

# CANIS MINOR

ANTHONY DOMINIC

New Mexico boundary, 75 miles-per-hour. State Road 522, starry-lit. Chase hands over the Corralejo, and I take a sloppy swig, left hand still palming the wheel of the FJ Cruiser.

“Do you know any constellations?” she asks, cheek pressed hard against the passenger window. Outside, high desert shrubs flutter by. Beyond, a blurry vista of cold and dirt. Life in monochromatic.

“A few.” I ease the briney burn with measured swallows, two-and-a-half gulps. Bottle goes back into the center console with a *clink*. “But you’re looking out the wrong window.”

Chase’s smile glows from the passenger seat. Big, bright teeth like squares of Orbit Wintermint. She recrosses her legs, now right over left, denim, indicating I have her attention.

“This time of year, this time of night, you want the southeastern sky.”

She points behind us, toward the hatch window. I retract the sunroof. Vicious January air swirls into the cabin. The passenger seatbelt snakes loose, and Chase wastes no time turning to straddle the console; one of her two knees jabbing the cushion between my legs.

“What am I looking for?”

My eyes drift from the pocked asphalt and meet hers. Deep and cobalt. I think of Navajo Lake. Flanked by fading summer freckles. And wavy blond strands slumped over the shoulders of a coarse, classic brown Carhartt smock, hers, not mine, appropriately oversized.

“What do you know about Orion?”

She tugs the hood over her brow, corralling wild blond locks. “What do you know about patience?”

“Look back to the horizon and a little to the left. A hunter, sword and shield, arms overhead.”

Chase clasps the seatbacks and pokes her head into the black. My eyes roll back to the road. My left hand rests on her thigh. In the distance, the silhouetted mesa of Ute Mountain stretches skyward. The border’s close.

She howls excitedly. “There’s a *million* stars out here. But I can’t tell the difference from one to the next.”

“Blink a couple times, hard.” I lift my foot from the

gas pedal and feel the V6 calm, the car coast. “His stars are some of the brightest in the sky. He might be standing at an angle. Find his belt, then trace his legs and torso, and then his sword and shield—OK?”

Mismatched surface markings disappear, one after another, below the grill. Are we going to the night, or is the night coming to us? At some point 522 turned into 159, Colorado State Highway. I must’ve missed the signs.

I reach around Chase’s leg and pinch the steering wheel, so that I can dig my phone out my door-side hip pocket. I shake it to life. Still no service. No texts from the others.

“I got the belt. I think I got the belt.”

The car swerves a little into the left lane. I readjust my hands.

“Maybe the sword? But it doesn’t actually look like a sword, right? Because these things never look like what they’re supposed to look like, right?”

“The sword is in his left hand, way up over his head. The shield—”

“Yeah, I see the sword.” Chase sounds small out there in the wind. “Yeah, that’s definitely the sword.”

The San Luis Valley sprawls infinitely in most directions. Sun-dried hillocks lined with chico brush rise to the east while, to the west, the valley basin slopes all the way to the rugged San Juan Mountains and the crystal headwaters of the Rio Grande. A ways to the north, the shrouded Sierra Blanca Massif towers over miles of rolling dunes. Santa Fe, now hours behind us, might as well not even exist.

“OK, now look at Orion’s feet. Look behind his feet. Look for a ... figure. Look for that, and then imagine it’s canine. Imagine the left leg is actually a tail.”

The longer I gaze out the windshield, the fewer of night’s secrets elude me. Blacks fades to blues. Shapes take definition. Distant birds occupy the unattainable place between the stars and the horizon. I’ve been here before.

“Holy *shit*—I actually see it. The tail and the body. I think I do, at least.”

“A regular Ptolemy.”

“What’s it supposed to be again?”

"That's Canis Major," I holler up. "The Greater Dog. That's one of Orion's hunting companions."

After a long pause, probably in order to take it all in: "What are they hunting?"

Something's in the road. It's moving.

The birds are gone, and something's in the road. I shout Chase's name. Can't say how loud or for how long.

BA-DOON.

The moving thing in the road is now on the hood of the car. Right there. The world shrinks into a single radius of 10 square feet. I jam the brakes semi-voluntarily. Camping gear—16-ounce propane tanks, a three-person tent, waterproof duffle bag, packed cooler, much more—clamors across the back seats.

White-knuckle deadlock. In my peripheral, Chase is trapped inside the sunroof. Her body convulses as the car slides to a crooked and screaming halt in the middle of the barren highway. This all happens over an interval of time that could be described as forever and an instant.

The next part is like waking from REMS. Vignette panorama. Silence is the first thing. Then hyperventilating, but not my own. The headlights burn a hole through the darkness, illuminating a still mass slumped in the road. As if permitted, the low-humming drone of night sounds pours in from the open sunroof. I think about who I am and where I am and when I am. A quivering mess of Carhartt and girl is slumped over me. With my foot still lodged against the brake pedal, I reach around her and jam the car into park.

"Hey? *Hey*—are you with me?" I draw back the hood and press my fingers through mangled blond.

"Hey? *Hey*?"

Slowly, she wraps her free arm around my shoulders. I feel her heartbeat rattling from inside the billowy jacket. My eyes remain locked on the thing in the road.

"Oh, *god—what happened?*" she manages, mouth muffled against my sweater. "Seriously, did we ... did we *hit* something?"

She pushes off, sits up. We're looking at each other like mirrors. This lasts a while.

"There's something in the road. See it?"

I'm outside the car. I'm helping Chase off the driver's seat. She's wincing and clutching her side. I'm repeatedly asking if she's all right. She's repeatedly saying "I don't know." Blood circulates and carbohydrates metabolize with heightened efficiency. Each moment takes on meaning only after it's passed. Temporal distillation in full effect.

We step into the blinding headlights and look down.

A dog? Probably a coyote. But bigger. I don't know what it is, but it's dead. Craned neck. Twisted hind legs and a purple pool of entrails.

"It's not dead." Chase steps closer to the animal. Two

hands have vanished up her coat sleeves.

"*Don't* touch it. Don't do anything."

"But look—look at it's eyes."

I step around the belly-side of the thing and, in the light, can make out one blinking eyeball. The iris is hazel, like mine. The dilated pupil finds me, I swear, and doesn't bat away.

"What do we do, Alex?"

I glaze over its wet, peppery coat, then back to the shuttering eyeball. Clouds of warm air vapor plume from my lips and obscure my field of vision. I think the rattling heartbeat may have been mine all along.

"I don't know. Aren't you supposed to kill animals like this? That's what you do."

"Kill it with what?"

Digging through the open hatch. Spilled supplies everywhere—smear shoes, chipped firewood, leaking CamelBaks, tear-open pouches of instant Uncle Ben's, a drawstring-sealed sack of hydro. I trace the outline of the camping shovel and tear it from the pile.

"What do you think?" I unfold the slab of sheet steel and point the tip toward the dying thing. Chase is scanning north and south, presumably for oncoming vehicles, but there's nothing in sight. The FJ is the only source of artificial light in eyeshot. That's saying something.

"I guess so." She's shivering and hunched over, saturated in high beams. "If you think you can do it"

"I think I can, yeah. It's what we're supposed to do, right?"

"Yeah, I think that's better than the alternative, yeah."

I step over the animal and consider the alternative. From this close, I can sense its lifeforce. Impeded breathing. Secreting fluids. I can almost hear the eyelid flapping open and closed. The purple pool has doubled in size.

"I would do it quickly and get it over with. Then maybe use the shovel to push it off the road?"

I aim the steel tip at the thing's throat. One thrust should do it. Christ—what is this? Detours into the unhinged. Somewhere with cushy chairs and low lights, does this scene play in widescreen again and again in the same way, forever?

"Alex, just get it over with." Still scanning, now palming her knees. "It's fucking freezing out here."

"OK, OK—I *got* it."

As if cued, I hear the roar the moment I raise the shovel blade to my head. It's coming from behind us, the car. Under the hood, there's a multi-port fuel injection orchestra revving up. But as abruptly as it starts, the discord crescendos. And then it's gone. Absolutely. The headlights fade away gently.

"*Chase?*"

"*What happened?*"

I reach around in the dark and find her arm. A small light flashes in my face, her phone.

"Alex. What is happening here?"

"I don't know."

"Were you watching the gas gauge?"

"I think so. I thought we were fine."

Stumbling around, trying to avoid the dying thing, toward the open driver-side door.

"How far out are we?"

"A ways."

"Are we close to anything?"

Are we? "There's ... a town back before the state line. Remember? Fort Garland is up the road 15, 20 miles, I don't know. Farms scattered deep in the valley."

I take the light and shine it across the lifeless dashboard display, on the keys still locked into the ignition.

An empty gas tank wouldn't explain the snuffed headlights.

Movement behind us. Off the road, in the brush.

"Alex." It stops.

I pivot and flash the phone in the direction of the sound. Nothing.

An eternity later: "What's wrong with the car?"

"I don't know. I don't know how to know what's wrong."

I disengage the keys, and try again. And again. We pop the hood, wave the light. No smoke, no corrosion.

The engine is a simple-looking thing, plasticky and smoothed over. When I close the hood, I see purple splattered on the white paint. Some gets on my fingers. I drag them across my pant legs.

"Do you think it's the battery?" Chase is gawking up and down the highway more frantically than before. "If it's not the gas tank, it's the battery."

My eyes are adjusting. The stars are helping. If you allow it, the night will invite you in. Up the highway, about 15 or 20 feet and to the right, is a nondescript side road. Not uncommon around here. No personal signage or postal

"Now depress the brake pedal and shift into neutral."

She's trying, but the shifter won't budge.

"Is there a shift lock release?"

"I think there's a tiny cover next to the shifter. Flip that open and hit the button, then shift."

I hear the stick drop into place. I tell Chase to steer for the side road. And to watch for the dying thing, which she says she can't see from the driver's seat, so I tell her to do her best.

With one heave, the FJ's tires roll forward ever so slightly. I dig the toes of my boots into the road and lean on the bumper, pushing as hard as my thigh and calf muscles will allow.

"Hard right, keep it right." Groaning, clenched fists and spittle spraying. "Can you see the road?"

"Yes, I see it. Just keep pushing, we're getting there."

"Did we miss the animal?"

"I don't know—did we?" I look around, best I can, and don't see the dying thing either. I keep pushing.

"Almost there. I'm going to brake when we hit the dirt—there's a decline."

And pushing. Time passing without clarity. I feel the bumper leave my hands, as I watch the FJ glide onward and jounce its way down onto the dirt turnoff. Again, silence. Eventually, night sounds.

The desert is a great equalizer. You can't see it, you can't touch it, but out here, there's a great weight.

Close your eyes. You're standing on the seabed.

"There's no signal. We need a jump."

Back on the highway, I don't see the slumped mass. I don't see anything. Chase is standing next to me, spinning the car keys in one hand, trying to make a call with the other.

"Maybe they can help." I nod toward two southbound white beams, slowly floating this way. This is either vertigo or déjà vu.

Chase says she's texting the others to let them know what's going on. Says maybe the messages will go through

*Somewhere in the past, I see an identical pickup parked on the far side of a swaying field, below a darkening treeline. Its deflating tires sink into a plash of fresh spring mud. I can't timestamp it. I can't know whether to trust it.*

boxes. Just mile marker No. 2 and a wide swath of dirt that runs east into the hills, maybe for miles, before vanishing out of sight. Blacks and blues. A vague sense of depth. I'm trying to remain calm. I'm trying to tap into some reserve of pragmatism.

We're going to assume it is the battery, she says. We're going to get the car off the highway and over to that side road, she says. We're at least going to do that, she says.

Chase hops into place. I run around the backside of the car.

if, at some point, we slip into a service pocket. I consider if.

We don't even have to flag the vehicle, a weathered Silverado. The left turning signal flashes as it approaches the turnoff.

The truck is silver and old with rusted hubcaps. It may have once been modified for improved ground clearance. Somewhere in the past, I see an identical pickup parked on the far side of a swaying field, below a darkening treeline. Its deflating tires sink into a plash of fresh spring mud. I can't timestamp it. I can't know whether to trust it.

The pickup rolls to a stop beside us. Its passenger window is already down. An arm with a hairy hand hangs against the door.

"Trouble?" A brusque voice under a brimmed hat.

"Yes." Chase says without hesitation, stepping forward. "We hit an animal on the highway. And then I think our car died."

On the other side of the voice, behind a peeling leather steering wheel, is a tanktopped girl, olive skin, no older than Chase, with a kerchief around her brow.

"What kind of animal?" the voice asks.

"Looked too big to be a coyote," she says, still twirling the keys. "I dunno."

The girl puts the pickup in park. The engine growls in response.

"*Too big* to be a coyote." The voice lets this thought linger in the air. It's colder with every passing second.

"I dunno," Chase repeats.

With a crank, the passenger door flies open. The voice under the hat becomes a man. He's standing at my feet. Boots and a jacket similar to Chase's.

"Let's look at this dead car."

The girl stays inside the running pickup, watching. The headlights throw elongated shadows up the dirt road.

"Where's the animal?" he asks while lifting the FJ's hood. Chase and I both stand three purposely or unpurposely measured paces behind him. "Didn't see anything in the road."

"I dunno." Chase. "It was there, and then it wasn't."

"And then *it wasn't*," he repeats, holding his hat to his head against the winter wind.

"Yeah. Something like that."

He draws a pencil-thin flashlight from his jacket and begins navigating the Toyota's vitals with purpose and precision.

"Maybe it got up and stumbled off while we were moving the car." I'm not sure why I offer this speculation. It goes unmet.

I turn back to confirm whether or not the girl is still watching from inside the pickup. She is.

The hood slams, jolting us both to attention. Without a glance our way, the man walks around to the driver-side door, opens it and inspects the dash. By accident, I make eye contact with Chase. I get the sense she's been staring at me for some time.

*Clink-clink.*

He's holding the bottle of Corralejo. I forgot it was in the console. The man looks back at us over his shoulder. For the first time, I see a shadowy smile below the hat brim.

"Why don't you both get into the truck, and we'll give you a lift up to the farm." He shuts the door, still holding the bottle of Corralejo.

"What's wrong with the car?" I ask.

"I don't know what's wrong with your car." He's walking

toward us, bobbing the bottleneck between his palm and finger. "We'll give you a lift up to the farm and get this straightened out."

"You live up there?" Chase asks, pointing east, up the road, toward the hills.

It occurs to me that telephone poles do not run along this highway.

"Do you want to try the keys?" Chase dangles them from her finger.

"We'll give you a lift up to the farm."

I gaze back to the empty highway, then up to the Milky Way. I do this from the cramped truck cab. I'm sitting next to the girl, who's slowly driving us away from the car, away from Colorado State Highway 159, and into the hills. Out of sight, Chase grasps my sweating palm.

"Where were you headed?" The man asks. His arm's hanging out the open passenger-side window. His eyes are locked ahead.

"To camp," I say. "To meet some friends in Alamosa County."

"Where are you from?" The girl chimes in.

"Santa Fe area," Chase replies.

My eyes continually wander to the man's lap, to the nestled bottle of tequila, to the hairy backside of his hand.

"Santa Fe's *real* pretty," the girl says.

"Yes, it is," says Chase.

"What do ya'll do down there?"

"Oh—well, I'm in art school. He writes for an outdoors magazine."

"Outdoors magazine?" the man repeats, still locked ahead. "You gonna write about this?"

Still eyeing the bottleneck between his legs. "No, I don't think so."

We flinch as the truck dips into a deep pothole. The girl gives the Silverado extra gas, and the tires fight their way out, kicking up mud and stones. The wooden cross dangling from the rearview mirror bobs uncontrollably.

"Isn't it something that these mountains go all the way from here down to your neck of the woods, to New Mexico?" the girl says with a smile. I nod with no expectation of being noticed.

"You know the name of these mountains?" the man asks.

"These are the Sangre de Cristo Mountains," Chase says.

"You know what that means?"

"Uh, no, no I don't," she says.

"The Blood of Christ."

Eventually: "*Oh.*"

"You know this valley used to be Ute country?" The history lesson continues.

"No, I didn't know that." Chase is being a good sport, as she clutches my hand harder.

"Back in the eighteen hundreds. Got kicked out by settlers after the Mexican War."

The potholes are one after another now. Seatbelts would be useful.

"Most of them went quietly to the west, to the reservations. But not all of them."

One peek into the rearview, and I realize how much we've climbed. The highway is now a pale meridian running parallel to the westward horizon.

"The stragglers watched and waited. Until one day, when they took up arms, when they waited in these very hills until nightfall."

"How much farther?" Chase sounds like she's talking through a box fan.

"Oh, not far," the girl says. Her round face remains expressionless while she negotiates the road's growing obstacles.

"Not far," the man affirms.

As the pickup winds around a mound of rock and brush, the highway completely disappears from view. Up ahead, two barn lights flicker in the night. Beyond, a row of glass-walled potting sheds. Even farther, a lifeless two-story cottage. Unspun wire fencing and wind-blown wooden stakes now trace the perimeter of the road.

"Told ya." The girl.

The man lifts the bottle of Corralejo from between his legs, loosens the cap and takes a generous drink.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh ... fuck." Wiping his mouth with his coat sleeve. He offers the bottle to Chase.

"No, no thanks." She politely lifts her free hand.

"How about the outdoorsman? Would he like to partake?" Instinctively, I snatch the bottle. No sip. I just cradle it under my arm.

The truck rolls past the first of the two barns. Its doors are blown wide open. Nothing's inside.

"Now be a gentleman and offer the lady a drink."

Rattling past the second barn, also open, also empty.

"Huh?"

"I *said*," the man repeats, "offer the lady a drink."

Chase is squeezing so hard that all feeling has abandoned my off hand.

"Would you ... like a *drink*?"

Her colorless lips grin.

"Better not, being that I'm behind the wheel of a motor vehicle. Don't ya think?"

Potting shed after potting shed, each as fruitless as the last.

"Yeah. Better not."

The truck finally comes to a stop in front of the cottage. The girl kills the engine and pockets the keys. The headlights ricochet off uneven strips of sky-blue siding.

"You two wait here," the man says, "and we'll be right back."

"*Right* back," the girl echoes.

They exit their respective doors and tread up the stairs, across the porch and through an unlocked front door. I wait

for a light to flicker on inside, but none does. I'm staring at an overturned plastic tricycle atop the stairs when Chase speaks.

"Fuck this."

I imagine sliding out of the driver-side door and staggering onto the yard and across the yard and down to the hill crest, not along the road, not the way we came. Stumbling over talus and brush. Boots beating against frozen ground. Pumping and pumping through steep thickets of mango greasewood until the land finally levels.

Instead I turn to Chase, who's scooting around, tearing at her jacket, lifting the T-shirt underneath. After cupping the skin below her chest, she yelps and throws her head back



against the truck seat.

"Your ribs. From the accident."

She nods, lips pursed.

"Chase, what do you want to do?"

Her eyes are clenched shut. "I can't breathe. This is *fucked*. What are we doing?"

"I don't know. I ... don't know."

In a fit of frustration, she kicks the truck's dash. Like a jammed vending machine, the glove compartment pops open and spits out coins, loose papers and a dull-black semi-



"C'mon." I'm slowly lifting the handle. "Chase."

"Two ..."

Blinding. The man's face turns white. As does the cab of the truck and the front of the cottage. I pivot and, through the rear window, spot high beams flying up the dirt road.

"C'mon!"

In one fluid motion, I yank Chase by the arm as I kick open the driver-side door. In the confusion, she loses the gun and it discharges as it hits the floor of the cab with a *BANG* that prompts the girl to drop, hands over head, onto the lawn as we stagger past and across the yard and down to the hill crest, not along the road, not the way we came. Stumbling over talus and brush. Boots beating against frozen ground.

Pumping and pumping through steep thickets of mangy greasewood.

...

**D**ay breaks cold and clear in the valley. Atmospheric oranges and amble blues blend like watercolor as sunlight glistens over the hills. The fractured basin floor glows anew beneath my boots. Miles ahead, a cluster of clouds swells over Blanca's imposing granite faces. Chase is on my back, one of my hands under each leg, a limp arm draped over each shoulder. She was mumbling for a while and then coughing and then slipped into a spell of semi-consciousness. I keep walking. North. My cell battery died some time ago.

Hers is password locked. I don't know the password. I don't know a lot of things about Chase. Like the punchline to the private joke she's been carrying for years. I see flashes of it in her smile, in the way her blue eyes settle on mine.

Reality can quake.

Behind us, I spot headlights. This keeps happening. Is it better when you can't see a storm coming? I think she needs help. I think her ribs are cracked.

Are qualities born, or are they projected? How do we measure? How can we know? What must we memorize in order to forget?

I set her down a couple paces off the highway. I sit nearby, leg under leg, palms spreading in the red dirt.

Eyes flutter once, twice, three times. There she is.

Headlights close the distance. A dust cloud whirls in their wake.

"How do you feel?"

She pulls back her hood, plucks blond out of her eyes.

"Hi."

Consider the places you've been, the positions you've been in. How real are those now? Very? Do you carry them in your pocket? Or does time keep them? Handwritten credit card numbers sealed inside a suburban insurance office safe.

"Alex?"

"Yes?"

Reality can quake. A summer on the lake. Northern pike, channel catfish and warm Budweiser.

"You never answered my question."

"No?"

"Huh-uh." She points skyward.

Rowing through the deepest waters. From the prow, she looks back, and that's when you know.

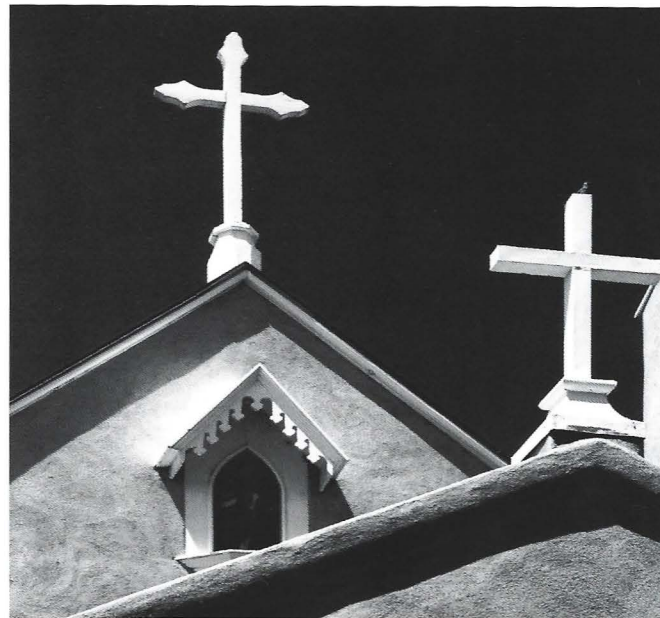
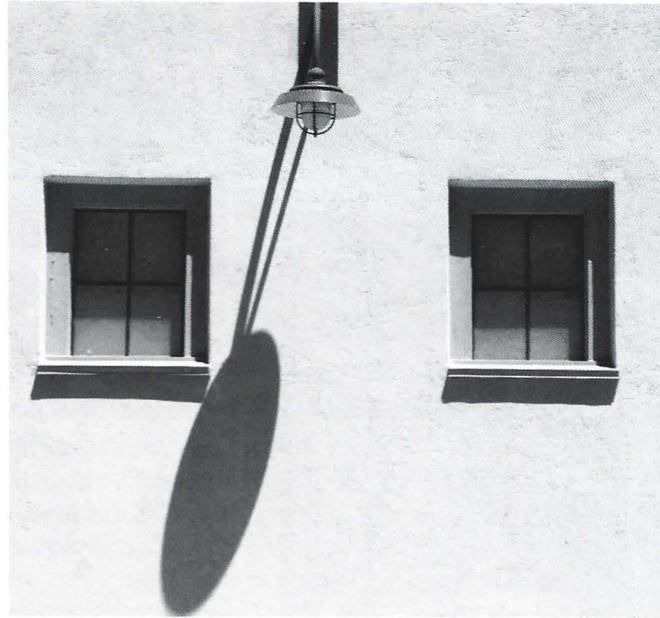
"What were they hunting?" The oncoming vehicle slows, drifts over the edge line. Its make and model are clear.

"Lepus. The hare." Headlights dim.

"And where's Lepus?"

"You can't see him anymore. Not now." Chase rolls her neck, gazing.

As the last of the stars fade away, we're pulled into the vehicle, doors behind us. It drives off into the valley, toward teeth of granite, slowly revealed by the rising sun. ♡



*Top: Camino de la Familia; Bottom: Two Crosses* | MICHAEL ANTHONY



# THE NATURE OF THE WEST Camas

VOLUME 26 NUMBER 1

Jeannette Rankin Hall  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812  
camas@mso.umt.edu

*Camas* cultivates a community of writers and artists dedicated to land health and cultural resilience in the American West.

**SENIOR EDITOR** *Jessica Eller*  
**EDITORIAL INTERN** *Clare Menahan*  
**FICTION EDITOR** *Heidi Daulton*  
**POETRY EDITOR** *Jonathan Pierce*  
**NONFICTION CO-EDITORS** *Kitty Galloway • Zach Goodwin*  
**EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS** *Mattie Lehman • Jessie Hampton • Claire Foley • Elissa Chott • Casey Valencia • Sylvia Doyle • Tommy D'Addario • Liam Cody • Mason Parker*  
**FACULTY ADVISOR** *Phil Condon*

**OUR TITLE** *Camas* takes its name from the plant *Camassia quamash*, which is native to the American West. *Camas* has historically served as a staple food and medicine for Indigenous communities. Its harvest continues longstanding reciprocity between land and people.

**OUR HISTORY** Founded by Environmental Studies graduate students at The University of Montana in 1992, *Camas* provides an opportunity for students, emerging writers and artists, and established voices to publish their work alongside each other.

**OUR FRIENDS** *Camas* received support for this issue from the Associated Students of The University of Montana, the Clark Fork Coalition, the Wild Rockies Field Institute, the Missoula Writing Collaborative, Montana Natural History Center, the University of Montana Environmental Studies Program, and donors.

**SUBMIT AND SUBSCRIBE**  
online at [www.camasmagazine.org](http://www.camasmagazine.org)  
\$8.50 per issue, \$16 per year

COVER ART:  
*Mona Lisa, Downtown LA* |  
**TONY SALVAGIO**





# CONTENTS

---

## INTERVIEW

- 2 WORKING TOWARD A GENTLER  
WORLD, AN INTERVIEW WITH  
ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE  
*Clare Menahan*

## POETRY

- 6 BACK IN MISSOULA  
*Robert Michael Pyle*
- 9 CEREMONY  
*Robert Michael Pyle*
- 24 GEORGIC II  
*Ben Swimm*
- 25 THE DIVIDE RUNS  
WEST OF HERE  
*D.A. Lockhart*
- 39 WHISKEY  
*Leath Tonino*

## FICTION

- 10 CANIS MINOR  
*Anthony Dominic*

## NONFICTION

- 18 DELUSIONS OF REALITY  
*Anna Zumbahlen*
- 22 THE SEMIOTICS OF SASQUATCH  
*Robert Michael Pyle*
- 26 WEARING IT ON  
*Tom Sentner*
- 30 THINGS NOT SEEN IN THE REAR  
VIEW MIRROR  
*Debra Marquart*