

A black and white photograph of a field of flowers. In the foreground, there are several large, light-colored flowers with multiple petals, possibly poppies. The field extends to the horizon, where a dense forest of trees is visible. The sky is clear and light. The overall scene is a natural landscape.

Bloodroot Literary Magazine

Volume 15
8th Digital Edition

Bloodroot

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Bloodroot Literary Magazine

Bloodroot is a nonprofit literary magazine dedicated to publishing diverse voices through the adventure of poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction. Our aim is to provide a platform for the free-spirited emerging and established writer.

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Covert art: image produced by OpenAI’s DALL-E generative application.

Note on Type

This book is set in 12 point ET Bembo, a modern face designed for the web and print by Edward Tufte and based on the Bembo family of typeface. ET Bembo is a freely available open-source font. The text was typeset using xelatex, an updated \LaTeX typesetting package, along with several other free packages, including poemscol.

Introductory Remarks

There has been much discussion about the function of authorship, the meaning of creativity, and the purpose of writing since the public release of OpenAI's ChatGPT in the last months of 2022. We created the cover image for this issue using OpenAI's DALL-E image generation application. The "prompt" used to generate the image connects nature and technology, both past and present: "A single bunch of white bloodroot flowers in the center of a hilly field of green grass with a blue sky. Ilford XP2 400. Nikon lens. Medium-Shot Angle." The request for color was overruled by the request for an image that would appear as if it were taken on black and white film and using a camera from a previous generation. We created this image in order to gesture toward the creative possibilities within some of these new tools, possibilities that perhaps arise most acutely from their imperfections and frequent confusion of sense and nonsense.

For this issue we asked that people refrain from submitting if they'd been published in *Bloodroot* before. We did this to make space for new voices, and to encourage those who feel like they are on the periphery of the literary scene. We are interested in what the writers in the Upper Valley are doing, and how their work resonates with select writers living outside our region.

We never have a theme, but much of the writing in this issue seems linked in both thematic and formal ways. Victoria Brockmeier details the aurora borealis while Helga Kidder takes us to Spain and shows us the light. Ira Goga invites us into two very different dreams while Amanda Skinner details a political nightmare. Karen Kilcup writes from inside a snowy day while Clara Strong conjures up a rainy springtime. *Bloodroot* has long encouraged literary experimentation and we are especially excited to be publishing several poems constructed by Allison Parrish. Parrish's poems are generated using innovative strategies that transform a text through the resources of both language and images.

We are glad that you're here and hope you find this issue deeply inspiring and refreshing.

RENA J. MOSTEIRIN & JAMES E. DOBSON

Voltas (on “The Windhover”)
Allison Parrish

These poems were produced with a computer program that performed the following steps. The program first converts each character in the source text to a greyscale pixel (according to the number of that character’s Unicode codepoint); then it rotates the resulting two-dimensional array of pixels as though it were an image, using nearest-neighbor interpolation. Finally, the program converts the pixels of the rotated image back to the character corresponding to the pixel’s greyscale value.

I’ve included a handful of examples at particular angles that I found interesting, but the algorithm is capable of rotating the text at arbitrary angles.

0° (Original text, by Gerard Manley Hopkins)

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

6°

I caught
 dom of dathis morni
 Of the roylight's dng mornin
 High therlling leveauphin, dg's minion
 In his ecse, how heel underneapple-dawn, king-
 As a skatetasy! therung upon ath him st-drawn Fa
 Rebuffed t's heel sn off, offthe rein eady air, lcon, in h
 Stirred fohe big wiweeps smoo forth onof a wimpland stridis riding
 Brute beaur a bird,nd. My heath on a b swing, ing wing ng
 Buckle! ANty and va the achiert in hidow-bend: t
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 No wonder loveliere that brect, oh, ae mastery nd gliding
 Shine, an of it: sh, more danaks from ir, pride,of the th
 Fall, gald blue-bleeer plod ngerous, Othee then, plume, hing!
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 s, and ga ah my deagh down siier! n
 sh gold-ver, lion
 rmilion.

12°

I
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 Oom ofht th
 Hf the daylis mo
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 As his ere, ng lls dag mor
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45°

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180°

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354°

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 dom of dalling leverung upon forth onow-bend: t ing!
 Of the roe, how he n off, offth on a bing of the there
 High theretasy! theweeps smoot in hide mastery plume, hn
 In his ecs's heel snd. My heave of, thir, pride, a billio
 As a skatehe big wi the achiect, oh, athee then,ier!
 Rebuffed tr a bird, lour and aaks from my chevalllion
 Stirred foty and vae that bregerous, Ogh down si
 Brute beauD the fir, more danakes plouar,
 Buckle! AN loveliereer plod m, ah my deermilion.
 Times told of it: seak embersash gold-v
 No wonderd blue-blees, and g
 Shine, anl themselv
 Fall, gal

Subject

You could say: *Claessinka*,
I love you, but we'll only
imagine this possibility here—
in the sudden onset of white
when a phantom moth
lands on your shoulder,
beats twice, & you
remember me.

Like a god, to love,
you were object, never subject.
And me, only subject to.

CLARESSINKA ANDERSON

Buttercup

Some secret poison splayed her out,
breath snapping like a flag

in the wind, and I peered
through the window

so many hummingbirds mistook
for a portal to another sky,

dropping with certainty,
like the green-hulled walnuts

that stained my fingers orange.
She couldn't stand.

We didn't own a gun
so we called the neighbors.

The many chambers of her belly
closed to each other, blocked by plastic

swallowed in her bovine stupidity.
Why do I remember winter

when I know it was summer?
Deaths conflate like facts.

The familiar whiff of a blanket
thrown over a space heater, nearly burning.

My mother's arms over me. A sound
like the lake breaking through the dusk.

I draped myself over her back
in the sun like a hide, curing.

She was the color and comfort
of peanut butter. My stepfather knelt

in the wet hay, emptying her
stomachs with care.

Her son, left behind, was darker
than the dark.

We inefficient farmers
kept so many useless animals.

They gathered at the front door
waiting to be let in.

I wanted so badly
to love them, I think.

CLARA STRONG

Red Efts

When the rain stopped, we ran
to collect the glints of poison light
from the wet road.

In our palms, powder-orange curls,
their embryonic backs dotted with black spots,
false eyes blinked perpetually open.

My brother made a pile of tiny bodies
writhing in the ferns.

We loved setting traps, our fantasies
of tamed fawns or foxes we'd keep as pets.

We wanted something smaller than ourselves
to care for, to neglect, abuse.

We propped up boxes in the dark wood
behind the house with a jagged stick and a carrot furred with mold.

Once, found coyote droppings on the wide rock
that busted open the dirt path like the crown of a colossus.

Surely, we were only moments behind—
sheer moments behind a heartbeat, a paw,
a tongue flickering over canine teeth.

CLARA STRONG

There Should Really Be a Stop Sign at this
Intersection

I witness at least six car accidents
from this window.

At night the thump of shoulder
against drywall wakes me.

Based on his uniform,
I think he's a nurse.

The baby's voice twists in
and out of my rain-drenched sex dreams,

a siren passing me on the street,
until I shake my husband awake

and say god damn it they're at it again.
I cry about it in my soft bed,

on the phone, in the car, in the shower.
I startle when a door slams at the office.

We stand at the window, wincing.

I've never had neighbors
who didn't beat each other senseless.

In the morning, my doorstep glitters
and I almost spill my coffee stepping over it.

CLARA STRONG

DREAM: SUBURBIA

A bomb dropped in the street
& did not open. Across the lawn,
a rosebush, budding. As I tended
to him, my father became smaller.
His eyes, dissolving. The sky, milkier
than ever. Blue lacquer in a bowl.
He would not speak my name. He would not
eat with me. I screamed. He would not eat.

IRA GOGA

DREAM: IN THE END

We stood on a yellow hill. The air was clean
and still. The sky, necessary. Below us,
a lone pine carved into sharpness
by wind and ice. A bird—black—slept here.

I pointed. A lark.

My mother shook her head. It was a magpie,
tail feathers long and thin as scissors.

IRA GOGA

Magic Fountain in Montjuic, Spain

Lights at night illumine the water
craving stone and earth
beyond the arc,
 red, yellow,
then midnight-blue, the hue
mirrored from above.

The colors stroke my tongue
like saffron as a whisper
of mist falls on me
 standing
in a rectangle of night,
lost in love's
basic beat on
 the heart.

HELGA KIDDER

When Stones Speak

She left no stone unturned,
 she tattled
 about another neighbor
 whose husband cheated on her,
to get him back.

Was he hiding his undoing
 under stones, the underside
 of solid rock: earwigs, maggots,
 we hide from others?
 What kind of stones?
 Boulders, rocks, gravel?

Sandstone, easily imprinted
 with feet walking over it?
 Granite, used for farm sinks
 and troughs? They must
 have been pebble-like,
 easily tossed over the shoulder.

He tried to stay on the undersides,
 tell white lies or even black ones,
 laughing off accusations
 across the dinner table
 while at night his wife listened
 to him mumbling in sleep.

What could I say to my neighbor,
 a woman who constantly gathered
 gossip and bundled it into a bouquet
but, well, there are still plenty
of stones left unturned
that have not yet spoken.

Sacred Dreaming

As our world deliquesces
into a pure chaos star

A mountain forms in the voids
and a tree grows in the sun

COLIN KA RIN MOMEYER

Mu

Zen has no definitions
The universe is its headwaters
One breath is good

COLIN KA RIN MOMEYER

above the circle

like the ocean shrugging one shoulder, an iceberg
rises into the months-long night, monumental smudge
in the dark—but closer, it does gleam

under snow that knew only a wish to settle, to soften
crag where it found them

the aurora flares above in revenant chartreuse,
the color the sun shines at night

& snow, or mist, sprays up when the breeze fidgets
while the mountain hisses itself away
when the waves slap up its sides

if light could find its ragged depths, they'd be the green
of mosses & moss agate, nephrite jade, copper ore
pine needles sweetening in an ice storm

all vanishing into sightless saline while seabirds call
as though over unbroken water

VICTORIA BROCKMEIER

yule tree

wind rattles the pasture, soars across
our house's mold-sooted cedar planks

after exorcising my mother, we open

weaving lights, first
over my shoulders

the wind distressing
gray-brown stems & burrs snow (snow)

bells jangling, glitter breaking off,
silver to green, green to opalescent

red, my dad one after the other
& endless christmas tunes

bright nutmeg flavor
on our breath

VICTORIA BROCKMEIER

INVENTION OF BAY WINDOWS

In the library, by the bay windows there are two leather chairs—
I sit in the chair on the left & —
a great body of ocean is facing me.—
In the other chair, there is a mouth fastened—
to the dear life of you—
as if expertly extracting poison —
or a bullet. & a great body of ocean is facing you.

I have 4 empty test tubes in my pocket—
I fill 3 with your breath.
All the while, this mouth continues
as if unearthing
a government secret.

“Excuse, me”—I say, holding my 4th test tube.
But the mouth is very dedicated.

“Excuse me,”
I say again, gently removing the mouth
from your thighs.
“I need this for my collection.”

J. HOPE STEIN

INVENTIONS OF ERASERS

You were a liar
& a thief (but not
a cheater). You were
brilliant (but not
for the reasons they think).

You were the best pencil thief in the factory—
Your erasers were divine to chew on.

The way the cat
is always gorgeous—
You were gorgeous.

J. HOPE STEIN

With Anna

A cluster of ramps in the wind like rabbit ears.
Split at the base: take only one. Smells of onion
and earth. In the shadow of the rickety ski jump
a stack in my hand, green and wilting, removed
from their other half. Talk of parts, parting, bark
peeling into scrolls. Time out of joint
pain and horizontal nights from one tick
and then another, each holding on so tightly
they lost their heads. The bacteria having already made
their way. I swore secrecy for the location of ramps. The truth
is I don't know how we got here. I don't believe
in landmarks. I distrust
anything resembling a tower, and a ski jump
is a tower with a delivery mechanism. I tell Anna
I want to be mycelial, splitting and splitting again,
pulling myself toward something to transform.
Hot and lichenous. The pesto not yet made.
Stomach formless. Head hungry.

TOM BOSWORTH

Pine Park

“The days I don’t want to kill myself / are extraordinary”

—Gabrielle Calvocoressi

I’d like to thank
the goldenrods
and the slippery
jacks. They knew
my name before
I theirs. A monarch
flew figure 8s
&I almost lost it.
I had mistaken peace
for a kind of stupor:
stultification.

The town demolished
The bridge. Too
expensive to keep
the planks from
rotting away.
The only way
is through the gorge.
Down into the gorge,
the gorge like a scar.

TOM BOSWORTH

Juncos in Snow

Just barely freezing this morning—
the snow that stopped Virginia traffic
yesterday for fifty miles drifts mildly
in milky air. The hemlock branches
bear the weight with grace, as if
awaiting a turning point, when
the weighted cover cascades down
to needled ground.

Snow sticks sideways
on the leafless trees,
mottling bare limbs.

On days like these, my grandfather
led me tramping through the woods,
our snowshoes swishing below our breath;
he'd peer for tracks of squirrels, rabbits, deer.
Gone for more than forty years, he'd hope
to catch a glimpse of the bobcat that haunts
our neighbor's barn, and sometimes
dashes through our grassy yard.

The storm's settling into dusk.
A pair of dark-eyed juncos dart
their pink bills up and down,
plucking seeds from the vanishing path.
They seldom scare, keeping company
with slaty companions, cheering
the silences of a late gray day.

KAREN KILCUP

To the River (and Back)

Snowflakes slip sideways
across the yard, switching
directions with the fickle wind,
first west, then east. It's below
twenty degrees. No bluebirds,
no finches—even the plump juncos,
brisk in silver and charcoal,
cannot spark a fire.

I'm stuck inside the corners
of my computer screen,
another kind of whiteness
and blank. If my grandfather
were alive, he'd call me
to tramp to the river
encased in floes except for
a ridged black strand
stippled with scraps
of ice. He'd spot a bird,
then insist we wait until
the otters show themselves.

He's still gone, too long
gone, for such a fantasy.
But he's returned in later
form: another slender one
who guides me over
mountains in a storm,
who lures me outside
the house, outside myself,
regardless of what registers
on the frosted thermometer.
Who always makes sure
I stay warm.

Later, I'll bundle up in down,
give him new blue mittens,
take him to the little river,
which is always there
no matter the season.

KAREN KILCUP

a poem is a bone

in the graveyard of remembering—
a bleached carcass of dreams
the sturdy scaffolding that holds
you upright, then lays you down

it is mineral and meditation
sinew and simile, a relic unearthed
it is desert skull, sand-polished
weather-pocked, where beauty

and danger reside side-by-side—
scorpion and chuparosa blooming
from calcified hollows

it is clack and whistle, a holy totem
carried off in the jaws of junkyard
dogs, retrieved again

and again from the dry riverbed
of marrow and grist, unrestful
place—the excavation of stories
and ossuary ghosts

LUCINDA TREW

Eton Rifles

We watched the leader charge the horses through the lines
 picket fences – once white now blackened with the grime of industry
 And so for her it was an easy charge to tell them to make do and mend—
 pick up where she left you off, right?

This year the violence has had a musical quality:
 a performance every week as the nation stands by
 their mended fences and applaud the broken, the trampled, the ravaged
 as it struggles to its feet after another charge.

And what of our Dear Leader?
 Dyed with desperation, tailored by the shears of belonging
 –which he never did—
 Another grocery boy allowed to play in the club
 where they cut off the pig's head and used it for sport,

because he's funny. Unlike the one before
 they jeered and called classless names because he was not like them
 but like this one
 wanted to be liked by them.

And their game was to see how far they could push it
 before the jester too would fall to his knees and they would
 smash the pickets with applause and banging
 kitchen utensils cook used to boil the pig's head.

AMANDA SKINNER

A Theory on the Origin of Timber

Let it be, leave
the lid alone.

I carry you
in a beechwood box,
hold you close to
let you forgive me.
It is a veil
which you inhabit;
your vision is
what calls me.
You are permanently
conceived as
the coarse grained
person in this
photograph.

I carry you
in a beechwood box.
The smell of roots
is the way
the lid slides
off to reveal you.
All around you
in the foreground
are the things you
carried in your
hands—Namely,
the mistake
of a jacket on
a humid day.

I have sat you
upon velvet.
Reveal to me
what you were born to, although
you were not
born
to the sensation
of falling into things,
stomping on each weed
rising upwards with
heavy sneakers.

This box was
my first project.

I carved it and
whittled at it.

In this way

I have become you,
as framed body.

See how the patterns
in wood move
backwards and cross grained.
How they reminisce
In their random
decisions, how they
meet at the ends
and taper.

I have not just made
this box—

I have split the wood
with my axe. This is the origin
of timber. The axe is the start
of wood. Rosewood,
cypress, mahogany, spruce—
It is all the origin.
Yes, the origin
is an ending.
Your engraved
photo is ingrained
in this
beginning.
Now that I have come
to believe in
such myths,

I must laminate
your image.

KYLE SINGH

For girls with paper wings

There is a ladder in the kitchen to the top of my sky
A brick roofed room overlooking a cracked sidewalk
An aging wrought iron gate I don't have the legs to jump
A bed of Tansies that will complain if my timings off
I'd like to think they'd leave me there, stretching,
Until I feel it in my toes, until the traffic subsides,
until she turns the corner to trace my outline,
Maybe if I was made in the shape of you
I could climb the cumulus clouds home
With no key, I doubt these wings could carry me

CHENNELLE CHANNER

The Woman's Tongue Tree

It was a celebration really
He tore my dress
There were flowers, yellow, greenish white
Pressed pistils smelling up the backseat
A message on the windshield to fly home
It was a celebration
There is an image of me baring my teeth
A mother praying me off the island
White matter in the womb
I kept my eyes open through it all
It was a tradition
Every cell awake and stinging
He fed me noisy fruit
I poisoned it, twice for luck
It was the summer I was leafless

CHENNELLE CHANNER

The Gifts in Brown Furniture

My dining room is 8 feet wide by 12 feet long, with 10-foot ceilings. There are eight pieces of brown furniture: A table, with hidden inverted leaves, five chairs, a sideboard with drawers for placemats and cloth napkins, and a four-foot-wide cabinet with glass bookshelves that takes up the back wall. There are two inches of breathing room on top, and small spaces on either side of the wall.

Sitting directly opposite a window, the bookshelf commands the center of attention, even though it is divided into two sections on the bottom and the top, each of which has its own set of center doors. The content of the bottom section is hidden: two long shelves sit behind wooden doors that must be opened to access. There's an art to opening the cabinet: Slide your fingers into the center opening for the right door and pull gently. Once the right door opens, push the door on the left from the inside. This is the only way it opens. (It is possible that the wooden acorn that once adorned the left front used to serve as a handle, but it is in two pieces—and rests on a shelf inside.)

Inside the doors rests my yarn swift and ball winder. Candles, old cards from family and friends, a remnant from a quilt. My Aunt Martha's world has shrunk to a wheelchair inside the confines of a memory unit in assisted living. But inside this card from 1999, Martha has both her wits and wit as she recounts attending a Nantucket wedding that the bride called off—and all the fun that was subsequently had by the groom's family and friends.

The top section of the bookcase is paned with glass. There are four horizontal shelves. Open the glass, step on a stepstool to examine the top shelf and you will find:

- A small leather covered book of poetry written by my great grandmother with abject apologies to the German language (*when and where did she study German?*),
- Semi-filled calendar diaries from Woodward and Lothrop from 1918, 1920, 1924, 1925 and 1929 (*why does it make me feel better that the resolutions to keep a diary so often end by March?*)
- A postcard from 1933 with annotations on favorite haunts in the White Mountains, and another from 1896 telling the story of a moose my great-grandmother encountered
- Christmas poems from a mother-in-law and favorite aunt of the 1880s
- A handbound book consisting only of empty envelopes and yellowed newspaper clippings with household tips: *to remove grass stains, rub the spots with molasses and wash; soak mud stains with kerosene; wet and expose scorch to sunshine*

- Narrative poems from my namesake Aunt Eleanor that are hard to follow. I connect more with a slip of paper I find among her work scrawled in pencil, “*At times, I think my mind is a mine of trivialities.*” This I share with family ranging from age 11 to 81 by SMS and receive emojis in return.

As my grandmother’s Aunt Ruth wrote of her New Hampshire childhood in *American Kitchen Magazine* in 1902, *more than one kind of history repeats itself*. Ruth was talking about the family habit of eating things from the yard: she ate sweet flag, goldthread, and blood root—*most puckery and unpalatable*. She hoped that her sister’s children—my grandmother and her siblings—would share this experience. They did and so have we through the generations. My uncle Eddie ate dewberries, wild sorrel, and purslane and my dad made popsicles with apple cider vinegar. My sister Emily and I feasted on clover, wild strawberries, and honeysuckle stems. Emily’s daughter Anna ate a wild mushroom as a toddler that resulted in an ER visit with a toxicologist. We all lived through it.

When I slow down enough to pay attention, I can see threads across generations: “*Dad, would you believe Ruth and I both turned 50 in a pandemic? I’m using her gardening strategy of making a game of taking out one species of weeds at a time and applying it in my own yard. The Japanese knotweed that ran rampant last year in my yard is now endangered.*”

Our five Marys, three Ruths, three Johns, and Aunt Eleanor have bestowed upon us the gifts of empathy, self-preservation, and hope. I worry less about economic downturns than pundits or friends—I have pictures of my great-grandmother wearing “newspaper leggings for warmth” and recipes designed for a pauper’s budget. Family writings teach me that even in the worst of times, it is still possible to have a strong ending. After all, I am the second Eleanor and the second Ruth proclaimed that it was a better name than Marjorie for the middle years when your hair begins to thin, and your teeth fall out.

The Woodward & Lothrop Diaries leave out much of the pain we know from the dates in the family bible. In 1918, my grandmother—the youngest of six—turned three, and my great-grandmother Mary was newly widowed after her husband John died of Bright’s disease. Later that spring, after the entries end, her oldest son John died of meningitis in South Carolina. The plans for John junior to take over the family apothecary business in Alexandria, Virginia were unrealized, and in 1933, the doors shut with all the contents inside. Today, the apothecary lives on as a museum run by the City of Alexandria.

“*Ars Longa, Vita Brivas,*” says my Uncle John, great-grandson of pharmacist John. *Art is long, life is short.*

E. CHANDLEE BRYAN

Sugar Hill

[excerpt from a novella]

I wager there are few sights that strike you dead like the first moment you lay eyes on a house fire. Still standing but completely consumed within, every window and dormer a pyrotechnic display of catastrophe. But after that split second, you've got to snap back to the plan. I'm trying to separate myself and scan the perimeter for a proper scene assessment when I catch a flash of movement off in the backwoods, like a fox or a deer. I can't tell if I'm in too deep with the high of it all, or if it's just shadow-play from the cinder-box, but I swear I could see eyes looking back at me through the scarlet glow. I start to say something when Murphy spots a dry hydrant down the dark road and it looks like I'll be hoofing the large diameters on a reverse lay as he gets right on up to the house for Bubski to deploy the attack line and charge water. Got to get to work. So, I pop out of the cab, throw my helmet on, and click some loose straps on my way to the hose-bed, hoisting up a few rungs and hooking the lasso, yanking the end of the line out and pulling it along in stride. I'm gliding through time and space.

Now I might as well skip over the play-by-play, since these sorts of things are only interesting to those physically in attendance and locked in battle. Needless to say, we dump thousands of gallons of water on this lost cause; Bubski sweatin' through his bunker gear and ready to tap out as soon as the next engine arrives. Those two and a half inch hoses can really buck you around, but I've got the ol' bent knee trick all worked out, and basically sit on the thing while I contemplate the blaze before me with a lazy sweep of the arms. It becomes pretty rhythmic and I'm barely using any strength, so my mind begins to wander back to those eyes. It's dark as hell but I can see what looks like fissures in the snow leading into the backwoods, possibly footprints. I make a mental note of it. Of course, by the end of the night there's been firefighters all over the property, all three-hundred and sixty degrees of it, performing grunt labor every which way, that no one notices the set of prints leading away from the scene. Except me.

I don't know why, but I keep it to myself. Just doffed my gear after the fight and shot the shit with the boys, sucking down bottles of water and sayin' all the usual stuff, but mostly staring into the night and watching the steam rise off of our bodies like the smoldering of the pile. It's incredible how happy everyone always is after a house burns down. It's the most exercise some of these guys get all year.

We each get assessed by the ambulance crew afterwards, and come my turn, I step into the back of the truck, and sure enough it's Sasha. We've got a little bit of a will-we-won't-we kind of thing going, but the momentum hit a wall somewhere and now things are weird

between us. She's giving me that look of detachment that I find paramedics are so good at. It's amusing but I'm also exhausted, so I just plop down and lay my head back while she rolls up my sleeve, gripping my arm just so, and wraps the blood pressure cuff around my bicep, firm from all the exertion. She hits the monitor, and the cuff starts pumping. And pumping. And pumping. She gives me a little eyebrow action, indicating she's concerned for my well-being. Finally, the damn thing constricts the artery enough to give me a solid reading.

I think you should stay here for a bit until your blood-pressure drops. It's concerning as it is.

Runs in the family.

This is normal?

I wouldn't know.

Work with me here.

I don't know what to tell you.

How do you feel right now?

I feel...wired. But good. It's been a long night.

You feel alright to drive home?

Sure.

I'm not so sure.

Are you holding me hostage?

I'll drive you home from the station.

Well...

Ok?

I look over at her marshmallow EMT partner who is definitely not picking up on what is transpiring, just accepting her ploy as standard medical practice among responders.

I suppose.

Good. Just to be safe.

*

The next day. Somewhere in the early morning haze I call my boss and tell him no way was I coming in. A few hours after that I emerge from the fog and start to kick my way out of the blankets and stumble toward the window. I know I should feel a little stronger about the fact that Sasha stayed over last night, but my mind keeps going back to the mysterious footprints in the snow. Those eyes. I look out and see the sky's got that silver-gray coat to it, not terribly visible but not overcast either. I know where I'm going.

Just as I turn, I can see she's watching me, all coy-like. I smile and try to pretend there's nothing else on my mind.

How's the patient this morning?

Oh, not so bad.

Would you say, good?

Mmm, definitely better. A little sore.

I know what can help with that, she says as she unfurls passage to the warm fleecy covers.
I nod slowly and rummage through the closest drawer instead.

Mind if I smoke?

Go ahead, she murmurs.

Want some?

No, I shouldn't. I'm on-duty tonight.

Just have what's-his-face drive and you handle the patient-care.

Sometimes I want to drive.

Too much patient-care last night?

Apparently not enough, she says with those eyebrows.

It's not like that...I've got a job interview later.

Oh.

Yeah. That's all.

For what?

You know, I don't want to talk about it unless it's gonna happen. Bad luck and all that.

Hmmm.

You think I'm lying?

I didn't say that.

Not with your words.

With my body?

Yeah.

Let's talk with our bodies then.

Well...

*

It's practically nightfall by the time I escape and set out for the fire-ground, which is for the best since Chief Roberts has probably been up and down that road all day, taking photos and looking positively cheerful. Problem is I can't remember the address, so I'm driving around on pure instinct. Somehow looking at the tops of all the trees provides the right dose of recollection and I feel I'm making progress. Onwards and upwards I drive until I'm zig-zagging up what must be that godforsaken hill we trekked last night. I'm just through my third 180 turn when, sure as shit, I'm there. Nothing but a heap left, some remnants of the foundation visible, and a solitary archway still upright, kind of sad-looking, like all his friends and family are dead and there he is, not knowing what to do or where to be. I just about choke up for a second. Weird how that happens sometimes.

I drive right up to the wreckage and sit for a minute or two, kind of wondering what I think I'm doing here in the first place, but also running through my head the hearsay of the

arson investigation. Word is the owner was off at one of his other homes in Florida or South Carolina, I can't remember exactly, and just found out about the whole mess. 'Course that don't mean he could't have been involved in the first place, but seems unlikely. It was a new build, and they were planning to move in for the summer. Something like that anyway. No real motive.

I grab a headlamp and step outside. It's quiet up here save for the wind that of course is just starting to pick up now that I've made an appearance. Like I've disturbed something or some dark omen is attempting to communicate with me. I ignore the thought and make a beeline to the backyard, half-expecting some wrinkly old woman in a robe to appear and offer to grant me wishes. I think I've got my fairy tales mixed up, but there's something spooky about it all that's making my brain work in strange ways.

I'm praying that this is all a mistake, that there really was nothing that I saw, and it can all be easily explained away just as soon as I get a good look at the indents in the hardpack, the surface details that will hopefully reveal your average feral prints of various woodland critters. Nothing to see here, time to go back to the pad and light a bowl, rest up for another day of back-breaking labor. If only. I say that because it's pretty clear from the start that what I saw is correlating with reality and I'm in too deep already. They're footprints alright. Human. Diving straight into the darkness to God-knows-where.

I ponder my topographical orientation and realize I've been up back this way before during some of my grouse-hunting misadventures. Before all the posted signs started showing up. Seems more and more a man can't find a decent place to hunt, what with all the land being bought up and "PRIVATE PROPERTY," a mandate to steer clear or get fucked. I guess I understand it, but also not really. Like, where's the liberty in that? As if guys wandering in the woods are a real nuisance to society. Kind of makes me think of that Robert Frost poem, and I can't remember if he was the asshole in it or not. Point being, I know the layout roughly enough to remember there being a steep drop and a fast stream pushing brook status somewhere abouts.

On top of it all it's a full moon, which feels like strike three, but is kind of a godsend seeing as my headlamp turns out to be dead and I ain't got any spare triple-A batteries lying about. Terrific. Time to go all Ghost Recon on this half-baked investigation. I'm a bit stunned to be the lead dog on this bread-crumbs trail, but then again, I've never known arson to be a thoroughly hounded crime. Firehouse nuts like Chief Roberts like a good fire, whatever the origin. Helps justify the costs of the department to the taxpayers, which he then keeps locked out. I'm beginning to think too much for my own good.

A sharp gust of raw wind plants me back in the here and now. I don't like it, but I don't have a choice at this point. So, I put one foot in front of the other, nice and slow, like the ol' Christmas jingle with the snow wizard and young Kringle. I even hum a few bars to get up the gusto. Step after step right past the tree-line and into the thicket. Easy does it. Every twig and bush shaking in the night breeze makes me jump a little. I'm not sure if I'm scared of something or someone, or just maybe finding something I wish I didn't

find, seeing something best not seen. But hell, I think, if it's gonna be somebody it best be me. It's the right thing to do, I tell myself, and if I just curled up back home and alerted the "proper" authorities I could just about guarantee how far that observation would go. Maybe they'd send a dog, but I doubt it. I've come to find that if a trail isn't road-worthy, most law enforcement types won't bother. But goddamnit here I am and how about stop being such a bitch about it?

I move forward on towards whatever it is. Deeper and darker I go.

AARON MICHAEL HODGE