



The Windhover

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Fall 2023

Editor

Nathaniel Lee Hansen

Contributing Editors

Cyn Kitchen

William Jolliff

Graphic Editor

Randy Yandell

Art Editor

David Hill

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by Sean Oswald

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Dr. Randy O'Rear, President & CEO

Belton, Texas

Statement from cover artist, Sean Oswald:

The practice of painting and drawing for me is partially about quietly and thoughtfully engaging with a subject, content, material, and myself. I think that an individual's perspective and voice is extremely important and somehow my acts of creativity are a performance of that. This can be seen in my work when I choose to flatten space, or mess with perspective, or to paint something differently than I perceived it. Sometimes a gesture can be a work of imagination or intuition, and sometimes it is a response to what I am looking at.

I love authenticity and confidence in artwork and I try to have these in mind as I create. These things manifest as bold colors, and expressive or gestural marks. I seek to tell things poetically and beautifully. The question that has been challenging me lately is, "is this good, true, and beautiful?"

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PHILIP C. KOLIN

An Old Man Reflects on Job

I'm living a strange math.
A new year adds days to the calendar
but only subtracts them from mine.

I take shorter steps on longer distances.
My body is stamped with brown and red moles,
an updated passport to enter life's last country.

I carry an abundance of wrinkled leaves;
my friends are ghosts; my career ended;
my memory cannot be trusted

to translate the past; posterity refuses
to claim me, an orphan with a walker;
their hearts I once thought a refuge

from aloneness; but I am smoke
in their way to flee from me;
all my paths have become extinct.

So many glossed lips once tolled love, home;
all have found an elsewhere;
they muffle their words now and tint their eyes.

My thoughts are riddled with sores;
it hurts to think about a future.
Blowflies stalk me.

JOAN BAUER

Third Wheel

Omaha, January 1986

They had concert tickets that night, but Susannah wasn't feeling well.

The three of them, Molly, Will, and Susannah, were having dinner first at M's Pub. Molly and Will had been dating for all of four months; though Molly was only nineteen, she had safely ordered a beer and was trying to eat a chicken salad sandwich without dropping anything into the folds of her scarf. Will was urging Susannah to drink some of her sparkling water.

"It's not going to help," Susannah said. "The only thing that would really help would be a cigarette."

"God, Susannah—just have one," he said.

"I haven't bought any in two days." Susannah leaned back and pushed away her plate. She had a generous body, with broad shoulders, full lips, and freckles over her nose; her curly blond hair had always been short, but when she found out she was pregnant, she'd shaved most of it close to her head, leaving a forelock to hang in her eyes. "If I can make it through the week, I'll officially be a non-smoker. And that's good."

They sat for a while without talking. Will finished eating and pushed back his chair, drinking his wine. The trench coat he wore was too big; he was good-looking but short, with small hands and a jaded expression. A group of people at the next table had clearly been drinking awhile. A girl with long teased-out hair and dark lipstick was smoking, and every time she exhaled, she tilted her chin straight up in the air. Gesturing with her cigarette, she dropped ashes on Susannah's sleeve.

"Hey, watch what you're doing," Will said.

"Sorry." She barely glanced over her shoulder at them.

Will leaned over and brushed off the ashes. Susannah said something Molly didn't hear, and when Will looked up, she just shook her head. "Are you alright?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's just so damn crowded tonight—"

"Let's just leave." Will raised his hand for the check.

Molly looked up from her plate and hurriedly wiped her fingers on her napkin. She'd barely eaten half the sandwich.

When they were out on the sidewalk again, Susannah drew in deep breaths of cold air.

“You look pale,” Will said.

“For a minute there, I thought I was going to faint.”

“Here—come over and sit down.”

“No, I’ll be okay.” She smiled a little when Will led her firmly over to a bench nearby. “You guys should just go to the concert without me,” she said.

“Susannah—” Molly began.

“Really. I don’t think I’d have very much fun.”

“We don’t have to go either,” Will said. “Why don’t we just take you home and watch a movie or something?”

“No, I don’t want you doing that. You’ve already bought the tickets and everything.”

“But I don’t want to go without you,” Will said.

“Sure, you do. You’ve got a lovely date there.” Susannah flashed a brief version of her old smile at Molly. “You can’t let her down.”

“Let’s just forget it,” he said. “It’s not important. What you’re doing is important.”

“Listen, Will. You drop me off at home, and then you can take my car. I’m sure you’ve got enough time. They won’t start until at least ten o’clock.”

Will finally agreed, but he insisted on stopping at the pharmacy first to get Susannah something for the nausea. He was in there a long time—he’d been talking to the pharmacist to see what she could take. When he came out, he was also carrying a two-liter bottle of 7 Up.

“God, you’re the greatest,” Susannah said as he handed the bag to her in the back seat. She’d made Molly sit up in front, next to Will, who was driving Susannah’s beat-up two-door Chrysler Newport. Molly remembered how puzzled her mother had looked when she told her Susannah had named it Sid Vicious. “I don’t understand,” she had said. “What happened to those other girls you used to spend time with?” She meant Molly’s high school friends—straight-A students, good Catholic girls like herself who were never in trouble.

“Will your parents be home?” Will asked Susannah when they pulled up to her house. Molly got out so Susannah could climb out of the back seat on her side.

“Mom went to a board meeting, and Dad will be in bed by now.”

“Will he wake up if you need anything?”

“For God’s sake, Will,” she said, leaning back in to give him a kiss on the

cheek. "I'm not due for another six months. I don't think I'll have to be rushed to the hospital."

"We'll leave early," he called out to her as she walked to her door. "We'll come back around eleven."

"Stay as long as you want." She smiled at them in the single light over the carport. Then she turned to go in through the little potting shed outside the kitchen door.

Will hardly spoke to Molly on the way back downtown. He was a fifth-year student at Lincoln—Molly was only a sophomore at Creighton, and a townie at that—and he hadn't called to set up their plans for the concert until last night. She'd been anxious for days, wondering whether she'd hear from him, but she was determined not to call him herself. After all, he was always saying there was nothing to do here in Omaha, and for once, she had planned something. That ought to be enough.

As they drove, Molly fought the urge to get into one of their conversations. All she really wanted was for him to drape his arm around her and say it was good to see her; he used to do it as soon as they got in the car. His clothes would smell sharp, like he'd bagged up his laundry before it was dry and then left it a while, and his voice would break just a little. But if she asked him if he had missed her, he would sigh and say that he hadn't had time to do anything but work on his CAD project. He was supposed to have graduated in December.

She would try to be nice; she would try not to ruin their evening. Molly cast about in her mind for something to talk about. But, alone with him in Sid Vicious, she felt like an intruder.

Susannah and Will were part of a network of people whose parents taught college together, and they'd known each other as kids. The two of them grew up a few blocks apart—Will in a neat Georgian house, and Susannah in that old falling-down Dutch colonial—and they both went to public high school in an Italianate building with columns across from the art museum downtown. Susannah was just Molly's age, but while Molly put on her uniform skirt every day and diligently beat out the other smart Catholic-school girls, Susannah had spent her time drinking and going to bars. Her wild party nights were all over by now; Susannah was just back from rehab when Molly first met her. But she'd seen all the best local bands, and she still had great record-store knowledge: the Velvet Underground, X, the Ramones, things that weren't on the radio here. All

of it made Molly feel like she'd arrived much too late on the scene.

Susannah and Molly would meet at M's Pub sometimes during the day. It was Susannah's idea. She'd always loved that place, and it was easy enough to go in there and sit at the bar if they drank Diet Coke—one of them timid and obviously underage, the other already recovering. And at first, Susannah was patient with Molly's hand-wringing about sex. "You know, Molly," she'd say, "I get up every day, and I say to myself, should I have a cigarette? And then I say, yeah, that's okay, and I do. You should just say to yourself, 'is this good for me?' and then do it."

Susannah and Will never dated, thank God, though a few of their friends had hooked up. Instead, Susannah used to go out with this skinny guy who worked full-time at the mall. Molly had met him a couple of times. He'd come over to Susannah's house during the day when her parents weren't home, and afterward, she would joke with her friends about the 'bed of passion.' But it wasn't a joke anymore; and for some reason, Will took Susannah's pregnancy really hard. Maybe that was why Molly invited Susannah tonight—she wasn't sure Will would have come otherwise. In fact, at a party a few weeks ago, Susannah, completely at ease in torn parachute pants and an old flannel shirt, had taken one look at Molly's green Ralph Lauren sweater and asked her point-blank, *Molly, what do you want from us?* The next day, she'd gone out and bought herself some black jeans and a new pair of black combat boots.

* * *

Will didn't want to get stuck in the parking garage, so they drove around for what seemed like forever while Molly glanced at her watch. They finally parked on Sixteenth Street, a good five-block walk in the cold, and as Will put the money in the meter, he said, "two hours should be enough." Molly found herself envying all those other people crowding around the auditorium who at least looked like they were planning to have a good time. She had a sudden impulse to arrange a meeting place in case they were separated, but that would be utterly stupid. If she had to, she could just call her dad to come pick her up.

They stood near the back through most of the show, and even then, they were jammed in by more and more people. There was no room to dance.

"Susannah could never have stood this," Will said.

"What?"

"I said, Susannah was smart to stay home."

He only held her hand briefly during one song, when someone lurched into her and almost knocked her down. Molly felt something warm on her leg.

“Oh, shit,” she said, looking down.

“What’s the matter?”

“That guy just peed on me.”

They were my brand-new boots, too, she thought bitterly when they were back in the car. She had wanted to go to the restroom to get cleaned up, but Will said the line would be long and she might as well wait until she got home. She felt like a disappointed child whose outing had been cut short.

It was bitterly cold, and Molly had barely gotten warm in the car before it was time to get out again at Susannah’s house. But that was all right. She’d been afraid Will might take her home before he returned Susannah’s car.

Susannah was practically sitting in the dark; the only light on in the kitchen was a little fluorescent light over the stove. She had turned off the light over the carport, too, and as Molly and Will stumbled in through the potting shed by the back door, Molly knocked something over. The first words out of Susannah’s mouth as she opened the door were, “God, you scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry,” Molly said, stamping the snow from her feet. Her sock still felt damp inside the top of her boot. Tomorrow, she’d get out the Saddle Soap her mom kept above the dryer with the detergent. But she knew she would never feel the same way about these boots again.

“How was the show?” Susannah asked.

“Terrible,” Will said before Molly could answer. “The mixing just sucked. The bass was pounding in my ears so loud I couldn’t hear anything else.” He patted Molly’s shoulder roughly and said, “and poor Molly got peed on.”

“Oh, you’re kidding.”

“Yeah, right on my new boots.”

“Do you want a paper towel or something?”

“It’s okay. I’ll take care of it when I get home.”

“How are you feeling now?” Will asked Susannah.

“A little better. My dad was still up when you brought me home, though. It’s the first time I’ve been alone with him since he knew.” She got up and put on some water for tea. Molly and Will sat down at the heavy refectory table. Several hanging plants screened the windows, but the wind rattled the flimsy panes in the potting shed outside.

Susannah had changed into sweatpants—the parachute pants, she said, didn’t fit anymore—and when she came back to the table, her face looked puffy and pale except for the freckles and the red rims of her eyes.

“God, Susannah, you’ve been crying,” Will said.

“Yeah, pretty much since you left.” She sniffed and then smiled when Will put his arms around her. There was something exclusive in that embrace; Molly felt frozen, tongue-tied, as though she were being forced to witness something intolerable.

“I went to Planned Parenthood today,” Susannah said. “If I want to have a D&C, I have until the twenty-eighth.”

“And after that?”

“After that I won’t do it. By the sixteenth or seventeenth week I might be able to feel the baby move. And you know—that’s where the line is for me.”

“Okay.”

“Besides, I can go as an outpatient for the D&C. I’m not checking myself into a hospital.”

“So that gives you eleven days to decide.”

“Yeah.”

“Was your dad trying to talk you out of it?”

“If it were up to him, I would have had an abortion by now,” she answered, getting up again and walking around the kitchen. “I think he’s been picturing me going through labor. He said there could be problems with the anesthesia, or I could have to have a Cesarean—and one abortion now wouldn’t significantly hurt my chances of getting pregnant again someday, when I want to have a family.”

“Susannah, you wouldn’t be the first person ever to make that choice,” Will said. Molly looked from Susannah to Will and wondered suddenly if he’d ever found himself in this position before. Will was a notorious player; it was one reason she’d been determined to take him on. She had wanted to see if she could make him be loyal to her.

“No, I know that,” Susannah said. “And then he told me that unmarried mothers have almost zero chance of ever having economic security. He and Mom are such crusaders, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Susannah stood holding onto the edge of the table for a moment before swinging away again. “But you know, I have to do what’s right for me. And right now, I can’t see myself raising this child.” She paused. Molly stared at her over her tea. “The counselor at Planned Parenthood was really cool. She said not to rush it. They’d take me on the very last day if that was what I decided.”

At this, the creature tied up inside Molly with a gag in its mouth—maybe it was herself—started to struggle and rock. She could make only muffled sounds,

but Molly knew what they were. She knew she should speak up right now. If she didn't, and Susannah went back to Planned Parenthood—

But could she speak up? Could she really afford to do that?

And besides, no matter what Susannah's father had said, Molly didn't believe she would ever go through with it. Look at the way she took care of herself, trying to stop smoking, giving up caffeine—and she was already talking about feeling the baby move.

But Molly also knew that a person who considered herself good-hearted and intelligent could not have failed to give up smoking when she became pregnant. That didn't mean that she couldn't convince herself that up until a certain date she could end her pregnancy, or that her friends wouldn't go along with her, whatever she did. Even Will had been asking the pharmacist earlier this evening what Susannah could safely take for the nausea.

"You know what's holding me back?" Susannah stopped and looked at Will. He had stood up too, and they were nearly at eye level.

"What?"

"I keep wondering, am I going to wake up on my due date every year and say to myself, this might have been my baby's birthday? She'd be three years old, four years old—"

"But Susannah," Will asked her, "are you going to wake up every day and ask yourself, what kind of life is my baby going to have? Without a father, without any money?"

"I don't think I could stand that," she said. "I mean, my parents gave me such a wonderful life. I really screwed it up, but—"

"Come on, now." Will made her sit down and put his arm around her shoulder again. "You're a beautiful person. You'll get through this."

"I just—I would want to give a child that. But I know I can't right now."

The two of them went on talking as though Molly wasn't there. It was kind of amazing after a while—they were having this intimate conversation that Molly would never have thought they would want her to overhear...and Will had been such a jerk. He had no time to call her, but he always had time for Susannah. Anyone who didn't know better would think it was his baby. At dinner, he had carefully brushed the ashes from Susannah's sleeve; and yet he had let Molly sit there with someone else's urine drying on her sock.

Molly stared at the little fluorescent light over the stove. It was late, and she really needed to go to the bathroom. She ought to go home. But Will would have to drive her, so she waited. At some point, she became aware of a rhythmic

banging outside in the potting shed. There were so many plants in front of the window that she couldn't see what it was; but the latch must have come loose, and the door was rattling in the winter wind. It was no wonder Susannah was afraid to stay here alone at night.

Molly never did see Susannah in maternity clothes. For a while now, she'd been saying how hard it was to be around people who were still drinking. About a month after that night in her old farmhouse kitchen, Susannah moved back to Minnesota to be near the friends she'd made in treatment. At her stipulation, the baby was adopted by a Jewish couple, who gave it the name she had chosen and promised to invite her to Passover seder.

Molly couldn't really say why she hadn't spoken up that night. She knew it was wrong to suppress her own conscience like that. But after a while, their obliviousness had had its effect; she had said to herself, *they're not asking me*. It was almost as though she'd been watching Susannah and Will on TV, or from the wrong side of a pane of one-way glass. Her own life experience seemed paltry compared to theirs; they had access to some sort of secret from which she'd been barred by her own watchful parents—or perhaps by her teachers, who had skillfully steered her compliant nature with praise. How ridiculous, how naïve, she must seem to them now—how pathetic, how eager to please when she took off that kelly-green sweater and put on those black combat boots! She had thought it would do no harm to indulge her nostalgia like that; if she were ever to form any pearls, she needed some grit. And maybe she had been slumming. But she was always so careful—so invisible, really—that she hadn't expected any of them to catch on. She'd been so surprised when Susannah had called her out. *What do you want from us, Molly? Why are you here?*

And what could she say? That she wanted to borrow their trouble—to gesture with it like an unlit cigarette?

Will had stopped calling, of course, and while Molly was sad about that, she was also a little relieved. On a slow night at work, she could lean against the checkout desk and stare down the glittering white corridors of the store, past the cosmetics and hosiery departments, and out to the mall. One evening, she watched as a skinny guy in a gray suit came down the escalator and walked all the way back to where she was standing. She knew him, of course. When he and Susannah were dating, he used to stop in once in a while on his break.

“So, I just wanted to ask,” he said. “Do you know where she went?”

“Minnesota,” she said.

He nodded, looking away toward the handbag department. “She asked me to meet her at M’s a couple of weeks ago,” he said, “but then she canceled at the last minute. She told me she didn’t think we should see each other anymore.”

“That’s all she said?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that.” He obviously didn’t know about the baby, and Molly wasn’t going to tell him. He came back a few more times after that, but when it became clear that he wanted to ask her out, she started ducking into the stockroom to avoid him.

But it didn’t matter, because Susannah was gone now. She’d never wanted anyone to romanticize her problems; she had always hated the idea of being treated like an exotic flower. It *did* turn out to be a good story; and yet Molly knew that if Susannah had had the abortion, there would be no story. She could not have romanticized that.

But once in a while, as Molly pulled up the covers around her shoulders in bed, she remembered the sound of that banging door in the potting shed outside Susannah’s kitchen on that winter night. It was as though the angel of death had been just outside, beating against the window with frantic wings; but in the end, the lintel must have been marked. Yes, Molly thought, when Susannah went to the seder with her baby’s parents, they would all celebrate a true Passover.

But no one had tried to dissuade Susannah that night. So, who put the blood on the door?

SARAH DECORLA-SOUZA

My Faith

is like an Easter egg
in a cut glass bowl
behind the china cabinet doors,
the tabernacle of our home
where fragile things are kept.
I take it out, I cradle it
in church, in the purgatory
of the children's room,
listening to the cries of babies, the scratch
of the speakers, the hypocrites. I cradle it
like a baby, like my children
as newborns, when I kept them wrapped
close to my heart, so I could carry on
with the business of living. I carry on
each day, praying at stoplights,
rosaries in the shower,
between cooking, commuting, listening
to children's fights, to the drone of the news,
to the quiet voice of God
still humming beneath the noise of the day.

BRENT HOUSE

Even Angels Call

6.

On the last Sunday night of summer, I sing “Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,” among the little flames of our vacation bible school, and I stand straight as the fluorescents above us, our fervent charm—illuminated by generations of faith—glows as phosphors in the love of our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, until the shared blood of our veins ruptures on the altar, as prayers of our open hearts write the initium of our covenant, fill hollows of our baptistry, flow to a yard set aside by a chain link fence, and settle into our soil, under the shadow cast by a cruciform steeple, lifted by the hands of men who can build most anything, on a sabbath afternoon, in the common hours between mornings at the pond and evenings in the pastures and garden, where they raise the sheep, pick the beans and squash our mothers cook, place in the fellowship hall, cover with foil sheets, while they sit in the pews, listen to the songs of children they call angels.

12.

Riding to crafts with the junior boys, I sit high above the wheel well, in the bed of our deacon’s Ford, outstretch my arms for a quickened breeze along the yards of highway between our red-bricked Baptist church and Brother Andrew’s place, not far past Mr. Bernie Ray’s doublewide beer and Coke store, to a house with a low-pitched roof braced and nailed together to withstand the winds of every passing hurricane, even Camille, then painted green as the greenhouse where he husbands the blueberries advertised with a u-pick sign nailed to the corner post, and the workshop, where the mailman delivers the weekly Penny Pincher ads and the monthly power bills. The double doors open, in this last summer, to the tools and work of our fathers, to lengths of two by eight by twelves we cut, sand, and lacquer into yellowhammer boxes for the eaves, where one family will fledge their hatch, return, each year, to protect our house from the others.

18.

Holding her niece's hand, Penny finds an empty sanctuary, the children outside eating morning snacks, teachers in classrooms posing flannelgraph lessons—Daniel in the lion's den for kinders, David and Goliath for primaries, Peter on the water for juniors—while I descend from the attic, from a search for props to create a forest for Camp Cando, where she acts as camp counselor, as they jump into her lap, drip red rover sweat and craft paints, and fall asleep to songs unknown to her, who doesn't even know John 3:16, a verse I read her first, while she laughs, as she speaks of the pierce and flow, bare record of her sins, among saplings of cottonwood and white bay cut and set in buckets of sand and water, haybales from Brother Doug's fields of alfalfa and timothy. Our sanctuary walls covered in butcher's paper, the bark we kneel and paint, as crowns of needles and leaves reach around the baptistry river, beyond the fake campfire, just a red bulb, with thin sheets of aluminum above the pulses of air, an illusion of flames.

24.

Husband to a preacher's daughter, I return to Shiloh, to hold the pew behind my father, near the fathers who built their birdhouses better than mine, as their wives wrap blankets crocheted by the Women's Auxiliary around newborns who reach from solid cribs when their fathers return from the yards and shops I never mastered as well as the verses I held in memory longer than the lives of children who sit now on the blue-papered floor around planks and corner posts cut, bored and strung with Manila rope, to shape a pier leading to mercy, God's way, Big Fish Bay, and the altar where Penny, a line of cousins, and I knelt to pray for salvation, where I ask him to send Jesus—even an angel—to call holy words from my mouth, and I wait, long after our children bow to our congregation, as Sister Carol plays "Just As I Am," until the fourth chorus, when Brother Arthur blesses the children, their baskets full of coloring sheets, popsicle-stick crafts, and the last cookies from a week of passing among hands that reached to wipe us clean.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ashley Archuleta

Carrie Heimer

Steven Peterson

Joan Bauer

Brent House

Russell Rowland

Jeff Bender

Marci Rae Johnson

Kiya Schafer

Richard Bernard

Heather Kaufmann

Lindsay Schlegel

Michael Brooks

Philip C. Kolin

Bill Stadick

Cynthia A. Crane

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Sarah DeCorla-Souza

D.S. Martin

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