

THE MANATEE



**Eighth Annual
Spring 2015**

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WHAT IS *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 undergraduate students on the Manchester campus, and we're able to do it with generous funding from the wonderful people in the School of Arts and Sciences.

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

Each year, we accept submissions through the fall, with deadlines in mid-December. Submit to *The Manatee*!

THE MANATEES

Chief Editors:

Cassandra Poulin
Dahvin Greenfield

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Editors' Note

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

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

Thank you to all those who submitted and of course to those who are published in this issue of *The Manatee*! Congratulations to those who are graduating in a matter of weeks – I am sure we will see your art elsewhere. As always, happy reading, everyone.

Cassandra Poulin
Editor in Chief

Dahvin Greenfield
Co-Editor

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Sarah Hamilton

“Dollhouse”

Each night when her girl would close the dollhouse walls, Bea would spill off of her powder stool and tremble on the silk-scarf rug. Rising, she would run her fingers over the plastic hairbrushes and wood-patterned plastic vanity, the textures frustratingly familiar. She would walk to the plastic bed, covered by a cloth duvet. She would pace around the room—no more than three long strides across, and four wide. She would sit on the floor, and knock four times. Erik would knock back. She could hear Barbara in the living room as she tapped on the walls. Ethan, in the bedroom just next to Bea’s would not tap back anymore. He used to.

Barbara had been the first doll in the dollhouse, she figured. It was Barbara, and then Erik, and then herself. When their girl had been younger, she had left the dollhouse open more—Bea had once seen the thing from the outside. Four rooms, none connected. Erik had shaken his head then, reached as if to pat her shoulder, and then turned away, having changed his mind.

“It is such a small thing.”

“No one ever said that the world had to be big.”

Bea had figured out that Erik and Barbara had been something once. Together. When the house was left open. When asked about the whole affair, Barbara had shrugged and said that time and loneliness could do more than any little girl’s imagination ever would. Bea would pry—she even reached out once to grab Barbara’s hand in a desperate attempt to appeal to her. Barbara had flinched then, waving Bea away with pink-tipped fingers. She was the only one who remembered a time before the house. Sometimes, she would sit so still, and be so silent that Bea wondered if she was not simply a fixture of the house herself. A pattern on the couch.

Then, of course, as the girl grew, she remembered to close the house at night, each doll effectively locked away in one of the four rooms. After a short time, Bea could not remember quite what the front

of the house looked like. Ethan had been the most recent addition, given to their girl by her pen-pal from a distant land. He had never seen the front of the house.

In the dark, Bea would shrink against the wall that separated herself and Ethan. She could feel him on the other side. She could hear him breathing through the wall. She would look at her toes, her knees, her hands, her arms. She would slide down against the wall, slip onto the floor. She imagined him on the other side, hands against the wall, so close. Sometimes, she would not find the energy to get back up until Erik knocked again, to remind her to sit herself back where she had been left the night before.

Tonight, she knocked with her ear to the ground. Nothing. Her breath caught in her throat; she knocked again, harder. And again. Nothing. Then, the wall shuddered. The whole far wall—and not just a little quiver, but a whole quake. On her knees, she crawled over, her hand against the cool plastic. It shuddered again, after a hearty thump. Erik was throwing himself against the wall. Her stomach lurched at the thought. She scrambled to her feet and propelled her body back the three strides that put her against the window. *Thump*. She charged the wall, throwing her whole self against the structure. She bounced off and landed in a heap. Her shoulder was jammed into her chin; she sat back up a little dazed, shaking her head. *Thump*. This time, it was louder. Harder.

She picked herself up off the floor, and charged the wall again, this time hitting it so hard that it actually budged. There was a crack between the floor and the wall through which she could just barely make out Erik below, a shadowy blur. The crack widened with his next attempt, but only by enough for Bea to squeeze her tiny fingers into the open space. She could hear another set of fists pound on a different wall, and Erik stopped. He crossed the room and spoke into the crack that featured a sliver of Barbara's face. She could only see the top of Barbara's head, but the blonde bob shook as she whispered. Bea was breathing too hard to hear what was said. Erik sat down in front of the crack, shoulders slumped. He buried his face in his hands. Bea pulled herself up and knelt with one hand on the wall, the other planted on the ground. She crawled over to the wall and peered through it to see if Ethan was listening. She could not see him, and did not bother to call

him. She curled up on the floor by the crack and stared at the frayed edges of the blanket covering her hard, plastic bed.

“Bea?”

She sat up, eyes on the wall.

“Bea?”

It was Ethan, his face pressed against the crack in the wall.

“Hello?”

“You were trying to open the house. You and the person downstairs.”

“His name is Erik.”

“The woman beneath me told him to stop.”

Bea sighed. She rested her forehead against the wall for a moment, sucking in a breath.

“Bea?”

“Her name is Barbara. She is probably right anyways.”

“Oh.” Ethan knocked twice on the wall. He never broke eye contact.

“It isn’t morning.”

Ethan knocked three times, all the while watching Bea’s face. She knocked back once. They sat like that for a moment, quietly looking at each other. She had not seen Ethan but once, when the dollhouse had been left open for the last time. Of course, she saw Ethan, Erik, and Barbara during the day, when they were tossed around by small, sticky hands, but their faces were much more than what she saw by day. In the night, she could make out a different Ethan altogether. He looked small somehow, with dark eyes, tight lips, and wide palms, plastered to the crack right above his brunette curls. She had the mad urge to stroke his hand, just to steal a little bit of real contact. The longer she looked at him, the wider the crack seemed. They sat in silence, eyes locked. Her

fingertips grazed the wall as if to touch him through the layer of hard plastic, seeking response.

She could sense morning, but Erik never knocked. Bea rose at the same time as Ethan, his movements in sync with her own.

“Will we be able to open the walls tonight?”

Bea shrugged. She did not want to tell him that they had only been able to open it this much because their girl had forgotten to fasten the latch that was attached to the outside of Erik’s kitchen.

“Maybe.”

She knocked twice on his wall, and then on the floor. She could hear Erik stir. He had been still all night. She could not hear if Barbara had moved, but she doubted it. Barbara had likely long since been in place. Ethan watched her walk to her vanity table, and she watched Ethan watch her. He gripped the wall hard; his fingers poked through the crack, stretched as far toward her as they could reach. Finally, as dawn came hazy through her window, he left the crack in the wall to take his place for the day.

Another day. Hours of limbs wrenched in different directions, stuffed into clothes and then ripped out of them. She was smacked into the wall of the kitchen when the little girl missed her mark. She sat at the kitchen table while Barbara, with her wet-paint smile, whacked a pan against the stove. Ethan and Erik had been deposited in the living room to wait for supper.

Soon enough, Bea was set back at her vanity, Barbara was deposited onto the couch, Erik was left to sit at the table, and Ethan was dropped onto the floor of his room. The dollhouse was closed. Night fell.

Bea knocked again, ear against the floor. The house was latched, however, and Erik never replied. She knocked on Ethan’s wall, and he knocked back. She could feel him on the other side of the wall, his presence faintly electric like lightning on her fingertips.

“Ethan?”

“Bea?” Muffled. She could scarce make out his voice.

“I just wanted to know if you were there.”

“Oh.”

After a few moments of silence, she could hear him breathe. She wondered if he could hear her too. She held her breath to listen.

Before she realized it, dawn crept through the window. Erik knocked twice, and she heard shuffling—time to resume her place at the vanity. Her eyes were trained on the high walls. She could envision him clearer now, though not completely. A tall form seated at a rigid, empty desk.

It was another day as any other—thrown about through the air by chubby hands, high, screeched dialogue imparted as the dolls mimed interaction.

She was placed at the vanity, as was usual. Erik was sat in the kitchen. Barbara, the living room. She watched through a veil of hair as Ethan was picked up off the floor and arranged seated on the bed. She waited for the walls to close. Fingernails scraped against textured plastic. Some shifting. The little girl’s hands were on the wall, jimmying it free from the carpet’s clutches.

“Mirra?” It was the mother, downstairs. “Come down to dinner.”

“Wait, I gotta fix it!”

“Mirra.” The tone was firmer. “Now.”

A plump lower lip jutted out. A low sound like a grumble. The little girl’s hand dropped from the dollhouse, the light turned out, and her sock-footed steps pounded down the stairs. But the house was open. The house had been left open.

The carpet was a sea, stretched from the lip of the bottom floor to the doorway that loomed across the room, a lit rectangle. As the sounds subsided downstairs, Bea looked out over the playroom, heart pounding audibly through her skin.

Erik was the first to spill out of the house. He tumbled onto the shag carpet on his knees—a pilgrim at a foreign mecca. He laughed and sobbed, laying out on the soft rug, limbs splayed. Barbara poked her

head past the border, but ducked back in a moment later, too afraid to nudge her toes beyond her cage. When she glanced to her left, her eyes met another pair, wide and astonished. Ethan.

Bea choked, cheek against the floor and hair hanging in the open air. Ethan reached around the thin wall—such a flimsy thing now that she really looked at it, a sliver of pink that sliced between the two small, square rooms. Hauling himself up, he swung one leg around the wall, and paused to regain his balance. After another breath, the other leg followed. He eased his body around the wall, stood over her. Without even thinking to do it, Bea pushed up off the ground, eyes trained on him. He stared at her, disbelieving. Neither of them breathed. Erik’s ragged sobs floated around them. Ethan raised one hand slowly, fingers outstretched. He shook. She could not stop staring at his face in the dark. His fingers brushed her cheek. A current—a shock that wracked her frame from her face through her skin to her toes. She exhaled in one huff as if she was a balloon that had popped. He collapsed against her, arms wrapped around her waist, face buried in her stomach. Her fingers tangled in his hair.

She pried one of his hands off of her hip and held it tight in her own.

Chelsea Robinson
“A Walk In The Afternoon Rain”

Goosebumps rose across skin like mountains.
Water ran as rivers between valleys.
A rotation of this moving earth,
the sun warmed its face,
and a spine's chill shook the barren fields.

Laurelann Easton

“Sleep”

The air is quiet and still, a peaceful weight that blankets us with the warmth of each other. His skin is like the sun, kissed by it gently and kissed by my own lips more times than I can count, filled with a warmth that pulls me in every time I'm near. His eyes are closed, lashes brushing his cheeks, but his lips are curved up slightly, drowned in blissful relaxation. With breathing slowed to almost a stop inside us both, I rest my head on his chest, but my eyes remain open.

If I could, I would spend hours with my sight set on him. I want to have every inch of him memorized. Color for color, line for line, until I can paint a picture of him, though I could never be satisfied because it still wouldn't capture him. There's a life in him that is rarely expressed. The warmth that radiates from him is felt by no one but me, and how do you paint warmth? With an image of the sun? With dark hair and brown eyes ringed like the inside of a tree, you can't create a golden spectacle.

If I could have all of the hours necessary to know him by memory, to recall each little detail, time would have to stop. And in this moment, time feels like a bad dream that we get to forget for a little while, until it becomes necessary to remember that it exists and stop drowning. Time feels as though it has slowly melted away, leaving a barely stirred air about us, barely stirred by my quiet sighs.

His eyes peek open a touch to reveal an edge of those spiraling rings, looking down his nose at me, and his arms tighten around me to hold me closer. Smooth skin to smooth skin, warm all the way through. Sometimes I wonder if everything is real, if I truly get to keep him. The insecure part of me is silenced with his touch, another forgotten thing that should never be remembered. He reaches for my hand, brings it to his lips and I know there's nothing to fret over.

My eyes trace the features of his face. Those two parentheses about his mouth from smiles only barely hinted at now. A random black hair on his chin missed during shaving, and equally dark hair sweeping over his brow. My fingers trace the lines in his chest, defined over time

from work. The light touch raises hundreds of almost imperceptible bumps along his skin, a stimulated chill pulling a sigh from his lungs.

The sigh carries the weight of his love to me, which I echo back, a heartfelt voice carrying it to his ears. It's not so much of a weight as it is another blanket that covers and surrounds us, reassures us even when a day turns gray. A weight would be more of a burden, and love should never be a burden. It should always be a blanket, weightless when the stimulus of it is lost to relaxation, lost along with all general feeling. Or maybe it's more so stolen by Sleep, drawing you away from your senses until nothing is left but darkness and dreams. Who can tell the difference, though, when real life is so surreal?

Alexander Fisk

“P9P-677”

Anguish hung about the edges of her door
and the wooden floor was Atlas burdened by her distress.
Each scuff, a note in her score
and annual rings that offer a glimpse,
not into a flowering growth, but an accession of tumors
that lead her by hand and branch against trunk-splitting wind.
It is a struggle in which the only repose is upon the ground.
Left alone to her final breath,
the fire approaches, a meticulous hound.
She will sing in the hearth of warmth before death.
Her flitting voice is but an echo in this hall.
Its absence leaves a stillness most piercing.

Gabriel Coffman

“Mist”

I miss the explosive feeling of colors.
I miss the resounding sounds of looping emotions.
I miss when the world ran viciously backwards.
I miss sitting stationary in someone’s silence.
I miss vowels getting upended and uprooted.
I miss too few things to count on broken fingers.
I miss my own warmth in dark places.
I miss a flight of stairs with ropes at the top.
I miss the edges at the bottom.
I miss the morning greetings and midnight farewells.
I miss plans and dreams and wishes and stories.
I miss what was never as close as I wanted.
I miss my mistakes and success.
I miss being in pieces.
I miss my other pain.
I wish I had yours.

Gabriel Coffman

“Wrong Boy”

I am surrounded by air, but I don't feel like I'm breathing.
I can't tell if I'm under the waves or under the rain.
My head's in the clouds feeling drowned in the sounds of now.
Feet first dragged forever forward, forgetting my own past.
On a command that said it's dead and gone and useless.
You're a Boy who needs dirty steady hands at work.
You need your boots nailed to the dirt and covered in tar.
Pixies in your pockets? Rainbows in your eyes?
You are Boy, you'll never cry, not ever. You're smoke and ash.
Play with the balls of your brothers in blood and pigment.
That spine needs more meat and your eyes need lust.
Act like the fodder of a war in the fog of our written wars.
We raised you Boy and named you Boy. Your name: Boy.
We'll walk you to your grave we'll help you dig.
Your tombstone will read Dead Boy. Don't try to fight.
I'll fit you in your coffin very nice and tight.

Renée Morrissette

“Grownups Don’t Need Saving”

It was a cool Friday night in late October. There was a full moon in the sky with wispy clouds passing periodically. “A Halloween moon,” I used to call it as a little kid. Even in the darkness, I could see how orange and red the leaves have turned. Wearing warm boots, tight dark wash skinny jeans and a flannel shirt, I couldn’t wait to get out of my house into the late autumn air.

My parents had just left for the night to get some things at Market Basket. I quickly seized the opportunity to apply thick, black Rimmel eyeliner and straighten my curls. As I looked in the toothpaste splattered mirror, I slid my pink tongue across my front teeth and deemed myself presentable. I grabbed the keys to my 1996 Nissan Altima from the gold hook and flew out the creaking blue wooden door.

I bought the Altima just two months prior right before school started from an old lady on the other side of town. She stood with what seemed like a hunchback, and spoke with a raspy, smoker’s voice. Her cheeks sagged like a hound’s jowls, and her short white hair stood on end as if she had put her finger in a socket. She had beady eyes, continually flipping them back and forth between me and the car in her short, gravel drive. From the description on Craigslist, the car was a steal. Only \$1,000 for a car with 98,000 miles and just a little bit of rear-panel work. The “little” rear-panel work took my dad two weeks and one gallon of Bondo to repair.

My car was the epitome of a “rust bucket.” I was a regular old “hoopy” as my brother put it. In comparison to the last car I owned that could turn on without the key in the ignition because it was once hotwired, I didn’t think this car was as ghetto. The poor car had several dents and scratches, presumably from the old lady’s erratic driving through Manchester city to her minimum wage paying job. A week before school started, I was spray-painting the trunk of my car, that was now misshapen from the amount of Bondo needed to make the car pass inspection, black to match the rest. Sadly, the high gloss spray paint cost too much, so I had to settle with a matte rear. Worst of all, there was a mysterious clunking sound coming from the engine, similar to the sound of a vacuum when it accidentally sucks up a penny.

Despite all of this, I rolled around the streets of Goffstown in this old beater with a sense of pride. Unlike most of my classmates whose parents bought them fancy Toyotas and Mustangs with high quality car insurance, mine did not. I saved all of my summer Goffstown Library paychecks and paid \$800 for this gem all on my own, after pathetically telling the seller that was all I had. It might have been a rust bucket, but it was *my* rust bucket.

That sense of pride especially apparent on nights like this. Because I paid for the car by myself and the registration was only in my name, my parents couldn't take the car from me. It was my property. It was my ticket to freedom.

So I set out after my parents were long gone to meet up with my boyfriend, Donald, at a local biker bar. At sixteen, I thought I was a daredevil, a sneak, a quintessential badass walking into the Trestle to watch my boyfriend play guitar for a bunch of drunk old men and chain-smoking cougars. In reality, I was pathetic. In the state of New Hampshire, a child under the age of eighteen can only enter a bar if he or she is with his or her parents. Therefore, in order to get in, I had to pretend to be Donald's sister, sitting with his mom sorely swallowing Captain and Coke in a short, frosted glass. And as I bobbed my head to the cords of "Let It Be" through the amp, my Mom thought I was watching PG-13 movies on Donald's basement couch. She always trusted me. I never gave her a reason not to.

After finally prying open the driver's side door to my Altima, I turned over the ignition and catapulted myself out of the driveway. I sped through the sleepy neighborhood of Lindsey Way, going twenty miles over the speed limit. I passed duplex after duplex with the same dirty brown siding with red trim and dimming front porch light nestled in endless cobwebs. The mailbox numbers glinted as I passed, blinding me for milliseconds at a time. As I approached the end of the mile long road, my car began to slow even though my lead foot remained on the gas pedal. The speedometer neared zero. Lights began to flash on my dashboard: check engine, low coolant, brakes. My knuckles turned white while the veins to my fingers pulled like piano strings. Gray clouds began to cover the moon. I veered off to the side. The engine stalled. Two tries and finally my car roared to life again. I drove carefully down to the stop sign at the intersection of Lindsey and Terrill Hill.

I gently pressed the gas pedal, edging my way onto the hill lined with a three foot high stone wall dating to the late 1700s and arching oak

and maple trees. I urged my car forward as I took the left turn towards town, whispering words of encouragement to the dashboard. As I was getting ready to straighten my car into the lane, the lights began to flash again: check engine, low coolant, brakes. The Altima halted. My hands began to tremble. A man in a gray F150 pickup truck pulled up behind me. His headlights were blinding in the fierce darkness. A woman in a red Honda Accord rolled her window halfway down next to me. I turned my key back and forth – off to on, off to on.

“Do you need help?” the woman halfheartedly yelled through the glass between us. My hand was on the ignition – off to on, off to on.

“Do you need a jump?” the man from the truck said, walking up to my window. I turned my key off to on, off to on. Suddenly, the dome light flickered. My car began to hum. The man backed away; the woman rolled up her window. She gave a feeble wave and scurried up the hill beneath the glow of the uncovered moon. The man asked again, “Do you need a jump?” He was wearing jeans with dirt caked at the knees and a green parka, despite it only being fall.

“No,” I said, “it looks like I’m okay. I am going to head home now.” I waited for the man to get into his F150 and blaze by me before I drove a few feet into the driveway of a white ranch on my left. Even though the shades are drawn, it was evident no one was home. Black bear statues cluttered the yard, appearing life like in the blackness. A steel miniature windmill turned, making a wheezed scratching sound in the stillness. I pulled the nose of the car into the drive, and shifted into reverse. Without warning, the car’s dash went black. The engine clicked off. The rear of my car was sprawled across half of the, now empty, street. I darted my head right then left. I frantically pushed the key back and forth in the ignition – off to on, off to on. I pounded the steering wheel, instantly regretting it. Now my hands throbbed while the moon covered behind clouds again, enveloping me in complete darkness.

I’m not sure if I expected to be rescued that night or not. I waved drivers around my protruding vehicle, but no one stopped like the first time. Maybe this was karma? When I hysterically cried over the phone with my parents, they answered, casually annoyed. Of course they couldn’t rush back to help me. Of course I needed to call my older brother who was still home. Of course it was my fault in going out in the first place. But was it? Any breath of freedom, any ounce of trust I was given, was exploited. I so desperately wanted to be grown up, to be the badass. But I failed to realize at sixteen, grownups don’t need saving.

Gabriel Coffman

“Was”

I was a leaf in endless worry,
more constantly blurring
than actually knowing
just where I was going,
in a box born of frost and burns.
I heard your name on the wind,
whispered like a bomb threat,
covered in gold and platinum,
but sprinkled in disaster.
You were a dewdrop,
dressed up in napalm.
A landmark isle among the noise,
the shouting rockets and roaring waves.
You were the dark crystal,
lighting up the cave.
Thighs thick with skittles,
and a past wrapped in riddles.
Born with a face
that came from outer space.
Assuredly ridiculous,
but breathing mostly miracles.
It's that thought in my head,
that becomes the twist of the knife,
that makes all the smiles.

Gabriel Coffman

“Heart Watch”

I feel as if I should rant
cover the facts
that make me feel
like a smoking tree
my school is spotted with stereotype clutter
snow should rinse the lack of independence
no one ever musters past vagueness
it takes me a thousand songs
to tie up my lips and not yell
why cherish nonsense like a child
nursing to bigger health
degree span locked up by a clam
outgrown out low outlaw
spam loitering on christened stands
functions swallowed left lingering on death's bed
questions lip reading
needed focals to observe the optic split
on the side of a heavenly stable
made from two stones and a heart
watched in and by two best friends
breach bred mountain cave
luster spring youthful snap
shark split angular
topple star
shift emblem
stutter and pounce
then gasp
gonna fucking find you
tackle you
hug you
throw you into a sunset
cover you in a blanket
made of poems written
because of you
until you feel better and believe

that you are an astounding existence
to walk this rotating rock everyday

Curtis J. Graham

“A Forlorn Feast”

I reluctantly accepted the flimsy tray handed to me by a rosy-cheeked young Marine who was wearing oversized latex gloves. His brown winter cap matched his brown fleece jacket, which matched the sand everywhere. As I glanced around the large tent that would serve as my kitchen and dining room for the next seven months, I noticed a dusty pair of radio speakers suspended from the ceiling by a few strands of parachute cord. A small white cord ran from the cheap speakers into the pocket of the brown fleece jacket, from which an iPod half protruded. This combination was the source of the Taylor Swift music that buzzed and crackled incoherently through the small speakers. As I stuffed a plastic fork into my pocket, I could not help thinking this was a welcome improvement to Taylor’s tunes.

The rosy-cheeked server greeted me from behind his folding table with an obnoxious “Wassuuup?” He spoke the phrase as a single sound with a crescendo that peaked somewhere in the middle of the two slurred words. The greeting seemed as though it were rehearsed to annoy, and my raised eyebrow and bland smirk seemed to be an adequate response. I glanced into the steaming metal bins that contained the cuisine for the evening. A greasy filling of chicken pot pie relaxed in one bin, and a pasty mixture of white rice resided in the other. Rosy Cheeks piled my tray with a sudden mound of slop, and the weight nearly capsized the weak cardboard vessel. I rotated the tray so my hand supported the weight of the food, a motion which would become second nature in the long months to follow.

I slowly followed the waddling cohort of mismatched uniforms through the food line, alternating tuning out the boisterous conversations of other Marines and the constant crackling of Taylor Swift. The next table I approached was manned by a cook with the local Georgian Army unit. The Georgians were very proud of their combat cuisine, chief among these dishes being the tasty and nutritious Soupy. A watery mixture of barley, carrots, and meat, the affectionately named Soupy was a local favorite because it almost looked homemade. I reorganized the contents of my tray to make room for the liquid scoop. After being

served, I instantly regretted not having taken two trays, as the Soupy rapidly began bleeding through the thin cardboard.

I had no choice but to overlook the enticing offer of pale green beans as I cupped the swelling tray beneath the Soupy and made my way to the seating area. I glanced at the beverage table, which contained a bucket full of frozen-solid water bottles and a small pile of powdered flavor packets. I marveled at the useless combination of the two and decided to opt out of any liquid refreshment, especially as it was currently in a solid state. A plywood hallway acted as a funnel leading from the serving area to the dining room, and I stood in the gathering crowd like a grain of sand in an hourglass, waiting to spill through.

Eventually, I entered the dining room and gravitated toward the warmer of the two eating areas. I later became aware that the two separate collections of tables were officially known as the “warm section” and the “cold section,” due to the fact that one side had a heating unit, and the other did not. I had naively assumed that the temperature in Afghanistan would be tolerable in November, and the exclusivity of the warm section reminded me of this error.

Finding a suitable table, as I soon discovered, was a difficult task. On that particular day, I decided to exchange unwanted company and a clean eating surface for comfortable solitude at a filthy table. The spilled insides of mustard and hot sauce bottles were everywhere, and I tried to ignore the carnage of condiments that surrounded me. In a strange way, the splatter reminded me of the Thanksgiving dinner my family would be having the following day--the colors, the mess, the friendly chaos. I looked at my miserable tray and tried to be thankful. There were several open seats at my Thanksgiving table that year, but only one at theirs.

Curtis J. Graham

“The Abstracts”

We are the Abstracts. We are the Homeless Hearts.
We have a stronger sense of self than anyone else,
Yet we are always searching for identity.
We can blend in or stand out at will,
And we do one as often as the other.
Our friends will try to predict us,
And our loved ones have stopped trying altogether.

We are fluid, ever changing, ever moving,
Ever developing, ever experimenting, ever seeking.
This is what makes us true. What makes us constant.
When others ask us to describe who we are, we inwardly laugh.
We then give forth our scripted answer, well rehearsed.
This satisfies them, but it is not who we are.

We are the twinkle in every eye.
We are a cold mountain sunrise.
We are an obscure, dusty musical instrument.
We are rich, black ink. We are the rough grain of forgotten wood.
We are the passing fragrance of a muscle car’s exhaust.
We want, we need, we laugh, we wish, we crave,
We compromise... we live.

But we want something else. We need something more.
We want to go places, and do things.
Our own kind is different from other abstracts.
We don’t pride ourselves in shocking others.
We don’t hold signs or rebel the cause.
We pocket our hearts, we challenge our minds.

We are at war, and life hangs in the balance. Life *is* the balance.
If either side wins, we are equally dead.
And so, in this battlefield, we make our home.
We walk the line. We wander, in search of ourselves.
In search of meaning. In search of *something*,

Something other than what we have already found.
We are the Abstracts. We are the Homeless Hearts.

Chelsea Robinson

“April 15, 1912”

I watched the bow caress the violin's bridge
as my white fingers held onto the wall's ridge.
Pea coats and hats all three wore,
as the musicians gave us a little more.
Filled with a harmonious warmth,
here I stood, rocking back and forth.
The air stole our warm breath
and replaced it with a warning, a sweet kiss of death.

Eddie Sam

“Halloween Night”

Setting: Standard suburban house living room

Larry: Roommate of Larry

Ken: Roommate of Ken

Larry: *(Extends his right arm)* Wait, where are you going?

Ken: To the store. *(Turns to see Larry)*

Larry: The store? Like the ones you go to outside?

Ken: Yeah, why?

Larry: There are zombies outside.

Ken: Zombies?

Larry: Yeah! Don't go outside.

Ken: You're joking. All right, I'm leaving. *(Turns back around facing the door)*

Larry: No, no, no, zombies, dude.

Ken: *(Turns to Larry)* Look, zombies aren't real.

Larry: But they're outside. Eating people's brains, and yours could be next.

Ken: Look, it's Halloween; I'm sure kids are just trying out their costumes and stuff.

Larry: No dude, they're *real* zombies.

Ken: Do you even know what a real zombie looks like?

Larry: I do, and they're outside right now.

Ken: I have never seen a zombie before in this neighborhood.

Larry: Well you haven't been outside today either and trust me, you don't wanna.

Ken: Are you trying to keep me inside?

Larry: Yeah, because there's zombies outside.

Ken: When was the last time you slept?

Larry: *(Scratches head)* Uh, maybe two days ago.

Ken: You must be seeing things.

Larry: Yeah, I had to stay up all those nights just in case of zombie attacks.

Ken: Look, get some rest. I'm gonna go to the store, so I can pass out candy to kids tonight.

Larry: No, not this year. Not even the next.

Ken: Listen, there are no zombies out there.

Larry: I've been trying to tell you there are.

Ken: Well show me.

Larry: I would but the windows are boarded up.

Ken: What? Why would you do that?

Larry: Zombies can't smell through wood.

Ken: Well, zombies can't smell anyhow.

Larry: Those are *movie* zombies, these are *real* zombies.

Ken: What's the difference?

Larry: Those were actors.

Ken: Or zombies aren't real.

Larry: But they are, and they're in our neighborhood right now, and no one is doing anything.

Ken: Whatever. I'm done arguing with you. See you later. (*Approaches the door*)

Larry: Don't leave! You're going to lose your brains!

Ken: I'll see you later, you lunatic. Sheesh, how do I put up with you? (*Exits Stage*)

Larry: (*Folds arms*) Oh he'll come back. I'll give him five seconds. Five, four, three, two, one.

Ken: (*Enters stage*) Dude, there are totally zombies out there. Why is everyone sitting around like nothing is happening?

Larry: See? That's what I've been trying to tell you.

Ken: What are we going to do?

Larry: Let's order pizza.

Ken: Dude, we're totally going to prank the delivery boy this time.

Kamila Atae

“My Little Princess”

My little princess
Don't worry
My little princess
If your childhood world is empty
Of toys
Joys
Dolls
Love

Don't worry
My little princess
If your clothes are faded
Your shoes don't fit
Your backpack has holes
Your friends laugh at your style

Don't worry
My little princess
If the old women berate you for being a girl
If no one understands your feelings
If the elders slap your face for making a noise
If you cannot have the dress of your choice
If you are not allowed
To laugh aloud

I promise
I'll buy you a world of toys
Barbie dolls
Panda bears
Make you a beautiful dress
Like Cinderella
Thumbelina
Buy lots of candles for your birthday cake
Your favorite candies
Fashionable shoes

I am going to draw your dreams in Baba's big rocks
Your smiling face in Buddha's visage
We will laugh out loud
Shout
Holler and hoot
We will dance with the splash of waterfalls
Sing with the migratory birds
We will share our happiness
My little princess
With the world

Renée Morrissette

“His Laugh”

As I study the tilted family photo from my sister’s wedding, placed in a cheap imitation-wood frame, I attempt to remember that day. I look carefully at each smiling face in the photo covered with a thin layer of dust. I settle on my Dad, wiping away the filth to reveal his firm lips, but blissful brown eyes. He seems as though he has something to say. Perhaps to warn me. Perhaps to comfort me. Perhaps to whisper one last word of advice into my ear that would guide me through the months that followed this August photo, which seems to be the only memory I can hold within the absent-minded file cabinets of my brain.

I followed the nurse in bright pink Crocs and green Mickey Mouse scrubs down the busy Intensive Care Unit corridor filled with the sounds of coughing patients and beeping monitors. I had only awakened about an hour earlier, with my clock still reading 6:15 AM in a bright digital green font. I was ripped from my dreams on that bitter cold winter morning by the ringing of my kitchen telephone. I listened carefully to my mother’s whispers through the receiver as thousands of questions ran the tracks of my mind like an uncontrollable train set to derail at any moment.

We continued past a circular desk station that housed several sleep-deprived nurses and one lone doctor in a long white lab coat. As I soaked in the scenes of patients in all states of health, my mind wandered. It is surprising how in moments of uncertainty, the mind always subtly resorts to the worst possible outcome: death. I was unaware what awaited me in room 226. I was not sure if I was ready to be exposed to the future that was bestowed upon us.

Greeted by four white brick walls and the aroma of alcohol and latex, my attention instantly gravitated to the small old man lying helplessly in the bed, surrounded by beeping machines, tubes and wires. He wore a stiff blue hospital gown patterned with tiny white polka dots. The man held his right arm close to his chest, cradling it like a premature infant who would not stop crying. He attempted to pull up the covers but his right hand’s fingers remained in a permanent fist. This failure caused me to look at his face. His head was topped with dark brown tussled hair,

sprinkled with flecks of grey from age, while his forehead was carved with three deep-set wrinkles from extensive worry and frowning of the brow. His eyes were lined with thick lashes and fear enveloped the pupils, sunken deep in his skull. His large, flat-tipped nose wheezed with each breath as tubes fed him oxygen. A scruffy beard with patches of grey and white lined his most visible imperfection. The right side of his mouth drooped as saliva slowly dripped from its corner onto the gown. But it was not until he opened his shifted mouth, belting a hideous “ah” sound that pierced through my hippocampus, that all of my memories were burned. On January 13th, 2011 I lost my Dad and gained a little brother in a 52-year-old man’s body.

For a month, my father sat in a bed with sheets folded in hospital corners at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Center. The stroke murdered the cells that once connected the sections for linguistic understanding and muscle movement used to formulate speech in my father’s brain. His brain could no longer communicate with his vocal cords or mouth to correctly pronounce the words he was thinking. His thinking patterns became disrupted and he experienced more tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon than any middle-aged man should. But the stroke also robbed him of his mental age. Not only did my father speak like a baby just learning to talk, he acted like one. He expressed the typical bipolar tendencies of a toddler, crying uncontrollably over his pencil falling to the ground one minute, then screaming at the top of his lungs in anger the next. For those first few months following the stroke, I could not even stand in the room with my father without being shrieked at in incomprehensible gibberish. To my father, no one understood. We were all the enemy in this battle called communication. However, no one was winning. I found it difficult to respect a man as my elder, as my parent, when he pinned all of his ills on those around him. As I matured into an adult, my father regressed into a juvenile.

I watched as my Mom became the punching bag for my father’s emotional roller coaster. She sat by him during speech therapy while he tried desperately to say the word “dog,” and rubbed his back as he cried, mourning the loss of the life he once had. But my Mom showed her true strength every day when she continued to say, “I love you” even though my father screamed at her out of frustration at himself. Despite all of the experiences I had with my father, she fought this daily battle the hardest. Many nights I’d come home from school or work and find my Mom

sitting in the dark crying, wishing to reverse the clock and gain back the David from before the stroke.

So as I stare now at this photo, on this bleak white wall within our home, I try desperately to remember that day. I rip apart my memory daily, trying to piece together the sound of his sweet voice on my sister's wedding day. I try to bring back the happiness. I scavenge for the visions when my father was my Dad. But my memory fails me. It is scorched. No matter how hard I try to find even a glimmer of what my Dad once sounded like or was like, deep within the caverns of my mind, I cannot; and I cannot help but feel this digging is all in vain. My memory is apathetic to me, just as the stroke was to my Dad. As each day passes, my memory fades farther and farther away, becoming less attainable. I must learn to forgive my Dad, and forgive my amnesia, for one aspect still remains beautifully the same about him: his laugh.

Renée Morrissette

“To Father, Dad, Whoever You Are”

Modeled after Peter Meinke's "Untitled"

This is a poem to my father,
Dad, Daddy, Daddi-o, Pops,
whose face is sunken in making heart-shaped crevasses out of your
cheeks

and whose hair has grayed and thinned to a gnarly thing.
Whose chin is still prickly peppered with 7 o'clock shadow
and whose false teeth are chipped in the front.

It has been harder to love you every year
because you are not the same as you once were.
No matter how hard I try, no matter how hard I
think,

 imagine,
 dream

I cannot remember what you **sounded** like
before that monster attacked your brain
nearly four years ago.

Was your voice soft?

Was it harsh?

Did it have a rasp from years of smoking Marlboros?

Sure, you were irrational before, but never like this---
 the screaming,

 the crying,

but worst of all
the eyes ablaze with pure hate
directed at me.

Who are you?

Where is the Daddy I grew up with?

Where is the Daddy I love?

Sometimes I feel like an awful daughter
because I just want to quit:

I am tired of trying to guess what you are saying,
that pathetically jumbled jargon.

I am tired of the child you have become.

I am tired of the fact that I have lost a father and gained a baby brother
who will never, ever grow up.

Be a father!

Be a husband!

Be the man!

But perhaps I am being too harsh---
you can't help it,
I know.

I just wish we could go back to what it once was,
that you could be who you once were.

So I write this poem for the father I wish I could have back
and the one I am still trying to learn to love.

Rusheena Boone

“Blue (Acrostic)”

Beauty lives here, expanding in all corners,
Luring weary travelers to the sleek hotels and historical landmarks.
Under permanent, crystal-clear skies, tropical waters glisten,
Enticing spectators to rest on the warm sands of Dubai.

Rusheena Boone

“Engulfed in Ashes”

It started as a vivacious blue flicker
dancing on the tip of a match,
but it quickly raged out of control.
I watched the fire smolder into a fury.
The crackling of wood and glass
whispered into my ears all night,
as the smoke filled my lungs.
I was seconds away from death,
but I had to stay.
I had to watch it burn.
I watched as the flames caressed the walls
and wrapped around the staircase,
covering everything in its path in a vivid
red, orange, and yellow.
It was a beautiful sight.
I didn't even flinch
when the flames began to singe my dress.
I welcomed the heat.
I wanted hell to consume me in a wave
and wash me away into oblivion.
But when I woke up, the fire had died,
leaving me behind to witness my destruction.
The charred remnants of my past
were all engulfed in ashes,
forever lost in the gray abyss.

Emily K. Murphy

“How I Became Jaded”

“Should I take these?” I held up my clunky driving glasses, the ones with the thick orange frames.

Jade shook her head. “Nah. I’m driving. And you need to look like a woman for once.” She ripped the glasses out of my hand and tossed them aside. In its place, she gave me a bright red lipstick. “Put that on.”

I pouted in an exaggerated way at my little sister, but nevertheless applied the lipstick. Despite my being a junior in college, this was my first actual “party.” Jade had already been to hundreds. I wanted to make a decent impression, so I figured I’d follow Jade’s lead. It was that way with us – one sister or the other would lead. I was the level-headed one, the studious one who got Jade through finals week. She was the fun one, the social one, who got me through parties without making a fool of myself.

I joined Jade at the full-length mirror in our bedroom, where she was busy fluffing her sheer pink scarf.

“You know that thing won’t keep you warm,” I pointed out.

“It isn’t supposed to,” Jade returned. “It’s a fashion statement.”

“But it’s November.”

Jade yanked a bright pink “I Heart DC” ballcap from the dresser. “Then I’ll wear a hat. Now come on, we’re late.”

“I thought we were supposed to be late.” I hastily tried to shut the lights, even with Jade yanking at my other arm.

“Only by so much.”

With my free arm, I grabbed a coat on the bannister; it was our little brother’s, but it fit me fine, and I was not one for braving the New Hampshire November cold without a coat. Jade shoved me into the passenger side of our Hunk of Plastic. Jade and I had to buy a car

ourselves, so all we could afford was a crappy, lightweight 2000 Toyota Corolla that swerved in the wind.

“Ready?” Jade said, flashing a grin at me.

I shrugged. “What do you think?”

Jade moaned and turned the key. “Don’t be so damned philosophical. Not at a party.”

“Don’t swear.”

Jade laughed and pulled out of the driveway. She controlled the radio dial, so we listened to radio-remixed pop the whole way up to Devon’s house. Jade sang along to every song. I mumbled along, too, until each song turned to “THUD THUD THUD WHIIIIIIINE!” During those parts, I watched the trees or the city lights fly by under the highway overpass. I wished Devon didn’t live so far away. The highway always made me nervous. Thank God for Jade driving.

Jade got off the exit a few miles north of the city. A remix was starting to make Adele sound like a chipmunk when the car finally stopped. I much preferred the chipmunk Adele. The music from inside the two-story colonial was so loud that I could hear the bass thumping. There was chatter and every light in the house was on.

Jade had gotten out of the car and already opened my door before I could fully process what I had gotten myself into.

“Come on, slowpoke.” Jade yanked me out of the Hunk of Plastic. She tucked the keys into her very skinny, more-for-show jean skirt pocket.

“I’ll take the keys,” I offered. “I have a pocket with a zipper.”

Jade shrugged and sent the sharp silver objects flying through the air. I barely had time to zip them into Bennett’s coat pocket before Jade shoved me to the door. She laughed when I rang the doorbell, and simply pushed her way in. The bass was thumping at an uncomfortable level. People everywhere crushing me, crushing each other, dancing, drinking.

“HEY! DEVON!” my sister shouted. “IT’S JADE AND MARGO!” I tried to stay behind my escort and say hi to Devon, but I

soon lost her. I wondered where the closet was. I was sweating inside my brother's coat.

I glanced around. The whole house had a yellow tinge from the lamplights. The whole experience was almost nauseating, being around so many people, half of whom I assumed were drunk. But I was determined to make an effort.

“JADE?”

I turned around. Luke, with a clear plastic cup in his hand, was standing in the doorway of the kitchen. “Luke!” I returned, not realizing my reply was swallowed up by the music and chatter. I didn't know Luke that well. In fact, I'd only ever had one class with him, and that was last year. But we worked on a group project together, and he was never stoned or drunk during that, so I figured he was as good a companion as any for the night.

“YOU JUST GET HERE?”

“YEAH.” I unzipped my coat. “WHERE SHOULD I PUT THIS?”

Luke shrugged and grabbed it from me. “WE'LL FIND SOMEWHERE.”

How about the closet, I thought snarkily. I made more of an effort to stay behind Luke than I had Jade. Bennett was going to be furious if he found out I lost his coat. Luke tossed the gray jacket on the staircase bannister, on top of a shower towel.

“LUKE! MY MAN!” Some other boys pounced on Luke quite literally. I guessed these were the ones I was hanging out with tonight. As they exchanged greetings, I found their speech wasn't slurred, and their actions seemed coordinated. It seemed they were going to be decent companions, at least for a while.

I don't exactly remember details after that. I was on the periphery of Luke's group for maybe a half-hour. Wherever he went, I followed. He didn't acknowledge me, and I only acknowledged him by laughing when he or one of the group members made a raunchy joke. I didn't take a drink because no one offered me one. I took a few of the

broken pretzels that were left in a paper bowl, trying to give myself a pretext for not talking.

I was standing a row or two behind an ugly olive couch, giggling at some not-funny joke, when I thought I felt my pocket vibrate. I looked down to see three texts from The Diamond (aka Jade):

“in his car w Kalib b back by 12”

“were @ craigs bar in manch”

“m come get me”

That last text made my stomach shrink to an infinitesimal size. This was the sort of thing you got warned about in safety slideshows, not stuff that actually happened. The phone buzzed again while still in my hand, and another blue bubble slid onto my screen, again from The Diamond:

“M HELP ME”

That did it. I made my way around the couch, shoving a few people in the process.

“LUKE I’M LEAVING!” I shouted.

Luke waved limply and continued cohosting with his friend on the couch. A few people stared at me. Then I remembered Devon was throwing the party, not Luke. Whatever. I hadn’t seen Devon anywhere, no need to say goodbye. What I needed was to get to my keys, and then my car.

I made my way to the stairs and yanked Bennett’s coat off the bannister. There was a suspicious stain on the sleeve that was still dripping when I put it on. Bennett was going to kill me.

Finally, I got outside, where I started to shiver. I had forgotten how cold it was. The music dimmed and the lights from the house shined my shadow over my car in the road. I stepped inside and shut the door, the thumping bass was the only penetrating sound.

“Don’t fail me now, Mr. Jobs,” I whispered to my iPhone. Only 4% battery. This was not going to end well. Luckily, even though I

hated the highway, I knew Manchester a little. So long as my phone could get me on the highway.

I typed in “Craig’s Bar” and got only one listing. I turned the key and peeled out. A drizzle started to fall.

“Recalculating,” a soft voice said. Great. I had made a wrong turn already.

“In 1.2 miles, turn left onto Greenbough Street.”

“Will do,” I said. I turned off the radio to hear the phone better. But that wasn’t going to do any good – an incoming message from Jade read “im outside” and turned the phone black. Battery out. I saw a green street sign coming up on my left. I squinted to read what it said.

Shit.

I wasn’t wearing any glasses.

Anybody with myopia can empathize with my internal freak-out at that moment. My palms started to sweat, my heart to race, and my eyes to water. All I could see were fuzzy yellow snakes in place of the double yellow lines. The street sign might as well have been an oddly colored tree branch.

I pulled myself up above the steering wheel and squinted my hardest, but I still had to stop the car before I could make out “GRENBOGH.” I figured that was Greenbough, and turned left.

I soon came upon streetlights, which would have helped my predicament if it hadn’t been raining. But it was, and now a little heavier than a drizzle. The road reflected the orangey yellow glow so I could hardly make out where the road was. I came upon a few street signs. I slowed down for each one, and didn’t recognize a thing.

“SHIT JADE!” I shouted at the windshield, stunning myself. I never swore. But if any situation required swearing, it was this one.

Another green blob popped up on my right. I slowed the car down as I saw blue in the center. I stopped and squinted to read “93.” 293 or 93? Did it matter? I needed exit 5. That was where the main strip of town was. But I wasn’t entirely sure what highway. Anyway,

the white oblong shape beneath it was vertical, meaning it was probably an arrow, meaning I should go forward for some sort of highway system.

Then, I saw the unmistakable gray curve of an onramp to my right. A car behind me was getting P.O.'d and honked at my stopping to read the sign.

“I CAN’T DAMN SEE!” I shouted back. “WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?”

The car didn’t respond, and I could barely calm down enough to read “N” on the green curved rectangle, meaning this was the north onramp. But did I even want north? I flicked my hazards on. The guy behind me peeled out and probably gave me the finger as he drove away.

I took a deep breath. We lived south, and we overpassed exit 5 on the way here. So I needed to go back that way: south.

I turned my hazards off and pulled back on the road. A car came the opposite way, illuminating the road into one big white mess. I couldn’t see any lines or anything but the headlights facing me. My sweat was making my hands slippery. I bit my lip and tried to focus on finding the lines again.

The car passed, and the fuzzy yellow snakes re-appeared. I hastily wiped my hands, one at a time, onto my pants.

A stoplight soon came into view. I couldn’t see the stop line. I didn’t care. I noticed a green sign on my right. I figured it was the southbound sign. I pulled my eyelids sideways, the strongest way of squinting, to make sure. “South” it read. Thank goodness.

I turned right and sped up on the ramp. My palms started to sweat even more. I hated the highway. I hated driving without my glasses. I hated Jade right then.

Merging was going to be a pain, I knew it. I glanced back and saw a never-ending stream of headlights. Or were they never-ending? I couldn’t tell. The lights faded into each other in big circles. I waited until two of the yellow circles were touching and punched the gas.

I heard a loud “HONK” as a speedy blob swerved into the next lane.

“WHY ARE YOU GOING SO FAST THEN, DAMN MASSHOLE?” I shouted, trying to lighten the mood. It helped a little. I cracked a smile. But I had just nearly died.

I was practically standing up the way I stuck my neck over the edge of the dash. I saw a white rectangle, which I knew to be a speed limit sign, which I knew to say either 50 or 55. I risked a quick glance down at my speedometer. I had to squint, because there was no way I was going 33 miles an hour.

I gulped.

No, I wasn't going 33.

That was the temperature.

The windshield wipers squeaked nervously. The rain would soon turn to snow. And the road to ice. And all around me were headlights, guiding sighted drivers through the whole dark abyss.

I tried to ignore the temperature. I needed to focus on the impressionist painting in front of me. I couldn't read the exit signs, but I knew that there would be an overpass that ran by the main section of town; I needed the exit closest to that overpass.

I kept thinking motorcyclists were behind me, but they were just distant cars whose headlights had converged. I could only tell they were cars when they started tailgating me and then peeled out in the left lane. I must have been going slow. Another glance at my speed.

Temperature: 32.

I gripped the wheel tighter. “SHIT JADE!” I shouted again. “IF YOU WEREN'T SUCH A DAMN PARTY ANIMAL THEN I WOULDN'T BE IN THIS DAMN MESS!” Swearing made me feel a little better. But what made me feel worse was the 18-wheeler coming up on my left. I could tell it was an 18-wheeler by the heavy engine rattling noise. I glanced to my right. On ramp traffic.

“SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!” I screamed, nearly crying. I couldn't cry. I wiped my eyes hastily. All tears did was make the blurry world worse.

I could see the bright lights of Manchester starting to form below me. This exit. I needed this exit. Great. The 18 wheeler only had a bit of ground on me. I flicked my directional on and prayed for a break in the incoming traffic.

I rode slowly for a bit, cars merging in around me. Then I suddenly saw the green rectangle that meant, “If you don’t exit soon you’ve missed your chance.” I did what every driver without directions would do; I braked.

Cue the horns honking. I slid over to the right, probably on a piece of ice. I came so close to the SUV also trying to exit that I could tell it was a red SUV.

“SORRY I’M BLIND RIGHT NOW!” I yelled at the vehicle. This one wasn’t honking, though, so I wondered if they sympathized with me.

I approached the red light and slowed to a stop. How I was going to find Craig’s Bar I had no idea. My best bet was to drive up and down Elm Street until I saw a womanly figure jumping up and down with her phone in her hand. Just as I solidified that plan, I noticed that little white dots were landing on my windshield. I wiped my hands on my pants again and noticed they were shaking. At least I was off the highway.

I turned onto Elm Street, not minding that there was considerable traffic backup. It forced me to go slow. I squinted at all the signs over the buildings. Brittney’s, no. Otto’s Chocolates, no. Super Duper Mart, no.

I moaned. “JADE WHY DID YOU HAVE TO PICK SUCH A FUCKING OBSCURE BAR!”

Once, I thought I saw it. I saw an orange sign that seemed short enough to say “Craig.” But I was looking for too long and almost didn’t notice the red brake lights in front of me. Thank God that our Hunk of Plastic has great deceleration. I wasn’t about to deal with paperwork while driving blind.

While stopped, I pulled at my eyelids. Sure enough, the orange neon said “Craig’s” in a fancy script. So I guess the bar wasn’t so obscure. When the bright brake lights turned off, I peeled out.

To make up for all my swearing, I cried, “THANK YOU LORD!” As I came closer to Craig’s Bar, I saw a womanly figure on the sidewalk, shivering and rubbing her arms. I could tell it was Jade because of her bright pink ballcap. She turned around to see me, and then she stepped out into the road and waved. I smiled genuinely for the first time that night, and the last.

I’m sorry, Jade. I know it wasn’t the icy road. But until my own life is gone, I’ll continue to swear –

I thought I hit the brake.

Klea Nakuci

“18”

Let's get up in the middle of the night and drive around while our hearts navigate where we go. Let's drive to our favorite diner to get breakfast. We'll laugh at the stares and whispers we get as we walk by, because to everyone else we're just two teenagers who have nothing better to do. Let's eat eggs and bacon and drink black coffee to fool our bodies into thinking the day is about to begin. Let's go back to bed and watch the grey sky glow as the sun crawls up the horizon. Let's not think about the past or the future, just the present. My feet will hang off the edge of the bed, shoes still on, and your head will be close to my chest. Your eyes start to close even as you continue to mumble about pointless things just to stay awake. And after you fall asleep, I stay up and count the hidden freckles on your cheeks.

C. J. Graham

“Tattoos and Memories”

The needle buzzed loudly, piercing the skin above my heart and leaving a steady trail of black ink in its path. I had just finished six weeks of Marine Combat Training, and I was spending my quiet Saturday in a smoky tattoo parlor. As the artist traced the lines on my chest, I experienced the sharp pain of my recent loss all over again. Mr. Pereira had passed away. The ink sank in with a permanence that whispered, “All things are passing away.” Over time, even the rich black ink would fade to a weathered shade of blue.

The images I had chosen to memorialize Mr. Pereira would eventually run together, each losing their distinct features as the seasons marched onward. I watched closely as his memory was reduced to the form of an old combat helmet, spotted with camouflage. Beneath the helmet stood a lone snare drum, a pair of crossed drum sticks resting gently on its surface. Angels’ wings draped behind, encompassing the shrine in a shadow of protection. Beneath the wings was a verse from Psalm 91, the Warrior’s Psalm:

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most

High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”

I could think of no better way to immortalize the memory of John David Pereira.

As I listened to the hum of the needle, I thought back to the day we first met. It had taken sixteen years to convince my father that drums were a legitimate instrument, and I could only hope the teacher he chose wouldn’t share his strong opinions against rock music. On a Sunday, my father introduced me to Mr. Pereira, a Vietnam vet who had recently retired from a lifetime of service in the Marine Corps. I had seen him before in church. He was quiet and bald, and he always sat close to the pulpit, accompanied by his cheerful, curly-haired wife, Pat.

I approached him after the service, and he thrust out his right hand in greeting. I noticed half his thumb was missing. “Hey, Buddy! So you’re the *drummer*, huh?” As he spoke these words in his thick Virginia drawl, the old Marine flashed a knowing wink, as though he were secretly communicating something else. I had a fleeting thought that perhaps my father had told him of my interest in the military. Somehow, I understood what he was really asking, and I replied in turn.

“I’m not yet, but I hope to be...one day.”

Throughout the next year, I spent every Thursday evening in Mr. Pereira’s log cabin, learning everything from marching cadences to jazz beats. Today would be my final lesson. I was an eager and restless seventeen-year-old, just weeks away from entering Marine Corps boot camp. As I drove up the long and winding driveway, I passed his familiar hand-made signs that read “CAUTION! Mine Field” and “Burglars, beware!” I couldn’t help but chuckle as I thought about the kind-hearted old man who lived at the top of the hill. Mr. Pereira built his cabin soon after retirement, choosing a quiet location deeply nested in the wooded outskirts of Penacook, New Hampshire.

I parked my beat-up Volvo and climbed the rugged steps to the front door. It swung open quickly, and Mr. Pereira barked his greeting. “What’re you doin’ here, Maggot?” As usual, he was grinning from ear to ear. He wore a forest green sweater and Wrangler jeans, sporting a big silver belt buckle engraved with the famous Iwo Jima flag-raising image. He was hunched in mock aggression, performing his favorite drill instructor impression. I laughed once again, humoring his tired joke as we entered the cottage. Truthfully, it never got old.

“I’m doing great. I’m ready to ship out, for sure.” We walked through the warm, carpeted living room and descended into the finished basement. The walls were papered with vintage Marine Corps recruiting posters and old vinyl covers from jazz drummers like Buddy Rich and Gene Krupa. On one side of the room sat his Yamaha drum set, its pristine cymbals shining like giant gold coins. The other half of the room was populated with several coat racks, each filled with an array of spotless dress uniforms and tattered combat gear. The whole basement smelled of dusty canvas, like a military surplus store. I loved it.

When I finally sat down at the snare drum, I saw Mr. Pereira in proper light. I hadn't seen him since his diagnosis of mesothelioma, an asbestos-related disease that had waited almost forty years before attacking his respiratory system. Released from surgery just days ago, he looked like a mere shell of his regular self. At least thirty pounds lighter, he now bore a pallid and wrinkled complexion. The childlike glow that used to radiate from every part of his cheerful face could now only be caught in glimpses, through youthful eyes hidden behind square glasses.

"How are you holding up?" I asked earnestly.

"I'm not doin' so bad. I've only got one lung now, you know." An expectant grin crossed his face, as though he had just shared the punchline to a clever new joke. This sort of talk didn't shock me anymore. Over the past year, Mr. Pereira had brought me into his world of living memories. He would sometimes get sidetracked in the middle of a lesson, squinting into the distance as though through a fog. As I listened to the tales of his youth, my drumsticks became like an M16 in my hands, and the syncopated jazz music that floated through the basement morphed into a soundtrack of war, a confusing melody that spoke only to a certain type of heart.

I had heard about the time he was bombed by friendly artillery in Vietnam, and how he spent the following hours collecting the limbs of his closest friends in garbage bags to be loaded onto a helicopter. I relived the night in which his squad ambushed a group of Viet Cong soldiers, discovering their "Swiss cheese" bodies in the morning, perforated with bullet holes. He had told me of his resentment for his field promotion to an officer grade, a rank which he openly referred to as "idiot Lieutenant." After returning home, he demanded to be demoted back to the rank of Sergeant in order to stay with his troops. I would have to wait until after his death to learn of the two Bronze Star medals he earned for valor, such was his humility.

Mr. Pereira rummaged around in a drawer for his favorite pair of sticks, the heavy ones he used while touring with the Marine Corps Band after the war. He looked spent, but I knew he wanted to be here.

"Are you still able to breathe all right?" I asked.

"Not really." He spoke slowly, drawing in a lungful of air. "Most days, I get out of breath just from climbing the stairs. But hey, here's

how I see it: I should've died a hundred times in those gunfights in Vietnam. Every day I live after that is a gift from God." As we had done so many times before, we began to warm up with a drum roll. Like every other time, I was soon lost in the wake as his drumsticks purred along, keeping flawless time. I only wish I could have been there on the day they finally stopped.

It has been several years since Mr. Pereira died, and my tattoo is beginning to bear the signs of age. Truth be told, I have not really *looked* at it for some time. When memories become a commonplace part of our identities, they are in danger of slowly slipping into irrelevance. I'm ashamed to say that years have passed since I truly *thought* about Mr. Pereira and the tremendous impact he had upon my life. The untaught lessons of a beautiful faith—humility and a quiet strength—were his to share by accident. Tattoos and memories, crisp and timeless in their day, threaten to blend into a blotchy mass the moment we look away. Perhaps that's why Mr. Pereira refused to let his memories die. He chose rather to relive them, both the good and the bad, for they formed him in equal shares. All things will fade away if we let them, just as the ink upon my heart has begun to do. I think it's about time I got a touch-up on that old tattoo.

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