



GREAT LAKE REVIEW

FALL 2013

THE GREAT LAKE REVIEW
OSWEGO'S LITERARY MAGAZINE
FALL 2013

We congratulate those who have been accepted into this semester's edition of the Great Lake Review and encourage those who submitted, but who were not accepted, to continue to submit your work. We are told in all of our Creative Writing classes that persistence is how you go places in life, but especially in the writing world. Sometimes, disappointment gets the better of us and we feel as though our work is not good enough simply because it has not been accepted into a journal. This should never dissuade anyone from submitting their work to our journal or to any other literary journal. If you were accepted, congratulations. If you were not accepted, do not give up on your writing or your artwork. Stay persistent. Revise until you have the best piece you could ever have. Submit. Submit over and over again. Do not feel as though your work is something to look down upon, but instead, be proud and know that you have done your best.

The persistence I speak of is directed to the editors of this journal, as well. They continue to be so persistent about putting out the best journal we can. They have put in so much time and effort reading through and editing all of the pieces that were submitted. Without them, this journal would not be possible. Thank you, editors. You are so appreciated.

No matter what you do with your writing and artwork, we hope you will continue to be persistent and know that you have work to be proud of. We wish you the best of luck in whatever you hope to achieve. Please tell your friends and continue to submit to the Great Lake Review. Without your submissions, this journal would not exist.

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Nature's Umbrella
Ann Pallifrone



Water Lilies
Kim Kittleson



My Father Collects Miniatures

Marian Holmes

My eyelids open to harsh, fluorescent lighting.

“French toast is ready; come on downstairs.” His voice is gruff, protruding from lips hidden beneath an almost-entirely-grey beard.

He has a penchant for standing in the doorway of my bedroom, flicking on the light, and talking at me until I get up. It drives me nuts. Thirty seconds pass and I don’t stir.

“Come on. Everyone’s sitting at the table.”

I groan audibly, throw back my fleece blanket in defeat, and follow him downstairs.

Leaning against the wooden chair my mother is occupying, I greet my family with a groggy demeanor. I’m handed a plate.

“Go sit down and get some food.”

“Dad. I *hate* French toast.”

“Oh!” he exclaims while mimicking a slap to his forehead; “that’s right! Well... there’s cereal?”

- - -

For a man who collects watches and clocks, he’s never on time. I guess it should not surprise me: there are thirty-seven clocks strewn along the ground level of our home, yet for a reliable timepiece, we all turn to our Cable box. I grew up to cuckoos and chimes, beeps, buzzes, and bells, all announcing themselves on a constant three to five minute delay. They wake up guests who stay over. I hardly even hear them anymore; for me they’re the norm. He is the norm. Our very own horologist.

For hours he sits at our kitchen table. Honey oak. Strong. It’s surface strewn with battle-scars from five children worth of schooling. Scratch-marks gouged into the wood from frustration - from math problems too difficult to comprehend - and the faint presence of glitter from a late night project that seeped past the poster board’s edge. This is where he works.

First comes the tackle box. He loves compartments. Tiny drawers and pockets to hide away his treasures. He leaves his clothes in a mountain on his bedroom floor, rivaling the teenager rebelling against his too-hard working mother. But his treasures, each and every one, get put away with the sincerest of care. He rolls his coins in paper sleeves.

He even sorts his screws by size.

At home they call me the human-octopus, because I spread out, all over the house, leaving traces of my existence on any surface that once lay bare. I blame him. Item by item he engulfs the tabletop. His hands, always dry, and cracking, deftly empty the shelves in his box once meant for fishermen. He has another that holds his lures and lines; it's bigger. But this one houses his time-keeping tools. His ebay addiction has brought most of them into our home.

He sits up straight. He's Germanic in so many ways, yet his Irish comes through when it needs to. He sits. And he empties. And then, he begins.

Today he's working on my brother Tim's watch. It needs a new battery, but the back won't dislodge. Its needs to be opened, but Tim would just break it. Patience is not a forte for my brothers and I. My father seems to be made of nothing but. He brings the jeweler's loupe up to meet his eye and investigates the underbelly.

"Swiss movement. Very nice." His hand reaches for a miniscule, bronze hammer.

He seems so official. As if he trained for years under the eyes of a bent-old man who breathed nothing but the air from inside a grandfather clock. He's always exuded wisdom... as tinkerers often do. You believe he could fix anything, and for the most part, he can.

- - -

I have yet to meet someone else who shines their own shoes.

A red, plastic gym bag holds his polish cans. Silvered tins of black and brown and oxblood, and hunter green even, sit among old t-shirts turned to rags. He always sends one of us kids to fetch it from his closet's floor. And the jingling is unmistakable as we descend the stairs, the bag bouncing against our leg. The sound means bring out your shoes. Your belts. Your backpacks, briefcases, and wallets. For the next two hours, he'll sit and he'll shine to bad doo-wopp CDs. Singing along with vocal cords that are always out of tune.

- - -

My father rises at six each morning. He showers first, and quickly, before the pipes have fully warmed. Only in walking from bedroom to bathroom are his feet ever bare. Socks otherwise, at least, always. They reside underneath

Teva sandal straps when we go to the beach, and he only frees his toes at the very edge of the pool.

Even on the weekends, he gets *dressed*. Pants. Belt. Shirt. Watch. Hair combed, and wet, and almost always overgrown. He places his wallet in his back-right pocket, and hooks the carabiner of keys to a belt loop on his left side. They weigh down his pants and the clinking of metal makes him sound like a janitor.

He winds each clock that he passes on his way to the kitchen. The cuckoo mechanism works by pulling long chains, weighted on the bottom by bronzed acorns. Others require that he stand on a chair, open the face, and turn a key-looking handle inside. When he reaches the kitchen, he flips on the lights above the stove; the rest of the room remains shadowed. Near the switch hang his aprons, all once-white. He places one over his head, and ties the strings loosely.

Tea water and coffee go up. Twelve scoops, twelve cups. There's almost always some left over.

"I never know who's going to drink it. Who's going to have a second cup. And I'd rather know I have enough."

He doesn't partake in the substance himself; he gave up caffeine in his late thirties. No chocolate. No coffee. Instead he drinks Postum™, a grounded up malt-wheat beverage loved by Mormons. I tried it once; I will never do so again.

The teakettle sings and he turns the stove down to simmer. The flame flickering on and off, on a timer, keeping it warm for the people beginning to stir upstairs. His hand reaches for the cast iron skillet hung on the wall among Le Creuset and burnt-bottomed stainless steel.

My father once told me that he could eat the same thing for the rest of his life, never tiring of the taste.

"I could eat on a budget. I'd eat eggs. And beans. And pasta."

My mother always says that his cooking comes from his Irish side. Irish are supposedly like the British... you don't visit for their cuisine.

At some point in his life he must have read about the benefits of olive oil. He coats the pan each morning with the glistening, amber liquid, poured from a tiny steel oil-can, like that of the Tin Man's in *The Wizard of Oz*. He goes through phases of real eggs v. egg whites dyed yellow v. egg whites untouched, but his morning omelet *always* includes cheese, and oftentimes, ham. Low-sodium. Like me, he isn't fond of

salt.

Two pieces of whole wheat bread, toasted dark-brown, almost burnt, accompany his eggs. They'll be dipped in the hot, wheat-beverage, remnants of poultry and cheese and ketchup, still clinging to the grains.

He eats before the rest of us surface, so that when we appear he can serve.

"I love to serve." His words.

He makes sandwiches to be put in lunch bags, and somehow remembers which one of us prefer Swiss to American, and that I will refuse to bite into anything containing mustard that isn't honeyed. Each sandwich is wrapped in wax paper first, then tin foil. He must have heard once, how aluminum shouldn't directly touch your food.

In high school, I entered my ecological phase, demanding brown-paper bags be switched for reusable, and sandwiches to be transported in Tupperware. His routine changed the next morning. If he used roasted red peppers however, he'd still wrap the meal in wax paper first.

"I don't want it to drip in your bag."

- - -

There are mornings that I wake up to fifty plus Facebook notifications. All from him: tiny comments on pictures and statuses, from days and months before. I wonder how long he must scroll down my page to find them. I know when he does this, that he is missing me.

He is surprisingly technological. Quick-witted too.

Once I put up a status:

"Am I the only one who feels like you should listen to only music from the band on your shirt when you wear it?"

My father replied:

"What if you wear a plain white T?"

He texts often.

Always in cryptic bits of poetry or prose. Sometimes questions. Sometimes sentiments that seem fitting of Hallmark. But always signed from a "dad" who fits the overall message's theme.

Love Saint Kevin Daddio

Love Timetable Dad

Love Just Proud Ol' Dad

I smile when I open them; I never text back.

- - -

He loves words and knows many. On the rare mornings he'd drive me to school, he would quiz me. Dilapidated. Olfactory. Not just definitions, but references, and places, pieces of his own knowledge, which held the potential for metaphor someday. He has a tinkerer's wisdom and a writer's soul. Sitting patiently with my youngest brother, Harry, who has Down syndrome, he explained in simple ways, "supple" and "brackish". Now when they shine together, Harry exclaims, with each piece of leather he holds, how supple it is.

I was put to bed by his voice. I wasn't read fairytales; I was lulled by *his* words. Binders of poems and stories and prose, all of which went entirely over my head. I could quote his work better than the common stories of first graders. They'd recite *The Three Little Pigs*, while I sat, methodically stating the opening lines to my father's latest piece:

"This is for danger. This is for glory."

He'd give me tiny assignments.

I remember practicing, for weeks, the art of Haiku. Five. Seven. Five. I wrote one about Winnie the Pooh; I thought it was genius, and my father didn't promote nor deny this statement. He simply let me believe in *myself*. Once I had "mastered" the rhyme scheme I was asked to help out on a project he was working on. A poetic view of Coney Island.

I wrote my piece on beer:

Twelve horse Genesee
Drink, drink, drink icy cold ale
It tastes very good

For this I was praised.

Words were the constant for my father.

For a while, he sold maps. Globes and atlases filled our home, and my school reports benefitted from access to accurate, topographical representations. He went to exhibits too, setting up his booth, convincing the schools of New York City to choose his company's cartography. These conventions always required pamphlets and packets. Us kids always put them together. Walking endlessly around the pool table, its edge littered with stacks of different colored papers.

"Take one from each pile. Try to keep them in order. Then bring them to me and I'll staple them."

In writing it sounds like labor; to us it was fun.

My father is a man of many jobs. He taught for a while. High school English. But he's too much a philosopher to survive the American education system, and that's how he

ended up in sales. He sold textbooks to Catholic schools, and worked night shifts selling insurance. For a while he sold adaptive technology for the disabled. But always, he wrote. First and foremost, he is a poet.

- - -

Once when I was younger I got off the bus and headed upstairs to change out of my uniform. As I reached the base of the staircase I noticed my path to be blocked by a man. I looked up, and promptly turned away from the step. Angry.

My mother stood by the stove stirring that night's dinner.

"How could you!" I screamed as I approached.

Her face moved from shock to confusion.

"How could you cheat on Dad?"

My father rushed from the staircase at the commotion.

"What are you talking about?" my mother asked. "He's right there."

It was the first time I had ever seen him with a clean-shaven face. It just doesn't suit him.

- - -

"In the hospital. Not to worry. They're holding me for tests on the ol' ticker. Will be home later tonight. Love Stress-o Test-o Dad De"

I slide the attached keyboard down and type a response. Another message comes in as I attempt to reply; it's from my mother.

"Dad's in the hospital. He went in for a stress test and the doctor's weren't happy with the results. They're doing some tests and they'll let him come home as soon as they're finished. Not to worry. Love you!"

I answer both and turn back to my work. I have two midterms tomorrow.

Time passes and a call comes in. They're keeping him over night. Stents: small mesh tubes which will be placed in the coronary arteries to aid with blockages. Fairly common; the procedure's low-risk I'm told, and scheduled for the morning.

I chat for a bit, and then turn back to my work. I have two midterms tomorrow. Spring break starts on Saturday; I'll be able to see him then.

- - -

For years my mother attempted to hide my father in our home, granting him allotted spaces: the home-office, our game room, the two-car garage too cluttered to ever house a vehicle. Piled on shelves, and atop themselves even, were his knick-knacks, her annoyances.

The worst were the beer bottles. He had over one thousand.

Ale. Lager. Stout. Shandy. Double Bocks and pilsners. Combinations of hops and malt and bitters. The products of fermented yeast.

He is a beer connoisseur; it broke his heart to see my brother Joe and I crack cans of Keystone for beer pong.

“At least drink Natty Ice. Ice beers are stronger.”

He keeps a kegerator in our kitchen. Beer chilled, and always on tap.

I miss the days when his bottle collection was proudly displayed atop our kitchen cabinets.

- - -

My brother Tim’s name appears on my phone this time.

“Marian. Have you heard about Dad?”

“Yes. I’ve been talking to him. He went in for some stress test, but then they decided to keep him. They’re putting in... stints, I think is what he said.”

“It looks like they can’t do the stents. He’s being scheduled for quadruple bypass surgery; most likely on Friday,” my brother says. “I don’t know what you know about the surgery, but, I would want to be here if I were you. *Before* he goes in.”

I’m still speaking with my brother as I email my professors. It’s late, and uncommon that they’ll send me a response the same night.

My gut tells me to get in my car and start driving. I call my father instead.

He reassures me as always, but I know him. He, the most honest person I know, would do *anything* not to worry me. Even lie.

I let him believe that I trust his “everything will be ok,”

and hang up. The tears fall instantly. I can't kick the mental mantra: *I may never hear his voice again.*

I leave for home directly after my first midterm, speeding for six hours in an unknowing state of panic, and fear. I cry intermittently, illegally checking my phone for news. No one calls. No one texts. It's been over twenty hours since I spoke with him. Over ten since he was given anesthesia.

- - -

The movies say that your father's supposed to say things like, "go get'em kiddo," and pat you awkwardly on the back. He's supposed to embarrass you in front of the kid that you like, and be the guy that sits watching "the game" on Sunday.

My father collects miniatures. Tiny ketchup bottles and a miniscule nativity set which contains what we refer to as a "jelly-bean Jesus".

My father cries.

At my senior Cabaret, I dedicated my final High School performance to him. "Send In The Clowns," his favorite show tune, after those by Jacques Brel. And on the morning of my graduation, he handed me a first edition copy of *The Waves* personally inscribed by his fountain pen. I've received poems and "just because" gifts, and every year, for Valentine's, he drives into Brooklyn to bring my mother and I sponge-candy, from the tiny old woman, who's been hand making it for years.

I didn't receive an awkward hug when he told me goodbye on my first day of college. Instead, our hug lasted for minutes. And when we pulled away, he looked at me through salt-water.

"Shine."

- - -

I enter the Cardiac ICU, ignoring the walls plastered with signs about hand sanitation.

I just need to see him. My brother leads me to his room in the circular ward.

Everyone seems dwarfed by hospital beds. Maybe it's the curtains creating unnaturally framed scenes of sickness. Perhaps the sterility plays a role, morphing perspective with its all-white backdrop. Or maybe, it's just that sick people

seem smaller, because staff hover above them, constantly, and IV poles seem to stretch upwards toward the ceiling, engaging gravity to aid in the drip, and they are broken.

Every Holmes is five foot six or less. My father stands at five foot eleven. A giant. But today he's miniscule. An angry scar, fresh, and clotting, runs what seems like the entire length of his being.

He lifts an arm riddled with tubing as I enter; I approach the bed gingerly. "I think they may have given me Shecky Greene's blood in that operating room!" he announces. "I've been cracking jokes all day!"

- - -

After the surgery my father retired and commissioned new business cards. They simply read:

"Kevin Holmes. Poet."

All black, simple font choice, embossed on a heavyweight, white cardstock. On the back was his personal mantra: "Peace found, is peace given." And just underneath was his e-mail, usedsaints@...

A used saint who will give of himself until the cracks on his hands bleed.

A man who performs miracles; I've witnessed them.

- - -

"What world did you conquer today fair you? Look at the best side and smile. Love Upward Thinking Dad."

I re-read his words and click reply.

It Rained in the Vatican Saturday
Claire Cerra

There was nothing in the Vatican
More inspiring than the rain.
Ferocious torrents beating against the marble
Like it has for hundreds of years
But it was a whole new sight for me.

The obelisk stood defiant
No sundial time to tell
While the queues quickly emptied
As the overcast skies shifted above.

Standing under the shelter of St. Peter's
I thought the storm would ruin something.
The majesty,
our clothes,
the spell-bound faith that enraptured me
From the moment I saw the cross.

No.

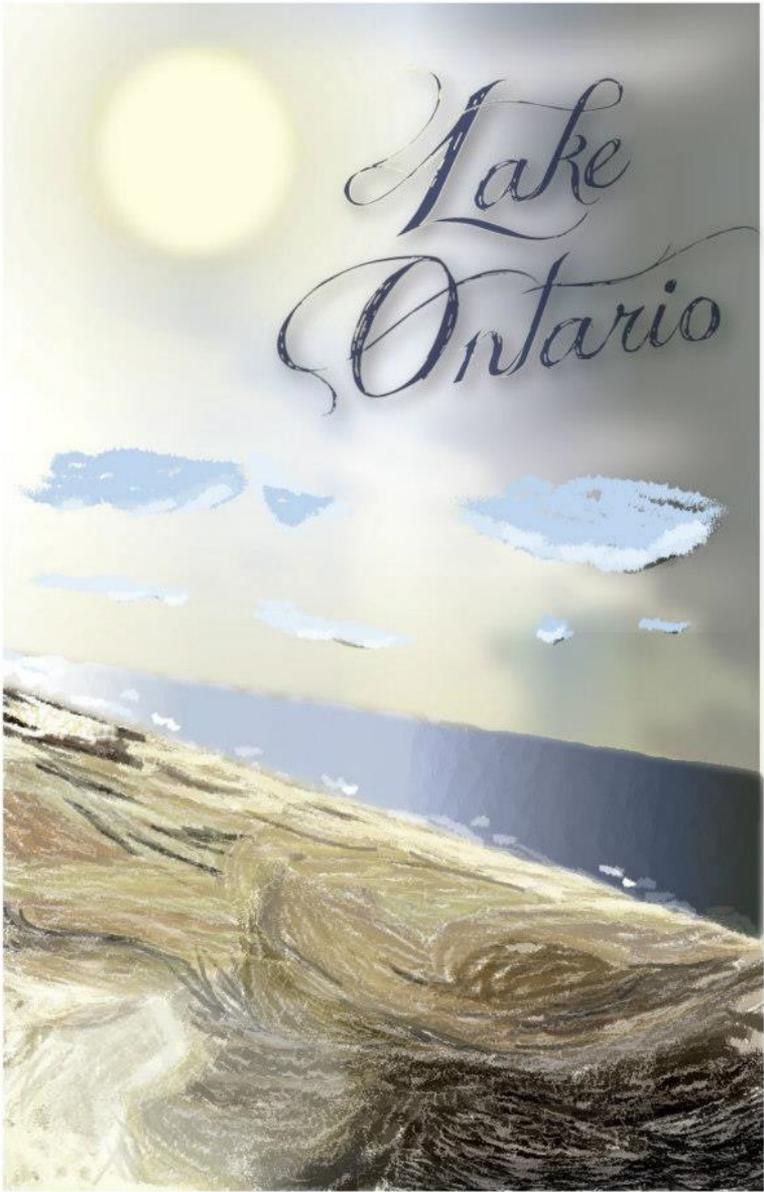
I once heard that God is in the rain.
And I felt every drop.

When I stepped out to embrace the downpour
It was the most cleansing rain on Earth.
I thought of you when I tilted my face up
And my heart leapt as it kissed my skin

Like the familiarity of an old friend.

I am changed but I am the same
I could credit time
Or the rain.
And all I have to say
Is I hope you see this someday
Because there is nothing in all of Rome
Like rain in the Vatican.

Lake Ontario
Lesley Semel



Hell

Christianna Miller

You drag your apathetic self to Women's Apparel only to find a large mob of women, sorting through rack after rack of Sag Harbor fashions, gathered around piles of discounted clothing like buffalo surrounding a watering hole. Still, you are unaffected and unresponsive to the pandemonium.

"Do you have this in a larger size?" a woman yells from a clearance rack as she holds up a maroon button up.

"Not that I know of ma'am," you respond with a forced smile. It is the smile of someone who has recently lost their soul but too beat to care. You engage in an unintentional staring contest until she breaks the gaze. You congratulate yourself; triumph is momentarily yours. Some folks are lucky enough to receive a pedestal in the corporate hierarchy, but you are at the bottom of the food chain as you monitor Women's Apparel from a rickety stool. The dressing room lobby, as dingy as to be expected, has been separated from the three dressing rooms by a cardboard barricade. It's as if the plastic wall panel that stood there before was vandalized, probably with employee graffiti, and management never got around to fixing it.

The downside of working at Wal*Mart are those mysterious smiling blots disguised as the company's logo that seem to be scattered everywhere; something about the face jabs with discomfort, as if it is the face of God while He takes pleasure in your customer servicing misery.

A toothless child crawls between the racks, hiding amongst clothes as his mother absentmindedly sorts through folded stacks of t-shirts, unfolding each once to inspect the garment and then continuing to throw it back onto the table without folding it, leaving the pile an untidy mountain of chaos. "*No respect,*" you think, "*No respect.*"

Then you see her. She comes forth, pushing her trolley filled to capacity. Body wash drips from the bottom. The goo is like molasses in its speed of hitting the floor. The poor bottle never stood a chance beneath the weight of Bud Light 30-racks, frozen pizzas, and general corn syrup treats. Buried in the load are her two children, one of whom finds it amusing to have the rubber cap of a plunger rest on his head. The other is using a bulk pack of maxi pads as a cushion.

“Hey, you.”

That is the worst. The instance where customers perceive you as below them and find it necessary to disregard your name plastered on the tag attached to your shirt. It is a name tag of the “*My name is _____: How can I help you?*” variety. On the back you’ve scribbled “Go fuck yourself” with Sharpie.

She stops at the counter and rings the bell placed directly in front of you. You are invisible after all, and if her presence wasn’t enough to annoy you, now you are audibly aware.

“I want to try these on,” she declares with a thick accent. You try to pin point it. She holds up an arm load of knit sweaters.

Who buys a sweater in Oklahoma? Or better yet, which briefcase-carrying Neanderthal determined it to be a profitable idea to have this Wal*Mart even stock sweaters in its inventory? As you thumb through her selection, you contemplate writing a letter to Wal*Mart headquarters explaining why it is not only a waste of money for them to ship sweaters to this specific store, but that it is also an inconvenience because you are the one who has to hang the damn things up and your arms get tired after a while.

You finish counting her bundle. 9, 10, 11, 12.

“Only eight are allowed in the dressing room,” you say as you pull a card number to place on her fitting room door. You don’t know who Wal*Mart is trying to impress, having card numbers and all, but you still hand it to the woman. She flings it back with a glare before waddling into the dressing room with her twelve ugly knit sweaters.

“Watch the kids for me.”

She shuts the door. Not only are you an undistinguished Wal*Mart associate, but now the title of “babysitter” has fallen upon you. Leaning against the cardboard petition, you study her children. They stare back. Their brown eyes glisten in the fluorescent lighting and the daughter chews her fingers, slobber dripping down her hand. Gross.

The son is clearly bored as he jumps out of the cart. You stay positioned at your station. You don’t care enough to lay out orders. At the same time, you don’t want him to be George of the Jungle around Women’s Apparel. His mother will most likely yell at you either way. He lays face down on the middle of the filthy tile floor. Ew. An elderly woman pushes her cart thru the aisle, obliviously approaching the boy but luckily she notices him before he is steamrolled

with her shopping cart. However, she doesn't stop but tries to push her cart around him. Unsuccessful, she eventually turns in the other direction. He remains sprawled on the floor.

The mother emerges from the dressing room, her sweaters sloppily hung back on hangers. Unbuttoned, of course, no one ever buttons sweaters after trying them on.

"May I count your garments?" you ask with obligatory politeness. She looks at you with offense, as if you just approached her on the street demanding a kidney with a machete in your hand.

"What? You don't trust me?"

"It's just Women's Apparel protocol, ma'am."

You know it sounds stupid immediately after the words leave your mouth. Like Wal*Mart would have "protocol," even she had enough brain cells to not take that seriously. It just has an official ring. But to you, this is not an issue of disrespect towards the Wal*Mart establishment. You simply don't like the bitch and any chance to inconvenience her gives you a tingle of warmth. She throws the clothes onto the counter and scoots past it, tending to her cart and her son, who is still spread eagle on the floor.

You count. *8, 9, 10. Wait, 10? Wasn't it 12?* It appears you have encountered an Article 5 Section B customer: the Women's Apparel shoplifter. Before the excitement is allowed to kick in, you inspect the dressing room for any left behind garments. She may have carelessly left two sweaters in there. Customers always do that and it pisses you off. You take a quick glance inside. Nothing. The mirror is, however, covered with the sanitary stickers that were attached to brand new bathing suits. The stickers are ancient remains of the summer crowd a few months before.

It appears today has become your day to be a badass. Catching her in the act and turning her in would not only boost your status among other associates but would also raise your \$7.25 income a whole dollar more. In corporate retail, an Article 5 Section B customer is a jackpot.

"Ma'am," you begin.

"What?"

"You handed me only 10 sweaters when I specifically counted 12."

"No, I didn't!" Her accent is thicker when she was defensive. Her eyebrows furrowed enough for you to notice the stray hairs between them.

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't!"

The banter continues half a minute longer. You look

to see where she'd hide the garments. Her purse? No, too small. Hot pink, too, and with a huge sequined cowboy buckle on the front. It was so tacky that not even the Home Shopping Network would sell it despite the fact that they sell almost every untactful thing imaginable. You continue to scan her body. Her pockets? No, they were so tight that she probably could not fit her hand into them, let alone two sweaters. Then you see a price tag sticking out from her collar. She has managed to roll the sleeves up far enough to barely hide under her t-shirt.

"Ma'am, I see one of the price tags. I am going to have to call my supervisor."

You are shaken into full alert as you watch her shoot off, running at the speed equivalent to an Olympic runner. She bumps into carts pushed by old ladies and jumps over floor displays. You've always seen "display jumps" in movie chase scenes but never fully understood what the difficulty of running around the display was. One would think it'd be easier than hurdling over mounds of junk.

She disappears from sight while her children are left in Women's Apparel. You won't have to be the sole provider of them now, would you? You have student loan debt for a psychology degree that has not been of much help in the last thirty minutes as you've tried to grasp the inner workings of their mother. You also didn't trust your own mother when she suggested you not purchase that piece of shit car on Craigslist and now you are on the hook for a new transmission. Also, you need new bath towels. You simply cannot afford to have two children inconvenience you. You sneak a glance at them, not wanting to be caught. Sweet beautiful children, they are all alone in the world now.

Another woman runs into Women's Apparel. She has the silkiest black hair, the kind seen on shampoo commercials with floral graphics and ecstatic moaning.

"*Oh, what now?*" you think. You have reached your limit for society's shenanigans.

"Oh, my beautiful babies!"

"Mommy!" the children chant simultaneously.

Your face falls.

She sighs in relief and picks up her daughter before pushing the cart towards the wall. "Mommy goes to the bathroom for a minute and she comes out and her babies are gone." She runs her hand through her daughter's hair. "My beautiful babies."

"Huh?" It's the only word you can muster. Confusion, disgust, you don't know what to feel right now.

“I went to the bathroom and left my babies outside, just right outside, right next to the door, yes I did. I come out and my little angels are gone.”

Not only had you encountered a merchandise thief, you had encountered a kidnapper as well. Unbelievable. People these days.

The store intercom chimes overhead. “Could we have a Women’s Apparel associate come to the front desk, I repeat, Women’s Apparel associate to front desk. And to the rest of you shopping with us today, thank you for shopping at Wal*Mart.”

You shuffle to Customer Service to find the woman and your supervisor standing together. Her face is decorated with an expression that expects sympathy.

Ted, the local sheriff, comes out of the bathroom located in Customer Service and he adjusts his pants while still buckling his belt buckle. His head is shaped like a square and has three long strands of hair that he proudly combs over his head. Everyone in town loves Ted. Many refer to him as a “Hometown Hero” ever since he scored the winning touchdown in 1972.

“You shoulda seen me!” Ted gushes, “Me and Annabel was a walkin’ in the lot, just not expecting, no, not expectin’ what we was about to see. We was a walkin’ and we see a lady running outta the store, I mean, she goes a dashin’ and me, well, my seventh sense told me that somethin’ was up and I knew I must stop her, so that is just what I did.”

“Carla,” your supervisor begins, “Is this the associate that assisted you today?”

Carla shifts her weight on her hip as if she is a wrongly accused victim taking a stand. She nods.

“Did you see this woman in Women’s Apparel?” he asks.

“Yes, I did.”

“Is it true you harassed her?”

“What? No!”

“But you did,” Carla says.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, yes, you did.”

“I saw her. She took in twelve sweaters when you are only allowed to take in eight and I told her that, yes I did, but she didn’t listen. She then went into the dressing room, leaving her children behind with me to watch them, only they weren’t her children, they were some other lady’s children. She was a kidnapper. I saw the tag sticking out from her

sweater and when I asked her about it she took off running, sir." You motioned your hands for emphasis.

"What an outrageous lie," he says. You scan Carla in hopes you will see the sweaters beneath her shirt but no luck.

"If she was in fact shoplifting, why did you not stop her?"

All you can muster is another "Huh?"

"If that was the case, we could have lost revenue.

That is not the sign of a good Wal*Mart associate."

"Well, it's like I was going to chase the woman."

"It is your responsibility to uphold the integrity of the company. Allowing shoplifting is not upholding integrity. But lying is worse than allowing a shoplifter."

"Lying? Check the security footage."

"Enough!"

You have no reason to feel remorse. After all, you did what you could and there is nothing your supervisor can say about it.

"You're fired."

Wait, he can.

Carla stands victoriously while your supervisor activates a gift card for her inconvenience. You see no reason to linger. You throw your name tag in the garbage bin. You contemplate snatching a packet of gum on your way out but you don't.

"*Fuck.*"

You understand the word is not in the supplied list of vocabulary for outstanding customer service. It wouldn't be found in any orientation packet halfheartedly given to you before you began another soul-destroying job. But the word seems perfect right now. You repeat it casually in your mind though your mind as you walk through the sliding glass doors to the parking lot, where you see your Craigslist catastrophe of a car.

"*Fuck.*"

Playing God
Shelby Coyle

Who are we
Small fragile things
To dance around
And pull on strings
Catching fate
Like fireflies
Pausing time
To say goodbyes
And who are we
These empty things
To dance around
And pull on strings
Picking times
And choosing dates
Twisting nature
Changing fates
Who are we
Faint-hearted things
To dance around
And pull on strings
Playing god
With mindful eye
To hide the question
Conceal the 'why'
And who are we
Small fragile things
To dance around
And pull on strings
Chasing fate
Like fireflies
Without the time
For our goodbyes

Black and White

Alexander Marchesi

...Good morning! Good evening! Whatever your time zone says I couldn't give a shit! It was between *falling* apart and *breaking* a heart tonight but I can never choose. So talking to an invisible audience never *seemed* like such a delight! And yeah, I got some time to waste minutes that were going down the drain anyway. I took too much of this thing called life and *overdosed*. It was an absolute *thrill* but I *still* want to try and hold your attention for as long as I can.

So many aliases I can choose from! Professor Kinky, Doctor Trauma, the conductor of catastrophe but *actually* I really don't care! Call me whatever the *fuck* you want. It's routine for me to act so humble when I'm laughing like a *madman* inside! Singing the same old songs feeling brand new, I'm the guy that *wishes* you luck by *breaking* your leg. Feeding my declining ego is the reason I'm here so stop whatever you're doing and *come* watch me spit out run on sentences going nowhere fast! HAHA.

I operate cluelessly *foolishly* that I'm smarter than all of you! A jester brought up from doom and gloom striving off the *lust* for undeniable glory. I walk with balls front and center just *trying* to struggle, but *not*, to be the first kid mentally stable admitted into an insane asylum. I do and say what you're not supposed to know. Spreading the truth as if it were mere *rumors* so you won't believe a word I say!

I'm a *maniac* gone *insomniac* turned *lunatic* from being uncontrollably hyperactive twenty-four seven. The lack of seeing anything that resembles an authority figure puts me on the *brink* and I undoubtedly love it! I'm judged to no end cause I'm loyal to every bad decision I've made. It's how I get my *sick kicks* from the simplicities of breathing your name! Witnessed my own downfall and couldn't *help* but make a joke out of it. Been grinding my teeth this whole time and you haven't even the slightest clue why!

I've been ruining Internet blogs and open forums to get through these *drooling* days without slicing a hole in my hemorrhaging sense of humor. Believe the unbelievable! That's the punch line I come from. I'm a wannabe has-been in love. A copycat whose minutes blend into hours. They shift into days into months and shortly after I'm wasting years in seconds from recycled gasps of air! I got an infinite amount of time to sleep but I don't. I'm unpredictably predictable and predictably unpredictable. I don't play well with others I don't

know why. Maybe it's because I'm my *own* worst enemy sabotaging my *own* life for the fun of it! Filtered out rationality a while ago to make this world feel a little bit more like home. Hibernated in a brainwashed head with no sense of an appetite for as long as I could; then made a never-ending list of why I hate this planet!

Take what I say with an ounce of sanity. More sarcastic than serious, I've been called a conceited clown well what do *you* think?! I had a plan for growing up *full proof* for falling apart. My immaturity is in a trophy case and I'm *addicted* to showing it off! My favorite number is thirteen just because *you* say it's bad luck. HA. I take pride in introducing myself as a stranger to everyone I meet then *expect them* to remember me by heart. If they don't... *get mad*. HA. Hit em good and hit em hard, that's *my* motto. The philosophy is "don't *give a shit*" with a musical ring to it. It's ethically probable for me to stay until the bitter end but I only come back for a pair of thighs *doused* in *delicious* eyes.

I'll have my back *turned* to the *world* when it crashes and burns. I'll be gazing at the stars mumbling "*la la la*" wondering where you are. I'll kiss you for however long *my* forever lasts *us*. You kiss me *so sweet* for a boy *so sour*. Take me for granted and let me in *I DARE YOU!* Tell me dead on that you've never seen worse so I can *smile* with joy. I'm completely delirious and serious when I mutter "I love you" under my breath. I'm convinced you're using me, abusing me until he gets back and I just... I just *LOVE IT!* I said I'm a man of my word and that's my problem but knowing me, I'll forget it by tomorrow! Paradise *awaits* us Z. Hook, line, and sinker that's all I have to say!

I'm just trying to make life more bearable for others by being the *inconceivable* joker devoted to handing out tiny *giggles* to the unfortunate... but when I found someone that did the same for me I just *straight UP* lost it! When the inseams of this book *collapses* from the pressure I say I'm under... remember me on paper and not as I am. It'll be so much more *fun* that way! I get *dizzy* from the wave currents in my head but *it* doesn't matter; I'll never stop talking to you!! Laughter all around! HAHA.

...Hello hello hello Mister Despair is in the building. I've been avoiding this regression but times my enemy once again. Came with a pocket full of happiness but I forgot to save some of it for myself. I'm a trendsetter for the latest mistakes, a shell of a ghost who was more exciting than me. The crown of sorrow has been passed down to its rightful

heir. I guess I'm royalty now.

I'll give you a tour. This is where dreams fall and nightmares rise. The aftermath of a natural disaster, that's what the inside of my head looks like. I developed an everlasting immunity to hopes and dreams. Saved the ashes of every last one and made beautiful calligraphy out of them. I stand for everything the kids forget to root for. They flatter me by calling me bad-spirited. I don't mind. A martyr without a trigger who never had faith, I'm a damn shame ashamed of myself.

Stay low; don't want my head up in the clouds daydreaming again. Oh, *that'd* be tragic. My house is bombarded with courtesy calls I can never pick up. I just see upside down, I can never find the phone. But I did find the transcript to my existence and surprise surprise God never makes an appearance. I swear to him I'm going to burn in hell before he ever shows *me* the light. Dark times echo through my eardrums against my will. God stacked this life against me. He enjoys seeing me slip up. I'm messed up stuck in fetal position crippled from the burdens of being his greatest creation. Where's the apocalypse when you need it?

Sent God some postcards a while back, telling him how awful I'm doing but he takes it as fan mail. Like I believed, I'm on my own. I'm motivated to gush sin from my neck. I'm in withdrawal. I'm going through every season like it's winter. I'm cold, frostbitten buried beneath deadened bed sheets with the blinds down numb to common sense. I take every thing out of proportion, torturing myself until I'm polite enough to put in the effort to smile.

Throwing tantrums like it's my job, the sunbeams tickle and tingle my skin. I'm used up but not used to this. When storm clouds are your only forecast, you forget what warmth feels like. I carry a squeaky-clean slate if you think about it. My expiration date took a backseat for the cutters and needle addicts out there ahead of me in this game of misery. Wildfires caged inside my pupils, they dilated when I jumped on the bandwagon of self-loathing. My heads spinning, I'm spiraling out of control. No amount of pills can make me feel ok awake. Gravity can't seem to hold me together anymore. I'm guilty from sunrise to sunset.

It's like I'm not allowed to amount to anything worthy of someone's time. Alibis and excuses make up my conversations. Sacrifice what I have to give me some purpose to keep fighting. I'm a veteran of pain. I got a severed heart. I retired first scar I got but that didn't do much.

Kept my feelings underground but this monotony I face on a daily basis is getting deeper and deeper. So deep it's making me think the one thing humankind can agree on is death.

It's a scandal missing all the juicy details. Crossed my fingers, wished on a shooting star, and prayed to God I would never love. But she came in with skin so smooth and delicate my hands rolled right off it. Stripped and poised of all doubt I have in this world, when she let go of my hand I went into paralysis. You drove me to complete insanity Z and you know it. Take it as an honor, only you could open my eyes like this. I can't imagine doing this without you.

After you told me I became the desperate boy you wanted, you said I'd never be the boy desperate enough to want. It's ok; I paraphrased but push that aside for a moment. Give me flawless instructions on making your heart race. I'll be at the finish line with a frown you'll reverse when you faint in my arms. I go out of mind traveling to places I shouldn't be when you're gone Z. You're my four-leaf clover and I'm running on luck. There's nothing left to see or lose but you.

...Dearly beloved, brothers and sisters, ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, I'm sorry it took me so long. I was rushing the front door but I'm cocky I know it so I only put in half the time to get in. I used to have big dreams aimed at fame and glory. Now my dreams seem so unrealistic. Yeah, that's right, in case you haven't heard I was meant for this. Born to be the greatest. Forget those two fools and look no further. I'm the successor to Shakespeare, the next Socrates in the making.

A little about me, I've been reigning supreme for two years running now. From start to finish I didn't think I'd end up in the middle. I'm stuck in my prime with no way out. Been like this for a while now. Metaphorically it's lyrically impossible for you to be me. I can downsize everything that makes you feel special. I'm unstoppable, untouchable, and invincible in everyone's eyes and if I'm not, they're blind. My minds as crooked as my smile. It's not my fault there's no cure for what I got.

Yeah, I'm tired of being quiet. I'm sick of this bullshit. I'm sick of hearing about the perfect boys with their perfect lives. I'm fed up being called the drama queen of a bunch of prima donnas. Tied myself down with writers blocks turned bricks, I've got world-class potential. A professional word bender, number one on your list of "people you can't beat." Always looking to get ahead of the curve, I can't get jealous

cause I'm the best there is. I'm on a whole new level only I can beat in a game you shouldn't play. I'm not here to satisfy you. No fuck that, I'm here for me and for starters, you're in my way.

They say all rights reserved to God. Well hell no my gift to him when the day comes will be a pile of shit at the gates of heaven. My punishment is to spite him so everyone looks at me like I've gone off the deep end. Too bad they'll be establishing statues engraved in my name soon enough. A smooth talker who's just as sharp as he is sly. Selling tips to con artists is how I make a living. Lying is a skill you adapt, train, an expertise you own. I came to conquer the survivors who don't even know they survived. Committed to the best I can be and if that ain't good enough, I'll drop down to my worst and see how that plays out.

Suck on your tongue and spit out your teeth, you're done talking. I'm cooking up recipes for calamity with a dash of tragedy until you call me "your majesty." These words do me no justice. They'll name generations after me. Replace me? I replaced *you*. You'll rest in pieces peacefully when I'm done and gone. I'll wave goodbye before you even say hello. I'm fresh out of the abyss. My status leaving: all-star. I gotta make an example out of someone and unfortunately, you're the lucky winner.

I died with a grudge in my hands. Popped out of my grave like nothing happened carrying a ruthless vengeance. It would be disrespectful of me not to take action. I'm the performance of a lifetime I've had the honor of playing everyday. I'm a genius on the ropes of the supernatural. This is the limelight and it's been shining on me like it's my very own spotlight. I make youth's heads roll when I enter a room. I'm a dead man walking feeling more alive that you ever have. Prisoner by my own sanity, I can't ever seem to break down that fourth wall.

I'm versatile and well behaved. Move side to side and don't step out of line or I'll cross it. The only person stopping me is me and I'm supposed to take him out any day now. I've been complimented on my wit but it doesn't change the fact that my conscience doesn't quite fit me. Next time, read what I write before it fuses into my skin, into every cell. Watch it make my bones, coordinate my brain, and materialize my rhythm, my thoughts, my voice. These words keep my pulse in check so please don't forget it. I'd hate to repeat myself.

I warrant the grandest of entrances but I'll close for myself *thank you*. I'll bow out with grace the day you're begging on your knees for forgiveness. I want to get you as

angry as me. They sold you out, lowest price on the market. I'm helping you out. I came to represent those who had their hearts kidnapped and beaten in a burlap sack. Yeah, fuck you to the boy's who've got their lives all planned out from the get go. Fuck you to the girls who cover up the hearts they break with the best make up money can buy. That's right darling, I'm coming for *you*.

And when they toss through these pages they'll get frustrated. They'll get angry at me. I'm saying there's no way out but this one. I'm building my empire off forsaken wishes and died out dreams. Giving out encores isn't my style; you gotta earn it in the future. Glad I got that out of my system for a second or two. These aren't threats, they're promises. I'll scream until my lungs burn and I start breathing fire. This makes three, the trio is complete. Over and done with bitch. I'll rule on this platinum throne with an iron fist with my queen Z at my side. Now... good-bye.

See what I'm dealing with now? That's what my... *character*... is based off of. My alter egos, the voices inhabiting the inside of my head. They're the narrators of this mockery of a story. I'm depressed confident snide and out of my mind all at once. How is that even possible? Oh, don't forget lovesick too.

On that note, I checked in under blacking out last night. I let the trio run rampant while I was gone and the result is what you read up above. Back on track, I slept with my notebook on my nightstand and it felt like my sleepwalking habits turned into sleepwriting. You're probably wondering why. I didn't break the news to my pseudonyms yet so this is as good a time as any. I talked to Z last night and months of guts built up all at once. And they all spilled out like I was gunning for a no tomorrow.

Untitled
Joel Dodge



Evasion Dance

Naomi Chalfin

Assorted bagels sit
in a paper towel-lined
wicker bowl.

You tell me
this, but my nose informs
me first. Not that
you've eaten without
me though,
and scrape your plates
off in a panic
before I block the kitchen
entrance.

When the aggressive morning
sun retracts, leaving my
curtain bleached in its wake
I hear your door sigh
open, warring with humidity.
I'm enclosed in
my room, stomach purring
with contentment at the same
frequency your creaks

make on the laminate
hall floor. In your gold
-toed socks, you reach
the sterile pink bathroom door,
audibly exhaling when
it's locked.

I found my violin shoulder rest
inside the reupholstered
piano bench yesterday.
I was alright when I played
but I've gotten better.
Now I can pass the bow
over the taut strings of your
fragile ego,
turning the pegs more
each time I misalign the towels
or forget where I put
Daisy's dog collar

In class we discuss
the way modern families
reconfigure generationally.
I isolate a loop in the stitching

of my prickly wool scarf,
thinking of how mine
refashions itself in just months.
Each time I return home
they have to remember
who I am.

We Don't Talk About It
Jessica Washak

Looking back now on my childhood, my family's "We Don't Talk About It" policy probably wasn't very healthy.

It applied to nearly everything back in the day. Daddy's stressful job supervising the production of medical equipment? We don't talk about it. Mom's lack of a job and housewifely duties? We don't talk about it. Aunt Jen's death? We don't talk about it.

The only part of that list that is contestable is the latter. When I was in the seventh grade, my parents sat down my two older brothers and me to tactfully try and explain to us that our aunt, my father's sister-in-law, was no longer with us. Presently, I know for a fact that the poor woman purposely overdosed on antidepressants, but the heads of the Walker household didn't exactly put it that way.

I can still see my mother's solemn face—for she was the one to explain rather than my father, who was a man of few words—as she grappled for the right explanation. "Too much of anything can kill you, really," she began. "In Jen's case, she accidentally took too many of a pill she was prescribed by a doctor. One dose was good for her. A whole bottle was not."

Wedged in the middle of brothers Marcus and Connor, I observed them exchange surprised glances. Uncertainly, my eyes wandered over the wall of family portraits. Before I could find her, the framed photograph of smiling Aunt Jen seemed to find me, her beautiful dark eyes glossy behind clean glass. I shifted uncomfortably, wishing that it didn't feel like her image was gauging my reaction to her death.

"When is the funeral?" Connor asked quietly.

"We'll be going to the funeral next week. Sunday afternoon. But until then, I want you guys to welcome your Uncle Jack here. He'll be staying with us for a bit this summer. 'Til he gets his head on straight."

The three of us nodded, looking properly sympathetic. Although I was sorry to think that I would never see my kindly Aunt Jenny again, a childish part of me was thrilled by the prospect of a sixth person coming to live in our great big home. We lived at the corner of nowhere and nothing, surrounded by only trees, creeks, and a rather large population of deer. It would be nice to have someone besides my impatient siblings to talk to, I decided.

If only I would have known how things would turn out. It's like they always say, be careful what you wish for.

Uncle Jack stayed with us well past the end of summer, even going as far as to offer to renovate the attic into a suite so long as he could stay.

"Just a little bit longer," he would swear, putting a burly hand over his heart.

To which my father would clap his brother on the back and say, "As long as you want, Jacky."

In the beginning, I was glad for Uncle Jack in the house. We were both early risers and for the first time in my life, I ate my breakfast with company. Together the two of us would tell stories, reminisce, and comment on the things that we witnessed throughout our previous days. Often, we would end up on the topic of Jen.

"She was just so beautiful," Jack would whisper sadly. "I've got nothing to remember her by now. Nothing more than some old photos and material junk."

I would grimace and nod, encouraging him to go on without actually speaking.

"I wish we had had a son. If we were smart, we would have tried in our twenties rather than putting it off for later. Let me tell you, Sharon, when it comes to family, never put anything off. Nothing is more important. Nothing. Not jobs, bills, or stuff."

He seemed to be eternally frustrated by the fact that he was a childless widower at thirty-five. Often, regardless of whatever conversation he was in, Jack would find a sly way to turn it back to kids. From my seat in the den, I could hear him talking with Mom about some old train sets of the boys' or the current weather. "I wish I had a child of my own to buy toys for," or maybe, "If I had a kid, today would sure as hell be a day to bundle him in a warm jacket."

More disturbing than his chats with us were his frequent phone calls immediately after his wife's death. Constant contact was kept between several medical offices and Uncle Jack. I couldn't imagine why. The demanding ring of the telephone would torture us at all hours, night and day.

"Jack's a scientist," Marcus would reply to any of my questions. "He's just doing what scientists do. He's got a whole lab set up in the attic."

This revelation stunned me. Where had I been when my father gifted a rather large set of equipment to Uncle Jack? What did he work on up there in the attic? Was he curing cancer? Finding groundbreaking information on the common cold? What? What was he doing?

So great was my fascination that one day when my uncle left the house out of the blue, I took it upon myself to creep up into the spare bedroom that had once belonged to him. Inside of the rather large closet sat the sturdy steps that rose into Jack's lair. With little thought of the repercussions, and much on how incredibly "book-like" my adventure was going to be, I climbed up the stairs and into Jack's suite, which he never kept locked. My parents had always stressed the importance of honoring Uncle's privacy, so I had never before laid eyes on his rooms. I was very surprised to find that the majority of the space had, as my brother said, been turned into a makeshift lab. Here there was a table full of carefully covered petri dishes, and there was a half-ajar dresser drawer of glass beakers. On one table, several shiny dissecting knives had been carefully lain out on a cutting board. The only sign that someone slept within the great space was the messily made twin bed shoved into the farthest corner, as if an afterthought.

I strode forward curiously, stepping around full and tied black garbage bags that littered the floor. As I moved toward the far side of the attic, however, something strange caught my attention on the crowded night table that dwarfed the bed. Several sunlamps had been placed in a circle around a mass that looked roughly like the pictures of jellyfish I had seen in magazines. The blob was shiny and pinkish-white, broken every so often by a splotch of deep burgundy. It was oval in shape, as far as I could tell, for one end of it had been nestled within a worn yellow blanket that I dimly recognized from my own childhood. Looking closely, I could see that the mass wasn't completely opaque. Instead, there was a vague suggestion of a creature *inside!* I had never really seen many babies before, as I was the youngest of our family, but once my mom and I had gone for a visit to the neighbor woman's house to see her newborn daughter. The *thing* inside the ball of jelly looked remarkably like that newborn, blurred beneath fluid.

In that moment, maybe there was a rush of scientific adrenaline to my body, for I wasn't scared. Not yet.

I outstretched a hand, eyes focusing on the object in front of me. As I slowly went to prod the surface, I wondered if the contents would ripple like liquid beneath the touch of my fingers. I wondered if it would be tacky or smooth.

"I wouldn't, if I were you."

Uncle Jack's voice was enough to freeze the fire in my veins. I whirled around, startled. There he stood in the doorway, his dark brown hair disheveled and an oddly

peaceful look on his weathered face. I couldn't speak.

Jack pointed to the mass I had been studying and uttered one word—a name. “James.” There was pride in his eyes as he said it, typical of a father to his child.

I bolted, using my small stature to slink past him in the doorway.

That night, I didn't speak to anyone. My mother challenged me relentlessly, knowing how unusual it was for me to fall silent for a long period of time. I just shook my head at her attempts.

We don't talk about it. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Long Live the Lonely: The Life of a Pathetic On-looker
Jordan Dedrick

(Jack sits on a bench by himself at Stage Left. A man and a woman stand on the opposite side Stage Right. They are infatuated with one another and pay no mind to JACK. JACK stares at the two of them.)

JACK

(To the audience)

I sit back and watch them interact with one another, chatting. They seem so carefree and... happy, for a lack of a better word. They touch, a lovers' caress, a reassuring embrace that displays their affections. He smiles, she blushes; the relationship moving on to a new level. Her normally porcelain skin blooms into a beautiful shade of pale pink.

I sit across the path, on a bench, eating my egg salad sandwich, and trying not to stare at them. My curiosity gets the better of me and I cannot look away. I'm not sure why these two intrigue me so, they don't seem particularly special. But my eyes, they glance up, as if moving on their own whim to see a spectacular show that my mind can't comprehend. I try to scold my brain, it doesn't work.

And then, I am there, with her. Across the park. As her skin flushes pink she looks at me, my... my... Rebecca... she says-

("REBECCA" now joins JACK who stands. Spotlight on the two of them. The man at Stage Right is in the dark.)

"REBECCA"

I'm so happy with you Jack. I don't know what my life would be like without you. Can you imagine it?

JACK

No, I can't say that I could. What we have, it's perfect. If not, it's pretty damn close.

"REBECCA"

It is perfect. You're perfect.

JACK

I wouldn't go that far.

"REBECCA"

I would...

(They lean in and kiss. "REBECCA" pulls away suddenly and rejoins the other man at Stage Right. JACK is left standing alone as the lights come up still in the embrace. He opens his eyes to see she is gone and sits back down on the bench.)

JACK

(To the audience)

It couldn't be like that. Relationships tend to have some sort of... what's the word? Animosity? I don't think that's right... (Pause) Conflict, that's the word. She seems "perfect" from afar. But, perhaps, she has a dark side. An, inner goddess, if you will. Yes, there must be a part of her that hates to cooperate and compromise.

But, that could be quite exciting. You always have a challenger, someone to keep you on your toes, a real fire cracker. That's how my Julie is...

("JULIE" moves again to JACK as

he stands. The spotlight engulfs
them once more.)

"JULIE"

Why do you always have to fight with me on this
shit?

JACK

Watch your mouth, we're in public.

"JULIE"

I don't care where we are. I can't hide who I am,
JACK. I won't do it.

JACK

That's not what I'm asking you to do. But when
you meet my folks, you have to be a
little more... refined.

"JULIE"

(Offended)

'REFINED'? Did you seriously just say that I am
not refined?

JACK

That's not what I meant.

"JULIE"

What did you mean, then?

JACK

Not everyone is used to you. I love that you
speak your mind and that you don't give a fuck
about what people think. But sometimes, you tend
to rub people the wrong way. I just want my
parents to think that you're as perfect as I do.
I'm sorry, I didn't think through what I said.

"JULIE"

I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to overreact. I'm so happy with you Jack. I don't know what my life would be like without you. Can you imagine it?

JACK

No, I can't say that I could. What we have, it's perfect. If not, it's pretty damn close.

"JULIE"

It is perfect. You're perfect.

JACK

I wouldn't go that far.

"JULIE"

I would...

(They lean in and kiss. "JULIE" pulls away suddenly and rejoins the other man at Stage Right. JACK is left standing alone as the lights come up still in the embrace. He opens his eyes to see she is gone and sits back down on the bench.)

JACK

(To the audience)

I feel like that may be a bit too hectic. I wouldn't want to fight with someone on a daily basis just to get my opinion across. She's too sweet to be like that.

(The man and woman smile at each other and begin to laugh.)

Her laugh is sweet too. I've never heard her laugh before. Does he not let her laugh? I can't imagine that could be true. It would be cruel for

him to do such a thing. But he's a jerk, a real asshole. ...Brad, how I loathe him for not letting her laugh more. But she sees his tyrannical ways, and moves on. Anna can see who he truly is.

"BRAD"

What is your problem, babe?

"ANNA"

My problem is you. I can't let you control me anymore. I won't let you control me anymore.

"BRAD"

Is that what you think I do? I control you? Well here's some news for you, sweetheart. I don't need to "control" you. I have Madison for that. And trust me; she lets me do whatever it is that I feel like doing.

"ANNA"

How could you? I've given you the last three years of my life.

"BRAD"

Tough shit. Get lost, honey.

("BRAD" exits Stage Right and
"ANNA" sits down on the bench
next to JACK and begins to cry
softly. He looks over
curiously.)

JACK

Do you like egg salad?

"ANNA"

(Confused)

Excuse me?

JACK

(Slower)

Do you like egg salad?

"ANNA"

I guess so. Why do you ask?

JACK

If you want, you could have half of my sandwich.

"ANNA"

Do you just sit in parks offering food to weeping girls?

JACK

Every now and then, when my calendar is open, I try to fit it in.

("ANNA" laughs and sits up straight to look at JACK.)

You have a very nice laugh.

"ANNA"

Thanks. So... are you going to give me part of your sandwich?

JACK (Chuckling)

Sure. Here you go. (Pause) Do you, um, come here often?

"ANNA"

Only when I'm getting dumped by dick-head boyfriends.

JACK

I'm sorry to hear about that. It's his loss; you seem like a fantastic person.

"ANNA"

You just met me. How could you know what kind of person I am? You don't even know my name.

JACK

I'm a good judge of character. And I'm sorry that we had to meet under these circumstances, but I'm Jack.

"ANNA"

I'm not... sorry. I already like you more than... I can't even say his name. I'm Anna.

JACK

Well, it's really nice to meet you Anna.

"ANNA"

You as well, Jack.

(“ANNA” bites into her part of the sandwich. A spotlight shines on JACK as he turns to look at the audience.)

JACK

(To the audience)

The two of us look back on the day that we met, we remember the unfortunate event that brought us together. This spot is ours, and no one else's. We spend a year together, two years... six... twelve. And still, this is our bench. But a year later, after this day, we come back here. We sit and eat our egg salad sandwich like we did on that first encounter.

(The lights come back up. JACK puts his arm around “ANNA” as she continues eating.)

"ANNA"

You know, I think this sandwich just keeps getting better each time you make it.

JACK

More and more love goes into the recipe each time.

"ANNA" (Giggling)

You're so cheesy.

JACK

It's the truth... and I put some sea salt into the mayo.

"ANNA"

So that's what I tasted.

JACK (After a pause)

What are you thinking?

"ANNA"

I was thinking that I'm so happy with you, Jack. I don't know what my life would be like without you. Can you imagine it?

JACK

No, I can't say that I could. What we have, it's perfect. If not, it's pretty damn close.

"ANNA"

It is perfect. You're perfect.

JACK

I wouldn't go that far.

"ANNA"

I would...

(They lean in and kiss. "ANNA" pulls away suddenly and rejoins the other man at Stage Right. JACK is left sitting alone still in the embrace. He

opens his eyes to see she is
gone.)

JACK

She is like no other woman I have met before. She is... perfect. I can't think of anything else to call her other than that. One simple word, so utterly overused, is the only string of letter that I can conjure up to describe her.

No, there is so much more. She makes me feel young and free and needed.. and loved. She is witty and beautiful and talented and smart and.. vibrant. But all those words, adjectives, they all add up to perfect. My Violet, she is nothing less than perfection, and if anyone disagrees it is purely because they have not been around her at all.

She is not mine.. yet. But when she sees how wonderful we could be, together... she will want no one else but me. She is my friend, lover and mistress all wrapped into one excellently proportioned package. And she will see that... tonight.

("VIOLET" walks sweetly over to JACK and sits next to him.)

"VIOLET"

Jack, you are my best friend. You always seem to be there for me, no matter what. I'm grateful to have someone as special as you in my life.

JACK

It is I who is the lucky one and you the special.

"VIOLET"

What do you think our lives would be like if we had never met?

JACK

I don't want to think about that. I care too much for you to think about a life without you.

"VIOLET"

It would be a bit bleak.

JACK

It would be more than 'bleak'. It would be a useless life filled with pure nothingness.

"VIOLET"

Um... yeah, I guess it would. But, we do have other things, people, to live for. Your life would still be worth living if we weren't friends.

JACK

I don't think so. Violet, you are the most amazing person that I have ever met in my life. I want... I want to take our relationship to the next level. I would like you to be my girlfriend. Will you?

"VIOLET"

(Taken aback)

Jack, where is this coming from?

JACK

What do you mean? You've had to know about my feelings for you. Violet, I'm in love with you.

("VIOLET" stands up and begins to slowly pace in front of JACK.)

"VIOLET"

Jack, I'm sorry if I have done anything to lead you on, but I don't reciprocate your feelings. I can't think of what I did-

JACK

Stop talking.

"VIOLET"

Jack, I don't understand all of this. I thought-

JACK

STOP TALKING.

(JACK stands from the bench and looks at "VIOLET" with anger. "VIOLET" is still, she looks terrified.)

How could you not have known the way I felt about you? Do you think that I just catered to you each day in hopes of becoming your best friend? Are you kidding me?

"VIOLET"

Well, I don't really understand why you thought that I felt the same, but I don't.

JACK

You're nothing but a stupid fucking tramp. GET OUT, NOW.

"VIOLET"

FINE. You're a psycho; I hope you rot in hell.

(JACK sits back down on the bench as "VIOLET" goes back to the man at Stage Right. JACK looks back to the audience.)

JACK

She's a monster. She's awful and I hate her. Nothing good could come from my love of her. So I sit, and I wait. I watch her from afar and plot different ways to make her see how good we could be together.

I love her... but she does not feel the same about me. So I have to make her. She must see how much she does truly love me. Brenda will see, in the end, that she can love me.

("BRENDA" kisses the man at Stage Right and begins to walk across to Stage Left. She stops in front of the bench and JACK stands up. He saunters slowly over to her, but she does not see him. He suddenly grabs her and forces her into a kiss.)

"BRENDA" (Struggling)

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? GET OFF ME!

JACK

Be quiet...

"BRENDA"

HELP!

(JACK puts his hand over "BRENDA's" mouth and attempts to kiss her neck as she struggles. She begins to cry softly.)

JACK

Hush... everything is okay.

"BRENDA"

(Pleading)

Please don't hurt me...

JACK

I'm not going to hurt you. Why would you say that? I just want you to love me, Brenda.

"BRENDA"

How do you know my name? I don't know you.

JACK

Can't you see that we're meant for each other? I love you so much. We're going to spend the rest of our lives together.

"BRENDA"

Please, I have a fiancé and a family and people who will notice I am gone. Just let me go and we can forget this even happened. I won't tell anyone.

JACK

You have a fiancé?

"BRENDA"

Yes, and I love him very much. We're getting married in a month.

JACK

You're cheating on me? Why would you do something so stupid?

"BRENDA"

I don't know who you are. Please, just let me go; I won't go to the police, I promise.

JACK

NO... You must be punished for what you have done.

"BRENDA"

Please... don't...

JACK

(Shaking her)

STOP, DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA OF WHAT YOU'VE DONE?
...You were supposed to love me... but you...

(JACK takes "BRENDA's" head in his hands and looks her right in the eyes. She begins to sob more heavily.)

Shhh... it's okay, I still love you.
Unfortunately, you must be punished.

(JACK quickly turns his hands and snaps "BRENDA's" neck. She falls to the floor, motionless. JACK bends down and kisses her forehead.)

I'm sorry I had to do that, but I couldn't let you get away with such a heinous act. The good thing is, now we can be together, without your protesting. I love you, Brenda.

(The lights go dark suddenly. Within a minute, they turn back on. "BRENDA" has rejoined the man at Stage Right and JACK is sitting on the bench located Stage Left.)

She would never cheat on me... I'd make sure of it. She would know that my love is the only one that she needs to sustain her life. I am the air she breathes, the blood that pumps through her veins and if there is any doubt about that... well, I would change that very quickly. She would never go out with some other guy because I was unable to satisfy her needs. We would be the perfect couple that everyone looks up to as the standard for perfection. We. Are. Perfect...

(The sound of a cell phone ringing is heard. JACK pulls it out of his jacket and puts it to his ear.)

Hello, honey... yes... sure I'll grab dinner on my way home... okay... I love-

(He closes the cell phone and puts it back in his jacket. The

*man and woman from Stage Right
walk across the stage, hand in
hand, and exit Stage Left. JACK
stares at them longingly as they
pass him.)*

JACK

(Mechanically)

Our lives are perfect. I love my girl and my life
and I wouldn't trade it for anything. We are
happy... I am... happy.

(Blackout)

THE END

Sunshine in a Field of Gray
Kim Kittleson



It was the worst thing I ever did. But I wasn't solely to blame for what happened, depending on how you look at it. Michael was different and it didn't take a genius to figure it out. He lived in his grandparents' house with his mother two houses down from mine. The house was different from the other houses in our development of Cape style homes that all seemed to be mirror images of one another. It stood a measly one story high as its bland yellow wooden siding only made it look all the more feeble and pathetic. They were born-again Christians and every other weekend cars belonging to their religious comrades littered their driveway and the street curb in front of their home. Michael was home schooled, so the people from his church were the only friends he had. He didn't have social experiences similar to those of the other kids on the block, but that wasn't all that threw us off about him. He had a bit of a strange fashion sense for a 13-year-old boy and a lisp that forced the tip of his tongue to flick off the back of his two front teeth turning every "s" into a "th" sound.

Every generation has their own vocabulary associated with it. Unfortunately for my generation, "gay" was commonly used to ostracize someone who acted strange or a bit out of the norm. So naturally, the other kids on my block would refer to Michael as gay in conversation. Picking on people was something I was never fond of as result of being picked on myself for being hyperactive. But when you're young and naive and for once not being picked on, you'll abide to fit in. Eric and I hung out with Michael a few times, but not enough to get to know him all that well. Eric lived in the house between Michael's and mine and was two years older than me. He was my best friend out of all the kids on the block and we'd frequently play video games, wiffleball, kickball, and etcetera with each other. The few times we hung out with Michael we either played video games or swam in Michael's pool. Nintendo 64, PlayStation, and even Sega Genesis, Michael had them all. Never before had I seen that large of a collection of top-of-the-line gaming systems and games to go with them. Michael was also the only kid on the block with a swimming pool. Playing his video games and swimming in his pool were the only things we did with him because in our minds those were the only times we'd have any desire to be around him. It would've been

nice to get to know Michael more, but I was the youngest of the dozen kids on the block and I was a follower of the majority. I went where they went, did what they did, and said what they said. I even stood around while they spoke with a strange man.

This man lived directly across the street from Michael. It was the man's parents' house, as he was divorced from his wife and couldn't afford one himself. I mainly only saw the man in his driveway with his two young daughters, but he talked to us once. We had been drawn over by one of the kids on the block and his older sister who volunteered at the local fire department where the man worked. The kids on my block, most of them two or three years older than me, were standing around holding their heads high in the clouds with the pride and self proclaimed "coolness" that comes with talking to and "hanging out" with an adult. However, I felt not as comfortable as my peers. I examined the man with curiosity. His crassly shaped crown was bare on top with stubble flowing from the chasm of skin folds on the back of his head to his pale-bulldoggish face. He was neither a tall nor muscular man, but bulky. My analysis led me to question my peers in their admiration for the man. However, the one thing that caused me to push questions aside and leave them for later was his combination of cigarettes and the occasional rum & Vanilla Coke that was highly intimidating, but yet dangerously appealing. This dangerous appeal was enough for me to somewhat approve of him, but also led me away from questioning the man in his admiration for my peers.

I stood amongst the group, staring at the ground and glancing at one of my "friends" every now and then. I was putting up a pathetic showing and my existence in the group was worthless. Except for a few awkward laughs at jokes I didn't understand, not a single word had come from my mouth the whole half an hour I had been standing there. It was exceptionally uncharacteristic of me. At one point the man asked us about Michael as he took a long drag from his cigarette, the ashes staying in place until he got to the butt of it. Michael wasn't with us as he hardly every was. I had been awaiting an opportunity to jump into the conversation and make my presence known. I could feel my stomach rolling around in side of me trying to find its way out while my heart said, "Fuck it," and started clawing itself out from the inside of my chest. This was my opening and I jumped at it, blurting out, "He's gay!" The words shot from my mouth like a golden arrow. Oh the accomplishment I felt for finally speaking up!

Little did I know, I had shot myself a Wendybird.

“Oh,” the man looked at me as if surprised I had a voice. “And how do you feel about having a gay person on your street?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I guess I don’t really care.” His question had knocked me back into silence as I came to realize the literal implication of what I had said. I was perplexed by my own ignorance. How could I simply assess something like that? I had never gotten to know Michael that well, nor had I made a legitimate attempt to. The shot I had taken had been based off of what others had told me and not my own evaluation nor actual knowledge. But however dumbfounded I was by the words I had said, I was equally surprised by the fact that I had actually said anything at all. I felt a sense of pride and settled back in my comfortable new confidence. It’s implausible for anything bad to come of what I had said. I had just vocalized the thoughts of the group. There wasn’t anything wrong with that, was there?

From that point the conversation continued into an area of grey that, like most of the conversation, found me wandering around my nine year old brain trying to find meaning in the mature context of the conversation. I spoke a few more times after my first declaration, but nothing would come close to being as influential in the conversation as when I first spoke. However, no matter how proud I was of myself for what ever it was that I had done, I couldn’t tell my parents when they called me in for dinner. They did ask me what we had talked about, but I answered with, “Nothing really.”

About a week later, I started noticing Michael walk across the street every now and then to talk with the man. Michael sat there while the man threw back a few rum and cokes. The man’s mass made Michael, who was tall for thirteen, look puny. He was a naturally skinny kid but looked frail, breakable by comparison. Once and a while, “they’d go inside the man’s house to play games,” Eric told me. I didn’t understand why they’d play games at the man’s house though. Considering the plethora of video games that Michael had, it would’ve made more sense for them to play at his house instead. I figured that the man must have had better game systems or a bigger TV.

My town was pretty quiet for the most part. It was a cliché suburban town, where there are more sirens of ambulance rushing to the homes of the rotting elderly in one week than the number of arrests made in a whole year. But

one day, I heard police sirens close by and looked out side to see black and white police cruisers lined down the street, there focus point was right across the street and two houses down from mine. They were making one of their few serious arrests of the year right in front of my eyes. The red and blue lights permanently dyed the whites of my eyes and switched my mind into a conditional state of delirium... apparently games being played wasn't all that happened in the man's house. Eric told me that man pulled down Michael's pants and that's why he was arrested. All I could see when I closed my eyes was the man greeting an unsuspecting Michael at his door, then the man wrapping his thick fingers around the belt loops of Michael's jeans and jerking down from his waist. The sheer horror and confusion that Michael must have felt to force him to run and tell his mother. I know better now and picture something far different from what I was told. I took bit of aging and maturing to realize what actually happened. Still even now it is difficult to come to terms with. I feel as if the monkey's chasing the weasel around my head and if I try to stray from what I thought to be true as a child, it will pop.

At the time of the court hearing my mom felt compelled to pick my brain about what had happened. As I climbed into the passenger's seat of our mini van to go to the grocery store, she engaged me in dialogue. "Did the man ever say anything, that seemed inappropriate, to you?"

"Well," I felt my face turning green and my heart once again tarring at the inside of my chest, "he asked if I had ever gotten hard. What does that mean?"

"It's something that happens when you're older," she uttered. She was taken aback by the fact that I actually had a response to her question that wasn't "no."

"Like Grandpa?"

She looked puzzled. "Yes," she said. Her face was flush, hands twitching and waiting to have the steering wheel occupy them and the traffic to occupy her mind. She wanted to focus on something else. Her face held a look of angst, but she carried herself as if she desired to know nothing more than what I had already told her. Repulsed at the fact that she even had to have a conversation of this sort with her nine-year-old, she started the car and started driving. The thing was, nothing had even happened to me. A man had asked me questions. Sure it was creepy, but worse things could've happened. My mother asked me if I wanted to go to the court hearing and make a statement against him, but I said that I didn't feel comfortable. My decision only poured super glue into the wound.

Seven years later, most of the neighbors on the block had moved away and none of the remaining neighbors from the day of the incident had seen Michael or the man since. Michael's house had been repainted to a burnt red that made it look as if it were covered in dried blood and things appeared to be much different than they were back then. But the time had come for the seemingly healed wound to start festering. While walking home from school, I was doing my usual scan of the houses on the block when I saw him. I saw the man stoking the wood stove in the garage of his parents' house. My lungs shriveled up and dropped like leaves; I couldn't breathe. I felt a tingling in my brain and all four major limbs went numb as my face burned with pure, merciless hatred. The astonishment I felt and the depressing blow to my heart drove me close to passing out. I hadn't seen Michael since that day, yet the man had the nerve to return to the scene of the crime. For a moment I lost all respect for the justice system for letting him loose, but I soon came to realize the catalyst in the whole situation and my anger towards all external sources dissipated.

I had fooled myself. For years I had been on a reckless vendetta against the misuse of the word "gay" in the vocabulary of my peers. I thought it to be a mission fueled by the political correctness instilled by my family, but really there was more to it. I had played a record in my head to cloud the truth from shining through and tainting my thoughts. I had expressed my hatred for the irksome euphemisms for the longest time, but for whatever reason I was never able to put a finger on why exactly that hatred was engrained so deeply. It took seeing the man's face after all those years to help me comprehend the real motivation for my hatred. It was a realization that brought all the euphoria of sneezing and the pain of getting punched in the nose at the same time. Without a doubt a rare concoction, unlike anything I had ever been forced to swallow. It took seeing his pink, chubby, stale face again, but now I understood. Knowing when to act, when to keep your mouth shut, and when to speak up are the qualities that we should the cherish most, but ignorance is bliss.

Well, You Asked Me to Read Your Future

K.M. Alleena

We will kiss.

Your mouth

will taste of Camel Turkish Royals

and mine of Dark Magic coffee –

which is real gross if we think about it,

so we won't.

We'll just kiss

and pretend not to notice

those details.

What began

as lingering fingertips

passing pennies roll by

roll from one till

to the next

will end like this –

or really begin –

depending

on which side

you look at it.

I will remember

the way your eyes squint

when you laugh genuinely,

crease at their corners slightly;

admire your stubbled profile

as you look skyward

out windows that stretch

across storefronts

on slow, Sunday mornings.

And you – you will

start that same text
fifty times
that you were not sure
you could send
(but you will)
and then
I will meet you
for coffee
at your favorite café
and your music will play
as we geek out
over *The Legend of Zelda*
and the construction
of our lattes.

There will be so many
snarky comments
between us –
a constant competition
to see whose sarcasm
proves best.
We will sip our coffee
behind crooked smiles,
adoring the comedy
of the other.

I will remark
at the fact
that this is the first time
I'd seen you drink
anything but Red Bull,
and you will laugh

that laugh
that breaks the Monarchs
out of their cocoons
sound in my stomach;
a flash of orange
and black wings
that will backlight
my eyes
like LEDs.
It will have been
such a long time
since either of us
have felt
such a spark –
tiny, at first;
a mutable red,
brief and easily missed.
But then it will grow great –
a bonfire built upon
paper wasted from
a season's worth
of worthless work.
Smoke will rise
so visible
that those around us
will grin when they notice.

Just like how
I noticed
when you didn't pull
your finger tips from mine.
How our eyes aligned
for a split second,

and our shoulders relaxed,
safe in that presence.

Just after,
you asked me –
(almost offhand;
brought up again
after our conversation
on witchery and Tarot
had ended much earlier) –
if I would read your future.

It was then that
I fell for you,
syllable by syllable.

Argument
Stephanie Arney



Trapped in My Head
Joey Kraus

ACT I

The setting is a small room in an apartment, there is a short, slender man named Vinnie walking around the room muttering to himself, he is the only one in the room.

VINNIE

I can't do it, do you hear me? I can't do it, I won't do it.

Vinnie hears a voice from someone not in the room.

VOICE

Don't doubt yourself Vinnie; we both know from your past experiences you have the potential to do anything, no matter what the consequences may be.

VINNIE

That's bullshit, I don't have it in me, I've thought about it again and again and again and it's not me, I just don't have the guts to do it.

VOICE

Vinnie, think about all the stuff you and I have come up with, we've come up with brilliant ideas. I'm the brains and your brawns of the operation.

VINNIE

(yells)

Brilliant? You mean diabolical. Everything you've told me to do has done nothing but hurt myself and others. Sometimes I never understand why I ever listened to you. For God's sake you're not even real.

VOICE

You naïve bastard, all those heists and murders have finally gotten to your head. This doesn't have to be the end, we can get out right now and never come back because right now you have a decision to make Vinnie, time is running out.

VINNIE

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

VOICE

Listen to the sounds outside, you fool.

Loud sirens are heard right outside Vinnie's apartment.

VINNIE

Oh I've made my decision and time is out only for you.

Vinnie walks over to his dresser, takes out a gun, and puts it to his head.

VOICE

Goddamn it Vinnie, don't do it.

VINNIE

(starts to tear up a little).

Vinnie's not here anymore.

Vinnie hears footsteps get closer to his room and pulls the trigger. Two police officers charge into his room and see his dead body.

THE END

Elevate

Collin Henderson

The floor's cold. My toes are about to fall off. That breeze that's coming from nowhere is electrifyingly terrifying.

Her white summer dress is stained with a large red splotch near the stomach. Looking around, she can see others with similar predicaments. A man in a business suit with half his face missing, jaw hung slack. A woman missing her left arm, a bit of sinew hanging from the stump. A boy in a hospital gown, face ash white with black circles beneath his eyes.

There's no pain. I can't feel anything when I run my hand over my stomach. Nothing.

The hallway in front of her is filled with people, shuffling around. Shadows adorn the walls, left by the single light at the end. She begins walking slowly towards it, drawn like a moth. Her bare feet don't make a sound. The people shuffle by, one by one, each with some kind of abnormality. A large man dressed in drab clothes looks at her.

Have I seen him somewhere before?

She can see the end of the hallway. There's no divergent paths, no other way to go. Behind her, only darkness. No one can traverse it. A young man in his twenties, face bruised and broken, walked into it and disappeared for a few seconds. He walked back out a few seconds later. All there is is the hallway. The man in shabby clothes is closer to her.

He keeps staring at me. I'm scared to continue. I want to get out of here.

But there is no turning back. The breeze continues to flutter her dress as she makes every baby step. Behind her, the man starts walking. His boots make heavy *clumping* noises. She hasn't seen what's wrong with him yet. But that feeling of being watched gives her goosebumps. She knows it's from him. The floor is still cold. She can see something at the end of the hallway, illuminated by a lamp hanging from the darkness where the ceiling should be. The boots keep *clumping*.

It's a metal door.

A line runs down the middle. It slides open like-
An elevator.

Inside is nothing. Complete blackness. Darkness that isn't drawn back by the lamp. An old woman in a bright pink dress stops in front of the giant chasm of the unknown and

hesitates for a second. Then, she takes a few steps in and disappears. The doors slide shut and a

Ding!

rings through the air. She suddenly feels heat in her stomach. It doesn't hurt, but she brings her hand to the spot just the same. Something warm is leaking out of her. The *clump* of the boots continue in perfect time with her silent steps. Drawing her hand back reveals a bright red and coppery glove. Almost at the elevator now.

Please stop. Please stop following me.

She moves a little quicker. The *clumping* continues. It follows her until she's standing ten feet away from the doors, directly underneath the light. The sound continues. Behind her... To her Right... In front. The man is in front of her now. She can see something on the back of his ratty black T shirt. Holes. Five bloody holes. The red flows down in trails.

Ding.

The doors slide open and the darkness opens up again. He turns around, close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath. His wide chest is intimidating. More holes. His dark eyes stare at hers for a second. Then his stubble ridden jaw moves.

"You're so beautiful."

His voice is low but booming. Her stomach keeps getting warmer and warmer. No pain. He draws in a breath and lets it out, sending a sour smell into her nostrils.

"But I think I killed you."

He turns back around and disappears into the black elevator. It closes with another

Ding!

and everything is silent for a beat. The warmth in her torso begins to fade as something red leaks from between the sliding doors. It starts out small at first, then starts to flow faster and thicker. It's pouring like a faucet, staining and pooling onto the grey floor. She thinks she hears a scream. But she can't be certain.

The blood will warm me up.

She steps into the large puddle and looks around. Everyone's gone now. The door slides open, beckoning her. Behind her is nothing. In front of her is uncertainty. The absence of everyone else pushes her forward. This time, each step makes her bare feet warmer. She steps in to the cold darkness and

It's so warm in here.

The lights flash on to. She puts her hand in front of

her eyes for a moment and lowers it when they adjust. The walls and floor are sleek, industrial, and completely clean. Her maroon feet don't leave stains as she backs into the corner. To the right of the doors is a small terminal with two buttons. One says "up" and the other has a black skull icon. A hand falls on her shoulder and she jumps a little.

"Please remain calm. I've already been told what to do about you. You're safe now."

The source is a middle aged man in a grey suit. His silver hair reflects in the bright light. His wide, pale eyes are magnified by his large spectacles. The skin around them crinkles as he gives her a warm, reassuring grin. He reaches into his breast pocket and produces a gold pocket watch. After a glance, it's quickly put back in its place.

"That man who came on before you is gone now. You don't need to worry about him anymore. Shall we go?"

Without waiting for an answer, he walks over to the terminal and pushes a button. She closes her eyes and waits.

Bump in the Night

Shelby Coyle

My mother has a horrible habit of hurting herself. Not on purpose, of course, she's just accident prone. And so eventually it came about that she tripped and broke her foot. Badly.

I don't remember exactly what she did to it, as this was not the first or the last time that she had injured the same foot in some horrible manner, but I do believe that the term "hairline fracture" popped up a few times.

She ended up stuck in an obnoxiously bright green leg cast of her choosing, and on pain meds, for a very long time.

I don't remember exactly how old I was during her 'crutch-time,' maybe twelve or thirteen, but I do remember quite clearly the night that I thought I was going to die.

I had been sleeping, probably having some nicely strange dream that I would never recall upon waking, when all of a sudden I wasn't.

"Shelby," my mother cried across the house, "Shelby, wake up!"

I grumbled, snuggled deeper under the covers for a moment or two, and waited until her next shout to reach blindly out for my glasses. I stumbled out of bed at some ungodly hour of the night – morning? – and shuffled my way through the house.

I had expected my mother to be in her room needing me to get her something, maybe water. With Dad away on work for the weekend, I was the only one there to help her. Instead I was greeted by the sight of my mother, leaning on her crutches, in the kitchen. She was looking out the back door with the outside light on, peering at the back deck and beyond. When she heard me coming, she looked back at me.

"I heard something," she said. "Screaming, I swear. It was coming from the back weeds."

Our yard is surrounded on two sides by The Weeds. The side weeds, filled with thorn trees and brambles, separates us from the corn field, while the back weeds lead back into the woods. Both sets of weeds are thick and are as tall, or taller, than I am.

"Ok," I yawned, "and...?"

"I want you to go check it out."

Well, that woke me up. An imaginative child with a belief in the things that go bump in the night, being sent out

into the dark, alone, to go investigate phantom screams. Exactly how I wanted to spend my early morning hours.

“No. No, no. No, no, no. No.”

“But Lynx is out,” my mother argued. “What if it was her?”

I faltered. Lynx, not as old then as she is now but much less inclined toward friendliness, was a cat that enjoyed spending her evenings outdoors terrorizing the small rodents and birds that made their homes around ours. She would also be near impossible to spot in the darkness, especially in the weeds, with her long brown-and-black fur. Lynx did not particularly like me back then, but I felt responsible for her, as I had picked her out at Lollypop Farm when both of my parents had been leaning towards another cat that went by the name of Peanut.

And so, armed with my battery-run Coleman lantern, I found myself edging slowly across the yard and toward the back weeds. My mother had hobbled on her crutches out onto the back deck to watch my progress and to more easily hear me if I were to find something – or if I were to be attacked by any beasts, whether of the fantasy or the human sort.

I crept my way along the dew-laden grass and around our old shed with its cancer of bees, until I was walking right up against the weeds. I held my red lantern high and took quick, careful steps along the edge, peering in for any sign of movement or a flash of yellow eyes. I saw nothing, but with every step my dread increased.

I was nearly to the tree that marked the two-thirds way to our neighbor’s yard, the tree where I told myself I would turn around and bolt back to the house as soon as I reached it, when I thought I saw something. Movement. I froze, lantern light swaying back and forth across the thick tangle of plants, a deer trapped in headlights. But there was nothing else.

I remained tense and couldn’t seem to remember how to work my legs. Somehow, though, I managed to find my voice and enough strength to make it carry.

“This is how people die in horror movies!”

My mother’s laughter broke the spell and I turned tail and ran. Across the yard, up the stairs, into the porch light, past my mother, and inside. I refused to turn around, feeling watched, pursued. The monster at my back only a few steps away, always just out of reach, gaining ground...

I heaved the sliding door shut, not caring that my mother on her crutches still needed to limp back inside. She

would be fine, she wasn't afraid of anything. She could beat it off with her wit and crutches both.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring beyond my mother as she opened the door and entered the house, making sure nothing was creeping behind. I told her I hadn't found Lynx and we both went back to bed.

Now, six or seven years later, I still remember the terror of that night, of feeling chased. Hunted. The impressions of an imaginative child who believes in the things that go bump in the night are not so easily forgotten.

My father, who had not been there that night, had somehow gone all these years without hearing the story. When it was finally recounted for him, he looked at my mother and blinked and laughed.

"Do you even remember the pain meds you were on?" he asked. "You sent her out there on a side effect!"

Satchmo
David Owens



Janelle

Chelsea Hamlet

INT. RADIO STATION STUDIO - NIGHT

RAP, R&B, or Soul song is playing in the background.

JANELLE (African American, 21 years old, short brown hair) is heard off camera

JANELLE

What up everybody, this is your girl Janelle and you're listening to W88S FM, your station for back in the day joints and today's R&B.

(Janelle is sitting in a chair with huge headphones on and a microphone stationed at her mouth.)

JANELLE

Tonight's show is going to be about confessions. Confessions about work, school, your love life, family problems, whatever you want to get off your chest, I'll be here to listen and provide some insight. The first caller tonight is named Latrelle. Latrelle, you're on the air!

LATRELLE (female voice)

Hi, Janelle.

JANELLE

Hey Latrelle, thanks for calling in tonight.

LATRELLE

No problem. I listen to you every night so I'm

happy I got through to you tonight.

JANELLE

Awww, thanks for the love Latrelle. What's your confession?

LATRELLE (sighs)

Janelle, I'm not sure if I should continue my relationship with my current boyfriend.

(Janelle jolts her head back in shock and scrunches up her face in confusion.)

JANELLE

Why, what's wrong? Did he cheat on you or something?

LATRELLE

No, nothing like that. He's great!

(Janelle rolls her eyes.)

JANELLE

So what's the problem?

LATRELLE
sighs)

I slept with one of his family members

JANELLE

Slept, like, fell asleep on the couch
together slept, or Oh My God we had sex slept?
Is it a female or male family member, by the way?

LATRELLE

Female, and slept like sex.

JANELLE

Oh wow. Okay, who'd you sleep with?

LATRELLE
(sighs and pauses)

JANELLE

Latrelle, you still there?

LATRELLE

Yeah, I'm still here... Um... it was with his
sister.

(Janelle's eyes open wide
and she puts her head down while
she shakes her head.
She looks up and smirks.)

JANELLE

Wow. Damn. His sister?

LATRELLE

Yes.

(Janelle scratches
her head in disbelief.)

JANELLE

Wow. Is your boyfriend listening to the show now?

LATRELLE

No, he's at work right now.

(Janelle nods
her head.)

JANELLE

Okay. Wow. So why his sister?

LATRELLE
(sigh)

He's always at work and doesn't pay attention to me anymore. I feel like I'm invisible to him. And on top of that when we do have sex it's not as good as it used to be.

(Janelle moves her head from
side to side with an
expression on her face that
indicates she's trying to
understand her perspective.)

JANELLE
(hesitantly)

Okay, so off the bat, it sounds like you're basing your relationship on quality time and sex? Am I correct?

LATRELLE

Ehh, not really so much on the sex, but it's a factor.

(Janelle moves her head from side
to side again to try to
understand what she's saying.
She leans her head more
to one side that
indicates that she sees her
point although she may not
necessarily agree.)

JANELLE

Okay. Well, what made you decide to have sex with his sister?

LATRELLE

I mean, I've always been bi-curious, but I never acted on it.

(Janelle rolls her eyes again.)

JANELLE

Okay, that makes sense, but you could've been curious with a different female so why his sister? Did she hit on you before? Did you always like her? Come on girl, spill!

LATRELLE (laughs)

She and I got really close when my boyfriend and I started dating. We became like best friends. She would be there for me when her brother was getting on my nerves and was even there to hang out if I ever needed someone to talk to.

(Janelle jerks her head back in confusion.)

JANELLE

But isn't that what friends are for? I mean, if I'm having problems with my boyfriend I would rather vent to my friends than one of his family members. That sounds like a recipe for disaster.

LATRELLE
(sighs)

Janelle, I feel like you're judging me.

(Janelle's facial expression is blank with an *are you serious face*. She shakes her head and smiles despite her apparent annoyance.)

JANELLE

I'm sorry Latrelle. I don't mean to be judgmental. I'm just trying to understand. Let's start again from you and his sister hanging out. What happened that made you decide to take that leap of faith and sleep with his sister?

LATRELLE
(sigh)

No, I'm sorry. This is just a touchy topic for me so I'm a little hypersensitive right now. I know you're just trying to help.

(Janelle makes a *DUH* face,
rolls her eyes, and smiles.)

JANELLE

It's okay Latrelle. I know this is very difficult for you to talk about so thanks for being brave enough to talk.

LATRELLE

Thanks. To answer your question though, one day we were hanging out and I was really missing her brother. I started crying and she started to comfort me like she always does but her touch was a little different this time. It was a little more sensual. She held me close and told me that everything will be okay. Then, I looked in her eyes, she looked in to mine, and the next thing I know, I wake up in the bed next to her with no clothes on feeling guilty.

(Janelle
looks shocked.)

JANELLE

Damn, and you never thought about her in that way before, or seen signs that she was possibly interested in you in that way?

LATRELLE

No, not at all. It was one of those things that just happened.

(Janelle makes a *really?* face.)

JANELLE

I don't mean to sound shady, but did it "just happen" again?

LATRELLE

No, it was only one time.

(Janelle makes a *yeah right* face.)

JANELLE

Okay, so I'm about to turn the tables on you. If the shoe was on the other foot would you want him to tell you that he slept with one of your family members?

LATRELLE

No

(Janelle's face expresses disbelief.)

JANELLE

No? Really?

LATRELLE

Yeah, no.

JANELLE

Why not?

LATRELLE

Because I wouldn't want to know. That would break my heart, which is why I don't want to tell him.

(Janelle shakes her head
indicating that she understands
her point of view.)

JANELLE

Mhm. I see. Well, if you keep it from him and he finds out about it, you're screwed because he's probably going to want to leave. If you tell him, he might just walk out and leave, and if you keep it to yourself there is a possibility that he won't find out. But remember, what's done in the dark eventually comes to the light.

LATRELLE

That's true.

JANELLE

And besides, you said you're not really happy with the relationship because he's not around as much and his sex game isn't on point anymore, so if he leaves, wouldn't that work in your favor?

LATRELLE

No, because I don't want to leave him. Yeah, I'm not happy but every relationship goes through ups and downs, right?

(Janelle makes a face that
indicates she's weighing out the
question in her head.)

JANELLE

Yeah, relationships have their ups and downs, but to what extent?

LATRELLE
(matter-of -fact-ly)

Depends on the person.

(Janelle scrunches up
her lips to one side to

indicate that she's thinking.)

JANELLE

Now you don't have to answer this next question, but are you afraid to be lonely?

LATRELLE

Um... I've never really thought about it.

(Janelle nods her head.)

JANELLE

Hmmm. Before we go to a quick break, I want to shed some light on a common misconception. People think, especially women think, that being in a relationship is the cure for loneliness. That's not always true. And sometimes whether we want to realize it or not, it's better to be alone and happy, than miserable and cuffed up. By you keeping this secret from him, Latrelle, you're trapping him - and yourself - in a relationship that doesn't seem to be working. Instead of clinging to the relationship, let it go so something else better can come your way. And better doesn't mean a man, it can be a promotion at work, or finding love within yourself. But I'm going on a tangent here. The next song I'm about to play is Toni Braxton "Let it Go." Latrelle, baby, I'm going to have to let you go, but think about what I said: are you afraid of being alone and if so why? because you might just need to let this relationship go. Okay?

Lost Explorer

Colleen Maney

Like a speck of dust
suspended in the atmosphere
with no Reason,
no name.

I swim through the blackness, unending night
so deep it stains my bones
through my impenetrable armor
and immovable science.

I gaze at the light
of dying stars,
chaotic birth of glimmering life:
a final gift to the abyss.

The moon watches with a knowing eye
as I step tepidly forward onto its ashen body,
gentle as a feather
sunk by Hope.

Planet Earth
looks back at me,
and we both know, we both
hear the whispers of the celestial:
We are One.

Subconscient L'esprit Sexe
Joel Dodge



Old Enough to Kiss
Cassidy Carroll

The green grass is spongy under our feet in his backyard. We go by the sunflowers we planted last summer in the flower box, and head toward the bank that leads to the river. He is slightly ahead of me, and I wish I could turn around without him knowing. I squeeze my hands into fists and feel my small nails press into my palms.

"Coming?" he turns, his face to the side.

"Yep," I try to say it calmly.

At the edge of the lawn where the grass ends and the dead pine needles, fallen from above, lie ubiquitously on the ground, we enter the woods. Small insects swarm our heads and I swat them with my hands. The bank begins to slope and the ground grows moister with each step. My flip-flops sink into the mud and my feet slide to the front of my shoes with the angle of the bank. Mud gathers between my toes.

"Does your mom know we're going down here?" I ask.

"I don't need to tell her where I am. I'm almost ten!" he says.

"Are you nervous?" I try to swallow the lump in my throat.

"No. You?" he still doesn't look at me.

"Nope," I lie.

Of course I'm nervous. I'm too young. We're too young.

I can see the river now. There's a slight bend in the middle. Rotting logs lie in the shallow murky water. Cedar Waxing birds make their high, thin whistle sounds out of sight. Rocks are spread out throughout the water. Many are small—just stepping-stones, really. There is one large rock right in the bend of the narrow river.

"My feet are gross," I say as we approach the water. I kneel down, cautious that my yellow sundress might show too much. I take the flip-flops off and place them in the cool water, letting them flow up and down in my hand with the current. The mud slides off and becomes one with the stream.

"Come on," Chris says. He takes off his sneakers and sticks his socks inside. He leaps from the bank onto a rock sticking out of the water.

I leave my flip-flops at the edge of the river and jump onto another rock. I land and wobble to one side. When I shriek he grabs my hand to stabilize me. The sound of my yell echoes against the water, clinging overhead in the branches of the trees before disappearing. For a second I forget about what we're there to do and I feel less tense.

We hop across the rocks until we reach the big one.

He climbs up and reaches down for my hand. His eyes are as blue as the shallows of an ocean. His sun kissed skin creates a great contrast with his bleach blond hair. His dry hand is small, small like mine.

I take his hand, and with the other I grip a part of the stone where there is a natural handle, and climb up the moss covered rock. My knees are now covered with green residue from where I've kneeled. I try to wipe it off but it won't go away without water.

"Here," Chris says and reaches into his shorts pocket.

"What?" I say, confused.

"Here," he shakes his hand in a loose fist then drops stones in my palm.

"What are these for?" I laugh.

"I took them from the driveway. We're going to skip them," he says with a smile.

"It's a river, we can't skip them here. It needs to be calm. Doesn't it?" I don't tell him that I can't skip rocks on calm water, either.

"Okay, then let's just throw them."

He stabilizes himself and stands beside me. I grab his ankle, just in case. He leans back, positioning his arm like he's about to throw a baseball and then grunts as he flings the stone through the air.

I lose sight of it right away but I hear it ping off another rock and then plop into the water. Chris takes another stone and does it several more times.

"You try," he hands me one.

"No, no. I'm not good at it," I say, and hand the stone back to him.

He sits down next to me. He's breathing heavier than before, from the motion of throwing. "You want a Cow Tail?" He pulls two long sticks of candy out from his pocket. They're his favorite.

His mother gives us money every Friday evening when they arrive in town. We ride our scooters down to Ernie's Market to stock up on candy. I see my town differently when I'm with him, from an outside perspective. The owner of the market pretends like she doesn't know exactly who my parents are and where I live. She looks at me like I'm another summer girl, only in town on the weekends. Whatever candy we end up getting is always gone before Chris leaves on Sunday afternoon, back to his real house in Vermont.

On the rock, I take a Cow Tail from him and pull the wrapper down to the middle of the caramel stick and bite into it. He does the same. We sit silently for a few moments, listening to the river whooshing past us while our toes dangle in the cool water below. I recognize the sound of a Mourning Dove off in the distance—my favorite bird.

I take the last bite of my candy when Chris says, "Ready?" I can tell he's not nervous in the least by the way says it, so confident and casual. "I don't know if we should," I say, careful not to look at him.

"We have to. Remember? I'm selling the summer house," he reminds me.

"I'm not even nine yet." I wait a moment before whispering, "We're not old enough to kiss."

"But I'm not coming back after this summer..."

I shake my head no. He turns away, upset by my rejection. He continues to eat his Cow Tail, chewing with his mouth open.

* * *

After dinner, when it begins to get dark, we climb through the old wire fence behind his house, and pass the threshold of the neighboring cemetery. His mother never asks why we like to walk here, she merely tells us to be back before it gets too dark. I don't tell Chris that I'm frightened of cemeteries except when with him. The graves are aged and abandoned. These were once loved people, now forgotten stones. Chris walks next to me as we step around the many plots. I remember that someone once taught me not to step on the part of the ground in front of the gravestone because it is not polite.

"I have a great aunt buried in here," I say. "At least I think she was my great aunt."

"Cool. Where is she buried?" he asks.

"I don't know, I couldn't go to the burial," I say, halfheartedly looking around for her gravestone. "But I got to see her in the casket at her wake."

He takes my hand.

We never used to hold hands. Last weekend was the first time. We sat in his small living room while his parents were on their boat, docked at the marina. We were eating Popsicle after Popsicle when he asked me if I'd walk the cemetery with him so he could hold hand my hand. He told me that he wanted to hold hands before he leaves.

"Can we finally kiss tonight?" he asks, letting go of my hand to touch a smooth marble gravestone.

"Maybe," I shrug.

* * *

Chris's mother leaves us in his bedroom with a pillow stuffed between us. His mother was uncomfortable with the idea of us sharing a bed at first, but my mother assured her we are young and only friends. They agreed it would be best if a pillow were put between us. They are both unaware that he wants to kiss me so desperately.

"Night kiddos," his mother says, closing the door with one hand, a glass of white wine in the other.

The moment the door is shut, Chris flings the pillow across the room and turns toward me in the dark. I suddenly feel even younger in my orange and yellow striped Hanna Anderson pajamas. His stepfather puffs on a cigar outside, and the rich smell of the smoke seeps through the old window screen.

"That smell is making my stomach hurt," I say quietly, facing him on my side. I bite the tips of my thumbnails nervously.

"Do you want me to shut the window?" he asks.

"No. It's fine."

We're silent for some time. I can hear the muffled sounds of his parents' voices from the porch below.

"Please..." is all he says.

I shake my head no.

My heart starts to pound fast and I can feel it below my sternum in my stomach. He awkwardly places his hand on my shoulder under the covers; it shakes a little, slightly rustling the sheets.

"But I'm not coming back," he nearly whines.

I don't say anything. I wish I hadn't stayed the night. I wish I told him that I was sick. I wish that our mothers knew he wanted to kiss me so we weren't allowed to sleep together.

"We're supposed to be best friends," I whisper, because if my voice is any louder it will crack. In the stillness of the air, I hear myself swallow too loudly. "Best friends don't kiss each other."

"Yes they do," he snaps back.

I shake my head no again, slowly this time. I ball the cotton sheets into my sweaty hand.

He leans into me and kisses me hard on the lips. My eyes, wide open, stare into his. I can see the deep blue around his pupils even in the darkness. His lips are dry, like his hands. Our front teeth hit together for the split second our lips touch. He quickly rolls away and faces the other direction, leaving me smiling in the dark.

Golden Years

Tori Muscato

Dance, Sing Frolic.

Golden Years.

Faces painted,

Gowns form the body

Waltzing figures--

Ice sculptures

Behold Beauty

Maidens a plenty

Bow.

Take my hand.

Making up steps as we go

O N E, T W O, T H R E E,

O N E, T W O, T H R E E.

Twirl. Shout. Skip.

Golden Years.

Happiness surrounds,

Life has begun

Dance till dawn--

Go back and forth

Charging each other

Sitting upon a steed

Guide the lance;

Struck down

Gaze up into my eyes;

Hit where the heart beats.

The scent of lavender permeates the house from June until the leaves began to turn color, and even then Lila keeps sachets in drawers. When she pulls out the quilts from storage for the winter, they smell so strongly that she hangs them over the porch railing to air out. It seems like everything tastes of lavender: the water from the faucet, the chicken being roasted for dinner, even the ice cream in the freezer. When Meg arrives in the beginning of October, she brings a little burlap sack to bring lavender back to Pittsburg. The lavender bushes had been planted by Will. Lila never expects them to live through the winter, but somehow they always did.

They are dying tonight.

Lila and Will always sit out on the porch on days like this, where the sun isn't too harsh and the wind isn't too cold. Lila wears a sundress with a cardigan, and Will wears khakis with a sweater. They wait until the sun is just above the treetops and they bring out a pitcher of lavender lemonade or hot apple cider, and sit and drink until the streetlights turn on and the creatures flitting about are either bats or birds, and they don't bother to differentiate between the two.

Lila's sister, Meg, joins them for two weeks of every October. She takes her yearly vacation and rides the train down from Pittsburg. She always tries to get the earliest train she can, to arrive at noon. Here, she can watch the leaves change and the grass yellow, without the daily smog of the city. Then, Lila and Will share the loveseat, while Meg has the rocker to herself. Meg stands up, and begins toward the big glass door.

"Meggie, are you going inside?"

"Just to get some water."

"Could you grab me my vitamin, please?" Lila puts on a beseeching smile.

"Sure."

Meg would deny this, but she is in love with Lila's kitchen. She would argue, and say how much she loves her cozy little kitchen with no frills, but the luxury of Lila's kitchen is unmatched. Airy, with huge windows and all the state-of-the-art appliances, it is a dream kitchen. Lila's prenatal pills are on the counter, next to a vase with a sprig of lavender in it. Meg fills a glass with water, takes one pill in her hand, and returns to the porch. "Here, Lil."

"Thanks!" Lila pops the pill into her mouth and takes a swig of lemonade. She makes a face and says, "Will, you don't know how lucky you are not to have to take these." Will takes her hand and says, "I know, Lil. You are a martyr."

Will, with his smooth rosy cheeks and crystal gray eyes, is the sort of man who can get away with little jabs that Meg could never make and remains in Lila's good graces. He smiles quickly, with a sort of entitlement in the way he put his arm around Lila that makes Meg uneasy. He knows his place in the world, and that he will always have Lila's heart.

Meg settles back into the rocker. Lila cuddles up against Will, noticing that the night has turned colder and the breezes stiffer. "Will, how's your dad?"

"He's okay. He's been calling every day to check up on Lil."

"What? Why?"

"He's so excited about being a grandpa. He just wants everything to go well."

"Of course."

Lila yawns, and says, "Well, I'm just gonna get the dishes, and then I'm going to bed. Need plenty of rest for the baby, you know" she adds with a grin

"Lil, we can get the dishes." Meg stands up and puts the glasses on the tray along with the pitcher.

"Sure?" Lila smiles, glad as always to get out of work.

"Yes, go ahead to bed," Meg says, waving her hand toward the door.

"Okay, see you in the morning." Lila kisses Meg on the cheek and hugs her, murmuring "I'm so glad you're here," and kisses Will on the lips, hands on his shoulders. She is nearly his height; she barely needs to crane her neck to kiss him. She flounces through the door and up the stairs, skirt bouncing around her knees.

The next morning, Meg finds a sticky note on the kitchen counter:

Meg,

At doctor.

Lil & Will

Lila talked about her frequent appointments with her doctor, a kindly older man named Doctor Goldstein. She had them once or twice a month. Meg can smell the pancakes that they must have made for breakfast. The skillet is soaking in the sink, and the glasses are in the drying rack. It's a chilly day, the kind that calls for a cardigan and jeans and a mug of chai tea. She quickly dries off the glasses, and puts them in the cupboard above the refrigerator. She scrubs the skillet down and lets it dry.

At twelve-thirty, the house phone rings. Meg, assuming it's the happy couple calling to apologize for being late, answers, "Are you getting home soon?"

"Meg? It's Will. Lil has to stay overnight. Can you take the bus here, and bring her some clothes?"

Meg sat down, trying to block out the thought of Lila lying in a hospital bed with her eyes closed and skin pale.

“Yes, why does she need to stay?”

“We can talk when you get here.” Will was a steady man, with the kind of confidence that wealth and a loving childhood brought, but his voice was caught in his throat, his normal clear enunciation slurred.

“Okay, where do I get the bus from?”

“You’ll just go over to Thompson Street, at the end.”

“See you soon.”

The next morning, Lila goes straight to bed, while Meg cleans the kitchen. There is a silence in the house, a sort of pressing quiet that seems louder than noise would be. The prenatal vitamins go into the trash bin, as does the powdered formula. She scrubs the counters and mops the floor, washes the windows. She takes the trash to the curb. Will comes downstairs; he has dark circles under his eyes. He is dressed in a button-down in pale orange that makes Meg feel like weeping: it is wrinkled and has a coffee stain on the collar. “Will? Do you want some coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

Will opens the refrigerator and takes out the bottle of orange juice. He pours a glass and offers the bottle to Meg. She shakes her head, and he puts it back. “Will, do you want me to clean out the-”

“The what?” The words come out sharply, the last “t” echoing in the empty room.

“The nursery.”

He holds his mug in both hands, staring into it. His brow is furrowed, creating wrinkles around his eyes, giving Meg a glimpse of Will in twenty years. “Go ahead.”

He stays at the table as she takes a big black trash bag and goes up the stairs.

The nursery is painted blue and orange, with gauzy white curtains. The rug has circles of varying shades of orange, fading to white. It is still pristine from the store, as is the tiny mattress and quilt. She’ll donate as much as she can, and throw away what can’t be donated. The room smells like paint and just a tiny bit from sawdust. Will had put up shelves that held tiny stuffed animals: a monkey, a sheep, a cat. The tags are in the wicker trash can in the corner of the room, along with the plastic packaging of the bedding.

The stuffed animals are all untouched, their fur perfectly soft, their eyes bright and glassy. As Meg drops them handful by handful into the bag, she touches one with a worn, woolly feeling. It is Bub, Lila’s favorite stuffed animal as a child.

Meg remembers Lila clutching the little tiger everywhere they went. One hand would hold their mother’s, the other clung to Bub. He dragged on the ground, picking up leaves and dirt. Afterwards, their mother would wash him with Dove soap and hang him above the bathtub to dry. Lila

couldn't sleep without Bub. If bedtime came and Bub wasn't dry, Lila would cheerily crawl into bed with Meg and take all the blankets as they slept. Meg would end up with only a sheet to cover her. In the morning, Lila would wake up first and go to the bathroom to see if Bub was at long last dry. She would grab the stepstool and get him, and hold him tightly for the next day. Then, she would lose her care and let him drag in the mud again, and spend another night without Bub.

Meg holds the tiger close to her, and puts down the black trash bag. She goes downstairs and outside, into the lavender bushes. She sits amidst the fragrance, closing her eyes. The flowers are flecked with brown, a few spots of purple on the dirt. The minutes become hours as the sun moves across the sky to just above the tree line.

The glass door slides open, and Lila steps onto the porch. She sits on the rocking chair, holding her stomach. She is wearing a gray dress that fit her well a few months ago, and fits well again today. The pallor of her face is oddly fitting. She is stunning in the fading sunshine, and a light breeze blows her dark silky hair. She turns to see Meg sitting between the lavender bushes, clutching a stuffed tiger.

"Meg? What are you doing?"

Meg only shakes her head. Lila steps lightly down the steps, and sits beside her sister on the cold, soft ground. Lavender falls upon her head and settles on her shoulders. She sees the stuffed tiger in Meg's hands and takes it. She holds it against her chest, right below her chin. She lowers her head and closes her eyes. Together, they sit among the lavender bushes, watching the petals fall and the sun slip below the horizon.

When the crescent moon sits in the velvet blue sky, Will leans against the porch railing. He is smoking a cigarette, the first in his life. The pale smoke circles rise into the sky and across the moon. Will's face is illuminated, his eyes seeming to be bright blue. His cheeks are nearly colorless, he doesn't watch the stars burn fiercely to their death, but the grass yellowing and fading to the dirt. Lila's eyes are on the moon, transfixed. Meg merely watches the wonder return to her sister's eyes.

Lila stands up, unsteadily but certainly. Her tiger hangs loosely in her hand now, and she walks away from Meg, toward the porch. Her silhouette is exaggerated in the lights of the night, her neck and waist nearly invisible, her dress chalky and full and short. She steps lightly up the stairs to the porch. Will turns his head, and taps out his cigarette. He lets it fall to the ground, where the last remaining embers fizzle and fade.

Meg still sits in the lavender, just where the light from the house doesn't hit. The scent is overpowering,

suffocating. As she watches them on the porch, something on the ground catches her eye. Bub lays abandoned on the dying grass. The dew will moisten him overnight, and perhaps he will be forgotten. He will lie in the grass when Lila and Will go to bed, and bugs will nest in him.

Lila and Will stand on the porch, right against the railing. Their hands are intertwined, his thumb stroking the back of her hand. The scent from the cigarette has drifted over to Meg, and now lingers in the lavender. Lila can smell it too, sharp and strong and musty and entirely wrong for Will, who usually smells of nutmeg and cedar. Will seems small in the unforgiving October moonlight, small and delicate and so young. They are murmuring to one another. Her voice carries easily, while Will's is soft and warm and quiet. Meg can just hear Lila says, "Will? Go to bed." There is such tenderness in her words, her simple words. Will's reply is inaudible, and Lila leads him inside, sliding the glass door closed behind them.

Meg picks up the stuffed tiger, and follows. She makes it as far as the porch, clinging to the woolly stuffed animal. She looks over the railing, resting her hands in Bub's well-loved, soft fur. She contemplates leaving him there to collect the morning dew, to be forgotten in the lavender bushes.

And yet, the thought of Bub gone to frosts of winter and the muds of springtime breaks Meg's heart. He will not stay here.

Meg goes inside. Will and Lila have left the lights on for her, and she turns them off as she makes her way to bed. The house is now dark except for one lamp in the guest room. Meg puts on her nightgown, thinking of the day. How could one day, one single day, be so long? She crawls under the quilt, holding Bub close. She clutches him close to her face, breathing in the smell of the ground and dying grass, the nursery paint and air freshener, and of lavender.

She cannot sleep. The air is warm and fragrant, and the house is silent. The scent of lavender can make one's throat raw, and the sweet floral fragrance makes breathing painful. Meg gets out of bed, still holding Bub by the tail. The hall is lined with paintings of gardens and mountains, but they are unimportant in the darkness of an autumn night. The master bedroom's door is cracked open, and inside is as dark as the hallway, save for a shaft of moonlight that illuminates Lila's face. She is asleep, the covers pulled up to her chin. Lila faces the door, while Will is turned towards the window. Meg puts Bub next to Lila's head, and goes back to bed.

Townie Life Can Be Beautiful
Kristen Burke



The Strike Out
Jordan Rockower

INT. WRIGLEY FIELD STANDS - SAME

The Wrigley Field faithful watches for the sole purpose of entertainment. Candice and her parents look on, confused that this is happening.

INT. WRIGLEY FIELD - SAME

The security guard chases Johnny all the way to home plate.

LINDSAY LOHAN

Buy me some peanuts and--

Johnny grabs the mic from LINDSAY LOHAN in mid-song.

JOHNNY

Gimme that.

The crowd is stunned.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
(to Lindsay Lohan)

Okay no offense but you haven't been the same since *Freaky Friday*.

(Looking at Candice in the crowd)

Candice, I love you!

The security guard grabs Johnny and takes him down to the ground. The crowd cheers as Johnny struggles with the guard.

INT. WRIGLEY FIELD STANDS - SAME

Candice stares at what is happening on the
field, completely stoic.

CANDICE'S DAD

What the hell is going on?

CANDICE
(Almost choked up)

I don't know. Why are they arresting him?

CANDICE'S MOM

Did he steal a base?

INT. WRIGLEY FIELD - SAME

Johnny gets up. He grabs the mic one more
time.

JOHNNY

Can someone get me some fucking Doritos?!

Johnny tries to make another run for it but
the security guard tasers him. The crowd goes
crazy.

INT. WRIGLEY FIELD STANDS - SAME

Candice shrieks as she watches Johnny get
tasered and escorted off the field. Her eyes
well up.

INT. POLICE STATION - VISITOR ROOM -
NIGHT

Johnny sits in the visitors' room behind a glass window. His parents, Debbie and Aaron are on the other side.

AARON

How could you get arrested for "impersonating a ballplayer?"

DEBBIE

Johnny we can't even tell you how ashamed we are of you.

AARON

They took away my season tickets, Johnny. Those meant everything to me.

JOHNNY

Dad, you never even used them.

AARON

Now I can't even scalp them.

JOHNNY

I'm sorry for the inconvenience.

DEBBIE

Five thousand dollar bail and a lawyer? That's going to cost us a fortune.

JOHNNY

I'll pay you and Dad back eventually. I'm sorry.

AARON

Like what were you thinking running onto the field? You think that's funny?

DEBBIE

Aaron, come on. Let's go.

Debbie helps Aaron out of his chair. They look extremely disappointed.

AARON

I'm ruined.

JOHNNY

You're ruined? I was arrested and got my scrotum tasered. I lost my job. I lost everything.

Debbie and Aaron give Johnny one more upset look before they cross out. Johnny puts his head down. A POLICE OFFICER approaches Johnny.

POLICE OFFICER

You have another visitor, Mr. Greenspan.

Johnny looks up. It's Candice. She looks confused and upset.

CANDICE

Johnny.

JOHNNY

Candice, I'm so sorry. Is this your conjugal visit?

Candice sits down opposite Johnny.

CANDICE

Can you please explain to me why you
got arrested on the field?

POLICE OFFICER

Mr. Greenspan, you have two minutes.
There's another visitor waiting to see you.

Nut-Zach peeks in. Candice turns around.
Nut-Zach plays it off like he's visiting
someone else. He sits opposite

another INMATE. The police officer pulls
Nut-Zach out of the room.

CANDICE

(to Johnny)

I remember that kid from the bar. The peanut
boy. How do you know-

Candice realizes it. Her body language
reveals it.

JOHNNY

Candice, I can explain.

CANDICE

You're not a baseball player are you,
Johnny...

JOHNNY

I am a baseball player. I'm Johnny Baseball.

CANDICE

You're Johnny... another peanut boy.

Candice wells up. It's evident in her voice.

CANDICE

(CONT'D)

Why did you lie to me?

JOHNNY

Lou Gehrig once said, "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth". That's exactly how I felt when I met you. I've never had this much going for me since--

CANDICE

Since what?

JOHNNY

Nothing. It's not important.

CANDICE

(Watery-eyed)

Since what Johnny?

JOHNNY

Since I got that call to the big leagues.

Chunks

Harry Christopher Moore

“Let’s go on the tilt-A-whirl, Marcus.”

“Yeah, sure.” *Why am I here? Oh, yeah. Pretty girl. This spins, doesn’t it? Yep, it does. This is not good. Just breathe. More oxygen will help. I feel light-headed. My head feels so messed up.*

“Oh my God, that was fun! You look so freaked right now. Let’s do the roller coaster next!”

“I love roller coasters!” *I fucking hate roller coasters! Ouch. Head support hurts. Closing my eyes will help. So much worse. I feel sick. Can’t let her know.*

“That was incredible! So many loops, right? Are you sweating?”

“It’s so hot.”

“Oh, there’s that ride where the floor drops and you stick to the wall.”

Please, not the Vortex. Can’t focus. So dizzy. Oh, shit. I’m going to puke! Not in here! All over everyone! Hold it in. Keep it down. It’s going to stop soon. Slowing down. Please let me off.

“It spun so fast. I’m so dizzy. Are you okay? You look a little green.”

“I need ...” *No! It’s all over. It’s all over her! She’s never going to speak to me again. That blouse looks expensive. No no no. It’s dripping down into her shirt! God, just kill me now.*

“Lucy...I...”

“Don’t worry about it. Just sit down for a minute.”
Keeper.

Home is Where the Hearth Is

Luke Parsnow

It was useless. They had tried so hard to adapt during the last few months, but had had little success. It was extremely difficult to cope, especially this time of the year.

The Christmas tree didn't seem as decorated or as bright as the previous year.

The glow from the fireplace didn't shine as bright as before and the reflections of the flames in their eyes seemed quite lifeless.

The presents under the tree weren't the first thing on the little girl's mind this time. The stockings didn't seem as full.

The Morgan family sat by the fireplace, fighting a losing battle against the vicious winter chill.

It was that time of year again, Christmastime, a time of joy and good will toward men. And it was on the eve of that most holiest of holidays.

All over Cleveland, a light snow was falling on the decorated houses, coloring peoples' happiness and love for one another. The streets were filled with parades and snowmen and the malls were filled with the usual last minute buyers, sprinting to the cashiers, anxious to get home to their families.

Everyone passed each other on the streets, greeting each other with smiles and a chorus of "Merry Christmas," was heard every so often. Sometimes "and a happy new year" would follow.

But in the Morgan house, there was no laughter. There were no smiles. There was very little joy.

Larry Morgan sat on the brown leather sofa in his blue and white striped pajamas, drinking a tasteless orange and spice tea, but it seemed chilled whenever he brought the steaming liquid in contact with his cracked lips. His head and unshaven face were much grayer than they had been just months earlier. He continually took off his thick glasses and wiped the lenses on his pajama shirt, and then replaced them on his nose.

Larry's wife, Andrea, sat curled up on the couch next to her husband. She was doing what she enjoyed most, sewing. She had decided to avoid the pile of tempting Christmas cookies on the coffee table in front of her, which were splattered with green and red sprinkles and frosting. But she sat there sewing a woman's shirt, the same shirt she had been making for months. The heavy bags under her middle-aged blue eyes impaired her ability to think clearly at the moment, as she laid the incomplete shirt down on her lap and sighed. No matter how hard she tried, it just seemed that the shirt always remained unfinished, something was always missing.

Larry and Andrea's nine-year-old daughter, Hayley, sat on the floor in front of the couch, playing with action figures from *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. She had asked her parents

many times to allow her to open one present before the morning, but to no avail. After numerous attempts, she gave up and continued playing with the action figures, her face smeared with cookie frosting. But she was very upset about her toys tonight. On Rudolph's belly, there was a button, that when pushed, would make his red nose glow. But tonight, the light would not work. She pushed and pushed and still Rudolph's nose remained dark. She had cried a little and Larry had tried to fix it, but it simply would not light. After a while, Hayley stopped crying and just went on playing without the glowing nose.

There was one missing member of the family. Brent Morgan, Larry and Andrea's son, had dark wavy hair and crystal blue eyes that Larry and Andrea had always been proud of. He was much older than his sister Hayley, ten years to be exact. He had graduated high school and joined the army, and was already on active duty in a scorching camp on the other side of the world.

This was the first Christmas that Brent would not spend with his family. While small, peaceful flakes of snow fell like parachutes onto the Cleveland ground, the Morgans imagined their son sweating in the extreme heat, in the heart of one of the world's most dangerous places.

Christmas just wasn't Christmas without the entire family present.

"Mommy, I miss Brent," Hayley whispered from her frosting-caked lips.

Andrea gave a long painful sigh and nodded.

"I know sweetheart. We all do. But he just can't be here tonight," Andrea said.

Hayley laid all of her Rudolph characters on the floor and looked into the fire light.

"I'm going to wish that Brent was here," Hayley told her parents.

"I'm wishing too," Andrea said.

Hayley closed her eyes and Andrea watched her daughter closely, and wished with all her might.

A couple of minutes of silence went by, before Larry slipped the last drop of his tea and said, "Well, we better get to bed. It's getting late. We don't want Santa Claus coming here, finding us awake, and skipping us and heading right over to the Jacksons across the street."

Larry couldn't believe it. Any other year, if he had said that, that young child would've sprinted to her bed before he'd finished the sentence.

This year, she sat completely still.

Just then, Larry heard a faint noise coming from the street outside the window. It sounded like voices.

Larry listened carefully and then distinguished them to be singing voices.

"The carolers are walking down our street," Andrea said,

smiling a little.

"I thought I heard them," Larry said, shifting himself on the couch a little.

"I was scared they weren't coming this year," Hayley said excitedly.

And then, as if they had stopped right in front of the Morgan house, the carolers began a new song, a song that wrenched the heart of every Morgan in that household.

"I'll be home for Christmas...you can count on me..."

Andrea put her hand on Larry's and closed her eyes.

"Please have snow...and mistletoe...and presents around the tree..."

The Morgans listened intently to the words, Brent flooding their minds as the music flooded their ears.

Throughout the whole song, to the very last verse, the house was still.

"I'll be home for Christmas...if only...if only in my... dreams..."

The singing ceased and the carolers traveled on.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

The noise interrupted the family from their trance.

"Now what indecent Scrooge knocks on someone's door at nine thirty on Christmas Eve?" Andrea scolded.

"Relax, Andrea," Larry said, climbing to his feet and walking out past the den to the door. "It's probably Joe needing to borrow your eggnog recipe again."

"That man can't cook up anything to save his life can he?" Andrea said, standing up and following her husband to the door, quickly followed by Hayley, right at her heels.

Larry switched on the porch light by the coat rack, slowly turned the handle, and opened the door.

Standing there was a young man with wavy dark hair and crystal blue eyes.

Before the door opened half way, he couldn't help but crack a smile.

"Brent!" Larry shrieked happily and grabbed his son's arms and pulled him inside and closed the door, before grabbing him in a bear hug.

"Hi, Dad," Brent said, his smile never disappearing.

"Brent!" Andrea cried as she walked in the room, ran to him, and threw her arms around him. Brent hugged his mother passionately.

"I'm home, Mom!" Brent said happily.

"Brent!" Hayley squeaked in delight when she saw her older brother standing there.

"There's the princess!" Brent said as Hayley ran into his arms and he picked her up and twirled her around in the air, while Larry and Andrea laughed.

"My wish came true, Brent!" Hayley said as Brent put her down to the floor.

"What wish?" he asked, kneeling so his eyes were level with hers.

"I wished you'd come home tonight! I wished that and it came true!" Hayley yelled happily and hugged Brent again.

"We all wished it," Andrea said, a silver tear appearing in her eye.

"So what happened? I thought you told us you wouldn't be home until February," Larry said as he took Brent's coat.

"I can't say exactly," Brent said, looking around as if someone was watching him. "Those are my orders. When I called last week I said I wouldn't be home and then something happened. A bunch of us were temporarily relieved and sent home but I decided to surprise you."

"Well you certainly surprised us," Larry said, chuckling.

"We're so glad you're home!" Andrea said reaching to embrace her son yet again.

Larry made some more orange spice tea for everyone, and was surprised at how hot this cup was.

Andrea picked up the shirt she had been knitting to put it away in her closet when she suddenly stopped half way out of the living room to fully look at it.

She double glanced at it and laid it against the front of her body to see how big it was. She looked at every stripe and every corner of it, which looked finished now.

Brent walked in holding a tray with a tea pot and cups on it and set it down on the coffee table in front of the couch.

"Brent," Andrea called from the doorway of the living room.

"Yes, mom?" Brent said, walking over to her.

"Does this sweater look done?"

Brent took one quick glance.

"Oh yes. It definitely looks done. It looks great!" he said happily.

Andrea smiled, but continued looking at the sweater, which she swore had looked unfinished just a moment ago.

"Hey Hayley, I see you're playing with the Rudolph characters," Brent said, sitting down on the sofa and pouring himself a cup of tea.

"Yes I was," Hayley said, sitting on the floor looking up at her brother.

"I remember always playing with them at Christmas when I was little," Brent said, laughing.

Hayley looked wide-eyed at him. "You played with these too?" she asked, astonished.

"Oh yes. I especially loved the Rudolph one because his nose lit up when you pushed the button," Brent replied.

"Yeah. It's broke now though," Hayley said, frowning.

"It is?"

"Yes. His nose won't light up."

"Let me see him."

Hayley handed her brother the Rudolph toy and he twirled it around in his hands, inspecting it.

"He won't glow," Hayley repeated.

"I can't see anything wrong with him," Brent said. Then he found the button on Rudolph's belly and pushed.

Instantly, the reindeer's nose illuminated a bright red.

"Brent! You fixed him!" Hayley yelled.

Brent pushed the button a few more times, turning the light on and off, to make sure it worked consistently.

"It must've gotten stuck," Brent said and handed the toy back to his sister, who went on playing with him.

Finally, the whole Morgan family sat together in the living room.

The Christmas tree seemed more decorated this year than any other previous year.

The glow from the fireplace shined brighter than ever before.

The presents under the tree were being gazed at intently by the little girl, who now began to perform some shaking tests on them.

They sat there for hours. Brent told them the many stories of the life in his encampment and in turn, Larry and Andrea told Brent about what had gone on at home since he'd been gone. They said how their neighbor, Mr. Hartford, had passed away in the fall, how a lot of Larry's co-workers had been laid off since summer, and Hayley told Brent about how she had won the school's spelling bee.

Never had Larry, Andrea, and little Hayley imagined that Brent would be sitting and talking to them on this very night.

All three of them watched and listened as Brent talked. That's where all of their attention lay.

Never mind that the electric bill wasn't paid.

Never mind that there were very little presents under the tree.

Never mind that there weren't any lights hung all around the house.

Never mind that there was a war raging on the other side of the globe.

Never mind that they lived in an uncertain world with an uncertain future.

Those things didn't matter right now. They had managed to forget all those things for just a short while.

This was now, this one moment, a moment that the Morgans were completely lost in.

Hours passed in what seemed like minutes that night, and soon, everyone looked to see Hayley sleeping peacefully with her toys by the fire.

"It's time we turn in," Larry said, for the second time that night.

"Agreed. I'm wiped out," Andrea said, yawning and

stretching.

She got up and went to carry Hayley to her room.

Larry poked at the remaining glowing coals of the fire.

Brent brought the tea tray and empty cookie plate back into the kitchen.

Soon all the lights were turned out, and the house was completely dark.

Larry was the last one to brush his teeth and made his way to his bedroom. He walked by Hayley's room, to see her snuggled up with her Rudolph toys.

He walked by Brent's room. He had to look hard to see if he was in bed. Brent lay extremely still and did not utter a sound, dead sleep.

He walked into his own room and saw Andrea all curled up snoring already. He silently crawled into bed next to her and laid there a moment, crossing his arms under his head and looking at the ceiling. He couldn't help but feel how lucky he was.

In faraway land, there were thousands of boots marching and metal hitting flesh.

He was about to close his eyes when he heard a noise.

It was a faint noise coming from the street outside the window.

It sounded like voices.

Larry listened carefully and then distinguished them to be singing voices.

Were carolers still walking around at this hour?

He thought he was dreaming but couldn't be sure.

The voices were coming closer and closer and then suddenly, they stopped.

He must've been imagining it.

Then, they started singing again, as if they were right outside the house, like it had sounded right before Brent had knocked on the door.

"Oh there's no place like home for the holidays..."

Larry cracked a smile and listened to the song all the way through. For the first time in his life, he really listened to these words, all the way to the end.

"For the holidays...you can't beat home sweet home..."

Larry smiled again, closed his eyes, and snuggled into the blankets. Though asleep, the smile on his face continued, even when the morning light broke the darkness.

Mehndi Hands
Kim Kittleson



The Thing About Pumpkin Guts

K.M. Alleena

Picking the seeds out of the glop never used to be my favorite thing about pumpkin carving. I was always the type of kid who would yell if mud was involved in any activity, or if a slimy bug crawled closer than comfortable. The gross stuff was left for my Dad to handle.

When I was a little kid, he used to pretend to be some sort of master pumpkin carver. Every single Halloween, we'd go out to the pumpkin patch in Pine Island, and so began the ritual. Dad would search for the largest pumpkin there was, and Mom would argue against it, citing ten previous years of absolute mess in *her* kitchen. That *he* never cleaned, mind you. I would wander just a little further behind, picking the smallest pumpkins I could find – the ones that looked like apples; ones small enough so I could carry a whole bunch with me, while Mom and Dad curly debated the future of this year's Halloween display. Regardless – because Dad really believed himself to be the aforementioned pumpkin-carving extraordinaire – we would go home with four impossibly huge pumpkins.

For all those years, we would be able to pick our jack-o-lantern designs out of the books Dad seemed to collect off-season with gourd-murderous fascination. He would fold the corners of the grainy, low quality paper – just as the instructions said in bold black ink – and tape it haphazardly to his fresh-from-the-patch canvas.

The problem was that he worked as a driver for construction companies since the dawn of time. He had strong, calloused hands that had grown too tired and clumsy for the fine detail that pumpkin carving certainly required. Even as awkward as the task was for him, Dad made the botching of our pumpkins art. And I would watch, every year, without fail, as he did so.

First, there would be a lopsided circle cut around the stem – this was the lid of the jack-o-lantern. Dad would set it on the table, and cut off the seeds and strings from the underside of the lid, scraping away the excess gunk until just about an inch of pumpkin was left under the stem. It looked like a full moon, bitten on the edges by some hungry shadow somewhere. And, to make it better, it would never fit *exactly* the way it was supposed to, even after this process. He would cut a notch in the lid, and explain that when he was a kid, this is how it was done, to make sure the real candles could breathe. I reminded him every year that our candles had batteries. He would smile, and carve little triangular notches anyway.

Next, he would scrape all of the goop out of the

pumpkin – breaking the little orange plastic scoop in the process, and bending a few kitchen spoons thereafter. In a purple, bat-patterned Halloween candy bowl, he would save the guts of the pumpkin, careful to lose the least amount of seeds possible. Bits of orange flesh from this task would fly everywhere in his wake, to the point where Mom would periodically sigh in impatience, before taking his glasses to clean the crevasses in the metal with a toothpick. After the beast of a pumpkin was cleaned to his liking, he would gradually work on some strange version of the design I had picked. My favorite always had witch hats or kitties, while everyone else loved their traditional jack-o-lantern faces, stylized and fancied up a little bit. Dad would do his best, often improvising. There were places on pumpkins where only a thin strip of material was holding the design in place. Sometimes, carving away the excess to let more light through, Dad would break the bat's wing in those tiny places, and the whole creature would fall from in front of the pumpkin-moon. I remember taping things back together certain years. As Dad said, it all looked so much better lit up, that nobody would know the difference.

I was about eleven years old when I was allowed to carve my first pumpkin. I didn't understand the concept of negative space, really – so my design was silly. A lightning bolt, and the letters "HP" carved out, too high up in the front, and varying vastly in font and size. It was supposed to stand for "Harry Potter," but everyone else chuckled because my design very wasn't cool or scary. Dad didn't laugh though. Instead, he took the tiniest of the dollar-store pumpkin carvers, and showed me how to carve away the excess, just like what he did. Sure enough, it did look much better lit up.

After the art-making process was done, Dad would take hours to remove the seeds from the pumpkin glop. A playlist of kids' Halloween music and Pink Floyd would play in the background, and he would sort seeds tirelessly. The watery ones were only as good as the glop, he would comment each time I asked why some seeds got thrown away. He would keep a few that seemed perfect for later gardening, and then he would throw the rest into a bamboo salad bowl. Throughout this whole ordeal, Mom would have the oven preheating, so the kitchen was warm. She would make us all some hot cocoa, and then take the seeds, spread them over a couple of cookie sheets, add some salt, and throw them in the oven. I loved the sounds of the seeds popping when they cooked a little too much just as much as I hated the texture and temperature of pumpkin glop.

Today, I look around my own apartment and balk at the lack of Halloween atmosphere. I have no creepy fabric, no ceramics, no faux spider webs – nothing of the sort that would always have been put up at home. I'm just starting

out. All these years in college, I didn't have the opportunity to go all out – decorate, throw parties – or even to carve jack-o-lanterns. I stare down at the tiny pumpkin in my hands – just about the size of an apple, with a lopsided grin fit perfectly with plastic vampire teeth. His eyes are a bit off-center, too – two tiny red sewing pins. This was the last one I carved today, so I place him on my bookshelf, and go back to my kitchen table, where a candy-bowl of pumpkin glop waits patiently next to a bamboo salad bowl. My fingers are cold and a little tired, but I begin the process of pulling the best seeds out of the strings anyway.

As I work, my mind wanders to the past three Halloweens spent away from home. I felt as though I couldn't really celebrate the holiday. Sure, there were offers to go to parties with friends-of-friends. I never fit in with the crowd, so I never accepted – for me, Halloween wasn't ever really about dressing up and going out. That was only a small part of it. The holiday was always about these little family activities – such as pumpkin carving. It had to be *together* though, to really matter. For me, it would never be *Halloween* out at the bars or fraternity houses, adult trick-or-treating for shots with autumnal names.

It almost doesn't feel like Halloween now, in my own space. My family is not here with me – but three-hundred-some miles south, carving their own pumpkins and decorating their own house. I wonder if they're feeling the same kind of melancholy mixed with odd twinges of nostalgia. I wonder if Dad remembers helping me carve my Harry Potter pumpkin all those years ago – or if Mom is barking orders to my sibling to sweep up all the stray seeds.

As I am about finished separating what will eventually be a fine snack from one chunk of pumpkin glop, a string flies up at me, complete with a seed. It clinks off of the corner of my glasses, and seems to clatter to the floor in the silence of my tiny apartment – almost as if to confirm my thoughts.

Elbow-deep in the guts of a pumpkin, I burst into laughter. Really, the seeds are worth the trouble. Only, there's no way I would ever tell Dad that maybe I do enjoy the process of separating seeds from strings more than the actual carving of the pumpkin. I don't think he'd believe me, anyway – but on the off chance that he did, I can imagine his reaction. A snort, and some sort of jovial comment along the lines of "Well, all those years I picked seeds out of that crap, you could've been helping!"

I could've. Of course. But why interrupt the master at work?

Fall

Tarin Bonvino

She could feel winter closing in on her.

It was close, but the leaves and trees of the cemetery betrayed no hint of the coming snow and ice. It was warm, the sun filtering in through the gaps in the trees, making the shadows of the headstones long and thin. The leaves were brightly colored and scattered across the ground like freckles on a child. Lily was grateful that this old graveyard was forgotten – no hired landscaper meant the leaves would stay where they fell, instead of being raked into piles. She hated the sight of those piles, hated watching them rot and melt into mounds of brown dead mush.

She lowered herself to the ground and lay among the leaves. A headstone was a few feet to her right, but the words on it were big enough for her to read.

“Here lies Edna, who led a beautiful life.”

Edna’s full name was etched below, alongside a very old date.

Maybe here, she could finally do it. Edna had rested here a few centuries. Maybe Lily could rest for a few minutes.

Ignoring her pounding heart, she rolled onto her side and thought of Edna, who led a beautiful life, and slowly closed her eyes.

At first, everything was fine. She could smell the leaves, smoky and sweet. She could feel the cold of the ground through her sweater and jeans. But she saw nothing. Nothing, but a cool indifferent black. She lay perfectly still.

And then it all came rushing back. It was as if a dam broke – she could almost hear her mind crack – but instead of water, she drowned in memories. She remembered the entire night. The doorway, the multi-colored lights, the laughing party-goers. She remembered the cup in her hand, remembered walking away from it... She remembered the back room where the coats were, the couch. With the scratchy brown fabric, the memory dragged forward from the very back of her mind. And the couch reminded her of the hands, the forceful, strange hands. She could feel them on her arms again. The hands that pushed her down onto the couch, grabbing at her, ripping, tearing – there was blood on her face, or maybe tears, tears that had absorbed the red from the festive party lights overhead. She was open now, the hands were laughing at

her and she couldn't close herself. Then she couldn't see anything – couldn't breathe, couldn't scream.

All she could do was feel the terror, the jolts of pain.

Feel the trembling shame shake her spine.

Feel the unbearable fill her.

Deep inside.

Her eyes shot open. Edna's headstone was blurry and distorted, and for a minute she thought, *That's it, I really have gone crazy.*

She wiped the tears and sat up. There was no rest for her here, not even in this place of eternal resting. Maybe you had to be dead to qualify. She squinted at Edna, who had lived a beautiful life and now slept peacefully. She would've traded a beautiful face for a beautiful life any day.

People had always told her she was beautiful. And she had always taken them at their word – parents, friends, teachers, boys – but now she wondered whether they meant that she was attractive or that she was fragile. Her blond hair was fine and thin, nearly translucent. It hung in curtains to her shoulders – a flimsy set of armor, but a pretty one. She'd always thought of herself as tall and lanky – thin, but healthy. Now she felt more like the girls on the covers of magazines, with bones that looked like they'd break if you looked too hard. Her eyes were big and blue, with that wide, childlike look that made people smile at her – princess eyes, her mother had said. So she had given her daughter a princess name: Lily. As a child Lily had loved the story. But she had come to realize that princesses were made out of colored glass. Pretty, beautiful even, but so easily shattered.

Lily hated it when people cynically remarked that fairytales weren't real. In her experience, they were just mistranslated in the modern world. Key elements were true, but with a twist. In today's world, the grand balls were house parties. Once upon a time, she had been the beautiful princess. She had gone to a ball, and she had met the handsome prince, the basketball captain and valedictorian. And then, like every good princess, she had been captured. Instead of being locked in a tower, she was trapped on a brown couch. She was guarded by an evil dragon, but the prince never arrived to slay him. Because the modern fairytale held a final twist: dragon and prince were one and the same.

In the end, there was no happily ever after. Just a stillness. A quiet moment in the dark. Where the only sound was heavy breathing and the only feeling was hot, sticky skin on hers and a scratchy brown couch. Then came the

never-ending nightmare of terrified phone calls, tears, ruined makeup, and sleepless nights. She was beautiful, but the princess was never rescued.

Lily leaned back against Edna's headstone. She tried to rub the burning from her eyes, but between constant tears and inconstant sleep, it was no use. Very few of the things she did these days seemed useful. The phone calls to her parents, talking to her best friend – it was all pointless. No one was sure they could believe her.

That had been weeks ago. Now the rumors had ripened and fermented, and the talk took a much more vicious turn. Lily walked the hallways in a daze, her eyes on the floor, but listening.

"I opened the door, man. On accident, right? And she *waves me out of the room*," Jeremiah Gaines, a fellow basketball player remarked. He shrugged at his buddies. "She wanted him, she got him. Next thing you know, she got him in cuffs. What the hell is that about? Girls, man!"

"I feel sorry for the poor dear, of course," the sophomore English teacher whispered to the school nurse. "But I mean he's such a smart boy. And she... well, she's been known to cause trouble for attention. Skipping school, breaking the dress code. They had to remove her from the volleyball team because of behavioral issues remember? She couldn't get along with the other girls."

"She should just forget about it," Carly, a girl who sat in front of Lily in math, had muttered one day. She was too busy putting her books away to notice Lily standing right behind her. "Move on, forget it ever happened. Besides, look at how she dresses. She was asking for it."

"She's such a bitch."

"Slut."

"Liar."

The words came from every direction, she couldn't outrun them. So, she tried to shield herself. She walked as fast as she could from one class to another, earbuds blasting. She sat in the back of her classes, reading quietly to herself and never looking up. She quit the field hockey team and ate lunch in the bathroom. The town was too small for a mall, but after school she avoided the local pizza place and the coffee shop where everyone sat and gossiped for hours. Instead she had taken to hiking through the small park on the edge of town. That's how she had stumbled upon the cemetery and Edna, who led a beautiful life.

What is a beautiful life anyway? Lily wondered. She'd

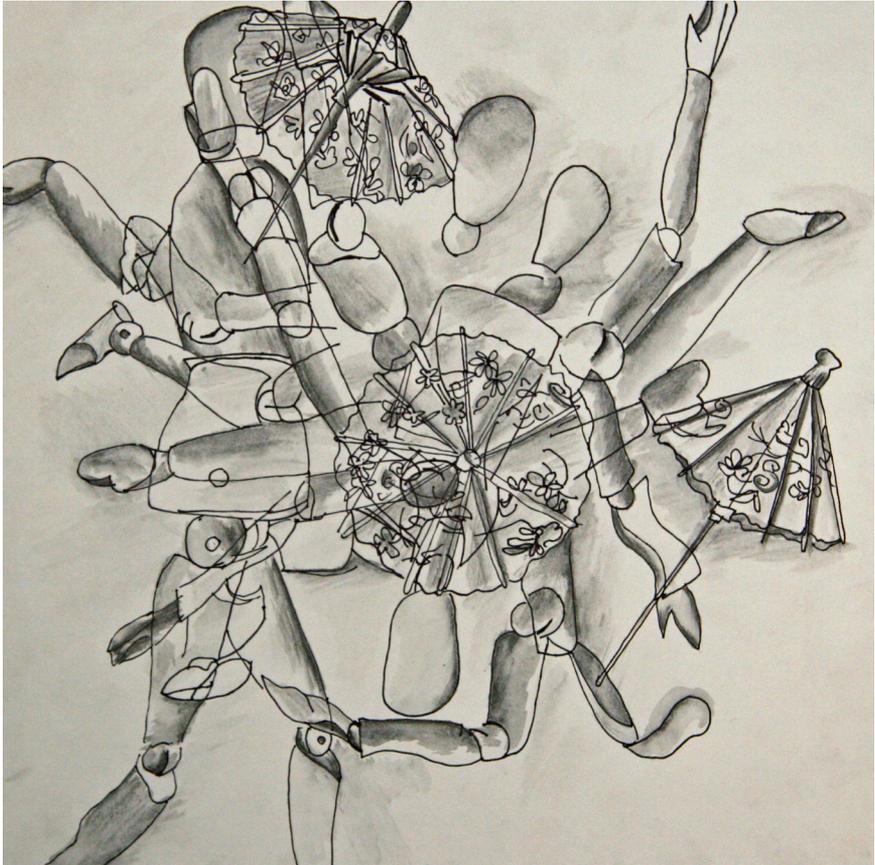
had enough of beauty. No matter what side of the debate they were on, whether they believed it had happened or not, everyone blamed her looks. She was either a beautiful girl who got bored and made up a lie for attention, or she was a beautiful girl who had seduced him, and now he was paying the price. Either way, she was the problem.

No one talked about what he looked like, but she remembered. She remembered his dark hair and the navy blue seventeen on his football jersey. She remembered that easy smile, the crooked grin that twisted all of his features and made her laugh at first. She remembered the way his hands looked coiled around her arm, fingers like snakes that squeezed tightly and led her down the hall. She remembered the look in his eyes when he finally shut the door behind them. Staring at her so intently it burned, made her skin crawl. He hadn't looked at her like she was beautiful. It wasn't longing in his eyes when he blocked her exit – it was *hunger*.

A chill crept up her spine, and she shivered. She rubbed her arms as she watched the sun set through the trees and what was left of their leaves. Winter was on its way, fall would be over soon. She knew she should go home, knew there would probably be more questions to answer, more reporters to not answer, and more nights to not sleep through. But something kept her there, amongst the patchwork leaves and the old headstones.

She rested her head against all that was left of Edna's beautiful life and stared at the sky. In the end it didn't matter – nothing mattered. Time went on. Fall was giving way to winter, and winter would give way to spring. Time would pass for her, too. Days would become weeks, weeks would bleed into years. A lifetime would go by. One day, all that would be left of her would be a headstone that read something like: "Here lies Lily, who was beautiful and led an ugly life."

Umbrella People
Kim Kittleson



Stuck

Shelby Coyle

A hallway. A door. A shadow.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

Move on. Don't look back.

Rusted handle. Twist, turn, screech. Stuck.

Release. Turn.

A shadow.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

Push off. Continue on.

Shadow. Sharp corner.

Shadow. Retreat.

Shadow.

“Hello?”

Laughter. Soft, indistinct.

Door. Handle. Twist, turn, screech.

Open.

Pause. Enter.

Light. Creak. Close.

Stuck.

Oklahoma City
Ryann Crofoot

Nature littered herself with the remains of human life.
Roofs thrown miles from the walls that held them
Stuffed animals stabbed by tree roots
Piles of bricks cover the sidewalk,
Broken lumber sticking out like a disfigured porcupine.
Fences wrapped around mangled trees,
Nature's barbed wire fence.
Trailers set on the foundations of what were once beautiful homes,
Now skeletal remains reach toward a sky that offers no help.
Only a stone fireplace and its chimney remain,
Pointing an accusatory finger at heaven.

There were a hundred and five of us,
People who had given up their time and two hundred dollars
Just to make it down to the arid heat of Oklahoma.
A thirty-eight hour bus ride
Followed by five twelve-hour work days
Full of heavy lifting, untangling, comforting,
Going from home to home picking up broken pieces of broken
lives.
Of all the people with us, he ran up to me.
Danny; age eight, coin collector and chicken catcher
Protector of maidens, swinging a stick sword at the alligators in

the two-foot pond.

He followed me everywhere, a never-ending stream of chatter

Did I collect anything?

Had I seriously never had an orange this big?

Had I ever had a goldfish or a salamander?

Did I know his dog had survived falling off a roof, a gunshot wound, and now a tornado?

Had I ever seen a tornado?

In such a desolate landscape, this eight-year-old boy radiated joy.

Despite losing almost everything, he was bouncing around ready to give anything.

Did I collect anything?

'Cause he had a coin collection he would share if I wanted to.

Had I seriously never had an orange this big?

'Cause he'd give me some red Oklahoma dirt that makes oranges grow that size.

Had I ever had a goldfish or a salamander?

'Cause he'd catch me one from the pond to take back to New York.

Had I ever seen a tornado?

'Cause he thought it'd be cool to see one, so if they ever had another one, I could come see it with him.

He followed me everywhere, always asking to help, and offering whatever he had.

He hung out with me during lunch,

And fed the cheese from my sandwich to his miracle dog.
He walked around with me even when I asked him not to
I didn't want him to get hurt,
But he didn't want to leave me by myself.
For twelve hours he talked to me,
Told stories of how he used to live by the ocean,
How he wants to go back someday.
Talked about his pets, his two dogs and three chickens and a cat,
How he's the only one who's any good at catching chickens.
Assuring me that he'll protect me from the alligators in the pond,
They can be dangerous, but with him around, I had nothing to fear.

He cried when I had to leave the next day.
He walked up to me, desperately trying to keep a brave face,
Carrying his giant bag of coins with two hands.
I hugged him as I turned down the entire collection
And cried as he handed me a state quarter,
Claiming he wanted me to have an Oklahoma quarter to
remember him by.
Even though it's an Alaska quarter,
I do not own a thing worth more.

Bond

Jordan Dedrick

THE SON sits alone in a room on a rickety chair. He lights a cigarette and takes a drag. There is a single, dim spotlight on him. ENTER MOTHER from STAGE RIGHT. Every time MOTHER speaks, a spotlight shines on her.

MOTHER

It's been fourteen years since my husband's death. My son still suffers from missing him so terribly. He would always strive for my husband's attention. I guess that's the way most boys act towards their fathers.

SON

Hey, Dad. I was wondering if you would want to go fishing tomorrow. I have the day off from work and I'd like to- Oh, okay. Well, maybe some other time then.

MOTHER

My husband worked hard for what we had, he provided us with a sense of security. We never went without. We never suffered or felt the hunger of poverty. We didn't have much, but we had enough.

SON

Hey, Dad. I was wondering if you'd be able to lend me some cash. My job- I got laid off. Factory life ain't as glamorous as it- I know, Dad. I tried but- I didn't mean to disappoint you. I'll try harder, I promise.

MOTHER

My husband loved his son with all his heart. He was a role model and never let any of us down. Sure, my husband may have had an angry side, but it was scarcely shown. To all, he was seen as a kind soul.

SON

Dad, I said I didn't know about it. I swear. Please don't tell Mom, it'll break her heart. Dad, no. DAD, STOP. I won't let you do this to me.

The SON pulls out a pistol from his belt and shoots. He begins to lament over his father and continues in the background as MOTHER speaks.

Oh my God, what have I done?

MOTHER

A relationship between a father and son is a curious one, with many contrasting and juxtaposed characteristics and ideals. The only people who could comprehend this type of bond is a son and his father. Everyone else looks in as an ostracized observer.

SON looks over to STAGE LEFT and is instantly infuriated.

SON

WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING, BOY?

(LIGHTS OUT.)

Anatomised

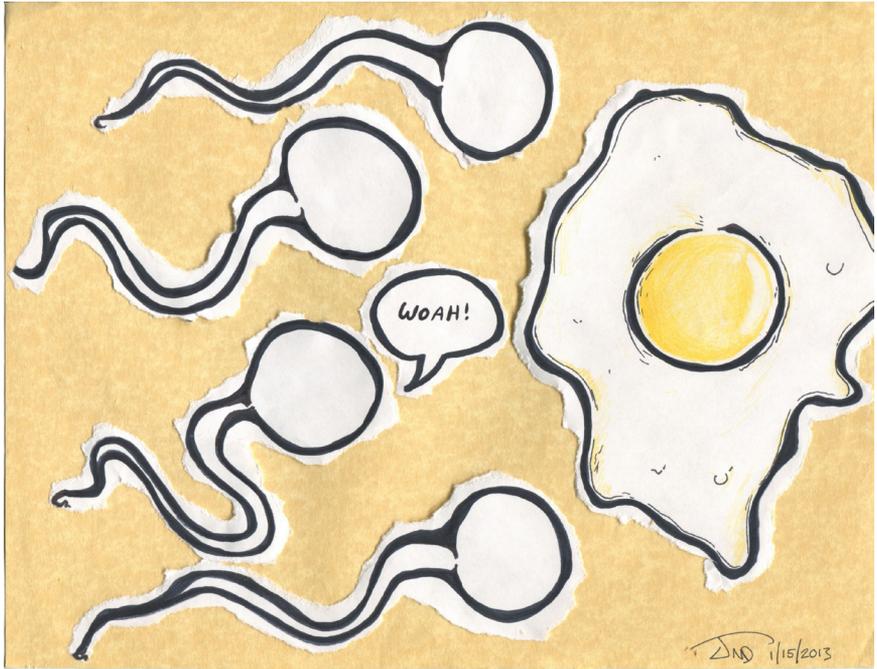
Harry Christopher Moore

It was an unusually mild night for January in 1846 and the sky was so clear that the moon was like a spotlight on the earth. Roderick Crow waited to the late hours before he harnessed his horse up to his buggy and headed out into the night. The sound of horse hooves clunked down on the cobble stone street and a bottle of whiskey that rested between Roderick's legs, sloshed to the rhythm of the horse's trot. Roderick took a big swig of that bottle and thought about Dr. Armstrong's earlier offer; the task at hand, and the substantial payment he would receive when the job was done. Easy money he thought.

When he arrived at Maple Grove Cemetery he stopped to make sure he wasn't seen before entering. The moonlight made it easy for him to find her grave without the use of a lantern. The ground was freshly broken but six feet of digging was still going to take some time. When he finally got to her coffin and opened it up; nine year old Ruth looked fast asleep inside. Roderick picked up the girl gently, as if not to disturb her, and placed her sitting up like she was a regular passenger in the back of his buggy. He stared at the uninhabited body for a brief moment, took another taste of his whiskey and went back to work reburying the unearthed coffin.

The ride to Hoosick was eerily unlonely this time with Roderick's newly acquired passenger. He tried his best not to think about it, but the back of his flesh couldn't help but feel the accompaniment of the purloined girl. The doctor was waiting for him when his buggy finally approached the back door of his office. The two men carefully carried young Ruth's dead body inside and laid it on the cold operating table. Dr. Armstrong paid Roderick fifty dollars, and patted him on the back for his help to medical science. The light of the early morning guided Roderick's horse home and even though he was extremely tired and drunk, it was hard to fall asleep.

Sperm and Egg
Joel Dodge



Hollow Rote

Holly Greenfield

This man-child
has grown tired

Slammed, slapped and struck by darkened
days that steal his sleep at night; he has
grown tired.

He possesses dreams, he's been inspired
ideas burn within in the form of desires

but on days like today, the place he aspires
matters not in this world— where his best
friend's been shot.

Above the din of teaching I hear his gasp.
A fellow classmate shared
the product of hate—that's how he found
out his brother's fate.

His lungs struggle to contain
the pain; he chokes on the thought
this death a joke it's not.

I compose a hollow note,
The time. The date. The classic school rote
permission to leave, grieve, recover—
a pass from class that holds no such power.

The child, not yet a man,
a hardened heart his battle plan
in my arms I should take— his dreams;
his aspirations dangerously at stake.

I should catch him in my embrace
in an unbalanced, raw kind of grace
as his tears, to the floor, we race

But alone he stands, his tall frame
sags, grief arrest, stretch and twists
his form. He can't breathe
but I let him walk out my door

between his thumb and finger
an un-healing note, that hollow school rote.

Vivat Rex

Dylan Woods

The monarch strode through the town square, the crowd parting around him in awe. His cloak, red and made from the finest furs, billowed behind him in the light breeze. His crown reflected the sun, shining so brightly it became a halo. A contingent of soldiers followed him closely, weapons ready. Some of the townspeople crossed themselves and refused to meet his eyes. Others just stared with their mouths agape. For many, it was the first time they had ever seen their king.

He ascended the stairs to the platform slowly, his back straight and his arms clasped behind him. His eyes remained fixed on his destination. His face was solid and unmoving, a statue untainted by emotion.

When he reached the top, he turned toward his subjects. He took a step forward and scanned the crowd, looking into the faces of every man, woman, and child, his stone eyes meeting theirs. The sun passed behind a cloud, and for that brief moment his crown lost its radiance. The soldiers stood behind him and raised their weapons in salute.

A man cried, "Long live the king!" The crowd cheered and applauded.

The king removed his possessions and handed them to the man beside him. He stepped forward once more, the guillotine towering over him. The executioner guided the king's head through the hole and locked it, then stepped back and released the blade.

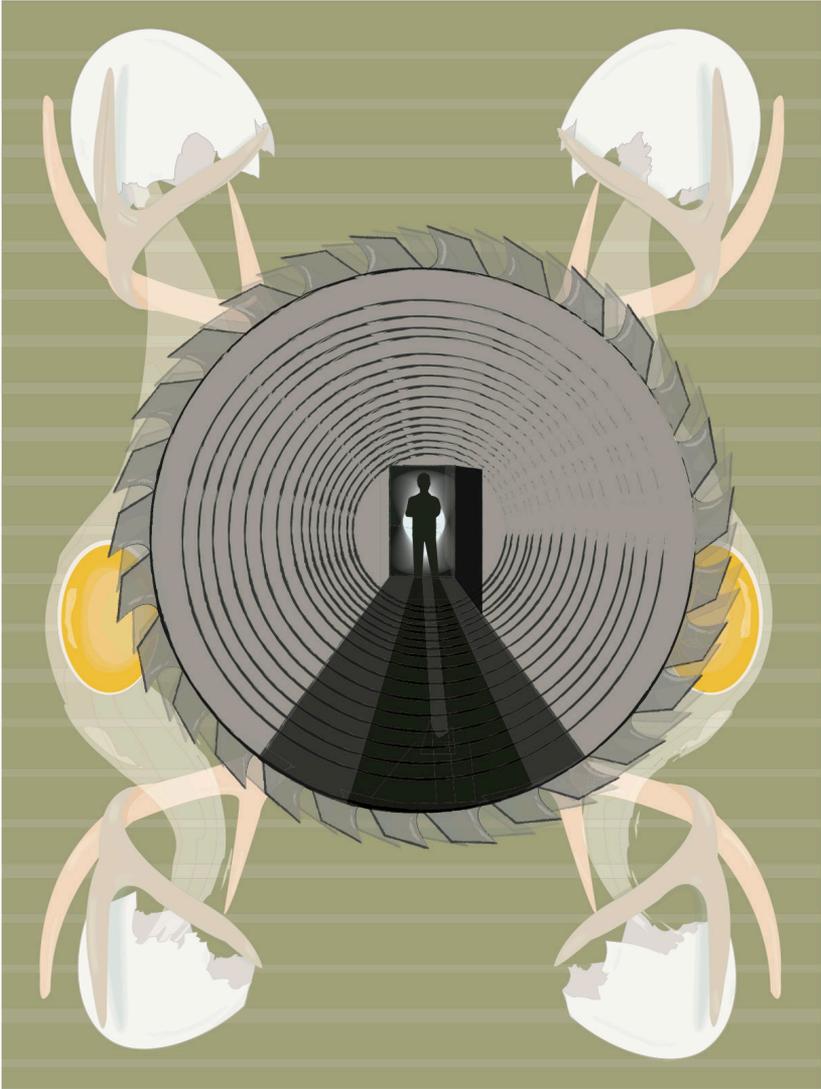
The crowd roared even louder.

The Insect King

Shelby Coyle

The monarch dances lazily
Aloft on brightened wing
The reverent breath of those bereft
At length begin to sing
“Oh, what beauty heightens thee
You’ve always been so fair
Monarch dancing lazily
Your kingdom is the air”
The monarch pauses daintily
To rest his weary wing
While all around his subjects sound
And praise begin to sing
“Oh, how regal here you rest
So noble and so proud
Monarch pausing daintily
Wrapped in your blazing shroud”
The monarch flutters purposely
Flashing off his royal wing
Then from the air, a shadow’s there
No chorus is left to sing
The monarch passes silently
Away on ravaged wing
Alone and left, of wings bereft
So ends the Insect King

Galloping Nightmares
Anne Greco



Fat Kids and Chocolate Bars

Morgan Altland

As I stare, into the blank and unforgiving
Glare of my refrigerator,
I am reminiscent of a time where
You were a part of my palette

I was in love with you, I loved you
Like single women love cookie dough,
Like rich people love eating soufflé,
Like fat kids love eating chocolate bars,
Cause there was a time where I could say
You helped me feel full

You are beautiful, gorgeous, delicious,
In a non-cannibalistic sense of the word,
Your hair flows down the back of your neck
Like a Willy Wonka water fall
Your eyes shimmer as if ring pops were
Combined with sapphires

Your lips, are as red and juicy looking as
Freshly opened Twizzlers
Freckles dance along your nose as if they
Were Hershey kisses from the angels

And your nose... well baby that's just a nose

I wanted our lips to push together like
Oreos, and hope you know I'll always try to
Go back and get seconds, and I wanted our
Fingers to interlock like slices, but let's try
To go for the whole pie, or maybe some
Cake, but, no cake I knew, was as sweet as your smile

Teeth as white as orbits and they're making
Me cool, while your body is making hot
Like preheating the oven at 350 degrees for
The best results, No one had the better than
Yours, your skin is golden brown like
Pineapple Upside down cake, and you know
That made me smile

I wanted you so badly, that I developed a
Craving, so I'd chase after you
Like a dog after a bone,
Like Germans after strudel,
Like fat kids after chocolate bars,
Cause enough was never enough

You had me twitching like I was some sort

Of addict cause the sugar rush you were
Giving me, was never ending, like downing
12 Frosties at once, the flavor was
Outstanding but the pain was killing me, but
I wanted this feeling to be like the pain in
the fact that it seems like it'll last forever,

Be like bubble gum and have no expiration
Date, even on the days when things were
Bad I'd think sour patch kids come in layers,
And under that layer of sour there's
Something sweet, just give me a sign that
The sweetness is there, and I'd be happy
Like giving cookie monster a bag of Chips
Aho my smile would never go away
I wanted our love to shine above our heads
Like an M&M rainbow, while we sit on the
Ground eating bags of Skittles,
Or just have it be up in the sky like a
Klondike star, hoping you knew I would do
Anything to grab it

But the growling of my stomach snaps me
back into reality, as I realize the emptiness
of my kitchen

Without you I'm feeling incomplete

I'm a Reeses without peanut butter

I'm a sundae without ice cream

I am the fat kid, and baby you were

my chocolate bars and there was a time where I

Could say you helped me feel full, but now

You're gone

And all I am is hungry.

The Impressionable
Jordan Dedrick

(CURTAIN RISES. A television set positioned at SL facing the wall is flickering. It is currently the only light source in the room. The television should have the news on, audible enough so the audience can deduce what is being played. A YOUNG BOY sits about three feet from the television on the floor, entranced in the images placed before him. A couch is behind the YOUNG BOY. On the side of the couch, at UC, is a FIGURE lying on the ground. On the other side of the television, BSL, there is a door faced diagonally towards the audience. ENTER FATHER.)

FATHER

What are you doing in the dark, son?

(FATHER flicks a switch. LIGHTS UP. Now the audience can see that the FIGURE is lying in a pool of his own blood. The YOUNG BOY's clothes are saturated with blood as well. He turns to look at FATHER and smiles.)

YOUNG BOY

Hi, Daddy.

FATHER

Hello, son. It looks like you had an active day. Did you have fun?

YOUNG BOY

Yeah.

FATHER

That's good to hear. But you forgot to clean up your mess. What have I said about leaving your toys out? Now clean up or no TV.

(The YOUNG BOY gets up and drags the figure with all his might toward the door positioned BSL. He opens the door and pushes the FIGURE through. The sound of miscellaneous screams of "help" can be heard OFF STAGE and cease when the YOUNG BOY closes the door. The YOUNG BOY walks up to FATHER and receives an approving pat on the head. LIGHTS OUT.)

Groovy Blueberry
Ann Pallifrone



Canvas

Shelby Coyle

Mary sat alone on the bed, bottle hanging loosely from her hand. The liquid was far enough gone so as not to spill out despite the angle it was being held at. The overhead light was off, but the bedside lamp cast Mary and the room into a dim orange glow. Shadows covered in the corners.

The pale walls of the room were mostly clear. There were no posters, no pictures, no papers. There were only the paintings; two of them. At the head of the bed hung a deer, lazily basking in the sun and content to enjoy the lush grasses and watch the stream flow by. It was peaceful, but did nothing for Mary's mood.

The second painting hung on the wall opposite Mary, and she had been staring blankly at it for the better part of an hour. It was a dark painting, filled with mountains and a drought-struck valley. In the foreground stood two brightly colored carousel horses that did not at all look out of place among the despairing landscape.

Mary brought the bottle to her lips.

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary."

Mary brought the bottle down before she could even taste the liquid left within. She blinked blearily around the room.

"Come, now, Mary," the voice was soft and a small creaking sound accompanied it.

"We're right here, Mary," a second voice called, eerily similar to the first, but even Mary could identify it as different. "We've always been right here."

Mary blinked her eyes across the room once more before landing them back on the painting. Somehow, there was no surprise to find both of the horses staring at her, whereas before only one had been.

"Mary, Mary," the first horse shook its head. "Poor, poor, Mary."

The second horse limped closer—had it always only had three legs?—and stared out at Mary with its gray painted eyes. "What did you think would happen, Maaary?"

Mary brought the bottle up again and swallowed down a burning mouthful.

"Don't worry, Mary."

"We're here for you, Mary."

"We'll *a*lways be here, Maaary."

Mary shook her head. She twisted around to see the

deer.

The deer, so peaceful. She could hear the water flowing, see it making its way downstream. And the deer was standing tall now, staring unblinkingly out at her, antlers too large to stay within the frame. Oh, how she loved that deer.

"Mary!"

The sudden, sharp call did not startle her.

The deer, the deer.

"Mary! Mary!"

"Come to us, Mary!"

"We love you, Mary!"

"We won't leave you, Mary!"

"Never leave you, Maaary!"

Mary did not turn, nor did she blink. She stared back at the deer, as motionless as it. The bottle fell to the floor, adding another stain to the carpet as what small amount of liquid was left trickled out.

"Mary!"

The horses reared back, screaming to their lightless sky. Mary was sure she heard a faint echo, the brushstroke mountains reflecting back to the waking world.

A Letter Addressed to Rock Bottom
Alexander Marchesi

Dear my love, this is it
I'm tearing my conscience into bits
Fingers crossed, you won't forget
A die-hard romantic is nothing but tragic

What I do I do best
Sabotage myself and tell the story to no one
In a notebook feeling homesick
"Paint me in your favorite lipstick"
A kick-start to the head but no better off dead
From the day I met you, it's always been my medicine
To be alone with you in bed

I'm an arrogant boy who thinks he knows
Everything he needs to know in the whole world
Twisting thoughts into lessons you can never learn

Lead the parade for the double-crossed
We are the underdogs bent on living inside your head
Dealing with the sorrow that will own you when tomorrow
comes
Cause word on the street is that I cheated death
Forever hold my peace one day at a time
I'm your best-kept secret
Below the waist.

Open Mic Night

Todd Robert Stark

A claustrophobic din surrounded Tesla as she made her way to the bar. She ordered a vodka tonic, paid seven fifty, and got a charming smile from the bartender for no extra charge. Not that she noticed; her eyes were on the stage.

Front and center the lead singer worked the crowd; his voice crackled and boomed with raw electricity. He was shirtless to show off the power lines that ran from his chest to his throat, where the microphone that now served as his voice-box throbbed with every note. Grey and black metal modification merged flawlessly with his skin. It was fine work. The same could not be said for the bass player's instrument, an average sized guy who seemed tiny in the musician's muscular arms. Four thick strings stretched from the knobs protruding from his neck down to his groin.

On the other side of the stage a blonde girl reclined on a barstool, the guitarist holding her leg upright, strumming wildly. Tesla thought he was being too rough with her, but when he pulled his slide down the length of her six-string-leg, the guitar-girl's face contorted in ecstasy.

Only when the song ended did Tesla turn away from the stage. Most of the bar patrons were unmodified, but she still saw more of her own kind than she had in years. There were all the popular models, and then there were the less common instruments— a pair of harps plucked each other, a keyboard let people take turns pressing his buttons, a wheelchair-bound woman drummed on her legs, some dude with a flute descending from his abdomen stalked the room making rude requests. Almost all of them electric except for some of the brasses.

An unmodified guy, long hair and long fingers, talked to the guitar-girl from the band. Tesla made sure he saw her before turning away from him and taking off her jacket. Her black open-backed dress exposed the soft wood inlaid into softer skin, strings that ran down her spine and over the hole in her lower back.

"That's a fucking acoustic," someone whispered.

He was by her side in an instant. They said nothing, but he took her hand and led her to the stage. He sat in a chair as she straddled him, her back to the silent crowd. He rested his head on her shoulder, closed his eyes and struck a chord. Tesla felt her whole body quiver. Then he began to play.

A slow, steady rhythm emerged, an intoxicating melody. She opened her mouth to gasp and the sound flowed through her. This is what she had dreamed of, what she had paid for, what she was meant to be. His fingers danced faster, her head swam. This was heaven. This was music. It was too much.

A string broke. Tesla covered her mouth, red-faced, and made to get up.

"Relax," said the musician, "it happens to everyone."

Stop Your Squawkin' and Get Back in the Kitchen
Joel Dodge



Cross Examined

Dani Walters

I stare at the Bible
in front of me
nervously, braid the
ribbons that dangle from its spine.

The Pastor speaks in fairytales
of a Prince he knows
hands of silk
holes from steel
pierced to save us from our sins.

I examine the wooden cross
that hangs over Pastor's head.
Contemplate every point,
every line.

I try to find the aspects of introspect
in search of words that I could actually
comprehend.

I view you in the pews
remembering last night
I saw you at the bar
shooting your system with shots.
Your friend at the strip club
with a fist full of Washington's.

Your mother at the casino
begging the machine
to answer her prayers.
Now sitting and asking God
for the same things.

My best friend dragged me here.
She tells me she hates gay people
and God does too.
Last night
during truth or dare
she kissed a girl.
Now she screams her hallelujah's,
crosses her heart and prays God
never saw it happened.

I tell her,
we are no better than
those who bought their Heaven
from street merchants
on a corner.

Billy

Michelle Stiles

MALE SAXOPHONE PLAYER

Well, thank you Ma'am!

He tilts his hat at her.

Millie blushes and then walks on.

MILLIE

Oh I just love that song!

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY

*Millie and Vergatroy walk by FEMALE
CARICATURE ARTIST drawing a picture of a
YOUNG COUPLE.*

YOUNG COUPLE shares a quick kiss.

VERGATROY
(Whispers)

That is similar to what I will do on Mars.

Millie suppresses a laugh.

*Vergatroy looks up at the bright blue
sky with puffy clouds and sighs.*

VERGATROY

Millie?

MILLIE

Yes hon?

VERGATROY

Where is your mate?

Millie looks away for a second.

MILLIE

My mate? My husband...passed away.

*Millie holds back tears. She adjusts her
purse on her arm.*

VERGATROY

What did you call him?

MILLIE

His name was...Earl? No wait, was it Evan?
Erik? I don't recall.

Vergatroy tilts his head in confusion.

MILLIE

Anyway, he was a very handsome man. We
actually met here in Central Park.

VERGATROY

Fascinating.

MILLIE

Thank you!

FLASHBACK - EXT. CENTRAL PARK - ICE SKATING
RINK - WINTER - DAY

SUPER IN SCREEN: FIFTY YEARS AGO

YOUNG MILLIE, attractive 20s, bundled up in a warm coat and red scarf skates cautiously on the ice.

Dozens of people fill up the rink. Some COUPLES hold hands. A FATHER teaches his SON the stand up on skates.

Holiday music plays in the background.

Young Millie appears to have steady footing then all of the sudden, YOUNG MAN, attractive, 20s, skates into her by accident.

They both fall down on the ice.

YOUNG MAN

Oh my goodness. I'm so sorry, Miss.

YOUNG MILLIE

You should be more careful!

Young Millie gets up and dusts herself off. Young Man is still on the ice.

YOUNG MILLIE

C'mon, let me help you up.

Young Millie grabs his hands and helps him up. They lock eyes intimately.

*As she starts to blush, Young Millie turns
away. Young Man lifts his eyebrows in
interest.*

YOUNG MAN

I'm terribly sorry. Let me make it up to you.

YOUNG MILLIE

How?

YOUNG MAN

Let me buy you some hot cocoa.

YOUNG MILLIE

Sure. I'm Millie by the way.

YOUNG MAN

Millie. Such a beautiful name for such a
beautiful lady.

Millie blushes.

YOUNG MILLIE

Thank you.

They smile at each other.

*Young Man loses his balance
and Young Millie catches him.*

YOUNG MILLIE
(flirtatiously giggles)

You know, you're a terrible ice skater!

Young man nods in agreement while he puts his hands up in pretend surrender.

YOUNG MAN

Maybe you can teach me to skate?

YOUNG MILLIE

Maybe I will.

Millie checks him out.

He is wearing a form-fitted black sweater, a black snow cap, and jeans.

She smiles at him again—clearly liking what she sees.

Young Man and Millie skate off to the concession stand arm in arm.

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY

Millie continues to walk with Vergatroy.

*They walk past a pretzel stand.
Millie notices that
Vergatroy is looking at the pretzels.*

MILLIE

Do you want to split a pretzel?

VERGATROY

Is that what you call that? A pretzel?

MILLIE

Yes, dearie. They are really tasty. I'll get one.

Millie goes to the pretzel stand. The PRETZEL MAN, 30s, looks at Millie as she fiddles with her purse.

Millie takes out some money from her wallet.

PRETZEL MAN

Hello. What can I get cha?

Millie ponders over her choices.

MILLIE

Umm—I will get one big soft pretzel please. To share.

Pretzel Man gives Millie a quizzical look. He shrugs his shoulders.

He grabs a paper and uses it to grab a pretzel out of the cart.

PRETZEL MAN

Alright, ma'am. That'll be three dollars and fifty cents.

*Millie makes the transaction and takes the
pretzel.*

PRETZEL MAN
(Under his breath)

Crazy old broad.

*Oblivious to what Pretzel Man says, Millie
takes Vergatroy's hand and continues on.*

MILLIE

Let's go, sugarplum!

EXT. CENTRAL PARK - DAY

*Millie sits next to Vergatroy on a park
bench that outlooks the lake.*

*Swans and paddle-boats coast along the
water. Two fit JOGGERS run past on the
sidewalk.*

*Millie hands Vergatroy a piece of her
pretzel.*

MILLIE

Here, try this.

Vergatroy takes one bite and spits it out.

VERGATROY

Yuck! That was nasty!

MILLIE

You didn't like it, honey?

VERGATROY

No! On my planet, we wouldn't even feed this to our pets.

MILLIE

(Frustrated)

Well, I'm sorry that you don't like it but you do not have to be fresh.

VERGATROY

My apologies. It was just unsatisfactory.

MILLIE

That's okay. You can't like everything you eat!

Millie finishes her piece of the pretzel.

MILLIE

What a beautiful day!

VERGATROY

I do not mean to be fresh but, I really must be getting my pollen. May we leave now?

Millie is taken aback but gets up to leave.

MILLIE

Okay. Just so you know, I'm a little allergic to pollen.

Millie adjusts her purse.

MILLIE

I just sneeze and sneeze! But flowers are very lovely.

Millie reaches her hand out to Vergatroy.

MILLIE

Let's go, little one.

They walk away from the bench
and head to Strawberry Fields.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK SIDEWALK - DAY

Millie and Vergatroy walk together.

*An adorable family walks by. A LITTLE GIRL,
wearing adorable pigtails, with her
PARENTS, 30s, typical Ken and Barbie looks.*

*Her MOTHER pushes a blue
stroller. Clearly for a BABY BOY.*

*LITTLE GIRL skips alongside
the stroller and sings a nursery rhyme.*

LITTLE GIRL

(Sings)

*Frere Jacques, Frere Jacques, Dormez vous?
Dormez vous? Sonnez les matines, Sonnez les
matines, Din, din, don! Din, din, don!*

*Her father looks at her with an endearing
smile.*

FATHER

*Sweetie, you are so nice for singing to your
little brother.*

*Mother holds Father's hand and as they
all walk past. Vergatroy looks up and sees
Millie stifle tears.*

VERGATROY

Millie why are you leaking?

Millie collects herself.

MILLIE

That was just so darn sweet! It feels like just yesterday that was me pushing Billy in the stroller.

Vergatroy does not know what to say. He just holds Millie's hand.

Millie looks at him with a sweet expression as they continue to walk.

EXT. CENTRAL PARK SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

As they near Strawberry Fields, the sidewalk gets more crowded.

A TEENAGER rolls past Millie and Vergatroy on in-line roller blades. A BUSINESS MAN talks on his cell phone while he holds a briefcase.

An OLD MAN walks his huge Irish wolfhound. Vergatroy appears a little overwhelmed.

Millie continues to walk and is oblivious to Vergatroy's mini freak-out.

All of the sudden, a giant dapple gray HORSE and carriage trolls along and carries a couple of TOURISTS who snap photographs.

Vergatroy sees the gigantic animal and is clearly terrified.

VERGATROY

Uh? Millie?

Just as Vergatroy is about to say something else, the CARRIAGE DRIVER, 50s, who is wearing his uniform complete with top hat and gray mustache cracks his whip.

CRACK!

CARRIAGE DRIVER

Yah!

The horse neighs really loud and speeds up right past Vergatroy.

VERGATROY

(screams in total fear)

AHHH!

Vergatroy hides behind Millie.

MILLIE

What's wrong, hon?

VERGATROY

Wha...? What was that...CREATURE?!

MILLIE

Oh that? That was just a horse!

Seeing how distraught Vergatroy is, Millie gives him a hug.

MILLIE

Oh honey? Did that horse scare you?

VERGATROY

Indeed! That was terrifying.

MILLIE

It's okay sweetie, those horses are well-trained.

VERGATROY

But it was so big! Like a monster or something!

Millie giggles at the comment.

MILLIE

Well some people might see you as a monster!

Vergatroy seems to ponder the idea.

VERGATROY

Yes, I suppose you are correct.

They share a laugh.

EXT. STRAWBERRY FIELDS - DAY

God

Ann Pallifrone

The rhythmic beeping of her monitor made my head pound. I needed to escape. After I passed through the automatic doors, I walked down the familiar stretch of sidewalk to sit on the bench to take in the crisp autumn breeze. I put my head between my knees and closed my eyes, trying not to feel anything.

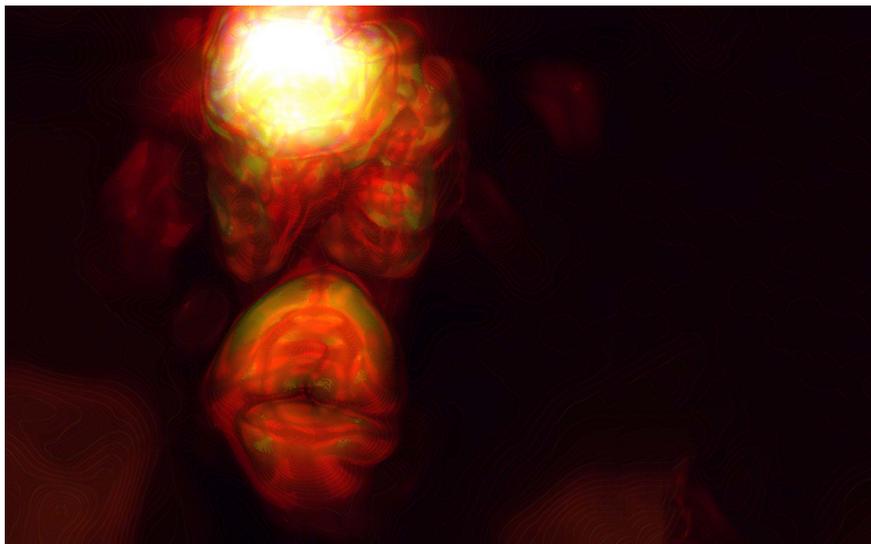
When I opened them, I saw a snail.

I got down to the ground for closer inspection, and the snail seemed unmoved by a giant coming closer. I reached out to poke its tiny eyestalk, something I'd found entertaining since I was little. When my fingertip made contact, its eye shrunk into its body to keep safe. After a few moments, the eye extended back and the snail resumed its slow pace across the pavement.

I grabbed the snail by its worn and imperfect shell, pulling gently to unglue its body from the pavement. I placed it in my hand and studied it for a while, looking for any sign of the weakness I felt. The snail never showed fear of me, even though I could have easily killed it. The snail didn't seem to care about death; it had better things to do.

Jealous of its resilience I asked, "Why aren't you afraid?" but I received no answer.

Tympanum
Stephanie Arney



Shine on Me
Kristen Burke



I Feel You, Empty Snapple Bottle
K.M. Alleena

The trains from Penn Station
for commuters to Port Jervis
are generally unkempt,
a matter of too many bodies
wanting similar disarray.
The seats are composed of grime
and hard plastic –
unwelcoming at best –
but I take my place anyway.

You would figure
I'd be used to the way
public spaces are abused –
filthy five seconds after
a good half-hearted cleaning –
though I suppose such a cycle
is never-ending.

This was the last stretch
of my reckless journey –
I was twelve-hours-and-
fourty-minutes too tired
to fight this crowd –
to speak out against

mindless chatter
in the background.

So I sat beneath a luggage rack,
one bearing a single glass
Snapple bottle.
And when the train
lurched forward finally,
it rolled off
and crashed
in an explosion of
lemon-tea stained glass –
not even a foot away
from my hand.

Greatest Pep Talk
Joey Kraus

Characters: Ian, early 20s, seems very nervous, actor.

Cole, mid 20s, Ian's best friend, excited for his friend.

The play starts off in a dressing room, Ian is sitting in a chair, seems to be having trouble breathing, his best friend Cole is standing in front of him, trying to calm him down.

IAN

I can't do it.

COLE

Yes you can.

IAN

No I can't I'm...

COLE

Stop saying that.

IAN

Listen to me Cole.

COLE

Ian, I'm listening.

IAN

I don't have faith.

COLE

I have faith.

IAN

I'm going to suck.

Cole slaps Ian across his face, really hard.

COLE

Feel better now?

IAN

No, dude that hurt.

COLE

Good, it was supposed to hurt you. Now tell me why you're freaking out.

IAN

I'm afraid the audience won't like me.

COLE

That's ridiculous, dude you've been rehearsing for months, you'll be great out there.

IAN

You don't know that, okay? You don't.

COLE

Yes, I do because I've seen you work hard as this character and I've see how intense you get when you're angry, that's pretty much the emotion you portray in this play.

IAN

I just don't have faith in myself.

Cole thought about something for a few moments then realized something.

COLE

I fucked your wife.

IAN

What?

COLE

I fucked your wife.

IAN

When?

COLE

About two weeks ago.

IAN

Bullshit.

COLE

Has she looked guilty?

IAN

Lately?

COLE

The past two weeks?

*Ian thinks about it, then starts to look
angry.*

IAN

Kinda.

COLE

Well, there you go.

IAN

You...

COLE

Are you mad?

IAN

Yeah.

COLE

Good because your show is about to start.
Save that anger for your character.

IAN

Uh, okay thanks?

COLE

You're welcome buddy. Break a leg.

IAN

We're still going to talk about this after my
play.

COLE

I'm looking forward to it.

Ian stares at him angrily and exits. Cole
smiles and feels very proud of himself.

THE END

Pearl Harbor
Kim Kittleson



Medium

Holly Greenfield

For the hundredth time in as many days her car crests the hill, slowing as she nears me. I'd given up hope she'd ever stop, content she noticed me each morning with a wave.

Once she had stopped in the middle of the road. Her engine hummed quietly. My hope swelled painfully. I'd wanted to go to her, tell her my name is *James. James Price. Please stay.* But she'd driven away. I'd been foolish to let hope rise where acceptance had never followed.

Now as she steps from the car, I feel her call to me. Not knowing why I need her, just that I do, I close my eyes, and draw her to me. She comes bearing a pink carnation.

My fingers sweep her back, steering her along with those quiet thoughts we share. She steps toward the faded stones.

Eleanor.

Caroline.

Porter.

"James..." Her cheeks glisten. "You out-lived them all."

I kneel beside her, watch her lay the carnation beneath the dates. I know scorn. And pain. But this flower? The gesture embraces me. For the first time in a century the pang eases. Who's this woman with so much love? Her eyes close and the world brightens with an unbearable light.

I smile.

This is why I needed her.

They are all waiting for me—in this light she's opened—this light I feared I'd been spared.

I spent my childhood with shadows. Hiding from the sun to protect my fair skin, being followed through the streets of Cherry Road as I ran around trying to keep up with my older cousins; surrendering the spotlight to my younger sisters whenever they made even a slight fuss about something.

“She’s afraid of her own shadow,” my mom would tell everyone. I was never a huge fan of scary stories, the dark, or the attic. Regardless, these were all things I was constantly exposed to with my older cousins. My weeks could go one of two ways. I was either spending all my time babysitting my two younger sisters and playing Polly Pockets under the shady trees of my backyard, or sheepishly following my older cousins through the streets of Downtown Rochester trying to earn my way into the cool crowd.

When I was nine, my mom and dad sat my five-year-old sister and I down and told us, in their most enthusiastic voices, that we were going to have a new sibling. The news that normally brings people to tears of joy brought my sister and I to shrieks of terror. Aubrey was an attention hog who feared anything that stood in the way of her voice being heard. I was sick and tired of hanging out with “babies”, as I often called Aubrey.

We both had our own ways of reacting to the news. Aubrey was in a phase where she thought holding her breath was the key to getting what she wanted, and usually she was right on that thought. She sat Indian style on the scooped up kitchen floor, crossed her chubby arms and held her mouth closed as tightly as she could; the bottom of her chin quivering from the pressure. Her face scrunched as her cheeks filled with air and her eyes widened. As the baby of the family, Aubrey had the dramatics down so I didn’t really feel the need to lash out to that extreme. Instead I just sat in the shadows of her tantrum, facing the realization that in nine short months I would be living underneath the shade of two children instead of one.

With a new baby on the way, my parents thought it would be best to move into a house with more space. As we pulled into the driveway for the first time, my eyes fixated on the giant tree that stood out front. The branches hung low around the husky trunk; their reflection swayed on the deep green grass below. It made me feel safe.

The house seemed to go on for miles as I stepped through the dark, glazed wooden door and examined my new surroundings. The stairs stood parallel to the entryway where we each entered one by one, taking in the presence

of our new home. I weaved in and out of the empty, overly clean rooms, trying to imagine where I would set up my Easy Bake Oven, where we would sit down to dinner every night, and where my dogs would curl up to sleep.

When Lexie was born the perimeter of the house seemed to shrink. The empty canvas I looked at months earlier had become filled with baby swings, gates blocking off every entrance way and a plethora of baby accessories. Not to mention the faint smell of spit up and dirty diapers. With no space in the house to call my own, I grew impatient and decided to take action. I approached the situation like I was pitching a new product idea to a board of executives.

"Mom," I sternly said, standing in front of the TV as she weaved her head back and forth trying to see through me. I explained to her my desire to spend more time with people my age.

"It's really my time to experience what life is." She looked at me with a blank stare and then started laughing.

"Jay, you're ten," she said, attempting to brush me off and get back to her soap opera. As I continued with my speech, growing more and more emotional with every stupid line I had written out in my Lisa Frank notebook, my mom became more impatient.

"Jay, I have an hour before Lexie wakes up and all I want is to relax, can we please talk about this later!?" Fully aware of what my mom's breaking point was, I gave it a rest and let the idea simply linger in my head as I waited for the perfect moment to spring it on her once again.

My parents threw a party at the new house to welcome my new baby sister into the family. The typical guest list trickled in; Grandma, Grandpa, Uncle Mark and his Kids, Tia and Slade. They were both a few years older than me, so I made sure to wear something that didn't show my age too much. The "BIG SISTER" shirt my mom laid out for me wasn't going to cut it for this visit. The plan to act older and experience life was still in motion and if I was going to fit in with my cousins I had to act the part. I changed out of my long flowing Pocahontas night gown and put on my favorite pair of jean overalls and a D.A.R.E. t-shirt I got from school: clearly the "hippest" choice.

As Tia walked into the house, I ran right past my uncle and grabbed her arm, pulling her up the stairs with me.

"Nice to see you too, Jessie!" my uncle yelled up the stairs after us. I locked the door behind us, a feature I loved about the new house, shutting out all the "ooohs" and "aaahs" that babies provoke in grown-ups. As soon as the door closed, Slade was on the other end, drumming away at the wood to get let in.

I always envied the relationship my cousins had. Neither of the two craved the spotlight, so they were alright with sharing. Because they were so close in age, they did everything together. I was ten, Tia was twelve, and Slade thirteen. They spent the whole time at my house telling me about their escapades around their neighborhood, giggling and speaking in hushed tones to prevent the adults from hearing. I just sat silently listening to their stories, trying to live vicariously through their adventures.

This visit did nothing but add fire to my flaming desire to get away. Setting my mind on a rampage, my plan was in place. I would spend my weekends with my cousins, letting my free flag fly and becoming the pre-teen I was convinced I needed be. My mom wasn't opposed to the idea, probably because she had had enough of my weekly rants about how much I hated watching Barney repeats and unenthusiastically reciting the clean up song with Aubrey as we picked up *her* messes.

I looked at the weekend visits to my uncle's as luxurious vacations, regardless of the fact that it was less than a ten-minute drive. I would spend all of the school week counting down the seconds until Saturday morning came when my uncle's Pontiac Grand Am would pull into the driveway to take me away from the nonstop baby crying that filled every room of my home.

The horn on the car beeped excessively as Slade sat in the passenger seat reaching over my uncle and laying on the steering wheel to rush me out the door, which only made the baby cry more. I didn't care as I ran out and leaped into the back seat next to Tia.

The second I got into the car I started doing my research, asking each of them what they had done all week, what the new best songs were and examining their clothes to make sure the "hot" styles hadn't changed. I pretended to be on par with them, agreeing with all their answers like I had any idea what they were before they said them. "So did you hear that new song!?" I would ask questions just broad enough to evoke an answer I could connect to and ride with.

There was a noticeable difference between my cousins' neighborhood and mine. Surrounding my house was freshly paved, busy streets lined with tacky chain restaurants and at least four supermarkets within a five-mile radius. There were cars lining the parking lots of each plaza and barely any sign of pedestrians. Driving through town to get to my Uncle's house was a digression of consumerism. Once we reached the neighborhood my cousins lived in it was all small businesses, city schools, people on their front porches and one 7-11 on the corner before their street. The flashy green, red and orange neon sign stood out amongst the Ma and Pa diner and independent beauty salon that

shared the plaza space.

I spent most of my time with Tia, listening to her new favorite songs on the computer, creating weird food concoctions and making up dance videos with her friends. It was typical that we would stay up until the late hours of the morning, sometimes just neglecting sleep all together. Like clockwork, at 3am my eyes would flutter as I pretended to pay attention to our weekly ritual television marathon. From Saturday morning to Sunday afternoon, it was all Degrassi, all the time.

"Oh. My. God. I cannot believe she just said that!" Tia would gasp as one of the main characters did or said something ridiculous. I pretended to be paying attention, straightening my back and drastically widening my eyes to clear the look of exhaustion off my face. She saw right through it every time.

"You're staying awake, Jessie!" She would harshly whisper as she shuffled into the kitchen, opening the fridge quietly so no one knew we were eating at 3am. Her way of keeping me awake and alert was to add a couple spoonfuls of sugar to my Coca Cola, tricking me into a sugar high that had me back on my feet in no time, sliding around the hardwood floors of the kitchen to the light sounds of the Spice Girls.

When Slade hung out with us, we tried to tailor our activities to be more gender neutral. We would spend hours in the dimly lit back room stacking Legos, creating miniature cities of skyscrapers. Without fail, as I marveled in my elaborate creation, Slade would swoop in and attack the tallest Lego sculpture with one of his foam swords. The multi-colored, shiny plastic blocks flew in every direction, hitting the wooden television stand and covering the floor.

"Sladeeee-aaahhhh," I groaned. I always showed my age when I would get upset, failing to hold back tears while the two of them laughed at the mess on the floor.

"Heeeh-Heeeh!" Slade had a unique laugh that he reserved to use for mocking me. He was never out to maliciously upset me, more to cause a stir and spice things up. Taunting me was his own way of showing he cared, plus the more I reacted to his teasing, the more time he seemed to spend with Tia and I. To me it was a win-win, even though my Lego creations had to suffer the consequences.

In the summer we spent all our time outside, not really doing much of anything. Tia and Slade had their set group of friends and they were slowly warming up to the idea of having their own personal Michelle Tanner following them around. The neighborhood was our playground and there wasn't a square inch we hadn't visited. I would hop on the pegs of Slade's bike and ride wherever they would take me,

sometimes ending up in the darkness of the woods under a sky full of trees. Typically, this is when I would start begging to go back to the safety of the streets. I was never an adventurous kid, but when I was with them I had to at least try to be.

Tia had plans to be out all day rehearsing for her dance recital the following week. With a couple hours to spare before my mom's usual 2:30 pick up time, my heart was set on joining Slade in whatever escapades he and his friend Larry had planned. My problem was that I didn't know how to approach the situation in a subtle way that didn't make me seem too eager and kiddish. I had hung out with Slade and his friends before but up until this particular day Tia was around to "up my cool".

I watched from the kitchen table as the boys slipped on their almost identical DC Skater shoes and headed towards the door.

"HEY! Can I come!?", I blurted out. The boys paused a second before turning around; I can only assume they took the extra second to roll their eyes and prepare for one of my long rambling proposals. After ten minutes of moaning and groaning, Slade finally agreed to let me be his temporary shadow for the afternoon.

He spit into his hand and waved it in front of my face, I followed his lead, hiding my urge to slap it away. A spit shake to seal the deal, promising I wouldn't be in the way. Our slimy palms shook and after a second I pulled mine away, wiping the remaining wetness on my ratty jean overalls.

"You better not break it like last time, kid," Slade said as he glared into my eyes. "It'll be like I'm not even there! But you'll want me there because I promise it will be like I'm not! Cause I won't be annoying. Promise!" Him and Larry shared a look of regret.

With his approval I ran to the front porch and stared at my shoe options, taking them all into deep consideration. I could go one of two ways. Choose the sensible, but super nerdy, shining new sneakers my mom has just bought me for "back to school" season or go for Tia's unsteady, worn out wedges that I constantly begged her to borrow. Naturally, I chose the latter, and unsteadily ran back out to the living room where Slade and Larry were slumped into the couch, impatiently waiting.

Trying to mask the extra bounce in my step, I followed them out the door and walked towards the hot summer sun. The chains attached to Slade's jeans clinked around as we all walked past the perfectly usable sidewalk and into the middle of the street. I was used to ignoring the sidewalk

when I was with them, “living on the edge” as they called it. Of course I would never be seen walking in the middle of the street with my mom around in fear of being yelled at or forbidden to return to Uncle Mark’s. After a couple minutes of walking a half step behind the boys, and occasionally interjecting with a gasp reaction to the swear words flowing from their mouths, we reached uncharted territory: the abandoned railroad tracks that lined the end of the neighborhood.

We had walked through the tracks more times than I could count on our way to the park, but never for more than a quick pass through. Moss and greenery tore through the rusted tracks that were once run by Rochester city trains. We usually just ran across to save time, so when Slade and Larry started walking down the tracks rather than through, I was hesitant. The uneven gravel lining the railroad tracks was the worst possible platform for the one-size-too-big wedge shoes I so stupidly decided to wear; the balancing game alone was exhausting. I could feel my fair skin turning red from the hot sun ahead. Poorly crafted, fading graffiti lined the walls of the tracks, showcasing words and symbols foreign to my youthful, naive eyes. The further we walked, the more intense my internal panic attack got. I could feel my heart rate drastically rise with every step I took towards the cracked bridge up ahead. Realistically, we didn’t walk more than a quarter-mile down the tracks, but to a petrified ten year old, this was States away from home.

Breaking my spit shake promise, I let out a wail and begged Slade to take me back. *Bad move, Salamone. Very bad move.* Already annoyed with me tagging along and stepping on the heels of their shoes, Slade and Larry had had enough of babysitting. They led me to the back of one of those gray, rusty oversized garbage cans I was used to seeing as the setting of a murder on Law and Order.

“Wait. Here,” Slade said slowly, spacing out the words like I didn’t understand English. Those two simple words lingered in my mind as I watched the boys jog away from me. I was left sitting in the boxy shadow of people’s garbage. Not exactly how I wanted to spend my last couple hours at Uncle Mark’s.

My first instinct was to look around, wishing I had left a breadcrumb trail leading me back to my Uncles’. My eyes darted from left to right, up and down as I tried to remember which tree I walked past and which street would best lead me to the safety of my uncle’s couch. Once I came to the realization that escape was not in the cards for me, fear set in and it came with a heavy dose of tears, showing my age once again.

I sat forcefully against the garbage can, trying to become one with it so no one could see me. I let my

thoughts get the best of me as I imagined the endless possibilities of things that COULD have happened to me as I waited for Slade and Larry to return. I thought back to every scary movie I had ever shielded my eyes from, wishing I had watched to learn some survival skills. The scenarios my imagination made up were elaborate to say the least. A dirty homeless man with one tooth, hit by the passing train, or my favorite, abducted by aliens, could take me. That idea was taken from "Signs", a sci-fi mystery movie Tia and Slade had made me see in theatres with them weeks earlier.

What felt like hours ended up being only minutes and finally the clattering sounds of Slade's chains lifted me out of the fetal position. I looked up to see the two boys racing towards me. With shit eating grins on their faces and two brown paper bags full of sour patch kids, the boys pushed each other around, laughing about something funny that had happened on the way there. The worst part, worse than my full fledged panic attack or my chronic nightmares from that point on was that if I had just sucked it up and walked a little further I would have avoided all the fears of death and ended up at the candy shop a block away. I wiped the tears from my cheeks and stood up straight, leaving the safe haven underneath the garbage can I had created for myself.

I didn't mention the dangerous adventure to my mom as she drove me home from my uncle's that day. The safe bubble of home that I dreaded just days earlier seemed so much more appealing now. Not even the rumble of Aubrey's clunky feet kicking my seat bothered me. As we pulled into our driveway, my eyes once again fixated on the shady ground underneath the tree out front. I exited the car and headed towards the tree. Sprawling out on the slightly chilled ground and letting the swaying shadow of the branches protect my overtired body, I was safe.

The Zen of It
K.M. Alleena

Some healers tell me
via little quotes
that I am not alone –
never alone –
if I befriend myself.

But poets are
unaware
of their own deepest
secrets –
the ones tiny words
hint at –

And when we see them,
we cry; then we write
to comfort ourselves –
and so there is balance.

Hybrid
David Swift



Sad Owl
Allie Rhode



Teatime in Chinatown

Julie Schofield

We bring our birds
In cages to sit
Above our heads
For teatime in the sun

They chirp, whistle, mutter
Float, flap and flutter
Birds in cages above our heads
To sit for the sun in teatime

Everywhere we go
Our birds in cages
Sit inside our heads
Chirp, whistle, flutter, float, flap, and mutter

Moving through the city clamorous
No longer in the teatime sun

Evolution
Shelby Coyle

Pallet Town

“Charmander, I choose you!” The little girl cried.

“Rrrraaaaaahh!” The man leapt out in front of her, snarling at a half-dead cherry tree.

The little girl giggled “It’s over there,” and pointed at a patch of grass to his right. The man quickly corrected himself and roared at the appropriate target.

“Use Scratch!”

The man rushed ahead and clawed at the air.

“Quick, get out of the way!”

He dropped, rolled off to the side, and sprang back up.

“He’s using Tail Whip! Scratch him when he gets in close!”

The man obliged.

Vermilion City

“Look at my little trainer. Guess you’re not so little anymore, huh?”

The girl smiled and slammed the trunk closed. She was all packed up and ready to go, keys jangling as they dangled from her fingers.

“Guess not,” she said as she turned around.

“Right, well, you be sure to come back and visit your old Charmander once in a while, you hear?”

“I don’t have a Charmander anymore,” the girl said. “You’re at *least* a Charmeleon by now.”

She stepped forward into his open arms.

Lavender Town

“Well, I guess this is it,” the woman said, looking down at the ground. “The end of our run. You got me through the Elite Four. You made me a Champion.”

She blinked the water out of her eyes and read the stone again. Name, dates, and the carved inscription underneath. *Loving husband and father.*

“See you around, Charizard,” she whispered.

She placed her flowers at the grave and turned away.

Lagoon Love
Shanna Fuld

She told him she was a mermaid
In the black lagoon,
The sailor could barely see her scales
in his boat under the phosphorous moon

The mermaid's tail would never shed,
And the sailor could stay no longer,
Turning around and bidding her goodbye
She darted after, but his motor was stronger

Long days passed and she sat idle
Waiting to spy his face.
She wiggled her fins and looked around
But no one new could replace.

Please come back she thought
And dance with me
In the still of the Jordan heat
Even the thought set her free

One day the sailor- oh he did return
Returned to the shore of the lagoon
To find his dainty poor maiden, but
Her death had come too soon

Salt

Amy Lipsky

Drowning is a horrible word. When humans think of the word drowning they think of how easily it is for them to suffocate by water; how their lungs ache, stretch, and scream for air while their vision comes and goes like the tide. Yes, drowning is a horrible word, but not what comes after.

Ha. Mortals, they spend their entire lives trying to find reasonable explanations for every aspect of the universe. Mortals. Always missing what is right in front of them.

Drowning? Yeah, it sucks. I've gone through it, we all have. We all know. But this life is much better than mortality. This life is worth the risk of drowning. For once you die by the sea's hand, the ocean claims you for eternity.

I admit, it can be terrifying at first. You drown and you know you're dying. You can feel whatever it is that keeps you animated and alive being squeezed out of your lungs. And then, just when you think it's all over, once you think you've finally died, you wake up on the ocean floor. You wake up as a Mercreature. When you find out that we devoured your human soul, as it is our only food source, you may think it's morbid. You may hate us. You may loathe yourself. You will try to drown yourself by the land, except you can't. You're pathetic if you think that you can give your soulless self over to Death herself, whom only wants your soul to begin with. Death will no longer bother you, for you have nothing to offer her. You are one of us. You are a Mer. You might refuse to take part in our diet at first, remembering how you felt when you woke up; suddenly able to breathe underwater with a tail melded to your hips. You might find disgust in us when our mother ocean brings down an entire ship so she can feed our rumbling tummies. You might find it a monstrosity that when the full moon rises we grow legs and are able to hunt the land by night, drawing frustrated sailors or lonely widows into the water's depths. You might find our virescent eyes unnatural. But I promise this - you will succumb to your new nature. You will feed with us. You will embrace the way of the Mer. You are, after all, one of us now. There is no turning back for you.

#

It was Alba's first full moon. She was young, hardly seventeen. She was beautiful, with deep red hair and (when she was human) brilliant green eyes that shyly hid behind a curtain of eyelashes. For the first few days of her transformation, the She-Mers couldn't get enough of Alba's red hair.

Our own little mermaid, they squealed, swimming circles around Alba's head. They soon grew bored of the joke. They soon grew bored of Alba whose voice came out in barely a bubble, and red hair captured the attention of every He-Mer in the tribe. Humans might call the emotion jealousy, but a Mercreature would never admit to it.

Jealous or not, Alba was their sister by their own accord.

They were the ones that drowned her, after all. On a pontoon boat with her family, Alba had jumped into the ocean after her baby brother Benji and fell overboard. Benji survived seemingly completely unscathed. Alba, however, was never found.

Now it was nearly a month later and Alba was anxiously awaiting the full moon. Her back muscles were sore from the weight of her new periwinkle tail. When she asked if she could see her family on the full moon, the other girls laughed so hard that they cried.

No, no, Sasha said, trying to catch her breath. Even if you went to see them, they wouldn't recognize you. The human minds are feeble and easily influenced. They think you're dead, so you're dead. They'll see a resemblance to their lost daughter, but they will never believe it's you. It's simply impossible.

Are there others like us? Other supernatural beings? Alba had asked as Leila braided sea stars into her hair.

Of course, silly. You didn't think we were the only ones, did you?

What else is there? Alba asked, leaning forward to hang onto Leila's every word.

Hmm, Leila frowned, her bow-shaped lips turning down into a pout. Vampires, of course. Werewolves — they're practically family considering the fact that they're half animal as well. There are fairies and elves, witches and warlocks.

Can they turn me back into being human? Alba asked, causing Leila to giggle.

Of course not. Alba, you're dead. We ate your soul. That's the circle of life.

It hardly seemed like *the circle of life* to Alba, whom had always thought that Mercreatures were a thing of lore and fairy-tales. It was still hard to grasp the fact that she was a thing of mythology. It was hard to accept the fact that she was expected to, not only drown an innocent human, but to suck their soul out as food. It was sickening despite her ever-rumbling tummy.

We were all as innocent as you once, Sasha said, sunning her brown skin in the summer sun, her golden tail flicking drops of sunshine onto her He-Mer's face as he stared at her adoringly. *I didn't want to feed on anyone either. But that changes with the full moon. The full moon does things to us. It lets the wild side out. We confuse our hunger for sex and when daylight breaks, well . . .* She trailed off laughing, reaching down to caress her He-Mer's cheek with her webbed hand, sending a shiver down Alba's spine. Yes, she may be called innocent, but she could never do what the rest of her new family expected of her; to seduce and to kill. No, Alba was not like the rest of them. At least, that's what she tried to convince herself as she watched the full moon rising above the ocean.

Do you feel it? Shane asked, scooting up onto the boulder next to her.

I do, Alba admitted. It was a stirring low in her abdomen, tugging her towards the land.

Come with us, Alba, Shane encouraged, taking her hand, slowly lowering himself back into the ocean. *Come play with us.* And so she did.

Their hands interlocked, Shane led Alba to a hidden cove where she was greeted by the rest of her pod, their alien eyes fixated on the land.

How does it work? She whispered, to which Shane put one finger up to her lips, nodding in the direction of the shore. Leila was the first to go — she beached herself on the sand basking in the full moon's light and as she stretched her upper body up towards the moon she shook her scales loose, shedding her tail to reveal two long human legs. She stood, laughing and dancing naked in the full moon.

Come my sisters, my brothers, she giggled, twirling around. *Tonight we are free. Tonight we feast.*

#

It was easy getting used to having legs again. Alba grinned in the light of the moon, caressing her soft legs and squealing with delight as her toes curled around the sand. Leila handed her a worn sundress from a trunk hidden behind a boulder.

Well we can't exactly walk around naked. Leila said with a laugh at Alba's confused look causing her to blush. Of course they couldn't walk around naked. Alba had gotten so used to being topless underwater that she had nearly forgotten about the basic human norms.

Let's go dancing, Leila said, grabbing Alba's hand and dragging her through the woods. The Mercreatures, now human, giggled and stumbled their way through the woods that surrounded their secret cove. They sectioned off in groups, Alba sticking close by Leila's side as they came out from the woods and into the outskirts of a small city.

Won't they suspect? Alba asked in a hushed tone as they sniffed the air for a crowd of mortal blood.

Humans are stupid. Shane replied, tickling Alba's side. *Come. I can hear music.*

They danced barefoot through the streets, howling at the moon like baby werewolves.

Magic is everywhere, Leila giggled to Alba as they came across a bar, its music leaking out onto the streets. They burst into the bar, much to the dismay of the several vampires that Leila pointed out to Alba.

Let us feast, Shane growled, and off they went, each to their own, sniffing out the weak minded that weren't already being hunted by a supernatural.

Werewolf, Leila whispered, nodding towards a girl with a silver aura around her. The werewolf's eyes locked with Alba's and she gave the She-Mer a toothy grin.

This is unreal, Alba replied, letting Leila drag her to the bar. The humans were completely oblivious to the creatures in the room. Alba watched in fascination as Leila slid up next to a human man, drawing him in with her eyes.

Its easy, Shane said.

Do we just . . . Kill them?

We can't kill them when we have legs. Instead we feed off of the sex, which is basically just a midnight snack for us. Not nearly as satisfying as their soul. But if they should follow us to the ocean in the morning, well, that's when we drown them. Shane laughed at Alba's horrified expression, patting her on the head like a child before leaving to find his victim for the night.

It was about an hour before he walked in. He came in with the rest of his crew. It was their first night home after their two-month long voyage. Alba didn't even have to turn around. She knew he was it. She could hear his soul singing to her from the doorway. Mercreature lore had it that the Mer would sing to the sailors from the sea, making the seamen go mad, causing them to jump into the ocean straight into the waiting arms of who would be their killer. But they were wrong, Alba realized as she slowly turned away from the bar. Instead it was the humans who sung to the Mer. The human soul hypnotized the creatures into a trance. A hungry, begging trance. How could no one else hear it, she wondered as she watched him laughing with his friends. How could no one else crave him like she did? He looked up then, locking eyes with her and she blushed, dropping her gaze.

"He's quite the catch," a raspy voice said from next to her. Alba looked up to see the girl werewolf that Leila had pointed out earlier. "He's the apple of every human eye in here. Even some of the lads adore him. He's the most skilled sailor this town has ever had. Fearless, strong and easy on the eyes. Any captain would be glad to have him on his ship." The werewolf gave Alba her toothy grin. "Feast, little She-Mer. I can hear your tummy rumbling from down the street.

The werewolf swayed her hips to the beat of the live band and sashayed her way across the dance floor, winking over her shoulder at Alba as the man with the singing soul made his way over to the She-Mer.

"Hello," a voice said a second later. The singing was louder now, vibrating the hair on the back of her neck, seeping into her every pore. She didn't need to look up to know it was him.

"Hello," she replied back.

"I saw you," he began to explain. "From across the room. I saw you and thought I've never seen anything more lovely in my entire life." Alba bit her lip to keep from smiling. "I'm Peter."

#

And so it began. They got drunk off of the cheap beer, laughing loudly and dancing wildly around the bar. As Peter twirled her around and around Alba caught Leila's approving eye and smug grin, but she ignored it in her drunken state. Despite the singing radiating out from his soul, being with Peter made Alba feel normal.

"I've never met anyone like you," Peter whispered, brushing his lips against her neck. "You're intoxicating. Come, come home with me. Come with me."

After they made love in the small bed of Peter's rented room, Alba traced his lips with her fingertips, her body vibrating with the pleasure of finally being fed. Earlier she had been human drunk.

Now, after feeding off of his orgasms and moans of pleasure, Alba was drunk off of something much stronger, much more satisfying.

"Tell me about your life," Peter requested softly.

"I saved my baby brother once," Alba offered. "He fell overboard and I jumped in after him." It was all she could offer to him. Memories from her human life were still too painful to remember. Peter was silent for a bit, stroking Alba's hair gently.

"My parents drowned when I was very young," he finally said.

"Shockingly enough they were pirates." Peter laughed, shaking his head. "I was on the ship with them. I couldn't have been older than five. A storm was brewing and a wave came over the edge of the boat. My mother fell overboard first and my father jumped in after her. I just remember screaming for them. I was so scared. My father's first mate grabbed me and kept me from jumping over the edge of the ship. He retired from the pirate life after the incident to raise me with his wife and their two other sons." Peter stared off into the distance, twisting her long red hair around one finger.

"How are you not afraid of the ocean after that?" Alba asked.

"It's not the ocean I'm terrified of." He looked down at her, brushing his thumb along her cheekbone. "If I tell you something, do you promise not to dub me crazy?"

"Of course," Alba promised, cuddling her body closer to Peter's human warmth.

"Something in the water took my parents." There was a long silence as Alba tried to calm her churning stomach.

"What do you mean?" she hardly whispered.

"I saw it, Alba. Call me young, tell me I made it up in my head but I know I saw something take my parents. They were huge, with massive fishtails. They snatched my parents from the surface and dragged them under. One tried to grab me." Peter flipped moved his arm into the light of the full moon, revealing four, long scars on his forearm. "It dug its fish-hook nails into me and tried to drag me under.

"What was it? Peter what was it?" Alba stared at him with wide eyes, a cold chill dripping down her spine.

"Mermaids."

Fear settled deep into the pit of Alba's stomach. She was afraid that if she spoke she would scream. Instead she sang him lullabies that her Mersisters sang to her when she first turned, ancient songs about the ocean. He fell asleep with a smile on his lips, his lilac eyelids closed against the world.

Too soon Alba could feel the tugging, the magnetic pull that was drawing her back to the ocean. It was time for her to return to her rightful place. She kissed Peter's eyelids, his cheeks, his lips, and left a small starfish that had been woven into her hair on the pillow next to him before sneaking out into the street.

It was the time of day where all the mortals were sleeping. Even the insomniacs, whom were under the impression that they never slept, were dreaming at this hour. It was the hour of the call. The full moon was sinking below the horizon, her sister, the sun, chasing right after it.

Alba watched the vampires slinking back into the dark of the forest, the werewolves going home to their packs. As she walked towards the forest Alba decided not to tell her sisters and brothers about Peter's tale. She knew they would make her kill him, and that was just something Alba couldn't fathom. At the edge of the forest, sitting on a rock, Leila was waiting for her dear sister Alba, her hair a mess and the imprint of a hand around her neck.

What happened? Alba asked, reaching up to touch the bruises.

I like it rough, Leila replied, her eyes glowing in the near dusk. *Come on. It won't be long now.*

The girls sank back into their waters right as the first rays broke over the horizon. The Mercreatures were quiet as they watched the sunrise, resting their aching bodies and rubbing their swollen tummies.

How'd our little mermaid do, Sasha asked as her He-Mer brushed the tangles out of her hair. *I'm assuming by the blush in your cheeks you fed quite well last night.*

His name was Peter, Alba sighed, her unnatural eyes lighting up with lust. *His soul was singing to me.* Sasha and her He-Mer laughed.

Well Peter sure is in trouble, Sasha's mate said. It was the first time Alba had ever heard him talk. He was glued to Sasha like a barnacle. He wasn't just her mate — he was her servant.

Marcus's soul sang to me once upon a time ago, Sasha added. *Of course, that was when he had a soul.* Alba couldn't quell the chill that rippled down her spine and so she sank beneath the surface, floating down to the seaweed beds, dreaming of Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter . . .

#

Do you hate her for what she did to you? Alba asked Marcus one night as they floated on their backs, watching a meteor shower. It had only been a week and a half since the full moon, and already Alba was craving Peter. The lust growing inside of her was worse than the hunger. Leila claimed it was the rising heat — it made all the hormones crazy. But Alba shook her head, claiming it was something other than science.

I don't know, Marcus replied. *I don't remember much about being human except the nights I spent with her. Sasha was a Mercreature long before I came into her life, but mine was the first soul that ever sang to her. The elders say that when a human soul sings to you like my soul sang to Sasha, like Peter's sings to you, there's really no other choice than to turn them. It's not just you that's hypnotized, Alba. He's probably starving himself over you right now.*

The thought of Peter in pain because of her only intensified Alba's sorrow. She swam as close as she dared to the shorelines, to the ships in the harbors in hopes of catching a glimpse of Peter.

What if he's not there next full moon? Alba whispered while she sunned her back in the sun with the rest of her sisters.

He will be, Sasha assured her. *He doesn't have a choice.*

And she was right. Finally, after weeks of waiting, it was time for the full moon. The Mer waited anxiously in the cove, hovering just below

the surface, waiting for the full moon to rise. As soon as it cleared the horizon, Alba rode the waves onto shore, kicking the scales from her tail loose with her newly formed legs. She could hear her brothers and sisters following her lead behind her as she pushed open the hidden trunk full of clothes.

Ready? Leila asked as Alba adjusted the dress around her shoulders. She grinned, unable to hide her excitement. Hardly breathing at all, Alba and Leila moved swiftly through the woods, leaving their siblings far behind them.

This is it, Alba said with a shiver, her hand on the handle of the door that would open into the bar where she had first met Peter. Leila smiled encouragingly as Alba swung the door open, stepping into the threshold. Immediately, the singing began. It was stronger than she remembered; the song slipped over Alba's skin, raising her flesh into goosebumps, sending shivers down her spine.

He's here, she whispered, just before spotting him at the bar. She walked up next to him, slipping onto the bar stool beside him. He was hunched over his beer, eyes half closed. He looked tired; unshaven hair was growing above his upper lip and around his chin. Alba could see dark circles forming under his eyes.

"Peter," she said, reaching out to touch him. He turned, ocean-blue eyes dull, but once they registered Alba's face they lit up like the stars in the sky.

"Is it really you?" He asked, reaching out to touch her hair.

"It is, I promise," she replied, brushing the darkened bruises under his eyes with her thumb.

"I missed you," he whispered as her fingers trailed down to his lips. "Come back to me," his breath gentle on the pads of her fingers.

They didn't waste time at the bar this time. They were both far too hungry to care for the weak alcohol. Instead they went back to Peter's rented room, getting to know each other again after their long hiatus. She relished in how it felt to run her fingers down his muscular stomach, her fingers tugging at his chest hair. Peter's fingers cascaded down her spine, reaching down to pull those magnificent legs around his waist, kissing her with a hunger that could equal the one Alba felt rocking through her body the nights before the full moon rose again.

"Where were you this whole time? I searched for you. I looked everywhere. I thought you left me for good." His hands trembled as he pulled her warm body closer to his own.

"I can't explain it. I can only come on the full moon." Her eyelashes brushed against his cheek and he shivered at the touch.

"Why?"

"I can't explain it." She said with a smile.

"You're so mysterious, Alba," Peter said with a smile. "Can you sing to me again?"

"Of course my love." Both human and Mer closed their eyes, drifting away in the current of Alba's Mer songs. Her voice bubbled like a hidden creek, taking Peter to a place he never knew existed.

"Where did you learn that? I've never heard anything like it." He

whispered, his head resting upon her bosom.

"Something my sisters used to sing."

"I didn't know you had sisters."

"I have many sisters, Peter."

"Tell me about them."

"Can I tell you about my brother instead? Benji was so full of life. So full of youth. There's something beautiful in that, Peter. There's something so beautiful about your eyes lighting up with life."

"Was?" Peter asked, confused. "Did something happen to him?" Alba smiled sadly, shaking her head.

"Something happened to *me*."

#

Morning was on the horizon. Alba could feel it in her marrow — she needed to get back soon.

"Sleep," she whispered to Peter, kissing his earlobe. "Sleep and be rested. I'll be back the night of the next full moon."

"Don't leave me," he begged, fighting the overwhelming urge to shut his eyes and sleep through the next month.

"Sshhh." Her voice was like the waves on the shore. "Sssshhhh" — in come the waves. "Sssshhhh" — out go the waves. And so he slept.

The withdrawals from his soul were worse this time. Alba spent hardly any time underwater, choosing instead to lay upon the rocks of the cove, sunning her jeweled tail in the strong sunlight, writing songs about love in the sand.

Just because we cannot die doesn't mean we cannot suffer, Sasha said one day.

How long did you last? Alba asked her.

Three moons. I lasted three full moons before turning him into what he is now. I act like it was nothing, that the cravings weren't ripping through my body like they are for you. But trust me, dear Alba. They did. Marcus almost died because of me. He stopped eating and sleeping . . . He threatened to kill himself if I left him alone like that again. So I took him to the ocean with me. Believe me when I say that feeding off of his soul was both spectacular and disgusting at the same time.

Alba was quiet for a bit, watching the gulls pass overhead.

I don't have a choice, do I? If he chooses death because of me . . . I don't have a choice.

No. No you don't have a choice. Come with me. I want you to meet somebody. Sasha slipped her webbed hand into Alba's and guided her back down into the ocean.

They swam down to where the nurse sharks were dozing, gliding past them and coming to a small underwater cave. Alba followed Sasha inside, her eyes adjusting the dim lighting and what she saw made her cry out in fear.

Curled up in the center of the cave were the remains of a Mercreature. Her skin was hanging loose from her bones, her white hair dead and lifeless, and her tail . . . Her tail was the worst part. Her tail had been sucked dry of any color it could have possibly had. Instead it was stark white, nearly glowing the dark lighting. Scales littered the area around where she was sitting. She must have been here for a very, very long time.

Suddenly, the She-Mer looked up, locking eyes with Alba. Even her eyes were dull and lifeless.

Mercreatures can't die, Sasha repeated. *But they can suffer.*

What happened? Alba asked, resting on the ocean floor next to the She-Mer.

If you don't turn him, this is what you'll be, Sasha explained, speaking for the immobilized creature. *She gave him a choice to be a Mer. He got scared and chose to end his own life instead. Couldn't bear the thought of being with something other than a human.*

The lifeless She-Mer stared straight into Alba's eyes, her mouth moving.

I'm sorry? I can't hear you, Alba said. The She-Mer crooked one finger at Alba, beckoning her to come closer.

Kill him.

#

The ghost of a She-Mer was called Serena. She had been on that ocean floor for as long as anyone could remember. The rumors say that she showed her lover who she really was, and it broke his end of the curse. It scared the desire right out of him.

For the first time since meeting Peter, Alba was dreading the full moon. She knew that their love would only result in one thing — death.

Early one morning, with the tale of Serena's heartache weighing heavy on her mind, Alba sought out a pod of dolphins to clear her mind. She twisted and leapt with the creatures, laughing with ease for the first time since meeting Serena. Suddenly, the dolphins switched directions and began moving in the opposite direction of which they were headed for. Alba peered into the blue, noticing a boat floating towards her. She darted underneath its shadow to conceal herself and she noticed that the closer she got to the boat, the louder a barely audible humming became.

Could it be, she wondered, her curiosity clouding her judgment. She quietly surfaced behind the small boat to peek at its captain. The telltale humming proved itself true, even underwater. Sitting in the middle of the boat, casting his fishing pole was none other than Alba's dear lover Peter with one of his favorite crew members. Unable to hide her excitement, Alba gasped, just loud enough for Peter to hear and turn his head in her direction. Alba disappeared below the water's surface, hiding herself underneath the bottom of the boat once again. She could see Peter's reflection leaning off of the side of the boat, his eyebrows furrowed.

"What is it?" Peter's friend asked from above the surface.

"I thought I saw . . ." Peter began. "No. No, it couldn't have been. I haven't seen one since . . . I thought I had made them up."

"Drink some water, Peter," his friend suggested, laughing. "Either dehydration or love is making you crazy."

There's no way he recognized me, Alba assured herself, but her gut still insisted on twisting from nerves. She didn't tell a soulless creature about her near encounter. She knew the rules – if they see you, they become one. Instead, Alba waited for the moon, hiding in the confinements of the reef. Time moved on. The tides kept changing. The moon grew fuller and fuller with each passing night. The whales kept singing and the world kept spinning. The full moon rose . . . And everything seemed to stop.

Alba went through the motions; she shed her tail and picked out a simple dress that was two sizes too big. She followed her sisters and brothers through the forest, breaking free into Peter's village. She found herself outside of the tavern with a heavy heart. But when she opened the door and heard the singing of Peter waiting for her, the stories no longer mattered.

He looked better than the last time she saw him; he had shaved and looked as though he was eating again. He looked . . . Happy. For a moment Alba paused, wondering if he needed her anymore. If somehow, by hearing Serena's tale, the cursed desire had been broken. But, as though she were the one singing to him, Peter turned and saw Alba in the threshold, and smiled.

She put off going home with him for as long as possible, but soon it became too much. She wanted to feel his arms around her, wanted to feel his heart beating in his chest. She wanted to feel the warmth of a human and her body longed for the cravings to be filled.

"You look better," Alba commented as Peter cradled her in his arms.

"I've been busying myself with a mission of sorts."

"A religious mission?"

"No," Peter said gravely. "A hunting mission. I saw one of those creatures in the water the other day. One of the ones I told you about. The kind that took my mother." Alba could feel her heart sinking into her stomach.

"What did you see?" She whispered, remembering how Peter had looked in her direction when she had been watching him fish.

"A mermaid. An abomination."

"Peter!" Alba gasped, unable to hide her hurt.

"They killed my parents, Alba!" It was the first time he raised his voice to her.

"But –"

"There's nothing to protest! They killed my parents they tried to kill me! They were probably coming back for me the other day!" His voice cracked with fear. Unable to say anything more about the matter Alba pulled Peter's cheek around and kissed him, drawing him away from his nightmares.

"I often wonder if I make you up," he admitted to her a while later as he caressed those smooth legs of her. "Always coming and disappearing. So mysterious."

"I'm very real," she assured him, goose-flesh rising up from where he touched her.

"I'm in love with you, Alba", Peter said, tracing over a freckle on her thigh. "I've never been so captivated before. I would follow you to the end of the world if it meant being with you. I will love you forever."

Perhaps our dear Alba should have taken his warning. Perhaps she shouldn't of let this mortal flaw called love blind her so wildly. As the stars passed overhead and the sun grew closer and closer to breaching the horizon, Peter's breath slowed down, his eyes closing into what Alba truly believed was a peaceful slumber. So when she kissed his forehead, leaving him the tell-tale starfish that reminded him that yes, she was real, there was no way she could have known that he was only pretending to sleep.

#

He followed behind her, watching her move gracefully across the land, hiding behind the rock faces. He watched as she pushed aside a curtain of branches to reveal the cove. He waited until the branches snapped back into place and he hid behind them, watching her.

The sun was about to rise — she could feel it. She could feel the rays struggling to break the horizon; she could feel her legs drying out, shedding their human form. Alba scrambled to the top of a boulder, shedding her human clothing and without a second glance back she dove towards the ocean, her body curving in a perfect arch as the sun's shining arch breached the horizon.

Silly girl, Peter thought as he stepped out from the trees to greet his lover. He stepped to the water's edge, but what he saw terrified him to the very core. Peter watched in horror as Alba surfaced, not as the human girl he had thought he had loved, but as a hideous creature with pointed ears and gills and a fish tail where those slender legs had once been. "Alba?" He gasped in disbelief.

"Peter!" She cried, pulling a bed of seaweed to cover anything, everything up. "Peter don't look at me," she begged, her purple eyes wide with fear. He shook his head, taking a step backwards.

"It was you," he accused. "It was you, in the water that day. You were that hideous fish I saw."

"No! Peter, no! It's me, it's just Alba."

"You killed my parents!"

"No! I didn't! Peter—"

"You tried to kill me! You *demon!*"

"No!" Alba screamed, but Peter wanted to hear no more of this. Shaking his head with a disgusted look twisted upon that handsome face, Peter walked away from Alba, leaving her for a place that, for now, she couldn't reach.

She cried for hours. Despite her sisters' beckoning, despite her brothers' pleas, Alba remained tethered to the cove by her own arms,

hoping that her lover would come back for her. And he did. He came with an army, with spearguns and fishing nets. While she had been mourning her broken heart, he had been spreading rumors about the creature he had thought he had fallen in love with. He told the regulars at the pub about his story; about his parents' death, about how he had gotten the scars on his arm. About his demonic lover and how she had tried to seduce him into the sea. Word travelled fast in that small town and soon enough the pub was bursting with angry men and fearful women, listening to Peter's story, all asking for Alba's head on a platter.

"They're seductive," he told the townsfolk. "They will lie to you. They will starve you dry. They will kill your children. They are *monsters*." Some of the women who were standing close enough to him whispered that they saw a tear in his eye. Peter? Heartbroken? Betrayed? Who would do such a thing to our benevolent hero?

He came ready to capture Alba, to skin her scales and sell them as glittering jewels. He came ready to display her for all of the world to see. He came ready to destroy the human girl he had thought he had fallen in love with. Ha. Mortals. Always missing what's right in front of them. He came ready to defeat the human he knew. He came expecting a vulnerable girl. He came forgetting that the very reason he was so frightened of our dear Alba, the very reason he wanted her dead was because she wasn't human. Not in the slightest.

When she saw the sharp weapons, and the army of men that Peter brought along with him, and the hungry look in their eyes, her instincts kicked in. You see my pitiful mortals, there is no flight for a Mer-creature. There is only fight.

Her sisters and her brothers heard the call. The water was alive with Mercreatures stirring the cove, hypnotizing the men with their violescent eyes, grabbing onto their flesh with fish-hook fingernails, dragging them into the depths of the ocean, feasting on their human souls. Some claim that Alba had tried to reason with Peter, professing her love for him over and over. They say that Peter was hissing obscenities at her, lunging at her with his spear. When Peter pierced her side with his sharpened weapon, Alba, whom everyone had underestimated, even her proudest brothers, wrapped her webbed hand around Peter's ankle, dragging him slowly into the cursed water.

You promised me forever, she reminded him, her laughter resembling that of a peaceful bubbling creek. As Peter wasted his last human breath on a single-note scream, she pulled her beloved down, down to the deepest ocean floor, past the hammerheads and the Anglerfish, smothering him in darkness as she devoured his soul, keeping him as hers forever. Yes, drowning is a horrible word.

Elephant
Stephanie Arney



I Sleep with Dr. Jekyll and Wake with Mr. Hyde
Holly Greenfield

That's not entirely true; sometimes I'll get a show from them both in the middle of the afternoon.

Stiffened
Joel Dodge

Stiffened

Straightened

Dried

By heat

Mechanically

Formed to

Fit my naked feet

Twisted, crafted

Stained and Shaped

Mechanically

Formed to

Make my seat

Elegant outfit

Elegant recline

Comfort and Elegance

Sunday Divine

Through the Secret Window
Kim Kittleson



Blue Moon at the Nowhere Café

Collin Henderson

A man in a red suede suit sips caffeine while Seger serenades from the radio

The voices change, preaching the exploitation of the poor and helping the strong

He grins and thinks thoughts of perfume

The woman in the corner drags the cancer willingly into her lungs, savoring her death-bringing breath

Free from constraints of the everyday that anchors those who are creative and lucid

Dreaming of late night fun to be had when the kids are in bed

A teenager click click clicks away, not really seeing all that is happening around him

Content to be somewhere else,

Anywhere but here since the here is painful to think about. Youth always brings mundane pain

Rain starts to pitter and patter on the roof as the cook takes a gander at the waitress

Impure for sure, as it always goes when the blue of the moon falls and paints the sky

But alas, lust is sometimes unjust, nothing more than a sparkling fantasy amidst trees of thought

A young woman of about twenty six and a quarter stumbles
out the door, daring to dare the weather

Not knowing that she won't be seeing the sun rise
ever again

Since youth brings stupidity, too

Too bad that this will be forgotten one hundred years down
the road

Long after everyone here is dust in the earth
Left to the worms by their loved ones

The man in red suede leaves his tip, tipping the glass and
hat, wishing Johnny good fortune

Stepping out into the rain reminds him,
He has a date with a .38

The Blue Moon turns red
Tires pop, gunshots crack, lust explodes
And somewhere, a baby weeps to its mother

Oswego in the Winter
Allie Rhode



Things I've Broken While Drunk

K.M. Alleena

I wanted one night
to lose myself –
all my pieces –
in thoughts mixed
by a bartender
and served on the rocks.

On my best days –
the days before
you left me speechless
by the harbor
in Portsmouth –
I am no tavern patron.
I am not one
to drink away
my heartache,
my problems.

No one told me
of my antics,
except I found
evidence
scattered around me
that prove
too little grace
and too much
Irish coffee
are no sure solution.

The dishpan cracks
tell the story
of my misstepping.
By the look of it,
a muddled mind
could not tell black plastic
from black carpet.

The crystal goblet
split as it spoke
to the way I could
always pick up
my pieces;
how I never
really shattered.

It took a week for me
to find some clothing
I misplaced –
a pair of black,
mead-soaked flats
still hanging
from the lamp shade –
the purple blouse I wore
the day you walked –
and, of course,
a bra better meant
for the laundry.

If I recall,
the same song played
until I broke

the red jukebox button
clean off –
a whole bar got sick
of Ben Gibbard's voice
fast enough.

I asked for just
one more drink –
wine or rum –
one more drunken poem
scrawled on
shredding napkins –
one more moment to
forget, before
being forced to move
forward –

These broken,
misplaced things
still tell the story
of *me*, crossing
railroad tracks,
clutching fragments
of myself
to my chest.

Fractured, or whole –
lost, or found –
we'll survive this
encounter
just as we
always do.

It Could Happen

Carrie Rooker

The Future of the Weimar

The far left and right parties gathered in the hall. In the middle was the Center party. Many voices were raised in the room in argument.

“If Germany takes the offer of the Young Plan we will suffer, it will be like Versailles all over again. Germany will correct itself. Where is your faith and *German pride*?” The room was divided in debate.

“This is our chance to come back from hyperinflation! If we take the Young Plan it will boost the economy. The Americans are willing to lower reparation coast, but extend the payment period.”

“You are a fool! This will never work.”

No Cooperation

Once again the Republicans and Democrats find themselves in disagreement. No surprise there.

“You hear the government shut down,” said my friend in a concerned voice. Everyone I knew was either pissed or fearful of the situation.

“Sure did, the fuckers. This means I’m not getting paid. I have a family to feed.” My face turns hard and angry. I slam my fist on the bar table. I shouldn’t really be spending money on beer, but the government makes me want to drink.

“What do you think will happen if the Democrats and Republicans can’t come to an agreement?”

“I don’t know and I am not sure I want to find out.”

An American Reich

It’s been two years since democracy failed. The government shut down of 2013 lead to the takeover of another party, the American Nazi Party (ANP).

“Since the founding of our nation, the government has been corrupted by individuals with concern only for themselves. I am here to restore our beloved nation and give

faith to the people of America!” bellow a middle aged man into the microphone with a famous Hitler pose. There was a cheer from the crowd following a “Seig Heil”.

Following the speech was a parade. The Marines, Navy, Army and Air Force all dressed in their best clothing. They all march in step with each other to the beat of the parade music. Each branch of the military was holding the flags of their units and the new nation flag. This was the birth of new nation. Let’s hope the country won’t follow in the footsteps of Germany.

Narional Spying Agency
Anne Greco



Debt Collector
Aaron Golish

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The high-noon sun beats down on the asphalt. Heat waves that radiate off the road distort the view.

A tortoise begins to cross the road as two cars speed past. A beat up, sky blue 1980 Ford Fiesta and a black Deuce Coupe Hot-Rod with tinted windows.

CUT TO:

INT. FORD FIESTA - DAY

A greasy MAN with wild hair and fingernails bitten a tad too short wears a dingy suit. He looks frantically over his shoulder at the vehicle that pursues him. Fuzzy dice dangle from the mirror, and a deck of cards scatter around on the floor amongst empty liquor bottles and beer cans. As he hits a pothole a bunch of cigarette butts fly out of the ashtray and fling everywhere. The glass bottles clatter.

MAN

(through clenched teeth)

Shit!

He veers off the road in an attempt to lose his follower.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The Hot-Rod follows the Ford Fiesta off the road and begins to gain ground on its prey.

CUT TO:

INT. FORD FIESTA - DAY

The Man looks over his shoulder at the pursuer and doesn't notice a cactus ahead. He turns his head and successfully swerves out of the way, but slides out of control and skids on the loose dirt.

The Man looks up just in time to see the Hot-Rod slam into the side of the vehicle, which smashes both of the passenger side windows. Glass flies everywhere.

MAN
(in panic)

Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh fuck!...

The Man reaches into the back seat and grabs a large, and very full, paper bag. He throws open the car door and scurries out, but trips on his own feet.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

A door creaks open and the man freezes in fear. The door slams and the man slowly turns his head.

MAN

Big Baus sent you didn't he? I don't have the money right now, but I can pay him back. I swear!

Pleading for his life, the Man tosses the bag towards the cars. He still sits in the dirt. Some rolls of bills fall out.

MAN

Here's ten grand. I can have the rest to him in two weeks tops! Just please don't --

A SHADOWY FIGURE walks around the front of the two cars, his boots click with each step. As he catches sight of the figure, the Man stops mid sentence.

MAN
(cont'd)

Who the hell... What in the hell are you?

The shadowy figure is a skeletal being that wears a black leather jacket with fur lining and leather pants and boots. A glistening silver sickle attaches to his waist. This is the GRIM REAPER.

GRIM REAPER
(dramatically)

I am the fourth horseman of the apocalypse! The pale rider! The courier of lost souls, and the harbinger of doom. Simply put, I am Death. Or as you people like to call me, the GRIM REAPER!

The man looks a little green in the face. He turns his head and vomits.

MAN

Holy shit!

GRIM REAPER
(in a sarcastically comforting tone)

It's okay, everybody gets nervous their first time.

(in a more serious tone)

You seriously thought you could outrun me? Nobody, and I mean nobody, can outrun death. It's time for you to meet your maker.

The Reaper pulls out a ruby red Colt .45 Peacemaker from his jacket and presses it directly against the Man's forehead.

GRIM REAPER
(cont'd)

Any last words, Raymond Cooper?

MAN

Um... My name's not Raymond.

GRIM REAPER
(bewildered)

Come again?

MAN

My name's not Raymond Cooper.

He frantically digs into his pocket. He grabs his wallet and opens it to reveal a drivers license.

MAN

(pointing to the name on the license)

See! I'm TODD MILLBURN!

GRIM REAPER

Shit! I'm so sorry for the mix up.

The Reaper offers Todd a hand and helps him up. The Reaper puts the gun back into his jacket. Todd has a sigh of relief and he retrieves the bag of money.

GRIM REAPER

Again, I'm terribly sorry for the mix up. Please don't tell anyone about this. It's the job, y'know? It gets pretty stressful. Can't get it right a hundred percent of the time.

The Reaper gets back into his Hot-Rod. He pulls away from the Ford Fiesta and pulls around by Todd. He rolls the window down.

GRIM REAPER
(cont'd)

I can't exactly take a day off either. Thanks for understanding.

The Reaper begins to roll up his window to about half way.

GRIM REAPER

See you next Thursday!

The reaper rolls up his window all the way and does a burnout. The Hot-Rod vanishes in the cloud of dust. Todd drops the bag of money. He stands, mouth agape.

TODD

What!?

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - DAY

The tortoise finishes crossing the road.

FADE TO BLACK.

A Conversation Between Business Partners
Collin Henderson

Phillip sat down at the table. The restaurant was brightly lit, filled with the sounds of waiters going about their business. The large man, Wilco, walked in a moment later and sat down across from him. The waitress walked over a moment after.

“Can I get you two anything to drink?”

“Diet Coke, please,” Phil answered. He looked at Wilco, willing him to answer.

“Nothing for me, thanks,” he replied.

She walked away to fill the order. Wilco turned to Phil and said, “I expect the money to be transferred tonight.” His voice was icy cold, like that of a businessman.

“I promise, that won’t be an issue. I’ve got a guy working on it as we speak. I assume everything went smoothly?”

Wilco grinned. It wasn’t something that Phil liked to see often. “As smooth as it could have gone. Bastard had a bat. Almost nailed me when I came in.”

The waitress returned with the Coke. “All set to order?”

“I’d just like a piece of pie today. I could really use it,” Phil responded.

“Same here.” The waitress walked away.

“You know, Wilco, you’ve done a lot of jobs for me. I can always count on you to do it right. How would you feel about working for me full time?”

Wilco’s face dropped slightly. After a beat, he responded, “I prefer the freelancing style of work. It keeps me free. I can more or less do what I want, and I’m not held back by the rules of an organization.”

“That’s disheartening. I think we could use some muscle like you. You could really do a lotta good for me and mine.” Phil thanked the waitress when she put the piece of pie down in front of him. He took his fork and tore out a chunk. The taste was heavenly. “Goddamn, this place never disappoints. How are you enjoying yours?”

Wilco gave a thumbs up. When he swallowed the piece he’d eaten, he set the fork down. His hand dropped to his side. “Another thing about being a freelancer that I like is that I’m not loyal to anyone.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. I don’t need to kiss anyone’s ass or lie about

how I feel about them. Not only that, but when they know there's competition, people will pay up to get me. They know I'm one of the best there is, and they're willing to give up a lot of dough in order to get me."

"I never thought about it that way." Phil was almost done with his pie. There was only a fork full left.

"Few do. Not many people have what it takes to make it in the kind of work I do. It's why people who can do the job right are so highly valued. And just to prove it, I've taken on two jobs at once."

Phil nodded. "What's this other job?"

Wilco grinned.

"What's so funny?" Phil put the last piece in his mouth.

"Someone in your position of power makes a lot of enemies. And I mean a lot." He took a sip from his drink. Phil saw a glint in his eyes. "And these enemies can be very persuasive. Even someone like me can be charmed by them."

The rich taste of the pie turned bitter.

Uncle Sheldon
David Owens



AARON GOLISH
ALEXANDER MARCHESI
ALLIE RHODE
AMY LIPSKY
ANDREW BAUMGRAS
ANN PALLIFRONE
ANNE GRECO
CARRIE ROOKER
CASSIDY CARROLL
CHELSEA HAMLET
CHRISTIANN MILLER
CLAIRE CERRA
COLLEEN MANEY
COLLIN HENDERSON
DANI WALTERS
DAVID OWENS
DAVID SWIFT
DYLAN WOODS
GIANNA PUTRINO
HARRY CHRISTOPHER
MOORE
HOLLY GREENFIELD
JESSICA SALAMONE
JESSICA WASHAK
JOEL DODGE
JOEY KRAUS
JORDAN DEDRICK
JORDAN ROCKOWER
JULIE SCHOFIELD
K.M. ALLEENA
KIM KITTLESON
KRISTEN BURKE

**WE'RE NICE
PEOPLE**

LESLEY SEMEL
LUKE PARSNOW
LUMEN ARCANUM
MARIAN HOLMES
MICHELLE STILES
MORGAN ALTLAND
NAOMI CHALFIN
PHOEBE LAMONT
RYANN CROFOOT
SHANNA FULD
SHELBY COYLE
STEPHANIE ARNEY
TARIN BONVINO
TODD ROBERT STARK
TORI MUSCATO

