2016 Reading Panel

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Poignancies

Samantha Ogden

As a boat sinks
Water becomes more
Than a pipe dream
For a little girl
Hoping for a fish tale

As a shoe falls apart
The asphalt burns
The soles of the feet
On a man
With no money

As the wall turns yellow
The paint begins peeling
And fumes begin spreading
To the lungs
Of those unaware

As the green fades
The brown shades
And falls to the ground
Colder than the day before
Yet more welcoming still

As the poinsettia wilts
The ground becomes thick
With white powder
And foot prints
Of hiking boots
As the plank rots
Thoughts of a forest
Dance across the mind
Of a child who knows
The air is running out

As the exit sign flashes
The panic ensues
And on the floor
Lies a girl
With no hope

Sitting erect in a small, hard plastic desk, I try to focus my attention on the white board in front of me. Mr. Werskilla is going over planetary alignment to the best of his ability. He is a dusty man. He towers over us like a tree trunk; I think he is as old as a tree or maybe time itself. He was a commander in the Vietnam War, but now can barely remember what day it is. There are tales that buzz aimlessly around the unforgiving hallways of middle school regarding flashbacks he once had during class. It was said he stood up, flipped his desk over and began yelling at students as if they were the Viet Cong warriors he fought so long ago. Often times during lecture, he would stumble over words and forget his train of thought then go off on tangents about his life in the 50s as a taxi cab driver.

The first day of Mr. Werskilla’s class, my fellow students and I compared notes on how many family members have been taught by him previously; I won. My grandma, grandpa, mother, and father were all in his classes, and they all said he was just as crazy then as he is now. In a town where nothing ever changes, I guess he was no different.

“Who knows what Pluto is?” Mr. Werskilla asks with exuberance.

“A big yellow dog,” replies a notoriously snide kid in the back of the classroom who has repeated the 6th grade at least twice. The rest of the class laughs, and I join in because I do not want to be the only one not laughing. Mr. Werskilla continues on as if the interruption never occurred; he has a way of dissolving such instances with complete ignorance.

“It is a planet, folks! Maybe one of the best in the galaxy; well, I think it’s the best in the galaxy, but that is an opinion folks, not a fact. It is important to know the difference between fact and fiction especially when buying a car. You always have to know the facts when buying a car. Ya know? Some folks will really try and rip you off. Ya know?” He gains momentum like a roller coaster’s highest point right before it drops off into a gut wrenching plummet.

Trees
Jordan Draves
Winner, Chesapeake Library Narrative Essay Contest
His relentless chatter is interrupted by a piercing shriek in the direction of the closed door to the hallway; everyone’s head shoots in the direction of the scream. The remaining attention Mr. Werskilla had of the room completely vanishes. A faint smell of smoke seeps into my nostrils and I wonder if anyone else smells it. Walking to the site of the disturbance in slow giant strides, Mr. Werskilla opens the door to the hallway. Dark gray smoke billows in through the half open door, and the room erupts with chaos. There is a window in this particular classroom, and it is swarmed in seconds by the thirty-two children inhabiting the room. I am one of those closest to the door—furthest from the window. I turn to run for the window, but before I do I notice Mr. Werskilla calmly stride through the threshold of the door towards the fire in the hallway. This crazy ass old man is going to kill himself! I turn and run for the window without looking back. No progress has been made in opening the window. I push my way past the other kids, some crying and some hitting the glass panels.

“IT is locked! There’s no way to open it without the key!” a voice from a tiny cheerleader shouts.

“Everybody duck!” screams a brutish boy much too large to be in 6th grade, as he hurls a desk chair at the window. The chair bounces back and breaks on the ground.

Smoke continues to build in the room and sparks of fire can be seen dusting the sides of the entry way; still no smoke alarm nor water spigots have gone off in the room. Panic almost paralyzes me. My heart has never beat so fast; I can hear it in my ears.

“The only way out is through the door!” a boy that lives down the street from me says.

“We will all have to run out together and get to an exit.”

It is the only plan we have at the moment, so we assemble two by two near the door, and just as the first kid is about to march out, Mr. Werskilla walks into the doorway just as calmly as he walked out. He is not alone, however; he is carrying three very small, special needs children and toting two by their hands.

“Get us outta here old man!” yells the brutish boy.

Mr. Werskilla pays no mind to the comment and proceeds swiftly to the window with the key in hand. He is followed by the mass of children occupying the almost smoke-filled room. As he opens the window, kids push, kick and scratch to get through to the safe haven of the grass below. Those of us remaining are handed the children wrapped in Mr. Werskilla’s arms to get them safely through the window. Only after the last child is out does Mr. Werskilla slowly climb his way through the window. Stumbling on to the grass, he begins counting kids.
Just Following Orders

Ian Shannon

Wake up. Get out of bed. Look at the mirror. Recoil.
Run your hands through your greasy hair. Tell yourself that it’ll look
better when you get out of the shower.
Ignore your swollen, angry, petulant gut. Ignore the fact that it reminds
you of a tumor eating away at your flesh. Ignore the fact that it calls out to
everyone around you, screaming “Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!”
Ignore it.
Ignore it.
Ignore it.
Walk back into your bedroom. Ignore the sweat stained, off-white,
reeking carpet. Throw yourself onto the ground and lift yourself on
trembling arms. Continue to do so until your muscles scream and you
can’t see for the sweat in your eyes.
Slip and fall and silently hope that the neighbors can’t see how pathetic
you are. Lift yourself off of the floor and decide to stop here, even though
you promised yourself that you’d do three more sets. Silently curse
yourself for your laziness.
Rummage through your chest of drawers. Pull out a pair of shorts and
an old t-shirt. Put them on.
Find your grey hoodie. Put it on. Lift the hood over your head and
hope that the neighbors won’t recognize you.
Walk outside. Close and lock the door behind you. March through
your neighborhood like a Napoleonic infantryman until cars start to pull
out of driveways and you realize by your aching shins that you’ve been
outside for three hours.
Walk back to your house. Hope that your neighbors don’t mind that
you cut across their lawn. Unlock the door and walk inside.
Open the refrigerator. Pull out one bowl of soup and place it in the
microwave for one minute.
Wait for your breakfast to cook. Ignore the dozen flies watching you
with beady eyes and sucking mouths and fluttering wings and oh god
where do they come from there’s no food for them and the windows are
closed and the doors are shut and the garbage is out and how do they
get in?
The microwave beeps. Ignore the flies. Pull the soup out of the
microwave. Burn your hands slightly.
Find a piece of paper and record the following:
Calories: 423
Total Fat: 19.8 grams
Total Carbohydrates: 31.1 grams
Eat your breakfast. Stare at the piece of paper and wonder if maybe
you shouldn’t leave a little soup, or maybe half, for tomorrow?
Finish breakfast. Put the bowl in the refrigerator. Walk upstairs and
turn on the shower. Take off your clothes. Step inside.
Isn’t this lovely?
Step out five minutes later, because you can’t afford the water. Look at
the mirror. Find a brush and fight with your hair. Smack it and stab it and
curse it until it lies defeated and you can almost pretend that you don’t
look like a slob.
Go to your bedroom and find clothes. Look at the mirror. Put them on,
and look at the mirror. Smile a fake smile, and look at the mirror. Run your
hands through your hair again and look at the mirror. Consider staying
home today.
Walk outside. Close and lock the door behind you. Walk to your car
and open the door. Did you lock the front door?
Check the front door. Fight the urge to check again as you walk back to
your car. Sit down and slip the key into the ignition. Did you lock the front
door?
Drive away before you can check again. Consider circling the
neighborhood, parking, and checking again.
Drive to school. Watch the world fly by around you. Catch a glimpse
of children walking to school and wish you could join them. Why are you
always in boxes? You wake up in a box, drive to school in a box, drive
home in a box, go to sleep in a box. You’re so sick of boxes.
Resolve to go outside more.
Finish driving to school. Park your car, remove the key from the
ignition, and stand up. Close the door and press the remote lock button on
the key fob precisely three times. Walk away as the car beeps exactly three
times.
Did you lock the car?
Press the lock button precisely three times. Continue walking away as
the car beeps exactly three times.
Did you lock the car?
Of course you did. Turn around and press the lock key exactly three more times anyway, and walk away as it beeps three more times. Consider what would happen if someone found your car unlocked. How would you go to school? How would you go to work? How would you buy food?

Turn around and press the lock button three more times. Walk away, even though the car didn’t beep because you’re too far away for the signal to reach it and it’s sick of you anyway.

Walk to class. Look up, surprised, when a boy your age compliments your shirt. Say thank you, even though he must not mean it because your clothes are ragged and there’s a ketchup stain near the hem of your shirt that you scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed for maybe twenty minutes and couldn’t get out even though you used the nice soap and cold water and you tried so hard and why would he praise you for making a mistake?

Run away. Try not to look like you’re running away. Wonder if he thinks you’re weird now.

Find the correct building and walk inside. Take the stairs, because you’ll burn more calories that way. Wonder how many calories walking up a flight of stairs burns.

Find the correct floor. Walk to your classroom. Try not to make eye contact with anyone in the hallways.

Walk into your classroom. Say hello if anyone wishes you good morning. Find a desk in the back, preferably in a corner. Wedge yourself into it.

Check the time. Pull out your notebooks and flip to a fresh, unspoiled page. There’s so much potential in a fresh sheet of paper, and you’re using it to take notes for an introductory class that you don’t care about.

Wonder why you came to class today. Wonder why you’re in school at all. Wonder why you’re alive.

Adjust your t-shirt so that it lies more flatteringly across your cancerous stomach. Wonder if your classmates think that you’re fat. Sneak a glance and confirm that none of them are looking at you.

Reach into your pocket and pull out a pencil. Place it on the paper. Write the following in enormous, maimed cursive:

I don’t want to be here.

Don’t let anyone see what you wrote. Find your pink eraser and exterminate it, or else they’ll see what you really think that and we can’t have that, can we?

Rip the paper with your eraser. Pull it out of the notebook. Turn to a new page.

Greet your professor when he waltzes into the classroom. Stare at the back of his grapefruit head and jot down the name of the next chapter’s title.

Take notes as your professor rushes through his PowerPoint. Ignore the wild animal grumbling in your stomach. Ignore the aching pain as it claws your guts, shredding through red and purple tissue and setting forth a flood of scarlet blood. Tell yourself that you aren’t really hungry.

Fight to keep awake as a riptide of exhaustion threatens to drag you under glutinous waves. Take your pencil and drive in into your hand. Bake yourself with your fingernails. Slip your cheek between your crushing molars and chew on it like a piece of taffy.

Draw blood if you have to, but only in the places where your wounds will not be noticed.

Wish your professor a good day as he leaves the classroom. Drag yourself from your seat and into the next class. Repeat the above three more times until the sun sets and you’ve filled eight pages of paper with perfectly symmetric notes on every subject under the sun.

Drive home. Beep at your fellow travelers because you want to charge through the streets like a bull and they’re actually following the absurdly low speed limits. Consider vandalizing the speed limit signs outside of your neighborhood.

Pull into your driveway. Sit in your car seat for the next ten minutes staring at the radio and try to find the mental energy to stand up.

Get out of your car. Lock the door behind you. Walk to your front door and thank god it was actually locked, what would you have done if you had been robbed? Reenter your house and lock the front door behind you.

Drag yourself to the kitchen. Open the refrigerator and pull out exactly one oven roasted, bone dry, day old chicken breast. Weigh it, then place it in the microwave for one minute. Find a piece of paper and write down the following:

Calories: 283
Total Fat: 6.1 grams
Total Carbohydrates: 0 grams

Delicious. Unseasoned chicken is your favorite meal; it warms your cavernous belly like a campfire warming a nomad’s creased, dusty hands, and you find comfort in its alabaster portions.

Pull your dinner out of the microwave and slice it apart. Throw its carcass to the ravenous beast that lives in your stomach and pray that your vile companion will be silenced.

Walk upstairs. Unzip your backpack. Pull out four notebooks, four textbooks, one calculator, and four hours of homework. Sit down and sigh.
like a man releasing his last breath. You don’t want to do this, do you?
Why are you doing this to yourself?

Glance at the mountain of academic discovery you need to laboriously ascend. God, it’s so big. You can’t believe that all needs to be done in two days.

Procrastinate. Fire up Chrome and sift through the Internet like a drug addict snorting cocaine. Inhale the information carelessly, like a virgin sucking down an overdose of poppers. Feel the blue light slink through your brain. Gasp in pleasure.

This is the first time you’ve been relaxed in months.

Three hours later, realize how much time has passed. Nothing has been accomplished, except that the clock now reads 11:51 PM. What have you even been looking at?

Close Chrome. Watch pictures of chocolate chip brownies, badly written horror stories, homemade pornography shot on shaky video cameras, several websites explaining suicide methods and one Google search for “how to write a suicide note” vanish into the ether.

Glance at the atmospheric mound of homework lying next to you. Consider starting.

Instead, open up Microsoft Word. Take your plump, bulbous fingers and type the following:

*I think I might have lost my mind.*
I have admired the vine since I was young
It has now covered every inch of the old picket fence
Small, lilac flowers celebrate the warmth of spring
I am here to cut it down, but I can’t
It is my friend and the fence is its home

It does not have a voice to protest
Although I can hear it begging me for mercy
Who am I to take its life?
I study the stalk, it is round and strong
Resembling a hungry python constricting its prey

I see a lonely, dark cloud covering the sun
Cold rain drizzles
The vine’s thirst is quenched
A rumble of the thunder declares war
Helpless, is the small town
Amelia Island

Anna Williams
Winner, Chesapeake Library Narrative Essay Contest

We stand far enough forwards, where we believe we will not be hit by the edge of the crashing waves. A simple photograph takes a memory and makes it permanent.

Fernandina Beach in Amelia Island, Florida, looks much like the beaches surrounding the Chesapeake Bay. The water is a murky brown because the rivers empty out into the ocean, carrying the stinking sediment of the estuaries with them. The brown color is intensified by my sepia-toned sunglasses. I pick up simple shells to keep this memory alive for when I return from this mission trip. We run along the line the moving ocean leaves for us. Water is splashed in a game whose rules were never written. David is wearing the shirt we have all been given to wear for our break on the beach. I am one of the few who rebelled and I wear a shirt that I packed myself. I dance away from the liquid crystals that he sends in my direction. David is constant. He wears the same sweet smile and the same kind eyes. I shriek as he dumps a bottle of the cold seawater on me. I return a spray of water back at him. We are soaked when my friend, Julie, decides to take a picture of the small group of us gathered near the ocean. We move around a few times because the seaweed lazily floats around our ankles and scares us. We fear what is unknown by us. My boyfriend at the time, Ethan, is ignoring me yet again. He moves from standing at my right, to front-and-center for the picture. I know it is not going to turn out well as I stand and pose patiently. There are too many factors involved for it to be a great photograph.

The redneck men bob in the water and drink their beers somewhere behind us. A little boy rushes into the waves with his green and yellow body board. He stops for a short moment to attach the leash to his wrist. I see everyone wrap their arms around each other. David stands to my left. He is so close to me but I had made myself avoid him in the past. I am so conflicted as I stand inches away. His ex-girlfriend wraps an arm around him and he around her. I can tell that she initiated that move because her hand rests on the small of his back and his crosses over her already-placed arm. Julie calls us all in closer and the crook of his right arm presses against my left. Paul, David’s younger brother, rushes up to get in the photo. He strikes a sideways Superman pose. Everyone squints at the camera backed by a brilliant light that is larger than life. Ethan drops down to pose and lie in front of the group. A wave comes and drenches him in a sudden attack with saltiness like all the tears he had caused me. A patient finger presses down on the camera’s button and the moment is forever immortalized.

I scroll through the digital photos on my iPod, searching for a memory. I settle upon one of a bright day with happy people on a beach. A wave breaks upon their ankles and one boy’s body. There is hidden pain in the masked eyes of a girl standing on the edge of the group. She smiles because she knows this will be the end of one sad chapter but more importantly, a start of new beginnings.
Earth Warriors

Amber Stone

Sapphire free waters
Cutting through the land
Bronze glints reflect
From the sun-kissed
Skin of the Sioux
This is their land
Sacred space of the natives
Chainsaws pierce the air
Ripping through divinity
Hearts swell, tears stream
Neon flashes shock the terrain
Poster boards line the tape barriers
Hands link, passion burning
The fire can’t be extinguished
Amber flames roar
Plastic puddles, staining the soil
A foreign entity to the Earth
Draining her of all energy
The warriors are called upon
**In My Lifetime**

Clifford Williams
Winner Writing Contest, Virginia Beach Campus

If granny found out that I was headed into the alleyway behind the house she would kill me but I just gotta know. I can't go back to sleep. Mom usually gives me the thumbs up when she's at the trolley stop. Granny put that stupid plastic on the windows I couldn't see anything. He paces near the back door. She was supposed to stand under the street light so that I could see her. I even did like Pop Pop told me and counted to one hundred Mississippi and she wasn't there.

His hands shake feverishly as he talks to himself. Mom never ever listens to Pop Pop. He told her to stop going through the alley way because it gets crazy at night. Pop Pop said the pipers have sex and smoke crack near the bushes. I know he's not lying because I heard them fighting. All I know is somebody started crying and then it got quiet. Jamal and I snuck back there the next day. So we could make ninja swords with the tree branches and there was blood everywhere. We ran so fast back around the corner I was out of breath. I told Michael and he snitched on me. Granny gave me and Jamal a whooping right there on the porch with that ugly orange belt. His hands shake feverishly as he talks to himself. Mom never ever listens to Pop Pop. He told her to stop going through the alley way because it gets crazy at night. Pop Pop said the pipers have sex and smoke crack near the bushes. I know he's not lying because I heard them fighting. All I know is somebody started crying and then it got quiet. Jamal and I snuck back there the next day. So we could make ninja swords with the tree branches and there was blood everywhere. We ran so fast back around the corner I was out of breath. I told Michael and he snitched on me. Granny gave me and Jamal a whooping right there on the porch with that ugly orange belt. He reaches for the door handle. Granny is going to beat me….sighs… Whatever… I’m doing this. He stops to reason with himself.

Maybe I should give Pop Pop just a little bit longer…yeah, yeah I should. Nope…no. It's snowing he’s gonna be late. The weather man said 4 to 6 inches. Michael is gonna tell me to shut up and go back to sleep and granny already took her medicine. Duke’s barking couldn’t even wake her up. He carefully jiggles the stubborn lock. I hope Michael doesn’t go to the bathroom. He’s gonna see that I’m gone. Please God just let him pee the bed this one time. The blustery wind pushes hard on his small frame as he struggles to keep the heavy vault like door from slamming shut. The ice cold breeze makes him regret his decision immediately.

I should have waited for Pop Pop or Uncle Zeke. He pulls his skull cap over his ears. How did I forget Mr. Garret’s dog Duke is a psycho? He almost bit my leg off. As he walks down the frozen steps he grabs onto the neighbors’ chain link fence. Duke didn’t even wake up that’s weird. He’s always outside knocking over trash cans and barking like a maniac. Mr. Garret must have taken him in the house or he froze to death… I hope he froze to death. The wilting oak tree branches scratch against the aged window pane. The hairs on his neck raise sharply. I do kinda wish Duke was here. It's too quiet. Yup… I’m gonna die just like in those scary movies. He makes his way along the ice-covered fence. His feet are bright red. His body trembles from the cold winter gust. He tries hard to stay focused. I should have put on my snow boots. What was I thinking flip flops…for real? I’m so stupid. Mom told me to bundle up before school tomorrow. I never listen. She was right I’m so hardheaded. My toes are going to fall off and then I’m going to be in so much trouble. Oh well…sighs… I guess it won’t matter once granny kills me.

He walks slowly down the dimly lit pathway. The alleyway never felt this long. It seems faster in the day time. I can never make it all the way through with my eyes open probably because I’m such a weenie. He moves away from the dilapidated house it is darkened and unsettling. I hate this place so much it’s haunted just like that poltergeist movie. He looks through the broken window and hesitates. I remember when Jamal’s older brother Malik bet him that he couldn’t run from the front yard through the house and into the backyard. Jamal did it. He pooped on himself. He swore up and down Freddy Krueger was chasing him. Malik and I laughed all summer but I swear he is bravest person I know. His stride slows as he inches through the alleyway I’m gonna just hold my breath and hopefully Freddy won’t get me. The light has quickly faded. Aww man…. I can’t see a thing not even this bright yellow Hulk Hogan T-Shirt. His heart sinks into his stomach. I really hope mom didn’t get taken in there. I don’t think I’m brave enough to save her. I’m not like Jamal. He turns his head away from the abandoned house and clinches his fist so tight his knuckles began to ache. He reminisces to ease his fears of death.

I wish Michael was here. He’s so strong and he’s not afraid of anybody. He beat up Tyshawn really bad. Blood was everywhere it gushed like a water fountain. That guy is a straight jerk and deserved it. I remember now…oh… yeah that’s right… Michael broke his nose. I wanted to be just like my big brother…strong. I needed one of those Hulk Hogan T-Shirts so freaking bad so could I be just like Michael. I begged mom for a whole week. She was supposed to stand under the street light so that I could see her. I even did like Pop Pop told me and counted to one hundred Mississippi and she wasn’t there.

His hands shake feverishly as he talks to himself. Mom never ever listens to Pop Pop. He told her to stop going through the alley way because it gets crazy at night. Pop Pop said the pipers have sex and smoke crack near the bushes. I know he’s not lying because I heard them fighting. All I know is somebody started crying and then it got quiet. Jamal and I snuck back there the next day. So we could make ninja swords with the tree branches and there was blood everywhere. We ran so fast back around the corner I was out of breath. I told Michael and he snitched on me. Granny gave me and Jamal a whooping right there on the porch with that ugly orange belt. His hands shake feverishly as he talks to himself. Mom never ever listens to Pop Pop. He told her to stop going through the alley way because it gets crazy at night. Pop Pop said the pipers have sex and smoke crack near the bushes. I know he’s not lying because I heard them fighting. All I know is somebody started crying and then it got quiet. Jamal and I snuck back there the next day. So we could make ninja swords with the tree branches and there was blood everywhere. We ran so fast back around the corner I was out of breath. I told Michael and he snitched on me. Granny gave me and Jamal a whooping right there on the porch with that ugly orange belt. He reaches for the door handle. Granny is going to beat me….sighs… Whatever… I’m doing this. He stops to reason with himself.

Maybe I should give Pop Pop just a little bit longer…yeah, yeah I should. Nope…no. It's snowing he’s gonna be late. The weather man said 4 to 6 inches. Michael is gonna tell me to shut up and go back to sleep and granny already took her medicine. Duke’s barking couldn’t even wake her up. He carefully jiggles the stubborn lock. I hope Michael doesn’t go to the bathroom. He’s gonna see that I’m gone. Please God just let him pee the bed this one time. The blustery wind pushes hard on his small frame as he struggles to keep the heavy vault like door from slamming shut. The ice cold breeze makes him regret his decision immediately.

I should have waited for Pop Pop or Uncle Zeke. He pulls his skull cap over his ears. How did I forget Mr. Garret’s dog Duke is a psycho? He almost bit my leg off. As he walks down the frozen steps he grabs onto the neighbors’ chain link fence. Duke didn’t even wake up that’s weird. He’s always outside knocking over trash cans and barking like a maniac. Mr. Garret must have taken him in the house or he froze to death… I hope he froze to death. The wilting oak tree branches scratch against the aged window pane. The hairs on his neck raise sharply. I do kinda wish Duke was here. It's too quiet. Yup… I’m gonna die just like in those scary movies. He makes his way along the ice-covered fence. His feet are bright red. His body trembles from the cold winter gust. He tries hard to stay focused. I should have put on my snow boots. What was I thinking flip flops…for real? I’m so stupid. Mom told me to bundle up before school tomorrow. I never listen. She was right I’m so hardheaded. My toes are going to fall off and then I’m going to be in so much trouble. Oh well…sighs… I guess it won’t matter once granny kills me.

He walks slowly down the dimly lit pathway. The alleyway never felt this long. It seems faster in the day time. I can never make it all the way through with my eyes open probably because I’m such a weenie. He moves away from the dilapidated house it is darkened and unsettling. I hate this place so much it’s haunted just like that poltergeist movie. He looks through the broken window and hesitates. I remember when Jamal’s older brother Malik bet him that he couldn’t run from the front yard through the house and into the backyard. Jamal did it. He pooped on himself. He swore up and down Freddy Krueger was chasing him. Malik and I laughed all summer but I swear he is bravest person I know. His stride slows as he inches through the alleyway I’m gonna just hold my breath and hopefully Freddy won’t get me. The light has quickly faded. Aww man…. I can’t see a thing not even this bright yellow Hulk Hogan T-Shirt. His heart sinks into his stomach. I really hope mom didn’t get taken in there. I don’t think I’m brave enough to save her. I’m not like Jamal. He turns his head away from the abandoned house and clinches his fist so tight his knuckles began to ache. He reminisces to ease his fears of death.

I wish Michael was here. He’s so strong and he’s not afraid of anybody. He beat up Tyshawn really bad. Blood was everywhere it gushed like a water fountain. That guy is a straight jerk and deserved it. I remember now…oh… yeah that’s right… Michael broke his nose. I begged mom for a whole week. She was supposed to stand under the street light so that I could see her. I even did like Pop Pop told me and counted to one hundred Mississippi and she wasn’t there.
his leg somethings on my foot... something sticky. He reached down and touched the liquid. It's on the bottom of my pants too. He strains his eyes but the darkness limits his vision. Granny is going to find out that I was out here. She's going to see my wet, sticky clothes. Dang it... tomorrow is laundry day.....dummy. I'm gonna throw that belt right in the trash. He wipes the fluid on his shirt. The snow begins to fall like a heavy rain.

Maybe I should turn around. Mom probably just forgot to wave and I missed her. I can't see anything. The Johnsons' porch light is barely visible through the thick shrouding of trees. Come on... come on, don't act like a chicken you're almost there. The width of the alleyway continues to shrink. The overgrowth clouds the pathway, but there is a glimmer of light between the tangled branches. He moves through the bushes and notices a trail of burgundy spots on the bleach white snow. He stoops down to a knee.

.... wha... what... is this? Is...this blood? He checks his entire body. Did Freddy Krueger get me? His body becomes rigid but his nerves are flighty. Are the Pipers back? He pauses. His pulse speeds up. I hope mom is o.k. he walks closer to the light. Oh man, I better go home. No I can't, I gotta be brave, I gotta be strong, I'm gonna protect mom..... The warm tears roll down his frost bitten cheek. His thoughts are frantic. He wants to be a hero but his mind and body will not cooperate.

No.no.....not right now... I can do this...get it together. The tears overwhelm his child like face. I'm always thinking the worst, I gotta be positive....think positive ...think positive, she's ok, I know she is. He pushes forward. Please God, please God, don't let anything happen to her. He notices a small pink object in the distance...... is...is that mom's sneaker? Please God don't be. The snow piles are too heavy for his trembling legs. It's too cold. I'm not going to make it. I wish I was strong like Michael. Oh..

no no please Jesus don't let this be mom's. The tears become uncontrollable he gasps for the cold air to reach his lungs. He looks up and down the alley and notices a motionless bulge in the snow.

MOM! MOM! He struggles to reach the lifeless body. Her white hospital scrubs are drenched as her slim frame lays frozen in a stream of blood. POP POP! GRANNY!, ANYBODY HELP!..... MY MOM IS HURT! Please.... please, somebody she is... hurt. He shakes her violently. WAKE UP MOM PLEASE DON'T DIE I'M SORRY, I WONT GO IN THE ALLEY ANYMORE. I PROMISE.... I promise. The veins on his neck have swelled. The wind and tears have dried out his throat. His voice cracks as he sobs. I'm ... sorry mom. The ambulance sirens become louder but he is oblivious. He holds onto his mother's limp body as the pain of losing her splinters his insides and his faith as well. His innocence has dissipated

A voice in the distance calls to him...Allen...ALLEN WAKE UP!

The Commute

Eric Lefebvre

Crushing pressure,
darkness engulfing.
Burning. Yarning.
Urging me gasp.
Certain death.

Small, familiar, round,
'tween my fingers,
rolling with the boat.

A snack.
snapping me back.
A blueberry.
Bitter sweet.

Aye a sailor,
Heading to sea.
A beige scene
I see
before me.

Atop a stone-cold beach,
A walrus.
Hot breath fogs the air.
Safe. Breathing.
There's Only One Stereotype that Matters

Kasara Tattrie-Doak

Everyone gets handed an index card with a specific stereotype they should follow. One says “You’re black so you eat watermelon and collect food stamps.” Another “You’re Asian so mispronounce your words and devalue females.” Or “You’re white so you drink Starbucks and look down on every one of a different color.”

Maybe I was fortunate when I was born and they proclaimed, “We don’t know what you are,” and left my card blank. At the time, though, I saw it as a misfortune as I struggled to identify with a people, a race. I bounced back and forth to different segregated groups, trying to mimic stereotypical behavior to fit in. I would have people tell me, “You don’t fit here,” and I would move on to somewhere else just to be told “Not there either.” Lost and confused I wandered. Was I black, Asian, Indian, Polish, white?

It took me quite a while to realize that I am all of those. I am a person, and as a person I belong to humanity. I belong with every other person because a person is not defined by race. You don’t have to play the card handed to you at birth, and you don’t have to search for one. There’s only one stereotype that matters and that’s the unique one you create for yourself.

My Brother’s Keeper

Lorraine Fayth Fereday

Sitting alone in the sparsely furnished hotel room as the sun slowly sank behind the imposing concrete and steel skyscrapers, I was struggling with the devastating news that I received earlier in the day. The two solutions presented so matter-of-fact in that cold, sterile office seemed impossible. My head throbbed as I wrestled with my thoughts, painstakingly considering my next move with the careful concentration of a master chess player. But this was no game; the stakes were infinitely higher.

I knew that of the two options, finding the policyholder was the most obvious choice, but I had no idea where to begin. It had been over 25 years since I last saw him and there had been almost no contact. I was anxious, but it wasn’t the thought of seeing him again that concerned me. I had convinced myself long ago that it didn’t matter that he wasn’t a part of our lives. It was the possibility of NOT finding him that frightened me, the fear of failing that gripped me like a vise, squeezing so tightly that I felt as though I couldn’t breathe.

The first set of tests were over and while there were still two more days to go, I knew that I needed to call and deliver the latest crushing news. As I sat on the side of the neatly made bed in the increasingly darkening room, I glanced out of the window to the street below, contemplating the events of the day. Eventually, I reached over switched on the light, picked up the phone, and quickly dialed the familiar number. Listening to the shrill ringing on the other end of the telephone line, I tensely waited, choking back the tears that threatened to drown my heart. Finally, she answered. I reluctantly explained the circumstances, the insurance had to be changed to catastrophic level, or we needed two million dollars for the operation. Quietly, she said in her typical stoic manner, “Then we must find your father.” She shared what little she knew. My father was from Pittsburgh and had two sisters, Fayth and Jean whose married names she didn’t know. He had been a Marine and was a Korean War vet. She suggested that someone in Pittsburgh might know how to find him and recommended I check the local telephone book for other people with our surname. Then she hung
up. I sat there silently staring at my reflection in the window as night settled over the city of steel, thinking about my brother, only a few miles away at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. How ironic, to end up in the city where my absent father was born and raised.

There was no time to waste. Tom had been given six months to a year to live and had already been on the transplant list for eight months when we received the devastating news about the insurance. The policy could only be changed during open season by the policyholder, leaving six weeks to find my father. If we missed the enrollment period, there would be no choice except to raise the money because the hospital refused to perform the transplant without the first million dollars. Anger and resentment washed over me as I replayed the transplant coordinator's words over, and over again in my mind. How could she put a price on my brother's life?

I took a deep breath, braced myself and grabbed the phone book, opening it to the page that contained a list of strangers with my last name. I took a minute to practice my speech and then dialed the first number, no luck. I dialed the next one, and the one after that with the same results. When I reached the sixth person listed the woman who answered, listened patiently and then explained that she was a Fereday by marriage and that her husband was away. She asked me to share some family names in case any sounded familiar. When I mentioned my father's youngest sister's name, she became very excited and told me that the week before, while checking books out of the library, a librarian named Fayth had casually remarked, "My maiden name is Fereday. We might be distantly related." After we hung up, I called the library only to find that Fayth was not at work. I left a message, and later that evening the aunt I had been named for but had never met returned my call. Unfortunately, it didn't lead to my father because sadly they, too, had been estranged for many, many years.

After Tom and I returned to Virginia, I started sharing my father's personal information with anyone who might have access to government databases, each time explaining the grave situation, praying that someone would be willing to provide the critical information I needed to find him. Several weeks later, while opening my brother's medical bills, I found a statement for my father's wife sent to us in error. The doctor was local, so there was a good chance he lived within driving distance. I gave the information to my mother who desperately tried to confirm my father's address with the doctor's office but was only given the zip code. Thankfully, that was enough information to identify the name of the small Virginia town where he lived. A few days later, sometime after midnight, I received a telephone call from a man who wouldn't identify himself. He instructed me to get a pen, and then he proceeded to provide the manufacturer information and license plate numbers for two cars registered to my father. Before I could ask for the model names and colors, or even thank him, the line went dead. The call had lasted only a few short minutes but had provided another crucial piece of the puzzle.

Armed with the name of the town located on Virginia's Northern Neck Peninsula and the vehicle information, I hoped that the place was so small that I could easily find him. The next day I headed out with a map, driving three hours along tree-lined, two-lane winding country roads, across multiple waterways to a blink-and-you-missed-it sized town. With strong determination, I started my search somewhere I guessed that many of the townspeople would gather, the tiny post office.

I parked out front, entered the brick building, stepped up to the customer service counter, and asked the only employee visible, the postmaster, about the area. She acknowledged that Heathsville was a very small town, but added that the post office covered a very large rural community. Feeling despondent, I explained that I was trying to find my father and told her his name. She admitted that she knew him but was hesitant to share any information. He had never mentioned a daughter much less another son and there was the Privacy Act to consider. She didn't want to risk losing her job by providing me with the crucial information I needed. Finally, in tears I explained that my younger brother needed a lung transplant and without it, he would die. I shared that we were from a previous train wreck of a marriage and that the divorce had been so contentious there was minimal contact. I made it clear that I wasn't there as a loving daughter seeking to reunite with a long-lost father. I was there for only one reason, and that was to try to save my brother's life. I pulled myself together, wiped away my tears, calmly looked her in the eyes and said, "You are the only obstacle keeping me from finding my father and obtaining the signature needed to increase the medical coverage for my brother's life-saving operation." Finally, she relented and although she wouldn't give me my father's actual address, I was elated to receive directions to his subdivision. As I turned to leave she swore me to secrecy, asking that I not tell my father, she helped me.

Once in the neighborhood, I began the tedious journey of looking for my father's vehicles. Each time I found the right make of car, the license plates didn't match. Without the model or color of the cars, it was practically hopeless. Finally, completely frustrated, I stopped the
only person I could find, an elderly man on a riding lawn mower and
desperately asked if he knew my father. To my disbelief, he did, and
he gave me directions to my father’s street, but he didn’t know, which
house was his. As it turned out, the subdivision was much larger than
I imagined. I immediately drove to the picturesque cul-de-sac with five
homes overlooking the Potomac River. Since it was a weekday and early
afternoon, most of the driveways were empty. However, one house
couldn’t be seen from the road. I boldly drove into that driveway, and as
I turned the corner, I saw parked beneath a large oak tree a silver pick-
up truck with a Marine Corps sticker and a license plate that matched
the paper clutched tightly in my hand. Because the house was extremely
secluded, I felt like an intruder.

Nervously I walked to the front door, an imaginary newspaper
headline running through my mind...Father Accidentally Kills Daughter
Who Was Trying to Save Brother’s Life. I knocked, no answer. In despair
and having no other ideas, I drove back to the street and waited, hoping
that someone would eventually return home. Finally, hours later a
truck appeared in the driveway. I frantically jumped out of my car and
flagged the truck down. Peering through the driver-side open window, I
immediately knew that the person was far too young to be my father. As
my heart pounded wildly, I asked the driver if his name was Keith and
when he nodded, I said, “I am looking for your, mine, our...our father, I
am your half-sister...he did mention that you had a half-sister, right?”

My abrupt appearance was initially a shock to my half-brother,
after he collected himself, he told me his father was out of the country
hunting and couldn’t be reached. I quickly told him about Tom and why
I urgently needed to find “our” father. I begged him to take my contact
information and pass it on as soon as possible. Then I politely said, “I
know that you don’t know me and certainly don’t owe me anything,
but if for whatever reason our father isn’t willing to help, will you
please at least let me know that he said no, so that I can attempt to raise
the $2,000,000 needed for Tom’s transplant.” He agreed, but I had my
doubts.

A few days later my father called and in February 1992, three months
after the insurance was changed, my brother received a successful
double lung transplant. Tom went on to live an additional seven years
and managed to pack a lifetime of accomplishments into those precious
years. He fell in love and married one of his nurses and became a step-
father, step-grandfather, and an uncle to my sons. In addition, he went
skydiving and participated in two transplant Olympics, inspiring many
other people with cystic fibrosis to opt for a double lung transplant
when all their other options were exhausted.

Tom died in November of 1999, a month before his 37th birthday. In
the 17 years since he passed away I remain grateful to him for all that he
taught me and greatly humbled by his strength, courage, compassion,
and love of life. I still miss him every day.

Epilogue: This event occurred before cell phones and the Internet. Through the help of many people and fate, I located my father in less
than four weeks. Years later, I discovered that my aunt and half-brother
both lied about my father’s whereabouts at his request. It was unsettling
to learn that my brother’s transplant almost didn’t happen because of
my father’s bitterness towards my mother.
Shadows of Fear

Joanne Teague

Her feet could hardly keep up with her heartbeat
Shadows played their fear-inducing games
Every gust of wind: the sudden chilled & choking hand of the unknown – seizing her breath grasping her throat
She may as well’ve been blind (as she couldn’t see a thing) and every gust of wind was assumed to generate from tattered demon wings whose maleficent motions caused a crawling in her skin in foolishness & haste she chose this dreaded path Limbs of trees were as skeletal hands that seemed to reach for she Claws of terrible, terrifying tyranny and imagined enemies crawling from cracks of decrepit unfamiliarity Come to know the overbearing shadows Come to delight in the thrill of your fright
Second Chance

Marjorie Day

February 5, 1992, 2:24 a.m.: mother-daughter lifeline severed. The scissors did not have to work hard, for the nutrient rich bloodline was already toxic and fragile. Exasperated sighs swallowed the cold morgue-like room while elated tears pierced the veil of remorse. An insatiable, shrilling cry broke the silence in the air as the exclamation of the first breath filled the nostrils of the delivered creation. Lament and elation revealed their weapons of choice. “Beautiful, Shelli, absolutely beautiful!” the voice of elation and benevolence exclaimed. Shelli loathed the voice; her body filled with mixed emotions of resentment and love. She knew what was going to happen, and what needed to happen, beyond a shadow of doubt; however, the enchantment she experienced when she peered at the alien-like creature consumed her—her heart pleaded with her mind.

The iridescent man enveloped in the scrubs, coated in remains of the dramatic act having just occurred, handed the treasure to the couple standing in the room, visibly full of complex emotions. The grizzly man that accompanied the female quivered with joy. The deed was fulfilled. The months of hassle—judges, juries, witnesses, paperwork—faded into the distance. Nothing else mattered except the pulchritudinous figure in their arms, the baby they always wanted. Ambivalence stormed the corners of the room. Shelli knew that this was not going to be the last time she would see the exquisite child, but she could not fathom the life that it was going to have. Time and time again she had rehearsed the life the Days could provide that she would never be able to. She envisioned how magnificently they would handle the feat ahead of them, engrossed with bubbling resentment. She knew that it was not the Days that she resented, but herself, darkened with guilt from the past decisions and irresponsible choices she made that put her in this situation.

Before and after this, Shelli, my birth mother, had other children. Her two youngest kids she raised now have children that know their “GG.” She travels to visit them regularly, showers them with presents and captivates their attention. Embedded in her sullied attempts at gifting stuffed animals and coloring ridiculous pictures is disappointment that courses through the unpleasant remnants of past memories, shattered by guilt, and sheltered by unquenchable laughter. Every time I see her at family events, I hurt for her and the remorse she carries heavy-hearted, knowing that her actions are rooted in regret. Embodied by perseverance wrapped in chains, she has overcome the struggles that plagued her leading up to my birth, but still slips and falls back into her old ways now and again.

Never could she, however, comprehend the effect her magnanimous act would eternally have on the Days’ life, as well as mine. I am forever molded by her unwavering, unselfish decision to place my life into the perfectly imperfect hands of another. Shelli’s countenance and actions throughout her life at this time motivate me to become everything she is not. I am endlessly reminded of the catastrophic lapse of judgment characterized by her drug use, which essentially forfeited her freedom, the life she ensued on the streets, and procured the abandonment of her children. The unconscionable actions in Shelli’s life inevitably constitute mine. Because of her, I feel compelled, better yet forced to substantiate my life, to roll the dice until the dotted numbers are invisible, to be better.

Aside from nature, I am eternally indebted to my parents—my saviors—who may never perfect the script of life, but undeniably empower my soul with their enduring choices and sacrifices. No one could ever understand the abandonment, the emotional turmoil, and the suffering they saved me from that I would have experienced being raised in a life full of uncertainty. They endured all the medical “could-be” miracles, endlessly pursuing children, wracked with self-doubt and defeat. To know I am their miracle, a means to an end, frames everything that I am. My prospect in life is full of gratitude, fostered by the insurmountable evidence that I was chosen—plucked from the ruins of addiction and detoxified by love. Not everyone can understand the amount of time that goes into parenting a child, especially somebody else’s blood, but there is no doubt in my mind that I am theirs. People often get the wrong idea when I say I am adopted. They bombard me with questions: “Why didn’t she want you?” or “Did you live in a foster home?” or “Do you hate her?” or “Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like?” The answer in my every breath is simple: a second chance.
Through the Eyes of a Child

Porsha Vaughan

Please don’t touch my child! Considering the fact that I am a first time mother this is the thought that crossed my mind every time someone approached my daughter and me in a public place. I have an overwhelming fear of germs, which was only heightened when I brought a child into this world.

A few years ago on a beautiful sunny morning in Lake City, Florida, I walked into a Goodwill thrift store to see what kind of treasure I could find. The air was heavy with the musty smell of someone else’s discarded belongings. I put my three-year-old daughter with her bright blue eyes and long blond hair in the shopping cart. I was now ready to start my treasure hunt by perusing down each and every densely packed aisle. My daughter does not share my passion for thrift store shopping no matter how exciting I try to make it sound. She usually just sits back and people watches.

We had already walked down several aisles when I noticed my daughter giggling and smiling at someone in the distance. This exchange went on for several minutes until finally a gentleman in his mid-forties and of medium build approached us. He began to tell me what a beautiful child I had and that she had the most infectious smile. The gentleman had a visible skin condition, which caused bumps of various sizes to cover most of his body. They weren’t open wounds, and he didn’t appear to be in any physical pain. My daughter didn’t even seem to notice that his appearance was any different than ours. She stuck her chubby little arms out in a gesture that she wanted to hug the man. The man looked at me with concern in his eyes and asked if it was ok to hug her.

It seemed like the world had come to a screeching halt and my worst fear had come to fruition. I had to quickly decide whether I was going to overcome my fear of germs and let my daughter give this man covered in bumps a hug or was I going to let my fear consume me and take away this beautiful moment of empathy and kindness. I chose to overcome my fear and let them exchange a hug. The smiles on their faces and the way the man’s face lit up let me know that I did the right thing. This world we live in can be so cruel and unkind at times. I’m sure this man had been stared at, made fun of, and possibly shunned at one time or another throughout his life.

Some time later as we were getting ready to leave the store a lady with grey hair and kind eyes approached me. She thanked me for speaking with and allowing my daughter to hug her brother. She said that our gesture of kindness made her brother’s day and that he just loved kids. I smiled and told her she was very welcome, all while I beamed with pride. I realized that maybe more of us should look at life through the eyes of a child. They are full of such innocence and haven’t been corrupted by what society considers normal. Everyone is going through some sort of struggle, and a kind word or simple embrace could be a lifesaver.
There were galaxies in his mahogany eyes echoing with experience, knowledge, and suffering. On the rare occasions smiles did grace his lips, wrinkles met the corners of his eyes and the choice few who got close enough to see them were immensely lucky. His jaw was wide and angular, not like the pretty boys from Hollywood; he looked more human than that.

Curls were something he had in excess, framing his face in black and gold. The blond streak through his hair fell down between his eyes sometimes when he was being snarky or flirtatious. He reached six feet in height, but his constant shrug made him look shorter. His beard was scruffy and full.

Four tattoos were etched into his skin, only one of which was seen when he wore a short-sleeve shirt and jeans. FEARLESS in American gothic font was scratched across his shoulder blades. The koi fish waded along the outside of his right shin. There was a scythe on the left side of his chest; there had been writing inside the tool, but he had carved that out of his skin when the ink was still fresh. The angel wing fanned across the inside of his right forearm, the tips of the feathers tickling his wrist. He only had one wing. He plans to get a demon wing on his left forearm, but he hadn’t made it back to his artist Tetanus yet.

He felt old. His mind was young and his wit was sharp, but his body and his soul felt older than the dirt under his shoes. That’s what being terminally ill twice will do to a person. He had no faith; in religion, in humanity, in love, or in his own happiness. He had been on this earth for twenty-two godforsaken years and it felt like two hundred. The world had been bright and shiny like the sun for the first decade, but then everything lost its glimmer. Apathy and negativity ruled him. He stood in Limbo, staring at the sky, waiting for the sun, hopelessly.

As I was being rushed into the operating room, my mind was racing. How did I go from having such a wonderful pregnancy and labor to this? I wasn’t the first time Mom anymore. This was my second go-round. I had planned this pregnancy. I didn’t gain too much weight. I still worked part-time and managed the house. I had been worried about taking care of two kids rather than just one, but the thought of anything wrong never crossed my mind.

Ethan was to arrive on May 8, 2005. His birth date was to be on Mother’s Day that year. I thought that was just perfect. Everyone told me that babies rarely arrive on their due date, but I still thought it was a great omen of what was to come. My first child, Dylan, was born early. My water had broken and I spent 12 hours bringing him into the world. I was also living in Iceland at the time with only my husband in attendance.

This time was going to be different. We were living stateside and I was looking forward to having family around me. As my due date approached, my excitement grew. This pregnancy was super easy. I felt great and just knew that I had everything under control. I kept going into false labor 2 weeks before my due date. My parents kept visiting and planning their vacation time around me. I felt terrible every time they arrived and nothing happened. I walked the mall every weekend, hoping to get things started.

The day before my due date I just knew that I was in labor, and I dropped Dylan off to a friend and headed to the hospital. When my husband and I arrived I was told that although I was having contractions, I was only 2 centimeters dilated and that it would probably still be a couple of days. We left the hospital disappointed but optimistic that it was almost time. We picked up Dylan and went out to dinner to celebrate that we were almost at the finish line.

At 5 a.m. I woke up with a strong contraction. I tried to go back to sleep, knowing that I had just been to the hospital and they said it would be a few days. By 6 a.m. I was waking up my husband. The contractions
were intense and only 9 minutes apart. We arrived at the hospital by 8:30 a.m. and I was escorted to a room and directed to change into a gown. I was dilated to 5 centimeters already and was starting to get excited and anxious at the same time. By 10 a.m. I was at 7 centimeters and getting a spinal block instead of an epidural because I was progressing so rapidly.

My labor was going perfectly. I kept comparing this labor to my last one. The contractions weren’t even that bad this time. I was talking and joking around with my husband and the nurses. Even the spinal didn’t hurt that much. I really liked that I could still feel my legs. With an epidural I had gotten the feeling of being paralyzed from the waist down, but was still asked to push. It was the weirdest sensation of pushing with all my might and not feeling anything happening.

As I lay there bracing myself mentally to get ready to start pushing, I heard the fetal alarms going off. Nurses started rushing into the room to let me know that the baby was having irregular heartbeats during my contractions. The doctor was going to be called in to check me over. It was 10:45 and I had only been at the hospital for 2 hours. Everything was happening so fast that I was having a hard time keeping up. My doctor was introduced to me, and he was an old salty Army colonel who I liked immediately. He saw that I was fully dilated now but the baby hadn’t made his way into the birth canal. He wanted me to start pushing right away because the sooner the baby was out the better. This was when panic ensued. While pushing we would lose the baby’s heartbeat. They rushed to get me up on all fours to stimulate oxygen to the baby. Seconds passed which felt like hours. It felt surreal in the room. Everyone went quiet while we all waited to hear the beep beep of the fetal monitor. I could hear my labored breathing as I waited, straining with them that matters. I know now that I will always just grit my teeth and push through them.

An emergency C-section was now a must. I was rushed through paperwork while the operating room was being prepped. I was given a drug to stop my contractions and my husband was given scrubs to put on. It was 11:15 and I kissed my husband goodbye as I was rushed out of the room. The contractions had not stopped, and I was freaking out every time the baby’s heartbeat was lost. We got into the operating room and they tried to give me an epidural since the spinal wasn’t enough for surgery. The contractions were so intense that my whole abdomen felt like it was in a vise. The nurse wanted me to bend over and hold still for the needle to go into my spine. After 10 minutes of trying, with me in agony, tears and snot dripping down my face, the Colonel rushed in dressed in his green scrubs and yelled, “What the hell are you doing? Knock her out NOW!” They quickly strapped my arms and legs down to the table, all while I was bucking up off the table with contractions that screamed through my body. The gas mask was placed over my nose and mouth, and I remember panicking and wanting to just run away. Then the nothingness took over.

I felt a burning, stinging pain as I slowly woke up. I was groggy and couldn’t remember what happened to me at first. All I knew was that I felt like I had gotten run over by a train and cut in half. As I slowly realized where I was and what had happened, I searched the room for my husband. He was in the corner chair holding our baby boy. Ethan had triumphantly arrived into the world at 11:50 a.m. on Mother’s Day 2005. He was our little miracle baby. The Colonel came in to explain what had gone wrong with my labor. The umbilical cord had been wrapped around Ethan’s neck twice and there was a knot in the cord. Every time I had a contraction and started pushing it would tighten and cut off his oxygen supply. The Colonel had this same thing happen to another laboring woman two months ago, and she had not been as lucky as we had been. I was very thankful that he had known what was going on and that the C-section had been done so quickly.

That day happened over 10 years ago and I am still in awe of how lucky I was. I am reminded that although I still like to plan and have everything go smoothly, I can adapt to the situation. Sometimes I have to rely on the expertise of the people surrounding me and hope that everything works out in the end. Did this experience scare me away from childbirth? No way! I am the happy mother of three wonderful boys. There will always be scary things in the world. It’s how you deal with them that matters. I know now that I will always just grit my teeth and push through them.
There are so many battles to be fought in our lives; others just have theirs a bit more challenging. There are people who are kidnapped and held captive for years. People who have lived through wars that cause the destruction of the places they loved and people they care about. People who have because deathly ill and are not expected to live, but a tremendous miracle happens; and they make a full recovery. These people would be considered “survivors” since they fought for their lives and wellbeing. I am one of these people too. Instead of fighting with another person, force, or illness; I fought with myself.

I was officially diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder in March of 2016; but I know I have dealt with it way longer than that. I first noticed symptoms towards the end of my freshman year of high school. My uncle, who I was very close with and considered him like a father, passed away a little over a year ago. My younger cousin was still upset about her dad passing away; and she went through a depressed phase as well. I noticed I would wake up and just feel sad, for really no reason. I didn’t want to eat. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to be left alone to sleep. I tried to tell my mom about what I was going through but she said it was just hormones and brushed it off.

I knew I wasn’t getting any better but I had no idea how to cope with it properly. I self-harmed for a bit; and I used drugs to get high so my mind would be off of how I felt. I sobbed at night, and sometimes even prayed that I wouldn’t wake up the next day. I felt overwhelmed with school and my life at home; everyone fought all the time. At the time, this was the worst off I have ever been. Luckily, once sophomore year wound down, I started to feel a bit better and I felt like I was making progress.

Junior year I definitely felt like I was better. I was motivated to make good grades in my classes. I was sociable and made new friends. I actually saw myself having a future, I made plans to take the SAT and to start looking into colleges that I may want to attend. I stopped self-harming and did so for about eleven months. I was proud of my
progress with my mood and temperament. It felt like everything was finally going to be okay. I felt like I was on top of the world, and nothing nor anyone could stop me. That was until about December of my senior year.

It was the holiday time, and I was unusually down. I stopped eating again and started to sleep more. I really kept to myself; occasionally having short conversations with one of my only four friends. Overthinking plagued every crevice of my brain. I tried so hard to hide how I was feeling on the inside. I had assumed I was down because I missed my uncle and I thought about how much it sucked spending yet another Christmas without him. But Christmas had passed, and I still felt the same. I relapsed and self-harmed again in January, just two weeks shy of being one year without self-harm. I hated myself. I felt ashamed. I felt like a failure to my family and to my friends. I seriously started to think about ending it all.

I reached rock bottom in the beginning of March 2016. I felt alone, useless, and unwanted, so I made plans to end my life. I remember being very emotional and mentioning the plan to my closest friend via text message. She was upset with me, which caused me to become very aggressive towards her and eventually stop texting her at all. She kept the messages I had sent to her phone and showed the guidance counselor, who in turn called my mom and told her about what I was planning. My mom was beyond angry; she thought I was being dramatic, and selfish; and until recently, she thought I was faking this whole time for attention. I was hurt that she didn’t believe me, that she wasn’t supporting her only daughter who needed her more than anything. She called our family doctor and set up an appointment to evaluate my mental status as soon as possible. I didn’t realize it at the time, but this day changed my life.

I was eighteen and about to graduate high school; one would think that would be enough to make me at least content with my life situation. But I wasn’t, and in all honesty I did feel bad about it. I hated the way I felt and I knew I shouldn’t have felt that way. After I was diagnosed, I felt embarrassed since there is a huge stigma with depression, but after months of counseling and prescribed medications; I realize now that there is no shame in having a mental illness, just like there is no shame in having cancer or diabetes.

I want to share my story, not for sympathy, but as a sign for someone going through what I did. If you feel like something is wrong, get help. This is your sign that everything will be okay in the end. You are strong; battling your mind is not the easiest thing to do for anyone. I won’t lie; it still does get hard sometimes. I still have days where my medication doesn’t work as well and I feel down, but I am making progress. I am getting better. Since my diagnosis, I was able to graduate from high school with honors, I was able to become licensed a certified nurse aide, I was able to meet a wonderful man who I care very deeply for, and I was able to discover my passion in life to become a nurse and to spread awareness about mental illness. If you decide to skip through my narrative about my struggle with depression, just take the time out of your day to read this statement: It does get better, and the first step to getting better is getting help. You are a survivor, too.
Standing; Waiting

Rhiannon Morris

I sway in the light breeze as the creatures in my limbs feed their young with what they find. A fall of my nourishment is being taken in by my feet as the young children bloom around me. A peaceful radiance glides across the sky; I stand here, waiting.

The heat from the harsh radiance simmers at my hair, but my body is cool. My canopy creates plenty of shade, which many creatures seek shelter in. My feet spread out, searching for the nourishment my body needs to survive in the heat; I stand here, waiting.

The air is cool again; my body shakes in the wind. The creatures in my arms take my eggs from me and hide them, or take them for food for the colder seasons, although they would have fallen anyway. My hair falls out and I know it is time to sleep; I stand here, waiting.

The freezing air makes sheets of nourishment on the ground above my feet, but I barely notice. I sleep the entire cold season away. I feel nothing as my core is frozen solid, and all I hear is the dull crunch of frozen earth. It’s not time to wake and flourish, so I stand, asleep and waiting.

It is time to wake again; I stretch my arms wide, letting my hair explode in green. The children are growing again in many colors and the creatures in my arms scamper around, feeding their young. The wind rustles my hair and arms; a light, warm breeze. It’s that time again, another cycle passed. I stand here, waiting, for it all to happen again.

My Children Poem

Walter Pearce

Mikayah, before I had my own kids, You were my first child. Your mother and I didn’t work out, But I stayed around, For her but for you. I still remember when I had a sleepless night, I would hold you, Your smile showed me it would be alright. When you not around, I’m always missing you. Not a second goes by, That I’m not thinking about you, You will forever be mine. Aaron, my only begotten son, My exciting ball of fun, Can’t believe I got another one. Another mother that didn’t make it Only difference is I got custody. My shadow lived with me, We both love school and electronics, Education is key. Elementary to college, chasing knowledge. Not a second goes by, That I’m not thinking about you, You will forever be mine. Zariyah, my baby to come! I don’t know how I’m going to react to you. I may pass out or not, While cutting the cord, I may cry or not, Maybe even late or not. Those are maybe, maybe not.
What’s guaranteed for you from us:
Hold, Love,
Guide, Teach,
Protect, Defend.
Mommy and Daddy are only human,
So we will always be there,
Aaron and Mikayah will be there.
Just know I’m good.
Even at time when you think,
We’re being hard on you,
It for your own good.
That’s later down the line,
For right now just make it here,
Then I will be at ease and fine.
Not a second goes by,
That I’m not thinking about you,
You will forever be mine.

Some of the best memories from my childhood have taken on the likeness of a warm, fuzzy photograph. The night before, we had the Taylor family over for a dinner party. It was a time of merriments and choruses of laughter from the adults. Everyone was having such a great time that time was the thing almost forgotten. When I finally crawled into bed around midnight, I knew I was going to have a long day ahead of me.

My father had planned for a curious kind of father-daughter trip. Mom came into my bedroom to wake me far before the sun had even considered rising. We left with the loud rev of dad’s truck engine and the scent of diesel somewhere around 4:30 in the morning. Dad drove to Greenbrier, where we transferred our things to my grandfather’s pickup and left the comfort of ours behind.

The light started to peek through the trees when we hit Suffolk. I stared out the small back window and tried not to be sick with my grandfather’s driving. It didn’t help that my stomach was completely empty and screaming at me for food. The farther west we drove, the more the mist curled out onto the roads from the fields around us and the more nauseated I got. We finally stopped at a Lowe’s on the edge of Emporia. Granddaddy Joe went into the store to pick up a few items and dad stayed with me while I ate a couple biscuits that mom had packed for me. At that point, I was just trying not to throw up from being in the truck for so long. Granddaddy came out and dad voiced that he was going to ride in the rear so I could sit next to a working window. I rolled that sucker down all the way and probably looked like a dog with my head sticking out the window. We turned onto the low grounds and drove down the small, winding road through the hills. We made a quick stop at my Uncle Jim’s cabin to get the four-wheeler and its trailer from his garage. Granddaddy continued down the road etched clearly into his memory.

When I saw the old country store, I knew I was almost home. The road turned to gravel and we passed the hunt club. The red cabin came into view a few short seconds later. There was love put into that building.

Anna Williams

Emporia
but time had taken a hold of it. The local idiots had shot the sides of the
house my great grandfather had raised from the ground. The windows
were shattered and the door had been busted open. The only thing
people hadn’t stolen was the kitchen sink. I walked around and let the
weight of things sink in. I felt the happy memories and the heaviness of
abandonment seeping out of the old wood beams. We wired the door
shut and continued on.

Granddaddy backed the four-wheeler off the trailer and hooked
the trailer to it. It was finally my time to drive it. Granddaddy walked
over to the hunt club and got his tractor and dad got into the truck. We
drove in our little caravan down a dusty trail to the fields. The sky was a
brilliant blue and the sun beamed down brightly. The autumn wind that
flew by me was cool and made me feel so free in that moment.

We turned onto the first field and I had absolutely no clue what we
were to be doing. Dad popped down the tailgate of the pickup and
slid big bags to the edge. I got the picture quickly though. We were to
be planting Austrian peas, clover, and other low growing plants for
the deer. Dad started setting up the four-wheeler to spread seed and
Granddaddy Joe lowered the tractor tiller’s old blades to the ground.
I jumped eagerly on the back of the four-wheeler to take care of the
spreader. Granddaddy had attached the spreader to the frame on the
rear of the four-wheeler with the exposed bolts sticking up. As I sat on
that frame, I knew those bolts were going to have it in for me eventually.
After seeding a couple of the fields that weren’t going to be rented out
for farming, dad pulled the little Hibachi grill out of the truck. It hadn’t
occurred to me but I didn’t pack food. I assumed we were going out
to one of the little diners in town. Then he slid forward a small cooler
and pulled out sausages and buns. My mouth watered in hunger. Dad
started the little grill on the uneven dirt and put me in charge of the
food. After a few minutes, I knew I needed to rotate the links or they
wouldn’t cook properly. The harsh slant I was working with scared me
to roll them over. I called dad over for his opinion. He took the thin stick
I was using to move them around with and accidently rolled a sausage
right off onto the dirt. We both laughed and he put some sticks vertically
through the edges of the grill slats so they could no longer roll off. Before
walking off, he sneakily put the sausage back on the grill and said that
he’d eat it if no one else would. The meal was amazing, probably due to
the fact that we were all so hungry.

Afterwards, we continued going to the fields that were fallow and
sowed seed for a hopefully bountiful rut season. It was in the final field
where my dreaded prediction came true. Dad went through a shallow
ditch in the four-wheeler and I nearly slid off of the metal rack I was
clinging to. He hopped off unscathed on the other side. I knew I didn’t
have the same luck. There was a gaping hole torn in my pants and I
was so glad for the long t-shirt I was wearing. At the very end of our
work trip, the sky clouded over and a light drizzle fell from overhead. It
was perfect timing, right after we’d finished and it would help to
germinate all that we’d just planted.

We drove home as the sun shone dazzling colors behind us on the
highway, calling us back to the place we all knew and loved. I felt at
peace for one of the few times in my life. I got to call this place my
home, a place where I grew up and learned who I was. Hard work was
something special out among the leafy green branches. There was no
greater privilege to me than to spend a day or weekend in Emporia.
The Storm

Rhiannon Morris

I look out to the valley
All those humans below
How they run around to rally
As my tempest comes calling hello
I am not angry or mad
I just want to play with you
I don’t know why you are so sad
I just want to bring something new
I end up crushing everything in my path
Not on purpose, I assure you
It’s unfortunate I leave you with the aftermath
But it will help you build something new.
It was the sickly curdling of my stomach that had first rudely awoken me, into pain. My pulse throbbed within my trembling hands. Bare, and icy, they stung wildly from fresh scrapes and cuts. My eyelids fluttered and struggled; head aching with a trauma currently eluding me. But it was the burn – the caustic, almost sandy burn invading my throat and nostrils which painfully delivered the ambivalent news that I was, in fact, still living.

A dizzy, drowsy sense inundated my being; head floundering unsurely atop my neck, as though tethered by rope. It drooped and lightly swung to and fro. I shifted my weight back onto my hands. The cut of countless cold, damp, stony edges told me that I was resting upon a bed of jagged gravel.

Vision slowly surfaced. Through the cracks formed by my weary, uncooperative eyelids, I dimly made out a distant tree line. Thick fog nearly obfuscated the trees entirely. Such heavy fog, it left chilled dew on my face. The mist floated on the air and cooled the pervading aches. It was a small peace. For barely a second, a creeping second, my awareness dwelled on the cool dampness.

The moment then shattered. An utterly shocking blaring of a horn sent a sudden, yet familiar wave of fright through my chest. Back down into my lungs, my breath retreated. A piercing light screamed at my eyes.

You need to move...No, really.......move!

An instinctual panic lifted me onto my left knee and flung me from the place where I had mysteriously awoken. I landed harshly on the cold, slick rush of a lightly snow-dusted hillside. I hit the bottom. My timid breath had been knocked from me. Scrambling to my feet, I turned around and looked up the hill. Disbelief held me still. I was watching a long string of train cars pass. They traversed the hill from which I fell. My lips quivered to beat my darting eyes. They followed the passing cars and scanned my dread thoughts for phantom memories that may reveal the truth of my current situation.

A terrible howl then, I think, pierced my soul. There, through the passing wheels, illuminated by the soft glow of a plump moon, was the pitch-dark figure of a man. His eyes were as smoldering orbs of ashen volcanic magma. His cruel stare took my heart into its grasp. I thanked the veiled stars in the sky that the rolling wall of train cars kept his grasp from verity. There was movement behind and around him, drawing my attention. In the misty air, aglow with lunar shine, voracious tumult revealed something horrid to my eyes: a pack of hungry hounds.

I looked to my right, and forfeited all relief; the caboose of the train had come into sight. My feet acted before my mind could. They grew wings and bid me flee! Across the frosty field behind me, with such haste that I couldn’t be sure if my feet were even touching the ground, I darted for the shadowed tree line...
It’s 4 a.m. on a cool November morning. The sound of an alarm disrupts my dream desperate for a conclusion. Lilliana—the three year old Fox Terrier—is curled up at the foot of the bed. Her eyes heavy, squinting as I turn on the bedroom lights to get ready. She is hoping that this is only a drill, but soon realizes that our day is beginning. I grab her leash from the hall closet while she slowly makes her way to the front door. I hook her up and we head out to the car. My sleep is sacred, but the weeks of anticipation and the mug full of coffee are motivating me to complete this journey. The faint light of the moon illuminates the overcast sky. The morning dew drapes the windshield. There is barely a car in sight on the normally traffic-plagued I-64. The occasional headlights of the few courageous morning road warriors shine in my eyes like the light of a thousand suns—why can’t people learn to turn off their high beams?

Our journey brings us to a winding mountain road in the Shenandoah Valley. A small grass patch next to some railroad tracks marks the trail head. A rusted yellow sign and a bump in the road are the only warnings of their presence. By now it is 7 a.m. and the dim orange sun struggles to fight through the thick layer of fog that developed along the way. We hoped for a sunrise to start, but the misty and cool air had other plans. We begin our hike—three days in the woods—just me and my dog.

Lilliana is never upset. She is happy to be walking, running, jumping or sleeping. She is always excited for a new adventure and never complains about going an extra mile, or pushing further before lunch. She is a small and timid dog. Her most aggressive moments are finding the bottom of her bowl at dinner or chasing a squirrel out of the backyard. She is the perfect companion to take on a weekend adventure.

Hiking through the forest is surreal in such dense fog. The trees heavy with rain drape across the orange leaf covered trail. The fog causes a tunnel of white on the path. It looks like the cover of a horror movie. Any concerns of an untimely death are eased knowing that I have 20 pounds of squirrel hunting fury at my side.

Lilliana is growing accustomed to playing “the floor is lava” and is spending the trip jumping between rocks avoiding the cool wet ground. We hike to the first clearing hoping we see sweeping views of the Virginia landscape. Instead we are blinded by sun bleached fog and blowing wind.

We stop for lunch at a slick rocky overhang that lays at the crest of the mountain range. This is the part of the hike I am looking forward to the most. It is the highest elevation and the views promise to be spectacular. Instead of endless views we are met with a rocky shelf that disappeared into the fog. It felt as if we were floating on the edge of a mountain, surrounded by a cushion of fog. Our pace is faster than expected so we take some time to rest under a tree. Three miles and a 1,500 foot descent lie ahead. The wet leaves slide over the sharp rocks. Calculating every step is required. One mistake could lead to a fall and the potential for injury. My knees are tired from the steep descent and hard ground. As we round a corner the trees part and a clearing beyond the slow rolling creek reveals the first campground. Thoughts of a warm fire and a hot dinner consume our minds. We settle in for the night, hoping that the next day would bring sunny skies and warmer air.

We wake in the morning only to find the same gray skies. Each sip of coffee helps to break the chill of the morning. We quickly stuff our mud soaked gear into our packs and continue our trip. It is seven miles to the next campground. The rain has turned a slow moving creek into a roaring river of white noise. Staying dry is no longer an option. Wet and cold become normal, pain is accepted, negatives become positives and the little joys shine through as life’s true pleasures.

By 1 p.m. we reach the final campground. A short hike out to a high point reveals a diminishing gray horizon. We sit on a wet moss covered rock to contemplate spending the night. The campground looks like an abandoned ruin in the woods: fallen trees, empty shelters, and campfire remnants of days past. As the round beady eyes and mud soaked paws look up at me, the decision is clear.

We return to the car cold, wet and tired. I peel my soaking wet socks from my pruned and tired feet. The warmth of the heater holds me tight like a sweater straight out of the dryer on a cold winter day. The warmth of the heater holds me tight like a sweater straight out of the dryer on a cold winter day. We avoid the commercialization of the interstate on the way home. The winding roads and undeveloped country side make me feel like the only person alive. Everything was different than I imagined this trip being in the weeks before. Omitted the part about splendor, I think this sentence is important to the meaning. I end the trip feeling alive, accomplished, and free. Just me and my dog.
All those titles out there
It just doesn’t seem right
It’s totally unfair
It’s time to end this stupid fight
Of why we let them think
That they can describe us
Sure sometimes life can stink
But why create all this fuss
To label someone
Based on looks
This isn’t a game that’s fun
We are not books
Each of us has a personality
That makes us apart
And in reality
It makes us think about what we were taught
The rights of our lives
Should not and will not
Be defined by the lies
Of what was not sought
So stop with all these titles
And start being you
Because we are entitled
Just as a few
To be untitled
Anew

Danielle Boucher

Perky like newly
Sprung flowers after snow leaves.
Constant growth cycles.

Salt water coffee

Charlie Sanford

The first sound I am conscious of today is my iPhone alerting me that it is now time to stumble out of bed and depart for my early morning ritual. After a few minutes of negotiation, I finally convince my legs to work and make my way haphazardly down the staircase. The coffee pot hums as I proceed to mindlessly chomp on some granola. I look at the clock which reads 5:45 a.m., time to pack up. I head out to the board shed, the early morning moon exiting stage left as the sun begins to make its triumphant entry. I enter the rustic pine colored shed, the interior covered with old surf posters and art from the 70’s. I find my weapon of choice for today, a retro twin fin built for style and flow. I apply a fresh layer of coconut scented wax, taking shallow sips of my coffee in between strokes up and down the fiberglass. I leave the shed and head up the yard to the driveway to load up my gear and board. I approach my vehicle, a 1995 Camry, now almost completely held together with surf stickers and melted wax. The thick ropes of my surf racks feel coarse in my hands as I tighten down my board to the top of the car. Now it is finally time to head to the break.

I bump along the familiar road down to the beach, windows open with classic Bob Marley tunes filling my car. The smell of coffee circulates around the car mixing with the scent of surf wax, creating my favorite aroma in the world. I pull down the tree lined road leading to the beach, and I feel anticipation rising in my soul. Pulling into my usual parking spot I sit for a moment, feeling as though I’ve finally made it home after a week of work and responsibilities. Fresh salt air greets me on a cool morning breeze. My board in hand, my wetsuit donned, and I am now running like a child to the sound of the crashing waves. I come up over the sand dunes to see a perfectly groomed wave yawning on the sandbar, beckoning me to join it, to become its dance partner. The water finishes my coffee’s duty and I am now fully awake after I have been submerged under the first wave. The water is cool and with no wind on the surface is like that of porcelain. I make it out beyond the crashing breakers, and rest in the calm morning current. I finally feel that I have made it, the only thought is that of the next wave peeking up on the
horizon. A dolphin breaches beyond the break for a sip of precious air, only to disappear back into the sea, still dark from the low morning sun. Alas, a sizable wave challenges me daring me to tread upon it. I turn around and forcefully paddle to stay on course with it. I feel my board begin to speed up, all in one motion I am now up to my feet, my stomach drops and the dance begins.

The art of dance is fluid and graceful; it flows like water out of a basin, yet takes precision and technique. Much like dance, surfing takes accuracy, combined with flow and individual style. On this particular morning, I find myself gliding down the face of a beautiful green wall of water towering over my head. I arc up the side with perfect style, drawing lines behind me in my wake like Picasso. I let my partner carry me under her curling lip, caressing me gently. Looking through the hollow cavern, the sunlight breaks through the clear water and time slows as I become one with my surroundings and my dance partner. But alas, I must depart from the cavern as the towering wall of water collapses, heaving its final breath of energy onto the sandbar, she whispers to me as her foam and spray returns to the sea. Life and energy flood my body, and I paddle back out in search of my next partner.

After about an hour of dancing with the tides, I decide that it is time to leave the sea and return to land, to rejoin reality. I sit now on the sand, watching my love dance alone, she curls over to die out unattended, without the pursuit of a rider. I finally draw my attention back to my responsibilities as a sense of time returns. Slowly I trudge back up the sand dunes looking back to catch a final glimpse of where my heart calls home. My car is now packed up and I brush off the clinging remains of sand from my flannel shirt. I head down to my favorite café, Zeke’s, to enjoy a well-earned breakfast, and see the newest art being featured on the walls. I walk in greeted by the fresh scent of hand-ground coffee and freshly sliced fruit. A timeless Bob Dylan vinyl spins on the record player, and the fresh art inspires my poetry that I brought along to work on over breakfast. My good friends Jake and Vance walk in join me as they do every Saturday, and soon the laughter and jokes begin as usual. My regular granola and fruit bowl covered in shredded coconut is delivered, and I find it easy to smile warmly at my waitress. Just before eating I sit back and withdraw from the conversations going on around me. In this moment I reflect on how grateful I am to have given breath each morning, even the hard mornings, when the sun refuses to shine and the clouds hang low. For it is those mornings that make the one like today special. Because until we have experienced the bitter cold life can bring, you cannot truly appreciate a glorious sunrise, or the simplicity of some morning salt water and coffee.

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**Writer's block**

*Samantha Ogden*

Bubble, peach, tree, orange  
Nothing rhymes with orange  
Except maybe door hinge  
But even that’s a step in the dark  
Because what if I have an accent

Yes, I’m aware it’s no good  
But when all that seems to rhyme are  
Fish and fish  
I couldn’t really care less  
I just want to write

It’s embarrassing  
My pencil is on paper  
There are thoughts in my head  
But all that’s coming out is a poem that makes no sense  
Who rhymes sense with head?

I’m frustrated  
And you can tell by my lack of fingernails  
Not a single stanza  
Not even an idea  
What even is an entity?

How do you expect me to read this out loud?  
When people expect the best  
And I’m struggling with the third grade concept of feelings  
You write and write  
And write again

Until orange rhymes with door hinge in an Irish accent  
Until it’s not fish and fish that rhyme, but two and blue  
Until it doesn’t matter that you rhymed sense with head because it’s yours  
Until you realize you’ve written about an entity all along  
Writer’s block is a feeling too
“I’m home!” Well, at least that’s what I thought until I noticed that my home wasn’t the place I knew anymore. The faded yellow house that I was raised in is no longer yellow but an ugly grey color similar to a naval ship that’s been out to sea for several weeks. The apple tree that used to welcome me with fresh red apples during the spring and summer seasons has withered away and no longer shares its loving embrace. The sunflower and rose bushes that my grandfather had planted were uprooted. The front lawn where they once resided, now resemble a barren waste land. I couldn’t help but to shed tears at the sight of my childhood home. Windows were boarded up by huge pieces of plywood; the screen door torn off its hinges while the front door was bolted shut to prevent the local squatters. “What happened to my home?” I asked myself while the slow flowing stream of tears ran down my cheek. Then I heard as loud as a siren the wind’s voice whisper in my ear, “Home is where your heart is; you will always find it there.”
“Sorry for your loss.”

That’s what they all say. But do people really mean it? Or is it just something that we’ve been told to do, something expected? Is it for them, to make themselves feel better, or to look like they care?

I received the call somewhere around three in the morning, telling me to turn on my television to the news. I sat there in horror, watching the place where she had been camped being consumed by fire. I knew that she was gone, I didn’t need them calling back giving me false hopes about being able to find her alive. At that moment the only thing that I could think of was that she’d never be forgotten, my sister would live forever in the hearts of those that she died for, helping make their lives a little more comfortable.

I had just talked to her earlier that night. Things were quite on her end, despite being close to an active war-zone. When I asked her when she would be heading back home, back to safety she always gave me the same response.

“The work I do is important. You know that. You also know that I’m going to live forever, just like Doris and Raul in ‘Fame’.”

Blame, for me, wasn’t on the people that attacked the village. At first I blamed her for going, or her for not leaving when she had planned, but, mostly, I blamed myself for not able to convincing her not to go. Or myself for not going with her like she had wanted. More impatiently, I blamed the people that couldn’t protect her.

People came and went saying how the world would be just a little darker without her here. Most of them didn’t even know her, not really. I was her only family, and now, I’m all that’s left. That’s what got to me the most, knowing that I didn’t have anybody left that I could always count on. She was always there for me, without question, even when she was out on a job she always had time for me.

“They have another job coming up. Come with me?”

“Why don’t you stay here? Can’t you stay here this once?”

She laughed.

“You have no idea what you’re missing. It’d be prefect for your photography.” She leaned back on the couch. “You could really show people what it is we’re doing over there.”

“I can’t...I have projects to finish here.”

Sure enough the call came at five-thirty in the morning. Her boss.

“It was her, wasn’t it? She didn’t make it out in time?”

“Phoebe would have wanted you to come collect her things, but, if you’d rather, I could send them to you.”

My phone slipped from my hands before I realized it. Even though I knew that she was gone, hearing somebody confirm it made it too real. I scrambled to grab the phone from the floor.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t...I don’t know.”

“The next flight over here won’t be for another few days. I’ll call back tomorrow to see if you have an answer...Athena, we’ll keep everything safe for you.”

“Yeah...I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

The phone fell from my hand once more before I fell back onto the couch, crying into my hands. I knew what I had to do. It was her last wish and I had to do it, for her at least.

The wait was what drove me crazy. More than once, I second-guessed my decision to go. If she could only see me, she’d be laughing at how long it took me to pack my bags. She would have said that paint could have dried faster.

We were close, “two peas in a pod” my mom called us, but she was her own person. She wanted to help those that didn’t have the ability to help themselves. I didn’t understand what drove her to do the things that she did. She tried to make the world a better place even if it was only one village at a time. She was the one person that made me want to be better than I was, better than I am, where as I was the rebel with green hair.

Our parents never would have believed it. That I would be the one flying across the planet to finish what Phoebe had started. But here I am about to embark to a place I never imagined that I’d go. I’ve always wanted to explore the world, but never quite like this. Phoebe knew that I’d go, that I couldn’t deny her last request.

I couldn’t believe how long the flight felt. Dread soon became unbearable and didn’t let up till the plane landed and I was on the tarmac. I wasn’t even sure of the person’s name that I was meeting, but I somehow knew that meeting her would make everything final.

“Athena, I’m Alice. Your sister told us so much about you.”

She was tall with long strawberry blond hair. She looked more
like my sister than I ever did. I felt jealous. Even though I exchanged emails with Phoebe daily, she knew and understood things about her that I never could. But just maybe being in this place, seeing how she lived and who she surrounded herself with would give me more of an understanding. That was something I desperately needed.

“I know. She told me about you and your work as well.”

Alice smiled.

“This work was important to her, but I’m sure that you know that.”

She grabbed one of my bags.

“I think that you’ll like it here.”

The reality of what had happened finally hit me as I walked into her room. This would be the only thing that I had left of her. I admired her for everything that she stood for, everything that she believed in, and everything that she did to provide houses, schools and hospitals to those who needed them. She had been in Turkey close to the borders of Syria and Iraq and I had told her exactly what I thought at the time.

I understood why she felt the need to come and help those that were affected by the wars going on around them. I felt an urge to stay and capture what Alice and her company were doing.

Pouring myself into you leaves my spirit half empty.
Yet, it is the only way I can fill up on hope.
That eventually, the favor may be returned.
Though - endowed to me you are not.
No requirements of circumstance.
Small donations of admiration are welcomed.
One stipulation... my love, and
The number of deposits I’m allowed.
Investments fail when checks are void.
Time to vacate the premise.
A piece of my heart remains.
Strategically positioned, simply for me to revisit.
Or recollect.
Or recall.
Moments of passionate conversations,
Stimulating embraces,
Dreams of Public Displays of Affection.
Guess the private thoughts will suffice.
For now.
Resolution

Lauren Patterson

When you stand on the precipice
Staring at your fate
You think of all that’s precious
Before you see those pearly gates

Faces flash before your eyes
But all you see are their lies
Hopes and dreams shattered at your feet
This misery inside, you cannot defeat

Toes clench along the ledge
As you waver to and fro
You lean further over the edge
Close your eyes and go

As you fall into the abyss
You feel as though you’re flying
Though through all the bliss
You know you’re really dying

Between The Lines

Jonathan Oldaker

I feel as though I have spent as much time in an automobile as I have on my feet. Driving is in my blood, stemming from a family of over-the-road truck drivers; father, grandfather and uncles all drove, distributing steel, building materials, and dry goods to quench the thirst of this nation while supplying sustenance for home. I currently quadruple the average annual mileage for most Americans. A road whore I am called. Like a band of gypsies or nomads my coworkers and I travel across this country, bartering our trades for payment. Along with many other tradesman, I refuse to commit to any one company. Oddly, I find the traveling relaxing, even though it’s a frenzy of watching, listening and trying to predict the movements of every other driver around. It’s a constant game of defense.

The smell of hot asphalt can burn the senses, the sulfur watering my eyes and scorching my nasal passages. It brings back memories of trying to walk across the same hot surface on a shoeless summer day. The first few steps are warm, then warm turns to hot, and hot turns to pain. I had to leap the last few steps to make it into the cool grass.

Initially the trails crossing the land were for expansion. Our roadways were developed to increase the growth of our new nation. Roads allowed for movement across the land, spewing out the wealth of immigrants to new corners of the vast landscape. They searched for fertile land, panned for gold and became kings of the wild frontier, creating legends of the new world. The discovering of new landscapes stimulated the literature and imagination of artists. Although roads served their original purpose well, we use them to maintain the links between families, the lifeline that keeps my heart and loved ones within reach. If I stop and think about the route back to grandma’s house or back to where I grew up, it’s not over a hill and through the woods anymore. It’s a continuously paved journey that is completely charted out. I can find a road to take me anywhere and everywhere, whether it is to the end of the block or to the other side of the country. They have
been the final resting place of many animals as well as the occasional location of a new life entering the world.

Through the bug-marked glass, the hazed headlights guide my chariot of choice. The rearview is my yesterday and the mirage ahead is my tomorrow. Whether it is the heat of a summer day warming my arms and chest or the cold seeping air and the frigid water finding its way through the most minuscule crevices, it’s a welcome feeling. The fluorescent blur of the highway cone is my runway beacon, awaiting my return flight.

Celestial Night

Amber Stone

A child’s starry eyes
See a world to be healed
Glowing new perspective
Into a whirling orb
Of existence
Pure innocence
Before words are spoken
Questions wondered
Until the ridicule
Shatters brave persistence
A small boy
He must be hungry
He has no bed
Stop asking all these questions
There’s food here
We can help
Our country is there, trying
The bombs
They hurt the boy
The terrorists
Must be stopped
But what about
That little boy
Time for bed
It’s getting late
A crystal drop of pain
Drips down
A child’s rosy cheek
An open heart
Beats the rhythm
Of a torn planet
Why do we
Close the spirited eyes
That hold a celestial night
My heart beats rapidly with anticipation and my palms are starting to sweat. I stare at the large yellow envelope that I just pulled out of my mailbox. My parents told me that it was on the way. I am surprised it arrived here so quickly. I had been waiting for “the poster” for over four years. I already reconciled myself to not ever getting it. Fortunately, my parents recently went back to Illinois for a visit and finally retrieved the poster from my cousin, who had been promising to send me the poster without ever following through. I told myself that she probably threw it away and didn’t want to fess up to making a mistake.

I sit down at the kitchen table and stare intently at the envelope. I realize that I’m afraid to open it. What if it’s not like I remember? Why did I want it? What was I going to do with it? My parents warned me that it was very fragile and falling apart. I don’t want to damage it any further, but I snatch it up like a kid on Christmas morning. I try to calm down. Slowly I tear a corner of the envelope and carefully get my finger in the hole. I wiggle my finger around to make the hole bigger and quickly pull it across the envelope like I’m ripping off a band aid.

I peek inside the dark interior of the envelope with open curiosity. The smell of musty old books fills the air and I crinkle up my nose. In my haste to pull out the contents, a small brown piece of paper crumbles and falls into my lap. I pause to collect my memories of this poster before carefully pulling it the rest of the way out. I gently lay it on my kitchen table and start to unfold it. I sit back and stare at it in amazement. It’s exactly as I remember it! The edges are torn and I can see layers of different kinds of tape clinging to each of the four corners. There are deep creases in the middle where it has been folded. The vibrant colors it once had have faded away long ago, but it really does look exactly as I remember it!

I am transported back in time to my Grandma’s house in Illinois. The poster hung on the door of the spare bedroom for as long as I can remember. I would crawl into the bed for naps or bedtime and feel a little nervous at being in a strange environment. After being tucked in, the door would be shut and I would have that moment of trying to find peace in a different house. I would stare at this poster as I adjusted to the new smells and sounds around me. I remember thinking that my mother and aunts had all lived in this room at one point in time and I would try to figure out who had picked out this particular poster. I would play out different scenarios in my head involving each of them. Sometimes I even pictured my own Grandma picking it out and surprising the girls with it after school. Maybe this is why I wanted this poster when she passed away in 2012. I was asked that awful question—“What do you want from the house?”—during the days leading up to her funeral. What one thing could memorialize the woman you had known and loved for the last 35 years? This poster was the first thing that popped in my head and tumbled out of my mouth. I smile at the poster laying on my table as I vividly remember all those happy memories of my childhood that it evokes. This is why I chose it.

Putting my memories aside, I take a closer look at the poster that I now own. The caption at the bottom declares “Candy is Dandy… But…” in candy striped splendor. The picture is of a little girl and boy at what looks like the corner drugstore. The little girl is reaching up to pay the cashier. She is wearing a small flowered dress, red socks to her knees and black patent leather shoes. As she reaches up to the counter her white ruffled underwear is on full display. This is the sight that has intrigued the boy standing next to her. He is dressed in some very colorful blue striped bell-bottoms and a light blue ribbed turtleneck. The look of utter delight on his face as he gingerly touches the bottom of her dress is hilarious. From the blue and white checkered floor to the candy displayed on the counter and the old fashioned cash register this poster just screams the 1970’s. Upon further examination I find the numbers 975 and western America corporation in the bottom left corner buried under layers of old tape. I can also make out the words post office, Oregon, and a full phone number. I have no idea what this means except that I’m sure it was printed in 1975. I perform a quick Google search on my phone, but find no further info on this poster. From an adult’s point of view, I guess it’s pretty dirty minded, but in such a sweet, innocent way. The little boy checking out the girl’s butt under her dress is probably not very appropriate behavior. All I know is that it still makes me smile and giggle a little bit.

I grab my measuring tape and start measuring the poster, jotting down the info as I go with satisfaction. I will purchase a mat and frame for it tomorrow. I’m already trying to imagine what color mat I and what kind of frame will work the best. I wander around the house trying to
figure out where I’m going to hang it, wishing I had a spare bedroom to put it in. I can just picture the look on my mother’s face as she stares at it as she drifts off to sleep in my home.

A rose. That was her life. So many different colors, both bold and soft. A few thorns here and there, but nothing too painful. Her life was so simple, yet so complicated. Having always told herself she’d never find love at sixteen like they do in the movies, but then it happened. From any random onlooker, her life wasn’t anything special. Just your average love story with average problems and average romance. She saw it differently though. Every relationship, including her own, was special in that they’re all filled with real, complex emotions and unique lives that they live. To her, her love would make a great love story. One that she would read over and over again.

Every sunny day, without fail, she would meet him. In a radiant garden filled with all sorts of budding and blooming flowers. A white picket fence around the garden, making the colors pop even more. A small white table with vine designs and two chairs to match sat in the middle. There they would have tea and talk for hours on end until the sun cast a gentle orange glow on the sky, telling them that it was time to go.

A young man and woman, as in love as one could be. What did they talk about? It didn’t matter much, most of it being small talk or random stories. Sometimes they discuss a strange dream one of them had the night before. So it doesn’t matter much what was said, nor what kind of tea they drank that day. All that mattered was the moment. Him and her. The warm sun on their skin. Looking into each other’s eyes. Admiring each other’s smiles. Any possible flaw on their faces was beautiful. She loved his stained, crooked teeth. He loved her large, hooked nose. What moment could possibly be more beautiful than this? It was as if they were in a children’s storybook, she always said. Though the beautiful moment could only last but so long. The conversation always ended the same way.

The man frowned at her, a strong look of concern on his face, “When will you wake up? Won’t you please wake up? This can’t go on forever.”

She would take a sip of her tea and avoid looking at him, “I don’t want to. It hurts too much. I like it here.” With that, they would part until the next sunny day.
Standing outside the fence was a man, looking beaten and downtrodden. He hasn’t had a good night’s sleep in days. Dark grey clouds hung heavy in the sky. The white picket fence was broken and the paint almost completely faded. The flowers were all wilted and dead; the garden taken over by weeds with vines growing over everything. At the table sat an old woman. There was no tea. There was no young man.

A man in white walks up to him and places his hand on his shoulder, “Are you ready?”

Closing his eyes, he let out a heavy sigh before staring again at the old woman, “There’s nothing I could do for her. She’s in your hands now.”

The Meal

Renee Murat

Hands reaching in, I am brutally awakened from my slumber in the cupboard among my friends.

The teacups sit peacefully beside me, their porcelain glistening in the sunlight. Hands outstretched, grasping hastily.

I am the one who isn’t saved for special occasions.

I am used more often, and for that I am grateful.

The others look lonely sometimes. Gathering dust,

Losing some of their shine over time.

Once I am set down, I have steaming warm contents poured onto me. The smell is heavenly, It feels like a soft dinner roll, savory green beans, and fluffy mashed potatoes.

I am faced with a look of disgust, I’m saddened.

My contents seem perfectly and meticulously prepared but I am still frowned upon.

The human before me is a girl I am very familiar with. I am the one who held her birthday cake on her 1st birthday. I am the one who has a chip from being dropped when she was frightened.

I have been the courier for countless meals year after year, Yet somehow, instead of being met with excitement, Lately the contents I hold are met with anger and anxiety. She looks frail lately. Almost as fragile as
The porcelain that sleeps beside me.
If only she ate the contents I so willingly provided
Would she get strong and healthy again.
I feel something warm begin to fall on me.

Drop
By
Drop

The soft salty pearls begin to
Blend into the mashed potatoes,
Creating miniature craters in their soft hills.
“Just one bite,” I hear in the background.
“Please do it for me.” I can sense the worry and despair in the
woman’s soft voice.

Suddenly, I am shoved against the wall,
I feel a sharp crack encapsulate my entire being.
The contents bestowed upon me are
violently strewn across the room.
A war zone of splattered potatoes,
Crushed green beans
And an unscathed roll surround me.

I feel confusion.
I am not afraid for my own predetermined fate,
but I feel a sadness towards the human I have come to know so well.
I have watched her grow up in this small house.
I have been the one who was gently lifted from my perch to have
comforting contents placed upon me
when she came home crying after a failed exam or some other tragedy.
I have always been able to provide this human with some sort of
comfort.
Up until recently.
And for that, I am sad.

Losing Half of Myself

Adam Hess

I was, to put it lightly, a fat, waste of space. I had dropped out of
school, because I thought that I was smart enough to just make it on
my own. I was working two jobs, but not saving a dime. My body fat
percentage was around 30% (which is to say unhealthy). My mom
was my landlord (rent free), and my cook; and she did my laundry,
paid my bills, and I never even said, “Thank you.” I had even become
your stereotypical “basement internet troll” with the pony tail and an
overinflated sense of self righteousness. All of this was cumulating into a
giant ball of failed dreams. So, I had to go through some metamorphosis,
some kind of change to turn myself into an adult; and not just a
complacent blob with no ambition to change his lot in life. I guess all of
this began when my ex-girlfriend, my first real girlfriend, began to date
someone else.

So it was around October, and my ex and I had been broken up for
over a year; but I was still incredibly hung up on this grand illusion
that she and I would still end up together. We hung out all the time,
took long road trips to concerts, I even took her to school. Suffice to say
I spent a majority of my free time, of which I had a glut of, with her.
She was attending college, which is where she found someone who she
began to develop a relationship with. When she finally told me the news,
that she had a boyfriend, I was devastated. We sat in her driveway for
hours talking that night. I told her that I needed time away from her, so
that maybe I could finally move on and let myself grow up. At the time
she honestly didn’t even really seem to be broken up with me cutting
her off for a while, which stung for a while. She had found someone to
lean on who wasn’t me. Over the next few days I felt worthless, I had
measured myself with the stick of how much she loved me for so long
that I didn’t know how to measure myself any differently.

Two or three weeks passed after our talk; I began to actually strive to
improve myself; although at first it was just to impress her. So I started,
with the obvious first step, going to the gym. I forced myself to go by
investing most of my paycheck into membership and a personal trainer;
to give myself a strong motivation and get my ass off the couch. As time passed, the fruits of my labor bloomed and the idea of doing this for someone else faded into more of a drive to improve myself.

So three months passed since I had last seen my ex and she came into my work to see me. At this point I had lost 25 pounds and had gotten my “basement internet troll” pony tail chopped off into a short, more mature haircut. Obviously, she was surprised at the difference in how I looked, but also in how I carried myself. I guess I had started to make the transition into not only looking like an adult, but being an ambitious, driven adult who wanted something out of life and would be damned before he would be stopped.

As time passed my goals fell more in line with my attitude. As of now, I’ve lost 70 pounds and am under 200 for the first time since freshman year of high school. I am paying for school out of pocket, and I have a five-year plan for the first time ever. My ex and I are close friends to date, no unrequited love, no hard feelings. It shouldn’t always take a negative to get you off your ass and give you real ambition but if that’s what it takes, then at least it will help you stop being a fat waste of space.

Experiencing Life
Anna Zwade

The pounding of the plane’s engine roaring as a constant background noise acts as a lullaby in my mind and eases my fears. I gaze out of the plane’s open doorway that awaits expectantly to be an exit. Inhaling, I fill my lungs with the crisp autumn air that occupies the space around me. “Are you ready to jump?” the skydive instructor yells at me over the blaring white noise. I nod my head slowly and exhale, my breath matching the clouds below us. He counts down from three to two to one and suddenly my body is in a full flight downwards, rushing towards the ground as thoughts race through my head just as quickly.

I have a flashback as I’m falling through the sky. There was a point in my life, two years ago, when I wanted to be doing the same exact thing but with no parachute to save me. The situations were similar, except the white noise in my mind was life’s trials and difficulties. Instead of a jump suit I was clothed in anxiety and depression that fit too tightly around my body, creating a constant sensation of being overwhelmed. Substituting the autumn air were painful thoughts, emotions, and experiences. And with every breath I took I allowed those things to fill and consume me, suffocating myself from the inside out. Back then, I had no one to save me, just my demons telling me I had no way to escape.

My mind snaps back to reality as the ominous similarity sweeps over me. Everything could have come to a grinding halt that day, but this time I have my parachute. I pull the cord and the instructor and I jerk upwards from the motion. Compared to the fast paced dive towards earth, the opened parachute makes the world feel as if it’s in slow motion, allowing me time to gather my thoughts. Now we are soaring through the clouds, clouds that are so close I could reach out to touch them and collect their purity. The golden sun gently caresses my face, creating a sense of warmth that balances out the frigid October weather. I stare down at the earth below me with a bird’s eye view of the life and the scenery I would have left behind if my suicide attempt had been successful.

Today, as I’m surrounded by the vast limitlessness of the universe I want nothing more than to dive towards life, jump in, and be invited to
everything it has to offer. “How do you feel?” the instructor asks me as if he already knows what I’m thinking. It’s the same question I used to be asked by doctors, family, and friends. But for the first time I finally have a truthful answer. “I feel alive!” I yell back, currently at peace with my past and free of the internal struggles that tormented my life day in and day out. I am, at this very moment, a changed person, stripped away to reinvent myself in a new light.

The ground grows closer and closer and vibrant shades of green, yellow, and orange encircle me as we rush past trees that stand tall and proud, now at eye level. Finally, my feet sink into the earth as the instructor and I land in an empty field. The soft dirt is stabilizing and the mixture of adrenaline and exhilaration courses through my veins. Gusts of wind greet me with a sense of playfulness, as if earth is welcoming me back. People surround me with laughter that echoes in my ears, and I am reminded that deciding to embrace life is the right choice.

As I unbuckle my parachute, I am thankful I chose to release the darkness I once held inside. A newfound purpose awakens within me. I find myself filled with bliss as I stand soaked by the rays of the sun. A sense of calm overtakes me as I come to terms with who I once was and what I have become. I’m living for the girl I lost within myself, as a tribute to the fact that I am not the summation of unfortunate events or past mistakes. I am the beautiful image of life resurrected on my own terms after all hope had been abandoned.

Many students in high school take an art class, hoping to receive an easy A. They figure all it takes is to paint multicolor lines on a canvas, mold cold, squishy clay into a figure, and doodle random still-life objects placed in front of them. Unlike those students, I chose to take an art class because of the feeling it gave me. I would enter the class every day energized to see what was planned, no matter what it was. Even the days we were reading and watching videos about Vincent Van Gogh and everyone in the class is sleeping, my eyes were glued on soaking in all the knowledge about the artist. It’s as if I received a golden ticket when I have a paint brush in my hands. The world around me is silent and all I care about are the lines, textures, colors and other features in my artwork.

Art became an optional course in middle school. When many of my classmates rushed to sign up to take cooking classes and technology courses, each year, art was always my first choice. Having experience came with a cocky attitude. I never had work to take home because my teachers would either keep them for examples or place them in art shows. But if my art work wasn’t coming home with me, a ribbon was. There was never an art show I didn’t place in. I marched around with my head high and chest out as if I was Johnny Bravo. I could do no wrong.

My sophomore year, my teacher assigned the class to find any picture on the internet to paint. My favorite painter, Kara Walker, immediately came to mind. Her historical silhouettes based off race and religion drove my inspiration. After doing research, I stumbled across a picture of a pale skinned lady with a whopping flower hat that resembled ones worn to church on Sunday mornings. If I was going to challenge myself to create a silhouette, her skin had to be pure black. I began sculpting out the outline, then mixing and blending complementary colors that corresponded with the background and the hat. I started painting those features first. Finally, a hint of jet black paint swept across the face of my drawn-out image. I stared at my canvas with disgust. This wasn’t the image I had envisioned to create.
My teacher had called my name to show him my progress and my heart became a bowling ball in my chest. The journey to his desk felt like I was slowly walking on a never ending aisle. When I approached him, I instantly told him how displeased I was. He stared at it with a blank glare and explained that changing the color of the skin was one of the hardest challenges for most artists. I politely grabbed the picture out of his hands and moseyed back to my chair in sorrow.

This failure showed me I wasn’t perfect. I knew improving myself required research. To build off other artists, I started traveling to art museums, such as the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, the National Gallery of Art in D.C and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. I learned to love many other artists’ work. Picasso, Jacob Lawrence, Frida Kahlo, and many more have crafted me into the artist and person I am today.

After graduating, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my life. To save money, I enrolled in classes at Tidewater Community College. Sitting there one day I saw the day care taking the kids out for recess. I instantly realized I wanted to be an art teacher. I want kids to find a love for art at a young age, just like I did. And if they come across a failure, I want to be there to help them through the obstacle. While in school, I plan to take art classes along with Childhood Development courses and volunteering in order to achieve this goal.

There is something powerful about happiness and the extent that each and every person will go to reach it. Personally, I always thought it could be reached through minor things, such as the acceptance of others and the value they would see in my appearance. One seemingly simple action led me down a path of discovering self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-love.

Broken. Dead. Unhealthy. All of these words represented the state of my chemically processed and straightened hair before I embraced my natural beauty. After years of being taught that my hair was ugly, nappy, unworthy, and undesirable in its natural state, I yearned to look nothing like myself. Being born a black female with darker brown skin was a sure way to encounter a life filled with society’s rejection of my natural beauty. Becoming a prisoner to this societal rejection, I let society’s view of me dictate how I viewed myself. Acknowledging this reality was the bright light that made me want to accept my hair, although my mind was still going to take some time to accept this self-knowledge.

Nature itself shows that human life or any product of human life will prosper best when nature has a part in it. With this in mind, I figured my hair would only grow if I removed these harsh chemicals from its diet, permanently. This was crucial information that I needed to first understand, accept, and then act on. I picked up the closest pair of scissors I could find. I lost myself in the actions that followed. Snip after snip, I started with the sides of the dead, stringy mess. Gone. Next was the back. Gone. After I removed the front, there was no going back. All gone. It was a single moment right after forcibly shedding these dead strands, where I took in every single aspect of this dramatic change. Should I accept it? Should I look at this as just a poor decision that I’ll eventually get over one day? I stared at this kinky, cottony cloud lying on my head. I didn’t know how to introduce myself to this never before seen accessory of my body. It was too much of a shock to handle at the time, but eventually, I started to reflect on why I was even hesitant to accept my hair in the first place. It was because not too many people
even saw my hair as beautiful. But why can’t I? I can. I should. I will. I decided to take on this next challenge subconsciously without even realizing that a simple change of mind could affect how I perceived life from then on.

After chopping off a great portion of my hair, I put down the scissors. Nothing was left but a severely life-changing perspective and a short mound of tiny curls. This time I knew there was something completely right about this decision, even while I was still in my uncertainty. I respected this decision so much that I refused to tell myself I hated these kinky coils, knowing deep down I still didn’t truly find it too “aesthetically pleasing.” I looked to this discomfort with a positive view, and I knew I’d grow to love it one day. It wasn’t a matter of what I found “aesthetically pleasing” in the moment, but rather what I would find beautiful in the matter of time. Was I really starting to tap into this part of myself that I was so reluctant to do before? Eventually, others’ thoughts of me, whether positive or negative, didn’t seem to affect me as much. This whole reality made me feel worthy of one of the most important self-possessing qualities of all: self-love. I didn’t need to live up to others’ standards, I needed to compare myself ONLY to myself and live on as such.

Throughout this experience, I was able to open my mind up to my soul. I began to realize the power material things should hold over my mind: nothing, absolutely nothing. Most importantly, I was able to fully understand that when people give the power of material things over their lives for the hope of peer-acceptance, they limit themselves to acquiring self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-love.

At nine years old, we had not yet conceptualized loss. At our neighbors’ house, my older sister sat stoically next to me feigning focus toward the television used for background noise. With a resigned voice I thought aloud, “Grandad won’t make it through the night.” Memories of oblivious happiness played out in sequence when I received no response. Silence settled between us as the night dragged on, episode after episode.

Our grandparents drove from Chesterfield, Virginia, to Little Rock, Arkansas, for our rescue from a drug-addled domestic nightmare of a home. My sister, Brandie, recalled being two years old when our mother tossed me, a screaming four-month-old, into her tiny arms to argue violently with our father. Our grandparents bundled us silently into the car when our mother pleaded with them not to take us. Aunts, uncle, and cousins all joked as we grew older about the mirror which finally soothed the constant wailing I put on for days after our rescue. Brandie’s small voice, too young to be so unwavering, informed our grandparents of my endless crying over terrible diaper rash. Accommodating my need for distraction and theirs for peace, our grandfather purchased a new bedframe with a mirrored headboard creating a calm place in their room where my shrieking finally ceased.

When Grandad started dialysis, six years later, our grandmother set up a room devoted to the ritual. Every four hours commenced the ceremony to combat the damage of untreated diabetes to his kidneys. Grandma cautioned us about the bandages and tubes prohibiting the hugs with Grandad we usually threw into with such enthusiasm. With seemingly arduous changes, our childhood resumed. Brandie and I slow danced in the dialysis room to make Grandad laugh and smile throughout the day, becoming our grandmother’s aides in caring for him. He repaid us in kind as he taught us to bake peanut butter cookies from scratch and took us on fishing trips.

By the time I was eight, our mother had gotten herself together as much as a former addict could muster and moved in with our little
family. That same year, our grandparents were informed the kidney transplant wait-list was substantially large, but a transplant was necessary to sustain his life, thus began the race against time before inevitable kidney failure. As a means to keep him closer to his family before his death, our grandparents chose to move back into the city he grew up in, trading the only home I had ever known with a new model. Intermingled with the bustle of the move, our mother felt the need to send Brandie and I to stay with our father for the summer, attempting to shield us from the hardship of death. We’d matured enough at this point to detect the swelling severity, but not enough to cope with the anger we felt in being sent away from our true family at the behest of our estranged mother.

Boarding the Greyhound bus, our mother grouped us sentimentally into an unwanted embrace, stating her plan to be tested for kidney donation soon after Brandie and I were due to arrive in Arkansas. My sister and I shared a look; two seconds of silence ratified an understanding that we cared only about Grandad getting better while our mother blathered on, oblivious to our apathy, about her ribs being cracked open in surgery which would require elongated recovery. The release was immediate as we rode away from our mother’s narcissism, our feelings for her never matching those we had for our grandparents.

In our father’s care, we stuck to the outdoors to avoid the blatant drug use by the surrounding adults. When sober, our father found it necessary to teach me to ride a bike. I argued to deaf ears that Grandad should have been the one and let my tears fall unabashedly. I was pushed down a long dirt road, defeated, until the bike underneath me was let go. The choice between self-preservation and over the sentiment I longed for was forced on by the hands of my father. Brandie waited silently as I took the dirt road back, shoved the bike to the ground, and hugged her tight. We both just wanted to be home.

Upon returning at the end of summer, our grandparents had long been settled into their new home. Our mother waited with a prepared apartment for just the three of us. When our grandfather fell back on that bed with the mirrored headboard that once brought peace, our grandmother made the call that landed us at the neighbors’ home. Our grandmother was not blood related and shouldered our mother’s blame for Grandad’s death. During the years most children spend playing and exploring, my sister and I assumed the role of caretaker for Grandad and ourselves—an important lesson in life taught to us by our grandmother. Absence gave our mother a false sense of knowledge and entitlement over who we had become and how we had formed relationships with her parents in ways she was never able. Her lack of comprehension in the years before our grandfather’s death, in my mother’s eyes, meant no one must have looked after her father or the children she abandoned. Her denial cemented the decision to keep us far away from her step-mother for nearly eight years.

Silence consumed us as our mother sobbed for her loss. Silence was the anger that shattered our sense of childhood. I spent my adolescent years in a home run by absentee parents, leaving me to my own devices. No one woke me up for school or made sure I did my homework. My dropping out could have been predicted by anyone with life experience. The drugs, drinking, and partying at a young age only served as a lesson in wasting time. I became grateful for these experiences after realizing no one even noticed if I was home within designated curfew hours. I moved two hours away when I turned eighteen, burning bridges and walking away without looking back for my mother.

I swallowed anger, abandonment, truth, bitter resentment, and apologies, along with my pride, on a lengthy road trip to see my grandmother when I was 24 years old. The words, “I missed you” struck me, along with a suffocating embrace. I ran to my grandmother as if I were once again seven years old. “I love you” trickled over the scar tissue of wounds I thought once healed. “You’re an amazing mother” brought me to my knees when I took my son to meet my grandmother and sister for the first time. Finally, I felt comfortable staying the night in my grandmother’s home after a year of frequent visits; I found the guest room decorated in photos of my grandfather and me. Carefully placed ornaments, made by my sister and me with our grandparents, sat atop the dresser that matched the bed with the mirrored headboard. Silent tears fell as I came to understand that the love, given selflessly to children dealt a bad hand, had never wavered.
“You’re grounded! Get out of my face and go to your room!”

Growing up as the oldest was hard enough. Being the only male child made it harder. Having two younger siblings meant that I was the leading example for my two sisters. They would have to learn from both my mistakes and accomplishments that defined me during my formative years. And there were several mistakes.

The first time I remember being punished was the third grade; I had gotten detention for causing a commotion in the classroom. The problem was that I never told my parents. After detention, I somehow missed the after school bus and had to call my step-father to come and pick me up. He asked me why and I lied, telling him that the vice principal had kept me for “no reason.” Big mistake. My dad came to the school and marched directly to the vice principal's office, demanding an explanation. I believe my rear end stopped growing that day, thanks to the spanking.

This was my life as a child. I’d do something insanely stupid, get caught, and then get punished. Some were just simple week long restrictions followed by laborious chores around the house. Others were a little more severe. The garage was the location where most of the corporal punishment was carried out during my youth. The worst one I ever endured was the day my step-dad caught me smoking.

Three weeks into being a high school freshman, one of my new classmates brought over a pack of Marlboros that he had confiscated from his mom. Believing that the heat and smoke would rise, we puffed the smoke out of my second story bedroom window. Twenty minutes later, we exhaled our last nicotine fueled breath of air that day, and Daniel left, leaving the cigarettes behind. Five minutes later, Karma taught me a lesson as my step-dad got home early.

On a normal afternoon, I wouldn’t worry about him being home. The usual afternoon routine involved him heading to his room, stripping off his grease-stained overalls, and taking a shower. Not on that day. Instead of bypassing the stairs that led the way to my bedroom, he ascended. It
was the sound of his work boots stepping on that third stair riser that sparked the reality of what was happening, and I frantically began my attempt to dispose of the evidence of my first ever tobacco indulgence. Before I could make it to the trash can, my door swung open, reminding me that I forgot to lock my bedroom door.

“Stop right there and get your ass over here right now boy!”
Dejected and deflated, I walked over and knew that trouble was coming.
“Open your mouth.”
I complied.
“Let me smell your hands.”
I lifted each hand as he put his nose close, and inhaled before he spoke again.
“I want you in the garage in five minutes, and you better bring whatever cigarettes you have with you!”

That day, he met me in the garage, still dressed in his overalls, with a lighter in his right hand and a belt in his dominant left. Before wrapping the inch-and-a-half leather strap around my behind, I was forced to smoke the remaining six cigarettes left in the slightly crumbled red and white pack, in front of him. It was then that I decided that I was going to leave home as quickly as I could when I was older. I hated being his whipping boy. I hated him.

Three years after the cigarette whipping, I got the chance to move out on my own. I had gotten a job out of high school, and saved enough money to get my own place. I left like a thief in the night, never saying goodbye, leaving only the curtains and the dresser my step-dad inherited from his father.

It took another five years before I returned. I had bounced around from place to place during that time but always remained within ten miles of the family home. I received several promotions in those years and I had just finished making payments on my first car when I decided it was time to go home. I did not anticipate the welcome I received that Saturday afternoon.

When I knocked on the front door, I expected to have a simple conversation at the front door with him glaring at me. Instead, my step-dad let me in and gave me the biggest embrace he had ever given me in my twenty-three years of life. The tears that were streaming down his face dampened the right shoulder of the cotton T-shirt I was wearing.

That afternoon and night, we talked about anything we could come up with to talk about. We discussed my job and the promotions. He showed me his latest project car (a 1996 Ford Mustang Shelby), and we talked about my mother, their divorce, and how my sisters were doing during the whole transition.

Then we went to the garage. The garage where my backside suffered and I saw him at his worst.

I saw an article once that said that it’s not until an individual reaches their early to mid-twenties, that he starts to have a good relationship with his parents. Mine started that day. Gone were the feelings that my step-dad was the worst person in the world. No longer did I feel like I hated him. Instead of remembering the twenty or thirty times I had been grounded as I grew up, things had changed. I looked at him as someone who cared enough to teach me discipline.

I apologized several times for leaving so abruptly and for not keeping in touch. When we cracked open an ice-cold beer in the garage I once wanted to burn down to the ground, he said the most important thing he ever said to me.

He began by telling me that he always knew that I would be able to survive on my own and that when I left, he felt empty and ashamed. He understood he had been hard on me and that the discipline my sisters received was not as severe when they got in trouble. He rarely laid a hand on them, only spanking them once or twice. He finished by saying the phrase that made me love him even more that day.

“You’ve done better than I could have ever imagined. Despite my failings as your step-father, I’m proud of you, son.”

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The Little Red Hair Girl

Necole Beach

Growing up in inner city Baltimore, Maryland, was difficult. The gangs, crime, crackheads. For example, the exterior of my grandmother’s house was a common filming location on the television show “The Wire.” However, for me, my most challenging struggle has been on the inside.

I used to hate the way I looked. Who ever heard of a red head, freckled face black girl. Sure, as a little girl adults would say how cute I was. But I never felt that way. You must understand, most girls first sense of what a beautiful woman is would be her mother. Except I looked nothing like my mother. Until my brother was born, I didn’t look like anyone in the family. I thought my mother was gorgeous. She has perfect skin, a lovely chocolate complexion and radiant black hair. My mom was shaped like The Commodores’ song. A brick house. “Why can’t I look like my mom?” I would say to myself.

Once I started school I was exposed to more diverse looking kids. Yet I still felt awkward. Don’t get me wrong it wasn’t just my looks. I was the very definition of a nerd. From my bright colored hair to my second hand, out of style clothing, my appearance said loser all over. One day during the first week of school a little boy ran up to me. I thought he was going to ask to play. Nope! He pointed at me and said “you look like Pippi Longstocking.” Now we all know once one kid starts the name calling, all the rest follow suit. I wanted to cry as they all laughed and sung the song from that movie. There was nothing left for me but beat that little boy up. And beat him up I did. Or at least smacked him up good enough that he never looked in my direction again. From that day forward I refused to let my mother put pigtails in my hair. They were officially banned!

When I got to middle school, I had pretty much assembled together a group of misfits like myself. We were a tight group. Losers to everyone else. But something started to change. My girlfriends started to grow boobs. “This isn’t fair, where the Hell are mine?” I thought. One morning, I asked my mom “when will my bosom grow?” “What are you talking about child?” she asked. “My friends have already started getting them,” I replied. “You can’t control when your body grows” she said. So off I stomped to my room to re-inspect my chest for any new developments. Nevertheless, one day I noticed I began to grow a little something in the chest area. Very little. Surely this can’t be it. I truly hated my life!

Sometime later I found myself in high school. Finally, I was ready to reinvent myself. Before transitioning from middle school, we were given the opportunity to apply to a college preparatory high school. And I had been accepted. “Perfect” I thought. Now I can become who I wanted to be with a new group of kids. I remember storming into my mother’s bedroom one evening. “Mom, I need to dye my hair before school starts,” I demanded. “Absolutely not,” she said sternly. “Why not?” I asked. Because it will make your hair fall out, besides you are only fourteen. “Not fair” I thought. Surely by now she knew how much I despised my hair. I was fuming. My mother was ruining my life!

The first day of school soon arrived and I was going to pull out all the stops despite not being able to color my hair. I put on my best 5-7-9 outfit with my brand-new Reeboks and off I went. My school was huge. It was built to look like a castle. As I entered the intimidating structure something caught my eye. More like someone. A boy. God, he was cute. But before I had time to awkwardly stare at him like I typically did to boys, the first period bell started to ring. Later that day I met up with my best friend from middle school. Our classes were next to each other, so she walked with me. As we walked down what seemed to be a massive hallway, I spotted him. He was standing in the door of my geometry class. I grabbed her arm and squeezed. “That’s the boy I told you about,” I said. He was gorgeous. Six foot two with blue eyes. He was wearing Timberlands and baggy jeans, my favorite. Our eyes met. It felt like he was staring into my soul. I felt naked and vulnerable, yet somehow like he saw me for me. Not the nerd I thought I was. He smiled and went into the classroom. It felt like I hadn’t taken a breath for minutes. Meanwhile my friend had been telling me to stop squeezing her arm. “Sorry, but he is so hot. I have to make him mine,” I proclaimed.

Eighteen years have passed and we are now married with two wonderful boys. I no longer remember what happened once I went into that classroom. All I know is that was the day that I saw myself through fresh eyes. I began to believe that I was beautiful. Worthy of being admired.

So what if I was different. Different is unique, not ugly. Sometime ago I asked my husband if he remembered the day we first saw either. His response was, of course I do. How could I ever forget the beautiful little freckled face, red haired girl from the hallway?
I was never good enough. Regardless of the countless pencils lost in the oblivion of pages, I was never good enough. Regardless of the relentless work ethic developed through the need to contribute to the constant payment of backbreaking bills, I was never good enough. Regardless of the devotion towards my morals and ethics to strive towards being the perfect son, I was never good enough. Despite all of my doubts, I indeed know, it was never about being good enough. Like the Grim Reaper looming over a terminal patient, my father’s shadow shrouded my entire existence.

My father originates from an ancient relic of a town that we deduce resembles the dust-swept city of Babylon from his descriptions. Growing up in Ramallah, Palestine, my father Ibrahim Ajaj views life as a baby gazing upon its mother’s face for the first time, with utter contentment. Needless to say, the head of the Ajaj household impressed the traditional values held by all Muslims upon me at a young age. Even though that smile never wavered, I could see through the visage of my father at supper. I was able to see the years of turmoil and anguish my father had endured in his sixty-three years in this lifetime that enabled him to now lay his head to rest every night and feel satisfied by both his accomplishments and failures. For although my father had failed in becoming a famous man throughout the world, he was content with his ability to create a beautiful and loving family.

The prefix “Abu” in the Arabic language has no English equivalent, yet it is a mainstay phrase in any Arab home that carries the weight of the world upon its shoulders. The prefix is not as simple as the English “Sir”; this prefix is the ultimate title bestowed on any Muslim or Arab man. It is a title meaning father.

Unfortunately, I would never be so bold as to label my father and me close. In Muslim-American households, it is not uncommon to see the frequent clash of differing ideals wage war over a cup of coffee. When traditional values waged war with a Millennial’s thought, it was no surprise that my father and our relationship was tense. Yet, through the countless arguments and matches to see who could strain their vocal cords the best, my father has always stood as a symbol of solidarity and comfort. In my early teenage-years, I gazed upon my father as I bore my resentment that bled through the cracks of our relationship and morphed it into the shattered image of glass that it has become today. However, regardless of the disagreements we share, overshadowing the constant arguments, there lies mutual respect between father and son that ultimately permeates through the cracks of the seemingly translucent glass.

I only recently understood the truth behind my father’s harsh teachings and life philosophies that I thought redundant. “There are no such thing as friends,” he would often say in a voice coated with the tang of classical Arabic fused with the English language, “only family.” This phrase, amongst others such as, “That’s not the way our people do things,” only served to widen the gap of misunderstanding between us. I, being a modern day Arab-American born in Fairfax, Virginia, never quite agreed with the whole concept of isolating others outside of our family’s culture. I remember the time I actually asked my father whether or not I could invite a friend over to a breaking of the fast during the holy Muslim month of Ramadan; at the mention of this, my father almost choked on his coffee.

It was during my graduation from high school where I started to unearth my father’s rough philosophy on life and treatment towards me. After the usual photo opportunities graduates undergo, along with some tears shed by all, my immediate family took a trip to my aunt and uncle’s house. First, the women brewed the coffee while the men spoke in rushed, garbled Arabic about politics as I desperately attempted to keep up with the conversation, pulling on every ounce of Arabic learned through the years as guidance. Midway through the conversation, I had caught my name amongst the clutter of the classical language. Yet, it was not solely my name in isolation in the conversation as it would have been if someone were calling for me. It rather seemed like my Moroccan name was being used to speak about my father as an individual rather than me.

I came to this realization like when we finally understand the answer to a question that has been eluding us for so long.

Abu-Rashad was what every one of my Arab speaking family members called my father. The more I sought after that phrase in conversation, the more I found it. It was then when I had conclusively begun to understand. My father never relished in speaking about his past; much of it is still shrouded in secret from his children. Ultimately,
I never will know what exactly my father went through in his youth, or even the relationship between him and my late grandfather, but when I hear his title, Abu-Rashad, being tossed around the conversation, I understood then that I was an extension of my father.

It is a popular stereotype that in many Middle Eastern countries, the eldest son is often hailed as a prince amongst the family and treated as such, yet if that were the case then what was the reason for my father’s hard teachings? Every moment my father answered to Abu-Rashad, I could recognize the glint of pride for his son staining his raven eyes. My father looked upon me as not what he was, but what he wanted to be, what he strived so hard to be in his youth. So I understand my father’s rough philosophies on life and towards me, but what I once thought to be just a dissatisfied parent, I now know to be an individual who only wants to provide the best for his legacy-bearer, and ensure that I never have the doubts that are so easily traced on his wrinkled face.

In the classical Arabic language, the prefix, “Ibn” is also a title similar to Abu, given to the first sons of families that originated in Mecca where our religion began. While Abu is a title held with great pride, Ibn is a title that serves to inspire the male Muslim youth to strive towards the excellence that is our culture, our people, and our fathers. My father is known as Abu-Rashad, the Father of Rashad, and amongst my family’s inner circles, I am referred to as Ibn-Ibrahim: The Legacy of Ibrahim Ajaj. Lying deep within the crevices of my character, the potential to be as great a man as my father is ever so present.


I had to remind myself to breathe as I looked at my opponent staring back at me. While he stood there, slightly hunched over, breathing at a quickened pace, I thought about my next move and how I could finish him off for good. For almost an hour now we had been competing against each other. Now, up 5 games to 2 in the second set, all I needed was two more points and I would win the match. Victory was right there for the taking.

I took three more deep breaths before I bounced the tennis ball twice, stood up straight, tossed it in the air and served it across the court. Jeff, my opponent for this high school singles tennis match, returned my serve with a skilled forehand and the battle for the point began. For what seemed like five minutes of continuous back and forth, we hit the ball across the net. A forehand return from the left side was met by a backhand screamer down the line. A well-placed drop shot over the net, returned by a skillful lob to keep the point going. On and on we went until I made a mistake and the ball sailed wide, giving him the point. Then the unanticipated happened. My foe found new life and won the next three points and took the game from me. Before I could catch my composure, Jeff had won five games in a row and took the second set. On to a third and final set we went, my victory in the match was no longer a certainty. I was scared, but more importantly, I was angry. Not at Jeff or myself, but at those who were standing on the sideline.

During the exchange of strokes, Jeff’s teammates were clapping and cheering him on. On my sideline, my teammates were all laughing and joking around. With each successful point he won, the louder the cheers got and the praises he received began to rain down, and all I could hear from the players who were supposed to be supporting me were chuckles and the stories of the activities from the previous night.

“Atta boy Jeff”, “Nice shot dude”, “You got this, take him down” were all the words I could focus on. Every word, every hand clap, every verbal pat on the back, fueled his confidence, while for me, my blood
began to boil. With the final point of the set having been lost, I walked off the court for the in between set break and let my team know exactly how I felt. The problem was, is that I did not just use my words.

Before there were smart phones with cameras and websites showing acts of violence that lived forever on the World Wide Web, people had to recall events from memory if they want moments to live on. I remember every expletive and every kick I made that day. The Gatorade jug, my spare tennis racket, and even the chain link fence felt my wrath. No one said a word to me as I slammed things into the ground and knocked over tennis ball container after tennis ball container in my fury.

My tirade continued like this until I looked up in the stands at the actual faces in the crowd. It was when I saw her that everything changed. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and absolutely stunning, Shana Thompson sat in the top row. Three days prior when we met for the first time, I had invited her to come watch me play and I was surprised that she actually came. Our eyes met, and everything stopped. The rage had left me and now new emotions were coming over me. Embarrassment, shame, and disappointment took over as she looked at me with a stunned look in her eyes. My heart dropped as I realized that what she saw was me at my worst, and even if I were to win the match, I could never undo what she just saw.

Twenty-six years later, I still remember the events of that day just as clearly as when it happened. I lost the match 4-6, 7-5, and 6-0 and never came close to winning a game in that final set. My victory had been taken away from me, and I learned I had an anger problem. A double whammy against what could have been my greatest match.

Shana never got the apology that my teammates did, nor did I ever get the chance. When she left the stadium that day that was the last time that I saw her. There were no cell phone texts, Facebook messages, or Instagram apps for me to try and salvage a smidgen of dignity. To be honest, I am glad there wasn’t. Otherwise, I would have never learned how to breathe.

The sun is high and bright without a cloud in the sky. As it shines through my windows making the terracotta colored walls look the part of a sunset. I smile at the sight then shiver remembering it snowed and the temperature dropped to an ultimate low of 22 degrees from a sadly comfortable 32 degrees. To keep from getting frost bitten feet, I tiptoed back to the bedroom fast as my frozen toes allowed me. Shifting through my top drawer, I search for my fuzzy socks to put over the pair already on my feet, then throw on my favorite gray NAVY sweater. I walk back proudly in the sunset room and canvass the place full of moving boxes and crates. I stretch filling my lungs with the lingering cold air.

I turn on my radio to the Mardi Gras station and start rearranging the boxes, putting them in the appropriate rooms. It’s amazing, no matter how many times we move, have garage sales or just give away items, I always accumulate so much stuff. But I’m lucky enough to have kept an item or two with memories that will turn into keepsakes. Today I found my keepsake hidden behind a tall painting with bold red circles and dark brown squares. I carefully pull and lift the 20 x 24 oil painting off the floor. I carry it to the kitchen table where I left the dust rag and cleaning supplies. As I reach for the thin cloth I examine the keepsake for any cuts or scratches, to my surprise there are none.

The blackish cherry wood frame has very detailed carvings, making it hard to clean the dust out of every nook and cranny with only a cloth. So I go on to cleaning the canvas. In the painting the gentleman is wearing traditional black tuxedo suit with his dark brown hair combed straight back. Though the gentleman commands attention, however, it is the lady who is the main focus. Her dress is green, representing the earth, has prints of red apples, orange pumpkins, and red-yellow marigolds. The fruits and flowers are as if they were freshly harvested from a farm, and gently placed upon the dress. The couple both have their eyes gently closed, only listening to the music and sensing each other’s touch and movement.
They are so close together, if it wasn’t for her dress there wouldn’t be a way to tell them apart. Their dance form is very formal; the kind of form you would see in a waltz. As he dips and spins her she combs her fingers through his hair. She feels her own long wavy hair swing and lift, with the help of the wind, off her back. This gives his properly placed hand just enough time to feel the warmth of her silky skin. The background fades, just like the old movies, highlighting only the couple while everything around them turns into a burgundy black.

To me this painting has always exude togetherness and love. So I hang the painting where everyone can see and enjoy, across from the window the sun shines through. Now when anyone walks through the door they will feel the warmth of not only the sunset, but of the togetherness and love that fills the home.

Forbidden

Glenda Diane Smith

Passion forced by desire
Weakened by his fiery stare
I am a helpless moth drawn to the fire

At night I sleep on a bed of barb wire
It pierces my skin in this nightmare
I am nothing more than a liar

His love is all I require
In this forbidden love affair
I am a helpless moth drawn to the fire

A beast with horns in uncontrolled ire
Judging me with a blood red glare
I am nothing more than a liar

My hunger takes me higher
The cravings are so unfair
I am a helpless moth drawn to the fire

Feelings of guilt will transpire
With a broken heart beyond repair
I am a helpless moth drawn to the fire
I am nothing more than a liar
Barriers
Daimion Mulligan

August 28th, in 1963
I had a dream
White
Black
Brown
Yellow
Or Purple
We all should’ve agreed
Our civil liberties
Constituted me
Him, her
And you too!
Depression nomore
As oppression
Exited the door
When up-keeping relations
No longer a chore
Where racial profiling
Lived then died
Color barriers broken
Destroyed
But I woke up…
It’s September 2016
And the civil unity
I dreamed for you and me
Has faded from the forefront
Oppression still present
Foolishness evident
My day
August 28th, in 1963
Was just a dream.

In the Rueful Sideview
Joanne Teague

What have I done? She desperately questioned herself . . .
as if a less tragic answer would suddenly emerge
and transform her tale from this dreadful dirge
Please wake up. Please, she pleaded
not only of herself, but of this whelp
who once let out a shocking yelp
She shrieked internally, silent, dethreading her nerves
Moments pass, but not this one
deadly sins cannot be undone
What was I supposed to do?
I couldn’t stop.
He chased the damn dog.
I couldn’t stop.
A chilling knell rang through glass
as icy fingers gave a ghastly tap
on the window of the calamitous car
which, though stopping short, went much too far
Her neck of rusted gears from all those tears
hesitantly turned as she wiped her face
Y . . . you . . . . you’re . . .
“I’m cold. Why did you hurt me?”
a small, frail voice decried
in disbelief at what she’d espied.
Then a howling wind came to impart
a notion which had broken her heart
There in her side mirror laid
the bloody shoes
of one
who now
will never play
Room of Regret and a Lost Soul

Jessica Peterson

The front desk receptionist forces a tired smile and greets me with words I’m sure she’s repeated several times that day. I mimic her smile, barely making eye contact. We walk to an old, worn elevator with creaking doors and a close button that doesn’t work. I push the button several times anyways until the doors close. It opens to a floor I’ve never been to before. Silently, I follow everyone through the maze of hallways to an empty room. There’s an intercom on the wall. Father pushes a button and speaks to someone to buzz us in. I read the visitation hours while we wait. The doors unlock and we walk in, footsteps out of sync. A machine continuously beeps, echoing ominously through the white halls. I glance into a room as we pass by. Two people stand by a bed, holding the hands of the person lying with her eyes closed. Another sits in a chair in the corner of the room, their head in their hands.

We make it to the end of the hallway, greeting our relatives who had been waiting. I peer into the room beside us; my uncle standing by the bedside. Slowly, we take turns going into the room, putting on rough, yellow robes and smelly latex gloves. I go in with my sister and watch as she greets my aunt. Tubes and wires ran everywhere. One tube coming from her throat, helping her breathe. A cast on her left arm and swollen hands made for a miserable sight. They told me to say something to her, but what do I say to someone who might not hear me? Her eyes wander, her mouth sometimes moves, but can she even see us? I keep looking through meaning in her gestures, yet I knew there was nothing to make of it. I say similar lines to what I’ve heard from everyone else. My sister and I fought back tears as our uncle recounts tales of her. Our uncle steps out so my mother could have a turn. She comes in, leaning close to my aunt and speaks loudly and clearly. She asks her if she’s ready to rest. Of course she’s ready.

Mother says her goodbyes as does my sister. I hold my aunt’s hand, regret filling my gut and a lump in my throat. So much I want to say, yet I can’t say it. I should’ve come here sooner. You’ve been in and out for almost a year now. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. Does what I say even matter anymore? A week ago I was told there was no brain activity, but I barely reacted. On my way here, I barely felt anything. It wasn’t until I saw the defeated looks of my relatives that I felt something. I wasn’t sad until I saw the pain of everyone else. Am I a bad person? I should say something now. You probably wouldn’t want me to see you like this. I don’t want to see you like this. My grip tightens slightly. “I’m glad I got to see you. Rest easy now.”
I’ve thought and thought
And thought again
About the advice I would give myself
To make my life
A better one to lead
I think most people make the mistake
Of thinking of their life like a piece of art
And they want to make it as perfect as possible
So that maybe one day
It will hang in a museum
And go down in history
As the best life lived
But I’m an artist
And when my paintbrush hits the canvas
It leaves more mistakes than purposes
The thing about paint on a canvas is
It doesn’t wash off
You can scrub and scrub
And scrub again
But there will still be that tint of purple you started with
And you’re not about to throw away a $100 canvas
So you paint over the purple
And with a few more mistakes
It turns into art
And when you look at it
You can still see a small tint of purple
But that’s what makes it glow
Mistakes aren’t supposed to be forgotten
We make them for a reason
Just because you can’t see the reason yet
 Doesn’t mean there isn’t one
That tint of purple made the painting what it was
And without it
It would be something different
So if I had one piece of advice for myself
It would be
To go buy a canvas
And don’t paint on it
Hang it on your wall
Stare at it everyday
Then realize how boring it is without paint
There isn’t a single artist that can paint without making a mistake
So would you rather stare at a perfect patch of nothing?
Or embrace the beautiful gallery of lessons learned