



Judy
Nick Ivins

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Blood Count

Bryan Angel

I wonder if he still
Heard the wailing of a saxophone
Inside his head as he
Clutched a bedside ghost's hand while
doctors and nurses
Foxtrot and swung around-the-clock to
Keep a rhythm steady.

Before "Take the A-train" or "Lotus Blossom" filled a concert Hall,
Entangled future lovers in a rhythm & sailed through a
Smoky room lighting a man's cigar,
Billy Strayhorn had a vision that violins, oboes & concertos would bow
To his black hands but the image of Mahler & Rachmaninoff soon erased itself
When he looked in the mirror.

Duke & Billy nearly invented each other next to staves, rests,
& crescendos. Duke said Billy became the eyes in the back of his
Head, always making sure his shadow was never stumbling behind him.
Duke also said they became one man, interweaving
Trumpets & trombones, something like Apollo
dressed to the teeth dreaming out a horn section,
But it was Duke who stood center stage & Billy who played Phantom.

I wonder if he still heard the wailing of a saxophone inside his
Head while his lungs begged for air. Did his hands reach out to
Touch ivory keys one last time? I can only imagine the last song Billy
Tried to sing to Duke, Duke watching the eyes in the back of his
Head disappear.



Statue
Stephanie Durham

In the Light of the Lakeside Hotel

Devin Collins

Ethel sat up in the living room, smoking her Virginia Slims. The clock shook the hours off into the night as she waited for her husband to come home. She looked past the TV set, out to where just enough light spilled through the drapes into the front yard to see her laundry line. She had used it every washing day when they had lived in the country, but now it seemed misplaced. All of the clothes got put in the dryer, now. Her job at the grocery store took too much of her time to line dry anything, but she could still remember the smell. Now the clothes all smelled like chemicals, still, instead of the breeze. She ashed her cigarette and glanced over to see her son Robert standing in the hallway, barely at the edge of the lamps throw, shirtless, in his torn pajama bottoms.

"Robert, what're you doing up?"
"There's too much light to sleep."
"Go back to bed, sweetie. Close your blinds."

He stood there for a moment staring Ethel down, but finally turned and went back to his room. She listened for his weight on the box springs, imagining the rustle of the sheets that would soon follow.

Ethel had smoked two more cigarettes by the time she heard Glenn's truck rumble up to the curb. His boots scuffing up the walk, crunching across the drying grass, and knocking against the screen door. He slipped in, placing his hat on the rack. Ethel looked at his strong jaw and knew what it was they saw in him. Glenn walked to the kitchen, and Ethel heard him pull the tab off a beer. He passed back into the living room, turning his back on Ethel to head to the master bedroom.

"Glenn?" she exhaled.
He stopped and leaned on the wall.
"Please. Don't come home so late. Not anymore."

Glenn waited a breath before he said, "Stop waitin' up for me." Then he took his beer back to the bedroom.

*

*

*

"So whaddo you do?"

The voices screeching over the loudspeakers at the fair made it tough for Glenn to hear her, but this wasn't his first rodeo.

"I sell cars," he said, taking the can of beer and the three hot dogs from the vender.

"A cowboy like you? You oughta be out here, ropin' and ridin'," and she smiled at him. Her hat was red, lighter than her lipstick, with white lacing all around it.

"Well, I used to, but I had to sell my horses."

"Well, maybe then you'd like to come out riding with me sometime," he watched a bead of sweat slide down her collarbone, but he quickly smiled back into her eyes, "That's a lot of food you've got there, even for you."

"For my kids," Glenn said.

"Oh, so you're married?" but she didn't look hurt or offended when she asked this. It was just an honest question.

"Separated," Glenn said, "Say, how would I get in touch with you if I wanted to take you up on that ride?"

Glenn felt the napkin crease and move in his pocket as he walked back to his children. He handed Gina and Robert their hot-dogs, plain just how they liked, and sat down between them in the crowd. The metal seat had become heated by the sun, but he sat and bore it.

"Dad," Gina asked, "when're you going to do some roping again?"

Glenn bit into his hotdog, and was only halfway through chewing when he said, "I'll tell you what, I'll rope you two

knuckleheads as soon as we get home," and he tousled their hair meanly.

"Stop it!" Gina shouted, and Glenn did, "You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean. Soon. Soon as we can get some money."

Who knows when I'll rope again...

* * *

Ethel pulled the station wagon around the corner into the cul-de-sac. She looked over all of the track houses, each one nearly the same, but slightly different. Just enough so you could tell them apart, red shutters instead of blue, green paint instead of white, her own cheap drapes softly swaying in the wind. She passed Robert on his bicycle in the street and he waved to her. He was out playing with the Santini boys, riding up and down the street, and she waved to all of them.

When she got out of the car she watched Glenn in the front yard as he played with Gina. He had his cattle rope out and she was laying on her back, laughing, as he made the rope weave in between her arms and legs and then cinched the knot. He had fast hands, and Ethel had seen him win a few competitions before the ranch got sold. Back before she had to work Saturdays at Lucky's. She walked by them and into the house, hanging her purse next to Glenn's hat, still a little dusty from the rodeo.

She looked back out the door to Glenn and called, "Have you seen any cigarettes around the house? I ran out at work."

Smiling, he looked up at Ethel, "I'm not sure. Check the nightstand," he turned back to Gina, "Okay, you ready? Get going and I'll lasso you."

Ethel walked back to her bedroom with the sound of laughter, playing and falling behind her. The cigarettes weren't on the night stand, but she lifted up the beige sheets and looked under the bed, between all of their shoes. She went back to the front door to check the bowl of keys, but there was nothing there, either.

"Glenn, there's nothing here, either."

"Check the junk drawer, then."

Of course he won't help. He can't help anything. She turned from the open door and went back to the kitchen. The kettle was already on the stove, so she lit it and figured she'd make herself some tea. Anything to pick her up. The junk drawer was the furthest to the left, the faux lacquer on it meant to make them think it wasn't just composite wood, the tacky brass handle. She took ahold of it, the coolness on her skin, and tried to pull it out, but the drawer wouldn't budge. She tugged once, but it still wouldn't budge. Ethel grumbled under her breath and tugged again, with force, but the drawer only moved to the side. She gripped the handle from beneath, then, and tugged on it again and again and again. The sides of the counter crackled ever so slightly, but she kept pulling on it. The veins in her forearm shot to the surface one last time and she jerked the drawer so violently that the wood gave away and the drawer came clear. Ethel stumbled backwards, the drawer still in her hand, dumping pens and lighters and a legal pad onto the floor before she fell flat on her ass.

She felt hands on her shoulders, and heard Glenn's voice in her ear, firm but soft, "What happened, Ethel, are you okay?"

Ethel just sat for a moment, and she felt someone pull the drawer out of her hand. She put her hands on her face. There was the noise of a click and an inhale behind her, and she smelled the smoke. Glenn moved in front of her and she took her hands from her face. He gave her the lit cigarette. She didn't like Marlboro's, but she took it and inhaled deeply. His fingers wrapped around her hand.

"What's wrong, Ethel?"

"I don't want to work at a grocery store."

"I know you don't," Glenn sat down beside her.

Gina walked around Ethel and kneeled down in the chunks of wood and pens, crisscrossed like pine needles on the white tile, and started picking them up and stuffing them into her pockets.

"Why couldn't we stay in our home?" Ethel asked.

"This is our home," and Glenn stood up. He picked Gina up from her crouch and said, "Go outside with you mom. I'll get all this."

Ethel took the cigarette out to the front steps of the house and sat and motioned for Gina to sit next to her. They looked across the street at the Santini's home and Ethel pretended for a moment that the Santini's had nicer drawers, nicer things that she could be angry about, but she knew their house was just the same inside as hers was. Back on the ranch was where the solid wood was. She couldn't have broken those drawers even if she had tried. Glenn couldn't keep the ranch, though, and so they were all here, now.

Glenn came out with his keys jangling in his hands, "I'm going to go down to the hotel to get a drink."

"Glenn, it's nearly dark," Ethel stood, "What about dinner?"

"I promised Clark I'd meet him and some of the boys from the lot for a beer or two. I'll be home later."

She watched him climb into the truck and start it. He rocked the stick back and forth before he got into first gear while he rolled down the window.

"Gina, go on up the road with Robert and get some cigarettes for your mother," and Glenn pulled into the road.

Ethel watched his car round the corner at the end of the cul-de-sac, standing with her arms around Gina.

"Go on," Ethel said, "I'll get dinner ready for when you get back."

* * *

Glenn came home when even the light to see was gone. The truck rumbled up to the curb, and he stared at the station wagon for a moment, and his son's bike in the front yard. He aimed the rearview mirror at himself and turned left and right, looking himself over. Glenn saw the light on in a house across the street. Thoughts of what it would be like to just wander into their home came over his mind. Maybe no one would even notice. All these houses look just the same anyways. They could just switch lives, maybe. He smelled his shirt and found only the scent of smoke and then took off his hat and set it on the passenger seat before climbing out of the truck.

He moved over the grass, and it crunched under his boots. It hadn't been so tough to look at when he didn't have neighbors

before. No one saw their yard out where the ranch had been. It was still there, of course, but it wasn't his anymore. He noted that even the dirt smelled different here, like fertilizer more than anything, sour and chemical.

Glenn opened the door and saw Gina sitting Indian style in front of the TV. He could hear Ethel in the kitchen, and he made his way back to her. She stood over the sink, scrubbing at the dishes. There was meatloaf on the counter, which was mostly eaten. He walked up behind his wife, pecked her on the cheek, and reached into the cabinet for a plate.

"How was the bar?"

"Just fine," Glenn spotted the place where the junk drawer had been that morning, the wood split out where the tracks had met the counter.

"The meatloaf is cold," Ethel said.

Glenn pulled the fridge open and reached in for a Pabst and a tupperware of potato salad. He took his plate back to the living room and plopped down next to his daughter.

"How was work, Papa?"

"It was alright. Your old man sold a few cars, even. Help your pop get his boots off."

Glenn sat down in his big lounge chair, a pale beige only a few shades darker than the carpet in the living room, and Gina started to work off his boots.

"You should tell your brother to move his bike before someone trips on it. Lord knows what would happen if your mother did."

Gina nodded and started on his second boot.

"What's on the TV?" Glenn squinted at the screen.

"Just some movie."

Glenn fell asleep watching the movie. There were monsters, chasing someone around their house, and it was all black and white. He drifted off with his plate still on his lap.

He woke up as Ethel took the plate away. She moved it to the sofa next to the chair and stood in front of Glenn, the light of the TV

flickering behind her. Glenn grunted and scooted back into his chair, trying to right himself.

Ethel hiked her dress up and climbed onto Glenn, and he felt the warmth of her legs through his jeans, through the napkin he still had in his pocket. She began to stroke his hair and she leaned into his chest.

She whispered in his ear. "The kids are asleep."

Glenn grew rigid as she kissed his neck. Ethel began to unbutton his shirt, and Glenn thought that he must have been turning red. He felt embarrassed; he hadn't had a shower since the bar. He pushed Ethel back, gently, but she tried to roll his hands off of his shoulders, trying to dodge his movements like a boxer. He pushed with both hands then, trying to look away.

"God damnit..." Ethel sat up straight. She grabbed the collar of her dress and pulled it, trying to cover herself, somehow.

"Ethel, I'm sorry..."

She stood up and turned away from him. She ran her fingers through her black hair, but it just fell back around her shoulders, forming her perfect bob again.

"Well, can you see about fixing the drawer?"

Glenn stared at her slender figure, just a silhouette. He looked back towards the couch.

"Broken. This whole house is flimsy," she said, "It's cheaper than cheap."

Glenn heard her voice go gentle and trill with that last note, and Ethel turned and walked back to the master bedroom. She left only a crack open as she slipped silently through the door. *Of course it's cheap.*

When Glenn woke up again it was to the sound of the station wagon starting. He heard the tires turning in the drive, and he got up to pull the drapes apart, hunched and stiff from sleep. The headlights cut across the window and he saw the car move up the street, out of view. He held his back there for a moment. When he turned he saw Robert standing in the hallway, dressed in pajama bottoms.

"How long have you been up?" Glenn asked. When Robert

remained silent Glenn said, "Get your sister and get dressed."

Robert left, and Glenn sat down to pull on his boots. He buttoned his shirt back up and grabbed the keys from the table. The truck started right up and Glenn tried to clear the sleep out of his eyes while he waited. His hat was still on the passenger seat and he picked it up and pushed it all the way back on his head. He lit a cigarette and pushed the door open when Gina and Robert got close.

The three of them cruised down the road, rumbling along in the truck. Glenn scanned the road, not searching but waking himself. At every stoplight he could hear the bottles clinking together underneath the seat, rolling beneath them with each stop and start.

Glenn could see his children tracing his eyes, trying to look over the dash and see what it was he was seeing. He knew that as he was spotting the large bucking horse, up in lights the name "Lakeside Hotel," so were they. He idled around the parking lot until he found the station wagon and pulled in next to it. Glenn left the kids in the car. He walked up to the door with a number seven on it. It was the only one with the light still on.

* * *

Ethel heard someone open the door and come into the room, but she didn't stop unpacking her suitcase into the dresser next to the bed. She was waiting for Glenn to say something, and she just kept unloading her things, her socks, dresses, bras, nothing in order.

"What're you doing?" Glenn said, and she could hear the stones in his throat.

"Making myself at home."

"Here? This isn't your home."

"Why not?" she stopped unpacking, but still faced the wall, "It sure feels like it. As much as our place does."

"Ethel, stop."

"Right here I can have you just down the way. You and your new girlfriend, or whoever."

"Just put the clothes back in the suitcase, come on," Glenn began moving around the bed to Ethel.

"It's got the same ticky tacky drawers here," Ethel turned

to him with a shirt still hanging from her hand, "It's got the same old blinds. It's got all the same makings, and just at a fraction of the price."

Glenn tried to take the shirt from her, but she tossed it across the room. They stood facing each other. He tried to reach out and touch her, but Ethel turned away. She hated the smell in this place, like chemicals, and she hated the drapes and the busted, dirty bed. Ethel grabbed the dresser drawer and began to tug on it, grunting as it resisted her, not wanting to be pulled free. She felt Glenn grab her around her waist and say something in her ear, "Let go, let go."

The drawer wouldn't come free though, even after the dresser nearly toppled over, and Ethel finally let go. She slumped onto the floor and Glenn seated himself next to her.

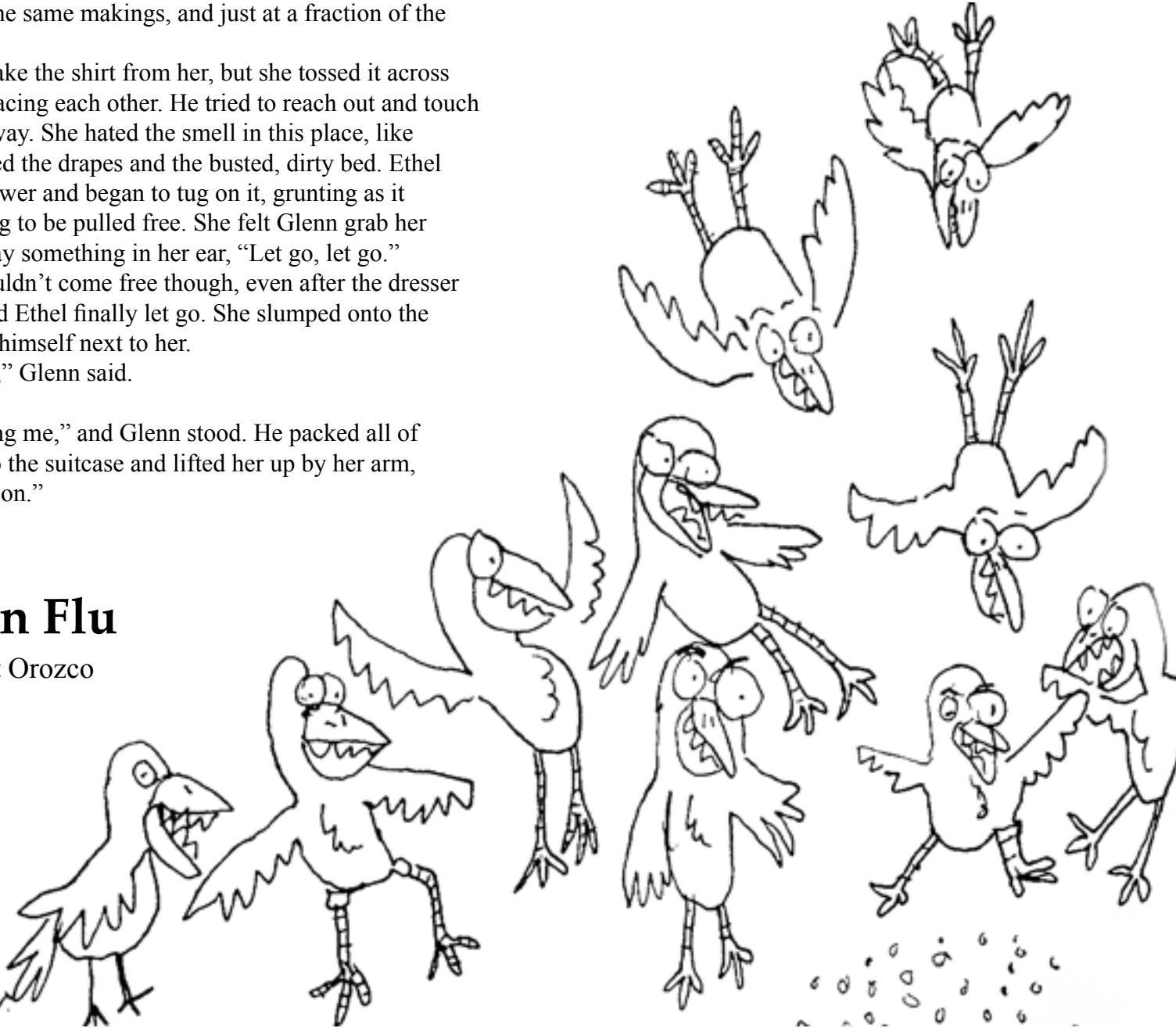
"Let's go home," Glenn said.

"You sold it."

"You keep telling me," and Glenn stood. He packed all of Ethel's things back into the suitcase and lifted her up by her arm, "Come on, now. Come on."

Avian Flu

Robert Orozco





Barstow
Brandy Sebastian

Graveyards

Olive Edgar

I like it at midnight.
Two to ten. Four to twelve. Eight to four.
I like these a.m. deadlines,
these early morning endings that lead me out
into Milky Way darkness, into that Silent Hill
grey, but more charcoal than that,
into burnt, black coldness
that strokes the coldness of my cheeks
and the tip of my nose,
and settles heavily on my shoulders.

I like the emptiness of my office,
straightening chairs as I walk back
from a still-full coffee maker.
I like the echo of my highest heels
on faded carpet stairs, and I like taking them off
to rest stocking feet on Veronica's desk.

I like that part of school
when all the students have walked off,
when it's just me and the trees and the tall yellow lights,
which erase all colors but goldenrod,
even the greens, even the purples,
even the sad colors.

I like being off before sunrise,
sleeping through sunny Southern California days.
I like to pretend that the blue of pre-dawn
will last forever - an endless mist
spent driving home on deserted roads,
moving toward our half empty beds,
reaching for you always.

Walking on Glass

Mia Yturralez

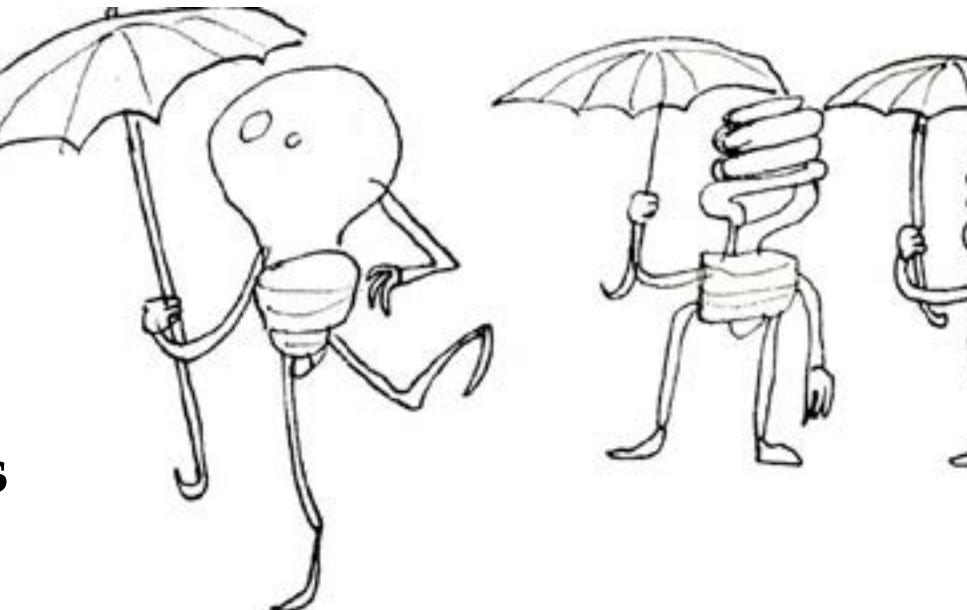
I laugh as I glance into my rearview mirror
and see the footprints on the inside of my back window.
The half-formed footprints I purposefully pressed onto the glass
as we lay in the back of my car
playing romance "Chicken."
The footprints are a fond memory from another time.
A time when all I needed to be content
was a pint of fudge brownie ice cream
and a twenty-pack of plastic spoons.

Lightbulbs
Robert Orozco

Dark Night

Melissa Kloz

I have no illusions anymore.
They're gone.
Under a new moon, I asked them to go,
and they obliged me.
In red hot flames they burned,
their ashes floating up into the dark.
In their absence, it's just the dark I'm left with.
And the light has not returned.
The sun didn't arrive on time today,
to overcome the space my illusions once occupied.
I stoke the dying embers,
and dance in the glow of their heat,
with only my shadows to keep me company.
At last, I welcome them,
coax them and dance intimately with them.
Together we sing the sun up.



Eats

Sarah Bates

Soupy fog descended around the windshield of my car as I pulled onto the gravel driveway in front of the diner. Blue light from a neon sign glowing above the entrance shimmered "Eats." I hit the brakes and the antique mirror propped in the back seat of my rented Volvo thudded against the back of my head.

"Damn," I winced as a screw head in the back of the old wood hit my scalp.

I'd been roaming through the Kansas countryside for three days, poking into stacks of dusty chairs, bureaus and farm equipment piled in barns along the one-lane roads. Lured by hand-lettered signs, I knew treasures lay buried beneath the ephemera of shuttered lives. So far, I had little to show for my efforts.

Hungry and tired I gazed at the diner windows reluctantly anticipating another greasy meal. A man sat at the end of the counter hunched over a cup of coffee and a newspaper. He looked up as I entered then turned back to his sports page.

"Whatcha want?" A fat waitress loomed over me, tapping the stub of a pencil against her front teeth. She squinted, sizing me up, like she might look at a fly hovering over cold chicken.

"Coffee, black." I peered at wedges of pie stacked in a pie case on the counter. The machine's ancient motor squeaked as the selection rotated.

"And one of those," I said, pointing to a thick slab of apple.

"Fresh," the waitress said, "Good choice." She slid a mug across the counter at me and tipped the coffee into it.

I felt my stomach grumble. "Yeah."

The coffee and pie tasted like home, flavors I'd not experienced in years.

"You the owner?" I asked.

She nodded, intent on watching me eat. I glanced up at her, met her eyes and then focused on the red name badge pinned to a white lace

handkerchief on her pink uniform.

"What's up, Barb?" I asked.

"You passing through or you new here?"

"Just looking for old furniture and stuff. You know of any for sale? I have a small shop in Topeka."

"That there pie display. It's for sale."

"With the pie in it?" I joked and noticed the pupils in Barb's eyes grow small.

"Without the pie, 'course. I'm just saying the display is for sale. You want it?" She brightened. "Hey, you buy it, I'll throw the pie in too."

Barb looked around the near empty diner, like she's had a thought so grand she could barely contain it.

"Tell you what, lady, you can have everything in the damned place. How much you give me for it?"

The offer stunned me.

"I only buy antiques," I sputtered.

"Everything in here's an antique, or just plain old. Most folks don't know the difference," Barb said.

She had me there. I greedily assessed the contents of the diner: shiny Naugahyde upholstered stools, vintage linoleum counter top, a Wurlitzer tucked into a corner, the pie case, the neon sign and a brand new Italian espresso coffee machine. I could sell all of this for close to eight thousand I figured. The coffee machine alone would get me a grand.

"Give you two thousand for the lot," I said. "Cash. One down, one when I pick it up tomorrow with my trailer. Deal?"

Barb's eyes glowed, her round face wreathed in smiles. She stuck out her hand. "Deal."

Motivated by the sales I anticipated, the next day I sped back dragging the trailer hooked to my Volvo, congratulating myself on the

good fortune I'd stumbled upon. When I reached the location, dead white sun illuminated the building, now shabby without its gray cloak of fog. I took the steps two at a time, grabbed the door and pulled. The handle came off in my hand when the door swung open. Inside, the contents of the diner were gone. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and draped the windows. On one wall where the pie case had been, a yellowed Notice to Vacate claimed the diner closed in 1938. "How could this be? I wondered. Worse, what happened to my thousand-dollar down payment? Bewildered and feeling foolish, I turned to leave. As I did, on the floor I spied a chipped red badge pinned to a tattered white scrap of lace. I stumbled back outside, but as I opened my car door I swear I smelled coffee and apple pie.



Egg

Brandy Sebastian

77 Beale Street

Rachael Guerra

He works high above the city,
overlooking the industrious gray
beauty that is the Bay Bridge
While watching the early
morning fog gently roll over the
bay, then disperse into the city,
he knows he has made it
He successfully escaped the
crowded and parched San
Fernando Valley, in search of
tranquility among the sturdy oak
trees throughout the Bay Area
How did he do it?

In the burnt orange glow of a
Southern California sunset,
he stands youthful and innocent
in front of a dilapidated liquor
store
It's the 1970s, as his feathered
sandy blonde hair tells it so
He is no older than 16
His flared jeans, a sight to see
I recognize my smile on his face,
a wide grin

It feels as though I am looking at
someone else
How did he do it?

Would he ever think that a small,
insignificant moment captured
in front of a liquor store, would
spark an interest in his daughter
some 40 years later?
An interest to know his past, and
how he came to be
I possess this photo as if I were
holding on to a deep secret
The secret of who my father was
before his life began
When he was just a teen, on the
brink of adulthood
Working at a crummy liquor
store in the '70s

But he is no longer that
struggling teen from The Valley
Now, he's a husband and a
father,
who resides in the lush foothills
of Mt. Diablo,
who works for a corporate giant
high above the city,
and over looks the morning fog,
while taking a glance at the Bay
Bridge whenever he feels like it
How did he do it?

Him and You

Susan Whaley

I wish I could lie and
tell you to leave
You give me too much credit

I stay in this choice that knows
my future more than I
could ever try to live

Let me tell you...

You sleep right next to me
with arms always over me
like you've never been able to live before me

Before the night comes down
I kiss you
laying on your pillow
I lay awake all night wishing
I could travel through your dreams

Instead I roam in unnecessary desires
of him
in his own bed
with his own girl
As he tells me he thinks of me
when he comes inside of her

Need to find my way back

One last time
We say
just one more time
We both know it needs to end
Stop, cut off, cold turkey

No more hiding out under
the skin of someone else

But,
I would suffocate just to
breathe you in
one last time

Come home too dirty to lie in bed
in his ignorance
of my whereabouts
Succulent lips on my neck
He never questions
as he sucks in the sweet nectar
of the deceitful blossoming

Got nothing to give but a damn hard on,
hard time,
hard to get
Nothing coming out of your mouth
but IOU's
as I swallow

I give you my mouth and
you give her a ring
All I want is your fingers
and to shed my guilt

Living in a day dream,
evicting my duty to commitment
Leave no trace behind,
pack in, pack out
The evidence rests in
what we choose to believe

Awake

Robert Bender

We as human beings are infants in the eyes of the universe. Humanity has only occupied our tiny corner of the cosmos for a blink of an eye. We have come a long way since our humble origins. However, we feel lost and empty now that the majority of our time is not consumed by hunting and gathering. How do we fill the void left by the cessation of our need to survive? Consumerism is not the answer. Beats by Dre, Escalades, and Frappuccinos are not the answer. The answer lies within yourself. Understand that you are not an individual. You are part of an entire species that as of this moment is consolidated to this single planet. I remember the moment, on a cracked, scorched patch of highway when I came to this realization. It changed the way I view myself, and it changed the way I view others.

One holiday weekend, my wife Stephanie and I decided to visit my mother who happens to live in Boulder City, Nevada on the outskirts of Las Vegas. We had made the six hour drive up Interstate 15 many times before, so for us, it was routine. And so our trusty baby blue Hyundai Accent, which had seen 175,000 miles, pushed on to Vegas. The week prior I had just finished reading "The Future of the Mind" by Michio Kaku. This book had opened my eyes to where our mind is today and where it might be tomorrow. I enjoyed the book to say the least. I had spent the first half of our drive contemplating what I had learned in between conversations with Stephanie, when suddenly I found myself asking big questions. Did I really know who I was? Will I ever feel important? Where is my place in the world? Why should I care? I had no way to answer these questions and soon I was in a private state of confusion and anxiety.

The sun set, my wife dozed off and I was left alone with my thoughts. Like the rest of the desert, the road we traveled was empty. All around me was blackness in the sense that an actor on stage sees the audience. To him the edge of the stage is like a wall, but he is

aware there is space beyond it. It felt like I was trapped in a box that only showed fifty feet of road at a time. As I drove, I struggled to find my sense of purpose but none came. I clumsily concluded that all of our lives are random and thus could never divine a singular purpose. My anxiety increased and I stopped looking inward and began to look outward.

I contemplated our world, our galaxy, our universe, our reality as a whole. I began to feel meager, powerless, and debilitated as the stage like blackness lifted to reveal the night sky and the silhouettes of distant mountains. It was almost as if I had been living my whole life in a small room and the walls were suddenly torn down. The minuscule world of which I thought I knew was in fact immeasurably immense. Then the panic came. I found myself in the midst of a full blown panic attack. Looking at the stars felt as if the universe itself was watching me. White knuckles protruded from burning fists as I clutched the steering wheel. I didn't dare wake Stephanie. The last thing I wanted was to pass my panic on to her. Besides, how could I possibly explain how I was feeling? I felt no one could understand. In my mind I was completely alone. And so I contained the panic and continued to think as I drove.

The road stretched on for eternity until a blinding silver light reflected off of my rear view, cascading down the dust covered dashboard on to the silent, broken radio, filling the Coca-Cola stained cup holders. I hesitantly looked into the mirror expecting to see some physical manifestation of the fear I felt, but only the light stared back as if it were telling me to wake up. I focused on the road and getting my head right. Life could not possibly be this bad. Yes, I am meager. Yes, I am relatively primitive. Yes, I could never hope to affect the entire world or the universe for that matter alone. And then it hit me.

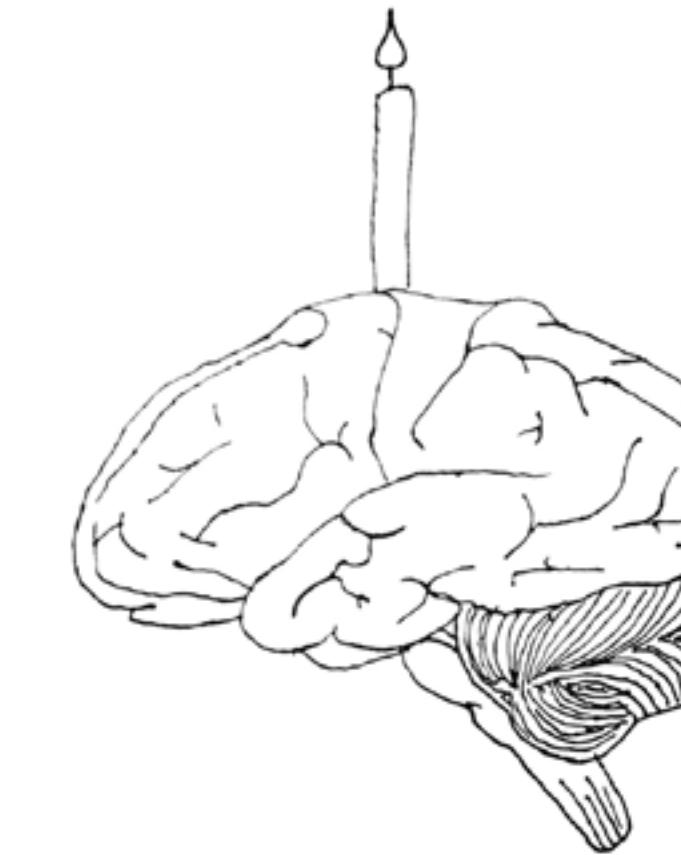
Nothing I have ever accomplished in my life was done alone. I always had help, and others always contributed. This new line of thought brought me hope and my grip on the wheel loosened. The lights faded as they pointed in a new direction and the empty desert night returned. However, things did not seem as dark. In the distance I could see a golden hue just beyond the horizon. I glanced over at

the shadows of my dozing wife. With her by my side, why would I need some divine destiny to give my life purpose? The depth of our relationship was more than enough to give me contentment.

And that was it. We are not individuals randomly bumping into each other on a relatively microscopic ball of water circling the faintest spark of energy. We are a vast interconnected web of relationships that make up humanity. It is in the bonds that we create with each other that give us purpose. These bonds are what will make a difference in the world, not an individual man or woman.

As the weathered Hyundai rose over the next crest in the road an electric oasis made up of glowing ziggurats jutted from an empty patch of desert like a beacon. I couldn't help but think of what we have accomplished in such a short time. Suddenly, my panic felt foolish, and maybe even a little shameful. In that moment my only hope was that others felt the way I did. I wanted to believe that others in the world understood truth of human nature.

Stephanie stirred, yawning and stretching. She asked me if I was tired and if I was still okay to drive. I smiled wearily, patted her leg and said that I was fine and that I was wide awake.



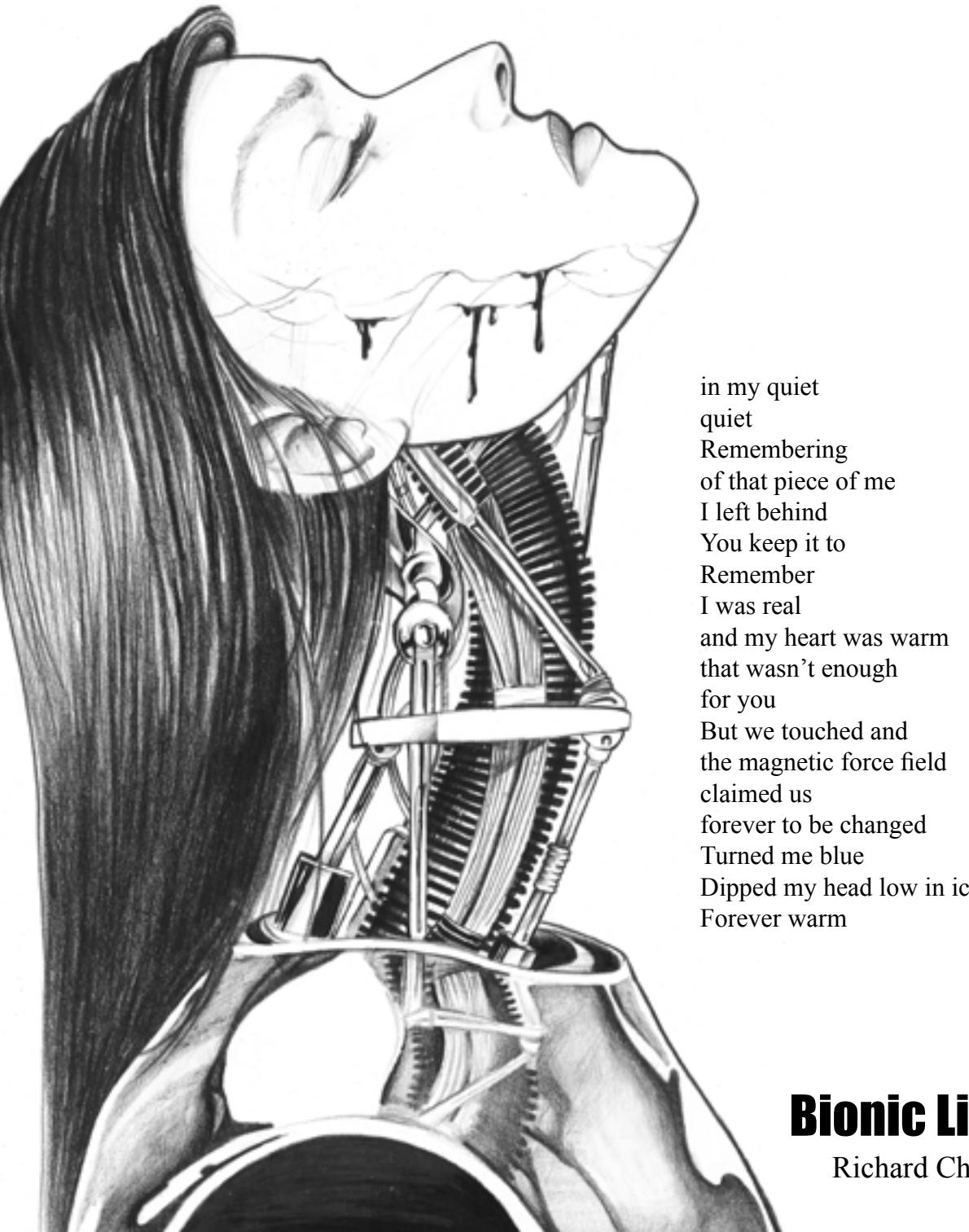
Lit Brain

Robert Orozco

Blue

Susan Whaley

I know you are here, so show me
what it is you want
You turned me blue
dipped my head low in ice
still, a blossom in the cold
You changed me
Turned me blue
Dimmed low
My quiet
quiet
Remembering
of why I ever let you
turn my skin electric
Don't you remember why
you decided that I
wasn't the one for you
So why show up here
now



Bionic Life

Richard Ching

in my quiet
quiet
Remembering
of that piece of me
I left behind
You keep it to
Remember
I was real
and my heart was warm
that wasn't enough
for you
But we touched and
the magnetic force field
claimed us
forever to be changed
Turned me blue
Dipped my head low in ice
Forever warm

areola

ruth rice

when you speak to me
your words slip
back through my lips
as ice unmade
water that slides
down my chin
over my throat, into
the small hollow, that
holds my shoulders aside
i could contain in your intention
in the rising of roseate skin

A Crying Heart

Donovan Ortuno

I remember looking at you, dancing with you along with the leaves in
the wind
And when I looked into your eyes, even though I may have been
looking down
I always saw the brightest blue sky in them
As if Nature's true beauty had been perfectly encased in those eyes
I can still feel the crunching leaves beneath my feet
Tall trees all around shining with a golden tint as the sun began to set
I wonder what you saw when you looked into my eyes
What mask was I wearing when you kissed me
Because it wasn't me you were kissing.

Pageant Pain

Jessica Payne

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Candice concentrated on inhaling and exhaling.

On the projection screen she could see her smile habitually displayed on her face thanks to the Vaseline on her teeth. She was picture perfect, she thought looking up at herself. Her teeth were iridescent white, not a hair out of place, and her spray tan assisted her from getting washed out in the stage lights.

"These young ladies are the best America has to offer," said Jerry, the host of the pageant. Candice looked at Jerry's temple where a drop of sweat glistened in the hot artificial light.

Breathe.

In the heat from the beams Candice remembered sitting in the hotel room watching E! News talk about how the sun damages skin, causing wrinkles and severe aging. She couldn't imagine her face on the projector with deep folds in her skin. Candice caught herself in her daydream. Why was she thinking of this?

Breathe.

She was one-in-a-million, standing next to twenty other girls who looked just as pretty as her, all grown up in the pageant world, all living for the made-up awards given to them. They all had the whitest teeth, fakest tans, and the tightest fitting dresses on in order to show off the growth of their anorexia. Standing together on the staged stairs, Candice thought the group's dress colors and glitter competed for attention like an unorganized kaleidoscope.

It occurred to her the only realism was just backstage where trickling water was leaking from the roof, exposing the reality outside.

Candice watched the other girls begin the 'Personality' portion of the pageant. Teresa was called first. She glided down stage

to receive her question. Jerry asked, "What is your favorite pizza topping?" Like any one of them actually ate pizza, thought Candice. Teresa responded with her high-pitched voice, "I actually love sardines!" Some of the audience winced — well she isn't winning. Next was Amanda. Her question was, "What is your go-to easy read?" Candice guessed something written by Nicholas Sparks. Amanda responded "Definitely *The Notebook*!" A flutter of applause from the audience followed as Amanda returned to her spot. They liked that one. Candice knew all the questions were silly nothings to help win over the audience and make the girls relatable; they were questions to help the façade that pageants and outer beauty did not consume the contestants' lives.

Candice looked into the harsh lights, they reminded her of the lights around the hotel pool. She remembered the glistening rain drizzling down on the water. As each girl walked up to the microphone, answered the question, and walked back to the group, Candice thought they were the glistening raindrops, illuminated by the forced light around the pool. And as each girl fell into the spotlight, they hoped to make a splash in the shallow pool water.

"Candice!" Jerry called out to her. She was forced back into the hollow moment. It was her turn to be the raindrop. Candice responded by graciously coming forward from the crowd of hungry girls.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Candice carefully walked up to the cold, silver microphone. As she made it to her destination with all her poise she felt the spotlight hit her. She saw the lights illuminate the confetti of dead skin cells in the air around her and veil the faces of the audience. The wanting-world in front of her evaporated. She knew it was just her, for the moment.

"Hello, Jerry."

"Candice, you have done very well in the competition so far."

"Thank you, Jerry." Candice's cheeks were getting tired.

Breathe.

"Candice, if you could have one thing right now, what would

you wish for?"

Candice felt her lips quiver and her voice shake. "What would I wish for?"

"Yes," said Jerry clarifying and keeping his charm and smile.

"...Um..." She felt time melting away, what would she wish for, she thought. Candice felt her eyes fill.

"Well, Jerry, I would wish for happiness." Her smile still intact and the audience silent, Candice returned to the group of ghostly girls. She felt everything disappear except the sound of her breath and the intruding rain from outside. She looked once more at the projection screen and saw her mascara drowned, leaving her eyes sunken into dark circles from the makeup. Blankly smiling, she inhaled and saw the curtains close.



Mummy

Brandy Sebastian

Perceptions

Gabriella Pleasant

I saw a painting
of a woman standing in the rain
holding a folded paper bag of groceries.
Her face was obscured
by her black hood and hair
and her brown hands contrasted
well with them,
as the slender fingers folded together

There was a companion —
the photo that the artist rendered.
He did not depict
that she was older, middle aged
the bag was crumpled, not folded and
her hood was too small
so that she leaned forward and stood awkwardly,
like a backwards ‘S’, holding up the bag and blocking out the rain
Her wrists were exposed from sleeves too short
and her fingers were laced except
for the pinkies.
Which looked as though they meant to touch
but had gone on slightly different paths
so that they failed to connect.

All these things made her flawed and whole.
Made her both real and tangible
And severed her from the artist’s rendition
I saw all that he wanted to see in that painting
All her flaws removed
The small details we choose to ignore
that accumulate while we’re not looking
into our everyday lives.

31 Hues of Pink: A Day in the Life of the Average Ice Cream Drone

Third Place, Fiction

Mia Yturralez

One

When I’m behind that counter, it’s as if no one remembers I can see, and hear, and feel them. They talk among themselves, and they seem genuinely shocked to realize I can hear them. I can understand the words they’re saying. I speak basic English, too.

A mom and daughter speak together while I scoop the mom’s order into a cup — Chocolate Peanut Butter, I think. And World Class Chocolate. I’m standing a bare foot away from them, leaning into the cabinet to get that second scoop, and the girl knows what she wants. Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, in a cup like her mom’s. I hear her tell her mom this as I walk toward them with cup and spoon in hand. I set the mother’s ice cream on the counter in front of them and look at the girl.

“You wanted the Reese’s, right?”

Both these women stare, then laugh, delighted at this little trick their server knows.

“Such a good listener!” they giggle. “So good at her job!”
Like I’m a monkey in a little red suit and hat,
dancing on the street for loose change.

They probably didn’t even tip.

Two

When I’m behind that counter, I lose whatever gives me the right to basic common decency. The people in the store seem to forget everything they were ever taught as children. They lose something too; whatever it is that normally gives them the will to strive, just a tiny bit, toward doing their best instead of the bare minimum.

Every time I step beyond that barrier and into their domain, I enter a madhouse. A whirling bedlam of melted ice cream, scattered trash, and discarded coupons. I go to each chair and table, dutifully wiping away the stains of service with a rag, transferring the marks from worn plastic to wet fabric. Some of them look as though a person let their ice cream melt, spreading the puddle across the table with their hands. The Wild’n’Reckless is the worst — the blue and green and purple are the most obvious stains.

Other tables just have piles of trash lying on them, ripped cone wrappers, crumpled napkins, empty cups. As if whoever sat there couldn’t be bothered to hold it for the two extra seconds required to dump it in the trash on their way out the door.

Tiny hand prints smudge the windows that look out on the cold asphalt of the parking lot.

Children have filthy hands.

When I walk toward the cans by the front door — that agonizing five-step journey — I stop for a moment to stare. A pink cup rests on top of the trash can, pink plastic spoon nestled comfortably inside it. Teetering just on the edge of the can; a light wind could have toppled it. A split second. An inch or two of extra movement. A tiny push to get the flap on the can open. That’s all it would have required to put the cup into the trash.

With a sigh, I pick up the cup and drop it in the trash where it belongs. Adjusting my visor, I go back behind the counter with my rag, my sojourn beyond my usual environment gone unnoticed by the other patrons in the store.

Three

When I'm behind that counter, sometimes even I begin to believe I don't exist. My faith in my own existence as a human being falters, until I start to think of myself as untouchable.

A woman approaches the counter, towing two young children by their hands. I listen to the way she speaks; she tells them they need to hurry and make a choice, because I haven't got all day. Of course, what she doesn't realize is that she's fundamentally incorrect. I do have all day. The little numbers on the slip of paper I receive every payday represent exactly how much time I have to stand and wait while children — and adults more often than not — make up their minds.

The younger child, the boy, makes his choice at once, but his grandmother seems unconvinced. Wild 'n' Reckless has that effect on the uninitiated. Smiling, I share a tiny piece of myself with these people.

"This is my favorite flavor, too." Somehow, my opinion sways the woman, and she lets me scoop the flavor for the child.

When the children have their icy treats, the woman approaches my till, and I smile at her past my frozen mask. I chatter, asking how her day has been, as I'm expected to. And I listen to her talk about her day, as I have to. And I stare, in shock, when she seems to realize that I'm really there. Her parting words stop the world's rotation for an instant.

"I hope everyone is nice to you today!"

For a moment, after they leave, I allow myself to think that perhaps there's hope.

Then I remember: people are horrible and there is no hope, and the world spins into motion once more.

Four

When I'm behind that counter, I cease to be a person. People approach me — men and women who ought to know by now what it

is to be invisible — and they ignore me when I ask "How are you?" Even though some part of me is crying out to connect with them on such a basic level. All they see is the pink and blue of my uniform. The logo on my shirt. The visor hiding something from them that allows them to forget I'm human. They step toward me and ignore my greeting, my smile.

"A scoop of Jamoca Almond Fudge, on a sugar cone."

Why is it always Jamoca Almond Fudge? This flavor of ice cream that all the worst kinds of people seem to want. There must be something about it that attracts that special kind of person. The kind of person who feels justified in treating me like I exist solely to scoop the ice cream they so desperately need.

These are the sort of people who don't dare look at me for too long. Lest they see past the visor, and the large 31 on my back, and see. See that I look just a little too much like them. That I'm not just a pink-and-blue drone programmed to fulfill their every ice cream need. Instead they ignore me in favor of barking their order not-quite-in my face, and they play on their phones or stare at the empty cones or out the windows until I've handed them their desired flavor. Many of them seem eager to push their cash or their card into my hands, and I take a sick sort of pleasure in insisting I call for a ring.

Maybe they'll have to look at me if they need to wait ten more seconds to pay.

Five

When I go behind that counter, the people around me cease to be real, genuine people, too. It's as if entering the store reduces them to mindless apes, gesturing and grunting to convey what it is they want. An act as simple as ordering a scoop of ice cream becomes a ridiculous series of pantomimes and guesses, with me filling in all the blanks.

They stand across from me gaping at the impossible variety of flavors, talking among themselves as if I'm not even there. And when it comes time to decide, they throw their words at me in the

dismissive way they might throw a crumpled piece of paper in the trash. Or onto the ground, right beside the trash.

"I'd like a scoop of this one," they say, and I guess that they must be pointing to the tag on the glass front of the case. The tag that conveniently states the name of the particular ice cream they've decided they have to have. The tag that I cannot see from where I stand, because it's on the other side of the counter. On their side. Briefly, I wonder if they simply don't understand that what I see is different from what they do.

I savor the words that I'm allowed to say in reply.

"Which one was that?" The pleasure lasts only a moment, because they simply point more insistently — I assume — and repeat their desire for "that one." Sometimes, an especially clever ape might try to describe it.

"The green and purple one," they say. Or, "The one you just let me try." And I'm forced to give in, lifting the cover of the case to point at the flavor I suspect they want. Reduced to mimicking their vague gestures and phrases. Reduced to communicating on their level, that they mistakenly believe is mine.

Stooping to their level seems to pacify them, and they exit with their dignity impossibly intact, leaving me to sweep up the shattered remains of whatever dignity I have left in preparation for the next wave of customers.

Six

When I go behind that counter, people mistakenly believe I have some sort of power. Not authority — only a very few especially stupid people make that mistake — but a genuine power. They assume, when I'm behind that counter, that I can understand exactly what it is they want, even if they refuse to tell me.

A family steps inside, and I greet them with my customary smile. Other than a brief, cursory glance, I am ignored. As is also customary. Except to give me their orders, the family does not acknowledge my existence, and I follow their meandering path

around the store, mirroring their steps on my side of the counter while they take their time perusing the selection. The women — the mother and her daughter, I assume — seem particularly distressed by the sheer amount of choices arrayed before them. The mother clutches a sheet of paper in one hand so tightly you'd think the secret to eternal life were scrawled on it.

When they finally choose to order, the rest of their family has already disappeared outside. With her order finally in her grasp, the mother lifts the paper to pass it into my hands, and I pause, surprised that she'd relinquish something so valuable.

A word scrawled over the top of the paper in a "silly" font draws my eye, and I realize, with no particular interest, that it's a coupon. But not an ordinary coupon — this is one of the special ones. One of the few coupons we can not redeem, because it is only valid at another location, barely even a mile away.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I say — a bald-faced lie. "This coupon is only valid at the Old Town location."

The woman huffs, and I can almost smell the danger I'm in. "Why didn't you tell me before? Didn't you see me holding it?"

Yes ma'am, I did see you holding it. No ma'am, it is not my job to make sure you have read the coupon you downloaded online thoroughly. Yes ma'am, you do have to purchase your ice cream at full price.

I am forced to wait, while the woman stands beyond the counter — just out of my reach — and huffs and puffs and blows nothing down, and her daughter escapes outside to fetch money. When finally they pay, I insist that they have a good evening, and the woman leaves, taking her anger with her.

Have a nice evening, ma'am. Make good use of that coupon elsewhere.

Seven

When I step behind that counter, I gain a unique advantage over everyone who enters the building. These people come to me and

reveal parts of themselves I'm sure they never intend to reveal.

A man comes into the store with his family sometimes. He's the kind of man who will joke with the staff. Friendly. Likable.

I can't stand him.

He comes into the store, and something about him just seems...off. His jokes are a little too fabricated. His smiles a little too forced. His family — his wife and two children — a little too quiet.

Whatever it is that's wrong, I see through the shield of lighthearted banter he throws up the instant he steps into public. I see a part of him I'm sure he goes to great lengths to hide. He has the gall to make jokes to me and pretend to laugh with me, but I don't think he's ever really seen me.

I saw him once. Out in the real world. He didn't recognize me, but I saw him. And I knew who he was. This man who gives me vibes that make me hate him. It may seem petty, but I'm at a unique advantage when I'm behind that counter, individuality hidden behind an apron and a blue shirt.

I see these people.
But they don't see me.

Eight

When I'm behind that counter, people tend to assume that I care. I may be paid to be friendly to people, but a few rare individuals will mistakenly assume this means I agree with everything they say or do.

A man comes in from the dark outside world, and I greet him like a good little ice cream drone. "Hi! How're you doing tonight?" It's been a little while since my last customer. I've had time to recharge my enthusiasm.

He rushes past me to the back of the store, stating he's only here for a few prepacked quarts of ice cream. This isn't unusual — many of our customers like taking ice cream home — and I assure him it's no problem, I'll be right there if he needs anything.

When he comes back to the counter, he seems relieved.

"Thank god you have the Gold Medal Ribbon!" It's a popular flavor, but I don't share his enthusiasm for the ice cream he plops down onto the counter.

I start to bag up the quarts, while my shift leader rings up the man's items. As we work, the man talks at us. This is also not unusual — some people enjoy sharing with a captive audience. I listen while I shove his cartons of ice cream into a paper bag with a pink logo on the side.

"I'm glad you've got this; it's my favorite flavor," he says. I nod and make agreeable noises in response. "The other location only had one quart, and they wouldn't pack one for me for the sale price!"

By now, we're nervous. I look at the man, pausing before I'm able to ask if he wants spoons and napkins in his bag. Unfortunately for us, this is also not an unusual experience. My shift leader and I exchange looks, both wondering the same thing.

Oblivious, the man carries on. "I thought I could bully the girl into giving me the sale price. She was just a kid!" He plows on, not noticing that my shift leader and I have stopped making our agreeable noises at him. "Good on her for not letting herself be bullied!"

He takes his ice cream and leaves the store — totally unaware of what he just did.

He was an asshole to a teenaged girl.
And he was proud of it.

He bragged to two employees about his feat — and we stood and made noises that he interpreted as support.

Maybe next time he'll get his two unequal quarts for the sale price.

The Mbira

Bryan Angel

We've played you till the skin on our
Thumbs are no more than a gazelle's left
Thigh in a lion's jaw, till the soles here on our
Feet nearly give up on rain & settle into a
Gourd resonator. You're played until you bring
Peace to Zimbabwe's russet nightfall & bless a girl's
Bed until she can stand & no longer feel defeated by some
God awful disease. Yes, your buzzing symphony of translucence
Echos past angels, ghosts, & carves a totem of animal head, proving a
Bloodline & Your reed tongues are embraced until a spirit sings through
Our bones & ancestors send their blessings from the loom.

By the time the cab arrived at its destination the sky was dark. The lights of the city were coming on, and with them a shift in the city's energy. Riley felt it as he got out of the cab: a subtle tension in the air that made him want to move, to shout, to do anything except stand where he was. There were hardly any cars on the street, but what had been a slight trickle of pedestrians by day filled into a steady stream with the coming of night. Many made their way into the club Riley stood outside, but most passed by onto unknown destinations. Riley handed the driver his fare, with a sizable tip.

"Thank you, sir," the driver said.

Riley looked down at the man. "What are you going to do when you get off work?"

The driver thought for no more than a moment, then said, "I will tuck my daughter into bed, kiss my wife, and go to sleep."

"That's it?" Riley asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're not going to do anything to welcome the end? This is your last chance to go crazy, have a wild party ... lose your mind without any consequences"

The driver shrugged. "I will do what I always do. It brings me comfort." He looked ahead at the road, then turned to look Riley in the eye. "It is also the last chance I have to kiss my wife," he said, and drove away.

Riley stood there for a minute, thinking. He held a yellow legal pad in his left hand. It was filled with writing, some neat, some so scribbled it was hardly legible. He turned to the first blank page and started writing.

The hardest people in this city to talk to are those in denial. They go about their lives as if nothing has changed. Even the mention of the end makes them angry.

They cannot reconcile themselves with the end, so they pretend it is not coming. More than anything, I feel sorry for them.

Riley's phone buzzed. He read the message. A thumb moved to answer it, but hesitated at the last second and moved away from the screen.. An old homeless man passing by made him look up. He held a tattered cardboard sign on a stick. All Riley could see was the back of it, which read, "Told you so." He looked after the man, then back at the club. There was no one watching the entrance. Riley walked right in with everyone else.

He felt the music first. The pounding in his chest and head and feet told him the quality of the place, and as he made his way into the heart of the club his expectations were confirmed. Riley found himself pushed toward the sea of people on the dance floor by the steady flow of traffic into the club. He craned his neck to find stairs leading to the upper level, and just before he became one with the rhythmically pulsing mass, he spotted them far to his left. The lights shifted from red to purple to green in time with the music.

Riley broke off from the people around him and headed toward the stairs. In the last instant before reaching them he found that he could not make himself climb them. He turned away and looked for an empty space to sit.

Riley found an open table at the perimeter of the dance floor and he sat down at it. He watched the crowd moving to the music. The place had to have been past capacity; the floor was so densely packed, Riley felt sure that if one more person tried to join the crowd would burst like a cell taking in too much water. The music still pounding in his ears, he placed his legal pad on the table and began writing.

Music drowns out thoughts, drowns out reality. Bodies move against each other, letting everything except the moment disappear. They are wasting away, confusing sedation with acceptance.

Riley felt the hand on his shoulder before he heard the voice all but shouting his name. He looked up to find a young man smiling broadly at him. The first thing anybody ever noticed about this man was his hair. It was a shocking shade of gold, and came down lightly over one eye.

"Riley!" he said, clapping Riley on the back. "I can't believe you actually made it."

"Hey Jason. What are you doing here?"

Jason looked at Riley. "What do you mean? Didn't you get Susan's messages?"

Riley looked down at his pad and said, "No. I didn't bring my phone with me today."

"No? What're you doing here, then?"

Without looking up Riley said, "Research. My book."

"You're still on that?" Jason said. He frowned at Riley. "Anyway, forget that. Come on, everyone's upstairs."

"I'm sorry," Riley said. "I can't stay." He stood up to leave, grabbing his pad.

Jason put his hand on his shoulder again, stopping him from walking away. "Come on, man. We've missed you for months." He looked toward the stairs. "Susan's... everyone's been worried about you."

"I'm fine."

Jason looked at Riley. "You're not fine. Look at you." He reached for the pad. Riley pulled it away before he could grab hold of it. "You've been completely shut off from everyone for months, and for what? What are you even writing?" Jason looked at the legal pad again, prompting a step back from Riley. Jason sighed, and then turned his palms outward, conceding. "Listen. I don't want to fight. Not today. Just..." He looked pleadingly at Riley. "Just come up, see everyone. We'll talk. Susan..."

Riley's eyes shifted from his pad to the dancing crowd, to the

shifting lights, to Jason still waiting for his response. He shook his head, but finally said, "Fine. I'll come with you. But I only have a few minutes, and then I have to leave."

Jason let out his breath, relieved. "I'll take it," he said, and turned toward the stairs. Riley followed.

As they neared the upper floor Jason let out a small laugh. "What?"

Jason pause, as though he were trying to decide how to put it. "After you disappeared some of our friends said that you'd probably died."

The laugh that escaped Riley's mouth was involuntary. "What?"

Jason shook his head. "You know how Dan is." Riley did. "He even got a little bet going."

They stopped at the top of the stairs. "Oh?" Riley said. "What did you bet on?"

Jason turned to face Riley, a grin on his face. "Drinks are on me."

They walked to a booth along the balcony overlooking the dance floor. Riley recognized most of the people there, but he didn't see Susan until she stood up. She smiled and said something that was drowned out by the music. Some of the others turned around to watch their approach, and Riley could hear the sound of his name being called. Someone gestured gleefully at Dan, who hung his head and made a big show of reaching for his wallet.

Susan had untangled herself from the booth by the time they got there. Riley wasn't sure what to say, but Susan made it easy, hugging him tightly for a moment before pushing him away to look him over. "Riley," she said. "You look like hell."

"Thanks."

Susan had cut her dark hair short since he'd last seen her. She'd also replaced her contacts with glasses, again. "I've missed you."

"So I heard," Riley said, looking at Jason, who was sliding into the booth and already starting jumping in on the group's

conversation.

"How've you been?"

"Around."

Susan rolled her eyes. "You're supposed to say that when I ask where you've been." She looked at him again, frowning. "Where have you been?"

"Fine."

She sighed. "Still an ass, then."

He smiled the way he always did when she called him that. She laughed and said, "Here, sit down, I'll get you a drink."

Jason said, "I'm buying!"

Riley shook his head. "I can't," he said. "I'm only here for a minute. I need to get going."

"You're not staying?" Susan said. As she started to look away she noticed the legal pad in his hand. "What is that?"

Riley didn't look at her. "Today's not a good day for me."

"Today..." she stepped away from him. "Oh my god. You're still..."

Riley didn't look at her.

"You still don't believe the world's going to end?"

"I don't know what to believe."

Susan crossed her arms. "How many years has it been?"

Riley didn't answer.

"How many years since the first reports came out? How many scientists, teams of scientists, have tried to prove the projections wrong, only to come back with the same conclusion?"

He looked at her helplessly.

She sighed and said, "This isn't how I wanted to do this."

"Then don't," he said. "I'll leave."

Susan touched Riley's arm. "Please, Riley. Whether you want to believe it or not, today is our last day on Earth. Can't you at least spend it with people who care about you?"

"Care about me? That's not what you said when you left."

Susan pulled her hand away from him as though his sleeve was scalding. "That's not fair," she said, looking away. Jason frowned

at her and stood up.

"I have to use the restroom," Riley said.

Susan turned back to face Riley. "Really," she said, then caught herself and softened her tone. "Come back after? We can talk."

"Okay," Riley said. He walked away.

In the bathroom he scribbled frantically in his legal pad. After filling the page he stopped, breathless. He walked over to a sink, turned it on, and splashed water in his face. He heard the door open and turned around to see Jason walking towards him. Jason grabbed the legal pad from the counter before Riley could stop him.

"What the hell was that, man?" Jason said.

"Give it back."

"Why? What's so important about your little book that you can't even have a straight conversation with your friends?" He looked at the paper in his hands. His eyes widened a few words in, then narrowed as he kept reading. "What is this shit?" he asked. "Indulgent? Cowardly? Is that what you think this," he gestured toward the bathroom door, where outside the music still pounded away, "what all this is?"

"Isn't it?" Riley asked.

"We've only got one night left, man. We're trying to spend it living life."

"You're running away from life. The city's given up. You're in denial."

Jason scoffed, looking around at no one with an incredulous look on his face. "Denial? Really? That's pretty great, coming from you."

"Maybe I'm the one who's trying to see things clearly."

Jason shook his head. "It doesn't have to be like this, Riley. Just come on back to the group."

Riley shook his head and reached for his pad. "Give me my work. I'm getting out of here."

Jason pulled it back, out of Riley's reach. "Not until you apologize to Susan. I'll give it back once you've talked."

Riley considered it for a moment then swung his fist, punching Jason in the jaw. Jason took a step back, stunned. It was only for a moment, though, and he didn't drop the legal pad. Instead, he came back with a punch of his own. It connected with Riley's cheek, and Riley crumpled onto the floor.

"You were always impossible," Jason said, dropping the pad at Riley's feet. Riley didn't move. "I'm sorry I tried.

* * *

Riley stumbled out of the club, legal pad clutched to his chest. He felt his cheek with his other hand. He hadn't taken a look, but he was pretty sure it was already starting to bruise.

By now the city was moving in full force. The sound of human voices permeated everything. Laughter, mostly, but there was idle chatter and loud shouts mixed in as well. Riley thought about calling a cab, but the streets were filled with people rather than cars tonight. Couples danced in the middle of the road. Friends sat on the curbs, smoking and watching the movement around them. Riley scribbled in his pad for a moment, then started walking away from the club.

The denial is beginning to crack. As the time approaches ever closer, people are starting to come out, and they are agitated. Sounds of riots in the streets. Fear and anger fuel the night.

As he walked Riley passed a small diner. A sign hung on the door that said "All meals are FREE (today only)." He peered into the window, surprised to see only one patron. The homeless man he had seen earlier sat at the counter, hunched over something. His sign sat next to him, propped up against the counter. It read, "THE END IS NIGH" in big block letters. Riley laughed, then walked into the diner.

He sat next to the old man and ordered himself a sandwich. The homeless man was digging into a stack of pancakes.

Riley accepted a glass of water from the waitress, then said, "You ready for the end of the world?"

The old man snorted, patting his sign. "I've been ready for years."

"Yeah," Riley said. He started writing.

This man: this old, homeless man, has lost everything and everyone he's ever had or known. For him, perhaps the end of everything is a relief, something to look forward to. When is the last time he made a real human connection? Months ago? Years?

"What about you?" the old man asked.

Riley looked up. "What about me?"

"Why are you alone on your last day on Earth?"

Riley's phone buzzed, but he ignored it. "I'm not. Not necessarily."

"Oh?" The old man said. "Your friends are outside?"

Riley shook his head and said, "No. That's not what I meant."

The old man looked at his legal pad. "What are working on, there?"

"A book. I'm writing about the people of the city."

"What're you calling it?"

Riley thought for a moment. "I'm thinking of something like, 'City of Madness'".

The old man laughed. He pushed his plate away from him and pulled a crumpled five dollar bill from the ceramic mug next to him. He laid it on the counter and got up to leave. "That's a terrible title," he said, and walked out the door.

The waitress came by and picked up the homeless man's plate. She was an older woman, her gray hair tied back into a ponytail.

"What about you? What are you doing here?" Riley asked. "It's the 'End of the World.'" He had to resist putting the phrase in air quotes, leaving it implied by his tone.

The woman looked at him. "I've owned this restaurant for fifteen years," she said, simply.

Riley hadn't touched his sandwich, but he left some bills on the counter, mostly out of habit.. He left the diner and walked down the street, not looking at the people passing by. The sounds of music and people overwhelmed him, and he leaned against a wall. He let his body sink down onto the ground, closing his eyes. He could feel the lights of massive neon signs against his eyelids. Somebody kicked his

shoe as they walked by. They apologized, but he only waved his hand in acknowledgement.

After minutes, or maybe hours, he tried to stand back up, but found that he was too tired to move. His breathing felt heavy. He opened his eyes and saw people still dancing in the streets. They moved more slowly, now. Most people who had been standing before were now sitting on the curb with everyone else. The lights of the city began turning off, block by block, leaving more and more of the city in complete darkness.

The power went down in Riley's block. He looked up at the sky. One of the more compelling parts of the studies had been the disappearance of the stars. One by one, the reports said, they would go out, and by the time Earth was ready to die, there would be no more stars visible in the sky. Riley did not know why. He had never paid much attention to the science. What he did know is that, at that moment, there was no light pollution to block any stars out. But as he searched he saw nothing but blackness, darker than pitch, stretching out all around him.

I can feel the end coming, now. I don't know why I'm still writing. I can't see the stars, but I know it's all this light. The city has always fought the darkness at the cost of seeing the stars. Somewhere, though. Maybe out in the countryside. Someone is sitting in a field somewhere, looking at this same sky, and I know they see them. I don't know why I'm still writing. The end of the world can't come until there are no more stars in the sky. Everyone's afraid to look up so they keep the lights on. If they would just turn them off... They're still there. They have to be. The stars are still there, and as long as someone is looking at them I know it's not the end.



The Book

Stephanie Durham

Dinosaurs

Rickety Ram

I

I wanted to write the world's Great Poem,
of crisis,
of China,
and income inequality,
to lift myself up,
and call us all to arms.

Arms in resistance to the
Don Drapers and Mitt Romneys of the world,
and their solid, unshakeable forty-seven percent.
(The other fifty-three tune in to Breaking Bad, instead.)

I wanted to write a poem to challenge
all those jet skis in the Pepsi commercials
(and all the false, phony happiness
that they advertise to too many children on Saturday mornings),

and to the peddlers
of promised, lustrous Touchscreen Happiness,
all evangelizing for that so-called great singularity of mass delusion
and dejection, resignation.

I wanted to tackle issues of the day in these lines,
and though I may never be a Whitman,
or a Ginsberg, or an Eliot,
may I still use this brief time of mine to call attention
to the real unemployment rate,
the poverty of our interior lives,
and the drones that hover over these scary skies,

and yell into the echoing chasm of the digital Twittersphere
(and Facebook's unwashed cyber ghettos,
of overwrought "Like" pages and painfully curated Timelines),
all this in a fruitless attempt for me to yell,
"We are all in this together!
We of little faith and insurmountable ego!"

II

I wanted to write that Great Poem,
I wanted to call us all into action,
I wanted poetry to be relevant again,
not just for the English Majors,
but for everyone

But I can't do it anymore,
the words just won't come.

Words on the page don't have the immediacy
of the empty buzzwords that permeate our lexicon:
YOLO, Swag, and
OMG, I'm doing it, too.

There is such a rich history behind us,
and there is so much splendor
here and now in front of us
but I'm afraid that television and Facebook
and all my fretting about how many
likes or reblogs my last selfie got,
all of that

All of That
has left me numb.

Numb to the wonders around us

numb to the power in between the pages of a book
Numb, and numb, I've become numb.

I saw the premise for the new Jurassic Park movie today,
and something about it grabbed me much more strongly
than any summer blockbuster ever has before:

and it was that,
"decades after trying and failing
to create a dinosaur theme park with real dinosaurs,
twenty years later, they finally succeeded.
They finally have a place where everyday people
like you and me
could see and hear and smell real dinosaurs,
right there with their own eyes,
walking, four-legged miracles!

But in the face of that marvel of modern science
and technology and imagination,
all of it,

in the year 2015 we are face to face with real dinosaurs
and our response is
'meh, so what?
Big deal,
did you see how many likes my last status update got?'"

There are dinosaurs all around us,
everyday miracles in kind acts performed by strangers,
magnificent feelings of warmth and connection
waiting for us in every interaction between everyone,

these are the real dinosaurs and superheroes
all around us,
familiar and foreign,
all around us right now.

But ours is a world where these everyday miracles

are overshadowed by hashtag culture and the
unrelenting race to see who can amass the most online followers.

Our dinosaurs have been dethroned
by the computer-generated false dinosaurs,
zombies, vampires, and superheroes onscreen,
the big screen at the movie theater,
the big screen in our family room,
the little one we take to bed with us every night,
under the guise of our alarm clock.

Ours is the last generation.
Just as our forebears a century ago
were the last generation
to live without electricity and the automobile,
so it is for us.

We are the last generation
to remember what life was like before the internet
was ingrained into every last nook of our lives.
We are the last generation to remember life
before all of us carried tiny touchscreen supercomputers
in our pockets.

We have the whole world quite literally at our fingertips!
Everything that has been preserved
and passed down to us through the ages,
sonnets, sculptures, symphonies, revelations
and invaluable life experiences of men and women
who asked the same questions a thousand years ago
that we still ask ourselves today

Why are we here?
What was I meant to do?
What is it like to die?

Or fall in love?

We have all of that,
right here, right here!
And instead we swipe
and we swipe
and we swipe our hands
and watch videos of epic fails
or “10 lists about lists that will blow your mind!”
or funny pictures of cats dressed as dogs
or catching up on what Kanye West did next
so we can rush out and tell our friends
about how indignant he made us feel.

But in this Tinder culture we now live in,
where all of our beauty and unique strengths
to contribute something meaningful to the world
are just something to be swiped through,
stand our painfully curated online profile pages,
where we present the best version
of the person we want to be,
a usurpation of our real selves.

What would Walt Whitman,
that quintessential American Poet of ours,
think were he to see our digital fixation with presenting ourselves,
all wrinkles and imperfections smoothed and photoshopped over?
What would you think, kind friend,
you who taught me so much
about the beauty in every last pixel
of every square-inch of ourselves?

III

I wanted to write that Great Poem,

about China,
about “we are the 99%”,
about not losing ourselves to our own digital doppelgangers.

I wanted to write that Great Poem
that would return poetry into mainstream consciousness
and remind all of us why it has been such a powerful medium
for conveying the most pressing issues of our day:
war, death, meaning,
and yes, even love.

I wish I could stand on top of the mount,
or in the garden of olives,
and sing and shout, naked,
to everyone who doesn't have their headphones on,

“What beautiful, beautiful people you all are!
Powerful and breathtaking like dinosaurs,
with so many gifts and talents to give to one another!
Life is too short,
and time goes by too fast,
so enjoy your own original relation to the world around you,
for it's there to be discovered by us firsthand,
with our eyes, our ears,
our delicate sense of touch and smell,
not second- or third-hand and
filtered through some tiny screen.

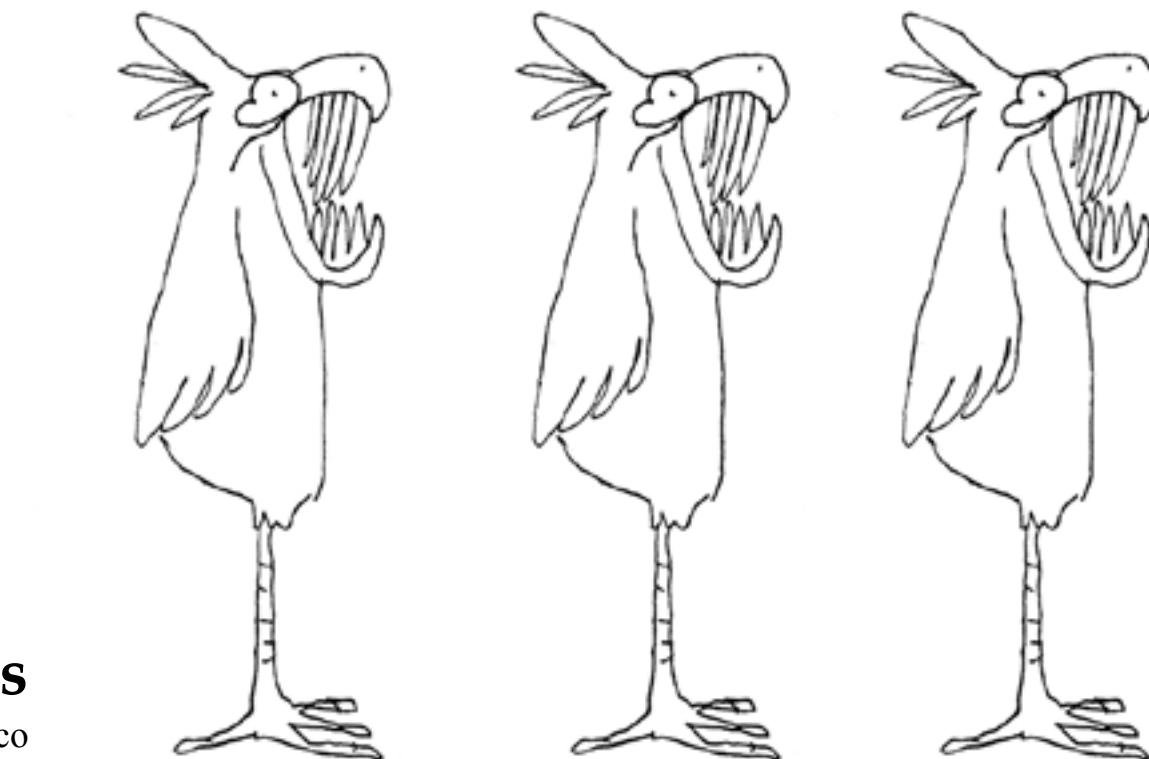
So smile, make a salad with the one you love,
cherish the company of your family and friends,
and remember how good it feels to give or receive a hug.

In the face of zombies,
vampires,
superheroes,

and computer-generated talking raccoons with oversized guns,
or
Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram,
and all the things to come
that will make them seem as quaint as MySpace,

in the face of all of that!
I still, perhaps naively,
maybe delusionally,
I still think it's possible to write that Great Poem,
to say all those quote-unquote “important” things,

I wanted to write a Great Poem about all that,
but this one will have to do.



Monsters

Robert Orozco

Kore

Amanda Williamson

Persephone grew up on her mother's farm, under the kind of massive pearly-edged sky that only really happens when there's barely a hill for a hundred miles. She grew up with bare feet, dry and brown with dirt from dashing through the fields, and jars of fireflies and roly-polies on her windowsill. Her house was filled with the garlands of grass and wildflowers she made.

Once, when she was little, she found a mouse's skull in the fields, bare and fragile and white-and-yellow under the dust. When she excitedly brought her prize, like she had always brought flowers and interesting rocks and ladybugs to her mother, Demeter snatched it from her and threw it hard from the porch into the fallow field behind the house. Persephone cried as Demeter scolded her and roughly scrubbed her hands.

Persephone has always known what her future would be. After all, her mother has it all planned out. She'll get a degree, more than one if she really wants. This is the 21st century, after all, not the dark ages. Then after she graduates she'll help her mother with the farm and eventually take it over entirely. Theoretically at some point she'll meet some boy and get married, but whenever Persephone mentions even liking someone her mother sharply tells her she's too young for all that. So Persephone studies, and makes daisy chains, and goes down to the ice-cream parlor and the library with the girls on nearby farms but never to meet boys like they did. And she gets very familiar with keeping her internet history off the shared computer so as to avoid interrogations. And that's how it goes for many years.

She meets Hades online when she is 22 and halfway through a double-major in Business and Agriculture at the tiny community college two towns over. Her mother drives her there every day in their battered green pickup, since Persephone still doesn't have a driver's

license. Persephone meets Hades in a gardening forum, during a blazing argument over the propagation of miniature roses. Then one over when to plant annuals for window boxes. Then another over pruning practices. And another over fertilizer types. Eventually they start talking outside of those arguments, then about topics other than gardening. Hades lives in one of the nearer cities, she learns, and runs an oddities shop. He gets almost more excited about the macabre things he finds to sell than about his house-plants, which is saying something. They have names. Both the houseplants and the oddities. She found that out when he started describing Gary, who she had assumed was a friend of his but turned out to be a large alligator skull that was taking a long time to sell. Hades is a few years older than Persephone, closer to 30 than 20 when they meet. By the time she's finished her degree Hades is one of her closest friends, and she has gotten very, very good about making sure her mother never finds out about him.

Demeter is on her knees, wrist deep in fresh soil with her hands around the roots of a new hollyhock bush when she sees the car pull up and stop in the gravel road outside their house. It's a boxy black convertible of some kind, several years old and dusty from the drive. The man driving it has longish black hair and shiny sunglasses. A moment later, the front door slams open and she sees her daughter sprinting to the car with a duffel bag. She flashes by in an old white tank top and torn jeans, long hair flying behind her. Before Persephone even reaches the car the passenger door opens for her to toss in her bag and slide in after it. The car door slams and as Demeter is running to the fence the car speeds off. Later she will find the letter that Persephone left on the kitchen table, saying goodbye.

Persephone can barely breathe as they drive away, hands shaking as she turns to shove her bag into the backseat. The car smells of soil and cologne and faintly of cigarettes. The engine growls as they turn back onto paved road and speed up, rushing away from the only home she's ever had. She looks at Hades, the first time she's ever seen him outside of a photograph. He is austere looking, pale-skinned with a hooked nose and harsh cheekbones. He tips his

sunglasses down his nose and looks at her for a moment, thin mouth curving into a reassuring smile and ice-blue eyes crinkling before he looks back at the road. Persephone takes another deep breath and forces herself to relax slightly. "Holy shit," she breathes, and she hears Hades stifle a laugh.

They stop at a little diner two hours away and Hades buys them both strawberry milkshakes and big club sandwiches. It's incredibly strange to Persephone to be able to look across the table and see him, to be able to steal some of his milkshake after she finishes hers and hear him snort in amusement as he pretends not to notice. Every few minutes, she catches herself thinking, shit, what if someone tells my mother I'm here with a man, before remembering that even if someone recognizes her and thinks to tell her mother it won't matter because they'll be gone in half an hour anyways. By the time they leave her hands have stopped shaking and she's almost more excited than terrified.

She starts living in his apartment and working with him in the oddities shop. She loves it. She loves the hum of the city outside the little apartment above the shop. She loves working the counter, watching people's faces as they come in and chatting with them as she rings up their taxidermy squirrel or pack of tarot cards. She loves the farmer's market three blocks down on Saturday mornings and the coffee shop on the corner with the fresh blueberry muffins and squashy couches. She signs up for drivers ed online, even though she can take public transport or walk just about everywhere here.

And she loves living with Hades. She likes seeing him scruffy and bleary-eyed when he shuffles into the kitchen in search of coffee and breakfast, with wavy hair and flannel pajama pants. She likes being able to argue with him in person where she can see him talk with his hands and make faces when he can't believe what she just said. She likes that when he walks in on her dancing instead of doing dishes because a great song came on the radio he'll join in. She likes the way his face lights up when he starts explaining what a great find he just made for the shop, those idiots didn't know what they had it's a genuine such-and-so, even when she has no idea what he's talking

about. She likes arguing about what to have for dinner and when to go grocery shopping and it's my turn for the shower stop using all the hot water already. She gets to meet his massive Rottweiler-Pittbull-who-knows-what mutt Cerberus, who immediately decides that he is in love with this new human and follows her around the apartment dopily, sitting on her feet and generally getting in the way.

She makes friends. Hades' friends come for dinner, and the college students helping at the shop conspire to take her out dancing. She doesn't go for weeks, still intimidated by the city and not quite convinced that she's allowed to do as she likes. Eventually they talk her into it, take her to a club where the music is too loud and the dancefloor is packed and they buy her drinks and dance until their feet hurt. One of them drives her home and she stumbles up to the apartment giddily and takes a fumbling moment to get the key in the door. Hades is asleep sitting up on the couch with the lights on. She considers him fuzzily for minute before kicking her shoes off, turning the lights out, and snuggling up next to him. They both wake up stiff and sore, joints cracking as they stretch and grumble their way into consciousness. Persephone grumps at Hades about waiting up for her and not going to bed, but he just raises an eyebrow and asks why she didn't wake him up when she got in then so they could both sleep in their actual beds?

It goes like this for months, while the crisp early fall turns into a freezing, slushy winter. Persephone steals Hades' jackets until he notices she doesn't have a warm one and drags her to a thrift store to get winter clothes. Thick caramel colored sweaters, an oversized leather jacket with a soft woolly lining, extra socks to wear layered under her boots. A stripy hat with a yarn pom-pom on top, and a massive purple scarf. She finds a hat with knit devil horns on top and badgers Hades until he buys it. As they walk out of the shop she digs through the bags until she finds that hat and stands on her tip-toes to pull it onto his head while he stands stooping ruefully until she lines up the horns just right.

Persephone misses her mother, sometimes. She misses her old friends and the way the light went through her bedroom window in

the morning. She misses being able to walk for miles through open fields with everything smelling dusty and grassy and the wind warm on her skin. She misses sitting on the porch with her mother, braiding flower chains while her mother told stories. She worries about her mother finding her, and worries that she won't see her again. She drinks a lot of tea and resists the urge to call home. She wonders if it will stop feeling so strange or if everyone walks around with missing pieces. Her friends help. Charlie, who makes deliveries for the shop, brings her a massive armful of flowers one day and they sit on the fire escape making wreaths and dropping flower petals down onto the alley below. Cerberus puts his head in her lap and rumbles at her until she scratches him. Laurie finds a local community garden and prods Persephone into volunteering with her. Eventually she starts to feel less like any minute someone will come to drag her back, or like she'll break on her own and run home.

The only warning that she gets when Demeter comes is hearing a car door slam and glancing out to see Demeter raging into the shop. Persephone is sitting in the window of the apartment, and for a moment she wants nothing more than to hide until her mother leaves. But then she hears the yelling downstairs. She squared her shoulders and opens the door, grabbing Cerberus' collar to keep him from getting out. He whines as she shuts the door, then rumbles a bark after her as she rushes down the stairs. He barks again, then again, the sound echoing after Persephone as she almost falls down the last few steps and catches herself on the wall. She scrapes the heel of her hand on the rough bricks as she rounds the corner to go into the shop, hissing at the sharp sting.

Inside the shop, Demeter is leaning over the counter, demanding to know where her daughter is. Lucy is cowering slightly, saying that she doesn't know where your daughter is ma'am, please, you need to calm down.

"Mother!" Persephone cries, rushing to insert herself between the two. "Stop it!"

"Persephone! Oh my god!" And here Demeter breaks down, crying. Persephone is shocked. Demeter hugs Persephone hard,

saying, "Oh thank god you're all right, I was so worried."

"I'm fine Mother, honestly. Hey now, come on, let's go outside and let Lucy work."

Persephone hesitates for a moment outside the shop before taking her mother upstairs. She sits her mother down at the table and starts some water for tea. She also hunts down a series of Band-Aids for the scrapes on her hand. Once her mother calms down, the trouble starts again. "So how long do you think it will take you to pack?"

"...what?" Persephone's stomach drops as she asks the question, hoping against hope that she's misheard.

"How long will it take you to pack your clothes and things?"

"Mother, I'm not going to pack anything." Please let her understand. Please don't let this turn into an argument.

"Oh, well, I guess you didn't take that much with you. We can leave as soon as you're ready then."

"No, I mean I'm staying here." It's going to be an argument. Her heartbeat thuds in her ears, and she balls her hands under the table to keep them from shaking. She feels a little light-headed.

Then there is a lot of yelling. Then crying. It ends in them quietly sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea and awkwardly catching up on the past few months. Every few minutes one of them has to stop short and stiltedly rephrase something to sound less confrontational, or Demeter catches herself starting the whole argument over again and needs to take a long gulp of tea to distract herself. Cerberus puts his head on Persephone's knee and grumbles softly until she distractedly puts down a hand to scratch him.

When Hades gets home, laden down with brown grocery bags, things get even more awkward. How do you introduce your mother to the man who helped you run away? Or your best friend to the woman you were running from? Everybody smiles stiffly and says hello, eyeing each-other's faces warily. Demeter holds out a hand to shake, and Hades, after a moment of fumbling to set down the groceries on the counter, takes it.

"So," he says slowly, looking at Persephone, "I guess I should call Laurie and Jake to cancel dinner?"

Persephone bites her lip worriedly and looks at her mother, then back at Hades. "Yeah, probably. Tell them we'll do it next week, 'kay?"

Hades relaxes infinitesimally at the mention of a next week. A muscle in Demeter's jaw jumps as she equally infinitesimally grits her teeth. Hades excuses himself to go make the phone call. Persephone busies herself putting away the groceries, glad to have something to do with her hands.

Dinner is awkward, finding extra blankets and convincing Demeter to take Persephone's bed, she'll sleep on the couch, no really Mother it's fine, NO I'M NOT SLEEPING WITH HIM JESUS CHRIST is more awkward still. The last bit is only halfway a lie, since most of the time they do end up in the same bed but sex isn't a thing they do so technically... And with her mother there it would be just far too embarrassing anyway.

Demeter reluctantly leaves the next morning, but makes Persephone promise to call at the very least. Persephone agrees and tentatively proposes a longer visit in the summer. They both cry a little bit. Persephone kisses her mother's cheek and waves her off, ignoring Demeter's glare at Hades' arm draped around her daughter's shoulders. After the green truck turns a corner and is out of sight, Persephone sags into Hades' side. He hugs her for a moment.

"Want to go get pancakes?"

"Sure. I've got work in a couple hours though."

"I know, I do the schedules remember?"

"No you don't, I've been doing those since a month after I moved in."

Bickering about whose job the schedules were exactly, they amble down the street, Hades' arm still slung over Persephone's shoulders. Then the overcast sky opens up, rain beginning to pour down, and they turn and sprint, laughing, back to the apartment for an umbrella and better coats.

And life goes on.

Devotion

Second Place, Fiction

Ashley Fernald

Songwriting in Milwaukee

Larry Narron

Spring has come suddenly to Milwaukee,
but winter has followed it over the fields,

silently passing the train tracks
half-buried in gravel. Water still hangs

suspended from your window sills:
the tongues of mute mouths, their spiral-

shaped choruses frozen mid-throat. Deep
in the blue heart of your house, candles

hold close to their counterfeit sunlight.
The pictures of horses you've drawn

on your walls seem almost to gallop
behind wavering amber tongues of light.

Everything you wanted finally ruptured,
tablature crackling into curling notes

of smoke, split wood turning gray
in your furnace of songs. Out on the rivers

the ferries are trapped in ice, so you'll stay here
in your bed, nursing the dark while the storms

keep shredding the trees, while your horses
continue to run through the fields of your walls.

unsaid

ruth rice

i put her out
at the greyhound station
silence scythed between us
like a foreign tongue
last chance mommy
a tissue of regret
stuck to her shoe
neatly swallowed up
by the wheezing doors
next stop, never

Nana sat slumped against the wall in silence. She could not move or speak anyway. She was only a doll. But she could think and feel, and she did so constantly.

The dingy floor of the dark room she sat in creaked and moaned. The wind blew up from the second story and whistled through the cracks in the wood, chilling feet and faces. Though the curtains were drawn aside, the window was caked in dust and little light made its way inside. A tousle of dirty blankets huddled forlornly in the corner. The girl wrapped inside shivered and sniffled. For the millionth time Nana studied her girl's flushed, chapped face, her tangled black hair, and the clouded eyes that would never see.

Nana had been Essie's doll from the time she had been made. Essie's father had made her out of scraps from his old coat. Two shiny lead buttons were her eyes, soft silk lining was her skin, and coarse denim was her dress. Twisted twine stitched onto her head was her hair. She had no mouth; her father was not skilled in sewing. It did not matter that Nana's right arm was yellow and her head was gray, nor that her dress was stained from years of mold. Essie couldn't see these defects and so didn't care.

The little girl heaved a wet cough and spat on the floor. Nana cringed inwardly. Essie was sick. Very sick. Her father could not care for her; her father was at work. Her mother could not care for her; her mother had gone to the Lord. Nana could not care for her; Nana was just a doll. But Nana could love her, and love her she did.

Essie sat up, pale cheeks red from the cold. She felt around the floor with her right hand, rubbing her nose with her left. "Nana?" she croaked. "Where are you Nana?"

Nana didn't answer. She was just a doll, after all. But inside she shouted, *Here I am, Essie, wonderful girl! I'm here, and I love you, and I won't leave you.*

After a moment Essie stopped searching. She sat with her blankets drawn up to her chin, sniffling. She kept blinking at the bitter wind rushing from the cracks into her face.

She needed medicine. Her father could barely afford the small room they were staying in, much less a cure for his daughter. Sometimes Nana wished she could move and talk. Maybe then perhaps she could provide for Essie.

A long time later Nana hadn't moved. Her cloth head still slumped on her shoulder and her dress still crinkled under her. Essie had fallen into a fitful sleep, jerking in her pile of blankets. The dim light that seeped through the cracked wall and filthy window faded. The breeze grew colder. Her father wouldn't be home from the factory for several more hours. Normally Nana would have been tucked under Essie's arm, content in the girl's love. But stray cats had wandered in last night. One of them had picked Nana up to play with her. She was batted around for a few minutes, then left in the corner, forlorn.

She had a lonely life, as a doll. Sometimes Nana contemplated what it would have been like if she was a real person: a mother who always cared for her children, a wife who loved her husband, a maid working loyally for a rich family. Then she remembered that she had been stitched together by the calloused fingers of a poor workman and she could never be more than a doll. But what if her soul was born instead of sewn? What if her body was flesh and not cloth? Nana dreamed of this, in the cool nights and quiet days.

Clunk. Clunk. Shhh. Footsteps. The door creaked open and a hunched figure shuffled in. Essie's father was home. He kneeled by his daughter and smoothed the hair off her forehead, planting a light kiss there. Noticing Nana's absence, he glanced around the room. If Nana had a mouth, she would have smiled. The man loved his daugh-

ter. He knew she wouldn't go without her doll if she could help it.

Essie's father returned Nana to the girl's arms. Instinctively Essie clutched the doll to her chest. Nana flushed with warmth at her love. Her father stood and ran a hand through his hair.

"Sweet dreams," he whispered to her like he did every night. "Goodnight, beautiful Essie. Goodnight, little Nana."

What little light was left vanished. Essie's father slept on a mat in the corner of the room. The wind strengthened. But it was all right, because Nana was in her girl's arms, safe in her warmth.

But then it wasn't all right. Because the warmth was fading, and Essie's skin grew cold. Her arms were limp around Nana. The doll's thoughts grew frantic. Essie was sick! She should be kept warm! Had the blankets fallen away? Had the breeze somehow poked its cold fingers into their nest?

Nana brooded over this all night, her worry increasing when her girl only became colder and colder. She felt like she was freezing in this once warm embrace. Air whistled through the cracks in the floor, playing a mournful dirge.

Morning came, and with it, a watery light landing on Essie. Nana looked at her. Her face was very still and pale.

Essie's father groaned as he woke. The doll could not see him, but silently begged, *Please, oh please, good man, come care for your girl! She is sick!*

"Come on Essie," he mumbled, pulling his jacket on. "I'll get a bowl of porridge from the landlady... Essie?" His daughter didn't stir. He knelt down next to her with a caring smile. "Come on sweetheart, it's morning. Wake up now..." He put a hand on her cheek. With a gasp, he drew it away as if his fingers had been burned, though his daughter was frigid. Just as quickly, he cupped her face again. "Essie? Essie, sweetheart, wake up. Please wake up." Her head lolled in his hands.

Nana could see his expression wrench into a twisted frown. His jaw clenched and his breath came short and fast. He put a finger on her lips, then brushed her nose. The doll was puzzled. She did not understand what he was doing. After a bit with seemingly no results,

something sounding like a choke escaped the man's lips. He jerked the blankets aside, accidentally throwing Nana across the room. She landed upside down against the wall. Her feet sagged into her face and her dress flopped down. But she could still see, and what she saw broke her stuffed heart.

Essie's father cradled a cold body to his chest, shaking with sobs. He rocked back and forth on the floor. A keening moan came out of him, then a loud wail that brought several sets of footsteps pounding to the door. A man burst in, quickly followed by an older lady. They both stopped short at the sight of Essie's broken father.

"Oh, Joseph," the lady said. She put a hand on his shoulder and crouched next to him. "I am so... so sorry." He didn't respond.

Now more than ever Nana wished she could move. She wished she could control her limbs so she could get up and run to her girl. She wished she could cry so she could properly mourn for her girl. She wished she had a mouth so she could wail for the whole world to know that her girl, her wonderful Essie, was gone.

But she couldn't, and so she didn't. A day passed. The room remained empty. Essie's father had taken his daughter's body somewhere, forgetting about Nana. The light waxed and waned. The cold wind seemed to lessen today, as if to apologize for blowing out the young girl's soul during the night. Eventually, the sunshine left and darkness reigned again. Nana was alone. Perhaps alone for good. It wasn't as bad, being alone, when she was clutched in Essie's hand, but Essie wouldn't hold her anymore. She had no one to be alone with.

In the middle of the night, the door, left ajar, creaked open. Two yellow eyes glowed in the starlight. Cats.

Six stray cats played with Nana that night. They tore her dress and left holes in her once-smooth skin. A claw snagged on the threads holding the lead button that was her right eye. It ripped and the button jerked loose, dangling down her face.

One cat grabbed her in its jaws and took her downstairs. It padded down one flight, another flight, and then slipped outside. A man on a bicycle kicked at the cat as he passed and it dropped Nana

to spring away. The doll landed in the gutter.

She felt numb. She had never felt this way before. The only thing Nana could think of to compare this feeling to was being emptied of all the stuffing in her body. Now she was both alone and abandoned.

Night fell away and the sun rose. People emerged from dirty houses and went on their way. No man walking busily by noticed. No woman out for a pleasant stroll cared to look. The only living soul that saw was a little boy, younger than Essie, who tugged on his mother's hand and pointed, but was soon swept away by the crowd.

High noon came. Not many people were outside. The heat was something Nana had never felt before, in that small cold room she once lived in. It was not at all pleasant. Nothing like Essie's warm hugs. This was a feverish heat.

Nana heard footsteps. A man walked past and started to open the door to the building she had once lived in. He paused, and slid back to look at her. It was Essie's father. His eyes were very red, and when he stretched to pick her up, his hand shook. Nana was too tired to be happy that he had found her. He held her up to his eye level and stared at her. With one finger he pushed her eye back in place, then let it flop back down. Hoarsely he said, "You're all that's left, Nana. All that's left of—" His voice cracked. "—My beautiful daughter. So what am I going to do with you...?"

After a moment, he tucked her in his jacket and started walking. In the dark, stifling pocket, Nana wondered. Where was he taking her? Was he going to fix her eye? The doll lost track of time in the heat. Eventually Essie's father stopped walking. There were muffled voices, and metallic scraping noises, and a fresh breeze filtering through the cloth. One voice began speaking, and the man started trembling. He put a hand over the pocket Nana was in. She didn't understand. What about Essie? What had happened to her body?

The one voice said something with a tone of finality, and the scraping started again. Essie's father took Nana out of his pocket. She saw a hole in the dirt, and a long wooden box lain inside. There was a man in white standing beside the hole, and two other men with

shovels, just beginning to fill it in with dirt.

Essie's father stared at the doll for a long time. He seemed to be wavering between two difficult choices. Nana stared back at him, with her lead button eyes, one hanging off her face. He opened his mouth and croaked, "Wait."

The men shoveling stopped. The man hopped down into the hole and pried open the box. There lay pale little Essie, hair combed, skin washed, clothed in a pretty dress.

Suddenly Nana grew warm inside. She would be put in her girl's care forever, devoted to her until they rotted. Essie's father put her in one of the girl's hands. With one last kiss on the forehead, one last look, he stood. His hand was on the coffin's lid. He blinked at the tears dribbling down his cheeks. "Goodnight, beautiful Essie. Goodnight, little Nana."

He closed the lid slowly. And Nana could have sworn, as the last of the sunlight that she'd ever see hit her, a tear of her own escaped her eye and rolled down her cloth face.

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THE WITCH'S EYES.



A comic created by
Caleb Halsted
CH
2015

First Place, Visual















Mira, the Moon Goddess
Kristian Smock

A Summer's Climb

Rachel Culver

The great green canopy of leaves created a patchwork of moving shades of light and dark across the rich soil between the old trees. I decided, as I often did as a child, that I would not take the wide dirt road that runs up to my grandparents' small weather worn house, but instead take the path that cuts through their avocado orchards. It's funny how something as simple as the way shadows dance across an orchard's floor can conjure up such vivid memories of the past.

The trees I walked through felt suddenly younger as the past came to life before me. With almost eight years of experience stowed beneath each of our sun bleached ball caps, we found ourselves almost wild in the freedom of these summer days. Originally, my cousins and I had been sent to the orchard by some adult who had decided to busy our time with chores. However, we soon found ourselves heading to the Tree, our original orders forever forgotten. Today we were sure we would claim "big kid" status.

Our feet, bare and extremely tanned by the summer sun, crushed the dry leaves that littered the orchard's floor. Cool, wet, and soft, this sweet soil was a welcome relief to the feet that had carried us up the hot and dusty dirt of the main road. School and shoes, it would seem, were both symbols of imprisonment that must be shed at the start of our summer. Three small pairs of leathery feet snapped twigs and crunched leaves on our way to claim the respect of those that had climbed and triumphed the biggest tree in the orchard.

There we were standing at the base of a tree that we were sure had sprouted from the very pages of Jack and the Bean Stock. With a trunk that none of us could wrap our lanky arms around and branches that were so thick that those who had conquered its heights would

crawl out and grab the branches of the surrounding trees. We looked at each other as if to ask, "Who is going first?". Since I was the one who suggested that we attempt this rite of passage, I felt that it was my duty to be the first to challenge its great branches.

Rubbing my dirty hands on the once white T-shirt that had been handed down to me from my brother, I took hold of the lowest branch. The gritty bark pitched at my small fingers as they did their best to wrap around its thick circumference. Swinging my legs up it took me several attempts to hook my heels around the desired branch. For a second I just hung there, like the chimpanzees I had seen at the Wild Animal Park. With a deep breath I swung myself into a sitting position. Lifting my gaze I gaped at the rungs of branches above me. There was a reason that this was a tree dedicated to the big kids. I slid my feet under myself and I reached out for the trunk. Searching out hand holds I hoisted myself up to my feet and teeter-tottered for a moment before regaining my balance. The rough surface of the heavy branches rubbed at the exposed skin of my arms leaving behind red splotches and thin scrapes. This irritation was slight compared to the annoyance I felt when branches began to grow farther and farther beyond of my reach. I didn't make it to the top that day or the day after that. In fact it took me a year and a few good inches before I defeated the Tree.

Passing through this orchard again and seeing the Tree after so many years, I find myself laughing. Everything, the crunch of the leaves under foot, the shades of light and dark that dance across the soil, the stillness of the summer's heat all play before me in a reel of memories. I find I am glad that I did not take the road.



Green Whistle
Darby Norris



**The Shores of
Infinity**
Kristian Smock



El Monkey
Citlali Rodriguez

68

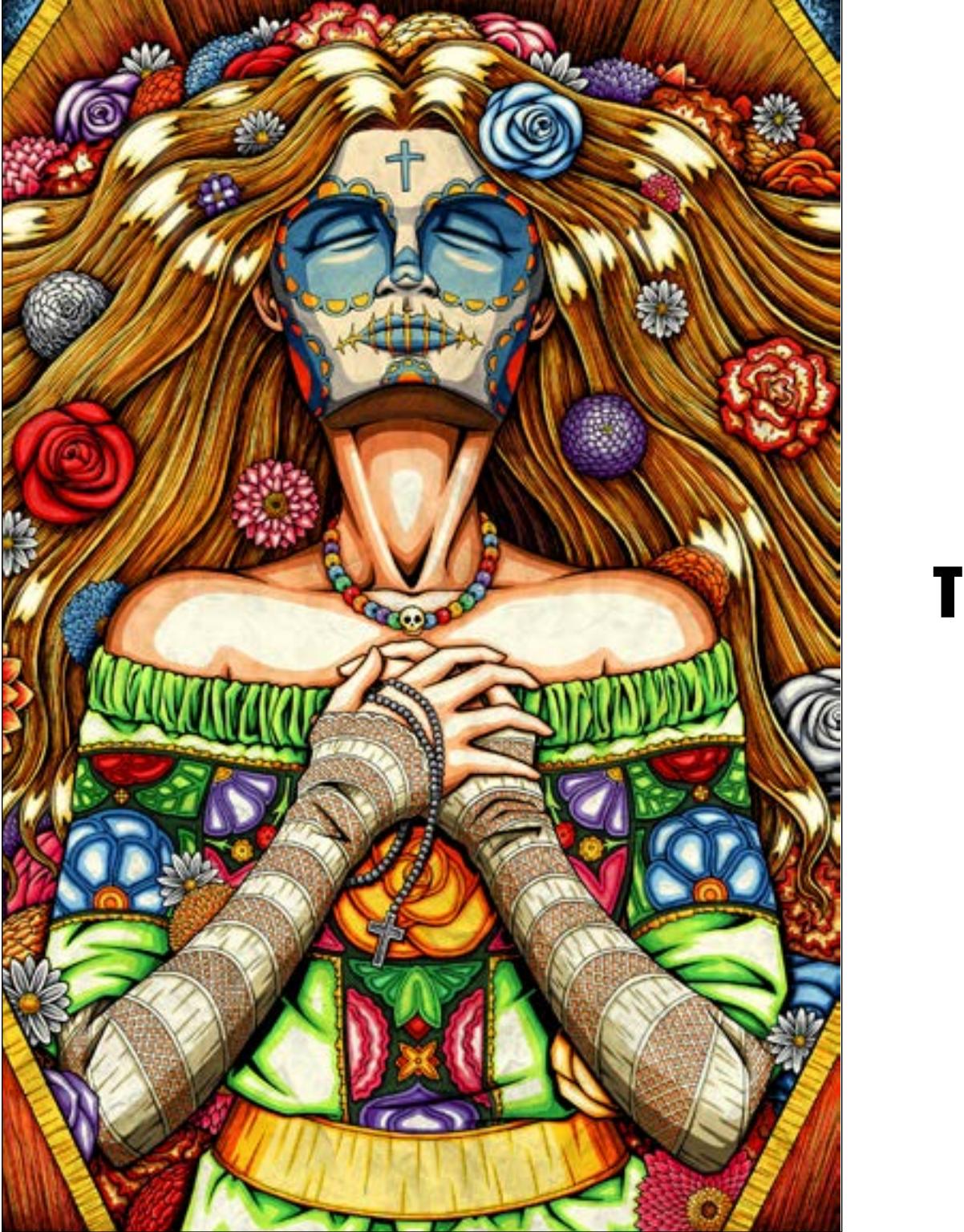


Smiling Clown
Lauren Rushing



Valley Fire
Brandy Sebastian

69



The Floating Coffin

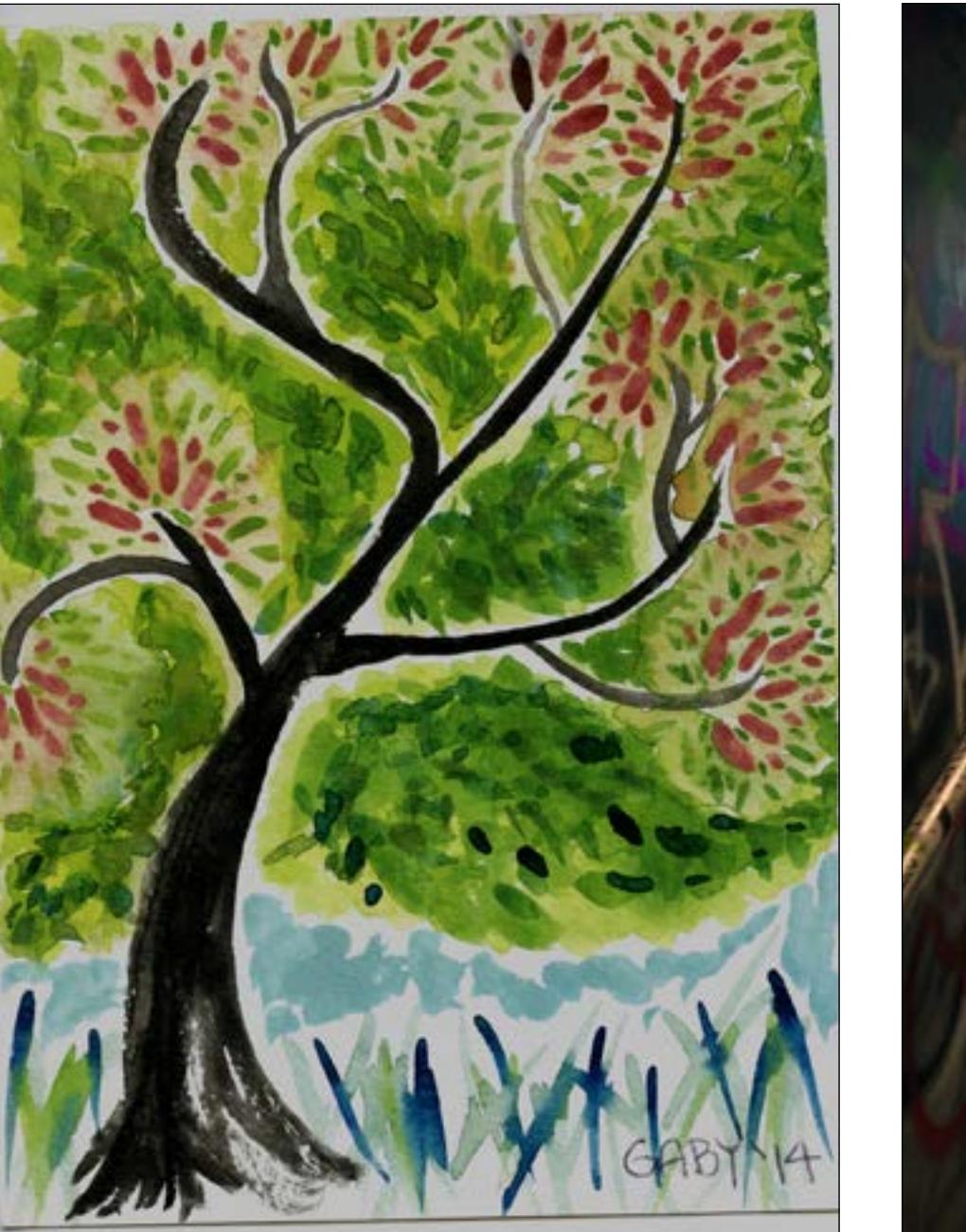
Second Place, Visual

Nick Ivins

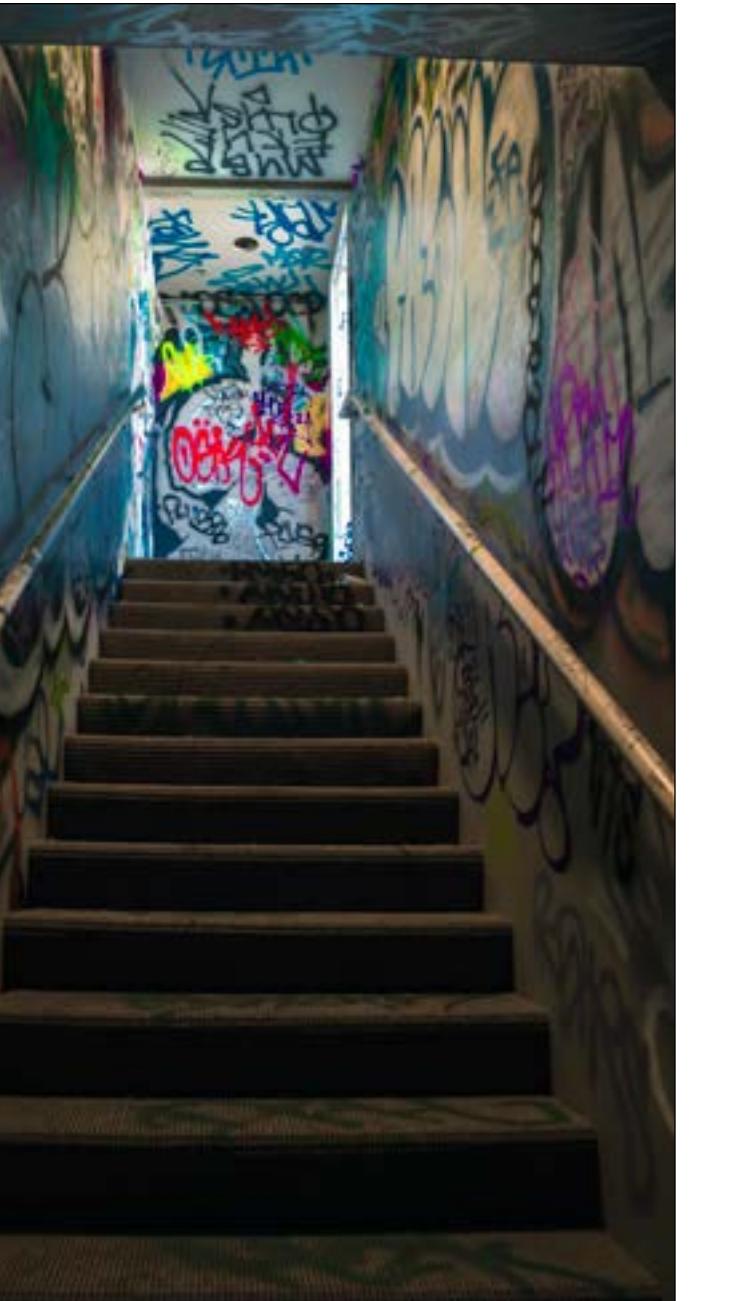
Safety Pin Stuck in My Heart

Nick Ivins





Trees
Gaby Goff



Urban Exploring
Kristian Smock

Fawn

Stuart Farst

Shaffer sat in virtual silence amongst the splintered branches of a fallen tree. Jared raised an index finger to cover his lips, and Shaffer froze in place. They saw a sliver of tan and white through the foliage. Jared removed his 30-06 A-bolt from his shoulder, eyed his brother, and passed the heavy gun through the brush.

Shaffer turned twelve 3 months ago; the legal hunting age in Pennsylvania. He had never fired a gun, let alone held one. Dad left before he could teach him. Jared planned to change that. So, two hours earlier, he demonstrated rifle usage. He showed Shaffer how to load a magazine, how to eject a round from the chamber without jamming the A-bolt, how to aim, and where the safety was. Jared would have to remind him this was all essential, something he needed to learn.

Shaffer pantomimed his brother's actions. He checked the chamber and pushed the safety till it showed red. He glanced in his brother's direction. Jared nodded, and Shaffer crawled between the branches toward the embankment. Then he saw it. A Buck with antler's like large fingers reaching for the sky. Its head was bowed toward the flow of the stream, taking in water. Its body was perpendicular to the hunters. Its fur reflected the rising sun, causing it to shine gold like a trophy.

"Just take the shot boy" The buck's head turned at the sound of Jared.

"Fuck Shay, take the shot. It's right there!"

Shaffer adjusted in the dirt, and looked back.

"I don't think I can get it from here... I need to sit up."

"Then do it, before it runs."

Shaffer rose to his knees without making a sound, and aimed the rifle. He felt like one of his plastic green army men poised to fire, except the weight of the gun was too much for his frame. His arms began to shake. He placed his head where his brother showed him to,

directly against his shoulder with his eyes down the sight, and looked through the scope in hopes that the shaking would stop. The deer seemed to bounce around in a tunnel. His palms began to sweat and his head started to itch. Worst of all, his brother was watching. Jared grunted something.

The buck turned toward the sound, and Shaffer fired. The recoil surprised him the most. It was like Jared punching him on the shoulder. He expected the shot to miss, and it did.

"Son of a bitch, how did you miss that Shay?" Jared said, slapping his brother's boot from beyond the branches.

"I knew I shoulda bought you a 270. Hell, a 22 woulda been better. But fuck, that wouldn't a takin down a deer, especially that beast."

Shaffer didn't know what any of those numbers meant, so he told his brother not to cuss instead.

"Fuck Shay, we can cuss all we want. Not like Mom's out here or nothing."

Shaffer nodded, and looked down at his shoes, hammy-down boots from when Jared was his age. Their outfits were even the same, camo pants with dark green long sleeves, and an orange hunting vest. They almost looked identical except for their height and haircuts. Each brother had light brown hair; Jared wore his like a Jar-head; tight on top and even tighter on the sides. While Shaffer preferred shoulder length, something their father never approved of. When he left though, Shaffer let it grow.

Jared sighed, and stood without worrying how much noise he made.

"Well, you can try again. I saw it run up that side of the river, if we're lucky we can track it before noon. You remember what a deer track looks like right?"

Shaffer nodded, and they found a shallow crossing in the creek.

After five minutes of searching on the east bank Jared found a fresh print in the mud that lead deeper into the forest. As the sun rose toward its meridian the brothers ran into a barbed wire fence. The sib-

lings hadn't notice it at first, until Shaffer pointed out a yellow sign tied to the wire itself. Pressed into the metal were the words "Private Property". The tracks continued past this, and over a ridge covered in thick brush.

"Take off your jacket."

"Isn't it for safety?"

"Yeah, when other hunters are around, see that sign though? That means no hunters are there, and I don't want a land owner spotting us in bright orange vests. That's poaching."

"Don't worry about the deer Jared, it's not important."

"Not important? There's a reason Mom ain't here, and it's not so I can cuss. Take your jacket off."

Shay removed his jacket while Jared pushed the barbed wire apart with a branch and crossed.

The walk into the private woods was more difficult. Shay knew it was overgrown, though tracking the deer proved to be easy; as the brothers located broken branches and prints more often than before. After an hour they arrived at another creek, smaller than the last, but clean and running. Jared ordered Shaffer to fill the canteens from the bags. He obeyed, and Jared found a log in the tree line to rest. He pulled his leg up onto his knee and began to massage the pain from his calves; making sure to do this only when Shaffer was distracted. A dog began barking nearby, and Jared spun toward the sound.

* * *

Shaffer found the article in the lobby when he went outside for air. He always hated the Hospital. The plastic furniture and cleaning agents were too unnatural, and there was nothing to do while he waited. So, to pass time Shay flipped through the paper until he came across a story that caught his attention: "Man accidentally shoots boy while hunting." Shay smiled, and peered over the paper. Jared was barely awake in his bed and so his eyes flickered when he saw Shaffer's expression. A thick white wrap covered his left leg and the blankets were pulled up to his chest.

"What are you smilin' at?"

"Nothin, this article just made me laugh"

"I could use some entertainment" Jared said, as he shook the remote to the busted T.V. Shaffer nodded and began to read the article out loud.

"Jared Peterson, a 17 year-old boy from the town of Mansfield was shot Thursday morning during a hunting accident. The incident occurred when Kevin Ward, a local land owner, went hunting on his property and shot Peterson when his dog alerted to movement. Peterson was rushed to Kindred Hospital with a single gunshot wound to the left leg. Ward does not wish to press trespassing charges, though urges Peterson to wear a hunting vest at all times, as the boy was found without one."

"Lemme see that paper."

Shaffer handed Jared the paper. He slapped the page with the back of his hand.

"They call me a fuckin' boy." He turned his head away from the paper, and stared out the window.

"There's no view in this dump." He threw the covers away from his leg.

"I'm going for a walk."

"Doctor said you shouldn't." Jared ignored his brother and pushed himself from the bed. His left leg was straight and he moved like an animated scarecrow. Jared stopped at the edge of the bed, and stared at the door knob. He said something about distance, and then threw himself at the door.

"Want me to show you how to use a cane?"

"Shut up Shay."

Shaffer stood up after Jared left the room, and grabbed the paper from the bed. He turned to the page of their article. Smiling, he skimmed over it one last time, then threw the paper away.

Montana

Elizabeth Hoffman

Gold leaves crisp in the fall breeze
crunch beneath my worn-out Vans sneakers
in a symphony, as I walk beside the
creek that churns and bubbles
as though it has a voice
of its own.

Beautiful, my mother whispers
we find identity here
bound up in the
wilderness.

In this untrodden landscape I
breathe deeply and fill
every inch of me
with cool oxygen.

My mother and brother,
uncle and grandmother
walk ahead while I
follow slowly behind
until the creek drowns their
conversations.

Aspen and pine adorned
in green and russet tones
stand tall against a backdrop
of plum-colored mountains that

rise from the earth,
like the bones of giants
felled long ago.

All at once I am swallowed up
encompassed in the wilds
of Beartooth Pass, not far from
General George A. Custer's
final stand and a wild horse range
where hoofbeats echo off the
mountain passes in a chorus
of liberation.

I am already long gone
when I step from beneath the
shadows of ancient trees
into the sunshine.

My mother tells me
to stop as she
snaps a picture with the
camera. She smiles when
my face wonders why.

Later, she shows me the
photograph of a young
woman I hardly recognize,
her blonde hair catching the
abounding sunlight.

you asked me
what my future
felt like
I said it had no feeling to it
I was laughing
but you were straight-lipped
thinking
stubborn child
we drove down the road
it was called
Ocotillo Wells but we never saw any
we approached two big
hills with smaller ones
resting around them
we walked towards the middle
in between
we found
a narrowing
river of sand
waiting, cool
almost
blue in the shade
of the rock rising on either side
the sand had just had its hour
in the sun for the day
and was protected again
in a blue afternoon
you asked me again
what is your future

like it was some kind of noun
I might describe for you
and I laughed again
put cold sand in your hands
look at you pressing on
your questions move you forward
but they make me settle upon the cold
sand
maybe like I am just another grain
I welcome sand into my creases but
you never liked having sex outside
so I sat there and let you keep walking
and maybe I am living my life
closer to death
than I ever thought I would
is that what you needed me to admit?

years later I can still see you
the memory is dry
you kissed me and you moved forward
to get your sun
and I stayed cool in my
little blue
line
but every day the sun comes for me
just an hour
and I'm kissed again and it's
divine and only a little
like death

hour of sun

hannah keene

I know you too well.
Better than I know myself
from years of reminiscing

I've asked you to leave
but like a squatter you live
unwelcome, unwanted
planted firmly in my mind

You've taken root
Won't leave me alone
Your footprints still here
when you're not.

You wake me in the morning
with your musty breath
you remind me

That you know all
Then you pop a mint
to crudely disguise
pain as a lesson

I heed your warnings -
Never be vulnerable again.
I appreciate your concern

So we go out into the world
just me
and you in my head

I am tired of your voice!
Sometimes pleasant

Often painful
Always present

You work hard to remind me that
I learn from it
I deserved it
I still deserve the pain

Aren't you tired?
Your clothes are thin and tattered
Your feet are blistered and black
from years of _____-ing (with) me.

After a long day in my head
You slip into bed with me
and I softly kiss
your cold callous lips

Hoping it will kill you
or me -
yet knowing that it bonds
us both

There's a moment
of reprieve
during our slumber
but when I wake

I approach you once again
with an eviction notice in one hand
and an invitation in the other.

The Past

Jennifer Prillaman

Your Favorite Constellation

Alexandra Woodworth

I couldn't catch you. I knew that much as I cracked pine needles under my boots, my breath shattered in my throat, but I wouldn't replace the feeling for any warm fire or quilted bed.

The ice cream we bought was tucked under my arm, melting through its cardboard casing and onto my shirt as I screeched into the hazy late night air, "You cheat!"

I could hear your laugh, but if I were honest, even if you were a thousand miles away I'd still be able to hear your cackling. It rattled off trees in a senseless echo, "Come on, a little further!" My short legs screamed profanities as they competed with your long strides.

I could smell the lake before I could see it, all clouded depths. It broke the line of pines, whispered in shadows between night-faded trunks. As I got closer a hulking shape drew up from the lake, a trail of muffled waves in its wake. Our rock. You stood atop it, the moon silhouetting your slim figure, doubled over in exhaustion. You managed to only get out two words when I finally stumbled up the side of the mountainous boulder: "I win."

When our racketed breathing slowed to even gasps and I was done trying to slap your arm, we sat. You withdrew two spoons from your pocket and I dropped the carton lid into the darkness. The ice cream slid down our throats as quickly as our feet had collided with the Earth.

We always began in silence, the strings of our familiarity beginning to reconnect after we got past the small talk. We had already chipped away at the easy outer layers of our lives in between sun-kissed summers of our yearly camping trips.

Whenever we were alone together our eyes seemed to be drawn up, linked by thousands of burning stories, interconnected by other gazers just like us.

You prattled off names of constellations, tracing empty circles on my chilling thighs, touching one mole to another. But what I loved the most was when you grew still under the weight of previous centuries' knowledge, overcome by the mere extent of it all. Your eyes would pan down the horizon and settle on me.

Years later, staring at the blinking cursor of a processing response, I would understand what those moments had meant. With a cup of tea burning in one hand and my phone, cool in the other, I stared out at an inky black sea. I licked my lips free of the salt-tinged air and regarded the sky that had previously been just pinpoints of light in an endless blanket of sky. Now, they had names and meanings; Vega blinked out at me from Lyra and Polaris wasn't directly ahead, but it was the closest thing we had.

I placed my steaming cup down on the creaking floor of the deck, because one hand felt inadequate for the question I typed out, "Why did you always get quiet when you looked at me all those summers ago? You could talk forever about stars, but I'm just me."

One hour fell into two, my tea had been drained to empty, and the sea had just lulled me to meditative state when my phone finally buzzed once more in my palm. I sucked in an anxious breath as I read, "I imagined for a bit that all your moles and freckles were stars that I could trace into constellations, each with their own myth and fable, spun out by my fingertips."

I tipped my head back against my chair, trying to find Polaris or Ursa Major or Minor, but storm clouds had closed over my connection to you. Just as I stood to go inside and warm my skin, my phone shivered a final time. "You were my favorite constellation."

u.s. borax town (life among the desertbillies)

ruth rice

i was raised on the precipice
of the largest open pit mine in the world,
in the towering shadow of the teamster's union,
among mining men and mules.

friday paychecks at the silver dollar,
where lucille attended barstool courtisans
in a tinfoil tiara and time stood static still,
this was the edge of the world.

every leap year, just about the time
the miners tired of his neighbor's borrowed wife,

contract negotion called the faithless forward
to a collective vacation, a good old fashioned
cross torching, car scorching, downhome strike..
men running bear chested in midday heat,
building snare traps from broken pallets of paranoia
and burning down houses in worship.

oh, these were the days of spoken tongues,
when the wind walked the desert on stilts
of abandoned reason and fervered release.

arbitration, the final ritual, returned the denizens
to homes of foreclosing mortgage, gluttoned
and sliding back toward the silver dollar,
where lucille takes up her scepter and stool
offering benediction, as time concedes
once again an uneasy truce to stasis
on the edge of the world.

Some Nights

Third Place, Poetry

Larry Narron

That winter he was hired to work nights,
patrolling the tracks down by the drained canal,
sometimes he spotted the trespassers
creeping together alongside the platform.

He always kept a safe distance
between them & himself when he waved
the beam of his flashlight toward them.

In those moments they realized
they'd been caught & ran,
their probably stolen cans of spray-paint
banging together in their backpacks
as they pulled themselves up
& over the chain-link fence.

That was the part of the job he hated:
he was ashamed to send them away.
He wishes he could have explained
how he'd only wanted to scare them
because he didn't know if they had
guns or knives, because all he had himself
was a flashlight, because it was his job.

He wishes he could tell them how
some nights, after chasing them off,
he walked slowly all the way down
the canal, disarmed by the illegible
curves of their aliases braided
through the fractured horizon
of concrete, the neon outlines tracing
their hieroglyphs shining like moss
in the headlights of passing cars.

The Sun Also Rises on Black Friday

Olive Edgar

I.

I spend thirty six hours a week
wondering if I should buy new orthopedic inserts,
whether I can afford healthier than Hot Pockets
and whether back to back statistics lectures
provide enough sleep that I can stop applying
deodorant to the outside of my sweater.

II.

The deprivation turns questions into statements:
“Wire rainbow. Are you a realist?”
I no longer wonder about a sudden apparition of chroma.
I cannot join the discussion.
I think instead of funny little tool,
that wire thing for mixing flour and milk
and dream of flaky crusts, cakey crusts,
“tough because I kneeded it too much” crusts,
of pies, of pie, of pi,
and I crash back to class.

III.

“You’re going to burn out, you know.”
you say the morning I’ve slept through a meeting,
and on past Karate Club.
I’ve got this, though. You don’t believe me,
but I’ve got this. Eighty hours and sixteen units,
is nothing, doll. Try living with you.

IV.

I’m not Catholic, but you are,
so much so that I might as well
be too.

The Stallion’s Knees

Briana Munoz

Hunched over
Face in his macaroni and cheese
Saliva drooling
Splats down onto his skinny knees
Butt cheeks sore
Sitting idly in his wheelchair

Each pill I help him take
Comes with a different memory
Of when Pop was not sick
Summer’s spent
At ranches
Where he trained stallions
Ten times stronger than him

You see,
My dad is not weak
Nor any label or diagnosis you will place on him
He is not vegetative, handicapped or disabled
He is only as weak as the
stallion’s knees

How he bolts through the open range
Piercing through the clean mountain air
Bucking up on hind legs
Naying proudly
Freely

He will not be confined
To that piece of trash
Rubber wheeled, plastic shit,
Wheel chair

But he will
Run along stallions
Buck on hind legs
Nay sounds of pure freedom
Because my dad is only as weak
As the knees of a stallion

Zest Made Me Grow

Meagan Huerta

A childhood vandalized by cable TV
Dress up with the neighbor's daughter
Her mom's photogenic ages
Boxes of fuchsia, and midnight blue go-go boots
We drape ourselves, drag queens around the block,

Sticking in groups of children called friends
That whisper labels behind my blonde, nappy head
"Bossy, mean, spoiled,"
I just wanted someone to talk to,
A vile vibe trails the pathways to doors
Of our donut shaped group of homes
Little boys toss kittens on beds for amusement,
So I hid one in the closet,
Only the production of my seed

Ding dong ditch, and a whistle calls me home,
Common girl born in pink with Barbies
A porcelain doll named Sally was my baby until her feet cracked
I don't remember exactly how they broke
But I recall the way the neighborhood sign's letters looked
In my sister's closet when my dad questioned why they went missing
I remember well
The fact that the day she left our speaking world was on a Monday
And her funeral rested on a Tuesday
And yet no photos of both those spring days.
And even the very deep and compelling dimples of the girl
That led me in endless, engrossing laughter minutes before
She died
Stays with me too.

A string of linked little girls leap on the fatherly roots of a tree
On a playground where politics began
In sync we sang "Jesus take the wheel"
That now takes me back to the moment me and

A friend watched the crucifixion of the one and only,
Too young to know how to spell sacrifice,
We only knew how to splurge in twisted ways
Trick-or-treating until parents start shooing us away
And opening birthday presents with hair dripping wet
After a shower when everyone is finally home and ready for slumber
Splurge in the joy of waiting for daddy to open the thundering garage
Under the posts of my bed
After overtime has taken his chance
To start over again this week

Nothing was ever censored except our own lips,
Dirty Dancing inspired me to dance
The Sopranos played continuously and carelessly
And gore was mistreated when it came on TV
Big eyes mechanically geared to slasher scenes
That dad forgot to flip the channel on
We were thrown to the wolves and expected to begin pedaling

The girls and I hung sprawled on the curves of territorial timber
Where honey like sap did not bother us
Humming "Because of You,"
Dreaming of our future
The good girls wish to be ballroom dancers
Painted in sequins, toes so pointed it hurts my own
But I'm a greaser girl masked by flowers, and bow ties
Wishing to be a teacher of the world
To protect innocence I've never known

Daddy never made mom bruised but she bled in her sheets
After a quarrel of undeserved remarks had led her to unravel
The small teddy key chain
With Brittany sewn at the tummy under her pillow
Was constantly there and so
I knew I slept through another mistake

She always shared the statements of his second personality
I was the only girl that watched and can replay the steps
I predicted dad like a machine
Like instinct, I could smell the moment that he would let go

The scar on my left ankle from falling down a slope
I assumed I could not handle
Is that what made me grow? Or
Shavings of my brain's memory in its earliest impressions
The zest of my childhood exposures
The zest of family disputes,
The zest of abandonment
Have made me grown.

Lights hit every corner of every room. These Strangers
My mother knows walk through them all like a fun house,

All mirrored & grinning. I wonder if they ever put down
The red cups in their hands or do we need to go to the

Hospital to have them removed. Their voices turn
Into one, turn into a beehive. My left ear is love, smoke,

& broken words. My Right ear is shouting, cursing, & then
A struggle. I wish I knew what they were saying and do these

Stranger's have mom's and dad's that ground them or read
To them at night? I've never heard music this loud before.

I wonder if the angry electric guitars & the never ending drums
Can be heard from Grandma's house. I was there last night &

Swear I heard my dog howl & cry her way into our house. The
Strangers still move around my house like a maze, now they're

Almost sleep walking and talking in tongues. If my
Mother was here she'd make them all disappear just by holding

My hand. They all point & smile at me like I know who they are,
I'd disappear but my secret spot is locked & I hear voices coming

From that room and it sounds like they're screaming each other's secrets.
Next to the window I play astronaut. I peek through the blinds

To go to the moon & its bright white face is staring down at my mother tangled
In arms, her lips not on my Fathers.

Voices at the Party

Second Place, Poetry

Bryan Angel

Symbiosis

Barry Munson

Gazing skyward
my first sight
radiates
an amber glow

My complete dependence
her absolute attention
on every detail
reflected in her eyes

The tautness of my cheek
and delicate pores
uninterrupted by blemish
or imperfection

Microscopic hairs
translucent and soft
like finest fur
Invisible to touch

After many years
of casual observation

with no attention
to gradual change

The finest of lines
emanating from corners
of eyes and mouth
cast the slightest shadow

The graceful curves
of softened creases
outline a smile
that warmed my heart

And diverted my eyes
from the wavy furrows
that cross her forehead

revealing decades of worry

Her complete dependence
my absolute attention
on every detail

reflected in my eyes

Rolling Blackouts

Larry Narron

We were still virgins that night when the lightning
struck & our honeycomb skyline extinguished.
Languages snaking the phone lines hissed out
midsentence; syllables dangled there uselessly over

Los Angeles. Our siblings lit candles & urged us
to read, but we only got lost in the delicate
labyrinths of flames. In time, we tired of watching
the wicks curl into themselves & drown

in their puddles of wax. We got up & left,
rolled our bikes out of garages & rode through the wind
to find each other waiting in a darkened cul-de-sac.

We held a kind of counsel in which it was decided

we should try to do something, though none of us
knew exactly what, until somebody turned
the power back on. The more our eyes adjusted
to the dark, the more we all said it should stay off all night.

Pennies over the Olympia

Edgar Limon

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE. DAY

We open on a beat down little mom and pops liquor store. The counter is filled with hundreds of fading stickers with chipped paint looking like a label itself.

A small hand places a nickle on the counter and slides it forward. A much larger hand returns five shiny pennies.

EXT. UNDER BLEACHERS. DAY

CLOSE UP- The pennies fall into large a tin bucket, half way filled with other coins and small pieces of metal.

We back up to a circle of young boys surrounding the tin. One of the large kids passes a lighter to the small boy holding the bucket.

The small boy turns to the the bleachers and yells something in Spanish. A thumbs up emerges from above.

The small boy holding the bucket is given a can size blow torch. He points the flame towards the scraps.

EXT. OUTDOOR ARENA. DAY

The bleachers are on the edge of a beach, built over the sand several dozen feet high bleachers. They surrounding a decent size wrestling ring.

In the ring are two wrestlers in the middle of a lock. One is a large bald man with a thick mustache. The other is a MASKED LUCHADOR attempting to escape from his fierce opponent.

TITLE CARD: "SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, 1988

EXT. BLEACHERS. UPPER STAND

An older man wipes white powder of his thick black mustache. Next to him another person holds up a tiny mirror with three lines of coke, he snorts one and passes the mirror to his right. At the end a man waits his turn.

EXT. UNDER THE BLEACHERS. DAY

The coins inside the bucket are now red and smoking from the heat. The kids smile with spoons in their hands.

2.

EXT. RINGSIDE. DAY

We see the ringside spectators in full appreciation of the spectacle before them. A man sits with a finished cigarette dangling from his lips. One of the beer girls has stopped in her tracks, staring into the rings at:

INT. RING. DAY

The large fighter holds the masked Luchador over his head like a stereo. With a warrior scream he throws the Luchador to the mat. The Luchador gives an exaggerated scream as he hold his back in "excruciating pain."

EXT. RINGSIDE. DAY

The beer girl rolls her eyes at the wrestlers performance and continues her route.

EXT. RINGSIDE. DAY

The bald villain sits the masked hero on the top turnbuckle as he prepares to suplex him to the ground.

INT. RING. DAY

The little boy with the bucket and five other kids run past her on the way to the ring.

INT. RING. DAY

Both wrestlers are now on their feet on the third rope, high above the crowd they cast shadows. Just as the bald villain is about to throw the Luchador over his shoulder:

Don't Stop Sucking That Cancer Stick

Olive Edgar

I would have forgotten you this morning
if not for the boy in my poetry class
who rolls his own cigarettes just like you do,
loose leaf tobacco as black and spiraled as pubic hair
creeping out the ends of a wrinkled, flaccid paper.

I would have forgotten that your jacket pocket
always smelled like a crinkled plastic burgundy packet
of vanilla and smoke.

I would have forgotten that face you made
when a scrap of American Spirit stuck to your tongue
and how getting it out was as difficult as pulling
a tiny hair from your mouth.

If not for the third-generation Asian American
and his black and yellow Pumas, which evoked the midnight premier
of Dark Knight Rises, when you bought me a gallon
of extra-super buttered popcorn and I got to third base.

I would have forgotten that loving you
was driving through downtown San Diego at night,
during Comic-Con weekend,
while suffering from cervical radiculopathy.

I could have forgotten you completely.

The masked hero stands his ground and they both begin to grapple while barely keeping balance.

EXT. RINGSIDE. DAY

The boy with the bucket takes the brightest penny in the bucket and aims at the Luckador. He fires, the tip of the spoon burning his thumb.

3.

INT. RING. DAY

We see the penny in the air reflecting the sun just as it's about to hit our hero when:

The masked crusader pushes the bald heel to the mat, pushing so much he falls himself.

The Penny misses him and falls on the mat where a large shadow begins to obscure it. The mustached foe falls over the red penny.

We hear the sizzling sound of bacon on the stove.
The bald bully gives a HIGH SCREECH of pain.

EXT. RINGSIDE. DAY

Every spectator in attendance stands to their feet in awe of the man's performance.

CUT TO:

EXT. RING. DAY.

The referee raises the hand of our masked hero before the wave of jumping fans.

CLOSE UP — The face of Lincoln imprinted on the back of the bald man as he makes his way backstage.

End

Atypical Quarter-Life Crisis

Marcelle Torbert

There are so many boxes — empty in our closet, cardboard cubes that held gifts of joyous holiday spirit — and I have precious little with which to refill them.

Three large totes loom about my den, his last touched possessions and most useful tools contained therein. The CACO (Casualty Assistance Calls Officer) stands silent and official; it is his duty and an honor to have served me so. The inventory has been counted; all is approved in conditions reported, and questions concerning contents answered to the best of abilities.

2nd Lt. Micheal Kim still bristles at my inquisitive humor — one would think weeks on end, never leaving my side, had accustomed him to my candid demeanor. I pulled out another piece of equipment. The evening had become a guessing game of military familiarity vs. knowledge of my own husband's idiosyncrasies.

"So would this be...a camelback accessory?" I inquired, feeling semi-confident about the photographic memory of Eric's gear strewn about the floor and recalling his field explanations for the most bizarre-looking objects.

"Approximately 1 foot plastic tubing, clear in color." 2nd Lt. pauses, then without any change of inflection, he adds, "I have never seen that before in my life." I have started to hear between the words unsaid. This man cannot tell me why any more than what or which, but the echoes of uncertainty comfort us both.

This day has felt so much longer than a few weeks ago, the first attempt at sorting through all proof of this tragedy. But it has come with necessity; cold paper with copied signatures and two-dimensional reminders of sympathy too static. Amidst the focus

on the loss of his life, I became overwhelmed by how my husband lived. I always had the charitable intentions, and he would give; there is a value for everything to someone.

I began to designate a few boxes separate from the larger containers; I could no longer simply return items to their places without thinking of who would want to have them the closest. I saw talismans for Eric's siblings — relics of his encouragement and hope. He couldn't be there to attend the wrestling tournaments, cheering on the only little brother I've known. Instead of a high school rivalry's title, he defended the country. I packed the tracksuit thinking of Dennis, how he won his last match with more pride than ever before. There wasn't anything that I could think of to give his sister Lynn, at beautiful 18, who learned what not to do (or how to get away with it) from her older brother.

Fellow Marines in Cpl. Eric Torbert, Jr.'s squadron would echo this sentiment with the utmost respect for being crazier than they dared try to be. Certain items, treasured only by a battalion of Combat Engineers, I placed in another box. "Anyone in Torbert's platoon would be honored to have something with his name on it." 2nd Lt. assured me in such a reverent voice. I'd forgotten that this was his first time completing a CACO's duty. He had never met my husband in life, even with the formalities of being an officer in the battalion. Since the evening those 4 men showed up on my doorstep, however, I had talked about Eric nonstop and even shared with his Major everything that my husband loved; I have always wanted the world to know who he is outside of the Marines.

I discard leftover empties when the chore of repacking seems futile; why put away what I cannot yet touch, if only to remind me of holidays I never had? So many boxes were not meant to be filled, with all that was left of him, to be only mine.

Headache

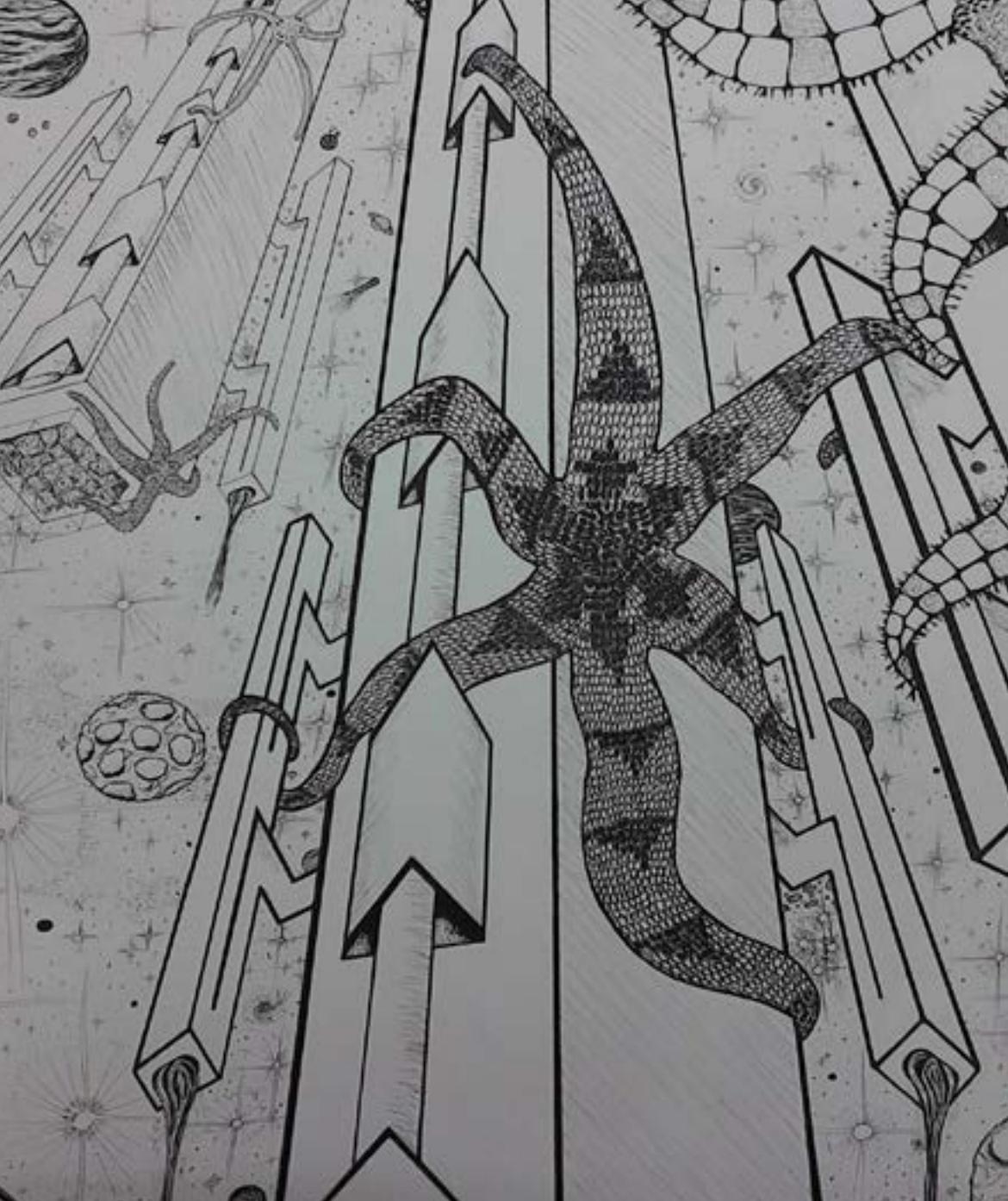
Joshua Rincon

One night I found myself at a table with a beautiful woman. She looked oddly familiar, but I couldn't place her. I wanted to ask her where I knew her from, why she looked so familiar. But I didn't want to seem so forward. She looked uninterested, wrapped in a silky black dress of ennui. She smelled like a beautiful summer flower. What did she want from me? I decided to occupy myself with the trivial papers that lay before me. Mostly bills and coupons. Oh but that smell! I couldn't help but press my nose against it, taking it in with deep breaths. I kept looking up from the paperwork every few minutes to guess the woman's name. Nothing came. I got desperate. I searched the lines of her face, examined her over, and then again.

Still nothing. I gave up.

Eventually my mother walked into the kitchen, noticed that I had ripped up another perfume sample that came with the mail, and smiled. Who was it this time, she asked. I told her that I couldn't figure it out and that the smell of the ad was giving me a headache. She assembled a few bits of the model's face and said, "Audrey Tautou".

And I said, "Who"?



The Empire of the Dead

Editors' Choice, Fiction

Freddy Cleveland

I.

I'm not sure where the story begins. Gabrielle keeps saying that telling stories is the best way to remember but what story am I supposed to tell?

Gabrielle says it over and over again as she slowly drains the glass of vodka cradled in her hand. Her gentle drunkenness sharpens her accent, thick strokes of French in her English. She pauses every once in a while to order her next words, sometimes holds on to vowels, thinking, rolling the foreign sounds around with her tongue. I have to really listen to understand what she's saying.

Between us are three beer bottles. Two of them empty, I'm working on the third.

"Now is the time to remember," Gabrielle says. Wet ice twinkles in the smoky light as she gestures with her glass. "So... tell me your story of Astrid."

I try to remember. I don't know where to begin. What I'm supposed to say. My memories are there, but locked away. Hidden from me in an indecipherable code of chemical data. The neural pathways that might let me see them again deficient from years of SenseBoard use. There, but clogged by disuse. If I could get to a SenseBoard, access a memory program, the datascape would form around us, and there would be no reason to tell stories. We would see the past with fresh eyes anew. We would know.

And I would remember more than little flashes of sensation. Colors brighter. Sounds deeper. The mere touch of things more precise. And then everything fading so quickly.

"Charles?"

Everything I might say about Astrid is a simple statement. A

fact with no conclusion. An image or an imprint or something with no story to follow it.

Astrid dead and buried.

Astrid whose funeral we've fled.

Astrid burnt and poured into an urn that will rest forever in the Catacombs beneath Neo-Paris.

Astrid surrounded by the Cataphiles she was once a part of, their frenzy giving homage to the urn upon the altar. The doses of StimDisks coursing through everyone's veins, sending a rush of serotonin through their brain. The Cataphiles whip themselves with long branches, drawing blood.

And then:

Astrid replacing my mother when I was eight.

Astrid walking the dog every night.

Astrid hovering at my door, her sad distant eyes lost in a silhouette.

Astrid weeping on the edge of my bed.

Astrid singing.

I shrug and carefully bring the third bottle to my lips.

Watching Gabrielle watching me. She and her father have played host to me and mine for the last few days, and not until the vodka is halfway gone has she looked me in the eye.

"I don't have one," I say.

"Nothing," she says. The word is an insult. "You do not remember a thing about her."

"I remember plenty," I say. "But it's just images. It's just... she was there. She was always there, she was part of my life and then she died. There's no story in that."

"There is a story in everything," Gabrielle drinks.

"Not in that," I say. "Sorry. But what do you want? I mean, the funeral just made you angry, and that was all about celebrating Astrid, worshipping her or whatever it was the Cataphiles were doing. Why not remember with them?"

"What is happening back there is not remembering," she says. "It is mere indulgence. An excuse to overdose on stims. To make everything numb and push it away."

"I mean..." I point at the glass in her hand.

She looks at it and sets it down on the table with a frustrated sigh. The wood echoes.

"It is not the same," she says. "This is just something to drink."

In the following silence, I look around the bar. It's skinned to look like something out of the past. Chalkboards instead of holographic displays, old taps and wooden tables. A single screen hangs in the corner, probably over fifty years old. Behind the bar stands an old man, all natural. No telltale glow of eye implants, no gentle whir of replacement limbs. Not even the circular metal of a brainspike on the back of his neck. It's an odd sight to see.

Piano music hangs over everything, playing gently. Filling the bar with long single notes drifting in and out of chords that echo in the desolation. The man at the keyboard hasn't looked up or stopped playing since we entered. He barely seems to notice the woman lying across the back of the piano, her long hair spread out all around her. The cigarette in her dangling hand drifts smoke up to the single lamp above her.

"You know," I say. "I don't think I've ever heard someone actually play the piano."

"Really?" Gabrielle says.

"I have on the datascape," I say. "You know logging into concert halls or whatever. But never in real life."

"You are one of the escapists, then?" Gabrielle says. "Always plugged into your SenseBoard, never surfacing?"

"I'm not an addict," I say. "It's just something to do."

She raises her eyebrows, drinks, doesn't say another word.

The little expression hits me. It's sudden, fast, the little knot of frustration in my throat. A long moment before I realize why.

"Astrid used to do that all the time," I say. Gabrielle tilts her head, suddenly curious.

"What?"

"The eyebrows," I raise my own.

"Oh," Gabrielle smiles and looks down into her now empty glass. "I think I must have gotten it from her."

Another silence, so I prompt her:

"You two were close?"

"Until she left Paris," Gabrielle nods. "After she finished school, she took care of me more often than my parents did."

"Huh."

Her smile makes me a little more confident.

"So what's your story about that?" I say. "About Astrid taking care of you?"

The smile fades.

"A story of hurt," she says. "She left when I was seven, on an impulse. She did... something, I can't remember what, and my parents were very angry with her."

"So you can't remember either," I say. "Figures."

"Don't be shitty," she says.

"Astrid used to say that all the time."

Another silence grows, lengthened by the last note of the piano fading away. Gabrielle straightens her back, shifts the empty glass in her hand. I stare at her, hoping she doesn't look up. The more I look the more I see of Astrid. Her face isn't quite as narrow, her eyes not as clouded by years of anger. But Astrid is definitely there, a shadow of her. A memory.

I look at Gabrielle and for her, I want more than anything to remember.

II.

We leave soon after, out into the streets of Neo-Paris.

Gabrielle draws her coat back on, covering the flesh exposed by the deep ‘v’ of the back of her dress. She tightens her scarf beneath her pointed chin and smiles at me.

“Shall we go?”

“Yeah.”

She leads me into the city and I look into the face of the world we’ve built for ourselves.

High above: the curves, the contours of cloud, the little rolling nubs lit by the city glowing angrily beneath. And against the dull yellow-orange of the light pollution, the uneven rows of the corporate monoliths. Dark shapes against the darkening sky. Upon the monoliths glow the abstract advertisements of the new world, the flowing fluid shapes engineered by NeuroArtists to make us feel alive. We their witnesses in the bower of light and dark. The flowing twisting shapes morphing into logos. Billboards in the black of drifting colors marking the firmament of heaven and earth.

Let there be light and the light spills down, draining through the haloed mist to the streets below. The glow of water turning the asphalt shining and grimy, the grit so stark in the nightlight you can feel it on your skin when you clench your hands. In the scrape of shoes. The rivers, the rivulets, the gutter creeks shine and ripple.

It ripples. It shines. The twisted cord of water lines the sidewalk’s edge.

Where she is taking me, I can’t tell. I don’t know the city. I’ve seen the streets before, but on a construct of Paris at the turn of the century, and even if the streets hadn’t drastically changed, I wouldn’t remember anything.

I don’t recognize the black metal plated armor-like over every façade. Shining the colors of the lights above. Old faces hidden away, afraid to show themselves crumbling and ancient in a world of agelessness. What we’ve built is the only thing that rots anymore. What we are is replaced with plastic and latex and metal before it has a chance to. Forget the fact of flesh.

And then: the lines beginning to appear on Astrid’s face. The hoverbike burying her in the side of a pickup truck. Agelessness of

a different sort. The lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth that seemed so unnatural. Everyone is young forever.

And then: Astrid talking about her city, the stories of its people, the stories of the life that breathes through its streets.

“The city was alive,” she said. “The little shops that quieted the world outside. The scent of people and cigarette smoke. To be able to look up and see the sky past the trees and the roofs. The unbroken sky. Pont Neuf and its lights before the river dried and turned to just another place for flesh to rot.

“And now the city is dying, and people forget what death is. They have filled in all the catacombs but one. The empire of death. They have filled them in and forgotten the thousand stories to be found, all for the sake of the world above.

“The city rose,” Astrid said. But the City fell. She had loved it, the thing gone before she was born. She told her stories about it. She remembered.

“Look,” Gabrielle’s gentle order, her finger guiding me towards the monolith ahead.

For a moment, I stare at it, wondering what makes it so special, the billboard high above us, flattened and garish from our worm’s eye view.

But my eyes drift down to the orange light that shines beneath. Here, the monolith was set over existing buildings, a webway of arches and pillars rising from the buried street to hold the bulk aloft. The light is firelight, streetlamp light. It buzzes and hisses with ancient power.

“What is this place?” I say.

“The new catacombs.”

We draw nearer and I begin to smell cooking meats and something deeper. A rancid sweetness. Flesh discarded to rot away.

We stop at the warren’s mouth and stare at the smoky inside.

“Why did you bring me here?” I glance from the haze to her and back again.

Her face is bathed in light and she has nothing for me but a gentle smile.

“This is what you wanted, no?” she says. “Here, there are places where memories are a moment away. Recall as you wish. Perhaps then, you can return to me with a story to tell.”

I take a step forward and she doesn’t follow. I look back at her, hovering beneath the foundation’s arch.

“You’re not coming?” I say. “My French isn’t great.”

“You do not need an interpreter. You know the SenseBoard symbol,” she says. “So a symbol is all you have to find.”

She leans against the threshold arch and stares back the way we came.

“All right,” I say. Mostly for myself, I think. “I’ll go, then.”

And I step inside, to the sudden wave of moist air, warm from the bodies trapped here. Beneath the chatter and murmurs of the milling crowd creeps the sound of whirring augmentations. Everywhere I see exposed metal knitted into flesh, glowing eyes cutting through the smoke. Eyes drifting towards me and away again.

I pass a meat-shop window, look inside to see a woman lying on her stomach. The skin of her back peeled away from metal ribs still flecked with strands of meat and blood. A man stands over her, wiring something into her spine. She looks up at me, smiles, waves. I move on, looking up now at every sign I pass, searching for the familiar symbol: the circle nested within another, the radius of both marked by a line stretching down.

At the door of the first SenseBoard den I pass, a man stands guard, his face hidden behind a black mask, a baby’s empty face, the eyes dark and staring.

At the second, the body of a man hangs from meat hooks. His legs twitch, his head rolls back and forth, and his body begins to swing. No arms. Stumps in their place, metal stumps laced and dripping with exposed wires stripped of their insulation.

The third symbol is paired with an arrow, pointing to an alley, shadowed, distant. On either side rise abandoned buildings, their patios sketched out by scars in the sidewalk where fence posts once stood. Stacks of rotting umbrellas once speared through café tables flank the mouth of the alleyway. Silent watching. I pass

between them and follow the neon symbol glowing above a door deep within.

It opens at the third knock, with no one behind it to greet me.

There is a moment of waiting as I look deep into the darkness. From high above, I can hear the gentle pulsing of a SenseBoard’s diagnostics, a soft single-tone song. Something in the alley has turned the sound of the new catacombs to an almost deathly quiet. The song cuts through it all. The rectangle of blackness slowly filling itself with the pale light of the SenseBoard den, a deep blue. A flight of stairs leading up.

I watch as the shadow of a woman stands up and comes through the light, and her outline draws me forward. She stops at the top of the stairs, nothing more than a silhouette. The waves of hair gently matching her movements, the slender arm rising to draw me forward into her shade.

I enter, and the door shuts behind me, and the stairs come towards me stumbling. The woman turns and glides back through the door, the train and bustle of her skirt drawing a wide figure in the gloom. I follow her, feeling my way up. The steps creaking. This building crumbling. Around me, it all seems old. The darkness hiding all but the smell. The blue light, the shifting slithering sounds of fabric.

I crest the stairs and enter.

She stands waiting for me, silent, smiling pleasantly, dressed in something ornate and beautiful, something far away.

“Memories,” I say, pointing to my head. “You have memory boards here?”

She tilts her head, says nothing, still smiles, her expression unchanging. In the pit of my stomach, I feel a sudden hard knot. The woman barely moves, not even the rise and fall of breath. Her hand slowly reaches out cupped and still like a doll’s. Gestures to a narrow chair made from a swoop of padded metal.

“That’s a memory board?” I say.

She moves to stand behind it.

After a moment, I sit. It’s strangely comfortable. So I lean my

head down gently.

Another moment, and she runs her hands through my hair, tickling my scalp. Her fingers trace furrows down to the brainspike and slowly circle it, stroking the metal, brushing the edge where it meets the skin of my neck. I hear the hiss of a SenseBoard flaring to life and feel her moving slowly somewhere behind me.

I give her a thumbs up.

"Ready when you are," I say.

The cold metal at the back of my neck. The feeling of a cold finger reaching into the center of my head, almost tickling the back of my mouth. Sinuses filling with cold air, with a sudden burst of scents.

"Lock me in," I say.

She must understand. I feel her hand twist, hear the click of metal.

III.

The moment of disorientation when you first enter the datascape isn't something you get used to. Like falling without moving, senses firing and exploding before a scene begins to form. First comes the smells, always a blanket of odors shifting in and out of each other from sour to sweet, a burning smell, ashes, and finally a sterile scent. A spark in my ears and a rush of white noise, a sudden ache, watering in my mouth at a memory of a food I can't name or see. Flashes of light, flashes of color, slowly taking form.

The datascape first comes as something ripped from the last sights you say.

Images coalesce into a room filled with blue light. I reach behind my neck and feel flesh.

The chair tips forward slowly and I step down to the ground, thinking about memory, willing the datascape to form something, to give me something to latch on to that will deliver me to the memories etched by chemicals into the fabric of my brain.

I turn in a slow circle and find a door leading out of the room. I open it. Move through it. Join another field of black that flares to

life. Darkness vanishing and memories appearing.

And here I see:

My father kneeling on the living room floor, wrestling Astrid's arm into a cocoon of bubble wrap and packing tape. His movements silent and angry and quick.

And here I slide slowly backwards, walking through the house I call home. Already, it seems distant. Already, only four days away, it seems like something I must have made up.

And at the front door, it is night time. Astrid opens it, her keys jingling. And the leash of the dog. He rushes towards me, his coat dewy from a gentle rain. I look up and wait for Astrid, but I hear her footsteps fading, walking away again.

It all vanishes as I turn away. The dog, Astrid, the door half ajar. They cease to exist. The memory of moments layered half there over the memory of this location.

Up the stairs that creak, following the sounds of shouting voices. Walking up to a conversation I don't remember. But I must have heard it if the SenseBoard can drag it up out of my brain.

The voices come from the SenseBoard room, our little bank of computers. I hear Astrid's desperate voice, and my father's reply, even and cold. Muffled when I open the door and stare into the empty room.

"He spends all day on his datascape," Astrid says. "We cannot allow..."

My father, "This is the world now. Stop living in some fantasy of the past."

"Better some fantasy of the past than a fantasy that will never exist."

"How so?" my father's voice rises.

Their hollow voices speaking and nothing else.

"You are killing your child."

"Don't you..."

The voices cut abruptly. I blink and an image is there. Astrid, facing away from me, tearing a SenseBoard free of its mount and throwing it at a wall. This I've seen before.

"Enough, Charles," she says. "You've spent long enough..."

I see her turning to look at me, but I'm already running. I catch sight of a flushed cheek as she chases after me. I follow the memory, and I'm ten years old again. Her voice calls my name.

I follow the memory and it takes me to my room.

Night. Dark, this room, the light in the hallway flickering on while I curl up against myself beneath blankets that somehow still leave me cold. Through half closed eyes, I watch Astrid hover at my door, her sad distant eyes lost in silhouette.

I blink and she's gone.

But that's not right.

That night ended with her sitting on the edge of my bed for the first time since she married my father. She thought I was asleep. She cried.

"Mon fils," she said. "Tu es mon fils. I will remember."

Or did she know I could hear? I want to ask her, but she's gone, and the scene refuses to form. I blink and she's still gone and she's still gone and she's still gone and she's not coming back.

I rise from the bed, hoping to feel her weight there. I rise to follow her out into the hallway and call after her, to ask all the questions I never did.

The bedroom door swings shut and won't open again.

I pull. Shake the handle. Call her name. All that happens is the hallway light vanishes from the edge of the door.

And my head splits apart.

A spike driven through it. A pickaxe through the crown of my head. I feel it down to my feet, this shudder of terror as memories tear apart, hurricane winds that deafen and blind ripping it all away.

The smell of rotting flesh, of bleach.

The sound of rustling cloth and slithering flesh, of gentle feet skittering across the floor.

The taste of another's mouth, of lipstick and perfume.

And the lights spilling slowly over my vision, the colors spilling. Dripping. Rack focus onto the images forming.

My room again, and the woman, the SenseBoard monitor.

Smiling gently.

"What are you doing here?" I say. "Is something..."

"Mon fils," she says. "Little boy."

I don't have any words ready, but I open my mouth anyway, feel throat start to speak.

She rears up suddenly, and her clothing slips away into the shadows as if it were never there. Beneath the last scraps of her skirt whipping into nonexistence come eight legs rippling forward, smooth and textured like bone. Where the legs join together, folds of flesh dripping with viscous fluid.

I'm still halfway through my first word when it turns into an alarmed cry. The fear pours through me, catching me up in wave, dragging me under. Her human arms find my wrists and pull them above my head and pin them there. Her spider legs tickling grasping the little hairs pricking into my legs, wrapping around them, sticking like thorny branches, forcing them apart.

I squeeze my eyes shut, try to bring the datascape down with neural commands.

"Mon fils, mon fils," the spider-voice whispers in my ear.

"Shut it down!"

She laughs as I twist beneath her.

"Shut it..." something clicks, a realization. I gather a breath, force clear words through the fear closing tight my throat, "User override: emergency shutdown."

Nothing happens except that the laughter stops, and a roll of flesh opens on her pulsing arachnid form. The black curve of a stinger twitching, feeling its way towards me. The trip drips a hot fluid that burns my legs where it touches.

"You," she strikes me between the legs. A burst of fire. The scream that claws its way out of me is inhuman, animal, from a world before words.

"Must," she strikes again and I can feel the warmth of blood making my legs slick, soaking the sheets, making them heavy and warm.

"Behave," the third strike comes and her voice rises in

gleeful anger. The fire in my legs freezes them and slowly rises into my stomach, my chest, my throat, my throbbing skull.

And behind the spider is Astrid.

A knife in her hand.

"You," Astrid says.

The spider twists, her hands and legs releasing me to recoil to the corner. Her body covers me, and she lunges away towards the woman replacing my mother. Towards the woman dead and buried, nothing more than an urn.

Astrid strikes up with the knife. Blood, more blood, as the knife tears the woman open from belly to sternum. Astrid's face alight with cold fury.

The spider falls, and Astrid drives her knife down again, bloody up to the elbows.

She leaves the knife in the spider's gurgling throat, buried up to the grip. She stands and tilts her head, looking at me.

"I'm sorry for this," she says. "It might hurt."

"Hurt?" I say.

It seems the only thing my mouth can say.

But she has already vanished. Gone again.

I rise shakily, and blood is the only thing I smell now.

The spider is still, her blood draining in heartbeats that grow weaker and weaker.

I reach out to touch her.

And the world is torn from me again.

The breath I take feels like the first that I have ever taken.

Gabrielle stands over me. For the first time, her face is lined with something other than mild amusement. Worry, concern. I sit up and look for Astrid. There is a cold hole in the back of my neck.

"Charles," she says. "Are you all right?"

"I'm OK," I say. The words coming unbidden on a heavy tongue. I reach to touch the back of my neck, but Gabrielle's hand finds my wrist and guides it away. There is a stinging pain shooting deep into my head.

"Where's Astrid?" I say. "I saw..."

"Shh," Gabrielle says. She tilts my head forward, presses her folded scarf against it.

"What happened?"

"She had the brainspike locked in. I had to..." she makes an angry yanking gesture with her hand and then begins looping the scarf around my neck, tighter and tighter to stem the flow of blood.

"I saw..." I want to tell her about Astrid, about the memory that refused to show itself.

"After, Charles," Gabrielle says. "Tell me after. We should go."

We pass the woman, the spider turned back to a human as we leave. Her wrists are bound to her SenseBoard recliner, duct tape wrapped thick around her hands. More tape running around her mouth and brainspike. Her eyes are rolling in her head, wide open and unfocused.

"What did you...?"

"Nothing," Gabrielle says. "I only reminded her that perhaps she should be more careful outside of the datascape."

I can't tear my eyes away from her convulsing form.

Gabrielle's hands lead me, hold me steady, and step by step my legs grow stronger until we are walking through the new catacombs again.

Outside, it is still night, still raining. And beyond the reach of the catacombs it is cold once more. The guttural cries vanish until we walk through silent deserted streets and once again the colors play out only high above.

IV.

We arrive back at their apartment. It is empty, dark, everyone else still at the funeral. Everyone else still underground, riding wave after wave of endorphin pulses. Listening to the music, the discordant voices shouting and challenging the heartbeat drums.

But the apartment is quiet, a steady soft silence that only seems softer when Gabrielle flicks the lights on. They cast a half-light

to fight the darkness spilling in through the windows. In the distance, the lights and monoliths draw a perforated skyline. The new catacombs beneath them lie hidden from view.

Gabrielle makes me stand beneath a lamp to examine the brainspike's ruin. When she pulls her scarf away, it comes away cold. The sodden bloody spots beginning to crust at the edges. She gasps softly and the hand upon my shoulder tightens.

"Is it bad?" I say.

"It looks worse in the light," she says. "We should do this in the bathroom."

She leads me there and sits me on the toilet.

"Take your shirt off, she says. "I'll try to find bandages and..."

She leaves. I take a few shaky breaths and then reach to the back of my neck to pull the shirt over my head. It sticks to my back, peels away. Brushes the wound and sends a sickening wave forward to my eyes. I let the shirt drop to the ground. It's brown and brittle. With a finger, I feel the raw flesh of my neck, the light scab.

My hands come away streaked with red, dusted lightly with crumbs of dried blood that coalesce when I rub my fingers together.

I see Astrid again. The memory that wouldn't display.

"Gabrielle," I say.

"One moment," her voice is distant.

The deeper I breathe, the quieter my heart becomes and the tension that keeps me taut, ready and waiting, slowly releases.

A breath catches in my throat and another. And I press bloody fingers into my eyes to stem the flow of tears. For a few long minutes, I sit there. Shaking. Trying to stop.

When I look up, my jaw is clenched tight and my vision is blurred but I see Gabrielle hovering at the door. She comes in, kneels beside me, spreading out her bundles of cloth and rolls of gauze on the edge of the sink.

"It will be all right," her hand takes mine. "You are safe." I nod.

"Keep your head still while I do this," she says.

"OK."

I close my eyes and focus on the gentle touch of her fingers dancing around the wound, the deep shards of pain where the cotton swab touches.

"I saw Astrid," I say, but I find myself telling her something else that comes unbidden to memory. "This dream I had of her."

"Oh?"

"She was tucking me in. I was a kid again, and she was saying good night to me. In her lap, she was holding..."

"This may sting a bit," Gabrielle says. She dampens a large cotton round with an upended bottle. She bends low to set the bottle on the floor.

"Tell me of the dream," Gabrielle says. She reaches a hand behind my neck. The pressure is gentle, nervous, but it feels like boiling water coiling into my neck.

"So she was saying good night, but in her lap she was holding her urn."

Gabrielle retrieves a swatch of gauze and tilts my chin down with a finger. She presses the gauze into the wound with her finger, and the muscles on my neck to tight.

"And the urn, it lit up her face. This glow like a candle, except it only moved with her breathing. She told me she loved me and took the urn with her, and every step she took away from me, the urn got brighter and brighter."

"Hmm," Gabrielle unfurls a strip of tape and tears it off with her teeth.

"I don't know why I told you all of that," I say suddenly. "I mean, it's a dream I had on the flight over. It felt important."

"What I wanted to say, what I was trying to tell you is about this... memory that I have, of Astrid. And I tried to see it on the datascape, but it wouldn't display."

"So?" Gabrielle presses the tap against the gauze, catching some of my hair, tugging at my head as she smoothes it over my skin.

"So it's not real," I say. I feel more tears rising in my throat, but I talk through them and they fade quickly. "Everything else I saw

I almost forgot, and the one thing I remembered about her, this one night, the first night she tucked me in, the first night she... she said she loved me. The first night she sang that song of hers, and it's not even real?"

"How do you know it is not real?" Gabrielle says. Her voice is laced with frustration. "If you remember it and a computer cannot, why does that make it false?"

"Because it never happened?"

"But you remember it," Gabrielle says. "And you... you love Astrid for it, no?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Is your love of her real?"

I don't answer.

"And your love of her keeps her in your mind, and in your dreams, even her urn gives you light. So what does it matter whether that memory is something real or not?"

"Isn't that your whole deal? I mean, you keep saying how telling stories is the best way to remember," I say.

Gabrielle shrugs.

"The best way to remember love or hurt or joy or sadness," she says. "Stories do not remember everything. Only what is important."

"Right. Only what's important," I say. I lean forward and press the heels of my hands into my eyes. "So I remember pretending to sleep. I remember her crying, and saying I was her son. I remember how careful she was when she said she loved me. And she sang this song. She hummed a lot of it because she didn't know the words..."

"La Vie en Rose," Gabrielle says.

I look up at her. Her eyes are looking up at a distant corner, and she smiles.

"Yeah."

"She sang it to me every night," she says. "And... it would be so easy to find the rest of the words, but..."

She laughs, and the smile slowly fades. Quickly, she dips her

head and begins gathering up her medical supplies, organizing them in a little grid beside her. The silence seems to make my neck hurt more. She pushes herself up to her feet.

"Would you like some tea?" she says. "I am getting a little cold."

"Sounds good," I say.

She leaves me alone in the bloodstained bathroom.

After a moment, I hear the sounds of cupboard doors, the clink of mugs and the hiss of running water, the heavy sound of a kettle banging against something. I hear her singing as I leave the bathroom to join her in the kitchen.

From the hall, I listen.

The tune is familiar, haunting, distant, and it makes me feel like crying again. I imagine I can feel Astrid's hands in my hair. Her finger delicate and curious following the lines of my ear as she sings night after night.

Gabrielle doesn't know half the words to the song, but neither did Astrid.

Sumatran Tigers at the Wild Animal Park

Marguerite Martinet

Fangs, large as my whole hand
The smallest of the largest
Feline of them all- the grandest
And biggest ones are all extinct now.

You pace, and pace, then turn to face
Flahsing cameras, clicking apertures
Whizzing digital instagrams and pinterests
Impotent pixels to "pin" "repost" "like"

And You, Sumatra's large-cat king
The height of jungles majesty,
Your powerful silent paws leave
Prints wide as mine times three.

And while all the rest of us bipeds
click pictures and plod on,
I want to hold your yellow gaze
Summary of evolution's centuries of work.

January

Flor Marshall

Youth hung heavy in the door way
and my room an awful stale cold.
I took the Route 26 to your house.
I crept up slowly through the snow
leaving small fresh footsteps,
though I knew you weren't home.

You were away,
high above in the mountains of West Virginia.
And it was I who was growing cold outside your window.
See all I wanted was to lie in your bed
and smell you.
To fill my lungs with the scent of the laundry detergent,
your mother uses to wash your weather worn clothes.

I tried to pry open every door,
to slide in from any crack or crevasse,
but to no avail
I sat outside growing cold on your doorstep.
My tears resonating in failure.
I left the warm imprint of my naked hand
on the small glass of your back door.

As I stood in the bitter wind of January knowing what lay ahead,
I refused to believe the truth that was etched into my heart.
So I placed letters to God under my pillow
in hopes you would change your mind.
But he never answered my prayers,
and you left me with time.

Cubicle Coward

Editors' Choice, Poetry

Roxanne Reed

Linger

Elizabeth Butzen

Wreathed black, the moon sighs
paths of shattered stars on waves
while shells cry sand. Mud
and dark grains coat my bare feet.
Water licks away the prints.

Stars shiver and sing
wordless songs of what could be,
but how that moonlit path sways---
Trade air's sting for water's touch
and I could then dream.

If dawn-burnt sand awaits
me should I sit here longer.
then let me flow forward,
then let endless nights soothe
what lingers left of me

If you tell her to take her top off one more time,
I will send staples through your lips.

That woman is a college graduate,
scaling the ladder of success,
with the intellect of Aristotle,
the emotional depth
of a practiced mother,
and a collection of philosophies
you'd beg God
to give you the understanding of.

And what are you?
Cowering in your cubicle,
your Bud Light eyes
molesting each female to pass you,
feasting on her breasts
while she speaks to you,
as if you could actually
demolish her grounding.

You swallow mouthwash
so your worthless comments
come out a little fresher.
Save your poison,
because nobody's listening.

Fever Dream

Katherine Birmingham

Inside the barn, the smells of straw and horse dung lingered in the
lair like a bad gentleman's cologne. The braying of horses
reverberated off the wooden rafters only to be drowned out by the
whirl of the windmill outside. I was alone on the farm that morning
as my parents and brothers had traveled to church for the sabbath day.
God had no place in my life however and I had once again refused to
accompany them.

As I replenished the hay, my legs almost slid out from under
me when I heard a barbarous scream. It seemed to be coming from
outside, high up on the hill. I threw my pitch fork down and flung
open the barn doors. The bright sunlight streamed into my irises,
constricting my pupils down to tiny black pin points.

I ambled up the hill, blinking to regain my sight. In the
distance, I could make out her blurred and mangled form; white with
a streak of cardinal red, thrashing back and forth in abject terror. I
sped up, my dusty boots hammering hard into the grass.

Mid-way up the slope, I glanced down, surveying the land
below. The little farm house looked oddly out of place. Its rectangular
shapes stood out against the dark enveloping curtain of the
surrounding wilderness, like a lone ship on a doomed voyage. It
reminded me of the Walt Whitman poem that my Willa had liked so
much. She had used to read me passages from Whitman while her
long ebony hair spiraled into her face. It had been seven years since
she drowned in Devil's Lake, yet it had seemed like only yesterday.

The flutter of wings startled me, bringing my attention back
to farm. A gaggle of geese was upon me, attacking from behind. They
squawked and pecked madly at my legs. I picked out the ring leader,
a plump and solid fellow, and kicked him hard in the floppy butt. He
tumbled down the hill with a resounding screech. As the other geese
waddled off in terror, another scream came from above.

Following the rickety fence, I reached the top of the hill, an

entrance to a darker stretch of deep wood. A mopey cow lingered
by the gate chewing his cud. He stared coldly at the alabaster shape
sprawled in the grass. I shooed him away and knelt down beside her.
The tiny lamb looked up at me with sweltering eyes of black marble.
She bleated. It sounded exactly like the screams of a child. My jaw
grew slack as I watched the blood trickle down her legs as if
christening her snowy fleece. It was that damned devils rope that was
wrapped around her neck. The man who had sold it to my father had
called it Glidden wire. It was supposed to keep the wolves at bay but
it had again claimed another innocent life. The lamb nudged my hand
with her wet nose. I ran my fingers over her soft fleece and spoke
gentle words as I lifted the pistol out of my boot.

The shot blasted through the farm land and my ear drums
caved in. A splatter of blood landed in my mouth. I spit it out onto
the grass and rolled over onto my back. I lay on the grass a long time,
staring out into the murky woods as thoughts rolled asunder in my
mind, and then something moved beyond the trees.

At first it seemed to be nothing more than a shadow but as she
turned I caught the angular visage of unholy perfection. She seemed
to possess a dark and languorous beauty, the kind that could tame a
raging river. Her face was that of a woman begot of an angel and a
devil. A tangled mane of ebony locks dangled from the crown of her
head. She stared in my direction and smiled with orange lips. My
pupils dilated. I could feel my youthful virility welling up inside of
me. I sat on the grass watching as she drifted deep into the woods, the
curves of her body hugging every tree it passed.

So I did what any man would do. I followed her, then
strapping my pistol back into my boot, crossed beyond the safety of
the gate. I trudged for miles through the thick wood hoping she would
turn again and notice me. She didn't. Instead she spoke in hushed
tones to the gossamer flowers, instructed the clouds, and directed

the large sprawling oaks. The high grass seemed to part in reverence to her. Even the proud tiger lilies purred and the thistle milk bushes shrank as if complimenting her magnificence. I called out to her and she laughed. I took it as an invitation and continued my pursuit.

As we reached the mossy banks of Devil's Lake, I noticed a strange phosphorescence rising from the earth. She was close to me now, so close that I could smell the sweet scent of persimmon wafting from her mouth. Oh what I wouldn't give to part those silky orange lips. My soul? What a strange thought. I slicked back my hair, cleared my throat and said, "Excuse me, may I introduce myself? I am..."

She turned and grinned a half moon smile. I lost my composure. Paying me no mind she sauntered over to a massive oak tree and bowed down. A tremor rippled through her body and she straightened, rigid and tense. Then her head began to wobble. It twisted, spinning around her neck in three full rotations. I cringed as I heard the bones crack. Her eyes rolled back into her head until the whites shone bright as goose eggs. The air screeched and rapid gale of wind rose up. It tore over the lake and through the trees forming a whirlpool around the ancient oak. With a crack, the mighty oak was split in two. The gnarled innards of the tree sighed. It opened revealing a doorway, a strange cosmic portal.

I moved closer and stared at the barrage of images unfolding inside the pulsating portal; a dead human infant sliding out of a birth canal, an eclipsed sun moving into position behind a moon, my brothers copulating with rotted carrion, teeth gnashing, my mother making the sign of the cross before lifting her skirt, Willa's dead body floating on Devil's Lake...

I buried my eyes in the crook of my elbow. I heard a moan. I think it was me. Laughter rose up, echoing along the putrid water bank. I whipped around nervously like a wounded deer then clenched my fists. The woman was studying me. She looked radiant as ever but something in her had changed. It was her eyes. She had a dark funerary gleam in her eyes. She opened her mouth and spoke two words to me. "Surrender, Joshua."

My heart raced. "How do you know my name?"

She spoke again. "Lo, the unbounded sea, On its breast a ship starting, spreading all sails, carrying even her moon sails."

It was a passage from Whitman. I felt myself sway as part of my shivering soul slipped into hers. It was Willa.

Willa was changed but not completely. She still had the wild ebony hair, the high cheekbones, the perfect complexion. She had just grow up. In seven years she had morphed from a prepubescent 12 year old into smoldering siren. She pulled her dress high up onto her thighs and waded down into the muddy water. "I love you, Joshua."

I heard my voice tremble. "I love you too."

"If you love me, surrender." She offered me her hand. For a fleeting moment I almost succumbed, almost lost myself in that in that luminous beauty, in the curves of her hips, in the pout of her parted succulent mouth... but deep down I knew it wasn't really Willa. Not anymore.

I took two steps back when she lunged at me and clutched me by the boot. I slipped and fell hard into the mud, hitting my head on a spiked log. Pain surged through my neck and down into my spine. Blood trickled out of my right ear as my body slid further down the embankment. She dragged me down in the filth and muck right up to the waters edge. I dug my nails into the slime, but there was nothing to hold onto. The stench of rot and death invaded my nostrils as I descended into the lake.

Spanish moss flowed into my mouth as I struggled to breathe. The deep green waters gurgled around me as if all the poor drowned souls were murmuring their secrets to me. I cried out, "God, help me!" before I went under. It was then I remembered the gun. I reached down for the pistol in my boot as the woman dug savagely into my back. I flung myself out of the water and she came at me again, snarling. I aimed the pistol squarely at her head and prayed it would fire. Her skull exploded as I shot her in the face. She crumbled and fell back into the lake, bobbing along the surface of the water. As she floated away, I crawled out of the slime, picked myself up, and ran.

I raced for what seemed like miles, barely daring to look back.

I clawed my way through brambles and ripped my flesh on prickly branches, desperate for any sight of home. Finally out of breath, I collapsed just inside the gate of my family's farm. Closing my eyes, I heard the familiar hum of the whirling windmill and then everything went black.

When I opened my eyes that stupid mopey cow was staring down at me. I waved him away but he just blinked with contemptuous eyes. "What happened to you?" I squinted into the direction of sun and saw my brother Thomas leaning against the open gate.

"I... I just had a bad dream," I said. Thomas scoffed and looked at me with a mischievous grin.

"There's an dead animal lying beside you and the right side of your face is covered in blood. You didn't just have a bad dream."

"I did. I was lost... in a wild fever dream, but I think I've found my way back now." The cow mooed loudly, flicked his tail, and sashayed off. Thomas held out his hand to me and I took it.

He pulled me up with his muscular forearm. I stood for a moment regaining my balance in the hot afternoon sun.

"Let's get you home then," he said and the two of us headed down the hill.

Grandpa and the Scar

Winner, Jack Mawhinney Fiction Prize

Nikki Nelson-Hicks

See this scar?" Grandpa asked as he pushed up his sleeve. "I got that during a racoon hunt back in '32." The porch creaked as he leaned back in his ladderback rocking chair. His young grandson sat nestled in his lap, waiting for a story, while the rest of the family prepared Sunday dinner inside the house. "Biggest damn one we ever treed. And mean! Lord, I'll remember that one for the rest of my days. The way it fought and scratched and cursed. OOWEEE! It was a sight!"

"My daddy went hunting once and brought back a deer head." the little boy piped in. "Mom got all mad."

Grandpa shook his head laughing and looked down at the boy, "Let me tell you something, boy," he leaned forward, his head cocked. "Your Paw don't know nothin' about huntin'." He sat back and snorted. "Hmmph! He calls hisself a hunter. Boy, there's more to huntin' than running out into the woods with a six pack of beer in one hand and a rifle in the other. Nah.....these young ones today.....don't know nothing of huntin' ..of the chase."

"But...my Paw...he knew. And he taught me....listen up--"

"There was always a mess of them running across my Paw's back field so we would set up traps, wooden stakes- oh, about as big around as your leg and half as long, boy- all around the back side, pointy side up. Paw and my Uncle Jed had trained the dogs to corral them especially through this strip of land. It was one of my Paw's favorite tricks."

"My dog can do tricks. Roll over, fetch, shake...all kinds of

stuff. Ginger is a good dog."

"You wouldn't want nothing to do with these dogs, boy! These dogs weren't for pettin'. These dogs were for huntin'! They were the meanest pack of hounds I ever knew. You could hear those dogs baying all over the hills as soon as they caught wind of them. Then....Good Lord! You couldn't hold them back! They'd bolt right after them and run 'em straight to the stakes. You could hear them a'screamin' as soon as they'd hit'em. Usually, we'd trap the bastards right there in the stakes but that one in '32 was a mean one. It just kept running, blood trailing everywhere it went. But that was just fine by us 'cause the dogs would get a whiff and chase it all the harder. Lordy, that one in '32 was a smart one and kept just ahead of the pack. I figure we must've trailed that devil almost half the night."

"I remember camping outside in the back yard all night with my friends. It's so dark out here in the country at night. How did you all see to hunt?"

"The moon was full that night, I recall. Shinin' like a yellow beacon. Besides, hounds don't depend on their eyes for huntin'. They use their sniffers." he said, tapping the side of his thin nose. "It's better than radar."

The boy laughed. "Cool."

"He'd run plumb through Paw's entire 10 acre field and smack into the old county graveyard. Since it was my first trip out- I was all of 12 at the time - my Uncle Jed figured he'd let me do the

honors. Somethin' of an old tradition....my first blood."

"Kinda like how last year, when I first turned six, my daddy let me hook my first worm at the Shelby Park fishing rodeo?"

"Hmmm. Something like that."

The boy nodded, understanding.

"So I stepped forward, proud as a peacock, when...suddenly, all hell broke loose! I raised up my arm just in time to avoid catching a rock right in the eye. That's where I got this scar from."

Grandpa stopped and pointed down again to the scar. The skin around it puckered like stitches in a hastily sewn hem. The boy leaned closer to study it, touching it gingerly. It was a terrible, awful scar.

Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?

Winner, Angelo Carli Poetry Prize

Olive Edgar

1.

The first bite is always the most delicious they say, but I think it's just the most shocking, biting through thin flesh to white meat, feeling the juices run down my chin, tasting the saccharine.

I leave them everywhere, twice bitten pink ladies. I leave them in the dust on my top book shelf where they stain my oak with sticky residue, I leave them on the dashboard of my car during the day and they dry, they brown, they grow old. I leave them in the kitchen, on the counter for three minutes before my aching grandmother throws them away.

2.

There is a hole in the heel of my favorite socks. I wish I could be the woman who knows what to do in these sorts of damaged situations, but I am a woman with teeth.

So when my sock needs stitching
or my panties need stitching
or my lips need stitching

up I am not the one to call. I am the one to call
for seven packets of uncooked chicken flavored ramen,
for crumpled one dollar bills but never any change,
for broken, bleeding black pens, for melted bars of deodorant
and, if you see an empty pizza box in the backseat of my car,
for the reassurance it'll still be there in six months.

3.

I am a woman with teeth.
When my co-workers choose to exclude me
from gin-soaked karaoke night
I drink four cups of coffee for courage
and flirt with another department.

And when the effable boy from three floors up
presses his Matthew McConaughey-body against mine,
I smile and I know that I am the one
with teeth.

Frida

Briana Munoz

When I was twelve, my dad bought me a dirty blonde palomino horse. I named her Frida.

The last day we went out to ride together, my dad had already been diagnosed. And it's sad to say, but I still didn't even want to go. I might not have known the cancer was already spreading and that same day, my favorite band was playing in LA and all of my friends were going.

"Mom, come on! Do you even know who Suicidal Tendencies are? Legendary. I'll probably never have another chance to see them again. That's so fucking unfair. God!" I whined.

"You watch your mouth, Kat. I don't care who they are, I know there's going to be drugs and alcohol. You guys don't even know your way around LA." She replied.

"Google Maps, Mom. All phones have it nowadays. We're not in your caveman days anymore. All my friends are going!"

"I don't care, your dad invited you to go riding. You need to spend more time with him instead of worrying about what your friends are doing. I don't want to hear about your Tendencies Suicide anymore or whatever they're called. Get your riding gear on; Dad should be home any minute."

We hopped on our horses and he rode in sync with the direction of the wind. For my dad, to be in a saddle, was home. The moment we got out on the field, I would watch him become one with his horse. Zipping our way through the sea of golden grass, we rode until sundown. From afar, we appeared as small little ants. I'd feel my body breaking through the air as the wind hit my chest and combed my hair back. The sun warmed my body and the goosebumps on my skinny arms would settle back into place.

"Come on, catch up!" Dad yelled as he wisped through the autumn wind.

"Oh, you think you're quick, don't you? You know, it's just

because you didn't let me ride Frida or you'd be eating my dust."

"Why should I let you ride Frida? Last time, she almost bucked you off. You need to come to the ranch more often, and then maybe I'd let you."

I escaped into another world on that field. An open range, free of sickness, free of neurosurgeons baring nothing but bad news, free of all the pain in my heart that I carried when I watched my mom crying beside my dad's hospital beds.

Two years later, it happened, when no one really expected. It still seems like a nightmare I keep having but there is no gasp of relief when I awaken. Instead, it's just a stab to my stomach of reality.

"Kat, I asked you to run to the pharmacy for your dad's medicine for me. Did you do it?"

"Shit."

"You forgot again. Didn't you?" She asked as she spoon fed my dad some mashed potatoes.

"I ask you for one small thing, Kat, and you can't even..."

"Mom! I'll stop at the pharmacy before I go to the show, okay? But I'm already running late."

My dad was already glued to a wheelchair by this point and my mom couldn't as easily run to the store anymore. All of his horses and fancy saddles had been sold to pay for the endless hospital bills. He didn't like this at first but after a while he hardly ever talked about the horses.

After dropping off his medicine at home I met up with my friends, dressed in too much leather and patched denim. We drank whiskey on our way up to the venue in the not-so-nice part of Sunset Boulevard. As I entered the Echo, I ran into a few girls who gave me death glares for the one time, years ago, their bearded boyfriends brought me into their beds. The rest of the grungy girls sipped on cheap beer as they bobbed their heads spilling their drinks on the concrete floors.

"Kat, funny seeing you here."

Dan was almost ten years older than I. Long hair that sometimes he'd throw into a bun.

"Hey darlin', nice catching you here. How's your bastard brother? Haven't seen him since he kind of screwed my best friend." I replied while casually running my eyes across the venue. "Actually, don't answer that. I don't really care."

"Cigarette?" He asked as he extended his hand toward mine.

The night went on and the only recollections I had were dancing with Dan's hands on my hips, trying to slip his dirty fingers up my high waist cut off shorts. His hands were colder than the chilled cocktail that he had bought for me. We somehow ended up in the back of my best friend's car. My spine was being forcefully pushed up against the car door. After that, everything else was hazy. While my dad's unconscious body was being transported in the back of an ambulance, mine was in the backseat of my best friend's car, passed out drunk, topless. I woke up to fifteen missed calls on my cell phone from who I believed was just a nagging mother.

When I finally found my way home, I stumbled my way through the door that was left open and sunk into my bed and fell asleep. My mom came home the next morning and I knew something was wrong when I heard my mom yelling, cursing the same god she reminded me every night to pray to.

The next day, I drove myself to the only place I thought I'd find solace. I ended up in front of an empty field of yellow grass and remembered the days that my dad would bring me here, before he became ill. The sun didn't shine as bright as it seemed the last day I came riding with my pop. The air smelled fresh and clean but it was cold to my bones and they ached. The wind blew my hair in different directions and it whistled a song the lonely old man sings on his way back home from where he visits his wife at the cemetery. I longed to feel the happiness I felt the day my dad had brought me here last but I felt absolutely- nothing. Attempting to feel connected to a spot I had such beautiful memories at, I decided to lay on the floor. I looked up squinting my eyes and wrinkling my pale skin forehead staring at the ugly sun. Mad. I spread my arms and legs and shuffled them as if I were making snow angels except in a field of dry, dead grass. But I still felt absolutely nothing.

Finally, I let out a big "FUUUCCCCKKK YOOOOUUU!" I gave up.

I closed my eyes and as I started to begin to accept this complete sadness of not having my dad here anymore, my hero, my best friend, my pop, I heard what sounded like galloping hooves in a distance. I sat up on my elbows, squinting again, trying to figure out what it was that I was hearing and then I saw a beautiful blonde palomino horse running wild. So free, swimming through the weeds, almost making them come to life. It didn't get too close to me but I didn't question it one bit. Instead, I stared in admiration.

In my dreams, the same blonde horse visits me and I know it's my pop, because he loved palominos. And in heaven, he gallops free, in the endless fields of yellow grass without sickness, without his wheel chair that still sits in our shed. The one that he was tied down to, the last few months of his life.

A Final Namaste

Daphne Munson

No!!! It can't be," I cried, my thoughts racing as my legs pumped up the hill, breath coming in gasps, heart pounding. But as I approached the top of the hill, the ambulance in the driveway, the wheelchair tipped on its side, the blankets strewn across the yard gave evidence to the truth. Two young men in EMT uniforms were carrying a stretcher with a white sheet covering a body that looked much smaller than I had imagined, as if in death the old man had shrunk, his soul leaving only a shell behind. I saw the family standing in the driveway. Dark skinned, dark haired: the wife in a brightly colored sari, a button down shirt tucked into pleated pants on the husband, the kids in jeans and t-shirts, all wearing sandals. Tears stood out, reflecting on the woman's face as she turned to her weeping husband who gathered her into his arms.

I had started my morning as I usually did, getting my husband and children out the door, settling in behind my computer screen to work until I couldn't bear the oppressive walls of my cramped office any longer. Then I'd put on my running gear, double knot my running shoes, put my sunglasses on, and settle my visor on my head, making my way out the gate and onto the street. The sun was out and a cool breeze was gently blowing. I moved at a quick pace, my shoes softly clomping on the pavement in time to my breath as I sped down the street.

I knew the old man would be out sunning himself.

I began this daily ritual a year earlier. I had wanted to lose the few pounds that had inevitably crept on as middle age progressed, but I wasn't really interested in joining a gym. So I started jogging through the neighborhood, mapping out a three mile route with a few steep hills to help get my heart going. I liked running in my neighborhood, looking at the neighbor's yards, noticing who was remodeling, who was moving in, who was moving out. And when I

ran I made it a habit to wave at the others who were out on their daily jaunt: the older ladies who walked their dogs in a group and gossiped, the elderly Japanese couple who wore long sleeved jackets and big floppy hats to keep the sun off, the old man in grey sweats who ran everyday preparing for his next marathon. I waved at the passing cars too, partly to ensure that they noticed me, partly to see if they would wave back. I waved at the Girl Scout on the corner selling her cookies and the balding family man in shorts and t-shirt out mowing his lawn. I waved at the gray haired woman with the big straw hat pruning her roses and I waved at the old man at the top of the hill.

He was Indian, dark and weathered from the sun, with grey and white strands weaving through his cropped hair. His square jaw hinted at a man who had once been the strong patriarch of his family, but who now sat quietly on the sidelines. He sat in a wheelchair, with a plaid blanket laid over his knees, sometimes another one draped over his shoulders. On his feet he wore sandals, wide brown leather straps crisscrossing his gnarled feet which rested on the foot pads of the wheelchair. If the weather was inclement he would not come out, but if there was sun, no matter how chilly it was, I knew he would be out. When I first saw him, a younger man, his son or son-in-law I supposed, was wheeling him out to the front lawn where it was flat and the sun was not blocked by the roofline or the neighboring trees. I waved at them both, but got no response.

As the weeks progressed and I made my daily ascent of the hill, I'd wave when the old man was out. Sometimes he would be napping, slumped to one side, the blanket sliding off his lap. Sometimes he'd be wide awake, leaning back in his wheelchair, soaking in the warming rays of the sun. Sometimes he was not there at all, and I would worry that something had happened to him. Then one day as I approached his home I waved, and slowly, tentatively he raised his hand in a return salute.

After that, it seemed as if he were expecting me, as if he were waiting for me to pass by so that he could wave at me. He would wave as I ran up the hill and wave as I ran down the hill across the street from his home. If I missed a day or two, I knew he was

probably out there waiting for me. I imagined I could see the relief in his eyes when I returned to my regular routine. And likewise, I looked forward to seeing him, the old man at the halfway point of my route, giving his daily benediction as I ran past. I'd wave at him even if he was sleeping, a salute to the sentinel at the top of the hill.

I'd noticed the ambulance siren wailing as it roared past me when I started climbing the first hill of my circuit. But in my aging neighborhood it was not an uncommon sound. And so I continued unsuspecting, until I rounded the corner at the bottom of his hill.

I stood on the sidewalk, just a few feet away from the ambulance, the lights still blinking, the siren no longer sounding. I saw the husband look up at me, in recognition, saw the sorrow in his deep brown eyes.

"I'm so sorry," I choked out barely able to keep the tears in check.

"Thank you," he said in the light lyrical voice of East India.

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Ramesh, Ramesh Bhuta," he answered.

"Ramesh" I whispered.

I turned to go back down the hill and then stopped. Facing the place where the old man had fallen, the place where he always sat, I placed my hands in front of my heart and bowed my head.

"Namaste, dear friend Ramesh," I intoned.

"Namaste."



Buried

Emily Williamson

In the Wake of Romy's Tail

Daphne Munson

"Let's go!" We decide to cut through a stony slotted route
Staccato cadence in my chest, my breath shallow, rapid, my vision narrow
I follow my companion into the hollow of my fears
We dive down the steep hillside into the maw of the ravine,
A wall of silent pines mark the far side as the creek bed narrows
A mottled marble punctuated by dense dark tops of conifers and jagged irregular peaks

I shadow my guide
Who leads assuredly at a rapid pace
Over densely covered boulders
Slumbering under a thick carpet of white precipitate

I sweep down the rocky incline
Face cold, tingling

Self-made wind whistling past ears, driving salty rivulets down cheeks
Edges of encumbered feet bite into the crust of snow
If I slow I will be trampled, trammeled
I race to stay on Romy's tail

We slice through heaped humps of icy cold carved out by previous transients where I have tripped up before,
The sight of numerous yard sales
Hurtling forward into the wake of her icy rooster tail

We bank, legs and body moving in rhythm: plant, twist, turn; plant, twist, turn

Out we fly, soaring onto a wide white field
Sky a bright azure

The sun's reflection nearly blinding us
A full throated laugh bubbles up from my belly

Camiling, Tarlac, Philippines

Kiam Marcelo Junio

on the sandy banks
of Camiling River, the
dunes hear everything

the sound of bamboo
trees clacking, the leaves rustling,
ripe cherimoyas

falling on the ground
a dog barking by a fence
scissors clipping a

young boy's hair, his aunt's
hands like a gathering storm
gathering mahjong

tiles, chicken feet on
the dusty earth, chicken feet
on a sizzling grill

little feet stepping
into high heels, plastic bag
sides ripping open

for little legs to
step into a brand new swim
suit, flowers plucked from

the street perfume
a sheet of cellophane
salvaged from the trash by

nimble hands. on the
sandy beach several kids
gather to crown the

new Miss Universe
the last question: who would you
marry: a poor man

you love or someone
with a lot of money? the
first boy answers, "I

would choose the rich man,
so I can have everything
and my family

would be happy. the
second boy responds, "I choose
the poor man. being

loved feels better than
being rich. perhaps today
the dunes still know what

became of the first
boy — if he found a rich man
or woman, if he

has left the house his
father built with his own two
withering hands. as

for the second boy, if
asked today, I know I still
would say, I choose love.

Birthday Party

Nathaniel Rogers

I was startled awake by my phone ringing on the nightstand. I should have known better than to answer it, but my hand acted out of reflex and made the decision for me.

"Rob." The sound of his voice made me sit up and try to sound alert.

"Hey Dad."

"Are you on your way, yet?" Disapproval is my Dad's default tone when we speak, and it's always loudest on Jake's birthday. This is why I don't answer my phone. It's easier to hide behind little lies and send my parents a disappointing text.

"Yeah, I just need to finish wrapping Jake's present and then I'll be out the door." It won't take me 45 minutes to get there, but that's the time I give him. The gift has been sitting on my shelf in green foil wrapping paper slowly dust since I missed Jake's party last year.

"I can't wait to see it when you get here." He ends the call abruptly. It would be rude if it weren't Dad. I grab the small box from the shelf and wipe the layer of dust off with the sleeve of my shirt. It takes only a few minutes to get myself dressed and I head out the door.

I get to Jake's inside the projected time frame, but I'm still not ready to face him. I wander down to the cafeteria to buy a cup of coffee before checking in with the nurse at the visitor's desk. As she hands me the visitor's log she says, "Aww, it so sweet you visit your brother on his birthday." I can't blame her, thinking that I choose to be here is a common mistake. Just being here reminds me of how Jake got here.

* * *

Born only minutes apart, Jake and I had always been those kids. The ones who needed leashes. Literally. Our parents would strap us into these harnesses with short leads that they could hold onto. Of course, that wouldn't keep us from taking off at a sprint, throwing our bodies against the restraints like a pair of Alaskan sled dogs. Wild childhood anecdotes aside, our knack for trouble scared our parents. Once we had managed to get our hands on a box of matches and they woke up to smoke and the smell of burning carpet. After that, they installed a lock on the outside of our door thinking they could at least keep the house from burning down. It continued to be a point of mild consternation for me and Jake. Not understanding the irony, we would ask, "What if there was a fire?"

Our Mom would flash that smile that was all teeth and mirth, and tell us, "Then we'll just buy more kids from the Gypsies. Probably girls this time."

It didn't end up mattering, though. The night it happened, Dad was working late, so that left Mom with the unenviable task of putting us to bed alone. We were too big for her to wrangle at the same time, so she cornered me first and carried me to the room I shared with Jake. I squirmed in an unsuccessful bid to escape. Jake joined me a few minutes later but he wasn't breathless or covered in sweat, and he hadn't been carried in.

"Jake, are you feeling sick?" Mom managed an expression somewhere between concern, relief, and suspicion as she peeled back Jake's covers to help him into bed. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, he picked his feet up and pivoted on his bottom to get in bed, never letting his hips touch the bed. Finally, he pulled his blanket up to his chin and ducked his arms under the covers.

"Nuh-uh, tired." Calm doesn't look right on Jake. Even in his sleep he used to thrash back and forth at whatever vivid dreamscape he was experiencing. I used to dream like that.

"Okay." She looked at my bed and saw that I was crouched behind it instead of in it. "I thought I told you to get in bed." She raised a hand in front of her, her index finger standing alone. "One." I dove under my blankets stifling a giggle before she got to two.

"I love you boys. Even if you're both evil and rotten." My Mom's sense of humor in the face of mine and Jake's chaos was a miracle to behold. She used to have long hair, but she gave that up shortly after we turned two-years-old. It was cut in short bob style now curling just below her chin, but it was still a mess from chasing Jake and me all day. Strands of it were sticking out in all directions, haloing her head like she was the Patron Saint of Patience.

We went through the rest of the motions. The "We love you tooos", the "No really, shut your eyes NOW" game, and the obligatory "Can I have a glass of water?" followed by, "You should have thought about that before you fought me going to bed, huh?" Really, I just wanted her to go downstairs already and turn on the TV. I wanted to know what Jake was hiding.

A short eternity later, the muffled voice of the news caster echoed up the stairs. I rolled out of bed and checked the door. I knew it would be locked but I checked anyway. Jake must have heard the TV too. He started shifting and rolling under his covers. His eyes were shut, but he was awake. I scrambled on all fours to his bedside, and held the mattress like I was pulling myself up over a cliff's edge. The moon was coming through our window at the wrong angle so I couldn't see what he was doing.

"Jake!" I whispered. "Whatcha got?"

"Nothing! Mom told you to go to bed!" You can't lie to someone you shared a womb with.

"Come onnn! Tell me. You gotta tell me, Jake!" I was desperate to know. I couldn't just let Jake get away with something without including me. That's not how we worked. We were a team, and teamwork meant telling me what he had in his pockets.

"Just go away, I don't have anything." I stayed put, letting Jake's silence fill the room. I would sit there forever if I had to. My answer finally came in the form of the soft sound of crinkling paper and a crunch.

There are some things you just know. It's knowledge that comes from your bones, your blood, and your very soul. When you're eight, one of those things is the sound of a cookie being eaten in the dark. A cookie that you aren't eating, but is being eaten by your brother past bedtime. There are some things you just can't hide. Jake might not have expected me to yank his blanket off the bed and throw it half way across the room but he had resolved to protect his prize. I lunged for the cookies and he met me by twisting on his back and kicking with both feet, catching me in the chest. The blow sent me sprawling, the wind knocked out of me. Jake was out of the shadows now and I could just make out the cookies by the moonlight. Jake had three of them, and I knew that he would never share with me. But I needed one. I don't think I have ever needed something as badly as I needed that cookie. This wasn't just about cookies. This was about truth, justice, and apple pie. Most importantly, Jake had something I didn't!

Ignoring my feeble begging he finished the first of the treats, taking his time. Mocking me with each bite. Desperation is the mother of discovery and it birthed a thought. A crude and sinister logic formed.

Blackmail is such a negative word, but it gets results.

I got the second cookie and we shared the third. As I finished the last morsel, I realized it wasn't enough. Life wasn't meant to be lived like this, sharing a meager offering of cookies in the dark. There had to be more, and we had to get them!

There was a problem, though: even if we got out of our room, there was only one route to the kitchen through the house, and that was through the killing fields of the living room. It was too brightly lit and there was no cover to hide behind. We would never get past Mom and her news shows.

Jake watched me from his bed holding his favorite toy, a tat-

tered stuffed bunny named Mr. Lop. I was trying to think of a way around the lock. The only other way into the kitchen was from the outside patio through the sliding glass door, but we were on the second floor, so that wasn't an option.

I looked out our window, anyway. I couldn't see the sliding glass door, but only because it was being shaded by the awning, a three-by-seven foot sheet of thin yellow corrugated fiberglass. The finish was long gone and the fibers beneath glittered in the moonlight. It was all held up by two aluminum rods mounted into the wall. In our young minds, it was as enduring as a mountain and would certainly hold our weight. It could work. We tied blankets together to make a rope and we had just enough to reach the awning. Jake would have to jump from there.

"Robby," Jake started, "maybe this isn't a good idea."

"Jake, if I was your age I'd be scared too." I assured him.

"We're the same age!" he interrupted.

"Yeah, but I'm the oldest and that means you have to do what I tell you. Just think about all the cookies! You aren't chicken are you?"

Something instinctual must have warned him that what he was doing was not a good idea because Jake was wide eyed and trembling when he looked out of the window toward the awning. Still he climbed onto the window sill and lowered his bare legs out, momentarily teetering forward in his perch causing him to gasp before he regained his balance. He should have stopped it there. Just called the whole thing off, climbed back into bed and ignored whatever I had to say. Instead, he just squeezed our blanket rope tighter and licked his lips. I took the rope in both hands and braced my feet against the wall. Looking up from the floor, I could see a full moon over Jake's shoulder.

"Ready?" he asked, looking back at me. His knuckles were mottled white and red from his death grip on the rope. I gave him a thumbs up, and he went out the window. The sudden weight was more than I had expected, and it yanked me to the window's edge. I desperately tried to hold onto that rope, but my grip slipped so fast.

Panicking, I did not understand what might happen if I couldn't hold onto my end, but I knew it would be bad. We had to be almost there, but I couldn't hold on any more and suddenly my hands were empty. I leaned out the window trying to catch some of the tail of it, but I missed.

The sickeningly slow memory of Jake's fall is something I can't escape. He seemed frozen in midair, the ground rushing to meet him. He was looking at the concrete below, and I could almost touch him. He held the blankets in his left hand over his head, they trailed behind him twisting like a long ribbon. His right hand was cast out in the direction of the porch as if to break his fall. His knees were bent and his toes curled up from bracing against the wall. He hit the awning in the center and the impact sent him spinning. It didn't hold. Instead, it shattered into points and sharp edges. The ground came too fast.

I spun away from the window and put myself back to bed. All of the covers were on the porch now, leaving me nowhere to hide from the fear that was reaching out of a cold pit in my gut to grip my heart. I tried to stay calm, but my heart was beating hard enough to shake my body and my breath too shallow. Jake might be okay. My parents would want to know what happened. I had to think of a good lie to tell them to stay out of trouble. Jake would be okay. In my head the reel of Jake falling kept playing back and forth. So many times that I could take in every. I assured myself that Jake would be okay. I had to figure this out, but all I could do was stare at Jake's bed, where Mr. Lop had been abandoned face down.

I could hear my Mom's voice coming through the window, and the hysteria and tears in her voice crushed my self-assurances. She must have been in the kitchen when the awning and Jake came down, and was now on the phone and speaking very quickly. The ambulance showed up a little while later and took Jake away to the hospital, Mom went with him. Our babysitter came to keep an eye on me. She shut the window and brought me a new blanket, speaking in whispers. It was like she was afraid I would scare if she spoke normally. I asked her to read a story.

When I woke up, my Dad was sitting on Jake's bed holding Mr. Rabbit. He stood up and came to sit by me. I wanted to know if I would ever see Jake again, but I didn't know how to ask. I sat up and waited for my Dad to speak first.

"Robby." His hand reached out and rested on my shoulder, his voice was quiet, sounding exhausted in more than just a physical sense. He sounded drained of life. "What happened? How did...? Why did Jake jump out the window?"

"Jake wanted cookies." It felt like it might have been the truth. If I was going to get in trouble it was going to be now, I had to say something. "He made a rope and told me to hold it. I tried to stop him, but he went anyway." I secretly hoped Jake wouldn't tell on me.

His hand lifted off my shoulder and patted my cheek. "Let's get you some breakfast, we're going to go see Jake. He'll..." Dad's voice broke, it's the most vulnerable I have ever seen him. "He'll want to see you when he wakes up." The first time we visited Jake in the hospital, I insisted that we bring Mr. Lop.

* * *

I finish checking into the Hospital Visitor's Log and walk toward Jake's room. My parents are still there. They both think they understand why I don't visit more often. Mom made her peace with the accident a long time ago. Dad blames himself for not being home. I don't know how to tell them the truth. I wish Jake would wake up and tell them.

Taking the seat next to Jake's bed, I un-wrap the gift and pull out a rabbit carved from red jasper, small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. The lady who sold it to me said that jasper was a good stone for making amends. Jake had liked rabbits. That's why I got it. My Mom sits across from me and describes everything for Jake. I pass the rabbit to her and she puts it in Jake's hand.

Dad stands in the corner with his arms crossed, "He's already got a rabbit." I already know he's pointing at Mr. Lop. The only other witness and he has been as quiet on the issue as Jake. I stand up to leave and look one last time at my brother. He is the very image of calm, and it still looks so wrong on him.

Weather Report

Jared Kelly

No Kansas Weather
Bright San Diego Sunshine
Now hugged by warmth

Hot heat brittle ground
Thirsty not a drop to drink
Drought will continue

Rain Lluvia pluie
Heavy precipitation
I day dream of rain

No Ecology
Melting Ice Caps No More Shore
Lost Hope Lost Future

Big Bad Barbed Brown Bears
They Roam Freely Destruction
Con Deception Fraud

Nuclear Winter

Third Place, Visual

Richard Ching



2015 Contributors' Notes

The life of **Bryan Angel** is your classic rags-to-riches story. Bryan was born in the slums of Soweto, South Africa. Working the maize fields of South Africa for sixteen hours a day, Bryan raised enough money to migrate to California by age nine. In California, Bryan started his own custom luxury piano and suit business and eventually found himself in artistic circles with the likes of Michael Tilson Thomas, Jeff Koons, John Adams and Yusef Komunyakaa. Bryan's poem, "Voices at the Party" is this year's second place winner in the poetry category.

Sarah Bates short fiction has appeared in the Greenwich Village Literary Review and Bravura. She is the author of Twenty-One Steps of Courage, an Army action novel published in 2012. Her historical novel, The Lost Diaries of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, is due out in 2015. Bates was a student of Professors Versaci and Carlton Smith, and an English Department writing tutor at Palomar College for ten years.

Robert Bender is a twenty-seven year Marine Corps veteran who is obsessed with yoyos. He is also a student who loves to write for fun, but dreams to be paid for it. He lives in Temecula with his loving wife Stephanie and his trusty cat Diego. They are both his inspiration and his motivation to succeed in life.

Katherine Birmingham is a student at Palomar College and an editor of Bravura Literary Journal.

Elizabeth Butzen is an English major attending Palomar College and will soon be transferring to a four-year university. After graduating, she plans to travel the world while using the written word to capture the experiences; to capture the quirks and charms of cultures, the beauty and struggle of different animals, and the wide arrays of landscapes and architectures coating each country. Elizabeth just hopes that her terrible sense of direction and daydreaming habits will prove an asset in finding adventure, rather than lead to complete disaster.

Richard Ching is a student at Palomar College. His piece, "Nuclear Winter," is this year's third place winner in the visual arts category.

Freddy Cleveland is an utter narcissist, but when called upon to talk about himself, he can't think of what to say. This is his second year working on Bravura and he's very proud of his story. It's so good. I mean, did you read it? Go read it. Legitimately amazing. Now find his contact information and congratulate him. Freddy's story, "The Empire of the Dead," is this year's Editors' Choice Award winner for fiction.

Rachel Culver is a student at Palomar College who enjoys writing short stories.

Devin Collins is an undergrad at UCR, graduating in Spring. He likes his coffee black and the weather cool. He is a previously published contributor and editor to Bravura and is very proud to be part of this great tradition. If ever you spot him in his native wild of Fallbrook do not hesitate to stop him for a bite to eat and a good conversation.

Olive Edgar is attending CSULB for a useless graduate degree she'll think about fondly at her permanent, entry-level customer service position at a bank that's not actually a bank at all. She hopes you like her poetry. If not, that's cool too. More words are necessary here, but you can fill them in yourself, if you want to. Her poem, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" is this year's Angelo Carli Poetry Prize winner.

Stuart Farst is a traditional student at Palomar College; a night owl, and eats too much sugar, and doesn't know what he's doing. His spare time is spent playing games (board and video), reading, and writing. He has been a theatrical technician, a construction worker, an actor, and has a strange array of experience.

Ashley Fernald has been studying German at Palomar College for a year now. She has been writing stories all her life and hopes to publish a novel or two someday. This is the first work of hers that has been published and she is very honored to be featured in Bravura. Ashley's story, "Devotion," is this year's second place winner in the fiction category.

Gaby Goff is a student at UCSD and a former student at Palomar College. She loves comics.

Rachael Guerra is a Bay Area native currently residing in San Diego. She plans to major in Communication Studies and minor in Television and Film at UCLA. When she is not busy being a student, Rachael enjoys going to Moonlight Beach, reading, writing, cooking and traveling. This is her first poetry publication.

Caleb Halsted is a student, artist, and lover of comics outside of the mainstream—cartoons as a kid, manga as a teenager, and alternative 'graphic novels' in early adulthood. It's certain that he'll be drawing for the rest of his life. With a background in theater and a love for art history, Caleb is a classicist-animalist of the comic tribes, yet he firmly believes in the potential and experimentation of comics as a medium. "The Witch's Eyes" is Caleb's first publication, and he is eager to self-publish his own greater works. To view more of Caleb's work, he continually posts to Tumblr and DeviantArt under the name "Jo Cassidy." Caleb's comic, "The Witch's Eye," is this year's first place winner in the visual arts category.

Elizabeth Hoffman is an English major at Palomar College. She is a Christian writer with a deep love for traveling, her cat, old bookstores and ice hockey. Her plans include the pursuit of a career in writing at Westmont College or Point Loma Nazarene University next fall.

Meagan Huerta loves long walks on the beach and watching the sunset. JK. She actually plans to fly in the US Coast Guard. She works at the Boys & Girls Club teaching poetry. Meagan hates small talk, Hello Kitty and Starbucks & loves her family, her BFF boyfriend, her car, steak, and life's miracles. When she's old she hopes to be wild, weird, and whimsical: riding motorcycles, building racecars and not letting opportunities pass her by.

Nick Ivins is an award-winning artist, illustrator, and graphic designer, born and raised in San Diego. His artistic pursuits began at the age of three with crude drawings of undersea life and autobiographical comics. They have developed admirably since then, if only in the smaller

amount of tantrums a drawing necessitates. Nick's illustration, "The Floating Coffin," is this year's second place winner in the visual arts category.

Kiam Marcelo Junio (preferred gender pronoun: "they/them") is a Chicago-based interdisciplinary artist creating work through various media, including but not limited to, photography, video, performance (blending elements of butoh, drag, and burlesque), sculpture, installation, and culinary arts. Their research and art practice centers around queer identities, Philippine history and the Filipino diaspora, post-colonialist Asian American tropes and stereotypes, military power dynamics, the politics of personal agency, and social justice through collaborative practices and healing modalities. Kiam served seven years in the US Navy as a Hospital Corpsman. They were born in the Philippines, and have lived in the U.S., Japan, and Spain.

Hannah Keene is throwing a little party in her head every day. Please don't call the cops. She tries pretty hard, only at poems though. She's obsessed with Frank O'Hara but David Bowie is her favorite poet.

Jared Kelly is a student who currently competes for the Palomar College Forensics Team. He grew up in Southern California and severely misses the rain. Once he graduates Jared hopes to become a Jedi or enter the competitive field of high seas piracy. In his spare time when he is not going on adventures or sleeping he is probably rocking out to 80s' music while cooking and/or gardening.

Melissa Kloz wrote and illustrated her first story at the age of four. When she couldn't immediately find a publisher, she got discouraged and gave up writing for athletics and foodie-ism. Over the next three decades, sharpening her chef's knives with a maniacal look in her eyes became her emotional outlet. But it apparently really freaked her family out, so she decided to return to writing as a more productive form of catharsis.

Hannah Lawson likes reading excessively - with a dark room, a dozen apples, and at least twelve hours of uninterrupted time to hide from reality per session. When she does emerge she is usually doing all the schoolwork she put aside last minute so that she can graduate with a Literature degree and literally never stop reading again. This is her first experience working with pieces that are to be a part of a published journal.

Edgar Limon is a too-much-sightseeing, analytical, under/over achieving, bilingual man with a critical ego that makes any person reconsider the size of his brain relative to the number of fucks he drops while having a conversation over Jesus and other mythical figures.

Flor Marshall is an aspiring poet with a yerba mate addiction. As long as she has a cup of it in hand she'll hunt down any chance to write. This is her final semester at Palomar, majoring in both English and German, and hopes to transfer to a UC this fall. She works for the Media Studies department for Palomar College's newspaper, The Telescope, as well as being a poetry editor for Bravura literary journal. Her professional goals are to become a German translator as well as an editor for a publishing company. Her poem titled, "January," reflects her ability to directly portray a deep sense of longing and despair. She also has an insatiable need to travel the world.

Marguerite Martinet is still wondering how she stumbled out of bed this morning. This is her second work published in Bravura. The first, a poem entitled "Lighting Matches," was published in 2012.

Briana Munoz is an aspiring writer. She spends most of her time writing fictional short stories and talking to her cat, Darla, convinced she was a human in a past life. She finds inspiration for her writing in hospital cafeterias, on her drive to work, walking through college campus. Simply cursed with the mentality of a writer yet wouldn't trade it for handsome bearded men, moonshine or gold.

Barry Munson attended Palomar college and studied math, science and photography prior to obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering from SDSU. Since that time he has worked in the civil engineering field in San Diego. He is a business owner and an Army veteran. He has always been interested in writing and is currently enrolled in creative writing. Not only is this his first published piece, it is his first poem.

Daphne Munson is a returning student to Palomar Community College, where she originally studied math and science. After receiving her degree in Computer Engineering at UCSD, she went on to a career in the software industry. Recently retired from the tech world, she decided to take a creative writing class at the suggestion of her husband. This is her first published piece since taking on this new endeavor.

Larry Narron grew up in San Diego's North County and studied at Palomar College before transferring to the University of California, Berkeley, where he attended Joyce Carol Oates's short fiction workshop and was awarded the Rosenberg Prize in Lyric Poetry. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Phoebe, Whiskey Island, Eleven Eleven, Permafrost, Mission at Tenth, Tishman Review, The Rogue Voice, Stoneboat, The Boiler, Sandy River Review, The Round, Coe Review, Suisun Valley Review, Bravura, and other journals. A poetry student in Pacific University's low-residency MFA program, Larry works as an English tutor at Portland Community College in Oregon. Larry's poem, "Some Nights," is this year's third place winner in the poetry category.

Nikki Nelson-Hicks has been described by a fellow writer as the 'unholy lovechild of Flannery O'Connor and H.P. Lovecraft. It is an accolade she finds incredibly amusing. If you like her work, check out her author page on Amazon.com for a listing of all her published stories. Nikki's story, "Grandpa and the Scar" is this year's Jack Mawhinney Fiction Prize winner.

Darby Norris is a student at Palomar College who enjoys creating visual arts.

Donovan Ortuno is a student at Palomar College. He enjoys writing poetry.

Jessica Payne is a student at Palomar College.

Gabriella Pleasant is a student at Palomar College. She doesn't like people to make fun of her name.

Jennifer Prillaman is a student at Palomar College.

Rickety Ram is a student at Palomar College who contributed to this year's Bravura with his poem, "Dinosaurs."

Roxanne Reed is a poet, singer-songwriter, feminist, animal lover, performer, and sponge-like college student who plans to travel the world and document every drop of individuality and beauty that this world has to offer. She produced her first album of original songs, Sunny Disposition, in 2013 and plans to produce many more. This is the first time her poetry will be published and she's SUPER excited about it. Roxanne's poem, "Cubicle Coward," is this year's Editors' Choice Award winner for poetry.

ruth rice farms nasturtiums and dust bunnies with equal vigor. Her art (while highly suspect) is virtually all she thinks about, thus leaving little piles of distraction everywhere she meanders. Keep her roots damp and sing the occasional aria, and this poet will drop petals beneath your feet.

Joshua Rincon is a student at Palomar College. He is a film major, and has earned an Associate of Arts Degree from the Cinema program. He currently resides in Escondido, where he enjoys spending time with friends and family.

Citlali Rodriguez is a student at Palomar College.

Nathaniel Rogers is like if you cross a cat with a literary genius. That's like 62% words, 109% Thug life. He is also not very good at math.

Lauren Rushing is a student at Palomar College.

Brandy Sebastian is a student at Palomar College.

Kristian Smock is a San Diego based artist/writer with a background in journalism and publishing. After getting his start at The Telescope newspaper he became a syndicated staff writer for The Coast News Group, which ultimately led him to Penton Overseas, Inc. where he worked as an editor, copywriter and graphic artist. He is currently studying graphic design and photography at Palomar College. Please check out more of his work at kcsdesignz.com.

Beverly Terhall is a student again after being laid off from her job. She wants to teach art to special education children. She is currently expanding her knowledge of art and child development. She loves to express herself through her art and hopes all who observe it can learn from it. Beverly hopes to improve the world with beauty through art.

This is **Seth Valenzuela**'s second year editing on Bravura. Previously he published a poem about an apocalypse. This year his short story is

about an apocalypse. His favorite video game is The Last of Us, which is about...an apocalypse. He doesn't have an apocalypse fixation, he swears. And even if he does, it's not the end of the world. When not at school or work, Seth can be found in his bunker at an undisclosed location.

Marcelle Tolbert is a student at Palomar College.

Amanda Williamson knows the meaning of hard work, determination, crepuscular, and a lot of other words due to being an inveterate nerd. She likes bad jokes, writing, and glittery things. Also cats. Amanda is an English major and outside of school can be found reading or in a pet store making small noises at the animals.

Emily Williamson is a first year Palomar student who enjoys science, art, and the junction of the two. In the future she hopes to study environmental science at a university and show art in a gallery.

Susan Whaley has been writing poems and stories since third grade. She has been at Palomar on and off since 2008, taking semesters off to travel. She is majoring in journalism and has worked on the school newspaper since 2013. Susan enjoys being outdoors rock climbing, slacklining, running and camping. Her love for these things, as well as her love for people and animals, is what drives her as a writer.

Alexandra Woodworth (aka Alex) is twenty years old and pursuing some sort of degree in English. She aspires to breathe life into stories, both her own as well as others. Her interests include skipping sleep to finish books (only to regret it in the morning), petting fuzzy animals, curling up with friends, and walking around barefoot to feel the earth between her toes.

Mia Yturralez graduated from Palomar College in Fall 2014. She works as an unholy combination of busboy, waitress, and barista while saving up to finish a Bachelor's degree in psychology. Fantasy, in all its forms, keeps the gently creeping shadows of madness at bay. She's a rad chick who enjoys table-top gaming, ice cream, and spending too much time on the internet. Mia's story, "31 Hues of Pink," is this year's third place winner in the fiction category.

“Grandpa stopped and pointed down again to the scar. The skin around it puckered like stitches in a hastily sewn hem. The boy leaned closer to study it, touching it gingerly.”

—from “Grandpa and the Scar” by Nikki Nelson-Hicks

“That was the part of the job he hated:
he was ashamed to send them away.
He wishes he could have explained
how he’d only wanted to scare them
because he didn’t know if they had
guns or knives, because all he had himself
was a flashlight, because it was his job.”

—from “Some Nights” by Larry Narron

“I wish I could be the woman who knows
what to do in these sorts of damaged
situations, but I am a woman with teeth.”

—from “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” by Olive Edgar