ChannelMarker
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Please visit www.tcc.edu/channelmarker for submission guidelines and read ChannelMarkers volumes 1–5
Cover painting by Donna Donlin, TCC Visual Arts Center
Preface

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

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

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

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

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

Phyllis Gowdy
Literary Festival Committee, Chair
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This summer I forced my son, now a junior, to start looking at colleges. I could tell he enjoyed this project by the way he rolled his eyes and groaned whenever I mentioned it.

Poor guy. It’s not that he won’t get into a college. I just think it’s not on his radar, and I don’t want him to end up like me: a 40-year-old freshman trying to blend in with teenagers.

It’s daunting to undertake at an entire college curriculum as an older woman. I know I’ll eventually get my degree. But since I’m grabbing classes here and there, my grandchildren will probably have to wheel me across the stage to pick up my diploma.

There was never a lot of “me time” to begin with so adding classes to my weekly schedule—which already included bringing up a family, fund-raising for my son’s crew team and working full-time—brought new meaning to the word “cram.”

I’ve skimmed flash cards while waiting in drive-thru, read chapters while stirring spaghetti and once, in a fit of bad judgment, tried to memorize a vocabulary list in the shower. Water + paper = bad.

Since many of my classes are at night, and my husband often travels, I’ve been forced to leave three mischievous boys home alone. They don’t just find trouble; they seek it out, invite it in and coax it to stay.

Last semester I came home early and was greeted by three ski-suit and helmet-clad boys using a mattress as a sled on the stairs. There was also a lake-sized puddle in my kitchen—all that remained of a failed attempt at ice cube skating. They were playing Olympics. At least they had the good sense to protect their thick heads.

College, as we all well know, is expensive. There aren’t many offers of scholarships when the scholar is not fresh out of high school, so I’m paying the whole bill out of my pocket. Since my pocket usually holds the grocery money as well, we’re all eating like college freshmen. Let’s see, Mommy just had to pay for books, tuition, lab fees and parking stickers so enjoy that Ramen, kids.
I like to think of it as pre-conditioning. I’m certain they’ll thank me later for those cast-iron stomachs.

Classes at my age are mentally challenging as well. Since I’m paying good money, I believe in maximizing the classroom experience. This is, I’ve learned, not good freshman behavior.

I wasn’t aware of this until I was taken aside by a peroxide princess who suggested that if I, like, wasn’t raising my hand all the time, she could, you know, be home in time to watch “The Bachelorette.”

I’m not always the oldest person in the classroom, but somehow my professors zero in on me. One instructor told the story of how she fled her home country 23 years ago—a time she doubted anyone in the class would remember. Then her eyes locked on mine and she recanted. “Well, maybe one of you remembers.”

Of course I remember—it was part of my government final in high school.

In another class, the professor took it upon himself to give his students the benefit of his advice about interviewing for a job. Naturally, he picked me as an example of what not to wear.

My outfit, he explained, wasn’t suitable because my clothing, all black, made me look “like a badass.” Now, it’s true he’s got the degree and I don’t, but I haven’t met many biker chicks who wear tailored slacks and cashmere sweaters.

Why didn’t he pick on the girl in front of me? She had fingernails so long they resembled 10 little backhoes. Or the guy next to me, who was wearing a slouchy, purple and gold, velour, jogging suit that made him look like a walking Crown Royal bag?

I hope at the end of all of this, I will truly be considered competitive in the job market while still being young enough to enjoy it.

I’m hoping my kids will have forgiven me for ignoring them in favor of studying, and I’ll have forgiven all the vapid, vacuous bimbos who tried to get between my 4.0 and me.

If nothing else, for a little while, I get to put my own grades on the refrigerator, borrow pencils from my kids, rifle the cushions for soda machine change, and beg someone else to do my laundry.

In a lot of ways, I’m just like every other student in America, which is oddly comforting.
Grocery List Passed By On Street

By Jade Chandler-Haag

Honey
sweet melody
heralds her passing,
carried on
Meat
-y thighs, proud
and strong in who
she is. Hips swaying like
Pears
heavy on the branch,
ripe in the noon
sun. Joyously, plump
Strawberry
lips spread into
a smile, reaching
golden delicious
Apples
her cheeks, genuine,
when the smile touches her
eyes, newly washed
Blackberries
glistening in a bowl
of heavy cream, making you
warm like freshly baked
Bread
minutes from the oven,
steam curling up, butter
melting. She is true.
Coffee
hair caught in a breeze, framing
her face, leaving vanilla
dreams in her wake.
The Jewel is in the Lotus

Carl Windell Ward

“...One must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise...”
Henepola Gunaratana on Vipassana Meditation

Sweating the box of burgundy swilled the night before, Gatlin lay in bed. It was already early afternoon, and the sun was glaring in vertical shafts of heat through the grimy, unshutably bent blinds nailed slipshod to the only window in his one-room apartment. The dirty sock he used to cover his eyes from daylight’s harshness did little to quell today’s unspeakably brilliant sun. In spite of his impromptu sleeping-mask’s stench, Gatlin directed his attention to his breathing, to the in and out movement of air through his wheezing nostrils, clogged as they were with an unusual mass of nicotine-stained mucous. Snorting hard, he gathered a chunk of phlegm just above his tonsils and spit it into the large Mason jar he kept by his air mattress for the purpose of urination in the event he was too hung-over to walk to the toilet.

Today was such a day, but more important, today was a new day, a special day. Today, Gatlin would rid himself of that Mason jar, along with every other possession he valued and to which he was “attached.” After relieving and then pleasuring himself (as he did in that precise order every morning), Gatlin hobbled to the shower to cleanse his body for the last time—as a layman. Beginning today, Gatlin would fully commit, would join the “Sangha,” and begin his journey toward “Enlightenment.”

***

After his body rinse, while gazing at his bloodshot face in the cracked, steam-tinted mirror, Gatlin again turned his attention to his breath, to its flow through his nostrils—in for a count of ten, out for a count of ten. He rubbed a solution of three parts water to one part baking soda under his armpits and between his thighs and swished
a generic mouthwash around his gums and teeth for precisely one minute, or three sets of in and out breaths, those breaths toward which Gatlin was trying very hard to focus his attention. (He thought for a moment about the fact that using mouthwash was as effective as flossing for removing plaque. He felt a sensation of gratitude for this fact, followed by a shudder at remembering his aversion to flossing. Then he tried remembering where he had read this fact. Suddenly, he remembered he had seen it on television, on a commercial for Listerine. Then he remembered hearing Doctor Sanjay Gupta on CNN talk about this fact and about how the study which reported this finding was, unsurprisingly, sponsored by Listerine. Then he felt a physical sensation of disgust brought on by an intellectual sensation of moral superiority which caused him to audibly grumble at the greedy, shortsighted, corporate ruling elite who manipulated the media into dumbing-down the general public so as to sell more of their products to an already strapped working class for the sinister purpose of controlling more of civilization’s wealth.)

At this point, his most-likely gingivitis gums started to burn and Gatlin spit the mouthwash into the sink, with some vehemence, and yanked the half-empty bottle from the medicine cabinet, dumping its remaining contents into the commode. It was then that he noticed a whistling noise coming from his nose, caused by some emergent blockage. He suddenly remembered he had dropped his attention from his breathing! He had become a victim of the “Monkey-Mind Phenomenon,” and he urgently refocused his awareness on the flow of air as it moved in and out through the “delicate gates of life” that were his nostrils, after blowing from them, into a few folded sheets of toilet paper, a slimy, oyster-like mass.

Gatlin ran his fingers through his dampened, matted locks and stared at his bloated reflection, trying to imagine himself bald. Knowing what had to be done, he grasped his Norelco Fancy Trimmer while remaining conscious of his breathing. Following the in and out breath of air around the rims of his nostrils, he flicked on the power switch: silence. Agitated, he momentarily stopped breathing while shifting his gaze up to the fluorescent bulb above the bathroom mirror. Wincing at its brightness, he noticed the empty electrical socket. “Fuck,” he thought. He opened the vanity’s center drawer to search for the razor’s power plug and rummaged for a few seconds amongst the lotions, matchbooks, Tylenol packets, Q-tips, and dull nail clippers before seizing the thin wire with its phallic insertion jack which connected at the other end to the black-box power source. Jamming the jack into
the underside of the razor, he plugged the power source into the socket over his head and flicked the switch: nothing. “Shit,” he mumbled, and, tossing the Norelco onto the counter, he stomped from the bathroom to find his Tracfone.

***

“Chrissie,” he said with gravity and precise diction over the crackling of a weak signal, “I need you to come over right away and bring your father’s beard trimmer.”
“What for?”
“So you can help me shave my head.”
“Are you serious?” she said.
“Dead serious. If I am to practice the Dharma with any truth, it is absolutely vital that I adopt the external as well as the internal. My appearance is a crucial aspect of my commitment to the Sangha and to The Way.
“You’re a retard.”
“Do not argue. One day you will understand. As a Bodhisattva, I promise to remain in the world to help all sentient beings escape the Wheel of Birth and Death. I will aid you, too, in your quest for Nirvana,” he said, wondering what teen spirit did, in fact, smell like. He then returned his focus to his nostrils and so to his breath. “And please stop by the Dollar Tree and pick up some candles and incense for my ceremony, for which you’ve already promised to join me.”
“Whatever,” she said.
“I do not expect you to fully understand. You have not yet chipped away at the wall of illusion that hides you from the truth. Ignorance is a primary hindrance. Remember this prayer: ‘May all beings everywhere, with whom we are inseparably interconnected, be fulfilled, awakened and free. May there be peace in this world and throughout the entire universe, and may we all together complete the spiritual journey.’ Remember this prayer like a mantra. And please stop by the 7-11 and get me a pack of Marlboro Lights, in a box.”

***

Later that evening, with a bumpy, bald head ripely shaved, Gatlin tripped walking into the King’s Hospital Thrift Store, his nose landing squarely between the buffed and shiny breasts of an otherwise filthy, headless mannequin, which broke his fall. Before picking himself up,
Gatlin lay for a moment on top of the naked and plastic humanoid, wishing to refocus on his breathing. He followed, with perfect attention, the in and out movement of air around the rims of his nostrils, from which the new pain in his just banged, left elbow was now distracting him. As he breathed in and out, his awareness shifted from the sensation of air around his nose to the musty stench of the store, emanating from the rows and rows of dusty, moth-riddled clothing surrounding him on all sides like an army of ghosts.

As he lay breathing, he became faintly aware of another stench--that of a cross between the malt vinegar he enjoyed sprinkling on his fried whiting at Captain’s Fish and Chips and the grated parmesan cheese from his refrigerator, which just yesterday he had used to hide the taste of a can of Chef Boyardee ravioli. Finding the combined smells particularly out of context and revolting, Gatlin opened his eyes to find himself staring at a pair of bulbous and calloused feet housed in a pair of tiny, pink flip-flops. It was from between the ten, yellowed toes hanging over the front edge of the rubber sandals that the bottom-of-the-hamper smell originated.

“Are you ok?” sang a voice from above. “Let me help you up.” And suddenly a hairy hand was thrust in Gatlin’s face.

“Fine, thanks,” he said, ignoring the hand. Gatlin pushed himself up on all fours and hovered for an instant above the decapitated, synthetic lady with whom he had just shared a moment, thinking briefly of Chrissie and wondering just how much of a challenge his chosen life of celibacy would be. Using a coat rack covered in what seemed to be furs made of patchwork rodent, Gatlin hoisted himself to his feet. Standing before him was an unshaven, middle-aged man wearing Jordache jean cut-offs, a polyester shirt with a paisley print, an ill-fitting sequined dinner jacket, and clown-sized sunglasses. A lime-green feather boa swirled dramatically about his neck. Stunned by the sight of his would-be rescuer, Gatlin quickly bent down to upright the mannequin. Lifting her by the shoulders, he was arrested by the voice of the stranger.

“May I cut in,” the stranger chuckled and, grabbing the mannequin by the waist, he began twirling it around and around, culminating in a final dip before setting her vertically on her stand. Now slightly broken from the scuffle with Gatlin, she bent crookedly, as if afflicted with severe scoliosis.

“So, what brings you by my little palace?” the stranger inquired and then whispered, “You’re not planning to sue me for the fall, are you?”

“You work here?” asked Gatlin.

“More than that dear. I own the place and it works me!”
“Is that get-up the employee uniform?”
“Oh, no, honey. My friends and I are going to the Elton John concert tomorrow night and we’re picking out some costumes.” The stranger turned and waved to three very well-dressed young men, one of whom had donned a tiara. “But what about you, sweetie? What kind of a disguise are you looking for to go with that haircut--if you can call it that?”

Gatlin looked at the stranger and said, “I’m actually looking for a Bhikkhu’s tunic.”
“A what, honey?”
“A monk’s robe. Something a Tibetan monk would wear. I’m converting to Buddhism tonight.”
“I see,” said the stranger. “And you want to make it official. I have just the thing!”

***

Satisfied that the orange bathrobe would meet his purpose for now, Gatlin left King’s Daughters, making a mental note to ask his mother to sew a Buddha patch over the Holiday Inn Bangkok logo, a patch he felt sure he could purchase on Ebay.
Simon entered the office with great anticipation. Mary offered him some coffee but he politely declined. He didn’t want to be too wired when Artie came in. He sat down on the couch and waited. The couch was very comfortable but Simon found himself sitting on the edge. He needed to relax. He needed to not think about it so he could be calm, cool and collected when Artie came in.

He thought the office was nice and welcoming. The couch was a reddish-brown. It didn’t quite match the curtains. They were bright orange. The sun was casting a beam through them so that you could see the dust particles floating in the air. It reminded Simon of an orange crush freshly poured into a glass as the bubbles danced on the surface. He could see where the couch was supposed to match but with much use the brown had over taken the red. In a strange way it kind of worked with the Early American style tables and book shelf. The end tables reminded Simon of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home. He had gone there as a boy. It was a nice memory. Simon wondered if his office would look like this one. He could see himself in this office with his pictures and his books on the shelf.

Mary popped in to let him know that Artie would be just a little longer. That was very considerate of her. She would be nice to work with. He would have to remember how friendly she was to him.

The fern definitely needed to be watered. It wasn’t dead yet but you could tell it was struggling. Some of the leaves had fallen on the floor. The carpet was brown with tan and black speckles. It looked like a field that had been plowed for some years now. He could almost smell the fresh soil. But that was probably the fern.

Artie finally came in to the office. He was smiling and friendly. Simon didn’t want to be overly excited. He was going to be patient and listen to Artie’s small talk without getting antsy. He was ready to hear the words. Simon was glad to see that Artie was dressed in black Dockers with a coal grey tie with a white shirt. Simon was wearing the same thing but with a different color tie. He was glad that he didn’t
Simon had been working at the company for years and knew who his competition was. He had done his job well; people on the floor liked him. Besides, he was confident that he was the most qualified. And Artie seemed to like him.

This was it. Artie was getting down to business. For weeks Simon had been preparing himself for this promotion. He fantasized about how different his life was going to be; the pay, his own office, the company car. He had already told some of his friends that he thought he was going to get it. Simon was ready. Only these weren’t the words Simon was ready to hear.

How embarrassing.

Simon found it hard to focus on what Artie was saying. Artie was explaining how they made the decision; what factors they based it on and how tough it was for them. Now Artie was telling him that he had a great future with the company. Simon was barely listening. Just enough to nod at the right times and say “sure” and “I understand”. His mind was wondering.

The couch was no longer as comfortable as he thought. He noticed it sunk in a little too much, making it hard to maintain good posture. The brown was also hiding what seemed to be soaked-in blood. It almost made him feel… unclean.

As the sun lowered in the sky, it no longer peeked through the window. Simon’s eyes started to fix on the curtains. They looked like autumn leaves waiting for a breeze to send them down to the floor; the mud. That’s what the carpet looked like, mud from a freshly dug grave. It only made sense with the funeral home furniture and Artie dressed like an undertaker. All he needed was to put on a long black coat and a stove pipe hat.

Simon continued to “sure” and “I understand” Artie but his mind was sinking into the freshly dug grave. All he wanted now was for this conversation to be over. It was weighing on him, dragging him down. This shouldn’t be his funeral. He should be the one feeling sorry for the other guy. He was so sure the position was going to be offered to him. He was crushed.

The more he thought about it the more he realized; he didn’t like this office after all.
Picture

Christina Turner

Picture

We have spent many nights watching the stars dance across the sky, like mini ballerinas in sparkling gowns. I remember the first time you told me, “I love you.” It was a cold night, you spoke those words as soft white snow fell on our faces.

We continue to learn, continue to love, and we are painting a magnificent picture of our lives together, that will hang in the great museum, the galaxy, for all to see.
untitled

Paul Mozley

she is the air that passes through my hands
she is the wind i cannot grasp again
she is gone and won’t come home again
i’ve had enough of them
memories…
The Drecks and Dregs of Public Transportation

Maureen Hutchings

Wearily, dreadfully, I opened my bloodshot eyes and searched for the deafening phone alarm lost somewhere in the abyss of my bed sheets. My mind was scattered from two weeks of New York, two days of airport bustle, on all of maybe two hours sleep. I wanted to close my eyes and slink back into the dark corners of my bed, and delight in heavy slumber for the next 16 weeks.

Apparently I did not see myself as ready for the new semester. My laziness had always plagued me and set me up for horrible predicaments. On the first day of my hopefully second successful semester, I found myself not knowing my schedule, having no books and still having an hour’s worth of transportation ahead of me. Nobody had it as hard as me.

I dragged my objecting body out of bed and managed to appear at my class late, sans coffee and textbook, both attributing to my bad nerves; ahh the perks of being lazy. Embarrassed for not being ready, I steered to the library to assess my schedule. As I read my forecast for the next four months, I realized my schedule was not in my favor. No one had such bad luck, such as I did.

I loathe public transportation. The drecks and dregs of city scum come out at night, attach themselves to the bus stop and leach off of women, and other unfortunate souls of all that are decent. However, ride public transportation I must everyday. I refused to take the bus past five o’clock at night; it is too dangerous, and I am not ashamed to say that I am afraid of what might happen to me.

My agenda dilemma was that my beloved World History class began at 5:30. I had been enlightened by my World History 111 professor, and no matter what I had to face, I was determined to be a part of the 5:30.

“How will you get home?” my conscience would pose; the bus does not run that late on Little Creek, so transportation was always hard for me.
“And the next morning, Maureen, how are you going to manage that?!” the more logical side of my mind would inquire.

Oh, I could do it. So what if I would not get home until 8:30 pm, only to be back on the bus at 6:30 am. I could do it. I would always lie to myself… it is a curse of mine. I would over task, over try, and fall under all the aftermath from either laziness or exhaustion. I would never listen. So, I sat there at the computer and let the mouse drift over the drop/swap link on the screen. I remembered how much I had learned with my professor, how much she had helped me see. It was as if I had sat down in the desk the first day of class, she fitted me for eyeglasses, and I could see world history more clearly. I did not want to lose all that. Reluctantly, I clicked the class away and picked up an 11:00 am class. I had listened to myself. I had enrolled too late for her 1:00 pm class… now I am convinced… I have it harder than anybody. Then the elevator bounded upward to the bookstore.

The Follett book clerk stared at the clock and sighed; she slumped as she put the books in the over stuffed bag. It was true; she did want to stuff 10 pounds of shit in a 5 pound bag just to get back at unruly customers. I was just another face trying to rush her to have my books ready; again, she glanced back to the clock, ready to leave. I never had to pay for my books before because my father always took care of everything for me, but he had to work; therefore, I was left with a blank check and a pen. As the number spilled from the cantankerous cashier’s lips, my ears went numb and the blood in my fingertips ran cold as I wrote the figure - $532.83. No used books this semester; I came too late. I left campus with my overpriced books; I do not know which made them weigh more, the knowledge of their price, or the 5 pound bag that was beginning to rip. Nope, not a soul is in more dire straits than I.

I was leaving my ridiculously hard and tiring day, and walking towards the crowded, dingy bus stop; it was late… too late for me. I looked up and saw a tall man who was stooped, wearing second-hand clothes, and carrying bags. He was approaching me with a limped step and his hand held outward towards me. He frightened me, but I refused to show it. I had been intimidated by weird men at the bus stop for too long, and I refused to show him I was weaker, although he could have knocked me unconscious. As I walked closer to the man, I could tell he was not uncanny like others I knew; but there was still something off. He boldly asked me if I was Spanish.

“No, I’m Italian”, I told him looking straight ahead hoping to end the conversation. But his hand was still held out and then he asked if I could cook. Now I shook his hand, and I was surprised how soft it
was. It was huge, do not get me wrong, but it was like my hand was engulfed in a velour glove; I do not think he worked a day in his life. I gave him a mental once over, but the truth had not clicked with me yet. He asked me if I was married, so I turned around my high school ring and said yes. Then this old man, who I had never met before in my life, asked me to come to his wedding. I said I would try. Then he asked me why I was not afraid of him. He was confused on why I was not running away like the other women had. Puzzled, I listened to him intently.

He said “I’m not bad, I’m autistic”. Simultaneously, his eyes began to well into tears, and my heart began to break. I told him many people are autistic, and it was no one’s fault; people just don’t understand. About ten seconds passed, “You know what they need?” he sobbed “They need to go to church!”; my heart broke harder.

We waited at that bus stop for a half an hour. He told me that he lived at Hope House, and he wanted me to come see him, and asked for other promises I could not keep. He got on the bus, and I assumed he returned home. I often think back to that moment and think about how he changed some part of me. It seems funny how I found a tender, tragic beauty in the drecks and dregs of public transportation.

I was hardly ever so “woe is me” as I was that day, but the combination of events, and my lack of preparation seemed to attribute to my selfishness that day. I do not have it hard at all, and that is fine, I am very grateful; but what am I doing for those who do have it hard—and not because they are lazy?
Sanctuary

By Nicholas Hirsch

Bordeaux said little as they paddled their way along the sunken streets of what had only days ago been New Orleans. People still called it that, but to his eyes this was the same city no longer. This had always been a place where life and death had played together in a complex display that left the world dazzled. New Orleans had become a living myth. Now, death had won over and the city was a myth no longer living. Seeing the people stranded hopelessly on their rooftops and in the high places, praying to God as much as they cursed Him, he was hard pressed to imagine his beautiful home ever restored to its old vibrancy. The Storm had taken all of that away.

Behind him, St. Francis said nothing. Bordeaux could sympathize. His partner wasn’t used to death’s proximity, not like this. And while Bordeaux had long ago lost his family and his lover, St. Francis had a wife and two children, lost somewhere in the wrecked city. They hadn’t gotten out before the storm hit, and there had been no word of them since the deluge began. St. Francis had been on duty for two days now and the worry had taken a visible toll on the man. Bordeaux wasn’t about to ask him if he was alright. He didn’t want the man breaking down right now and all he needed was the slightest provocation to do just that.

One last trip, thought Bordeaux. One more foray into this stinking wilderness. I’ll help St. Francis find his family, and then go find a quiet hole to put myself in until this is all a distant dream.

The barrel of a gun and the scream of a hot bullet filled his mind’s eye for a moment, shocking him into alertness again. No. No more stray thoughts like that one. He’d been keeping that side of himself at bay for too long to give up now. He was still needed. Someone still needed his help. Bordeaux calmed himself by concentrating on the task at hand. Find people, living people. Anyone who was left to be saved. Find them and lead them to safety.

Almost on cue, a woman’s wailing sailed out into the fetid air. Bordeaux couldn’t tell where the sound was coming from. To his
confused ears, it seemed eerily to come from everywhere at once. He looked to St. Francis, whose expression didn’t change as he pointed to the far side of the intersection they’d rowed themselves into.

“There,” he said quietly. His voice was steady and for that Bordeaux was thankful. The other man wasn’t as close to breaking as he’d thought. The woman was sitting on the roof of what had been a hair salon. She was wearing a yellow cotton dress with red flowers, which had been soaked through with brackish water. When they found her, she was on her knees, hands over her face, crying to the heavens. The body of an elderly woman was floating past her, purse ridiculously still clutched in her hand while its contents slowly floated out and away from her, her hair a gray wreath swimming around her head.

“Mama!” the woman on the roof wailed at the body. “Mama!” A loud, constant keening sound escaped from the desolate woman’s frame, as if the whole world was lamenting, using her as its medium. Her pitch rose and she never faltered in her horrified howling. Bordeaux found himself weeping with her, the sound of her grief resonating with something deep within himself. He felt in his heart a mirror of her pain and almost sank into it himself. He couldn’t, though. His duty was to help these people. She needed help. More help than he could give. He tried to clear his mind and ignore his heart.

“Ma’am,” he called. She had stopped her moaning and sank down on her elbows in open-mouthed silence, hands tearing at her face, which registered nothing but blind horror. Her mouth continued to work around the phantom noise, and he wondered for a second if he’d simply lost his capacity to hear. “Ma’am,” he called again, feeling a rising sense of hysterical ridiculous. What of use could he possibly say to her? What question could he ask and expect a reasonable response?

Nevertheless, her blank eyes rose to look at him. He was unsettled by her stare but continued anyway. “Ma’am, I’m with the police. We’re here to help. Someone will be here shortly to get you and take you to safety. Do you understand?” he asked and when she didn’t respond for a moment, he asked again. “Do you understand me? Someone is coming to rescue you. You’ll be alright.”

She stared at him for another moment and then, ever so slowly, she nodded. Her expression seemed to wilt a little, and she lay down along the edge of her perch, staring at the corpse which had now drifted several yards away from her. “Mama,” was all she said, this time with such a dead tone that he doubted she’d ever care about anything else again.

He radioed her location in to headquarters and requested that a rescue squad pick her up on its next rounds. Then he looked to St.
Francis, whose face was impassive. Worry began to build up in Bordeaux for his partner again, worry and helplessness. There was nothing more he could do for the man than he could for the woman on the rooftop. Less, really. He prayed silently that all three of them would survive this intact and rowed on, looking for what other survivors there were to be found.

They abandoned the effort at sunset. Bordeaux could take no more and St. Francis had started to resemble Death Himself. They’d found others, none of them sane or cognizant. What little there was left of the population still in the city was in a deathly state of shock. Many seemed to have been killed by the storm, but their bodies were still moving, blank-eyed as that woman wailing for her corpse mother. Bordeaux felt constantly a dark part of himself rising to the call all around him. *Long for the end,* it begged him. *Make yourself want to die. Tell me you aren’t thinking of it more with every body and every madman shooting at the sky.*

St. Francis was showing definite signs of despair. Every time they encountered one of the wandering fools, those blank, staring eyes, the man looked harder and more terrified. His wife and children were still missing. The sky, perhaps more torturous for it, shone bright as a summer sky could be, blue as laughter, cold even in this hot weather. What God could create such beauty on a day like this? Bordeaux quieted himself, but it was getting harder. He looked to his partner and felt guilty. He had no right to mourn so much. St. Francis shouldn’t be given the excuse. *Be strong,* he thought. *Be strong.* It was almost done. The base was close and they had little left to do but return to it.

Tomorrow would be another day. Another would follow it. There would be days to remember this and days to rebuild. It could end when he was done, Bordeaux knew. He needed to stay for this. He was needed for it. He needed to stay here for St. Francis, who looked almost better as they headed in. If for no other reason, he needed to keep living for this man’s sake. He knew if he died, he’d be followed quickly.

A shadow passed over their boat and both men shuddered involuntarily. One of the old churches stood mocking the light with its silhouette. It was dark against the fading sun and cast itself over the water like some obsidian overlord, reflected as if it were the last tower the world had. It made the Earth look like folly and man a doll with too much feeling in his fragile frame. It might have been a trick of the clouds or his own mind haunting him, but to Bordeaux, it looked like the stone edifice was standing over him, judging as an architect or a priest.

The doors were open and the water flowed in freely. All of the windows had been busted out, either by lunatics or the storm. Not
so different, as far as Bordeaux was concerned. At this point, insanity was insanity, however it took form. He looked to his partner, who was staring at the high-flown cross like it was an angel or God Himself. St. Francis met Bordeaux’s eyes for the second time that day and in them the older man felt his heart sinking again. There was no depth farther than hatred and no deeper a one to hate than one’s own God.

He rowed toward the church with the sense that he was entering a gate to some other place, not knowing if it was heaven or hell he was thinking of. The shadow of the ruined church consumed them, and they knew it was only time that could tell when their unspoken promise was made good. Inside, there was a smell that made Bordeaux glad he’d skipped his lunch. He wondered how many bodies were in here with them. How many living souls? The scent of decay was almost overpowering, but they went on anyway.

The arched doorway was high enough that they could row right in without too much trouble. Once inside, they were met with an almost preternatural darkness. The wall facing the last of the sun’s rays had only one window, the only one left unbroken. Jesus Christ looked solemnly over his broken congregation, one hand raised in stained-glass benediction, the other holding a shepherd’s staff. His image fractured the light into a hundred multi-colored lenses, which hit the wall above the entrance and made a blur of it all. The rafters were draped with sodden tapestries proclaiming joyful hosannas. The boat hit something, and Bordeaux turned on his flashlight. What he saw, and what his light revealed, sent the last of St. Francis’ composure out into the wind.

Bordeaux felt the final shreds of his control slip out of his grasp. This was too much. There was too much to live through. There would never be enough of him to last until he wasn’t useful. Not when the world was capable of this. Too much. He felt his hand going to the revolver he’d kept snug against his hip. It took him a second to realize that the other man had done the same.

“St. Francis,” he said quietly, for there is no other way to speak in a church of the dead than quietly. “Don’t do this. You’ve still got someone out there. They need you.”

“They’re dead or gone,” said St. Francis calmly. Another prerequisite. “Someone needs to stay and help,” Bordeaux replied. His words sounded dead, like the dozen bodies that were floating around the boat he’d been touring this necropolis in all day. They felt mechanical, coming from his mouth, numb from the disconnect. He was in shock or so he excused himself.

“You don’t know how to help any more than I do,” said the other.
They were staring down now, not looking at each other. Jesus watched them both in Tiffany silence. Bordeaux wondered if they would ever be forgiven.

St. Francis shot himself first. The sound was white hot, like it ought to be. Bordeaux heard and saw nothing for a moment and thought he’d been the one to pull the trigger after all. But no, his vision cleared, and who cared if his hearing did. There would be nothing but the soft sound of corpses floating, as corpses will.

He sat staring for a moment, looking at the body he’d been calling St. Francis for as long as he’d known it, never really getting to know the other man until this, their last day in the force. He knew the man had other family, outside of town. They’d be saddened, disappointed that he hadn’t been able to handle it. For a moment, he considered living, just to tell them that their boy had done well for himself. That he’d tried to the very end not to let the Storm get to him. But in the end, he thought better of it. Better to add to the mystery. Better that the legends be made fresh for the future, so that when the city was finally repaired, it would have new stories to tell.

He watched the body twitch for a bit, then raised his pistol, thinking that maybe this was how he’d finally be able to help everyone, always. There was nothing more comforting than the end of sanity.

He shot himself.

The Storm raged on.
The Death of Roadside America

By William Lloyd

The dying neon’s dim glow across the damp asphalt
Reflects on the broken window of a souvenir shop.
Its solemn shadow lost on the blackened floor,
A grim epitaph to the death of roadside America—
Over ten million served,
Mr. Frosty Presiding,
Last chance for gas next 50 miles…
The colorful country rides for cheap cigarettes and fireworks, gone.
Pink flamingos lie shattered in the back of storage sheds
—I have been to Florida…

Endless fields filled with horses and cattle,
—Shopping centers and condos.
Quaint tourist traps,
—Theme parks.
Bright, blurry Sundays at the hamburger
and handmade ice cream shack,
—McDonald’s, Wendy’s, Hardee’s.
Keychain trinkets, wooden peg games, souvenir spoons,
—Cell phones, video games, road rage.

Waiting on the stoplight near midnight,
Looking out the passenger side window,
I see a smiley face drawn by small fingers in the previous days frost,
Simultaneously peering inside the car,
And out toward the strip-malls.
Somehow a torch is passed.
Miracles Travel in Sevens

Kelvin Parker

She peeked out at the world with brown marbled eyes methodically tracing the room. Neglecting to blink, she gently pierced my soul as though my heart had eyes. I quickly gave in and met her stare with a harvest of joy and serenity. Holding a speck of glee as if the only star in the night, she returns the look I gave her mother resulting in this miraculous day. Now closed, her eyes are hidden beneath a blanket of lashes resembling the stroke of a single strand of thread trying to find the hole in a seamstress’ needle. Wedged from her favorite hiding place, I glance up at the calendar and notice: miracles travel in sevens.

Her head is already filled with thin black hair. Like cotton candy, it swirls around with seemingly no end or beginning. I was challenged to imagine it growing beneath the surface of life. My face defined it as a kiss without lips, weightless, yet moist, found only in a dream.

I watched as her little chest rises like a loaf of bread filled with yeast, and falls like water fitting perfectly into its container. Quietly listening, I pressed my ear close to her tiny nose and mouth. I was privileged to hear the faint but purposeful mouthfuls of air being swallowed like a lamb tasting her mother’s milk for the first time. What can compare to the smell of virgin air breathed from an innocent life not yet daunted by the impurities of this world? Surely, this is life in its purest form.

Sensing their first touch, her miniature hands open one by one, each revealing its own map of fold and bends. How could life have given her such a journey so soon? Her fingers are prepared to point out life’s mysteries like the hound points out his master’s prey with the shifting of his nose.

Her pint sized feet are molded in typical lazy “U” fashion as they are hardly a threat to pinch the calluses on her Grandmother’s toe. Using the corner of my sleeve, I fell to temptation and tickled her precious soles. While they mimic each other with mirrored perfection, I enshrined her feet with a kiss, marking them as my possession like the proud farmer marks off the acres of his hard earned land.
Time is used as the gauge to measure the softness of her skin. Intervals of moments learning the silken silhouette I held in my hands is conception brought to the surface. She was as smooth as the granules of sugar in a jar just before dipping the spoon.

Pinkish at birth, I waited ever so patiently for the heated lamp to color her bronze and keep secret the pathway of life revealed by her veins.

Carefully wrapping this priceless gift in soft toned blankets can only be compared to my first kiss. Would I do it right? Would I hold her with the same sensitivity that she unknowingly holds my ego? Will she feel what I feel? Will she know how much I love her with a single mime of my heart? Will she trade her life for mine as I stand poured out and empty? Will she give back to me?

Suddenly, she cries! In an instant, I realize I am cradling the whole of creation. I feel both powerful and weak with neither emotion outweighing the other. The equivalent of a rich man whose money is useless in a foreign land. I listen as she struggles to find her identity in life through wave after wave of innocent screams, lamenting over life outside the womb. I am reduced to tears.

Humbled, yet proud, I hear the calendar voicing the “sevens” of that day; on the seventh day of the seventh month, my seventh child is born. I quickly followed suit choosing seven letters, and named the miracle, “Tabitha.”
Clouded

Theresa Adams

Sky is dark
Limbs down
The rush of the water comes in.

Reflection’s deep
The mind wanders
Anger ravages the soul.

Capture this moment
All else fails
Miracles really do happen.

And to my surprise,
Sun shadows my face
He is above me.
Culture Shock

Theresa Adams

Woman selling newspapers outside of the Moskva Hotel in St. Petersburg, Russia.

As the bus pulled up to the hotel in St. Petersburg, all I could think about were the beautiful palaces, the majestic cathedrals, the long walks through the gardens, the opportunity to see the A Company perform Swan Lake at the Musorgsky Theatre. These were going to be the highlights of my trip. What I would talk about when I arrived back home and what I would write about when I pulled out my journal. I have to be honest though in saying that after my excursion, regardless of the beauty and enormousness of it all, that wasn’t what really hit me the most. What really struck me was something I wasn’t going to St. Petersburg for at all. The people.

The people of St. Petersburg and the looks on their faces are what I captured in my memory and brought back with me. How they live. What they do. Why they stay. It didn’t matter where you were or what you were looking at. There was always a little old woman with worn, dirty clothes only a couple of feet away. Every morning I was reminded of this as I walked out of the hotel. Up against the outside wall of the hotel where I stayed, there was a newspaper stand. All of the papers set neatly, not one out of place. This woman would sit and wait for someone, anyone to buy her papers. She had two mangy mutts which she made a bed for every morning by unfolding old and tattered cardboard boxes so they would have somewhere to lie. They were just as dirty and homely as she was, but they didn’t seem to mind. They had her.

I only wish now that I had tried to speak with her. Although there would have been a language barrier, just hearing her voice and seeing the expressions on her face would have been a story in itself that would have probably been enough to satisfy both of us.

The men standing outside of the metro. Obviously homeless drunks, but how they got that way, I will never know. One beaten so badly that as he bent over, the blood poured from his nose and brow.
The gypsy children who beg for money as if they were the poorest of poor in Russia and I actually felt sorry for them. It’s not until after giving in to these precious filthy faces that I was bombarded with fifteen more not able to squeeze enough out of me.

The children of Russia have an engaging opportunity to learn music, art and literature. One instrument that I am quite familiar with is the flute and I am very proud to say that I not only indulged myself into his work of art, but also had the privilege of speaking and drinking with the one and only Zhora Belyakov. What a remarkable and brilliant flutist! His work is extraordinary and it would be an honor to hear him play again. His music runs through your veins with every note played and the movement of his body somehow captures you. The majority of people in Russia carry either an artistic, musical or literary talent and they are taught young.

On Nevsky Prospect, the history of Russia is poured into the streets and the way I saw it--Old Russia during the day and New Russia by night. As I wandered through the cemetery, I could see the memorials, the mass graves, old women desperately searching for family they lost and older men wearing their medals of honor. The gifts they brought with them were absolutely priceless. Thousands of beautiful freshly cut carnations, slices of bread, candy, coins, whatever they had to bring their lost loved ones. And in taking the time, I also saw the old man sitting in a ditch on top of some rubble with a look of anguish as he stared on to a mass grave marked only by a year. I will never know who it was that he lost, but that didn’t matter. I could almost feel my heart shatter and practically lose my breath to picture what he was thinking at that very moment. Complete and utter devastation, despair really. It was then that I cried. Not only was it not the time nor the place, but oh how I wish I could have spoken with him. Just to understand and know. I was so eager to learn. I wanted to know exactly what he saw and who he lost. How it changed St. Petersburg and how it changed him.

After leaving the cemetery, the streets started to be overcome by people. Younger people, the New Russia. This is an absolutely incredible event to witness, and to be a part of the Sixtieth Anniversary made it all that more exciting. I believe there was not one person walking down the street who wasn’t throwing back a Baltika or two. It was their celebration of life and victory. Though they mourn for their loved ones, they still continue to carry the strong spirit of Russia.

As I strolled up and down the walkways gazing at all of the many beautiful things for sale, I saw what I would see at any other flea market that I might have been shopping at. Only at this particular flea market,
all of the vendors speak at least three, if not four or five, languages. Yet, the flea market is all that some of them know. This is their way of living. At one point, one of the vendors was asked, “How much for all of it?” Meaning for everything on her table and she quickly responded, “Five-thousand dollars.” This was so fascinating considering that the price she gave included everything of which was completely handmade or at least painted by hand and also included the shipping and handling to the U.S. It was a strange feeling to know that as an American shopper at the flea market, the prices go up. All Americans have the stereotype of being very wealthy people and compared to many Russians, we are. However, in our culture, I struggle to make ends meet as a working, single mom and full time student. It truly is an awakening that would make anyone truly appreciate what they really have.

I walked into a world that was completely unknown to me. A mysterious place of darkness and shadow that only he who lives there would ever truly understand. I can say now that the lack of knowledge sparks a hunger to learn when submerged in one’s life for seven long days. Until my journey across the world, I had never experienced such a shock. I thought the hardest thing in life that I would ever have to do is say goodbye to my children. I was completely wrong. My children have a warm, safe home with plenty of food. Six different types of fish, twelve loaves of bread and various cuts of steak if they choose. Many from this other “world” may only dream of such luxuries.

I would tell myself that I did not care for the history, but it was their culture of today that I took interest in. However, it was quite the reality check to find that this culture is the way it is because of its history. To walk the streets of St. Petersburg and realize the trauma and despair of these people brought a whole new meaning to some of the phrases that we throw out so nonchalantly. “I’m starving,” “I’m broke,” “My life sucks,” “I’m having a shitty day.” I don’t really think we have anything to complain about. Now that I have had the privilege to travel to this magical city, I must explain why it is merely impossible to make anyone truly understand through writing a few words, showing a couple of pictures, bringing souvenirs, and telling stories. I have read various books on St. Petersburg and heard several stories myself before embarking on this voyage. I can remember saying that after hearing a tale or two that I felt as though I had already been there. But no book, nor story, nor movie will ever give you the truth until you have been there yourself.
Margie Bomhower

1692

Salem.
Sad Salem,
With your prudish, puritan paranoia.

How could you believe those boastful brats?

Shame on your tightly buckled shoes,
And arrogant bonnets of deceptive white
Can you imagine, how horrible her hour

Of Officially Ordained, sadistic salvation?

Put on display, tormented by her own ministry.
A rye-bread requiem for your teenage angst

Hallowed hallucinations and flying familiars, indeed

You must know that Lucifer’s legions leered,
‘Cuz those blood-drawn confessions surely couldn’t cure,
Those of bedeviled, befouled blood
Nineteen of your neighbors named,
All of them accused, adjudicated, accursed.
Innocence incarcerated, innocents immolated.
Gallows Hill displayed the wicked,
Hanging ornaments of fear and delusion.
But, after all, the signs of their wickedness
Were plain to see
A wayward goat, a black barn cat, a sick cow,
A tuft of fallen hair, a child’s misplaced doll, or even
A sewing needle that bore the blood of a diligent finger.
But, I think the signs of evil you failed to see,
Were, in all actuality, more likely to be,
A bored husband, a slighted friend, unrequited love,
A poor harvest or simple jealousy.
The Salvation you delivered,
As such, scarcely seems
Divine.
Time’s Inconsequence

By Betty Dahm

On a rainy afternoon, hours of waiting drip by in a room both welcoming and chilly.
A forgotten afghan resides in a cluttered closet – zigzags of repeating colors, calming and fall-like.

On the underside, my fingertips brush a silkier surface; turning back the corner, I read, “Made Especially for you by Frances B. Evans.”
Who were you, Frances B. Evans? Did you live near here? Marry? Raise children?

Who enriched your life as nimble fingers created this treasure? What was the news of the day? The tune you hummed under your breath?

I picture a cup of tea at your elbow and a heavy, black phone with a rotary dial.
An aging poodle quietly snoring at your feet, butterscotch-colored and nearly blind.
I know the tile in your well-scrubbed bathroom, cirrus swirls of green and cream.
A Methodist church cookbook, left open on your kitchen counter.

Are you surprised that I see you so clearly? I have crocheted you from leftover skeins of every gentle, soft bosomed, powdered elderwoman I have ever known, just as you crocheted this comforting embrace, which I gratefully receive, and return to you, wherever you are.
Beat Me to the Punch

Jade Chandler-Haag

Flora needed to make the pain more tangible, to find some way to hinder the ache in her soul from growing into more of an all-consuming beast. The pain was constant, stalking her no matter where she tried to hide. She had to find some way to bring it into the light so that she could get it under control, so she flicked her green lighter and let it burn. The metal of the lighter began to glow an angry sunset orange, getting brighter and hotter with each second. When the edges became smudged by carbon, she released the lever, and pressed the searing lighter into her lifeless left bicep.

Her teeth clenched. She pressed her eyes tightly shut as she began to feel her culpability fade, being replaced by the concrete agony in her arm. The lighter was beginning to cool and her arm was throbbing lightly in a calming rhythm. She let the lighter drop onto the grass and held her arm up to the streetlight so she could look at what she had done. She thought that her chastisement was beautiful in the way that the bubbling flesh cast a small shadow upon her arm. With one last look at the moonless night sky and a silent prayer for peace sent to the first star she spotted, she picked her cigarettes and lighter up off the ground beneath the swings and began the two-block walk back to her house.

The light to her bedroom was on; through the window she could see Celeste and Michael embracing. Celeste rested gently against his shoulder, her hair, falling in long waves, looked like a liquid gold waterfall. Michael’s face was to the window; his algae-green eyes were heavy lidded. They had found each other again. Flora thought about how Celeste had spent last weekend with her ex-boyfriend, Barry, having blown off plans with both Michael and her. Flora still felt slightly rejected and incensed. “Obviously, Michael’s found a way to forgive and forget,” she thought as she opened the front door quietly and made her way to her basement bedroom.

Flora could hear the muffled voices of Celeste and Michael as she approached the door to the bedroom she had shared with Celeste for the past six months. Flora missed having her own bedroom; she missed
having a place that was solely her own. Flora wanted something she
didn’t have to share.

Flora flung open the oak bedroom door so it crashed into the closet
door. She hoped she had disturbed the two lovers.

“Sorry to disturb you two, but I needed to get some stuff out of
here,” Celeste and Michael untwined as Flora brushed past. Flora put
her hand to the small of Michael’s back, moving him farther aside as
she headed for the cluttered computer desk in front of the window. She
rummaged through the papers on the desk until she found her emerald
leather journal. Grabbing a pen from amongst the chaos, she turned her
gaze to the couple centered in the room.

“Actually, I’m really glad you’re home. We were just talking about
Bill Dryer’s graduation party at his grandpa’s farm tomorrow night, and
we were wondering if you wanted to go with us.” Celeste flashéd her
radiant smile that caused many a heart to shrivel in its brilliance. Her
forget-me-not eyes twinkled with the residue of lovemaking and a hint
of manipulation.

Flora looked from Celeste to Michael to see if he shared Celeste’s
eagerness for a third-wheel at the party. Their gazes held for less than a
heartbeat before he looked past her and out the window.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Flora replied, “I guess I could go. I
don’t have anything else planned for tomorrow night, if you’re really
sure that you guys don’t mind.”

Crossing three feet to Flora and enveloping her in a hug, Celeste
squealed, “Goody, now Michael and I can go too! His car’s in the shop so
you’ll have to drive, k? You are the bestest friend.” When Celeste’s arms
released her, Flora felt an exploited chill wrap itself around where her friend
had been. She lowered herself slowly into the worn gray computer chair and
watched as Michael awkwardly said his goodbye to Celeste. His eyes briefly
met Flora’s as he mumbled a brief farewell before rushing from the room.

With a sigh and a toss of her golden locks, Celeste turned her
attention back to Flora. “I see that you’ve grabbed your notebook.
Are you planning to head to Blue Sky? And if so, do you want some
company for a while?” Before Flora had a chance to answer, Celeste
began getting ready. She packed the usual into her brown leather
satchel: notebooks, pens, dictionary/thesaurus, cigarettes, and her Virgo
lighter that she received from Barry on her last birthday.

Feeling that she didn’t have the choice to say no to the beaming
blonde standing before her, ready to go, Flora simply nodded. “Maybe
Celeste can help me figure out what to do, burning my arm will only
work for so long,” she thought.
Flora entered her ‘77 banana yellow Omega with questions swirling through her mind, like the winds of a cyclone. Starting the engine, she started the questions. “So, you and I haven’t really gotten much of a chance to talk since last weekend. What happened with you and Barry? Why’d you two break up? And how the hell did you and Michael get back together after being split up and ‘just friends’ for almost two years?” Flora didn’t mean for the questions to come out so, she hoped her friend wouldn’t be offended. She wasn’t. Being a person who thrived on drama, mostly self-imposed, Celeste divulged the happenings of the past week. “Well, first, Barry was less than attentive on our trip to visit friends in Kentucky; he actually left me alone in the hotel while he went off and drank at bars I couldn’t get into because I wasn’t 21 yet. And while I was sitting alone in that poorly decorated room that smelled of stale cigarettes,” Celeste brushed her blonde waves back behind her ear and turned in the cracked leather car seat to face Flora, “I had time to really think about my life and I came to realize that Michael was the best boyfriend I ever had. And I knew he still wanted to be with me because he was still hanging around all the time, making plans with me, and essentially dating me without reaping any of the benefits,” she tossed her head back as she let out a small musical chuckle. “So when Barry and I were driving home, I pretty much knew that I wanted to try over with Michael. I wanted to see if I could find those old feelings again.” Celeste turned back toward the window, watching the countryside as they passed. The quiet in the car during the rest of the drive felt like a third passenger to Flora. A third passenger that sat behind her, breathing cold damp air down her neck, and passing judgment as Flora passed mile markers.

Celeste and Flora sat in their usual corner booth at the Blue Sky, just at the start of the smoking section. Behind them sat a drunken couple who had left early from the nearby bar. The couple was arguing about how he had slept with another woman while they were broken up. The girlfriend was angrily tapping her fork upon the table as she screeched about how she still considered it cheating.

Celeste leaned in toward Flora and whispered, “Can you believe some people? If you’re broken up, it’s a free game. Ya, know?” She waited for a reply from Flora as she stirred more sugar into her cooling coffee.

“Well, I guess. But what if he felt guilty and wanted to admit his sin to the one he loved? Shouldn’t he tell her then?” Shrugging, Flora sat back against the pale mint green plastic booth.

“I see it this way: if telling the person would help them, and you’re not just telling them to make yourself feel better by getting it off your
chest, then yes, you should admit your sin to the one you love.” Celeste looked at her watch and muttered an intelligible string of expletives. “Damn, I really need to be getting home and sleeping. I have plans for breakfast tomorrow. Don’t forget, we’re leaving for the party at 10 tomorrow night. Ready to leave?”

Flora nodded, feeling a little more at ease after having coffee and conversation with her friend. She was ready for sleep, hoping for a night free from the beast of her dreams.

Flora attempted to enjoy the party. Reminiscing about classes, teachers, and past parties, Flora kept a smile pasted securely to her face. Her gaze continually wandered back to Celeste and Michael. She watched as Celeste sat on Michael’s lap, like a queen regally lounging on her thrown, openly flirting with Michael’s friends. “I guess some things never change.” Flora thought with a smirk.

As the party died down, Flora made her way past the bonfire to the picnic table spread with various half-empty liquor bottles, empty 2-liter soda bottles, and a punch bowl filled with Southern Comfort and orange juice. She’d already downed enough alcohol to quiet the beast to a low roar, but she wanted one last drink before she went home to where the dreams waited to rip at her with razor sharp talons.

She reached the table and looked squarely into mossy green eyes. Michael smiled a slightly intoxicated grin as he filled two cups with the warm punch.

“Guess you beat me to the punch,” Flora attempted a joke in her unease.

“Yeah, so, how’re you doin’?” he replied slightly chuckling.

Grabbing a cup and waiting for Michael to finish with the ladle, she replied, “Fine, I guess. And you?”

“Good,” he nodded.

“That’s good.” Flora’s discomfort was growing with each word that passed between them. “So, how’re things with you and Celeste?”

He finished with the ladle and handed it to Flora, their fingers brushing lightly in the exchange. His gaze never left hers. Standing with two full cups of the sweet intoxication, he replied, “Good. We’re at that fragile part of a relationship, and I’d really hate for anything to mess it up.”

She looked down to the cup she was filling, swallowing back words she couldn’t set free. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Michael shuffled his feet and looked back over his shoulder to where Celeste was drunkenly hugging guys as they left. “Well, I better be getting back to Celeste. Did you want to leave after these drinks?”

Flora could only nod. Tears of remorse and the loss of what could’ve been burned her eyes.
Intoxicated, they stumbled down the stairs to Flora’s bedroom. Celeste leaned heavily into Michael’s arms for support.

Motioning to the queen-sized canopy bed, Flora slurred, “You guys take the bed tonight. I’ll sleep on the futon in the other room.” She swayed as she walked, holding the wall for support. Falling onto the black mattress, she pulled the green velvet blanket off the back to cover herself. She hoped that her high blood alcohol level would be enough to keep her sleep dreamless. Closing her eyes, she pictured eyes the same color as the blanket that embraced her and velvety soft lips that had been pressed to hers seven days ago. She escaped into her memory of entwined limbs, and fell asleep.

An angry voice from the other room pulled Flora from her coma-like state. She couldn’t discern what was being said, but the tone told enough. The angry tone was Celeste’s, followed by the pleading low tone of Michael. Knowing that her beast had been brought into the light, and there’d be nowhere to hide from it in the morning, she embraced her beast of memories and deceit and fell back asleep.
Peju Reflection

By Kendra Fowler

Tucked neatly into a corner
Peace allowed
Drifting in the translucent haze of moonlight
Listening to midnight concertos, heavy-eyed on a cloud
Away from an angry, hissing world
Caressed ivories echoing lonely sonatas of the moon
Away from a world draped in artificial skins
As crying on are the sad wails of Mozart’s violins
Wednesday Night Randomness

Wes Organek

Stopped between stars
Waiting

for someone to refill my tank
Hiding behind books
Avoiding the obvious truth

I listen to music in silence
When everyone is asleep

A sun that is set begins to rise
I hold on to that sun without getting burned

A demon temptress calls
Her voice is acid
in my ears
I swear never to talk to her again
I hope she calls back

Taking leaps and jumping mountains opposite in every way
Surrounded by fire surrounded by ice exactly the same
Revealing Justice

Katharine Beachboard

A guiding hand, pale and fragile, passed through the darkness into the light. Long-awaited warmth swept over the poor soul as she witnessed another day in the light. Where she had been forced to stay seasons had passed by in darkness. As she gazed up at the blazing sun tears crept at the corner of her pure blue eyes and the light momentarily blinded her. A short joyful laugh escaped her throat, knowing that she had made it. She was in the light again.

Janice Gill, a cave dweller in the woods off Rockwood village, lived trapped by the limitations of blindness. She had lived in the darkness so long that she couldn’t remember when she was first blinded. Seeing the sunlight, Janice was quickly reminded of that faithful afternoon in the blacksmith’s shop, where her father worked. She couldn’t remember the details, only that her eyes had burned and her father had died that night.

Even though Janice found the return of her eyesight a miracle, she could not help but wonder why. Janice deeply believed that things happened for a reason. She lowered her gaze to the forest filled with green moss and various pine trees. A small dirt path, worn by her constant travels for food and clothes, led to Rockwood village where she had once lived. As she took in the beautiful sight of the overhanging tree branches and the patches of wild flowers, Janice recalled that her mother was buried not far from the village. She would finally be able to see the colors of the flowers she picked for her mother’s grave. Janice smiled, happily.

Just then, a deer appeared between two rather large pine trees. The black eyes stared at her with a look of wisdom as though the deer knew. Years of life in the woods had earned the deer long antlers twisted about, all pointing to the dirt road. Janice had never thought a deer could have such unique antlers. At that moment, she knew what the deer was there for. She turned away and took her first step on the road, well aware of what lay ahead of her.

As Janice approached the village she was startled by the many different facial expressions and colors. She had never thought that there was so
much to see. Janice stopped at the small entrance way into the village and stared at the many people and things surrounding her. It amazed her how different people looked from how they sounded and smelled.

A burly man in black breeches and a brown tunic shouted Janice’s name. She jumped, surprised, as he continued walking by, unaware of her reaction. Janice recognized the voice as the bartender, Jim Case. She didn’t recognize his face. Janice was slowly beginning to realize that it was going to take some adjusting now that she could see again.

Janice began slowly walking into the village. She stared at each face in a sleepy daze. Those that Janice knew did not seem to notice a difference of behavior as they greeted her and spoke to her. She nodded and blinked. Everyone was overwhelming her. As she turned away Janice caught a glance of her appearance. Her oblong face was smudged with dirt. Janice touched her long dark hair bound back with a tie. Strands of her hair fell loosely in her face. She pulled back her hair, mystified. Janice couldn’t believe how disheveled she looked. She thought it was best to return to the cave for the evening and tidy up.

That evening Janice headed for the river, which ran through the forest near her cave. She kneeled down beside the running river and stared down at her rippling reflection. After a long moment she scooped up a handful of sand beneath the water and began scrubbing.

* * *

Janice was jerked from a deep slumber by a nightmare. She feared that she had gone blind again. As she eyes opened to the morning’s light she began to calm her racing heartbeat. She took a deep breath and rose from her pallet of blankets near the end of the cave’s wall.

On the far end of the wall hung a pale pink dress lined with white lace. The last time Janice had seen the dress was on her mother. She picked up the dress and began dressing. Janice could still smell her mother’s scent on the dress. She paused a moment and recalled her mother’s face. Her heart fell as she recalled the bright smile her mother would have given her. She doubted the deep burden of her mother’s death would ever leave her, ever cease to be a great burning wound inside her chest.

After a long respectable moment for her mother, she left the security of her cave. She knew that the village waited for her, waited for the part she would play in something so tremendous that even she did not understand, nor wish to comprehend, until the moment came.

In entering the village a second time with her renewed sight she saw travelers’ horses stopping in for the day. She saw the many soldiers
in bright colors of red and gold - as flashy as the sun itself. Janice looked
on in amazement. She recalled these times as springtime in Rockwood.
It was a time of celebration and great trade. It was a time she had long
shunned, for it was the day that her father had died.
Quietly, Janice steeled herself to face the new challenge, the old
memories. She could hear her father’s voice telling her of the many
pieces of steel that would be sold to great warriors. Slowly she let
herself breathe, recalling the many blades that fell that horrible evening.
A few guards of the king’s army stopped and smiled at her. She bit
her lip, nervously. It had been so long since she had seen a man’s eyes
on her. She stood on a little patch of dirt until the soldiers were gone.
Janice was venturing into the village when the ladies of the farms
stopped to say hello. Their dresses were a little less appealing to the eye
of the beholder. The ladies wore pale crème colored dresses with white
aprons. Janice blinked, staring at the maidens, stunned. She had not
realized that there were so many different colors of white. The women
gave her a disgusted look before hurrying off.
Janice panicked, thinking that she was dirty again. She hurried to
the nearest window and looked in at her reflection. She was relieved to
see that there was nothing wrong with her appearance. The more she
thought about it the more she figured it was her reaction to the way
they had greeted her. Janice rebuked herself, but couldn’t help staring at
her reflection in the window, a stranger staring back at her.
Just then a young man’s reflection appeared in the window behind
her. It was a soldier from the king’s guard. He wore a long golden
sash across his chest unlike the others. The young stranger smiled at
her reflection, complimenting her dress. She recognized his strong
and sturdy voice as the man that had helped her find the food market
through the crowds in spring.
“Peter,” she spoke his name in surprise as she noticed how brown
his eyes were.
“Of course,” he answered merrily. “Who helped you with the dress?”
Slowly Janice realized that Peter did not know that she could see.
She turned around, her breath caught in her throat.
He took her silence wrong, thinking that he had said something to
offend her. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”
Janice was about to respond when she saw a familiar face, one that
struck fear in her heart. She instinctively gripped Peter’s arm. Janice felt
her face heat up as she saw him again in the midst of the crowd. It was
the stranger in her nightmares, the raven black hair, the sharp beard,
malevolent gray eyes cold as his heart. He was the man that killed her father.
“Janice, what’s wrong?” Peter asked, taking a hold of her as she began feeling faint.

Janice pushed Peter away and ran into the crowd as the stranger disappeared. She couldn’t lose him now. Janice knew it was him, she knew that was why she could see at that moment. It was clear as day. He didn’t say anything when he killed her father, but she saw his face.

Peter followed her, worried for her safety. He pushed other soldiers away, keeping his eyes trained on the girl he had thought was still blind. Peter was making his way towards her when a large wagon cut in his path. He panicked, trying to look around the wagon. The wagon was clearing way when he heard Janice scream. Peter ran to the sound of her voice, upset that he had let her out of his sight.

Janice had stopped in the midst of the crowd, seeing him as clear as though it had happened at that moment. She raised a shaky hand and pointed. Janice shouted, “Murderer! Murderer!”

Everyone around Janice had stopped what they were doing and turned to where she pointed. The stunned looks were nothing compared to the look of a guilty man. She saw through him.

“Murderer!” she screamed. Janice took a step towards him when Peter caught her from behind. She screamed, “Murderer! You killed my father!”

Jim, the bartender, stepped out of his bar with the rest of his guests, hearing Janice’s voice. He stared at the frantic young lady, mystified. Jim had never heard Janice raise her voice before.

“Calm down, Janice,” Peter begged her.

Finally, the accuser smiled, trying to cover his reaction. He turned to the man he was talking to. “Everyone knows she’s just a blind crazy girl.”

“Murderer!” she screamed. “I can see! I know it was you!” she spoke firmly, keeping her finger pointed at him and getting stronger by the moment. “You killed him that night I went blind. You were there! Murderer!”

Peter looked at the man she accused and called him by his name. “Is this true, Luther? Did you kill her father?”

Luther’s grin grew shaky, but he replied, “No.”

“He lies!” she screamed, her voice nearly raw. “I remember that night when you came in. My father was working on one of his swords. He told me—,” her voice choked with tears. “He told me to go. I hid under the table instead. You came up to him and fought. He—,” the night of the fight flashed in her mind at that second, “…drew a poker. You have a burn on your right arm.”

“Alright. Let’s see the arm,” Peter ordered, letting go of Janice.
Luther looked around, nervously. “Can’t you see? She’s crazy! She can’t see! She’s lying!”

Janice raised her head high, excepting the challenge. “You are wearing a green overcoat and black pants. There’s a white scuff mark on your left toe.”

Whispers gathered around the village, ending by stares in Janice’s direction. She was right. Janice was, indeed, no longer blind.

Peter returned his attention to Luther as soldiers of the king’s army stepped forward. The soldiers placed their hands on the swords at their sides, swords honed by Janice’s father. They were ready in case Luther tried anything.

Luther had no choice but to roll up his sleeve. He frowned, sweating at the temples. Luther carefully pulled up his sleeve. Along his forearm was a long burn mark made by a poker.

Janice blinked at the mist in her eyes as the soldiers came up to Luther, tying his hands behind his back. That was it. Justice had been done for Janice Gill.

Peter walked over, still stunned. “How did you get your sight back?”

“I suppose my father was still looking after me even after death,” she answered, softly. Tears of relief spilled over her cheeks as her vision began to fade. “It is done.”

Peter took her hand, having a feeling that she would need him again. She squeezed his hand, knowing that there was no going back to her solitude. Her father had guided her once again and lifted another type of blindness from her, or perhaps it was her mother. Janice turned to Peter’s blurry face and smiled, having a new light to look to.
Writer’s Blocks

Sarah McGuire

At times words dance to the cadence of my thoughts.
Giving form to the formless:
Fine silk revealing the contours
of the invisible truths they cover.

But I cannot pluck some things from my heart,
hold them far enough from me
to wrap choice words around.

I am left with burlap-covered bricks
that I hide under books and bury in piles.
Shower Droplets are like Dying Stars

Julia Ramos

There was a buzzing in her ears. Jordan pulled the sleeping mask from her eyes and was blinded by the sunlight streaming through her crooked blinds. Her head pounded in pain and her mouth was dry and chapped.
There was a thickness in the room...so hot and heavy that it felt like she was being smothered by something invisible. She dreaded waking up. It was like recovering from a deep addiction...a deep and cutting addiction you just don’t want to let go of. The darkness was her safety...like a blanket of relief.
She peered at the clock. 1:27 p.m. Too damn early.
Aimlessly, she pulled away the covers. The heat rose from her body and foot by foot she stepped out of her depository...each step weaker than the one before. As she opened the door of her room, the once muffled sounds of the day were now roaring. Like a zombie, she roamed her hallway...shutting the sunlight out the best she could. The floor creaked beneath her heavy steps, while she made her way closer and closer to alleviation.
The shower blasted cold water as the euphoria slowly dripped from her body. She sighed a sigh so deep it made her dizzy. Black mascara ran down her face and flushed through her eyes. The stinging came, but to Jordan, it never made a difference. Her veins bulged as she coughed defenselessly. Water bounced between jutting ribs and cuts prickled in pain. A rusty razor lay upside down on the shower floor, marbling the water running beneath her feet. Laugh lines faded, black circles darkened, and the scabs failed to heal. Jordan was a specter of everything she hated. A product of self-injustice, a victim of her own neglect.
It was not that Jordan’s life was wanting or short-handed or bare. For one to have a wanting or short-handed or bare life, one would have never had any sort of a life before at all. Jordan’s life was just the opposite. It was withering. It was cashing in and checking out.
Years ago, long before her memory was diluted by her (trying) life...
Jordan was known for being the strong one of the family. 
*She was a light.*
Her face duplicated one of a woman burning with satisfaction and intent all at once. She believed in goals and in truth and in understanding. She was the over achiever and the go getter. She lived with a hope that overwhelmed you, yet brought you reassurance at the same time. 
*And her heart. Oh, her heart.*
As if she were the inventor...or the originator of what a heart should feel.
She felt love.
She felt trust.
She felt true contentment. She felt empathy and humility.
Her heart...well...it simply...felt.

But just like a candle that has already been lit and has already charmed a dark room will go out......So does a soul. 
As if a switch was flipped or a fire suddenly extinguished...day had turned into night...and reassurance had turned into complete chaos.
Her eyes revealed fresh, bleeding wounds and every part of bitterness and disappointment within her. The wax was used and melted. The retired black wick, was brittle and in decaying condition.

*Something cutting....something destructive....something damaging* had suddenly marred her.
As Jordan stepped out of the shower and dried her body, she no longer felt proud of it...but ashamed. Ashamed of the experiences and the stories behind her bruises.
The bathroom door opened and the sunlight again streamed in. Still blinding and stale as before....
Collide

Brook Buesking

Collide

Stop. You are at a constant stop.
How do I get past?
Draw me a map, please draw this map.
Show all the ways across, around and throughout your town.
Draw for me, so when I cross a path untouched,
my tread will wear lightly and my hands will withdraw.

Pause. I am at a constant pause,
never knowing when to proceed.
Hand me a list.
Please number accordingly
so I might carry out quickly all prerequisites
to get inside your lines.

Help me pass these bounds.
Help me to get past yourself,
past your past that saturates our days.
Please pass me no more,
please tempt me no less,
yet, please take me at all.

Take me through the point,
your hands meeting mine,
our bodies on slow collide.
Take me, so you can.
Catch me if I dive,
yet I dare.
Clutch me if I grasp,
yet I run.
Reach, so I can breathe without pause,
and walk without borders.
Ballad of a Fallen Rose

Hunter Byron Smith

The shimmering wet street
lay clouded with dim lights and thick curled smoke
My life is in a small polished silver briefcase
I head to that familiar place
a small social of chattering birds
their songs lewd and meaningless

My eyes follow the hot steam
that bellows from the storm drains on the midnight street
Figuring my bearings and taking watch
careful not to draw any interest

My eardrums rattle
to the steady growl of thunder in the distance
It’s the kind of night where dreams fall like the rain
and I walk between the drops

Gazing at the adjacent terrace
I catch a glimpse of the foul moon laughing in the window
And it’s there amongst the secluded garden above
that I spot a most peculiar rose
Fresh from the rain she glimmers
I can’t help but extend my hand toward her
grasping nothing but the cruel thin air
but in my mind making a meaningful connection

The keen wind breathes against her roughly
and she trembles like the last leaf on a dying tree
Her amber hair is a tangled dark mess that flutters softly
Her finger traces and caresses the rim of her drink
Through God’s looking-glass I can see her
posed like a model against the steel black railing
Her eyes are suddenly a calm pale forgiving dreamy blue reflecting the abrupt break in the wind

She’s the center of all attention everything else is seemingly a blur Her ember red lips kiss and swallow the night whole and her gleaming white skin is the same shade of the frigid ivory orb above

I wonder what type of woman she is how her lips feel and how her hair smells I try to stay silent watching but I’m a mad dog that won’t sit still

A somber man approaches her with a bottle full of hopes and dreams As they embrace and gracefully dance away the lights I quietly pray the rose has unseen thorns but this beautiful blossom is nothing short of perfection

A blinding pulse of light a sharp vibration and tear tinted eyes An unwilling angel of destruction that whispers the closure of their fatal attraction

Faces as fixed as a painting depicting a mix of agony within puzzlement near bordering on alarm and a desperate squall for help Mouths agape and gasping like dying fish Dark silhouettes make deep immortal stains on the walls The flowers crumble and fall grey and lifeless those brilliant shimmering colors lost in the treacherous night

Quiet and nasty I begin to move away but I can feel a terrible and dreadful pain ascending at my legs an unseen ghastly hand that stretches across my chest My heart spurts and sputters as it is crushed and strangled I stumble and stagger my body ignited with agony Then something inside of me screams the loudest sound followed by an everlasting and all consuming silence
I’m told when hell is full that we’ll all die dreaming
And then I drift off into that sweet serene oblivion
trying desperately to find that perfect rose
that I’m dying to meet
Stories from an American Town

Tory Fox

Rake up the leaves, let them burn and the smoke rise up
Like a dragon
Glass shatters in an alley whispering someone’s afraid
All these choices, masteries, mistakes have led to this freedom
Lie in this comfort
Lie with this fever
As all the dreams fall out the window
And like untouched grass on a summer’s day
No story is told
Like an unknown soldier’s grave
I am the mother of three boys. Fully the Queen of my own home, Supreme High Priestess and Keeper of All Knowledge Regarding Girls and, let’s be honest, they’re going to want it someday. I have no knowledge of hair scrunchies, hip huggers, or which boy bands rock out loud. I am on a first name basis with the kids down at the local surf shop. I’ve showered with GI Joe (we’re dating) and slept with menacing looking plastic robots (they snore). Six days out of seven, I love the odds. And then, one of them exhibits aim so bad he literally pees into the wastebasket. Then, you know, not so much.

With a house full of little men, two of them teenagers, when it’s good, it’s good in triplicate. When it’s bad, it’s bad exponentially. For example, there is almost no chance that any food will last long enough in my house to go bad. The refrigerator door is persistently propped open by a grazing boy and the kitchen remains available 24/7. The downside, of course, is that my grocery bill looks like I’m supporting a small country – or at least supplying them with arms. Dishes are usually minimal, since my boys tend to eat from the container they cooked in. That is assuming they cooked at all. I once saw my eldest boy munching a cold baked potato, skin and all, while he browsed the refrigerator for a better option. The potato was, apparently, merely an appetizer.

Unlike most girls I know, my boys are incredibly easy to please when it comes to clothing. Their wardrobes consist of khaki pants with seams in various levels of destruction and t-shirts in either white or gray. They care little about brands, only that the garment last long enough to be of use to the original owner and then fall immediately apart – thereby preventing a younger brother from ever owning it. These pants should also have pockets large enough to hold an ID card (which has been through the wash 187 times), pictures of cute girls (whom they lack the courage to talk to), and the remote control (which is placed there to prevent a younger brother from changing the channel).

We are not growing any couch potatoes in our house. All the men from tallest to smallest are active, which means my laundry reeks to
the power of four. Sweat socks occupy the vast majority of the reeking pile and create an eye-watering odor that permeates the ground. My eldest rows Crew, so his socks are a stomach-turning concoction of goose poop, mud and grass clippings, mashed together with a generous amount of oil-slicked canal water. Occasionally, there’s some wretched animal part in the fibers - always a special treat since they send their socks to the laundry inside out. Nothing gets my day off to a better start than finding a disembodied claw or fin. Truthfully, this is the very reason why my husband now does the bulk of the laundry, less of a gag reflex. Weekends are when my home most closely resembles a frat house, as no one seems to think anything of wandering around the house in his boxers, scratching his armpits in the kitchen, or sleeping surrounded by piles of filthy clothes, only waking long enough to snag a slice of cold pizza from the box at the end of his bed.

Boys are notoriously spare when it comes to conversations. They tend to spend most of their time chatting with girls in ultra-safe formats like Instant Messenger which frees up the phone. The downside of this selective muteness is, I could, quite conceivably, show up in an absolutely spectacular outfit that has made our family up to twenty minutes late and I’ll not get an adjective any stronger than “fine.” As in “you look fine. Can we go now?”

One of the great things about boys is that they never shy away when there’s an ugly or grubby job that needs to be done. Of course, the mess must exceed their tolerance level before they notice it. The garage could be stuffed to the rafters with flammable materials and exposed, sparking wires and no one would raise an eyebrow. But let that prevent them from removing baseball bats or hockey sticks and it’s a national disaster requiring neighborhood mobilization. Boys are always ready to work when destruction is needed. There’s never any shortage of willing executioners should an aimless bug wander into the house. Not only do I have three volunteers willing to kill it, they’ve dreamed up new implements of death to get the job done. Why just swat a fly when you can immobilize it with hairspray and then freeze it in a paper cup. This way, not only does the fly bite it, we can discuss cryogenics after we try to reanimate it. Everyone wins!

It’s true; I’ve done most of the teaching, but they’ve taught me a thing or two. For example, I’ve discovered it’s more important to be clear than to be clever. If I were to point out that girls probably don’t belch at the dinner table, I’d be met with an offer to improve my volume and timbre vice the apologetic burp-free silence I’d hoped for. Boys just can’t be bothered with changing a behavior when it would be so much more fun if I just joined in.
This is not to say that I’m living large in Ape-land. Far from it. Eight hands reach out to hold open my door, no one has ever stayed out past their curfew, and when I’m looking for a little respect, they can definitely bring it. They’re also developing a better understanding of my girl stuff. Every 28 days they shove a chocolate bar under my bedroom door and it’s been several years since anyone used my tampons for scud missiles. For my money, I’ll take raising boys over girls any day.
Art by Julie Waltz, TCC Visual Arts Center
The Visitors

By Katherine Huber

It was on Winter Solstice that Megan Flannery turned forty-years-old, and it was also the evening that the flying saucer came. She was attending an AIDS benefit with her husband Mark and her good friend Christine Cornwall at a three-hundred-year-old house museum in Barnstable, Massachusetts. Christine and Megan sang soprano at their church and both of them liked to keep busy. Their homosexual friend Joe got them involved with this project and they both were on the covered-dish committee.

Joe was playing piano and the crowd was singing along. He picked a wide assortment of popular tunes and ordinarily Megan and Christine would be singing, too. Both women had headaches, though, and decided to step outside for fresh air. There was about one foot of tightly packed snow on the ground and Megan decided to sit down on it. Christine joined her and they both tried to make snow angels. Both women were probably intoxicated and when they sat up again, they saw the flying saucer. It hovered about fifteen feet above them and a door opened up. A metal ladder dropped down. Both women climbed on board, Christine first. There were three men greeting them, each equally handsome. They were all wearing turquoise-colored scrubs.

“We were responding to your SOS calls. Both of you were in so much pain that your brain waves were screaming into our wavelength,” the leader said. “We have an MRI machine on board and we’ll do scans on both of you.”

The scans were painless, but both women were nurses and saw enough similarity between the UFO’s medical equipment and their own hospital’s to trust these strangers.

“Looks like you both have scoliosis,” the head doctor said. “I think it’s because of the amount of stuff you carry in your purses. You need to do stretching exercises for your backs, and I’m also going to recommend that you start drinking Valerian tea, which is a muscle relaxer. It’s an herbal tea and non-addicting.”

The women thanked them and left. When they got back inside to
the party, it was as if no one had noticed them gone. Around midnight, most of the people were gone and Megan’s husband Mark wanted to go home.

“You can leave,” Megan said. “But I’m on the clean-up committee and I’ll have to go home with Christine.”

Around two, Joe stopped playing piano and asked Megan and Christine to excuse him from cleaning up. “Just throw everything away,” Joe said. He gave them the keys to lock up. They were relieved to see him go so they could start talking about the Visitors.

“And why wouldn’t there be people from another planet?” Megan asked. “If God could make muffins once, He could make muffins twice.”

Around 2:30 AM, they heard a knock on the door. Thinking it was Joe, Christine opened it and twelve handsome men came striding in.

“You’re not going to throw all this food away,” they cried out in unison. “There are homeless people who are starving who could use this food. We have equipment on our ship that can kill germs. Let us clean up. Relax and put your feet up.”

There was an old Dutch oven fireplace in the dining room that Joe had used to keep the food warm. The museum had been an Underground Railroad house, and there was a secret room with a modern kitchen with all the conveniences, which the Visitors found by using a pocket-sized x-ray machine. They also found another secret room with a sound system. There were tiny speakers in the ceilings connected to the audio room. They stacked the CD player with rockabilly music and went to work with The Stray Cats in the background. They finished in about two hours, took the leftovers to the spacecraft, and then made a huge pot of coffee.

“You know,” the one who was name-tagged Adam said, “We’ve been coming down here for years. Sometimes we’re the boss you don’t like. Sometimes we’re the guy you boss around. Some of us are CEO’s. Some of us are homeless or in jail. But your planet affects our planet. We’re connected spiritually. If your planet gets wiped out, then it hurts us. The weather conditions alone on your planet are enough to make my hair stand on end.”

“We’re not trying to take over your planet. Think of us as your guardian angels. If you think you recognize one of us, please be kind. We have a lot on our shoulders,” one named Dave finished.

They left as quickly as they arrived.

Both women went home and each found a box of Valerian tea in their cupboards the next day.
We Wait at the Door

By Christopher DeMatteo

The planning began a year from last May,
Now everything’s right: both weather and tide.
Artificial fog blocks the sun’s ray
Too late to turn back, we’re in for the ride.

Today’s the day, the hour is near.
Bobbing up and down, a glimpse of shore.
Some bow in prayer, others look out in fear.
Thirty seconds is yelled, we wait at the door.

Cement behemoths loom overhead with eyes.
A whistle is blown, boys become men.
Bells ring, gates open, forward rows get flies.
Over the side we go and into the Lion’s Den.

With enemy report, we shall not cower.
Only tomorrow will tell, if we have the power.
i ran on the beach last night
i sprinted
from i did not know what
to i do not know where
until
i got there
I want to wrap the horizon around me
Tuck it under my chin.
But the sky is flying away.
I taste the bitter rain it scatters
And the clouds smell green.
Come back, cover me
Wrap yourself around the earth again.

Searing sun, shedding iron rays
Bakes the world with stabbing heat
Till water becomes brittle and stones turn soft
While winds stravaig about my feet.
The barren, quivering veil of warmth
Engulfs me and sharpens the lines of the world.

I’ll rides the skies,
Will sing there soon, counting the islands beneath me.
I’ll hear the songs of silent stones.
You’ll be there yourself, in no time,
Chaidh mi do’n choill’ an robh croinn is gallain.
The damp scents will greet us, remind us of home,
Clouds blanched with light, land thick with color.

stravaig: ‘To sally forth, go up and down, to ramble aimlessly.’

Gaelic: Where woodlands are green, with trees well [nourished]
(from the folksong, ‘Fair Young Mary’)
Mint Perfume

Denise Bates

The scent of powder, with a faint hint of mint, her white hair in tight curls around her face, and the tissue paper-thin skin on her hands, that felt like rose petals. That is what I remember most about my Mema. Northern New Jersey, its rolling hills, and the tallest pine trees I have ever seen, huge lakes that freeze solid in the winter, raccoons and squirrels roaming the nearby brush created a wonderland for my brother and me when we were young. Mema had a tiny garden in her backyard full of Lilly of the Valley, and wild mint. I would lie on my tummy for hours looking at all the plants, picturing myself being small enough to climb the tiny stalks that held the bell shaped flowers.

Mema would call us in for lunch, and the three of us would sit in her old fashioned kitchen, eating chicken noodle soup, and tuna fish sandwiches. We always got the white melamine plates with the big sunflowers on them, and the jelly glasses portraying Speedy Gonzales, or Tom and Jerry. I love those jelly glasses. Every time I see one, it brings me back to those days of sitting in her yellow kitchen, the sunlight streaming through the window over her sink, and laughing and talking with my favorite grown-up in the world, Mema.

Every summer, when I would get to her house, I would run into the kitchen, snatching up the glass mayonnaise jar off of her counter, and dash out the back door, letting the metal screen door slam loudly behind me. My brother, Chris, was always just a few steps behind me as we ran to the back of the yard where the mint plants grew in large tight clumps around a pile of boulders that held back the neighbor’s yard. There we would plop down on our bottoms, and set to work, carefully picking the biggest, prettiest leaves off the mint plant, trying not to get many stems mixed into our harvest. I would smile to myself, thinking about Mema’s face when we are all done, and present her with our lovely mint perfume. After filling the jar with only the very best leaves, I would have the honor of carrying the jar over to the spigot off the back of her clapboard house. My brother would turn the water on, oh so slightly, so cool water would run in rivers into the jar, and over our
mint leaves. When we had decided it was enough water, we would get a good strong stick, and stir our concoction into the finest mint perfume you had ever smelled.

Oh if only I could see that look of love and tenderness again, that she would give us when we presented her with our lovely perfume! She always gave us a huge hug, thanking us, then opened the jar. She would breathe in the intoxicating scent, smiling proudly at us. After dabbing some on behind her ears, and on each wrist, she would clear a spot in the middle of her dressing table, and set our jar there among her perfume bottles, and tiny trinkets, “so she could see it every morning when she first gets up”. “Poor Mema,” I would think, “she has to wait all year until the summer again if she runs out of mint perfume, for who else knows how to make it for her?” Chris and I were so proud of our gift; we would beam every time we got close enough to Mema to smell the faint hint of mint and crushed leaves.

Twenty years have gone by, and I have my own children, and the memories of Mema’s mint perfume never left me. I can’t avoid a smile whenever I see wild mint growing. Safe and loving memories of my Mema flood over me.

Dozens of brightly colored crayon drawings pinned to every spare space of my bulletin board in the kitchen, the color of the refrigerator peeks out from under all of the honor roll certificates, and crayon scribbled handmade cards. I have in my jewelry box, not jewels and gold, but macaroni necklaces, clay rustic ornaments, and gumball machine plastic rings. I don’t have a lot of money, or gems, but I have a wealth far grander than that. I have the love of my children, and because of mint perfume, I treasure every drop.
A Wake(n)

Margie Bomhower

Watching you dance, I longed to meet you
Draped in swags of jasmine and magnolia
You swayed in balmy breezes
To a tribal drumbeat
That pounded blood through my veins
And with alligators at your feet
You called my name

Vampire lore fed my hunger
My thirst became painful
Tantalized by dry, chicken bones and cigar smoke
Feathers, rum, sequins of blood and the
Obsessive caress of the swamps
A bowl of mysterious moon garnished
With swinging moss

And that morning,
When you stretched to the Sunlight
And yawned in Southern slowness
Your dark, French complexion
Blanched in the face of Purification
Metallic beads poured into the mud
As your descendants wailed to the usurper

Hemorrhaging from your wrists
Your blood drowned the faithful
Quartered and drawn,
I watched in horror
As sewage-steeped insanity
Ravaged your children
Gun shots punched the thieves
Rapists reveled in feral freedom
And the skeletons ate garbage

My eyes are stung with longing
For the mistress I would never know
Your tuxedo clad warriors
Bloated and stiff
Gaze forever with pearly eyes
As they drift in the sludge-brown wake
Spectral cobblestone Jazz
Accompanied by the howling of zombies

Wearing jewels of impotence and despair
We pray over your funerary altar, a dead dog
Can blow-fish powder bring you back?
Or funeral ashes mixed with goat milk?
I’d write your name on red paper
And wrap it with tendons of desire
Then burn it on the third night
Just so I can imagine you as you were

Dancing in bayou fire with snakes
I can hear your occult rhythms
And from above iron scrolled balconies
I can see neon palm readers beckoning
From the Bourbon drenched streets
Illuminated by parade floats
As your masked disciples toss golden coconuts
To a sea of painted, masquerade faces
Sanctuary

Eraca Phillips

Alone I stood amidst a thousand sensations,
Marveling an embrace of love.
Emotions took flight
Skydiving,
No chute,
Towards a mass of thought
That controls us all.
Uncertainty in certainness envelops
An emotion I need explained.
Tormented time braces patiently
Amidst a path paved of thorns,
As the rhythmic beating wall of stone
Interwoven with scars,
Contemplates the past yet passed.
To love
To ache,
Fate.........fate?
Idlewild

Kymm Beaver

I grew up in Oil City, a small oil boomtown in northwest Pennsylvania. Oil City is nestled in the valley of the Alleghany Mountains and wanders up over the hills from the Alleghany River. Our family owns a weathered and simplistic cottage called Idlewild along the rivers edge in an area called Eagle Rock and, for as far back as I can remember, it’s where I spent every summer. Even today, I can still recall packing up everything we would need for three months and the ride to the cottage. It was like packing for a trip to the unknown. Would it be cold, was it going to rain, did we need to pack our clothes to go to church? We had to pack a little bit of everything. Daytime temps could reach a sunny 75-80 degrees and yet it was always possible to wake up with a light lace of frost on the ferns that lined the path to the river. Long-johns to bathing suits, warms coats to flip-flops, everything went in to the suitcase.

I always enjoyed the ride to the cottage. I would torment my grandfather “Pop” and Grandmother “Gram” on the fifteen to twenty mile trip with the never ending questions. “Are we there yet”, “can I go in the river when we get there”, “are we going fishing”, “can I take the canoe out”; everything my brain could recall ever doing while I was there came out as a question. I would start to settle down as we reached the top of the hill and made our stop to pick up a few last minute items at a small Mom & Pop gas station and grocery store before we started down the final winding road to our summer hideaway. After this, there were only seven more bends in the twisting road until we reached the turn-off. I would count each turn eagerly aloud, “one…two …six…seven…yay, we’re here”.

The turn off was more of a well worn path of two tire ruts beaten into the side of a lush green forest canopied hill on one’s left and a precarious steep drop into McCray Run on the right. We made one last stop to make sure nothing was coming fast and furious around that eighth bend towards us and then with a quick dart to the left and across the highway, where we would bottom out, as we turned on to the car
path. The trees bent to scrape their welcome on the car’s roof and I felt their roots reminding us we were in their territory as we bumped down the path to the parking area. I could see the roof of the cottage peaking through the trees, a fine whisper of smoke wafting up through the leaves from its chimney. “Finally, I’m free!

I grabbed my most important possessions, my blanket “Pinky” and stuffed lion “Rutger,” and bolted from the car. Tumbling, skipping, and occasionally sliding, I ran down the path to the cottage below, past the outhouse and the bonfire circle to the smooth and welcoming stones that lined the walkway. It was all still here! The big old oak tree still leaned gracefully over the river’s wide bank. The boat my grandfather made and the old red canoe, already taken down the river’s edge, awaited the next explorers for a trip across or up the river.

I checked inside the cottage to see who was already there and found my aunt and uncle busy cleaning up the dust that had settled on the tables and floor over the long winters slumber. My great-grandmother, Bah, 88 wise years to my eight tender young years, sat in her wicker rocking chair, slowly gliding back and forth with a steady creak from the runners and a tapping as her black heeled shoe hit the floor. I greeted all with warm hugs and slipped into the bedroom to put Pinky and Rutger on my bed and then dashed back out the door to the front porch. I climbed aboard the old grey swing and gently pushed off, listening to the creaking springs as I watched the river slide “Idlewildy” away.
Leaving Paradise

Anna Brown

The sun, looking pink and orange against the blue sky, rose slowly from behind the hills. As the sun emerged fully into a golden sphere, the town’s name, Paradise, Kentucky, could be seen clearly on the water tower.

John’s curled-up body began to move under the covers. As he awakened at the first sunlight filtering through the curtains in his room, he was startled by the sparseness of it. Then he remembered he had been giving Miss Debbie most of Rita’s things. John stretched while rising from the bed and sat at the edge of it resting. Remembering the day before gave him shivers. He had chosen not to think much of what Doc Barnes had told him, even the hopeful part. His seventy-plus years in that town had brought him tears and joy. It was about to be over now, he thought. Rita had gone the year before, as the spring came in. He would go as the summer went out.

John walked to the window and, pulling the curtains aside, stared in the distance. He saw the familiar places he had come to love over the years. He could see Mr. Miller standing outside his drug store talking to a stranger, pointing down Main Street as if giving directions. The drug store’s clock had been broken for countless years, but it would still be there, while he would not.

As John stared outside the window, he began to see through his mind’s eye the occasion of his tenth birthday. He had been dressed in his finery when he was challenged by his best friend Charlie to climb the water tower. He had been scared, but nobody would be calling him a coward. When the feat was done, his mother found out and his tenth birthday ended without cake but with fond memories.

He could see himself and Charlie at fifteen, walking on the train tracks at the edge of town, both resembling a balancing act. Each using a different rail, they walked until one fell. Always trying to beat the train coming fast toward them. The last time the tracks had been used was in the 1940’s. The train would take the GI’s wherever they needed to go to be trained for war or to join their regiments. His father was one of
the men who left on the train for the Army and never came back. The tracks had been shiny and strong then; now they were rusted and weak, like him.

Now, he thought, it was his turn to leave. A journey not of his choosing, but one he must make and, like his father, he too would never come back. John moved slowly away from the window and his memories, and he was overcome with weakness. He sat at the small table by the window and ate what Miss Debbie had left for him. He finished his meal and put on his trousers and white shirt. He must make a journey of his choice this time, he thought. John went to the stairs and walked down to the front door.

The front door opened to the view of Jackson Square. John stood there delighting in the view of the neatly tendered green lawns and trees that composed the little park at the center of the square. At the corner of Jackson Square and Main Street stood Miller’s drug store with its broken clock on top of the building for all to see. In the center of the park stood a bronze statue of Andrew Jackson sitting on his horse as if still in command.

Four paved pathways forming a cross met at the center of the park where the statue stood and where benches welcomed the townspeople on nice sunny days. As John slowly walked down the pathway to cross the park, he noticed the same stranger he saw from the window, sitting on one of the benches. For a fleeting moment, his thoughts were elsewhere but then he resumed his journey.

John could hear the crunching sound of his footsteps on the gravel road leading to the pond. He stopped by their tree. Memories of Rita came flooding over him as a force of nature, making him sway. His recollection of the past seemed as clear as day. Rita, at eighteen with her black curly hair and brown eyes, was running by the pond while he chased her. With the sun shining above their heads, they both fell exhausted on the green grass, laughing. Lying there, they enjoyed the sight of the hills around them while the birds chirped, making them feel close to heaven.

Then, Rita got up and ran by the young oak tree standing by the pond. Holding his pocketknife, she scratched their initials on the tree. Years later, the initials faded and she asked John to carve their full names.

He carved: John and Rita, Forever.

Now looking at the tall towering oak tree, John could only see the distorted word forever and where their names had been, there was now a few illegible scattered letters. John felt crushed. He had needed
to know that something tangible was left of his memories. They had never had children to continue their journey—not by choice. A thought drifted to John’s mind. How fitting that the word forever should remain, while their names did not. Just like reality and not a fairy tale where everybody lives happily ever after. He began to tire with the emotions of the day and started treading slowly back to the graveled road toward home, thinking life without Rita and his old friends wasn’t worth living after all.

A single crow with shiny black feathers, perched on a branch of the oak tree, watched John walk way.
Baby Bird

Elizabeth Parks McCoy

I am sorry, so very sorry.
I must start with this apology because I am a foul human being; one that is relentlessly being punished, and deservedly so.

My story begins with my childhood, those years when time is blurred and we lacked responsibility and knowledge of how the world worked, the time when youth is equated with the ignorance of how cruel life can be, when a child is too young to understand a tortured soul and the bleeding pain of remorse.

My childhood so far had been pleasant, though a bit lonely. My family and I lived in an “old” neighborhood, meaning that the majority of the people living there were too old to have young children living at home. My only company was my little brothers, too young to be of any real interest to me. I spent most of my free time in solitary abandon outdoors with the plants and animals, and all of nature that would have me. I loved the water; I loved to wade in it, splash in it, swim in it, and most especially to paddle my canoe through it. That was when I was truly at peace, in my ignorant bliss, even more separated from the cruelties of life I had still to learn about.

I was only allowed to paddle up our canal, a 12 foot wide, and 40 foot long body of water that ran beside our property and into the marsh that lay just beyond. Always within screaming distance from our front porch, always in the line of sight of my mother when she looked out the living room window; I was protected there. But that was fine; in fact, it was even better than fine. It was wonderful because there were so many natural delights to touch, smell, see, and play with. So many different types of plants and animals to commune with, explore, and get to know.

This day I remember all too well. It was spring: beautiful, warm, and full of life’s newness. Young raccoons, muskrats, ducklings, and many other creatures were starting their lives in this rich marsh, and I wanted to meet them all, especially my favorites, the barn swallows.

Each year they would pair off and, couple by couple, make their mud nests, which clung like dirty grass-filled baskets to the pylons that
supported our bulkhead. Each year I would paddle by, stand up in the canoe, and look into those nests to see baby birds huddled together, staring back at me with expressions of frowning defiance on their beaks. I was always delighted to see them, even as un-welcomed as I was.

But on this day there was something new, something unexpected. I was welcomed by one tiny, naked baby bird.

All of Baby Bird’s siblings had already grown their pinfeathers, which were breaking through the waxy layer that covers them to reveal fluffy down. But Baby Bird had still grown none. Baby Bird’s siblings all had their eyes open and were staring at me with their frowns, but Baby Bird still had his eyes closed. The siblings were at least twice the size of Baby Bird, while his small body showed signs of weakness from not eating. He was tiny, blind, and naked. And he was struggling and suffering, that much was obvious when compared to his counterparts.

As I looked at him, he stretched his neck, beak wide open in a silent scream, pleading for food. Begging with all his might for the chance to live if he only were fed. Begging with such desperation that I felt it, not just in my heart but in my soul. His body wobbled back and forth showing the failures of nature as he pleaded for life, as he pleaded for something, anything, to help him cling to life just one day longer. He was begging me and I heard that silent scream.

I quickly dropped back down into the canoe, grabbed the paddle, and rowed back to the house as quickly as I could. I threw the paddle up on shore, dragged my canoe onto the sand, and ran into the house. My mother, who was in the kitchen, asked me what I was doing as I grabbed bits and pieces of food and shoved them into a bag. I explained what I had just seen and she just looked at me for a while. As I turned to resume my mad dash around the kitchen, she said, “Honey, sit down.”

As I reluctantly sat at the kitchen table, she began to explain: “We do not know what barn swallows eat.”

Anything is better than nothing,” I replied.
“If you feed Baby Bird, his parents will no longer feed him,” she said.
“They are not feeding him anyway,” I responded.

She looked me dead in the eye: “They will. You have nothing to fear. And you will do far more harm by trying to help than not.”

My insides were screaming, a silent scream like Baby Bird’s I wanted to help desperately; a part of me needed to. But she was my mother, and so I abandoned my instincts, and tried to silence the silent scream.

But I did not. That night I lay in bed, sleepless and terrorized with worry for Baby Bird, terrorized each time I closed my eyes just to see the pitiful, struggling image of him on the other side of my eyelids. Try as I
might, I could not make the image that was burned so deeply into my mind disappear. I could not forget Baby Bird. That night was torturously long.

When morning finally came, I knew I could not live another moment without checking on Baby Bird, so I dressed quickly and ran down the stairs, grabbed the paddles, ran to the waterfront, and flung my canoe overboard. I heard my mother calling me from the kitchen window, something about breakfast, but I was not to be stopped. I clambered into my canoe and set off.

As I approached the nest, I thought I saw something small and pink partially hanging over the side. I drew closer and stood to take a closer look. Time froze and I stood there for what seemed like forever. I felt every bit of my ignorance slipping away. My fleeting and blissful innocence was falling away like a rock to the bottom of a bottomless well. Life was now cruel. Life was now unkind and unfair.

Baby Bird had died. His tiny, naked body was draped over the side of the mud nest, his beak still open. Not trapped in an eternal plea for help, but instead, just slightly as if to let out life’s last defeated sigh.

I wanted to die, to face death myself. I wanted to face the ultimate failure as I had failed so badly in not answering Baby Bird’s cry. I was now stuck in a silent scream of my own, a silent plea begging for help, to be able to take it back. Begging for another chance to make it right, begging with my now broken heart and soul.

But nothing answered my silent scream. I could not make it better. I could no longer help Baby Bird. That chance had slipped through my fingers like smoke. That chance was dead like Baby Bird.

I am still caught in my silent scream, still pleading for help. I want forgiveness. I want release. I am so full of remorse. My heart is caught in an ever tightening vice of personal torture, inescapable regret looming over me like a dark storm cloud thundering down upon me. When I close my eyes, the image of Baby Bird is there, always there, begging and pleading, screaming silently. I can hear it still, my ears forever ringing with his desperate pleading.

I have visions of my own death, still caught in my eternally unanswered and unheard primal cry. I pass through the veil and Baby Bird is there, strong, beautiful, and sleek feathered. I beg him for forgiveness, for absolution.

Baby Bird, sweet, sweet Baby Bird, know that I am sorry, so very sorry. I would give anything for your forgiveness. Please, please forgive me. But know that you changed my life, for the better. You taught me a great lesson, that inaction is inexcusable. That if I can help, I should. And for that I thank you.
I am grateful for the day I met Baby Bird and for how it changed me. Because of my experiences that day, a day that will remain with me forever, I am always looking for another Baby Bird. I am driven and on the lookout for creatures that need assistance, and I offer it. I now do anything I can to help, to make a difference. Even though the memory of Baby Bird is painful, it is also motivating. My inaction has now become action, my failure has spawned success. I still cry for Baby Bird but the tears are bitter-sweet, sweetened by the lesson learned, and sweetened by the many memories now linked to my reminiscence of Baby Bird: memories in which I did make a difference, memories in which I helped, memories that I am proud of.
He would never amount to anything, at least that’s what people always said of him. He looked ordinary, not a bad looking youth, if given the chance. It was obvious that he was not from the Cleavers’ house as he could be seen in the neighborhood at all hours of the night, usually lacking some appropriate clothing. His upbringing had been less than ordinary. His father was almost never home; when he was, a Jerry Springer installment in the making happened. Most of the time, as these epic battles between his father and mother took place, they could be heard throughout the neighborhood. His mother remained a mystery, locked up in her own little world. Rumors always about town focused on questioning her sanity. Of course, when people spoke they were always loud enough to make sure their insults reached his ears. The town was so small they could not be held responsible for what they overheard, but how the town used this misdirected information with malice was another matter.

He vowed things would be different someday. The hurt he felt growing up surfaced from time to time as he remembered the times in the classroom as kids made fun of him by mocking the strange sounds coming from his stomach that yelled with hunger. He would grip his stomach so hard causing black and blue bruises to appear, trying to strangle the voice of hunger. Trying to make himself disappear. He could recall the time as football practice was just about to close, as the dark of the night rolled in, the kids cracking jokes about the woman approaching dressed in all white, resembling a nun, maybe the “flying nun” as her head was also covered. His mother he knew without looking and in his embarrassment, he couldn’t look at her. For this he felt doubly ashamed. Meanwhile, as the kids screamed their ghost calls, even the coach could not help but to laugh. Once again his humiliation was such that he wished he could fade away. The times at Christmas when he would avoid the friends he did have in order to avoid the question, “What did you get for Christmas?” He could not tell a lie nor could he conceive the disappointment of another empty Christmas. Each year he would hope for things to be different.
He wished many times that he could make himself invisible or to vanish into thin air to avoid the pain that people inflicted upon him. He wished for the childhood that he so often desired. He wished he were better looking, hence a beautiful woman in his life. He wished he were rich enough to never again want for anything. But if this could not happen, his one wish would be for people to be gone, so they could never remind him of the hardships he was burdened with.

What a powerful wish. His last wish had been a world unto himself, never again the feelings of not belonging, or so he thought. Just as in the movies, by some strange magic, his last wish had come true. However, he quickly found this new world a much darker place than his old world. All of his newly acquired possessions were hollow. There was no one with whom to share his dreams or to be part of this new wealth. There were no more world news reports at night. No more stadiums filled to capacity on Saturdays. No Super Bowl this year or any other year. No more movie premiers or fall line up. No one to wait on him at his favorite restaurant. Not only the things that he despised in the world, but also the ones he loved were now gone.

Now that everyone is gone he wishes that he were stronger, confident enough in himself to let people know it was okay to be himself. To stand up for his mother who had it much harder than him. Maybe to applaud his father for coming back and trying to be loving and caring to a woman who was only a shell of herself. He wishes he were grateful for the things in hand, friends, family and all those difficult situations that made him who he is today. Now that his last wish has come true and everyone is gone, he wishes for his life back. He now discovers how lonely a world can be with everyone gone and nothing but time.
Success

Monir Feezor

Too much worth in money,
too little money in worth;
the problem, I feel,
is based on appeal:
for gluttony rather than mirth.
Oh the Love of Youth!

Denise Bates

The little slope of her nose, and the soft way it joins her lips. Lips slathered thick with pink lip gloss, slightly upturned at the corners to form a smile. Her almond shaped dark brown eyes sparkle as she speaks. Tossing her long, sun streaked, auburn hair over her shoulder, and letting it cascade over her back, she giggles, her eyes downcast. Eyes slowly rising to meet his, I think I have seen this look in her face before, but maybe not.

They chat back and forth, their body language telling what they dare not speak. He smiles at her, and moves his hand to cup hers. She shyly looks down, smiling with a slight blush coming to her cheeks. She pulls her hair back, and slowly tucks it behind her ear. Her hand, its long slim fingers, glides down, grazing her cheek. Their voices become almost a whisper; they move their bodies slightly closer, scooting across the wooden swing. The wind blows slightly as they swing slowly; blowing her hair back off her shoulders, then back again.

Their youth and naivety shows like a neon sign. This is the love of their lives, not one of many. To them, at this moment, no one else exists; the world has stopped for them. This moment will live in their memories, long after this day is gone. They will longingly remember this night, and re-live this tender moment with a small pang of regret. Maybe regret of what could have been, should have been, or possibly of what never could be. One thing is for sure, they will feel this again, but it will be tainted with a hint of distrust, a pinch of reserve. Oh I wish I could feel young love again, with the open, unstained eyes I have long ago lost. To feel the rush, with no fear of loss, no end in sight, no negativity lingering deep in the back of my mind. Fresh, clean, new, oh the love of youth.

She tilts her face slightly, listening to his whispers with great intensity. His arm is now thrown over her shoulder, and in this moment, my daughter is no longer mine. She is his; her heart, her soul, on this night, has become his. I pray he is gentle with her, that she never knows pain, longing, fear, or loss. Reality tells me she needs
to feel. She must cry, so she can appreciate joy. She must hurt, so she
doesn’t cause pain. She must long, so she can be comforted, and she
must love and lose, so she knows what love should be.

She giggles, and tosses her head back to look into his eyes. Her
face, close enough to his to feel his hot breath on her cheek. If only
this moment could last forever for them, lock it in a box to be brought
out far, far in the future. Yes, I remember this feeling, but I remember
tomorrow’s feeling too.
I’m the big sister of five children, always in charge because Mama’s always working. I usually only suffer mild disrespect from the kids, partly due to my sublime benevolence but mostly through my supreme disinterest. But the other day I snapped. And discovered real power.

The kids had been aggravating me all afternoon. They refused to do their homework, pretended to throw up on their dinner, and ignored my pleas to do their mini-chores. And they fought. And they picked and they nagged and they whined. For hours.

My ears were already ringing when Brad began rasping in his imitation of the devil to the Wizard of Oz soundtrack two inches from Alexandra’s face.

“Somewhere over the rainbow!” he snarled. Alexandra kept her eyes steady on her book and tried to ignore the parched white lips threatening to brush her cheek. But after two more verses of Judy Garland’s duet with Satan, Alexandra punched her little brother hard in the leg.

“Stupid!” he hollered and slung a beat-up blue Converse into Alexandra’s shell collection. War. Books fluttered across the cramped bedroom and action figures splintered on the walls. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “Alexandra, go unload that dishwasher! Brad, you still haven’t taken out that rotten trash! Do it NOW!”

Alexandra bolted from the room and I soon heard dishes clattering in the kitchen. But Brad, who revels in confrontation, picked up his video game controller and coolly replied, “No. I’m playing Tony Hawk.”

“Brad, I’m not playing with you. You haven’t done one thing you were supposed to today and I want you to turn off that game.”

“Me me blah.”

Me me blah? What the hell is that?

I yanked the cords out of his Playstation, marched the whole system outside, and locked it in my trunk.

Through the window, he screeched, “I hate you! I’m calling Mama!”
But I wasn’t going to let him brat his way out of this one. Brad was already dialing Mama’s work number when I got back inside. I easily snatched the phone out of his hand, worn smooth by constant “gaming.”

“Leave Mama alone, Brad, and stop being such a brat,” I begged, my head pounding.

Instead, he looked me straight in the eye and let loose a horrifying scream. It reminded me of the time our dog killed a muskrat. I smacked Brad right on his mouth.

Shocked, he stopped screaming and two red droplets appeared on his upper lip. I had never hit either of the kids before, and immediately I wanted to say I was sorry. But the look on Brad’s face stopped me. His liquid eyes had a new look of fear, of awe.

He looked at me for a second, then went and took out the trash.
Devil Talk

Tutankhamun Geth

I swear on the souls of righteous men I will dwell in
your hearts forever,
Not by feeding you words of wisdom but quenching
your thirst for pleasure,
I will feed the men’s lust by giving them women to
plant their semen,
I will feed the women’s desires by giving them
diamonds till dazzling liquids
Sparkles as it trickles from their eyelids,

Unwanted noise shall be overthrown by silence,
A silence which will someday be clearly heard,
Just so the thought of chaos will be a thought absurd,
All fighting governments shall cease from my peace
Then we will celebrate by smoking the dankest weed
And drinking the finest wine as we feast

We will have the truest Dionysian experience as we live
spiritually fearless,
Drunk on wine w/ a peace of mind
We shall live as children of the universe without
abiding the laws of zodiac signs,
Whether your skin is tinted in a reddish color, black,
yellow, or white,
We won’t be able to tell the difference because our eyes
are too tight,
Whether you hetero or homo it shall not influence the
laws we abide,
Cuz all we want to do is drink till we’re drunk and
smoke till we’re
Cloud Nine High
Church of my youth
In the autumn of my years
Your memory is to me—as if a dream

Shimmering flames from votive candles
Give light—to pervasive darkness
Scent of incense permeates the air
Saints’ eyes—follow me

Purple cloth—drape the Stations of the Cross
A reminder of his death

Christ . . . prostrate—by the main altar
A crown of thorns
Wounds on chest and hands—bleeding
Soulful eyes pierce my soul

Wheat seedlings flank the body—new emerging life
Silently I walk out of the darkness into a new Dawn
Mac awoke to the sound of heavy rain beating against his bedroom window. His room reeked of beer from a three-day binge. He stumbled out of bed, bound for the bathroom. The cold tile on the bathroom floor made his feet feel alive but did little for his aching head. He reached for the comb on the counter and noticed the Christmas cactus that Annie gave him had bloomed with vibrant pink flowers. “Take time to enjoy its beauty and perhaps you will appreciate life more,” Annie stated as she walked out the door. It was her last gesture of kindness, before giving up on Mac.

Mac grumbled and rolled his eyes away from the cactus. As he combed his wiry gray hair and smoothed his bushy eyebrows with his index finger, he caught a glimpse of the blooming display in the mirror. It was full of life and somehow seemed poignant to him. It was then that he understood what Annie meant.

Eager to share his new outlook on life, Mac picked up the receiver and dialed Annie’s number, hoping it was not too late.
Friday in Tappahannock

Betty Dahm

In a field sloping down from the school playground
two cats sit shoulder to shoulder
and look at me.
Cautious. Ready to run if I come

one

step

closer.

School doesn’t start until next week,
and they will not be rushed.
Between the Ninth and Tenth Floor

Josh Elliott

Of all the horrible luck, James thought to himself. Of course he did have reason to be irritated. He could be up in his fully functional apartment right now, reading the newspaper, or making himself dinner. He still had to put those bills in the mail; he wasn’t one to put things like that off. He recalled having painted the doors in his apartment the night prior and hoped the smell would have dissipated by now. James knew he was one of the only people left in the cold brick-faced building that actually tried to keep his place in good working order. James sat down on the floor, which met his backside quicker and with more force than he had expected.

And the company is just splendid also; James chuckled inwardly at his sarcastic comment. Leaning against the opposite wall and shuffling through large sheets of paper was Amanda Waldun. Her thick curly black hair sprawled itself like a frazzled mess over her eyes and shoulders. She pulled it back and continued admiring the sheets of paper. James wondered what it was she was looking at. Amanda Waldun was an art teacher. She taught at the elementary school only two blocks down. She had her large brown satchel with her. James had seen her walking back and forth from the school before and always thought it a strange sight, especially on windy days, when her hair gained a new life. Today must have been one of those days, James stopped himself from chuckling when he broke a whisper.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” Amanda asked, momentarily distracted.

“No, no, it was nothing,” James breathed deeply and imagined Amanda knew exactly what he had been thinking, and Amanda went back to her papers. He always thought Amanda the odd sort. The door to her room had large, soft-colored flowers painted on it. Though James had never seen the inside, he had walked past the door once or twice. The inside of the room would have given James a fit. The room’s ceiling had been removed when her upper neighbors, who were elderly, had left the water in the bathtub running, and it leaked down and softened
the drywall. Now the apartment was just one big studio. Pieces of Amanda’s artwork hung from the water and gas pipes exposed above her head, and either tarps or canvas covered everything else in the room. She had no problem with living like this. She loved the idea of being surrounded by art. After all, Amanda was an artist. James would have said there was no further explanation needed. She currently was putting the papers back in her bag. James recalled what she had said earlier when he first stepped into the elevator.

“Oh, hold that!” James had recognized the voice and immediately let the door go. A hand shot through the small crack still left. The door opened and Amanda stepped in.

“Thanks,” said Amanda still blissfully unaware of what James had tried to do. The doors closed and the elevator started upwards. They both stood in silence though it was apparent that Amanda wanted to say something. James could sense this and hoped she wouldn’t. They both watched the numbers light up as they passed the floors. James glanced down, then to the door. Then the elevator stopped.

“Well, this must be my stop,” said James as he stepped toward the door which did not open. Amanda had a slight frown on her face.

“No, I think the elevator has stopped,” Amanda said calmly.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, I knew I should have taken the stairs,” James sounded irritated, though not as irked by the elevator stopping than by the company. Neither had said a word since then. Amanda had finished putting the papers in her bag.

James’ curiosity wrestled around inside his brain until he finally asked, “What were you looking at?” He looked up at Amanda and awaited an answer.

“Oh,” Amanda quickly pulled out the papers again, “these are just some of the paintings that my second graders have done.” She handed one of the papers proudly to James. “This one is from a boy named Brian.” James took the paper and let out a robust laugh, a sound that his ears had nearly forgotten. The picture was apparently of Amanda, but on her head was something that looked like a black octopus. The rest of the picture looked normal enough, for a second grader at least.

“One of your kids painted this?” asked James, not in disbelief, but in amazement of the bravery that this young boy named Brian must have.

“We have been talking about things that people have teased us for,” said Amanda, “I told them that I have been teased for my hair. Then we all painted it.” James handed her the paper and remembered the last time he had painted something just for fun. He had painted his room a couple of days ago, but that was work. He tried to remember what it felt
like to paint a picture; after all he had been pretty good at it. He looked up, past the wood siding at waist level, and stared at the blank white walls; the elevator hadn’t been painted in years. Then he looked back down at Amanda, and for the first time felt sorry for all of the things he had thought about her.

“That is really a genuine idea,” James said, trying somehow to make up for his inward, sarcastic remarks. “And it is pretty brave also.” At this Amanda looked at James with a smile and her cheeks turned a darker shade of pink. “I have painted before but it has been so long that I don’t know if can anymore.”

“Then we will have to fix that.” Amanda began searching through her bag for some paper and her paints. “I always carry my own paints with me.” She pulled out several, bright-colored, twenty ounce jars. She started opening them. When she got to the black paint, however, the lid flipped and a small shot sped through the elevator and landed on the white paint of the elevator.

“Oh, Amanda quickly grabbed for something to blot at the black spot. Then James spoke up.

“Wait a second; those white walls were a little bland anyway.” James spoke slowly like a turtle realizing that it was safe to come out from in its shell. He looked at Amanda who looked back with a look that said, I don’t know about this.”Come on Amanda, I can already see the deep rainforest surrounding us.”

“Well, it is unlike me to stifle creativity,” She said, though more to herself than to James. “And I can see that panther prowling around behind you.” They both laughed. Amanda handed James a jar and brush, and they both went at it. James started on a tree to warm himself up, while Amanda worked on a panther. James could feel its smooth black hair, it was so lifelike. He worked mostly in the background and the sky, as he was taller, while Amanda expertly crafted the foreground and extra detail. The black spot that was splashed onto the wall was transformed into some of Amanda’s hair. James attempted to paint himself on the wall, and over exaggerated the ears to mimic his real ones. When they had finished, they stood back and admired their work.

“We work pretty well together,” James said bashfully.

“Yes, I do think so.” Amanda was studying the small figure on the wall that was supposed to be James and said, “You obviously did very well.”

“Nonsense, I haven’t painted in forever. It was you that did most of the animals; they are the hardest I think.” As they bickered back and forth as an old married couple, the doors opened and a lengthy, red-haired boy stood there a foot above James and Amanda, with a crowbar in his hands.
similitude

Paul Mozley

poetry on wet snow
leaves no imprint on the soul
it melts away like angry words that don’t know where to go
it fades away like simple truths too obvious to know
it cries aloud like a wounded heart too wild to bring home
it leaves me here all by myself but I am not alone
in my puddle of words and hope
Sticky

Jade Chandler-Haag

Lies of honey
falling out of my mouth
getting sticky on my hand
as I try to wipe them away
tangled in my hair
when I brush a strand
back into place.

Lies of honey
falling out of my mouth
choking me, keeping
bitter truth off my tongue
pooling on the floor
keeping me stuck
just where I stand.
Exist

Kendra Fowler

I squirm a bit, letting a nervous giggle escape my lips. A pure, flush of red creeps up into my face as my body tenses up, breath slipping from my lips in rhythmic pants. I see his body doing the same; he is even gritting his teeth. Somehow, I think I should feel awkward doing this with a complete stranger, but oddly enough I don’t. The notion fades away from my mind, a new, more invigorating thought taking its place. I timidly smile at him as we begin to move and he returns a reassuring grin, his green eyes glittering with a willing zeal.

I can feel my body throbbing for that exhilarating moment I had waited an eternity for, my anticipation building with each passing second. I slowly sip in air through my puckered lips, allowing it to fill my lungs and push my chest against the impenetrable weight bearing down on top of me. “Here we go!” he whispers to me in a darkly raspy voice. My heart flutters and I nod, closing my eyes and swallowing the anxious lump that has formed in my throat.

We’re moving together, this entire epoch, moving as one fluid, lissome entity. Inch by agonizingly wonderful inch, we ascend to the culmination of this moment. My eyes drift open and without real cause I tilt my head back. “Oh God…,” I murmur into our little space, my heart beat speeding up. The air around us thickens with avid expectancy, a fervent longing and craving for that perfectly enthralling moment when every one of our senses will be deliriously overwhelmed with sensation and our bodies devoured by a fiery thrill. The wait is almost unbearable.

Everything is becoming so clear to us both. I can see over the world and straight into heaven from this mercurial high. We still seem to be leisurely working our way towards the climax of this passionate affair. I impatiently writhe a bit and let out a perturbed sigh. Just as he nods and flashes his white teeth in an understanding grin, everything stops.

As we gaze at each other, the seconds in front of us pulse with a delirious intensity. We teeter there for a moment, on the brink of what we had been waiting for. A searing burst of power suddenly erupts
around us, a violent forward thrust wracking through my entire body, and tearing us forward with an electric force.

Closing my eyes, I feel lightheaded with the sudden and breakneck velocity. My racing heart, as if seeking safety from the sudden thrust of power, plummets to the bottom of my stomach. Arching my back, I strain against the force that is bearing down on me, and open my mouth to let out a rapturous scream. My voice joyfully crying out until my lungs are completely devoid of air. My eyes flying open, I watch the handsome stranger next to me toss his head back, letting himself go to this incredible rush. He lets out a grunt and his fingers curl around the sides of our stalwart foundation, preparing him for the pinnacle of our passionate endeavor.

Faster and faster we go, until I feel my body tremble with excitement. I see a tiny bead of sweat roll from his temple. I steadily call out the Lord’s name in the off-color of my solitary tongue, until begin to slow to a stop. Heaving a sated breath, I turn to him. His face is flushed from screaming, but on his fair face is a wide, very satisfied smile. We stare at each other for a few moments, regrouping our thoughts and absorbing our few moments together.

Slumping backward in my place, blood thunders through my veins and rushes in my ears. Inhaling deeply, we stretch our limp limbs before struggling to stand. My heart is still thudding a wild tattoo in my chest and my body is tingling all over.

I relax a bit, that small giggle gurgling up into my throat and tripping past my lips again. Pulling ourselves together, we plant ourselves firmly on the ground. I smooth my hair back, while he straightens his shirt and adjusts his wrinkled jeans. “It went so fast!” I say to him, adjusting my shirt and slipping my earrings back in. Nodding, he murmurs his agreement. That devilish grin reappears once again on his lips. “…It was great though,” he says, a vibrant craving filling his eyes again. “Absolutely,” I say, “I love roller coasters.”
A Race Worth Winning

Jamez J. Appel

I didn’t sleep well, thoughts of the race swirled in my head most of the night, and the sound of the coffee pot at 5:25 a.m. came much too soon. I said a few prayers, had a bowl of cereal and paid a small amount of attention to the cats before jumping into the truck and heading off to the beach.

The beach was filled with people in pink t-shirts. Sponsors had booths set up everywhere (Ford, American Airlines, Kellogg’s, Yoplait…) one of the local radio stations broadcasted live in the center of the booths. I found my schools pick up area for my number, 3029, on the back of my shirt I pin a pink banner that says: In Memory of Susan Zamer.

Waiting for the race to begin is an experience that is hard to describe. There is a man wearing a shirt that says “In honor of my Mom, Sherry 1956 – 2005”, a little kid in a stroller whose shirt says “In Celebration of my Mom”. There are t-shirts scattered about that explain how to do a breast self exam, there are pink wrist bands, pink shoelaces, pink, pink, pink…

The race finally begins and I turn on my music and go. Not even half-way through I want to stop and walk, I see other people walking, I surely could… then I see the guy running ahead of me with the shirt for his Mom “Sherry” and I keep running.

Water, finally there’s some water… where have these people been, hand out more water for God’s sake…

I get tired again, I want to walk… I close my eyes and think of Susan and her struggle, did she quit fighting? Did she give up? I tear up, but I keep running.

I get tired again as we approach a turn, people are cheering us on OVER the sound of my music. I tear up, and I keep running.

I can’t do this, what was I thinking, I have to stop… I think of my Ma surviving and the strength she showed during the whole ordeal. I tear up, and I keep running.
I finally have to stop; the pain in my stomach is too much... I walk for a half a block, and then take off running again.

Shouldn’t there be more water, where are they? Oh, there they are, I can run that far, I need water, I get two small cups of water... I start to slow down, I’m so tired...

A woman, a survivor, grabs my arm and says “Come on, we’re almost there, we can do it”... she inspired me to keep going, she kept pace with me wouldn’t let me slow down kept me going to the end.

I ran the Tidewater Area’s Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure in 32.24 minutes, and raised $925.00. A task I’d gladly undertake again and again, until we find that cure.
Birth Mother

Melissa Clifford

She’s an urban professional, well into her fifties, though one might never guess. (Please, God, I hope I got those genes.) Nails polished, lipstick in place, words well chosen, she’s always on camera. Does she have something to prove?

Twice divorced, she doesn’t need a man in her life. There’s the occasional old flame that keeps popping up. Like that pair of slacks that she keeps in the back of her closet, the ones that never fit, but she keeps them anyway, she takes them out and tries them on once more. They just never fit.

If she thought her kids could do better, she’d tell them. My how she tells them. Over and over, in lectures that they’ve already memorized, “Make sure that you don’t forget,” and “Take my advice on this one.” In her repeated efforts to make all my crooked paths straight, she forces me to raise my guard. I hide little pieces of myself, and give her only what she wants to hear. Why am I offended? I sense the underlying theme of her advice, “Don’t make the same mistakes I’ve made.” But why can’t we just spend time together, and get to know each other.

I know. We’ll aim for lunch together, with no ulterior motive. We’ll laugh, surprised that once again, we’ve chosen the same entrée, without even discussing it. The appetizer will no doubt raise questions about the ten pounds I’ve gained. A salad will turn her attention to my relationships, the one she disapproves of, the one that got away. By the time the entree arrives, she’s calling her friend, the dermatologist, for advice on how to handle my adult acne. By dessert, I’ll be overwhelmed by her questioning. Invariably, she turns each lunch date into a performance review.

Is my frustration justified? I’m not a child. When did I become her business? Eight, maybe nine years ago, when I first found her? I was curious and wanted closure. So much mystery surrounded the few details that I was able to piece together about her life. Was she still alive? Would she accept me the way I am, the way I turned out? A little detective work quickly paid off. She had kept her maiden name, a sign
that indicated to me that she wanted to be found. I researched her address, and I sent her a card:

_Dear Ms. Hunter,_

_Today is my birthday and I wonder if you ever think of me._

Three months passed. She finally responded and agreed to meet me at my home. I can still feel the anxiety of that first reunion. It must have been incredibly painful for her, just reaching for the door bell. I paused and took a deep breath before opening the door. Years of wondering welled up inside of me. Finally, the conclusion was drawing near. Would I be disappointed? Would she?

I was taken aback by the mirror image that stood before me. It was my own face, only seventeen years older. The moment was surreal. I forgot to speak. “Melissa?” she asked, with a flip of her hair, my own signature move. She even had my mannerisms! At one point, I remember that I wanted to reach out and slap her mimicking me.

In five hours, we had recapped the last 30 years. I just remember thinking, “I hope that she likes me.” I needed for her to like me. I wanted to be so perfect that she’d admit that she’d made a mistake. I spoke so carefully, each sentence well thought out, as if Oprah herself were there, hosting our little show. There I was, nails polished, lipstick in place. Do I have something to prove?

Is this woman who gave me life the high and exalted authority on who I should be? Do I have to check with her reasoning before deciding that I have succeeded? Should she show signs of disapproval, will that forfeit all that I have accomplished without her? I am a hybrid of sorts, a blend of her urban intellect by genetics and my down home upbringing via a rural foster system. I spent 30 years wondering who she was. She has spent 30 years building an image of who she hoped I would become. If, because of the choices she made, I am better off, she has no regrets. She lives with the peace of knowing that she did the right thing. If, on the other hand, I was in some way deprived, she blames herself for the void. No matter how you look at the situation, I am who I am. I have nothing to prove.
TAKE ME BACK

Catherine Averett

Cold crisp air fills my lungs
Yellow and orange ornaments
Dangle from outstretched limbs
Aqua-blue mirrors
Now covered with canvas
Floating in the warmth
Laughter in the splashing
Are distant memories
I return to a place I love
With the closing of my eyes
A time long ago
Where my soul was fed
And my spirit was free

Ah...nothing’s more priceless
Than a golden memory
Hampton Roads Bridge, rush hour

Sarah McGuire

Mother of pearl vapor mingles with surf
at my vision’s near horizon.
Sunlight
loosens their embrace, ignites
the mist, scatters
quicksilver over the waves,
etching their beauty on the back of my eyes.
Fallen

David P. Henderson

Heavy gray clouds squat over a small city. The downtown streets are filled with people going to and from lunch. The young people move swiftly from one cooled building to the next while the older people move slowly through the hot, liquid air. Sweat clings to everyone.

The civic buildings are worn looking, low-rises colored with the soot of ships passing on the river. On the worn, cement steps leading into the courthouse stands a young boy with his head bowed. His clothing, well-worn and patched, hangs ill-fitting from his slight frame. In his arms, he cradles a heavy black leather bound tome, its gold lettered title obscured by his sunburned arms. Mutely, he seems to wait as those people who have or had business with the courts swarm past him. Most ignore him; the few who notice him shun him.

A nattily dressed man with heavy leather briefcase and a well-dressed woman move urgently up the steps in conversation. As they pass near the unnoticed boy, he suddenly shouts in a high voice, “HARLOT!” The woman stops startled as the boy lifts his head catching her in his blank gaze.

“Repent your sins,” cries the voice, “or face His Eternal Damnation!” They move quickly past the boy as if fleeing. The woman’s face flushes.

The boy moves his vacant eyes from passerby to passerby, all the while hurling epithets and promising retribution from on high. From across the tree lined street watches a tall dark haired man. Though he wears heavy leather work boots, denim and flannel, he seems comfortable in the muggy air. Unmarred by sweat, he exudes coolness except for his eyes. A piercing, fiery blue, they allude to a depth of understanding beyond his apparent thirty or so years. He curls and uncurls his right hand above his left hip while his left hand grasps empty air at his side searching for something long carried but now gone. His hands belie his rough clothing, they are delicate almost feminine as is his whole appearance. Despite this hint, no one would, upon close inspection, mistake him for anyone other than someone familiar with power and command; someone capable of personally dealing with any situation.
The boy continues his fervent, zealous admonishments, driving all away from him. None miss him now, though each avoids him, slinking past, avoiding his attention. Guards leave the comfort of their positions within the courthouse as if to remove him, yet they approach reluctantly, and then relent, returning to the safety of the court’s interior. Soon the steps clear and the boy once again stands mute, head-bowed upon the steps.

Without looking, the man steps into the street, crossing it swiftly in a few strides. Seemingly instantaneous, he stands unnoticed before the boy. He touches the boy with his delicate hand. Startled, the boy falls back but is held upright.

“Do you understand these words,” asks the man in a lyrical voice, touching the heavy black book with which the boy shields himself. “Why do you rage so? You wield this without thought or discrimination, striking all without regard for merit.”

The boy shrinks before the power of the man’s voice which promises hope and inspires fear. The boy’s body wants to run, but the man’s grasp holds him immobile. The boy’s voice, so shrill and insistent before, fails him.

“Wh-wh-who are you,” the boy finally stammers, then, defiantly, “Lemme go, or my Pa’ll git ya.”

The fine hand remains upon the boy’s shoulder, “Then, it is your father to whom I should speak. Is he near?”

The man’s blazing eyes leave the boy’s, searching the surroundings for the father. Time appears to stand still. Seeing no one near, the man returns his full attention to the boy. The hand releases the boy taking the heavy book from his arms. A momentary ray of sun passing through the ominous clouds reflects blindingly from the gold letters on the cover.

“Do you understand this?” the man asks quietly, holding the tome, title hidden. “Do you comprehend the words you shout? Do you? Do you understand its meaning, its intent?”

The boy slumps. “No,” he whispers, “But my pa tol it to me. He tol me, I had the gift. He tol me that I had to use it to save the sinners. He said, ‘we’re all sinners, but those what have the gift gotta use it; else, they’ll suffer worse’n all the others.’ Pa said, ‘my knowin’ all the words were a sign that it didn’t matter that I don’ unnerstan’em all.’”

Sadness, an ancient melancholy, crosses the man’s face. He presses the book back into the arms of the boy as the clouds open, spilling a furious rain; lightening leaps forth with deafening peals of thunder. Everything below obscures.

The storm’s fury dissipates in moments, revealing the drenched
landscape to the sun’s full force. In seconds, steam rises from the streets and walks. On the steps, only the boy stands holding the soaked remains of his heavy black book. Tears well from his dead, gray eyes.
The Underwood Connection

Daniel Durand

I cannot deny it. I regularly use my typewriter more than I use my computer. My typewriter, a 1960 Royal De Luxe, with its red rusted chassis and peeling green paint, somehow manages to hold my interest. How can a machine older than my own mother continue to captivate me?

My interest with these ancient machines began when I unwittingly stumbled upon one in an electronic auction. I thoughtlessly placed a bid, not at all considering the dire consequences. Weeks later, I found an oversized cardboard box sitting at my door. It was unmarked except its ominous return address, “Parts Unknown.” Ignoring all common sense, I tore through the box. Among cardboard ruins I spied my booty, the typewriter that I had bid on weeks earlier. It was a relic; there was no spellchecker, no way to save my progress, not a backspace key in sight. This was a tribute to the simplicity of past years.

I decided to try it out. The typewriter’s keys though jaundice with grime, moved swiftly and smoothly. Completing a line of text would yield a satisfying ding.

Its uncomplicated action clacked like that of a rifle, such that an exceptional typist could wield it like a machine gun. A composition could be likened to a beach invasion, a literary assault on some lettered coast; the enemy in his pillboxes, attacking with each key press, and the typist with his landing craft, letting loose a violent retort with each carriage return.

The extinct typewriter will never crash on you. While the smallest fleck can easily disable a personal computer, no amount of dirt or dust can bring down a creature as hardy as the typewriter. A computer may offer many advanced functions, but carried with this is the weight of increased complexity.

I do not dispute that it is often the direction of society to move from technologies that are simple towards technologies that are complex. However, this does not explain why I hold on to such an artifact. I do not deal in antiques, and typewriters carry no nostalgic value for me.
Like John Henry—the steel-driving man—I continue to clutch to this obsolete device.

To me, typewriters serve as the last vestige of a much simpler life. I do not seek to return to this era, only to remind myself of it. To remind myself that there were times when erasing mistakes were impossible, and that fancy text formatting hadn’t always been popular; for we cannot look forward without first glancing over our shoulders.
...and it sold comics

James J. Appel

It was 1985 – 1986; DC Comics was in the middle of Crisis on Infinite Earths, one of the first twelve issue maxi series in comic history. It was a plan to simplify the DC Universe, which quite literally had infinite earths. They promised heroes would die, history would be changed…the DC Universe would never be the same.

I remember the cover clearly in my head--Superman, outfit torn all to hell, holding the limp body of Supergirl, surrounded by all the other heroes in the DC Universe. Inside this issue, Supergirl sacrificed her own life to save that of her cousin Superman. I was fourteen and cried when I read that issue. It was a defining moment in comic book history. It was a defining moment in my history… and it sold comics.

Other heroes in comic book history have also given their lives for others: Jean Grey (a.k.a. Marvel Girl), Flash, Green Lantern, Thunderbird, Green Arrow, The Avengers, The Fantastic Four, Donna Troy… I probably could add to the list ad infinitum. In 1988, DC Comics offered readers a vote to let the new Robin (Jason Todd) live or die in an upcoming issue. This was a very controversial idea and sparked all kinds of debate; in the end, the readers chose to have him killed.

But these heroes don’t stay dead; always some loophole explains what really happened. Jean Grey is alive and well; apparently she didn’t die, but her body was taken over by a universal spirit which later tried to destroy the universe. Supergirl is alive (?) I don’t know how they plan to explain this one to me.

Jason Todd, Green Arrow, Green Lantern….

These stories affected readers in such a way that they are sometimes considered to be defining moments in our lives. When these characters are brought back to life again and again, it lessens the lesson, lessens the experience, and lessens the value of the character, the comic and comic book companies.

Superman and Lois Lane get married; Peter Parker and Mary Jane get married; Green Lantern’s assistant gets beat up for being gay; George W. Bush and Lex Luthor both President of the United
States; Green Arrow’s sidekick is HIV positive; Supergirl dying… These are stories that touch the imagination and make us think about the hard issues, the life issues, the happy issues, the sad issues. Don’t kill characters just to sell comics.
Full Moon

Margie Bomhower

My heart falters
She’s behind me
Silently imposing herself
So dreadful, so cloyingly close
I run with leaden legs
And she, with vampiric patience,
Slowly reaches for me
Her cool ivory tendrils stroke my spine
Commanding me to kneel at her
Black, iridescent throne
Shielding my ears from her
Sadistically sweet, siren song
I cower in the shadows
Locked inside my room
Hiding from my Moon Mistress

She eases into my room
Ignoring my pleas
Slowly, teasing towards me
‘Till I’m alone in her pale bath
And delivered unto her dead countenance
Her melancholy melody consumes me
With dead stomach resignation
My skin burns, a maddening itch
My blood ignites like gasoline
I writhe like a salted slug
Crying out to the stars
That stare coldly at my suffering

A scream rips open my throat
Raw and bleeding, I shed
My humanity, fleeting thoughts
Of dew drenched forests
Ripe with small, throbbing things
That give chase
With muzzle wrinkled ferocity
And slavering damp fur
The cool night invites me to run
Shaking off drops of broken glass
I leap to the ground
And pause to listen
With a howl to any rivals
I run with my beautiful Mistress
plague

Paul Mozley

like a levee
licking up the dust
of a thousand tears
ambiguous
fireflies and spanish moss
glistening though ominous
fault the heart that’s curious
in this solemn place of
ambivalence
torn broken like the ring
that was hurled back at me
trepidation and mournful things
turn my feet to bricks and my heart to freeze
if I could see beyond this stubborn log
then my eyes once dim could gaze upon
a hope that rises as it fills
each cavity of my broken will
lucid dreams that come and go
are caught up in their own escrow
a guarantee against the slovenly
a faith that rises from the woe
now i’m gone because i go
to live the life i’ve never known
A Paragon of Insanity

Amber Grusczeczka Clark

Glaring summer sun made my window seat on the city bus painfully hot. The backs of my bare thighs sweated on the ripped vinyl, making me slide forward at each bump in the road. I tightened every muscle in my legs and feet so that I wouldn’t slip to the floor. The air on the bus was stifling and thick with dirty hair and unwashed clothes. In the seat behind me, a man and woman were deep into a fierce argument. I hadn’t noticed the pair when I got on the bus; out of some shy embarrassment, I always kept my eyes on the floor and went swiftly to the first empty seat. Now I looked searchingly at the other passengers and saw faces nervous and bewildered. Foul language flooded my space, the man’s anger gruff to the woman’s cruel mockery.

Finally, exasperated, I turned around to get a good nosy look at the two. But there was only a single, solitary body. The two distinct voices filling my ears came from only one person. An old man, dirty and grayish-black. His sweaty shirt clung wet to his sagging chest. Between his knees stood three beat-up fishing poles. On the seat beside him was a scarred five-gallon bucket, out of which came the stink of warm dead crabs. He wore on his weathered head a filthy oversized hat, the same color as his skin. His eyes chilled me, rolling in different directions. As soon as he caught my open-mouthed stare, his dual identities stopped raging mid-word. I wondered if he could even see like that when he leaned forward, eyes spinning, and flatly said, “What?”

I knew I looked pale and scared and stupid, and I quickly spun around to face the front of the bus. The “couple” resumed their fight. I sat rigid, thighs swimming in the hot seat, and waited anxiously for my stop.

Finally, filled with relief to see my stop approaching, I threw my hand up to pull the signal wire. Silly with joy, I knocked my knuckles hard on the metal window frame. I shook the hot pain from my fingers and someone else rang the bell. The bus started to slow and I jumped up and walked fast and long-legged to the front door. I said thanks to the driver and hopped down the steps to the ground. Once again
breathing fresh, easy air, I looked up to watch the bus leave. But it wasn’t leaving. Clumsy with his fishing gear was the very person I had just escaped, exiting the back door. He stepped to the ground and stalked past me, adjusting his grasp on the poles, mumbling something about bitches. Half a block away was a pile of leaf-filled trash bags on the curb. The man walked down the street and sat himself on the bags, laying down all his gear except for one fishing pole.

Now disturbingly silent, he inspected his rod and reel and tied a hook to the line. A dry, ashy arm went down into the bucket and reappeared with a limp minnow. His grubby gray hands pushed the hook through the minnow’s little body. Mesmerized, I stood like stone as he cast his line into traffic. The minnow on its hook smacked the windshield of a little blue Toyota. The car got away, and with much gravity the man reeled in his line. He speared another fish and cast out into traffic. This time the hook caught on someone’s windshield wiper. The old lunatic struggled with the line, but his prey was too strong. The dry old hands lost their grip and the car puttered down the road with a rusty red fishing rod bouncing along behind it.

The man watched his fishing pole sadly until it was out of sight. Then, looking resigned, he gathered his things and pushed himself up off the pile of bags. He had sunk down deep into them and had to struggle to get to his feet. At last he stood up, looked at the tree branches above him, and shuffled back onto the sidewalk. Cussing again, though now more quietly, the man walked off and didn’t once look back at me.

I saw the poor old thing again this summer, standing on the outskirts of a Farm Fresh parking lot in the shade of a lonely young tree. His fishing poles were gone and his lips were still.
Trainyard

Michael Albertson

No one was on the road, it was late Sunday night and all the stores in the stripmall were closed. The stoplights at the intersection blinked orange and reflected in the windows of an empty office building across the street. A SWAT team van’s siren broke the silence as it roared down the street and turned right at the industrial park. Inside the van were about 20 SWAT officers who, just an hour ago, had been asleep in their beds. The van stopped a mile down the road at the gates of a trainyard. The men poured out of the van like soldiers and rushed up to the gate. In the yard they could see railroad cars being kept in storage on several tracks stretching the length of the yard. One of the SWAT men pulled out a pair of bolt cutters and broke the lock. They all rushed in and split off in groups of threes between every row of cars. The gravel crunched under their feet as they jogged down the corridors with their guns drawn. They had all trained for this and seen the movies but it never felt like this, it was too real and was quite a rush.

Halogen lights illuminated the rusty steel fence around the yard in an unearthly, pure white glow. There were no lights in the yard itself because the lamppost would get in the way of the workers during the day. This made the center of the yard the darkest part of all and that is where the suspect was hiding, in the deep recess under a coal car. He had a video cable from a VCR stuffed in his pants pocket. He watched the men as they came closer to his position. To his right he saw three men pointing their guns in every direction as they walked swiftly down the corridor. To his left he saw another trio opening the door of a boxcar and looking inside with a flashlight fixed to the end of a shotgun. All the men looked the same, faces hidden behind black ski masks, Kevlar helmets, black police uniforms, two layers of flak vest and black combat boots. The only way to tell one from the other was by the kind of gun they were carrying. Some carried assault rifles, others carried submachine guns, and nearly half carried pump action shotguns with 16 inch barrels.

The men in the left corridor came up to a long neglected caboose next to the coal car. It was kept separate from the other cars on the
track because it was being used for storage. One man came up the steps and tried to open the back door; it was locked. He turned to the others and said, “Stand back.” He pointed the shotgun at the base of the door handle and fired. The knob fell off the door and he swung it open. He turned on the flashlight and looked inside, then turned to the other two and made a series of hand gestures. The other two did not know what the gestures meant and neither did he. He saw it in a movie and thought it looked cool. The other two chuckled and followed him inside where they found boxes filled with spare parts and delicate GPS equipment. They moved the boxes, thinking the suspect might be hiding behind one and then threw them out the door because it felt fun to break things. Another trio ran up to the caboose; one was carrying an MP5. The man who shot the lock off came out.

“What happened? Did you see him?” the man with the MP5 asked.

The man with the shotgun said, “No, I just thought he might have broken into the caboose. There was a lock on the door so I shot it off.”

“Damn, I was all pumped up and everything.”

As the MP5 man led his group back to their own corridor, someone announced over their six headsets, “We’ve found him; I need backup at the northside of the yard near the water tower.”

“Let’s go,” the man with the shotgun said.

The two in the caboose ran out, hopping over the broken GPS equipment as they followed their leader to the northside of the yard. The MP5 man and his group followed them.

Silence and darkness surrounded the suspect again, no crickets chirping, not even the white noise of car traffic, just absolute silence. The darkness around him was not the kind found in the country, but the type found in the city when everything is just barely visible because of a distant light. He thought about leaving the recess and hiding in the caboose, thinking they would not look twice, but then decided it was safer to stay where he was. A chain rattled in the distance.

A little more than half an hour later another trio of SWAT officers came up to the caboose. It looked like a different group, since the last two groups he saw were carrying shotguns and submachine guns, and in this group, one man was carrying an assault rifle.

“Look at this,” one of them said coming up to the caboose. They stopped and looked at the debris.

“He was here all right, stealing some computer parts or something.”

“We better tell the captain. Joe, run back and get him, we’ll stay here.”

A man with a shotgun ran off to the gate. The other two went up to the door and looked inside.
“I can’t see anything, I need a flashlight.” one said.
They went down the steps again and stood outside the caboose looking around at the other cars. The suspect pressed himself against the back of the recess as tight as he could.
“It’s quiet, too quiet.” one man said.
“You think it was one of our guys looking around in there?” the other one said.
“Naw, had to be that psycho.”
There was silence for a few seconds then the other man said, “Let’s get on top of the caboose. It’s safer and we can see better.”
“Where’s the ladder?”
“Over here.”
They climbed up the ladder and sat down on the roof where they could not see directly into the recess of the coal car. The psycho stuck his head out slightly to see where they were. They could barely be seen in the low light but were clearly silhouetted against the starry sky. The man with the submachine gun turned on the laser light. The submachine gun did not have the range for the laser to be useful, but it did look cool. The other man had an M-16 with the characteristic high mounted sight.
“They thought they found him, but it turned out to be the night watchman,” one of them said.
“I would’ve shot him anyway,” the other one said, “You can’t take any chances, you know? I see anyone running around here who ain’t a cop I’m going to blow their head off, reload, and do it again.”
“You hear about Tommy? That kid’s family is suing him.”
“That punk should’ve known better than to wave a thing like that in front of a cop. Orange cap or not if you see someone holding something that looks like a gun, you have to shoot ’em. You can’t take any chances.”
“I know. Everyone around here has a gun; you never know what’s going to happen.”
“That jury better not convict ol’ Tommy let me tell you.”
“There’s not a house around here without a gun. That psycho could break in to any house, kill everyone inside, then shoot one of our own.”
“We’re professionals, only we should have guns anyway. It should be just us and the army.”
“I know, people wouldn’t go around killing everyone if they didn’t have guns.”
Minutes later one of them asked, “Where the hell is Joe? He should’ve been back by now.”
“I wish we had those headsets like those guys in Lambers’ section. This would be a hell of a lot easier.”

“Find Joe and bring him back here, I’m not waiting all night.”

“Leave you here?”

“I’m fine up here, now go,” the man with the M-16 said.

The MP5 man went down the ladder and hustled away towards the gate. When his footsteps could no longer be heard, the psycho came out of the recess on the other side of the coal car. He delicately walked on the gravel and hid in the shadow of a boxcar in the next row. He picked up a rock and threw it at the coal car. It made a sharp metallic sound that startled the M-16 man. He jumped down from the roof of the caboose and went to the coal car to investigate. The psycho pulled the VCR cable from his pocket and wrapped the ends around his hands. The M-16 man put a leg over the coupling that connected the coal car to another car. The psycho stretched the cable between his clenched fists. The M-16 man took a few steps into the gravel covered corridor and looked around. He did not see the man in the shadows.

He said, “Come on, I know you’re here.” He turned his back to the boxcar and said, “Show yourself, you coward.”

The M-16 man heard the coward coming but could not turn around in time. The coward put the cable over the officer’s head and pulled it tight against his neck. The M-16 man dropped his gun and tried to pull the cable away. The coward pulled it tighter. In less than 30 seconds, the M-16 man fell to his knees. He felt everything rush towards him, then everything rush away and he stopped struggling. The coward pushed the man away as he fell and picked up the M-16. He turned the man over and took two magazines from his combat vest and stuffed them in his pockets. He thought about taking the man’s wallet but then decided there was not enough time. He walked swiftly but delicately on the gravel towards the northside of the yard. He saw the water tower outlined in the sky. If I can get up there it will be alright, he thought to himself, if I had a flash suppressor it would be even better.
The Chase

K. Brook Buesking

When I was in boy….I met this love.
In life, sometimes you will catch one glance, one word or one sensation, and that becomes all that is necessary to hook your hands around that idea until you conquer every aspect it offers. When I was in my twenty-second year, I met a boy that changed my smiles forever. Our introduction was a mere glance, a coy smile and a twinge of something unexplainable, yet obvious of significance. This boy, in his veiled splendor, was to be mine, because I knew there was something to him, something for me.

On first notice, you would only see his reluctance. He was slow and reserved, and proved uniform to his introverted reputation. It was indeed these perfect marks that so held my total consummation and interest for so long. Why did my lips speak of no one but him? Why him? He certainly wasn’t charming, or bold or even talkative. He actually rarely spoke, keeping his words as ransom and depriving me of my much needed liquidity of words. However, when they did come, they were thick with something I couldn’t resist, and when he did exhibit dare; it was so overwhelming that you overlooked his more bland strides.

Why this came, I could never attempt to rationalize or explain away. It was strong with will and clutched me tightly to its conception. No matter how hard I reasoned that I was probably better off, it stuck to me like an invasion I could never defy. I would just lay awake at night, convincing myself to sleep by the thought of his presence. When my eyes fell heavy, I imagined him employing his room, his body suddenly hesitant to move with a vision of me. I imagined him clouding his walls with pictures of me in his sleep with patterns of light playing on them, dancing from one image to the next. I desired to trespass his dreams with softer sides of myself I could never manage to show anyone. This wasn’t just wishful thinking, for the vulnerability of just the idea made my whole body withdrawal. It was a sign that I was centered, and was again ready to accept.
I knew nothing of his days. I was left to only wonder of his passed time, of his methods of managing his space. I wondered what he thought of this life he inhibited passing him by. I wondered if his very glance at a constellation caused a catapult of questions about life, space and creation as it did in me? I wondered did he listen from the left or from the right? I knew he was nowhere in the middle, as far as politics or anything else was concerned. I didn’t need to know him completely to realize that he was only black or white, and held no pity for those wandering shades of gray. I imagined the scent of his skin at the end of the night, alone in his room, with the day washed off of him. I consumed myself with these questions, overwhelming my senses with the thought of his responses. He began to cause quite a big smile in this meek, yet notable little girl.

I continued to watch him as days became weeks. I watched the way he moved, floating like liquid in and out of my path. I watched the way his lips curled and pursed as he spoke. I watched his hands… I watched his touch. My eyes became unstable with the sight of his skin and my feet fell burdened with the mass of desire. Weeks became months, three months, five months, six months. I feared I would have to resign myself for the betterment of my senses. I came to reason with myself: he’s likely unbearably tedious, or perhaps he is just a sloppy sentimentalist, or maybe a selfish spoiled boy whose naïveté would cause my decline? This was most torturous, for after I had convinced myself of this, I would see him, and my exposed self would fall anew.

Fall.

It was spring now, twenty days past March. The air was saturated with the promise of warmth and the smiles that ensued. My life started to head me in many different directions, and all of them pointed north of his feet. My leave was about to take place, and I feared I would never see him again. I assumed I would have to wait until my last chance to see his face and make a monumental speech, a passionate plea, an admittance of this emotion- such emotion. Could I? I wanted him too much not to. I wanted to have him in the haven of my room, curled next to me, where nothing would be heard except our heartbeats. His would become my clock, my lullaby. I desperately wanted him in the palm of my eager hand, at my fingertips, where everything could be as slow as he. With each touch taking hours, each kiss lasting days, each smile lasting months. I feared I would never know him.

When April struck, my month of luck, it brought with it his leap and I suddenly found him right next to me, a likely grasp away. My lips curled upright, my slight eyes narrowing his path, because I knew
my wait was over, he had come to me. My boy had finally jumped, and slowly, he crawled towards my company. I only had the strength to watch, my body unable to even react to his touch, my lips a hesitant pause. There he was, as if the time waited never even existed. The buildup collapsed and I saw his face clearly, its eyes focusing on mine, its lips now part of mine.

Looking back, it was not so much the wait that caused me trouble, it was the impatient desire that ruined my stand. My body craved him and would settle for nothing less than his unyielding affection and all its possible attention. I had never hit anything as hard as this. Days ran together, and many times, a week would pass and we were still at each other’s fingertips. My dreams did not stop once I had his hand. They persisted, and I dreamt of us years from now, just like this. Anywhere…. together.

One morning, when I awoke with his warmth beside me and his body molded to mine, my dreams became interrupted with a less pleasant supposition. I became painfully aware that his touch would someday leave. The touch I craved and counted on would someday be just a memory, just a concept. I thought this cruel, my object of desire, finally at my feet, and now I had to conjure a plan for its keeps.

I searched. Where was our pause? Where was the snag, the skip? I searched within myself and within his voice for a trace of a guide. My efforts were to no avail.

Upon its ponder, I concluded my fragile eyes couldn’t bear to see him walking away; my hands, even with all their softness, couldn’t bear another scar, and my words would escape me for the rest of my life if they had to mourn a good bye. With all this realized, it occurred to me what I would have to do. My boy, full of the softest edges and soothing voices. My boy, with his touch becoming part of my essentials. My boy, with all his unseen circumstances, would have to fall behind me. And I would have to let him fall behind me, swiftly and without justice, yet swollen with sacrifice. I would have to become invisible to his step, so invisible that I would eventually possess none of his memory. It had to be done. The inevitable was near, so near, I heard my tears before they had time to swell. I would go so far that, one day, he would wake up and think to himself that he could’ve sworn he’d forgotten something as he was walking out the door. He would look back into his dwelling, searching for a signal, searching the walls, the floor, the sides of this cavity, until at last, he would resign, and think it nothing.
untitled

Paul Mozley

i see one brave flower resplendent in the sun
i see dragonflies dancing because
that is what they’re made of
as wind from a distant storm
whispers to me
that these,
are the days of my life
and this,
is what they’re made of
Washing His Feet

Monir Feezor

My sight held me proper,
but vision leaves me wanting.
In a set of two the best
reveals as rather daunting.

For in my day of righteousness
I stood a mighty prize,
but love did not abound in joy
for lowering humble eyes.

Grace has raised me high,
so I shall set me low
and on my knees—my spine convex
is how I’ll truly grow.

In this day I hear the lesson
taught through silent lips
and cast my many relics down
to rest in distant crypts.

My pride suspends me high
and love now calls me low,
for in this moment I have found
my adoration show.
Hatterassonance

Betty Dahm

The wind has many voices on this narrow stretch of sand. It presses against my back, converses past my ears. It whispers across the face of the window screens. It spins the neighbor’s chimes, slowly stirring the sound, drawn into a gentle eddy.

It snaps a flag, it rustles a live oak.
It lifts the heron with a slap of wings and flash of white, and says, “It’s time to go.”
Take This Bird and Stuff It

Melissa Moreau Baumann

November marks that time of year when I don my apron shield, put a basting tool in my hip holster, and I prepare to do battle with the nefarious Tom Turkey. He is the ultimate foe. I have often smelled success only to have it slip through my grasp. Just once, I'd like to cook a turkey without having a calamity befall me. Disaster has struck so many times; I've caught my kids negotiating with my husband for the video camera, so that they could record the yearly disaster for posterity.

The first turkey I ever cooked as an adult was a beautiful golden brown bird that oozed juice and smelled divine. It also held an overlooked packet of giblets under the neck skin fold. It was the only place I hadn’t looked for them. I did everything to that bird short of inserting a speculum and after an hour of earnest excavation, I decided that the giblets had fallen to the factory floor and proceeded to bake the bird. Now, I don’t know a lot about plastic bags, but I suspect their intended usage does not include slow roasting inside a turkey for four hours. Not being willing to ingest the results of a time-released chemical spill I let my friends at Swanson’s Frozen Foods feed me that year. I should have seen it as an omen and given up the idea of cooking a turkey, but every year I insist on making a valiant attempt. It’s a badge of honor I wish to wear; instead, I end up wearing battle scars and the defeated smile of someone who has yet to taste victory.

I remember the year I had researched the family stuffing recipe, carefully calculated the size of the bird necessary to feed my little family of three, and taped the Butterball Crisis Hotline number to the refrigerator. I had new hot pads, a roasting pan from a fancy gourmet shop, and a shopping list that had been checked twice. I was armed. I was ready. I was doomed. I seriously miscalculated the amount of time it takes to prep a turkey and make stuffing so I was a good two hours behind schedule right off the top. The little red button guaranteed to signal me when my turkey was done was so clogged with my fresh herbs and butter that it never popped. Dinner was served about two
hours after my toddler fell asleep on the couch. Of course, he’d already had a big helping of holiday beanie-weenies.

In my post-traumatic stress flashbacks, I can recall the year I dropped the turkey on the floor and the year I forgot to stuff it. The time I bought a bird so big that it no longer fit in the oven (I had to break its ribs to get it into the roasting pan), and the time I accidentally knocked the temperature up so high the fat in the pan caught fire. That last disaster actually had a silver lining. I threw flour in the roasting pan to douse the flames and stumbled on the best way to make gravy. Go figure. I wonder if that’s how my mother learned.

There was one year I managed to cook a fairly nice, appropriately stuffed, plastic free turkey. Unfortunately, that was the year the Teflon flaked off the pan and into the mashed potatoes so I have a hard time counting that year as a success.

I could always give up on the roaster altogether and try one of those nifty turkey fryers – but I worry that therein lies the path to disaster. The “simple instructions” include warnings about “not cooking on a flammable surface or a wooden deck.” So, I’m cooking this bird where - the surface of the moon? Prepping the bird includes the use of a basting injection device, which looks remarkably like a prop out of a Wes Craven film. Apparently, you just jam this 12-inch syringe, multiple times, at varied angles mind you, into your bird and voila! You will either create a very juicy meal or a big bird junkie trying to score a dime bag of butter. Plus, picture my house “Hey, kids! Mommy’s decided that our super fattening, artery clogging holiday meal isn’t sending us to our graves fast enough so this year I’m going to give the turkey a hot oil Jacuzzi.”

If not for my stubborn desire to serve a Rockwell-esque feast, I suspect this year we’d be saying our prayers of thankfulness over a Heavenly Ham.
Office Odium

Nathan Windley

I was never as stressed out as my co-workers that sat across from each other in the windowless tech shop were. Richard looked like a bear mauled him then after that his wife mauled him for messing with that bear. On my right, Doug silently prayed along to whatever AM Christian radio station he was listening to. Danny was trying to look busy behind his laptop, and Arlie tuned in NPR behind his cubical divider. All four of them had been there for many years before me, and had given up trying to make their jobs or the company better. They all worked just hard enough not to get fired. The company was family owned, and poorly ran as I soon found out.

The general manager, John, would stroll in to the tech shop on occasion to micro manage. He was heavy in a jolly sort of way and was a beer chugging, face kicking, hell raising punk back in the 80’s. I noticed holes from piercings in his nose and ears that looked like chicken pox scars that he scratched too hard. I asked about them before on a road trip mostly because there are only so many topics for discussion when you’re in a car covering 1,000 miles with another person. He told me about the Mohawks and the piercings and the 80’s punk scene and disproved my belief that management types are all soulless bastards whose only joy in life is to make mine as miserable as possible.

The other technicians and I traveled all over the place, installing networks in grocery stores and servicing the equipment that malfunctioned. We trekked north over massive iron bridges and into looming cities, ignoring the crime and pollution and west into the mountains, ignoring the yokels and seemingly displaced diners on the sides of mountains. We braved gleaming, expensive hotels with no towels and unmade beds, and moth orgies in frugal fire damaged motels with grinning, beer chugging rednecks and mysterious knocks on the door in the wee hours of the morning. To the south, we discovered tiny fishing villages populated by sailors whose stench rivaled those of pig farmers and were, I thought, the ancestors of the lost colony. Dealing with this was why they paid us, I imagine, because
the work was mindlessly easy as long as you did it right the first time and didn’t “Fuck shit up” as Arlie would say.

“You’ve been doing this for how long never getting a raise?” I asked Arlie again on some trip in a minivan that led down a rural two lane highway with forest and an occasional house on either side expecting him to have a better answer. The answer was the same and my heart sunk. I really wanted to enjoy this job, but financially it was a disaster. I always offered to go on road trips with my equipment and do an install and get the job done and slack off in a far away city or town and chat it up with locals for the overtime. I would train the customers on their new equipment and be there to answer questions when something became too overwhelming. It was better than sitting at my desk all week, taking phone calls and answering the same questions that have been asked by the same customers that refuse to think for themselves.

I didn’t mind terribly going out of town by myself sometimes. Doug’s seemingly constant need to converse about the Christian faith earned him the top position on my list of least favorite people to travel with, and he was easily distracted by things that didn’t involve work. Dick was pushing 70 and still doing the same things he was hired to do, and repeated stories about them constantly.

“What’s up Dick?”

“Me, about 5’9”, feelin’ good and handsome as hell. I’m an old man now so I can’t get up into the ceiling like I used to. You shoulda seen the size of the rat that jumped out at me! It was seriously this big! I gotta .380 in my van and I had to put it in some kid’s face once. I wasn’t gonna let ‘em steal my van, lemme tell ya!” he echoed. These stories were only interesting the first time I heard them.

“I like this job, but I’m not doing it forever. I hope they realize that,” I expressed to Danny on another trip indistinguishable from the other hundreds. “I don’t want to be over thirty and bitter as hell.”

“You just described me,” Danny pointed out with a frown.

“Also,” I threatened, “I’m not gonna be on call anymore if I don’t get some kind of reimbursement.”

Being on call was like working for stupid people all night for free. I would receive phone calls at two in the morning from some office assistant having trouble with having the patience to wait for a report to print out. It was like the office phone calls at my house that completely ruined my weekends and imposed on my meals, household chores, and family. The local stores liked to call on Sunday mornings with problems that required someone go to the store to fix them. The callers conveyed dire urgency, that the store was in serious trouble and so busy that they
were too busy to look at the things you asked them. When I would get there one lane out of the six available was broken, and only two lanes had cashiers using them. Sometimes, when I would go back to the shop to find a part or circuit board, I would be so agitated, so annoyed over having to deal with these worthless people and these malfunctioning registers that should have been replaced years ago, I would find an old cash register and violently stomp on its keyboard and display with the heel of my shoe, snapping the plastics and bending the frame until I was satisfied it would no longer ring anything up ever again. I loathed the on-call aspect of the job.

I offered the idea of raises and reasonable compensation to John and he always assured me that money will come, despite what the others were saying. I didn’t feel it was right that I made more than someone ten years older with a wife and kids. Raises were hard to ask for because you had to go straight to the president of the company.

“I don’t have anything to do with the paychecks, but if you stick around I guarantee it will be worth it.” I heard more than once.

“Yea, when I’m Dick’s age,” I never said.

A year after I was hired, a full year on the day, after I had been commended on jobs well done, questions correctly answered, and well chosen decisions, I received a raise. I figured that this job wasn’t like any of the others I’ve had, where after they tell you what a great job you’re doing, you would get a raise. I had to go and ask for it. I stepped into the President’s office, sat down and recited the lines I had memorized and practiced days before.

“I have been here for a year. My responsibilities have increased, and I think my pay should reflect that,” I read from the script I had written in my mind.

He agreed! My pay increased and I was complemented by my co-workers.

“I’m surprised you had the balls to do that,” one told me for reasons I didn’t understand.

After that the cycle continued. I traveled and installed networks for grocery stores. I trained the customers. I took phone calls and fixed computers. Everything went on as it did before and I was making a little more money.

Another year passed and my responsibilities increased yet again. I attended meetings, and traveled, and installed. I had some command over new people that were hired. I would do my work, and oftentimes work that other people brought to me. I complained a little, but not as much as the others in the office. I decided it was time to ask for another
raise. I gathered the courage and did so. After waiting for close to three months, it never came. I began dissenting with the bitter thirty-year-olds. I slacked off, and did only the work I needed to do. I only worked hard enough not to get fired. I had become just like the others. I had enough. I could leave. The others were stuck there with house payments and expensive little children and wives that liked to shop. I decided to put in my notice two weeks before school started.

I told the people I traveled with my plans.

“I would do it in a heartbeat if I could,” Danny informed me and made the excuse, “but the only thing worse than having a job is looking for one.”

He was right about that, but I think he was a glutton for punishment.

A few weeks before I had planned to give my notice rumors began to spread. People that didn’t need to know my intentions were asking me to confirm my intentions. John, to whom I originally wanted to disclose my escape plan, was on vacation. I couldn’t let someone tell management before I could, so I gathered what courage I could and told the vice president.

He shook his head in this double take sort of way and blinked his eyes. I had seen him lose his cool before and I was expecting his full on rage towards me, but he kept it together.

He attempted to guilt trip me with “What about all we’ve taught you,” and “You’re just going to leave us hanging, just like that after everything we’ve done for you?”

My mind was racing for things to say that wouldn’t make his head explode and all I could think was “What about all I’ve done for YOU? I was hired here to do the most menial of labor and someone working with me realized I knew more than how to climb a ladder and put holes in the wall. I was the ONLY tech in the back at times taking phone calls, AND fixing computers for everyone else in the company. I can’t count how many times I was pulled away from my work to look at someone’s computer that was misbehaving. I completed the network runs some previous employee had attempted and botched. I’M the reason you have a functioning network here at all,” but I managed to wimp out with, “Yea, sorry about that, but maybe I can work part time.”

John was not happy when he got back from vacation. He felt I went behind his back and waited for him to leave to inform everyone about my departure.

“C’mon man I thought we were cool,” he retorted after I told him what he heard was true.
He winced from his vacation sunburn and from me quitting behind his back. I told him the reasoning behind what I did and he seemed to forgive me, but deep down I think he lost a little trust in me. He did everything a good general manager should do. He tried to change my mind to staying with the company then tried offering alternatives like online classes and finally offering part time work.

On the last day of my two week notice, all the guys from the tech shop took me to Olive Garden for lunch. We ordered the infinite soup, salad, and bread sticks (or “delicious bowls and sticks of gold” as Danny liked to call it) like we always did when we ate lunch at Olive Garden. As usual, because of his lactose intolerance, we let Doug get a bowl of salad before the waitress ground the cheese all over it. We ate and joked about work and customers and it was just like any other day.

When quitting time rolled around, I said my goodbyes to everyone, saving the tech shop for last. I walked in and for a split second, I doubted myself and wondered if I should really quit. I stopped at everyone’s desk and looked them each in the eyes and said “Take it easy, man,” and “I’ll see ya around,” and shook their hands. I still keep in touch with everyone there, and I think they will be stuck there forever.
In awake sleep, loudly silent together we lay
Deep in the dew of light sleep, entranced awareness
Lovers always, expecting never day
Lost in a wintry river rushed sea of balmy dreams
Eyelids heavy with the wispy mysteries of sleep and it seems
Fertile premonitions and fiery imaginings remain
in the frigidly tart disquiet and never fully sours
Love me in the dead of living night;
as waning on are the growing candle-lighting hours
Nightwalker roaming in the clouds above,
searching below for the arms of Morpheus
Sleep; the world is on fire
Dream; visit landscapes of forgotten desire

Explorer of hearts, lost in the maze of the mind,
throw a diaphanous frenzy of a meekly fierce fuss
Leave her hours of darkness; stay for her midnight,
take this sensual sleep
While sinking into the wake of a sleepy mind,
images of you bring hot tears to cold eyes, and laughing, I’ll weep
At your own wistful vigil, let carnal thoughts delicately brood
Venture to safely kiss me in this dangerous mood

In awake sleep, loudly silent
Listening to one another breathe
Found in dreams, blurred, lost at heaven’s gates,
Hellish passion does seethe
Lost in each other’s arms,
Wrapped in Morpheus’s heavy-eyed embrace
Clearly blurred, the breathtaking visage on this expressionless face
Nonendurance of shredded loves, whole again,
Into anxious hands, calm falls
Shimmering breaks of frosty winter smoke that
Dissipate to spring’s burst, to summer’s suffocation
Dark silhouettes of sleep’s season’s dance on the heart’s walls

Permitting fugitive, running toward me,
to sleep an enigmatic slumber and dream lofty dreams
Unutterable feelings, lover beside me,
Morpheus’s gift in this staggeringly great little scheme
Sleeping in the lather of clouds,
Soft fog heavy does delicately lay
The illumination of shade transcends the shadows,
Melting into the shining darkness of day

In the arms of Morpheus, wind powerful as silk,
Whispering screams through my hair
Unforgiving lips, silently urge, forbid, speak and without music dance
Blind eyes see and two lovers by forty winks swear
Doting on the vow to recall the prologue of tomorrow
And overture of yesterdays past
Hands still voyaging to remorseless hemispheres,
Tender ensuing breath rolling over hills,
Drowsy, sleepy, Morpheus, watch fast!

Smooth as oil, satin designs form beneath the fabric moon
Always wakeful and never stirring, wrapped in quilted clouds
The end of night begins too soon

Frenzy of calm silence, slumbering Morpheus,
solemn and bright comes to the lover shedding a dry tear
Time heavy in the heart, he washes away with jewels of sleep,
Any trace of morning here
Velvet passions take hold of this glossy night
Sky of a blind man’s holiday, seeing a darkness that can only be felt
Only one source can be of light

Two aficionados who lay with great abandon
In each other’s arms amid a great hush in the sky
A tranquil storm calms raging words,
As peacefully thrashing Morpheus sleeps,
Quietly, softly, violent outcry
In awake sleep, loudly silent together we lay
Deep in the dew of light sleep, entranced awareness
Lovers always
Never expecting day
Disheveled by Mourning

Kendra Fowler

The world is not well
Blistered and Torn
Two thousand years and this is the evolution we have born
Hamurabi, please, eye for an eye
Tooth for a plea bargain
The world is not well
The world is on fire
Where have we gone?
Up in flames
That wars are spawn
Of the same religions
Over unholy land
Petty, contrite, impious world
You are burning
So quickly unfurled
Wasted innocence
Glitter tears unborn,
Spill blood,
Weep from deep wounds
Her children!
They cannot come out to play
Light men with dark souls are out in force
Hands reach out wrongly
From ecclesiastical attire
Blister, torn, unwell
Thief!
The world is on fire
East wind, now due west
Milking the subconscious, sir
Fire in my breast
Snarled society over cremated civilization
Disagree in direct request
West by North
East by South
Declined guest
Oiled incline, slippery climb
Empty hands in pockets deep
The world is burning!
Harmony of bullets, sing dark litanies
    Pierce
Watching, burning, eyes weep
    Battle hue and cry
    All American
Served in mothers own warm apple pie
Lovers come standard wrap; resign
The world is not well
    Fight
The world is on fire
    Flight
River weep; mountain tremble; earth shudder
    Mourn against the wind
    Unwell
    Unsound
Celestial burning
Universal hunger less critical than
    The latest Versace vest
Virginia! Allen! The world is not well!
    Henry! Ray! The world is on fire!
Solar wind carries unrefined request
The world is not well
    Unaddressed
The world is on fire
    Blistering and Torn
Your god is my god/
is their god is our god/
is her god is his/
god is mine
Different, yours
Walk through walls transcend race
    Yours is
    Was mine
    Theirs is
    End, to Our
To agonizing ends we swell
Mourn, the world is not well
Tin City, 1963

Betty Dahm

My granddad was a dancer and the cantankerous and coddling bedrock of my childhood. Oh, I never managed to convince many people of the dancer part, but it’s true, all the same.

A once-towering farm boy whom age was beginning to shrink and curve, I’d never see him without his ironwood walking stick. To an aging man with a painful limp, it was a security; to an old soldier with a hundred stories to tell, it was a doorway to conversation. And to a favored granddaughter with a smart mouth, it was an unpredictable weapon. Granddaddy couldn’t get from place to place very quickly, but that walking stick gave him a lateral reach of about six and a half feet. After a lot of trial and error—mostly error—I learned that if I couldn’t hit the seven-foot-mark in time, it was better to come in close. There wasn’t much velocity to that thing if I could get in beside him as it was coming around. Plus, from there I could give him a wink and a quick peck on the cheek and by the time the screen door slammed behind me, he’d have forgotten what I’d done to make him mad.

How well I remember Sunday afternoons on our front porch, the swing hung so high I could only kick it back with the tips of my dirty toes. The barely-there breeze carried the smells of motor oil and sweet wisteria across the yard, and the squeak of the porch swing competed with the strains of Shenandoah playing on the Philips Wireless. At the other end of the porch, Granddaddy would perch one butt cheek on the painted railing, lean that brass-topped stick against the column, and produce three eggs from his trousers pocket. And then Granddaddy would commence to juggling. Not your average, uncommitted, something-I’ll-goof-with-juggling, either. No sir; when it came to making three brown eggs rise, float and fall, Granddaddy was an artist. German shrapnel might have kept that old man off the VFW dance floor, but his hands could still turn and twist and pirouette in a sublime pas-de-deux. Ever at ease in the footlights of a Carolina sunset, he bowed, acknowledging his captivated audience of one.
Inhale

Kendra Fowler

Two waxen, pale figures stood, wet and slightly shivering, beneath the rusting tin awning of an abandoned hardware store. The dusty, acrid smell that thickly oozed off the building was slowly being washed away by the cascading sheets of rain. Rolls of distant thunder rattled the already creaking joints of the building, while nearby, nearly internal thunder roared, disturbing the brittle joints between the two pallid bodies that huddled away from the rain, gazing blankly at the melancholy shroud of clouds in front of them.

The last smoldering cigarette passes, quivering, between bluish lips and chattering teeth. Haggard and worn, this will be the last moment the sallow couple will ever share. Leaning against the dusty window of the abandoned store, the first of the specters take another long drag off the cigarette, the smoke, becoming an agonizing swirl of memories.

The angry clatter of rain takes the ghosts back to a brighter time when days sparkled and shimmered, and glossy nights were illuminated by vivid dreams. Said the second ghost sotto voice, “Do you remember that awful little room? During that ghastly storm?” The ghost paused, raising a faint hand to a blurry eye. “Do you?” came the tight echo.

Somber and as erosive as the building on which it leaned, the first specter pulled the cigarette from it’s lips, passing it away to the trembling ghost inches away from the swirling smoke. “I do.” Came the wispy reply that drifted off with the wind.

The first ghost inhaled deeply and exhaled; gray eyes following the gray smoke into the gray sky. A watery smile quivered across colorless lips. “It was a horrible little room…but what a beautiful night.” A hoarse voice said, fading in and out.

A frail laugh, choked and weak, came from the ghost. “The floor boards. Creaking. Never a way to sneak in...that creaking...” The specter pressed ashen palms against betraying eyes. “Thunder then too...Mother Nature’s symphony...”, said the ghost, choking back a sob, “Nothing compared to the more private arias trilling and reaching...”
The specter nodded, massaging aching temples. The feeble ghost shook its head, contemplating the numbing conclusions of late. With a trembling voice, the specter finally gazed at the pallid and weak ghost for a moment. Turning away to face the window, and only the heartbroken reflection of the ghost, the specter’s voice found it’s way to the ghost’s ears. “We have to.”

The ghost sank down to the ground, a convulsive sob wracking the brittle entity. “Then…this is it.” A statement to twitch ears and ring in hearts and minds, not a question on which to linger.

“Yes.” Said the specter, floating away, disappearing into the rain and thunder, a gray memory absorbed, unmade. Only a dying cigarette remained as evidence to the last memory of abandoned dreams.
Birds sing sweet hosannas in the whispering trees on a bright summer afternoon. The clouds look like citadels, joyful in the distance. The air is sweet with fresh breezes. The mountainside is almost obscenely cheerful as a man dangles helplessly from a high outcrop of rough stone several dozen feet above solid ground. And oh, but it is solid. The rocks below seem to have been designed for evisceration.

The man is not military, though he once might have been. His arms bulge with the strain of supporting him, but he hangs on for dear life. He imagines sweet, beautiful Linda hearing the news. He thinks of the fireworks sitting in the trunk of his car and all the times his wife and children will sit staring at them in horror. They’ll blame themselves for his death. Charlie might kill himself. He’s not the strongest child. His eyes have never been less than adoring in the presence of his father. The man thinks of Charlie’s eyes and fireworks and holds on.

There is blood flowing freely from his ruined hands. The rocks cut deeper with every movement he makes. His palms are shredded and slipping slowly. There’s a slow fire building in his biceps. He hears a jaunty tune ringing out from the top of the rock face. It distracts some of the birds, but most ignore it. The man curses his life. The cell phone he’s left charging in his car keeps ringing. It’s probably Bill. The man pictures Bill standing next to Linda, cell phone in one hand and fishing gear in the other.

The man wonders idly if they’ve been screwing around behind his back. Linda loves him, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t persuaded easily enough. He remembers their days in college; sweat crawling down their backs and finding unholy places to insinuate themselves while the young couple swore undying love and fidelity. He remembers the day they conceived Charlie. Two days before he proposed. Four months before Bill ate all the wedding cake.

The man starts to cry. This isn’t fair. The phone isn’t ringing anymore and the birds are happier for it. No room for electric dissonance in this Eden. They take chirruped bets on how long the two-legged thing will
last, clinging to the precipice. The clouds, haughty as they are, ignore everything the man stands for. One of them is pregnant and promising rain. It is a forbidding gray to the shining white of its peers. The man doesn’t notice any of this. He’s busy. Men often are.

Lines of red and black are flashing across his vision, snapping with the rhythm of his pulse. His arms are running fire, his fingers blood. Somewhere along the line, he has soiled himself, either from fear or because he needed to conserve his strength. He is uncomfortably aware of his involuntary arousal.

“Why now? The hell!” he says to his body.

He thinks of Linda again, of course. Then he thinks of Bill. Ah, hell, he thinks. Let them have their fun. We’re only alive for as long as we’ve got. He wills Bill to be a good father to Charlie. Maybe with a man like that to look up to, Charlie will turn out a good man. The dangling man wonders for a second if his son is a homosexual. He thinks of college, again. There are so many moments, he thinks. He wonders if there will be a lot of people at his funeral service. His father had died only two years ago and had been sent off by a virtual army of loved ones. He wishes he could have lived up to his father’s expectations.

His arms are starting to slip. The muscles are going, but he is not. He grips down with everything he’s got and wants with everything he has to be alive for his son’s civil union. To prove to his wife that he’s everything she always wanted him to be. He thinks of punching Bill in the face, but that’s unwarranted. He thinks of threesomes and firecrackers and pretty clouds like the ones above him.

He grips the slick rocks and grits his teeth. The brown stone is replaced by red and black splotches. Inevitability had fallen over him like a shroud, while tires crunch gravel above him. His face is red. His eyes are red and so is the precipice. His arms are shaking with strain. It’s too much for him. He thinks of firecrackers again, but this time there’s little to connect them with. His thoughts are flooded with automatic responses.

Don’t you dare die, he rages. Don’t you die, you pussy! Come on!!

His mind flashes across all the things he won’t see again and then disappears. Survival is its own reward. He starts to really struggle. His feet kick at the air. His arms bend upwards only a few inches, but they are inches hard won. Somewhere overhead, Bill and Linda are calling him, but he hears only memories. He wants so much to see them again, doesn’t know he’s looking right at them, until his arms give way.

He refuses to make peace. “I want to live!” he screams. “I want to live! Damn it, live!”
Linda is calling emergency services, but they’ll be a long time in coming. There’s been an accident down the road with a gas rigger and three family vehicles. They hang up on her when she starts crying hysterically at them. She’d be more composed if she could see recognition in his eyes. Bill, meanwhile, is trying to lift his screaming brother from the edge of the cliff, but the crazy bastard is resisting him. This isn’t going to be easy.

Time stops. Linda’s finger sticks to the “end call” button, and Bill’s arms stop wavering with the strain of pulling at the man’s wrists. The man sees this and calms down. He is still moving, so he looks around. Two nesting sparrows are gossiping about things that only birds would care about--millet theft, avian miscenagation and the like. They stop and look at him when they realize he’s staring.

“What?” one of them asks. The man is startled that he understands. He looks back up. His brother’s sweaty face is concerned and frustrated. And not moving. He takes this at face value and looks back to the birds who are still staring at him, eyes unreadable.

“Are you hallucinations?”

“We sure are!” says the second bird. This one is bigger than the other, with black feathers.

“Am I dead?”

“Well, you haven’t hit the rocks yet, so I doubt it. I wish you’d hurry up, though. The suspense is boring me,” the bird replies.

“What’s going on?” the man asks, dazed.

“Damned if I know,” the first bird says. The birds go back to their preening and gossiping, occasionally tossing sidelong glances back in the man’s direction.

The man tries pulling himself up again, but his legs are granite weights and his arms have become damp rope, useless to help him. He looks up again. His brother hasn’t moved. There’s a perfectly formed drop of milky sweat suspended just two inches from the man’s thick black eyebrows. Charlie is going to have those eyebrows, like dueling caterpillars. Of course, he’ll probably preen them. Charlie is a strange bird. He comes by it honestly.

Dizziness comes over the man in waves. His scalp tingles; his lungs catch holy fire. His senses desert him. He stares at the sweat hanging there, thinking how much things travel in circles. He is perspiration personified, hanging for a moment in a gasp of time. His son is a bird with caterpillar eyebrows and suddenly the man is a caterpillar, too, waiting for the birds to come and take him away. A breeze stirs and he panics.
The birds are laughing at him now, pointing their vicious, feathered wings and guffawing heartily. Bill is smiling, too, though the man doesn’t know how he found the time in this missing time. He thinks of time and forgets what he was doing, for a moment. What is Bill doing here, anyway?

Bill isn’t offering any answers. All he can do is grit his teeth and try so hard to save his brother’s life that sweat pours from him in fountains, and the man feels suddenly that fraternal love that he thinks he must have lost somewhere along the way. Bill was always the bigger man, always more robust. He hit puberty first, even though he is two years younger than the man. The man remembers looking up to his younger sibling, joking that time was backwards for them.

Well, he thinks, now time isn’t anything at all.

Details are disappearing, of course. Fog is crawling in on the edge of the man’s vision. He’s in love with someone. Who? This giant who’s holding him from the edge of nothing? Perhaps the boy he sees silhouetted against a night full of fireworks. The girl he sees gasping under the stars behind the frat party. He loves a lot of people, maybe, but it’s all going away as the birds cackle on.

The clouds start to sway. They are impatient with this spectacle. There is nothing really notable about the drama on this particular cliff face. It’s just another caterpillar dangling by a chromosome wire. The birds hate the clouds, but they know that it’s just jealousy talking. They wish they could stay up there that long. The man starts to wonder what it’s like to be the sky.

Is it easier than remembering my own name? he wonders, for he can’t anymore. He wonders if he ever really knew it or what it mattered to him what they called him, as long as they loved him back. He thinks about the sky, but it isn’t thinking, really, because being the sky is not like thinking. He feels the breeze pick back up and this time it’s him, no self but in the scenery, and he’s gone.

Bill finds himself holding empty air as his brother of thirty-two years dissolves into thin air. It takes only a second, but it’s there to be seen, nonetheless. In the moment it takes for a bead of sweat to fall from his worried brow, the man he’s been trying to save fizzles out like a fine mist, spreading into the atmosphere so quickly it’s hard to follow with the eye. All that’s left for a second is his Cheshire smile, the one that Bill has always envied. It’s the smile Charlie’s already famous for with the girls at his school.

Then, it’s done, and Bill is staring at empty air, into which he almost spills as his center of balance is dramatically shifted. Linda is there,
though, and pulls him back from the edge. They both fall back against
the ground, staring at the place where there ought to be a man falling,
or maybe even rising. There is nothing though, just air which has picked
up in a stiff, giddy breeze.

There’s a pregnant cloud at the far side of the sky, lingering like
doom. Bill looks at Linda and she looks at the cloud, trying not to think
about what she just saw happen. They hold each other tight, still sitting
there on that lonely height, wondering what terrible god is hiding in the
storm and trembling as the chill air seeps over them, seeking bone.
Confessions of a Lost Being of Light

William Lloyd

Dialectics do not apply,
Not between the gorge of love and hate.
Alone, and claustrophobic,
In between this life and the next.
Stifled, sordid and spiteful.
Least I should abandon faith in you.
I judge myself guilty,
For the fitful murder of the human soul.
Everyone is immortal until paper burns.
Saddle Up and Move Out!
Diddy-boppin’ down a dusty road
Fine grains of young men, humpin’
Whispering rumors of dead cherries
Fragged in the spring of Aquarius
Calendars with carved X’s
Lifers, Short Timers and Double Veterans
All in Bravo Company, fatigues
KEEP YOUR SHIT TIGHT!
The sun turns its back on us
I’m in a dark rain and still
Rice-paddy sweat crawls
In the mud under my helmet
Caressing my hair with slimy tendrils
Of yellow throated malevolence
We hump through elephant grass
As tank-sized cockroaches
Screech from spider holes, under our boots
GO SILENT!
Walking, dripping fear and no-one
Cares about Me & Victor Charlie
Midnight sky and sweet, reeking weed
Its pungent smoke burns my lungs
Like napalm suffocation
COMPANY HALT!
Exhaled slowly, a smoky pit-viper
Leaves me alone, AWOL
Paranoid gorillas creeping through the bush
Of bamboo spikes, rat tunnels, and RED eyed Terror
A yellow painted smirk
TAKE COVER! EAT DIRT!
They welcome us with sparklers, fireworks
And a shower of razors
Glowing garnets arc through the trees
Brief, flickering illusions of hatred
Strobing and seething they jump
Effortlessly, like aliens
INCOMING! INCOMING!
The earth erupts at my feet
Popping embers embedded in my leg
Searing sinews dripping into lustful dirt
GET THAT M60 UP FRONT!
I scream to indifferent stars
And I can’t hear
My own words
MEDIC! DOC!
Pawing through blood congealed gore
Leaving my leg behind
In the mud, a ticket home
HANG IN THERE, AIR CAV’S COMIN’!
The freedom bird falls, choking
Tragic smoke and weeping fire
Left behind rotting in the jungle
Tears drip from a tiger cage.
Delicate

Theresa Adams

Learn what has been
forgotten-life
inspired by a child’s
passion. Exotic
innocence looks at the world
as a child. Isn’t it
virtuous? Isn’t it
enchanting? These
are exquisite
revelations. Rain
about to touch, ocean
breeze destined to free
blonde locks, snowflake
on a meritorious tongue,
even the mortifying
No that ends the world.
Echo In The Emptiness

Erin Guthrie

It’s 2:16 am, according to the watch on Dominic’s wrist. It stopped working a few hours ago, though, when he’d taken it off to mess with the band and the face fell off and the stripper that had been hired for the evening speared it with her stiletto. Then, she proceeded to crush it some more, but that time it was between her breasts.

“I could never live here,” Dominic looks up and Billy’s standing a few feet away, Dom’s lighter and a small package of Cloves in his hand.

“Me either. It’s too empty,” Dom kicks his feet a bit, splashing some of the cold river water on his pants, and Billy bites his lip, presumably restraining himself from telling Dominic that he would catch his death of cold if he kept such activities up.

“And dirty,” Billy replies instead, and grimaces a bit before sitting down next to Dominic, careful to keep his feet out of the Mississippi. “You’re going to freeze your toes off, and how attractive would that be, a foot with no toes?”

“Shut up, Bills,” Dom’s got a bit of a smile on his face, and Billy knows that he doesn’t mean it anyway. Billy holds out the packet of Cloves and Dom takes it, lighting one and enjoying the cinnamon taste on his lips.

“Wow, no snarky comments about how this is leading to my death?” Dom remarks and Billy frowns slightly.

“You get tonight only off. And don’t be cheeky.” Billy flashes Dom a lopsided grin and Dom just can’t stay indignant.

“Why aren’t you at your own bachelor party?” Dom asks a few moments later, trying, and failing miserably, to blow a smoke ring. Billy takes the cigarette from between his nicotine-stained fingers and, after a few seconds of careful contemplation, blows a perfect circle. Dom laughs and snatches the Clove back; Billy leans against a rock, smug.

“Because I’d rather be sitting out here with you on the ground than inside, watching Charlie shove twenties down that overpriced girl’s g-string – is that what they call it, a g-string?” the British inflection in Billy’s voice washes over Dominic like waves breaking against the rocks, and Dom suddenly wishes he’d brought that bottle of Jagermeister out with him. All he can think about is the summer of 1996 when they
realized they could see the drive-in screen from the roof of Billy's house and they sat around the entire vacation, eating popcorn and making up the script to melodramatic old movies. "Besides, it would feel a bit like cheating, you know?"

"I can't believe you're fucking getting married tomorrow," Dom says instead, inhaling once more on the cigarette between his fingers, then stubbing it out on a rock and shoving his hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt.

"Me either," Dom twists his neck to look at him and sees that Billy's now flat on his back, looking up at the sky, a thoughtful expression flitting behind his eyelids, the lights from the New Orleans' Hot Girls Now sign reflecting off his eyelashes.

"What I can't believe is that stars are really just balls of fire. How unromantic is that? They burn themselves out, then fall, and nobody even knows it for years."

"Not that unromantic," Dominic turns back to the river, watching as a ferry stops on the other side of the banks to pick up a group of passengers. He wonders how long it takes before the star knows it's dying, and then remembers that stars can't think. "If you could be anywhere right now, where would it be?" Dom asks suddenly, not sure where the question came from, but anxious to hear the answer. He knows without having to look that Billy's face is slightly creased in thought, and he waits through the quiet pause.

"The Goat and Tumbler," Billy says finally, and Dom raises one of his eyebrows.

"The what?"

"It's a pub back home with the best pies in town -- right now I could eat a horse, I'm so hungry."

Dom shakes his head, an expression of fleeting amusement on his face.

"You never change."

"I consider it part of my charm," Billy replies, the same expression crossing his eyes, and his eyelids flutter shut.

Dom merely bites his lip and watches as the ferry begins its return back over to the near side of the bank, the sound of laughter drifting towards them from over the water.

"You never answered," Billy's voice breaks the silence, and his vowels slur together -- something that happens when he's sleepy.

"Where would you be?"

Dom knows automatically what his answer is, but it takes him a few minutes to get it around the lump in his throat, and he licks the saline off his lips, wishing his hands would warm up.

"Here."
The Apollo

Dennis Barnes Jr.

at the bottom of a staircase
in a home at the bottom of the world
the children played foolishly, freely
pretending they were onstage
at The Apollo.
anxious amateurs
rubbing the banister
for good luck
using Auntie’s ratty hairbrush as a microphone
dressing up in the older folks’ jackets
using them as costumes
booing loudly
or clapping crazily
until one of the older folks said, “Keep that noise
down!”
and then whispering the next song
until the warning was forgotten
until they were celebrating youth again
and feeling all tingly in their tummies
because they felt something
SOMETHING
something spectacular, damn it!
while the older folks spoke in the other room
about why we have to put the house up to get
pa out of jail
and how will we go about this intervention shit
it has really gotten out of hand
She sits, keeps her arms
close, wraps her legs gracefully
around her like the whorls of a conch.
They keep the world at bay, isolate
her within it.
Perhaps if you hold her near enough,
you will hear the sound of her soul.
Drip drop, the syncopated tick tock of rain drizzles down. A damp and angry soul, world weary, clinging to the window with no hope - no regard for heedless pouring peers. Slipping, falling, bleeding, dying – a second hesitation. Clinging to a moment long passed.

“Alright…you ready?” I dragged Maxine by the elbow and plunked her onto one of my finest blue vinyl kitchen chairs. She rolled her eyes, but finally conceded her attention, trademark smirk barely pulling at the corner of her mouth. “Okay. This is what I’m going to do.” Scooping up my tiny rattan bongo set, I scrunched my face into an intense, poetic stare. Pacing – one, two, three – my eyes never left Max’s, despite her obvious struggle not to peal into fits of laughter. One, two, three, I marched with a purpose. I was intense. I was a poet. Then, without warning – I stopped. My eyes burned a hole into the very soul of everyone they met! Max snorted once, and finally lost her valiant battle, doubling over in hysterics. Not to be deterred, I slowly raised my drum, majestically - ceremoniously. And with a terrible flourish, I slapped the bongo once, hard, with vitality. Tears in her eyes, Maxine pulled herself back into the chair, bottom lip quivering as she awaited what was sure to be the grandest of finales. “Bongo,” I whispered, the drama of the moment pulling my eyes to the floor, and one statuesque doubled fist to the sky.

Fifteen minutes and a glass of tap water later, I was finally able to peel Max off of the floor. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she could barely keep the chuckle from her voice as she questioned me, “Seriously? That’s what you’re doing?”

“Why not?” I frowned, scratching at her water glass with a scrubby sponge, “I think it’s good.”

“Of course you think it’s good,” Max snorted again, a habit I was beginning to find both infuriating and utterly unfeminine, “You think the guy who wrote that bomb shelter pamphlet was good!”

“It was very informative!” I screeched.

“What was that called? ‘You Can Survive?’”
“Look,” I whirled around to face her, “You knew I was going to this thing tonight, and you had every chance to help me prepare something, but you didn’t! So, guess what, sister?! ‘Bongo ’ it is!”

Max began to laugh again, “Okay…okay…I’m sorry. But, since when are you so interested in poetry, anyway?”

I stacked the glass in the cupboard, “I don’t know. I just am. It seems to be the really popular, nonconformist thing to do right now.”

“Popular nonconformist?” Her lip began to twitch.

“Yes,” I retorted sharply, cutting off the smirk, “So will you come with me? I don’t want to go by myself.”

“Oh, believe me,” Max giggled, “This is something I’m going to want to see.”

Street lined, housed in brick. Fatalistic rows of city lights, blinking out sorts of noisy destiny - You cannot come unless you stay. A beat in verse, compelling sleep and easy rest - beating out simplicity. No one bothered to tell the rain, sliding his own path of makeshift streets and lakeside retreats. He’ll come again another day. He’ll come again another day.

The scene at City Lights was familiar. A gaggle of beatniks here, a throng of hipsters there, all threaded amongst piles and piles of paperbacks. I had done my best to fit in, pairing black pants with a black turtleneck, and (after a significant period of scrounging) had come across a dark pair of sunglasses, and an old tattered beret. It wasn’t quite black, but I suspected it might be dark enough in the bookstore to disguise the fact that it was, much to my dismay (and Maxine’s amusement), a faded shade of purple.

“You look ridiculous,” she smiled, as we picked our way through the hoards of hippies and radicals.

“Shh!” I hissed at her, disregarding her tasteful cardigan and skirt, “I think they’re about to start!”

The crowd grew silent as a slightly balding, less-than-important looking man with a beaked nose stepped forward, wooden stool in hand. “Hello, everyone,” he said casually, setting down the stool, “Welcome to City Lights.”

“Who is that?” Max whispered.

“That’s Ferlinghetti,” I grinned, enthusiastically.

“Who?”

“Lawren – oh, never mind,” I replied, “He owns this place. Now, shh!”

Ferlinghetti smiled briefly, and then, as if forgetting what he’d planned on saying, broke into a grin and blurted, “Please welcome…Bill Burroughs.”
William S. Burroughs, as the flyer had read, turned out to be a cool-looking fellow, hard eyed and serious, with an air of something intangibly bizarre. He settled himself onto the stool, and after a brief, solemn overview of the anticipating crowd, wound himself up to a tired-sounding, bitter groan, “Did I ever tell you about the man who taught his ass to talk? His whole abdomen would move up and down, you dig, farting out the words. It was unlike anything I had ever heard…”

Maxine’s jaw dropped, but she continued to listen politely, stealing the occasional sideways glance at me. But, I, standing stock-still amongst the best minds of my generation, was too enraptured to care. It wasn’t the words, and certainly wasn’t the subject matter, but something about this man had completely taken me in. ‘Where is the showmanship?’ I began to wonder. I felt my little set of bongos brush lightly against my leg, “Where is the drama – the panache?” And, as I peered around the tiny bookshop at a hundred captivated faces, all eyes on Burroughs, I suddenly felt ashamed. Slipping the purple beret off my head, I crammed it deep into my pocket, carefully avoiding Max’s puzzled stare.

The audience applauded enthusiastically as Burroughs stepped down and took a seat next to a smiling Ferlinghetti. “We’re going to open the floor, now,” Ferlinghetti called from his chair, “So…yeah, man…you know what to do!” He settled back into his chair, and his face lit up in a grin as the crowd began to shift, allowing a handful of poets and wannabes to make their way forward. One by one they stood before the captivated crowd – artistes spouting complicated words, blurry-eyed junkies rolling out simplistic one-liners – a saxophone, a conga drum, a thumping bass, a nod from Ferlinghetti, Burroughs’ angry amusement – and, I, standing, bemused, shabby bongos in hand.

“Aren’t you going to go up there?” Max’s sharp elbow dug into my ribs. Before I could object, she sent me sprawling towards the front of the room with a firm shove.

Horrified, I turned back to her, mouth agape, as she grinned and gave me an encouraging thumbs-up.

Heart beat, heart race, slowing down at no man’s pace. That salty droplet out to sea, tremor shaken, waits for me.

Paperback books of pocket poetry began to swim in circles around my eyes as I lurched into a dizzying spin. There sat Ferlinghetti, dopey smile plastered to his face – Burroughs, thumbing sternly through a medical reference on morphine. My eyes struggled to focus, resting on a balding, bearded gentleman in the back of the room. It was Ginsberg – his watery eyes peering sympathetically over a cup of hot tea. My
heart began to pound out of control as every beatnik poet I’d ever encountered transformed before my eyes. The portly woman browsing the biographies melted into a handsome, strong-jawed Kerouac, his soulful eyes questioning, “Why would you mock me?” Diane di Prima, bohemian robes flowing, emerged from the history stack to offer me naught but a slow, disapproving blink. And, even as I searched to find a friendly face in the crowd, Max’s horrified stare mutated into a grotesque Richard Wright, whose serious disposition was still mouthing, “Say something! Say something!”

I opened my mouth and a parched squeak managed to escape my lips. I felt my neck flush up to my ears, the searing heat burning humiliation into my skin. My bongos slipped from my clammy palms and clattered noisily to the floor, where they lay pathetically in a cheap pile of broken veneer and plastic. The anticipation of the crowd was palpable as they awaited the tremendous insight I obviously had to offer. A long-haired hippie in an old striped cardigan slowly breathed, “Yeah, man…I get it…”, and sat back in his chair, content with his translation of broken bongos.

I lowered my eyes, and swallowed hard to try again. This time, though, the words came. “I…have nothing…to say,” I began slowly; “I am seeing you there…Ginsberg, and Kerouac, and Wright…and I…I have nothing to say.” Tucking my chin into my chest, I quietly scooped up the pile of instrumental fragments, and scurried back to my seat. Richard Wright was gone, and left only Max, her eyes full of empathy as I whispered, “Let’s go, okay?”

But as she reached to take my arm, a slow murmur was running through the crowd. Ferlinghetti was on his feet, grinning, and clapping at my mortified backside, and Burroughs was standing right along with him. The man I had thought to be Ginsberg (who, in actuality, shared only a strong balding, bearded resemblance) had risen as well, and the portly, feminine Kerouac had set down her biography to applaud.

“What’s happening?” I frowned at Max.

“They’re applauding you,” she answered slowly.

“Yes…” I started cautiously, “But why?”

Max panned the room. Ninety percent of the crowd was on their feet, and still others were preparing to rise. My shaggy-haired friend in the cardigan was beaming like a full moon, and shouting, “Yeah, man! Yeah! That’s, like, crazy!”

“I...don’t...know,” she finally answered.

A freckled girl in a dark jumpsuit reached over to pat me on the back, “Yeah, man! That was, like, so in tune, you know? Ginsberg?
Yeah…that’s crazy! And I totally get you, you know? That stuff about having nothing to say? That’s sooo in tune!"

Max peeked around the girl’s frizzy curls, the familiar smirk beginning to pull her lips upward, “Um…” She began to giggle.

“Are you ready to go?” I interrupted quickly.

“Oh, I’m ready,” she laughed.

The applause from City Lights faded into street noise as I discarded my broken bongos and beret into a trashcan, and slipped an arm through Maxine’s. And as we strolled down the street, discussing everything but poetry, I silently contemplated sending “Bongo” to a publisher.