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TCC at Olde Towne, Portsmouth
Preface

An idea was reintroduced that has long been pondered by philosophers, theologians, and simple wonderers: Does a soul exist? Can it be quantified? Is it a provable entity? There are those who would say yes and, of course, those who would argue its existence—thereby denouncing the thought as only imaginative fluff. Fine, let the debate rage. However, the point remains that after our many, many millenniums of thought, after our superior technological advances, after our non-mystifying all the mysteries in the world, we still ponder. We still question. We still need.

ChannelMarker was conceived for those students who felt the need to commit more to life than just its requirements and for those students who felt a need to communicate more than the necessary words the days prescribed and for all of us who in reading their words could understand a “soulful” response. And it is to them that ChannelMarker is dedicated.

ChannelMarker is the product of this collegiate administration which embraces a total student mentality. This collection of students’ creative musings represents our college’s commitment to excellence in all its vast and varied manifestations. Dr. DiCroce, Tidewater Community College, our instructors and staff, all visualize the concept of the total student—the student who is diverse in thinking, needs a creative outlet, and who is compelled to put into words ideas that must find voice.

Our journey for our literary anthology of student works, we now call ChannelMarker, began in 1998 in direct response to this need for expression. As all growing, living things do, it began small. Today, it has grown into this fine annual publication you are reading now. Please join us. To paraphrase an old saying, “It will do your soul good.”

If you would like to express your soul’s desire and become part of this extraordinary project in the future, visit us at www.tcc.edu/channelmarker. We’ll be waiting for you.

Phyllis Gowdy
Chair, Literary Festival Committee
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  Matthew McCabe
“They say that the worst way to die is by fire or water. But I say fire is the worst of all deaths.”

Sara’s picture sat in a circle of black candles in my living room. Sara was perfect. People always say that when a person dies tragically they become a saint in the eyes of the living, but Sara had been an angel even in life.

Everyone had loved her. Especially Peter. Sara had been the town beauty. She had been the perfect wife and the only holder of Peter’s heart until he met me.

I know it’s crazy to be jealous of a dead woman, but I am. Sara’s pictures are all over the house and Peter always talks of her as if she’s still here in the house. And you know what the awful thing is? She is still here.

Sara had died in this house. Right in this living room. She fell asleep on the couch one sunny afternoon and while she slept, an electric fire had broken out in the kitchen. By the time she woke up and smelled the smoke, the fire had already spread into the living room. The living room had no windows and the only exit was through the kitchen, so Sara was trapped and died a horrible death in the living room.

To this day, not many people will talk about the day Sara died. The one person who talked to me about it was my new next door neighbor Anna, and she said that the whole neighborhood had heard Sara’s screams as she burned. The fire-truck made it in time to save the house, but not Sara. By the time the firefighters made it to the living room, Sara was nothing but blackened bones.

The only rooms that were damaged were the kitchen, living room, and dining room. Peter, Sara’s then husband who’d been at work during the fire, restored the house within a year and moved back in. The people of
the small town of Candlelight Grove, Virginia were shocked to see Peter come back to the home in which his wife had met a tragic death.

Sara’s death happened ten years ago when Peter was twenty-two. Peter and Sara had known each other all their lives and had married young. Peter just met me last year when I moved here from New York City to write a book of death poems and we’ve only been living together for a month.

Our first date had been sort-of an accident. I’d been interviewing people in the local bar asking them about the deaths in their families and Peter had been one of the only few to do an interview with me. He told me about Sara. The only reason why he still lives in the house she died in is because he says that he feels like she’s still there with him. He cried a bit and I became very taken with him. But eventually we got off the subject of Sara and talked about ourselves and planned another date.

The first time I’d ever been in Peter’s house or even seen it had been the day I’d moved in. Ten minutes in Peter’s house was all it took for me to realize I wasn’t welcome.

Things of mine went missing, I would trip and there would be nothing there that could have caused my fall, weird things would appear in my food, and out of nowhere objects would fall on me. Peter laughed my complaints off saying that I was imagining things, that Sara couldn’t hurt me, she was only a ghost.

A few days ago I went to a corner bookstore to look for something that could help me control or get rid of Sara’s ghost and found Banishing Spirits by I.T. Barnes. The whole book was full of spells to help you safeguard your house against ghosts and demons. In other words, it was perfect.

When I got home, I hid the book with my writing journals and started getting dinner ready. As we ate our dinner, Peter surprised me. He got down on one knee and proposed to me and I said yes. But after he put the ring on my finger, his cell phone beeped. Peter had just gotten a text from his sister, Violetta, who lives in California with the rest of his family. According to the text, Violetta had picked up some sickness and needed him for support.

Since this was family business, I decided to stay here and watch the house. Peter left on a plane to California this morning.

So now I sit in the living room with the spell book in my lap and Sara’s angelic picture surrounded by candles in front of me. It’s a good thing this room doesn’t have windows, ’cause if someone was to see me now, I would totally be in the loony bin before sundown.

The spell for banishing a spirit from a haunted house is to bring a picture of the person to the place they died and surround the picture with black candles and then recite: “I banish you, foul spirit” five times and then blow out the candles. Hopefully the spell will work, because Sara was getting on my last nerves.

“I banish you, foul spirit,” I whispered into the silent house.

“I banish you, foul spirit.”

“I banish you, foul spirit.”

“I banish you, foul spirit.”

I took one more deep breath and said, “I banish you, foul spirit,” and blew out the candles.

I sat in relieved darkness for two seconds thinking that I’d finally gotten rid of Sara, when all the candles flared up again and I came face-to-face with a horrid sight.

I screamed and nearly had a heart attack, because in the middle of the candles was not Sara’s picture, but Sara herself. Or at least I believe it was Sara. The thing in the middle of the candles looked nothing like the angelic picture of Sara, it looked more like some horrid demon brought to life. The thing that was now Sara was a horrible collection of black bones in the form of a naked skeleton.

I ran for the kitchen, but the living room door slammed shut and burst into hot flames. I whimpered as I turned back to face a demonic looking Sara as it spoke in a dead whispery voice that sounded like something that had been dug up from a graveyard after 200 years in the dirt.
“You thought you would banish me with your weak spell book and take my place. No one will ever take Peter from me. When he gets back from the wild goose chase I sent him on, he will not be yours. He is mine.”

Sara then raised both her bony arms and disappeared with a peal of insane laughter as the candles fell over and set the room on fire.

“Help me! Help me, oh dear God, help me!” I screamed banging on the walls and screaming as they burst into flame too.

They say that the worst way to die is by fire or water. But I say fire is the worst of all deaths. Fire burns you to your last dying breath and all through the pain you feel and smell the fire burning your flesh away.

I screamed through the whole thing. I felt the pain as the fire burned me alive and the smoke clogged my lungs. Unlike Sara, the firefighters made it to take me out of the burning house and then to the hospital, but it was too late. I suffered hours of hellish torment and died before Peter made it back from California.

Now I haunt Peter as an ugly mummified-looking ghost with Sara, the black skeleton. Oh, if only Peter could see us now!

After the second fire, Peter restored the house again but this time he sold it to another person. He then moved to California, where three years later he met Lianna.

Both Sara and I were so jealous that we agreed that she will not have him. Peter was OURS.

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**Definition of Self at 21**

*Matthew McCabe*

In uninviting leather chair Man with Goatee and Glasses and Framed PhD
Asked me who I was and what’s been on my mind and I said with stoic conviction,

“I am my jeans-
An old pair of 501s- my favorite jeans-faded with time and coffee stains
and frayed at the hem:
1,000 photographs stuffed into threads and seams
Bursting with memories like fireflies in a jar.

I wore them when I first saw the aluminum roofs and shacks and desolation and beauty of Port-au-Prince
When I waved to Tap-Taps, learned Kreyol with Reginald, Wesley, and Jean-Rene;
When I watched Caribbean sunsets drinking Prestige from an island balcony
That no longer exists.
They were with me when I spent two months alone with a shovel,
In a city sandwiched by Evergreens and the Sound
Sitting in a garden with ashtray, notebook and thought.
They graced cold plastic seats on the backs of busses while I read bargain-bin books-
‘Next stop 160th’-
With me when I turned down a meth-mouthhooker, who just wanted $12 for rent, and I had no cash;
For conversations with homeless Craig about life and death, how to sell heroin and abscesses and groceries on Sundays;
Satin grass while a presidential candidate from Illinois spoke of change on a brisk April Saturday,
Or read letters that began with ‘We regret to inform you’.
They were with me for all the nights I wish I could keep in my back pocket,
Nights of Chronic and 40s and shooting stars,
Redman leaping from speakers,
Double-rolled joints in Central Park
And Christmas in the Low Country.
I find comfort in 16s, chopped samples, handclaps, Yes Yes Y’alls,
Insulated between my boom-bap speakers.
I’m the Champ of Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda
Standing within claustrophobic walls of isolation
Praying in rusted phlegm dialect to the Patriarch of Second Chances,
Hidden in nicotine shadows, somewhere between insignificance and low self-esteem
Persevering with fermented bravery in my veins,
Easing imaginary stress one Camel at a time
Waiting to ride the Flying Hourglass

I long for Motown vinyl and Flower Power -
A time when youth meant more than riding the conveyor belt.
“I wish I was but a grain of sand
I wish I was only 6 again
I guess I don’t know how to be a grown-ass man.

I am simply a member of the human condition,
Paralyzed with consciousness,
Just trying to keep one foot in front of the other.

I’m one of 300 million people going their own ways, from Bangor to Juneau-

Schizophrenic harmony-

An epic kaleidoscope, once more brilliant than red white and blue alone-
Now a broken mosaic of brown yellow black white
Rotting in individually wrapped snack packs on supermarket shelves,
Slowly careening towards disintegration,
Where any errant vapor of differing opinion
Can and will be squashed in the name of the Just and Righteous Tapestry of Stars and Stripes
By fat men with racist radio shows,
Who write books about the dangers of compassion and unity

For the empty statues frozen in their LCD stainless steel and granite countertop cells
Who stare out their windows and can’t remember what color a cardinal is.

Beware, The Rapture cometh via cable news.

I don’t know how to talk to God, but I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him-
A woman bathing her child in a street-side puddle, happier than I’ll ever be.
Everyone carries on with their Microwave Jesus and plastic Hallelujahs,
Which float from transparent smiles like black-hole whispers,
In sync with microchip metronome hearts.

When did digital replace umbilical?
I can hear the celestial laughter,
‘These assholes got it all wrong.’

So Man in Leather Chair with Framed PhD
You ask me who I am and what I feel?
For now, I’m just a bundle of insomniatic numbness-
Confused and 21-
Who gives a shit what I believe?
Next time I hope I’ll have a clearer answer.
But I’ll still be me, carrying a torn and folded leaflet in my back pocket
With Prayers scribbled in messy penmanship from the voiceless
That should’ve been Psalms howled in a deafening falsetto
And maybethen the beginnings of a Definition, one day closer to whom I’m supposed to be;
Still rocking my favorite jeans but still without a fucking clue.

Just give me my happy pills so I can kindly leave.”
Flyaways

Jessica June Burgess

All she had to do was turn on those proper heels;
The inner bell chime signaling fight or flight and she chose to spread those wings and lunge into a breath strong enough for capture;
It continues to hide;
Between black cotton and moist skin covered in anxiety beads;
Lurking among the cracked fingernails of one too many surrenders;
And those shiny mirrors;
The kind you find in the dressing room of a department store that belong in a home-made mobile fun house with metal studded floors and bright purple paint that cracks when you touch it and turns your fingers green for a week. It’s the ride in the back of the carnival away from the pipe organ music and fluorescent cotton candy where carnies smirk when you fall in front of their leering eyes and they lick their lips like vultures on a fresh carcass.
Where a large is ancient history and extra small comes with an armored battalion that has suffered blows upon the chest;
Those muffled sighs heard next door;
By the young one who’s hands pound the floor, squeezing into denim shackles.
The kind of room that tears are made of.
Rib cage and sternum contract in one heave and pouring forth is blastulas sludge;
The kind that becomes a bad habit after a 90 days of quitting;
The kind you take a lighter to and watch the flames lick rocks to syrup;
And syrup to caked eyes and numb lips too weak to say anything but ‘yes’;
Heavy hand reaches towards a face too close to water;
The kind of water that’s stale with age but doused with perfume like the football coach in your sophomore year that smelled of sweat and expired Old Spice. Think back to how he taught and all the free time you had to roam the brick layered halls during his lecture which usually involved watching Saving Private Ryan for the fifth time and

then listening to his Kmart metaphors relating his students to shoppers who could give a shit less as he bellowed homework plans and plays to football practices after school. 
Drowning angst and rage; 
The kind of pain that comes with hours of pinching until your skin is speckled pink. 
Indulgence towards a funeral, a revival, a some kind of all-knowing, holy; 
And that water keeps rising; 
That kind of saying is worse than the hunger inside you; 
Those kinds of sayings are what make this so easy. 
Chiseled jaw leaning against cold and cheap black lacquer; 
The kind with bacteria infested crevices where adipose is aplenty and one- ply is king; 
Think about who has been here before you; 
Reading the walls love-notes; 
“He’s a stud muffin” and her “first lesbian experience was more than just a drunk accident”;
Think back to your first inebriation and remember how the sky came falling down that night into your lap and out your fingertips as the cobwebs of yeast started to form around your eyes. 
Hate-notes scrawled against the polka dots reminding you how she’s a whore and a backstabber who prefers pompons to book reports and always has the perfect eyeliner but will never let you use it because somehow, you’re now beneath her when for years it was peanut butter and jelly and it really was that simple; 
Polka dots like the bruises that line your upper thighs and lower stomach; 
Counter corners used as fists against a punching bag; 
You were always too soft; 
Like the puddled paper on the verge of dissolving that swims at your knees along the caulk lines; 
Sometimes, that obnoxious footprint creeps past your ear; 
Hold still; 
Holding still for that moment between enter and a deep sigh between heaves; 
The kind that stain enamel and harden foolish resolve to keep going; 
Going, going, it’s die or die; 
No in between to save the nerves that frazzle at their ends and lay on dead muscle; 
Empty palms that lose their grip;
The kind of palms that cradle salt water and coated lashes; 
The kind that fall from their nets and will eventually be replaced; 
By overpriced glue and synthetic fibers; 
This is pretty and perfect; 
The foolish fooling the fools. 
Tiled walls spin on their mildew layered cement graves and the light is dimming; 
The kind of dim that creeps around your shoulders, burrowing in your brain and you know it’s just a matter of time before the doors and walls become speckled black and deep blue with filmy yellow centers that don’t know the meaning of adjust; 
Rods and cones failing as the brain folds in on itself; 
Metal clangs like a gun on aluminum and your hand is layered in bites from unattended incisors and that filed down chipped tooth that was hit against that water fountain years ago by some boy running by in the hallway too concerned with his recess to notice you were there; 
Not the worst thing that could happen; 
But typical; 
The stale air around your face reeks of acid and insecurity; 
Your conscience is withered charcoal like that dilapidated crab shack on the way to Maryland, tucked behind country roads and overhanging trees. You can still see the rusted buckets and paper thin stickers hanging by cheapened glue onto the walls and the staircase whose rotted wood cracked beneath your feet. 
Try to keep up the place and it falls in a heap around your ankles; 
Take a photograph with a nervous smile and haunted eyes; 
That’s the kind of girl who’s the topic of your conversation when there’s nothing left to bitch about and all the cheap wine ran out long after your memories came running up the front door; 
Barreling in like they own the place and trapping you in the kitchen to feast on remains of anger that were left unresolved from years ago when opinions were knives severed into the muscle that held your head like those groups of girls who caused you to each lunch alone in the math wing on campus by the vending machine and you’d stare down into your soggy turkey sandwich and past the vast bungalows that became desolate that half hour; 
During fall the leaves would pile in the corners and you’d stare down into the line of pockets, wishing they were deep enough to fall through. 
That was your sanctuary; 
Cutting into everything untouched and leaving you with nothing but an empty pit of regret for always being the smart kid who never said ‘yes’ to ‘can I copy your answers’.
Lipstick stains the mirror as the judge in the 3rd act;
The kind of judge that turns up her nose and takes notation like her word is prayer;
Get down on your knees and worship;
Remnants of self-worth removed upon sight of the reddened cheeks;
Flushing like pink snowball sugar puffs against skin with too many freckles to count and not enough laugh lines to etch the corners of eyes and mouth that they should have;
The kind of should haves that skipped stones across ten years like a child playing tag;
You’re it;
You were never it;
Games were deserted for books and fantastical stories of salvation and capture and redemption all bound together in that caramel leather and stored on the bookshelf that you thought had to have been twenty feet high;
The kind of high where you never came down like those purple balloons flying in the wind attached to your wrist when you were ten years old after going to your grandmother’s birthday party and you think back to the way she always smelled so classy and her enveloping hugs that lasted forever when forever always existed and never came three years later;
You’d let it go, set it free to the telephone wires that riddled the skyline;
Hoping they’d break free from that white ribbon and rush out of sight;
Wave goodbye.
October

Janine O’Neil

Let go of your Hot young Summer
With his blazing humid mouth and youthful build
And Embrace me

Feel my tender brisk kiss against your shoulders
Still bare from Summer’s Love
Let Me Exhilarate
With cool breezes and tender nights

Do not think of dark dreary winter
Or the cold promises of snow that never come

I will show you Bronze Glory
And wrap around you with delicate breezes
Lift your face to my crystalline sky
Show me your face tinted rose with my cool kiss

Collect your Dead Sticks for your moonlit bonfires
I will dance with you around its amber flames
Tease your hair with cool Zephyrs

And when I am gone mourn me
The dark golden promise of ripe fruits and delicate gourds

I will fill you after Summer has left you wane
With memories to last through Winter’s Dark

Nesos

Christopher Shingledecker

This journal was discovered on 29 October, 18XX, wrapped in oilskin and adrift in the Pacific, by Captain Enoch Blackwood of the Isabella, a New England whaler. Some effort was made to calculate its place of origin to no avail. It was later willed to the grandson of its discoverer, Prof. Randolph Douglas Blackwood, who translated the passages below from the original Old-Dutch. Its current whereabouts are unknown.

To whomever finds this journal:

My name is Ambroos van der Möbius and if you are reading this, I pray to god that you have been spared my fate. Before my time on this wretched Earth is up and death has its day, I will try to recount both who I was and what cruel lot later befell me.

I was born in the year 16XX in the city of H-----, in the Netherlands. My mother passed beyond the veil when I was still of tender years and my father was a Calvinist preacher whose character, like his sermons, inspired more terror than love in the hearts of others. His wish was that I follow him in his vocation; however, I was of a different mind and, at my earliest opportunity, was ordained as a cabin boy on a merchant ship bound for the East Indies. To my delight, I quickly discovered that I excelled in seamanship as quickly as I had failed in theology and, in no time at all, had left the fo’c’s’le to apprentice as a navigator. The winds of fortune continued to blow fairly for me and, after a few years, I became captain of the Ligeia, a merchant vessel from Rotterdam.

On my last voyage, my crew and I had the hull loaded with spices, silks, and slaves brought to us bloodied and in chains whose pace we quickened with club or whip. We were eager to depart, since ahead of us lay a journey of thousands of miles back to the Netherlands in our rotted wooden hulk.

It was late summer and a typhoon threatened to delay our departure, but I was determined not to let nature stand in my way and so, bracing
The next day, determined to survey my new surroundings and, if dolphins fell prey to our hunger. That having been done, with nothing doldrums. As the ship lay in irons and the sails hung limp and lifeless on the masts, we slowly cooked under a sun that now seemed like a mortal foe when, not long since, it had been welcomed as an old friend. In time, our supplies were exhausted: it was then that the desperation began. We still enjoyed the company of a few of our dolphin friends but, now that the food was gone, harpoons were fashioned and the dolphins fell prey to our hunger. That having been done, with nothing left to eat and not a breath of wind in the air, we resorted to other means of finding nourishment. May god have mercy on our souls for what we then did.

It came to be after that that I was the last person left alive on the ship. I wanted to die; however, it seemed my punishment was yet future for in the distance I could make out the dark shadows of a massive storm. Hurriedly, I lashed the sails and braced myself for the onslaught. With my last shred of strength I retired to my cabin, placing myself utterly at the mercy of the raging tempest.

I awoke, sprawled on the shore of some strange island, the remnants of my ship and the fortunes it contained lying strewn about. My location, along with how long I had been unconscious, was a mystery to me. I sat for a moment on the fine, white sandy beach, staring off into the distance, searching in vain for any sign of a passing vessel that might afford me rescue. Thus was the manner in which I passed my first day on the island that would become my inescapable prison.

The next day, determined to survey my new surroundings and, if possible, discover some means of escape, I made my way to the line of scrubby coniferous trees that grew on the edge of the beach. The undergrowth was minimal, with only a soft layer of dried leaves and a few small plants under the shade of the taller trees. The forest looked so tidy that it seemed as if I had suddenly found myself in a well-tended olive grove. I walked for roughly two days before I heard the sound of a stream. I quenched my thirst in its cool, refreshing waters and sat for a while on the leafy bank until, overcome by exhaustion, I slipped into a deep sleep. I was startled to find, on waking, a clean, neatly folded set of clothes by my side, along with a small sack of food full of meat-pies, cheese, and various dried fruits and nuts. After having ravenously devoured the contents of the bag, I put on the garments, which consisted of a breezy white cotton tunic and leather sandals, all the while keeping an eye out for the mysterious agents who had left them. As my only other clothes were torn and soiled from the previous troubles, I gladly cast them off. Making my way upstream, I continued to call out occasionally, hoping to meet my new-found hosts.

Gradually, the forest gave way and I found myself in a place unlike anything I had ever seen, a city built in the most singular fashion. It was in the shape of a circle, or rather, a series of three concentric rings with the largest being at least twenty miles in diameter and each smaller, inner ring being positioned a little higher than the last and separated from its neighbor by a moat, forming a massive hill at the top of which was a temple-like complex of buildings. From this mountain-city flowed a grand canal lined with stone that led back to the sea. The roads that led into the metropolis were surmounted by enormous gates made of gleaming metal and stone. Each of the rings that made up the city was full of magnificent buildings that in style were similar to the ruins I had seen in Greece and Crete during my voyages. As I made my way toward this mysterious place I immediately noticed the singular lack of both humans and animals, for I had, during my entire time on the island, seen neither a villager in the forest nor a single bird in the sky. This lent the entire land an eerie silence that I found was not broken in the city.

As I wandered the streets I discovered the most amazing things man has ever seen. The structures were marvelously built out of pure white marble, accented with various stones and metals which were unknown to me. Inside, the walls were painted with amazingly life-like frescoes depicting the everyday life of a people I could only describe by their manner of living as being specially blessed above all other nations. What I found even more remarkable was the fact that even the humblest of dwellings contained a king’s ransom in gold, silver, and jewels, just one of which could enable a man to live as he pleased for the rest of his days, forever liberated from the need to lift a finger in work. Furthermore, on each table in each house was a feast of rich and dainty food. The dishes included fowl stuffed with bread and olives; whole roast pig with dark crispy skin; an uncountable number of fish that were fried, baked, and stewed; loaves of soft, steamy bread; and perfectly ripe fruits, the like of which I had never seen before, all set on ornately carved wood and ivory tables, lacking only someone to eat them. Such sights convinced me that...
the denizens of this place had to be about, and so I continued my search, gradually working my way to the top of the mountain.

The temple complex that looks out over the countryside is undoubtedly the greatest wonder the world has ever known and would surely overwhelm even Antipater himself. Even now, given all that I know and have seen, I am still able to marvel at its grandeur. Taking in the magnificent view, I noticed that to the East in the direction whence I came, there was indeed a well-tended forest, but it itself was merely part of a larger island that seemed to contain nearly every type of environment: mountains to the north, rolling plains to the South, and marshland to the West. In the temple itself, there is a giant statue of a great goddess with three heads, that of a dog, a horse, and a snake. Strangely though, it seemed to have been constructed on the site of a previous one, whose shattered remnants still littered the interior. In front of the statue was a mammoth brazier from which smoke issued forth, though I could detect nothing burning inside. As the sun set and the waning near-circle of the moon appeared, I decided to retire to one of the dwellings at the bottom of the hill and partake of the mysterious feast that had been prepared by elusive inhabitants that I had not yet seen.

I expected to be roused by the rightful occupants of the house during the night; however, I awoke to find that I was still quite alone, though astonishingly, my discarded plates from the previous night’s dinner had vanished and the table had been set again with the same sumptuous feast it had borne before. I had never been a superstitious man, but I then began to feel a growing unease about the forces of the world of spirits and the unseen that I had not experienced since the days of my long-dead father’s sulfurous sermons. This steeled in me a desire to leave the accursed place by any means possible, and being a mariner by trade I set to work constructing a small boat that would carry me away from these god-forsaken lands. Shipbuilding, though, requires tools and I had none, so I wandered the streets searching for anything that would suit my purposes to no avail. In fact, I did not find a single implement of work of any kind, be it a broom or a stew-pot. This forced me to improvise, and so I began fashioning what I needed from the rocks of the nearby cliffs. I had just finished this task when the sun dipped below the horizon and from the waters of the deep rose the ghastly visage of the full-moon.

This was the first full-moon I had experienced since my arrival on the island, and I only wish I could say it was also my last. As I made my way from the forest where I had been working to the city, I began to see the shadows move. Gradually, their grim outlines sharpened until they came into horrible contrast. The shadows themselves became the lost inhabitants for whom I had been searching. Though they may have once been alive, they were now twisted, condemned spirits horrible to behold. The bodies of the ghouls were dirty and decaying, their torn garments being stained with the liquid of their own putrefaction. Their moans and screams filled the nauseating, sickly air all night long as they labored away, performing all the myriad tasks that kept the island superficially a paradise. Some were in various states of transmutation into beasts. Worse still, those who had completed the process of transmogrification were chased down and butchered on the spot by a morbidly obese monster with a bloody cleaver the size of a large door, who used their remains to prepare the meals on which I had been feasting so ravenously. The rest of the condemned toiled under the lashes of the overseers, skeletal giants in fiery armor whose whips, it seemed, could tear and shred the soul. Even the very water itself turned to thick, dark blood in which bodies floated up-stream toward the now dark and sinister citadel in one continuous, macabre queue. Terrified, I ran toward the ocean, but everywhere the spectral slaves labored on. Eventually, I found a rocky crag under which I hid, praying for the sun to rise up and banish these evils from my sight.

The next morning, all was deadly calm once again with the terrors of the previous night having vanished without a trace. Now frantic to escape this hell, I redoubled my efforts to construct the craft. Working night and day, I refused at first to eat the grotesque meals that were set fresh every night by the shadows, but gradually, hunger and the complete lack of other sources of nourishment forced me to choke down just enough to survive. Despite the feverish pace at which I worked, I was forced to endure several more nights when the full moon revealed the island’s daemonic secrets. After completing my boat, I gathered what supplies I needed, but before leaving for good I selected what I thought were some of the choicest gems from the treasures of the island and stored them away as a kind of compensation for the unspeakable trauma I had endured during my stay. Launching my little ship into the Grand Canal, I cautiously sailed toward the open sea and, I hoped, home.

As the sight of the ocean rose up to meet me, my spirits began to improve by degrees. Eventually, I found myself gratefully watching the island slowly vanish in my wake. I thought I was a free man. I was mistaken.
It seemed that the farther I traveled, the darker the sky grew till a giant storm developed and began to strain my fragile raft to its limits. Skillfully, I navigated through the towering, foaming waves that seemed almost to possess some mortal hatred of me. Yet, I somehow managed to steer my way through them and towards safety. However, unbeknownst to me, the dark forces of the island had more tricks yet in their bag. Through the stinging drops of rain, I beheld a maelstrom raging ahead of me. Not having seen it in time, I was pulled into its fury despite my strenuous efforts to escape. My last memories of that night were of being drawn beneath the waves. In that moment, I bitterly wished for death over the cursed future that awaited me. Sadly, that wish was not granted.

Once again, I awoke on the warm beaches of the island just as before. Scrawled in the sand next to me, some spectral finger had left a warning lest I attempt to escape again. It read, “YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE.” Broken and exhausted, I resigned myself to this fate. And so, I grew accustomed to languishing in the golden city by day and feasting on the fel-banquets at night. Thus have I done for more years than I can now remember, still dreading the coming of the full-moon and being horrified to discover that each time more of the condemned spirits beckon me to join them in their labors as a fellow-worker, or taunt me, like the overseers, who crack their whips menacingly in my direction, giving me a taste of what is soon to come, namely, an eternity of penance for my crimes.

Now, as I complete this final task of setting down the particulars of my life to serve as a cautionary tale, I can only pray that, once I consign this journal to the waters in hope of its leaving this dreadful place that I cannot, whoever finds it will take heed and, from time-to-time, spare a kind thought for the cursed soul of a poor sinner, destined to labor for eternity on this wretched island of earthly delights.

Kristen spent her days as a secretary for a television repair shop. It was a small company, having only three employees; two of which were the owner, and his egotistical son. Day in and day out Kristen filed paperwork, submitted invoices for payment, and dealt with emotional abuse from customers who couldn’t live without their precious televisions. Oh how terrible it must be for a human to have to endure a week or two without that plasma television. For the past three years Kristen had remained a faithful, underpaid and overworked employee. Kristen was only twenty-eight years old, but her days of teenage rebellion seemed like so long ago. Sometimes she wondered if her life would have turned out differently if she had gone to college directly after high school she wouldn’t be working a minimum wage job, struggling each month to pay the bills. Sometimes she missed the partying; exciting nights that began with drinks and bong hits, and ended with new friends, amazing stories and plans to start again the next day. Whenever her mind wandered to the past she would solemnly remind herself that she was an adult with responsibilities; she had chosen her path and there was nothing she could do about it now.

Monday morning arrived just as it did every week, and Kristen began it like the hundreds of Mondays before. Up at 7:00 a.m., one cup of coffee while watching the news, frozen dinner for lunch packed securely in a plastic grocery bag, pack of cigarettes in hand as she headed out the door at exactly 8:20 a.m. Ten minutes later she is unlocking the shop’s door, and turning on the computer to begin the day’s paperwork. Kristen was filing away invoices when her boss, William, showed up. William was a nice man; in fact he was probably the nicest boss Kristen had ever had, but his kindness didn’t make her feel any better about the meager salary he provided her. Still they had a good relationship, and Kristen believed that William genuinely cared for her. William was there for about an hour before his son Aaron showed up. It always annoyed Kristen that Aaron showed up to work whenever he felt like it, and never worked a full day, yet he made over double her salary. Just the perks of working for
daddy she supposed. The guys headed out to begin the day’s repairs and deliveries, and Kristen settled in for another day of monotony.

She had just finished eating her Lean Cuisine frozen pizza when the most handsome man she had ever seen walked through the front door. His jet black hair rested comfortably on his head; a few strands falling onto his forehead. He had a five o clock shadow that made him look rugged and mysterious all at once. His clothes looked as if they cost more than Kristen made in a week. He wore black cowboy boots, black slacks and a black button down shirt that was just opened enough at the top to see the slight traces of chest hair, and a glint of silver from his necklace. She thought to herself that he really had a “sexy Dracula cowboy” thing going on. Before she could utter the words “how may I help you?” he seemed to instantly be standing behind her. She felt the cold edge of a blade pressed to her throat; all of a sudden his sexiness didn’t seem to matter. Before she could explain that there was no money in the shop, he pressed his lips to her ear, and whispered in an accent that she couldn’t place, “your life begins now”.

Kristen awoke in a hotel room. There was nothing about the room that could tell her where she was; it looked like any generic room. Her head was pounding, and she had no idea how long she had been out for. Her fear was momentarily put aside by her curiosity. She assumed that if her attacker had wanted to kill her he would have done so by now, and other than the worst headache in her life she wasn’t hurt. What in the world was going on? Who was the mysterious man that had come into the shop, and why was this happening to her? These questions were rolling around Kristen’s mind when the hotel room door opened, and in walked “cowboy Dracula” himself.

Instead of a dagger he was carrying a tray of food. He walked over to her and told her she needed to eat something, and take the aspirin that he had brought as well; seeing the steaming tray of food instantly reminded Kristen that she was starving. They didn’t speak as she devoured the burger and fries, and washed it all down with the can of coke he had brought. She was finishing the last of the fries when it occurred to her that she had been kidnapped and was sitting in the room with her abductor. She should be frightened, terrified even, but to her amazement she felt completely calm and at ease. After hours of conversation, and many questions; Kristen learned that her abductor was no vampire or cowboy; his name was Luke, and he was her brother.

Kristen’s mother, Diane, left her only daughter at the tender age of three years old. Her father then remarried, and they began a new life in a new city. Diane died of a heroin overdose when she was only thirty-five years old; never having a relationship with her daughter, and never revealing that Kristen had a half brother who was only four years younger than her. Luke had spent his childhood bouncing from one foster home to another, and had spent the last six years attempting to track down the family he never knew. After hundreds of dead ends he learned of Kristen, and vowed to find her.

When Kristen asked him why he had scared her to death, and kidnapped her rather than just inviting her out for coffee like a normal person, Luke went on to explain that he had been living a less than virtuous life. Over the course of those six years of searching for long lost family he had lived a life of crime. Luke had acquired over ten million dollars in identity theft scams. Kristen had always lived an honest life and knew that what Luke had done was wrong, but he went on to explain that he only stole from those that not only had more money than they could ever spend in a lifetime, but that his victims had earned their fortunes by taking advantage of the American people. Luke considered himself to be a modern day Robin Hood. He had arranged for the two of them to start a new life in a new country. He explained that he kidnapped her so that she could start over, free and clear. He could provide her with a whole new identity complete with a birth certificate, social security number and passport. Luke left her alone then, he said he had some errands to run, and that he was sure she needed some time for everything he had just told her to sink in.

Kristen settled into the hotel bed and lit a cigarette. Her life had changed so much in such a short amount of time. She had always longed for a brother; being an only child can be so lonely. Her first thought was that there was nothing to think over. Luke was wrong, he had stolen from people; no matter how bad those people were, stealing was still wrong. She had responsibilities, a job, an apartment, and two cats. She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another; times like these called for chain smoking, and as the flame reached the end of her Marlboro Kristen asked herself when the last time she had been truly happy was, when had she woken up feeling excitement for the day ahead, when had she looked forward to another day arriving. She couldn’t remember. Her life had been filled with disappointment after disappointment; years wasted at an unfulfilling job, and a father who had spent more time in
prison than with his daughter. What did she have to lose, what was she really leaving behind if she were to embark on this crazy adventure with a brother she had just met? There was nothing she would truly miss, except for maybe the cats, and that’s when she decided that Luke had been right; “her life begins now.”

When Luke returned to the room he retrieved two plane tickets to Spain from his jacket pocket, and asked her what her decision was. Kristen told him she was sorry. Sorry that she had thought her brother was sexy, but that he better pack her some sun block if they were heading for Spain. Luke smiled for the first time in years, and hugged his sister. The two of them boarded the plane the next day, never looking back at the dismal lives they had left behind.

Becoming One

Ashley Hall

I want to put my hands in the ocean,
Run my fingers through the waves.
I want to feel the warmth of the sun on my neck,
A graceful breeze across my lips.
I want to feel the sand under me,
As I watch the clouds drift over me.

All time will stop.
As the tide crashes,
The sand
And water
Are one
For one
Brief moment.

Pure bliss
Is the ocean’s
Sweet kiss.
I am the gaping hole in your heart,
The bottomless pit in your stomach,
The daggered lump in your throat.

When your knuckles are white and
Grappling for control,
I am there.

I am the longing for desired love,
The source of your heartache,
The distance that causes you misery.

When you feel like the world isn’t fair,
I am there.

I am the tears that soak your pillow,
The shortness of breath,
The quiver in your chin.

When you cry so much
That you ache with pain,
I am there.

I am the small reminders that you are alone,
The sting behind your eyes,
The sense of exhaustion from nothing at all.

I am the jealousy,
The impatience,
The fear of unknown.

I make you stronger.
Bet You Never Lie Again
Zakiya Canteen

Casey sat on the edge of the bed looking down at Manse; it was a pitiful sight to see this once well-shaped handsome man come to this. He reached out his hand to touch hers, and as a reflex she jumped back. He reminded her of a dinosaur like the ones in Jurassic Park: they looked harmless and just as you would let your defense down they would attack you just because they thought that you were weak.

His once brown eyes were bright red from all the long hours that he lay in bed awake from all the pain that he was feeling, and now she was his rescuer. The one that he had done wrong for all those years now he needed her, and she was the only one that was there for him.

“Would you like something to eat?” she asked, gently rubbing his face. The tube running down his throat feeding him would soon be removed and he could eat and speak again. “Well Dr. Jones said that it will be a few more hours and then you can have liquids again slowly, is that OK with you?” she asked loving and adoring. “I called your mom, she and your wife will be flying in tomorrow morning. I am supposed to pick them up from the airport and then I will bring them to you.” A tear welled up in Manse’s eye, and shaking, he mouthed the words, “Thank you.” “You are so welcome, you were once my husband and I loved you with all my heart and soul; I could not imagine not being here for you,” she said as she kissed him on his forehead. He looked across the room to see a shadow of a person sitting in the seat by the window. The shadow was wearing Jimmy Choo Peony Tall leather boots, a black pleated Vera Wang Skirt and Great Escape camise stood as she walked toward the bed.

“Hey there and how are you doing?” The shadow asked swinging her hair over her shoulders. Manse got a cold chill up and down his body, his eyes grew wide and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Fear took over his body and he tried to get loose, but the belts on the bed kept him from getting away. Why, he wondered, was he tied down to the bed, why couldn’t his strength get him away?
Casey, rubbing his shoulders, tried to calm him. “She is only here to visit. Don’t be afraid, you’re safe with me; I got your back like you have had my back in the past.” She placed her well-manicured French tip hands on his face turning him towards her. She smiled. He smiled as if to say that he knew she would have his back like she had always despite the fact that he always did her wrong.

“Nola come on stop playing let him know we are here for him as he has been for us.” Both women chuckled and Manse knew his demise was near. Just then Dr. Jones came into the room. “Hi Mr. Leath how are you today? I have some great news for you, the tube can come out in just a few hours and we will have you back to normal in a few days and 100% in the next year. Now isn’t that great news ladies?” The doctor turned to both women and they smiled and agreed in unison. “I will be back in about an hour to pull the tube out from down your throat and one of these beautiful ladies can start to feed you ice until you can have your first meal.” Dr. Jones stood at the side of Manse’s bed, tapping him on his leg, “You’re one lucky man to have these two women here for you, they have been here the whole time by your bedside; yes sir lucky indeed.”

Manse started crying profusely. “Don’t cry sweetie we are here to take real good care of you, we won’t leave your side because we want to take care of you just as you have taken care of us,” Casey said smiling at Manse, so that the doctor could see all the love that she had for him. Dr. Jones exited the room smiling. Casey stood on the right side of the bed as Nola took the left. They both leaned over and whispered in his ears simultaneously with equally sinister tones and smiles “No-one can hear you scream now.” Nola pulled from her Carlos Falchi purse his tongue in a plastic bag. She leaned over eye to eye with him and said “What Kat got your tongue? I bet you never lie to anyone else again.”

Severe anxiety filled my body from lack of sleep. As I lay in bed, beneath the soft, plush comforter, I thought, “It sure would be nice to get just a few more minutes of sleep.” Even though my brain felt fully activated and turned on, my body yearned to continue its slumber.

Instantly awake and bitterly annoyed, I heard rustling noises coming from under the bed, in the closet, down the hall, up the stairs and a small pitter-patter in and out of the bathroom. I tried to dream it away. I felt contempt for the small being causing the ruckus. Pure hatred consumed me as I desired to do nothing more than sleep.

Stepping out of bed several minutes later, I brushed the sleep from my eyes and ventured into the bathroom. Still wiping my eyes and shifting my hair away from my face, my feet grudgingly led me to the small space where the toilet resided. I entered and casually closed the door. Expectantly and immediately following, I heard a small, nervous cry at the door. I realized I had offended the small animal that sat outside, whining like a baby.

While sitting on the porcelain throne, I leaned over slightly to push the door into a more open position allowing the small creature to enter and surround my toes. It was commonplace for him to sit at my feet and enjoy my touch on his soft, shiny fur. I resentfully caressed him behind the ears and down his back to the tip of his tail.

During his pampering session, I couldn’t help but notice how pleased and contented he seemed. As he circled my feet, I stroked his back, still upset that he had awakened me. I caressed him softly for about a minute until he was satisfied and as swiftly as he entered, he whisked away. I too, was anxious to start my day.

I briskly headed to the vanity to beautify myself. I contemplated taking a shower, but that thought soon escaped me as I decided to brush my teeth, put my hair into the usual pony tail style and dress for my morning class.
I removed my glasses and strategically placed one contact in my right eye. Just then, I looked down and saw the creature stirring near me. Restlessly, he was moving about back and forth, pivoting around and around about six inches from my right foot.

He seemed to have found interest in two items on the floor: one white t-shirt and one pair of plaid blue and grey boxer shorts. I thought very little about this, only that the criminal mind seemed to be stirring about in an unusual way. Pacing around the clothing and stalking it, he pounced on top of the clothing like prey that would surely meet its untimely death.

He swayed his lower body, mainly his back-end, side to side and then repositioned himself into what looked to be a squat. With my eyes now open wide with intrigue, I thought, “He is not going to do what I think he is going to do is he?” Right at that moment, I leaned in toward him and I stretched out to pet him and I realized he was relieving himself on top of my husband’s clothes. I grabbed hold of his lower body. Holding him in place with my right arm, I reached up with my left arm and fiercely twisted the closest knob in the sink into the ON position.

My body stretched in an awkward position as I struggled to maintain a tight grip on the peach colored creature while allowing time for the water flow to reach a luke-warm temperature. I forcefully dragged the animal into the vanity sink.

There I stood, with cat in hand, and a grimace on my face. I had somehow managed to lift the cat’s urine drenched rear-end into the sink. I held the cat against his will, shaking and shivering vigorously—his eyes bulged, his ears turned back. I reached for the body wash in the shower stall adjacent to the master vanity. Harshly, I sprayed water on the beast. I vehemently refused to allow the demon to take control.

Minutes later, when all the commotion stopped and the cat received an offering of a warm, dry towel from my loving hands, I felt elated. A quiet, calm filled the air, and the house seemed peaceful once again. I finished cleaning up around the sink and floor then walked down the stairs where I inhaled the most alluring aroma of fresh brewed coffee.

The morning’s comedy was all rather hysterical now, and as messy as my life seemed minutes before I wouldn’t trade it for the world—even for the seemingly stress-free life of a cat.

The Pretty One

Mary Richards

For my ninth birthday I wanted a new face; if that didn’t magically appear in the middle of the night, then a visit to an animatronic dinosaur park with my father would be an acceptable alternative. I instead got to ride with him in a truck cab full of garbage to go see Joanne, a recent acquisition who had become Daddy’s girlfriend after he removed a massive infestation of hornets from one of her rental properties. I had never met Joanne before, but Daddy said that she was a nice lady who owned a plastering company and enjoyed watching Redskins football at the local sports pub. He nicknamed her “The Pretty One.” My father liked pretty girls, so it sometimes came as a surprise to me that he ever wanted to see a 5’3” third grader who made a habit of chewing off her own hair.

Revenue from the stuccoing trade had built Joanne a comfortable oceanfront bungalow with a yard full of palm trees, their fronds bandaged in black plastic for the winter. One of the front doors opened and their proprietress appeared, a full-breasted woman with heavy, gelatinous lips who looked as though she had spent a considerable portion of the year in gauzes herself. I got this hunch from knowledge passed on to me by my mother, another unattractive member of my family whose personal jealousy prompted her to teach me how to detect plastic surgeries on an individual.

“Look, look” she would say, pulling out two consecutive Christmas card photos of one of our cousins. “See the first picture. Her chin looks kind of lumpy and disappears into her neck. Next year, smooth and perfect! Her boobs are bigger, too.” Once the lecture was over the prints would return to their basket, and I would marvel at the doctor’s ability to cut up a person’s face and arrange it into any conceivable form.

As I approached the front stoop it became even more obvious to me that Joanne’s body was of a composition never engineered by nature. Her face was covered in pancake makeup, but the basic structure of it 
indicated a possible brow lift, nose job, and multiple collagen injections. Then, of course, there were her breasts, a rigid pair that stuck out of her halter-top like two paperweights and never dented inward when Daddy hugged her in greeting. “So, Mary”, he said to me, “This is the Pretty One!” Joanne batted her lash extensions and let the ring on her pinkie toe make happy taps against the marble floor.

“Hi Mary, I’m Joanne. She’s so, tall, Gary.” She pawed my father some more and told me that I could go to her kitchen to drink Kool-Aid and watch TV. Then Daddy said that he and his lady friend were headed to the back to play a game of freeze tag.

“You’re it!” yelled Joanne, slapping him on the ass. She emitted a giggle that caused her whole throat to vibrate; I was reminded of a rubber cock that I had found in a drawer at one of the other girlfriend’s houses. When I brought my find up in conversation later Mama decided that it was time to have a sex talk with me, using hand gestures and scientifically correct terminology. The right index finger PENIS had pounded the open left fist VAGINA, then bam, everything was over. “That’s it” Mama said. “Sometimes you get screwed.”

Her last words recalled the time that Daddy had left our family. He’d gotten sick of Mama, an older woman with bowed legs and a scar across her neck from where they’d cut out some cancer years before. The night that it happened Mama and I had stayed up all night together in the living room crying, she drinking wine from the bottle, I half naked on the floor with a Sunday school rosary around my neck so that I could pray for a miracle. Tears streamed down our ugly faces, making them red and grotesque, like two trolls sealed up in a cave by the Prince.

That face was coming back to trouble me again, this time appearing as a reflection in the television screen. Even with “Clarissa Explains it All” blaring at full capacity I could still hear the sounds of Daddy and Joanne at their freeze tag game across the house. The only other place I felt comfortable being was the bathroom, a spacious chamber with five different mirrors throughout its expanse. Behind the largest glass a garish surprise awaited me: there, arranged on shelves, was Joanne’s entire collection of makeup.

I reached for one of the foundation bottles and dabbed a little on my arm. It blended perfectly, so I coated my face as well. With joy I watched my freckles, moles, and scabs get swallowed up by the creamy incoming tide. Once the facial skin was evened out my eyes and lips seemed too bare, so I filled the void with liner and shadow. Then I took a few steps back and gazed with wonder upon my creation.

To anyone else the overall effect of my artistry would have been horrifying, I, however, felt ravishingly beautiful, like someone boys would give diamonds to or stab each other over. Each of those five mirrors reflected a little goddess, and as I looked into them I could envision myself growing up into a gorgeous woman. I wanted to go to school feeling just as perfect, so I did the only thing that seemed logical to me at the time. My Spice Girls backpack opened, and in went as much of Joanne’s stash as I could carry away.

Once fully loaded I washed away any remaining evidence and returned to the kitchen to wait for my father. He came back about an hour later with the Pretty One at his heels, her hair askew and makeup beginning to rub off in patches. “I guess we’ll be going now,” Daddy said, either to Joanne or to me or to the both of us. The Pretty One had no reply; she only went to the living room’s console mirror to examine her face with a critical eye, as though she couldn’t tell whether the features were emerging or eroding. I took a final look at her on the way out and the weight of the knapsack seemed to increase.

I guess that Daddy felt remorseful for the way that he had conducted himself on my birthday, because he took me to a waffle house afterward with the Pretty One at his heels, her hair askew and makeup beginning to rub off in patches. “I guess we’ll be going now,” Daddy said, either to Joanne or to me or to the both of us. The Pretty One had no reply; she only went to the living room’s console mirror to examine her face with a critical eye, as though she couldn’t tell whether the features were emerging or eroding. I took a final look at her on the way out and the weight of the knapsack seemed to increase.

I guess that Daddy felt remorseful for the way that he had conducted himself on my birthday, because he took me to a waffle house afterward and let me order anything that I wanted. I asked for an aerosol bottle of whipped cream to be served to me in a pink bowl. I ate in an ungainly fashion, smearing the product all over my mouth and clothes.

“What’s on your face?” he asked after staring hard at me for a few minutes.

“Whipped cream, Daddy.”

“I saw the whipped cream. I mean on your eyelid; it looks purple from here.”

“I think I hit myself earlier.”

“Bruises don’t glitter. Get over here, girl.”

I slid my bowl across the table and went to his side. Spitting on his hand, he wiped the trace pigment off the top of my eyes.
“That’s just what I thought. Now open your purse up.”

“No, it’s my birthday, I don’t have to!”

“Don’t sass me! Open it!”

I unzipped the backpack and let him see where the whole cache was resting under the azure gaze of Baby Spice.

“Where did you get this?”

“Mama gave it to me. We want to be beautiful now.”

“Your mom isn’t that type. Didn’t even wear it when we got married. I think we both know where this came from.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

“Then don’t lie to me, Daddy! I know you don’t play freeze tag! I KNOW WHAT SEX IS!!!”

I yelled it proudly, so that the whole waffle house could hear. Then I stood up and licked the leftover whipped cream off my face in a mock seductive manner borrowed from the Fran Drescher reruns I was made to watch during the middle of the day at my sitter’s. My father, now the embarrassed focal point of the eatery, slapped me on the cheek in retribution. It left a mark. I was sent to the bathroom for a full wash up and then instructed to meet him outside.

He was waiting for me on the sidewalk, in a cold evening air that stung my freshly scrubbed face.

“So,” I asked, “are you going to make me take it all back?”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t think that I’ll be seeing her again.” He gave me a little apology pat, and the two of us started to walk along the boardwalk by the ocean. Shops were boarded up for the end of the season, and by the water’s edge a lone blonde was skimming over the sand with a metal detector. I saw Daddy watch her tits bounce up, down, and sideways as she crossed the beach. Bicycles passed. I looked at my father again and then continued into the wind, which was turning my bare cheeks to scarlet.
A monster who munts in adorababe,
caçhe in blankable points of past.
An allatime tartar between five beasts.
She tussles to bag catch.

Crimsonian Reptilia, beast one, fissures her grit,
extirpates all environing it.
Molten blaze in its lodes,
 vexation seeping from all orifices.
She lacerates this beast,
banishes it,
whittles the flesh with her tones.

Skeletonia, beast two, traffics the form,
as well as the essence.
Coffin nail between the brims,
a modish bloke to scoff at every turn.
A blotto induhvidual.
The girl’s adeptness to call the tune to her trunk where the beast
sojourns,
Skeletonia is soon abashed to nothing more than grime.

Snowdo, beast three, twines to animation so stubbornly.
Clinches with parky feedles to the totality around it,
to never let fly.
Pushed into grey matter,
shunned from the lagger of which it most tribulates.
Antisocilioden, beast four, drubs from the cosmos.
But if advanced too abruptly, it goes stricken.
Extends with red mist,
blubbers as it ropes out,
then scuds away.
Occlusioned from her ratiocination, to the point of suffocation.

it vanishes.

The heroin who ridded them from her sphere.
She dekkos in the speculum,
and commemorates when the beasts were all constituents of her.

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My Tutor

Sasha Wilson

If pain gives us wisdom
Then you are my tutor
And I seem as but a small child in your eyes
In need of another lesson.
Distraction

Kieran Richardson-Geehan

Bright lights and silence, that was all.

I sat there for what seemed like an eternity, muddling through my thoughts, getting everything wrong. I couldn’t show it; that wasn’t the ‘done thing’. So I sat there impatiently. My sense of time was fading with my nerves and anger following. I was swimming amongst blissful thoughts when I was suddenly interrupted by the unnerving sound of thunderous footsteps; loud footsteps. I stopped; it stopped. Distraction. Thankfully it began to go away, more time passed and my eyes and ears explored my surroundings; I saw nothing, heard nothing. Felt nothing, only panic. I was stuck, needing help. I couldn’t ask anyone for help: it wasn’t the ‘done thing’. Ruffling enveloped me.

That was it! I couldn’t contain it any longer! I was about to explode! So many things I couldn’t handle; the bright lights, the footsteps, and the frustration. As a distraction I shuffled my paper.

Then I could hear it, approaching from the distance. I could sense it wasn’t large but in my mind as intimidating as a towering fiend. Heavy-footed, it brushed through to reach me. It picked up speed and the footsteps became louder. I grew more anxious, clicking my pen. For a moment, I forgot about it… pain, it was piercing from all angles! Then I was back; it was standing next to me. I couldn’t see anything. I froze. Just like before, it froze, too. I lost my sense of time, but I waited for the footsteps, a signal that it was gone. My senses told me it had retreated.

I sighed with relief. Ruffling surrounded me once more, drawing me to search for the source of the penetrating noise. There was nothing. So I distracted myself again by dreaming of where I’d spend Christmas holiday. My thoughts merged with words. Before I knew it, I was mumbling aloud. This was not the ‘done thing’. I felt the piercing. It was happening again.
It was worse this time; the footsteps spoke anger. The piercing grew stronger. I was in shock. Everything faded, but the sound remained. It was intense. I wanted to scream, shout, run... escape. This wasn’t the ‘done thing’. I calmed down, stopped mumbling and it went away.

Was it my actions attracting its attention? Focusing on trying to solve my problem brought it all back. I couldn’t handle the pressure. I nervously clicked my pen, tapped my foot and took deep breaths. Just like before, I felt piercing. My sight slowly returned and I could see everyone glaring back at me. It came closer. I felt its presence behind me. It touched my shoulder, its claw upon me. It bent down to my ear and whispered “You’ve got five minutes and I’m collecting your test.”

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**Proposing a Certain End**  
*Kris Adam Santos*

A couple holds each other hand in hand  
They gaze beyond each other’s own faces.  
Recreate their clumsy steps in the sand  
And revisit amongst the few places.  
The golden sand beaches of Napoli,  
Green forests of the North West damped in rain,  
The letters from Shinjuku under trees,  
And a Love Nest where the birds wait in vain.  
His two left feet matching her two right brains,  
Her glossy lips speaking in native tongue,  
A question floated within the sound’s plains,  
The response then crept to her ears and hung  
Pleads she take his hand, be one with the breeze,  
As the man looks at her down on his knees.
Secret Language

Kirby Augustin

Countless mornings, I woke up to a frail but stern voice constantly hitting me with a clipboard. Repeatedly she recited something that faintly sounded like alphabets but appearing as if the sun were in the room clearing my early morning vision was my first concern. As the clouds passed from my eyes I saw a short, tenuous woman with a ruler, her weapon of choice, tightly clinched in her hands as if it were a sword. I quickly sat up straight and cleared my throat, but she continued to repeat the same gibberish over and over. After some time I attempted to recite her words and then she suddenly stopped and began to shake her head in approval. Twenty-four hours hadn’t even passed since this lady they called Grun had moved in and started to make her presence known to me immediately.

Months passed and the same process continued but the words were now associated with physical items, emotions, and were used in phrases. The sword she clinched so tightly pierced my pride on many occasions and proved to be an excellent weapon of choice. Still the meaning of her teaching me this secret language was unknown. Week after week I would ask others in the house, “Why is this lady waking me up so early to repeat the same words she said?” but all I received was a pat on the head and a smile with a softly spoken, “You will see.” As time passed her language began to get easier to me so I decided that I would learn all I could. One day I would be able to ask her in her language why she had to wake me up so early.

Finally understanding this secret language made me feel excited, honored, noble, even. I began to show off what I had learned to everyone in the house. Skipping around with the innocence of youth translating items I saw and feelings I felt in complete phrases. Everyone would smile and shake their heads in approval. Strangely, one morning I wasn’t awake before the sun; I stayed in bed wondering if this could be some sort of test but it wasn’t. My father came into the room with a...
gloomy look on his face and sat on the floor next to my bed and started
talking. Grun turned out to be my grandmother who had been dying
from old age, pneumonia, and heart complications. The secret language
was actually the native language of Haiti (Haitian Creole) which is part
of my heritage which Grun didn’t want me to lose just because I was in
a foreign land. My father stood up and told me she wanted to see me.
Slowly I rose out of bed, confused by the overwhelming information
that was just given to me. I entered her room, and her face was full of
fatigue, pain and malady; she looked over at me and began to glow.
In Creole she began to tell me about the importance of our heritage,
learning, practicing and teaching it to all who would listen. Grun
stopped talking to take a deep breath then asked me to help her sit up
in the bed. Then she waved me to come closer; she placed her hand on
my cheek and said in her broken English: “Learn baby, no stop to learn
ever.” Some may forget where they came from but I never will.

Lauren Emery

Breathe

I am that which eludes me most.
I am a tree. With roots
that go on and on.
Endless.
And I can reach forever.
My branches, my hands
They brush the sky.
I can see the danger that lurks behind every beautiful flower
It’s transforming, but I stay the same.
I know no fear for it.
Because I have strength that’s never been tested.
And I have love that knows no limits.
And I have heart — My heart.
Have heart. For you are fine.
Breathe.
Just.
Be.
Late at night, my dog, Mugsy, would let himself out into the yard. His nocturnal wanderings were registered and then dismissed by my sleeping mind as one of the usual household noises—the sound of the ancient gas heater clanking to life or the rumble of the refrigerator motor. Also registered was Mugsy’s eventual return to my bed. One evening, he failed to return and demand half the bed. I awoke fully and went to find my dog. I looked out my bedroom window and saw him sitting on the lawn next to the holly bush. “Are you ok, Mugs?” I whispered out the window. He turned his head in my direction but did not rise. Worried that he was injured, I went outside and called him to me. He came, gave me a head bump and went back to his spot. It was a lovely night, so I left him resting in the grass. I knew he would come inside when he was ready.

This went on for a week or so. Not every night, but most nights. One night I saw him sitting sphinx-like, staring intently at the holly bush. I watched for a few minutes; he did not move. Curious, I went outside to investigate. Deep in the holly bush was a nest of squirming possum babies. I was surprised that Mugsy, the mouse chaser, the squirrel stalker, left the babies undisturbed. Fearing for the babies’ safety, I called Mugsy inside and closed the doggy door. He grumbled at me and settled himself in front of the doggy door, refusing to come to bed. Unable to sleep, I went into the living room to read. Every few minutes Mugs would leave his post, brush against the sofa and coo at me. (He often made an odd cooing sound when he urgently wanted something). Finally, I relented and opened the doggy door for him. He returned to his position in front of the holly bush.

I shook my head in resignation and went back to bed, recalling the first time Mugsy saw a possum. We were on one of our late night rambles through the streets and alleys of Santa Monica. On a wall next to an orange tree a very large possum was peeling fruit with its rubbery snout. When it saw us, it stopped, still as a stone, its naked pink tail hanging over the edge of the wall. Mugs stood up on his hind legs...
and stared hard, sniffing and squinting at this unfamiliar creature. He turned his head to me as if to ask: "What is that?" I said, "It's ok, boy." (My standard answer to many of his queries.) I tugged him away from the wall, and we continued our walk. Since that first meeting, Mugsy greeted all possums with the same solemn curiosity.

The next morning I wondered if I should call animal control or find some way of protecting the nest from Mugsy and the neighborhood cats. However, I was busy during the day and forgot about the babies. I did not remember until it was too late to call animal control. I decided to wait and see what happened. Frankly, I was a little worried the babies might be destroyed if animal control came to the house. We had plenty of possums in the neighborhood, poaching from the fruit trees and vegetable gardens. I doubted that my neighbors or the animal police would be as concerned as I was for the welfare of our tiny guests.

I often spied on Mugsy as he kept his vigil in front of the bush. Once, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small shape creeping along the fence top. It was the mother possum. Mugs stood up, stared at her and took a few steps back from the bush. The mother possum took a few steps toward her nest, and Mugsy stepped back further. When he finally reached the back stairs, the mother possum slipped into the shrubbery. Mugsy came into the house, gave me a bump and we went to bed. As I crawled under the covers, I realized that my dog was baby-sitting for the mother possum while she searched for food or did whatever possums do in the middle of the night. Maybe she just needed a break. My big dog, who tried earnestly to catch any cat, squirrel or bird that crossed his path, had somehow decided that he was the guardian of the baby possums. At first I thought he might be scaring the mother away from her nest. But as the weeks progressed, I became convinced that there was an understanding between the momma possum and my dog. Once, I watched her stand on the fence and wait for Mugsy to come outside. When he was stationed in front of the bush, she waddled off on her tiptoes into the night. I stopped worrying and left the two of them to conduct their business unmolested.

One evening, just before sunset, Mugsy woofed for my attention. I followed him outside to the holly bush. Mugs stared straight at the nesting spot. I looked into the bush and saw that the nest appeared to be abandoned. I gave him a rub and said, "I guess they’re gone, Mu. Want to go for a ride?" He did his doggy dance of delight, shimmying and hopping while I tried to wrestle him into his harness. We hopped into the truck and headed north up the Pacific Coast Highway to our favorite Starbucks in Malibu for a latte and a dog biscuit. Treats secured, we drove to the beach. While I watched the sun sink into the ocean, I patted my dog and hoped our little friends were safe in their new home, growing fat on oranges and tomatoes.
Champagne
a brilliant kiss
the universe is laughing
as we hold our breath
and flutter about like gypsy moths
enchanted
by a front porch light
The story begins thus, that Nesca was a tree of the olden kind, able to walk the land and speak aloud her thoughts if she wished.

She was a leafless tree, a tree which has never met and danced with its mate, and thus had never flowered. She was slender with a trunk of smooth ivory wood. Her branches seemed impossibly long and reached straight for the sky as she walked.

She wandered the land enjoying the creatures she found nesting in the trees of the valley. The creatures tamed the trees, and the trees were content to stay in one place and provide shelter to the poor four-footed things so ill equipped to reside in the open. Yet even this was in the plan of the Designer, who wishes for all his creations to care for one another. Often these trees would settle down with their mates and friends of similar bark and eventually settled into slumber, sinking their roots deep and dreaming of past walks over snow capped peaks and green fields.

The lovely Nesca wandered past these sleeping groves and ached with loneliness. In all her years of wandering since the Designer had bid her to walk, she had yet to find her mate. She wondered, was she meant to always walk alone?

She came upon a craggy windswept cliff on which nothing grew. Its peak was so high it often touched the clouds. Nesca spoke to the cliff and asked to climb it. The cliff replied, “I am Leessa. Why do you wish to go to my lonely summit?” Nesca explained it was lonely everywhere to her, so it made no matter, and Leessa granted permission.

Ewau was the river of the gorge. He was strong of current, and moved so frequently from his source to the sea that he never froze. He was white-bearded, frothy, full-bodied and strong. He could see far from his river and traveled its length always, being in constant motion, never resting. Ewau had carved the cliff face of his sister Leessa ages ago with his windy brother Wasu after his other sister Cia had been playing with Leessa and pushed her out of the warm underbelly of the earth by accident. Once exposed Leessa had cooled and hardened and was unable to move or travel with Cia anymore. This was as the Designer wished it to be, so Leessa was content.

Cia was very upset to have lost her sister as a playmate. However when she saw the beauty of Leessa against the blue sky, Cia was so pleased she tried to make other mountains all over the earth! The salt sea Icheal met Cia as she came up from beneath him, pushing up mountains all the way from his seabed. He fell in love with the fiery warm Cia. Only his cool serenity could soothe her and even then, only for a short time. The Designer had made Cia to bubble and froth forth mountains, and she was as He wished her to be. So Cia lived in both ways, sometimes forging mountains and other times resting beneath Icheal, the sea who soothed and loved her as no other could.

Over a long period of time Ewau watched the barren Nesca, and marveled at how strong she had to be to climb the rock face of Leessa. It took many years for her to do so, but a year for us is a day to a tree and a river. Each year he would see her progress and in watching her, fell in love with her. He would often splash against the bottom of the cliff face, creating great frothy splashes almost halfway up the face of the rock.

The windy Wasu would whistle about Nesca calling, “See my great brother below?”

Nesca could see and was terrified. She didn’t understand. She felt sure Ewau meant to sweep her away, to drift on Icheal. The river must think she was a dead tree! She had often seen trees floating on rivers of other names to their burials at sea. She waved her branches and tried to show her vitality and life, but the water only frothed higher. Nesca knew the language of Leessa and begged her to tell the river she was alive, and that she needed no pallbearer to the Icheal.

Leessa rumbled to her brother that the tree lived. Ewau replied he knew she wasn’t dead. He loved the tree and only wished to look more closely at her beauty. He begged Leessa to ask Nesca to come and settle by his riverbanks.

Leessa told Nesca of her brother’s love, and Nesca looked into the water again. Realizing it was no longer threatening her, she could see its
powerful beauty, but how would she ever flower unless she danced with her mate? She shook her great head and continued to climb.

The great river was frustrated. Even with the great height of the Leessa, it was hard to know if Nesca would ever see her mate. Yet Ewau knew Nesca would not come down until she did, if even then. For a long time he contented himself with watching her climb, and splashing up to tickle her roots with his waves. When her climb took her higher than his reach, Ewau begged Wasu to carry her gifts of river water in rain to quench her thirst.

The day Nesca reached the summit was the first day of spring in the valley. Every tree and flower that had danced with its mate remembered the dance, and began to flower in memory, every tree but Nesca. She stood naked on her cliff top, and saw no one like her in all the world . . . barren and leafless. Had she been a river, she would have wept. Being a tree, she stretched her long limbs out to the sky and let Wasu give her comfort in Ewau’s rain.

Leessa graveled her surface to a fine dark soil to give Nesca a comfortable place to stand, and Cia reached up within Leessa and warmed her tired roots to ease their ache. Mountain, River, Wind and Fire were all fond of Nesca. They did all they could to comfort her, yet they knew the plan of the Designer. Nesca would never flower until she found her mate.

Ewau spoke with his siblings, deciding they who could travel should look for Nesca’s mate. It wasn’t until she had danced and carried seed to fruit that Nesca’s pain would end. Her sorrow burdened him, and his love for her called Ewau to this quest. And for love of their brother, Cia and Wasu agreed to help. Leessa would watch over Nesca in their absence.

Cia traveled the earth below, violently popping up here and there to look for Nesca’s leafless mate. She would often forget her quest and start making mountains again, until the gentle call of the sea Icheal would woo her and remind her of her search.

Wasu traveled the globe on the currents of the sky searching all the dry cold places the others could not go, while Ewau stretched himself into tributaries, looking until his flow slowed to a trickle in the valley. Leessa wicked up what water from him she could for Nesca. With Wasu gone, there was no one else strong enough to bring Nesca rain.

At long last, Wasu found Nesca’s mate in the desert. In a last desperate attempt to survive, Lillo had sunk his roots deep into the soil to find water, but there was none.

Lillo now had no strength left to pull his roots out again, and the desert was too large for Wasu to bring rain to him. Lillo begged Wasu to carry to Nesca the gift of the flowering, a seed that she must carry and bring to fruit. Wasu’s strength was almost gone but he agreed. Lillo showed him the dance he must teach to Nesca to make the seed flower. With his life’s goal at last reached, Lillo stretched his limbs to the sky, and gave his spirit back to the Designer.

Wasu carried the seed to the tributaries of Ewau and with the last of his strength, taught the flowering dance to his brother. Then, nearly dead, Wasu fell still from exhaustion for many years.

He bade Ewau to return to Nesca with the seed, saying he would return when his strength recovered.

Ewau traveled back home, gathering himself back from the tributaries of his search, growing stronger as he returned to the valley. One of his tributaries had awakened Ourie the waterfall. Ourie didn’t want to sleep again, so he traveled with Ewau back to the valley, and there saw Leessa, and he loved her at once.

Ewau realized that without Wasu, there was no way to get the seed to the top of Leessa, but Ourie was eager to help and suggested that Ewau help him climb the long sloping path up the back of Leessa to her summit. Ewau agreed and used all his might to shove Ourie over Leessa, causing him to spill from her summit. Ewau could no longer travel to the sea, so great was his effort to push Ourie over, so he simply pooled at the base of Leessa, and when rested would begin the climb again to push Ourie over once more.

Ourie brought grasses to Leessa’s summit, and their growing brought the little creatures to live in them. Leessa loved Ourie for bringing this life to her barren crest. In gratitude, she hollowed a streambed for his path.

Ewau now could pass Nesca so closely as to touch her roots. He gave her Lillo’s seed and floated past day after day, telling her the story of Lillo’s death and Wasu’s journey to bring the seed to him, and of his
own journey to bring the seed to her. Nesca’s great branches bent with sorrow, until they brushed the surface of Ewau. Ewau wept for her, and the mist of tears carried over Ourie and awakened Joi, the lights of the rainbow.

As Ewau passed Nesca each day, he taught her the dance that would awaken the seed within her. Nesca kept her head bent towards the river, watching and carefully imitating the movements of his swirling current. Slowly she began to flower, and her beauty was greater than all other trees. Ewau carried many of her children to grow on his riverbanks, where they do homage to him in honor of their willowy mother. Nesca grew to love the river so much she never lifted her face to look away from him again.

On the grassy plains far from the valley, Wasu recovered his strength. Slowly he made his way back. On the day Wasu returned, he saw the changes in the valley, and felt for a moment he no longer belonged there. Cia had returned and rested beneath Leessa, playfully stretched tendrils of heat to Ichael to create new land at the edge of the sea. Leessa was even more beautiful in the company of Ourie and their creatures, and Ewau had his beloved Nesca close to him at last. Wasu felt very alone and nearly turned away, but his eyes fell on Joi, the shimmering lights of the rainbow. She now lived in Ewau’s mist at the base of Ourie. Wasu was smitten. He gentled himself to a breeze, and kept the mists swirling off Ourie and Ewau for the rest of his days to keep Joi with him. Joi loved him all her days, and never left his care.

Now you know why wind and rainbow dance together at the bottom of waterfalls, why the waterfall roars with delight as he falls over his beloved mountain, why the fire within the earth plays with the sea, and why the willow leans to her beloved river.

It is all for love of one another, as the Designer meant it to be.

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I want to see the green flee from the leaves,
See the autumn oranges and yellows dancing in the breeze.
I want to feel the crispness of the air tickle my nose,
Feel the welcomed chill travel all the way to my toes.
I want to see angels and witches fill the streets,
Together they march filling their bags with treats.
I want to taste pie made with pumpkin and spice,
Taste the warm rich flavors, a scoop of ice-cream would be nice.
I want to carve a pumpkin and put it by my door,
Decorate my home with witches, goblins, skeletons galore.
Of all of these “wants” nothing could be better,
Then curling up with you in a fall knit sweater.
I want to see the green flee from the leaves,
See the brilliance of fall paint magic in the trees.
These are all my wants and my last single wish,
Is for you and I to share a perfect fall kiss.

---

Laura K. Facenda

A Fall for You

I want to see the green flee from the leaves,
See the autumn oranges and yellows dancing in the breeze.
I want to feel the crispness of the air tickle my nose,
Feel the welcomed chill travel all the way to my toes.
I want to see angels and witches fill the streets,
Together they march filling their bags with treats.
I want to taste pie made with pumpkin and spice,
Taste the warm rich flavors, a scoop of ice-cream would be nice.
I want to carve a pumpkin and put it by my door,
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I want to see the green flee from the leaves,
See the brilliance of fall paint magic in the trees.
These are all my wants and my last single wish,
Is for you and I to share a perfect fall kiss.
The Trains of Campbellsville

Mike Fugere Jr.

We traveled down a series of winding, Kentucky farm roads for quite some time. My mother sat in the back seat, giving my wife, Kristen, directions to our destination. I sat silently in the passenger seat, fearful that at any moment an automobile larger than our Ford Focus would come along and bowl us off of our narrow path. The feeling that my mother might've gotten us lost started to creep over me, and I could tell by the weary expression on my wife's face, she was feeling the same. But just as turning around was about to become a unanimous decision – after all, who we were visiting would be at the family reunion the following afternoon – my sister, Krissy, who was sitting directly behind me, shouted: “There it is! That’s Uncle Poochie’s house.”

And sadly, she was right.

Poochie’s house sat on a bare spit of land that was obscenely far off the beaten bath even for being in a town like Campbellsville, Kentucky, which was comprised of little more than fields, hills, open plains of grazing livestock, and an oasitic Wal-Mart. The old two storey structure once belonged to my great-grandmother, who had been dead for over thirty years, and didn’t look as if it had been updated since she’d passed. Slats of wood siding hung loose, swollen and naked from a mix of elemental abuse and negligence. The surrounding yard had grown wild to the point where I wondered if my sister was mistaken. In fact, if I hadn’t noticed a patch of grass behind the house that had been flattened by previous visitors, we wouldn’t have known where the hell to park.

We climbed out of the car and surveyed our whereabouts. The adjacent fields were practically backdrops to Sergio Leone films, vast dustbowls that hadn’t seen any sort of respectable crop in years. A pile of rusted farm machinery sitting in an open barn near the house only furthered this grim setting. The only thing that seemed remotely alive was the myriad barn cats stalking through the tall grass like some legion of feline sentinels.

Most of them looked as if they hadn’t eaten a decent meal in weeks. They were thin and sick, some with milky eyes and mangy coats, none of them worthy of being indoor pets. They watched us with a distant curiosity.

Poochie stepped off the screened-in back porch and trudged through his forest yard to greet us. The cats scrambled at the sight of him, and then quickly reformed their watchful positions.

My mother met Poochie with open arms and introduced us. Kristen gave a friendly wave and said hello in a chipper tone. My sister, being the exuberant creature she was, followed suit without hesitance. I, on the other hand, was more reluctant. I hadn’t seen my great-uncle in fifteen years, and the man I remember was not who stood before me. His posture had degraded horrendously, and he walked with a limp. He wore a pair of tattered overalls and a sweat-stained t-shirt which was inside out, persuadably because the outside was too dirty to be presentable and needed to be flipped for extended use.

Regardless of his physical appearance, I shook his hand and told him it was nice to see him. Being a man of brevity, Poochie simply nodded and grunted something which sounded like “you too.” I didn’t allow this to come off as rude. After all, I couldn’t come up with anything more substantial to say either.

Our silence quickly turned awkward. My sister saw this and in an attempt to break the silence blurted out, “Can we see the trains, Uncle Poochie?”

Poochie reached into his overall pocket, took out a partially smoked stogie and stuck it in his mouth. He gnawed it for a moment, pulling his lips apart to expose a row of small, yellow teeth protruding out of his nicotine-brown gums as he considered her request. “I reckon so, honey,” he replied, and removed the cigar from his mouth long enough to cough up and hack out a black substance from his gullet into the tall grass.

Now I had always heard of Poochie’s model trains, but I had never seen them, and my mental picture was far from impressive. I was expecting to see a few rickety chunks of plastic chug down a decrepit track covered in cat fur, running through a water-damaged cardboard diorama somewhere in the basement of the house. But as Poochie led us to a large detached two-car garage, the newest structure I’d seen since we’d been there, it dawned on me there might be more to the trains than that.
“Where’s that baby?” Poochie asked, not really addressing anyone in particular. He was referring to my niece, Zoë. Krissy explained to him that we’d left her at the house with my father. “So I reckon I’ll see her at the reunion then. What about that wetback papa of hers?” I looked at my sister’s face to see her reaction to Poochie’s racist comment regarding the father of her child.

Amazingly, Krissy let it roll right off her shoulders. “He didn’t come,” she replied softly. Her face was emotionless like a porcelain doll. My wife on the other hand, looked mortified, but tried her best to hide it.

We entered through the side door of the garage, which led to a small cluttered office. The whole room reeked of stale cigars and cat piss. In the corner sat a tall metal bar stool behind a small work station, littered with open bottles of acrylic paint, food wrappers, carving tools and magnifying glasses of all sizes. This is where Poochie spent most of his time. This, as they say, is where the magic happens.

He plopped down on his stool and turned on a portable radio that was hidden behind the mess. Poochie paused a moment to listen to the nasally voice of a talk show host squawk for bit. Once he realized he’d heard the broadcast before, he turned down the volume and muttered a six letter racial slur about our president. He then craned his neck around to us and said, “They’re through there.” He motioned to a door on the opposite side of the room. “It’s unlocked. Go in, but don’t touch nothing.”

And so we did, marching single file into the train room. My mother went in first, followed by Krissy and Kristen. I headed up the rear, unable to see much of anything over them. At first their silence was disconcerting. Was I right about the trains? But as I saw the fruits of Poochie’s labor, I understood. Their silence was out of sheer amazement.

The garage was filled from wall to wall of waist-high tables, each covered with a slab of replicated life. The narrow space between the tables gave little room for movement, but it was a minor inconvenience. There could have been live rattlesnakes slithering across the floor and it wouldn’t have stopped me from soaking up that train set. It wouldn’t have stopped any of us.

We stood as giants, looming over that diminutive town and its population, suspended in their daily activities. There was a woman in mid-step walking out of a general store carrying a load of groceries in one arm and an infant in the other. A young shoeless boy had his arm cocked back, about to hurl a stick for his brown mutt to fetch near a large red barn. A father and son on horse and buggy were paused on an old dirt road, with a ’31 Ford Model AA carrying crates of milk from the local dairy sitting parked right behind them. Every aspect of life in the era seemed to be covered, from the schoolhouse letting out a line of children toting composition books lashed up in leather straps to the town drunk urinating in the fishing hole. They were all there, and in that frozen moment, we were their protectors. Their watchers.

We were their gods. And every tiny, hand-painted face in every crowd looked to know it.

“Wow,” Kristen said, snapping me back into the real world, the big world. “This is – “

“No,” she replied, “not at all.”

“Glad we’re in the same boat.”

Poochie sat behind a control board at the end of a long table, twisting knobs and flipping switches, causing the town to light up, and then dim again. One of these controls even made a series of tiny lights overhead come on, replicating a clear, star-speckled night sky. That’s when I realized that we weren’t these folk’s anything. We weren’t their protectors. Not gods. No. We were merely visitors. It was the sloppy bigot in the dirty shirt that created them and their world. He gave them their faces and picked out their clothes; he carved the fiber glass river which ran through the town; he laid the tracks for that massive iron horse running through the mountain tops; he built the trees, their homes, the sun, the moon and stars above. He was everything to them.

This left me perplexed. It was obvious Poochie had an artistic soul. There was so much love in that garage. So much passion. But Poochie seemed far from being a passionate person. He was a mean, tired, old man who didn’t care much for any real progression.

I think the fact he replicated a picture-perfect slice-of-life from the 1930s truly spoke to this. He recreated a time that perhaps, he thought was perfect in American history, or maybe it was a time he vaguely
remembered as a boy and building this world would to help him find his roots. Either way, the trains were a marvel without having a drive behind their creation. No artistic pathos and/or inspiration would’ve enhanced the experience.

Poochie was getting restless as another one of his less than desirable quirks began to emerge—he didn’t like people fiddling with his trains. He had a big “no touching” policy when it came to his stuff, which is understandable when you’re ten years old. My mother saw this and suggested we leave. Suddenly I was transported to my younger years, resenting my mother for making me leave Showbiz before I earned enough tickets out of the ski ball game to buy that cool X-Men fanny pack out of the prize display.

We left the garage and stepped back out into the harsh reality of Poochie’s life. Back to the dilapidated house and the sick cats, back to the old rusted crop machinery and the dried up fields; back to the way things were.

Poochie walked us to our car and gave us a less than heartfelt goodbye. On the ride back to the house, I wondered if I’d see him in a different light the next day at the reunion. My mother would later tell stories of her great grandmother’s house and the time she spent there when she was a little girl. She painted a beautiful picture, one that was lush with fond memories and heartfelt anecdotes of Americana. There was sadness in her voice.

I can see it in her smile
The pain she had to face,
When she was just a child
Her childhood was erased.
From that pain her strength continues to grow,
And from the way her brown eyes shine
You would never know.
In the mirror, I see a reflection of all the strength she has given me.
In my laugh, I hear her voice,
The soft words she spoke to me when she made the choice—
To not let the silence hurt her again,
To voice the secret she sheltered within,
To give a voice to the girls with broken lives,
With this voice, she helped herself survive.
In my hands, I see the hands she held me in,
The hands she used to push out the pain within,
To once and for all lock the skeletons away,
And to finally embrace the new day.
For all the women who have paid the price,
With these hands, my hands,
She opened the door to a new life.
When I was a kid I was vaguely aware that my dad was involved with a radical Christian group. They gained a level of notoriety in the late 1980s for protesting outside women’s clinics and pro-choice facilities. Although they specialized in peaceful protests they held signs, sang, and made human chains to prevent patients from entering the buildings. As a result, he spent several months in a minimum security jail. He considered himself a champion of the cause. After my parents divorced he traveled the country, protesting and getting arrested. He spent time in jails with names like “the Farm and the Tomb.”

He never took me to protests, but starting when I was 7 or 8 he took me to demonstrations. The demonstrations were always the same: a large crowd would meet in a parking lot and get fired up. I usually recognized a group of people from our church. There was chanting, singing, handing out signs. Someone would lead a prayer. I was convinced we were right and others would only have to read our signs to give up their sinful lives. I felt excited to be at the forefront of such an important issue. Once we walked to our designated sidewalk we were silent, flashing our signs toward traffic and passersby.

Usually the demonstrations were advertised enough that pro-choice and feminist activists would find out and protest on the other side of the street. This was probably done deliberately by the organizers to get us in the newspaper. I was incredibly sheltered by my parents. They monitored everything, I wasn’t even allowed to watch The Smurfs because it depicted witchcraft. Those demonstrations were my only exposure to openly liberal people. While we were demonstrating silently, our antagonists were rowdy.

The short-haired women screamed, heckled, and chanted slogans. One of their favorites was “Keep Your Laws Off My Body!” The more exuberant protesters would raise their arms and wiggle their hairy armpits. When I was very young I assumed these women were
belligerent simply because they were evil and they couldn’t stand to hear the truth. By the time I was 12 or so, I began to understand their concerns. I wondered how two groups of people could each be convinced they were correct. Wasn’t there a simple answer for everyone?

One quiet June morning we marched down a side street on the way to a Planned Parenthood. The sun was shining from behind fragrant eucalyptus trees. A homeless man sat in a sunny spot drinking a can of beer. Our signs that day were rounded on top and each was supposed to represent a tombstone for a woman who died because of abortion. The man put down his drink and started nodding.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he cheered. I nodded with him, glad we were already making an impact. He noticed my head bobbing. “Before you know it the government will be wiping our asses for us,” he continued sarcastically. It took me a moment to realize he wasn’t my cheerleader.

We walked around the corner to the assigned place. Women on the other side of the street were passionate. They could be my mother, my sister, me. Even though I’d been assigned to the other side, I felt a strange camaraderie with them. Obeying my parents I lifted my sign, taking part in a conflict with no resolution.

The Doctor

Timothy Naginey

If God has died
I swear I had no part in it—
Except that I was a doctor
Frantically searching for vitals
Trying my best to revive
Reluctant to pronounce dead His Majesty,
But convicted too severely
With the cursed burden
Of truth
Headlines

Timothy Naginey

Millions slaughtered
I carry a couple of blankets to drug addicts in the park.
What have I done?
Four-year-olds bought and sold for sex
I drop pocket change in the bucket as it’s passed my way.
But what have I done?
Hunger steals the life of little babies, sons and daughters
I donate a few dollars on the internet before I perform my search
and I am tormented
they had faces, just like mine
I see them in the mirror
they had dreams, thoughts, fear, and breath
they were real
my mind tries somehow to grasp it, my feeble and unworthy mind
and all I can think is What have I done?
What have I really done?

Immaculate

Peter Selden

I wonder how full of grace the Virgin Mary really was after she got the
good news from her angel. Imagine yourself there: Could you really
begrudge the girl a private weep; offer some sympathy for the most
unplanned of pregnancies; forget for an hour the father, our Father who
art all the way out in Heaven?

There are never so many crosses until you reach Calvary yourself. I
look for the red ones, borne across the hospitals and ambulances, the
clinic where they took my blood and the Health Department where they
told me that my blood was no good. I gave myself up to that Red Cross,
bearing them my veins, week after week, but in the end I still found
myself judged and wanting. I really tried to be a good person. I kept my
grace and my virtue.

The voice on the other end of the phone stumbled over the conversation.

— And why don’t you want me this week?
— There’s something wrong with you
— What do you mean?
— I’m not allowed to say, but go see a doctor, and don’t have sex with
anyone else.

Else. Else was the giveaway, else meant that I was unclean, else meant
that I was anathema, or else I’d brought something down upon myself.
Else bothered me more than sex I didn’t have, else was a malediction.
I was indignant, I knew that there was no need for else, that I stayed
untouched. But I went to the Health Department anyway, to give up just
a bit more blood.

I did feel bad for the nice nurse I had to put through the ordeal of telling
me that I had HIV; she seemed more concerned for me than I was --
There must’ve been some mistake, there’s no way I could be sick like
that — Of course, ‘no way I could be sick’ wasn’t the same as, ‘I’m not sick.’ I know that now.

My prognosis is good, I haven’t gotten AIDS yet. What weighs on the mind most, though, is why I’m the sick one. What grace do I owe? Why did Mary get an angel, and I get a blood test? Of all the sins in the world, what was my sin that I deserved immaculate infection?

Dancing at Halftime

Paula Nikolaisen

Weekend tribes don paint, and headdress, say we’re showing honor at halftime. Navajo, Quapaw, Eskimaux, Pueblo see taint and obsession, a kind of crime. Celebrating the 50 yard line dancer, we dishonor the spirit of the dance. Our celebrations at Indian halftime degrade Cherokee, Ojibwa, Mattaponi all the time. Promising to listen above cheers and screams For our favorite teams, we’ve become deafened by our fake chants and war cries. In love with celebrations, proud of our country, with mascots, tomahawks, cardboard Indians we create trophies of Native American culture. We do not honor the dancer, ritual and practice, away from our weekend fields of battle, the peanut stands, the trinket vendors. Learn about the dancer, learn about the dance.
I hold out my hand
not to beg
but so it can be grabbed

I hold out my finger
not to blame
But to show the way

I hold out my palm
not to receive
but to give a gift

I hold out my fist
not in anger
but so it can protect

But you stand there
arms crossed
Not willing to grab the hand
to pull you
Into the direction I have shown
that leads to
the gift I have offered
in my love
That offers my protection
from the world
The Plot (A Dogs Tale)

Justin Griego

You stare as he sleeps
plotting your next move
to recapture his place
and the end of the room
where he lays his head
on his soft pillow
jealous of the sound
of his snores, loud they billow

You have learned his habits;
his tricks and his traits,
what gets him alert
and what makes him sedate.
So you wait and you plan
so sinister and cruel
to get that sleeping dog
to wake up and drool

You set your plan in motion
by licking your food bowl
according to the plan
in a move so foul
and he wakes and moves
to see what’s for dinner
and when he moves you steal
his bed of pillows, and you’re the winner!

Nobody listened

Filip Cvrkic

I can still remember
Mr. Keeling an old Virginian
Old school stoic but just
He tried to explain
Importance of management
Most of them got it wrong
Now the country is falling apart

I can still remember
Dr. Loomis a quiet Californian
Old school but mellow
He tried to explain
Importance of philosophy
Nobody listened
Now the country is falling apart

Of course I still remember
Ms Kessling from Michigan
A different kind of woman
She tried to explain
Importance of art history
Nobody ever listened
Now the country is falling apart
A Moment of Clarity

Colin Smith

“I feel like I’m on to something here,” I say aloud before slurping down the rest my Sapphire Gin and Sprite

I was on to something; I was on the verge of an entire new reality. The bare-naked truth of what there definitely was and most definitely was not. The realization that my dreams and aspirations were dead didn’t truly take hold until the clock struck two. There I was in a state of complete ambiguity, or is that the wrong word? Ambivalent, to say the least.

My skin was red from earlier that day. Some good idea fairy, hopped up on some sort of drug that can’t even be described, hit this Bill Clinton hero wannabe a few days before. This man set off a chain of events that led to the total annihilation of all that was good and pure in those children’s hearts. They poisoned those kids before they even knew what happened. Green-aprons and flat soda for everybody, all in the name of shadowiness, just like the soul of the beast.

Shadowiness describes a whole number of emotions, lighting, and the mentality of the waitress…all I want is another drink goddamn it. The room was a shadow, decorated in some sort of mix between one of those Americanized far east restaurants that claim to be authentic, and one of those American restaurants trying to be hip by throwing heaps of shit all over the walls. Luckily for my stomach it was too dark to see this third circle of hell.

“The only real danger is that you eventually step over the edge,” I mumbled in some sort of terror stricken Hunter S. Thompson voice. All I needed were the large pilot glasses and a bald head and I could write for Rolling Stone.

Despite my gonzo attitude, I really had been on to something. But the clock struck two and all the intelligible metaphysical leaps and bounds my brain had comprehended, a completely new reality. A brand new world that would make John Stewart Mill envious, it was on the horizon. The only danger was that I would eventually step over the edge.
The Call of the Blade

Kayla Randall

Do I answer it?
Do I even dare?
Do I give in to the merciless beauty of the Blade?
Will I allow it the satisfaction
of spilling and drinking my red hot essence?
It calls my name
Ever so gently
But also
Demanding
Who’s in control?
Me or the Blade?
Who answers who?
Oh so very tempted am I
by my steel lover
As the temptation in me starts to swell
I wonder
Why I press that stainless tip to my flesh
every time
The answer...
Control
Pain
Pleasure
Disgust
Insanity...
I close my eyes
waiting for the familiar sensation
of cold metal
through flesh
But I do not find it
Courage flows through my body
as I set down the piece
Untarnished

and though I look longingly
into it’s gleam
I speak to it softly
like an old friend
Maybe next time my dear...
Maybe next time
Independent

Mathew Moore

The sun’s blistering rays,
Shine upon your cheek.
As the night overcomes day,
And the sun begins to shrink.
Somehow you think…..
If day can leave why can’t I?
Caught in a life with nobody by your side.

Stereotype

Mathew Moore

A black guy shows me signs that he can play sports
I see his shoes are for the basketball court
But this guy actually likes to skateboard
In contrast images begin to distort
As a Mexican begins to run to a gate
Near the border the police do not hesitate
But he has been a citizen since he was eight

Because Immigration isn’t rare in that state
While confusion begins to circulate more
An obese mother is seen at a food store
Using EBT because she has been poor
But she’s a vegetarian at her core
People really wouldn’t believe what they will see
Because people confuse judgments so easily
Unfortunately your mind wanders so badly
No matter what please do not stereotype me
My “master” allowed me to have this book, my book. It was the last thing my father gave to me before the Romans came to our village. The bracelet my mother gave me is hidden in its box back home. I miss it there; I miss my house with my family. I miss the fields and orchards where I used to roam and work and play.

It has been three months since I was taken from my home and my family, since I was torn from everything I know and love. At least I’m back in the country for now. My master is a senator. I help take care of and educate his younger children and girls while we’re here; when we get back to the city the older boys will be going to a schoolhouse. When I’m not looking after the children, I’m cooking in the kitchen or cleaning or serving food or some other chore. I never do much that requires physical effort because I’m a girl. As if that makes a difference!

When the Romans came, we were all working in the fields and caring for the animals. The men fought back as they tried to protect home and family fields; they were almost instantly cut down. Small children, my six-year-old nieces among them, were slain along with anyone who resisted. It was my birthday.

This book and the bracelet were gifts celebrating my coming of age to marry. Lucky for me, the only man in the village who wasn’t cowed by my temper was Keenan, a boy only two summers older than me. He called me Katchushka, little Katya. Usually, -chushka added onto a name is an endearment reserved for family, especially children. He used it in reference to my size. He was only a head taller than me, though! When different slavers caught Keenan, mother, and me, Keenan was taken to some Roman city in the north. Mother and I were taken to the city itself.

It was a long journey. Once, while riding a boat down a river, a man among us tried to kill himself by throwing himself overboard. The guards fished him from the water and beat him soundly. After that, none of us dared even think to do such a thing.

I was sold to the friend of a senator. This senator had some young children who needed looking after.

Thus, here I am. The other slaves say that some day, I may be freed. When I do, I’m going to find my mother and Keenan. I’ll free them somehow, we’ll go home, and Keenan and I will get married. I think I’m old enough now.

It’s time to get to work now. I’m glad I have this book. Now, hundreds of years from now, someone will open its yellowed pages and Mother, Keenan, and I will not be forgotten.
Amanda Lawson

slammed on brakes, middle of right turn lane

a fuzzy chunk of meat on the right
and on the other side, a mallard shiny
lost and circling his sheduck just fallen
her head turned deathly nimble
too far back, her pyrite eye
squinting at me imploring
to stop the car and move her
off the road into the grass
he squawked at me to fix her
wake her up
i slid past needing to be on time
haunted by his devotion

studies indicate they
would have broken up at the end
of the breeding cycle anyway
but i can't help wondering
a year from now, two years
when he’s sitting in the grass
with a new sheduck
if he’ll really have eyes for her
or just go through the duck motions
What Would Kerouac Do?

Amanda Lawson

I found myself sitting on a stool outside an unfamiliar 711 recently. It was 5:30 in the morning. The only people around were the foreigners on duty with their limited English (encouraging me to take as much free coffee as I could drink), as well as the sundry characters getting ready for their day. I could tell from the way people were assessing me or avoiding looking at me altogether they thought I was a prostitute. Blame it on the cold, I had put on my warmest jacket which happened to be covered in fluffy white faux fur. Armed with a cappuccino and my Geology textbook, I planned to stay and wait until the repair shop across the street opened. Two days is a long time to be without my Firebird. I flipped through the textbook wanting to absorb the lecture I had missed the day my car broke down.

I noticed a couple of construction workers meet up in the parking lot to carpool. A woman got out of one of their cars looking like she hadn’t slept in a year. Ellen considered me for a few moments before cautiously asking why I was sitting outside in the November cold. I told her. A little Guatemalan baby in her backseat stirred and went back to sleep. She invited me back to her place for coffee and to get out of the cold. I refused instinctively, but she offered again. For some reason, I could sense that she had good intentions. Diane Arbus and Jack Kerouac wouldn’t have hesitated, so ignoring the most basic laws of personal safety I got in the car….

I knew there was an adventure coming, or at least something more interesting than sitting in the cold.

We were going back to her place, that was the plan. Just some coffee. We were chatting, I remember something about her bad cold and her living with “the Diablo.” Apparently the Diablo had just got out of a few weeks in jail, although they’d been together two years. She said he liked to get assault and battery charges like other people might mention the weather.

Ellen’s son called, and after her explaining repeatedly that it wasn’t “that kind” of medicine, just something to stop him from throwing up anymore, she informed me that we were driving an hour to Williamsburg. Her son was real sick and needed his medicine. She had his medicine with her. I pictured a little boy with asthma. It wasn’t until we were in Williamsburg that she told me her son had just got out of jail where he was forcibly injected with heroin and the medicine was Oxycontins she’d bought off a friend in Richmond. I thought it was strange, but who am I to judge? For some reason, I still felt that I could trust Ellen, and that I would be fine as long as she was my guide down this rabbit hole. I realized I was increasingly in need of a restroom. She said that was fine, I could use the crapper in his hotel room. Ellen kept telling me that Mike was very cute because he looked just like her. He called several times during the drive to track her progress. When she turned in at a little motel, he was standing outside waiting for us.

She told him I needed to use the little girl’s room without introducing me, and by that time I couldn’t keep from running. I made a mental note to stick to small coffees. When I came out into the motel room, she was waiting to get in the bathroom and gave me the instructions to “just ignore him.” He was sitting on the bed with his back to me. I stood there smelling cigarette smoke for a minute before I sat in one of the two obligatory motel chairs. That’s when I realized Mike hadn’t swallowed the pills. He was getting ready to inject them into his arm. I didn’t even realize that was possible. She came out of the bathroom and started pacing back and forth, wanting to block my view, but also wanting to peek out the window at the Diablo’s child sleeping in the car. Her bad cold seemed to have disappeared within minutes of leaving the bathroom. I took the opportunity to look around the room.

Ellen had mentioned in the car that Mike gave her a 42 inch flat screen TV, and there was another one in this room, along with juvenile magazine pictures of models in bikinis taped to every wall, and a frosted bong vase filled with branches of the bush from the parking lot. He mentioned getting her another TV from his guy next week, and they had some words about getting a hold of a gun later in the day because there had been static with his dealer the day before. Apparently the dealer had absconded with $800 and was either in hiding or in jail. I wasn’t sure if they had forgotten I was in the room, or they just took a casual attitude about these issues. There was some unseen signal, and it was time to leave for her place. He climbed into the backseat and passed out sporadically during the long trip back.
Mike sat up briefly to ask the sleeping child to pack his cigarettes, but the child did not wake. He kept asking in a far away voice until I realized he was asking me. He wasn’t up for the job of slapping a box of smokes, so I took the liberty of unwrapping them for him as well. He tried to hand unlit cigarettes up to Ellen, but he kept dropping them between the seats. He repeated everything he said several times, at one point it looked like he was using a sweatshirt between his hands as a sling to hold his sleeping head aloft.

She asked me for the third time whether I was sure my car would be ready. I told her again that they had called me the day before to say the work was done and the car could be picked up. She asked me how much it was going to be and I said 300. I heard a sudden noise from the backseat that could either be a cigarette lighter or a switchblade.

“Hey Mom, look at this,” Mike laughed. She turned around to look and shook her head at what she saw.

“The car shop has my credit card number already,” I lied needlessly.

If my mom had seen Ellen’s motel room, she would say it looked like a bomb went off. Ellen rushed around to spruce the place up a bit. There was a whole chicken sitting out to be cooked in the convection oven, and a tray with some leathery Canadian bacon. After finding a tiny backpack, she strapped it on the groggy child. Realizing he needed to eat she slapped a few chunks of bacon in his palm with the word “Eat.” When Mike realized Ellen wasn’t going to take him to Richmond looking for more pills, he decided to stay behind and sleep. That meant the baby was in the backseat and we were on the road yet again.

She went inside to drop the kid off at a preschool for children with special needs, and I waited in the car. And waited. A few minutes turned into more than an hour. When she came back she apologized and said one of the teachers had stopped her to ask what would happen to the child if the Diablo got sent back to Guatemala. Ellen said she didn’t have time to talk about it.

She panicked when she spotted a cop anywhere on the road and I’d reassure her that she was just another driver. She told me about the similarities between prison and summer camp. We compared notes on our former addictions and our penchants for cats over dogs. She dropped me at the car shop and said she hoped I didn’t mind all that I had seen. I’m not sure why we exchanged numbers, I doubt we’ll ever see each other again.
Mom’s Favorite Story to Tell

Amanda Lawson

when i was four or six
i’d spread my dolls out on the living room floor
changing each one’s outfit
in my own dimension; hours at a time

mom and grandma
watching over me from the kitchen
talk about celebrity plastic surgeries
and what operations they would want
if they had the money

mom leans back to say “i would
like a tummy tuck, a boob job,
great dolly parton boobs,
a neck lift or maybe
just another chin."

i dropped my doll
to look at her unblinking,
“but why do you want
another chin
when you already have two?”

The Man Who Was Incapable of Anything Spontaneous

Amanda Lawson

I know a cat who won’t consider
going to a movie, unless it’s three days away
and either historical or factual.
His every comment has a purpose, no small talk.
He doesn’t believe in entertainment without
some precise intellectual benefit.
He requires a military-style chain of command.
I think he misses wearing a uniform daily.
He’s amused by my unpredictability,
although he won’t indulge me.
He realizes he’s very Spartan.

The only dream he remembers having
is of analyzing subway blueprints.
Paris, Pass the A1

Maxwell Despard

Sir Winston Churchill
chews a scotch-soaked cigar
over a plate of bones
and barbecue sauce.
Lizzie Borden just refilled
my iced tea.

I’m not kidding,
Siddhartha
is getting a plate
at the salad bar.

And I could be mistaken,
but it seems that
the manager here
is Helen of Troy.
There’s a huge wooden horse
parked in a handicap space,
emanating the subtle
grunts and shuffles
of soldiers
fucking each other
like it’s the last time
they’ll ever eat steak.

Uprising

Maxwell Despard

The votes are in,
Cowboy Boot Shot Glass
is the new governor
of Counter Between
Fridge and Sink.

Two coffee cups birthed
an artistic movement
reminiscent of early Kandinsky
and African cave paintings.
Tephra spills
from Mt. Rubbermaid’s
gaping maw, linoleum tarnished
by its caustic marrow.

Last week, Cheap Toaster
informed us that talk
of revolution flitters
among the flatware.
They’ve gathered stray
matches for a strike
on Living Room.

We haven’t seen
or heard from him since.
I wipe my brow and look into the cold pale sky. I watch as the clouds of smoke float lazily into the horizon. I take an icy breath. I look from the frozen white ground to the dark mass lying beside my boot. I pull my jacket tighter and breathe into my hands. I bend down. I clasp the shovel and begin to dig yet another grave.

I pick away at the cloth fused to his neck. I remove his tags. I view a photograph of a woman he had secured within his helmet. I lift the man by his arms and thrust him into the forsaken chasm. I gently place the photograph upon his mutilated body. I lift my shovel and begin to bury yet another soldier.

As I walk to our small encampment, a deafening silence falls upon my ears. There are no songs being sung or idle subjects being conversed. There are only men, huddled close to a small fire with little clothing and dry, blood spattered faces. I sit and join in their silent meditation, but I hate the silence. To me, silence is death. Silence allows one to think on the horrors he has witnessed. It allows him to dwell on his darker thoughts. It allows him to think of the family and friends he has left behind. It makes me think of my wife in Georgia. My wife. I pull out an old letter from my tattered vest and read,

*My Dearest James,*

I received your letter sent on September 10th. I hope that you are alright. We all are in good health here... My eyes skip to the bottom. We’re so proud of you, James. My darling soldier, take care.

*All my love, Sarah*

“My darling soldier,” that line always throws me. An American soldier is supposed to be the image of honor, hope, and freedom. At least, that is what everyone back home believes. However, here, it is an image of despair, death and anger. All that we live for is to kill. All that we think about is survival. All that we breathe is the stench of ever-present death, and the soldier is left to wonder if this war will ever truly be over. Even after the guns are silent and the treaties are signed, the solitary soldier must still fight within himself, for the senses are forever damaged and the man forever scarred. And it is this soldier that must constantly remind himself of what he is truly fighting for: his family, his friends, and most importantly, his freedom.

I awake to the words “Mail Call!” I stretch and secure my rifle strap over my shoulder as I crawl out of my tent.

“Walters!”

“That’s me.” I yell as I push and prod, arm raised, through the crowd. I grab the letter and shove it into my pocket. I sit on the back of a transport truck, pull the letter from my pocket, and look it over happily. I furrow my eyebrows as I notice the letter is sent by my sister-in-law. I look at the postmark. It reads December 12th, over a month ago. I tear open the envelope. I pull out the letter anxiously, and begin to unfold the paper, hastily reading,

*James,*

I have written this letter many times. Sarah didn’t want me writing to you, but you got the right to know. There were some difficulties. The babe is lost, and we’re fearing for her life now...

I stop reading. My mind is numb. My eyes linger over the words without comprehension.

*The babe is lost, and we’re fearing...*

Stop. I look at the tiny parcel. I read the paragraph again. I close my eyes. I breathe in the icy air. I feel it in my bones. I fold the paper. I hold it in my hands. I stare at the rifle at my side.

“Walters.” My eyes dart toward the general. “Gather four more men. You’re going on an expedition.”

“Yes sir.” I reply lethargically. I place the letter back into its envelope. I sit frozen.
The image of the words burns in my skull. I cannot cry. I cannot scream. I cannot feel. I have become immune to sickness and death. I now knew that this war had destroyed more of me than flesh.

“Johnson, Shore, Williams, Atwood, get up. We’re goin’ to go hunt us some German.”

Protests meet my ears, but I cannot decipher them. I cannot hear anything except the ringing of the empty paper words in my mind. As I trudge toward the desolate city, thousands of questions fill my head. These thoughts I attempt to stifle to no avail. “I must concentrate.” I tell myself. “I must stay alive.”

I hold my rifle fast. My eyes are wide and aware as they roam the ruined village for any sign of life. My mind is racing. I try yet again to focus on the mission at hand, but my thoughts continue to drift back to that letter. That letter. I hear a scream and a shot. I turn. My rifle raised, I begin to jog cautiously toward the origin of the sound. There is an open door. I creep ahead. I see a soldier lying on the floor, convulsing as he clutches at his blood drenched chest. I bend down, take his blood stained hand and remain silent. Suddenly, he wrenches his hand away and signals toward the open doorway. I feel the fiery darts inject themselves into my back. I hear distant shots and yells. I collapse. My chest hits the ground. I turn my head. I see her. She bends over me. She whispers in my ear, “Not yet, Jim, not now.” I sigh, “Sarah.” She disappears. I feel hands grab at my body. I lift my head. I see the men’s faces. I view the red cross upon their helmets. I think of her.

Bruce Jones

A father’s prayer,
hopes unrealized,
eXpectations still to dream.
Not yet a child,
it was not your time,
But God’s plans,
blinded by my sin,
go unseen.
Pleading miracles,
unworthy tears are swept away.
*******

My child was born,
small and fragile.
Life clings to tattered threads of faith.
There was a hoary flash with a hint of blue, following the sound of a truly horrific popping noise. Some sort of propelling object, black as coal, slowly made its way towards the woman’s head. “What is that?” she thought, trying her hardest to move to the side to dodge this curious object but of course, she couldn’t. The woman was, or seemed to be, bound by some force that couldn’t be seen but inevitably felt. The force held her still as this black thing hurtled for her, tearing the air as if it was foil. Gently, it tapped her head, bouncing off and hitting the floor. She then fell to the floor just as the thing did, blurry eyes open to the cloudy sky. The woman couldn’t blink; she couldn’t feel her legs. She was only able to move her finger an inch. Though while her vision suddenly came to, she ogled at a dark looming figure that bled the cloudy sky of its white. An odd stranger, with a face of arcane, hovered above and did not move.

This blatant memory of hell branded itself in the woman’s mind, singing the most terrible jingle from its everlasting hum.

The woman, so called Anne, dreamt this same dream every other time she closed her eyes, or at least when she saw the hole in her head while catching sight of her reflection. It haunted her, like some sort of a demon that thrived off of its host’s angst. Or maybe a fly that would buzz and buzz and by no chance ever stop buzzing. Clutching the frigid steering wheel, Anne leaned forward and tried her hardest to decipher the difference of ice, snow, and the street. The windshield wipers hardly did a thing; they seemed to be frozen, but not quite frozen enough. They made their poignant attempts to reach the high and low of the windshield as they screeched like nails on a chalkboard. Anne cringed at the irritating sound, though at the same time, pretended to ignore it. “Where am I?” she thought as she leaned forward, squinting through the white snowflakes shining through the dusk. “I must’ve missed my turn.” Anne glanced down to the radio on her dashboard. 6:15pm, the radio’s clock flashed in green characters. She sighed to herself at the sight of the time. “Six already.” Squinting, Anne leaned forward even further,
pressing her chest to the steering wheel. She scrunched her nose as she peered through the snow to find the side of the street.

There was no street, only ice and snow. There were no lights, no buildings nor people, only the dismal atmosphere that seemed to hover just above the ground. Although, from a distance, there seemed to be one person; someone huddled to himself. Anne gasped and suddenly halted the car to a stop. After struggling with her seatbelt, she hopped from her car and hurried to the stranger. The stranger walked by himself, head down, face blurred. He held a brown suitcase with a tight grip and slowly dragged his feet.

“Excuse me, sir!” Anne called, hand high in the air to catch the stranger’s attention.

The man continued on his way, not even glancing at Anne. Puzzled, she tried again.

“Excuse me, sir!” she repeated.

The man, once again, paid her no mind. Anne was no longer puzzled but offended. She held her coat closed, shielding herself from the harsh cold, and stormed her way to the man.

“I’m lost, can you tell me where I am?” she asked, walking beside the man.

The man kept dragging his feet through the snow, head still down.

“H-hello?” Anne stammered, waving her hand across the man’s blurred face. “Sir, are you alright?”

Silently, he walked at a snail like pace, clutching the suitcase so tightly that his hand appeared to be shaking. Anne grew concerned and afraid; she figured it may be safer to part from the man. She stopped following him, but stared from behind. Her eyes trailed down the man’s back to the suitcase he carried. It was a faded brown, decorated with wine-colored stains and ink. The suitcase looked old and oddly familiar. Shaking her head with confusion, she turned and went back into her waiting car.

She had been driving for hours. Her eyes grew heavy, everything began to look the same, she’d been listening to the same song under heavy static on the radio, and her hands and feet were numb. Her blinks were seconds longer, her yawns were frequent. Anne was very exhausted and very tired. She closed her eyes to think, just for a second, and realized her head had lowered itself to the freezing steering wheel. Anne shot her head up, and quickly tinkered with the heater as she began to see her breath. While looking down, with the weight of fatigue on her eyes, they closed. Then she felt a zapping cold shock from her forehead once more from the steering wheel. With her eyes wide open, Anne saw another figure directly in front of her car.

She gasped and slammed her heavy foot on the brakes. The car skidded on the icy road while it swung itself to the left and right. Anne grasped onto the steering wheel, letting out a horrifying scream as she felt an abrupt crash to her left.

Coughing, Anne swayed her shoulders and thanked God that she could. Next, she moved her fingers and toes, and thanked God that she could. Apprehensively opening her eyes, she saw that she was incredibly untouched, and she thanked God. She struggled with her seatbelt once again. While she wrestled her seatbelt, she noticed that she was hanging to her left.

“Help!” she cried out, trying to break free.

Just as she cried out, her car door flew open. A stranger’s hands unbuckled her and pulled her from the wreckage. The hands helped support her as they led her to the icy ground and sat her down. Anne turned to see her car, toppled over onto its left side. She closed her eyes, pushing back tears.

“Thank you,” Anne said, still facing her totaled car.

“You’re welcome,” a woman’s voice said. Anne cringed at the voice, the woman sounded all too familiar.

Anne shot around to see something awfully odd. The woman was a mirror, well, maybe not a mirror because Anne surely felt the woman’s hand on her shoulder; mirrors do not have hands. Then it must have been a mirror image; the woman looked exactly like Anne. Same hair, eyes, nose, mouth and clothes, and above all, same concerned expression.
Anne moved her lips; she was mouthing something but the words would not come out. Her eyes were wide with shock, and her hands began to tremble. Anne backed away from the other “Anne.”

“What? Who are you?” Anne managed to blurt out in a whisper.

“I’m Anne,” the woman replied, moving closer to the real Anne.

“No you aren’t! I’m Anne, Anne Turner.”

“So am I.”

“We can’t both be Anne Turner! Now stop playing games and tell me who you are!”

“I did, I’m Anne Turner.”

“I’m Anne Turner!”

“I am too! Don’t you see what’s happened?”

“What do you mean?”

The other Anne sighed. “I had to figure it all out myself. Look at yourself, what’s the difference between me and you?”

Anne studied the question in her head. “What do you mean? There’s no difference between--” she stopped as she noticed something. Anne had something that the other Anne didn’t have, and she was surprised that she’d taken so long to notice. The other Anne had no hole in her head, but she did. She gently touched the hole that was now scarred and blotched.

“Anne, you were shot, remember?” the other Anne asked, looking herself in her eyes.

“Of course I do, but why weren’t you?”

“I don’t know. But I was supposed to be . . .” the other Anne paused for a second, and then continued. “I wasn’t supposed to live through the argument, but he didn’t hit me.”

“What are you talking about?” Anne’s confusion quickly grew into anger.

“What do you mean?”

“Our argument with our husband yesterday. When we stormed away and grabbed our suitcases, that’s when he pulled out the gun.” The other Anne stalled once more, pulling herself to finish. “He pulled out the gun and pointed it towards us, remember?”

“Yes, I do,” Anne said slowly, reliving the moment to every detail.

“He fired the gun,” The other Anne focused on the hole in Anne’s head. “Though he didn’t shoot me, he missed . . . the bullet went straight past me. I ran to my car and drove away. But he did shoot you, right in the head. You died,” she stammered for another moment, “but I got away. That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because I can see you . . . I can see my own ghost.”

“That’s insane. I must have head damage from the accident.”

“Why don’t you believe me?”

Anne sighed, looking at the other Anne’s bullet-less forehead. “I can’t. This is all too impossible, I just can’t believe you.”

“Alright, you will believe me when you see this.” The other Anne stood and helped Anne to her feet. They began walking past the wrecked car into the gray.

The two walked for quite a while, hardly talking. They didn’t pass glances, not even a peek. Anne simply followed the other Anne until she couldn’t feel her frozen feet any longer. Ignoring the prickling pain, Anne saw a brown mass partially covered in snow.

“Open it.” The other Anne commanded, turning away.

Perplexed to why the other Anne turned away, Anne swept away all the snow from the mass. She shook it; it was very heavy. “Hmm,” she muttered, realizing that she had found her suitcase.
“My clothes are in here.”

“Open it,” repeated the other Anne.

Anne chiseled away ice from the lock with her fingernail and raised the hood. As she caught sight of what was inside of the suitcase, she screamed. Inside were feet, arms, chopped legs, a torso, and a head with an all too similar bullet hole.

Another New York Story

Thomas Van Pelt

Another New York story rising from smoke and flying down Interstate 13, a sudden stop on Canal, unloading to rats as big as footballs, shipments of noodles and fake Rolexes.

We meet in Union Square
so early the lights are still on
and Evelyn’s park is dead still, on
the top of Union Square.

When the open markets bloom,
they’re shelling apples
rolling like rocks and red as Hebrew doors.
The fullness of the day and the miracle of desolation
brings us to a skip in Park Avenue where poetry was scorched and the wine was fire.

At night we are angelic over black books and Bookers bourbon
through the leggy doors of Elsa,
with your French tongue and the swing of Birdman against the Walkmen.

Live jazz and pink Piscolinos met us at Bar Rue
with nude snapshots framed as art crawling on the walls.
The sot piano player like Peter Lorre,
collecting fingers
of Scotch.

We get chased out of Death & Co. at peak chasing hours
straight into Needle Park where our skin became tough and thick like steel.
And the little foes who couldn’t beat us down settled for our change and bled into our mercy.
We remain risen as the sun rises
High on the Highline and floating like Planets
with an awful mass and heavy gravity spinning madly out of control.
That New York drunk where everything is almost legal.

Our departure is met with a raucous band.
Parades led by dragons, little drummers and a fraternity of old Labor.
We’re running out on a Bus of organs
With Virginia Beach crawling closer to us
as Interstate 13 runs behind us.

Rest Between Poe and Cobain

Erika Bowers

I keep your photograph still;
so that I may pull it out at will.

It’s tucked away in an album
on my bookcase.
It rests between Poe
and book about Cobain.

Like them both, I know,
you’re better where you lie.
Time to Stop Pretending

Erika Bowers

Little girl, put that book down.
When will you realize that fairy tales aren’t real?
No prince is coming to save you
to take you away to his castle
and his kingdom.
There aren’t any enchanting kisses.
There aren’t any magic spells,
no secret potions.
There are no fairy god-mothers.
There aren’t any birds to braid your hair.
There are no wishing wells.

There’s only real life.
There’s only the real world.
And in the real world
you’re on your own.

So take off that tiara.
Stop waiting to be saved,
for you’re no damsel in distress.
It’s time to stop pretending.

That Day

Eric Benoit

The call coming in from the Coast Guard was loud and clear. Rather
than continuing on our previously scheduled flight plan, our crew,
which was patrolling the area, immediately headed towards the scene.
I had practiced several training exercises before, so many exactly like
this very call. Hearing the call through my headset, I had no aspirations
of it actually being anything more than another exercise; so imagine my
surprise when I found out this was for real. I had never pulled a real
body, living or dead, from the sea. I have pulled the training dummy to
safety many times, but today—today would be different.

As I sat on the edge of the H-3 helicopter, I stared out into the vastness
of blue. The water seemed as blue as the sky and the horizon looked
as though the two had melted together. I couldn’t tell where the sky
ended and the water began. All I could see was blue. This wouldn’t be
the first time I had taken this ride, and it certainly would not be the last;
however, I didn’t know it at the time, but this ride would end so much
differently than all the others.

The scene, when we flew over, was nothing I could have been prepared
for. I had never seen anything like this. At first glance I couldn’t believe
that someone had managed to stay afloat on such a ragtag flotation
device. I guess some would say it appeared as a homemade raft, but to
me it looked like several piles of wood simply tied together. Each pile of
wood had been bound to several other piles creating what looked like a
train of small wooden rafts. The main raft had a makeshift sail of sorts
with a sheet of plastic as the body of the sail. With desperation and fear
for their lives, five Haitian refugees clung to the raft. Even as we flew
overhead, they did not release their grips, not even to try to flag us as to
their whereabouts. After positioning ourselves overhead, I could clearly
see why: several dozen sharks, big and small were circling the rafts. I
remember how clearly I could see them, their enormous bodies gliding
through the bright blue water. I could feel the anxiety building in me,
and I swear I could almost hear my own heartbeat over the deafening sound of the helicopter. With everything going on around me, the world just seemed to slow down and go quiet, as if in slow motion. I remembered feeling the mist as it was being kicked up by the propeller wash over the water. The spray felt nice and refreshing compared to the heat of the Caribbean air.

It was then, when the world seemed slow and everything quiet, that the call came through my headset; we had been cleared for a jump rescue. My heart raced faster as the adrenaline rushed through my body. I admit I had been thinking that it probably would have been a better idea for the Coast Guard ship to deploy a raft rescue; however, I am not one to question the decisions made by my superiors. This decision had been made, and now all the training and hours of practice would be put to use. The questions continued to pop into my head: Was I up for the task? Had I been trained well enough? Could I really do this? All legitimate questions that only I could answer with my actions.

Still watching the sharks intently and trying to build up courage, I heard the final call: “Clear for jump.” I removed the headset as I prepared myself. “Swimmer away, Swimmer away” would be the next call. Upon hitting the water which seemed so far away, I deployed my shark repellent pack immediately. From the helicopter I could clearly see the frenzy of sharks below me, but now I had no idea where they were. I only knew they were there.

Not a far swim to the rafts from my entry point in the water, it didn’t take me long to reach them. I seemed to glide across the top of the water. I guess the fear of the sharks must have given me a severe adrenaline boost. Either way, I wasn’t wasting any time. As soon as I made it to the rafts, I quickly hooked the first guy up. Although they spoke no English, there were no words needed to understand what we were there for. This process continued for the next survivor as well. As we continued to drift in the current, I noticed that our shark repellent was no longer around us. Knowing I would have to retrieve more, I decided that when it came time for the third recue I would also hook myself into the pulley. This would also give me a much needed break from swimming in the fast flowing currents, even if only a brief one. Jumping again, I hit the water this time deploying two packages of shark repellent upon entry. We never really knew or were sure if the stuff would repel sharks but I was putting all my faith in the product now. I wasn’t going to leave anything to chance.

Swimming closer and closer to the wooden rafts, the number of sharks by this time had increased. The pace quickened. I became more anxious as the seconds passed by, and yet the world around me still seemed to move as if in slow motion. The wooden rafts, sitting just under the surface of the water maybe three to four inches were now getting bumped by the sharks as they swam closer and closer. The water started to look like it was boiling from all the shark activity. They were hungry and we were on their menu. At that moment I had no idea, but would later find out that there had been nine Haitians when they first set sail. Somewhere along the way they had lost four members, taken by the sharks as they swam from raft to raft.

Completing the last rescue, I felt as though I could finally breathe again. The world seemed to be back at a normal pace. While being raised on the pulley, I finally looked down and was able to put the entire experience into perspective. I had just rescued five people on the verge of death while putting my own life on the line. The training although long and hard had been good. I could do this job. Looking down again, I could see some forty to fifty sharks below and I couldn’t have been happier to be back aboard that noisy helicopter.

I still think about that day from time to time, when I am reminiscing or looking at the commendations I received for the rescue but mostly when I am alone swimming, and the world just seems to slow down and go quiet around me. Just like it did that day.
Standing in too-small-for-his-continually-expanding-waistline boxers, and socks with big, brown mud stains, Frank Amick stared into the mirror examining his pale belly and the slight cut on his neck, compliments of a hatchet-job shave done in all too much of a hurry. He thought about how late he would be to work, if he actually decided to make it to the office this time. Tearing off a dot of toilet paper and placing it over his wound, he wiped the rest of his face clean with a towel and wondered about what he might spend two hours thinking about sitting in Starbucks this morning.

Frank got dressed, putting on his favorite sweater over his Oxford shirt and tie. Upon entering the kitchen, he stopped to soak in the early morning charm of hot, strong coffee and mourning doves frolicking along the tops of fences. He sat down with the day’s paper and the “My Child’s an Honor Roll Student” mug that had come with several obnoxious bumper stickers that were now sure to be fading and peeling from the old Dodge Caravan he and his ex-wife had sold some years ago. He let the coffee cool a bit, blowing on it frequently, and then stepped outside to face the onslaught of an unusually cold February wind chill and attempt to smoke the first cigarette of the day.

Every morning was the same: Morning masturbation in the shower; post jerk off self-ridicule in front of the mirror; too many cups of coffee to go with too many stories about kids his son’s age getting blown to pieces in places that sounded like made-up words like Fallujah, Baghdad, Kandahar, Marja; the first of a day’s constant nicotine binge. Then it would be off to cubicles and line number 3 and post-it stamps and group e-mails about the new insurance policy. Today would be different, though. Today Frank would make a change. Frank would resist, revolt, rebel.

Frank sat in his car, littered with coffee cups, empty cigarette packs and old notebooks whose pages were lined with disillusioned rambling and wannabe poetics. Once upon a time, Frank was in a band. They would play all along the East Coast, stopping at colleges and dive-bars, sleeping in a van that smelled like piss, dropping acid and getting drunk with strippers. They called themselves “Infinite Jest.” Frank played guitar. He was good enough, but nothing to write home about. Hence the job in the cubicle.

On his way to work, Frank tried to find a reason to cry. Years ago, Frank cried a lot. Not so much anymore. When he was very young, he would cry at the end of nearly every movie, happy or sad. This lasted until he was 18, and on a date with who he thought he’d spend the rest of his life, he cried not only at the end but throughout the entirety of Jaws. Needless to say, he never went out with Patty Davidson again. Frank wanted to cry today, he just wasn’t sure how to do it anymore.

At work, he sat in his grey box on his swivel chair, trying to see how far he could get a thumbtack into his thumb. He really wished the prudes hadn’t taken over the world; he really wanted to smoke something. He fantasized about rolling a cigarette out of the “Mooresville Ground Well Analysis Report #270”; back in the day, Frank went out in the field to collect these results. Now he just typed them up, every day, and he could no longer muster up the fake enthusiasm to lie to himself or his bosses and coworkers that he actually gave a shit about arsenic and sulfur leaking into Mrs. Victoria Reynolds’ sprinkler system. So Frank just played with his thumbtacks, and found an essay online about the State of the Cubicle in 2006. He read past the name of the writer before his eyes lost focus, and all he saw was a collage of colors; white and black on the monitor, cool grey padding of the box around him, and little red drops on the keyboard.

Everything was better when he had hair. Maria was still there then. They would lie next to each other, professing their insatiable and eternal love for each other with coy smiles and stares and batted eyelashes, nights becoming mornings and mornings becoming nights, sharing cigarettes and discussing possible baby names. When Alex was finally born, Maria found God and domesticated principles, and Frank gave up trying to write music. They were supposed to live off-the-grid, raise a beautiful family, and grow corn and maybe write kids’ books. Instead they bought a station wagon and a 3-bedroom house in a neighborhood called Willow’s Creek that had no Willow trees. Maria sold Frank’s Stratocaster and could name all the characters from As the World Turns. Frank got a job with a chemical engineering company, researching harmful minerals. And he had a great combover.
He walked into the cafeteria where posters of encouragement hung on the walls that reminded him of high school. It reeked of Salisbury Steaks and mop-water. Ernie Middleton, who was imprisoned just 4 cubicles away from Frank, kicked a vending machine, demanding his Diet Pepsi. The eyes followed him everywhere he went at lunch; he didn’t have to hear what everyone said, he could see it. “Alcoholic.” “Manic Depressive.” Frank didn’t speak to anyone anymore. He’d just eat his lunch and type reports. Punch in, punch out. Frank hated the cafeteria more than the cubicle. At least in his box, he rarely had to see anyone. He could operate within an illusion of autonomy while trapped in his box. As long as he typed. But the cafeteria was hell. It meant coming in contact, and in many cases face-to-face, with all of the braggadocious, puke-invoking Christmas cards about timeshares in Costa Rica and Timmy’s full scholarship to wherever.

If only Alex was still around. It wasn’t as if he was dead; he was just gone. He used to see him every other weekend after the divorce, and sometimes less. Gone were walks through the arboretum on Daddy’s shoulders, or this is an A chord, that’s a D chord, or put your fingers on the laces, nice spiral! Alex was just gone now. Off to college far away from home, or far from Frank. Gone to live his own life. Gone to find out for himself if all of this is worth a damn. Frank just wanted to read him one more chapter of “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.”

Frank made his way through the line and surveyed the options for lunch. The aforementioned, abominable Salisbury Steak with mashed-potatoes or the chicken patty sandwich with cold, soggy fries. It was the exact same lunch menu as the day before and the day before yesterday and the day before that. This Frank could no longer stand for. The sight and the smell of Stockley-Erickson Chemical Engineering’s cafeteria’s entrees began to churn Frank’s stomach, his nostrils flared, and he gritted his teeth, jutting out a jaw that many had never seen before underneath all of his 7 chins. Today, Frank was staring in the face of an injustice so severe, a lunch menu of plastic meats, seasoned with arsenic and sulfur, he thought his head would explode.

The cafeteria buzzed with conversations about last weekend’s golf outing and Weight Watchers stepcounters, but nothing about this infringement, this trespassing, this violation of human liberty? How can they all talk of everything but this crime against humanity, Salisbury Steak or chicken patty? Frank began to tap his feet, quietly, but steadily crescendoing, as he slid his plastic tray down the assembly line, closer and closer to his enemies.

A fly landed on Frank’s tray. This insect, this less-than-a-centimeters–worth-of-carbon-and-eyes-and-loud-wings, this creature existed for a purpose. It was to buzz around peoples’ heads, shit invisibly on everything it touched, and create more flies, and sometimes decompose things. This stupid fly was more than Frank had ever been; it wasn’t just a fly, it transcended species. Why was Frank even here? Not in the cafeteria line, but Earth? Who was he? What was he?

He was Frank Amick, Jr., the second son of Francis and Barbara Amick, who used to play guitar in Infinite Jest and cried during Jaws, ex-husband of Maria Tomasson, estranged father of Alex Amick, typist of arsenic and sulfur, who drove a 1999 Toyota Camry and lived in Willow’s Creek, alone and numb. But not today. Today, driven by the aroma of Salisbury Steaks and the uncompromising mission of an obnoxious housefly, Frank Amick would make a stand. He hadn’t spent thousands of his now dead parents’ money to memorize the periodic table, suffered through a bitter divorce, and watch helplessly as his son forgot he even existed, just so that he could stab himself in the thumb in his grey box and make the choice between the Salisbury Steak and the Chicken Patty every single fucking day. Sisyphus he was not; he was Frank Goddamn Amick, Revolutionary.

Frank made his way through the line and surveyed the options for lunch. The aforementioned, abominable Salisbury Steak with mashed-potatoes or the chicken patty sandwich with cold, soggy fries. It was the exact same lunch menu as the day before and the day before yesterday and the day before that. This Frank could no longer stand for. The sight and the smell of Stockley-Erickson Chemical Engineering’s cafeteria’s entrees began to churn Frank’s stomach, his nostrils flared, and he gritted his teeth, jutting out a jaw that many had never seen before underneath all of his 7 chins. Today, Frank was staring in the face of an injustice so severe, a lunch menu of plastic meats, seasoned with arsenic and sulfur, he thought his head would explode.

The cafeteria buzzed with conversations about last weekend’s golf outing and Weight Watchers stepcounters, but nothing about this infringement, this trespassing, this violation of human liberty? How can they all talk of everything but this crime against humanity, Salisbury Steak or chicken patty? Frank began to tap his feet, quietly, but steadily crescendoing, as he slid his plastic tray down the assembly line, closer and closer to his enemies.

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Frank left the cafeteria, drenched, but smiling. He decided he’d go to McDonald’s. He hadn’t had a Big Mac in a long time. In his car, he

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listened to “Axis of Love” all the way to the Golden Arches. He ate in the parking lot of the Super Wal-Mart behind the McDonald’s. He smoked a cigarette while he watched Mrs. Victoria Reynold’s report burn. And back in the cafeteria, a janitor cleaned off the wall where a fly had been squashed.