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RAGWEED

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Ragweed

A Literary Journal of Lees-McRae College

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Fiction

NOVEL EXCERPT

Emily Ekhart

I came to the French horn by accident. This was, I would learn, rather unusual. Most classical musicians have at least one musical parent, and this held true for my own circle of friends. Juliet's mother had been a concertmaster in London, a young rising star until a hand injury ended her career at the age of twenty-nine. Henry's father played piano well enough to accompany him in recitals. Penn's family was the most musical of all, with a piano teacher mother and an oboist sister. The Harris home was a wonderland of scores, old-fashioned records and CDs, busts of composers, and musical instruments—but I'm getting ahead of myself.

While Juliet, Henry, and Penn were already performing on the concert stage, I existed in musical ignorance in a leafy suburb outside Boston. My mother was a guidance counselor, my father a software developer. The only music I knew about was the ambient synthetic pop that leaked from TVs, radios, and kids' phones at school: music I found forgettable, if not annoying. I disliked the obnoxious thumping of cars at intersections, but I had no comprehension of the range of possibilities. I barely knew what an orchestra was, let alone Mozart or Beethoven.

At the age of fourteen, my main occupation was the school robotics team, a group of six high schoolers, five of whom I considered expendable. The other kids viewed the team as something like a club, a fun time to hang out after school in the tech lab and tinker with machines. I was focused on an actual goal. In two months, we would compete at an annual robot race held between ten schools in our area. Our school had never broken into the top half of the rankings. It was my first year on the team, and I wanted to lead the rabble to the top three, if not win outright.

The technology teacher, an easy-going man in his thirties, watched in bemusement as I whipped the team toward our destiny. I delegated tasks. I assigned Nancy, who was always looking things up on her phone, to collect pictures, descriptions, and video footage of past robot winners. Darryl always tabbed and labeled his notebooks for each class, so I directed him to organize and inventory the parts in our robot kit. Tim was a master at reinforcing his book covers with silver duct tape. I had him replicate the race course on our worktable with strips of masking tape; he would also be the time keeper for test runs. Joe and Jeff, the class clowns, were left as my personal assistants. They would help me to construct the robot and keep track of design versions and improvements.

Within three weeks, we got our robot to travel the two-meter distance as fast as last year's second place winner. Tim whooped and threw both hands in the air. Nancy clapped. Joe asked the teacher, "Can we have cake?" This enraged me.

"No!" I shouted, jumping up on a chair. "We haven't won anything yet. Keep working!"

That afternoon our teacher broke the news. I was fiddling with one of the joints of the robot, alone. The others had fled as soon as the meeting was technically over.

"Iris," he said, "Your vision is—unique—but I think it's harming the team."

I stopped what I was doing and looked up at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"The tech lab is supposed to be a positive place. It's about fun, not competition."

This made no sense to me. "But we're entered in a competition. *You* entered us."

"Right. An opportunity to meet other students and see their robots, not something to have an unhealthy obsession over."

I mulled this over, trying to understand how you could enter a competition and not want to win.

"Iris, there have been multiple complaints."

"About what?"

"About you."

I wondered who had accused me. "That's crazy. I'm the only one getting anything done. I designed the robot. I built it." I stopped just short of saying, *I am* the team.

"You are a helpful member," he conceded. I started to protest in rage, but he cut me off. "But if you don't change your attitude, I'm going to ask you to leave the team."

I stood up, pushing my chair out from behind me, leaving the partially adjusted robot in two pieces on the table.

"Fine then." I tried hard to make my teenage girl voice boom. "Good luck winning without me."

Bereft of robotics, I languished. There was little to do after school in a town like mine, where the busiest stretch consisted of a CVS, two churches, and the library. Most kids opted for team sports, but I abhorred these; they seemed to me like mere tests of brute strength, a celebration of humans' animal origins. Nor did I have any friends, excluded from female confidences by my intellectual interests and conceited attitude. I knew my short haircut and boyish clothes weren't conventional, but I didn't care enough to change them. I liked that they made me different in this unbearably ordinary town. I didn't belong in a place like this: swaths of green football fields, bland tasteful homes, square-nosed school buses, jewel-toned minivans. I was meant to do something grand, far beyond these somnolent streets. I could feel my destiny hidden behind the visible surface of things; I just had to listen for it, its heartbeat, its hum.

One Saturday night, Mom, concerned about my morose lack of activity, dragged me to a wind ensemble concert at Wheaton College. She never would have attended such an event on her own, but was invited by her friend Marlene. Unenthusiastic, I sat in the dark, drafty auditorium, hoping I could glean enough light to read the book I'd smuggled in. The performers filed out on stage in their concert uniform—black bottoms, white tops—carrying unfamiliar instruments of various sorts. I thought of the kids in school

who sometimes lugged mysterious cases through the hallways. I'd sometimes heard bursts of notes coming from behind the band room door, but I'd never been the slightest bit curious about it. I wondered why anyone would bother playing a musical instrument. It seemed a useless, puzzling pursuit.

The ensemble members took their seats. The lights in the auditorium dimmed even further, and I realized unhappily that it was now too dark to read, even though our second-row seats were close to the light of the stage.

When the conductor raised his hands, the ensemble burst into sound. I had never attended a live concert before, and I was stunned by the immediacy of the music—it wasn't separated from me through a screen or a speaker, but was there right in front of me. I was hardly a dozen feet from the origin of the sound waves filling my ears. I breathed the same air as the musicians, who turned red as they gasped for air. I saw woodwind players' fingers racing over the keys with thrilling speed; I saw each emphatic jerk of the conductor's shoulders, elbows, hands. The piece ended with a blaze of brass and crash of drums. The conductor turned to bow, his face shiny with sweat. As I clapped, my heart carried on the beat in silent momentum, unwilling to relinquish the rhythm.

The wind ensemble started in on a slow, lyrical song. The instruments played soft melodies that made me think of dark colors and cool autumnal evenings. A few minutes in, most of the instruments subsided into the background, and a single instrument rose above them in a solo. This instrument had a round, mellow tone that made me think of a large, graceful animal, like a whale. I'd never before heard a sound as mesmerizing as this. It felt like I'd swallowed the music, and it was spreading through my body like a cold beverage, making my skin tingle with a pleasant chill.

"What is that?" I whispered to Marlene, who seemed like she might know.

"French horn," she whispered back.

French horn. I turned its name over in my mind for the duration of the concert. The rest of the program was pleasant, but nothing arrested my attention as much as the sound of that single remarkable instrument.

A week later, I was still enchanted. Hours of French horn YouTube videos echoed in my head. I couldn't stop thinking about the sound. I felt that I had to possess it somehow. One day I blurted at dinner, "Could I take music lessons?"

Dad looked confused. Mom looked curious. "What do you want to play?"

"French horn." I felt my face get warm. For some reason, admitting that I had been affected by the concert felt embarrassing.

"What's that?" Dad asked.

"A brass instrument. Sort of like a trumpet, but lower." I had already acquired some familiarity with the different instruments from my YouTube explorations.

"Oh." I could tell he was wondering why I would want to do such a random thing, but he wasn't about to discourage me. My parents considered it important to let me try things.

"I think it's a nice idea," Mom said. "I'll talk to Marlene."

The following week, she returned home with a strangely shaped black case, which

she had borrowed from the high school. It somewhat resembled a large briefcase, except one end sloped downward and flared into a bulbous shape. The case was covered in scuff marks, and its back corners were held together with dirty gray duct tape. I reached for the handle. The leather strap that attached its ends to the case was frayed on one side, and it jerked up alarmingly, like it was about to rip off.

"Maybe Dad can fix that," Mom said.

I opened the case. Inside, nestled in a plush fabric, lay a weathered-looking instrument. I guessed it had once been shiny, like most brass instruments, but this poor veteran was tarnished and scratched, with so many dents that the metal resembled the rippled surface of water. This instrument looked arcane and mysterious. It had a circular maze of pipes whose purpose was unclear. To my amateur eye, they seemed to twist in all directions, like a tangled mass of vines. The end of the main pipe suddenly flared into a large bell almost as the rest of the instrument. I'd never expected to find myself face-to-face with a French horn, but now that I did, I was fascinated by this improbable object.

Susanne Wallace taught horn in the living room of her home. On one end of the room were a recliner, a flat screen TV, and scattered children's toys. On the other end, delineated by the back of her couch, was the music studio. She had two wooden chairs facing a black music stand. A large framed photograph showing a close-up of the horn's pipes hung on the wall. There was a bookshelf filled with CDs, music books, various horn mutes, and figurines of people playing the horn. She even had an old-fashioned metronome, a narrow pyramid with a swinging arm that ticked the beats. I gawked at this display, amazed that someone who lived only ten minutes away could lead such a different life from my parents.

Suzanne herself surprised me. I'd expected someone straight-backed and stern, a music teacher who would inspire excellence through fear. Or else someone young and overjoyed that a fresh new mind wanted to learn this obscure instrument. Suzanne was neither. She appeared to be in her late thirties, and she seemed a little bored.

"Let's get started," she said, lifting her horn from the rug where it lay next to the chair. She gestured for me to sit.

She set her horn on her lap, turning to face it in my direction. It was a dusky silver with hardly any shine. "All right, an overview. This is the lead pipe." She pointed to the slender pipe that started at the top of the instrument. "That's where you blow in. This is the bell, where the sound comes out." She passed a hand over the flared end of the instrument. "These are the slides, which you'll move for tuning and emptying water." She pulled out a small U-shaped pipe from the center of the instrument and then replaced it. "And these are the valve keys." She pressed the three keys under her left fingers in succession. "You'll use these to play different notes. I know that's a lot. You don't have to remember it all now."

"I got it," I said. I already knew all this from reading about the horn online and watching YouTube videos.

"Let's see if you can make a sound," Suzanne said, indicating the closed case at my feet. I bent down and fumbled with the clasps of my horn case, lifting the instrument out.

I fished the mouthpiece out from its small compartment. It was a small piece of metal, narrow on one end, slightly flared on the other into a cup that rested on the player's lips.

"With the mouthpiece," Suzanne said, "You want to make sure it's secure. It's okay to twist it, but don't push it in too hard. And never bang it in with your palm."

"I know." I inserted the mouthpiece into the lead pipe with ease.

"Now, to make a sound—"

I could restrain myself no longer. I breathed in and brought the instrument to my lips. I carefully performed the trick I'd learned: squeezing my lips together and blowing through them fast. The instrument sounded with a note. I thought it sounded solid: a cool, competent statement that a talented new student had arrived. I took in more air through my nose, adjusted my lips, and switched to a different note. I played yet another by pressing down one of the keys. I felt Suzanne's eyes on me. I wondered how many of her students came in already knowing how to play. I played several more notes until my lips started to feel tired. I casually lowered the horn, pretending that I'd decided it was enough.

I expected praise. It was always easy to impress my teachers in school. I put minimal effort into my school work, but they were always eager to blab about how I'd gotten the highest score on some test everyone else failed, or had written some essay far above my grade level. Their awe filled me with contempt, but it would have taken a kid with saintly nature not to be affected by it. And I was far from saintly.

"All right," Suzanne said. She sounded totally blasé, like I'd just tried to show off by reciting the alphabet. "I guess you've already messed around a little."

The words stung—hours of preparation reduced to *messing around*.

"Can you read music?"

"What?"

She opened the book that was sitting on the music stand. Inside was a page filled with mysterious symbols. There were sets of lines running horizontally across the paper. Upon these were inscribed strange curlicues, lines, and dots. I had never seen anything like it before. My sense of panic returned. I'd had enough sense to prepare for playing the French horn ahead of time, but something like this hadn't even occurred to me. I was starting to have a vague, terrifying realization. Was I meant to decipher these complicated symbols and play the instrument at the same time?

"Relax," Suzanne said.

"I am relaxed."

"Your face doesn't look like it." She laughed. "You're sort of uptight, aren't you?"

"No." Even to my own ears, the word sounded false.

"Don't worry. You'll pick it up—eventually." Smiling, she gave me a side glance.

"I want to show you something," Suzanne said.

I watched as she breathed, pursed her lips, and blew into the instrument. It resonated with a round, dark sound. Accustomed to my own uncontrolled bursts of sound, I was astounded by the beauty and depth of that one perfect note. She followed it with a whole sequence of them, each like a shapely pearl on a string. She departed from that linear string into a jaunty melody, bouncing up and down from high to low with the

ease of a mountain goat navigating a rocky slope. She finished it off with a rapid oscillation between two notes and a final low note so loud that I could feel it resonating in my chest.

She grinned. I could tell she knew she'd won my respect.

I thought about the horn at school, while teachers droned on about *Lord of the Flies* and the evidence for tectonic drift. Every moment of my day was mere prelude to the when I returned home and ran up the stairs to my room. One corner had been transformed into a music nook with a folding wire music stand, a chair, and a rag, which I left on the floor for absorbing "water" – condensation that accumulated in the tubes of the instrument and had to be periodically emptied.

The horn's solemn, cool weight became familiar under my hands. Despite my chronic teenage arrogance, I knew Suzanne's fast strings of notes were out of reach for the time being. But I felt an immense desire to produce at least one Suzanne-quality note. One resonant, three-dimensional note: not a cartoonish, squiggly circle, but a perfect vibrant sphere. I wanted to do what she did: to take plain air and transform it into a brilliant stream of notes.

I started with long tones: playing a single note for the count of eight with my new digital metronome clicking at one beat per second. The metronome was a small, digital device that emitted clicks at all sorts of speeds. It also had a screen for the tuner: a little line swiveling back and forth like the speedometer on a car, registering your exact pitch. Each note, I learned, was less like a stair step than a slope. A middle C could have minute variations up or down in pitch, and these were called "sharp" and "flat." The goal was to get the tuner line to stay steady right in the middle, the perfect center of the note.

Then I did slurs. Unlike the piano, which has a dedicated key for every single note, the horn has only valves. It can play all the chromatic pitches over a four octave range. But any individual valves combination on the horn can result in ten or more notes, depending on the position of the player's mouth and lips. With slurs, I pressed down a single key and practiced moving between two different notes.

These exercises complete, I started my melodies from Goldstein's etude book. The music notation was starting to make sense. On the background lines, lower notes were placed lower vertically than higher notes. I could now play six notes in total. This exhilarated me. It reminded me of when, as a child, I'd learned to read and realized that soon I could decipher the books on my parents' shelves, with all their knowledge and secrets. I was starting to love this instrument. It took my breath, so silent and otherwise unremarkable, and transformed it into wild and unexpected sound.

Mercy

Bryce Patterson

There's a Vulture in the barn, she tells me. The animals are afraid.

I know this. I know, because I hear the Vulture whispering, the sound lapping through the wooden slats of the barn and over prairie grass to our little clapboard house; the sound stealing through every window, nook, and cranny. It was a dull pain in my stomach that woke me, hunger, and I heard and I was afraid: *Give me*, it says. So I left my bed, struck a match and lit a candle. I did not hear my nightgown trail behind me. I did not hear the cattle murmuring, or the insects chatter. I did not hear my feet creaking over the floorboards.

I placed the candle at grandmother's feet and the light haloling her hands let me hear, silhouette flickering large on the wall. I watched them work. Shaking, joints cracking (though I can't hear those), she made the shapes that I hear. Over and over and over.

There's a Vulture in the barn. The animals are afraid. Grandmother does not need to tell me that she is also afraid. Her bones draw white lines through the thin layer of meat covering her body. We are hungry. She does not need to remind me of the new calf in the barn, still weak, hungry as we are, and we cannot afford to lose a single head. I know this. Vultures come for more than livestock. We both know this.

I don't hear my grandmother whispering her *hail Mary, full of grace* as I walk to the window. The barn is close to the house. Moonlight catches the sides. Beyond, the pines are dark.

I hear the Vulture whispering and it is the first sound I have heard since the accident, the day the world went silent. I turn back to my grandmother in her chair. She is repeating the signs, *the animals are* and I can only see the relief of her hands against the wall. Her eyes are failing. Candlelight glints off of her pupils, dim, as they catch my outline and the motions change.

Get the gun.

We are alone here. Six miles out of Leadville, there is only grandmother and me and the nearest homestead too far to reach in time. I know that I can barely lift the rifle, but I also know that I have to. My grandmother coughs, the motions jarring her shadow against the wall. She is all stretched skin and shrunken flesh. A speck of blood drips from the corner of her mouth. The Vulture is a carrion-bird. The Vulture follows decay.

I take my candle and drag the gun from its place by the door, attempt to sling it over my shoulder. It's too heavy, and I let it hang behind me. Fumble with the knob. I don't hear the door creak as I open it, but I feel the rust in the joints as I drag the rifle out onto steps, down to the wild prairie. A breeze threatens to put out my candle, and I huddle my body over it like a lifeline. Step out into the grass. The barn is dark up ahead. I can already smell the animals inside; a wall of shit and the carrion scent of Vulture. My breath catches in my throat.

If the stories are true, the crickets are not chirping tonight. In the barn, the animals make no sound. So they say.

Give me—the voice weaves through the prairie grass. It moves like smoke, or like a snake moves. Oily. Feathered. Smooth and too soft. I try to quicken my pace, and I can't, won't, don't dare, and the rifle drags a line in the grass behind me. Step, freeze, step. The voice gets louder. I try not to listen, but there is no other sound in my world. I lift the candle over my head as I ghost through the door.

The woman, he says. *Give me*— My candle lights the space for a few feet in each direction, just enough to make out the hay strewn across the floor, the wild open eyes of the calf and its mother. Beyond, ink-blackness. The voice comes from every direction, a physical force in the limited space. All I have are my eyes, and I turn up toward the rafters, knowing that when the Vulture comes it will be from above. My halo of light barely reaches the ceiling above me. I tighten my grip on the rifle, swing it up to balance on my forearm. Ahead there is a lantern attached to one of the beams. I can't see it, but I know that it's there.

I take another faltering step into the barn. *Mercy, Lord, mercy*. I am too far from the door. Dangerously far. There's no turning back now, only two shots in the dark and my eyes are nearly as useless as my ears. A flutter of air and a talon grinds into the crossbeam above me. I stumble back, candle high, and I see him.

Naked and coal-toned and starved enough to count his ribs. Hunched over, I can see the thread-lines where the beak is sewn into his face. The light of my candle catches the skin on his forearms, grotesquely stretched away from the bone and crudely nailed to each wing.

The woman.

Give me.

It takes me swinging all of my weight and dropping the candle to lift the gun, barely able to aim beyond the shaking. I don't hear the boom. I see light reflected on a half-dozen pupils throughout the space. I see wood splinter and his wings catch the air and he dives backwards. I see mother and calf slammed against the retaining wall, battering to get out.

The pitch of the Vulture's voice raises to a shriek and I hear the hysteria now more than anything; *please, please, please*. He is starving. Starving and weakened and desperate and dangerous.

My candle sparks out on the hard earth and there is nothing but black and the Vulture shrieking.

Please, please, please.

He is starving. My stomach aches. They say that Vulture meat is tough and without flavor and I know he is hardly a meal. But I begin to salivate. I could tempt him down with a morsel. One act of mercy, and then another—a killing, a freeing. *Bang*. We are so hungry.

I can't see, but I lift the rifle again. Feel rather than hear a metallic click as the bullet drops into the chamber. And I don't hear the report, the same sound that took my ears when I was barely old enough to remember. Don't hear the ripping of flesh-bone-flesh. But in the muzzle flash, I watch gore explode out of the new calf's head.

I drop the rifle, empty now, and leave the barn as the Vulture descends on the body.

Only one act of mercy tonight. These are hard times.

Poetry

Třathánka Íyotake's Drum

Robert René Galván

Not much remains of my ancestors,
That other half ensconced in the winding
Molecules inside my cells;
The plains purged of bison
To make way for *amber waves of grain*,
The Thunderbird plucked from the sky,
Morphed into the T-Bird
Until her Daddy takes it away,
Regulated, relegated into ever smaller
Plots of land, wigwams traded for trailers,
Bounty of the forests for dried milk,
Tainted blankets and fire water,
Represented by grinning sports totems,
The bearer of cigars and Hamm's Beer
From the land of sky blue waters,
Chuck Connors' painted face
On the Big Screen—

There's a U-Tote-Em store near you!

(My earliest poems were written
On Big Chief Tablets!)

They took horses and guns,
But not enough to quell the tide of Manifest Destiny,
The suffocation of concrete cities:

In Vancouver, I saw my brothers inebriated
At Dr. Sun Yat Sen's Chinese garden,
And frat boys from the University of Texas
Refilled our glasses at the Scholtz Biergarten
Because they thought we were "drunken Indians,"
And found us amusing.
A toxic pipeline runs through the last vestiges
Of our territory and the Thanksgiving myth prevails.

In the unspoiled world, everything was filled
With the essence of the Manitou,
Every stone and tree,
The sky and the wind;
In dancing, singing and beating of the drum;
The sacred cacti of the vision quest
Brought forth the guardian spirits.
Heathens! *Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?*

In a place once called Manna-hata,
At the National Museum of the American Indian,
I stood before his horned drum
Cloistered behind glass,
He who crushed Custer at Little Big Horn,
Toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show,

Earned his way as kitsch, returned to Standing Rock
Only to be shot in the head for Ghost Dancing.

**In Lakota = Buffalo Bull Who Sits Down*

Soft Shells and Scuppers

Henry Cherry

I was a chopper,
a stirrer. I was
seasoned out of mind.

I was a dynastic crab
imperial, dangling
claws to the night.

I trucked out of the
Sip N Bite in white
scupper boots.

Rambling down Baltimore
Street, the blue light came
five ways, like in craps

Sentry

Kyle Trujillo

The implications of a good world are more strange,
Discomforting to cross my reflexive dismiss of the future.
I am too prepared in myself for the lifeless resolution
Where inconceivable machinery disrupts our small joy.

It is reasonable to sleep on the endless open sea,
Not when the fate of souls is told by our presence to act.
The weather in my shell is skewed toward meaningless
As cast against the human story and its organic values.

When I linger careless it returns to shape my vision.
Bleak vibrations through the air in my signals send
A flood of bad imagination to behind my flattening view.

I believe in no absolute cataclysm come to waste our horizon.
No hard stop to hope where effort turns to tears in flame.
My sore inaction is inexcusable by emotional disguises
Such as automation, distress or a weakness identity.

I cannot be caught asleep outside the world, painted
Eyes as stone or cold with thin teeth fearful.

Total detach and an irrelevant spirit are two fluttering straw figures
For delaying my scratched lens its smash across the brickwork.
People inside the Earth sing human needs worth recognition
Despite the rushing water and our censored, peeling skyline.

I am familiar with how the storm emits gorgeous, bleach-white bolts
To lotterize the flesh of waving, rooted flowers. Listening how
This air will wipe off life like vapor, I'll
Too easy let my conscious-self exhaust.

The expectations for a good world are more difficult,
More steady gazing over ruthless noise to watch for
The wounded and still walking, past hot breath to find the
Sugar that's in sweat. Responsibility to clean soil and
Sentry vacuum sky.

Death is not yet. We are not disappearing.
We are not alone in this glass forest winter.
The horizon is clean and endless like a ring of wind above.
If I let beauty to the world then it will multiply and live.

my third eye

Dan Jacoby

not a whisper of wind,
pipe smoke hovers
drifts off to northeast
fog beginning to root itself
in grey fallen corn rows along otter creek

air is pungent of decaying detritus, wood smoke
timber has the musk of fall
rustling of leaves seems like a shiver
as elm, oak, hickory leaves riffling
cloaking the timber floor

tree frogs, insects in retreat
making my walks noisy, lonely
until the fall rains and early snow
soften the sounds of my stroll
sharpen hearing to sudden sound

here the dead find conduits
into the reflections of the living
especially those souls left uneasy
robbed of happiness and dreams in life
fueled by the rage of loss

unrestrained by the grave
come in the rain
voices carried in gusts
or in early morning frosty fogs
in a song fixing thought out of nowhere

seem to be forging an epitaph
one they feel they lack
until they stop keeping score
they will never have any peace
nor i

Lees-McRae Student Feature

Watched

McKenzie Jensen

I watched her prepare her breakfast and noted that she had ten more minutes before she had to leave for work. She pivoted on her foot and grabbed her car keys to head out of the door, but not before she stooped to my level to pat my golden fur and scratch underneath my chin so that my leg kicked. I stared at her, my eyes looking into hers, knowing that I knew everything about her, and she knew absolutely nothing about me. She left the house telling me to be a good boy and that she'd *see me later*. I watched her car pull out of the drive and turned with a flick of my tail when I could no longer see her.

I'd lived with my owner for two years now. She found me when I wandered out of the woods with ticks and fleas covering my matted fur. From the beginning, she accepted me in my four-legged form, then again, she had never known anything different. I watched my soft paws pad across the kitchen floor, feeling the discomfort in my joints from the previous day of not being able to stretch my limbs out. I slink my way to the bathroom where the mirror is. Once there, I begin to observe my reflection. Soft blonde fur and a stark black nose are the first to capture my attention my fur is course and well managed much to my dismay. I thought it felt too coarse to be perceived as real, but my current owner was fooled.

After I surveyed my form, I looked at my eyes, a dead giveaway if you ask me. They were too small and not the correct shape to be from a dog. I laughed to myself, and a chuckle made its way through my mouth and out of my snout.

I stood, fully upright on my back legs now at my usual 6 feet tall instead of my debilitating three feet tall stance that I have to take when my owner is around. I feel for the cold metal on the stomach of my fur and pull until it stops below my naval. My cool skin appears behind the clumped fur, and I begin removing the suit while I watch myself.

The head is first, it slides off my oily scalp and exposes my dark pupils and crooked nose, my face greasy from sweat and snot. My arms are next, they glisten in the light and expose my slim toned arm, veins sticking out, I look at my chiseled nails and take another bite out of one of them before stepping my left leg out of my disguise and then my right. Once entirely out of my suit, I make eye contact with myself and grin. I survey my naked body and flex my muscles, knowing that as long as I want this to go on, it will.

A Tuesday Afternoon in 2003

Alice Gomez

I collected TV static with my hands, reveled in its viscosity

Plucked the mint bashfully growing on the side of my house
Perfumed my hands with it
Put in my pocket for later

Tried to shower by myself for the first time
Similar to the static, I let my fingers feather on the supple inside of my
bicep

I reveled again

Pulled a scab off of my knee and watched the blood bubble and spill
I thought my knee was crying
I apologized to it.

I needed to know that this is all real
To believe I am here

I wished my soul would come introduce herself to me soon

CONTRIBUTORS

Henry Cherry

Henry Cherry has worked as a cowhand in South Texas, a chef in New Orleans, and once snowshoed through Maine in February. Now a journalist and photographer, he is based in Los Angeles. A recent story appearing in *Slippery Elm* was nominated for a Pushcart. He has been a featured reader at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and at Litquake in San Francisco. His work has appeared in Australia's *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Silver Needle Press*, *The Louisiana Review* and is upcoming in *Poydras Review* and *Free State Review*.

Emily Eckart

Emily Eckart is the author of *Pale Hearts*, a short story collection. Her writing has appeared in *Nature*, *The Washington Post*, *Harpur Palate*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Potomac Review*, and elsewhere. She was a 2016 visiting artist at New York Mills Regional Cultural Center. She studied music, literature, and sustainability at Harvard University. Read more of her work at emilyeckart.com.

Robert René Galván

Robert René Galvin was born in San Antonio, TX, and resides in New York City where he works as a professional musician and poet. He has taught at Manhattan College, The College of Mount Saint Vincent and the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music. His last collection of poems is entitled, *Meteors*, published by Lux Nova Press. His poetry was recently featured in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Gyroscope*, *Hawaii Review*, *Stillwater Review*, *West Texas Literary Review*, and the Winter 2018 issue of *UU World*. He is a Shortlist Winner Nominee in the 2018 Adelaide Literary Award for Best Poem.

Alice Gomez

Alice Gomez is a 21 year old Guatemalan woman from Los Alamitos, California. She is a senior at Lees-McRae College pursuing a degree in Theatre Arts and will be graduating in May 2020. Alice plans to move to Boston Massachusetts after her graduation.

Dan Jacoby

Dan Jacoby is a graduate of St. Louis University, Chicago State University, and Governors State University. He has published poetry in *Anchor and Plume (Kindred)*, *Arkansas Review*, *Belle Reve Literary Journal*, *Bombay Gin*, *Burningword Literary Review*, *Canary*, *The Fourth River*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Steel Toe Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and *Red Fez*, to name a few. He is a former educator, steel worker, and Army spook. He is a member of the Carlinville Writers Guild. Dan was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2015. He is currently looking for a publisher for a collection of poetry.

McKenzie Jensen

McKenzie Jensen studies History at Lees-McRae College where she is also a cheerleader. Winner of the 2019 English Department Ghost Story Contest, she also writes poetry. McKenzie is from North Carolina's Piedmont.

D.E. La Valle

Danielle is a writer of short fiction and poetry. She enjoys expressing herself through a variety of media, but her true passion has always been to write. She has appeared in *Raconteur Literary Magazine* and will be featured in *Bookends Review* this June.

Bryce Patterson

Bryce Patterson is a writer and musician based in Colorado. His work has appeared in print in *Journal 2020*, and he has read at large public events like the Boulder Body Slam and In the Bleak Midwinter. He received the Jovanovitch Award for Imaginative Writing as an undergraduate at CU Boulder.

Kyle Trujillo

Kyle Trujillo lived his nineteen years in Southern California before driving to Seattle in 2016 with his partner and cats. He writes poetry of uncanny moods while drinking coffee at three a.m., and also creates experimental electronic music as Sunshine Girl.

About the Issue Editor

Nolan Capps is a writer and a graduate of Lees-McRae College. He fought in Afghanistan in 2010, and that experience colors much of his work. In 2017, his story "Hearts and Minds" was selected as runner-up in *Phoebe's* Creative Nonfiction Contest, and his short story "Smoke Signals" will appear in the 2019 issue of the *Journal of War, Literature & the Arts'* 2019 issue. Capps earned All-Conference honors in 2017 as a collegiate cross-country runner, and he still runs today. When he isn't writing, running, or drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon, he writes country music under the alias "Geoff-Gordon Ramsey."

