



TOWERS MAGAZINE
Issue 96

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ISSUE 96

EDITOR'S CHOICE FOR ART



Untitled, *Natalie Pivoney*

EDITOR'S CHOICE FOR FICTION

Snushkelfer

by Kara Mercer

Naomie wasn't sure what to expect when she opened the door of her grandparents, but the whiff of the old oven she remembered affixed to the kitchen wall was not it. Naomie had always loved the smell of the one-level ranch: a mixture of lavender and vanilla—a scent her grandmother always seemed to find—was heightened by the smell from what she thought were her favorite chocolate chip oatmeal cookies. Nostalgia hit Naomie like when she would wash her hands in various bathrooms and be taken back to kindergarten by the scent of mass produced soap. It had been so long since the smell of baking and promises of licking the utensils had come from that kitchen; her grandfather being the baker in the family, and he hadn't touched the oven in eight years.

She followed the smell to the kitchen where she almost expected to see the man she remembered standing in front of the stove. Instead, she saw her grandmother—very out of character in an apron embossed with a large “V”—bustling around different trays. Naomie leaned against the wall and stared in amusement, surprised she didn't smell the burning that usually accompanied her grandmother's attempts at baking.

“Hello sweetheart! Come in, come in. I didn't even hear the door.” Her grandmother was surprisingly adept at transferring the actually-good-looking-cookies she had made from the cookie sheet to the cooling rack placed on the counter. Her greying hair was piled high on her head, and her grin made Naomie smile back.

“Hey Grams, did you forget I was coming? You said to just come in.” Naomie was still having trouble processing her grandmother baking.

“Not at all dear, here would you like to be my taste tester?” As she said this, she shoved one of the cookies from a stack towards Naomie who accepted with a look of suspicion. “Don't look at them like that; they're perfectly fine.”

Braving the dessert, Naomie took a bite and stared at her grandmother in shock. The cookie practically fell apart in her mouth, and she reached for another almost perfect recreation of her grandfather's recipe. Countering with a look of smugness, her grandmother chuckled and beamed, “They're meant to be for Grandpa's birthday. I've been taking a couple classes at the community college to get them just right.”

“Oh Grams they're wonderful!” Naomie was glad her grandmother had found something to do with her time.

“Thanks sweetheart, your grandfather...” she trailed off. Her grandmother's smile dropped long enough for her to notice.

“You alright grams?”

“Yes dear, I'm alright. Your grandpa just had another one of his episodes today. I asked him if he wanted to help me bake, and I seem to have upset him. It's alright though, he'd love to see you, and he's probably in the den.” Her grandmother offered her a weak smile, and Naomie noticed how tired she looked: her normally confident posture slumped and her eyes red like she hadn't been sleeping. Naomie regretted that she hadn't been over in a couple of weeks.

Her grandmother shook her head a little and went back to transferring cookies with a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes. Before Naomie could respond, her grandmother spoke with her normal cheer, “When I finish with this batch, I'll go grab you those videos you wanted.”

Naomie tensed and tried not to show it. She forced her feet to carry her towards the den and hated how reluctant she was. It was a stark contrast to the excitement she used to feel coming over with her mother after school. Naomie would go straight for the book called *Read to me, Grandpa*. Now, he couldn't even speak in a way that she could understand; his words only came out in a jumble.

Naomie paused to look at the pencil markings on the chipped white door frame of the kitchen. The last one had been etched into the wood 8 years ago, the day before her grandfather had been in a car accident.

Naomie remembered being taken to the hospital after school. The anxiety she felt stepping through the hospital doors and seeing her grandfather lying there, cuts all over his face and a tube down his throat, was the same she felt every time she walked into a room with him since. She hated the way her heart sped up and her throat tightened. She had taken to looking at him through the mirror that had been across from him in the hospital room to counter the anxiety: she could still see him, but it was as if the person in the mirror were someone else. She found she couldn't do the same now.

Naomie noticed how dark the room was as soon as she turned the corner, and she frowned at the covering on the mirror just inside the doorway. The den was probably the most oppressive room in the house on days like these, when her grandfather took to covering every mirror in the house and not entering rooms he knew had them. The curtains were drawn, and her grandfather hadn't bothered to turn on any lights, so she was only able to see him from the glow behind the curtains and the flashing of the TV.

He was already looking at the doorway, probably hearing extra voices from the kitchen. He gave her a smirk that unsettled her. “Snushkelfer uth rof twua chaw snushkelfer” he mumbled. This was his usual greeting to her, and she wished for

the part in his brain to make the connections they would have before he'd been run off the road. The words that came out of his mouth made her shiver; they sounded like he was talking with a swollen tongue.

"Yeah, snushkelfer Grandpa." It seemed to be his favorite word. She forced the muscles in her mouth to move into what she hoped was a convincing smile. She leaned down to kiss his aging cheek, and he said nothing else.

He had stopped going to speech therapy five years ago. It seemed to make him angrier than mirrors did. The doctors said the aphasia was likely permanent. They couldn't explain it, or the occasional outbursts he had. The brain was a funny thing, and Naomie still didn't understand it any better after studying it for so long as an undergrad.

Her grandfather turned his head back to the TV, slowly, as if his head were on gears. His gaze lingered on her, making her want to bolt out of the room. Taking his averted attention as her cue to do so, she went back to find her grandmother, who was still in the kitchen dealing with several trays of cookies. Naomie didn't know what she was going to do with those cookies, since her grandfather's birthday wasn't for another week. She figured she'd get stuck taking some home, which she wasn't going to complain about.

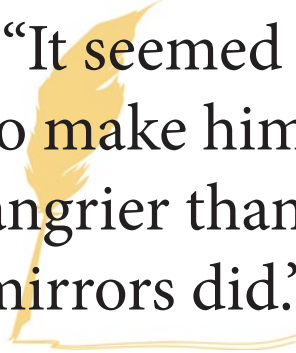
"Is this the binder, grams?" Naomie ran her hand over a black case sitting on the counter just inside the door.

"That's the one! All the CD's I've burned should be in chronological order. You can use the desk in the back room." Naomie grabbed the binder off the table. Her grandmother's soft voice stopped her in the doorway. "Naomie, thank you for doing this. It'll mean a lot to him. I know he can't say what it means...but, just, thank you."

Naomie smiled at her grandmother and gave her a little nod. She came back in to steal another cookie and headed to her grandfather's old work room.

Naomie was already half way done with the compilation of pictures and videos to celebrate her grandfather's almost 75 years of life. She'd been working on the project at home for the most part; she told herself it was because she liked the comfort of her own bed. She only needed to find a couple of videos to add to the slideshow of pictures she'd started.

Naomie stepped into the powder blue room. The first thing she noticed was a crack on the full-length mirrors that doubled as closet doors; it stretched across her reflection, distorting her face and making the dark circles under her eyes from many sleepless nights studying more apparent.



"It seemed
to make him
angrier than
mirrors did."

She settled herself at the large oak desk and opened the nearly full binder to look through all the titles. "Macie's 50th," "Naomie's Graduation," and finally "Naomie's Graduation Party" were legibly written on the CD's surface. Figuring reliving her graduation party would be a good start, she placed the CD onto the open tray of her laptop.

The videos always made her thankful she had such a great family. Her grandmother had such a talent for recording videos. She'd always find the little in-between-moments: her Aunt Macie standing in the corner of the room smiling at the party, a stolen kiss between Naomie's parents, and her grandfather, sitting on the couch as one of Naomie's cousins explained what was going on in their life at the time. The lump in her throat returned as she stared at her grandfather. He seemed to be completely ignoring her cousin with a blank stare on his face. She watched the clip for a few more seconds only to realize her grandfather's face had morphed into a condescending smirk. She skipped ahead a bit when her family had moved to her back yard. Naomie smiled when she saw the old metal fire pit they'd used that had eventually been run over and ruined.

Her phone buzzed, showing her a new Snapchat from her roommate. The home video continued to play while she recorded herself making faces. Shifting through the various video filters, she stopped on the one that reversed her features. The video played again.

"Valerie!" Naomie froze. She looked at the screen in time to see the end of one of her grandfather's outbursts. Her heart started to race as she turned the volume up on her phone. Had she heard that right? The video looped again, waiting to be sent. It was a bit distorted, but those were definitely words. Again she heard, "Valerie!"

Naomie stopped the video on her laptop and frowned at the screen. She saved her snapchat video to her phone and pressed the "x" in the corner so she could record some more. She had to be losing her mind, there was no way she could have heard her grandmother's name from her grandfather.

Rewinding to when he first started to speak, Naomie pressed play and began recording again on Snapchat. She went to the backwards filter, and her heart skipped in her chest. The voice was distorted, but she could make out, "Help me Valerie!"

Her hands started to shake. Could it be that her grandfather was just speaking backwards this whole time? Eight years, and no one had noticed. In the beginning, some of the best specialists in Ohio had been brought in to help, and none of them had noticed. Eight years without being able to understand what her grandfather was saying, and she had a way of understanding him the whole time.

She imagined he was crying for help because no one could understand him. Her hands were sweaty now, and she wiped them on her jeans. Her mouth had gone dry, and her ears were ringing. A fury at herself had blossomed in her chest, making tears prick behind her eyes. Sniffing, she got up to go close the door, checking that the hallway was empty.

Naomie pulled another CD out of the case, this one labeled "Sarah and Eddie Vow Renewal Dinner." She replaced her graduation party CD with the new one and skipped around until she found her grandpa again. He was sitting next to her grandmother and mumbling to himself. She skipped to the middle of the mumbling, turned the sound all the way up, and recorded the ten seconds the app would allow her.

Her hands trembling, she added the filter to the video. “We were tired of it. Now you know,” she heard. She knew his outbursts sometimes consisted of him talking to himself, but she’d never thought of it as complete sentences. She decided to record the rest of his outburst, and she got the rest of the sentence: “For four years you’ve had to watch.”

Watch what? Who was he talking to? The video kept replaying; an endless connection of distorted words that ate at her. How could everyone have missed this? What would her grandmother think? Sure, she’d have an opportunity to understand what her husband was saying, but so far nothing was making sense. Her grandmother would be happy, but devastated. She’d probably feel the same self-frustration Naomie was feeling now. What could she do with this information?

Naomie searched the rest of the video, finding different instances of her grandfather’s speech. Every time she recorded it, the sound was terrifying when she played it backwards. It seemed like her grandfather had developed multiple personalities and was talking to himself. Naomie even found an instance of him saying the phrase he always seemed to greet people with. She recorded it, afraid of what he had been saying, and flipped through the filters.

The door creaked behind her, and she turned around expecting her grandmother at the door to see how the video was coming along. Instead, Naomie saw her grandfather staring at her with the same smirk he wore earlier.

“Oh hi grandpa.” She quickly minimized the window on her computer.

He stood staring at her, motionless. His face was twisted into a smile that didn’t show teeth. His thin, sagging skin hung on his face making the smile seem sinister. Naomie suddenly registered the sound that was coming out of her phone.

“Watch out for the reflections,” came repeatedly from her phone on the desk.

She glanced at the mirror on the far side of the bedroom. The hanging skin on his neck wobbled as his head turned to look at her through the mirror. The reflection was different this time. Instead of a grin, her grandfather wore a look of fear. His hands came up, as if to bang on the mirror, but that wasn’t poss...

The mirror shook and wobbled as if it had been hit, but her grandfather hadn’t moved from the door way when she turned her head back to check. Naomie flinched at the sound it made and looked back to her grandfather who was making his way towards her.

“Grandpa, what’re you...” Her grandfather flew at her, pushing her over. Her head hit the corner of the desk. She landed sprawled on the carpet, her vision blurred with the fuzzy form of her grandfather standing over her.

She couldn’t remember falling asleep. She knew she was waking up, but couldn’t register what had happened to make her unconscious in the first place.

“Wake up,” the voice was female, but it sounded different than her grandmother’s. Right, the video, her grandfather. A thousand tiny grains of sand had been lodged beneath her eyelids to keep her from opening them. Ignoring the pain, Naomie wrenched her eyes open. The room was darker than it had been. Events of the day began to connect and she remembered the eerie Snapchat video replaying on the desk, her grandfather coming towards her and pushing her over.

She looked in the mirror. She could see herself and her grandfather. She inherently knew she was still sprawled on the ground, but her reflection was standing, smirking down at her.

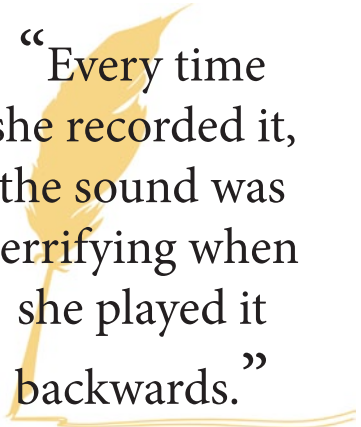
“Get up,” her reflection’s mouth moved, and she realized it was her own voice that had woken her. When her reflection spoke, she felt her mouth move in the form of the words. Her head throbbed. Somehow, she was on her feet, though she hadn’t made any effort to move.

“I’m sorry Naomie. I couldn’t stop him,” that was her grandfather’s voice, and she turned her head to look at him standing next to her. His face wore a look of concern, and she knew this was her grandfather. The one she’d been missing for eight years.

“Grandpa, you can...” She felt herself crying, but her head was wrenched back to face her own in the mirror.

“Now you will know what it’s like to be helpless. To be a slave to the person on the other side, to follow blindly and have no control.” Naomie felt her lips moving again. Her reflection raised her hand, and Naomie’s followed suite.

“Now you are the helpless reflection.”



“Every time
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backwards.”

FICTION

Indifference

by Suzanna Fleming

The prospect of taking a walk in the woods at five o'clock in the morning is something few people enjoy. There is the man, who springs awake at this ungodly hour, ties on his shoes, and attempts to shake his wife awake to enjoy nature with him. His wife groans at the thought of leaving her warm bed to breathe in cold dew, whacks his antagonistic arm with a pillow, and pulls the covers further over her head to shut out his acclamations of nature's glory and the benefits of rising early in the morning.

One of these few men was Tray Elsker. Since he had no wife, however, he roused his five dogs to go with him and was more successful than the average early riser at finding a walking companion. He took a deep breath when he stepped out of doors and filled his lungs with chill morning air. The ground was soft from the night before and the grass glistened. The sun came from underneath and touched every blade of grass and every tree root so that the ground was filled with light before the sky was streaked with gold. There was no wind, only absolute silence interrupted only by the occasional duck quacking or flapping wings. Elsker crossed the thin green alley and stepped over the ledge separating his lawn from the woods. The impressive trunks rose up all around him, but grew in straight rows. The terrain was bare of rocks and grass, yet moss grew plentifully and the area was covered in orange pine needles. Elsker felt like a king walking this natural path. It was as if the trees parted only for him.

For Elsker was their advocate. In his wayward youth, he had been the clerk in a massive lumber company. Every morning, he would walk into his small office in a tower overlooking the logging yard. For eight hours, he sat watching the dead trees being brought in to be hacked in pieces for profit. As the light died, he listened to the saws run until he fancied he heard the screaming of the trees as they were molded for man's use. As the sun died, it seemed that the yard became a slaughterhouse and the red lights blinked ferociously. To distract himself, Elsker wrote poetry.

A thoughtless boy through nature wanders
 Breaking arms with no remorse
 "Weeping fingers, mournful faces,
 Hide from me your deepest curse!"

There was one other clerk in the office beside him. Brandon, his name had been, and he smoked like a fiend. Even on a fine day like this, Elsker thought of Brandon as he brushed past the healthy trees and listened to the branches sing overhead. Brandon's blurry eyes and smoking mouth stuck in a permanent pucker impressed themselves on his memories. They had looked up at one another past their huge ledger books and time tables. But they never said anything. All day the logs rolled by in tumbrels and the bloodthirsty saws screamed joyously. Elsker tried his hardest not to watch out the window and was grateful when the heavy fog obscured his view. Hunched-over with his tie thrown over his shoulder, he tapped voraciously at the typewriter and stained his shirt front with ink until he looked like a soldier returning from battle. The clerks timed out at the end of the day, jamming their yellow cards in the punching machine, staining the cards with black thumbprints.

After a year, Elsker grew to hate it all. He had loved his job at first; but eventually the smell of rotting wood and the feel of sawdust itching every inch of his skin, even if he did not actually handle the trees, overwhelmed him. He had a hand in their mutilation. What was worse was the sticky sap that stuck to his shoes and coated the doorknobs. Their blood was on his hands. The sawdust and ink never washed out, but remained as stains on the sink and dust on his sweaters. Finally, he snapped.

On that day, Elsker took off his coat, put it behind his chair, and rolled up his sleeves to work. He had thought of another poem as he walked in and was eager to type it down.

Like a beautiful woman
 The branches spread their trees over
 Rivers of mirrors
 To show off their beauty to themselves
 Observe and appreciate
 Their vanity before
 Age wrinkles their fair bark skin.

Brandon came in, flung his coat on the hook without caring if it flopped right to the floor, and slung his lanky body into his chair. Ignoring him, Elsker put away his poetry and pulled out the accounts he had been lining up the night before. Brandon lit a cigarette and stared out the window moodily. The workers stirred, putting away their coffee, and tugged on their gloves to begin their work. The boss was going to be early that morning, or so he threatened. The only one who did not seem to care was Brandon as he smoked his first of many cigarettes. For some reason, the smoke bothered Elsker and he coughed forcibly.

"Brandon," he choked, "Can you please put that out?"

If Brandon was surprised at being addressed directly for the first time in months, he did not show it.

"It's cold, isn't it?" he returned, puffing slowly, "I don't envy the boys having to toil in that mess,"

Elsker waved a hand in front of his face and wished he thought to buy a coffee before he came in that morning. He was feeling too lazy to get up and boil some water. Just then, the door opened and Brandon slowly unraveled himself from his comfortable position as both men stood to welcome the boss.

Mr. Foster was a rather large man. It took him a moment to squeeze himself through the small door.

TOWERS

"By goodness," he panted softly as he tugged his coat further over his corpulence. "I thought it smart to place the office up so high so that you boys would have a chance to move around after sitting all day. Never thought about how deuced hard it was to get up here! I would barely manage to crawl down after a long day's work!"

"We do manage, sir," Elsker muttered, having never really thought about the stairs. Climbing stimulated his thinking and those thoughts distracted him from the distance of the office to the ground.

"Well, thankfully, we are going to get something done about that," he beamed with importance. "Boys, we are expanding the business!"

There was silence in the room, but Foster spoke again without giving it a chance to develop.

"Business is booming. We have already sold out our rivals down in Presbury and can build a bigger business in Westfield so that their customers can come half-way instead of having to come all the way to Kingston. I shall bring you the blueprints tomorrow. For today, though, I need our accounts settled up to date. I will be hiring more clerks so that you two don't have more than you can manage."

Elsker's mind was racing. They were leaving. The building would be closed. The screams would stop. But, they would start again somewhere else. His mind filled with thoughts of his future. What was waiting for him at the new job? A bigger flora slaughterhouse. He would be even more fully surrounded by people who killed these trees daily. The mess would be bigger, the sounds louder, the work longer, and he would be twice as worse off. Brandon was still puffing at that dreadful cigarette. He wasted ink and paper left and right, but Elsker had never seen him throw away even half an un-burned cigarette. Suddenly, he hated Brandon. The smoke and smell and bleary eyes that glanced up once or twice at him all day. What if Foster hired more like Brandon? He turned and looked out the window. Mr. Foster was still talking excitedly in the background, but Elsker ceased to hear him. All he heard was the screaming of the saws and the clunk that the dead trees made as they fell to the floor. He watched the men strip the bark and cart the blocks around. The supple young oak they laid on the saw shook as the machine ground under it. Disregarding the trembling pith, the men yanked the saw and chopped it in two. When a tree falls in the forest, no one hears its cry. But Elsker heard that tree as its severed body fell off the sides of the saw and hit the ground.

"I can't take this anymore," he announced, cutting Mr. Foster in the middle of a sentence. "What was that, Tray?" Mr. Foster inquired, kindly letting the interruption slide.

"I am done, Mr. Foster," Elsker explained, facing his employer, "I am fed up with it. All day long, the grinding, the chopping, and the sawing. It is enough to make a man go out of his head! If I follow this to the new building, it will follow me until the day I die. I am finished!"

He tugged his tie in place and grabbed his personal items off the desk.

"Tray," Mr. Foster protested, "This is sudden. Could you give me notice before you quit? Have I not paid you enough?"

"I am leaving now," Elsker insisted, "I will only take the wages owed me. I cannot do this anymore. I don't know how I held out this long. It is not being under your employ, Mr. Foster, it is all this!" he gestured with an impatient wave to the window and went to get his coat.

Flinging it on, he punched in his card with a decided motion and slid it back into place for the final time.

"I don't understand," Mr. Foster scratched his head.

"Elsker," Brandon sniggered, snuffing the cigarette, "Have you gone off your rocker?"

Elsker slammed the door behind him.

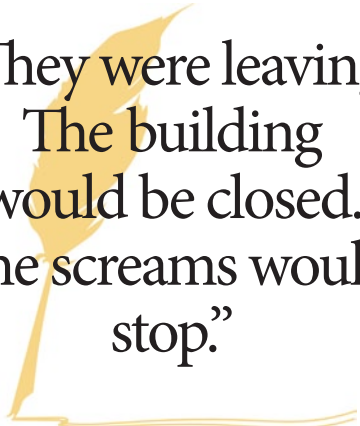
From then on, he threw himself into a new lifestyle. He refused to have anything wooden in his house unless he made it himself from trees he found already fallen in the forest. His wardrobe drastically changed. All leather, fur, silk, and wool were tossed out and replaced with linen and cotton. But he did not stop there, for the more he avoided the destruction of the forests, the more aware he became of the other atrocities committed against nature.

Once, Elsker went to buy a cow for his mother. It was her biannual supply of beef that would support her so that she did not have to get her meat from anywhere else and she would not run out until the next purchase. The business that owned the cow would raise, slaughter, package and label it before the person who bought it came to claim the meat. Smelling the blood as he walked in the door, Elsker grimaced, wishing he had

something to cover his nose with as he addressed the owner and asked for his mother's cow.

"Well, Mr. Elsker," the buggy-eyed owner smiled, "the cow should be ready soon, but you are early to pick up your order yet. How about I give you a tour of the establishment?"

That was the last thing that Elsker wanted, but Mr. Tubher, ever eager to impress, took Elsker on a tour around the butchery. Following the butcher, Elsker sidestepped several great smears of blood that had not yet been cleaned off the floor and put courtesy aside to cover his nose.



“They were leaving.
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"This room is where we take the cow after it has been brought here by the farmer," Tubher gestured, "We have several close farms in the region that transport their cattle directly. That way the cows are in a more ideal condition when they arrive. We wash them head to foot and take them in here,"

He opened another door and preceded Elsker into the room. Elsker's hand dropped slowly from his nose. A huge machine of primitive proportion, complete with ropes and hooks, occupied three-fourths of the room. Against the wall, in an elevated box, were several guns and long knives that gleamed in the weak light that came from one small window near the top.

"Mr. Tubher," Elsker pointed to the machine, "Do you use this monstrous device to slaughter one cow?"

Mistaking his horror for awe, Mr. Tubher nodded, his fists on his hips.

"Impressive, ain't it?" he motioned to the guns on the wall, "After the cow is roped up, we shoot it once with a captive bolt pistol, which was invented in Germany not too long ago," Tubher gestured, "One shot to the brain induces unconsciousness. So we can salvage as much meat as possible. A normal bullet is too messy and could poison the meat if the bullet stays in the animal."

"Is the cow dead when you cut it up?" Elsker did not want the answer, but something made him ask.

"Technically speaking," Tubher frowned in concentration, "there is no telling if the brain survives the shot."

Clearing his throat, he led Elsker out of the room and into the packaging room. Elsker barely followed the rest of the tour. On the way out of the shooting chamber, he spied the head of a cow hanging with other slabs of meat from a chain in the wall. The purpose of the chain or the room did not matter to him. The aura of death was stronger than the smell of blood clinging to the air and Elsker hugged himself against it. With the images of cow heads, shooting stations, and bloodstains on his mind, Elsker went home without his mother's cow and vowed never to eat meat again.

A few months after the tour, he organized a protest against captive bolt pistols and other inhumane methods of acquiring meat. They picketed the butcher shops and independent establishments where owners killed and processed their own cattle. In order to make a living for himself, he bought and owned a small organics store. Any money he made from his

"A huge machine of primitive proportion, complete with ropes and hooks, occupied three-fourths of the room."

small floral and fruit business was spent on sponsoring the "no-fur" agendas of animal activist corporations and protests against inhumane methods of killing animals for meat. In fact, if there ever was an environmental protest, he immediately joined up. As for his own achievements, he set up a non-profit foundation that was against deforestation and advocated for the trees. He took these programs into the schools and traveled from state to state teaching children to plant trees and recycle. With the schools' and parents' permission, he even took the classes on field trips through the woods to take nature hikes, watch birds, and pick up the trash that was thrown there by storms and tourists. His signature was the largest on the petition that called for and successfully removed all paper bags from grocery stores and replaced them with plastic bags.

His mother, more than anyone, expressed concern when she saw that Elsker was losing weight.

"Son, are you sure you are making healthy choices?" she asked concerned, "You are looking sparse,"

"I am tired of oppression and inhumanity, mother," he answered, feeling a sympathetic soul, "This destruction of our forests and animal population will render both extinct and then where would the world be?"

She sighed.

"I don't know, darling, I am sure it won't be nice," she told him, "But aren't your measures a bit extreme?"

"The world is only chaotic because of the choices humanity has made," he insisted. "Nature is peace; therefore, it needs to be protected,"

She sighed again, "If you say so, dear,"

On this peaceful morning, Elsker walked with his dogs and contemplated on the fulfillment of his mission.

"I think I have done right, haven't I?" he asked the dogs, who wandered around sniffing as if Elsker had said nothing.

"I think I have," Elsker added, not expecting an answer, "I have made the world a better place."

They reached a quiet part of the woods where the light was strongest as the sky filled with pink from the rising sun. Elsker stopped to clean his muddy shoes on a patch of pine needles. The squirrels were chattering and dropping acorns from their nests while the blue jays screamed their protest. Elsker muttered his latest poem to himself while leaning against a particularly stout oak tree.

Keep silent, you wanderers!
Behold, you are walking through a prison—
Nature groans!

TOWERS

Underneath the outstretched, creaking branches
Are the graveyards—
Mass burials of the leaves.
There is beauty all around you
In the prison of the world.

Suddenly, he heard his dogs break out in throaty barks and paused in the process of cleaning his shoe. Something was definitely up. The dogs were not usually roused into this long a barking spree over a squirrel or passing rabbit. But Elsker did not have long to wait. Out of the verdant solitude of the forest, a beast charged, crashing through the bracken. Six long antlers broke tree branches and shook down young leaves to a premature death. Cloven hooves tore up the moss and trampled the fern. Red eyes barely saw what was in front of them before the hooves followed. The steam poured thickly from the buck's flaring nostrils. The squirrels scurried for hiding and the birds sped screaming to the treetops. Elsker did not move, but his dogs split into two directions. Four scrambled away, barking lustily over their shoulders. The younger two stayed where they were, bouncing around on their paws in ecstasy. The buck followed the noise. It did not pause to ponder on the nature of the barking. The sound resounded through its sensitive ears until, in a desperate attempt to regain its territory, the buck charged with antlers down.

Instinctively, Elsker threw himself forward to sweep his dogs out of the way. They danced from his arms, barking continually, practically taunting the wrathful deer to come after them. Elsker pushed one of the closest dogs forcibly toward the four that had moved away from the deer. He never saw the deer turn its head. It missed its original mark. The antlers struck the king of the forest instead. Elsker felt a rending pain that tore threw him repeatedly as the deer swept its antlers side to side, having found something to vent its pain and rage upon. Attempting to push the animal's heavy head away, Elsker waved his arms, his hands knocking against the deer's skull. It did nothing and the sky went dark.

When he opened his eyes, Elsker stayed leaning against the tree while viscous blood from many wounds ran down his body. He looked with glazed eyes upon one of his dogs lying dead at his feet. Confusion spread through his being. The buck had flung Elsker against the tree and trampled one of the dogs who had not the sense to flee from danger. His arms stretched outward in a strange parody of protection, Elsker did not have the strength to move. Pain wracked his abdomen as he once again smelled blood as he had in Tubber's butchery. As his dying senses attempted once again to serve him, he felt the leathery red tongues of his dogs as they licked the blood from his skin. Revulsion made him tremble, but he could not put out his hands to shove them away. The sunlight broke through the trees and lit up the great oak tree, but Elsker only saw growing darkness.

"I do not understand," he muttered. His voice was lost.

The trees waved overhead, waking one another with the gossipy swish of their leaves. The squirrels jumped from branch to branch, dropping acorn shells from their nests. The morning glories winked from the ground; and from the treetops, the birds sang.

I'm a Good Drunk by Zeus

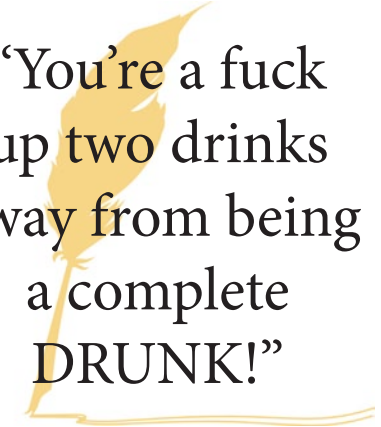
Fuck you. Yea, I said it. Fuck you, you... you... charlatan! S-A-T WORD! Charlatan, noun: A person falsely claiming to have a special knowledge or skill. Charlatan. You think you know everything, huh? You don't even know yourself. Your ex-wife was right about you. You're a fuck up two drinks away from being a complete DRUNK! Drunk, noun: a wobbling, unfocused, poor, beer guzzling, unsuccessful, empty shell of a man. Drunk. Is that what you want for yourself?

Just look at you Orville. Nice suit. Professional. HA! Professional. How perfectly inconsequential such expected aesthetics. You, professional? You're nothing more than a tired epithet used to beguile students into submissive drudgery. S-A-T WORD! Beguile, verb: influence by slyness. Beguile. C'mon, Edwin. Mister Orville! Mister coffee stains on the tie. Mister thinking nobody noticed. Mister prescription meds and unmade beds. Mister pompous. Mister almost brilliant, almost novelist, almost head of literary department. Mister almost made it, almost drunk! Mister too soon to say not soon enough. Mister pugnacious fingertips of strict grader. Mister I care about my students' education. Mister cheap liquor next to red pen. Mister wishing to be cryptic except everybody knows already. Even Douglas knows... and if he didn't he does now. And now this institutional, federally enforced, communication of imperfect people culturally accepted to be valuable in brevity is tainted and destined to be forever contrite. S-A-T WORD! Contrite, adjective; feeling or expressing penitence. Contrite. Doomed to be witlessly contrite.

Drunk, noun: an abject and barren husk with no regard for penalty or presage replacing probity with the devil's acidic and ironically conveniently insufferable saliva. Drunk. Poor Douglas. Never having known altruistic intentions to be fatal. Never having known charismatic characters to be converted to Shakespearean duplicity. Poor Douglas, of sound mind.

Of perfect wisdom. Culpable in nothing but a lack of ignorance bestowed unto him by you Mister Orville. You are that sardonic merchant of thievery that has stolen from a young boy, not yet as pretentious as you, his ability to thrive without glooming hindrance. You, my well established sir, if not a pure fantastical façade, provide brief diminishing of academic pulchritude. You are no genius. Instead a visceral inchoate given a decade and a half to ruin the lives of many.

That boy had a future before you, obvious through sensible predilection, that boy had a future before being touched by your wrathful tutelage. S-A-T WORD! Tutelage, noun: protection of or authority over someone or something. Tutelage. Poor Douglas, cursed to be excellent. To be knowingly set on a path of righteous endeavors and then have it all marred by YOU! By



“You’re a fuck
up two drinks
away from being
a complete
DRUNK!”

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you, Mister Orville! By your sinister stupor. Yet your sole solace is that you are not yet a drunk! Drunk, noun: a fool of irreverent intentions borrowing problems from glasses, cans and bottles. Oxford comma not needed. Drunk.

I wonder if Douglas has tainted his soul with this liquid emptiness yet. He's certainly smart enough to not give up hope. But definitely damaged enough to know that SLOWLY is the best way for any man to die. Poor Douglas. Straight As. Future poet. First generation. Future engineering major. Versatility bestowed by Gods. Athlete. Athlete from broken home. Intelligent athlete from broken home. Intelligent athlete from broken home with incredible capacity in mathematics. Intelligent athlete from broken home baring math proficiency with deep appreciation for the poetics. Walking scholarship. Now angry. Now bitter. Now fatherless. Filled with contempt, a bill received by YOU, Mister Orville!

You didn't have to drink that night Mister Orville. The day was a good day. Nothing had happened to provoke drinking before work. Drinking during work. And drinking after. You are a sham of the highest caliber. A perfect nuisance. Adequate enough to be taken seriously, but not adequate enough to piece together what is not so obviously broken. And you drank and drank and drank. Drove down to the market. Drove over hills and down alley ways. Lost on your way home. All under the guise, that you might be a GOOD DRUNK! A functioning alcoholic that waits for someone to die to realize that he cannot function! Blurred vision mixed with intoxicated whispering, I got this, I got this, rams into car not half as nice as yours. Waking up from dim nap while coasting pass burning fuel. Man left untangling seatbelt while blurry vision attempts to make picture in rearview mirror. Explosive debris, smelling like flesh, unfortunately too distant to touch you as you drive 80 on a 40 miles per hour road. And then... you sick bastard, then you went to work the next morning as if you had not killed a man. Cable news stations perpetuating dullness as you consume liquor-fed coffee with your equally unimpressive colleagues watching the story of a man who died in a hit and run. And you... you Mister Orville, reprehensible recreant, dawdled to your English class to talk about verbs and participles! S-A-T WORD! Recreant, noun: a coward. Recreant. Time to take attendance... Douglas not present.

Drunk, noun: an irresponsible plague to the world it inhabits. Drunk. Mister Orville... did it ache to watch a student with perfect attendance miss two weeks of school? Two weeks of tennis practice. Two weeks of class with his favorite teacher. And then come to you in a state of humbled weakness, on poetry day nonetheless, reciting the words of your despair. Did it ache when you learned his father died in a car crash? Did it ache as you pretended that exasperation only ended in fatigue and not that rock bottom at the end of your drunken, liquor-filled ABYSS!? Did it ache to learn that his mother was a drunk? A pitiful drunk that could not care for him. Not financially, not mentally, not socially, and definitely not happily. As he cried in your classroom talking about all the work he wouldn't make up because of the boys in the group home that had forced the little uppity nerd to tend to their academic needs, useless in nature, before poor Douglas could get to his own stale pieces of misery, were you able to reconcile not being a drunk then? What about when he cursed under his breath that vile drunken dastard of a mother he had? "She's just a drunk, Mister Orville. She's too drunk to remember her neglected husband is dead let alone her neglected son. I'll be stuck in that group home forever because of that DRUNK!"

Remember that Mister Orville? Remember coming home... to this very mirror and giving it these ragged edges. Oh what history this mirror has with us. The almost-drunken and the denier. Remember failing to inveigle your drunken self that you were not like Douglas' scorned mother? Remember trying to convince yourself that you were nothing like that flagitious drunk. That waste of body. Drunk, noun: A poor excuse of a human, especially if that human happens to be a mother. Drunk. You said

to drunken self, with an ostentatious tone that desperately wanted to tap into a vitriolic melody as it assumed its poor attempt to expiate. "I'm a good drunk. Nothing like her. I'm a good drunk. I may have killed a man, but I'm a good drunk. I'm a good drunk. I promise, I'm a good drunk. I have a degree. People look up to me. I can hold simple conversation in fancy attire. I can breathe sober. I can sleep well most nights. I can drive perfectly... that was a mistake. A tiny extremity in an otherwise perfectly capable man. I'm a good drunk. I'm a good drunk."

You knew it was a lie then. So you punched the glass to somehow shatter that filthy image of yourself. To shatter that likeness to Douglas' mother. But you couldn't. I'm a good drunk. What a simple lie. A good drunk. Quite the oxymoron. Drunk, noun: a worthless piece of human filth embracing dubious machinations in order to forego embarrassing likeness to brash individuals. Drunk. There is no such thing as a good drunk. No such thing. A wisdom expelled by Douglas himself. Perhaps you may think you're slightly better than the other putrid drunks roaming this alcoholic abyss because you worked up the courage to tell Douglas that you killed his father, alongside the convenient caveat, "But I'm a good drunk."

Douglas was right, such a thing cannot exist. Because for some reason you thought you were not as morally reprehensible as your fellow catalogued cohorts. That you were not... that kind of drunk. Or that since you had not been that particular kind of rage induced awful, that maybe you weren't a drunk at all. How laughable. A good drunk. What is the real definition of a drunk anyways? Where's that pocket dictionary-

Drunk, noun: a person who habitually drinks to excess. Drunk...



Someday, *Daniel Verdin*

TOWERS

Breaking Up: A Mixed Drink Recipe

by Cyrus Rossi

Ingredients:

- Start with the pretentious craft beer of your choice, like the ones we were drinking right before we kissed for the first time and I dropped it on the floor within a few sips, unable to keep track of it beyond how much I had wanted to wrap my arms around him for so long.
- Add 1 bottle of Jack Daniels, like the one he brought the night he came to my dorm for the weekend and asked to be my boyfriend with a postcard he got when studying in Cuba.
- 1 bottle of Southern Comfort, like the one he brought the night he met my best friend, and the second they hit it off I knew he was so right for me.
- 1 water bottle filled with halfway with whisky and the other half lemonade for what we were drinking the night he took me to a frat party at his school and told me he loved me for the first time.
- Add a hearty amount of absinthe for the night he invited me to my first concert. While he gave me the ticket partially because he needed a DD, it was still an amazing experience to share with him.
- A shot of amaretto for each time he told me how much he loved staring into my eyes- an intoxicatingly sweet drink to match the gesture.
- A shot of Fireball for each time he said “God, why aren’t you 21?” It burned going down but it still awkwardly warmed me as he went out of his way to spend time with me.
- A few jello shots for the night I planned on him coming up for weeks, only to hear the night before that he was bailing for a celebratory rager for a friend’s internship offer
- A full bottle of UV Blue for the one he got me for my birthday. He had me drink it on the three hour car ride to a wedding, because if I “wasn’t getting drunk, what was gonna be fun about this weekend?”
- A shot of Svedka for every time he started to tell me how bored he was. A cheap liquor for the cheap thrill he made me feel like when I couldn’t stay out late with him because I’m underage or stay weekends because of work.
- A 42 ounce 7-11 Slurpee AND
- A shot of Seagram’s vodka, for the day we mixed them because of a song lyric and he continued to tell me how it seemed like a pain to make all this effort when there’s so little to do.
- One shot of pineapple Ciroc, what a 45 year old bartender at a gay bar in his hometown had to give him to score a makeout session. Four months in.
- 4 shots of tequila for each of the 4 gay dating apps that were still on his phone 6 months after we had started dating- a drink and an action that both made my stomach uneasy.
- One Long Island Iced Tea for the one he bought the guy he started meeting up with that he met on Grindr 5 months into our relationship.
- One shot of Everclear for the night I found out
- Finally, add a shot of whatever’s left in the kitchen for every doubt, insecurity, and moment when I saw the end of the road that finally came to the surface at once.
- Mix ingredients together in large punch bowl. Pour into tall, chilled glass and slug it to the back of your throat, because no matter how pungent the flavor is, you’re never going to truly reach a point where stopping drinking is going to seem bearable.

Penny for Your Thoughts
by *Kaitlin Gettinger*

Mist gently rises from the sleek pavement, coated from an evening of light rain. I lean my forehead against the window, the cool glass creating a fogged silhouette around the outline of my head. The clock ticks off the empty walls, bouncing inside my skull and against the backs of my eyes. The weight of the door is all that keeps me separate from the outside. If I close my eyes against the clock, I'm in a rain forest surrounded by trunk bodies and leafy hair. The silence is refreshing, the rain and damp grass overpowering the stale air. Footsteps shuffle down the hall, the imaginary world shattering instantly. I trace a heart, wondering if someone will pass and believe in love.

Daddy appears in the kitchen. He doesn't notice me against the window, a red and round circle on my forehead leaving a chilled reminder of the rain forest. I narrow my eyes, waiting for him to say something or startle once he realizes I'm there. Continue his mission in the kitchen, I burn my gaze at the back of his head.

Reaching into the chipped cabinet above the sink, he pulls down the fifth of Jack. He shuffles to the side, stretching his arm with a muffled grunt. He swings the cabinet open and finds a glass. He finds his short, black glass that he always uses. Setting it down with a small clank against the laminate counter, he signs through his nose. He pours the whiskey, almost filling it up entirely.

As he lifts the glass to his chapped lips, he stops to listen. I listen, but all I only hear the clock. The glass tips back and the liquid quickly disappears. Wincing, the empty glass hits the counter.

Mom strides into the kitchen, too determined to see me. She stands in front of the fridge and grabs a bottle of water. Standing at the counter opposite my father, she leans against the sharp corners. Her strawberry blond hair glistens in the faint light from hiding in her room for days. An oversized t-shirt and shorts swallows her small frame. She doesn't look at Daddy, but at his feet with one eye narrowed and the other relaxed. She's glazed and empty, unresponsive to most things around her.

I unfold my feet from underneath me, holding my breath when my feet graze the floor. My sweating feet, slide against the cold, rough carpet. Walking across the living room, I stand on the threshold of the kitchen. Their gazes don't waver,

remaining in their places.

Daddy reaches across the narrow kitchen, his fingers barely reaching her clammy skin. She doesn't flinch. She finds his feet far more interesting. Daddy steps forward, away from the counter and closer to Mom. He firmly grips her shoulders, bending to look her in the eye. Her stoic stare turns into a scowl and she attempts to shrug him away. She grunts while she struggling against him, trying to use her elbow to get him away from her. Daddy presses his lips together, fighting against her without causing harm. The bottle drops from her hands, spilling onto the floor and their feet. Mom yells at Daddy, screaming in his face as she lifts her fists. She pounds them against his chest and shoulders, but he doesn't fight back. As my mother's eyes turn from stone to hatred to the agony that's built up inside her, her assaults slow down until she rests her fists against him.

Succumbing to her own pain, she falls into Daddy's arms. She wraps her arms around him and digs her fingernails into his back. He closes his eyes, a tear running down his cheek and falling into Mom's hair. He uses his arms as a blanket for her pain. She buries her tear streamed face into his shoulders. Lightly shaking in his arms, Dad's silent tears fall down his cheek. My heart aches, pounding in time to the rhythm of the clock as I wish to be on the receiving end of Daddy's hug.

The clock ticks louder and my heart grows with it. I walk closer to my parents, ready to embrace them and apologize for all the pain. I wince against the sound of the clock, my heart screaming back at it. The blood rushes in my ears as my heart tries to out-beat the clock. They battle until I'm directly in front of Mom and Daddy. They stop when Mom's crying ceases. The deafening silence absorbs all of us. As I reach towards them, a slow yet demanding knock on our door breaks the silence. I whip my head to the left, staring at the door. The knock echoes again, causing the clock to tick at a faster rate. I walk to the door, my feet hitting the ground heel first. The cold knob twists in my hand, the heavy door resisting from the air pressure. Carolyn stands on the cement porch.

Frowning at her, I study Carolyn. She shouldn't be here. She's not supposed to be here. Carolyn left for Rome 10 days ago, and wouldn't be coming back for a few months. Or, was it yesterday? The clock ticks faster, pounding like a drum against my temples. Maybe it was 10 years ago. No, it had to be just 10 minutes ago. The clock pounds against my rib cage.

Carolyn isn't 18 like she should be. There are crow's feet resting at the corners of her eyes and deep wrinkles on her forehead. Light blond pieces of hair may be gray, depending on which angle you look at them. The clock stops ticking when I realize she's upset.

"Jesus, Penny," she gasps, grabbing me in her arms and smashing me against her chest. Her bony shoulder digs into my chin. Pulling me away, the cement she stands on isn't our porch but a cold hallway lined with white doors. I stare at my hands, dry and cracked. Peering over my shoulder, the house is gone and I'm trapped inside a white box room. There's a metal post bed and a desk chained to the floor. There is pen and paper on the desk. Besides a single barred window with a fading heart traced

“The glass tips
back and the
liquid quickly
disappears.”

on the glass, the walls are bare and lined with a few dirt marks.

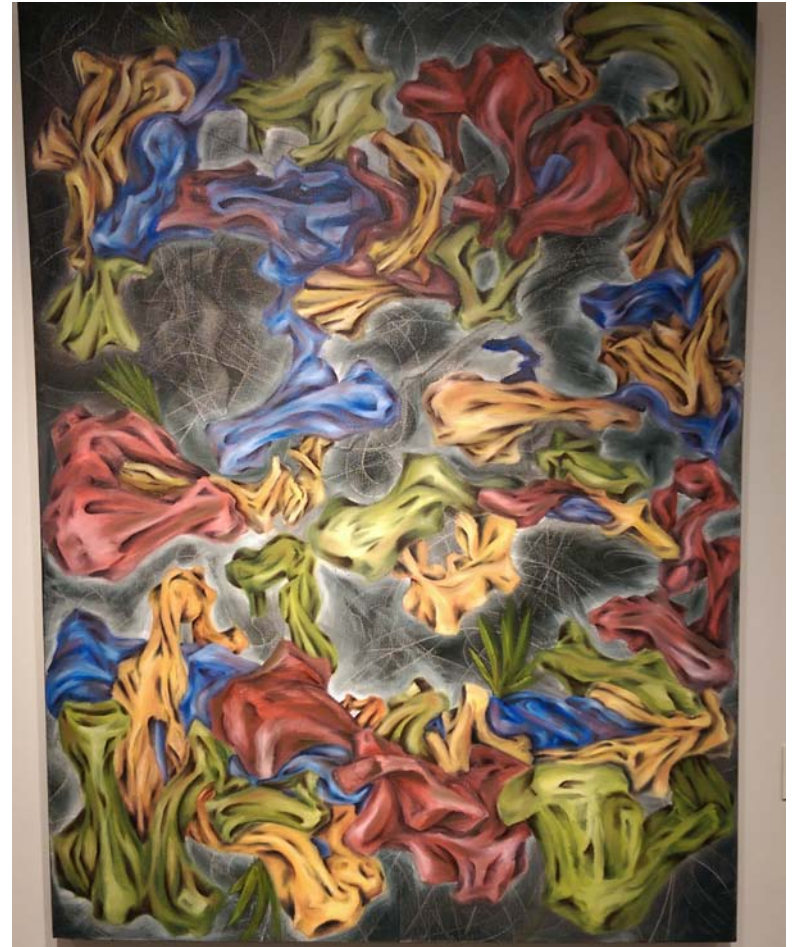
“Mom and Daddy,” I ask her, taking a step back. I realize I must be having another episode and I’ve placed myself in an alternate reality. I pound the palm of my hands against my temples, trying to make the clock come back. I growl in my chest, anger bubbling into my throat. I throw myself toward my desk, placing a hand on my pen. This Carolyn is an imposter. She must be. I cannot let her take my pen.

Why would she take my pen? Because she stole Mom and Daddy from you... I turn my head to the corner of the room where the Darkness looms. She killed them and took them from you.

I glare at Carolyn, narrowing my eyes at her. She takes a step back, fear covering the sadness in her eyes. Black dots appear in my vision and I know the ticking will start again. I lunge toward Carolyn, causing her to scream and slam the door in my face. I fall into the door, peering through the bars on the small window. I scream, chaffing my throat as I try to force the angry bubbles out. I smack my hand against my head again, hoping the ticking will start again. I heavily breathe, wheezing and fogging the window.

“Here it comes,” I whisper, the clock ticking slowly throughout the room. Tears fall down her cheeks as men in white uniforms approach behind her. The Darkness grows from the corner of the room and climbs up my leg. The ticking meets back up with my heart, the world going back to normal.

“The ticking
meets back up
with my heart,
the world going
back to normal.”



I Remember....
by Zeus

Momma, can you hear me? Momma? Open the door for me please, Momma. I miss you. I promise I'm not here to ask you to cook for me again. I know you still think you don't have a son so I actually made something for you, Momma! Hashbrowns! Freshly fried from potatoes. I grounded them up myself. It took me a long time to peel them and I had cut myself real bad but it was worth it. Like you used to say Momma, anything worth loving is gone eventually make you bleed. And I put the Band-Aid on by myself. It's Snoopy, Remember we used to watch Snoopy, Momma? ...Oh, never mind. Of course you don't remember. I'm sorry. But I remember, Momma. Momma, I remember! Please let me in. I just wanna talk to you, Momma! I know you don't remember me but Momma... I remember. I remember.

Momma, remember the first time I was standing outside your door like this, waiting for somebody to open it. You and Daddy had got in that big fight. You say it wasn't my fault but I remember. The night before I was up playing pirates. I had to walk the plank so I was just jumping off my bed and thudding into the ground. No... it was a big blue carpet with all the Winnie the Pooh Characters. Not all. Just Pooh, and Christopher, and Piglet and Roo and your favorite, Tigger. March fourth, 1991. It was a Monday. Dad banged his fists against the wall, three times. Then he started yelling at me to cut it out. You weren't trying to have it so you ran out the room to check up on me. You wanted to make sure I was okay and wasn't hurt. You came in my room with your hair all messy and your clothes slipping off. But you ain't care. You just wanted to make sure your little Mickey was okay. You started hugging me tight saying I needed to be careful. Then Dad came in all mad and stuff. You guys must've been doing the nasty-nasty cause his belt was all unfastened and I could see his tighty whities so I started giggling and laughing while you guys were fussing and fighting. You wanted me to share a room with you guys again. This room. The one I can't come in now. Dad was yelling back at you saying that I was too old. "HE'S SIX, DAMMIT! HE'S SIX, DAMMIT! Him being in a room by hisself isn't gone make him anymore retarded than he already is!"

That's when you got really mad, Mommy. You didn't like that word so you slept in the room with me and we played Pirates. We played, and laughed, and when you finally had to put me to sleep you told me that I wasn't retarded. You hugged me tighter than you tucked me in and you told me that I shouldn't let anybody call me retarded cause I wasn't stupid. I was just different. And since I was different that meant I was just like everybody else cause everybody is different. Remember, momma?

That next morning was the big fight. You usually get up and make breakfast for me. But we were up all night playing Pirates and jumping on Tigger so you were still sleepy. That's why I tried to make breakfast for myself and pour some cereal. I was doing good at first but then I poured too much milk into the bowl and it got everywhere. Momma, I tried to clean it up by myself so you wouldn't have to. I tried to do it fast before Daddy got up. I grabbed the big towels out of the bathrooms and I started wiping the floor and picking up the Cheerios with my hand but I was too late, Momma! Daddy walked in and he was just so mad. He hated when he had to clean up after me. Like when he had to bandage your head when I threw that tantrum about you giving away our dog and I accidentally hit you with her fetch ball. Remember that, Momma? You told me anything worth loving is gone eventually make you bleed.

Please tell me you remember Momma cause Daddy didn't think I was worth loving. When he had to clean up my mess again, and again, and now again, he didn't think I was worth loving. So, when he was crouched over that spilled milk cleaning up my mess, looking all mad and unloving... I bit him. I'm sorry, Momma. But I just wanted to see if I was worth loving. So, I made him bleed but I wasn't worth loving, Momma. He got so mad! He kept saying he couldn't do it anymore, Momma. He woke you up and said, he couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't handle it anymore. I went in the bathroom and started drinking the mouthwash so you wouldn't be able to see the blood in my teeth. So, when you asked me what happened, I lied and said I didn't know. Daddy screamed again talking about how I was a lying retard. "YOU'RE A LYING RETARD! YOU'RE A LYING RETARD!" But I just kept pretending that I didn't know what was going on and then I started crying and stuff. That's when you punched Daddy in the nose and he finally stopped yelling. The whole house was quiet for the first time that morning. Daddy grabbed four tissues from a box of Kleenex and he looked at you. He looked at you for forty-seven seconds. March fifth, 1991, on a Tuesday morning, he looked at you for forty-seven seconds with four Kleenexes in his nose and he said... "Bye."

“And since I was
different that
meant I was just
like everybody else
cause everybody is
different.”

You got to hugging me tight again saying that it wasn't my fault. You were telling me how I wasn't retarded and how it wasn't my fault and that no matter what, my Daddy deep down loved me. Then you ran in your room and closed the door. I followed you up there cause I felt so bad for making you cry, Mommy. I wanted to tell you the truth. That it was my fault but you locked me out. You didn't want me to see you cry and I just stood outside your door like this. I just kept saying to the door that I am worth loving, Momma. I know you couldn't hear me at the time but I could hear me! I just couldn't believe me, Momma!

And I said, Momma I promise, I'm worth loving. I promise, I'm worth loving. I'm sorry Momma, I'm worth loving. But every time I said it, I couldn't believe it, Momma. I didn't think that I was worth loving and I couldn't lie to you again. So I told you the truth, Momma. I'm not worth loving. I'm not worth loving. This time I said it loud enough for you to hear me, Momma! I'M NOT WORTH LOVING! ...You swung that door open so fast and for the first time ever, you hit me. You smacked me across the face with your left hand and there was a stain where you wore your wedding ring. You grabbed my shoulders and you said that I am worth loving. You told me that I was worth loving a thousand times over and I should never ever say that I wasn't to you ever again! Please tell me that you remember that, Momma. Don't you remember that I am worth loving, Momma? I know you having a hard time remembering, Momma, but you gotta try. Cause I remember, Momma. I remember!

Don't you remember you teaching me how to ride a bike without training wheels because I made you and how I didn't want the other sixth graders making fun of me? Don't you remember, Momma? Or that Mother's Day when I stole a Mother's Day Card out of the dollar store and you had to go explain to the police people that I didn't know what I was doing? What about the time when we went to Chuck E. Cheese for Francis' birthday and since I know you lactose intolerant I ripped all the cheese off the pizza? I know Francis was really mad but I just wanted to make sure you could eat and have fun with us, Momma. Don't you remember, Momma? Don't you remember when I was eighteen and it was Monday, March 5th, 2001 and I caught you in the kitchen by all them empty bottles and you were crying and I asked you what was wrong? You looked at me for forty-seven seconds, just like Daddy looked at you and you said, "I miss him, Mickey. I miss him. I know I'm not supposed to but I miss him, Mickey." I sat right there by your side, Momma. I took the bottle out of your hands and I just laid on your shoulder and we started talking about how we missed, Daddy. You cried in front of me for the first time and you said, "But no matter what, nothing could ever get in the way of how much I love you." Don't you remember that, Momma? Don't you remember, Momma? You love me, Momma? You can't forget that you love me. Cause if you forget then ain't nobody left, Momma. You gotta remember, Momma. I remember, so you can remember, Momma!

Please Momma... Please... open the door for me. I know you think I'm a stranger... I know you don't remember... I know you don't remember that I am worth loving, but Momma... I remember.

“I know you don't remember that I am worth loving, but Momma... I remember.”



The Scenery Grows
by *Kaitlin Gettinger*

The Eagle

The kids laid in bed, tucked safely into their own rooms. Nobody fussed, nobody cried. Everyone frightened or worried for what might happen. Joyce couldn't stay mad at her daughter for calling her brother-in-law. After he picked her husband up and brought him to the hospital, she could barely bring herself to do any household tasks that were gnawing at her mind. It was all different this time, and Joyce dreaded what may come.

She sat at the dinner table, her glasses placed on top of her brown, permed hair. She held the cup of coffee resting on the laminated wood between her two hands. She waited at the head of the table, somewhere she probably shouldn't have been. But, he wasn't home, he wasn't there, and he didn't deserve to command her tonight.

The side door, the one leading into the miniature dining area, opened revealing her husband. Dan sadly limped through the door, knowing he would not receive any assistance from his wife. Besides the doctor who stitched up the small, drunken and self-inflicted wound on his leg, nobody had wanted to help him that night. He quietly shut the door, knowing that his three children were probably asleep. He looked down at Joyce sitting at the table, huddled around the cup of coffee. He sat in the closest chair, stretching out the stiff and sore leg.

"Have ya talked to anyone?" He grumbled. Joyce wished he would just open and spill every single emotion he ever felt. Maybe incidents like that wouldn't happen again. She looked up at him, his eyes only gray and no longer blue and green. Just a pale, dull gray. She bit back the tears that threatened to reveal themselves. She had to be strong for herself and her children.

"Only your terrified children," Joyce managed to respond with. She knew her sharp, Italian tongue only angered him more, but she couldn't help it. If he got to stab himself in the leg, then she surely got to talk back.

He flinched like he had been physically slapped in the face. Upon closer inspection, Joyce could see a faint purple bruise growing stronger underneath his right eye. Possibly left by his brother when he picked Dan up, whom she couldn't even imagine hurting a fly.

"I dunno where to start, Joyce," Dan managed to say. He kept the passive tone in his voice, like he didn't stumble into the house seven hours ago, carrying the stench of whiskey and stifled nightmares behind him.

"You better start somewhere, Dan," Joyce retorted. "It's like you don't know how much this hurts me to have to watch. What if it isn't your leg next time? What if it's somewhere vital, or one of the children?"

"I'm not here when I'm drunk," Dan half-yelled, trying not to be angry. His anger was not for his wife, but at himself and how he felt. "I'm back there. I'm fighting for my life on land or swaying on the decks of the ship. I'm watching my friends and my brothers die in Nam."

"But, you need to be here, Daniel," Joyce whispered, a single tear finally betraying her. She looked away from Dan and down at the cup of coffee that had now become lukewarm. "The kids need you here. I need you here. You came home from Vietnam over ten years ago, Dan, and I need you, now."

Dan didn't answer because he could not see Joyce like that. He could never see her cry, especially when he knew it was his fault. He thought about all he had, all he could lose. He thought about the future for once. What sort of timeline would he be damaging if he lost his children and the love of his life?

"My brother gave me a single option," Dan began to explain, trying to plead with his imploring gaze. Joyce shut her eyes, slowly lifting her head to him.

"And?" Joyce sighed, her eyes tired and the stress line becoming permanent across her forehead. His guilt weighed on him.

"I get sober," Dan said, barely able to utter the next words, "Or, Jeff said he'll call someone to take the kids from us. Just so they can be saved from me."

"Is that what you want?" Joyce wondered out loud. Her brown, hazel eyes were heavy. She couldn't believe they were still open.

"Never," Dan finally uttered with a crack in his voice. He shook his head, frustrated at his weakness. He placed his fingers across his forehead, curling the other hand in a fist on the table. "I love 'em, and I love you. I know that I have no other choice. I can't leave 'cause ya can't take care of 'em on yer own. I can't continue this 'cause I know that they'll take 'em from me and you. They're all ya got when I ain't here."

**"I'm fighting for
my life on land
or swaying on
the decks of the
ship."**

TOWERS

“What happened, Dan,” Joyce blurted, trying to avoid the discussion. She couldn’t even reach out to him and grab his hand. She didn’t want to comfort him. Maybe years ago she would’ve, but she couldn’t manage to find the girl that had fallen in love so quickly. Staring at the tattoo peeking out from under his t-shirt, it reminded them of something that they would never be able to get rid of.

The Earth

Joyce stood in front of the mirror, coating her hair in the final layer of hairspray to make sure the braid stayed in place. Andie finished getting ready, slipping her skirt on and fastening her cardigan over her blouse. Joyce turned on her heel to face her best girlfriend.

“Do we really have to go?” Joyce asked, folding her hands across her chest, “You know I don’t want to see Ray.”

“You need to get over this eventually,” Andie explained, flattening the skirt over her thighs and grabbing her purse, “I get the blind date didn’t go as well as Jeff and I thought, but don’t be so weird about it. With Jeff and I, you’ll probably be seeing a lot of him.”

“I’d like to avoid him as much as possible,” Joyce concluded, making her way out of her bedroom door, “I don’t appreciate being sniffed when he thinks I’m not paying attention.”

Andie followed closely behind, her laugh echoing off the walls as they lightly trampled down the stairs.

“Gosh! You’re such a girl,” Andie teased, giving Joyce a small shove of endearment. Joyce glared at her, but it didn’t do any good because she couldn’t keep her smile hidden. The girls yelled a quick farewell to Joyce’s mom as they flew out the door. They walked down the stone pathway leading up to the street where Jeff had parked his car. The girls hopped in the backseat behind Jeff, slamming the door behind them while giggling. Andie bent forward to the front of the car, giving Jeff a quick kiss on the cheek. Joyce silently gave them their moment, staring out the window at the passing scenery of Chicago.

Jeff, Andie, and Joyce had decided to go together with the faint idea that Ray could be there, as well. Roaming around the party casually talking to people, Joyce could feel someone looking at her out of the corner of her eye. She gradually turned her head to meet his eyes from across the room. A man stood beside Andie and Jeff, just a bit taller than Jeff, with dark blond hair and a sharp chin. Slightly built, he had a sort of mischievous tilt to his stance. A hand on her shoulder yanked Joyce’s attention away from the man. Joyce met Andie’s eyes.

“What are you looking at?” Andie winked, turning Joyce to look at her. She grabbed both of her shoulders and stared deep into Joyce’s brown eyes, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Who is that,” Joyce questioned, flicking her eyes to Jeff and the oddly familiar man.

Andie giggled, “It’s Ray and Jeff’s older brother.”

“Wait. I thought his other brother was in the Marines?”

“He is,” she began, taking Joyce’s hand and dragging her back towards Jeff and his other brother, “He’s home visiting right now.”

As they got closer to Jeff and this other brother, Joyce could now see how much he looked like Ray. Although he had similar traits as Ray, the blue-green eyes and dark blond hair, this brother had less fat on him than Ray and clearly well-muscled.

“Dan,” Andie started to introduce, “This is Joyce, my best friend. Joyce, this is Jeff’s other brother, Dan.”

Dan smiled down at her, catching her off-guard. He nodded, tipping his cup towards her. She got a subtle whiff of whiskey. Something about him intrigued her. She couldn’t tell if it was the way his eyes stared into her or the sole fact that he was in the Marines. She shook his hand, politely, dipping her head.

Within the first few weeks of summer, Andie and Jeff invited Joyce over to his house to hang out and play cards with them. Joyce accepted, taking the bus to his mom’s house. The bus dropped her off at the corner of their street. As she walked, all she could manage to think about was if Dan had left yet. Would she see him again, or never again? A small, fleeting glance of a moment that just might never be.

“I knew ya’ looked familiar,” answered his voice. With a quick little flip of the butterflies in her stomach, Joyce looked up to meet those familiar and penetrating eyes.

“Hello, Dan,” she nodded once, approaching the porch steps. He sat on the ledge, a cigarette hanging in one hand and a can of beer limply hanging in the other. Ray gave Dan a quick pat on the shoulder, walking inside and leaving the two alone. She stood in front of Dan and the door, her hands folded perfectly in front of her dress.

“You are such a city gal,” he smiled, teasingly, “Look at how ya’ stand.”

“Well, you’re such a southern boy,” she playfully retorted. A small glint of excitement passed across his face, “Now, are you going to be a gentleman and welcome me in?”

“Where I come from,” he said, reaching for the door, “Ya’ don’t need an invite. Ya just walk right in.”

He pulled on the door for her, using the hand holding the cigarette to usher her inside. He followed right behind

her, entering the busy room. A table sat in the middle of the living room, something a ‘city gal’ like her had never gotten used to. The Belair family came straight out of Kentucky with accents, customs, and all.

“Texas Hold ‘em,” Dan called out, coming back from the kitchen and popping open another beer can. “One last round before I git back on that damn ship. Deal ‘em, Pa.”

Joyce took her place beside Andie on the couch. They happily watched the boys play a game of cards, conversing with the few women in the room about the point of playing cards and why men insisted on flaunting their masculinity.

“Gotta’ compete for beautiful ladies like yerselves somehow,” Dan suddenly blurted, turning to Joyce and giving her a single wink. Throughout the game, she caught him staring at her. Not in a strange or uncomfortable way, but like he tried memorizing every part of her so he wouldn’t forget once he went back overseas.

“I think the ladies best call it a nigh,” said the boys’ mom, “It’s gettin’ late and I’m sure their mothers don’t wannem out with a bunch’a crazy men.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Andie said through a yawn, “Excuse me. We’re going to head out, Jeff.”

She walked over to her boyfriend, giving him a quick kiss. She turned around to join Joyce by the door and, right before she moved out of reach, Jeff gave her a firm slap on the butt. Andie yelped, turning around and slapping him on the head. Ray, Jeff and the boys’ father roared with laughter while their mother shook her head in distaste. Joyce met Dan’s eyes a final time that night. He tipped his head to her in farewell and respect.

“Goodbye, Miss Joyce,” he winked with a small wave.

“Goodbye, Dan,” she responded, slowly turning on her heel and heading out the door with Andie. Andie looped her arm in the crook of Joyce’s elbow, leaning against her shoulder as they walked towards the bus stop.

“He thinks you’re cute,” Andie giggled like a schoolgirl. Joyce could feel her cheeks bloom with a pink blush.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Joyce tried to shrug it off, but she couldn’t get those eyes out of her head that seemed to be blue while in a room, but green while under the sky.

“That smile on your face says different,” Andie shoved her shoulder into Joyce’s.

“Just flattered by the Belair boys,” Joyce lied, “That is all.”

Almost a year later, Joyce found herself spacing out in front of the mirror. Unlike the other Belair parties, though, Joyce walked up to the door with a little more purpose and excitement knowing what would be behind the door.

“Hey, dolls,” Jeff smiled wildly, opening the door for the two girls, “Come on in!”

Stepping through the threshold, their eyes locked upon entrance. That same color, the blue with the green secret, made her heart warm as they lit up with excitement and affection. Jeff, Andie, and Joyce approached Dan. Andie welcomed him home with a loving hug first. For a moment, Joyce and Dan stared into one another. Joyce thought of the months of letters piling up between them before she stepped through them and gave him a tight, but warm, hug.

“It’s really good to see you, Dan,” Joyce mumbled into his shoulder, accepting the embrace they both had been waiting to feel. Joyce could see Andie and Jeff give each other a skeptical glance as she pulled out of the hug, but Joyce didn’t even care.

“Wanna see my tattoo?” Dan asked, pulling up his sleeve for Joyce to see. She laughed at him, playfully appalled that he would get such a thing, “It’s the Marine tattoo that everyone gits.”

The night, once again, progressed as any party would, except for how much of the night Joyce spent by Dan’s side. He wouldn’t participate in the normal drinking and card playing, but sat with Joyce and watched with her just to feel her warmth. They would lean in exchanging secret words, placing a hand on a leg, a shoulder, a cheek. People noticed, wondering when those two had gotten close or when they even began talking since Dan had been gone eight months. Ray and Andie were the ones to look on the most, baffled by the scene while Jeff stood behind them with a hidden smile. There she was, quiet Joyce who never dated anybody, hugging on the oldest of the Belair boys. Joyce and Dan could not be bothered, though, because they were in love and he would not be leaving again.

“That same color, the blue with the green secret, made her heart warm as they lit up with excitement and affection.”

The Anchor

She can feel the ache crawling up the middle of her back as her cracked hands move mechanically over the surface of the used dishes. She takes a deep inhale, slowly releasing it back out as she simultaneously bends over the counter. She gazes out the window of the backyard that leads out into the field of the YMCA. She can recall all the grandchildren sledding down

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the small hill in the winters and trying to create an igloo out of the miniscule amount of snow they had gotten one winter. With another nostalgic sigh, she continues the daunting task of washing the used dishes, listening to the conversation at the kitchen table.

“It’s a blue jay,” Emma explains to her Papaw, “Remember when you said it was my Native American animal?”

“Lemme see it,” Dan grumbles in his deep, aged voice, “They did a good job. Now, don’t go tattin’ up yerself. Don’t want ya’ lookin’ like a circus freak.”

“I’ll be fine,” Emma challenges and Joyce can just hear the eyeroll that probably followed.

She hears some shuffling by the table, turning to see Dan pulling up the shirt sleeve of his pocketed t-shirt. Tanned, leathery skin marked by small but many freckles, as well as a deep blue, faded tattoo. Joyce knows that tattoo well, having seen it at least once every day for the past 40 years.

“Ya’ know when I got it?” Dan questions his granddaughter, that passive voice preparing to tell a story, “We just came ashore. Tiny lil’ shop by the dock. His name was Oliver. He knew what I wanted before I did. He was 60. Long gone, now, but the tattoo a daily reminder.”

Joyce shuts her eyes to the sound of the memory. “Daily reminder” resonates in her mind like an echo through a canyon. While the tattoo may be faded, now, she can still see it fresh as morning dew. The eagle with its wings spread as wide as the width of the earth its standing on. Behind the earth, an anchor with a rope engulfing it. Today, you can barely tell what it looks like. You can make out the three objects: eagle, earth and anchor. The details aren’t as precise or clear anymore, black ink blending with skin and freckles from long days in the sun.

She feels a love tap on her butt, cocking her head backwards to see Dan putting his arm around her. He kisses the spot on her chin underneath her right ear. He whispers, “Love you, baby.”

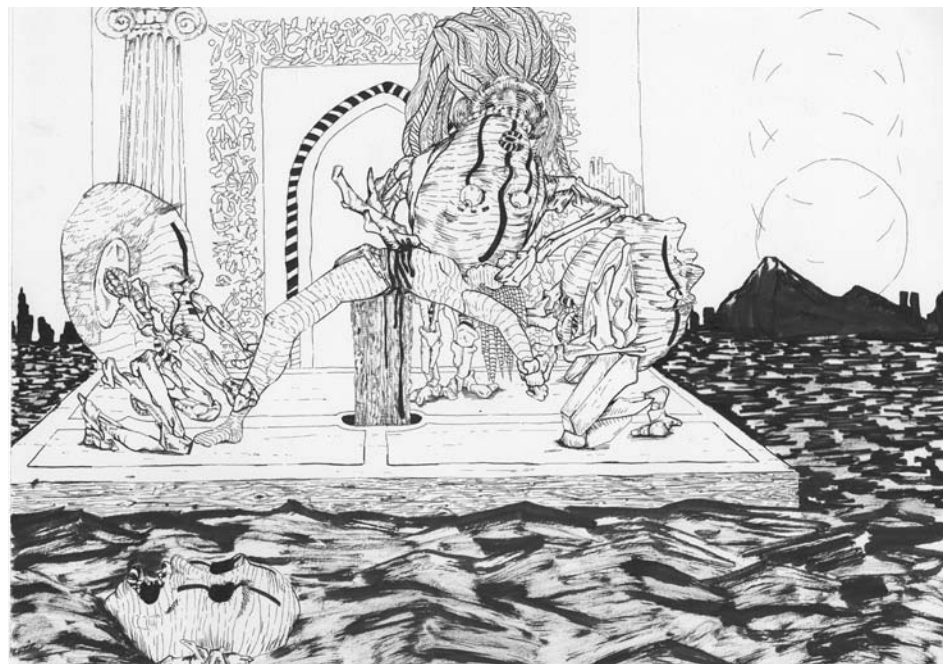
She doesn’t smile, but shakes her head to him casually as he chuckles and parts her with another pat on her butt. She looks over her other shoulder, watching Dan head towards the den to potentially play another hundred games of Texas Hold’Em on the computer.

“Gran,” Emma says, curiously, entering Joyce’s thoughts. Joyce smiles to her granddaughter, eyebrow raised.

“Yes, Em?” She encourages. Emma shoves the rolling chair across the floor, landing beside the stove only three feet from Joyce.

“How did you and Papaw meet?” She asks, her eyes filled with the same wanderlust she was born with and her everlasting love for her Gran written all over her face. Joyce takes one last longing glance towards her husband in the den before turning around to face Emma.

“Well, Em,” Joyce began, floating backwards in time to a different world, a different life, a different man, a different girl, “I was young...”



Ancient Revival, Daniel Verdin

Fine

by Konstanze Fowler

No matter what's going on, I can't believe what they've told me. Actually, it's more like I won't. I refuse to believe them. My mother is bawling her eyes out behind me. I turn to her. She has extraordinarily short black hair and her brown eyes are red and puffy. She walks over to me and hugs me, squeezing me tight.

"Mom," I frown. There are people here. I pull back and look around our living room. My dad is sitting in the middle of our huge tan couch with my neighbors and a few family friends on each side. My dad's blonde hair is messy. He's been crying too. Someone pats my shoulder. I turn to them.

"How are you holding up, Livie?" A short plump woman asks. Her greying hair is in a long ponytail. I think she's my mom's friend.

"I'm fine," I say, expressionless. My mom bursts into another fit of sobs and I go into the kitchen. People keep bringing in consolation food. It's only been two hours since they said those absurd words, so why are so many people here, in my house? My cell phone rings and I go out the back door. I sit on the swing set in our huge green yard and answer the phone, "Hello?"

"Liv, I just heard about Ava and Jake. Are you okay? I'm on my way. I can't believe what happened," my friend's voice is cracking, like she's crying.

"I'm fine, thanks," I say.

"I'll be there soon. Do you want me to bring anything? I made muffins yesterday," she croaks.

"I'm fine, Sam," I frown. We have enough food.

"Well, I'm on my way," she says and I hang up. I walk back into the cream house to the living room.

"Olivia," my dad says and holds out his arms to me. He's standing now. I hug him, even though I don't want to. He moves my shoulder length black hair away from my ear, "I'm so sorry, sweetie," he says and I pull away.

"I'm going upstairs. Tell Sam when she gets here," I say.

"Liv, are you alright?" One of my dad's coworkers asks.

"It's Olivia," I say and head to the stairs. They creak under my feet. At the top, I take a left down the hall, passing Jake's room, then Ava's. I close the door behind me when I get in my small room. My bed waits for me in the middle of the back wall with my dresser on the left. My cluttered desk is on the right. I sit on my bed. This has to be a dream. I'm sure it is. There's no way both of my siblings would die at the same time, especially the day before Jake's birthday. I sit in silence until I hear voices in the hall.

"So, how did it happen? I heard it was a car accident, but what happened?" A woman asks someone. I don't know the voice.

"Ava was picking Jake up from t-ball practice when they were hit by a drunk driver and a semi. The semi was behind them when the drunk got into the wrong lane and hit them," I know that voice. That's Levi. He's the brother of Ava's boyfriend.

"Please, stop telling everyone. I'm tired of hearing it," Damien cries. Damien and Ava have been together for three years. I get up and open the door. Damien is sitting on Ava's bed, holding the picture of them that she keeps on her desk. He wipes away tears, his medium length brown hair falling into his face. Levi gasps when he sees me. Damien looks up and relief floods his face, but the grief quickly returns.

"How are you alive?" Levi asks me. He shaved his head recently.

"They were twins," Damien says. He gets up, puts the picture back, and hugs me, "I can't imagine how hard this must be for you,"

"Yeah, it's sooo hard," I say, my voice dripping in sarcasm. Damien backs away from me.

"You-you don't mean you wanted her dead, do you?" Fear is in his blue eyes.

"What? Why would I want Ava dead? She's my sister for God's sake. I mean, this can't actually be happening. This is probably a dream or something," I frown, "a nightmare."

"I wish this were just a dream," Damien frowns. He ruffles my hair and goes downstairs. I fix it as the girl and Levi go downstairs and I see Sam come up.

"LIV!" She cries and throws her arms around me. Her blonde curls aren't as perfect as usual. She isn't wearing obscene amounts of make-up, either.

"Hi, Sam," she pulls back. I can see her blue-grey eyes are filled with tears.

"I mean, this
can't actually be
happening. This is
probably a dream or
something"

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“How are you- you aren’t crying?” She chokes on her words. I just shrug. She takes me back into my room and goes to my closet. She finds a teddy bear and hugs it while she sits next to me on my bed. I play with the edge of my superhero blanket. We sit there for a while. The only noise is Sam’s crying.

“Sam, can I be alone for a bit?” I ask after who knows how long. She nods, hugs me and leaves. I sit in silence alone for the rest of the day. I don’t think; I just sit. A few people come to check on me, but I shrug them off. They offer me food, but I’m not hungry.

“Olivia,” my mother opens my door, “would you like to come downstairs? You’ve been up here for over a week.”

“I’m fine,” I say, but I always say that and she knows it. She sits next to me.

“Livie, we all miss them,” she pushes back tears, “the only time you’ve left this room, is to go to the funeral and for the bathroom. You’ve hardly eaten anything. Please, Liv. I don’t want to lose you, too,” she frowns at me.

“I’m fine,” I tell her again.

“No, you aren’t, Liv. You need to eat, you need socialization. You can’t sit here forever.”

“I’m fine,” my voice is practically robotic.

“Olivia,” my mom starts crying, “you’re starving yourself. You need to eat to live, please, come downstairs.”

“What’s the point? Why should I try?” I frown.

“What?” She seems surprised I said something other than the two words I always say.

“What’s the point in trying? I’m waiting to wake up. I need to wake up, but every time I close my eyes, I see coffins with Jake and Ava in them. I don’t know how to wake up from this nightmare.”

“You do need to wake up, Liv. As much as you don’t want to believe it, this is reality,” she cries. I lie down.

“Please leave,” I say and she does. I need to wake up. I lie in my bed for a while and decide that maybe I have woken up. I get up and walk into Ava’s room. She isn’t there. I go to Jake’s room and he isn’t there either. Maybe they’re downstairs. I walk slowly downstairs. My muscles are weak. I haven’t moved much since that day. My leg buckles under me and I fall. I hit my head on the wall and my arms and legs hit everything as I fall down the stairs. When I stop moving, I lie there, motionless,

expressionless, alone, and in pain. I hear my parents shouting and they’re soon by my side. If Jake and Ava were here, they would’ve gotten to me first. They’re gone. They’re really gone. Tears flood down my face. They’re gone. Now that I can see that, now that I’m awake, it’s time to live for them. I need to live for them and for me. Now that I’m awake, I’ll be fine.



Sir Sand and Lives, *Linda Zalewski*

Element Story

by Taylor Stamps

Disturbance

Cassandra drifted along wearily through the woods dragging her grotesque limbs as she walked. The wood she carried back and forth through the woods took a toll on her distorted body. Prospero's spirits flew about her constantly teasing her with the childish song they'd created long ago. "*Cassandra is a walking disgrace,*

No one will look her in her face,

Ho, ho, where will she go,

It's true that no one knows"

Cassandra had been picked on her whole life because of the way that she looked, so it was natural that she had become used to it by now. What no one knew was that while they discredited her because of her looks she was slowly learning. She had convinced the naïve Miranda to teach her how to read. Once she accomplished that there was no stopping her.

There was a jealous rage growing inside Cassandra that no one knew about, or even took care to notice. From the first time she laid her eyes on Prospero she knew she was in love. The only person she had been used to seeing was her mother, and his peculiar behavior startled her. She had never seen someone so dedicated to a task who could also wield so much power over others. Cassandra was used to having a recessive role in her relationships and gladly decided to be taken under Prospero's wing. All her attempts to draw him in failed, and he refused to notice her as anything other than a servant. Years after Prospero and Miranda's arrival Cassandra decided that if Prospero wouldn't love her then there was no reason any of them should continue living. One day she had overheard her master and one of his spirits discussing a plan to bring others to the island soon, and Cassandra knew she had to act quickly.

Soon, her contraptions would be completed, and the domino effect of her plan would fall into play. On the day of her attacks Cassandra first distracted the spirits by instigating a fight between Ariel and the others by enquiring why Prospero favored Ariel the most. She then led Miranda to the edge of a mountain where a trap captured her and proceeded to throw her off the mountain. For her final phase, she would have to take care of Prospero who was locked away in his study where he did not wish to be disturbed.

Cassandra knew that once the time came she would have to be patient, so as expected, she waited. The sun was beginning to set when she finally heard the creaking of Prospero's door opening. He stepped on a trip wire and his hands, feet, and mouth were entrapped so that he couldn't move or talk. Cassandra slowly

approached him and recited the monologue she had finally gotten the opportunity to say after her many years of preparation:

"Prospero, you've never taken any notice to the love and affection that I had for you, but now, that is all about to change. Since you wouldn't confess your love for me I finally realized that I'll just have to kill us all instead. I know you may be thinking she sounds crazy blah blah blah, but think about it, that way we can all finally be together forever, and how I look won't matter."

Prospero tried to twist and turn to break free.

"Please stop struggling my love my plan is almost concluding, and you're really just wasting your time. Now if you're done interrupting me with your failed attempts to escape I can continue. Where was I, ah yes, we will be together forever as airy spirits with love binding us together forever. The end."

Cassandra pulls out the knife concealed in her cloak and tragically ends her and Prospero's life.

If only she knew of his real plan to finally get everyone off the island. She was a clever girl for being able to conceal her plan for as long as she did, but not clever in the sense that she didn't think of the consequences. The storm and the boat that were supposed to lead all our key characters to the island never happened, and so they returned home safely, never having to face the consequences of their actions for causing Prospero and his daughter to flee to a nearly deserted island. Worst of all, in the afterlife Prospero still refused to love her. Cassandra's crazed jealousy blinded her, her plight was that she had not really thought everything through. Including the fact that once they were dead, Miranda would be reunited with her mother, and Prospero his first love.



Chimp, Daniel Verdin

TOWERS

A Difference of Temperament

by *Ryan Janovic*

(This story was written as an exercise for my English class. The prompt was to take characters from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and change aspects of their personalities. We were then supposed to write a short piece with new versions of the characters. This is what I came up with.)

As soon as the storm hit, Antonio knew it was the work of his brother. It was in the way the tranquil blue sky appeared to open into a cruel black maw, the way the rain and winds began to beat against the ship from every side, the way that every member of the crew felt sudden deep dread awaken in their stomachs. As the Lord of Naples took a sleeve to his rain-clogged eyes he heard orders and yowls struggling to be heard over the gales. The crew dashed across the deck in desperate but consummate professionalism. They had trained for this. Any self respecting swabbie knew how to survive in a storm.

All of that confidence evaporated like smoke when the spirits came down.

“The crew dashed across the deck in desperate but consummate professionalism.”

Out of the sky's dark heart they came. Fiendish pixies with giant dragonfly wings swarmed the ship and shot bolts of lightning into the hull. One unfortunate crewman raised his sword in defiance and received a burst of pulsing death straight to the chest as a reward for his courage. Chaos erupted as the men attempted to both control the ship and meet the spirits in combat. They would come up short in both endeavors.

Antonio stood at the bow, gazing over the nightmare. His mind returned to the last encounter he had with his brother over a decade ago. Prospero had gone five weeks without attending one of the weekly strategy meetings; tedious affairs where the bureaucrats would discuss the minute runnings of the kingdom. Prospero had always found farming disputes and trade negotiations insufferably boring so usually his absences were tolerated with slight annoyance by the officials. Antonio had decided he had enough of the menial discussion and, perhaps out of a sense of brotherly mischief, decided to storm Prospero's study and see what the Duke was up to. Typically when the

administrators couldn't find their lord the study was always a safe bet. Antonio loved to drop in on his brother and see what esoteric project he was cooking up. This current endeavor must have been of critical importance considering Prospero had

hardly been spotted outside of his room in the last month. Because of this Antonio was surprised when he threw the doors open to find the room empty.

Antonio looked around at the books that adorned the study. Prospero had always been a devoted reader. Books of advanced mathematics, fairy poetry, and histories of Scottish kings decorated the walls. The room was well lit with an enormous window overlooking the mountains. Glittering alchemical contraptions were strewn over a giant ebony desk in the center. On any other day Antonio would have taken the rare chance to explore his brother's library but on this occasion he was drawn to the bookshelf in the far corner. It appeared to be slightly ajar from the wall. Antonio slid his hand in the crevice and pushed out to reveal a staircase descending into murky blackness.

He didn't want to go down. Of course his brother would be at the bottom. He knew where it was all going.

The walk wasn't as long as he expected and before he realized it Antonio was past the simple wooden door and inside his brother's hidden lab. The room was dimly lit by torches but Antonio could still see the arcane symbols that ran along the dark stone walls. Bottles containing what appeared to be body parts were proudly on display, like fruit from a local merchant stand. Three hideous statues that resembled witches loomed in the far corners. Prospero was in the center. His back was to Antonio. In front of Prospero a body lay a dais. Even without its head, Antonio recognized the bloated and decayed shape of the missing Gonzalo.

Antonio felt his body carry him forward. He needed to understand what he was seeing. Before he could say anything Prospero turned around. His white shirt was splattered with Gonzalo's blood. In his hands was a skull, the gore from the kind old servant still drying on its ivory surface. Prospero had a kind smile on his face. His eyes twinkled like distant stars.

“Wipe your eyes brother. Smile and have comfort.” His voice was musical.

Two hours later Prospero was in chains and being taken to his execution. Antonio would soon wear the crown of his father. It was undoubtedly dangerous to allow the sorcerer to live but Antonio would allow no more blood to spill in the royal halls. With a few rushed commands the new Duke of Milan had shipped the heretic to live the rest of his days on the most barren island his navigators could find. The Duke watched the vessel disappear, and never smiled again.

The wood splintered and the ship began to take water. Raindrops hit like mean, bulky beads. Half of the men had been stricken down by the wicked spirits, several more had fallen into the slush below. As Antonio drew his sword, he took a breath. He wouldn't beg for mercy or forgiveness from his wicked brother. Everything they were given was what they had deserved. Antonio thought of his beautiful niece, and went to meet the sea.

The Darkest Room
by *Konstanze Fowler*

Silence surrounds me as I wait in darkness. I'm unaware of time and space. All I know is the darkness that I've been in since I can remember. Occasionally I can hear someone come close and speak to me, but I can't fully understand what they say, what they want. I spend my days eating and sleeping, just like anyone else. I don't do much, but wait. I'm not exactly sure what I'm waiting for, but I'm waiting for something. Maybe I'm waiting for some light in the darkness. Maybe I'm just waiting to go free. Maybe I'm waiting for the day that I can see. I barely move, afraid if I move too much, I'll stumble or hit something in the darkness.

"Hi, Nina," a deep voice says. He says this whenever he comes to visit, but I don't know who he is and I don't think he speaks the same language as me. I'm not sure if he's someone to trust or not. He always has a calming tone to his voice, but for all I know, he could be trying to gain my trust in order to betray me later. I don't know what he wants from me, but he never talks for long before leaving again. When he leaves, I'm usually left in silence again, so I enjoy his company.

I don't remember how I got here. I don't remember anything before this darkness. Sometimes I wonder if I'm missing my memories, which would explain why I don't remember much. I wish I remembered more than this. I want to know what it's like to see, to run around and dance. I want to know what my family and friends look like, if I have any. I don't remember them if I do.

I lift my hand and hold it in front of my face, squinting into the darkness, wishing that I could see it. I try to cry, but no tears escape me. I hit the wall nearby in frustration before hugging my knees to my chest and falling asleep.

I'm woken by an earthquake and I throw my arms out to steady myself. I lean against the wall and put my hands on the floor, silently hoping the earthquake won't last long. It makes me feel nauseous, but I don't let myself get sick. I squeeze my eyes shut while I wait for it to pass and it soon does. After a bit, I hear the man, but this time, his voice is on the other side of the wall. Is this wall a door? I feel around for a doorknob, but don't find one. Instead, I'm greeted by darkness and the voice on the other side of the wall.

"Are you okay, Nina?" He asks and I'm able to understand, surprisingly. I nod, but realize that he can't see me, so I try to speak, but nothing comes out. I try and try, but it's as if someone removed my voice box, so I knock on the wall to let him know I'm okay.

"Good," he chuckles and I hear a knock on the opposite side of the wall. I lean my forehead there and wish that I was on the other side of this horrible wall. He speaks and I can only understand a few words.

"It's--light, bright," he says and I know. He can see light. The other side of this wall has light. I have to get out. I have to see the light. I boldly decide to explore the room I'm in, but only discover that I'm in a round room with no doors or windows that I can find. I can't reach the ceiling, so I assume I came from above. If I've been abducted, they tossed me in here from the ceiling, but if that's true, there's no way out, but up. If that's true, the man may have never even been in the room with me. Maybe he was always on the opposite side of the wall and I just now realized it.

I wake up, struggling to catch my breath. Something's wrong. Something isn't right. There's shouting, talking. Everything is loud and I want to go back to the silence. It's still dark, but it's so loud. I cover my ears and close my eyes, wishing for the noise to stop. Instead, something grabs me and I'm brought into blinding light. My eyes automatically close and they water from the pain of the sudden light. My lungs hurt, but I'm able to catch my breath. It's loud, it's cold, it's bright. I don't want this. I thought I wanted light, but no, it's horrible. It hurts my eyes. I guess I should have expected that, though. I've never seen light, so my eyes aren't used to it. That's why it hurts. I'm not fully aware of what happens, but eventually, I fall asleep, exhausted from the lack of oxygen I had before.

My eyes slowly open, squinting in the light and I see a man.

"Hi, Nina," the familiar voice says and I grin. I know him. I can see him. I can see his blue eyes and black hair. I can see his chiseled chin and handsome features. A woman appears next to him and I stare at her, trying to recall any female voices, but she doesn't speak. She simply smiles and makes some signs with her hands that I can't identify. Her long golden hair falls in her face as she leans in close to me and kisses my forehead, like a mother might do. I smile at the thought and think for a moment. They know my name. The woman kissed my forehead. Maybe these are the parents that I don't remember having.

"Come on, Nina. Let's go home," the man says and I try to move to follow them home, but after barely moving for so long, I don't have the strength to walk. The woman picks me up and my instincts tell me that I'm right. This woman is my mother and I will love her forever. These are my parents and I'm finally free of the darkness. I try to say, "okay," but my voice doesn't obey because I've lost my voice box, and it looks like my mother lost hers as well.

"I don't
remember how
I got here. I
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anything before
this darkness."

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MALONE AWARD

She's Wearing a Smile

by *Aidan Osterby*

There was nothing like automatic gunfire to make a man question his decisions in life. It was 4AM, a storm was supposed to be rolling in, and here Jack was at a dilapidated warehouse with gunfire going off. Any smart man would be home, in his bed, asleep. It begged the question: what was he doing here?

The easy answer was that he was here for a client, looking for someone in one of these metal husks. The hard answer? A long and painful affair starting with a shy Venus looking for a twin sister that disappeared when they were 17. He'd been chasing this case like the white whale for near a month now. It had taken him from whorehouses, to back alleys, fancy hotels, and boardrooms. All the while, men were turning up dead all over the city. The bodies counted nine so far. Two were known dirty cops, the rest, gangsters. The story he'd come up with was... something to be sure. He'd spent the ride over going over it all again, trying to make it add up. It started with a kidnapping. A girl taken and forced to become a whore. Then the girl gets rescued and taken in by a wealthy club owner, and after that she moves up to a business tycoon. Tycoon gets sick of her, maybe has a fight with her, makes her disappear and that's the end of it. Except it wasn't.

She was back from the dead, and she had an agenda. She was the one killing people and Jack knew it. An hour ago he'd gotten a phone call, with a woman claiming to be her wanting to talk. Now he only had to survive the meeting and he could call the case closed.

Two cars were already parked on the side of the street; mob owned. That didn't bode well for this. A set up? He felt for the Colt under his armpit. The weight of it, heavy with power, comforted him. He was just getting out of his car when it started. Gunshots, two of them, inside his building. The answer came soon after, and boy what an answer it was. Automatic, relentless; a string of fireworks that split the night's silence. Just as abruptly as it began, all went quiet.

The heavy Colt came out of his holster and he made for the door. He gingerly pushed it open, praying that it didn't creak. The first thing he saw was a face, frozen in shock. A man in a suit, a mob man, dead and full of holes. Opening the door further he found more, five more. Six men in total, all armed with pistols. He recognized one of them. Marco was his name. Three days ago he manhandled Jack, searching him for weapons when he went in for a meeting with a man named Maxwell Jovus.

"Evening, detective!" A woman's voice called from the darkness, demanding absolute attention, echoing all around the huge room, making it impossible to locate.

"Janet Camilla!" He called out, "come on out!"

"Let your eyes adjust, you'll find me just fine." It laughed.

He swept his eyes around, trying to pierce through the darkness. "Listen, Janet, I get it. You got a raw deal, but this isn't going to help you." His footsteps echoed across the concrete floor as he moved further in.

"I'm inclined to disagree."

A look back at the dead men, "There's a thousand more where these came from!"

"Oh, I'm shaking!" The words passed through the woman's lips gleefully, like Jack had just told a joke. A few yards from the bodies there was a single hat, wide brim, black, he had a similar one. "I've lost count of how many times men have tried to kill me. It hasn't happened yet. But that's not the point here." Finally, he could hear where it came from. Above him.

Jack had never seen a woman wear a suit before. Now he wasn't sure he ever wanted to see different. The pants, blouse, and vest were tailored to her shape, flattering every curve. Looking down on him like that, she looked divine. She sat on a catwalk, one leg crossed over the other, feet hanging free. Her left hand was over her side, where the clothing was torn and stained crimson. Her right hand gripped the Thompson laying on the metal next to her. "The point here is you, Conroy. Because I imagine you've got questions for me." Her head tilted to the side, turning her calm smile crooked. She didn't bat an eye at the Colt; it suddenly felt a little light in his hands. They watched each other for a moment, neither moving nor speaking.

"Why not come down?" Jack broke the silence.

"I like the view up here."

"Mind if I share it?"

"Leave that down there," she nodded to his weapon.

He shrugged, "Fair enough," then laid it on the floor and stepped back, making sure she saw it. He made for the stairs, keeping his eyes on her the entire way. As he approached, she stood, letting go of the Thompson and meeting him a few paces away. She held out her unbloodied hand. The movement swayed her coat just enough to give Jack a glimpse of her insurance policy: an unfriendly looking knife on her belt. He took it and shook, expecting her to let go. But she didn't. Instead,

her grip held firm while she pulled his hand upward and bowed her head, gently placing soft lips to the back. Then she released his wrist, a faint magenta imprint on him. His eyes shifted to the wound on her side. “You gonna need something for that?”

“You’re sweet, but I’ll be fine. It grazed me, that’s all.”

Jack didn’t believe her, but he nodded, leaning against the catwalk’s railing. “So you’ve been busy since you got back in town.”

“You could say that.” She smiled down on the dead men.

“The police still think they’re looking for a man,” he chuckled.

A laugh. “For once, womanhood works in my favor. Don’t suppose it’ll stay that way after this.”

Jack shrugged, “I was hired to find you, not solve the murders of mobsters and a couple crooked cops.” He took a cigarette out of this pocket. “I’ve got no stake in this game. If you get killed that’s on you, not me. Besides,” another glance to the dead men, “you seem like you can handle yourself.”

“Well that’s one less thing I have to worry about.”

They were silent a moment, staring back at the moon that peered in from the skylights, bright, but not enough to reach them. “So what’s the endgame?” He finally asked. The unlit cigarette bounced between his lips.

“Settling a score.”

“What score?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” She gave him a sideways smile. “You’re a detective; detect.”

Jack smiled, never one to refuse a challenge, or a lady. “Alright then, why don’t I start at the beginning, see if I can piece it together from there. Say you help me if I miss a crucial detail or two?”

“Sounds fine to me.”

“Then let’s start at the night of the kidnapping.” Jack dug around in his pockets for his matchbook. He heard the sound of a strike; Ms. Camilla was holding one out for him. “Thank you.” He lit the stick. “So you went to a dive called Janus with a college boy named Pointer, right?”

Janet snapped her fingers. “That was his name.”

He took that as an affirmative. “From what I gather, he goes out with you, gets strong-armed into leaving when you’re off in the lady’s room, and then you’re on your own. How’s that sound?”

There was a condescending laugh. “Oddly enough, I don’t recall why he left. But the people at that bar were anything but violent.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because I’d been there three times already.”

“With Pointer?”

Another laugh. “Of course not. But he didn’t know about the others. It was obvious what he was looking for,” she waved her hands across her body, displaying her point. “I wasn’t giving it to him.”

“You turn that into a habit, teasing the boys with no finale?”

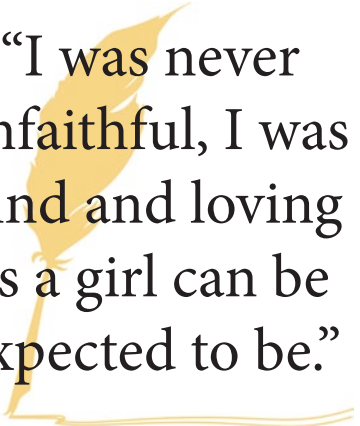
“Oh, I didn’t always stop before the climax,” she retorted with a playful smirk.

Jack laughed humorlessly, “So you played the naïve, innocent virgin to get a few free drinks, then let them leave you just naïve and innocent every once in a while.”

“Dates detective; I was a teenage girl, going on dates. Maybe you’ve heard of ‘em,” she replied, still holding the same smirk. “I was never unfaithful, I was kind and loving as a girl can be expected to be. But every once in a while, I pretended not to get a dirty joke or faked a cough when I drank whiskey.” She laughed to herself a little. “I tried to make myself more untouched.”

“I’ll bet you were quite the little seductress.” Jack replied dismissively.

The laugh this time was longer, genuine. “What kind of girl do you think I was eight years ago, Jackaboy?” She goaded. Jack gave her a questioning look, so she clarified. “You think I was doing anything on purpose?” She shook her head. “Back then I was just looking for a boy who cared. But they looked at me funny when they saw I could hold my liquor or I didn’t act lost in the bedroom.”



“I was never unfaithful, I was kind and loving as a girl can be expected to be.”

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Jack knew she was right. He was talking to the wrong girl and he was years late to talk to the right one. But he knew what it had led to, or rather, who. There was a regular at Janus that he'd learned about. A violent man. "Did Bluto buy it?"

She dropped her behind back down onto the catwalk, letting her legs swing. "Matter of fact, he didn't. Like you, actually. Didn't like me lying. He scolded me about it, you know. I made the mistake of laughing it off. Who did he think he was?" A sigh. "I got there, clinging to Pointer's arm and acting nervous, the look he gave me..." she chuckled. "Nature calls, and when I come back, Pointer's gone, the car's gone, and I'm stuck twenty miles from home. You can piece together what happened afterward."

Kidnapping, rape, forced prostitution. Jack's expression spoke for him. "Bluto was such a scared little thing." Janet mused.

Jack laughed first, thinking it was a joke. "Him? Scared little thing? Sister I talked to a lot of people and every one of them said he was a thug."

"And they were right," she replied confidently. "He was definitely a thug, a bully, and whatever other insult comes to mind. But human beings are never just one thing. We've got as many faces as we do relations." Jack nodded ponderously, sucking in smoke from the cigarette. "Bluto always, and I mean always, apologized at least ten times every time he came by. He had anger issues, a lot of them, and they terrified him." She stood up and grabbed a black coat that was hanging over the railing. She took out a flask, opened it up and looked into it. But she didn't drink. "God, I hated him."

"Can't've been easy, dealing with that."

She giggled, "You'd be surprised. After a year I figured out that pushing back on his sad days got him to leave me alone." She closed the flask and put it back in the coat, sweeping it around and shoving her arms in the sleeves. "Did you go there? To La Femme Deux Vis?" She over-pronounced the name of the whorehouse she'd been taken to, giggling a little to herself. Jack nodded. "You met Mariah?"

"The owner? Yes, she's the one I talked to."

"How is she?"

"Seemed to be doing well for herself," Jack replied disinterestedly.

Genuine warmth came over the woman's face. "That's good to hear. She's the only reason I survived two years there."

"Oh? She never mentioned that," Jack replied, interest sparked a little.

"She downplayed it. Honestly, she just let me get drunk, offered a shoulder to cry on, stop the bleeding on the bad nights... but that was enough." Her gaze went to the floor, "I barely remember most of it. I was either drunk and out with Bluto, or just vicious to everyone who talked to me."

"Why didn't you ever leave?"

"I ask myself that every day and I've never found an answer. Sometimes I think I was just in too deep. Some days I think I was scared to try. But those feel like excuses."

"Mariah mentioned how much you wanted Bluto dead. Did you...?" She shook her head, Jack nodded understandingly. "Hard thing to do, kill a man, especially when you're barely an adult."

"You don't believe me?" Her face didn't turn, but her eyes still found his.

A shrug. "Well, he ended up dead somehow. I can't think of a jury that would convict you. Self-defense, open and shut."

"As I recall, they ruled it a suicide."

"They did," Jack nodded, "but I'm not sure how a man shoots himself four times in the back."

"Touché." More genuine laughter. Then she stopped abruptly. "It was Aaron Friend."

Jack gave her a look, raising an eyebrow. "Friend? You're pinning it on him, of all people?"

"Yes I am." She paced to her gun and picked it up by the barrel.

Jack clapped his hands and rubbed them together, smiling satisfied, "All the better. Woodsman slays wolf and saves little Red. Right out of a fairy tale."

"You know the wolf eats her in the original version?" She heaved the weapon up and rested the barrel on her shoulder. Then she took the hand away from the wound, giving Jack a look at it. It had more than just grazed her. It wasn't a hole, but the gash was deep. She stuck the bloody hand in her pocket, pulling out the flask again. She unscrewed the lid with her teeth and took a swig. Her entire body shuddered and she made a muffled grunting sound. "Wow that burns going down."



“We’ve got as many faces as we do relations.”

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Jack raised an eyebrow. “Trying out the act on me?”

She shook her head. “It’s been years since I touched the stuff. I went clean. Got a flask just yesterday, don’t know why it took me till now to try it.”

“Why kick the habit?”

“Not sure. Maybe I developed a fondness for my liver. Or maybe I just... lost my taste one day.”

Quite abruptly, and for the first time in this meeting, Jack saw the smile drop from Janet’s face. It was overtaken by ice, pure and biting. The Thompson came off her shoulder, her bloody hand caught the other end. Jack tensed and quickly began running the conversation through his head to figure out what he may have said to set her off. “You know detective, I hate people who break promises.”

He eyed her warily, “How do you mean?”

“See, when two people draw guns on each other, they make this promise.” The stock went under her arm, braced against her good side. “A promise that one of them’ll be dead by the end of it.”

Then it began. The flash of the muzzle, the heat around the barrel, the deafening blasts, and the smell and taste of gun smoke assaulted Jack’s senses. He reeled back, nearly falling over as Janet swept the barrel across, sending a barrage of bullets into the bodies and concrete below. Then it was over. Jack had to take a moment to recover from the overwhelming and pointless brutality he’d just watched. When he finally found his voice, the only thing he could get out was “What the hell was that?!”

“Housekeeping.” Her expression didn’t change.

Jack looked back down at the bodies. One of them had moved a few feet forward, and his hand was reaching outward toward a pistol. Jack gave himself another moment to breathe. “How about you warn me when you’re gonna do that next time?”

She glanced at him with a returning smile, “Sorry, for what it’s worth.” After being shattered so viciously, the silence seemed fragile, wounded worse than she was. The moon was gone, covered by clouds. They sat in silence again and a pattering sound began, rain. It sounded light.

“So what do you have against Friend?” Jack killed the quiet.

“What did he ever do for me?”

Jack smiled incredulously, shaking his head. “He got you out of that place, brought you to the top, gave you a job, bought you all kinds of nice things, kept you safe; what didn’t he do for you?”

“Care.”

“Care?”

“Did I stutter? Yes, care. I wasn’t his princess, I was his trophy, a toy.” She drank from the flask again, giving another shudder.

“What do you mean, ‘a toy’?”

She turned on him suddenly, her face inches from his. “I was there for his entertainment; care to know what entertained him best?” She didn’t give him a chance to answer. “Misery. And boy, was I a gold mine.”

Jack didn’t flinch. “Oh come on, I saw your room, that stage you had, the gifts he got you. You were living the high life. You say Friend killed Bluto, but you’ve nothing to back it up. You say he wanted to make you miserable, but he pampered you constantly. You say you were a trophy, but every person I talked to about you and him said he sung your praises whenever he had the chance. You say he didn’t care, that’s not the story I read.”

She started giggling. After a moment the giggles became chuckles, then laughs, then cackles. When she finally settled down, she asked, “How much did you talk to Friend?”

“A decent amount, mostly about you.”

“Did he tell you I hated singing? Being on stage in front of so many people, it terrified me, made me sick to my stomach. I told him. He smiled at me and said he understood perfectly.” Her eyes stared into the pitch black hole of her flask, gripping it just a little harder. “Every night after that, he sent two men to drag me down if they had to. I either sang with a smile on my face or he threatened to take a knife to me.”

“Friend’s not the type to go for violence, he had to be bluffing.”

“See I made that mistake too,” she replied with a laugh, then pulled up her sleeve to show three scars the length of her forearm. “Some men are willing to do some appalling things to keep control.”

Jack stared at the scars as though they’d just insulted his mother. “I don’t believe it.” He wasn’t sure whether the statement was an accusation of lying, or an exclamation of abhorrence.

“I don’t need you to, detective. You say you saw my room?” She began pacing a few yards back and forth, closing

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her eyes and speaking almost lazily in her calm. Her shoes clanked against the metal. “Well I saw it too. I saw it morning, noon, and night.”

“He didn’t let you leave?”

“Oh, he did every once in a while..., if a weighted coin came up tails. One of his boys went with to keep an eye on me.” Jack was silent, he tried to glance back at her, but found her eyes holding him in place, forcing him to look at cold soiled truth. “He was a sadist, Conroy. Those gifts; he gave and took them on a whim. If I cried, it got worse. It took me a few months to learn to laugh, to act all haughty and brave, like it didn’t faze me. You ever smile for two years straight, Conroy?” She gazed at him with the same crescent carved into her face that she’d had nearly the entire time he’d been there. “You get so tired, but you forget how to do anything else.”

They were silent then, listening to the unknowable rhythm of the rain, watching the sky flash threats. Janet held out the flask, blood from her hand still smeared across the metal. Jack took it and drank. There was one final stop on her journey before she disappeared again. “Maxwell Jovus?”

On cue, lightning flashed and thunder clapped, making Janet jump. For the first time, she refused to look at him. Her eyes were shackled to the bodies, but she clearly wasn’t seeing them. Her face held a dim haunted memory in it, looking like a soldier back from the war. “Maxwell Jovus is a successful businessman whose grandparents were born in Italy,” she recited emotionlessly. “He has been working to keep the city clean alongside his friend and Mayoral candidate Aaron Friend.” The smile stayed, but her eyes were cold, blank, dead. The name had evoked things long buried in her.

Janet turned her back to him and let the gun fall to the metal walkway. Her coat slid off her shoulders. She moved her hands to her middle and began unbuttoning her vest. “He was well known in his younger days for being quite a heartthrob, a ladykiller.” Once the vest was off, the buttons on the white shirt underneath came next. Underneath was a thin white undershirt. “Even now in his late sixties, everyone says he looks forty at the most. He demands respect, courtesy, and above all,” she took off the shirt, leaving nothing but a bra between her and indecency. Scars marked her, disrupted smooth skin in a torturous map. In the center was the crowing piece. An x shape with an M over it and a J beneath it. It was a brand. “Obedience.”

“Mother of God,” Jack breathed.

Janet slowly slid her shirt back over her shoulders. When she spoke, she seemed to be back from whatever vacation her mind had taken. “Jovus didn’t like repeating himself. If he told you to do something, say something, be something, you obeyed. Otherwise...” She retrieved the rest of her clothes and began to redress.

“What did you have to do to earn that?”

“I got smart with him, made a joke. It’s quite an experience, waking up naked with your hands and feet bound and a man walking toward you, wielding glowing red iron,” she redid the last button of her shirt, looking back to him now. Jack could

only blow smoke out from his mouth, he had no words.

“You remember that pain,” she suddenly sneered, making the man four inches taller than her flinch, he recognized the impression of Jovus, “you make that pain your teacher. I own you, and here’s your proof.” She nearly fell against the railing, the strength seemed to seep out of her. Jack took a step forward to help her. “Don’t touch me!” She snarled at him, stopping him in his tracks. She breathed for a moment, then held out a hand for the flask. Jack handed it over and she emptied it down her throat, shuddering again. “It took me a little while to learn my rights. Choice wasn’t one of them; I was no one anymore, I was one of his dolls.”

The detective had nothing. No doubts, no comebacks, no remarks. There was another piece to the Jovus story though, and if he wanted the facts, that needed to come in too. “Jovus started seeing a woman while you were there, a Miss Haruka.” She flinched at the name, a bad sign. “Sorry, I know this isn’t ea-”

“Hadu.” She said distantly, at least that’s what it sounded like.

“Come again?”

“You’re pronouncing it wrong,” her tone was still tired, but the light was back in her eyes like someone flipped a switch. She finished buttoning her vest and grabbed her coat. “I used to say it the same way. She’d get so mad at me,” her smiled returned fondly. “Roll the r, put the stress on the first syllable. Haruka.”

“Alright, Miss Haruka. What I know is that she came into Jovus’s life and really didn’t take a liking to you. From what I heard, she yelled at you all the time. Eventually she wanted you out. Next thing anyone knows, you’ve disappeared. Before tonight, I’d assumed that was it for you; that Jovus had you killed.”

“Well, clearly, that was wrong,” the exhaustion was gone from her almost entirely. She sighed, looking lost in a memory. “Haruka was...” she let out a shuddery breath, “the best thing that ever happened to me. She rebuilt my mind, my confidence, my identity. She made me feel like a woman again.”

“Even though you argued all the time?”

She let her back rest against the railing, letting her head back. “That was the best part. I got to have conversations with her; real, intelligent conversations. I wasn’t allowed to talk most of the time, much less argue. Jovus was king and I was in his kingdom. But then a Goddess came from the east and neutered the king. She yelled at Jovus all she wanted, and he couldn’t shut her up the way he could with me.”

“Why would a man like Jovus take that from any dame?”

“Because he didn’t own her. Detective, Japan’s got a mafia all their own, twice as big. She didn’t belong to him, she

didn't even need him. Jovus had met a woman who looked at him like he looked at women: a conquest. And she forced me to talk to her, argue with her, think for myself again; all of the things that Jovus spent over a year working out of me."

"Can't imagine a man like Jovus standing for that."

"Oh he was hopping mad, did whatever he could to stop it. But to be blunt, she was smarter than him. He would go to a party to meet her, leave me behind, and then twenty minutes later a few men would come by to pick me up and take me right there."

Far off the sound of sirens could be heard. Jack met her eyes. "Sounds like someone else might've heard that firefight. What say we finish this story up back at my office?"

“Choice wasn’t
one of them; I was
no one anymore,
I was one of his
dolls.”

her unoccupied hand, the blood now mostly dried on her palm, and held it out to him.

"When does it stop?" He took the revolver and holstered it.

"I think you know that answer already."

"You're going to get yourself killed."

"Most likely." She didn't seem all too broken up about it.

"And you're alright with that?"

She shook her head. "You've got everything you need. Now tell me the score."

"Still don't trust me? Sister, the coppers'll be here any minute, you-"

"Detect me, Conroy." She cut him off.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. You went through Hell for six years. Beelzebub traded you to Lucifer traded you to Satan. Now you're back from parts unknown and you're going after them. How's that?" The sirens were getting louder.

"Let's go pick up your six-shooter." She nodded toward Jack's Colt, still on the floor, then walked past him, heading for the stairs. He followed behind her, down to the cold factory floor. She grabbed his Colt by the barrel with

"I was almost planning on it. But I've got friends. Like you said, been busy since I got back." Janet walked to the lone hat across the floor, picked it up, and set it on her head, tipped forward just slightly to shadow her eyes. Looked good on her.

"Takes a hell of a woman to bounce back after what you went through. I'm still missing two years though."

"Then are you going to ask?"

"I would if I thought I would get an answer."

She laughed and returned to him. "You're learning." She took his hand again, shaking it and repeating her welcoming kiss. Then the gun barrel was aimed at him.

Jack had to take a moment to comprehend it. He slowly raised his hands into the air, giving a wry smile. "And here I thought we were friends."

"I think we are, detective, but I can't have you following me, and I need time to get out of here before the boys in blue arrive."

"So was that the whole point of this talk, keep me here until you get a fall boy?"

She raised an eyebrow at him, giving a small sigh of exasperation. "A fall boy? Unless you're hiding a bigger gun in your pocket or that Colt fires like a machine gun, they can't prove a damn thing. I just need to get gone, and if they find you here, they'll have a suspect with no way to convict him."

"Ever think of just asking?"

"Hadn't crossed my mind, funnily enough. Not willing to take the chance." She backed up, keeping her gun trained on him. The way she held it, braced against her shoulder, muscles tensed; if there was any doubt she knew how to use it before, it was gone now. A few more steps and she melted into darkness, beyond Jack's vision. "If I survive, I'll look you up some time, buy you a drink, and tell you the rest."

"And what about the girl who sent me? What do I tell her?"

There was a pause, and for a moment, he thought she was already gone. "Tell my sister that I'm dead, so she should stop looking, and I'll visit around Christmas."

"Janet," Jack called out into the darkness, there was no response. Regardless, he still said, "good luck." He threw his cigarette down and stamped it out. Then he listened to the sounds of engines rolling up. He checked his watch, 4:30. Sun would start coming up soon. Car doors opened and slammed shut. "As many faces as relations huh?"

Begged the question: what face was she wearing now?

TOWERS

EDITOR'S CHOICE FOR POETRY

"Jelly Bean"

by *Dhana Perry*

It escaped the impregnable abstract, the nebulous, the velveteen comforts of ignorance,
and it is red: an unmistakable, unapologetically crimson manifestation of everything I want
but am not yet ready for.

It is apprehension; it is dyspepsia; it is alone in a porcelain cradle at three in the morning.
It is untimely and beautiful, a blithe warbler at your mother's funeral.

—Good god, when does the codeine kick in—

It sits atop the surface of the water, unmoving, turgid; a coagulated cherry jelly bean. I sit
on the bathroom tiles, tenuous, trembling.

It does not want. It does not cry. It does not breathe. It does not feel me push it around
the bowl with the handle of the toilet brush, and it did not feel me push it out. It does not
know where it is or who it is or if it is at all.

It does not sense the Pandemonium spinning my mind like the burning resurrection of
last night's bedside Bacardi.

Does it have arms? fingers? a face? MY face? No one would see me look inside.

...

...

...

It cannot forgive me.

Flush



POETRY

all this chaos is mine
by Sarah Rosengarten

everything's so all or nothing with you
all happy or all tragic, or all hectically magic
but i like it anyway; i like you anyway
i like how things stand at the end of the day
when no one's around and it's just you and me
when we don't need to hide 'cause no one can see
and i like the way you twitch in your sleep
i like how you give me your secrets to keep
i like that you're afraid, yet willing to confess
and i like that together, we're a complicated mess

'cause nothing worth having is easy to get
and if you haven't fought, you haven't lived yet
and even if this is the best we can do
i'll take it and be happy to have part of you
because happiness is as happiness does -
my world's gotten brighter than once it was
and i'll take my contentment in serene little doses
a shining, tarnished princess in a garden of roses
making you laugh in quite unbecoming ways
for such a stoic knight whose heart never sways
for if there's one thing i have, and plenty to spare
in lieu of charm, or face and figure fair,
is joy - and the truth of joy is? it's joyous to share.

so pass one more night, and wake one more morning
put no worry to what is or isn't forming
just enjoy what we have and what may yet grow
lie back and savor it - let happiness flow.

Infinitely
by Faith Mellenthin

In mathematics, any set of infinite numbers
Any set of numbers at all,
Contains the possibility of no set — the empty set.
Zero.
To me, zero is the black of color sets;
The absence of numbers entirely.
For there is nothing to see, nothing to count,
And,
No way to interpret the distance between 1 and negative 1.
Zero could be as infinite as numbers of infinity.

It is both everything and nothing at all.

In physics, there is an experiment
Involving a very tiny particle that behaves as two things.
When observed,
It becomes one of those two things — not the other.
Perhaps this is the empty set of particles,
Of tangible things.
The two parts are equal, but one is infinitely nothing.
The other, infinitely identifiable.

It is both everything and nothing at all.

In neurology, there is a distinction
Between the brain and the body.
Our consciousness may be an empty set to our physical being.
Thoughts are not tangible — yet is it all we have.
Perhaps we have an infinite number
Of thoughts,
That go uncounted.
Contributing to the empty set of humanity.
While the infinity of man continues to progress
In the known universe.

It is both everything and nothing at all.

Pressured Weight
by Marc Crowell

Pressured Weight

Pressured weight
Will hold in state
For many years to come

The light for some
May overcome
And leave us running late

The circled sky
Will one day lie
As ashes in the sway

We're dust and sand
A scattered band
Across the Milky Way

The love above
The heart apart
There is none like our sun

And with the Earth
Our place of birth
We'll one day be as one

TOWERS

Untitled by Sarah Rosengarten

It was pure bliss. The rain accompanied us as we held each other in with an warm embrace. She fit in my arms like the last puzzle piece. She turned and began to talk. Instead of her words, I was lost in her eyes. It was as though I was seeing her world. When she smiled, it was so infectious and vibrant. I smiled too. Her hair had a mind if it's own. Twisting and curling into perfection. And her lips... moving so swiftly and seductively. Begging to be caressed. I heard them call. I placed my hand on the side of her face, under her ear. Three fingers lay in the abundance of curls, while two caress her face. She was still talking. And we made eye contact. I said her eyes remind me of a sunset. Calm. Peaceful. Gorgeous. I wanted to plunge deep into the sunset. To feel the warming rays of it must be euphoric. I said she was beautiful. And she smiled and stopped talking. I felt her embrace around my arm tighten. I felt the rain slowly remind us they it's still with us. Again, I going myself I her eyes, then eventually her lips. We kissed. Our lips were infatuated with each other. My hands conformed to the curves of her body. They demanded more. Her body screamed to be touched. They continued their adventure, until they found it. It was warm and soft as memory foam. They did not hesitate and began their assault. Their strategy was to search, rub and repeat. She immediately pulled back from our embrace to let out a moan. She wants more. I want more. I want her. But does she want me or just my embrace?



Glasswalker by Sarah Rosengarten

The predators who prowl these streets rule with animal might
Monsters of a manner who no man could wish to meet
Even jungles can't escape the sultry city nights.

Neon lights tangle above, a canopy nuclear-bright
Chatter of monkeys at every turn, a drum in every beat
The predators who prowl these streets rule with lustful might.

This hungry city's hunting now – so choose from fight or flight
The billboards above all combine to produce this brilliant heat
Even jungles can't escape the wicked city nights.

Snarling jaguar teeth glint sharp and snowy white
(From the hood of a car creeping slowly up the street)
The predators who prowl these streets rule with monstrous might.

Mirrored skyscrapers tower to ever-dizzying heights
Shadows half a step behind, stealthy on their feet
Even jungles can't escape the steamy city nights.

There's nowhere truly safe enough to hide away tonight
No corner of this wild new world the neon lights won't seek
The predators who prowl these streets rule with animal might
Even jungles can't escape the sultry city nights.

Running Light, Kimberly Kuba

The Inner Dialogue of an Imbalanced Libra

by *Astrid Larson*

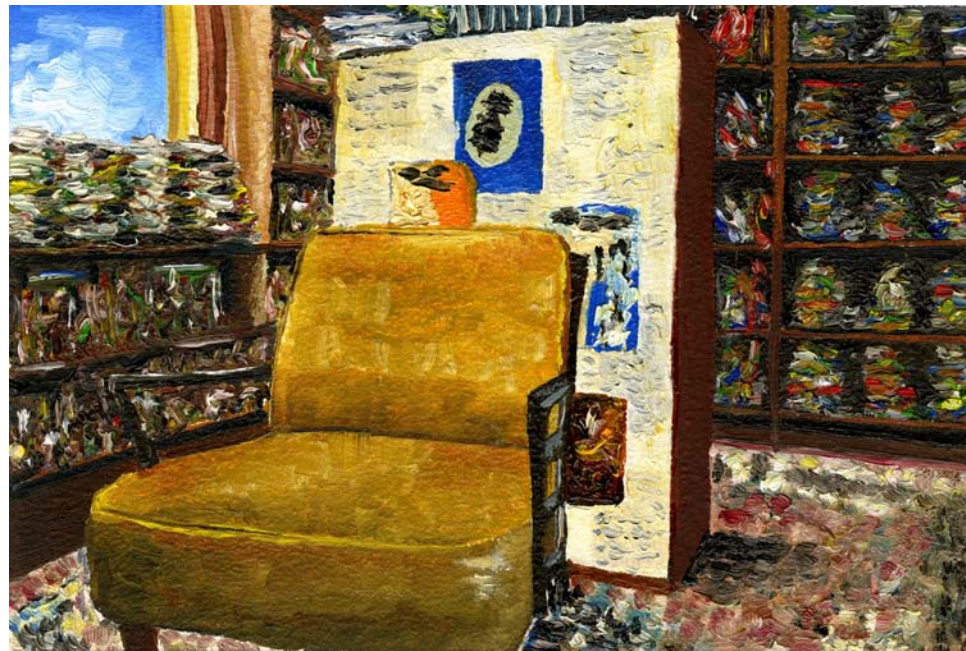
Is this another bad time?
two people inhabit one body
twirling, in a unison fashion, the same soul
feeling the same heart bleed and the same skin rise in goose bumps
watching the same world with the same eyes
one answers yes and the other “I don’t know.”

Is this the making of something scary?
being too comfortable with relapse
consuming too much too fast
getting too cool with endings—everlasting endings
reread the last page, over and over, but it will not change what was written
instead, flip the world, down a snowy hill, and watch it wreck
think about it and
pass it off with a smile, because heaven knows we are our mothers’ children
one, with a shaken core and the cold frontal lobe numbness
stutters out stop and the other says “Perhaps.”

How long is temporary?
pushing just over 22 years
13 days
1 regretful morning
365 chances in a year
2 people continue to wait quietly
before continuing

Is there such thing as stopping?
one hesitates before failing to answer and the other says “You tell me.”
“Old habits die hard,” the other points out
“Too much emphasis is put on the death rather than the haunt.”
The other continues:
“Rather than the thing that lightly lingers,
reminiscing everything what once was, and wondering about everything that
will be.
Rounding about in a perfectly full circle,
and, once complete, will be at the ready to spin again.”

Is that a good enough answer?
one body, a map of thousands of paths
some of which have been traveled and
many that have yet to be found
and others that hold “no trespassing” signs
millions of footsteps printed by two souls
footprints which, every so often, stray away from the paths
one says yes and the other “I’m glad you agree.”



Pringle Creek

by *Andrew Beebe*

There is a stream that runs past Salem Hospital, a little tributary of the Willamette River that drains the entire western Oregon forest country. At Bellevue and Winter Street it is called Pringle Creek, and a low cement wall scattered with cigarette butts from the nursing staff overlooks a bend in it. Looking down the slow ripples of Pringle Creek you see the trees leaning in, toward its bed, like they’re falling asleep. I’ve crossed it many times and every single time I want to turn and walk straight into it, into the deeper half

of its water, under Winter Street and around the first bend and the others. Pringle Creek is the most beautiful river I have ever seen, in person or otherwise, more beguiling and wondrous than the Mississippi, the Thames, the Liffey, the Platte, the Colorado; it is the most tempestuous and regal body of water in this world or any other, the shame of the four celestial streams which flow down the Mountain of Eden. If I walked into that river it would have me and know me forever; it is the only river where always mothers have washed or drowned their children, where cattle were slaughtered and bred, where steamboats failed and burned and retreated to the bosom of silt, where women drink, where men drink, where blood is gathered and spilled and painted over the doorways of the continents; it runs past Salem, past the Willamette River deep into and below the Pacific, impossibly far beneath Earth’s mantle into the very cradle of Fire, whereto it would carry me through and beyond, even farther into its oblivion. It is the sapphire urine of God, the pumping ligament of certainty. Pringle Creek is the only moving visitor on a planet cast in nickel by a terrible planet-sized mold. Its waters will rise to rust the trail signs, sopping over the Oregon Basin to the chins of Rushmore; they will find a ranger there, alone, hip-shooting at weathervanes, and meet his burnished sixgun like a flaming sword.

Books 2, Natalie Pivoney

TOWERS

Peaches by *Carissa Hartwig*

I think there's good reason
Why all of my life
I have subconsciously chosen to buy
The dented can
The bruised peach
The squashed loaf of bread.

maybe I can convince myself
that there is someone out there
In this universe
Who p r e f e r s to buy
damaged goods.

Maybe I can convince myself
That someone
someday
Will hopefully
See me (bruised)
amongst the
freshly picked peaches
And think to themselves
"Nah, I want the fucked up one instead."

mirrors are made for breaking by *Sarah Rosengarten*

I see you down there, in that well of darkness
I'll send the bucket down but be warned –
The world I'll lift you into is one where there's no sun
And the shadows dance in glorious madness
With nothing to hinder their ecstatic hearts.
Come! Dance with me through the mist-wreathed trees
For this will be my kingdom and my cairn
The princess, collared, becomes the Queen.



White Bird by *Sarah Rosengarten*

She looks out the window and lets out a sigh
Like a dove in a cage, no song she can sing
Oh, how she envies the birds in the sky.

Each flutter of wings; how freely they fly
No wish she could make but to take to the wing
She looks out the window and lets out a sigh

Wishing for once to be free and to fly
Not a princess for a prince, nor a queen for a king
Her heart burns with envy for the birds in the sky

Each one is an idol, a hope to her eye
Promising the free open light, this glorious thing
She looks out the window and lets out a sigh

Not a sparrow flutters past, not a lark swoops by
That escapes her notice; not one feathered wing
She burns with envy for the birds in the sky

One day she'll be one of them and she too will fly
But for now there is only the waiting
As she looks out the window with a sorrowful sigh
How fiercely she envies the birds in the sky.

apart
by Sarah Rosengarten

Is it time to take my brain apart again?
Into the mirror and down to the glen
Past talking flowers and bright singing stars
Where is my moon? I'm stuck here on Mars
Nobody mentions when they talk about eggs
That Humpty Dumpty had no fucking legs
And that when he fell and shattered to bits
The first thing to go was poor Humpty's wits
And when he hit the ground and broke
All the dust from his pieces - he started to choke!

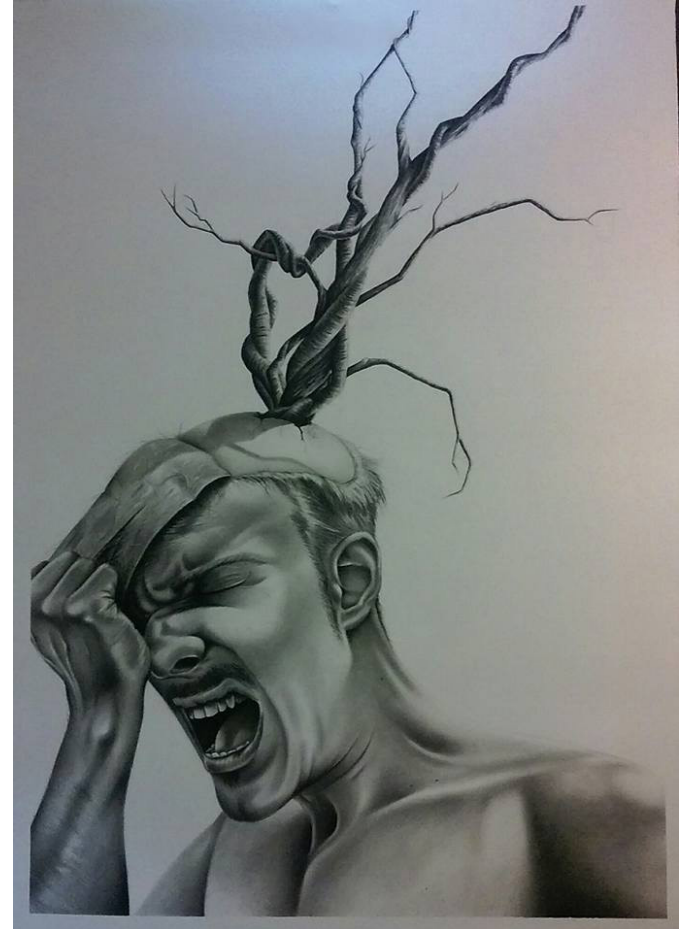
If I take me apart into us'es and we's
Inspecting my insides for this disease
How can I stand and how can I speak
When the glue at my joints falters - is weak?
How can a doll with no strings hope to dance
And how can a shattered egg stand a chance?
There's pieces too small to ever go back together
Storms that do damage too vicious to weather
All the pieces are gone, plain worn away
How can I put me together today?
When there's nothing left and no kind of glue
That can lift up the crumbs and the tiniest few
Shards of my soul, of my mind, of my heart
And mend them together, fix what's apart?

So ask me, then: why not sand on the bar?
Why not drift away; why remain as you are?
A marionette held together with pins
Trembling and shaking and faking the sins
Of her kind, of her past, of her future that lies
In wait for the moment when her last hope flies
Why dance the dance, why hold out your hand
When down there is waiting the cool dark of the land?

The tears that you see are what keep me alive
Remind me I breathe and that sometimes, to dive
Headlong into madness is all that I need
To shatter and reform, until stop is the speed
And the race is the moment and the mind is the fire
When the egg on the wall begins to perspire
As he rocks and weaves and flails and wobbles
Soon his course takes him onto the cobbles!

And there's no hope after that, not for him or for me
So in taking my mind apart, well, you'll see
There's no guarantee that we'll find sanity
Or that what we'll lose isn't something we need -
But the dust left behind I can do nothing to fix
For a fragmented mind like an eggshell on the bricks.
So: know there's no way, once the mind is aflame
To stop short the burning, and no way to tame
The wildest of notions that infests the mind
For terrible thoughts never tire with time.

#11, Brock Pieper



TOWERS

That Night by Sarah Bresnahan

Dissociating in Wicker Park, Chicago, on June 11, 2016

The heat anchored us to the concrete,
hypnotized our bodies to its
cooling steadiness--
tantalized indefinite hibernation.
A trick of faded streetlights
and harsh neon signs
dissolved the sky into
bleak yellowed ash.
Suffocated by sewage,
human sweat,
stale liquor,
and the distinct rot of long-dead rodents.
The tyranny of one thousand eyes.
A rabbit sensed a pack of wolves,
not knowing which one would strike first.



Lay with Me, Skylar Easson

Canyon de Chelly by Andrew Beebe

The Navajo saw deserts
eat away at lips, the guidebook says.
You imagine tastebuds buried like
boulders in the cavern of our mouths.

Your hair stiffens, knots with the wind
pulled into the sky,
above forgotten purple rivers
carved by photographers in airplanes
flying from Davenport to Phoenix.
They sipped coffee
and cricked their necks;
you envy them.

Below you in the canyon,
dangerous and deep
pine trees cast their frames.
Gently have our nightmares
glimpsed the shadow behind the butte,
conjured talons of the mesa.

A centipede
stalks the black sediment,
winding into cold clutches;
fossils scratch the inner shell
of noiseless shale, moaning wind
out through the pores of the earth.

You call me from the bus ride home.
You've seen the edge of the world, you say,
and it is so much wider than me.

The basin sweats dark water.
The rocks rise straight up,
like marble pencils
sharpened by lonely gods.

From (a sonnet)
by Sarah Rosengarten

To hold a mirror to the very soul
To look inside and see what lies beneath
To draw the razored blade out of its sheath
To sacrifice independence and control

To stand up bravely, carving out a name
To take what's yours without a moment's pause
To snarl in the face of Fate's ferocious claws
To blaze at both ends – boldly burning flame

To face what's feared and stand before the gods
To resolutely lead, and show the way
To greet the dawn with love for each new day
To take the dice and throw against all odds

To proudly see your soul despite the stains
To slough away the chaff, and what remains –

Watching Time Collapse
by Sarah Rosengarten

Porcelain pale, she lurks in wishes
Smoke twisting up motionlessly
Questions waiting in every cloud
Breathless and shy, yesterday said
Slow down, daffodil!
Violet the dawn
Scarlet as poppies
Between evening and fog the blue waits
Thunder rattles, moonlight creeping
Morning rainbows by light of dusk
The girl, she walks wild and secret
Forever following a flower that rises
Poisonous but bright
Speak and have ferocious pride!
Noisy and cold, the night is nothing
But a mantle lain over a corpse.

Artwork 1, Jeannail Carter



TOWERS

Lacuna by Darius Strong

What is the sound of the end of the world?
Something like bells, while the hells unfurl.
I say this not lightly, for I know that the toll.
It takes on us all, effects not consoled.

It was a warm day, late autumn.
Too warm for the fall.
Such warm days in autumn
Should not exist at all.

He entered the school.
Deep lines ran his face
Concealed, rage instilled,
Guns no one could trace.

What is the sound of the end of the day?
Sound signals to run, while the sun wastes away.
I say this not lightly, for I know that they cried,
The kin of the causalities, the persons who died.

Gun blazed in the building.
Wailing sirens in the distance
Not one could have known.
How to prevent the instance.

"He was a good boy."
"No such monster should exist."
Two juxtaposed beliefs
Boil down to this:
What is the sounds of the end of the night?
Much like death, for their last breath they fight.
I say this not lightly, for I know that the boy,
He took his own life, for the bereaved to enjoy.

"I had no choice."
He wrote in the letter.
"The world spat on me,
So, I had to do better."

"So, I showed them a way.
My bullets sang a song.
Yes, I stowed them away
In the bodies of those who had wronged."

What is the sound of a boy mistreated?
Varying screams while his dreams are defeated.
I say this not lightly, for I know that he felt.
The pain of a person the world had dealt.

Knit Hat Pillow by Sarah Rosengarten

Sing out to me my dear, my love, my light
Don't let me go without a goodnight kiss
I cannot bear another lonely night
I need you here to keep me close like this
I feel the wind that cuts too deep each day
For as I watch you grow and start anew
I wish there was a way to make you stay
The last leaf clinging, desp'rate, to the yew
The song I heard within your heart that dawn
That rang with joy and flowed throughout the wood
Is now a memory threaten'ing to be gone
Though still I love you far more than I should
Someday perhaps I'll hear your song again
But for now I can only dream of then.



Igniting by Madison Smith

Today she is part and not whole, lost
to the pieces that are no longer pieces of her.
She believes the world in grays and blacks, choking
on all the days that made her nothing but smoke.

This tiny revolution lives inside her brain
and makes her too much and too little
for all the right people. Both she and it are campfires,
constantly caught between burning and burning out.

This conflict is nameless.
When it simmers to nothing she cries for its symptoms
like their autonomy might cling to her cage
and save her from herself; This is Igniting.

Perhaps her days are paradoxes,
where burning is burning out and surviving is dying.
Isn't all surviving just dying in disguise?

She'd rather die than survive, because
burning takes parts of her and reduces them to ash;

She is more than that. She wants to be more than
just the aftermath of a chemical reaction.

Weight, Skylar Easson

The Desperation of Jewish Children

by *Megan Montgomery*

I protect my sister with sophistication
while trying not to swallow human fudge.
If we were to stir, we would face annihilation.

I sulk during my people's cremation
while I hiss at my sister not to budge.
I protect my sister with sophistication.

As we near the realms of asphyxiation
it's difficult to not harbor any grudge.
If we were to stir, we would face annihilation.

Although I dream of German damnation
I realize God is the only being who can judge.
I protect my sister with sophistication.

I shed muted tears of humiliation
as I am buried up to my nose in fecal sludge.
If we were to stir, we would face annihilation.

I plead with god for my people's salvation;
six million Jews wiped from the Earth like a smudge.
I protect my sister with sophistication.
If we were to stir, we would face annihilation.

Trinity, Kimberly Kuba



first kiss

by *Sarah Rosengarten*

there you were in scarlet, clever and keen
hit me out of the blue, coming unseen
you caught my eye from the very first moment
even though i knew i hadn't thrown it
what could i do to get you out of my head
or, barring that, get you into my bed -
hah, yeah right, this is different for me
not my usual game, as you can see
where i'm used to losing, but know the rules
know how to deal with the clueless fools
but you're unpredictable, unknowable - new
and it's throwing me off that i can't see through
like with everyone else whose motives are clear
but instead of terror and the typical fear
it's exhilarating, leaving me bubbly and bright
effervescent, even; brought into the light
what can i do? - oh, i'll savor not knowing why,
and eyes bluer than a soaring winter sky.

Rise

by *Robyn Sperling*

The embers of burnt paper scatter like leaves in an autumn wind
Watching the swirls of colors dance away into the dark horizon
Water falls from eyes that have worked endlessly to add beauty to the mundane
While the fire rages outward to engulf and destroy, spirit ignites
The physical representations of expressions may meet demise
Though it will be met with no fretting, the artistic soul will never die
The vast worlds of endless imagination, boundless passions, and fascinating images
Will always belong to the bard, the painter, and the composer
Eradication of their tangible efforts will not make them hide
Instead, it gives them the inspiration to stand and rise

TOWERS



Night Moth by *Leo Thull*

By the bright incandescence
of the garage's floodlight,
the lilies close their white blooms
as night shuts them in.
Cutting through the dark
is a gray moth,
sliding into his circadian prime.
His wings surge randomly,
forcefully keeping him afloat
as he eyes the blooms,
plotting his advance.

In the distance,
the toads sound their mating calls,
the cars howl past in the dark, nearby street,
and all around the crickets chirp and the dew gathers.

The moth, thirsty, pushes
through the closed petals of the pallid lily,
staining them with a touch of his wings as
he burrows himself into her.
The gray is still there in the morning.

After, he takes off into the night, as free as he came
while the cars pass by and the crickets chirp
as the mocking toads sound their mating call
and the dew gathers.

Striations, Kimberly Kuba

Spinning (a sonnet)

by Sarah Rosengarten

The sky is wide, and overhead I see
 No chalk-gray clouds to hide away our sun
 Only empty blue as far as man can run
 So stark and sharp against the leaves of green
 In sunset now, and dawn that's yet to come
 The colors fade through rainbows dim and soft
 Upheld by nothing, glowing; thrown aloft
 So hard to pinpoint where the lights are from
 So slow, in sparkles, stars wink into sight
 In teasing chase; their echoing is vast
 Though still I see this threshold cannot last
 For soon the dusk is swallowed by the night.

The sky is wide, and overhead I see
 The night is reaching out to cradle me.

Pinocchio and Burnt Bagels

by Madison Hill

I remember her.
 The crochet needles red and green
 Salsa dancing between her crinkled fingers.
 Pinocchio was her best friend
 Who wished and yearned to become a real boy.
 My breakfast always served,
 A bagel turned black that felt of rock and ash.
 Its taste to that of dirt,
 Bitter but full of wonders invisible to the naked eye.
 The smell of her only perfume,
 A combination of compassion and cigarettes.

I remember her.
 A wanted youthful palm intertwining with an older one,
 She held 50 years over my 12 year old self.
 The last time I almost touched her veiny limb that hung limp from a metal frame,
 But didn't out of fear and confusion.
 The sound of a beautifully painful cacophony
 When the damage of the smoke was far too much.

The Letter People™ Place their Bets

by Andrew Beebe

We crawled gasping from our vacuum seals and started to unwad, thankless and slow, like mashed receipts blooming in trash bins. Soon we were beached on the storytime rug, certain we had stunk up the trucks. Some of us had ears. We leered at each other's bent serifs, painted our skins rainbow and filmed it for public access. We did these things because we were stupid, because we loathed Mr. Rogers and C-Span, because we were . . . uninflated. It worked okay. Now we're holding hands, sticky-tacked to the shelves around Yolanda's 1st grade classroom, welcoming and bright as a Menards lamp aisle. We've accepted the noodle-rank breath of strangers into our bodies, just enough that nobody's going to get recycled. We won't cry. We're tough like Yucatan latex. When the class empties we'll scrape spiderweb off our backs, pushing our fat little arms against the whitewashed brick on our Odyssey downward.
 We'll rip out these plugs and then man

we're gonna buy choppers, gonna haul down the interstate. We'll take on real wind, open
 and open ourselves 'till we're tatters, plastic ribbons beat like weathersocks spelling out
 scripture no Rosetta, no stammering Fullbright can
 lick.



Untitled, Daniel Verdin

TOWERS

Give, Take by Astrid Larson

When life gave me lemons, my father said for me to make a lemon drop shot
Sour citrus, simple sugar, and volatile vodka
Swirl it in a tiny glass; the concoction followed itself with the circular strokes of a
teaspoon
Bottoms up
Nothing meshed like it was supposed to,
but the lemon juice, ancient as it was, still caused my lips to pucker
The sugar stuck to the bottom of the glass, not to my taste buds like I wanted
The vodka zipped down to the very depths of my human core
Even my soul felt the burn, tasted rotten sunshine, and had just enough to cure her
sweet tooth
And it was all just enough to take care of the sniffles
Just enough to settle the hurricane in my head,
tone down to soft, lapping brain waves
Push and pull, push and pull
By the gravity of a harvest moon
These thoughts drag along the sand, breaking down into the grains itself
After all, life's a beach

When I'm at this beach, I just have to have the tide wash over
Wash over me without taking me out to sea
If I let go too easily, I'd be captured and rolled up in the waves
To be surrounded by water that not even gods could control
Eventually I will drown
My lungs take in salt water, aching to burst
My nose plugs up, being one of the first senses to immediately fill
And my eyes, they can't tell the difference between the tears
Night after night, they can't tell the difference

My fate changes when I stay put on the shore
The tide washes over while I just sink my toes into the sand
Let it cling to my sun-soaking skin
Rake my fingers against it
And to collect beneath my fingernails these bits of sediment

to only have them dug out and returned to the earth
I try not to take too much for granted, even the smallest grain
I also try to keep my hands clean
Because when life hands me lemons,
I don't want to squeeze so hard that juice gets everywhere
Coat my fingers and slip into every sliver-sized cut
Digging into these tiny wounds with the sand and salt water
Hurt myself even more just to make a refreshing drink
Besides, a shot is only so small
Some days I might want to make some lemonade
Keep it clean from the sand
Not have it bitter by the ocean
And have it sweet enough to stretch lips out into a smile
To have enough to share for two



On the Nature of Poets by Leo Thull

I read once "the moon smells like
spent gunpowder" and thought
it sounded like something
somebody made up
just for a poet to come along
and roll around in
like a dog that finds a pile of
coyote scat and soils his fur
with every grain of digested meat
and wanders back into the house
like nothing had gone wrong
and gets abruptly kicked out until
he can be properly bathed.
It's not his fault, though.
He simply came upon
an irresistible object and executed
his natural reaction.

Flight by Leo Thull

I've flown with flocks
of birds like a mirage haze.
I've driven down roads,
speeding, lost and dark.
I've walked through tallgrass
with no intention to ever return;
but here I've returned;
back again under these old stars,
among this freezing air;
back from warm travels,
lost, dark, and beautiful; here
I return – familiar, though I've
never been before; here I return,
though soon you'll see me go;
I'll be the mirage haze
far outside your window, flying
to the horizon.

Aubade Inverted
by *Leo Thull*

I.

As limbs lace together,
we lie, facing one another,
and I am too warm for you.
That void between us, a sliver
of air, radiates heat from my core
but lets my extremities freeze.
Our feet cannot touch, for fear.
Our hands are not clasped, for comfort.
Our breath is directed, for shame.
Our eyes are open, in suspicion.
So, I lay on my back and pray for
you to fall asleep so I can stop failing you.

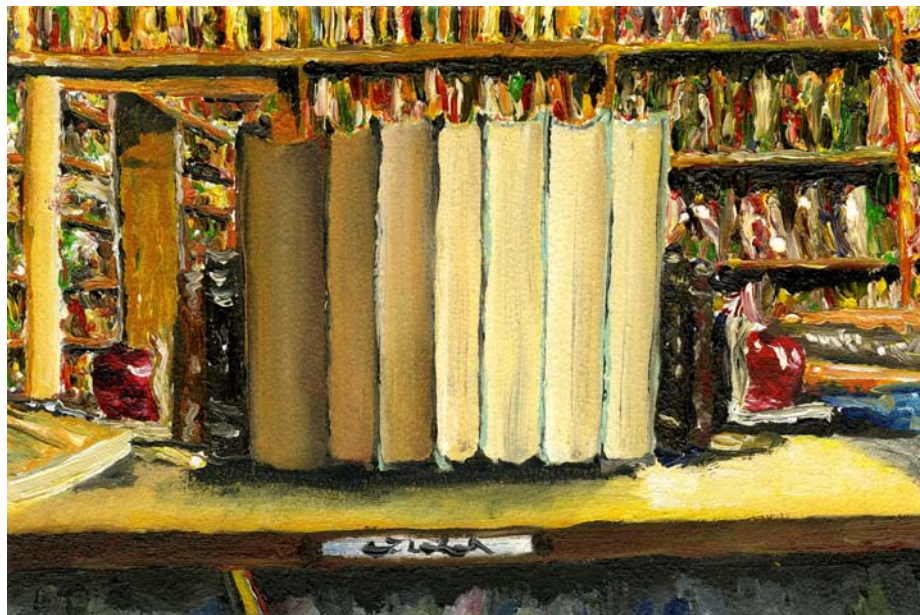
II.

You shelter your face in disgust.
I watch, in the spirit of human penance
like city officials, trying to shirk the responsibility
of genocide, citing federal jurisdiction.
I force myself to watch through tears
at limbs, sore and broken, braided together,
filling a chasm, naked. You've left the room,
but I stare, trying to comprehend
their feet, shrunk with hunger;
their skin, scarred red with Typhus;
their cavities, rotting with neglect;
their bodies stacked by the thousands.
I don't notice your absence this time.

III.

You wake, trying to find my warmth,
but only find I've rolled across
the valley under the covers, trying to hide.

You can tell I'm not asleep,
so you pull at my limbs until I surrender.
Our skin touches again, but I feel only flesh.
Our breath mingles, but I feel only moving air.
Our eyes close, and we only can feel.
So I plot my careful inching,
peeling slowly away from you,
re-teaching myself to be alone again.



Books 1, Natalie Pivoney

one eighty
by *Sarah Rosengarten*

it was like this once before, you know
with a trickle of light in the frame
that laced that tempting door with its glow
and no one but I was to blame
for when I reached too high, then
my waxen wings
, they melted fast
i try to hide my hope, when

i know this dance will never last.

some cookie jars call for a key
up on a table twice my height
but no magic little cakes for me
nor an 'eat me' sign in sight
so i let it go, and let it drown
i give my thoughts some concrete shoes
i look for another to wear the crown
someone in desperate need of a muse.

i don't hope for much - i'm not holding out
imagining some magical prince will arrive
i spend too much time plagued by doubt
and determined, on my own, to survive
the nights alone won't kill me, of course
not even the dark, nor the silence
they've tried enough times already with force
but my every breath is defiance.

but in the end it all comes down
to the echo inside that rattles, gone mad
i'm trapped in a gray and faded ghost town
not a drop of sunlight to be had
so i find myself claimed by a crumbling empire:
head in the clouds, but my feet trudge the yard
dreaming the glow can begin to inspire
a heart that never learned to be hard.

so i put on my wings and lift my face
knowing salt and sun will see me fail
but i'm not aiming to win any race
i've never expected to prevail
i just need to fight through the unknown
one more step, not giving up today
no doubt, i'll make it all on my own -
because i don't know any other way.

TOWERS



Confectionaires, Shellfish, and Infernos

by *Madison Hill*

Ginger comets peep through
The Hershey's canopy which cascades her scalp.
Lips a color to that of newly spawned shrimp
With strawberry marshmallow texture at surface level.

A palm descends upon my cheek
Branding my face with its frigidty.
Heat boils from the depths of my inferno
Begging and pleading for more than simple contact.
My pearls connect with her cerulean ones
With synonymous smiles ensuing.

Blankets encase us within a single, scorching carapace
One vehement with estrogen.
Her face confined between sugar cookie extremities
While I worship her succulent face clam.

The craving breaches the confectionaries of my inferno
Spewing through the battling mollusks.
Keep me forever
I think to my sweet.

Within, Skylar Easson

Meditating on the Clouds

by *Leo Thull*

The Shadow.

There are brief moments
when sunbathing
while you're laying
spread out
like a cadaver frog
that the unrelenting swarm
of ultraviolet rays seems momentarily
paused.
You look up
to see why youre suddenly
shivering
and find a cloud
covering the entire star
and realize that those bits of sunlight
traveled ninety three million miles
to hit you
but the bombardment was halted
by this little cloud
that could probably
maybe
cover your block
if it came down
for a visit
and you take off your sunglasses
and wish it would,
just for a moment.

The Clouds.

And suddenly, I'm among them,
the clouds, and I slink across
their pearled edges and get
tossed about by the sunrise
peeking through their folds.
I wake up and carry them
along, and they trail at my
bootheels wanting to taste
the Earth as it gets kicked up,
but they always leave before
getting their fill of it.
I'm left to reimagine the drear,
lost to the clouds;
lost in the clarity.

The Rain.

I wonder how hard it would
be to evaporate,

atom by atom, sucked into
the clear sky.

If I became a cloud, would it
look like me,

or would I be some non-descript
mass of condensation?

If I tried my best to be picked up
and carried away

by the force of the sky's wanting, could I
pull it off?

Would I be wanted?

Or, if I made it, would the sky
rain me out

recognizing the mistake it made
bringing me in?

After all, no human belongs
in the clouds.

How would it feel to rain? To
hit the pavement

and have my mass fall into
some strange form?

How soon until that puddle sinks
into the ground?

Phantom, Kimberly Kuba



20/20

by Sarah Rosengarten

There are things I wish I were too blind to see –
The things I would give not to notice his gaze
His arms hold her, but his eyes follow me.

No matter my begging or how fervent my plea
It only grows stronger with the passing of days
There are things I wish I were too blind to see.

With a stone-heavy stare that won't let me be
In a heat I can feel, its own summer-hot haze
His lips taste hers, but his eyes follow me.

I cannot escape; I cannot get free
Trapped by that knowledge, just a mouse in a maze
There are things I wish I were too blind to see.

Like rot at the root of a grand, drooping tree
With each season's passage my composure decays
His fingers twine to hers, but his eyes follow me.

Every time his glance wanders, I know where it will be
He thinks I don't see it each time his smile strays
There are things I wish I were too blind to see -
His arms hold her, but his eyes follow me.

Artwork 2, Jeannail Carter



subspace
by Sarah Rosengarten

subject now to (of)
the sweetest bruises
treasured, these gifts
rich, and dark as sable
i can almost taste them
heady, leaving me dazed (dizzy)
even ambrosia could not compare

whispering, crawling up my arms
this delightful descant that purifies
speckled over hip and thigh and side
spattered paint on the palest canvas (skin)
notes across the staff
tokens from the stove
branded by my subservience
these marks of ownership
the likes of which i like

this conversion of passion
from intangible to evident (obvious)
dusky-plum purple
and indigo violet
giving way to yellow – green – yellow
this skin, an artist's palette
take the brush (whip)
and array this rainbow over me
claiming, clamoring sweetly
hands sure, slow in the drawing
carving – sculpting – caressing
until i have been subsumed into art.

Ablaze, Kimberly Kuba



the barefoot jungle
by Sarah Rosengarten

raised by hippies in a barefoot jungle
waiting for every album to start over again
watching smoke curl toward the ceiling
like a lazy cat stretching out toward the sun
with no rules or responsibilities:
no lines in the between-place, and
everything flowed effortlessly forth from itself
there was no time in those drifting worlds.
sometimes the long nights are torture
sometimes the days that drift by are surreal
but if there's one thing a barefoot child learns to believe
it's that reality's only what you feel

she waited for me alongside the fence every day
with a smile on her face and dirt on her cheek
the music she sang filled the whole of my heart
chasing shadows from corners with dancing motes of light
the bells that follow her words and her laughter
pulled down the wall that kept me from the world.
i saw her in a dream again today
curls all tangled and her brown eyes bright
i remember her scars and i remember her soul
and still i've never seen anything so beautiful.

the end
by Sarah Rosengarten

so there's no more words between us
no grand crescendo into peaceful repose
just me biting my lip to keep from
breathing out your ghost.

EDITOR'S CHOICE FOR NONFICTION

The Feminists by Anna Kaye-Rogers

She pauses, mouth ajar, the last syllable quickly shoved back in. Her elbow rests on the desktop. The ballpoint pen she's using to gesture has been stilled, suspended in mid-wave. At this angle, it suggests another woman holding a light aloft, except that light is literal. This pen is a figurative light, for whatever words she will use to describe this moment of absurdity later have not yet been written.

The words she hears now- her words, her concepts, but in a different voice- are said without self-awareness, without being intended to wound. Yet metaphorically, they do. It is a boy's voice, a boy's tone, a boy's decision to repeat her knowledge and claim it without credit or acknowledgment as if it is his own. It is not the first time he has done this to her or her female classmates, but it is slightly more ironic than usual.

Everyone in the circle of desks has a pet peeve when it comes to writing. For many of her classmates and colleagues, the issues are of grammar. Sentences that dangle like participles, tenses that shift uneasily like the group does when plots become uncomfortable, or the endings that stop just when the story should be starting to make way for chapter two. Some detest the circular arguments over genre, others the hypocritical callouts in critiques of behaviors the critic themselves indulged in. Nearly everyone scoffs at the disclaimers in the beginning of some pieces to ignore grammar and mechanics in a workshop class. Her pet peeve is becoming the familiar sensation of swallowed words.

In 1994, an issue of *Green Lantern* (#54, if you care about that sort of thing) featured a female character being killed. She was not a superhero tragically sacrificing herself for the good of the world, only to be revived a few issues later. She was not a hero hurt in the line of duty, or a character due for a reboot. She wasn't causing trouble or forming plot holes. Her murder happened because something needed to happen. Girl comic readers were shown a woman being killed simply to motivate the male hero, without being allowed to develop her own agency or identity outside of being a girlfriend. This motivational tactic became known as 'fridging.'

It had been her reference, her explanation to give. She had straightened her shoulders, almost imperceptibly, and crafted her words carefully. It was an inside joke from last semester, a reference to a friend's piece the new people hadn't read. It had been one of the new people who hadn't been there last semester that asked what fridging was. They weren't around to know better than to start her off. She spoke passionately about the topic, excited about the chance to warn others away from the technique. And then, mid-sentence, she had been verbally fridged herself. Unceremoniously shoved out of the way so he could explain the topic.

The issue with fridging is a mechanical one. Rather than develop the male character through his own actions or consequences, a female character is brought in. While female representation is awesome and very much needed, leaving her undeveloped and existing just as a girlfriend is a very low bar, one that should be cleared easily. To have her function as a name and a relationship title is a disservice in itself. But to purposefully leave her underdeveloped because you know you're going to kill her off in two pages so that your hero can begin his quest—that is fridging. You created someone just to be killed, to exist as a pawn and not a player. The issue is not that people die; especially in comic books. The issue is that your character is not a character but a cardboard cutout until you can get them out of your way. And if you treat what is sometimes the only female in your story that way, that's how your readers will treat them.

She could have talked for several minutes about the implications of fridging, but now she cannot speak at all. To cut a writer off seems especially egregious. They are formed from words and phrases and characters they liked when they were five. They have grown up reading the tropes, catching the tricks for what they are and expertly deploying what they have learned in every comment, every critique, every assignment. She prides herself on being able to speak about what she studies. She wants to save every poor character invented for these assignments for being relegated to a spot next to the milk and eggs and tupperware leftovers. It is in the writing rooms in universities and high schools across the country that things will change, that writers will learn they have to do better than 'the girlfriend' for a name and 'breathing for the moment' for a personality. She wants to express her opinion, but the opportunity has been stolen from her. The conversation moves on. But the moment has been stored away for the future.

The classmate interrupts everyone, so she suspects it is more of a him problem than anything else. But other boys in the class sometimes interrupt other girls, sometimes say other things without accrediting them. Each girl in the class can cite an example of the phenomenon, and several of the more petty ones keep receipts—her included.

The problem with fridging is not constricted to the male writers, but rather the pervasive atmosphere of terms like 'toxic masculinity' and 'the patriarchy' that can still exist in literature and literary criticism. But disliking or arguing the validity of those terms is too broad and too needed a discussion, so we focus on the specific trope. The standards for women in stories are lower. Their characters can be less important, less useful, less formed. It is this idea that allows fridging to occur. A strong, fully formed woman character who dies because of her actions is not an act of fridging. A woman who is killed after being developed is not even necessarily an act of fridging. A man who is motivated to avenge a woman's death can avoid fridging. It is the combination of the missing personality, the missing motivation, and the missing better ideas.

She resolves, later, to do something. It is not just one interruption, one time. It is daily, constant, aggravatingly unproductive interruptions and repetitions of multiple people, many of them her fellow girl writers that strengthens this decision. They are all noticing now, and being bothered when it happens to the people they consider friends. It is not that criticism is not accepted, but that the criticism is being delivered without respect, without noticing someone else was talking, without recognizing the same words are being said because he is so focused on making sure he is the one that says them.

But it is hard to know what, exactly, she is supposed to do. If she interrupts him interrupting her, she feels the logical argument is that she is no better than he is. If she interrupts him interrupting another girl, she is derailing the discussion about

someone else's story and using up their workshop time to workshop him. Sometimes, they question if the issue is being blown out of proportion. But it goes on for weeks and the interruptions keep happening and the frustration grows and she surprises herself when she snaps at him.

The puppet strings are obvious in fridging, and that is the culture needing to be called out. Women exist in real life as more than motivators, as more than plot devices, as more than girlfriends or mothers or daughters or sisters. As arguments break out about 'hosts' and 'uteruses' and whose body parts are whose, arguing about which gender's body parts are stuffed in the fridge may seem incidental. But it is the arguments to leave this perspective out of the comic books, out of the action movies, out of the "guy stuff" that makes this very discussion so necessary. Pop culture informs culture. What you like in television and movies and books—how you perceive the world through these experiences, shapes who you are and how you act and what you think. Girls are more valuable away from the fridge and in the real world. Their place is everywhere yours is.

She makes a noise. It's unintentional, and unrelated. Someone made a good point. it was something she hadn't thought of, hadn't considered, but she feels the rightness of it inside her. She claps a hand over her mouth and slides it down to her chin, as if she can wipe away the syllable before anyone notices. But they do. The lead critic- another female, if you think that detail should matter in this moment- makes eye contact and asks her to explain the noise.

Apparently he had also made a noise, but he is too busy scrolling through the story on his phone to realize other people exist in this moment. They both open their mouths at the same time. There is no pen in her hand, but her conviction feels mightier than a sword.

"Actually," She snaps- and the word 'actually' is never a good sign, when she talks- "She was asking me, because I made the noise."

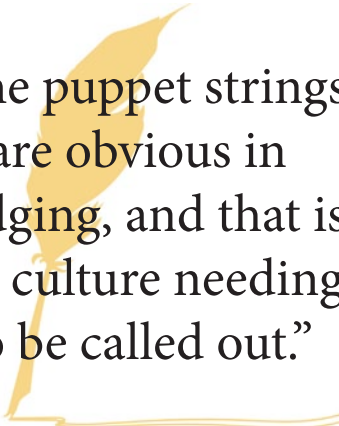
There is silence for a moment, a heavy pause that most authors dream of using in their work. It is the pause they would use at the climax of information, at the moment of transformation when the hero steps up and says or does something heroic. But this real life, and as much as she can glorify it in her head, she should not need to. This moment should be happening daily, everywhere, as women finish their syllables and state their points without needing a man to retranslate them to an audience that should know better. He fumbles through an excuse, bewilderment in his tone, but she brushes him off. She doesn't need to know what he thought to answer a question about what she thinks. She explains herself as the realization kicks in.

The truth is, she hadn't meant to take a stand. It was her own selfish and anger and frustration. The knowledge that she is about to be ignored on a question directed to her. The feeling that she doesn't matter, that her hard work and her thoughts and her opinions are worth talking over, aren't strong enough to be acknowledged. But this is all subconsciously. In the moment, she is only annoyed that she wants to say something and cannot; a feeling all too familiar for writers everywhere. It is as if someone else is being her writer's block in the moment. She feels her phone vibrate, and within fifteen seconds of the encounter five girls have expressed themselves to her.

'Yes,' 'slay,' 'damn, you go,' 'shut him down'

they say, and together they have formed a sentence. They have all had their own opinions, but rather than rush to be first or not listen to each other, they have spent the past few weeks taking turns sharing their feelings and feeling that their very valuable insights and critiques are going unshared. She may have snapped, but her hot-headed moment feels like a group victory.

If you haven't experienced this issue or noticed it being done to you, you may not see why this is a big deal or an issue that needs resolved. But please, do not brush it off because it hasn't happened to you. Listen to the people saying they don't feel heard, because if you don't listen, you are proving them right. You can wait your turn. You can let her words speak for themselves if she has already said what you were going to say. You can listen during a discussion, instead of planning your next comment. You can stop fridging the brilliant people around you who have different perspectives and information to give. And you can stop interrupting me when I'm speaking, because I am very motivated to shut you down when you take my friends' ideas and ignore my friends who have them. I know five girls who have a great idea where to hide a body; but lucky for you we've got better characters to write about.



“The puppet strings
are obvious in
fridging, and that is
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to be called out.”

NONFICTION

Around the World
by *Adam W. Burgess*

To this day, some twenty-years later, I still vividly remember learning to play “Around the World” for the first time. We, that is, my Mom, Dad, and older sister, had just moved into our new house after spending the first ten years of my life in various apartments. This new house came with a detached garage, which came with its very own basketball hoop. For a relatively un-athletic kid, it might seem odd that I look back on this activity with such nostalgia, but I do.

Now, I had played basketball and various versions of it in the school gymnasiums and at parks across town, so I was no stranger to the ball-and-hoop. I knew how to dribble a ball, I knew how to shoot a basket, and I even knew what a lay-up was. I just didn’t know that all of this could be made into something fun. I preferred baseball, soccer, football, even tennis: anything to basketball, really. There’s no reason that I can identify with this aversion, except perhaps the subconscious knowledge that some kids had their own homes with their own basketball hoops, but I wasn’t one of the lucky ones. At least, I hadn’t been until our move.

The funny thing is, my Dad and sister were the ones who really loved basketball. They would be out there on the driveway all the time, shooting hoops with our dog, Dusty. That dog was, no joke, much better at the game than I ever was, and probably had more fun playing it, too. Still, I gave it my best whenever I did join the game. If nothing else, I had a competitive streak in me – I still do- and, though I rarely beat either my Dad or sister, I took my cue from Dusty and went at it with every effort I could muster.

One day, probably a few months after moving in and settling ourselves into the new home, I was out on the driveway shooting hoops with some of the neighbor kids. We were playing never-ending games of “HORSE” and “PIG,” when one of the guys, Ted, suggested we play something called “Around the World.” Ted was a month younger than me. We were both going on eleven, but he was probably three or four inches taller than me already.

I never liked to play one-on-one with any of my friends because they could all out-jump and out-run me, but these stand-still games seemed fair, and “Around the World” sounded cool, so I agreed and we listened as Ted explained the rules:

“Alright, so there are different points in this half circle around the hoop, extending backwards to its farthest point at the direct 3-point line, right?”

Several nods. No one would admit to being confused, even if we were. Guys don’t ask for directions.

“One person starts shooting from the closest point, here,” Ted went on to explain, pointing vaguely at a spot near the front right-side corner of the garage door. “Then, if you make the shot, you move on to the next spot, here,” he said, moving backward and pointing at a spot nearer to our house’s kitchen window.

Ted went completely around that half-circle of our driveway, showing us all the shooting-spots until the final points, just underneath the net and then up to the free-throw line (which was imaginary, since we never actually painted out a “court” on our driveway).

We all understood the game fairly well at that point, and we decided to shoot in order of height, shortest to tallest, which meant I got to go second after Ted’s younger brother, Mark, who was 4 years younger than us.

As the game went on, and as I started to get to spots farther and farther ahead of my friends and opponents, it occurred to me suddenly that – swoosh, another one- I was hitting baskets like it was nobody’s business! I moved from point-to-point, outshooting my pals around that circle and onto the second-to-last spot, which was that area directly below the net. And there I stayed.

I went from first place to last, trying time and time again to make that damned shot! My friends all got it, one after the other, except Mark who just couldn’t get the ball high enough. But I wasn’t about to feel great about beating a first-grader at basketball.

Of course, in typical fashion, I joked with the gang about it. “Ah, I just felt bad for you losers,” I jibed glibly. “I got so far ahead of you, I could barely see ya’ll in the distance anymore!”

“Sure, Adam, sure,” they scoffed, not believing it for a second but happy to let me believe what I needed to, considering I came in nearly dead-last and was already nursing a wounded boy-pride.

We played another couple rounds of “Around the World” and some of the other classics before my Dad came home from work and everyone else went home for dinner.

A few hours passed, but the summer day stretched on. It was early-August and the sun set late in the evening, leaving it bright until nearly nine o’clock. I had been sitting in my room playing video games and eating a cheese sandwich, thinking about that new game and that stupid, impossible shot. I knew I had to try again.

“Hey, Dad,” I called, walking out of my bedroom and through the small hallway that led to the living room. I can still smell the damp, chalky smell of our pebbled crawlspace, which we could only access through the floorboards of a small closet in that hallway.

“In the kitchen,” he called back. “What’s up?”

I found him sitting at our family's single computer, a brand-new IBM, complete with a DOS operating system that, for the life of me, I could not operate today if I needed to. On a T.V. tray next to the computer was our very large, very noisy printer. Dad was printing something out, and I watched curiously, the idea still being relatively new to me, as the attached leaves of paper were tugged slowly upwards from a large box on the kitchen floor, through the printer itself, to droop lazily downward over the front of the printer.

"Hey. Ted taught us a new basketball game today, kinda like HORSE, did you want to play for a little bit?"

"Umm..." he responded, sounding a bit confused. It was rare that I would be the one to ask him to play basketball. He knew it wasn't my favorite sport and he typically, inexplicably, had more energy than I ever did. I suppose he was wondering for a minute if this was a trick question, but, as expected, he replied: "Yeah, sounds great. I'll get changed and meet you out there."

"Awesome!" I slipped my shoes on and darted outside, letting the screen door slam behind me (which my parents hated, but whatever). I ran into the garage, leaping over the large, square boards which covered our sump-pump.

After a couple minutes of dribbling and taking warm-up shots, my Dad came out in his cut-off jean shorts and tank top, Dusty traipsing along at his heels. "Okay – what are we playing again?"

"It's called 'Around the World,'" I replied, "and it's kind of like HORSE, except the spots are all set-up ahead of time."

Dad listened patiently but distractedly. He always had a short attention span, especially when it came to instructions. I think he just preferred to make things up as they went along, which is probably why we never really saw him reading instructions guides when he was building something, or when playing new board games with us.

"So, that's it!" I paused, making sure the rules had sunk-in, at least partially. "We end up here," I pointed at the spot I was standing on, "at the free-throw line."

"Sounds good!" Dad tossed me the ball and I went first, making it three spots "Around the World" before missing a shot. Each basket I made was followed by a loud and genuinely encouraging, "nice one!" from Dad. Of course, after losing my turn, Dad quickly made-up the difference and eventually got two spots ahead of me before his first miss.

"Hey," he laughed, pumping his fist in the air and looking over at me, two spots behind him, "this is a great game!" I suppose you could say that competitive streak of mine actually runs in the family.

"Don't get cocky!" I used one of Mom's lines on him, before shooting from my spot, making it, and shooting from the next spot, Dad stepping back out of the way so I had room, and ("Yes!") making another one. Dad played around with Dusty, keeping him entertained and out of my way as I moved onward, two spaces ahead of him, right up to that mystery spot of doom, just beneath the basket.

"Ah, Nemesis," I shouted. "We meet again!"

"Nemesis, that's a good one." My Dad was always a fan of vocabulary words. He was playing tug-o-war with Dusty, some ratty old toy being yanked back-and-forth between them.

"Thanks," I said, delighted to impress him. "I heard it on X-Men." My pride was soon deflated, though. I shot and missed. I leaped forward as the ball hit the ground and started to bounce away. As I tossed the ball over to Dad, I grumbled angrily, "I can't figure out how to make that one, I missed it all day long!"

"Oh, yeah? Hm." He didn't seem to think it was a big deal. Maybe he didn't realize that earlier that same day I tragically lost a game, victory stolen from my ten-year-old grasp, because of that one stupid spot.

"Yeah, it's kinda annoying," I responded, kicking a stone down the driveway and hoping he might get the hint: I was asking for help.

Dad shot from two spots back and quickly made-up the difference, sinking the shot, then the next one, and suddenly he was under the basket and I was the one moving out of the way. "Huh, well, let's see."

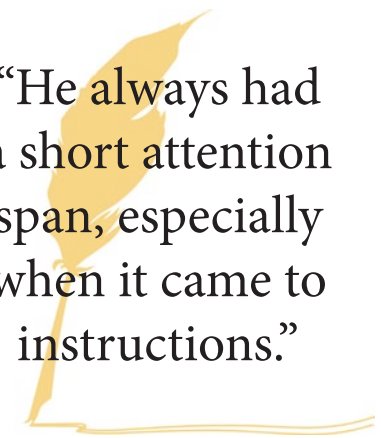
I watched as he dribbled from beneath the basket, looked up as if figuring out some complicated math problem or something, then hooked his left arm upward, flicking the basketball out of his hand, against the backboard, and through the hoop on his first try.

"WHAT?!" Dusty took off after the ball, planting his front paws atop it and chomping his muzzle across the leather, trying to take a chunk out of it. "How the heck did you do that?"

Dad jogged over and yanked the ball away from our dog. "Here," he said, guiding me by the shoulder over to the spot below the net. "The first step is to get in place and look up at the backboard for the spot you want to hit."

"Okay, but wait," I hesitated. "It's still your turn," I said and held out the ball to him. "You just have to hit the free-throw up there and the game's over."

"Nah, nah," Dad replied, pushing the ball backward toward me. "Let's figure this out first."



"He always had a short attention span, especially when it came to instructions."

TOWERS

So, I got in place, spreading my feet shoulder-width apart, setting up my posture first, as Dad instructed. Next, he had me hold out the ball with my left hand, arm's-length away. "Don't shoot yet," he said. "Just see if that feels right, if not, try your right hand."

I tried both hands, experimenting patiently to see which felt more comfortable. "I'm right-handed, but it's the left, definitely." Of course, the right-handed shot felt better for me, but I saw Dad make the shot with his left, so that's what I was going to do, too.

"Okay, now keep your arm out like that," he instructed, "and look up above you for a 'sweet spot' on the backboard. Try the top right corner of that red target-square we've got painted on it."

I looked up, trying to figure out what he meant by "right corner," since he was looking at the backboard straight-on, and I was looking at it backward. "M'kay," I said confidently, more confidently than I actually felt. "I got it."

"Alright, now just toss the ball up toward that spot gently. You don't need to chuck it too hard."

I took a breath, settled my feet once more and pumped my arm up-and-down cautiously a few times before taking the shot. I kept my eye on that corner of the backboard, just as Dad told me to, and – unbelievably- I saw the ball hit it, dead-on, before angling downward and through the net. "YES," I shouted, and high-fived my Dad as the basketball's rim echoed its metallic clang.

"Nice one," he beamed before running over for the ball, which Dusty had already slobbered over again. He tossed the ball back to me. "Final shot – free-throw!"

I dribbled over to the free-throw line, completely forgetting that it wasn't really my turn, and easily sunk the shot. "Woo hoo! Winner!"

"Good game," Dad said, picking up the ball and making some random shots. "Want to go again?"

"Uh," I paused, "how about 'NO.'" I laughed. "I never beat you at basketball. This is great. I'm going to enjoy this one for a while!" I whooped happily again and grabbed Dusty's tug-toy, tossing it into the backyard and watching him bound after it, barking.

"Alright," Dad conceded. "But there will be a re-match." He dribbled the ball and shot again, easily sinking it. "We should teach your sister this one."

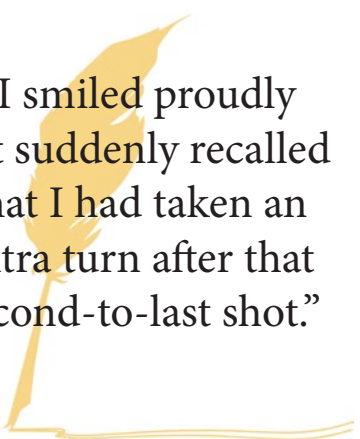
"Yeah, definitely. I can probably beat her, too!"

After Dusty returned from his romp in the backyard, ratty toy dangling from his maw, we took him inside, where

I gloated to my Mom about whooping Dad in "Around the World." She seemed doubtful, but feigned interest. "I saw you guys playing out there, it looked like a close game," she said.

"Yep," Dad responded, looking back at us over his shoulder while washing his hands in the kitchen sink. "Adam's getting pretty good. Beat me fair and square."

I smiled proudly but suddenly recalled that I had taken an extra turn after that second-to-last shot. Something in Dad's voice made it clear, though, that I hadn't so much taken the turn as he had given it to me. "Thanks, Dad."



"I smiled proudly
but suddenly recalled
that I had taken an
extra turn after that
second-to-last shot."

Stalking the Heat
by Megan Montgomery

If that goose keeps staring at me I'm going to pepper spray it. I am not interested in conflict. I came to the Lagoon with purpose. I lean back in my obnoxious pink hammock, rocking my hips to gain momentum. Hammock season is almost over; soon I will have to retreat to my dimly lit grotto of a bedroom for the winter, like a rat scurrying into the bowels of a New York City gutter. To say that I loathe the Midwest winter is a perfect understatement. First of all, fuck the snow. I wish I could buy a flamethrower and torch it all. Every last snowman built by those booger-leaking nuisances we call children. I think I could easily buy a flamethrower with our country's gun laws. *Perhaps I'm the nuisance.* Secondly, I hate the winter because Christmas is the epitome of everything I find vile in this country. Pimping out a sacred holiday for gluttonous corporate gain, because what would Jesus do? And I love my family, but they are insufferably bland. Who will win this year's dinnertime political debate? Will my aunt and uncle finally learn how to cook an edible ham? Find out on this year's episode of Christmas!

Winter is AIDS to my unstable psyche. I much prefer the glorious elements I'm delighting in right now. The sun is out, though the cancer-donating rays are shining on other unfortunate dupes, not me. I prefer swinging under the quaint underbelly of the bony, chipped trees in my nylon sack. I peer out beyond the knotty-shaped water body, which resembles a toilet bowl with that fizzy shit snooty people use to turn the water blue. I ponder why they call it a lagoon. It looks more like a pond to me. Lagoons are more viscous and cruddy, with a thick fog looming on the surface like you'd see in Scooby Doo. No, that is a pond if I ever did see one. The two fountains that usually spout an impressive bend of water in all directions are now off for the season. Another stark reminder that frigid doom is impending. The people at the lagoon don't seem to notice. I watch a redhead chick carelessly walk through landmines of goose dung while tapping away on her smartphone. And that young man across the waterway, I think he's having a rough day. He's got his head nestled into his palms, propped up as if his neck was as fragile as a newborn's. *I feel you, buddy.* I'm sure the Lagoon-goers are all amiable people. But I hope nobody advances towards me asking some bizarre half-baked question. It's happened a couple times before.

I guess I look like an approachable person. One time I was curled up in my hammock like a vegetative caterpillar in this same exact spot, nestled perfectly between two birch trees. I was hypnotized within Ayn Rand's *Anthem* when I felt something yank the side of my hammock straight into the air and then thrust down against my body, sending me flinging from side to side like Newton's Cradle. It was a cute yet dorky looking chick with lengthy black princess hair parted down the middle of her scalp. I giggled awkwardly because I didn't know how else to respond to a stranger giving me an unexpected push. I didn't know if she was being friendly or wanted to abduct me with the way her olive eyes bugged out when she spoke. Turns out, she just wanted to try my hammock and couldn't think of a better way to break the ice. *Spectacular.*

Another time--same lagoon, different set of trees--I was squirrel gazing. My eyes followed the movements of one agile tree rat as it effortlessly navigated atop the canopy of branches. He reminded me more of a jungle Macaque than a squirrel. *This is the Simone Biles of squirrels.* Then Dirk entered my domain. To be clear, Dirk wasn't his real name, although it'd be pretty crazy if it actually were. It's the name I assigned him in my mind--something I do often with people I don't know--and the name

I used when I described him to my boyfriend. He kind of looked like a Dirk, but he acted like one even more. I rested on my back when he stood over me and leaned his plump egghead inward so it obstructed my line of sight. His muffin belly accidentally bumped into the side of my hammock, extinguishing my swing. His glasses almost tumbled down his petite nose and onto my face.

"I've been watching that squirrel, too," Dirk said. I had nothing personal against Dirk; I promise I dislike all strangers equally. I forced a friendly chuckle, which I thought sounded plastic, and looked the opposite way in hopes he would recognize the awkwardness of his actions and leave. He didn't.

"I'm Dirk," he said, except he didn't say Dirk. He said his real name, but I didn't care to remember it.

"Hi, I'm Meg," I replied, trailing off towards the end.

"I don't mean to bother you. You just looked like you wanted someone to talk to."

What possessed you to think that? "Oh, well thank you but I'm trying to nap."

He didn't leave. He stayed. He stayed for forty five agonizing minutes, droning on about some dull nothingness, and then lecturing me on the dangers of alcohol, drugs, pornography, and other party favors he considered the "Devil's creation." I told him I like to drink and smoke and he called me a "loser." Said I reminded him of the losers in his family. He didn't seem like very much fun to me and he wouldn't know a hint if it sunk its talons into his calf and tore the meat out. I decided to heckle him for shits and giggles.

"You mean you don't masturbate to big-titty MILF porn?" I smirked. He looked flushed.

"Jesus! No! I used to be sick like you, but I repented. You can repent, too!"

"If I repent, can I still have orgies with midgets?" He was astonished, probably racking his brain for a response and avoiding seduction back into his satanic ways. *This is why you shouldn't talk to strangers, Dirk.*

I'm really not an inherently mean person; I swear it. I just have a weird anxiety with people I don't know. And if

*"If that goose
keeps staring at
me I'm going to
pepper spray it."*

there's one thing I absolutely detest in this world--albeit, there's many--it's when arrogant twits try to scold me on religion or politics. If I want irrelevant and outdated opinions, I would read the comment section under a Fox News Facebook article.

I sit up and clench the rim of my hammock to crack a few stiff joints. I have a bizarre obsession with the gritty feeling and the blunt popping sound. I look down at the uneven patches of grass underneath me, littered with goose droppings and dying alongside autumn. A young Asian man sits down on the cold metal bench fifteen feet away from me, fingering through a dense book with a plain brown cover and backing. *I wonder what he's reading; probably something above my intellectual level.* I watch the residential army of Lagoon geese as they sail on the open water like pontoons. Hundreds of them, paddling in small groups, yet none of them having a clear picture in their feeble minds of where they are going. I question why they congregate on one end of the pond. Is the water sweeter over there? Are they conspiring? Perhaps not even they knew why they all cling to the south side of the pond. Maybe it's just imbedded in goose culture. Soon winter will exterminate the weakest of them, freezing them in time where they sneak their final breaths. *Darwin is cheering from the afterlife.*

The sun is levitating just above the tree line to the west. I know it's feeling heavy, begging to sink down into the bedrock and let the moon take over for the night shift. The Asian man has left his bench, as well as most of the other Lagoon patrons. It's just me and a stubborn fisherman who refuses to go home until he captures a slimy prize. Surely the geese have had the first pickings at the buffet of fish patrolling the murky underworld, but I admire the fisherman's perseverance. I want to ask him if he had caught anything all day. If he had, why wasn't he satisfied? If he hadn't, why wasn't he discouraged? I figure that, like me, he didn't come to the Lagoon to converse with strangers. I leave him alone.

The air begins to chill as the wind picks up and slaps the appendages of the trees around. It's almost as if the trees and the wind are teaming up, writing an invitation for me and the fisherman to get out before the running snot in our nostrils becomes glaciated. I refuse to allow the elements to chase me inside. I stay, ignoring the cramping numbness of my finger joints. Maybe if I close my eyes and imagine a sizzling desert scape I can trick my body into feeling warm. I picture a slick green Saharan lizard peddling its feet over the blistering sand and under the shade of a crumbling rock. I fantasize of a large brown tumbleweed, dryer and more damaged than the inside of a dreadlock. It somersaults through the thick, wavering air and over the coasting sand dunes, like a boat fighting tropical waves. I open my eyes. I'm still bitterly cold.

I pack it up and walk home. You win, nature. I roll up my hammock and begin to walk back to my cute Victorian house, slumping my shoulders in defeat. I promise myself that this is not the last hammock swing of the season. I lie in my bed and begin to think. *I need to buy a heater and a sun lamp before I become deranged and aggressive.* I accept that this is going to be my life now for the next four months. Laying in my king-sized bed with musty sheets and a documentary playing on my laptop. Brooding in the darkness of my bedroom with Japanese takeout molding on my nightstand. Wondering what that stale, pungent smell is, but not caring enough to get rid of it. Waltzing with anxiety and tangoing with depression. *I'd better stock up on Nyquil and boxed wine.*

Beyond by Marc Crowell

Here I stand on my own little Everest with fresh air in my eyes, in my hair, in my lungs. I stand aloft, perhaps twenty feet from the ground. Above me is blue and white. Below me is green and brown. The smell of leaves and manicured grass envelopes my nose. To my left stands a four-story university building. To my right are several trees (about a century old each). In the distance a stream meanders and babbles quietly.

I walk around the corner of a building which is on the far border of campus, and an object comes into view. A thing. From where I stand on the path, I see three enormous slabs of rock suspended against one another. The rock on top is suspended more than ten feet off the ground. As I grow nearer I notice that the rocks are held in place by girders. The struts remind me of the ones which hold up roller coasters at my favorite theme park, Cedar Point.

As the gap between us closes, I notice a staircase mounting the slabs of granite. It curls up and around and stops abruptly facing a field. The stairs and railing resemble the color of the sky. Each step has a plaque with a word engraved in bold black letters. Feet to ground, head to sky. I put my hands on the cool, powder blue railing and take my first steps:

"Beyond," is displayed on the first.

"Marc!" shouts my manager. "The banana table is almost empty. You will need at least three boxes of yellow, and two boxes of green." He is suddenly very close to me and his breath reeks.

"Right away, Richard." I heft the boxes onto the sleek aluminum cart and push through the door to the sales floor. I whistle a tune by the Beach Boys as I neatly stack bananas for the customers to peruse.

"Marc!" this time it is Sam. "Do we have any fresh mint in the back?"

"I'll check right away."

"We're all out," I state as I return from the back as I notice who is looking for the mint. A short, red headed girl with a mischievous smile stands by my coworker. I had never seen her before. Her blue eyes were like tiny clear ponds in her soft white face.

"How about ginger root?" she asks in a voice that would make flowers bloom.

"I'll show you." I manage to articulate.

We walk together past the lettuce. Then the carrots. We need more carrots. We pass other root vegetables. Celery root, jicama, rutabaga... Ah, here is the ginger root. I can't help but feel she wants me to do something. She thanks me and I go back to stacking bananas. Another shitty song comes on the intercom, so I begin to whistle "When I'm Sixty-Four" by The Beatles.

As she walks out the door she gives me a look like I did not pass whatever test I was taking. Why didn't I make any effort to talk to her? Is my job really more important than my social life? I should have gone above and beyond for this girl, but I didn't.

"Beyond what?" The wind in the trees is the only response.

"Attempt," this word seems to taunt me.

"Attempt to...," I get frustrated and push forward.

"Yield," I might be understanding this.

"Yield to others...?," I hesitate for a moment.

"Doubt," the first response which comes with no struggle.

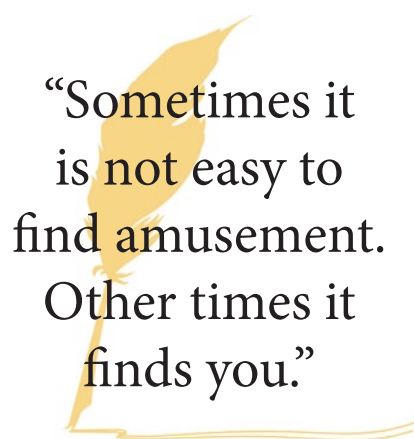
"Doubt without reason," I state clearly.

"Demand," reminds me of "attempt", from before.

"Demand diligence." A confidence burgeons within me.

"Amusement," not bad; in small doses, good.

The staircase accesses a clearing in the trees. I look up and see the clouds shift gently in the breeze. Sometimes it is not easy to find amusement. Other times it finds you. Still other times we are, all of us, surrounded by an abundance of amusement and are not amused.



“Sometimes it
is not easy to
find amusement.
Other times it
finds you.”

My great uncle still finds amusement at the age of ninety-six. At his last birthday, he got cupcakes that read, "Happy 96th birthday, Uncle Mike!" There is a photo from when he rearranged the cupcakes to say sixty-nine. In the picture, he was laughing and wiping his tears away. I have great respect for this great uncle of mine.

"Appreciate amusement." I say, sounding a bit like "Mike" (aka Anthony Crowell).

"Condition," the state of things.

"Condition restriction." Learn from the past and use the present for the future.

"Fantasy," reminds me of "amusement".

"Fantasy forms." Said with a certain difficulty.

"Interpret," emotion... language... data.

"Interpret information." Saying and doing.

"Solace," a real, fake smile glances off my face.

When my cousin Danny passed away I was very sad. He and I were born five months apart, so we were very close. However, his parents, siblings, and young cousins took it much harder than me. Danny was very inclusive. He always made sure to spend ample time playing with our younger cousins. If we were starting a game of whiffle-ball he would ask every cousin if they would like to play. The little ones began to take their frustrations out on each other soon after his passing.

I found solace in the days following his death by smiling with our family. I was not smiling because I was happy. I smiled so that they might have one good thought that day. It seemed to help them realize that happiness would return to their lives, like the sun's rays on the first true spring morning of the year.

"Solace is healing." There is always room for hope.

"Discovery," my mind rolls, my sole goal.

TOWERS

“Discovery finds frontiers.” Discovery never ends.

“Claim,” various definitions pop into my mind.

“Claim what is necessary.” Reject the rest.

“Beyond,” the first and last steps.

I look up from the last step and see through the light blue sky. I imagine faraway stars and places thereby. Places that are beyond my spatial capacity to know. My world feels small as it swings about one of the many nuclear fusion generators splayed across the heavens. I think about all the space that exists beyond what I am a part of. I think about the apathy that people tend to have towards space travel. Sensing the enormity and diversity of stars before me, I imagine similar fates for faraway beings which I may never know. I imagine people in grey uniforms sweeping space travel into a corner. It is not feasible, they may say, to devote time to something so prone to failure. A common stance is that we should fix what we have before we go elsewhere in the cosmos. My opposition to this is that many of the things that we enjoy, from cars and planes to computers, result from the curiosity of people unafraid to go beyond. For what aspiration is higher than shooting to the stars?

“Go ahead, go beyond.”

“My world feels small
as it swings about one
of the many nuclear
fusion generators
splayed across the
heavens.”

A Time to Refract

by Faith Mellenthin

I am an amateur. Knowledge that Saturn and Mars floated above me this fall season had been on my mind, confirmed by several online articles. These planetary bodies mesmerized me so much that I decided to do something about it. On August 19th, I got in my car and drove down Lincoln Highway against the sun's dissolving light.

In a cul-de-sac where my house resides I had spotted the planets a month before. A quick google search and one setting sun later, the recipe was perfect for observing. Only attempting to locate Mars, I centered myself in the circle of gray pavement and blue tinted trees. My neck crammed backwards as the stench of grills reminded me that I still stood in a neighborhood. The only information I had was to look next to the moon.

Stars, those extremely tiny points in the sky, can still shine with color to the unaided eye. I was convinced I found what could be Mars to the north-east of my viewing position of the moon, which itself was low in the east sky. I smiled and pointed at it as I walked back into the enclosure that was my house. “Don't move on me!” I mumbled, reaching for the door handle. At the moment, I was desperate to be both inside and out at the same time.

“Scott, come look at what I think is Mars,” I pleaded. Too excited to continue viewing on my own, I bent my brother's reluctance until he was also surround by the dark blue hue of houses on the court. He had the bright idea to take photos of him holding the light between his fingers.

It was a very fun moment pretending we discovered something. As of right now, I still was not certain we were even looking at Mars. After I discovered goose bumps all over my skin, we returned inside to resolve what we were looking at.

On some website, there was a very clear diagram of where Saturn and Mars were on that particular evening. This was enough. Giving my brother a high five, we celebrated by watching TV shows together all night. Perhaps I owe him more than a high five, seeing as he was the one that sparked my interesting in science by making me watch a most classic science fiction show with him two years ago: Doctor Who. I was reminded of all this while on Lincoln Highway. I knew the planets were in different positions now, which I had been too busy to keep track of. Continuing to intensify my interest, I was on my way to the Science and Surplus store in Geneva, Illinois, where they were holding a science night. A telescope workshop and viewing was to be featured. I could finally see what I wanted to look at. The focus developing on my future endeavors was starting to intensify.

* * *

Every day I hung up a fresh drawing up that was sprinkled with just the right amount of charcoal. It was surrounded by my classmate's creations, each tacked up displaying a delicious variant of the same recipe. Today we were drawing a nude woman fixed into different poses for a certain amount of time.

“Take a look at how she handles depth. Things that are behind are darker shaded, while the highlighted areas in the front stay in a lighter tone,” the instructor explained, referencing my drawing.

I could say without boasting that visually displaying the model in unique and correct strokes came easily to me. Perhaps my high school education was finally getting revealed. Each frantically drawn up page had its own charm bearing the aftermath of timed persuasion. The result is not meant to be real, but hold just enough information that a viewer is convinced of the human figure.

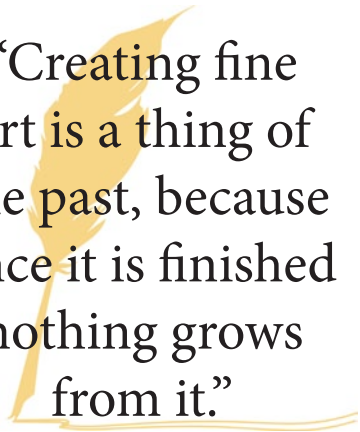
“You always pick out her work,” a student in front of me blurted out. Everyone shockingly looked at her as she continued to say how she tried to do what was taught but just didn’t know how to draw. My embarrassment was a growing like a redness that I watched from behind the crowd, slowly burning my name off the black and white paper tacked on the wall.

I hated it. I suddenly hated being the best at something in this group of learners. Particularly because I did not think I was the best, but the instructor’s continuous references made my colleagues think so. Even more so, I probably disliked the class itself more than the rest.

Fundamentals of art are extremely necessary, but professional artists require these skills because there is nothing more to art than viewing. Here I am standing at an easel drawing from life a naked model, each day a new person, and creating what is considered a beautiful and fulfilling practice. Stereotypically, this is what people already think of artists. The more I practice, the more useless the images appear to be. Creating fine art is a thing of the past, because once it is finished nothing grows from it. What is the point of adding more ideas to an overflowing landfill of knick-knacks that satisfy the emotional needs of mankind?

Life Drawing was doing nothing but adding to this growing dread of creating art. Obviously, I was good. I was so good that others had been secretly upset at me for it. Up until now I had believed art was entirely useful, but now it seemed that the whole study was lacking in application.

I needed to contribute something more to the scene than pretty pictures; no longer wanting to be good, I desired instead to become useful.



“Creating fine art is a thing of the past, because once it is finished nothing grows from it.”

* * *

“You have two options; you can take an incomplete, or submit the work as is.” He is a very successful man, my illustration instructor, who was still trying to give me another way out. I have already accepted the situation. A painted blue background on illustration board represented one assignment; another had been the very first project of the semester. Both deserved no more than to be shredded in millions of pieces, thrown into space, to become dust burnt up by the sun.

I needed him to tell me I was an awful student because that was the fact. Instead, he stayed this understanding man in a knitted hat and beard who graded the two unfinished projects with a D and a C. His generosity only marked me more of a failure.

Bittersweet, the final project of the semester was the only one I had turned in on time as the rest remained unattended to. Up until now, missed deadlines were just a small fracture in the overall performance. I had been able to pull together a masterpiece that captivated an audience even though the curtain was drawn so late people were about to leave their seats.

Time had now become the price of a ticket. Suddenly, I couldn’t compensate creativity with time, and without both my ability as an artist was put on the line. Never before had I been the worst one in class.

Feeling strained, I started regretting all the years I had focused on art. Perhaps I would have been more productive in a different field of study. I was told in tenth-grade biology that I should be taking Advanced Placement science classes, but I did not care for them at all. I always thought that art was the only thing I could do and therefore was the only thing I should try to do. Apparently, I took a turn somewhere.

Art was still what I wanted to do. Only now, I had no idea what purpose it served nor was I any good at it.

* * *

Geneva’s Science and Surplus Store was appealing to kids with things that were just plain cool to look at. Air hissed from outside where they exploded coke cans. A faint hum whined under all the chatter as electricity was being displayed. The whole place smelled of plastics and people. Sparingly unsocial, I began to wonder why I arrived so early. At the very center of the store was a round man who looked humble and at home next a small display of fairly expensive telescopes. “Some people think computerized telescope are good for the amateur astronomer. Personally, I think that if you are starting out, it is better to get familiar with locating things on your own.”

He told the four of us listening that sometimes it takes him thirty minutes to set up a telescope. By dusk, he was unloading his scope out of the truck of a car for the viewing party. I wish I could say I remember his name but I did not even bother to learn it. More important things were happening to the cylindrical puzzles being assembled in the parking lot. Several curious astronomers were also watching, but the chatter of impatient kids was really putting a crater in the calmness of the event.

Both telescopes being put together were refracting telescopes. They used large glass lenses to bend the incoming

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light so the large image appears small enough for the eye to look at. This is no different than the way a straw appears bent when sitting in a glass of water. Light is no permanent thing.

* * *

The most professional thing I have is my shiny new compass that I bought overly priced at Michael's for about \$20. Sadly, I am using my \$3 ruler instead. It just works better. Tracing paper out, I brace the HB, H, and 2B pencils for impact by sharpening them each, letting the broken shavings fall to the floor.

The light brown box is handled with care as my hands lift up the lid. Held together with tan tape, the sides remain secure but the over the overall cube is in a skewed state. Perfectly written capital letters can be seen on opposing faces of the cardboard cube and below the chewed edges of the lid.

“DOG SKULL.”

Just as worn out as the package, the skull is tinted with amber and sepia tones, nestled on a few very pathetic looking packing peanuts. At first, the station smells like paper and cardboard. Pencil and ruler out, I position the skull eye level on a shoebox and the skull box. The stale air is already festering from being in a box of decaying bone and musk. This particular dog had a skull fourteen centimeters long and about 6.6 centimeters wide. On the tracing paper in front of me, I mimic this shape in two-dimensions by drawing a rectangle that is exactly fourteen centimeters by 6.6 centimeters. The illustration is now confined in exact one-to-one proportions.

It looks unnaturally small.

* * *

Eventually, the large Meade and Celestron telescopes were set up. Both of them fixed on Saturn instead of Mars; this was mostly because Mars, though closer in distance, was comparably miniscule. With my eye on the lens, I got the feeling that the planet was melting away. The sharp outline of the lens image felt like it was cutting my eye as I wanted to un-blur the faint planet. The image was not permanent and seemed to wave like ripples on water when the ground beneath the telescope was disturbed. Tipping its rings towards me, Saturn behaved like any other animal with its back turned — an innocent sphere. I uncurled from the bent over position and caught a breeze of wind.

Leaving the windows down in the car on the way home, the night air was so sweet that I could not bear to trap it outside. Swerving, I strained my neck to the south where I could still see them. Red and yellow glimpses. Betrayed by the smallness of my own eyes, only my mind will be useful if I hope to someday approach the spheres. Living in a fragile body I must learn fast before the universe finds out. Before it turns around and pounces back at me.

Weather Narration by Faith Mellenthin

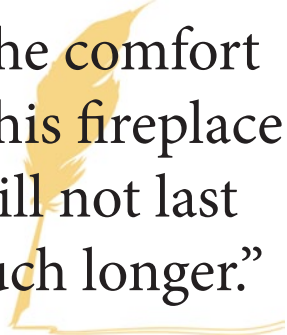
December 3 — 4:00 P.M.

Shades of gray are swimming in the atmosphere. Blue and purple clouds look muffled through the veil of dusk that comes so early these winter months; submerging the daily hustle in a premature sunset.

I have only now decided to leave my house after experiencing the death of one of my lightbulbs. Seeking new luminosity, I find myself at a Panera Bread surrounded by other individuals. A decadent company I do not deserve. The dim sky outside the windows tells me that. I am hiding in the warm glow of a fireplace and polished wood, escaping the guilt I have about causing my grades to be admitted into permanent intensive care.

Darkness thickens. An absence of wind, ceasing all movement of branches and bushes, silencing any whistling that would have bombarded the glass enclosure. No birds fly overhead. No creature desires to separate the clouds and ground during this time. The landscape welcomes these coming hours with open arms, bare moments away from touch. A gentle, peaceful embrace.

Yet, my heart beats faster. Breaths increase as my leg shakes with anxiety. The comfort of this fireplace will not last much longer. Soon, I will leave and interrupt the intimacy of the evening, sinking into the night sky. Drowning in blackness.



“The comfort
of this fireplace
will not last
much longer.”

Black Wallstreet
by *Taylor Stamps*

The opening statement in the documentary Black Wallstreet said “In 1921, Tulsa, Oklahoma was dubbed the “Oil Capital of the World.” It had a population of 100,000, with a Chamber of Commerce, an Opera House, a Petroleum Club...and a Ku Klux Klan with a membership of over 3,000.” That being the opener for this documentary told you that this topic is going to help us learn why society ended up being set up to serve “white privilege”. A city that was thriving completely changed in one day. The facts on what occurred were often distorted and this film was created in order for us to get a better understanding for what really happened, the reasoning behind it, and why it still affects us to this day.

One man being interviewed said that while he was getting his haircut as a boy he overheard two white barbers saying, “Hurry up and finish cutting that kids hair so we can go down to the railroad tracks and see if we can shoot some niggers.” This example shows how racism and discrimination against blacks was instilled into future generations because that is all they heard and saw. Because of this they thought that what they were doing wasn't wrong since it was the norm. Systematic oppression of blacks was nothing new to them, so when the Tulsa Lynching occurred no one made any major moves to help the black community. In my opinion, if there were people that claimed to think racism was wrong the least they could have done was warn the black community about what was going to happen the next day. They also could have gone a step further and did whatever they could to help protect them. Whatever whites that did try to help must be commended, it is just my wish, that they could have done more.

The Ku Klux Klan's reign lasted for 15 years. One fact that I learned from watching this documentary was that the Klan targeted Jews, Catholics, and African Americans. My initial knowledge of the Ku Klux Klan was that they found it their personal responsibility to execute African Americans whenever they deemed it necessary. The reasoning behind this, especially for the KKK in Tulsa, was that they saw how inadequately they were doing compared to the African Americans in Black Wallstreet who were thriving. They couldn't find work so they decided to put their energy into something else. They internalized their hatred, and let it fester, until they rounded up enough other middle class white men who thought the reason for their downfall was because of black people as well, and decided to kill them.

It was not a crime in Oklahoma for a man to kill a negro. This imbalance started through the government. White people knew that their crimes against black people would always go unpunished. They used this knowledge to help fuel the fire. The law is put in place to try to guide people into doing the right thing, and also to punish them when they don't. So therefore, if the law is telling you that you have the right to do something without punishment, and you are fueled by the hatred in your heart, there is nothing stopping you from doing it. Once again, because according to the law, it isn't wrong. At this time, two black people a week were being lynched in America. There were no consequences for those who committed these hateful acts, so the killings continued.

During the Tulsa lynching they stole everything from them, looted their homes, burned their houses and businesses, and killed thousands of innocent black people after cutting the city off. They wouldn't let fire departments or ambulances help.

Because of the weapons that they had the departments had no choice but to let the events that were unfolding continue. The attack that the KKK planned was systematic and merciless. The white people in their group saw black prosperity, and they couldn't stand it, so they decided to take everything from them. This event tore black families apart. They imprisoned blacks for no reason, and the only way the army would protect you is if you were approved by a white person. “Before the day was over every black person was killed, wounded, or placed in confinement.” Some white families attempted to hide their domestic workers during the riots. Everyone that had to flee had absolutely nothing to their name. Most of the men were taken out so women and children had to flock to other cities. They burned Greenwood to the ground. Even after all this at the end of everything that unfolded a white jury still placed the blame on black people.

1,400 black citizens filed claims for their losses, and not one received a settlement. Everything that had been done up to this point was designated to keep black people from ever succeeding again. 1,200 homes were destroyed, 320 looted over, 4,000 people were left homeless, and over 1,000 spent the winter in tents. No one was ever imprisoned for the crimes they committed. This shows me that it's all about a person's mindset. Because still we rise. June 2, 1921 was a very trying and disturbing event in African American lives, but I am grateful it didn't completely destroy us.

“The law is put in place to try to guide people into doing the right thing, and also to punish them when they don't.”



Named for the spires of Altgeld Hall, the “Castle on the Hill,” Towers is Northern Illinois University’s literary and creative arts magazine. Originally sponsored by the Xi Delta chapter of Sigma Tau Delta (International English Honor Society) and Nu Ita Pi, the publication has been printing student work since 1939.