

# Cash and Carter

Lily Langstaff

—Short Story Competition

It occurs to me as the cool wind kisses my face that we could be the last two people on Earth in this moment.

Neither of us is exactly sure where we're going, but we know how we're feeling. I watch him, following his gaze through the dashboard onto charcoal road disappearing behind us. He drives with one hand, the other on my leg, and the sun is shining in my world despite how late it is. His hand lingers for half a second before gripping the shift to change gears and absentmindedly fiddling with the radio knobs, turning the song up loud enough for the deer in the woods to hear.

He loves country music and I love him—it occurs to me in this moment as he's singing "Folsom Prison Blues." Not for the first time, I've had plenty of mini revelations about my feelings for this boy, but under the velvet, star-studded sky, it feels real. He is so alive with Johnny Cash that I feel like June Carter. Hazel eyes are warm, and when they turn to look at me—just short, second-long glances—something inside me melts. Nobody has ever been so fond of anything as I am of him. His shirt is stained with cappuccino (two sugars) and his hair is finally out of his face, tousled by the breath of air from the trees and his foot on the gas. Johnny Cash is singing thanks to his Spotify playlist, from the phone nestled in the cupholder, resting against mine. We're on the outskirts of town now, and though we know we'll return, we don't look back.

I don't look at anything other than him. The way his lips curl when he smiles is earth-quaking and it makes me wish I'd known him way sooner in my life, like, *Where has he been this entire time?* He is in his element like this, on the open road, and I wish I could paint him and frame it somewhere important.

"God must have taken his time when he made you." I'm surprised he even hears me over "Jackson."

"God took his time with everybody." That smile comes back when he speaks and I wish I had a Polaroid camera—I would take that picture with me everywhere.

He's right, but it's almost angering that he doesn't understand what I mean about him.

He is heaven on Earth.

It makes me feel like I can finally breathe for the first time in my life, and *God*, how deeply I breathe him in. I breathe in his coffee breath and the teasing words on pursed lips and his lingering gazes.

He is just this: a maddeningly perfect breath of air on a maddeningly perfect night in a maddeningly perfectly imperfect boy's car.

Perfection in people is impossible, but he comes close.

**"He loves country music  
and I love him."**

It's a bit early and I am young, but if I can live this for the rest of my life, I would be happy—he is everything I need.

Six feet of frustration and love.

There that word is again.

It's been thought so many times, but never spoken before.

"I have to tell you something." I breathe in a chilled breath of the nighttime Mississippi air, and breathe out the three words.

The four words he exhales back sound just like a supercut.

It takes me back to the very first time that he ever made me really *think* about him, in front of the river. It was sweaty August and his hair was long. He wiped his palms on khaki pants and that night when we began walking we didn't know it would be the first time of many. He told me that night that he liked me and I felt a spark of hope in my chest that has grown, flickered, dimmed, and brightened—but will never die.

That hope has dwindled a couple times, through a couple words and a couple sentences.

"*I just can't handle this right now; there are more important things I need to focus on.*"

"*Most teen relationships don't last, you know.*"

"*There's like a .001% we'll stay together after high school.*"

He plays with fire, simply sighing against the flame like he knows he could blow it out. Other days, though, he is gasoline.

*"You're so pretty."*

*"I'm sorry—you know this is going to happen again, right? You're so patient."*

*"How was your day?"*

*"I love your smile. There's not a part on you I don't like."*

I am emotionally turbulent. I cry rivers over him and dry them on his hoodie sleeve. He is frustration and love.

He is very left-brained. He overthinks and overanalyzes everything. He gives balance when I think too little and decide too quickly. He is the calm to my storm.

Johnny Cash made June Carter cry, surely, but he made her smile and laugh. He made her dance and sing and fall in love.

And June Carter sure did love him. △



## Lifsins og Stríðsins Tré

Third Place—Sculpture

**Michael Begley**

Foam board

## So This Is Wayne County

(after Ted Kooser)

**Luke Bowles**

Leaving the old dirt driveway,  
Pines stretch as far as the eye can see.  
The houses by the road  
Rest in patches of earth  
Like old widows in recliners.

Asphalt twists and turns  
As a meandering river  
That never settles, always restless.  
The stoplight flashes  
Like a dying star  
In a dying town.

So this is Wayne County.  
A Sunday morning,  
Everyone going to church.  
Blouses and button-ups,  
Elders in every nook and cranny.

Prideful teenagers,  
Now models of modesty.  
Racist adults,  
Now advocates for acceptance.  
Hateful old folks,  
Ever careful to bring their Bibles,  
A monument to their hypocrisy.

You feel like that;  
You feel like saying something,  
Like trying, attempting, anything,  
Just to see a speck of authenticity.

You feel like leaving forever  
Just to escape the cycle of insincerity.  
*Hello's, Goodbye's, How you doing's*  
Those fake smiles surround you  
Like a masquerade.  
You feel like replying something spiteful,  
Anything not to conform.  
You smile instead and say,  
"I'm good, how 'bout you?"