2013 Literary Festival Committee Members
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Preface

The artist’s world is limitless. It can be found anywhere, far from where he lives or a few feet away. It is always on his doorstep. ~Paul Strand

“Tidewater Community College: From Here, Go Anywhere.” This is so much more than a slogan; it is the basis of a fundamental belief of the college’s administration, faculty, and staff that students can, indeed, go anywhere their dreams and initiative take them. We want our students to see the world as being as limitless as their imagination.

What you are reading now began as a thought—a whisper—as all dreams do. Understanding that learning and discovery do not end at the end of a class, the college community wanted to give students a means to share their visions of the world. Since 1998, ChannelMarker has been that outlet.

Expression exists in both words and images. ChannelMarker honors both. With short stories, essays, poetry, paintings, and photos, it gives everyone a glimpse of the talent that exists in our students. We continue to be awed at the depth of their creativity and expression, and eagerly anticipate every entry, knowing that each one brings us a unique perspective of the world.

ChannelMarker will continue to grow, helping students to realize their talents and to fulfill their creative potential. We welcome entries from all TCC students. If you are interested in sharing your work, please visit us at www.tcc.edu/Literary-Festival/Channelmarker. Let us be a part of your journey.

Suki Tooley
Chair, Literary Festival Committee
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Ajax was beset with an icy numbness that felt as real as a blizzard’s biting wind. He felt it literally, viscerally, and it cut though the intensity of the oppressive heat, the stink of burning land and death until his bones felt frozen. His mind felt frozen too. There was nothing else to do. The Jeeps brought them back to camp, night finally reclaiming the sky and casting its cloak around a world that seemed suddenly unreal and foreign to Ajax Blackburn.

He dumped his gear at the barracks and left immediately, leaving no room for the others to question him, not wanting to hear the glib and heartless accounts of the lives lost, land purged of all life. He didn’t think he could bear to hear his fellow soldiers joke and make fun of what they had seen, and he knew they would—that was how they worked. But not him. He was too young, his skin too thin, his morals and sense of righteousness still full of vigor. He hated them for smoking on the ride home, quietly talking amongst themselves, not once speaking of the depravity and gore that they had wallowed through for hour upon hour until his nose could no longer smell of the charred remains of humans and animals, until his boots were hot and blackened from walking through each demolished village. Ajax couldn’t bear to think that all of these men, some of whom he liked well enough to consider friends, did not care about what had happened. We should be angry, he thought, ignoring calls from his friends to chow, the smell of the mess hall sickening him. Ajax walked on, his back as straight as a board, every muscle tense, his face like a block of ice.

Walking through the camp was like walking through a dreamscape. It felt unreal. Ajax felt unreal. He found himself passing the filthy white walls of medical buildings on autopilot. He flowed into the med barracks like a dusty breeze, ignoring everything and everyone.

“They killed everyone.” Ajax told her, fighting for some modicum of composure and not finding it. “They killed the babies, the animals... everyone.” He tilted his face towards hers. “How could they slaughter them all? How could they do that to their own people, Briseis?”

“There isn’t an easy answer,” she replied.
“That is not an answer—" "I know." She stroked his short hair as he sat on her small bed. “Lay down. I’m tired."

“I hate this day.” He wiped at his wet eyes, falling back. “I hate this place too.” Briseis pulled off Ajax’s boots, kicked off her own and lay in the crook of his arm which pulled her close automatically. It felt so nice not to be alone. The tightness in his chest abated, the horrible coldness was leaving him and in its place a smoldering fire began to burn. His sense of justice was furious with the fact that there was no fight to put it in, no resolution in sight. It would have been wonderful to engage the enemy and make them pay dearly for what they had done. Even better if they had caught them before they had murdered everyone and set the world on fire. He imagined that this small platoon could have stopped the melee, or at least they could have done something. It seemed so useless, the waste of so many lives, so many youths that would never blossom into adulthood. No more possibilities for the dead. No futures. Nothing. It made everything that Ajax had ever done seem small and stupid, except that suddenly all of those small and stupid things felt immensely important to him. Nothing could compare to home now; this grand adventure that he had set off on paled in comparison to the simple joy of bringing the cows in with Mr. Morioka, or watching the garden grow under his mother’s knowing hand, riding Fly bareback during the full moon. His whole life had been perfect, but he had never known it until now.

He dreamed of his old school that night. It was dark in the corridor of his dormitory and Ajax couldn’t find his door. The numbers never became his. After a while he became confused, then confusion led to agitation. Where is the door? He was afraid that he had made some mistake, that this really wasn’t his building, or that he remembered the wrong room number, so he began to knock on doors. No answers came. “Hello!” He cried out, pounding on the doors. “Is anybody there? I’m lost.” He pleaded. He ran down the dim hallway only to find that the numbers were repeating. He screamed in rage, kicking and beating the doors. He was breathless and frantic. Ajax dropped to his knees, gasping for breath. Suddenly he was outdoors; a chill was in the air. His breath plumed from his lips like thick smoke. It didn’t look right. His chest was burning. He looked up and saw a child sitting in the doorway of an old house. She was nearly naked, her boney knees cut and bleeding, her bare feet looked like skeletal bones with filthy skin pulled tautly over them. Her head was covered by dirty dark hair that hung over her face, hiding it from him.
“Jack,” she whispered.

He panicked then, blood running cold though his throat was on fire. He fell to the ground, scratching at his chest and throat. Smoke burned its way out of his nostrils, his eyes, his mouth. He was burning to death from the inside out. He heard screaming then, louder than his own. It made him stop writhing. He turned his head and saw fields burning. Mice and lizards, snakes and other small creatures fled from the blaze, some already maimed. In the distance he could hear Briseis scream so he forced himself up and ran into the tall grass. He hadn’t run far when gunfire stopped him cold. It sounded like a series of explosions and each time there were fewer and fewer voices in the air. The smoke became thick, the grass gave way and there was nothing. A pile of bodies was all there was to see.

“Briseis!” he shouted through the fire in his mouth. “Briseis!” Again and again he cried, running circles around the heap of charred bodies, searching for hers. “Briseis!” He screamed once more, his voice roaring like the fires of an inferno.

Ajax awoke with a scream passing his lips and Briseis shaking him, her dark eyes wide with fear. She had fistfuls of his shirt in her hands.

“Christ.” He panted.

“You okay? You were talking in your sleep...” She let the rest die before she could speak it. She kept her hand on his breast, mentally counting his racing heartbeat. She frowned.

“Let’s just sleep, alright?” He rolled onto his side, shaken. Briseis regarded him for a moment then slipped beside him.

“What were you dreaming about?” She asked.

Ajax didn’t answer immediately.

“Lots of stuff.” He said noncommittally. “Burning. Dead people.”

He rolled over on his back, looking at the ceiling. “Just a nightmare, that’s all.”

Briseis rolled away, using his arm as a pillow. Her backside was against his thigh, and it felt good to have her near. He was also glad that her piercing gaze was no longer fixed on him. He rubbed his sore eyes. There was silence between them for a time. Her fingers played at the cuff of his shirt, touching his wrist and occasionally his fingers. He was beginning to feel contented when he realized that she was trying to figure out whether or not to speak. He could tell by the way she was fussing at his sleeve. “What?” he plied.

“You were talking in your sleep.”

His heart skipped a beat.

“You called my name.”
Alternate Methods of Peace

Sam Scheffler

Take a hit, we’re flying high
the sky’s the limit until we die
Even then you never know,
cause when we’re gone, well
are we really?
Anger, hate, it’s kind of silly
when out there, somewhere,
there’s something bigger
Spread the love and douse the hate
take a drag and help create
a better life which will precede
an abstract everlasting life
Backwards dreaming

JaVaughn Gray

Backwards...... dreaming
A saxophone interrupts the cadence
of the acoustic guitar
thoughts displaced.... parts of my imagination in disarray
and as the moonlight eclipses the darkness
I feel somewhat. sanely insane
I dreamed of rain falling from the ground
creating a pool of frozen matter...
i had a thought of flowers blooming into beautiful seeds
and us a planet growing into children
pure. innocence
lacking ignorance
grateful instead of greedy
proud instead of needy
right now im in need of the place i call my salvation
the person who i love
if love is even a feeling that can be felt
i believe it can
because when i express it..
all hatred is replaced
The Battle

Pamela Williams

I swallowed three bottles of pills and lay down to die,
For I felt there was no other way out.
I dreamed about being an angel in the sky,
Every time my dad gave me a clout.
Growing up with my dad was hell on earth,
Sometimes my parents said they regret my birth.
In and out of institutions and detention,
Between me being expelled and all the suspensions,
I felt my parents and I were in a contention,
When all they had to do was pay me some attention.
Yes, I always had an attitude and was always in trouble,
But it was like I was stuck, stuck in a bubble,
No room to move, no air to breathe
Whenever I was put away I felt relieved.
Fifteen years never had a break,
And everyone around me was just like a snake,
I was the one to give and they would always take,
So I prayed to God will I ever get a break.
Me being born was not a mistake,
Even though I was always the reason they had a headache.
Although, I was mad and blamed everyone else,
I realized I had to take a good look at myself,
I learned that I had the best tool to win,
So I gathered all my energy and ambition.
Although I felt like ammunition,
Bullets, shells fired from a gun, I stand here before you
This battle I was in I’ve finally won!
I never knew how much this summer would change me as a person. I went into Bike and Build knowing that riding my bike across the country this summer would change the size of my legs, it would probably mangle my behind with saddle sores, and that I would meet some spectacular people along the way. Little did I know, my life would be changed by the time I arrived in Portland, Oregon seventy-four days after I began my journey in Virginia Beach. I thought that biking would be the highlight of my summer, but the people I was privileged to meet along the way are the ones who truly left a mark on my life.

“This is unbelievable,” I said aloud as we pulled up to the Build Site in Portland, Oregon for our final build day. Once a week, we did our service day where we helped an affordable housing organization build a home for someone who was in need. In this case, we were told that we would be doing yard work to fix up an elderly woman’s house. In my mind, I thought of mowing the lawn or picking weeds; boy, was I wrong.

I opened the door to our fifteen-passenger van and saw a jungle of bamboo, trees, and shrubs covering what was once a home. I could feel my face wrinkle up in confusion as I wondered how someone could let her home get into such a condition. I grabbed my gloves and shovel and was told to begin pulling up the bushes that were marked by red string. I quickly found a corner of the yard that needed my attention and began to hack through the jungle like Indiana Jones.

“You didn’t! You didn’t!” cried Miss Williams, the homeowner, with fear in her eyes. I immediately dropped my shovel and backed away from the uprooted shrubbery with my hands in the air like a criminal caught red handed. She scooped it up and cradled it in her arms like a newborn child. “The cats love this catnip plant!”

I quickly apologized to Miss Williams and told her I would replant the shrub. I obviously didn’t pull up the plant on purpose, but my eyes must have gotten lost in the sea of red string. “You know, Miss Williams, you have such a beautiful yard. What made you want to plant all these exotic plants?”
Her old eyes got lost in the distance and she looked at me with a smile on her face. “Mother loved flowers.” We walked over to a shady spot by a mass of uprooted bamboo and decided to take a break from the heat for a talk.

“You see, this is Mother’s house,” she said. Back in 1992, her mother was involved in a horrible car accident which put her in the hospital. Miss Williams decided to plant different types of bamboo in the yard to surprise her mother with when she was released from the hospital.

I saw the pain in her eyes as she spoke of the mother she loved so dearly. I didn’t know what to say so I continued to listen intently as my fellow teammates continued to pull out bamboo like they had found the world’s biggest jackpot.

“Does your mother still live with you?” I stupidly asked.

“Mother passed away not too long after her accident,” she said. I looked around the yard and realized that she must have kept on planting and planting because it would have made her mother happy if she could have seen how beautiful she made her yard.

My heart broke in two as I put the pieces of Miss Williams’ life together. This home was not a case of homeowner neglect: it was a place of healing. Every plant had its story, a memory, a therapeutic aspect that I will never be able to understand. The smallest bush had its place amongst the chaos just like Miss Williams had found a place in the chaos of her mother’s accident. I looked into those wise brown eyes and saw the pain that had accumulated for twenty years. She had attempted to turn a tragedy into something beautiful only for it to backfire.

As I continued to work on pulling up shrubs, it seemed as though the bamboo had grown through a beautiful bush that Miss Williams was adamant about keeping in her yard and there was no way to save it. I approached her with tenderness for I saw that the day was beginning to put a strain on her physically and mentally.

I thought of a way to approach her without being too stern. The day was coming to a close and we had to finish the rest of the lawn work before we left. “You know, Miss Williams, you have so many beautiful plants in your yard. If we keep this here, people won’t be able to appreciate the plants that are thriving and growing. How about we get rid of it?” I asked with tenderness.

“I guess so,” Miss Williams said.

Eight hours of hard work later, thirty-one Bike and Builders piled into a line to get into the van to take us back to the host. A long day of biking awaited us in the morning and we were exhausted from a day of strenuous landscaping. Miss Williams’ house was almost
unrecognizable from the first time we saw it earlier in the morning. You could now see a beautiful brick home and an array of small plants strewed across the freshly mulched lawn. I waved goodbye to our final homeowner and reminisced on the past ten homes we worked on. They must have saved the best for last.

I’ll never forget my summer spent with Bike and Build and I will never forget Miss Williams and her story. She opened up her home to us and made the first step of the healing process when she decided to let go of the bamboo that once defined her relationship with her mother. Miss Williams might have needed us, but I needed to hear her story even more. Every home from this summer had its story, and every homeowner forever has a place in my heart.
There are some things in life that aren’t really given much notice; things that, when witnessed, earn only a passing thought. More often than not, these are occurrences that will shake a person to the very core and will change her forever. An occurrence of that type, such as one that I went through, should never happen. A single object, a bracelet, is all it takes to remind me every day, every hour, every moment thereafter.

In the spring of my high school sophomore year, I witnessed one such event during my creative writing class. A boy was in the computer lab when he had a grand mal seizure, his limbs thrashing about of their own accord and his conscious mind completely shut down. His friend kept calling out to him, telling him to “snap out of it.” I looked on with concern but remained somewhat impassive. I had no idea what it was like, no experience of any kind that might let me relate with him. Like his friend, I just kept wishing he would wake up, convinced that he would somehow be all right if he did. Now I know better.

I don’t know the exact date. I don’t even remember what happened precisely. It left a blank spot in my memory. One moment I was on the computer, the next I was in the back of an ambulance. I was scared. The paramedics told me that I had had a seizure. They told me it was all right, that everything would be okay. I’d had a seizure, how could it possibly be okay? I didn’t want to go to the hospital. I was tired. I just wanted to go home. My muscles were weak, leaving me with a feeling of helplessness and I couldn’t remember anything. To this day, I continue trying to recall what happened but the memories don’t come.

I was angry; my entire life had been interrupted by something I couldn’t control. This inability to control events is not so uncommon, but this was my body. Something in my brain had “short circuited” and I was powerless to do anything about it. Not long after, my mother and I met my new neurologist. He prescribed a variety of medications, and with every new drug, he told me, “This one will work.” It didn’t and I grew increasingly angry and frustrated. Why wasn’t he fixing this? He was the doctor, he was supposed to fix it but nothing was happening;
every time I thought we had finally gotten something that worked, I had another seizure. I knew only one thing for certain: all of my seizures occur at night. This simple fact left me exhausted, unable to sleep for fear of having another seizure. I would often lie awake in the dark, my mind plagued by a single question: Is this the one that will finally kill me? Though I refused to even acknowledge it during the day, I knew that the possibility of a fatal seizure was all too real.

One drug followed the next without any effect on my condition; the only change that occurred was clearly written on my bracelet. With each new medication the word on the silver plate was worn off and replaced with a new engraving. It continued in this way for several months until a change of an entirely different kind occurred: the introduction of another, milder seizure in addition to the ones that left me so utterly exhausted.

Like the others, these came only at night but this new one didn’t allow me to sleep through the experience as I had in the past. The only thing I can really compare it to is this: When watching a movie or reading a book, sometimes you tell the character “don’t do that, you’ll be killed” or something along those lines. But you are the outsider, the observer; nothing you say or do has any effect on the character’s actions. During those seizures I became the observer. It didn’t matter how many times I told my body to stop, the muscle spasms always continued. I still haven’t decided what’s worse: not remembering or being completely aware and unable to do anything.

I tried several drugs and combinations of drugs in order to control my seizures before we finally found something that works. I often wish I could simply forget what happened and what I must take the medication to prevent, but I never will. The memories, such as they are, are burned forever in my mind and the silver wrapped around my wrist will always serve to remind me.
The Cemetery

Colleen Ronan

The inevitable stresses of childhood could always manage to find me hidden among endless cornfields and forests of apple orchards lining dirt roads scraped into the countryside of upstate New York. My trusted retreat, however, not a graceful woodland trail, or refreshing fish pond, but the town cemetery, was a mere half mile bike ride from home.

Immediately upon entering unimpressive wrought iron gates, the world melts behind me. The instant hush as sounds of town-life absorb into the canopy of huge conifers crowding the lower path, swallows me and beckons me forward into its solitude. I bathe in the relief of being accompanied only by enormous trees and granite markers, greeting me like silent friends at the ready to perform the duty of nonjudgmental camaraderie.

Without thought, I lean my bike to the right, and glide through an old section of the cemetery where the monument dedicated to the town’s fallen soldiers looms atop a small knoll. The multi-tiered testament rivals the surrounding trees, and conjures memories of being assembled at its base each year after the Memorial Day parade to endure the seemingly endless pontifications of sweaty dignitaries—whose prattle remains to this day, completely lost on those of us miserably hot, swathed in cumbersome band uniforms.

The path branches and then curves around to the foot of the old section, meeting up to continue briefly as a single lane. Polly rests here. She’s endeared herself to me though I know little about her. Only her first name and a date offer clues of her existence. Someone loved her, this I do know. Her headstone, small and plain, yields an inscription so firmly and significantly raised that even after facing well over two centuries of the harshest winter storms, no browsing visitor could doubt that POLLY 1792 rests in this spot.

A little stone bridge arcs over a rivulet of the Salmon River, and joins the older to the newer areas of the cemetery, where members of my family rest. Grandparents, several aunts and uncles reside toward the front of the section situated at the base of “cemetery hill.” Upon
inspection, everyone appears tidy and in order, so I begin the arduous ascent up the inclining path leading to the back of the lot. Stopping at the apex of the hill to visit my sister, I take a moment to pull a weed and straighten a container overflowing with an array of fragrant blossoms. Wondering who left the flowers for my little sister, I spit on the hem of my t-shirt to wipe a speck of bird dropping from her rose-engraved stone, and then rehang her wind chime that must have blown from its hook.

Gathering my bike, I glance down the hill, to the bottom, toward the bridge and Polly. Pausing briefly, I start my descent. Never able to resist soaring down that perfect hill, I build speed, grinning ear to ear while crouching low over handle bars. Statuary, fluttering little flags, brilliant flowers—all become a blur as the breeze my momentum creates blows my hair out behind me, drying the sweat that formed on the trek up the hill.

The daredevil risk of crashing into a stanchion of the bridge should a rogue pebble find its way under a tire, and the heart pounding anticipation of the extreme handling maneuver needed to avoid a horrific collision with Polly is every bit as thrilling as the breakneck speed!

I catapult out onto the main path breathless and unscathed by another exhilarating flight down “cemetery hill”. Gliding around into the oldest part of the cemetery, an inviting auxiliary path, broken and crumbled, jolts me forward into a vista of gravestones worn so smooth by centuries and seasons that even lichen gave up its invasive quest. Here, the stones mostly seated awry, tattered by time and impossible to read, seem ready to guard their secrets from those easily turned away. The utter stillness invokes the memory of a 6th grade field trip guided by an enthusiastic teacher arming us with flimsy paper and waxy crayon sticks, intent upon turning us loose to try coaxing the headstones into revealing their mysteries. They seemed eager to break their silence and share their thoughts with us as we rubbed their faces into conversations with paper and crayon.

Drifting forth, I rejoin the main path that ultimately leads me back to those unimpressive wrought iron gates. Having witnessed my transformation from anxious to centered, the gates now encourage me through their opposite direction, reassuring me that they will remain open for the next time I need their embrace. Hesitating before exiting, I look over my shoulder at the solitude, the intense shady peacefulness I am leaving behind. Inhaling deeply, I propel out into the living world refreshed and ready for what it has to bring.
Waiting backstage, the anxiety within my body is growing faster than a five o’clock shadow. My heart is pounding faster, harder and increasing in intensity like a bass drum crescendoing in a marching band at a pep rally. Each breath becoming heavier and more difficult to come by. The concrete walls and curtains around me are beginning to seem like they are merely illusions for the cages and furnaces in this unstable boiler room. My band mates are scattered behind the curtains, clutching their instruments tighter as it gets closer to the start of the church service. After numerous motions to my pocket in order to check the time on my cell phone the clock strikes eleven hours and ten minutes. My band mates are now making their way toward the stage. The shoes on my feet now feel like sandbags as I lumber to make my way to center stage. All eyes are on me.

As I stand front and center from the stage toward the congregation, the people are all still chattering, hugging, and shaking hands with each other like it’s a family reunion of sorts. The others in the band are now turning on their instruments and sorting through their song sheets in preparation for the worship service to begin. The sounds of amplifiers crackling, guitars tuning and the hollow thumping from the stage as my foot taps slightly to the rhythm to indicate to the band that it’s almost time to begin. Sweat is now extruding profusely from my palms and leaves a print on my acoustic guitar as I rest it inches away from the sound hole. All of the congregation is now piled into this lemon colored, rectangular and green cushion chair filled sanctuary. The people have all now taken their seats and are waiting for the service to begin with gaping stares towards my area of the stage. It is time to begin.

Pressing my dry saliva-ridden lips up against the microphone, I invite the congregation to stand and join us in worship. As my pick strums across the strings of my guitar, the people all rise from their seats like a military squadron being commanded to stand by their platoon sergeant. Infatuated by how not a command, but a simple invitation could provoke every single person in the room to stand together, I close
my eyes and begin to sing the song that they have been waiting for. Halfway through the song, I feel my vocal cords clinching tighter like a devil’s knot is wrapped around my throat. My head is getting heavier and heavier as the blood from my heart is rushing to it. I gasp for air, chugging through the melody. I can’t help but think to myself “How in the world does the normal worship leader do this every week?” Pushing that thought aside, I continue to sing and my vocal cords still have yet to loosen from the knot that is around my throat. I wonder if the crowd even thinks that I’m any good at all.

I open my eyes and to my surprise, there is movement ranging from the stage to the little doorway that the people process through. There are knees tapping to the rhythm of the song, people singing along and mouthing the words that I sing, swaying from side to side with one shoulder simultaneously motioning toward the other. Heads are nodding up and down and others side to side. The youth jumping up and down right up against the stage as I am worried that one of them may accidentally make contact with my music stand. There are people both young and old with their hands facing toward the sky. Whether their hands are held up high above their heads or they’re positioned ninety degrees below their shoulders. The people are all enjoying themselves. Finally, the knot around my throat is loosened and I can sing until my lungs can’t go anymore.

There is something different about this performance and I can’t quite understand it. There is this indescribable joy from it that is unmistakably evident. People are all dancing, singing and expressing themselves in which way or whatever fashion that they wanted without a care of whoever is around them. Not a single person was doing exactly the same thing as someone else. But, there was one specific thing in common that was probably the most significant of all. Almost all of the congregation has their eyes closed. Not the typical get into it and close your eyes for a little bit kind of eyes being closed, but an intimate and intentional shutting of the eyes. They aren’t focused on me at all, but with themselves and the higher power that I am singing about.

Maybe that performance wasn’t about me at all. No recognition for me, but the experience of oneself with his or her God. It was then that I realized that true joy is not selfish or even of this earth. This unfathomable happiness could never be experienced until I laid my pride down and put all of the glory and recognition that I thought that I was going to be receiving from my performance at the feet of the Lord who gave me the talent to do so anyways. Ever since I had that realization, I have never been happier in my entire life. Not everything
is about me and there really is no need to worry about anything. It’s only human to worry every once in a while, but it’s for us to realize the redundancy of the act. If only I had known this prior to that performance and I would have enjoyed it for every bit of it for what it was. Maybe I wasn’t and never should be on center stage at all for myself, but a vessel for God to work through and give others and myself the show of a lifetime.
Cheeseburger Sub

Matthew Chambers

His lip would curl when we said it,
We teased him for his favorite food.
Back in the time of long, energetic summer days-
We knew each other well.
Hours seemed to go by slower,
And trips to the comic book store were adventures in the highest order.
We forgave each other fast,
And jumped neighbor’s fences faster.
We left skid marks in our wake,
They were our calling cards,
The longest one earned bragging rights,
Yes we rode our Huffy’s hard.
School we simply endured,
Until the liberty bell rang-
And set us free from the chains of drudgery.
Large freezie-pops we soon procured,
As we relaxed in the front lawns’ luxury.
We didn’t work; our job was to explore the world around us.
We were comrades,
Brought together by wondrous childhood ignorance,
Kept together by adventures and experiences-
That helped form who we are.
In those long, energetic summer days,
We laughed well,
We forgave well,
We knew each other well.
Coffee and Cheerios

Daneen Fox

We dance in the kitchen to the music
the rising sun paints on the floor
your hands on mine
my head against your chest
my feet upon your feet

You banish the residue
of darkness lingering from the night
with a twirl
and a dip

My laughter inspires the birds
to sing their welcome to the new dawn
Leaving the cool, rainy, fall weather outside, I stepped inside a warm and cozy atmosphere where the aroma in the air immediately hit my nose. The busy Starbucks coffee shop smells of sugary sweetness with the awakening and comforting scent of deliciously delightful coffee. As always I stepped into the ever-growing line at the cash register to join the line of anxious people waiting to get their caffeine fix. I ordered my fall favorite, the pumpkin spice latte as my friends came in to meet me. We now have coffee dates, since all of us have become busy with our new and different schedules; the Starbucks has become the perfect place to catch up while grabbing caffeine for our studies.

I finally received my tall cup of coffee, and as I took it into my hands I felt the immediate warmth from the wonderful drink inside. I waited for it to cool and I took the first pleasant sip which tasted of pumpkin and cinnamon. It burned my tongue a little bit, but cooled as it went down my throat. It was one of my favorite things to enjoy after a long stressful day at school. After all my friends and I received our beverages, we walked back through the crowded store to find a table to chat.

One of the most interesting things that I find about Starbucks is the people watching. There are so many different types of people who go there every day for a chai tea latte or a Frappuccino. There is definitely a buzz that goes through the shop with all of the people talking, but at the same time it is a peaceful environment. In the corners at little tables you can find students working away on their Mac Books to get their latest paper finished before class. There are always business men dressed in their dark crisp suits walking briskly through the store to grab their cup and get out of there before their next meeting. Sitting on the sofas you also have your hipsters in their distressed jeans and beanies striking up a conversation with a fellow Starbucks patron. Gathered around the table you find group meetings of moms discussing the latest fiasco that their child has done in their third grade class. Then there are my friends and I sitting and enjoying the climate it creates as we sit and laugh as
tell our stories and discuss our favorite topics: fashion, boys, and any drama imaginable.

A melting pot is the best way to describe a Starbucks coffee shop because of all the different types of people, but they all had at least one thing in common, coffee and enjoying the environment of a lively coffee shop. Their morning coffee is like their oxygen. I don’t think that one could find all these people in one room anywhere else. They all have diverse interests and personalities, but a place like this can become a common ground. Sometime you can witness the groups of people intermingling and making a connection over one random thing that they could share a passion for.

Watching people is one of my favorite habits. It fascinates me to see how people interact with each other and to try to figure out their stories. I watch their interactions that they have with one and other. You can easily tell what sort of day that they are having. If one of the moms looks flustered with her hair in a bun, wearing sweats, and no makeup, I easily assume being a mom is giving her a run for her money today. Or if there is a hippy girl, I wonder to myself how she got to where she is today. I think about whether her parents accept her for her behavior or what kind of things she may do in her life. I am curious if she is an earth loving person or if she has the other definition of hippy who take psychedelic drugs. I am sure that people do the same to my friends and me. We probably appear as goofy teenage girls who complain so much, but really have nothing to even be worried about.

Therefore observing this when I go into Starbucks has really taught me a lot about the idea you cannot judge a book by its cover. The people inside the coffee shop are so unique and sometimes obvious to what type of person that they might be, but you can’t stereotype them just based on appearance. Watching the conversation inside is an example why; two people who seem completely different are striking up an intellectual conversation. If you were to judge someone by the way they appeared you could be missing out on a lot in life. As much as you can decide what their life is like you will never really know until you get to know them.
To most people, paradise is on a beautiful beach with white sand, crystal clear water, surrounded by giant palm trees: but not to me. My ideal paradise, my grandparents’ house, exists in a small town in Iowa, at the end of a dusty old gravel road. There sits an old, well-worn white farmhouse surrounded by acres of cornfields and dozens of cows. Wind rustling through the cedar trees, their house is the most relaxing place in the world.

Something about that aged, weathered house captures my heart. Its crusted and chipped paint, its squeaky floorboards and stairs, and all of the unique characteristics make the house so special. From their house, I most adore seeing nothing but open land, no bustling traffic or vexing stoplights. The feeling I get when I’m surrounded by nothing except for the beautiful, tranquil view is perfect. Nothing is more peaceful than sitting on their spacious porch and getting lost in my thoughts while being serenaded by the birds chirping pleasantly in the trees. Home cooked meals are prepared daily. The cinnamon rolls have a wonderfully distinct aroma that has permeated the walls of the kitchen after nearly a century of use. I can sit at the kitchen table, close my eyes, and smell the fresh baked rolls long after they have left the oven. The mosaic of family pictures that adorn walls and span decades from my grandparents’ childhood through my family’s last visit provide the comfort of a warm blanket on a chilly evening. I am reminded that no matter the challenge, the strength of my family will always be there no matter what happens.

Jumping on hay bales in the pastures or building forts in the hoary, abandoned barns, exploring nooks and crannies in the damp and musty basement, their homestead is full of adventures. Anytime of the year, their house is always filled with numerous games to play or quests to accomplish. Whether it’s planting flowers during the spring, swimming in the creek during the summer, hunting with my dad during the fall, or building snowmen with my siblings during the winter—their house is heavenly.
Some people say that “home is where the heart lives,” and I couldn’t agree more. My heart lives in a comfortable and unassuming white house, at the end of a dusty lane that is surrounded by crops and livestock. My home is my grandparents’ house, and that’s where it will always stay. I have created more memories at their house than anywhere. Moving around my entire life, my grandparents’ house has always been the single constant for our family. It is always waiting, welcoming us with its door wide open, and ready to embrace us with its warmth. My grandparents don’t live on a tropical island surrounded by a beautiful beach or a penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park. They are much more fortunate than that; they live in paradise.
Listen. Please, listen. I’m not crazy. It’s all here. In these boxes. In my notes. Look at the pictures. It started about three years ago. I was conducting research for an article on disasters, social calamities, you know? I wanted to learn how people respond in a crisis; why they come together. Then I noticed him. The figure. In Civil War photos. In pictures from the Johnstown flood and the Hindenburg disaster. He’s always there. At the corner. On the edge. Watching. I thought I was seeing things, you know? Maybe my brain was filling in the gaps.

I decided to look at old paintings of war and death. Waterloo, Guernica, the Black Plague. I found him again. A black smudge lurking on the edge. A blot on the human psyche. Like the painter wasn’t sure what it was but had to paint it anyway. Then I studied images from WWII: D-Day, the concentration camps, Nagasaki. He’s there. Emotionless. Immobile. Waiting.

Things got really weird. I watched news clips from Vietnam, the Kennedy assassinations, Kent State. I found him again and again. He’s turning toward the camera. Not off in the corner, but near the front of the picture, closer each time. He’s getting clearer, too. I can almost make out a face. A smile. A wave. Look, here and here. You can see it, right? The thin black figure? I think he knows I’ve been watching him. I think he’s coming for me. I think he’s coming for us.
Be forewarned. Before I relay unto you my recollection of events the influence of my own personal bias holds no weight upon this explanation and exploration of my admittedly significant involvement in the events preceding my detainment and that of my cohort. I must also stress that my seemingly unorthodox effectuations in regards to dealing with this matter have been justified in absolute completion by my own convictions, and that my being here now reflects not on any bout of insanity. Further, those who, to myself, share the same ideology that has led me to making this request of you and those of your station, though few they may be, will, or already have or must understand and accept the implications of the events that have transpired as a necessary genesis to justify what I am about to ask, as soon you will. Undeniably such a thing holds unavoidable repercussions, the like of which I respect to the same extent as the nature of mortality, as it is an unpleasant thing, but the truth has been sought and uncovered and absolution must be executed. Finally, I must ask that any other questions be held until all details are accounted for, as I will provide them. I have nothing to hide, and no image to maintain.

To begin, I met the Artist at a gathering of many fine, established upperclassmen shortly after my third year at University. He had spent the evening observing a tapestry quite studiously while holding aggressively perceptive conversation with all who approached him. The man’s deceptive tact intrigued me, so much that I schemed to entertain myself for the night by investing time into studying him. I found it an absolute necessity to simulate the scoundrel’s stratagem in order to gain serendipitous audience, and I must admit outright, such a thing I have no adroitness for. Nevertheless, I set out, casually approaching a gentleman who happened to be standing beside the tapestry my subject was so fond of, and initiating conversation, simulating my subject’s own tactics, and expecting him to take notice. Before long I felt the approach of a jovial energy, and turned to see him, the Artist, my subject, parading toward me with a grin from ear to ear that seemed to flicker in the air.
before him. A playful grin; one directed at me as if to pierce the veil I hung between us and initiate a meeting of minds that time itself held dearly, blurring those and all activity save for myself and my Artist. How I miss that smile.

After we had disbursed pleasantries the Artist and I shared title and education. He made known his father, the architect, and his own apparent disinterest in the structure of such work. To him I told of my studies in chemistry at Santiago, along with my humble achievements in medicine at my current institution. This ignited his interest in relaying all information of his travels, having been to Florence to study classical literature and painting. It was not long before I, rather bluntly, made note of the tapestry in order to ignite an explanation from my subject, as certainly the thing was of exceptional quality, and over the years I had garnered a recognition of such fine craftsmanship, but I had been left amused by my subject’s avid fixation of the work and desired to understand, perhaps, some level of his heinous nature through an understanding of his bizarre interests. His delight in mention of the thing was apparent, and he went into great detail on its magnificence, taking care to note the hand woven detail laden within, and its terrible age; over a century old he informed me. He instructed me in the method by which the tapestry was crafted and to add to my amusement described the process as “unremarkable.” To this response he apparently took notice of my confusion. “An object’s history,” he explained, “far outweighs its function or purpose. They are the dead who have provided us the possibilities we enjoy this very moment, and they are the dead to whom we owe any success we could ever achieve. Our world has been handed to us by the humble un-living, and we must accept their place in it.”

The Artist and I spoke again on many separate occasions, and so began to form our dark bond, which at this point rested at a friendly companionship, brewing with bizarre conversation, and you must understand that the first of our ventures was purely a coincidence of questionable fortune, and perhaps this affair would not have taken root had such a thing not occurred. It was of the Artist’s dear friend I speak; one whom he had held great esteem for, and to this day I do regret the traumatic influence his death must have had on my subject, as he held a ghastly paleness when the news came to him. My companion had rushed off to the aid of his old friend and mentor in Prato when hearing the news of his grave disposition, and by request of my subject himself to join on the venture, to lend both my experience in the studies of medicine and support of my own friend, I joined him to see to the sick man.
On our arrival to the cottage we were left to scorn our lack of haste, as the man had apparently passed in the night, only a small number of hours previous. The cursed grave in which we stood, the home of his former friend, accomplice, and mentor; the chrysalis we emerged from, not as changed men, but as black beasts of hazy outline and amorphous qualities was the first place I would see the broken smile of the Artist; mouth half cracked; upper teeth slowly descending from the crescent of his upper lip. He explained to me the beauty before us, of the lifeless husk that once was, and, perhaps fearing I would not see his philosophy, he explained the opportunities such a thing posed to my studies and to my advancement in the field of science. However, unknown to him I required no more reasoning than the subconscious stimulus sent from image to mind. We fanned a fire that should have, for the good of all, been stamped out, and further endeavors, in the both the realms of my science and his sculpture, were contracted between us that day.

And so, after much time executing this agenda, having taken the lives of well over two dozen and added them to our collective of applicants toward the advancement of causes higher than their own conceivable station, it was inevitable that my subject and myself were to begin eyeing each other from behind back with the same appetite we shared upon an unsuspecting future applicant, for he saw in me his beauty of life to capture in death, and I in him an anomaly and shadow of myself, the likes of which I could only understand by intimate examination of its innermost workings. It was with this knowledge I came to suddenly realize the absurdness of our collective existence, the pandemonium we instilled in the laws of nature itself by simply exposing ourselves to them, and why I now sit before you, having torn apart the raft and revealed the location of our River Styx in the hopes that you would confine both my subject and myself from the rest of this world. But as I sit here and relay these events unto you, I realize confinement will do no good. In review of these events, as all details have been given of the chaos that is our being, of our abominable thoughts beyond madness, beyond what truths this universe has the capabilities to hold, I ask, no, insist to be permitted into the adjacent room in which my subject holds interview to end our influence, and restore nature to a state untainted by us, or to at least lend it time to mend itself of our corruption.

In my final act as a practitioner of medicine, I would heal this dimension by removing its malignant anomalies; I would cut down the Artist’s life in that room, and proceed to extinguish my own, for we are the flame curling this world and blackening its center as parchment. Even now my eyes fill the air as a vapor pouring forth from the jaws of
madness, free to infect weak minds and cause all the world to blur as it does for the Artist and myself, deformations of reality that batter the boundaries of existence with our every breath. If you value your world and wish it restored, I must be granted this option now. I have told all I can tell; you may speak.
A Dedication To The Struggle

Michelle Gould

Not many years ago, there was a sweet young girl who was in the sixth grade. She was one of the brightest and most popular students in the entire school. The girl went to school on this particular day, and as normal, she arrived to class on time. Whenever the teacher asked a question she was the first student to raise their hand, and she completed all of her assignments in a timely manner. Yet, no one ever realized the struggle that was going on in her home.

When the lunch bell rang, the young girl eagerly trotted down the hallway to the cafeteria; today they were serving her favorite lunch, cheeseburgers and french fries. Yet, for some reason, the girl did not eat all of her favorite food. A classmate questioned why she was wrapping her cheeseburger in a napkin, but the girl did not respond. And no one ever realized the struggle that was going on in her home.

After lunch, the girl rushed back to homeroom and slid the napkin-wrapped cheeseburger into her bookbag. All afternoon she kept a watchful eye on the clock; the girl was anxiously awaiting the departure of her school bus. When the day was over and the bus finally arrived at her stop, she quickly darted off, but not without her bookbag and that napkin-wrapped cheeseburger close by her side. And no one ever realized the struggle that was going on in her home.

This young girl’s mother was a single parent working to make ends meet that just wouldn’t agree. Mother was also a diabetic, and there was no food in the home. This sweet girl secretly sacrificed her lunch, just so her mother would have something to eat. And still no one ever realized the struggle that was going on in her home.

This is a true story about the struggles of me and my mother, Mary Lucille Newby. There are single parents who desire to make it, but just don’t have the resources to succeed. When parents are hurting, children are hurting too. There are amazing children in this nation who suffer with heart-wrenching problems. The deeper sadness is either we are too busy, don’t care or just don’t realize the struggle that is going on in their homes. OPEN YOUR NATURAL AND SPIRITUAL EYES AND HELP SOMEONE WHO IS STRUGGLING!
The cold shocks my body. My eyes adjust to the darkness. The sound of waves crashing pounds my inner ears.

I get to my feet and strain to see my surroundings. Finally, my eyes start to see again. It’s so dark here. A green haze highlights any available light. The damp steel deck plates echo as my feet march forward.


The waves are crashing along the bow of the ship. The green is from the light reflecting off of the algae that has made its home on the hull. This ship is beyond its age in time.

Slowly I make my way along the starboard passageway. The darkness is unholy. Why am I here?

A tall dark silhouette of a man haunts the end of the corridor. His hand is outstretched. Pale ash colored skin covered in midnight clothing. He almost seems to be a part of the darkness. Without thinking I grasp his hand and we are walking.

“Welcome home,” says the man, his voice bellowing through the body of the ship. For an instant, I almost think it is the ship speaking.

“I don’t belong here.”

“Every person you have ever met will eventually belong here”

We continue walking. The cat walk begins to creak from the weight of our feet. I peer through the grating. The bioluminescence of the waves shines a rainbow of color back at me.

The further we walk the more coherent I become. The damp metal begins to dry into a rusted dust. Wires start snapping around me. The steel floor cracks and separates. The paint slowly peels from the walls. Falling like the leaves in autumn. The vessel is collapsing. Disintegrating. The ship is dying.

“We are here.”

At my feet, a massive hatch.

“Turn the wheel and open the door.”

Intimidated by the sheer size of it, I reply, “I can’t.”
“You must try.”

I squat on my calves. My hands wrap around the handles. I lift the colossal steel door with surprising ease. With a rush of musty, stale air, deafening screams escape.

I gaze in horror at the mountain below me. The hollow shell of the ship stored a surplus of life. Squirming and climbing like worms. An orgy of thousands. Naked bodies crying, sobbing, screaming. I see the faces of my family, my friends, slowly swimming through the hoarding heap of flesh. They beg for my help.

Their anguish engulfs me and I fall to my knees. I lean forward and slide through the hole in the floor. Diving head first, I begin my descent.
The brute stalks me bearing a thousand teeth that move as fast as sound
He kills my family with no remorse
Screams echo
The weak are driven from my protection
I stand tall in opposition, but have no way to fight
The teeth rip my rings from me turning them to shreds
I fall, and am snatched up by a rumbling beast
My extremities are ripped off and thrown in a truck
My transformation takes place, and now a piece of me sits at the table
A trophy
My dog tags only cost the U.S. Army about $5, but to me they are priceless and worth more than any gold necklace, diamond ring, or platinum bracelet. Dog tags are made of two pieces of soft, cheap, and light stainless steel with a ball chain worth about as much as anything a six year old kid could pull from a Cracker-Jack box. If one tries hard enough he or she will bend the metal, and if a person pulls hard enough the ball chain will snap, but still. Somehow, they are the most precious pieces of jewelry I have ever owned. Their metal, much like my skin, is tattooed with permanent markings that separate them from all others. They are nicked, marred, and scuffed. They’ve been dragged through the mud, soaked in sweat, and covered in blood, yet still they remain never wavering, nor faltering. Much like a Spartan’s shield or a knight’s sword, my dog tags symbolize strength, duty, honor, loyalty, courage, and discipline, the attributes of a soldier. They, now, hang from the rearview mirror in my car, telling all who see them, “Yeah, he was in the army; he’s been to war, and he fought for freedom.”
Earl Grey Goodbye

Sarah Whitman

I wrote you a poem in a dream,
as I lay sleeping in my bed.

It was lovely,
sweet,
kind,
as you are.

But I woke up
and couldn’t remember the words

They sifted out of my head
like sand from my fingers.

I sat and thought about you,
and about sand, and the tea we drank together.

You steeped out of my heart
slow
gradual
into my mug where you sat, steaming.

And I was finally able to say goodbye to you.
The tea you made was bitter, but I liked it.

I sipped it
calmly
happily
as my dream slipped into wonderland.
The Era of Imagination

Anna Powers

The defining memory of my childhood was play. I believe my sisters and I played from the moment we woke up until bedtime. Sarah, Deborah, Miriam, and I made games for everything. When my dad came home from work we would tell him all the games “us four girls” had made up. In my opinion, play is very important for children, and a playful childhood is not a bad way to grow up.

We had an enormous collection of costumes and a log cabin in the backyard, which my mother and older brother Stephen had built. The log cabin was truly a magical place. It was small and dark, with a front and back door, and two windows. There were small gaps between the beams, and we would stuff blankets and shawls into the cracks to make curtains and doors. Inside, there was a wood floor, a table, a little bed, and a spigot screwed into the wall made up our kitchen. Fastened next to the front door was a wood-burned sign that said “Powers.” The flat black-shingled roof was an adventure to climb up to, and we only attempted that when we were feeling very brave. Standing on the roof, we could see down over the back fence into our neighbor’s backyard. That cabin became our home, fort, hospital, trading post, schoolhouse, church, whatever our fancy was that day.

Our imaginations conjured up detailed yet flexible historical settings for our play. We combined the refinement and happy endings of Jane Austen and Cinderella with the violence and action of the Wild West, pirates, the Revolutionary War, Nazis, or the bubonic plague. We loved anything that involved using Stephen’s large collection of authentic-looking toy rifles, pistols, and handguns. It was not uncommon to see one of us running through the yard wearing a fancy dress and lace shawl, two pistols holstered at our waist, brandishing a rifle, alerting the countryside that the Redcoats were preparing to ambush us on our way to the President’s ball. We called it “back then.” Once a foolish adult challenged me, “But Anna, what do you mean by ‘back then’? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It means- it’s just- it’s back then!” I said, frustrated. We made such
fantastic leaps of imagination, merging time periods and locations that it was impossible to define.

One of my favorite games was The Ball. Out of the blue a messenger from the king or prince or duke or earl would gallop up on an imaginary horse and holler, “An urgent message for the ladies of the house!”

“Oh Mama, Mama, a message from the palace!” My sister Sarah was always the mama. (That was pronounced muh-MA, like they always said in the Jane Austen movies we watched.)

“Well, well, my loves, let me see it,” said Mama. She would un-scroll the parchment we invariably used—it was an authentic replica of the Declaration of Independence that our grandparents had bought us when they visited Colonial Williamsburg. “Good night, Miss Agnes! It is an invitation to a ball at the palace! And listen girls- the prince will be there!”

Then we all would dress up some more and go indoors to the dining room for an elaborate tea party, usually of water and crackers, but on very special occasions, juice and cookies. We used our very best manners and our most posh British accents. After the tea party we adjourned to the living room and turned on Tchaikovsky’s music very loud and danced away. The best part was ostentatiously bumping into each other so we could have the opportunity to bow or curtsy very low and say, “I beg your pardon” and “oh no, ‘twas nothing to be sure.” Of course we all got a chance to dance with the prince.

After the ball, we hurried back to the cabin, usually deciding that the prince was too dull or too plain, and generally declaring that we should never marry at all but continue to pioneer in the west.

In 2004, Hurricane Isabel came to town. A great big tall oak tree in our neighbor’s back yard fell and crushed our little cabin. We pretended the big thick tree was the deck of a pirate ship and the slanted cabin was the hold. Eventually though, my parents cut up the tree and threw away the remains of the cabin. I think that was also the year I decided I was too old to play dress up.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but the demise of our cabin was the end of an era. I think that playing with my sisters was the most important thing I did in the first ten or so years of my life. There is always plenty of time later in life for worry and reality, so I am very glad that we were able to grow up playful and carefree.
Eroding Streams

Bria Friestad

Rushing stream flows strong
Thundering through hard stone
Thought changes our world
Everybody Said

Hannah Berk

don't build a sea expect it not to fall

can't build a sea expect it not to fall

don't build a sea expect it not to fall

don't build a sea expect it not to fall
Exile

Leslie Camp

the canyons dream without me
great orange rocks dance so slowly
the span of my life is a day to them
I mourn their absence
stuck in this flat swampland
they haven't noticed I'm gone
I saw myself
in the faces of Atlanta today.
Men walking to and fro
old beyond their years.

Their choices in life
have left them
with a half dazed look,
and half able to speak.

Thoughts floating in clouds
unable to respond
to the simplest questions.

Days spent aimlessly walking
the asphalt, concrete and grass.

Daily trying to grasp
what departed long ago.

Wisdom.
Fall

Chris Langreder

The time is coming near again
For sickness and dry skin
Darkness quickly fills up the sky
As everything starts to die
Beautiful colors all about
But makes me scream and shout
Gone are the days that I love
Falling

Evangeline Stille

This season makes me fall deeper.
Dark chocolate eyes feel so warm,
Like being cuddled in a brunette woolen sweater,
Itching with a toasty discomfort of mystery.
Like the citrus-brown colors of the foliage greeting winter.
Like acorns parting from stems striking a heap of leaves
Sinking slowly to the frigid worm-plagued soil.
The smell of dead leaves roasting
Dingy gray clouds rising from sticks and rubble.
That scent clings to his hoodie,
Smoke wrapped around every thread.
Consuming me, wrapping me around him.
Cigarette smoke mixing with open flames
Demanding me to taste the nicotine on his lips.
Grossly intense aroma of stale tobacco.
His addiction brings me to mine,
Feelings of warmth and need.
Fear of falling with the leaves.
Feast of Knowledge

Bria Friestad

Fill my mind, bloat my thoughts,
Expand my knowing beyond my brain.
Eating slowly, devouring deep,
Savoring every fact I must keep.
This is how learning should be.
A dessert, a flavor,
Something decadent to savor.
But not here, not now.
We are stuffed full.
Shovel it in, swallow it down, hope you don’t explode.
It leaks out the edges, facts replacing facts,
Muddling and foaming, messing into each other,
All while flowing over the edges, leaking out our ears,
Like pus when pores infected.
They force us full, they bloat us fat.
This is important, now that’s a fact.
But after the test, where does it all go?
Out, gone, flushed and dumped, erased from our mind.
For the space is needed, the vacancy already filled.
Space is rented, prepaid and bought.
Next subject, next test, go, go, go!
What do they expect?
When they force it in, force it down.
Push, push, push it in.
Rub the throat, swallow hard, hold it in, hope that we don’t explode.
Feasts like this, this knowledge of life,
Should be savored, enjoyed, left to ferment and ripen.
Not pushed and shoved, without chewing or digestion,
To clog and stop the intestines of our mind.
Let us enjoy, let us savor this learning,
Taste it, feel it, let it melt on our tongue.
Not forced and pushed, shoveled inside,
Leaving no trace of scent,
Or flavor on our tongue.
The sky is blue. The fluffy clouds run away. Halos of sunshine stream down, softly touching my face. The water glistens, the spray of the fragrance filling my nose. I lean over the railing, entranced by the life below me. Fish swim by. Seven dolphins chase after us. People gather around, gaping in awe. The clouds close in, one ray of sun slipping through. The birds soar over head, singing their songs. My heart shaped locket glistens in the light. I touch the cool metal as I glance at him. He smiles down at me, planting a sweet kiss on my cheek. The wind blows, chilling the air and I shiver. He wraps his arm around me and I welcome the warmth. I rest my head on his shoulder, as the boat rocks back and forth. The mighty horn bellows. I take out my camera and snap a shot, capturing the moment forever.
The night that would prove to change my life—my purpose, even—began as a normal, very common type of evening. Much like the last thousand Thursday nights, or so it seemed, I found myself in my usual routine. It was about midnight as I exited the Fordham Street practice facility into a cold, dark alley, the sub-zero chill instantly permeating through my thick coat and gloves. Walking East toward Chester Street, I noticed a row of streetlights flickering against the black, abyss-like night sky as if in an attempt to distract my gaze from the barren, familiar pathway I was traveling. About thirty yards from Chester Street, two high-pitched screams caused my gaze to shift from the streetlights to a smaller, less sufficiently lit alley to my right. As I peered down the long, narrow alley, I could barely make out two figures, conspicuously motioning and arguing with one another. In defiance to my desire for personal safety and, perhaps, out of curiosity, I slowly crept toward the two figures. Inching ever closer, I could now make out two men, both wearing baggy, hooded sweatshirts, one of the men proceeding to rummage through a bag of some type. It was in the coming moments that I realized the gravity of the circumstance that I had stumbled upon. As one of the men vanished from my sight, another cry for help, clearly from a young woman, reached my ears. In this brief moment I forgot my fears, embraced reality, and, harnessing the courage and aggression within, boldly approached the single visible man. Grabbing a block of wood from a pile of debris, I continued to close in on what I could now see was two men, one forcing himself on top of the victimized woman as the other man stood facing me, taunting as he brandished a knife in his right hand. Upon reaching the man with the knife, I deftly swung the block of wood and landed a crushing blow to the right side of his skull. Quickly turning to my right, I pulled the other man off of the now half-naked women, hurling him toward his unconscious co-conspirator. Kneeling next to the unresponsive woman, I checked her vitals and noticed several large bruises on her hips and neck along with a large, gaping cut along the left side of her chest. Seizing the opportunity to get the woman to safety, I hoisted her up with both arms and began to hurry
back toward Fordham Street. When we were about twenty feet from the end of the alley, a loud crack sent the woman and myself hurling to the ground, an indescribable pain seizing my entire body.

After this, everything was a blur. The next place I remember being is in a large room lying supine on a very uncomfortable table, a man with a mask staring down at me, his form barely visible through a brilliant and blinding white light. As I sat up, the man lowered his mask and stared incredulously—it looked as if he had seen a ghost. Come to find out, I had been shot, three times to be exact—one in the head—and was originally pronounced dead at the scene. At first glance it seemed I had been gifted with immortality, but seeing that there’s so much injustice and victimization in this world, I more like to think of it as a calling.
For the Loss of a Job, the Family was Torn Apart

Joseph McCann

There was a time in my life where I couldn’t withstand the feeling of walking into my own household. There are 6 red brick steps leading up to the door of my house, and my legs would quiver and become weak each step closer I got to opening the door to a monster. The silent, cold moment every night before I’d unlock the door was the hardest part of the day. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to sleep in my car and risk freezing to death, or just try to face my fear, risking a heart attack, and sleep in my warm, cozy, bed. Neither of these choices fulfilled my desire. Opening the door was like walking into hell, the sight alone would bring atrophy to my legs and tension to my stomach. It wasn’t the boogeyman, my closet, or the darkness; it was the tears of my loved ones. There was a time when smiles were abundant, and the presence of my parents and siblings brought unimaginable joy to my heart. For the loss of a job, there was no money; for the loss of money, food became scarce; for the tears of my parents; my sisters and I became scared; for the fear brought to our household, we began to fall apart.

Some say that stress can kill the body and mind, without body and mind there is no heart and there is no will to live. Our generation is facing the stress brought upon by the economic struggles many are facing. There is a saying, “All you need is love,” and in some circumstances this is true. For a wife and a husband, an economic struggle could mean getting an apartment instead of a house, or a 94 civic instead of a 2012 Mercedes-Benz C-class. There is also a saying, “It’s all about the Benjamins.” I thought this was only true with drug dealers and filthy rich old men with a suit closet worth more than many peoples’ house. Sometimes it takes more than love to keep a family together. Today, countless families are being torn apart by the absence of money.

My father, from the time he was born has always been a hard worker. From the stories I’ve heard from my grandparents and mother, it was rare to see my dad not working. When I was born, he worked 3 jobs so my mom could raise me in the attic of a 4 story apartment with no AC in downtown Norfolk. When I turned 2, God blessed our growing family...
with a beautiful daughter and baby sister. This beauty also made things more difficult. My mother could no longer stay home to raise us, and was forced to work because money was so tight. I was too young to feel at the time, and remember anything for that matter, but history has a way of repeating itself, and little did I know that everything would take a turn for the worst.

12 years, 2 sisters, 2 houses, and 2 school changes later, my family was back on its feet and thriving. We had a decent sized house in a decent neighborhood, what I would consider to be “doing well.” My father had worked his way up to owning a business, and as it would take off, so would our economic status. For the first time in my life I felt like I could ask for something. I wasn’t afraid to make a Christmas list or ask for twenty dollars to go see “Paranormal Activity” in theaters with my friends. I had been under the assumption that television was only possible to watch in the living room, but now I could watch movies in the car. As I got older and matured little by little, I didn’t experience any stress. I could wake knowing that my family had financial freedom and the only thing I had to worry about was getting good grades in school and playing sports. My parents never fought, and my sisters and I never quarreled about anything. By the time I had turned 14 we were in an even bigger house, and things couldn’t be more perfect. What I didn’t know, is that outside of my perfect little world, everything around me was falling apart, piece by piece.

I had never watched the news until my parents started fighting a lot. I felt like my dad didn’t want to talk to anyone, let alone throw the baseball or football with me anymore. It seemed like the only way to talk to him was to wake up at 6 and watch CNN with him before he went in to work. I watched but never listened. I remember hearing, “the economy is taking a dip,” and “people losing their homes,” but it never occurred to me that I was a part of that world. I was too concerned with getting my dad to throw the football with me.

Months passed, more arguments stirred up, and smiles became rare. My parents argued every night, I fought with my sisters, and I started to feel like the people that I used to love being around hated each other. I was so caught up in the anger and hostility that I never stopped and asked myself why this was happening, why no one was happy anymore. One night I decided to stop being ignorant, and listen to what my parents were arguing about. I lay flat on my stomach, resting my chin on my hands prepared to listen in on what was fueling the fire within our family. I would not sleep that night, for my pillow was soaked in the tears of knowing the truth. What I heard that night, was that my Dad was forced to sell his business, and my perfect little world would become life as I knew it.
Day by day, little by little, things began to get more difficult financially and emotionally. Each day was a struggle to keep our family together, as our fear and anger became a growing elephant in every room. Getting to the end of the week felt like finishing an Iron Man triathlon of emotion. I remember waking up one morning where things felt normal for once. Although neither of my parents had jobs, I was living off of Chef Boyardee, and I didn’t know where we would be in a week, for once I felt like my family was slowly coming back together and maybe things had a way of healing themselves. My sisters and I were eating the generic frosted flakes when my Dad asked me to watch the girls because he was going to turn our vehicles in. I took it as, “I know you’re in a good mood, but life sucks right now and you need to chill out on the happiness.” The following day, an eviction notice was sent to us if we could not pay our mortgage in 48 hours. At this point I was ready to give up, as well as my Mom, Dad, and sisters. I couldn’t live like this anymore.

The nights grew longer, and my fear grew stronger. Each waking moment filled my gut with anxiety that was equivalent to what I would feel as I was watching a horror film. I was tired of feeling like something was getting in between the only people that mattered in my life. I was sick of asking myself why money was tearing us apart. Wasn’t family supposed to remain close even in the toughest of times? Aren’t families bound to prevail through love no matter what life throws at them? One night I stopped asking myself those questions; I walked downstairs into my parents’ room and when I thought I could speak my mind, I choked up and cried. I cried like I once did as an infant, and the only thing that could make it stop was the love from my family. At that moment my parents finally realized the magnitude in which our financial situation had affected our family. My sisters came downstairs because they heard my cry, and that night we would all sleep in my parents’ room. That night, we were no longer a family torn apart by financial stress, we were a family that had been in the trenches, kicked and scratched to survive, and so we did.

Today our family could not be stronger. Although things aren’t as easy as they could be, I wake up every morning knowing that I’m alive, in a house, breathing, surrounded by the people I love. The Washington Post can give you percentages of unemployment as well as stress the rising cost of living, but you couldn’t put a number on the percentage of families who face emotional struggles as a result of our economy. For the loss of a job, the family was torn apart. For the cry of a child, the family became one again.
Gentle Yearning

Sarah Whitman

Say hello to this gentle maddening yearning

feel the painless incessant tug of it on your warm but lonely heart

Go ahead ponder your worthiness

scour
    examine
    berate
your miniscule insignificants

But all the while keep that strawberry tart smile in place
But make sure it doesn’t go to waste as you sit in your room

and think about this time last summer when you could escape
and run away from it all

but September came and went
and here you sit this Easter Sunday

wishing it would just consume you already

but no, not this
not this ever so gentle yearning feeling

that keeps you just inside the bounds of sanity while slowly driving you mad
Gift to Self

Daniel Belcher

A gift to ourselves
is not always wrapped
in colorful papers
with fancy name tags.

Sometimes
it’s the silent ability
to recognize attacks.
And move
out of harms way.

Sometimes
walking away
is not defeat
but wisdom.

Moving to place
where the air is clear
of verbal projectiles.

Some gifts
you see
with your eyes.
Others resonate
from the heart.
HAIKU

Dawn Clark

Seashells on the sand
Water washes them away
Soon they will return
The Helpful Hand

Quatasia Smith

Everybody has that one person who has made an impact on their lives. Whether it was a very small impact or life changing event, it matters and creates a difference in us. A good friend, Carlos, just so happened to be my savior, without my even realizing it.

As I entered my middle school years things were good, for the most part. I also started to feel alone and just lost in the world. Sure, I had friends but I enjoyed staying to myself. I liked staying in the house. At times I felt like I was in solitary confinement, but it was nobody’s fault but my own. One night, my brain was flooded with thoughts, just so many thoughts. I decided to step outside for a moment. I just sat there, my back against the cold brick wall. A familiar face appeared in the distance. With his hand in his pocket and a slouch in his walk, he waved. It was Carlos. I have had the biggest crush on him since I was in the third grade. He came and sat down beside me. I am almost positive he saw the sorrowful emptiness in my eyes, and the chill bumps that ran down my arm. And with this, he took off his own jacket and placed it around me. My eyes began to well.

He looked into my eyes, with his beautiful brown eyes and asked me what was wrong. I sat there without a word and began to cry. The sorrow spilled out of my eyes like a tipped over glass. I choked on my words; the cat had my tongue. He held me so tightly, I now felt safe, and with this I told him everything. I spewed all of my thoughts that are now vague. The words danced on my tongue like the Spanish doing the Salsa. He comforted me with every teardrop and stutter. I apologized for the sobbing and he laughed and said, “Why are you sorry? That’s the last thing you should be.” I smiled and tilted my head.

He explained to me that even though I was going through a rough patch, it did not mean that I was alone. We got into deep conversation and lost track of time, but that did not matter. Somebody had finally understood me, and was willing to listen. We were close friends so I had no problem opening up to him. Soon we stopped talking about things that made us unhappy. We started talking about his music; his
songwriting and guitar playing (which I was in love with, by the way). I remember him asking me what it was that I liked to do. What made me feel at peace? I told him that I like to write. He smiled widely at my response. The question that he asked still rings in my head at times. “What empowers your writing?” I stared off into the sky for a moment then answered. “My life, the experiences of others around me, fantasy, escaping real life and reality, you know, things like that.”

After this conversation we departed. I went inside my house and went to sleep, but not before I watched him cross the street, ensuring his safety. The next day Carlos returned with some paper and a pen. He explained that he wanted me to create a journal and write in it whenever I had the urge, or whenever I had something to say. So, this is what I did.

Since this day, I have written various pieces that range from horrible partially written “novels” to poetry. I have won poetry contests, analyzed articles, written many papers, and produced many journals. I love to write, the only problem is, I have been busy and am now lacking in the writing department. I still love to write, I just need to get back into it. I have a passion. I want to be the voice that others do not have, or are afraid to speak, that is one of my goals.
Helping Hands

Chris Kleppe

She lays on her side,
on her bed,
one hand holding her book,
the other holding her head up.
Her fingers, deep into her thick
and curly hair.
She hears the all so familiar little, high pitched,
voices screaming from downstairs,
“Kayla!” “Kayla!”

Without hesitation, she goes downstairs
to greet the children at the couch.
She sits down,
her little sisters place themselves
along her legs as she lays out across the couch.
One hand with the remote in her hand
to select the movie “Despicable Me”,
with her other hand’s long, delicate and thin fingers,
grasping her little brother’s shoulder
while he rests up against her chest.

Not a single selfish bone in her body
and the least of them are in her hands.
They’re always at work, whether it be with a pencil and paper in her hands,
in efforts to become a pediatrician, or making an egg sandwich
for her siblings and the ones she loves.
Her helping hands will touch many others in the days to come.
Hope

Kristen Bridgeman

There are days when hope is lost.
Where silent tears pour out from the soul.
When the heart can’t beat once more
And your world turns cold from the frost.

Emotions suffocate and choke your cry.
Stranded and alone, nobody can hear
Except the emptiness resounding from within.
Leaving any strand of happiness to die.

But what magnificent and sweet pure light!
Burning a new flame of emotion.
Every empty corner floods with a desire.
Crippling every fear and humbling my might.

The glorious Lord replenishes the weak.
Restoring hope, passion, and peace.
Transforming the heart to be whole and complete
Proudly loving all who pray and seek.
A Human Gallery

Shaun Russell

A life is painted in such vibrant hues
That few can ever hold a flawless brush:
Some smear the sheen, or let the pigment gush
Inconstantly, depicting fluid views.
The ones who’ve had successful lives may choose
To splash the canvas with acrylics lush,
But though it may seem perfect at first blush,
Contrivance may belie the artist’s ruse.
A gallery haphazard holds our kind
United, in the sense that we’ve designed
This interlocked mosaic, each alone;
Though scattered, and ineptly intertwined,
A broader spectrum shows us all aligned
As colors blended in a single tone.
I Am

Heidi Kolesaric

Time slowed.
My present became my past; a haunting vision of past memories
   The eerie goodness of my carefree life
      My heart resorts to the beat of a child, a child of faith

My spirit lifts to the calming sense of the home I used to live
   To the loving presence of my father
      To the past of the future, where modern is retro now

Time floated.
   What it is I feel, I cannot explain
      It is not meant to be explained
         Explaining is futile and unnecessary

We don’t live in a world where that’s possible
   But we live in ourselves, ourselves that hold the key to remembering
      A beautiful gift that deteriorates overtime
To me, however -
My soul speaks
Like the desolate dreams of the poet wandering through the mire of hope, embroidered only by the ideals of those too tired to lie anymore. Like the outstretched arms of the child reaching with great concentration for the comfort and warmth of the wolves. Like a million golden spoons floating in space reflecting the majesty of the stars with only the blind to witness them. Like the horrible silence punctured by a single meaningful note, so also am I mislead, so also do I reach for what will be the end of me, so also am I unable to witness the beauty of that which surrounds me, and so also am I only able to stumble upon meaning in the smallest of portions, so also am I afraid.
I Found Art Again: A Chance Encounter with Gallery at the Chapman

Hakima Hamilton

I decided that I was going to sleep in on Tuesday morning because I didn’t have class and I needed some much deserved rest. However, my mother had other plans for me. I didn’t want to get up but I have a hard time saying no to my mom. I got up and prepared for what she had planned for the day. It was bright and sunny outside but breezy too. I could tell that autumn was in the air.

First we went to one of her doctors’ appointments which seemed like hours, when in actuality we were there for about 45 minutes. Afterwards we went to Teppanyaki Grill over in Hampton since we were on that side of the water already. Once we left, we needed some time to kill before my mom needed to pick up some medicine. So I suggested that we go to the movies; she didn’t want to go. I had really wanted to see “Possession” that had just come out too, so I was a little bummed.

After throwing around a few ideas she finally agreed on walking around the mall. We headed to the front entrance of the Peninsula Town Center Mall and on the way in I saw a sign that said GALLERY. I have never been in an art gallery before so I was curious to find what was in there.

My mom and I both love to draw and paint so it was natural for us to be amazed at the creative art work we saw in the gallery. We saw paintings and canvases all over the place. There were things there that local artists had made such as bottle top earrings or bracelets made out of guitar picks. A few artists had even used torn up paper and made a picture out of it. It was truly an amazing place; better than I imagined. I was inspired by the creativity and artistry that surrounded me. There was even a painting called “Let Go” that I wanted to buy. But $2000 was something I did not have. I asked the woman in charge of the gallery if she had any art background and she told me how she makes glass and fusion glass which means she puts one glass art into another. She also told me how she used the torches to make her work and being that
it sounded so dangerous, I was even more amazed. Her art work was astonishing.

I started drawing my junior year of high school. I was interested in the different forms of art, but I never really tried anything else other than drawing. The basic art classes that were mandatory for school were just about the only experience I had, but drawing came so natural for me. A few months after I graduated, I stopped drawing altogether. I felt like I had done everything that I could think of and nothing new or creative was coming to me. I wasn’t motivated or inspired to draw anymore. I figured maybe I needed to branch out to painting, but I couldn’t afford the material I needed, so I just stopped altogether. After being in the art gallery and looking around at the different mediums that were used and other art work displayed, I felt really inspired again.

Once we finished the rest of our errands I went home and took my old drawing book off the shelf and blew the dust off of it. I sat in my room all day not really drawing anything but just fooling around with ideas. By three o’clock in the morning, I had finished my new drawing and it had to be one of my favorite drawings thus far. I was so proud of my work that I went back the next day and showed my drawing to the sales woman. I was proud of my work but I wasn’t sure if it would be good enough to put in the same room as the other amazing paintings that were there, but it was worth a shot. Although I was nervous to present my work to the woman, I knew that, that day I was going to have someone who is a big influence in the art world look at my art work.

The sales woman loved my drawing, but she wasn’t sure if the panel that voted for the art to be put in the gallery were looking for what I had drawn. It was okay though because I loved my drawing and it was probably something that I need to keep with me. I even called it Inspired Again. I keep my book with me at all times just in case I get an idea of something that I want to draw and maybe one day I could get my drawings noticed and in a gallery too. The sales woman didn’t know it, but her compliment really triggered the inspiration that I have right now. I didn’t think that I would ever find art again, but a chance encounter with a sales woman did just that.
Imagine That

Allen McGrath

The loud, constant roar of the lawnmower had been ripping through my otherwise quiet neighborhood for almost twenty minutes. The winter rye seed I planted in October had taken root and transformed into a lush, green carpet by the end of an unseasonably warm February. I normally enjoyed this weekend job, breathing in the smell of freshly-cut grass mixed with a hint of petrichor and especially feeling the sense of satisfaction when walking the yard for final inspection. Today, however, was different. The din of the engine, the warmth of the sun, and even the aroma in the air were distant and muted. I was completely distracted and my wandering thoughts almost caused me to sever the foot of a friend with the mower blade.

“Whoa there, Allen!” the foot’s owner exclaimed, making a backwards jump before I did any damage. I released the throttle and the engine puttered to a stop.

An old man stood before me. He donned a well-worn baseball cap with a faded, unreadable logo just above the brim. His face was a roadmap of deep crevices and wandering creases, skin permanently tanned from years of outdoor exposure. He was no stranger to the long passage of time and the hard work that usually accompanied it.

The man was Ray. He travelled through the neighborhood most weekends, pushing his old mower looking for yard work and other odd jobs. I had hired him to help paint my garage in the summer of 2009. We spent that weekend together scraping off old, flaking coats and applying a new, bright white layer. Throughout the two days we talked and became fast friends. We met up on occasion since then and continued our conversation as if it had never been interrupted.

“Sorry about that, Ray,” I stammered, “it didn’t catch you, did it?” He lifted his boot-clad foot slightly off the ground and pointed at it. “Steel-toed, son. If’n you had, I’d be more worried about that blade done being busted!” He let out a loud laugh at his own joke.

After his laughter tapered off, he leveled his gaze at me. “You look like something’s eating at ya, Allen. What gives?”
Since the garage-painting weekend, I had noticed Ray seemed to know when I was struggling with an issue or had a problem on my mind. His advice in the past had always worked for me and there was no reason to suspect this time would be different. I took a deep breath and spoke.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about something lately that I need to put down in writing,” I began. “It’s for an English class assignment and I’m having a lot of trouble finding a subject.” I explained to him the topic of the assignment was titled The Spot and that I was instructed to describe a place that is supposed to have a special meaning in my life. However, I could not find a spot I deemed worthy of such attention.

Ray sat down on the front step to my house. He looked up at me and said, “Well, I ain’t no college boy, but I’m thinking that sounds about easy. What you got in your mind so far?”

I took a seat next to him and described my best idea: The night at the casino. I told him of the flashing lights and the cacophony of the slot machines, like little yelping puppies begging to be coddled and fed a treat. My passion that night was the craps table, where I was placing bets on the Hard Ways, or ‘Sucker Bets’. “I wasn’t a sucker that time,” I said with a flourish. “I came in with $100 and had almost $15,000 in chips by the end of the night. They even posted a security guard next to me while I played.”

“Well I’ll be goddamned!” Ray exclaimed, slapping his knee. “That sure sounds like one helluva night, one helluva night!” He paused for a moment and then asked, “What else you got banging ‘round inside your head?”

I began to tell him all of the other subjects I was considering: A week-long vacation spent in Cancun, Mexico; The time I found myself alone in a canoe on New Hampshire lake; I even told him about a series of forts I had built as a child with my friends. For at least a half an hour, I went through all of my spot ideas, while Ray sat there silently. He let out a guffaw at times, but for the most part he never said a word. The silence continued for a few minutes after I finished. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet but firm.

“You sure got yourself a whole bunch of good stories there, Allen,” he said, “and I ‘spect you gonna have a whole lot more before your time ends. Everybody’s life is made up of moments: Some good, some bad, a few gonna be tough. But -- and I could be wrong -- I think you been focusing all your attention on a spot that done already happened and ain’t never gonna come around again, instead of thinking of The Spot you been to in the past and where you gonna go back again someday.”
Before I could respond that I could not think of any such place, Suzanna turned the corner and began driving into the driveway. She had left earlier in the day to run errands. Regardless, Ray countered my unspoken words by saying, “Why sure you can think of The Spot, Allen, you just ain’t thinking ‘bout it the right way.” He rose up from the step. “Well, it done looks like it’s time for me to get on down the road. Take good care of yourself, son. I’ll be seeing you around.” And with that he left, walking past Suzanna as she stepped from the car. Neither acknowledged the other.

“You’ve been busy today,” Suzanna said as she approached. I didn’t reply, I simply watched Ray saunter down the sidewalk. “You got a lot done. I think the lawn looks great,” she said. I was about to tell her I still had more to do, but I quickly looked around. The entire lawn was neatly mowed. Not a blade of grass was left uncut. I could even see the faint impressions of my shoeprints left behind while performing a final inspection.

“I’m going inside,” Suzanna said, opening the front door. “Are you coming?” I stared down the road. Ray was no longer in sight. “I need two more minutes,” I said absently as she disappeared into the house. Ray’s words echoed in my mind.

The meaning behind his advice had become clear. The Spot I had been searching for was somewhere intangible, not located on a map. It was neither a moment in my life when the stars were in alignment, nor was it floating on water in upstate New England. I would often retreat to The Spot as a child and I still find myself dropping in for a visit time and again as an adult. My Spot is my own imagination; a place where I can blow aside clouds of uncertainty or envision magical stories for my own enjoyment. It is also a great place to take a moment and have a nice conversation with an old friend.
As I began to think and look back over my life
It seems very strange that nothing has been done right,
Everyone is against me, as if I were a disease
No matter what I would do, they would not be pleased
Never felt that I was good enough, to accomplish my goals and dreams.
My dreams were visions of reality,
I feel sometimes I have several personalities,
Sweet kind, nice, gentle, respectful, real
Not trying to persuade you, just stating how I feel
In this life I was dealt a raw deal,
But giving god thanks, I’ve never missed a meal
Arrested, abused, mistreated, and deceived
So they are trying to get me to believe
That I am nothing but scum of the earth
Thanking god for allowing my mother to give me birth
I was born dead, later diagnosed as autistic
For the life I was living felt unrealistic
Bought up in church, taught never to fear
Inside of me

Every breath that I have taken
Every tear that I have cried
Every turn has had me shaken
So many times I have been denied
Stressed and in a deep depression
No! It’s not due to the recession
For I feel I’m only loved for what I can do,
For the things I can provide
For just one second I’ll push these thoughts to the side
I’m still here, standing tall,
For my mind is made up I shall not fall.
Many things have been said and done,
The opinions of others, I value none.
Can’t be who you want me to be, for this is my life
I can only be me.
Insomnia

Leia Safshekan-Bishop

I never knew the delight of dreams as a child. Some of my earliest memories are of terrifying and horrible nightmares; not nightmares of movie monsters—no Gremlins hiding beneath my bed or Freddy Kruger’s razor-fingers clawing the walls—but terrors rooted in reality. That was what bothered me most. In one particularly disturbing reoccurring dream, my mother and father would let a deformed and murderous infant brother terrorize and torment me relentlessly. I learned to hate those hours of waiting for sleep; I dreaded the impending sensation of falling from great heights that I experienced right before I began to dream. Perhaps the nightmares are what led to my insomnia, but no one can know that for sure.

My worst bout of insomnia occurred when I was 16. That was an awful year for me anyway, and it almost feels right that I would suffer the most then. I didn’t live in a happy home, one with a family who loved and cared for me. Home was a hell, a trial by fire that left me with scars. My insomnia was a great stone hung around my neck, bending me, breaking me, deforming my mind. It altered my perception of life and living. It was with me always, a fear lurking in the back of my brain. It sounds silly, but if you haven’t experienced insomnia in earnest, then you can’t imagine what it does to your life. I carried the burden unseen but affecting every facet of my young life. We lived so far out in the desert that it was as if my sick little tribe were on an island. Nobody on the outside had any idea what was really happening, and anyone who did know was as bad or worse than my own family. So my doctors ordered tests along with heavy doses of medications that often left me zombified and emptier than before. Each week I seemed to be getting worse. Some nights I would fall asleep for a few hours, only to wake feeling startled and frightened, my body on alert. Other nights I simply never fell asleep at all. When one sleepless day slipped into another, I could manage, but when I went three or four days without any sleep I began to feel strange, separated from everyone else. I hated them and their soft breathing, their snoring in the dead of night. After five days
without sleep, I really began to envy and loathe them in equal amounts.

The sixth day was the worst. I could barely function, but no one cared; I had my work to do, my chores around the ranch, a house to tend while my mother was at work. Who cared if the world looked alien to my sore eyes, the light burning into them like fire while the shadows appeared as liquid darkness that shifted and churned, mocking me into madness. I knew that I was hallucinating, and it had happened before during these battles with insomnia, but never like that. Never had it felt more real; meanwhile, I was becoming more and more unreal and insubstantial with each passing minute. Was that my own hand? Whose strange face did I catch in the bathroom mirror? Everything seemed impossibly slow and slurred. Sounds became painfully sharp, sensations set my body aflame, and the day stretched on and on, each moment dragging on and on until I found myself alone-finally-in the darkness of the empty kitchen, staring at the peeling brown linoleum. No disapproving eyes to stare at me now, no nasty words hurled in my direction. I was alone with my fracturing reality, trying to make sense of the shapes in the plastic cupboards.

Day seven was a blur. I tried to keep my eyes closed but my mother and older brother were fighting again so that didn’t work. Their anger and raised voices were a punishment for me then, and I wept and prayed, begging whatever god or higher power to release me from my wakefulness. I fantasized about leaving, running away, but I had seen what happened to kids living on the streets. I also had two horses to whom I was devoted, and they kept my feet on the ground. I could not leave them with these insane people—I would not abandon them as I had been by my father, by friends of the family who had chosen to turn a blind eye in my direction. Screams turned into threats. Something got smashed—again. Probably another mirror. It was always a mirror. I caught bits and pieces of the fight and knew that it would soon be turned on me. Somehow, no matter what the argument was about, it managed to encompass me. I remember being kicked out of my bedroom and having to sit in the living room with my mother, who was itching for a reason to let her anger loose on me. There was no place to hide. I remember a lot of begging God and crying that day, but not much else.

Day eight I actually thought I might have to kill myself to make it stop. Some part of my brain was still functional and rational, while the rest of me was rapidly turning into mush. I never felt more lonely than when they glared at me or sent me out of a room. I did everything they told me to do, tried to please them both, moving when they said
to move, making myself as small and insignificant as possible in a
house of anger and sadness. Nothing I did changed the way things
were, and my “illness” was offending them. I was unwanted and sent
to suffer in silence. I couldn’t keep my eyes open, but I couldn’t sleep.
I was a machine, going about my daily business without emotion or
concern. That day was the longest day of my life. It stretched out like
the burning Mojave horizon, vast and inhospitable, shimmering with
the raw choking heat of the last days of summer. Finally, it was the
witching hour, and I found myself blissfully alone. I watched some very
bad late night television to try and pass the hours, debating as I sat
hunched, unable to hold myself upright, the merits of suicide versus
living another day trapped in my personal hell. I couldn’t bear the
utter loneliness of the quiet house, and found myself wobbling down
the cracked concrete steps out into the front yard. Under a good moon,
my aching eyes soon adjusted to the lack of light. My heart raced as
the strange liquid shapes swarmed around me, seeming to wait in the
darkest places, like the mouth of the old garage, the black shadows of
tumbleweeds and sage brush. Rabbits fled before me, no more than
blurs that my sluggish brain couldn’t process properly. I went to the
pasture, to my horses Patch and Sweet William. Who else did I have?
I was in hostile, enemy--held territory, biding my time until I could
leave and take my horses with me. But I wanted it to end so badly, all I
could think of was dying. I saw the horses at a distance: the pasture was
about two acres and the horses stood hipshot in the moonlight, dozing.
William’s white coat gleamed silver in the moonlight like some dream
horse come to life. I fumbled with the gate, my fingers huge and stiff
and clumsy. As I approached, Will pricked his finely shaped ears and
the old Appaloosa pony looked my way. They watched my drunken
approach, watched me stumble barefoot until I finally fell down. I was
too tired to fight it, to move, and so I stayed there, barely breathing with
my cheek against the hard ground. My burning eyes closed. The air
was cool now, and the earth felt warm and inviting. I forced my eyes to
open and saw an owl alight on the large mesquite tree the horses used
for shelter; it regarded the scene with mild interest before it noiselessly
took flight, searching for its next meal. I listened to the soft noises of the
night animals, cooing doves and quail, the screech of a rodent dying
in the night, and somewhere far off the Trona train carried borax from
the mines, chugging through the vast desert. I felt the ground move
before I heard the plopping of unshod hooves against the hard earth. It
was my old pony, Patch. He approached me cautiously, as if he were as
unsure of my solidity as I was. William followed, hanging back. Please,
I begged silently, don't hate me too. Patch was a very old Appaloosa, approaching 30 and very crafty. He snuffled my cheek and blew sand into my face. He nudged me with his whiskery, speckled muzzle. I tried to speak, but couldn’t find words. He nudged me again, then gave the equine equivalent of a sigh and pawed at me—very gently—with his hoof. William nickered softly, encouragingly, his dark eyes luminous in the moonlight. I pushed myself back to my knees, using the chubby old pony to keep me up. I reached for his mane and somehow got to my feet. I lay myself across his shoulders for a moment and savored his warmth, his smell, the familiarity of his form. But he was old, and I was interrupting his sleep, so he began to walk, and he let me lean on him all the way to the mesquite tree. I slipped over to William, who was always concerned about everyone else. He pressed his soft gray muzzle to my face and lipped me. I gave him a kiss and touched his smooth, arched neck before my knees buckled. I caught myself used the older burned branches from the ancient mesquite to settle down in a place where the horses often stood to rest deep inside the protection of its thorny branches. I put my back against a “v” in the large branch and marveled at how my equine friends cared for me. They quietly found their own sleeping places. I let my anger and hurt slip away, the frightening shapes in the darkness forgiven. I listened to the soft breathing of the two horses and finally—finally—fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.
Jacaranda

Leslie Camp

purple crowns smashed
betrayed by roots no bigger than a hand
undone by devil winds that blew in from the desert
thirty-three friends hauled away
replaced by shrubs
safely knee high
Duncan Crook

There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky. The sun was high up and the air was warm. That day was a perfect day for a pilot to fly.

There, deep within the territory of a tropical forest, was one of the last remaining sanctuaries of life on the planet that has yet to be entirely invaded by humanity. Only the bravest explorers would dare go into that place. But as time went by, the grip of civilization ever so slowly began to tighten its hold around that wild place. Trees began to disappear, the cries of a thousand different animals began to subside, and the once mighty wooden jungle began to be replaced by the mighty concrete one. It would only be a matter of time before that place that so much life called home would join the others that were touched and destroyed for the sake of progress. For the time being, however, the forest was still there. People from all over the world would still be able to go there and marvel at the sights and the sounds that it had available to provide. They would learn to make a living there, no matter how difficult the hardship, just to call that place home.

And it was on that day that one such person, a young pilot who had moved there from the city only just five years previously, was enjoying the sights of the forest from above. This young man, Alberto, who had lived in the city for most of his life, had desires of getting away from the smoke choked streets and the constant roaring of cars. The city was never his home to him. Sure, there was plenty of stuff to do, but he still couldn’t call it home. He desired the wild, the untamed, and the untouched. It was this desire that probably led him to the life of a pilot. Up in the skies, he was free and happy; and careless too, according to those who knew him. For the most part, he was a pretty level-headed guy, with not much to complain about. However, when up in the air, flying in his prized modified Catalina airboat he personally refurbished, he would sometimes get caught up in the excitement, allowing his feelings to get in the way of his better judgment. More than once, this had led to some close calls. It’s anyone’s guess how he managed to get his flying license in the first place.
Perhaps fate was in his favor, and this would seem even more apparent when he decided to finally move out of the city in exchange for something a little more rural, for the wild may be what called him out, but it was the presence of Sarita that sealed the deal. Alberto always tried to get out of the city as many times as he could, but when he met a shy farming woman living in a small town on the outskirts of the jungle he had to stay. No one would have guessed they would fall for each other, not even themselves, even after they had originally met. While he was daring and a laugh to have, she was timid and self controlling, but somehow a connection grew between them. It was frightening at first for them, especially for Sarita, but it didn’t take long before they would be seen together, hand in hand. Ultimately, Alberto had to move in with her, a decision she didn’t mind one bit. The transition was rough, but well worth it as far as he was concerned. Five years later after he permanently moved in with her and having spent all that time together, was he able to have the courage to bring up that one oh so intimate question that she had wanted to hear.

About a week later, he was flying over the forest again, taking in the sights. It had been a while since he last flew just for the fun of it, and he had been feeling too jittery with excitement after the proposal. He needed to get out and stretch his wings, and the skies over the forest were the best place for it. While the sky seemed to be nothing but a blue screen, the ground below seemed to be having a rush of activities. The rivers snaked and carved across the land, leaving twisted silver trails that stretched from horizon to horizon. Every now and then, he would spot a waterfall or two tunneling its way into the ground, leaving large crater-like holes. Everything else however was almost nothing but greens of nearly every shade. From high enough above, the forest would almost resemble flat plains with brushes as the trees would share the same height, but there were still hills, cliffs, and mountains to be seen everywhere, even though they were completely engulfed by the vegetation. As his eyes were being bombarded by these colors and textures, and he thought he could smell the scent of a thousand different plants filled his nose with an aroma that would rival all the perfumes in the world. Of course, he really couldn’t. Just the fact that he was high up enough to see for miles meant that there was no way any smells would make it up to him, but he felt a connection with this place, this haven. He loved this part of the world. He loved it perhaps more than himself. He had to see more.

Back inside the cockpit, he reached up to the control panel above him, preparing to do one of his favorite stunts. Everyone else back home
would keep on telling him not to pull such stupid acts, telling him he is going to crash one of these days. Sarita was even known to speak up quite vocally despite her reserved nature. It wasn’t that he didn’t care, but he couldn’t help it. The engines reminded him too much of the bustling cars of the city, and it interfered with his enjoyment. In all fairness, he had learned to be more careful now he had someone else in his life to take care of, but the urge was still there. Besides, he had done this many times by then; he knew what he was doing, and flying inside a cockpit wasn’t enough for him. He needed to truly feel that he was flying. So after checking his altitude to see if he was high enough, and pointing the nose of the aircraft into a gliding position, he put on his aviator cap and mask to protect him from the harsh wind that was about to come, and he reached over to the side to open the nearest window in the cockpit. The wind immediately began to bellow through the Catalina with noise that could rival the engines, just the way he liked it. Then with a final act, he killed the engines, and for a moment all that there was to hear was the air.

He sat there, motionless, taking in the sensations that were encompassing him. Some that knew him would say he would act as if he had a sixth sense. He would feel like he could make out sound or smells that everyone else couldn’t. Obviously, this wasn’t true. He was human just like everyone else, much to his disappointment, but he wanted to believe he could. Remember, his desire for flight would drain out any reason from him, and while he would be called crazy by some people, he wouldn’t listen. Then soon enough, he began to make out sounds, even if it was all in his head. Over the noise of the wind, there they were: tens of thousands of different sounds. Each one coming from creatures the like of which are not found anywhere else and he knew that many of them have yet to be found at all. At least, he thought that’s what he could hear. The euphoria of sounds then began to blend into the rest of his senses. All those sounds bouncing around everywhere like a swarm of insects, twisting and turning the sweet nectar that was stuffing his lungs and nostrils. All of this was covered by a blast of sizzling tones that blinded the pupils. Here, he was finally at home. Here, his inner being was at peace. He had found a place where he belonged, he was doing the things that he cherished the most, and soon he will be living with someone that he can finally call his wife. There was no other place he would want to be. He -

Off way in the distance, something caught his eye. It was black, and narrow, and very fast. Was it another airplane? No, it was too small for that, but it was going too fast to be a bird, right? As it approached, the
colors started to come in. Vibrant greens, blues, and oranges began to emerge. Long feathers blanket the sun behind it. Its long tail seemed to stir the sky’s blue tones into swirls. It was definitely a bird, but he had no idea what kind. It zipped through the air majestically, making his way to Alberto, as if it was just playing around. Then it made its way up to the silent plane, swooshing past the windows, showing off its feathers like a peacock. Alberto was able to make out swirl patterns all over the creature, some seemingly unnatural. Then there it was: a cry, a soothing melody straight from the beak of that bird, one that he had never heard of before. Even over the roaring wind, he felt how the essence of the sound struck him going down into his very soul. It drew closer, its presence drowning out all of the other sensations around him. The eyes shined and sparkled like the starry night. Why did he not notice this thing earlier? He had never seen such a creature like this before, one that encompassed the very nature of the forest. He felt the essence of that bird. To him, there was nothing else like it. For a moment, they were one and the same. Their souls were intertwining. He was free. He was happy.

And he was careless, for while he managed to just notice how low his aircraft had gotten to the treeline, there was no time for him to start up the engines again.

The crash was heard for miles.
Jumping Fences

Matthew Chambers

I used to jump their fences when no one was looking, 
Around five o’clock, when they were busy at the dinner table. 
I would shuffle up the springy steel frame, 
And launch myself from the top. 
My small feet landed with a large thud in a new world, 
And the adrenaline made my skinny legs move faster. 
Upon reaching a point of cover—
I’d peek out from around the trunk, 
With my dirt stained face, and my lips blue from spoiling my dinner. 

These were the days when I knew—
That a barrier was put there simply to be broken, 
And if a fence was built—
Then the sole purpose for its existence was for it to be jumped. 
No other conclusion crossed my mind, 
And as I weaved my way—
Through the muddy backyards of anonymous neighbors, 
Stomping dandelions, and evading guard dogs, 
To the smell of fresh cut grass—
And the watchful eye of a hyperactive squirrel, 
Heaven on earth seemed real to me. 

But this didn’t last. 
And as I grew, it seemed the fences did also, 
Around every corner—
Some too big to be jumped, 
Or maybe I was too big to jump them. 
The years had a way of slowing my legs down, 
And cleaning up my face, 
But these weren’t good things.
And in a vain attempt,
I tried to make the known seem unknown.
I longed for leaping, springing, and landing-
In a new world again.
But it seemed like a distant dream,
And the most I could hope was to look through them-
To capture a portion of the past,
Until the day,
The day I saw that gleaming steel fence,
Without rust, as if divinely placed,
And my large feet landed with a huge thud,
In a new mission, a new adventure, a new place.
You departed yesterday, 
left me flat on my back. 

Desolate. 
Adrift. 
Stranded. 

Yet a year has somehow passed 
and I find myself on my feet again. 

Standing. 
Laughing. 
Living. 

The sorrow is harder to recall. 
The smiles outshine its shadows. 

And I can’t remember how or when 
but I’ve learned how to walk again. 

How to keep you in my pocket 
and leave you there. 

Let you rest. 
Let it be. 

I thank you for your wisdom. 
I cherish you for your love. 
I move on to a new beginning.
But I am not without you.

You are the wind in my hair,
the smile on my face,

the applause in my ears,
and my loved ones’ tight embrace.

So I will walk this new path.
And every time I reach into my pocket,
whether with purpose or by chance,

my smile will be for you
The Magic of a Moment

Jaimee Hadley

Pushing the shopping cart, the man walked with a limp. He wore the same dirty outfit everyday—an oversized army jacket that was almost in shreds, tennis shoes that looked 20 years old, with holes all over them and pants that were way too big. His hair, long and scruffy, was as gray as a polished nickel. The homeless man walked up and down the street several times a day, his face always expressing a look of complete sadness, his entire collection of possessions loaded inside a shopping cart. To me, it was junk; to him, his world.

My mind often wandered as to the kind of life this man experienced before homelessness impacted his world. Quite possibly, his life consisted of coaching a little league team, working at a high-paying job before the lay-off took place, living in a beautiful home before it went into foreclosure, and being a productive member of society until his addiction with drugs began. All these scenarios were possibilities of how his life was defined before his entire collection of possessions fit in an old, rusty shopping cart. This answer, I would never know. I watched him every day as he would find the perfect spot to park his shopping cart, pull out his sign with the words, “Please Help” scribbled on it, and place an empty can on the sidewalk in front of him. This was his daily ritual, in hopes of getting money for a drink or a meal. People reacted to this man differently—some would drop money in his can, some would walk past him and stare, and others would walk very quickly, almost trying to act as if their bodies were invisible.

Snowflakes started to fall and painted a beautiful sight of a winter wonderland over the city. The snow got heavier and the temperature began to fall very quickly. My thought of going home and sitting around the fire, drinking cocoa and enjoying the sight of the falling snow was suddenly interrupted—I saw the homeless man standing on the corner of the sidewalk. Shivering and cold, he stood with his shopping cart, watching everyone scurrying around. He had no home to go to; consequently, he had no roof over his head, no protection from the wind and snow. As my mind was racing, wondering where this
man was going to find cover from the snow, I noticed a woman quickly walking by him. The briskness of her walk, briefcase in hand, proved that she was not going to let this snowfall interrupt any of her plans for the day. She walked past the homeless man and incredibly, much to my surprise—came to an abrupt stop. She turned around and walked back toward him. She took off the bright red scarf from around her neck and placed it ever so gently around the man’s neck. She took off her matching red hat and put it on the homeless man’s head. She exchanged a few words with him and off she went to go about her daily duties.

My eyes got teary as I realized I had been given a gift. The most beautiful random act of kindness that I had ever seen had taken place right in front of my eyes. I was able to witness the kindness of a stranger and how the actions of one moment in life can dramatically change the way someone else will think, act, or feel. Sure, the man wasn’t given a home or a car or even a bed for the night, but he was given the kindness of a stranger and would possibly be able to stay a little warmer. The man began to walk down the road, just as I had seen him do many times before; ultimately, this time was different, he was wearing a red hat, red scarf, and had a big smile on his face.
As we roared down the road in Cassie’s brother’s truck and Corey Taylor screamed at us through the speakers, I thought that surely, this would be the best day of our young lives. The summer heat had been slowly growing to a monstrous broil that kept kids inside and glued to the Xbox, but an absolute beast of a thunderstorm had been waging its own personal war against our town for the last three days, died in the night, and left us nothing more than a cool breeze, a vast sea of puddles, and a perfect day. It seemed to our fourteen-year-old minds that the storm could not have been anything else but a sign, a great and angry harbinger of the brutal and absolutely bitchin day that was finally here, after all this time, to rock our world and blow our minds into tiny bits of shrapnel. Mayhem Festival had arrived, three stages, fourteen bands, an entire day of metal and rebellion.

We’d stared at the lineup deep into the night, wondering how it could possibly have happened. It was like someone had made a list of our favorite bands and set up a concert accordingly, and out of all the cities in the world, it would be coming to Chesapeake. It seemed almost too good to be true, Slipknot and Disturbed? Dragonforce, Suicide Silence and Black Tide? Of course now, years later, I hate every single one of these bands with a burning passion, but four years ago I would have killed and skinned ten men for a chance to see just one of them, and here they were, all of them, with another nine vicious sounding bands that I had never even heard of. We’d waited and saved our allowance for months, and sure, we could have shelled out a measly fifteen for lawn seats, but we were true fans, and would settle for nothing less than the sixty dollar pit, where the real action happened.

When we got there and stepped through the gate, the festival revealed itself not only to be real, but to be more than we could have possibly imagined. We’d stumbled into the main nerve of the counter culture, a writhing sea of black shirts, piercings and angst. Best of all, it was sponsored by Rockstar Energy Drinks, a vile liquid concoction with enough caffeine and sugar to slay a raging bull, and they were handing out as many free cans as we could drink. It was perfect for a while. We
laughed, we screamed, we headbanged. The music was loud enough to
smash windows. We tried to hit on girls with blue hair. I entered a
mosh pit for the first time in my life and survived. Never had we felt
more alive.

This all changed very suddenly, and very painfully, in the mosh pit of
a band called Walls of Jericho. The music was a screeching and anarchic
blend of thrash and death core with a female vocalist whose banshee
cries split the air with howling fury. It was intoxicating, and the mosh
was a great and raging whirlpool of thrashing limbs and fury. It was
too much to resist. As the band poured their hate down onto us and we
pummeled each other to bits, a huge and hideous beast of fat and acne
rose up behind me, and shoved. The fast bastard had to be at least thirty-
five, and I was completely unprepared for his cowardly assault. He’d
thrown all of his considerable mass into the blow, and I hadn’t even
known it was coming, I was done for.

I hurtled through the air and came down hard. The ground we were
standing on was a particularly rough and jagged plain of black asphalt,
and my bare hands and knees hit it with the force of a sledgehammer.
I know I hit my head at some point, because there were scratches on
my temple, and I didn’t remember standing up. But there I was, being
carted past the edge of the crowd by two people I didn’t know while
my friends ran to catch up. I looked down at my body and surveyed the
damage. My knees were a ragged red mess of flayed skin. Flesh hung
off in ribbons, and a dull white showed through in spots. I can see the
bones in my knees, I thought, metal. Blood was flowing down my legs,
and my socks were rapidly absorbing the vital fluids, making obscene
squelching noises with every step. I was missing a shoe.

That’s when I noticed my wrist. It was bent at an angle it shouldn’t
have been, but I couldn’t quite figure it out. My mind was still floating
in slow motion, trapped in jelly, and it took me a good thirty seconds to
puzzle out that it was not in fact my wrist that was bent, but my forearm.
Arms don’t bend that way though. I decided I was too messed up to
accurately judge my own condition, and needed a second opinion.

My friends caught up to me then, and all yelled some variation of
“Oh shit that looks really bad.”

at my elbow for me and tell me…” it was at this moment that I realized
that I was supposed to be saying arm, not elbow. “My arm I mean, is my
arm…”

“Oh shit! Shit that is busted as hell!” Nick shouted with the eloquence
of a shotgun. At this moment I was still too brain dead to care about that,
and decided that absolutely everything was going to be fine as long as I
could find that damn shoe. Where could it have gone? How had it come off in the first place, I wondered. It was in this moment of reflection that Cassie started screaming about my knees, how oh my god that looks so bad, and there’s so much blood, and oh shit oh shit oh shit. This proved too much for me, and I shouted for everyone to please just shut the hell up for ten seconds and find my god damned shoe before I pass out.

Three rolls of gauze, one horrifically painful disinfection, a splint, and entirely too many painkillers for a fourteen year old boy later, and I strode out the hospital door, and on my way back to the venue. My knees looked like raw shredded hamburger wrapped in mummy bandages, and my right arm still made a sharp left turn half way between the elbow and wrist (I would have to go back later that week to have the bones reset), but it was only seven o clock, and the headliners had yet to play. The doctors had told me not to go back to the show, that I needed rest and to not have dirty men on cocaine screaming at the top of their lungs through a microphone into my ear. But I had been through a lot today, and there was no way in hell I was missing Disturbed.

The day had been the perfect shit storm. I was wounded and unable to do much for the rest of the summer. I started high school with a broken arm, and my knees didn’t fully seal up for another two months. I have two massive and unsightly scars that won’t ever fade, and my arm still makes a horrible clicking noise if I twist it the wrong way. But the rest of the night made the whole steaming pile of pain worth it.

No one tells you this, but being maimed at a concert and then coming back from the hospital to see the rest of the show nets you some major street cred. Strangers twice my age thought I was gnarly, and everyone wanted to see my exposed knee caps. A relic of the eighties with hair down to his waist, a pleated gray beard and a Slayer shirt bought me a beer, and I even managed to make out with one of the blue-haired girls we talked to earlier. I was able to see my two favorite bands, and the cacophonous sonic assault of their metal blasted forth with nuclear force from the speakers.

It was not the perfect day I’d envisioned. It was hot, sweaty, painful, bloody and expensive. By most people’s standards it was terrible. But that day taught me something. Sure, sometimes we get screwed. Sometimes the perfect day devolves into a bloody and agonizing slap in the face from the universe, but if we keep on walking, no matter how much it hurts or how much blood is in your socks, we just might get to make out with an azure-haired chick named Krista behind the Slipknot tour bus, and really, what more can you ask for than that?
Another white hallway greets me with unfamiliar smells, unfamiliar machines, and unfamiliar faces. I walk with confidence even though my hands are trembling with fear. I straighten my badge and smooth out my crisp, white nursing uniform. “Own it.”

Another occupied room with the sound of a heart monitor echoing towards the nurse’s station; the rhythmic sign that tells me life is still present. Beep, beep beep: the metronome of the oncology unit.

Another room leads me to wander aimlessly like a child exploring a playground. My eyes fixate on a military line of recliner chairs and my heart tumbles to the depths of my toes. Flashbacks of my mother receiving chemo therapy flood my mind with memories I thought I had blocked forever. Every patient is slumped back as the chemicals flood into their veins.

Every warrior in those chairs looks like my mom, my dad, my brother, my sister. I start to shake my head as I wipe back the tears hoping to bring myself back to reality. “Detach and smile, detach and smile.”

Eight hours later and my faked confidence is only a faint whisper. My feet are aching from the constant back and forth of the newbie nurse. I grab my binder from the lounge and start my way towards the electronic double doors out of the unit. Looking back, I wave goodbye to the warriors.

Beep, beep, beep: The metronome of the oncology unit.
Every time I look out my window at the giant Russian olive tree in my yard, the tombstone under it will never allow me to see it in the same happy manner again. Giant, calm, and graceful, this tree held a bottleful of fond memories; now, it holds a really bitter one. Watching the tiny green leaves and red speckled berries every day, the tree, which I have known since I was a child, reminds me that time never waits for anything. Astringent and tart with a hint of sweetness, the taste of a Russian olive makes me reminisce about all my pleasant memories from my childhood. Whenever I step outside to visit the tree with a Knockout rose in my hand, I always pop one of those tart berries into my mouth and look down at the flat tombstone, which bears: “Bart, our beloved Fat Cat.”

Bart originally did not belong to my family; he used to live two doors down from my house. Bart’s original family, who dwelled in the world of crime, quickly packed up what possessions could fit into their hands and left him behind. In the midst of winter, he spotted my house and patiently waited for someone’s attention at my sister’s bedroom window. My sister, who at the time attended kindergarten, noticed this black and white cat spying at her with his soulful hazel eyes and shrieked for Mom’s attention. Spotting him, my mom immediately knew that this cat had the intelligence that the average cat does not possess. When my mother walked to the living room door, before she even finished opening the door, Bart was already there, waiting for her.

Bart knew which house to choose and beg to live at; he did not even bother with my next door neighbor, except to cross his yard into mine. This cat had an ability that the average cat has never possessed: exceptional intelligence. Bart seemed like a human trapped in a cat’s fat, turkey-like body, since he preferred to live like a human. Bart loved eating human foods: yogurt, spaghetti noodles, Pringles, Cheetos, Twinkies, Long John Silver’s, and Whoppers. He loved Whoppers so much that he not only knocked down a quart of them off the coffee table in my living room, he also chewed a corner of the box off and ate
the Whoppers that rolled out. If he smelled any foods that he liked, he would paw at my family for it, including me; he would also just sit there with a pitiful look in his eyes and wait patiently.

He also allowed my family to pamper him with love in many ways that normal cats would avert from. When he had a cold, Bart allowed my mother to put him in a steamy bathroom with a running shower; he also let my mother put a homemade “bib” with Vicks Vaporub around his neck. Whenever my mother took him to the vet, he allowed her to put him in a pet carrier with no fight, unlike my youngest cat Socks. Bart has also cared for many kittens, which have lived in my house, and my family when emotional spars occurred or when someone was sick. My two other cats, Peeko and Socks, viewed him as a father of sort; especially Socks, since Bart took him in as a lost kitten, looking for a home. Bart also punished those who did something bad with a swat on the head or a long, sour caterwaul.

Unfortunately, Bart suddenly got sick with a mysterious illness, which stole his notable personality. At the time his illness began, my family and I had no clue that he was actually dying. Bart normally socialized and made himself noticeable; when he was sick, he wanted to sleep, hide, and even wanted to go outside. When my dad noticed that Bart vomited at least twice a day, he then felt bad and even guilty for his cruel remarks. I woke up to my worst morning, since I listened to Bart’s last hurl and cacophonic cries of unbearable pain; I also received the news that my crying parents had to euthanize him, since his kidneys failed. Normally, my dad carries the masculine attitude of not shedding a tear; he even cried because of Bart’s unwilling departure, but not to his late mother when she passed.

Bart lived for twenty years as an indoor cat, a dear friend, a parent, and as an honored member of my family. His legacy still lives in my household, like a ghost haunting a historical home. Bart may forever sleep under my giant Russian olive tree, but his soul still remains in my heart. He lived his life to the fullest, and left the world at his happiest. His passing taught me that time flies much faster than people believe, so we should shower an abundant amount of love to the living, since death can strike at any time, like a sniper waiting for his target. We can only enjoy our time here and watch life bloom its flowers and berries. Since Bart has taught us that life has a lot more to offer than it seems, only something as simple as a Russian olive tree can remind us of cherished memories, such as the ones he created.
Sarah Whitman

Majestic green clouds
Bequeathing the earth
with lush evergreen

yet marred, scarred
with gruesome highways
engorged with maggots

disgusting maggots
clogging wind and sky
with a ghastly perfume

It is we who bring the
apocalypse
with snazzy cars
Nostalgia

James Robinson

To turn back the clock & reverse the days
To dive back to the time when we dreamt away

For our future to shine as the stars in the sky
And break away the boundaries that chain us inside

To the days when fear would never hold us down
As a warrior would clash on the fields of a battleground

To days that were filled with color, when nothing was bleak
To relink with the past, for the joy that we seek

We continue to search for that missing spark
Absent through the turmoil, lost within the dark
To regain our broken faith, our sense of hope
For a brighter tomorrow, for which we all can cope
It begins in twilight on a desolate beach. I hold a girl I do not recognize, watching oily waves trickle over harsh, gray rock. The spray is offensive, thick as sweat. The tide, vile and hypnotic. Somewhere, a gull calls, its screech lost in the wind.

Over me, forebodingly close and distant, a lonely cottage at the brink of a sea cliff. The house perched, imposingly still, listening. Shingles in the yard, fallen, mounds of rotten teeth. Windows leer but offer nothing.

The front door cracks. Inside a family, lean, taciturn, appareled in the fashions of poverty. Sly and telling glances followed by a squeal of furtive hinges.

We approach in spite of instinct, hearts pulsing. I cringe at the dwelling, at the dwellers, at a confession waiting to be heard. We climb timidly to the porch, this nameless girl and I. Through gapes and knotholes and opening door, the brood stares.

Their features are ornaments, expressions of blank irony. Skin hairless, pale, taut over an unnatural skeleton. Eyes, false and unblinking. Redolent of surgery-addicts, stitched into mere costumes of the living. Dolls; worse than dolls, for the suggestion of what is or might have been.

“What are you?” I demand.

“What are you?” cried the echo as they grinned.

A child steps forward, his fellows nodding approval. That hint of the organic makes him familiar and unspeakable. That face, those stolen features. A forgery, black perverted forgery. He advances to the doorway, that counterfeit boy. To the doorway and no farther.

At his next step, I back away. Another pace and I recoil. He doesn’t run until I run.

The chase seems longer than my hike up, longer than the hillside. Running at first, half-leaping, tumbling, then somehow falling until I stood again. Below us the sun drowns in a mold-green ocean. I don’t know where else to go.

Stones jab as I rush into the shallows. The bed a collection of sludge and barnacles. The fluid sticky, tepid, alive with eelgrass. A womb of turpentine.
I press further— gasping, retching, eyes leaking from salt. My pursuer follows, bobbing, struggling to keep above the breakers.

Quick as a snake, I turn. My hands wrap neatly around the little neck— squeezing, twisting, holding the boy under.

He claws, gashes, trying for eyes but finding limbs. Squirming, ripping, teeth bared but useless. All wriggling fury. Screaming bubbles, orange forth, my arms torn to the fat. Legs thrash— wild then heavy then suddenly, slowly inert.

Breathless, swearing, I paddle to shore. My eyes sprint up the cliff-face, up to the shanty. She’s already gone.


Night drips like tar. Creeping water. Hushed blackness. Years of hate and discolored moonbeams.

I feel the dark stir, the brine yield, a gross presence at my back. Bloated, oozing, draped in slime. Eyes vacant as ever. Flesh wrinkled and bloodless. Limp, hollowed by crabs, a gift from the kelp and undertow. One of us shrieks as it floats ashore.

Possessed, disgusted, I grab for it. The carcass child tosses, a slippery mass. I drag it by an ankle, marching to the largest, sharpest rock. The face pulps, splatters, wet meat under my nails. Jawless spittle, chunks of gray, a rubber spasm. I slam the boy down again. Again and again.

Bashing, flaying, howling for oblivion, unmaking it against the rocks. Flying pus and rib shards. Globs of body in my hair. My hate is thirsty.


In the damp and clay, the scraps move. They writhe. Blind, throbbing, all exposed nerves, dancing like grubs. Inching, probing, leaving mucus trails. Swarming, an orgy of maggots, a twitching heap in the center. Guts bulge, raping each other, coming in a gush of blood and shit and piss. Tearing themselves apart. Gorging on themselves. Vomiting fresh bulk. Mutilation and discharge. Endless.

Innards clump, scab, melt into veined soup. Pink and boiling.


Every moment maturing, detailing, becoming. Digits form pointing. Newborn eyes, opening, accusing. Lips sprout, then separate,
“murderer” their first word. Legion of infants, raw and bleating. They glare at me, feral, loathing, outraged by their filth.
   The hole fills quickly. Untrustig, unsatisfied, I stare. The ground refuses to rise.
   She’s screaming now. Glancing behind, suspecting, knowing… but the grave is untouched, sealed. Startled. Baffled. Almost speaking. Instead I kneel, burying my face.
   She screams again, and I don’t ask why. I feel maggots on my tongue.
One Way

Bria Friestad

One way down
One way road
One way

The words are clean,
Only one, one option, one choice
No dilemmas, no opinions.
That IS the way.

For what?
For direction?
For change?
What about opinions and thoughts?
Is there only one way for those?

A one way street breeds safety,
Conformity
Security
You don’t have to worry about the size of the gap,
No one is coming the other way.

But if everyone is coming from one way,
How is the course of life to change?
That rut will grow deeper and deeper
That the path will always be the same,
And thought and spirit shall die under the yoke of conformity.
On Solid Ground

Avery Joyner

I feel the cold breeze penetrate my skin and pass through my core causing tiny bumps to appear on my bare arms. The cracked skin of the huge limb feels rough against the part of my soft back where my shirt is pulled up. I open up my mouth slightly and breathe in the cool, crisp air. It tastes bitter on my tongue. I exhale a warm breath that fogs the atmosphere. It smells sweet, like strawberry lip balm. I look up as cold tears begin to fall on the leaves above me. They roll off, splash down on my closed eyes and trickle down my cheeks. I look down at the ground, so far away, and wonder what it’s like.
sometimes I think of a place with dials like a radio
and I can control their volume
but their noises always leak through the cracks of my imagination

pillows don’t help either
they don’t muffle her cries
or the sound her body makes when it hits the floor

walls don’t block his yells
the way he damns her to eternal hell
when he demands her slavery

and mine

to dream would be nice

but I’m a light sleeper
Poet Days

Daniel Belcher

Some poets live long
to polish and cherish their craft.
Others barely begin
and the curtain of life closes.

But it remains a mystery.
As the scripture says
time and chance
happens to all men.

To work and grow
in ones gift is a blessing.
To touch the face
of the source
and pull from the threads
of inspiration
of those great poets
who have gone before.

Some laboring in the fields
of war, some doctors, some farmers.
Who’ve answered the
call of the gift
that rest in the heart
of the seasoned poet.

And so we write.

Each day without end.
The same thing yet never the same.
Porcelain Bridge

Robert Van Cleave

With the sunset so pale in the distance
The road continuing beyond the realm of hope
Not a soul surrounds, is this even Earth-bound?
The cogs are still spinning in their place

With the clouds so gray in the sky
Blurring the difference between night and day
There’s a hole in the ground that can’t be Earth-bound
The system of cogs ends where this begins

This indigo cell dilates
Taking me and taking shape
The flames of hell may dance inside
Or the end of a journey could finally reside

Creating a force that begins to gyrate
Pointing all of this world towards this chasm
The spiraling winds begin to deform
Pulling me towards the eye of the storm

The cogs are loosening out of place
The system can’t last while this presence exists
The road that once lay ahead
Now rains down from the sky as the squall’s skeleton

The serpentine trail bends towards this atrocity
The wind’s tortured screams increasing in velocity
Providing me a glimpse of the what might be beyond
Can I even help but to look inside?

As I approach an eve to an end
Pondering what will come next
I humbly apply my curiosity
Now the only hole left rests inside my eyes
Frank stared at the small slip of paper, his expression blank. He sat at a table in a sparse kitchenette. A cup of black coffee steamed in front of him, while a small television perched on a counter provided background noise. It was tuned to the local news, the volume turned low, but just audible enough to be heard throughout the small, non-descript studio apartment.

“Today is the last day for the winner of the $100 million Mega Lotto lottery drawing to step forward,” the anchorwoman’s voice bubbled out. She was a pretty blonde and had been with the station for the past three years. She was perky and cheerful, and Frank enjoyed her company each weekday morning. He looked up at the screen.

The story was big news in the state. Exactly one year ago, a man had walked into a neighborhood grocery store and purchased the single, winning lottery ticket. The news had been playing the grainy security footage from inside the store for months, and did so now as the anchorwoman described the scene. An older man stood in front of the service counter, his face slightly obscured by an old ball cap. Frank watched as the man pulled out his wallet and handed the teenaged clerk a bill, who in turn handed back his purchase.

“With that one dollar, this man, whoever he is, became an instant millionaire,” the anchorwoman said breathlessly, her excitement evident in her eyes as the camera shifted and widened to reveal a man sitting to her right. “That’s right, Kerry,” he said to the woman before turning his attention to the audience. “And with the time limit ending today, he has,” the man looked off screen briefly, “roughly eight more hours to claim the $100 million.” The winning numbers appeared at the bottom of the screen:

5-7-10-20-24-27.

“I wonder, what would I do with all that money?” Kerry asked. “What must be going through that person’s mind?” the man countered before continuing his report. “And in other news…”

Frank turned the television off. He could have answered the anchors’
questions if they were sitting there with him. He looked again at the small slip of paper for what must have been the millionth time. Printed boldly across the middle were a series of numbers that matched the ones on the television earlier, the numbers that held the key to instant riches. Frank closed his eyes and let his mind drift back.

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“Prisoner 572427, step forward!”

From within a group of men dressed in familiar black-and-white striped prison garb, a young man emerged and approached the guard who barked the command.

“Name?” the guard asked, not looking up from the sheaf of paper on a clipboard he held in his hand.

“Robert Perlford.”

“Date of birth?”

“October 20, 1937,” replied the 26-year-old prisoner.

The guard continued the questioning, while confirming the information printed on the form. Perlford verified the crime for which he was incarcerated and that he was currently serving a 40-year sentence. He confirmed that he was being transferred from Hinds County Prison, where he had been held for the past seven years.

After the interrogation, Perlford was led to his new cell. There were two bare bunks with a folded blanket at the foot and a pillow on top of each. A toilet bowl was positioned between the beds.

“You’re lucky, you have the place to yourself for a few days,” one of the guards grumbled, as he inserted a key into the cell door. A rough metallic squeal echoed throughout the cell block as the door swung open. Perlford neither felt lucky nor said anything as he stepped into the cold room.

“Lights out at 10 and don’t make us come down here to turn it off for you,” the other guard warned. The cell door slammed shut.

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Frank’s eyes snapped open at the memory. It had been a long time since he last thought about Robert Perlford. More than 47 years had passed since he had left the prison and he still would chuckle at the ease of his escape.

After two years, Perlford was assigned to field work where he picked cotton from the prison’s 1,500 acres. Ten hours a day, six days a week he would pluck the fluffy white blooms from the brown stalks and fill burlap bags. Never one to slack, Perlford was considered the best picker of the prison. He could fill more bags than it took three other prisoners combined. It was this dedication and speed that left him alone in the
field one day, far removed from the other prisoners and guards. Perlford waited a few moments for shouts as they came to realize that he was missing, but no alarm was raised. So, Perlford put his bag down and simply walked away from Parchman.

Frank had moved to the small outdoor porch with two fresh cups of coffee. The sun was casting early morning light across an expanse of lush, green grass. After years on the run, he had made this place home for more than three decades.

Johnston Plantation was by no means as large as the neighboring Wormsloe Plantation, but it did have its share of history in Savannah. It had been the site of two major battles in the War Between the States, with the main house serving as a hospital for Union and Southern troops alike. Pared back from its initial 1,000 acres, the plantation now covered less than five. The current mistress, Marjorie Johnston, was the sixth generation in a long family line to occupy the residence and, childless at ninety-two years old, she was most likely the last.

“Why Mr. Carlsteen, I see you’re up and about early this morning,” the woman said loudly, approaching Frank. “May I join you and sit for a while?”

This was their daily ritual. Rain or shine, Missus Johnston would visit Frank to share a cup of coffee and discuss matters concerning the plantation. Even though they were the only two people living on the land, she insisted on the routine. “It is the overseer’s daily duty to ensure the success of the plantation,” she had stated when Frank ventured the idea of scaling back the meeting schedule.

“Why, of course, Missus Johnston, of course!” Frank replied, and the woman bounded up the two steps and onto the porch. She may be the last Johnston to own the plantation, but she was in no rush to see that to the end.

“Thank you,” she whispered, settling into the chair next to Frank. Her voice raised, she asked “So, where shall we begin?”

“Well,” he began, scratching his chin, “I need to go see about the fence alongside East Yard, and I was thinking of heading into town to see about getting the tractor tuned up for winter.” She shook her head. “No, no, no. I don’t want to hear about the land today, Mr. Carlsteen. I suspect you have everything well under control. I want to hear about you.” She leveled her gaze directly at his eyes.

Frank froze. ‘She knows. She must have seen the news. She’s probably known all along.’

He had been very careful to stay in the shadows of society since his escape from Parchman, wandering the South in the early years, working
odd jobs for cash. He never stayed long in one place and, relying on his prison experience, he rarely interacted with people. Frank had no real friends, with the possible exception of Missus Johnston, and he had always kept their relationship strictly professional. He had lived in obscurity for nearly 50 years and the lottery ticket in his pocket threatened to shine the light of unwanted attention on him.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Missus Johnston,” he said slowly.

“Now, now, Mr. Carlsteen, we’ve known each other for many years, and I can tell when there’s something eating at you.” She leaned forward a little. “You’ve been on edge for some time. I’ve always respected your privacy. Lord knows you don’t need an old woman mingling in your business, and I don’t mean to start today, but I suspect you have yourself one big dilemma to figure out.”

Frank nodded his head in silence. He recounted the many hours he had spent trying to come up with a solution for cashing in the lottery ticket. He had even visited the Live Oak Public Library to research himself. Frank was disheartened to learn that even after all the time that had passed, Robert Perlford was still a wanted man. It seemed as if society had a way of never forgetting a man’s past and was intent on collecting its due.

That was Frank’s problem: if he turned in the ticket, there would be a maelstrom of attention from the media and ordinary people. Everyone would want to know the name of the lucky old man they had watched in the security footage. Also, there would be questions. Lots of questions. Having lived in obscurity all these years, he had learned that answering questions was the biggest threat to his identity. Frank knew that if he redeemed his winnings, he risked becoming Robert Perlford, the wealthiest prisoner in the state.

On the other hand, there was Missus Johnston. She had hired Frank to manage the upkeep of the plantation shortly after her husband had died. Frank had expected to work the job for a short spell and then move on. Now he had come to view the place as his home. One hundred million dollars would go a long way to restoring the place back to its original prestige and, as she herself said, he was the overseer and the plantation’s success was his responsibility.

“Don’t you agree, Mr. Carlsteen?” Missus Johnson asked, breaking Frank from his thoughts.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I must have strayed there for a bit,” he replied. “What was that you were saying?”

Missus Johnston huffed. “What I said was people our age have been between many rocks and hard places during the course of our lives, but
if we do what’s right for ourselves and families – and praise the Lord – we tend to find our problems solved. Take stock in what you have and live today as if it is your last on Earth. Now then, would you agree, Mr. Carlsteen?”

He looked around before answering. Peach tree leaves swayed in the gentle morning breeze. On the days when he would mow the expansive lawn, he would fuss at how the dropped peaches would gum up the riding mower’s blade. Frank looked towards the old building that had served as the servants’ quarters in the plantation’s heyday. He noticed the paint beginning to flake, needing a new coat soon, even though the building had stood empty ever since he could remember. Lastly, he looked to Missus Johnston.

Frank studied the woman’s face. Fragile at ninety-two years old, she still had a hint of a young girl in her eyes. He had lived the life of a normal man because of her generosity, and he reminded himself of that each morning. Suddenly, he had his lottery decision made.

“That is very true, Missus Johnston. I like to think that’s how I’ve lived my life all these years and how I hope to do so until I am gone,” he said as he rose from his chair. He instinctively reached up to adjust his cap before remembering he had stopped wearing it after seeing the security footage. He stepped down from the porch.

“Praise the Lord, Mr. Carlsteen,” she replied. “Now, where might you be heading?” He stopped and turned to her.

“I was thinking I might head into town and see about getting the tractor tuned, and maybe get some paint for the old servants’ quarters,” he said. “You have yourself a good day, Missus Johnston. I’ll be seeing you later.”
The Rebellious Bird

Jennifer Bergmann

The Bird is a rebel  
It comes and goes as it please  
It will fly and never return  
That is the way of The Bird  
The Bird is a lonely soul  

It will look out for no one but itself.  
Spring is a different matter for The Bird  
For spring is nature’s sign of love and birth anew  
Once a mate is chosen, The Bird becomes complete  
The fate of The Bird is to find its true love, to find its calling  

The Bird can choose the life of a wandering soul  
The Bird can choose the life full of love and care  
The Bird is a free bird, and knows no bounds  

It will come and go as it please  
It chooses its own destiny  

Destiny holds no sway over The Bird  
The Bird is free forevermore
Retrospective

Hannah Berk

To talk about what’s been
already gemmed and nubbed,
harsh sheen unshined,
a scalpel toward a scab.
What’s done’s undone,
no crux fixed in the fissured
brain, axis of hemispheres
dividing spark from spark.
Again to try again, but this time
farther in the dark.
The Ride

Emily Uperti

The rain has left the asphalt glimmering
The sun begins to peak its head out amongst the clouds
An early Saturday morning has left me trapped in my thoughts.
Time for a bike ride.

We hit the pavement and the tires hum against the asphalt
The puddles from the previous night shower me with grit
I take in the silence of the morning around me and let my thoughts run rancid.
Time for a bike ride.

The wind pierces my face as I round the corner
My speed picks up and I pound down on my pedals with unimaginable force.
I wonder if this is what flying away feels like.
Time for a bike ride.

I use all of my energy to get to our final destination.
And I sit on the sandy beach of Ocean View and look out at the sea.
A few serene minutes later, we are back on the road
Time for a bike ride.

I pull into the driveway with reluctance
I know that my temporary escape has come to a close.
You, bike, are my magic carpet.
I’ll always have time for a bike ride.
Runaway Days

Matthew Chambers

Dozens of days carrying themselves along right by me,
I reach to grab them-
To make them halt,
But they continue to distance themselves.
One day after another-
Running away, to a place outside of time,
Where each used up day is stored.
A retirement home for time itself,
Where the days of old can relax after passing the torch-
To the next one, equipped with twenty-four bright, sparkling, virgin
hours,
Ready to be seized,
As one seizes a vessel,
During a storm on the high seas.
The winds of doubt challenge my ability to board the ship-
And steer the rudder.
But I fight my way on-
Clashing swords with a pirate named fear.
I overtake him, but not without wounds of my own.
I hoist the flag with my only good hand,
Say a prayer and steer towards land.
The seas have grown quiet,
But adventure’s voice is calling.
And though this day shall soon retire,
I must keep my flag from falling,
I’ll catch the day before it’s gone,
To quickly seize and sail on.
Passing through
the matrixes of time
He thought
he escaped justice.

Somewhere in his mind
he imagined
retribution would eventually come
But, not so soon.

Forgetting
that the scales of justice
must be balanced.
Thinking otherwise
is deception.

Space and time
Can't separate
the weights of life.

Justice will always
be satisfied.
Seven Iris

Robert Van Cleave

My black wings show me the way
As I become a specter in the sky
Limitless in a linear way
To make this second world alive

The black clouds give birth to hope
Something distant in the sky
Bounded up, it screams its free
But its chains keep it alive

Through the thickness of this fog
In the darkness of this haze
The farther away I get from reality
The closer I am to finding your purity

Navigating the oceans of space
To a place that may not sustain life
Where the biting cold has never felt so warm
Quite possibly no oxygen in this atmosphere
Or ground to tread this perfect world

My black wings show me the way
As I become a specter in the sky
Limitless in a linear way
To make this second world alive

Comets head my way as I fly across infinity
Hoping to reach the other side
Time loses all meaning
Emotion loses its value
Consciousness fades to solipsism
As the mind loses its definition
Blurring the lines in between the lines
Into a specter in the sky

I’m limitless on this linear path
I’m free as long as I keep my chains
Through the thickness of this fog
In the darkness of this haze
The farther away I get from humanity
The closer I am to finding your purity
The Shack

Jeff Burgess

Trembling in the shadows of the night, the faint occasional inch of light fell from the moon upon the dull glass windows. The corrugated tin roof was too corroded to reflect any luminosity. Just a breath of air left the walls to cry in discomfort. The pasty paint frail and dry flaked like psoriasis. Beat down and uncared for, neglected but not alone, the shack sat suppressed by the trees, as they swallowed it further into darkness.

As I peeked through the barely lucid and cracked window, I observed a mirror image of the dark outside and my shadow intruded from the moonlight creeping behind me. The kitchen, retro and outdated, looked empty, and the linoleum arched away from the wood on the countertops. In the distance was obscure, and I couldn’t see but a hallway that opened up into another dark room, and an outline that looked like a worn couch.

Returning to the eeriness of the night I backed away and headed for the front entrance. The door looked weak but secured by a padlock attached to a rusted chain. Pulling the key from my jeans pocket I slid the key into the opening and worked the pins until it released. Looking over my shoulder, I yelled out to my friends Anson, Kyle and Jamel as they stumbled around the corner from a stretch of empty field where all that barely stood was a rotted stage, where once kite fest was held in the crest of summer. They followed.

As we crept in through the doorway a draft of arid cold air chilled us; similar chill to the sensation of being home. Confused by the blackness, we waited to be blinded as Anson fumbled, looking for the breaker. It wasn’t long after the room lit and Jamel found his place at the deserted drum kit, beating away the dust as it elevated to the ceiling, where mysterious blue footprints climbed from the wall and all merging into symphony with the raising smoke from Kyle’s bowl. The crackling of the amp puzzled my ears as Anson sank into the frayed couch, chiming into the symphony with his bass, brightening and warming the room. It wasn’t just the four of us, accompanying was a manikin, still in the corner but seeming to rock with us. The shack never felt so alive. For
once in some time the energy within competed with the repression of
the sinister exterior. Music and celebration is what we loved but could
not be the same in any other, what we called “the shack”.

Our youth seemed to allude the age of the dying place where we felt
so full of life. Built from the palms of Anson’s parents, they left us a part
of them they remember as do I. And as they grow brittle like the shack,
wavering to stand, our presence and life will warm and lighten them
from the inside and strengthen them too. Maybe this is why they held
onto the shack, embracing it in the preservation of their land. For us,
maybe to one day leave something behind as they did, and let life carry
on for our own.
I was reading peacefully on my bed, gradually succumbing to an idle slumber, when I become aware of it. There was no telling sound, just the slightest touch followed by the perception that something was amiss. I glanced away from my book with an indistinct, almost casual urgency, awake yet not firmly convinced of this reality. My eyes drifted, mental focus sluggishly intersecting with vision, and the cause of my foreboding became clear. There was a spider on my arm.

Needless to say, I hated spiders. Whether it was their inordinate number of limbs or the hideous mechanics of their scuttling or some other indefinable quality in their ghoulish appearance, they’ve always racked me with dread. Observing them was chilling even from a distance in the garden or open wilderness. I’d spent my entire life avoiding them and now one had finally found me.

Desperation broke over me in a swift and terrible wave. A drowning memory screamed for my attention, a fleeting reminder of near-identical fits. Suddenly I was a child again, peering out from a high windowsill. I could see the streets below me and felt the sheer panic surging through me. (I always sensed a troubling instant of indecision on the brink of ledges; something that wasn’t born from doubting my balance or the ledge’s structural integrity or even that subtle impulse to leap within, but a disquieting external hesitation. So it always seemed wise to step away as quickly as possible, to run before the planet jerked on its axis and the mountain could hurl me down.)

However, as I raised my paperback, I recognized just how small my target truly was. At less than half half the size of my tiniest fingernail, this spider was hardly the stuff of nightmares. More a flea than a spider actually. I considered the ugly mite as it traveled down the length of my forearm, uncertain whether it should live or die.

Oddly, I even marveled at the minuscule horror. How it clung to the underside of my wrist, defying gravity with an effortless resupinate stride! How, regardless of the spider’s dimensions, there was still a certain menace in its details; something beyond the macabre symmetry
and that awful, creeping gait! It remained eerie yet all the more fascinating for that eeriness.

Then I questioned whether the little fiend could feel me watching, feel all the wonder and contempt I held for it? Did such an oblivious speck deserve the violent end that it was tempting?

It scaled the mighty crag that was my thumb and descended into a valley of cupped hands. I slowly closed my palms, interlocking my fingers to prevent any escape. If I clenched my fist or wrung my hands, this helpless little thing would be utterly crushed. The moment to pass my judgment had arrived.

I contemplated the spider’s fate; slightly amused with the novelty and power of my situation. After all, how many opportunities did one have another’s destiny so literally thrust into their hands? How often did I, personally, have such a hated object completely at my leniency, to spare or forfeit at a whim?

Contrary to this spark of malevolent joy, I mostly felt a grand indifference. Neither the demise nor survival of the bug struck me as overly important. The benefits and disadvantages of killing it needed to be weighed and decided by which was less inconsequential.

Obviously, this tiny arachnid posed no danger—no more a threat to me than I was to Mount Everest. In fact, it remained docile in the black cavern of my palms; timidly awaiting my verdict.

My old fear seemed irrational, almost ridiculous, now. Then again, I reasoned, which phobia was wholly sane? Was my groundless aversion so unreasonable compared to that of darkness, or death, or the odd numeral which fell between twelve and fourteen? And what of foreigners and confining spaces and even water? Certainly, spiders (and heights) were just as legitimate: Water and minorities, though frightening, were seldom found unexpectedly within a household. People seemed more prone to walking off cliffs than stumbling into places too small for their bodies. Each was more concrete than the hypothetical monsters in the night and obviously more valid than any number, even one as intimidating as thirteen. And what is that singular uncertainty of death compared to the thousand devastations life may unleash at any given instant? (Surely there is more charity in that institution than is freely admitted.)

I reflected on whether this nuisance’s merits outweighed its hazard. If it lived to devour other pests, would this spider have earned its salvation? The idea seemed rational but unlikely. This was a feeble predator in its finest hour and apt to become a minor injury.

I began pressing the life from the soft, little beast, confident it
wouldn’t make any lasting difference. Yet, as I proceeded, I remembered
my stories. Not just those in the book nearest to me, but all those fictions
I had abandoned years past. I thought of Charlotte soothing Wilbur
like a loving mother and knitting “Some Pig” into her web. I thought
of Anansi, that crafty swindler, sharing heaven-won stories with his
people. I thought of all those spiders immortalized in nursery rhymes
and puerile songs, fabulous and horrid and sometimes noble as they
perpetually climbed their waterspouts.

Then, I knew I couldn’t kill it. After all, it haunted my childhood;
wasn’t it partially responsible for my present? Maybe I owed this
creature and its pitiful race a debt for contributing to me, for defining
me with shock and delight if for only for a brief second lost in eons?
Maybe we enriched one another?

Unsurprisingly, the spider bit me. Just a tiny, thoughtless bite;
some vain stab at the engulfing blackness, to remind me or itself that
it continued to live. The spider’s nip was scarcely enough to make my
hand flinch, but more than sufficient to ruin itself.

I sighed at the dead thing in my palm—so rude and insignificant—
and went to bed soon afterwards, saddened by the waste of it all.
The immense amount of hatred I had for this man. Glaring through the ovoid glass window, centered on the kitchen door, I watched him. This man-sized lobster, clenching his glass of Chambly, drinking until the foam from his beer resided on his lips. His skin toned red, alcohol flushing through his veins, and out of his pores. A smirk of pride hit his face, as he bounced his wedding ring on the granite countertop, flirting with the brunette behind the bar. His other claw, clamping his phone, his security, his way of making us feel trapped, imprisoned and small, displayed the cameras like guards in watchtowers. Returning back to work, again I faced the furnace of heat from the grill blistering my hands and my sweat boiling off my forehead.

Tickets continued to spill from the thermal printer, Chef calling out a new set of orders, which in the back of my mind nothing was new about that at all. Each day was another day in the machine. Programmed to prep, cook and clean, the “Big Man” observed his robots, waiting for a glitch in his system. Once again the printer chirped as the ticket read a series of orders on head honchos tab for his waitress staff during the peak of business. Returning to the fire, the lobster now, steaming in my mind. Chef shook his head recognizing the expression of frustration on my face as our hard work again remained unnoticed. Peeking back through the window overseeing the bar, there he is locked into the same chair as he is every night, open until close, drink after drink getting his fix. This time I see him point out toward the balcony at the sun reflecting its beauty over the Elizabeth River- his hand seeming strangely still.

The corporation I worked for had an immaculate illusion of magnificence that corrupted everyone who stepped foot inside. A fortress that stood taller than any other for miles, it reached down touching the water with its amber glow at sun down. Through the doors, an elevator that held the luxury of a mirror residing above, ascended customers to the second floor; looking up gave one last chance to smooth imperfections on your suit before greeted by a beautiful blonde to seat you. The interior, dim and soothing, set the atmosphere
for a romantic night. Sleek granite tables and mahogany enriched the customers’ ego as they suddenly felt big and important. What they didn’t know was that behind those wooden doors was Hell’s Kitchen and the damned and forgotten who were enslaved there.

I felt for my Chef. If it was anyone to hold such anger it should have been him. In the industry for thirty years, a Cordon Bleu trained culinary master- French for blue ribbon; an honor given to the highest skilled chefs- was rarely given gratitude for constructing such a successful business and only to benefit the Big Man. For it was the food in reality that had people coming back, something the owner couldn’t buy. He tried to explain to me that there will always be the boss that employees will resent and as an employee have you realize you can use them just as well as they can use you. He would fall if it wasn’t for us. Although nothing could disassemble the amount of hatred I accumulated for my self-righteous, drunk for a boss, I respected my Chef and took in his advice.

Without my job, I have to admit, I would have nothing to show for. No car, nor money for tuition, no presents for my family, or food on my plate. It is important to realize people like the lobster, and as inhuman they can appear, make jobs for the common man. But that isn’t even the sum of what I had learned. Things may not be what they appear. As big and immaculate something may seem, it can never stand alone. The small, seemingly unimportant things are in actuality the support and structure and I was a part of it.
The hydrangea bush was crying. Its soft sobs echoed off the surrounding trees as its multi-colored heads swayed and shook with a sorrow quite out of place in such a manicured and pastoral setting as a flower garden. My garden had been featured in The Georgia Gardener since 1959. With divine providence, Griffin Farms would make the cover this year. I did not need two eight-year-olds traipsing through my flowers. The heels of my pumps sunk in the dark earth as I weaved through various plants to reach the pastel hues of the hydrangea.

The bush was easily twice as wide as I am tall and almost as deep since it had grown in the same spot for five generations of Griffins. My Nana used to say the spot was perfect for the dense mophead; not too sunny under the white oak and good loam mixed with sand from the nearby river bank. I remembered summers lugging water with my mother and brothers to save Nana’s garden from various heat waves. While the other plants had wilted to the ground, the hydrangea had handled the heat with all the grace of a true southern lady.

I bent over and peered past the bright green leaves and the pink and blue flowers to see my daughter’s tear-filled eyes. In Caroline’s despair, her eyes almost matched the blue blooms as her pale face stood out from the shadows despite its speckling of dirt. In contrast, Ester’s dark skin could have blended into the deep shade, except for the pink dress and shoes she favored. I noticed with a mother’s dismay that the colored girl’s frilly white socks were streaked with dirt. I had a passing relief that the child’s clothes weren’t my responsibility. I cleared my throat in an effort to break through the girls’ weeping, “Caroline, Ester’s family is waiting on her. You girls come on out of there now.”

My proclamation was met with renewed bawling as the children clutched each other tighter. I sighed back my impatience and tried to hold my temper. I reached into the bush and tapped Caroline on the nose, “Stop that noise right now, young lady. What would your grandmother say about you hiding in one of my best bushes and carrying on so?”
Caroline glared up at me “I don’t care, Mama. I don’t want her to go! I’ll never see her again!” My daughter’s wails got louder as she closed her eyes and collapsed against Ester, sobbing into the other girl’s hair. The colored girl held her friend close in abject misery. Ester’s stoicism somehow tore at my heart worse than my daughter’s prostrations.

I sighed again. “Caroline, you’re going to ruin poor Ester’s outfit. She’s supposed to look pretty for her trip.” I held out my hands to each of them “Come on now, I pleaded softly. “You both need to get cleaned up.” I heard someone walking up the gravel path. I stood up, dropped my hands and turned to see Ester’s father approaching.

Elijah was lanky and tall and looked a bit out of place in his Sunday finery, since I had only ever seen him in mechanic’s overalls covered in grime and grease from the engines he fixed. His eyes carefully avoided mine as he walked over to stand a couple of feet away from me next to the bush. Then he knelt in the dirt unmindful of his clothes, and held out his arms. “Come on young’ens, you ain’t gonna grow no roots so you might as well come on out of there,” he said, keeping his deep voice soft. His smile widened some. “And your throats have gotta be hurtin’ with all that wailin’ you’ve been doin’. Come on out and I’ll get y’all sugars some lemonade.” Both of the children responded to his cajoling and crawled out to take his hand. I took Caroline’s hand from Elijah’s and brushed off the worst of the dirt while he did the same for Ester.

Caroline dashed over and flung her arms around the two colored folks, almost knocking Elijah off his feet. “I don’t want you to go Mr. Elijah,” she said, starting to weep anew. “Ester’s my friend.”

Elijah glanced at me as I tried to get over my shock from Caroline’s outburst. He patted her shoulder, awkward about my watching him and then carefully pulled her away so he could look at her face. Ester nestled into his side as she glanced up at me and quickly looked away as her father spoke to Caroline. “Be mad and sad at the sun for shinin’ and the birds a’singin’, but being mad won’t stop any of it—it has ta be” Elijah took Caroline’s hand into his own as though he were holding spun glass. “Sugar-baby, I’d take ya if we could, but your Ma and Pa need you here,” he said softly with another glance at me. Then he carefully untangled himself from the foliage and stood up holding Ester tightly in his arms. “You’re welcome to come down for some lemonade too, Ma’am.”

Elijah’s small cottage was further from the river so we walked the shortcut through my family’s yard to reach it. My husband had been reluctant to rent to a colored family, but their treatment of the old carriage house had bore up their references. A beat-up brown station wagon was loaded for the Jones’s trip to their new house up north.
knew through Caroline that they were moving to Chicago to a colored neighborhood there.

Elijah’s wife had set out a small snack to eat before her family started their journey to their new life. Grace’s eyes also carefully avoided mine in a dance of humility well-learned by most coloreds in the South. She offered the small plate of cookies first which I declined with tight politeness, citing my dirty hands. Grace smiled slightly and offered me a small damp cloth similar to the one Elijah was using on Ester to scrub off some of the dirt. I thanked her and began to clean Caroline’s hands to cover my embarrassment over my daughter’s appearance. Ester looked as if the hydrangeas had been her only hiding spot. Caroline seemed to have rolled in half the garden and then some. I had to admit I was going to miss Ester’s prim influence over my child who would rather climb a tree then sit quietly under one.

The mason jars were covered with beads of condensation and filled with pale yellow lemonade. Its tart sweetness belied its humble container. After we had all finished, Grace quietly collected our empty glasses and went back into the house to wash them before stowing them in a small picnic basket. Elijah continued to check over the car and kept the girls busy fetching last minute things from the house. At last there were only a few odds and ends including a few small potted plants carefully packed for the trip.

Suddenly, Ester cried out, “Wait, where’s mine?” The colored girl dashed to the side of the house and tried to pick up a large pot of green leaves. Her father rushed over to steady the armload and then took it from Ester’s thin arms. Ester hovered until her father carefully placed the pot close to the front porch. Grace smiled as she helped her daughter check over the plant. Caroline dragged me over to the porch, “Look, Mama. Ester’s plant is going to look just like mine, just not as big.” Caroline clambered onto the porch and embraced her friend, “The flowers will be all different colors, just like mine. That way we both get our favorite colors plus the pretty one you get when they mix together.” I remembered that Caroline had begged for clippings from my hydrangea this spring as an Easter present for Ester. I had given my child the stems content in the knowledge that such cuttings were difficult to propagate. Somehow, Ester and her family had found a way to make them flourish.

Grace laughed and put an arm around Caroline. “Like I tell ya, Sugar-baby. You’re blue, Ester’s pink and together ya make one of the prettiest colors I know.” The colored woman stiffened as she caught sight of me and carefully took her arm away from Caroline’s shoulders.
Elijah called that he now had made more room in the car for Ester’s flowers. Grace and the girls carefully loaded the mini hydrangea into the cleared spot on the floorboard below Ester’s seat. Caroline stood on her tiptoes to study the plant and turned around to the Joneses. Tears started to trickle down her cheeks as she gathered Ester and her parents into her arms. I felt like an intruder spying on my daughter and the family she loved so much, finally understanding that Caroline thought of them as kin and that they were as dear to her as her blood relations.

I walked over as quietly as I could. The elder Jones patted and rubbed the backs of our sobbing offspring with tear-stained faces. Grace looked at me and met my eyes with surprise when she saw my tears. Elijah also looked confused as he carefully separated the girls and turned Caroline towards me before scooping up Ester. I gently lifted Caroline into my arms, stroked her hair and began humming her favorite song in her ear.

I had once prayed that God would find a way to separate my child from the one shaking with sobs against her father’s chest, but now was not positive in my regard for the graciousness of divine providence. The family I thought so beneath me and mine did more than tolerate my daughter with hidden disdain as I had so often done unto them. They loved her as one of their own, which made my neglect of Caroline’s feelings all the more devastating to me.

I found myself shifting my weeping burden and holding out my hand to Elijah. His weathered face soon forgot its shock as he gripped my hand while his eyes met and held mine. “I count on you to write us once you get settled some,” I said, pitching my voice over our offspring’s distress.

Elijah nodded and smiled tentatively at me. “That I will, Ma’am.”

I looked at Grace next and held out my hand. She took it warily, unsure of my dereliction of custom. “The hydrangea came up beautifully. Won’t it be too cold in Chicago to transplant it?” I asked solicitously.

Grace’s eyes sparkled and warmed. “My Grandma has a greenhouse I can winter it in since it can’t set roots before the first frost. Hydrangeas grow fast, but not that fast.” I found myself smiling deeper since her manner so reminded me of Ester’s quiet dignity. Caroline’s crying slowly melted into sniffles as she quieted in order to listen to the conversation.

Elijah chuckled. “Please don’t get her started talkin’ plants, Ma’am”, he pleaded with a teasing look at his wife. “She’ll get goin’ and we’ll never get on the road.” The tall man shifted Ester to reach in his pocket to fish out his watch. “Oh Gracious, we need ta get.”
Caroline started crying softly at his announcement. I cuddled her closer and stepped back so the Jones family could get into their car. Caroline held my neck tightly and buried her face into my neck. I whispered in her ear, “Do you want Ester to remember you all crying and sad and keep your tears in her heart instead of your smile?” My tender-hearted daughter shook her head. “Then dry your eyes, baby. She’s watching you.” Ester’s mother turned in her seat and joined her daughter as they waved at the back window while the car slowly made its way down the dirt road to the highway. We waved back until the car vanished in a cloud of dust and sunshine.
First is silence.
It’s hard to hear.
I can’t tell if anyone is near.
Second is darkness.
I’m starting to lose my sight.
I can see a small light.
But it’s being surrounded by darkness.
Finally are senses.
It’s an appeal.
The wind I can feel.
I can’t find a joint or bone.
I think I’m stone.
Stress Keeps Building

Patrick Ard

Tuck in the shirt
Tie the Tie
Comb the hair
Flatten the pants
Shine the shoes
Stress keeps building
Force a smile
Force small talk
Shake their hands
Make the sale
Receive the money
Stress keeps building
Blast the Cro-Mags
Slip on your jeans
Black flag shirt
Call your friends
Stress keeps building
Grab the mic and sing along
Know the words to the violent song
Smash a face
Pretend it’s your boss
Without these nights
My mind would be lost
Most children feel extreme loss when a parent leaves. A lot even feel anger, which stems from the feeling of abandonment. They tend to lash out at the world, trying to find some explanation of “Why me? Why my family?” Not all children share this mutual feeling.

I was ten years old when my parents decided to end their marriage. I was out of town that summer in Philadelphia, visiting my Dad’s older sister when it happened, so I’m not sure of all the details of how they finally came to this conclusion. I just know I wanted to go wherever my Mom went, and so I did. We got an apartment and we continued on with our lives. For some reason, my mother thought that I needed someone to talk to about the split, but in reality, I did not care. My father always seemed to ignore us when he was home in Chesapeake, Virginia from the Navy, so there was not a dramatic change. Except that my mother seemed happier and that is all that mattered to me. I have only met one other person who felt the same elation about their parents’ splitting, and that is my best friend.

Jackie Keys, age nineteen, was seventeen years old when her father, Omar Keys, was sent to prison in Michigan. He was sentenced to two years for the illegal possession of two firearms. He was incarcerated on July 1, 2009. Keys felt no remorse for her father’s imprisonment.

“I was tired of all the threats and abuse and the fear had to stop. I wish my mother had left him years ago.”

Jackie has a younger sister, Kadence who is just thirteen years old; who Jackie felt should not have to grow up with so much disappointment. The younger sister had been hoping the two parents would come to solve their issues and their differences would disperse so they could be a family again. Jackie gave her little sister no false hope.

“I kept telling her that it was ok to love him, even though she knew we did not want him back in our lives. My Mother and I did not want her to know anything about what was really going on.”

According to Keys, her mother Mary was abused by her husband one too many times, and tried to protect her children and make a better life
for them. Mrs. Keys was sent to prison in 2006 for fraud, which meant leaving her two young girls with their father.

“I did not trust them with him. I did the only other thing I could,” she shrugged, with a sad look in her eyes.

“The day my mother left was the worst day of my life. My sister and I were told we were staying in Virginia for the summer with our Grandma, but once we got here we were told we weren’t going back,” she stated with a dry laugh.

Jackie and Kadence were sent to live with their grandmother in Portsmouth, Virginia, where their mother followed after her release in 2009. Omar Keys was sent to prison right after she had come home.

“I was so happy when she came home. But then things got better when she told us about our dad.”

Why would a young girl have such distaste for her father?

“He was cruel. He hit my mother and they would get into the worst fights. He got mad at my new dog for sleeping in the bed with me and threw her at the wall and killed her. He needed to get a hold on his anger.”

The three Keys women finally felt peace and safe once Mr. Keys was behind bars. But safe was something they only felt as long as he was still in prison. According to Mrs. Keys, she had received many death threats from her husband’s letters. He had been upset because she had recently revealed to him that she wanted a divorce and she was taking the children with her and he would never see them again if he continued treating them the way he had. She told him his lifestyle had to change to be a part of their children’s lives, but she was done.

“I could not take it anymore. I told him I was not afraid of him anymore.”

Mr. Keys was released from prison on June 30, 2011 on parole, right after Jackie Keys had graduated from High School.

“When I learned he was being released, things changed for me. I was not afraid, but I was not going to let him keep hurting my family.”

When Omar Keys had his new-found freedom, he decided to use it wisely, with redemption from his family. He started by following them to Virginia to try to win their hearts back. Due to her father’s release, Keys sought to stay home for college and attend Tidewater Community College.

Jackie Keys shared that even though she was happy her father was far away from her and her family and could not hurt them, she still felt that absent place where a girl’s father should be.

“I wish he had been the father we needed and wanted him to be.
Nothing hurts like having a parent disown you,” she says sadly.

Keys had been dating a male of Caucasian background and she tried to keep her father involved and keep him updated on the events of her life. So she had written him a letter telling him about her new interest. Her father did not approve. He sent her a letter back telling her that as long as she was with him, she was no daughter of his.

“It hurt but for different reasons.” Keys said that the fact that he could disown her so easily and why was what had bothered her.

“Things have definitely progressed since then, I will admit. I never thought I would see this kind of change in my father and our relationship is under construction,” Keys says with a kind smile.

Today, Keys has left Tidewater Community College for Dental schooling at ECPI, and says things with her father are a far cry better than where they had been two years prior. Her father is now a part of the young Keys’ lives, helping her with her finances while she attends school, but his divorce from his wife will be final in December of 2012 and they are continuing their relationship on friendly terms.

Some people think that it is better for children if they grow up with two parents. But who is to say that they are not better off with one? Or that just because their parents are not in the same household anymore, that the child will make a bad turn. Many great people in the world have come from unhappy or terrible homes. The mistakes that parents make should not determine the future of their children, but to help them learn from those bad choices and pave their own ways to be successful and happy.

*The persons in this piece are based on a real family. For privacy reasons, the names in this piece have been changed.*
This is Not the Way to Solve a Problem

Leigh Anderson

“Don’t play with her; she’s weird,” Kelsey said to the rest of the kids as we were waiting at the bus stop in front of our day care. I was sitting on the curb watching the road and waiting. All I wanted was to get on the bus and go to school. Kelsey had other plans. She convinced the other kids to gather berries from the bushes and bring them to her. When she had enough, she and a boy unloaded them into my hood and smashed them onto my head, forcing the gushy insides between all the strands of my hair. There was uproar of laughter as I removed my hood and tried to groom myself. The woman instructed to watch us didn’t make a sound.

When the bus arrived, Kelsey got on ahead of me. The anger inside me was a fire boiling my blood. Her ponytail was swinging in my face, taunting me. Despite my conscience, I pulled it hard. Kelsey fell back and started making a noise that seemed like crying, but sounded more like whining. The bus stop monitor stopped the bus driver from reprimanding me and whispered to her for a minute.

“Leigh, this is not the way to solve a problem,” the bus driver said to me after their talk. “If you act out again, I will have to report it.”

Over eighty percent of bullying incidents occur without intervention and only half of educators are trained on how to handling bullying (Love Our Children USA, 2011). The monitor at the bus stop didn’t think that the situation I was involved in needed to be addressed, but when another incident occurred shortly after, felt that I didn’t need to be reprimanded for fighting back, either. I certainly do not agree with my reaction to Kelsey’s bullying, but can recognize that my actions were from a culmination of incidents that were never addressed by the party in charge of our wellbeing. In not identifying bullied children as victims, there is no allowance for advocacy or prevention of future situations. Instead, children are left to wonder, “Why me?” Without guidance, victims of bullying are forced to come up with their own ways of advocating for themselves, which may not be the most tactful.

Since I was born, my sister Karen has been angry and resentful towards me. She was five years old when I came into her life. At that
point, my dad had made an anthology of home videos with her likeness on every frame. She had plenty of toys and plenty of attention and I was only there to take it all away from her. I distinctly remember several times when she would exclude me from activities that she was involved with. It didn’t matter if my friends were there and the family was watching, she would still shove me out of the frame of the camera, yell at me for participating, or move the children to a room where she could lock me out. Even at the dinner table, she would dominate the discussion and talk over me so I could not get a word in.

I tried to talk to my mom about how sad it made me. My mother told me that it was all in my head and that Karen and I needed to talk and work it out together if there was a problem. That was all she said. No advice, no examples. My mother didn’t validate my feelings, and it made me feel as though I was the one with the problem. I came to identify with this as part of my personality, instead of being taught good communication skills or how to define poor relationships.

One night while spending quality time with friends at my parents’ house, my sister overheard a conversation I was having with my friend Ryan. I had a problem with an incident involving him that had just occurred. I took him aside to discuss how I felt about it. While eavesdropping, Karen was inspired to see me in a different light. She exclaimed how she wanted to be that open and honest, and followed with apologies for a few recent offenses against me that she wasn’t proud of.

It was a good start.
unicorn trap

Lacey Lewis with Scott Keith

Hello?
Hello?
Is anybody listening?
“Hello,” moans back from the receiver.
Sorry, did I wake you?
“No, everybody calls me at four in the morning.”
Oh my.
“What’s wrong?”
Nothing. Nothing new, anyway. I just say that
sometimes when I’m out of things to say.
“Why bother?”
Helps fill up the silence.
“So, did you want anything?”
Just meet me at the park. Behind that castle-shaped pile of rocks.
A yawn wrings itself out. “Fine. I’ll be there tomorrow.
11:30 or so. By the way, did it ever occur to you that
a castle is only a castle-shaped pile of rocks?”
Whatever. See you at twelve.
There’s heavy breathing on the line, probably my own.
“Well, goodnight.”
The dial-tone comes on like a flat-line.
I love you.

A bottle of the cheap shit crashes in the distance. There’s a splash that
makes me want to piss on a police cruiser. I catch a gust of wind to the
face and reconsider. My junk might brush against the door and freeze
there.
She’s probably on her way, maybe getting solicited for an innocent
blowjob by some widowed sixth grade English teacher. Wouldn’t
surprise me. Only whores are out this late by themselves.
She’s actually waiting for me when I get there; earlier than midnight but
still too late to loosen the knot in my stomach.
“Do you know what you want now?”
No.
“Did you ever?”
Not really.
“Then why the hell am I here in the middle of the night?”
The same reason why I brought three bottles of vodka. Two of them are still full, if you care.
I take off my jacket and spread it on the grass beside her. She doesn’t sit. “This makes, what, the third or fourth time?”
My dear, to end this for good or to see your gorgeous face every day are both ideal.

“You might think that you’re debonair, but that’s all Mr. Smirnoff putting you under his spell.”
Burnette’s.
She pauses a frustrated pause, “What?”
It’s Burnette’s. Trust me, it’s way worse. It’s for drunks, not connoisseurs.
“Did I make you become a drunk?”
No, you just helped me find a better way of living. At least something close to what we had. Honestly, I can’t see the difference anymore between intoxication and irony anymore. Both keep the feelings away.
“Did you feel too much from me?”
Yes.
No.
I don’t know.
You really didn’t give me much to work with.

“I want that one,” whined the little girl. The mother cat picked up its head lazily then immediately laid back. The kittens ignored her, far too busy suckling.
She pointed to the kitten again—the littlest one—as it struggled for an unoccupied nipple. “Please. She’s so cute, Daddy. PLEASE. She’s especial.”
“Are you sure, darling? They’re an awful lot of trouble.”
“I’ll take care of it,” she added, glancing back. “I promise.”
He patted his daughter on the head. “I just hope you remember that when we get home.”
The father motioned to me. “We’ll take that one. The one at the end of the line.”
I opened the cage, grabbing the runt by the scruff of its neck. It looked annoyed when I pulled it away.
The girl tugged on my sleeve all the way out. “Give!” she pleaded, over and over, “Give!”

Jill was working the desk that day. I still remember what she said to the brat: “Don’t worry, sweetie. It’s all your’s now.”

The little girl smiled when she heard that. I smiled too, for different reasons altogether.

“It’s getting cold,” Jill says, her voice turning into steam.

Too cold to finish?

She trembles underneath me, our breath mixing together. There’s a cold kiss on my shoulder as falling snowflakes turn into liquid.

Okay. Hand me my pants.

She peels herself off my coat and starts gathering clothes. I’m wondering if we could pass off the impression we left as a snow angel when I hear a little gasp. I turn in time to see Jill’s eyes go wild. The ring stood out like a period on the frost.

You know, I’ve always hated cats.

She raised an eyebrow.

Allergies.

She gave me a look I can’t quite define, somewhere between amused and sympathetic.

That and the smell.

“What’s wrong with the smell?”

Frankly, it smells like cat.

I thought I’d fall over when she grinned back at me. The gap between the front teeth made her seem adorably young, like some little girl caught trying on mommy’s make-up. But the fullness of her lips, the quiet mischief in her eyes, they said things little girls shouldn’t know about.

“It helps if you think of them as tiny bear-monkeys. Smelly, tiny bear-monkeys.”

A snort slips out unintentionally. I’m starting to see the appeal. You might have just changed my life.

“Glad I could make a difference.”

So, who exactly, do I mail the “thank you” card to?

“They’re usually addressed to Jill.”

I said the name again. Jill

It sounded so plain, so ordinary, yet I’d never actually met anybody with that name. There just never seemed to be enough Jills in the world.

So, Jill, what are you doing tonight?

“Dunno. What did you have in mind?”

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I was thinking we could get some dinner, see a movie, maybe fetch a pail of water?
That depends. Are you being cute or is that some kind of double entendre?
Yes.
Again with that gap-toothed smile.

“Is that...?”
No. Definitely not.
“Then...”
Green Lantern.
“Who?”
Google it. This is a ring that empowers the holder, not the kind that relinquishes any control over your own destiny.
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”
I slip the ring on and make a fist. Then just forget it.
“If you think that’s exploitative, you should see the things a man does to a woman.”
You should see the things a woman does to be exploited by a man.
“I can’t win with you.”
Makes the word ‘stalemate’ ironic, doesn’t it?

She’s standing over me, half-naked and witchy in the moonlight, fresh powder clinging to her hair. I watch Jill struggle back into her jeans, . Our eyes meet as her parka zips up. “Still cold.”
I pop the seal on another bottle, and curl into a corner of the castle. At least you’ve got your pants on.
Jill casually tosses the depleted bottle into the pond. She hands me my pants and says, “Come on. This is the last time we’re doing this.”

I was still catching my breath when the light clicked on.
The apartment was a war-zone. The coffee table was on its side, magazines and our unused movie tickets scattered over the floor. A couch cushion brushed against my foot and I couldn’t explain how it got there. I wanted to ask Jill, but she was still tinkering with the dimmer switch.
The light rippled across every curve, savoring even the imperfections. The mole on the small of her back, the dark constellation of freckles on her breasts. My hand twitched, remembering the feel of her, and found its way to my crotch. The shaft was stiffening again, tender and sticky. Too sticky.
Christ, Jill, can you get me a towel?
Jill stopped playing with the lights. “Why?”

You know why!

All the muscles in her back clenched, but she wouldn’t turn.

Jill, there’s blood all over in my lap! For chrissake, why didn’t you tell me it was that time of the month?

“Because it isn’t.”

All I can do is stare into the hard knot of her back, then at the red stain on my thighs as I realized what I’d done.

Her hands cup against the breeze and a flash of color spotlights Jill’s face.

Christ, you’re smoking now? I turn my head away from her. I guess it’s nice to know I had some effect on you too.

“Don’t give yourself too much credit. I’ve been sneaking cigarettes out of my mom’s purse since I was twelve.”

That, at least, I understand. But why were you hiding it from me?

Jill shrugs, looks off at nothing in particular. “It’s not very lady-like. Besides, I lit up every night I left your apartment. Surprised you never caught a whiff.”

So, you cheated on me with cigarettes?

“Who ever said you were the one being cheated on?” The hot cherry of her cigarette brightens.

Infidelity? Is that it?

“I’m not seeing anybody else if that’s what you’re asking.”

Then what changed? You or me?

“Neither.”

How the hell did we get here then? I thought we really had something together.

I can’t tell if it’s smoke or steam but I can see Jill’s sigh. Sometimes people lie because it’s what’s expected of them. Both of us just happen to be great liars.”

I...But...Oh my.

I watch the snow drift in, beautiful and sad as lost feathers. A part of me wants to catch one, to hold it until it melts in my palm.

“So how do you want to play this out? One of us must know...”

Sooner or later.

“What?”


“Another one of your jokes that I don’t get.”

She quietly snuffs out her cigarette. “Don’t call me anymore.”

I stuff my hands in my pockets and wait for her to leave. She’s out of
sight before I grab the last of my vodka.
The bottle feels cold in my hands, colder than when I brought it, but
I know the warmth it promises. It’s up to my lips without a thought,
as much a habit as dialing her number. There’s the sound of plastic
scraping on plastic followed by an antiseptic smell as the cap
tumbles off.
Jill.....

The vodka empties out, past the bright green emblem on my finger, into
the pond. Afterwards I watch the bottle float away, thinking of stray cats
and power rings and all the stuff that was never meant to last.
We Call Him Superman

Marvis Gaines-Stevens

There are many threads that weave the tapestry that is the culture of my family. Humor, music, love, sarcasm, togetherness, faith, dependability, and work ethic, these are the many threads that intertwine so intricately that though there are many, they are one. The most noteworthy thread, dependability, has been spoon fed to my entire family by an authentic super hero. “Look, up in the sky, it’s a bird, it’s a plane,” it’s my grandfather, Superman! “Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!” Well maybe not, but my grandfather IS the most dependable individual I know.

My family is large but close knit. It includes my grandparents, their four children and their respective spouses, eleven grandchildren, three of which are married, and ten great grand children. That is a grand total of thirty-four people who I call my immediate family, and we all defer to the super human wisdom and ability of our patriarch. Thirty-four people made from the same stuff but as different as day is from night. We do not always agree on things, but one thing that we can all agree on is the character of our grandparents. Grandparents? Yes, grandparents. I would be remiss if I spoke of Superman but neglected to mention Lois Lane. After all, beside every good man there is a strong woman helping him along and revitalizing him after he has finished saving the world.

Superman is the source of physical strength for the family. I cannot tell you the number of times that he has swooped down from above to rescue me in the nick of time. For example, I remember a reoccurring problem that I had when I was fifteen years old driving my very first car. My car, affectionately known as the bucket, was a white 1980 Pontiac 6000 with holes where the key holes should have been and a rust spot on the trunk. I loved the bucket, but I used to get a flat tire at least once a week. Don’t ask me how it happened. All I know is that it always happened to me. I was a damsel in distress. I was usually stranded on the side of the road, on a busy interstate, at a random gas station, or on a curb. I never wondered who I could call in those cases. Any time of the
day or night I knew that I could call on Superman! I would call him up and say “Hey Papa,” as if nothing were wrong.

“How are you doing?” I would ask trying to make small talk.

“Super!” he would reply in a big, golden, almost God-like voice. At that moment, I knew that everything was going to be okay. He had equipped me with the skill to change my own tire, but he would fly over roof tops to rescue me. My hero!

I can also recall that during my most dark days when my mother was ill from March 17, 1998, until her untimely death March 3, 2001, he never left her side, nor mine. He has stood the test of time and has shown himself to be as solid as a rock.

Because of his tireless efforts and dedication to the family, I feel that I have become a dependable individual. Furthermore, I feel that dependability is an important quality to have because when everything has been said and done, people need to be certain that someone has their back.

I can apply this tool to every facet of my life. In my profession, or any profession for that matter, my employer, the clients, and employees need to know that they can rely on me to show up. In my church life people depend on me to plan and teach the music for Sunday morning. At home the children are counting on me to be home to get them off the bus.

I am going to do my part, and I feel that the best way to pass this trait to future generations is not only to tell them of the heroics of my hero, but to show them just as he did for me.
A World Without Sound (Music)

Anthony Roberson

A world without music is like
Body without soul
Rhyme without beat
Dancers with no feet
Uniqueness would be nonexistent
All emotions silenced
Just a plain dull world
With nothing to soothe the violence
In our minds our problems will linger
Until our soul collapses off the bridge of joy.
And we fall into sin’s abyss
Only to never recover to give the sun a kiss.
Without music people have nothing to restrain their pain from consuming them.
See music brightens the light in our soul
Passion, confidence, inner power music contributes to all
If music is scarce there will be more rebellion and more tainted adolescence
More spirits caged to die
Less pure wings to fly
Nothing to serenade the embryos as they grow
The world would be a sound proof ear
Nothing to surge the kids to learn
No claps of freedom to ignite a change
A lack of fuel for the mental train
Nothing to uplift your soul from falling
The world would not hear the angels calling