

SUSAN MOORE

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Mixed media, 19 x 19 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PEYTON BURGESS

The Life Expectancy of a Gravedigger

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I'm hightailing it to Chattanooga.

In Chattanooga, I'll spend the night at a La Quinta and say hi to my grandparents at the Memorial Park cemetery. The next day, I'll head to Virginia Beach, where I'll locate my burned-out former rock star sister, K, check her vitals, if you will, and drive back home to New Orleans, to my wife, completely and totally without incident.

From Louisiana through Alabama, there are nothing but pines shaped in such identical formats that they will trick you into thinking they all come from one creator, like Nintendo or something. Still so many needles on the ground this time of year. Needles, needles, everywhere, give me all the needles. What covered-up roots. All these trees are siblings and their lives end up more or less the same way.

Just how different are K and I? Do I even know my sister? Where do our needles fall?

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When she was in sixth grade, K skipped school, walked down to a used-instrument store, and traded in her cello for a Squier Jaguar bass guitar. Mom was pissed, and a part of Mom never accepted that her daughter was no longer, had never been, the cello type.

Nonetheless, Mom, Dad, and I soon found ourselves standing front and center at K's first gig with her middle school band, the Unnamed Dames. The school fair was, as far as I could tell, a bunch of annoying preteens, their strange parents, hot dogs, frozen preformed burger patties, funnel cakes, a dunking booth, and a twenty-minute set by the Unnamed Dames, which K fronted, backed up by two of her goth girlfriends.

Mom and Dad were wearing pleated khaki shorts, which meant to imply they were there to have and facilitate good times. But there was a group of boys whispering, giggling, and pretty soon, despite the Unnamed Dames putting on an impressive show, the boys' giggling escalated to straight up pointing and booing.

Again, Mom was pissed.

And before Dad could try to calm her down, Mom marched over to the boys and laid into them. The distortion from the Unnamed Dames drowned out what Mom

*Pretty soon Nards
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was saying, but by the looks on the boys' faces, they seemed scared. Then one of them chuckled and said something to Mom. Whatever it was, it was just enough. She grabbed the boy by the arm and yanked him closer to her so that she was right in his face.

"Dad, should Mom be doing that?" I asked.

"No," Dad said. His arms were crossed and he was frowning.

"Should we stop her?" I asked.

"Peter, I don't think we can," he said.

The boy, who was probably in seventh or eighth grade, pulled away from Mom, rubbing his forearm and looking a little shocked.

K caught sight of the scene and stopped playing. Her bandmates looked up, confused. Then K ran off, still holding her bass. A big buzzing pop echoed across the schoolyard as the bass cable was yanked from the amp.

And Mom, seeing her daughter run off in shame, seeing the look on the boy's face as he rubbed the nail marks from his forearm—Mom, how to be a mom in such a boy's world?

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I'm exiting I-59 for a Shell in Tuscaloosa. It is in Alabama gas stations where one realizes the southern cracker will do just about anything to prove to the rest of the world that he is, indeed, the dumbest scum of his own making. I refill the tank and get more coffee.

&

I remember one summer, Mom, Dad, K, and I took a trip to New Orleans. As per our masochism, we stood under the hot sun in Audubon Park for family pictures. We tried not to squint in the sun. We tried to stand still, but Dad kept shaking his leg out because his boxers were straight up run through with sweat and chaffing him.

After it was over, I saw K standing by the pond. She was watching a park ranger try to catch a nutria.

"That is one gnarly critter," I said.

"It is the punk rock star of rodents and it doesn't get its due," she said.

On our long drive back home, K sat in the back of the family van making collages with clippings from her collection of rock magazines and a couple brochures from the park.

As we were finally pulling into our neighborhood, she yelled at me. "Peter! My comic book! The Adventures of the Rockstar Rodents. It's about this band. They turn into nutria whenever they play live shows!"

It was a sloppy but admirable little book of the heads of the little orange-toothed rodents implanted on the bodies of rock stars. I remember loving how excited she was about it, like I knew even then how rare and important a feeling like that was for her.

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Ah, Chattanooga. This La Quinta Chattanooga is nicer than most La Quintas. You might be wondering: What are you, some kind of La Quinta guru?

Yes. Yes, I am.

Why?

Because, in 1999, I went with my sister on her first tour, and La Quinta was the only decent chain that allowed her to bring her pet nutria, Nards, without a deposit.

That's right. K's affection for nutria never ceased, and for her sixteenth birthday, she convinced Mom and Dad to let her buy and keep one as a pet. Nards, much to my dismay, was allowed in the house. Pretty soon Nards was like any other lapdog, except a rodent, and he enjoyed cuddling with all of us, but typically he was always with K, in her black leather purse or cuddled between her mop

of blond hair and the bed's headboard as she slept. And as K grew up and became famous, so did Nards.

Anyway, K's first tour. 1999. And La Quintas. At about sixty dollars a night, it was still way out of her band's price range. But alas, Nards had to go everywhere with her. So they cheaped on other stuff.

But the band wasn't broke for long. Before the end of the tour, the first album hit number one on the Billboard 200. By the next year, the tours were already really different, but they kept it real and still stayed at La Quintas. I didn't go because by then I was in college, had a job. But I saw the pictures. Read the stories in Rolling Stone. Nards even had a caretaker.

There were more drugs too.

But here, now, at this La Quinta Chattanooga, I say aloud, all alone in my room, "What more could you ask for?" This king-size bed. This high-def TV right in front of my fucking face. The bottle is in my hand, and if I want to, I can watch awful TV and drink bad wine all night.

I wonder if K still has Nards?

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I call my loving and patient wife, Liz. No answer. I tell myself that she is okay.

I'm

not
gonna
crack.

But this Woodbridge magnum isn't going to finish itself.

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The tight, clean bedsheets here at this La Quinta Chattanooga feel good. Tomorrow, I see my deceased grandparents. Right now, I finish this Woodbridge.

I feel the cool wine drip down my chin. How much better the trickle feels when there's no care. I look down to see a beautiful red bleeding out on my white Jockey tee.

Dad is calling, and I kick myself for not letting him or Mom know I arrived safe. I consider ignoring and texting that I'm still checking in or something. Instead, I blink hard a few times to straighten my senses and answer the call.

"Hey, Dad. I'm here! At the La Quinta, of course!" I turn from the phone and take a quiet, momentary good-bye swig of the wine.

"Great. That's good to hear. Listen, I need to tell you something."

"What is it?" This tightening in my gut is a feeling that I've become accustomed to over the years of overdoses and breakdowns. Instead of just muting the TV, I turn the volume down all the way and the tightening in my stomach grows as the TV volume decreases at that slow notching pace. Maybe it's enough time to let me get ready. Of course, it's not.

"Listen, Peter. K is in the hospital. She's alive, but unresponsive."

"When did you hear?"

"This morning. I didn't call you because I knew you were on the road." Dad starts sharing some details, the easy ones at least. Who called him, etc. "We went and saw her."

On the La Quinta room TV is SNL's "Best of Chris Farley"—the volume still down. There's Chris, American treasure, belly flopping onto a coffee table. I hear no laughter. All I see is the sweat and agony on Chris's face.

"She looked pretty good, Peter. Considering, I've seen worse with her. But she looked showered, her hair was pretty, she really looked nice. She just looked asleep."

Dad sounds like he is describing a dead person at a viewing in a funeral home.

"She sounds dead. The way you're describing her, she sounds dead. Is she dead?"

"She's unresponsive, but alive."

"Should I pack up and drive through the night?" I ask. And I know how bullshit of an offer it is.

"No," Dad says. "That wouldn't be safe. But do you have any questions?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just anything you want to ask me."

"No. I don't think so."

"Okay. I'm going to go then. Your mom is upset, of course. I'm going to lie down with her."

I end the call. I'm going to finish this magnum of red Woodbridge. Then wake up, visit the grandparents' graveside, and drive to Virginia Beach to see Mom and Dad, maybe my sister.

I plug in my JBL Bluetooth speaker. I select shuffle on

my phone. The first song that plays is Corillaz's "Broken." I stand up on the bed and start dancing and jumping. Then things get a little bit more intense when the Bug's "Jah War" plays. I consider the volume but decide to let it ride. I jump higher. The last thing I hear is Slutever's "1994," with its deafening grind and screech and then a crash.

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I wake to a loud banging noise. I am on the La Quinta carpet.

The banging gets louder.

Louder.

There is a small puddle of drool between my mouth and the tight bristles of the carpeting. I sit up, wiping off my mouth, and as I right myself I realize that the banging is someone knocking on the door.

The music is still playing from the JBL. Still playing? Had been playing? I'm not sure. It's something by Juana Molina. I can't do music right now. I turn it off.

"Mr. Burgundy, answer the door please?" a man yells.

Another whispers, "Maybe he's dead."

"I'll call the police in a second."

"Did the music just stop?"

"Finally. Mr. Burgundy?"

"Yes!" I answer. "I'm here! I'm here! Please don't call the police. I'm coming." I straighten my shirt, take a swig of bottled water and swish it around in my mouth. Not a great thing to swallow. I answer the door.

Two men are standing there. One in the blue La Quinta polo, and another in a generic security guard outfit.

"You're alive," the security guard laughs, smiling, genuinely happy about it for some reason.

I get the feeling I've done something exceptional, but I act surprised by their visit anyway. "Yes, why wouldn't I be?" I say. "Is everything okay?"

"You tell us," the La Quinta clerk says. "You were blasting music through the night. We had multiple complaints. You wouldn't answer the room phone or your door."

It's then that I turn to look over the room and see the high-def TV broken on the floor.

"And you're bleeding," the security guard says.

"Am I?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the clerk says.

"Checkout is in four hours anyway," says the security guard. He shrugs his shoulders.

"I understand," I say. "Can I still get some free coffee from the lobby?"

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K has also been banned by La Quinta, although I think the corporate office banned her from every location, whereas, according to my friend the security guard, I'm just banned from the one Chattanooga location.

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The morning chill, hanging here along Lookout Mountain, makes me happy to be awake, to stand next to my car and sip my free La Quinta coffee. To beat the fuzz out of my eyes from that magnum of Woodbridge and that high-def TV in my fucking face last night.

I send a check-in text to Dad. No change with K. She's still unconscious.

Off in the distance, perfectly coifed by the fog on the hillside, is a gravedigger, whom I assume is a gravedigger because she is operating a bright-orange mini excavator and with it digging a grave-sized hole in the ground. Wearing one of those heavy-duty, insulated camo coveralls, the gravedigger stands up from the seat and turns off the excavator. The little machine hiccupps and rumbles to a halt. I wave.

Pulling the bandana from her face, she waves back and then she goes back to doing whatever she's doing as if she thinks I just wanted to share a nice morning wave.

"I'm lost!" I yell.

She bends over and grabs a McD's bag out of her backpack. "I'm sorry. Hang on," she says. She starts unwrapping what looks like an Egg McMuffin. Takes a Bunyanesque bite. I get the sense that she's sizing me up as she scarfs down the McMuffin. I figure I might as well walk on over.

But she throws up a hand, "No, give me a second," she says. "I'm almost finished."

"Sorry," I say.

I stand there, sort of dangling out there in the field about twenty yards from the gravedigger, until she waves me over.

"Okay, now," she says.

I dutifully proceed.

"I'm looking for the Burgundy plot," I say. "I swear it was around here."

"You need a number," she says through a McD's napkin as she wipes her mouth. Then she pulls out a walkie-talkie. "Ben, come in, please."

"Yeah, Jan."

She looks up at me. "I need a full name," she says.

"John William and Melissa Burgundy," I say.

"You hear that, Ben?"

"163, Jan."

"Thank ya, Ben. Over."

"Thanks, Ben!" I say.

"I already said, 'Over,'" Jan says, staring off into the distance, perhaps looking at the fog against the hillside, maybe looking for plot 163.

It seems to me that Jan knows when people should shut up, so I shut up. I just watch her stare.

She closes her eyes, wipes her mouth again with the McD's napkin. "Follow me," she says. Then she opens her eyes and takes off at a brisk pace.

I try to keep up, but Jan, as if guided by a supernatural but stuttering internal compass, is zigzagging all over the place and much better at navigating the slopy, soddy terrain than my flip-flop-footed self. Alas, after hopscotching from one flat headstone to the next, we come upon the plot of John William and Melissa Burgundy. I gasp. Or is it more of a guffaw?

Both Grandpa's and Grandma's concrete burial vaults are slightly exposed, the foot ends poking out of the little rooty, clay hillside.

"Damn erosion," Jan says.

Yes, the erosion at plot 163 has gotten out of hand. The tree roots and azalea bush roots are hanging like silly straws. I half expect to see Grandma's and Granddad's concrete burial vaults crumbling out of the little hill.

"I can fix this," Jan says. "But you should expect to see them like this again next year, the way the earth is moving these days."

"Annual burials," I say.

"That's life," she says.

"Does it have to be?"

"It does actually."

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Jan is off again. Headed back in the direction of the mini excavator. Again, I try to keep up but again the slick grass, the hillside, my dumb fucking flip-flops. She gets into the mini excavator, revs it up.

"Should I just say my goodbyes?" I ask.

"No, you need to learn how to bury people."

"I'm not sure it's a skill that will serve my interests."

"Gravedigging serves everybody's interests at one point or another."

This is hard to argue with, so I climb onto the side rail and grab the top of the cab. Jan throws the mini excavator into gear. We lurch forward with a sudden burst of power, and I almost slip off, but then the machine settles into an agonizingly slow pace, its tracks clopping across the gravel road. All power, no speed, just like death, except when death surprises you.

"How long have you been gravedigging, Jan?"

Keep in mind, we're both yelling, loudly, over the rumbling of the excavator.

"Do I look like I've been doing this all my life?"

"You seem pretty comfortable in this excavator."

"That's because I used to be a midwife."

I'm silent with this information for a second because it's both pretty fucking unbelievable and also, as I'm hanging off the side of her excavator, I fail to see the connection between gravedigging and midwifery.

"Is it midwifery? Is that how you say it?"

"Midwifery is about trusting in the power of life and the power of women."

Jan turns sharp, sending me swinging sideways. One foot slips but I hang on and regain my composure. I suddenly feel like I'm in an early Primus music video. We climb the hillside until we reach plot 163. Jan shifts the excavator into neutral and it crumbles to a low groan.

"So what happened? Are you still a midwife?"

Still yelling, but not as loudly as before.

"They called me a witch. They shut down my practice."

"Of course they did."

"It's hard for a man to see somebody believe in the power of his wife more than he does."

"I think I see what you mean, but honestly, I probably don't."

"In short, I followed a patient's birth plan against the wishes of her husband, who happened to be a council member. He stripped me of my license, accused me of witchcraft, which I didn't deny."

The excavator pitches back into action, the rpms of the groan increasing, a little more exhaust puffing up and away into cool morning air. It's been a few years since she last assisted with a birth, she yells, as she moves some fill into place, gently coaxing the clay up against the hillside and nestling Grandma's and Grandpa's vaults, with surgical precision, back beneath the earth. I slip my flip-flops off and feel the cold silky clay between my toes and stomp the ground smooth and flat.

"I'll install some sod and netting later," Jan says. "Help keep it in place." She takes off her gloves and slaps them against the seat of the excavator.

"That's sweet of you," I say. I snap a pic of plot 163 with my phone and text it to Mom and Dad. I had to do a little reburial for Grandma and Granddad.

"I'm going to go now. Have a schedule to keep, but I'll see you again, I'm sure."

"Maybe, Jan."

I wave as Jan and the excavator grumble grumble off into the distant, tombstone-speckled horizon.

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I hit the road again.

The passage through the Shenandoah Valley, through the Appalachians, can be a little stressful. The winding elevation transitions, the trucks, the beautiful views that will rob your attention and then your life.

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Dad calls.

"Almost there, Dad. About three hours," I say.

"P, I wanted you to know that your sister disappeared."

"That's better than dead!"

Silence.

"She walked right out of the hospital," Dad continues. "And damn it, how do you not notice somebody walking out the door holding a giant nutria?"

"K had Nards with her at the hospital? How does that work?"

"Emotional support animal or some other damn nonsense."

Cursing was never Dad's strong suit. Even in this situation, it doesn't fit him and sounds a little forced coming from his super-gentle lips.

"Well, I mean, maybe that means she feels better."

"She's in no condition to be out of the hospital."

"Then I'll find her. I'll find her and Nards and convince her to check herself back in. I'll be there in 150 minutes."

"No speeding."

I hang up.

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I arrive in 152 minutes.

Virginia Beach. What a place in which to have been a kid, to have kidded it up, a local I once was, during the days of fluorescent Seventeenth Street Surf Shop T-shirts,

stolen Sturpee refills, and gobs of melted Sex Wax on every sidewalk.

Dad answers the door. He looks . . . like shit. Tired. His hair seems grayer, thinner. Sort of lost in his exhaustion, he doesn't think to give me the usual salutatory hug until I walk through the door and take hold of him, patting him on the back.

I throw my bag in the hallway and go to the kitchen to pour a glass of wine.

Mom is in bed.

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Hot dogs! We have microwaved Ball Parks, which is a clear nod to a human necessity to eat even in the midst of dread and grief.

Mom is still in bed. Dad goes to check on her. When he comes back, he looks even more tired, more sad.

"Do you want to bring her a plate?" Dad asks me.

"Yeah," I say. I take one last swig of wine and grab a couple Diet Dr. Peppers from the fridge.

I walk down the hallway, and I can hear the Weather Channel blasting, its oceans of blue casting down the walls toward me. I knock on Mom's bedroom door even though it's partially open. She sits up and mutes the TV. "Oh, hey, honey," she says, as if she hasn't been expecting me, as if there were nothing weird about her being in bed at 7:30 p.m. "Come give me a hug."

We hug and I crack a Pepper for her and then the other for myself. I swish it around in my mouth to get rid of that bitter film of wine on my tongue but it doesn't work.

"Have you been drinking?" she asks.

"Just a little wine," I say.

"You know why that worries me."

"Mom, I'm not K."

"I don't know what else we could have done for her," she says.

It occurs to me, has occurred to me many times before, that there's not much of a difference between Mom and K, the condition in which they choose to live. Is it a choice? The meaner person in me says yes.

"You can't do anything for somebody like her," I say.

"You shouldn't say things like that, Son. You'll regret it someday."

I let that one sting for a little bit. Then I say, "Well, I guess I'll go look for her then." Which sounds like inspiring marching orders, but instead of taking the dramatic exit, I sit there on the bed, hold Mom's hand, and we drink our Peppers together, watching the Weather Channel on mute.

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Before I leave, I peek in K's old bedroom and turn on the lights. You can see where the Scotch tape from all her posters has left the walls looking a bit beat up. Some tape still dangles, but all of the posters are gone, casualties of a very long battle between two people that refused to understand and accept each other, I guess. A lot of her crap is thrown under the bed. I see an old composition notebook and open it up. One of her diaries. No thanks. Not going down that fucking hole.

And then, a few sad little remnants of her nutria punk band collage slip out of the notebook and glide down to the floor. The lead singer—a kind of Frankenstein of a nutria head and the torso and limbs of a rock star. I pick it up, turn the lights out, and go put the collage in my backpack.

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Room 403, the La Quinta desk clerk tells me.

"Dude, it's so good to see her," he says. Greasy, thinning, dated haircut, faded arm tattoos, and a cheap pressed uniform. The kind of look that I've always found really fucking depressing. The look of glory days resigning to mediocrity. "Does she have anything new in the works?" he asks.

"I wouldn't know," I say. "Thanks for the intel."

"Let me know if she needs anything, will ya?" he says.

"Yeah, quick question. Isn't she banned from La Quinta?"

"Never this one, man. You know that."

"Right. Thanks." I enter the elevator.

I slide the key card and open the door to room 403. I poke my head into the bathroom.

Good old Nards is doing the backstroke in the tub, chewing on a piece of a lucky bamboo arrangement. "Hi, Nards. Where's your partner in crime?"

Nards waddles out of the tub, and then scurries around my feet and into the bedroom area.

I follow Nards and see K slumped on the love seat. She looks asleep. Her hair is hanging over her face. She's wrapped in a mangy white plush robe. Nards cuddles into a ball on her lap. Other than the robe, all K seems to be wearing are her signature-yellow Dr. Martens.

She clears her throat suddenly, and her head slowly tilts up. She moves her hair away from her face.

"P, Brother. Are you here? For real?"

"I don't know, K. How real do I look to you?"

"Meh," she smirks. She lets her head droop again.

She's high.

"What's new, K?" I say.

"I have a new album," she says. "They want me to tour for it."

"Are you ready for that?" I say.

"I will be," she says. "Piece. Of. Cake." Takes a sip of her drink. "I want you to come along."

"K, I have a family now. I can't just ditch them to goof off on some tour."

"Goof off?"

"Sorry. You know what I mean."

"Sure, P. I sure do."

"You know," I say. "If anything, Mom and Dad would be happy to see you well enough to tour. They could use a break from the worry."

"You don't get it. When it comes to me and Mom and Dad."

"It seems pretty obvious, K."

"They think the world is coming to an end, and here I am, happy as a clam."

"I don't think they believe you when you say you're happy."

"Did you come here to lecture me, Professor? I thought you'd be a famous artist by now," she mumbles.

"And I thought you'd be dead by now," I say.

"Geesh. That's harsh, even for you, P." She wraps her arms around Nards and gets comfortable, going horizontal on the love seat. And just like that, she's out again.

"K?" I get up and take a closer look at her. Her face, once almond shaped and flushed with the adrenaline of making loud music, is now more like a bruised pale-yellow tomato. Nards is snoring.

I go to use the bathroom, take a stinky Diet Dr. Pepper pee. When I'm washing my hands, I see K's kit sitting plain

as day by the hand soap. It's funny to me how unremarkable this drug looks in person. Just a sticky brown powder.

And so, I'm nothing like my sister, but here I am and I'm going to try this. I'm not going to cook it and mainline like my sister prefers. See, Mom? I'm nothing like K.

I tap a bit out onto the counter and snort it. I walk back into the bedroom and chase the hit with a sip of Jack. Another. One more sip.

K. The way she's curled up in a ball on the love seat, cradling Nards, a slight smile on her face, makes her look like my old sis again.

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I wake up on the floor. Again. On the floor of a La Quinta. Again. My heart feels like a bomb, and my brain feels like it wants to explode out of my fucking eyeholes.

I think of Liz and River, and I want to be home. I fumble around for my phone. Liz has called three times. I want to go home. I have to go home or I might die, or they might die. Somebody might die.

I stand up, go to the bathroom, and throw water on my face. Suddenly, I realize Beyoncé's "Halo" is blasting from outside on the balcony. The alarm clock on the bed stand says 7:30 a.m. Nards is sleeping on one of the beds.

Out there on the balcony is K, robe hanging from her body. She's dancing to "Halo" and singing the lyrics very loudly to what looks like the Ocean Lakes High School football team as they run drills on the beach. And the team is loving it. They're dancing along with her.

For a second, I smile, laugh a little, and feel like everything might be okay. But then the wind blows, and K's robe lifts up just enough to reveal a bloated belly, pregnant with the ugliness her body can no longer expel. That familiar dread returns, and I feel I have to leave. I say nothing, I do nothing, as I sneak out of the door.

Peyton Burgess is the author of *The Fry Pans Aren't Sufficing* (Lavender Ink, 2016). The story featured here is an excerpt from his novel in progress. Other excerpts can be found in *Tin House*, *Autre*, and *Joyland Magazine*.