



Eighth Annual
Spring 2016

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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 are able to do it with generous funding from the wonderful people in the School of Arts and Sciences.

Visit www.facebook.com/TheManateeAtSNHU for information, submission guidelines and news.

THE MANATEES

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Editor's Note

For years, *The Manatee* has published Southern New Hampshire University's student's creative work. It has showcased breathtaking poetry, thrilling short stories, hilarious plays, and beautiful pieces of art. This year is no different. *The Manatee's* eighth edition features outstanding student work, and it shows how many dedicated writers attend Southern New Hampshire University

During my first year as an Editor in Chief of *The Manatee*, I have experienced more excitement than could have been anticipated. We were flooded with more submissions than any year previous, even after having limited submission guidelines to include only on-campus, undergraduate students. This has been an incredibly rewarding journey, and I am proud to have worked with so much talent.

As always, happy reading everyone!

Cassandra Poulin
Editor in Chief

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You Are Cordially Invited

By James Hiltz

Mr. Fox licked his lips as he read over the evening's menu.

"A very good selection tonight," Mr. Fish said, stroking his mustache behind his scaled mask. "I wonder where they're getting this new meat from."

Miss Bird shrugged, her mask's beak poking into the menu. "Well, they really needed to step up their game. Their last batch almost cost them that fourth star, hmm."

Mr. Fox could only nod absent-mindedly. He wondered if Bird was pretty behind her mask. "Well," he said, placing his menu onto the clothed table, "shall we see the meat of the day?"

Mr. Fish and Miss Bird nodded. Mr. Fish waved his hand absent-mindedly.

The waiter, clad in his black suit and a mask that resembled a face made of mirrors, approached. "Are we ready to order then?"

Mr. Fish scoffed. "Hardly, my boy. We are ready, however, to see the main dish. Bring it out, will you?"

Miss Bird moved her mask slightly to cough into a napkin. "Run along will you, hmm."

The waiter nodded and walked through the double doors on the far side of the room.

Mr. Fox rested his chin on his hand. He wondered how long this would take, and how long he'd have to suffer the company of Mr. Fish and Miss Bird. He glared at them from behind his mask. How he wished Mr. Frog had not been not busy. Perhaps he'd at least get some good conversation with his meal. He looked at his glass. At least the wine was good and a deep, deep red.

The double doors opened again, revealing the mirror-masked waiter with a chain in his gloved hand. The chain was attached to the collar wrapped around the neck of a young brunette girl. She was naked and shivering. Water dripped from her darkened locks as she stared with wide, bloodshot eyes at the diners around the table.

Mr. Fox looked her over behind his mask. She was short and thin, probably just about to reach puberty. She had protruding hips and underdeveloped breasts. Mr. Fox grimaced behind his mask. He liked them bigger and thicker.

The waiter dragged the girl over to their table, ignoring the shrieks she was letting out. Mr. Fish smacked her as she bawled, leaving a red mark on her pale face.

Miss Bird shook her head. "Don't bruise her, hmm. I despise bruised meat."

The girl whimpered. "Please... please let me go. My father..."

Mr. Fish reached over and felt her bicep. "Oh good. Nice and firm." He glanced over at the waiter. "Have her bones been tested?"

The waiter nodded. "Of course. No sign of deterioration or breakage. She was well raised. Chosen from a prestigious herd I might add."

Mr. Fish nodded, lowering his hands to her ribs. "Hmm, a bit skinny... Not a lot of meat on these bones I say."

The waiter bowed his head slightly. "I must confess our stock has been a bit thin, but trust me, the chef has some grand ideas for your dishes tonight. He promises savory meat that nearly falls off the bone. And if you are dissatisfied with your meal, you could always fill out a review card. You know how seriously we take bad reviews."

Miss Bird nodded, and twirled her finger. "Around please, hmm."

The waiter nodded and spun the girl around. Her shoulders shook as she silently cried.

"Hmm," Mr. Fox said, looking down at his menu. "What would you recommend with the wine?"

"With the Sang Rouge? I'd recommend the veal escalopes with a garlic mushroom cream sauce. Quite delectable."

Mr. Fox nodded, looking more at the menu than at the girl. Mr. Fish reached out a hand and pinched the girl's buttocks with a snort. The girl whimpered.

"I think we're ready then," Mr. Fox said, glancing around the table.

Mr. Fish and Miss Bird nodded.

"Ah, good," the waiter said, standing at attention. "What will it be then, sirs? Madam?"

Mr. Fox absent-mindedly tossed his menu onto the table. Miss Bird had to dive to save her glass of wine from being hit. "I'll take the veal as you said. And more wine of course."

"Of course," the waiter said.

Mr. Fish coughed. "I'll go next then, eh? Give me the braised ribs with the carrots and polenta. And the tomato-basil soup as well. And more wine of course."

The waiter nodded.

The girl wept, snot running down her pretty face.

Miss Bird shook her head. "The grilled marrow bones and the rosemary-lemon bruschetta please. And more wine of course."

"Very good, madam. Your meals will be ready shortly."

The waiter turned on his heel, pulling the chain with him. The girl collapsed on the floor. Her crying eyes stared out of her skull, as if accusing the patrons of some sort of crime, before the waiter yanked the chain again, dragging her along the ground as a gagging sound exited her throat.

"I hope he doesn't pull too hard," Miss Bird, swirling her wine around in her glass. "I hate bruised meat."

You already fucking said that, you brain-dead whore, Mr. Fox thought. He shared a look with Mr. Fish.

A thud came from the kitchen.

Then a scream.

Mr. Fish shook his head as he sipped his wine. "I thought they were sound-proofing the kitchen."

Thud.

Scream.

Mr. Fox shrugged, tracing circular patterns in the tablecloth as he half paid attention to his companions. Senile, old bastard. "They should work on that."

Thud.

Scream.

Thud.

And finally, no scream followed.

Mr. Fish turned his head to glance at the kitchen's doors. "Finally," he said. "Thought she'd never shut up."

Soon enough, appetizers had come and gone, and the main course was brought out. Mr. Fox reached up, fork and knife in hand and began cutting up his veal, remembering how the girl had looked at him before she had left. Her eyes. They made him unnerved, almost like she knew what kind of man sat behind the red-faced fox mask he wore.

He chewed the tender meat, tasting mushrooms and garlic and fat.

Hmm, he thought as he chewed. Should've ordered the lobster instead.



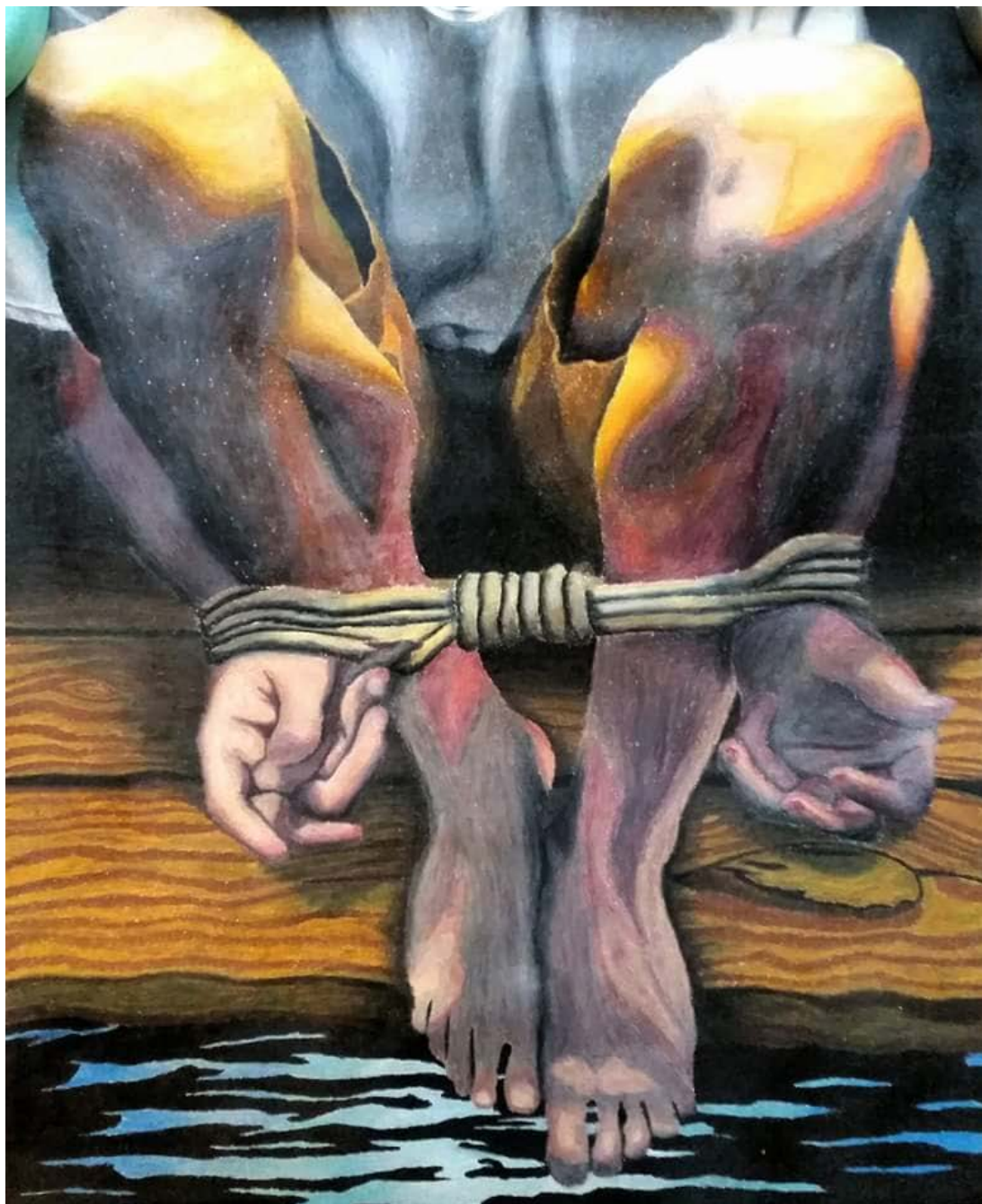
From The Perspective of A Spider

By Jessica Miller

Oh little spider sitting on my porch,
Where are you going?
What are your dreams?
My dreams, replied the spider, are many and few!
One is to not get squashed by you!
I have dreams of London, Paris and Rome!
Anywhere will be my home!
To be caught on a breeze,
Steady and swift
To fly freely through time and space,
Just set me adrift!
My voice is small,
But my spirit is big!
Maybe I'll even stop in Ireland,
And fancy a jig!
I laughed heartily when he spoke of his plans!
But what about this moment?
No wants or demands?
Not a thing, he replied, quite happy and content.
For all I need is a corner to rest,
Perhaps a bug or two would be divine!
Maybe even some cheese?
So I can wine and dine!
My dreams are simple,
But many and few!
I am content on your porch,
Just watching the view!

Bound

By John Guy Albert Comeau III



All Saints' Day

By C.S. Lobaito

Life is hysterical as a clerical error.
Good morning to the good afternoon people.
This November rain reminds me of a song.
Pitter-pat-tat-hush, minus the solo.
I pop in an amaretto K-cup & brew my coffee
Advanced as the pharaohs would be proud.
You're still asleep, dreaming those dreams
As a CIA agent smoking guns in Beirut.
I check my twitter account for more followers.
The French toast makes itself, for attention.
Click-a-dee-clank, my typewriter's typing blank
Because I forgot to place a ribbon in her hair.

Good afternoon the good evening people.
If you just started reading this, my mind went blank.
Let's water the bamboo plants for a child.
We're centuries away to play that prank.
Should I enroll in online college, to earn
A degree to put me 30k in debt?
The squirrels outside laugh at me,
Call them scholars. You know life sucks when
The highlight of the day is checking the mail.

Blunted Blades

By Tyler Leighton

Blunted swords clashed outside of the tent, one of the many tents that were clustered away from the fields where spectators gathered to watch the joust and melee. The sound of anticipation filled the stands and penetrated the tent's canvas walls.

Myra sat in the corner of the tent, lost in the outside noise as her brother, Elliot, was helped into the armor by their father. He pulled the final leather straps tightly under his arms. He had lost weeks to making sure everything fit. This was the first time she had watched armor being put on, and it was decidedly less interesting than she had hoped.

"Finally," she said, hopping off of the crate she had used as a chair with the exasperated energy only an eleven year old can muster. She had been thinking about this year's Spring Festival Tournament long before her brother had the chance to become a participant.

"Well, what do you expect?" Elliot answered. "I didn't see *you* helping out."

"I was busy."

"Doing what?" Elliot moved his face to seem fed up.

Myra paced around the tent with long exaggerated steps. "It's just such an important day, I don't want to forget a single aspect, and this tent. It's quite large, so I had to-- "

Her father interrupted. "What do you think of it?" he asked Elliot.

Elliot paused. "It feels good, like last week, and the time before that too."

There had been many trial runs of this armor. Elliot told his father that it felt tight in the shins. This resulted in an entirely new suit being presented to him a little after two weeks later.

"I know, but I made a few more improvements," he said with a cautious smile.

"It's real good. I like it," Elliot said. He moved the shoulders, stretching and testing the limitations of the new suit.

"Good," his father answered. "When is Sir Carr coming?"

"I don't think he's going to," Elliot said.

Myra only knew a little about Sir Carr. As Elliot's mentor, the Knight stood tall and strong each time she saw him waiting outside their home for her brother. The man's white hairs poked out from his face rather than his head more and more.

"What? How can he not be here?" said their father. "His pupil is about to go compete in his first tournament in front of half the kingdom and the royal family and--"

"But what would he do if he were here?" Elliot asked.



"Well..." There was a befuddled look on their father's face. "Isn't this the time where he should be sharing some last second advice? A secret technique? One that will help you win!"

"If I still need to learn now against these men, then I've already lost." Elliot retrieved his helm from his father's hand. He made sure to shake his father's hand. "I'm going to do my best."

"I know you will," his father said. "You always have."

Elliot moved to Myra and bent down to look at her. "I hope you have as much fun watching as I will in the thick of it." He moved close to her ear to whisper. "And, I know you'll be out there with me in a few years. So, I promise not to make you look too bad."

He put his hand in her hair, and she shooed him away. "Good luck," she said.

Myra and her father walked together to the stands and up the makeshift stairs in search of a place to sit. Her father was quiet and stiff, as though he believed that the entire crowd had focused their gaze on his movements.

She had talked with Elliot a lot about the tournament and his preparation. The nights he spent learning with Sir Carr, the days, and sometimes weeks, he spent away from home. Each time returning with a more fantastic story of his own and his mentor's bravery. She couldn't remember how long he had been training.

On the field, she could see that several knights had already begun to gather. A few of them were stretching, while others took light swings at imaginary opponents.

The stands were already filled with people. The rich, in the front, separated from the commoners like her and her father. Their family's company for the tournament was often unrefined, which in Myra's opinion, only added to the fun. Ale flew as freely through the stands as curse words when a knight popular in the betting rings had fallen.

The King and his family were placed in their own stanchion, centered just above the field. Looking down from their position, all that was visible within the platform were the royal family's Red Guard.

The voices and bodies of each member of the crowd congealed into one unmoving mass of flesh and noise. It was an atmosphere that only fell on Drysdon during this tournament, and it was infectious for Myra. It was the excitement that she could only experience here that made her look forward to the festival whenever spring approached.

Her father found an empty row where they could both sit in mild comfort near the end of the bleachers. He seemed content with the view, but Myra could only make out a portion of the field through the well-packed spectators.

"Where do you think he is? Did he go back into the tent?" Myra asked, taking long unsure looks at each of the visible competitors.

"There he is," her father said, pointing his finger at Elliot. His grey armor shone brighter than the others, with blue and green cloth draping down from

his shoulder. The cloth was the same one that Myra had seen Sir Carr wear. It was as good as Myra had ever seen her brother. Tall, strong, proud, he looked like he belonged.

Her father sat silently after that, focused on each blue and green movement.

There were roughly forty men around the field when the judges made themselves known. They began by reading the rules, which Myra listened to for barely a minute. The melee's rules were straightforward as far as she was concerned. Men enter and carry whatever weapon they felt most comfortable with. The weapons were blunted of course; the melee, like all the events of a tournament, was a spectacle to display talents and strength, not to maim.

The men would then fight. Judges were positioned around the field to make rulings on when a knight had been beaten by his opponent. All men began on the field at the same time, and the last man able to fight, who had bested all before him, would be announced as the winner.

As the last rule was read, all of the competitors lined up facing the crowd. One of the men judging proceeded to walk down the row of men, yelling their names to the now silent audience accompanied by their accomplishments or titles.

Knight, knight, knight. Some of them Myra had heard of, either from previous tournaments or around town. Each one was met with mild applause from the crowd before their low rumblings returned. Until the man yelled out: "Squire, to Knight Frederic Carr!" A hush fell over the crowd that was followed by applause, but it was confused, like the crowd had collectively tried making the noise of an audible question mark. The sentiment continued as the final few combatants were announced.

Myra noticed the sound and looked at her father. He had the same unsteady look on his face that had become more pronounced as the tournament grew closer. It was the first time that she could remember hearing a squire called in the melee, but she assumed it had happened before. The sound of the crowd made her doubtful. Her eyes locked back to her brother's blue and green cloth.

The horn sounded. Some of the men scurried back, not wanting to put themselves in danger of being the first man beaten. It was this strategy every year that Myra criticized with her brother. Why enter if they weren't ready to fight? When Elliot remained in place, sword raised, grip tight, she felt nervous but proud.

Of the men remaining in the line, one caught eyes with Elliot. A knight whose horrendous green garments and armor gleamed. He must have been a somewhat prolific knight, not enough so to leave an impression on Myra. For all the tournaments they had watched, she could not place his name or the ugly color he wore.

They both began stepping towards each other, carefully. The sound of other weapons crashed, and the crowd had already begun to cheer. Myra could let herself look away from her brother. Once within weapon range, they



circled. They were waiting for the other to make a mistake in movement, to allow for an easy strike. Neither did.

Elliot struck first, with an aggressiveness that Myra hadn't expected. A two handed strike high, attempting to knock the knight off balance, but it was deflected. Her father hadn't expected it either as he jumped back with the blow. The knight in ugly green struck back quickly, faster than Myra thought he could, turning the deflection into a strike at the feet, but Elliot was able to step over the blade.

Elliot drove his back foot into the ground and pushed forward, planting his shoulder into the chest of his opponent. The knight in ugly green had put too much force behind his low strike, leaving his body open. He fell backwards, landing hard on his back. The man still had a grip on his sword and lifted it, but he was unable to do so before Elliot had placed his blunted blade on top of the man's neck.

The voice of one of the judges sounded. "Sir Charles Ryan has been defeated by Squire Elliot Hadaway."

Myra stood tall in the crowd, followed by her father and the rest of the people in the stands. She couldn't tell if that was the first man to be defeated; she could see only a few suits of armor on the ground, and many more men were still attempting to land blows on each other. The field was a mess of movement, but she could focus only on the area surrounding her brother.

Myra thought to herself how Elliot should have let that fight go on longer. To allow more men to be eliminated before he went back to action.

Another crash, metal on metal, then metal to the ground. Myra heard another judge's voice, "Sir Eric Baldroc has defeated Sir Marcus Landon."

Elliot turned in the direction of the announcement, and the knight who was still standing over his opponent. It was Sir Baldroc, holding the hammer that had made him infamous in this tournament, and to Elliot and Myra. Over the past three years, Sir Baldroc had won the tournament and many more across the country. Myra could remember the lasting impression he made each year with his brutality.

Elliot took a step towards the hulking man, standing at least half a foot taller than him before Baldroc stopped him with his mouth.

"Now who is this?" the Baldroc yelled, reaching for the crowd's attention.

He gained Myra's and her father's.

Elliot was confused, as were some of the competitors, whose weapons had stopped swinging to look on.

The huge knight continued. "He looks like Carr, but isn't. He's still a child. Carr sends a child to fight me. Well, I'll raise my sword when the old man comes here himself," Sir Baldroc said. He turned around looking for another competitor.

"Hey!" Elliot yelled back to Baldroc. "Are you afraid?"

Myra put her hands over her eyes. She knew that her brother had just made his first mistake of the competition. In-between her fingers she saw the hulking knight spin back towards Elliot.

"How about it then?" Elliot continued. "You said it yourself, a child. This should be quick for you then, right?"

Baldroc clenched his hands around the hammer in his grip. "All right. If you want to get hurt... I'll hurt you, little man."

The rest of the competitors were still; those that were seconds ago fighting looked on. It wasn't as though Myra noticed them: even her father disappeared into the background.

Sir Baldroc gripped the large black hammer widely. Elliot focused on the knight's massive hands; these could tell him where attacks would be coming from.

Myra noticed that Elliot placed his feet in a wide stance opposite of Baldroc. This way, he would be able to quickly maneuver in either direction. Elliot had watched Baldroc before, watched him win the melee just last year. He knew that the sheer size of the hammer, which was massive and black with pitch, made attacking slow for the knight.

Baldroc reared his hands back to the side. He would sweep the hammer across the ground like the last opponent had. Elliot hopped backwards with time to spare before the swing.

Myra could see her father rearing with every movement. This must have been the exact fight that was on his mind when the unsure look came on his face in the past weeks.

Baldroc's hands moved close to his chest. A jab, Elliot thought, and sure enough it came. Once again he moved out of the way with time to watch his opponent follow through. But Myra knew that this wasn't a strategy that would win the confrontation. Her brother's aggression was what won his first bout, and put him in this position.

On the next strike, Elliot moved in before the swing, ready to pass his sword behind a knee to get the massive Baldroc on the ground. Before he could rear back, a massive hand came off the hammer and flung Elliot across the field.

Another change in strategy. Distance, quickness. Elliot got to his feet and waited for an opening, striking when Baldroc was between his steps, hoping to catch him off balance.

Myra couldn't see if the barrage of strikes affected Baldroc until he raised his weapon overhead, blocking a strike with the long handle of the hammer. Myra noticed before her brother the mistake he had made.

The strength of Baldroc was enough to make Elliot second guess the stance, and Baldroc's heavy boot stomped down on Elliot's weight bearing knee. It popped in the wrong direction, eliciting a groan from the audience and a scream from Myra.

Elliot tried desperately to get back to his feet but his leg wouldn't support his weight. He had heard the pop that accompanied the kick, but now the



extent of the damage was clear. His leg buckled and he fell back to the ground.

"That was quick," Baldroc said.

Myra watched her brother lay there in agony. Her father was still on his feet by her side, silent. The man responsible went on to win the tournament, the praises of the king, and the cheers of the crowd. But Myra watched, and only one thought went through her mind from when her brother was carried from the field to when Baldroc's arms were raised in victory.

Myra was going to stop Baldroc from winning another tournament. She didn't think about the training she'd need, where she would find the knight, or how any of this would be accomplished. All Myra could feel was anger for what he did to her brother. It was a feeling that she knew wasn't going to go away.

Prisoner 258241

By Adina Friedman

We will never be equal, you and I
Separated by generations of hatred and sin
The difference between heaven and hell
Hides beneath the souls of our skin

You stand there
Pristine clothes pressed and never worn
Hair washed and brushed
With stars in your eyes

I stand across from you
Behind sharp steel that bites into my bones
Stripes covering a skeletal frame that will never recover
A star painted across a heart worn down by death

You are full of life and light and joy
And you tell me I am too
How you see that, I don't understand
You are beauty and I am sin

You are everything that is right with the world
God favors your kind
With bright blue eyes and hair golden like the sun

And we are the scum of the Earth
The Forgotten and the Lost
With scars on our heads void of hair
And bones full of dirt

You tell me we can run away together
To a place without hatred
And I want to believe you, I do
But the only way I can cross this fence is in the river

When you run your fingers gently over my tattoo
Hand reaching through the fence with cuts on your arm
I feel a little closer to a God that doesn't believe in me
And Prisoner 258241 feels like nothing a ghost of myself

The tattoos on my arm are a mark of my status
Of the status I have been given by those who matter more than I



But you embrace what you can
A scared arm covered in tattered pajamas

We will never be equal, you and I
For I am a Jew and you are German
And we are on opposite sides

Breakfast in A Basket

By Annika Firestone



Worth

By Beth A. Richardson

Monday: You ask me for five dollars. My eyes shift to the crack on the ground. Remarkably, it looks eerily similar to the crack that appeared in Amy Pond's wall in that *Doctor Who* episode when we first meet Matt Smith. How wonderful would it be if the Tardis were to appear right now, and whisk me out of this awkward exchange, and off to some exotic adventure in the far reaches of the universe? I'm certain that our universe is the only one where people have enough gall to beg outside of reputable establishments. Why should I depart with my hard earned money, when you can't even hold a job, keep a place to live, keep yourself clean? You ask me for five dollars, and my head jerks up, and I look across the street and think about how you can't even get a decent fast food meal for five dollars anymore. How the price of everything has increased dramatically over the last twenty years, but the value has stayed the same or gone down. For a brief minute I consider offering to take you to lunch, and instead I mumble something incoherent, but that you understand to mean "No." Now your eyes shift down, and I walk away, thinking about fish fingers and custard, and why you have to sit in front of the bookstore every single day. I just want to buy a new journal.

Tuesday: You ask me for five dollars. I notice the worn soles of your shoes, the frayed hems of your pants, and the holes in the fingers of your gloves. I think about how that's so stereotypical of homeless people. How in every movie or television show I've ever seen, they always cast the beggar with a pair of worn gloves with holes in the fingers. I think back to the cheap pair of gloves I bought at Target last winter and how they wore through the fingers before the first month was over. The ones I had bought the year before cost the same price, yet they lasted the entire winter, so while the price stayed the same, the value went down. You ask me for five dollars, and I look at the dark smudges under your eyes. Today I have a crisp five-dollar bill in my pocket, but I'm afraid to give it to you. I want to know what your plans are for these five dollars. Will you go across the street and buy a greasy burger and a side order of French fries to satisfy your hunger? Will you use it for a bottle of cheap wine down the street at the corner store? Will it go toward a pack of smokes, or to a dealer on some other corner? My cheeks flame as I stand there judging you, feeling your eyes staring through me. Waiting. Wondering. Eager. I mumble what is supposed to be "I'm sorry," and walk away. I still haven't gotten my journal.

Wednesday: You ask me for five dollars. I look at the tattered edges of your canvas jacket as I plunge my warm, gloved hands into my pocket. You wear layers upon layers of clothing, and huddle under a dirty plaid blanket. I wonder if you sleep on the ground in front of the bookstore or if you move somewhere else at the end of the day. I still carry the five dollars with me, having been tempted to spend it on a strawberry mango smoothie, or a hot

dog from the vendor around the corner. I don't even like hot dogs, but he was cute, and for the few minutes it would take to order my food and discuss the different topping selections, we could flirt a little and that was certainly worth the price, wasn't it? I thought perhaps I might take the five dollars and buy a newspaper, or a magazine, but I don't care to be depressed by the news, and magazines cost more than five dollars these days anyhow. You ask me for five dollars, and I think about buying you a hot dog. This would allow me to still flirt with the cute man behind the cart, and you would get a hot meal as a result. Well, maybe warm, by the time I walked back from around the corner. I wonder if you even like hot dogs, and I turn to ask you, but you are already looking intently at the crack in the ground, so I walk away. I wonder if my journal will cost more than five dollars.

Thursday: You ask me for five dollars. You're starting to sound like a broken record. I wonder why you don't change your approach. Maybe a sign that reads "Will work for food" or a can, set out in front of where you are sitting, where people could just donate whatever they deem you worthy of. I spent the morning rushing around to appointments I was late for because I have not been able to buy my new journal, and I feel frustrated with you. Your tight hat and dirty hair are an insult to my well organized and scheduled-right-down-to-the-last-minute life, and I don't know why you can't just find another doorway to squat in front of. I consider if it would be rude to walk over you, and just make my purchase, but then I would have to walk over you again. I can't even understand why the shop owner allows you to stay here, as clearly you must be cutting down on the amount of business he is bringing into his store. You ask me for five dollars. I turn to ask you why you keep asking me for five dollars, when it must be clear by now that I am not going to part with my hard earned money. You're fiddling with something in your hand, however, and I mutter under my breath and walk away. Maybe I don't need that journal as much as I think I do.

Friday: You asked me for five dollars. All week, each time I tried to enter the bookstore. So today, I went to the dollar store and purchased enough items to fill a 2-gallon size Ziploc bag. I bought toiletries and travel sized tissue packets. I bought Chapstick and hand lotion. I bought socks and even a few pairs of knit gloves, although I'm sure you will wear through the fingertips, just as I have in years past. I thought about each item, and how you would be able to use it while living on the street. I added energy bars and sore throat drops, in addition to disposable hand warmers. I brought my Ziploc Bag into the store with me, informing the clerk, so I could judge when the bag was full, and would still be able to zip closed. After I paid for my purchases, a total that came to far more than five dollars, I slipped the five-dollar bill into the bag, and headed towards the bookstore. On the way, I stopped and purchased several gift cards to the fast food joint across the street, and inserted them into the bag. As I crossed the busy road, my eye caught sight of an orange cone in front of the bookstore. I stopped at the entrance, turned to where you would be sitting, and found your blanket lying



on the ground. I stood there a few minutes, waiting. Watching. Wondering. I entered the bookstore, my heart starting to race. I selected my journal, and as I was paying, I carefully asked about your whereabouts. The clerk shrugged her shoulders, and I took my package and left. I lingered a few more minutes, then carefully placed the Ziploc Bag under your blanket, and turned and walked away.

The Magic of Mama's Purse

By Amber Lynn Revis

The Magic of Mama's Purse

is when I am coughing
on spring pollen and
marooned at a late hour
in a hotel in Prairie du Chien,
There's a cough-drop in the inside
zipper pocket, wrapper fused to it,
coated in fine crumbs.

It's when my nose is raw red
runny from sliding my
parka sleeve across, the handbag
cradles a soft tissue for me on
the banks of iced-over Kent Lake

If I fidget in hunger
in the vinyl diner booth
while Daddy looks serious,
Mama's purse holds crayons
and almonds.



Just Another Night

By Jaime Zulli

10 o'clock at night: I'm a normal sixth grade girl who knows I'll be exhausted in the morning. My dad is at work, my little sister is fast asleep, and my mother is passed out on the kitchen floor. The burning stench of vodka fills the room, a smell I dread that is all too familiar to me. This smell should not be familiar to a little girl. I walk into the kitchen where my mother lies unconscious. I look at her in sadness and disgust, wondering, "Why me? What did I ever do to deserve this?" I attempt to carry her to her room, but I am just too small and not strong enough. I grab her arms and drag her down the hallway and into her bedroom. I use all my strength to toss her in bed and tuck her in. "Goodnight Mumma, I love you," I say to her, knowing she cannot hear me, and does not even want to listen in the first place. I shut her bedroom door behind me, and I do not look back. I place her glass in the sink to be cleaned, blow out the Macintosh apple scented candle she had lit to mask the alcohol stench, and make my way upstairs to my room to try to get some sleep.

1 o'clock in the morning: I'm in 9th grade now. It's the weekend, and I am doing what all teenagers do best: chatting with my friends online. While making plans with my best friend, something bizarre happens. The door to the computer room rushes open while my mother stumbles in, trying to keep her balance. With tears streaming down her face and her makeup smeared all over herself, she approaches me. I can smell it again: the sickening smell of alcohol. "Why don't you looooooove me!!!" She screams directly in my face. I am so confused and have absolutely no idea about what she is talking about. Of course I love her. After all, she is my mother. Before I could answer her, I find myself in a place that literally threw me off guard. I end up on the floor, confused, dazed and with a pounding headache. I cannot believe what my mother had just done. I remain on the floor in shock, while my mother exits the room and slams the door shut behind her, acting like what she had just done was nothing out of the ordinary. I had done nothing to deserve a physical beating. I pick myself up and cancel plans with my friend. I head up to my room once again, bruises and all.

12 o'clock in the morning: I start college in a week. I am watching my favorite television show, *House Hunters*, while eating a bag of popcorn. Minding my own business. Then it happens again. My mother approaches me in a way I had never seen before. She looked so upset and so bothered, I almost felt bad for her. She looks at me like a lost puppy, and sits herself next to me on the couch. "Why do you treat me like this? Why do you hate me so much?" she asked me in a normal tone of voice. This made me upset. To have my mother truly believe that her daughter hates her is the worst feeling. I replied that I do not hate her and that was when she lost all control... She stood up and went in front of me and stared directly into my soul. "You liar!

You good for nothing b****! You have nothing going for you, you're so ignorant, so selfish, so disrespectful, I can't stand you; I hate you!" I am speechless. She ripped my phone out of my hand and threw it at the wall. I stood up and got in her face like she had done to me. For once in my life, I decided to stick up for myself and defend myself against my own mother, my own blood. This was the moment I was done trying to be nice to her, and I was done taking care of her. This was finally my time, and she was taken aback at the fact that I decided to stand up to her, so she got physically violent with me. Defending myself, I pushed back and told her exactly how it was. I told her how much I hated the life she chose for herself and how much I do not appreciate how she treats her family. While she proceeded to scream and insult me, I did what I wanted to do ever since I was little, ever since I can remember. I packed up my things, and left.

9 o'clock in the morning: I had spent the previous night at my boyfriend's house because I did not know where to go, but I knew that as long as I was out of that house, I would be okay. For all these years I have been dealing with my mother's alcoholism. Most of the time I blamed myself for it. Maybe I am a terrible daughter, or maybe I am ignorant and selfish like she had told me. Am I a failure as a daughter? No. I am not selfish, I am not ignorant. I am not the cause of my mother's poor habits. I took it upon myself to be the motherly figure in the house from a young age. It was this series of events (among many others) that led me to the discovery that I am not the one who is responsible for my mother's poor habits and decisions and I am done looking after her. It is her life, and she has the right to do whatever she wants with it. Watching a mother deteriorate over the years and become progressively sick is something no one should have to experience. Worrying about when she'll end up in the hospital again is a normal thought for me, but in the back of my mind there is hope that she will sober up. As I grow older, I realize the importance of family and that no matter what the future has in store for my mother, I will always love her, even if she has made some mistakes in her life. I have recently discovered the root of the problem, where this disease assembled and what contributed to it. But this is my story: it does not compare to my mother's and the overwhelming amount of trauma she experienced that was not mentioned here. I admire her for being so strong, even if her past constantly haunts her and tempts her to do dangerous things. This is the reality of alcoholism and how it can destroy a beautiful relationship between a mother and her daughter.

12 o'clock at noon: I am 21, and I have realized that a mother's true love and strength will never die, even when her body does.



Volunteer Fire Department

By Alicen F. McCoy-Limestoll



The Chess Game at Wise Acres

By Curtis J. Graham

“George, I want to go outside, George.”

“No, Howard, we can’t do that right now. It’s inside time.” George was stressed. Thirteen bucks an hour wasn’t enough to put up with this. George on Tuesdays, Ralph on Thursdays, and they always wanted to go outside. What is up with that? George moved a pawn forward two spaces. “Your turn, buddy.”

Howard glanced down at the chessboard then back out the window. He grabbed one of his bishops and took George’s last knight. “I want to go see the grass, touch the grass, George. You touched the grass today. I saw you, and I want to walk on the grass too.”

“You saw me coming into the building, from outside your window you mean?” George took one of Howard’s pawns with his rook. He knew he’d never beat Howard, but for some reason he treated this weekly chess game like a test for dominance. Howard was the one with hand and ankle cuffs, but George still felt the need to prove something to himself every Tuesday. “I took one of your pawns with my rook, Howie! What do you think of that?” Maybe his tone was a bit too harsh. Fortunately the security camera in the corner didn’t record sound, just video. And here was George, just a dutiful caretaker playing chess with his patient.

“No. Can’t move rook from C-5 to take pawn from G-5. Puts your king in check, George. King at B-3, now exposed to bishop at F-7. False. False move George.” Howard was rocking slightly, his eyes fixed on the barred window and the brown grass outside. Shabby, muddy grass leading to the rusted wrought-iron inner fence that surrounded Wise Acres Safe Haven.

Sonofabitch. He was right. George put the pawn back and contemplated the impending check. “We’re not going out today, How. We can’t go out, remember? You ask me every week. We can’t do it.” He moved his bishop neutrally, keeping up his failing defense game.

“George, my game George. Best let’s go outside now George. Feel the grass, feel the—pavement.”

“Howard, you have not won yet. It’s your move.” Yet. George didn’t like that, not that there was any chance of his winning. He felt his face grow hot. This is the sort of tedium you don’t learn in training. It was even more frustrating to think that this shift wouldn’t even pay for one carton of cigarettes. That pissed him off.

“George, I move knight to E-4. You move pawn to H-6. I take pawn at C-5 with queen. You move king to B-2. I move rook to F-2. You move king to A-3. I move knight to B-5. Checkmate.” Howard tipped his chin down and turned his eyes slowly from the window to George. “Checkmate. George.”

“You know what, fine.” This eye contact was more than George could handle right now. “Want to see the grass? Let’s go to the window.” Crazy old



mug. George stood and walked towards the window. The sun was setting, and it wasn't a half bad view. "You see, Howie? You can see the grass from right h--"

George turned around and there was Howard, inches away.

"George, checkmate." The white king approached George's eye fast, then slowed as it pressed against the fleshy mass. George screamed for half a second before Howard's large hand covered his mouth completely. Howard pushed his thumb in until the green felt bottom of the king filled George's eye socket and he stopped moving. George gently sank to the linoleum.

Howard looked out the window and spotted a daisy pushing up through the dusty brown ground. "Hello, pretty one."

Howard turned toward his cell door, always left open an inch for the caretaker's safety. He lumbered out the door and down the hallway, counting the moves before the swarm of white pieces would put him in checkmate.

Looking Back

By Lise Christofferson

With some effort, I tear my gaze from the misted moon, to look over at Kerry, who has her face turned towards the planked pine floor. "It'll not be cold enough down there, the root vegetables will rot, you'll see." Above her head, in the moted air of our cabin, braids of onion and garlic move in slow, twisting dance. I close the shutters against the cold and go back to the table.

"Maybe it'll be too cold." I answer, contrarily. I don't want to hear her dark prophesies born from her fear of hunger. My husband walks in, bloody still from butchering the deer he brought down in the gloaming, the tang of fresh meat coming in with him. "You'll go back out, Abraham, and clean up a bit better than that!" I speak more harshly than I intend; he turns abruptly and leaves. It angers me, this bit of compliance. I continue my task of bundling plants. Taking a deep breath, I allow their gentle perfume to soothe my raw nerves. Our yoke of feigned obedience must be broken, my husband and I have to accept the fact that we now have certain freedoms.

Kerry starts to go on about something else, I don't know what, and I nod patiently in agreement to the back of her head and try to listen to her; yes, perhaps it would be better to live as the natives did, in their movable lodge homes like gypsies in the wild, and on and on she goes. But my heart tugs towards Abraham, recalling this morning's lovemaking; the light touch of his leathered hands, the beading of sweat on his upper lip picked out by the tentative first glow of dawn. I shrug my shawl up around my shoulders and walk away from my sister, leaving her in the dark of her blind eyes while I go outside and find my husband.

He is sitting on the bench in the wash house, chatting amiably with our daughters, Alana and Gemma, who are heating up a kettle of water for him. I smile, and he nods at me, in good spirit. I sing a bit of a rune, low so none hear, as I add wood to the fire. Grandmothers, help me to shine, shine for him. I walk over and slowly pull off his shirt, running my hand gently over the solid planes of muscle on his back, and the raised webbing of scars there. He has known enough of lashings; I must learn to still my tongue. I step back a bit, watching the girls, and begin to recall a bit of myself.

I was ten, I reckon, when I was put on a ship for the Americas after my mother passed. It was a few days after her funeral when my father roused me from my sleep before the dawning, telling me to grab my kit and accompany him to the marketplace to find work, so he said. Just the two of us, I wasn't to waken the others. I was thrilled, as he had never been over fond of me, and this was a blessed treat after all the oppressive sadness of the week before. So I followed him down to the docks, and it was a difficulty to keep up, him hurrying and not looking back to me. But I stayed with him, and we went into a long low building crowded with people, where the feel of grief and smell of fear could stop you in your tracks. I didn't understand, it didn't make sense to



me, and I grabbed onto his coat as he made his way to a table. I didn't hear all what he said to the man, as I was looking anxiously about me in that noisy place, something about mum having just died, and the other children being so young, but I did hear the man as my da made his mark on a paper. The man was stating aloud that I was to be indentured for seven years, so as to learn the domestic trade, have room and board, and receive some education. Upon the termination of my indenture, I was to receive two new outfits of clothing and a very modest sum of money. By the time the man had finished his small speech, my father had already turned and walked away. I stood there in the crowd, alone, dumb. Causes me to remember my mother, how she looked when she died. So...empty. The babe had followed her that night. Everyone said how lovely they looked, peaceful like, laid out together on the table. There was no beauty in it as I remember, but then, I was just another motherless child.

I became an unprotected child. I often wonder, had my father been able to keep our small home, is that what this had been about? Had he been paid? I hope it was worth it to him, his oldest child sold off into servitude. My shining red hair had proven to be irresistible to a few of the men on the ship, and so it had been a miserable crossing, indeed. I remember, after making land one sultry afternoon, standing in a square in Charleston, part of a group of tired Irish paupers and prisoners awaiting our fate.

It was an old lady that paid my indenture, as it turned out, which was somewhat lucky for me I think, as I look back. She liked that I was already handy with a needle, and had some of my own things. Maybe what made her choice that day was something else, though. Perhaps it had been my sudden boldness to mention my knowledge of the plants that heal, my play to land me the best spot available to me. They hadn't known that about me, about the plants, I mean. I suppose my father hadn't thought to mention it, or maybe he hadn't known this about his eldest. That was mum and me, that was what we did, that was our secret. So anyway, this woman took me, and worked me all my waking hours and beyond, but she was never cruel, really. I did my work, apart from the others, and I don't think she, nor her family, ever noticed me much, at least not at first. I often thought as maybe I was already dead, but my body hadn't yet caught on to the fact. Anyway, on Sunday afternoons, for my free time, I learned to read, write, and work some numbers from a governess that worked some doors down, who resented the extra work outside of her house, I'm sure.

Early into the learning of my chores, the mistress made a trip down country to visit her son on his farm, taking me and her ladies maid along with her, and what a farm, the likes I had never seen before. It seemed the size of an entire county, and all the slaves were black, and there were so very many of them. They put me up in the attics in a closet with another seamstress, Mattie was her name, who took one look at me and my sad face, and she gathered me up into her arms and rocked me close as I sobbed wildly into her thin shoulder. Finally, since Mum had passed, someone had laid hands on me

in kindness, and I'm not likely to forget that moment for all of my life. The people who worked there must have seen as I was starved for affection, for someone or other always had a hand on my shoulder and a kind word for me. I received my first ever doll from them, though I was well past the age for dolls; she was made of rags and had a black face, and oh I loved her so. I no longer have her, it's my girls that do; although much mended she is still loved dearly. We left back to Charleston too soon for my liking, but I was happy enough, really, because I knew we would go again and again to the family farm, and folk there would see me, and smile to look at me.

I learned a lot from them in the country. They weren't all Christian, and even the ones that were had their own spirit family. They showed me how to throw bones in the dirt, and the placements you see in your mind's eye of where they fall. I told them about the old rune stones my mother had given me, and how they had been taken from me on board the ship, how you could sing them, carve them into trees, trace them on your person; there's nothing you can't do with runes. I traced them in the dirt, and explained their magic, and these kind people listened; you can't imagine what it's like to have someone listen to you when you don't remember it ever happening before. When I came back with Mistress on her next visit to her family, this man Moses gave me a deerskin pouch, and in were all the runes carved on discs of wood! How did he remember them all to carve them so well, I wonder still. And they gave me a throwing plate with them, marked so I could learn the levels, and I threw my runes like the bones, and I began to awaken again.

They liked stories, same as me, that's all we had. I told them tales of magic from a misty green land, and they shared theirs of dramatic landscapes, incredible animals, and their reverence for their ancestors, right down to the bones. Moses had a son, a quiet boy, and handsome. That would be my Abraham. He was good and calm, like his da, but he did suffer from a sense of injustice that was often his undoing as he got a bit older. As we grew taller, I fretted more and more as he began to come into trouble more frequently. Really, why he couldn't plant cotton, cut cotton, pick cotton, help them build the new house, and try to be invisible like the rest of us I don't know. But, I guess in the end, he did force himself to be even tempered and restrained. Wasn't he sitting there right now, not being angry with his own harpy wife? I began to prepare for tomorrow's washing while he scrubbed the blood and grime away in the tub, and the girls sat down at the bench with their gourds to carve. Then I remembered about Kerry so I left them in the wash shed and went back into the house.

Kerry was the girl ol' Missus McKierney had paid for to replace me, only the skinny thing came down with Yellow fever right away and went blind. I tended to her through her awful, bloody ordeal, but she was no good for labor afterwards, and the brothel man didn't want her as she tended to weakness, so the missus made me take her with me when I left. The missus was real good to me by then, and she let me take my daughter and my unborn child, also. She was kind to me ever since I had saved her sister from a blood infection,



you see. I had my remedies for everything, but with this working I added some flakes of gold I had scraped from a religious scroll she had hid away. Not that it added any to the actual work, but it made an impression on her, all right, my magic; she respected me some after that. And so I did take Kerry, and I called her my sister because I couldn't want for one better. It was getting on winter when we left, me already having Alana with me and Gemma on the way, and off we walked. I had a bit of money that had been promised me, and a good change of clothes and some more sewing things I had secreted away over the years, and before long, I had some business come in for sewing, but mostly I took washing. I also took the name Smith, because I was still angry with my father and I didn't want his name, and Missus told me I could take any name I wanted. I think she thought I would take hers, but no, she was nothing to me after all.

Kerry was everything to me, though. She watched the girls, kept our room clean and fixed our simple meals. We put on like we were ladies, her having some training as a ladies maid, and didn't we feel like it. Kerry said if we acted like ladies, these women over here would think we were, and so, we were treated better than maybe we might have been because of the airs we put on. I did sew some beautiful dresses for us, from the excess left from different jobs, and not a woman in Charleston could claim she was more becomingly turned out than we were. I needed to make more money, though, so we travelled on to New Orleans, and were treated even better there. I learned more and more the African slave ways of worship and magic, and they learned my ways from me. Still, I dreamed always of Abraham, as only a young woman can dream of her first and only love. I sewed, I washed, and I sold potions and worked spells for folk, and it took five long years, but finally we had the money to buy my man's freedom.

The McKierneys down Twin Oaks way didn't seem at all put out to get rid of Abraham, and even if I can't say as if they were good people, neither can I say they were bad, as they didn't balk over selling him his freedom, and nor did they claim ownership of the girls. They made us get married by their preacher. I should have said no, we had already had our binding, but after being told what to do for so long and keeping our personal doings secret, we just went along with it, and then off we walked, away from Twin Oaks forever.

We took the old South Carolina road up till it turned into the Cherokee road, and we walked and walked until we found this place in a small valley where some other free people live, and there are some Scots with a tiny village up across the ridge. No one bothers us here.

Abraham hadn't wanted to go to New Orleans, as he didn't feel safe there as a freedman. He said he couldn't feel comfortable in any place like that, where they were buying and selling folk in the town square. So here we are, in a cluster of separated homesteads along a creek, and we barter with the Scots for flour and whiskey.

Our home is so very nice, cozy, made of logs and chinked well with deer hide and clay. The sturdy plank floor with the root cellar underneath and large stone hearth are a luxury I never thought I would have, growing up in a tiny row cottage with a floor of dirt and a father who was always covered in coal dust and anger. Well, here I am, with my own home and outbuildings anyway. I feel like the proper lady, just like Kerry says I am. My Abraham looks after us well, and it's wonderful how he shoulders all the responsibility and I am proud to be of a help to him. It was hard when I was on my own, with Kerry and the girls.

"Come and sit, Kenna." Kerry motions me towards the hearth as she hears me walk in. "Here, let's put some ash on the hearthstone, and trace a rune. It's Samhain, after all."

And so it is, our most sacred time of the year. The veil that separates the living and the not living is at its thinnest, the season of work outside is done, and we can now enjoy some bounty for a while, until the season of Small Sun comes, when we worry, will we have enough...but no, we have enough here. No one troubles the communities in the hills, and we help each other if need be, and leave each other alone mostly. So I watch as Kerry scoops some ash onto the hearthstone, and I start to sing my spirit song while she beats her father's bodhran, and I hear the girls come in and their father after them, and I feel the new life kick in my belly, with my grandmothers' spirits all around us, the ones of the cold North. Alana traces a bindrune into the ash that speaks of home, light, and plenty. Gemma reaches for her father, and he pulls her close and they watch. My eldest begins to sing, and I let my voice fade away as she sings to raise Spirit. She begins to dance, and Kerry beats more wildly, and I feel wild myself and I support my unborn child with both hands as I dance, too. Abraham and Gemma pour some whiskey for Obatala and the grandmothers at the family altar, she dances as she does so, and her father steadies her hand while she pours.

We finally tire out, and stand laughing around the fire, but Abraham catches my eye and nods towards Kerry, and it looks as though she's going into the twilight between the worlds, so I pull the girls away to the table where we light some precious candles and admire the hideous faces the girls carved into the gourds. Abraham goes about setting candle nubs into the gourds to light them from within, and I complain of the waste of it, but he admonishes me with a look and I know to bite my tongue. I marvel at the gentleness in his manner with our girls, with myself, and Kerry also. I start to remember Dublin, and the rows and rows of cottages, all end to end, and all that I saw there in my short years before I left, and I'm thankful for my husband, tall and true, and kind to a fault. But the memory of hunger and abandonment start me crying, the back of my father's head as he walked away, never looking to me again, and Kerry snaps out of her travels to come to me, and I feel the fool to ruin such a lovely night.

I slip back to myself, the moon shrouded still, and this memory is embedded now in my brain as if it were my own.



Coffee Break

By Natalie Jones

Margot Anderson sits alone at her kitchen table, striking matches against the rough strip on the package and blowing them out immediately. She becomes increasingly anxious as she continues to glance at the clock. She adjusts her lace dress impatiently, tugging at the edges where the kitchen oven's heat has worn away the seams, leaving black burn marks and fingerprints on the delicate white fabric. She pulls a cigarette out of a rusty tin can sitting on the table, and dusts off the filter before sticking it in her mouth and lighting it. Margot walks to the sink, uses the edge of her dress to wipe dirt off the rim of a cracked coffee mug, turns the faucet on by turning the handle forcefully. The water sputters and makes loud groaning noises as it dispenses murky brown water into her mug. With a frustrated push, she manages to reduce the stream of dirty water to a series of drips. She cradles the mug and the book of matches in her arms as she walks to the sliding screen door. Margot is sitting on a rocking chair propped against the balcony wall as she balances the cracked coffee mug between her knees. She strikes the matches more furiously, now, barely blowing one out before lighting the next. Hints of the sun can be seen in the distance, illuminating the trees with a pinkish glow as daylight begins. As she lights the last match, she allows herself a few solitary seconds to stare into the cherry-red, incandescent light before extinguishing the flame in the mug's murky brown water.

What If?

By John Gregory Evans

Solaced spirits of the night,
As the darkness crafts

an allegory of prosody,
genres by the score, well, all right.

What of the “what ifs?” and
all who try various constructed ideas?

What if, the seeds of metaphor
flourish in a spontaneous kind of way?

What if, alliterations all but vanish
away?

What if, this melting pot of word
gives way to its metered form?

And lost its way within the swells
of a metaphorical storm?

The accent of an indigenous scene
Pilfering the slam

of ingenious minds, and
robs the soul,

so be it in the land,
of what ifs, and
for in the end it’s all the same

you turn out to be
not so absurd.



Creation

By Dora J. Simpson

Phusis, born at Creation, but daughter
to none. Goddess of nature: you're the crisp
crunch from red autumn leaves: jelly-like, yellow-
orange fungus on frost blanketed bark,

waves of green grass in deep meadows; rushing
icy blue of thunderous waterfalls,
violet forget-me-not seeds beneath
fertile soil awaiting vernal equinox—

time of rebirth and Rapture. Au naturel
under a fresh wintery Comforter.
Yet, restless on an eternal hinge your
flirty curves allure passionate ponders.

No artist transcends creator's alla
prima creations. As brush strokes glide like souls
rising over spiritual mountains.
Unparalleled, the landscape her canvas,

her being, her body. Harmonious
save one. Nomos, her nemesis, who yearns
to restrain Phusis' natural freedoms. Vex
for selfish favor. He is mortal's law.

"Ah, Nomos, kata physin," says Phusis.
"Live unison with nature." An arctic
kiss brushes her snow-covered shoulders—hills
in the distance. Tall pines sing haunting, mystic

melodies. Wolves bay in chorus, warning.
The birches stand solid, layered, white-lace
garments clothe bare limbs. Shivering willows
weep and sway their feathery fingers, stroke

long curving arms of shadowed streams. Twisted
veins of blue, once brimming with earth's steady pulse.
Clouds are falling upon the horizon,
as if to crush Phusis, Goddess of nature.

A Death for a Life

By Emily K. Murphy

There's an epidemic going around. I hate to say it, but I needed one. It ain't like I despise folks; I don't. I love the people in Leeden. Like the Crone family. See 'em on Sundays – Martin in his nice jacket, Emma smiling at every song, and that little 'un, Susan. Smiles like her ma and cleans up like her pa. She doesn't pay attention at service, but I don't hold it against her. She's the sweetest little thing. She likes to bring me flowers sometimes because I once brought her some. They's like that, folks in Leeden. That's why I don't like epidemics.

But a man needs 'em to live. Once in a while. Once a ten year. Maybe once a five year, if there's a dry spell. But I don't wish harm on no man. Half the village down with putrid throat, and that ain't something I'd wish on my old man, rest his soul. It's rough. Your fever is so high you can't feel the heat. You cough up a lung and swell like a fat pig. Your throat is on fire, then dry, then so raw you can't swallow anything except what's forced down – your own filth washed from your head or stomach. I don't wish it on nobody.

But I don't wish starvation on myself, neither. A death for a life, that's what I always say. One dies so one can live. Even Jesus did that. But with me, I always end up being the one living. Funny how that is. I guess I ain't like Jesus, then. I try to be. I want to be. But I'm more like that Joseph. The one with the tomb. They say he was saved and all, because he helped Jesus. But he wouldn't of been saved if Jesus hadn't died. It can't be right, that.

I wonder if I'm damned, just because I live off folks dying. It don't seem fair. Then again, it don't seem fair to the folks whose kids die. They don't like me much, folks in Leeden. Unless they're a little 'un like Susan Crone and don't understand.

But I understand. And that's the problem.

Here I go again, thinking myself in circles. I can't ever make heads or tails of it when I get like this. That's why I need an epidemic, to keep my hands busy.

But I don't like epidemics.

Thank the Lord, here's my boy to distract me.

“Another's dead, Pa. Susan Crone. She's about three foot six. They can pay you in a week.”

I take out my saw and some fresh pine wood. Three foot six. Better make it four feet, then. Susan deserves a little room.

“A death for a life, Matthew. A death for a life.”



Michigan Splendor

By Mark Bookout

The summer heat assuredly gives way
To brilliant blue skies, cool breezy days
A transition is made, a chill's in the air
It's autumn in Michigan
The trees declare
Bursting with color, bright orange, red and yellow
The cold Northern winds begin to bellow
A symphony of color
Fills the Great Lake State
The greatest of painters could never create
Mozart would smile at the beauty abound
Michigan Splendor
Sweet music resounds

The Corner Witch

By Rebecca Martone

I remember hearing of a time, before my own, when the witches were treated like royalty. They sat beside the thrones of Kings as trusted colleagues, until one selfish king's heart was betrayed by these powerful creatures, and their kind went all but extinct from his vengeful rage. Now all that remains are the corner witches—women in strange garb who congregate under the blinking street lamps and in the dank alleyways, bargaining for odd trinkets in exchange for granted wishes.

My feet pound through puddles as I hurry myself down the sidewalk.

Don't let them see you. My thoughts scream as I watch the strangers I pass, few and far between. They have no care for where a lonely girl is running at this late hour; their eyes do not stray from themselves. But I can't shake the feeling that I'm being judged for my decision.

I'd always listened when they warned me away from the witches; they couldn't be trusted, that they were playing with us, asking for random objects and giving us magic that did not exist. I wasn't even sure the corner witches were *real* witches. However, I had tried everything else to make this nightmare end. The power of a witch was my last resort.

I heard their laughter as I rounded the corner. Three women in dark clothing stood close together at the edge of the alleyway. The one in the middle told a story, and the other two cackled between puffs of smoke. Their conversation hushed when they noticed my appearance.

"What do you want?" One asked, tossing back her red mane of hair.

"I..." I had never stopped to talk to one of the witches before. How was I supposed to ask them for help?

"I need help." I said.

The witches laughed.

"Why on Earth would we help you?" The redhead snapped.

"Yeah, kid, go run back and cry to your mommy about your problems."

"But," I rummage through my bag, digging for the trinkets I'd tossed inside before leaving. At the bottom my hands reach for a broken watch and a key for a door I still can't find. "They say that...witches help people."

The group laughed at me. I knew this was a terrible idea. I was just about to run back to where I came, when footsteps pounding up the alley silenced the group of witches.

A fourth woman stepped out of the shadows. She approached me without a word to the others. I was already rather frightened by the general idea of being around the witches, but this one, with her height and sharp features, scowl, and high cheek bones, highlighted by the yellow light of the street lamps, made me very much reconsider the running I was going to do earlier. She gave me a good once over before speaking.

"What did you bring me?"



“Cyn...” One of the other witches began to protest, but she held up her hand.

I lifted the meaningless trinkets with shaking hands. Cyn looked at them with no real change in her expression.

“What do you want?” she asked as she pocketed my offering.

I thought about all of the feelings that question brought up. There were so many things about my life that I wanted to change. However, I came here for the nightmares and that’s all I needed to fix for now.

“I need the nightmare to go away.” I replied.

The witch’s lips twitched upward for a brief moment. “Take this. Put it under your pillow. You’ll begin to sleep just fine.”

She handed me what looked like nothing more than a small pouch filled with sand. I didn’t understand what this would do to help, but before I dared to question her, Cyn was slowly shrinking away into the shadows of the alley.

“Wow,” one of the other witches muttered. “I wonder what’s gotten into her.”

“She’s probably bored.” Another said. “You got your help. Now leave us alone, girl.”

I felt the witches’ bitter glares following me as I left.

I rammed my shoulder into the door and it swung open with a shriek. Someone grumbled from the living room, but I couldn’t make out who in the darkness. I made my way through the house and up the stairs, careful not to touch the railing, which was barely holding itself up anymore. In my closet of a bedroom I had to prop a chair against the door to keep it closed as usual. I pulled down the shades and placed a towel on the windowsill to keep out the cold air.

The sagging mattress ached beneath my weight as I dug through my satchel for the witch’s gift. The pouch was still a pouch. It still held nothing but golden sand, glorified dirt that was somehow supposed to keep the nightmares at bay. I tossed it back and forth in my hands, thinking, to no avail, what magic it held, before following the witch’s instructions and placing it under my pillow.

I buried myself beneath my thin blankets and fell asleep thinking about the corner witches. I would never say it out loud, but they had both fascinated and frightened me my whole life. I used to sit for hours in the public library reading their history. I didn’t understand how they went from royalty to nothing, how one man’s opinion began a genocide, and his ideals poisoned even those of us who hadn’t been born yet. In a way I felt bad for them. If you read the right books, you could see the beauty of the witches’ limited powers. They didn’t use their magic for evil and they never had. Even now that their species is all but extinct, reduced to granting wishes to ungrateful humans on street corners, they still remain peaceful. My mind plays these thoughts over and over again.

Until the nightmares begin on cue.

I should have known the corner witches were nothing but hocus-pocus nonsense.

After waking up in a cold sweat and tossing the bag of dirt across the room, I couldn't get back to sleep. The nightmares were more vivid than I remembered them being before. I checked every inch of my skin to be absolutely certain the fire that engulfed my body in that dream wasn't real. The sun had barely set when made my way back to the street corner, my heart racing as I prepared the words I wanted to shout to that stupid witch.

The trio of gossips stood right where I'd left them the previous night. Their eyes narrowed as they all recognized me.

"Where is she?" I spat.

"Heh, Cyn, looks like you have a dissatisfied customer!" The redhead shouted, "What's the matter with you, girl? Cyn's stuff is good."

"It didn't work. There's nothing wrong with me," I insisted.

Cyn's heels tapped down the concrete of the alleyway. Her waved locks were twisted into a haphazard bun on the side of her head, and she had bags beneath her eyes that mirrored my own. She studied me again, and if it weren't for her ragged appearance I might have felt self-conscious about my baggy clothing and limp blonde hair. But I was too filled with rage to care. Or maybe it was embarrassment.

Never trust a corner witch.

"It didn't work?" Cyn asked.

"No, it *didn't*."

"You put it under your pillow? The pouch I gave you?"

"Of course, I'm not an idiot. I can follow your simple instructions, jeez."

Cyn pondered this, pacing beneath the lamplight. "But..." She shakes her head, fingers rubbing her temples.

"What is in these nightmares you claim to have?"

Revisiting the things I saw in my head at night was nearly as painful as the experience itself. I thought about the fire from the most previous nightmare, how it seemed to come from nowhere and engulf the room around me in seconds. I "woke up" surrounded by the flames and screamed as they licked my limbs, threatening me from under my bed. There was an empty path, just wide enough for me to run through the door, where the fire followed me down the hall. The stairs gave out below me and I tumbled into the foyer, knocking my head against the bolted front door. The fire gave chase, like a game of cat and mouse, twisting around every corner I turned in a house that no longer seemed like my own. I felt the radiating heat making its way through my skin as it backed me into the corner of an empty room, windows and doors too far for me to make an exit.

It was only when the flames caught up to me that I finally woke up.

The sweat returned to my brow as I tried to find words for Cyn. She studied my face as my expression melted into the terror. The witch cleared her throat and dug through the long pockets of her chunky cardigan sweater.



Another pouch sat in her hand; this one was made of a translucent green fabric allowing me to see the green flakes inside. I took the bag and immediately gripped my nose with two fingers.

“What on Earth is that smell?” I eyed the bag, daring for a moment to breath in the rancid scent inside. The flakes looked like leaves, but the odor was too strong for me to decipher what they were for.

“That doesn’t matter,” Cyn said “just put it under your pillow as you did with the sand.”

“But...I have nothing to trade this time.” I replied.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re a curious case; consider the solution to this mystery payment enough.”

Cyn stood looking down at me for a long moment. I looked from her to the other witches, who whispered to one another just as baffled by Cyn’s actions as I.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night, girl.” And with that, Cyn made her way back down the dark alley and I stepped away from the corner once again with a bag of nonsense.

The flames let me out that night.

After tumbling down the stairs, I found the front door ajar and I rushed outside without question. The world beyond the burning home felt strange in this nightmarish land. The street remained silent; houses stayed dark with their residents tucked safely inside. But the darkness around me was alive. I heard creatures shrieking from the shadows, sticks cracking and leaves rustling from the trees beside me. There were eyes watching me; the hairs on the back of my neck, on my arms, stood aware of something I couldn’t see. I stood in the middle of the empty intersection, waiting for a monster of sorts to catch me off guard and eat me alive.

This nightmare was different than the rest, beyond being let out of the house. I lifted the charred edge of my pajama bottoms where the flames had left their mark: raw, bright red and pink bubbling flesh. I touched the wound and felt the sting as real as could be. I began inspecting the rest of my body then: picking at the splinters lodged under my skin, grazing the bump on the back of my head from where it hit the floor and watching the purple bruises form on my arms.

I began to sweat as I tried in vain to wake myself up. The nightmares had never hurt me before. No matter how close the flames danced towards me, I never felt the fire, never woke up with a burn to remember the night. But there I was, lying on the pavement covered in souvenirs from the night. Was I asleep at all? I could no longer tell the difference; the pain enveloping my body seared through me too palpable to be imagined while I slept.

It was that damn witch! And her stupid bag of leaves! She was toying with me again, giving me her *free* magic only to torture me! You can’t trust the corner witches. They’ve been reduced to nothing but vermin, fooling stupid humans like myself. Maybe once, centuries ago, their magic had been used for the good of the world: healing the sick and the parched lands. But

what did they do now? Give foolish humans their tainted magic in exchange for broken and forgotten items?

The rage boiled beneath my skin, my body heating like the burn on my leg. I inspected it again, furious to see what I would look like when I awoke. It was a hideous sight: the peeling skin and blotchy bruised markings. I reached out my hand and wrapped my fingers around it; the touch ignited more pain through my body. Just as I was about to whip my hand away, I felt a numbness wash over me. My hand glowed like the red-hot flames, but beneath it the burn began to shrink, clean skin growing over the wound like it had never been there. My hand shook as I staggered backwards, falling onto the pavement. My skull collided with the black top with a sickening crack and I grabbed onto it.

The numb feeling returned.

Cyn wasn't in the shadows that night, and her gossiping cohorts were nowhere to be seen. She looked too dolled up for her spot on the corner: her mane of dark hair fell in mermaid waves over one shoulder and she'd traded her frumpy clothing from the other night for a dark dress that scraped the sidewalk.

I threw the bag at her feet.

"Whatever you're doing to me, witch, it is not funny."

Cyn smirked at me. "I never said anything about comedy, girl."

"Then what?! What could your goal possibly be to have to cause me so much pain? I wanted the nightmares gone. Do I need to tell you what that word means because I don't think we're quite clear on that!"

"I tried to clear your mind of these nightmares. It may not mean much coming from me, but we're not malicious. After all of the pain those humans have brought upon our kind we still remain benevolent."

"What do you mean *those humans*?" The way she gestured away from me made me curious. The witches were supposed to hate all of us. After all, our ancestors hunted all of them for the mistakes of one.

"If you don't see it by now..." Cyn trailed off, digging through the small bag hung across her body. She held up a knife and, without giving me a second to be frightened, sliced her palm.

"Give me your hand," She ordered, holding hers out. Blood dripped onto the sidewalk, mingling with the collection of forgotten gum and other mysterious spots. Cyn continued to shake her bloody hand at me until I finally caved and grasped it. I felt the warmth in my palm again, like the fire from the dream. I pulled away as the numbness returned.

Cyn held up her hand with a devious smirk; there was no longer a mark, not a single trace of blood.

"What did you do?" My body quivered as I backed away from the witch.

"I didn't do anything," Cyn laughed. "You want to tell me anything special about yourself? Like, why such a decent looking girl is in such a rough neighborhood so late at night? Or maybe, about who you got all of that



blonde hair from.” She reached out and grabbed a lock of my hair, letting the strands pass through her fingers.

“What are you talking about?” But by now I knew what the witch was alluding to.

The nightmares and misfortune that have plagued me my entire life were never anything that could be fixed. I sympathized with the witches, saw comfort in their stories ever since I was young. I didn’t find that dark corner of the library with the dusty old books on my own, I remembered. My mother, a woman I could only recall in vague snippets, memories that ended by the time I turned seven, talked senselessly about the witches. She would wear dark garments and pretend her cookbooks were spell books; she would joke with me, tell me that I was a fast healer, that my neon colored Band-Aids were magical. However, I supposed she was just covering up the true magic in our home.

I remember the day my mother told me we were playing hide and seek. She told me to hide in the back of the closet and stay very quiet. I never thought to question how we could be playing if she knew where I was hiding.

I heard the thumping and shouting through the floorboards of our old home. The house shook when they knocked the door down and stormed inside. The footsteps of angry men pounded through our home, followed by my mother’s cries. I saw a shadow pass over the light under the closet door, but whatever it was vanished before checking. I sat in the crushing silence for hours. The sun had faded before I finally brought myself to crawl from the closet. The intruders had broken everything in our house, knocked over bookcases, torn pictures down, and smashed glasses and vases. My house was empty; my mother was nowhere to be found.

Now, I watched the yellow light of the flickering street lamp pass over Cyn’s sharp features. She looked different to me now, no longer a mysterious villain or untrustworthy corner witch. She was the answer to all of the questions I had spent years searching for.

Malice

By Meryl Healy

The decrepit lion rears its giant head—
Black cavern filled with stalactite fangs
Belt-like tongue slapping poison,
splashing hatred—
hatred that permeates the soul

Turmoil meant for two,
becomes— a sort of circus.
Where everyone can attend.
Even when they're not invited.

Standing in the big-top
So small and all alone,
Waiting for the next act:
Waiting for the next flogging.

And after the grand finale
And after the self-serving applause dies,
Perseverance shall remain intact
Because there was never any engagement
to begin with.



Lavender Rice Noodles With Shrimp

By Annika Firestone



The Final Event

By Shannon Copeland

“I’m on my cell outside the wire, I can’t talk long, but they let me call to make sure you are okay. Don’t panic if I have to hang up.” In Iraq, it’s important not to make calls on your cell while on patrol. You need to pay attention to the mission: they can listen in on your calls and they track you.

They were making an exception for him that day because he had just come in from a sniper mission and had to take his scout platoon out on patrol right away. I was surprised to hear he was able to call from there, but needed to hear his voice, and the unit knew it. My mother had tried to commit suicide the night before, and I had sent messages to the command asking to have him call me.

I’m not really sure what was said between us for the most part. I remember vaguely talking about why she had done it, how I was handling it, if I was traveling home. I remember thinking how glad I was that he was calling at 2am and I wouldn’t have to share the phone with the kids. I think I may have even said to him how peaceful the conversation was. I felt better just hearing his voice and his reassurances that she’d be okay.

And then it happened. Through the phone I heard what sounded like a combination of static and tin foil being balled up. I knew right away that was the sound of trouble. It didn’t sound like an explosion, it didn’t sound remotely like anything I’d ever heard before. But even before my husband started screaming, I knew it was awful.

“What the fuck was that!?”

“Get in the fucking truck!”

“Where the fuck is it coming from?”

“Shannon, I have to go.”

“Where the fuck is the rest of the team?”

“I love you.”

“Get that motherfucker in the truck.

“Go, go go!”

CLICK... silence.

In my life, full of chaos, full of aggravations, usually I yearn for silence. I relish it, I beg for it, I’ve cried because I couldn’t get a moment of quiet.

This is not what I had in mind.

Suddenly, my limbs felt like there were made of jello, but not just any jello. This was a special, lead-weighted gelatinous goo, and it was melting. I couldn’t move. I don’t think I was breathing. As I sat there, I felt the sofa start to suck me in. I could feel it engulf me, pulling me into it, deeper and deeper. And then the tears came with all the intensity of a sobbing, wailing 2-year-old. But I still wasn’t moving, not sobbing and probably not breathing.

I just sat there, blank and frozen in time with the phone still to my ear. There weren’t any thoughts going through my mind. No what if’s, no



questions, none of my typical creation of improbable and impossible scenarios. I don't know how long I sat, it could have been hours, it could have just been a few minutes.

I don't know how I got to bed, I don't have a clue how I got the kids ready in the morning, or how I got to work the next day. The only clear memory I have of that morning was sitting on my platform at work, overlooking all the employees, and thinking how unimportant our job was, how clueless we all are. Thinking about how we go through life knowing anything could happen at any moment, and ignoring those thoughts, because if we didn't, none of us could get through each day.

How long would it be until I heard from him? I started doing the calculations. If it hadn't been anything, he would have called me by now. If someone had been seriously injured, as soon as the soldier or unit called his family, the phones would be open... that should be soon. Was I thinking about someone being killed? No, I really wasn't. I was in some sort of denial of the obvious.

And then I got it. The most important text I've ever received said simply: "I'm alive, and I love you." Remember those sobs that didn't come out the night before? Here they came. Whooping and bellowing, loud and long. I sat there on my stage at work, an entire building of people looking at me like I'd lost my mind before I was able to get up and leave the building. I was done for the day, I didn't have anything left in me.

But now my mind had decided to start thinking, and the possibilities seems endless. What did that mean, "I'm alive"? Was it that simple? Was he hurt? What took him so long to write just that? And if he could text, why couldn't he call?

Oh my God, someone died.

Someone died.

I had to be alone. Would the sitter keep the kids overnight? Did I know anyone who had a Xanax? Maybe a valium? This bottle of vodka is going to have to work. Wait! What if he calls soon? I can't drink that, he'll need me to be clear headed. I just wanted to stop making up stories in my head. I just wanted to speak to my husband.

I just wanted him to tell me everything was fine. I'd exaggerated his situation like everything else in my life.

When the call finally came, I was still holding the phone in my hand from the day before. I had not put down the last call for fear of missing the next. I answered it before it rang, alerted to the call by the lighting of the screen. Closing my eyes, trying to picture his face, I answered, "Steve?"

He didn't say anything. He tried, he stopped, and then he cried.

Some men don't cry. My husband is not one of those men. He's a macho man, an alpha male, and tough as nails. He's the kind of guy that people are afraid of the first time they meet him, and he gives off an aura that says "Don't mess with me." But he will cry, and I've seen him do it on many occasions. This time it was different, this time I couldn't be there to hold him

and comfort him. This time I could hear the pain more than any other. Maybe it was because I couldn't see him, and I was more aware of the tone. I don't know what it was, but this time, I knew from just the sound his cries that our entire life had changed forever.

When he was able to talk, he gave me an abridged version of what had happened. They had let some soldiers off his Bradley to patrol the route he had just been overseeing as a sniper. They were walking the route he had taken to get to and from his position, and it should have been clear. After they let them out, they drove to another point to overlook the mission and provide security. That's when he called me.

The noise I had heard was a land mine. My husband didn't know him. He was in another unit, and he knew him only in passing. He had a wife, a young child and a newborn. He was funny. People liked him.

And then he started to shoulder the responsibility for other men's evil.

Should he have seen it? Was it left for him? Did he miss it? Did he step over it earlier in the day? Could it have been him, instead? Should it have been him instead?

They had to get him back to the FOB, so my husband sat in the back with him.

"Shannon, he just stared at me the whole way. Blaming me, accusing me."

WAIT! Maybe I had misunderstood! I could finally breathe; maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought. Gently I asked him, "So he's still alive?" No, he wasn't alive. It was too late as soon as he took that step. He wasn't even whole. "Sweetheart, why didn't you close his eyes?" In the quiet before he answered, I could hear him thinking, I could feel him struggle for an answer: "It never occurred to me, I never thought of it. Besides... I deserved it."

Maybe we talked longer, I don't know. What I do know is, my husband was done with Iraq. Quite literally, the entire Army couldn't make him do it anymore. I don't know why this was different. He'd witnessed death, he'd taken life, but this was the last one he could bear. This soldier took a part of my husband with him when he left this world.

Six years later, my family still talks about this man we never knew like he was a member of our family. Discussing what his wife and children may be doing now, talking about stories we've heard about him since then. Honoring him on Memorial Day, Veterans' Day, Christmas, and the anniversary of his death.

And every day since, my husband has thought about joining him, wherever it is he may be now.



Kristallnacht

By Adina Friedman

Dark and cold was the long winter night
Never had a child wished so hard for the day
And to the vanishing of the firelight

Their homes and cities they have no more right
Horror and terror fill them as they
Are led like cattle into the dark night

The fire, it howls and burns so bright
The skull and crossbones soldiers keep at bay,
Those who would die before first light

Fast and quiet was the flight
Of the children hurried on their way
By parents swallowed up in the demon night.

Oh, the horror of the glass strewn site
The children's laughter once so gay
Now turned away from the light

Unimaginable that the solemn height
Mothers and children cry and pray
That this night will end, the Broken Glass Night
And that at the end of the Reign of Terror there is light

Beautiful Young Bird

By Delilah Ingram

Here sits a pretty young bird without a broken wing.
She has all the answers to life and gleefully she sings
Of hope and a new found love she has discovered.
And without apprehension she sheds her covers.
She unveils all that was once forbidden,
The truths her elders told her to hold sacred.
She dances in the light for all to see,
Not ashamed of her new love and the joy it brings.
The young bird flocks and flutters, so proud of her new beau:
A hot-blooded red robin who likes to boast.
He boasts of his conquests; of the young bird he speaks the same.
He sings of how his pretty birdlings follow, chirping out his name.
The elders watch as the pretty young bird falls prey to the robin's song.
They watch with disdain as many other pretty young birds follow along.
Gnashing of their young beaks across each other's mane.
Vowing to be the one pretty young bird the red-blooded robin claims.
The elders, unable to watch more, pull the pretty young bird aside, asking if
she knows her worth.
Nursing her bruised beak with affirmation, she nods her bloody mane.
The elders stare back at her, amused by her claim.
The eldest of the elders, the one who cares the most
Spreads her beautiful feathers and tell the young bird to look close:
To see the damage that's hidden there of wars fought years past,
To look upon her scarred beak and see the marrings there.
She told a tale of when she was a pretty young bird:
Of how she sang a song so beautiful to all that passed,
Of how she was so certain of the loves that would last,
How many red-blooded robins had crossed her path
Proclaiming to be the one that would build her a nest for life.
Only to feel the beak of another misled pretty young bird sharp as a knife.
How she would soon again fall victim even after warnings from her elders.
How the promises of the red-blooded robin he would never keep.
How a lifetime of hurt she would repeat.
Moving closer as the pretty young bird began to weep.
She said you nodded your bloody mane, your self worth you proclaimed: you
knew.
But your beak and mane tell a different story, one that hides the truth.
You see self worth cannot be spoken; it requires no words.
It is holding yourself to a value that will be found rare in most pretty birds.
Self worth is in your strut, in the way your wings catch the breeze.



Of the air as your mane pushes further up, flowing freely in the sky.

Self worth is the proud reflection that you see in your bath.

Knowing that no robin can truthfully boast of jewels never tasted,

Knowing that you do not share the same robin and have never been wasted,

Your beak shines brightly, your mane is empty of blood, and your wings
spread beautifully free of scars

Because you know that self worth has to be bottled not in glass, but in a steel
jar.

Self worth has to be locked up tightly and held onto with cautious hands.

Look around you and understand: we elders all have scars, some more than
others.

The ones with few found their self worth early and learned the lessons they
were taught.

Those with many, well, we learned later, after all the wars we fought.

The elders do not know all, but one thing we know for sure:

The robin who boasts the loudest and sings of his conquests means no pretty
young bird any good.

And the pretty young bird who knows her self worth leaves the robin
confused.

The Maze Of Halls

By Coral Rousseau

The maze of halls,
daunting and endless,
like a hoarder's attic,
boxes lining the walls.

Full boxes, of everything,
every date, every time,
apparitional calendars spilling out
information, corrupting other data.

Sledding on the fourth of July
an English accent, the dog talking
“Cold water boils faster, Chef”
All at once

All this noise is held at bay
with invisible shields of lethargy,
the crackle and sputter
buzzing, and swarming just beyond.

A billion bumble bees
of thought,
checklists, plans, ideas, best intentions,
all choked up as dark enveloping silence

muffles and restricts.
Tear gas of the mind, assaulting the senses,
shunting the brain, numbing the body:
an acrid burning fog.

Time slipping by,
slashing at your flesh.
Gone, gone, gone,
each instant,

bleeding, scarring,
deforming the pristine
blank canvas;
the square milky bland block of clay.



Shaping, changing, contouring.
Time an unbroken torrent,
raging, rushing, eroding,
flooding on;

the engine is stopped up,
sputtering, choking at each throttle.
Directionless in a wood,
madness seeps in

and you swing from the vines
in the dank and soul sucking void.

Seagull

By Ryan James



Prairie du Chien

By Amber Lynn Revis

Silver dollar bodies of geese
shimmy and shimmer in two
flocks flying
over the East Channel of
the Mississippi River.
Black wings laboring long and floppety carrying
each bird over
the blue metal bridge.
Cold metal bridge
into Wisconsin.
Horns and high-hats
softly blow and scratch
from the warm radio as the silver dollar
geese head into a clear sky.

Land

By Emily J. Abel



Don't Shun The Journey

By Paul Venturella

Let me ask you a Question
Let me bring to your Attention
A certain Situation
It involves a Condition
We're in dire need of Expectation
You have the Education
And are skilled at Communication
And have the powers of Connection
And have all your required Information
But sometimes we see Contradiction
Low and behold we see Dereliction
Let alone Sedition
Maybe some Consternation
Or even Resignation
Some doubt is certainly an Option
I'll paraphrase a Quotation
Of what it means to have strong Motivation
I'll make a Prediction
Maybe even some Speculation
If you allow me this Recommendation
And I allow you some Consideration
Put aside thoughts of Expiration
And focus on the Anticipation
You don't need Perfection
But do you have the Dedication
A willingness for Execution
To see something through Fruition
Do you have the Conviction
To reach your Destination
But the Journey...Oh what an Exhilaration

Blindsided

By Anthony Boucher

I went in to get eyeglasses. I came out without eyesight.

I thought that would get your attention. Let's continue, shall we? Be forewarned – I intend to indulge my penchant for making groan-inducing puns, and since I'm postulating that you will not laugh at them, I will take the liberty of laughing at them for you. After all, you're supposed to "have fun when you write." This way, we can be assured that at least one of us will. Me.

On a Tuesday in early June of 2007, while utilizing my own unique brand of gracefulness (which is "none"), I managed to both drop and step on my eyeglasses. So I figured the next logical "step" (ha!) would be to go get a new pair. When Friday poked its amiable countenance over the looming majesty of the Rocky Mountains, I valiantly resisted the urge to pick up piles of horse poop, and braced myself for a trek into the "big city" to visit the local optometrist.

Once there, I searched in vain for something that would make me look "stylish"; in my case, this is the equivalent of "putting lipstick on a pig." You can do that, by the way. I have. I've got the pictures to prove it. It's far easier than making me look "stylish" (or trendy, or sophisticated, or whatever pejorative term you wish to employ). I finally settled for "utilitarian."

The saleswoman who was allegedly "assisting" me (I suspect her actual purpose was to "upsell" me into something else, no matter what I decided upon – it was starting to feel like I was being accosted by a Scientology recruiter), told me that I would have to submit to an eye exam, because it was "standard procedure." At that point in time, I probably would have agreed to a full-cavity body search by a bearded lady rather than endure another "suggestion," so I readily agreed. Besides, I was 46 years old; it was certainly possible my prescription had changed a smidgen in the last 2 years.

I was whisked off to the examining room (which, inexplicably, had pictures of kittens all over the ceiling – perhaps this was a cult of some kind I had inadvertently stumbled upon.) A dour middle-aged woman, so lean and sinewy that she bore a remarkable resemblance to a stick of beef jerky, introduced herself as "Dr. Audrey" and said she was going to take a "peek" (ha!) into my eyes.

She maneuvered a bulky contraption that resembled a submarine periscope into position, and she did indeed "peek" – for approximately 10 seconds. Then she withdrew the machine ("up periscope!"), looked at me as if I were some sort of exotic creature she had never encountered before, and uttered the words that were to forever change my life, and will be probably still be rising unbidden (and unwelcome) from my subconscious on my deathbed:



“You need to go to Northern Colorado Eye Care immediately, and see Dr. Rothstein. DO NOT drive yourself there. Have someone come and get you. I’m going to call right now and tell them you’re coming.”

I’ve had drug flashbacks before, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. I grew up in the 1970s, after all. But I hadn’t had one for over 30 years. This seemed like an exceedingly odd (and inopportune) time to have one. So I figured I’d better say or do something to restore normality and re-orient myself to Earth.

I managed to blurt out something along the lines of “What? Why?”

That’s your humble narrator, dear reader. Never at a loss for words, except when it counts.

“There’s a problem with your eyes”, Dr. Audrey grudgingly informed me. She spoke as if she had an allotment of words for the day, and I was “raiding her stash.” It wasn’t really the information I was looking for, honestly – I had already gleaned that much of my own accord. “I would rather have Dr. Rothstein explain it to you. You should really get there as quickly as possible. I’ll have the receptionist call them.” Now I felt bad for her, and I’m the one that’s supposed to have the problem. My quest for information had probably exceeded her word total for the day. How would she order lunch?

I didn’t know what she meant by “better equipped”; perhaps she thought Dr. Rothstein had a better grasp of the English language. Or a larger word allotment. I was thoroughly perplexed by this point, but my options seemed to have diminished to “none.” So, gamely, I called my long-suffering wife (at that point, we had been married for 18 years – at least you only have to read one of my stories.) Since most couples who have been together for that long tend to form some sort of low-grade psychic bond, and since I had previously been stricken with a mild heart attack at work and had her not believe me until my boss got on the phone, I had a pretty good inclination of what was to ensue:

“Hello?”

“Honey, I’m at the optometrist. They said I have to leave the truck here, and you have to come drive me to Northern Colorado Eye Care right now.”

“Will you stop screwing around and get your glasses?” (Click.)

(Redial) “Honey, I’m not pranking you. This time. Here, please talk to Dr. Audrey.”

I had made yet another mistake. Dr. Audrey had already used her words up. Thankfully, the receptionist took the phone and somehow convinced my wife that I was not “joshing” her (hey – the receptionist’s word, not mine.)

I elected to wait for my wife outside. It was a beautiful day, and besides, I was pretty sure the Scientology auditor – I mean “sales associate” – couldn’t upsell me into a new pair of “beautiful blue eyes, instead of those tired old hazel ones you have.”

I was whisked away to Dr. Rothstein. At the time he appeared to me to be the epitome of the “mad scientist” cliché; to be fair, we have a forged a truly enjoyable relationship over the past 7 years. Especially for him, since I’ve

probably put his children through college, and he will probably write a book about me (if he hasn't already), since every time I see him (ha!) he usually says something to the effect of "I've never seen that (ha!) before" or "That's not supposed to happen." For someone who has repeatedly sliced my eyes open, as well as burning (yes, burning) them, sticking needles in them, etc., he's a pretty great guy.

He was indeed more versed in the English language than Dr. Audrey, and seemed to have a much larger word allotment, but I did not appreciate it at the time. He explained that I had a condition called "end-stage pigmentary dispersion glaucoma." To put that in layman's terms, the pigment (colored part) of my eyes was flaking off and clogging the eye's drainage canals. This causes the eye pressure to rise, which (irreparably) damages the optic nerve and causes vision loss. Normal pressure levels in a healthy eye are between 8 and 12; mine were 58 and 62, left to right.

Dr. Audrey didn't seem quite so eccentric anymore.

So, in medical parlance, I needed immediate trabulectomies and shunt placement (for you folks that means having your eyes cut open and stainless steel drains implanted in them). Of course, medical parlance also said I should be a middle-aged African-American woman, but at least they were right about the surgery part. I was also declared "legally blind", a term I find perplexing to this day since I have yet to meet an "illegally blind" individual.

Oh, I know what you're thinking – "How could he be going blind and not know it?" I had the same question myself, once I swam through the river of denial. The answer is simple and straightforward, and probably best explained in a different story, but I don't want to leave you in suspense. To quickly summarize:

A.) Glaucoma is called "the silent thief of sight." It's not painful, and it is very, very gradual except in rare cases (like I said above, I am the living embodiment of "That's not supposed to happen".)

B.) Glaucoma begins by taking away your peripheral vision, and then your upper and lower fields of vision. It creates what is commonly known as "tunnel vision." If you place empty toilet paper rolls (or full ones, if you're into that kind of thing) over your eyes, you will have the approximate vision of someone with end-stage glaucoma. How does one not notice this is happening to them? The answer is ludicrously simple:

You turn your head. A lot. You just don't notice that you're doing it.

I could go on and on about the multiple surgeries and unique challenges, but that, too, is for another story (or perhaps a novella). The gist of what I wish to impart to you has been eloquently (if ungrammatically) stated by others with far more brevity than I; I believe it has been best conveyed in musical form, by diverse artists from 1960s folksinger Joan Baez to 1980s hair metal mavens Cinderella: "You don't know what you got 'til it's gone."



Near The Cottage At The Blueberry Inn

By C.S. Lobaito

Black swans peddle in a lake of stars
To wake the foghorn dreamer.

He's smashing lightning rocks
& hard boiled poetry

For truth, or something near.
What can we do to help?

Perhaps listen to whistling ghosts,
Or drink a parched message

In a bottle, to say
Reality is the perception of many

Strung through antiquity's mirror.
I cannot count the armed cicadas

Planting symphonies in the blue grass,
Nor can the world speed up existence

For health, or something dear.
But I do know the foghorn dreamer

Is reciting God a prayer,
Simple as infinity times infinity

With humanity to spare.

Hearts of a Lullaby

By Andre'-Mar'Quis Mitchell-Franklin

I feel her rocking as she weeps; it is a cold and rainy night. She—we feel pressure, fear, and there is this constant and familiar thump that I can feel and hear. It gets faster, but this time, I feel two:

Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom!

A voice I cannot feel, I have not learned, yells, “I have told you before, if I wanted whining kids and a bitchy wife, I could just take my ass back home.”

They met six years ago when Mother worked as a bartender at Sin, the only bar in Bricking, Texas. She hated her job, but it was the only place that would hire her without any type of education. He stood 6’5, 230 pounds, and had a voice like lightning and thunder; a quality which swept Mother off of her feet, since rain, lightning, and thunder were the only things that calmed her soul. He was consistent in his courtship; he made constant eye contact, spoke strong, so gently of his life, hope, dreams, and desires. His generous tips and career as a successful businessman were enough for Mother to ignore the tan line on his ring finger, dismiss his intolerance of alcohol, and play along with his charms—until one day she found herself no longer pretending. He was the perfect guy, and she accepted his flaws because she too had many of her own. His consistent visits, and her lack of resistance to his charm, quickly led to her acceptance to his offer of taking her away from her miserable job and giving her a life of comfort.

There is a song by Garth Brooks called, “You Can’t Help Who You Love”; it has become Mother’s favorite song, and it is no wonder since it has become her life and the only way of justifying the fact that she had fallen in love with a married man. She was a young woman with a fear of loneliness, deceived by love in every relationship she had ever given herself to; so naturally, she settled for the one who stuck around the longest and promised herself to do whatever it took to keep him around, including accepting the fact that he was married with four children and unapologetically shared his time with his family and her.

He continues, “...are you willing to let all of this go: the apartment I pay for, the car you drive, the Louis Vuitton and Chanel your closet is stocked with, only to go through the same pain?” Mother is not one for confirmation. Her past relationships had proven that entertaining such behavior only led to an unwelcomed slap, choke, or blow, so she instead gazes out into the rain, disregarding his threats, all in an effort to protect me, her ‘bundle of joy’ as she refers to me—from his unwillingness to love me the way she does.

She is humming a familiar hymn with no words as I feel her seal me tighter. I am safe here: these pink walls are my home, and they protect me from harm. I feel the warmth of her holding me and protecting me from the cold breeze from the window we are sitting in front of—we are one. She



stops humming as he screams again, "You must realize what you'd be giving up; I will not stick around for this, this is my last time telling you—terminate it!" Our breathing seems to stop for just a moment, and after a deep breath, she continues to sing louder to me—ignoring his words that have impaled our souls:

"¡A la nanita nana,
nanita ea, nanita ea!
El nene tiene sueño,
¡bendito sea! ¡bendito sea!"

I am calm again until a *wham!* echoes throughout the house and startles us both into an intense halt. I kick in fear as mother calmly says, "It's O.K., baby, He is gone, and Mommy is here." She pretends to be fine for me I think, but I can feel that she is saddened by the same words she ignores, believing that if she does not respond, I will not feel that pain she feels from them. She holds me tighter, "you'll be my first, sweet angel, not the fourth," she promises, and though I do not understand, I do feel her warm embrace as she holds me and continues rocking—singing to me—"¡A la nanita..." until she—we slowly drift into a dream.

The night is long. While I am in and out, she is very obviously 'in'—in a state of deep desperation; she tosses and turns as she lies in her empty bed. She cries, wailing to her God to rescue her—us. Mother has never been able to bring a baby into the world. I am not her first. "Please, give me the strength and heal my body. I want to give life," she prays, though her faith had been lost, and in her anger she kicks and cries until finally she, too, drifts into a tearful dream.

The morning arrives, and the rain is still hitting against the window. I already miss her embrace as I feel the heaviness of her heart; something is different today. I do not remember her tears ever stopping in the night. She is still in pain. When Mother is not well, everything here stiffens. She moves less than gently, it seems as if I am no longer a part of her. She cries aloud at random, mumbling, "I just, I-I cannot put myself through this, not again." As the tears stop, she—we take a seat for a moment. As I drift away, I only wish I could save her from herself.

I am awakened by bumps, horns, and Mother loudly speaking above the sounds of traffic, the radio, and the cold wind from the car's window.

"We're going to be just a bit late. Will the Doctor still see me?" she asks. Moments pass and the bumps have rested. I worry as Mother has yet to recognize me today—so I kick to remind her, as I cannot understand what has changed in the time she last held me and promised me the world. I can feel that something within her has been altered, and I unwillingly blame him. She—we take a deep breath as we walk and later sit again. "18 weeks to go Ma'am." "Doctor," I remember—happy, nice, bright, and loving, like Mommy. We walk and follow her voice into a place Mommy always says is "freezing" every time we are here.

"Doctor, I-I..." Mommy starts.

The doctor interrupts, "Oh dear, carrying a child is such a miracle. It is magical, isn't it? Have you thought of names for your baby. . ." she pauses and continues with excitement ". . . boy yet?"

"Baby boy?" Mother struggles to repeat as she cries. We're shaking, but it is not because of the cool.

"Yes Ma'am, just what you hoped for, and you've done so well. Listen to his heart, it's fully developed now: Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom!—the 'heart'"

I finally understand.

"Strong and healthy. Isn't it beautiful? Take a look at the screen."

"Oh no, I shouldn't," mother whispers.

"Oh my, he is such a beauty, look at him," Doctor continues as she is smiling at the Ultrasound projection. Mother is still as she looks up at the ceiling and cannot find words to respond. She instead places her forearm across her eyes as she realizes the Doctor is enjoying this moment far more than she is.

"You're going to be a charmer in there, little guy," Doctor says to Mommy's stomach.

"Oh. Me!" I think to myself.

"He is not," Mother cries.

"I'm sorry?" Doctor asks.

"He is not, so Doc, let's just be honest here."

"I don't understand," Doctor says slowly, as if anticipating bad news.

"I don't either," I think to myself.

Mother sighs and cries as she asks, "What are my options for terminating my pregnancy?"

I kick. Wait, I think to myself, I know that word. I know it because it makes the thump—the heart—go fast and saddened when He says it to Mommy—to us. *Mommy!* I try to scream.

"Just wait a moment, yes, I know you've lost three prior to him, but really I think you have a really good shot at this one, I do not recommend you take this route," says Doctor.

"Please—don't, I cannot keep doing this to myself, you and I both know that I cannot..." Mother screams as Doctor interrupts, "please consider at least trying to carry to term, I-I-I really think this time will be different," she stutters.

Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom

"There it is again," I think to myself.

"No! It is my decision, please," mother cries.

"I understand exactly what you're going through. Remember, I've been here each time going through it with you, and I think this time is different," says Doctor.

Wait, you promised me, I try to interrupt, but neither of them hears.



Mother yells, “You’ll never understand this! Have you ever lost something you’ve always wanted? Do you understand how it feels to be so close to something and have it be snatched right from you?”

With a quiet tear and a painful sigh, Doctor hesitates to explain, “In the state of Florida, you have the right to terminate your pregnancy up to your third trimester, that is after 28 weeks of pregnancy; however, as your Doctor, I do not—”. She stops as if to remove personal emotion after mother must have given a scornful look, and she continues in defeat—“I can schedule you an appointment to move forward, but I’d like you to consider taking a few days to really think about what you are doing,” says Doctor.

“No, now—I need it to happen now,” Mother peeps through her weeping.

“I think it a good idea to first consult the child’s father,” Doctor adds.

“HE...”—I understand now, as Mother continues, “HE has no place in this—HE doesn’t want it!”

In a moment of clarity, Doctor pries, “I am sorry, I do not mean to ask about your personal life, but is that what this is about?”

“Doctor, please,” Mother cries out.

“No!” Doctor shouts— “Now, I do apologize for speaking out of turn, but is He what you are referring to when you asked if I had ever lost something I had always wanted? Is this man the reason you won’t give this sweet boy a chance?”

“Doctor!!” Mother screams

“No,” Doctor continues; “Listen, I understand things are extremely hard for you, but I also know that there is nothing in this world that you want more than meeting your own child. So is he what you are referring to?”

“Doctor, please!” Mother screams again.

“I need to understand!” Doctor shouts back.

“No!” Mother cries, “No, OK?, I am referring to my children, ok!—just spare me the three, four, and five months of preparing, hoping, and anticipating a dream which will never prevail! I cannot and will not take another unexpected grab at my heart. I don’t want to! I can’t take it! Please--” Mother cries hysterically. “For once, give me a chance to prepare myself for the inevitable. I cannot carry to term, and sure, maybe I should have listened when I first learned it years ago, but you know what, I had faith! Faith was supposed to heal my body, give me the strength, and protect my children. I do not expect you to understand, Doctor, but please, spare me the months of considering suicide for not being enough of a mother to bring my children into this world, spare me the years of immobility and staring at the darkness, sleeping days upon days only to dream of holding them, spare me the pain of thinking that for once, Faith would give me the one thing I want in this world! Please, spare me the haunting nightmare of delivering; the pushing, the breathing, and hoping of life in a stillbirth pregnancy.”

For that moment the world seemed to stop. I had never felt her cry this helplessly. I had never felt this much sadness before, and through it I could feel an ending.

"Wait here," says the Doctor, as even she could no longer hold back her emotions. I hear her weeping as it slowly fades down the hall.

Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom!

It grows stronger; the fastest it had ever gone before.

I feel nothing. She has forgotten that I am here. She has no song, no lullaby. I understand now that I have no power to save Mommy from herself.

Please hear me, I try to beg—I know that she cannot hear.

I kick.

Mother, please, I kick again.

"I'm so sorry little baby," she finally speaks to me.

"Mother—you do still love me?"

"This is not your fault, little angel," she cries as I kick. "Mommy cannot keep you, my son," she continues.

I kick again, to remind her that I am still here—hoping she may reassess. The three before myself, I can feel their presence. There are gentle footprints left on the window of the pink walls of my two sisters and brother, which surrounds me and keeps me safe when Mother cannot. She cries and finally holds me tight as we sit in a dreadful silence—a very loud, very telling silence of my fate.

I kick again. *I am not ready to leave you*, I try to cry to her. *Mother!*

A swing of a door. A voice interrupts, "My name is Dr. G. Wreaper, and I'll be replacing your Doctor for this procedure. Do I have your consent, Ma'am?"

No!! I try to scream.

At the same time, Mother answers, "Yes."

"Then I'll need to ask you again before we continue, if you are absolutely sure that this is what you want to do?" Doctor Wreaper asks. *No!* I try to scream again as Mother again replies, "I am sure."

I hear a scuffle of clings and dings as fear becomes an emotion I understand. I begin to kick, and kick, and kick for there are no words that she may hear from me or anyone to change her mind. I am an unborn child—my home is her body; no matter my cries, she will decide. I wish I could do more. Still I refuse to give up on us, I wish she felt the same. I continue to kick until I have nothing more to lose. *Don't give up, I can be your first, remember?* I attempt to cry out one last time as life begins to...

Though in distance, I almost feel rocking as she seems to weep, "I'll need you to stop rocking and be as still as possible in order to properly perform the procedure, the Doctor interrupts. As she cries, she attempts to sing once more:

"¡A la nanita nana,
nanita ea, nanita ea!"

Her voice has become unclear as I feel myself drift into a dream; "four," I think, but cannot kick.

Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom!



Ba-boom! Ba-boom!

Ba-boom!

Ba-

It is gone.

It is raining; Mother feels pressure, fear, and an inconsistent thump—her lonely heart; it continues to decelerate. She weeps as she presses her hand against her stomach to feel—except this time, there is nothing. A rush of realization brings her to a halt; as she shuffles a hand full of ‘defeat,’ drinks to numb her final pain, and whispers to herself,—

"Five."

The Silent Rage of a Dyslexic

By Mary Ann O'Brien

You cannot hear
My silent rage
It creeps in
At an early age
The hidden silence
And hidden shame
I cannot read
I am not the same
I thought that I
Would always soar
To reach the stars
Wanting more
I know not why
I cannot see
Those words that twist
Play games on me
Is it fate
I need to know
That I fail to read
And fail to grow
This inner rage
That overwhelms
The urge to learn
Is at the helm
In this silent rage
I must proclaim
I cannot read
They cannot tame



Tidal

By Vicky J. Foust

For so long,
The sea
Calm.
Dark.
Sits.
Waiting, for
Sun chinks.
A storm to
Roil in.
Stir this mind
Asleep at shore.
Shake her up
Remind her.
Pain
Can be driven
Away.
Salty seas,
Wash over me.
Ashore, awashed.
Seaweed laden.
Hermit crabs
Laughter clicks.

Dance atop
Her roots.
Fluttering breaths,
Dip from skies.
Broken, by
The yawning sun.
Splash your swell
Upon her.
Remind her,
The taste of life.
Thick, wet sand
Dries white
In clear light.
Life so brilliant.
Your eyes,
Shut.
Yet see,
Stars.
Salty seas,
Wash over me.
Ashore, awashed.
Seaweed laden.

The Land of Make Believe

By David Rutter

The thought never occurred to me
how chasing dreams became a reality.

Who I wanted to be
is far from the man you all see.

And if you could remember,
who you wanted to be,
would you fail in misery,
or succeed from agony?

No I can't recall,
the last time I believed in you.
Can you tell me
if you ever knew,
the pain inside me
that shows you my truth
of a fabricated life,
of lies forming a noose?

I want to go,
where the dreams are all fake.
The place we remember,
the place of give and take.

So when I fall down,
will you please not leave.

Will you please keep me alive
in the land of make-believe?

And if you could remember
who I wanted to be,
would you let me succeed in misery,
or fail in agony?

The lives we wanted to live.
The way we wanted to be loved.
Is far from who we came to be
in this world of reality.

Who we are.
What they see.
Is from the land of make-believe.

So please grab my hand,
don't let go.
Today could be the last time I see you,
it may be the end.
So don't forget who you are.
Don't become just another trend.



La Rue Cler

By Dora J. 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.

Recursion

By Natalie Jones



Moving On

By James Toma

Last night, I took a shower
Deactivated my Facebook account
Picked up a Hardy Boys book
Got under the sheets
And read and read until I fell asleep.

I woke up this cold morning
Made my bed and went downstairs
Chatted with mom, ate breakfast
Sighed and sipped my tea
I am not going back to watching daytime TV.

At 9am, I went for a walk
I was listening to upbeat tunes
Avoided awkward encounters
The goal is to get a slim body
To live a life that is healthy.

I went online later to Indeed.com
Fought an urge to google a Facebook page
Printed job ads and typed cover letters
Nope, I'm not going to search Katy Perry
I will be working on my destiny.

Project Peace

By Kosoko Jackson

Against the advice of her clingy entourage of men in black suits and locked jaws, President Samuels stood on the steps of the squashed, butter colored house alone. No—that was her privilege talking. Technically she wasn't alone, with the guards less than 20 feet away and the long-distance surveillance orbs newspapers sent out more often than actual people, there were at least 14 sets of eyes on her. But standing on the steps, listening to the scurries and murmurs behind the door and waiting for the warped oak and rusted hinges to wheeze open, she felt like she was the only one in the world.

Slowly, the door opened just enough for a sliver of a face to be seen. President Samuels tilted her head down, flashing a half smile she hoped reached her eyes. The steely look she received back told her otherwise.

"Marissa," she greeted.

The woman said nothing, the door unmoved. Her eyes kept locked on the taller woman. Her hand, curled around the jam of the door, slipped up, gripping closer to the top.

President Samuels sighed. "This is a courtesy, Marissa. I didn't have to come here. I could have had him dragged out on the lawn, handcuffed, and hauled into my office. But I didn't. Now please, do me the courtesy of letting me in." She paused, before adding, "Before I force myself in."

Again, Marissa didn't move. Seconds of a stare down between the two women passed with President Samuels unyielding before eventually Marissa opened the door with a defeated sigh.

"I voted for you," she said as The President grabbed the briefcase by her side.

The President paused, the words stinging more than she thought they would. "Then you should know more than anyone how much I wish this were different."

She turned her head to the half a dozen lazily floating silver orbs. She raised her free hand to give a half wave and a mechanical smile before being swallowed into the house.

The inside was silent, and not in the way most houses were nowadays. The silence was the byproduct of a machine that produced a small hum that blocked out all outside noises, making, as the manufacturer said of the product that sold 10 million copies overnight 'as tranquil as The Garden of Eden.' No, there wasn't a hum right now in this house. The silence was lingering, dry, and stale. It was the silence before the storm.

And she was the storm.

"Where is your husband?" She asked. "Jeremy, is it?"

"Work."

The shortness didn't go unnoticed. If anything it made Samuels' gaze soften just slightly before letting out a small sigh. "If this could go any other



way, I would be advocating for that, Marissa,” she said softly. “But we’ve run out of options.”

“There are always other options. This is just the easiest one for you.”

“Trust me, this isn’t easy for me.”

“I promise you, it’s harder for me than it is for you.”

President Samuels wasn’t here to play the ‘who had it worse game’ and she wouldn’t engage in that. Nodding slowly and licking her blueberry colored lips, she glanced around, panning the room with a thoughtful, memorizing gaze, eyes settling on the dingy, off-white carpeted stairs.

“Is he upstairs?”

Marissa nodded quicker this time before giving a bow to the President. “Please, make yourself at home, Miss. President,” she seethed between gritted teeth. “Would her majesty like some tea?”

Insolence like that could have gotten the woman thrown in jail, a heavy fine, or both. Instead, Samuels mimicked the expression her constituents took whenever she gave them news they didn’t like--a straight back, a locked jaw, and a clench of her fists before taking to the stairs, ascending two steps at a time on the tips of her feet. The woman, despite being the definition of a mother hen, wasn’t of her concern and more so wasn’t acting out of the ordinary. If the situation were reversed, Samuels would be acting the same way. Then again, that would mean Samuels had children, and that horrific thought made her shudder.

Rising up the steps, Samuels got a good view of the family. Non-descript, nothing exceptionally out of the ordinary about them. Pictures on the walls, a house that was clean but not exceptionally clean, an average size with an average amount of clutter, and an average-sized car in the driveway. President Samuels let her mind do something she never had time for--she let it wander. Did the Larsons produce any stares when they walked down the street? Were they average on purpose in an attempt to blend into society as best as possible, pressing their backs against the metaphysical walls of normalcy?

The government had done as much as it was allowed to do in order to hide the name, address and identities of this family. She was proud of her administration for that. Before today, she doubted the Larsons had ever been approached by a reporter, a religious fanatic, or anything of the sort. Except for today, of course. Today was the day, in so many ways, Marissa and Jake’s lives would become hell.

There was an itching desire when she reached the top of the steps and the hallway with four doors to explore each one of them. A flicker of a flame burned inside of her, a burning sensation that was toxic for most people--especially someone of her age and position. She had no reason to be jealous of this boy. Of course he had a family who cared deeply about him, something she had never had. Just the idea of a home compared to the Boarding School hallways she had been forced to call home over her years made her cringe. But the flip side of that was that a strange woman was

walking in his house to have the talk with him. Again, her privilege was talking--the privilege to dream about the past and not worry about her own future, something this boy no longer had.

The second door to the right was cracked slightly open. It was the only room with artificial light spilling out of it and the sounds of a TV muffled by still slightly audible. It was the closest President Samuels had ever been to the boy and the closer she got, the more her heart pushed against her chest. She had been honest when she said she hoped things could be different, even if Marissa hadn't thought she was. No one was prepared for this, let alone with a child. It was a cruel twist of fate.

She walked up to the door and raised her fist, knocking on it gently. Why she did that, instead of walking directly inside like her position granted, she wasn't sure, but she did. The door wavered slightly back and forth before falling still. There was a soft voice, distant but clear, that followed.

"Come in," the voice said.

President Samuels pushed her way into the room. It was painted better than the house was, with strong bold colors and sharp accented angles. The walls were decorated with things any 12 year old boy's room would be decorated with--sports, bands, and a few pictures of his friends here and there. It had a stark scent to it of puberty and food that whispered through the air, along with a maze of clothes strewn all over the floor. There was a comfort in the normalcy of the room.

A boy sat in the middle of the room, sitting Indian style unceremoniously around a pile of dirty clothes, magazines, and video game boxes ripped open as if by a savage animal, their mutilated carcasses the only thing left. For being 12 years old, he looked on the thinner side. Then again, The President remembered her own brothers from the same age, both starkly different from the other: so different people assumed they were friends rather than brothers. Opposites tended to do that to you. Dressed in a red tee shirt and shorts, he sat with his back turned, working on a level in one of the games.

President Samuels didn't know what to do. Should she speak up? Puffing out her chest was how she got so many things. Being the first female President meant having to make your presence known, as an interviewer of the most watched talk show said, "holding space." But this was just a child, a naive kid who had no idea what was going to happen. No, she was going to take this slowly. She might not be a mother, but she knew how to handle a hostile situation. With grace, poise and tenderness until proven otherwise.

"You're here to kill me, aren't you?" The boy asked. His voice had an even keel, like he was asking what time of day it was.

What a straightforward way to talk about death from such a young child. President Samuels didn't expect it, and the look plastered itself on her face before quickly disappearing. She gently took the briefcase and put it on its side on the table, clicking open the metal latches that flipped upwards in salute. Quietly, as if the mother bear downstairs would come charging up in a fit of fury if she were too loud, she opened the top, revealing the dark, plush



insides. Like the beating heart of a human, the contents stared back at her, raw and exposed.

"I don't know yet." She finally spoke to the boy, still staring at the silver shaped gun in the case.

It had just one bullet in it, the same gun and the same bullet having been passed down for the past 5 presidencies. No other president before her had had to do what she was about to do, or had come close to having this drastic measure taken. It was some cruel twist of fate, she was sure. Punishment for cheating on her Algebra test in 7th grade. Sleeping with her law professor in her third year, smoking weed and lying about it. Lying during the debates. This had all been because of that.

President Samuels had to remind herself again, this time with a visible shake of her head, the world didn't revolve around her.

The boy fell silent for several seconds as he finished the level of his game in a victory. He turned around to face the President, crawling before standing up. He was curious, a trait she could admire in anyone. Curious of the gun that was placed no more than 10 inches in front of him.

"Is that what you're going to use?"

She nodded.

"Will it hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Will it help people?"

She nodded again.

The boy's youthful face scowled in thought, scrunching together. It was adorable, the way his round face that hadn't completely lost its baby fat looked so much like an older man hunched over a computer screen with the weight of the world on his shoulders. The boy did have the weight of the world on his shoulders. Well, more like the weight of 1 million foreign citizens and a quarter of a million soldiers that would have to march into battle and die in a bloodbath that might end in a victory, unless he was willing to give up his own life. This boy couldn't possibly understand the magnitude of what was in front of him. And yet the puzzled look on his face, cocked to the side and the same old man furrowed brow said otherwise.

He couldn't possibly fully comprehend the fact that from his birth he had been unlucky--unlucky enough to be tattooed with the nuclear launch codes for the most precise missiles humanity had created inside of his heart. It was an attempt to make the world more humane--project PEACE--to make the President accountable for their weapons of mass destruction, posing the question "could you, if you had to use your own hands, kill one person in the name of peace by killing millions thousands of miles away?" War wasn't something the other Presidents before her didn't have. They each had their own Great War: The French American War, The Nigerian Conflict, The Hot War of Asia, and the Aquatic Wars off the coast of Chile. But they all found solutions that didn't require the use of Project Peace.

She wasn't so lucky. She had a choice to make. Have blood on her hands in this house that would define her whole Presidency, a presidency she built on promising to destroy Project Peace--or take the chance and continue on a war that was slowly rumored to be the precursor to World War Three. No one should have to make this choice. For the first time in her life she wanted to mutter three simple words: it's not fair.

"Do you need to decide soon?"

Another nod.

"Will you read me a story?"

There was a hesitation from Samuels before her reaction. She scanned the room idly for books, seeing a bookshelf full of them. If this boy wanted a story, that was the least she could give him. She moved towards the bookshelf but was stopped by the tugging on the edge of her jacket from the young child who tugged her over to the bed. "A story you made up," he said obstinately. "Mom never reads me any stories, she rarely comes up here anymore."

She was The President of The United States; she wasn't a storyteller. What type of story could she tell this child that didn't involve tax burdens, social security or the reestablishment of Don't Ask, Don't Tell? Or maybe the Christian League that spat in her face was right. A female president was one thing. A lesbian President? Maybe she was bringing this great nation to its knees . . . But once the boy lay his head down on her legs, the words just seemed to flow out, at the same time her fingers ran through his soft brown hair.

"Once upon a time, there was a boy, who lived in a world that was isolated from the rest," she began. "In his world, it was beautiful, it was warm and everyone loved him. But outside the world, no one loved anyone. They fought hard, they stole, and they were mean to each other. This boy lived in a world of brightness and color, while everyone else lived in a world of darkness and fear."

The boy turned his head up to look at her with that same frown on his face. "Is this a happy story?" he accused.

Samuels stroked his cheek, kissed her fingers and pressed the kiss against the boy's forehead. She let her fingers stay there for a moment before the boy rested his head again and closed his eyes, falling into a safe space of security.

"Of course," she promised. "And even better yet, it's about you. And you're the hero."

When the boy's smile took over his lips, she smiled back.

"Now, where was I?"



What Remains

By William Seeley

love is unquestionable

unconditional
unmitigated truth

and yet you fall away

what remains?
what remains?

shut down whole portions of the brain

cut away so much
just to survive

old habits remain

they are the only things that can
fall into rhythm and motion
the semblance of automatic behavior
just...

nothing else is possible

In The Dark

By James Hiltz

Todd shouted as he felt the bike slam back down to the earth, pumping his legs to keep up his momentum.

"I can't believe no one goes here!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"That's what Ryan said!" Tucker shouted back, before letting out a hoot as his bike jumped off a small ramp they had set up. He grunted as he landed, wobbling a bit before moving on. "He said no one goes up this high in the hills! Too dangerous!"

"Oh yeah? What'd you say to that?"

Tucker grinned. "I said we weren't a couple of fucking pussies!"

Todd laughed. He didn't care about danger. He was seventeen, had loving parents, an after-school job, a hot as fuck girlfriend, and he'd already been accepted into Sequoia University. He was set, what did he care if a simple patch of rocky hills was deemed "dangerous" by some sad fucks? He was in this for the thrills; he loved the feeling of adrenaline pumping into his veins that came with sports. And he knew Tucker felt the same. They'd been best friends since the second grade after all. Danger and risks were nothing new to them.

"You think we're still going to do stuff like this after I move?" Todd shouted back.

"Hell yes!" Tucker replied. "I'll come visit all the time, dude. If O'Malley ever gives me time off from the auto shop, I mean. We can go biking up on Mount Sequoia."

Todd laughed. "I'll look forward to it."

With a grin, Todd turned and lowered his body, tightening his grip as he pumped faster, racing ahead of Tucker with a laugh. He raced up the makeshift trail, grinning as he could feel the pleasant ache in his legs' muscles. He pushed forward, legs moving slower as he urged his bike up the steep hill. He reached the peak, and from the top he could almost see all of Roseport and Hartman's Woods that surrounded it. He stopped for a moment, taking in the sight of home, and breathed in the air. He looked down the hill, at the other makeshift ramp he and Tucker had constructed earlier. He paused for the briefest moment, hearing Tucker huff and puff behind him as he forced his bike up the hill, before pushing the bike forward, letting gravity do the rest.

The wind blew by Todd's face. He had to squint his eyes as he raced down the steep hill. The bike's front wheel was wobbling as it rolled over the rocky ground, but Todd held the handles forward, never letting his grip falter. He was aimed right for the ramp. He could just feel that this jump was going to be amazing.

The bike jerked, and Todd realized something was wrong. He could feel vibrations in the ground through the metal and rubber of the back. His brow



furrowed as he let his eyes glance downwards just in time to see the front wheel of the bike to sink in the ground, coming to a quick and sudden stop. Todd yelped as the bike flipped forward, throwing him over the handlebars that he had such a tight grip on. His back slammed into the ground, knocking the wind of him as he grunted in pain. The bike stayed up straight, the front wheel sunk nearly all the way into the ground.

Todd gasped for breath and tried to clear his head, rubbing his eyes. The ground felt strange, soft, almost warm. He looked down, confused at the earth beneath him.

A shout drew his attention up, just in time to see Tucker and his bike leap off the hill and fly through the air, slamming down into the ground.

“Tucker!” he croaked, still partially winded. “Tucker, wait!”

His words flew meaningless into the air as Tucker raced down the hill at a break-neck speed. He looked quizzically at Todd on the ground just as his bike rammed into the same patch of dirt that Todd lay on. The ground seemed to rumble as Tucker’s bike smashed into it, and within a moment, Todd felt himself falling down, into the darkness that lurked below.

Todd let out a groan as he regained consciousness. He opened his eyes, but there was nothing to see. It was dark, so dark that he couldn’t even see inches in front of him. He could make out basic shapes, but nothing more. No light leaked down. Todd had no idea how long or in what direction he had fallen, but the entrance to the pit had vanished. There was nothing but the darkness and the sound of wind and dripping water.

“Tucker?” he called out, but no reply came.

Todd pushed himself over onto his hands and knees. He shivered as he felt his hands touch the floor of the cavern. It was moist and sticky yet solid, almost like warm mud. He suppressed noises of discomfort as he shuffled over the ground, feeling whatever the ground was coated in slowly covering his limbs as he surged forward.

“Tucker!”

Todd let his hands reach around in front of him, searching for something, anything familiar besides the strange ground on which he crawled. His nerves screamed at him, aching for him to just sit and rest, but he continued on.

“Tucker!”

His hand touched something other than the sludge on the ground. Metal. One of their bikes. Todd stopped, feeling around, feeling out for the rest of the bike, and hopefully, his friend.

“For fuck’s sake, Tucker! Answer me! Fuck!”

His hands continued to search. Sludge. Warm sludge and nothing else.

“You piece of shit, Tucker! Fucking answer me!”

Todd’s hand touched some thing else again. He squeezed it. It was thicker and softer than a bike. Not being able to see with his eyes, he rubbed down the length of the cylindrical object and felt hair. He reached down further and smiled as he felt a tightly laced sneaker.

“Tucker?” he whispered, but there was still no reply. “You must be out still.”

He reached up, feeling up past his legs, up and over the torso and up to his face. He felt his fingers crawl up and over Tucker’s face, feeling the contours of his features, of his nose and eyes and mouth. His friend’s forehead was wet, though that could’ve just been whatever was all over the ground.

“Tucker. Come on, man,” Todd said, slapping his friend’s face lightly. “Come on!”

He smacked Tucker’s face harder now, again and again.

“Tucker! Come on! Wake the fuck up!”

The sound of flesh smacking flesh echoed through the cavern. Sobbing soon replaced it, and Todd realized that the sound was coming from his own mouth.

“Oh fuck. Jesus fuck,” he cried to himself. “Shit.”

He laid down, feeling the sludge coat his face as he laid beside Tucker. God he hurt. He ached all over. He wanted rest. He wanted to sleep.

God, he wanted to be out of this place.

Todd had only nightmares as he slept. He dreamed of times long past, of things living beneath the earth, of slime and sludge and corpses. When he awoke, he had no idea how long he had been asleep besides his best friend’s body. Time seemed to have no meaning in the darkness.

Without anything to do, he had begun wandering around the cavern, counting his steps away from where Tucker lay so that he could always return. He wanted to map where he was, to have some vague understanding of the cavern that was becoming the only thing in his life. Walking was difficult however, thanks not only to his wounded body, but also because of the slippery substance that seemed to coat everything down here. More times than he could count, Todd had been walking with his arms outstretched, hoping to feel a wall or an entrance or anything, only to take a step, lose his footing and fall face first into the sludge. He would sputter and gag, trying to force whatever he swallowed back out of his body before standing up and continue on.

He cried whenever he tried to sleep. He thought about his parents and how worried they must be. He thought about Shelly, and was wondering if she cried for him, now that he was gone. He thought about Tucker, who had wanted to build his own car, to visit all fifty states, who wanted to eventually settle down and get married. He would cry and hold himself until he fell asleep, only to awaken what felt like mere moments later, sputtering and spitting. He couldn’t get the taste of the slime out of his mouth anymore. It felt like it was crawling into his throat whenever he slept.

It felt like days had passed, though Todd had no way of knowing for sure. But one thing let him know that time was going on. His hunger. His stomach



had been growling at him for what felt like forever now. His body ached now as he walked around the cavern, trying to find its edge, limbs feeling like they were too long, his body feeling heavier. His bones cracked as he moved. He could barely keep his eyes open anymore, not that there was any difference in what he could see with them closed, and the hunger was always there. Gnawing away at him inside.

The granola bars and water bottles they had packed went all too quickly. He gobbled them up, and only after he was done did the thought of rationing and saving the food come to him. In desperation, he had taken to eating the slime from the very ground. It tasted foul, like rotten lunchmeat, and was too warm for Todd's liking, but it was better than nothing. But the full feeling it offered him never lasted long. He'd eat a mouthful and be satisfied, but all too soon the hunger would return.

Todd thought of home, of his mother's cooking. Her pork roast was to die for. Add some fried potatoes; some asparagus in butter sauce, with homemade carrot cake for dessert, and you would have a meal. If his mouth wasn't so dry, it would water at these thoughts, but they just made it worse. If only there was something, anything to eat down here besides dirt and slime.

Todd had taken to licking Tucker before he went to sleep. He knew it was wrong and horrendous, but the taste of sweat and flesh underneath the layer of dirt and sludge that now covered his friend's body was intoxicating to his senses. It let him get a dreamless sleep, something he was all too thankful for. It sated the hunger for a moment, but it had a much sweeter taste than what the slime offered.

He held Tucker's hand when he was falling asleep now. It helped him to know that there was something else in the dark. To remind him of what had come before. He sometimes felt like he was going mad. Hearing things, imagining shapes moving in the shadows. His name was Todd. He repeated that to himself every night as he squeezed his eyes shut. There was no difference in what he could see from when they were open or closed, but feeling the pressure of his eyelids smashed together helped to remind him of what he was, even if the shadows hid it.

His name was Todd.

He'd eaten Tucker.

It felt like weeks had gone by while he was stuck down here in the dark. He was almost getting used to it. The darkness offered a form of comfort. After all, he couldn't really see what he'd been putting in his mouth, which he thanked god for.

He couldn't remember when his licking had turned to nibbling, which had then turned to biting and chewing. He couldn't remember his teeth tearing off bits of skin and muscle, feeling lukewarm fluids drip down his chin as he ripped chunks of flesh off the bone, savoring the rich taste of meat for the first time in what felt like months.

He cried after the first time; when he'd bitten a finger clean off in a hungry desperation. He'd chewed and swallowed it before he'd even realized what he was doing, just so overcome by the desperate gnawing from within his stomach. He could taste the slime still on Tucker's skin, but underneath it all was the sweet taste of meat. He hated himself, hated that he was being driven mad by the empty darkness. He wasn't an animal. He was a man. His name was Todd.

He dreamed of home again that night, of coming home with his mother and father waiting for him, a big family dinner steaming and ready to be eaten. He'd woken up into darkness again and ate Tucker's hand in its entirety, gnawing on it down to the bone. He didn't speak, but made mewling noises as he snapped Tucker's radius and scrapped at its marrow with his teeth.

He went to bed content that night.

Who was he?

Time had gone away. It had lost its meaning against flickering shadows that now made up the world. Maybe that's all he was. A shadow on the wall of the cave. A shadow that had fallen asleep and dreamed he was a real boy and now had been smacked in the face with cold, hard reality. Maybe he was going mad. He didn't know anymore. Time and space had become meaningless. He walked in circles, retracing his steps over and over. Escape was pointless, he'd decided.

Todd? What was that? Such a strange, foreign word, though it kept bouncing off the walls of his brain.

Todd.

The other thing was long gone now. He couldn't remember what to call it anymore, the food-thing. He'd gnawed on the bones as he fell into restless sleep full of screaming dreams. He should've been wiser, saved some parts of the food-thing for the hunger that was without end now, sated only briefly by eating copious amounts of sludge. He wished he'd saved some of the brain. That had been his favorite part.

Todd. Todd. Todd.

What was the word for the food-thing? It was on the tip of his tongue.

Todd.

What did that word mean?

He shoveled slime into his mouth as he crouched on the floor by the food-thing. It was all that was left to sate his desire. He giggled to himself, sludge slipping from his lips and falling onto his chin. He crawled on all fours, forwards or backwards: it didn't really matter, scuttling about his domain. He'd decided he was a king, and the shadows were his kingdom.

Todd.

"Hey!"



He stopped, ears twitching as something happened. A new sound. Not a dripping, munching, gurgling, giggling one, but a real sound. His head turned, ears and eyes searching for the source.

“I think we’ve got something over here!”

The sound again. It sounded so close, and familiar. These were... were... words? Words. Language. He wanted to cry or laugh or scream. It felt like forever since he’d heard something other than the sounds of the cave.

A rumbling sound shook the cave, the slippery stone seeming to vibrate as dirt and pebbles fell from the ceiling. He looked up as the ceiling began to fall. He scrambled forward, spindly limbs pushing him onwards.

The ceiling cracked and a searing otherness crept into his domain. He hissed and reached up clawing fingers to cover his eyes. Pain. Searing pain shot through his body as his eyes were confronted by the otherness. Non-darkness.

Light!

It was light!

He remembered. The outside. The world beyond the cavern. Home, where he was loved and remembered.

He fought past the pain, squinting his eyes and dug his fingers into the wall, pulling himself up and up.

He remembered. There was so much beyond the cave. There was home. Roseport. With mom and dad and Shannon and all the fucking bullshit he’d taken for granted before.

“I think I see movement! Can anyone hear me? Todd? Tucker?”

Todd!

His name was Todd!

He was graduating in the spring, he was going to college, he was going to have a real life. His lips, sloppy from spittle and slime, pulled back into a wide grin. He reached a hand up and out of the cave, pulling his body out of the cavern.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

“What the hell is that thing!?”

He was Todd. Todd with the pale, pale skin and distorted limbs, arms and legs stretched out to horrid lengths. Todd the thin and hairless, with broken teeth and bleeding wounds and claws instead of nails. He was Todd covered in slime with his skin stretched taut over bulging ribs and a bloated stomach and dangling genitalia.

He could see the crowd now. See their faces staring at him. There was mom and dad right near the front.

He reached a hand out towards them, bones creaking and cracking as they adjusted to new angles.

He was home.

“Jesus! What is it!?”

“I don’t fucking know! I don’t fucking know!”

He was Todd. He was home. He just needed to tell them.

He opened his mouth. “Drr...” his unused throat croaked out, his dried up tongue flailing behind yellowed teeth. “Drr...”

“Everyone back!”

“Fuck!”

“It’s coming right for us!”

“Get the gun! Get the gun! Get your fucking gun!”

Ties

By Halie Osgood

as we walked along the tracks i couldn't help but notice
the way that his laughter sounded different than yours always did
every time it bounced off of the rocks

but when i think of your echoes now
all i can hear are the stabbing syllables
that clanged off of empty walls, not rustling trees

i look around at the pines now and wonder how many people they've seen
walk by
and if they notice when only one person comes back
after always being two before

i watch him marvel at the things i'm showing him along the way, always
checking over his shoulder to check for a train even though it's only eight and
you and i both knew it only ever comes by late at night

we sit down to watch the sun sink beneath the ocean of trees
as he says something about this being the best view he's ever seen
i've seen it so many times before, it's just lost all its luster

i wonder if you still think of me whenever you get woken up at midnight
by the distant horn and rumble from deep in the woods
your sleep was always the lightest but his is as heavy as these iron beams

"see, i told you," he says as we feel the ties start to shake
a light comes around the distant corner and he ushers me off to the side
you would have let me stay right where i was.

Fall Path At SNHU

By Annika Firestone



Escapade

By Hoong Sing Cheong

Letter #1

Dear Heart,
Do you remember the time
When you told me to stay?
But I did not listen,
And locked you away;
Well, thanks for your thoughts,
And your petty advice,
But you were damn wrong,
Everything is quite nice;
The wrong answer's yours,
The right answer's mine,
The joke is on you,
Cause I'm doing just fine;
As a man of great manners,
I wrote you this letter,
To inform you dear heart,
Life couldn't be better.

Letter #2

Dear Heart,
Do you remember the time

Perhaps a little too naïve,
And possibly too blind;
Well I guess there are times,

But it's nothing special,

There are definitely instances,

When I'm out with my friends,

When I look to the sky,

When I'm under the sheets,

There's this aching feeling,

The meaning of all these,

When I said I was fine?

When I do feel quite sad,

It still isn't too bad;

When I really miss home,

And I feel so alone;

As I pace on these stones,

With my eyes to the phone;

Deep down in my bones,

Is yet to be known;

To you my dear heart,
Who has been with me,
With me when I'm angry,
And when I'm in need;
With me when I laugh,
When there are tears in my eye,
Do keep me in prayers,
As I bid my goodbye.

Letter #3

Dear Heart,
It's all going bad,
All burned to the ground,
My dreams disappeared,
And no hope can be found;
My mind's full of nonsense,
At the same time it's blank,
It's like it exploded,
And got crushed by a tank;
Consumed with agony,
As I lay on my bed,
I just wish I could put,
A bullet right through my head!
To feel so rejected,
And to feel like you're cheated,
The most painful feeling?
To feel so unneeded;
Every time I have fun,
I screw up people's day
And when I am smiling,
I drive people away;
It's not feeling unloved,
Having no one to serve me,
But the fact I disappointed,
Everyone that loved me;
I've been predisposed,
To wound people's lives,
And I don't have a choice,
The duty of a knife;
I have tried to change
My thoughts and my actions,
But in the end it's the same,
I have not changed a fraction;
Do you remember those people,
Who would jump from those buildings?



We would say that they were stupid,
And made fun of their doings;
Well now I can hear them,
Their deep piercing voice,
And I have started believing
They made the right choice;
I've changed, oh heart,
I'm no longer the same,
I've bowed down to pride,
To lust and to fame;
I am a different person,
Who was and who is,
I'm less of a man now,
And more of a beast;
Unlovable, sinful,
My conscience destroyed,
Malevolent, evil
I no longer rejoice;
"Unworthy, undeserving,

You caused so much pain,"

These voices, it's crazy,

And it drives me insane;

These thoughts and these words,
Probably don't make much sense,
But to express is beauty,
A magnificent dance.

Letter #4

Dear Heart,

Do you remember the joy,
The fun times we had?
I will miss those moments,
The good and the bad;
Now I need a favor,
Will you do it for me?
Can you stop your beating,
Just for one short bit...
Thank You...

The Shuffle

By Alex Oleson

I do the shuffle once, twice a month. Sometimes more. Often more. It's gotten to the point where I enjoy it, in a desperate sense. I get a minor rush from a successful shuffle; it's like finishing a final paper mere hours before it's due. A rush of accomplishment and a flood of shaky relief. After a shuffle, I laugh a bit and lean back in my computer chair, wiping at my brow and breathing a little heavily, like I'd just been victim of a good fuck.

Which isn't too far from the truth. The shuffle is a desperate dance, a twirling, sweating maneuver. I guess the strippers down at the Leopard and I have something in common; we dance for, and with, our money. But I guess the Leopard girls would laugh at me; they probably have a lot more of it than I do.

The shuffle starts with a biweekly paycheck that always looks pitifully small. Like a tiny midget hand giving me the middle finger.

This is how little your time is worth, the paycheck tells me.

After a weary look at the bank account, it's time to move. I'm sitting at my computer, a fresh cup of coffee on my coaster, grimy blue squishy stress ball to the right of my mouse pad.

First, take care of rent. Rent is a walloping chunk out of the chocolate chip cookie of my funds; rent is like offering your dog a bit of your ice cream cone and he bites half of it, leaving you with the dripping waffle cone. Fuck me, right?

Rent is roughly half my monthly earnings. Don't ask what I do for a living. Just think something shitty and low paying. Think retail. Think stock boys and cashiers and those poor fuckers who have to push carts when Michigan decides to snow for 6 months out of the year. It doesn't matter what I do or how much I make; everyone at my income level does the shuffle, at least a little bit. It's like we're in a music video and all the poor people are back up dancers, doing the same moves in unison.

Okay, separate rent. Just like, highlight it, snip it out like a newspaper clipping, and set it over there. Bam, smaller money cookie. And here's where I start to shuffle.

Electric bill. All right, that's low, let's pay that. Click, click, online bill pay; cool I did it. But wait, since I just paid that, it leaves my balance below what I need for my other bills. Not to mention, you know, food. That's alright, because I have \$16 dollars of credit left on the Capital One, (I don't even want to think about interest) so if I pay my credit card bill and then use that card to pay my other bills, I'll be okay. Well, no, because my credit card will be maxed out, but cross bridges when you get to them, right?

I feel like a high profile stock trader. A Day Trader. Numbers roll over my screen, I tap those numbers into a little calculator to my left. I shove and split and move and transfer money around, spreading it like a little kid smears



shit on the bathroom walls. Squeezing my stress ball, jiggling a leg, sweating too much.

But I'm on top of it. After scheduling a late payment with the Internet company, pushing that payment off until my next check, I'm able to pay on the second credit card-- only the minimum, but still!-- and put a dent in the outstanding water bill. We don't have cable, so that's one thing I don't have to worry about, but man, that fucking car is eating me alive. Insurance. And we had a flat tire last week. The guy was nice enough to let us drive off with a guarantee that we'd pay. Maybe because it's close to Christmas, who knows.

Squeeze the stress ball, squeeze.

Well, there's \$20 dollars in the savings account, so let's pull that right the fuck out of there. Wait, no, we'll get hit with a fee if we don't have at least \$5 in it. So \$15 measly bucks gets transferred over. Use that plus the remaining cash in the account to pay on the cell phones. Every time I pay that bill I wonder why I need the fucking thing, but it's important when you have a wife and a kid who go off in different directions during the day.

It's a game of financial brick breaker. Keep bouncing dollars back up into the air, trying to bust up bills that hang over your head like cigarette smoke. Keep bouncing meager cash up and down, trying to avoid going into the red; the dreaded land of OVERDRAFT FEES.

Squeeze, squeeze.

But it's cool. I don't have health insurance, so that's one financial worry that I don't have. There's a pain in my chest sometimes, but let's wait a few years to do something about it.

I have \$10 in my Paypal account from some website that pays nickels to review products. Took me three weeks to save it up to \$10, but it's shuffle time, baby, move it on over.

The shuffle feels like aborting a nuclear launch. Tip-tapping away at the computer, fixing my glasses as they slide down the sweaty runway that is my nose. Account numbers and passwords and transactions all fly by my strained eyes as I try to keep the little boat of my life from capsizing.

All said and done, all bills (nukes) paid or staved off for further destruction, and what's left of my paycheck? A smoldering ruin. Seven dollars. And thirty-three cents. \$7.73. I stare at that number for a bit. In wonder. That close to destruction. Less than a movie ticket.

To be clear, I'm not talking about the normal anguish of paying bills. That's part of life. I'm not talking about the "death and taxes," sort of bullshit that my dad would say. Paying bills is just part of being an adult.

I'm talking about the shuffle. If you've ever had to bum \$20 bucks off your mom to keep the lights on, you've done the shuffle. If you've ever sold blood plasma to help buy groceries for your kiddos, man, you've fucking shuffled. If you've written term papers for rich kids to buy a month's worth of ramen noodles that are so unhealthy they take that month out of your life, baby, you done shuffled your ass off.

If like, a \$40 fee or bill that you didn't see coming blindsides you and knocks your accounts into the OVERDRAWN zone like the #4 hitter smacking a middle of the plate fastball, you're probably familiar with the shuffle.

This happened to me literally as I was staring at my transaction history. Couple of 2, 3 dollar purchases at work and a hefty \$50 for some miscellaneous household stuff. I was fine with all of that, but then the page froze as I was scrolling, so I clicked "Refresh."

Account balance: -\$11.34

Squeeze. Squeeze.

WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED?!

Scanning, scrolling, reviewing like the transactions are those nuclear launch codes I was talking about. And there it is, a purchase at Wal-Mart. - \$19.07

I should've left my dancing shoes on, I still have shuffling to do.

My wife comes home later and gives me a hardcover book, a batch of short stories from my favorite author. I'm touched, but that only hurts more. The fact that it was something for me that tossed us into OVERDRAWN is hard to bear. I just sit down at the kitchen table, and wonder vaguely what being a prostitute is like.

Eventually I mumble something about how the account is overdrawn, and my smiling wife shrugs and says: "Oh! Well I've got a \$20 in my purse, I'll go deposit it so we don't get hit with any of those nasty fees." She leaves the house and I hear the car pull away. My son is running around and getting into shit, but I don't notice because I'm staring at the little white board that we write on with magic markers. It says:

"Netflix: \$7.99"

And it's due tomorrow.

That twenty my smiling wife is depositing will put us at less than three bucks in the account. We'll be in OVERDRAWN land for sure.

I sigh. Got another cup of coffee.

Time to shuffle, baby.



Coffee, Coffee, Coffee

By Rebecca Martone

Coffee,
Coffee,
Coffee

Steam billows into the air as a low murmur fills the café with patrons' early morning chatter. I take in a slow breath, filling my nostrils with the sweet scent of espresso. Frothy white milk foam sits right at the rim, a swirl of light brown decorates the top like a small work of art. I wrap my fingers around the ceramic blue bowl of a cup. Heat spreads through my fingers, a burn so comforting I couldn't bear to take my fingers away. I soon forget the sting as the cup lifts to my lips. Slowly I sample the heavenly liquid, taking in the strong bitter bite of espresso, the notes of sweet vanilla flavor light my taste buds alive and alert for the day. Happily stimulated they urge me to taste more. Fingers tap on the cup, debating the decision at hand. The temptation to gulp down every last drop of the drink is more than inviting. Should I not savor it? Slowly sip at the latte, enjoying every last drop? The mug grows cold in my hands as I snap out of thought.

I look down to realize that during all the time debating I'd found my way to the bottom after all.

Ft. Bragg

By Dwayne Schamp



Battle of Bane

By David Rutter

Why is it selfish to want the world to feel your pain?
The pain it contributed to.
The agony it has brought forth.
How is it fair for them to say “go away.”
When all you want is a familiar face to listen and stay.
They scream “get over it,”
but you don’t know how.
You can’t imagine a world
free from agony
or sorrow.
So you sit there
drunk and high
in a world made of one big lie.
You look like shit.
You sound insane.
But you don’t understand
why no one feels your pain.

You feel it’s only you:
the rebel, the soul, the few.
It’s only you
who seems to complain, cry.
You’re a bane
to their existence.
Your friends are gone.
Family left.
Alone in the dark is the closest to a living death.

You just need a moment
to collect your thoughts.
Wipe the shallow and morally defunct plots
of life.
Yet you feel selfish,
On your lap is a phone
holding a universe of names.
One second is all it takes
to dial into the world
but you can’t—you won’t.
You rather be miserable
because it’s what you know.
“Reap what you sow” is what they’ll say

when you later complain,
and ask why no one was around
to feel your pain.



Running

By Adina Friedman

Running.

Running.

Running.

The dead tree roots cut my legs as I run from them. From the horrors behind me. I clutch you to me, your small body wrapped in a dirty cloth I'd found outside some desolate home. I can feel the wetness streaming down my cheeks as I leave your father behind. I knew they were going to kill him, but he told me to run. He told me to live.

I can hear the vicious snarls of dogs and the officers shouting at each other in a harsh language I barely understand. I hear my name and words like filth, dirty, abomination. Then they start talking about you and my heart cracks. The dogs snarl and it's as if they are already snapping at my heels.

I remember when it was different. Back when everyone lived in peace and harmony. But it all changed when he came to power. He tore down our cities and places of worship. He had us rounded up like cattle and carted off to be killed. 'Like sheep to a slaughter,' your father would say. But you'd only garble and squeak in that funny baby way of yours. I hope you don't remember this.

All the running.

All the fear.

They're getting closer. There's a light in the distance and I would have cried in relief if the officers hadn't been so close. I notice the building has the distinct shape of a church. The bells begin to toll from within, announcing the 2 o'clock hour. My heart sinks. No one sane will be up at this hour. I just wish you'd gotten to live, gotten to experience life the way I used to.

Suddenly, a crack of yellow light falls across the dead grass as a figure appears in the doorway. Gesturing me inside. His voice is rough from sleep and, at the same time, I can barely understand him. He has the same accent as the officers, almost unrecognizable in my exhausted mind. I think we've been on the run for days now, you and I, but maybe we'll be safe now. One can only hope.

The man in front of me is dressed in the robes of a Christian priest. His hair is like a mixture of salt and pepper, 'the spice of life,' my mother used to say. Her favorite thing to say. Before they blew her brains out right in front of me. She had dropped like a stone, but I ran.

I've been running ever since.

The man is still talking, so I try to focus; but I'm exhausted and I don't think my body can hold out much longer. I beg him to take you and keep you safe before my body gives out and I collapse onto the floor. Blackness seeps into my vision from the corners. I make the man promise to keep you safe. To keep you away from them.

Maybe I won't have to run anymore.

Wild Feathered Foes

By Denise Sawyer

I woke to their gargling banter
far off for now but advancing—
those horrid barrel-bellied beasts
whose pompous raids darken my morning mood.

The winter's snowy hedges sealed them off.
But April's warming breath let them loose!
Now they dart freely over wrinkled potholed roads, ever nearer to my own.
Soon they will be here, unwelcome at my garden's table
where they stripped last year's English lavender,
and decapitated the stately zinnias by the fence.

A surprise awaits these trespassers, pumped and ready by the door.
A reach of 20 feet will blast uninvited guests.
It's guaranteed, it says so on the box.
The wild turkeys are nearer now, a battalion goose-stepping on the neighbor's
lawn.
The Tom nags at them to move on towards my yard.

Dashing to the porch door, I grab my armament.
Out to the deck along the shrouded grill I creep, barefoot and pajama-ed.
Popping up my sniper head, I raise the cartoon-colored blimp and fire!
A streak of water hits the Tom, sending the angry mob to flight.
With skirmish lost they retreat to trees—
to spar with me tomorrow.

The Cost of Love

By Courtney Hendrickson

“We’re going to have to leave this place eventually.” Kari gave Miles’ arm a playful nudge. He did not look too impressed.

“You know I hate the rain.” Miles sat adamantly, refusing to look at either Kari or the rain. The couple waited in silence. Birds flew by the opening of the gazebo, chirping a tune too happy for Miles’ liking. How could they sound so happy at a time like this? He thought. He closed his eyes and listened for any sign of the rain letting up. It only grew louder and stronger.

On the other hand, Kari looked longingly out toward the rain and chirping birds. They all sounded so peaceful. She could never understand Miles’ hatred toward the rain. Rain brought joy and new life, it was fun to run through and it created puddles for jumping. As the rain grew louder, her excitement grew less containable and she stood up from the bench where Miles now sat alone. She strode to the edge of the gazebo, sticking her hand out to touch the cold rain. She shivered and a grin spread across her face.

Miles stood up, angry, and grabbed Kari’s hand away from the putrid rain. Her hand felt cold and wet. He walked her back to the bench and sat her down. “What were you thinking?” His features grew dark and desperate. “How could you so carelessly stick your hand in that stuff?”

Kari snatched her hand quickly from his, her own anger building up. “What is your problem?! It’s not like the rain will kill you!”

“It may not be able to kill me, but it could kill you! This is not Earth. You are not home. Simple things such as rain are dangerous here!”

Kari looked down at her hand and saw burn marks forming. This would have made any normal person scream, but all Kari wanted was to walk through the rain. “It’s only a minor burn, Miles, it’s NOT going to kill me.”

“How do you know that?” Miles looked defeated and small. His voice was quiet and he sat back on the bench.

“Nothing I love so much could kill me.”

“Just because you love it, that doesn’t make it any less dangerous.”

Kari strode back to where Miles sat and took his hands. “I don’t see any burns on your hands. If it doesn’t hurt, why do you hate it?”

“It doesn’t hurt because I am not a weak human like you. I hate it because I love you and I hate anything that might hurt you.”

“That doesn’t even make sense. You can’t hate everything that might hurt me. If you did, then you’d have to hate yourself and everyone else here. How do you think I got here in the first place? I was taken from Earth by YOUR people.” Kari walked back to the edge of the gazebo and placed her hand under a stream of rain. “If I were back home where I belong this would not hurt. I would not burn. Whose fault is that?”



Miles looked at his feet in shame. She had a point. If he hadn't fallen in love with her, she would never have ended up in this situation. He'd been impatient.

"My place is on Earth. Humans are not built for heaven. We are weak, but strong-willed. I can only be hurt here until the time comes when I die. Only then will I be granted a heavenly body. Only then can we live here together in happiness." Kari could no longer hold back the tears. She wanted to go home to her family. She'd stayed in Heaven for too long.

"I'm sorry."

Kari turned away from him, holding her now scorched hand. The tears still stung her eyes, but now she could smile. She would go home today. Heaven was beautiful, but could only truly bring joy to those who had ascended properly. Every step toward the edge of the gazebo brought more tears as the realization came that she would no longer see Miles once she stepped out. Her toes brushed the edge of the rain, leaving tiny holes in her red converse. She looked back at Miles and gave him a tearful smile. Then she walked into the rain and disappeared. After long, her world grew dark and her skin felt hot.

When Kari woke up, she was in the middle of a park filled with flowers. Next to her was a note. It read: I will always love you. Your angel, Miles.

Three A.M.

By Melissa May Southernland

Do you know what my favorite time of the day is?
It's three a.m. when you're standing outside and the world is asleep
There's a cloudless sky above you full of twinkling, shining lights.
Everyone is at home, at peace, dreams in their heads
And yet I'm standing here, staring at the stars, amazed,
And I am alone.
But, my solitude is not lonely, instead it is grateful:
Grateful for the vast world above me that makes me feel small
But, not insignificant.
Instead I feel blessed.
Blessed that I have the opportunity to see such a stunning sight.
The world is beautiful, especially when it's silent.
In the rare, unguarded moments when nothing is there to distract,
When nature makes you stop in your tracks and just breathe
Because you can't talk
And that's fine.
Just take it all in and know that a large world doesn't make you less;
It makes you special
You are privileged with front row seats to the greatest show ever.
A stroll down the street is a walk through an art gallery
The sound of the wind on a blustery day is nature's concerto,
And yet we take it for granted.
We drown it all out with noise and racket
Cover it up with flashy clothes and busy schedules
Entertain ourselves with Hollywood gossip
And I admit I'm part of the problem
But my favorite time is still three a.m.
When I'm standing outside alone, awake, and the world is quiet



Monique

By Stephen Ratte

She has really done something to me, & I dont really care about seeing the rest of Europe if it isnt w/ her.

This is what I thought over the course of the night that I took the bus to Marseille, away from her.

It was the morning, the time when she would be at the airport in Paris, & I used the buses shit wifi for as long as it held out just to make sure that Paris International hadnt been blown up, like ISIS had threatened.

She told me that all she could think about was being in Danville, in Abbeys kitchen, making soup, & now all I could think about was her being there as well. Danville, out in the sticks, felt like it was a universe away from the horrors of this world, though I knew better, but I just kept thinking, just get to that kitchen . . . I just needed her to do that & then I could move on..

When the bus arrived in Marseille, the sun was shining, & I knew that if I did not write this down, then I would not remember it; truly, who remembers if the sun was shining the day after a tragedy?

From the bus station in Marseille, I passed people who asked me if I wanted to buy weed, hashish, until I found the metro, & as I was waiting there on the platform, I thought I saw her in my peripheral, as I had so many times before, & I turned quickly & she wasnt there & my eyes began to water, as they had so many times in the last 24 hours, & I could feel my face getting red, & this time hit me the hardest, for some reason, & I didnt want to look at anyone else there on the platform because I didnt want to know if they were looking at me or not, & I think it hit me the hardest because I totally forgot that she was gone, for that moment, & so totally believed that she was standing right beside me, but there was nothing to do except to ball up my fists & plunge my knuckles into my eye sockets to dry them, & then to get on the train when it rolled into the station.

The night before, I had joked to her that I would have to start drinking for two now, but perhaps it was not such a joke, & walking to the hostel I had booked, I thought about buying a handle of rum, drinking like I did back in college, or at least like I had during my freshman year of college, but then what would that fix? Nothing. It may have only proved to put me in a worse position than I was already in, if I were to go out & do something stupid.

& so I simply planned to check into the hostel & to take a shower there & sit in the shower stall & bawl.

I wrote previously that earlier in my life, before I visited the Bataclan Café, that crying never had made sense to me, & that was true.

Before, crying never made sense; now, nothing else did.

On the walk to the hostel in Marseille, crying was the only thing that made sense.

So, of course when I got to the hostel, it was much too early in the morning to check in, to take that shower & cry. But, as I waited there, this guy came by & said that everybody should avoid going down near the post office, that there was some type of security threat there, or something.

So, naturally, I go down to the post office to get my mind off of things, off of her. & there are police officers & ambulances & firefighters & a big crowd of people standing around, & it doesn't look like whatever is happening or has happened at the post office happens a lot in Marseille, but I can't say for sure..

People take photos & this one police officer preps one of those robots that they use to defuse bombs & things & I think about the police sirens chasing us around Brussels & all the heartache felt in Paris & all the terrible stories being brought up in the news & the warnings about travel & all that & I begin to wonder if this type of shit is going to chase me for the rest of my time in Europe.

But then, I notice that the officer is not prepping the robot, but packing it back into the truck & one by one the firetruck & ambulance & police cars pull away, & the police officers get on their bikes or walk off & the crowd of people dissipates, & I'm left standing there, looking around, watching life go on like nothing happened at all.

I walked a few streets in Marseille, to kill time before I could check in, & somehow, somehow, it's not so hard to think of how, somehow I got caught up in wondering what her & I would be doing at that time, if it were the both of us in Marseille, & I figured that we would probably be looking for somewhere where she could use the bathroom, & then that would turn into where we would get lunch & maybe people watch from a table outside. & so, somehow, I ended up sitting on a curb, around the block from the post office, not far from the marina, the smell of fish, salt water, sea in the air, w/ a crushed Red Bull can in front of me & people walking past me, some staring.

& as I sat there, I did make an effort to not think of her, I honestly did, & I hope if you have been reading me for a while then you can trust me, I did try to not think of her, but it was no use, & all I could think about was missing her, & so I felt that I would indulge..

I will miss the sound that she makes when she sees Christmas lights & ornamentation.

I will miss the early days of traveling w/ her, before she dyed her hair, when her hair was light & I would notice that she left it all over the place.

I will miss the goofy way that she would dance sometimes, all shoulders & knees.

I will miss that moment when the mushrooms really kicked in for her in Amsterdam; I don't think I've ever seen anyone fold under the stress of eating a slice of pizza like that before.

I will miss the way that she tried to haggle w/ the shop owner in Cologne: two for five?

I'll miss the symphony that was her snoring at night.



The way she would order a shot of Jameson w/ a beer.

Miss watching her draw & writing about her drawing & watching the people who walked past her who would watch her draw & writing about them as well.

I wont miss how she would pick at her nails, the skin around her nails, but then I know I will.

I will miss how she could tell me the history behind various architecture at the Acropolis.

I will miss picking hairs and fuzz off of her clothes.

Ill miss how messy she can be when she eats, & how we did a 'ketchup check' that one time.

The way she needs so much coffee to get through the day & how it tears me up to see her so reliant on something.

The faces she makes: she has a whole catalog, & could run a photobooth out of film w/ them all.

How she hit her head on the seat in front of her when the Megabus driver went hard on the brakes.

How she would wear all black, most of the time, because it hid sweat & she would 'run hot.'

The way she could be around cats & dogs.

The way she looked in winter hats.

The way that Europe was all shit; good shit, bad shit, cool shit, old shit; it was all shit to us.

The way she can sleep face down through the night & not suffocate, & wakeup w/ her makeup still all perfect. But then there was her face w/o makeup, w/o anything . . . the face w/ makeup on, that was everyone elses face, the face everyone else got to see . . . but the face w/o makeup, the face she sometimes took to bed & woke up w/, the face when we were just chilling in the morning, that face sometimes felt like it was the face that only I would see. But was it mine? No. She could never be mine or anyones, in any way. No one will ever be able to call her theirs. You could spend every waking moment together & every night beside each other & she would be no more yours than a stranger on the other side of the world is. She is not to be possessed, not yours, not mine, she is to be watched, she is to be experienced, she is to be.

& I will miss the way that shes slightly taller than me & how I would sit up as straight as I could when I was beside her.

& I will miss whatever the reason was that I tried to always finish my drink faster than her.

& how she would sing in the shower.

& how she got me into all this modern music like Big Sean & that Doses & Mimosas song.

& the times when she would roll over in the morning, look at her phone, groan & throw the covers back over her head, & Id laugh & then she would laugh. It was such a regular thing for us.

Miss the times when she got bed bug bites.

When she broke that hosts mirror.

When she flooded that hosts bathroom.

All those times she realized she forgot her towel after she had taken a shower.

Miss when she asked me if I got any writing done, one day, & I said, I thought about it & then I just didnt do it, & she joked, cut me down, told me, thats what all the greats said; & that felt like some real serious & true shit when we stopped laughing & I thought about it.

Miss guys, anyone staring at her, wherever we were, wherever we went; but I stared at her a lot as a child, so I get it.

& her eyes. Those eyes are the same as when I first looked into them as a crushed child.

How giggly she gets when shes tired.

How I consider myself to be some adventurer, & yet how she was the reason that I was out of my comfort zone so often.

The freckles on her eyelids; I dont even know if she knows she has them .

..

Pointing out the smallest dogs in Europe.

Did you see that bucket of water in the bathroom? Yeah, its called a toilet.

Her snowboarding jacket that stood out in every crowd we were ever in.

How she thought I was a bad liar.

All of our inside jokes: Hey Donna & Aldi back; Bitch, its called Hotline Bling; that mashup video of Donald Trump saying China.

When we were walking in Paris & I told her I was hungry for Chinese chicken fingers & forgot that I did this & moments later she saw a Chinese place & told me I could get chicken fingers there & I looked at her & asked her if I had told her that I wanted chicken fingers & she said, no, & I had to really think about whether I had told her that I wanted them in the first place or not, because I would have believed, & did believe, that she simply read my mind.

She got caught up in a passing tour group in Krakow &, at the same exact moment, we reached out to each other & yelled out, SIMBA!! because, yknow, thats what happens in the Lion King.

She is my opposite, I know this now, & yet we were on the same page so often, thinking the same thing so often that it got scary; I have never had anyone so in my mind before. I believe in a type of equilibrium in this world, & that one person has to be doing one thing, be one person so that another person can do & be something else. In so many ways, she is my opposite & I exist because she does, & vice versa. In so many ways, we both live lives that the other cannot.

She made me feel good, though sometimes like an ember in the rain.

& of course I will miss the way that she radiated body heat, & how my cheeks would get warm when I would stand so near to her.



& I look forward to meeting up again & having that movie night where we watch Predator & Road to Eldorado & Super Troopers & make hot wine & eat nachos.

But, for now, I miss when she told that Russian girl that shoe sizes in the United States came in small, medium & large.

Miss the way she would get quiet & walk faster always because of one, or all, of 3 reasons; she was tired, her feet hurt, or she had to pee.

Miss that terrible joke she made in Krakow about 'pole' dancing being invented in Poland.

Miss when our host in Krakow spelled out his name & asked her how she would pronounce that; somehow JARO turned into YOGI.

& sitting on that bench in Amsterdam, watching the people through the uncurtained windows of the apartments across the canal, she drank from a bottle of wine & I smoked cigarettes & we talked about life & shit.

& Ma P-Hone.

& Ill be plagued by whether she trusted me or not, in the sense as to whether she didnt tell me certain things because she thought I would write about them. I see no reason for secrets though; the story of everything you have been through & everything you will ever go through can help someone out there. So, perhaps I can be trusted, but just not w/ secrets if one is trying to hide them.

Miss how she looked dancing alone at that club in Bodo.

The way she looked dancing beside me at that bar in Bratislava.

The way she looked on that first metro we took in Paris.

The way her face would glow when it met her phones backlight in a shadowed room.

The way her face would glow.

In our, my time in Europe, I feel as if I have been writing about her like she was a figment of my imagination; but no, she is so, so real & so, so beautiful. She is beautiful, but not only through looking at her; I mean, yes, she is beautiful in that way, her eyes, but to know her is beautiful as well; she is beautiful to know. & I know now that it is not about seeing someones flaws as beautiful; its about realizing they are flawed & teaching yourself the discipline to deal w/ it & the discipline to love them; & I know now what it is to love a friend true.

& yknow, its funny; I planned to write this piece long before I even knew that she was leaving.

Kitty

By Courtney Hills



To Him That Stands Before the Throne

By R. Tirrell Leonard Jr.

A quiet forms upon his lips and glance
A question rises from a deeper mind,
A dream- perhaps, but dreams to end our kind.
The flutter fabrics felt, as if by chance
Her whispers in this gloom, an old stance
A head so lowed, as eyes avert the bind,
A life so lived on faiths, yet lived so blind!
Her hand is fate, so chilled her icy glance.

The stone pillars cast shadows, weighs a soul
His deeds are soil, his faith was ash, to burn.
The fires consume quick, his hungry flesh
Reforms the acts of man to serve, console.
His fears will flee, before the chosen turn
And blaze the sun in space, to warm to bless.

Juicy Fruit

By Aubrey Shimabukuro

With the baseball bat tucked under one arm, Jenna dug into her shirt front pocket and slid out a piece of Juicy Fruit. She walked down Post Alley. Once the yellow strip was in her mouth, she started to savor its sweetness and walked faster up the hill. Jenna took the baseball bat in her hand and glanced around. The frost that morning had coated the balcony plants and slowed the walkers; it made scouting easier when she didn't have to fight off hordes.

As she neared the crest of the hill, Jenna paused in front of a brick wall. She snapped her gum a few times and stared at the growing photo memorial. Survivors had taken the Seattle tradition and repurposed it. Smiling faces now joined the colorful array of used gum. Jenna slid the yellow piece of gum from her mouth and pressed it to the bricks, which added to a large section of the same color arranged in a spiral. Her girlfriend would complain about the tanginess left in her mouth. Jenna thought back to six weeks ago.

Dakota dug into the pocket of her flannel shirt and pulled out a piece of Juicy Fruit. She put the strip in her mouth and tossed the wrapper over her shoulder. "This is the worst flavor," Dakota said.

Jenna glanced at her as they walked. "We have other flavors. You're the one that insists on Juicy Fruit," she said.

"It's not about the flavor, Jen," Dakota said. They turned up Post Alley and started their ascent up the hill. Dakota entwined their fingers.

Jenna shook her head and rotated her wrist, which spun the bat in her left hand. "Then what's it about?"

Dakota laughed. "Tradition."

"There's nothing special about chewing gum on a brick wall, Kota," Jenna said. Dakota came to a stop, which made Jenna follow suit.

"The world's gone to shit. And this is a tradition we shouldn't let die just because zombies roam the streets," Dakota said. She gestured over her shoulder to the bricks caked with used gum. "This is a sign that our home was a weird fucking place. I want to remember it that way." Dakota took the piece of Juicy Fruit from her mouth and added it to a large mosaic sun she had been working on. "Every yellow piece is me leaving my mark that I've made it another day in this hell hole."

A crow squawked, which made Jenna turn away from the wall. She looked up and down Post Alley and found herself still alone. Jenna stared at the section of bricks covered in yellow gum. Dakota had dragged Jenna there to show her Seattle's weirdest tradition. The way Dakota's face lit up about the gum wall had distracted Jenna from the original story. Jenna liked to dub it their first date their freshman year.



Jenna turned away from the gum wall and started up the final turn into the old farmer's market. Before, the cobbled aisle was teeming with activity as vendors with flowers, jam, and handmade goods sold their wares. She paused where fisherman used to hurl fish at each other for tourists. Jenna shivered as she stood in the shell of what life was like before.

Twenty feet from where Jenna stood a zombie limped away, unaware it was being watched. Jenna gave it a once over and noted half its left arm was missing and that it dragged its right foot. Tattered and grimy skinny jeans clung to the walker. The more Jenna watched it, the more she thought about who this zombie once was. Was it an innocent tourist? Or perhaps someone's significant other that had gone into the city unaware of what had transpired? Jenna's hand tightened on the handle of the bat.

In a few steps, she had caught up to the zombie and swung. Jenna felt the bat connect with the walker's head before the skull gave way. The decomposed brain matter splattered across the street. The body crumpled.

Jenna's heart pounded. She lowered the bat. With a few deep breaths, she examined her handiwork and then her surroundings. She was still alone.

"Shit, I forgot the gum," Dakota said. They had turned onto Post Alley when Dakota said this. "I meant to put a fresh pack in my pocket last night."

"I have spearmint if you want," Jenna said. She reached over to slip her hand into Dakota's.

Dakota shook her head. "It's gotta be Juicy Fruit." They kept up their pace as they walked up to the gum wall.

Jenna pointed at the sun from Dakota's yellow gum on the bricks. "We'll come by later."

She waved off Jenna and they made the turn up into the farmer's market.

A collection of growls made them both stop. Ahead, a horde approached. Jenna tightened her grip on the bat and glanced to her girlfriend. Dakota reached back and seized the machete from where she had strapped it to her backpack.

"We'll clear a path and I'll race you to the compound," Dakota said.

The horde reached them, and together Jenna and Dakota started to force their way through. Jenna managed to beat down a few zombies and realized there were more than she anticipated. She turned her head mid swing when she heard the first gunshot.

"Run!" Dakota swung at a few zombies with the machete and took aim with the other hand.

Jenna hurdled the zombies that had fallen from the gunshots, and sprinted ahead. She heard the footfalls behind her and picked up her pace down the street and towards the apartment building they called home. After a block and a half, Jenna slowed and turned to Dakota who sounded like she was following suit.

"That was fun," Jenna said. She worked on catching her breath, one hand held the bat, the other on her hip. Jenna smiled and looked to Dakota.

Dakota shook her head. "Fun is the wrong word," she said. The machete was gone, and instead Dakota's free hand now covered a tear in the flannel where blood seeped between her fingers.

"Kota," Jenna said. She dropped the bat and stepped over to Dakota to examine the wound.

"No, stop." Dakota moved backwards.

"You did this with the machete, right?" Jenna took a step forward but Dakota countered. They stared at each other, and Jenna saw Dakota's eyes water.

"It's over, Jen," Dakota said. Her voice caught, and she cleared her throat. "Take this." Dakota held out the handgun to Jenna.

"No."

"Jen. I-I need you to do this," Dakota said.

"Kota, no. You know I can't." Jenna felt her face get hot, and she tried to blink back tears but they slipped down her cheeks.

"Please, Jenna. I can't do it myself," Dakota said.

Jenna took the gun from Dakota, who proceeded to keep a few feet between them. "Kota, please don't make me do this." She didn't like the weight of the pistol in her hand.

"This is mercy. I don't want to be one of them." Dakota's voice was quiet. "Please, Jen."

They stared at each other. Jenna nodded. Tears flowed down her cheeks. "I love you, Kota." Jenna pulled Dakota to her and pressed their lips together. A hand cupped her left cheek and Jenna leaned into it as they separated for air.

Jenna stepped away, choked out a sob and held up the gun to where it was aimed at Dakota's forehead. She shut her eyes and pulled the trigger. The gunshot made her flinch first; the second time was when she heard the body hit the ground. Her shoulders shook as she lowered her arm and sobbed.

She used the elbow of her shirt to wipe her tears. Jenna stuffed the handgun in her waistband, and started to drag Dakota by her shoulders. It took her several minutes to get the door to a boarded up building open, but Jenna got Dakota's body inside and lay it down. Jenna closed Dakota's eyelids and brought one of her girlfriend's hands to her lips. The warmth had already left Dakota's extremities.

Jenna reached into Dakota's flannel pocket and pulled out the empty pack of Juicy Fruit. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she walked away and looked at the yellow gum package. Jenna crumpled the pack in her fist and tossed it aside. She picked up her bat and walked toward the compound alone.

In the empty street, Jenna looked down at the zombie corpse of the stranger. A tear slid down her cheek and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. You didn't deserve becoming one of them. She shouldered her bat and walked away.



The Lighthouse Keeper

By Brandon Carbaugh

Light your lantern, love
and stoke the flame with hope
that you and I might sail our way
through starlight and the
darkness there below.

Let us hum the coast
and whispering waters that
lie off the canvas-edge sing out
a road of light to
lead those stars to home.

for in those days of wind and salt when every night we climbed the sky
I knew a brighter joy than any moon has ever shone

But not enough, those
songs that we together cried
to guide the ancient mariner
in from the dusk
to port among the foam.

And when that ship sailed
flaming in and dashed to dust
upon the rocks, I wept for us.
At dawn, I snuff the lamp and
face the darkening stairs alone.

Treescape

By Courtney Hills



Supervillain Named Neurosis

By Thomas James Gordon

I walk up to the rack of comics and look for the section that displays the Vertigo comic books. Despite the *Watchmen* graphic novel having won a Hugo award in 1988, six years before I was even born, and the fact that I liked the movie, I had never actually read the book. That was going to change today.

After a few more minutes of searching, I find the last copy of *Watchmen*. As I am reaching for it, a fifteen-year-old I didn't notice before grabs it. I think about saying something, but then decide to drop it. After all, I can just come back tomorrow; hopefully, they'll be restocked by then. Not wanting to leave empty-handed, I grab a Batman comic that ties into the Arkham video game series and head toward the check-out counter.

That same fifteen-year-old kid who got the last copy of *Watchmen* is somehow in front of me, but I'm too distracted to pay much mind. Behind the counter is a nineteen-year-old girl with dark pink hair that comes down to the top of her breasts and a rare smile that looks genuine whether it's fake or not. Her creamy skin is flawless, and her jawbone has a slight angle to it. She looks a little like Ramona Flowers. It may just be that the *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* poster behind her is making me think of Ramona Flowers, but who knows?

Suddenly, my lungs start to hurt. Then I realize that it's happening again. I close my eyes and steady my breathing. A few seconds, and everything's back to normal.

"...Can I help you, sir?"

I look around. The kid who was in front of me before is nowhere to be seen; in fact, no one is. I step up to the counter. "Um, yes, I'd like to purchase this." I give the comic book to her in a stiff motion.

"Of course," she says. She looks at the back of the book and inputs some numbers into the cash register. "With tax, that'll be... \$15.74. Would you like a bag?"

I look over my shoulder and see that it is still raining. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea." She bends over to get the bag, and I try to think of something witty to extend the interaction. Like all the other times when I need it, it isn't there, so I just count out the money I owe.

She hands me a brown paper bag that has the book and receipt in it. "Will that be all?" While asking this, she maintains that beautiful smile that I almost forget may or may not be fake.

"Yes, thank you." I turn around and head for the door when I hear a "Hold on!"

I turn back around and try not to smile. "I almost forgot to give this to you." She bends down, picks up some newspaper-looking thing, walks around the counter, and hands it to me. "This has news on That's

Entertainment and comic book news in general. Sorry, it's my first day and I forget stuff sometimes." She laughs for some reason and, so she doesn't feel alone, I laugh with her. I laugh too hard.

"So that's why I don't recognize you." I look down at my watch. It is 6:12. "I should probably be going. I'm supposed to be picking up milk for my mom."

It may just be my imagination, but her smile seems to falter for a split-second. "Okay. Have a good night."

"You too," I say. Then I turn around again and exit the building.

"I'm home." I place the gallon of milk on the table and my mother looks up.

"Can you pour some into those glasses, dear?" She gestures to the already-set table.

I yawn. I didn't sleep last night, not that I could say that; she'd get all "mom-like" on me and freak out. "Sure." As I pour the two glasses, I notice that the chicken smells especially good tonight. I'm guessing it was cooked with lemon and maybe something else, but I'm no cook so I don't really know. I make no comment on this, though.

I sit down and soon learn that the chicken is just as good as I expected. Mom joins me soon after. "So," she says, "how's the job search going?"

I give her the same lie as always. "It's going." I turn my attention to one of the pictures on the wall, making it clear that I didn't feel much like talking right now. The picture in question was of me, mom, and dad before he left. When he left, he said it was for the best. Mom insists that, except for my brown eyes, I look a lot like him. Outwardly, I agree, but I only really see a few similarities, and I want it to end there.

The other pictures on the wall are of just me and mom, mostly. One is of me getting my high school diploma, one is of me and mom right after my graduation, and the rest are either of us in front of some famous place or at a family reunion. My smile isn't as convincing as the cashier's.

After dinner, I push out my chair loudly when I get up to grab her attention. "I'm a little tired. I'm going to go to bed early."

"Okay," she says, "but you're doing the dishes tomorrow night."

I flop down on my bed and take the graphic novel and the *That's Entertainment* newspaper out of the bag. I put the newspaper aside to read later and open the Batman comic. It's about a serial killer who goes after corrupt officials and leaves Batman these complex riddles filled with literary references that he has to decipher. It gives me a few ideas, and I jot down a few notes for my comic book in case I ever get around to actually working on it.

I lie back on my bed and focus on the Catwoman poster that's on my ceiling until I eventually fall asleep.



I arrive at the building across from That's Entertainment at 10:55 the next morning, five minutes before it opens. However, since the cashier from yesterday might be working again, and I don't want to seem like I'm stalking her or anything, I decide to wait longer than I need to. I walk into the store at 11:05, because five minutes makes a big difference.

In order to keep up the image that I could care less whether or not that same cashier from yesterday was working today, I don't look at the cash register while heading toward the Vertigo section. No other customers are in the store at that time, so I don't run into the same problem as yesterday. With a copy of *Watchmen* in my hands, I make my way toward the cash register.

The girl from yesterday is, in fact, working. She is drawing something behind the counter and, as I step closer, looks up and puts on her beautiful, maybe-fake smile. "Forget something yesterday?"

"No," I say. "Well, not exactly." I give the copy of *Watchmen* to her. "I meant to get this yesterday, but this other kid wanted it, so I let him have it." Which is true, though the phrasing I used may be a little misleading.

"Well," she says while putting some numbers into the register, "that was nice of you, considering that it meant that you couldn't read an excellent book last night. Not to insinuate that the Batman book isn't good, too. It's just, I mean... this is *Watchmen* we're talking about." She puts the book and receipt into another brown bag and hands it to me. "That'll be \$20.98."

"Right." I reach into my pants pocket and take out my wallet. A few coins slip out until I steady the hand holding the wallet with the other.

"So..." she says, "I saw you walk in here. Live close by?"

"Uh, yeah." I look up. "Just a few blocks. You?"

"I have to drive about half an hour."

"Well," I say, giving her the money, "could be worse."

She laughs at the joke neither of us made. "True. My last job back when I lived in Toronto was an hour away."

"That must've been rough." I try to think of something else to say. Again, nothing's there. "Well, I'll be--"

"Now that I think about it, I really don't know the Worcester area that well." She glances at me.

"I-I could show you around sometime." I swallow hard, but I also actively try to repress it, so it feels like I just got punched in the throat and I contort my neck weirdly. "If you want, I mean."

Her smile widens, as if she orchestrated this whole thing and I just now understood my role. "Well, now, I'm not sure if I should go anywhere with a stranger. What's your name?"

"A-Asa."

"Emma. I get off at 3:00. Can you come back then?"

"Um, sure. See you then. At 3:00. When you get off- I mean, uh, bye." Bag in hand, I turn around and walk quickly out the door.

I sit down on my bed, take out my copy of *Watchmen*, and start to read. The reality of what just happened sinks in only a second later and I immediately drop the book due to the sweat on my palms. I don't know whether to jump for joy or scream. Worried that the noise might disturb mom, I decide to just grin like an idiot.

My eyes dart toward the clock. It's only 11:32. My head is killing me.



Parasitical Love

By James Hiltz

When you were young,
you got a tapeworm
from raw meat.
You got so sick
that the doctor
had to go in and get it out
from underneath your skin.
After it was gone,
you felt so sad and lonely that
you went and tried to put that parasite
back in.

When you were a child,
you were bitten
by a spider,
and the skin puffed up
and went bad.
For once you felt so content,
that you wanted to thank that spider
and wrap yourself up
in its web.
The bite of bug
is like a lover's kiss.
A little prick,
and you've got
a parasitical love without end.

Star Stuff

By Alex Pellerin

An entanglement of
Star guts
Swirls of nebulas splattered across black vastness
Sprinkled with the dreams of those
Who have wished upon them.

Star dust rains down
Plummeting to the blue below
Just star crumbs
Desperate to be salvaged into something new
To be alive again

It courses through our veins
We are made of star stuff
Isn't it curious

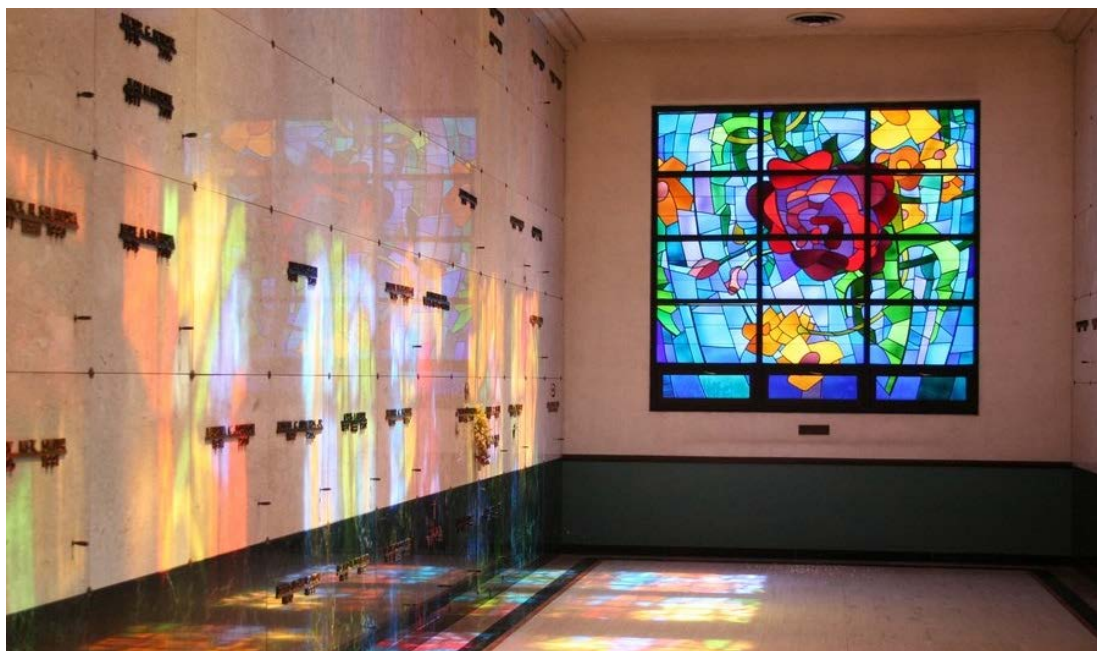
We are the dead stars looking back up at the sky
From which we came?

Gazing at old friends
Contemplating, thinking,
Reminiscing perhaps,
About our old home
In the still chasm of space



Light Unto Legacy

By Sarah Bella



Untitled

By Brandon Ricard

I'm dazed and confused
Trapped in the haze
I can't find my way out of this maze
So many options so little time
How do I know what I pick will be right?
I sit and I think
Think my thoughts while I drink dirty water from the sink.
In a perfect world this place is still shitty
I speak of no imperfections to avoid receiving pity.
What is it going to take?
What is it going to take so I can sleep a minute through the night?
Another sip of water should make everything right.
Everything except for what I fear most.
A relapse breaking in this blurred comatose.
I thought I had this down, that I had learned the ropes, but I'm dazed and
confused.
I'm lost in the haze enough is never enough these days.
Shot after shot pill after pill
I've thought for sure this will be the end of me
But it seems they lend me a few more moments of blatant irresponsibility.
I thought I had this down, I thought I learned the ropes.
We push ourselves to the limits to which we hope we can withstand
Alone but hand in hand
I'm nothing will out it to which my urges they demand.
One more sip for some bullshit reason
The dirty water used to make me warm now my eyes are closed and I'm the
one leaving.
Lights out close the door goodnight
I think I've taken this too far tonight.



Small Things, Big Meanings

By Richey Synsmir

Have you ever heard the saying, “Nothing lasts forever”? Well, my experience will prove that wrong: memories do last forever. Do you remember your first car? How about buying a vehicle that turns out to be the best vehicle you’ve ever had? Sometimes it’s rare that someone falls in love with something that they turn it into a hobby. I’m one of those rare people. Some people take pictures. I made model cars.

When I was seventeen, I bought my second vehicle. Turns out that car was the best vehicle I’ve ever owned. That car was a 2001 BMW 525i. It was quite the luxurious car. The color was midnight black with a matching black interior that still had the strong, musky smell of leather as if it were factory new. Most of the vehicle’s age was shown in the interior. The seats were ripped and the M was missing in the trim but those blemishes did not take away the integrity of the car. The bright orange dash light still worked, the vehicle had a custom wood trim, smooth and polished to perfection. Even though the check engine light was on, the engine still ran like new.

Two weeks ago I bought a model car set, a BMW 525i. It was also black with the same color interior. The only difference was that the model car was brand new and disassembled. The model car came in 24 pieces that I manually had to put together, from the interior, the body and the frame, to the wheels and engine. All I had at my disposal was patience, perseverance, and a screwdriver.

I remember my first drive with my BMW. We were picking it up at my mother’s workplace, Windham Correctional Facility located in Leeds, ME. When we pulled up and I saw it, I was about as happy as one of those inmates finally being released. It was a crisp May evening. The sun was setting and the clouds looked as if they were painted in the sky. I was driving down Main Street in Westbrook with the windows and the sunroof down. It was as if every single person was staring at me in disbelief, shocked that a teenager like me was driving a car that was created for executives. The best part about receiving my car was the timing: I purchased my car the day before prom night.

The day of prom, I probably spent roughly ten hours learning about my car, the different settings, functions; I even studied the manual, and did some research online. I wanted to learn every square inch of my car front to back. While I was driving from one side of town to another, I learned as many things mechanical about it, how to turn down my windows, and put back the sunroof at the same time with a push of a button. I was driving down 295 going a steady 80mph, sunroof open letting the warm rays of the sun warm up my arm, hand on the shift knob, the windows down, and the music cranked to the maximum. The feeling was so euphoric, enough to make any senior relive their youth again. Later that day I went home to detail my car.

My close friend Malachi came over. I remember his blue Buick Century with a sound system that was one of a kind. He had two 12in. Memphis speakers and an amp producing 1500 watts through the speakers. You could hear that sound system from a mile away and it was like an earthquake under your feet when standing next to his car.

This was the first of many weekends that we got together and detailed our cars. It became a routine and created a bond between us. Malachi had an Armor All gift set that his mom purchased for him on his birthday and this was the first time we got to use it. I never knew there was so much that needed to be done when detailing a vehicle. We started by giving it a basic wash, and then we waxed the car. After the wax we used a wax finish and then started working on the interior. We vacuumed mercilessly, washed and dried the floor covers before installing them back on. We cleaned both the inside and outside of the windows, including the sunroof. We installed leather conditioner on the seats and trim cleaner in the interior.

We made sure we got out all the excess junk and old paperwork that we could find. Last but not least, we detailed the wheels. We washed the wheel and the rims, sprayed tire shine and used the rest of the wax finisher on the rims. This whole process took two and a half hours but the result was absolutely stunning. It was 86 degrees and sunny. The way the sun shone on that vehicle was as if God himself had shined a spotlight on that car. The wax made the paint sparkle, the wheels had a wet glow to them, and the light hit the front emblem just right so that the shine blinded you when looking at it.

We couldn't help but to just sit there and admire our work. Like Michelangelo and the Sistine chapel, Leonardo da Vinci and Mona Lisa. The way that BMW looked at that moment was timeless and the memories made working on it will never be erased. I realized the details are what make memories special, the smell of something, the way something sounds at a certain point, and it's what makes the memory more authentic and unforgettable.

Details are what made the model car special. The whole set was over twenty pieces and everything had to fit. The seats and steering wheel of the interior had to fit, the body when putting the shell of the car over the frame had to be a perfect fit. The set came with 5 wheels and there was a spare tire compartment in the trunk where I put the spare wheel in. Nobody else can see or will ever notice it, but it is one detail only I will know.

I still remember the day my mom told me that my car was gone for good. My heart skipped a beat, I felt lightheaded, and my vision was blurry from the tears. I felt as if someone squeezed the air out of my lungs. The most severe form of upset. My car wouldn't start one day so I towed it over to Bill Dodge BMW in Westbrook, and a few weeks later, I received a forwarded email from my mom, saying that my car got totaled at the dealership. I was in New Hampshire that day and the following day. I went to see my vehicle, and it was one of the saddest memories of my life. There was a gigantic, spider-weblike crack across the windshield, the passenger side airbag was missing



and the entire car was leaning to the driver side. It looked nothing like my car. Six months, one lawsuit and \$2500 dollars later, I managed to recover from that, but the mental damage will always be there. The saying is true, “all good things must come to an end.”

Between working and school, I managed to finish the model car in three days. It looked exactly like the BMW I owned. The paint was the same, the interior was the same, and even the buttons on the center console were the same! The last time I had such pride in a vehicle was when I detailed mine for the first time. We were in the process of moving and as I was packing my stuff, I lost track of my model car collection. As we were settling into our new home, I asked my mother about my model cars and she told me, “I thought you didn’t want those anymore, so I donated them.” I was crushed when she told me. I searched and searched but I couldn’t find them anywhere, so I gave up. I comforted myself with the thought that a child somewhere less fortunate than me was playing with them. Hopefully it turns into a hobby for that child and he or she will end up making the same everlasting, bittersweet memories as I did.

Sunset

By John Gregory Evans



Aliens: An Impasse

By Laurelann Easton

Detective Carbone received a call from the exasperated chief of police about the need for an investigation concerning the disappearance of Old O'Malley. He and his wife lived on a dilapidated farm, as aged and worn as the couple; the farm sat slumping into the earth on the edge of the growing town, away from the noise and bustle of business.

Cheryl O'Malley had made enough noise of her own to disturb and awaken the town as she'd driven her husband's clunking pickup to the police station around four o'clock that morning, Chief Frampton said. He had waited until seven to make the call, and Carbone answered just before the machine could pick it up. "Sorry to disturb you so early, but I've waited as long as Cheryl will allow."

Carbone skipped his morning shower and shave, and settled for a quick comb through his greying hair and throwing on clothes before setting off for the police station on the other side of town. He couldn't imagine what was troubling the O'Malleys this time, but of course they asked for him to help. Sometimes these people took too much advantage of him living there. He repressed the urge to stop for coffee along the drive. The town was still waking up that Sunday morning, and everything seemed quiet and still in the foggy air.

Inside the police station, an officer directed him to the back office where Cheryl waited, seated in the seat on the other side of Frampton's desk. She was hunched in on herself and shook with tears, and her hands were splayed over her face to hide them. Her head shot up at the sound of the door shutting behind Carbone; her eyes were red and her wrinkled face looked damp.

Chief Frampton stood from his desk, yanked up his pants under his heavy beer gut, and shook Carbone's hand. "Thanks for coming." He kept his voice low so that the words would stay between just the two of them. Carbone could feel Cheryl's eyes on them, and he purposely avoided looking at her. "I'm sorry, but she wouldn't stop asking for you."

His eyes felt as though they were dragging low on his face from how sleep deprived he was. "What happened?"

"John is missing. She wants you to find him."

"How did he go missing? Did he just disappear?" Old O'Malley couldn't have gotten far on his own, not with the trouble his knees had been giving him the last year or so, and he obviously didn't have his truck. Was it a kidnapping? Who would want the guy, though?

Frampton sighed. "This is a weird one, Carbone. I really don't know what to make of it."

He nodded and sidestepped Frampton to approach Cheryl. Frampton watched from the doorway, and Carbone perched on the edge of the desk. He

was pleased that she had managed to get herself under control. “When did your husband appear missing?”

She sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “He didn’t just disappear. He was taken.” She began to rock in her seat. “He was taken by those creatures and I don’t know what to do, I don’t know, I don’t know.”

He pulled out his notepad and pen. “Please, relax. How long has he been gone.”

“Since three this morning.”

“What creatures do you mean?”

“They....” She paused to lick her chapped lips. “They were these strange things with...with faces like flowers. These thin, vine-like limbs that carried John away. Those faces....” One hand clutched at her hair with a tenacious grip, but her sanity had clearly flown the coop hours ago. She shook her head, and her eyes were fixed wide on a knot in the wood floor. “They had these grainy faces, strange petal-like things” —she made sweeping motions away from her face— “surrounding their faces.”

He sighed, and his eyes rolled upward. Cheryl sounded like she was straight out of the county institution. “How many were there?”

“Two—no, three. Three aliens.”

At the word aliens, he turned to Frampton. “Aliens? Really?” he asked. He stood and pocketed his notepad. He lowered his voice to speak only to Frampton by the doorway. “I will not be made a fool. Really, Bob? Of all things.”

“Look, I warned you.”

“Not about this.” He let out a harsh breath. “Cheryl likely had a nightmare about her garden. We all know she drinks. Tell her it’s too early to call this a missing person’s case. Call me when she’s talking sensibly again.” He brushed past Frampton, who stood with his mouth gaping, and stormed away from the police station.

Grumbling, he drove his old Caprice to Lila’s Diner. He needed coffee and normalcy. Aliens? No. Not a case for him—for this world. The small diner, which had survived since opening in the ‘70s with hardly an update to its classic look, held scattered early risers. He had plenty of space to seat himself with a huff at the counter. The waitress with curly hair piled on her head and a stained yellow apron swung by with a cup of normalcy like a reflex. “What on your mind, hun?” she asked as she poured.

He burned his lips and tongue with the first gulp, but it was needed. “This town has some crazy people, Laurie.”

“Tell me about it.” She set her elbow on her side of the counter and leaned her chin on it. “What’s new at the station?”

“Cheryl’s husband is missing.”

“You’re kidding!”

He shook his head. “Not a bit. I wish I was. She’s claiming it’s because of aliens. An alien abduction.” He took another scalding sip, as though it



could burn away the words from his lips. “He hasn’t even been missing twenty-four hours! What is she thinking, calling on police already?”

“Aliens are bad business, hun. No wonder to me why she went to you lot so soon. She’s scared out of her mind. You know, if my Doug disappeared, I’d probably be doing the same as her.”

He raised his brow at her. “This is a person, not a dog. O’Malley probably took a walk and didn’t tell his wife. She was probably just dreaming things.”

Her hands took to her hips with indignation. “All of your ‘probably’ and twenty-four-hour technical stuff—you need to loosen up. Keep an open mind. What if aliens really did take John?”

“Do you really think that’s how he disappeared?”

“I don’t know. How would you know otherwise?”

“Aliens don’t exist.” Hot coffee down his throat. “There’s no proof of it.”

“There’s no proof they don’t exist.” She tilted her head at him in a pointed look, and then her attention shifted back to a couple at the other end of the diner. “Keep an open mind on this one, hun. It’s better to find the guy, right?” She picked up the coffee pot and swung on away to refill other cups.

Carbone stared at his half-empty mug. The argument was at an impasse. Impossible. Without finishing the coffee, he left a couple bills under the mug and returned to his car to drive back to the station. He wasn’t about to go believing in aliens, but there was still a missing person who needed to be found.

The Crossing

By Dora J. Simpson

We tread from the tranquility
of our wooded sanctuary.
Frosted leaves snap and crinkle
under our weight. Around the crook,

we hear man's murmurs;
his killing machine rumble.
I contemplate the breadth.
"We'll make it." Venture forth

on strange ground; senses alert, racing.
Black, solid, so still—asphyxiating.
I seek the refuge of hushed woodlands.
Breath steams past unblinking lashes.

We pose, sleigh-less deer
on thawing soil as man watches nearby.
Tails stand tall, stark white
against weathered birch.

The slow, sliding water over smooth rocks
in the riverbed beckons us back.
Damp pines in the distance dredge
up memories of slaughter and starvation.

The ancient oaks beyond the barren
field abandon sweet acorns for our nibbling.
Our ears and noses twitch sampling
the air. Human traits elude our detection.

Confusion mounts. Hearts pound
as we step out wary. Driven by hunger.

Buck and doe simultaneously,
trot across the great divide.
Down into a ravine, tan hides
blend in among the bare trees.

Ghosts of the forest.
Disappear.



Alive In The Past

By Kathryn Fiducia

May 1893

“Tap...tap...TAP” The shrill sound of the hammer jolted me from my daydreams. For the past several months that sound has been accompanied with the vile sight of splintering wood, the rough back and forth of a saw, and the acrid smell of paint. I look down at my once soft hands, now covered in calluses from the long move out west. Looking up from the dinner preparations, I cannot help but smile. The wet paint has dried to a calming peach color. Mother’s table stands regally on the floor. The smell of fire from the newly built hearth warms my insides, and the pantry is slowly filling with goods. I am lost again in thoughts of future meals, of the pitter patter of children coming in, their noses pink from playing in the cold. Of sunrises and lazy days sitting on the front porch. As I gaze out the window, drinking in the summer sun, John saunters in.

“How does it look?” I ask, John smiles enthusiastically, wiping the sweat from his messy brown hair.

“Nearly finished.” He gives me the goofy grin that always makes me love him even more. “All that is left to do is paint the baby’s room.”

John saunters over, his lean body coming right up next to mine, and fondly caresses my swollen stomach. I smile and wipe my dough-covered hands on my apron. I gaze into his deep brown eyes. He smiles wider, whispering ever so slightly.

“Next month, we will be a family.” My heart jumps a little when he finishes his statement, my stomach fluttering with activity as if our unborn child heard his words as well. John takes his hand off my stomach and brings it to my head, fixing my forever messy blonde curls, displaced from days of hard work.

I turn towards John as he wraps his arms around my growing waist. “Relax. A month is a long time,” I say, brushing the one displaced strand of brown hair from his forehead. He smiles, obviously trying to hold in his excitement. I can’t help but laugh in amusement.

“You’re going to make an excellent father to her.” His eyes widen with shock, and he backs away from me in surprise.

“It’s a girl?” he looks quizzically at me.

I tip my head to one side and grin, “I’d like to think so.” I turn my head to go back to fixing supper when it happens again. I can barely see the dough in front of me, instead everything goes dark. I try to hide it from John, but I know he can tell. John steadies my wobbling form, and looks at me concernedly.

“Why don’t you rest a little bit, and let me finish preparing supper.” All of a sudden the faint pounding in my head that’s been accompanying me

since last Monday becomes worse. I gasp softly. He backs away, pausing, concern in his eyes as he looks over my body.

“Are you feeling okay, Suzan?” I look down. I’ve been trying to hide the headaches. He brushes curls from my forehead and embraces me.

“I’ve been a bit under the weather recently, but there’s so much to do bef-” I lose my train of thought. Why can’t I talk?

“You look really pale. Why don’t you rest?” As if it was a command instead of a suggestion, he takes me by my almost white hand, and leads me up the stairs, which still smell like newly furnished wood, to our bedroom. He tucks me in the covers his mother gave us, kisses my forehead, and goes downstairs to finish supper. I want to get up, to complete my job myself, but before I can say another word, everything goes away.

February 1899.

She took no notice of me as I watched from the distance, smiling. Happily skipping down the path that led to the front door, her dark blue coat flew behind her as her knees popped up rhythmically. Her blonde curls bounced to the tempo, her nose pink from the cold.

John followed several paces behind her, his thin frame covered in a thick winter coat and burdened with a heavy sack.

“Susan!” He called, and she turned to the sound of her name. So did I. “Wait for me!” he shouted. She paused, coming over to her father as he staggered under the weight. Together they walked to a lone tree, still naked from the winter.

The rucksack plopped to the ground. He reached one hand into it, and pulled out a massive beast. The child’s brown eyes widened in wonder.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s our dinner,” he replied, grinning that stupid grin while tying the beast to the tree. He continued, “Mr. James caught it for us, and in return, we gave him a 50 pound bag of potatoes.” Susan looked up at him, her head turned slightly.

“See, Susan, part of living life out here is trading for what you need...” The little girl with blonde curls listened. I smiled. I always knew he was going to be a great father. The girl listened on, taking in the lesson her father taught her. I stood silently, my white dressing gown blowing in the wind.

Soon, the sun went down, and the pair reluctantly went inside, the father holding his daughter’s hand as she tottered up the steps. Before he went through the door, however, I saw his glance change to that of a secret sorrow as he looked desperately beyond the tree, to where a single stone sat silhouetted on a hill.

July, 1914

I sit in the shadows, watching the candles in the house slowly go out. I can hear the creaking of the wooden steps as John sluggishly climbs them, his



body taking longer than it used to. After a few minutes, I see the light go out in his room, and I wait patiently for morning.

I am interrupted by a lone shadow, sneaking down the newly-built road. I am alert at once. I try to scream, to make noise, but as usual nothing works. Then, all of a sudden, there is a dark-skinned man under Susan's window. I dash over.

I scream. He doesn't listen.

"Get away from my house!" I wave my hands, trying to get his attention.

He cups his hand around his mouth, and calls softly, the sound almost identical to an Owl. Then I see the window open, and Susan's pale, beautiful face pops out of the window. He lights up, smiling widely and beckons to her. She holds up her hand, her lips silently mouthing one second.

She pops out of the window, placing her feet delicately on the roof of our entryway. He comes closer, and she jumps into his brown hands. She laughs, and I notice that the girlish figure I remember seems to have been replaced by a woman. They look at each other fondly, and he brushes away the stray blonde curl that falls on her forehead, a gesture that seems familiar to me. She kisses his chocolate brown lips. They disappear down the road moments later, my little Susan still in her nightgown.

November, 1916.

I hear shouting from the house.

"It's my choice, father, I love him!" the girl cried.

"It doesn't matter how you feel, he is a man of color!" the father shouted back, trying to get his daughter to see reason.

"I want to marry him, he the closest thing I have had to a friend in a while!" I could hear her quiet, desperate sobs.

"I understand how you feel, but you simply cannot marry that kind of man"

"What if your parents stopped you from marrying mom just because of who she was?" She continued, "What if someone told you she would die in childbirth, would you still have married her?"

After that, I heard nothing but silence.

May 1919

The day was beautiful. The aging house was surrounded by people I thought I should know, but then at the same time, they were strangers. Everyone was seated on the lawn in pretty white chairs, a marvelous white arch at the front with the beaming couple beneath it. Almost all of the women were crying into handkerchiefs. The man from the house sat proudly in the front row while his daughter, dressed in white, her golden hair in a long braid, exclaimed with no nerves: "I do." Her lover looked back at her, his mouth curving into a joyful smile.

September 1925

She walks out of the old house in a knee-length dress, her bare arms cradling a little blue bundle. She smiles, breathing in the fresh air for the first time in months. The bundle cries, and she shushes it softly. "Hush, my beautiful little boy, my John."

At the mention of his name, I perk up, foggy memories barely touching the surface. Was this my daughter, and that little bundle my grandson? Susan looked over behind the lone tree, its leaves just beginning to turn yellow, and gazed at the two stones silhouetted on the hill.

October 1940

Everything is different. The house grows old as the family matures. A middle-aged couple with two sons and a daughter replaced the lone father and daughter I had watched for so long. The eldest son has black hair and looks exactly like his father. The daughter has brown hair and dark skin. The other son, however, looks like his mother, the blond curls framing his round childish face. He looks exactly like someone else I know. I just can't remember... I perk up to find the whole family outside of the old house with peeling paint. The eldest son pleads with his mom, something about going to war.

"I don't want to be left behind!" he protests.

"No, I will not have it!" the woman says, her face stern, the shallow wrinkles quivering. Her voice quiets down. "Isn't one enough?" she whispers.

The young man sighs as the father comes out, dressed in a uniform of some sort, a brown bag over his shoulder. The mother looks on sadly.

"Promise you will be safe?" The man does not say any words, and just kisses her softly. He leads her to the car, and the children follow. The car speeds off. When they come back, the father's gone, and the mother is sobbing.

March 1962

It's the middle of the night. There are a group of boys outside the house. I don't know why they are there. It doesn't matter to me. I suddenly hear the pelting of eggs against the peeling paint, and someone yells:

"That's what you get for mixing things that aren't supposed to be mixed, bi-racial shit!"

A man with pepper-white hair and a woman with several wrinkles peer out of the window of the old house. They shut their window, and the light turns off. The cars speed away. I wonder what that was all about.

April 1980

The people are packing up all of her belongings. The old woman looks on, tears in her eyes. Most of the cardboard boxes go into a big vehicle. Some go in a small car. It takes three days to completely empty the crumbling house.



“Why?” the old woman asks, tears in her eyes.

“The house isn’t safe anymore, Mom.”

“I’ve lived here all my life, it is perfectly safe.” A tall man with short blond hair embraces her and leads her over to the car. She pauses, shakes him off, and walks slowly up behind a tree stump to a small hill with three stones silhouetted on it. She kisses each of them, and with one final gaze, turns.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

September 1980

A huge crash wakes me from my trance. The house is now a pile of rubble surrounded by huge, beeping vehicles. Dust covers everything, including the four gravestones on the hill. Then all of a sudden, I am drifting into oblivion.

Sleepwalker

By Haley Marie Corning

My darling sleepwalker
You say you're awake.
I, however, know your fate
Because
We lose, destroy, crush
Bring mountains down to bedrock
And with nothing else to run back to
We settle to sleepwalk
Just souls bound to walk in endless hindsight.



Morning Summer

By John Gray



The Other Fairy Godmother

By Alexandra Lazar

The girl stood in her stepmother's pumpkin patch, her ragged dress dirty from kneeling in the soil, as she stared at the woman in shock. On this evening, every other maiden in the small village of Ashford—in fact, every girl in the whole kingdom of Charmington—had dressed in her finest gown and travelled to the castle for a Grand Ball. Only Ella was left behind with nothing but chores to look forward to. She had been weeding the patch when the woman appeared out of thin air, wearing a dress that sparkled with silvery starlight, so bright that Ella could hardly bear to look at it. With a kind smile on her grandmotherly face, the woman waved a magic wand. Within moments, Ella's rags had been transformed into a magnificent gown and a pumpkin had swelled into a gold-trimmed coach, complete with horses and footmen who looked confused that they were no longer rodents nibbling upon the pumpkin vines.

"And now, for the finishing touch," the woman said with another radiant smile. With a twirl of her wand, a pair of shoes appeared on the ground in front of Ella's feet. Made of a transparent material that reflected the woman's twinkling glow like a prism, they cast rainbow reflections onto the brown dirt beneath them. "Glass slippers," the woman explained when Ella cast her a questioning look. "Trust me; they'll be important later."

Ella bent down, gazing at the sparkling shoes. As she reached towards them in wonder, her arm brushed up against one of the patch's few remaining weeds. The instant that her skin grazed the twisted little plant's black thorns, she fell to the ground. The slippers shattered as her weight crushed them into glimmering dust; the magical glow faded from the scene. Now only moonlight illuminated Ella's pale face and closed eyes as she lay crumpled on the ground, her new gown now as rumpled and dirty as her old dress had been. At first the woman did nothing, frozen in shock. "Ella?" she whispered as she crept hesitantly towards the girl's still body. With a cautious hand, she reached out and touched Ella's wrist, sighing with relief when she felt a pulse. Not dead, then... just unconscious. Or asleep. "This isn't how the story is supposed to go!" she cried into the empty night. "How...?"

As if in answer, a shadowed figure materialized in the pumpkin patch and thrust a blackened, warped wand towards the woman, who was propelled backwards by an unseen wave of force. With her out of the way, the figure stooped over the girl's body, cackling with satisfaction. "Cursed Thorn; works every time."

"Go back where you came from, whoever you are!" the woman declared, getting shakily to her feet.

"Awww, look at you putting on a show. But you're not so tough under all those sparkles, are you, Virtuosa?" the figure quipped. She whipped off



her ghostly cloak, revealing a woman's sharp face. Her dark hair was streaked with gray; only her sparkling black eyes had not been muted by age. But Virtuosa would know that face anywhere.

"Harriet?" Virtuosa gasped.

"You know that it's Horrifica now!" Horrifica exploded. She plunged her wand towards Virtuosa again, but Virtuosa—prepared this time—countered the blast of magic with her own wand.

"You shouldn't be here, sister. You know the rules as well as I." Virtuosa drew herself up, despite the quiver in her voice. "I am the Fairy Godmother in this story. You have no power here."

"Tell that to Sleeping Beauty over there," Horrifica laughed.

"The rules of magic clearly state..."

"Who cares about the rules anyway?" Horrifica interrupted, giving Ella's sleeping body a nudge with her foot. "Anyway, I'm doing the poor girl a favor."

"This is no favor! If she doesn't go to that ball—"

"So what? What's she missing out on? A dance, a prince? Big deal."

"How can you say that when you know the fate that awaits her if she stays?" Virtuosa demanded. Horrifica casually tossed her wand from one hand to another, not responding.

"You'd prefer for her to remain her stepmother's slave? Working her fingers raw until her back is stooped and her spirit is broken?"

"Maybe." Horrifica shrugged noncommittedly.

"You can't mean that," Virtuosa begged, irrationally hoping that Horrifica would come to her senses. "This is Ella's chance to find True Love!"

"True love isn't always so true," Horrifica murmured darkly. Virtuosa's heart sank. They both knew that she wasn't talking about Ella anymore.

Even as children, Virtuosa and Harriet knew that their destinies had been set the moment that they were born. As the elder sister and heir to the Fairy Throne, Harriet was fated to become the Fairy Queen, ruling Charmington alongside the mortal royal family. Virtuosa, the younger, would become the Fairy Godmother, responsible for leading the people of Charmington to their Happy Endings. These facts were not to be debated; in the custom of the Fairy clan, the girls' futures were inevitably determined by birth order. Even as Harriet—clearly the more talented of the two in matters of magic—was forced to endure etiquette lessons and dress fittings, while Virtuosa spent her days practicing spells, neither sister dared to defy destiny. And so the sisters grew up: Virtuosa poring over the Book of Fate and memorizing the paths to Happily Ever After that were dictated within it, and Harriet suffering through an endless stream of royal engagements. Worst of all were the hours that Harriet spent with Prince Vincent. As everyone knew, tradition insisted that the Fairy Queen marry a mortal prince of Charmington and, as decreed by the Book of Fate, her parents had selected the younger prince as Harriet's suitor.

Vincent's entitled ways frustrated Harriet to no end, but she forced a smile onto her face around him. This was her Happily Ever After. Her fate. Her destiny. And there was nothing she could do about it.

They were married on her 21st birthday, and it didn't take long for Vincent to reveal his true colors. Worse than merely spoiled, he was manipulative. Selfish. Cruel. Any affection he had shown her was a façade, a way to get a throne of his own despite his status as the younger son. But she was trapped, for a terrible price awaited those who defied the Book of Fate. If she left Vincent and abandoned her destiny, the Fairy Throne would be empty. Chaos and destruction would fall upon the kingdom, and it would be all her fault. So she endured his insults, countering them in her head with a constant stream of instructions—Laugh demurely at his jokes. Curtsey delicately when he enters the room. Be the queen you are destined to be. Don't let them down. Whatever you do, don't let them down—until one day, after decades of marriage, it all became too much. She had no choice: she had to do the one thing that Fairies had always been warned against. She disobeyed the Book of Fate, becoming Horrifica in the process. And Virtuosa never saw her again... until today.

"All princes aren't like Vincent! Ella will find happiness with her prince! It's written in the Book—"

"The Book is wrong!" Horrifica spat venomously.

"It is not our place to question the Stories!" Virtuosa shouted, her voice rising angrily.

"Not yours, maybe, but mine? We both know who's the more powerful fairy here."

"Power has nothing to do with it! You're not Ella's Fairy Godmother. I am."

"Well, you're doing a heck of a job. She's clearly having a blast." Horrifica gestured towards the sleeping girl's body with a laugh.

"It's my responsibility to lead Ella to her Happily Ever After!" Virtuosa exclaimed.

A terrible look passed over Horrifica's face. Virtuosa backed up and nearly tripped over a pumpkin, suddenly afraid despite herself. There was no sign of Harriet in that sinister face—only Horrifica, the dreaded fairy with powers that far exceeded her own, untroubled by morals and untouched by remorse, full of the darkness that punished those poor souls who chose to defy the Book. No affection for her younger sister shone from her eyes: just hardened fury.

"What's so happy about it?" Horrifica snarled. "Being trapped in some drafty castle for the rest of her life, squeezing into dresses that are two sizes too small and always being told that you're not polite enough, not pretty enough, not royal enough..." Horrifica was ranting now, her eyes burning with a hatred that had nothing to do with the girl lying in front of them.



“The old stories have been the same for too long,” Horrifica hissed. “It’s time that someone gave them an update. And since you’re too scared to do it —”

“That is not your choice to make. I am the Fairy Godmother, not you.”

“Who says there has to be just one?”

“You know who.”

A satisfied smile stole across Horrifica’s sharp features. “Oh, you mean this?” With a jerk of her wand, a cloud of magic—sparking with electricity—hovered above her hand. When it cleared, she held a book, its cover warped and wrinkled with the age of centuries. “There’s a new Fairy Godmother in town, sister. And she’s not afraid to change the stories’ endings. Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s a prince in the Dark Forest looking for a girl in a glass coffin, and I’ve got to send him in the wrong direction.”

Virtuosa lunged at the book, but with a terrible laugh, Horrifica waved her wand again. Instantly, Horrifica—the Book of Fate grasped tightly in her hand—disappeared with a crack of lightning so dazzling that Virtuosa stumbled, momentarily blinded. When her vision cleared, she was once again alone in the dark pumpkin patch. Ella’s sleeping body breathed peacefully at her feet, and for a moment, Virtuosa envied her tranquility. The girl had no idea that her world had been turned upside down. And now it was up to Virtuosa to solve it... because if she didn’t, if she couldn’t stop Horrifica, everyone in Charmington would live Unhappily Ever After.

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