

TCU Journal of the Arts

eleven40seven

Spring 2015 | 10th Anniversary Edition

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10TH
ANNIVERSARY
EDITION

SPRING 2015

"ART IS THE ONLY
WAY TO RUN AWAY
WITHOUT LEAVING
HOME."

- Twyla Tharp

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EDITOR'S NOTES

"The earth has music for those who listen."

— William Shakespeare

All creative people have open ears, open eyes, and open hearts. I believe that being vulnerable and living without fear of judgment are extremely important values. Without that primal, humanistic need to express oneself, there can only be madness and chaos. There is a need in this world for an explosion of lights and colors and words that shout who we really are. As an artist myself, I find that without the release, my mind is a dove confined to a too-small cage.

At eleven40seven, we encourage all types of creative expression without any restrictions. We allow artists and writers to free their minds and drift along the rapidly rippling river of creativity, with or without a raft. The works that we publish are nothing short of greatness. There is so much originality and spunk in these works and I could not be more proud of this magazine. Thank you so much to the contributors that make this publication top-notch; we couldn't have done any of this without you.

I would like to give a special thank you to Dr. Emory Hamilton and Mr. Frederic C. Hamilton for establishing the eleven40seven Endowment Fund in honor of their daughter Helen. To show our appreciation for their generous contribution, we have chosen one excellent piece to receive the Hamilton Award for Excellence in Creative Expression. Congratulations to this year's recipient, Lizzy de Gravelle, for her fiction piece "Gully," which you can read in this issue.

Lastly, I would like to thank the creators of this publication. Thank you, my fellow editors, for working so hard and expressing your passion for the arts. You all have made my last semester the best one. I would also like to thank Dr. Curt Rode for dedicating your heart and soul to eleven40seven. We appreciate everything that you've done for us.

Enjoy!

Lauren Hart
Editor-in-Chief, New Edition

Before writing this, I reread every editor's note ever published in a volume of eleven40seven. This mission took me to our third volume, from Spring 2006. In that note, Dr. Curt Rode, eleven40seven's indefatigable advisor, cites Dorianne Laux and Kim Addonizio from *The Poet's Companion*: "good writing works from one simple premise: your experience is not yours alone, but in some sense a metaphor for everyone's."

This sentiment is why eleven40seven has been so important to TCU over the past decade. For those who have worked on the journal, been published in the journal, or read and related to any of its pieces, eleven40seven reminds us we are interconnected. The artwork, photography, poetry and prose that have filled our pages testify to the lived experiences of our contributors and make valid the emotions, observations, and whims of our readers. There is a strong creative community at TCU. eleven40seven provides a forum for those in the community to find, support, and celebrate each other.

This semester, the staff read every published piece from twenty volumes, selecting our favorites to reprint in the anniversary edition. Though whittling our catalogue down to the most emblematic pieces was a monumental task, I am confident that this issue of eleven40seven represents where the arts community has been, as well as where it is going.

As the only publication of undergraduate creative work at TCU, eleven40seven fits a growing (if submission numbers are any indication) expressive need on campus. Of course, the journal is indebted to those who have ensured its survival for the past ten years. Dr. Rode, faculty advisor and wisdom giver, has been with the journal since the very beginning. The English department, Bryson Literary Society, SGA and the Hamilton family, with their Helen Hamilton Award for Excellence in Creative Expression, have also played huge roles in supporting and funding the journal. I must also thank the students who have worked on eleven40seven's staff over the years, who have gone on to become lawyers, journalists, graphic designers, parents, teachers and more. eleven40seven will always be part of their legacy.

Our first volume came out when I was in sixth grade; I'm graduating in May. In the intervening decade, my understanding of nuance, creativity and passion has deepened dramatically. From web to print, gray scale to color, small to expansive, eleven40seven has likewise evolved in its ability to represent these qualities. The content, too, has matured as the brand has grown and the community has found and pushed each other to produce ever better work.

I can't wait to see what we've become at year twenty.

Allana Wooley
Editor-in-Chief, Anniversary Edition

MY SISTER SELLS HER BLOOD IN A BORDER TOWN

Katie Terhune

My sister sells her blood in a border town
So her pink sandcastle of a house can keep the lights on.
My sister eats oranges from her orange tree,
Avocados, cheap as the rich dirt they grow them in
Down there.
My sister has neighbors with an armored Mercedes
With bulletproof windshields—they are almost never home.
My sister says they are Cartel
The same way you say "they are Christian," or "they are Texans."
My sister learned all about Santa Muerte
And Jesus Malverde
From the gangster hooked up next to her at the plasma center.
He showed her his tattoos through the haze of tubes and machinery,
Talked about bullets, who he prays to.
My sister's seventh graders are skipping class, she says,
To run drugs for the Zetas. They held an assembly about it at her school.
My sister counted the empty seats.

Originally Published in the Spring 2012 Edition

UNTITLED 2

Dhananjaya Perera



Originally Published in the Fall 2009 Edition

GULLY

Lizzie de Gravelle

The pan hit the floor with a clatter as my arm seared with pain. Screams—coming from the room above me. Charlie’s room. Scooping up the lopsided cake I had just pulled from the oven, I flung it onto the stovetop. I dashed for the staircase, trying to ignore the throbbing red mark flaring up on my wrist. When I reached his room, I found him sitting on the rug in the middle of the floor. His crying filled the room. Pieces of his favorite puzzle scattered across his lap and all over the carpet. As I reached for him, I realized I still had my oven mitts on and tore them off. My hands frantically fluttered over my son, searching for any sign of injury—a bump, a bruise, a cut, *something*.

“Charlie, honey, *what happened?*” I demanded, crouching beside him and taking his red face in my hands. He could barely focus on me through his sopping eyes. Spit was dribbling from his open mouth.

“GULLY IS L-LEAVING M-M-MEEEE!” he howled, clutching at my wrists, pressing into the throbbing burn mark. I cringed at his grip, but my worry deflated considerably. Gulliver was Charlie’s imaginary friend—but of course, I never called him ‘imaginary’ in front of Charlie.

“Charlie,” I assured him, “I’m sure he will be coming back soon. He probably just needed a snack.” Gully, as Charlie often reminded me, loved to raid the pantry and gorge himself. He’d eat anything—slabs of bacon, gummy bears, peanut butter, green onions, cheese cubes, bow tie pasta. Charlie only screamed louder.

“NO! H-He is leaving-g FOREVER! Be-Be-Because I-I’m six!” My brow furrowed as Charlie covered his swollen eyes with little fists. He dissolved from groans into quivering, pitiful sobs. My poor baby looked inconsolable—hunched like a little old man, grieving. I pulled him into my lap.

He was shaking, and his skin was flushed and damp. With Charlie’s hot face against my neck, I was reminded of Gully’s arrival, years ago. Charlie was two, plagued by a horrible fever; he had resembled a little lobster—red and boiling hot. Night and day, he cried until his voice vanished and he could barely make a whisper. When his lymph nodes began to swell, my husband and I, sleep-deprived and terrified, rushed him to the hospital—to steroid shots, beeping machines, and thin blankets. After a few days, the fever finally broke and we took Charlie home. He had to stay in bed to wait for the

Recipient of the Helen Hamilton Award for Excellence in Creative Expression

illness to subside—it still hurt for him to swallow, and his cough was terrible. It was the kind of cough that was painful to hear.

He was quiet when we were in the room. He’d lie back against his pillows and nod or shake his head, or reach for us if he wanted us to sit with him. But when I would leave him alone so he could rest or flip through a picture book, I’d often hear him babbling to himself.

“Charlie, who are you talking to?” I would ask over and over. He would shake his head, smiling. I kept asking him this question, with greater and greater anxiety as I considered possible aftereffects of the fever. But he would just smile lightly and pull his covers up to his mouth to stifle his raspy giggles, which further perplexed me.

For two weeks, he merely sat with his jumbo box of crayons and drew in his sketchpad. But the blue crayons were the only ones he used—he would scrawl some blue on every page and show it to me. As a first-time mother, I began to entertain unlikely fears—maybe the fever had turned Charlie color blind? Maybe he was hallucinating and seeing things that were not there?

One afternoon, I passed by his door and saw him sitting on the floor and flipping through his sketchpad. I heard him talking to himself again, posing questions about the drawings.

“Charlie?” I asked anxiously, “Baby, who are you talking to?”

Charlie turned the sketchpad to me, revealing a scribbled blue blob.

“Gully.” He pointed to the paper, smiling with joy. He turned to look beside him, and pointed at the empty air. “Gully is my friend.”

Over the years, Gully had evolved from a crude blue scribble to a voluptuous hourglass shape. I glanced at one of the recent drawings tacked by Charlie’s bed: Charlie and his fluffy blue creature playing soccer. Charlie loved to draw. I had set up his miniature easel in the corner of his room. He would tilt his head at his picture, then turn his chin up to the empty air beside him and ask, “What do you think?” Tearing my eyes from the picture, I gently coaxed his sticky hands from his face.

"Charlie, is Gully here still?" I asked. Charlie glanced around the room. His eyes fell on his beanbag, and nodded, as a new flood of tears cascaded down his face.

"Did Gully say why he has to go?" He struggled to speak through a bout of hiccups. "Calm down baby, it's ok." I rubbed his back in small, soothing circles. "H-He said cause I'm six today he h-has to fly away. He—he says that's the *r-rule*." He explained breathlessly, burying his snotty nose into my apron. I sighed, unsure what to say.

My husband James and I had just been discussing Gully the night before, after Charlie was in bed. James was even-tempered, but adamant.

"We need to wean Charlie off Gully somehow." Charlie was six now, so he'd be starting kindergarten in just two months. He wouldn't be able to spend every day catching ladybugs in the garden or making pillow forts in the living room. He would be learning how to read and write, how to add and subtract. He would draw countless pictures for his new teacher. Charlie would need to make friends and adjust to a school routine.

James and I had bickered over Gully several times now: countless debates in the summer evenings with my strong-willed husband never deviated from the usual pattern. He'd look at me with a serious frown, peering over his reading glasses—his dark-framed courtroom glasses that made him intimidating. With one look, his blue eyes could pin you to a wall, see through the innocent and guilty people he interrogated. He was by no means cold or calculating at home. He was just a bit of a control freak, sometimes wielding a hot temper. But his concern for Charlie was sincere and reasonable.

"Rosie, the other kids and parents will call him weird for talking to himself. Honey, who knows what his teacher will be like? I just don't want him to be singled out or feel inferior. He's become so attached to Gully that he rarely speaks to anyone else." James was right: our son, as sweet as he was, was a shy boy, without his father's charisma or my chattiness. He probably wouldn't be well received if he constantly chattered with his imaginary friend in the kindergarten classroom all day.

Though I felt the quizzical stares of others in the grocery store or at the playground, I felt hesitant at discouraging Charlie's attachment to his big blue friend. I appealed to James that Gully was completely real for Charlie—just invisible to everyone else, including us. Charlie did not realize that he had control over everything Gully did or didn't do. What would

Gully's absence do to him? That's usually where the argument ceased, to be continued another day.

I combed my fingers through Charlie's curly dark hair and glanced at my watch as he grew quiet. The burn on my arm was raw and rubbery. 12:38.

"Well, let's see... your birthday party will be starting in a little while. Didn't you tell me Gully loves birthday cake?" Charlie had relentlessly reminded me that I needed to make his and Gully's favorite: "funfetti" cake mix with blue icing. Charlie nodded his head and looked up at me with his big hazel eyes.

"Maybe if Gully stays for your birthday party and has some cake, he'll change his mind about leaving. Maybe he'll decide to stay a little longer." Charlie sniffed, blinked hard, and wiped his nose, not entirely convinced. But his crying had subsided, and his birthday party guests would be here soon.

For the moment, I was glad James wasn't there—he would point out that Charlie's emotional outburst was an indication that his obsession with Gully had grown and we should address it immediately. I frowned. We would have to discuss it later. I didn't want to spoil Charlie's birthday and the grand party we had planned for him with that very distressing conversation.

I smiled and gave him a little squeeze; all these thoughts about kindergarten made me realize how much I would miss having him home all day while I clicked tediously at my computer. I worked from home as a freelance graphic designer—using software to create logos, brochures, posters, and flyers for businesses, cover art for books and albums, and invitations for parties, showers, weddings, and other events. Charlie was my assistant and would create his own masterpieces while I worked. He loved to draw pictures of Gully and write stories about him: where he came from, what he liked to do. Honestly, my son's detailed imaginings of Gully's adventures were fascinating. I stood up, setting him on his feet and giving him a big noisy kiss on his cheek.

"Let's put on your shoes and go downstairs. We'll finish your blue cake and you can see the decorations me and Daddy put up in the backyard while you were solving your puzzle."

His face broke into an eager smile. We had kept him occupied in his room with the 100-piece puzzle until we could finish transforming the backyard from a simple green lawn to a festive party space. Now he was practically bursting with excitement, fidgeting and buzzing in suspense.

"Gully says he'll come to my birthday party!" He announced. After scurrying to his closet, he returned with his favorite blue sneakers. We practiced tying them before we went downstairs together. He oohed and aahed when I spread the thick icing over his birthday cake, which thankfully had not been ruined by its fall. As Charlie licked the wooden spoon clean, I put some ointment on my burn and kept an eye on the clock. When would James be back with the massive bouquet of helium balloons we had ordered?

As we walked through the French doors to the wide back porch, Charlie stamped his feet in glee. Our spacious backyard looked wonderful. James had hung blue paper lanterns and a blue racecar piñata in the glittering canopy of our large oak tree. I watched with an amused grin as Charlie let go of my hand and tore down the steps and across the lawn. He waved his arms and zoomed around the sunflower stalks and tomato plants in the garden. I felt like I was watching a frenzied little hummingbird, deliberating which flower to devour first. He ended his march at his "tree house" (which we were keeping on the ground until he was older), which we had covered in blue streamers and all of the photos I had of Charlie in my photo album.

Since the party would be starting in fifteen minutes, I began moving the sliced watermelon and pitcher of iced tea out into the shade. My ears buzzed with cicadas' chimes and I took some deep breaths of the thick summer air. Thankfully, it wasn't too hot today; Texas summers tended to be scorching, but it had rained all day yesterday, cooling the pavement and reviving the grass. I had pulled out Charlie's round plastic pool and dropped the hose into it so it could start filling up with frigid water. With that finished, I shook out a dozen blankets from the linen closet and spread them out for our picnic party. As I smoothed down a thick blue quilt stitched with vibrant sailboats, I was reminded of Charlie's drawings of Gully. The blue coverlets and decorations reflected the immaculate blue sky. I looked over at Charlie. He was cheerfully whispering over his shoulder to Gully now, hovering over a photo pasted to the door.

I jumped and whirled around when I heard a loud crack. My spooked heartbeat slowed slightly as I spotted James walking through the gate with a sheepish smile on his face. He was struggling with a huge bouquet of colorful balloons, trying not to pop them on the cedar fence. Charlie gawked at the balloons and eagerly rushed over to his dad.

"Daddy, can I hold them?"

"No way, buddy. All of these would carry you away to outer space!" James laughed, handing him just one balloon.

"Can I have one for Gully too?" Charlie asked, holding out his hand.

"Share that one with Gully; these are for your party guests."

The doorbell rang faintly and Charlie ran to the front door with his red balloon. As our son scurried off, James gave me a loaded look.

"Rosie, I thought we agreed to discourage his fixation with Gully." James lectured me as he tied the balloons down to a chair. He looked into my eyes and I saw the exhaustion painting his features; he had been working in his office all night before waking early to drink black coffee and decorate the backyard. He had dark circles under his eyes and I could see a few silvers peeking in his hairline. He raised his eyebrows at me, expecting an answer. I decided against telling him about Charlie's episode this morning.

"Baby, it's his birthday. Now's not the right time. Let's just let him have fun today." I replied calmly and stroked his hair, which was identical to Charlie's thick curls. He set his jaw in irritation.

"As long as Charlie plays with the other kids. It's *his* party; he shouldn't go wander off to a corner by himself. He *has* to make some real friends, Rose." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. I nodded and reached for my tense husband's hand. We heard a boisterous, masculine voice and Charlie's delighted laughter approaching the porch.

"That'll be Pop." He kissed me briefly before going to embrace my in-laws, who had just emerged with Charlie between them, holding their veined hands in his. I allowed James to greet his parents first and walked to the side of the house to turn off the hose.

A few minutes after 1:15, guests began to arrive, pouring into the backyard with packages in bright patterned paper. Moms put sunscreen on their kids' faces and my three teenage nephews munched on watermelon and spit the seeds at each other. My two nieces were lying in the shade, playing with each other's hair and texting on their cell phones. The men—James' two older brothers and some of our neighbors—gathered around the barbecue pit with James to chat. They each retrieved a dripping bottle of Chimay from the cooler. The women—housewives who lived on our block and a few of my clients—settled on the blankets to gossip and sip lemonade.

The hazy air was filled with the smell of charcoal fire and the sun warmed my shoulders as I walked around the yard and played hostess. I spent the next hour walking around to greet family members and neighbors: soccer moms trying to plan for school supplies shopping, one of my clients who was planning a baby shower and needed me to design an invitation, and of course my father-in-law, Derek, who enveloped me in a crushing hug and proceeded to rant about the Texas Rangers' latest game.

Eventually, I excused myself to put on a *Disneymania* album for the kids to dance to—and many of them did, waving their arms and spinning in circles to tunes from *Lion King* and *Toy Story*. Several more enjoyed the pool and threw water balloons at the fence and each other. My eyes found Charlie, who was playing *Twister* with some friends at the mat I had arranged on the grass. It was his favorite game, though he was not quite tall enough to be good at it yet. But he practiced on rainy days, when the yard was too muddy for me to work on my garden. I remembered with a pang that he played *Twister* in the living room while I worked in my office nearby. I would hear him laugh loudly and joyfully request that Gully put his right foot on yellow, his left hand on red.

As I passed the mat to grab a glass of lemonade, Charlie was monitoring the spinner and calling out directions. Our neighbor's seven-year-old daughter Katie tried to reach a blue circle with her outstretched hand. She collapsed and the other kids laughed as she brought them down with her. Charlie timidly tapped Katie on the shoulder and held out the spinner so he could join his friends on the mat. I saw James standing at the barbeque pit and watching Charlie, too. He had a crooked smile on his face. Finally, he was relaxing.

As I walked over to make sure he didn't burn the chicken and hamburger patties, my mother-in-law, Judy, called to me from the porch. Unlike her guffawing husband, she was very prim and shrewd—like her son. She invited me to sit with her in our wicker chairs as she flipped through a *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Before I knew it, she began detailing her toil of renovating her house: What color should she stain the big dresser? Were these drapes too casual for the living room? Her long, dark red nails and spotty hands flipped through the pages as she asked me endless questions. She barely gave me time to utter responses before she was on to the next page and the next set of choices. I grew quiet and merely listened as she appraised a decorative floor rug for her kitchen.

Then my sister, Erin, caught my eye. From just over Judy's left ear, Erin made a silly face resembling an insane clown, her eyes wide and her smile gaping.

I stifled the urge to make a face back at her as Judy eyed me skeptically over her reading glasses and tightened her red lips.

"Judy, excuse me for a bit, I've just spotted my sister." I stated politely before rising to join Erin at the other end of the porch. Judy just flipped to the next page with an indifferent nod.

"Hey Rosie. The party is great! You and James did a great job out here." She smiled brightly, her brown eyes shining. I pulled her into a hug, trying not to get any of her teased blond hair in my mouth.

"Thanks—I've been decorating and baking all day. *Please* let's get something to eat—I'm *starving*."

"Absolutely! I brought lemon cookies if you're interested."

"Where are they? I *need* them."

She led me over to a tray finger sandwiches, salads, and her lemon cookies. We chatted about her kids' days in summer camp, our husbands' annoying obsession with the stupid Rangers, and the upcoming school year. Though we talked on the phone a few times a week, it was rare for us to have a conversation uninterrupted by whining children. But her three kids—Allie, Roger, and Jesse were happily tossing water balloons at the little pool, and Charlie was distracted by his party guests.

"So, wait, you had to pull the stinger out of her hand?" I asked, wiping at a lemonade stain on my tank top. Last week, Allie had accidentally set her hand on a wasp in their backyard while picking flowers.

"It was horrible. She was so freaked out; now she's terrified to go near flowers. I'm just glad that the boys weren't playing by the nest, too. I can't imagine what I would have done if they were all screaming like that." She shook her head to dispel the memory and took a bite of potato salad from her plate.

"Speaking of screaming... Charlie completely lost it this morning. I've never seen him so upset before. I was taking the cake out the oven when I heard him." I showed Erin the patch of red skin on my arm, still glistening with balm. "I was so startled I dropped it on the floor."

“Ouch! What a waste...” She took my arm and studied it sympathetically. “Wait, never mind the cake—was Charlie ok? He was screaming? What happened?”

“Charlie was hysterical this morning, crying that Gully is leaving him. I didn’t know what to do. James is putting so much pressure on me to have a talk with Charlie about getting rid of Gully. But it would break his heart, Erin.” Erin’s face tensed and she rolled her eyes.

“Ugh, this again? He’s barely in kindergarten—he’s still so young! I can’t see the harm in keeping Gully around. My kids love to hear about Gully. Doesn’t James realize it could be damaging to disillusion Charlie like that?” Erin was an elementary teacher and had worked with kids for years. “I’ll admit that none of my students thus far have ever brought an imaginary friend to my classroom. But I don’t think it would be a problem as long as he wasn’t disruptive. And Charlie is just not a disruptive kid.”

“James is afraid he’ll be bullied.”

“*Please*, kindergarteners *love* to play pretend. And James pretends professionally—as a *career*.”

“I know, but... Charlie doesn’t think Gully is pretend, Erin. He is Charlie’s oldest friend. I just wonder what will happen in the future, as Charlie grows up—will he just forget? What will life be like after that?” Erin glanced at Charlie and lowered her voice, tilted her solemn face close to mine.

“Rosie, Gully is just a fairytale and someday Charlie will realize that there is no blue monster and move on. You can either listen to James and do it now, or allow it to happen naturally. But Charlie probably keeps Gully around because he’s shy and doesn’t really care to socialize with kids his age.”

I took a deep breath and looked at Charlie. He was crowding with the other children under the tree. James was there, maneuvering the piñata.

“Piñata time,” I told her, “Let’s head over. I want to see Charlie hit it.” I attempted a smile and she returned it, squeezing my arm.

“It’ll be fine, Rosie; you’ll figure it out. Just don’t let James push you around about this. You know your son; you spend every day with him. You’ll know what’s best for him.”

We made our way over to the piñata crowd. James was tying the blindfold

over Charlie’s eyes: the birthday boy got the final swings. They’d been at it for a while. The kids had a rough time denting the piñata with a plastic bat, but any other was just too risky. We had to keep the kids several feet from the batter to avoid concussions and tears. But there were a few fraying corners on the racecar—it wouldn’t be long now before we had a dog pile of screaming kids. We laughed as Charlie swung and James pulled the chord, making the piñata dance up and down, so close and then just out of reach. Charlie managed to whack it a few times, but suddenly took off his blindfold and peered at his dad.

“Daddy, can Gully have a turn? I can’t break it open—Gully says he wants to try to get the candy. You know he loves candy.” Charlie asked innocently.

A few kids let out exasperated sighs of impatience and looked to James. I cast an anxious glance at Erin, who was biting her lip, and I stepped forward. But James had already let go of the rope; he was now looming over Charlie.

“No, Charlie, Gully cannot have a turn. Gully isn’t even here.” James replied matter-of-factly, fixing Charlie with an imperious stare.

Charlie blinked in confusion, glancing around.

“He’s right here, Daddy. You can’t see him, remember?”

“Charlie, Gully is not real, son. He’s just a character—you imagined him and write stories about him, ok? Now please, if you don’t want to hit the piñata, hand the bat on to a friend. You can go join your friends playing soccer over there. I set up the goals so you could break into teams.” He gestured to the kids clumsily dribbling the ball across the grass.

Charlie stared, dumbfounded, before turning to “face” Gully. He shook his head.

“Gully *is* real, Daddy. He’s right here; he lives with us, he plays with me all day when I’m home with Mommy. But I sent him an invite to the party anyway. I put it in our mailbox. Right, Mommy?”

Charlie turned to look at me. James looked at him over Charlie’s head, as if to overrule him.

“Charlie, why don’t you give that racecar one more swing?” I asked. “There will be plenty of candy for everyone, including Gully.” I ignored James’ glare and the other parents’ looks of confusion and whispers, “Who’s Gully?”

Charlie turned back towards the piñata. James did not jiggle the rope this time. Charlie gave a mighty swing, crumbling the cardboard. A small hole opened. He hit it and pieces of candy began to rain down. Kids swarmed over the candy. Charlie joined them, grabbing handfuls. James tossed the shell of the piñata into the trash and went back to his buddies. To separate myself from the crowd for a while, I walked in the other direction—toward the tree house. He wouldn't confront me when we had so many guests; but I'm sure I would hear about this later. He would be wearing his glasses when I climbed into bed.

As I dawdled by the tree house, which was almost as tall as me, I smiled at some of the photos of Charlie that James and I had picked out. My face stretched into a genuine smile as I gazed at photos of him—Charlie in his newborn blanket and hat, Charlie in his Halloween costumes (most of them blue Power Ranger getups), Charlie on the swing at the park with his daddy. My eyes drifted to the door and fell on the photo Charlie had been studying earlier. It was of Charlie at Disney World the year earlier, on his fifth birthday. The photo was taken in Tomorrowland. Charlie, with a chocolate-stained grin, clutched a Mickey Mouse ice cream in each sticky hand. The Buzz Lightyear ride, with flashing green lights and a long line of tourists, rose up behind him. Buzz Lightyear was Charlie's favorite ride... and that was where James and I had lost him for an entire hour.

My little boy had wandered off while we waited in line for the umpteenth time. It had been so crowded that no one noticed him go.

I cringed, feeling my throat tighten and my stomach sink. I had felt like a terrible mother for losing my child. The park personnel reassured us that it was a crowded park and happened all the time. I did my best not to bite their heads off in my panic. James was even more aggressive, his guilt intense because he had been supervising the stroller. I am not a very religious woman, but I prayed and prayed. After putting on his glasses and making some threats—itching for a lawsuit—my husband looked at me in painful distress. As he tucked the glasses into his shirt pocket and sat down on the bench beside me, I'd never seen him look so vulnerable and powerless. He kept rubbing his eyes to keep the tears from falling.

"At least he won't be scared if Gully is with him. He won't feel lonely; he'll talk to him until we find him." Nodding, I laid my head against his shoulder, my face slick with tears and sweat.

We sat like that for an hour; James was ready to leave the security kiosk and search the park himself, armed with a map of the attractions. But then there was a radio call for the two cheery security officers who were waiting with us. Charlie had been found nearby in Fantasyland, where the famous teacup ride was located. He was waiting for us at an ice cream stand. When we ran up to him and squeezed him tight, Charlie merely smiled at us. He had a Mickey Mouse ice cream in each hand.

"I got lost in all those people. Gully said we should go get some birthday ice cream." He held out his hands to show us his treasures. "He said you'd find us if we sat right here and ate our ice creams. This one is for me, and this one is for him." We smothered him with kisses and said thank you to Gully. We beamed at the generous ice cream vendor, a freckle-faced teen, and paid for the ice cream, tipping heavily. We snapped this picture of Charlie, Gully, and their melting ice creams in front of the ride.

I glanced around the party. Everyone was laughing and enjoying the food we had prepared. James was swigging a bottle of Chimay with his tippy swagger, surrounded by his friends. Erin was cuddled up with her little boy Jesse on a blanket. Finally, my wandering eyes found Charlie again. He was sitting on a blanket by himself, eating some pretzels and whispering to the air beside him, shaking with giggles. He was so happy, so at ease as he flopped down on the blanket and gazed at the sky. The other kids were running, playing Red Rover or Tag, but Charlie simply rested in the sunshine, a content smile on his face.

Turning back to the picture, I thought again that Gully had been part of our family for a long time. I wished for a minute that I could see him too, and talk to him. I cleared my throat as I realized that James was wrong. Charlie could have Gully for a few more years and be a perfectly normal, albeit brilliant, little boy.

I felt the familiar weight of James' hand on my shoulder. His wedding ring was cool against my shoulder.

"It's time for cake, Rose." I bit the inside of my lip and cast him an annoyed look, my eyes sharp with disappointment and my forehead tense. He looked surprised and glanced away. As long as Charlie chose to believe in him, Gully would stay. Then, I brushed past James and went inside to retrieve the blue-frosted cake with blue swirly candles.

When I emerged on the porch, everyone had gathered around the table. The tall candles glowed and flickered in the shade of the oak tree. “Happy Birthday” began hesitantly, slowly—but it quickly picked up. Young and old voices mingled—we could hear Charlie’s Grandpa Derek above everyone else. James mouthed the words. But I sang all out and snapped pictures of Charlie with my camera as he gazed excitedly into the candles.

Charlie grinned from ear to ear. But as the song progressed, he began to glance around, as if he’d lost something. As everyone broke into applause and chanted, “Make a wish!” his head whirled around, clearly disturbed, searching. His brow was creased with worry. I called his name, trying to show him I was there, on the other side of the table. He didn’t seem to see me. Suddenly, as he looked over my shoulder, his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. My eyes followed his across the yard and I spotted the giant bouquet of balloons lifting into the air. There was someone dangling from the end; I yelled, “No! No!” I stood frozen in fear, praying they would pop from the weight. I waited for a parent to scream and launch themselves at the balloons, to extract their kid from the ribbons and set them safely on the ground. With my heart hammering, I started toward the balloons, which were rapidly floating towards me. But as the balloons floated just overhead, I realized I was mistaken.

There, gripping the balloons, was Gully. He was shaped like a bulbous, top-heavy peanut and his fleecy skin was the most beautiful shade of blue, brighter than the sky surrounding him. His two swollen, golden eyes were spaced wide apart and his tiny pupils gazed steadily, almost as if he was blind; his lack of eyelids gave him a reptilian expression. His head sported two heart-shaped protrusions, his ears. His great big mouth did not smile or frown, but revealed only two moss green buckteeth. His arms were elastic and spindly like noodles, with no elbows or joints. His fingers were mere stumps—three on each petite hand. His two squat legs, which had no knees, feet, or toes, kicked wildly as he rose higher and higher, like he was swimming up to the clouds.

My hearing became muffled as he looked into my eyes. I felt my throat closing, my heart sinking—that familiar feeling of dread emerged. Then it dawned on me what was happening. Charlie’s shrill voice returned to me, “GULLY IS L-LEAVING M-M-MEEE! FOREVER!” Charlie was six. Charlie was going to school. Charlie would need visible friends, friends who were not blue. Gully had to leave. It was the *rule* of imaginary friends—who perhaps were not imaginary at all. Gully’s large round eyes glowed with love and sympathy for Charlie, with great emotion and respect for his little friend.

My own eyes filled with gratitude for Gully and anguished tears as I heard Charlie screaming and realized I had not believed, had not prepared him for this terrible moment. Again, I felt that acute sensation of failure that had tortured me at Disney World.

With blue icing staining his fingers, Charlie tore away from the crowd of party guests. He howled desperately into the sky, “Gully come back! Don’t leave me! Don’t go, Gully! We made your special cake! I love you! Please don’t leave me!”

But Gully rose higher and spoke not a word. He cast a beautiful blue light as he began to melt away, like the Mickey Mouse ice creams. I felt horrified, wondering if this is what dying looked like for Gully. He was engulfed by the blue sky, blending into the atmosphere. I felt my heart squeeze as if it were shrinking as Charlie fell to his knees and heaved sobs into the grass. I looked helplessly at the crowd: frozen, whispering, watching my disturbed child.

James ran forward, panicked, and scooped up Charlie in his arms, asking him to calm down. His eyes met mine, and I felt a sob bubble in my throat—James hadn’t seen Gully. I looked at the faces: James’ frustrated and embarrassed glare, Judy’s stoic expression, and Derek’s wrinkled face lined with worry. I looked at the faces of the parents, judging my son and holding their own children back. I looked at the faces of the kids, their eyes wide and confused by what they were seeing. Then I frantically looked at Erin—my confident, collected sister. She looked back at me, frightened and bewildered. There was no recognition in her eyes.

I heard James over the mutters from the crowd.

“Charlie, they’re just balloons!” James barked, “It’s ok! Son, calm down! Charlie!”

I looked at the sky again, rooted to the spot, my mouth agape and my eyes so wide they felt that they would burst from the pressure. Charlie was screaming. I was screaming. My hands were full of shredded grass. I looked up and saw just the balloons, deserted and sailing away.

BEER MAN, AUSTIN

Ethan Wang



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GRASS STAINS

Claire Shelton

He lets himself imagine she is you.
The curve of her spine when she curls
into herself on top of his naked
mattress as he sits beside her,
tracing patterns on her palm with the tip
of his index finger. The little indentation
above her collarbone, deep like yours;
the twin dimples at the bottom of her back,
not so deep.

And sometimes when she's sleeping, he reaches
up and feels for the pulse in her neck.
If he closes his eyes he doesn't know the difference.

One day she'll wake up early, realize he's gone,
and find him kneeling before the slab of marble
embossed with your name and some numbers.
And when he hears her footsteps and pushes
himself up, she'll brush the flakes of grass from his knees
and scribble foreign words onto his forearm with her thumb.

Eventually he'll realize that he won't find you
buried beneath the skin of someone else,
but in sounds like snow crunching beneath boots
and the ocean inside a seashell
and that smell seconds before clouds give out.

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IN SPECIAL ED: 1998 – 2001

Eric Fisher Stone

That egg-white room
Was brimming with youths

Mad as jackals,
Angry as birds in boxes.
And howling like hyenas,
The boys declared war on pillars,
Buildings, mountains—
Anything taller than themselves,
They vowed to break. One boy
Smoked a blunt in class
And let the gray wisps from its embers
Slowly finger the air.
Another sliced his arm with a shard of glass
Until his defiant limb soaked red.
Still another orated Nietzschean manifestos
And declared himself the pinnacle of self-mastery.
They became my friends
In the time of rage when we were a pack of wolves
Wailing from our throats with hatred at that world
Which splayed us from our mothers' love

By making us monsters to be discarded
In special education classes.
In our battle against God,
One of us might have said like King Henry, "We few, we happy few,
We band of brothers, this life is our feast of Crispian:
We will die in arms."

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PETER

Eliza Smith



Originally Published in the Spring 2013 Edition

VOLUNTARY ENDINGS

Valyrie Kulp

in the style of John Ashbery

Icy hand coaxes ink into valleys of wool.
Conspicuously voided soles press into the snow
making molds of antiquity.

She feels everything too soon.
Her mother's favorite purse collects dust.
*Someday you can have it all,
but the candle will freeze once more.
Protect yourself, since you're all you have.*

Her eyelids droop past the horizon,
and her feet lock into the sand.
It's raining in Argentina while coffee cools
but children, please stop it.

Go back to the past, for a change.
A penny, nickel, quarter, dime, for every chance.
Velvet light blends the stones of the cobbled sidewalk
in hopes of drawing her where she needs to be.

BAPTISM

Justine Grace

I'd only seen Mama cry once.

My brother and I were getting baptized at Greensboro First Baptist Church on a clear Sunday morning. I can remember the white baptismal gown whipping around my ankles from the breeze and the sun shining off David's golden curls. Mama had decided to dedicate our whole family to the glory of the Lord. David went first.

"Do you accept our Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

David looked to Mama; she nodded.

"Yessir," he responded.

"Then I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen."

Then he was dunked into the depths of the baptistery font.

Two heartbeats passed before he emerged, shaking his hair like a dog and grinning like a fool. He stepped out of the tub and onto the asphalt of the church parking lot.

Greensboro First Baptist liked to make religion a public affair.

David came out dripping and winked at me as he passed. It was my turn.

The beaming sun made everything look like a movie as I approached the tub, the reverend beckoning me with open, soggy arms. An Elder helped me climb the ladder up and over the blue lip of the tub, and my body settled into the tepid holy water.

The white gown quickly became transparent, revealing my white bra and underwear. The reverend aggressively averted his eyes from my general direction.

Sun rays beat upon my head, heating my hair. Members of the congregation smiled at my skinny form. *God bless her.*

The reverend looked above my forehead.

- BAPTISM -

"Do you accept our Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

Silence fell.

A member of the congregation coughed, a baby started to whine.

I made eye contact with David, who was sneaking obscene gestures at the other witnesses in the folds of his soaked gown.

David had just turned seventeen and thought he knew everything.

I made eye contact with Mama; her eyes were red, and the bags under her eyes were more pronounced than usual. Tears pooled in the bags. She kept nodding vigorously.

"Yessir, I do."

"Then I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen."

Then all became dark as the reverend's gentle hands nudged me into the sacred bath. The water cooled my hot head and flooded my sinuses.

Then, as soon as the water had come, I was propelled to the surface, wheezing and eyes stinging. I looked to David, who was still flicking people off when they weren't looking. Then I turned my gaze to Mama. In that moment I thought everything would be all right. Her crooked smile filled with too-large teeth took up half of her face. She had saved her children from eternal damnation.

I glanced back at David and I wasn't so sure.

I hadn't quite been sure why Mama was so Hell-bent on getting us baptized. Going to church was enough of a stretch. Mama was raised as a Southern Baptist, but Dad was a retired Presbyterian so we never went to church. Mama would go by her lonesome to the small congregation and pray for our souls and we would get dressed all frilly for Easter and Christmas to rejoice the end and beginning of Jesus' life, but that was the extent of our religious experience.

Then the outbreak happened.

Mama came storming into the kitchen two days after we evacuated Charlotte for Greensboro. Dad couldn't come with us because he was hung up in the city. Dad was an ER nurse, and more and more people were getting sick every day.

Mama was raving about how David and I were going to Hell because she'd neglected her Christian duty to baptize us as babies. We just exchanged glances across the card table that served as our apartment's kitchen table.

We were lucky enough to find tenement housing because we left Charlotte just before the government finally publicly recognized the outbreak. Dad had told us to leave.

"They're not telling us something, Mary," he whispered to Mama in the living room after he thought I was asleep one night.

"People are dying every day; I can see the body bags. They won't let anyone besides CDC personnel into the infection zones. It's bad."

"Simon, do we need to leave?" Mama asked tersely.

"Yes. And soon."

We left the next morning. I clung to Dad, burying my head and tears into his shirt.

"It's just for a little while, sweetie. You'll be back before Christmas!"

He and Mama shared a glance.

I still remember his small form waving from our driveway.

We followed Mama to the white steeple on Sunday morning, dressed in the nicest clothing we could dig from the suitcases we'd packed in 15 minutes. We entered the front pew, Mama gazing adoringly at the pulpit. The congregation was composed of a mix of the obscenely elderly and young families, likely newcomers from big cities like us.

The service began with a Gospel revival of *How Great Thou Art*. I mouthed along so as not to embarrass myself by messing up the unknown words. David just stared blankly at the space above the choir pit.

David hated going to church because he could never pay attention for very long. His brain worked too fast.

After the resounding choral echoes subsided and the congregation was seated, the sermon began. I immediately tuned out the fervent assurances of destruction from the reverend and examined my socks. One was a distinctly different shade of white than the other.

I began to slump further to the ground in my investigation of off-white versus alabaster. Mama finally ripped her eyes from the pulpit to notice her children's less-than-rapt attentions.

A quick slap to the side of my head straightened me out. An icy glance in David's direction returned his attention to the balding reverend. The rev's shiny head had turned purple from his passion about the end times and our need for salvation.

"The Horseman of Pestilence has made his descent! WHAT SHALL YOU DO BUT PROCLAIM JESUS CHRIST AS YOUR SAV-I-OR?"

The last word was drawn into three distinct, drawn-out syllables, in a way that I thought was used only by movie pastors. Clearly, I was wrong.

David and I weren't convinced by the rev's argument, but Mama certainly was. Hook, line, and sinker. Before we knew it, David and I were wearing what looked like our late Grammy's nightie and were about to take a dip with the very same plum-faced reverend.

Weeks passed and Dad's phone calls got more and more sporadic, shorter and shorter.

"Hospital's sure busy, but everyone's in good spirits! The CDC says they're close to cracking a cure. I'm sure I'll get time off to visit soon. I'll grill burgers and Mama will make potato casserole. How does that sound, huh?"

We could hear the moans of the dying in the background. The continuous shouting of the PA system:

"WE HAVE A CODE BLUE IN WING SEVEN, REPEAT, CODE BLUE."

Then we stopped getting calls. Mama's forehead was constantly furrowed and her big-toothed smile withdrew to a blank line.

She called the hospital every day, but they refused to tell her anything aside from Dad got sick. Nothing serious. He'd call her when he was better.

I guess he never got better.

After three weeks passed, Mama stopped calling. Something inside her died. I think it was the part that loved Dad, but I came to think it was the part that loved us too.

One night after a dinner of beans and toast, David kept talking about the plans he was making for when Dad came to visit Greensboro.

"We'll go fishing, and then we'll watch Sunday Night Football. Maybe he'll let me have a beer like old times."

I didn't have the heart to remind him that cable had been knocked out a week ago, but Mama cut his reverie.

"The cable's out," she said.

"What are you talking about?" David's voice cracked.

"I said the cable's out. And Dad hasn't called for three weeks."

I guess David's brain had been going too fast to realize what was happening in front of him.

"Davy," I tried.

"But that doesn't mean—" David pleaded, his lips pursing just like Dad's.

"He hasn't called for three weeks. Your father always calls. He's dead."

David stormed out of the kitchen, his head bumping the single hanging light bulb, sending it oscillating above the card table. The spinning light created ghostly shadows; David's beans grew cold and congealed.

Dad was dead. The words had been said. Somehow I had already known, deep inside where the sensible part of me lived. But the foolish part of me broke into a million jagged splinters. Somehow it just kept festering and hurting no matter what I did. Mama quietly scooped her beans onto her toast, her mouth a flat line. Her eyes were wet, but no tears fell.

I knew that Dad was never to be spoken of again. I mourned him during the lonely times just before dawn in my cot.

The CDC's quarantine of large cities was failing. Logically, if you trap an animal, it immediately wants out. People would hire guides to smuggle them out of the cities. The radio talked about entire squatter colonies being established in the nation's subway systems. The outbreak ran rampant through the country.

Greensboro decided to take action. The mayor asked for volunteers to donate their fences to the city. They were going to fence us in, or as they liked to phrase it, "make our borders selective."

David and Mama hadn't spoken since the night Dad became no more. She turned to her Bible and housework. He used his anger to build the fence around the city limits. He came back hungry and silent, his skin tanned and his muscles ropey. He was no longer the boy who flicked off the Elders at our baptism. The brother I had known for fourteen years was as dead as Dad.

Greensboro became a safe haven after the fence was completed. People flooded the gates, their eyes haunted and cheeks gaunt, but none were allowed into the town. The city went on with business as usual, despite the wannabe immigrants' desperate calls for help day and night. I had even become used to the sound with time, a sort of horribly depressing white noise.

That is, until the mayor died.

He was found in his bed, skin gray and deflated.

The coroner confirmed Greensboro's greatest fear: the mayor's insides were completely disintegrated, his innards turned to pink mush by the intense fever brought on by the outbreak.

The city council was in shock. How had the outbreak reached our paradise?

I remember the town hall meeting to elect the new mayor.

Blackouts were common by July when we all filled the hall. The AC was out and the heat was almost unbearable.

The arguments and petitions for mayor were increasing in decibel.

"They still think it really matters. They think God hasn't already judged us all," Mama murmured.

Mama's monotone froze the sweat on my spine. My gut turned to ice. I held David's hot hand. He tried to squirm it out of my reach, but I grasped it as if it was the only thing keeping me from drowning in the icy sea.

We were doomed.

A newer, handsomer mayor was chosen. He made promises of "getting down to the root of this outbreak."

Mama just laughed, a rough, hard sound.

It was eventually discovered that the old mayor had a mistress. They found her body in the shower when they were clearing out the mayor's mansion for the new tenant. Deflated and ashen, she was an obvious victim of the outbreak. One of the cleaners recognized her as one of the desperate masses outside the city gates.

Citizens cried for more safety procedures. David joined the newly-formed Greensboro Guard. Mama didn't even try to stop him.

I pleaded with him while he put on his hand-me-down police jacket.

"Davy, please don't go. It's a death wish!"

He gave me a look in the single-bulb light.

David and I had always been close, before the outbreak. We were only three years apart.

I have this memory, locked deep in my heart where no one can steal it. It's of a Tuesday morning before school in Charlotte. I'm about six and Mama made pancakes for David and me before school and for Dad after he got off the night shift. She let me help pack our lunches for school, and pretended not to notice when I slipped candy into our lunch sacks. The aroma of syrup and batter on the griddle made us all giddy. Dad was exhausted, but made smiley faces on our pancakes with chocolate chips and strawberries anyway. We all sat down, David dipping his fingers into my syrup while Mama said grace. It was perfect.

It was over.

David looked me over, his eyes buggy and bloodshot. My elbows and knees were starting to protrude further than usual. My stomach rumbled to break the silence. The city council was enforcing rations.

He turned his back, grabbed his nightstick, and walked to the doorway of our shared bedroom.

"Goodbye, Sarah."

His wiry frame walked down the hallway and out of sight. The slamming door shook the apartment. I cried in my cot for Dad and David while Mama prayed in the living room.

Ten people died that week.

Twenty the next.

I tried to keep my hands busy to not worry about David. I cleaned the apartment with Mama, but there was only so much to clean. I attempted to plant a garden on the balcony so we would have something to eat other than rationed beans and stale bread.

Mama cleaned and prayed, and then would make dinner (if that's what you could call it). She always gave me the biggest portion. I don't think I ever saw her eat. Her cheeks became gaunt and her eyes became hollow. I heard her sobbing in the middle of the night.

David's anger made him a soldier. Mama's anger nearly killed her.

A knock on the door interrupted Mama's prayers. I was thinking of ways to cook my newly sprouted onions. She didn't get up, so I lumbered to the door. A man in a police jacket asked if we were the next of kin to David Johnson.

My breath halted. My blood solidified in my veins. I could feel my heart trying to pump the sludge to keep me alive.

"Yessir, we are."

Mama was still murmuring over her Bible.

"David has fallen victim to the outbreak. He served our city bravely. You should be proud."

I staggered to the couch. Mama was nearly shouting excerpts from Jeremiah.

I had to shake her to get her to stop.

She looked me dead in the eye and whispered, "He finally gets time with Dad."

Rage thinned the sludge and my heart beat fast. This was no longer the mother who had acted out stories for David and me at bedtime. This was not my Mama who kissed my knee when I fell off my bike, the Mama who danced with Daddy in the living room when she thought David and I had gone to bed.

That woman was as dead as Dad and David.

I couldn't separate Mama from her Bible long enough to get her to the funeral. It was more like a mass burial, as they slipped his gray, deflated body into the pit with the other corpses. His ghastly pallor contrasted with his vibrant pink lips. He wore a defiant smirk. Death had brought back his humor.

Months passed in that miserable apartment. The days shortened and the temperature dropped. With it came hopes of the end of the infection. My crops died. Mama stopped making dinner and cleaning the house.

I tried to feed her, but she wouldn't eat. Her eyes ran wild in their sockets when they weren't closed in prayer.

Mama never left her prayer post in the waking hours.

In her moments of lucidness, she would grasp my shoulders and tell me I was her "special girl" and "chosen by God" to live through this. She would tell me to go to church and pray with her. I never did.

Mama would slip out of sanity and I would go back to my business of keeping her alive. I force-fed her and read to her to make her sleep. My life was not my own—the outbreak took it.

I stopped going to church after David died. The cross above the pulpit mocked me with each passing moment. Daddy and David's voices swam through my thoughts. David's post-mortem smile was emblazoned on the inside of my eyelids.

I awoke one day to fire. My body was aflame. I looked down at my toes, but could not find the blaze.

I realized I was infected.

I was going to die in this thin cot in this miserable city, and Mama probably wouldn't even notice until my corpse stunk up the house.

I tried to use the tap to cool myself, but the faucet was dry. I drifted in and out of sleep. Visions of Daddy in his scrubs playing doctor with David and me came to my brain. At one point, I saw David sullenly looking down at me in his police jacket, nightstick aloft.

Mama did notice my absence. She creaked down the hallway and stared at my slight form: a ghost in my doorway. She turned her back and left me to burn for hours.

When she returned, she brought the reverend who had baptized me. The color left him when he spotted me.

"Do it," Mama commanded.

"Mrs. Johnson, I don't think it's—" the reverend stuttered.

"DO IT!" Mama screeched.

The reverend placed his clammy palm on my burning forehead.

He murmured something in Latin. *An exorcism.*

He sprinkled holy water from a washbasin all over the cot and my forehead. The water felt like ice on my skin.

Mama thought the infection was a demon, and was doing the only thing she could to save me, or the idea of me. She was crazy. But at least she wanted to keep me alive. God knows why.

I started to convulse. Not from the reverend's words, but from the final throes of the infection.

"NO, NO, NO!" Mama screamed.

That was the most I had heard her say in months.

Then all was dark. I saw Daddy and David. Daddy was in his UNC sweatshirt with his arm around David, pre-Greensboro David with the mischievous smirk and dirty sense of humor. They waved at me. I ran to them, but there was a fence between us, the same fence that surrounded Greensboro. I slammed on the chain links until my fingers bled. I slammed again and again, desperate to reach them. Then there was a yanking at the back of my belly button. Daddy and David bled into white, and I was pulled into darkness.

My eyes snapped open. I was blinded by light. It was morning. My body was not on fire anymore. Mama and the reverend were nowhere to be seen. I got up from my cot, legs shaky. I noticed the Bible on the floor, spine down. I picked it up. Isaiah, Mama's favorite. The washbasin that was full of holy water was upside down, the water pooled in the middle of the sagged floor.

"Mama?" I tried, my voice raspy from fever.

A weak moan down the hallway answered me.

I walked against the wall, leaning all my weight into the peeling flower wallpaper. I turned the corner and found Mama in her usual position, praying on bended knee.

"Here's your Bible, Mama."

I set the book by her knees, trying to shake the images of her standing over my bed while the pastor exorcised me. But something was off. I looked at my mother. She was a deathly pallor. Heat radiated from her body.

I had infected her.

"The reverend's already dead," she croaked.

My eyes widened.

"I—I—"

"But it's okay. You're here. God saved you, my special girl."

She put her burning hand on my cheek.

"Mama, you need a doctor. Here, drink some—"

Her eyes opened. They were red with broken blood vessels. Her dilated pupils dug into my contracted ones. Her lip quivered, her resolve broke.

"Sarah, honey, I—" she whispered as she collapsed to the floor.

I stood frozen, fixated by her crimson eyes.

Then she blinked. The trance was broken. I bolted from the apartment, and flew down the stairs.

I ran until my shaky legs gave out, heaving. I reached the fence.

This town took everything away from me.

- JUSTINE GRACE -

One member of the Greensboro Guard spotted me.

“Honey, get away from there! You’ll get infected! Where’s your Mama?”

This was my one chance.

My fingers clawed the chain links. I hoisted my body up.

Dad.

“YOUNG LADY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING??” the guard demanded.

David.

I hoisted another foot. Seven more to go.

Mama.

“GET DOWN NOW!!”

I had to leave this place; anything was better than this.

Four more to go.

I survived the outbreak.

The guard blew his whistle.

I hesitated for a second; *I survived, I can help.*

Two more.

I looked back, able to see the town spread out before me. The church’s spire cut the rising sun into halves.

Three more guards came running to the patch of fence.

Flashes of Mama’s eyes and David’s body cleared my judgment. This town killed my family.

Let them burn.

- BAPTISM -

I hoisted myself over and let myself drop to the other side. I was free. The guards continued to shout, but the blood rushing in my ears drowned them out. I tested my legs. They were intact. I ran. I ran until I couldn’t hear the

guards anymore. Until all that surrounded me was brush and a broken highway.

The heartbeat in my ears drowned out the shouts of the guards. The adrenaline in my veins cleansed my sin.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

FADED

Luis Cuenca



REFLECTIONS

William Hamlett

the wind
rushing through

red cypress, wild
grasses' cool churning

the apprehension
of the sumacs' red-brown

droops before
their golden blooming

here, roots fold
into the serpentine stream

the stone standing strong is
as a strong standing stone

in the streaming of serpentine
roots, folding here

their golden-blooms
drooped before

the brown-red sumacs'
apprehensive

churning: cool grasses,
wild cypress red

rushing through
the wind

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NIGHT WATCHER

Paige Walgreen



THE WRATH OF AN ANGEL

Abigail Buckley

They imagine you with silver feathers
and frosted skin
bleached in sun-soaked light,

but your flesh is more copper than ivory,
barely visible underneath your prickling glare.

The living can't escape a thousand omniscient eyes.

Still, they picture you with
a gold-dipped halo
and nurturing hands,

but you don't create.
You were made to destroy,

and your movements
are not for the
temporal to see.

You are far more nebulous than luminous.

AD ASTRA PER ASPERA

Rachel Spurrier

Pre-Main Sequence

When I was nine, I asked my father what would happen if the stars were to go out, one by one. He gazed up at the sky and said, *You know, it takes millions of years for the light to reach us. That star right there, he pointed, could be dead for all we know, but to us, it's still shining.* I asked, *How can a star die?* He sighed, put his hands in his pockets, and shook his head. Some things we aren't meant to know.

As a little girl, I cried when I understood that nothing lasts forever. Not the earth, not the sun, not the stars, not the universe. Everything has a beginning, and everything has an end. The earth will be consumed by the expanding sun; the sun will run out of fuel and burn out; the stars will collapse under their own weight and burst into a million pieces. Existence started with an explosion, and it will end without our knowing it.

Protostar

When I learned that we, too, are stardust, I imagined my blood carrying sparkling bits of stars through my body. The radiance was too much for me to bear, and I wanted to shine through my own skin. I reached for my mother's sewing shears, because if I collected enough of my dust in a bowl, I could make a new star in my hands.

One night, midwinter, I boiled water and filled a thermos with hot chocolate. My parents' old house creaked and moaned behind me as I sat cradled on a hammock in the backyard, curled under a blanket and waiting for the meteors. I swung back and forth on the groaning, withered ropes. When the showers rained across the sky, I prayed that he was watching the same spectacle, witnessing the same miracle that space and time have to offer.

Binary Star

How could you possibly understand it? How could you begin to know what I've been through? She had one eye on Orion's belt, the other on me. I turned away to hide my face. I stared up at the Little Dipper as the tears froze on my cheeks. My car keys jingled in my pocket while I bent over to dust snow off my boots. *I'm sorry, I whispered, I don't know.* She waved my words away with an impatient swish of her hand. The Seven Sisters were one blurred chaos when I turned my chin upward.

I was too afraid to skate on the fragile ice in the dark. The snow had thawed and frozen on the ice again, deceptively slippery and smooth. The snow twinkled an innocent sheen as she offered the skates to me. I stepped backward and slipped. I ran away up the hill, so she followed, waving the skates at my back. I sat down defiantly, and she stalked off, head held high. I watched her sharpen the blades and tie the laces, her bare hands fumbling. I couldn't stop hearing the ice crack as she twirled on the pond.

Fusion

The only light nearby flickered from the lanterns in the barn, where the calf, abandoned by its mother, huddled in the hay. The sky turned velvet-black, the stars sewn into the sky like jewels. The stars were so many and so bright that I couldn't find the constellations. He took my hand, but my fingers were too numb to feel the caress of his thumb.

I asked him to help me paint the sky, but he refused. *It's not for us to change*, he insisted. I held the brushes and oils up to his face, pleading. He grinned, took me in his arms so suddenly that I dropped the paints and brushes, and twirled me around in the air. *You're my wild girl*, he whispered into my hair, his breath pine-fresh. The paints and brushes disappeared under the falling snow.

Mass Transfer

When the day was said and done, we watched the harvest moon rise, and the jack-o-lantern flickered and laughed on our porch, the mortgage sitting silent on the kitchen table. Goblins with green faces marched up for a reward snatched from the bowl we abandoned on the sidewalk. The orange moon loomed so large in the sky that my husband extended his hand to touch it, fingertips brushing the air. *I always knew there was a pumpkin in the sky*, he murmured, so quietly that I wasn't sure he said it. Mice and witches and ghosts skipped down the cracked sidewalk. They jumped over the fissures and giggled shrilly. Their pleas for treats pealed in my ears.

We fidgeted under the quilt my mother had just given us on our wedding day. The air smelled like smoke and roasting meat. The rusty swing screeched softly as we rocked back and forth. He twirled the ring on my finger. *I'm not sure we should have done this*, he said, and I nodded. *We can't undo it now*.

Supernova

I think that star is winking at me, Mommy. I followed my son's gaze and saw a blinking light rising in the sky. It was a satellite orbiting the earth, but I sang *how I wonder what you are* in his ear. He wrapped his arms around my neck as I picked him up to carry him home. He buried his pink nose in my jacket and fell asleep as my footfalls died in the fresh snow. How are we allowed to have such gifts?

He opened his mouth, trying to catch snowflakes on his tiny tongue. Melting white flecks covered his miniature clothes. This small human trying to taste the world stood on the porch, a spotlight from the hanging lamp shining on him. The ray captured the speed of the falling flakes. I held out my arms and gestured to him to come inside. *It's getting too late!* I called. He danced in the light, waving his arms and grabbing at the air. *Just one more*, he pleaded. *I want to get one more!*

Pulsar

I grabbed his wrists as he tried to walk away. I tugged on them and felt the sinews and fibers struggling against my grip. He shook me off, and my hands fell limply to my sides. His breath condensed in the air, and each word he yelled escaped his mouth shaped in a puff of smoke. I shouted apologies, one burst of fog after another, expelled into dusk. I listened to the fading crunch of his boots on the packed snow as he walked away.

I pore over the papers hashing out who gets what, who sees our son and when, so I stay up late, worrying about when the next meteor will fall and crash into the earth, displacing the seas and the heavens. The porch is slick with ice, and the treads of my boots barely catch the grain of the wood. The early morning hours taste bitter on my tongue. Because the air is frigid and crisp, my movements create sparks.

STRESS

Kirsten Laurie



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THE LAST WILDERNESS

Aubrey Fineout

The speaker in my cabin crackles like dead leaves and I jolt. *Please attend the formal passenger meet and greet in the Grand Ballroom, starboard side, in five minutes.* I've only been on the ship for an hour. I haven't even finished unpacking. I let out a breath and push myself off the sea bunk. *Formal*, the speaker had said. I open my trunk and dig out a pair of scuffed navy pumps and slip them over my hose. There. Formal enough for a retired schoolteacher.

I pocket my cabin key and step out into the corridor. The carpet is covered in woven schools of fish all swimming the same direction. Something goes through my mind about the fish subconsciously teaching the young the ideal of uniformity, but I push the thought away. It is just carpet with fish on it.

I decide to wonder about more important things like: which way is starboard? I look behind me but the narrow hall is empty. Never mind, I tell myself. I don't want to meet anyone anyway. I turn around just as the door across from me opens. A man appears, a tailored suit coat draped over his arm. He stops when he sees me.

"Hello."

I nod at him, trying to not stare. He is combed and styled—the whole works all the way down. Shiny dress shoes with square toes like my brother used to wear, and a starched, white shirt with marching black buttons like little British soldiers. His hair is thick and wavy like Gregory Peck's—the kind you want to smooth your fingers through. Anyway, I do.

"Going to the Ballroom?"

I nod again. I am now.

"We'll be late." The man closes his door but doesn't bother to lock it. I wonder if he's extremely confident, or extremely poor with nothing worth stealing. His shoes don't look poor.

"Do you know which way is starboard?" I stutter, my tongue working ahead of my brain.

The man smiles a sort of smirking grin and points at the subconscious carpet. "Fish swim forward toward the front of the ship. Starboard is on your right." He holds his arm out for me just like Jack Gregson had done at my senior prom. "I'll take you."

I put my hand in the crook of his arm and walk with him down the narrow corridor, the plush carpet catching on the rough bottom of my pumps. He laughs as I trip, but his arm steadies me and I catch a whiff of sweet, musky cologne. It reminds me of chilled blue spruce or pine. "Never been on a ship before?"

I shake my head. "I've been on a ship in Seattle with my brother and his family, but I recently retired and I thought that this was the best way to see the world."

"And your family didn't come with you?"

I shrug. "My brother's daughter is married and lives in Canada. She's all the family I have left."

"So you signed up to see the world by ship? Alaska is hardly the world. Do you like cruising so far?" the man asks. I nod as we pass under soaring, gothic arches. It feels like we are entering a chapel built by the Greek gods I used to tell the kids stories about in my mythology class. Zeus himself could live here—him or the sun god Helios. The ceiling is covered with pink and gold clouds and I feel like an angel nearing the throne of heaven.

"This is the *ballroom*?" I raise my voice over the hum of chattering voices.

"Nice, isn't it? I'll get you a drink. What'll you take?"

I run my tongue across the roof of my mouth. "Whiskey," I say. The man's face lifts in surprise and I try not to blush, but my skin is too thin now to keep the color out. Of course he probably takes more to ladies who order champagne—not hard liquor. I think about changing my answer, but my head is already spinning from the heavy scent of expensive perfume and I suddenly feel very warm and tottery in my blazer and pumps.

"Two whiskies, then." The man winks and drops my arm. "Wait here."

I watch him leave, weaving his way through the mass of people like he's dancing. I don't know why I am so flattered he paid attention to me. Maybe it

is because no one sees me these days. They did when I was twenty-two. They looked at me twice, then.

There he is, coming back with two shot glasses and one of them was ordered just for me. "Ivan Flannery," he says as he hands me the whiskey. "My name."

"Virginia—Ginny Simmons." I touch my glass to his and then down the amber liquid in one gulp. That is the only way to drink whiskey, my father had said. I smile as the smoky pepper burns down my throat and settles in my stomach like a warm, familiar stone. "My doctor said to not drink whiskey with my medications," I tell Ivan. "He said I'll decline faster."

Ivan looks at me and then drinks his whiskey just like I did. He coughs as he finishes and then clears his throat. "I usually drink wine," he says with an apologetic smile. "I constantly have headaches and the wine seems to help dull the pain."

"The whiskey will definitely help with that. My father used to make moonshine," I whisper with a sly smile.

Ivan chuckles and stacks my shot glass on top of his. "I see." He sets the glasses down on a nearby table and nods toward the door. "Let's get some fresh air." Ivan leads me up to the top deck and we lean out over the railing, watching the black waves carry us toward the indigo horizon. The wind tastes like salt and brine and blows stiffly, slapping my face and tugging at my body as though trying to sweep me into the sea. I almost wish it would.

"I like long hair," Ivan says suddenly. I turn to look at him, but my hair has pulled loose from my braid and it sweeps into my eyes like it is trying to blind me. "So many cut it short, but I like it long." I can't see his face, but something in his voice sounds wistful, as though he has lost something and I've just reminded him of it.

I turn my face back to the wind and let it cool my cheeks. "Most teachers cut their hair short so that they can work on lesson plans instead of their hair."

"You're a teacher?"

"Well, I will be. I just graduated, see."

"Starting late in life?"

I laugh at his joke. “No, I’m only twenty-two.” It’s Ivan’s turn to laugh and he does, but the sound is hollow as if he finds no humor in my response.

“Ginny, don’t you ever feel like everyone is waiting for us to die so that others can take up our space on earth?” I’m not shocked by Ivan’s forthrightness. Something about his chin, and maybe his forehead, makes me think he’s used to saying exactly what he thinks.

And he called me *Ginny*. No one has called me that since my little brother, James, died five years ago. I think it was five years ago—or maybe seven? I was thirty-three when he died, I believe. I lean hard on the rail, the metal digging into my elbows. “I don’t like babies—never have. I like kids well enough, but I don’t want any of my own because that would involve babies,” I say, feeling goose bumps lift on my arms. Was it cold outside when I first came out?

“I’m glad you’re here,” the man says at last. “It’s lonely, isn’t it—waiting to die. That’s what we’re doing, isn’t it? Did you see all the other passengers back there? They were young and their families were young. You and me are alone on the wrong side of life.”

“I’m not waiting to die,” I say softly. But I know what he means. There is a sad sort of inevitable singularity that comes with age. A longing—an unexplained lingering for something you dread, but also wish for more than anything else.

“Why are you on this ship?” Ivan asks abruptly.

“I want to see the Last Wilderness,” I answer, my voice floating around me like I’ve been asleep.

“I know you don’t mean Alaska.” Ivan’s voice drops to a catching whisper. “I thought I’d have some wine tonight and then come out here and jump. Seems as good a way as any. Even wore my best suit.” He pauses and then says quietly, “You wouldn’t stop me if I jumped now, would you? You understand. My pal, Rob, and I used to say that if we ever became a nuisance to the world, we’d go skydiving with our last nickels and not pull the chute.” Ivan clears his throat and knocks his knuckles on the railing, vibrating my elbows. “Rob died in Vietnam.”

I rock gently back and forth with the waves and stand silently by Ivan’s side. The waves look black, like pieces of liquid obsidian. Only the faint glow of the moon shows that they’re alive. Poseidon’s house must be dark tonight.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Ivan finally asks.

I pull the hair away from my face and turn to look at him. His forehead is crinkled like a plough has been through it, but the rest of his face is smooth. “My brother James died too and he didn’t have a choice. You and me do. Rob and Jimmy didn’t.”

Ivan laughs. The sound is low and sad and humorless. “I am in control of something, aren’t I? Maybe not Rob’s death, or my wife’s heart attack, or my own body, but I do have that one thing: my heartbeat. And I can stop it, too.”

I put my hand over Ivan’s chest and press down until I can feel a faint thumping above his ribs. Then my eyes cloud and my mind clouds and everything feels white and constricting like I’m choking on oblivion. I back away, pressing my fingers against my temples to stop my brain from climbing out of my skull. “Why am I here?” I hear myself mutter. There’s a man in front of me I’ve never seen before, but he looks at me like he knows me.

“Ginny?” the man asks cautiously. He called me what Jimmy calls me. The man must know James somehow.

“Who are you?” I ask. I’m not scared—lord, he looks like Gregory Peck and no one can be scared of Atticus Finch.

The man gives me a half-hearted smile. “Are you pulling my leg?” he asks. Then he frowns like he’s remembering something. “Please say yes, Ginny.”

I smile at the man to show him I’m not offended by his forward words. I stare up at his chiseled face and watch the hard corners of his cheekbones soften in the dim lights. My little brother has good-looking friends. “I’m sorry, but I really don’t know you. Maybe you’d like to get a drink? James can introduce us.”

“Oh, Ginny.” The man calls me by name again, but this time the words sound harsh and thick like he has discovered something awful.

“Are you all right?” I ask as the man’s face suddenly sags and he leans against the railing. We’re on a boat? I must be here with James and his family—they took me to Seattle once.

“Do you feel old at all, Ginny?” the man asks.

I shrug. I don't feel old—not right now, anyway. Maybe I have before? Then I glance at my paper-thin skin and my deformed, arthritic hands that turn black if I knock on doors too hard. I am old, aren't I? I can imagine away my sagging body and deep wrinkles and gray-blond hair and remember what it feels like to be young and excited and standing by a handsome boy in the soft darkness. But I *am* old, or at least at some point I must've been.

The man looks back out to sea, shaking his head like he doesn't believe me. "Isn't it a damned thing that our carcasses get wrinkled and bruised, but our souls are just as young as when we were born? It's a damned thing. People always claim they're old souls." He lets out a laugh that sounds like he doesn't think that is humorous at all. "Once you get here, you realize your soul is still young and always will be." Ivan reaches into his front pocket and takes out a cigar. His hand shakes as he cups it around the lighter to protect the flame from the wind. "You don't mind?" he asks around the cigar. Smoke hazes the air between us for a moment.

"Not at all, Ivan," I say as the wind pushes the smoke out over the waves.

Ivan looks at me sharply, his eyes narrowed like he's afraid the gusts will blow sand into them. "You remember now?"

"Remember what? To thank you for the whiskey? Thank you." I smile coyly.

He takes the cigar from his lips and taps it calmly on the rail, scattering glowing ashes. "Ginny... do you know my name?"

"Of course," I say. "You're Jimmy's friend... um." There is a place for his name, but the word is black as if I spilled coffee on that part of my memory. "Yes, I know you," I try to pretend, but I'm already embarrassed.

"It's all right," the man says. He surprises me by grabbing me and hugging me tight. He smells like my father's evening spruce cologne and smoky whiskey. "I'm sorry," the man says as he releases me.

"No, that was fine," I tell him, my cheeks warmer than they've been in a while. "It's late," he tells me. "Can I walk you back to your cabin?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm here with my brother's family. We're going to Seattle. I'm looking for my niece. She's only four and I told my brother that I'd look after her," I explain to the man. "Have you seen her?"

"Your brother found her. Don't worry about your niece," the man says after a moment. He gives me a small smile. "You should rest, Ginny."

Thank goodness Jimmy found Violet. I can't believe I lost track of her. I must've been distracted somehow. What if Violet had fallen overboard?

"Goodnight, Virginia," Ivan says abruptly. He stares at the sea like it's more interesting than me. With Ivan's clipped words, the ache in my knees and shoulders flares and a chill spreads across my back making me shake. The whiskey has left my stomach and now my middle feels as empty as my head.

I nod at Ivan, but he's not looking at me. "Goodnight," I say. He doesn't seem to want to talk anymore. I make my way back to my cabin, walking upstream from the carpeted fish. Someone told me that they weren't conformists, but really a map so that children don't get lost.

The next morning comes as I lay on my bunk, staring at the stark, white ceiling. I'm trying to find patterns in the paint strokes. I've found an elephant and about seven poodles, which can be found in about anything abstract if you look hard enough. There's some sort of knocking or scratching outside my door and I wonder if my cat has caught another bird. I hope not. The last one was a mess on my welcome mat. I stick my feet into my slippers and pull on my housecoat as I open the door. Several uniformed Filipino men stand in the hall, whispering together in their native tongue.

"Excuse me, what's happening?" I ask, pulling my robe tighter around my body.

One of the men takes off his hat. He looks official. "Nothing to worry over, ma'am. We're looking for a missing person. We'll find him, don't worry."

"Oh." Something in my chest relaxes and I feel my shoulders droop as though I've been holding them up. A name surfaces in my mind like a waterlogged cork, bobbing in my muddy brain. Somehow the name is connected to this hallway, but I can't remember why. I start to shut the door, but there's a piece of torn paper crinkling beneath my foot. I bend over to pick it up. It has my name on it in wide cursive—the kind I was taught in second grade. I smooth the paper open.

Ginny,

Thank you for talking with me last night. I enjoyed the whiskey. I don't know if you'll even remember me, but I wanted to tell you that you're brave.

- AUBREY FINEOUT -

Braver than I will ever be. Both of our minds are dying, Ginny, and the worst part is: I know it. Think of it as a blessing that you can't remember. You can still live in the past and think it's the present. I wish I could live there with you.

I have a tumor—that's the reason for all the headaches. They can't operate and I can't live. Perhaps I'm cruel to tell you this, but you're the only one who will know. If I'm going to see the Last Wilderness, I'll do it on my own terms with as many memories as I can. I'll say hello to Jimmy for you.

Love,
Ivan

CHANDLER BING

Mary Kate Ritzo



GIVE IT TIME

Nia Brookins

So as I'm sitting here typing in my phone at 5:36am
I decided to write a poem for weirdos like me & all the fat girls or thick chicks as they like to say.
I'd also like to think it's for sci-fi geeks, Harry Potter creeps & that one socially awkward guy that says "you too" when the waiter says enjoy your food...
Most of all I wrote this for the blacks.
After all black is the absence of color.

I know it feels like the world rejects you
(there's been many poems about this)
I know your mom won't accept you
Because you're a girl that's a little more butch than the other kids
I know you don't wake up feeling asterisk asterisk asterisk flawless
Because you've been taught you'll never be
& I just know you wish you fit in

Mini me let me tell ya...

I am not the standard female species
(PUUUUH, says the gay chick duhh)
& you may not be the average guy
But who says you still can't be beautiful?

I sing in the shower
I trip over air on the sidewalk
I totally underdress 5 days out of the week
& 9 times outta 10 my poems don't rhyme

Society says that extraordinary is not beautiful.
That being naturally bubbly is nearly impossible.
That you're supposed to find the love of your life by the time you leave college although the average age of settling down is 27 but whatever.
Society says the mistreating of women is because of their own fault.
That men are sexual beings & have to be masculine 24/7

Society says.. that their definition of "beautiful people" should be glorified because those people are now the minority.

So we put on this facade
Hoping that no one seeps through into the no no box that hides all of our secrets
& when we're alone we weep like the kind of prayer your grandma gives you with the trembling of Jesus himself in her voice...
Spiritual cleansing.
We live life believing that the mask can protect us from the infamous ways of the world.
We live in the lies...

So this poem is a recall, reformation, reconsideration of the blasphemous status quo that we are bound to abide by
Because the degradation of women is holding us back as a culture.
The misinterpretation of men is destroying us as a nation.
& when the culture of my society is filled with hopes of only luxurious treasures and variety
& When saying superfluous in everyday conversation is me being a "white" instead of an intellectual woman?
This is becoming personal.

Shake the dust off your cold shoulders
Tell the world about your secret convulsions
Be the author of an amazing story told by the beautiful being that is (you should fill in your name right here)
Be splendid Sheldon or divine Diana
I just made up those terrible names but that's okay
Because being completely lame doesn't mean you should be ashamed
Tell your kids that racism is a learned mentality not a born trait
& go from being under gravitation to setting the standard & expectations
Because fat people have their own gravitational pull anyway right?
Be the man that you were called to be & it doesn't have to be a preacher
Say you're a blacktivist & not because pulling the race card is an excuse for incompetence.
(Repeat line)

- NO STANZA BREAK, CONTINUED -

You're a beautiful size 16 or size 6
You're still clean even if you're gay lesbian hetero or somewhere in
between
You are here.
You are whole & you are breathing. Living.
Existing though your cold body & warm chest
You are Important.
Be black.
The absence of color.
Imagine that we live in a world where cures make love to our cancers
Be a clean slate.

& as for the rest of the world, give it time.

BONE SEASON

David McAlister

i ride the 5 train down
to Lexington and 8th—
in trenches laced with steel—
long trains will take us to
the withered Battery.

kids fountain fishing—wet
full fists of pennies—hear
leaves hiss and crackle like
small pointed fire tongues—cluck
their bloody veined swells in
the wind to make their break.

the women i watch through
Tin Alley—sipping butts
and blowing smoke—will show
white thighs on dagger shoes
with velvet boxes in

their arms. the sulfur scent
of steam and puddles of
oil color bars in streets—
the dirty essence of
tame, ivory bones for
rib watchers—just like me—

STEEL MILL IN MY HOMETOWN

Ethan Wang



Originally Published in the Fall 2012 Edition

THE WATCHDOG: INSTALLATION AND OPERATING MANUAL

Rachel Gollay

Thank you for purchasing The Watchdog, the premiere home surveillance kit for specialized use in Safeguarding Your Personal Space and Peace of Mind.

These products have been specially designed to alleviate the paralyzing fear of being watched in your own home. If you have ordered this kit, you are likely overwhelmed with paranoia because you have received unwanted attention from a trespasser or peeping Tom.

Before beginning installation, take a moment to confirm that all of the essential items have been included in your kit:

Four 500-watt motion-sensor flood lamps that switch on at even the slightest rustling in your yard, even if the rustling only happens to be the neighbor's cat in your hedges.**

Two patented motion-activated infrared cameras to acquire grainy, barely discernable photographic evidence of the trespasser.***

One bottle of extra-strength sleeping pills to aid in surviving those manic nights of nauseating terror when you jolt awake from a cycle of nightmares about being brutally murdered in your bed.****

*** (The lights may not function properly if the trespasser is an expert at using crude tools to smash light bulbs or creeping through the darkest shadows of your yard to avoid the illuminated areas.)*

**** (Your local police authority will insist upon having such evidence, otherwise they will likely close your case due to "lack of sufficient leads.")*

***** (These nightmares are perfectly normal and may occur frequently, particularly when you awake to see a stranger's silhouette framed through the curtains of your bedroom window.)*

- THE WATCHDOG -

Step-By-Step Procedure: Using The Watchdog

Step 1: Spending

Thanks to the low economical pricing of this kit at \$299.95, this should allow you to spend several hundred dollars more hiring an electrician to install the motion-sensor flood lamps and cameras, since the wiring may be too complicated for the average user to configure. Make sure the equipment is strategically placed in areas where you suspect a high incidence of creeper traffic (most likely near your bedroom window).

Step 2: Waiting

Wait restlessly through the dark hours and expect the motion-activated floodlights to flick on at any moment. When they do, jolt out of bed and peek through the curtains to see nothing but maybe the neighbor's cat in the hedges again, or perhaps a shadowy human figure slinking toward your back door—you can't really be sure, the flood lights don't reach that part of the yard.

Step 3: Expecting

Now that your pulse is pounding, expect to see his pale, expressionless face looming above you while you lie frozen in bed with the covers up over your head. Expect him to look like a chain gang vagrant clutching a gun/baseball bat/machete. Expect that you're just paranoid, just imagining things, there's no possible way he could break in without tripping the indoor house alarm—but dial 911, just to be safe. Expect the police to take twenty minutes to arrive, with sirens and lights blaring, and expect them to take a leisurely stroll through your backyard to confirm that there "ain't nobody back there but a cat." Expect that they won't notice that the lock on your fence has been broken off. Expect to take matters into your own hands, but before you do, try desperately to hope that for all the money you've spent, there's still a chance the items in this kit might somehow prove useful.

Step 4: Ignoring

When you awake to find that the only photographs that have been taken by the infrared camera are a few blurry blobs that may or may not be a person hunched underneath your window performing a lewd act, and a few of that neighbor's cat's glowing eyes, try to ignore the fact that the police have closed your case due to inconclusive evidence. Resign yourself to the fact that the asshole breaking into your yard is just too slippery to catch. Try to ignore the idea of his shadowy frame still lurking around your property in the eerie hours of the night, peering into the windows that you now have completely covered with blackout curtains, another \$150. The bottle of pills

included in the kit may come in handy during this final stage. Ignore those lingering feelings of vulnerability as you drift into the drug-induced sleep you'll come to expect as routine.

Once again, thank you for purchasing The Watchdog. Good luck!

The manufacturers of The Watchdog cannot fully ensure the success of this product in protecting your privacy or safety. Results are often temporary and the threat of being watched cannot be completely eliminated. The manufacturers of The Watchdog cannot be held responsible for crippling fear and paranoia. Where The Watchdog falls short of its intended purposes, consider the following two options:

Sell your home. Even if your last mortgage payment is a couple years away, you've invested thousands of hours and dollars on remodeling and redecorating, and it was formerly the one space in your hectic life that you could return to and feel tranquil and safe, relocating someplace far away is often the only way to ensure your safety—at least temporarily. Or,

Purchase a firearm.

MY MOTHER THREADS MISERY

Rachel Russell

My mother threads misery through a needle with her bare hands,
Stitching up a gash just north of my spleen, east of my heart.
But her eyes are old and a wound remains, leaky with viscid black ink

That she uses to pen a hasty letter, tucking it into my breast,
Praying that I won't lose it when I rise and try to breathe again.
My mother threads misery through a needle with her bare hands.

I want to see myself in the stacks of sewing patterns on the desk,
Ready for metamorphosis—wiped clean like a four-limbed canvas,
But her eyes are old and a wound remains, leaky with viscid black ink.

It spreads quickly, blotting out the charmeuse and bruising the silk.
Her eyes gleam. Her fingers worry the hem of the skirt.
My mother threads misery through a needle with her bare hands,

And the seams holding my body together loosen and whine,
Although the dress holds fast around it, packing the slabs upright.
But her eyes are old and a wound remains, leaky with viscid black ink.

I lean forward to rest my head in the wide butterfly of her hands,
Before one of them descends to fetch the letter from the ground.
My mother threads misery through a needle with her bare hands,
But her eyes are old and a wound remains, leaky with viscid black ink.

NATURALLY FIERCE

Khang Nguyen



Naturally Fierce

1	2	3	4	5
<color 2>	<color 3>	<color 4>	PANTONE 11-1305 TCX:Angel Wing	PANTONE 16-5121 TCX:Meadowbrook
R:86 G:53 B:115 0.8669%	R:255 G:205 B:168 4.489%	R:0 G:0 B:0 17.82%	R:244 G:223 B:215 14.86%	R:92 G:159 B:163 46.86%

MANIPULATION HAS MET HIS MATCH

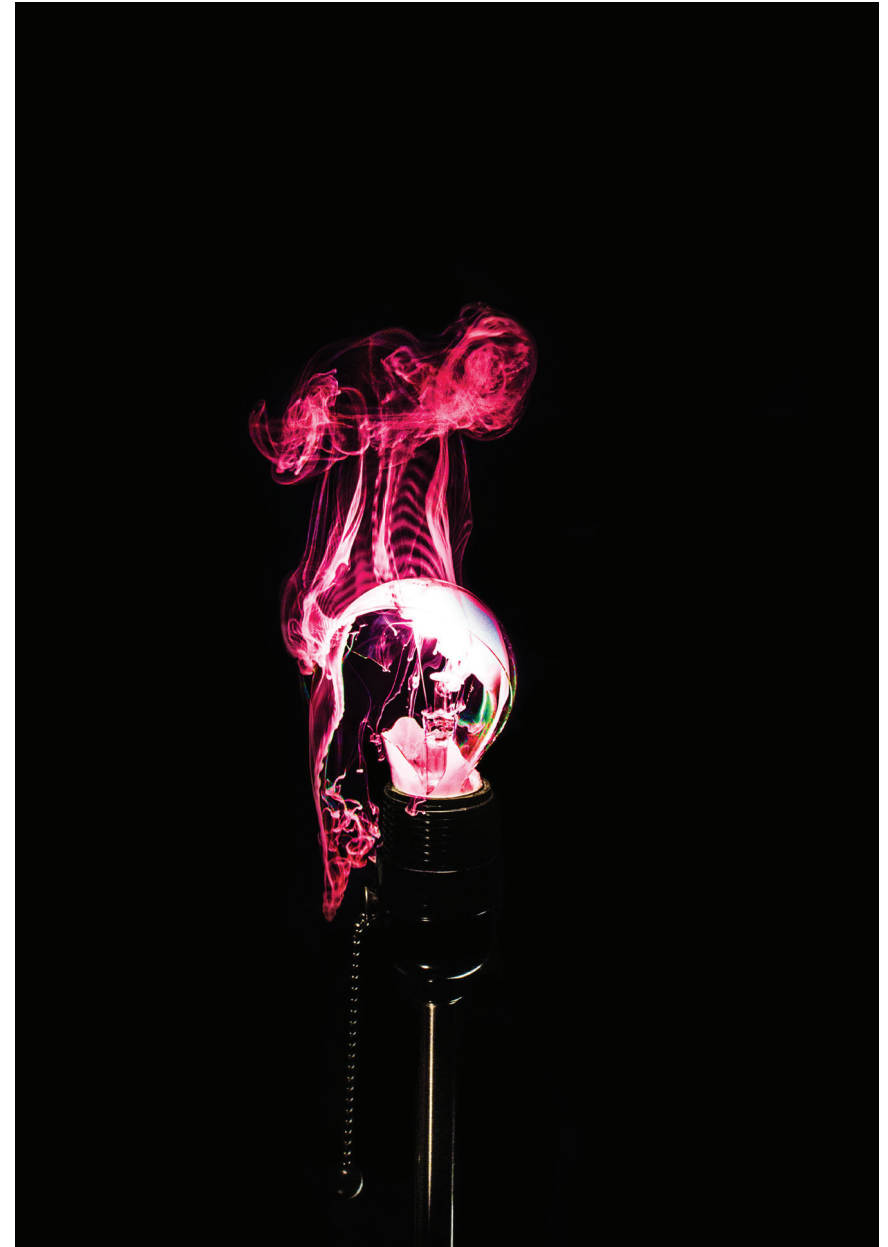
Shannon Hardwick Green

You pinned me to the bed and leaned against me like tender knives
just so you could hear small sounds of a woman in love. My breasts
shrunk like nerves exposed to the whispers of spiders hanging from
fixtures of basement light. I spilled secrets, each one lonelier than the
one before, just to hear the sounds of a man in love, crying and guilty
for not yet being born.

Originally Published in the Spring 2006 Edition

ELECTRIFYING #4

Christina Catterson



Originally Published in the Fall 2012 Edition

CEILING STARED PRAYERS

Ethan Murray

Give me empty pockets
and a dirty old egg sucking
dog that hitchhiked across
blue highways on back
of a Folsom Harley, begging
bar after bar.

Give me burnt rubber cracklings
of tires melting into black desert
asphalt as they rip through
the stillborn air leaving
a trail of fly carcasses
splattered in the eyes
of the bus windshield.

Give me faded blue jeans
broken-in like a well read
paperback book;
coffee stains, wrinkles, and holes
gathering with every step,
rewriting my story.

Give me Japhy Ryder's boots
laced with Zen, serenity
reverberating through sojourner feet
into my bones, the core of me
receding into tar.

Give me campfire hands
that burn like whiskey
down the throat, warmth
stretching into my icy
woogity woogity fingers.

Give me guitars strung
with soul, full
of Hendrix's hazy dreams whispering
in my ear, telling me
to kiss the sky.

Give me to the Road,
all of me.

BROKEN

Kristen Kilpatrick



Originally Published in the Spring 2012 Edition

FINDING GOD

Bailey Betik

First, enter the oak doors, sturdy as saints, and sit shifting underneath stained glass sermons. Unbuckle your shoes when your mother's not watching, dip your tiny china toes into the blood-red velvet carpet (*of Christ our Lord amen*). Bury yourself in catechism chasms. Slip your lacy socks back on. Finish your rosary. The shoes bite into your feet.

Next, gather with loud hands-in-the-air *GLORY!*s. Try and catch a shower of mercy like Times Square confetti. Grasp between your fingers, strain through bass guitar *GLORY!* Nod politely when Oregon Lady says that she speaks in angel tongues while you pick the *GLORY!* out of green bean casserole. (Do not ask her to translate.) Then follow the glamorous ones, the Gospel According to Bono, glitterati fishermen: *you are too pretty to worry about hell*. Watch for His guest appearances in cameo roles, in Marlboros, in constitutions; salvation's at the bottom of this bottle. Confess to stubbled bystanders in whiskey-marinated phone booths as revelations flicker by in rolling credits.

And when doubt settles in your ribcage, ignite the temporary temples. Turn out hollow-pocketed prophets and count the change they never gave you. Find prayers in your attic, at the bottoms of cereal bowls your brother leaves in the sink. Follow proverbs down rattling subway cars wailing by and pick up the left-behinds. Peel the skins of sermons off your foot soles; use them to paper your walls.

Count the moons and cry, each one a perfect tattooed testimony to *Our Father, who art in Heaven, and on Earth and in cities, spaghettis, & sisters, who smiles at you through park benches, through handlebar hymns, through psalm and pepper: amen*.

Originally Published in the Fall 2013 Edition

THE STRANGEST HEROES OF ALL

Jeramey Kraatz

And now, prepare yourself for one of the most exciting reading experiences of your life! For you are about to enter the fascinating, unpredictable world of ... The X-Men!

— *X-Men Issue #1*

I wish I had superpowers.

I wouldn't even be picky about which powers I had. Naturally, there are those attributes that I would value above others; given the choice between telepathy and super strength, I would choose the ability to read minds, hands down. But I'd settle for less, as it is often the case in comic books that it is not so much what you do but the fact that you can do it at all. The type of superpowers I would like to have is a subject that I have spent an alarming amount of time pondering. Flight or teleportation? Lasers or a healing factor? I have sat for hours discussing the logistics, the capabilities, the strengths, and the limitations of different abilities with my fellow superhero wannabes, creating fantastic illusions in my mind of banding together to fight in the name of truth and justice. My sense of morality and the lines separating right from wrong weren't learned in a church or a classroom, but rather drawn in inky outlines on the pages of comics and animated every Saturday morning on Fox Kids while I watched the Marvel Power Hour. My morals wore capes; my sense of humanity wore spandex. I would hear the synthesizer theme of the X-Men cartoon series from the kitchen and scramble, cereal in hand, to the TV, anxious to see what adventures lay ahead for my heroes, for my friends.

Decades before I caught sight of my role models on television, the first issue of the X-Men comic book series was released in September of 1963, the brainchild of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, two of Marvel Comics' most prolific creators. Together, Lee and Kirby created superheroes like Iron Man and the Fantastic Four who were not the pristine and squeaky-clean men and women in tights that the golden age of comic books had made popular. Their heroes were flawed, faced with issues like alcoholism and marital problems, and, as odd as it sounds, more human than comic book characters in the past. The X-Men were a team of teenage mutants, those blessed and cursed with special powers thanks to a naturally occurring evolutionary gene that set them apart from the rest of humanity. They banded together in a school

under the guidance of their teacher, Professor Charles Xavier, whose vision was to create a world where mutants and humans could live together in peace. The idea of coexisting in harmony was the dream that would guide the X-Men over the next 40 years, the hope that one day they could live without fear of being persecuted for their differences.

The original five X-Men were not a testament to diversity. They were all white, upper-middle class teenagers with modest dress and conservative thought. It wasn't until the special issue *Giant Sized X-Men #1* in 1975, created and written by Chris Claremont, that the X-Men series began to take on a more serious, worldly voice. The issue introduced five new mutants including Storm, one of the first black superheroes, and Wolverine, the breakout character that would grow to be an icon for Marvel Comics. There was little expectation for Claremont's X-Men to be successful, since the series was operating under a looming threat of cancellation, but the issue was an overwhelming success. Claremont was put in control of writing for Marvel's mutants, and over the next decade turned it into one of the centerpieces of comic book culture. His stories were deeper, instilling the characters with raw, emotional personalities and raising bold, often controversial ideas about the nature of humanity and what exactly it meant to be a "hero." The success of Marvel's mutants resulted in countless spin-off comics, video games, movies, and, of course, a highly successful animated series.

The first issue of X-Men I read was in July of 1993, issue #22 of the second series (the original comic had been officially re-titled *Uncanny X-Men* in February of 1981). At that time, Wal-Mart carried a few comic book lines in the aisle next to the action figures in an effort to lure seven year olds like myself into begging their parents for four-inch plastic molds of masked heroes and villains. It was my mother's idea to buy me the comic book, as I think she was wary of the R.L Stine Fear Street novels I had taken to reading at the time. Seeking a healthier subject than black magic and serial killers, my mom figured that comics represented a safer, more conventional source of literature for little boys.

Jumping into the middle of a comic book series is like beginning to watch a television show that has been running for decades with the same cast of characters. The plots were confusing, the allusions referred to obscure issues originally published in the '70s, and the characters carried histories and personalities built over countless story arcs concerning love and death and the blurring lines of right and wrong. The family trees of the characters were extensive and overlapping, forests of past relationships and split personalities and alternate universes and timelines that meant that nothing was ever black

and white or concrete. I continued reading, even though I didn't really know what was going on half of the time, because from page one I wanted to be a mutant, to be an X-Man. Over the next few years, I would collect not only X-Men comic books, but toys, bed sheets, bookmarks, novellas, cards, and encyclopedias concerned specifically with characters from the X-Universe. By the age of 12 I could recite to anyone who asked the origin, powers, and a biographical sketch of the characters I had grown to love. I was a stereotypical comic book geek, and I relished every aspect of the label.

In my youth, the thing that drew me to the X-Men was the sense of family that I felt with them. I knew these people, was attuned to their hopes and fears. In my mind, I saw myself with them, hanging out at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, training and honing in on the finer parts of our superpowers. I knew how I would interact with each individual team member, who would take me in as a mentor and whom I would have a rocky relationship with until I inevitably wound up saving their life in the midst of battle. When I read conventional literature, I would always feel a little cheated as I closed the book, knowing that the story was over and that I would never know anything new about the characters or where their life took them after the final period was typed. But the X-Men promised to appear month after month with new adventures. I knew that even if a character I loved died, as many have throughout the series, that in true comic book form, they would come back to life 20 issues later, explaining that it was not them that was killed, but rather a clone from an alternate reality that had taken over his or her life as part of some convoluted, diabolical plot.

I was aware of the general immortality of comic book characters, but that did not stop me from mourning the loss of Professor Xavier in *X-Men #41*. As a 10 year old, I threw myself onto the couch of my living room and wept for hours when Xavier's time-traveling son mistakenly impaled him with a telekinetic sword. I begged my parents to allow me to fly to New York for the mock funeral Marvel was throwing in his honor (a fantastic publicity stunt) and was crushed to find that they refused. I buried myself in my pillow, wailing about the death of his dream. Professor X was the one constant, infallible voice of reason throughout the forty years of the series, so what were the X-Men to do without him? And what was I to do? He was the mentor of the X-Men, their father figure, and therefore he had been mine too. I was on the cusp of puberty, about to enter the sixth grade, when the Marvel universe trembled with the repercussions of Xavier's death. I knew he would be returning at the end of the storyline—in all actuality a mere five months later—but I made a conscious decision that this would be a good time to put away childish things and abandon my fictional family (after seeing my

reaction to a fictional character's death, my parents also felt that maybe it was a good idea to take a break from the Marvel Universe). I stopped buying comic books on a regular basis, picking them up a few times a year to see what my friends were doing, never really forgetting about them completely. I would buy the odd action figure that caught my eye as I roamed the toy aisle, and when I got a credit card at 18 and discovered the wonders of eBay, I bought a bootleg DVD set of the entire animated series—all 76 episodes. In my room, I kept the poster of Gambit, my favorite X-Man, hanging above my bed. Tattered and beginning to fade, the print hangs above my sleeping head to this day, watching over me, a symbol of the dreams of my youth, the elaborate scenarios of wonder that I would place myself in, wishing that I was born into their world.

Have you tried not being a mutant?
— Iceman's mother, X2

The themes presented within the pages of the X-Men comics were something that I did not give much thought to in my youth. To me it was simple: most humans didn't like mutants, but the X-Men were bigger than that and fought against the evil-doers that sought to destroy humanity. It wasn't until I was a freshman in college, as I retreated to my hometown for the winter break, that these underlying messages really began to surface for me and present themselves for what they really were. I was driving myself crazy in Odessa during the break, the longest I had been back in my hometown since I moved 300 miles away for school, and I was struck with a sense of ennui and restlessness that I was not familiar with. While returning our faux Christmas tree to the attic sometime in January, I spied a familiar green Rubbermaid storage bin in the corner. I made my way to it, stepping carefully on the floor beams as to not end up falling through the ceiling and into the dining room, and blew the dust from the top of box in order to read what I already knew was written on the duct tape that crowned the bin: "Jer's Comics." A smile crept across my face, and for a moment I was again 10 years old. I lugged the box down the attic stairs, overjoyed at the prospect of reading and reminiscing for an afternoon. I was in an awkward stage of my life, unsure of my identity, not certain of where I considered my home, and what I really needed was a sense of familiarity, to be told that I was safe.

That winter I was 19, and my foundations were slowly starting to fall down around me. As a teenager growing up in West Texas, I, along with every other adolescent, wanted nothing more than to fit in, trying to conform to the conservative, moral individual that the region loves to raise. But that had always been a problem with me, no matter how many friends I had or

how popular I was with my peers. When puberty hit, my budding sexuality led me astray, pulling me in a direction I didn't fully comprehend. I watched as my friends began to couple off in the naïve relationships everyone goes through in their early teens and realized that the person that really captured my affection was my best friend Ben. I told myself that he was just my good friend, that I was confusing the sense of brotherhood I had with him in my head. This was a one-time thing, a phase, and like all things it would pass. I learned to repress such thoughts during the day, indulging them only in those fleeting moments before sleep, and even then unable to wake from lurid dreams without a heavy sense of guilt. I grew older and those feelings didn't change; if anything, they became more unavoidable, Ben giving way to Adriel whom I forgot about when I met Blake; all friends who were unaware of the turmoil they were causing within me. Even in the scarce moments that I would feel at peace with these feelings, in the back of my mind I still clung to the idea that one morning I would wake up and be normal, waiting for the day that my thoughts would change.

My high school years represented a rigorous inner-conflict. I argued with myself, struggled with my feelings as I strove to live up to the person I thought I was supposed to be. I dated girls, fooled around with them, told them that I loved them and broke their hearts after a few weeks. And I did love them, as I love my sister and my family, trying desperately to amplify that connection into something more. I was incapable of keeping these relationships for any substantial length of time, because from the onset I was counting down the days until they would be over, dreaming up reasons for ending them. My moves were all calculated in public, everything I said or did was screened in advance, all in the name of creating a version of me that I thought others would deem acceptable. But when you hate who you are, you can only be miserable trying to be someone else. If I tried hard enough, I could change. And that's how I felt when I left for college: I was going to a new place, and I could create the person that I wanted to be, despite how I really felt.

It wasn't long after I moved away that I snapped, exhausted from years of trying to be someone else. (A few of my friends now refer to this period of time as "that November that Jeramey went crazy and we couldn't figure out why.") I slowly began to accept the fact that I was gay, an event that coincided with my first introduction to final exams and my return to Odessa, a place that had always made me feel out of place. I was silently going out of my mind by the time I found the old box of comics. My room in Odessa was the draftiest in the house, and I sat in the middle of my floor (my favorite spot to read) wrapped in a blanket featuring cartoon astronauts and aliens as

I sorted through the stack of comics and graphic novels and stories that had been transposed into book form for casual readers under the age of 12.

I sat in that spot for hours, my back aching, pouring over stories I knew by heart and reintroducing myself to friends I had long neglected. I was accustomed to putting myself into the action of the stories, fighting alongside the X-Men to save innocent bystanders or a city or the world. But it wasn't the action that jumped out at me this time, but rather the meaning behind it. The subtext of the material allowed me to draw new parallels, connections that were more realistic and applicable, especially at that point in my life. Mutants became aware of their powers in their early teens, a gift of puberty that they were not expecting. There were those few who were excited about their gifts, at the prospect of power and uniqueness, but for the most part the discovery that you were a mutant resulted in self-hatred and denial. These teenagers were hiding what they viewed as flaws, would conceal their true identities from their friends and family in a desperate attempt to seem normal. Bobby Drake had the power to freeze the moisture in the air and turn into an ice-form. A mob broke into his home and beat him, while I was trying to keep my eyes off anyone with XY chromosomes. Warren Worthington III, Angel, possessed giant white wings protruding from his back which he kept folded and belted to his torso so he could wear normal clothes over them. Meanwhile, I was trying to think of legitimate answers to the question "Have you met any nice girls at school?"

As I read on, the analytical skills I had worked at mastering in my English classes took hold, and I began to see the X-Men series for what it had transformed into during the mid-1970s: a cry for social equality. I read everything in my box, but I wasn't satisfied. I blew a large portion of my Christmas money at the local comic book shop buying back-issues and hardbound collections of some of the most famous X-Stories. Their fight had always been my fight as well, but now on an entirely new level. Countless instances throughout the history of the X-Men can be viewed as criticism concerning race, gender, and anyone considered to be a minority, but I focused on what was closer to me at the time, what I could really relate to.

The X-Men are hated, feared and despised collectively by humanity for no other reason than that they are mutants. So what we have here, intended or not, is a book that is about racism, bigotry and prejudice.

— Chris Claremont, 1982

By the following summer, the summer of 2005, I was reading the two main X-Titles every month, and I was dating a boy (the first male I had ever had

a relationship with) named John who lived in Midland, Odessa's sister city 15 miles to the east. Midland was home to the only comic book store that had survived West Texas, and was little more than a cramped room scarcely larger than a garage. It was also eternally hot. The owner of the store would always try to sell me cell phone service when I went inside, so I avoided the nuisance by making John pick up my comics every other Wednesday. Late at night when I couldn't sleep, I read over online databases that warehoused thousands of facts or summarized comic book issues, studying the history and continuity of the X-Men. I found that Northstar, an important player in the Marvel Universe, revealed his homosexuality in March of 1992 and went on to become a fervent supporter of gay and mutant rights. Mutant hate crimes in comics seemed to coincide with major stories of gay bashings and racial bigotry. Political movements such as the "Genetic Purity Act" which made it illegal for mutants or those who were suspected of being capable of producing mutant children to reproduce seemed appalling but outlandish until compared to the actual political bans keeping gays from marrying. I discovered that in 1992 the Legacy Virus was introduced to the X-Men series, a disease that devastated the mutant population. The disease seemed to only afflict those with the mythical X-Gene, but was later found to affect humans as well, a clear reference to the AIDS epidemic and its connotation as a "homosexual disease" during the '80s.

When the Legacy Virus broke out, it was heralded by many humans as a plague sent by God to wipe out sinners: mutants and their supporters. This was an idea I was all too familiar with having grown up where there was a church or two on every corner. One stereotype of West Texans is that they are a God-fearing, conservative bunch, a population more concerned with whether or not the mayor was in church on Sunday than what he was going to do about gang violence on the south side of town. For many people, this label rings true in Odessa. My family raised me in the Baptist church. We had a good, Southern preacher who spoke passionately, sweat pouring from his brow as he gulped at the water glass at the podium before raising his hands to the sky and calling for a collective amen. Nightcrawler, a teleporting X-Man, has the smell of brimstone about him whenever he uses his powers, but I first learned of brimstone in reference to God's wrath during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I was raised in a church that focused on the damning power of Sin, the countless things I was doing that made me an abomination and disappointment to God. I remember wanting to crawl away from the sanctuary when I was 15 and Brother Earnest, our faithful preacher, was appalled by the introduction of any number of gay characters into the mass media. He damned them, and any who found their presence entertaining. My family sat stoic. My father agreed wholeheartedly. As a 20

year old, I would sit at the dinner table as he, unaware of the finer points of my personal life, explained to a friend of mine that if any member of his family had turned out to be gay, he would have stripped them of the Kraatz name; would cut them off financially and emotionally. A closet liberal, my mother was apathetic, as she was just biding her time until the sermon was over and we could all return home and lounge around for the afternoon. My sister doodled on the program.

The X-Men have faced some of the same religious struggles, fighting to find redemption in a sect whose “come one, come all” policy has shifting boundaries. In *God Loves, Man Kills*, a graphic novel published in 1982, the reader is introduced to one of the most disturbing villains in the X-Men’s history: the Reverend William Stryker. An articulate televangelist, Stryker’s religious crusade against mutants began as the same simple label of sin I had heard many times in my youth, but grew into something more. Before long, coliseums full of people were gathered, hanging on his every whim. Murders broke out across the country, the killing of mutants in the name of God. Mutants were a curse, a blight on the land, and the righteous would not inherit the kingdom of heaven until the sinners were wiped out. He was a messenger of the Lord, and his message was one that played to one of the most common traits of humanity, the fear of the unknown, change, and the alien. Stryker and his “Purifiers” murdered many mutants, regardless of their age or gender, before being stopped by the X-Men, as one could expect. But his ideas, his piercing resolve against those born differently, jumps out at me from time to time as I watch the news. Reflections of his ideas echo in the preaching of religious fanatics throughout the world, but don’t watered-down versions of his notions trickle down into our everyday society as well? And if this is true, where are the X-Men when we need them?

Are arbitrary labels more important than the way we live our lives, what we’re supposed to be more important than what we actually are?

— Cyclops, *God Loves, Man Kills*

By the spring of 2006, I was once again a proverbial encyclopedia of X-Knowledge, buying around five comic books a week. I had an impeccable ability to recall the most trivial of facts from the course of X-Men history. When my sophomore year roommate was bored, he would ask me simple questions like “Does Cyclops have a brother?” and an hour later I would still be in the middle of my answer. I continued to look for the messages of equality and questions raised by Marvel comics; accustomed to bouts of self-centeredness, I have always appreciated things that seemingly spoke directly to me. In *Astonishing X-Men #1*, released in the summer of 2004, it was

revealed that a cure had been developed for the mutant gene. Thousands of mutants jumped at the chance to become normal, to finally blend in with the status quo. Even some of the X-Men that I trusted asked themselves if they’d be happier living a life that seemed so temptingly easier. I was appalled by those weak enough to submit to other people’s ideas of normalcy, was angered that someone would give away what I had always so desperately longed for. I questioned myself as well. I was genetically determined to stand somewhat outside of the perceived norms presented in the world I was born into, but if the choice were mine, would I keep it that way? I like to think that I would, that I am proud of who I am, that I am happy with myself, and that I have the integrity to not change myself to fit into society rather than rise up and promote change in the society itself. But then again, I state that knowing that there is probably no chance that I will ever be faced with that decision.

The third X-Men movie, *X3*, centers on the issue of the mutant cure. It features Magneto, the first and most dangerous of the X-Men’s foes, standing before a crowd of mutants proclaiming, “They want to cure us? I say we are the cure.” From the first issue in 1963, Magneto has acted as a foil to Xavier’s vision of a peaceful future, certain that humans will never accept mutants into society and therefore should be destroyed. He preaches that they, the humans, will never really accept mutants, that every step toward equality spurs those who would have them destroyed. I often find myself tempted by Magneto’s eloquent monologues and cries for mutants to rise up against the oppressive powers. In the X-Men movies, Magneto is appropriately played by Sir Ian McKellen, a gay actor and public supporter of homosexual rights, first drawn to the X-Men movies because of their allusions to discrimination based on race and sexual orientation. In *X2*, a teenage Iceman comes out to his family, for the first time explaining to them that he is a mutant. The director of the film and McKellen worked to make this mirror what it is like for gay teens to come out to their parents, a way to present the situation to an audience of predominately straight, red-blooded American males who undoubtedly find themselves on Iceman’s side, not realizing the underlying implications of the scene. This is the sort of cleverness that breeds hope within a culture so seemingly on the cusp of gaining the simple right to marry. If society can support and love a population of mutants on screen, shouldn’t they be just as accepting in real life? But every time this question is raised in my mind, I can’t help but think of all of the movies I have seen and all the books I have read in which I find myself siding with the bad guys, if only for the sake of knowing that after the final frames roll or that last period is placed, the consequences are not ones that I will have to deal with in the real world.

I wish I had superpowers.

But I don't. And while I have always tried to believe whole-heartedly in Professor Xavier's dream of a harmonious existence between humans and mutants, there are those sinking occasions, fleeting moments of uncertainty, where I find myself wondering if Magneto is right. I hear stories from friends cut out of the lives of their families and children disowned by their parents because of the way they were born, and I wonder what they will do without Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters to run to. I learn of murders and beatings and inhuman oppression, and I search the sky for someone in tights or a cape. I turn off the TV or put down the newspaper and sit idly by, straining to hear a synthesizer in the distance heralding the arrival of my costumed friends who have come to promote equality and peace. But the X-Men are not coming, and I don't know that I can do their job for them. For more than a decade I have dreamed of rising up with my fellow mutants and fighting in the name of justice and freedom. Now that I finally find myself in that position, I can't help thinking that the world would be much easier to change if I had metal claws or the power to control the weather.

BLEACH YOU

David McAlister

laid up in bed
coddling my swollen belly.
cooing fussing with myself to
tame you my infection.
jelly created in His image.

hot flashes then a dull sweat.
sour acid on my breath in my teeth.
wrung out and thin
calling you
my inside friend.

a diet of crackers and
drippings from the faucet.
i'm
losing sleep
thinking about you.

i can't eat for myself
but the chemical sprain
churning in
my gut says feed you.
red bed sheets say fix you.

it's about me
then you here.
i want to be special
to you but

you ruin me.
flushing you out
into porcelain water
you're only somebody i used to know.

MAINTAINING 5

Jonathan Amerson



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WANDERLUST

Rachel Russell

We cut down the ironwood tree
in Manila on a Friday
evening and the children stay home,
eating clotted cream and biko
in a mess of thumbtacks and old
teeth scattered across the foyer.

Camellias pull themselves apart
by the Jakarta riverside,
reacting to wintertime like
a swift-bodied ballerina
caught in a sausage grinder's hull.

The postcard from Taipei is sour
from old coffee—punctuated
with the afterthought of orchid.

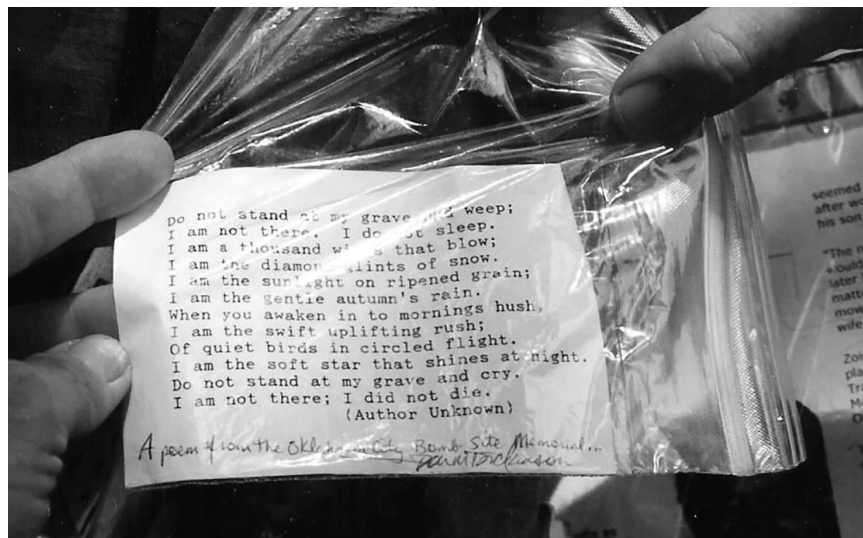
In the ramshackle Shanghai den
they drain the poppy's fruit with their
gnarled, pockmarked hands, greed like mucous
in their eyes when the pipe flickers
to life.

He spots her yellow coat
in a sea of thousands in Rome.
When she laughs a tangle of
gardenias blooms from her
pretty red mouth.

The fat sun strains
against the Tokyo horizon
and frightens the cherry blossoms—
stuns them into silence like a
molasses breeze has come to
seize them and slit their soft pink throats.

NYC 2002

Amy Milakovic



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MY SWEATER

Laurie Meguro

Dear A,

This is the letter I'll never send
about the moment that stopped time,
the day in my kitchen where I asked if we could end
the journey we were writing
together? And you looked at me with oddity—
an ant discovering fruit rotting in the grass.

You smiled, taking my hand in yours, and I was certain
we would say goodbye,
but then your fingers tightened, my fingers turning
a dark shade of blue, sensation fading quickly, and in that moment,
I knew
you were unwilling to let go—a canine with teeth locked in flesh,
jaw snapping, mixing blood and breath.

Every muscle in my body— a soldier at attention,
tall and stiff, slightly
shaking,
saying goodbye to a fallen friend.

Tell me, did you hear the
crack
of my head against the tile as you released me from your grasp?
You slammed the white kitchen door behind you,
the hood of your car the next victim of a dent, and then

I crawled to the door and turned the lock,
and upon hearing the
click,
you came flying back, pounding your fist into the frame, and

I could barely hear you screaming that you're sorry, that this was just a mistake—
an accident,
a simple snag in a sweater, just a knot in the yarn coming undone,
slowly but surely unraveling, precariously unwinding until
the wearer is left naked on display;
the sweater—a memory, just scraps and threads scattered
on the floor.

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LET'S HIDE IN THE MOUNTAINS AND NEVER COME BACK

Samantha Sears

These mountains are the perfect playground. My brother Taylor and I
love racing each other down the snow-covered slopes. Our high-speed
competition carves straight through the icy terrain, causing the cold wind
to cut straight through my several layers of jackets. My feet feel more like
frozen blocks of fresh ice than flesh. I think I am wiggling my toes, but the
frigid sting makes it hard to tell. I'm mildly concerned about getting frostbite,
but I still can't stop the evidence of a fun day from spreading across my face
into a smile. I love getting to vacation with my family in Colorado, even if my
frozen toes don't enjoy the trip.

No matter how fast I try to fly, it is never a fair race between Taylor and me
because he is fearless on the mountain. As I cautiously take the widest turns
possible, he points his red snowboard straightforward and soars. Seeing his
black helmet dip over the horizon of the mountain ahead, I think to myself of
how once again, I'm both envious and proud of him for his bravery.

Skiing reminds me of the many challenges that Taylor overcomes with more
courage than I could ever contain. Even though I am sixteen and he's twelve,
I'm the one who is too afraid to sleep alone after we watch scary movies
together. The last time we watched *The Ring*, he had to make a pallet of
pillows near the end of my bed on the carpet, and sleep there to protect me
from my eerie closet where all my irrational fears like to hide.

As I meet Taylor at the bottom of the mountain, his brownish green eyes
are patiently blinking up at me. I know the grin he's wearing comes from
the rush of the mountain, the pride of winning, and the excitement to
finally see me again.

"It's about time!" He threw his mitten-covered hands up in the air to
dramatize my slowness. "Grandma skis faster than you, Sammy!" He jokingly
smirked. "Wanna go again?"

He is already backing up towards the lift that will take us up the mountain
again. His eyes are outlined by red traces of where his goggles used to be,
and a cloud of warmth that smells like leftover hot chocolate from breakfast
escapes his smile as he speaks.

"Come on Sammy, what are you, chicken?"

I can never back down from a challenge. "All right, fine! One more time. But then we have to go meet up with Mom and Dad. We promised to meet up with them for those lunch reservations back at the lodge. Plus, I'm starved."

His shoulders slumped at the sound of lunch. He silently nods in agreement, but his lack of enthusiasm for leaving the mountain is obvious. He pulls his goggles down from around his helmet, back into the imprints on his cheeks, making his windblown frozen red nose stand out as much as his snowboard. As we reach the ski lift, we line our boards up with the yellow line and excitedly anticipate the lift chair to smack our backsides so we can sit down. Reaching up, I pull the metal rail bar down around us to make sure the two of us are safely secured in our seats. Usually Taylor gets annoyed when people worry over his wellbeing, but as we start our emergence back up the mountain, he doesn't complain. I would never say this out loud, but I love skiing mainly because I just love doing stuff with him. Moments of uninfected fun with him are a rarity.

Upon finishing our last glide down the mountain, we start to make our way over to meet Mom and Dad for lunch. Walking into the cedar wood lodge, I am immediately comforted by the warmth of the room and happily wiggle my toes in my boots at being reunited once again with the sensation of circulation. No longer needing my excessive layers of clothing, I unzip my top jacket and tie it around my waist. The snow from our boots is melting into a wet slosh onto the floors that looks like someone spilled a clear Sonic Slush. The smell of chicken noodle soup and French fries waft through the room and make my stomach grumble with anticipation. We make our way through the crowd and find a seat on one of the wooden benches where we will wait for our parents to show, or for the hostess to call our name for our table, whichever comes first. Looking around, I don't see Mom or Dad. Surprisingly, they seem to be running late. Taylor and I are never on time for anything, so I hope they come quick to witness this miracle. The second we sit down, the short blonde hostess steps out from around her podium made of pine, and opens her mouth to holler out the name of the next ready reservation.

"The Make-A-Wish Reservation, your table for four is now ready!" Her voice was straining to be heard above the crowded buzzing room, but at the sound of Make-A-Wish, everyone seemed to settle down a bit from a mix of curiosity, pity, and respect.

Make-A-Wish... the foundation everyone knows that sends dying kids and their families on trips. I watch the cluster of eyes around the room join in with the hostess in search for this unfortunate family with a sick kid. Eyes naturally first fall to the family seated on the waiting bench closest to the door. They sit with a boy whose hairless scalp beams as whitely as the snow outside. His mother is preoccupied with a yellow and white striped cloth in her hand that she's using to dab off something unseen from his lips. Dabbing away, she is making no sudden movements to claim the call. Her eyes look exhausted in a way only a mother-of-a-sick-kid can. The painfully uncomfortable familiarity in those eyes makes me look down at the wooden paneled floors. I'd rather look at anything than a pained mother taking care of her sick kid.

I look over at my brother to see if he is going to speak up, but his eyes are on me, waiting for me to move first. I simultaneously stand and raise my right hand.

"We're here! That's us!"

I look down at Taylor to smile and let him know it's okay because his cheeks look flushed with embarrassment. We keep our focus forward as we start following the hostess leading us to our table through the crowded cluster of curious eyes. Tables of bent heads momentarily forget their food and instead carve over our silhouettes, tracing our frames for any clues of death. The quiet murmurs in the room seem muffled by our loud and clumsy heel-to-toe stomping in our metal snow boots. We are loudly waddling behind the hostess like an awkward pair of penguins. Looping my arm through his as we walk to our table, I hope I can give him a little touch of comfort and stability that no words in moments like these ever can. Stretching myself to stand as tall as possible, I am hoping I can block some of the weight of their gazes from hitting him, and let them fall on me instead. I wish we were a solution as easy as making a pallet of pillows that could help me distance him from his fears like he does for me.

Sitting down at the table for four, by the floor-to-ceiling windows in the back room, I want to start up a conversation in hopes to distract him. I can tell by the way his eyes have lost a little of their light, that he is remembering that we're only enjoying this awesome vacation because the Make-A-Wish Foundation sent us to Colorado. Taylor has Cystic Fibrosis and he hates anything and everything that reminds him that he's terminal, so I hate it with him too.

"Taylor, for all we know, people could be thinking that I'm the sick one." He softly smiles at me in response to let me know he's grateful I tried, but I know he's still worried about what other people think. No one can ever tell from the outside though, that I'm the healthy one and he isn't. He wears his athleticism like a mask, letting it portray an illusion of healthiness that is only skin deep.

When people look at Taylor, they see a cute, athletic, blonde kid with a good sense of humor. But what those people can't see, are the handfuls of bead-sized pills he swallows at every meal. They don't see the hours of breathing treatments he inhales every morning and night. They don't notice the hospital bracelets that monthly decorate his wrists, or the Band-Aids on his inner arms that hide the bruises from IVs. Today we are in Colorado, but the trip my family most often takes is to the hospital.

Every day I wonder why I'm healthy and he isn't. CF is a genetic disease that usually affects all the children of two parents who are both genetic carriers of the CF gene. We came from the same womb, are made of the same blood, and yet the drastic differences in the condition of our lungs were unjustly distributed. Silently, as I sip on the water our waiter just brought, I start rolling through my litany of daily questions: *God, why did you choose me to be the healthy one? Why'd you make him sick? Why is there no cure? Why do doctors get to determine how many days he has left? Why does this disease get to dictate everything?*

My stomach clenches as these questions give way to betraying thoughts of gratefulness, for my health over his. Quickly I swallow more water, hoping to wash down the complexity of my two-faced thoughts.

"Do you want to wait on them to order?" Our waiter emerged, pointing with the four plastic menus in his hand, towards the two empty chairs at our table.

"Yeah, we'll wait. They should be here soon."

"All right, well here are your menus. My name is Bradley; I'll be your server. Wave me over if you need anything."

Looking over the lengthy list of foods, everything sounds good to me. I'm so hungry I'd eat anything off the menu. Just as long as it is something warm.

"Taylor, what sounds good to you?"

"Nothing. I'm not hungry." I know that's just the CF talking. His sickness has taken his lung function and his appetite.

"Well, you know when Mom gets here, she'll make you eat something."

"And Mom always gets her way doesn't she?" He's smiling again for the first time since we've walked into this lodge, and it makes me exhale a deep breath of relief. If he's fine, I'm fine. I know worrying over Taylor's health has made me grow up faster than most girls my age, but I love him too much to worry any less.

Sometimes I wish I could borrow a little of his strength, so maybe then I could finally and fully ask the one thing from God I'm always too scared to ask- that I could have Taylor's sickness in exchange for a healthy him. Even though I know God doesn't work like that, I sometimes scare myself with how much I wish He did, and at other times, with how much I am relieved that He doesn't. Contrary to what this Colorado-trip-giving-foundation makes me want to believe, I know, in this life at least, not all our wishes can come true.

"Are you sad we have to leave Colorado tomorrow, Sammy?" His sweet voice brings me back from my sad thoughts.

"Yes, but we knew we'd have to get back to the real world eventually."

"I know, but it doesn't mean I'm ready to leave. I wish we could stay up here forever." He's looking through the windows at the mountains outside with an expression of such longing, that it silences me for a moment.

"Me too Taylor, me too."

ALCHEMY

Bailey Betik

there are so many stories I have to tell you.

there are so many words that swim inside my stomach, the Gulf of Mexico, the Trinity River of syllables, the fricative ripples of the Mississippi swishing in my ribcage, flipping and flicking shining letters onto the pages, and I gobble them up, my mouth of crisscrossed net, straining to serve to you later, perfectly cut into bite-sized pieces and sprinkled with lemon pepper

there are so many sentences that I have to pen, have to scrape them off the soles of my feet like thick Louisiana mud, peeling off like flakes of old paint on my grandparents' rocking-chaired porches, the slithering slip of snakeskin as I scribble, etching earth into these lines, collecting the sun-dried syntax to fold into the furrows in the salty dirt, distinctly dug with my pinky finger

there are so many lines you have to learn, glass menageries of framed memories from my childhood, pressed playbills from my adolescence, stained with the slipperiness of stage makeup and set with sticky hairspray residue from summers past, thousands of songs and steps and crowds and chorus lines, and I flip through them, rifling them like the sound of distant applause and sketching out cues so that you can pick up in case I ever forget

there are so many songs I need to sing you, melodies I've gathered from the shoes of my ancestors, from deep within the creases of Methodist hymnals, drawn from the shouts of main street parades, in taffeta ball gowns, patchwork quilts and backseat drivers, and other places where sometimes the music is so loud I can touch it, and I do, and I tuck it away in my pocket for later and feel the chords through my clothes, through my sternum, pulsating against my skin

there are so many secrets I have to tell you, little pearls that sit on my collarbone, glistening between gemstones on my throat, because my mother used to treat the emeralds as if they were rhinestones, using words so carelessly, to tell me that my grandfather was dead, or that I would never be a writer, and so I use these to spite her, to glorify the significant minutiae she seemed to gloss over, and I show them off gladly, my crayon drawings, my crumpled ribbons, my cavities

there are so many poems I have to write you, that make you think about God and brothers and fictional lovers, about lost teeth and scavenger hunts and rainy day windows, about the threadbare carpets that line your brain, and about pages you've bookmarked, and pressed wildflowers, that make you remember the apple-crisp scent of second grade spelling bees, or of honeysuckle summers, or the taste of my perfume mixed with old wood, or the ridge of your finger prints against the slick pane of frost, so many poems, just like this one, that try to put life in a stoppered bottle

there are so many stories I have to tell you, but I can't remember any of them.

NATURE IS FASHION

Molly Martin



MISTAKES

Aaron Wilson

Click.

Lock.

The dim row of bulbs above flickered on,
Illuminating a cramped room littered with
Creams, powders & cosmetics.

The dirty white knob spun, loosing a shrill squeak. Cool
Water washed away all traces of the girl whose
Name I'd already forgotten.
It soothed my cracked lips &
Moistened my arid, stale mouth.

A thin and frail young man stared back from the mirror.
Raised pink lines adorned his pale shoulders,
Some faded, some fresh.
Purplish-gray splotches littered his neck and breast.

Our eyes met, two parallel pools of crimson veins.
Profound weariness lay behind the boy's dull gaze,

"What kind of deceitful monster am I?"

I awaited wisdom—some small pearl of insight.
My battered and bruised echo displayed no desire to speak.

REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY: I HAD TO GET USED TO IT, TOO

Jonathan Turner

I'm just joshing.

It's funny, because his name is Josh.

Get it? Josh-ing.

He, my heterosexist, moderately-could-be-homophobic-but-we-don't-really-talk, mascu-centric brother, and I talked tonight. He wanted to ask me about the last time I went to church. He ended the call with advice from older sage to young heathen: go to church and class and bed. And church.

Another joke? He doesn't know.

He has to know. *Hips don't lie.*

He doesn't. *A rabbi, a priest and a gay walk into the bar. I am the rabbi.*

I'm sure he does. *Cleopatra is queen of De-Nile.*

I haven't told him. *But I have a shirt that will.*

He is one among many. Our mother thinks it could negatively affect everyone: my grandparents, cousins, *and* dogs. (Why is it that there is no word for the aunt/uncle unit in English? It would rock their world, too. Why are you discriminating, English?)

In my head, I see it. I tell Josh. *Death.*

But our mother would never let him actually kill me. She never even let him hit me.

Maybe that is the reason.

I walk up to him. *I came, I saw, I conquered. Or whatever. A rabbi, a priest, and a gay walk into the bar. I'm not the rabbi. A brother, a brother, and a secret start a fight. The secret dies. So does the brother. Which brother? A death, a life, a death.*

Death. That sounds right. He won't kill me. Yay though I walk...no evil.

Mom and I discussed it. But when that moment comes, when one starts a story, invites his family to go with him, and they say no, it's about sacrifice.

What do I sacrifice? Who do I sacrifice? Why do I sacrifice?

Death. The perception and image and identity. Sacrifice?

Life. The new and infinite possibilities. Where am I going, and who is going with me?

Death. What was planned. Is that re-claiming your own narrative?

Yes.

October 11, 2013: Happy National Coming Out Day

MISSING LORD

Hayley Zablotsky

If Santa doesn't exist, and there is no such thing as the Tooth Fairy, and toys really *don't* talk when you leave the room, and your parents don't love each other anymore, and there's no real cherry at all in Cherry ChapStick, how are you supposed to believe in God?

That's what I want to know. But I don't ask. I don't ask because it does me no credit among believers.

So I say what they want to hear. If someone asks me where I see God, I immediately, automatically state, "In random acts of kindness, of course." It works every time.

But I'm actually doing a lot more *not* seeing than seeing. Maybe I need to put up signs on lampposts like people do for lost cats. MISSING LORD, my sign would read. ANY INFORMATION WOULD BE GREATLY APPRECIATED. REWARD \$200. I'd print off a picture of Morgan Freeman and paste it on the sign, add my cell number, and go around the neighborhood with a roll of tape, mentally calculating how many months I would have to go without Starbucks in order to pay the reward. Maybe I should make it \$150.

How much is the Lord worth? Somebody told me recently that the value of a human body comes in at \$9, so \$150 really seems quite generous.

I can only tell certain crowds that I've done the unthinkable; I've done something incredibly irresponsible, and lost the Lord. It's usually okay to talk about it around artists, hipsters, college students, atheists, and, in general, the people you're allowed to say the word "fuck" around without getting Looks.

But everyone else? I keep quiet.

As with all things, there is a beginning. My rocky relationship with religion sprouted way back when I was baptized at age three. I have two great-uncles—both reverends—and it was deemed fitting that one of them baptize me. The job fell to Uncle Kerry, the reverend who inserts the word "goddamn" in between almost everything. Spaghetti and goddamn meatballs. Shut your goddamn mouth. Jesus, Mary, and goddamn Joseph.

Uncle Kerry got some holy water on my goddamn white dress. Ever since, I've held a grudge. It isn't Christian to hold grudges.

But that's what I do. I hold grudges.

Grudges are the backdoors of relationships. They're wonderful because they get you out of the long and delicate process of forming a meaningful relationship. Take the cat, for instance. Poor bastard hasn't had a meaningful relationship in his life. In addition to the fact that cats are intrinsically emotionally unavailable, cats are also the species that invented the grudge. Humans aren't smart enough to have come up with that.

Besides, we invented democracy, calculators, and spaghetti and goddamn meatballs. We can at least give cats this modest breakthrough.

I don't think God wants us to hold grudges.

I know two kinds of churches. My Kind and Not My Kind. My kind is the Lutheran kind, the kind of Lutheran with drippy candle traditionalism, the kind with kind ladies in camel-colored cashmere sweaters, the kind with an excruciatingly heavy wooden offering plate.

I once went with a friend to Not My Kind. The kind where the church is filled with short-blade ceiling fans, crackling Spearmint gum packages, and a congregation full of robust middle-aged trailer trash in FEAR GOD t-shirts as well as teen parents with infants. Unlike the members of my home church, these members do not subsist solely on the will and whim of breathing machines, walkers, and canasta. The ratio is probably about 3.4 babies to every adult.

(The reason for this is clear when you consider the simple fact that, when God told Adam and Eve that they shalt not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He also *apparently* mentioned that they shalt not use of the condoms either. In both cases, you see, they shalt surely die.)

In both types of churches, devout followers abound. When I go to church, I rather feel like I'm at a zoo, watching strange creatures behave in strange ways. I'm not proud of it, but my fascination with churchgoers is akin to that of a scientist studying a lesser-developed species, a species that hasn't yet figured out something vital. And yet, if the members of this species really

believe with absolute certainty that there is someone out there loving us all the time no matter what, then I envy them.

I also envy designer dogs because they get to spend their days eating organic sausage rolls and riding in mesh-encased strollers.

And I envy lattes with foam because everyone loves them emphatically, unconditionally.

And I envy calculators because nothing eludes them.

And I envy the Dalai Lama.

I haven't always been disillusioned like this. Back when all I did in church was color and eat snacks from mom's purse, it was fine. All I had to know was that there was an Almighty Father out there who loved me and didn't yell half so much as the one at home. It was good.

But it isn't good anymore. And there aren't any snacks either. My world is obscene now and contradictory and sensual and strange. I'm part of the multi-dimensional grown-up world now where no one knows anything, and the people who pretend they do know things actually know the least of all.

When you're little, very little, you know everything. You don't know what you know because it is necessarily true, but rather you know it because you believe it. Believing in something makes it more true and more real than reality itself would deem it.

I recently spent two months working as a nanny in New Zealand. The family I worked for was religious and diligent. The children already knew things—everything. The second-to-youngest was Josh, a boy with a great capacity for believing in miracles and who liked his toast with a layer of Marmite thin enough that we could see the toast grains through it. Josh was sensitive and perceptive, creative and technical. I think he would do well in a career of interior design.

Josh and I looked at the stars sometimes. New Zealand's night sky is perhaps the world's original soul, unadulterated and pure and exquisite. It is the only thing that has ever made me feel small and important at the same time.

"You know what?" I whispered one time, caught up in the beautiful moment of humbling tranquility.

"What?" he answered, as he always did, with as little pretense as the smattering of freckles across his pale face.

"They say there are more stars in the sky than grains of sand on the beach." I felt proud about this moment, this cliché. I had managed to be Educational and Fun at the same time, and these are the two main things you have to be as a successful nanny. I was expecting shock and awe. But instead, Josh said:

"Yes, and did you know that God loves you more times than there are stars in the sky?"

Oh.

I suddenly felt very inadequate as a human being.

There are really only four stars in the Southern Hemisphere that matter. They're situated in the shape of a diamond, but we're supposed to call them the Southern Cross because connecting them with lines could form the cross. But they look like a diamond.

The Southern Cross is a constellation sailors used to seek out as a guide when steering their ships into harbor in New Zealand. But there are false Southern Crosses. There are stars that *look* like the Southern Cross but are not. These false Southern Crosses used to cause shipwrecks and untimely death for many sailors. It's funny, I mean not funny, but, you know, *funny* how much death is associated with Christianity all because of the cross.

Personally, I'd rather magnify diamonds with a telescope than death.

Josh was not the only child who educated me. Four-year-old Chloe once told me that, when you cry, God "collects your tears in a jar." God collects your sorrow in a jar and keeps it safe. So it's okay to cry.

I used to fill God's jars sometimes. On the nights I could hear doors slamming as I sat there in my room asking the pink wall if they would get a divorce this time. We always seemed to have spaghetti on those nights, and sometimes daddy just left it sitting there at the kitchen table after hurtling away in his

black Lexus. Sometimes the spaghetti stayed there until the next day or longer, and sometimes I wanted to cry seeing it waiting there for something that just wasn't going to happen.

But then sometimes I didn't cry. Didn't want to and just didn't.

When I was very small, we had a black and white cat. Her name was Sophie, which means *wise*, which she wasn't. At one time, she was a nice cat—so the story goes. But then my parents had children—which was incredibly callous and irresponsible of them—and Sophie was soon overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy and envy.

She held on for a few years, although she never forgave my parents for their procreation. But we all have a breaking point.

Don't we?

And so, one day, Sophie packed up her things and just walked out. And we never saw her again.

I was very young then, and still generally heartless, so I was not moved deeply by our family's loss. I'm not sure if the rest of the family was really moved either, though. I don't remember seeing any MISSING CAT posters.

Maybe our printer was broken. Maybe it was raining. Maybe mom didn't want a fickle furry friend whose claws were as sharp as her purr was sweet. Or maybe it just wasn't worth the bother.

In any case, there was no reward for finding Sophie. And she's probably dead now.

But. I am rising above my family's neglect and *am* offering a reward in my search for the Lord. And I just remembered a Starbucks gift card I got for Christmas, so we're back up to \$200.

FLYING COLORS

Paige Walgreen



5:47 ON A TUESDAY

Ashley Rea

They say water has no taste
but I think they're wrong, whoever
They are anyway and I've never
had better water than from the
faded Nike bottles used in cross
country practice each morning, when Drew
would use one he'd always miss,
sending droplets splattering down soaking into
the sweat drenched shirt that might
have been light gray once but
it's charcoal dark damp now and
even black in the cool fog
of Andy Brown park at 5:30
am on a Tuesday which means
hills day, more like hell day
to be honest, we'd go up
past the public library to Hertz
street we joked it should be
called Hurts street as we sprinted
up the monstrous hill calves burning
with each step, past Kim Kirby's
house, man that girl could run
and finally reaching the top and
turning to fly, pinwheel legs careening
carelessly down the still dark hill
with momentum gathering as you realized
you couldn't stop even if you
wanted to and let's face it
you don't because right now at
5:47 am on a cold Tuesday
you are free, breaking through walls
of muscle and sinew and lack
of sleep and you are perfect
and alive and fifteen, so even
though you cursed Coach bitterly on
the frozen bike ride to school

- NO STANZA BREAK, CONTINUED -

it's worth it just for this
moment and soon it will fade
and you'll turn around for another
God-awful hill sprint but now
you're drinking greedily from the cracked
Nike bottle passing it around the
clump of quiet teammates who shift,
stretch quads, caught in silent thought.

JOHN O'CALLAGHAN

Caroline Chandonnet

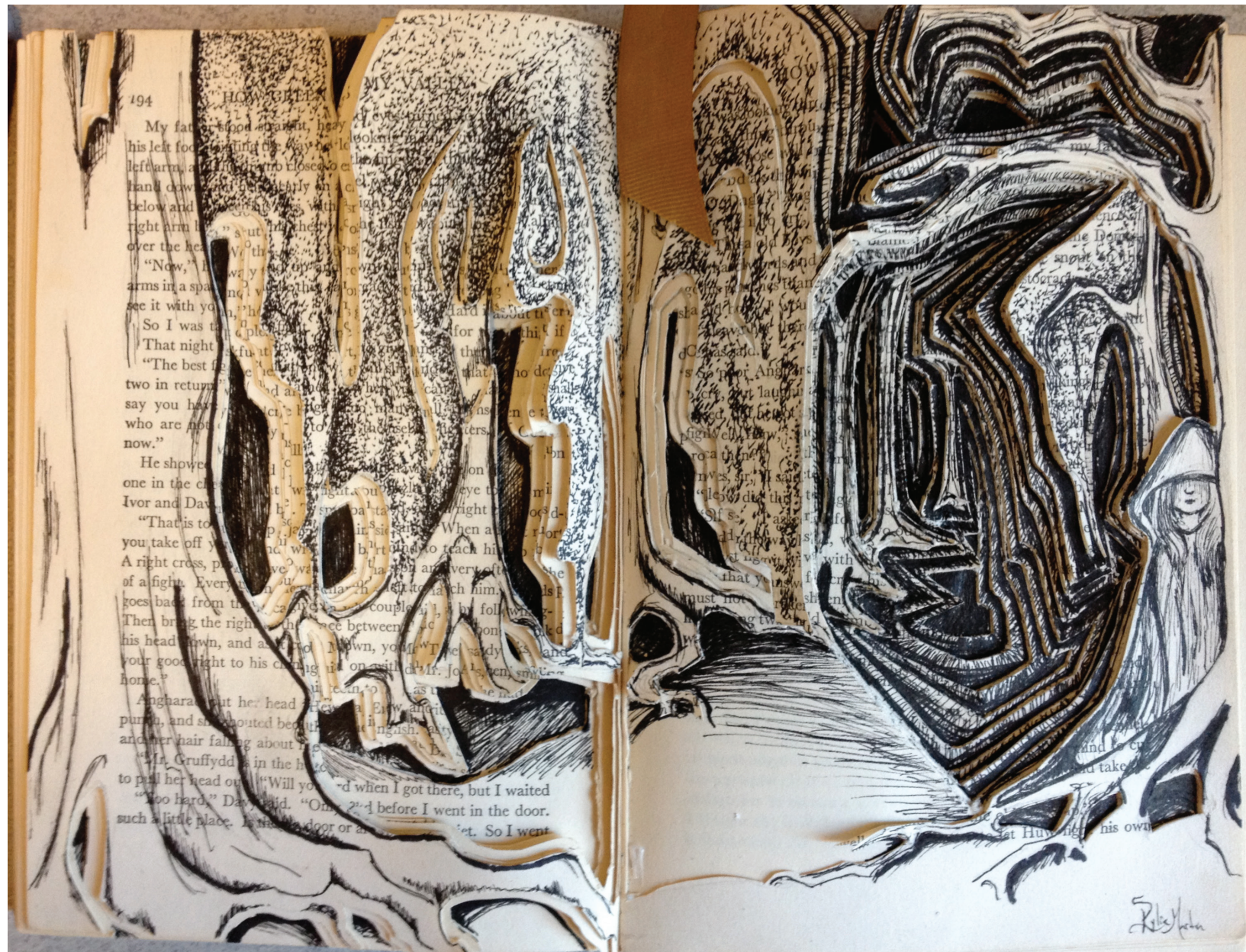


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INTO THE DEEP

Kylie Martin



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Haley Moore

BEFORE YOU GET TO ST. PETER

Nathan Pesina

“Jesus Christ,” the man said into the phone.

“Yes?” The voice on the other line answered.

“I’m having the busiest day; can you take some of these interviews off my hands?”

“Come on, Tom, you know I don’t handle interviews myself.”

“I know, but I just thought, this one time—”

“No exceptions, you need to get these last few in or out. I know it’s Easter, but I can’t resurrect your job performance,” he replied with a small chuckle.

Tom sighed at hearing the joke for the fifteenth time and replied, “Fine.”

Tom picked a folder up off his desk and examined the contents and sighed heavily. He was not happy with his afterlife. He had a mundane office that he rarely got to leave. The wallpaper was colored brown. Brown. This was the best his boss could do for him. He had asked for blue, but it wasn’t in the budget, apparently. His chair needed to be replaced. He wanted one that he could adjust to his desk’s height since his chair sat low to the floor and made him appear shorter than he was to incoming candidates, who often commented on his misconstrued height. He had a Dell computer, but he wanted a Mac. He never got one while he was living and thought he could at least get one here. That was, unfortunately, not the case and he despised his PC with every fiber of his being.

Tom pressed the button on his desk intercom, “Carol, can you send the next person in?”

“Certainly, Mr. Clark.”

“And can you call my wife and tell her I’ll be home a little late tonight.”

“Certainly, Mr. Clark.”

-BEFORE YOU GET TO ST. PETER-

Carol was his secretary, handpicked by God to help him with whatever he needed. She was so helpful that Jesus often joked that she must’ve come from Tom’s rib. Tom hated Jesus’s sense of humor. His arsenal of jokes was nothing but Biblical puns and references, which he got enough of at the daily church services. He also did not care for Carol as she was not his first choice for the secretary position. She was like his wallpaper—boring and made him dislike his job even more. He thought in Heaven, he would get a beautiful secretary, unlike the “Carol” he had while he was living, but he had Carol. Tom assumed that they had to do away with attractive women in the workplace in Heaven so that there weren’t any “wives being coveted.” He laughed to himself at the witty reference, but his laughter quickly turned to a realization of hypocrisy, as this was the kind of joke he would hate to hear from Jesus.

A man in his younger twenties entered the room and looked around confused at the absence of clouds, angels, or any combination of the two.

“Mr. Aldridge!” Tom said putting on a fake smile and getting up to shake hands. “Welcome to Heaven, I’ll be your interviewer today, please have a seat!”

“Heaven?”

“Yes, Mr. Aldridge you passed in your sleep 20 minutes ago, but rest assured you lived a very long life and it’s good to see you looking young again!”

“But, I’m 85.”

“Yes, but now you look 25, as most people do when they enter Heaven.”

“I’m sorry, mister...”

“Clark.”

“Mr. Clark, I’m sorry, but this isn’t exactly what I expected.”

Tom was slowly losing his positive attitude after hearing this for the 1,563rd time today, “Well, I can assure you, Mr. Aldridge, this office is better than what you’d see in Hell, and what’s on the other side of that door,” he continued pointing with his thumb to the exit behind him, “is what you’re probably looking for. But first we need to go through some things and you’ll need to answer some questions so that we can find out if you’re the right fit for what we’re looking for here in Heaven.”

"Wait, I don't just... you know... get in?"

Tom frowned, "I wish it were that easy Mr. Aldridge, but Heaven is where you get to live for eternity. We don't let just anyone in, we have standards."

"I thought the way I lived was supposed to be my... test or whatever."

"Everyone thinks that, Mr. Aldridge," Tom said opening a file on his desk, "Now let's have a look at your resumé here."

"Resumé?"

"Yes, we here at Heaven keep track of everything important in your life, good or bad, and compile it into a 'Life Resumé' of sorts. Sorry you won't be able to lie on this one as you did in... 1978," Tom said pointing to a spot on the paper.

Tom gave a cryptic smile to Mr. Aldridge as he watched him shift uncomfortably in his chair as he did in the interview he received in 1978. This was actually the only part of the job Tom liked. Evaluations. He had the power to tell people, 'No. You can't get it in. Sorry, you just missed the cut.' It made him feel exclusive, special, part of the elite God-fearing demographic. Plus he actually got to push a button on his desk to drop people to Purgatory (recommendations for Hell had to go to Jesus). He thought a button opening a hole in the floor in front of a desk only existed in movies and cartoons. Numerous days in between candidates he would practice the lines he said to people he would send to purgatory. Being a large movie and TV fan, he liked to incorporate quotes and catchphrases into them: *You are the weakest link, goodbye* or *Hasta la vista, sinner!* Sometimes he would squint his eyes, run his fingers along the edge of the button and say, *You've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well do ya, punk?* And then he would push the button imagining the look on their formerly hopeful faces as they fell from the clouds.

"Well there are some very impressive things on here. Tell me what was your religion again?"

"I was a Christian, sir."

"Denomination?"

"Non-denominational."

Tom did not take his eyes from the resumé as he replied, "Oh, that's a shame."

"I'm sorry?"

"We generally prefer Protestants. Being a non-decider doesn't help your case and just shows us that you are incapable of commitment."

Tom glanced again at Mr. Aldridge, who seemed unable to sit still in his heavenly chair.

"Could be worse though," Tom continued, "You could be a Mormon." He stared at Mr. Aldridge for a few seconds and then laughed while Mr. Aldridge joined in uneasily.

Tom stopped laughing abruptly. "The last time you went to church?"

"A few months back."

"I see, and the real last time you went to church?"

Mr. Aldridge paused and replied, "10 years ago."

"Reason for leaving?"

"My wife passed and I stopped going. She used to make me go. Can I ask... is she here?"

Tom did a 360 in his chair towards his computer and typed in "Mrs. Aldridge." Once the search results came up he asked without turning, "Cause of death?"

"Oh, it was cancer."

"Narrow that down please, 'Aldridge' is a common last name and cancer is a common cause of death."

"She died of brain cancer in May of 2000 at St. Mary's Hospital."

Tom typed in a few more things and then turned around to face Mr. Aldridge, "She is in Heaven, Mr. Aldridge. Let's hope she can give you a good reference."

Tom enjoyed checking references. The things people said about who candidates thought were their loved ones was a beautiful sort of ironic

humor. Sometimes he would mess with candidates' heads, pick up his phone and pretend to be talking to someone he had already spoken to in regards to their wholesomeness. He'd witnessed candidates scream in anger at the phone and cry at the lack of testimony to their good behavior. *Give me the phone, I'll kill that bitch, I was a wonderful husband! or How could he say that, my own brother?!?* Tom would then hang up, say a line, and push his button.

Mr. Aldridge laughed thinking this remark was a joke, but Tom stared at him until he stopped. "Did I say something funny?"

"No... I just... I just thought you were kidding."

"I am an interviewer, Mr. Aldridge, and like any good interviewer I need to check on your references. With that said, I hope you two had a strong marriage," Tom said, pausing for a few seconds to stare at his interviewee while waiting for an answer to a question he hadn't directly asked. "Well? Did you?"

"Oh! Of course we did, loved each other very much."

Tom looked back down at Mr. Aldridge's file and said quietly, "We'll see."

Mr. Aldridge shifted nervously as Tom waited for him to confess what he already knew, "We fought a decent amount... but we were still happy."

Tom lowered his head, but kept his gaze fixed on Mr. Aldridge in an attempt to pry out another confession.

"I had an affair once..."

"There it is!" Tom exclaimed happily as he began scribbling on a piece of paper. "See, doesn't it feel nice to confess? Maybe you should have gone to confession a few more times—then again, that would've made you Catholic."

"Is that going to keep me out?"

"Well adultery is a sin, Mr. Aldridge. Did you ever tell your wife?" Tom asked already knowing the answer.

"No, too guilty."

"Of course you were," Tom said still writing. "Just out of curiosity, was the affair with a secretary?" He asked, thinking of the unattractive (for some reason in-her-40s-while-in-Heaven) Carol outside.

"No," Mr. Aldridge replied, looking at the floor, unaware that he could be dropped through a hole from where he was sitting.

"You were a doctor, I see, lots of work to help the uninsured, that's helpful... I suppose."

"I also donated to cancer research," Mr. Aldridge replied eagerly, trying to get his string of good qualities noticed.

"No one likes a bragger, Mr. Aldridge."

As he slumped back in his chair, Tom continued scribbling on the folder. He was drawing a picture of Mr. Aldridge. Like his "phone calls," the notes were fake, a means of making the candidate nervous, which was working well on Mr. Aldridge. Tom liked letting people go through the door behind him a lot less than letting them fall. It gave him less power and plus, when he did let them proceed to Peter, he was forced to recite a verse from the Bible as he let them through. It changed every now and then, but usually it was Psalm 23. Such a cliché. It pained him to recite it so much that he sighed and recited it hastily in only a few seconds when he let people in.

"I don't feel like things are going very well, Mr. Clark," Mr. Aldridge said, looking away from Tom.

"No, I wouldn't say they are," Tom said as he finished shading the areas around Mr. Aldridge's face. He got ready to pose the only real question he enjoyed hearing an answer to. "Why do you want to go to Heaven?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Why do you want to go to Heaven? You're a non-denominational Christian, have attended church sporadically throughout your life, and you have definitely not abided by good Christian values, you know, with the adultery and all. So why do you feel Heaven is the right place for you?"

Mr. Aldridge sat silently for a minute, "Well I was a Christian my whole life, I was always thankful to God and Jesus for everything I had and—"

Tom raised his hand cutting Mr. Aldridge off. "Stop. Answer me this—why were you a Christian?"

Mr. Aldridge looked at the armrests of his chair. "I don't know... I guess... it felt safe."

"Safe?"

"Yeah... you know," he raised his eyes from the chair looking Tom in the eyes for the first time. "I thought it was a no-lose commitment. Taking a chance and believing in God to get to Heaven seemed safer than not believing in him and going to Hell."

Tom instantly leaned back as if blown back by the surprisingly obvious, but never before heard answer. He thought for a second, smiled at Mr. Aldridge and said, "Well, Mr. Aldridge, today's your lucky day because you're not going to Hell."

Mr. Aldridge's eyes widened and a smile began to break out, "Really?" As Tom thought of an especially witty line (that Jesus just might appreciate) and chuckled to himself for its ironic ingenuity, he reached across the desk for his favorite button. "Surely goodness and love will follow you all the days of your afterlife but you, unfortunately, will not dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

ON LAUREL, NEBRASKA

Tyler Hall

I.
Before the first cigarette
There huffs in us a promise

To clean out the jaundiced
Railroad toenails.

To slice and squirm
Under the pressure of
My puss and pool balls heel.

To work even harder.

But on my way to promise
I drop
My jaw
At the singsong sickness

Of our
out-here-(nowhere)-on-our-own-without-a-reason.

And the boom truck lowers its crane
Like a machine

Because it is a machine.

II.
The next time I come
Home
I am in bed with this one
ex-girlfriend
She hums her repulsion at my
Ruined
Feet

I try to sing back to her

“I’ve been working
on the railroad”
like it’s nineteen aught
and that should get her hot

But she doesn’t let me finish

III.
I’ll never forgive the
Motherfucker
Who drove that first
Spike down into the guts of
Allen, Nebraska

Who sent unsuspecting me
To
Become
A simple machine

You might have seen it before,
Hundreds of toenails given their
Walking papers
Leveraged out by the back and forth
Back break
Of low down steel

IV.
The Joose is Loose
Laurel, NE
Population 307
Beware

The Joose is Loose
And seriously,
You should
Hide your daughters.

This is a warning.
There is no maybe,
Things will get
Ugly.
Then uglier.
It will burn down your barn
And ruin your corn.
And after that
I am going to need a nap.

For two dollars and seventy
Three cents you can
Step over
To the half-life with me
Where even God bends
To your will.
We can listen to the back
And forth
Back break,
From Nebraska to Texas.

The Joose is Loose,
Fills up your boots, rots your feet
But we’re having fun here, no?

V.
I have a
Pallet on the floor
Inside all this spinning

I say prayers
I don’t
Know who I want
To hear them

I hammer spikes
With dead end railroad Messiahs
Rippling flesh never to cross state
Lines

- STANZA BREAK, CONTINUED -

I make promises
To them all
Early in the morning

But, as I escape
Finger-crossed

The kids on their bikes
Are losing
Their Band-Aids behind me

And
Sunup is as good a time

As any for the first cigarette.

PARADOX

DeAnna Sandoval

eyes closed, back arched.
neck up, self still.
mind loud, unsettled.
voices rough, self filled.
cringing, struggling,
hesitating, relaxing,
stiffening, softening
click.
i'm floating, body weightless.
i'm fading, self latent.
noise canceled - no plugs.
self silenced, everyone.
all connected, it's mine
it's me, i'm it—
with it, without it,
disconnected, soul in.
inhale, exhale.
back lowered. eyes open.
i'm radiating, i'm reaching
no effort.
i'm here.

BESTILL MY PERIPATETIC HEART

Travis Freeman

To begin, my dear, with the birth of all—

Let's assume that the Big Bang theory developed by physicists is correct—everything in the observable (and unobservable) universe began at an infinitely small point: “the atom of all”, if you will. And this point at once bursts and expands, and thus is born our universe—all time and all matter. And since matter cannot be destroyed or created, everything that would ever exist has its foundations in that “atom of all” and the subsequent explosion. And since this explosion was a physical reaction, the movement of the each and every atom that lay within the greater atom is simply a reaction to each and every other atom surrounding it. Therefore, if we could account for every atom in the universe, we could determine the formula by which molecules and gas and stars and planets and amino acids and cyanobacteria and multicellular organisms and human beings perform and function. And since every action of every atom at all times is simply a reaction to every other atom at all times, every action ever performed in the entire history of the universe is determinable. And since we now know that time is not a linear progression, but rather something that has always existed, and our perception of the movement of time forward is an illusion created by our limited sensory capabilities, every reaction that will ever occur *has already happened*. The universe is in the midst of being born right now; it is also dying, and nearing the zero point of time, the ultimate death of all matter, the collapse back into the “atom of the all,” where everything will return to a state of complete stillness.

Where does all of this leave us, my dear?

Well, there are a number of plausible scenarios—

The ancient Greeks were correct in their assumption of “fate” determining all action. The idea of fate is just the naming of the intuition that all action is predetermined; where the Greeks fall short is in the assumption that only certain acts are the acts of fate, wherein the truth is that *all acts are the acts of fate*. Odysseus was not only fated to follow through on his journey—*there was no other choice*. Choice is an illusion. The organization of independent atoms into molecules and subsequent matter does not negate the predetermined motion of said atoms. Molecules and matter only become further expressions of that original explosion.

-BESTILL MY PERIPATETIC HEART-

And so for you and I my, love, there is no choice, do you see? All of the independent atoms that have bonded into molecules and further organized into matter, the matter that constitutes our very being, are only following the natural and determinable paths they were meant to follow, and have always followed, and will always follow. You and I have been brought together by the initial explosive birth of the universe, and all time (that exists always) has only led up to our being together, and this particular moment that our limited sense organs allow us to perceive.

So, again, let me state for the record that I am indeed so very terribly sorry that I fucked your sister, but there really was no choice in the matter, was there?

Another scenario, my sweet beautiful one—

Let's move forward from basic Newtonian physics into the realm of Quantum physics. One of the early principles that would go on to form the backbone of this branch of physics is that of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. This principle is usually expressed thusly:

$$\Delta x \Delta p \geq h / 4 \pi$$

This mathematical theorem states that the uncertainty in the position (Δx) multiplied by the uncertainty in momentum (Δp) is equal to or greater than a constant ($h / 4 \pi$). The constant is referred to as Planck's Constant (where $h/4\pi = 0.527 \times 10^{-34}$ Joule-second). In essence this theory states that the more precisely we measure one property (let's say position in this case), the less precise we can be in our measurement of another property (say momentum). The reason for this uncertainty in measurement extends from the very act of observation itself; if you observe a particle, there must be a probabilistic exchange of energy with the particle being observed and with light particles. The exchange in energy inevitably results in a change in moment or position of the particle, so you therefore cannot measure both properties equally. This theorem is not a reflection of the technology we currently possess to measure particles; it is, instead, a constant principle, one that cannot be avoided. Even Einstein attempted to disprove this principle, but in vain. Uncertainty is the only constant.

Do you not see the implications, my dear, sweet love? As certain as I am in my undying love for you, how can I be certain in your love for me? Or if it be you that possess the undying love, how can you be certain in mine? Uncertainty is a simple fact that we mere mortals must come to terms with, and fix into our conceptions of true love.

In the same vein, how can you be entirely certain that I did indeed fuck your sister? Could not the very fact of your observation—namely your opening of that bathroom door at the Ramada Inn reception hall where your cousin was having her Quinceañera, to find your very drunken sister and I enjoined in a rough, uncoordinated coupling—have affected the very event you thought you were observing? I put it to you to try where even Einstein has failed, in a negation of one of the most respected and time tested of physical principles.

Yet another scenario, oh glorious love of mine—

Let us consider the events described by Schrödinger in his famous thought experiment. Although I am quite certain you, in your beautiful and infinite mind, are familiar with the experiment, I will record it here for posterity:

A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter, there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, so small that perhaps in the course of the hour, one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none; if it happens, the counter tube discharges, and through a relay releases a hammer that shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for an hour, one would say that the cat still lives if meanwhile no atom has decayed. The psi-function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed or smeared out in equal parts. It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation.

As I am sure you are aware, my dear, this thought experiment demonstrates a problem with Quantum theory, namely the expression of quantum mechanics in their relation to everyday reality. For we know that the cat cannot be both alive and dead; there is no equality of death and life that the cat can possess equally. But as the thought experiment shows, when considering quantum data, it can be both: it is both alive and dead.

In this way, before you opened that door of the bathroom (which your bitch sister swore was locked), I was both simultaneously fucking *and* not fucking your sister on the faux marble sink top, the crinoline of her hideous turquoise dress swaying like a stiff fog, choking my every breath. The event you believe you observed was in fact only one of two possible outcomes, and I plead with you to bear this in mind the next time you consider taking a croquet mallet to the hood of my car.

A final and equally plausible scenario for you, the center of my being—

Einstein, in a letter to Schrödinger praising him for the content of his thought experiment, stated:

“You are the only contemporary physicist ... who sees that one cannot get around the assumption of reality, if only one is honest. Most of them simply do not see what sort of risky game they are playing with reality—reality as something independent of what is experimentally established.”

Did you see that little phrase in his statement, that little morsel of doubt? “The assumption of reality”: it sits like a smashed June bug on the windshield of quantum physics, a crushed and smeared exoskeleton that has dried to an impenetrable paste, with no amount of washer fluid or countless swipes of a wiper-blade that could ever erase the stain. Everyone—physicists, trash collectors, mailmen, you and I—we cannot escape the labyrinth that is the assumption of reality. The world spins and operates on the assumption that what we perceive—the sunrises and sunsets, the movement of clouds over a hazy bone-dry July horizon, the cars pouring through cities like rogue leukocytes, the deaths of our fathers and mothers, the peculiar, acrid-and-electric yet pleasing sensation of touching the tip of your pink tongue to the end of a nine-volt battery—is actually there. We can only make it through the day if we truly believe that the desires, the losses, the grasps for momentary relief from the drudgery and seeming indifference of the physical world with the embrace of another, the momentous confluence of events that we deem chance and synchronicity, are not in vain, but are the stuff of a very real and tangible world, a world with purpose and integrity, a world where the mere presence of someone we love annihilates the doom inherent in uncertainties and possibly poisoned cats.

Without you, this assumption dies for me. The universe turns instead into a piece of clockwork, a metal canister with a decaying atom waiting flip the switch and flood my lungs with a deadly gas, a cold and preconfigured system where I might be alive, but I am also most certainly already dead. It is to you whom I cling, knowing full well that it is not the atoms from which you are formed that pulls me close, but what it is those atoms form—your face, your smile, your seemingly limitless ability to love. And if fate may still play a role—if there be something that still intervenes in the miniscule and foolish lives of men—I only wish for your forgiveness, one action to undo the errant motion of a stupid and arrogant man...

CONFESSION

Hannah Taylor

When I was seven and you were five,
I forgot to feed your fish.
You were crushed by guilt,
As we stared at the floating gold.
I watched,
Remorseless towards my fault,
As you flushed your first friend.

And when I was twelve
I let our dog eat your chocolate.
You were shocked by your own incompetence
To leave the temptation at snouts reach.
I held your hand
While his stomach was futilely pumped.

And when I first drove alone,
I backed over our family cat.
You were appalled,
Remembering the door you left open.
I hated that cat,
But still felt regret
From killing your last childhood friend.

Forgive me
For divulging this now,
Though I don't regret
My slants.
You would much rather believe
That you were to blame
Than to accept
How little you control.

HAIKU

Wesley Gentle

Staring at the ground
is like watching a TV,
but it's much harder.

KINDRED

Jonathan Amerson



3D DESIGN QUOTE

Constantine Zgourides



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THE ENVELOPE

Rosalind Hunt

"Now, boys and girls, is there anyone who has not shown their project?" Mrs. Coldwell stared at Samantha Benton, the only student who had not yet gone.

Sam's almond-shaped eyes shyly peered around the classroom. Derrick had made a volcano that erupts, Taylor had plotted out six generations of his family tree, and Antonia had designed the surface of the moon with astronauts, a space shuttle, and an extraterrestrial on it.

Sam was only in the third grade and she already had a reputation for her unspectacular science projects. In fact, the janitor was still repainting the walls from the "exploding gerbil" incident.

"Sam, do you have something to show us?" As Sam felt Mrs. Coldwell's burning stare on her flushed caramel skin, she knew it was her turn.

Mrs. Coldwell crossed her arms impatiently and narrowed her eyes until the flesh surrounding them rippled into a thousand folds. The effect made her gray-blue eyes nearly disappear under the aged skin.

Sam slid out of her chair and slowly made her way to the front of the class. Even though she was the shortest in her class, Sam felt that her typhoon of springy locks made up for the shortage in her height. She walked toward Mrs. Coldwell's desk, a massive ponytail bobbing to every step, gripping something to her chest, hiding it from view.

"Show us what you have, Samantha." Mrs. Coldwell demanded.

It was a manila envelope a little larger than a sheet of construction paper. Sam held the envelope in front of her with her arms fully extended.

"May I borrow your toy, Toni?" Sam asked.

The students in the class looked at each other and back at the crinkled envelope, while Antonia peered at her astronaut and alien action figure.

"Sam honey, why don't you have a seat, I've seen enough."

"*Please*, can I borrow your toy?" Sam stood her ground.

- THE ENVELOPE -

A moment went by when everyone was silent. Even Mrs. Coldwell did not expect a protest from Samantha.

Then Antonia Ross's long mahogany legs swung with gusto as she brazenly walked to the front of the room, abruptly stopping in front of Sam. For a moment Antonia towered over Sam, one hand defiantly braced on her hip, dangling the toy alien in Sam's face like a carrot for an overworked mule. "This better be good," was all she said.

Sam opened the envelope and showed the inside to the entire class. There was nothing spectacular about an empty envelope.

Once again she opened the envelope. "Drop it in."

Antonia released the alien into the bag. They all watched it drop. But they never heard the sound of the toy alien hitting the bottom of the envelope or saw the bag change shape. Sam folded the envelope in half, then into quarters, and it became obvious to the class that a toy alien could not fit in the envelope.

"Where did it go, Samantha?" Mrs. Coldwell asked, trying to mask her interest.

Sam unfolded the envelope and turned it upside down. Nothing fell out. Then she showed the inside to the class. Empty.

Nervous laughter escaped from Mrs. Coldwell's lips.

"*Where* is the alien, Sam?"

Sam shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know where it goes."

Billy Rodriguez ran to the front of the class with his Spiderman lunch box. "Here!" Billy shoved the lunchbox in Sam's face. "Make this disappear!" he challenged.

Sam shrugged her shoulders again then opened the envelope for Billy to drop in the lunchbox along with the toy alien.

"Now, girls and boys, you know that it is impossible for that alien to disappear," Mrs. Coldwell started. "Billy have a seat. Samantha no—"

It was too late. Billy had already released his grip on the lunchbox. As the lunchbox fell through the air, the lip of the envelope seemed to expand just wide enough for it to enter. And, just like that, the envelope returned to the width of a sheet of paper. The Spiderman lunch box was gone.

The students in the class were silent. *Where did it go?* was written all over their faces. After the awe wore off the students began to wonder if what they saw was real. Finally, Billy broke the silence.

"Give me my lunch back!" Billy started shouting.

Mrs. Coldwell sided with Billy. "Samantha, you can stop playing games now and give Billy back his lunch."

Sam started backing away from the class until her back bumped into the chalkboard.

"Really, I don't know where it went." Sam sputtered.

She started digging into the envelope in an effort to find the missing objects. Each time she forced her arm farther and farther into the envelope. Eventually, she was able to put her entire arm, shoulder, and head into the flattened envelope.

When Samantha fully resurfaced she brought with her a baseball, a rusted pair of scissors, a Barbie doll head, and a television remote, but no Spiderman lunchbox.

Samantha dropped the objects on the floor with a deafening clank and submerged her head and torso into the envelope once again. All the class could see was a bounty of curly walnut hair ballooning from the top of the package. Sam pulled out several other objects in the next three minutes, none of which were the missing ones. On her last attempt, Sam eventually found Antonia's toy alien and Billy's Spiderman lunchbox unharmed.

"Well—" Mrs. Coldwell said as her jaw snapped open and closed like a fish gasping for air. "I suppose that is the end of presentations for today."

In the very odd moment of silence that followed, Sam slid Billy's lunch onto his desk and placed Antonia's toy alien on her model of the moon's surface. Sam half-jogged towards her desk with the envelope crushed against her chest. And before Mrs. Coldwell or any of her classmates could make a

comment about the bizarre nature of her presentation, Sam secured the envelope in her *Miss Everything* backpack and headed for the door.

"It's time for lunch, boys and girls!" Mrs. Coldwell finally regained her composure and started clashing hands together to hurry the class along. Mrs. Coldwell proceeded to personally inspect Billy's lunch, and, surprisingly, everything was intact, down to the last squirt of grape jelly. "Go ahead and line up—except for Samantha, I need to have a talk with her."

Mrs. Coldwell's eyes narrowed to tiny slits as she searched the room for Sam's wild ponytail. "Samantha—where is Ms. Benton? Samantha!" Mrs. Coldwell looked toward the exit just in time to see the door swing shut. Sam was gone.

* * *

"Just tell me about the looks on their faces." Samantha's older brother Eric asked her while he was driving her home from Rose Mount Elementary school. "Wait, wait—did Mrs. Coldwell freak?" Eric laughed to himself before Sam could answer.

"I thought she was choking," Sam said. She just kept shaking her head, back and forth.

Eric couldn't help but imagine the elderly Roberta Coldwell having a stroke in front of a classroom of third graders.

"I felt bad for her. She looked so frightened." Sam looked down at the backpack gently rocking between her feet as if she could see the manila envelope right through the pink nylon fabric. Sam wanted to laugh as easily as her brother did about all of their putty faces, but for some reason she only felt shame. Without her brain acknowledging the guilt, Sam's heart knew that she had terribly misused the envelope.

"That's my little sis," Eric laughed again. "I'm just surprised you could pull it off with those tiny hands of yours. How many times did you practice?"

But it was clear that Eric did not really want to hear the answer because he quickly changed the subject.

"Look, Peanut," Eric said. Peanut was a name Eric made up for Sam because she had skin the creamy color of peanut butter. Eventually the nickname

“peanut butter” became shortened to just plain old “peanut.” Not to mention she had a peanut head, he would always say.

“Mom told me if I want to go out tonight I’d have to ask you along.” Samantha knew where this conversation was going because they have been through it a thousand times. “If mom asks, what are you gonna say?” he said before reaching over and jumbling up her already disorderly hair. Sam responded automatically.

“I’ll stay home.”

Eric turned the radio on to some hip-hop station and pretended he was not driving a Dodge Minivan. His jet-black hair waved in the open window as perspiration rolled down his cream-colored skin.

“Bingo!” He laughed his teenager laugh again. “They must be teaching you a lot on *Blue’s Clues* these days.”

* * *

The news was on TV when they walked into the stuffy two bedroom apartment. Sam’s mother was tightly curled up on the red and brown checkered sofa, dozing off to the sound of the news anchor’s voice. Eric tossed his shoulder bag onto the colossal Victorian table in the kitchen and Sam put her pink backpack on the floor next to the wobbly TV stand. All of the furniture in the apartment was donated to the Benton family by the charitable citizens of Maple County. As a result, they had a strange collection of antique furniture that always needed repairs and rarely matched. Despite the strange collection of lamps, peculiar rugs, wardrobes, and bookshelves, the apartment was delightful because every wall was covered with their mother’s vibrant paintings and jubilant sceneries. Sam’s mother always said *life was a work of art in progress*. Sam even felt that living in their apartment felt like being a character in a painting.

“We’re home.” Eric announced, walking straight to where his mother was lying on the sofa. He noticed she was visibly shaking under the multiple layers of clothing and stack of winter blankets. Her balding head was covered by a knit cap where the darkest waves of dense black hair used to grow. Eric gently placed his hand on his mother’s forehead to check her temperature.

“Hi, honey.” The rich tones of Mrs. Benton’s voice filled the room as she woke from her nap. Her clammy complexion brightened at the sound of her

children’s voices. She gave Eric her most charming smile before falling into a series of violent coughs. Sam crept up to the couch beside Eric and held her mother’s perspiring hand until the attack subsided.

“Where’s my baby?” Mrs. Benton fought to say while she slowly stretched out her arms for Samantha to crawl onto the couch beside her. Sam immediately scrambled under the covers into her mother’s warmth and protection. Even though Sam was being held by a sick woman, she felt like nothing in the world could harm her as long as she was tucked away in her mother’s arms.

“Mom, have you eaten today?” Eric asked to monitor her diet, but he could see the spoiled lunch on the ebony coffee table and knew the answer was ‘no’.

“Oh, honey, I tried.”

Mrs. Benton stroked Sam’s curly hair with a distant expression. Her cloudy eyes were not focused on anything in the room, but the corners of her lips curved into a smile. She was momentarily amused by something in her thoughts. As her long delicate frame shook with laughter, Mrs. Benton’s slim fingers pulled back a rebellious strand of Sam’s hair and she whispered a secret into her ear. Samantha started chuckling and then they both looked up at Eric and continued to gossip clearly about his clothes.

Eric was dressed in a nice blue button up shirt and dark slacks. On a regular day he usually wore a white T-shirt—sold in packs of five at Wal-Mart—a pair of old jeans, and Converse tennis shoes. Mrs. Benton always told Sam that she was happy her son was charming enough to pull off the Wal-Mart look without being teased at school for being poor. He had inherited his long, lean frame, strong chin, and empathetic eyes from his mother. However, he had inherited his charcoal mane from his father. But today his hair was cut business length and he was wearing clothes they had never seen him wear before. Eric’s face flushed when he realized they were inspecting him closely. Sam wondered if he used his money from working nights at the *Pretzels Plus* convenience store to buy the shiny new shoes and freshly starched shirt.

Eric retreated from his mother’s raised eyebrow and took long, quick strides to the kitchen to start preparing dinner. A roar of laughter followed his every step. Even the sound of the news reporter was zoned out by their shenanigans.

“What would you like to eat, Mom?” Eric threw open the pantry doors and automatically scanned the various labels and cans. “What about chicken soup? It’s got plenty of salt.”

Before his mother responded, Eric heard a stream of deep rich laughter and high obnoxious laughter. “That sounds good, honey.”

“Alright.” Eric unbuttoned his dress shirt and carefully placed it on the back of a chair to keep it from getting dirty. “Noodles or rice?”

“What do you think I should have, Baby?” Mrs. Benton asked Samantha.

“Noodles, Noodles, Noodles, Noodles—” Samantha sang to the melody of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

As if Eric had done this a thousand times before, he whipped out a can of soup for his and his mother’s dinner, and started boiling pasta for his sister’s dinner. Eric always prepared dinner in the most theatrical way possible, with pots and spatulas flying in the air. After Samantha heard the banging of pans in the kitchen she came over to sneak a peek. She sat in one of the chairs at the massive kitchen table. “What are we having tonight?” she asked in the sweetest voice she could conjure.

Eric refused to tell her before the meal was prepared. All Sam knew for sure was that they would have lots of vegetables. And of course, she was right.

* * *

Samantha and Antonia Ross sat on the cement slab that made up the outdoor basketball court of the middle school they would attend in three years. They rolled the basketball back and forth between them while watching a swarm of bees fly around a trashcan.

“What were you thinking walking out of class today?” Antonia’s chocolate skin shined in the sunlight as she flipped her mass of braids over her shoulder and rolled the basketball back to Sam.

Sam was busy watching the sun set over the top of the math portable building. The exquisite shades of purple, red, and orange looked like one of her mother’s favorite paintings. The basketball came to a halt at Sam’s foot.

“HELLO!” Antonia’s voice jolted her out of her daydream. “What was up with that envelope?”

“Well...” She looked at the basketball like a foreign object. “My brother told me that my dad brought it back with him from Africa.” Sam thought about the father she had never met. He was a field journalist who never returned after covering an assignment in Egypt. Her mother always told Sam she was a shorter version of her father. He also had bronze skin, world-weary brown eyes, and a fearless personality. Sam rolled the ball back to Antonia.

“Why would he bring back a cruddy old envelope?” Antonia’s long arms juggled the basketball between her hands. “Your dad went to Egypt, Brazil, India, Japan—everywhere! And he brought back spears, tribal masks, pearls, and you’re telling me—”

“He brought back an envelope.”

“What for?”

“He said—he said it was special,” Sam watched the last of the sun’s rays disappear over the horizon. “Or at least he told Eric that.” A silence fell between them.

“I’m not *saying* what you did in class wasn’t cool. It was.” Toni looked away toward the street, across the soccer field, across the fence, to one of the windows of a nearby house. Some woman was having an argument with her TV. “The envelope looked so—”

“Old.”

“Ugly.”

“Fugly.”

They both laughed. Without warning Antonia bounded up from the concrete and starting making shots at the goal. *Swoosh, swoosh*. She could even teach Shaq how to make free-throws. Antonia already agreed that if she ever went pro in basketball, she would let Sam be her manager.

“Do you ever miss your dad?” Antonia asked the question as if it had no more importance than discussing what she ate for lunch the day before. Sam knew Antonia was straining to hear the answer because she missed her shot.

Sam was the first to grab the basketball after it rebounded.

"I miss my Dad the most when my mom talks about him." Sam answered the question in the same nonchalant way.

Antonia watched Sam's feet hop off the ground as she sent the basketball flying towards the hoop. Even with all of her force the ball landed short of the goal.

Mrs. Benton always told Sam that her birth was a way for God to make up for taking her father away from them. Samantha Avery Benton was born eight months after Samuel Anthony Benton died. At the time Sam's mother thought it was a fair trade, but that was only until the fateful day when her doctor diagnosed her with a terminal disease.

Sam grabbed her own rebound before Antonia could get her hands on it.

"If you've got to know the truth about the envelope," Sam changed the subject to a more comfortable topic. "My Dad taught my brother how to make things disappear with it and then—" Sam dribbled the ball and her short legs propelled her body forward as she went for the lay-up, "Eric showed me, too."

The ball teased Sam by dancing on the rim and then hopping off.

"I wish he taught you how to play ball." Antonia stood with her arms crossed like a disappointed basketball coach. "'Cause you definitely need some help."

Sam ignored Antonia and kept taking failed shots.

"Come on, Sam. We should be getting home."

"One more shot..."

Sam dribbled the ball once, twice, three times, then raised her arms to shoot. She closed her eyes and heard the singing grasshoppers and felt the cool summer breeze gently lift her hair. After the wind subsided she let the ball roll off her fingers. As she watched the basketball arch toward the hoop, she thought about how Eric used to play basketball with their dad. Daddy would have let me win, she thought as the basketball rebounded off the hoop and rolled into the grass beyond.

* * *

"Honey, I want you to go out tonight and have a good time." Mrs. Benton tried to keep her voice down so as not to wake Samantha. They shared one of the bedrooms so that Eric could have a room to himself.

"I know you're not feeling well. I can go out with her another time."

"You cannot postpone life, honey." She closed her eyes and shook her head, holding back a cough. "Don't waste your night on account of me."

Eric was still standing next to her bed. Sam was on the far side of the king-sized bed in what appeared to be a deep sleep. She stayed as still as possible, straining to hear every word.

"You look great, and that Aubrey girl would be a fool not to like my son."

"How did you know I was going out with Aubrey?"

Sam cringed under the sheets, recognizing her betrayal. She held her breath to see if her mother would turn her in.

"A mother knows these things."

"Sam told you?"

"Yep."

Sam had been found out! She knew her brother would make her pay tomorrow. Sam listened to see if Eric would go out or stay and torment her.

"Now will you get out of here? You're going to be late." Mrs. Benton muffled a cough.

The silence in the room seemed to stretch on for minutes. Then the door to the bedroom quietly clicked shut and he was gone.

* * *

Sam sat on the couch in her pajamas wearing her *Miss Everything* backpack. She crossed her arms defiantly, while streaks of hot tears streamed down her face. "I'M STAYING WITH MY BROTHER!"

Sam's father's oldest sister, Auntie Sofi, was in the kitchen making hot chocolate for her. Sofi's porcelain hands shook the empty teacup, her nerves clearly at their end. Even though their Aunt was a great caterer and event planner, she didn't know a thing about looking after children. Aunt Sofi stood frozen in the kitchen searching for the right thing to say.

"Well, Samantha, your brother isn't here, now is he? You're just going to have to come home with me." Aunt Sofi's flawless face crinkled in distress as she quickly learned that this was not the right thing to say.

"I WANT TO BE WITH MY BROTHER!"

Sam stared at the doorknob on the front door. It was three in the morning and she was determined to sit right there on the couch until her brother returned home. The pounding in her head made it so she could not hear any sounds in the room, not even the desperate cries escaping her mouth. She anxiously twisted the shirt of her hand-me-down Ninja Turtles pajamas between her shaky hands. Tears, intermingled with snot, continued to drip from her chin.

On any other day Sam would not mind staying at her Aunt's house. She had sheets that smelled like lavender and pillows as soft as marshmallows. She even let Sam feed her snakes and parakeets. But today was different. For the first time, Sam viewed her aunt as a threat that might break apart her family. If her mother died, Aunt Sofi would be their legal guardian.

Aunt Sofi turned toward the door just in time to see Eric enter the apartment.

"What are you doing here?" Eric stopped at the door and wildly scanned the apartment. "Where is mom?"

Aunt Sofi's eyes widened to the look that meant 'how dare you talk to me that way' and her birdlike frame rose to her full height of five feet.

Sam ran to her brother. She huddled behind him as if he were her guardian. Her strained eyes shot daggers in Aunt Sofi's direction as if she were the devil.

"Your mother's in the hospital."

Aunt Sofi brought her full attention back to the hot chocolate, concentrating on pouring the sugary-sweet liquid into a teacup. "No reason to be alarmed.

Dr. Rosenthal is seeing to her. He is very good." She talked into the cup. "Now, Eric—"

Their aunt tiptoed toward them blowing the top of the steaming hot chocolate, "Please help me get your sister to bed."

Sam held onto her brother's hand and turned her swollen eyes up to his face, hoping he would not make her stay. The sobs caught in her throat, she held her breath, and began to pray. *Please don't take my brother away from me too, please...*

When neither of them moved from the door, Aunt Sofi was forced to look up from the cup of hot chocolate. "Come on guys, you both have school tomorrow."

Eric looked down at Sam's pleading face and back to their aunt.

"Is anyone with mom at the hospital?"

"You can see her tomorrow first thing after school." Their aunt looked as if she had come up with a brilliant solution. But neither Sam nor Eric saw the genius.

"We need to be with our mother."

That was all Eric had to say for Aunt Sofi to give in. Her narrow shoulders sagged and her face fell. Without another word Eric took his sister by the hand and led her to the Dodge minivan.

* * *

Sam and Eric sat in the waiting room outside of the Intensive Care Unit. ICU had its own waiting room with a coffee pot and vending machines, but on the third floor that meant they were the furthest from the cafeteria. Sam's stomach growled, but she did not want to move out of the comforting position she was in, with her head tucked into her brother's armpit.

"How much longer?"

"Well, visitation hours don't start in the ICU until eight in the morning."

"What time is it now?"

"A little after five."

"Oh."

They had been at the hospital for nearly an hour and they would not dare go to sleep. Not after Dr. Rosenthal told them they were still trying to find out what was going wrong with their mother. "We'll just have to keep running tests until we get a stroke of luck," the doctor told them.

Sam heard Eric's stomach grumble. He patted his pockets and turned out only lint.

"I hope you're not hungry, Peanut. I'm out of cash."

"I might have something."

Sam reached for the backpack under her chair and opened the main zipper. She couldn't reach the bottom of her bag, so she began pulling things out left and right. Sam got the attention of the middle-aged man sharing the waiting room with them. He laughed a smoker's laugh to himself, and then went back to reading an outdated issue of *TIME*. She plopped down on the floor in front of her chair and tossed a toothbrush and a pair of *Wednesday* panties on the chair in front of her.

"What are you carrying those around for?" Eric asked.

"Just in case we got into a car accident on the way over, I'd have a clean pair."

The man gave up on concealing his interest in their conversation when his laughter—or rather, cough—interrupted the silence of the room.

Eric gave the man a look so he would mind his own business and waited to see what his sister had stored in her bag. Next, she pulled out the manila envelope. Before the envelope touched the chair, Eric told her to put it back in her bag.

Sam knew the envelope meant a lot to Eric, so she did what he said without question.

"Here it is!"

Tucked away in her journal were five one-dollar bills. Sam started straightening the crinkled bills between her fingers while Eric haphazardly swept everything that had accumulated on the chair back into her backpack.

They decided they could get more food from the snack machine than the cafeteria. Sam and Eric ate their Barbecue Fritos, Honey Buns, and candy in silence. It wasn't long after their feast that they managed to nod off to sleep.

* * *

Sam stood in front of her mother's hospital bed in the ICU. Tubes were coming from her arms and chest, pumping fluids in and out of her body. Mrs. Benton was attached to the machine that beeped continuously. The new shift nurse had already taken her vitals and was not likely to return soon.

Sam waited for her mother to notice her standing by the bed, but her eyes never opened.

"Mom."

She did not respond.

"I didn't get to tell you about my day."

Sam placed her hand on her mother's arm and she leaned close to her ear. "Wake up," she whispered. Her mother did not obey.

I'll show her how I did my project. Sam's plan energized her. She went straight for the envelope in her backpack and began her presentation in a similar fashion. Sam exposed the bare inside of the empty envelope.

She pushed her hand into the envelope as she had rehearsed, but something was different.

Sam looked at her mother's face, her eyes wide and startled. Sam's fingers touched the cool silkiness of a flowing stream. Not believing what she felt, Sam plunged her hand deeper into the envelope to the liquid below. Her mouth dropped open as she retrieved her hand from the flattened envelope. Water dripped from her fingers and made a splat sound when the drops fell to the floor.

Sam held her breath and put her arm back in the envelope. This time she felt two hands grip around her wrist and firmly pull her body into the expanding mouth of the envelope. The manila envelope fell from the air and slid under the hospital bed unnoticed.

* * *

Eric had searched everywhere in the hospital looking for Sam. He asked every nurse or hospital personnel he managed to run into in the halls. His new shirt hung wrinkled and limp on his body. Finally he went back to his mother's room in the ICU defeated. What would he tell his mother? That an hour ago, he woke up to find Sam's chair empty? Eric's feet stopped just outside the door. He leaned against the frame until he was able to suppress the urge to cry.

* * *

Sam was in a place that could only exist in dreams. The river flowed in a soundless way, moving in blurs of aquamarine, cerulean, and cobalt. Sam recognized each distinct color in the river because those were the exact colors in her mother's collection of acrylic paints. The grass was still wet, as if freshly painted; she could distinguish the hair marks from the brush strokes on each blade of grass. Nearest to the river, the mossy green color smeared onto the soles of her feet leaving the appearance of a mowed lawn in her wake. Grazing zebra caught her immediate attention as one boldly walked up to the river near her and began lapping up the water. The zebra, absent of detail lines, blended in with the river as it drank soundlessly.

Sam peered at the sun touching the horizon that neither rose nor fell. The layered sky gave the impression of motion, but remained still. As the royal gold flecks of light of the setting sun met the sap-green field, splinters of white pearl and yellow gold dotted the expanse. It was her mother's sunset. She had painted it.

Slowly backing away from the zebra, Sam stumbled across her mother's autograph: C. B. Sam understood why she felt her mother's presence surrounding her. She was actually inside one of her paintings. Sam knew which painting she was in when she saw the slim truck and rough foliage of the Wild Syringa tree that appeared to grow horizontally. Her mother had spent months carefully painting the African savanna, which was only the background for the main feature of the painting, her father. Somehow Sam was standing in the portrait her mother painted of her father—but where was he?

She remembered the painting clearly: her father was supposed to be sitting peacefully in the field scribbling frantically in his journal. Her adrenaline rushed at the prospect of meeting him for the first time. Sam spun around wildly in search of her father, making herself frantic.

"Dad!"

She heard nothing but the sound of stomping hooves and the wind blowing through the reeds. She called him again and again, spinning in circles. Eventually her legs collapsed beneath her and she fell to the ground. Where was he when she needed him? For the first time in her life, Sam felt desperately alone. Sam cried into the soil, letting the earth absorb her sorrow.

"Peanut!" the fatigued voice called to her.

She knew it was the voice of her father.

Sam pushed her body from the dirt to feel her brother's hands lift her from the ground. Eric brushed the flecks of dirt off of his sister's hair. Sam realized it was actually Eric's voice she had heard. She looked around her brother imagining she would see her father approaching them, but he wasn't there.

"Are you alright?" Eric's eyes narrowed in concern.

Sam looked up at her brother through her puffy eyes, having trouble finding the right words to express her disappointment.

"He's not here." Eric said before the thought could leave her lips.

Sam's disappointment was replaced with anger. "Why—why not?" she nearly shouted.

Eric looked into Sam's eyes then stared at the sunset a long time before he answered. Sam knew he was keeping something from her because he kept rubbing the stubbly hair on his chin.

"Well, Peanut," he gently turned toward his sister. "That's not my story to tell."

* * *

Aunt Sofi brought all three of them fresh clothes and hearty club sandwiches for breakfast. Even though sandwiches were usually a lunchtime food, Aunt

Sofi knew how their mother loved her homemade club sandwich with fresh chunks of avocado and tomato, with just the right amount of turkey. Sam, Eric, and Aunt Sofi were so excited that Mrs. Benton was conscious again that they refused to eat sitting down. Instead they stood in a circle around the hospital bed, chatting away.

At some point in the morning Dr. Rosenthal consented to move Mrs. Benton out of the ICU and onto the second floor. The visitation hours weren't nearly as strict on the second floor, so all three of them crowded around the hospital bed, too excited to wait for their turn to speak.

Mrs. Benton sat propped up on the bed with five pillows scrunched behind her. Sam could not take her eyes off her mother for a second. She was mesmerized by the way she ate her food, tearing it apart and eating it piece by piece. As the sunlight poured in from the window on the white hospital gown and white sheets, she looked like an angel.

In the middle of a bite, Mrs. Benton paused, looking at Sam. She patted the bed beside her, and Sam immediately took the position to her left.

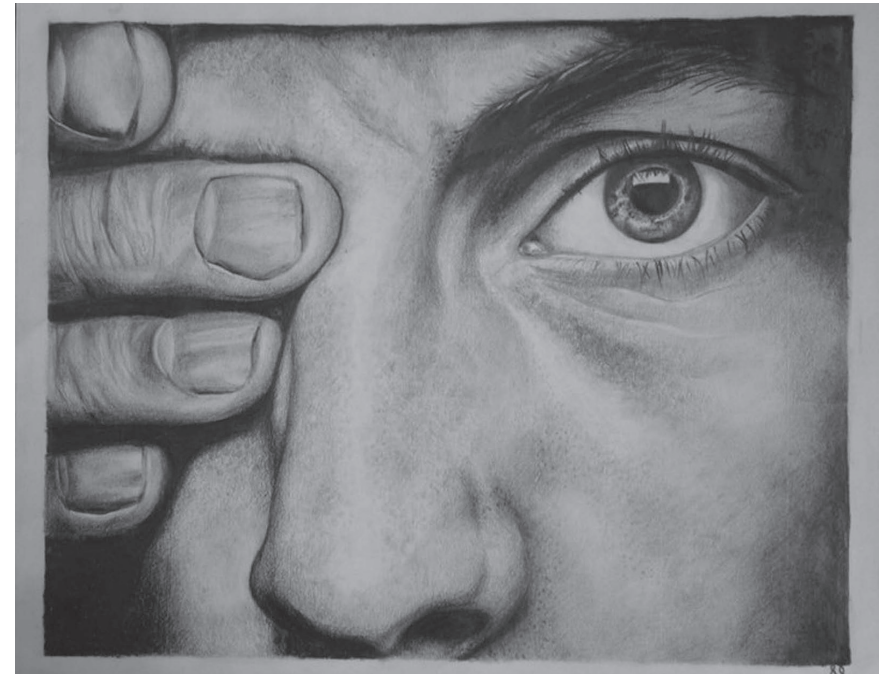
"I had the most amazing dream." Mrs. Benton looked like a child that discovered candy for the first time and desperately wanted to be the first to introduce it to the other children. "Come here, Eric. Sit by me." Her childish tone revealed her eagerness.

Eric devotedly took the seat on his mother's right.

Sam, Eric, and their mother stared at Aunt Sofia expectantly, waiting for her to join them on the tiny bed. Once they had all crowded together on the narrow hospital bed, Mrs. Benton told about a dream that began with a man named Samuel Anthony Benton and a very unusual envelope brought back from the wild plains of Africa...

HIDE AND SEEK

Jenna Simard



MOSQUITOES

Trip Starkey

after Jake Adam York

Listen to the sky
Murmur overhead,

splitting the glass river.
It gathers in knots of wind.

Letting my pistol crack,
I watch them tangle

in cottonwood leaves.
My daughter sits

on a blanket,
pinking her dress

with watermelon.
Stains trickle like blood,

watered-down. Mosquitoes
reverently wait for her to finish.

My wife's screams echo
in the cedars

like Miles Davis, spinning out
on a coal-black vinyl.

I threw brisket
across the yard,

watched the mosquitoes
gather on the breeze

to devour the bourbon-
soaked evening.

Drinking dandelion wine,
I followed her

to the creek's edge.
Two men were wading
in the shallows, stringing
a trotline from one bank

to the other. The one smoking
a cigar grinned. In the silver moon,

his eyes seemed unreal, like flakes
of granite. He looked like John

the Baptist, cursing his knotted bones.
I dont I dont I dont I dont hate

It. The words dripped down
down my spine. Carved

out the limpid air. The men lured
catfish from the black

murk. As the cigar man bent
to seize one, my wife

grabbed the pistol. Pulled its trigger,
burying a bullet in his cold chest.

My daughter picked
seeds from her teeth
after she woke,

- STANZA BREAK, CONTINUED -

fed them to the sparrow
on her windowsill.

The bird boxed itself
in a nest near the ceiling.

My daughter fell down
laughing, jammed her fingers
in bowl of oatmeal. It stuck

to her ceramic fingers.

The sparrow ate her seeds
and mosquitoes birthed

from its open mouth.

No one knew my wife
or the man she carried

from the river. Tearing the trotline

from the shallows, she flossed
the yellow of her gums.

Wandered into the meadow.
She scared up starlings,

burying the corpses beneath
a congregation of ragweed.

At night, she whispered
I have found myself
walking through a field

of roses. The summer wind
matted her hair. They sprout
from the eyes of men.

The whiskey evening
distilled her breath.

Wandering on
a forked path,

we fell down to sleep
in the moonlight.

She began choking
on dust.

I could see it
billow like the current

in the river. She spit
up blood-strung

saliva. It started
to drown her.

My daughter
sang softly,

all God's critters
got a place in the choir
Some sing lower
and some sing higher.

She trapped the sparrow
beneath a cast-iron skillet
on the wall.

- STANZA BREAK, CONTINUED -

Peering down
a crack in the floor

board. Squeezing in her hands,
she took the sparrow down
to the river. Mosquitoes clouded
over the banks. Water licked,

swallowing the reeds.
She plucked feathers from
the swelling tide.

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THEY CALL ME HER

Abigail Philp



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SOUND OF SILENCE

Ellery LeSueur

The sound before a question:
the brazen nothing.
It must infect me
even through the firmament:
the plight of being
pregnant with purpose
as before a star gives birth
and luminaires break into space
into a meadow of dark heaven,
the celestial glen.
The great beyond:
neither height nor depth,
shapeless, noiseless,
brimming with eventuality
that still speaks in sleep.
The purest stillness,
where secrets live,
that small corner of the universe,
stays the stuff of existence.
The peace hosts both the
drawing and departing,
but there the soundless speaks of lacking,
ever broken by a heartbeat.

BROKEN BRAIN

Natalie Kasling

My brain works backwards in a sense of wrong.
I was told always that I was broken.
You will learn to read me like, to a sing song
because that's what they say. Write with a pen

Natalie, you'll have a permanent voice.
I don't want my voice permanent. I fail.
Connections lack and do I even have a choice?
Blind eyes within me, I might as well read brail.

"Again" teachers me to say. "Again"
I harder focus, gripping tighter my chair to.
Drained eyes. With sweaty palms and dry skin.
"I don't how know to this can't see you do."

Broken brain, you say? I don't sort out a thought.
I'd like to see you read backwards without being taught.

ENTOMOLOGY

Bailey Betik

Some people are collectors. My grandfather collected coins from the Civil War, lined them up in chronological order: faded tin, copper, nickels half-eaten by time. My dad, he collects baseball caps, but only wears the same three over and over. I've never understood that, why someone would have a collection of things they don't use. I have never met a person who collects trains, but I've heard about them as we all have: those dentists who search for the perfect engine, the penthouse CEOs who lord over dioramas of Pacific railways, playing God between voicemails.

I was never very good at collecting things. Like antique spoons or almost-boyfriends, I could never quite commit to the satisfaction of repetition, of permanence. Stamps were boring. Autographs were just pieces of paper. My mother tried to get me to collect snow globes when I was younger. Mount Rushmore, Empire State Building, a buffalo on the plains, Cinderella's Castle. The same scene beneath a blanket of glitter-snow. Stir it around, repeat. Never changing, just stuck in a plastic moment forever. But I was too careless, tumbled into my dresser when I was eleven and walking on my hands. Shards of glass buried themselves in the carpet, cut my hands when I tried to vacuum them out. The buffalo still stood, unperturbed. My mother took my snow globes after that and put them out of my reach. They were sold in some garage sale past, pushed onto the next young girl who could only dream of life inside a bottle.

I found my first story when I was four years old. My ballet class was for some reason doing a dance to "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," miming homeruns in tutus and leather mitts. Somehow through criteria beyond my comprehension I was selected to sing said song while my classmates danced, but the microphone screeched and I ran off-stage crying. The audience roared with laughter. No one ever warned me about feedback. Later I'd realize that my first story was nesting in the velvet curtains. I'd go back and coax it into my hands, carefully save it in a jar to use at my nana's tea parties, and everyone would laugh. After that I saw them everywhere—the supermarket, the backyard trampoline, our church. I found some digging in the sand on the playground once and kids gathered around to see them for a quarter. Stories were nice, I learned. They helped you make friends.

Some stories are easy to find. Your common household stories. They buzz around your dinner table, landing on unattended spaghetti, batted off by Aunt Gayle when she notices one perching on her fork. These are the easiest

- ENTOMOLOGY -

to capture. Pin them against a wall with a newspaper. Clap them in between your hands. It's okay if you think you've killed one; usually you've only stunned it, momentarily stopped its heart. I had to learn this the hard way, left a couple to die only to hear them whirring around again minutes later. You can resuscitate them, tip them into a jar—but they don't live very long so you have to be quick about bottling them. *Charles watching Lonesome Dove instead of going to Christmas Mass, the search for your brother's stuffed hippo.* Keeping these alive is a complicated process. Give them some air or they will suffocate; not too much, though, or they will escape.

Some skid the surfaces of water, dart past you so quickly you have to snatch them immediately. Timing is everything. They land for a brief moment, lighting on coffee mugs and wineglasses just long enough for you to swing your net, and then you only have so long to tell them. *Did I tell you the one about the rabbi? A photographer walks into a bar and tells them he'd like a shot. So my boyfriend didn't know the difference between nickels and dimes until sophomore year of college.* These are clever, tricky. Sometimes if you're lucky they glow. If caught correctly they make everyone laugh; if you miss them you're left with the chalky taste of their absence, the missed beat, the lost timing.

Others wriggle along the baseboards of houses you're visiting, between cobblestones, the insides of picture frames. These always come as surprises; often you are unprepared, have nothing to catch them with. I keep napkins in my purse for these specific occasions. Wrap them up, hold them in your fist if you have to, but don't let these go. Bright green, chirping, begging to be seen, these are the ones people come to see, the centerpieces of your displays. *Tell them about getting locked in the Alamo! Tell them about philanthropy and acrophobia, about Mackinac Island, the theory of everything.*

Others have very specific timeframes, only visit when it's hot out. You can only hear them occasionally, their hums cutting in and out of sticky magnolia air. My mother pours a sugar mixture in a bowl on our porch to catch them. It's better for them to gorge themselves on sweet self-gluttony before they find a person to latch onto. They keel over, drunk on themselves, sleepy satisfaction like *that kiss at Getzendaner Park, New Year's at the lakehouse, impromptu sunrise hikes.* If they find a host they will suck your blood, replace it with the itchy feeling of *tell it again tell it again tell it again* when you know that you can't. That you have to hold onto them or it won't be the same, that it will never be the same. So you bottle them after they push their seams to bursting, let them live lazily, dripping honey. These are nearly immortal.

Then there are those stories that feel like you wait forever to find them. Sometimes it takes decades to track these down. They plod along, armor glinting, slow to come and tough to crack. Their skeletal pieces, their delicate delivery—*why you don't believe in Hell. Coming home to Impressionistic brushstrokes blood-staining the shower.* They are fragile, like snow globes. They require a lot of trust. Patience. But more often than not they come by air, dropping in to tickle your eyelids, brush your cheeks. *The homeless girl who lived in your room when you went to college. Peter Pan stopping a Disney World parade for you. The poems you got in the mail last week from the boy you thought you lost.* These are harder to tell, but softer. Heavy stories have cousins who fly.

I didn't know stories could hurt you until I was sixteen. I found a story in the arch of my foot, haphazardly stuck in moon-pale skin. Pain seeped through my ankle as I howled on the ground. My brother helped me get it out. Tweezers, digging around beneath my skin until he found it, embedded deep like a tooth. *You missed your chance.* That one stung me hard. I couldn't dance for a week. Tried catching that one, but there was nothing left of it, just the dead stinger threatening to cut me again. I think there may be some still remaining though, shards that cut the surface if I step on it wrong. I try to leave it alone. What people don't understand is that collecting is dangerous. Stories, they linger.

I've heard about stories that bite you when you're sleeping. You suddenly wake up one morning with words on your swollen body, itchy whispers like *you gave your sister that scar on her forehead, like that boy who had a girlfriend, like your crippling insecurity of never being enough.* These are days when they surround you, when you can't bring yourself to catch them even though you know that you should. You lock yourself in the bathroom to sit on cold tile, to make the redness subside, make the bites disappear. Sometimes they leave you marked.

And I need to find these. I have to write because there was nothing else left to collect. I was too careless for snow globes, for shot glasses, for brittle china. My mouth was too brash to collect songs, no matter how soft they were. Being a story collector gives me a way to become careful, human. I keep these in glass bottles in my mind, reordering them and taking them out and shaking them, dissecting them until I can see every heartbeat, every word chosen meticulously then soaked overnight. Words give me a way to mediate my carelessness, to tell what I wish I could have said but didn't have the time to tell. I know that I can't keep them forever pinned down like

museum displays, that they have to twist free or else only skeletons will remain, stuck in snow like plastic buffalo.

I don't write for love or for country or for the noble reasons other people will tell you. I do not write for anything but the fear that I will lose them. That I will lose you. I write because someone has to keep track of these stories, every one of them vital to the ecosystem of humanity, the only things I know people will remember. They need air. Someone has to feed them, keep them. So I do. I write to reconcile. I write to keep life alive.

CARROTS

Cale Downs

How to create a poem:

Step 1- Think of a title

Choose a word

Literally any word

It doesn't have to relate to your poem

At all.

Step 2- Think of a topic

Love.

You're welcome.

Step 3- Find some big words

And create some incoherent sentences

Such as:

"The iridescent rays of her luminescence drifted aimlessly
amongst the everlasting glow of dawn."

I don't know what that means

Neither do you.

It doesn't have to make sense

No one gives a crap

It's art.

Step 4- Formatting

Break up

The lines like

An arrogant jackass.

Maybe add a few

Hyphens- or forward

Slashes/

You can use/them-

Whenever you want/

Maybe put some words

over here

or down here

Step 5- And finally

Whenever someone tries to critique your poem

Insist they are simply ignorant

Because

Your thoughts run deep as the ocean.

And you are an artist.

Boom! Poetry.

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MARIONETTE

Amanda Foster

Hemorrhagic stroke in the cerebellum and temporal lobe.

Posterior parietal cortex and premotor cortex affected.

The muscles on the right side of my body:

A marionette cut from its strings.

My mouth sags towards hell,

My right shoulder is harpooned, dragged shrieking into the fire.

My dominating hand does not dominate,

But curls up as if in defeat.

Too tired, I struggle for words,

Lose my native language,

Wander the labyrinth of lingo.

A mute monster manipulates my tongue,

Causing me to choke on the fur

That seems wrapped in malevolence.

Memories are a jelly jar I cannot reach.

I am marooned by muscle,

My logic liquefied.

Significantly fractured vertebrae at the age of seventeen.

Levorotoscoliosis of thoracic five through lumbar one.

My spine is as crooked as my smile.

I wanted to be as graceful as my hands' movement.

I wanted to look as if I was not walking,

But floating through the air,

As fluidly as that goddess of which you dream.

I don't float. I st-st-stutter step on good days,

And grasp my hips, grimacing in agony on bad ones.

The twinges of torment throb in torture.

Never a moment without searing pain.

I am betrayed by bone,

My base broken.

Shattering of the right eye-shelf and fracture of the pelvis.

Hip dislocation and fracture of the left femur.

My ribs and my hip feud as to what is going to sit where,

Sometimes they both win, hardheaded hip and heart holder.

A demon wrenches my spine to the ground,

Twin imps fight over my hips,

Ripping skin to shards of dried carcass,

Decimating bones to a fine, white powder.

Wicked laughter echoes in my head,

The harrowing hell-demons, a constant nemesis.

I am faulted by frailty,

My psyche shaken.

TREE OF LIFE

Paige Walgreen



SPECIAL GIRL

Shelby Johnson



EARLY MORNING / LATE NIGHT

Natalie Guess

I love the times like this
when it feels like there's nobody awake
except
me
and God
and you

somewhere far away.

It's cold
seeping
and maybe my brain is a little funny
but
genuine.

Alcohol makes my brain funny
but *terribly* genuine.

The sky is grey
but not just grey
It's backlit
sort of
rumpled
seams of white creeping through
the angry creases.

Early morning
or late night?

I am in the center of a hive
a campus characterized by mindless
activity
talking
buzzing
walking
and I am completely alone.

Three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of
solitude.

I probably spin
and see every one of these degrees
completely empty
and I laugh
my breath a brief and joyous burst of
white.

It was a moment that I knew I would
remember.
Something about being
alone
in a place where you are
never alone
is very
jarring
and maybe important.

People here don't like to be alone
but
I like to be alone.

Let them have their buzzing
I have me
and God
and you
and this angry, rumpled hell of a sky.

Early morning
or late night?

And you are so far away
and I feel every bit of that distance
I taste the cold air between us
I see the roads
and trees
and buildings

- NO STANZA BREAK, CONTINUED -

and sheer amount of fucking *matter*
that is between us.

But yet
I feel you.

I know you are there.

And this is why
I pray
under this trembling sky
I pray for you
and your health
and your rest
and I pray
for us.

Darling, I pray for us.

And I smile and laugh
my joy turning into
wisps of steam.

BROKEN RECORD

Samantha Shircliff

The light in the bathroom won't flicker on and the mini fridge is not making its usual humming sound. The landlord has finally had it with us. She's turned the power off. This issue, of course, does not occur to me until my laptop dies and plugging it into the off-white, cracked wall outlet does nothing to bring it back to life. After walking through the apartment, flipping light switches and even trying to click on the old, 1970's style television, I slump into the kitchen chair. It creaks beneath me as I sit, the woven seat bottom straining from the overuse, and pick up my book to read. I won't try to write anymore today. I have become too irritated to begin to think straight.

But my book does little to distract me. All I can think of is what he will do when he gets home from the studio. He usually walks in, silently, paying no attention to me, kissing me on the forehead blindly while I heat up a couple frozen dinners. He walks into the bedroom, switches on the TV, and heads for the perpetually ceaseless pile of clothes to find some paint-free ones. He is calm and collected, quiet, and, like usual, unfocused. Tonight, he'll walk into a dark, cold, candle-lit kitchen, ignore me, grunt a few times while he tries to work the TV—without luck—slip out of his clothes and climb into the rickety bed without a word, as it squeaks and grumbles under his weight. That's what happens on the bad days—most days—on the days when he can't sell any paintings or on a day like today, when the realization that we have no money hits both of us like a ton of bricks.

I guess then, tonight will be the night.

Before he gets home I go next door to our neighbor's apartment to borrow their microwave so we might at least be able to eat something – something more than the pop tarts and coffee we had for breakfast. I hope that dinner will keep him from an immediate dismissal of the issue so we can try and discuss it. The candles I lit at dusk give the atmosphere a musky smell and the kitchen an eerie glow, doing little to warm the now freezing apartment. I bundle up in two t-shirts, a sweater and my winter coat, as well as leggings, a pair of jeans and three pairs of socks. I check my old, cracked wrist watch: 6:10. I still have a little while before he'll be home.

I grab a handful of coins and head out the door to the street, where the nearby streetlights flicker over the dark, deserted sidewalk. I walk quickly around the corner of the crumbling, deteriorating apartment building, past the old man in the old wool coat and white beard pushing a shopping cart

full of random knick-knacks, and over to the old payphone. I deposit my fifty cents into the coin slot, pick up the phone and dial the number I haven't thought of in almost four years.

I stand there, shivering, trying to warm my bare hands, watching as the little white puffs of snow begin to fall from the sky, listening to the ringing of the phone on the other line. I begin to become impatient, letting my nerves get to me. Finally, the ringing stops and a woman speaks.

"Hello?"

"Um," I clear my throat. "Hi—Mom?" and sit there nervously waiting for her response.

The line remains silent for a few seconds and I can only sit and think she hung up, until I hear her take in a few short breaths. "It's been so long," she says through her sobs.

"I know-um, it's just—" I take a deep breath. "I-I really need-a place-somewhere to stay ..." I trail off, waiting for her response.

She sits wordlessly for a while, tears acting up, her sobs putting doubt in my mind. I shouldn't have called her. I expected too much. It really has been too long. But then she says the only thing that could possibly console me at this moment: "Please, Jamie, let me help," she is still sniffing through tears as she tries to console me.

I am overcome with relief, "Thank you, Mom, so much."

She takes a few deep breaths to calm down. "We'll have a room set up for the two of—"

"Wait, Mom, no," I clear my throat, and force myself to mumble out the words, "just me."

"Oh," is all she can say for a while. She sits on the other line silently, as if waiting for me to say something to explain myself to her. When I don't respond, she awkwardly begins to say goodbye, to which I respond to rather quickly in an urge to avoid any more conversation.

I hang up with a sigh of relief and run back up the stairs to the apartment. Grabbing our only working flashlight, I rush into the bedroom and crouch

down on the cold, hard concrete and begin scrounging under the bed for the old duffle bag I've had since college. When I finally pull out the dust-covered, moth-eaten bag, it dawns on me that I don't even own enough things to fill it halfway. I dig through the pile of clothes, picking out the few things that are mine. I gather my toiletries, laptop, and other personal notes from around the room and tuck them neatly into the bag with the clothes. With one more glance at my watch, I shove the duffle bag into our tiny closet and head back out to the darkened kitchen to sit and wait. The dinners are only a few seconds away from freezing back into their original state when he finally walks through the door.

He looks around with a small frown on his face, glancing at the candles and me, most likely wondering why I look as if I've gained twenty pounds. I sit, anticipating his reaction to the lack of lighting, but to my surprise he shrugs his shoulders and a grin like I haven't seen for years spreads across his face. He walks over to me and lifts me into his arms, kissing me roughly on the lips. Now it's my turn to scrunch my forehead questioningly at him when he pulls me back to smile at me again.

"Um, hey," I stammer. "Good day?"

"Amazing day," he beams, squeezing me tighter in his arms. With this, he lets go and hums a familiar tune while gliding into his seat, smiling even more than before. As he lifts his fork to dig into his plastic dish of meatloaf, potatoes and carrots, he looks over to me—still standing—and says, "Dinner looks great tonight, Jamie."

I don't know what to say to that. I stare at him, a mixture of shock and confusion keeping me from moving, waiting for more of an explanation. It takes me a few minutes to shake out of my trance and sit down across from him and even more of an effort to pick up my fork and begin eating as well. After a few minutes of him humming and chewing his food and me staring and picking at mine, I find the courage to ask, "What happened at the studio today?"

He flashed his white teeth at me and replied, "We'll never have to worry about this," he motions to the candles and the frozen dinners, "again."

It takes a minute to register. He sits there, smiling at me, waiting expectantly for me to jump up in excitement, hug him, kiss him and tell him how much I love him, how proud of him I am, just like every other time. But to his surprise, and to mine, I can't do anything but sit there and let the tears run

down my face, the little holes in the corners of my eyes opening for the first time in years. *Not again. Not again*, I think to myself.

I can't tell him why I'm crying. I can't tell him that I am torn inside, so ready to leave, desperate to get out of this prison that I suffer through every day. I try to think of how in love we used to be, how happy we were living our dreams and proud to be out on our own; but it's so hard to cover up the life we live now: barely talking, let alone looking at each other. We are two strangers living under one roof. I have to get out, provide for myself and make a new life, start over and try to be happy again. I can no longer live in this world, the one so much like a broken record, where the same part continues to play over and over again, and there is no way to fix it unless someone picks up the needle and stops it from playing. It's time for me to pick up the needle.

He sits, staring at me questioningly, his brow furrowed and the smile he once held now drooping to match his eyes, watching me break into a million pieces right before him. I don't want him to comfort me; I don't deserve his comfort. He begins to get out of his chair to come over to me, but I reach over and grab his hand, shaking my head and motioning for him to stay in his seat. I don't want him to ask me what's wrong, so I choke out the first excuse that comes to mind. "I'm ju-just s-s-so hap-p-py." With this, his concerned eyes soften and his grin spreads back across his face. He caresses my hand which I have unconsciously left in his and I try to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down.

I immediately pull my hand out of his and try to occupy myself by clearing the empty plastic trays off the always-dirty table and attempting to wipe it down with a damp washcloth, doing little to rid it of its permanent grime. I turn to the cracked, yellowing sink and reach for the faucet. It slowly begins to dribble out water as I crank the knob towards the 'H' lettering that used to be HOT, although I know it will get nowhere close to this temperature. As I begin to scrub the tarnished forks and the foggy looking glasses with the torn and stained hand towel, I hear him come up behind me. He doesn't seem to notice my uneasiness as he hugs me and kisses me on the back of my neck. I have to bite my lip hard and squeeze my eyes tight to keep myself from crying again. As he releases me, I remain standing there, frozen, until I hear him in the bedroom, whistling happily as he puts on a change of clothes.

Carrying the flashlight, I push through the brown sheet hung to serve as a door to the bathroom and slowly feel my way around to the sink. I have to pull myself together and regain my confidence to follow through with it. I

turn on the sink and splash my face with water. I look at my shadow of a reflection in the cracked mirror and begin to recite, in my head, what I'm going to tell him when the whistling in the room adjacent comes to a sudden halt. It takes all my energy to reach over to the hung fabric and pull it back to look into the candle-lit room and into his eyes. They are open wide in surprise, yet they droop from sadness. His brow is furrowed in question and his mouth is slightly open as his gaze goes from me to the object my flashlight is shining on.

In his hand, and directly in the beam of my flashlight, is the gray, moth-eaten duffle bag I had hurriedly stuffed into the closet earlier this evening. I am paralyzed in my spot; all I can do is stare at the bag and think of my stupid mistake. All the while, I feel his gaze boring into me, waiting for me to give an explanation. When I do nothing but stand there, he begins to slowly shake his head. "No. No, no, no, no, no. Please. No," is all he says. He repeats it over and over again, and his voice begins to crack. Finally, nothing can be understood because the words have become muffled in his sobs.

I feel my heart break into two pieces. How can I do this to him? I've ruined what should be one of the happiest days of his life. But it's too late now. "I-I," I stutter, "I can't-I just can't-I'm sorry, but it's too much. I—" I can't hold the tears back any longer. My words turn into sobs and become indecipherable.

We both stand there, on opposite sides of our old rickety bed that we bought together six years ago, tears rolling down our cheeks, me unable to make eye contact with him, he staring at me as if the longer he does, the longer I'll stay. After a while, he drops the bag and walks over to me, embracing me in his long arms, holding me tight against the cold, and, for a minute, I think I might change my mind. I hug him back as his grip becomes loose and he collapses to his knees. He puts his head against my stomach and wraps his arms around my waist while I stroke his hair. *Maybe I'll stay; things could get better.*

But then I come to my senses and begin shaking my head. I remember the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that, and the time before that. I have to end it now. I gently pull his arms from around me and finally look into his deep blue eyes. I take his face in my hands and try to say something, anything that might console him, but all I can do is shake my head and say, "I'm sorry." I turn away from him and swiftly walk over and pick up my bag. I pull my key to the apartment out of my pocket and set it on the table on my way out.

On my way down the stairs everything is a blur behind my tear-filled eyes. I wipe my running nose on my sleeve and try to muffle my sobs as I push through the door to the street. I reach out with my left hand to flag down a taxi and glance at the thin golden band that wraps around my finger. My stomach feels sick for a moment when I realize that it means nothing now. It is merely a piece of scrap metal that I will eventually have to remove from its sacred place on my hand. This induces more tears and the taxi that pulls up to the curb looks like a big yellow smear across my vision.

I open the door and throw my duffle into the back seat and slide in after it. I take a couple breaths and tell the driver,

“Hartford, Connecticut.”

TAURUS

Abigail Buckley

Be wary of a Maychild,
born with a heart of gold
and words sharp enough
to pierce a crimson cloak.

They inhale anger slowly,
and leave smoldering ashes
flickering to the ground,
as the saturated smoke
curls lazily above your
shell-shocked skull.

After all, Hathor
herself took life
as easily as she
nursed it.

DESOLATE MAN

Ola Bodurka



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MADE-UP PATH

Emma Crandall

Freckles of light decorate the floor.
Trunks with gnarled wood
provide support.
Crunching and snapping.
Stepping and skipping.
Hands graze rough bark as she passes.
Nothing is disturbed.
Walking through the forest,
along a made-up path,
she becomes a part of its creation—
another deer who grazes or runs,
another bird who flies and sings.

LOVE IN A NEW HOUSE

Theresa Stanislaw

I can hear Caleb upstairs playing my violin
in the empty room at the end of the hall.
The house is still sparsely furnished, baring naked
wood floors, allowing the violin's vibrating tone
to bounce off the walls and through the doors,
outside to the back patio and back in through
the kitchen.

What is so new? We're both still just living.
Our environment has changed,
but our existence is still so the same.
We look at each others' reflections
in the blindless windows and grow together
like the chain link fence and oak sapling
in the back yard.

Like sound and wooden floors our lives echo
our living—we are in a new house
doing un-new loving.

LIFE

Grace Gallagher



WINGS

Luke Miller

I
Zen. Rinse before I begin,
Aloud, into a taptap (isthisthingon)
Microphone, in a sparse
Church, at seventeen.
Surrounded by
Students with experience in
College and condescension.
They could say what they will
About my performance, but I know
I was coral on that stage, blossoming
Into rigid pinks and brittlebony whites.
I breathed kudzu into their ears,
My mouth spiderwebbing them
Into a temporal ecosystem.

The next day was a blur of
faggotqueer.
Dodging the
Elbows, the
Glances, the
Slurs like a boxer
Fighting past his prime.
Huddling behind windows of hands
And praying to God as I shot
Holes in His moon that I
Would make it to lunch that day
Without dabbing blood or spit
From my shirt.

I was a teenager like
Roadkill is a martyr.

I made friendships with periods.
Knives became handshakes,
Coffins morphed into the

Infinite embraces of old friends.
Nooses were rough like
The hands of lovers
That I couldn't take
To prom that year.
Or any year.
Caressing my face with that same
Futile gentility.

II
The town we lived in wasn't much, either.
Days spent wishing for somewhere else,
Nights wishing I were a mummy,
Wrapped in gauze, if only to hide the bruises.

The kind of town
Where people go to Wal-Mart
For fun in high school
Four times a week
And nobody finds a thing
Wrong with that.

They called it the suspension bridge for a reason.
Guys would arbitrarily toss tortillas into the river
With their girlfriends, and I would sink back
And wait for them to turn around with the sun.
Punch me in the jagged, I'd say.
Throw me through your tough,
I know you could.

III
They wanted me to monochrome
My way through their existences.
They would shade me with Sharpie
Instead of Crayola. I was a firework,
Borne from the eye of Brahman
And deadalive warm like a Chicago dove
On an electric wire.

I ululated color and the clouds rained on.

- CONTINUED -

IV

The person they knew passed, one day.
Slipped from existence,
A greased memory joining
The greater Weaving—

People were shocked—not really.
They came to the funeral, out of pity.
Closed casket.
Some wore yellow and stood behind.
Their eyes exploded into
Colorado summers, blotching
Their desert cheeks.

I saw them as I stapled on my
Tinkerbell wings,
Never having felt like flying
When my heart was gasping,
When I was hum and throttle—

V

Don't cry too hard, Dad.
I wasn't born for 8 millimeter.
Just understand
It wasn't your hand
That cut me off.

I know you. I
Am you, held down
By layers of
Toxic paint.
I will become smaller with time,
Eventually nothing more than
A lone black-and-white
Photo in your study.
Facing away from you.

Don't cry too hard, Dad.
Just redecorate over me.

VI

Fling open the blinds, Mom.
Note the frosted dawn windowpane
Taut against the sky.

Unfurl your son's footsteps
As you glisten your routine.
Gloss the personal effects,
Define your space between.

Blizzard the town with gasoline.

WARNING

Steffen Francisco



FAILING EVERYONE AND WINNING AT LIFE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN EX-BASSOONIST

Jonathan Turner

In the collection of sounds fighting for resonance, a hierarchy of timbres and technique, there is one that remains largely unnoticed. She sits and waits. While others carry out a fight across the eardrums of their participants, displaying the percussive power of soaring, crystalline highs and rich, rumbling lows, she waits for recognition. She, with the silky medium voice, plays along, quietly observing the war. Suddenly, the fight subsides. There is silence. For a brief second, for a fragment of time, the silence invites her to voice herself, the voice that had been masked. The waves part, and through the center, she sings out. Through the air she flies, gracefully dancing around, embracing light and dark, high and low—like the moon's light flinging itself through windows, spilling along the floor in graceful luminescence. And for that minute, through the obstacle of notes and rhythm she so adeptly negotiates, she reaches the heart; she tears through, flinging herself into resonance, into existence. And after that minute, after she dances her dance, the subtle moment of peace ends. Like the meeting of a candle's flame to water, she disappears in the smoke, and the war rages on.

Movement 1:

I wish I had been *that* good in the early dawn of my bassoon career. That would come much later, if ever. I remember first opening a bassoon case. I didn't want to play bassoon. It was weird. It still is. All of a sudden, though, my band director forced the instrument into my hands.

"We need someone like you to play this horn. You're smart. Bassoon players are smart," he said.

I have since learned that this is not necessarily true.

So I opened it. I heard the click of the latches to the case. I savored the sound right before opening up my little bundle of treasure. I heard a movie in the background. This was sixth grade band, and the fall semester, the first semester we were allowed in band, had just started. While the others watched a movie on the first few days, I was exiled to the practice rooms,

- FAILING EVERYONE AND WINNING AT LIFE -

which are 6x6 white-wall rooms with the delightful smell of aged spit and tears, with my teacher. See, the bassoon is hard. It is 200 years' worth of hard. Everything about it is treacherous for a beginning musician. I only knew part of the struggle, the battle, in which I was entering with the "clique." So, for a second or two, I savored it.

I sat down with it anyway. It was most awkward to handle. To hold the thing, one needs a strap that very much resembles a belt—or something else, if you catch my drift. With a hook, it attaches to the bottom of the bassoon, called a "boot"—also fitting. Some of the fingers fit over holes. Others fit over keys, the little metallic ornamentations that give an interesting contrast to the sea of dull maroon. All was great. I had it in my hands, sitting on it. What else did I need? On came the bocal; the bocal is the pipe that leads from the mouth to the actual instrument. It is the intermediary that channels air from me to the base of the bassoon. It looks like a swan's neck. With that on, next came a reed. Like two panels of a paper fan collapsed in on each other, it was an interesting material. It was neither wood nor paper, but also not any other material I had experienced. Oddly, it is called a reed because they are made of... reeds. These two panels of reed vibrate once air passes through their hollow center—this vibration is what makes the bassoon sound like a bassoon. I don't know that I knew any of that when I first put my lips on the reed. It didn't stop me from swallowing in air and then expelling it into the two panels that then vibrated and sent the vibration and air through the pipe-like swan's neck bocal and through the base of the horn and the holes that some of my fingers were covering. I just blew. And it played. And I heard it. And it sounded terrible.

And I was so proud.

Movement 2:

She screamed. It was so loud everyone within spitting distance turned and looked at *me* funny.

Excuse me. Look away.

It was freezing. Excitement just sort of welled up from somewhere very deep within, and a little glowing light overtook my smile. I did it. I just placed very well and very highly in a major nerd competition. I was a sophomore in high school.

I had won.

My friend and I, ignoring the somewhat strange glances thrown our way, danced on the sidewalk in the freezing cold night air in front of the results. It had been a rough day. It started by finding my audition room. Of course, this was *hours* before I actually had to audition. Luck favors the prepared. There was a corner I had been eyeing; it was perfect for me to warm up. It was well lit enough for me to practice my music while also being hidden enough to hide the delicate beads of sweat falling off my face that I knew would pool down by my feet—well, that and the spit that I drained from my vocal and tears that drained from my eyes.

It was hot that day. It felt like the Sun was mad and taking its wrath out on my armpits. I could feel the stains start to form, the little lakes of perspiration. I wish deodorant was made for Texas weather, even in February. The temperature was supposed to drop, but I didn't believe it. I was also lugging Courtney around; somewhere around freshman year or so I named my bassoon Courtney. I had a fancy case; it fit snugly on my back like a backpack. Normally, Courtney wasn't heavy. But under the circumstances, namely the weird unseasonal heat, ol' girl had put on a few pounds. So I had to spend the day lugging around a 5,000 lb. Courtney and swimming through the sweat that leapt off my brow each step before I confronted death.

I was not particularly confident. Or dry.

The organization that runs the competition plays with its contestants' minds, too. For whatever reason, they make us all file into a room and watch a performance of gifted musicians play very difficult music before releasing us to hand-to-hand combat with our instruments. The group playing was a brass ensemble, so my already wrecked nerves were waving white flags of surrender, hoping to crawl out of that room with me. The cacophony of sound and the shine off of the gleaming metallic surface was an assault on the senses. My friend just stared straight ahead. She was as nervous as I was, but her temper was shorter. She was mad that she had to be there. She could have been practicing. I could have been practicing. Courtney could have been practicing. Rather, we were sitting in a room full of prepubescent band kids, which means little bursts of acne here and there like fireworks, watching this monstrous brass ensemble playing when all I wanted to do was either practice my horn, run away, jump in the river, or cry so hard that I was dehydrated and had to be rushed to the nearest Coke machine. I really, really like Coke.

This was agonizing.

And then I auditioned. The audition lasted for six months per piece. I had three, so pretty soon I was prepping for my graduation speech.

I was just surly by this point. I was sweating, which I hated, I was moving, which I still hate, and I was being forced to compete with the state's best, the state being bigger than some countries. But somewhere within my first piece, I started dancing. I was in it, in the music. I found myself hiding in there. With Courtney, I tried to break open the lines and persuade myself out. This was not my first year at State. This was my second. The first year was met with minimal success. My teacher said that I was not myself in that audition, that I was hiding my *self*. So, this time, without consciously deciding to act, I ventured into the music to find where I was hiding the last time. Suddenly, in one of the movements, there I was. And without hesitation, I flung myself into the life of the piece. I was dancing. *I want to be a musician. And a teacher. I want to be a music educator.* And then I was finished.

My audition was complete.

The temperature did drop. I walked over to the sheet. Turns out, I wanted to be a music educator, and that list told me I could do it. I made the decision right there, squeezed in a hug and crying.

Movement 3:

I was drowning.

It was a trick. It was the dirty seduction of a bassoon named Courtney and the fickle illusion of high school success. I thought that I wanted to play bassoon and be a band director. But somehow, there I was: the second day of my college career and already in tears. I hated it. I hated music. I had failed myself. I had failed music.

Why did I do this? They, those people back home, wanted me to be a music major. Why did I let them talk me into it?

In my heart, I had divorced myself from playing the bassoon not long after I had that really important competition.

In my head, I thought, *scholarship money, scholarship money, scholarship money, they are going to pay me, school will be cheaper, just suck it up and do the music thing. Music thing, get paid. Get paid by doing the music thing. This is easy math.*

In truth, part of my plan supported the path I desired. I wanted to teach. I wanted to teach English. Music then became an economic means to an end.

I called my mother crying. I called my best friend crying. I called Twitter crying. I called anybody with an ear or with moderate *giveadamn* skills—because, let's face it, it's not really all that interesting. I needed them. I was pacing around my dorm room one day, crying, hoping that my roommate, who had known me for two days at this point, didn't walk in. See, in my naiveté, I thought that if he saw me crying on the phone to my mother, it might be somewhat off-putting.

Weird.

I didn't want to play my horn. Worse, I didn't want to undergo the life of a music major—the various ways of being and doing that I so vehemently detested. I didn't want to structure my life in that way, to carry out an act which I was not in control of or had not actually whole-heartedly consented. This was not my life; it was someone else's. One can only imagine the fear when waking to find that the body walking around and the life that body is living are so very contrapuntal to the life in which you would have constructed in dreams and moments of personal wisdom.

The body was on autopilot, like a mouse in a maze.

I was trying to get to the end, but only some options were evident; I was just trying to get to the end and survive. Imagine my own fear when waking up one day and rather than feeling like a whole person, living in a room with a thousand threads of possibilities waiting to be plucked, I was rather running through a series of blinders to an end.

Hell no, we ain't 'bouta do all this. Somebody better get up in this joint and fix this shiz. Not about to have it. Nope, you don't win this one. Let me show you how we do it Horny-Fa'-Life land. My move, friend.

My move.

We have freedom. We have the freedom, at some critical point in our lives, to construct a life of our own choosing. While this freedom may present itself as a difficult—maybe polarizing—choice, it is present.

It is *our* present—a consolation prize for the struggle.

If anybody tries to mask this choice, to make one feel that the life he or she has been assigned may not be altered or at least challenged, the mentor in whom faith has been given has been operating under a guise. *A wolf in sheep clothes*. Through no other's fault but my own, I, myself, wore the sheep mask unapologetically. I had limited myself. I determined a life path and made a tough choice that I did not accept. So, I decided to make another difficult choice. And in that choice, to leave music, to leave a life spent learning complex musical theory and an even more complex instrument, I felt like a failure.

I failed. And, in hindsight, failure was the best thing I could have given myself. Because of my failure as a bassoonist, the courage it takes to fail tremendously, to fail greatly, I was given a path, a life, a self that would have been overlooked if any other iteration of *this* life had been realized. I chose to follow a thread of intrigue—to find that which causes me to inquire, to question, to confront and challenge. I'm following a thread that leads to meaning, to meaning making. I get to critically explore ways of being, doing, and knowing and engage with complex ideas—the spelunking of frameworks too big, too difficult, to simply *look* at. And by "failing" tremendously, where I was once looking at the ceiling, I am now looking at the sky.

SUNDAY MORNING

Hannah Taylor

Kneel down
And place your palms together.
Intertwine your fingers
Like the weaving of a basket
Meant to hold the weight of the world.

Bow your head
To hide from the serpent
Odor of incense.
Ignore the piercing cry
Of the baby, and the mother
Hushing her kin.

Squeeze your hands
And recite the words
Written in your brain
By the red outline of a ruler,
A punishment granted
On your wandering hand
By a woman more cruel
Than righteous.

Open your storied book
To endure the trial of ages,
The grand mystery of believing
In what you can't see.

TIMM SCHRAMM'S FUNERAL, BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

Jordan Ray

November snowfall,
Layered as a sigh.

MAN AND HIS BEST FRIEND

Ethan Wang



Originally Published in the Fall 2012 Edition

SHERMAN

Brendan Kiefer

sherman, surely, but he wasn't there;
instead, a t.v. infomercial and the damn cat
flickering adjacently, pulling air into bone-caged balloons
with little puffed coos, scrabble letters like cartilage on the table
spelling troubadour, blimp, and haveyoureallygone?
his wallet: three flaps holding a dollar, hugging his license and a
peppermint wrapper,
idle flesh.

Originally Published in the Fall 2006 Edition

TURNING BLUE

John Wood

To my brother Karl

I sat between a prideful patriarch
and a wet-eyed mother of four grown boys.
We heard thumping boots in gripping cadence
as rows of green-clad muscle, disciplined,
marched from behind towering Georgia pines.

There he is! and she waved at him in vain,
second from the left in the second row,
the youngest of four sons at attention.

Was it you and I, Cowboy, Indian,
battling in the yard? You never won then
but you are taller than me now, eighteen,
and you know well how to kill other men.

He will jump from a winter sky five times,
kind blue-eyed patriotic Icharus,
floating, deadly, the son of a craftsman,
while I write poems... yet I am terrified.

Originally Published in the Spring 2007 Edition

THE ROUND UP

Helen Hamilton



Originally Published in the Fall 2011 Edition

ODE TO PURPLE LIPSTICK OR (HOLDING ON)

Paige Poe

I washed the lipstick
Off your teacup this
Morning,
Rubbing the bruise
Colored stain until it dissolved
Under the steady water.
If only it were so easy
To remove the memories
Of you, a few
Drops of soap would
Cleanse me of the
Burden of remembering
And I could return
To usefulness, like a cleaned
Mug returned to the shelf,
Ready to hold
Again.
And that's what you do,
Fill and empty,
Carve people into vessels
With the force of your nature
Until you have rushed on.
I hold my body
Under the steady thrum of
The shower
As if water could cleanse
Me too,
And fill me back up,
Without you.

THE LAST STORY

Kellie Coppola

There were only five witnesses to the story of that night. Five complete witnesses, that is. For years after, other bystanders could still spout fragments of the wild tale that they'd witnessed themselves, and strung together these scenes might have made up a passable skeleton of the entire night. But there were moments and memories that connected the five of us for our entire lives, even after we were old and gray and living miles apart. There were parts of the story that only we had lived, and only we could tell.

If Jerry Martin, the grouchy anesthesiologist with Marxist ideals, were telling this story, he would have started with a lecture on capitalism and the woes of the ever-diminishing morals of today's youth that he always kept handy for any audience he deemed in need of healthy doses of liberalism.

If Beckett Thompson had somehow weaseled his way into telling the story, he might have cracked an alcohol-influenced joke about one of his ex-wives before plunging into a wild tale with exaggerated details that made him look like the underdog hero of that night.

If Sarah Corlaine, lovely Sarah, were speaking she would...but never mind. No one would have asked Sarah to speak today and she certainly wouldn't have volunteered. She turned red at the slightest mention of public speaking and she couldn't bring herself to use any cuss words, which, really, were half the story.

But if Richard were telling the story, the audience would sit straight in their seats, eyes wide and hands tense like children waiting for Santa Claus. Even though Richard had told the story the same way for sixty years—over beers on the golf course or cigars and champagne at fancy dinner parties—people still listened with new ears whenever he started off again. There was magic in the way Richard told it; his exaggerations were wild, yet believable, his impressions perfectly on point to make everyone involved look like a fool without actually insulting them, and his well-placed jokes made listeners laugh no matter how many times they'd heard the punch line. Even I, who had been at the toga party that night, was pulled into the lives of the characters as if they were strangers. I would sit captivated, completely forgetting that we escaped from the cops in the end; that Beckett was found unharmed the next morning in a tree outside the Kappa Delta sorority house; that Sarah and Jerry ended the night kissing in the smoky back room of Nickel Street Bar, while Richard and I were passed out to the sounds of Dusty Springfield, still in our muddled togas.

But I guess it doesn't matter anymore how they would tell the story and which one would tell it best because they're all gone now: Jerry to lung cancer, Beckett to a boating accident, and beautiful Sarah peacefully in her sleep. Richard spoke at all their funerals, retelling the story to the old familiar audience who laughed and cried and thanked him until they were red in the face. I remember at the last funeral—Sarah's two years ago—I sat in the pew and wished I could be present for my own memorial, if only to hear that well-worn story one last time. But in some trick of fate Richard had gone first, a heart attack at his beach house last week, and now the responsibility of keeper of the story falls to me.

I wait in the pastor's office in the back of the chapel where Richard married his wife thirty years ago. The June day is sweltering, and I wish I could crack a few windows but the minister has them bolted shut to prevent sun damage to his collection of vintage Bibles. *Hippie*, I snort inwardly as I examine the Zen garden on his immaculate desk. When I was young, ministers were boring old geezers with ear hair and monotone voices that would put the fear of hell in you if you talked during service. These days the ministers wore blue jeans and had the hymn lyrics playing on large projection screens like we were in a third grade classroom rather than the house of God. But Richard had liked the younger guy, said he had passion, and, really, what else did you need?

I hear the murmurs of a hundred voices as funeral goers shuffle in and take their seats, grumbling about their sweat-infused mourning outfits as they fight for the pews closest to the air conditioning. It sounds like all of Georgia is out there, which is no surprise since Richard knew everyone within a hundred mile radius. Such a crowd is enough to make any speaker nervous, but what really gets me is that they all expect the story.

Of course they do. Richard was the hero of the toga party story. The one who pulled Jerry through the window of the third floor of our fraternity house when his toga got stuck trying to escape the police. The one who had the guts to nick the bottle of Scotch from the chancellor's office. The one who talked his way out of a DUI ticket and saved my ass when I fell off the bridge into the icy waters of Lake Pincho, both of us buzzed as bees. The story was classic Richard, who was always the leader, but it also showed a wild side that few ever knew he had. When he died he was better known as the successful Southern gentleman who started up his own investment firm and made millions before his 35th birthday. He was the husband of a beautiful ex-anchorwoman and father to three brilliant children, full of responsibilities and stock market jargon.

But the others would talk about Richard Neel the success story. The funeral could go on for hours with all the people who had things to say about Richard. I had been perfectly content to sit in the back of the church listening to strangers heap praises on my oldest friend, but his wife Melissa insisted that I speak. *It was his favorite story*, she smiled with tears in her eyes when she approached me a few days ago. *And you were his best friend. He would have wanted you to tell it.* How do you refuse a grieving widow with an argument like that?

The black tie my wife forced me into tries to strangle me. Martha promised me she would be parked in the front pew with Melissa and that if I fumbled all I would have to do is look at her. I scoffed at the thought yesterday, but now as I review my note cards one last time I'm starting to feel a little tongue-tied.

Now, I may be old, but I can remember every minute of the night of the toga party vividly. Well, maybe not every minute, but even the parts I was blacked out drunk for I've heard often enough to be able to speak of with ease. But I want to tell the story right. I want to tell the story like Richard, so I spent hours last night trying to remember the exact words he used when he told it. The jokes he would lay on that were always funny, the hand gestures for theatrics, the eye roll he gave whenever he got to the part about Beckett streaking down Greek row. I wrote down every detail I could remember and practiced for hours, but still I feel stiff and unprepared. No matter what I do or say every person in the audience will be thinking the same thing.

That's not how Richard would tell it.

"Ted, we're about to get started." Richard's daughter Denise sticks her head through the office door. Boy, does she look like Richard. Dark hair and eyes that are always laughing, but whether at you or with you, you can never tell.

I nod and she smiles sadly.

"You're telling the story, aren't you?" She sighs. "We'll give you a couple more minutes."

When she is gone I exhale loudly, sweat pouring from my temples. I can't be the last person on earth to tell this story. I wasn't the hero, or the clown, or the hopeless romantic or any other kind of interesting character in this tale. I was the bystander, the one along for the ride whose greatest moment was attempting an impression of King Kong on a bridge and falling into the lake before I could finish. How is that heroic?

- KELLIE COPPOLA -

The first notes of *What a Wonderful World*, Richard's favorite song, drift through the office demanding that I go to the church, but I'm frozen. The song brings back memories of long nights smoking and drinking in the backseat of an old Chevy parked behind the fraternity house. I begin to think about my friends, my best friends, all of them gone, leaving behind impressions of older people with responsibilities and calm dispositions. There is no one left but me to remember them when they were young and carefree.

I think of Jerry, known as the uptight doctor who filled the minds of his patients and friends with liberal teachings that bordered on socialism, but who once climbed the Ferris wheel at Breckenridge Pier on a dare and had to have every firefighter in the county help him down. Beckett, who may have died an alcoholic insurance agent with a cantankerous personality, but was a solid roommate and true friend who took the blame for the fireworks incident of '61 so Richard's record would be clean to run for fraternity president. Sarah, an old and wrinkly grandmother that was once the girl every boy had a crush on. Our beautiful Southern belle who broke Jerry's heart and married a dentist in West Texas, and we couldn't help but keep loving her. Then there was Richard. Not Richard the successful businessman or the beloved father/husband. Richard the terrible golfer who had a soft spot for strawberry milkshakes and cried when the Mets won the 1969 World Series. My best friend since high school. These were the friends I had really lost. The friends I owed this story to.

I leave the note cards on the pastor's desk and straighten my tie. I enter the church, the stale, hot air sweeping through me. I take the pulpit with sweaty hands as a sea of people stare expectantly at me. They all know what comes next. I clear my throat and glance at the giant picture of Richard beside the casket. His dark eyes meet mine and this time I know they're laughing at me. *Don't be a coward Teddy*, I hear his voice in my head. I grin as I take a deep breath and start to speak.

"Our junior year of college, on a cold weekend in October of '62, Richard Neel got it into his head to throw the biggest toga party our school had ever seen."

SUBURBIA'S BEST FRIEND

Shelby Johnson



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CONTEMPLATIVE POETRY CONTEST WINNER

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CONTEMPLATIVE POETRY CONTEST HONORABLE MENTIONS

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"THAT IS PART OF
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DISCOVER THAT
YOUR LONGINGS
ARE UNIVERSAL
LONGINGS, THAT YOU
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FROM ANYONE. YOU
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- F. Scott Fitzgerald