

# A DAWNING OF DREAMS

## VIRGINIA SOILEAU

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*“Always keep dreaming the dreams of your past.  
Like a child that plays as the early dawn rises,  
they will grow with the shadows the morning sun casts.”*

The fairies that frolic through a little girl’s head  
gently lead her feet as she slips off to bed.

*“Always keep dreaming, for children grow fast...”*

Centaurs, mermaids, and unicorns too,  
laze in soft flowers that shimmer with dew.

*“Freed from the shadows the noon sun casts...”*

She rides on dragons that dive through the skies  
while Father Time watches with a tear in his eye.

*“Always keep dreaming your dreams ‘til the last...”*

Paladins fight horned heathens from Hell,  
as life slowly slips from Youth’s emptying well.

*“Whispering in the shadows the evening sun casts...”*

I could lay these to rest, with my ebbing age,  
but I remember the whispers of a wizardly sage:

*“Never stop dreaming the dreams of your past,  
or they will die in the shadows the full moon casts.”*

# STRICTLY BUSINESS

JESSICA ASTIN

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Lizzie DeWitt walked carefully on the rough planks that made up the sidewalk, hitching her skirts slightly in order to avoid the mud stirred up by the recent rain. Now, the air was thick with a fog, one that would no doubt be burned off by noon, but now made a chill surround her like a second skin. Lizzie was glad she had worn her warmest shawl, the thick grey wool giving her some protection against the chill. She passed the mayor's wife and gave her a polite nod. The woman pointedly ignored her, almost stepping off the sidewalk and into the muck-ridden streets to avoid her. There were some chills you couldn't hide from, Lizzie mused, as she reached a deceptively plain looking wooden building.

Her soft leather boots were coated in mud, so she stomped on the rag rug just inside the building, wanting to keep her establishment as neat as possible. It was tough in a place like San Francisco, which had sprouted up so fast that things like sanitation often fell to the way-side, but Lizzie DeWitt was a tough woman. If she decided to have the cleanest brothel in all of San Francisco, then she would have it.

She glanced over the lobby, a simple but comfortable room. A pair of tasteful leather davenports were available for clients use while they waited, but the focus of the room was the front desk. It was large, made of carefully carved dark wood, with a shelf behind it. Lizzie shrugged out of her shawl, neatly folding it and storing it behind the front desk, next to the money drawer and the ever-present rifle, which had been used more than once to escort an unruly patron to the door. The girl seated there, Charlotte, greeted her, and Lizzie asked if any customers had been in. It was early yet, but the men of San Francisco were always about, either working until the last flickers of light died or merrily spending the results of their hard labor. Their pleasure was Lizzie's business, and her business was booming. It hadn't been too many years ago, before they found gold at Sutter's Hill, when Lizzie was barely eking out a living, selling the only thing she had to offer, herself. Now, she ran a brothel of her own, making fine money, with

a dozen girls working for her. She could stay strictly on the business side, and it was there where she felt happiest. Most in control. A smile curled at the corners of her lips, but it faded when she saw Charlotte start shaking, all the while saying a familiar name.

Deputy Marshal Blye. The most troubling man she had met in her thirty-odd years, and she had met more than her fair share of rogues, scallywags, and scoundrels. It was easy to see why—take a man with no character or interest in doing anything but satisfying his basest desires, give him a position of power—and you've got a disaster waiting to happen. If he was just crooked, it would have been bearable, as paying the law to turn a blind eye was an important part of her business, but he also demanded time with the girls, and he often became violent.

Like with Charlotte. Normally, Charlotte worked in one of the back rooms, not behind the counter, but the last time Blye came to visit, he had roughed her up so badly that almost a month later, she still wasn't ready to get back to her normal work. Lizzie hoped she'd be ready soon; the men loved the petite French girl with her large dark eyes and were willing to pay more than they were for American girls with less charming accents. If any other man had done that to one of her girls, Lizzie would have marched him off her property at gunpoint, but Blye she couldn't touch—and he knew it. Not only was he a marshal, but his brother was one as well, high enough to wrangle a job for his ne'er-do-well brother, and tangling with him would bring down the full force of the law upon her. She'd end up shut down, in jail, or worse, leaving her little choice but to tolerate him.

Steeling herself, Lizzie asked how long he had been there, and with who, learning that he had only arrived a few minutes prior, and that he was with Mary. She breathed a little easier; Mary was a strong young thing, and she had a spirit that was not easily cowed. If he tried to get too rough with Mary, she was likely to handle it. Still, she was wary, walking down the hall lined with bright red doors, each with a different girl behind it. Some waiting for the next client, others in the midst of entertaining. It was a well-traveled hall, its rug thinning in the middle from use, but it still served its purpose to make the place look welcoming and to muffle the sounds of feet. Lizzie pulled out a kerchief to wipe away a speck of dirt from the door frame, then continued down the hall. She paused in front of Mary's door long enough to

listen for signs of trouble. Hearing nothing unusual, she continued on to the back of the building, making rounds like she was on patrol.

Even when there wasn't anything pressing to do, Lizzie had a problem resting; she always had to be on the move. Back and forth, back and forth, cleaning a smudge, looking for patrons, always listening for signs of trouble. It was more than second nature to her. Ever since she was small, she always had to be on guard. It had always been her and her mother—her father ran off before she was born—and her mother had never gotten over his betrayal. For as long as she could remember, her mother had taken refuge the only way she knew how, through drinking and men.

Unlike Lizzie, her mother never sold herself; she gave herself away freely, for love and for drink. The parade of men in her mother's life was constant. What was also constant was the low-quality of those men. As she wasn't a respectable woman, no respectable man would have her, and so the men in her life ranged from shifty to criminal. After the latest in her mother's string of men assaulted her, Lizzie took off on her own, and it was then she turned to prostitution. She moved further and further west until she found herself in California, at the precisely perfect moment to monetize on the gold rush. Yes, life was so much better now for Lizzie, but she still couldn't relax, couldn't escape from the hold of her past.

Lizzie heard the front door open before she saw it, the solid wood groaning as though it was pained to be moved. She walked over to greet him, the crimson fabric of her dress rustling softly with every step. Pleasantries exchanged, she showed him to the shelf by the desk, which displayed a row of dolls. It was a simple system: each doll represented a girl working at the brothel. Each was cunningly made to best depict the girl and display her charms to the customers. When a doll was lying on her back, it meant the girl was with another customer, but when the doll was sitting, facing the potential customer, the girl was open. Lizzie fancied the method as it wasted less time; no need for the girls to fritter away outside their rooms, bored and waiting to be chosen. Instead, they could pass their spare time as they pleased, only having to see the customers when they were actually hired. For the men, they could easily see if their favorite girl was available and, if she wasn't, decide if she was worth waiting for or if he wanted to give another one a try. Sure, some men wanted to be able to look first, and she

would of course accommodate, but for the most part, the dolls worked as intended.

The customer chose a doll with lovely red curls and bright blue eyes—Clarice, a bold Irish lass—and Lizzie escorted him down the hall to her room. She made a brief introduction and then left the two to get to know each other on a more personal level. Again, she paused by Mary’s door, but again, nothing sounded suspicious. No cries of pain, no shouts of anger. She allowed herself a brief smile. Mary was capable of handling this situation; she had no need to fret.

Lizzie returned to the front of the brothel, deciding to take a look through her books. She knew her letters and numbers, but they came slow to her, so she hired someone else to do them for her. Still, she liked to check and make sure things added up, that her business was still running the way it ought to be. She had a goodly sum banked and more hidden away, and that was the way she liked it. With money came security, luxury, and, perhaps one day, respectability. It was a far off dream, especially now, standing in the middle of a brothel, but she could never have imagined before that she’d make it this far, a madam rather than a prostitute, a woman of means rather than a beggar. Was being respectable such an impossibility after all that? Carefully, she put her books back into place, aligning them neatly in their drawer.

She had hardly closed the door when she heard a sudden scream. Without a moment’s pause, she grabbed the rifle, loaded and ready, from behind the counter, and headed down the hall. In the heat of the moment, she didn’t register which room the scream was coming from, but as the doors in the hallway opened, most (but not all) curious to find the source of the sound, she had a sinking feeling that she already knew which room it was coming from.

Mary’s room.

She felt as if she ought to lay down the gun and go at that very moment, there could be no good coming from threatening a marshal—deputy or not—with a rifle. In fact, she knew it would only bring her the kind of trouble everyone wished to avoid. But the rifle was melded to her hands like it was cast in iron, and so she kept it, a talisman against evil. As she came to Mary’s room, she tucked it under one arm so she could open the door, perhaps talk some sense into that damned Deputy Marshal Blye. Try to threaten to report his behavior to his brother, who was the only person he’d listen to, and then only

just. Or maybe—hopefully—open the door to find that Mary had only screamed as a result of accidentally slipping off the bed. Lizzie knew it wasn't that, knew it with everything in her, but still she prayed as she opened the door that what she found would be innocent.

At first glance, the tableau that greeted her was almost normal. There was nothing broken in the room, not the bedside table, nor the wardrobe, and not so much as a tear in the canopy of the large bed which was in the center of the room. The two figures in the bed could have passed as a couple in the act of passion, if you looked only for a moment before averting your eyes.

Lizzie, however, was never a woman who could simply look away. She saw the way he straddled the woman, with his hands not at her waist nor on her breasts but instead around her suddenly so small and delicate-looking neck. Mary was writhing, yes, but not in real or faked throes of ecstasy—she was trying to escape, struggling to breathe. For a moment, Lizzie could have sworn it was she being strangled, feeling the grip tighten around her throat, wanting to speak but suddenly helpless. What was there to say?

“Stop,” she managed, her throat feeling like it was filled with broken glass. Once the first word was out, the next came easier.

“You’re going to kill her.”

Blye turned his head towards her, as if he hadn’t noticed her before, which, she supposed, was possible, so intense was his focus on poor Mary’s throat. His shoulders, tense in the act of strangling, loosened slightly, and Lizzie hoped that it was enough to allow Mary to pull a breath. It was his face, though, that held the most expression, and it held the strongest rage Lizzie had ever seen. In another situation, Lizzie would have wondered what would cause a man to hate like that, to be filled with a rage so powerful that the Devil himself would blanch, but a life was on the line, and there was no place for wonder. Only survival.

“Turn around and walk right out of here,” Blye said, his gaze flickering between Lizzie and Mary, “This is business between me and the lady.”

“You need to stop,” Lizzie said, hardly moving, hardly breathing, “I can’t have you hurting my girls.”

There was a mean, mocking glint in Blye’s eyes as he looked at her, up and down, like she too was for sale.

## STRICTLY BUSINESS

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"I can do what I want, lest you want me to haul you in for running a whorehouse. There's nothing here I can't have, and both of us know it. So get out of here before I decide that I want more."

A familiar revulsion flooded Lizzie's throat, tempered by a flush of rage creeping over her face. Her grip on the rifle grew painfully tight, surprising her. She glanced down at the rifle, then back up at Blye. As if reading her thoughts, he said, "You and I both know you're not going to use that. Go and put it back like a good girl. Get on now."

Her gaze went back to the rifle. It was beautiful, its rich cherry-colored wood smooth and shining. Lizzie took good care of it, and it had taken good care of her. Just taking it out made her feel strong, powerful, and she had never yet had to shoot a man with it. Its presence alone was enough to drive most ne'er do wells away, but Blye was not one of them. She tightened her grip on the rifle and, for the first time, aimed it at Blye.

"I told you to stop," she said, and Blye laughed incredulously.

"Do you have any idea what trouble you're getting yourself into?" he asked, standing up. He was naked, not as much as a sock on him, and as he stepped towards her, Lizzie was perilously aware of the height difference between them. If it wasn't for the rifle she'd be quaking, but it strengthened her resolve, and she trained it on him.

"Take your clothes and leave," she said, ignoring his question. "You're not welcome here anymore."

She could feel it, the shift of power as she spoke, as Blye realized she wasn't backing down. Disbelief crossed his face, and she could tell that no one else had told him anything like that in a long, long time. He grabbed his pants, yanking them on, and then took another step towards her.

"You don't know what you've gotten yourself into," his lips curved into a snarl, "I'm going to take you in. You and every one of your whores!"

Lizzie felt his words, rather than heard them, and it was like lightning striking through her chest. She saw Mary past his shoulder, still gasping to recover, and her mind flashed back to the fear in Charlotte's voice when she said his name. She saw a shelf of dolls, shattered, collapsed to the ground. It felt like forever, but it couldn't have been more than a couple heartbeats.

She knew what she had to do. Staring straight ahead, she

pulled the trigger.

The rifle fired, reverberating through the room. The scent of the powder burned Lizzie's lungs, the shot echoing in her ears, and the sight of Blye filled her eyes. He collapsed onto the floor, his chest gaping open, blood so dark red it was almost black spilling out. She couldn't help but think how hard it would be to clean the floor after this, blinking numbly at the sight before her. The sound of Mary, coughing weakly, snapped her back to her senses, and she rushed over, helping her into a sitting position.

"You—you shot him. The marshal," Mary managed to gasp out between coughs, "You—his brother—he's not going to rest until he sees you dead."

"Don't you worry about me," Lizzie said, patting her hand, then standing up, "I can take care of myself. Now, I'll fetch Charlotte to look after you."

Quickly, she walked through the hallway, noticing few eyes on her. It looked like most people had made a run for it or hidden away in their rooms at the sound of gunfire—good. Charlotte was still at the front, albeit hiding behind the desk. Lizzie sent her off, grabbing her books as soon as the girl left, then left the building. She was going to have to disappear, start a new life, before Blye's brother could end her own.

Despite it all, she felt almost giddy. This time, she had money. This time, she could run away and be anybody. Not a prostitute, not a madam, not a fatherless daughter of a drunk, but anyone. Fear and excitement mingled, flooding her senses, and for a moment, she forgot the ugliness she'd left behind. She would be someone else. She would be free.

# “DO YOU HAVE CANCER OR SOMETHING?”

PAIGE SELIGMAN

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“Yeah or something” I lied not wanting to go into the long winded explanation of my disorder in which, based on past experiences, the conversation would either end in awkward silence or confusion and then awkward silence. It was easier to say what they wanted to hear, to give an explanation that they wanted, that they knew; it was better to lie. I plastered on a smile and finished up her transaction, unable to do much of anything else. I handed over her receipt. “Thank you, have a good day” I said mechanically. “You too, oh and good luck with... that” she said hurriedly grabbing her groceries. I choked back a cynical laugh.

*“I just thought you didn’t shampoo your hair...”*

Trichotillomania is an impulse control disorder that causes people to pull out the hair from their scalp, eyelashes, eyebrows, or other parts of the body that can result in noticeable bald patches. As many as 4 percent of the world’s population is known to have this disorder and is four times more common among women than men. Hair pulling varies greatly in its severity, location and response to treatment. I have been battling with it since I was thirteen.

*“Did you have surgery?”*

In 2012, Americans spent around 11 billion dollars on about 1.6 million different cosmetic procedures, not including Botox, which is one of the leading non-surgical cosmetic procedures in America. Over 90% of plastic surgery patients are women with more than 10 million women having plastic procedures each year. These procedures always run the risk of going wrong, and even if it works out well, it takes a long time for the body to heal. Risks like pain, infection, hives, bleeding, numbness, scarring, skin loss, blurred vision, swelling, blind-

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## “DO YOU HAVE CANCER OR SOMETHING?”

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ness, nerve damage, ruptured implants, hair loss, loss of facial expression, skin damage, baggy skin, skin falling off, toxic shock, burning, fat clots in the lungs, heart problems, kidney problems, bursting blood vessels, blood clots, disability, and death.

### **“Why?”**

Why do you bite your nails? Why do you twirl your hair or tap your foot? Why is there a need to check our phone every two minutes for new messages? Or talk to ourselves when no one’s around? Why do we have to dress up every day before leaving the front door? Why do we have to adjust our hair just so? Why do we cake on makeup and take hours upon hours to look perfect? Why look in the windows to make sure nothing has changed? Why must we stare at ourselves so closely that we fog up the mirror? Why do we obsess over every zit, every blackhead, every pore, every out of place eyelash, every drool stain and every remnant of food in our teeth?

### **“Why don’t you want to come swim with us?”**

What if I get my hair wet? They’d see my bald spots. The thinning of my hair exposed by the lake’s touch. I let the subtle waves brush past my feet as I stay covered tightly in a towel. Looking out to where my friends are laughing and splashing I feel a pang of sadness and longing. Longing to not care, to enjoy the water and the feel of the unknown. To give myself over to my love for the sea and all its cousins. Instead, I silently turn back to the fire pit and sit waiting, eyes brimming with tears, for them to return.

### **“You shouldn’t worry so much over what other people think of you.”**

According to researchers at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, from 1983 to 2009, stress increased 18% for women and 24% for men. Those with higher stress were women, people with lower incomes and those with less education. The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in America, affecting 40 million adults age 18 and older, or 18% of the population.

### **“Oh. Your hair is so short on top... I’ll see what I can do.”**

My heartbeat quickens as I silently psych myself up. Do I really need a haircut? I could just dye my own hair. Or wait longer, no big deal. They probably won’t even have an opening. I avidly avoid appointments because they tend to loom over my head and amplify my

already heightened anxiety. I lock my car door and walk through the clear glass doors into the salon. Looking inside I see a wave of nameless faces and feel a bit better. Not much. I don't know any names of the people inside because I try to avoid the same hairdresser twice. Not because I am picky, but because I hate the conversations. The silences, the inquiries, the need to try and 'help' or understand. The judgments or conversations that always circle back to the one topic I hate to discuss. I don't want to hear all their confusion and attempts to figure out how to best hide or blend or fix my hair. So I just sit there, as statuesque as can be allowed, watching the clock tick until I am released.

***"Do you have a rash?"***

Thought to be brought on by poor diets, pollution, or lack of exercise, acne is most likely the bane of pubescent people's existence. In the 1960s, blackheads managed to rank as the most repulsive of all bodily excretions. Americans spend over 11 billion dollars annually to treat acne and skin blemishes. Although thought to be a modern day curse, acne is not a new development. Ancient Egyptians believed that acne was caused by telling lies and facial disfigurement has been seen as a mark placed by the devil throughout history. An analysis of cinema shows that even now we still have an association between skin conditions, scars, and evil.

***"You have a baby face."***

Like it or not, a person's face affects the way that others view them, especially in first impressions. According to several studies, the shape of a person's face plays a role in how a person is perceived, their attractiveness, and even their chances of getting a job. Women who wear makeup are perceived as more competent, trustworthy and attractive than their barefaced counterparts. People with symmetrical faces are viewed as prettier and more likable while people with big eyes look more youthful and trustworthy.

***"That's an... interesting haircut. Did you cut it yourself?"***

I look in the mirror. Tears welling in my eyes as I try to comb over the newest bald spot to no avail. Strands of hair litter the sink as I scoop the hairball out and throw it away. I try my best to hide it and hope that no one will notice. Wiping my eyes, I put on a fresh paint of makeup and head off to school.

***"Your skin is so light, it looks like porcelain."***

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## “DO YOU HAVE CANCER OR SOMETHING?”

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In 2013, a study by the University of Cape Town found that more than one-third of women in South Africa bleach their skin because they want to have ‘white skin.’ Nigerians are the biggest users of bleaching agents, with 77% of women using the products on a regular basis. Skin bleaching has been linked to skin and blood cancers as well as an increase in burns, and skin damage.

About 7.8 million women and 1.9 million men use tanning beds. Although the numbers have been decreasing overall, there is a 177% increase in tanning among men between ages 40 to 49 and a 71% increase in usage among men 50 and up. Indoor tanning increases the risk of melanoma up to 75%.

**“You have pretty eyes. They look almost like amber.”**

Nearly half of all Asians have an epicanthal fold, a skin fold of the upper eyelid that covers the inner corner of their eyes. East Asian Blepharoplasty, or eyelid surgery, reshapes the skin around the eye with incisions and sutures to create a defined crease on the upper lid, or a ‘double-lid’ common in Western people. This cosmetic surgery is one of the most popular Asian cosmetic surgeries in America and the most common surgery in Korea.

**“Do you just not use mascara?”**

**“So are you just getting fat or what?”**

**“I’m sure you two would make a good match;  
he likes personality more than looks.”**

**“You just need to eat healthier.”**

**“You used to have such a cute little dip in your sides...”**

**“Your hair looks so stupid did you cut it with a fucking razor  
or something?”**

**“You just need to lose a few pounds.”**

**“You have more of a coke figure.”**

**“You should wear nail polish more, you’d look nicer.”**

I look into the mirror. Tweezers in one hand. My face inches from the mirror. Below me are is an assortment of makeup; foundation, cover-up, blush, eye shadow, several different sized brushes. My straightener slowly heating up to my left along with several acne washes and a washcloth set off to the side. My phone buzzes and I look down from my daily routine to read it.

**“Good morning beautiful.”**

# SEASONS OF THE DAY

PATRICK McSHERRY

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In the world of an eight-year-old boy  
in East Texas  
in Burlington, population eight  
seasons are marked by time of day not year.

Ben Fox is repairing a tractor in his shop  
a rusted weathered farm implement  
that stands on the dirt floor soaked in sweat and motor oil  
that stands under the tin roof soaked in morning sun  
that stands surrounded by wooden beams and shiplap.  
In the morning season,  
beside my grandmother's home.

Rubin Fox works in his store tending the coke box  
a vat of frigid water holding cola bottles  
that stands on the oak floor painted with tobacco juice  
that stands in the noon-time air smelling of bubble gum and kerosene  
that stands in view of the towering gas-pumps filled with ethyl.  
In the heat of the day,  
beside my grandmother's home.

Mondo and Chico are playing in the yard  
two brown sons of migrant farm workers  
they shape play-things with clever hands rough as brown cinder blocks  
they speak a language that I don't understand  
they seek out fireflies to hold in a clear glass jar.  
As we play in the last hours of daylight,  
beside my Grandmother's house.

Aunt Mo smiles as she looks out from her porch  
an angel with large arms that remind me of wings  
arms that hold everything with care

*(Continued)*

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SEASONS OF THE DAY

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Arms that can dispatch a chicken for our dinner  
Arms that protect and guide an eight-year-old boy.  
In the evening moonlight,  
beside my Grandmother's house.

In East Texas, in Burlington, population eight.

# I WANT A COUNTRY

NATALIE FRANCE

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I do not want a country  
where residing in prison  
is more permanent than a home,

nor a country  
where minorities are easier to hose down  
than wildfires

I do not want a country  
where bodies are as disposable  
as plastic bottles, piling up  
in urban streets

I do not want a country  
where getting richer  
is the only means  
of getting ahead

I do not want a country  
where shortcuts are taken  
for big corporations,  
leaving destitute lives forsaken.

I want a new country  
where we won't have to be reminded  
that *anyone's* lives matter.

I want a new country  
where headlines of black names  
are for the Nobel Peace Prize,  
not about the irreversible death toll rise.

# STARS

STEVEN GONTARZ

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## Symptoms of mania: Mind racing

I just peed in a cup and set it on the kitchen counter. I drank some because it's a waste of nutrients and I need to put them back in my body. I've been up all night and I still have half of the Apple mouse stuck in my boot. I know I have to find the Starbucks rewards code but I'm not sure what I'm suppose to do with it yet. Maybe send it to Big Perm? He's the one I first told that I was trying to get into the CIA. Maybe he's the link? My thoughts are like shooting stars, each one more brilliant than the last.

As a teenager I was constantly searching for myself. I dyed my hair bright colors, pierced every body part I could, got tattooed, and even cut myself. The world around me was strange; an alien landscape that I tried to fit into. The stars and satellites would fall above me burning bright as they raced across the night sky. The Milky Way spread across the dark of night like a river of fireflies. Who am I?

## Increased energy

I was up all night transforming my body into a machine. The nanotech was in my blood so it was only a matter of time. I got an email from my wife's aunt, maybe she knew about the murder in California? Somebody tried to log into my Yahoo account from a government building in San Diego and somebody else tried to log in from the Netherlands. I took my computer to the genius bar to make sure I wasn't being hacked. Maybe they were trying to contact me?

Moby sings, "people they come together, people they fall apart, no one can stop us now, 'cause we are all made of stars." His lyrics take me away to another time. When I was younger my dad taught me how

## STARS

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to look up at the night sky and wonder. My mom taught me how to follow those stars. I knew when I looked at the infinite galaxy above me that we were all connected. I believed growing up that we all had our own star to guide us through this otherwise confusing and perplexing world. Who are we?

### Reckless/dangerous behavior

I put my hand in the TV box and grabbed the Styrofoam. The box moved and suddenly the 3D printing began. I was out of my mind. I was going to be the best soldier ever. Part man and part machine. I followed the rabbit trail of emails and secret messages and there I was. I ate some Styrofoam. I even stuck my penis in the box covered with ranch sauce. Every part of me would be transformed into a better version of my previous self.

The divine intricacies swirling overhead lead us to a deeper meaning. Andromeda and Orion share the vast sea of vibrant nebulas painted across an infinite galaxy of wonder. I find myself somewhere between Dioscuri and Karkinos, floating around 90° to 120° celestial latitude. The surrounding nocturnal landscape is rich with clusters once fused together with gravity and gases that will now be exhausted into a burst of crimson.

### Intense sense of well-being

I have to get in to see my doctor so he can give me the medical clearance I need to get in the agency. I already packed my bag with running shoes, rock climbing shoes, swim shorts, and goggles. I was prepared for any test they might give me. I was almost positive I would be leaving that night; I just needed my damn medical clearance. I got off one exit short and had to park in some random neighborhood. I ran through the park with my bag on trying to get to the hospital. I felt amazing, like a brand new pair of jeans; fit and ready for anything.

The Zodiac is divided by the speed of the sun weaving through 12 sets of identity individually pulling on the strings of humanity. I search for my path in the constellations like an ancient Native American ceremony. The medicine man has brought me this far; it's up to me

to find the pattern among the heavens that will lead me to greatness, the ones that will reveal the best version of myself yet.

Sense of serendipity (everything's connected)

I finally got to my appointment a half hour late. They told me to come back at a later date. Damn, no clearance I guess I'm going to have to figure something else out. I pulled out both of my phones, my droid in the pelican case that was in "safe mode" received the secret messages and an old iPhone 3G was off the grid so I could take photos with it. On my way back through the park I found a black cane they left for me. The bottom of it could be pulled out and was connected with a rope to the rest of the cane.

I sat there in good company as we all anxiously awaited the big fight. Family had invited us to a house party in order to watch the championship bout. The stars were all out to see Pacquiao take on Mayweather. I had been out of the hospital for about two weeks and was initially a little anxious about the get-together. It had been almost month since my episode and I was officially diagnosed with bipolar disorder. My meds had me balanced out but it felt like I was moving in slow motion thanks to the Olanzapine. In a way I was relieved that the CIA wasn't recruiting me and that it was all in my head. I hadn't been keeping up with my horoscope but I continued to look up at the stars whenever I could. I was finally starting to feel like I knew who I was again. We make small talk about the fight and Pacquiao's training then the old man says, "You know he drinks his own urine?"

# THE MIGHTY NARWHAL AND THE HORN OF MISFORTUNE

## KYLE TURNER

---

standing in the dead memories  
of battles lost and truths fallen into falsehoods,  
we embrace the grotesque  
and vanish into the comfort of carnal desires.  
in the carnival shit show we call life  
no one can save you from self.  
so breathe lightly in the absence of others –  
you're only making things worse.

face to face with the fallacy of our own,  
we grow in infinite spirals –  
we branch out into uncharted skies –  
we sink our roots into the brutal soils  
which bind us to the ugly, under evolved  
perceptions of others. leaches. poisoned beaches.  
and a particularly pretentious position of self-righteousness  
– we sink our teeth into the fleeting minutes

and we take the time to smile  
at the golden assholes of tomorrowland.  
this is an anthem for the self-proclaimed –  
for the undefined. this is an expansion of the mind  
and it's time for us sever our ties with sanity.

# I WANT TO ASK MY FATHER

## CHISI AMANDA XIONG

---

In the Laos jungle,  
down the hill,  
on the elephant trail  
was the last time he saw him, his father.  
How old was that boy?  
Who looked back one last time,  
was the question I wanted to know.

A new world, with strange weather,  
where delicate ice shavings fell like petals  
and grounds that sizzled your feet, as if they were as delicate as eggs.  
Did you think the world was changing?  
Seeing the weather so strange

A new place, to call home  
but it's not home, only a place,  
to live for another day and live a different way,  
so how can this place be called home?  
Because war time had separated families

How did you brush it off?  
The laughter, not with you  
but at you.  
Pointed fingers  
at your long hair and repeated pants,  
with no socks to wear.

No helping hand extended, because  
yellow skin and hidden lids, because  
English was not your first language;

## I WANT TO ASK MY FATHER

---

but being thought as “stupid”  
didn’t sit right with you.

As you sit in your room  
no mattress, no pillow  
no mother, no father  
was your spirit beaten down?  
Had it left you behind, to endure the pain alone?

The hidden tears, that never dripped,  
a painted smile, or a mask,  
can’t hide the droopy eyes  
but you kept going because?

He looked up and said, to me  
I looked back one last time  
and ran down the elephant trail  
to my father,  
no hug, but I said ‘I love you’ to him,  
for I knew it was the last time  
I’d see his face.  
He told me to go  
before I was too far behind the others,  
and to come back to look for them, if I survived  
and that’s how your grandmother  
and my brothers got here,  
because I survived.

# EXTINGUISHED

VIRGINIA SOILEAU

---

Fire choked the sky, making the evening air too thick to breathe.  
The mix of smoke and twilight gave the mountain a bruised quality.

Evening deepened and the setting sun lent its brilliance to the rising flames  
as the beat of a helicopter paralleled the pulse in my veins.

Long fingers of steam reached for the intruder,  
wanting to pull it down to Earth to further fuel its hunger.

The flames bellowed, demanding the earth yield its sacrifice.  
Through the sky, a murder of crows denied Fury's call,

and I wondered if their voices sounded a warning siren,  
or if they were screaming their defiance.

Stalking behind, Inferno followed me home.  
Smoke crept into my room, stroking my hair while I slept.

Dreams, flaring like scattered kindling, jumped and skipped,  
igniting in me every emotion I had let wither and dry.

Outside, darkness camouflaged the haze, hiding it from sight.  
In its thirst, it consumed the stars, stealing away with their energy.

Only in their absence could I see Rage as it engulfed all life.  
Even the crows lost their breaths—silenced.

I watched it in its gluttony, searing its name on the earth,  
until, with nothing left to yearn for, it devoured its own essence.

# SWIMMING IN A FISH BOWL

## CHRISTOPHER WU

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**I**t was a Tuesday morning when I got a call from Ava asking if I would like to come over for dinner that night. It had been several months since my friend was committed to the psychiatric ward and I hadn't talked to her in that time. I wasn't around when it happened, but I heard from other friends that she had been committed to the hospital by her boyfriend for suicidal depression and mood swings. I had known her since high school and I knew that she suffered from depression, but this was something else entirely.

At five o'clock I locked up my tool box, tried my best to scrub the grease out of my fingernails, and clocked out. It was a thirty-minute drive to her place from the shop. I spent that time thinking about different scenarios, and different topics to avoid. I wondered if she would be in a fit of rage or as depressed as a French movie. As I pulled into the driveway I saw her silhouetted in the kitchen window. She turned and looked out and went quickly to the window and shut the blinds. When I knocked on the door it took her several minutes to answer. When she finally opened the door I was struck by the awkwardness of not knowing quite what to say.

"Hey Ava! Long time no see!" was what I finally said.

"Hi Josh, no kidding," she said, smiling awkwardly.

She invited me in and I took off my greasy work boots by the door before walking into the kitchen. She told me that she hadn't started cooking yet since she wasn't sure when I would get there. I looked around her small house. It had an air of being occupied by someone consumed with lethargy. On the couch there were several blankets that resembled a freshly opened cocoon. In the sink there were dirty dishes, and crumbs had seemingly been scattered on all the counters. I could see empty glasses scattered around. They reminded me of way points marking her movements through the house.

"What's new with you?" she asked.

## SWIMMING IN A FISH BOWL

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"Not much. I've just been busy with work. Things have picked up lately so I've managed to get a fair bit of overtime this month."

She shuffled to the fridge to pull out dinner. I knew that her boyfriend, Jim, had left her recently. I guessed that he was either unwilling, or unable, to deal with Ava's mental illness. I wasn't sure how much I should, or shouldn't ask. Yet, we had known each other for a long time, even dated for a while. In that time we had always been very open and honest with each other, which is one reason I felt Ava to be one of my closest friends.

"How have you been?" I asked, hoping this vague question would help guide our conversation in a safe direction.

"I'm doing better. I'm glad to not be in the hospital anymore. That place felt like a prison. The food was terrible and for long parts of the day they keep you locked in your room alone. The atmosphere in there felt so barren and cold. It was fucking miserable," she said, trailing off quietly as she rinsed asparagus in the sink.

I tried to imagine the scene that she described. It seemed contrary to what one might expect in a facility meant to help people. I had never seen the inside of a mental hospital and so my only basis for what it might be like came from what I had seen in movies. I thought about *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and decided that maybe her description of the place wasn't that skewed after all.

I watched as she moved slowly around the kitchen to gather the things she would need. There was something of the specter in the paleness of her skin and roundness of her wide staring eyes. I couldn't guess the last time she had been out in the sun. I felt an uneasiness just sitting there watching her since all her movements seemed to be slowed down as if she were under water.

"I'm glad to hear that you're doing better. Would you like some help with dinner?"

"Sure, could you take care of the pasta and asparagus? And I'll do the salmon."

It was a very simple dinner to prepare. I watched the asparagus steam and the pasta boil. Ava worked on baking the salmon.

"Do you remember Ms. Hoffman, the dance instructor from school? She came in the shop a few weeks ago?"

Ava's face brightened at the mention of her old instructor.

"Yeah, I remember Ms. Hoffman. She was my favorite. If it

wasn't for her I never would have made it as far as I did in ballet. How was she when you saw her?"

"She was really good. She's still full of energy. I guess she retired last year though."

"I'm sure everyone at the school misses her. She really was wonderful."

"Do you ever think about getting back into dancing?" I asked.  
"You really were great, you know."

"Sometimes I miss it. But it takes a lot of work and I've been out of it for so long now that I doubt I could get back to where I once was."

"I suppose. But I still think you should get back into it, just as a hobby if nothing else."

When dinner had been served we sat at her cluttered table to eat. I noticed the amber prescription bottles lined up on the corner opposite me. In the interval there was a mass of opened and unopened mail, pens, pencils, an empty napkin holder, and a few other oddities strewn about.

"Do you remember the conversations we used to have, Josh?"

"Which ones are you referring to? We've had lots of conversations."

"The really deep ones, the ones we used to have when we were in high school and were trying to decide what to do with our lives. The ones we had when our paths in life felt infinitely wide."

"Yes, of course I remember."

"I've been thinking about them a lot lately. We used to talk about how we wanted our lives to mean something and I've been feeling like mine is..." Ava trailed off without finishing her thought. "Are you happy with where you are in life?"

"Yes, I suppose I am, for the most part."

I stared at my hands, at the black grease embedded in the edges of my finger nails, at the scars from years of busted knuckles. I was about half way through my plate. Ava had hardly touched hers.

"May I ask why you have been thinking about those talks we used to have?"

"I've just felt... so empty lately. I mean, I haven't been able to work in months and being supported by my parents again just makes me feel like a leech. Also, everything in life just seems so dull and mut-

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## SWIMMING IN A FISH BOWL

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ed. I think it might be the mood stabilizers that I've been put on. They keep me from having manic episodes, but ever since I've been taking them it seems like I don't feel emotions anymore."

"Have you talked to anyone about this, your doctor or psychologist? That really doesn't seem right."

"Yeah, I've talked to them about it. They told me that it is a normal side effect, but that it should lessen as I adjust to being on them. You know, they told me I would have to be on them for the rest of my life. The thought of having to take all those pills everyday for the rest of my life sickens me. I haven't told anyone else this, but I've been thinking about killing myself?"

I felt frozen as I absorbed the gravity of what she had just said. I realized that my mouth was still open in anticipation of food. I quickly closed it and set my fork down gently on the plate. I looked over at her and saw that she had her head bent down staring into her lap. Both of her hands were beneath the table fidgeting with the edge of the table cloth. I had no idea what to say. I was afraid of saying or doing anything for fear of it being the wrong thing. I felt as though I stood at the edge of a precipice in complete darkness. Yet I had to move. I wanted to help my friend.

"Do you have a plan, Ava?" I asked, trying to gauge how close to the action she might be.

"No. Not really."

I wasn't wholly convinced by this statement, but I didn't feel as though I should pursue the issue.

"I'm sorry Josh. I know you probably don't know what to say. You don't have to say anything. I don't know. I just feel that I will never be able to lead the kind of life that I want. To live the rest of my life on these meds, alone, with no emotions or interests, just seems pointless."

I tried to think about what I would do in her shoes. Her conclusions on life didn't seem terribly irrational to me after all. What would it mean to live as an automaton? What sense of purpose or meaning could be derived from life when it has been reduced to nothing more than a biological process? Still, suicide, for some obscure reason, seemed like an unacceptable answer. I knew I had to say something, but wondered what I could say that she hadn't already heard. She had been to the hospital before for suicidal thoughts, and she had been going to counseling for years. A feeling of helplessness began to

well up inside of me.

“I don’t think things will be like this forever, Ava. I mean life is all about change and nobody knows what lies ahead.”

“That’s what my mom keeps telling me. She just keeps telling me that despite how dark or overwhelming things might feel now they won’t last forever. At this point, though, I feel like I will be coping for the rest of my life and not really living.”

I tried to dig for some kind of philosophical grounding to give a foot hold against the dark abyss that seemed to be forming in her thoughts.

“Do you remember the story of Siddhartha that we read in school? Do you remember how he went on his quest for enlightenment, first joining the ascetics and trying to reach enlightenment by trying to kill his ego, then deciding to embrace the material world until he became consumed by lust, greed, sloth, wrath, gluttony, and many other ills of this world until he wanted to kill himself?”

“Yes, I remember the story. Why?”

“Well, he finally found his enlightenment by the river when he realized that everything in life is one and everything changes, just as the river is at once at its source and at its delta and forever flowing. So the reason I bring it up is that I wonder if there isn’t much more to life than our emotions, or our jobs, or even our companions.”

“Yes, perhaps. Like what though?”

I was caught off guard by this. The question was simple enough, yet I struggled for an answer. I looked at her plate and saw that the pasta had begun to dry up around the edges.

“I wish I could answer that question, Ava, but the truth is I think that everyone has to create their own meaning. I don’t think anyone can answer that question for anyone else. I know, for me at least, learning new things gives my life a sense of meaning. I harbor the idea that on some level, life is all about learning what life is all about. I guess that’s why I read so much.”

“Yeah, I like reading too, but lately I can’t seem to commit my mind to it.”

After I had said it, the thought struck me that reading was an awful thin thread to hang the meaning of one’s life on. I thought about what it meant to be a mechanic. The thought of fixing people’s cars and giving them a means of mobility seemed to have a fair bit of signif-

## SWIMMING IN A FISH BOWL

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icance to it. Yet, when I thought about all of the pollution, the wars over oil, the debate over global warming, I wondered if it was really such a great thing.

A silence fell between us. It didn't seem as though Ava was going to have anymore of her food, and it seemed inappropriate for me to continue eating.

"Would you like me to start a fire?" I asked.

"Yes. That would be great, thank you."

Ava got up and moved to the couch, pushing the blankets into a corner. While I found Tupperware and put her food in it for her to have later, Ava sat in the semi-darkness of the living room, her slender hands folded in her lap. She seemed to be looking at nothing at all, yet her head was directed toward the empty fireplace. I doubted if anything I had said had reached her. I felt my chest tighten with anxiety as I wondered what I should do.

"Would you like me to take you to the hospital?"

"No. No, I'm never going back there if I can help it." Ava said flatly, and continued to stare into the fireplace.

I didn't feel like it would be right to leave her alone, yet when it came time for her to ask me to leave I couldn't very well say otherwise. It seemed to me that, short of strapping someone to a bed or locking them in a padded cell, it really was quite impossible to control someone. I didn't want to see either of those things happen to my friend anyway, so I figured the best thing I could do was to simply spend time with her.

I went over to the fireplace and started tearing up the cardboard boxes that had been stashed in another larger cardboard box for kindling. Before long a healthy fire was crackling above the hearth. I sat on the far end of the couch away from Ava. I watched as the dancing light of the flames played across her emaciated face. The emptiness that had haunted her grey eyes seemed to lift in the glow of the fire.

We sat there watching the fire dance. It seemed to take on a life of its own the longer we watched it. It would grow merry and become subdued as logs were added and logs were burned. I thought about how when we left it for the night it would be reduced to ashes, its life and warmth lost to the universe. That fire that had danced for us that night would burn only once. That was the last time I saw my friend.

# FOR MY LATINOS

## DIANA ALGOMEDA

---

For my people dreaming about the American Dream,  
Giving up their family, money, culture, food,  
friends, Spanish, music, and home, falling  
for the promises of a dream

For my people whose bravery is unstoppable  
they take their skills and virtues as their only luggage  
La Bestia, the border, danger, fear, confusion,  
running, walking, hiding, broken bodies,  
Never knowing, never understanding,

For my people blamed of taking jobs  
missing their families trying to survive,  
by digging, planting, picking, cutting, packing,  
Cleaning, washing, scrubbing, cooking, babysitting  
Never gaining, never understanding,

For my people, their struggle is real  
Living in the shadows suffering demeaning names  
Beaner, fence-hopper, landscaper, handyman,  
Wetback, fruit-picker, illegal alien,

For my people, victims of a dream  
Hondurans, Salvadorans, Mexicans,  
Gone for years and the dream not yet achieved  
Bleeding hands, scraped knees, painful backs  
Why do we fall for the American dream?

*(Continued)*

## FOR MY LATINOS

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For my people seeking their strong voices, gone,  
My people, who have much to offer if given a chance  
My hard working people, not criminals,  
For my people with dark skin, dark hair, dark souls  
Because the American dream has filled them with smoke.

Let my people work. Let their beauty be shown.  
Let the music be heard. Let their bodies heal.  
Let my people escape the fear of deportation.

# TRUTH SEEKING MISSILES

KYLE TURNER

---

darker days of a different weight  
have torn their way back out  
from beneath the pebble of despair  
– deep within the ocean of the mind.  
the poet's hand reaches for blue skies  
but grabs nothing but time – the body  
fades into violent hues of salty tides,  
and in the waking hours of evil, the pile  
of bones at the bottom bubbles  
in a crystalline iridescence.  
it bursts forth in beautiful chaos –  
with reckless abandonment;  
for if time  
has become the body then the poet  
is universal and these words transcend  
the abstract notion of today.

and if time  
has become the body, then the limitations  
of an evolved consciousness must surpass  
the internalized heartbeats of dead fathers.

and if time  
has become the body, and every atom  
of carbon echoes in the laughter of lost  
memories – i'll be waiting in the jungle's  
womb with the blood of an unborn revolution  
stolen from the coral reefs.

# IT DOESN'T RAIN IN AFGHANISTAN

STEVEN GONTARZ

---

The meek, grey sky hung overhead peering through the plate-glass windows. Suddenly, a whoosh, I heard the beginning pitter-patter of rainfall. In an instant this light tapping was followed by what sounded like sheets of rain being beaten down by intermittent gusts of wind. The pitter-patter turned into a snare drum of rainfall as I sat there trying to read.

I was in the Seattle Room on the tenth story of the downtown Central Library. I couldn't help but think of Arizona where I grew up as I read a collection of Native American tales for my Native American Literature class. Arizona rain had a much different heartbeat than the Seattle rain I had now become accustomed to. I wondered if the Hopi still performed rain dances.

You see, in Arizona we would get monsoons, storms that started with a vicious bout of thunder and wind and lightning as if it was a statement from the gods. After the torrential downpour of a monsoon they always ended with a slow, steady day or two of light rain. I thought of this extended shower as a time of cleansing. As if the gods had made their statement with the initial impact of the storm and decided that now it's time to reflect.

I couldn't help but think as I sat there with the rain still dropping above me. The stories I read spoke of tricks being played by the sneaky Raven or some other mythical creature. In almost every story there was mention of death or some question of existence. I kept thinking about death and what it means to truly be alive.

Her name was Jennifer Moreno. I had the pleasure of serving with her in Afghanistan. She was a member of a special operations unit called CST, short for Cultural Sensitivity Team. Brave women were paired up with Ranger units in order to help manage the women and children as we encountered them on our mission. It wasn't proper for the men to handle them so the CST played a vital role in our

operations. Jennifer was a commissioned officer at the rank of first lieutenant who volunteered to work with the CST. She decided to join the CST after working as a nurse at the Madigan Medical Facility on Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

I was the Radio Telephone Operator or more like the Satellite Communications Operator. RTO is one of those old Army names for a job that hasn't changed since World War I. My job was to maintain a satellite link with the main base when we were out on target. I was the link between our platoon leader and higher command. Communications were flawless for the most part thanks to the constant clear skies in the Middle East. We never saw the cloud cover we had become accustomed to back home in Washington that would wreak havoc on comms during training. So our unit of command and control consisted of myself, the platoon leader, and other special teams members, including Jennifer. I didn't know her as well as say the other RTOs I hung out with, but we were acquainted and developed a friendship over the course of our deployment.

We raided multiple compounds in and around Kandahar that deployment. Although we had multiple resources to help ensure mission success and our safety there was always that looming threat of improvised explosive devices. You never knew when you might run into a trap set with IEDs. There was always this dark cloud hanging overhead no matter how many times we had been out on a mission. The enemy seemed to always be one close step behind with learning our methods and then using them against us. I would say more about these methods but that's classified information. The point is these bastards are smart and they know how and when to hit us where it hurts.

My back was getting stiff as I continued reading, two hours or more had gone by. The rain continued to fall from the ash colored sky as it scattered among the glass. The Hopi believed that a very long time ago there was a hole in the earth. Out of this hole came mankind and a mockingbird that would give man his name and language. I couldn't help but think we live our whole lives only to end up buried in the ground and yet the Hopi believed this is where all life started. Is this another way of saying we are all reincarnated?

I remember one night myself; Jennifer and five others were crammed in the back of a Stryker getting ready to head out on another mission. Jennifer was always cheerful and in good spirits. We

often made small talk between the platoon leader and us. This was our attempt at lightening the mood just enough after the stress and running around that came from preparation. I often saw Jennifer in the gym, kicking ass. The CST was tough and there was no doubt they had earned their place with us. Jennifer Moreno wasn't just another gear in the machine, she was an operator. She was one of us.

It hadn't been but a couple weeks since we got back home. I was over at my buddy Caleb's house helping him install his fence. There was a light drizzle that day. A typical Seattle grey-sky afternoon.

"Did you hear what happened?" Caleb asked.  
"No, what are you talking about?" I replied.

It was then that I got the news. You see the CST team was on a longer rotation than we were. So even though we all got to come home late that August the CST team would remain in country for another couple months.

"There was an attack. A whole compound full of IEDs." He told me.

Turns out it all started with the call out. That's the part where we ask everyone to come out of the compound. An early attempt at a smooth raid. There were two women with suicide vests the reports said. After they both clacked off there was another blast setting off a deadly chain reaction. Other IEDs in the area started going off as Rangers responded to the initial wounded; a total of 12 would blow that night. It wasn't until the fifth one went off that she would be washed away from this life. Three others would die that night in what turned out to be a literal living hell.

The constant whisper had slowed above me and the marble sky was there as if to mock me now. It doesn't rain in Afghanistan. There's no cleansing for the horrors of war. I hadn't thought about how to deal with the death of Jennifer since Caleb gave me the news that cold, rainy day. I had some nights where I broke down into tears at the thought of this 25 year-old on top of the world being suddenly ripped away from us. Not just her but other Rangers too. Suicide would claim two others while I was there, a staff sergeant and another young lieutenant. There's no telling what the next world holds in store for us.

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## IT DOESN'T RAIN IN AFGHANISTAN

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Maybe the Hopi knew as they danced and prayed for rain. Every storm is the beginning and the ending of something bigger and more powerful than us. There were times in Arizona that you couldn't even believe how much water fell so fast. Roads would shut down from flooding and there would always be coverage on the news of people getting their vehicles stuck. The forces of nature are always greater than us. The forces of life and death were greater than her.

# FRONT YARD: TACOMA

## NATHAN BARLOW

---

White picket fence, aging and covered  
in moss stands guard at the perimeter.  
Paint peels from slats of weatherworn wood  
like beads of sweat in the summer.

The gate hangs  
from his hinges, a sentinel too long at his post.  
Steps of grey concrete, covered  
in decaying leaves, reach  
up from the street-side walk.

Along either side terraced gardens of slumbering  
bushes share the leafy covering.  
At the top, a turn lined with waist  
high shrubs leafless in the winter wind.

The corner is a patio of moss covered bricks,  
a privacy fence decorated in a green  
patina of moss separates ours from theirs.  
Eight more steps, concrete, aged, weathered,  
stones showing through the surface, polished and  
bright before the door.

Outside the door, a tall green shrub, the only plant  
still holding its own oily leaves.  
Embedded within their ovoid, dark  
green are sparks of color.  
Pink petals fringe the yellow interior,  
a beautiful song of spring.

Outside the fence across a bustling  
city street whitewashed concrete walls obscure  
the view. Against its smooth sides grass grows  
green and glistening with dew.

Four crows, sleek, dark, and sinister, search  
through the trash left by a careless passerby.  
Their actions are us—  
We search for what makes us feel alive,  
Grey skies grow heavy with the threat  
of rain, but we don't care.  
Our home is here.

# MY FROZEN SUMMER

## VIRGINIA SOILEAU

---

I have learned to despise the very moment of waking.  
Not a second is wasted as I am reminded,  
with the barest flutter of an eyelid,  
how tentative my control has become.

The summer's breath could never unthaw my frozen skin.  
My nightmares are lined to dry in the sun warmed air—  
freshened each day to be draped over my shoulders  
like a winter shroud. Breezy and light, they settle.

Morning sunlight shines brightly through the open windows.  
Birds sing of girlhood dreams, ready to be caught in gentle hands,  
but my fingers have grown cold and weary,  
and my palms feel beaten and cracked like the old walls of my room.  
With the morning songbirds, my dreams have flown.

Little girl trapped, waking forever in this winter house of terrors—  
innocence beaten to a pulp of desolation  
while my will to stand, my will to walk and run, or play,  
has bent and submitted to a staggered crawl.  
My tears drift like molted feathers, lost in the sun.

# TWENTY-THREE AND A HALF HOURS AWAY

## KYLE TURNER

---

i'm keeping my distance  
because, it's the only way  
i can cope with the images carved  
into the flesh of these memories.  
i treat each day  
like, loss was an art form  
and these scars tell stories –  
still, i have no idea  
where to place this anger  
– like, why don't you  
fucking care about the consequences  
of knowing?  
truth is in the heartache  
of children unseen – not heard.  
the gears at the bottom  
have bigger teeth and coral  
is the color of the night.  
grow my little, silent soldiers –  
grow and grow and grow and grow  
and spit fire in the faces  
of them.

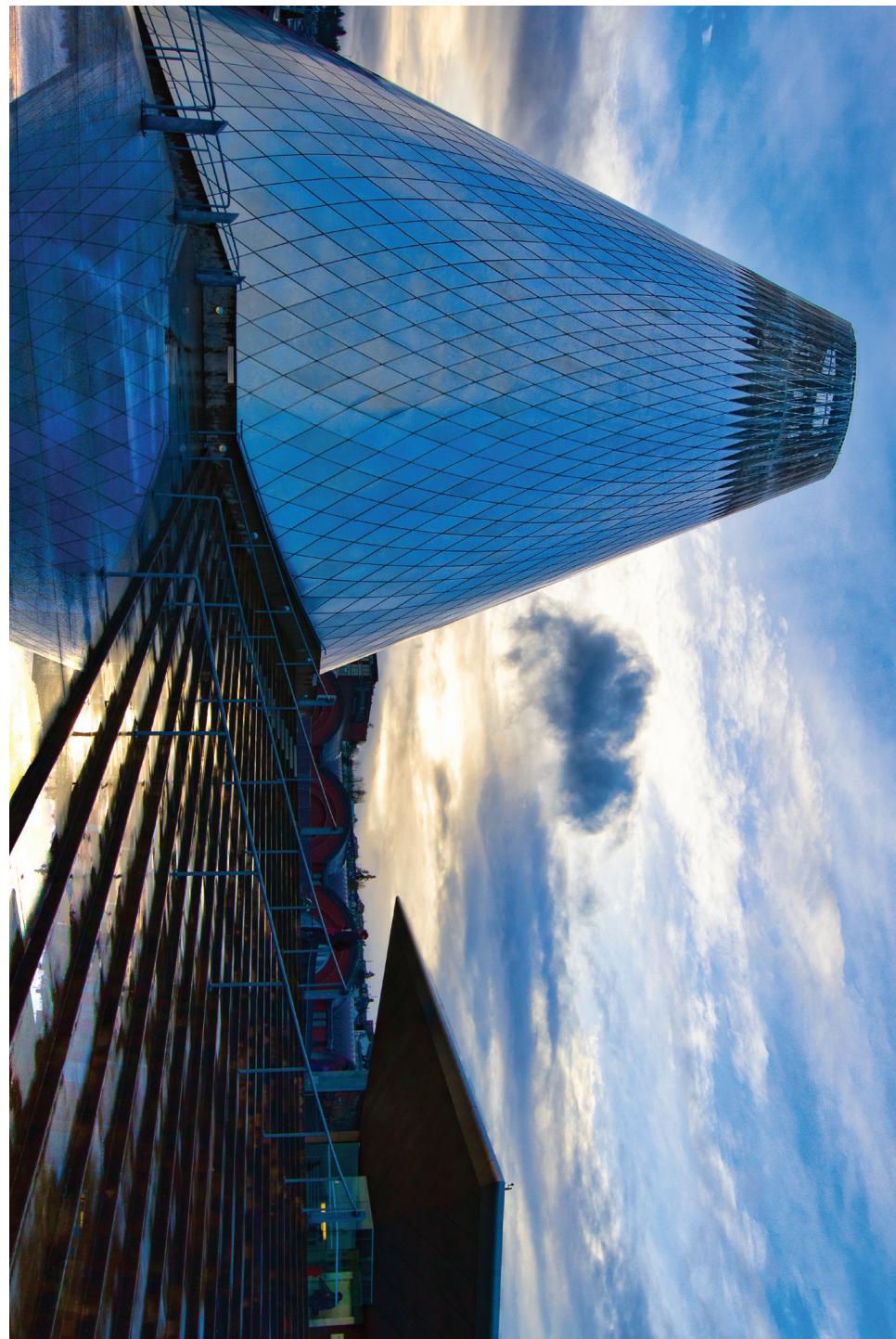


# VISUAL ARTS

# MUSEUM OF GLASS REFLECTION

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NATHAN BARLOW | *Photography*



## MONSTROUS TROPES OF FEMALE MONSTERS

DANIELLE McMAHON | *Photography*



# TACOMA

NATHAN BARLOW | *Photography*



# A NEW DAY

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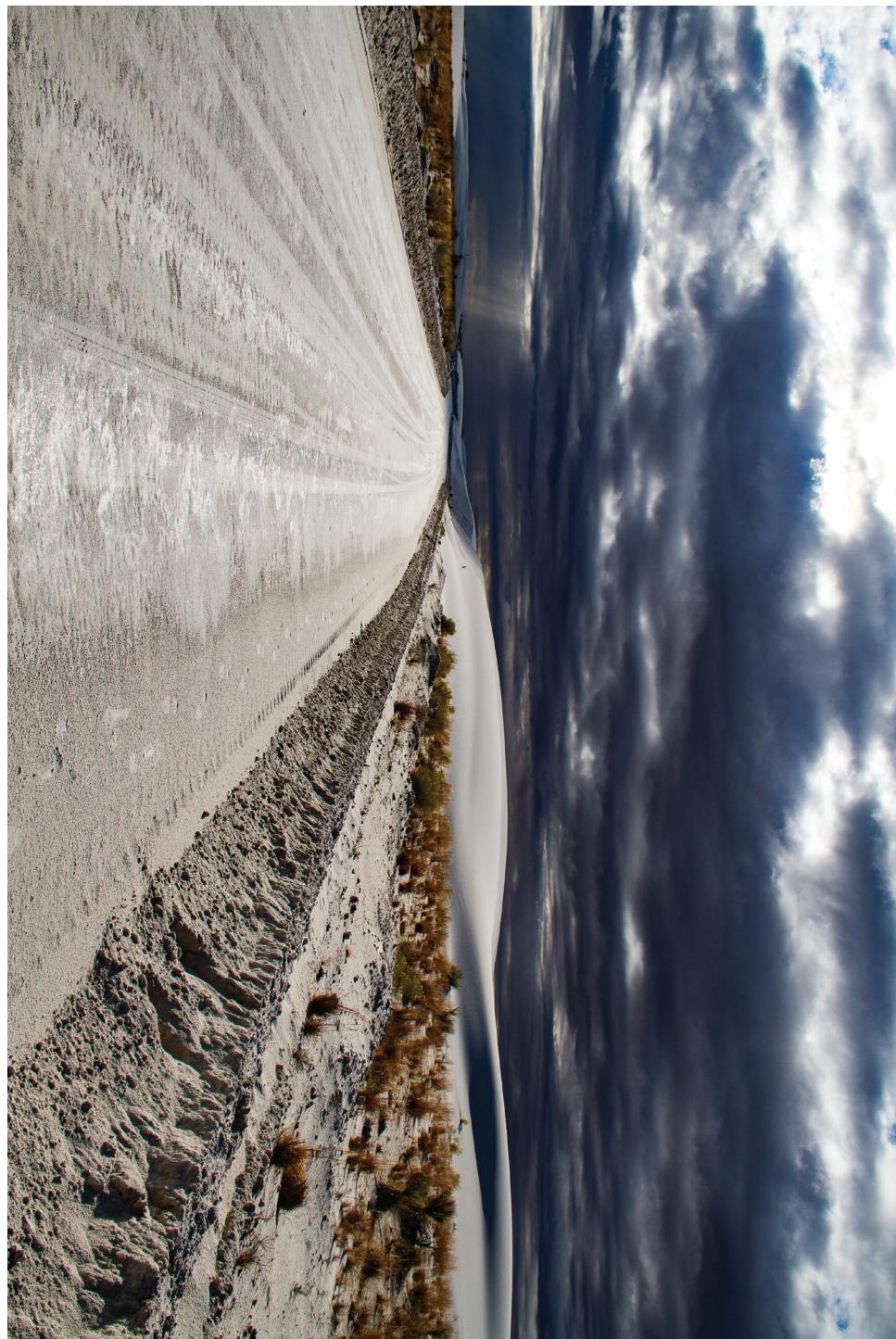
JENNY RYAN | Photography



# MOODY DUNES

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NATHAN BARLOW | *Photography*



## HUSKY ART COMPETITION

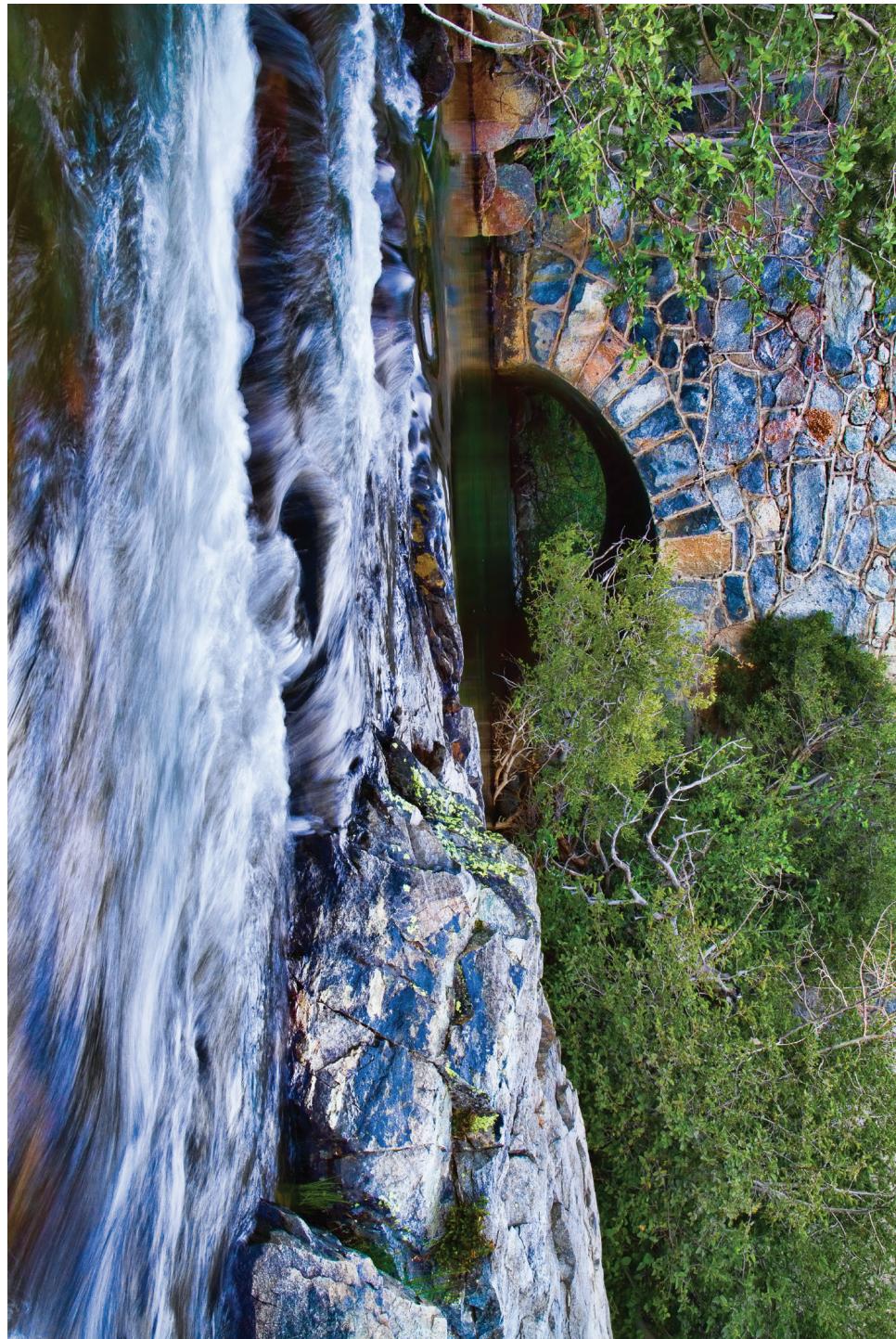
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JOSEPH BELL | Photography



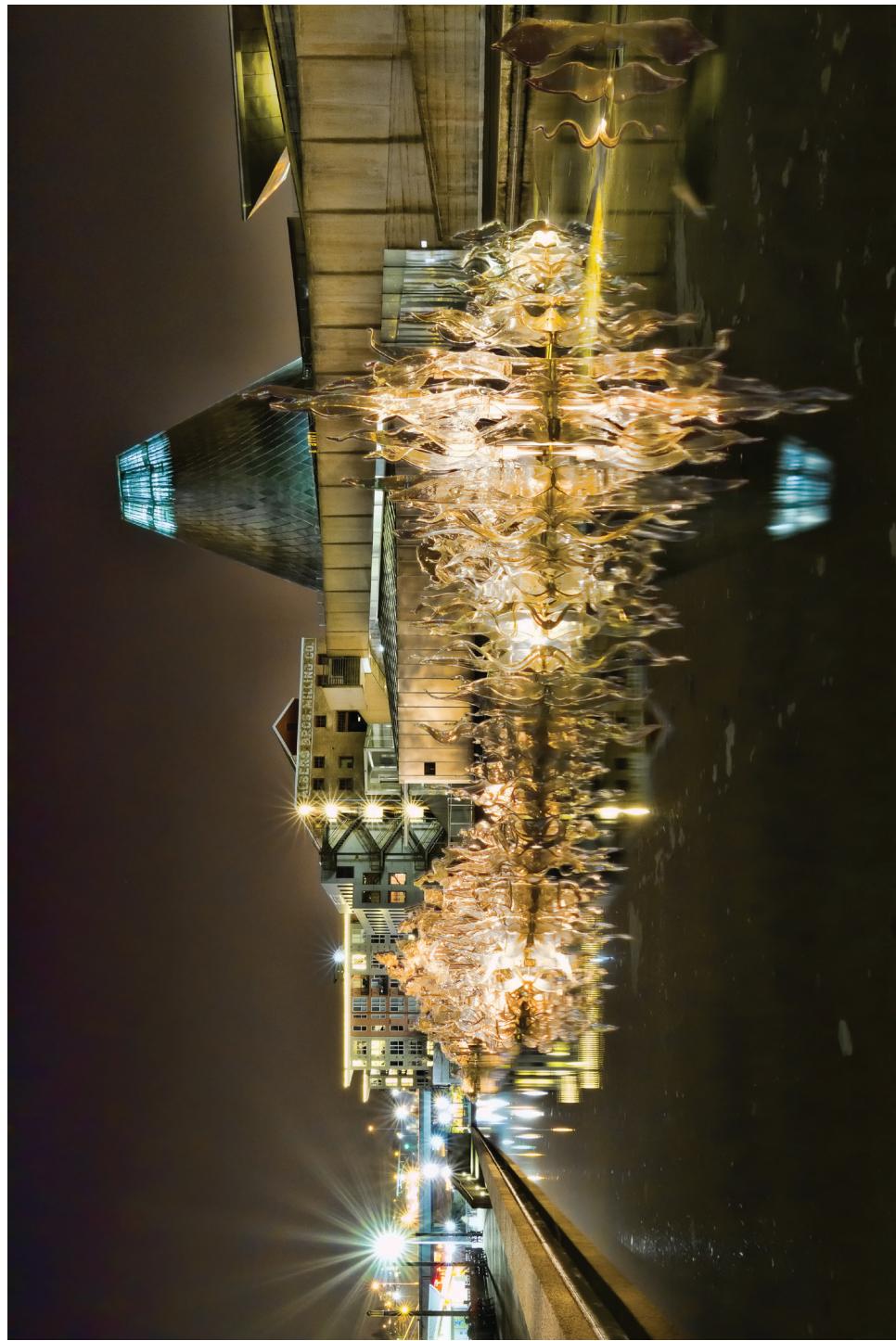
# SILKY RIVER

NATHAN BARLOW | *Photography*



# GLASS

NATHAN BARLOW | Photography



# YOU CAN'T HAVE MY OSCAR

CHELSEA BROWN | *Pencil Drawing*

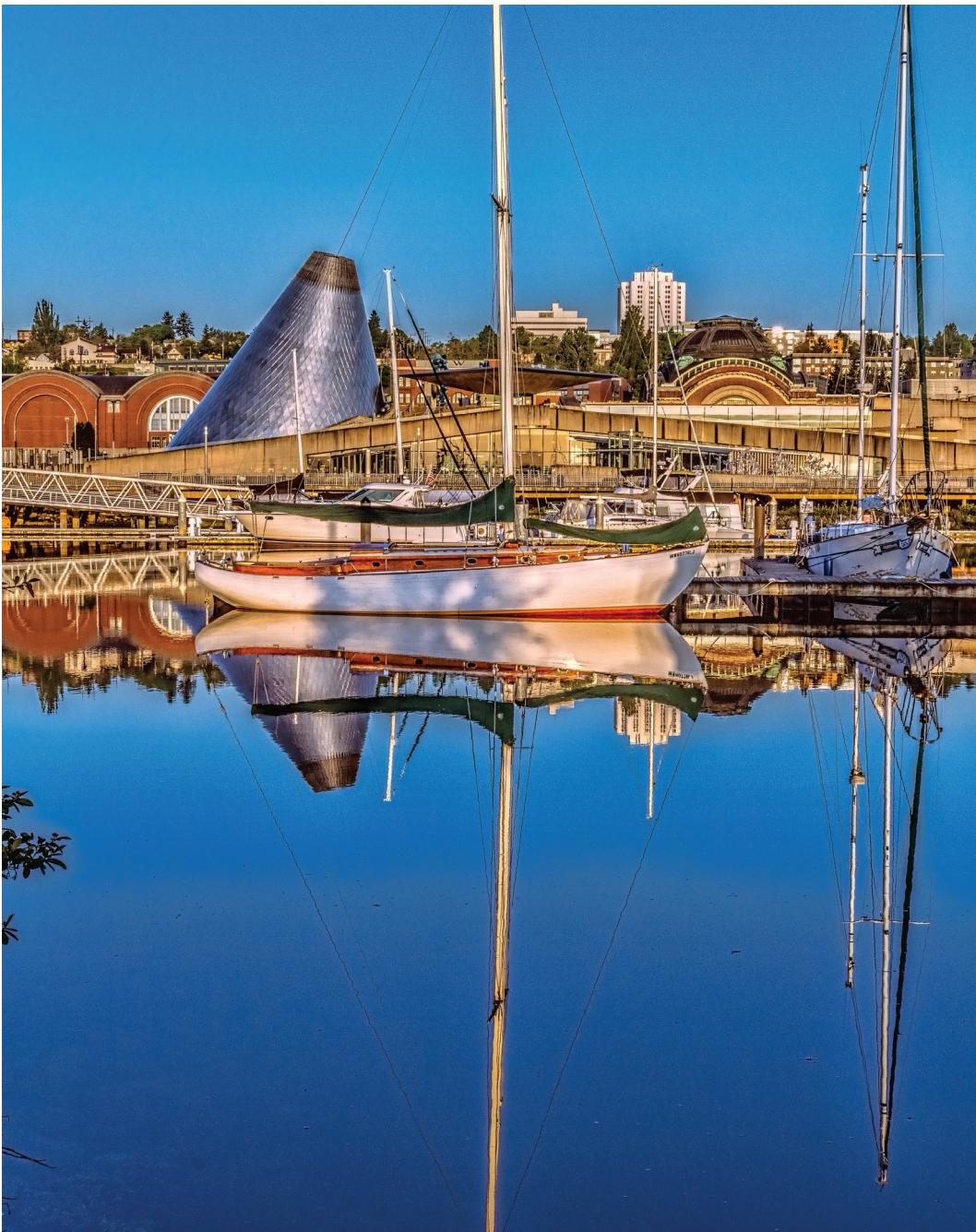
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# PEACEFUL REFLECTIONS

NATHAN BARLOW | *Photography*

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# A CLOCKWORK INDIGO

KYLE TURNER

---

under emerald eyes  
i, try harder  
each day – like, basalt  
reaching out from icy  
fissures – like, the mind  
is an island  
and these savage thoughts  
have purpose.

there's a complex web  
of jungle trails  
spun orbiting the moon  
exhaling youth  
in the name of sacrifice  
– like, gold wings  
chanting unspoken verses  
once scribed in quicksand.

i count backwards  
in the memory of lies – i  
connect constellations  
like lizard tails and slug  
slimed abstractions of a reality  
now forgotten.  
if the crumbling  
sidewalks could talk –  
would the image of god[s]  
remain the same.

# REINCARNATION

KIRSTEN BUTLER

---

Some say they believe in reincarnation  
Past lives, coming around again

Birth and rebirth, round and round  
Karmic swill in the Buddha's eternal trough,

I think I might believe it too, sometimes  
Sometimes if I sit quiet and still

I think I can remember - I was an old woman once.

I've seen her in my visions, this dowdy old thing  
Baggy clothes, worn sandals, mousey bun hair

Stooped over a small thin garden, dirty hands working  
Clawing at grass blades, sowing seeds, hard work, good work.

A child playing at her feet, a familiar toothy smile  
He laughs and kicks at wandering dirt bugs.

These past life mirages just fodder for fantasy yet  
I think can remember – I was this old woman once.

Yes, she is me and I am her, we are one and the same  
Long ago, ancient history. Once upon a time in 1991.

# FOREVER UNNOTICED

VIRGINIA SOILEAU

---

When shadows are unhinged from bodies,  
would their absence even be noticed?  
Weightless essences of self flit along a  
pebbled river bed, listening to the stones chime  
as they are cast in careless abandon—  
caught in the fingers of playful nymphs.

Would we remain oblivious as our shadows dance  
amongst the dandelions?—clinging to the downy tufts  
as they fly on the soft air of a child's wish,  
bouncing off the ebony fur of a humble bee.  
Coated in a splash of sunflower pollen,  
he hums his joy as he busily bumbles his way home.

Oh, how we miss them, as darkness steals them away.  
A capricious existence, doomed to vanish at the  
whim of a velvety cloud, braiding a path of gossamer  
lace across the face of the moon. Darkened—gone—  
drifting on the powdery backs of fireflies  
to play hide and seek behind our blinkered eyes.

# THE IMPRINT OF TRAUMA

COLLEEN RUSSELL-ANGLE

---

A fossil. A stone, imprinted for life. Buried under layers of mud and silt—preserved. The pressure of the sand and mud use their weight to embed an image, a memory...history. The mud becomes rock and sets for life. Even the brown sludge of the earth can leave its mark. We walk on dirt, we swish it with our feet, it flows through our finger tips; we don't always see what is beneath the surface. Underneath, lies an impression, a stamp, a mark, a scar, a fossil. Something left behind, a sign that "it" was there, whatever "it" was.

Like the plaques on my wall, *I ponder...* My children's hands preserved in plaster. It was years ago walking through the fairgrounds, that we spotted the vendor stand marked, *Impressions in Time*. I remember thinking what a good idea it would be to have my babies hands pressed in the plaster. To fossilize them forever. An artifact of my memories: their precious hands. They now hang in our hallway, a gallery of mementos—like the fossils in the earth.

I wish all imprints were good; welcomed, like the ones that hang on my wall. I wish we could choose which images embed; which ones leave their scar for life. Like the soil pressing, shaping, and preparing for a lasting stamp, trauma implants itself. It chooses.

It was the day of our trial. The first time I saw him since I left. I sat in the courtroom anticipating the moment that he would walk through the door. *What would it be like*, I wondered. *What would I feel*, I kept asking myself as I scanned the room nervously. I wondered if he would use his old tactics of control and manipulation with his piercing eyes; I wondered if my body would shake uncontrollably like it did when I told my story to my counselor, my attorney, and my support group. I feared that he would know the turmoil that was tearing me up inside and that it would give him the pleasure of control. I sat terrified and frozen in thought in the darkroom in shades of brown, like the colors of the marks he used to leave on my body—it reminded me.

My attorney summoned me to the front of the room where she sat at her table preparing for trial. I sat behind her in the pews where observers would soon be sitting, watching me struggle for composure as I spilled out every dirty detail for their gluttonous ears. I had to cross the barricade that divided the room of spectators from the attorneys, judge, and “us.” I had to open the gate and enter the space where it would all take place. I moved toward my attorney and sat in the chair next to her, making every attempt to avoid eye contact with the dark chair of oath that sat next to the judge’s throne—so commanding-ly awaiting my presence.

My attorney kept running through questions over and over like uninvited songs that repeat themselves in one’s head. I found it difficult to answer even the most basic requests for information. I could hear her talking, but could not hear what she was saying. Her mouth moved like a silent movie, while I sat still in my thoughts, trying so desperately to hear her. I could sense her frustration entwined with compassion. She slid her papers and files to the side. Her eyes locked mine; she told me to “breathe,” and that everything would “be alright.” She told me to take a walk outside and catch my breath. I knew I wanted to do this, but then my fears took over as I imagined running into him as he made his way to the court room.

I decided instead to take a seat on a bench outside of the room that was tucked away in the corner of an adjacent hall. It was dark and quiet, like the memories in my head. So imprinted and vivid, as if they were yesterday. The hair pulling, pushing, the time he whipped me with a rake and left a bruise so big on my leg that I could not hide it with my shorts—he cried when he saw it. He left lots of bruises including the ones in my spirit. I think they are embedded deeper than I thought; deeper than the fossils buried beneath the earth.

The biological process of wound repair, they’re called. They form when your body heals itself after an injury. Sometimes they are so deep, that they damage nerves and other tissue. Like a girl in my kindergarten class that had such a deep scar on her face, she did not smile the same way she used to; kind of like me. Her nerves were damaged. Scars usually fade over time, but they never really go away completely.<sup>2</sup>

I’ve been told that my nerves are damaged, or that I have “neurological abnormalities.” I have PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

it's called. Most people are familiar with the disorder and associate it with veterans. I "caught" it from my experience with domestic violence they say.<sup>3</sup>

I remember the weeks and months after I left him, I was scared beyond belief. I thought that leaving would make it over; that it would stop him from harming me, but he was still present in my mind. I couldn't sleep. I sat upright in my bed night after night. I guarded my home and surroundings like a soldier guarding his battlefield. Every sound caused a reaction—whether it was a dart to the window for a peek or my body freezing in fear. My nights became my new abuser. If I did fall asleep on accident, I would awake in a sweat from nightmares. I remember the worst one: I was begging for him not to do it as he kept ordering his accomplices to get the plastic wrap to wrap my body up so I could not breathe—all with his glib smile. The smirk I was so familiar with, as he muttered "I love you."

*That smile...What if I see it again as he walks in the courtroom,* I wondered. *Will it have the same effect on me?* The elevators lined the hallway outside the courtroom and around the corner where I sat. With every, ding and slide of the door, my body froze. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears as it used to at night when I would hear a sound, imagining it was him. Ding, the elevator sounded again, as I heard the laughter of two young women. It was not him—thank God. I stared at the trim around the ceilings and doorways, admiring how beautiful it was. I picture the soft hand of the artist that shaped it and pressed it in place. I imagined the brush swishing from side to side softly as he lay the paint on it, leaving his mark with the soft stroke of his hands. Like the hands that line my walls in my hallway, such a kind mark left behind. A "good imprint."

I think of the hands that would so often wrap my throat and the funny feeling they would leave afterward when I swallowed. Hands have so much power. They can shape and mold in so many crafty ways. I remembered the day I lay on the floor in my kitchen while he kicked my back and legs; he was infuriated that I questioned where he had been when he got home at midnight from his day job. He said I should have kept my "trap shut." I lay there on the floor holding my belly; protecting the baby inside from his blows. It was as if time stood still as I admired the baseboards in front of my eyes. Like I do now sitting here on the bench in my hiding place.

I had trimmed the room out the week before like the carpenter that trimmed the rooms in the courthouse. I was pleased at how good they looked. I had done it the right way with the caulking and mitered corners. They looked seamless with their white paint. I was happy in that place where I could shut his blows out. This was a skill that I became quite talented at over time. I was able to do it with such precision, that I almost forgot what was happening.

I felt a jolt as he pulled me to the kitchen corner cabinet. He kept me in a choke hold sitting on the floor with our backs to the cabinets—his arm reaching around me from behind. With one arm around my neck, he reached for the knives on the kitchen counter. They sat neatly in their butcher block holder on the marble counter-top that I had shined earlier that day. The sound of it sliding out of its holder—sw-o-o-o-o-sh—still screams in my head. The sound only a knife can make. I almost have to hold my ears when I think about it; he did not cut me. Bone chilling screams must have startled him just enough for me to break away and run out the door.

I can still see it all. I can hear my screams. They are imprinted in my mind. I can even take myself right back there as if it is happening again—right now or anytime. Sometimes just a thought can do it. Sometimes, I see something that reminds me of him or a time and place where things happened. I would imagine that the fossils buried inside are pretty well set in stone.

Ding, ding. I hear it again. I begin to shake as I wait for the sound of the elevator door to open. With a swish to the side, the quietness fades as I hear footsteps enter the hallway. There are no girls laughing this time, there are no voices. I begin to tremble as each foot hits the floor like a giant monster pounding his feet into the earth. Stomp, stomp, I hear, heading to the courtroom door. I freeze. It is the sound of his voice as his attorney greets him just before he opens it. She calls him by name. He answers. That voice. I sat silently as I remember each tone. Sounds that are so familiar and so ingrained; I will never forget the sounds of his voice. “You had better check yourself, b—tch!” he used to say in that voice. Another time, “bow down!” if I wanted him to stop. So ugly those words were. His voice makes me cringe. Ugly it all was, “like the sludge of the earth.”

My attorney comes out and says, “it’s time.” I follow her to the room and sit in the front row snuggled up to the paneled wall that

divides my attorney and I. I feel naked as his eyes pierce the back of my head from several rows behind me. Even from a distance, I can still feel him, his power, his control as I freeze in place waiting for it all to begin. “All rise,” the lady in the front says. A door from behind the solemn desk opens as a gray haired man with a black, dark robe enters the room and sits at his throne. He looks down at his papers as if it is just another day at work. All the while I sit restlessly awaiting the moment when I will have to recall it all. It is more than just another day for me.

It is still embedded. Like a scar it fades a bit, but still sets in for life; it is a part of me now. I cannot separate who I am from who I was before “it” happened. Trauma has left its mark. The earth spun, the sun rose. The wind blew through my hair as I crossed the parking lot that day at the courthouse. The oceans swelled, their waves crashed the shores. The old town clock struck the hour like it always does. It was just another day. I sat buried in memories as I do most days and nights since. Imprinted for life. He left his mark. Like a skilled craftsman.

<sup>1</sup> Krystek, (1996). *Un Museum*. Retrieved from [www.unmuseum.org/fossil.htm](http://www.unmuseum.org/fossil.htm)

<sup>2</sup> NIH, (2015). *MedlinePlus*. Retrieved from [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/scars.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/scars.html)

<sup>3</sup> van der Kolk, (1994). *Trauma Information Pages*. Retrieved from [www.trauma-pages.com/a/vanderk4.php](http://www.trauma-pages.com/a/vanderk4.php)

# ELECTRIC LOVE

STEVEN GONTARZ

---

My hands all over the curves of your body

they slide up and down as

I grab your neck;

and finger you for the solo

We thrash in a violent dance

as my sweat drips all over you.

We move up and down together

as the stage beneath us

pulsates;

with every beat

as the drummer bangs his head.

# GRAMPA BUD

JESICA BARTELL

---

Your house was always dank with the smell  
Of cigarettes and cats but you had a chipper radio  
A California Raisin smiling like the sun  
It held a microphone in one hand  
The other pointed to the sky  
When your son and granddaughter would visit, I would try  
Hard not to take it  
That radio and all your treats  
Made every visit pleasant

When the dank tobacco took root in your lungs and blossomed  
Black Death into your brain  
The California Raisin for me  
Your Dodge Ram for my Father  
Is what remained

I held it close and from its speaker  
Spoke, the dank smell of smoke  
Still teeming from the tweeter  
Later it was packed, in your son's attic  
It never came back.

I would cut the rust time earned  
When my key turned in that truck  
The diesel would combust,  
A good engine corroding like my memories of you  
So I sold the truck to someone who brought it new life

I brought back the raisin in the form of a tattoo  
A bright little raisin, shining like the sun  
Singing and dancing like the radio had done  
Something I carry with me every day

Since I cannot be carried with you,  
In your truck or in your arms, on my arm is your tattoo

# I'M YOUR COCKER SPANIEL

## VIRGINIA SOILEAU

---

Don't pity me;  
my mournful eyes  
and happy smile  
are my disguise.  
Wagging my tail  
with tortured delight;  
bruised pain I keep hidden  
behind lonely fright.  
Betrayed and beaten,  
yet cute I remain;  
blissfully happy  
to hide all my pain.  
The might of your anger  
and sting of your hand  
bring soft tears to my eyes  
because I don't understand.  
But worse is the fear  
of being alone...  
the loss of those moments  
of rare kindness you've shown—  
I'll keep forever these nights,  
at the foot of your bed,  
and if I do a good deed  
there's a pat on my head.  
My lover, my master,  
to you I submit,  
as I cower in corners  
from the lashes I'll get.

A slap to my face,  
and a boot to my ribs—  
punish this dog  
for all of her sins!  
Will I know that I'm worthless  
if I simply don't hear  
your hatred and yells  
as I whimper in fear.  
The pain you unleash  
on this spirit you've claimed,  
sits silently muzzled...  
head lowered...ashamed.  
“Bad dog! Now sit—  
disloyal little bitch!  
You know not to bark...  
you deserve to be hit!”  
Each bruise a remembrance  
that Master was there;  
if I didn't do bad,  
he might even care.  
But don't pity me,  
my mournful eyes;  
just let me love him  
and believe my own lies.  
I'll remain loyal  
for a moment without sobs;  
but I guess it's my fault  
for being a bad dog.

# SEARCHING FOR FREEDOM

ERIKA WIGREN

---

(Alcatraz, 1937)

Ralph stared at the worn pages of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The once crisp pages from his favorite book were frayed and torn, its spine weak from his habit of bending the pages backward behind its cover.

The collision of Ralph's thoughts with the ruckus of the prison's mess hall made it hard for him to focus.

“Can I join you?”

A tray dropped onto the table in front of Ralph, startling him. Ralph looked up from his book, locking eyes with a pudgy man smiling from ear to ear. Ralph hadn't met him in person yet but he would have had to be stupid to not recognize the famous gangster from the newspapers. He was a short, balding man with a bulging nose and fat lips—Al Capone.

“Mr. Capone...” Ralph began, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“Please,” he said waving him off and sitting down across from him. “Call me Al.”

Ralph nodded and quickly glanced around the mess hall—the Gas Chamber as he and the other inmates liked to call it. The room was filled with the sound of chatter, utensils scraping trays, and regular yells from the guards. Everyone's eyes seemed to be on other things, no one seemed to care about Ralph's table guest.

“It's Roe, right?”

“Just Ralph,” he mumbled, surprised Al knew who he was.

“Well Ralph, I've heard stories about you,” he said stuffing a spoonful of pudding in his mouth. “About how you got here anyway. Bank robbing, fighting, trying to break out from McAlester. And your old partner, uh, what was his name again? William?”

Ralph locked eyes with Al, unsure of what he was getting at.

“Wilbur.”

"Ya, that's it, Wilbur," he said with a smirk. "Mad Dog, I believe they called him. Had a bit of a temper, hm? Ya, I heard you shot him dead." Ralph slammed his book shut and clenched his hands into fists.

"I don't know what you're getting at but I'm no killer," Ralph said. "Wilbur got himself shot by police, not by me."

Al's smirk didn't fade as he held his hands back in defense. "Now, don't get all riled up, I'm just stating what I heard. You see, kid, I'm not here to accuse you of any-thing, in fact I would like for you and I to be friends."

Ralph tilted his head in question. He wasn't anyone of importance, he had a knack for thieving since he was a teenager and he robbed a few small stores, sure, but not out of complete selfishness. The Depression had hit Ralph hard, and there wasn't much money for a small town Oklahoma farmer who had a sick father to take care of. So when Ralph had met Wilbur Underhill and the pair successfully robbed their first bank, Ralph got a taste of the good life and never looked back. Ralph had always regretted it though. He had never wanted to be a criminal.

"In all honesty Ralph, I'm here to make a deal with you," Al said leaning in closer, their faces just inches apart. "I heard about you and Theodore Cole's plans."

Ralph stood up quickly, accidentally knocking into his food tray. Some guys nearby glanced at him but quickly turned away after seeing him next to Al.

"Now, calm down," Al said and motioned for him to sit back down. Ralph gulped and slowly sat back down. He hadn't told anyone about his plans, but he wouldn't be surprised if Cole couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"I ain't trying to stop you," he laughed, "hell, I'm rooting for you."

Ralph stayed quiet, fists still clenched and uncertain of what to make of Al.

"I know you and Cole are planning on making a break for it soon. And you see I don't mind you making a go for it," he said. "But you see, Cole and I have some unfinished business, my friend, and I personally wouldn't like to see him leave so soon. That is, unless it's in a body bag."

Ralph stared at him, confused. Ralph wasn't aware that Cole had known Al personally but then again, he hadn't known much about Cole at all. He did know, however, that he had a hankering for trouble.

"What did Cole do to you?" Ralph asked.

"Well, you came from McAlester with him, didn't you?"

“Ya, so?”

“Then you know that he stabbed his cellmate.”

Ralph’s eyes widened. Cole had murdered his cellmate at McAlester. He had stabbed him and told the guards it was self defense, but Ralph had known otherwise. Self defense didn’t fool anyone being as Cole had stabbed the guy twenty-seven times. Ralph hadn’t particularly cared for Cole, he was a killer, but both he and Cole had tried to escape from McA-lester and, unlike Ralph, Cole had succeeded—before getting caught later. Like him or not, Ralph needed Cole. Ralph was sentenced to ninety-nine years and if he didn’t get off the island, he would die in there. “Who’s the cellmate to you?” Ralph asked.

“That’s not important,” Al said.

“Well, what do you want from me then?”

“I’d like to ask you for a favor, kid. You see, I have a lot of connections outside of this place, as you may know, and I also know that you won’t make it two miles off this island without help. Those waters are too tough, too cold, and you’ll get swallowed alive. So I thought maybe we could come to an arrangement.”

Ralph studied Al’s face. He knew Al was probably right, but he wouldn’t admit that to him. “What kind of arrangement?” Ralph asked.

“I want you to make sure Cole doesn’t make it off this island,” Al hesitated, his eyes burned into Ralph’s, “alive.”

Ralph shook his head laughing.

“You’re kidding, ain’t you?”

“I don’t kid, kid.” Ralph’s smile quickly faded. “You ain’t good friends with Cole anyway. You see, kid, I can read people. I can tell the good ones from the bad ones and you ain’t a bad one, but Cole, now Cole’s a bad apple, a cold-blooded killer, and I suspect you know that. I suspect that you’re just using him to get out of here, nothing more. Ain’t that right, kid?”

“Enough with the ‘kid’ shit alright? And why don’t you just off him yourself since you’ve got so many connections,” Ralph said, irritated that Al somehow knew so much.

“I thought you might ask that. But you see, ki—” Al began, “Ralph, I ain’t got much time left in this place and I want no connection to Cole’s... disappearance. I need stay clean.”

“And I’m not a connection?” Ralph said, glancing at the guard nearby. Al glanced towards the guard and smirked.

“Tell me, did you once see the guards look in our direction? You don’t know me, and I don’t know you, and as far as anyone here knows, this conversation never happened.”

Ralph sat in silence. Did Al really hold that kind of authority over this place? He didn’t know, but he didn’t put it past him either. He was Al Capone.

“So do we have a deal, Ralph?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Ralph looked at his hands, now calloused, rough, and starting to bleed. He had spent most of his days the past month sawing away at the bars with a stolen hacksaw, doing most of the work himself while Cole kept watch. Cole stood by the mat shop entrance shooting glances outside the door every few minutes in case the guard came back early for head count. He ran his long fingers through his greasy hair.

“This has been taking longer than we planned,” Cole said, chewing on his thumbnail.

“You wanna do this shit?” Ralph spat back.

“I ain’t criticizing, I’m just sayin.”

Ralph rolled his eyes and continued to saw.

“I never did ask you,” Cole said. “What are you gonna do when we get out?”

“Swim,” Ralph joked.

Cole didn’t laugh, he just stared out the door window.

“I ain’t sure yet,” Ralph said, but that was a lie.

Ralph had stashed cash not far from his farm—a lot of cash. His dad had died after he had gone to McAlester, Ralph had assumed he died of disappointment and as much as it hurt him to know he had no family left, he no longer felt obligated to take care of someone else. If he made it out, Ralph was gonna get his cash and start new, just like the *Count of Monte Cristo*. Count Ralph Roe—he liked the sound of that.

Ralph continued to file away at the bars, ignoring the cramp in his hand.

“Wrap it up for the day, Ralph, guard’s coming back,” Cole said coolly as he moved away from the door and tried to look like he was working.

Ralph quickly jumped back. Placing the hack saw on the floor, he

pushed the nearby shelf back into its place, covering the saw and the window. The mat shop grew darker afterward, his freedom disappearing with the window.

“Head count!” the guard yelled from in the hall.

Both Ralph and Cole walked towards the door.

“I’m gonna open a candy store,” Cole said smirking. “No one would suspect a man with a candy store of being a criminal, eh?”

Ralph nodded, but shivered at the idea of Cole owning a candy store. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who liked kids, or people.

Ralph had met Cole when they were both at McAlester Prison. He had never really liked Cole but they were both from Oklahoma and like Ralph, Cole had started a life of crime at a young age. He told Ralph that he robbed a bank at fourteen and shot a cop. He was even supposed to get the death penalty but ended up getting only fifty, even after he killed his former cellmate. In truth, Ralph hated Cole. Cole only had fifty to life—nearly half of Ralph’s sentence—and Ralph had never killed anyone. But Cole had escaped McAlester Prison successfully once and Ralph’s separate attempt had failed. He needed Cole, and Ralph hated the idea needing someone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ralph was at it again the next day. He stared through the bars as he sawed at them, looking into the outside world. A thick blanket of gray covered the grounds and made it nearly impossible to see the ocean and anything beyond it. Ralph had never seen the fog so thick.

“Today’s the day, I think,” Cole said. “I don’t think I can take much longer in this shithole.”

Cole’s left eye was risen and now a soft hue of blue and purple. He had hit an inmate with a food tray in the Gas Chamber yesterday, but the guards put a stop to the fight real quick, one of the guards fists meeting Cole’s eye—he wasn’t lucky he wasn’t put in solitary again. Ralph didn’t ask why Cole had hit the inmate in the first place, because he knew that Cole didn’t ever need a reason to fight.

Ralph winced in pain as the bar he was working on finally snapped and cut into his hand.

“Cole!” Ralph said, wiping his bleeding hand on his shirt. “I got it.”

Cole ran over to him to investigate, pushing Ralph aside. His eyes grew wide, “I don’t believe it, it actually worked.” He cast Ralph a wicked

smile. Together they dislodged the broken bars and Cole handed Ralph a towel. Ralph rolled his eyes and quickly wrapped the towel around his hand, smashing the glass of the window. Cole pushed himself through first, dropping a few feet onto the ground below.

Ralph swung his leg onto the ledge and looked back into the mat shop. When he and Cole were first given jobs in the shop, Ralph had asked to work in the library and the guards laughed in his face. In response, Cole had spit in the guard's face and told him off, leading to a week in solitary. After his time in solitary, most of the inmates started to call Cole Screw-loose. Ralph had never understood why Cole did that, but Cole's actions almost made Ralph like him—almost.

"What are you doing?" Cole asked, as he looked around anxiously. "We gotta go."

"I'm comin," Ralph said. He lifted his other leg onto the windowsill and froze. "Damn," he muttered to himself. He remembered the wrench they left on the table and pulled his foot back in. Cole glanced back at the window where Ralph no longer was.

"God damnit," Cole swore under his breath. "Ralph," he said quietly, as he glanced in every direction to make sure they weren't spotted.

"Ralph!" he said a little louder. "Get your ass out here, or I'm gonna leave you!"

Ralph popped his head out of the hole and stuck his hand out showing a long metal object to Cole. They would need the wrench to get through the main gate. Ralph tossed it to Cole and then quickly hopped out of the window.

"You were supposed to grab that. This whole thing would be useless without that," Ralph said to Cole.

Cole nodded, he would never admit to his mistakes.

They made their way across the lawn, crouching down and moving fast. They approached the main gate and sighed in relief that they hadn't been spotted.

"This fog is a God damn miracle," Cole whispered. "I doubt the guards can even see us from up there."

"What if we run into one of them?" Roe asked.

"We kill 'em," he replied with no hesitation or remorse.

"Just open the damn thing," Ralph said, urging Cole to break the gate's lock. He didn't want to think about having to kill a guard. Cole twisted the padlock off the gate with the wrench, and both men sucked

in their breath as the gate slowly creaked ajar. Once it was open enough Ralph didn't hesitate and took off through the gate, ignoring Cole's order to wait. He ran as fast as he could and heard a yell in the background, he whipped his head back as he ran and suddenly smacked into something hard. Ralph's eyes grew large as they met the eyes of a guard. The guard opened his mouth but before he could speak, Cole hit him in the head with the wrench. Ralph stood frozen, gaping at the guard as he twitched on the ground. Cole bent down and bashed him on the head once more, blood spattering his face.

"God damnit Ralph," Cole said, his breath short. "You could have blown the whole damn thing." His voice was quiet but angry. Ralph stared at the blood on his face as it slowly trickled down.

"You killed him," Ralph said backing up slightly.

"It was either that or go back, and I ain't going back."

"But you killed him," Ralph said again.

Cole's expression hardened and he grabbed Ralph's shirt by the collar. "We gotta go now," he growled. "They'll be figuring it out that we're missing soon, the guard is dead, if he didn't die we would have been caught. So snap out of it and let's get the fuck out of here."

Cole dropped the wrench and began to move towards the cliff's edge. Ralph managed to move his feet and followed after Cole, glancing back only once at the dead guard. He hadn't killed him, but he may as well have.

Ralph turned his back to the prison and made his way after Cole. Cole had stopped on the cliff's edge and was staring down.

"What is it?" Ralph asked.

"This is the hard part," Cole said. He slicked his hair back and did a two finger wave at Ralph as he jumped down, landing with a thud on the ground below.

Ralph glanced down at the water, the beach below was small and bare and had to be fifteen feet or so down. Ralph shivered as the waves crashed onto the rock scattered ground, drift wood floating in and out as the ocean breathed.

"Jump, Ralph!" Cole said from below, motioning him.

Ralph glanced behind him, little bits of the wired fences faded in and out from the fog, Alcatraz barely visible. Ralph turned away from the prison and jumped. He landed with a heavy thud on the ground below, his ankle giving away.

“Shit,” he said.

“Hurry up!” Cole said, picking up a large piece of driftwood. He pushed his way into the waves with as much force as he could muster. Ralph found a large piece of driftwood and followed Cole’s path. The water was like ice, crashing over them and instantly soaking their clothes, biting its way into their skin. Ralph’s teeth began to chatter as he kicked and kicked his feet. He used all of his strength to make it out further and further, Cole trudging along next to him.

They kicked and kicked for what felt like hours, Ralph’s hands turning shades of blue as the water washed over him, the cliff of the island fading away as they moved. In the distance, sirens blared and both men stopped paddling. Cole smiled through chattering teeth.

“Sounds like someone’s escaped,” he said with a laugh.

Ralph laughed for the first time. “Sounds like it,” he said. He looked back at the island, little yellow spheres danced through the fog. Inside the prison, inmates hooped and hollered as they heard the sound of the sirens for the first time. The inescapable Alcatraz prison no longer deserved the name.

Ralph turned his head forward, telling himself that he was free. Even if he died now, it wouldn’t be in a cell.

A sudden gust of wind and a cluster of waves hit Ralph and Cole. They began to paddle again harder and harder, their prison soon swallowed up by the fog as they went. Their pace slowed the further they got out. They were far out now, the fog blocked the view behind them and in front of them. Ralph wasn’t sure how long they had swam, but his body felt cold and weak. More waves crashed into them as they went and Ralph wondered when they would stop.

He heard splashing behind him and glanced back in time to see Cole’s head become submerged under the water. Ralph didn’t realize how far ahead he had gone.

“Cole!” Ralph yelled, barely recognizing his strained voice from the cold. Cole’s head emerged from the water, bouncing up and down between waves.

“Cole!” Ralph said again and then he hesitated. The face of the dead guard flashed into Ralph’s mind, his mind asking if Cole was worth saving. Ralph thought of what Al had said, about Cole being a bad apple, a killer—and he was. Ralph knew that, Ralph saw that. But Ralph had told Al Capone no to his arrangement for a reason because Ralph was no killer.

Ralph reached Cole in a matter of minutes, he was just barely able to keep his head above the water. Ralph grabbed onto his shirt, pulling him onto Ralph's piece of driftwood. Ralph held on to Cole as he began to paddle outward. He wasn't sure why he was saving him, or why he was risking his life to help him, but he couldn't just allow him to die. Just like the guard, that was as good as killing him. Ralph paddled farther and farther out, Cole just barely kicking to help. The water finally began to soften, the waves receding as they paddled farther out.

"I'm losing too much steam here, Cole," Ralph said, his breath escaping him. "I can't push you anymore."

Cole nodded, "It's alright, I can manage now." He pushed Ralph's driftwood towards him, offering it back to Ralph.

"No," Ralph said. "You keep it, you need it more than me."

Cole looked Ralph in the eyes. Cole's hair was plastered to his face, his skin white as the walls of his cell contrasting against the purple of his blackened eye. His face drooped with exhaustion and there was no longer blood splattered across it. For the first time since Ralph had met him, Theodore Cole looked innocent, almost kind.

"I think it's time we part ways," Cole said, looking into the fog.

Ralph nodded. "I'll see you in another life, I suppose," Ralph said as he let go of the driftwood his body submerging up to his neck.

"Another life," he agreed with a smirk and turned his body away from Ralph. Ralph watched as Cole paddled away slowly, barely making a noise as he went, not even a splash. He grew smaller and smaller as he went until the fog swallowed him whole.

Ralph glanced around him and felt a sliver of regret for giving Cole his driftwood, but he started paddling farther and farther out without it.

Ralph continued onward but soon stopped to listen for sign of life nearby. He didn't hear the sirens from the prison any longer, Alcatraz was now completely out of view. It was just him and the ocean. He could no longer feel his legs and feet, and his hands and arms felt stiff. He looked up to see a small flock of seagulls fly above him, their bodies flying through a white blanket of fog. Ralph let his body float, spreading his arms and legs as he laid on his back, the ocean water clogging his ears. He thought of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the freedom the character Edmund must have felt when he too escaped his imprisonment. Ralph's body no longer shivered and his eyes were no longer heavy. He felt relief in the gentle embrace of the ocean as it cradled him back and forth. He felt alive, he felt free.

# I WAS RAISED BY

## SHARONTA PICKERING

---

I was raised by smooth talking,  
Money getting, fast moving,  
Wig splitting parents

I was raised by Henderson streets  
A never knew if you were going to make it  
The next day kind of streets  
Watch out for them boys shooting kind of streets  
There goes the ice cream man kind of streets

I was raised by sounds of balls hitting the bat  
Alarming sounds of crowds cheering my name  
Fast running, Kentucky derby sliding,  
Home run hitting type of sounds

I was raised by spade  
A black, silky smooth dog  
Bearing kisses of love and barks of wisdom  
Protecting me from harm

I was raised by the sweet smell of buttermilk pancakes  
French toast, eggs, bacon, and honey  
The everlasting aromas filling the morning air  
Like fresh squeezed lemonade on a hot summer day

I was raised by the Caribbean, Spanish, music of my father's accent  
His peoples St. Thomas talk and my mother's country twang  
Words holding a barrier to the way I speak

I was raised by judgment, and compassion  
Two identities ripped apart through a sea of hate  
Causing pain and confusion among those who cannot speak

# TRUMPET-CREEPER FAMILY

LACEY CURRAN

---

*A human being becomes human not through the causal convergence of certain biological conditions, but through an act of will and love on the part of other people.* —Italo Calvino

The emerald vines of *campsis radicans* have nearly overtaken the east side of the house, vigorously sprouting, crumbling the concrete foundation. They've already coiled and stretched around loosely hung shutters barely hanging on to rotting timber siding and outlined glassless windows. A ruthless array of creepers have begun to emerge from the cracks in the walk leading to the front door where small stubs shoot from a mat that has turned to earth. The warmth of incessant dedication gradually melts away the nose-tickling moisture each morning, briefly appearing through a transforming sky. Commitment glistens upon descendent dewdrops from *campsis radicans* as they scatter across an expanding garden. Opaque orange blooms call out to a desperate flittering nearby from yellow throats, offering attainment to starving humming birds. These vines require guidance through specific nurturing in a garden constructed and bound by a limitless kind of love. The substantial dedication required to raise these complex vines from latching on to just about anything and suckering out of control provides *campsis radicans* with many names.

One particular name for this suckering vine might derive from an aggressive yearning, an itch, perhaps a strong desire. Other names might derive from their climbing abilities or destructive behavior. Nevertheless, it really doesn't matter what you call them—hummingbird vine, cow itch, trumpet creeper, these vines are invasive in nature and when not managed properly, trumpet creeper can easily take over and become extremely difficult to control. The vigor of trumpet vine should never be underestimated and when temperatures rise, mouthy little suckers will emerge in greater numbers and latch on to every

available surface. Eventually they will grow into dense, hardy stalks and possess the ability to dislodge established roots with a growing power to overwhelm everything in their path.

No matter where you live or who you talk to, the decision to rear trumpet vine should never be considered lightly, some gardeners will caution that these climbers can overwhelm small-space gardens and easily become troublesome. If after substantial consideration, you decide trumpet creeper is a good fit for your garden, it is probably best to first upgrade to a larger space with room to grow—once these vines start to sucker, it is already too late and before you know it, *Devil's shoestring* will tie its knots around your foundation and suffocate your own roots if you aren't paying close attention. An intense amount of love and nurturing will be required to guide your precious vines in the right direction.

The *cows itch* is likely to come around at one point or another in many lives. Especially when there is heightened pressure and encouragement from others to expand their gardens, but growers beware, vines are very invasive. Raising vines can threaten your existing roots and weaken your resilience with the aggressive aerial rootlets of the colonizing vines as they grow and challenge everything in their path. If you make the decision to bring these vines into the world, always be prepared to pull back your sleeves and have your gardening gloves ready as they climb. And remember, it is your responsibility to guide your *hummingbird vines* and prevent them from growing out of control and this will significantly increase with every milestone.

Raising trumpet creeper is explained as relatively easy in gardening books, encouraged that with proper care and guidance, your *Hellvines* can be kept under control. These books will even tell you what to expect when you're expecting. They'll tell you to expect your vines to grow extraordinarily fast and approximately when to expect them to bloom. Apparently they'll thrive in sunnier areas so you'll have to be careful not to overshadow them. You'll be advised to water your vines in drought but not to overdo it and watch them particularly close after they have bloomed as they will then be capable of producing attractive bean-like seedpods of their own. They will grow fast, oh will they ever grow fast. They'll grow way too fast, but these books will never prepare you for that nor will these books ever tell you that raising vines will change your entire life.

*Creeping vines* will turn your heart to a thick layer of moss. Saturated and splintering shingles will crack away from rusty valves and tired arteries will deteriorate in homage to your ravenous brood. The strands growing atop your head will grow wiry and silver and the lines between your eyes will increasingly hollow with each and every angry squint. Your pointer finger will grow longer, angrier and threatening, and your soul will soften in the same moments it hardens, eventually turning to earth. Your world will grow heavy and your pockets empty. Your gardening bucket will grow bigger, accumulating in tools, but your tool shed will stay the same. You'll say *when I was your age* and *when I was a kid* and *I'd have never gotten away with your behavior* more than you'd ever dared believe when your own parents warned you. You'll have to fight the urge to scream while pounding your fists on the dinner table for your twelve-year-old to grow up and eat her fucking dinner and you'll lose everything and gain even more in return.

You'll go crazy each time the winds upset your precious vines and every time a caterpillar chews away at their leaves and you'll grow crazier each and every time their roots try to reach out over yours. But you'll still be crazier about each and every one of their yellow-throated orange blooms from your deepest starving roots to theirs with a ferocious and vile kind of love that holds no verse, only grows, invading every inch of your garden.

And you'll know, you'll finally understand the mantras your own parents repeated while raising you. And the next time you ask a newly established or wed couple if they plan to raise *trumpet vine*, ask first the strength of their roots and the size of their garden. Recall the simple words of Italo Calvino and this: *children cannot be raised without the sacrificial suffering rooted deeply within unconditional love.*

# SORRY, NOT SORRY

STEVEN GONTARZ

---

I'm sorry for the way I  
look at you  
from the bottom up  
I'm sorry I don't look at your face  
I'm sorry I don't see you.

I'm sorry I whip my head around  
when I hear the clacking of your heels  
hoping the sound matches the  
image in my head of  
long, sexy,  
*legs.*

I'm sorry for the skintight pants  
and low cut shirt all the  
fashion magazines tell you  
to wear for me.

I'm sorry for the red lipstick  
and mascara, the nail polish,  
the scent of your perfume and  
the way you have to style your hair.

I'm sorry for the beer commercials  
and burger ads with  
their bikinis and bust lines burning images  
of what they want *us*  
to see as beautiful.

And why are my shorts long  
but yours are short?  
My jeans are baggy  
and you wear second-skin  
pants to

work out,  
to school,  
to the grocery store,  
to go shopping.

I'm deeply sorry  
American culture taught me  
to look at you like this.

I'm not sorry I'm a man.

# HONEY BEIGE

NATALIE FRANCE

---

My tan brown different,  
heavy-to-wear skin.  
I didn't look like them.

Worry  
slipping my thought process  
with a drug called anxiety  
What do they think  
What do they see

Who even cares?  
They don't even know me.

But apparently they do.  
It's written on my locker.  
This humiliation,  
felt all the way through...  
my skin.

But from that event  
I've learned not to be angry  
with my God-given complexion  
if asked what I am,  
to show them without any objection.

My honey beige sun kissed  
celebrated skin.  
I don't look like them.

# YELLOW PASTELS

VIRGINIA SOILEAU

---

The wooden box has weakened;  
its clasps hang loose, the corners chipped,  
and the faded musk of pine  
leaves only a flicker of a memory.  
Stained, marked, its contents caressed  
by fingers stolen away too soon.  
Inside, soft pastels lay silently waiting,  
each smear across the lid a tribute,  
each autumn color like the last leaf of Fall,  
slowly blowing across a canvassed surface  
to lay brittle and broken—Summer's shroud.

Your life transcended into those pastels,  
a vibrancy unbleached by illness.  
Fragile fingers cherished brilliant yellows.  
You slipped away, drop by drop,  
like rain splattered across sunset reds.  
As the cancer left you dimpled and scarred,  
white, frothy rapids wound through healthy hills.  
When you no longer had the energy to fly,  
sketches of mallards winged through finger-smudged clouds.  
In a quiet room, greens rustled from the canvas  
as willow branches chimed in a lake-blue wind.

An entire life of dreams is held within this box.  
My thumbs rest on the rusted clasps,  
the closest I can ever come to holding your hand.

# YOUR PRAYERS MEAN NOTHING

## MASON PELLEGRINI

---

**A**rthur couldn't wrap his mind around what he was seeing. His worst fear had been realized. Tears pricked his eyelids. "It was your son that did this," his wife Maria said, standing near the doorway of the garage sobbing, still wearing her dressing gown. She let out a wail of anguish.

Arthur said nothing. He looked over the scene in his two car garage once more. The window had been busted out, the drawers in his tool box were all open, the door of his Buick was open, with the center console and glove box open. Their contents were thrown all over the interior of the vehicle. All of his air tools and power tools were gone. The meat freezer was open with all the steaks missing, and the ice inside was beginning to melt into a dirty puddle on the concrete floor. This couldn't have happened more than five hours ago. They had taken his laptop, which he had been using to tune his car. Even his 26-gallon air compressor had been stolen. It must have been a hell of a job ripping those bolts out of the concrete to move the damn thing. Arthur realized that this was just what Maria had been afraid of happening all of these years. He felt a tear run down his cheek as he squeezed his wrench so tight his knuckles turned white.

"Art, talk to me goddamnit! We can't just let him get away with this! He can't just do this because he blows all his money on dope and borrows from people that he can't pay back," Maria said.

"Maria, I know we have to do something, but I don't think it was him that did this. He hasn't fallen this low yet," Arthur said and turned around to look at his wife. Arthur put his big hands gently on her shoulders, looking down from his abnormally tall height.

"Arthur, the kid's a criminal and a cheat. We should be calling the cops on him right now," Maria said and shrugged Arthur's hands off of her. She began backing away from him.

Arthur's face involuntarily twisted with disgust. "We're not in-

volving the police, Maria,” he said flatly. “They can’t help Marcus, and they can’t help us. The kid’s not going to prison like I did. We’ve gotta deal with this ourselves.”

“Jesus Christ, Arthur! When are you going to learn that you can trust the police?” she said angrily. “You still need to do something about this. Go to Marcus and get the truth out of him, and if it comes to it, you better call the cops on him, Arthur. Don’t bother talking to me until you’ve figured this out.” She stormed off.

“I’m going to prove it wasn’t him!” Arthur yelled at her disappearing figure.

He was suddenly alone in his destroyed garage. He stood there for a moment, then carefully placed his wrench in its proper drawer in his tool chest and closed it. Could Maria be right? He thought back to the day that Marcus had twisted their relationship into the unnatural shape it was in today; the boy had flown into a rage and caught Arthur with his guard down, breaking his hip and arm on a job site in front of the contractors. At the time, Arthur was glad to have a reason to finally kick him out since the boy had been stealing money from him for months. That day was almost four years ago. Still, stealing a little money from your pops or getting into a scrap with him was one thing. Ripping everything he owned out of his home in the dead of night was something completely and utterly different. Could it have really been him?

He didn’t know what to believe. Arthur’s mind was about as organized as his prized and very expensive garage workstation was at that moment. He desperately needed clarification. Arthur walked out of his garage, through his garden, past his chicken coop, and back into his house looking for exactly that.

Minutes later, he sat at in his leather chair in his office, looking out at the morning sun shining through the slits in his blinds. It was going to be another hot, sunny day, and he was going to need to make decisions wisely if he was going to avoid messing things up worse than they already were. He took a drink of his black coffee. He needed to put the situation into the hands of something bigger than him. He punched in his sponsor’s number and let him know what had happened. “Someone broke into my garage last night and cleaned the place out. All my tools are gone, everything. Maria thinks that it was my son.”

They talked for the better part of an hour. First, it was agreed that Arthur needed to do whatever he could to either confirm or disprove that it was his son. He couldn't just drive to Marcus's apartment and try to squeeze the truth out of him like a lunatic. Even though he didn't really need the money, it was agreed that Arthur would have to confront him if it was his son and try to get his possessions back or paid for. He knew that letting Marcus carry on like this wouldn't help him, it would only enable him, would only let things become worse.

His sponsor was hesitant at first, but finally agreed that if Marcus was the culprit, all of this was to be done without involving the police. Arthur knew that Marcus had already been nabbed on fourth degree assault and possession of stolen property earlier this year, the kid would be facing serious time if he was picked up again. The boy could still redeem himself without that kind of punishment. After he was done speaking with his sponsor, Arthur called his employees and let them know he wouldn't be on the job site that day.

Arthur stowed his phone in his jeans and sat for a moment staring out the window again, then suddenly his head turned in the direction of his closet on the opposite side of his office. Inside the closet, there was a large metal safe which was bolted to the floor as the courts had specified, and inside his wallet, there was a key which would open the safe. He legally wasn't allowed to have this particular key on his person because he was a convicted felon and inside the safe there was a small semi-automatic pistol, his wife's Ruger SR22. Arthur had had to fill out a mountain of paperwork with his probation officer when Maria had first brought the firearm into their household years ago. His wife had entrusted him with the key anyways because she knew that he was trustworthy. He was not the person that he had been before he had gotten clean over a decade ago. Back then, before Maria and Arthur had met, Arthur had illegally possessed a different pistol which he had packed almost everywhere until his sponsor had pointed out that, in his thirty years of clean time, he had never seen a meeting turn into a shootout.

His sponsor's command not to act like a lunatic bounced around in his head, and Arthur dismissed the notion of taking the pistol with him. He looked back out the window at the morning sun. Doing what his sponsor had told him had gotten him everything that he cherished in his life. Even if his son did run with a bad crowd these

days, not listening to his sponsor in a time of need would be idiotic. After all, Arthur reflected, anyone can do what's right when times are good, it's only in times of trouble that a person can really demonstrate their faith.

With that thought, Arthur stood and walked slowly to the center of his office, knelt onto his knees, and bowed his head. He began to speak quietly. First, he asked that the robber prove not to be his son, that it be some other thief. Next, he asked that he be given the strength to not act in anger, however the day turned out. Above all, he asked to be able to do God's Will, even if he didn't know that was what he was doing at the time, even if it was unpleasant for him. He rose, knowing his mind wasn't going to get any clearer than it already was.

Hours later, warm wind was whipping Arthur's long, greying hair as he sped his Buick down a dusty road. Don't do anything stupid, Maria had said when Arthur had told her what his plan was. She didn't really understand. She was a normie, and it wasn't her kid anyway. Arthur had already gone to half a dozen pawn shops in all the seedy parts of the city looking for his tools. He inhaled deeply the life-giving oxygen as it rushed past, then he slowly let it out. If it was indeed Marcus who had robbed him, this next pawn shop was probably where Arthur would find the goods. Arthur knew the boy was too lazy to have driven to a farther away pawn shop to distance himself from the crime, and this place was less than half a mile from his son's apartment. He pulled into the pawn shop parking lot, the Wright Pawn and Jewelry Company. Vulgar promises were painted across the store in colorful, inviting letters: NO CREDIT CHECK, NO LIMIT CASH LOANS, CASH IN A FLASH.

Bells tinkled as Arthur walked into the store. There were only a few people inside it on this weekday morning. A burnt-out man wearing a Hawaiian shirt was sitting behind the counter. Behind the man was a wall covered with guitars that had once been owned by dozens of desperate people. A large display of televisions of varying degrees of antiquity showed an old western movie, but their audio was all slightly out of sync, creating a strange babbling background noise composed of terse conversations and sporadic gun battles. The clerk seemed to have noticed Arthur's car through the barred windows of the shop, and called out to Arthur as he approached the counter.

"Hey, Hot Rod. You looking for anything in particular today?" he said.

Arthur had been asking for very specific tools of his that had been stolen, something that not just every pawn shop would have. "You got anything to measure compression in cylinders, something that can do single and twin two-cycle engines?" Arthur said.

"Matter of fact, we do," the clerk said as he eyed a young man rifling through electronics in one of the aisles, "just got a pretty nifty leak down tester in this morning. A Motion Pro Eight if I'm not mistaken. Should be on the far wall there." He pointed a hand covered with gaudy rings. Arthur's emotions were a dry pile of kindling in danger of going up in flames.

He headed to the other side of the shop. Arthur recognized the small silver box from a number of paces away sitting on the shelf. He picked it up and opened it, running his finger across where he had carved his initials on the inside of the lid. He snapped the lid shut, and had to consciously stop himself from grinding his teeth together and balling his fists. Discordant gunshots began blasting through the shop as a renegade sheriff tracked down an outlaw cattle thief on the many televisions covering one of the walls. The old fires had been ignited inside Arthur. After everything he had gone through to raise that ungrateful son of a bitch! He went back to the clerk's counter.

"You see the young man that brought this in here earlier today?" Arthur asked slowly. Arthur placed his left hand on the counter, which was visibly shaking, and raised the small metal box in his right hand level with the clerk's eyes. The clerk paused for a moment, still not looking at him. He still watched other customers handling merchandise in the shop.

The clerk finally gave Arthur his full gaze, a hint of a smirk on his face. "We don't divulge that kind of information about customers," the clerk said. The fires began blazing brighter inside Arthur and his heart began pounding in his ears. A sudden impulse shot through his mind to grip tight onto the metal box and smash it into the clerk's mouth, certainly spilling blood everywhere. But no, that wasn't God's plan for him anymore. He wasn't going to break his hand for the sixth time on some idiot's face. Arthur breathed deeply and looked down for a moment. He repeated the Serenity Prayed mentally, and felt God enter into his soul, allowing himself to come back together incremen-

tally. He looked back at the clerk.

"Look here," Arthur said, "this leak tester," he clicked it against the glass of the counter, "is stolen goods. It was taken from my garage last night. See my initials carved into the lid here? Arthur Kessler."

The clerk opened his mouth, but Arthur continued before he could speak. "That young man who brought this in here," Arthur said, "I'm pretty sure was my son." He was speaking loudly now, and his voice was heavy with emotion. The man looking through electronics glanced quizzically in their direction.

"Sir..." The clerk said.

"I don't want to hurt him or anything he's my kid, and I'm not asking you to give me my stuff back either," Arthur said, he was getting so worked up he was afraid that he was going to start crying right in the middle of the shop. "I just want to make sure before I go talk to him. I care about the dumb bastard. You don't even have to say anything. I'll describe him and you can just shake your head there or nod it."

There was a pause. Arthur said, "The young man that brought this in here. In his twenties, bout my height?"

The clerk rubbed his head with his hand then sighed. He looked Arthur in the eye then gave him a slight nod.

"Dark, straight hair. Good lookin' kid?"

The clerk gave another minuscule nod.

"Tattoos on his forearms, hands, and neck?"

The clerk nodded again, and Arthur felt like his heart stopped. He hadn't realized that even up until this point he had still been hoping that it wasn't his son.

"Pal," Arthur said, "you might have just saved a misguided young boy's life today." He returned the testing kit to its shelf and left the pawn shop.

Shortly after, Arthur sat in his Buick on a residential street, looking up at the window of his son's second story apartment. He had parked half a block away so that his son wouldn't spot him out there in his car getting ready to confront him. The powerful midday sun glared down out of the cloudless sky. Arthur texted his sponsor and Maria to let them know where he was and what he was about to do in case anything bad happened. Why did God have to test him like this?

How did he still find himself in these situations after his twelve years of clean time? His sponsor texted back in less than a minute asking Arthur to call him immediately after he spoke with his son to confirm everything was okay. Maria told him she loved him. He texted back his responses.

Arthur reached out and put his hand on the basic text of Narcotics Anonymous, which always sat on his passenger seat, and then he said out loud, “Thy will, not mine, be done.” He got out of his car and began walking towards his son’s door. Loud aggressive metal and the smell of weed floated down from his son’s open window.

Arthur reached the door and began knocking, hard blows with the bottom of his fist. “Open this flimsy ass door or I’m going to kick it in!” Arthur yelled. He grabbed the door knob and began shaking it. Out of his son’s stereo, a metal singer let out a prolonged death growl.

“Get the fuck out of here old man, we don’t want any beef with you,” his son’s voice yelled from the other side of the door.

“You already have beef with me you pussy! Now open this door and face me like a man,” Arthur said commandingly. The door flung open, and Arthur’s ears were hit with a blast of black metal and his nose the pungent smell of marijuana. Suddenly, Arthur and his son were standing face to face for the first time in over six months, taking one another in. Two of Marcus’s little hoodlum friends were sitting on a couch in the room looking up at Arthur. Quite visibly, one of them was holding a pistol in his hand, which rested on top of the table.

His son’s tall frame was emaciated. He wore a dark-colored long sleeve shirt, which had the capitalized block words YOUR PRAYERS MEAN NOTHING emblazoned across it. Arthur remembered the concert his son had bought it at. The shirt hung off of his skeletal frame so much that Arthur could clearly see the bones in his neck and shoulders. On this 95-degree day, the long sleeve shirt could only be to conceal track marks or abscesses in his arms. His shoulder length hair was lank and unwashed. Arthur looked Marcus in the eyes to examine his pupils and saw that they were contracted into tiny pin drops despite the semi-darkness of his apartment. He had clearly used some of the money and scored already.

After what seemed like five minutes, Arthur finally said, “I think you have something that belongs to me.” He set his jaw rigidly. The double bass drum thudded angrily out of the speakers on both

sides of the couch. Marcus's cronies looked at him expectantly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Marcus said flatly.

"Okay then. If you didn't rob me, then why does your little friend have his goddamn twenty-two sitting on the table there?" Arthur said, reverting to the behavioral patterns prison had instilled in him, channeling his fears into a cutting display of domination. "Why the fuck are y'all so scared?" The man on the couch stirred uncomfortably.

"I don't know. Maybe he's afraid of big-ass crazy old tweakers busting into the apartment and starting shit for no reason?" Marcus said.

Marcus's other wannabe gangster friend covertly closed a laptop, which Arthur suddenly recognized was his own, and stowed it under the couch. Arthur's breathing sped up, and his fists balled. He was going to give Marcus one more chance; he didn't want to have to do this.

"Fuckin' comedian here," Arthur said. "And it's just a coincidence that the guy at the pawn shop said some young kid who looked like you was coming into the shop this morning selling my tools?" The hoodlum without the pistol stood up and began walking to stand behind Marcus.

"There's a lot of people that look like me in this city," Marcus said and smirked. Tears came to his eyes, and he considered grabbing his son and dragging his disrespectful ass out into the street to wipe the smile off of his face, but he knew now that Marcus couldn't listen, not until things became much worse for him. Even if Arthur caved in his face and forced him to give to give all the money back, it wouldn't save his son. Arthur closed his eyes and mouthed the Serenity Prayer for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. The fires inside of him were suddenly extinguished, and he became strangely calm. It was finally over.

"Now why don't you take your old, grey ass off of my doorstep and run home to Maria. I know that she's all you care about. Her and your stupid, bullshit fellowship," Marcus said, still smiling. Arthur recognized the smile, he used to wear a similar one on his face many years ago.

Marcus's friend said, "Yeah, get the fuck out of here old man!" Marcus took a long drink of his beer, LIVE FREE was tattooed across

his son's knuckles.

A tear ran down Arthur's face for the second time that day, but for the first time today, there wasn't a trace of anger in the tear at all. It was a sad tear. "Goodbye," Arthur said, and turned around, starting back down the stairs. Arthur heard the door slam behind him. It looked like Marcus was going to have to learn the same way that Arthur had. Arthur knew better than most how old habits claw and struggle like scared animals before they can finally succumb to death. The last time someone had spoken to him like those kids did, Arthur had grabbed his throat and broken his face on a bathroom floor, but he had changed over these years. Ghostly notes of an aggressive guitar solo followed him as he walked away.

Arthur got back inside his Buick. He sat there for a moment, then sent Maria and his sponsor a quick text telling them everything was alright. Everything was going to be okay. Arthur pulled out his phone and dialed 911 for the first time in his life. He knew that, for a convicted felon on probation like his son, just having a firearm in his home was a mandatory 48 months. It didn't matter who owned it, and it was probably stolen anyways. Tears flowed freely as he told the police the whole story. "Yeah, they still got my laptop in there, looks like they at least haven't gotten rid of that yet. I got the serial number for it and an insurance policy at home. One of the boys is packing heat too."

Arthur gave them the address. "Yeah, I'll wait until they show up. I'll make sure none of 'em leave."

# TO LIVE AND DIE IN GRAHAM, WA

JAMES NORDLUND

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The trees went down in a matter of weeks. Soon they would be replaced by a Fred Meyer's parking lot. One lone, ragged tree stood in the clear cut. Its appearance was sickly at best; branches only comprised the half and up the north side, splintered and cracked. Why this tree wasn't cut down with the rest is an unanswered question, whose solution is likely mundane or pointless. Still, as a child, I wondered what that slightly twisted conifer did to deserve a suspended sentence when its family and community were unhesitantly put to death. When it finally disappeared, after a few weeks of indignant protest, a building was erected in its stead.

The Fred Meyer's has expanded the lot since then to host fast food franchises, a Mexican restaurant, a few banks, a Starbucks (despite that there is a Starbucks already inside the Fred Meyer's), and a cyclical array of establishments that change or stay, pursuant to and depending on the frequency of their customers. Twenty-five years ago, the little Podunk mountain town of Graham had a population of around 9,000. Since then, it has increased its human residency to over 25,000—with 15,000 coming in just the last decade. The growth has brought apartment buildings, a new high school and middle school, and the closing of long established businesses to make way for new and ever rotating ones. Close by as well, just heading out of Graham, is every small town in America's dream: Wal-Mart.

Graham, Washington is named after Smith Graham; the foreman of the Cascade Timber Company's logging camp near its present designation. The story goes that he arrived in this area in 1905 and, because mail from Tacoma was given to him for distribution to the laborers, the phrase 'Take the mail to Graham' set the town's moniker in stone. In that time there were very few roads; none that connected Graham to any significantly established city. The first homesteaders

came from Tacoma by rail. These were farmers, loggers, wood mill laborers and, most importantly, since the area had been logged quite extensively, stump-farmers. The task of removing all the stumps in order to make the land fit for building homes, farming, and pasture was an undertaking of ambitious proportions.

In 1989, my parents moved from my Grandparents' place in Tacoma to a little doublewide trailer on an acre and a half in Graham. I was four years old. I have two brothers, one seven years older and the other fourteen months younger than me. My dad and brothers still live in the old doublewide trailer while my girlfriend and I live in a one room cabin in the back (my mom divorced my dad and left in 1999). I have at least one memory for every square inch of this property; some contain hundreds.

The ground in most of the yard is extremely rocky. When my friends and I took shovels and pickaxes to it we found the task of building dirt bicycle jumps was not an easy feat. Our determination was met with opposition; we often joked about it once being a river bed that had just been covered in. Scoop, scoop; rock. Scoop; rock. Rock; pick; scoop; rock. Digging was like this in most places. And then, the holiest of holies: soft, divine, clay-like soil; blackish deep brown pay-dirt, perfect for packing down on the lips so they became compact and smooth—when the tires roll off of it there is a *whhrrooss-hh* that cannot be recreated otherwise. Our trails/my dad's backyard became known among riders as L.T.L.—an acronym that fuzzily seems to have started as Loomis Trail Locals, after the *In Living Color* character Loomis B. Johnson, but it has had so many words inserted and replaced that I can't say for sure what it originally stood for. Many of the original diggers still ride on a regular basis and spent over a decade of toil, sacrifice, and much deserved enjoyment at L.T.L., but the trails had been abandoned in the last few years of its existence.

Riding bikes is something a lot of small town American kids understand as the only god damned thing to do besides drugs in most cases. I was one of those kids. If we weren't packing dirt down on a new jump and hucking ourselves over it, we were hitting the new construction developments for ledges and rails to grind, and to sometimes laugh our asses off at security guards who attempted to 'hold us until

police arrived' for damaging private property—we simply pedaled away. I don't regret scuffing the paint on someone's hand rail, chipping the paint on a business' ledge, or scarping my own knees, shins, and elbows out there. We didn't play baseball, football, or ping-pong for that matter. This was our sport; our choice of physical expression that would have otherwise been muted—not to mention less creative.

I used to set videos of us riding to music, attempting to emulate the skate and bike movies we watched, using two VCRs and a CD player. After a while I would go riding just to get footage of my friends to use for my latest production. I once spent a whole street riding road trip to Portland following along on a razor scooter with an old, clunky VHS camcorder. I started losing interest in progressing my own riding, since I wasn't very good anyway, and soon I exclusively just filmed. God, am I happy I did that; there would have been little to no record of our exploits if I hadn't. Some of the only surviving relics of those days are old, worn out VHS tapes.

The first store and post office in Graham opened in 1908 and was run by Henry and Nancy Bates. Henry became Graham's first postmaster in March of 1908. Soon another entrepreneur named David Presley opened a second, much larger store just kitty corner to the Bates' place. The Bates business slowed because they couldn't keep up with the variety and supply of goods that Presley offered. They began losing profits in 1911, and sold the store to aging Civil War veteran David G. Harvey. Henry Bates passed away in 1913.

Time goes by both quickly and slowly living in a small town. It seems like yesterday because of the familiarity of the landscape that I was pedaling my bike around, looking for something to destroy. Yet, it also seems like a lifetime ago that there was a log cabin-style restaurant building surrounded by trees where now there is an apartment complex. Directions can be given to anyone who has been around here long enough through a 'where the old *something* used to be.' Growth and expansion in places like Graham could be considered a good thing; building the economy and so-forth. But, it has its problems as well.

It was no big deal for twelve year olds to ride their bikes around town passed 10 p.m. on a summer night when I was young.

Rising crime and drug use have extinguished this freedom now. I saw people go from average teenagers with angst to strung out junkies, robbing whatever isn't tied down so they can haggle for their next fix. Oxycontin hit the scene when I was in high school. It became an epidemic. Pills flooded the streets. Soon it wasn't strange to hear that the cute girl in history class got sent to rehab by her parents. It wasn't out of the ordinary to learn that a quarter of the football team had controlled substance charges. When pharmaceutical companies were pressured and changed the way Oxy could be consumed—the pills were made so they couldn't be broken down and smoked or shot up—those hardcore users, some still teenagers, began using heroin. Suddenly, heroin was in. It has taken Oxy's place in a big way. You see, Oxy, in all its medicinal glory, is really nothing more than synthetic heroin. Raiding grandma's medicine cabinet changed to burglarizing the neighbor's big screen TV.

Before Oxy and heroin, meth was the big problem. It's actually hard to find someone in their thirties living in Graham that hasn't at least seen it. But law enforcement has effectively slowed the meth lab culture that supplied the tweakers with the bath tub crap that was prevalent in the 90s. Instead, much cleaner, refined and powerful drugs are coming up from Mexico.

As my friends and I grew older and dropped out of high school, our interests changed from riding bikes and raising hell to drinking and partying and raising hell. I was especially fond of the psychedelic side of drugs; psilocybin mushrooms, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and the occasional ecstasy tablet (or four depending on the night). We always mixed our drugs with alcohol, which has a way of producing a potent 'fuck you' vibe. We drank nearly every single day; whether it was a couple of beers, a whole case of beers, or a half gallon of whiskey it didn't much matter as long as we were inebriated by sundown. Our consumption of toxins rose steadily and a few of us were getting into harder drugs. I stayed pretty mellow with my choices of mind altering substances and I never became overly dependent on anything I took. With the help of the beautiful girl who became my longtime girlfriend, I quit the constant party life and went back to school to pursue my writing. But it was not the same case for more than a few of my friends.

I had known Andrew since we were very young. He grew up next door to me and was one of the first to stick a shovel into the rocky earth at L.T.L. Vodka and pain killers were his vice of choice. One day while working in the garage he began to turn very pale and before his dad could find out what was wrong, he fainted and had to be rushed to the hospital. It turned out that he had fallen while drunk into a pile of scrap metal and bruised his pancreas. That, coupled with alcohol and pharmaceuticals, developed into acute pancreatitis. His organs rapidly shut down and before the end of the night he had completely lost brain function. His parents had no choice but to pull the plug.

Warren and Adam were big time partiers. They were always together sporting around in Warren's Mazda MR-2 drinking and snorting copious amounts of cocaine. I had known them from high school. After a kegger out in the woods they drove over a train track crossing going 130 mph and the tiny Mazda caught air, becoming a spinning torpedo that ripped into shreds like a pigeon through a jet turbine. Neither of them was wearing a seatbelt; neither made it to the hospital alive.

When I joined a metal band in my early twenties, a hang-around named John and I became pretty close friends. We both enjoyed speculating on our place in the cosmos, as well as staying up late and trying to out-drink each other. John's mom and step dad were big meth addicts all throughout his childhood. He had gone to prison while he was still in high school for beating his step dad half to death with a baseball bat for abusing his mom. When I first met him, he was a calm, collected individual, dealing with being clean from his own meth addiction. He began dabbling again pretty hard though. After days of no sleep he ran head on into a tow truck and was partially decapitated by the back window of his little Chevy.

My group of friends in high school consisted largely of people I had met outside of public school. Myself, and two other riders had started a punk rock band and I helped put together Bethel high school's battle of the bands in my junior year. After that performance I was approached by a leather jacket wearing punk rocker and fellow junior named Mike. We hit it off immediately and started partying and going to shows together. Mike was welcomed into the fold, becoming good friends with everyone in our group. He started dating a girl who was fresh out of prison and was an extreme junkie around the time I

had started back at school. Our paths slowly drifted apart and it wasn't long before he was shooting up heroin with her. Last February, Mike used a dirty needle and caught an infection. It started to abscess and by what I heard, none of his new junky 'friends' would take him to the hospital. His mom ended up picking him up from some dope house and rushed him to the emergency room. The infection caused blood poisoning so her efforts were too late. He passed away that night while I was in a playwriting class.

Last summer we bulldozed L.T.L. Months accumulating into years of work, all by hand driven implements of digging, was gone in a matter of hours. Flattened. The arid heat turned the grass and moss covered lips and landings into a leveled, dusty plain. The dozer unearthed a refrigerator that was the backbone of the first landing; then the remnants of decayed wood and fabric that was once a couch; a car engine emerged; golf balls; a basketball hoop back board; two riding lawnmowers; over half a dozen large tree stumps—buried and forgotten until that day. The exponential rise of dustiness in the yard made its way through the windows and was tracked into the house by clothing, shoes and pets for a time after, which became annoying and required a lot of wiping and cleaning. The trails had many little nooks for rodents—voles, shrews, field mice, the occasional migrating barn rat from my neighbor's chicken coop—all lost their little homes. Our pet cats had quite a time capturing them and leaving their carcasses on our door step. Growth came back quickly, however. By early fall's rain there were berry bushes sprouting back through the earth; grass breaking through the dry surfaced terrain.

In the middle of trails we had planted a ponderosa pine years ago. We watched it grow from sapling to an adult; from around three feet to fifteen or twenty feet tall. It has been left untouched.

**Reference:**

Anderson, Lawrence D. "In the Shadow of the Mountain."  
*Gorham Printing*, Centralia, WA. 2007. Print.

# THE JOURNEY

## STEVEN GONTARZ

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Our Father  
I was only seven  
deadly sins, I was taught  
and I was afraid  
so I attend with the masses.

I was only thirteen  
but did I know  
what it meant?

A confirmation of my upbringing,  
I was immersed years before  
in a belief of generations  
ahead of mine.

Our father who art in heaven  
I was only seven  
when I was forced to believe  
after a divorce  
eighteen years in the making.

I went to live with my dad;  
I had no choice.  
I was seventeen and still he dreamed  
that I needed You the same as he.

Twenty-eight and I chose the war.  
I prayed every night on the bird before  
but we weren't on Your mission;  
we were fighting for freedom.

## THE JOURNEY

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Every night  
I go to bed with an atheist;  
my wife.  
Should it matter that she doesn't believe?

She is the gift  
You've given to me, no matter  
how long it took  
me to find her.  
I'm sorry she doesn't believe, but

I love her  
no matter what.

Thirty-three now and  
still I search  
for what it means  
to be a man,

of God, faith, wisdom, integrity, strength and love.

Thy kingdom come.