

Jenna Devine

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## Naked

Dahlia felt a certain dizziness, the rush of a twenty-five-year-old memory, as she let herself be jostled through the crowd in the museum's vast atrium. Overhead the sun was setting and streaks of orange burned through the glass ceiling, painting strips of light on top of the heads moving into the main gallery. The glow combined with her nerves cast a strange aura about the room. The colors were too saturated, the blues and greens too bright.

"Dahlia."

Harry's hand slipped into hers and anchored her momentarily. "I keep losing you in this crowd."

She tightened her grip on his hand. "Sorry. It's packed. I had no idea it would be so popular."

Harry chuckled. "The opening of E.M. Gregory's new show? I'm surprised they don't have riot police guarding the place."

Dahlia smiled faintly at him. She knew it was only a matter of time before he slipped into his art history professor voice and started marveling at the brushstrokes or chiaroscuro techniques in a still life. She knew this, and she loved him for it. But she had not come to see E.M. Gregory's new show, to marvel at the never-before-seen works exhibited for the first time in a posthumous tribute to the artist. She had only come to see one painting in particular, one in E.M. Gregory's series of nudes that *The New York Times* had dubbed "an exquisite and breathtaking view into the human psyche."

Harry was already walking forward, tugging her along like an eager child. He had taught a seminar on Gregory and his contemporaries, and Dahlia could tell that the chance to see these previously unknown works made him almost giddy with excitement. She wished she could match his enthusiasm, but a sharp twist of fear behind her ribs inhibited her. The entrance to the gallery loomed ahead, a massive black-and-white photograph of the artist suspended above the glass double doors. Dahlia

could feel the enormous eyes on her as she followed Harry through the crowd. E.M. Gregory was young in this picture, maybe thirty. Definitely taken before the decade of heavy drinking that would put ghosts in his eyes and carve gorges in his olive skin. It was a photograph from the time she knew E.M. Gregory—before he was E.M. Gregory, when he was still Elliot and she was his model.

Maybe there were a million reasons why she did it. She was young, she was impetuous. It was the summer before her senior year of college, her last chance at carefree living before graduation and impending adulthood. She had only just moved out of her parents' home into a real apartment—no more dorm rooms for her—and had paid her own rent for the first time that morning. Seeing her name shine in the wet black ink on the check gave her a restless tingle in the backs of her knees. Her legs propelled her from her apartment, down four flights of stairs, onto the sidewalk and into the sultry air. It was New York City in August; she could taste the melting asphalt with every intake of breath. The midday sun glared off the skyscrapers and left her coated in a sheen of sweat that clung to the back of her neck and the hollow in her collarbone like a second skin. So maybe this was the only reason she did it: the heat.

*To read the full story, purchase Issue 1 of The Lindenwood Review.*