The Great Lake Review
Fall 2009 Staff

The Great Lake Review is open to submissions throughout the year.

Please send your fiction, creative nonfiction, dramatic writing, poetry and visual art as an attachment to:

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Following the Wedding
Sarah R. Georgianna

There's a single speck of who-knows-what dust on my lapel
and I'm brushing it away with the tippy-tip of
a sort-of orange flyswatter, still unused this winter when there are no flies
to swat at.
And the curtains that stretch too tall for me
to close
have been open for months,
all in that shade of orange you sort-of picked
by telling me you liked it more than mauve,
which is my favorite.
And didn't I see you on the street only weeks ago, I didn't know
you lived in this city now.
You used to be such an infrequent visitor.
All day I've been cooking and kneading, kneading and cooking
and needing
again to get the perfect batch of orange sort-of scones,
so like the ones
your mother makes,
I'm told.
But now they are quite burnt, I can smell them,
so I must be brief in wishing you all the best
in your new home, following the wedding.

The House on Cedar
Tonya Burrows

You don't know me. No one knows me until it's too late. No one wants to.

When I enter the house on Cedar Street, fresh blood assaults my nose. Thick and heady and repulsively intoxicating, the odor floods my every sense. It is nearly a tangible thing, a dark orb you can reach up and pluck out of the air. It always is.
The house on Cedar Street is in suburbia, a place where everyone knows everyone by name, a cheery hello is readily given, and nothing's ever amiss. Surrounded by a lush yard and flowering plants, it's a picturesque family home. Two-stories, light green with dark green trim and a matching minivan that usually rests in the paved driveway but is now missing. The only thing that seems out of place is the blood red front door, a grotesque smear on a perfect existence. It just about begs for something horrible to knock.

I knock.
The door squeaks open.
The girl seated on the two-person sofa in the living room has her back to me. Glossy hair tumbles in waves over slender shoulders and smoke curls from the cigarette in her left hand. Her palm blackened, smudged, and the room reeks of fresh gunpowder. Blood spatters the white lilies in the crystal vase on the coffee table in front of her. Bare feet peek around the edge of the sofa and her gaze is transfixed on the dead body.

"I've been waiting for someone to come," she whispers.

"I know."
The House on Cedar

“I pictured you looking different.”

“Everyone does.”

“You know, it wasn’t supposed to end like this.”

She draws on her cigarette, releases the smoke in a shuddering breath. “Did it hurt?”

I move around the sofa just enough to see her profile, the right side of her face. She’s an attractive girl in her mid-teens, honey hair and bedroom blue eyes. So full of potential that will now never be realized because of one act—one single act, one horrible act out of panic, pain, and stupidity is all it ever takes.

I shake my head and lie, “No. There was no pain.”

Her pink lips tremble as she raises the cigarette again. Her gaze moves up from the body on the floor to the blood-splattered glass of the coffee table.

“She just kept talking... I couldn’t stop her. I had to defend myself.”

I draw a breath. Prepare myself for what I’m about to see. Then my eyes go to the floor and my stomach rolls over. I have to swallow to keep everything from coming up. Grisly scenes like this always make me feel ill. Odd, I know, considering my profession, but I’ve never claimed to have a strong stomach.

Half the dead woman’s face is gone. Her personality—her features—her life—is now nothing more than indiscernible gray and red mush on the floor. It seems wrong that a whole person, a person who had laughed and cried, loved and hated, could be extinguished so easily. One act, one bullet and it’s all over. It’s nauseating, and unfortunately, I see it all too often in my line of work.

I clear my throat, try to find my voice. “What happened here, miss?”

The girl gives a startled, abrupt laugh. “I shot her.”

“You said you were defending yourself. She attacked you?”

The corner of her mouth twists up in a half-smile. “In a way, I suppose. She made me feel worthless. Always her voice inside my head...” She taps the finger of her right hand against her temple. Her fingernails shine and she wears a class ring three sizes too big for her.

“Always there,” she continues in a distant whisper. “Always telling me I meant nothing to anybody. I guess she was right. You are the only person that came here, after all. No one cares.”

“I care.”

“It’s your job to care.” She sighs, rolling the class ring around on her finger, watching the sapphire stone flash in the evening sunlight. “No one cared about her either. No one helped her when she cried out for help. No one helped her when I held the gun to her temple, when her panicked eyes begged for her medicine, for relief.” She tosses an orange pill bottle at me and I catch it as it bounces off my chest.

“She tried to get rid of me,” the girl continues with a smirk as I read the label: an antidepressant. Inside the bottle is a rolled piece of paper. I take it out, carefully unfold it. In misshapen, lipstick-smudged letters are the two words I’ve seen written countless times, in countless ways. So simple, yet all encompassing; they mean everything and nothing at the same time.

I’m sorry.

The girl finally looks at me with a sad smile, a
twist of the lips that shows disillusionment and desecrated potential. All that’s left is the depression she’d tried so hard to kill off.

A car door slams out in the driveway and the girl gives an empty chuckle. “Mom’s home.”

“Yes,” I say. “It’s time to go.”

“Think she’ll miss me?”

“I know she will.”

Nodding, the girl bends over and crushes out her cigarette on the carpet beside her own corpse, then stands. The ring slips from her hand, bounces on the carpet and comes to a halt by the smoking gun at her feet.

The ominously red front door opens. Her mother takes one look at the living room and screams the daughter’s name. I glance over at the girl. A fat tear rolls down the unscathed side of her face. I hold out a hand. She sweeps at the tear and nods, wrapping her fingers around mine. It never fails to amaze me how people go so willingly into the arms of Death.

You don’t know me. No one knows me until it’s too late. No one wants to.
The Art of Movement
Amanda Nargi

I glimpsed freedom in a moment of martial movement.

Skin hard and sun worn;
baked, bronzed, pulled taught and muscle bent.

Quadruped
bipedal beast
grappling with the wind

Featherless flying
arms and legs stretching
hoping, praying
landing!

Prescient posture
stagnant
four seconds
crouching

Bent over knees.

Prescient posture
Perching.

Syncopated pattering, battering;

Silence.

Breaking with a breath, rush of air out

Off again running,

lissome lion in a concrete jungle.

Redemption Day
Jen Tinker

*Jen is a poetry editor on staff for the GLR this semester. Redemption Day was chosen last semester, however there was a printing error and her story didn’t appear in the magazine. Although our staff is not allowed to print in the magazine, we’ve made an exception as the story was submitted and chosen for the magazine prior to Jen joining our staff.

I had been sitting on that torn up black pleather love seat for at least five drinks. I can’t remember what I was drinking, or how many I had, but I’d just finished watching the “Banger Sisters”, and I couldn’t stop crying. Five may be an under-exaggeration. I know I was drunk and pissed off. It’s hard to believe that I was once that overwhelmed with life, yet I can still remember the tears that covered my face as I sat Indian style when I wrote this:

Everything seems so fake. I can’t find reality.
I don’t know what reality is. I don’t know what life is. How should I be living it? I have no clue. I’m not depressed I’m confused. I don’t know how to find myself. I don’t know who to trust. I hate caring about people because I feel everyone is out for themselves. I can’t find one person who really cares about me.

I have been continually writing in about seven journals I’ve been given within the past ten years. I’ve never actually bought one on my own. Sometimes I may
see one I really like, but I always tell myself I have to fill the others before I can start one more. The journal the above excerpt is from I’ve had since Christmas Day of 2002. I had just graduated from Herkimer County Community College, and my goal was to get a portfolio done, become a model, and make enough money so I could stop working and move to the Adirondacks and do nothing but write. Either that or commit a crime that would send me to prison, so I’d be able to fulfill my passion with plenty of free time that I’d have sitting in a jail cell. I have always felt that I have never had enough time to write, so I thought I needed the type of lifestyle where nothing occupied my time except for my own thoughts. Clearly, I fell into neither lifestyle.

Also in December 2002, I fell in love. Yes, I’m going to use love as an excuse for not fulfilling my goals. I’ve never been the type of person to regret things, but thinking about it right now, I would have much rather had me become a model than fall in love with that guy. I had only been a drinker for a little over a year. My sister’s old license helped me tell everyone I was twenty six. Dan was twenty five, which back then seemed so much older. Tall, dark (hair/eyes), handsome, mysterious, tough, fun, and taken; all the top qualities women love in a man. We fell for each other, and he broke up with the girl (or tried to).

It was an eight month rollercoaster ride with me never really knowing if they were broken up or still together.

A terrible waste of time, the entire relationship consisted of continual dates involving me, him, and our essential third wheel, alcohol. We drank together almost every day and I had no clue what that lifestyle had planned for me. But, although we were drunk, we still managed to “fall in love” after a month and a half of our drink dates. It took me two years to get over him, a much larger waste of time.

The end of my eight months of psychological torture from the crazy ex-girlfriend landed in August, days before my birthday. Weeks after I had spoken my pent-up feelings at the foot of his stairwell door, knowing (because her car was in the driveway) his ex-girlfriend was pissed off and pacing upstairs or gloating because she was there and I was not, I moved three towns away to Frankfort with a girl friend of mine. I was freshly 21, out of school, always drunk, and single. I should’ve been fired from work for all the times I was late, hung-over, or
Redemption Day

still drunk. Besides drinking, if I wasn’t bagging groceries, I was watching movies and listening to music. Which still today are two of my top five favorite hobbies. So, on this particular perfectly gorgeous late summer day I decided to watch the recently discount purchased “Banger Sisters”. I somehow had so closely identified with these forty something characters that by the end of the movie I was surrounded by scattered balls of crumpled toilet paper. Although painful, all the thoughts rushing through my head were so strong I didn’t want my moment to end.

I hate the news. I hate the public. I hate gossip. I hate war. I hate politics. I hate the government. I hate sleep. It only makes you more tired and more delusional.

To not lose the flow of emotion and tears, I put in my favorite cd. Sheryl Crow’s self-titled sophomore album has been my favorite since I got it in 1997. Number six is my favorite song, and it may actually take the number one spot in my top five favorite songs, “There is a train that’s heading straight/To heaven’s gate, to heaven’s gate/And on the way child and man/And woman wait, watch and wait/For redemption day/Fire rages in the streets/And swallows everything it meets/It’s just an image often seen/On television/Come leaders, come you men of great/Let us hear you pontificate/Your many virtues laid to waste/And we aren’t listening.” I know I chose this cd to listen to because, with it being my favorite cd at age fourteen or fifteen, I knew focusing on it would bring out more fervor in me. I first learned about love, loss, and life while listening to those songs and I knew this was the perfect time to bring it out again. So, I was chain smoking, crying, and listening to Sheryl Crow drunk when I decided to write.

I love alcohol. I love cigarettes. I love writing. I love listening. I love talking. I love sharing. I love honesty because it’s so scary. What is this state of mind I’m in? Learn to laugh. Laugh a lot. Love and Happiness are good things. Whether created by yourself or someone else, they’re always going to be there. Life is short. Do what you can while you can. Fuck everyone else, fuck society, fuck the norm. Be yourself-Find yourself-Live for yourself. I want to be remembered. I want to be known. I want to leave an impression.

It wasn’t only Dan that was upsetting my life at that point. I think he was just the trigger. Being with him, or anyone, masked my insecurities. Being alone, is how I was able to write that. I never seem to get much writing done when I’m in a relationship. Maybe that’s why I secretly enjoy being single. I know we all take pleasure in companionship, but come on, relationships are really just a pain in the ass. If you don’t see it now, you will some day.

The inside cover of this journal has a quote by Christina Baldwin, “Journal writing is a voyage to the
Redemption Day

interior.” I often tell people that there’s nothing more important in life than getting to know yourself. Of course I didn’t start telling people my new found philosophy until years after I wrote my little anecdote. It was about a year and three moves later when I began to understand and get to know myself. August of 2004 I started bartending at the 22 year old Happen Inn in Little Falls. I had never spent much time in this city except for going to the health food Community Co-op (definitely one of my top five favorite places to shop in central New York) with my dad on occasion, so being there then was truly refreshing. The history behind this place is fascinating but it’s so small people laugh when you tell them it’s actually the only city in Herkimer County. I don’t know if it was the unbelievably nice people that I met or the extra money from having a second job, but I fell in love with this place. I was working for the best pub owner I had ever met and I was meeting new people every time I worked my seven hours behind that long, waist level, wooden bar. It was the original from when the place moved from up the street. Plastered underneath its glossy finish were pictures you could tell were taken in the early 80’s and news clippings of its history and that of the city’s as well, and jokes were scattered about that always helped the guys make their first attempt at the cute girl sitting two stools down from them (while slipping their wedding ring into the left pocket of their dirty blue jeans).

Jen Tinker

October 24 it was another slow “No Sappy Songs Sunday” at the bar. I refused to let anyone play sad songs on Sundays because, for one: there were never many people there so it was easy to control, two: I hated listening to that sappy shit, and three: listening to that music while drinking in a bar could make anyone want to slit their throat. Okay, maybe just me, but everyone always seemed alright with the idea of me forcing them to be happy. I sat there that night with two or three guys in front of me, not paying attention to the conversations they were having but always placing another cold beer in front of them as soon as the ones they were sipping had about an inch left. Needing something to occupy my mind, I grabbed one of our note pads and started writing:

1 once thought that to have a good life you have to pick a college and graduate by the time you’re 21 or 23, get a good job with good benefits and a good retirement plan, and you’re set for life. I’m 22 years old and I want to do everything. I want to be a singer, a dancer, a model, a teacher, a business woman, a social worker, a writer, a magazine editor, a wife, a mother, a friend; but mostly, I want to be me. I love life and I want to enjoy every second I have.

The pressure society puts on us is too much. If I stick to listening to music, reading books, and watching movies I know I’ll feel good about my life. But then people say I’m living in a dream world and ignoring reality. But I guess it all
Redemption Day

depends on your philosophy on life. I want to have fun and know that in the end, I didn’t waste any time I was given.

As long as I wake up with a smile on my face, see the sun shining and tell myself how beautiful this world is, see a couple kissing (and even though I don’t have that) it makes me happy to remember how much love there is everywhere, and go to sleep with a smile on my face, that’s all that matters!

I was finally beginning to be happy again.

Ten months later, I got an apartment a block from Main St. and around the corner from the library in Little Falls. I began looking back at my writing and came across that entry from 2003. I didn’t know what to think about what I had written, but I did think it was fuckin’ sweet. Every time I drunkenly brought someone to my apartment, I always had them read it. The response was usually, “Wow, this is really great” or “Holy shit, that’s awesome” or “Oh my God, I feel the same way.” I realized, although I felt very alone and abandoned at that time in my life, just about everyone has felt that same way anywhere between the ages of 15 and 23 (so if you’re between those ages and reading this and have never felt this way, it’s sure to come). To be able to help these young adults through this depression, and help them realize everyone goes through it, was the new addition to my list of goals. I would help them get the best out of feeling so bad.

My brother graduated from high school at 19 in June 2007. We often tell people we just meet that we’re twins because we’re generally the same shape and size with pale skin and blonde hair and green eyes. When they say, “Wow, really? He looks so much older than you,” I’m thrilled. He’s always had a unique sense of style. When he was in junior high he decided to wear a real wool, full-sized, black hooded cape to school. He wore it once every few weeks and sometimes two days in a row. It didn’t take long for other kids in school to make this a fad and begin wearing capes themselves. But I imagine no one had an authentic cape like the one my mom had gotten from Morocco. When he was asked by teachers why he was wearing a cape he’d say with a shrug of his shoulders and his easy going smirk, “I just feel like it.”

I wasn’t a big part of his life from age 17, when I moved out of the house to start becoming everyone’s roommate, until he turned 17 and started visiting me at my apartments. So even though there were five or six years of his life that I had missed, I didn’t waste any time agreeing with him when he decided not to go right to college after high school. I believe a little soul searching is necessary before college. His soul searching was the echo of mine. A little bit of drinking, a little bit of drugs, a little bit of love, and a hell of a lot of pain. He was sitting on our couch in the living room gazing out our big picture window. It’s a good window to gaze out of a lot of hills, fields, farm houses, dogs running around, and if you’re lucky you
might see a deer or a fox. I saw the look in his eyes and I knew exactly how he felt. It had been about a year since he had graduated and our mom was hassling him because he was unemployed, did nothing around the house, and as far as she had heard he’d been drinking a lot of Budweiser and Jack Daniels shots. That was what our Dad’s brother Don used to drink. He was an alcoholic that couldn’t hold a job and was in and out of jail for most of his life. I guess he yelled at or hit my sister when we were little and our mom never liked him from that moment on. So after my mom accused my brother of becoming just like Uncle Don, he went into a bit of a soul searcher’s depression.

I got out my journal, opened it up to that overly viewed page, put it in front of him and said, “Here, I want you to read this.” He took the journal without hesitation and slowly read each of my words. He didn’t have quite the same response everyone else did (maybe because he was sober). But after he read it, we just talked for a while about how life is crazy and fucked up. It was a good talk. We spoke of people who’d screwed us over and people who screwed with our hearts. We’re both laid back and like to keep things simple so our conversation wasn’t overly emotional. It was just two people talking. I told him a lot of the shit that had happened to him and a lot of the shit that got under his skin is the same shit that causes everyone else to get upset with life.

He mentioned he felt ready to go to college to study music. He had been a drummer in bands since he was 11 years old. His first transitioned from Suicide Kings, to Wasted Years, to Attica, and ultimately The Mourning After. His next band evolved from The Blind Pilots to Why We Fight, and this was the one he thought he’d become famous with. They won annual local Battle of the Bands and played many small gigs around the valley (at the same time playing other small gigs with his friend Sam as Reverie Summer, and now, still together, as Fourth Floor). After being without them for a year or so, he was confident to move on alone. Within the few months following our talk, I helped him apply to Herkimer College and I brought him up there anytime he needed to do something for enrollment. He started school last fall and he seems to be doing great. I don’t see him very often or talk to him because as a broke college student, he doesn’t have a phone. When I do see him, I’m never excited to see anyone more.

Knowing that I could help a twenty year old, pot smoking, rebel musician is a great start for me. I long to guide wandering souls a way to be remembered, a way to be known, a way to leave an impression.
I Just Saved A Bunch of Money on Car Insurance By Killing Myself
Kevin Leonard

gonna slit my throat
gonna sniff some coke
gonna hang myself
‘CAUSE I DON’T GIVE A SHIT

gonna eat Clorox
Russian Roulette
bullet in each slot
‘CAUSE I CAN’T DEAL WITH IT

carved your name into my knee
stuck my hand down my throat
‘cause you won’t look at me
and honestly, you left me with no choice

gonna jump off a bridge
and I can’t swim
everybody look at me now
listen to the magic sound of my
vvvvvvOOOIIIItccccEEeee

gonna drive my car
off a tiptop cliff
my girlfriend and I
had a minor tiff

just give up
just give up
there is no alternative
just give up
just give up
It's time to call it quits
just give up
just give up
had enough of all this shit
just give up
just shut up
now

I Just Saved A Bunch of Money on Car Insurance By Killing Myself

A Staircase Away
Sarah R. Georgianna

There was a movement back in the late 1990s to take the homeless off the streets. It started with shelters, with harassment and jail. Laws were passed prohibiting what they called "long term loitering" by any person. Prohibiting "temporary or residential construction" in any non-sanctioned area. Effectively prohibiting the homeless. In 2042, during The Great Review of every United States law, these notions were finally enforced.

So areas were set up, modeled after the "tent cities" of older times, and disheveled towns were built. Far from the major cities, they received no government assistance.

This is what we did to the Indians in the 1830s. The Japanese in their internment camps, only this time it's the poor and destitute.

With this in mind, the rich began to stifle the poor. Cities built up higher and higher and "ideal" property was at the top, far from the noise and clutter. The poorer of these people lived in government-owned residential areas, underground. The undercity.

Do you remember the idea of subways? Imagine the subway system advanced. Homes were built. Condos began at ground level, and built lower and lower. Commercial businesses started. And those of us unlucky enough to be poor, well, we were moved down here.

"Hey girlie, are you going out today?" My girlfriend Jemma tosses a few flakes of cereal at my head when I enter the kitchen. How she gets in and out of my place, I'm not sure. When did she last leave, I'm not sure of that either. I hit a button on my wristband and the TV turns on.
A Staircase Away

The thing about Jemma is that she’s never really had a place, anywhere. Technically, her permit is for Englewood, a suburban tent city outside of New York. I’m not sure how she got here, but without a residence permit she can’t work, can’t pay bills and lives mostly under the radar. So long as we avoid the luxuries my work supports us both, and I protect her as much as I can.

Without Jemma, I could save the money. I could build my account and move up top. Without her I could have a new life. One where I would be completely lost. Completely alone. Without her.

When you love someone, you better their life without thinking of your own. Jemma throws a few more flakes at me.

“You need milk.”

Wonder why.

“Let’s get it when we’re shopping”

“We’re going shopping?”

“We should talk to the housing sector while we’re out. Thinkin’ we might qualify to finally move up top.”

She grabs my wrist and hits the TV off. Smiling, she picks up the bowl to slurp up the rest of the milk, a real lady. I’m clearing my throat for my first big line of the morning. I look up, eyebrows knit, sarcastic smile across my lips.

“Who’s we?”

“Nena! Baby! Good to see you out and about.”

Some friend of Jemma’s greets me and hops over a subway bench to get closer.

Sarah R. Georgianna

“Jemma convinced me.” I’m awkward and apologetic. “We’re doing some shopping.” No need to tell him about our plans with the housing sector. Anyone who finds out we’re trying to elevate will pretty much write us off forever.

“Well, you take good care of her Jem, don’t be a stranger!”

I’m not even sure what his name is. The crowd finally takes him and he’s swallowed up.

“He’s right, you know.” Jemma is pulling my hand, leading me into the tunnels to the Overview Line, finding a seat. “You never come out anymore. It’s like all you want to do is work, do you even have any friends?”

That was a dig. I could tell her I’m working to make our money. Working because I’m one promotion away from getting an apartment up top. Working because I want to see what she would look like with a tan. I want to grow flowers, outdoors, in a real sun. But I’m not telling her anything. Dialogue was never my strong suite.

The thing is, Jemma takes care of me. And I take care of her. She jokes that I should stop helping her, or she’ll never live a legitimate life. I joke that we’re unhealthy, that we’re holding each other back. Neither of us is really joking.

“Come on, Nena. Sit down.” She lays my head on her shoulder. “I’ll tell you when our stop is.”

My eyes are still open when we hit the housing sector of the GA section. GA being “Government-Approved.” Jemma pulls me up and directs me to our
A Staircase Away

platform. She finds our elevator and the housing office, signs my name for the appointment. I pick at my falling-out hair and nails.

The meeting was just a meeting. Just the basics. We present my paychecks. We present my permit and my GA contact information. A man takes all of this and we’re finding subway lines again. To be honest, I haven’t really paid attention. Jemma knows what she’s doing, and she’s the one pushing this.

We get back to my place and Jemma pulls out a key. My key. I’m not sure when I gave it to her but I make a mental note not to leave the flat, or I might never get in again.

Travel exhausts me, every time, and Jemma puts me to bed with a light kiss. She smells like wet fabric and smoke. I can’t remember the last time we kissed, and it’s nice. The light goes out, and I hear her telling me we forgot the milk. She still wants to go shopping. She’ll be back tonight, and she’ll bring dinner. I nod, sleepily, and I’m asleep before I hear the door close.

It’s around noon the next day when I sit down for work. The nice thing about my job is that it’s time consuming and sanity-depleting, but it’s digital. You know all those census surveys the government takes? I interpret them. The information is loosely categorized and sent to people like me, who stare at the screen hour after hour deciding all those fine details that computers still haven’t been perfected to know. Until they are, I’m the technology used. Input information here. Output data there. Conclusion proves this. See also: mind numbing government work.

The real money comes from my political accounts. “You know you single-handedly got that bastard elected, right?” Jemma throws the remote at me, hard. “He’s keeping the restrictions on tent cities.”

She’s probably still talking but I can’t hear her as she exits the room. Cupboards are slamming but since nothing is broken, she’s probably not all that upset.

The good news is that my job gives me key insight to what the population wants, and how to make it look like they’re getting it. Low-budget happiness. This isn’t a unique gift in itself, but being able to write these reports into voter-friendly language is a skill. Input information here. Output political success there. Jemma always said I was better on paper.

The bad news is that she doesn’t exactly approve of who I’m writing for. I thought she’d decided to overlook it when the candidates’ office offered to move me up top, by way of promotion.

“Jemma?”

Another cupboard crashes shut and her head pokes around the kitchen wall. “You know he started the Pen Pal Act.” There’s no way she can be mad when I’m saying this.

“Four years ago, he started the Pen Pal Act. He introduced it. First thing I ever wrote for him.” Her face softens. “Jemma, he’s why we met.” Jemma was assigned as my pen pal three years ago. A poorly funded GA program to connect the poor
A Staircase Away

Sarah R. Georgianna

to the rich. Unfortunately, the rich bought their way out, and after just over a year the program was abandoned. But Jemma kept writing. I fell in love and offered to transport her here, with me. She declined. A month later she showed up on my doorstep. I didn’t question it and we never talked about the legal issues.

“You forgot to shower.” She pulls a hand through my hair, smiles, and our fight is forgotten.

“Nena I wanted to ask you,” Jemma starts but then the phone is ringing. I hit a button on my wristband and a voice comes from the speakers on the ceiling. Something about documents. I’m half-listening while I watch one little curl of Jemma’s hair slide out from behind her ear, falling down her jaw line. I’m back in reality just long enough to hear “...approved. Thank you for your patience, further instruction will be delivered shortly.”

I know that in the kitchen inbox we’ve just received a thick envelope, in GA canary yellow with my moving papers. Jemma hugs me, tears pressing against my cheek and I pretend not to notice that at first, her smile was sad.

With my promotion approved and my motion to elevate accepted, the next week is a blur. Jemma filed paperwork. Jemma filled in forms. Packed bags. I listened inattentively, picking at a thread on my jeans and working at my computer.

The way it works when you move is that you can take anything you want. Anything at all so long as it fits in three GA containers, to be inspected and forwarded to your new government-provided housing. You can carry with you one bag, no bigger than a purse, for your paperwork and cash.

Even up top, government regulation goes unchecked.

I’m at the checkpoint, a boundary separating the last of the undercity from the sunlit streets up top. This is the closest some will ever come to natural sunlight. The warmth of daylight is no more than a staircase away, and you can feel it.

My permit is stamped and handed to me. I’m reaching behind me for Jemma’s hand, and instead she gives me a bag.

Now is where I’m confused.

“You’re the one going.”

No.

“You’re headed up there, sweet thing.”

I can’t.

“You know they’d never let me go.”

I need you.

“Everything we have, it’s always been yours.”

I’m panicking.

Jemma is kissing my cheek, Jemma is walking away, back down into the city. Jemma is my world and she’s leaving.

“Jemma.”

Dialogue was never my strong suite.
A Staircase Away

"Jemma!" I’ve caught her hand and she’s wrenching it away. “Look at me!”

I grab her waist and she twists from my hands. Her curls bow downward and cover the sides of her face. I catch her and she wrenches away. I catch her again and I slip, her heels clicking down the steps. I’m not the only one crying here, but right now it feels that way.

Jemma.

Jemma is gone and I should have known.

When you love someone, you better their life without thinking of your own. She’s so far down the staircase, so small, that I’m not even sure I can pick out her face.

I’m aware of the GA uniforms watching me, no doubt wondering if Jemma deserves further inspection. I have the rest of my life to fall apart.

I pick up my bag and steady myself on the railing. Chipped paint crumbling off in my hand. I take the steps, one by one, until I feel warmth. Then I turn my face to the sun.

Underrated Woman
Scott Korn

The barest left hand
Ever seen
A woman
Wanting nothing

No boys
No suitors
No schmoozer's, whom
Content with their dreams
Denied
Leach toward her

She turns
Toward the future
Her dogs follow
Noses to the ground

A silent celebration of
Independence
In dependent lives.
Jazz Funeral
Ben Petrie

Pepperlicious
Katherine Walseman
I was on a kick see; I was ready to write and was excited about doing it well in my classes. To bad I wasn't in classes over break, contained within that protective cocoon that was Oswego. Encased in snow machines and businesses bustled about chaotically under the great weight, warming from the inside out. Instead, it was Christmas break at home on the outskirts of Rochester; I was in my old Honda bumping down the highway heat hissing and cold knuckles on the wheel looking forward to the consistent warmth of the coffee shop in the heart of the city. I shivered in anticipation.

I remembered when my brother threw an ice ball at me and hit me in the lip. I never forgot kneeling in the snow, steaming blood worming its way through the dense packed snow. I didn’t cry, I just sat there watching it tunnel fast and winding like branches on a tree. I thought about how it would feel. Mom grounded him and consoled me; quietly she pulled me away from the blood.

In the coffee shop sipping on a tea I ate my favorite shortbread cookie. Everyone was just there for the people, this was the place where everyone came to do nothing and act a lot. It seemed as though the discussions spilled into and out of the walls. They were decorated with trash and fine art mixed without rhyme, never tackling any important reason.

In the coffee shop I sat drinking tea and writing nothing worth keeping. Everything was gradually getting back to the same temperature, a steady normal, equilibrium. My tea cooled, my nose and toes stopped tingling and I could feel my warm wool socks again. I concluded my last thought. I then bundled to brave the weather. I put on my dad’s old, long, wool coat and my favorite worn out hat. I brought my dishes back to the bohemian girl running the steamy espresso and said something about the weather or something that everybody says and left through the clanging door.

I heard the leather strand of bells echo and resonate through my mind and nestle into past Christmases. I could smell the homemade eggnog and pine sap running hot. I could see the smiles and hear the carols in the background. I remembered the reindeer adorned socks that I had to wear every Christmas morning. The little eyes staring blankly in anticipation of new things wrapped in old boxes and pretty bows.

I walked deep in my thoughts and through the back streets of the city blankly looking down at the sidewalk in front of me. The street lights illuminated me from behind casting harsh angles and proportions. I noticed foot steps plodding through snow, not messy footsteps; they were moving with haste.

"Hey......hey kid.” I heard a man say to me with a coarse tone.

I said nothing and kept walking, pulling my coat in tight in around my body. I felt every piece of rock salt grind under my boots and into the cracks.

“Yo... kid, I'm talking to you.”

His shadow towered over me, clouding my small figure in a black cloak. I slowed and turned. He was tall, hooded, and confident about his words. He looked down at me, his hand open, palm up toward the falling snow.

"I need your help, I need some money.”
Exothermic Reaction

I looked around for answers and my eyes only found three other men sitting on a stoop across the street, eyes fixed on me, never flinching in the silent flakes still falling between us.

“I said, money, I need some now.”

“Sorry, I don’t have any, I can’t help you.” I coaxed out as calm as I could muster.

I started to turn and leave this cold exchange, searching for warmth. I felt nothing, just the harsh grinding of his voice up my neck.

“Then we have a problem, because I need money, and I know you got some.” Hand open, this time much closer to my gut.

I slowly produced my wallet to show him that I had nothing left. I was careful not to expose the back section of my wallet that held one twenty, the last of my Christmas funds. I was going to protect that section hiding it behind the small silk partition, safe from exposure.

As I opened my wallet he tore in grabbing at my bills, prying the soft silk away with his big hardened and calloused hands, finding the bill and making it his own.

“I knew I was supposed to come to you.” He said as he walked away leaving my wallet splayed, emptied, catching the cold flakes that melted on contact. I picked up and stuffed my wallet away, quietly appalled and awed.

“Jesus told me to come to you man.” He yelled as he slunk away.

The first time I was rabbit hunting with my dogs I shrugged my shoulders hard against the snow, hood up. I watched them hunt the hot tracks, yelping and gaining.
(LIGHTS UP on a brown velvet couch center stage. SUZANNE bursts in the doors stage right.)

SUZANNE
Jesus Christ. Sorry I’m late. This traffic is ridiculous on Fridays. I really gotta change my appointment. It’s beginning to interfere with my gambling hobby. What, you don’t play lotto? It’s a shame. Y’know, my husband used to say that he’d be playing lotto. He’d go and be gone for three fuckin’ hours, and me all innocent thinking he got lost. He’d comeback all flustered, “Yeah, hon’, took a detour home”. Of course. That makes sense. Then I saw the lipstick on his collar. What were the winning numbers that day honey? 6? 9? 69? Asshole.

(SUZANNE lights a cigarette, the hand holding the cigarette is trembling.)

Sonofabitch. I never would have started smoking if Anthony didn’t convince the entire cheerleading team that smoking was cool. You don’t remember Anthony? That was my first mist—marriage. It’s been about 7 years since Tony waltzed away. That sack of crap. Thinking he’s hot shit since he’s on Broadway now. If we had kids they all would have turned out like my cousin that was disowned. Don’t get me started on my family. Mom always used to joke, “Oh Suzy, you’re never going to find a man that’ll tolerate all of your bitching”. Look at me now, Ma! 4 husbands later, and I still prove her wrong. George was first, and the jerk had the nerve to die getting a check up. No, not a heart attack. He was allergic to bees and didn’t know. Next was Sydney, he was the dreamboat of the bunch. He taught literature at GW. He had an attraction for the classics… and younger women. Happy, wonderful, QUEER Anthony was next and danced his way from my bedroom to Broadway. Now I’m on to Jeffrey. So far he’s been a keeper. Only thing is he keeps going off to see his sick mother. Now I’m not sure if he’s been telling the truth. Not like I’m in a position to judge though, I come to see you, don’t I? She’s dying of emphysema.

(She lowers her cigarette and stares at it instead of dragging on it every other word.)

Maybe I could try and cut back. My father died of lung cancer before I could really get to know him. Mom always said ‘don’t smoke’. I smoked because she told me not to. Maybe I’d be able to hold on to Jeff better if I quit it. Maybe.

(LIGHTS DOWN.)
Intrapersonal
Robert DeLong

periwinkle feather dust crops the ancient streets
we wander with our souls, leaking from our feet
Witnessing, what no man has seen
The object of infinity, few and far between
Take this as your only offer,
I beg you, don’t trust the chauffeur

Try to bend the frame of this moment
Letting ourselves see no color or texture
The displacement of tongues
Lead us to sorrow
Our hearts beat loud and the sun fights the moon
No one can control the break in the road
Chalk it up to mankind

The second the words leave your mouth
All credibility is drained
What is soul?
The ring around your bathtub
Eat sleep fuck, better than any luck
Throw it on, throw it away
Tomorrow is a new day, if you let it
You got mad soul, but you be sold

Missing and Presumed Drowned
Samantha Lefberg

1943

The day the judge sentenced me to serve my time at Alcatraz is the same day my life ended. I didn’t know who I was. Everything in me just seemed to have been erased in that moment. That was over six months ago. When my chained feet stepped off the boat, I wasn’t Rufus Anglin anymore. I was #46388, a successful bank robber from Seattle who just ran out of luck one day, and now was serving thirty years for all the jobs I pulled. The ride to Alcatraz could make anyone go crazy. No one talked. All you could hear was the breathing of every criminal, and how each exhale carried the sense of uneasiness. Though I sat to myself with the same wonders of my new life, I escaped with my imagination. I just closed my eyes and pictured my life without crime. My sense of imagination had filled me with hope, so even though it felt like they took away everything from me, I wasn’t going to let them keep it forever.

Regret doesn’t exist in my vocabulary for everything I done was with pride and thrill. And even though I was stuck on this rock, I found ways to amuse myself. Course there were always consequences, but it’s all worth it.

I had been put in solitary confinement for two days for telling one of the guards to drop dead. No one takes jokes around here.

“You know the rules, Anglin. Any type of threats or attempts on anyone in this institution is an offense,” Officer Cline had told me before throwing me into the
darkness. Officer Cline was reciting one of the many rules to this fine institution. And I knew the rules, all of them, and could recite them, but it's damn hard to follow the rules. Solitary confinement ain't as bad as people say it is. Sure you sit in the pitch black, and it's cold and wet, but it's a good place to sit and really think. In my two-day punishment, I did a whole lot of thinking. If they thought that putting me in this shithole was going to make me learn my lesson, they were fucking idiots.

I would never have been caught if it wasn't for that one unlucky day. Bank robbing was like a specialty. For me, it was better than sex, more thrilling than anything in this world. In and out like a ghost, the papers read. Sometimes it was just too easy. But then that day happened when I got caught and it wasn't even my heist. I had been researching this one bank for months. Even paid a kid to pretend to be a journalist for his school interested in knowing how the bank works. I wrote down the questions and he got the answers, easy as pie. It was Saturday April 12 when I decided to pull the job. I had on a uniform posing as a deliveryman with the package in my hand carrying my gun and mask. My heart raced with excitement as I walked through the back entrance of the bank ready for my task. Unfortunately I was unaware that some amateur was attempting to rob the bank already. I could hear him yelling like a madman and I knew his voice was filled with fear. Someone probably called for the police already. And since I had never been put in that situation before, I really didn't know what to do. I decided my best bet was to run for it before the pigs showed up.

And that's where my luck slipped away. An officer saw me running from the bank. I thought I could outrun him, and I could have if there weren't good doers in the world that stopped me. I don't even know if the guy robbing the bank was ever caught. If he wasn't, he sure as hell owes me one.

When you're young and circling the drain, New York is pretty much the best place to be. Ask anyone. A plane ticket and a cheap apartment, both made possible by a parent-funded college loan I never wanted, and here I am. Cheap being a fairly relative term, of course.

I shouldn't think about the past anymore. It's useless to me now, and I don't want to end up like the others who realize their sins, and become all spiritual and shit like that. No sir, that ain't me. A master of stealth, that's what I am. Though the pigs and media thought that they tamed me, I've been thinking of ways to getting out of this shit. Course when you get to the rock, everyone tells you there ain't no way of escaping. Guards are always watching your every move. And if by luck you were able to get passed them, you'd have to first be able to get over the high fence, and then a jump into the fierce water of the Pacific, and hope to God you survive the fall and the current. Eh, maybe the ones that attempted to escape didn't have a concrete plan. Every attempt I heard of, there were always groups of threes or fours. No, you can't pull a job like that with someone here. Everyone is out for themselves. It's got to be solo. Plus the ones that tried weren't me, and I actually have some sense in my brain.

It's a great feeling to see light again. Two days in
complete darkness can take a toll on your eyesight. When the doors opened, I felt like I was staring into the sun. Two guards came in and pulled me to my feet, while my hands blocked the brightness of the light. Both guards stood by my sides as they led me through the halls to C-Block. Now even though I served my punishment, they still took away some of my privileges. So instead of being led to the exercise yard where everyone was, they brought me back to my cell on C-block. What little sun came through the small windows was a comfort, and I sat on my bed imagining the sound of the waves and the singing of birds.

There really wasn’t anything waiting for me outside the rock. Parents died when I was younger, my only brother won’t even talk to me no more after finding out my real profession, and as for wife and kids, well I ain’t sure about the kids part, but there ain’t no woman waiting for me. I’ve always been running from city to city, so there ain’t no time to just stay in one place longer than six or seven months. It would be nice to know what it feels like to not always be in motion. Sure I’m stuck here for the next thirty years of my life, but this ain’t the way to living. I want the real thing.

With the thought in my head, I jumped off my bed and stood close to the bars. Both my hands gripped the metal, as I looked around. To my right and all the way at the end of the block, was a fat guard just patrolling the keys that hung from the ceiling. Those keys were the spares that opened the door to get out of the cell house. I sighed at the impossible thought. Even if I managed to be out of my cell and knock out the fat bloke that just stood there picking his ass, there was another guard that guarded the door on the second level. He’d shoot me and that’ll be the end, and I’d always be known as the fool who didn’t even get that far. Breaking out of the cell house was impossible. Well, it seemed like every area I thought about, the exercise yard, the dining hall, were all practically impossible to break out from. I didn’t want to stress too much on my hopes to escape. It was possible, I believed. Escaping would be such a thrill, and I think I’m up for the challenge.

My plan hit me like a hammer a week later. Now at the rock, we all had four rights: food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention, and that was it. Everything else was a privilege to be earned, including working. Go figure, right? I’ve never been so happy than cutting up wood for a couple of hours. Time flew by, and I could make out the tall buildings in San Francisco. From the cell house, it was in the direction east of the rock, and it was one of the closest buildings to the edge. It seemed like freedom was so close, just a run and jump. There was always one guard watching us from inside, another patrolling the outside, not to mention the guard in the watchtower ready to shoot. So when I was cutting up some wood for God knows what they needed it for, I started to have a plan. There were four exits, but the main exits to the building were one leading toward the cell house, and the other opened up right by the water. On good days and depending on the guard, they kept the door open a bit. Maybe it was in mockery for us to look out, but keep in mind that we were trapped.
Missing and Presumed Drowned

My plan would need some help, even though I always have said that a stunt like this would need to be solo. I ain’t saying I’m helping them escape because that’s not the idea, but I’ll let them think that. Luckily I worked with two other guys in the woodwork section that were fucking imbeciles. They were Richard Armstrong and James Frye, also bank robbers like me, but they ain’t got sense like me. Armstrong and I were on the same boat to the rock, whereas James has two years under his belt with twenty more to go. I’ve watched them before and seen they like to be the followers, even though they think they are tough shit. With my smooth words, I’d be able to convince them with my plan. With every “what if”, I had a solution even if I wasn’t a hundred percent sure. I knew they’d buy it if it seemed like I’ve been planning it for months.

“You really think it’s gonna to work? I ain’t so sure man,” Armstrong said during dinner. James was more eager and was sold with the very word of escape, but Armstrong was turning into a chicken.

“Course it will. No one has tried it yet. Are you turning into a pansy now, Armstrong?” I said before shoving a pile of mash potatoes in my mouth. I knew that comment would get to him.

“I ain’t no fucking pansy, Anglin. But if it don’t work and we get caught, you’ll be paying for it because I don’t want more time than I already have in this hell.”

“Relax you pecker checker,” James said jumping in, “It’s gonna work.”

I couldn’t sleep that night. Anticipation filled the air and my heart felt like it was going to break through my ribcage. When the sun began to seep into the cell house, I began to go over my plan once more. I was so sure of it. At six, I was preparing for the cell doors to open. Every day the cells opened at six, and every day we inmates stepped out like robots. And just like any other day, the doors opened and all inmates took a step out of their cells and waited for role call. I looked around to see James smirking at me. This proved he was a fucking imbecile because he was showing he had something on his mind. And if he kept that face, I was sure we’d get in trouble. I quickly shot him a look and he stopped.

“#46388, Anglin,” Officer McDonough yelled. He looked at me and checked my name on his clipboard. Once that was finished, we walked in rows to the dining hall. The sound of the march echoed loudly in my ears. I ate in silence and didn’t say shit to no body. Like clockwork, the guards came to prepare the “privileged ones” to their working stations.

The weather was more beautiful than I could have asked for. There was not a cloud in the sky and the sun was still rising. It was hard to keep myself from smiling. Once inside the shop, we all got to work. James was getting excited, and I was getting worried he was going to blow it for us. He needed a good punch in the stomach to make him focus. He knew the signal. I kept looking back at the guard watching what he was doing. He was sitting on the chair facing us, but I could tell he was itching for a nap. He had already taken off his hat and placed it on
"More wood," I said to him. All the wood was stacked up alongside the wall. Lucky for me, it wasn’t in the direction the guard could see. While whistling a tune, I walked passed the guard and picked up a stack of wood. When I turned around, I saw the guard watching me. I smiled and he turned back to Armstrong and James. Like a shadow, I crept towards him, but as I lifted my hands to hit him, he turned around again.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Anglin?” He barked as he got up. I saw him reaching for his stick and I began to back away. My body was shaking. I didn’t expect him to turn around. The guard blocked my view of the others, and I wondered if they were going to run for it or help. Then I heard a loud thud and the guard grunted and stumbled back. There was James with a block of wood in his hand. James hit him again, but this time in the head. I didn’t know if the guard was dead or not, sure was an awful amount of blood creating a pool by his head.

“Why the fuck would you hit him in the head?” Armstrong cried. If he’s dead and we don’t get out, we’re gonna be fried!”

“Shut up you pansy and help me undress him,” I commanded. As quick as possible, we took off the guard’s uniform. There was a bit of blood already on it, but I thought it could pass without too many suspicions.

“All right. Go hide the body,” I said as I began to change into the guard’s uniform.

“Why do you get to change into the uniform?” Armstrong questioned. I wanted to hit him with the piece of wood. All he’s done so far was bitch and moan, and now was turning into dead weight.

“Cause, it’s my plan that’s why. Now shut the fuck up and do your job before some guard comes in.”

I was impressed with how almost perfect the uniform fit me. There wasn’t a mirror so I wasn’t able to check myself out. I grabbed the hat and pulled it far down to conceal my face.

“Nice change there, Anglin. I actually think this might work,” Armstrong said. I gave a quick smile.

“So now what’s the plan now boss?” James asked. His voice was anxious. Turning toward the door, I could smell the ocean, but I knew it would be suicide if we just ran for it.

“We’ll sneak through the back door toward the laundry building. If we run into anyone, we’ll just play it off as if I was bringing you somewhere,” I said. Armstrong laughed.

“You really think no one will notice you? They’d be like, hm who’s the new guy? He sorta looks like Rufus Anglin. Oh wait, that’s Anglin and he’s trying to escape!” he said.

“Enough! We don’t have time. Let’s just stick to the plan,” James said. We grabbed some tools just in case we ran into any more trouble.

The back door was located down the hall where the equipment room was. I led the way as if I was leading my troops through enemy territory. I went back and forth...
from every wall, looking through the windows, and signaling to them to keep moving. When we reached the back door, I opened it a crack and peeked out. There were guards walking around enjoying the weather, but they were patrolling the laundry building. When the guards disappeared to patrol the back, we walked alongside the woodwork building heading back to the front door.

"Ok, you two get in front and I'll pretend to be transporting you somewhere. The guards in the tower can't make out our faces," I said. James and Armstrong obeyed and began walking closer to our destination. I pulled my hat down farther; afraid anyone would see my face. Each step was closer to freedom. Finally I would be out. Though I knew I'd have to be in hiding, it was better there than being here. And I'll always be known as the one that got away. I imagined myself reading the newspaper about my escape and being named the greatest escape artist.

"Hey!" Someone yelled from behind me, breaking my trance. I didn't turn around. We were too close.

"Hey, where you taking them?" The voice yelled. Armstrong turned around and gave me a worried glance. I cleared my throat and spoke.

"Transporting them back to their cells sir." I nodded my head for the two to keep walking, but as we began to move forward, the voice spoke again.

"Boy, you better turn around and face me when I'm talking to you," he said. I didn't want to turn around and face him, for then my dream would be crushed. I could hear his footsteps walking towards me, but I didn't move.

"Fuck!" Armstrong yelled and he began to run. James became petrified and took off as well. I was left in complete horror. I watched them run as the man in uniform behind me began to blow his whistle, and chase them. I stood in amazement that the guard avoided me and focused on them. It didn't take long before I heard gunshots from the tower. Armstrong was screaming like he belonged in a funny farm, while James began to throw the tools he had stowed away in his pocket at the guards approaching. They acted as the distraction I needed. I snapped out of my trance and ripped off my jacket. The barbed wire fence stood in my way. Everything I felt, I used to climb as fast as possible. With the jacket in my hand, I used it as cushion over the wire. I looked up and saw guards and officers yelling. I didn't bother looking for James or Armstrong. They were as good as dead. As I threw one leg over the fence, I tried to secure it in the fence. As I began to lift my left leg over, my right slipped from the fence, and the barbed wire went through my jacket, piercing my dick. I cried out in pain as I pulled my body up, feeling the barbed wire in me. My eyes filled with water, but I knew I had to keep going. I looked up quickly to notice the guards were now screaming towards me. Shots were being fired and it was time to take the plunge. Looking down at the water, I closed my eyes and jumped off.

Everything was silent and tranquil, like a film running in slow motion. At the time, I didn't feel anything as I drew closer to the water, but in my head I felt I was finally free. I hit the water hard and my body began to panic. My plan was to swim out a bit, but my body was shaking for air. The coldness of the Pacific shook me.
Missing and Presumed Drowned

awake, and my hands began to fight to the surface. Taking in the air never felt so good. The guards were still shooting at me, and I knew I wasn’t in the clear. I felt the bullets in water almost like heavy rain coming down. As I began to swim, I felt a sudden pain in my leg and I knew I was hit. I didn’t scream out in agony. The thrill of the chase was the only thing that kept me going. I was free and they weren’t going to stop me. I took a deep breath and went under to avoid any more bullets. All I kept thinking was, I’m free...I’m free.

eVOLUTION
Timothy Fredenburg

Oh!! Copernicus
Your dying mind slips,
Your ideas refuse to let go.
You are paid
By the ears of God.
You’re like a newborn
Absorbed in yourself.
The stars above never seem
To change
As the world
Around you flows,
But the heavens and the earth
Float through systems alike.
Galileo didn’t invent the telescope
He used it first.
Discovery,
Oh frontiers!!
They spiral on repeat
Building on accepted knowledge.
Collective agreements.
Ideas all die slowly.
Constantly dangerous
Is confidence in omniscience.
Angry Man
Aaron Z. Lee

Hybrid Beast
Dahl Todd
Bills Fan
Eric Wojtanik

My roommate sat in our suite common room on the speckled brown loveseat. The loveseat, comprised of a wooden base and round spongy cushions, matched the rest of the circa 1970 furniture crammed in the corner of the room. Combined with a mud brown, four-person couch and two royal blue chairs, the furniture formed three sides of a square around the T.V.

My roommate was positioned directly under a giant, glossy poster of the Buffalo Bills 2009-2010 season schedule. Circled in black marker was the date 9/20. The words “home opener” were scribbled next to it. He looks up from his Oswegonian sports section, eyes following the banner advertising Labatt Blue and the 50 year anniversary of Buffalo Bills football. The banner stretches around the entire perimeter of the common room, decorating the upper trim like Christmas lights.

Strands of my roommate’s thin brown hair peak through holes in the top of his white Buffalo Bills throwback logo hat. The hat hides his wide forehead and receding hairline. The lack of overhead lighting in the common room magnifies the off-white color of his sleeveless t-shirt which fits about as well as a bed sheet. The shirt is ripped down each side-seam to just above the waist, revealing a white wife-beater undershirt. BUFFALO BILLS FOOTBALL is written in faded red and blue lettering across the shirt which he wears like a uniform every game day. The broadness of his shoulders is intensified by his slouched posture, giving his 175 pound frame the illusion of hugeness. He strains his neck around the obstacle (a person) sitting next to him to get a good view of the 27-inch flat-screen. The T.V. is raised off the crumb-filled carpet resting atop a crude alter made from a dresser and tablecloth. An entangled knot of black cords connects the T.V. to the cracked outlet in the wall.

My roommate’s navy blue basketball shorts, striped down the side of both legs, are hiked up just a little too high. His exposed upper thighs rival the color of the Bills’ helmet facemasks. These fleshy, pale legs tremble slightly in anticipation of the approaching game. The loveseat creaks while he crosses his legs, showing off a blistered, blackened heel and jagged, dirt encrusted toenails. The red, white and blue Bills themed clock on the wall across from him ticks to 4:05 p.m. Instantly an alarm goes off in my roommate’s head. It’s football time. His calf muscles tighten into a ball as the opening kickoff flashes across the screen. A grin consumes his face after a couple of blue jerseys make a strong defensive stop in the Tampa Bay backfield. He starts clapping encouragements as if he’s down on the field with his favorite team.

He reaches for the lone bag of generic brand tortilla chips on the circular coffee table, exposing a coarse patch of armpit hair. Five heads simultaneously turn to look at him from their respective seats. My roommate smirks. “I’ll buy the next bag.” Within seconds he’s got one hand glued to the bag while the other plunges into it, snatching up the triangular corn contents like a grizzly bear fishes for salmon. Before the game returns from the first commercial break the bag is considerably lighter. “We
gotta get some dip next time,” he coughs out. Spraying chip flakes across the room. After licking each one of his bony fingers with a wet smack, he rolls up the now half-empty bag and tosses it back onto the table. Not a single person makes a move for the chips.

As the Bills take the field for their first offensive possession he leans forward, eyes transfixed on the screen. His gaze doesn’t un-focus for the team’s entire one minute 52-second drive. He studies the screen intently like there’s gonna be a pop quiz immediately after every play. When the pigskin sails through the air during a 32-yard pass he holds his breath and then explodes in a dramatic crescendo of nonsensical celebration screams as it’s pulled in for a touchdown. He yells like he’s trying to out-scream 70,000 plus at Ralph Wilson Stadium some 200 miles away.

My roommate flexes his massive grapefruit sized biceps, suggesting he had some kind of hand in the score. The veins pop out of his neck and forearms like prairie dogs pop their heads out of holes. Instinctively, he leaps over the side-by-side mini-fridges and runs across the length of the common room to our bedroom. I glance at the old loveseat. The imprint of his back and butt are visible in its soft cushioning. He emerges seconds later with music blasting from his iTunes. I recognized the song as the Buffalo Bills “Shout” song; it’s played inside the stadium after every Bills score during a game. He waltzes around the room kicking his legs up in perfect time with the beat. When the song ends he returns to the loveseat winded but overjoyed nonetheless. The imprint retakes the shape of his back and butt as he eases into it.

When the Bills jump out to a 17 point lead, the pencil-poked dimples on my roommate’s cheeks double in size. He rubs his hands together so hard I’m sure they’re gonna spontaneously combust from the friction. At the start of the second quarter, Tampa begins to drive. My roommate rises, taunting the Tampa quarterback. He gyrates his body in a semi-provocative fashion, thrusting his hips and shaking his money maker. How he thought this behavior would impact the performance of the player I have no idea. The quarterback continues to pick the Bills’ defense apart, however, unfazed by the antics going on hundreds of miles away.

My roommate takes a seat again, nervously tugging on the grey lacrosse head string tied around his right wrist. He pulls back his yellow Livestrong band on his left wrist and snaps it against his skin. “Tampa’s gonna score here.” Sure enough a 42 yard touchdown pass is heaved over the middle, cutting the Bills’ lead down to ten. My roommate sits blank-faced, shaking his head. The screen cuts to a shot of the Bills head coach with practically the exact same look on his face. My roommate rises and smacks the giant Bills helmet Fathead sticker on the opposite wall. “Come on, let’s go Buffalo.”

He returns to his seat and begins chomping down on his fingernails, starting with the thumb on his left hand and munching all the way over to the pinky on his right. When the defense takes the field again, he pumps
his fist and waves his arms in the air trying to insight the fans on the T.V. to become even rowdier. Tampa instead continues to look good on offense, sustaining a drive. My roommate observes the next ten minutes mimicking Rodin’s “Thinker” statue. His knuckles dig into the cleft in his chin, thick brow frozen in a furrowed puzzled position, eyes squinting, and lips pursed.

Voice hoarse from all the previous yelling, he starts coaching what play needs to be called next and why. He draws blitz schemes out with his fingers on an invisible clipboard of X’s and O’s. After Tampa scores another touchdown, he turns to the bottle, pulling a plastic Nalgene bottle from under the loveseat. He starts chugging the water inside. He winces when he pulls the bottle away from his mouth, suggesting its contents are harder than they appear. Rubbing his feet into the grayish carpet, he lets out a sigh. The whistle blows on the T.V. “Halftime,” he chokes out. My roommate rises and heads for the bathroom as the Bills run towards their locker room with a six-point lead.

Uncle Eddie pours a generous splash of moonshine into his glass and passes the clay jug to my brother Robert and me. He takes a long, slow slurp, the moonshine churning about his fake teeth. He sits back, ruminating in the smooth darkness rolling over the cornstalks that snake out from the porch, ending in black maple trees leaning over the fields.

“Let me see, what was I gonna tell y’all about?”
“Ah yes, I were! Your great granpy Magnus, he’s a real bear thumper, he is.”
“What you mean, ‘bear thumper’?” I ask.
“Don’t you know none?” says Uncle Eddie. “Your granpy Magnus be the reason there ain’t black bears in the Katskill Mountains no more.”
“What he done to ‘em?” asks Robert, bending his elbow real strong and reaching for the jug with his other hand.

“Why, Magnus, he done ran all the black bears from these here hills, he did. And he done it all with his own bare hands. When he first built this here cabin, there weren’t no folks in these parts. Magnus had to fend for hisself. In those days, when I was but a little chick, wolves and panthers and black bears owned these hills. I used to play in the yard, chasin chickens and hens, and sneakin swigs from the jug of moonshine sittin on the porch when I was just about seven. Your granpy Magnus would be out raslin bears all day when I was just a babe scrabblin about with the chickens. He is a fine man, yes sir.”

“So how did Grandpa Magnus scare off the black
bears, an such?” asks Robert.

“When Magnus come to the Katskills, the bears and panthers and mongooses ran the mountains. The wolves done terrorized folks and ain’t nobody gonna live here. But Magnus, he didn’t take no stock in that, much. He done built a cabin for his fambily and took me in besides, when my own kin died of yeller fever. But anyhows, Magnus, he didn’t take no shit from them critters.”

“This one time,” says Uncle Eddie, “Your granpy Magnus, he called a meetin with the wolves and the panthers and the mongooses.”

“What about the bears?” I ask.

“Now don’t go having a conniption fit,” says Uncle Eddie. “The bears came especially. Well now, where was I? Your great granpy Magnus, he be taller than the biggest oak in the forest, and his chest be twice as big around. When he stands up and stretches his arms out in the mawnin, he blocks out the sun, and grabs the moon off ’a the horizon to scratch his back with. And when he yawns, the whole mountain shakes and all the aminals run for they’s dens. He rips the trees out of the ground by their roots when he clears a field, and uses their branches to pick the wildcats out of his teeth after a meal.

“Magnus’ still is cut right into the side of the mountain. He uses a whole pine forest to fire it, why you can hear that somnabitch boom in for miles down the valley. One day, not too long ago, ’bout fifty years maybe, he picked up a whole mountain stream and laid it back down so’s it runs straight into his still’s coolin barrel. When Magnus gets thirsty from choppin trees for the fire, he takes the big kettle from the hearth and dips it into the still just for a sip of moonshine.”

“But what about the bears, Uncle Eddie?” I say.

“Lord, child!” says Uncle Eddie, “You’re wound tighter than a hound dog chasin a possum through a briar patch. Don’t you worry none. Them bears, they went all right. And to this day, no bear with any stuffin ’twixt his ears done come to these here parts.”

Uncle Eddie passes around a fresh jug and we each pour out a glass, the mercury clear shine glinting in the moonlight. We sit, contemplating the quietude of the woods surrounding the cabin, wondering if Great Grandpa Magnus was at that very moment rastling with a bear or whirling a rabid mongoose into a bramble bush.

“Don’t you worry none about them bears. They be leaving soon enough! So when he done called that meetin, the animals, they come. He stood there with his hands on his hips and his eye was gleamin so mean it done caught the trees on fire around him. He told them aminals that he weren’t gonna take no more of their connivin ways, and they better git! And when your great granpy Magnus said ‘Git!’ half the trees in the forest came crashing down around them critters.”

“Well, the wolves, they turned tail and headed for the Rockies, where I hear they’s still pulling buffalo down for a mornin snack. The mongooses, they disappeared into the crevices of the mountain side, their tails crackin so fast they lit on fire, their beady eyes gleamin out from them dark crevices, jist a’ waitin for the day your great granpy Magnus go away. And the panthers, they headed south, figgerin they gots a better chance with Davy Crockett than...
Great Granpy Magnus

with your granpy Magnus. An’ that’s why old Davy gots so much trouble down there in the cane.”

“But the bears,” I say. “What about the bears?”

“Why, the bears,” says Uncle Eddie. “I ’most forgot. The bears, they’s too proud to leave. Granpy Magnus, he say they better leave right quick. But they just grumble and sit on they’s haunches, sayin he ain’t got no right to make them leave.”

“But your granpy Magnus, he told them again, ‘Git’! And this time half the mountain leapt up under their feet and crashed down upon their heads.”

“Did they go?” I ask, knocking over the jug of moonshine.

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out out out out out
Kevin Leonard

hard iron bars station cages:
silver cars snake through
musty brown capillaries;
red blood cells barely harbor
oxygen, pace to and fro
on wet stuffed lungs

she waits for the shuttle to Broad Channel,
beads still in her hair
chest heavy palms dry -
death hops the turnstile, death is strong
death ate her math homework.
he took her shoelaces, too,
now her tongues loll out all
hey hey sloppy -
face puddles;
drool is not becoming -
paces the boardwalk,
chainsmokes; red messed lipstick.
skin is plastic bags
death is huge death sneaks in through the kitchen window death.
cries rattle and rent clear air
death smothers them

thin, old someone waits stationed -
white gown folded chair
oh the Mets oh my wife the twins oh King Cobra
and I think I see lights. plastic grin cane and hip
oh death is death is sweet.
death is waiting on the front porch he’ll be there all night
I wander into the Oddity and scootch onto a stool at the bar. It is open mic night and the hippy girl who sings Bobby Maggie every week is belting it out for the 567th time. The bouncer sits in the corner, fingers in his ears and a pained look on his face. Just as I’m about to leave before my brain turns to applesauce, my friend Nicole sidles up next to me. She has been a reliable drinking partner for the past few months. I have the feeling that when everyone else is gone, she and I will be the only ones left drinking together.

“Well partner,” she says. “What’ll it be?”

“Well partner,” she says. “What’ll it be?”

“Whatever you’re drinking is fine by me. We don’t get much on the trail these days.”

“You’re in luck because tonight I’m drinking sloe gin fizz’s.” She motions to the bartender. After much fiddling, the bartender places uncertain concoctions in front of us.

“Take that. I’ll meet you outside in a minute,” Nicole says.

I wander out of the Oddity and sit on the deck watching the river gush by. White froth spits into the air and a greasy fog slips down the river. The river swells and heaves as if there were hundreds of bodies surging beneath the surface. A hand sticks out here. A foot there. Swirls of black and blond hair spread out like jellyfish tentacles. Eyeballs glint in the reflections from the streetlights along the river walkway.

The swells lurch toward the river bank, hands grasping at the wrought iron rails. Heads peek out, are pulled up, and crawl over the rail. Dozens of dripping people wearing slinky lingerie and pussycat masks stumble along the sidewalk.

A black shadow floats slowly down the river, pushing the water and fog away from its thick vaporal sides. It stands up, a giant gangly figure, points to the shore and waves the followers on. It is St. Patrick. This is odd, because it is not St. Patrick’s day. A great foot lifts up and over the rail, squashing one of the zombies. They scream and rush away down the street waving their arms high and dancing the two step. St. Patrick stomps by the deck, stealing an unguarded pitcher. He leans back against the rail and surveys his harem.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says. “You think it must be easy, having so many women at your beck and call. Well, it’s not.” He shakes his head and downs the pitcher in one gulp. “It’s so fucking hard to keep them all happy. Bitch, bitch, bitch. That’s all I ever hear.”

St. Patrick picks up the table’s umbrella and tap dances up the street, whistling, “Singing in the Rain”.

One of the girls climbs over the deck’s rail and sits next to me, kicking her feet up on my lap. Her pink whiskers flutter with pleasure at the sight of the dancing masses.

“Hi!” she says, her pussycat mask motionless, hazel eyes burning two holes through the pale plastic. Her toes twitch with anticipation.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“You know who I am baby,” she says, rubbing her spiky pink hair on my shoulder. “You know what I want,” she purrs, her hand sliding up my thigh.

“Get back, you beast,” I push her away. “You
In just one night, everything had changed

Bryant Cook

St. Patrick and the Transvestite Pussycats

can’t have my drink.”

“Got to go!” She leaps over the rail and runs down the street turning back once to beckon to me with a kiss. I ignore her and gaze at the river, sipping my fizz. St. Patrick can have his transvestite pussycats for all I care. A bunch of freaky freakies is all they are.

Nicole walks around the corner with two new G'lin fizzes in her hands. She carefully sets them on the table and sits down.

“Did I miss anything?”
Untitled
Ryan Salisbury

Mannequin
Aaron Z. Lee
Starlight and moonlight seemed enough for the few screaming and soon-to-be hypothermic passengers that remained. Most had drowned but the luckier ones made their way onto rafts. Some died from falling debris off the ship and sharks may have gotten a few. Tom couldn’t help but wonder if their reflection could be seen in the sky just as the sky’s reflection could be seen in the icy waters. The lifeboat slowed in this day dream.

“Tom, keep paddling.” Paul commanded.

“Sorry, it’s just beautiful up there,” Tom replied, “and the reflection is quite beautiful as well.”

Some thrashing could now be heard from the boat.

“Beautiful isn’t the word I’d use to describe this scene, now keep paddling we’re almost there.”

“I don’t know about Bridgeport, but in the city I never get to see a sky like this. I wish I had a painter with me right now.”

“Can you focus on paddling? People are dying you know.”

“You should focus on the positives Paul, it makes life much more enjoyable.”

“Try giving your optimism speech to the people in the water Tom.”

“Most normal people would be thrilled to see a view like this.”

Paul scoffed, his boss told him only the insane would go back to try and find survivors and not save their own hide. The insane were all he had to work with.

“Alright we’ve only got four bullets here in case people get out of hand.” Henry said and readied the barrel.

“Just man the flashlight Henry,” Paul ordered.

“That’s Smitty’s job, I’m crowd control.”

“Smitty’s trying to organize B boat, you’re on flashlight duty. Now start shining, we might find some swimmers.”

“Smitty’s going to organize B Boat?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, not an ideal candidate but at least someone is trying. Now get that flashlight shining Henry.”

“Yeah well where’d you put the flashlight?” Henry asked.

Paul bit his tongue. He refused to play the blame game and kept his composure. The boat began to circle and he could see Tom admiring the sky again.

“Damn it Tom!” He yelled.

“Sorry, I was just thinking that we could find people using starlight.” Tom said.

“That solves the light problem, I’ll go back to the guns,” Henry added.

“Try thinking and paddling Tom, and Henry, no guns.”

The starlight sufficed to see waving hands and splashes in the water. Paul took deep breaths and noticed the vast dispersion of the fog from his mouth. At the start of each stroke a glare of starlight shined into his eyes from the wedding ring on his finger. Henry kept his two pistols close and Tom admired the rippling of the night sky where his paddle broke through the water. The great ship had been long sunk but a few still survived.

“Help!” A voice cried out. “Over here!”

“Tom, toss the safety ring to the left.” Paul ordered.

The ring splashed in the water and a dark figure was pulled back to the boat. They hoisted him into the boat.
and wrapped a blanket over him immediately. The man shivered uncontrollably.

"You’re safe, where are the others?" Paul asked. He shook and pointed somewhat straight ahead toward the screams that echoed across the water. Paul gave the nod to continue.

“What’s your name?” Tom asked.
“Fa-fa-fa-father O’Brien.”
“Oh you’re a priest? That’s pretty awesome my man.” Tom went for a high five, but all the freezing priest could do was shake.
“Do you think you could bless our voyage? You know, for safety purposes?” Henry asked.
“Let him be, we’ve got more survivors to pick up.” Paul said. Father O’Brien tried to stand up and slowly made the sign of the cross.
“In-n-n the na-na-name of the Fa-fa-father, and-d-d-d the S-s-s-s-son, and-”
“Hey, look over there!” Henry exclaimed.
A group of people could be seen floating on a large piece of debris, almost as large as the rescue boat itself. Henry spotted about six of them, but Paul could see the seventh, a child in his mother’s arms.
“Toss the safety ring over there Tom.” Paul said. Tom stood up and swung the ring until Henry rose up and grabbed it from him.
“Don’t! There are six of them, that’ll make 10 of us in an 8 person boat. We’ll sink.”
“There’s seven of them.”
“Six or seven, doesn’t really matter Paul, we’ll sink.”
“Damn it wait, get back on your raft!” Paul shouted. He struggled with the men in the water, kicking at them like small dogs clinging to his pant leg.

“What, are you going to shoot us? We’re dying out here!” The tall man shouted.

Henry fired his gun into the water right between the two. “I’ve never missed twice.” The men in the water backed off and re-entered their float.

“Anymore than eight persons on this boat and it will sink,” Paul explained. “And there are eleven of us. We can’t all go on here.”

“Then throw us a paddle so we can both paddle back.” A shorter man suggested.

“We need both paddles, at this rate, in this cold, we’ll all die at that pace.”

"Nous laisser sur votre bateau!"

“Why does he talk like that? We can’t let him come if he talks like that.” Tom suggested.

“We’re not leaving him because he doesn’t speak English Tom,” Said Paul. “That’s not right.”

“No, Tom’s right, that’s bad for the ship’s karma, plus we can’t communicate, dangerous for all of us Paul.” Henry said.

“It wouldn’t be so bad for him to die out here, the French love beautiful scenery. And maybe the Father can leave him a blessing or something, in hopes that another ship will show up.”

Father O’Brien nodded and made the sign of the cross in the Frenchman’s direction.

“Sit down Father, knock that off.” Paul ordered.

“Okay, send the child and his mother over first.”

Tom tossed the ring toward the debris and they pulled closer to each other. The mother and child carefully crossed into the lifeboat and were given blankets. They smiled and nodded at Paul, who held his breath. He felt relief for a moment until the shorter man tried to cross over after them and Henry drew his gun.

“Hold it right there bub.”

“It’s my husband and this boy’s father.” The mother pleaded.

Henry contemplated, but Paul had made up his mind. This man would be on the boat.

“Okay but the next person who tries to jump this ship is getting shot.”

“Calm down Henry,” Paul said. “We’ve got room for one more.”

“Hey asshole, how’s it fair that their whole group gets to go and mine doesn’t?” the tall man suggested.

“Who’s in your group sir?”

“My wife, her sister, and I.”

“No Frenchman?” Henry asked.

“No, screw him.”

“I don’t know Paul, he’s got a decent case.”

“They have a child here, he gets a seat.” Paul said.

“But really, what has this child ever done for society?” Henry asked.

“He’s the beauty of our future and a bright ray of optimism.” Tom said, staring at the endless water and the stars that lay upon it.

“I mean he can’t paddle, he’s really just taking up space.”
The Lonesome Duck Ranch

“He’s a child Henry, he has his whole life ahead of him and I won’t have that taken away from him now.”

“Paul’s right,” Tom interjected. “I mean if we go simply on the basis of impact on our futures, we really should dump the Father.”

“W-w-w-what?”

“Hear me out Father, you’re old, you’ll probably die soon anyways.”

“He’s right, plus you’ll go right to Heaven for being such a noble human and giving up your seat.” Henry said.

“We’re not dumping the Father because he’s old.”

Paul said.

“I bet they have a spectacular view in Heaven.”

“We’ll solve this different way, just give me a minute to think.”

Paul looked around him and saw nothing but desperation and water. And no sign of B Boat. The others looked on, awaiting the conclusion that he would come to. He held his left hand upon his heart and knew three seats went to this family. The two women should also be aboard. The Father looked pale and would need a doctor soon. If he had to leave anyone, it would have to be on the basis of whom had the best chance of surviving until B Boat arrived, if B Boat arrived.

“Okay, we can talk this out like civilized people. Does anyone have any suggestions?”

“Il est un bel enfant.”

“Okay Paul, if that Frenchman talks in that gibberish again, I’m shooting him.”

The Frenchman sat down quietly.

Henry laughed, “He understands a gun in the face!”

The sisters stood up and looked at the men on the boat.

“Why can’t one of you men get off the boat so we can get on?” One of them asked.

“Well, he may be old but the Father was here first. How bout you short-stack? You getting off for one of these ladies?” Henry asked. The mother and child clung tightly to the short man.

“We meant one of you three.”

The crew looked at each other, Henry and Tom began to laugh but Paul contemplated.

“Why would we get off? It’s our boat.” Tom asked.

“Yeah, let’s not waste time with stupid ideas lady.” Henry added.

“Maybe it isn’t such a dumb idea,” Paul said. “They’ve been out in this freezing cold for a while now and we’ve got dry clothes on, we’d have a better shot at lasting until B Boat gets here.”

“That’d be if B Boat gets here.” Tom whispered.

“W-w-w-what?” Father O’Brien asked.

“Shut up Father, and Paul, if you wanna get off the boat and trust that Smitty is going to come save you, be my guest, but Tom and I are staying here.”

“You coward!” The tall man shouted.

Henry quickly drew his gun and shot the tall man. The sound of the shot and the splash followed each other under the sky and over the water into nothingness.
“Henry! What are you doing?” Paul shouted. The two women screamed. The short man held his family tight and Tom watched the ripples shake the sky.

“What? He challenged my courage.”

“He’s right Paul, we’ll have the Father say a blessing for him.” Tom said. “Father?”

Father O’Brien again attempted to stand and make the sign of the cross. “In-n-n-n the nam-m-m-m-me-”

“Yeah we get it Father, you can sit again.” Henry requested, pointing to the seat with his gun.

“Henry, give me the gun.” Paul commanded.

Henry stared at him for a moment. “There’s no need to make enemies here Paul, we need to work as a unit and in this unit, I’m crowd control.”

“Give me the gun Henry.”

He opened the barrel and emptied the bullets. “Fine, but I’m keeping the bullets.”

Paul rolled his eyes and put the empty gun in his pocket. “Okay, there are ten of us and eight seats. The women should get seats here.”

The women nodded in approval, while Henry and Tom shook their heads. The family held each other and looked at the Father, shivering and smiling back at them. The Frenchman looked restless.

“That’s a dumb idea. Who’s gonna paddle back with all these women in the boat?” Henry asked.

The Frenchman stood back up.

“Je pagayerai!”

Henry grabbed Tom’s paddle and smacked the Frenchman across the face, knocking him into the water.

“Henry!” Paul shouted and took the paddle back.

“I told him to knock that gibberish off, it’s bad karma.”

“Sit there and don’t do anything or I’m throwing you in the water! This is a rescue mission damn it!” Henry sat down and they all stared at the Frenchman floating in the water. “Well… isn’t anyone gonna try to save him?”

They all looked at each other, waiting for someone to try something but they knew with one less person their chances of surviving increased. Paul finally poked the body closer to the boat and pulled him in. Tom curled up, avoiding any contact with the foreigner and they placed him on the seat next to the Father who laid still. The short man’s family continued to huddle under their blankets and stay close to each other.

Henry shook his head at the unconscious foreigner. “He’s probably dead Paul, we should just leave him.”

“Shut up Henry.” Paul stopped to think. “We’re going to have to leave two people here, is there anyone with family at home waiting for them?” Everyone’s hands shot up and Paul sighed. “Tom, who do you have at home?”

“Well, I don’t have a family of my own parse, but I am an only child and my mother always tells me I’m ‘the light in her life’.”

Paul rolled his eyes and pointed to Henry.

“I have, let’s see… a sister, a girlfriend, a wife, and a couple of kids, but I’m not sure where they all are.”

“Well the short man’s family is staying on the boat.” Paul said.

“You know I have a name.” The short man said.

“We don’t really care.” Henry answered. “How about you girls, any family besides that corpse?”

“He’s not our family.” One answered.
The Lonesome Duck Ranch

“We made that up so we’d be more likely to get on the boat.” The other added.
“We’ve got no other family than each other.”
Paul had made no progress. No one wanted to be left behind in the icy waters to die but it had to be someone. He was almost certain that B Boat wouldn’t come. Fear was setting in, dark thoughts that they may be the one exiled into the sea that still reflected the bright stars and illuminating moon. The family clung tightly to each other and the sisters held each other close. Henry held his hands deep in his pockets while Tom admired the horizon that seemed to go on forever. Father O’Brien sat quietly and motionless, next to the very unconscious Frenchman. Paul rubbed his temples, knowing he had to make a tough decision.

“Well, being fair and all, the Frenchman didn’t tell us what family he has.” Tom said.
“Yeah Tom’s right, plus he might be dead already. Let’s just leave him”
Most nodded in approval of the idea despite the fact they could all see his breaths in the cold air.
“Neither did the Father, should we leave him too Henry?” Paul jolted.
“His family is in the Kingdom of Heaven.” Tom added.
“Yeah, plus he might have a congregation or something waiting for him... Hey wait, you didn’t tell us about your family Paul. Who is at home waiting for you?” Henry asked.
A silence lay over the water. The family clung tight and the sisters huddled together in fear. Tension cut through the cold air and they all realized what Henry had not. There was no fog from Paul’s breath in the air for many seconds and his eyes stayed fixed on his ring finger. “I don’t have anybody Henry, my wife and child died in labor.”
Everyone fell silent. Paul stared at his reflection in the water, seeing the sky that Tom had admired so much and the Kingdom to which the Father’s soul belonged. A tear rolled down his cheek and rippled the water that mirrored him. Everyone kept their heads down but Henry pondered.
“Maybe...” Henry said as Paul turned to him. The crew held their breath. “Never mind.”
“What Henry?” Paul asked forcefully. “Tell me what you were thinking.” Paul clenched his oar tightly and Henry looked around, the other passengers were keeping their distance. “Come on, don’t be a coward.”
Tom gasped at the accusation and could see Henry’s brow furrow. Paul’s eyes were wide and confident. They had a glare of their own now and were focused on Henry’s.
“You and I are going to stay Henry, the women will take our seats.”
“Bullshit Paul, I’m not getting off this boat.”
“Yes you are Henry, I’m going to teach you something about courage.” Paul nodded with a strange smile as he slowly walked across the boat with an oar. Henry’s hands stayed in his pockets.
“Que l’enfer!”
Paul turned quickly to the awaking Frenchman and in that moment, Henry drew his second gun and shot
The Lonesome Duck Ranch

Paul through the back. His body fell into the water and the women screamed. The short man again held his family tight and Tom watched the stars and moon dawned a red coating.

"Que l'enfer!"

Henry then shot the Frenchman through the head and his body followed into the water. Everyone fell silent and looked up at Henry and his smoking pistol.

"Now there are eight of us." Henry said and extended his hands to the ladies. They boarded and everyone felt conflicted. "Do your thing Father."

"Actually Henry, there are seven," Tom said.

"Father O'Brien is dead."

Henry walked over to check the pulse and confirm it. He looked at Tom and shrugged his shoulders.

"Better throw him in too then." He said as they hurled his body into the water. Tom and Henry both made the sign of the cross then sat back in the boat.

"Alright well, we paddled here, you guys can paddle back." Tom said, admiring the sky again and hoping to find differences from what was up and the duplication that was down.

Henry stood tall at the bow of the boat with his pistol in hand. The short man took one paddle and his wife took the other. The sisters sat with the young boy and kept warm with him. The paddles rippled the water, but the sea was silent.

Village Kids
Scott Korn

Kids these days....

It takes a poke and prod
To produce men and mothers

We're not ready to be bothered.

Save your dreams.

We're village kids

We're not primed for maturation--honest.

We're just a bunch of kids fighting and fucking,
Shooting and boozing.

Hell...
We're pissin' in the shower post potty train.

It took all you, to raise us--
I
Hope you're happy.
A state trooper found my father pulled over on old route 12 passed out with no idea who he was. Our dog, Kaylie, sat in the passenger seat whining frantically while the cop searched his pockets for an identity.

My mother called me, to tell me the news. It was a Friday, I was at school sloshing Miller Lite, and she was terrified.

“It’s his ammonia levels,” she said. “His liver’s shot, the ammonia’s clogging his blood stream and putting him into a progressive state of amnesia.” She pauses a moment. “He didn’t even know my name.”

I sit staring out from my dorm room window, thinking about everything my father has stood for in my life. I think about him forgetting all of it, like it never happened, and greeting me with the goofy smile he reserved for family friends and distant relatives. I’m furious.

I waited a week and a half to call him after the incident. The dumb bastard, he did this to himself, all those years of Jack Daniels, black Trans Ams and self-neglect. I picked up the phone and found myself furious again. How dare he be sick, how dare he ask for our sympathy, after all he has put us through?

My father used to beat me without mercy as my mother stood sobbing atop the second floor stairs. He threw her down those stairs one Thanksgiving while my brother and I stayed with my uncle. I wet my mother’s shoulder with tears after his beatings. My mother calls me now, me away at school, and wets the receiver with hers.

I’m terrified as I dial the number.

“Dad? Dad, how are you doing?” I almost cry. He sounded so happy to talk to me. I’m overwhelmed. “Dad, are you okay?” His voice, so airy and high, seemed foreign, so vulnerable, nothing like the cold commanding growl that would stop my blood cold.

I’m at home. He’s in the kitchen when I walk through the door unshaven, dirty laundry slung over my shoulder. He’s making dinner, I think. A salad fills his plate, no meat, no cheese in sight. Something really is wrong.

“They told me to cut the protein,” he says. “Have to watch my sodium, too, but I’ll be fine.” That was the end of it, end of discussion. He looked like death, his hair disheveled and gray, his face sunken and shallow. His already high cheekbone was a cliff I could dive from. But he just has to watch his protein, cut the alcohol, and everything will be all right.

He’s in bed by 8 p.m. My mother gets home from work at 9:30. We sit at the kitchen table and stare for a while at the smooth oak grain, neither quite sure how to say it.

“If they hadn’t found him,” my mom says, counting dollar bills from her apron. “He would have passed out and died right there.” I listen as she tells me without a flicker in her voice.

They call it hepatic encephalopathy (hep-pat-ic en-sef-alo-pathy). As the liver fails, it loses its ability to breakdown toxins like ammonia, the alcohol and the
toxic fumes of paint spray in men too stubborn to wear a mask. It allows them to build up in the bloodstream. The resulting ammonia reduces oxygen to the brain, creating profound confusion, amnesia, disorientation, and in some people, extreme violence. My mother tells me this on the phone the morning after they found him.

We both think the same thing: she says it first.

"Do you think it was all just the disease all these years?"

I want to be just like him. I can't help thinking with a bit of pride that I could be just like him. No, it's more than that really, I want his power. I envy it. The ferocity of his existence, his rugged, reckless and unforgiving flaws are too tempting.

My girlfriend caught me watching porn one day.

"What? My photos weren't enough for you?" she said.

"What, is that it? Everything I've done isn't enough for you? You just have to control every part of my life don't you?" I slam my fist into her dresser drawer and keep beating it until I can't feel my hand and blood trickles down from my battered knuckles.

"You're lucky I'm not my father," I snarl. "Or that would be your face." I storm out of the room. She's terrified.

My father graduated from Oswego. I found his ID card sometime back, hidden in a musty wooden drawer in our basement. His hair long, face unshaven, his eyes staring out over our unwavering jaws; I see myself.

It's a Saturday, 10 o'clock. I'm at home over winter break and the phone rings. It's been a month since it the incident. My brother picks up. It's my mother.

"He needs to take his medicine. Kyle please go call up to him to see if he's taken his meds, please."

Kyle's been home a week. He's been briefed. Every six hours means 40 mg of lactulose and a diuretic pill or else things get goofy. We call up. "Dad, did you take your meds?"

"Yeeppppp." Sounds the drawn out sigh from the bedroom.

Kyle knows something's up. "Are you sure?"

"Yeeppppp." This time it's more distant.

"Are you naked?" This was the test.

"Yeepppp." Things just got goofy.

Kyle takes control, grabs the pills, the syringes. I don't know what to do with myself.

The bedroom is dark. The shades are pulled down tight. My father is sitting on the bed, staring at the ceiling, naked, as promised. As we open the door, his head flops lazily in our direction and he stares at us with distant eyes.

I stand by the door and watch as Kyle measures out the lactulose and sucks it into the oral syringe. Kyle talks to him like he's five.

"Hey big guy, how you doing? I'm going to give you a little medicine, alright?" He nods his head with the
Father’s Face in the Bathroom Mirror

exaggerated motion of a sleepy four year old.

I do everything in my power not to laugh. I fail miserably, the stunted grunts and chortles slip past my lips and past my hand and into my parents bedroom, the one in which my helpless father sits naked on his bed as he takes hand fed medicine from my brother. I’m laughing.

The trooper who found him said he’d never seen anyone so powerless. Yet, I’ve never known anyone that had more power over me.

Avarice
Zechariah Azazi

The wet, uneven sidewalk did little to aid me in the cat-and-mouse game I was playing. My yellow princess dress was pressed tightly to my chubby frame as the raincoat failed to keep me dry. The hood flapped in the wind, revealing my plastic tiara and braids, as I ran towards the red door of the house.

As usual, a trio of heckling boys followed me from the bus stop, screaming absurdities about my strange behavior. What’s so strange about wearing the dress of my favorite cartoon princess?

Nothing.

The murmur of the boy’s voices became squelched by the introduction of my face to concrete. I lay on the ground clutching my scathed cheek and surrounded by three of the meanest boys I had the displeasure of laying my eyes on.

“Leave me alone, you jerks,” I screamed, “or I’ll get my Nana!”

“Really, Princess? Looks like your Nana isn’t home,” said the oldest of the three followed by a gross cackle. His jowls jiggled in a way that would make even his mother flinch.

I looked toward the driveway, a pit formed in my stomach as I came to the realization that he was right. My grandmother wasn’t home. What am I going to do?

My thoughts were derailed as I felt my hair pull. I looked at his hand seeing my bejeweled hair-piece with my black hair woven into it; a cruel reminder of the reason
for my aching scalp. The ginger stole my tiara!

"Give it back you freckly, four-eyed booger-eater!" I said with clenched indignation.

"Make me, Sara-beara!" he cleverly retorted, "-beara" meant to ridicule my bushy hair. I hate boys.

As soon as the words escaped his lips, my knee, as if controlled by a force of nature, made contact with the very thing that distinguished the sexes.

The tiara flew out of his hands, tumbling towards its final resting place in the middle of Main Street. ‘Freckles McGee’ kneaded his groin as I let out a horrified squeal.

"Now look what you did," I yelled over my shoulder, running toward the tiara.

I ran, hoping to grasp it before the jewels were scuffed by the harsh pavement. I made a b-line, ignoring everything except how much I wanted that tiara back where it belongs; on my head.

Before I knew which way was up, I found myself strapped to a gurney.

Thwarted by a mail van!

But not before I saw it.

A few seconds before my impact with the van, as if compelled, I stopped in the street and returned my stare toward the driveway. This time I was not looking for the ugly “boat” my Nana deemed suitable transportation for her precious granddaughter, but I was staring into the broken window of the house nearby. The blue shutters were tattered and crooked against the brown wood paneling, accentuating the ‘abandonedness’ of the house.

Did I see a hand in the window?

Did I have a neighbor?

Within a few hours, my “injury” was cared for. I don’t know what the fuss was about. I felt fine. The car ride back home passed quickly. Nana’s lecture about road safety became white noise. We reached the corner of Main and First when the window became visible in the distance.

"Nana, do we have a neighbor?” I said, cutting her sermon short.

“What?” she said, “No... what makes you think that?”

“Well, I thought I saw someone in the window before the accident.”

“You didn’t. Now what can we do about...” she continued.

The car came to a stop at the end of the driveway. I opened the big red door and bolted for my room. I reached my door, bedazzled with all of my favorite princesses. My room was what my Nana called “a live-in toy room”. I had posters of all my favorites and any merchandise they provided: the crowns, the make-up kits, the snow globes. I threw the door open and rushed by my pink canopy bed to the window sill.

I stared at the little window with the crooked
shutters and attempted to “will” the hand to appear again, but to no avail. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Maybe Nana was right. I was just seeing things.

In an instant, fear struck every nerve in my body like the dissonant chord of an out-of-tune piano.

Where’s my tiara?

I turned around, running towards the door to ask my Nana where it could possibly be when I noticed something on my white comforter; a small, bejeweled tiara with dark knotted hair throughout. The fear had been replaced with jubilation. I picked the tiara up and started to dance, holding it high for my “friends” to see. I placed the tiara back on my head and rushed to my window seat to begin to act out my favorite scene of my favorite movie.

Then, my eye was drawn to the window suddenly. This time I didn’t see the hand, but I saw the curtain move; that gentle sway as if someone had walked by.

Someone’s in there!

It was decided. I had to go to the house. Nana would be busy with dinner soon and I could easily sneak out the window. I did it before when I thought I saw a unicorn in our backyard. Turns out it was a bunny rabbit. His name is Fluffers and he lives in the cage on the floor next to my nightstand now.

I turned on a movie to fool Nana. I climbed on the window seat and hoisted the window up. I stuck my legs out one at a time, each foot hitting the soft ground below.

I snuck toward the window to take a peak. The window was much higher than I expected. With no rocks around to stand on, I made the trek to the broken front porch of the house. The wooden boards could have alerted a deaf man of my presence as they creaked and cracked. I crouched as I approached the window.

The interior was luxurious, well put together and hospitable. The furniture looked very pricy and the wooden floors immaculate. A tea tray with pastries and a kettle of hot water was on the coffee table, as if someone had recently placed them there.

I wanted nothing more than to sit on the plush red couch and eat those muffins.

My salivary glands kicked in just in time for a strong hand to grasp my shoulder.

“Can I help you?” said a deep voice.

I turned and was met with a handsome blonde coifed gentleman donning an expensive suit. His shoes were like two black mirrors, reflecting what little light there was to reflect on a day so dreary.

“Oh no, mister. I wasn’t aware anyone lived here. I was just curious because I thought I saw someone in the window earlier. Nana said no one lives here but I knew she was wrong.”

“Yes, quite wrong. I’ve lived here for some time now. Are you not the young girl struck by the vehicle earlier? You seemed to have recovered nicely. Might I add that is
a lovely tiara?” he said smiling, his arms crossed except one hand he let linger next to his lips. “Princesses get to wear tiaras like this and Nana always tells me I’m a princess. Where are you from mister? You talk kind of funny; like you’re from England or something. I’ve always wanted to go to England. Is that where you’re from?”

“Never mind where I’m from. Perhaps you would like to come in for some tea?” he said.

“I probably should get back... Nana is making falafel tonight and I love that stuff. She’s gonna give me a whooping if she knows I snuck out of the house.”

“You’ll come inside,” he stated matter-of-factly, accompanied with an austere gaze.

Feeling obliged, I walked inside. The house smelled of roasted turkey and pastries. My mouth was watering.

“I don’t believe I have properly introduced myself. My name is Dr. Avis Reese, but you will call me Dr. Reese.”

“Okay, Dr. Reese. My name is...”

“I know your name, Sara” he snapped.

“Well that’s funny. How?”

“Would you like some tea? It’s English Breakfast. Delicious with any of the pastries I have on that tray over there. Go ahead and sit down. I’m very glad to finally have you as company, Princess Sara” he said, that same smile creeping across his lips.

He called me princess. This guy was alright in my book. I sat down on the couch and reached for a muffin. It was the best muffin I had had in my nine years of living. “Do you like my house, Princess?” he shouted from the kitchen.

“Oh yes, mister. It’s gorgeous. Why is it so ugly on the outside though?” I asked.

“You mustn’t judge things based purely on the exterior, Princess. I’m sure you’ll learn that soon enough” he responded, that same smile illuminated his face. “Why would a princess be dressed in something so hideous as that yellow potato sack? Come with me, I have a few dresses that you may find to your liking. Dresses fit for royalty”

I removed myself from the couch and followed him eagerly down the long corridor. Real princess dresses? There was no possible way this was actually happening. We entered a small room at the back of the house. The wooden door lay open to reveal a well lit room with a chest under the window, an armoire, and a walk-in closet.

“Are you ready to see your dress?” he said.

He took my visible elation as a go-ahead. He swung the armoire open to reveal the most beautiful yellow gown I had ever seen. The dress was of the finest fabric and complete with elaborate embroidery. This dress was incomparable to any dress I had ever seen before. An unfamiliar impulse washed over me: I had to have this
Avarice

dress.
“Can I wear it, Dr. Reese?” I said, my eyes big with anticipation.
“But dear, you already are,” he replied.
I looked down to realize I was indeed wearing the dress from the armoire. It fit me perfectly, as if it was tailored just for me. My tattered yellow dress had taken residence in the garment bag that had contained the dress I was now wearing.
“Oh, I guess I never noticed,” I responded, delight oozing out of every pore of my skin.
“Inside the closet I have yet another present for you, Princess. Would you like to see it?”
“Then close your eyes and wait here.”
He walked into the closet as I waited next to the armoire. I heard some rustling as he struggled to get something. With a huff, he made his way back to me.
“Open your eyes.”
I opened my eyes to a pair of pristine pale yellow shoes; the perfect accompaniment to my dress. Once again, that strong impulse flooded my senses. I was not presented with a choice of whether or not I wanted the shoes, it was a necessity; mandated by this feeling that had taken over me.
“Can I wear them, Dr. Reese? Please, please, please?”

Zechariah Azazi

I said hurriedly, as if he would deny me if I didn’t ask quick enough.
“Dear, they are already on your feet. They are your shoes now,” he said with that smile I had come to expect. “I would love it for a princess to accompany me to the royal feast. Where ever could I find one?” he said, feigning surveying the room.
“Right here! I’m right here!” I replied, my stomach growling. “But my tummy’s all grumbly. Can we eat now?”

His austere gaze returned as I slumped a little in the dress out of embarrassment.
“Surely you need an escort. Shall we, Princess?” he said relinquishing his stare and reaching his hand out to me.
I reached my arm toward him, and placed my hand in his, only this time both my hands were covered with white gloves that traveled up to my elbow.
He must be a magician.
“How do you do this?” I asked, laughing.

We traveled through the narrow hallway connecting the small room with the living and ultimately the dining room. With each step, the scent of roasted turkey and freshly baked bread began to fill my nostrils.

As we entered the threshold of the dining room, my eyes were met with a grandiose scene. The table occupied most of the room, along with enough chairs to safely accommodate my extended family. The table was
teeming with delicious food: roasted turkey, potatoes, and stuffing among other delicacies.

The scene was majestic, fit for royalty; like me. We approached a chair at the tail end of the table.
“Have a seat,” he said as he pulled the chair out, bowing as he did so.

After pushing the chair in, he made the journey to the opposite end of the table and sat. The plates were already full of food and so I began to eat. He did not eat, he chose to stare. The stare left me uneasy but I did my best to disregard it.

“ Aren’t you hungry?”
“I’m simply too busy admiring what a beautiful young princess I have dining with me. Does it bother you?”
“No.” I lied, “I just don’t understand how anyone could resist food that looks and smells like this.”

We sat in silence for a moment as he continued to stare me down. I wished he would stop looking at me. His stare was strange, made even harsher by eyes that shown like two pools of the deepest water.

Without a word, he stood up. He walked towards the kitchen as I continued to stare me down. I wished he would stop looking at me. His stare was strange, made even harsher by eyes that shown like two pools of the deepest water.

My stomach turned. I wanted this crown like nothing I had ever wanted before. That impulse that had surfaced earlier was now inside of me, pulsating and reverberating within every fiber of my being. I did everything in my power not to snatch the crown off the pillow.

He took my silence as acquiescence. As he touched the plastic tiara that was adorning my braided hair the impulse faded.

“I would rather keep my tiara,” I said, just as surprised as he had appeared to be.

He recoiled, and then smiled.

“Silly girl. Now let me take this,” he reached for my tiara again.

“I would like to keep my tiara. As nice as that one is, it doesn’t compare to mine.”

His face had twisted to an expression of shock and anger.

“You will wear this crown, Princess,” his voice was no longer jovial and light, but abrasive and forceful.

“I don’t mean to hurt you,” I said, “ but...”

He snatched my tiara, taking with it a few clumps of hair. My eyes closed as I winced in pain. My hand now occupied the vacant area my tiara once lay upon.

I opened my eyes once again. The table was broken. The chairs were strewn about haphazardly. The food lay rotten on the table, as if it had been there for years.
The house was dark except for a few shafts of natural light permeating the broken windows. Dr. Reese was nowhere to be found.

My heart pounded as I turned around to find the door; nothing. I approached the narrow hallway. I walked by the small room that had contained an armoire among other things. The room was now completely empty except for my yellow dress which lay crumpled on the floor along with my white sneakers.

I threw the dress he had given me to the ground, along with the pale yellow shoes and replaced them with my own clothing. The creaks and groans of an old house filled my ears as I heard footsteps approaching. I quickly composed myself and headed for the door of the small room.

I ran out of the room and attempted to make my way to the front door. I ran down the hall and into the living room. This house was no longer the inviting and hospital place it had once been; it was a cage.

I reached for the doorknob of the white door. Just as I did so, the door melted away, leaving in its wake a damp wooden wall. Panicked, I turned around to search for another way out. The footsteps rang louder in my ears as he approached.

I ran around the living room but each time I touched anything it would disappear. The couch had vanished. A tray of rotten muffins and a cold kettle of water had evaporated as if it had never existed. More painfully, the window that had led me here had gone without a trace.

I hid in a dark corner of the room as the footsteps made their way towards the living room. My head cradled in my knees, my yellow dress betrayed my location.

I lifted my head to see Dr. Reese standing in front of me. The eyes that glared at me from across the table had become engulfed by the pupil soulless. His dazzling white teeth were no longer white, but serrated and rotten. The once handsome face showed signs of time; wrinkled as if made of tissue paper. The aristocratic man had been replaced by what appeared to be a well-dressed goblin; bearing little resemblance to the man who had bid me entrance into this trap a few hours prior. On his head lay the crown he had tried to force on me, in his hand rest my tiara; broken.

“Could you show me the way out?” I muttered weakly, a tear brimmed at the surface of my eyelid, “I just want to go home.”

He stared at me and laughed a sinister, wheezing laugh.

The tear traced the outline of my jaw, searing into my skin as I looked down at the crooked floorboards.

I closed my eyes tightly, hoping that the tighter I squeezed the more likely that this was a dream. I opened my eyes. He was still staring at me.
I flinched as he raised his hand, anticipating a blow. Instead of striking, he removed the crown from his head and, again, offered it to me. “Wear it!” he screamed, forcing the crown under my nose. “I don’t want to. I don’t have to do anything that I don’t want to!”

His face flinched as if in excruciating pain. He recoiled, grabbing his stomach as a shaft of light illuminated one side of his sallow face; a window pane had reappeared! “I don’t want your dress!” I screamed.

The room now had a full window and a small chair reappeared in the corner I once sat huddled. He began to back-up. He limped slowly as he attempted to escape me. “I don’t want your shoes!”

The coffee table, complete with pastries and hot water had rematerialized. The plush couch popped back into place, as if it had never been gone. Light filled the room, showing a most peculiar scene; half the room remained in ruins, the other half, as hospitable as I had entered. Dr. Reese continued to hobble away towards the small room. I followed him surefooted. “I don’t want your gloves!” I yelled, following him in a controlled gait.

The entire house had returned to its previous state. The banquet table had delicious and aromatic food abound. The chairs were neatly placed against the table, inviting visitors to partake.

Dr. Reese had retreated to the small-room with the armoire. I turned the corner and entered the room as well. The chest, armoire, and walk-in closet were no more. Instead, there stand a crowned goblin of sorts, amassing his belongings in a pile in his arms; an ornate dress, a pair of pale yellow shoes, white gloves, and my broken tiara. “You look ridiculous.” I laughed, “do you know that?” “Step away, child!” he growled, “these are mine!” “You can have them. I only want one thing,” I continued. “What’s that?” he hissed, baring his serrated teeth and stomping his foot like a bull protecting his stomping grounds. “Give me my tiara!” I shouted and reached into the pile. I lunged for it. After shaking a few items around, I felt plastic; my tiara.

I grasped the flimsy plastic and pulled with all of my might. Everything had fallen on the ground, except my broken tiara which now rest in my hands. The goblin sat huddled in the corner of the room. He quickly returned to his feet and began to charge at me. His large feet stomped on the ground as they neared me. I placed my tiara on my head and flinched; my eyelids pressed against each other. No impact.

I began to make my way towards the front door. As I turned into the corridor, I heard laughter. How
strange. This was not the sinister laughter that I had heard previously, but joyous laughter; laughter I had heard on playgrounds.

My slow walk hastened to a jog. I made my way towards the laughter. It seemed to be coming from the dining room. I rounded the corridor and turned the corner.

I cautiously opened one of my eyes. The goblin had disappeared. In his wake, lay an expensive suit, shredded. The pile he had amassed of expensive royal regalia had vanished. I rummaged around the room, trying to find a trace of what may have happened to Dr. Reese. I couldn’t find any vestiges of him.

I began to make my way towards the front door. As I turned into the corridor, I heard laughter. How strange. This was not the sinister laughter that I had heard previously, but joyous laughter; laughter I had heard on playgrounds.

My slow walk hastened to a jog. I made my way towards the laughter. It seemed to be coming from the dining room. I rounded the corridor and turned the corner.

There, seated at the chairs around the table teeming with food as if they’d always been there, were three ethereal little girls; one wearing a beautiful yellow dress, one wearing pale yellow shoes, and one with long white gloves reaching her elbow. I stood in the doorway and watched them. They continued to laugh as they looked at me.

"Good day to you, Sara," said the little girl with the shoes, nodding her head in a welcoming gesture, "Perhaps you would like to join us? We have plenty of room for you at the table."

"Oh yes, and Dr. Reese has provided us with plenty of delicious food. He’s a strange man, don’t you think, Rose?" said the little girl with the dress, her eyebrows arched.

"Most certainly, he seems a tad obsessed with my gloves."

"Perhaps you would like to join us?" said the girl in the gloves, "after the day you’ve had I’m sure you could use refreshment."

The room erupted in laughter. I joined in and took a seat at the head of the table.

"I’m perfectly alright. I can’t stay long though. I’m sure my Nana is looking for me. Do you know the time?"

"Oh no, darling. But perhaps you are right. Give me a moment and I can show you to the door," responded the girl with the shoes.

"It’s okay. I know where it is," I said.

I lifted myself off of the chair and headed towards the front door.

"Sara," said Rose.

"Yes?"

"That’s a lovely tiara," she added, smiling.

Instinctually, I touched my head. My tiara was no
Avarice

longer broken but felt as it did this morning. I smiled; a
tear streamed down my cheek.
   I found the white door and planted my feet on
the creaking porch. Day had retreated, leaving as it’s a
replacement a cloud strewn velvet night. The wind goaded
drops of rain to sweep my face, reviving me.
   I found the white door and planted my feet on
the creaking porch. Day had retreated, leaving as it’s a
replacement a cloud strewn velvet night. The wind goaded
drops of rain to sweep my face, reviving me.
   I made the floorboards cry out once more as I
reached the porch window. I placed my hand over my
eyes, attempting to discern any signs of the girls.
   The house was empty.
   A smile crept across my face as I headed toward
the big red door.
   Rose was right. My tiara is lovely.

Plastic Soldiers and Fake Make-up
Cari Johnson

Let’s play:
Just like when were kids,
although we didn’t know each other back then.
A leaf in one hand, a stone in the other,
Behind my back my fingers will cover.
Choose a side, ready? Take aim.
Will you go? Or will you stay?
Up the stakes
New rules, new game:
“Stones and sticks,
Please kiss my lips
and tell me you’ll never leave me.”
The Taming of the Fruit
Jeane Spencer

I figured they'd take three, four days tops to ripen. But these weren't ordinary bananas. These were mutant fruits from Florida, each with its own Disney character sticker. All of the other bananas in the store were already yellow, well on their way to being over-ripe. I like them just a day or two after their conversion from green to yellow, still firm, not mushy with no bruises. Yes, I am a banana snob. If the color yellow had a flavor, it would be light and bright on the palate, with a hint of banana flavor. Guess I'll forgo bananas this week, I thought to myself, or buy them somewhere else, maybe the farmer's market. As I rounded the corner of the cereal aisle, I saw the banana tree on wheels. It was full of vibrant green bananas, Emerald Lake Green according to the Behr Paint color chart. I plucked a bunch from the tree. They were Disney bananas from Florida, with character stickers of Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and Daisy Duck. Since they were still green, they'd have plenty of time to ripen.

Two weeks later the bunch of bananas were still Emerald Lake green. They hadn't ripened a bit, and they were rock hard. I wondered if there was anything going on inside the rind, so I took a knife and cut into one. It wouldn't peel.

"Wow," I said to my partner Dee, "I wonder if these are ever going to ripen."

"Maybe they don't want to be eaten," Dee laughed, "or maybe there's something wrong with them."

"Obviously there is something wrong with them," I retorted, "they are Disney bananas. I guess they want to remain pure and not be eaten." I continued to wait and watch. Two more weeks passed and I thought I detected a slight change in the green hue they were now sporting. My eyes deceived me. The bananas were still raw. My next plan would be to coax them into ripening.

"Put them in a brown paper bag," my friend Rachel suggested, as she inspected the Disney character stickers, peeling them off one by one and sticking them on me.

"I don't have any," I replied, "I'm contributing to the earth's early demise by choosing plastic." I pulled each sticker off my shirt and stuck them back on her. "I assumed since they came from Florida still green, that they would take a few days to ripen, but I never thought I'd have to wait two months to eat a freakin' banana!"

"Well, I don't think these are ever going to ripen, you might want to buy some that are actually edible now," she laughed.

I put the bananas back in their bowl on the counter and scowled at them, "I will make them ripen if it's the last thing I do."

The next day, I bought two ripe bananas to sit next to the mutant Emerald Lake green bananas in hopes that they would somehow entice them into ripening. Many fruits emit ethylene gas that aids in their ripening. Bananas, pears, peaches, apricots, plums, and kiwi all have high concentrations of ethylene gas. This should work, I thought. I was wrong. A week later, the ripe bananas were history, and the mutant bananas were still Emerald Lake green. I had grown frustrated, but would not let this bunch of bananas best me. My decision to ignore them proved to be their downfall.

Seven weeks after I first bought the mutant bunch, I walked into the kitchen to see that they had changed color.
The Taming of the Fruit

at last. They were no longer Emerald Lake green. They were now a sickly yellow color. Dried Palm according to the Behr Paint color chart.

“Oh my god!” I yelled, “they’re ripe!”

“They’re probably not any good on the inside, it’s been almost two months,” said Dee as she walked into the room. I took a knife and cut off each end of a Dried Palm yellow banana. It took some work, but eventually I was able to peel off the skin. It reminded me of cornhusk tamale. The outer rind came off in one piece as I made a slit down one side and prised the fruit out of its enveloping hide. It looked fine. I took a bite.

“They’re fine, actually quite good,” I handed one to Dee, “go ahead, eat one.”

“Nah, I’m okay for now, maybe later,” she put the Dried Palm yellow banana back into the bowl. I knew this meant she’d be eating zero bananas this week.

“Fine then, more for me.”

I finished off the mutant Disney character bananas by myself two months after I first plucked them from the banana tree at the grocery store. No one else trusted the fact that if it took them that long to ripen, they would still be good on the inside. I’ll never know why they were so stubborn other than they never ripened in the conventional way. These days I never know which aisle I’ll find the banana tree on wheels in the grocery store. It migrates week to week. However, when we do cross paths, I always give it a wide berth.

These are my Songs

Kristin Anderson

You vulture!
Humming around my decaying head
pumping red venom
drooling white foam.
Circling endlessly, you’re not dizzy
it’s your favorite dance
your only dance.
Perfecting it took you years but
its long melody and quick steps
only make you animate deeper.
You crystallize naturally
Flickers of white, silver and blue
swallow your black eyes.

No! You cannot have this
perfect disfigured, puffed out
choppy stamp, lavished with Novocain.
Melted tissue in my fabric
bleached lace
pink and purple radiation.
My defect in mine.
The cleavage is cracked in two
or maybe four.
Pink gums cut out with glass
reflection of backwards yellow daggers.

That long eared road kill
gave me this name.
White bone scooped out
like vanilla ice cream
spin around like carousels.
These are my Songs

I'm on the pink horse.
I wish I were on the carriage.
Uneven lines circle inside
you can feel it with you finger.

The portraits I painted
trim from my fabric
cleft and jerked from the tank.
No longer swimming
leaping and flying
through thick air
not paralyzed.
Sugar is sweet
and you are acid
liquefying this flesh.
Blazing stench of brown
rotten meat is perfume
that makes you twirl
with you arms out
catching wind.

I'll date them
with black ink
and needles.
Bleed to remember
and embrace
my history, it made me.
No!
You can't
have this
part of my

Kristin Anderson

Air. It's what
makes me walk
looking at the dirt
or the flying birds.
I choose to hide or be seen.
So no you can leave
Go circle somewhere else.
The Pins hold together
My flesh.
“...ankee, X-ray, Zulu...” Crackles the speakers of your edu-bed. Sacrificing three years of your life in order to gain a high school education through an experimental pod-based super-soldier method was a rough decision but, for better or for worse it’s over now.

You were suspicious of the lab-coated men when they lured you into the uncomfortably cold, poorly cushioned Cryotube (patent pending) but you’ve gotten used to it. The lack of social influence from public school was replaced by the constant repetition of seemingly random facts but, hey, how many friends do you have that can recall the base weight of every water-dwelling mammal by habitat? None! That’s what the outside world calls a “joke,” you think... You’re not exactly sure why it’s funny anymore. But, heck! today’s the day you’ll be released back into human society.

“The surface dwellers want our freedom...” will squawk your speakers and again you’ll roll your eyes... This again. Of COURSE the Surface Dwellers want our Freedom, that’s a scientific fact! It’s like that dumb Pledge of Alignment that they made you recite in Middle School. “By craw and barb we will maintain our honor!” you reply. The pod rewards you with a blast of dopamines piped directly into your brain. Your eyes flutter. As much as you hate being pandered to, you love these softball questions. It’s almost like you’re addicted to them.

With a hiss and a squirt, the tube opens, and your limbs don’t remember how to move. You spend seven hours focusing until you can wiggle your big toe, like Uma Thurman in that movie you never saw because you were locked in a Cryotube. After about two days you manage to stagger free of your pod.

This isn’t how you imagined it. You always assumed that the lab-coated men would be here, that they’d congratulate you, that they’d hand you your high school diploma. Or your GED. They weren’t sure, when you went into the tube, if the state would let them hand out diplomas. Especially because there was no physical education portion.

But there’s nobody here. One laboratory, covered in dust, with a line of empty and opened cryotubes against the wall.

There’s a note against the door. You’ve sort of forgotten how to read, because all of your communication for the past three years has been audio, but you’re pretty sure the note says:

SUBJECT 13

I’m sorry. We can’t wait any longer. Who gets held back for two years in a row? We ran out of funding months ago. I’ve been hanging out here because I got evicted from my apartment but now the electric is off and I can’t cook my quesadillas. But seriously, dude, two years? You must be a serious loser. We told your mom you were dead because we didn’t want to embarrass her. “Yes, ma’am, he had top marks, but his tube malfunctioned. Take this
Happy Graduation Day

hefty reimbursement from the government. You knew the
risks when you signed the waiver”.

That girl from tube 11 waited here every day for a full
week after she graduated, to see if you’d make it out. But
no dice. Eventually she left with #7.

Anyway, if you ever get out of there, I left you half a
pickle in the fridge.

Doctor Steinermanner

Tears are welling up in your eyes. You remember the
girl from tube 11. You talked to her for a full ten minutes
before you were frozen, and thought about her every day
for the past three years, just two pods away from you. You
had vivid fantasies about asking her out when you both
emerged. But I guess you blew it again, huh?

“Flamingos and pigeons create a milk-like substance in
their lower intestines which they feed to their young,”
you say, but you receive no dopamine shot. Life outside
of the tube is not what you imagined at all.

Fighting back your sobs, you crawl back over to the tube
and lock yourself in. How does an eternity of high school
factoids sound?

city, march
Kevin Leonard

sundried drippedrop
tongueting tubetops
all in brown my love
went dying
oh i hate being cold.

shingled dewdrops
leafsmooth rooftops
check in tooth
gravel grinding
windows shrink and boys get old.

muffled chainhounds
shuffled headdowns
grey is grey
and mortgage binding
scarlet signed our necktied souls.
CURSED MUMMY
Robert Moses

Afternoons in Vermont
Ryan Salisbury
A Fight with the Clouds
Kimberly Frank

Every time Allison takes a sip of her Carlo Rossi her nose crinkles as if she has just gotten a whiff of Oscar Mancat’s litter box. It isn’t because it tastes bad; we have gotten used to cheap wine living in this small, shabby apartment deep in the real-people-with-real-jobs streets of Oswego. The face is something she makes as a reflex to the small nip the sugary red liquid gives her tongue on the way down. That gallon jug of wine was the first legal purchase of alcohol I ever made. I was proud walking out of the discount liquor store on the corner of 3rd and Bridge, heaving my brown paper bag on my hip like a baby, the fingers on my free hand laced with Allison’s as we walked home marveling at the “big girls” we had become.

Tonight we decide to finish what’s left of the celebratory wine in light of the homework we put off all weekend. She sniffs, wipes her nose with the knuckle of her right index finger, and sets the crystal wine glass my mom gave to me as a house-warming gift on the coffee table in front of her. Oscar, our orange tabby cat and man of the house, lays fast asleep on the couch between his moms. His white-bootied paws are stretched out directly in front of him and his chin rests on his left arm. The rest of his body is arced directly on top of Allison’s collection of random art supplies and his creamsicle tail is casually wrapped around the power cord to my MacBook.

Tonight Allison’s concentration is on a graphite illustration for her studio class tomorrow morning. She sits on our fat, green couch Indian-style, balancing her drawing board on her right thigh. Her yellow cut-off tee shirt boasts something about being Irish, but her tan complexion indicates that it probably belongs to an ex boyfriend. Her Italian skin is marked with graphite smudges that from a few more feet away might look like bruises. There’s one on her temple and a fresh one on the tip of her nose. Her right forearm is completely grey from resting on the mountains she is trying to perfect with her fingers. She’s wearing my black gym shorts, which cut off just above the knee, revealing a bruise the size of a fist that she got falling over an end stand in the dark. Her feet are bare, red-polished toes curled slightly in frustration. One of the toenails is fake, though she won’t tell me which one because she thinks it’s embarrassing.

“I don’t like clouds anymore,” she says to me as her small, gummy eraser dabs over the paper, making a small crack each time it is lifted. The last project she completed for her illustration class had perfectly fluffed cumulous clouds. Now, her attempts to make them “wispy” enough to make the dark grey mountains beneath visible are failing and it is discouraging her. Her left hand holds the neck of her shirt to her nose as if it is a handkerchief and she is mindlessly biting her thumbnail through the yellow cotton. Her right hand is making tiny, sharp arcs with the graphite pencil she holds between her middle and index finger, almost the same way I would hold a cigarette, but her thumb steadies the lead with an odd precision.

The music of her pencil turns from staccato beats to a long drum roll as she shades the inside edge of a mountain. She pauses to sigh, gives her temples a short massage and then combs her fingers through her hair. “This is going to take me all night,” she half yells at the drawing on her lap. Uncomfortable, she adjusts the board to her other knee and continues to darken the
I am the product
of the murder of all the lost souls
who had their land stolen and raped dry.

I am the product
of the fevered lives
constructed by plantation houses
and captors’ whip-lashed eyes

I am the product of
deep fried potatoes
and low grade beef
saturated, worm hook, feeding trough, McDonald’s

I am the product of
advertising blitzkrieg Armani suit capitalists,
carpet bombing every inch of life

I am the product of
Ritalin, Dexedrine, and learning disorders
amphetamine intervention of predisposed weakness

I am the product of
a drug war school zone,
D.A.R.E. me to rebel

I am a product of
my education,
Christopher Columbus had bloody hands
washed clean
by childhood textbooks perpetual white lies.

A Fight with the Clouds

mountain. When the lead gets thick enough on the paper,
she takes a tissue from the box sitting on the arm of the
couch to her right and begins to smear the black in small
circles, creating a cloudy shade through the center of the
mountain. Using this technique allows her clouds to look
a little more believable and her toes relax as she kicks her
legs out in front of her.

In her attempt to get comfortable one of her feet
hits the wine glass on the table, causing the sugary treat
to topple onto the floor. The glass does not break, but
bounces softly on the carpet, making a small ping. The
wine lands in a Texas-shaped puddle, and some sprinkles
my bare toes. As it soaks into the rug, combined with our
warm apple pie scented candle, the room begins to smell
like alcoholic apple cider. I drop a few paper towels onto
the mess. When it doesn’t come out we declare it artistic;
a sign that we live here.

Oscar has jumped down onto the wet carpet and
tracked purple kitty paws onto the pale linoleum in the
kitchen; a sign that Oscar lives here too. Allison picks up
the cable remote from the coffee table and flips to Access
Hollywood. Her slender fingers are still covered in soot
and her nose is still smudged, but I know that in a few
minutes she will have forgotten her fight with the clouds
because Latoya Jackson “speaks out about the death of
her brother” and frankly, that is less depressing.
I am the product of race wars, hate crimes, and televised ethnic cleansing; Bosnian landmine bubble-baths.

I am the product of the gulf war on terror, the war on drugs, and the yearly changing two minutes of hate.*

I am the product of Dr. MLKJ, Gandhi, Marx, and Jesus Christ thinkers’ rung necks milked by greedy hands.

I am the product of Timothy McVeigh, Bin Ladin, Charles Manson, both Bushes and the atomic bomb.

I am the product of fear 24/7 broadband broadcasting, bombards, escapist, color coated nightmare, dream-scape, terror alerts.

I am the product of myself, everyone else and the changing world around me.

*Taken from George Orwell
A thin red frame borders the black and white photograph of my cousin Calista and I, taken by her father when I was six years old in April of 1996. The oversized hospital chair I am sitting in was tan with tiny pink roses. It smelled faintly of sweat and Downy fabric softener. The walls of the room were pale yellow, the floor an endless sea of glistening white tile. A large group of people had gathered in front of me, oohing and ahhing at the cuteness of the moment while a baby cried in the nursery behind me.

I felt completely trapped.

The navy blue sweatshirt I’m wearing is two sizes too big on my scrawny frame. My hair was darker back then, and pulled back into two identical pigtails held in place by big white bows. In my arms I awkwardly hold the soft pink bundle that is my newborn cousin, whose birth blue eyes are open and staring at me thoughtfully. Her skin was like rose-colored silk, and what little hair she had was like blonde down.

I thought she looked like an alien.

I’m not smiling in the photograph. My eyes are narrowed into chocolate brown slits, my mouth turned down in an annoyed scowl. The camera flashed and I resisted the urge to shove the unwanted baby off my lap and onto the floor. Everyone was staring at me, so I searched the many faces until I spotted the one I was looking for and then silently pleaded for help.

A broad smile lit up my dad’s ruddy face when he caught my panicked gaze, but he took pity on me and began to make his way through the crowd. He was built like a linebacker, and had no problem pushing his way to the front. By the time he reached me the smile had extended all the way to his cerulean blue eyes, and he was chuckling softly. I had no idea why he thought my situation was so funny, but I kept my mouth shut and waited for him to save me from the humiliation of more photos.

My dad knelt in front of me and I was instantly surrounded by the comforting scent of sawdust, coffee, and cigarette smoke. Instead of reaching out to take the baby, he placed a calloused but gentle hand on my shoulder and touched a finger to Calista’s soft pink cheek, his way of connecting us despite my unwillingness to even accept her into our family. I said the first thing that came to my mind.

“I asked for a puppy, not a cousin.”

My dad’s laugh came from the pit of his stomach. He laughed until there were tears in his eyes. Then he gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze before easing the baby off my lap and into his arms. “A little cousin is even better than a puppy.”

I was convinced he had gone crazy.

Calista was only five years old when I left her in the woods.

I was supposed to meet with some of my friends that afternoon, but when I had told my aunt where I was going she insisted I take my little cousin with me. Arguing with her would have been a waste of my time, so I reluctantly agreed and waited until she disappeared into the house before turning to point my finger at Calista.

“You either keep up with me or I’ll leave you
Calista

behind, got it?”

Calista nodded her head several times, her blonde pigtail waving frantically while her aquamarine eyes danced with anticipation. She was as lithe and energetic as a foal, and her eagerness to please was a constant source of annoyance for me. I just rolled my eyes dramatically and started toward the woods, Calista following closely behind.

The sound of birds chirping and autumn leaves rustling in the chilly breeze were both familiar and welcoming. The trees were beginning to change color, their luscious green leaves giving way to fiery reds and golds. I could smell autumn in the air—wet earth, dying leaves, and wood smoke. The transition between summer and fall was my favorite time of year, but it also meant the approach of hunting season, and that meant no more playing in the woods until next summer.

The area where we usually met was about the size of a soccer field, and shaded by the tops of the large maple trees that were scattered generously throughout. A small brook ran along the western edge of the woods, and beyond that lay cornfields as far as the eye could see. It was my favorite place to be, and where I spent many of my lazy summer days with my friends.

Calista saw my friends before I did, and waved despite not knowing who they were. None of the three waved back at her, and I felt the heat of embarrassment slowly began to creep up my neck and into my face. Calista, oblivious to their displeasure, ran to them and proudly introduced herself. None of them returned the gesture and Calista, never one to be discouraged, simply shrugged her shoulders and danced away toward the brook.

“You brought your little cousin?” Kara asked, pinning me with accusation.

I shrugged, trying to appear unfazed by their anger. On the inside, however, the butterflies in my stomach were doing cartwheels. I know I had screwed up, and I had no idea how to make it better.

“It’s not like I had a choice. My aunt told me to bring her.” It was lame, but it was the best I had. My aunt usually took care of me while my parents worked, so I was expected to listen and do as she said. Even if that meant dragging my little cousin along with me everywhere I went.

“If I wanted to babysit, I would have stayed home with my little brother.” Jake turned and glared at Calista, who was singing a nursery rhyme while she happily splashed in the shallow water. He then turned and started walking away. “Sorry, but I have better things to do.”

The rest of my friends slowly followed his lead, and before long I was standing alone, anger and heartache two very equal emotions coursing through my body like a disease.

“Britt, look at me!”

I didn’t look. I bitterly swiped at the hot tears that burned my eyes, then turned and began running as fast I could back the way I had come. Calista called after me, but I ignored her. Before she had come along I had been happy, with undivided attention from my family and a group of friends who looked up to me. Now I was forced to share everything, including my life, with someone I
didn’t even like.

Calista eventually found her way out of the woods, and I was not allowed to return to them until the following summer.

I was twelve when I got the flu for the first time. At first I thought the doctor had misdiagnosed me surely I had something worse than the seasonal flu, because it felt like I was dying. My muscles ached, and I became exhausted after the simplest of tasks. At one point my temperature, which had never escalated above one hundred and one before that day, reached one hundred and three and left me slightly delusional for about an hour. I had been quarantined to my room, with the lights down low and a cold compress on my forehead. The normally cheerful mint green walls had taken on a sickly glow of their own, and my bed had disappeared beneath a sea of crumpled white tissues.

I was just starting to drift asleep when I heard the door squeak open. Thinking it was my mom coming in to check on me, I didn’t bother to open my eyes. The footsteps that made their way toward my bed didn’t sound like my mom’s, though. These were softer and occurred closer together, suggesting less weight and shorter legs.

The footsteps stopped beside my bed, and I waited a beat before opening my eyes. At first all I could see were shapes and shadows, but I blinked a couple of times and brought the image of my little cousin into focus. She held a glass of water in one hand, a book in the other, and her beloved teddy bear tucked under her arm. I had no idea what she was up to, but I knew I didn’t have the patience for it.

“Go away,” I growled, closing my eyes and turning my head away from her.

She didn’t say anything. I waited for the sound of retreating footsteps, but I didn’t hear any. I counted to thirty before opening my eyes again, but I didn’t need to see her face to know that she was not smiling. Her hair had been cut boyishly short, but she still managed to twirl a piece around her finger in a gesture I recognized to be her nervous habit. As nervous as she was, though, I could feel the determination rolling off of her in waves. She was too stubborn to give up and I was too stubborn to give in to any story of our childhood.

“Don’t you have something better to do than annoy me? You’re not even supposed to be in here.”

“I came to read to you.” It was said so matter-of-factly that it took me a couple seconds to comprehend exactly what she had said.

“What? Why?”

“Because that’s what my mom does when I’m sick, and it always makes me feel better.”

I stared at her for a moment, unsure of exactly how to react to her kindness. Turning her down would have made me a jerk, laughing at her would have made her cry, and accepting her offer… well, that was new.

I sighed heavily, then moved closer to the middle of the bed and patted the empty mattress in unspoken acceptance. Calista smiled, revealing a missing front tooth, then happily crawled up onto the bed to sit beside me. She was sitting so close to my prone form that her hip was touching my left ear, but I didn’t have the heart to move away or make her move over. The smell of milk
and fresh winter air (she had just come in from playing outside) surrounded me as she repositioned the blankets so that they covered me all the way to my chin.

“Ready?” She asked excitedly, opening the book to the first page.

“Sure.”

I fell asleep to the sound of my little cousin’s voice carefully reading me the story of the three little pigs and, for the first time, that didn’t bother me.

Calista was nine years old when she experienced her first broken heart.

I was sitting on the couch in my cousin’s living room, flipping mindlessly through the television channels while I waited for Calista to return from soccer practice. Her mom had gone to get a pizza for dinner, since my parents were working late and would not be home in time enough to eat dinner with me. Until one of them returned I had the house to myself, except for their dog Rosie, who was content to sit on the carpeted floor at my feet and doze.

It wasn’t long before I heard the front door open and slam shut, followed by a thud as Calista dropped her bag onto the floor. I looked up when I heard the soft patter of footsteps making their way across the kitchen and into the living room.

The first thing I noticed when Calista walked in was the tears that glistened in her eyes. Her shoulders were slumped forward, and most of her hair had come loose from her ponytail. I put the remote down and started to stand when she suddenly flopped down beside me. It was no surprise when she grabbed the remote and turned the television to the Disney Channel, before leaning into my side and resting her head on my shoulder.

“Mind telling me what happened?” I asked while rubbing her back in slow, comforting circles.

“Boys are stupid.” It was simple, it was foolish, and to her it was the end of the world.

I had to breathe slowly so as not to laugh. “Care to explain?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yes you do. You always want to talk. It’s the shutting up you don’t ever want to do.”

She gave me a hard shove with her shoulder and started to pull away, but I pulled her tightly against my side and ruffled her hair with my free hand.

“How about this: we raid the kitchen, and you tell me all about this boy over a giant bowl of black raspberry ice cream and caramel topping?”

She considered that for a moment. “With rainbow sprinkles?”

“How about gummy bears instead?”

She straightened, wiped away the last of her tears with the sleeve of her jacket, and smiled. “Deal!”

A handmade frame of popsicle sticks, glitter, feathers and plastic beads surrounds another black and white photograph of Calista and I. Taken just a little over a year ago during a weekend fishing trip, it has earned a special place on the wall of my bedroom back home.

The sun was shining brightly that day, making the river in the background glisten like a thousand gold coins. In it we are standing hip to hip, me about six inches taller than her, our arms wrapped each other’s waist. We are
wearing the same New York Rangers cap and camouflaged waders, but her sweatshirt is forest green whereas mine is faded gray. Our smiles are big and goofy, our cheeks pink from the chilly afternoon air.

The king salmon that Calista holds in her free hand was well over twenty-five pounds, and as she proudly held it up to the camera her arm was shaking so violently from the effort that I wondered if she might drop it before her dad could snap the photo. We had spent nearly two exhausting hours trying to reel it into shore, during which time we periodically switched out to give each other a break. Some of the other fishermen glared unhappily at us, while others watched with mild fascination and encouragement. Calista was the one who finally reeled it close enough to shore for me to scoop it out with the net, and our teamwork earned us a round of applause from the small audience that had gathered.

As we posed for the picture her dad insisted on taking, a man I recognized from earlier had come over to offer his congratulations on a job well done. He then slapped her dad on the back and said, “Been a long time since I seen teamwork like that in this river. You must be proud to have such talented daughters.”

Her dad did not correct the man, just smiled and nodded his head in agreement.

“Did you hear that?” Calista whispered, nudging my ribs lightly with her elbow. There were blonde curls sticking out from under her cap, and her eyes were as bright and innocent as they had always been. When she smiled it was like watching a light bulb come on, and her cheerfulness was contagious.

“That guy thinks we’re sisters!”

“We practically are,” I reminded her, smiling when she leaned into my side and nearly knocked me over. I gave her a playful shove back, then pulled her close when her dad told us to smile for the camera.

I never did get a puppy, but that’s okay.
We're nice people.