

*Kirsi Marcus*

**Nobodies in the Universe**

Nora Gorman had just turned fourteen, though she'd been calling herself that for the last five months, she had recently become pretty. Nora wasn't sure when it had happened. At thirteen she still had those skinny legs, and a stomach that hung over the waist-band of her jeans. At thirteen she hadn't yet learned that her hair was curly, and thirty minutes after her shower it uncontrollably puffed out around her face. But sometime between then and now her legs had gotten a little bigger, her thighs a little sturdier, her stomach had shrunk as her posture changed to accommodate a small, growing pair of breasts, and the plumpness of her face vanished into happy cheekbones and an angular chin.

Nora could feel that things in her body were changing. She had been feeling it for the last six months. It was quiet at first; there were new sensations in a part of her body where previously there had been only one sensation—the urge to pee. The other feelings were like little electric shocks that swam around deep in her pelvis—and swam around a little faster when she walked past the picture of the naked cherubs in mother's bathroom. Boiled down, these feelings were composed like this (from what Nora could determine): ten percent the need to pee, thirty percent the desire to rub against the bathroom counter or furnace, fifty percent the desire to run her naked legs between a pair of sheets like she'd seen depicted in movies with women who presumably had just had sex—in fact this fantasy could be taken to broader terms as the desire to know what anything might feel like if she were to be completely naked while doing it—and the last ten percent was simply the desire for something, anything new.

Nora had a crush on the boy from the gas station. Lester was his name. She'd been going there every day that summer stealing cigarettes. Nora didn't smoke many of them—they still made her lungs hurt—but she liked the possibility they represented. Her mother had started to smoke at thirteen and her friend Missy already smoked a pack a day. Missy was the one who had taken Nora to the gas station in the first place. Missy was the one who had first pointed at the boy behind the counter and said, "He's cute," and Nora had agreed.

Lester was lanky, pale and had a sunken chest that was visible even through the t-shirts he wore. His hair was dark, his eyes were dark, and his face was covered in tiny brown birthmarks—he looked like a photograph in Sepia, kind of strange looking, which Nora liked.

Nora was slowly making progress with Lester. She had learned how old he was, twenty-nine. She had learned what his favorite food was, biscuits and gravy. And she had figured out his work schedule, weekdays six to noon, weekends five to ten PM.

Nora had yet to kiss a boy. Missy had already had sex with three different boys, but she didn't rub it in Nora's face. Still, Nora had decided she was ready, and had picked Lester for her first time, because things with Lester were different than with other boys. He was special. Nora had been waiting for him to ask her out for weeks now, but she was done waiting.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

The night before she had set her alarm clock for 8:00 AM, but she woke up at 6:00, too excited to sleep any longer. Nora always awoke early because her windows had no curtains. The Gorman's, Nora and her mother had moved into the house two years ago and things were still not done. This was a house on Maple Tree Lane, which was right off of Cherry Tree Lane, where Ms. Gorman was employed as a receptionist at Seagleson and Co. Tractors Inc.

Nora showered and watched TV while her mom ate breakfast and then left for work. Once she was gone Nora walked to the gas station, which was only three blocks from her house. The temperature was well into the 90's already, and when Nora walked in she saw Lester sitting in front of a table top fan at the counter. She smiled at him and headed for the slushie machine.

"Je-eez, it's hot outside," he said.

"Totally," she said.

She poured herself a slushie. Lester went back to flipping through a magazine, and Nora took the opportunity to slip behind a shelf to the back wall where the cigarettes were kept in a glass case that was partially open. She grabbed the pack in front of her, dropped it in her shoulder bag, and with a racing heart she walked up to the counter to pay for her slushie. When she reached into her bag for money she could feel the plastic wrap on the carton of cigarettes brush against the back of her hand, and it sent a shiver of excitement down her legs.

"This all for you?" he asked.

"Mmm hmm," she said. It was hard not to resist the urge to bolt.

Lester took her cash, pressed a button on his register and handed her back a few bills and some coins. Nora's mother had taught her to always count the change, and normally she did, but this time she didn't glance away from Lester, because in some small gesture she wanted him to know she trusted him.

"See you tomorrow," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "Or, what are you doing later?"

"Later today?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know," he said.

"Oh, well I was thinking to go to the lake," she said. "Want to come?"

"Yeah, okay maybe," he said.

She smiled at him and then managed to walk calmly out the door and around the corner before letting out an involuntary gasp. She had a date.

Lester didn't meet her at the lake that day. She waited until she thought the skin on her back couldn't take any more sun. She was disappointed, but figured he had just forgotten and the next day she waited for him after work, and they left together.

They sat on top of a picnic table in the sand talking about a jazz band

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

that Nora had never heard of. She scooted closer to him. Lester said he couldn't believe the saxophonist only had one lung. Again, she scooted closer. She was so close now that their knees were touching—his was hairy. She was so close she could see his heart pulsing slightly through his shirt. She could smell the cigarettes and coffee on his breath, which mixed together and came out smelling like dark, smoked chocolate. Lester stopped speaking. Nora braced herself. She knew if she didn't act now, she'd miss the moment. She breathed deeply, not knowing when she'd get the chance to breathe again. She closed her eyes, and leaned in, and missed. She overshot so far she grazed his cheek with her ear, then quickly hugged him to cover her mistake. Still, it wasn't unpleasant with his arms wrapped around her, and next time she'd know better and take a more careful aim. All these thoughts prevented Nora from fully witnessing the moment hugging turned to kissing, but suddenly they were doing just that.

First she was overwhelmed by the funny feeling of his tongue and lips, and how differently it felt from kissing her pillow at night. She was just getting used to the feeling when, without warning, a hand emerged, groping under the fabric of her t-shirt, feeling the contours of her bikini top, which was unbuckled in the back and left to float above her breasts. Then the entire array was swept over her head and Nora was bare on top.

This next part was left out of her diary. This was the part that was too embarrassing to think about or remember, and she quickly stored away in the back of her mind with all of the other things that made her cringe at night when she was lying in bed and had nothing else to think about; events so mortifying she had momentary visions of stabbing her heart with an open pair of scissors. Lester had inserted a nipple into his mouth. He kissed her lips and neck and then craned his head downward and took a nipple gently between his teeth and began to suckle at it, unabashedly, as though he were an infant. Nora's breasts were so small they barely lifted off her chest, and, yet, Lester was there sucking, pulling at them, creating a vacuum with his mouth into which the whole breast disappeared.

One week and six days later Nora had sufficiently pushed the incident with the nipple to the back of her mind. She had told herself this story so many times it had become true for her. This is what had happened. Lester had held her hand. He had walked her down to the river and picked out the picnic table for them to sit on. He had opened her beer for her. She had rested her head on his shoulder. He had held her face gently between his hands as he told her about his home life, how he had spent most of his time alone as a kid because his dad had left, and his mom worked long hours as a nanny. Then he had kissed her very sweetly, just grazing his lips to hers. This is what had happened.

Nora picked up the phone and made an appointment.

"Do you have any plans tomorrow?" she asked.

"I work," Lester answered.

"And after that?" she asked.

"I'm free," he said.

And it was set. At Lester's buddy's house off Highway 23 just after six

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

o'clock on August third, Lester would be waiting for her to "hang out."

Nora spent the rest of the day in preparation. She took a bus into town and bought a purple eyelet skirt with a ruffle at the bottom. My sex skirt, she thought and she wondered if anyone would notice it was important. Back home she went into her mother's chest of drawers and extracted one pair of adult underwear. There had been no thought in the selection, the idea of lingerie was almost too embarrassing to think about. Almost, because it was too much to handle the thought of buying a pair of one's own from the intimates aisle at K-Mart, and just barely manageable to blindly select a pair from her mother's top drawer. She thought of the movie Pollyanna, the scene where Pollyanna goes to the carnival. Pollyanna pays what was probably only a couple of cents to throw a fishing line across a partition where someone on the backside attaches a prize with a clothespin. Pollyanna won a porcelain doll with tiny perfect curls. In a later scene, when the doll gets stuck in a tree, Pollyanna falls out the window while reaching for it, and breaks both legs in the accident. She winds up in a wheel chair waiting to undergo an experimental and costly surgery to regain the ability to walk. But that part was irrelevant. In Nora's mind the simple comparison of flinging a fishing line for an all-important item had been made, and it was only a fleeting thought.

Back in her room Nora tried on the underwear. Her mother's panties were red and silky and much too large. She folded over the top and hiked up the legs, gazing at herself in a full length mirror. Accessing the situation she decided that it didn't look bad, in fact it was pretty. Then she put on the skirt and walked around the room. Her legs rubbing against the satin was a strange and new feeling, and one she was not likely to forget.

Then it was August third. Nora took extra time in the shower. She sat down on the floor, letting the water run off her shoulders while she scrubbed her feet and toenails. She washed behind her ears. She turned the faucet all the way on hot and stood in the stream of water until it became unbearable. Then she turned the faucet off and towel dried herself. She brushed and blow-dried her hair. She put cover-up on the sunburn around her nose, and picked at the flakes of dead white skin. She powdered her face to her hairline. Then she powdered her cheeks with translucent pink blush and surrounded her eyes with a black liquid pen, using a piece of wet paper towel to smudge the line where it had bled. She stepped back, crinkled her forehead, stepped towards the mirror, and puckered her lips before deciding, yes, she looked perfect.

Nora went to her room and turned on the radio. It was reporting the seven o'clock news. She turned down the volume and lay on her bed. Looking out her window she could already see it was going to be a beautiful day. The oak tree outside was shaking with a small breeze and somewhere in another yard a dog was barking. The weather report came on the radio and Nora turned up the dial slightly. Clear skies, it said, high of 84, perfect conditions for star gazing, the reporter said, there was a meteor shower tonight.

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When Nora and her mother moved into their new home on Maple Tree Lane it was the first time they ever had a backyard. Briefly, when

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Nora was a child they lived in an RV park; that was when Nora's father was around. Before Nora's grandmother died they had lived in the basement of her house, and between then and now they had lived in an apartment complex across town with a near constant rotation of her mother's boyfriends. When Nora was twelve they moved into their new home, and after a few hours of unpacking her mother had taken Nora to the K-Mart and they had bought two lawn chairs, a set of fancy plastic cups, swirly straws for milkshakes or lemonade, and a bright new tablecloth. When they got back in the evening Nora and her mother laid out the chairs on the lawn and relaxed. It was only a matter of moments before a shooting star went streaking across the night sky, and Nora's mother pointed her arm heavenwards.

"Did you see that?" she asked.

It was a star so bright it briefly illuminated its part of the sky, causing the stars around it to burn a little dimmer.

"Mom, it's a shooting star," Nora said, and laughed. I wish I had a boyfriend to love me. I wish I had a boyfriend.

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It took Nora forty-five minutes to ride her bike across the two main highways and three gravel roads to where Lester's buddy lived in the country. Laying her bike down in the grass, she walked behind the house and into the backyard where she heard voices coming from the tree house. Lester spotted her from the window.

"Hey!" she called up, waving.

There was someone else with him, someone who asked, "Who's that?" Someone to whom Lester answered, "Just a girl."

The base of the tree was scattered with empty beer bottles and a couple burger wrappers from Wendy's. The other boy popped his head out the window.

Nora waved again, "Hi, I'm Nora," she said.

"Steve," he said.

Nora couldn't get a good look at him because the sun was in her eyes, but she managed to make out the gist. His hair was long, and he was wearing sunglasses and a hat.

She climbed the ladder. The tree house was larger from the inside than it seemed from the ground. Both boys had stretched themselves out on two reclining lawn chairs. Lester patted her on the back as she entered and continued talking. There was a little room for Nora in the corner if she brushed aside some bottles and a stray wrapper. Lester was telling a story about a camping trip he had taken down by the lake, and how a girl named Nancy had "blacked out." Nora quickly interjected with her own story about blacking out while snorkeling at her Uncle Orwin's cabin on Lake Pontchartrain.

"The water was so murky I couldn't even see the dock, I smacked my head right into it. Blacked out and everything. I would've drowned if Uncle Orwin hadn't been fishing right there and saw the whole thing, and



## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

grabbed me up by the hair." The story elicited no response. Nora wasn't sure what was off in her telling. It had always been a hit before.

"It's not really the same thing," Lester said.

Nora felt her face catch fire, but she was determined not to be embarrassed, and if that was impossible, then not to let Lester know how embarrassed she was, and even if she was embarrassed she wasn't about to let him scare her away.

Steve opened another beer and offered it to her. Then he opened one for himself, the last one, as Lester continued with another story. Nora sipped on her beer slowly, hating the taste. It was a while before Lester talked himself out, but when he finally did, he too noticed that the beer was gone and suggested Steve go into town for more.

"You don't mind, do you? Nora wants more," Lester said. Nora bobbed her head up and down, and whether or not he was happy about it, Steve agreed.

When he had left the tree house Lester patted his lap. "What are you doing all the way down there?" he said.

Nora got up from the floor and sat down on his knee, "Did you have a good day at work?" she asked.

"I don't want to talk about work," he said, shaking his head and pulling her hair slightly to tip her chin back. He waited for a couple of seconds before starting to kiss her, a couple of seconds in which the butterflies in Nora's stomach turned to a swarm of migrating bees. He slipped his hands under her shirt and held her firmly across the rib cage. He reached around her back and undid her bra, which lifted off her chest and floated under her shirt. Grabbing at the inner material of her top he pulled it down to reveal her naked breast, and, to Nora's mortification, he did it again. He put his lips around her. Nora waited for it to end, and soon he lost interest in her breasts and moved lower. Then he slipped off her skirt and panties in one motion, carelessly ignorant of the effort that had gone into the selection, picked her up and carried her onto the floor with him.

Nora had tried to imagine what sex might be like, but it was a difficult thing to do and many questions remained. As a child she had the misguided impression that sex was only performed while standing up. That impression corrected itself when she walked in on her mother and her boyfriend a few years back. And just a couple of weeks ago Missy had told her that an erect penis pointed upwards. That was mindboggling.

As Lester undid the buckle on his pants and slid them down she was disappointed to see that the penis did not point directly upward, plastered to the pubis, as she had imagined, but just stuck out a little, as though it had elevated intentions and wasn't quite achieving them.

In regards to the act itself, a few things came to Nora's mind. For starters, the whole thing lasted a lot longer than she had anticipated. She had been expecting something in the vicinity of ten or fifteen seconds. The other thing that struck her was how very undignified it was, and she spent the time thinking how strange it was that everyone came from this, and most everyone did it at least once, and then she couldn't stop herself from

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

thinking about all the people who must have had sex before, teachers at school, her principal, even her grandmother before she died. And then she wondered if there was anyone else in Hammond having sex right now, or if she was the only person. Was there anyone else in Louisiana having sex right now? In the world, and if so how many?

And then it was over. Lester moved away and wiped himself off with a burger wrapper, while Nora continued to lie still, taking stock of the situation. Her legs were up like triangles and she had one hand resting across her stomach. In what ways was she different? Then she remembered the blood, that there might be some, though she had started taking precautions a few days ago, wearing tampons even when she didn't have her period, and taking a plastic mixing spoon from the kitchen and generally stabbed herself around down there hoping to pave a path. Her friend Missy hadn't even been able to have sex her first time because the boy hadn't been able to break through her hymen, and Nora wanted to prevent that embarrassment at all costs. Sitting up and reaching for her skirt and panties, Nora looked at the floor of the tree house and didn't see any blood, just a pool of runny white stuff that smelled like chlorine.

Turning around and seeing that Nora was dressed, Lester patted her on the head, "That was nice," he said, returning to his lawn chair.

"I wonder where Steve is?" she said checking out the window.

"Don't know," he said.

"It's going to be a nice night," she said, noticing that the light had become a golden orange color indicating sunset. "It's supposed to cool off too, and I heard on the radio there might be shooting stars."

Lester didn't respond. Nora kept chattering.

"You have plans later?" she asked.

"Steve and I have a thing," he said.

"Oh yeah? What thing?" she asked.

"A party, over at a buddy's house in Brookfield."

"Oh, I hope it's outside, for your sake, because it'll be pretty out," she said, and then, "I have to go."

"Oh yeah," he said. "You need a ride?"

Nora knew he didn't have a car. "No, I have my bike. But thanks," she said.

"Anytime," he said.

He got up and hugged her goodbye. Nora climbed down the ladder feeling a tiny bit shaky. She retrieved her bike from where it was lying in the grass and started to peddle away. Once on the road she couldn't stop the tears from pooling in her eyes. She tilted her head skyward to stop them from spilling. The sky was clear and except for a few wispy clusters it was a perfect Louisiana evening. It wasn't too hot even, or humid, which was rare for this time of year. Louisiana was swamp land, it was always humid. The sound of the cicadas picked up; there must be a pond nearby.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Nora continued to pedal; the faster she pedaled the more it felt like she was punishing herself. The first tear escaped from the corner of one eye, and was quickly followed by a second, and once she started, she couldn't stop and a whole storm of them came out. She didn't know why she was crying, or why she started to chant in her head, you're ok, I'm here, I'm here, which is what she chanted in her head every time she cried, as if splitting herself into two people, both the crier and the comforter, would protect her from being alone. Through her blurred vision she saw in the distance a cloud of dust rise from the road and she knew it meant a car was coming. She veered to the side as the green pick-up truck emerged into sight; it was Steve's truck. She hoped he wouldn't stop, but wiped the tears from her eyes all the same. The truck began to slow down. It pulled up beside her and came to a stop.

"Hey," he called to her from the open window on the passenger side, "leaving already?"

"Yeah," she said, "You took too long," she gave a false smile. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were blotchy and there was noticeable discoloration around her nose, which had crept towards her mouth.

"You ok?" he asked.

Nora nodded.

"Let me give you a ride into town," he said.

Nora shook her head. She tried to protest as he killed the engine and hopped out of the car. He grabbed her bike and put it in the back. Then he opened the passenger door and helped her up, and Nora start to cry again.

"You really don't have to do this," she said.

"I know. But I figure, it's the least I can do, the way Lester treats girls."

"He didn't treat me badly," she said.

"You're crying ain'tcha?"

"But I wasn't expecting..."

He put a hand on the back of her neck which seemed like a very intimate thing to do for how little he knew her. "Where can I take you?" he asked

"I live on Maple Tree," she said.

"No shit! House I grew up in is only a couple blocks away," he said.

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"Well it's not like Maple Tree or nothing. It's in those apartments just off Cherry, lived there with my dad."

"My best friend lived in those apartments," she said.

"Yeah? I heard they kicked everyone out and turned them into more offices for the factory," he said. "Where'd your friend end up?"

"Well actually her family just moved to Slidell. Her dad got a job there."



## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"Oh," was all he said.

They drove in silence for a couple of minutes, Steve turned on the radio and fiddled with a couple of stations, getting only static.

"You hungry?"

Nora nodded.

"Because I was thinking to get a burger, and I have that beer in the back. We could go down to the lake, unless you have places you need to be."

"No, that sounds good," she said.

Nora ordered a bacon cheeseburger with fries and a soda, and Steve ordered a double cheeseburger, with no tomatoes, and fries and a soda, and they loaded back into the truck and drove towards the lake. When they passed by Nora's house she pointed it out to him.

"That's a nice house," he said.

"Yeah, my mom's been saving a really long time," she said.

"Sounds like you have a good mom," he said.

Nora didn't say anything for a second. "Yeah, but she is so annoying."

Steve laughed, "How old are you?"

"Fourteen," she said.

"Shit, that's so young," he said.

"Yeah, how old are you?"

"I turned twenty-two last month," he said.

"Hah. That's a baby," she said. "Lester is like ancient compared to you."

"Yeah, Lester is a lot of things I'm not," he said.

"Then why do you hang out with him?" she said.

"Why do you hang out with him?" he asked.

"I don't know."

They pulled up to the lake. Steve put the car in park, "Grab the burgers will you?" he said. "I got a couple towels in the back we can sit on."

The wind had picked up some causing small waves to break along the shore line. Nora found a grassy spot and Steve laid down a towel and they both sat down and opened the burger bags. Nora spread the wrapper of her burger across her lap and took small bites. Her condiments squeezed out onto the paper and covered her hands. Steve handed her a napkin. Then he opened one of the beers using a ring on the middle finger of his left hand.

"Doesn't that hurt?" she asked.

"Nah. Calluses."

They talked more about Nora's life, her mom, school. Nora kept think-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

ing she must be boring him. She worried that she didn't have anything to talk about with a twenty-two-year-old boy. Everything in her life seemed so small. The sun set into the horizon and the first stars came out, Spica, Shaula, Saiph, each of them hundreds of light years away.

"It's just hard to believe it's all so old," Nora said. "I mean, I know that's a moronic thing to say, because it's obvious, but it's that old." They were lying back on the towels looking at the night sky.

"It's pretty impressive," he said.

"Why haven't we seen one yet?" she shook her legs back and forth as if she couldn't contain her excitement.

"Relax, we'll see one. It said on the news there is supposed to be a ton of them."

"I already know what I am wishing for," she said, propping herself up on one elbow and turning to him.

"What is that?" he asked.

"A dog," she said. "Then my mom would have someone to focus on other than me." A shooting star flew through the sky. Steve's hand shot up, "You see it?"

Nora hadn't seen it, she'd been facing him. "No," she laid back down, "Of course, the one time I take my eyes away."

"That one was all mine," he said.

"What are you going to wish for?"

"I don't know. Maybe that I'm able to save some money and move some place nice."

"That's not a wish," she said.

"Sure it is, why's that not a wish?"

"Because it's not something magically bestowed on you. All you have to do is save money and then it comes true, you're doing it."

"Same as getting a dog," he said.

"No its not, because my mom would have to have a giant lapse in personality to agree to letting me get a dog," she said.

"I'll get you a dog," he said.

"Where would I keep it?" she asked.

Steve waved his hand. "Details."

Then another one came. The explosion seemed to happen right above them, and it shot all the way to the edge of the horizon. In quick succession it was followed by a second.

"Oh my god," she gasped. "That was HUGE."

"I know," he said. They were silent for a while. Nora wondered what she might say to thank him for bringing her here.

"You know what would make this fucking spectacular?" he asked.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"No," she said.

"You smoke?" he asked.

"Yeah, I have some cigarettes in my bag, it's in the car, just let me..."

"No, I meant," and he held up a Ziploc bag extracted from his pocket. He shook the contents. There were a few lumps down in the bottom, it was dark and Nora couldn't see well, but she knew it was marijuana.

"Yeah," she said. "I mean I haven't."

"Ever?" he asked.

"Nope."

"You're going to like this," he said.

Steve took out a white rectangle of paper, and broke off a part of the marijuana bud, which he aptly rolled into a cigarette and lit.

"So you got to inhale it into your lungs, you breathe deep and you hold it there, like this," he said, taking the first hit. He puffed out his chest, and strained his neck, holding it for two, three seconds and then releasing. He passed it to her, lighting the end again.

Nora put the cigarette to her lips. She inhaled, it felt like someone had kicked her in the chest. She let out a small cloud of smoke and a cough.

"Ow," she said.

Steve rubbed her on the back while taking the cigarette with his other hand. He took another hit. They passed it back and forth four or five times until it had burnt itself out.

"I feel like I can't breathe, what happens if I can't breathe?" Nora asked.

"You're fine," he said.

"No seriously. Will you have to cut my throat open?" she asked.

"Yeah, if it comes to it I'll perform a tracheotomy. Just breathe," he said, and then his voice softened, "you're fine." His hand was resting on her bicep. Then he was running his fingers along her humerus, up and down. "You're okay," he said.

They lay there in silence for a while. Another star shot passed them.

"It's so beautiful," Nora said, giggling. "How long before I feel different?"

"You might not feel anything all that noticeable this time," he said. "But you seem relaxed, that's good."

"I am very relaxed," she said. She rolled her head to the side and smiled at him. They were both leaning back on the towels again.

Steve still had his hand on her arm. He rubbed higher up to her shoulder and Nora shivered. He traced the veins on her neck, and tapped against the cavity of her breast bone.

Mmmmm, she said.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"You cold?" he asked.

"Nope," she said.

He continued to touch her. He rolled onto his side to face her. He ran his fingers down the center of her rib cage, and hiked up the material of her shirt to reveal the bottom of her stomach, the area just above the line of her skirt. He traced the tops of her hip bones, which formed two little mountainous ridges, one on each side.

"You're so little," he whispered into her ear.

"You're going to miss the stars," she said.

"They'll be there when I get back."

She giggled, not peeling her eyes from the sky. He put the end of his finger tips under her shirt, exposing her belly button. He stuck a finger in it, and she clenched up and kicked him with her leg.

"I'm ticklish," she said.

He ran his hand back and forth across her stomach and Nora settled back feeling very warm inside.

"Don't do anything else," she said. He didn't.

She didn't say much after that. Maybe it was the weed, or maybe the beer, probably a combination of both that made her feel very drowsy. She never wanted to leave that embankment. She wanted to lie there forever, wishing on every single star in the heavens, not just the shooting ones. It felt good to have Steve touch her. It wasn't like it was with Lester. They weren't really doing anything, but she felt as if they were.

Another star took flight. Nora didn't squeal out this time, she just wished that Steve would be her boyfriend someday. And then she wondered if maybe it was a bad omen for her to spend such an important wish on something that had just died. Why wish on shooting stars? They weren't even stars to begin with. They were nobodies in the universe, just these tiny little flecks left over from something that had broken into smaller bits. Nora re-wished her wish on a different star. She wanted it to go up on something that has been around for billions of years. Then another one shot across, followed instantly by another, and a third. How was it that these tiny unimportant things could make such large explosions? Stars have great explosions, they go through all sorts of dwarf-like phases. She remembered all of this from an astronomy course she had taken last year. It was a much bigger deal when a star died. It expanded out and ate everything with its dying breath. And then the star morphed into something else. So the star didn't really die at all. It's these small things that die, she thought, not the big things. The big things just changed into other big things: nebulous dust becomes a star, a star becomes a black hole. For the first time Nora was struck by her own smallness, her unimportance. Human lives come and go so fast the universe barely has time to register them, so what did it matter what she did? It didn't. She found this comforting. Nora wasn't someone who spent time worrying about dying. She wasn't worried about the where she would end up, or what was next, and now she was fairly certain nothing was next, and it was comforting to think there would come a time in her life when she wouldn't have to wor-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

ry about anything at all because she wouldn't be around to worry. It was amazing. Fourteen years old and she was already perhaps a fourth of the way through her life, maybe a fifth or sixth if she was really lucky. How many billions of years had these rocks been alive, and yet Nora would come and go before they even had a chance at visible erosion, nature was so indestructible.

"I think I have to go," she said. "What time is it?"

Steve pulled out his cell phone, "10:30," he said. The light from the phone was bright and momentarily blinded her from seeing his face.

"I should go, my mom doesn't know where I am," she said.

"Stay, five more minutes and then I'll drive you," he said.

Kirsi Marcus is a senior at the University of Iowa where she studies Fiction and Literature. This is her first publication.