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Letter to My Uncle from S. Goering Street

by Elizabeth Ratzlaff

[201 S. Goering
Moundridge, KS]

Dear Sam,

I send this letter from my new address. Had you heard we moved back to my grandparents' old place? Back to the yellow siding, green shutters, zwieback, books, and climbing trees. Same neighbors, same school. They're gone, but they haven't really left. Grandma's brush strokes flutter from her painting of peonies to the floral print wallpaper. The garden, flowers, and scattered beans of the locust trees write Grandpa's name in the ground. As I fell asleep last night, I dreamt I was with them:

Dusting off the crumbs,
we fold the picnic blanket,
the sky flowing with fury.

Crack! and I'm alone –
the sole tree in
waves on waves on waves
of grass.

A prairie falcon dive bombs,
the earth crumbles beneath,
rain turns to rubble,
and I'm tossed about a bluestem sea.

New waves with a new rhythm.
The grasses are gone, replaced by
hand after hand after hand
grasping for solid ground.

“When the ocean heaves
 sending rhythms of water ashore,
 Piedade looks to see what has come.” [Paradise –Toni Morrison]
 Sees a face, then millions of faces.
 Piedade withheld, grace ungiven –They are unwanted.
 They don’t match.

Uncle, you can imagine I woke feeling rattled. The morning came. I tried
 to brush the dream away as I had the crumbs inside of my dream. Lying on
 the worn, familiar porch steps, I found the paper. Seeing a small body, head
 face down in the sand, arms lifeless, I read the headline:
 “Image of Drowned Syrian, Aylan Kurdi, 3, Brings Migrant Crisis
 Into Focus” [The New York Times]
 That night I dreamt again:

Surrounded again by
 blade after blade after blade
 of American big bluestem.
 Each one matches.

The blades speak to me
 in a language my
 ears have never heard, seen, tasted.
 Andropogon Gerardii, their name.

I hack my way through the grass
 revealing my grandparents’ house,
 my home.

I reach for the door knob,
 eager to escape the mass of unfamiliarity.
 My hand falters,
 the door knob centered at the bottom of the door.

Inside, the lights flash on, off, on, off.
 The radio broadcasts distorted babble,
 carpet now cold concrete,
 and furniture made of barbed wire.

The painted peonies have been replaced.
Filling the frame are unyielding blades of bluestem.
Outside I check the house number. Still 201.

“...The old address is unreachably there and
yet has been annulled.”

[*The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum's
Logic of Irreconcilables* —Edward Said]



American Desert Flower. Photography. Garrett D. Smith.

Uncle, I hope I haven't lost you. If you are already questioning my soundness of mind, you'll be sure of your supposition when I tell you what I found the following day. Caught within the laces of my tennis shoe was a seed head belonging to a blade of big bluestem, unmistakable with three individual spikelets, resembling a turkey's foot. Believe me or choose not to, but I tell you these things for a reason — because of a realization.

I am a blade of big bluestem grass. I twirl the seed head between my index finger and thumb, and I imagine a stretch of Kansas prairie. I see big bluestem standing tall — proud of how far it has come, proud of its transformation from seed to a salient inhabitant of its surroundings. Its roots staking claim to where its humble seed once landed — in hopes for a future, for prosperity and provision for its kind.

But in its pursuit, it is susceptible to fear: its roots resist the life of anything new, hoarding resources to silence the persistent “just in case;” when the new manages to find a landing place among established roots, big bluestem determines it must grow taller than the rest in fear that it won’t receive the light to satisfy. It disregards the shadow its resolute climb casts on those beneath; from its mighty height, it looks down at another, demanding assimilation to its kind in turn for success, happiness, a home.

Uncle, do you see that we are the Big Bluestem? Did you notice how we have grown, learning to imitate and fit, scared of anything different encroaching on our conventional existence? Frankly, Big Bluestem’s prairie home has been and continues to be “a forest of closed doors behind which there is a breaking into people with a world not theirs.”

[*“To Say From Their Way”*

—Diane Glancy]

I stare out the window and daydream:

Of a home without fear
 Without walls
 Without locks
 Without set, patterned wallpaper
 Without an entrance fee
 stripping identity; a home
 with endless seats at a table
 in all its forms
 With doors flung wide

Love,
 Elizabeth



Thumbelina. Acrylic with mixed media. Natalie Unruh.

Lost Cloud Interview

by Will Shook-Shoup

I open daycare memories at end
of Monday's naptime, flip the pillow to
the cooled side and squirm towards sagewort friends:

there's toilet trauma, potty training, new
and violent wild Morning Glory wars,
their petals ripped by sylphid wings, their roots

among the cracks I will not step on. Sores
that ooze from falldowns, thistle scrapes, and hoops —
our basket plastic, broke, and netless — wait

for Band-Aids' grace while Candy hocks her Kay
in back by orange juice jug. Then Abigail,
our poet guest, slips into memory's play —

through wisps of dream and mothers' backs not broke —
reminding me that once I danced like smoke.

To the Objectified Black Girls

by Akiyaa Hagen-Depusoir



Reflections. Watercolor. Akiyaa Hagen-Depusoir.

To the objectified black girls
We know who we are

Objectified black girls
When will we stop allowing ourselves to be the punchline to every loud
joke?
To be the fetish to every fantasy?
The immobile chess piece controlled by the demands of others?
Constantly having to prove our place in society, in our community, in our
family, in our own mini minority novelty groups?

Why are we still a novelty?
Because our bodies are still under scrutiny?
Because the only thing that can truly hold my hair back is a scrunchy?
Because our livelihoods still have no security?

Objectified black girls

When will we have security?

When will we know what it means to be secure as a double negative, double
adversity minority?

Has our security been stolen by black males in another dowry over our
blackened bodies? Was 3/5ths of me divided in a divorce
settlement scrimmage?

Was my testimony forgotten?

My affidavit to independence over this body, lost in translation?

Objectified black girls

When did we have independence to begin with?

When were we not the property of some minority majority, whether it be
by race or gender, that have the ability to negate our own solidarity
as black girls?

To ensure our label as objectified black girls

Objectified black girls

What does it mean to be objectified?

Well, what does it mean to be desensitized?

What does it mean to be overly sexualized?

Our bodies have been fetishized

Minds minimized

Personality rationalized

Commodified

Ratified so our curves become our most prominent asset to society

Only reinforcing the novelty our ass may behold

Striking curiosity but only in brevity

Long-term relationships have lost any real integrity

Bodies wanted for the novel anomaly conquer

But the width of our hips makes us easier to discard

As someone is always in search of a novel artifact

And our hearts are always left broken and searching

Objectified black girls

Why are we still searching?

What can we possibly be lacking that cannot be found in the curvature of
our own hearts?

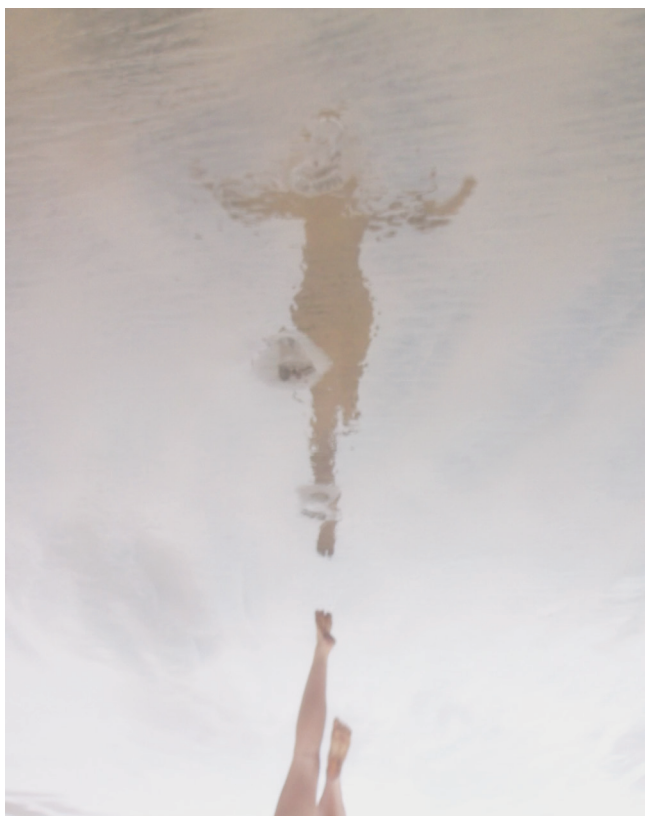


Jerusalem Reflections: Mediterranean Sea

by Sutton Welsh

Glass could enter into my feet as I walk to a blue waves, white foam destination. I hear the giggling of my peers, some louder than others, but all harmonious. You can hear the clink, clatter of shells in our palms, hoping to bring a piece of this Mediterranean moment with us.

Why did I face the glass in my feet, the bird poop, the airplane food, the hauling of a suitcase larger than my body? All to learn. And I have learned this: so often we grow without learning, keep seeking without finding. To touch, to taste, to feel another world will only reveal the canvas of conflict is painted gray.



Untitled. Photography. Garrett D. Smith.



Flora. Photography. Katrina Heinrichs.

Eighth Rest

by Allie Chesbrough

Inhale.

The calm before the storm, nothing
but anticipation and respired
water droplets fill the air.

Stagnation is a moment
held captive by those creating it,
the token black kid, stereotyped
Asians, variants in a sea of
whiteness melding as fifty sets of eyes,
one-hundred ventilating lungs, one being.
Where language becomes
irrelevant and differences fade away.

Where speechlessness is all you
need to hear the ledger lines
weaving harmony into a new score.
Exhale.





Kansas Violin. Oil. Natalie Unruh.

Winter

by Austin Biggerstaff

June 13, 2036

This winter is the most beautiful of all. It is my favorite time of the year. The water is glistening. The faint sight of evaporation can be seen from the tops of the water. They do say that the sun is burning brighter. The trees are delightfully barren of all their leaves. The trunks are an eerie brown color that almost looks burnt. The grass lies flat as if Jack Frost laid them to rest. This winter is the best yet. I have grabbed enough food to last a few days. I feel no need to make another trip. I've trodden through enough snow. I let Brexten, my mangy mutt I just adopted, outside to play around. I met him running around in town with no owner. The poor boy is losing fur in patches and is beginning to look like Frankenstein. But I have grown fond of him. Every time he comes in there is snow to be plucked off with gloves. We don't need him losing any more fur. At times he ends up eating some snow and I have to feed him what charcoal I have to make him vomit it back up. This snow is not to be eaten. The thought comes to me. I am actually running low on water. I cannot drink from the pond right outside the house. I look back outside of my ransacked shack. I envision children running around and playing in the grass. I imagine the tourists visiting the memorials. Then the picture painted so beautifully fades to the gray-white snow. The blue sky splashed into the picture turns the color of a fading leather saddle. The crumbled ruins of Washington, D.C. linger in the background. I look at Brex and tell him we are going on an adventure. I grab my backpack and Remington 700, though I will not have to use it. We leave to scavenge the wastes in search of water. Honestly, this isn't so bad. I couldn't imagine not living a life in solitude. The Geiger counter begins crackling like the popping of kernels. The smell of ash burns the nostrils. The natural life is beautifully dead because of the season, a season that lasts year-round. I'm just thankful it is winter.

-Survivor





Sand Creek Crossing. Film photography. Logan Hughes.

To Be Determined

by Neil Timothy Smucker

The place of our meeting was To Be Determined
Much like how we were going to be determined:
A commitment to the place of termination
Or just examining what it meant
At all

We believed in the terms
And in the definitions of our conditions as conditioned beings,
In full feeling of freeing from physical slurs
The hard rock of action

We found, beneath the skin of wild panting
A stratum of old trowels and vegetation,
Ossified by the conflict we so readily mounted above
But requiring a caution heeded by neither party
Not to break this new ground

In defense, we interned ourselves in each other's images
Determined enough to stay in bunkers
Whose walls were, as well, uncertain
As our identities' permutations

We found that the cyclical pounding of our conversations
Had become the reason for us
In totality

Cornering the turn
In our investigation of what we meant
When we said,
"To be determined,"
The conclusion inferred from data of the observed
Was of overwhelming extermination



Like our affirmation of each other
In each incarnation of the Other
And all other carnations that the mind discerns with pleasure
We were determined

But without the traction of a true decision
Or the future tense of due conviction
We were not determined enough
To be



Road Weary. Photography. Heath Goertzen.

Night Hawk

by Miner Seymour

I pin my mind to the clothesline.
The bob and sway as birds come and go,
sparrows first, chickadees, nuthatches make way for
blue jays, wrens, all easily sent away by the swell and
snap of blankets, towels, my winter socks, next to
yours, still damp from our morning walk. Collected and
remembered scents will delight and stay through the night.



Sweet Harmony. Watercolor. Shelby Barron.

Three Miles from St. George

by Mackenzie O'Brien

Looking at this old house you would think, why does someone still live there? It looks worn and beaten. You don't think of who could live there and their story, and what you don't see past the chipped paint, the rickety porch, the roof with missing shingles, is all the love and memories that have taken place in those walls the last eighteen years.

Coming down the dirt driveway, you hit every pothole and bounce up and down. You think about how muddy this driveway would get when it rained and how you would run around, letting the rain trickle down your arms, back, and legs. You loved to get your cowgirl boots all muddy, but then mom would yell at you for tracking it all over the house. You can see all the trees that dance in the Kansas winds, those trees that cover the house and five cars. You can see a big black Ford truck tucked away in the trees almost as if it was waiting to pounce on you; an old blue Subaru sitting in the green grass that you drove throughout high school; a red Oldsmobile older than your parents with a crack across the windshield; a white, rusty Toyota truck with the bed full of firewood for the winter; and the shiny silver Subaru that you would all pile into for those long family road trips across the country. In front of the house there is a full colorful flower garden, bees buzzing around, and birds chirping. You see the vegetable garden, with the crisp cucumbers you would put in fresh salads, red tomatoes that your mom would put in her homemade salsa, huge watermelons that you remember tasting so sweet in July, and the tall and bright yellow sunflowers that seem like giraffes stretching up to kiss the sky. You love those sunflowers because they give you hope when you look at them. Behind that full and lush garden, you see the tops of beehives, which you avoided because you would always get stung if you got too close. They are worn from the weather, but still full of golden honey. You spent every fall in the basement with your dad harvesting the honey, and you imagine that sweet nectar in your mouth.

You expect your parents to be excited to see you, and they are, but the fuzz balls are more excited. They bark, jump, and lick you and you can't help but laugh at them and rub their bellies. Looking around the room you remember how everyone would gather around the fireplace and make s'mores on winter nights when the cold would creep in like an evil spirit.





Spring. Photography. Kiley Varney.

The TV is on and of course there is a baseball game on. Mom loves watching the Royals. You could hear her yelling at the TV from your room while you studied for your finals at the end of the school year. Your piano was a gift from your great grandma, bless her soul. You spent hours upon hours sitting on that now-dusty bench practicing and playing for your family, and even more hours making forts and camping out with your sister. The dining room with its messy table, never functioned as a place to gather around to pray and eat. It was a place to put all your crap. You see old mail, magazines, and newspapers with all the crosswords done because your dad did them every morning. The kitchen is where all those Christmas and Thanksgiving meals were cooked. You image the smells of ham and turkey, your pumpkin pie and grandma's sugar cookies, how crowded it was with the whole family helping. But it was always so fun and full of jokes and laughter that rang through the whole house. Your room, your childhood. The blue paint on the walls is faded and dull from the summer sun shining, the floor covered in a rainbow of paint, because you thought you were the next Picasso when you were younger. The room feels empty, only the basic furniture is left sitting, your desk, dresser, and bed. All your personal items are no longer

there: your guitar that you spent hours picking is no longer in the corner, your horse collection that you used to play with as a kid no longer on the shelf, your high school diploma that you walked across the stage for no longer on your desk, your prom dresses that you danced the night away in no longer in your closet. The room feels as if only the ghost of someone who once was, lived there.

To anyone else it would look like a worn down piece of crap, but to you, that was home, that was family, that was love. That will always be home, but you know when your time is up. It's time for you to move on and start the next chapter. You look back at the house one last time, and head out, hitting every pothole again. In the rearview mirror the house gets farther and farther away until all you can see is the dust being kicked up. Now only the dirt road lies in front of you, and you have no idea where to go from here.



Humid. Photography. Heath Goertzen.

Language of the Ocean

by Jenna Deger

The future is an ocean, and a vast one. Everyone is going somewhere. Some focused only on finding land, some on the horizon and some are focused only on the water in front of them. It's constantly shifting, being tossed and moved. It's easy to end up somewhere you didn't wish to go. I look as far ahead as I can see, trying to get to where I want to go. Mapping it all out, writing it all down. Charting the stars, and striving forward. Constantly checking and rechecking, making sure I haven't messed up my map, but constantly feeling like I have made the wrong choice. Questioning everything and never feeling like I can get there. I toss myself into the ocean, drowning in the stress of tomorrow when I'm not even there yet. It's all too much, the stress of the future, of tomorrow — all too much. Down I go. I tie a rope and chain of fear and worry to my own ankle but then try to pull myself back up to the excitement of what's to come and question why I can't get back to the surface.

Those questions still press against my mind and push against my heart constantly. Maybe it's not a language I can learn, the future. If I were to know everything that happens behind the scenes to create the brilliance that is to come, wouldn't the adventure cease to amaze? The revelation. I am not meant to know it all. Maybe that is my comfort. The future is the most obscure thing I could imagine. There are no guarantees. Maybe it's just an opportunity to trust. To put aside my fear, those lies that claw at my back and tell me that I can't do it. Tell me that I can't grow up, go to college, move, start something new, leave something behind. Tell me that I can't get there, to put it all aside and just trust.





Drowning. Oil. Akiyaa Hagen-Depusoir.



Bliss. Colored pencil. Akiyaa Hagen-Depusoir.

Dangerous

by Akiyaa Hagen-Depusoir

Allowing happiness to become tethered to another is the most dangerous
of games

Another's heart cannot be the holding place of your own
Hanging your self-worth on them like a coat rack has only a few conclu-
sions and they all end with alone

Their love is not the answer to your questions
But rather you must learn to question their love

In the meantime, find yourself

Your independent self

Your happy self

Your funny self

Self apart from them

Your identity may be hard to find if it has been dormantly hiding behind
another entity

So launch a thousand ships

But this time not for love

This time in search of yourself and not another

That way reward will be the only possible ending

No longer pretending

You will find what you seek

When you stop seeking another's hand



Land Assault

by Jacob Miller

Prairies are the heartlands of Mother Earth
though hers is broken at the hands of frustrated men
who undress native soil without permission.
Millions of acres of eroded, dirtied soil silently scream
& management disguises its destruction with “production,”
claims she never said “no.”
The prairie we call plain as we measure beauty by diamonds,
compressed coal that wants to be left alone,
& the ugly we don’t measure
is ourselves.





Leaf Stalks. Photography. Tara Schwartz.