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Inside the Branches

Matthew Gilbert

I pluck memories like maple leaves from high branches.
You taught me to climb that first summer
we stayed all night. I crawled outside my mother's shadow,
felt hardness of roots reaching from the earth.

I was eight years-old when I learned to make mistakes,
when I climbed too high in the tree outside my grandmother's
porch, and she convinced me I could make it back down.
Hands and arms scratched, but intact. I ate strawberry shortcake

and caramel apple pie. I learned to indulge in my sweet tooth
and found creativity in the tasting of chocolate and vanilla batter
when my grandmother taught me how to marble cake with a knife—
she let me swirl my designs with vanilla chips, her mountain hands

teaching me mixtures of art. I bit into fruit where her peaches grew,
built my first bookshelf from oak in her woodshop by the road. She pulled
two splinters from my hand and kissed the wound. That day
I learned to treat the smallest gash,

her people's yarrow oils cared for the spirit, same as the body.
Now, I trace footpaths on the limbs, follow dirt trails where
highlander hooves roamed free, listen for echoes of hymns
over the Blue Ridge.

I can still feel the rays of summer and smell baked chocolate
tingling the nose, reminding me to listen to myself.
I hear my grandmother's words faint in the leaves as
I count branches beneath my fingertips.

Bad Trip

Mattison Pierce

The glare of the fluorescent lights in the Quik-Stop Minute Mart had him wishing he had brought sunglasses. They seemed violent and judging as he strode through the aisles of chips, candy, and beer. The tiny store was empty other than the cashier and the drunk guy in the back who was fumbling with the glass door to get a six pack. But it felt incredibly crowded. He hunched his shoulders, his eyes darting back and forth as if looking for a predator that might have been hiding behind the display of two-pack muffins.

A sense of urgency overtook him, and he realized that he couldn't stay in the store any longer. He walked up to the register, piling whatever hodgepodge collection he had grabbed onto the speckled countertop. He nodded when the cashier asked if he wanted a bag, slid his card when the machine asked, and left the store after telling the cashier to keep the receipt.

He began his journey home from the corner store, plastic bag adding white noise to his steps as it bounced against his leg. Sirens sounding in the distance made him shift his eyes to and fro, but he tried to ignore them as best he could, focusing on his feet. He didn't like looking up while he walked since coming to the city. The buildings were too tall and looked as though they bowed over him, forming a canopy of metal beams and glass. He longed for green and for the gentle movement of leaves.

Anxiety spotted his brain with tiny drops of acid, leaving pockmarks in his mind. When he tried to complete a thought, it sizzled away under the burning rain. An attack was leaking through. Beginning to panic, he walked faster, periodically stretching his jaw to keep from grinding his teeth. He had to calm down, or he wouldn't make it home before his composure completely dissolved. He raised his head to look at the sunset.

The sky was bleeding. Overexposed bands of orange and yellow smeared together and slid down through the air and into his eyes like rivulets of molten wax, and it felt like he was melting along with them. He tapped at his chest in a steady rhythm to get himself to focus on something, reaching back to his earliest coping mechanisms. His lungs ached, preparing themselves to hyperventilate. Passing people on the street, his brain screamed out for them to save him, but his body kept walking, knowing that these strangers could do nothing to stop what was about to happen.

Then the sun went out. Everything that was extremely bright one moment was dark the next, as if someone had put a dimmer switch on the sun and turned it all the way down. Everything became grainy, and he felt like he needed to turn the antennae of the world to get a better picture. His consciousness was shrinking. His awareness was being confined to himself alone, and the entire city was being put behind sheets of glass. He waited for his body to seize up in panic at not knowing what was going on, but it couldn't. Panic was now a foreign feeling, a dying star being held at arm's length.

Ah, that's right, he thought. The meds he'd taken at home must have been kicking in. There was a blanket being pulled further over his consciousness by the moment, and he felt a heavy sense of calm being forced on him.

As he teetered on the edge of the drug's effects, it vaguely occurred to him that this feeling was a bit too large to control. Its presence was opaque, and the depth of it made him uneasy. But with the sun bearing down on him and the feeling of his thoughts burning in his brain, he thought being consumed might be better. So, with that thought, he let himself be enveloped by the void, and he watched the color that was previously unbearable to him drain from his surroundings. They pooled onto the ground and sank into the pavement, leaving the surrounding cityscape flat and bland. He was right. This was better.

His pace slowed, and he looked at his feet, suddenly aware of every step he took. The sidewalk felt harder than usual, and he felt a twinge in his left knee that was becoming more familiar lately. Sounds ran through him like liquid, and he forgot them as quickly as they were made. Cars rushing past on the left. A truck without a muffler. Two cats in an alley, intent on making babies. He continued slowly on, suddenly unable to place what it was that had frightened him so much only moments before. He cast the thought from his mind, thinking that at least now he could get home without incident.

He turned a corner, and a man burst out of one of the townhouses in front of him, yelling something impossibly loud yet perfectly incomprehensible as he stomped down the steps and onto the sidewalk, whirling around to shout toward the building. The woman with whom he was arguing came out and stood on the stoop, imperious and unyielding, and shouting just as loudly at the man in a shrill timbre. He halted and stared at the

couple, thinking that being a spectator was better than walking between them. Wondering what they were arguing about, he strained his ears but still failed to understand the guttural noises that spewed from their frothing mouths. The language seemed familiar. Were they speaking English? German? Or was it some other twist of linguistics unique to only these two?

As these questions slid through him one after another without pausing to be answered, the woman stopped yelling and went back into the house, slamming the door behind her and allowing the drone of the city once again to settle in like dust over the closing day.

The man on the sidewalk was looking in his direction with an expression too intense for what he felt he deserved. The stranger's lips moved, forming shapes that he assumed were vowels, and he watched the man's tongue move behind his teeth with loose fascination. The sounds eventually wormed their way inside his ears, and he was surprised at how they managed to sound so angry despite how sluggish they seemed.

"What are you looking at?" they said, the words funneling slowly through his ears and sloshing against his brain.

He wasn't sure why he was being asked this question, but it looked like the man was ready to fight with him. He tried to think of an answer that could appease the stranger blocking his path. Yet, the more he thought about it, the less sense the things around him made. He felt as though he was playing out a memory in his head, the tension of the situation having passed and that there was no rush to get to the end. He felt content to let the confrontation play out on its own. Only this wasn't a memory, and he was no longer a spectator. Why had he not answered the other man? Had he forgotten how to speak? As if to test this, he posed the question to himself.

"What am I looking at?" he said more than asked, the phrase dribbling from his mouth and onto the pavement. It splashed on the sidewalk and evaporated in an instant, vanishing from his mind. What had he just said? He became aware that he hadn't blinked for a long time. Did he look strange to this man in front of him? He looked up and blinked at the stranger, slowly, consciously, and he could feel his eyelids coating his corneas with a fresh layer of mucus.

The man shouldered past him, knocking him off balance even though there was plenty of room on the sidewalk. Watching the stranger disappear

into what now seemed like a monochromatic backdrop of a movie set, he felt somewhat sorry he wasn't able to provide the man with an answer. He blinked again, making up his mind to do so more often, and continued on his way home.

He did not live far away. The location of his apartment was the reason he chose to walk down to the minute mart instead of go grocery shopping. Bringing food home meant having to prepare it, and he wasn't ready for that kind of commitment. His apartment building loomed in the distance only a block ahead, but it appeared much farther away than it should have. The sidewalk seemed to extend under his feet, making him walk for such a long time that he was surprised when he made it to the building's doors.

None of his neighbors acknowledged him when they passed him in the hallway. Or maybe they did, but he did not acknowledge them, just barely aware of their presence as he made his way to his own numbered doorway. Their shapes seemed to glide past him like glitches in a game. When he got to his apartment, he retreated immediately to his room. Sitting on the floor, he let the plastic bag settle beside him, and he breathed in the stale air, taking in his surroundings. Everything here smelled like himself, and he smiled lightly at the familiarity. He pushed his consciousness out before him, the tendrils of his thoughts stretching until they filled the room. Finally, he was home. He leaned his head back against the wall and forgot for the next two hours.

These meds weren't suited for him after all, he thought when he woke from his stupor. What should have been a fifteen-minute walk had felt like hours, his only solace being that he didn't have a breakdown in the middle of the street. That would have been a good thing if he had been able to work through the problem himself, but the meds took over for him, forcing his feelings into compliance. He wasn't looking to be put into a box, safely tucked away from the world. What he wanted was to be balanced and functioning, able to speak and connect with things around him.

He would have to go back to his psychiatrist and redo the process of deciding what went wrong, if it was a dosage problem, if he was allergic to this family of medication, and what other side effects he could expect from the new prescription. Would they suggest toughing this one out for a while to see if he adjusted? He looked at the lingering graininess of his room and decided that would be the worst option.

His therapist kept saying he was only a few steps away from his own success story. But how many of those steps were new medications? He sighed, feeling like he was falling back to square one. Fiddling in the plastic bag, he pulled out a pack of sour gummy worms and tore it open, the candy's unnaturally bright colors contrasting against the gray of his bedroom. He popped one of the elastic crawlers into his mouth and crunched on the outer layer of sugar before really starting to chew. His teeth throbbed. He was too old to be eating candy like this, but the artificial sweetness flooded his mouth with artificial happiness.

He put another gummy in his mouth. As he chewed, he looked down to find the imprints of color on his fingertips. Thinking it might be residue from the candy, he ran his hands over the rug on which he was sitting, and the parts that he touched became smeared with their rightful hues. The corners of his eyes creased with a tired smile, and he began to touch his hands and arms, leaving streaks of color where there had been none. He spent the rest of the evening treating himself gently, eating candy and brushing his fingers against the surfaces in his apartment. And though it was splotchy and uneven, color began to flow back into his life.

Exploring Growth through Depravation

Lauren Cottle

I. cross breeding innocence with shame

Bright green roots sprout from nothing. You called them weeds. But when the overgrowth found its way to our front porch, we thought we could garden it. Two gallons of water and a pound of fertilizer later, my thighs are still stained with dead peat.

II. atonement

Tree rings melodize
the rain, the wear,
the meat of the forest.
To grow flowers
behind your eyes, first
ask for forgiveness.

III. bygones and pinecones

I baked in our dry season. You sent me off
with nothing more than bone white parched lips.
Consider branching a photosynthetic goal—
but the boughs must grow too.
I remember dehydration,
I remember the only taste on my tongue
was salt.

IV. pressurized blooms

nothing grows this way
bundles of loose graying leaves
stuffed in kitchen drawers

Mountainbottom Removal

Micah McCrotty

What we've seen from our old canoe,
in the near waters of a drowning world,
are spirit shapes and gasps of land,
sounding cities now lost to song,
prophecies bellowed below the surface,
whose kneeling buildings bow towards south,
blown down as victims of a quiet fury.

Soon I followed receding waters
to pick and scavenge for any ornament,
to search for chert or bits of teeth
and sift the shore for flint or fire,
yet found ruling winds and drying rot,
the tired bricks of another time,
and a single severed rusting anchor.

It's now a landscape we fear to cross,
where trees collapsed and sank from sight,
eaten whole into the darkness
like the thinnest twig into a river.
Wait for your eyes to adjust and see
families hidden in bubbling tombs
now buried in the surge of silt.

Last Rites for a Lame Bird a Few Days from Christmas

William Rieppe Moore

Roosters come and see. They tilt their heads upside down
because you're hurt. Then eat your feed. The pan I laid
in front of you. You sank it with your beak. That might have been
your last night, but you still breathe in the lift and lilt of your ruffled body.

You have another darkness before you. It will be
the long night of your fowl life while I sharpen steel to stone
so that its edge becomes almost invisible. In the morning
if you see the ice cycle in my hand, it's just a reflection.

He ain't got no legs with nary a drink, Lem said and
shook his head. Your two hens are here. They come and go.
Vanilla tan hues still tint their outer feathers like dried
beech leaves. They cluck and croon question marks against near silence.

White scratches of frozen air skate downward like notes
cast out of heaven. The scratches heal over and close up
tight like skin around a splinter in hardening windchill that hurls
smoke down from the chimney.

Don't forget, the fire glow inside is the color of your
weary eye. It slips and winks and strays its gaze
away in a lick-log flame, staring inward through
increased aperture to hold its heat in a lame body of ashes.

Squatting Against the House in an Old Place Renewing

William Rieppe Moore

Papaw's shotgun rests across my lap.
Steady drizzle keeps telling me, Don't you do that.

Bear buried a stolen pistol somewhere
around here. He said, By now the hammer's

pulled down. Be careful where you do
what you do cause it was loaded too.

Though it's where everything occurs, the ground's
not safe anymore. Now we walk easy in this place.

From where I sit in the slop and mist
I can scan my eyes behind the beech

at least as far as my carbide lamp can reach.
These wind-raked leaves mounded by the house

make a lapsing seat. My underpinning backrest
was raised shortly after the foundations were laid.

Scattered sounds skitter in the poplar bark
like raccoons traveling between here

and heaven. That's what I'm waiting on.
Procyon lotor they call them. But I've just got

one thing to say if they come to raid
the chicken crumble, and that's Bang!

When they descend for their masquerades
with their robber masks, they'll taste lead

sweep their round hides, before they retreat
to star-shrouded crannies between branches.

Ode to a Small Boy of Spring

Danielle Ladd

He is bouncing green grass
in the straw-colored sunlight
of an early Spring afternoon,
laughter echoing up through the branches
of the matriarch magnolia tree.

He slips up the limbs

part squirrel
part snake
part puppy dog's tail

Feet and toes and fingers

test this branch—

— no, that—

testing physics in real time

pushing limits

learning what a leaf knows.

Highway Children

Kelsey Adams

We used to run wild in knee-high grasses
danced 'round trees like watered-down whiskey circling the drain, we'd
come home eaten alive starving and full
of stories we'd tell passionately, intensely
then forget when the telling was done

Freedom tasted like sunburns and jammed fingers,
the blood from the knee we didn't remember skinning
till it burned that night in the bath
hot like glittering metal, the stain
the day's only remnants left in small rings
'round the inside of the tub

How long and strange the days seem now
how each freckle and scar carries tremendous weight
the distance distorted by time and orange-slatted sunsets
like dreams with foggy edges that
fade upon waking
the sky's hushed luminescence fading to grey

I hum the ghosts of songs I don't know these days
twirl their soft fingernails around my heavy tongue
daydream about afternoons stretching golden
across my skin
magic I can no longer recall waiting for me in the dust

Contributor Bios

Kelsey Adams holds a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in women's and gender studies from Austin Peay State University. A customer service rep by day and a freelance copyeditor by night, she loves strong drinks, slow mornings, old photographs, Tennessee football and Bob Dylan. She has writing in the *Red Mud Review* and the *Broke Bohemian* and work is forthcoming in *Pidgeonholes*. You can also find her tweeting snark at the president (among other things) on Twitter: @kelseyadams02.

Lauren Cottle is a graduate English student at Belmont University who graduated from Austin Peay in May 2017. Beside writing and going to school, she loves practicing yoga and hanging out with her cats.

Matthew Gilbert

Danielle Ladd is a Clarksville transplant of 14 long years and counting. She received her bachelor's in English from APSU in 2010 and her master's in advanced research in education in 2018. She currently teaches Latin and raises children. She does not like writing about herself except in poetry.

Micah McCrotty

William Rieppe Moore is enrolled at East Tennessee State University in the English Department with an emphasis on creative writing in poetry under Dr. Jesse Graves. He had a poem selected by *Still: The Journal* for publication in October 2018. In 2012, he was selected as a finalist for the "One Book, One Poem" contest judged by Ron Rash. He received finalist honors in *Undefined Magazine's* poetry contest edited by Ed Madden in 2010.

A senior at Austin Peay State University, **Mattison Pierce** is a writer of fiction and nonfiction. Born in Kentucky and living in Tennessee, she is pursuing a bachelor's in English literature with a minor in creative writing. This is her first published work.