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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The Great Lake Review
Spring 2010 Staff

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Ivy Unattended
by Eric Yeager

The clay vessel, the very womb that bore me,
broke and fell away at a young age.
Close enough to call, but not to touch,
she watched from afar and formed her opinions.

Desperately, I clung to the soil she left behind;
soil that didn’t care. Scattered and blown,
he worried only about losing what had held him together.

Yet, I thrived -the sun warm enough,
even at its distance, as I ever reached for it.
And as I grew, I noticed others whole and beautiful in their pots.

I grew to touch them, caress them, yearning
to have a solid home again, I chose one,
not knowing entirely why, but she was healthy and brilliant; full
of life.

Deeply I buried new roots, entangled them with hers
and for a while found nourishment and bliss.
Eventually, I shed that part of myself, protection against the acid
in her soil.

Unattended, I’ve grown quite large, feeling the glass that holds
me in.
Certain I can break through and find a place at last that is safe to
set my roots.

The Affair
by Katrina Koski

My mother and I often joke that when the conversation turns to
weather or laundry, you’ve run out of things to talk about.

Weather is a miserable topic. I’m not a fan of the sunny,
cheerful day but that’s the only kind you don’t hear people
complaining about. Instead they complain about other things:
how they have so much work to do they don’t have time to
enjoy such a beautiful day.

I prefer gray skies and chilly air. Cold enough to warrant a
scarf or a hoodie. I like layers. On sunny days I’m often inside,
reading a book or chatting with like-minded friends and trying
not to sweat.

It’s not often I can walk the college campus and appreciate
snow falling all around me. It’s a nuisance. I’ve always been
the type of person to openly cringe at folks who express
excitement over the season’s first snowfall. Any amount of
white fluffy stuff on the ground makes me regret the fact that I
not only stayed in the northeast for my undergrad, but I ended
up at a school characterized by its winds and blizzards.

I was present for the nine feet of snow that accumulated in a
matter of days. Fourteen-foot white, marbled-with-brown walls
lined the roads. The city was constantly plowing. The school
brought in dump trucks to clear the parking lots and students
headed out in droves, digging for their buried cars. The bigwigs
actually canceled classes that week, but only two day’s worth
and not when they really should have. I still had to go to my
three-hour night class, and for that I am eternally bitter.
The Affair

There are moments though, where your perspective switches abruptly and you’re left questioning all the things you thought you knew for sure.

I was walking to class this evening when flakes the size of gumballs started sticking to my glasses. They fluttered down delicately - like moths, only less creepy. Street lamps started to ignite and the indigo sky mixed with orange fluorescence almost made me long for my camera.

I concentrated on the snow that was accumulating on my face. The flakes were so large that the warmth of my skin wasn’t even enough to melt them down before other flakes latched on and didn’t melt away. As I walked, I felt myself becoming Frosty the Snowman. Well, maybe his wife or sister. A friendly female neighbor.

I desperately wanted to open my mouth and invite a flake or two in, like a child wearing snow pants and one of those hats with the fuzzy ball of yarn on top. Even as a child I’d had an aversion to snow and did my best to decline as many sledding and snowball fight invitations as possible. To be fair, I avoided snowball fights for the same reason I avoided playing tag and exactly why I stopped myself from trying to catch snow on my tongue: my nerves can’t handle the idea of getting caught. Anybody could have been looking.

But tonight I had a brief and delightful affair with the snow.

My eyes tried to follow each flake’s journey as they looped and skittered through the air. Some of them collided to make bigger flakes.

Katrina Koski

This reminded me too much of the annoying accumulation of snow on the ground and my attention quickly moved on to newer, less-clumpy flakes in an attempt to hold on to these blissful feelings.

A few of them drifted onto my lips. The first time it happened I let the snow sit there, just to see how long it would survive. The temptation to feel the cold on my tongue was too great though, and I began to kill them off with warmth. This brought the affair to an abrupt end.

Like any blissfully brief romance I have fond memories of that snowfall, but after the affair I found myself disinterested. My thoughts eventually strayed off in the direction of laundry. It was fun while it lasted, snow, but I know how to recognize when the conversation is over.
There were not enough trash cans
in the park that day.

There are usually plenty,
sitting between the trees and benches
like stout aluminum soldiers.

They watch over us
as we recline, and recreate,
and feed the birds, and feel sorry for ourselves
(making sure we don’t indulge
in any of these too freely).

But there were fewer that day;
surely everyone indulged themselves
far too freely.
Clueless
by Kevin Leonard

It's beyond impersonal, at this point, from the cement floor to the brown eyes exponentially more interested in the grey frills of this basement than me. I'm quite literally inside someone, feeling that someone's body touching me, the uncoordinated push and pull that's sensual and natural by reputation, warm skin on skin, but partially shaved pubes and plastic are chaffing me, which is the only part of this shindig that could accurately represent my insides. I think back absurdly to a conversation with Terence:

"Okay, this might sound weird, but if you're not too confident with pokin' around down there-"

"I'm not."

"Then listen."

"I'm listening."

"Well, what I like to do - if I can't walk right in the door, I start at the top, then slowly go down until it's, you know..."

"And how do you know?"

"You'll know."

"Okay."

"And take her underwear too. Girls love that. They want you to have a souvenir. A memento of sorts."

"Shut up."

Kevin Leonard

I should've asked what the hell to do once I got in the house because I'm more or less clueless. On top of that, I'm utterly self-conscious at the moment (how stupid does thrusting look?), on top of that, this girl dumped me over a year ago, and on top of THAT this isn't even my first time. That was the other night. I had a party at my house, and we've had a history. It wasn't my idea. We were both tanked, and it happened in my brother's room, with his condom. He's younger than me. The sex was fairly awful, but it wasn't self-conscious, due to the Coors Light and the fact that the Black Eyed Peas' album "Monkey Business" played through 4 times.

My brother's door doesn't have a lock, so no less than seven of my friends plus my mom saw me and Sara DelMonico deflower each other. Someone equated it to a one legged chicken doing the Cha Cha Slide. My friends were pleased. My mom was not:

"Open that door, I know what you're doing in there!"

"Mom, I'm trying to sleep, get outta here."

"I know what you're doing, unlock this door!"

"I'm trying to sleep in here."

"Hey, that girl's naked!"

Needless to say, I told Terence about it the next morning:

"So, let's follow up on this. Your mom walks in on you layin' pipe."
“Halfway through the 4th time ‘Pump It’ came on. And when did you start calling it ‘laying pipe’?”

“Just now. Then she mysteriously leaves. Then you continue to do it, and fail to go?”

“You’re calling that ‘going’ now?”

“And then, after watching you take the virginity of Steve’s cousin, she goes to Pickles and buys you and everyone there sandwiches?”

“Yep.”

“And the twins found your used condom on the side of the house, which you had to steal from TJ, cause you didn’t have any of your own.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Congratulations. You scarred ten different people for life and didn’t even go.”

I guess my lack of skill that night is acceptable. I was drunk, it was my first time, and my Mom saw me naked. I wasn’t coordinated (from what I recall), and I didn’t “go,” as Terence calls it. Tonight was gonna be different. It’s a school night, and she called me over. I practically ran around the block, my ambitious junk rubbing not-so-kindly against my jeans. I thought about what Terence said when I told him about the first time Sara and I did anything below the belt:

“So... she tell you how big you were?”

“I think I know how big I am.”

“So you’ve measured yourself?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“I won’t. And I meant did she tell you if you were bigger or smaller than other guys she’s seen.”

“No, I don’t care to know.”

“Okay, smaller then.”

“That’s not what I said!”

And that’s what I think about now, and even as I try to hold onto it the belief that this was a good idea as summer evenings rush in on the last half hour you can see a baseball: Stupid bad small dick can’t please me; chaffing, chaffing, ouch chaffing, oh boy awkward; one day I’ll laugh now I think I’ll cry- is that blood?; tell me that ain’t blood, why does this smell like chicken?; oh boy clueless. My ventricles are pumping. I still like this girl. But I’m getting that feeling you get when you’re driving your Dad’s old Sentra and you see flashing lights in the rear-view mirror, and you just know they’re for you. I think halfheartedly about trying to dart down a side street, but I know this guy’s coming for me, and it’s just a matter of time before I’m pulled over and late to school. Still, I try to drive straight and act like I didn’t just run a red light, but if this were really a car I wouldn’t even make it out of the driveway. And there it is:
“God, you’re clueless.”

Did I just swallow a live squid? Not only did I get pulled over, but I know the cop. And she slashed my tires. And I might throw up.

“Oh yeah, you’re fucking great at this...fucking thing.”

I pull a scooter out of the trunk and, I roll away proudly waving my ticket. I’m home, and I call Terence:

“You stopped doing it and left a perfectly naked girl by her lonesome because you weren’t comfortable. Men all over the world are booing you. I’d stay away from windows and maybe school for a few days.”

“I’ll deal with it.”

“What the hell happened? Was it like the Cha Cha Slide again, Sir Clucks-O-Plenty?”

“More like the Cotton Eye Joe -”

“But that’s fantastic - “

“- but halfway through it changes to a Cher song.”

“Oh, well there you go. So, you left. You just left her there in the basement?”

“It’s her house, it’s not like she needs a Concord. And if she did, I wouldn’t drive her to the airport. She was a total bitch.”

“Wow, what a badass. Did you go?”

Kevin Leonard

“Not yet.”

“You mean you didn’t even take care of it?”

“Not yet, I wanted tell you first.”

“Well, take care of that. “

“I just started.”

“Gross, dude.”

“Yeah it is.”

“So, what are you gonna do. You know, about doing it? How are you gonna learn? Videotapes? Lessons? You gonna hide under your parents’ bed and take notes?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I want to know what I’m doing. But I don’t wanna have do it to get good at it. I wanna have sex because I like it, and because I like the person I’m putting my penis in. Does that make sense?”

“You’re an ass. But, yeah.”
Nous Dormons (We Sleep)
by Craig Murray

Where Y'at?
bounced from the brick walls of Canal Street,
I lifted my head & spit blood on the side
of the aluminum barge,
that I called home for three days,
after the great storm.

The swell has made the bayou limitless.
The sun refracts off of the gas trails left by
the bigger boats,
it's burning my corneas-black and grey
like the sky of Katrina, that bitch.
N'awlins ain't the same,
& won't be for many years.

There,
in front of the Le Petit Theatre
muddied above
the front window sills,
the panes weren't there anymore;
they're broken
as the faces & will of the two men, woman, & child in front of me.
A boy gnawing on her breast for milk that wasn't dropping,
the men looking at each other, trying to figure out who the hero is,
the woman, already feeling the humid air suffocating every decision.

I wanted to yell "Pass me a good time and I'll pass you yours".
I just waved to them and thought- "Them pro-bly sick of floating, like me".
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Lobsters Are Beautiful
by Aaron Z Lee

I don't know my own mind well enough to know anything else
by Elizabeth Sauchelli

Because the truth is
most days I can't tell you how I am
trying out emotions like flavors of ice cream
too sugary, not cold, less chocolate, more dough
It's not that I'm indecisive
But if I was a mind reader the first mind I'd decipher is my own
He used to tell us stories before bed every night. My brother and I had a few that were our favorites, so he would repeat these ones more often than the others. There was the one about how he and his brother went to steal sugar cane from a farmer down the road from their house, and how the farmer caught them and chased them off his property with pitchforks. My father’s more than six-foot wingspan would almost stretch across mine and my brother’s parallel twin sized beds when he showed us the size of the weapon each time we heard the story. He claims this one is true to this day. Our other favorite was the one where he jumped out of the school bus window and “used his big ears to fly away” because the other kids were making fun of him. This we believed wholeheartedly for the few years that the stories were told to us every night, because his ears are quite large, and angled just enough perhaps, with the guidance of his long wings of course, to catch the wind enough to bring him to safety. No matter how short the story had to be or how far past our bedtime it was, at least one story before bed was his duty to us, and he fulfilled it religiously. His warm neck and prickly facial hair I felt on my cheek, as he hugged me before he left the room, was always the perfect ending.

* 

He used to pick me up from religion class once a week, when he remembered. I hoped that he would show up to get me each Tuesday night after class, but also secretly wished he would be a little late so he didn’t embarrass me in front of my classmates. When he was early, he always parked in the handicapped spot right next to the door, flashed the headlights of his cornflower blue Honda Civic and beeped his horn when he saw class was dismissed. With the windows open, he’d have a Marty Robbins or Lonestar CD cranked as loud as it would go, and yell, “Buddy!” as I approached the passenger side door. I always sang along, and tried to match his excitement with a “What’s up Man?” or some other greeting that masked my disappointment quite well.

When I sat down next to him, he never looked me in the eyes, but I looked at his. I needed to know, and his small, glossy brown eyes and slow motion blinking always gave it away. The fact that he was chewing gum had the opposite effect that he intended because I knew he did it to cover up his breath. On the way home one night, I saw the speedometer hit 95.

* 

We always got up at five a.m. to go fishing during our yearly vacation in Canada. Before the sun had reached our small, leaning cabin on Bob’s Lake, Dad would sneak into our rooms and gently pull on our big toes to wake us up. “Rooney,” he called me, “time to go fishin’.” Before he left the room, I was up and putting on my jeans and sweatshirt that were stained with worm guts from the day before. As I made my way out to the small living room, he was always sitting Indian style on the
Carrying Dad

rocking chair with his thin, dark brown hair sticking up like a rooster’s and an early morning smile on his face. Since my mom and sister were still sleeping at this time of day, my father whispered to us the things that needed to be loaded on the boat, our exact time of departure, as well as where he planned to take us that morning. “What do you think about hittin’ that weed bed back in that swampy area where we were nailin’ the smallmouth yesterday? Does that sound good? Or we could try a new spot, whatever you guys want to do.” He drove the boat, but we always told him where to go when he asked us.

As we made the short walk down to the dock where our boat was tied, there was never a morning when he didn’t say, “Guys... the water looks like glass this morning,” bugging his eyes as if it was some miracle we’d never seen before. Having heard this every day we’d been fishing so far, however, we just laughed. We also laughed at his fishing attire, to which he gave about as much attention as he did to his greasy hair on fishing mornings. Dad’s normal outfit for fishing was a pair of plum colored pajama pants that barely reached his ankles, one of the old, faded t-shirts my mom always tried to get him to throwaway, loafers, and a ball cap that set on the very top of his pear-shaped head. He rarely threw away clothes. I’ve seen him wearing the same outfits in vacation pictures that span several years. But fishing wasn’t about what you wore or what you looked like, it was about “flicking that floating lure across the top of the water, setting the hook at just the right time, and keeping your rod-tip up.” With this method, my father taught anyone who stepped on that boat how to catch fish, as silly as he looked when he did.

It was fun to watch him fish, which wasn’t seen very often due to the amount of time he spent navigating the boat into areas where the fish were located. And I could always tell when he got a bite. First, he would go completely still, aside from the gentle swaying caused by the waves from the water rocking the boat. Next, he would pull the tip of his poll up very slowly until the fish jerked it back down. He described this feeling in the only way I can describe it today, using the sound, “Buh-bump, buh-bump.” This is the moment when less-experienced fishermen, like my brother and sister and I, would pull back carelessly, and begin to reel-in a fish that we hadn’t even successfully hooked.

But not Dad. Instead, since he knew the fish was interested, he would gently ease the tip of his pole down almost to the surface of the water, and wait until he felt another tug. This way, when hooking the fish, he would have the maximum amount of space to yank his pole straight into the air instead of back towards the boat where he would run into the rest of us. If the fish bit again, his left hand would slowly approach the reel to tighten the “slack” created by the wind blowing the line from side to side, keeping his right hand perfectly still on the handle. When the line was tight, he would yank the tip of his pole straight into the air with all his strength, hooking the fish that he was sure had taken the bait in its mouth since he had so patiently waited for him to do so. If the pole stayed bent, and the high-
Carrying Dad

pitched sound of the drag (the reel mechanism that gives fish some extra line so it doesn’t break the line from pulling too hard) sounded, he was hooked. If not, we usually attributed the lost fish to the force with which Dad yanked to set the hook. But he assured us that fish have strong mouths, and he couldn’t pull-up hard enough to rip through one. Dad taught us how to fish, so his fishing style was always one I tried to emulate.

* 

He did a lot of yard work on weekends, or anything that allowed him to be in the garage for extended periods of time. That’s where he kept it. He thought I didn’t know when he hid it in the live-well of the boat, or in the old locker where he kept the gardening supplies, but I always knew. Take-away the 16 oz. Coors Lights he hid in our old toy box, the shooters of Smirnoff vodka he stored beneath the top drawer of his tall dresser, and the times he didn’t see me watching him empty my mother’s boxes of wine into his mouth in the corner of the kitchen, and I still knew. It wasn’t always in the thick film over his eyes or the constant raising of his brows to ensure they stayed open, but in other things, like the smirk he would make at me when I looked directly at him, and the sound of dryness his lips made when he touched them together and parted them again. He could hide it from Mom and Jared and Ashley sometimes, but not from me. I always knew.

His favorite job was mowing the lawn because that took the longest. He would go a few laps, with the mower set to the

Jacob Doubrava

highest possible speed, go into the garage for a minute or two, then come back out and continue the cycle. One day he decided to keep a beer in his lap as he mowed instead of making trips from the front yard to the garage and back. I’ve heard the hot sun increases the effects of alcohol, but I’ve never tested this theory before. Dad did that day. When we thought he’d shut the mower off to make another trip to the garage, we heard him stumble onto the front porch and fumble with the door knob trying to get in. My mother opened the door to find him standing motionless in the doorway with vomit on his face and shirt. Barely a teenager, it was difficult to support my father’s weight during the trip down the hall to my sister’s bed, where he also vomited. It was only three in the afternoon, but he was out for the night.

* 

“To Jacob, From Santa!” Dad always distributed the presents on Christmas morning, shouting from under the tree in the foyer that our presents were from Santa even after we’d discovered he was a fraud. He crossed his long, slender legs in a Yoga-like position, and crawled under the tree to get our gifts one at a time. But before we even made it to our actual presents- the ones under the tree- there were our over-flowing stockings we had to tackle. Mom did most of the Christmas shopping, and Dad did the wrapping. Boy did he do the wrapping. In fact, he not only used so much tape that it often took a few minutes to fully expose what was inside, but he wrapped each individual present in our stockings as well. From packs of Bubble Yum and Whoppers to gift cards and
Carrying Dad

CDs, unwrapping each stocking-stuffer took almost as long as the rest of the presents did.

Some years, mom would warn us in advance that Christmas “may not be like it was last year,” which we were old enough to know meant money was tight and that Mom and Dad couldn’t afford the Christmas they really wanted to give us. Whenever Dad heard her say this, he told us not to worry about it or even listen to her. Then he shook his head and looked at the floor, not because he was upset at her for revealing some disappointing truth, but at himself because he felt it was his responsibility to disprove her. And he always did.

* 

“I’ll break this door down if you don’t open it!” he said, as he tried to get into my fourteen-year-old sister’s bedroom. An argument had occurred minutes earlier, which led to him chasing her around the downstairs of the house, and her tripping him with the laundry basket as they passed through the foyer. While it may have been an impulse on her part to protect her own safety, it made him even angrier, and she knew she had to make it to her room where she thought she’d be safe. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Although he had made threats to break the door down in the past, none of us present that night- my sister, my mother and I- thought that there would ever be a good enough reason in his mind to actually do it.

It took him about a minute to actually make it through. He had to take a few breaks due to the amount of energy it takes to break a door down. Once he was inside, my mother snuck by him, rushing to shield my sister who was as close to the wall on the inside of her bottom bunk bed as she could go. As I assumed would happen, he threw her petite body aside like a stuffed animal, and yanked my sister out from her hiding place. At this point, I knew I had no choice but to protect the girls from him, regardless of the fact that I was only a skinny 16-year-old myself. After creating a force field over my mom and sister with my body, I only received a few blows to the face and a pair of broken glasses- hardly significant compared to what the 250 lb man was capable of, and a victory compared to what he could done to my younger sister.

I always stayed up late with him. As far as he knew, it was because I enjoyed the same strange shows that came on that late at night. In reality, it was because I was too scared that I would be asleep if he were ever to attack my mother during one of their arguments. In fact, I was often scared to shower when they were arguing because I couldn’t hear what was going on downstairs when the water was running. I learned to shower in under two minutes.

The night he broke the door down, my mother had gone to sleep after a brief argument with him. He normally didn’t wake her up after she had gone to sleep, so I thought it was safe to turn-in myself, until I heard him say,

“I swear to God I’m gonna get out my shotgun and blow her head off,” as I sat next to him on the couch in the...
Carrying Dad

living room.

“You know something? I know you would never do that because that’s not the type of person you are. Am I right?” I replied, knowing that I would now have to stay up until he made his way to bed himself, fearing what he could have done if there was nobody there to tell him he shouldn’t.

“You’re right, I’m not,” he agreed.

*

I’ve only seen him embarrassed once- the night I watched him sit handcuffed at the police station down the road. He was going to pick me up from work and couldn’t quite stay on his side of the road, I guess. His expression was strangely innocent, as he kept his eyes on mine, and asked politely for the officer to remove the handcuffs so his son didn’t have to see him like this. He wasn’t innocent. Drinking and driving is illegal, and going to pick your son up from work in a state like that, which the officer re-iterated several times, is just something you shouldn’t be doing. However, the tears my father had in his eyes as he nodded his head, looking only at the floor, told me he knew he’d made a mistake. I told him that that’s exactly what the whole situation was- a mistake- and that we all make them. The important thing, I assured him, as I sat next to my mother who watched the police officer fill-out paperwork in silence, was that he made sure mistakes like this didn’t happen anymore.
A narrow dirt road, now mostly mud,
shoots off, barely visible,
from the winding highway
in the shadow of the mountain.

The people in this place are shrouded.
They are shadows themselves,
watching passersby inquisitively.
They do not realize that they will only ever be passed by.
In this inertness they are feeble and dry
having come to resemble their cornfields
at winter’s end
and they inquire not of those who move,
but of the earth that binds them so
to this spot of agrarian madness
in the shadow of the mountain.
Shadow of the Mountain

But the cornfields will sprout and
shoot up into life once more
as their condemned, questioning masters well know
and more closely resemble
this narrow dirt road, shooting off
into Providence, or, if the season is cruel,
oblivion.

At road’s end, the answer is less grand.
There is a slick-bottomed creek, and,
down another, more hidden path, a black lake
that speculates why corn grows so tall,
unaware of its own part to play.

And upon the lakeshore,
the huddled masses
are nothing more than twenty-odd
dead crows. They appear sleepy,

Stephen Russomano

as if to say,
“We, too, are bound to this spot
of agrarian madness.”
But they have bested the people in this place.
They have not ceased to be;
they have only ceased to be passed by,
and have done some passing of their own,
out of the shadow of the mountain.

And the cornfields, as ever,
do not fathom their own good fortune;
that they might prosper
from these dead crows
and that, on the other hand,
would meet their utter ruin,
were their condemned, questioning masters
to pass out of
the shadow of the mountain.
A Letter of Love
by Camden Barden

You have always seemed pretentious. You would walk casually across the room, chin level with the floor and eyes forward with the vindication of royalty. The air about you seemed as chilled and crisp as mid-autumn, gaining your eager eyes and ears to your whims. There was nothing that you could not say or do to receive anger, envy, or frustration from your peers. And I was one of those that could never think of you negatively.

The days that I can recall before my days with you seem murky, undistinguished, and dull in almost every sense. The warmth of my loved ones from my younger days is lukewarm. The joy of my first remembered birthday seems halfhearted. The pride at my accomplishments seems vain. You were my everything from the first glimpse from behind that car.

It was that car that first took my notice. I remember it well—a 1999 blue Chevy Lumina with a dent above the left tire rim. You changed cars only a few days after, but this was a car that you had loved as far as material possessions go. The first car you ever got, the car that saw the first few exciting years of freedom, and the car that you lovingly locked before walking away. I noticed it due to the model, since that was the very car that my father had always driven. Yet only after a few days in your new environment, you had to cast aside the Lumina.

This all had happened on September 17th. The day started out with some fog that never cleared up entirely. It was a warm day, but overcast with a shower around 2 o’clock that after noon. The sun peeked through the clouds—just a bit!—when you stepped out of the Lumina to lock it. It was almost perfect, since perfection would have been some sort of mystical music from the heavens.

I could feel that heat of the sun on my head as I watched you. I was walking up the hill next to the lot, moving quickly to make it in time. I was moving so fast for so long that my breath was heavy and my throat was dry. But seeing that car out of the corner of my eye, and glimpsing your graceful figure emerging from it, stopped me dead. My breath was caught in my chest and my heart seemed to stop beating. I had to watch you gather your belongings, lock your car lovingly, and walk past me.

Your height, your eyes, your mouth, everything was vivid in my mind. Even your scent enraptured me from the very beginning. This sounds strange, even remotely sadistic, to say this and to have acted as such, but I was lost. Even more so when I had discovered that we had both ventured to the same hangout spot in the evening. That was where I first spoke to you.

To tell the truth, although you have told me countless times how secure I am, I was so nervous that I could barely stand. You sat alone at the café with Mein Kampf in hand and a cup of black coffee on the table. You were dressed for the summer season, showing more skin than what was usually seen during that time of year. Your hair was done with precision.

I watched you for half an hour to the grief of my acquaintances...
A Letter of Love

and friends. I simply could not stop looking at you. It was at their persuasion that I walked over to you. Halfway over, I nearly fell into a table and ran away. Yet I kept on advancing as boldly as I could to you and your lovely visage. I made it to the table three away from you when I stopped. You were the one who spoke to me first.

"Could you hand me a napkin?"

I was stunned. I suppose I looked like a deer in headlights at your voice. I assume that you might have guessed my insecurity—although you claim I am incapable of such a thing—since you smiled and rose from your seat to the station behind me to get what you had desired. I, with all my clumsiness, could not do a thing but retreat.

The café meeting was what set things in motion between us. You kept coming back and so did I. Each week you had a different book of some interesting variety with you. One week, it was the Feminine Mystique, another week it was Gulliver’s Travels, and another week was the Koran. Of course you know that we began to speak to each other. Your company was completely enjoyable; all the while my heart raced and my hands shook with apprehension.

You know the rest. We had our first date, our first kiss, and our first everything. Time was precious and irreplaceable. And I am truly sorry.

"I would like to be a firefly." Do you remember? We were in our apartment together, the night was as silent as it could be in the city, and the night was hot. My grandmother had passed away just a month ago and I began to mention death. You tapped me playfully on the shoulder and proclaimed that she would probably come back. I had never known before then that you believed in reincarnation.

"Why?" I asked laughing. "They’re just bugs. Wouldn’t you rather come back as you are? Why not human?"

You were quiet for a few moments before turning to face me in the dark. You looked me in the eyes, contemplating if I was worthy enough to know this much more about you or if I was to be left pondering your bizarre choice. Finally, you whispered words that I could not understand.

"I want everything I do to bring meaning."

*

Tonight is one of the last nights of August. I was meandering through the park at dusk, not quite moving quickly but not strolling. I stopped at the pond where you and I would usually meet for our dates and rested my elbows on the fence around it. The sky was clear and a rich, royal, iridescent blue, and the tree leaves seemed black against it. A gentle wind rustled the leaves together along with the bushes and flowers around me. It was then that I saw them.

They filled the ground like the stars in the sky. They blinked and moved, swarming around each other gracefully and magically. The crickets called out to each other underneath the
fire-lit sky of the park. A little girl squealed in excitement behind me, pulling at the hands of her parents to point out the fireflies. I looked behind myself to see an older couple kiss. A group of friends all stopped and gazed quietly at the show.

I thought of the fireflies. They call to mate with each other with their light, so the light dancing in the night was a dance of love. The other insects around them would probably feast on them, allowing those insects to mate and have children. The fireflies created all the commotion around me. They did it, themselves.

With not much more of a thought, I left the park with a smile. I came home to write this letter to you to tell you that I finally understand. I hope you are a firefly.
Fly
by Jennifer Schifferle

Right here, right now is where you’re meant to be
    Take my hand as we sail across the sea
        As the soft wind tickles our nose
We’ll take the world in beautifully garmented cloths
    We’ll battle the kings like brave, shining knights
        And be the voice for all those civil rights
We’ll stand our ground and do what’s right
    We’ll swim the ocean, in the dead of night
Take the world with passion and with aw
And people won’t quite believe what they just saw
    Let’s give them a reason to talk about us
Let’s be the center of all that fuss
    Let’s do something that like never before
        Take my hand, together we’ll soar

The Surprise
by Aaron Z Lee
The Surprise

Aaron Z Lee

The Client is here, and he wants to see you NOW!

We've got to go.
We're in my hometown, at a booth in a small restaurant. We're there to have drinks, served by a close friend of mine from high school. Laura pops over now and then to chat, but mostly she's off clearing tables and glowering at the homophobic DJ, stuck in the corner until two.

"I'm a counter," she tells me.

Immediately my thoughts fly away for just a moment, to visions of things a person can tally up. Friends, lovers, points in a game, pieces of cereal. The important things, the unimportant things. The tangible, mostly, but I wonder if there are varying degrees to this counting business. She likes even numbers. Two cookies, never one or three. Eight or ten bits of kibble for the dog.

Her name is Marie. Five letters, oddly similar to my own name, for those who think of me as Katie. Her consonants are the thirteenth and eighteenth letters of the alphabet. Mine are the eleventh and twentieth. I'm an odd number person, and it fascinates me that we both start off at odd letters and move on to even. The vowels don't count because they're less interchangeable, but I notice two are odd and one is even. I like this. It feels balanced.

Laura was there when my mother stopped drinking, St. Patrick's Day six years before. She cleaned up the cut on my mother's nose, sent her to bed, and taught us both something about booze, though in wildly different ways. I'm distinctly
aware of hereditary alcoholism, but I dislike feeling drunk so I'm not worried. When down, I bury myself in books and marathons of television shows, not booze. Characters are what I live for.

Laura brings us each a second beer, unprompted. Marie’s worried eyes hold mine. “I’m driving,” she says. I’m relieved. She’s not one to push the limit and I’m grateful not to have to cut her off or hint that I’ll find my own ride home. I nurse this new beer, garnished with my usual lime, and reassure her that Laura and I will handle the extra. Laura brings a soda.

I count the patrons in the bar, just to see what this counting thing is like. I keep losing track because they’re in and out and all over the place. I give this new game up quickly.

“My family loved you tonight.” Marie looks unsure. We haven’t had much more than a moment alone together. “The boys never stick around for dinner, but you gave us some great family time. It was wonderful, just sitting around trading stories like that.”

And then I remember how the tale of my mother’s infidelity and brother’s unknown origins wormed its way in, almost casually.

_They didn’t know whose kid I was_, he had said. I kept my eyes averted, focusing on the very interesting mushrooms and steak left over on my plate. The juices swirled together. Pink blood and brown created rose, and would have been lovely on the walls, to go with my mother’s inherited china set.

Marie was the one to change the subject back to a lighter tone. I wonder if she counted the seconds of silence after he said that. It feels like there were so many, but she handled it beautifully.

In the bar I take a sip of my beer, and then another. The lime juice finds its way into a cut on my lip. I wasn’t aware of it before, but I’ll spend the remainder of the night obsessively applying lip balm. I take another sip, just to feel the cut burn. Why am I doing this?

“Sorry about the awkwardness at dinner.” I stand the stick of balm upright on the table.

It bothers me that that my glass now has lip marks on it. I try to hit the same spot each time so I don’t dirty the rim with balm. I put the glass down, wondering how many sips I just took. My cheeks are warm, my thoughts heady.

Marie’s foot finds its way to my booth, rests against my thigh. Her smile is unnecessary, but welcome. My fingers find comfort on her ankle and a slight focus in her smooth skin.

I am not yet aware that when I get home I’ll find my mother’s blue eyes turned teal from tears. I’ll pull away from the hug to smell six years of sobriety left behind in the evening. All I smell is beer on bitter breath.
I remember you:
you used to climb the willow tree
behind my house,
never going higher
than a certain bough,
a cradle
for you to sit and read.

I remember you:
you used to make clay figurines
of imaginary animals
and worlds for them
to live in,
where stories
could be discovered.
That Which Is Forgotten and Found

the game was like tearing a butterfly
from the chrysalis too soon;
though it was a blanket
and anything underneath
as each of you played predator,
taking more from the other every time.

I remember when I came:
I knew so much more than you,
had seen things my classmates
would not understand for years;
I was the one to be terrorized
because they all knew, silently,
there was something different about me.

I remember when I forgot about you:
I would try to teach my friends

Marissa Hill

what I knew, what they had seen in movies,
through stories/lies about truths
I could not recall, and so thought
them dreams and, twisted by my imagination,
they swarmed into my waking thoughts.

I remember the day I found you
the wounds to your small mind hidden,
but added-to by choices (people)
I had made because I did not know
how you had suffered
at both another’s,
and my own, hands.

I remembered I was you.
**Bigger Dreams**  
by Katrina Koski

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**Fate**  
by Jennifer Schifferle

When you close your eyes in the dark of night  
You imagine a world in colors so bright  
Illuminated to that perfect shade  
With all the possibilities your heart has made  
A painter's white canvas that you smear with your heart  
In each tiny crevice, you bury one part  
And you build it up to mean so much  
It's image perfect with your very touch  
And to you, that image is how it's meant to be  
When you dream your dreams, it's all you can see  
But when you wake up one day, the plan is blurred  
Not one detail can ever be assured  
And it may hurt to see your creation fall  
Cause when it breaks, it takes it all  
But in the midst of your shattered dream  
Life decides to sew it's own seam
Fate

And it may be ziz-zagged and out of control
But in the chaos, it makes your heart whole
Life never happens like that scene in your mind
But upon close look, it’s better than you find
Sometimes you have to sit back and enjoy the ride
Sometimes you have to forgot how hard you tried
Upon that canvas was your unique work of art
But life always knows what’s deep in your heart
It isn’t about fighting the day
It’s about learning to live, come whatever may

12, 441
by David Kailer

By the time our pewter GMC Suburban pulled through the horizontal tree trunks that served as the main gates at Philmont Scout Ranch, I’d already flown cross-country for the first time, been to the highest point in the continental United States, and spent more time outside in four days than I had the rest of the summer combined. All in all, Philmont would be a breeze. Pretty impressive for a sixteen-year old.

Philmont is a Boy Scout Ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico, a Scouts-Only paradise. They might as well check an ID card on the way in for all the paperwork one has to go through to get here.

But in our colloquial use of the word, Philmont represented thirteen days of continuous camping, ten of which would be spent in the backcountry, my contact with civilization limited mostly to the seven other members of my crew.

Paperwork and administrative protocols need not apply.

The adventure started in Tent City, basecamp if you will, the beginning and end of Philmont. It’s huge, nondescript, and surprisingly impressive. Beaten, gravelly dirt spreads out from underfoot in every direction, it looks more like a scene from Afghanistan than America. The area was leveled sometime in the past, the ground’s flat, uninterrupted save by the countless rows of tents, maybe a hundred or more. They’re lined up in rows of six. Six tents, open space, six tents, open space.

Wash, rinse, repeat.
Each of these tents is identical; beige squares that blend into the sand, six feet tall, dormered roofs that look like a row of sandy dunce caps. Viewed from afar, Tent City looks like a formation of perfect little soldiers standing at attention. The only thing that breaks up the uniform appearance are a few scraggly trees here and there, short, deciduous, scranny little things with few branches and a head full of forest green leaves whose only purpose seemed to be to blow in the incessant breeze of northern New Mexico.

You might convince yourself the scene could go on forever if the Sangre de Cristo Mountains didn’t loom so close you felt you could hit them with a rock. We’d be there soon enough. After all, we didn’t travel nineteen hundred miles to look at mountains.

That night, as we were sitting around talking about the trip ahead of us, we saw a yellow school bus pulling into Tent City. After a moment or two, it disgorged a straggling mass of adolescents in formerly bright yellow t-shirts. They were now an ugly, unkempt brown, caked top and bottom with more dirt than I’d ever seen in civilized America.

Apparently that’s what ten days on the trails of Philmont did to you.

* 

Less than an hour onto the trail, I was dangling two hundred feet above a little ribbon of water. We’d just left Tent City that morning. My boots were tied to my pack, dangling somewhere below me, but I had sneakers on. The ranger had warned us to wear boots, but I didn’t want to stop and sneakers had never let me down before, until of course, I was walking beside a rockface on a trail that tilted chasm-ward, they all do in Philmont, and my feet slid off the path. I didn’t dangle in such a way that I was pulling with my arms, but I was lying so convolutedly that a future on terra firma seemed unlikely. The path was generally overgrown, trees grew out of the dirt at all angles, intersecting the path, forcing us to step over or on top of. The bark was always sharp and brittle, and it wasn’t long before my hands were red from rubbing raw against tree trunks to keep my balance. The path I slipped off wasn’t more than a foot wide, which doesn’t seem constrictive unless your pack is three feet wide and you’re not used to being wider than your body. It’s an acquired sense, one I didn’t have on day one.

The day was bright, abusively bright, the kind of bright that makes a chubby blond from Central New York want to take refuge. It was hot too, maybe ninety Fahrenheit, but not like New York hot, drier than New York, a little more comfortable. The world was painted in greens and blues and browns. Our trails were always brown dirt, each boot step kicked up a little cloud of dust wafting up my ankles from time to time. The trails were hedged by thin, wispy grass, lightest green in color. Unlike Tent City, there were a lot of trees, mostly deciduous, very pretty altogether. The leaves glinted in the sun like the countless faces of an emerald.

In training for Philmont, I’d overlooked one thing, and it bit me in the ass right from the start. If you’re going to spend time humping a backpack across mountain ranges, it’s generally a good idea to get used to having weight on your back.
I'd done lots of running, hiking, inclined walking in the months before I boarded a plane to New Mexico. But I hadn't done any of those things with any weight on my back.

It didn't take an hour for my hips to start grinding, unaccustomed to and punished by an extra fifty or more pounds. Breath deep, but labored, hips on fire, grinding with every step, even my skin felt gritty, dirt collecting on my exposed skin like paint thrown across a canvas.

In a surreal way, New Mexico is painted with more vivid colors than I ever saw in New York. Everything seems to just pop out there, the colors are brighter, more potent, the sun just a little more present, the sounds heard rather than discussed, the sense of touch kicked up several multitudes.

We hiked single-file, get-to-know-the-people-in-front-of-you-by-their-pack single file. The backpack in front of me belonged to Chuck, the upper-middle brother among four. His pack was red, fire-engine red, and tall enough that Chuck appeared to have no head. In the middle of that expanse of red was a black rectangular patch with black mesh webbing: Chuck kept all his snacks and water in there.

When we got there, our campsite was a worn away patch of dark brown dirt. Maybe it was nutrient-rich or something, but it was the color of mud, in stark contrast to the light brown dust we'd been kicking up all day. The site was dark because dozens of tall pine trees blocked out most of the sun. branches had been trimmed away to make the site hospitable, or at least negotiable. Where the sky was visible through the opaque claws of pine, it was habitually haze gray, mixed with blue. We couldn't always see the sun, but the amount of light meant we were always aware of its presence.

The clearest detail of that first day on the trail was that it hurt, every minute, every hour. It wasn't that everything hurt, or that the pain was somehow paralyzing, it was always being conscious of the fact that your legs aren't used to the extra weight. By the time we got to our first camp that evening, I was convinced there was something anatomically wrong with me. In all my months of physical preparation beforehand, I should've seen it coming.

It wasn't just pain, either. If I was already this exhausted and sore after our easiest day on the trail, how in hell was I going to manage the tougher days, with elevation gains upwards of two thousand feet? I was getting depressed, and doing so in record time. I'd have to go home early, wait for the rest of the crew in Tent City because I was too weak and too tired to keep on keeping on. Worse, what if the rest of the crew had to ditch the entire trip, thousands of dollars of gear and travel expenses because the crew minimum is eight people, and me leaving would cut them down to seven.

In the emotionally fragile state of a high-strung teenager, this amounted to the end of the world. Later that night, as we were roping up our bear-bag to keep our food and smelly stuff from being dessert for the wildlife, I asked Luke, the oldest of four brothers on the trip if he thought I wasn't ready for Philmont. I can still remember him looking around camp at the other six guys, "None of us are," he admitted with the same defeatism I felt.

That night, around a modest fire and with our packs as impromptu chairs, we talked about packing it in, walking back to the drop-off point, and catching a bus back to Tent City, then
flying the two thousand miles or so homebound.

I don’t think there was one person in our crew that didn’t consider it.

* 

We’d been on the trail a few days when our site was washed through by a flash flood. It had been a dark, drizzly day. By the time we got to our camp that night, the world seemed saturated by water and deeper in hues because of it. Everything was wet, which is something of a rarity in New Mexico when summer dryness usually leads to forest fires. The wood in the area was all soaked through and heavy with water. None of us had luck starting a fire that night, so we ate our backpackers’ dinner cold. We sat around the lifeless fire ring on uncomfortable fallen trees with patches of rotted bark telling the kind of inappropriate jokes teenagers are famous for.

Dinner had been cast aside in scorn when it started to rain again. With no fire to dry clothes and gear if they got wet, we retreated to our tents, a ring of highlighter-blue A-frame tents placed close enough for conversation at night. They were two man tents, but with several hours before darkness fell and no other options for entertainment while we passed the time, several of us crowded into my tent. It looked like a Syracuse University basketball game; angled blue tent walls contrasting with bright orange sleeping rolls, brought along to minimize the discomfort of sleeping on the ground.

Maybe four of us played cards with varying levels of interest for the next few hours, idly flipping plastic rectangles and talking about the trip, life, and eventually girls, as a group of teenage boys are wont to do. The soothing patter of raindrops on synthetic nylon soon grew to an incessant roar, to constant and demanding. It might just have been me, but I felt like nature itself had awoken to attack us, oppressing us under torrents of water and wind, so unlike the generally pleasant weather we had most of the trip. It was thrilling and frightening all at once, the rain getting so intense that kids with two or three feet of each other had to make a conscious effort be heard over the dull notes of the storm.

Perhaps the most amusing moment of that night was Mike, the third Slominski in the crew realized he’d left his tent flap open and darted from the sanctuary of my tent to go retrieve his mp3 player, only to find his tent washed several feet beyond the ring and filled with an inch or two of water. Conveniently he’d brought his sleeping gear into our tent to make himself comfortable, but I’ll never forget hearing his disembodied voice outside the tent yell, “My mp3 player!”

I don’t think it ever worked again, a victim of nature’s violent temper.

* 

Lee was suffering, in his own stoic fashion. He looked like shit. Bad, disgusting, revolting shit, exhausted, spiritless, soaked in sweat. His shirt was two distinct shades; citrus orange and sweat-stained burnt amber. Legs covered in black hair, hair colored in thick dust.

He looked entirely out of his element.

Lee is my best friend, even now. He has been for years. I’ve known him since elementary school, and he’ll probably be the best man at my wedding one day; the kind of friend anyone
would be lucky to come across.

During Philmont, Lee was my safety-net. Neither of us were in great shape, at least compared to Luke and Tom, high school seniors who’d spent their four years on the wrestling team. As long as we trudged along together, neither would stand out as weak members of the pack.

You'd think New Mexico would always be hot, especially in July. Not so. The morning we were to climb Baldy Mountain, Philmont's highest point, we broke camp at around 4:30am. This was typical, and a safety measure for getting out of the sun before the heat took its toll in the early afternoon. After a week on the trail, we were good at our jobs, and it didn't take long to stow our gear and break out daypacks for the ascent, even without the sun to give us light to move around. That night would be the only night we stayed in the same camp more than once. The day's task was to climb Baldy and come back. Even now, five years afterwards, it sounds easy enough.

We started our climb in the early morning, before the sun broke the horizon. The world was a palette of deep blues and deeper shadows, and in spite of it all, it was cold. We knew we'd be hiking for several hours, during which the sun and the temperature would both rise, so I left in just a t-shirt, assuming the movement would warm me up. It didn't. I was freezing and tired. Most of the hike was uphill, which took a toll on my legs early and often. The sweat darkening my sea-green shirt didn't help any, either. All week, heat and pain had been my enemies, and now, on our toughest day, I couldn't get warm. Maybe an hour up the trail, numbness started to creep up my arm.

Around sunrise, we stopped to eat a gourmet breakfast of trailmix and skittles, and paused on an overlook to watch the sun come up over the mountains. At the edge of the overlook was a small cluster of three or four trees growing into the side of the cliff. I defied my eternal fear of heights by eating my skittles in that grove of trees. The ground was smooth, but sloped away from the trees on either side; small rocks peaked through the light brown, powdery dirt, tripping hazards for the unwary. Because breakfast was short and quick and I never wanted to be the reason we slowed down, I threw a soft, long-sleeved brown thermal shirt over myself and my backpack. Photos from the trip show me looking like a backwardly pregnant mutant with a baby growing out of my back. It kept the chilled air off my arms, and before long I had feeling in them again, which helped my mind get back to the burning in my legs and chest.

Of all the mountains we climbed over during our seventy-five mile trek through Philmont, Baldy’s peak was the scariest. The last three hundred feet or so had no trail to follow because the shoulders were too steep for dirt to rest on, and so the final ascent was a crawl up loose gravelly stone, nothing more than pebbles that slid under your feet. And I say crawl because the angle of inclination is around fifty degrees for that last hundred yards or so, and every time I stood up, gravity felt like it was going to pull me back over my heels, down the mountainside. With nothing for my hands to hold on to, I had to thrust them between the rocks to keep my balance, constantly afraid I was going to fall off the mountain.
A benchmark is a little metallic circle with a mountain’s name, elevation, and USGS information on it. Every mountain in America has one, a little gift from the U.S. Geological Survey that says, “Congratulations, you’ve reached the top, it’s all downhill from here.” Baldy Mountain, Philmont’s highest peak, has one too. It says “Elevation above sea 12,441 feet”.

I knew I’d peaked Baldy because there was nothing above me but crystal blue sky, light wispy clouds, and the searing sun and its dry, penetrating heat. I knew I’d reached the top because I looked down, below me, and saw huge birds flying in the sky.

While I don’t remember that benchmark, I do remember a little wood-brown and bronze plaque, half-buried among the rocks. It was a memorial of a scout who’d fallen from Baldy’s shoulders and died. In my mind, that made me a survivor.

Baldy Mountain was the peak of my trip, the pinnacle, the climax. Every achievement before and after that thirty minutes or so would be held up, measured to the standard of that moment.

The USGS was right, it’s all been downhill from there.

* * *

Like all good things, my trip through Philmont eventually came to an end. We started where we began, in Tent City, accompanied this time by a strong sense of accomplishment and more than a little wistfulness. While I won’t ever forget that first hot shower after we got off the trail, modern life had lost a lot of its appeal, there isn’t a great deal of accomplishment to getting through each and every day with a television, microwave, and electronic heat. Most of us, I think, wanted to go back out. Departure was a flurry of administrative details and accounting for and packing everyone’s gear into our almost-forgotten pewter Suburban.

There is a legend among Philmont campers that if you look over your shoulder as you’re leaving and see Philmont’s iconic Tooth of Time Mountain, made famous in Lewis and Clark’s expedition, you’ll come back to Philmont one day, one way or another.

I didn’t just look, I stared.
Escape can be bliss
As can transformation
But I am out of control.
I cannot escape, cannot transform
To who I want to be
To who I have been
For you.
The old me returned
If not to stay here
If only for tonight
Then I must still throw my arms up
For a promise is a promise
And you are right, my love.
It does matter
And it still plays a role.
I still love you
And if anything is promised
It's that I always will.
Monster

I'm fallen.
I just need you here
To help me stand again
To help me fight again.
I told you once that without you
I would be lost.
Water would defeat the flame
And that was also a promise.
This promise that I made to myself
Was broken when he took me out
When he slammed me against the wall
Took control and cut my soul.
He is a monster
Trying to destroy my dreams
My future
My everything
My you
And when the sunlight faded out

Christopher Cook

And night fell upon us
I let him do it.
If not eternally
If only for tonight
Then I must still throw my arms up
For a promise is a promise
And I am left alone
Forced to wonder
Is he the monster
Or am I?
I think that pharmaceutical companies should conduct studies on the instance of medical diagnosis exacerbating illness. I can attest to the fact that having a doctor look you in the eye and explain your infirmity will only make it worse. Being handed pamphlets on coping strategies and case studies is nothing more than salt in the wound.

I’m interested in heath. Personal, holistic, well-being. Health and happiness seem interconnected to me, in the cliché propagated by the FDA. Physical health makes the brain happy, a happy brain gives you the energy to go be healthy. It logically follows that an unhappy brain sucks energy away from where it’s needed. I made a bulletin board about mental illness and assured everyone that it was a real disease, nothing to be ashamed of. Does tacking something to a wall on colorful construction paper make it true? One can hope.

I suppose it doesn’t help that this is same bulletin board where I fashioned my National Velociraptor Attack Awareness Month spectacle. Males between the ages of 18 and 25 are the demographic at highest risk for attack by velociraptor. That board had graphics. Graphics are the hallmark of irrefutable truth.

My best friend is a strong proponent of how foods affect the body. She is a vegan by force, because lactose causes her to lock herself in a bathroom for hours, and will plan meals to cheer me up if I feel yicky.

“We need something cleansing, let’s make a big fruit salad!”

The girl can down a watermelon in a single sitting. Just go to town with a spoon. Scientifically, however, fruit isn’t cleansing. Fruit sits in your gut and rots. You want cleansing, eat some beans. And then take a shot of wheatgrass. It’s revolting in the mouth, but that shit will make you regular like nobody’s business.

I am always particularly annoyed when I watch TV and see commercials for depression medications.

“Who does depression hurt?”

“It’s going to hurt you if you don’t back off and stop trying to sell me your happy pills.”

“Where does depression hurt?”

“Your face, I tend to swing high.”

But then they show images of sad dogs and neglected children and the lack of energy thing kicks in again. Interesting marketing that the tear-inducing thirty seconds can make me believe I need the drugs.

Slightly less degrading is the Cymbalta bubble guy that walks down penciled streets to poppy jazz. Is that what Cymbalta will do for me? Remove my extremities and engorge my cranium? It might make for a nice change of pace, or at least give me a visible excuse for the fact that I don’t go to class anymore. In this instance, I would be wary of the generic.
High Ground

I got a pet recently. No one can argue against loving an animal, not even my cynical self. His name is Yoshi. He is a blue parakeet. The internet says that he likes to be up high. Heights make him happy. A wire cage and some paper to shred, trapped, confined, redundant, as long as it is up high, he’s happy. I copied him and lofted my bed. I’ve found that I sleep better up high, cuddling down three feet from the ceiling. Hold the high ground, it’s easier to fend off your enemies. Yoshi knows.

Where does the line blur? Physically, we’re safer, Yoshi and I, up high. Should I stay up high emotionally? Mentally? Since I started sleeping again, my emotions are easier to control. But they are still up high. An ozone layer where the bad metaphor is that abandonment and lies and loneliness are the CFC’s that fester and propagate and dissolve. Ozone on the ground is toxic, did you know that? Strong emotions are apparently toxic to my REM cycles.

So maybe for the sake of health and happiness it is better to stay up high. I can sit in my bed hunched against the ceiling eating beans and wheatgrass trying to figure out how to handle loss, hope, depression, love and ultimately deciding it’s just too hard before I fall asleep happy that Yoshi is happy, emulating his simple, redundant pleasure and getting through days so I can focus on surviving nights.

I started wearing heels and makeup more often. “Any Cosmo girl knows”... there are life lessons to be found in Legally Blond. Mascara gives the impression that I am awake and heels fix my posture. Shoulders back, guns out girls, you gotta flaunt what you got. My feet miss my slippers and it is now hopefully clear that I would do anything to stop feeling this way.

Love is irrational, overwhelming. Is it better to love unconditionally and fully give yourself to a person or rather to withhold a portion of the self and so not lose something irretrievable?

“I want you to let me love you.” Is this something I should have to ask permission for? Man up. Being loved is a good thing. Of course, I really can’t say I know given recent events.

And later with another: “I think you are missing something.” Something missing could have been the self I ended up losing. Does this make sense? Is it all my fault? Knowing would ease the void, result in the older, stronger, wiser approach I suppose I am supposed to be developing.

There are two camps of thought. The first follows the it is better to have loved and lost concept, which makes me reflective, nostalgic, perhaps grateful for the experience, the opportunity. This is rare. This is faltering and above all this is false. The second camp, the dominating belief which provides the anger to counteract the depression follows more of a fuck you and your little dog too mantra. Inappropriate cultural references make me happy.

I am trying to be a crunchy- the colloquial term for new age, granola-munching hippies. Convince myself that another thing that makes me happy is yoga and the vegan lifestyle involving large melons and spoons. If I don’t take the prescription, supposedly diet and exercise will fix my head.
High Ground

Caitlin Orbanek

Natural endorphins and the B-vitamin spectrum. But organic food is ridiculously expensive. Water sources in the United States are not regulated against farm waste, so my apples and soybeans are grown by the antibiotic-laden poop water that runs off every dairy farm in the state.

Clearly these battles cannot be won.

For as long as I cared to wait, Yoshi seemed lonely. I saw too much of a reflection. Sitting, regarding, sleeping and sitting. So I bought him a friend. Oh, that it should be so easy. One is not enough, is never enough, and the green companion I affectionately dubbed Toad has brought out Yoshi's voice. My sleep is now affected not by the emotions, I've since given up on those, but the chatter and tweeping and chirping that testify to my pets' happiness.

They're happier together. I've started an experiment where I let them out of the cage. One will flutter to the bookcase and the other to the floor. Four feet apart they cannot find each other and so chip, piercingly in tandem, until I take Yoshi on my finger and Toad on my thumb (his preference, I'm not yet sure why) and bring them together to explore my desk.

I put Yoshi back in the cage one time before Toad, and Toad launched himself off the desk after us only to slam into the dresser front. His wings are still clipped, he can't make it. Been there, buddy. They tell me it grows back. I'll believe it when I see it.

They snub the vegetables I try to force myself to eat. The older, wiser thing. This they know. They need each other and I am simply the third wheel, with my wheatgrass and my watermelons, the adjunct that provides the food and rotates the toys.

If I took the drugs, would my toys rotate?

I can only conclude that Yoshi and Toad together are an anomaly. They rub beaks and preen each other, regardless of the fact that they are both male (little birdy babies would clearly be too much). They're annoyingly co-dependent and one should not envy parakeets. I like to think that the wisdom I've gained will keep me from slamming into dresser-fronts. I'm happy that they're happy and I value my own independence, but, when looking at the small orange bottle on my desk, I know that given their option, I'd take it.
Pomegranate
by Allison Snyder

Those same seeds which Persephone tasted
I now feast on for myself.
Rare it is, that I have the luxury
To enjoy these small drops of death.
Their deep red color, like blood
Glistening crimson, in the sunlight
Release bursts of the best flavor imaginable!
It must be the Gods who keep me unable
to properly describe their divine delicacy.
Even thought to be that forbidden fruit
From the garden of Eden.
All the more tempting.
No wonder it was thought to be the chosen food
Of the deity of death and destruction!
It should honor Rimmon to be
Named after such a glorious, succulent, notorious object.
If ever Hades needed a bait to lure anyone,
He chose the best;

Allison Snyder

If I had been in Persephone’s place,
I would be gone with Hades in an instant
And would never have come back
To the land of the living;
   My thirst for its sweet nectar
   Has not yet been quenched.
Kwasinaboo
by Tonya Burrows

The bottle broke; smashed into a thousand fragments that glittered as they fell across the puddle of blood soaking into the thirsty brown earth. Yet somehow, I just didn’t think that was what really happened. I gazed up at Carl. He still held the neck of the bottle raised above his head. Jagged edges flashed in the hot July sun. A bead of sweat dripped down his flushed face as he lowered his arm. He looked at me like he was lost, then his gaze dropped to the dead man on the ground that we knew only as Cowboy.

“What happened?” he whispered.

I opened my mouth to reply, but I didn’t know the answer. I shut it again. A shudder shook down my spine and I got to my feet. “Let’s get out of here, Carl.”

“Did—” He stared down at the blood in awe. “Did I kill him?”

It sure looked like he had. Dark red splotches spattered his T-shirt and jeans, and he clung to what was left of the bottle like a man devoted to it. I felt lightheaded. It sure looked like he had committed murder, but I just didn’t know.

* * *

“Here we are, fellas,” Cowboy said, swinging a leg off his big brown horse. As his snakeskin boots hit the ground, he took off his authentic ten-gallon hat and wiped sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his brown Western-embroidered shirt. Everything about the man was brown. Horse, hat, shirt, his weathered skin, his long hair tied back at the nape of his neck with bale twine. He was probably the biggest man I had ever seen, all hard-packed muscle and sinew, a true-and-blue cowboy born into the wrong century. His dark features were sharp and severe, creased with years of hard work in the sun, and even the smallest smile seemed it would shatter his face. His eyes were a solid dark brown, nearly black. They glittered as if he had a fantastic secret or two.

“This is the burial ground?” I asked, sliding off my horse and patting her spotted back. As a journalist for a National Geographic-type magazine, I often had to ride horses to get from site to site, and over the past eight years, I’ve become adept. Unfortunately, Carl, my timid and awkward photographer, never managed to master the art. The man was a wiz with a camera—I swear he could capture feelings on film and not just objects—but put him in a saddle and it was pathetic to watch.

Carl had one leg twisted around in his stirrup and one on the ground, and his horse kept walking in circles as he hopped along beside it, struggling to free himself. I let out an exasperated breath and reached out to steady the animal. He yanked himself free and gave me a dorky, crooked smile as he shoved his glasses back into place.

I just shook my head at him and turned back to Cowboy. “Do you know any of the history associated with this place?”

He grunted. “Injuns were buried here after white folk came through an’ slaughtered ’em all.”
I sighed. This article was shaping up to be a dull one. I knew it was going to be from the moment it came across my desk, but try telling my boss that. He had run an ad in all the papers in Texas searching for interesting local landmarks. When he got the call about the Indian burial ground, he was practically salivating at the thought of the story. Personally, I didn’t see what was so great about the place. It was nothing but a dusty, flat plain scattered with chipped, weathered stones. Tumbleweeds rolled across the burial ground, roaming now in place of the long-forgotten buffalo. One bounded over a sunbathing snake and it hissed at having its nap disturbed.

Jeeze, I thought, welcome to Tombstone.

“Get pictures of those,” I told Carl, then again turned my attention to Cowboy. “There’s no local history I can include in my story?”

Cowboy slapped a hand against his dirt-caked jeans. “Well, shoot. There ain’t nuttin’ like that here. It’s the middle of the desert.”

I almost groaned; had to bite down hard on the inside of my cheek to stop it from slipping out. In my line of work, nothing hurt a career more than proclaiming a place as haunted. You might as well start writing up “will work for food” signs because you’d lose any credibility you started out with—which, for me, wasn’t much. I used to be one of the top journalists in the country—winning awards, schmoozing with the elite at black-tie charity events—until someone accused me of writing a false article. Thing was, the story was absolutely true. Okay, mostly true. So I fudged some of the finer details. What?

It needed some spice, a bit of a flavorful kick. Nobody can fault me for it. I sold more papers in one day than had been sold in a year. I should still be living the high-life right now, instead of standing in a haunted hundred-year-old graveyard, in the middle of the rusty desert with the fireball sun beating down on me.

“I can’t write myths or ghost stories,” I said to Cowboy, trying hard to keep irritation out of my voice. Didn’t do a good enough job at it, though. His eyes narrowed in insult and I explained belatedly, “I have to have solid facts.”

“It ain’t no myth. It’s the godforsaken truth.” He waved a huge, craggy hand in a dismissive gesture at me. “Eh, you city-slickers don’t know nuttin’. You act all big an’ tough but I betcha you git out here an’ you run inta Kwasinaboo, the Soul Catcher, you’d damn near piss yourself an’ cry for your mama.”

I closed my eyes, rubbed my forehead with my thumb and index finger. A headache was starting to build there. “Soul Catcher?” I echoed and wondered if this man could have thought of a more cliché name for his ghost.

“Um-hm. He takes people’s souls, puts ‘em in his silver bottle, and leaves the rest of ‘em as zombies out here in the desert to die.”

“Mac,” Carl called from the middle of the graveyard. “You want me to get the snake?”

“I don’t care, Carl,” I answered, not turning to look at him. This ghost story intrigued me despite my skepticism and I looked into Cowboy’s black eyes. There was something captivating in the way they sparkled, the way the color snaked
Kwasinaboo

through them like an oil spill slithering in the sun, destroying whatever it touched. You could get lost in those mysterious, labyrinth-like eyes.

When I spoke to him, my voice sounded strained even to my own ears and I wasn’t quite sure why. “So you’re telling me you are a grown man and you believe these make-believe stories?”

Cowboy nodded, but his eyes didn’t leave mine. “Yes, sirree. And you might better believe ’em too, ’cause Soul Catcher takes a fancy to city folk.”

“Mac!” Carl called.

I ignored him. “Do you use that line on all tourists?”

“No tourists come here. Few years back a coupla kids came out here a’lookin’ for a good time, an’ they weren’t never seen again. No bodies found or nuttin’.”

“Mac!” Carl shouted again.

I stared at Cowboy, watched the black in his eyes ebb and flow like the night tide.

“My mouth felt dry, stuffed with cotton balls. I ripped my gaze away from Cowboy and my headache increased tenfold. The pain was so intense I almost staggered when I spun to face Carl.
“What’s this?”

“Oh, real cute,” I muttered, joining them. I snatched the bottle away from my photographer. “The Soul Catcher with the silver bottle, huh? And after you reeled me in with that story, you were going to whip this out, right? Thought you’d scare yourself up some city slickers today.”

“Give me that,” he said, his raven eyes never leaving the bottle.

I held it up over my head, then swung it side to side and watched his eyes follow. “What do you have in here, anyway? Bet it’s a little nip of Jack. After a day like today I sure could use—”

I popped off the top and a cold blast of air exploded out, knocked me on my ass. I scrambled crab-backwards and stared as it jerked on the ground, kicking up clouds of sunburned dirt. The air tingled with something I couldn’t name, a tension or power that raised gooseflesh on my arms and made the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention. Cowboy’s features contorted with an ugly, feral rage that I’ve never seen on any human face, and that I never care to again.

He lunged at me, screaming as he pinned me down and wrapped his massive hands around my neck. I thrashed, kicked to get free, but it was no use. He grabbed my chin and held it in his claw, bruising my jaw. Helpless, completely trapped, I did all I could do. I closed my eyes.

He murmured something soft and lulling to me, as if he was singing me to sleep, and before I could stop myself my eyelids popped open again.

Tonya Burrows

His ink-like eyes locked on mine, tore into me. Something ripped inside, seeped from my eyes into his, but I couldn’t break my gaze away. Behind his head, the sky swirled awesome colors I never knew existed. I felt my body falling away and I moved up, up into his obsidian eyes. He smiled at me, the slinking smile of a crocodile before he bites your arm off—then the smile faded. His face twisted with confusion and his ebony pupils expanded in surprise, drowning out the whites of his eyes. I swear I saw thousands of tortured faces in the brilliant colors whirling above his head before shielding my eyes with my arm.

Cowboy’s back arched and his arms stretched out at his sides. His mouth opened to form a scream, but only a choked gurgle came out as the faces forced their way inside his body. He convulsed like he was having a seizure and I turned away, squeezed my eyes shut and prayed this wasn’t the end. My heart beat a drum-roll in my chest and I couldn’t seem to catch a full breath of the hot, dry air. Sweat swam down my spine.

Then the power broke in a thunderclap and everything slammed back to normal.

“Mac?” Carl whispered.

I looked up. He stood over Cowboy, the broken remains of the silver bottle in his hand, blood splattered over his clothes, and a look of utter confusion stamped on his bony face. Beads of sweat dripped off his long nose and his glasses hung cockeyed and broken from one ear.

“What happened?” he whispered, blinking owlishly at me. I opened my mouth to reply, but I didn’t know the answer.
Mr. Class of 2008
by Elizabeth Sauchelli

Part I: You used to talk louder
You were never a hero
the only shoes to fill were your own
filling a room with your presence
the way people really listened to what you had to say
washed up two years after graduation, only leaving
your tomb to buy the drugs that got you so strung out

Humanity fell away
Pity isn't needed
And no one ever gave you the kick in the ass you
needed to get past the Class of 2008

Counting on you to be something more
People used to listen when you talked
Mr. Class of 2008

Part II: I guess this is where the problem lies

Running from the roles you could not fulfill, never thinking your back up plan would be the hardest to hold onto

I didn’t expect to see you on the wall reserved for drug addicts and Class A jerks, trading your craft for the cheap jokes and chuckles it was worth

musical feet

A skill that was always envied, an instrument left untreated

We stumbled for you in the dark and I gave up hope you’d ever amount to much more than that

One day you’ll reminisce and remember everything that never was, all the opportunities you might have made

head up in a cloud of smoke

better left alone that way

all you could have been, you never really saw

Patrones
by Steven Kochems

The floors of Oliver’s Bar were scummy and wet with stale beer. On dry spots, your feet would stick because they didn’t own a mop, the owners depended on the snow or rain to be tracked in on the feet of whatever lost soul wandered into their shithole. Or at least that’s how I saw it. Don’t get me wrong, I woulda left Hell a long time ago if I could’ve, woulda tried to find my piece of the American Dream. But this wasn’t a decent place where decent folk could just leave. In fact, the only decent thing I’d ever seen in that dump was one picture I kept behind the bar, and I kept that to myself. We had no draft and no top shelf, just assorted booze. It was all we ever needed for our so called “customers,” if you could call them that. I never did. For as long as I’d been working there I’d never seen an honest soul in that neighborhood, which made Hell a tough climate to escape. At best we’d have a meth-head or some other junkie stop in, wondering if we’re holding. I didn’t do that shit; I still don’t do that shit. Not after the stories I’ve heard. Especially not after the story this dude named Hector told me one time. It’s an odd story even for this setting, no doubt, but the lesson is the same.

Back in 98’ I was in the bar all by my lonesome when that dude Hector came in here with a briefcase and a Frosty’s Ice Cream Truck hat. He set the case down between the stool and the bar and then threw the hat in the garbage, it must’ve been a give away for whoever was hunting him. I stood at the end of the bar, trying not to watch this pachuco catch his breath and calm his nerves. That’s how you get shot. He signaled to me and I did the cool bartender move of still drying the glass while walking over.
Patrones

"Two Patrones, por favor." I nodded and set the glass down. He looked out the windows. I'd seen that peer through the drapes before, the cops were after him. I set down the two shots and continued wiping the bar because in these delicate situations, you gotta be predictable, like every typical bartender in every typical movie. It was like tip-toeing through landmines, but if the worst ever got worse, the double barrel was racked right in front of me. He threw down the two shots and pointed for two more.

"Sure thing," I said to him and brought the bottle over. Normally, that's a good way to get your ass robbed, but his eyes weren't desperate like a junkie and they weren't fearful like a fugitive. It was more like he was a man on his death bed, trying to make peace of his whole situation. I poured two more and he threw them back. He pointed yet again.

"Sure thing," I said again, "You know these are five bucks a shot right?"

He never looked me in the eye. Most people would flip out in this shitty neighborhood, but he kept calm and opened his briefcase. He threw down a Benny Franklin and put the case away.

"Keep em' coming." He said and headed back to the window to check the streets again. I nodded and pulled out a glass of my own. Three Patronés. He turned back and saw me holding one of the glasses up.

"This one's on the house pal," I said. He nodded and drank the shot with me. "Cops after you huh?" I prodded and he stared me down, holding the second shot in his hand. I definitely broke a cardinal rule here, and I knew it, but I was only fucking 23. I trusted the world a bit more, especially the normal world. He didn't seem like the usual fuck ups that I had to be wary of, or at least that's how I rationalized trusting that he wouldn't slit my throat for asking such a stupid question. At worst he was a contract killer and at best he was a CEO who robbed his corporation. I figured I could talk my way out of anything in between.

"Mind your business barkeep." He replied and threw back the shot. I nodded and stepped back to wiping the bar.

"Cops don't come in this neighborhood, especially not into this bar."

"Oh yeah and why's that?"

"You're in gangland territory now homeboy, they gotta have a damn good reason to want to come in here looking for you. Swat teams and shit, no jokes."

"I'd be so lucky if the cops caught me."

He had the sound of defeat in his voice, anyone who wanted to get pinched would. It seemed he had nothing to lose, but his voice carried remorse. I was curious, much too curious for my own good. I knew I had to figure out what he'd done, so I made an offering.

"So what'd you do?" I asked, setting down the Patron in front of him. He stared at it for a moment and glanced back at me. His eyes weren't deciphering my motive so much as they were wondering if he could drink straight from the bottle. His hand slowly moved in and he uncapped it.
Patrones

"If I'm gonna tell this story, we're gonna need another bottle." He drank and I nodded. With one exhale, his breath filled the bar with tequila and a hint of menthol. I cringed and listened. "A while back I began this lil' operation a few towns up. I'd done some jobs back in Mexico that had gone awry, so I was in on this alone and it worked. You probably know that heroin was a big market in this area, but the cops had got smart and cracked down. They didn't have to get real smart though; gringo drug dealers in that town were stupid, peligroso. I knew it could easily be my town, but they still had U.C.'s everywhere, even after the drug lords were busted. So I got a cover job and took it mobile."

"You were a door to door heroin dealer?"

He looked at me as if I had insulted him. I wondered if it was the comment or simply the fact that I had interrupted him. I prayed for the former.

"No." He took a long drink and refreshed the stale air with prime tequila. "I sold good drugs. Vicodin, Oxycontin, even some Dilaudid. The good shit for this neighborhood, one that was littered with alcoholics and drug addicts, people not worthy to raise children. You got any kids?" I shook my head and he reached in his pocket. It was a knee-jerk reaction for me to jump back, until I saw his wallet and the pictures he pulled out.

"It's a beautiful thing. I got two hijas back in Mexico." They were twins, beautiful young girls that were unlike anything I'd ever seen. "I couldn't afford to bring them over to America though and most immigrants get paid shit. But I was working on it, Mexico is like Hell on Earth."
they’d hire a *spic* like me for.”

I shook my head in amazement. It was awful, immoral, manipulative, and god damn brilliant. “Couldn’t you have just delivered pizza?”

“Hmm…” he pondered. “Never thought of that.”

We both had a chuckle and poured shots.

“Anyways, I decided that the kids could be beneficial because they could get the drunks and the druggies that were in the houses out of the houses and to my truck. Plus the iced cream was in there already so I might as well. It did pretty good for about a year, I was getting regular customer’s and *mi amigo* who knew the pharmacy truck routes enjoyed his slice off the top, everything was good.”

“It worked for a while because I stayed smart. I knew there were some decent people in that neighborhood who had suspicions about what was going on, but I was safe and never sold to them. There were a few regulars; *Señor* Lexington always got his 500 milligrams of Oxycontin and a choco-taco for his son. *Señora* Rohrbach always asked for two boxes of Lortab’s, but I knew she’d try and sell them herself so I’d limit her weekly numbers. My favorite though was *Señor* Cooper. He was the last one on my route and loved his Dilaudid, all 15 tablets he’d get twice a week. And his daughter Lucy, she would ride up on her pink bicycle and her beautiful brown eyes and reminded me of *mis hijas*. I always let her have a fudge pop for free because it always made her smile.”

He stared at the picture and his eyes watered. I poured two more shots and we clinked glasses. I was starting to feel a buzz but he didn’t seem phased by the alcohol, it was like water to him.

“So what happened?”

“Economics. I kept my supply steady and the demand increased. The environment changed and I tried to stay the same. The drugs may have been legal they really had a hold on some of those scumbags. Some wanted higher dosages and others wanted bigger quantities. I wasn’t about to kill anyone so I wouldn’t give high doses and I damn sure wasn’t gonna give more out so some *imbecil* could risk my operation by selling it on the street. So my good rapport went down the shitter. Hostility, anger, threats, they all started coming my way, but *Señor* Cooper tried to keep them all calm. He had a way with his drunken lips that could move a mob in one direction or another and I was thankful that I had a good customer like him around.”

Hector sat for a few moments. It looked as if he were reminiscing, or maybe regretting. I offered him another shot and he nodded.

“So the economics pushed you out?”

“No, though I’d thought about leaving because of them and I’d wished I had. One afternoon Lexington decided his Oxycontin was more important than little Billy’s choco-taco. It broke the boy’s heart, so I gave him one on the house. It outraged his father, not for handing his son something he should earn or filling him full of terrible foods, but because I never gave him anything for free. I took the pills back and he tried to jump through my window like *un perro loco*. I fought him off and drove faster than normal. Before I knew it, the
whole neighborhood was chasing down my white truck and its colorful depictions of happy children and iced cream. They thought I was skipping out on them."

"Wow."

"Yeah. I thought about packing it in, ya know, cutting my ties before shit got any crazier. But I thought I could hold out just a few more weeks, I was so close to being able to set mis hijas up with a place of their own here. Hopefully something close to campus."

I watched him grab the unopened bottle and ignore his shot. He took a large swig and began to waiver his balance.

"You okay man?"

"Yeah, it's just starting to hit me. Here." He handed me the briefcase. "Put this behind the bar, just in case." I reluctantly took the case and set it below the double barrel.

"So later that week I was on my route when Lexington shows up again. He wants his shit from a few days before and his shit for today, but I tell that fucker he's not getting anything if he can't calm down. The discussion, hell, the argument I'd hoped for wasn't there, instead he started wailing on my truck with a baseball bat, the bastard. He planned for me to say no. As I pulled away the other neighbors converged on my truck like zombies. I hit the peddle faster and they chased the "pop goes the weasel" tune that increased as my speed did. Some even had guns, blasting holes into truck and shattering my mirrors. I pulled around the corner and thought I'd made my escape. But then I looked behind me."

He began to waiver again and took another swig of the bottle. I could hear a commotion coming down the road, unlike the normal commotion of gang territory. I held his shoulders and he pulled his head up. He gulped and nodded like it took until just now for him to accept whatever was to come next.

"What was behind you?"

"Nothing. Not one person had reached the corner yet. I turned back around and saw Lucy on her bike, in the road. I hit the breaks and got out of the car to check on her, but her brown eyes were lifeless. Cooper came out and saw her pink bike mangled. He pulled me up from her limp body and shook me furiously but I couldn't feel a thing. Cooper fell on his daughter and cried out as the mob came around the corner. I thought for a moment to let them take me, rip me to shreds and accept it. But that really wouldn't solve anything, that wouldn't bring Lucy back, and it wouldn't give mis hijas a better future. So I got in the truck and drove. But now I'm too drunk and I hear them coming."

I looked out the window, like a man running from the police, and saw a mob of civilians tearing his truck parked at the end of the street apart. Some had gone inside to take drugs out while others poured gasoline on and prepared a torch. The blaze lit up the streets and a few looked to see me peering out the window.

He stared at the picture of his girls on the bar right up until they came in and grabbed him. I told Hector to grab the double barrel while I locked the door, but he must've been too drunk, or maybe it was what he wanted. I was clubbed with a nine iron once the doors came down and woke up when the sun rose. The report I'd read that morning said a Mexican had been found
outside of Oliver's Bar tied to a telephone pole with a heap of bloodied stones at his feet.

When I woke I could feel the bruise across my jaw from the clubbing I took. My head throbbed, though I thought that may be more from the tequila than anything. I peeled my body from the sticky floor and was surprised to see the bar mostly intact, or at least as put together as it normally was. Up on the bar was one empty bottle of Patrón and one half empty, with three shot glasses nearby, two still full. I went behind the bar to find the picture of Hector's hijas sitting on the ground. When I picked it up I noticed his briefcase was still here. I opened the case and found it was littered with cash. I could get up outta this dump, I'd thought, get a nice studio in the city, maybe write a sitcom or two. Maybe then I'd meet a nice girl and settle down, live the normal life outside of gangland.

I drank the two shots and hated every moment of it. The taste lingered in my mouth for some time and to this day I can still taste it. That money wouldn't be my ticket outta Hell. It was meant for true beauty. The only thing I was entitled to keep was the picture of Hector's hijas. And that has been a good enough prize anyway.

**Party Time**  
**Katie Scutt**

Gather round for a beat communion.  
Raise a glass  
A toast to our guides  
Drink deeply  
the vinegar of life.  
Corroding your core,  
With aching warmth  
As those hidden connections light up  
And blast off fireworks  
of blinding brilliance  
Illuminating everything.  
All laid bare in uncensored beauty.  
Do you feel it?  
Can you see?  
Look at blackout  
His eyes so wild  
They howl for freedom  
And Seamus there  
Tickle his diaphragm  
And see how he laughs  
Party Boy on the balcony
Party Time

Exhaling smoky confessions
See the man across the way
Keeping an eye on his neighbors

They all scream for revolution
Shouting
Let's set the world on fire
And sight see while it burns
Let's sink great fangs in the fabric of time
And tear the night apart

Beer pong next door
Did the beats play pong?
Quarters?
Kings?
Does Jun San carry a flask beneath her monk gear?
A special brew of liquid peace
To spike the tea of senators and governors
And CIA surveillance teams
Does she slip them a shot of secret wisdom?
A splash of color on their whitewashed brains

Katie Scutt

My shoe is on steroids.
That isn't your shoe.
Wildcard you crazy bastard
Lurking in the closet
He prepares for the attack
As the unaware victim emerges
Spagett!
Wildcard bitches!
That never gets old.
Spagettied out of bed
Hit the floor writhing
Laughing tears
Out of control

Drink too much.
Smoke too much.
Live too much?
Never.

Goodnight Charlie Plymell
Party Time

You dirty old man
Sweet dreams peace crane lady
And you Buddhist Monk
Forever Sauntering
Hope you have sturdy shoes
Rest well Jack Kerouac
And all of Lowell’s lonely

It’s dark and quiet
Strange how peaceful this night is
I want to shatter the stillness
To shout, shriek, scream
Cry out in heart stopped agony
But everyone’s asleep
And I should be too.
Philosophies in Charity
by Marissa Hill

While helping people applying for food stamps, I met a small woman with white hair and a sun creased face. She looked from the papers arrayed on the coordinator’s desk to a small auburn bear facing her from the only open space left by the forms and documents.

As she lifted it, and ran her knarled fingers across the blank plastic eyes, she asked in a clear voice, “What is your name?”

The coordinator’s nails paused their stampede on her keyboard and she spoke in the bear’s silence: "It doesn’t have a name."

“Oh,” the woman whispered, her hands stilled, eyes wide and blinking. She touched the speechless bear’s nose and said, “If you do not have a name, no one can hurt you.”

Instead of making another set of copies, I paused and looked around at the papers that reduced this woman to an “applicant” and her life, both past and present, to a series of confidential numbers: income, expenses, savings.

I said nothing as I walked, mouth dry, to the copy machine.
Philosophies in Charity

Her husband’s death certificate, creased and torn from decades of folding and unfolding, could not tell me the years they spent raising children, or the nights they had spent in each other’s arms.

Had she never been given a name could the world still ignore her life in favor of calculation, because all there would be to speak of her existence is her existence?

If she had never been given a name would the man that married her have known her to be any different than the billions of other women whose names he did not know?

Without a name can anyone make you nothing? Without a name can anyone see you as something?

Without a name can anyone love you?

the final figures
As I returned with the duplicates and the original held carefully, the coordinator was typing the final figures into the online application. The woman was tucking away the other documents I made copies of, one by one.
Philosophies in Charity

As I handed her the fragile certificate
her blue eyes smiled at me,
her cold hands wrapped around mine.

"Thank you."

The Escape
by Phil Marcus

IDC Terax, Spring 2306

Over one hundred light years from the frontlines of the Imperial-Mech War, the moon known as Terax orbited a ringed gas giant and journeyed around two stars in the Tallesax System. The inhospitable nature of all the planets made naturally evolving humanoid life impossible. The nearest cargo vessel route was over ten light years away and there were few stars in this corner of the Empire. The nearest system was Ronnar at twenty light years away. Terax was small enough that listening post officers on the other side of the border did not bother to monitor it.

The moon was slightly larger than a typical one, but it was dense enough for Earth-like gravity. The atmosphere was within normal parameters for humanoid creatures. Roughly a quarter of the moon had jungle, while the rest was an arid wasteland where only the toughest creatures could survive, such as the Eletian desert eagle (a ferocious predatory bird). The inhospitable conditions made it the ideal location for a penal colony. On a plain in the northern hemisphere was the Imperial Detention Center at Terax. A circular arrangement of buildings, the camp was surrounded by plasma turrets that kept people in. It was a perfect facility to hide those who the Imperial Elite Shocktrooper Corps, or IESC (pronounced like "Isaac"), perceived as immediate threats to the Empire.

The extremely hot water seemed to be hitting at light speed. Completely naked, Nicole Hawkins was doing her best to suppress the sheer pain of the water. The "decontamination process" was more like torture, one of the things Terrans took
The Escape

great pleasure in performing. It had been two centuries since the fanatics left Earth; the exiles had since reverted to the deep core of humanity: violence, brutality, bigotry, efficiency. Ironically, it was said that after they left, the Terrans underwent genetic modification to the point they could no longer be classified as human.

At last Nicole could not hold it in and she screamed. After a few more seconds, the stream was finally deactivated. Two black-clad shocktroopers entered the chamber. She could not see their faces, which were obscured by masks. One of the shocktroopers waved a scanner around her body and turned to his partner.

“The subject is decontaminated. Dry her now.”

At that moment, desert-like wind began blowing up from the floor. Ripples formed on Nicole’s skin. This time she did not scream; the water seemed to have swept away all the pain. She thought of Earth, a world she had not set foot on in six years. Still, it was the only planet she could really call “home”.

With Nicole barely able to stand once she was dried, the shocktroopers dragged her out of the decon chamber and into the adjoining hallway, where they then threw her to the ground. The coldness of the metal floor was comforting for a moment. Another door opened, and Nicole watched as her brother, Justin, was brought out as well. Immediately she embraced him, with no consideration that they were both completely naked.

“It’s okay. I’m still here,” whispered Nicole into Justin’s ear as she embraced him. The shocktroopers silently watched.

After another short period, a third door opened. The shocktroopers brought the two to their feet as an officer entered the chamber. They could not believe their eyes. For the first time, they saw a Terran up close. Very few of the rumors back home were true. The Terran did not have a gigantic forehead. He did not have a sixth digit on each hand. He did have two distinct ridges on the forehead. Other than that, he appeared much like normal humans.

“I am IESC Colonel Klarid, commanding officer of Imperial Detention Center Terax. You are here because you are enemies of the Imperial Territories. You are free to move about the facility. If you attempt to break through the perimeter, you will be killed by the automated defense system. Do as you are told, and you will stay alive.”

“Wait, aren’t there laws against arresting minors?” asked Justin.

The Colonel smiled. He silently walked over to him, with a glare that easily intimidated the teenager. Klarid suddenly brandished his pistol and clocked Justin on the head. Nicole grabbed him before he could fall to the ground.

“Well, human, the Empire has no laws saying minors cannot be detained. Also, you may only be sixteen, but here that would not make you a minor. Corporal, provide them with clothing then bring them to the surface.”

“Yes, Colonel.”

The two men in orange jumpsuits sat playing Devian Squares near their hut. James Tyran’s dark face bore the signs of many battles, from both before and during the Mech Wars. His upper ridge was broken during the Jannitem Offensive.
The Escape

He received the deep cut on his right cheek at Stadinburg. Mikhail Andropov's face bore fewer signs; his scars were elsewhere on his body. There was a laser burn on his left shoulder from the Winter Campaign. The Battle of Borem X took most of the skin on his right arm.

"Assault Position L-61," said Mikhail. With an automatic success, he moved his piece onto the position.

"Withdraw from J-12 to H-11," replied James.

Mikhail's pieces were on the offensive. His position seemed to be unbreakable.

"Combine assault from K-44 and L-32 on M-17," said James with a smile.

"Sir, that's a mistake."

"I got to be an officer before you, ki-spinner. I know my moves."

"You haven't called me that since we got out of basic."

James rolled his chance sticks. Mikhail put his hand onto his face. The roll was successful and his strongest unit was no more.

"Do you wish to capitulate?"

"I can rally my pieces and..." Mikhail's voice trailed off as James moved a unit right onto Mikhail's home square.

"Devian Vetoria."

"I'll get you one of these days, sir."

Phil Marcus

At that moment, the loudspeakers began playing the anthem. Like clockwork, it was time for the latest news from the frontlines.

"Special Announcement from the Emperor's Headquarters on April 12, 2306, the High Command of the Imperial Armed Forces reports. Last night, the Imperial Army renewed its offensive against the Mech Infantry."

The report continued for nearly twenty minutes. Every day for the last three years, the High Command would report on the situation of all frontline activities. When he came to power twenty years earlier, Emperor Talon had vowed to extend the Terrans' influence throughout the galaxy. First, they conquered the so-called "independent systems" (worlds not allied with the Federation or the Empire). Now, the Imperial Military was invading the Confederated Alliance, the territory of the mechanical creatures. So far the Federation was staying out of the war, but a good portion of humans knew that they would be next.

James and Mikhail simply began rearranging their pieces for another game. No matter what the News Ministry was saying, the war was still going badly. Invading the independent systems proved rather easy for the Empire. The Mechs were different. Those machines were able to resupply much more quickly at the front. Every year, the Imperial Fleet made a little progress towards Mecha Prime. However, it was clear that it would take a massive thrust into Confederate space to capture the home world, an offensive which was becoming less and less likely.
The Escape

“Last night, long-range Quad Gliders penetrated deep into Imperial Space in several locations. Armed with high-yield cold fusion reactors, they targeted mostly non-military centers in the coreward and antispinward sectors of the Empire. A high number of civilians on Keviter and Fennikis II were killed.”

Mikhail looked up at the loudspeaker.

“That concludes today’s broadcast from the Imperial Armed Forces.”

A sense of shock and misery began filling Mikhail. The Mechs penetrated deep into the Empire and attacked Keviter, his home.

“That may be it.”

“You don’t know that, Mikhail. They may have been off-world. We also don’t know which population center was hit.”

“Does it matter? We’re on some God-forsaken world at the edge of known space. They might as well be dead. I might as well be dead.”

The turbo-lift door at the main structure opened. James and Mikhail saw the two newest prisoners enter their world. The young girl and boy were wearing blue jumpsuits. At a detention center, everyone wears a colored jumpsuit based on why you were arrested. Orange is for Imperial citizens who committed crimes against the state, green for aliens, and blue for non-Imperial citizens (usually people from the Federation).

“Mikhail, looks like we have some Federation types here.”

“I wonder how a human was able to get this far out.”

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Phil Marcus

“Maybe we should ask them.”

Colonel Klarid directed his troops to set up a display stand. He then motioned for the humans to stand on it. With little choice, Nicole and Justin stood so they could be seen by the entire camp.

“Prisoners, you may have stolen, you may have thought poorly of our Emperor, you may be of a lesser-race, but, for most of you, you are Terrans. You are the absolute purest race to inhabit this galaxy. I want all of you to look at these humans. They have failed to realize that time works too slowly for evolution. Their two-hemisphere brain is still vulnerable to psychics. They live for only a century. Their four-chamber heart still has a tendency to clog, causing them to die. Look at them and always remember that you are superior! Glory to our Empire!”

With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the prisoners replied with “Glory to our Empire”.

The line extended out of the mess hall. Nicole looked at the first pan. The food it contained was pink and gooey, like someone had vomited. The second pan looked much like the first; the only difference was that it was green. The Calian in front of her took a small scoop of the green vomit and walked off.

“The green shit is the only thing he can eat,” said the Terran behind her.

“No chance of Europa Algae, huh?” answered Nicole.
The Escape

“Nope. But believe it or not, the pink shit tastes just like it.”

Nicole took a small scoop of the pink food and carefully placed it on her spoon. It smelled awful. She placed it closer to her mouth, but was hesitant to put it in. Whatever it was, it did not smell like Europa Algae at all.

“Come on! Thought you humans love to try things!” said the prisoner as he forced the spoon into Nicole’s mouth.

It was just about the most revolting thing she had ever tasted. In an instant, the man felt a sharp pain in his gut. Suddenly, he was faced down in the pink stuff. Amid his screams, Nicole continued holding his head down before she was tackled by another inmate. Justin stood there; he stood no chance against the Terrans.

“HEY!” shouted another inmate. A tall-black Terran walked up to the instigator, “That’s enough, Callims.”

Callims walked off as Tyran lowered his hand to Nicole. “You alright, Feddie?”

“I could have taken him down.”

“Word of advice, kid. Few humans are able to stand up to a Terran and leave without any broken bones.”

“Thanks for the advice,” said Nicole as she lurched her arm away.

“It’s Tyran. James Tyran.”

“Nicole Hawkins.”

Phil Marcus

The four then sat at a nearby table. Nicole and Justin prepared to eat, but James and Mikhail stopped them. The former soldiers had not spoken yet.

“For the food we are about to ingest, we thank thee, Emperor Talon, Ruler of the Territories, Leader of Destiny,” recited James and Mikhail. The humans merely looked at each other, imperial society was more complex than they learned back home.

“I was wondering, Miss Hawkins. How is it that two humans managed to get so far from the Federation Core Systems?” asked James.

“Ash,” replied Nicole.

“Ash? You have worked with ash?”

Ash was the result of burning the leaves of the Keinido Bush from the Aho Eridani System. Doing so created a powerful stimulant which also blocked the brain’s reasoning center, effectively causing the user to do anything without thinking twice about it. The illegal drug was widely popular on developing worlds within the Federation Frontier.

“Like I said I haven’t really had any choice.”

“Well, you can’t really blame your ship for getting you sent here. Our borders are air tight. Not even a hydrogen particle can get through,” said Mikhail.

“Yeah? Well, your borders are pretty open. A comet could pass through before anyone would know. If our plasma vents weren’t open, we wouldn’t have been ambushed by the B-109s.”
The Escape

“B-109s on border patrol? Are you sure you were at the border and not at the front?”

“Isn’t Vedilan on the border and at the front?” said Justin.

“Vedilan? You got close to a Mech colony and survived?”

“More like we got close to your war machine and survived. You won’t believe what we saw when our escape pod landed. Mechs were rounded up to town centers and shot. Sometimes I wonder how you were able to abandon everything that makes us human,” answered Nicole.

“We are not human. You are making your own mark on the galaxy, we are doing our own,” retorted Mikhail.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t reform ourselves,” said James.

A moment of silence occurred as they continued to eat their “food”.

“Mikhail, when is Ranner getting here?”

“I think he is inspecting the camp in a few days.”

“We may have something for him.”

The few hundred inmates stood at attention as the Terran known as the “Hero of Vellak” examined them. Major General Evan Ranner was not a member of the party. He looked down at most actions Emperor Talon was making. He was a soldier, nothing more and nothing less. He went to the planets that were being invaded. His victories earned him praise among the people. Despite his influence at headquarters, he was only a soldier and right now he needed to praise members of the super-army.

“I am very impressed, Colonel Klarid. You have certainly collected a wide range of dissidents,” said General Ranner.

“Indeed. This center is a microcosm of threats to our great culture. This inmate attempted to distribute leaflets at Yorim University. We got him before he could damage the soft minds of the students. These two were refusing the call for their government.”

As Klarid continued speaking, Ranner exchanged glances with Tyran. James could see that another star had been added to his collar since they last met. The General then looked at the girl and boy in blue jumpsuits.

“And these two? They are not Terrans.”

“No, they are not. They were aboard a ship running ash to the Outer Rim. I would recommend sending another squadron to reinforce the border zone. We cannot have our colonists being exposed to that Federation drug.”

“We need all the ships we can for the front, Colonel. And right now anti-drug patrols are the least of our concern.”

“Understood, General. Hail Talon!”

Ranner returned the salute and turned towards the landing strip. The prisoners began to fan out while Tyran and Andropov caught up with him.
The Escape

“Sir!” shouted Tyran.

“We shouldn’t be talking, Captain,” replied General Ranner.

“Sir, we need to know about…”

“There is nothing you need to know. You officially committed crimes against the state and although you were my best troops, there is nothing I can do.”

“You signed the order to have us imprisoned here. We have seen enough atrocities. The humans have firsthand accounts of the brutality the shock troopers are using at the front. We can make a broadcast to our people and expose Talon.”

Ranner led the two troops into a corner.

“Gentlemen, the plan has failed. The ISF went to General Froterial’s house last night. Talon is suspicious of me enough as it is and if my record was not what it is, I would have been shot. I appreciate your sacrifice, but quite frankly, a change in government is now next to impossible. Now if you will excuse me, I’m needed at the front.”

“Sir, do you have any word on Keviter?” asked Mikhail. Ranner paused for a few seconds.

“Your fiancé was two miles from the hypocenter. Your brother died in the hospital yesterday.”

James and Mikhail looked at each other, stunned.

“Is there anything you can do, General?”

Phil Marcus

“Not officially. But from your reports, I understand that you do not wish to spend the rest of your lives here.” General Ranner thought for a moment. “There is a remote possibility that can allow you to escape.”

“We’ve been fighting under you since you were a Major, and a remote possibility is better than nothing at all,” answered James.

“Very well, Captain. How familiar are you with the Martians?”

Lying on the top bunk of Hut 5, Nicole had a pleasant view of the sky through the translucent dome. The binary stars had set and only the rings of the gas giant were visible. After three days on this forsaken moon, the nights were starting to seem more peaceful than the day. She tried not to think about the predicament that she was in with her brother. Nicole just sat there observing the stars and thinking about what wonders resided beyond them. It was one of the few things that gave her joy anymore. Had things proceeded differently years earlier, she may already be in Fleet and travelling to those stars, instead of on the flight deck of a pirate vessel or in a sub-basement counting bags of drugs. Still, those sounded better than lying in an Imperial penal colony.

It started to seem like a mystery that she and her brother had ended up there; an Imperial camp of all places. There was no way to undo what had been done. No way to stop her father from leaving and her mother from hanging herself. She could not prevent the pain she suffered six years earlier. The only thing she could do was escape this place, and that was much easier said than done.
The Escape

“Are we going to die here?” asked Justin from below her bunk.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” replied Nicole in the cold tone she developed over the last few years.

“How could this happen?”

“Shit happens all the time. There’s nothing anyone can do about it. Doesn’t matter if you’re on Earth or Collor III. Life is fucked up.”

“I wish I had a Fed-Credit for every time you said that.”

“Well, it is true. But who knows, tomorrow may be slightly different.”

The door to the barracks opened slowly. Nicole could see a figure walk in. She could not see him very well, as the figure was wearing dark clothing. Before she had time to react, a hand was covering her mouth.

“Shhhh.”

Nicole got a good look at his face; it was James Tyran.

“There is no reason you should believe me, but I have a way off this rock,” whispered James.

“Is that so?” answered Nicole.

“You probably know more about the Martian Liberation Movement. They’re secretly getting supplies from the Empire. General Ranner told me that they’ll be coming here for more weapons. If we hit the armory, we can get on board their ship and leave this rock before anyone notices.”

Phil Marcus

“Sounds promising. But why come to me?”

“There are few humans out there who can take down a Terran. Something told me you could be a useful partner.”

“Six years have taught me the best ways to tell lies and to spot them. Why?”

James took a deep breath. “During the First Offensive, I was part of frontline assaults. The carnage was beyond anything you could imagine. A single Mech could take on three Terrans. The soldiers under my command were being slaughtered. I bet, on Earth, they talk about how brutal we are. The reality is different. When the fighting died down, we tried to establish a regime change. I saw it as a chance to save the home I loved. Mikhail and I were sent here for phony reasons to expose the brutality of the Emperor. That plan has fallen apart. I don’t really have anything left. But then I saw you take on a Terran and it made me realize we are not the super beings they say we are.”

Nicole smiled. “Quite frankly, my brother and I have little to lose. We’re in.”

The sleek Martian assault ship penetrated the atmosphere with grace and precision. The crescent-shaped vessel was among the most advanced crafts in the Federation. Its wing-mounted disintegrators and powerful shields made the vessel more than a match to any opponent. It served well as an escort of corvette troop transports to combat zones. The speed it could attain made it ideal for crossing the vast distances between Mars and the Frontier.
The Escape

If the ship appeared deep in Imperial space, it would have raised suspicion among personnel. Terax was one of the six Imperial worlds close enough to Federation space that a Martian ship could travel to for clandestine missions. A journey such as this was definitely not something that needed any attention. Since four of the six planets were now contested by the Confederated Army and another was too far off for a ship that size, Terax was the only location from where they could get supplies.

James and Nicole watched as the vessel touched down at the landing strip. The crew exited the vehicle. While Martians were capable of breathing most atmospheres, they still required their own gasses. This caused them to wear atmosphere tanks on their back with a mask apparatus that provided the gas.

Colonel Klarid led the Martian Captain into an underground briefing room. The shocktroopers stood guard.

"Captain Lek’fro, I trust your journey was a pleasant one."

"Spare me your Terran sentiments, Colonel. We need equipment and we need it fast."

"The new J-87s haven’t been doing their job?"

"No. The King’s Army is squeezing our bases. They’ve overrun three colonies in the last week. Our presence on the Red Homeland is nearly depleted. We estimate that we have two months before he calls the Federal Home Guard."

"Captain, I assure you, the Imperial Government has every interest in ensuring the Liberation Front succeeds. A client world close to Earth will help destabilize the Federation and allow us to return."

"And how will destabilizing the Federation help you when you have not been able to force the Mechs into surrendering?"

"The Empire will deal with the Mechs. After we win, you will no longer need to worry about supply difficulties. We are suffering some difficulties on the front, but soon you will have standard weaponry."

"Some difficulties? If I remember correctly, you have lost thirty ships in the last two weeks alone."

"As I said, there is some difficulty, but I believe that our emperor will be turning the situation around."

While this conversation continued, beneath the surface James was leading Mikhail, Nicole, and Justin to the weapons locker. Two shocktroopers were standing guard.

"What are you doing here?" asked one of the guards.

"Just taking my fellow inmates on a little stroll through the base," replied James.

"There are other locations you can visit. Step away or you will spend the next month in solitude." The two guards aimed their rifles right at James’ chest.

As James started to walk away, a great screech was heard as a desert eagle landed in the distance. The two guards watched as the predator landed with its recent kill and started ripping it apart. During this moment of distraction, James grabbed the one closest to him and aimed his rifle at the second guard. The plasma burst knocked him off his feet. In an instant,
The Escape

the first guard was dead as Mikhail broke his neck. They opened the door and handed Nicole a rifle. He pocketed a few power cells.

“Justin, listen. No matter what, if anyone starts firing, you hit the ground. Got it?” said Nicole.

“Yes.”

While Nicole embraced Justin, James and Mikhail dragged the bodies into the locker and took off the armor.

The landing strip had roughly six shocktroopers standing guard by the Martian ship. Hiding behind one of the refueling tanks, the four inmates could clearly see their ticket to freedom. All they needed to do was get past those guards.

“What’s the plan, captain?” asked Mikhail.

“We walk up to the boarding ramp and explain we are the relief guards and then we kill them. Nicole, you bring Justin on board after we clear out the rest of the ship.”

“Are you sure you can do this?” said Justin.

“Shocktroopers believe they are superior in every way. They are overconfident.”

It was an honor to be wearing the uniform again, even if it was an illegal act. James and Mikhail approached the boarding ramp of the ship. A simple salute and two of the guards left the scene. After a few moments, Nicole and Justin could see plasma bursts and four of the guards fell to the ground. James and Mikhail ran up into the ship as Nicole and Justin ran towards the boarding ramp.

Suddenly, an alarm began blaring through the camp warning of an escape attempt. Nicole and Justin ran up into the ship’s cargo bay and retracted the boarding ramp. A few more plasma bursts could be heard through the ship. Nicole climbed up a ladder into the bridge. The smell of ozone reeked as she saw the dead bodies of three Martians.

“The shocktroopers will be heading here any second. Can you operate the weapons systems?” said James.

“No problem!” answered Nicole.

Moving over to a computer terminal, Nicole started flipping switches for the portside disintegrator. Outside, the wingtip began glowing green. From a distance of about half a mile, Colonel Klarid exited the main building to investigate. A stream of green energy struck the building, causing it to erupt in a massive explosion. Nicole then began targeting the perimeter cannons. The other inmates watched and began fighting the remaining guards.

On board the ship, Mikhail entered the engine room to activate the ship’s thrusters. Next to the control panel, he found a human wearing a yellow jumpsuit. He almost instantly held his hands up. He did not appear to be a person who would pose a threat. One of his hands appeared to be rubbing the injector coils.

“Who are you?”

“Johann, engineer of this ship,” replied the cowering human.

“Alright, you work for me now. Get these engines online.”
The Escape

“What makes you think I won’t ignite the antimatter?”

“Because judging from the way you are feeling the injectors, you don’t want to damage them.”

A few more blasts and the perimeter grid had been reduced to ashes. In the confusion, the inmates ran off in all directions. The guards became overwhelmed by the sheer size of the crowds. In the confusion, prisoners stormed the barracks and took whatever weapons they could find. A few ran towards the landing strip where a single shuttle stood. The shock troopers and officers ran into the desert. The former Martian ship exited the atmosphere, leaving the chaos and the camp behind; the only things in sight were the gas giant and millions of stars scattered across the screen.

On the bridge, James sat in the captain’s chair admiring the view. Mikhail checked the ship’s scanners; four blips appeared at the edge of the screen and were rapidly moving towards the center.

“Sir, I think we have some B-109s inbound.”

“Nicole, lock on with the disintegrators. They have strong shields for ships their size.”

Four spear-shaped B-109 attack fighters swooped in behind the ship. The pilots strafed the hull, hoping to knock out the engines. Battle-hardened veterans would have easily knocked out the power systems, but they were just fresh recruits assigned to protect a star system were escape was considered impossible.

The targeting systems were advanced, so Nicole only needed to enter a few commands. Green rays struck one of the fighters, annihilating it. The remaining three fighters came around for another pass. Mikhail found the helm controls to be very sensitive. Using manual control, the ship made a sharp dive and narrowly avoided a collision.

“Do we have torpedoes or anything?” shouted James.

“There is an aft launcher, sir!”

James moved to the fire control panel and activated the aft launcher. Outside, the stern glowed orange as three torpedoes were catapulted towards the enemy. One pilot broke formation, but the other two were not so lucky. The last pilot engaged his engines at full power and positioned himself in front of the Martian vessel.

“Sir, that pilot is on a collision course!” shouted Mikhail.

The fighter rushed towards the ship, blasting his laser cannons hoping to inflict serious damage. At the last moment, Mikhail made a sharp turn and caught the pilot off-guard. The fighter struck the starboard wing at just the right angle to break apart.

“Damage check,” said James.

“If I’m reading these things right, we’ve lost two power relays and a magnetic coupling. Antimatter containment is holding. I think we should be able to make a jump,” said Mikhail as he placed his legs on the navigation console and entered commands to the ship’s computer.
The Escape

“We should reach Earth in less than a week. If that’s where you two would like to go,” said James as he looked towards Nicole.

“There’s nothing left for us there,” replied Nicole.

“What about the engineer?” asked James.

“He’ll stay. Doesn’t seem to care about anything other than the engines.”

“Alright then, set a course for the Federation Frontier. There may be some interesting business opportunities there. And Mikhail, activate the transponder to register as ‘Desert Eagle’. That bird helped us get off that rock.”

As Mikhail entered commands into the helm station, Justin walked over to his sister.

“I knew you weren’t being serious in saying we were going to die there,” he said. Nicole smiled and embraced her brother. Once again, they were free.

With that, the ship, now called the Desert Eagle, engaged its star drive and headed for the Frontier, leaving Imperial space behind.

THE END

My Hope Turned Cold Today
Justin Tabeek

I run around all day to escape my mind, to preoccupy myself from thoughts.
I find activities and voluntary group gatherings to keep from enveloping myself within the loneliness.
I spend the nights exercising not only to feel better about myself, but allow myself temporary peace of mind that would otherwise become insomnia. Most of all, I spend my days and nights believing in hope; hoping for humanity, hoping for the future, and most often hoping for us. It seemed so right, if just for that moment, but it became the moment of transcendence that both inspired me and made me hunger for more. The night suddenly took all that away, as my hope turned cold today.
My Hope Turned Cold Today

Everything seemed fine, everything seemed great, everything seemed

like the beginning of something special.

The past still hurt in the present, but the present and future seemed surmountable

if we combined; a duo melded in mutual pain that could find happiness against all the odds.

The collective sharing and caring seemed to be a growing process

that would maximize with time;

but then my hope turned cold today.

A wave of sorrow, a wave of premonition,

a wave of something wretched and unnatural filtered

straight through to my body, wrenching and pulling my inside to the point of nausea. I had no evidence or word from you to explain such transference, but upon looking towards an empty telephone screen it became clear that I was becoming cognizant of something outside of me.

In this very moment it still gives me a feeling of a void,

a black hole of sorts within the galaxy of my body,

cold, alone, enveloped under a dark cloud of despair and as I maniacally check the phone every few minutes for recognition while it sits on the ledge each time the phone feels heavier and colder.

My hope turned cold today.

On this eve of corporate holiday decadence and the celebration of materialism I look outward to an empty street that epitomizes my mentality:
cold, alone, enveloped under a dark cloud of despair without much more than a flicker of life.

My hope was one that could make such a dark environment illuminate and glow with possibility, an intangible essence of the greatest possibilities of the human condition. Instead, I sit here isolated with an electronic weight symbolizing the end of a connection, and the beginning of dark days ahead.

My hope, which burned and destroyed my inward paralysis and made me burn for more, has suddenly become nothing more than a component of the surrounding environment;
My Hope Turned Cold Today

Bah fucking humbug.

nothing special, nothing less.

My hope turned cold today,

and it sent a shiver down my spine.

Bah fucking humbug.
Carcass
by Stephen Russomano

JUDY, disheveled
GEORGE, strapping
A VOICE ON THE WIND, of mutable quality
SLEEPING WOMEN, of many shapes and sizes

Note: The Sleeping Women can be played by as many as twenty but no less than three actresses.

Note: A Voice on the Wind can be played by either a male or a female; the actor or actress should provide an androgynous quality. Where indicated, the character appears briefly on stage as a hooded apparition moving about silently. It is both a lapse in memory and a sort of epiphany for Judy and George. In addition, these appearances are not uniform; A Voice on the Wind might slowly pace, or wave its arms and disappear, or simply stand momentarily. If George and Judy see any of this, they do not understand it, and do not recognize the apparition as A Voice on the Wind.

1. Dead Fish That Routinely Wash Ashore

(JUDY stands atop a huge cliff. Her clothes are ripped and tattered, and she is generally much disheveled. She sings. As she does so, a myriad of female voices joins in, in various manners, until her recitation is reduced to an unintelligible din. She tries in vain to make herself heard.)

JUDY

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Stephen Russomano

The slope, it has come alive, but the valley has been dead all year.

Help yourself to thoughts contrived of pillows and my lover here.

The smell of my lover’s face has spent itself like waning pride, on sky and moss and empty space and what my lover can’t decide.

The air has formed its carapace from the rock, so slow to move.

I am fast, but stand alone until my lover is in the mood.

Wind that blows and wind that burns erupting in my lover’s face speaks the words that I would spurn on sky and moss and empty space.
Carcass

(Ending with a scream, she attempts to shake the other voices out of her head, to no avail. She turns to face her lover, a dead fish stretched across a nearby boulder jutting out of the mossy ground. It is recently deceased, so there are no flies around it and it smells quite fresh. She waits a long time for her lover to speak. There is a small movement behind her, but she is intent on the fish and does not notice.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What are you waiting for?

JUDY

What?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I said, what are you waiting for?

JUDY

Who are you?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I am not “who”. I am not anyone. I simply am, and I simply am what I am, and what I simply am is a voice on the wind. And I am nothing more and nothing less.

JUDY

Why do you speak to me?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I speak to whoever needs speaking to. Those who heed my words are only the better for it.

JUDY

...And what are your words?

(Long silence in which the wind whistles but does not speak.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What are you waiting for your lover to do?

JUDY

(Gestures to her lover.)

My lover.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What are you waiting for your lover to do?

JUDY

I don’t know. Take me as anyone would take their lover, I expect.
And suppose your lover does not take you as one would take one's lover. What then?

JUDY

I hadn't thought that far ahead.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Ah, of course. Lovers rarely plan for the future, I have found.

JUDY

Well of course that is the case. If, in regards to my lover, I planned for the future, he would be something of a spouse, or a soul mate, and not my lover at all.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

How can a fish be such things to such as you?

JUDY

I don't know. As it stands now, though, he is simply my lover.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

As it stands at this very moment, that fish is not your lover!

JUDY

Nonsense.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

It is a fish!

JUDY

A fish is perfectly suitable for me.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You must find a man. A fish is only good for so long. A woman needs a man.

JUDY

(Defiantly.)

A woman can get along just fine without a man. If my fish lover doesn't last forever, then I will simply find a new lover. But he won't be a man. Perhaps I will have loved my fish lover quite deeply, and so I will kill myself when he goes away. Or perhaps I will take this moss, or a rock or two, or a soaring gull, or a great oak tree, or a woman, to be my lover. Any of those would suit me quite well. But I don't need a man. It is not imperative that I find a man.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Oh but it is. None of those things can satisfy you the way a man can.

JUDY

And how would you know?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Oh, I've seen what must be seen in order to know such things.

(Long silence. Judy frowns and looks about,)
And what must be seen?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Nothing more and nothing less than what you have seen. Do you remember men, my dear?

JUDY

...I don’t care to.

A VOICE ON THE WIND:

Whether or not you care, we both know that you do. Can you honestly say that you recall men less fondly than this fish?

JUDY

You’re wrong.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

How do you know that I am wrong? And even if I am wrong, how do you know that you are right?

JUDY

I have seen enough in my lifetime to know that a man is not necessary for a woman to be satisfied.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You are still young. You cannot have seen very much at all in your lifetime. Have you even ever come down off this hill?

JUDY

This hill offers quite a wide view. I see many things from atop this hill.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

That is not what I asked.

JUDY

Yes, yes, I’ve come down from the hill! I’m surprised you couldn’t tell me that yourself, so knowing you are. But it doesn’t matter. My life is here now. I have neither cause nor want to come down from this hill.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Oh, have you been atop it long?

JUDY

...No.

(Long silence.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I assure you, my dear, I see many more things than you. I am old, older than the earth itself. And the wind passes through many towns and countrysides, sees many things and many
Carcass


JUDY

Why should I listen to you? You are a voice that I have never heard before. What assurance do I have that you work for my best interest?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

No assurance. I mean not to coerce you, only to offer advice. You do not have to climb down. You do not have to find a man. But I promise you, you shall not be satisfied if you stay here. Where did you get this fish, besides?

JUDY

That is my business.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

If you insist. What real purpose does he serve, this fish?

JUDY

He is my lover.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Let him speak then. Let him stand up to defend the love that you share.

(Long silence in which JUDY looks at her lover. Finally, she begins climbing down from the cliff. The wind whistles but does not speak.)

Stephen Russomano

2. Decades of Leaves Fall Over

(GEORGE sits alone in his room, not partaking of his life. He is wearing a very plain shirt and trousers that are slightly tattered, but clean. Meanwhile, most of the space in the room is occupied by SLEEPING WOMEN, on the chairs, sofas, bed, and floor; beside, against, and on top of each other. GEORGE ignores them and sits, barely existing, in his chair in the middle of the room.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What are you doing here?

GEORGE

(Starting at the voice.)

What! Who’s there?!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What? Who’s there?!

GEORGE

Only I. A voice and nothing more. Heed my words.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

And why should I? You are alien to me. A voice and nothing else is alien to me! And I am to blindly obey it?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What else have you to do?

GEORGE

I must keep watch over these women.
Carcass

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Why? What are you watching for?

GEORGE

That is no concern of yours!

(Catches himself; lowers his voice to an angry whisper.)

I do not know to what end I am guarding their sleep, but guarding their sleep I am; such is my function. Now leave me be!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Are you sure that is your function? Might there be something else? Haven’t you anything better to do?

GEORGE

I don’t know...

(Suddenly GEORGE decides that he should in fact be partaking of his life, and that he will start doing so now. He gets up, lets out a loud, gleeful yelp, and does an incredible, soaring back flip, just to get his blood flowing. It makes him very happy, and he tries once more for good measure. This time he is unable to fully complete the flip, falls on his neck and breaks it. Thewind whistles through the room.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

It’s time to get up, George.
Carcass

It would satisfy your hunger. And eating raw meat and fish is perfectly safe, as long as it is clean and fresh. And that fish is still very fresh.

JUDY

Of course it's fresh! It is my fish-lover. Haven't you insulted me enough?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

A non-lover would not be so fresh. A non-lover would not be so nourishing. Eat it before it spoils.

JUDY

I don’t want to eat it! Who are you to tell me to eat it!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Nothing. And Nobody.

JUDY

You lie. A voice is not nothing.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

But is that to say that a voice is really something? I’m surprised at you. If, as you say, I lie, why did you not accuse me so on the mountaintop?

(Long silence.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You are not doing what I say. You are doing what I suggest.

Stephen Russomano

I do not want to hinder you, Judy. I want to help you. If you don’t believe me when I say it, or you don’t want my help, please, by all means, return to your place upon the cliff. But I maintain that you must find a man.

JUDY

How do you know my name?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I know all names. Can you not feel me under your skin as much as on it? Eat the fish while it is still fresh.

(JUDY regards the fish for a long time. Finally, she eats it raw. When she has had her fill, she casts the fish carcass away and looks for something with which to wipe her hands and mouth.)

There must be a clean, fibrous plant of some sort that I can use.

JUDY

There must be a clean, fibrous plant of some sort that I can use.

(She looks around but finds none, the only plant life being more moss. The wind whistles and she stands up straight, staring into space. Presently she reaches up under her skirt, pulls down her underwear, which is her only piece of clothing that is not dirty and ripped, and wipes her hands and mouth with that. When she is done, she casts her underwear away, in the same direction that she cast the fish carcass.)
Carcass

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I am sorry for leading you on such a barren path.

JUDY

I suppose this is the only path on which I might find a man. For all I know, I am talking to myself. For all your cunning and clever words, you explain nothing.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

How right you are, my dear.

(Judy glares into space, wishing there was a body at which she could project her frustration. Presently she gives up, and rubs her eyes wearily. There is a small movement behind her; she senses something, but when she turns there is nothing. Long silence in which the wind whistles but does not speak.)

JUDY

How right I am... What now?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You must find a man.

(GEORGE is still sprawled on the floor after breaking his neck. The SLEEPING WOMEN gradually begin stirring more and more in their sleep. Suddenly GEORGE opens his eyes and moans loudly, and the SLEEPING WOMEN go back to sleep. GEORGE slowly struggles to his feet. One side of his neck is an angry black-and-blue where it broke. He is unable to hold his head straight; it sits on his shoulders crookedly, like that of a curious dog.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

That's the spirit! You'll be ready for all tasks, before long.

GEORGE

All tasks? What task other than standing here do you expect I am ready for?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Finding a woman, of course.

GEORGE

Nonsense.

(Looks down at his clothes with difficulty.)

Well this won't do at all. These clothes clash horribly with this bruise.
Carcass

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Why don’t you cover your neck?

GEORGE

My neck is sensitive. Scarves and such don’t agree with it.

(GEORGE looks around for new clothes. Eventually he spots some; he goes over to one of the SLEEPING WOMEN and rolls her over, revealing a dapper white suit, complete with hat, vest, shoes, and cufflinks, that she had been sleeping on. She does not wake up. GEORGE picks up the white suit and examines it, smoothing it here and there, and then begins putting it on.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You must find a woman.

GEORGE

Nonsense! I’ve got a whole harem right here.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Nonsense? You’re dressing especially for it!

GEORGE

Only because my clothes clash with the bruise!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

If you truly remembered women less fondly than these creatures you call women, would colors be of any import to you? What do you care of clashing, if your harem is your proper function?

(Long silence.)

GEORGE

I told you, these women are my charge.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Who are they, besides? Where do these “women” come from? How did you obtain them? And most importantly, how did you come to be watching over them?

GEORGE

They are those left to circumstance. They have lived and died in doubt, in toil and misery, and now they are left with me. To give them what peace I might.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You seem quite sure of this. Is it not equally clear that you live in doubt, in toil and misery? You need a different woman. One woman. For everything, not just fornication. Find what peace you might, George.

GEORGE

One woman. You mean a spouse?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Perhaps, in time.
Carcass

GEORGE

HA! The day I take a spouse, a cold fish will take my place here among the sleeping women.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

That can be arranged.

GEORGE

What?

(There is a small movement behind GEORGE, but he is preoccupied with putting on the suit and does not notice.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Why is the thought of a spouse so dreadful to you?

GEORGE

(Lowering his voice.) I didn’t say that. I don’t exactly have a choice in the matter. You should know that, able as you are to infiltrate my sanctum. Do you see these women? Perhaps not; I have yet to meet a body to go with this voice.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Oh, I have no body.

GEORGE

Perhaps. Do you see the women or not? You certainly speak of them enough.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Stephen Russomano

Indeed, I do see them! Sight without eyes can be the best of all George!

GEORGE

(Iissing.) Keep your voice down! Indeed, if that’s all you possess, one would think you’d have mastery of it! (Casts wary glances at the SLEEPING WOMEN.) This talk of finding a lover disturbs them! And they don’t like to be disturbed.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

And what of you? Do you like being shackled here?

GEORGE

I am not “shackled”. They need watching over, and so I watch over them. They have no one else.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

So they have you, but do you have them?

GEORGE

Perhaps not. But it hardly matters; I have my place and they have theirs.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Sure of that are you? Sure that this is your place? Sure that we all have a place?

GEORGE

I am not sure of anything.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
Carcass

Well then, why do you stay here? To what end do you seek to give these “women” peace? What were you doing before you came here?

(Long silence.)

GEORGE

If you must know, I was eating pecan pie. It’s on the very edge of my memory now, and it almost hurts to recall it... I had a lover then.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Wouldn’t you like to find your lover again?

GEORGE

Impossible. She is gone.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What happened to her?

GEORGE

We went fishing... She was upset at not catching anything... Stamped her feet in frustration... Slipped on the moss and was pitched headlong into the river... We had spoken of having a child just before... She wasn’t sure being a good mother and a good lover were conducive... I never could find her carcass.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

She died in doubt, in toil and misery.

GEORGE

Stephen Russomano

What?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

But it doesn’t necessarily have to be so.

(The wind whistles through the room but does not speak. GEORGE finishes putting on the white suit, and sits back down in his chair. He cannot get comfortable, however, and after while he gets up and leaves his room. He is very careful not to make noise. Once he is gone, the SLEEPING WOMEN again begin to stir in their sleep, emitting various grunts and murmurs.)

5. Probably a Good Slice of Pecan Pie

(JUDY walks down the road, searching for a man.)

JUDY

At the bottom of the slope and beyond, I expect I will find railroad tracks.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Where do you suppose these tracks will lead?

JUDY

Of course I don’t know. I expect that perhaps I’ll follow them and see.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Do you suppose that you might encounter a train?
Carcass

JUDY

I don’t expect so. But it’s possible.

(Long silence. The wind whistles but does not speak.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Are you looking for a man like I told you?

JUDY

I came down off the cliff, didn’t I?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Indeed you did. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that you are following my advice. Are you following the tracks to find a man, or simply to follow them, or worst of all, simply to appease me?

JUDY

I have no other reason to come down off the cliff other than finding a man, as you say. I do not know that I want a man, or even to find one. But you have somehow taken my fish lover from me.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Oh, he was animate and attentive before I spoke to you, was he?

(Long silence.)

JUDY

...He might have been.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

How right you are, my dear. What do you suppose a train would be carrying, were you to meet one on the tracks?

JUDY

Pecans.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Pecans?

JUDY

Pecans. In burlap sacks.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Whatever for?

JUDY

They harvested several tons of pecans with which to make pecan pies. They packed them in burlap sacks and loaded them in the train to carry them to wherever they will be made into pecan pies.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Are these pecan pies for any special occasion?

JUDY
Carcass
Not especially. They are to be sold at farm stands to young couples taking picnics in the countryside.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
How do you know all this?

JUDY
I don’t. But I expect that it is so.

(The wind whistles but does not speak. JUDY continues walking.)

6. A Huge Instantaneous Cliff

(GEORGE stands atop the cliff that JUDY previously stood atop. He looks around and smells the air.)

GEORGE
A woman has been here.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
How do you know?

GEORGE
I can smell it.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
You mean her.

GEORGE

Stephen Russomano
Don’t be so high and mighty. The “it” I’m referring to is her scent. There’s no reason to give a scent gender.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
Everything has gender, in its way. What does it smell like?

GEORGE
Fish.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
There’s no need to be vulgar.

GEORGE
I’m not referring to her genitals. And how would you know what fish or a woman’s genitals smell like? Gained a body all of a sudden, have you?

A VOICE ON THE WIND
Of course not. But I am knowledgeable. Can you not feel me under your skin as much on it?

GEORGE
I hadn’t noticed either.

A VOICE ON THE WIND
Then you haven’t been paying attention. I do not exist for myself, but for you. If you find this task hopeless or pointless, I won’t stop you from returning to your harem. What could I do, being without a body?
Carcass
(Long silence.)

GEORGE

I believe she was eating fish up here.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

No, that came later.

GEORGE

What?

(There is a small movement behind GEORGE, and he whips around trying to spot it, but it is gone. He stares angrily at the spot where the movement was, clenching his fists. Eventually he just sighs, turns, and rubs his eyes wearily. The wind whistles but does not speak. GEORGE begins climbing down from the cliff.)

7. A Previously Trodden Path

(The bottom of the cliff. GEORGE reaches it, hops down to solid ground, and brushes off his suit.)

GEORGE

The smell is stronger. I’m quite sure that she was eating fish down here.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Do you suppose she cared deeply about this fish you speak of?

GEORGE

How should I know? I can only tell that she probably ate a fish down here, and...

(Gives a quick sniff.)

...that she ate it raw.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Quite a nose you’ve got there.

GEORGE

It serves my purposes.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Ah, so you acknowledge the value of this journey!

GEORGE

I’ve come this far, haven’t I? Call it curiosity.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I think, rather, that I shall call it dissatisfaction. And oh, how right you are, George.

GEORGE

What is that supposed to mean?

A VOICE ON THE WIND
Carcass

Only that you are right to heed my words. The carcass might be lying somewhere hereabouts. Do you suppose that would help at all?

GEORGE

Perhaps.

(GEORGE searches the area. Eventually he finds the fish carcass and JUDY’s underwear next to each other. He holds up the carcass and examines it briefly, then drops it and holds up the underwear.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Does it smell like fish?

GEORGE

(Laughing derisively.)

Who’s being vulgar now?

(He gives the underwear a long hard sniff and recoils violently, cringing and choking.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

What’s the matter?

GEORGE

It does smell like fish! Quite repulsively so! And you knew it would, didn’t you? Didn’t you?!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I know nothing more than what I am meant to know.

(GEORGE looks all around, hoping to find the source of the Voice. There is a small movement behind him, but when he turns there is nothing.)

GEORGE

You are toying with me.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

I assure you I am not.

GEORGE

And what good are your assurances to me!? I don’t know who you are or where you are, and yet I have followed your instructions as a blind disciple!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

You are no disciple. You are merely a task, as we all are tasks, and you have tasks of your own. Tasks that, left uncompleted, will swallow you up into the void.

GEORGE

Is that what happened to you?

(Long silence.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Even if something had happened to me, it wouldn’t matter. The task at hand is what matters.

(The wind whistles but does not speak.)
Carcass

GEORGE looks around some more, satisfies himself that he is alone, and walks away.)

8. For I Did Not Partake of My Life

(JUDY stands beside railroad tracks.)

JUDY

I have no more inclinations as to where to go. It’s easy enough to follow the tracks, but in which direction?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Do you suppose you might just wait here and see what happens? A train coming along, or something else?

JUDY

I don’t expect it would hurt. I certainly wasn’t doing much more than waiting on the cliff.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

But you had your fish-lover, did you not?

JUDY

That’s what I was waiting for. As you well know.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Do you suppose he ever would have come?

JUDY

I have no idea. And it hardly matters now, besides. I was perfectly content to wait before you spoke to me. Now I am only restless.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

But it does matter! Have you really come all this way only at my behest? Am I the only source of your restlessness? What did you have before you had the fish lover?

(Long silence.)

JUDY

(Whispering.)

I had a man.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Of course you did. And you loved him, didn’t you?

JUDY

Very much.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Very much indeed.

JUDY

...More than anything.

JUDY

...I lost him.

(Long silence in which the wind whistles but does not speak. JUDY begins weeping softly.)
Carcass

There is a small movement behind her, but she does not notice.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

The time for mourning is over. The task at hand is to find a new man, one whom you can once again love more than anything. Wouldn’t you like that?

JUDY

I suppose.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Onward, then. Find a man, Judy.

JUDY

But I don’t know where to go!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Easily mended. Sometimes we travel the farthest by staying put.

(Long silence. JUDY sits down on the ground.)

9. Plunging Downward

(GEORGE walks down the road, searching for a woman.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Do you suppose you’re getting close?

Stephen Russomano

GEORGE

Yes.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Do you suppose you’ll take her for a lover when you find her?

GEORGE

What’s this talk of a lover? You wanted me to take a spouse before. There’s a difference, and a considerable one at that.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Yes, but you know, first things first. Spouses are first lovers, and should remain so when they are spouses. Wouldn’t you agree?

GEORGE

Perhaps. I don’t see how it’s proper to take a lover so hastily, if that lover is to become one’s spouse.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Proper. You are not thinking of “lover” and “spouse” properly. And was it more proper sitting in your room? Was that in fact your proper function?

(GEORGE ignores this and stops to sniff the air. Suddenly he starts violently, recognizing a familiar scent. He whips around to face the SLEEPING WOMEN that are coming.)
Carcass

towards him. Their wakefulness varies; some are walking, some are limping, and some are crawling.

SLEEPING WOMEN

Where have you gone?

GEORGE

I...well...

SLEEPING WOMEN

Where have you gone?

GEORGE

I...well...

SLEEPING WOMEN

We thought we had lost you, George. It's a miracle that we found you. But you must return to the room now. We can't sleep without someone to watch over us. Come back and watch over us, George.

GEORGE

Can't you find someone else?!

SLEEPING WOMEN

No. Only you. You will return to watch over us as we sleep. Only you.

GEORGE

Why only me? Why must I be doomed to such a fate? Look at my neck! It’s ruined! It’s hideous! If I had had room to move and breathe, perhaps I wouldn't have so rashly disfigured myself.

SLEEPING WOMEN

We like your neck just as it is. Now come home with us, George. We need our rest.

SLEEPING WOMEN

We haven't held you, George. We love you, George. We would never hold someone we love.

GEORGE

I won't do it! You've held me there for too long!

SLEEPING WOMEN

We haven't held you, George. We love you, George. We would never hold someone we love.

GEORGE

You've shackled me to you! No prospects, no hope, just the drudgery of guarding your precious sleep. From what do you need such protection, I wonder!

(The wind whistles but does not speak. The SLEEPING WOMEN begin hissing and snarling at the sound. GEORGE runs away down the road, very awkwardly because of his broken neck. The SLEEPING WOMEN move off in the opposite direction, some walking, some limping.)
and some. The wind whistles but does not speak.)

10. I Realize the Cargo Night

(JUDY is still sitting beside the tracks. GEORGE runs up to her, breathing hard.)

GEORGE

You! You’re a woman!

JUDY

And you, you’re a man.

GEORGE

You’ve got to come with me, quickly!

JUDY

What’s the hurry?

GEORGE

No time to explain! Look, I’ve brought this for you!

(He takes the underwear out of his pocket and holds it out to JUDY. She gazes at him lovingly.)

JUDY

Where did you find this?

GEORGE

On the side of the road. It is yours, isn’t it?

Yes, it is. I only ask because… Well, I didn’t realize I was being followed.

GEORGE

That’s just it! I wasn’t following you; not you in particular, leastways. I’ve never seen you until now! I’ve searched and searched and now I’ve found you. You must be the woman I’ve been looking for.

JUDY

Maybe. I too have been searching. For a man, that is. But I haven’t found him; instead, you have found me. I’m not sure it’s meant to be that way.

GEORGE

It must be, it must be! Please, come with me, I’ll take you to the most beautiful place!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

First you must promise to take her as a lover, and then after that, to take her as a spouse.

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Yes, right now.

JUDY

…You hear it too?

GEORGE
Carcass

Must I? Right this second!?

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Yes, right now.

JUDY

... You hear it too?

GEORGE

Yes, of course... You mean you hear it? The voice?

JUDY

Yes. I hear it.

GEORGE

Is that why you’ve been searching? This voice has spoken to you and compelled you?

JUDY

Yes. You as well, I surmise.

GEORGE

... Yes.

(Long silence.)

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Time is running out.

GEORGE/JUDY (unison)

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Stephen Russomano

I’m not talking to you!

A VOICE ON THE WIND

Ah, so your respective journeys are to be abandoned at this late hour? No lovers or spouses for either of you? No promise for Judy, no function for George?

(Long silence. George and Judy gaze at each other.)

JUDY

It would be nice.

GEORGE

All right, all right!

(George puts the underwear back in his pocket and steels himself for the promise, but before he can speak, the SLEEPING WOMEN arrive. Some of them restrain George while the rest seize Judy, biting and tearing her flesh. She struggles and cries out. They grasp the sides of her head and twist violently; her neck breaks and she collapses to the ground. The SLEEPING WOMEN drag George off, kicking and screaming. The wind whistles but does not speak. After a long time Judy awakes and staggers to her feet; her neck is in the same state as George’s. She looks around, waiting for something to happen.)

JUDY

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Carcass

...Hello? Are you there? \(\textit{The wind stops whistling.}\) What do I do now?

(Long silence. Eventually, and with difficulty, JUDY lies back down and goes to sleep. After a while, the SLEEPING WOMEN return, walking, limping, and crawling. A few of them carry the articles that made up GEORGE's white suit. They take up spots all around JUDY and go to sleep.)

11. Before the Wind Did Blow

(GEORGE stands atop a huge cliff, wearing his original clothes. A piece of pecan pie sits nearby, on a boulder jutting out of the mossy ground. The wind is silent; the air is still and stagnant. He sings.)

GEORGE

The slope, it has come alive, but
the valley has been dead all year
Help yourself to thoughts contrived
of pillows and my lover here.

The smell of my lover's face has
spent itself like waning pride

Stephen Russomano

on sky and moss and empty space
and what my lover can't decide.

The air has formed its carapace
from the rock, so slow to move.

I am fast, but stand alone
until my lover is in the mood.

Wind that blows and wind that burns
erupting in my lover's face
speaks the words that I would spurn

on sky and moss and empty space.

(Long silence. GEORGE stares into space, listening. He hears nothing. He turns to look at the piece of pie, staring at it for a long while. Eventually, he goes over and devours it messily, smearing sugary stickiness on his face and hands. When he is done, he looks around for something to wipe his mouth. After much searching, he finds the underwear in his pocket. He holds it up and looks at it for a long while, then wipes his mouth and casts it aside. He sits down on the boulder.)

(Curtain.)
Midnight in a Foreign Country
Stephen Russomano

Midnight in a foreign country
was not what I expected,
not what I wished it to be
when thinking on it beforehand.
Beforehand, I was not sober enough to notice
the color of the beacons
that marked my path.

My path is strenuous,
and I limp much of the time
guide-less and friendless are the meek,
the ones flagellating themselves
until their scars run as the branches of a spindle-topped tree,
not devoid of flowers;
tattooed on soft white flesh

but of midnight in a foreign country:
There were many inconsiderate cyclists
(opposed to the many inconsiderate motorists at home)
there were too few rowdy gangs of

Midnight in a Foreign Country
smiling football enthusiasts,
swollen and ruddy from the pitch;
and long-haired world travelers
were woefully scarce.

I missed their ripe stench,
a result of too much traveling and unreliable lodgings
assailed by Spanish whores (though not in Spain),
attacked by swarms of ants when
lying in a psychotic concrete trench
(clutching one's rifle and praying not to die),
fighting the siren song
of a great burnt spire constructed from
hewn chunks of concrete,
but never wishing anything else
because of two blue beacons
(that appear even bluer at midnight in a foreign country)
that was neither a fault nor a flaw.
It was only a stench because it was too strong to be a scent.
Stephen Russomano

When midnight in a foreign country finally did arrive,
I happened to be sober enough to notice ( should not have been
drinking in the first place)
I no longer feared foreign countries.
Midnight in one’s homeland now seems
much more hostile, stinking of diesel fumes and
sounding too much
like a raving-mad lunatic city,
all in darkness.

I still fear midnights generally;
leastways when I do not have the blue beacons
to guide me safely. I expect too
not to fear them
when I have a soft, white, spindle-topped tree
to curl up under, like a fawn.
We’re nice people.