the heady rush of summer, and watch as it spits upwards in its attempts to swallow the boulders in its path. Will your eyes to follow the spray,
and there they’ll be: a line of them, huge humped backs stacked on top of spindly legs, each one following the other, up and across and up and up, always climbing, a liquid line of bodies, until one by one they disappear over your horizon, searching for their own.
When the doctor cut my teeth out
She gave me Vicodin.
Afterward, I stumbled up my steps
And sagged onto the blurred lines of my couch.
When I awoke and found the blood and pus potion
That had slipped from the corners of my lips
And pooled on my shirt I laughed,
Stretching my still fresh jaw-wounds till they screamed
Words that I could not hear
Through ears numbed by the Vicodin.
Sleeping Lessons No. 2
The Hunt
Signs
Elisa Berger

Sleeping Nude II
Kristina Pallova

Untitled
Daniella Silva

Trapped
Untitled 1
Some people are white, and some are black. But some are red, and some are purple, and some are orange, green, and speckled brown like an Easter egg that you dropped into every dye. And it doesn’t matter to me, except because groups of people are more beautiful for me to look at, like paintings. I like to make paintings using my hands and also paintbrushes, and sometimes I paint pictures of people and my mom looks at them and says “Wow honey that’s beautiful! What is it?” and I don’t understand how she doesn’t see that what I have painted is people so I cry and rip it up. Once I was at a playground inside a hamburger restaurant and I was on top of the slide ready to go down but I couldn’t see the bottom so I was scared. There was a boy behind me who also wanted to go down the slide and he started yelling at me to GO FAT BOY GO, but he had a funny nose and a t-shirt with a picture on it of the Looney tunes and I just love the Looney tunes so I just kept laughing and laughing. Eventually he sat down and put his feet on my back and pushed me and I went down the slide face-first like a penguin. I splashed into the colorful balls and thought to myself, hmm, if they made these balls smaller and smaller and smaller we would eventually have ourselves a beach. Ha! This just killed me. Then I started to think about water.
Angie and Charlotte stood in the kitchen waiting for the oven timer to ding. The smell of cake was thick and as they waited for the baking to finish they had no shame about digging a butter knife into the tub of frosting and enjoying a few guilty calories.

“We got a gift of a day for this, huh, Char?” asked Angie.

“Really couldn’t have asked for more.”

“It poured last year!”

“I know, the worst.”

“Not for David, though. I’ve never seen a kid love the rain so much. How’s he doing out there?”

Ding.

“Ah,” Charlotte said. “Good timing.” She probed a toothpick into the cake’s center to make sure it wasn’t too sticky. She was satisfied and indicated so with a deep inhale and an exhaled mmm.

“Just right?” asked Angie, as Charlotte pulled the cake out of the oven.

“Perfect. You frost. If I do it I’ll eat the whole thing.”

Angie gave the cake a few gentle blows, letting it sit for a few minutes and then starting to frost it, slow and steady, in big thick curves.

“Really, though. How is David?” Angie asked again.

“David is David. There’s not much more you can say about him.”

“He seems to be doing well,” Angie said. “He’s out there playing with the rest of them.”

“That’s not playing. It’s just not. He’s with them, but he’s not with them, you know?” Charlotte stared out the kitchen window toward the backyard and watched the boys play, her eyes locked on her son. The boys ran quickly back and forth, two of them stationary at either..."
end, throwing a tennis ball between them and trying to peg the runners between the bases. David stayed mostly in the middle, running one way and then, seeing the pack headed toward him, running back the other way, but never quickly enough to make it to either base before being spun around again. The boys with the tennis ball would throw it at him occasionally, but only underhand. David was not bothered. He laughed and laughed and threw his hands to the sky.

"I don't know," said Angie, snapping Charlotte out of a trance. "It looks like playing to me."

"He’s having fun, that’s what matters. And the boys don’t seem to mind."

"Not at all."

"How many candles this year?" asked Charlotte.

"Eleven."

"I used to change Johnny’s diaper. You know that?"

"You don’t have to tell me!"

Angie stuck eleven candles into the frosted cake, which looked like a beach covered with snowdrifts. Charlotte lit one and used it to light the others.

"Looks great," she said.

* * *

I started to think about water because isn’t water just the greatest? Fish live in water and never leave it, except when they flop up on land or get stuck on a fisherman’s line like the kind my grandfather used to use. I sometimes wish I could live in water too. It’s so tiring all day, holding up my arms and my head, but in the water I don’t have to hold up anything. It holds it all up for me. I can just float around like the bits of peanut butter suspended in the jelly jar and it’s just the nicest. What is that that hit my leg? When everyone runs it reminds me of that time I ran away
from home. I remember I was just sitting there just minding my own business in the sandbox and then I decided to go for a walk so I hopped over the fence and headed for the local bakery. They make just the best cookies there. Before I knew it was dark and I had never found the bakery and I was shivering but I didn’t mind, I just kept going on and on down the road, and all of a sudden a police officer stopped his car and got out and grabbed me. I was so scared I started to kick him and scream and then my mother and father arrived and thanked the police officer and took me home. They seemed so sad and scared but I was just the happiest and shivering. I’ll run away again soon and make it to that bakery.

*   *   *

“Kids!” Angie called. Once one of them caught sight of the cake with its candle crown they all came barreling forth, stranding runners on bases. Singing began all at once and in several different keys, like two barbershop quintets with separate arrangements and unique senses of rhythm.

“No no no no!” shouted David from behind the pack of wailing vocalists.

“Happy birthday dear Johnnyyy,” they sang at the top of their lungs.

“No no no no!” cried David, arms beginning to flail like he was trying to take off.

“Boys, boys, keep it down!” said Charlotte over their voices. She cut them off before the cacophonous climax, which would have sent David into an uncontrollable spiral of tears. “You know he can’t stand it.”

They sung the final line in a whisper, and Johnny blew out the candles to no applause, just the rustling of the wind and David’s muffled sobs.
I don’t think it’s something you have ever experienced, because I have watched you and I have never seen you experience it. When you see or hear something you don’t like you do this just amazing thing where you say, Hey, I don’t like that, and you leave or go away or do something else. I don’t do that, although it would be nice. Sometimes I’m just so mad or sad I have to scream and cry, and tears are a waste of water. Do you scream and cry?

There were ten of them there, all boys, and after the singing ended Angie was swift in doling out pieces of cake, careful to cut them in equal portions to avoid serious arguments about justice and fairness. Johnny got the first slice. Cole was so hungry for cake that he plunged his face directly into the cursive purple “Hap—” without any regard for utensils. Baker immediately challenged Brett to an arm-wrestling match, which he won definitively by employing both his left and right hands. Teddy took a plastic fork and apportioned himself a reasonably sized morsel, but upon transferring it to his mouth an extra-frosty bit fell onto his arm, which he rubbed on Mason’s face without hesitation. Andy, the smallest of the bunch, didn’t like birthday cake, so Angie had brought him a couple of wafer cookies because she knew they were his favorite. Jessie and Jordan, identical twins, tried unsuccessfully to get two pieces of cake each by receiving a piece, slipping under the picnic table, and then pretending to be the other twin.

In the middle of the table there was David, and
while hysteria ensued around him he sat upright and shoveled forkful after forkful of birthday cake into his mouth. As he chewed each bite he placed his fork down and put one hand beside his face and bent it toward himself with splayed fingers, like a starfish waving goodbye. He would swallow, pick up his fork, and take another bite.

Charlotte stood beside Angie with her arms folded and stared as David ate and waved.

“Teddy stole my cake and called me stupid,” said Brett.

“Brett farted and told me to sniff it,” said Teddy.

“I have to go to the bathroom right now,” said Jessie before dropping his fork and running off.

But David said nothing, and Angie watched as Charlotte became fixated on him. She watched Charlotte’s gaze grow distant and her eyes glaze over as she stared at him, yet somehow through him, while he gorged himself and waved his splayed fingers. Her eyes became opaque and dry, the kind of dryness that comes before a flood of tears.

“Excuse me,” Charlotte said. She blinked several times and, without another word, returned to the kitchen.

* * *

I used to do this thing when I was little where I would go to the bathroom, number two, and then draw with it on the living room walls. My parents would yell and scream but I never understood why because it was such a waste of water to flush and it looked no different from any other painting on the walls to me. Come to think of it, I should probably do that again. When I’m done I’m going to go swimming, which I think is the best use for water. It’s primordial. That’s a word I learned from a book and
it refers to things that came from a long, long time ago, at the beginning of Time, the book said. It makes everything less heavy, water does. Even thoughts have weight, I think. Ha! When they are in our head they make our head heavier and when we say them to ourselves they float up to the sky and make our heads lighter. But they have to go somewhere, and then that place must be heavier, yes, because it will have my thoughts. I wonder if that’s where Heaven is. Yes, that must be.

*   *   *

“Charlotte, are you all right?” Angie entered the kitchen to find Charlotte sitting at the table, eyes welling with tears and makeup streaming down her cheeks. “Business as usual,” said Charlotte without adjusting her gaze.

“Honey, honey…” Angie wrapped her arms around Charlotte, who buried her head into Angie’s shoulder. “It’s ok. It is. David is doing well.” Charlotte resumed her heavy sobs.

“You just can’t understand,” Charlotte said through heaving breath. “You just can’t understand what it’s like to watch your son with all those boys who don’t even know he’s there. Or maybe he doesn’t know that they’re there, you know? Ten years and there he is waving his stupid little hand like some… like some idiot… and I have just tried so hard, so hard to make days like this less painful for him, for me, for everyone.”

“Shh, shh…” Angie insisted as she rubbed the spot on Charlotte’s back between her shoulder blades. “David is happy.”

“It’s just so hard.”

“Look, Charlotte,” said Angie as she left her side and went to the window. “He’s out there right now, at the
table, playing, eating cake with the b—.” Her voice fell flat. Charlotte sniffled. “What is it? What’s the matter?” “That’s odd,” said Angie, her voice thin and her throat dry. “He’s not there.” Charlotte sprung up like she had heard a gunshot. “What?” The kitchen door flung open. It was Cole. “Mrs. Collins? David is at the bottom of the pool. He’s not moving.”

* * *

I feel so primordial down here. The light is not so harsh when it comes through the water and I don’t feel like I have to break it up with my fingers like I normally do. The water does it for me. It’s funny, to watch the light dance. Dance dance dance! You can look at the same spot and it will change when the water shifts and that’s just not the way the earth looks from up above. I feel like I could take a great big breath of water. Oh, oh... what’s this? It feels different now. I’m floating, but not like before. Now I feel different, new, like it’s my thoughts that are floating. Oh, there’s one! It seemed to sail right by. I remember that one. There it goes! Is this what the fish see? It’s so beautiful. It’s beautiful.

My mom is over me now, kissing me on the mouth, punching my chest, and everyone is screaming and crying. Ha! You do after all.

Maybe our thoughts don’t fly up. Maybe they sink, and float in the water.

I’d like to go back down there someday. I wonder if that’s where Heaven is.

That must be...

Yes, that must be.
Alex Newhouse

The Song of a World Aflame

I am a citizen of a world
Devoted to fire. Born from ash, scoured by flames,
Broken and warped on an anvil
Made from salt and sand and the detritus of
A thousand thousand suns burned until their fuel abandons them,
And they explode, and the cities bear the marks of the cosmos.

Few voices are heard by many
As the words sear their mark into the
Black glass of fused soil,
The bombs that fall from the words thrown about
Like nothing more than pennies,
Or more than diamonds,
Thrown about worthlessly
As their meanings fade to ash.

But from ash is born a song.
A song of civilization and the primitive,
In which the bones of the ancients echo on the
Fall of the lilting voice and the wind
Passes through the burning branches
To speak of time before.
To speak of time after.

The oak snaps as the sparks render its limbs useless
And the smoke that billows out sings.
I am a citizen of the burned earth,
Listen to the ash as it flows from the deep spring,
Listen to the oak as it falls.

You can hear the words.

The fall of light, the light of day,
When night comes near, the Moon today
Looks large in constant yellow shape
When harvests come, and harvests break.

When flames lived nowhere but the grate,
When words said freely met their fate,
When fate meant nothing but the will
Of solitude and quiet’s still.

When far beyond the trampled oak,
Where evergreens stand tall and cloaked,
Night gathers clouds to shade the day
And cold and dark come out to stay.

When lakes grew high, when towns stayed low,
When houses in the village sowed
The ground with life and not with flame,
When words met life with life, the same.

The time when lunar light shone bright
Was then, and when again shall night
Be brighter than the brightest day?
When cold and dark come out to stay.
MacPherson Moore was an enormous person. He benched two hundred and ninety-five pounds, and his shoes were a size fourteen. In middle school, he couldn’t fit through the doors of the school at the same time as anyone else, so when everyone shoved their way out to the buses at the end of the day he stood in the entranceway, reading a textbook while he waited. We didn’t think it was possible, but MacPherson came back to school at the beginning of freshmen year even bigger, so he had to twist his shoulders and shuffle through doorways.

He had a pretty big face too. His cheeks looked full of jelly, and his eyes were sunk in like someone had poked them backward with two fingers. They were small and blue and nice and blinked a lot when he talked to you, his dimples sinking in and out of his cheeks. When he shook your hand, which he did practically whenever he saw you, he patted you on the shoulder with the other one, and he always called you by your name and nodded to you, even when he was just passing you in the hallway. His laugh came all the sudden, like it didn’t know it was supposed to exist until something funny happened.

None of us really knew that much about MacPherson, even though we said we were friends with him. We knew that he worked at the pool in the summer,
and the kids there called him killer whale. We knew he was the president of the Religion Club and sang in the choir at church. People gave him shit about his dead preacher dad and called him IC, for Immaculate Conception, but we didn’t really know anything about his dad. He just sort of laughed it off, and we never asked. He hung around with us quite a bit, but he was a quiet type—he laughed along, but never made jokes.

MacPherson Moore was the star of the ninth grade soccer team. Everyone said what a phenomenon he would be the next year, when he joined Community Academy’s varsity squad. No college would turn him down, they said, he could probably go pro if he wanted.

“Just about believing,” he would say when we asked him how he did it—how a boy his size pinballed his way through defenders to score goal after goal, game after game. “I owe it to the team.” He would nod to each one of us as he tossed us an Apple & Eve brand juice box, his traditional post-game drink that he brought in twelve-packs for the team.

But one day in late October MacPherson didn’t show up to practice. Coach told the team he was sick, but the next day he didn’t come either. For a week or so, MacPherson didn’t show, and the forwards got yelled at a lot.

Then finally, maybe ten days after the first practice he’d missed, we were taking a water break after a corner kick drill, when Bryce Benson tripped over the stacks of orange cones and fell flat on his face. Laughter and jeering erupted from the team, but Bryce’s face stayed marble.

“Guys,” he said, lifting his chest up with his hands in the grass. We followed his gaze to the woods next to the field, where the sun was melting orange on tops of the trees. Out of the dark rows of naked branches came this figure, a dark mass interrupting the fading light, pacing
toward us with slow steps, as if trying not to break through the ground beneath him.

One of the boys shouted that it was Meagan Divine, the prettiest girl in the grade, and some of the kids got nervous and faced the other direction, punching each other and messing around. But after a few seconds, Reed Horton said, “It’s Mac,” and the team got quiet.

Approaching the edge of the field, his silhouette was so big it looked like someone had set up a port-a-potty on the sidelines. He was holding a ball between his wrist and his waist, the blue one he always juggled before games. Most of the guys closed their water bottles and threw them on the ground and started kicking balls around, trying to be casual. I didn’t really move, just watching him stand statue still, wondering where his sunken blue eyes were looking.

“Ay, Mac,” Steven Mell said. “Come back from the dead?”

MacPherson lifted the crown of his head up a little. He dropped the soccer ball where he was sanding, and it bounced softly in place a couple times. His arms, as big as my legs, dangled at his sides.

“Why don’t you come show your team what you’ve been so busy with?” Brandon yelled.

“Or who,” Reed said, and some of the nerdy guys laughed.

MacPherson breathed for a second, and in the trees behind him, a bird cawed and flew up into the sky. Then Mac turned around and started walking the other direction. Slow and metronommed as he came. He disappeared into the parking lot next to the field and never came to practice again, but at school he’d congratulate us after every win of our undefeated season. I don’t think anyone ever asked him why he stopped showing.
In the fall of our tenth grade year, Bryce and I went to watch the middle schoolers play a soccer game one day after school because Bryce’s little brother was the goalie. It was hot for early November, and the sun reflected off the bleachers like spotlights. Bryce and I were passing a plastic water bottle back and forth, taking small sips to make it last.

The parents stood in a group at half field and some of the moms leaned forward, nearly over the sidelines, yelling at their kids in seal-like shouts to run faster or get to the ball. Our team was losing by about seventeen points, so after a while the moms calmed down and reverted to mingling among themselves, probably comparing plans for their booths at the Fall Family Festival that weekend.

A few feet back and to the left, this woman was standing by herself, in tall brown boots with heels that were sunk a little bit in the grass. Her face was so thin you could practically see her skull, and her forehead made this ledge over her eyes so they looked like two black holes. Puffed blonde hair gripped her head and flipped out at the ends in u-shapes that bounced off her knobbed shoulders. Her fingers intertwined around a white thermos, and every once in a while she put her lips up against the hole, pinched them tightly together, and took a little sip. Faded jeans bagged around her knees and her elbows looked sharp. I kept thinking the wind might blow her feather body away, but she didn’t move, just her forearms kept going up and down, putting the little hole against her little lips and lowering it back to her hips again.

“Vodka,” said Bryce, nodding in her direction. I gave him a one-syllable laugh and shook my head. “Bet you twenty bucks.” Bryce grabbed the water bottle from my hand. “Blondie is going at it right now.”
She was still standing there when we left, a few minutes before the end of the game, and her heels were almost all the way in the dirt.

Weeks later I had to go to the front office to get a note from my mother. I only had a few minutes to get to class so I was running down the hall, not looking where I was going, and when I flung open the office door I heard somebody gasp.

“Woah,” I said. “Sorry.” But there wasn’t anyone behind the door.

The lady sitting at the desk rolled her chair to the side so she could see around the person she was talking to. She looked at me over her pink polka dotted glasses, cleared her throat, and swung her chair back over.

“Blessed be the day when all this mess gets sorted out,” said the woman standing at the desk. Her back was to me but I could hear a smile in her voice. She was wearing a tight blue dress, the kind girls wear to school dances. Her body looked like a bag of marbles, stretchable flesh sagging around little balls of elbows and knees and collarbones. There was a swollen red mosquito bite on her shoulder, and the back of her hair was puffy and blonde.

“Thank you.”

She turned around and her eyes were blue and pushed back under her forehead, a rocky ledge jutting out over a cave entrance. I looked down.

“Peter, right?” she said. Her voice was high and gravelly, like an old country singer.

“Yeah.” My hand was still gripping the door handle.

“You used to play soccer,” she said. Slow, as if she were trying to match a beat.

I felt my heart speed up a little. “Yeah.”

“I’m Mrs. Moore,” the woman said, her lips sucking in at the corners.
“Oh,” I said. “That’s nice.” I tried to remember if I’d brushed my teeth that morning.

A silver bracelet dangling a cross-shaped charm came toward me and then her hand was resting on my shoulder. I looked down and saw that my shoe was untied.

“Mom.” We both turned to the door. MacPherson was standing behind me in the doorway, his shoulders angled so they fit in the frame. “Let’s go.”

“Ok.” Mrs. Moore smiled at me and took her hand back. For a second her eyes were on mine, then she was at the door, next to her son.

“Hey, Pete,” MacPherson said.

“Hey, Mac.” I was very conscious of the papers protruding from my backpack as they disappeared from the door.

*   *   *

Bryce drove us to the beach one day that March. He had a Jeep that we all fit in to somehow, some of the girls on each other’s laps in the back and the cooler under Bryce’s calves in the driver’s seat. MacPherson sat up front. He always came along when we went to the beach, because he had a free parking pass and usually brought a few beers to share.

It was a public beach but not many people were there, so we found a spot a ways down and built a ring for a fire and passed around some drinks. The water was cold so we didn’t get in past our shins, but we stood in the waves and let the water ride up onto our toes and snatch the sand away from under the arches of our feet. After a while there was only a little sand left to stand on, and it felt nice to need just some bones and joints to stay upright.

When we left the lady at the parking pass booth asked if we had a nice time. She knew us because we came
pretty often, and she was one of those grandmotherly types that calls you darling. MacPherson said we did and thanked her, nodding.

“Drive careful, be kind to small animals and large elephants and the rest of it,” she said as we were pulling away.

On the way home we sang and our throats got so dry we had to swallow our spit. The windows were down and the wind was loud and people were yelling things from the back seat up to the front and one girl tried to stand and stick her head out of the sunroof. The wind was hard against my ears and my eyes got sort of blurry.

We stopped moving and the doors opened and then we were in MacPherson’s entryway and shushing each other because he hadn’t told his mother we were coming. We left our shoes on the mat by the door in their little circles of sand and MacPherson climbed the staircase, halfway up turning back to us with his finger to his lips. Hand-over-mouth laughs echoed against the yellow striped wallpaper.

Everyone was in the kitchen. I went out for air. The back porch had this nice fence around it, shellacked wood that was soft on my hands like an old nightshirt, and I leaned up against it and breathed for a while. The stars were pretty faint but I looked at them for a minute or two and they moved around a little. For a second I felt like all these eyes were watching me, from up in the sky.

My toes still felt a little numb from standing in the ocean for so long. I scrunched them up and straightened them out a few times, trying to get the blood all the way back down my legs. They made a soft rodent scratch against the deck that wafted out into the trees behind the house. I thought I heard something make a noise in the woods so I licked my lips a few times, tasting the air, then slid my fingers next to my tongue and tried to whistle. No
sound came out so I took a deeper breath and tried again, but only made a “who.” I thought I could see the breathy ring in the sky.

I took my fingers out and wiped the spit on the bottom of my shirt and tried to yell but all that came out was a gravelly vowel like the in-between radio stations. Little pebbles of sound floated through the air and got lost in the trees. There were just enough leaves to eat my voice.

Something hit my elbow and I looked up and Mrs. Moore was leaning against the fence next to me.

“Lost your voice?” she said without looking at me.

I turned and watched her profile for a second. Her nose crooked down at the end and I could see the bags in her eyes from the side. “Yeah, I guess,” I said, faint and raspy.

She made a sound in her throat, a long “m,” and raised her bird nest of a wrist in front of her, pointing her twig fingers out to the trees. “I saw it. In the branches.”

My eyes were still on her profile and for a minute she seemed to me the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. “Me too.” I turned back to the woods. “Hopefully it comes back soon.”

“You see the stars last night?” She was folding her hands in a prayer, switching right over left then left over right.

“Last night?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

“They were big.”

I nodded and curled my toes in again. They were warmer.

“You see that?” She pointed to a tree maybe a hundred feet away, dark and shadowy next to all the others.

I nodded.
“Under that tree.” She swallowed something in her mouth. “There’s this shit mess of squirrels.”

“Squirrels?”

“Little tiny scraggly little munchkin squirrels.” She coughed and swallowed again.

“Babies?”

“Probably. They’re so small it’s like they don’t even have skin. Just little bedsheets wrapped around their bones. So small. Smaller than this.” She held her palm up in the air and closed one eye. Her hand came close to my face for a second and it smelled like soap.

She brought her hand back down and wrapped her fingers around the edge of the fence and leaned her hips back, as far as they would go, so her body made a seven. Her hip bones stuck out so far you could hang a towel on them. I looked back out to the tree she’d pointed at and tried to imagine a little bundle of bodies pillowed together underneath it. It was quiet for a second.

“I’m gonna kill those squirrels,” she said to her knees. She took a step back and disappeared inside. A second later she was back, a thin black rifle next to her thigh. Her high heels clicked down the porch steps and squelched in the mud. She stopped in front of the tree and held the rifle up to her eye and my hands flew to my ears when it went off. Twice, then again. Then again.

“Mom,” someone said behind me. I turned and there was Macpherson, his massive silhouette in the doorframe.

My shoulders felt heavy and my feet weren’t sure what direction to point. I looked down at my hands and folded them together, the soft side of my palms against the cold wood of the fence around the porch.

“Mom,” MacPherson’s voice was thunder. I could feel it crawl up through my calf muscles and shake my ribs like a tambourine.
Mrs. Moore’s heels sunk further into the ground. She lowered the rifle to her hip and turned. I could smell the smoke from the gun as it lifted in the air up to the trees. She breathed for a second then walked to the porch, up the steps, and back to her place at the fence.

The door closed behind me, a soft thunk like someone jumping on a bed.

“They didn’t stop moving,” she said. “You know.”

“Yeah.”

“They’re still there.” She moved her hand to my face for a second and the smell of soap filled my whole head. “Did you hear that?” she asked. “They’re still asleep.”

“Asleep,” I said. And she lowered her hands and looked at my eyes and walked into the light from inside.
Your breath is misty cold.
It smells like my last heartbreak,
the sticky scent of marijuana.
I catch my breath on you and hold it,
let it out but not in, in is dangerous.
When smoke curls in
to your lungs, it is hard to see
and easy to feel, easy to choke,
easy to miss, easy to miss you,
and we rely so much on our eyes
that our other senses leave us blind.
I try to feel your thoughts.
My fingertips brush and drag
along slippery outlines
of the future and rough holes
in logic that neither of us tries to fill.
If only I could read braille
I might feel past your breath in my eyes
and know that you are looking at me.
I am holding my breath. Your eyes are brown.
You wrap them around me like memories
that slide silkily against my skin.
I invite you onto my bed where it is soft,
and my words scratch like lies
up my throat but they are true.
You drip silence on my bed.
You hold my hand firmly and
I am with you. I am afraid.
Friction holds us closer than I expected.
We lie, our pillows under our heads, and hold
our warm together with the parts of
ourselves we are willing to share - hands, smiles,
lips - and close our eyes to hide the parts
we don’t want the other to see yet.
Our bare chests breathe against each other
through our shirts.
He stands like I do, 
my reflection. 
His head is bowed. 

I see he is looking at something 
with our mother’s golden eyes. 
I see it reflected there, 
flipped on its axis, the mirror image of truth, flickering in his gaze. 

I tell him to close his eyes. 
He doesn’t trust me. 

I stick my feet in the water so we are joined by our ankles and by the family blood that spills from our wrists. 
I love it when the water ripples so I don’t have to see how much I look like him. 

Red memories are cloaked in the folds of the silver surface. 
I cannot see where I have cut myself.
Corbin had never biked anywhere outside of Brooklyn. He kept his rides short, maybe once or twice around Prospect Park when the spring days brought a rushing breeze through his hair before he’d pedal home. But he hiked any weekend he could; he’d drive his car out of the city, pull over on the side of the road and just walk through the trees, carrying a yellow notebook with him in order to trace his steps so he could find his way back. Twenty-foot wide houses don’t do much for the soul. He’d gotten sick of the man made spring—the rows of trees lining each block and the flower stands at every bodega promoting a hassle free nature. The earth and the city were separate entities; their mixing unnatural, their manicured relationship forced.

The air grew stuffy with gingko trees and rotting garbage—New York City summer had crept up on us. It was the end of June in 2010, and Corbin needed out. I took a two-week vacation from work—the dog kennel business doesn’t run a particularly tight ship—and he and I hopped in his car, loaded up our bikes and drove out of the city. On our way north, we picked up Corbin’s friend Isabel, a prescription drug addict attempting to quit cold turkey. The hatchback Volkswagen roared up the I-95 before connecting onto the 495 to the 6 all the way up the Massachusetts cape. We pulled into a stop outside of Provincetown and
wandered into town, grabbing dinner in a self-proclaimed “tranny bar”. Our budget was low; karaoke was free, and soon—after a couple of pitchers of motivation—she and I danced on the bar top to “Wanted Dead or Alive” and “Shoop.” She didn’t sing much at all, but her eyes kept flashing excitement over the hum of the bar. Her cropped hair bounced with the offbeat, playing catch up with the rest of her body. I grew tired of dancing, of trannies staring at us making fools of ourselves, of Corbin restlessly tapping his foot at the table. We leave. The walk to the car is long and difficult, and once we’re there, we know it’s much too late to get started now. Isabel collapses in a heap in the backseat. Corbin and I sit on the hood of his car, looking up at a black sky.

“Every time I go home, I’m compromising part of me, you know? Like it takes something out of me each time I take the garbage out or move the car for street cleaners, or whatever. I don’t know how to articulate it. This trip is important. I don’t know what I’m doing”

I tell him that none of us do. I tell him to go to sleep. He does. And now I am alone, on the outskirts of Provincetown, the cold ocean wind rolling over me. I walk across the road to sand dunes and take my shoes off. It’s still early, maybe eleven at night. The sand sweeps over my feet, grains looking for a place to hide find the spaces in between my toes. I rub the lines on the back of my hand, pinpointing which lines will turn to wrinkles and at what rate. The rhythm of the waves pounding away at the shore counts down the time between sunset and sunrise. I go to sleep too.

In the morning, the three of us stuff our gear into saddlebags for our bikes and packs for our backs. Corbin locks the car and we leave, taking the trails along the beach in Provincetown before jumping on the shoulder of
route 6. Everyday we bike a little over twenty miles, stopping in towns along the way, setting up tents in camping grounds or on beaches off the side of the road. A biking trip is a different beast than hiking or driving: there is no conversation, just you, the road, and streamlining the bike in front of you for less resistance. My Cannondale is rusted silver, mud spattered, only five years my minor, and a smooth ride. Its tires are thin, designed for roads, for well-groomed streets filled with well-groomed people who have all been groomed not to look up at a honk, or a holler, or an ‘excuse me, but’. I soar down the highway, catapulting past trees and houses, silent, my face drying faster than I can wet it with sweat. When we stop, we read. Isabel brought a Billy Collins poetry book, Corbin, Outliers, and I, American Pastoral. We chew away at our snack rations, turning pages, lost in two different worlds: the alien one of writing and the alien one of camping. Philip Roth reminds me that insignificant events—the banalities of life—matter. The bike trip is a sham. Running away from the city is running away from the things that matter: the way my sister grows a second chin every time she laughs, that my stoop is covered in holes from a shoddy attempt at redoing it, the crunchy v. fluffy debate regarding bagels in New York City. I stop reading American Pastoral and dive in the ocean.

Days later, Isabel couldn’t sleep. She was irritable and nauseous. Corbin was out in space, scribbling like mad in his yellow notebook. He drew everything he could remember, all the twisted faces Isabel made when she yelled, all the trees blurring together into a green wall, his new cuts and bruises. Isabel left the tent. I stayed inside, reading Billy Collins by headlamp light. The glare started to give me a headache and Isabel had been gone awhile, so I went out to get some fresh air. We were camping east of Falmouth off the main road. The summer of 2010 was hot, record breaking hot, and although it was nearly four
in the morning and I was only wearing underwear, I was sweating. Isabel was nowhere in sight, but a couple yards away from the tent was her shirt. I called out her name. She didn’t hear. The three of us had been relatively independent during the trip; when you’re spending two weeks with the same two people, it’s important to keep some distance. A couple yards further, her pajama pants lay in the grass. Isabel loudly and publicly identified herself as a lesbian, and insisted that when I identify myself as a man, I call myself ‘hetcis’ because saying “man” creates exclusionary gender and sexuality code, where those who aren’t straight or happy in their gender have to labels themselves as such where straight people simply imply it by not calling themselves gay. This strikes me as ludicrous, but I let it go for the sake of harmony. The main point being, she and I were not sexually compatible, so when I found her clothes on the ground, I wasn’t too anxious about seeing her naked body. I headed to the main road.

Isabel stood in the middle of the two lanes, my headlamp casting a spotlight on her naked body. Her back arched, toes pointed, she twirled and leapt like out of a ballet. Her eyes were closed, but her movements precise, as if this dance needed to be just so. She called me over. She put my hands on her hips and hers on my shoulders and taught me to waltz, there, in the middle of the road, naked, at four in the morning. She had been crying, but when I tried to speak, she rested her fingers on my lips. She danced faster and faster, hurtling us around, there, in the middle of the road, naked, at four in the morning. The tears were coming faster now. She caught me looking down and raised my chin, there, in the middle of the road, naked, at four in the morning. Then she said stop, lips quivering, and wrapped her arms around me. The night’s air was heavy with heat, thick and tough to breathe.

I led Isabel off the road back to our tent. Her tears
had dried. We found her shirt and her shorts. As I unzipped the tent, she grabbed my arm and kissed me hard on the mouth. Then she went inside and fell asleep. Corbin had put the notebook away. We walked outside and sat in the tall grass. He tells me that he hasn’t found anything, that every time he pedaled, thoughts left his head, rather than the other way around. I told him that this trip is important.

The next day we took a ferry to Martha’s Vineyard, stayed there one night, and then returned to the mainland. We had bags under our eyes and the towns were the same, so we plowed our way back up the cape, biking faster and longer than we had on the way down. When we reached Provincetown again, we ate at an outdoor restaurant, rather than the bar we had danced in before. Then we drove, route 6 onto the 495 to the I-95 home. Gingko trees never smelled so nice.
Please keep submitting your wonderful creations to: blackbird@middlebury.edu

And check out our new website The Orchard at: www.theorchardartsjournal.squarespace.com