

Bloodroot Literary Magazine

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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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Cover art: Photograph by James E. Dobson, taken on October 5, 2024 in Claremont, New Hampshire with an iPhone 12.

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 and open-source packages, including poemscol.

Introductory Remarks

Each fall, when we open up the *Bloodroot* submissions portal and start reading, we're delighted by the outpouring of beauty, pain, joy and creativity emanating from our community and beyond. The Upper Valley is home to many professional writers as well as those for whom writing is an avocation. Some of these are students or retirees; some in between jobs or staying at home. Others write in those special, perhaps stolen, moments found in between work and parenting. Let's not forget those writing through their evenings, early mornings, or in the middle night when they can't sleep.

Every spring when we launch the new issue, the most fun part is meeting our contributors in person, often for the first time. We have seventeen contributors this year, each offering something different. Carlene Kucharczyk and April Ossmann will be our featured readers at the launch for this issue; both will read from new books of poetry they have out this spring. We'll also have an open mic and we hope to hear from many of the talented writers whose work appears in this issue.

Touring the remains of a burned down abandoned factory, William Doeski writes, "Now weeds comb the little breeze." Marcia L. Hurlow takes us to the moon, while Shari Altman invites us to watch wild turkeys play in "Reckoning." Sarah Dickenson Snyder offers a blessing in the style of Lucille Clifton, and Robin Dellabough writes of the heart in "Kardia" and remembers her mother in "October, Pine Park."

Chelsee Niebergall writes, "I slide out another book and remember how Jo, Beth, Amy, and Meg kept me company when I felt lonely." There are many voices in this issue that will keep you company. Spend some time with this new issue and you'll see that your friends and neighbors in the Upper Valley, and in the wider world, have been considering some of the same questions you are. We might live in a rural place, but we are not alone.

The cover photo is of a tired yet imposing building located at 11 Water Street in Claremont, New Hampshire. Once a part of Monadnock Cotton Mills, this building is described in the National Register of Historic Places as "a bland flat-roofed three-story block... constructed in 1880, first as a bleachery" before its conversion to a cloth house. Perhaps due for another conversion like its neighboring more stately buildings down the street, this building caught our eye as one simultaneously saturated with New Hampshire's manufacturing past—bearing witness to much historical change—and a sense of lingering possibility of being remade once more.

RENA J. MOSTEIRIN & JAMES E. DOBSON

Obscure Lines

Beautiful unkown space with full of love
is printed on the cloth bag our friend

brought back from Japan.
What could be a more exotic gift than English

applied as surface design, a garden
of parts of speech and spellings

planted in approximate order?
I try to clear my mind of language

and view these scribbles in my own alphabet
as I would Sanskrit or Arabic,

whose loops and lines I take in as pure shape
—lovely on the border of a skirt,

leaving me with no message—
but this anglicized brain anchor-hitched

to the mother tongue will not untie the knot,
and I linger in the tangle of words I somehow grasp.

SARAH CARLETON

Vultures

Like a mother, the nearer one
holds me in his orange-rimmed eye.

Made serious by long devotion,
at the edge of the woods past

the pasture two vultures rustle, hopping
branch to branch to stay together,

their plumage heartbroken,
from an underworld so blue-black

it formed two birds of *there-there*
who comfort the dark with the darker.

Death has nothing to do with it.
You can be held always, the bird says,

even in a stoneheart summer,
pills locked away, through weeks

of *Don't-don't, my tiny hand.*
The invitation must be stern

to reach me. The hill rises.
There, the heaven I call meadow.

MIRANDE BISSELL

Descent

The other word for heart is hawk.

I wouldn't have chosen it,
not at first, but the size is right—
a bird small enough to hold
in unprotected arms

though it rises and circles
where I cannot,
over the ridges and pine stands,
the north branch of the dark river
breaking white on the rocks, falling
ecstatically.

I am the wall
and the ground.
I am low.

Slapped,
I turned
toward who
I can protect.

The raptor races far from me,
gaining speed
as it falls,
abandoning
itself to the approaching
fields
where currents
and silver mist join light, earth's weight,
a wager
against abandoning
one another.

In the hawk's
outstretched auburn wings, no vestments.
Shoulders thrown wide catch every lift.
No place for melody,

its thorax packed with rhythm, light
and absence, naked alternations.

MIRANDE BISSELL

Yes

I talk with the dead.
I still have sex with one
in dreams. I breakfast,
lunch and sup with them,
we walk, swim in the river,
and fly cross-country
counting the clouds together.

Yes, I drive with the dead—
just yesterday we drove
from my valley home
as the sun rose
coloring the river coral,
then saw it rise again
thirty miles later,
pinking snowy mountains.
Two sunrises in one morning,
and no one else to share it with.

Yes, I talk with the dead
and the yet to be dead,
but physically distant
I'm with in spirit.

Yes, I still love them.
Doesn't everyone?

APRIL OSSMANN

Song of a White Sunset

Not quite sunset,
a rising line of White River fog
veiling a time of day we haven't
yet named, before clouds turn rose,
the sun shining white and gold
like a soul over the horizon
I can't shift my eyes from
snowshoeing a white field,
a haloed sun, like a hello
from a beloved friend
I thought long gone,
song of a white sunset
from Aimee, in company
with other gifts
she still gives, the *privilege*,
as her widower said,
of loving her.

APRIL OSSMANN

Foundation and Foundational

A factory stood here almost
a hundred years ago. Dismal
voices of employees linger.

The day after those voices
unionized, the factory burned
to the ground. It rebuilt

eight hundred miles to the south.
Now weeds comb the little breeze.
The voices get into my head

and fester like favorite war wounds.
They don't complain but discuss
personal matters pertaining

to obsolete people forgotten
before the milestone of my birth.
Maybe they aren't human voices

but the tenor of autumn crickets
or the undertone of nesting wasps.
The stone factory foundation

forms a low wall on which to sit
and enjoy professional baked goods
I can neither afford nor resist.

Divinations no longer explain
the muddle of human and insect
voices, but the truth of both merge

in the watery southern breeze
that balloons me with Ur-texts
more pompous than even the dead.

WILLIAM DORESKI

Mud Ghazal

And at the end of the season, the mud returns
as the snow disappears. What else returns?

The beer cans hidden underneath the snow.
Will they stay on the ground or be returned

for change? This morning, I thought I heard geese,
but I can't be sure. When do the snowy owls return

to the Arctic? Or have they already? Their irruption
here noted. I wonder: What will I return

to? Or what will return to me? In this new spring.
Setting forth, with renewed energy, returning

me to a greater sense of me. When I was quiet,
I thought I heard you speak to me. Returning.

CARLENE KUCHARCZYK

The Rowboats

Not tied together with ropes,
not reaching like hands
into each other. They're different,
slightly, in each picture.
They've been seen before with eyes
other than yours. There's a hat
in this one, but it's not my artist.
I didn't know when I started
looking at it, which was just now
or years ago. The ripples, they crinkle,
on the side of the boat. No,
I don't mean the water,
I mean the boat. Like sheets,
like curtains, like something they're not.
His beard, it looks like the living.
Does anything on him look
like the dead? Perhaps
he is holding antlers. The dead
cannot hold anything, even
if they want to. The boat
looks white like the waves
far out, beyond. The sea near
so dark, but is it uninviting?
It's just when adrift, afloat,
everything blue appeals, oceans you
into a night like this, saying:
You, in this space, are moored.

CARLENE KUCHARCZYK

October, Pine Park

Running girl in black shorts,
fuschia sports bra, stops to walk
up an orange-leaf-carpeted hill.
I want to tell her *it's okay to slow down,*
the way my mother would say
you're not having a breakdown,
you're having a breakthrough.
I remember all my mother's words
but can't hear her laugh. A cluster
of college kids is laughing,
they actually leap and cartwheel
across such tender light.
I wonder if it's joy or alcohol.
My mother's face held joy, even
when she was still drinking.
Near the gold-specked river, a young couple
on a beech log are arguing or confessing
or exchanging secrets. I want to tell them
it's okay to let love take its measure,
to cherish this amber, slow day.

Just before sunrise, I watch
a pink streak scratch cerulean sky,
writing all the time I don't have.

ROBIN DELLABOUGH

Kardia

My heart is a vernal equinox, instead of three cusps, two fill with backward
flowing blood. I should avoid salt.

A Swedish niece has fallen for a wheelchair-bound Norwegian. His second
heart is ten years old. They don't think about how many more
beats they have together.

The youngest heart transplant patient was four. I met him when he was
twenty. He showed me his scar-crossed chest, wrote of
a star-crossed lover. Died young.

My father knew all his heart's chambers, superior vena cava, circumflex
artery, great cardiac vein. When he got too tired to ride
a bike, he knew he needed a new valve.

His six-foot frame was too big for the recovery room bed. As I whispered *hi*
dad, he reached up to stroke my hair, smiling, a placid baby.
His new pig part was a story.

Once I bought a heart, ate it in three bites, all my hearts melted into one.
Seventy percent cacao, tasting of bitter earth, \$12.99—
a bargain.

ROBIN DELLABOUGH

The Hotel Iguana

climbs tangled bougainvillea
laddering toward heaven.
The roof is a haven
during daylight only.
When the temperature drops
she clambers down.
She has heard of stars, myriad
pinpoint suns. She has heard
of their starveling beauty.
Night, she thinks, is a large cave
that holds us all. Like a small
child, tucked in its mercies,
she falls asleep
before the court assembles.
But she still dreams
of their shimmering glories,
their brilliance, their infinite
judgment, their
infinite solace.

CHRIS DAHL

Reckoning

They appeared like a magician's trick.
Sudden and unexpected. Moving left
then right, then left, the turkeys—
a summer theater troupe.
The play, spontaneous and fleeting.
I watched until there was nothing left
to witness. My applause brought no encore.

Last night coyotes pierced the silence,
The moon, barely a sliver.
A lonely, cold reckoning.
The soundtrack of wild geese flying south.
A madness of sorts. A lining up,
then merging. What it must mean
to have that kind of trust in the body.

SHARI ALTMAN

To Skull

The stillness of water
just before the oars slip in
to propel me backwards.

Scull—what a strangeness
to realize it's the same
sound as *skull*,
that strong fusion
of bones under the skin.
How thin and fragile
an unearthed skull is.
How many I have seen
and looked away from
at the Killing Fields,
a whole stupa filled
with the collected,
the saved,
the sacred.

I scull
on the river, the mist
rising into the pines
lining the lacquered edges.
Soon, the mountains
will appear. The morning sun
warms our planet like some kind
of forgiveness each day.

SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

Blessing

after Lucille Clifton

May you lose your first balloon
holding the hand of someone who loves you
so that you know that while some things drift away others stay.

May you keep a rain diary
to translate all of the fossils
that emerge & loosen.

May there be a stack of stones
or a star to follow.

May you touch the steep wall
of a pyramid, press against sadness
& strength to hear the billow
of life, then death.

May you eat a grapefruit
to taste the sun, but first
cut the other half;
separate each section
for someone else.

May you find words
as mooring. Become the moon
& know by reciting, the sound will braid
your blood, your bones, your breath,
& pull you toward this watery world.

SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

Kissed

Thin, wary, she worked the canteen at the factory where I toiled unhappily as rent for our rooms behind a butcher's shop that gobbled too much of our wages needed for a threadbare young family. With my order she gave me extra cake she said she paid for. I wanted to kiss her. Workmates who noticed her largesse warned me about her partner, a thug, a bad-news bully who bruised her. I still fantasized about kissing her, nothing further. Now, these years on, I think of other kissing: friendly ones blown from fingers, or those chasing tears away, wretched Judas's kiss of death, CPR's of life, Goergie Porgie's, spin the bottle's, beguiling curls in front of the ear, Hardy's kiss on dying Nelson's lips like Juliet's last, heartbroken, kiss. Doisneau's staged lovers amidst a swirling crowd, Aurora's sixteenth birthday's kiss, sad steamed-up kisses through plexiglass, John Smith's and Pocahontas's cross-cultural kissing, and Rodin's swooning embrace. Learning she had two youngsters, surprised. Though worn and tired she looked so young. Whenever she walked past, she touched me, a moth's wings. I wrought no encouragement, uttered no innuendo. In that treadmill of production, our greedy boss stalking staff, ready to fire them, I gloried in the triumph of her falling for me.

Sleeves rolled tight around tattoos I drove us to a local cliff-top spot overlooking our dark bay's glimmer where we shared a flask of whisky I, cinematic scenarios afflicted, had splurged on. She stopped after two drinks while I got slowly drunk. As dusk ceded to night, we talked avidly like best friends reunited. Then we kissed. Remembering that oh so tender kiss I think of Klimt's, and a baby's wet kiss to tickle the coldest heart, also repeated crosses ending messages of distanced love. There was that kiss in surf in a great old movie from here to eternity ago, an old rocker's long tongue Kiss, and others in more books and movies including young cowboys' kisses up a mountain and lovers on a doomed vessel. Opportune kisses under mistletoe, and our first feverish crazy in love kisses are anecdotally remembered. When I moved my hand down her body after we had kissed hungrily, she gripped my wrist, and I understood intrinsically. After being consumed by closeness, our lips swollen, I dropped her two streets from home as directed. Nothing further came of our liaison; strangers become a team at an accident scene. Apart from a flat battery for leaving my lights on after driving home carefully on quiet roads to park behind the shop, I paid no price for this strange, uncharacteristic interlude. I still recall the wild wonder of it, a kind of darling sadness as my years toll.

IAN C. SMITH

First 48 Minutes

From "Playlist for Michael Collins, Apollo 11"

I'll have silence now.
Just the first pass around
then I'll see all the cosmos
again and always, I know,
the darkness from one side
and the lights of millennia
or a year from the curve
of the window, the curve
of time over distance,
the whole equation
between me and the others
landed in the light. Now
they'll have a thump
or a sinking in the surface.
What a ground, the rocket-
tested gravel. Their voices
call from the sand. They
listen to air, to the radio
of voices that ask and can
respond to their questions
of position and procedure.
Now I want a voice to hear.

MARCIA L. HURLOW

A Second Pass around the Moon

From "Playlist for Michael Collins, Apollo 11"

Out of the dark now, the voices
command that I find the module,
two people off target by four miles,
four miles of lunar dust in what
direction, an eight-mile diagonal
to search in a few seconds. Where
in the grey circumference? What
depth below the surface? No sign
from that tin can. Next time
I'm in the light I'll scan
for the shine, a disturbance
in the Sea of Tranquility.
The stars look very different
this time. I have to believe
they landed safely. It's time
for a little tidy-up, because
I know that they'll need
a clean space, an orderly calm
when they come aboard again.
Nothing else that I can do.

MARCIA L. HURLOW

Flat Rock Stack

World epochs sketched onto trunks with the symmetry of oceans.
Their laws are rigid. Speed echoes the encore of youth. Musings:
Spheres & faults. Circles traced with a shrug. Connected roots at
Dome base. Shielded. Radium, at abyssal heat, plumes & deforms.

S.D. DILLON

Dog-eared

Sometimes I like to pull a book out from my shelf, find the worn corners, and run my finger over the crease in the page, remembering the story and where it took me. Or, more likely, what it took me from. I pull a tattered paperback copy of a romance novel by Lisa Kleypas and remember how the *Wallflowers* held my hand through postpartum depression. The page corners of my favorite passages are still folded over. I slide out another book and remember how Jo, Beth, Amy, and Meg kept me company when I felt lonely. Each turned-down page a journal entry. I didn't always dog-ear my pages. I had actually been quite against it. In my youth, I would take great care of my books since my small town didn't have much in the way of a library. I would be careful never to crack the spines and always use a bookmark. I kept up the practice even when I had access to a broader range of books when I went to college.

This mindfulness to keep my books pristine ended abruptly when my son started to crawl. He couldn't help but want the thing mommy always had in her hand. Whenever I sat my book down, he would shuffle his chubby knees across the carpet toward my book. The tasseled end of my bookmark too hard to resist. He would yank it out and stick it right into his slobbery, cupid's bow mouth. Once he'd sufficiently chewed the bookmark, he would eventually move on to the book itself. And the older he got, the fewer places I had to keep my books from his curious hands. Eventually, bedside tables could be reached, and chairs could be climbed. There was no haven where my book could be safe. After many frustrating nights spending my precious reading time trying to find my place, I gave up and folded over the tiniest bit of paper, trying to leave as little a mark as possible.

Eventually, even this bit of care gave way, and the dog-ears got more prominent and more frequent, coupled with notes in the margins. And though I am ashamed to admit, even my library books got dog-eared. I hope the librarians over all the libraries I have frequented understand a mother's desperate need to keep her place in her figurative lifeline. Now, when I check out books, I secretly hope there is a page here and there marked with that familiar crease. I never found it annoying or disrespectful. I find it rather endearing. Like little life marks left on the page by a fellow book traveler. I always wondered what each mark had meant. Did it mark a favorite passage intended to be shared with a friend or lover? Or was it the spot the reader had stopped before drifting to sleep? Or, most likely, the last resort when one couldn't find their misplaced bookmark.

Now that my children are older, they understand the severity of losing one's place in a book, being readers themselves. So, my bookmarks go unbothered. I no longer need to fold the pages over to keep my place. I don't remember the exact date when I stopped creasing the pages of my books. Just like I don't remember the last time I carried my son before he got too big or the last time my daughter chewed the corner of a hardback to ease the pain of growing a new tooth. It makes me wonder if this nostalgia has anything to do with the action of dog-earring itself or the circumstances that drove me to do it in the first place.

CHELSEE NIEBERGALL

Neglected Graveyard in the Woods

Oaks stand at a mortician's respectful distance,
while Fireweed closes in
around the plots, like family of the deceased.

Who brought the Black-Eyed Susans? Nobody.

Mowers, weed-whackers,
those who straighten headstones fallen askew
need not come here—

the hardwood looks after things, as sextons do.

One black-robed officiant,
hoarse from many Hall family committals, has
taken to presiding from a tree.

Bittersweet overwrites carven names, to prove
how ephemeral is individuality.

RUSSELL ROWLAND

A Mostly True Story

The young man driving
 the Black River Produce truck—
 windows sealed against the sultry
 late June air, radio on loud,
 the morning rolling into lunch
 and the promise of a ham&swiss at Downers—
 might not have even noticed
 the sign for the Poetry Festival
 at the Unitarian Church on Main
 were it not for the folks pouring out
 of the white steepled edifice with their hands
 clamped hard over their ears.
 Like people leaving a bakery holding their noses,
 it is not what he expects to see.
 Not until he watches the firetruck
 pull out from the station,
 does he understand something
 other than bad poetry is at hand.
 Now that he's thinking of it,
 (poetry, that is) he must remember
 to call his mother, she who always wanted
 him to read Frost. He will tell her
 about the building filled with poetry,
 where something must have caught fire.

BROOKE HERTER JAMES

I Long to See Her Unharm'd Breathing Air the
Earth Is Meant to Breathe

i follow the poet

because i want
to see her

free

words make a
light path

to the country

i long to see

breathing

oxygen of cerulean skies
that all of the earth is
meant to breathe

unharm'd

i will call her She
her feminine pronouns Her Hers

after violence
what does it mean

thriving

does She fold
into herself onto Herself

and after

long after the assaults

i follow the poet
he tells me to write

at my blue desk
a candle's flame
there is a window
the air smells
like snow arriving

an army

ravages Her people and the land they belong to
the country She is

when i was a child
my father and i talked

i miss him

She exists She is
a Country
my father would say
in morocco he fought
to protect Arab
children
from the french rampage

in paris i never thought twice
when i wore my black and grey and white
scarf patterns of olive trees
passages from the sea onto Her land

i am not Palestinian but
french american from
corsica

i follow the poet
he is breaking my heart
each day

when the violence ends
how will She breathe
in Her restored cerulean sky
glimpse sun on Her
Mediterranean waters

NATHALIE CANESSA KRAMER

Professional Development

We almost wish we were here. Yesterday we learned nothing and today we learn even less. Now I sit in my hotel room and watch the late afternoon sun come obliquely through the window. Outside, beyond the empty parking lot, lies a grove of sickly-looking trees. The endless sound of cars moving up and down the highway. I'm lucky to be sitting in a nice hotel room, paid for by my employer. My fellow trainees are not so lucky. Mostly they come from the halfway house over in Wooster: Jeremiah's House. They say, "I'm over at Jeremiah's. I did some time in the pen before that. Now I've got six months clean."

At first, it seemed like a mistake that we were all in the same training program together, but actually, it wasn't a mistake at all. In fact, nothing could be more fitting. I was a drunk, you see, and the reasons why I didn't end up in prison, or Jeremiah's House, are frankly mysterious. I mean, I've gone to jail plenty of times, but I always got bailed out, and my parents always gave in and coughed up the money for a good lawyer to keep me out long-term. By all rights, I should have gone to prison.

But these guys have had a rough go of it; there's no doubt about that. There's no fancy lawyer appearing at the last minute to save them. The things they've been through make my life look like, well, like a goddamn picnic, really. Like a nice picnic in the park on a beautiful sunny day. But the truth is I belong with them, here at this training program. The truth is, I'm right where I belong.

We are training to become "Weatherization Technicians," which is a fancy way of saying we are going to be crawling in people's attics and basements, doing what can only be described as Dirty Work: air sealing, insulating, that sort of thing. So we are learning how to use a spray-foam gun, how to caulk a window, how to avoid falling through the ceiling. No, it's not glamorous, but it pays alright, and if you learn enough and stick with it you can eventually become an auditor, and then the work isn't so backbreaking. Once you're an auditor, you just say what work needs to be done, and we, the technicians, are the miserable sons of bitches who get to do it. That's what we're there for, but the fact is right now we're pretty hopeless. I mean, we're all a bunch of fuck-ups.

But like I said, I'm the lucky one. They don't know it yet, but I do. These guys, they've got nothing. They've got Jeremiah's and six lousy months, and that's about it. Me? I've already got a decent job; they're who sent me here for "Professional Development." They're paying me to be here, they even put me up in this nice, cool, hotel room. Plus, I've got a car—my parents gave it to me after I crashed my old truck into the woods. Meanwhile, the boys from Jeremiah's are riding the bus. They're riding the bus, or else they're walking. Sometimes, on a good day, Jeremiah's sends down a van to pick them all up, grimly referred to as the "druggy buggy."

Another thing I've got is two years without a drink, and the same goes for the drugs. I won't say it's been easy for me, because some days are pure hell, but slowly, little by little, I've been building a life for myself. But even before all that, I was just lucky. I came from a loving family with money and infinite patience for my bullshit. I kept burning everything down, and they kept helping me put out the fires. Whenever I started to lose control and things got scary, they would swoop in to the rescue. Pretty pathetic, I know.

I even got a college education, but nonetheless, here I am, sitting in one of those oddly demoralizing buildings found in industrial parks across the country, reading PowerPoint slides about the advantages of air sealing versus insulating, the merits of spray-foam versus polystyrene sheets, while Skinny Johnny dozes peacefully beside me. It's a good name for him: Skinny Johnny, he's skinny alright; no use denying that. The man is thin as a rail.

Yeah, it's safe to say that this is not how I pictured my future back in college when I was reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and trying to wrap my head around Heidegger. But then again, I also didn't picture myself living past twenty-seven. And the truth is I barely made it through college as is: I conned my way through most of it, or else simply begged for mercy. I suppose in the end my professors took pity on me. Although, pity probably isn't the right word—more like they were just sick of me and wanted me out of there. Back then, I thought I was going to be some kind of intellectual, but boy was I wrong. I guess fate had another thing coming.

"If you see cockroaches or bed bugs in the house, it's your call whether or not you continue working. Ultimately, you have to use your judgment. Me personally? I keep working, I don't worry about a few roaches. Even dead animals. Trust me guys, you're going to find some dead raccoons under the porch, and God knows what else, especially in the mobile homes," says our instructor Wayne. He's got a big gut, and he walks around like the bad guys in old Westerns with his feet pointed way out in either direction. In the back of the room a man who has been totally silent for two days begins to describe the cockroaches that plagued his childhood. This laconic and distant man suddenly becomes quite animated, saying, "it's not the family's fault, it's not always their fault if there are roaches, they spread like crazy, it's not their fault. It's the landlord's fault, foreal." As he talks, he waves his big arms through the air.

This morning, I went down to the lobby of the hotel to get some free coffee. There were professional-looking people milling around, eating the complimentary breakfast, quietly chatting. There was a big TV going. They were covering the LA wildfires, and the screen displayed a smoky inferno. You could barely make out the shapes of buildings, presumably people's houses, through the haze. The people in the lobby watched the TV and shook their heads, they said "I heard it's the wind that does it" or turned to each other and said "Jesus Christ, you see that?" They all watched as they ate their fruit and their bagels, filling in the empty spaces. Were they also sent here for professional development? What sorts of dreams did they leave behind, or has everything gone smoothly, just as planned? Are these so-called dreams merely a bourgeois fiction? I imagine most people just go to work, doing

what they can.

For the past week, during the breaks, Rob T has been trying to sell me a streaming box. I don't really understand these things, but from what I gather it's a piece of equipment—illegal no doubt—that hooks up to the TV and enables you to watch whatever shows or movies you want for free. I don't have the heart to tell him that I don't own a TV myself, nor do I have any intention of getting one. So I let him go on with his endless pitch, demonstrating the amazing streaming and entertainment potential of this clever little device. I simply nod and say things like “Wow, that's really something,” or “Damn, I can't believe it.” I think he takes it as a sign that I'm close to giving in and finally getting one of the damn things, but nothing could be further from the truth. I feel bad, and I wish I could help him with his side hustle, but I just don't have it in me. He doesn't realize that his position is roughly equivalent to that of a man trying to sell pork to a devout Muslim. But there's no way he could know, and I'm not going to tell him. I don't go in for TV anymore; I've got enough issues as is.

But we start talking, and he's telling me that he can't sleep at night, and the shows are his only comfort. “The meds they give me don't work,” he says, “And I got PTSD.” I say that it's hard to sleep or do anything when you're just thinking about the past. He nods. “And I got one hell of a past, I got stabbed when I was twenty, right here.” He turns his neck and shows me a big scar that runs from behind his ear down to his throat. “I had four hundred grams of crack on me, I was in my own territory and a rival gang jumped me. I almost died. I got hit twenty-five times over the head with a glass bottle.” All I said in response was “That's fucked up, man.” I wish something more meaningful came out, but really, what else can you say?

Rob T gets up and joins the others for a smoke. I'm the only one in the class who doesn't. Come March, it'll be a year since I quit, God willing. On the first day Rayshawn offered me one, and I shook my head. “Good job, young blood, good for you” he said. It felt good coming from him, from everyone else it's worthless. But right now, I wish I could. I want to be out there, with them. They are probably smiling, laughing, exhaling with pleasure in the cold morning air. Instead, I sit alone in the empty room, staring at the empty coffee cups, the half-full bottle of red Powerade, the open, lifeless notebooks. They're those black and white ones with that pattern, the strange pattern that looks like nothing. Like something a shrink asks you to describe. Something you see when you close your eyes, maybe. Everybody received one at the beginning of the training. I look at my hands for a while, then out the window at the ugly tangle of brush, and the pale sky under which everything is permitted.

ZACHARY FINE