

The Manatee

THE MANATEE

Dorothy Crawford Meryl Fawn Healy Susan Grant

Joshua Walker Jennifer Michelle Fryar Araxie Yeretsian

Heather Lynn Atwood Andrea L. Aste Alex Neely

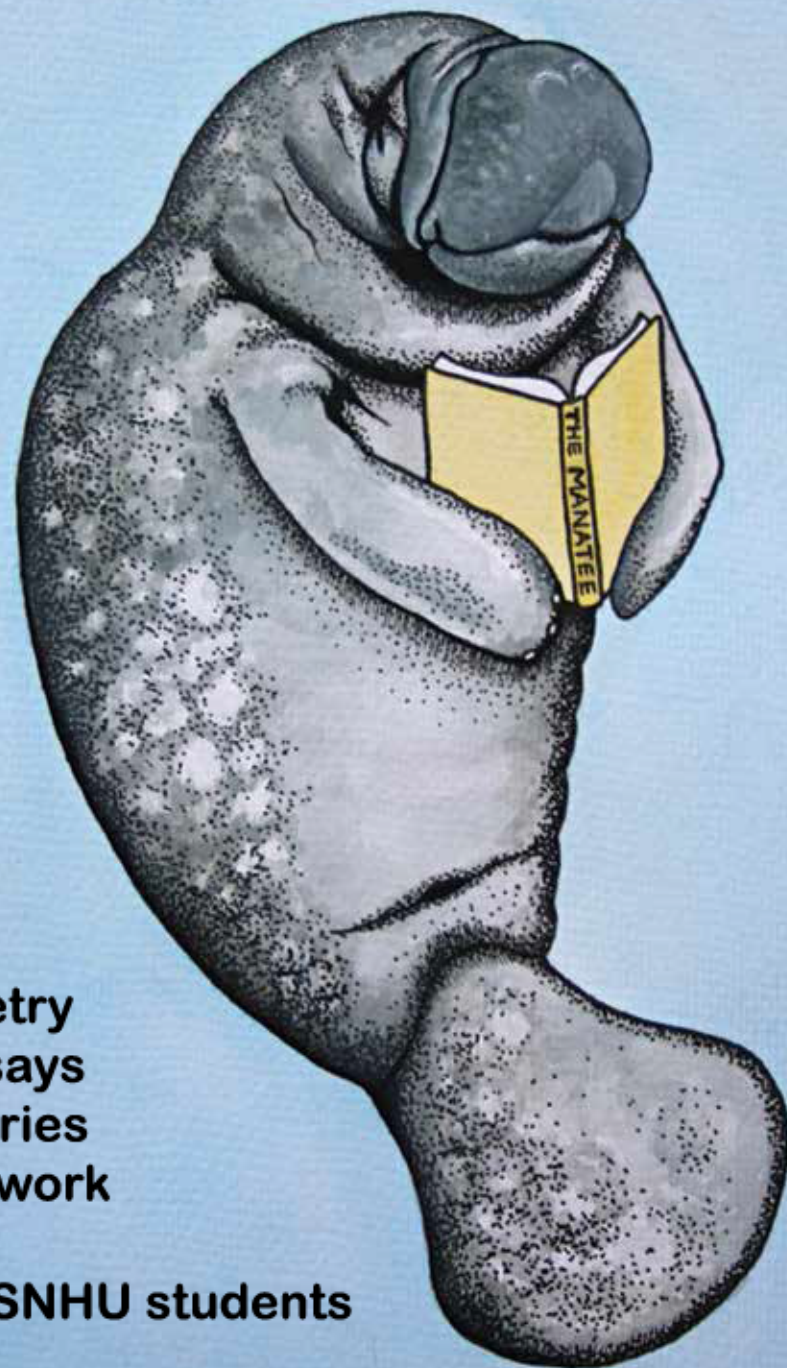
Amber Lynn Revis Rachael Hali Cassandra Shawver

Dahvin Greenfield Dania Al Hussein Hilary Hirtle

Brande N. McCleese Katie Smith Carolyn Haskin

Cheryl A. Loux Timothy Liddick Lauren Ashley Ferraro

Alanna Pevear Kristie Mahoney



Poetry
Essays
Stories
Artwork

by SNHU students

SPRING 2014

The Manatee



Seventh Annual

Spring 2014

Copyright 2014 edited by Kristie Mahoney and Alanna Pevear

Layout by Kristie Mahoney and Alanna Pevear

Front Cover Design by Susan Grant

All pieces in this journal were printed with permission from the author. Any works enclosed may be reprinted in another journal with permission from the editors.

Published by Town & Country Reprographics

230 North Main St.

Concord, NH 03301

603.226.2828

WHAT'S THE MANATEE?

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

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

THE MANATEES

Chief Editors:

Kristie Mahoney
Alanna Pevear

Copy Editors:

Kristie Mahoney
Alanna Pevear

Advisor:

Allison Cummings

Editorial Board:

Andrea Diminick
Angela Hiott
Autumn Byers
Brian Neves
Heather Steadham
James Seals
Jessica Sayers
Judith Beaulieu
Karen Rizkallah
Lauren Ferraro
Lisa Capozzi
Martha Schoonmaker
Meryl Healy
Mika Sugano
Olympia Jones
Sarah Lowry
Susie Whitmer
Suzanne Wratni
Tyler Fish
Vanessa Dunn
William Green

Editor's Note

The Manatee has seen great talent throughout its years in publication—this year is no different. We have seen authors and artists thrive and become better, their work becoming one of the best our editorial board has seen, and we have published work that deserves to be recognized.

Southern New Hampshire University has grown in size over the years, and as such, so have the number of submissions and the amount of interest in our precious little journal. This year we have spectacular usage of graphic design, longer fiction pieces, and poetry that will take your breath away.

We sincerely thank everyone who was involved in creating this year's *Manatee* and wish you all happy reading.

Alanna Pevear
Kristie Mahoney
Chief Editors

Table of Contents:

- 9** **Always There Was Music** – Dorothy Crawford
- 19** **Old Photographs** – Meryl Healy
- 20** **Untitled** – Susan Grant
- 21** **Balance** – Joshua Walker
- 28** **Daddy’s Home** – Jennifer Fryar
- 30** **Robotic** – Araxie Yeretsian
- 31** **Black Coffee** – Heather Lyn Atwood
- 37** **Finding Grandpa Jones** – Andrea Aste
- 39** **Untitled** – Susan Grant
- 40** **Save Me from My Enemies** – Alexander Neely
- 42** **Morning Coffee** – Amber Revis
- 43** **Orchid** – Rachael Hali
- 44** **Freeing Narcissus** – Cassandra Shawver
- 52** **Kerplunk** – Dahvin Greenfield
- 53** **Untitled** – Susan Grant
- 54** **The Big Brown Box** – Dania Al Hussein
- 61** **Montana Autumn** – Amber Revis

- 63** **Looking Through** – Hilary Hirtle
- 64** **Watching him Clear the Desk from the Bed**
–Jennifer Fryar
- 65** **The Battle** – Brande McCleese
- 66** **Untitled** – Susan Grant
- 67** **From Home** – Katie Smith
- 69** **Remember...?** – Hilary Hirtle
- 70** **Untitled** – Carolyn Haskin
- 71** **Chopped Meat** – Cheryl Loux
- 76** **Rubik’s Cube Poem** - Timothy Liddick
- 77** **Untitled** – Susan Grant
- 78** **Life, Accepted** – Lauren Ferraro
- 81** **Dementia Fall** – Andrea Aste
- 82** **Untitled** – Carolyn Haskin
- 83** **Excerpt from *Ring of Fire*** –
Alanna Pevear & Kristie Mahoney
- 95** **Contributors**

Always There Was Music

Dorothy Crawford

I can't remember the first time I heard my father sing.

There is no one moment that stands out in my mind, no one song that jumps out at me, no one memory that screams at me, "This is it! This is where it started!" As with so many events in my childhood, I have no conscious memory of a time before I knew he could. I imagine that he always sang, since before my birth, and why would one day, one instance, one song have struck me as more memorable than any other when I was that young?

He'd sing us to sleep at night, after our prayers, and he'd sing us awake in the morning, while Mom made breakfast. He'd walk around the house singing with the radio, or serenading us with cartoon show theme songs, or making up the words he didn't know to the *Sesame Street* tunes that he did. He sang to us when we were sick, when we scraped our knees, when we had the chicken pox. In my father's world, there was no event so traumatic, no hurt so terrible, that it couldn't be soothed with a song.

On a sweltering August day in 1978, we moved from the large city that had been my home for the first five years of my life to the small country town that would be my home for the rest of it. He sang to us and with us the entire way. I know that my hand got closed in the car door that day, both because I remember it and because I still have the scar. I've been told that I spent the whole drive curled up in my mother's lap crying in pain and clutching my tiny cast, but I don't remember that. I don't remember much about that trip – where we ate, how long it took, how I felt seeing my new home for the first time. I do remember being miserable that I was leaving without my friends and not understanding why we had to move to some place I'd never heard of before.

But I remember the sound of my father's voice singing along with the radio, and I remember how safe and right I felt because of it.

Our new house was quite a shock to a five-year-old city girl like me. It was surrounded on three sides by corn fields, and it had an honest-to-God dirt road running in front of it. It was twice as big as the home we'd just left, with two floors, two bathrooms, a basement and a barn. It had a wide wrap-around porch, too, that went from the back door all the way to the front. My Dad took one look at it and piled us all back into the car for a trip to the local farm and home store to buy a porch swing.

It wasn't a fancy swing, just two black pieces of pipe, some narrow, unfinished boards with fake wormholes in them, and a couple of chains. It definitely wasn't anything impressive, nothing special enough to stick in most people's memories, but that porch swing would become, over the next weeks, months, and years, the center of our family life.

We kids wanted to run and play in our new yard, because it was a million times bigger than any yard we'd ever seen, but it was August in Illinois, and it was just too hot. So we spent most of our days in the house, with all the windows open, heavy drapes drawn closed to keep out the sun, in front of the fans that were scattered all around the living and dining rooms. But in the evening, when the sun went down, we were finally turned loose in the yard with our flashlights. Mom and Dad came out with us, but instead of joining in, they sat on the new porch swing and watched us. Dad would nurse a few beers and Mom drank her iced tea while they talked about whatever parents talked about when the children weren't paying attention.

One night, Dad brought his guitar with him.

At first, it was just in the backs of our minds, a soft soundtrack for our games of dark tag and keep away. Soon, we were paying more attention to the sound of our father's voice than we were to the lightning bugs we'd been so fascinated by only minutes before. It wasn't long after that we abandoned all pretense

of playing and arranged ourselves in a rough semi-circle at our father's feet.

And that was when it started.

It became our evening ritual. Every night during the summer, if Dad wasn't at work, we'd all eat our dinner as quickly as possible and without protest, no matter what it was. We'd do the dishes without arguing about who had to wash, dry, or put away. We'd take our baths as fast as we could, so fast that sometimes Mom had to send us back in because there was no way two minutes was long enough to get clean. We'd get in our pajamas, pull back our beds, and as soon as the sun was down, we'd go out to the porch.

It was our shelter from oppressive August heat, our escape from the sun that kept us inside all day long, our small rebellion under the moon. And it was there, on that front porch, on that creaky porch swing, under the yellow glow of the porch light and the rustling leaves of the giant oak tree, that we learned who our Dad was, who he'd been, and how truly, madly, and deeply in love with our mom he always would be.

At first, it was just the music. He started with the songs that we all knew, the ones we could sing along with. We almost always started with "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," because he said it was a good way to open. Then came "BINGO," "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmitt," and "Comin' Round the Mountain." No matter how many times we sang them, there was always at least one of us who messed up the words – not always accidentally – and that was Dad's cue to launch into one of his silly, made-up songs that matched the original in name and tune only.

The end of August rolled around, and school started, and Mom said that we couldn't do the front porch anymore, because it was too late and we had to be asleep before 8pm. Dad pleaded with her to let us do a shortened version, only three or four songs instead of nine or ten, and only until the end of September. Mom finally agreed, but only with the stipulation that we start singing different

songs, because she was getting tired of listening to the same ones every night.

Dad's song choices didn't disappoint. At least, they didn't disappoint his children; Mom wasn't too thrilled.

The first time I heard the song "You Dirty Ol' Egg-Suckin' Dog," was on that front porch. I believed that my Dad was the only person who'd ever sung "One Piece at a Time," and I was surprised when I heard Johnny Cash do it on the radio. And even though I knew that Kenny Rogers sang "Lucille" and Roy Clark sang "Yesterday, When I Was Young," I was convinced that my Dad sang them better. Mom gave him no end of grief when he started singing "Elvira," "She Got the Goldmine," and "Jose Cuervo," but she laughed along with us anyway.

But by that point, as much as we loved the singing and the laughing, it wasn't the songs that kept us staring up at our father, wide-eyed and innocent, from our semi-circle at his feet. It was what he said between those songs that captured our attention, and our imaginations, like nothing else ever could have done.

Our father – our Dad – had been a musician. A real one.

He'd started playing the guitar since the day he'd snuck off into the attic with his father's prized six-string and started strumming around on it. After a few days, his older brother tattled on him, and Dad was convinced that he was going to get in trouble. Instead, his Dad – my grandfather – asked to hear what he could do. And with no formal instruction, no teaching whatsoever, working entirely from memory of what he'd heard his kindergarten teacher sing, he played "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

He was given his own guitar, a much smaller version of my grandpa's, for his sixth birthday.

There were no guitar lessons for him, because money was too tight. Grandpa taught him what he could, and when my Dad's ability to play that guitar surpassed Grandpa's ability to teach him, they switched instruments. By the time my father was eleven, he knew how to play the guitar, the banjo, and the ukelele. Grandpa

owned a violin, an antique that he'd gotten from his own father, but my Dad never played it like one. He played it like a fiddle.

He played them all without knowing how to read a single note of music.

When he started junior high, my grandmother decided that it was time for him to learn music for real, so she signed him up for the school band. My Dad hated every minute of it. He still didn't know how to read music.

All of this information was shared with us freely. He was particularly proud of the way his twelve-year-old self informed his band teacher that knowing how to read music was a stupid requirement for being in a band. He cringed when he told us how angry our grandma was when she found out that he quit, but he grinned when he told us how much our grandpa had laughed.

"Quit yellin' at that boy, Lorene. He's doin' just fine without knowin' how to read music. The world doesn't need another French Horn player, anyway."

When we asked our grandparents, they both confirmed to us that our Dad's story was absolutely true. Grandma insisted that she hadn't yelled nearly that much, though. When Grandpa laughed, and Grandma didn't smack his arm for it, we were pretty sure that Dad and Grandpa weren't the ones making things up.

We didn't stop going out on the porch at the end of September. Or the end of October. As the days got shorter and the air grew colder, we would go out earlier. In the dead of winter, when the temperature didn't go above thirty in the middle of the day and six inches of snow covered the yard, we'd abandon the porch and our swing in favor of the living room and the couch in front of the fire. But always – always – there was music.

And there were the stories.

The details of his life as a teenage musician, playing his guitar and singing for ten dollars a week and all the beer he could drink – half a decade before he was old enough to legally drink it – were given to us sparingly. He wasn't necessarily embarrassed, just filled with regret. He didn't want us to look at his life and

decide that it was something that we wanted to emulate. Of course, as is usually the case with the best laid plans of mice and fathers, trying to keep his past hidden from us only served to make it more magical, more romantic, and more appealing.

What daughter wouldn't marvel at a story of her father, at her own age, playing a guitar for the first time? What son wouldn't be amazed to hear the tales of the barroom that existed only in his imagination: the smoke heavy in the air; loud, rowdy men laughing and shouting; the darkness broken only in the places where neon blinked and where one single spotlight lit the stage that his father had once stood on? What child wouldn't be awed and amazed at the stories of the road – the buses, the towns, the crowds, the venues – or at learning that her father had gone on that tour with The Ink Spots, a real, honest-to-God group whose songs she'd actually heard played on the oldies radio station her mother loved so much?

Every word he spoke about those mythical years was a gift. Those words, offered up in the space between songs and drinks of his beer, were everything. He could never have known, never even imagined, just how perfect and cherished and right each one was to us.

As we aged, so did our Dad in the stories he told. He was fifteen and playing his guitar until his fingers bled. He was sixteen and had just joined a band for the first time. He was seventeen and dressed like Buddy Holly, and the girls followed him down the halls of the high school. Then he was eighteen, and he met our mother.

"She was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen, your mom."

"Even prettier than that model you dated?" my girl-crazy eleven-year-old brother asked.

"Oh, yeah. A whole lot prettier."

"Prettier than the cheerleader?" my eternally cynical ten-year-old sister asked.

"Not just prettier. More beautiful."

"Did you fall in love with her?" the ever-romantic six-year-old me asked.

"First time I laid eyes on her."

And so began our journey into our parents' love affair with each other – from the first time he asked her out, to the fifth, to the tenth, when she finally said yes. From the first time he tried to give her his class ring, to the third, to the sixth, when she finally accepted it. From the first time he asked her to listen to him sing, to the second, to the third, when he ignored the fact that she said, "No," and sang for her anyway.

"I was dancing, with my darling, to the Tennessee Waltz ..."

The smile that appeared on our mother's face the first time our father sang that song for us lit her up like nothing we'd ever seen. For those few moments, while he sang and she stood up from her spot at his side on the porch swing and started to dance, we didn't see our mom. We didn't see the woman who told us to clean our rooms, or yelled at us for getting all of the towels in the bathroom wet from splashing in the tub, or threatened to feed us liver and onions every night if we didn't eat our tuna casserole.

In that instant, for the first time in our lives, we saw the girl our father fell in love with, and when we looked at him, we saw the boy who fell in love with her.

The first year in our new hometown seemed magical to us. It seemed to stretch into eternity, days on end, each one better than the one before. We loved our house, our yard, the woods and fields that we played in. We thought it would never change. We thought it would last forever.

At the end of that first year, our landlord decided that we had to leave our big house in the country. We moved into a much smaller one half a mile further up the road. We were cramped, uncomfortable at being shoved so closely together after having had so much room to breathe, but it wasn't the inside of the house that was important. It had a front porch. It had beams to hold our porch swing.

And wherever Dad went, there was music.

Most nights were spent on the porch, so long as Dad wasn't at work. Then it became a few nights a week, when Dad wasn't sleeping ... and sometimes we noticed that he'd been sleeping a lot since we'd moved. The years passed by, and though none of us really saw or understood what was happening, our nights on the porch started to slip further and further away. My brother had a football game, or my older sister had a band concert, or I had a school play, or my little sister had a playdate down the street. More and more, there was something else to do, something more important to pay attention to. Our few nights a week became two, which became Saturday, which became two or three times a month.

Our father started drinking more and sleeping more, had a stroke, lost his job, and moved out of the house. Our mother went to work at McDonalds, then to school, then to work as a nurse at the hospital. My brother joined the army. My older sister got a job at a factory forty miles away. Dad sent himself to rehab, stopped drinking, and came home. We buried Grandma and Grandpa just three months apart. We moved out of the tiny house in the country and into a much larger one in town. I met the man who would one day become my husband. My little sister joined the school band, and the drama club, and the chorus, and the church choir.

With everything else that was going on in our lives, none of us noticed what we had lost until it had been gone for years.

It wasn't until a Christmas gathering, years later, when three of the four of us were married and had children of our own, that I finally thought to ask, "What ever happened to those nights on the porch, Dad? Why don't you sing anymore?"

He sighed, his eyes filled with tears, and he looked at the floor. "I can't," he said. "Singing, playing my guitar ... I've tried. Because I miss it. But I can't do it and stay sober. I just don't know how to play that guitar without a beer in my hand."

None of us ever asked again.

I can't remember the first time I heard my father sing, but I do remember the last.

It was another Christmas gathering, five years later, when my father suddenly stood up from his chair and walked upstairs to his bedroom. He hadn't said a word to any of us, and none of us knew what he was doing. He came back down with his guitar in his hands, walked out to the enclosed front porch, and sat down on the bench under the giant windows.

Then he started singing "The Tennessee Waltz."

His four children looked at our children, and we saw the looks in their eyes, the smiles and awe on their faces, and we recognized ourselves. We cried silently for what we had lost, and in happiness for what we knew our children were gaining. Our mother took her place at Dad's side, and she shared our tears, but hers weren't tears of joy. Hers were tears of sadness that none of us would understand for another two months.

Our father had lung cancer, and he'd found out about it just before Christmas. He didn't tell us until a family birthday party in March. He wasn't seeking treatment for it, and he wouldn't have told us about it at all, if not for the fact that he'd lost a noticeable amount of weight in a very short time. But it was one of his last wishes – because he knew it would have been ours, if we'd known to ask – that at least one time in their lives, his grandchildren hear him sing.

The priest that officiated his funeral detested our choice of music for the visitation, but none of us cared. It was our tribute to our father, the last time we would see his face in this world, and we were going to send him off in a way that would make him happy. If that meant playing Statler Brothers gospel songs and silly movie theme songs, if that meant making the priest glare at us when we laughed at the theme from *Blazing Saddles*, if that meant making the old church ladies roll their eyes when we sang along with "Dirty Ol' Egg Suckin' Dog," then so be it.

"The Tennessee Waltz" was the first song we played.

They say that when you lose someone, you start to forget them over time. They say that the voice memory is the first thing to go, and I suppose, in a way, they're right. I can't really remember the way my father sounded when he talked. I can't remember the sound of his laugh. After all these years, I have trouble even calling his face to mind.

But the sound of him singing, the smile on his face as he serenaded my mother and watched her dance ... that is something that I will never – can never – forget.

Our father was never a rich man, and he didn't leave us much in the way of material things when he passed away. My brother got his guitar. My older sister got his banjo. My little sister got his keyboard. And me? I got the violin, because he said that of the four of us, I was the one most likely to learn to play it.

My children know what my voice sounds like when I sing, because I do it all the time. I sing along with the radio in the car, cartoon theme songs, *Sesame Street* tunes, and silly, nonsense songs that I make up to sing while I'm making breakfast. Everything is a potential song; everything is music. I still haven't learned to play that violin, but when I do, I'll play it like a fiddle. I'll take the love of music that my grandfather gave my father, that my father gave to me, and I'll pass it on to a whole new generation.

And always – always – there will be music.

Old Photographs

Meryl Healy

As I turn the dusty pages,
I feel a cloud of musty air.
Deep inside my sorrow rages,
as these old photos take me there.

These places we were together,
living, laughing, loving-- we two.
This feeling-- so hard to sever,
yearning for one more day with you.

Joyful birthday celebrations,
taking grandchildren to the zoo.
All the glorious vacations,
these pictures keep me there with you.

The photos lose clear distinction,
as somber tears begin to flow.
They tumble from my blurred vision,
on to the pages down below.

Oh Mama, how my sorrow rains,
on broken branches from our tree.
These pictures do not ease my pain,
they are so hard for me to see.

Photographs fade with passing time,
I am praying the hurt will too.
Oh, sweet, "Dearest", mother of mine,
Devoid-- fading
without
you...

Untitled

Susan Grant



Balance

Joshua Walker

Henry awoke with a start. He rolled over and glanced bleary-eyed at the clock on his bedside table; it was still an hour before the alarm was set to go off. Through the partially closed blinds, he could see the night sky beginning to lose its daily battle with the morning, the inky blue-black giving way to the steely gray shades of dawn. It would be Henry's last dawn; today was the day that Henry was going to die.

It was this fact more than any other that motivated Henry to leave the comfort of his warm bed so long before the prescribed time. That, and his uncomfortably full bladder.

Henry flicked on the bathroom light, squinting at its sudden brightness, and proceeded to relieve himself; he sighed contently as he finished and flushed the toilet. It may well be the last pee he'd ever have and he was determined to enjoy it. As much as one could enjoy such things, anyhow. Once his bladder was blissfully empty, he staggered, still half asleep, to the sink to wash his hands the way his mother had always taught him. Funny, the things that stick with you no matter how old you get: never hit girls; righty-tighty, lefty-loosy; and wash your hands after using the toilet. He looked up into the face that stared back from the mirror. It was a deceptively old face. There was a time in history when someone who looked as old as he did was said to be on the downward slope of middle age. If they discovered you were older than you looked, you were said to be aging gracefully. By all outward appearances, Henry looked to be somewhere just north of sixty-years-old. In reality, today was Henry's two-hundred-and-thirteenth birthday. In times past, Henry would have been held as a marvel, an impossibility, or even something touched by the divine. But in the world of today, people's life expectancy pushed the boundaries of conventional life spans.

The number of bicentennials like Henry ranged somewhere in the tens of millions. Small compared to humanity's population of seventeen-and-a-half billion, but then again, there just hadn't been enough time yet for more citizens to reach their second century. There was a whole generation less than two decades away from just that achievement. And old Henry wasn't even the oldest out there. Some old-timers still lived from Generation One, the first generation that managed to stave off death. The oldest confirmed human being in history is an Austrian man named Gregor Schmidt. He recently celebrated his three-hundred-and-fourth birthday.

One may wonder why, if people could measure their life spans in centuries instead of decades, Henry is going to die at the relatively young age of two-hundred-and-thirteen when he is the very picture of good health and could expect, barring unfortunate accidents, to live for potentially a great many more centuries. The answer is The Balance. In a world where natural death may take hundreds of years, the generations begin to pile up like the derailed cars of a train. Traditionally, one generation dies and makes way for the next. But in a world where death has been curbed indefinitely, certain safeguards have to be installed to regulate population growth.

By the late 21st century, mankind had begun to approach its population threshold. The regular sleeper ships ferrying citizens to the new Martian colonies helped to relieve some of the pressure for a time, as did the lunar settlements. But the Earth was still becoming dangerously overcrowded. And then, in 2102, gene therapy was perfected in humans and people simply shed the terminal disease that was age. With illness all but eradicated in the previous decades, people just stopped dying and the planet was presented with a fresh problem. When age and disease are no longer an issue, population explodes. Once the fifteen billionth citizen was born, so too was The Balance, which stated that for every three births, two citizens over the age of one-hundred-and-twenty must die. Thus, a death rate is maintained and population growth is regulated at a more manageable pace.

Upon reaching the age of one-hundred-and-twenty, each citizen's name is entered automatically into a lottery. Every new pregnancy draws from this collection of names and chooses one at random. This is to ensure both parties have the opportunity to meet one another prior to the child's birth, which is also the day of the Balancing ceremony. The two families are forever bonded and often times go on to remain close for generations.

Nine months ago, Henry's number had been drawn by the pregnancy of Alison Stengel and her husband James. Henry had met with them many times and liked the young couple very much. They were sweet, just beginning their lives. Henry had no regrets. He'd lived a long life, sired two children, five grandchildren, and a great many more descendants all the way down to a seventh-generation grandson born earlier in the year. His wife had been subject to the Balancing some eighty years before, just five years after she turned the qualifying age of one-hundred-and-twenty. Henry missed her still, but if the religions of the world were to be believed, he'd soon be with her again. Today was the day Alison Stengel would give birth to her baby, and Henry, in the next bed over, would breathe his last.

Henry dressed and took a slow tour of the apartment he'd lived in for the last seventy years. He had lived alone all those decades but had never felt lonely. He was good friends with his neighbors and his family was only a short call away. His children, grandchildren, and even some of his great-grandchildren had been after him for years to move in with one of them. But he liked his privacy and his independence. And he liked to remind them that even his youngest great-grandchild was over the one-hundred-and-twenty year mark. Any of them could be chosen for Balancing at any time. It would be easier for all parties if a modest distance was kept. Just last year, Freddie, one of his closest grandsons, had been Balanced. It had been very painful for Henry. He shuddered to think how much worse it would have struck him had they lived together for the last decades of Freddie's life.

He paused in the hallway outside his bedroom and ran his fingers tenderly over a large framed photograph of his late wife. It was taken when he had surprised her with a lunar cruise for her

one-hundredth birthday. How beautiful she was, her red hair as fiery and vibrant as the day they met all those long years ago. They were married for just shy of a century. Even in a time when death is all but cured, one-hundred years of marriage is a landmark. Increasing people's life spans hadn't correlated in longer marriages, simply an increase in the number of times one could marry in the span of their long life. Couples like Henry and Jessica (Jessie to her friends) were still celebrated.

"I'll be seeing you real soon, kiddo," he said softly with that smirk that she had always loved. She told anyone who would listen that it had been that smirk that had melted her heart when she'd first met Henry as a girl of twenty.

The hallway down which he strode was positively plastered with framed images, most depicting friends and family, but more than a few were of exotic locales from around the globe. Jessica had been bitten by the travel bug early in life and had taken Henry along for the ride. And what a ride it had been, from the ancient pyramids of Egypt to the crumbling castles of Ireland to the battlefields of the American Civil War. Nothing seemed outside of her interests. And he loved her all the more for it, even if their bank account didn't. So many good times were had in his two centuries of life. Henry had lived exactly the life he'd dreamed of, full of friends and family, laughter, and good times.

By the time he'd finished the final trek around his home of seven decades, the sun was already well on its rise into the early morning sky. He checked his watch; the Stengel baby was scheduled to be delivered in less than six hours. Henry's family would assemble here at his home in another hour or two, spending all the time they could with him before he was ushered into the Balancing room, which was restricted to spouses and children of the individual being Balanced and whomsoever was witnessing the corresponding birth.

The two events were held together for a number of reasons. Firstly, the person being Balanced often developed a strong emotional bond with not just the couple but with the unborn child for whom he or she was dying. It would be cruel to deny them the right to view the next generation brought into the world. It had also

been determined that the joy of childbirth helps to ease the emotional pain of Balancing experienced by the family. The ceremony is really a celebration of life, the new and the old.

As Henry made himself the last breakfast he'd ever eat, he allowed himself, for the first time, to consider whether or not he actually *wanted* to die. He was prepared, resigned, but did he want it? Or more importantly, did he want to *live*? It wasn't a question anyone ever asked, at least not aloud. Everyone was expected to accept the Balancing once they were called. It was just the way things were, and had been for generations.

He supposed on some basic level, *nobody* wanted to die; that was, after all, why so much time and effort went into *stopping* the process of dying for as long as possible. Did Henry want to die? No, he didn't. He was burdened with the same selfish impulses as everyone else; he wanted more time with his family and friends, he wanted to experience more of the world.

Like so many before him, he wondered what marvels the future would bring. With such amazing technology that once found life only in science-fiction now a part of everyday reality, Henry could scarcely conceive the miracles of tomorrow. And he really did want to see them. There was certainly a measurable dose of frustration, even anger. But such emotions were brief, for Henry knew that the Balancing was important to the very fabric of society. If one person refused to accept it, then what would stop another from following suit? And if it caught on, the results would be disastrous. Immortality had a price, and that price was death.

So Henry drank his final cup of coffee and bit into his last piece of toast. He drove away all selfish thoughts with speculation of what the Stengel child would do with its guaranteed long life. Henry had grown quite close to the couple since he was chosen. They were smart, kind, and very much in love. It warmed his heart to know that his death would usher in a new life to such a wonderful family.

Henry was joined by his family as he was washing up his breakfast dishes: both sons and their wives, his grandchildren and their spouses, and even two of his great-granddaughters, both of whom were pushing one-hundred-and-forty. Their father had been

Henry's grandson Freddie, who had undergone the Balancing the previous year.

The time spent with his family helped to calm Henry's nerves. Though he was mentally prepared for his imminent death, knowing exactly when the end would come and watching the minutes tick off the clock had made him anxious. In many ways, he very much just wanted to get it over with.

Henry and his family spent his remaining time laughing and telling stories of years past, stories that had been told dozens of times but never seemed to get old. And as often happens when one is surrounded by the laughter and smiling faces of loved ones, the hours flew by with alarming alacrity. Before long, he received the call; Alison was expected to deliver within the hour. With a surprisingly high spirit for a man heading off to his own death, he bade a tear-filled good-bye to all but his sons, who would remain with him throughout the birth and Balancing.

The journey to the B&B center was bittersweet. He knew his sons would grieve him and his heart ached for them. What father wanted to cause his children pain? But he reminded them that death was the natural end for all things and that it was how you spent your life that mattered. He told them that he had led a good life; he had loved and been loved in return. He carried no regrets in his heart.

When they arrived at the center, Henry changed into his finest suit. He'd rarely ever had the occasion to wear one in his life and considered his Balancing to be one of those few times that warranted him looking his best. Henry was shown into the room in which the Balancing was to be carried out. Alison was nearing the end of her labor; she sat upright in a hospital bed, surrounded by attendants and midwives who eased her through the painful process. Her husband James stood by her side, holding her hand and whispering soft encouragements into her ear. His face lit up when he saw Henry.

He shook Henry's hand, then Henry's sons'. The expression of pure joy on James' face melted away any anxiety Henry felt. This was a day of celebration, not of sadness. He

offered the young man his sincerest congratulations and made his way to the made-up bed beside Alison's.

Arranged on a bedside table were framed photos of Henry's family, with a portrait of Jessica standing prominently in the forefront. Henry mounted the bed as his sons took their seats beside him and waited.

It wasn't long before word was sent to the Balancer that the child was only moments away. A young woman with kind eyes and a warm smile entered the room and walked directly up to Henry.

She introduced herself as Dr. Friedman and explained the Balancing process. Just after the baby was delivered, Henry would receive a small injection. He would have a minute at most before he drifted peacefully off to sleep, at which point he would be given another injection, which would stop his heart. Dr. Friedman asked if he had any questions and he said that he didn't. It was a simple procedure and he had witnessed it first-hand before. It was quiet, peaceful, and dignified.

Henry's heart began to race as Alison let out one final prolonged grunt of pain and, seconds later, a baby was crying. Alison and James both openly wept with joy and even old Henry found himself wiping back the odd tear or two.

James stepped over to Henry's bed just as Dr. Friedman administered the first injection. In the young man's arms was a tiny undulating bundle, crying its first cry of what would surely prove to be a long and happy life.

"Before you go," James said through the tears, "I want you to meet our son, James Henry Stengel."

As the fog of sleep washed over him, Henry smiled. It had been a good life. He closed his eyes, still smiling, and slept.

Daddy's Home

Jennifer Fryar

He's been gone for days
and the House sighs with relief.
No Tension, no Screaming
and no more Hiding for a change.

The House shines with happiness.
Each window beams in sun and sweet
sound, gives us something to look
forward to, for once.

The kitchen is warm, comforting < Don't say comforting
It's just me, the House, and her <who's her?
all together, all one for the moment.
All bonded in our shared wishes.

Wishes that this stays.
Wishes that the Pain forgot
about us, that the Crying won't return.
Wishes that are never spoken.

I admire her Calm, so Serene
as she cleans, content to be
like this, just this, forever.
A key turns in the lock.

He doesn't look at us as he enters,
smelling of gutter and bile and junk
and no regret.
He heads straight for the table,
and sits himself down.

The House becomes hot.
Calm grabs Serene's hand and runs.
She stops cleaning.

I wait for my chance, but it never comes.

He listens to her scream, denies
every word, even as his eyes
roll back in his head, bloodshot
and glazed.

Even as his sleeve rides up
and reveal the Bruises, fresh
and molted, dotted with punctures
and oozing with
the rent money that he was supposed to mail.

His skin hangs from his face, flesh meant
to fit a three-hundred pound man, but
he injected himself down to one-fifty
and doesn't seem to notice.

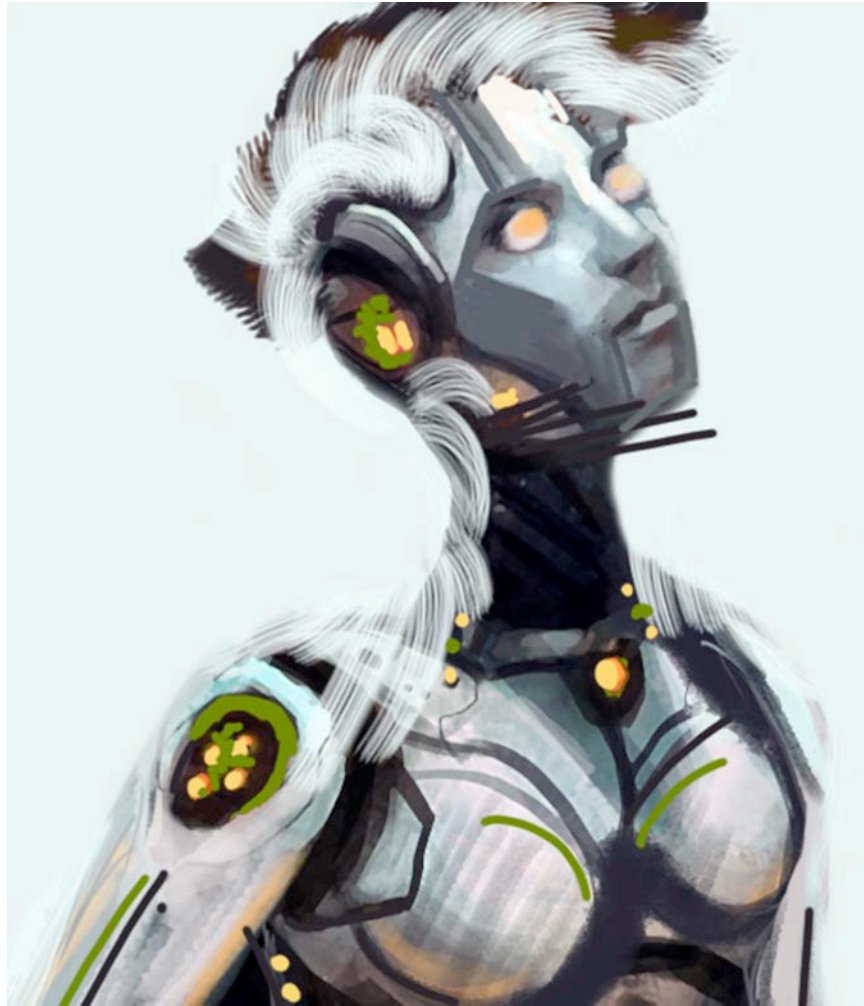
His rotted teeth are few as he
peels back cracked lips,
Berating her, she made him do this
with all her Bitching, it's her
fault, her fault, her fault, her

I shut the glass doors (to my mind) <strike
and settle in, ready myself for the storm
that will last until his high dissipates,
until he sleeps for days and doesn't eat.
The House and I suck in a deep breath.

Daddy's home.

Robotic

Araxie Yeretsian



Black Coffee

Heather Lynn Atwood

James set his briefcase on the floor next to his shoes, by the door like he did for the last six years. He paused for a count of two Mississippi before he walked to the kitchen. Mina's long hair was pinned back. It looked damp, but James couldn't tell. He didn't bother to say hi.

He went to their bedroom to change; the smell of roasting chicken followed him. She called after him to say twenty minutes to dinner. Once the tie was loosened and taken off, his shirt unbuttoned and thrown in the laundry heap, he felt his jaw relax. The muscles in his neck and shoulders released. He changed into mesh shorts and t-shirt, then padded to their shared bathroom. James felt the cold tile of the bathroom floor, and welcomed it. He splashed his face with water, not bothering to wait for it to warm.

The cold couldn't clear his head of what he saw today. All he saw was her. With him. At the coffee shop. James had suspected it since they had come back from Jamaica celebrating six years of vows. He had tried to win her back. But knew it was too late. He swirled tap water in his mouth and spit it out. He still tasted that damn coffee.

The coffee shop. He went there today for a sandwich and coffee, two blocks from his sky rise office. Convenient. He saw Mina almost immediately; her auburn hair caught the sunlight like it did the first time they met almost eight years ago. He started to walk toward her. She didn't see him. She laughed. Another man was with her. Her long fingers touched the stranger's hand. James remembered those delicate fingers on his flesh, the way she used to touch him, the tingle and electricity that coursed through his body. Mina was lost in conversation with this man who wasn't James. This man who looked like James, but wasn't James. James' dark hair was sprinkled with white; the stranger had no white. James was jealous of *him*.

James stood in line, his back to his wife and stranger. He looked back once. Twice.

"Next in line," the slender barista said. She looked young.

"Tall." His voice was hoarse. Sweat pooled under his armpits.

"Cream or sugar?" the girl asked.

"Black." It wasn't the girl's fault, but he wished it was.

He ate his sandwich in the corner by the restrooms. Mina never went anywhere without using a public restroom at least once. He wanted her to find him, not the other way around. He wanted to see her surprised to find him. He wanted to shock her.

The tasteless sandwich sat like a foreign object in his gut. He tried to drink the black coffee, but grimaced each time he took a small sip. He couldn't go back to the barista to ask for cream and sugar. He couldn't see Mina sitting by the window. He thought he heard her laugh; the musical pitch that he loved. His heart raced, threatened to jump out his throat. He looked up from his half-eaten sandwich, but she was gone. He sat there the rest of the day, nursing the harsh coffee. The office would go on without him. He sat in the hard-backed chair until it was rush hour-- time for him to go home.

James walked back to the bedroom. Nothing was out of place. Bed made, clothes away. Their five-year anniversary picture sat untouched for over a year on the dresser. She sported the baby bump well; his hand rested protectively on her belly. He picked up the silver frame, then set it down. James hadn't seen her smile like that since that day the picture was taken. He sat down on the bed, still looking at the picture.

It started with her hair- she used to keep it up. She began leaving it down, curling it, straightening it. He complimented her but she brushed it off saying, "No, I'm not beautiful."

She denied wearing a hint of new perfume- vanilla mixed with flowers. God, it smelled so good, James thought. He stretched over the bed and searched her nightstand drawer until he found it. He still liked the smell, even though she didn't buy it for him.

He had seen the black lace in her drawer. That was an accident; he wasn't snooping. Mina was his wife. He trusted her

completely. He just had a pair of her cotton panties mixed with his laundry. When he went to put clean clothing away, he found it, thinking she was saving the black for a special night. That was six months ago.

James got up from the bed. His stomach let him know he was hungry, despite the acrid coffee taste that lingered. He heard Mina's voice when he walked around the corner. She set her cell phone down, blood creeping to her face.

"Just a reminder for my annual doctor's appointment," she said. She shook her hair free of the elastic holder and James was transported back to the day they met. She standing in the sand, still wet from a swim, drying her hair. James knew before she turned that he had to know her. They were married within ten months, and in love.

James leaned over to kiss Mina the way he did each day. *Beep Beep Beep*. The timer went off for the chicken, she turned her head. He missed and caught the air instead.

"Where's your ring?" James asked.

She set the chicken pan on the granite, and looked at her hand before answering. "I...don't like to cook with it on. Afraid to scratch it, or get food in it." She hacked away at the chicken, her back to James.

James moved past her and snatched a bottle of Zinfandel from the metal rack. The *plop* of the cork always had a relaxing effect on him- his second favorite sound. His first was when Mina said his name. She usually called him "babe." "Hey, Babe. Can you," always asking for something, but it didn't matter. It still sent shivers down his spine. When they made love those first years, the sound of his name coming from her lips caused him to peak.

As she set the table, he watched her body move with a familiar rhythm. The slight tilt of her hips when she placed the plates on the table, the arches of her feet when she carried over the salad bowl. Her jeans hugged her ass perfectly when she leaned to put his plate across from hers.

James took a gulp, and then another, of the wine. The flavor was off. The bold spices of the Zinfandel were lost on his tongue. The black coffee had left a permanent mark on his taste buds. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to enjoy her chicken.

"Why do you always wear those shorts?" The edge in her voice made the hairs on the back of James's neck stand up.

"They aren't the same ones each day." In the beginning, they could finish each other's sentences; now a blackout curtain had gone up between them.

James hadn't heard her laugh since Emma was born. He and Mina had held her in their arms the entire night, until the sun shone through the blinds and light beams hit little Emma's still face. The hospital shift changed and she was taken. They buried her three days later. The female doctor said Mina's uterus was not viable. A good chance she would never carry a baby to full term. James wanted to strangle that doctor, and the next, squeezing until they stopped with the medical jargon. He wanted to protect Mina; shield her from pain. He was afraid to make love to her, and instead waited for her to make the first move. She didn't.

Mina cried. Refused to leave the house. James still went to work. He knew he should've been home with her, but someone needed to pay bills and buy food. Then there was that girl; she always greeted him with a smile. He loved going to work just so he could see her. So he could make her happy. So he could be happy.

Why did Mina choose that day to break her crying cycle, and come to the office with homemade chicken salad? She set the bag on the girl's desk and walked away. James always thought he never deserved Mina, from the beginning. She was more mature; preferred the high road where he liked to sucker punch his adversary.

After that, Mina didn't look him in the eyes. Her beautiful green eyes never met his. She froze under his touches. She stayed busy: book clubs, knitting clubs, jogging, tennis, but still cooked each night. He didn't ask for it, but it's what she'd always done.

He tried to see the same woman from eight years ago. The woman that he met on the beach. The woman that held him at night. She was there, only a prettier version. Friends said her body had natural elasticity. James looked down at his own stomach, an inflating balloon. He promised her a year ago he would start going

to the gym. He had been muscular when they met. He should've gone today instead of walking into the coffee shop. He never went out for coffee. He hated calling what should be a small, a tall. And what was *venti* and *grande*? Mina had tried for years to get him to go with her. He hadn't.

She brought his plate to the table. Her glass brimmed with red liquid. James loved that she was still slender. He told her each day how much he loved her, but the words sounded shallow after months of no response.

He heard her laughter mixed with noises from the coffee shop, and looked up from his food. He must've imagined it. She looked at her now empty wine glass as if it held the answer to a mystery.

"More wine?" Mina rose and stood over him, holding the almost empty bottle out to him.

James nodded. While she poured, he reached behind her and rested his hand on her back, just above her tight ass. He wondered if that stranger had touched her ass. His hand fell limp against his side. He took a bite of chicken. It tasted wrong. He took another. It tasted worse. His knife clanked against the white porcelain plate. Bitter coffee was all he tasted.

"I saw you today."

"Did you?" She started to clear the table. Neither one had eaten much.

"At the coffee shop."

"You don't go in to those places." She scraped scraps into the garbage. The fork *screeched* against the plate.

"Who was that man?"

"What?"

"That man I saw you with. Who was he?" James stood from the table. All he wanted to do was hold her. It had been so long since he felt her underneath him; felt her touch on him.

Mina ignored James and continued to clean the remnants of dinner. She tied the garbage bag and handed it to James. He saw the outline of plastic through the white bag.

"Did you buy this chicken already cooked?"

"I don't always have time to make you dinner." She turned and began to pour another glass of wine. The first bottle, empty,

sat next to the sink. A vintage they had been saving for a special occasion.

He took the garbage outside, as he did every night, while she drank. His breath made puffs when he exhaled the stale air. They had made snow angels in the backyard before Emma had been a thought in their minds. Then drank hot chocolate on the porch and watched the snow gently fall. He held her when she was cold. She was a fire underneath his touch. Their future together had been planned on this porch.

He stepped inside to hear the vibration of her cell phone. His neck and jaw muscles clenched against its constant rattle on granite. At a standstill, they both looked at the lit up phone.

"Are you going to answer that?" He could see she wanted to, the way she looked at it.

"Hello?" He watched her face change from hard and wrinkled to the Mina he saw only in those old pictures. "Yes... Not now." The bitter coffee penetrated James's mouth.

The phone crashed to the floor.

His hands were around her throat. He liked the feel of his fingers touching in front, and squeezed harder so they could overlap. He pictured the pretty barista from lunch with her beguiling smile, and relished how tight he could squeeze. He closed his eyes against the black coffee, which threatened to come up. The nurse who took away his baby girl popped into his head, and danced with the face of the doctor who broke Mina's heart. His fingers flexed and wrapped tighter. He swallowed the lump in his own throat. Mina's arms waved, tried to scratch his face. He dodged the manicured nails. It was almost too easy. He wanted Mina's throat to be that girl's throat, from his office; his one stupid affair he would pay for the rest of his life. He would give anything to take that back. Flesh caved in. Her voice box crumpled like a toy. After that, she only gurgled. Her limp body fell to the floor in a heap. The images stopped. He didn't recognize the woman on the floor as his wife.

He clutched his stomach and ran for the sink. The coffee, along with the chicken and wine, spewed from his throat. After that, James felt better.

Finding Grandpa Jones

Andrea Aste

Grandfather and grandmother
are there to welcome us
within their wicker breezeway,
but one fading woven chair
presses against the wall,

empty. Our great grandfather,
our Grandpa Jones, absent
upon our arrival, must be found.
Charge through the narrow kitchen
into the antique dining room,

where a battered white door
is mounted on the wall. Down crawling
plywood stairs, enter the workshop
where naked birdhouses line a bench.
A work stool stands empty.

The living room houses two
matching aged chairs. One forgotten,
polka dotted with flowers, perfumed
with cigarette smoke. The other
stiff backed, worn to threads.

Through the kitchen again
where Grandpa Jones would stand
chopping cucumbers into thin disks,
searching outside the sink window.

*Was this Grandma Jones,
when he was called to war?*

Into the hollow shelled garage
where a stand bides its time
full of jams, jarred pickles, squash,
birdhouses. And cucumbers fresh
from his garden out back

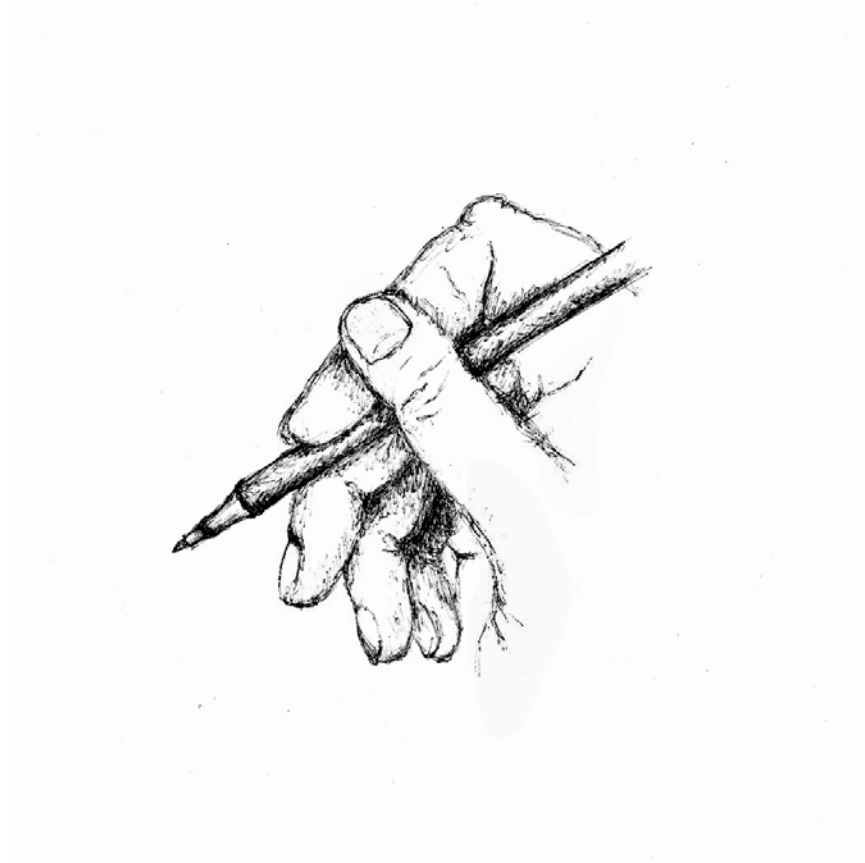
where he mines the earth. To the garden
where we greet lion-faced flowers
standing guard, towering over our heads.
We scurry to the left,
peer into the first row,

empty. Squint into the second,
empty, too. Tip toe
to the third and take a peek,
find the willowy figure
under sunflower heads

call out "Grandpa Jones!"
and watch his straw hat turn up
clutch onto his smile
before it slips away
with the sunflowers in the fall.

Untitled

Susan Grant



Save Me from My Enemies

Alexander Neely

I am stuck between a bunker wall and other bodies. The humidity is so that I sweat without movement. I haven't swallowed in minutes, or the sand in my teeth has soaked up my spit. The air smells of sulfur and burning flesh. I want to look beyond the concrete. I want to witness the side effects of an hour's worth of enemy indirect fire. But, I don't move. I don't look. I can't move.

The rigid gray concrete, now appearing black under the shadows, is strangely reassuring on my right side. While on all other sides, I feel the sweat and sand covered skin of grown men, their tense muscles shivering. Boom! Another rocket. Screams ricochet through the concrete tunnel.

"Save me from my enemies, my God; protect me from those who attack me!" The words are bouncing off a soldier's quivering lips. His sand-covered right arm, against my body, is scratching me, as it shifts between words. If he is crying, his tears are mixed with streams of sweat. I find a strange solace watching beads of water drip from his nose into the darkness of the bunker. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. Boom! Another rocket. Every soldier in the bunker flinches collectively, sending a twitch through their body and a dip in their chin.

"Save me from those evil people; rescue me from those murderers!" His American southern accent mixed with fear make the prayer sound like the delusional muttering of a drug-addled reverend. No one seems to be paying him any attention though. Each soldier is prisoner of his own memories and confusion.

Eyes open, their visions are a thousand miles away. They see their children. Or wife. Or girlfriend. Or parents. Or home. Or all. There is momentary comfort in their thought, a fleeting hug of home, and then it disappears. And where joyous reuniting once stood, vivid images of far away faces, like a sputtering movie reel against the backdrop of one's fear and regret.

"Look! They are waiting to kill me; cruel people are gathering against me." The soldier manically shouted the words

into the cement ceiling. Boom! Another rocket. That explosion sounded closer than the last few. The soldier plants his forefingers into his ears. I feel a warm sensation on my bare feet. The soldier in front of me has peed himself. A stale odor of iron emanates through clouds of sulfur.

“It is not because of any sin wrong I have done...” Boom! Another rocket. I hear metal and wood violently scatter through the night air. We are once again greeted with an uncomfortable silence, one that follows each explosion... *The enemy has retreated. Maybe our soldiers killed them. Or maybe not! Maybe the next one will hit us. The next one will kill me.*

“Nor because of any fault of mine, O Lord, that they hurry to their places.” I began to fear this soldier more than the explosions. Were those words really comforting to him? Had he lost his mind? What is this person capable of?

“Rise, Lord God Almighty, and come to my aid!”

I didn't want to tell him, but I didn't think God was going to rise. Ever.

Morning Coffee

Amber Revis

Dark dark, swirl in the white,
Mix in the morning,
Fade out the night.

Sugar cream, coffee bean,
Eyes start to blinking,
End the last dream.

Dark dark, swirl in the white
Fresh day brewing
On hot sunlight.

Orchid

Rachael Hali



Freeing Narcissus

Cassandra Shawver

Marcie Donovan didn't have much in the way of possessions when she died. When her last breath rattled out of her shriveled lungs, and her children folded her gnarled hands over her breast, they looked around and saw there was little to remember her by. She had made no will, no list of things to be handed off to her progeny. The task of dividing up what remained was therefore left to them.

After the funeral was over, and all final goodbyes were said, they wandered through the house as though they had never seen it before, gathering artifacts with the same care an archaeologist would papyrus.

By the end of a long day, and much discussion over what was worth keeping and what should be pitched, the four Donovan children huddled around the small pile of belongings that was all that remained of their mother: a spinning wheel, a handful of jewelry, their father's gold pocket watch, a case of polished silverware, and an antique bedroom mirror in a gaudy Victorian frame with a small crack in the lower left corner.

"Is this really everything?" Gwen, the second youngest, asked with a disappointed frown. Her fingers were coated with massive rings, and whenever she moved the heavy bracelets clasped to her arms rang like a gilded symphony.

"Everything that mattered," the eldest son, Richard, replied. His hands absentmindedly dusted off the case of silver, though no dust remained. "What do you think, Liz?"

The oldest of the siblings looked at him and furrowed her brow, carving heavy wrinkles into her aging face. She asked if she could take their mother's spinning wheel, as she had always enjoyed watching her delicate fingers twist the fiber before feeding it into the bobbin. Her siblings agreed, particularly Gwen, who claimed she didn't want that musty old thing cluttering up her house. Richard offered to take the silver set. Gwen, of course,

chose the jewelry, which was the one item that she felt was really worth anything, and Keith, the youngest, picked their father's timepiece, as he had been closer to him than anyone else. All that remained was the mirror, its cloudy glass murkily reflecting their solemn faces. Gwen suggested selling it—it was broken, after all—but Richard and Elizabeth shot her down.

“Mom loved that mirror,” Richard said.

“She would be heartbroken,” Liz said. Keith remained silent throughout their little argument, though his clenched jaw and blazing eyes suggested otherwise. He had never gotten along well with their mother, but he decided now was not the time to let it show. The argument lasted a little while longer until Richard and Elizabeth decided that one of them should take the mirror.

“There's really not much room at my place,” Richard said, holding out a hand to Liz. “You should have it.”

“Yeah?” Liz said. She looked to her other siblings. “Are you all right with that?”

Gwen and Keith shrugged, and Richard insisted it was what their mother would want. Liz nodded, and the deal was done. They parted with their new belongings, Liz to her home in the suburbs, Gwen to her condo in the city, and Richard and Keith to the two-bedroom apartment they shared downtown. All that was left to them was to mourn, and to move on.

When Liz pulled into the driveway of her two-story, picturesque home, complete with picket fencing, her husband, Jeff, was already home. He waved to her from the porch swing, a tight smile on his lips. He met her at the car, kissed her lips, and held her. He didn't ask how things had gone, and Liz was grateful for that. He knew such moments were unsuited for empty talk. Jeff ran his fingers through her hair, kissed her forehead, and wordlessly unloaded the car.

The spinning wheel was placed in the corner of their bedroom, as Liz had wanted, and Jeff said he liked it there, though his tone implied he didn't really care where it went. The mirror, heavy as it was, was placed in the adjacent corner beside their bed until they could make room for it on the wall. Jeff stood in front of it for several minutes, his hand waving in slow motion. Liz asked him what he was doing.

“There’s just something off about this thing,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Liz asked, crossing the room to stand beside him. He was right. There didn’t seem to be anything strange at first, but the longer she stood there, the more she came to realize that their images were slightly distorted, but only just. Her face seemed just a little too wide, her hands a little too long. It was subtle, but definitely there.

“Well, it’s an old mirror, hon,” Liz said. Jeff shrugged, scratched his bald head, and walked out. Liz stared at her unusual reflection for a moment longer, then followed.

The next morning, after Jeff had left for work, Liz sat at her mother’s spinning wheel. She didn’t have any wool to spin—she wouldn’t even know what to do if she did—but she found comfort in the steady rhythm of the pedals, the slow turn of the wheel and the spin of the bobbin. She could picture her mother sitting there, humming an imagined tune, strands of roved wool gently rising from the basket at her side. A tear slipped down Liz’s cheek, and she was brought back to the present.

She glanced at the mirror across the room, and was shocked by how much she looked like her mother. She couldn’t remember putting her hair in a bun, but it was there. She couldn’t remember putting on a skirt that morning, but it was in the mirror. She was so surprised at the resemblance that it took her a moment to realize: the room in the mirror wasn’t hers, but her mother’s. And the woman sitting at the wheel wasn’t her, but was in fact Marcie Donovan, alive and content.

Liz gasped and clasped her hands over her mouth to muffle her cries. Her mother kept spinning, her gentle eyes locked on the bobbin, her hands—younger than Liz remembered—twining the roving in her fingertips. She looked up from her work, seemingly looking straight at Liz, and smiled. Liz didn’t move, her heart pounding, but her mother wasn’t looking at her. A second figure entered the image, and Liz recognized her immediately. It was her, forty years younger, her fresh face ruddy from a day of play. Her mother’s mouth moved, but no sound came out. To say Liz was disappointed was an understatement. She would have killed to hear her mother’s voice again.

The little girl that was Elizabeth Donovan sat cross-legged in front of her mother, the back of her blonde head the only thing visible. But Liz could picture her face, dreamy and relaxed as she listened to her mother hum and watched the wheel spin. She could hear it all perfectly, even with no sound. Her body filled with warmth that hadn't been there since the funeral. She sobbed at the missed sensation, her head falling into her hands, her heart both knitting and spilling open at the same time. When she looked up, the image was gone, her blotched face and red eyes the only remnant of her mother that remained.

Liz waited for about ten more minutes, but nothing else happened. She wasn't sure if she was disappointed or relieved.

Richard got a call from Liz that evening, telling him that the mirror didn't really fit anywhere in the house, and would he please take it, because frankly it reminded her too much of Mom. The urgency in her voice took him aback, but after much prodding, he finally agreed.

"I'll be out of town tomorrow," he said, "but I can get it Friday."

There was an anxious pause. "Can't Keith come get it?"

"He doesn't have a car, Liz," he reminded her. "Is everything all right?"

She began babbling. "Yes, of course, everything's fine," she said. "Just tired. Just worried about Jeff's job. Just having a hard time dealing with Mom." Her voice cracked. But everything was fine.

Richard wasn't an idiot. He knew she wasn't telling him everything, but he also knew that when Liz got like this it was best not to push. He suggested having Gwen bring it over. Keith worked nights at the bar so he could let her in. Her voice immediately brightened. That would work, she said. She'd bring it herself but Jeff had the car, she said. Saying she would call Gwen, she hung up, leaving Richard to stare at the phone, his brow knit with worry.

"I deserve some major fucking sister points for this," Gwen said, her hands gripping the steering wheel of her Prius a little too

tightly. She was ten minutes into the return trip from Liz's home to her brothers' apartment. At first, she had refused to have anything to do with the ugly-piece-of-shit mirror, but her sister's anxiety concerned her enough to cave. "Why she couldn't wait one fucking day is beyond me."

Her front wheel clunked through a ditch, causing her arms to jangle like Christmas bells. She absent-mindedly adjusted one of her mother's rings on her fingers, and sighed.

"I can't believe you left me with these morons, Mom," she whispered. A flash of movement in her rear-view mirror caught her eye. When she looked, all she saw was the horrid mirror jammed in her backseat that had taken more than ten minutes to load because, like she told Liz, her car was not meant for carting any shit larger than a Yorkie around. For some reason, her arguments were always ignored. She glanced in the rear view mirror again, just to be sure, and screamed. The car came to a screeching halt.

Keith was asleep on the couch next to an empty six-pack of Budweiser when he heard frantic knocking on his apartment door. He groaned, blinking through his stupor, and rolled sloppily off the couch, landing face-down in a crumpled heap. He pondered falling back asleep, but then the pounding on the door began again, and he grunted. Rolling himself onto his feet, he shuffled over to the door. He asked who was there, leaning his head against the door to see through the peephole.

"It's me, you ass, open up," Gwen said, an edge of hysteria in her voice. Her green eyes looked wild as she looked back at him through the glass, her auburn hair looking unusually unkempt. Keith moaned.

"We don't want any," he said. Gwen threw several more profanities at him until he finally opened the door simply to lessen the throbbing headache that emerged whenever she spoke. He looked her up and down when she slipped into the room, and cleared his throat. "Well?" he asked.

"Well, what?" Gwen said, her voice quivering.

"The mirror," Keith said, "where is it?"

Gwen threw her hands in the air, telling him it was in her car. When he asked why she left it there, she said that it was too heavy and walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Keith heaved the mirror through the front door with stumbling feet, incoherent curses rolling off of his lips. Gwen was still in the bathroom. The mirror slipped in his fingers, so he let it slide to the ground and leaned it against the back of the couch, falling over in the process. Grumbling, he propped himself up on his hands, and ended up looking straight into the glass.

At first, he was confused, as he couldn't see himself in it. All that was there was an empty room, his parents' bedroom. He blinked a few times, shook his head, but the image remained. The four-poster bed that they had sold soon after the funeral was still there, the blankets spread neatly over the queen-sized mattress. The window to the right of the bed, nearly out of sight, spread a layer of amber light across the room, revealing a streak of lazily floating dust motes. A shadow shifted next to the image, and his father entered the room. Keith stared, not moving, in case the slightest shift would cause the image to shatter. He watched as his father walked over to the bed, his hands loosening the tie around his neck. He looked tired, as though the day had taken an especially hard toll on him. He tossed the black and red striped tie onto the bed, and coughed soundlessly. Keith's heart nearly stopped. He knew exactly what he was watching. He remembered seeing that tie hanging limply from the edge of the bed, wanting nothing more than his father to wear it again. He tried looking away, but he couldn't. Some terrible part of him had to see.

His father coughed again, and a hand clasped against his breast. Keith sobbed quietly as he watched his father collapse, the watch he always kept on him slipping out of his pocket, lying like a discarded trinket beside his lifeless body. A minute passed, then two, and the image remained. Keith wanted nothing more than to run, to hide in the bathroom with Gwen and cry until the walls around his heart built up again. But he couldn't. For some reason, he couldn't move.

A shadow shifted again, and his mother swept into the room. She saw his father lying there, and her lips parted in a silent

cry. She was at his side before Keith could blink. She shook him with hands he always thought were too late, muted tears falling from her eyes. She stayed with him for more than half an hour. Keith knew, because he saw the whole thing. He saw every tear that fell, every silent word she prayed, screamed, begged into the phone. She held his hand until the paramedics touched her shoulders and guided her away, and then Keith wasn't looking at his mother's room anymore. He saw his unshaven face, his bloodshot eyes, and was disgusted.

How many times had he blamed her? How often had he thought she didn't care? He ran a hand through his unkempt, jet-black hair, and felt his stomach churn. He vomited, but was unsure if it was from the booze or the pain. Or the regret. He crawled away from the mirror, terrified it would show him something else that would fill him with further self-loathing. The bathroom door opened, and Keith looked back to see a single emerald eye staring at him through the crack.

"Call Richard," she whispered. The door clicked shut again.

The four Donovan children sat at the small, uneven kitchen table in the brothers' apartment, staring at each other in discomfort. Richard had just returned from his conference, Keith having told him that there was an emergency at home and he needed to get back immediately.

"You guys have completely lost it," he said, tilting back a bottle of Budweiser. "I'd expect this kind of shit from you two." He gestured to Keith and Gwen, then pointed the bottle at Liz, "But what did they do to rope you into this?"

Liz had recovered from her previous hysteria, and now looked at him with eyes that seemed more at ease. More at peace.

"It's true, Rick." She said. Richard gave a bark of laughter, and took another long swig. Keith—hair washed and face shaved bare—insisted that they weren't lying, but Richard plainly stated that Keith had been drunk at the time.

"I bet you saw some pink elephants dancing with Mom too," he said, looking at Gwen. "You never said what you saw, sis."

Gwen looked up from her bare hands, glancing uncomfortably around the table. She said she had seen their mother, alive and well, just like Liz had said.

“She was rocking me,” Gwen said. “It was just after Mary moved away, do you remember that? I didn’t talk for days. Well, Mom put me in her lap and rocked me until I fell asleep.” She didn’t tell them how their mother’s jeweled fingers folded across her little chest, and how those rings were the last thing she saw before falling asleep. Richard sighed, and shook his head.

“Well, that settles it.” He said, slamming his beer on the table before standing. The others looked at him. “I’m going to look at this damn thing and see what all the fuss is about.”

He left. The others stayed. They sat in the semi-circle, not doing much aside from casting the occasional knowing glance at each other. The minutes passed in silence. Five minutes. Ten minutes. One hour. Two. Liz almost got up to check on him, but Richard eventually re-entered the room, his eyes rimmed red. He gulped, and his Adam’s apple quivered like a frightened child. Keith, Liz, and Gwen watched him, but didn’t say a word. A conversation seemed to pass between them, a silent communion, and at the end they nodded. They knew what had to be done.

The siblings stood on the balcony of the sixth-floor apartment, overlooking the near-empty streets below. The sun had lowered on the horizon, showering them in pale sunlight. The mirror was suspended between them, each one holding a corner. They hesitated. Richard looked back at his sisters. They nodded. Together, they lifted the mirror above their heads like an offering to some ancient god. Then they threw it. It sailed away from the balcony, slowly turning as it fell. A few dying rays of sunlight fell across it, and it flashed up at them, a final goodbye. It hit the sidewalk, and for the first time, it made a sound.

Kerplunk

Dahvin Greenfield

Sometimes I wish certain memories
could be transferred from my mind
to my laptop. I'd label the folders
with names, dates and smells:
Jackie, Starbucks, cigarettes.
The trash application burrows
the bottom of my screen, lid
unhinged. I'll click, drag and drop.

kerplunk.

I've trashed completed essays
and assignments; they never cross my mind.
I've moved on from you, but I still find you
lapping, lying back, sunbathing in his iris.
Anytime he says "I love you," there's a glow in his eye;
I wonder if it's you.

Too bad friendships can't be kept on memory sticks.
I'll toss you in a drawer atop a mattress of pencils and pens.

kerplunk.

I can't wait for my memory to fill to the brim.
I'd love to watch you pour out of me.
I'd crack, carve my cranium like a pumpkin,
remove you like the candle, just to feel you burn in my hands.
I wish you taught me how to forget; how to:
let the phone ring,
delete messages,
ignore plans.

I was always waist-high in your trash bin.
How awful for you to have trash that never left the curb,
that broke off the lid and teetered the can until -

kerplunk.

Untitled

Susan Grant



The Big Brown Box

Dania Al Hussein

I am wading in albums. There are small ones with images of picturesque meadows and lakes on the front and back sleeves, and others with silhouettes of bridges against orange and pink sunsets.

There are larger albums with the same happy couple still in love, still young. Their hair is perfectly coiffed and their skin smooth and acne-free. The same two people always in each other's arms are gazing out into the cloudless blue sky, which bleeds across the album covers. These plastic booklets around me are an illustration of how perfection is capable of replicating itself, and how inorganic such perfection is.

In front of me stands the cupboard with the glass front doors. In our old apartment, this cupboard used to be a showcase for crystal glasses, which were arranged in three rows of 2 and two rows of 3.

When the tiny spotlights on the inside were lit, the crystal sparkled brilliantly calling attention to their omniscient presence. Today, although the wood on the bottom half of the cupboard is chipped, its front doors are dull, and dusty albums stuff its insides, I still see this cupboard as a showcase. You could even say it's vintage, because beneath the layers of dust and the magnificently stale smell which escaped its cracks, every album holds a gem.

Geneva in August 1989 looks vividly familiar to a trip we had taken in the recent past. Lac Lemman is frozen in time and I am 6 years old again. The warm sun cradles the massive blue behind us and the water doesn't move except for when the white swans glide through it allowing curtains of water to open effortlessly. Around the lake, many small boats bounce around with the Swiss flag perched proudly and the sky is dotted with clouds that meander leisurely as if on holiday. To my left, a man stands so tall he can almost reach the sun. He has one arm around my shoulder, and on the other, he carries a big brown box that meets my eye level whichever way I turn. Even with its bulkiness, his forehead doesn't glisten with sweat. He makes it look so easy. Dad looks

down at us, tells us to show big smiles and then looks back up at the camera and his thick moustache smiles with him. Mom presses down and we hear it: 'Click'.

I return the photo to its snug little slot and for a moment my heart bubbles. I am sitting on the white plastic footstool in our storage room, tucked away behind the stairs. And although I am much taller, the 167 centimeters separating the soles of my feet from the top of my head are still dwarfed by cupboards that line three of the walls. Luggage is piled above me. Bags inside suitcases inside larger suitcases. Mismatched cupboards are crammed tightly with winter clothes and other garments forgotten or too precious to give away. It's about 10 am on a Friday.

On the floor next to me, the aroma of freshly brewed Lavazza coffee swirls up from the large mug and finds its way quickly into my nostrils. Loose threads from the worn carpet beneath my feet tease my bare soles. As I survey the small space of the room, I notice a miscellanea of stuff that exude the passage of time: a 38-cupcake dessert stand gifted to my sister years ago, a navy blue and yellow toolbox, rows and rows of cassette tapes from the 90s, hoards of other random gear belonging to Dad and a stuffed kitten- which I clung to as a toddler. Now, he is in an unforgiving somersault position pushed into a cardboard box and his faux fur begs for a scrub.

Sounds from The Globe Trekker leak through the AC vent from the upstairs living room. Ian Wright's nasal voice and goofy humor are unmistakable. I take a long sip of the coffee and grab an album knowing that with mom preoccupied, I wouldn't need to be cautious.

December 1982. Dania, age 1

Dubai. Dad's grey Oldsmobile, the first car we knew. A 1983 model. Dark blue leather-covered roof. Two of us with a combined age of 3 are perched on its hood; our feet not even reaching the edge of the car. If I try to touch my toes, I may slide off. Untamed curls. Her trademark, Dana's: springing, bouncing, crimping, fighting. Two sisters in matching mustard yellow corduroy overalls and brown shirts. *Was brown in?* A lone *abra*

glides along the Dubai Creek. Fishermen at work; phantoms of our time...

Later, in the park. The Intercontinental Hotel stands behind us. *Is that the Dubai Municipality next door?* Tumbling after a size 'Large' rainbow-colored inflatable ball. It reaches my knees! Mom in blue cropped pants and feathered hair. She helps me kick. Fists clenched, dimples in my fingers dance. Kick. 'Click.' I miss...

August 1984. Dania, age 3

Monaco. Our first (and my only) visit to the south of France. A small red merry-go-round. Me and Dana are flying. Bangs fall across my eyes. I'm holding tightly onto the handle-bars. I can hear my own squeal through this 4x6. Mom with a new haircut. Very short. *Must be inspired by the French...* On the tire swing. Blue and white striped sweater. I'm sinking into the tire. Mom pushes higher and I tilt my head backwards to Dad. I'm laughing, laughing. Hair in a mess. The two pink barrettes are just pretty decorations. Me, standing on the lower end of the see-saw. Dana standing on the ground nearby. We're in matching short overalls and beige sandals.

Even then, I barely reach her shoulders... *Just a year apart.* 'Click. Click'

Dad, leaning against the rental. Dark sunglasses. Bell-bottom brown pants. *He looks so cool.* Taut skin. Tall, lean and young. *Is that a growing afro?* There it is on his left shoulder, the big brown box. His right arm rests on its lid. 'Click'.

August 1986. Dana, age 6

From Zug en route to Lugano. Road trips through Switzerland were our favorite. Large patches of snow blanket the valleys and road sides. Dad stops the car- a pale blue Opel with an oval 'CH' sticker on the back. And the big brown box is waiting on the hood for a perfect moment. It is all around us, the snow. Dad balls up some for us to hold. One for Dana. One for me. One for him. He holds out his snowball and laughs. It's the first time we hold snow! The sun is shining, but the snow is cold, a little fluffy.

Our hands hurt. Our mouths are curled into a disbelieving ‘oo’. There is snow all around us, beneath our shoes. We see only snow. We are all snow. We want to jump in it and roll in it and scoop it up like the dream of scooping fluffy clouds from the sky. Little Mr. 3 year old, that’s Shams, holds his bottle, squinting from the sun. ‘Click’.

Our first time in a Cable Car! *We later learned, not all cable cars are red.* We are fledgling birds soaring above the world. Smoke rises out from the chimneys of log cabins like Arabian belly dancers undulating in slow motion. Endless streams of water slide down mountainsides. They caress rocks and then gush down into ravines. Icy cold. Translucent mist covers treetops; nature’s version of hide-and-seek. We’re finally on Telfis Mountain. Dana attempts the Alphorn (Alpine horn); a 2.5 metre long Swiss musical instrument. The elderly horn players look on, amused. Black beards climb up their chins and their hands are held behind their backs. They smile, visibly holding in a burst of laughter as her tremendously failed effort. Her cheeks are rouge like her sweater. She takes one step forward and tries again. Little Mr. 3 year old: he struts away in his denim overalls, giggling to himself. ‘Click’.

August 1989. Shams, age 6

Geneva. The Jet d’eau shoots water 140 metres up. *How can water stay so high?* A clock made of flowers. Popping pink peonies peruse the 6 o’clock. Purples dance with whites. Orange marigolds sneak around the 3 o’clock. And up at the 12, freshly-cut green blades contain the time. Shams observes two boys posing for a picture. The smaller one wears oversized white sunglasses and his shorts struggle to stay held up. Driving through the Grimsel Pass: valleys are overtaken by clusters of dainty daisies. They greet us with each shine of the sun and kiss of a water droplet. Spotlessly clean roads. Listening to Dad’s tapes of the Swedish pop band, ABBA. *For a long time, I thought they were Swiss.* Chiquitita, Dancing Queen and The Winner Takes it All. The windows down. Our mouths open, we eagerly gulp purified air. Rolling hills of glorious green are all around us. Cows chew on the grass. Bells

around their necks serenade drivers. Massive Alps rest in the distance; Switzerland is their throne.

My back is aching. I look over at the iPhone: 11.20am. I stretch out. My legs look like a poorly-etched piece of abstract art from sitting on the carpet. The next album my hands pull out is dated 1985. Both my grandmothers are visiting and the entire album documents the various family meals and gatherings around the dining table and the living room. They are full of youth; features stretching and smiling like taut elastic. But their faces are no more. They are no more... Hearing mom's voice nearby, I hide the photo amongst the jumble of albums strewn about on the carpet. *It's too soon.* As does dust that rises and settles from any movement, I feel a heave of breath rise and fall from somewhere deep within my lungs. I decide to keep this album hidden and continue on after refilling my coffee mug.

One of the rarer photos finds its way into my hands. It's rare because all 5 of us are in it. I imagine that a miniscule version of myself has been picked up and dropped into this photo and I mentally navigate its pixels, curves and lines as though I were there just last week. From the observation deck, a European postcard is laid out behind us in a feast of mountains, lakes and cobblestone-encrusted towns.

A 7-carriage train moves along unseen tracks and swirls of warm cinder adorn the space around it. Four of us stand close to one another around our table. The big brown box resembles a modern-day makeup artist's box from the outside. But dull orange felt lines its interior, and pockets and compartments house the different elements: tele-lens, micro lens, cables, lens cleaner liquid, cleaner fabric. I attempt to recreate what Dad was doing in setting up this photo: bent toward the viewfinder while the camera rests comfortably on three legs, he adjusts the height, the focus of the lens.

He looks up at us intermittently then at the background, then back into the viewfinder to ensure he has framed the photo just right. Behind us in the photo, a woman stands in profile stance, smiling. Her orange and beige patterned dress sways creating a kaleidoscope. Mid-length brown hair is windswept

across the left side of her neck. A few feet away from her, a man in white pants and long sideburns points the camera toward her.

‘Everyone, look at the camera and say cheeeese. Ten seconds,’ Dad finally announces. He presses down on the button and rushes over to where we are standing. Upon seeing the blinking red light, we suddenly feel the urge to be silly; giggling and making funny noises. It flashes quickly, the countdown.., and we all erupt in laughter. The camera on the tripod goes ‘Click’ and our moment of joy is etched on this 4x6.

Movement from upstairs startles my thoughts. The familiar shuffle of footsteps descends and it takes long to reach the bottom. I am wading in albums, in a pictorial lagoon of moments so ordinary and rich. Dad’s presence by the door prompts me to return from my nostalgic travels. He removes his glasses slowly, rubs his eyes. His eyebrows fight back, arching quizzically.

‘What are you up to?’

‘Research’, I reply, and pile several albums in his arms.

‘Find the brown camera case. Remember it?’

He inhales deeply and pauses. Grins.

‘You’ll see when it’s finished’, is all I offer as explanation. *(He is unaware the ‘research’ is in reference to this story I was writing.)*

In response, he merely says ‘Let’s. Before your mom realizes us both here.’

He puts his glasses back on and without bothering to sit, delves right in. He flips pages and pages, pauses at some, and continues. He says very little aside from vocalizing sounds of surprise and awe at how we have all grown, at adventures long gone, at the myriad of locations we had explored over the years.

I watch him reminisce and study his face. *Where are the long sideburns and the thick moustache? Where have the taut lean posture and the young smile gone?* He is tall yet his aging frame has overtaken that presence. And his face appears longer from the folds of skin that have taken residence at his neck. *Has it really been almost 3 decades? Thirty years since we first saw snow, knew what it felt like? And just a few months since mom became an orphan?*

Dad's Minolta showed us the world for 14 years before it was eventually sold in 1995. By the time I was graduating from high school, it had long been replaced by a smaller, lighter and younger camera- one that could no longer be considered 'hand luggage'. But even though it aged, what it had left behind were colors that never faded, edges that never creased, and dates and places that remained as legible as when Dad's perfectly squiggly handwriting gave them identities, years and years ago.

Montana Autumn

Amber Revis

Tiny specks of snow swirl
beyond ceramic pots resting
on the bay window.

Rust-tinged maple leaves
serve as receiving vessels
for the first decent snow.
They bailed from the branches
in last week's windy
Welcome to fall.

Big Sky country is Grey Sky
this far north and west and vertical.
The kids said good-bye
To the sunny sunshine
When they plucked pumpkins.

The day the refrigerator calendar
boasted black marker lines
through each letter-crowded square.
Day fourteen.

The living room was warmed by window light
and the smell of lost dog hair and dust
had not yet stirred the silence and sweet air
of Sunday's pork roast.

The furnace fan was not rumbling underfoot
and the mother sipped hot tea
and then
the daughter yelped
the day! the weather!

the pumpkin seeds the fairy wings the chocolate the super heroes
and monsters! So...

TODAY.

So. Today licorice tea raced down the mother's throat, because
TODAY was the last sunshine-y day.

Last neon sky day for the daughter who chased the son.
And then she slowed, surveying a pile of the October fruits,
 Rubbed a hand over the bumpy gourds,
 decided on two pumpkins.
 Deep cinnamon skin pumpkins.
 Deep squiggly grooved pumpkins.
 Light enough to carry under the mother's left arm,
with a weeping red-cheeked sweaty-headed son under the right
 arm,
 Across manure-muddy hay-covered parking spots.
 TODAY,
 Time is still awake, waiting
 for yeasty delights to bubble
 and bake. The snow has slowed,
 though the cold has quickened.
 The mother and children sink
Under a fleece throw on the sagging,
 Sueded sofa.
 A corner spared for Daddy's toes,
 Consolation for that awful
 Play on second down.

Looking Through

Hilary Hirtle



Watching him clear the desk from the bed

Jennifer Fryar

The sheets are cold. My skin prickles, yet I feel flushed, watching him move from across the room. He lifts my teacup off of a draft of my latest work, leaving behind a bergamot scented ring of time. The sun has long since gone out; the moon a dim lantern that casts blue streaks and shadows across my desk. Lips pursed, he clears the clutter from its surface, eyes focused on another world. He hums our song on soft breaths that I feel on my neck. My eyes trail from the lines around his eyes to the cuffs of his sleeves, frayed and riding up his arms, and I wrap the sheets tighter around my legs, waiting.

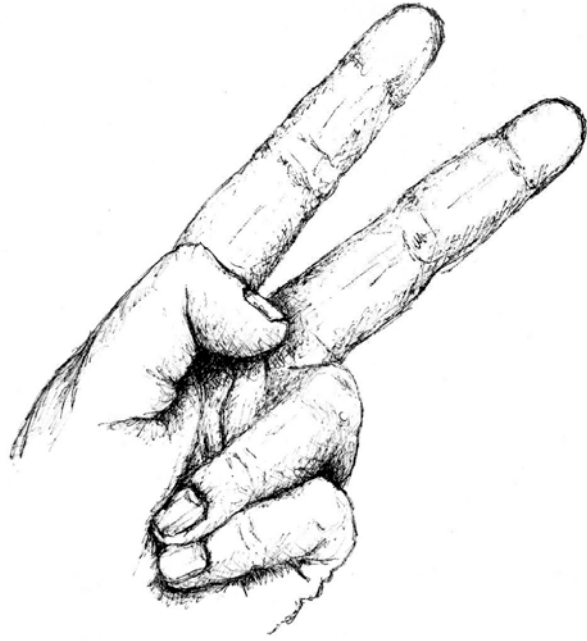
The Battle

Brande McCleese

The Battle
The winner of this war
will not be awarded medals
of valor.
Or ribbons for bravery
But we will both
walk away with purple
hearts;
battered, bloody, and beaten
from the disaster
that we've wrought
upon each other.
We are at war
only our weapons
are not guns,
bombs, or missiles.
We engage in up
close and personal
hand to hand combat
or rather
tongue to tongue.
Both of us are committed
to winning
at all costs.
Not realizing what we
are sacrificing, just
to say that we are the
victor not the victim.

Untitled

Susan Grant



From Home

Katie Smith

When I think of home, I think of the big city life style crammed into an area where cows outnumber people two to one. Each fall the townies gathers to eat apple-peach pie and watch the leaves jump from their homes in the branches just to kiss the ground one last time, and every summer the sound of children giggling on the piers drowns out the noise of the highway just down the road. The accents aren't quite strong enough to connect us to beloved Boston, but the sand between our toes isn't so glorified that it draws in the tourists from the Cape, no matter how many rotaries we build in the center of town.

In the summer, the whole town bustles with the energy of dads getting the boats ready for the coming months and moms teaching their kids to swim at the Y, hoping to cram six months of lessons into two weeks. Sitting on the docks, someone's daughter laughs at her boyfriend driving his father's boats deep into the salmon sunset, hoping to later call it their first date. For the first time they're realizing that sometimes not all feelings have words, and that's usually for the best.

The sun sinks behind the trees that stretch their limbs into the sky like the teenagers do every morning before school, each day ending dark just like it began. And if you shut your eyes and listen, right around seven in the morning you can hear the trees surrounding the pond whisper to each other in the wind, laughing at the prepubescent boys struggling to stand up on their wakeboards while the water's still calm. Late in the day, the sun kisses the backs of girls while their mothers throw anchors into the water, trying to find the right words to explain to their growing children that everything must sink before it can float.

Building homes in this town isn't much safer than building them in the souls of people you love. When six houses caught on fire and a garage filled with dictionaries burnt to the ground twenty

people were left homeless and at a loss for words in more ways than one. Only one life was lost, fire fighters trying rescuing him just a little too late, taking the teen death toll to two in the past five years.

Word of his death buzzed around the school that same September, first saying he was stuck, he suffocated from the smoke, but then weeks after the funeral flowers died and the counselor had left the high school, words spun up and they said he stayed in the house on purpose. I wonder if maybe he really did want to get out, and his mind just moved too fast for his body; or maybe his hands reached out but couldn't find something worth holding onto. I hope, that if there is a heaven, he's up there looking down knowing he'll always be remembered, not by the headstone in his memory, but by being one of the few to actually escape this town. They used it as an example in every health class K through twelve, making the idea of Matt into a mold to prevent anything else from happening in such a perfect New England town.

The idea of suicide stuck like sap to the minds of students, the idea that someone so bright, so talented, would want to take their own life puzzled everyone. Depressed kids wear black, not baseball uniforms; they sport scars not trophies. After that August everything changed, no one joked about killing themselves over a bad grade, suicide became a curse word, and the baseball team still bought him a jersey and brought it to their state championships that year. News crews stayed away, and the town became haunting. It's been three years and the family has since moved away, but waves of sadness still hit the town every August and it seems like even though it's a town built around a lake, everyone forgotten how to swim.

It's the place that gets lost in the shuffle. Everyone grows up hating it, talking about how they can't wait to graduate and leave, but for some reason no one ever does. Each child grows up and follows right in their parents' footprints, finding comfort in the fact that their mother's homemade lasagna is right down the road

Remember...?

Hilary Hirtle

I can't remember what happened...
One moment she was pulsing,
the next - she graced the floor,
lips moving no more.
Yes! One moment she was pulsing,
cracking and criticizing,
lips moving more and more!
And that's when I thought
(...cracking and criticizing...)
how blissful it would be
to hold her words.
And how blissful it was
to hold her words
until she graced the floor,
cracking and criticizing no more.
I can remember what happened.

Untitled
Carolyn Haskin



Chopped Meat

Cheryl Loux

Chopping up a body was obviously easier said than done. Arms folded across her chest, Gladys stood in the kitchen doorway contemplating this very thought. Either way, she had to do something. The sun would rise soon, wouldn't it? She had no real concept of time on this moonless night, but no matter.

Gladys was a get 'er done kind of gal. And when it came to Benny, her now deceased husband, she exhibited that get 'er done trait and got *him* done. In a numb, blind rage she took Benny's shotgun, aimed and fired the weapon into his chest. Poor Benny, upon hearing the distinctive sound that only a shotgun can make as Gladys took aim, turned to her in surprise. It was his last emotion before the gunshot rang out, knocking him off his feet, and leaving him a slumped bloody heap laying against the refrigerator.

Gladys almost succumbed to the sadness and guilt of her crime. After all, the poor sap of a husband did do his best didn't he? She and Benny started out as high school sweet hearts. Benny seemed to have great potential. He was handsome and desired by many girls. Gladys felt he would go places and keep her happy. And after a mediocre thirty years full of financial woes, a disappointing sex life, and realizing Benny could never fill the void she felt deep within herself, Gladys became bitter. The bitterness started as a pang of anger and then gradually rotted to a deep rooted rage. Gladys, functioning as a dutiful wife, became a ticking time bomb. So, as simple a thing as forgetting to buy a lottery ticket, Benny had unwittingly set into motion his own demise.

Gladys, an avid lottery player, had played the same lottery numbers for years. To her, this was her only happiness and the least Benny could do was buy the ticket for her. And he always did except for this particular night when her numbers actually hit. The jackpot had been huge. Gladys could barely believe her ears or her eyes when she heard and saw the numbers on the TV.

“Oh, my God! My God!” Gladys had jumped out of her chair. Tears welled in her eyes and she clasped her hands over her mouth. Benny sat quietly reading the paper and had looked around it at Gladys as if she had sprouted an extra head.

“What the hell?” He questioned.

“What the hell?” Gladys reflected. “Are you serious? I won. I hit the jackpot! I just can’t believe it!”

“Oh.” Benny had put down the paper. He put his hand on his shirt pocket and pulled out the one dollar he should have used to purchase the ticket. “I forgot to buy your ticket today, Gladys. Hmm. I’m hungry.” He said in a matter of fact tone.

Benny had nonchalantly gotten up and walked into the kitchen. For only a few moments, Gladys had everything she’d ever dreamed of. In the next moment, a nauseated warmth of disappointment overwhelmed her. In a shocked, numb state, she had nonchalantly walked to the gun cabinet and gotten the shotgun.

And now Gladys stood looking at the dead Benny. She sighed and went to the shed to get the hacksaw. She snatched the blue tarp of the car Benny had opted to restore instead of just buying her a new one. Upon returning to the kitchen she realized the laborious task at hand. She let out a small chuckle. All Gladys could think of was 200lbs of meat laying there to be chopped. This was certainly going to take a while and maybe should be done in the basement. Gladys huffed and put down the hacksaw. She struggled to get Benny’s body on the tarp and dragged him down into the basement.

Dismembering her husband’s body proved to be more arduous than she had originally thought. It all boiled down to that easier said than done thing. Definitely easier said. She sawed and sawed. Blood somehow got underneath the cleaning gloves she wore because it didn’t occur to her to drain the body first. After all, she had never murdered anyone before, let alone chopped up a body. Her back ached and her hands cramped. She put the body parts into eight bags and spent a lot of time cleaning up the blood.

Gladys sat on the bottom of the basement steps winded. She stared at her blood-stained hands and then at the black trash

bags lined in a neat row. Fine work for an amateur. Gladys decided to keep the bags in the big basement freezer and then dump a couple of them each week into the dumpster at her workplace. Thank goodness her boss was too cheap to install video cameras. She'd show up at work early just before sunrise on trash day and dispose of the bags. Seemed simple enough. That beat burying them in different locations. Who had time for that? And as for Benny's whereabouts? For now, he went out of town to visit a sick friend. Gladys felt she'd have more time to plan the details of her story later. For now she definitely needed rest. Sniffing her under arms, Gladys thought it was about time for a shower. She convinced herself that her own body odor was the offensive smell and not the coppersy, metallic smell of her husband's blood.

Gladys stood in the shower, letting the hot water sooth her body. Gradually, the blood rinsed away, staining the tub. This would be something else she would need to handle, but later. She barely made it to the bed before collapsing into sleep.

Despite her exhaustion, Gladys awoke suddenly from a restless sleep. She had dreamt of her husband and for a moment she wondered where he was at this time of night. Oh yeah, he's in the basement all dismembered, she recalled. She heard a loud sound, like shattering glass. Gladys let out a mouse-like cry and scrambled to turn on the light. She knocked over the lamp in the process. From the floor, the light of the lamp faintly illuminated the room, casting eerie shadows.

"Who's there?" Gladys's heart raced as she looked around the room.

When she saw no one, Gladys picked up the lamp and placed it back on the end table by the bed. She was shaking. Obviously, the sound must have been the continuation of the dream she was previously having. Murdering her husband made her a little skittish.

The sudden ring of her telephone made Gladys jump and caused her heart to beat so hard that it made her head hurt. She grabbed it and froze when she saw the caller ID. She read it three times over because it took a moment for her to register the information there. It was her lottery numbers.

Gladys clicked the red end button and slammed the phone back into its receiver. Someone was obviously playing with her, but who and most importantly, how? Maybe she'd have to get rid of them too. She panicked at the thought of having to get rid of someone else. All the stress of it. It was really messy. Having to chop up someone else was absolutely unnerving. Gladys didn't want to get her hands dirty again.

She put on her robe. The light bulb in the lamp popped and the room went dark. What is going on now? Gladys then put on her bedroom slippers. The light bulbs were down in the basement—with Benny.

Heading back down to the cellar, Gladys was surprised to see the door ajar. She groped for the light string and tugged. A dull yellow glow barely lit the stairs that led downward. She swallowed hard and carefully began her descent to get the bulbs. She froze midway down the stairs when she saw the trash bags that she had neatly tied shut, were now open. Blood was smeared throughout the basement, as if someone had taken each body part and dragged them across the floor.

“What is going on?” She whispered.

“I don't know, Gladys. I've been spending the last couple of hours trying to pull myself together. And by the way why did you do this to me?” The voice was gurgled and gritty. Gladys frantically searched for where the voice had come from. She felt something cold and wet caress her ankle. She lifted her foot with a little cry and almost lost her balance. Looking down, iciness crept from the caress and up through the rest of her body, making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

Through the stairs, Gladys glimpsed Benny staring back at her. At first it didn't register. How could this be? He was chopped up in pieces. How was he able to pull himself together as he had put it? She snatched her foot away from his cold hand and ran screaming up the stairs.

Got to call the police, she thought as she stumbled through the kitchen. Hands trembling, Gladys gripped the kitchen phone with white knuckle intensity. No. Can't call the police. What would she say? I killed and dismembered my husband and now he's coming back from the dead? She slammed the phone down.

Think! This really isn't happening. Must be some sort of nightmare.

"Wasn't I always good to you? Didn't I always give you what you wanted? I can't believe you shot me over a lottery ticket. Really, Gladys? A lottery ticket?" Benny's corpse struggled into the kitchen after her. His body parts were on top of one another, like unevenly stacked books. Head cocked severely to one side, Benny's dead eyes stared, unblinking. He awkwardly held the very same shotgun she used on him.

"Get away! Just die!" Gladys yelled. Her face was red and clammy. Spittle formed at the corners of her mouth. "All you had to do was play my numbers like always, Benny! You couldn't even do that! God! I deserve so much better! I should have never married you!"

On jelly-like legs, she moved to the front door, but it was locked. It had been Benny's idea about adding a deadbolt lock for safety, but due to another one of his inadequacies, the lock was improperly installed and, therefore, difficult to turn. Gladys violently shook the door knob. She heard the slow thump drag of Benny's approach. Without looking, she clambered up the stairs to get away. Gladys crawled into the room she and her husband once shared.

"Then why did you marry me?" Benny questioned, dragging himself towards her.

Collapsing onto her stomach, Gladys let out a blood curdling scream. He moved quickly for one so chopped up. She turned, swinging wildly at her husband as he loomed over her.

"It doesn't matter. The point is I don't want you anymore. After all these years, I just wanted something...adequate." Gladys said, tears streaming down her flushed cheeks.

"It's okay. Don't cry." Benny said. With one hand he gripped the throat of the shotgun, placing his bloodied finger on the trigger. He then methodically slid the butt of the gun up to his mangled shoulder with surprising ease, aiming it at Gladys's head. "I hope this is adequate enough for you."

Gladys' mouth fell open as she focused on the barrel of the gun. A shot rang out, shattering the silence of the new morning.

The violent recoil of the weapon loosened what little hold Benny had left on himself and he subsequently fell back into pieces.

“Well, that’ll leave a mark.” He commented. His headless torso exhaled one last time.

The sun rose, promising a beautiful day—for someone else.

Rubik's Cube Poem

Timothy Liddick

Walking through the store, what's this I see?
A shiny cube with six colors for me.
To the register I run, with money in hand,
ring me up Sir, as quick as you can.

In a flash my money is gone, a moment a fear,
as I realize what I've done.
Outside on the walk I tear open the pack,
And deposit the trash in the can on my way back.

Over and over in my hands I turn it,
unsolvable they say, I will disprove it!
Turn twist, twist turn, this cube is making my brain burn.
Turn twist, twist turn, this puzzle is making me pissed.

Turning and turning frustration sets in,
fuming I am, this puzzle may win.
Twist some more, no progress made, I can't stand it anymore.
Drop, kick, an explosion of pieces.

Serves you right evil cube,
my brain is like jello.
Curse you Mr. Rubik,
for undoing this fellow.

Untitled

Susan Grant



Life, Accepted

Lauren Ferraro

I could feel the goose bumps form on my legs and arms. I sat on the paper that was rolled out beneath me. My legs dangled. I rubbed my hands together as if the small amount of warmth it created would cloak my entire body. I looked down at my fingers covered with chipped nail polish, and my wedding band. The wrinkles of my skin mapped out the experiences of my life, and I wondered if I would have time for more.

As I picked away at the polish on my thumb, I remembered the first time I took my daughter and granddaughter to the nail salon. Ashley was only four. My daughter, Sam had told her that she could pick out whatever color she wanted; she jumped up and down.

We walked down the street and turned the corner. The salon was in an antique looking building, and had been in business for over forty years. The smell of lotion and nail polish remover seeped out of the door and into the street. Ashley ran up to the rainbow wall of colors and grabbed the purple as fast as she could. We were seated in a row, with our pants rolled up, and water bubbling between our toes. I can remember feeling so happy at that moment, relaxing in between my daughter and granddaughter. I sat back and observed how they chatted and giggled together. Ashley ran and jumped in my arms afterward and whispered in my ear, "I love you Grandma." It made my heart melt, and my eyes tear.

The clock on the wall was ticking loudly, and I watched it as fifteen minutes went by. The longer I sat there the more scared I became. I could feel my stomach start to turn, and I just wanted to put my clothes back on and leave. But I knew that I couldn't. I had to be here. I had to find out.

I twisted my wedding band around my finger and thought about Charles. I missed him more than ever, and I craved his presence. He would know how to relax me, he always could. But

he couldn't calm me down any longer. His heart wouldn't allow it. It gave out a few months after his sixty-eighth birthday, and he passed away.

A knock came at the door, and a muffled voice fought to come through.

"Hi Mrs. Haney, may I come in?" The knob turned and the door slowly opened. A petite woman with bright blond hair peered her head in before taking a step. "How are you feeling today? We have your results, and I know that Dr. Peters want to give them to you himself, so if you can just sit tight for a few more minutes, he will be right with you."

"Okay," I said as she turned around and left me alone in the sterile and bare room. I was thirsty, and frustrated.

The amount of time I had been waiting felt like hours, and I couldn't find a way to stop shaking. I took a deep breath and tried to think about things that would make me smile. My daughter and granddaughter, and Charles popped into my head. But soon my mind shifted to the day that I felt the lump. It was a warm day, and Sam had arrived at the house with some bathing suits that she wanted me to try on. She was fussing over the vacation she had booked for us, and would not let it go that I didn't have a bathing suit yet. She took it upon herself to buy me a few to choose from. I was in the bathroom, as she sat on my bed fiddling with the pulled thread of the quilt. She yelled threw the door at me to show her each suit as I put them on. I hated how each one looked and refused to wear them on the public beaches of Hawaii. As I pulled the final one up, and slid straps over my arms, I felt a lump with the brush of my hand. I immediately thought I must be mistaken with what I felt, and I ran my fingers over my breast, to feel again. The lump was painless, but it was close to the size of a golf ball.

I crossed my legs at the ankles, and fidgeted with my hair as Dr. Peters entered the room. He had his face buried in papers, before he lifted his head and made eye contact with me.

"So, Mrs. Haney. We have your results. The tests that we have done show that you have Metastatic breast cancer. Now this means that the cancer, which first formed in your breast, has spread to other areas of your body. This does not leave us many

options. Now it is completely your decision, but if you would like we can attempt a vigorous treatment strategy, but I honestly don't know if it would help at all. Your cancer is stage four and the..."

As he continued talking the sound of his voice grew quieter, and I could no longer hear what he was saying. I felt paralyzed. All I could see was flashes of my family and the amazing moments I had with them. I could see Sam and Ashley laughing together, and in the distance I saw Charles, with his hair gelled, his black leather jacket tightly fitting his torso, and his arm reaching towards me. As the images faded away, Dr. Peters voice grew louder again.

"I would say that you probably have three months at the longest. I am so terribly sorry, and I will give you a moment alone. Let me know when you would like to discuss your options." He touched my shoulder, turned around, and exited the room.

As I leaned backwards to lie down, the paper beneath me crinkled and ripped. I had to figure out how I was going to live with the fact that I was going to die.

Dementia Fall

Andrea Aste

From her chair
she watched the birds
fluttering about the porch
and heard the stealthy slink of cats.
Her wrinkled knobby hands sewing
another patched blanket.

She is here to change the blankets?
A bed now replaces her chair,
her quivering hands fold instead of sewing
and she is too high up to see the birds.
Home alone are the cats.
She is not looking out the porch window

where the bird feeders sway on the porch,
cast their image on folded blankets
indented by the body of a cat
watching over her vacant chair,
ignoring the flapping birds
in air, mimicking her sewing.

Her hands are no longer sewing
and the bird feeders are empty on the porch.
Time slips away like birds.
The last decade or two covered in a blanket
less tangible than the one beside her chair.

Birds scatter seeds upon the ground, sewing images
of cats that stalk between her chair and the porch.
Her blanket sent to the nursing home, abandons the chair.

Untitled

Carolyn Haskin



Excerpt from *Ring of Fire*

Alanna Pevear & Kristie Mahoney

Chapter Six:

I'm a Sun demon and I'm enjoying the moonlight—figure that one. I used to hate the night. I would cry every time the Sun would set beyond the horizon, yet now I've learned to enjoy what it is. I'll always take a sunny day over the night. Did Damon ask me something?

"What did you say?" I turn my body to him, but my feet stay planted, I'm trying to get them totally covered by sand by letting the waves wash over them.

Damon chuckles, "I asked if you have ever been married." I shake my head vigorously and turn back to the rising moon above the ocean water.

"I don't believe in marriage."

"Why not?"

I shrug. "Just don't, I guess." Damon stretches, lying on his back in the sand, using his suit jacket as a pillow—he looks good enough to eat. I've never believed in marriage. I believe in something much stronger than a piece of paper telling me I'm going to be with this person for the rest of my life. Sadly, only a few people have what I'm looking for, and even soul mates would be considered a watered down version of what I'd call a life partner.

"Interesting. You love whiskey. You own a multi-million dollar car franchise. You spend your free time in a biker bar. And your secretary has the hots for me. Anything else I should know about you? Am I missing anything?" He counts each thing off on his fingers, looking up at me expectantly for more.

"I love swimming." I offer, giving him an angelic smile. Smirking back, he gets to his feet, reaching for the buttons on his collar.

"Then let's go swimming." No, let's not, because once you take off your shirt, I'm going to give in to my hormones. Oh my,

his shirt drops to the ground. His muscles are lean but you can tell they're from long hours of work, not from hours in a gym. They make my mouth water.

"Last time I checked this wasn't supposed to be a swimming dinner."

His shoes come off next, then socks. If he takes off his pants David might have a freak out when I tell him all this tomorrow. Sure enough, his pants are off next. I can feel sparks tingling along my skin as I take in the great Damon Ristiano. Thank goodness he's keeping his boxer briefs on.

"Last time I checked car company owners weren't supposed to be as beautiful as you are."

I can't help it, I smile. "Oh, fine." Glancing down at my fully covered feet, I pull them out—feeling accomplished that I'd stayed still long enough to manage that—before unbuttoning my own shirt and putting it in the pile with his. My shoes pants follow soon after.

"You have tattoos? Is that why you didn't want me to touch your back?"

I stiffen. "Yeah, I have some new parts that are sensitive." Please don't figure out I'm lying.

He steps closer, getting a better view, "They're beautiful." Forcing myself to relax, I nod at the compliment of the tattoo I got many, many years ago. My entire back is covered in roses in different stages of life. Some are budding, others just dying, and a few are in full bloom. They're all interwoven with long, dangerous looking thorns that made me love roses in the first place—beauty and pain all wrapped up into one. The best part, in my opinion, of the tattoo is the fact that every rose is charred in some way or burning around the edges.

"Thank you. I love them." On edge that he's been looking at them for too long, I run into the water and dive head first, coming up into the waves a few feet later. Damon laughs and follows in behind me.

We swim in silence for a while, enjoying the cool ocean water. A hand snakes out to grab my wrist and I'm pulled into very sexy muscular arms. There's no longer any hesitation as Damon's lips find mine and his fingers run into my hair. My moan is

matched with his as I wrap my legs around his waist. Shit, heat is threatening to boil the water around me if we keep this up. I drag my lips from his, gasping for air. Damon doesn't stop and instead moves to my neck, teasing the sensitive skin there.

"Damon, relax. There's no rush." In answer, he sucks on the hollow below my ear. I dig my nails into his back and he moans. "Sex isn't happening tonight. But if you don't stop that I'll claw off your skin in sexual frustration."

Damon laughs against my neck but does pull back to look at me. "And for some reason, I don't think you're kidding."

"That's 'cause I'm not." We both chuckle and I let my head fall back, enjoying the night. My eyes fall upon the heavens. There must be a billion stars twinkling above us.

"They're beautiful."

I come back to reality. "What?" I ask.

Damon nods upwards since his hands are busy discovering my sides, thighs, and stomach. "The stars," he says simply, and I know he has no interest in talking about the stars. Damon's eyes are dark, brooding, and filled with lust that's pent up. They're fucking hot.

"Mmm, my grandmother used to tell me a story about the stars."

Damon rolls his eyes, "Everyone has a story about the stars. Which one did she tell you?"

I slap at his shoulder. "Don't roll your eyes at me. Although, that's true. But why not? They need to be explained somehow." He's not buying it.

"Well then, how does your story explain them?" I raise an eyebrow.

"You really want to know?"

"Mhmm." He mumbles, having returned to give attention to my neck. I sigh, enjoying the pleasure even as my body wants to give in to my fire, I control it.

"They're markers, for how many days Queen Rosemary has been without the love of her life."

Damon pulls back. "Go on..." Smirking, I lean down and kiss him.

“Sure you still want to know?” I tug on his bottom lip with my teeth, being rewarded with a growl.

“If you plan on continuing to do that...you’re getting that sex you crave but don’t want tonight anyway.”

Laughing, I pull back, jumping back into the story. “The woman, Queen Rosemary, was a warrior Queen of a people that could wield fire. She was fierce and feared by all and no one dared love her for fear she’d...well, in a simple terms, breathe fire down their throats and roast them from the inside out. Luckily, she was okay with that. She didn’t mind the space her people gave her. It lent her freedom to roam her country and explore the forests surrounding her home for invaders.”

Damon’s face is lit with amusement. “Sounds like my kind of woman.”

“Did you not hear the ‘fire down your throat’ part?” I joke.

He pauses to think about it, “Just sounds kinky to me.”

Laughing again, I run my fingers through his hair and keep going. “She went off on one of these scouting trips one day and she came across a wild mountain man taking care of a fawn that had broken its leg. But they were sworn enemies, their peoples I mean, and she went to line up the shot...until she heard what he was saying. Well singing. It was an old nursery rhyme her own mother would sing to her when she was sick. Bored yet?” I look down at the swimming Damon under me. He shakes his head.

“Keep going.”

Chuckling, I do as he asks. “Well, she hesitated and ended up alerting the mountain man to her presence. He whirled around to defend the baby fawn and the Queen dropped her bow. Umm...I believe the term is ‘love at first sight’? Since after that day, she would sneak away to the woods any chance she got to see her lover.”

“This doesn’t explain the stars.”

I growl, “I’m getting there.” I try pulling away, but Damon holds me tight.

“Oh, no you don’t. I’ve had to keep my hands off you all day. I’m making up for it now.” Shaking my head, I can’t believe what I’m getting myself into.

“Anyways, the Queen’s country was prone to war because she ruled all the different cultures and most of the people wanted to rule themselves, so one day, while she was laying with her lover, she saw an invasion force come creeping through the trees. She wanted her lover to come with her, but he knew they’d both die if they did and her people would suffer greatly without their Queen. So he sent her off and distracted the invaders long enough for her to raise her army. She never saw him again after that. His hut was burnt down and the fawn that had become his pet was huddled under a fallen tree. And while she stood on the spot they had loved one another she put all her sorrow, pain, anguish, and suffering into a burning ball of fire and threw it to the heavens. But because of him, she released the cultures and different peoples to rule themselves ensuring peace throughout her world. And...”

I look up to the stars in question, still mesmerized by them. My world has two Sun’s and there is only one part of the day you can really see stars, and even then they are much fainter than they are here.

I trace out three stars right in a row, “She mapped him in the stars. Orion the hunter. The dog... hound, whatever is supposed to be...a deer but she screwed them up. And there...” I point to what everyone here calls the ‘north star’, “Is where she marked the birth of her daughter. But that time she put her joy in it as well as her sadness.”

Damon’s quiet for a few moments—I can hear his mind churning over the story. “Out of all the stories I’ve heard about the heavens, I have to say, that might just be my favorite one.” Tugging the elastic out of my hair, he lets it run down my shoulders.

“Thank you. It’s one of my favorites too.” My words get cut off as his lips press against mine.

“Now, enough talk. Let’s get you wet.” I scream as Damon dives under the water without warning, splashing me. Oh... he’s going to pay for that.

Chapter Seven:

“Will you stop growling? I can’t concentrate on my methods of killing myself over you.” David slouches deeper into

his seat trying to get comfortable enough to rest his head on the back of the seat.

“Then he needs to shut his face. But really, David? Like you should tell me what to do, right now. The whole reason I have to have this meeting every year is because you’ve grabbed his ass...” I point to my assistant director of design, “at least five times in the past two weeks. You’ve grabbed his ass...” I point on my other side to my Human Resources guy, “and wait, you’ve grabbed every male’s ass in this room.”

David holds up a finger, “Correction... I have not grabbed his ass.” He points to the janitor, an older gentleman that talks to himself as he cleans.

“You’re just getting pickier and less horny in your old age.” Bright emerald green eyes bore into the side of my head with gay intensity—I laugh.

I hate sexual harassment seminars. They take up a full morning of time that I could be using to put the finishing touches on my new line of cars. But unless I want to go to jail because of David’s inability to control his hand movements I have to have it. Everyone from the company is here. My janitors, design crew, my corporate guys, even my mechanics. It’s funny though, how my crew is separated. All the suits are on my left while my garage guys on are my right, their jumpsuits unzipped to reveal greasy t-shirts and hair arms.

“Now, we also added a new program to handle gay marriage in the work place.” The woman giving the presentation has such a monotone voice. I’m sure that digging my eyes out with a spoon would be more exciting than her.

“Excuse me.” One of the suits raises his hand, one David find particular pleasure in grabbing, since he squeals every time. “I don’t believe that needs to be discussed. Gay marriage is not something this company recognizes.” Well, he just pissed me off. Grumbling, I rise to my feet and the room all turns to me at once.

“So you speak for this company? Last time I checked you didn’t create this place from nothing. And if you want to marry someone of your same sex, the more power to you, no one here is going to tell you or treat you differently.” The man slowly sits down, his face bright red.

“Touchy, touchy, touchy.” David says under his breath as I sit back down, settling low into my seat. The lady resumes her speech, skipping over the gay marriage part and going into sexual harassment levels.

I cock my head to the side contemplating, “Wonder what harassment level I would of gotten if I’d thrown something at that guy instead of talking to him. Hmm.” And my imagination starts running wild with the throwing of objects at the obnoxious man.

“Well, I think it really depends on what you throw. A piece of paper... or a chair.” I nod, trying to keep myself from laughing. The conference room door creak open slowly and I hear someone walk in and take a seat in the back. What is it with all the doors in this place creaking?

“What about a car? What would that count as?”

“I believe they call that homicide, Sunny, but I could be wrong. Oh my... look what the cat dragged in.” David jams his elbow into my side as I swallow back laughter. The woman explains, specifically, that ass grabbing is considered sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact.

“They’re talking to you, you know.”

“Graciella!” Growling, he digs his elbow harder into my side.

“Ow! What?” I turn and my interest picks up. Sitting in the corner is none other than my new parts supplier—Damon Ristiano. Amazingly, Damon has a look of amused boredom warring on his panty-dripping, good looking face.

David purrs, “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to deal with a lot more sexual harassment charges if he plans on coming here very often”

I ignore him. “He’s not required to come to these things. I wonder why he’s here. And in reality David, this class should be just for you, so the least you can do is pay attention. You alone account for ninety-nine percent of my sexual harassment charges. The only other one charge I’ve had is that secretary said the janitor was staring at her chest but really he just has a lazy eye. Her breast just happened to be in the way.” Damon’s mouth twitches as if he’s stopping himself from laughing. Weird. “Do you think he can hear us?”

David snorts, wiping the drool from his chin. “No. He’s on the other side of the room. How could he possibly hear us?” I’m not buying it.

My eyes linger on Damon’s strong jaw for a moment too long and his dark gaze meets mine. Shit. Well... too late to look away now. I raise an eyebrow in question. He smirks.

“He’s up to something.” My eyes narrow as he raises his hand.

Everyone goes quiet as the woman at the front points at Damon.

“Do you have a question, sir?” That dangerous smirk is still dancing on his face as he lounges back in his seat.

“Yes, I was just curious as to what level of sexual harassment someone would get for say... sleeping with the boss?” The whole room is deadly silent except for David’s gasp of shock as he wheels on me.

“I knew it! You bitch!” There have been very few moments in my life that I have been speechless—and this is one of them.

* * * * *

“I still don’t believe that you didn’t sleep with him.” David pouts, folding his arms across his chest.

“Be careful or you’ll wrinkle your new Armani suit.”

He answers with a huff and slowly unfolds his arms though his pout remains. I rise up onto my tip toes to look over the crowd of people hurrying out of the huge conference room. Almost immediately after the woman had dismissed us, I’d lost sight of Damon—who I have a few words for.

“Damn it, you would think with the four inch heels you make me buy I’d be able to find him.” I keep straining till I finally catch a shadow out of the corner of eye. He’s leaning against the wall, watching the doors much like I just am. For a moment, I just watch him trying to decipher in my mind what’s so intriguing about him. I’m over two thousand human years old and I’ve yet to have a human affect me like he has. There is no way this man could be a fire demon, my blood would know if he was, but what else could it be? Still curious as to if my earlier suspicions were

correct about his hearing, I do the only thing I can think of—I whisper his name.

Instantly, his head whips around to me and his eyes widen with shock before covering up with his usual mask of indifference.

“Princess, I have some commercial ideas I need you to sign off on before they can go on the air.” Jerry blocks my view of Damon and instantly I’m irritated, because for some reason I know that even if I push my damn partner aside, the wall behind him would be Damon free.

“Can we do it after lunch? I’m starving. David made reservations at that outdoor restaurant down the street.”

“Mind if I join?”

The amount of effort it takes not to cringe at the thought should earn me a medal. “Yeah, sure. Let me grab my bag and we’ll go.”

Jerry’s eyes are boring holes into the back of my neck while I take the less crowded stairs to the top floor. My office door shrieks on its hinges.

“Damn it! David, I’m gonna kill you for not fixing that!” Mumbling and muttering, I go for the bottom draw of my desk when something red pulls my attention back up.

A single, perfect red rose with a note:

Meet me at the beach – Damon

Full on lust didn’t catch my interest, but romance will? Well played big boy, well played. But all I see behind these weak petals are thorns just waiting to draw blood. I toss the note and rose into the trash without a second thought.

“You’re not going... right?” Flight or fight urges my heart to race.

“None of your business.” My voice is flat. Emotionless. Jerry picks at one of the loose screws attaching the door to the wall, not bothering to look at me though he might have just found the reason for my door’s awful sound.

“It’s always been my business. You’re my...”

I cut him off, “I am your boss.”

Jerry stops picking and finally turns to face me. “He’s different, dangerous. I know you refuse to look for another supply company, but I don’t trust his kind.”

I roll my eyes. “Why don’t you enlighten me.” My wittiness has always been wasted on Jerry.

“Listen to your instincts, Graciella!” Exasperated, he takes two long strides and grips the edge of my desk. Though he’s keeping the solid wood between us, just in case.

“The only thing my instincts tell me is to kick your ass out of my office.” But I don’t, no matter how gratifying that would be, because I know he knows what Damon is. How twisted that sounds. Either way, Jerry always had a knack in our world for identifying enemies during times of war. He could tell you what area they lived in, what they ate, what their age was, and most importantly, how to defeat them. Besides my parents and my sister, Jerry was one of the few most powerful beings simply because of that fascinating little ability of his.

For years, he’s tried to teach me his tricks, but magic in this world is dying out rapidly, and we rarely run across someone who is ‘different.’ His eyes plead with me to think, to remember our lessons, to know.

I sigh. “I don’t sense any danger from him, so I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Jerry’s teeth grind together. “Don’t be so thick, Princess. Can’t you smell the scent of blood and death that surrounds him?” No, actually. All I can smell is the night air that lingers on his skin and whatever cologne he wears that makes my mouth water.

So instead, I growl, “Is that not the same scent that surrounds us? Because I doubt Damon has killed as many creatures as our people have.” We’re nose to nose now, both leaning over my desk, gripping the wooden edge to keep from ripping each other apart. If someone saw us now they would probably think we are lovers, leaning in for a kiss, but the time we once were lovers is long gone. I gave it a shot and although Jerry was happy with our constant fighting and his jealous rampages—I was not.

“Our blood is filled with fire, ash, and soot. Death isn’t something that clings to our skin like a cloak. I know you suspect something. You can’t fool me.” He starts moving around my desk,

his eyes fixated on mine as if what he knows will pass through them into me. Defensive, I turn to fully face him. The heat coming from Jerry's body eases my shoulders. No matter what, he is always there. He is all I have left.

"Think..." Jerry leans down, his lips hovering along the pulse at my neck. "Think, my Princess."

His lips kiss the mahogany of my desk as I push his locked arm harder, keeping him down.

"I'm not in the mood for your seduction techniques. Maybe I was once, but now I know better. And as for Damon, I will do as I wish. I think I've earned that right after what I've been through. So if you don't mind..." I release him, only to shove him towards the door. Heat builds in the room as a spark runs down Jerry's fingertip.

"You will pick him over your blood? Over your people?" Flames ignite in my stomach, threatening to melt my bones, or Jerry's.

"Get out of my office or that blood you're talking about is going to be yours all over my hardwood floor."

Jerry growls, and I can smell the edges of his suit starting burn.

"You heard her, Jerry. Now go on and leave her be." David's voice acts as the much-needed water to cool my nerves. Jerry straightens as if a puppeteer yanked on his strings. "Don't make me repeat myself." David moves to stand between me and Jerry and instantly my guard goes down.

Jerry raises his hands in surrender, moving towards the door.

"As you wish, your Grace." Only when I hear the click of the stairwell door do David and I breathe again.

"Your skirt is smoking." David mentions nonchalantly, even though his eyes never leave the door.

"No it's not." I look down, "Shit!" Patting the edges of my skirt down, I sigh in frustration, "I really liked this skirt."

"I'll buy you a new one." He pauses, "I think you should go." Surprised, I look up and he's holding the rose up to his nose. I don't even need to be that close to know it's one of the sweetest smelling roses I've ever come across.

“What for?”

Silence. David shrugs, placing the rose once more on my desk.

“If anyone asks, I’ll tell them you’re working on the new line... on a beach.” Swaying his hips, he moves out of my office, leaving me with the bomb he just placed in front of me.

Contributors

(In order of appearance)

Dorothy Crawford, 41, is a first-year graduate student from southern Illinois. She has been married for 20 years and has four children, three dogs, and two cats.

Meryl Fawn Healy, 53, is a sophomore from Atlanta, GA. In 2008 she won a new car and a trip to Hollywood to meet the top eight *American Idol* Contestants. She had her own driver, a room for five nights in Beverly Hills, and her hair and make-up done by the *Idol* stylists. Six months after that trip she won ten-thousand dollars in the Georgia Lottery!

Susan Grant, is from southern New Hampshire. She was encouraged to write creatively as a freshman.

Joshua Walker, 27, is a sophomore from Temecula, CA. He's an avid knitter who has designed a number of geek-inspired patterns.

Jennifer Michelle Fryar, 21, is a senior from Boston, MA. She tends to drink tea like most people drink water.

Araxie Yeretsian, 25, is a junior from Boston, MA. She got to work on the MMA Wildstar.

Heather Lynn Atwood, is a graduate student in MFA program, 3rd semester, from Phoenix, AZ. She managed to drive cross-country with three cats, two dogs, and husband.

Andrea L. Aste, 21, is a 3rd year senior from Concord, NH. Andrea works at a coffee shop, but doesn't like the taste of coffee.

Alex Neely, 28, is in his first year of a Masters in English/Creative Writing from Glen Rock, NJ. Neely is a journalist for the United States Army. Over the past two years, he has covered events and written stories about the U.S., Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, and Kyrgyzstan.

Amber Lynn Revis, 36, is a junior from West Branch, LA. When she was 17, she spent the summer traveling from Pennsylvania to the west coast with her family, camping out of two Volkswagen vans, seeing the country. Travel was an education in itself, and it stays with her in her adult life. She finds herself moving every few years for a new adventure with her own husband and children, as they enjoy her career with the National Park Service.

Rachael Hali, 23, is a junior from Salem, OR. She likes to collect stickers and has a nicely-sized Sailor Moon collection.

Cassandra Shawver, 21, is a senior from Bedford, NH. She loves archery.

Dahvin Greenfield, 20, is a junior from Portsmouth, NH. Dahvin starred in a production of *Rocky Horror* last spring as Frank n' Furter.

Dania Al Hussein, 32, began her masters program in April 2013. She is from Jordan, but resides in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Through some inexplicable act of bravery, she did a skydiving trip about seven years ago. She can also never eat too much chocolate or cheese, and romantic movies sometimes make her cry.

Hilary Hirtle, 20, a senior from Westerville, OH. She's an avid amateur filmmaker who won a short-film screenwriting contest and had her winning screenplay, "Cleaning," produced.

Brandi N. McCleese, 30s, is in her final year of her graduate program. She lives in Edenton, NC, but is a proud New Jersey native. She's also been known to read an entire novel in one day.

Katie Smith, 18, is a freshman from Freetown, MA and has never eaten a blueberry.

Carolyn Haskin, 26, will graduate in 2014 and is from Minnesota. Though graduating this spring, learning will never end! The newly found free time will be used for blacksmithing, home brewing (wine and beer), language learning, blogging, and venturing through all of Minnesota's 70+ state parks!

Cheryl A. Loux, is in the second year of her graduate studies. She is pursuing an MA in English and Creative Writing with a concentration in fiction.

Timothy Liddick, 38, is a senior from Bellevue, NE. He recently discovered his inner geek and has been exploring it with childish joy!

Lauren Ashley Ferraro, 30, is in her first term of a master's program (3rd year at SNHU) and is from Greenwich, CT. She has a love for elephants.

Alanna Pevear and Kristie Mahoney have been writing together since their young years in High School and have been the Chief Editors of *The Manatee* for two years. Sharing their passion for writing has created countless short stories, plot lines, horrifying characters, but most importantly their jewel, *Ring of Fire*. After three years of hard work the first draft of their first full-length novel came to life. It's currently in the process of more rewrites and new additions, but their hope is for it to one day be on the shelves of everyone's local book store.