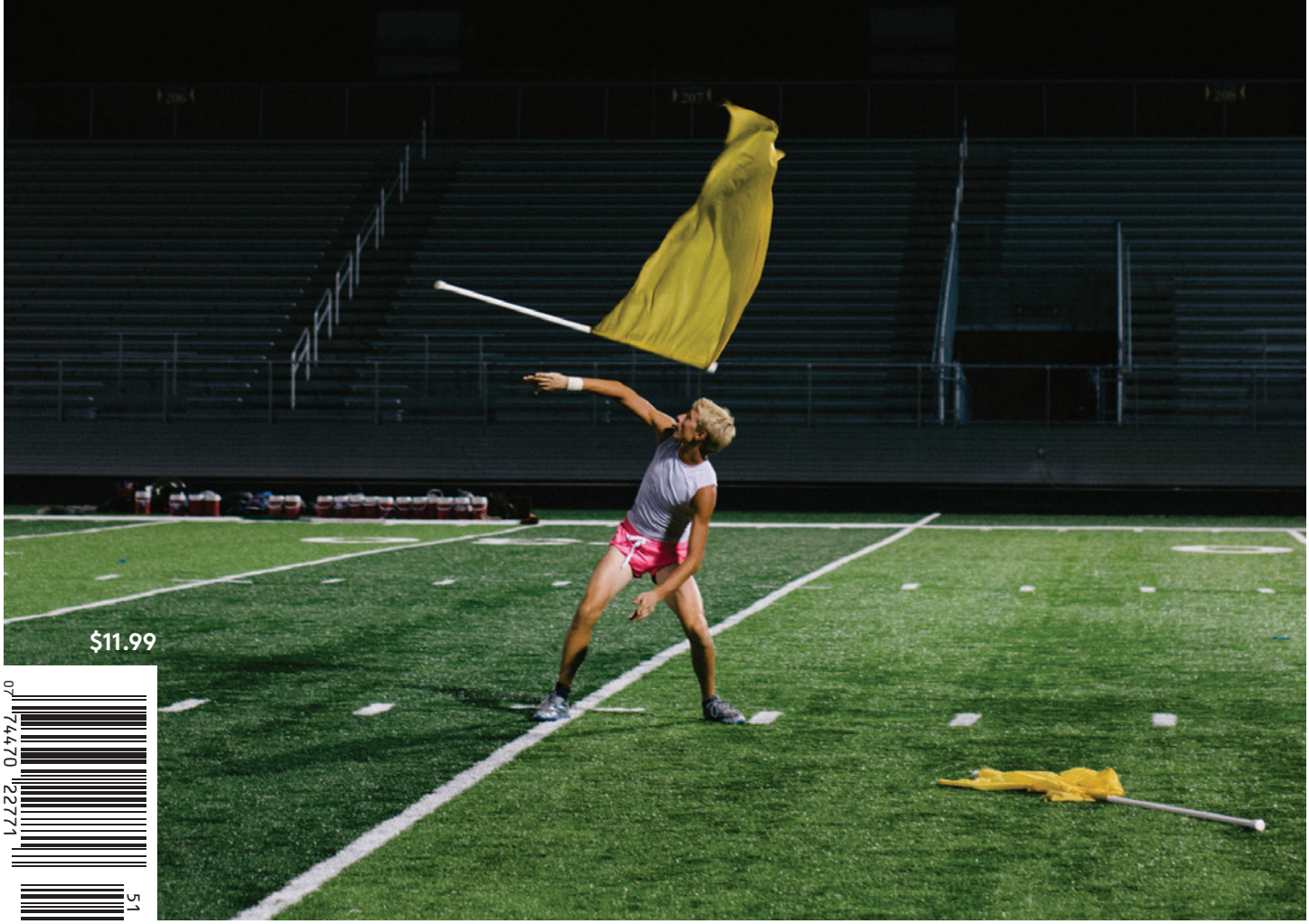
CANTEEN

THE STATE OF CREATION

ISSUE NINE



$11.99

07 74470 22771 51

Introduction

Elliott Holt

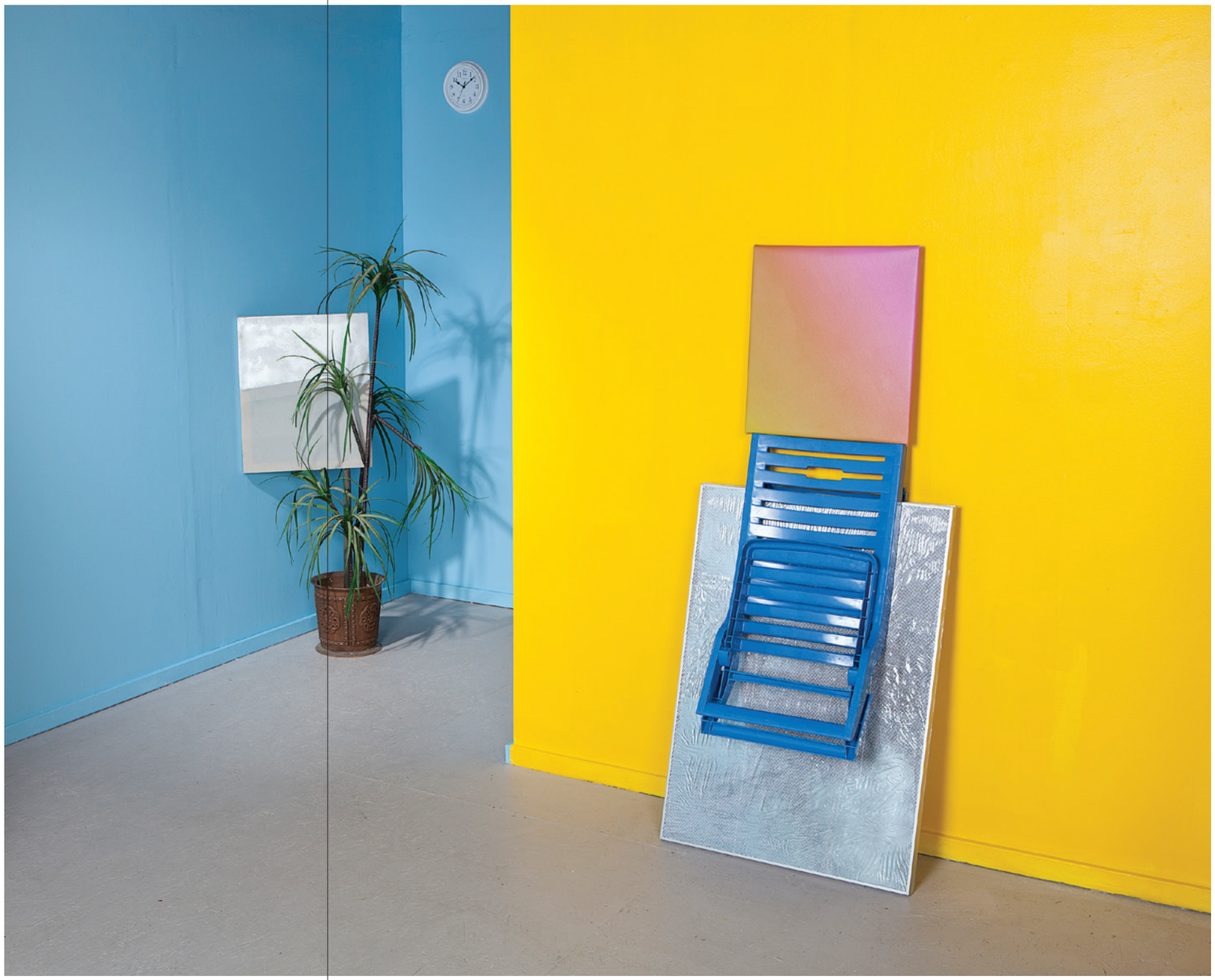
Since 2010, VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts has released an annual report known as "The Count," which compares the number of articles published by men and by women in the country's best known literary journals (*Harper's,* the *Paris Review,* the *New York Review of Books,* the *New York Times Book Review, Tin House*, etc). VIDA's pie charts show that the majority of book reviews are written by men, about books by men.

I wasn't thinking consciously about gender when I read submissions for this issue. The editors of *Canteen* sent me about twenty stories that they had culled from their submissions, and the authors' names and contact information had been removed from the manuscripts, so I had no idea which writers were men and which were women. It was only after making my selections that I learned all three stories I had picked were written by women. In the wake of The Count, I've heard people wonder if male readers are drawn subconsciously to work by male writers. So I asked myself if there was something "feminine" in these stories that appealed to me.

"Exchanges" portrays a wedding from three different perspectives. Jackie Thomas-Kennedy's writing is as self-assured and persuasive when she inhabits the bride's father as it is when she writes from the point of view of the bride. There is nothing sentimental in her description: just surprising, specific details and a compelling voice. Sasha Graybosch's "Risk Is Central to the Concept of Adventure" is a darkly comic story about a scout troop's camping trip gone wrong. It begins in the collective first person of the members of the boy camp, and the first sentence ("The scout leader was wimpy and worn from a life of losing objects") is so startling and good that I was hooked right away. Valerie Cumming's "Due South" is written in the first person and narrated by a young woman recalling her mother's long-term affair with a cousin, but Norman Rush's *Mating* is proof that a female narrator does not automatically indicate a female author. (As a female writer with a male name—I still receive mail addressed to Mr. Elliott Holt—I've heard from readers who are impressed that I write so "convincingly" from a woman's perspective.)

In short, there is nothing obviously "female" about these three stories. These are terrific stories that happen to have been written by women. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

Alex Da Corte with Sean Fitzgerald
Body Without Organs
Fjord Philadelphia, PA July 5-July 28, 2013



Risk Is Central to the Concept of Adventure

Sasha Graybosch

Boy Camp

The scout leader was wimpy and worn from a life of losing objects. Repeated failures in possession that got around in a town, a town as tiny as Hot Springs. Here, it was accumulation that made a person; a man was measured by his horde. If one walked up to another, pointing would commence. *See that? My fence. And that? Wife. Over there? That's Solomon, our purebred hound, taking a nap.* Even as young boys we were catching on, learning what there is in the world to hold onto, to lose, to be left by. Keys, jobs, pets, homes. Memory. Women? We could only speculate on the misplaced.

Our leader ate meals where he found them and rode to scout meetings on a bicycle, chained it up while we watched from our dads' trucks with our dads. "Have fun," they said and booted us out.

We eyed the leader as he unfolded a map distorted by white, weary creases. He pointed to a green bean of land way up north and said, "There is where we'll confront nature."

"What about bears," said Cody.

"Yeah," we said. "What the heck about bears? You bringing a gun?"

"I don't own a gun," the leader said. "Guns are cheating. Don't worry—I'll keep you safe."

To a pack of boys looking upward and growing in that direction, the leader was an ominous example of ill-fitting manhood. But who else had time to teach us tricks with knots and fishing bait, to distribute patches when we'd mastered skills of courage, hygiene, and survival?

We didn't trust the leader with our whereabouts, but our parents thought him harmless and sent us deep into the wilderness with backpacks and no ride home. He led the way on the hike, stopping to point out animal droppings and notable berries. We checked our compasses and made sure to stomp the brush along the way, disturbing nature into a recognizable, returnable path.

We came to a creek. Mason said, "Dip our toes?"

Tim said, "Yeah, I'm hot as balls."

Agreement of the boys. The leader piled our sneakers and we waded in, walked up against the rush.

A man appeared on the bank with rubber boots and a rifle. "Private property," he said. "This here is." His beard implied his extremely selective observance of rules. His burnt and peeling nose signified lack of romantic love. Overalls meant mean, unsatisfied urges. He represented something strong. We realized the gravity of the choices that make a person. People do kill people and this one was holding a gun.

"Now wait," said our leader. "Listen."

"Private property," the man said through teeth.

The leader said, "We're in the water. You can't own a state creek."

The man asked how we got there. We looked around. We pointed. "My land," he said. We turned and pointed again. "My land," he said. We swept our fingers in a circle. "My land," he said and sat. "And you've got to come out sometime."

Months pass, in hunger. Our feet are pruney and we are dying. One of us *has* died, is dead. The little one. Separated from civilization we grow coarse, make sun hats with our shirts. Our math gets rusty. We count ourselves to practice. One gone equals us minus one. Our parents' voices drift on the wind. A long, tasty-looking carp splashes in the shallows, offering its life as food. The smell of fried skin pops, salty flesh sizzling with a side of buttery roasted potatoes. We cast votes to determine what's real. The leader frets in the reeds and says, "The core of hallucination is the rupture of will on the cold stone throne of the world." He urges us up or down, one way or the other, tells us to run and keep low until we find public land or the police. We're looking to the sky this time and staying put. The leader's been wetting his jeans for weeks.

Girl Camp

"Your first mistake," said the new scout leader, "was selling yourselves for money. Peddling cookies like a bunch of bums. You girls want to grow into ladies? Or lady bums? Spit out your gum and stop staring out the window. Today we're sewing a heritage quilt."

The new leader had the high hair of a beauty queen and we'd heard she'd "made it in Texas" but returned to Hot Springs after some snags with her real estate license. She decided to put her sharp pantsuits to good use running girl scouts. We'd watched her snatch the position out from under our old leader, poor Mrs. Moyer, like a magician yanking a tablecloth from a table while the china on top remains composed.

Mrs. Moyer wore loose angora sweaters and hugging her, face first into her soft, unthreatening breasts, was like being enclosed in a warm cake center of acceptance, like smelling the smell of someone we'd lost and thought we'd never be good enough to smell again. She helped us sell enough boxes to be able to afford a ride in a hot air balloon, in a big basket for a group so we could all go up together. What we'd never seen was the world from a distance. We had dreams of sitting in the sky, wind-thrashed and laughing, waving; when the town on the ground looked up, we would be indistinguishable from a clump of dots or birds or boys. Our paintings of clouds were still tacked on the walls of the girl scout room, the cookie money locked away.

The new leader wrote on the board: What kind of woman should you try to be?

We looked around. Lacey raised her hand, said, "Happy?"

Shelby guessed, "A fast runner?"

"No," said the leader. "Those aren't types of woman. Anyone can be that."

Jo said, "Pretty and smart? But not too pretty and not too smart?"

"Yes, all that, but what else?" The leader gave us each a square of cotton and instructed us to draw a representation of our ideal female future. We would then sew the patches together and discover the answer to her question. We looked around again. Lacey raised her hand, "How is this a heritage quilt?"

The leader pointed to the back wall. There were our mothers, as we had always known them, lined up and looking as if they'd been startled from naps. The leader said, "For your consideration. Moms, how can these girls make you proud?"

One said, "Go to college." Another, "Be nice to your brother." The rest concurred that it would be great if we just didn't get pregnant until after we moved out.

We shifted and pulled on our scout socks. "OK," we said. Some of us didn't even have brothers.

Darby called, "What's for dinner, Mom?"

Jean whispered, "Mama, where have you been?"

"Quick," the leader said. "Look at them now. They can't be here for you forever." They were gone. She said, "That was one example. Here's another."

Our grandmothers, crowded and tired and leaning. All of them were there—one from each side of the family. Some we hadn't seen since they died. "You," the leader pointed at one with a walker. "What advice do you have for your descendant?"

She shuffled forward, coughed. "Find a clean man and cook him what he wants to eat." Another said, "No one likes a know-it-all, a whiner, a nag, or a tease."

The leader said, "Anyone else?"

One in the back: "Spend time abroad and skip matrimony. Unless you go broke."

They were replaced by a bunch of teenagers we didn't recognize but sort of did. "Here are your future children," said the leader. "Some of them you'll keep and meet, and some of them you won't. That's part of your power, too." The teenagers bristled, alarmed. The leader said, "So there's that."

"What is this?" we said, squirming in our seats. "Are you showing us there is no answer? That whatever we do will be wrong?"

"No," she said. "Time to draw."

We took up our fabric markers and considered what we'd heard, all the women we'd known or seen, beautiful ones, busy ones, ones married to presidents or singing in bands or in contorted positions, murdered on television. How could we tell what was best?

A soft rapping at the window and there was Mrs. Moyer, peering in. She put a finger to her lips and shook a tin can: the cookie money! She smiled and beckoned, tiptoed away.

It was almost dark by the time we finished stitching the patches into a quilt we were nervous to reveal—this exposed representation of our deep-seated thoughts. The leader demanded we roll the quilt and stand on the desk to unravel it dramatically. She faced us from the back wall.

We felt our creation pulsing under our fingers, heard the voices clamoring within the fabric—arguing, straining, desperate to twist into some new form, caught in a network of veins. We felt the soft parts, the quills, the liquid rush of hunger. On the count of three we let go, let it flop down, square the leader in the face—all our drawings joined as one: everything we knew and wanted so badly we had learned to want to stop wanting, but there it was.

"What is that?" the leader cried and fell to her knees, as though it could rip her in half. We saw her face and fled.

We slammed through the doors and scattered across the field like licks of flame, over the hill. Mrs. Moyer had a head start and the hot air balloon was across the valley, in the next town over. We dragged the quilt behind us—it nipped our ankles, tugged our skirts—unable to let go. We would use it to warm ourselves as we traveled through the night, then bury it deep in the bushes at dawn.

Summer Camp: The Counselors

The little boys and girls who came to outdoor adventure camp stayed the same youngish age summer after summer, but they were definitely getting stranger, either from some new trend in parenting or because we were getting older, losing touch. They used to cry when they fell off a horse or got punched in the arm. Now they cried when they ate too many marshmallows, when someone squished a lightning bug. "Good lord," we said to each other over their heads as we gave them hugs, patting their little backs. "What is it with these kids and hugs?"

They even went to bed when we told them. Like they had been reasonably informed of the benefits of sleep.

We were getting older, nearing the last year we could work as counselors: age twenty. Most of us were below the cutoff, but we dreaded that edge, when we'd have to find real jobs for the summer months, working for our

accountant uncles or delivering flowers in hot cars instead of tanning our shoulders while giving diving lessons, making sure no one was pinching or inflicting psychological torture. We didn't even need to remember names, could rely on "Bud" and "Squirt" and "Missy." "There there, uh, Bud," we'd coo, ruffling a boy's bowl cut. We treated them how we wanted to be treated. "Let's get you set up in the hammock with a juice box."

One afternoon, the campers and us counselors were deep in the smiles of watermelon slices at the picnic tables when little Roy ran up, holding what appeared to be a femur. He clanked it to the table and screamed, and then a handful of other kids appeared, screaming, waving small bones: a muddy tibia, an arm with dangling fingers, loose toes. "Holy shit," we said and jumped up. Counselors Dave and Dana were recently stoned and their glassy eyes ripped around; this was too much.

It was just us out here in the wilderness. Dave ran to look in the index of the counselor manual. "Look under B for *bones!*" we yelled after him. "What the fuck do we do in case of bones?"

Dana was crying and some of the kids joined, the smaller ones just staring, dribbling seeds on their rompers. Dana yelled, "Or S for *serial killer* on the loose!"

"No," we said, rushing the campers indoors. "B for *bones.* Big animal bones. Or E for *everything* is fine. N for *not* an emergency; *nothing* to worry about; N for *not* a good time to bring up murder, Dana, god." We went on the loudspeaker and announced that afternoon activities had been relocated to the Craft Cabin. We had to check things out ourselves and brought Roy to show us the way.

We followed the hiking trail to where Beaver Creek turned into Big Beaver River. Roy led us off the path and there, tangled on the bank and caught in the jagged rocks, like a mouthful of white food stuck between the creek's stony teeth, were more bones, more and more bones, enough to build many skeletons. The bones of a group, washed clean and down to our feet.

We sat and listened to the pattering of rushing water over rock and human remains. The whistles of warblers; a lone thrush's calls and trills, *tut-tut-oh-lay-leeee-pit-pit-pit-pit.* A squirrel rummaging. Maybe a raccoon. Then we fished the bones out.

We sorted them, as if order would bring some sense to the scene. We started a skull pile, a foot pile, and gave up. It was too hard to tell pieces apart; too gross. There was one skull larger than the rest. Maybe the big skull had killed all the small ones. Or the small ones had over-

Bones in bags were much less frightening; bones in bags made sense.

taken the big one and ate it in desperation before expiring themselves. Or a troop got lost. We checked our charts—not ours. Either way it seemed the event had happened forever ago, like in the seventies. If we notified the camp owners or the authorities, we'd all get sent home to our parents' basements. "OK," we said. "What now? Where's Roy?"

We found him in a tree with his fingers in his mouth and coaxed him down. "Look, kid," we said, "this type of thing isn't common. Don't get too worked up. It's not even dark yet." We held him to our chests and went back to camp for bags. Bones in bags were much less frightening; bones in bags made sense. "We're sorry," we said and put the bags in the shed. "Whoever you are. Were."

After we explained the incident as a family of starved wolves washed into the creek, most of the kids forgot what happened. Except Roy. During free time he went around with a notebook asking questions, snooping under picnic tables with a magnifying glass. "Little boy," we said to him, "we know what you saw, and so do you. A family of wolves who sadly passed away together."

"Liars!" he said and ran off.

We made a campfire night of s'mores and scary stories about detectives trying to solve ghost and zombie crimes, the smoke billowing eerily. At the end of each tale, the protagonist detective died a horrifying, humiliating death after death. His car was run off a cliff; his magnifying glass stomped by a gang of skeletons; his pet gerbil poached. "It's really a shame what can happen," we said to the kids falling asleep in their little lawn chairs, all except Roy. He peered at us across the fire with the eyes of a vengeful cat. The next day we caught him rattling the lock on the shed.

We elected Counselor Micah to take Roy aside for some man-to-man girl talk. He walked him to the lake's dock and palmed his shoulder, pointed, "See Melanie over there?" Roy looked. Melanie was convincing a group of kids to eat grass.

Micah said, "With her freckles and shiny braid, that cute pluck of bum beneath her bathing suit?"

Roy's eyes widened.

"She likes you."

Melanie saw Roy staring and marched toward a group of girls sunbathing on a blanket, a dirty old quilt they'd discovered in the woods. It was ancient, torn, and frankly revolting—the pieces arranged with an erratic logic, its texture coarse and uneven—but they were protective of it nonetheless. Melanie plopped down to chat with the other girls, their voices carrying across the strip of hard sand. Counselor Micah heard them mewling, kittenlike, an unfamiliar tone that unnerved him. Roy heard, "Roy, Roy, Roy, Roy."

Micah cleared his throat, said, "But no one likes a snoop or a tattletale. Especially not Melanie. Especially not girls."

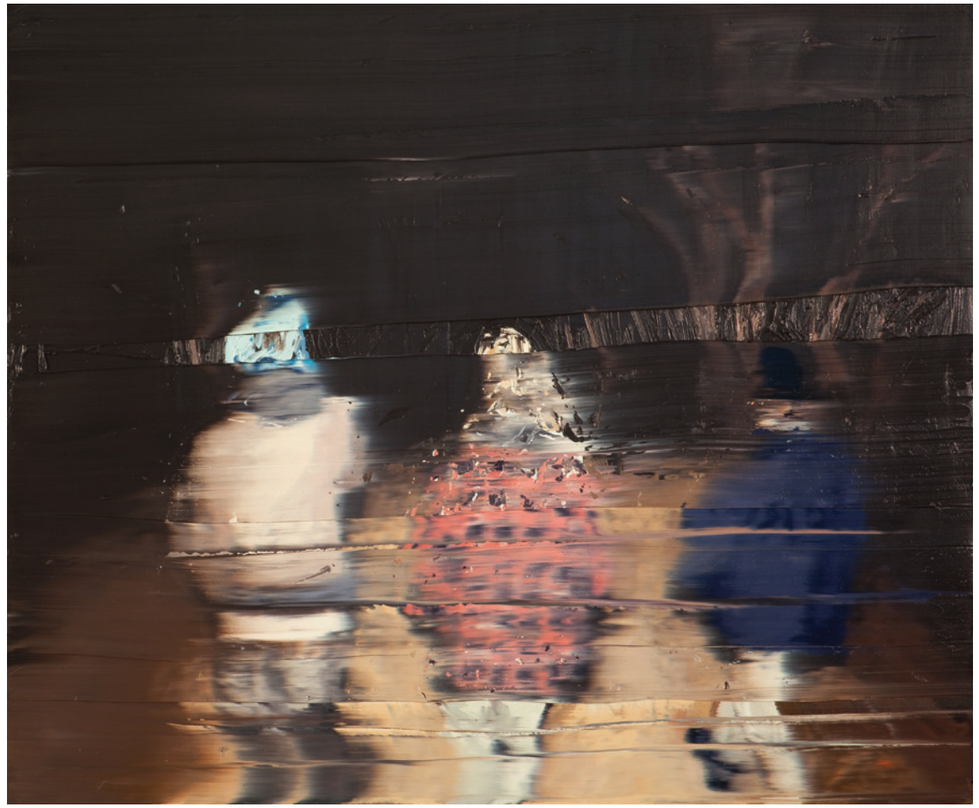
"What do girls like?"

Micah thought about this. From his experience, money and gentle fingers. "Kindness and gifts," he said. "And I bet Melanie would love a tooth bracelet from a, um, wolf." He handed it to Roy. "Don't lose it." Roy nodded gravely. Went off.

We congratulated Micah over cans of cheap beer on the dock after lights-out. He'd saved our final days of camp, and we meant to enjoy ourselves. A dark blob neared, blocking the sky between us and the stars. "Is that a helicopter? An air balloon?" we asked, standing. It passed, bobbing once, stalling and moving on, as if propelled by summer whims, by children, or no one.

The wind summoned a tender, solemn feeling, one we'd been trying to ignore. We eyed the shed filled with bones in burlap—we'd deposited the dirty quilt there, too. We couldn't keep them locked up forever, but there was always a time and a place for these things that was never now nor here. The stars shone with exquisite ignorance.

Someone sighed, a sip, another sip, a throaty belch. The campers were stacked in their beds, breathing heavily into their pillows. The sounds of the lake a smooth cloak over the night. We loved them, we decided drunkenly; the little buggers were alright.



Andy Denzler
In to the Blackwoods II