



# THE RUBICON

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# THE RUBICON

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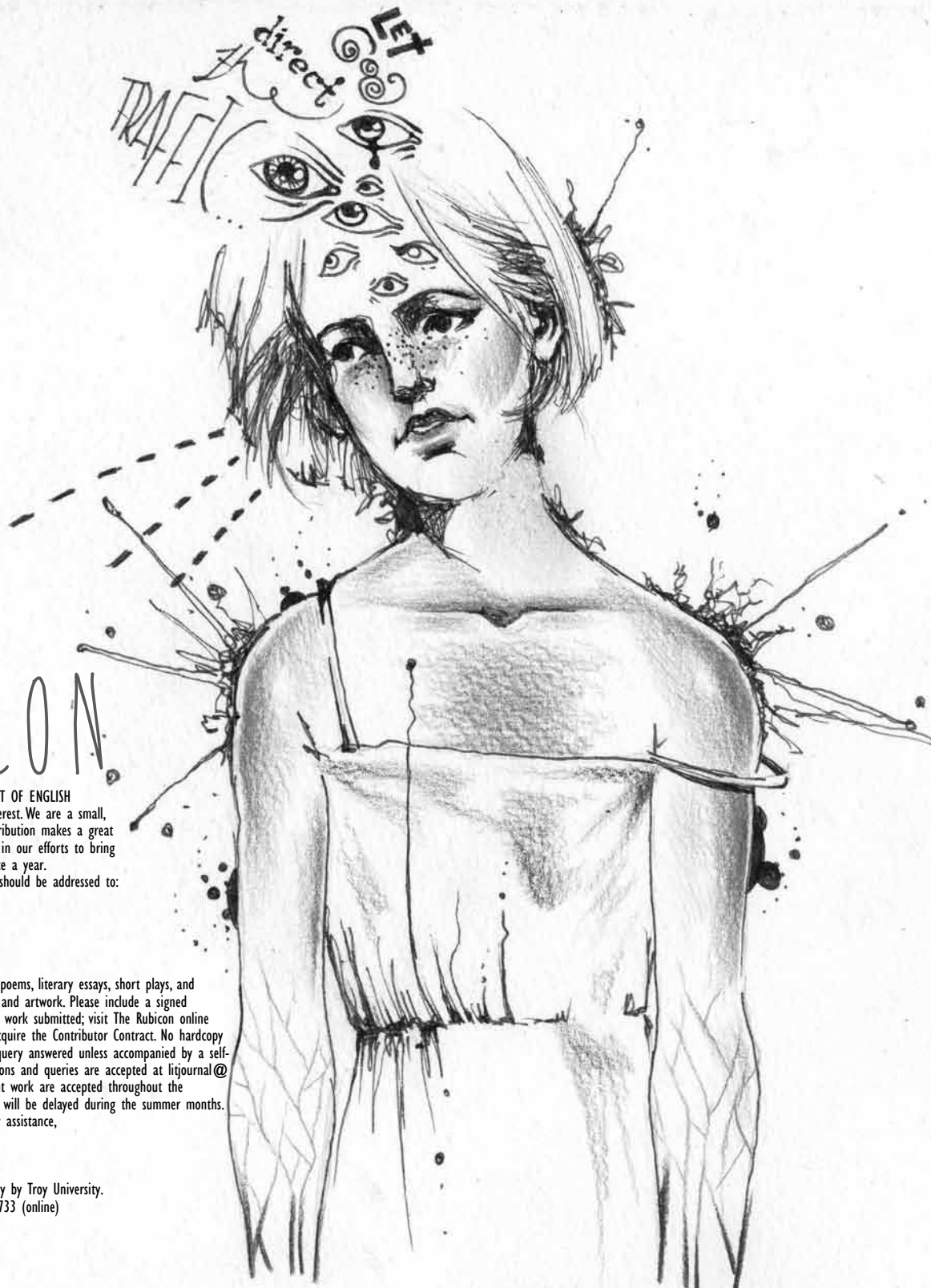
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# THE RUBICON

THE RUBICON is named after Julius Caesar's decision to lead his army across the Rubicon River in 49 BC, an act of insurrection against Rome. "Crossing the Rubicon" is an idiom for passing the point of no return. We know that submitting your work for publication is often a scary prospect, but we challenge you to cross the Rubicon and submit your work!

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CANDACE TURLINGTON

## LUNAR FOLLY

ZACHARY DALTON ASHBURN

The moon still laments our mistakes  
It just weeps  
All its nights away.  
It brings us the light we deserve  
'Til we look  
And watch as it wanes.  
We are cleansed by the foam of its wake  
'Til we're bare  
And nothing else remains.  
Except the memory of our infamy  
And it falls  
Every effort all in vain.

## FOR JAN

CLAIRE MATHIS

When you were young, as I am now, and you  
Were living free of kids and obligation,  
When peace and love defined a generation,  
I wonder if you thought about us two.  
Before the things you did became taboo,  
And you enjoyed your life of recreation,  
How could you think to feel the adoration  
A mother feels for those she never knew?

But now I know we're all you think about,  
Once distant thoughts that you have given life.  
Your days are filled with worry and with doubt,  
About the way you raised your daughters. Wife  
And mother, you should know by now, without  
Your guidance, we would live our days in strife.



## [KNEELING IN REVERENCE]

PATRICK DANIEL PUGH

Facing south is not so bad, just pray to the left in child's pose  
 Pools of fascination drown and soothe—  
 not brawny, browning down the throat  
 Let God direct the traffic: She guides third-eye cognition best  
 Meditation? No. I'm merely kneeling in reverence.

## PYGMALION AND HIS BRIDE

SAMANTHA LOFF

"Surrounded by whores, and lustful women,  
 I hope to never wed.  
 With Crete devoid of chastity, I'm  
 Confined alone in bed."

Your ranting inspired your latest work,  
 my ivory project mold.  
 My formless body, your endeavor,  
 is mine, but uncontrolled.

"I see the progressing hips and hands,  
 my ivory project mold.  
 A curving stance, a loving pose,  
 I'm watching you unfold."

To speak would be heaven. Give a voice  
 to this form, O, h vicious gods,  
 allow a chance to tell this man  
 my praise, my love, and lauds.

"What glorious features, rare and kind;  
 this face is designed for praise.  
 Oh, gods above, attend to me,  
 allow a voice to raise!"

I feel you again, a loving hand,  
 and wish to return your touch.  
 A new sensation overcomes  
 me; lips and hands and clutch.

"Oh, Venus, this statue, once so cold  
 and unfeeling now is warm!  
 I feel a pulse, a kiss returned  
 and now a moving form!"

"Pygmalion, my love, at last my voice  
 can reach your heart of gold!  
 I'm alive with breath and heart! No more  
 an ivory project mold."



AMBER BLANFORD



## TOMORROW IS BETTER

MELISSA MORRIS

Rain pours from my eyes  
Then a rainbow rises in my heart  
Out of the otherwise bad day.  
As a message in my head says:  
"Tomorrow things will go your way."  
Tomorrow turns out much better;  
Yesterday's worries were not as bad as they seemed.  
The sun comes out of that dark ominous cloud in my head,  
And, singing ever so distantly in my head is my favorite song,  
As I think to myself: There is still hope.

## GONE BAD

BOB MCGOUGH

Growing up in Southern Alabama, few things are as ever-present as pine trees. Everywhere you look their tall, narrow trunks rise up, capped in never ending green needles that end up blanketing the area in their brown, dead castoffs and grey cones littering the ground. I have always found pine trees to be ugly, devoid of the character of broad white oaks, lacking the grace of stately pecans. Pines are nature's filler: the tree called in when bland is the order of the day.

When I was young, our land was mostly open pasture, the product of decades of cattle farming. Almost moor-like, the pale green sea was only occasionally broken up by bramble patches that produced juicy plump blackberries every fall. It was my happy realm of wandering and play where I conquered imagined kingdoms and fought endless wars against fearsome creatures of the mind.

One spot in particular was my favorite, though it was so far out that I only went there when my dad was working in that area, too far for my tiny legs to walk there. It was a small spring that bubbled up from the middle of a thicket of scrubby plants and trickled out to make a thin creek. My dad once told me that if you followed that brook long enough it flowed into streams, which flowed into rivers, and if you followed them long enough, eventually down into Mobile Bay. I would leap across its banks and imagine myself following it, dreaming of getting into all sorts of adventures until I reached the Gulf of Mexico.

Occasionally I would find tracks in the mud of the stream. My dad patiently identified them for me when I asked. The majority were from raccoons of course; however, there were sporadically squirrel and opossum traces to be seen as well. I rarely saw the actual creatures that made them, beyond one time seeing a brace of tiny raccoon cubs peering out at me from under some briars before their dame hurried them away.

When I was six, my father sold off the herds of cattle and covered our land with a vast forest of pine saplings. Hundreds of acres, all planted in loblolly pine, spaced out in perfect rows like a marching army. He would walk with me to the edge of the rows, place his hand on my shoulder and remark, "That's your college fund there, safer than any bank. Can't steal trees Bobby, can't steal trees."

The trees and I grew older. By the time I was ten, they were taller than I was. And by the time I could drive, my once pristine grassy playground had turned into a thick dank forest of scabby pines. You see, they plant the trees close together so they will reach up to get sunlight and grow tall and straight. But this makes the undergrowth dark and unwelcoming, what little sunlight that streams through coaxing a few straggling briars to life, and not much else.

A pine farm like that is the closest thing to a desert that Alabama has. It is a wasteland, nothing growing there to truly sustain life, beyond the occasional bird. Even deer, which cover the state like fleas on a mangy dog, avoid pine farms as much as possible.

When the planters put down the rows of saplings, they plant them wherever possible. Very few places avoid their coverage, but areas like my little spring tend to get planted around. So you end up with the equivalent of a tiny oasis of life



BLAIR BROGDON

in the middle of those sterile wilds. A few scattered animals, forced to stay in a minuscule area, struggling to survive in a much reduced homeland.

When I was getting ready to go off to college, I decided to walk back to that little stream, something I hadn't done in over a decade. I planned to take a literal walk down memory lane, and try to recall what it was like to roam those low hills before the growing trees and passing years choked my childhood to death.

When you walk through a natural forest, if you walk long enough, you will eventually stumble on a game trail, which makes the going much easier. Not so on a pine plantation. As the trees grow taller, more light comes through, but all that seems to do is give the hardy briars the little bit extra they needed to completely overwhelm the underbrush. Practically every step was dogged by pulling briars, quickly causing me to regret my decision. Beads of blood dotted my arms and legs, sharp needles breaking through the denim of my pants and coat to nick me. It's hard to think about the past when the present is such a struggle, so I was soon lost in the repetition of tugging briars pulling against my clothes and flesh, with frequent pauses to pull especially vicious barbs from me.

After some time I eventually made it to my brook. Time had not been kind. Over the years, the once bubbling stream had wilted to a stagnant trickle, perhaps because the thirsty pines in the area had put so much strain on the small spring that fed them. It was the height of blackberry season, yet what few were growing there were tiny and withered, more like soured raisins than the full berries of my youth.

I strode over to the rivulet and stood by it, remembering imagined trips to the Gulf, a faint smile flickering across my face. I crouched down, letting my fingers drift through the tiny current, feeling its coldness wash around my fingertips.

I noticed some tracks crisscrossing the brook and peered at them. Half-remembered lessons from my dad and the Boy Scouts slowly dredged up from the depths of my mind, telling me they looked like raccoon tracks. Long skinny raccoon tracks.

I rose up, shaking the droplets of water from my fingers before wiping my hands on my jeans. I put my hands in my pockets against the chill of the day, and wondered what I was doing there. It made me sad that a place once so entrancing barely held my attention for a few minutes these days. I was struck with a bitter longing to regain the simplicity of childhood. I looked out to the ceaseless progression of silent pines, like lanky sentinels, watching over the fractured remains of my childhood. I had never hated them as fiercely as I did at that moment.

As I turned to leave, a faint rustling in the thicket caught my attention. I looked left, and standing on the edge of the scraggly briars was an emaciated raccoon. Its thin fur was mottled and discolored, and its legs were oddly misshapen, the product of too many generations of inbreeding. It hissed after me in a haggard fashion, and came staggering in my direction, but it was too slow to be a real threat.

Shaking my head sadly, I turned and stalked off into the gloomy undergrowth of the pine forest, leaving the creek behind. I have not been back since. ♦

## THE BEASTLY AND THE BEAUTIFUL

JAMIE BENNETT

Brigit could only imagine a life where she would be beautiful. Everyday of her life, she'd been told of her grotesque appearance. In high school, she had had a crush on the most handsome boy in the entire town. He had a gorgeous splotchy complexion, with shallow beady eyes that she could stare into for days. He weighed over three hundred fifty pounds and slouched when he walked. His ruggedly handsome face was covered in red pus-filled pimples, and he had hair growing on the back of his neck. All-in-all, he was the perfect man, and many mothers in the town pushed to have their daughters date him. The perfect catch.

Brigit wasn't sure what she was thinking when she confessed to him. She looked at him, examined his greasy hair that matted to his head with sweat and grime, admiring his perfection from afar before she got up the courage to tell him that she loved him. George laughed his wonderful grunt in her face before telling her that he would never date someone as ugly as she was.

Brigit knew all too well her own imperfections. Her disgustingly thin hourglass figure, her disturbingly bright blue eyes, the way she walked with her back straight and her shoulders squared. She looked in the mirror every day and saw her unsightly golden-blond hair that fell in ringlets down her back. She smelled her putrid mint-scented breath and wanted to gag. Even her parents couldn't understand how they'd ended up with such a hideous offspring.

Her mother was very pretty with the many rolls of fat that marked her beauty. She had the most fat of any woman in the town, and many of the other mothers admired that she'd gained even more of that beauty during her pregnancy. Her father had a handsome face with so many pimples that they resembled craters. He had a wonderful and husky grunt that made the women of the town shiver in delight and their husbands envious. Yet, Brigit had an annoying and grating voice that was soft and sweet and tinkled like wind-chimes when she laughed. She was a beast, not fit to be looked upon by the beautiful masses. The rejection, though expected, was too much for her grossly fragile heart, and she ran into the street, not noticing the truck coming toward her.

Brigit broke almost every bone in her body, and was confined to a bed for a year and a half in recuperation. In this time, she missed her high school graduation. Her mother, trying to ease her pain and discomfort, fed her constantly and, because she could not exercise, she gained two hundred pounds. Once she was able to move freely on her own, she found that the sickening grace that

she'd once been cursed with had been replaced by more attractive jerks of her stiff muscles and unused joints. She was even more overjoyed to look in the mirror and discover that the accident had caused the most beautiful scars and lacerations upon her face, finally getting rid of the horrible disfigurement that her face had once been. Her hair was limp and lifeless, from laying on it all the time, no longer those disgusting ringlets of gold. Her voice was sandpaper rough from disuse and her breath had the wonderful scent of a mouth that had been closed for far too long. She was finally beautiful!

Once the doctors had given her the okay to leave the house, she walked proudly down the street, shoulders stooped and feet dragging, while the neighbors stared in awe of her newfound beauty. Leaving the grocery, Brigit ran into George, who had grown even more handsome in the year since she'd last seen him. He'd gained even more weight and looked to be about four hundred pounds, even more manly than before. He was attractively soaked in sweat and gave off the wonderful aroma of body odor and unwashed skin. His beady, watery eyes searched her figure with perverted appreciation.

To her immense pleasure, he asked her out, telling her that she was the most beautiful girl that he'd ever seen, and that he'd never before encountered a girl with such wonderful scar tissue covering their face. At dinner, Brigit marveled at the way the pasta sauce covered George's face as he slurped his spaghetti with perfect manners. He was the ideal gentleman, as he sat before she pulled her chair out and let her pay for their meal. He made her feel even more beautiful than before.

They dated for four months before she got up the courage to tell him of how ugly she'd been before the accident. He shuddered at the picture that she showed him, but quickly told her that he was glad that she'd gotten hit by that car, because

she would have been cursed to live life as the repugnant beast that she'd been before. Two weeks later, George asked her to marry him.

No, in all of her time before, Brigit could only imagine a life this perfect, beautiful and married to the prince of the town. She'd been saved from being a beast, by the handsome prince and turned into a gorgeous princess. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined that her life would end up as a perfect fairytale life: The Beastly and the Beautiful. It had a nice ring to it. ♦

## AFTERNOON OFF

AMBER RICHARDS

One girl was leaning against the porch railing; she had dark, wavy locks and dark, bored eyes. The other was sitting on the railing on the opposite side; sunlight bounced off of her pale skin like a bike reflector. Both were smoking.

"What do you feel like doing today?" The girl leaning on the rail looked up at the live oak above their heads. Acorns fell every few seconds, making loud, metallic crashes on the tin roof.

"I dunno, maybe we could go to the lake," The girl on the far side of the porch took another drag of her cigarette.

"Ok, well, I don't really care what we do as long as we get out of this trailer."

"We will."

The lake was one hundred twenty-two acres of man-made waterlust surrounded by enough variety of reed, grass and vine to keep a botanist's afternoon booked. It was a short drive out to the water, but it was ensconced in forest thick enough to give the illusion of being somewhere much further away. The two friends sat under a pavilion on the backside of the lake, far from fishermen and out of sight from the old couple who ran the grounds and sold soda and candy bars in the same shack that was the bait store.

"Lonna, pass me another," The pale girl held out her hand for the next bottle of ale. "Thanks," She took off the twist cap and let it fall onto the blanket beneath her. She looked out at the undulating, sheer brown in front of them.

"What time are you working tomorrow? Casey? Casey?"

"Wha-sorry. Ten, I go in at ten."

"Lucky you, getting to sleep in. I have to go in at eight."

"Fuck that, I don't even care about sleep anymore. I'm just so sick of that place. Liz is a complete head case, Bruce is an asshole and I'm sick of being treated like I'm so dispensable."

"You are dispensable."

"I know."

The sun lit up the high points on the lake's moving surface; it looked like stars exploding, dying and being born in a brown-blue galaxy. The wind picked up the smell of burning rot; someone was burning underbrush somewhere around the lake. The humidity had backed down since September was drawing to an end, but would still be heavy air for a non-native. Green was still everywhere. loblollies, cherry laurels and spruce trees were still dark green with summer. Cicadas screamed from tree limbs, invisible.

HILLARY ANDREWS





"Everybody gives me such shit because I'm not content with this place," Lonna's eyes glittered green from squinting under the bright sun. Her brow lowered as she spoke, "They think I think I'm better than them and that's not it, even though I do have some things going for me that they can't say of themselves, I just want more than this. I don't think it's wrong to want to do something more with your life than work and live and marry and shit in this stupid little town that you've always been in and that has nothing to offer you."

Casey turned away from the water and faced Lonna. She sat silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"That's why I love you, Lon. Break the cycle, do more than squat out another kid to put through this same misery. Resistance is everything; it's our hope's only action."

Casey threw her empty bottle into a nearby feed barrel that was being used as a trash can. The bottle hit the trash with a loud glass-on-glass sound that silenced the bugs.

"Did you know," Casey began, looking up and around to the trees where the noise had ceased, "that cicadas lay their eggs into the ground and that the larva don't emerge for seventeen years? Wild."

"I did not know that," Lonna opened another beer. "What do you want to do for dinner tonight?"

Goldfish-orange light covered the rolling hills that were dotted with cows. Groups of small birds were returning to their nests, black in the sky. The Rolling Stones were playing on the radio as red dust stormed around the wheels of Lonna's cranberry Altima; mahogany and auburn wiped around in the wind pouring into the front two windows. The emptiness of the sky pressed into the emptiness of the green fields and brown lake and pushed everything down into to worm filled earth.

Lonna stared out of the window above the sink. It was a quarter to six and the sun hadn't even begun to set. One side of the sink was filled with lukewarm water; two chicken breasts were thawing out in it. A pot of Mississippi Creams was beginning to boil.

Casey walked into the living room that was separated from the kitchen by nothing; the carpet changed from shag to linoleum at the thresh guard. Her hair was wet from the shower and smelled like floral conditioner. She walked over to Lonna and picked up the whisk that sat on the counter beside her. She pulled out a sack of cornmeal from the cabinet and took some buttermilk and eggs from the fridge.

"I'm going to start looking for jobs in Nashville. Aaron will let me stay with him if I need to," Lonna started. "I hope you're not mad at me. You can start looking for a new roommate as soon as tomorrow if you like. I don't mind."

Casey stopped whisking the cornbread together and looked Lonna in the face for the first time since she came into the kitchen. Lonna's eyes and mouth were twisted; her brows were smushed together above the bridge of her nose. She had been crying. Casey's own face moved from an expression of confusion to that of gentleness.

"I could never be mad at you for leaving this place. Go make something out of yourself."



"I want to, but Casey, how can you be happy if you stay here? Why don't you come with me?"

"Happiness isn't everything, Lonna, living here has taught me that. As crazy as it sounds, I don't feel like I've learned everything I can from this place. I want out, really I do, but I'm not in a hurry. I used to be, but now I feel like I'll move on when the time is right. Does that make sense?"

"Not really, but if aren't ready, don't come. I hate leaving you here though. I feel like I'm abandoning you."

"You aren't abandoning me."

"But it feels like it. What will you do without me?"

"I'll work on me and then when we're both on the other side I'll be able to kick more ass than you," Casey smiled, "I won't let this place eat me alive."

"You'd better not," Lonna looked at Casey with a serious glare, "I mean it."

Outside the miles of forest and pasture stretched out away from the girls and their tiny homestead, trees reached upward, lines of timber ran away one bole at a time. Cicadas buzzed loudly, starting with huge force and dying out into a little whizz and then starting back up again. A new generation will molt out from dead skin in the spring and bring more bright green, buzzing bugs into the world, keeping with the tradition of covering every inch of habitable southeastern land.♦



## TUNNEL VISION

CANDACE TURLINGTON

Our heads were almost touching. There was absolutely no concern for the other's personal space, on either of our parts. We both wanted to see it so badly. To touch its time-worn pages, examine the intricacy of the five hundred year old woodblock prints. To feel the original leather cover; the binding still holding thousands of pages together even after hundreds of years. The first English print of the Bible.

She turned a page. Our heads were almost touching.

I caught myself wishing to rest my chin on her shoulder; an action reserved for those with a more intimate relationship than ours. I couldn't stop myself from watching her eyes as they flicked across the pages, sparks of enlightenment illuminating those emerald pools so full of knowledge. Her breath floated into my nostrils, all cigarettes and sweetness, and it took all of my strength to refrain from embracing her in an unexpected hug.

She turned another page, and like the others before it, I hold no memory of its contents.

I really did want to see the book. But our heads were almost touching. She was all I could see. ♦

## BOOTS

MOLLY BAILEY

It was surely one of the hottest days of the year. There was a hazy image on the road as the dirt turned into asphalt. It made the road look like a big black snake was trying to slip across without anyone noticing. I could barely see all this; I'd grown a little so I was just able to see over the dash.

The ride was bumpy even after the truck moved onto the black top. My boots knocked on the steel behind my feet as I swung my legs back and forth. The light blue truck seemed to shiver as I kicked backwards. I leaned to the window and cranked it down until I couldn't anymore. It sure was hot, but the breeze felt good. I ran my fingers along the outside of the truck. Little flakes of rust pricked my fingertips as my fingers slipped into the tiny rust circles along the door. The ride was short and silent. Well, silent other than my boots. The gas station was very busy, but the bright orange and white trailers we'd come for were easy to spot sitting in the back. We parked at the side of the store. Daddy got out and closed his door. I wasn't sure if I should get out too or stay sitting.

"Well, are you coming in or not, Buddy?"

At that, I was opening my door to get out, but he stopped me and he was real serious. I knew it was going to be something about money. That's what it was always about when he was looking so serious.

"Listen here, Buddy. I owe Mr. Jonny some money the end of this week. Don't you say anything about moving or the trailer, unless you can remember we're making him think this is for my roofing business."

I nodded as I got out of the truck. I knew this wasn't the time to ask if I could have one of those gumballs I'd been hoping for.

I swung my door shut and followed behind Daddy, placing my little boots where his big ones had just been. As we walked up to the store, I saw that both of the gas pumps were being used and there were a couple of cars lined up waiting. The preacher man that sometimes came to visit us was at a pump. He smiled at me and I smiled back. I had been told to be extra nice around him. He told Daddy howdy and asked how we were doing. Daddy smiled and replied without stopping, "Good as always. We've just been mighty busy. You have a good day."

We walked on into the store. The wooden screen door slowly creaked shut behind us. Daddy walked up to the big wooden counter to talk to Mr. Jonny about the orange and white trailer, but I stayed back to look at the picture advertisements on the doors and walls. One showed a woman holding a can saying, "Mary Kitchen-Roast Beef Hash!" It was actual roast beef in a can! I bet that was something else to try. I decided I was going to try that for sure one day.

Another picture was of a pretty redheaded lady holding a smoke and saying how good her Philip Morris cigarette tasted. I knew she was lying. First, I'd tried a cigarette with my friend Tommy after school one day and it was nasty. I almost puked. Second, that pretty woman looked a lot like Emily and Emily was always lying about things too. She told everyone I tried to kiss her one day. That was a lie. Girls are sneaks. Tommy's daddy had told him that and I sure believed it.

I was pulled away from the advertisements when the cash register chimed



NINA FRANKS

and I heard Daddy say, “Thanks Jonny.” He looked at me. It was time to go. I knew right then that we were for sure leaving here. I’d probably never even see this store again. I’d never see Tommy or that lying Emily. I’d miss Emily lying about me a little bit. Momma had promised this time would be the last, but I didn’t know what to believe. As we walked back to the truck to pull around to get the trailer, I followed behind Daddy again. This time I didn’t walk in his boot prints.

We hitched up to the orange and white trailer that had the word UHAUL written on the side and started home. The afternoon sun hurt my eyes so I looked down at my feet instead. I didn’t bang my boots this time. I was too busy thinking. I’d heard Momma and Daddy talking earlier about where we were going. We were going south to Grandpa’s house. Grandpa was going to meet us half way and we’d return the trailer at the midway point, but only after switching everything over to the trailer Grandpa was renting in his town. Daddy said he wasn’t going to risk bringing ours the whole way.

We got home and Momma was sitting on the deck as Benjamin made swirled footprints in the sand just below her. Momma was looking over at Mr. Jonny’s house. Daddy clomped up the sagging steps and Momma whispered something to him. I looked over at Benjamin. He seemed happy. Benjamin was too little to know.

Daddy turned to me, “Go get all your stuff gathered up. We’re leaving in three hours.”

I walked through the house I’d lived in for about a year now. Everything was in boxes and crates, and the bed me and Benjamin slept on was already taken apart.

I looked out the window and saw Daddy parking the truck and trailer as

close to the back door as he could. I picked up the old milk crate that I had put my stuff in and walked out the back door. I set my box down and went back inside to try and help Daddy move the kitchen table. We kept on and on moving things into the trailer.

We used up the three hours. Momma and Benjamin sat on the front porch watching, making sure that Mr. Clayton didn’t come for the rent money a day early and catch us. That’d happened the last time we moved. That’s when Daddy socked Mr. Charlie in the nose and we left too quick to get my baseball mitt. I’d felt worse for Mr. Charlie than I did about my mitt.

We closed up the trailer and all four of us got into the truck. Benjamin sat on my lap. I was glad he was too little to know.

I slept for a long time. I woke up pushed against momma’s shoulder. The truck was just about to come to a stop right beside another pair of headlights. Benjamin’s body was stretched across both our laps and his elbow was hurting my leg something awful. I saw someone cross over from the other truck. The person was a black shadow against the bright lights. He came to my Daddy’s door and I knew it had to be Grandpa. I’d only seen him once before. He looked like Daddy. His grey hair and wrinkled brown skin made him look like a real time cowboy. He leaned up against Daddy’s door and turned to spit out a whole bunch of tobacco.

“Well Henry, are you going to get out and help me move your crap to this other trailer or not?”

“I reckon I will as soon as you stop leaning on my door.”

Grandpa turned and walked back to the trailer and Daddy got out right behind him. Momma picked up Benjamin out of my lap, and I turned to watch them. I looked at the shadowy ground. Daddy was walking in Grandpa’s footsteps.

I leaned back in the seat. I swore to myself I wasn’t ever going to follow. ♦

## DREAM WORLD

KELSEY BARCOMB

“The desire to feel loved is the last illusion: let it go and you will be free.”  
-An anonymous poet

People used to say that Annabel’s brother, Adam, was the only person who could make her laugh as a baby; that his laughter alone could trigger even the deepest of belly laughs from her. Annabel couldn’t remember that, but what she could remember about her older brother was the way that he had loved her at the beach.

When Annabel was three and her brother was six, they lived with their parents on a private, gated community beach in Florida. Pristine white sand and clear blue water greeted them daily just inches from the back doors of their house. It was the perfect setting for an absolutely perfect childhood. Every day when Adam arrived home from school, he would immediately interrupt Annabel’s tea party/make-believe adventure/nap to take her by the hand and tug her through the house to the back doors.

“Come on! Let’s play, Annabel!” he would shout. Their mother would promptly follow them outside every time, without rejection to his plans, always watching her children from a close distance. The beach was generally empty and quiet around three-o’clock due to the fact that most of the residents of the gated community were either retired senior citizens or families with children above the age of fourteen.

The first memory of Annabel’s life was of a day she had spent with her brother on that beach. Perhaps, in reality, it was no different than any of the other days she had spent with Adam; but, for some reason, it stuck out to her in the same way that a shooting star against the night sky would have. In this memory she wore a billowy white dress and a pink paper crown (she had been playing “princess” when Adam came barging into her room), and her long brown hair had been loosely braided by her mother so that it hung delicately down her back.

That afternoon, when he came through the front doors, Adam ran for Annabel’s room. He grabbed her hand and tugged her to the back patio and then, slowing his pace for her benefit, he cautiously helped her down the steps, one by one. Their mother stood behind them with a book pressed to her chest and a smile on her lips as she watched her children.

As soon as they reached the sand, Adam was off again, tugging Annabel along with him. She struggled to keep up, her chubby toddler legs wobbling after her older brother. But she loved him so much, and she couldn’t wait to play with him, so she stuck out her tongue in concentration and focused on not falling to the ground.

“Be careful with her!” their mother hollered as she jogged behind them in the sand. She reached out and put a hand to the small of Annabel’s back to help keep her steady. “Don’t be so fast, Adam!”

Adam slowed when they reached the edge of the ocean water, and he stood in it so that it lapped over his toes. “Come here,” he said to his baby sister.

Annabel came to stand beside him. The water rose up higher on her than on him—it was almost to Annabel’s knees. The salty water soaked the bottom of her dress, but when her mother tried to remove her from that position, she protested in shrieks.

As their mother took a seat in a beach chair behind them, Annabel gazed up at her older brother, who was smiling down on her. She realized that he was still holding her hand, and without thinking, she squeezed his fingers gently. He squeezed back automatically, as if it was a natural instinct ingrained in him.

Suddenly, his eyes widened with intensity and excitement. “Ring around the rosie, pockets full of posies!” Adam began to sing. He grabbed Annabel’s other hand and slowly began spinning with her in a circle. She didn’t sing because she didn’t know the song, so instead she stared up at her brother in amazement and adoration as the world around them became a blur of vivid colors and intermingling noises.

Adam sang the song numerous times as they spun for what seemed like infinity. Eventually, Annabel memorized the ending verse —“ashes, ashes, we all fall down!”—which subsequently became her favorite part of the song. She gradually began to join in when Adam reached that part, and then she would laugh uncontrollably as he ended their spin by jumping in place in the water, splashing his sister’s dress in the process.

“I love you, I love you, I love you!” At one point, Adam sang these words to the tune of “Ring Around the Rosie,” making Annabel laugh again.

“Iloveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou!” Annabel mirrored him hurriedly, bringing her hands together to clap along to her proclamations.

“Okay you two, let’s go inside,” their mother said once they’d reached a point where Adam was just dancing in circles and Annabel was just clapping.

The memory faded out from there, but Annabel never forgot that day. In fact, she treasured it. It was often the first memory she found herself reliving when everything else in her life was falling apart.

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As Annabel and Adam grew older, they also, sadly, grew apart. Annabel struggled to keep any remnants of the bond they’d had as children alive, but something inside her brother changed along the way of growing up. When Annabel was six and wanted to play with him and the other neighborhood kids, he shook her off and left the house without telling her. If nine-year-old Annabel went to his room, the door would be shut and locked. The most hurtful part of it all was that, whenever she said “I love you” at any age after five, Adam would promptly reply, “I hate you, too, Annabel!” in a sarcastic tone with a smile as sweet as rotten candy.

Annabel’s mother promised that this sort of behavior wouldn’t last forever. “Everyone fights with their siblings when they’re young, sweetheart. One day you two will be closer than ever, and you’ll have a friend in him again.”

Annabel longed for her brother to love her again. When she was thirteen years old in middle school, and he was sixteen years old in high school, their parents had an arrangement: every day after school Adam drove to pick up Annabel. The car rides were unbearable—at least for Annabel. Adam would blast death metal music and ignore her existence completely as he smoked cigarettes and drove. Annabel barely saw him anymore aside from those afternoon drives—he was always off with his dangerous and mysterious friends, only coming home to eat, shower, and sleep.

One afternoon, Annabel decided to try to talk to him. She was sick of their only conversations being “Please pass the salt” or “What’s Mom making for dinner?” When she saw his black, dented Camry arrive at the curb of her school, she prepared herself with a deep, yet shaky breath. As she stepped into the car, the usual waft of bitter smoke enveloped her.

“Hi,” she greeted him.

He didn’t even look at her. He began driving away even before she could buckle her seatbelt or close her car door.

Annabel quickly shut the door as the car sped off. She watched Adam’s finger reach for the knob on the stereo system, and her heart filled with devastation as she worried that she’d missed her chance.

“I had a really fun day,” Annabel lied as quickly as she could. Annabel’s days at middle school were never fun. The other girls picked on her because of her unfashionable clothes and general lack of self-esteem, therefore causing the boys to disregard her as well. She secretly wondered if the way kids treated her at the middle school was the reason for her brother’s hatred. Was her lack of popularity at the lower level school stressful to him? Was he embarrassed? She wished she knew the answers, but she also wished she didn’t know the questions.

Adam flicked the stereo button on as if she hadn’t spoken. Annabel found

herself forced to yell over the music.

“We made paintings in art class. Mine is almost done. It’s a picture of a baby’s breath. I’m making it for Mom.” This part was true; she was painting for her mother, who loved the flowers.

Adam glanced out of the corner of his eye at her, then back at the road. He sat in a slouched position in his seat, one hand on the steering wheel as the car sped well past the speeding limit.

“How was your day?” Annabel asked in a loud voice.

Adam ignored her. She watched his fingers tighten on the steering wheel, as if he was angry with it.

“Adam? Did you hear me? I asked—”

“Don’t talk to me. You and I don’t talk. We. Don’t. Talk.” He spoke the words clearly and with precision through his teeth, making it so that she could hear him above the music and so that he would not have to repeat himself (something he hated to do). She suddenly realized that her brother was seething; his hands were gripping the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles had turned white, and his unsteady gaze at the road ahead was enough to make Annabel feel afraid to be in a car with him.

“Don’t talk to me” rang through Annabel’s mind repeatedly, like one of her father’s broken records playing on an endless loop, as she stared tearfully out her window. Her lips quivered and the corners of her eyes stung, and her legs were shaking as if she wanted to run. She didn’t see the passing cars or the trees or the houses outside her window. She only saw a brother who hated her, children who mocked her, and a boy who—once a very long time ago—had loved her more than he had loved himself. She missed him.

Adam’s malicious words mingled along in Annabel’s head with images of Adam as the child on the beach who had danced and held Annabel’s hand while shouting “I love you!” at her. Annabel thought about how, that very day in art class, a popular boy had dumped black paint all over her Baby’s Breath painting while she had gone to the restroom. She remembered returning to a classroom filled with students laughing and pointing at her misfortune. She recalled how the teacher had given her an A on the spot and a strained apology because there wasn’t enough time left in the school year to redo the painting. She thought of her mother’s loving face, and felt an ache in her chest. She desperately wished she had someone to talk to about what had happened. Someone like Adam. She shut her eyes as tears escaped her, and leaned her head against the cold glass of the car window.

Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me.

It was as if the brother she used to know had died and been replaced by someone else, someone who never smiled or expressed any emotion other than anger.

Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me.

It was like she was in a television show and the actor playing her brother had been replaced by someone who had chosen to take the role in a completely different direction than the writers or director had originally intended.

Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me.

She struggled to breathe evenly, telling herself that she was almost home. She could cry there.

Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me.

And after that day, she didn’t.

Years later, Annabel and Adam reached adulthood, but remained distant. Adam learned to be polite when he saw Annabel at their parents’ home, but he never offered anything to her and never reached out to her. He remained in their hometown working for a power plant, while Annabel went off to college to pursue a degree.

Annabel immersed herself in her college community, making friends and pretending to fill the hole in her heart that her older brother had caused. Because of the fact that Adam—the first friend she’d ever had and loved—had forgotten her, Annabel felt unloved wherever she went. Although many of her new friends were sincere and true to her, she never fully opened herself up to them. She was somewhat of a mystery to other people, and she came off as a bit cold.

During Annabel’s senior year of high school, her parents sold the beach house and moved to a rural neighborhood in Florida. There was no pristine white sand or clear blue water to greet them; only palm trees, grass, and a swampy river in the backyard. Because of this new location—along with the sadness Adam’s presence brought her during family visits—Annabel kept herself busy at college and only visited on holiday weekends.

And yet, somewhere inside Annabel, hope remained alive. She wrote letters and sent texts to her brother, telling him she loved him and missed him, and hoped that he was happy with his girlfriend and job at the power plant. On National Brother Day, she texted to him, “You are the best big brother I could have ever had! I love you!” Every single letter went without a response, and almost every single text was ignored, with the rare and occasional “Thanks” sent back.

On a cold December day during Annabel’s third year at college, she packed up her car and said goodbye to her roommates before she headed off to her parents’ house for Christmas vacation. The general happiness she felt when she didn’t have to think about her parents or her brother during the school year slowly faded away as she crept closer and closer to her parents’ home. Something Annabel had prepared herself for were tight bear hugs from her father, warm kisses from her mother, and a feeling of invisibility from her brother. Something Annabel had not prepared herself for were icy roads, losing control on said icy roads, and colliding into two other cars as a result.

Somewhere between loading her suitcase into the car and driving along an icy highway, Annabel’s reality morphed into a dream world, perpetuated by her life as a vegetable that needed a machine to survive.

In this dream world, Annabel was a child again, who danced and sang and laughed with her hero and brother, Adam. She was a genuinely happy child—happier than she had been as an adult. She was a genuinely happy person in this coma—happier than she had been with her eyes wide open in reality. In this dream world, Annabel and Adam played board games in the house, and Adam read stories to her from their bookshelf. Adam told her he loved her, and Annabel believed him because she could. Memories that Annabel suppressed also emerged in this dream world—she remembered getting into arguments with Adam over childish things like Christmas presents, and trying to “frame” him in front of their parents for things she had done. She remembered biting Adam on the arm



because he had made her so mad once. She remembered being spoiled.

But despite all of these problems, Adam always came back and told her that he loved her, and that he always would, and Annabel apologized and said that she would try not to do those things to him again. Sometimes she didn't and sometimes she did, but Adam's unconditional love never failed her...until it did at last, of course.

As Annabel relived happiness with her brother in this dream world—holding his hand as they sang and laughed on the beach blissfully—something in reality caught a piece of her scattered attention.

It was the feeling of someone's hand wrapping itself around her own hand, only this time, it wasn't part of a memory or a dream—it was actual reality. The hand squeezed Annabel's hand, over and over again, as if expecting a squeeze in return.

Annabel lingered in her dream world, allowing the hand that was holding hers to become a numbed feeling in the back of her mind like the rest of her painful reality. She decided that she was finally happy where she was, with her long-lost brother in a fantasy land.

Slowly along with her forgotten life, the dream world ceased to exist, and Annabel died happy while the real Adam held her hand in the hospital bed where she lay. ♦