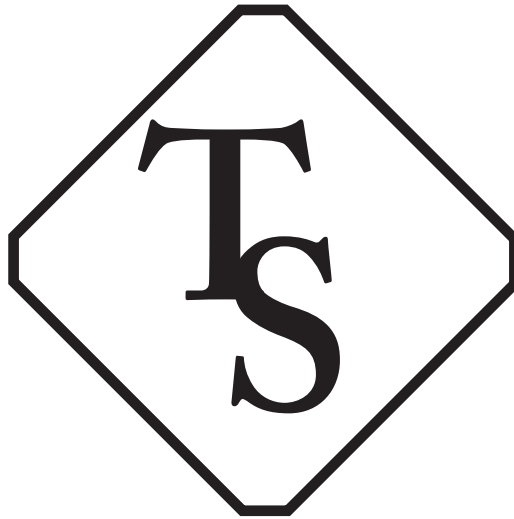


TOUCHSTONE



SPRING 2017



Dear Reader,

There are many things I could say about the contents of this year's edition of *Touchstone*. From tales of weird and unfamiliar places to precise renderings of the familiar, this year's edition provides a range of feeling threaded by exquisite awareness and observation of the world we inhabit. Grief, love, God, nature, and UFOs are all accounted for in these pages, and the individual works often blur the lines of difference and defy expectations.

Of course, if these pieces do their job (and they do—trust me on this), you'll come to your own unique emotional responses, and you certainly don't need me telling you what to feel. So, in lieu of further analysis, I'll simply express gratitude:

This magazine would never have seen the light of day if it weren't for the hard work of many. Specifically, I would like to thank Kira, Shelby, Minadora, Christopher, and Anna, who each took charge of their respective editing teams in order to read, select, and edit the work that ultimately appeared in this year's issue. In addition, I would also like to thank the members of each team (who are listed individually on the next page)—your effort and sacrifice of time does not go unnoticed.

Of course, curating material and preparing it for publication isn't all that goes into publishing a literary magazine. There's a ton of behind-the-scenes work that actually happens *behind* the behind-the-scenes work, so thank you to Elizabeth and Joe for your dedication and contribution to a smooth submissions cycle.

Thanks are also due to the Kansas State English Department, specifically faculty advisor Dr. Kimball Smith, department head Dr. Karin Westman, and Creative Writing Track head Dr. Katherine Karlin.

Enjoy!

Dylan Pyles
Editor-in-Chief

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OBLIVION

Anna Meyer

Reese writes the first time off as an accident because she's newly single, and they meet in June over Red Eyes at Whistler. Fucking hell, she thinks, ducking her warm face when bright eyes stare back. The woman chuckles with a hand over her dark lips. Then she uncrosses her glossy legs and slides over.

Reese peeks again. The woman looks older up close. Mousey brown roots show through her auburn hair, and she has thin wrinkles left from smiles, anxiety, and age. The woman holds out her hand. "Venus," she says. Her palm feels dry like crinkled paper.

"So, why are you here, Reese?" Venus asks.

Reese shrugs. "Fancied a drink, I guess."

Venus throws her head back when she laughs.

Reese's face tingles, and she clears her throat. It's multiple reasons honestly. It's London rain, and her mother's constant nagging, and the empty places full of memories of him the night he left for America. And although it seems like it, she didn't follow him here. But she doesn't know this woman, so she settles with grad school instead.

"I want to be a concert pianist."

"Ambitious," Venus says. "When did you start playing?"

"Four. My mum—" Reese bites her thumbnail. "Basically forced me into it."

"She must be thrilled then."

"Yeah," Reese says, which is a proper fucking joke. Her mum thinks she's in the States for law. Believes music's too fickle. She'd have an utter fit. Reese swirls her glass, and the ice clinks.

Venus's lips curl. "I got an MM in piano as well," she says.

"Really?" Reese asks. "What do you do?" She hopes it's somewhat sensible.

Venus hesitates and shifts on her stool. "Last week, I played Mozart for a violinist."

Reese scrunches her nose. At eight, she learned Minuet in G and couldn't escape the infuriating tune, not even in her dreams.

"Let me guess," Venus says, "Chopin?" Her left eyebrow twitches.

Reese smiles. "Debussy."

Repertoire banter must really turn Reese on because somehow they go from talking to kissing to climbing into the backseat of Venus's '99 Nissan because Chicago hotels are too expensive, and neither lives close—and sometimes you just can't wait. Reese isn't sure how long they spend lip-locked and tipsy. She knows she shouldn't let a stranger get away with this shit, but she lets Venus unbutton her jeans anyway.

Reese hesitates. "I've never—"

"Women are way better than men." Venus squeezes her thigh.

"Jesus, I meant hooked up."

Thirty minutes later, Reese's vagina aches from a half-assed fingering job. She'd expected

it to be different. She tells herself she feels nothing, even though the inside of her chest hurts like hell. “Thanks,” Reese says, even though she isn’t thankful. She doesn’t give Venus her number, but the love bites she left on Reese’s neck remain for a couple days. When they finally fade, Reese shrugs it off, and that’s that.

Had Reese actually pursued a law degree at UIC like she told her mother, they never would have crossed paths again.

But come August, Venus steps into Reese’s Concerto I Studio wearing a straight-legged pantsuit and addresses herself as Professor Demay.

It’s subtle the way Venus’s lips curl. Reese’s limbs go numb and bile crawls up her throat because Venus knew. She must have. Reese wishes she could fly across the Atlantic and never look back. Fuck’s sake.

It’s the little shit—the lingering eyes, the side comments, and especially the hand on the shoulder while Reese is playing. By the third class, they’re practicing independently for showcase. Reese is practicing Chopin’s Nocturne in C when Venus walks in. She leans against the cover, scrutinizing Reese’s fingers as they glide over smooth keys, edging closer until her breath is tickling Reese’s hair. It’s kind of dirty, but Reese can live with it.

Everything’s fine until the winter grad party at the downtown Marriott. The early evening hours are typical—composer chat, undergrad mockery, a couple bottles of Moscato—but around two it becomes a proper shit show. Some of her tenure professors are dry humping their spouses, and Reese sees Venus laughing with another woman. Her head falls back, just like last summer.

Reese’s classmate Claire hands her a half-empty bottle of Grey Goose. She’s the only other grad student who knows how to banter.

“Absolutely nauseating,” Claire says, nodding at Venus.

“Innit,” Reese replies.

Claire excuses herself to grab a martini, and Reese presses her lips to the opening and gulps vodka until she can’t anymore, which isn’t the brightest.

After that, it happens almost instantly. Venus halts mid-laugh, nods at her companion, and slinks toward Reese.

“We’re not doing this,” she says, leaning away when Venus grips her elbow.

“It’s fine,” Venus says.

She leads Reese down a hall past identical doors with peepholes that reveal identical beds where strangers fuck and pretend they didn’t.

Reese falls onto the one in room 205. “I don’t want to do this,” she says.

“You can stop pretending now,” Venus replies. Her breath smells like rotten berries.

“I’ll tell, I swear,” Reese says as Venus unzips her dress, tugs down her panties, spreads her legs.

“What will you tell them?” Venus pushes a finger into her. “That you’re already wet?”

Reese doesn’t understand how her body is aroused by something she finds so filthy, repulsive, wrong. She sobs when Venus licks her because she doesn’t really know how to fight back. This is her professor, and another woman, and they’ve done this before, so what does it matter. Reese feels her body stiffen and tries to push Venus’s head away, but it’s too late. She arches as Venus continues to lap at her clit until she’s so sensitive Venus’s tongue feels like sandpaper. Finally, she stops. Venus smirks and wipes her mouth. She doesn’t wait for Reese to dress, and Reese barely registers that Venus never removed any of her clothes.

•

"Where've you been? I thought you'd gone home," Claire says as Reese stumbles outside. She grabs Reese's waist before her face can hit the ground.

"Venus," Reese says, which isn't a lie.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm a bloody fly."

Claire snorts. "You do talk some shit when you're plastered, don't you?"

Reese shakes her head. "Poisonous shit."

By the time the train pulls into the station, Reese has vomited twice. Claire holds her steady.

The only other rider in their car is a man with a Bears cap and a Whole Foods windbreaker. He has a small baby nestled against his chest.

The train lurches forward like Reese's stomach, and she belches loudly. The man stiffens and glances at Reese. He cradles the baby closer to his body.

"Do you have a problem, sir?" Reese asks. Claire winces as if she was shouting.

The man frowns. "Will you keep it down? I have a baby."

"Reese," Claire says, patting the seat beside her.

"Okay Mum." Reese rolls her eyes before sinking down and ignoring the man.

At least, that's what would have happened had she not seen the Lucky Strike box peeking out of the man's windbreaker. And yeah, it was definitely his better-than-you vibe that set her off, but also other things, like the booze and how Venus always smelled like sweet smoke.

"Who the hell do you think you are anyway?" Reese asks, her voice growing louder.

"Reese, shut your mouth," Claire says, jerking her hand.

The man's eyes widen. "What is wrong with you?"

Reese's blood simmers as she stands. "What's wrong with me? What about you?"

"Reese." Claire stands as well.

"Don't smoke in front of a fucking kid," Reese says, pointing at the crying baby girl.

The man's jaw tenses, and his eyebrows slant inward. "Stay away from me," he says.

"Don't tell me, tell her."

"Reese!" Claire tries to grab her wrist, but it's too late. Reese surges forward. She barely has time to react before the man slaps her arm and swings, his fist colliding into her jaw. Reese staggers back, spitting pink saliva onto the floor.

"You bloody bastard," she says. Reese lunges for him again, but Claire grabs her shoulders and shoves her back. The man pulls a pocketknife from his jeans.

"Oh my god, please, I'm so sorry," Claire says. She drags Reese to the other side of the car until they're seated as far away as possible. Reese rubs at her jaw, which will bruise even more when Claire smacks her in the same place later.

Brian swears he's never been more thankful watching a train pull away. Fucking psychotic woman. He shushes Mei, rubbing her back in soft circles before bundling her closer to his body.

Home is a fifteen-minute walk from the Chief Mobile stop, but Brian's eardrums and left knuckles still throb when he shuts the trailer door.

He lets out a long exhale when he hears Tanner's snoring. At least Tanner wasn't with them. He probably would have broken that stupid girl's fingers. Thank god she didn't hurt her. Brian glances down at Mei, who is suckling the hem of her blanket. His chest warms. They'd only had Mei for a couple weeks when Tanner realized suckling indicated sleep.

When they first adopted her, she cried all the time. Brian would always attempt to retrieve

her, but his feet never hit the ground.

“No baby, you need to sleep,” Tanner would say, kissing Brian’s shoulder blade. Brian smiles. Two solid reasons why Tanner’s a keeper—his low, gravelly voice and the warm saliva puddles he leaves on Brian’s skin. Brian will probably never get tired of them, even when they have dentures, and Tanner’s lips feel like shriveled apricots.

Mei smacks her gums, spit collecting on her tiny mouth. Her eyelids twitch, and Brian wonders what she dreams about.

He trudges over to Mei’s crib. It occupies the spot where their foldout card table used to be. They always did 1000 piece puzzles together back when they were newlyweds.

Yeah sure, the crib’s white paint chips, and Tanner had to stack some old Beatles records under the back leg to keep it from wobbling, but it’s a fine crib. Brian lays Mei down and strokes her warm, velvety cheek. What kinds of crazies toss a perfect working order crib? He doesn’t know the family who left it on the side of the road, but he wonders if they have a daughter too, if she draws with pastel chalk outside a two-car garage, and most importantly, if this daughter has a mother.

Sometimes Brian wakes Tanner just before daybreak, not with intimate touches like when they first started dating, but with overwhelming doubts.

“We’re not the only ones,” Tanner would say.

“Just because we aren’t the only ones doesn’t mean Mei will accept it.”

“She will, baby. And if it takes a while, that’s okay, too.”

“What if she hates us?” Brian would nibble on his lip skin, and Tanner would pull Brian’s lip down with his thumb. “She won’t want to talk to us about boys or—.”

“Of course she’ll talk to you about boys, baby. You pulled me, remember?”

Brian rolled his eyes at that.

“You know what I’m worried about,” Tanner said. “Bras and periods.”

Brian chuckled. “Worse comes to worse: Wiki-How.”

Other times, Tanner gives him a stale kiss and asks about work. Usually it’s the same old shit, but once in a while something big happens, like the time the dairy trucks pulled in ahead of schedule, so Brian’s manager opened more bay doors, and the warehouse dropped fifteen degrees. It wouldn’t have mattered if Mei hadn’t been stashed in a storage crate near Brian’s station that day. Normally they have a babysitter, but she was out of town, and it was impossible for Tanner to take her to the Army Reserve.

Tonight, though, Brian pulls the Lucky Strike box from his windbreaker. He holds the cigarette pack in his hands and flicks it open. Nestled between his cigarettes are four Crayola crayons. It had been Tanner’s idea—a way to carry something for Mei to do when they were at a restaurant or on the train. Brian sighs and sets the pack on the nightstand before rubbing his aching fist. What a fucking ride.

When he wakes Tanner and mentions the drunk woman, Tanner mutters, “Unbelievable,” until he’s so worked up he throws off the covers and begins pacing back and forth, yelling about how the stupid bitch is lucky he wasn’t there. His stomps shake the metal awning, and Mei starts crying, and Brian sits on the end of their saggy mattress, rubbing his temples with the heels of his palms wondering why the hell he said anything in the first place.

If he hadn’t mentioned it, Brian would have shed his jeans and joined Tanner in bed. He would have kissed down Tanner’s chest, and Tanner would’ve nodded weakly before sucking air through his teeth when Brian took him in his mouth.

Brian knows exactly how to tease him—where to touch, when to pause, how many strokes

before adding another finger—so that by the time Brian thrusts into him, Tanner would be panting and minutes away from spilling between their sweaty bodies.

“Thank you,” Tanner would say because he deploys tomorrow morning, and Brian would have taken the stress away for a few blissful minutes.

But now it’s 3 a.m., and Mei is still crying, and Tanner is in rationalize mode.

“It wouldn’t have happened if you had stopped years ago.”

“I know, but I’m working on it now,” Brian swallows.

Tanner crosses his arms over his chest and sighs.

“I’m sorry,” Brian says. Then he heads to Mei and cradles her in his arms to quiet her wails.

This is not how he imagined it. No one wants to spend their last night at home pissed over what they can’t change, but that’s exactly what happens, and when their heads finally hit the pillow, they lay with their backs to each other. They’re out of time.

Brian stares at the pack on the nightstand as Tanner’s breathing slows and wishes that tomorrow would never turn into today.

Morning comes too soon. Reese has been sleeping on the floor with her shirt half off. She throws back pills, mouthwash, and a banana. Then she dabs at her purpling jaw with cheap department store concealer, staring at her reflection, piecing together the night, trying to figure out where the hell that came from because fuck’s sake, that wasn’t her at all.

Two hours later, the aspirin has worn off, and Reese is in studio twenty seconds away from losing her mind. She clenches her fists and scratches the bridge of her nose.

“Where’s your emotion?” Venus asks.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry like that’ll fix the problem.” She snaps her fingers. “Again.”

Reese inhales mildew and exhales exhaustion before forcing her hands to move, stumbling through another four measures before Venus slams her palm on the piano cover. The pang resonates inside Reese’s head.

“Unbelievable. How do you suppose you’ll impress anyone playing like an empty corpse? How were you even accepted here? It’s like you’ve regressed about a decade.”

“Are you quite finished?” Reese snaps.

Venus scoffs. “No, I’m not *quite* finished. And neither are you.”

One last time.

The last time they had gone to an airport together was to bring Mei home. Brian remembers holding the grainy, greyscale, 2x2 picture to his chest as they flew through clouds toward Shanghai. He’s surprised he hadn’t vomited at the orphanage, the way his stomach was churning and dropping. Maybe he would have if Tanner hadn’t been shaking too.

Brian watches the digital red numbers above the checking desk. The waiting is always the hardest part.

“God, I don’t want to do this again,” Tanner says. Brian squeezes his hand, his thumb stroking over and over on the back as if trying to memorize every bone and tendon.

The first time Tanner left was only for a couple months, but that was before they were married, and before Brian had told his parents he was gay. He remembers Tanner’s glassy eyes, and how much he regretted not kissing him among all the other couples.

Brian exhales a long, warm breath when the intercom calls for final passengers boarding Flight 483. Tanner stands. He holds Mei up to his nose, and Brian wishes he had his Canon.

"I'm going to miss you, little one," Tanner says, kissing her chubby cheeks.

"You'll call every Friday?" Brian asks.

Tanner nods. "Every Friday. I promise."

He kisses Brian's mouth once more before he's rolling down the runway.

Venus takes off through the parking lot, and Reese grips the door handle as if that will stop the car. Then she's at her professor's house in the study with the model trains and mock Monet's and once-full glasses that now lay on their sides. And she's lying there too, like the glasses, except she's being filled instead of emptied. She only had one drink, so she can't blame that.

One drink would muffle the harsh twisting in Brian's chest. His body sways with the bumps of the track rolling beneath, and Mei drops the purple crayon again. Maybe she wants a different one. He opens the cigarette box. Mei's small hands grab for green. Tanner's favorite color. Brian imagines Tanner's low rumbling laugh and crinkle-eyed grin as Mei toddles toward him on the tarmac, her arms raised high above her head, her tiny fingers opening and closing in the air. She'll probably be walking by then.

After they're home, after he's rocked Mei to sleep, Brian's lungs shudder.

It's too quiet. He hates snoring, but god, he wouldn't complain now. This is it—the part no one else sees. Usually he can hold it in, but this is different. This is eight months, not two. Afghanistan, not Hawaii. Brian opens their closet. He pulls out Tanner's favorite flannel and brings it to his face. The collar smells of Tanner's aftershave. Not good enough.

That's what Venus says about the others.

"Am I?" Reese isn't sure if she's asking Venus or herself.

Venus doesn't answer. Instead, she wraps them both in bathrobes and leads Reese to the glossy black Baldwin in her living room.

"Play."

"Why?" Reese rubs her eyes.

"Trust me."

"Fine." Reese clears her throat and settles on the bench. Her fingers press against the keys, and she begins to play Debussy's *Arabesque*. It's her strongest muscle memory.

Her eyelids shut as the tune swells and fluctuates, and she's almost back in Cheshire with her plaid jumper and pigtails—back to when her mum looked on, and she couldn't quite reach the pedals. Almost. But no, it's definitely there, the creaking pedal under her foot, and she can't hear the dull thud of her Steinway's old keys, no matter how hard she cranes her neck. Reese sighs.

She waits for Venus's sharp tongue. Nothing. Then, smoke. Smooth, sweet and mild.

Reese stops mid-verse. A memory pulls at her mind, almost breaching the surface of her subconscious.

"Go on," Venus says.

Reese swallows, nods, and her fingers move once more.

Come morning, neither boards. The train continues.