

didn't come, I knew something was awry.

"What's wrong, man?"

"Nothin'." He was antsy, distracted.

"Yeah there is, you keep looking at the clock. What's with you?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Quit bein' a bitch and just tell me." That got him. He hesitated a moment, turned his head to see if anyone was listening, then slowly leaned toward me.

"All right, you pussy. Check this out," he whispered. "Me, Josh, and Evan have this plan. As soon as the bell rings, we're gonna ride our bikes to Wendy's. Have lunch there, and ride back."

"Are you serious? There's no way you can pull that off."

"Yeah right. Wendy's is only like a mile away."

"Exactly! That's one mile both ways. Plus waiting in line, and you're gonna eat there, too? Lunchtime is only twenty-six minutes!" In trying to dissuade him, I was merely hiding my initial disappointment. Why wasn't I included? I suddenly felt stupid for thinking a few months of camaraderie was enough to make up for the last three years they had together. I was still on the cusp of their friendship, on the outside looking in.

He leaned back into his seat and looked at the clock. I could see in his eyes that he would not be discouraged. Jason had a pair of sky blue eyes set between long lashes that matched his black hair. Girls had no defense against those eyes. I thought they looked feminine, but at that moment they were resolute and determined. I paused, then tapped him on the arm.

"Let me come."

"It's too late. We met up this morning and left our bikes at Holm." Our elementary school is next door to Hamilton, separated only by a chain-link fence. "We set

the bike lock combinations so they're only one number off. That way we can just grab 'em and go."

"Well, I can take the LowRider." The LowRider was a busted old bike Jason and Evan had found the year before. They had attached new handlebars, fixed the broken chain, and replaced the tires. The rear wheel was half the size of the front wheel. The bike had no seat, no brakes, and it was no fun to ride. It was collecting dust in Jason's garage.

"I don't think so, Gabe." His smugness irritated me, but before I could tell him so, the teacher barked at us for talking in class. I gave him a look that said, *I'm coming*. He gave me a look that said, *I know*.

The bell rang and we were out the door before it stopped.

We dashed to our lockers, chucked our backpacks in, raced down the hall, and blew out of the side doors. Evan was already climbing the fence. Josh burst from the adjacent doors at full sprint and yelled, "What are you doing, Gabe?" I ignored the question. We scrambled over the six-foot chain link and landed on the other side with a collective thud. We ran to Holm's bike rack, and while they unlocked their bikes, I said between breaths, "We gotta get the LowRider."

Jason said, "I told Gabe."

"Oh, really?" Evan replied as he swung one leg over his bike. "All right, let's go!" I chased them down the path, between the pine trees on the lawn, through the parking lot, and across the street to Jason's house. His bike fell to the driveway as he hopped off and rushed to his front door. He lifted a stepping-stone, grabbed the house key, and ran inside to open the garage. The sun was bright, but the sharp November wind reddened my ears with cold.

"Shit!" Evan cried. "It's Ms. Betz!" I turned to see a forest green Lexus moving toward us. Panic drenched my insides. Jason swung open the garage door and screamed,

“Get in! Get in!” Josh and Evan pushed me inside, and ducked in behind me. We ran into the house and peered out the front window. I was too distracted to notice they didn’t just run inside themselves. They pushed me in first.

“Did she see us?” I asked. They were silent, as if Ms. Betz would hear them and suspend them on the spot. She slowed down and frowned at the bikes in Jason’s front lawn. It was the first time I thought about the possible consequences of leaving school grounds, and I became short of breath.

“Dammit, Gabe! We just lost about three minutes!” Jason complained, after she eventually drove away. “We gotta hurry, come on!” Nothing was said about returning to school. I wasn’t about to suggest it, especially since I was the reason they were almost caught.

Evan’s bike glided into first place. Years of playing soccer had turned his legs into proficient bicycle motors. Josh, who was a decent athlete himself, was not far behind. Jason was a close third, and three school buses could have fit between him and me. I was almost grateful I wasn’t closer, because if they had seen my skinny legs struggling to pedal that ridiculous little bike, they would have laughed at me the entire ride.

We rode through bike paths and side streets that eventually spit us out onto Hampden Avenue, a six-lane street too busy to cross without a green light. They were waiting for the light to change when I finally caught up. Cars blurred in front of us.

“Gabe, you are really draggin’ ass,” said Evan. Years later, if I ever need unfiltered honesty, I call on Evan.

“Hey, maybe I can ride your ten-speed and you can take this piece of crap.”

“No, thanks.” The light turned green, and we rode across the street, alongside a cemetery, and into Wendy’s parking lot.

As we walked inside the fast food restaurant, we let out a moan. Six people stood in line in front of us; none of them seemed as pressed for time as we were. The menu reminded me that I had not brought my wallet to school that day. Even if I had, there was no money in it. I nudged Jason with my elbow and said, “Can you spot me?”

“Are you serious?” He sighed heavily and rolled his eyes.

“What’s the big deal? You know I’ll pay you back.”

“You still haven’t paid me back from the last time I loaned you money. I’m not giving you a dime.”

“You’re a punk, Jason. You know that? That’s why I beat you up in fourth grade.”

“Yeah right, I killed you!” Josh and Evan chuckled as we bickered back and forth. I’m sure the other patrons heard us, and thought round two was imminent. Before it came, Josh handed me a five-dollar bill. Jason and I still debate over who won that fight in elementary school. We have always had a sibling-like rivalry. I suppose that’s why, years later, he is my daughter’s godfather.

We finally got our food and sat down to eat. The bright red vinyl seats were thrones compared to the backless metal benches our classmates were sitting on. The four of us joked about all the other students stuck with bland cafeteria food. You would’ve thought we were eating gourmet meals.

I savored every morsel of my Junior Bacon Cheeseburger and Biggie fries. For months I had strived to abide by the countless constraints adults place on children, and breaking away from that was like stepping outside for the first time. With every bite, a sense of free will and independence grew inside of me. I wanted to lock the feeling in.

“We have to leave,” said Josh, after he emptied his tray’s contents into the trash bin.

“We got time, man. Let me finish.” I was the only one still eating. I chewed slowly, enjoying every bite.

Jason slammed his fist on the table. “Dammit, Gabe! You wanna get caught?”

“Put your booger in your pocket and let’s go!”

Evan’s accidental mispronunciation of the word *burger* took the attention away from me. Jason let out his cackle of a laugh, and we began to tease Evan ruthlessly. I was thankful for the distraction, because I could finish my food without any hassle.

We were still laughing at Evan when we stepped outside and hopped on the bikes. I asked what time it was, and the three of them looked at each other blankly.

“Great. None of you geniuses brought a watch?”

“Shit, we better hurry. I think we’re late,” said Jason. His words threw fear and reality straight to my stomach. I grabbed the LowRider and took off. We blazed past the cemetery, caught a green light, and crossed Hampden. Even with the head start, I dropped into last place again. The distance between them and me kept growing, and I began to picture Ms. Betz smiling wickedly as she kicked me out of school. Just as we reached the bike path (the halfway point), Josh slowed down until I caught up to him.

“Here, take my bike,” he said. “You shouldn’t have come, Gabe.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you have a lot more to lose than we do. That’s why we didn’t tell you.” I paused and watched him pedal off atop the LowRider. To this day, Josh has never wavered in his loyalty and altruism. I was as grateful for his friendship then as I am now.

I was still in last place as we sped past Jason’s house, through the parking lot, and skidded into Holm’s bike rack. We clambered over the fence and sprinted to the schoolyard.

What I saw then made me want to sing. Students were still outside, waiting for the bell to ring.

Josh, Jason, Evan, and I slowed our pace to a walk, which turned into a swagger. No words were spoken on that dirt field leading to the school. We simply glanced at each other's faces, trading congratulatory nods and satisfied smiles.

The four of us had taken control of our own lives, if only for twenty-six minutes. We felt like men. Masters of our fate. Owners of our destiny. Men.

Men who laugh at the word *booger*...

The Last Vaquero

Daniel Patrick Garza III

Where have those days gone?
Where dew settles upon leaves,
Where the coyotes can be heard singing in the distance.
Waking early in the morning before dawn,
Tasting the lasso in your mouth...
...As you put on your cowhide boots with spurs of silver
attached.
You button up your western shirt that still has dirt from
the previous day.
How you breathe the fresh morning air coming in through
the window pane.
A fresh cup of coffee in one hand,
And some pan-de-campo you made in your Dutch oven
yesterday.
You rise off your throne and give your sweet wife a kiss
goodbye,
As you have many times before,
She looks right into your big blue eyes and weathered face
and gives you a smile.
Before you walk out, you reach for your cowboy hat you
wear every day.
The stench of horse sweat follows as you put on your light
tan chaps.
A tug here and a tug there, you saddle up your trusty
friend.
You broke him in as a colt, and now he lowers himself to
let you climb on,
Who says a horse cannot be a man's best friend?
You give a little kick and a whistle to get your tall trusty
friend moving,

You motion towards a bull that has wandered off course.
Your friend is well trained and he maneuvers to cut the
 bull off.

With a twirl and flip of your lasso, you grab it by the horns.
With a pull of your horse, the bull soon follows along.
Back with the herd, the bull is at ease, now it is time to
 take a snack if you please.

You reach in your pocket and pull out some deer jerky,
You look up into the sky and you know that it is almost
 noon now.

You don't need a watch; you have done this your entire life,
You can look at a heifer and tell if she is pregnant just by
 your experienced sight.

As the sun sets you decide to head back to the hacienda
 before it turns night,

There waiting for you on a table is some carne y frijoles.
A flour tortilla flies onto your plate,
Your lovely bride smiles and gives you a kiss on the lips
 even if you were a little late.

She looks into your eyes as if it were the first time.
She grabs your hat and sets it aside.

The love is still going after all these years.

From a chuck wagon cook as a young man of an owner of a
 ranch,

You have lived a wonderful life old man,
And I know that is something you understand.
You have been written into history forever,
As a noble man of stature and worth,
And you will be known for generations to come.
As the last vaquero I have ever known.

dedicated to my grandfather

You Know Me

Brian Cochran

You see the tattoos on my arm
I'm trouble.
You scan my red, tired eyes
I'm high.
You hear the carefree laugh
I'm apathetic.
Experience has granted you this gift.
Your judgments are final and infallible.
You know me.
You don't know me.
You don't know the tattoos are tributes.
Permanent memorials to those I care about.
You don't know my eyes are tired.
Two jobs and school will do that.
You don't hear the silence between laughs.
The silence filled with worry.
Worry that consumes my heart.
What have you left me?
A nation divided. An unprepared youth.
A world at war. A theocratic government.
There is no apathy,
There can't be apathy.
It falls to me to fix your creations.
Your experience has failed you.
You are fallible.
You don't know me.
We are from different worlds.
Your rules no longer apply
They have failed me.
You have failed me
You don't know me.
You never will.

Acoustics

David Welper

There are definitely certain acoustics involved with faces,
like the spoon tapping a wine glass. Sharp,
echoey with softness just before sundown.

It is there I find a man walking toward somebody he feels –
a woman who makes him know the place he's from (where
musicians
play with fire, then drink it to understand it).

The sound
on his face a snare drum and cello, or so she says. His
reply
purple, orange just before sundown. Just before a foreign
laughter
shared between fingertips.

for Dulce on January 18, 2005

Epitome

Jessica Thummel

It was snowing outside, slow, tender flakes, that twirled around, mimicking falling leaves caught in a breeze. From the safe enclosure of a building, the scene was beautiful and enchanting, but the bitter, cold vapors of England air had a way of burrowing under many layers of clothing and right into the depths of the soul, causing anything with a pulse to rush to the refuge of a warm fire.

In Sylvia's dim-lit room on Fitzroy Road, no one was gazing out the window, snuggled with a warm cup of tea, enjoying the scenery. In fact, the curtains were drawn, only allowing small slivers of light to peek through. It was just enough light to cast curious shadows and reveal the smoky cloud that had suspended in the air.

Sylvia lay on the bed, curled up like a cat, with a cigarette pressed to her lips, which were rounded into an o; small smoke rings blew out one by one, curling up into the abyss, which she found comfort in, almost like a small piece of the blackness surrounding her soul was escaping with those hazy, caliginous rings, escaping to an unknown destination.

She had only been smoking for a few months, but she had wanted a new need, needed a new want. The incessant internal gnawing had finally nibbled through, opening her to new thoughts; unhealthy, irrational thoughts.

She rolled over on the bed, pulling the blanket that was wrapped around her into a tangled mess around her legs, and snubbed the cigarette out slowly, grinding it until it smashed like an accordion, and the smell was so intoxicating that she almost decided to light another, but instead just laid there, her arm reaching out into the

ashtray on the side table, looking like a falling rock climber reaching out for help.

I've got to get up, she thought, and in her mind she made the effort, but her body showed no signs of complying. She was lost in loathing, lost to the present world, and couldn't help but engulf herself in a haunting memory of the past, a memory she had lived five months prior.

It was a hot July day, one that caused such profuse sweating that clothes were no longer crisp and figure skimming, but limp and dowdy. Though the stifling heat had no effect on Sylvia who was sailing along the Devon coastline highway with the windows of her car rolled down, and her hair flying about. Her mother, Aurelia, was sitting in the passenger seat, staring out the window at the line of green trees that hugged the road. Each was lost in her own thoughts, enjoying the quiet solitude.

After their short drive, they reached the house and went inside. They were giggling as they walked through the door into the kitchen, reminiscing about the past, but something undetectable quieted their giggles into small, inaudible noises. The house had a peculiar, airy quality to it, like something was changed, but everything was exactly how it had been when they left.

"Ted....Are you up there?" Sylvia called up the stairs as she set some bags on the counter.

"You're home already?" He yelled back quickly, trying to sound casual.

"Yeah, the shopping didn't take as long as we thought." But in truth, Sylvia had rushed through her shopping, hoping to get home before she said she would, in order to get a glimpse of what her husband did in her absence. She wondered why she couldn't lift the weight though, wondered why the sickness in her stomach was

still nagging.

Ringgggg! Ringgggg! The phone on the kitchen wall let out a shrill, announcing its presence. Sylvia looked at the phone and then to Aurelia. She had a feeling she needed to make it to the phone before Ted.

“Don’t bother, Sylvia....It’s for me!” Ted yelled from up the stairs. The thump, thump of his shoes on the floor, running towards the stairs, echoed in Sylvia’s head.

Time slowed down until it felt like it was almost at a stop, and everything Sylvia saw slowed down with it. She paced toward the phone, flipping her hair out of her face, swinging her arms rhythmically, each step feeling eloquent and concise. Thump! Thump! Ted’s feet plopped on the floor above her like a dancing elephant; they were nearing the steps. She whipped her head towards the stairs and then back at the phone. She stared at it, determined to get there first.

“Don’t worry about it, Sylvia, I got it!” He yelled, again.

But it was too late. She was mere inches from the phone, her hand was reaching up to grab it, and then the elephant steps turned into a stampede. Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud. Ted’s limbs were flailing in all directions as he slid down the stairs on his ass, looking about as graceful as a man in high heels. He came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, his legs spread apart, hands on the floor between them, slumped over like a stringless marionette.

Ringgggg! The phone was practically begging for her to cradle it. She picked up the receiver and tucked it between her head and her neck, all the while staring at her husband, not looking away from his panic-stricken eyes.

“Hello?” She spoke into the phone, as she watched Ted stand up slowly.

“Err, uhh, is Mr. Hughes in?” An obviously disguised woman’s voice rattled through Sylvia’s skull. Who is that,

she wondered. Then it struck her, like a punch in the nose, so painful and tear provoking. It was Assia, their old flat mate. Sylvia had always sensed that they were flirtatious with each other but Ted just told her that she was paranoid, and she had almost begun to believe it.

“Oh, you want to talk to my husband?” Sylvia yelled into the phone, her voice wavering slightly. “Just a minute...”

She held out the phone to Ted. He reached forward, grabbed the phone, and turned his back to her.

“Hello? Uh-Huh...Yeah....Ok....Well, now is not a good time...Sounds good...Bye.” He put the phone on the base and turned around, letting out a heavy sigh.

“Who was that?” Sylvia asked almost maniacally.

“It was just one the girls from my class,” he said, “She had a question about a lecture.”

“I don’t believe you,” Sylvia said accusingly. “It was Assia, wasn’t it? I knew something was going on between the two of you and you made me feel like I was a nut job!”

Sylvia was screaming now, and Aurelia inconspicuously slid out the room, not only to escape the awkward scene, but to check up on her grandchildren who were napping upstairs.

The anger flowed out of Sylvia like blood from a fresh wound. She felt helpless and enraged. She felt as if she could strangle Ted. She stomped over to the phone, wrapped both fists around the cord and yanked. The sound of splinters forming and the wall cracking was followed by the loud smash of the telephone on the ground. She threw the receiver at Ted, hitting him in the thigh.

“There! Let’s see if she calls you again!” She gave him a glare, and stormed out of the room.

The memories that followed were faded by salty tears and bitter anger that caused the days to flow

together like an endless nightmare. Soon after that day, though, Ted moved out and Sylvia eventually got her own flat in London, but the yelling from that day still echoed in her head. She wondered how she had been so naïve to Ted's womanizing ways. She ached for a sense of peace, a way to mute the memory.

But the howling December winds soothed Sylvia. It made her feel that nature itself was conflicted and not just her. She swung her feet over the side of the bed and onto the cold floor and sat up. She walked over to the heavy curtains and flung them open, stirring up the dust in the air, and leaned her forehead on the cold window pane. Feeling a familiar urge, she reached onto her desk grabbing a pencil and a piece of scrap paper. She put the paper on the window, illuminating it, and on the top she wrote, *words heard, by accident, over the phone...*