

TWO CITIES REVIEW



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Two Cities Review is an online review featuring quality fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Our editors are:

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Letter from the Editors

THE FALL CAN FEEL LIKE THE BEGINNING OF A NEW YEAR, AND OUR WRITERS ARE EXPLORING NEW LIVES AND NEW WORLDS IN THIS ISSUE. Is September the end of something, or the beginning? Can a new relationship mean a fresh start, or falling back into old and terrifying patterns? Our writers are bold explorers, diving deep into caves as spelunkers, or excavating the interior realms of grief. There's new ground to be broken here, and our writers are forging brave new pathways.

As editors, we couldn't be more excited about our September issue. We'll be talking about it for the weeks to come in our podcast, and having writers read their own work. Our writers come from around the world and they're gifted at bringing a part of their life experience to our pages. They're also experimenters, playing with line breaks and form to expand the possibilities of poetry.

The fall is a chance for new writing goals, new creative challenges, and new stories to tell. What's your fall shaping up to be, and what stories, essays, or poems will you send us?

Happy reading!

Blair Hurley & Olivia Tandon

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Be sure to check out our podcast, available at twocitiesreview.com/podcast, or the iTunes library. Search for “Two Cities Review” — and remember to leave us a review if you enjoy it!

Table of Contents

POETRY

September

The Wild Part

Cabinet

Drowning

The Clash

David Sam

Barbara Carlson

David Ishaya Osu

Kandie St. Germain

Gerald Yelle

FICTION

Bodies of Water

Ardor

Seasonal

Uncertainties

The Caver

Ash Sanders

Tim Keppel

Em Faerman

Carla McGill

Elizabeth Youle

ART

Cover: Law and Order

J. Ray Paradiso

September

David Sam

So green goes
pregnant underground
or flies with wind—
divine botanical passion

We darken this
with restlessness
for other equinoxes

How to vanish
turning away from such
an unreliable map

Where in the end
my likeness
will walk without me
while the world has changed

Bodies of Water

Ash Sanders

It was the summer of Nancy Drew--the year I finished the last of Carolyn Keene's seventy-eight mysteries at the library by my house and, enthralled, started again on the first one. School had been out for a month by then, and the heat came down like an omen, flat and hard on our bodies. My father had a name for this weather; he called it July's Murder. I liked this because it sounded Nancy Drew, and it worded the world exactly: the grass curling with exhaustion, the sidewalks belly-up with sun by early morning, crying: uncle! uncle!

Everyone who mattered knew what to do with this heat, and that was: go to the pool to see everyone else who mattered and suffer the weather together. I lived next door to the pool and by mid-morning the air would thicken and turn, honeyed by suntan lotion and salty with the smell of skin. I was not a person who mattered, and so each morning I biked past the pool, past the lapping and the laughing and the languid bodies, and into the starched, buttoned-up air of the library.

My cousin Diana was always there, and the routine was always the same: the left turn at the circulation desk, the stop at the mystery section, the five or six books from the revolving plastic cases near the windows in the sun. On a good day, if no college students were around, we might get the reading room. Then we felt adult, like we knew everything there was to know or would soon,

and had a pressing need to discuss this in our own glassed-off section in the back.

The reading room was for secrets, confessions, the otherwise-unspoken. Sitting there, visible to everyone, we could whisper things heard by no one, and this was a particular form of pleasure. But we took every precaution: the glass, thin; the content, top-secret; our voices, naturally loud. Before we began, Diana would stand me outside the room while inside she called out names of boys in our 6th-grade class. If I blushed, she knew I'd heard, and she had her upper limit. She called it testing the threshold. After that, the conversation could begin, the terror of being heard allowing us, strangely, a near perfect freedom.

We'd spent the first part of our summer in this manner, huddled around the meeting room table, unraveling the mysteries of our own small lives, our meager but particular plot of bodies, blood and intrigue. Diana would talk, mostly, and I would scribe: 1) While doing laundry, Diana had found a pair of bloody underwear at the bottom of the hamper. When she mentioned it at dinner, her sister had stormed away crying. 2) One day, at the pool, Ryan Hastings had told Tiff Myers she gave him boners, then climbed up the high dive and back-flipped off of it. Just for her.

These were our cases, and they proved difficult. We did not know where the blood came from, or why Diana's sister was angry but not scared. We did not know this word, boner.

At first we turned to dictionaries. Diana on the Merriam Webster, I on the Oxford. There were lines of definitions for blood, but none that matched our experience. There were no entries under

boner. We wondered: Was Diana's sister dying? Was Ryan Hastings sick with a terrible skeletal disease?

There was so much to know and no way to know it. Mrs. Willoughby, the librarian, had a placard on her desk that read, "Questions? Ask a bookworm!" We suspected, however, that our situation did not apply. For the first time in our lives, we could not consult books--our normal line of resort. We could not pester our teachers. And our parents--even if we dared ask them, if they even knew the answers--were not to be bothered: For days they had been talking about Something Important, gathering at each others' houses, putting down the phone when we entered the room. And this, one sweltering day in early July, is what we'd reserved the reading room to discuss. "Hushed tones," said Diana. "Carolyn Keene would call it hushed tones."

We knew that if Nancy Drew were in our situation, she'd solve this yesterday, scaling a fence to crouch outside the parents' top-secret meetings, or planting a recorder in a strategically-placed potted plant. But we had not been allowed out at night for a week, and were too scared of getting caught to pull stunts. In short, we satisfied ourselves with eavesdropping. And when we did--when we put a glass to our parents' late-night doors; when we loitered at the dishes, our ears bright and our hands soapy--we heard the word body, we heard the pool, we heard taken, and we heard the children. We had heard these words before, in other sentences. Why then, did they sound so ominous now?

We did not know. We did not know almost anything. But there was one thing we understood clearly: we were the children. As in, what about the, and we can't tell the. The children who must be

protected from this body, whatever it was, and this place where bodies were taken from: the pool. We wrote this down in a notebook that Diana titled *What We Know (So Far)*. It was the only sentence in the book. "We'll fill it in as we go," said Diana. But I knew her voice when she wasn't certain.

The main problem was school: how it didn't start again till September, how that was the only way we saw anyone our age who could tell us anything. Until then the days were dry and hot, the trees drier and hotter, until in mid-July the mountains themselves caught fire--the worst fires the adults has seen in years--the whole valley gasping water, water with a forked, orange tongue. A dry, hot summer with equally hot consequences. The grass outside on the edge of flame.

Each day, Diana and I fled to the library, hoping to shield ourselves from the heat, hoping to crack the case. But even our shaded meeting room blazed as the sun rose and the urgency rose and our casebook stayed mostly blank--as blank as what we could know from inside the glass, which was nothing.

Diana hated this nothing, this not-knowing. She would measure the reading room with her feet, pacing and stopping, pacing and stopping. "We don't know anything" she cried. "We don't know anyone." She spat these last words at me, as if it were my fault. Then, knowing she'd hurt my feelings, she'd switch tacks. It's so hot, she'd reason, and the only cool place is the pool. Everybody who knows anything goes there. We are wasting our time, holed up in this library, she'd say. Nancy Drew didn't sit inside some nerd palace, busting criminals by reading a dictionary. Nancy Drew had friends, for crying out loud. Hobbies. Boyfriends.

I wanted to tell her that I was her friend, that we did have hobbies. Reading, for example. Our casework. But I knew not to argue with that voice.

Then, in mid-July, Diana got what she called the blood. She showed me her underwear when it happened, the scarlet bright and deadly against the white cotton, and I thought so Diana is dying too. But she didn't act like she was dying. In fact, she spoke to me less and less as the summer gasped on, saying I wouldn't understand, saying something about the changes. I looked up the changes in my dictionary, but there were only the usual words, and she was right. I did not understand.

Who did understand was Tiff Myers, who had also gone through the changes, and as a consequence Diana was forever by her side, flipping her hair back when Tiff did, wearing her shirts off her shoulder, just like Tiff. When I tried to bring her back to the case, when I mentioned the searches in the hills by our house, Diana said she was tired of games and perhaps I should be too. When I brought her a paper I had palmed from the trash--a picture of the missing body, who turned out to be not a mere body but a girl our age, smiling because she didn't yet know she'd be taken while swimming, smiling in a school picture much like our school pictures--Diana changed the subject. "Maria says a boner is when a guy likes a girl so much he can't control himself," she said.

And then one day Diana did not show up. Same with the next day, and the next. I told myself I should have expected this, but I was new to rejection, and the shame burned in my throat. For two weeks, I sat alone at the desk in the reading room, the privacy unnecessary, the casebook waiting. Once or twice, I made feeble

attempts to gather clues, walking down to the gully in back of the library to search for god knows what. But I'd hear the scrabble of animals and would run back up the ravine, afraid. I learned then that I was a person who poached courage from stronger personalities, and I sat on the bank, hot with this knowledge, and hot with tears, too.

My parents noticed my grief in the way that parents are remote delicate machines for registering such things. They spoke to me, eyes stretched with concern, about how, despite being barred from going anywhere alone, I should also get out more. The only option I had was to go places alone, I said. But I was at the library for hours every day, they said. Surely I was lonely? Surely I could hang out with the girls from school? "Just like your cousin, Diana," they said. Just like Diana had started to do.

.....

Diana finally did come back, without explanation and nursing a plan. "We're going to the pool," she said, in the way our parents said that's that, even though what our parents had been saying for weeks was the pool is strictly off-limits, do you hear?

I agreed to the plan partly on formal grounds, out of a pure recognition of our failure. The many nights camped outside our parents' doors, scribbling down words, the attempts to draw our fathers into conversation about newspaper headlines, the words body, body half-hidden by their hands: all had come to nothing.

But mostly I agreed because I needed Diana--needed her certainty and her scheming and her insouciant walk. Because I felt like a conjoined twin separated in a precise surgery in which Diana had gotten the spine and the brain I had been left with only the

heart--a useless, bleating, beating thing I had no idea what to do with. But Diana knew, and I determined to follow that knowledge, past summer and into fall and all the way to whatever place a person goes to learn what she'll do next.

.....

The day we went to the pool, the heat hit the mountains like a bell, and the whole town sounded with it, a clamorous heat that thrummed in our nostrils and ears. I wore my detested one-piece, a white suit with red stripes and a sailor insignia on the front. Diana appeared at my house tawny and smooth, a bright green bikini with a stomach pale and tender as a newborn. "No parents, right?" was all she said for hello.

We didn't speak on the walk, either, and in the silence we heard the lazy, caramel voices of the popular girls floating toward us on the air. I almost turned back, especially when I saw the security guards, but Diana pushed me through the gate. "A true detective never quits on a case"--an old saying of ours, but said in a new way, with a barb so it would catch. By the time it did, Diana was across the grass, shoulders back, sauntering up to a knot of new friends.

That day would be the last I spoke to Diana. The last time she spoke to me. I remember it in fragments: the pool icy, the sun irascible. Swimming simply to have something to do, alone in the deep end while Diana stood, one hip out, laying a hand lightly on this or that boy's tan-broad shoulders. The drop in my belly before it happened, then the release. The blood curling up, my body kicking the water, treading with horror the darkening pool. Diana approaching, tall, pliant, all-knowing against the backdrop of sun.

"Oh, Moira," she said. And walked away.

.....

They found a body a week later, in the gully by the library. The girl from the picture, the girl from the pool. She had been there for some time, right beneath the window where Diana and I had conducted our investigation, right next to the ravine I'd sought out on my own. It was night when they pulled her out, but the moon was full, and even when our parents tried to cover us and the police bunched together we could still see the girl, bloated and baggy, heavy with some unspeakable weight. Diana was there, in the glare of the moon and the chemical flash of the flares. She was hanging on a boy I had never seen, and when our eyes met I tried to look at her the way I used to, when glances were a language: The girl from the paper, I tried to say. What we know so far. Diana held my look for a long time, her head high and very still, like a deer on a remote road late at night, angling its ears toward some secret what-next. And then she turned, very slowly, and put her mouth on the boy's mouth. I watched until I knew she would not look back, then turned toward home.

The newspaper said serial killer. S-e-r-i-a-l, not cereal. Finally, a word in my dictionary. It meant again and again, or a drama that appears in parts, a killer who kills again and again in a story whose end is not clear in the beginning. A story everyone learns as they go.

Our killer had particular habits: he stalked small-town pools and libraries, and liked middle schoolers especially. He always dumped his girls near water, their billowing bodies artfully arranged, flowers or weeds woven into their hair.

.....

As the summer burned down, we lost and then found these bodies, more and more bodies--girls in ditches and drainages across the valley. All but one. Diana's. She disappeared one day, too, but unlike the other girls, she was nowhere. She was simply gone. I know. I searched for her myself: in all the watery places, and all the places we used to go.

I had seen her only once since the night in the gully. She was at the swimming hole up the canyon; I was near the benches by the trees. She was halfway across a log that spanned the water, fifteen feet of air beneath. "Do you dare me?" she called to the shore. "Do you dare me to jump?"

.....

I would never know the name of the boy she had kissed in the gully, or the last thing she saw. The news said Missing since late August, the anchors at their desks, their papers neatly piled.

For me, it had been much longer.

I would never know what she'd learned, and if it was too late once she knew it. I would never know anything again. Of this I was certain. Not unsolved, but unsolvable.

.....

Unmoved, my blood arrived each full moon like a reminder. The red was always bright and shocking, but I never did die. I held onto the casebook for a whole year, the one Diana and I had shared. At night, I'd look over our notes. One of these evenings, when my room was too pooled with light to sleep, I took down the journal and, using the Mickey Mouse pen stuck inside it, crossed out whole pages with determination, starting at the back and moving toward the front, reversing time. Finally, I came to the first page. What We

Know (So Far), it said. We are the children, it said. I paused for a moment, then crossed that out, too.

Ardor

Tim Keppel

Monica Rendon was waiting for Professor Lawson's outside his office. Dressed in jeans and a halter top, she sat down hesitantly. In class she was quiet but attentive, always observing; when she did speak, her comments were incisive.

"Professor," she said haltingly, "there's something I want to write but I don't want to share it with the class."

"Remember that the other essays will be pretty personal."

"But, still . . ."

"Okay, if you want, you can just show it to me."

"Thanks, professor."

"Don't worry, nothing's going to shock me," Lawson said. "I've seen everything." It was an attempt to put her at ease, but he worried that it might sound like bravado. Empty bravado, at that.

The rest of the week Lawson's thoughts kept returning to Monica. He wondered what had happened to her that could be so traumatic. Lawson lived alone in an apartment near the university, where he had arrived seven years before, new to the city. Except for a couple of flings, he had kept mainly to himself.

When the students turned in their essays, Monica's had a cover sheet marked "Private: For Prof Only." Leaving class, she widened her eyes at him to emphasize the point. That night Lawson poured a glass of wine and set the stack of essays beside his recliner. The first one he read was Monica's:

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Sitting in the university cafeteria, Monica sees a guy walking toward her and begins to tremble. She hasn't seen him in two years. Would he speak to her? What should she do? Run?

She had met Ramon through friends in Barrio San Antonio. He was a hefty guy with curly black hair and a dense beard that made him look older than his eighteen years. A heavy metal fan, he wore black clothes and "his dark eyes, hooded by dense brows, revealed the pain of his mother's recent death and his resentment towards his alcoholic father." He himself abstained from drinking. He was very smart and always made her laugh – in the beginning.

"He's not my type of man," Monica told herself many times but eventually she agreed to spend time with him. She thought it would be a transitory affair like others she'd had. For a year everything was great. He was always thoughtful and romantic – roses, jewelry, a trip to the Hotel Sunrise in San Andrés. He would prepare her breakfast and take it to her at the university. They were together before and after each class, ate lunch together, and studied together. They took the same bus and when she got home he would immediately call to make sure she arrived okay.

This was only the beginning. Soon he was accompanying her to the door of the classroom and waiting for her when class ended. He would phone her throughout the day. Why did she let him do this? To please him? To show gratitude for his attentions? To help him through a temporary crisis? When she tried to change the rules, he said, "If you love me, why won't you spend time with me?" Finally she decided to "end that stupid game in which I was the

prisoner and he was the guard. But after that, for two more years, my life would not be mine.”

Ramon was consumed by jealousy. Monica’s classmates and even her teachers became threats. He made her stop listening to her music because she seemed too enamored of the singers. She tried everything to get rid of him “but it was like quicksand: the more you fought the deeper you sank.” Her mind “engaged in evil machinations that bordered on madness and which she fortunately didn’t act on. Others less dire she executed.” She tried to make him fall in love with another woman, she tried to bore him to death, she cursed him to his face. Nothing worked. He was always there, like a shadow.

One day he arrived while she was doing homework. She ignored him. Hours passed and his eyes burned with anger. She could hear his breathing. Neither spoke. Finally he announced that he needed to talk. “I don’t want to fight this time, I swear,” he pleaded.. “All right, tell me,” she said tightly. He insisted they go to her room. Monica sat on the edge of her bed. He walked around red-faced, clutching his head. Then he fell to his knees and sniveled, “You don’t love me anymore. If I killed myself you wouldn’t care.”

“The truth, no,” Monica said. “I don’t have a drop of love for you.”

Ramon let out an anguished cry and began to bang his head against the wall. Monica, terrified, shouted at him to stop. He seemed capable of anything. Her mother appeared, concerned by the commotion. After a while she managed to calm him down, then whispered to Monica to be gentle with him so he would make it home alive. All Monica could tell him was “Tomorrow will be

better.” He stared at her silently, eerily for fifteen eternal minutes before he left, saying, “I love you just for me.”

Early the next morning Monica and her mom packed up and left. For two weeks they stayed with her aunt. When they returned, the neighbors told them Ramon had waited outside the house morning and night. Opening the door, they found a pile of letters on the floor. Her mother took them and hid them. Then she asked Monica to do something which was very difficult for her: withdraw from the university.

“Two years have passed and now he reappears, walking toward me at the cafeteria. Voices and laughter, someone plucking a guitar. Should I run? Before I can react, his eyes meet mine, then swerve away.

It has been difficult to recover my life, to return to the person I was before. Slowly I am reclaiming myself.”

*

Lawson finished his wine and poured another glass. He’d been so absorbed in the essay that it took him a moment to acclimate himself: the books on the shelves, the sound of cicadas, the tropical heat. Monica had surprised him with her deft descriptions and illuminating details, she’d made him feel the intensity of her life.

Lawson read more essays but had trouble concentrating. He kept flashing on Monica sitting in his class, her tantalizing, supple body; penetrating eyes; tender smile. She spoke little to anyone except to her blond, heavy-set friend, Ashley, whose essay had dealt with her hypochondriacal mother..

Lawson wondered what had happened to Monica during the two years after she escaped from Ramon. He wondered what had happened since that day at the cafeteria. Did she still live with her mom? Had Ramon continued to pursue her? Had there been other men?

He was also curious about Ramon. What was it like to be so completely obsessed? Was he that obsessive about other women or was there something about Monica that drove him mad?

Lawson returned Monica's essay with a request that she stop by his office. It was dark outside when she appeared, a few voices echoed in the halls, the last students going home. Her nervousness seemed to lessen his own. He began by praising her essay and encouraging her to share it with the class, anonymously if she preferred. Monica said she'd think about it. Then, leaning forward and lowering his voice, he asked how she was doing.

"Better," Monica said, crossing her legs.

"Do you still live with your mom?"

She returned his gaze. "Yes, but in another house."

Lawson nodded consolingly. "And the guy?" He didn't want to say the name. "Have you seen him again?"

"No." Monica frowned, then added, "But I heard he wants to see me."

Lawson nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel afraid like before."

Footsteps resounded in the hall.

"Any time you want to talk, please feel free . . ."

Suddenly Ashley appeared at the door. With tight smiles, they parted.

*

After that, Lawson couldn't get Monica out of his mind. If she hadn't arrived at the beginning of class, he would speak disjointedly until she appeared, when his mood would brighten. He wondered if the other students noticed. He had sworn off getting involved with students. He'd done it once when he first began the job and within days everyone knew. But maybe a flirtation, one that only went right up to the edge and no further, would do no harm.

Walking to his car, Lawson watched the friends cross the campus under the towering ceiba trees. A fresh breeze blew, and he felt a twinge of envy toward Ashley for enjoying Monica's company. Some professors, including Christopher Pardo, the department head, invited him to join them for drinks, but Lawson declined. Conversations with them were always forced and their talk of university matters bored him. But he worried that they sensed his indifference and resented him for it.

His apartment – drab and cramped with traffic noise and a double bed with one side unslept in – was waiting for him. Pouring some wine, he thought of Monica's sensual voice, her full lips. He knew her modest collection of tight jeans and halter tops by heart.

The next class Lawson showed a film, *The Age of Innocence*. Turning off the lights, he positioned his chair to afford a clear view of Monica. She seemed to catch the subtle humor the other students missed and seemed touched by the parts Lawson found touching.

Maybe, Lawson thought, Monica could keep a secret. Had he not kept hers? He would bide his time until the end of the semester. The days passed slowly, and instead of enjoying the Monday holidays when there was no class, he cursed them. A week

after the semester ended, his heart pounding, he called her. A recording said her number was out of service.

The vacation days were dry and sultry. The grass was the color of rope. Not knowing what to do with his time, Lawson went to a movie by himself, he tried new restaurants. His sister and mother, who lived in a distant mountain town, wanted him to visit but he knew he would spend the whole time thinking about Monica. He considered calling Ashley to ask for Monica's number but felt she would see right through him. Then one day at the mall he saw her. She was sitting in the food court by herself. In his shorts and sandals, looking quite unprofessorial, Lawson approached her. "Hi, did you change your number?"

Monica's eyes flicked about. "Yes, I did."

Writing out her new one, she leaned over the table with her hair hiding her face. She kept glancing uneasily around.

Lawson said, "I'll call you."

*

A week later, Lawson sat sipping wine on the balcony of his apartment, waiting for Monica. He had tried to make the invitation seem so harmless that she'd be hard-pressed to refuse. He had offered to pick her up but she said she'd take a taxi. He still hadn't decided whether to play the concerned teacher or the platonic friend or simply show his hand. He would have to play it by ear.

Monica arrived wearing a yellow top Lawson hadn't seen, dangling earrings, and extra make-up. He poured some wine. The traffic noise, which he'd always found annoying, suddenly seemed lively and rather pleasant.

Monica sat with one leg curled up under her. She had a tiny mole on her neck the shape of a teardrop. He couldn't believe she was there in his apartment.

"I told my mom I was going out with Ashley," she said.

"So you told Ashley?"

"I had to."

"That's okay. She seems discrete."

"She is. Don't worry."

While they ate he asked Monica about her family. Her father had died when she was young; it was just she and her mom. She came down with anemia and it took several years to correctly adjust her medications. Her mom doted on her. She spent a lot of time by herself, reading and painting.

Lawson talked for a while about movies and books, pulling some off the shelf to show her, before finally asking what he'd been anxious to ask. Had Ramon contacted her? She said he hadn't. Was he studying at the university? She said she didn't know. Lawson worried that she might be bothered by his age. Yet feeling the effects of the wine, the night air, and the jazz on the stereo, Monica spoke and laughed freely. She emitted a physical warmth that made Lawson ache to caress her. He mentioned that he'd be staying in the city for the vacation and he'd like to visit nearby places like Popayan and Armenia.

"Maybe we could go," he blurted. When he put on the film *Body Heat*, she snuggled up to him on the couch.

*

For the rest of the vacation, they saw each other often. Though Monica didn't invite him to her house, he would pick her up a block

away and they'd go to his apartment or to a bar. She told her mom she was going to Popayan with Ashley and they spent two nights there in a quaint hilltop hotel, where the brisk mountain air intensified his passion. They frolicked under a natural waterfall and slept beneath two blankets with their bodies intertwined. Waking early, he lay watching her in the predawn light, her hair splayed on the pillow. A light rain plunked the tin roof and, breathing in the eucalyptus-scented air, he could not contain his happiness.

Monica, however, seemed to be holding back. Lawson wondered if her behavior had something to do with her ordeal with Ramon. Her habit of pulling her hair. The way she would recoil when he opened a cabinet as if he might hit her with the door. Her exaggerated fear of dogs and passing cars. Her insomnia, which left her in a slight but perpetual fog. Her compulsion to do everything, whether it be homework or household chores, to absolute perfection, so that she was unable to start something else until she had finished. She had said in her essay that she wanted to return to the person she was before. Lawson wondered when that would be, if ever.

Yet he accepted the challenge of winning her trust, of showing her how she deserved to be treated. Above all, he tried not to be demanding of her time. Sometimes, dying to call her, he would force himself to wait. And when she called him, timidly asking to see him, his heart would swell. Being in her presence was so intoxicating that even accompanying her to buy shoes or have her nails done was nothing short of bliss. He was leading the life of a man whose every move is determined by a love affair.

*

But when classes resumed in August, something changed. Now they had to pass in the halls with no more than a quick nod and a wan smile. And Monica was spending more time with Ashley, who seemed to be competing for her attention. Lawson worried that this might cause Ashley, out of self-interest, to reveal their secret. He knew that Ashley was tired of covering for Monica and Monica was tired of lying to her mom. Lawson was annoyed at having to cut short their visits because Monica had to get home. Maybe, Lawson thought, it would be better for Monica to level with her mother. But when he suggested this, Monica resisted. She said she wanted to “avoid complications.”

Also, being back at the university meant the presence – real or imagined – of Ramon. When Lawson would pass by the cafeteria and see Monica studying or chatting with Ashley, he would instinctively glance around to see if someone was watching her. He had never seen a picture of Ramon and only knew him from Monica’s description. Maybe he had shaved his beard or cut his hair but still Lawson felt that somehow he would recognize him, if only from the intensity of his gaze.

One Friday Monica failed to show up at Lawson’s apartment as they had planned. Trying to reach her, he kept getting her voice mail. Finally he called Monica’s mom, who said she wasn’t home. Much later Monica called him, peeved. She said she had been with Ashley and her phone had been “misconfigured.”

Lawson began to pass by her classroom to see who she was sitting with or talking to. He called her at odd times to see if she might be somewhere she hadn’t told him she would be. One day he

watched her from his car as she got on the bus, then followed her to make sure she got off at her house.

Lawson knew that Monica and her mom had financial problems. Though it was a strain on his paltry teacher's pay, he gave her money, clothes, a cell phone, an ankle bracelet. He sent her frequent messages and used the word love, a word she didn't use.

Lawson had hoped to see a steady increase in Monica's affection for him, to see her reticence and aloofness fade. But now he wondered if they had become a permanent part of her. When they made love, she no longer seemed to surrender, and he would notice, when she didn't think he was watching, a look of glassy indifference.

One day she told him she was looking for a part-time job.

"You don't need to," Lawson said. "Whatever they're offering, I'll give you more."

*

Lawson had imagined that being with Monica would bring an ecstatic happiness but instead he felt a painful anguish, a constant dread. Each time he saw her he felt a gnawing in his heart and a difficulty in breathing.

He decided he needed to win over her mother. One Sunday Monica planned a birthday party for her and Lawson wasn't invited. She told him she would try to see him afterward, depending on how long the party lasted. Lawson waited. Darkness fell and she still hadn't called. He decided to show up unannounced.

He parked in front and knocked on the door. Her mother, delicate and proper-looking with worried eyes, greeted him with a

soft voice. Lawson handed her a bouquet of roses. She looked confused.

Then Monica appeared, acting perturbed. Under her breath she told him, “I said I would call you.”

“My phone was misconfigured,” he said.

With a sigh, Monica led him into the living room where her mother, a couple of aunts, and Ashley were eating cake.

“Just in time,” he said awkwardly.

“So you taught Monica?” her mother asked, serving him a slice.

“Yes, she writes well.”

Lawson excused himself to go to the bathroom. He went down the hall and opened one door and then another until he found her bedroom. Seeing her room was like seeing her naked: her private self revealed. This was where she spent her nights. This was where Ramon had lost it. Lacey curtains, a flowered comforter, a neat little desk, and the walls covered with posters of long-haired musicians Lawson didn't recognize. He saw the postcard from the Hotel Sunrise.

*

The next day Lawson called a man he knew in Administration to ask whether a student named Ramon Gutierrez was enrolled in classes. The student had attended the first few weeks of his course, Lawson said, and then disappeared. After putting him on hold, the administrator came back and said yes, Ramon Gutierrez was taking a class in industrial engineering, Thursdays from three to six.

Twice the next week Monica excused herself from their usual encounters, saying she'd be with Ashley. Ashley needed her, she said; she was having a rough time with her mom. But were they

getting together to talk about Ashley's mother or to talk about him? Maybe Ashley was covering for her while she saw someone else.

One Sunday after a brief visit, Monica told Lawson she had to leave. The love-making had been perfunctory. Irritated, Lawson said he had something to tell her. He said one of the professors had asked him if he and she had something going.

"He knows," Lawson said. "And if he knows, who else knows?"

"But he can't know," Monica said. "We never talk in front of people."

"It had to be Ashley," he said.

Monica's eyes flashed. She went to the door, then stopped, looking embarrassed. Lawson always left the money on the table but this time he hadn't. He waited a five count, then stood slowly before taking the bills out of his wallet.

*

Her visits to his apartment became ever more strained. Sometimes they had little to say to each other and Lawson, fearing she was bored, labored to make conversation. He realized that both of them were suffering but he couldn't bear for her to leave..

One day she told him she was going to see a play "with a group of friends."

"Who's going?" he asked.

"Sandra and some others."

"Can you come over after the play?"

"I don't know. We'll probably go out for a beer."

He kissed her, just to see if she would let him. But the kiss only brought him sadness.

That evening he kept looking at the clock. His mind conjured up images of what Monica could be doing, and with whom. The pain he felt was much like a physical pain.

He stationed himself outside the theater and when the people poured out he spotted her with Sandra and another woman. He moved closer.

“Lawson!” Sandra shouted, not so much to greet him as to alert Monica. When Monica looked his way, he saw the annoyance in her eyes.

*

The next day, Monica asked Lawson if they could meet at a coffee shop. Already seated, she looked different somehow, like someone he barely knew.

“I’ve started a job,” she said, glancing away.

“But . . .”

“And since I’ll have very little free time, I think we should stop seeing each other.”

All at once the sounds of the shop became muffled. Lawson’s limbs felt numb and helpless.

“I need time to myself,” Monica said.

“I’ll give you time,” Lawson managed.

“I have to go,” Monica said, picking up her book bag. “Please don’t try to contact me.”

Watching her leave, Lawson kept hoping she’d look back, perhaps with sadness in her eyes. But she seemed in a great hurry to get away, to a place that didn’t include him.

*

That night Lawson drank until he could feel no pain and fell into a heavy sleep. But he awoke around four in the morning with his mind awl. Like someone who has lost his keys, he wildly retraced his steps, thinking that if only he hadn't gone there, hadn't done that, they would be right there in his pocket. How had he been so careless? And he seemed to know, with absolute certainty, that he would be locked out forever.

He was thankful when eight o'clock arrived and he could get up. He felt tired and weak. The brilliant sunlight, instead of consoling, seemed to mock him.

He tried not to let her know he was watching her. From a second floor window he could see the cafeteria, where she often sat with Ashley. Sometimes he would drive to her house and park at a distance.

One day he got an email and, seeing her name as the sender, almost cried out. He read the message hungrily. Lawson, it said, my mother saw your car parked near our house. She said you were there for hours. He stopped and savored these words before going on. It really upset her. Remember what I said: stay away from me!

Not only was he crushed but he was also offended. What did she think he would do to her? Something extreme? Just the fact that she thought him capable of something like that suddenly made it seem like a real possibility.

From the railing on the second floor of the Engineering Building, one could watch the swarm of students making copies, eating empanadas, gossiping, and making cell phone calls. The class on Thursdays was held in Room 104. Lawson came to know the faces of every student in the course, none of which was Ramon's.

One day Christopher Pardo called Lawson into his office. Fastidiously dressed and wearing a frozen expression, Pardo exuded the smug authority of a bank manager. “Lawson,” he said, “a student has made a complaint about you.”

Lawson was stunned. He never had complaints from students. “Who is it?”

“Monica Rendon.”

Lawson clenched his jaw.

“She seems quite distraught. She’s ready to go to the dean, or whatever.” The brightness in Pardo’s eyes suggested that he derived a certain pleasure from conveying this news. Perhaps he felt that his dislike for Lawson had been validated.

*

Lawson was alarmed at the thought of losing his job. Teaching was his only refuge. He began to sense a change in his students: the way they looked at him, the way they whispered. He began to believe that whether through Pardo or Ashley or Monica herself, the word was out, and instead of listening to what he was saying in class, they were looking at him as if he were a stalker. He saw now that the story would be passed from student to student, year after year, and even if he managed to keep his job, he would be forever tarnished. He began to loathe Monica almost as much as he loved her.

The courtyard of the Engineering Building was especially frenetic at six o’clock. As Lawson watched the students file out of class, his breath caught in his chest. It was Ramon. No heavy metal garb, just jeans and a button-up shirt. His hair was cut short, his beard trimmed. His face was impassive.

Ramon headed toward the main avenue. Lawson followed, slowing as Ramon waited for the crosswalk light. He had no idea what he would say to him, but he didn't want to let him slip from his sight. Crossing the street and entering the mall, Ramon walked slowly, examining the display windows. He stopped at a teller machine, took out some cash, and continued on. Finally he came to a small restaurant that specialized in crepes. He took a table and asked for a menu. Lawson stood behind a kiosk of sunglasses and pretended to be making a selection. When the waitress asked to take Ramon's order, he indicated that he hadn't decided. That's when it became clear that he was waiting for Monica.

Lawson swiveled his head, trying to determine from which direction she would be coming. He felt lightheaded at the prospect of confirming his suspicions. Perhaps his pain would be assuaged by being proven right. By knowing that she had gone back to that possessive beast. Perhaps that would make it easier to let her go. Or perhaps it would make it harder.

After a while the waitress took Ramon's menu and, later, brought his food. He ate languidly, then paid and left.

*

On Thursdays Lawson would go to the Engineering Building and, from his perch on the second floor, he would listen to the buzz of the students and watch them flitting from one cluster to the next like bees. Once, as he was leaning against the railing, he felt a presence at his side. Turning, he saw it was Ramon. Head down, Ramon was also focused on the teeming crowd. They were no more than three feet apart.

The Wild Part

Barbara Carlson

To you, half-witted sleepwalker walking on stones along the river under a black wind, what is it that still lights the blanks between your dreams? The secrets that haunt your life? Kept in the darkness for your shawl? Is there a thread of inmost longing that guides your mystery? And will you let the shawl unravel to nothing? You, leaving your shoes on the shore of all that is empty & vast between lives. The shoes will hold rain & let night overtake them, shoes that once held you for all that you thought you were & could be. You slip in the water, feel for the bottom. But there is no bottom. There is no shore—only the weaving of immanent branches whose leaves drop one by one into the river & the river holds them.

Tecumseh, MO

Seasonal

Em Faerman

The solitary orange tree of my youth was a scrawny thorned thing approached on lazy afternoons, supper a long ways away. The air choking. So thick, it was as if I had drowned. The citrus's skin split easily, thrown against the deck father had built. That falling sound of lonely.

Me still a youth, knife-less; lips to skin, sucking the tang of its sour juice, savoring. Already party to the sorrow of summer fruits. The sweet sticky dripping quickly gone. Peaches and cherries falling in & out of season.

In & out and in & out.

Until I was no longer young. Until I was no longer knife-less, preferring the juice worked by my unadorned hand. Sustained by a scrawny tree still standing. Unburnt despite wildfire, flourishing despite drought. Flesh even termites refused. The heartwood strong enough to break their mandibles.

Cabinet

David Ishaya Osu

i have stopped praying
with my forehead, it is

no longer light that finds
the place, it is pain that

knows why a bee keeps
coming to my breasts, it

glows like bends in wine
her eyes continue in mine

love can be seen as flying
from one mirror to another

our hairs grow a web wide
to speak with skylarks and

fall together as alabaster
angels into a cry bare as

mayflowers: after water
colours comes a cachepot

Uncertainties

Carla McGill

I know that there is a hundred percent certainty that it will happen. Death. With new advances in science, is there the slightest chance? No. It's nice to know that there is reliability in the universe—that something is one hundred percent. Other things are more uncertain. Marriage, for instance. In America, there is a forty-six percent chance that a first marriage will end in divorce, and that changes all the time. The percent rate goes up for second marriages, making it more advantageous to stay in the first marriage. In Orange County, California, thirty-three people each day apply for a divorce. Newport Beach, just down the road, has the highest divorce rate in Orange County. I have heard that divorced people are more prone to getting terminal diseases, but I have not confirmed it. The outlook for getting cancer isn't certain. Though for a woman, death from heart attacks, strokes, and cancer can be lowered by thirty percent if she follows nutritional guidelines (fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats). Combine that with the fact that a female over the age of twelve has a two percent chance of being murdered, and you realize you can't go by nutrition alone. It depends on where you live.

I happen to live in Santa Monica, which means that I am one of the nineteen percent here on Social Security. About twenty percent of us have heart attacks and about fourteen percent are divorced. We have a seven percent chance of being robbed, which I was, and I

rent an apartment in the section of the city that has the highest number of robberies—close to twenty-two percent. As for car thefts, the highest percentage is over on the other side of town, where more than one-third of cars are stolen each year.

As far as losing children, I know that among parents who lose a child the divorce rate can be as high as eighty percent. I checked on the Internet, and more than 52,000 children die each year in the United States. If each one has both parents that makes more than 100,000. Children who die in car accidents—close to sixty percent. Children who died in car accidents back in 1980, not as many, about forty percent.

Many uncertainties remain. For example, how many of them had had a peanut butter and honey sandwich that morning? How many were wearing a green and orange striped pullover? How many just turned four years old? How many were named Corey or had Star Wars wallpaper or curly, caramel-colored hair? And how many of their mothers are now standing on their small balcony in a semi-decent neighborhood in Santa Monica, California, having their morning coffee; and, of those mothers, how many drink black coffee and how many remember what the weather was that day in 1980, when they decided to take a drive, just to get out and do something, just to go see the beach, perhaps make a sandcastle?

Drowning

Kandie St. Germain

This is the room on the moon where
the snow

rides

ambulance white
in the world
she left.

She tries,
steadies
herself.

But always a murmur

a rumor

a

slow

leak.

Soon, the sky

is

the

floor

sinking.

A sand song a dry gulp of desert floating upside down underground
hides in a kimono's sleeve creased with watery wind sorrow a flat
hand pushing past a face the beautiful breath's thread pulled by
invisible teeth.

Backs of crows

fall forward.

The Caver

Elizabeth Youle

After the long passage underground, over dark puddles and under low mineral formations, Judith and her small cadre at last found the entrance. She paused for a moment to watch. The portable gas stoves heating up Thanksgiving dinner made the scientists' long shadows dance on the walls of the cave just like ancient torchlight would have done. The assembled group was settling in, draping blankets on a large flat portion of the ground and repurposing stalagmites to hang up their parkas and carabiners.

Two tenured professors, Mary Claire and Sean, took plastic containers and tin foil bundles out of backpacks and set them out them near the cluster of stoves. A wiry older man scraped their contents into a collection of unmatched metal cookware, which he then placed gingerly on the wire frames of the stoves, pot by pot. A few more people were still making their way through the narrow passage down into this large grotto, the belly of the cave, and Judith could hear their laughter echoing dimly in the damp and misty dark.

She adjusted some flyaway hairs caught beneath her headlamp and filled her titanium mug with red wine from a box that had been wedged into a lumpy pillar extending from the ground to the roof of the cave. Her two students chattered excitedly, their headlamps pointing directly into each other's faces, and they unclipped their mugs to follow her.

A hand clapped her on the shoulder as she bent down, squeezing her through her puffer jacket. It was Mitch, she knew. “Sure feels good to be back stateside,” he said, turning her around to face him. His broad shoulder almost met her brow as he leaned to whisper in her ear.

“When we were on Sulawesi dreaming of home, did you think you’d get to spend the holidays back in a cave?”

“I didn’t dare,” she said. “How was Brussels?”

“Fantastisch.”

“And your talk?”

“Best yet,” he said.

He embraced her and the familiar longing began to swell, a soft and frantic chorus. It was the same longing that accompanied the uranium-series dating research they’d undertaken last fall, through their conference PowerPoints, and even, especially, in the dark and drowsy tropical bars in Indonesia they traipsed through with her students.

He shrugged.

“It was okay, I mean,” he said. “When we have the new paper ready, that’ll blow them away.”

He smiled at a small group gathered near the food, behind Judith, and the smell of burbling turkey gravy filled the dark enclosure.

“Hear ye, hear ye! This session of the American Speleologist Club is hereby called to order, holiday edition!” Sean, the president, called to the group. A popular lecturer, he was in his late forties with a small potbelly, his greying hair partially covered by a fleece

beanie. He gestured towards the food with hands full of plastic cutlery.

“The Thanksgiving dishes you all have so lovingly prepared have been warmed up and are now ready for your enjoyment, so feel free to dig in, people. They’re only going to get colder.”

“There’s wine by the mouth of the cavern,” Mary Claire called, “don’t forget!”

“That’s my cue,” Judith said, tapping Mitch’s chest as she turned to join the line. Mitch stooped to follow her. A rangy, loping man, his physique didn’t especially incline him to cave exploration. He’d started free climbing as a teenager in Colorado; long arms and wiry musculature made him a natural. Needing a college major, he’d picked geology and begun a slow descent into the lifelong study of caves. He spent years contorting himself into ever smaller avenues, spelunking into the deep with the same fervor he ascended cliffs in his youth.

Though they’d been collaborators for almost two years with a close, teasing rapport, Judith came to the field very differently. A shy child, she felt her first flush of acclaim winning science prizes in school. She’d always loved these dark places, nestled deep in the earth. She knew they contained secrets, even beyond any troglodyte bones or paintings that might be discovered in them. The caves themselves told the mysteries of the earth in their dripping, infinitesimally growing way. Global temperatures of the ancient world, long-forgotten ecological disasters, the composition of the air itself— it was all inscribed meticulously into the mineral layers of the cave, if only you knew how to read them. She was petite enough to stand at full height in most explored caves, with wide

hips and thick glasses and her dark hair perpetually drawn into a ponytail.

Mitch was her research partner and frequent coauthor but he was not, like her, widely respected in the field. An adjunct lecturer, his students fell in love with him and eagerly signed up for the extracurricular treks he organized. He'd slept with a handful of them in Constantine Caverns, their bodies illuminated by the glow of spotlights trained on magnificent stalactite formations. He kept that part of his life secret from Judith, but she knew anyway, the way one always does in a small community.

He ducked behind her in line and rested both of his hands on her shoulders and she leaned back ever so slightly into his hold. An elfin doctoral student passed out paper plates, nodding to each attendee.

“Happy Thanksgiving, happy Thanksgiving, happy Thanksgiving,” he repeated down the line. Mary Claire served sweet potatoes covered in a layer of marshmallow and stuffing with rehydrated mushrooms.

“And for you,” Sean said when they reached the turkey, “I saved a leg, sir.”

Mitch bowed.

After the meal was underway some people lit candles and placed them on every available flat surface, secured with Paleo-paste, and the scientists sat cross-legged or perched on the sloping rock where the ground met the walls of the cavern.

Judith sat with her old advisor, a pale man who wore a sweatshirt with a bat on it and his wife, an anthropologist. She

looked across the cave at Mitch. A lock of brown hair covered his eye as he smiled faintly at something a pretty grad student was saying.

“In Indonesia...” she heard him reply.

In Indonesia he’d come in and slept in her tent after his was ruined by a pack of boars that had caught the scent of an energy bar. He held her that night, cradling her head and stroking her hair.

“We’ve got it this time, Judy. Our paper will be in Nature.” She laughed and murmured assent, too nervous to turn and face him. Instead of the seduction she’d imagined for so long her heart beat over-quick and unsteadily. Her breath became ragged just as he spread out and fell asleep.

She listened to his low breathing, felt his broad solidity through the layers of sleeping bags, and stopped herself making the slightest motion for fear he would shift away from her. She was giddy, near delirious, but she must have slept eventually because the next day he was out of the tent before she woke up.

When she emerged he was stretching by the water, his t-shirt tied up around his forehead shading his face. His chest was tan and hairless but for a few fine dark curls. One of the postdoctoral students along for the trip was with him by the shore smoking a cigarette and chatting with their Indonesian guide.

“You ready to get going?” he called, gesturing to the boat they paddled in each day to the cave’s mouth.

“Give me 10,” she’d said reaching for her toiletry bag, wanting to brush away the taste in her mouth before another day gathering stalagmite specimens. She was crestfallen that nothing had happened in the tent but told herself that nothing wasn’t evidence

of anything; she couldn't draw conclusions about nothing. By the time their boat knocked into the craggy shore downriver, she had so thoroughly stifled her disappointment that she felt only an edgy impatience that she nursed all day.

"I am endlessly grateful for my brilliant coauthor!" Mitch said to the group, his wine held aloft.

"Here's to our adventures, and many more to come. I owe all my best treks to you."

"Hear, hear," Mary Claire called. Everyone raised their camping cups.

Judith blushed, pleased. Many more, she intoned inwardly.

"Right back at you," she said, meeting his gaze with a smile. His eyes crinkled winningly until he turned back to the student, responding softly to something she said as she reached up to touch his arm.

After several others in the group made toasts and offered thanks, the cave reverberated with increasing chatter. The scientists were drunk, their red faces discernible even in the softly flickering light. Judith went back to the box of wine. When she turned around, Mitch, again, was there.

"Have you ever been to the cathedral room?" he whispered loudly.

"No."

"You've got to see this drapery, seriously." He clasped her hand and led her down a dark narrow path deeper into the cave and away from the festivities.

The path ended at a two-foot ledge of smooth rock. Mitch stepped up onto the stone and held out his hand for her.

“Turn off your headlamp,” he ordered, and he shut off his electric lantern for effect.

They stood close together on the narrow platform overlooking this smaller chamber of the cave, which extended before them, deepest black. A low ping of dripping water sounded in its recesses.

“Now,” Mitch said and clicked on his lantern, holding it up high over his head to cast light above them. Long drapes of rock shimmered with calcite, their layers rippling like silk curtains pinned to the ceiling and frozen there. The curves and folds were white, translucent, and glittering.

Now, she thought.

“Right?” Mitch said.

“Mitch, I have to tell you something.” Her voice was strange to her, odd and high-pitched. He hooked his thumb through the carabiner on his belt loop and pointed to their feet, inches apart.

“There’s a little condensation on the ledge here. Probably slippery,” he said.

“Ask you something, I mean,” she continued. “Have you ever thought about us—”

She tried to sound casual but instead sounded faintly – British? – “thought perhaps we could be...?”

Mitch’s shoulders rose sharply and he started shaking his head slightly from side to side.

“We work together, Judy. We’re partners.”

“I know.” She looked down to the mug in her hands, now empty.

“I just feel like we’re beyond that, you know, we’re better than that.”

He lowered his lantern and it shone under his face, illuminating his brow and nasal cavities. He was feebly trying to find words and resorted to the same ones he used on backpacking Aussies and graduate students.

“Our partnership is so valuable to me and,” he paused just a moment, for sincerity, “I would hate to lose you.” A tendril of hair fell handsomely over one eye.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she said quickly. Her lie hung in the cave. Mitch clicked his carabiner open and closed and cocked his head to the side, peering down at her with a performed kindness while his hands twitched nervously.

“Just forget it. The wine,” she said.

Lithe and naturally beautiful, Mitch had done this before. His voice was penitent, weary; he was perhaps moments away from giving her a hug. The disdain she had always felt for the women he tossed aside arose once more, but now settled, horribly, on herself.

She had believed that she was smarter than them and more deserving of his loyalty, which she received because she was a brilliant scientist and because his career depended on her. A sheen of sweat appeared on her forehead. She trained her eyes down into the abyss pooling below them just as a curious roar took up in her ears. Mitch cleared his throat and checked his altimeter watch. The landscape of stalactites and stalagmites behind him suddenly looked like rows of teeth. Without thinking, she pushed him.

Mitch fell 6 feet on the other side of the ledge, landing with an awful pop into a shallow pool of water. His lamp went with him, clattered and shut off.

He moaned.

Judith peered over the edge into the darkness. She turned on her headlamp and found Mitch in its beam. He was gripping his ankle, dark blood mingling with several inches of cave water. His eyes had lost their sympathetic aspect; he looked up at her stonily. His lip curled in pain and derision.

“Bitch,” he whispered.

“Help, we need a doctor!” she called. Her shock moved quickly to terror but she couldn’t break his eye contact. “Mitch fell!” He sneered, still caught in her spotlight, as a commotion swelled in the distant cavern.

“We’re not medical doctors,” Sean called, hurrying down the path.

The scientists appeared, out of breath.

“Mitch-man, we got you,” Sean said.

“I’m alright,” he cupped his hands around his mouth to call up to them. “It’s my ankle.”

Half a dozen flashlights lit him now, moving over his long arms, his hair. He looked up at Judith for a moment then looked down at his ankle, which was twisted grotesquely to one side.

“I need a bandage, maybe a splint.”

They quickly made a hoist with nylon ropes rigged together to create a Mitch-sized basket. They pulled him up, four heaving scientists to a side. He winced when they knocked his ankle into a protruding rock and he cried out when they pulled him over the ledge. A microfiber scarf was fashioned into a tourniquet; gel ice packs from a cooler were skillfully encased right in the folds.

The pretty grad student took off her thermal shirt and wet it with her water bottle, wiping beads of sweat from Mitch's brow in her sports bra and unzipped parka.

"What were you doing down here?" she asked, but in the activity no one answered.

Sean clapped him on the shoulder.

"The ledge was wet," Mitch said.

"I'll call the ambulance," Judith said, and Mitch didn't protest. She ran back through the stone tunnel frantically, like a bat, to the exit. When she reached the cool evening outside, the deep blue sky, she dropped to her knees to root around in her cargo pants pocket for her cell phone. She found it and dialed 9-11 with shaking hands.

"Hello? Hello! I'm out here at Grover National Forest, in the big one, um, Sutton Cave. There's been an accident. Yes, we need an ambulance. One of our hikers fell and hurt his ankle, badly. Yes, I'll stand by, at the entrance. Thank you," she said.

She stood and waited, panting from the run. He wouldn't tell them that I did it, she thought hopefully. He wouldn't want anyone to know.

Tall wispy grasses trailed after the evening wind. Birds sang a bit from within the dark and scattered clumps of trees. Twenty long minutes passes, and Judith felt her panic move to resolve with every ragged exhale until she heard the sound of sirens caterwauling from the interstate.

At the hospital, Mitch wouldn't look at her. She spoke with all of his nurses and fussed over the surgery timeline. When his sister arrived, she shook her hand and gave her every detail about his care that she could rattle off, then receded. He'll never be able to climb

again, she thought very dolefully, but when she boarded the plane to Jakarta the next day a strange and lovely calm spread over her. She watched the plane ascend over the clouds and then gathered up the papers she needed to edit from her tote bag, including the most recent draft of her and Mitch's new paper and several student theses.

During tea service her aisle-side neighbor, an old man with white hair and friendly eyes, turned to her.

"Do you ever get claustrophobic?" he asked, pointing to the array of caving titles on her tray table.

"Never," Judith said, honestly.

The Clash

Gerald Yelle

This was supposed to be a day for comedy.
Day of the dawn, not dawn of the dead.
It was supposed to be a celebration. A much
needed respite. We'd been drinking and now
we were going to stop. We were going to
check into a shelter, then check ourselves out.
We were going to weather the needles
and pins. Take inoculations. Gargle with saline.
Lave the wounds. Visit the doctor. Butter the toast.
I don't remember what we were going to do.
I think we were going to visit our father.
I think we were going to edit our plans. It was
a time of great anticipation. We were about to
step out of the way of our own personal
goals. Our rising billions. Instead it felt like
exhaustion. Like we were having trouble catching
our breath. Like we were leaning out of
a twenty-story window. Balanced on abdominals.
Should we stay or should we go. It's a clash
of competing impulses seeing on a saw,
living every minute on a nerve rubbed raw.

Contributors

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Tim Keppel's work has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *The Literary Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, and elsewhere. Three of his story collections have been published in Spanish translation by Penguin Random House. Keppel teaches literature and writing at the Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia.

Carla McGill earned her doctorate in English from the University of California, Riverside. Her work has been published in *The Atlanta Review*, *Shark Reef*, *Common Ground Review*, *Vending Machine Press*, *The Penmen Review*, *Cloudbank*, *The Alembic*,

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