

# **The Manatee**



**Sixth Annual**

**Spring 2013**

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## WHAT'S THE MANATEE?

The Manatee is a literary journal run by the students of Southern New Hampshire University. We publish the best short fiction, poetry, essays, photos, and artwork of SNHU students, and we're able to do it with generous funding from the awesome people in the School of Arts and Sciences.

Visit <http://it.snhu.edu/themanatee/> for information, submission guidelines and news.

# THE MANATEES

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## Editor's Note

Blood, sweat and tears went into this sixth issue of *The Manatee*. Don't get us wrong, we're fine. We're just not too sure about the characters in the many stories and poems you'll be reading in this issue. They're the ones you have to worry about.

This year we received a record number of submissions. In the years we've been part of *The Manatee*, never have we seen over three hundred submissions. It was amazing to see such a response from the online students of SNHU. We have students of all ages, from all over the world in this issue—which is just proof that writing brings everyone together.

We're truly amazed at the talent we've come across this year as well. You'll see the top rated submissions in this issue, but there were many more submissions that we would have loved to see find a place. SNHU is, without a doubt, a powerhouse of creativity. Although a lot of work, we'd love to see more people interested in submitting.

We would like to thank the Editorial Board first, because they had their work cut out for them this year. None of us could have anticipated the number of submissions, but the board handled it with style. Alanna Pevear, an editor this year, also found spare time to design the cover of our dreams, and she deserves a big thanks. We'd also like to thank Allison Cummings, for providing steady support for this project over the last few years. Everyone needs their rock, she's ours.

We're honored to have had the opportunity to be the Chief Editors this past year. It has been an amazing experience filled with a lot of organization, a lot of emails, and most of all, time. But we know that once we see the look on everyone's face as they see their story, poem or picture in print, everything will be worth it. You'll find a short story, as well as an excerpt, from us both at the end of this issue, as well.

We have many wonderful pieces inside these pages this year, including two hit-man stories, a non-fiction piece telling of a surgery and the process of a man receiving a prosthetic eye and

poems that are imaginatively crafted. Each piece is a work of art in its own right and has come together to form a journal that we're proud of.

Steve Bogart, our artist in residence at SNHU has taught many courses for students on the art of playwriting and screen writing. With professional experience and insider information on those different aspects of writing, he gives students a new horizon in their writings and a new way of thinking. He has given us a piece of his own writing to showcase in this issue. Although short, his piece displays the sense of humor and talent that is Steve Bogart.

Finally, we'd like to wish you all happy reading. Just sit back, and let the imaginations of SNHU's students take you away.

*Kristie Mahoney  
Brandon Barney  
Spring 2013*

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# Inky

Steven Bogart  
SNHU's Artist in Residence

Characters:

Claire-42

Nurse-25

Setting: Maternity Ward

CLAIRE

Ovens can be made from a multiple of materials. Clay, sand, mud and hay, iron, steel, brick. Baking and giving birth are not so different. Turkey basting. Baked goods, dough, flour, sugar, water, eggs. Lots of eggs. Fertile eggs. I don't care what kind and I don't care about genetics. The ostrich egg is probably too large. I want a child. That's all I know. It won't matter what I give birth to. It could be an inky squid for all I care. If I could incubate a chicken in my womb, I'd do it. I'm not proud. I want the joy of motherhood. I want to be a mother.

*(Nurse enters with what appears to be a newborn wrapped in a blanket. Nurse hands it to Claire.)*

CLAIRE

Is everything okay?

NURSE

She's fine.

*(Claire holds the infant pulls the top of the blanket down a little to reveal tiny tentacles sticking out. Claire coos.)*

CLAIRE

Aren't you precious. My little blessing.

END.

# Hero of Olympus

Debra St. Jeor

My dad inched his way up the fifteen foot ladder so as not to jostle it. The slightest movement could send me tumbling to the earth.

“Don’t move, honey! Stay where you are!” he pleaded.

From the ground far below, my mom, pregnant with their third child, held her breath as she craned her neck, straining to see through the branches.

I was perched happily near the top of the ladder, barefoot, sticky and stained from filling my belly with cherries. I was barely three, and fear was still foreign to me. I giggled as I watched my dad edge closer, and squealed with delight when he scooped me up and carried me fireman-style back down the rickety ladder.

From my earliest memories, my dad was a hero of Olympic proportions. Short by worldly standards, measuring in at a mere 5’9”, to me he was larger than life. He was brave, he was strong; he was my protector.

He taught me to drink from a garden hose, laughing when I soaked us both in the process. He gave us kid’s under-ducks on the swing which evoked shrieks of glee and had us begging for more. We hung on for dear life when he got down on all fours to give us “bucking bronco” rides.

He always looked clean cut and professional. Even when he was driving a tractor, his dark hair was neat and combed back. I relished the comforting scent that wafted about him; years later I learned it was Old Spice. His eyes were unique. They almost always sparkled, and his left pupil was shaped like a teardrop. I cherished that teardrop.

My dad loved life and lived it with intensity and fervor. He loved people, and he especially loved his family. He manifested that love daily.

\* \* \*

I was about six when I went with Dad on a business trip. We were driving the family car, a big green station wagon with wood-grain panels. Our family had moved to Wyoming but we lived in a part of the state that you can't find in tourist brochures, mainly because it is flat and barren and resembles a cosmic cat box. As the topography gradually changed, I was impressed with the "mountains" we were passing. They were really little more than foothills, but to me they looked like the Alps.

"Wow Daddy! Look how big the mountains are!" I exclaimed, my nose pressed hard against the car window. He pulled the car over and grinned. "C'mon, let's go!" he said.

He held my hand as we climbed. The hike up probably took less than twenty minutes; but to me, we were at the top of the world. The cars whizzing along the ribbon of road below were matchbox-size. The cool wind tousled the dry bushes and whipped my hair. I breathed in the smell of dirt, sagebrush, and the approaching rain. I was invincible standing there next to my dad, hero of all Olympus.

\* \* \*

It was the middle of a Canadian December. We had moved to northern Alberta where there were thick forests, narrow roads, and a lot of snow. I had accompanied Dad on a speaking assignment at a church about five hours away and we were returning home.

I loved these trips. I was ten years old and the eldest of six children so life at home could get crazy. But on these trips with just the two of us, there was no one to compete for attention; I got him all to myself.

It was a long drive back. We chatted freely for a while about school and Christmas and such, and then fell into a comfortable silence. The hum of the tires lulled me to sleep, but I woke as the car slowed to a stop at the side of a deserted road.

"It's OK, sweetheart. Go back to sleep," Dad whispered as he tucked the blanket around my shoulders. "I'm just going to get us a Christmas tree." I jerked up straight and peered through the window.

The world looked ominous. The moon was small and dull that night, so even with an explosion of stars and the reflection of the white snow, there wasn't much light. All I could see outside the car was a narrow road that disappeared beyond the reach of the headlights, and a black wall of trees on either side of us. Trying to see beyond that was like trying to gaze through tar.

"I want to come!"

"No. You're in a dress. Besides, I don't want you getting cold or hurt. I'm leaving the car on so you'll stay warm. I won't be long."

He grabbed a hatchet from the back seat, and with a final grin, he was gone. I watched him trudge across the snow to the impenetrable wall of pines. He paused a moment, shifted the collar of his jacket tighter around his neck, and then disappeared into the black ink like a feather floating atop a stream before getting sucked down and vanishing into oblivion.

I tried not to be scared. I hummed Christmas carols. I tapped my feet. I froze my hands on the icy glass, practiced muffled shrieking sounds, made up rhymes. I counted the tiny holes on the steering wheel, drummed my fingers, blew farting sounds against the window. I tried not to be terrified...but it wasn't working. My ten-year-old imagination ran wild. I was sure a crazed one-eyed lunatic lived in the depths of the forest, eating raw meat, and lying in wait for innocent people in search of Christmas trees.

About the time I decided that my dad was dead, I saw his coat break through the darkness—and he was dragging a tree! He looked like the mythical Orion returning victorious from a hunt. Dad threw the tree on top of the car and tied it down tight. His face and ears were red with cold when he climbed in next to me.

"We've got Christmas!" he announced with a grin as he tossed the hatchet onto the back seat. And we were off.

\* \* \*

From the first day of school in that Canadian town, I became a target for abuse. I was different because for religious reasons I wore knee-length dresses in a world of mini-skirts. I was mocked, ridiculed, and tormented. "You're wearing your

grandmother's clothes! Granny! Granny! Granny!" they chanted. As the months progressed, the bullying increased. The kids, particularly the girls, became ruthless. They seemed to thrive on the chance to harass me. They sought me out at school, in the playground, even in my front yard if I was alone. I tried to hide the bullying because I knew it caused my parents pain. My mom had tried to help soften the girls by coaching our softball team, taking everyone out for root beer floats after each game. When the season was over she threw a birthday party for me, inviting every girl in my class. No one came.

By the time I entered sixth grade, I believed them when they said I was worthless. Daily mocking by peers has that effect on a child. We lived in that town for three years, but it felt like three hundred.

After one particularly difficult day, I was down in my bedroom crying—I couldn't help it. In the throes of their bullying that day, the girls at school had grabbed my headband off my head, taunted me by throwing it back and forth, and then run off with it. They didn't take it because they wanted it; in fact, they threw it away. But to me it was a treasure because my Dad had given it to me.

My mom was unable to console me. When Dad got home from work, he came downstairs. Between sobs, I related the incident as he held me and stroked my hair.

"It'll be alright, sweetheart. I can buy you another headband," he said.

"I don't want a headband. I want a friend!" I wailed. Dad held me tight. When I looked up, I saw tears in his eyes.

"Daddy, please can I wear miniskirts? Maybe then they will like me," I begged.

He looked into the distance, seeming to gaze through the wall. Finally he spoke.

"Sweetheart, you know we've taught you to dress modestly." I nodded. "Well, sometimes it is very difficult to do what we know is right, but it is worth it in the long run. Do you understand?"



I nodded and whispered, “I think so.” He held me tight and I buried my face into his neck, breathing in the comforting scent of Old Spice. The world was right once again.

\* \* \*

We moved to Africa shortly after my twelfth birthday. I stood with my dad on Table Mountain, and we were on the top of the world again. Cape Town sprawled outwards like scattered Legos. The warm wind bent the proteas and whipped my hair. I breathed in the smell of moss, camphor, and salt water. This was our new Olympus.

I learned to drive on dusty trails winding through game reserves in the heat of an African summer. We were a large family on a small budget. Our vacations were usually spent on safaris...partly because we could drive there, but mostly because we loved the animals.

Afternoons on safari could be sweltering. With the sun beating down and flies buzzing in the lazy afternoon heat, the animals stopped their wandering and escaped to whatever shade they could find. They even hid in the minimal shadow provided by almost leafless baobab trees, gnarled creations that look like they were planted upside-down with thick arthritic roots spreading across the sky.

We usually stayed out in the heat of the day. My t-shirt got pasted to my body with sweat and grime; my hair turned the color of savannah dirt; my bare feet were covered in the gray powder. But I was gloriously happy sitting next to Dad, steering the family car as we searched for herds of elephant, giraffe, and impala, prides of lion, or a lone sable or rhinoceros. I loved Africa and I loved its wildlife.

Dad thrilled at the danger that came with close and potentially perilous encounters. To Mom’s vexation, he frequently broke the cardinal rule by leaving the car in order to get a better picture of an animal. His favorite close encounters were with big bull elephants...the kind that could stomp your car flat or impale it with their tusks and flip it over. He would risk life and limb for a better shot of those beasts.

*Hero of Olympus*

“Dale, stay here!” my mom would plead as he jumped out of the car, armed with nothing but a grin and a camera.

\* \* \*

My dad was our family’s protector. Our first summer in Africa, he risked drowning in the Indian Ocean to rescue me from a riptide. A few years later, he ran into our burning two-story house in search of my mother, fire raging around him and the building threatening collapse. He held me when my heart was breaking. He taught me to stand strong in adversity. He led by example and seemed to know no fear. Throughout my life, Dad was my hero.

\* \* \*

I was a grown woman the day he was killed. He saw the truck a moment before it hit...and he pushed my mom hard. She flew out of the crosswalk and away from the truck’s path, but he was hit solidly and dragged almost a hundred feet. He never regained consciousness, but died in surgery...bruised, broken, and torn. His vitality, his presence, his humor, his love...snuffed out in a moment. My Olympus hero was gone.

A week later, my sister and I had our first argument ever. It lasted about thirty seconds and was over something completely forgettable. Maybe it was our way of striking out and trying to waken from the nightmare we found ourselves trapped in.

Shortly after our spat, I heard a deep, muffled moan of pain. It wasn’t a human sound, but the broken cry of a wounded creature...a shattered, raw, animalistic howl. I found my sister face down on the bed with her head buried in a pillow, her body convulsing with sobs. She howled out her pain and anger...anger at a reckless kid and his deadly act, and at life’s unfairness. She sobbed as only the broken-hearted can. I held her and fed her Kleenexes. I didn’t tell her it would be alright, because I knew it never would be again.

How I envied her ability to cry, to wail at life, at the world, at the injustice of it all. But fear kept me silent. Fear of my emotions, fear of my anger, and fear that once I began to cry I wouldn’t be able to stop. It was my job to take care of my mother

and to hold my sister...to be strong. So I didn't howl. I just buried the million pieces of my shattered heart and trudged on.

\* \* \*

Some things are so powerful they endure even death. My dad's life remains an eternally wonderful gift. I learned much from him and carry it with me always.

I am now the mother of six beautiful children. I taught them to drink from a garden hose, laughing when we got soaked in the process. I married a man who thrilled our children with under-ducks and "bucking bronco" rides. We were a large family on a small budget so our vacations were usually spent camping and backpacking...partly because we could drive there, but mostly because we love nature.

Our eldest was just eleven when our youngest was born, so life was often crazy at our house. One-on-one time was hard to come by, but we did our best. We held our children when their hearts were breaking. We taught them to stand strong in adversity. We tried to lead by example even when we knew much fear.

Our older children are now grown and gone to college; with only one high schooler at home, we are a hair away from an empty nest. The three of us are living an adventure in a small fishing village in the Bush of Alaska. We are on the Aleutian Islands that stretch out from Alaska towards Russia, straddling the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. These tiny specks of land are isolated but beautiful. I never imagined we would end up here.

Recently the three of us stood on top of a mountain next to a volcano. Giant boulders were strewn across the valley, the village and ocean off in the distance. Cold wind tousled the scraggly berry bushes and whipped our hair. I breathed in the smell of tundra, earth, and salt water. And I felt my dad. He embraced me in the swirling wind and he filled my heart. He was there with me, standing on top of the world...our new Olympus.

# A Black Cat

Jeffrey Cygan

Beware!

A black cat stalks our neighborhood.  
His presence here is never good!  
He makes your brand new tires go flat,  
Your son gets strep, your wife gets fat,  
The lenses in your glasses break,  
You drop your car keys in the lake,  
The city streets fill up with snow,  
Mother suffers vertigo,  
Tumors eat away your brain,  
The Internet goes down again,  
You lose your cell phone down the can,  
You get a burn, and not a tan,  
Your marigolds get brown and smelly,  
Tapeworms wriggle in your belly.

Move with caution! Keep away!  
Don't invite the cat to stay!  
He stirs up hatred, hate, and death,  
Cursing with his fishy breath.  
Demon cat of Pluto's breed,  
Prompting pride, and lust, and greed,  
People pet him, give him milk,  
And collars of the finest silk,  
Never knowing what he's at,  
Sneaking, skulking, devil-cat.

The beast is master of his art,  
Pain and torture, for a start!  
He makes your savings disappear,  
Runs your truck into a deer,  
Summer turns too soon to fall,  
Baby throws up at the mall,

*The Manatee*

The home team loses 4-to-3,  
Husband gets an STD,  
Blameless men get sent to jail,  
Growths erupt beneath your nail,

The pilot light falls cold and dead,  
You meet a spider in your bed,  
Rabbits ruin the garden fence,  
And myths defeat our common sense.

Wily feline, grim and vile,  
No cat class, and no cat style,  
Life would be an April breeze,  
If you'd simply perish, please!  
Or forever disappear,  
Hellish cat, named All-We-Fear.

# Through

Rachael Hali



# An Unexpected Adventure

Alexandra Lazar

Zing! Bing!

Lights flashed on the screen as Matt leaned forward, his thumbs working furiously as he stared intently at the television. “Come on, come on...” he muttered, his face twisted in concentration. His body was rigid as he leaned forward, every molecule focused on the screen in front of him. His shaggy brown hair fell in front of his eyes and he violently shook it out of the way, not willing to put down the console for the two seconds it would take to tuck the rebellious strands behind his ears. He was just 100 points away from the new high score, and ultimate bragging rights with his friends. His cell phone buzzed—it was a text from his buddy Ryan, the soon-to-be-former gaming champion—and with a practiced motion, he grabbed the phone with one hand while manning the console with the other and typed off a quick gloating reply before tossing the phone aside and returning his focus to the game. Just 70 more points...

Then, his bedroom door swung open. It was his mom. Her hands on her hips, she shook her head at the sight of his room. It was a mess; things were scattered everywhere except where they belonged. The only clean things in the room were the television and the shelf containing Matt’s video game collection, which he treated with a reverence that most people reserved for holy relics. But, that was a fight for another day. Right now, Matt’s mom had a more timely matter on her mind.

“Matt? I told you to get down here ten minutes ago.” Matt didn’t answer. His whole being was focused on the television in front of him, and the 45 points he now needed to break the record.

“Matt...” If he wasn’t so engrossed in his game, he would have—he should have—noticed the warning tone in her voice. Nothing good ever followed that tone.

“Matthew Christopher Simons, are you ignoring me?” Matt muttered something about being almost done, but his eyes

were still glued to the screen. He was only 15 points away... Suddenly, the screen went black.

“What the heck?” Matt yelled, looking frantically between the console and the dead television, then over at his mom... who was standing near the wall, the television plug dangling from her hand, a strange, satisfied expression on her face.

“Mom! What did you do that for? I was like 10 points away from the all-time high score!” he yelled, his face contorted with frustration and anger. His mom, on the other hand, seemed completely calm. “You have spent your entire summer vacation tucked away in this room, playing that silly game. It’s high time I did something about it.”

“It’s not silly,” Matt answered petulantly. But, his mom just kept looking at him with that infuriatingly calm expression. Time to try another tactic. “But Mom,” Matt whined, “that game is, like, the only fun thing to do around here. And all of my friend—”

“And all of your friends shouldn’t be spending all of their time staring at screens, either,” his mom said in her don’t-you-argue-with-me voice. “It’s summer. The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and you, young man, are in serious need of some fresh air.” Matt didn’t reply; he sat there, sullen and silent, staring dejectedly at his now-useless video game console. But his mom didn’t seem to notice... either that, or she didn’t care.

She went on in a perkier voice: “I have a wonderful idea. Why don’t you spend the rest of the afternoon outside? When I was your age, I would have loved to explore out there.” Matt wanted to make a snide comment, something like “When you were my age, the only reason you would have wanted to play in some stupid yard was that computers weren’t invented yet,” but he sensed that a statement like that might get him grounded, so he kept his mouth shut.

Seeming to take his silence for support, his mom continued, still exuding perkiness. “Some sunlight and fresh air would do you good, and who knows? Maybe you’d even have fun. And I have a great idea. Why don’t you take Emma with you? I’m sure she’d love to spend some quality time with her big brother.” This was



too much—not only did she kill his game, but now she wanted him to baby-sit his 6-year-old sister?

“Come on, Mom,” he complained, but she cut him off.

“Outside. With Emma. Now,” she ordered, as she handed him his sneakers and a lightweight, navy-blue hoodie—both of which were conveniently piled on the floor nearby, where he ditched them a week ago—and pushed him out the door.

Matt sulked his way down the hallway, feeling mocked by the rows of happily smiling family photos that covered every available inch of wall-space. He stomped down the stairs, wanting with every fiber of his being to go back to his video game, but being perfectly aware that, as of now, it was no longer an option. He knew the way that his mom worked: once she got an idea like this, she wouldn't let it go until she felt satisfied, which meant that, like it or not, he was going outside with his little sister. After putting on his sneakers and grabbing a red baseball cap, he turned into the living room, a room dominated by an over-used couch and a very large rug, both of which were currently overwhelmed by toys and doll accessories. In the middle of the mess sat Emma, her favorite dolls in her hands. “Come on, Ems. We're going outside,” Matt growled.

“But my dolls are having a party,” Emma answered, her little voice very serious.

“Emma. Mom told me to take you outside. So, we're going outside. But, since you obviously don't care about spending quality time with me...” he retorted, loud enough for his mom to hear him. If Emma didn't want to go, maybe his mom wouldn't make him go, either. But his plan crashed as Emma, with one last glance at her dolls, quickly answered, “Never mind. They said we can finish the party later. Let's go!” As she carefully arranged her dolls on the couch, Matt groaned. There went his last hope.

Resigned to his fate, Matt helped Emma put on her shoes and jacket, both of which were excessively pink. She smiled up at him happily, blissfully oblivious to his bad mood as they headed out the front door.

With Emma by his side, Matt walked along the bluestone path, past the neatly manicured flower garden into the grassy area

beyond. “Sun, check. Birds, check. Ooh, the wonders of nature,” he muttered sarcastically. “What do you think, Emma?” But Emma had already run off, skipping merrily around like a little garden nymph, her long, white-blond hair blowing behind her like a banner. At first, Matt trailed behind her, but he quickly became irritated. He had to watch her, but he didn’t have to be her shadow. He sat down, slouched against a big rock as Emma scampered around, chasing butterflies and picking flowers.

Every few minutes, Emma ran up to him with a big smile on her face, eager to show off her newest prize. But Matt just rolled his eyes and slouched down farther. His mom didn’t know what she was talking about; this was totally boring. Maybe it was okay for Emma, but not for him. After a couple of minutes, Matt couldn’t take it anymore. There wasn’t anything to do in the yard. But there was a small forest near his house, not too far beyond the edge of the lawn. Maybe that would be more interesting. Matt walked up to Emma, who was happily making a dandelion chain. “Come on, Emma. We’re going to the woods.”

“But the woods are dark! Besides, I’m making necklaces for my dolls,” she protested.

“I’m the big brother, so I get to decide where we go. Come on,” he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her away from her pile of broken flowers.

Towing Emma behind him, he walked towards the forest. As they continued through their yard, marching past bushes and patches of flowers, Emma kept pulling away, wanting to stop and look at everything. But as the grass was replaced by a mucky layer of fallen leaves and the neatly-trimmed hedges changed into lanky, ancient trees that blocked out the bright sun, Emma became very still. When they passed through the tree line into the forest, Matt could feel her grip on his hand tighten as she scooted closer to him. “What’s the matter? Scared?” he teased her playfully.

“I told you, it’s dark. I don’t like dark. And it’s shadowy. What if there are monsters hiding in here? I don’t like it. Mommy wouldn’t want us here by ourselves.”

“I’m thirteen,” he replied, “I’m old enough to go into a little forest without adult supervision. Besides, Mommy was the one who told us to come out here in the first place.”

“But what about the monsters?” she whimpered, her lip quivering. Matt began to soften up. He was mad at his mom, but his little sister hadn’t done anything. Besides, she was almost crying; Matt couldn’t stand it when she cried. “Don’t worry; there aren’t any monsters. I’ll take care of you,” he said in a gentler tone. “Come on.” He pulled her along until they reached a small clearing, where the sun shone through to the ground. Spotting some flowers, he pulled Emma over and sat her down. “Look. Flowers. And it’s not dark. So don’t cry anymore, okay?” Emma wiped her eyes and looked suspiciously around. “No monsters?” she said quietly.

“No monsters,” Matt replied with a grin. Forgetting her fears, Emma quickly resumed making flower chains. Spotting some pieces of bark, she abandoned the flowers and turned to a new project. “Look, Matt,” she said, once again smiling, “I’m making a fairy house!”

“Good for you,” Matt replied absentmindedly. Now that Emma was feeling better, he had returned to the issue of the moment: the fact that, once again, there was absolutely nothing to do. Resuming his previous position, he slumped down next to a tree, leaning back and wondering if Ryan had beat his own high score yet. Feeling depressed, he idly grabbed a weird-looking stick and whacked it against the ground a couple of times. At least it gave him something to do. He was interrupted by a squeal from Emma who ran over to him, her eyes wide with glee. “Matt! I... oh, you have a magic wand!” she exclaimed, distracted from her original point by the stick he was holding.

“It’s a stick, Emma. There are, like, a zillion sticks here. What do you want?” asked Matt grumpily.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I found a bunny! You have to come see!” she exclaimed, pulling on his shirtsleeve. With a sigh, he stood up and followed her to a nearby bush. “Look! Isn’t it cute?” she whispered, pointing under the greenery. Matt rolled his eyes but kneeled to the ground. Emma was right; there was a rabbit

under the bush. It looked terrified—probably because there were two giant human faces staring at it—and although it pained Matt to admit it, it was kind of cute. Not that he would tell Emma, of course... his bad mood was back in full force and he didn't feel like breaking it. "His name is Speckles, 'cause his fur is all speckly," Emma whispered, her voice scaring the rabbit even more. Matt sat back, followed by Emma. "It doesn't have a name. It's a wild rabbit," Matt snapped.

"Yes he does. It's Speckles. He told me," Emma replied firmly.

"Oh, so now it talks?" Matt shot back sarcastically. Emma paused for a moment, pondering this new development, before nodding yes. "Oh, come on, Emma," Matt griped, "Rabbits don't talk. I don't know how you can say that with a straight face. Like this rabbit"—he gestured towards the rabbit with his stick—"can actually talk. I mean, seriously..." There was a flash of light and Matt glanced around for a second, concerned. If there was lightning, the forest was not a safe place to be. But then, he was distracted by an anxious voice. "Oh dear, oh dear, what on earth am I going to do? These monsters are going to eat me; I've got to get out of here. I've got to run... I've got to go..." Suddenly the rabbit bolted out of the bush, leaping straight over Matt's legs. Emma and Matt stood gaping at each other. "Emma, what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," Emma replied in a voice of awe, gazing in the direction that the rabbit had fled.

"No way. You must have said something. Because otherwise... no. That's impossible. I mean..."

"It was the rabbit," said Emma, "I saw him. He talked after your magic wand flashed." Matt felt a rising panic, but he quickly squashed it down and replaced it with frustration. Little kids made up the craziest stories, but Emma was taking this too far.

"Look, Emma. That was a rabbit. Rabbits don't talk. And this is a stick. Not a magic wand. This. Is. Just. A. Stick." Emma shook her head, but Matt ignored her. "Fine. You want me to prove it? That's just fine. Look," he continued as he waved the wand in the air, "Abracadabra. Hocus pocus. Nothing happens,

see? It's not like I can point it and say, whatever, like 'Turn my annoying little sister into a frog,' although I almost wish..."

Suddenly there was another flash of light and Emma disappeared. "What the heck?" Matt gasped. He looked around, muttering to himself, "Oh no. This can't be happening..." Emma couldn't have disappeared; that was impossible. But after a moment, he realized the truth: impossible or not, Emma had vanished after he pointed the stick at her. Now Matt was the one almost in tears. "This can't be real. What did I do?"

He kneeled down in the pine needles, looking around frantically until he spotted a little green frog. He gently picked it up and stared at it, gulping. "Ems? Emma?" The frog croaked. "Oh my gosh. Emma..." He stared at the frog, his disbelief temporarily suspended by his increasing panic. Feeling stupid but not seeing any other option, he picked up the stick and pointed it at the frog. "Delete! Backspace! Undo! Oh, for Pete's sake, go back! Fix this! Turn the frog back into my little sister, you stupid stick!" There was another flash of light, and Matt tumbled to the ground as the frog in his hand transformed back into Emma. All thoughts of the stick—or the wand, or whatever it was—vanished from his mind as Matt and Emma stared at each other, wide-eyed and silent with shock. Then, Matt pulled Emma into a big hug, subtly wiping the tears from his eyes.

"You're squishing me," Emma squealed. Matt mumbled an apology as he stepped back and examined his sister. "Are you okay? I never thought... I mean, if I had known..." But Emma wasn't listening. Instead, she was staring raptly at the stick—magic wand—in Matt's hand. "Wow," she murmured. Matt and Emma gaped at the magic wand for a long minute, each lost in their own thoughts. It was clear from Emma's wonderstruck expression that she was thrilled with their discovery, despite the fact that it had just turned her into a frog, a fact that didn't seem to bother her in the least. Matt wasn't surprised. He knew that she loved to play make-believe; this probably seemed like just another game to her. But he was thirteen; he stopped believing in magic a long time ago. This was impossible. Plain and simple. It couldn't be happening... yet, it was. Matt wanted to ignore it, to deny it,

but he couldn't. It was unbelievable, maybe even dangerous, but this stick was magic.

Finally Emma broke the silence. "Can I try it?" she asked hesitantly. Matt gazed at the wand, a mixture of fascination and repulsion playing in his eyes. Half of him wanted to throw the thing away, where no one could ever use it again. After all, it had just turned his sister into a frog! But then again... Emma's face, so full of wonder and longing, made the decision for him. "Fine. Just be careful. And don't point it at me, okay?" he replied. He handed the wand to his sister, who looked at it with solemn respect. "Mr. Wand, if you wouldn't mind, could you make real fairies visit my fairy house?" There was another flash of light, making Matt flinch. "This isn't right. I'm too old for this stuff. It can't happen," he muttered, feebly trying to reassure himself. But all of his doubts and fears vanished as Emma, breathless with awe, whispered one word: "Look."

As the siblings watched in amazement, the flowers began to change. Slowly, the petals folded down, morphing into tiny, beautiful creatures with gossamer wings. Fairies in flower petal dresses began to fill the air. As if in a dance, they circled around the children before landing at Emma's fairy house. It felt like the world was frozen in place as the delicate, otherworldly creatures flittered around the house, with Emma and Matt staring in slack-jawed wonder. Then, without a word, the fairies flew back to their flowers, which closed up around them like caterpillars' cocoons. Emma and Matt remained still, lost in the spell of the moment, until Emma spoke. "That was pretty cool, huh, Matt?" This time, Matt wasn't ashamed to agree.

After a moment, Emma ran over to her fairy house as Matt remained still, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Those fairies... they were real. Matt wasn't fighting it anymore: this was really happening. Now that he wasn't busy doubting it, Matt felt a rush of excitement. Magic... he had magic! "Hey Ems!" Matt called, a huge grin on his face, "Let's see what else this thing can do!"

Matt and Emma spent the next few hours amusing themselves with the magic wand. They made squirrels speak

English, turned rocks into chocolate, and enlarged mushrooms to the size of tables. At the same time, they explored the forest. As time went on, Matt had to reluctantly admit that his mom was not 100% crazy. In between zapping things with the magic wand, Matt started to enjoy being in the woods: watching Emma collect pretty leaves and picking up a few cool stones himself, climbing over fallen logs, attempting to catch newts (but leaving frogs alone... Matt didn't want anything to do with them anymore), and even—dare he say it—enjoying Emma's company. His moments of sullen boredom were far behind him when he looked up and realized that it was almost dusk. He had lost track of time; if he wasn't home by dark, his mom would freak out. It was time to go home.

With the magic wand in one hand and Emma's hand in the other, he made his way out of the woods. Then they walked through the lawn, making a brief stop at the patch of flowers so Emma could collect her necklaces. As Emma carefully picked them up, Matt's eyes wandered across the yard. "Not so boring after all," he whispered to himself. Emma's hand, yanking on his sleeve, broke him from his reverie. "What, do you need help carrying your stuff?" Matt asked with a laugh, looking at her bulging pockets.

"Nope, I just wanted to give you something," she said. He bent down as she reached out and put her longest flower chain around his neck. "There," she said, sounding very satisfied. Normally, Matt would have shaken it off in disgust, but not today. "Thanks," he replied with a smile. Then, they walked home, hand-in-hand.

When Matt and Emma reached the door, their mom was waiting for them, the anxious look on her face quickly replaced by a smile at the sight of her children: fairly dirty, draped in flower necklaces, pockets overflowing with who-knew-what, and entirely happy. "So, did you have a good time?" she asked. Emma quickly launched into an enthusiastic description of the afternoon, as her mom smiled and nodded at her daughter's incredible imagination. After she sent Emma off for a bath, she turned to Matt with a

smirk. “Well, you’ve spent a whole afternoon in the button-and-electricity-free world of Mother Nature. How did you survive?”

“Well, it was... I mean... okay. It wasn’t that bad,” Matt gave in with a shrug, trying not to sound too sheepish.

“Oh sweetie, I’m so glad,” his mom replied, giving him a squeeze. While her arms were around him, she noticed that he was holding something behind his back. “Honey, what’s that?” she asked curiously.

“This? Oh, nothing. It’s just a stick,” he said with a private laugh.

“It must have been a really cool stick, since you brought it home with you...” she queried.

“Oh yeah. Trust me. It is.”



# La Rue Cler

Dora Simpson

Sunlight streaks awning tops  
spilling ink sketches down Rue Cler  
as delivery trucks wrangle narrow  
cobble and brick, side-by-side they purr.  
Yesterday's swine hangs upside-down  
from meat hooks, stripped of its hide;  
sides of beef with s-shaped, naked spines  
drape over white, market smocks  
as men shoulder the red flesh.

Their cigarette smiles mock  
youthful vigor in aging frames.

Next door at Top Halles' grocery  
chin-dripping, ripe cherries and tangerines,  
pears as sweet as roses, lemons and berries tease  
the palate. Trees chirp with hungry mouths.

Two-wheeled carts thump. Parisian patrons  
choose cheese cylinders and grainy, hard wedges  
powdered white, gray, and burnt marshmallow.

Fish, clams, sea snails, and oysters  
fill cases at La Sablaise Poissonnerie.

Bouquets of yellow, orange, and red cheer  
pathetic troops of shrunken, bound shrubbery.

Sweet aromas rise on soft winds. Cappuccino,  
chocolate, and croissants. Rainbows of macaroons.

Sunlight streaks awning tops  
spilling ink sketches down Rue Cler.

# Untitled

Jonathan Sickinger



# ATM

Sandra Dascensao

The click of the latch flooded her like relief as she slid the card through the reader. It gave her access, if not money. Inside it was hot, too hot, and humid like a Laundromat, but despite the discomfort, it was better than outside. She leaned into the shadowy corner and allowed her tired body to slide to the floor. Glancing out into the brittle night, she relaxed a little. It was safer here, the only place she had access to that had any kind of a lock. Her stomach rumbled in familiar complaint. She was hungry with only the vaguest memory of the last door she had opened – the most difficult of all. It was yesterday when she finally found the gumption to step inside the mission. They provided a hot shower, a clean pair of socks, and the first meal she had eaten in days. The hunger was back now, a bone-eating hunger that ached like a broken heart.

It had taken so much for her to enter that place and she was sure she would again, but she postponed that inevitable moment. For the longest time, she stood out front, the warm, saucy air tickling her nose every time anyone opened the door. The smells of garlic and bread punched her in the gut until she timidly pried open the door with her fingers rigid with cold. Crossing the threshold was the passage from one life to another and the delicious scents were tainted with the aroma of resignation.

Tomorrow, she thought, for breakfast she would return. Her mind conjured up images of pancakes and scrambled eggs. She could almost smell the strong coffee. Her mouth watered as she settled against the cold brick wall. Tomorrow.

Just two months ago, she lamented the unavailability of a convenient nail appointment and the lack of Fage yogurt at her favorite Stop 'n Shop. She had been like everyone else – riding the Red Line into Boston and resenting the fact that she had to show up for her harmless job of filing unnecessary paper in a nondescript office. She had felt sorry for herself then.

She wore everything she owned. She had nowhere to leave it and it served as a barrier against the cold, but more importantly against people. The bulk homogenized her. Her clothing had already turned a sooty gray and hid her vulnerability as a woman. Her straggling hair fringed out beneath the edge of a green wool cap. Her pea coat was once her husband's and big enough to accommodate four sweaters, a t-shirt, and a flannel that used to smell of him. That was the worst of this. The smell was one she never associated with herself. It was acrid and ashy – animal, like the odor of a hibernating bear. She resembled a heap of clothing or trash tucked into the corner as she was. She knew she would have a few hours of undisturbed rest. Not many people used the ATM in the middle of a weeknight. The little glass vestibule offered visibility and relative safety. Her eyes drooped as her damp clothes began to warm and steam. She wrapped her arms around herself and drifted into the half sleep of the wary.

The man entered, wearing the new urban business attire of an untucked pinstriped shirt and a pair of carefully pressed frayed jeans that cost enough to feed her for a month. He wore a black pea coat much like hers that fell to the middle of his thighs and closed with wooden toggle buttons. In one hand he held an ATM card, and in the other an iPhone. He glanced in her direction dismissing her as a pile of rags. The woman stayed still. He beeped, beeped, beeped his pin code and the machine loudly began to churn out cash. Without thinking, the woman shifted.

“Hey. What the fuck?”

She yelled, too. Afraid, alone in the cold night with an angry man. Scare the bear, she thought. Make yourself big. Make noise. So she raised her arms and screamed incoherently. It was then she really saw his face, a man-boy really, looking more terrified than she felt. His eyes were bleary with exhaustion and wide with fear.

She screamed again, loudly, pushing past him, aware that the animal den smell came off her like a fog. She shoved open the steamed glass door and marched back into the brittle winter night. It was some days later when she saw him again. She was in Starbucks's nursing a Grande latte she had purchased with her last

five dollars. It was the admittance fee to a warm afternoon. He rushed in wearing the same jacket and a different striped shirt. He eyed her as he sprinkled cinnamon on his black coffee. She was sure he recognized her as she recognized him. By the light of day, he was not the least bit frightening. He was young and fresh-faced; dressed to go to an office much like the one she once had. He looked younger now, thinner, and taller. His eyes were large, brown, and alive with interest. He gave an almost imperceptible nod as he rushed back into the cold afternoon.

Next, she saw him on the T, doing Sudoku puzzles with a cheap blue pen. He must have felt her eyes upon him because he looked at her, dipped his chin in recognition, before returning to his task. The woman almost laughed as she lowered her eyes and wrapped her coat more tightly around her middle. She had finally surrendered fully to her circumstances. She was on her way to the shelter where she would be showered and drug-tested and fed. She would be given a bed, and if she was lucky, a bit of help. She examined her hands, rough now from the cold, with the nails bitten down and dirty. She tucked them into her armpits. Shame came these days in waves. Sometimes, she would pass a window, see her reflection, and flinch. The street had etched its way into the lines of her face, making her look older than her forty years. Her hair, like her clothing, had been leeched of color. Everything drooped as if she were in the process of melting. Her jowls were pronounced, her hair lank, her clothes lacking any kind of shape or body. She seemed shorter. Her back curled and her shoulders sloped. Her beautiful blue eyes darted around looking for trouble or pity. She wanted neither.

After passing the drug test, she was awarded a hot shower and a clean gray sweat suit that smelled of chlorine. She relished the luxury of cleanliness, smiling as she brushed her teeth with a new brush and cinnamon toothpaste. She dragged a wide comb through her dripping hair and then pulled her hair back into an elastic band. The sweatshirt was emblazoned with Boston Globe Softball. She didn't care. It was clean and it was hers.

After lunch, she filled in forms with her best handwriting. She told her story again and again. Widowed, laid off, evicted.

Then she was fed again, a paper plate of fish sticks and tator tots. She was led to a narrow bed with one clean blanket. She had been warned about theft both as a perpetrator and as a victim. She did not intend to steal from these people and she had nothing worth stealing herself except for her sneakers, which she did not remove.

Within a month, she had a job of sorts. She was the sample lady at the Stop 'N Shop, handing out small paper cups of yogurt. She hated this particular yogurt, but she handed it out with enthusiasm. She appreciated having somewhere to go. She smiled her best smile and held the cups up as if they were the holy grail of health. Eat this and you will be fine.

This time, when she saw the man-boy, he was shopping. His eyes found hers and he stopped in his tracks before a wide smile flashed on his face. "Good morning." He said softly taking a sample of her magic elixir.

The woman smiled her best smile as he took her offered coupon and thanked her for his sample.

# Louisiana Medium

Cynthia Roby

Hmph...

Reckon Miss Johnetta's  
personally riling up the dead  
with her ostentatious display of  
black-and-white candles  
orange prayer beads  
painted plywood crosses and  
dusty-dusty Ouija board.

Sippin' on sassafras tea  
strokin' that cracked crystal ball  
corns on her scuffed up feet  
yellow picket-fence of a grin...  
this mediocre medium

ain't really got compassion for no dead peoples.

Not lessen she can exile  
great-great Grandpa from  
that place down low  
so the belligerent bastard can  
tell us where he buried them dollars  
and deliver us from the  
anguish of being broke.

Damn lottery tickets don't work no moe.

He can tell us and then  
earn absolution for the  
lies he told  
money he stole  
folk's stuff he sold  
all without askin'.

Yep, done all them thangs-- how you say?

surreptitiously.

That man was nobody's champion.  
As far as idiocy goes, no one could be more  
--what's the word?

Idoneous.

Damn.

Watch out!

Here come one of her  
astral projections  
epic epiphanies

*or so she be tellin' folks.*

The table's got the DTs  
turnin', twistin', bouts-ta slap my chin  
and now dead folk done suddenly become a  
what is it--

ubiquitous part of this here parlor.

Duppies here I don't know

and ain't never seed,

walkin'

cryin'

moanin'

confessin'

and now

Miss Johnetta's eyes done run up outta they sockets  
and black marbles done jumped in.

"Where the hells' great-great Grandpa and my dollars!" I screams,  
on account-ah I seed ever'body but him.

Miss Jonetta, soundin' like some fool man ain't nobody knowed,  
say through the phlegm in the back of her throat:

"Hell's expensive. Gone and give Miss Johnetta a fifty and gits yo-  
self a job.



And brangs me some ice water, damn lazy cow.”  
Before Miss Johnetta’s eyes did theysel a comeback  
I knocked ‘em into next Tuesday.  
Left that fake, lying bag-ah wind on tha flo  
next to her worthless Woolworth’s wig.  
Bout time that heifer come to,  
I had done gone out and bought myself another lottery ticket:  
Louisiana scratch-off.

# Georgia Memory

Jaclyn Wilson



# Cat Eye Marble

Denisa Howe

Crossroads is our four way corner in town; the only one. Four stop signs. Four decisions. North took you to our six stores, one school rural town. South took you to the farm lands and country homes. West and east took you to the world outside of ours. Six years ago Floyd took the west road. I was sixteen years old, he was nineteen. He had a plan, didn't want to be a farmer—left to seek a place and a small fortune. The plan included me...or so he told me.

I stayed, graduated with ten other students, worked at the post office and waited. As letters arrived each week, our plan grew larger. My smile stayed in place, as did my heart. The letters came every other week and then as time went by, they came less often. There were a couple of phone calls, but long distance was expensive. He worked such long hours and only had one day off a week, so visiting didn't happen. I held strong and waited.

People started calling me Delta Dawn after some country song about a girl forever waiting. The pity they felt for me—made me mad and sad too. Boys quit asking me out a few years ago. My girlfriends had long ago married or left like Floyd did. Sweet Floyd with a plan that turned into just a dream. I can still picture his crystal clear blue eyes and sandy hair that was always covered with a Yankees cap. Tall, lean and determined for a better life.

I was at the crossroads still waiting. I used to come and sit on the fence waiting. I would daydream about him driving up and scooping me up in his arms. We would drive down the dusty dirt road, me sitting right beside him, together again. Today I sat in my own car, waiting. I looked at the cat-eye marble he gave me when he left. It was always his good luck charm. Maybe he should have kept it for luck. I pulled out onto the pavement, looked at three directions, turned east, and dropped the cat eye marble out the open window. I pushed a cassette tape in and smiled.

“Delta Dawn what's that flower you have on? Could it be a painted rose from days gone by?”

# Green Street, NYC

Susan Grant

I take a deep breath, and in my mind I  
meet you at the dawn of our journey, in  
a narrow band of moonlight that has found  
its way through the old factory window

and has diffused onto the worn oak floor  
boards. It's not unlike an old-fashioned  
silent film made of black and white visions,  
adorned with marvelous shades of grey – soft

and surreal. Only there are no cameras,  
no actors here, nor cue cards upon which  
we can rely to help prompt the next scene,  
for tonight we'll heed to the whispers of

the universe and we'll waft upon a  
tranquil sea – wave after wave, hushed and slow,  
lapping the shore. Evanescent ripples  
of energy quicken my sated heart;

the tingling in my fingertips cascades  
to my toes and resonates in tempo,  
emanating through the whole of my flesh.  
I respond with a knowing gaze into

the hazel of your eyes for we nearly  
have been here so many times before. We  
will at last chance to have this dance in sync.  
You lean in, a little nervously at

first, and I feel you quiver. As you bow  
some more I come to realize just how  
easy this is and how familiar we  
both feel. It is not a kind of surging,

arousing, kinetic fervor – that will  
come later – it is knowing that we have  
travelled so far in this search for our truths  
and we have finally found our way home.

Toms howl for their queens in the alley  
below as we share our first kiss down in SoHo.

# Waterfall

Carolyn Haskin



# The Company's Finest

Kendra Samuel

I didn't like the way she was sneering at me as she pulled my two espresso shots, almost as if I'd wronged her by ordering my usual pumpkin spice cappuccino. Like had I not decided to be such a dick so early in the morning and bring her my business, then she would have sailed through her shift without a care in the world.

I glanced back to make sure she could see the spiraling line of twenty or more grumbling people, half-lidded as they gripped their travel mugs in one hand and iPhones in the other. And here I am, smiling politely, my award winning, panty-dropping smile that should make anyone's morning.

But I get nothing from her, just a glare from her brown eyes as she pours way too much milk for it to be a proper drink. But I'm not even going to go there. It's obviously not her best day.

"Thanks so much... Sherri, this smells delici—"

"That'll be \$4.85..." She snapped her gum at me.

I handed over my gold card, and watched her roll her eyes again. Forgive me for being a loyal customer and getting a free drink.

I opened my mouth to say something else, but Sherri—at least I think that's the name that's scrawled on her poorly placed nametag—had already looked to the next customer.

*Maybe a tip will thaw her out.* I dug into my pocket and pulled out a dirty dime, considered it for a second, but then placed it in the shamelessly advertised yet neglected tip jar.

At the tinny sound of the metal clinking around in the Mason jar, Sherri granted me another pointed look.

I gave her a "times are tough" kind of look, you know like, you're not the only one that has to work to barely make pennies in this economy as I backed out of the stuffy coffee shop and into the crisp autumn air.

I pressed the unlock button and my Mercedes chirped from a few feet away.

What? Times *are* tough...but not for me.

I tightened my pea coat right before sliding into the leather seat, already warming up. Regardless of the Sherri incident, I can just feel that today is going to be a good day. I even met my deadline too.

“Alright, Mr. Howard, where are we dropping you off...” I pulled up the email on my phone, it’s not like I could wait for him to answer me, “Ah...looks like they’ve got a nice warehouse picked out for you. I don’t know what you did, but somebody at The Company cares about you.” I backed out of my spot, and shifted into drive starting the cruise toward the bridge over to the business end of town. “Maybe we’ll both have good days.”

At a red light, I turned in my seat and just as I suspected, the bastard was bleeding all over my premium interior. I swear the worst kind of passenger is a fat, dead guy that won’t fit in the trunk.

So I dropped him where he needed to go, used a few crinkled napkins from the glovebox to clean up after him—which in the end just moved it all around in this massive puddle, and climbed back into the front seat to head to The Company.

I call it The Company because I don’t actually know the name. I just do as I’m told, show up at this unmarked building that looks exactly like all the other unmarked buildings on the outside, enter the ridiculously nice lobby to ride the glass elevator to the twentieth floor, exchange pleasantries with the always lovely Ms. Bell—the secretary—and I wait to be assigned my next target...er, “client.”

And trust me, I know, “Myles, how *could* you?” Because I’m the idiot that went to Columbia for print journalism while all the papers were closing. Hundreds of thousands of dollars later I was a ridiculously in debt, disowned graduate, the stench of poverty detectable from my ill-fitting college garb and whatever I managed to nick from Goodwill. Yes...I *stole* from Goodwill. I know, I’m a terrible person, I’ve gotten it before.

And I wish I could say all my family is dead, that’s why I was so far in the hole I couldn’t even see the light of day, but they’re alive and well, nestled safely in the Upper East side in some presidential suit. The minute I was eighteen I was out of their



hair, and they were glad to be rid of me. Which was fine, I guess. They're the ones that made me this cold and almost emotionless shell of a human being, and until now, that hasn't exactly worked in my favor, so I'm not eager to keep in touch.

It was because of this that the job found me, or I guess I should say, Ms. Bell did, asleep in the local Starbucks, buried in one of the remaining *New York Times* classified and empty paper cups, then offered me the gig.

And from then on, I never had to get out of bed for less than fifty thousand a day.

I pressed through the massive mahogany doors, to see Ms. Bell's smiling face as she tittered away on the phone, shooting me a light wave and nodded at the empty seats in front of her.

"That's right, a twenty-four hour guarantee... mmhmm...we're here to serve you...I'll get that request in right away, thanks so much for calling!"

She put the receiver down with a click, beaming at me as I sat down across from her.

"What?" I asked, draining what remained of my cappuccino.

"I'm so proud of you, you're the best thing to happen to this place, you know." The wrinkles around her pale blue eyes scrunched up as her thin lips spread wider. Ms. Bell was, if I had the chance to pick, exactly the type of woman I'd want to be my mother. She was probably old enough to be, but that aside she was so warm and concerned all the time as she peered at me around her massive computer screen. I always wanted to ask about her life...her family, but we didn't do that here, we couldn't. The deal with The Company is one name only, no backstory whatsoever. That way, if I'm caught, there's no way I could squeal, even if I wanted to.

But I won't. Get caught, I mean. I hate to toot my own horn but I'm good at what I do. I mean, even Ms. Bell knows it.

But I decided to be a bit more humble with her as I shrugged, "I just do what I'm told."

"You do it well," She winked at me, "So, any preferences? I've got at least five people that are in need of your services."

My mind flashed briefly to the evil barista, but then I pushed that thought away. No emotion. If I let one thing in, everything I've been doing for the past year will make me unravel.

I shrugged again, "Surprise me, you always give me the best ones anyways, that last guy—"

"You figured him out, huh? I thought you might be ok with that one, not that you're ever *not*."

"True, but I was especially ok with him going. You know where I found him? Waiting on a *playground*. He's the reason parents nowadays are paranoid.

"Or he was." She winked at me, then wheeled over to her screen, only a few tufts of her curly blonde hair visible over the top. "Pick a number between one and...thirty."

"I thought there were only five."

"Just pick, dear,"

"Fine...fifteen—"

"Oh, so close, thirteen was the paid two week vacation," I wasn't so sure she was kidding, "Well, fifteen...Oh...this is different. Her name is Alyce, Alyce Wunderville...reason for submission unknown." She leaned over to read my expression.

And I was definitely surprised. In the year that I'd been there, I don't think I was ever assigned a woman.

"Do you want to choose again?"

"No, I mean it was bound to happen. It's just...weird is all. Location?"

"Stops in the same coffee shop you do every morning around 10...if you hurry, you might be able to catch her." She sounded uneasy.

"Look, I got this Bella—"

"Don't you 'Bella,' me, Myles. I...don't feel right about this one."

"That's why you aren't the one who does it. I am," I smiled to ease her worry, and headed for the door. "Bring you back a treat if you let me try for the paid vacation again?"

She gave me a nervous smile and the phone rang again. She looked regretful as she picked up, but answered in her normal,

sprightly tone. “Hello, thank you for calling your local pest control! How can I help you?”

I smiled back, and mentally prepared as I pulled open the giant doors to go and kill my first woman.

I made it into the shop at exactly ten, trying my best to blend, which I guess wasn’t hard. Jeans and a plain black sweater are hardly “look at me” clothes. Number one rule in this business: always try to blend. If there are witnesses that see you with the client the last time they’re alive then you’re in big trouble. But if I look like any other passerby with brown hair, clean shaven and plain clothes, they can’t catch me without fingerprints. Which also never happens. What can I say, I’m good.

I stepped in line for another coffee that I didn’t really want as I pulled out my phone and opened the tracking app.

Each person assigned gets tagged, and somehow through The Company app that came preloaded on my company phone and company gps system in my car, the client pops up on screen. And there it is, the little, red blip hovering only a few feet from me.

I heard the tapping of fingernails on the counter, “What can I get you,” Sherri sighed.

“Oh, just an iced coffee will do,” I said distracted. I looked back down and the blip bobbed further into the shop. I stepped away from the counter, staying cool as I wandered over to a small rack stacked with logoed merchandise. I glanced down at my phone and then up towards the windows only a few feet to the left.

The blip hovered in place.

Only I looked up to see the wall lined with women. Awesome. They really need to start giving me pictures of these people.

“Alyce!” the barista called out.

I slid away from the tiny newsstand toward the drink counter. There it was. A tall, hot coffee sitting there waiting to reveal my Alyce.

“Oh! Excuse me!” An old woman blocked my path.

“Oh no, it’s no—ah...” and then we proceeded with the “I’m trying to walk but you’re going to the same side as me

repeatedly” dance until I finally held her in place and stepped around her making her chuckle slightly.

By the time that was over, the little cup was gone.

I heard the bell from the door chime and a woman bundled up in a scarf and coat walked out with a twelve ounce paper cup.

I couldn't run after her, that'd be too obvious. I sighed to myself. *Until tomorrow, Alyce.*

That's when I felt hot liquid dribbling down my back.

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry!” A voice squealed as I stumbled to the nearest table. “Oh my god, oh my god, are you alright?”

I eased my head into a tilt, my back still on fire, to see a girl with bright green eyes and fiery red hair framing her freckled face. She bit her lip, looking genuinely worried that I still hadn't spoken. It was because my eyes had fallen on her now empty paper cup. Though the marker had run a little from the dribbles of coffee tumbling down the side, Alyce's name was still perfectly legible.

She squinted at me, waving a few fingers, “Hello? Please talk. I'm going to feel terrible if you're a deaf person—”

“I—oh sorry I just...ow,” I laughed nervously. There's something about her...

“I know, I'm sorry I'm such a klutz. I—” she kept talking but all the sound in the room was drowned out by my quickening pulse. Oh no...

“Hey...do I know you?”

No, no, no this *can't* be happening.

“Wait a minute! Myles? Myles Lender—”

“Learner,” I said about to be sick.

“Oh, right!” she smacked her forehead grinning, “How are you? Do you have time to sit?”

I desperately wanted to say no and walk away forever, take the money I've made, scoop up Ms. Bell and move to the farthest most remote place on the planet where no one would ever find us. But I didn't.

“Yeah, totally.” I said, and before I knew it I was following her as she bobbed to her table by the window.

How could I have forgotten that name? It's not like Jane Smith or something. It was the Alyce *Wunderville*, the one person

“the smile” never worked on (Sherri doesn’t count, there are some *deep rooted* issues there.) the one girl that I’d watch during the entire class. The only one that I’ve ever...felt anything for.

And I’m supposed to kill her.

“So, this must have been like fate or something! I was just wondering what happened to you.” She popped the lid off of her little paper cup revealing puffy whips of froth sprinkled with swirls of cinnamon and dipped her finger in to swipe up the first lick.

I watched her pop the finger into her mouth and smile wider.

“You must be some hotshot reporter by now, buried in leads, you used to talk about it all the time in school.”

Yeah before I realized all the papers would close leaving me with nothing but my little dreams that can’t pay the bills.

“No, I’ve kind of...wandered in a different direction now,” I couldn’t take my eyes off her, especially when she licked the foam from her lips like that.

“Yeah, me too. I write for *Cosmopolitan* now and my parents couldn’t be more pissed,” she sounded a little happy. “They really wanted me to forego the whole college thing and go into the family business, you know the winery, or just get married to a rich lawyer and start popping out babies.”

“Yeah, parents are tough when they don’t get it.”

“Tell me about it.” she looked up at me, curiously, “What do you do now?”

“Consulting,” I answered with ease, not like I’ve never been asked before, “I like to work one on one with people.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, trying her best to hold back a smile, “You never really seemed, like, I don’t know—” she paused for another over-sensual taste of her drink, “You were always pretty, no offense, ‘me, myself and I,’” She smiled guiltily.

“Yeah, well,” I shrugged, matching her look. That’s because the people in my life sucked and the girl that I liked—I assumed—barely noticed me, so why bother being involved with the whole relationship game where you pretend to care when you really just...didn’t? I cared about getting through school and being the hard copy version of Anderson Cooper. If I was distracted for

even a second, I was convinced that wouldn't happen. And yet... "I was driven, I guess. I've changed."

Which wasn't exactly a lie, but it definitely wasn't all inclusive. Her look changed, though, after I said this, and she stared deep into my eyes. Once she realized it, she looked away, blushing slightly.

*Stop it, right now*, I told myself, but it was too late. I could already feel my lips twitching into a small tentative smile. How am I supposed to kill her?

*Well there's poison, choking, fatal "accident"—*

I shut off my work brain and dusted off my human side. I meant how am I supposed to kill a girl that as far as I could tell, didn't do anything to deserve it? Ms. Bell usually gave me the tricky ones, but no matter how many ways I tried to spin it I just couldn't picture her doing anything. Her hands were way too dainty to properly cradle a gun or really any kind of threatening object, so she obviously wasn't killing people. She seemed to have this permanent, infectious smile, so I guess if you really wanted to stretch it I could picture her luring people, but she just...the attitude didn't match. As for the job? The only real trouble you could get into at a woman's magazine was probably scooping a co-worker on the newest make up fad.

In the past year, I had come face to face with rapists, money launderers, child molesters, some real scummy cases that you thought were only real on episodes of CSI, but this?

I got nothing.

*Since when do you care about right and wrong? Who cares what the reason is, just get her to dinner or something and kill her at home, make it look like an accident.*

My traitorous inner voice had a point. My hands were a bit too red to suddenly start worrying about morals.

"...Myles...?"

"Oh, yeah? Sorry, spaced out there for a moment...I just got, um, distracted trying to figure out exactly how to ask such a beautiful—"

"Silly rabbit, lines are for dumb sluts!" she swatted me playfully. "You know your 'smile' thing never worked on me."

“Come to dinner with me,” I was grinning now.

She looked like she was considering it, and then nodded, “but would you mind if I drove? I just got a new car and I’m kind of in love with it.”

I thought back to the crimson pool in my backseat, “it is 2013,” I winked at her, but she just rolled her eyes again. Maybe she really is immune...

Nah, no one was.

The night came too quickly, but I managed to get a grip during the time between to scrape together some semblance of a plan. In the hidden breast pocket of my jacket rested a tiny black vile of white powder, a sprinkle in the champagne and she’d be done. What if the opportunity never arose?

Well then I’d scoot on to phase two, powdered almonds. She’s deathly allergic. I remember her freaking out once because I wanted to eat an Almond Joy in class. Dust it over her food and it’s all an unfortunate accident, fault on the restaurant’s hands.

Of course, these are only options if she shows. I had three single red roses sent to her address, but only after I’d soaked them in a lethal concoction I’d managed to throw together with a few unused injections lying around my apartment. One prick from a thorn and she’d no longer be my issue.

Was it sort of a cop out?

Definitely. But if it meant I didn’t have to see it then I hoped it worked.

*What has gotten into you?*

When the elevator doors opened to the lobby of my neighbor’s building—I couldn’t give her my actual address, just in case—I actually felt a tiny tickle of relief. It was 7:10 and no sign of her.

Stepping out of the building however, there she was in all of her grinning, freckled splendor as she tugged nervously at the hem of her blood red dress.

*Well, at least it won’t stain.*

“The roses inspired me,” she spun, smiling wider once she realized it was a little more than impossible for me to tear my eyes away. “Ready?”

How could it not have worked?

It took a second for me to realize she'd asked a question, so I nodded, feeling sick and giddy at the same time.

*Fine. You tried Mr. Nice Assassin. No more playing around.*

I numbly followed her to the car, chanting in my head that tonight would be painless...at least for me.

Which I realized wasn't true once I had to fold myself into her eco-friendly car. Now I knew how my glove box napkins felt.

The agony of the night only grew, even after I practically sprung from the car with popping knees. I was actually enjoying myself, so mesmerized by the soothing tone of her laugh, the glint in her eye when she smiled, the bounce of her curls as she leaned forward into the table, never taking her eyes off mine...

"By the way the flowers were so sweet, my neighbor totally got jealous though, once I opened the box—she'd just broken up with her boyfriend, so I let her have them. I'm actually pretty allergic so it was probably best. They totally made her day."

Uh, yeah, until she took them out. But I just smiled and tried to push away the thought of her neighbor lying dead by an untouched vase of water.

Even though she had no idea what she'd just done, it was sort of cute, but it forced me to revisit the question of why someone would want her dead.

"Oh! I'll be right back. Restroom." She said. And after watching her go—what? I did mention the dress was red, right? It's a little hard to ignore the way it fit her—I tried to shake off my unsure feelings and focus.

I patted my coat pocket just to make sure I'd brought it, then in a swift move, uncapped it inside my jacket and flicked a drop into her wine glass. It fizzed initially, but then the liquid fell flat. It was only after I was recapping the poison that realized I was kind of shaking.

This can't be happening.

I quickly pushed it aside and looked up as she returned to the table.

"Sorry about that,"



“Yes, how dare you have normal human body functions,” I smiled, making her laugh.

She reached for her wine glass and the shaking in my hand came back. Thank god I put it on my lap, or I’d give myself away.

“So where were we...” she’d slipped her fingers around the glass stem, swirling the liquid around.

“I think I was about to convince you to get dessert.”

“I shouldn’t,” her face fell slightly. She put the glass down, “I’m feeling a little...woozy.”

It wasn’t my doing, since she hadn’t sipped.

“I think it’s the wine, to be honest. I just figured you were ordering some so...I’m not really a drinker.”

‘Not really a drinker...’ why did I find that attractive? I mean I shouldn’t because now I’m zero for two, but the way she pouted at the glass and opted for the water on the side just...I don’t know.

“Then trust me, you need something in your stomach. There’s a great pastry place down the road—”

“Myles—”

“I promise, one thing I did most definitely do in college was drink, and sweet foods always did away with the woozies for me.”

And next thing I know I’m squeezing back into her clown car driving us down the road to Donatello’s twenty-four hour bakery.

My foot shook on the pedal and my eyes began to see everything in front of me as one blur. My whole body felt heavy and awkward, like I didn’t belong in it. In all honesty it could have been the fact that a five foot eleven guy was scrunched into settings for a barely five foot two girl, but I think it was the gravity of what was happening.

The vile of powdered almonds in my pants pocket felt like lead.

All the while Alyce hummed from the passenger seat, sneaking fleeting glances at me and smiling out the window.

It's amazing. You can take the numbest guy this planet has ever seen and turn him into a trained killer, but the minute you put a pretty girl in front of him, all bets are off.

I have to do this. I've never not finished an assignment, and I'm not a hundred percent sure of what happens to the people that don't.

"...Are you ok?" her voice pulled me from my thoughts. I don't even remember doing it, but I'd already pulled and parallel parked her little nugget of a car, lights off and all.

"Oh! Yeah, I'm just...tired I guess."

"People like you kill me," she said

"*What?*"

"You kill me. You look exhausted, but you can't pass up an opportunity to flash that stupid smile of yours."

Oh. Well, that panic attack was for nothing.

I just rolled my eyes at her smiling, "You're noticing it, so obviously it's working."

She rolled her eyes right back at me with a grin as I stumbled out of the car, promising to be right back.

My knees ached terribly so I sort of wobbled into the bakery, and the delicious scent of vanilla and cinnamon weaved into my nose making my mouth water. I made it to the counter and blindly pointed at two powdery shaped cookies, perfect to blend my own concoction with. When the cashier put one down, I asked, "Would you mind if I could have one fresh from out back? My friend's kind of...particular." The man shrugged and shuffled out back.

I got to work as soon as he slid around the corner, digging into my pocket to pull out my cell phone in case Alyce was watching from the car, and slipped the tiny bottle of almond dust in front of it so it was pretty much invisible. I uncorked it, dusted it on her pastry, and then slipped the items back into my pocket just as the man came from out back, with a fresh doughy treat.

My hand started to shake again as I handed over my credit card.

"...You ok?" He asked, holding onto the plastic.

I wish people would stop asking me that.

“Yeah fine, just nervous. Wrapping up a first date.”

The guy nodded knowingly, “Just remember, when they say no...it’s open to interpretation,” he winked, sliding my card back to me. It took everything in me to hold back my disgusted sneer.

In what world am I supposed to let skeezy, late-night bubbas get away with essentially raping girls, yet have to murder a perfectly polite, hilariously outspoken and beautiful girl?

And there it is. Officially the first job I am not ok with.

I climbed back into the driver’s seat and handed her the bag, watching her peek into one of them as I started up the car.

“I live like five minutes from here, so if you want...” her voice trailed off.

I do.

*You shouldn’t. You can’t.*

“Alright, which way?”

99 Hadder Street was quiet, even this early on a Saturday night, sprinkled with orange street lights and a bus stop plopped at the corner. Her home was exactly how I could’ve imagined: small, quaint, and brick, nothing over the top. It was simple yet perfect, like her.

Her heels clicked along the pavement to the front door as she gripped the waxy bags in one hand and fiddled with her keys in the other.

“You’re lucky, I just cleaned yesterday,” she smiled, talking mostly to the doorknob as she pushed the key in.

*I shouldn’t be here.* I shouldn’t even be talking to her. *She should be dead already, why aren’t you dead?* I’d finally had enough of my work voice.

“I can’t do it.” I said aloud. I didn’t even care. It was the truth.

She just kind of scoffed, “Oh relax. It’s just coffee and pastries, I’m not trying to seduce you Myles.”

She had no idea what she was doing, inviting me in there, holding the murder weapon right in her hands as she did so.

She pushed the door open and walked into the darkness.

I exhaled a breath. I'll just go in. Tell her everything, then she'll forgive me and I can take her and Ms. Bell and just...disappear.

As I closed the door behind me, I was shoved up against it. So much for not seducing me.

Then I felt cold metal against my forehead, and the sound of a safety button clicking off.

Oh. Definitely not seducing me.

The lights flicked on and there she was, still calm and composed as she held a barrel to my forehead.

"I...are we role playing?"

"Shut up." She pushed it against my skin harder. And I did, almost immediately snap my mouth closed. "You're pathetic. You're the best they've got?" Her voice was cold and she looked way too comfortable with her finger tracing along the trigger.

"Uh—"

"I honestly thought he was kidding," she smirked, tightening her grip on the gun.

"Please tell me what's going on." To be honest, as scared as I should have been I was more confused than anything, my eyes desperately searching the room for the girl with the fluttering laughter and the warm smile.

This was some stone-cold killer in a sexy dress.

...So I'm not completely disappointed.

"Like you don't know—"

"Lady, look. I take my assignments no questions asked, no info given, I didn't even know what you looked like!"

"But even after you recognized me you were going to kill me."

"How do you know that?" I stressed the question, "You're wrong, but how do you know?"

"Family business. My Dad has this crazed idea that I'd be better at running around murdering people instead of writing fluff pieces for *Cosmo*. So he's trying to scare me into it."

"Your—your dad? Family...wait, Ms. Bell—"

"Mom. How is she?"

She knew. She knew and tried to get me to pick again.

“Great actually, my favorite at the company. I thought you owned a *winery*.”

“Well you work with people so well, Mr. Consultant, you ought to know they lie.” Right, but even this was a little...much.

“So I’m going to go out on a limb and say you’re not going to kiss me goodnight...”

She scoffed and then unflinchingly dipped into her cleavage, revealing yet another shiny metal accomplice.

“Seriously—?”

“You said I was wrong...why?”

“Because I really like the color red.” I eyed her dress, “I’ve never been assigned a woman before—”

“You know how this works right? You failed, so I kill you and take your money, your job, and we make it like you never existed.”

So that’s what happens. I guess I figured as much. But as any great spy would say (not that I’m a *spy*, but still) I’ve been compromised.

“Before we get to the fun stuff— by the way, I hope you have Clorox wipes because people bleed a *lot*— what gave me away?”

It was the shaking I bet. Or she could see the vials. Some stupid mistake.

“The way you talked to me. You sounded guilty. Every word.”

I nodded, “Well, Alyce...”

She didn’t even quiver. Not one flinch the entire time. Her Dad’s spot on. She’d be perfect for The Company.

The gunshot echoed through the house as the bullet tore through the glass window next to the door.

But I was still standing.

“Lucky for you, I hate my parents and I would never want this job.”

“Yet you have two guns.” I said almost breathless.

“Graduation presents,” she shrugged, tossing them to the floor. “I’m almost positive that my neighbors’ have been assigned to make sure I went through with it so you can’t go walking

outside now after I 'shot' you. Stay here tonight—oh wipe that look off your face, you are *so* not getting lucky.”

A man can dream.

“But tomorrow? You're on your own—”

“Unless I convince you otherwise,” I shot her ‘the smile’ and it worked for about a second this time before she leaned for one of the guns again.

“*Ok*, got it, message received, bad Myles,” I smacked myself on the hand.

This made her smile a little as she reached for the discarded bags. “Well, now that that's over,” she started to pull out the tainted treat.

“GAH!” I leapt across the room and slapped the pastry out of her hand.

“Wha—”

“Almonds.” I explained as she looked at me wild eyed like *I* was nuts. “*Never* eat food from a hired hit. Are you crazy?”

And after a moment of silence, out of nowhere we burst into hysterical laughter.

Because there was so much wrong with this picture it was hard not to. And after a year of feeling nothing and an entire day of feeling wrong, I finally realized what it was like to feel right and inappropriately loopy and happy as I giggled at the mess we'd made.

I didn't want to think about how I'd been killing nonstop, or what to do so I wasn't next. And it was while we both were wiping the tears of laughter from our eyes that I realized this was why people felt. Because when you walk around pretending you didn't care about anyone or anything, you tended to miss stuff. I definitely did.

And it happened to be in a red dress that now glittered with shards of glass.

She reached for a broom and extended it to me, dashing away as I swept up the damage only to return with a dustpan.

And when I looked up, she happened to be giving me bedroom eyes.

Who is she kidding? The smile will *always* work.

# Burning with the Poem

Leila Fortier

Swallowed  
Down by the weight of  
Abolished word to that hollow  
Where utterance remains artifact~  
The syllables trail off...Incomplete  
Sentences falling far away from  
The shore of my mouth and  
Its wasted longing~  
The poem that  
Penetrates  
With  
A  
Thousand  
Unseen eyes~  
Writhing within itself  
In a collage of the unspoken~  
In my silent ineptitude and muted  
Annunciation~ My failure to reconcile  
Thought to words and words to pages  
Perhaps I was meant to say nothing  
At all, save for the contour  
And taste of it~  
Escaping  
Me  
Always  
With the unsayable  
Torn from worn pages of a book  
Yet to be written and soaked in invisible ink  
  
~Yet, I am burning with the poem~

# Ashoon

Araxie Yeretsian





# Uncle

Cynthia Roby

Cousin Charlene and I sat next to each other in the front row of A.A. Rayner & Sons Funeral Home on that morning in 1961. Through white-laced Sunday gloves, we squeezed each other's hands as they opened Uncle's casket. She looked away. I wanted to see. I needed to make sure he was dead.

At the creaking sound of the opening casket, Grandma, who sat next to Cousin Charlene, dressed in her black funeral dress, pearls, and loose-fitting Sunday wig, began rocking to and fro—telling all of Uncle's business. She did that when folk died—told the untold. Swore they shouldn't take skeletons with them to beyond or below. Although she knew all of Colored Chicago's dirt, she didn't quite know all of Uncle's.

Grandma started telling people that when her water broke, Uncle refused to let her push him out. "Oooo talkin' bouts evil," she said, as if the revelation was news. "Big head devil fool kept a-crownin' and sneakin' back in-ta my belly. Didn't give a damn that afta' three days-ah me sweatin', screamin', and no bath that Miss Ellen had to sit her wide midwife behind on top-ah me and force 'em out. Bastard wuz never no damn good. Head tow me so bad my husband gots lost inside."

Miss Ellen, sitting in the row behind, let out a "Lawd have mercy, somebody gots ta shut dat nasty big-mouth heifer up," then pressed her palms over her hips and rolled her eyes.

Miss Josephine, who stood at the back of the dining-room-size sanctuary waiting for any cue, pointed at Grandma and shouted, "And in front of the Lawd she say them ugly thangs!" She then started on a Clydesdale trot in her low-heeled funeral specials up the five-row aisle and jumped onto Uncle's casket, slapping her palms over his ears. "Don't listen to 'em baby, please don't listen to 'em! They don't mean it, baby! It's a sickness they gots." Her wildly uncontrollable feet kicked the only flower arrangement in the sanctuary to the floor. When Cousin Charlene and I looked down, we read: "Burn in hell, black bastard." Our eyes widened in

wonder. Yet we both smiled and kicked our feet knowing that someone hated him as much as we did.

Grandma uttered a “Humph,” twisted her lips in disgust, straightened her not-so-tight wig and said, “Only damn sickness roun’ here is some peoples can’t leave dead folk ta rest.”

The back row, in unison, signified: “Tell it, sistah!” Some snickered.

Mr. Rayner and his sons, who stood to the left and right of Uncle’s budget burial box, pried the casket jumper off, escorted her to a seat, and straightened Uncle’s Goodwill blue pinstripe suit and tie. They were used to pulling off jumpers, the Rayners, being the only place in our south side neighborhood that allowed colored folk the dignity of a decent funeral. Even if they had to make payments.

We giggled till we had to pee, me and Cousin Charlene, then crossed our legs but never unclenched our fingers. The awful brown color of Uncle’s hell-bound box bounced off our stretched patent-leather Mary Jane’s. “Is he really dead, Artie?” Cousin Charlene leaned into my shoulder with her eyes closed and asked. “He really ain’t comin’ back in my room no moe?”

I eyed the brown-paper-bag-colored eternity box and said with a smirk, “Nope, no moe.” She smiled and opened her eyes. The funeral continued.

In lieu of a eulogy, the hiccupping bootleg preacher asked folk to come forward and tell stories about Uncle. Because Uncle was no church-going man, anybody who claimed to be a preacher and would take sawbuck and a Bible in his hand would have to do. The room fell to a silence as Grandma cleared her throat.

“I wonts ta tell y’all bouts my boy,” she declared, waving her hand to the about-a-dozen women present. She moved slowly to stand over Uncle’s wooden overcoat. We never knew how few showed up that day. No one signed the guest book. “Like I wuz sayin’ befoe, he wuz a liar and a damn crook from the second wide hips over there pushed him outta me.” She looked in Miss Ellen’s direction and rolled her eyes.

“Don’t think bout riling me up agin now, you baldheaded cow,” Miss Ellen said. “I’ll snatch the rest-ah that cheap-ass wig off yo big-ass head!”

Readying to giggle, Cousin Charlene and I looked over our shoulders. Another cousin, sitting next to Miss Ellen, politely guided her elbow into her belly, and then pursed her lips signaling her to “hush.”

“As I wuz sayin’ befoe that girdle-wearin’ bear interrupted my speech, my boy was a bad seed. Done leff tha earth with twenty-nine chirrens. Yep, twenty-nine a-dem bastards. All boys. Who the hells gonna feed-em now? Owe ever-damn body some money. And don’t gets no ideas that I’s gonna pay any a-y’all back.” She slapped her open palms atop Uncle’s bone-yard box and hung her head in disgust. Uncle didn’t feed a stray cat, let alone all those big-headed boys that shared his bad teeth.

Whispers of confession floated throughout the sanctuary: “I thought it was twenty-seven ... Hell, five of-em are mine and three are my sister’s ... Ain’t no way ... Damn liar toll me I wuz his one-an-only ... Bastard owes me five dollars ... Marlene say them four boys she gots is his, damn liar. Theys the same age as mine ... Which one of you bitches killed my man?” Grandma lifted her head, adjusted her bosom in the double-D cups of her long-line bra, and padded back to her seat.

The ride to Burr Oak Cemetery was uneventful. Cousin Charlene and I continued to hold hands in the back seat of Mr. Ralph’s wagon. Three cars filled with scorned women in black dresses and wigs with placards in the windows that read “Funeral,” followed. Uncle was broke and didn’t leave money for one of those sleek black funeral wagons that carted dead White folk to golf-course cemeteries. As the mini-procession turned south on State Street, Grandma, staring out of the front window, and without turning her head said, “I know girls. I’m sorry for him. I woulda killed-em myself but he wuz my boy. Like I said, y’all uncle wuz evil. Lecherous bastard.”

Before Cousin Charlene and I could swallow her confession, Mr. Ralph had pulled alongside the unkempt gravesite. A slap in the face of Colored folk’s dignity, the graveyard was, yet

too good for Uncle. Dry leaves crunching beneath Sunday-shoed feet, the women scattered from the three cars that followed and circled the open hole to hell.

Mr. Ralph and a few of the gravediggers heaved the flatliner's box from the back of the wagon and placed it over ropes that would usher Uncle to Hades. No one had volunteered to be a Paul Bearer. As Uncle was lowered, bootleg hiccupped through a half prayer and butchered Psalms 23. Miss Ellen tossed the blaspheming arrangement atop the good-bye box spurring Miss Josephine to scream, "You bastard! Two a-dem big-head chirren's b'longs to my granddaughter! Don't leeeve...." As she jumped his casket, one of the gravediggers lost control of the rope, causing her to tumble six feet under with Uncle. "I don't wants to go ta hell! Y'all help me!"

The sparse crowd giggled, Miss Ellen smirked. Grandma said, "Gone an' give the heifer a head start, throw some dirt on-er," then winked at me and Cousin Charlene.

We both leaned over the hole to see if the devil would really greet Uncle, and then kicked dirt over Miss Josephine and the hell-bound scabbard. "Never again?" Cousin Charlene asked a final time.

"Never again," I said. Squeezing hands, we giggled uncontrollably until we peed.

# Malta

Jeffrey Cygan

Late September days are bittersweet,  
when the harvestmen of Malta gather corn and wheat.  
Rarely speaking, focused on the task at hand,  
hard men are hard at work on ancient land.  
Autumn evening, crisp like apple wine,  
golden with the fruit of every vine.

Tang of cider, sweat of horses, spicy sweetgrass mown,  
harvesters reaping what they have sown.  
Stacks of wheat like yellow mountains in the field,  
luscious bounty of the harvest yield.  
Soil tilled by April's iron plows,  
dampened by the sweat of farmers' brows.

Harvest watchers, anxious for the field's rebirth,  
solemn soldiers guarding quiet earth.  
Clad in faded denim, faces made of pitted leather,  
crooked in the autumn rain, they stand alone together.

Memories abound of gentle June,  
when fields stunned by winter sleep in silent swoon.  
Alas, the time of harvest always comes too soon,  
at dusk, the reapers rest beneath an amber moon.

# Untitled

Jonathan Sickinger



# Guys with Guns

Jaclyn Blute

Born late and sleeping, the dramatic entrance comes naturally to you. But here, crouching behind a desk as men with semi-automatic handguns clear out the bank drawers in a hurry, you don't quite feel up to par. Right about now, you're wishing you'd acted on the headache you had this morning and stayed home instead of making that delivery to Wall Street.

No, think of the positives. Your uniform is brown, just like the desks. And your hair and eyes too. See? If only you were black, you'd blend right in. ...If your girlfriend heard you think that, you'd be a bachelor faster than the robbers could shoot you. The adrenaline zipping through you was unreasonable for all the hiding you were doing, but you could hear the men muttering from your hideout.

"You got all the money?" The robber, of course. You can't see anything, but it sounds like he's... maybe ten feet away? His voice is smooth, but determined, and you imagine he looks like Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible*. You feel a little ridiculous for it until Vin Diesel puts his two cents in.

"No thanks to you, jabroni." You've never heard that word before, but you're pretty sure him spitting after he said it rules that out as a compliment.

"Good." That's when you hear it: gun shots. A higher caliber than you expected, or maybe the hearing protection from the range has you pampered. You press your hands over your ears anyway. Better to have hearing than machismo.

The place explodes into noise after that, but only for a few seconds. Or half a minute, you weren't exactly counting. All you know is that you carefully lower your hands when the last shell clatters to the marble floor.

A halting, nasally laugh creeps in and almost makes you wish you kept your hands over your ears. "So we split it now, right?"

"Not yet, dumbass." You hear Cruise's shoes squeak on the floor as sirens work their way to the city bank. Was someone bleeding out there? "We gotta move." Their footsteps retreated as the sirens pulled closer, boots bearing down on the stone stairs outside. You're the first one standing in the bank, though you think you can hear a woman crying somewhere nearby. It might've crossed your mind to look for her if you hadn't seen one of the robbers bleeding on the expensive floor.

"Shit," he hissed out from clenched teeth as his pants darkened around the hole in his right thigh. You thought you'd be sick looking at it, but you make it over to him with no trouble. "Fuck off," he greets you. Seeing Vin Diesel dead on the floor a few feet from him probably put him in such a welcoming mood. What's weird is that he looks just like your cousin Arthur, only he doesn't have glasses as thick as icebergs. You consider helping him before cops burst in, screaming to back off and lie down on the floor.

More guys with guns. You do as you're told and lie flat on your stomach, listening to the EMTs lift the wounded man onto a stretcher. Judging from the half-scream, he's a little more attached to his masculinity than you are.



# Strange Encounter

Edward DeSilva

I watched a bird perched on a post  
Or was he watching me?  
With learned look he cocks his head  
As if to question me.

I meet his eye as he meets mine,  
I scarcely dare to breathe.  
My gaze he holds as I hold his  
And wonder what he sees.

No voice intrudes, no sound invades  
Our silent meeting there.  
Yet something is passed between us  
That weds the world we share.

As we hold this sacred moment  
That yields no place to fear,  
I realize with heavy heart  
It may ne'er again be near.

I yearn to stay a while yet  
Lost in this reverie  
But other needs are calling us,  
His impatience I can see.

We hold our gaze a moment more,  
But broken's now the spell.  
With flap of wing and merry chirp,  
He bids me fond farewell.

# **Black Widow**

Jaclyn Wilson



# The Last Ride

Meryl Healy

My thoughts are muffled by the revving engine, whining siren, and beeping monitors. *Who do those arrogant bastards think they are?* They delivered the news as though telling me my car couldn't be repaired. But this wasn't a car, this was my mother.

From the compact seat of the ambulance, I watch my mother's face, cloaked with concerned reflection. I am so angry. Angry with God, the gas station clerk, my siblings, the mailman, even my dear dogs. *Who am I kidding?* I am angry at everything and everyone, because I was losing my mother.

The past two years had been consumed with caring for my mother. I had lost count of the calls from her safety monitoring company, alerting me that mom had fallen. This caused me to drop everything and rush to her aid. Every night I would fall into an exhausted sleep on a tear-soaked pillow. I had no way of knowing the impact that this frustrating and emotional journey would have on my life. Ironically, it would initiate the birth of a beautiful friendship between this middle child and her mother.

Our relationship had always been difficult. My siblings were tolerant of my mother's verbal and physical abuse. Not me. Like my mother, I was filled with stubborn, Jewish pride. Mom would get so angry at my "middle child" rebellion that she would grab anything within reach to use for disciplining. That's how my mother earned her nickname, "Dearest" – after the abusive Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest*. Over the years "Dearest" became a term of endearment. Mom even had a custom license plate made that boasted, "Mommie 1."

My mother had unusually high expectations of her children. My brother and sister lived up to those expectations. I was the black sheep of disappointment. I married a blue collar Catholic, had four children, and had to drop out of college. Three strikes and I was out -- banished from my mother's life -- for the next ten years.

During those years, I would send mom long, deeply emotional letters and thoughtful gifts, begging her to talk to me, to be a part of my children's lives, to let me back into my family. For ten years, my letters and gifts would come back to me with a bright, red-stamp that said, "Return to Sender." My father would sneak to my job once a month, just to see how I was doing. When mom found out, she left my father for two weeks.

Towards the end of my ten year banishment, I received a call from my sister, asking me to attend my niece's sweet sixteen gala. She told me that mom wanted me to be there. I remember thinking, *What evil motive could my mother have for wanting me there?* When I first saw my mother in the room, I wanted to run up to her and hold her in my arms. The reception was icy, to say the least. The night was bittersweet for me, as I sat in a corner the entire time with my stomach in knots. However, it was a start. As I was leaving, my mother came over to me, hugged me, and gave me a kiss on the cheek. At that moment, all the emotions I had bottled for ten years, came flooding out of me. I was sobbing uncontrollably; but it was a satisfying breakdown.

Over the next year, mom and I worked to iron out our many issues. Like two battering rams, we locked horns several times. We never quite reached that perfect mother-daughter relationship, but at the time, I was happy to be part of the family again.

Two years later, my beloved father passed. He was my life, my heart, and my soul. He was also everything to my mother, her nurse, her maid, her friend, her driver and her emotional punching bag. I knew that my father would never want my mother to be lonely. I decided to devote myself to caring for my mother in honor of my father's memory.

A few months after my father passed, mom had a routine neck surgery, and wound up with an almost fatal spinal staph infection. This was the point when my life unraveled into a manic frenzy. Mom needed someone to stay with her upon release from rehab. I took a month off of work, hopped on a plane, left both my disabled husband and my five-year-old grandchild, whom I was raising.

My mother came home a different woman. She couldn't lift her trembling arms past her waist and her wobbly legs became dependent on a walker. I had to feed her baby food as she could not swallow solid food. She looked like my old, pale, grandma now, not my striking, platinum haired, hazel-eyed mother. This successful, bright, and strong woman was crumbling before my eyes. I secretly hid my endless flow of tears from her.

After falling several times in mid-2009, and sustaining multiple head injuries, mom made the decision to move to Atlanta. She wound up buying her own house, because as she so sweetly put it, "I don't like any of my children enough to live with them." She decided to move closest to me. I didn't realize it at the time, but I think mom made this decision because she knew that ultimately, I was the one that would find time to take care of her.

I spent the next year performing many roles: playmate, nurse, maid, personal shopper, emotional punching bag, medical transport driver, dog walker, and computer repairman. I wanted mom to have some kind of social life, so I took up the game of Mah Jong, a Chinese tile game that I disliked, which was meant for whining eighty year olds. Then there were the doctor visits—hundreds of them-- because mom found shortcomings with every last doctor that we went to see. They were either too fat, or had bad breath, or didn't speak proper English, or the most common complaint: they didn't take enough time to sit and talk.

I also had the incredible fortune of learning about my mother's softer side, her most intimate emotions. I discovered that she ordered Tweed, the perfume that her mother wore, and spritzed it around the house, so she could be surrounded by my Nana's presence. I witnessed her weeping as we watched commercials showing starving and abused animals. I learned that my mother's favorite color was lavender, that she loved chocolate more than life itself, and that as a young child, she was caught in the midst of violent fighting between her parents. Most importantly, I learned that it was enough just to sit in silence and blanket my mother's hand with mine to let her know that she wasn't alone. It was during one of these silent moments that she spoke these touching words,

*Meryl, what would I ever do without you?* I will cherish these words forever.

In February 2011, mom fell in the shower and suffered six broken ribs. Against her stubborn will, I forced her to get into an ambulance. It didn't enter my mind that my mother would never return home. Mom was put on the cardio floor of the hospital. The doctors gave us hope that the broken ribs would mend; however they had to keep watch for pneumonia as mom suffered from COPD. Two days later her vitals were crashing and she was rushed into ICU. After four days in ICU, the doctors decided that there was nothing more they could do for her. My mother was too broken to be fixed.

I'm jolted back to reality by the crack of the steel bolt sliding across the ambulance doors. A chill washes over me as I look through my tears, and see the somber sign, "Embracing Hospice." As they remove this daughter's new best friend, I realize that this was the last ride I would ever take with my mother.

# Dialect without Sound

Leila Fortier

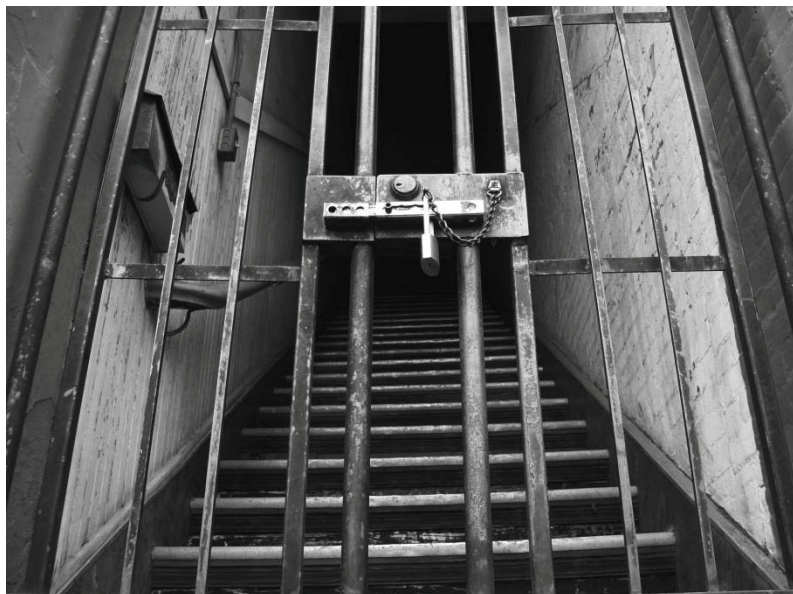
I met a man who wears some kind of wildness~ He speaks  
In colors unknown to his nation~ Music within  
Movements of some distant, internal  
Symphony; Where he paints  
Nectar filled breasts  
Flowering liberation~  
In the pulsing vigor of pea  
Greens, he tells of the “now” that  
Is mistaken for “tomorrow”~ Ruffling from the  
Womb of embryonic oranges~ Into the rush of violets  
Crowning explosive fish of majesty~ Contours of fluidity  
Reflecting enigmatic~ Streaming vibrancy from her hair~  
Shape-shifting expressions by stroke of hand...Only  
To reveal her blushing~ There is a wisdom  
In his wildness~ A dialect without  
Sound~ Painting the sacred  
Language of silences  
Speaking in  
Tongues  
Upon  
The  
p  
a  
p  
e  
r

~The waters of future songs~

*\*Dedicated to Japanese artist, Hiromi Sakurai*

# Gated

Rachael Hali





# Eye Witness

Janice Capasso

Thoreau asked, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” It reminds me how little we really know of another’s suffering. Over the years, I have learned never to take someone else’s experiences for granted and never to casually say, “I know how you feel.”

Over the past twelve years, I have been blessed with a relationship like no other I’ve ever experienced. On the surface, it would be fair for anyone to ask why I would stay with someone I know will leave me. My answer is simple: I’ve learned that I’d rather enjoy the time I have with him, and never waste a moment, than live without him because I’m too afraid to take the journey.

Bob has Von Hippel-Lindau (VHL)—a rare disease, affecting one in 30,000. It causes hemangioblastomas (blood vessel tumors) of the brain, spinal cord, and eye. People with VHL are also at risk for clear cell renal cell carcinoma (a specific type of kidney cancer), and tumors of the adrenal gland. VHL is insidious, chipping away at its victims, who lead seemingly normal lives until the next surgery to excise tumors before they grow large enough to metastasize.

Bob’s first surgery, to remove a tumor wrapped around his optic nerve, left him blind in his right eye. If not for the nine-inch scar that arcs from the peak of his forehead to a point just in front of his ear, no one would know. He lives his life like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

We’ve been through two kidney surgeries—one to remove 28 tumors, the second to remove 41, ranging in size from the head of a pin to three millimeters. I’ve dressed his wounds and emptied collection bags filled with fluid from drainage tubes. I’ve stayed awake with him as he struggled through pain-filled, drug-induced nightmares. None of it qualified me as having stood in his shoes. With all of his health concerns, we never thought we would have to worry about his blind eye. Yet, over the years, he struggled

through numerous painful laser excisions to remove small tumors that developed from time to time.

It was something we came to accept as a fact of his life, until the day I looked at him and noticed that his pupil was almost fully dilated, the blackness almost devouring the spectacular ice blue I loved. He tried to deny anything was wrong, but when I found him downstairs in the middle of the night—his head in his hands, nearly delirious with pain—I knew he was in trouble.

The diagnosis of neovascular glaucoma was almost a relief. Normal eye pressure ranges from 10-21 mm Hg—Bob's was off the charts at 53. The intensity of the fluid build-up in his eye was causing unbearable pain and, while it wasn't the tumor we had feared, the treatment options were no less daunting. He could try to manage the pain with eye drops and painkillers, or the eye could be removed.

To me, the choice was clear—why not end the suffering and remove it when, in Bob's own words, "the damn thing doesn't work anyway." But it wasn't my choice to make. Enucleation of his eye posed a 0.01 percent chance of sympathetic ophthalmia—an autoimmune inflammatory response that, in the worst case, could result in blindness in his good eye. No matter how slight, it was a risk he wasn't ready to take.

For three years, Bob vacillated between good days and bad. Every time the pain broke through, the medications were increased until he was putting four different drops in his eye, four times each day. He resented the drops, hated the way his eye looked and grew tired of people asking him what was wrong.

Eventually, the pain became impossible to manage and, once again, I found him downstairs at 4:30 in the morning—this time contemplating whether or not to stick a fork in his eye and yank it out himself. "Babe," he said, "the only thing that stopped me was the thought of infection. Otherwise I kept telling myself it couldn't possibly hurt any more than it already does." He agreed to have the surgeon do it instead.

The four-hour surgery went beautifully. The eye was removed, replaced with an implant to which the eye muscles were attached. As long as the healing process went smoothly, the

prosthetic eye he would receive in four weeks would have a decent range of motion. I didn't care if it could whistle show tunes. All that mattered to me was seeing Bob after the surgery—asking for the peanut butter and crackers he had been promised earlier—completely pain free.

The creation of a prosthetic eye is nothing short of fascinating, and the ocularists at Jahrling Ocular Prosthetics in Boston are artists in the truest sense of the word. I watched in awe, taking photo after photo, as the process unfolded before me—six steps during which numerous checks are made to match iris and scleral color and adjust sizing.

It begins with a white molding gel injected into the eye socket to capture the initial shape. The technician then creates a wax mold that will be used to check sizing before the acrylic prosthetic is made.

In the meantime, a clear acrylic disc is painted—beginning with the darkest color first—then built, layer-upon-layer, with lighter and lighter striations until it perfectly matches the iris of his left eye. When completed, this disc is attached to the scleral prosthetic by a post.

In the final steps, thin red threads are added to simulate blood vessels in the eye and scleral tinting is completed. Clear acrylic is placed over the entire surface and the prosthetic is cured for several hours. The entire process is completed in two phases over the course of eight hours—one day that ended a three-year journey for a man who went in with one eye and walked out with two.

I'm not afraid of loss. I've experienced it enough to embrace its lessons, to appreciate the moments that make up a full and rewarding life. Bob won't leave me because he's bored; he won't leave me for another woman. It won't be anything that superficial. Someday, I will lose him because VHL will eventually win the war if the genetic anomaly can't be reversed. Despite every hard-fought battle, the day may come when even the most skilled surgeons can no longer put him back together.

We won't give up easily. This entire experience has become a metaphor for our lives together—a determination to

continue looking forward. Through Bob's eyes, I have witnessed life-changing experiences, and—while I can never say I have felt his pain—together we share the same anguish, fear, uncertainty and hope.

There's a song called "Glitter In the Air" that asks, "Have you ever looked fear in the face and said, I just don't care?" We have.

# Severed Fingers

Joseph McGreevy

Breath streaming in the morning air  
he gropes through garbage bags --  
face, chin, and cheeks grime-smear'd.

He bends, fingers plunge  
into an open garbage bag,  
slide through chicken legs, fried rice, and coffee grounds.

He tugs a greasy plastic  
bag from his coat, drops in clumps of fatty  
meat, a flaccid waffle,  
slips his hand into the trash and pulls out  
half-eaten sausage links.

# Untitled

Jonathan Sickinger



# The Hit

## Timothy Liddick

The general public seems to have a common misconception about hit-men. Thanks to Hollywood, people think our work is glamorous, that we wear fancy suits and drive exotic cars. For ninety-nine percent of us in the contract killing business, it's nothing like that. It's dull, boring, tedious work; research, meticulous planning, and then BAM, you're dead and we get paid. If you're talented, you get more jobs, if you're not... you get dead. Luckily I'm in the first group. At least I was...

Sitting in Signatures, the Double Tree hotel's resident restaurant in downtown Omaha having an early dinner, I noticed her out of the corner of my eye. She was the only other person in the restaurant, a lovely looking dark-haired woman, seated at a table about twenty feet away. She seemed interested in me, which is a little odd. I say that because, while I have no real difficulty in obtaining female companionship for a night or two, women like this one were not the type that I attracted. I couldn't tell for sure if she was checking me out because of the sunglasses she was wearing.

The sunglasses I could understand, the late afternoon sun was streaming in from the floor to ceiling windows on the opposite wall of the restaurant, but the rest of her outfit was somewhat of an oxymoron. She was wearing a mango-colored halter dress that looked amazing next to her perfectly tanned skin and clung to her body in all the right places. At the end of her lean, toned legs she wore an expensive looking pair of high-heeled sandals; the polish on her toes perfectly matched the color of her dress. The outfit was well suited for L.A. or somewhere like that but a bit scant for the fifteen-degree Omaha weather. Then there was the scarf, a charcoal colored cashmere number around her neck; was that supposed to keep her warm somehow? I wasn't sure, but it looked great on her as well.

I put her out of my mind for the moment and returned to my dinner and my newest Michael Connelly novel. I had only a

couple hours left before the hit, all my prep work was done and everything was set for later tonight. I took a bite from my bread and went to set it back on the plate. About halfway there I heard the highly muffled shot from a silenced handgun and the slice of bread in my hand exploded. The bullet lodged in the wall next to me, the hole hidden behind a huge potted plant.

Normally I would flip the table, pull my pistol, and start laying waste to anyone who looked like a threat; but the shot wasn't meant to kill me, only get my attention. When I looked in her direction I could see a thin wisp of smoke curl out from the end of the newspaper that hid her gun. She was staring at me again, her face unreadable behind those sunglasses. I dropped what was left of my bread onto the plate, and wiped my hands on the hotel's linen napkin. I pushed my chair back from the table and walked toward hers. Her face remained expressionless as I arrived at her table.

"You murdered my bread."

She turned her face up to me, her voice a whisper, "I was trying to get your attention."

"You could've said hello."

"Then you would've mistaken me for one of your mattress bunnies," she whispered again.

"Why are you whispering?"

She gestured for me to sit.

"I'll stand, what do you want with me?"

"I want to stop you," she whispered.

That low raspy whispering was starting to turn me on but I reined in my hormones, "From eating bread?"

"From killing my brother."

That blindsided me. I had been over the mark's info with a precision microscope and there was nothing about a sister.

Picking up on my surprise, she said, "He doesn't know about me."

"Then why are you here?"

She took a sip of her coffee before answering, "Because I made a promise."

"Why are you still whispering?"



Ignoring me, she took a bite from a half-eaten blueberry muffin. As she set it back down, I noticed that the polish on her fingernails also matched her dress and on each thumb was a black skull and crossbones.

“Who did you make a promise to?” I pressed.

“My father,” she whispered.

“At first I thought the whispering was sexy, but now it’s annoying me.”

Irritated, she reached up and tugged the scarf loose; as it opened I got an unobstructed view of the wicked scar that ran from one side of her neck to the other. Now the whispering made sense, and had I not been a contract killer, I might’ve felt bad for her. Instead I was ready to be done with this conversation and this woman altogether. She quickly redid the scarf and took another sip of coffee.

“That’s one hell of a love bite; you should be more careful who you piss off.”

She nodded her agreement.

“Stay out of my way or I’ll finish the job,” I said as I pulled out my money clip and tossed a ten on the table.

I turned to leave and she stuck one of those delicious looking legs out to stop me.

I looked down at it, then at her, “Don’t make me shoot you.”

“If you persist, I will shoot you,” she said in her whispery rasp.

I stared her down until she dropped her leg. I left the hotel, walked over to Midtown and browsed the shops for a while. Finding nothing I couldn’t live without, I walked back to the hotel and rode the elevator to my floor. I headed down the hall to my room and froze. The Do Not Disturb sign was hanging on the handle, and I hadn’t put it there. I did a quick scan to make sure the hallway was clear, then pulled out my key card. I slid it into the lock and as soon as I saw the green light, I opened the door smooth and quiet, scanning the room as I slipped inside. I stood there listening... not a sound. I crept through the room, finding no one; I tossed my keycard onto the night stand; that was when I saw it. A

small slip of hotel stationary with a message written in the slow, loopy cursive common among females. It read: *Please stop, or you will die.* It was signed with a skull and crossbones. I crumpled the note and tossed it into the trash; two points for me. This chick was really getting under my skin, and I still had an hour to kill, so I decided to meditate.

Afterwards I dressed in my favorite pair of blue jeans and a nice button down shirt. I slipped on my shoes and tucked a hammerless .357 into the holster built into the back of my jeans. I shrugged into my pea coat, put on my stocking cap, and headed for the door. I flipped the deadbolt back, opened the door and stepped into the barrel of a silenced semi-automatic pistol.

I have always been diligent in my training; martial arts, target practice, familiarization with as many weapons as I could get my hands on. That training sprang to the surface now. In a blur I simultaneously twisted my torso and threw a palm strike to my assailant's forearm. The weapon sprang from her hand, my strike was quick as a cobra but she was just as fast. As the gun fell to the floor she delivered a wicked strike to my ribs. I swung my right arm towards her head with enough force to take it off. She was a good foot shorter than me and fast as lightning. She ducked my swing easily and my forearm crashed into the door frame, firing spears of pain through it. She scooped the pistol off the floor and took aim at my chest. I fired a snap kick at her, catching her in the left arm. She rolled back across the hall coming up in a crouch; again she took aim at me but I already had my .357 out. We stood there for a second, eyes locked, weapons ready to spit death.

"Wait!" she rasped as loud as she possibly could.

My finger tensed against the trigger. She slowly lowered her weapon, then placed it on the floor in front of her.

"I'm only here to help."

"You have an odd way of doing it," I said keeping my pistol trained on her head, "Slide your weapon over to me."

She stood slowly and kicked the gun across the carpeted hall.

I picked it up, keeping my eyes and gun on her as I did. I stepped out into the hall and gestured for her to enter my room.

She did as instructed and I followed her in. I motioned for her to sit on the bed; I grabbed a chair from the little dining area and sat facing her. I returned my gun to its holster and kept hers close by.

“You have forty five seconds to start making sense or I shoot you.”

“Your boss is setting you up and I’m here to stop it.”

“I thought you were here to stop me from killing your brother.”

“I am.”

I grabbed the pistol off the table, “Time’s up and you still aren’t making sense.”

“You’re my brother,” she blurted.

I smirked and aimed the silenced pistol at her head, “Bullshit.”

My finger tensed on the trigger. She put her hands up, like that would stop the bullet...

“Please listen, I know everything. Your father wasn’t a drug mule like Carlo told you. He was a mechanic, a great one, and Carlo wanted him to build drug cars for him. He refused and Carlo sent Rivas to our house, he murdered our parents, then took you back to Carlo.”

“Nice story, but again I say... bullshit.”

I really wanted to shoot this bitch in the face. Then I remembered we were in my room.

“Get up.”

She did as ordered and I shoved her to the door.

“Open it.”

She opened the door and we exited my room. I shoved her toward the elevator, keeping the gun pressed against her spine.

“What floor is your room on?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I suppose it doesn’t,” I said, pressing the down button.

The elevator must’ve been close because it dinged right away.

“You have a crescent-shaped birth mark on your right inner thigh,” she said as the elevator doors opened. Luckily the car was empty and I shoved my “sister” inside.

“You could’ve learned about the birthmark from any of the women I’ve slept with.”

I pushed the button for the lobby.

“I learned about it helping change your diapers, I was six when they took you.”

The doors closed and the elevator started its descent.

“I’m not convinced.”

“You still have trouble sleeping?”

For as long as I could remember, I’d had trouble sleeping; but I wasn’t about to confirm it for her. Then she did something that really threw me, she started singing. I didn’t recognize the song but as soon as I heard it I was instantly at ease. I felt my muscles relax and the tension squeezing the base of my neck back off a bit; she finished the song as the elevator reached the lobby.

“Mom used to sing it to you at bedtime; you wouldn’t sleep unless she did.”

The elevator doors slid open and I pushed her out. We made our way to a service corridor and started down it. A maintenance man approached from the other end... shit. I shoved the gun into her back a little harder to remind her to behave.

“Can I help you,” the man called as he got closer.

I smiled at him as my brain went scrambling for a viable excuse for our trespassing. He closed the distance between us.

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

“We’re just a little lost, we were looking for the laundry,” I said keeping the woman between us.

“The laundry... why?”

“My wife accidentally threw her necklace in with the dirty towels.”

“Oh, well, we better hurry then! Lost valuables don’t last long around here. Follow me,” he said, as he turned on his heel and headed back down the corridor.

“That’s not necessary,” I called after him.

“It’s no trouble,” he called back over his shoulder and shuffled off down the hall.

I took a quick glance at my watch... damn. If I didn't wrap this debacle up soon I was going to miss my mark. I pushed her along after the old man.

"Don't hurt him," she rasped at me.

"You don't get to dictate anything," I hissed, "this mess is your doing."

We followed the old man down the hall, and he disappeared around the corner.

"The man you're supposed to kill won't be there," she said as we made our way along the corridor.

"Neither will you," I said, shoving her around the corner.

The old man swung on me as soon as my head cleared the corner. For the second time today my incessant training rescued me. I ducked the old man's swing and the pipe wrench he was holding lodged into the drywall. I shoved the girl down and turned the gun on him. The wrench came free and he meant to swing at me again. I fired two quick shots into his chest and he dropped to the floor, the wrench clanging on the concrete next to him. She lunged at me then, catching me off guard, and we crashed to the ground. Slamming my gun hand into the ground, she meant to dislodge it from my grip. Too bad for her it wasn't working. I sent my free hand crashing into her temple. She let out a grunt and her grip loosened, I tried to jerk my hand free, but she held on.

"No, no more killing," she said as we struggled.

I threw another punch but she twisted her body, my blow glancing off her shoulder. Frustrated, I needed to finish this. Using my free hand I latched onto her shoulder and twisted my body throwing her off to the side. I dropped the gun and went straight for her throat. It was personal now; I wanted to squeeze that ugly scar until it burst open or this bitch's head popped off. My hands closed around her neck and I tightened my grip. Her eyes started to bulge and her arms flailed. I squeezed harder. Something hard poked into my ribs, and then fire shot through my midsection. My hands popped open and she sucked in huge gulps of air. I looked down to see the rapidly blossoming crimson overtake my shirt...

"Stop, please stop," she croaked.

I reached into the waistband of my jeans, extracted my .357 and shot her in the face. I pushed to my feet, the old man was writhing and wheezing. I stood over him, my gun aimed at his head.

“I was a cop for twenty three years,” he sputtered, “I knew you were bad clams the second I saw you.”

I shot him in the head, bad clams... stupid old bastard. I used a couple of towels to make a pressure bandage and made my way back to my room. I hurriedly packed my things and made a better bandage. The bullet missed my lung but a couple of my ribs were destroyed. I took shallow breaths and tried to keep my heart rate down as I made my way to the front desk. I checked out without incident and walked outside. My target was only two blocks away, but I was behind schedule. Running was out of the question, so I kept my pace easy. My breathing was coming out into the cold in forced ragged gasps, each puff freezing as it did. I slowed my pace even further, trying to regulate my breathing. Damn my chest hurt. I made it to the alley and tucked myself into a darkened recessed doorway. I waited for what felt like a week before I finally heard voices. I tensed up, ready for the show, then I heard them laughing, females... damn. I sank back into the doorway and another voice tickled my ear, this time male, from behind me, and very close.

“Hello Johnny,” it growled.

The voice belonged to the man who taught me everything about killing, Rivas, my mentor.

*She was telling the truth*, I thought as I swung my gun in the direction of his voice, intent on doing some damage. I saw the muzzle flash before I had a chance to fire. Another bullet ripped through my torso, not so lucky this time. The bullet tore through my lung and destroyed ribs on the other side of my body. I fired blindly into the darkness as I sank to my knees, frothy blood spitting from the hole in my chest as my body tried to keep breathing. I collapsed onto my face as my essence spilled onto the concrete.

*She was telling the truth*, I thought again as my breathing sped up, my body in full panic mode.

Rivas stepped from the shadows, “Sorry kid, the girl knew everything, couldn’t risk it.”

He fired another round into my back, the bullet tearing through my heart.

As I took my last breath, face down in a dark freezing alley, I realized that someone had cared about me, had loved me, had tried to save me. And I destroyed her.

# And He Wrote to Me

Danielle Kellar

And he wrote to me because I did not know  
that he was heading off to where the heroes go.

Off to war, fighting the enemy men,  
enemies—who are heroes to their wives and their friends.

And he wrote to tell me he was finally there,  
he told me to pray, he was really quite scared.

The bombing all night, the guns and decay,  
nine of his troops were all killed today.

He wrote of these sand fleas that buried in deep...  
into the soldiers, their legs and their feet.

And I was so scared as I held our son  
Would his daddy come home? He was so very young.

Then he wrote to me to tell me he's doing just fine -  
He's helping children now and disarming land mines.

I felt a little relief and a bit more at ease  
then I heard a knock on my door, and I felt my heart freeze.

A man in uniform stood there before me.  
He asked me my name and announced what I feared,  
then all I remember was my sea of tears.



# Eternal Chaos

Alanna Pevear



# Just a Kiss

Kristie Mahoney

I could never quite understand why people disbelieved fairytales. It seemed like insanity when people started to preach their love of religion instead of each other. My faith never waned. I knew deep down that the power was not in these invisible forces, but in the forces that we awoke to each morning. My beautiful, loving wife. We married young, and we were so in love. No force could stop us. This...this was true love.

I still believe, even to this day. These past few weeks have been hard; I can't stand seeing her like this. She's so pale—more than usual. I keep trying to get her to eat something, to drink her water or to sit up, but she just continues to stare out the window as if she's waiting for something. I've sat with her a few times, trying to figure out just what she was looking at. The birds are no help, they don't like me much. They only stay around when she's alone, or when I keep the window open. I've had to run them out a few times with a broom. The damn things keep swooping in and grabbing rags, flying around the house, hitting walls and the floor on their way back out the window. Dust flies everywhere they do. I guess I have neglected the house. That was more her area of expertise. As were a lot of things.

Cooking being one of them. Soup is about all I know how to make. My cook taught me when I was a child living at home. I remember bringing two bowls to my parent's right after, but they weren't as enthusiastic about my pinecone-berry soup. Thinking back, I can almost guarantee they both faked taking a sip before pushing their bowls away and telling me I was late for my riding lesson. It feels like another world now. Another world. Another time. It's too farfetched to be reality. No, this, this right here—me sitting at the bedside of my sick wife—this is reality.

Her hand feels colder today than usual. I reach around her and tuck her in, coaxing the blanket beneath her with my three fingers before crossing the room to grab an extra. The closet door squeaks loud and long as it opens to our extra linens. Mice

scramble out from beneath the blanket I take and weave between my feet to find a new haven. I hate mice. She used to tell me all the time that they were here first and had just as much a right to be here as we did. A bunch of medieval madness if you ask me, but I love her to death, so I tolerate the horrid creatures. Not to mention they had names, so if one or two went missing, they were noticed.

I'm being hard on her, I know. She does so much for me, for us...it's just hard seeing her like this. All I can do is change her linens, make her food and keep an eye on her until she's well again. Draping the new blanket over her doesn't make her stir; neither does my setting down of her new soup in exchange for the old, still-untouched soup. The steam rises from the new bowl and I take my usual seat at her side.

She's still looking outside. In the distance there's a mine. I can hear the maddening banging. It's going to disturb her rest. They pick the most inopportune times to do their banging. At least they're not singing today. I close the window to reduce some of the noise and I look down at my stunning wife. Her black hair falls down over her shoulders and her pillow in waves as dark as night. Her lips, as ruby red as they've always been. She is an angel on earth.

The day we married, I'll never forget her beauty. She was a vision in white, almost floated towards me as she walked down the aisle and met me at the altar. She looked like the first day of snow. When everything is sparkling in the sun and all you can notice is its overwhelming splendor. The quiet, the peace it brings, she is the epitome of poise, grace, selflessness...That's her. It's always been her. I'll never forget that day for as long as I shall live. The day she became mine.

That was long ago. Again, it feels like another time. I touch her cheek and hum to her, remembering a song she used to sing to me, but forgetting all the words. She used to love when I mimicked her like this. She told me once that this song was one that her mother used to sing. Her stepmother forbid it to be sung when she'd taken her place. But she loved that song—it was the only real piece of her mother that she had left.

Her hand still feels cool, so I put another log on the fire. Sparks spit at me as I do, sputtering and then crackling as the dry wood burns. But I need to keep her warm. This house has drafts from all sides, and I'm not too handy either. I watch the fire for a few moments to make sure it's steady before checking the time. It's getting late. I should have guessed by the banging at last ceasing. Time to tuck her in for bed. I retrieve a fresh glass of water from the sink and set it on her table next to her now-cold soup, then sit beside her on the bed. I fell in love the instant I laid eyes on her.

She was lying as still as she is now, but enveloped in glass. Seven men mourned her loss. I laid eyes on her face—that pretty face—and I knew I was in love. I knew what I had to do without ever having heard about it. I kissed her blood red lips and her blue eyes fluttered open. And she was in love. I didn't know her and she didn't know me, but the spell has ended and a new one begun. I took her home with me and declared us to be married before I knew even her last name. I was young then. Young and in love with the fairest of them all. And she only knew me by my lips.

Now she knows me. She knows my name; she knows my family and their status. And yet we're here. She preferred to live in this drafty cottage with birds and mice. I never quite understood it until now. She wanted to stay hidden. Out of sight, out of mind. I wished she'd told me about her stepmother before I'd announced to the kingdom my marriage to her. I'm not saying it's her fault this happened, but...

I never would have brought home that apple. That damn apple. I would have expected the queen to try again to kill my enchanting wife. If she'd told me, I'd have stopped this all. She'd be up cleaning and singing instead of lying on a cot watching the birds. I *should* have sensed something was off when that pauper offered me the apple. It was strange that she didn't want to charge me, sure, but I'm a prince, I'm used to the kindness of the people. A free apple? Harmless. A kind act of a stranger. And it was so red, so sparkling that I knew I had to give it to her. She smiled wide when I gave it to her and her blood red lips met the blood of the apple.

She'd collapsed right then. I'd thought she'd fainted, and laid her on the cot. She hasn't moved since. The apple—still sitting on her bedside table is rotten through. It's attracting flies. I have to keep swatting them away as I lay beside her. True love's kiss should have worked by now. It makes no sense why this spell couldn't be broken just like the last. I broke it last time, didn't I? But each night since she took that bite, I've tried. I've kissed her red lips and lingered. Waiting.

She's supposed to wake up. That's how the story goes. But I'm tired. I can't wait forever. There's no way to survive out here alone. Not on soup. And that incessant banging! Who could stand it out here alone? I touch her cheek again, running my thumb along her snow white skin. Like every night, I lean down and press my lips to her cold, unmoving lips. And wait. She is still. Like every night.

I'm tired. It's been weeks. Weeks of waiting minutes after kissing her. Weeks of making soup three meals each day that I end up eating cold because she won't eat. This cottage is going to drive me insane if I don't do something. I crawl into bed beside her and under the covers to share my body heat with her. She needs it more than I do. I'm surprised she's not shivering with this cold.

"Goodnight Snow," I whisper to her, kissing her one more time. Again, I wait. Habit, I guess. But I'll always wait for her. And I know that she'll always be waiting for me. Like she is now. I take her stiff hand in mine and reach over her for the rotten apple. This is the reason why she's not here with me—why she's not eating, drinking or sleeping. I wish she was sleeping. But I know she's not. I've been trying to make myself believe, but I know it's not true.

The apple squishes beneath my grip, toppling in on itself, collapsing the one opening made by Snow. It's more brown than red now, and no longer its shiny self. I just hope that it's enough to reunite my love with me. If it isn't...

I take a bite without continuing to second guess if it'll work. The mush slides down my throat and the taste makes me gag, but it's worth it. I feel the effects. The bubbling of my stomach, the shortness of breath. I lay down next to her and look

out the window as the world starts to spin. I see what she's seeing. Out the window. It's amazing. I can't even explain it. I turn to tell her how wonderful it is, and she's staring at me. Her skin is still as white as it's ever been, her lips as ruby red, her hair as black as ebony...but now, she's smiling.

# Excerpt from *Shadows by Midnight*

Brandon Barney

## Chapter 1: The Fall

The warm air brushed his skin and ruffled his hair, begging him to follow it, off the high ledge and onto the rocks below to be washed away by the crashing waves. For a moment, James contemplated the ease of jumping. He entertained the idea of letting himself fall from the walls of the Capitol, to descend past the precipice dividing Sector Alpha from the sea. He imagined how his body would sail by the jagged cliff, past the veined rock that defended the Capitol from the ravages of weather. The Capitol had chosen this particular location because of its height, using it to overlook the different sectors.

The wind wailed, complaining in his ear. It blew across the milky marble of the grand structures that stood for peace, and justice, balconies and embellished windows emphasizing their authority. Pages, parts of a personnel file, amongst them pictures of a young man, fluttered in the air. They glided on invisible currents, slipping to the ocean below, peaceful in their descent. The pages were indifferent to the dangers the water held. James didn't grasp after them, didn't care for the pain they contained, or wish to prevent their watery grave. They would be gone forever.

A wave slammed against the boulders below, sending a jet of water high into the air, barely missing the pages before falling back into the churning depths. The smell of the sea reminded James of home, but he let the thought drift away.

"You could do it," Charlie said, clenching his fists. James looked over, focusing on the raised scar that went from below his ear to the middle of his jaw. It cut through another ridge that traveled from his brow to his neck. Both were tinted green and looked infected in the moonlight. James turned back to the vista.

His dark brown eyes glittered, swollen with emotion, his shoulders shuddering as if under some tremendous weight.

“I know I could.” James moved closer to the edge, bracing himself in case of a strong wind while at the same time wishing he could let go.

“It wouldn’t accomplish anything.” Charlie stood up, putting his toes just over the ledge, and holding his arms out to the side, daring the wind to blow strong enough to throw him over.

“Says you.” James glanced to his right at the hint of movement. Looking closer, he saw two men dressed in full black, sneaking into a doorway hidden in the walls of the Capitol building. One of them was Lewis. His stride was smooth and controlled, each muscle tensed; sweat shone off of his black skin and his shaved head gleamed in the moonlight. He assumed the other figure was a high priority official, but he wasn’t sure.

“Why do we keep coming here?” Charlie turned around, heels now off the side, the gusts threatening to throw him over the edge. “It’s as if you’re still holding onto something, but always afraid to let go.”

“It doesn’t matter.” James stood up, moving to stand next to Charlie. If ever, today was the day to do it.

James jumped.

The wind roared, shrieking with fury and joy with its new companion. The rocks approached at an alarming speed. James contemplated letting himself close the final few feet. He couldn’t, not like this. He gave the ripcord on his shoulder a tug and two nylon wings sprang out of his back, snapping taught with the cords woven into his vest and binding the wings to his back. They grabbed his body and threw him up, high over the water. James shifted his body, angling the wings back towards the sectors, fighting the strong winds until he was looking at where he and Charlie had been standing to find that it was empty. Charlie was gone.

In the distance loomed the Industrial Sector. The silhouettes of factories spilled thick vapors. Orange dots, likely trashcan fires, lined the ground, casting odd glows. It was unusually cold.



James guided himself back towards the island, gazing at the canopy and the ominous blue glow filtering through. It wouldn't be safe to land. James tried to steer toward the wall, hoping for a strong upwind to lift him higher, his wings now level with where he had been standing with Charlie just minutes before. The rock face rose above him as he lost height. The water was quickly approaching; the island would have to do.

He slowed his descent just as his wings failed with an angry snap, the personnel papers now flapping wildly around him. A red stamp stood out on them. It read "DECEASED," a violent blare against the white pages. A beep pierced through the howl of the wind as James plummeted. He approached the sandy beach below, the beep growing louder.

The distance between him and the island diminished. James braced himself for impact, hoping his death would be quick. Just as he was close enough to see the dips in the sand and three sets of footprints, he woke up.

## Contributors:

(In order of appearance)

**Steven Bogart** is the Artist in Residence at SNHU. He teaches playwriting, screenwriting and improv to students each semester. He is also a writer and director himself, who frequents the Boston Playwrights Theatre in Boston.

**Debra St. Jeor**, 52, is an online student in her junior year. She currently resides in King Cove, Alaska, but she grew up in Africa and has moved about seventy times between three continents.

**Jeffrey Cygan** is a senior, ready to graduate in June 2013 with a BA in English/Creative Writing. Writing is his passion, but painting and photography are two of his favorite hobbies.

**Rachael Hali**, 22, is from Salem, Oregon. She is more commonly known as Dylan O'Meara to SNHU students, but publishes her work under the pseudonym Rachael Hali. She is a sophomore at the Manchester Campus and was born in Washington D.C, and since then has lived in Virginia, North Carolina, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon and now New Hampshire.

**Alexandra Lazar**, 21, is a freshman living in Charlotte, Vermont. She is studying online, and hopes to become an author of fiction for children and young adults. She loves writing about magical adventures and animals, especially her many pets.

**Dora Simpson**, 46, is a graduate student in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. She is an online student that is adventurous and loves to travel.

**Jonathan Sickinger**, 27, is a junior in the online program at SNHU. He goes by Johnny Stanley in his photography and loves to cook and travel; both keep him feeling alive and full.

**Sandra Dascensao**, 52, is in her senior year at SNHU. She lives in Dracut, Massachusetts and works as a Mask Designer Engineer in the semiconductor field. She is a textile artist, specializing in creating landscapes from fabrics, paints, dyes, and beads.

**Cynthia Roby**, 56, lives in Miami, Florida. She's working on her graduate degree online, which will look great next to her five marathon medals.

**Jaclyn Wilson**, 27, is a sophomore in the online program. She is from San Diego, California and her accomplishments include an original drawing in a 2001 science fiction/fantasy convention magazine and a YA original licensed novel for the television show "Charmed" in 2003.

**Denisa Howe**, 50, is from Wagoner, Oklahoma. She's in her sophomore year as an online student, and she has kept journals since the age of fourteen and still has them all.

**Susan Grant**, frame of mind of 25-30, is from southern New Hampshire. She is a junior at the Manchester Campus and was just encouraged to write creatively two years ago as a freshman.

**Carolyn Haskin**, 25, is from Burnsville, Minnesota. She's a senior in the online program and when she grows up, she wants to be a mix between Cleopatra VII and Mother Teresa.

**Kendra Samuel**, 21, is from Londonderry, New Hampshire. She is new at SNHU this year, participates in the Manchester Campus classes and this summer will be interning in production at WMUR, Manchester's television news station.

**Leila Fortier**, 39, is originally from Lebanon, New Hampshire, but currently resides in Okinawa, Japan. She's a freshman in the online program and has had some of her poetry translated into seven different languages.

**Araxie Yeretsian**, 24, is a sophomore in SNHU's online program. She is originally from Boston, Massachusetts, but is currently living in California, working in a video game company. She's working on the next big MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game).

**Jaclyn Blute**, 21, is from Londonderry, NH. She is a senior this year at the Manchester Campus, and she considers it a personal challenge to recreate factory-made goodies such as Mallow Cups, Sno-Balls and Peeps in her kitchen. Or at least she thinks about it around once a week. Sometimes she misses a week.

**Edward DeSilva** is an online student at SNHU and is working on his bachelor's degree in Creative Writing/Poetry. He comes to SNHU as an adult learner and is working on his degree from a love of learning and literature rather than out of necessity.

**Meryl Healy**, 52, is a freshman in the online program at SNHU. She is in the process of writing a series of children's books from her Atlanta, Georgia home.

**Janice Capasso**, 48, is from Middleboro, Massachusetts. As a junior in the online program, her passions include writing, cooking, and skiing. It's her dream to quit her day job, write as much as she can, and open up her own little Italian Bistro—preferably at a ski resort lodge at 10,000 feet. She'd call it Nella Neve (In the snow).

**Joseph McGreevy**, 49, is from Washington D.C. He is a junior in the online program and on a modified Myers-Briggs test, he is a 93% introvert.

**Timothy Liddick**, 37, is a senior in the online program. He lives in Bellevue, Nebraska and collects and solves Rubik's cubes and other puzzles.

**Danielle Kellar**, 37, is from Spring, Texas. She's currently in her sophomore year in the online program and she believes that there is no dream too big to achieve.

**Alanna Pevear**, 20, is a junior at the Manchester Campus. She's from Londonderry, New Hampshire and has been riding horses for over ten years. She still loves them, even when they bite her.

**Kristie Mahoney**, 21, is from Londonderry, New Hampshire. She is a senior at the Manchester Campus, and throughout her years in the writing community she has had two poems and a short story published in books and a literary magazine. She has also written a YA novel with her best friend, Alanna Pevear, called *Ring of Fire*.

**Brandon Barney**, 21, is a graduating senior in the Creative Writing 3-2 program. He is a dual major with a concentration in Fiction and his second degree in Literature. He is one of two Chief Editors of *The Manatee* and has spent the past year developing his manuscript *Shadows by Midnight*.

Joseph McGreevy



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