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

Please send your fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry and visual art as an attachment to:

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The Privilege to Witness Existence:
A Tribute to Allen Ginsberg
Robert Reeves

Drunken postcard dreams are written by sordid angels and suicidal scholars who all weep salvation.

Radiant visionary children are starving in Universities, and in basements, and in alleyways.

They all scream incantations of whiskey and hallucinate hopeless stanzas that hang in a concrete haze with phrases written thoughtfully in disappointed self indulgence.

Suicidal Pumpkins
Jeane Spencer

“Damned dandelions,” Elmer said to himself as he jabbed at another with the True-Temper Dandelion Digger, knowing he’d be out here all day if he let it get to him. There were dandelions everywhere. They came from the neighbor’s lawn, the one with the suicidal pumpkins. There were fifteen pumpkins cramped into a wooden veggie stand. Six were in a row along the stand’s ledge. Below the ledge were seven that had made the jump, lying on the grass. Their lawn was a sea of yellow, acres it seemed, of yellow heads ripening to fluffy seed parachutes. They would take flight at the slightest breeze, float away, lazily drifting down the road to his yard to start a new colony, and he hated them. Hated them.

He thought back to a time before hooks, dandelions and True-Temper Dandelion Diggers, back to life on a farm, a girl, Alice, marriage, and the start of farming his own piece of land; five hundred acres of prime soil. The crop put in, harvested. That first had been a perfect season, except for the yellow pom-poms peppering the front lawn. It began with just a few, sprinkled here and there; he paid them no mind, just mowed them over with the John Deere, or made a bouquet of them for Alice’s kitchen. Oh, Alice liked them, would play the butter game with the grandkids, would say “Do you like butter?” to one of them, and rub the dandelion under her chin, turning it yellow with pollen. Funny. Yes, she liked that game. And they taught her to make dandelion crowns to wear on her head. They thought that was funny too - grandma with a dandelion crown. Like a hippy chick.

But Elmer had begun to loathe them through the
years. He took pride in his crops, pride in his farm, and greatly prized his bluegrass. That's where the trouble all started.

Elmer and Alice had been married thirty years when he lost his arm. It happened in a grain auger. Some of the corn stalks had gotten caught in the chute. He tried to dislodge them with more stalks, and when that didn’t work he angrily thrust his hand into the chute to try and grab them back out. He didn’t have time to register the pain before he was knocked unconscious. When he awoke, he was in the hospital with a stub for an arm.

"Don’t you worry now, Elmer," Alice said, “I can get the boys to pick up the slack until you’re up and about.”

“It’s not the slack I’m worried about, Alice.” Elmer grumbled from his hospital bed. “The boys can tend the crops just fine; it’s the rest of the chores I’m concerned with. The lawn needs mowin’ and it’s time to fertilize before the next rain; it’s just started to come in nice and thick.” He knew that if he didn’t get that fertilizer down before the next rain, there would be bum spots where the grass had thinned out.

“Don’t worry now. I’ll have the boys take care of your precious lawn as well. You just lie here and rest.” Alice said. She gave him a crooked smile and sighed as she picked up her pocketbook and got ready to leave.

“Everything will be just fine. You’ll see, just fine.” She turned and left him to beg his commiseration from the night nurses.

Resting was all fine in her book, Elmer thought.

She hadn’t spent twenty years tending to that lawn. She had her garden out back, helped with the fall harvesting and canning vegetables, but he put in the hard work, long days of seeding, raking and watering the dirt with the finest Kentucky Bluegrass seed he could buy. He wanted a lawn so plush, so thick, that you could set an egg on the tips of its blades and that egg wouldn’t settle.

Elmer continued to stab at the infernal dandelions, muttering. After he was fitted for the hook to replace his arm, he learned to use it well. He could use it to jab at the dandelions just as efficiently as using the True-Temper Dandelion Digger, but he’d have to get down on his knees, and they weren’t in the best of shape anymore. He looked over at the neighbor’s lawn, the sea of yellow, the pumpkins lying on the lawn; they never really kept up on it, and it was he who paid the price.

The Finches moved in about eight years ago, and in all that time had never put so much as a flowerbed on the property. This year somehow, pumpkins made their debut along with the sea of dandelions. They never had a garden, Elmer thought to himself. Why all of a sudden is he growing pumpkins?

He saw Finch come out of his house and decided to approach him on the subject. Maybe they could come to some agreement. He could show Finch how to keep his lawn fed, how to use the fertilizers each season so the grass would grow in plush and vibrant. Maybe they could even share the cost and labor, if he could get him to see his vision; a vast expanse of Kentucky Bluegrass, acre upon acre, so neatly cut and pristine. Not a yellow
Suicidal Pumpkins

head to be seen. He smiled serenely.

Elmer started across the lawn, the farm stand caught his eye; he walked toward it, stood looking at the pumpkins, his face contorted. He scowled. Eight years of nothing, and now pumpkins? What the blazes was this happy horseshit? Everything else on their property was run down or broken. There were weeds everywhere, some as high as Elmer himself, and now pumpkins?

Suddenly he snapped. He’d had enough. It came up within him. The rage of all the wasted time digging up dandelions that were just going to come back. Another popping up where the last one had been; it seemed like an assembly line of yellow heads. He lifted his arm, the one with the hook, and thrust it down into a pumpkin. The hook did its job. He lifted it high over his head, swung his arm, and the pumpkin went flying, up and over the farm stand. It landed with a thud, cracking in two, spilling its seeds and orange slimy guts onto the lawn.

Elmer looked at what he had done, and he felt good, so good, he lunged for another, and flung that one up, even farther, landing with a quiet plop as it cracked and imploded. He smiled, then went for a third, a fourth, and on and on until all twenty-eight pumpkins were lying smashed on the grass. His hook was covered in orange, slimy pumpkin guts; he was sweating from the effort, his coveralls splattered with the fibrous insides of the pumpkins. Seeds covered his boots. Twenty years of fighting an ocean of yellow had turned into a catharsis of orange colored rage. Any idea he’d had of working together with Finch was gone. It was as if those thoughts had never entered his mind. This was only the first strike. He was not done yet.

Alice stared over the top of her knitting. She had watched this unfold in slow motion. Elmer’s obsession with the lawn was near to hysterical, like the feeling you got when a fly landed on your food in a fancy restaurant. There was nothing she could do to help; grass got weeds, and flies liked fancy restaurants. She chuckled over the thought of flies in fancy restaurants. There was no way around either, unless you used something that would kill them. Finch came running to the farm stand.

“What the hell!” he said. “I spent all summer growing those!”

“Just like you spent all summer growing these dandelions?” Elmer sneered. “You couldn’t mow ‘em down before they went to seed, could you-just had to let them go to seed. Had to let them invade my lawn. You could have done something. Anything!”

“I don’t care about your lawn. You’re going to pay for every one of them, old man.” Finch couldn’t stand Elmer, always out there bent over looking at his grass, the guy drove him crazy. It was grass for Christ’s sake, grass!

Elmer started to kick the pumpkins around, spreading their slimy, seedy guts and yelling, “You want to see what I go through every day? Cleaning up after your mess?” Swinging his True-Temper Dandelion Digger
one way and his slime-covered hook the other, he was a sight. Alice, still watching, started to giggle. bull-headed old man all right, she knew that. Wasn’t home from the hospital a week after his accident, and he was right back out there with his lawn. Caressing the plush carpet of verdant green, smiling, a far away look in his eyes.

Finch looked around at the carnage, and tried to salvage two smaller pumpkins that at first seemed to have no cracks in them.

Alice set her knitting aside. She was finding this more amusing than alarming. Elmer had gone off the edge like those pumpkins, she thought. He’d get tired, look at what he’d done, and offer an apology. Maybe she could collect what she could of the broken pieces and make a few pies out of them, a peace offering of sorts.

Elmer was undeterred. He was rabid. This would end today, one way or the other. Finch turned and came toward Elmer. He shook his head in disgust, face red from anger and spittle flying out of his mouth. He yelled, “You won’t get away with this, get off of my property. I’m calling the police! I mean it old man, this is done. If you want war, you’ll get war!”

As Finch started to approach Elmer he stepped in some of the pumpkin guts. They were slippery. He lost his footing and started to fall backwards (which would have been the better way to go). Wind-milling his arms as he tried to catch his balance, he teetered, then fell forward and met the business end of the True-Temper Dandelion Digger. He was impaled, stabbed in the chest, a deep, mortal wound. He looked at Elmer with a mixed expression of surprise and confusion. Elmer stood there, holding the handle of the tool, not knowing what to do.

Oh my God, look what he’s gone and done! Alice said to herself as she jumped out of her rocker and ran towards them.

“You stabbed me!” Finch whispered. He was bleeding profusely, the red mixing in with the orange of the slimy pumpkin guts.

“It was an accident!” Elmer cried. “I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone!”

Finch started to fall to the ground. Elmer looked at the handle of the tool he held with disgust. He let it go as if it burned him. Finch keeled backward like a felled tree. He lay there with the True-Temper Dandelion Digger sticking straight up in the air.

Elmer dropped onto his knees next to where Finch lay.

“Go call for help Alice.”

He was calm now, taking in the scene, remembering the day he lost his arm. He looked into Finch’s eyes, which were clouding over and staring straight up into the sky, as though trying to see where the handle of the True-Temper Dandelion Digger pointed.

“I’m so sorry,” Elmer said, “I never meant for this to happen, I wanted it to stop. I just wanted it to stop.”

Finch took one last gasp of air, and was gone. The ambulance came and went. The police took a report. It was an accident, all a tragic accident.

Elmer never recovered from that day. Fall turned to winter, and he seemed to slowly wither away, like the
Suicidal Pumpkins

season's last harvest.

Alice tried to get his spirits up, going on about this and that as he sat in his chair staring out the window at the farm stand. He never heard a word she said, only her constant sing-song voice off in the distance.

He passed away in the spring, and as he wished, Alice had him cremated. She knew he didn't want to be buried in the ground to be food for all those underground creatures. To have the roots of the plants that he once loved so much above grab hold of his bones and lovingly cradle them in their twisting, turning way.

Alice was always sensible, but she remembered Elmer always saying different; that she didn't have any good sense about her. After getting Elmer's ashes from the funeral parlor, she took them out to the backyard of their farm house, and spread them into the wind. She giggled as she watched them float away, lazily drifting down the road, toward a sea of yellow dandelions.
Clean Language
Tara Trovato

Unstopping I wriggled out of my backpack, flinging it into the dust swirling in the driveway behind me as my feet raced my heart to the house. Without the load I felt as if I was flying until, clumsily, I tripped up the cement steps and slammed my hip and shoulder into the door trying to open it too soon before my hand could turn the knob. Stumbling into the house and slamming the door behind me, I caught a glimpse through the large picture windows of the dining room of the brat, enveloped in a golden halo of curls, crouching down to pet her cat, Mewser, who had found my bag and was rubbing her teeth and whiskers against the zipper. Beyond her, my mother was mowing the lawn down near the garden. I dodged past my mother’s reading chair and lamp-stand, careful not to knock over her bibles and devotionals teetering in a stack under the light, and into the bathroom.

I didn’t bother to turn on the light. The daylight outside filtered into the dark through a window that illuminated the shower and bath. Even without it I knew exactly where to find what I was looking for. Hastily, I grabbed the slippery bar, soft from setting in the water that had stayed at the bottom of its dish on the sink. Spilling some of the yellow slime across the porcelain, I moved faster as the large bar began to slide from my grasp threatening to fall on the floor and opening my mouth as wide as I could, clamped my teeth into the soap. Classic Yellow Dial. I sat on the hard flat surface of the wooden toilet seat, arms crossed against my chest, sulkily reclined against the perspiring porcelain with my knees drawn up tight, heels hooked on the inner lip of the seat holding me steadfast on my perch. In the cool quiet of the bathroom, I listened to the distant hum of the mower grow louder as it neared the house. I put my head down on my knees, letting my dark hair stick to my tear-streaked cheeks, waiting. I was in big trouble.

Until this year, I had gone off every day, riding the school bus alone, sitting with who ever I felt like sitting with, while my baby sister, Beth, got to stay home with our mother. Hurt and angry that she had taken my place as the baby of the family, I began a family of my own out of my classmates, one that belonged to me alone. But this year was a big transition for me. I was no longer in the little kid wing of my school, but I had finally rounded the corner and entered the hall of the big kids. The hall where the bathrooms were outside of the classroom and we were allowed to go there by ourselves. I was now in fourth grade. A big kid with complete freedom. And my little sister was starting kindergarten.

Following me around, her big brown eyes watching my every move, pleading with me to stay close, Beth was everywhere that I was. I shared my room, my parents, and now my school and makeshift family in which she, again, became the baby. For the most part, I was very grateful for her. She was the little sister that I had prayed nine long months for. At home we never fought. I never had any reason to get annoyed with or away from her. She was my best friend and playmate. I adored her. But now, she was a baby and I a big girl. I wanted to be with my big friends, playing big kid games and talking about big kid things, things I didn’t want my mother to know.
about. Things like how babies were made (at least how other kids thought it happened, I had already had that talk), or things that my mother had left out, like condoms and the gross but still exciting descriptions of oral sex that the kids with teenage brothers and sisters always had to share. And of course, dirty words.

But there she was, always listening and absorbing every detail, trying to keep her place as my friend, and, for the first time, she bothered me. I was a fourth grader, too big to be hanging out with babies. I didn’t have anything in common with her, she didn’t know anything about the important things that we knew about, and worst of all, she would tell. So, I would hide in the back of the bus, leaving her with the other babies, and even sometimes by herself. I told her to leave me alone, that she was not big enough to sit with us. At home we still played, and most of the time I would tell her everything that I found out during those bus rides, once she promised never to tell. She was my secret ally. But not on the bus.

Every day I let Beth know that she was definitely not a part of our group, but every day she still tried. Usually I would just have to show her my most meanest face and tell her to go away and she would. But today she was more persistent than usual, probably because she didn’t have anyone to sit with. Growing more and more annoyed, and embarrassed because I could tell that my friends were annoyed, I used one of my newest and worst words that I could think of to hurt her feelings.

You’re a fucker!

I’m going to tell mommy when we get home.

Please don’t tell! I’m sorry O.K.? Come on don’t tell. I didn’t mean it.

I’m telling.

I hate you!

For the rest of the bus ride I sat by myself. My stomach turned over and over, twisting itself into a tight knot. I had never said anything like that before. I knew better. My mother always told us never to use dirty words, that they made people sound and look ugly. Little girls should always use clean language, because that’s what Jesus wanted, and because then others would think we were nice. Whenever we heard some random child using dirty words or if we heard them on the television, my mother would always remind us never to talk like that or she would have to wash our mouths out with soap. That was enough for me. Not only was soap the worst tasting stuff that I had ever tried, but I was afraid that Jesus would hear me and be sad.

The more I thought about it, the angrier and more stubborn I became. As far as I was concerned, it was Beth’s fault that I had called her that anyway, because she wouldn’t leave me alone. She wasn’t going to get in trouble for bothering me because what I did was worse. I was scared to death. The last thing I wanted was to get yelled at, so I decided that I would fix everything before my mother could get upset. If I put the soap into my own mouth, then my mother would know how sorry I was and I wouldn’t get into trouble. Instead she would be proud.
of me for being a big girl for knowing that what I did was wrong. The closer we got to home the more determined I became.

It felt like I had been sitting in the bathroom for hours before I finally heard the front door open. I could hear the muffled voices of Beth and my mother. Still crying, tears and drool formed slimy, soapy streams cascading down over my bottom lip and from the corners of my mouth, joining under my chin to drip into my lap and run down my neck soaking my collar. My mouth was sore from holding the soap and my mouth was on fire. My mother was in the dining room, close enough for me to hear her ask Beth where I was. I kept quiet, holding my breath as I listened for my sister’s voice, too low for me to make out her words.

TA-RA!

Suddenly, without warning, the bathroom door swung open, the bright sunlight filled the room only to be blocked out by my mother’s form, arms akimbo, looming huge in the doorway.

What are you doing?

Her hand shot in and flicked on the light, revealing my puffy eyes and lips. From behind her, I could see my sister’s big eyes peering out around the doorway, the bathroom light highlighting her golden halo. My jaw was tight and felt as though it was about to snap as my mother pried the bar loose from my clenched teeth, spilling a flood of Classic Yellow down my chest and over my shorts. She turned on the cold water in the sink, running it over a wash cloth with which she washed my face.

Cupping her hands under the faucet she held the water out to me to rinse out my mouth. After examining my burnt mouth, blood red and pitted from the soap, she washed and rung out the wash cloth for me to suck on. Over and over she asked me what I thought I was doing, but all I could do was cry. Finally after she had cleaned me off and calmed me down, she cuddled me up into her lap on the couch and gently cajoled me into telling her why I had put the bar of soap in my mouth. It wasn’t until then that I realized that Beth, my sister, my friend, never told.
The Season of Sun
Benjamin Allocco

What do you tell yourself the day the world is scheduled to end? Who do you call that you haven’t talked to already? Do you bother? Will it matter when it’s all over? Do you bother getting up? Do you stay in bed and smoke yourself into oblivion? Do you call your friends and get together one last time, waiting for the asteroid? Do you follow the nut-jobs that are crowding where the asteroid is scheduled to hit?

You don’t really think about it, you try to push it to the back of your mind. You get up. You put on your bra and underwear. You slip on some old jeans and a clean t-shirt. You make yourself breakfast. You remember that the electricity has been out for quite some time, so you eat some stale bread and peanut butter. You go to the bathroom to wash your face. Your hair is in a messy ponytail. You try to shrug off your hangover with the taste of beer and liquor, but it clings to your tongue even after the peanut butter sandwich. You brush your teeth and pee. You smooth your hair out and take your cell phone from your pocket. Its screen has been black for days, but you’ve kept it in your pocket out of habit. Now you toss it across the room and don’t wait to see where it lands.

It’s warm outside. The season of sun, the season of life.

You wonder what the impact will be like. Will you feel it? It’s supposed to smash into the ocean somewhere, but it’s going to hit the earth’s crust and send ash into the air anyway. The ocean will come rushing toward the shores at something like a billion miles an hour and everything in its path will be wiped out. You imagine sand castles on the beach melting as the tide rises. This will be the fate of man. The ash will smother the earth in a matter of days. The sun will go out like your electricity and everything will die. Everything.

You go to your garage and you get in your car. You don’t have enough gas to get anywhere far, but you’ve thought about this. You see yourself in the mirror, your sunken eyes, your pale skin. You were rich once. Before money became useless. You own a cherry red convertible Corvette with a rag top. You’re about to drive this once cherished piece of machinery through the closed garage door. You squeal the tires and get ten good feet to advance the speedometer as far as it will go.

There’s a fantastic crunching, smashing sound as you hit the door and it tears away from the garage. The car is now beautifully fucked up along with your house. Everything is worthless today.

Everything has always been worthless, you just never noticed before.

Your Corvette, all dented to hell, two broken headlights and a cracked windshield, flies through the neighborhood at something like a billion miles an hour. You’re off to meet your destiny. When the gas runs out, you’ll walk. You don’t even have a destination. You’re going to travel until the shockwave reaches you and your knees buckle and you fall to the ground or until the ash in the air smothers you. You’ve heard what it’ll be like, but you’ve recently blocked it out. You stopped wanting to hear it. You put in a CD you used to listen to as a kid and play it as loud as you can. Your ear drums are going...
Benjamin Allocco

to burst, and you smile.

Everybody dies alone. Today will be no different.
Though the world is waiting in anticipation, holding hands
or slitting their wrists in unison, they’re all dying for the
same reason anybody ever dies:
For nothing.

If My Backyard Could Talk...

Amanda Fortune

it would tell you about,
Friends jumping it’s fence, to ambush me during a
water fight.

It would tell you about how I thought I fell in love the
first time in our hot tub.
About how I cursed my mother’s name when I went out
there to vent about her.

It would tell you about how I would practice my
balance on the railing of the deck.

It would explain in extreme detail how I got the scar on
my right big toe.

It would tell how vivid my imagination is.
And about how deep I fell into all my fantasies.

If my backyard could talk,
It would want to tell you how much I love stars.
And how hard I cried when I realized my “first love”
was just physical.

It would tell you how I thought of moving in with my
dad.

If my back yard could talk it would tell you about
Polly Pocket, terrible neighbors and tanning out on the
deck.

It would tell you about Ryan, Jeff and Dan
and all the different ways I’ve been hurt.
If my backyard could talk,
you might understand me.
How to Take the Perfect Picture
Beth Stevens

While walking hand in hand,
*pause*
and pretend to take a picture of a flower,
trusting that he will wander a few
more steps ahead
captured in his rambling, jammering, ranting about
the universe in a nutshell.
With camera in hand,
*zoom*
in on his face,
letting his features fill the viewer.

Wait till he turns towards you,
jamming, ranting, rambling about
Paris Island.
*Focus*
on his brown eyes looking up at the blue sky,
on his dark hair with the swirl of a cowlick
near the front,
on the freckles covering his whole face.

When he pauses to take a breath from
ranting, rambling, jamming about
his friend who had a large heart,
tell him that you love him.
Wait that split second for him to look at you
with the smile that melts
all your worries
and
*click.*

Connecting Flights
Michele Giorlando

My seatbelt is already secured by the time the
captain puts on the fasten seat belt sign. I sit motionless,
hands already placed carefully on the arm rests, declaring
to anyone who sits next to me that I will be holding them
throughout the flight. I feel the cold chain of my necklace
against my overheated chest and overactive heartbeat. I
can’t fly without the necklace; I always wear it, just in
case.

If I don’t make it and I’m found at the bottom of
the ocean in the depths of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge at least
I’ll have the necklace on, a record that I was once alive.
The rescue crew will find me pale, my tan washed away.
I’ll still have my sneakers on and I hope they’ll see the
practicality behind that. Maybe they’ll even discover that
I sprinted to catch this connection, making it just in time,
the last person to board. If I’d been wearing sandals or
heels I wouldn’t have made it and I’d be waiting patiently
at Leonardo Da Vinci Airport, my fresh tan making me
seem native.

Once they haul me back to land to identify me,
they’ll notice the necklace, secure around my throat,
diamonds still shining. Maybe they’ll be able to picture
the boy who gave it to me one afternoon in the kitchen of
my parents’ house. Maybe they’ll even call him up to let
him know about the crash, or send him the clips from TV
and somehow he’ll remember me. He’ll remember the
day he gave me the necklace, that winter before we grew
up. It hadn’t snowed yet, even though Christmas had just
Michele Giorlando

passed. We were standing next to the refrigerator, eating leftover pies, when he gave me the small box. I hated it of course. I didn’t wear it, just left it in the box to collect dust. I didn’t say I love you either, even though the following summer, in the middle of our high school baseball field, searching for shooting stars, he said it to me. I didn’t say ‘I missed you’ when I went away to college and I didn’t say stay in touch when I found my job.

Whenever the seatbelt sign blinks on throughout the flight I reach for the necklace and say a small prayer. I don’t believe in god but I believe in the universe and wishing on shooting stars. I don’t really start to panic until I feel the turbulence or the people around me fall asleep, because then who will help me with the oxygen mask? But if the plane’s going down at least I’ll be found with the necklace on and coroners will think I’m sophisticated and classy and that there’s more to me than business trips. They’ll know that I too was once loved by somebody and loved them back, but was never able to say it.

So This Is Christmas
Julia Galime
“Quick! Hide!”

Three pairs of tiny bare feet scurry across the creaking hardwood floor; our breathing shallow and light as not to give away our most secret positions. I lie there, stomach to the dust covered ground, back pressed tight against the chilled wall. The only sound echoing off the slanted ceiling walls is the heightened patter of an anxious eight-year-old heart. Through the dim dark I can just make out the silhouette of a smaller body wedged between two dressers a mere four feet away. My eyes scan the shadows for the third member of our playing party but my under-the-bed view reveals no clues to where she could be hiding.

Time passes in slow motion seconds.

Waiting to be found is scarier then the actual moment when her hands will come from nowhere reaching around my tiny waist as I kick and scream for freedom. But the room remains unmoved. The fear is too overwhelming to take that single whisper risk to make contact with those unseen. Just as I’m about ready to shift for a better view of the door muffled footsteps come to life somewhere beyond the heavy sliding oak. One by one the wearing carpeted stairs gives way to the weight of a monster advancing on her three pajama painted victims. It takes every nerve not to break out in hysteric giggles.

Scrape. Thud.

Light cascades into the room outlining the towering shadow of terror. Blink a few times to adjust the pupils and then melt yourself into the pastel plaster. Steady, heavy footsteps creak closer, edging on the boundaries of the darkness. From the far corner a small gasp escapes the tiniest pair of lips exposing her small shaking figure.

“I see you,” a low rumble sounds from somewhere deep within the bowels of the demon.

If I can’t see it, it can’t see me. Close my eyes to shield myself from the chase. The bed above me creaks and a small rush of air brushes my hand covered face. Involuntarily my eyes shoot open to see the protruding bed springs bending under a large body. It’s so close I can almost hear it breathing.

Without warning a rough hand shoots between the bed sheets and the wall grabbing hard onto my clothes.

“Ah!”

My piercing alarm sets off the others as they attempt an escape. I will sacrifice myself for the good of my sisters. Within seconds their shadows dance through the blinding light and down the stairs. Struggling and wrestling with the grip; fighting to save myself from an imagined torturous fate. Its hold begins to loosen as my body twists and turns like a goldfish evicted from an aquatic home. Just like that goldfish I flip-flop free and roll myself out from underneath my cave of seclusion and scramble towards the door, feet flying, as if they had wings, down the stairs only looking back once I reach the bottom landing; my breath coming in tight, short bursts.

There it stood leering in the doorway. Skin colored pantyhose stretched tight over its distorted face. From the opposite side of the bright room my sisters stood quivering together in giddy anxiousness.

Screech.
One less step between me and the beast. My feet remain firmly planted in the ground ready to fight. Three less steps remain. My heart flutters deep within my chest. Two more steps left behind. I falter. Fleeing to the corner with my army of three we wait, huddled close together. Its feet become visible between the polished wooden posts of the banister as it leaves only five steps and a quick leap between us. Another step taken and our fates are sealed. But, just as quickly as if you were to blink and miss it, the monster tripped. That third step that seemed so futile to its purpose provided our salvation. A quick slip and a stumble and the hunter lay motionless on the hardwood floor. Its body contorted to fit the niche between floor and stairs. Victorious screams erupt from our cheering bodies. Fists in the air we circle each other in celebration. We have beaten the ogre.

Our laughter subsides and leaves the air lighter. But when we glance to the spot of its downfall our faces fall to confusion. Why isn’t it moving? Game over. We won. Is it so sour not to jump up and congratulate us?

"Mom?" my little sister squeaks from behind me.

Her chest isn’t rising. No sounds are heard from that corner miles away. Not one of us has the courage to examine our most fearful accusations.

"Mom! Get up!"

Panic overtakes excitement as our feet slowly edge closer to the scene of the crime.

"Is she dead?" we can’t help but ask each other even though none of us dare begin to answer.

"I don’t know," I respond quietly through locked jaw.

"Should we call Dad?" the little one asks once more.

That would probably be the best idea if any of us knew a number we could reach him at. My second thought is to call 911 but I’m still not convinced this is an emergency. Mom is always playing tricks on us like this. Well, not quite like this. Not the kind of trick where she doesn’t respond after a few minutes. Not the kind of trick where she lays stiff and lifeless on the ground. Not the kind trick where she would let us worry like this. Would she?

Hot tears began forming at the edge of my eyes and I quickly try to blink them away to hide my distress. But I can already tell my sisters have passed the place of worry and are clear into petrified. Not a one of us has any idea what to do next or what to do should our worst fears be revealed as truth.

"Someone needs to go closer," the bitty blonde suggests from my left.

"Then why don’t you!" I demand turning the responsibility away from my own nervous mind.

"You’re the oldest," little one speaks up. She has a strong point. Their tiny hands usher my back forward. Tripping over my own hesitation I slowly make my way towards the stillness. Within moments I am face to face with the trauma.

"Mommy? Mom, are you okay?" Carefully I lower myself to try and shake some movement into her.
Kimberly Saunders

My hands reach out to grab hold of her arm just as her eyes pop open and a loud yell bellows from her now wide mouth. I can't help but scream at this surprise; more out of anger than enjoyment. Her laughter reigns over us but we have no intention of joining her in this delightful rapture. Once again I wrestle free from her grasp and turn my enraged eyes onto hers.

"That wasn't funny!"

The three of us jump in at the same time spouting frustrations and arguing irritations. She just pulls herself off the floor, yanks the pantyhose off her now sweating face and just beams down at us from her ecstasy high above.

To my Secretly Flawless, Beautiful, Remarkable, Stunning and Amazing Ex-Boyfriend
Elizabeth Buecher

It was tragic the day you realized you gave away the only piece of truth in your life; I was sorry that I couldn't help you anymore. Our love was a rainbow, impossible to tell where it started or where it ended; somewhere in the middle it was Flawless.

Your life is a masquerade; it must be difficult to try so hard to be something you're not. It would be so much easier to show everyone the side of you that only I know, not the cool side; the Beautiful one.

I tried to strip you of your mask; so everyone could see how Remarkable you are. I tried and tried; but it only stripped us of each other. I'm not sorry that I tried; for I wasn't trying to change you, I only wanted you to give up your career as a professional liar. I hope that you find someone else
that can see through you; to a more
Stunning
you.
I pray that you gain the courage to reveal the secret that
you're
Amazing.
Until then
Your secret's safe with me.

The Old Man
Liz Gerace

John Fletcher breathed deeply and awoke to the familiar scent buried deep within his pillow. Fresh cotton, a light hint of musk, it smelled the way he remembered for the last fifty years. He rolled over and rested his hand in the empty crevice beside him, a slight indent. No matter how many times he changed his sheets, how many times he turned the mattress, it was always there. This unoccupied space had been empty for some time now, but every morning he reached for her, his fingers desiring the touch of her warm body, to feel the shallow rising and falling of her chest as she slept.

A wistful longing came over him, the same longing that ravaged his thoughts every morning, and he gently shut his eyes, reveling in the silence and despising it—escaping to the world of twilight, the fragile balance between the cruel awareness of reality and the reckless liberation of dreams, a realm where distortion controls perception.

Hearing a soft groan, John was torn from his placid escape. Opening an eye, he turned his attention towards the foot of the bed. Snoring softly as a fine stream of drool soaked the sheets, the dog—as old and decrepit as John himself—slept, twitching and whining every so often, lost in his own dreams of a past that seemed so old, so distant. At one point in time, the dog was a gift from John to his wife. Given many years ago in honor of an anniversary, a companion to fill the void that grown children had left; the dog and man now occupied each other's company, content in their existence together. One relied on the other, and to them it was comfortable.
The springs groaned as John lifted himself from the bed. The dog awoke, raised his head, and watched while the man-bones and joints cracking, breath growing shallow—stood up. He shuffled to the closet and, opening it carefully, pulled out an old suit. Moth-eaten and frayed at the seams, the suit—once a distinguished grey—was faded and thread-bare. But John wore it as he did everyday. He watched as his reflection pulled on the suit. He noticed each wrinkle and the few thin white hairs that sat on top of his head. John wondered at what point in time the reflection looking back at him seemed almost unrecognizable. Putting on his hat and checking his shoes one last time to make sure they were shined, he called the dog and the two walked out the door on their way to the park.

John and the dog slowly hobbled down the street, keeping their own pace, taking in everything the day had to offer. Before, he and his wife would walk down the same street engrossed in conversation while the dog, only a puppy, tugged violently at the leash, racing ahead and barking at anything that moved. A leash was no longer necessary as the dog, never leaving John's side, plodded along silently. When they reached the park, John let out a sigh of relief as he sat on a bench by the pond. The dog uttered a similar groan as he lay down in the cool grass, stretching his legs out behind him. Squirrels ran by, imprudent and reckless. Noticing that the dog posed no threat, they weren't afraid to run towards the bench, stealing the breadcrumbs that John had tossed out for the pigeons.

As people walked by, birds came and went, squirrels and chipmunks darted back and forth—the day passed and dusk set in, casting the park in dim shadow. John and his dog walked home through the silent streets as everything around them began to fade into nothing.

After a small supper consisting of a can of Campbell's soup and a piece of bread, and an hour of light napping on the couch in front of the muted television—its picture blaring, John Fletcher slowly climbed the stairs and hobbled towards his room with his dog close behind. He ran through his nightly routine, ending with a short prayer. Sitting on the edge of his bed, looking around the room that hadn't been changed in years, nothing moved or out of place—only aged, John noticed that the clock on his nightstand had stopped. Resolving to wind it in the morning, he started to lie down only to be interrupted by a raspy feeble bark. The dog being too old to jump up onto the bed as he used to, expressed his agitation until John reluctantly bent down. Groaning, his back popping and cracking, he lifted the dog onto the bed. Being returned to his rightful spot, the dog nestled himself into the comforter. Whispering goodnight to the picture of his wife and turning out the small light beside his bed, John escaped into the comfort of deep, forgetful sleep, free of painful memories and loneliness. Outside, rain beat down fierce and hard. The wind wailed in dirge-like mourning. All throughout the night the storm raged on, temper flaring wildly, throwing its furious tantrum.

Morning came. Daylight broke, dispersing the
Liz Gerace

darkness and obscurity of night. The sun, radiant and dazzling, erased all presence of the turbulent storm. The dog awoke and found John still in bed. After a quick stretch, he timidly crawled up to where the man lay. The dog licked his hand, nuzzled his cheek, but John didn’t stir. He nudged John a bit harder but to no avail. Letting out a frightened whimper, the dog frantically licked John’s cheek, begging him to wake up. Knowing that all signs of life had long since passed from the motionless body, the dog lay his head across the John’s chest and cried—cried for his man, his friend. One last raspy howl escaped as he closed his eyes. Remaining ever-devoted to his companion, the dog followed.
Lullaby
Bailey Garfinkel

Day 1 - The Spotting

I saw you in the morning.  
You came the night before.  
It was not a surprise visit.  
You were late.  
It wasn’t what I expected.  
Too naive to even realize, what you were.

Day 2 - Disappearing Act

Before I knew it,  
you were gone. Quickly  
disappearing, I thought nothing of it. I forgot  
your departure,  
as quickly as I forgot your arrival.

Day 3 - The Return

You came back,  
thicker then molasses,  
darker then crimson should be,  
and sharper then the sharpest spear.

You cause pains,  
in the lowest part of back,  
the middle that I can’t reach,

Day 4 - The Test

You finally got noticed.

Day 5 - The Decision

There are no choices.  
I never thought of a different option.

Day 6 - The Hospital

Four sterile white walls,  
one foreign sympathetic doctor,
six overly concerned nurses.

One lonely teenage girl,
two bottom cheeks showing,
and six hours of a ticking wall clock.

One person in the room alone,
two patients with a crying baby outside,
three hours of echoing lullabies to soothe the nerves.

Two pumping IV's,
four emergency bathroom breaks,
one confusing definite answer.

Day 7- The Wait

Time passes slowly,
knowing you are growing,
knowing your final destination,
timing means everything.

Pain passes slowly,
not knowing my body anymore,
not knowing what is happening,
pain is irrelevant.

Day 8-More Blood Work

Back to the place
where sick children go

Day 9- The Results

You left me again,
again not forewarning me. saving me the money,
and grief, of sending you off on my own

I suppose I should thank you,
for saving me a decision,
it makes me wonder,
where I will be one hundred and eighty days from now.

I know where you will be.

Day 10- Rock a, Bye Baby.

With narcotics My pain is dulled. When I say goodbye to you,
My darling little boy.
This is going to be the best vacation ever. I just got a new pink polka dot bathing suit, I get to watch movies in the car, and my sister is finally being nice to me. Yesterday, she told me I couldn’t wear her shirt because I’m ugly. Well, I think she’s ugly, but I’m not mean to her. Anyway, Mom made her give me the shirt because she said that, so now she is being nice so I don’t take it. The shirt isn’t that nice anyway, I am way over the care bears.

“Girls get to bed early we are leaving at five in the morning,” Mom said.

“But Mom, it’s so early and Dad said we can stay up.” Tara replied.

I don’t think Dad said that, but I went along anyway because I wanted to watch TV. If I had to go to bed now I would probably jump around my room until we leave in the morning.

“No. Both of you go to bed. Do you want me to get your father and ask him if he said that?” Mom smirked as she looked at Tara.

“That’s not fair. I’m older. Kelli is only six, make her go to bed.”

“Tara I am not going to tell you again, now go.”

It’s not like she’s that much older; she’s only seven. I’m glad Mom made her go to bed too, because she is starting to be mean again. She pushes me as she walks by and I want to tell, but I know somehow I’ll get yelled at too. So, I just follow her upstairs and walk to my room.

A few minutes later Mom walks into my room to make sure I’m in bed. I’m not, but I am too excited and I can’t sleep.

“Lights off. You need to rest for tomorrow.” Mom glared at me.

“But Mom I can’t sleep. Please just five more minutes.” How could she say no to that? But she did and turned my lights off as she walked out. I get in bed but I just stare at the stars on my ceiling until I’m dizzy.

“Wake up. It’s five and we are running late.” Mom yelled down the hallway. I don’t even remember falling asleep. I jump out of bed grab my suitcase, which must weigh about a hundred pounds, and drag it down the stairs.

Tara is already downstairs and she looks like a wet dog. I feel bad so I ask her what’s wrong.

“Leave me alone, I’m eating.” What did I do? She is so mean to me. I hit her in the back of the head and run away real fast. She doesn’t even bother telling on me but I know I am going to get it later.

We all pile in the van and are on our way. Mom and Dad are in the front; Gram and Pop are in the middle; Tara and I are in the back with the car seat in the middle of us for Erin. With Erin in the back there is hardly any room and Tara keeps pushing the car seat over.

“Stop it.” I pleaded with Tara.

“What? I’m not doing anything.”

“Girls.” Dad looks up at us and we both stop. I can’t help it; we have been in the car forever, and my legs are starting to hurt. We stopped four times on the road and I thought we would be there by now.

“Mom, are we in Florida yet?” I ask.
“No honey, we are going to Maryland.” Mom chuckles at me.
“We are?”
“Yup. We’re going to the beach.”
“Really? Can I swim?”
“Yes honey, but go to sleep. I’ll tell you when we’re there.”

I’ve never been to Maryland, I hope it’s fun. After another three hours we were there. I feel like we were in the car forever. The house we are staying at is so pretty and we have a deck that goes right to the water. Pop and I walk out to the back while everyone unloads the car and we look at the jellyfish. They are really ugly fish and I’m scared of them because Pop says they sting. Pop isn’t scared of them though; he keeps dipping his slipper in the water. All of a sudden his slipper fell off and I can’t stop laughing.

“Quick. Go tell Dad to get a broom.” Pop laughs a little, but I know he wants his slipper back. I come back with Dad and they get his slipper out of the water. There is a hole right where his big toe is supposed to go. The jellyfish stung his slipper and it went right through it. That’s it. I am never getting near those things again.

I come running inside to tell everyone the story and they all laugh, except for Tara. I ask her if she thinks it’s funny; she tells me no and walks away. I wonder if she thinks she is better than me because she is older. Pop is more fun to play with anyway.

“Where are we eating?” I ask Pop.
“Anywhere you want honey.” Pop has kind eyes. I like the way his skin crinkles in the corners of his eyes; it makes him look like he is always smiling.

After dinner we go to bed because Dad says we had a long day driving. I didn’t drive though, and I am still wide-awake. He tells me about the beach tomorrow and how much fun we will have. After a while Dad asks me to please be good and go to sleep so I have energy in the morning. I kiss him and say good night. He tucks Tara in and leaves the room.

I hate sharing a room with Tara, she snores and I am forced to stay up all night. I start imagining her snores are the waves of the ocean and that I’m playing in the sand. This is my first time going to a beach, but I have seen beaches on the TV. Mom says Maryland has a huge beach and that it looks like it goes on forever.

Five minutes later I wake up to my Dad rubbing my back telling me to eat some breakfast. He tells me it’s 8:00 and we should get going soon to get a good spot on the beach. I am so confused, I feel like I went to bed five minutes ago and I don’t want to get up. Finally, he gets me out of bed and makes us all eggs. We have to eat scrambled eggs because those are Tara’s favorite; I like the ones with the yellow in the middle.

“Move. That’s my seat.” Tara is always extra cranky in the morning.

“No. I’m sitting here. There is another seat right here.” I am not going to move for her.
“I’m not talking to you then.” Of course I get up. The threat of Tara not talking to me the whole day at the beach is a serious one. I need someone to play with and besides, the other chair was just as comfy.

We pull into the parking lot and there are about a million cars. Almost all of them are vans with a suitcase holder tied on top like ours. I hope there are a lot of kids here to play with. I have my new pink bathing suit on and my favorite purple Barbie sunglasses on my head. Mom asks if she can hold them so I don’t lose them; good idea. Pop takes about ten minutes to get out of the car with Gram yelling behind him to hurry up. They fight a lot, but Pop always makes jokes to make Gram stop. She doesn’t stop.

It takes forever to get to the beach. After we drive there we have to wait in line for an umbrella because you’re not allowed to bring your own. It must be really expensive because Dad keeps taking out money every time we stop.

“Five dollars please.” The man at the umbrella stand tells Dad. That’s pretty good; we get to keep the umbrella for five bucks. It looks like there are pizza slices with red, blue, purple, white, and green all meeting at the center. The entire beach looks like there are huge lollipops sticking out of the sand. I get to choose where to put the umbrella and I pick the perfect spot.

Mom puts sun block on all of us and I look like a marshmallow running around in the sand. I really want to go in the water, but Dad tells me I need to be patient and wait for him. Tara is lying in the sun and even though I gave her the seat in the morning she’s still not talking to me. I throw sand at her, and well, that turns out to be a bad idea. She is so mad I can see her lip curling up and head shaking. She runs and pushes me in the sand. Dad told us enough, and took us to the water.

When we are down at the water Tara fills her bucket with wet sand and then I do it after her. We start following Dad back up to the umbrella, but my bucket falls. I run back to the water as fast as I can and two seconds later I turn around to catch up.

They’re gone. They left me. Where are they? Its OK, I will follow their footprints in the sand. I find one of Tara’s footprints and start following it. As I get to the dry sand I can’t tell her footprints from anyone else’s. There are so many indents in the sand, and I start weaving back and forth trying to find the right ones. I am really starting to get scared. How could they leave me? Didn’t they even notice I was missing?

The umbrella. I realize I can find our umbrella and get back to Mom and Dad. I look up and think I have the best idea in the world. I start walking down the beach along the water and scan over the sand. All the umbrellas look the same. Oh, no. Everyone has the same umbrella. The beach no longer looks like lollipops in the sand, but like scary multicolored mushrooms growing out of the sand in thousands.

I continue walking along the water and I can’t stop shaking. It is getting so cold and the wind is practically blowing me over. I wish I was home. I hate the beach.
This is a stupid vacation. I bet Tara is up there telling no one to look for me. She left me on purpose. She did. I hate her. At this point I can’t stop crying. No one is helping me and I just keep walking. It is hard to see because my entire face is covered with tears and pellets of salt water that are blowing up from the ocean and hitting my face. They’re never going to find me. I’m going to have to live on the beach forever. I hope someone leaves their umbrella so I can live under it. Am I really lost? Why won’t anyone find me? I don’t know where to go.

I keep walking until my legs start to hurt. Finally, I sit down in the wet sand and bury my face in my knees. It is hard to breathe because I am sobbing so hard. I decide to walk to the parking lot and find our car. I get up and—

“Are you lost dear?” I look up and a red headed man with blue eyes and two red headed sons attached to his hands is staring down at me. I think about running away because he is a stranger, but I think maybe he will let me live with him and his son because I lost my family.

“Ye—ye—yes.” It is so hard to talk when I am crying, so I try to hold it in.

The man tells his son to grab my hand and tells me not to worry he will get me some help. On our way to get help he tells me we are going to a lifeguard.

“What is a lifeguard?” I ask him.

“It is someone who is going to help us find your parents.” He smiled as he explained this to me.

“Oh my parents are lost. I can’t find them. He laughs at me and I don’t understand, but he reassures me that we will find my family.

There is a huge wooden chair sticking out of the sand with a person in a red bathing suit sitting on top. I ask the man if this is the lifeguard and he nods. The redhead tells me to wait right here and not to move. He talks to the lifeguard and tells him I am lost. I’m not lost, I know exactly where I am; it’s my family that is lost. They left me. The redhead looks back at me when he is done talking and says someone is coming to play with me while the lifeguard finds my family. I look up and see the man in the chair waving two white flags back and forth. How is this going to help me find my family?

“Will you be OK if I leave you with the lifeguard?” The redhead asks.

“I will stay right here.” I am way too tired to start walking around again.

“OK, good luck honey.” He gives me a hug and tells his sons to say good-bye.

I have been waiting here forever and still no sign of my parents. They couldn’t leave me here could they? Just as I am about to cry again a girl older than me comes up to me and taps my shoulder. She tells me she is the lifeguard’s sister and asks if she can play with me. So, we sit and dig our fingers deep into the wet sand. I can feel the little pieces get stuck under my fingers, but I don’t care. We dig and dig until we find these little crawly things. She tells me they are called sand crabs and I scream and throw one. I think I scare her because she jumps too, but she tells me it’s OK and they won’t hurt me.

“Oh my God, Kelli. Are you OK?” Mom comes
running towards me and swoops me off the sand, we both started falling over but Dad catches us.

“Kell, where did you think you were going? What, you don’t like us?” Pop is always joking, but Gram hits him and tells him it’s not funny.

“You guys got lost, so I tried finding you but there was too much sand.” I try to explain what happened. Dad and Pop start laughing, Mom is still shaking, Gram is still hitting Pop for laughing, but I don’t see Tara. She is holding Dad’s hand and hiding behind him. I knew it. She didn’t want me to find everyone. Even when she knows she may never see me again, it doesn’t bother her. I give up. If she doesn’t want to be my sister, than I’ll just play with Erin. I don’t need her, a baby sister is better than a mean sister.

“Do you want to come help me with my Castle?” Tara asks as she slowly moves out from behind Dad. She secretly wipes tears off her face but I can see her.

“OK.” I start walking up the hill. I hear Pop in the background chuckling and saying someone should grab my hand so I don’t run away again. I hear Gram yelling, Mom sniffing, Dad just holding Erin as we walk, and Tara holding my hand.

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Someone peculiar passed by me this morning. It was maybe fifty degrees outside, and, having recently gotten over a bout of sinusitis, I knew to wear my jacket. Anyone would, no?

A young man stepped up to a tree across from where I rested on a bench, trying to lose myself for a moment. He wore a t-shirt and denim shorts! I could not believe my eyes. In this cold! Then, unbelievably, he straddles a bicycle and rode directly into the wind! My mind wandered over the possibilities, for this is strange behavior. Laundry day? No, that’s usually Friday. He could be trying to get sick in the hopes of avoiding a particularly platitudeous lecture he may have tomorrow morning. I finally decided that this gentleman must have a name and since I doubt I shall ever speak to him, I shall call him Mr. Munchausen. I mean truly, is this not his reasoning? Even if the avoidance of a certain bromidic professor is his ultimate goal, is this still not a call for attention by those around him? Are you ok? How are you
feeling? Let me know if

I can do anything for you. To which this young man most assuredly would have replied: “God

bless you for your genuine kindness and attention to me for which I am vehemently desperate. Worry not though, for I will be tip top in a few days. It will only be after your attention wanes that I will without fail contract some new, exotic ailment for which the only cure is your warm sentiment and foolhardy regard.”
Trees
Frannie Bray

It’s late. On every side trees rise up from the ground, their bare trunks curving up into the darkness.

The grass is moving, the pine needles on the ground are moving, like one giant wave. The wind is harsh and cold, and coats her face with a thin sheen of rainwater.

The dark surrounds her. Not too far away is the water, crashing and pounding and gurgling, a constant white noise. She stumbles, but does not fall. She is remembering.

She squints her eyes, shakes her head, like maybe clearing her head will make her remember better. She tries to remember his voice, as she weaves an unsteady path through the trees. She can’t.

His touch, she can remember. How his body felt, and his hands, and his lips. She remembers what his eyes looked like, how sometimes she really looked and saw something that scared her a little, at first.

She’s weaving around the curved trunks of these trees, and it’s really raining now. She feels a drop on her head, one on her cheek. The wind whips her hair back and forward and around her face, making her barely able to see at all. A hand comes out, up, brushes the strands from her face, and then goes back into her pocket. She hunches, against the cold, and against the feeling.

Again her foot catches on a branch, or perhaps on itself, and she falls. She doesn’t try to stop it, her hands still in her pockets as she falls. She doesn’t stand up. Instead she sits, kneeling, sunk into herself. Her eyes are vacant, and she stares at the trees around her, and the darkness between them.

In her lap her hands twist and flutter and feel each other. She has nothing to hold, no memento, nothing of his to hold and remember and feel. She has nothing.

The knees of her jeans are soaked through, her legs cold. But she sits, still. She tries again to remember his voice. She can remember him saying everyday things, barely. But she can’t, can’t bring up the memory of him telling her he loved her.

It’s been days since she’s talked to him, as she sits in the wet grass. And now that she can’t talk to him anymore, she can’t remember. She twitches, and coughs. The cold is settling into her bones. She rises again, begins her trek through the trees once more.

The sound of the waves is close now; she’s come to the edge of the ground. She can’t remember if he loved her. She coughs again. It’s cold, and the wind moves her at the edge.

Below her the sea tugs at the rocks, pounding and sliding and spraying. The sound thunders, and she can’t hear anything but that. His voice is lost to her, completely. The feel of his hands is going. It’s been so long, since she’s felt them.

The wind pushes at her back, presses into her. It’s the only thing she feels, the waves the only thing she hears. She has no memory of him.

She decides that maybe it’s for the best.
something is eating away
something is eating away
stop thinking stop thinking stop I can’t
I can’t stop
something is eating away
at me and
me and me and me and
all end every bit small last and little
last piece what’s left of me
from the inside outside in
big beautiful Fake easy smile
no target practice hear look listen and…
nobody knows this isn’t real
shell exploded and it hit every thing
entry wounded exit wounded enter/leave
all around me it’s all around me
paranoia paranoia paranoia
accuse every small and little last piece
I’ve got to pull must pull pretty perfect
pull on the pulse I’ve got one still
beating booming becoming bang trigger pull
me and me and me and
all ending every bit last little and small
what’s left of me
nothing at … all

On the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, tempers would never be lost; instead they would be always kept in place. Nothing would get out of hand and hot heads would just be people who spent too much time in the sun without hats.

On the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, war is just a card game. Violence would be the work of science fiction.

People make mistakes and here it would be understood by everybody.

On the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, there would be no such thing as “beer muscles.” Instead it would be “beer brains” and disagreements at the bar would be settled with a battle of wits. Apologies would always be accepted and understood.

Everything is laid back. There is no such thing as the wrong side of the bed. Laughter is the most commonly heard sound amongst large groups of people. The middle finger would not be offensive, and only used to serve its natural purpose.

On the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, an asshole would lose its purpose as an adjective. An open mind would widely be accepted. Nobody would have to be told to take it easy, because on the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, that’s how everything is taken. Hitchhikers could finally get a ride. The police would spend a lot more time helping little old ladies cross the street and not have to worry about concealed weapons.

On the planet of the cool, calm and collective, when you’re wrong, you know you’re wrong, and will-
ingly admit. The occupants of this planet accept all responsibilities for their actions. To look down upon, to be demeaning, and to ridicule would be absurd.

Go ahead and talk to strangers.

On the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, casual Friday would extend throughout the week. Uniforms would only be for those who truly needed them. Parents would let their kids listen and watch what they wanted because negative influence wouldn’t be such a big concern.

Like tropical islands, this planet would be inviting with vibrant colors and warm atmospheres. Like sitting on your back porch sipping coffee on a summer morning, this planet would be relaxing. Like living with your best friends, this planet would be comfortable. Like having a perfect dream, this planet would bring a smile to your face.

On the planet of the cool, calm, and collective, it would be a whole lot easier to make friends.

Ancient
Tara Trovato

Lying upon a bed of folded cream cotton knit blankets, his head resting on my mother’s plumped down pillow, the contrast of his fur against the blankets and the soft mauve pillowcase made him look ancient to my five year old eyes. Be gentle, my mother would warn, he’s fragile. Longing to scoop him into my arms and bury my face in his fragrance that was an ambrosia of my mother’s perfume, hints of lavender and amber, and time, subtly pungent like the smell of old attics, dry and still and filled with wonder, I would kneel beside him on her high brass bed and run the tip of my finger over his thread-bare black nose, up over the seam on his head, down his long ear that was once silky and floppy, now stiff and polished with age. Like the rest of his love worn body, his ear had become almost two-dimensional, his stuffing just as matted as his fur. He resembled a blood hound with long swinging legs, and a face that one could see, had he lips, would droop and sag.

When she was five, my mother and her best friend, Sue, both received brand new Morgy Dogs for Christmas. By the age of six, her insecurity pitched when she was torn from her mother’s arms to begin school and her mother returned to work. Morgy was witness to the tears she shed that wet her pillow and to the drenched sheets as she began to wet her bed. Little by little, the wettings and the washings began to take their toll. His plush light tan fur that my mother had held against her body as a child to protect her against the night, had become gnarled and matted, its softness flattened into a form of thicker skin.
instead of fur. Throughout the years, the edge of his right ear smoothed down to the material, which had darkened to the color of smeared molasses and had hardened like tar. Morgy was the only toy that my mother had left from her childhood.

Every once in a while, my mother would pick up Morgy and allow me to make him bark. At the end of his long body, stitched apart from the rest of him, swung a stubby tail. Amazingly, the fur had remained almost velveteen on the four-inch sheath that covered a cylindrical hard plastic squeaker. Apart from somewhere around the end of his tail, where the white plastic was visible, Morgy’s tail was intact and highly functioning, which was one of his best attributes. As I squeezed his little tail, it would sound as though he were catching his breath, like a soft hum in the back of one’s throat, and then release; a higher pitched, raspy with age squeak would slowly emerge that I imagined sounded quite accurate if one were to squeeze an old dog’s tail. Compared to the rest of his body, Morgy’s tail was the only part of him that held remnants of life. Except for his eyes.

I didn’t know it at the time, but Morgy had lost his original eyes of white felt embedded with a round shiny black plastic iris in each. The eyes that I knew were black leather patchwork buttons that had grayed at the highest points from rubbing my grandmother had sewn on, and they called to me. They were loose and bobbled from his head, making him look sad and lonely up on his shrine.

But at times, when he lay up there, his head propped up by a pillow, his eye would set at the perfect angle that looked straight at me. At these times he would take on an aura of great wisdom and kindness. At these times I wanted him most. I had heard the story of the Velveteen Rabbit and knew that if I could just have some alone time with him, he would reveal himself to me, and share with me the stories of my mother as a child. I knew he was alive.

When I turned six, I was exiled from my parent’s bed and forced to sleep alone. My sister had just been born, which meant that my place in my mother’s armpit, nestled between her and my father, no longer held enough room and my father had had enough. Broken-hearted and betrayed, I followed in my mother’s footsteps and woke almost every night, swathed in soaked bed sheets.

Morgy, too, lost his place on the bed. With a new baby on one hip and a kindergartner swinging from the other, my mother either lacked the time or had lost interest in returning Morgy from the chair to the bed, so there he stayed. At first Morgy owned the chair, it was his alone until eventually he lost even that. Sometimes he would be hidden, suffocating under a pile of clothes or blankets, while at others I would find him on the floor, his stiff ear flipped backward over his head, eye-button pleading with me to save him. Once in a while I would even find him in the living room or laying, legs dangling, on the cold painted wooden stairs that led up to my room. But I always knew where he was. It didn’t take long before he made it up to my own bed where he learned my secrets and became happy again.
When my mother finally noticed him there she again reminded me to be careful with him, but she didn't take him. I think she could tell that maybe somehow it was the reason he had survived this long and that he was happy.

Morgy turned fifty-five this year.

After I moved out of my mother's house, I left Morgy behind finding it unbearable to even think about taking him from my mother. Whenever I go back to visit, he still can be found on a pile of blankets and pillows somewhere, whether it be on the couch, a chair, or most usually up on my mother's bed. After twenty-three more years filled with love from both my sister and I, and now from our eight year old children, Morgy still looks the same as I remember him to be when I was a child. Where one of his button eyes used to be is now just a small metal hook peeking through his balding face. He no longer barks, but his ear has softened a bit and his one good eye still shines with love. Some day he will come and live at my house with my daughter and I, but for now he gets to share the love of both her and her cousin when they stay at their nana's house; my mother and I remind them, *be gentle, he's old.*

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I saw innocence torn from my stomach and watched the bleeding entrails grease the ground as I screamed a scream that no one could hear, the fever of childhood wearing off and the black and white turning to grey on a ship's mast as gunfire shot through my skull with the wicked truth that there was no Knight in Kevlar waiting to rescue me from you whose cut throat fingers wrote the inconsequential letters of my name and made it sound like Whore whose eyes never saw me, but phallic heart coveted whose lips never touched mine, but sinned the rest of me whose lyrical assaults on my ripcord mind held me together, and tore me apart who danced around me in a razor blade cocktail, carving his name on my insides I screamed that I loved him. He didn't care. who would never speak of me in public, but at 5am would burn his lips against mine, never letting me forget who surrendered a blood white rose on my door; it should have been red. I forgave it, I can't forgive him. whose hazel eyes trapped me in fantasies of coke and someone else's bed at 7am who begged to be mine on the day of the fool and like a bigger fool I turned him down to
the poisoning lust running through me for another
the acidic desire eating through my conscious mind and
tricking the endorphins to
make me think I was happy when really the
subliminal taste of betrayal was on
his lips the first time we crashed and fell into
each other in something that could only be the
glamour of a drunken driveway visit, just as
meaninglessly important as the next
who delighted in the chiascaro hues of my face as I
twisted away from the knives his
mouth blew at me, only to realize that it was all
true in the icy methodic that
shone forth.
that in the surreal escapism of the wanton flesh I had
carved illicit vows of chastity to a
deviant mind and fucked it all away in cigarettes
and wine and blow, a cyclical
stigmata of all that things I could never be to he
who could never admit to being the oppressor in our
sadistic cart wheeling dance through
standard education and classes that would have
been pass fail if I hadn’t
whispered him through
who bribed me from my bed with green caffeine and
pulled me down in a movie theatre
because two feet was too far away
who would call me from the splintered glass of Puerto
Rico because he’d dug a grave in the sand and

Bacardi 151 wanted to fuck me across the wires,
like lifelines seven
hundred and thirty days ago who for one
thousand ninety five days drugged my heart to him and
only him
who made my lungs crunch and pulse staccato and
spine break in half with your hands
lips eyes and words words words that always
left me yearning and never complete
– You –
It was always about you.
When riding his bike to school, Bobby always passed the towering house. On his way home today he decided to stop. Whenever he had come here with his mother he was told to play outside alone. He would lay on his stomach on the front porch swing, close his eyes, and pretend that he could fly. She would be indoors for nearly an hour and then come out and say, “Let’s go home.”

He stood outside the Thompson's gate and glared at their front door. The iron gate held within its border a vast amount of lush green grass and red roses in large pots on the porch. The door of the Victorian house was black, black like the soul of Lex Luthor, the bad guy from his favorite comic. Bobby had always imagined that if Lex had lived in this town he would live in this house, this dark house.

Mr. Thompson reminded Bobby of Lex as well. He was completely bald and wore a suit. When he would stop by his mother’s apartment, never with Mrs. Thompson, he always wore a tie and carried a thin black briefcase with silver buckles.

“Hey little man, me and your mom gotta talk. Skedaddle,” he would say as he headed down the dark hallway, his mother right behind him. Bobby would watch as their shadows retreated further away from him.

Today was the first day he had been to the house without his mother, and yet it felt just like every other time. He picked up a broken piece of gravel and threw it towards the bay window to the left of the black door and smiled with satisfaction as he heard the shattering of glass.
The Answer
Leonisa Johnson

She always had an answer for everything.
It didn’t matter if it was Monopoly or Chinese checkers
- she never let me win.
I couldn’t stand her long brown hair that touched the
back of her neck,
and a bitter cold sensation filled me on the days she
got to wear her hair down while I was subjected to
simplistic braids and beads.
I hated the fact that her mother allowed her to wear red
nail polish with silver sparkles,
while I was restricted to clear only.
Her bike was bigger and pinker than mine,
and that meant whenever we raced through the park
she would reach the end first.
Her house was bigger too and always filled with
strawberry ice cream - her favorite.
She had a big brother who would take her to movies
that my mother would have never allowed me to see.
And she had a closet filled with pretty dresses that she
wore when she visited her out­of­town family.
She seemed to have everything and I envied her.
But one day in school my teacher asked who my best
friend was and
I looked up
and whispered her name.

A Throne Fit for a King
Meghan O’Driscoll

There was a knock on the door. Tom, who is now
my uncle, was here to pick up my Aunt Katie for a date.
Expecting that eventually my grandfather would get up to
answer the door, Tom continued to knock, but my grand­
father remained still in his rocking chair. Upon entering
the front porch, one could look through the door and al­
most always, unless there was some kind of emergency,
see the back of my grandfather’s head as he sat in an old
brown rocking chair. If you did not know my grandfather,
you might be thinking that he was just sleeping, but if
you did, you knew that that chair was his territory, and
he hardly budged from it for anything. Eventually, after
several knocks, Tom just walked in. He proceeded into the
living room and attempted to greet my grandfather. They
ended up carrying on an entire conversation without my
grandfather having gotten out of the chair or even having
turned his head. There were no muscular problems; this
was just his stance. No one in our family saw this behavior
as stand-offish but rather explained to people “that was
just simply his chair and his territory.” He thought in it,
ate in it, read in it, slept in it, and watched television in it.
Whenever a serious talk was to be had, he would have to
be sitting in the chair to be able to carry on the conversa­
tion.

The chair is, to say the least, nothing spectacular.
It is a brown rocking chair made of wood with a built-on
cushion that is decorated with a 70’s style, pastel-colored,
floral pattern. If not used to the obnoxious pattern, I would
imagine that staring at it for too long would have a sort
of numbing effect on the eyes for most people. In fact, if
we decided to have a garage sale tomorrow, we probably wouldn't get more than ten bucks for it. Don't think we are keeping it around for its high quality or tremendous comfort either, because we're not. Sitting on it for too long can do serious damage to your posture and, as we found out later, would occasionally make a high-pitched squeaking sound if not sat on by the right person; almost as if it is protesting. At this point, the reader is probably wondering, "Why, if so ugly and uncomfortable, are you keeping the thing around?"

In November of 1998, my grandfather passed on and my father, sister, and I all moved into his old house. It was the house my dad grew up in, so it was still furnished as if it were 1972. We bought our own couches and tables and even redid the kitchen and upstairs, but one thing that was not touched was the rocking chair. I'm not sure if it's for convenience, or if my father is just trying to keep up with the tradition, but my dad's life revolves around that chair in the same manner my grandfather's did. All normal everyday activities from that point forward would be conducted in the chair. In fact, it came to the point where I would look for the back of my dad's head at the top of the stairs to see if he was home or not, rather than just looking for his car in the garage.

Needless to say, the chair has fallen apart on several different occasions, none of which can be blamed on my father, because it always seems to stay in place. It's almost as if my grandfather is looking down on our living room and making sure that the tradition lives on and that he is simultaneously living in the chair too, only through my dad. So, by respecting grandfather's wishes, my dad will remain in the chair for as long as possible until the next "man of the house" dares to sit in it. I wouldn't even be able to picture our living room without that chair in it. Even though the pattern is unsightly and it could very well fall apart at any minute, I know the true test to see if my future husband is the right one for me will be to see if he can sit in that chair without it coming apart or squeaking. Then, I will know.
Splat! That was the noise. Splat! Like a colorfully overdrawn word in an action comic book. I stopped instantly, gazing at it in disbelief. I scanned the sky for birds, a cargo jet, a tornado, anything that would explain the dead fish that had fallen like a meteor not two feet in front of me on the worn old shoulder of the deserted road. There was nothing. The sky was crystal blue. The nearest body of water was five miles east. The fish was almost a foot long. I took a picture with my cell phone.

You tell people these things, but they never seem to be as interested or curious as you are. I talked to my son about it on the phone that night. He was eleven. In between the sounds of lasers cutting through the flesh of aliens in his latest video game he muttered a mild, "Huh."

Thunder crashed outside. The image of this lightning bolt-fish kept screaming through my imagination. It lit up clouds as it flashed through the night. Zap! was the sound when it hit the pavement.

"I miss you, buddy," I said.
"Uh huh."

My daughter was eight. Her response was, "Tracy said fish die if they're not in water."

"Tracy's right, hon, but that's not what I... Uh, hey, did you do anything exciting in school today?"
"Summer started two weeks ago, Dad."
"Right. I knew that. You told me that."
"Yeah. Hey, Dad, I gotta go. CSI is on."
"Okay, baby, I love-" The dial tone said her goodnight.

I took out my phone and stared at the image of the dead fish. It hit me then. The answer to everything. The Great Answer: Trout. I laughed so hard I doubled over, tears raining to the linoleum of the apartment's kitchen floor.

I met with my wife the next day in some old diner I'd never been to. It smelled like stale coffee and ham. Tasted the same though I was eating a tower of some rubbery circles the waiter assured me were, yes, in fact, flapjacks. An old man three booths away from us kept glaring at me over my wife's shoulder.

"Kevin, would you just sign the fucking papers? Jesus."

"I fucking am."

I kept picturing a cow soaring through the air. A terrible explosion of intestines and milk as it hit the road in front of me. Ka-Blam! I signed the papers and handed them to her.

She snatched them, folded them into her purse, and sighed, I think, with relief.

"I want to see the kids more than once a week. This isn't fair. I didn’t do anything."

She stared at me, trying to burn a hole through my forehead and melt my brains, I assumed. "You fucked a seventeen-year-old."

"I didn’t do anything to the kids. And I didn’t know she was fucking seventeen."

"Well she fucking was?"

A waiter came over and told us to please mind our language, this was a family diner. The old man smirked at me triumphantly.
Benjamin Allocco

"God, Kev." Her voice was full of exhaustion. "Why did you do it?"

The thought of honesty crossed my mind then. The idea that I could tell her I didn’t know why. There was no logical explanation. It just happened; sometimes a fish just falls from the sky. I almost said that I didn’t mean it, that I was sorry, that the guilt was destroying me on the inside, that I wanted her back more than I wanted to breathe, that I missed my children and their love and that more than anything I wanted her to tell me she still cared about me and wanted to work through this. But the papers were signed and neatly folded.

“She had your eyes,” I said.

“You disgust me.”

I pursed my lips. A fish face, you could say.

As she stormed out of the diner through the squeaky-hinged door, a bell chiming an upbeat little Ding! It was my own head I pictured falling through the atmosphere. My own oversized, idiot head. It rotated slightly as it fell through a layer of fluffy white clouds, the nose caked with blood, the eyes leaking drips of clear liquid which seemed to float upward like air bubbles in water. The sound it made when it hit was a wonderful, Crack!

Broken
Tara Trovato

Forty years old.

Well, not quite forty, but still, thirty-eight is close enough. If I were a human, there are many who would consider me to be in my prime. Instead, I’ve heard people refer to me as a classic, as if that’s supposed to make it all better. It doesn’t. It’s depressing. Well, at least for me it is. Thirty-eight and what have I to be proud of? Sure, there are others my age who are still out there having the time of their lives: going on Sunday drives with their owners, getting bathed and waxed and primped to go beam their shiny perfect grills at sock hops and parades, hanging out in parking lots with other originals and restored classics revving their engines and racing one another while their owners boast and brag about them, sometimes more than they would their own children. Those are the lucky ones. They still get to feel the cool wind rush along their sleek high gloss bodies as their tires roll smoothly over the hot pavement. They still have regular check-ups and oil changes, the best gas, and a nice safe garage to sleep in at the end of the day. Many even get a nice snug cover to keep them warm and dry even in the harshest of climates.

Yes. They are the lucky ones. I am not so lucky. I sit here in this dark tomb-like cell, left alone with tormenting memories of when I was younger, listening to the silence of the lifeless bodies that surround me. It has only been about three years since my owner brought me into this old onion storage, but it feels like its been forever since I’ve felt sunlight warming my hood and flooding through my windows to penetrate the very depths of my interior. Now I can only count the days by glimpsing the
soft yellow rays that filter through the high age-streaked windows illuminating the rafters of the loft twenty feet above my roof, and leave me and the rats to lurk in the cold shadows below.

The stench of must and decay is now the only thing that settles itself into my torn and hardened black vinyl seats. On days when the sun seems to be in a particularly cruel and prankish mood he will reach his fingers further into the barn and just lightly stroke the neglected and mangled bodies that belong to my cell mates and me, but only enough to remind us of what we have lost. And, to add to the injury, a large circular mirror stands propped in a corner, mocking my pain, placed before me by my owner as if she, too, were in on the joke. On these days, I can’t help but to stare at my dust smeared reflection and mourn what I’ve become.

Back in 1969, when my creators at Volkswagen first brought me to life, my few siblings and I were of a new, strange and exciting experimental breed of Beetle. Although our exteriors were identical to our more common standard transmission cousins and we retained the economical practicality of the air-cooled engine and manual stick-shift, we were blessed with the luxury of the automatic clutch. Instead of using both feet to change gears, our drivers could simply release the gas and shift with their right foot and hand, while their left foot could continue to keep time with the music flowing from our beautiful Sapphire radios. Once we left the factory, Beetle lovers from all over the world brought us home and made us part of their families. Unlike our cousins, who swarmed the roads, we were rare so rarely did we see each other. But it didn’t matter because we each had our own human families to care for and who cared for us. If we happened to glimpse one another in passing, usually we would give each other a friendly little toot of acknowledgement just as we would all of our relatives.

For thirty-three years my family and I lived in the south west of the United States where, like a chameleon, my bone-colored shell blended with the arid desert sands of Arizona and New Mexico and sheltered my family from the broiling sun by reflecting most of its intensity. My owner’s daughter and I grew together as she went from the cute energetic child I once cradled in the safety of my back seat, her pigtails bouncing as we bumped along on family outings, to the beautiful intelligent young woman whose long delicate fingers wrapped themselves around my steering wheel when, at seventeen, her father handed her my keys as a gift for graduation. Together we went to work and to friend’s houses. I usually got to check out her boyfriends before her parents even heard of them. When her parents moved back to New York to escape the heat, I stayed with her as she moved further west to California and earned her degree. After college, we moved back to New Mexico so that she could begin her teaching career. Every day I got to sit in the shade in the school parking lot and watch the children on the playground, listening to their laughter or at times to their cries while I waited for her. I was beginning to think the day would never come, but when it did, I got to bring the thirty-year-old newlyweds
on their honeymoon.

Like the slight wear along my sideboards and the small tears in my driver’s seat, my owner too had just begun to show signs of aging. Despite the glints of silver at her temples and the increasing lines that framed her smile and decorated the corners of her eyes reflected in my rear-view mirror, my owner was still beautiful. And only because of her and the years we shared was I secure with myself in the face of the changing times. I felt confident among the newer and sleeker cars and rapidly reproducing SUVs. I was respected by them because of my age, but still treated as an equal because I was able to keep up even in this fast paced society. In 2001, when my owner found out she was going to be having a baby, my engine revved at the thought of a new family member; I thought back to when my backseat was her playground, her warm breath on my windows as she peered through them or her small head resting against my cushions as she dozed during long rides, and my seatbelts tingled in anticipation of holding her newborn tight.

It wasn’t long after she announced her pregnancy that my owner and her husband decided to take me on a trip across country to visit her parents in New York. Before we left I got a beautiful new paint job, changing me from my original bone color to a brilliant electric blue, and had a visit with my mechanic to make sure I was prepared to make such a long drive. I got new brakes and new white-walled tires that protruded out from under my rear fenders giving me the appearance of a Matchbox car. I was proud of my new look and couldn’t wait to see the look on her father’s face.

It was early evening when we pulled into the driveway of our family’s home. The slow purple hue of dusk began to settle across the lush green of the yard that spread far beyond the house. My engine purred into silence as we parked beneath the shadow cast by the steep peak of the carriage house. As my owner stiffly climbed from the passenger side and began to stretch, arching her back and thrusting her outstretched fingers toward the heavens as if she were going to pluck the opalescent moon right from its very throne, the screen door on the side of the house swung open, pouring buttery light across the stone walkway onto which stepped the hunched silhouette of a man closely followed by that of a woman. As they neared, I could see the gentle faces of my past, the man who had taken me in and loved me, cared for me, for so many years. I grew excited and wished I could honk and flail my doors and drive in dizzying circles around him to show him how glad I was to see him. Instead, I stood straight and tall on my new tires, allowing the last of the days glow to highlight my new paint. I followed his gaze as he strode past me without as much as a glance to where his daughter stood, allowing her open arms to fall and embrace him as she wept with joy. Stepping back so his wife could hold their beloved daughter, I felt a cold breeze sweep through my open windows that chilled my interior as I watched his eyes rake back and forth along my body, flashing with...what? Disgust? Contempt? Distrust? Before finally saying, “You realize that car isn’t safe for the baby, don’t you?”
For the next two weeks I toured parts of Central New York with my family, but most of the time was left alone in the driveway to watch as they would all pile into the massive ship-like Oldsmobile and float down the road and out of sight, quite often not returning until long past dark had fallen and once, the next afternoon. My owner had bathed me and meticulously cleaned all of the debris from my interior except for a rectangular piece of plastic with black and fluorescent orange writing on it, which she stuck in my windshield. People began to pull their cars to the side of the road and approach me, pressing their faces against my windows, jiggling my door handles, and leaving greasy fingerprints all over my freshly waxed surface. I felt like some kind of sideshow at a circus. A freak. I never saw any of my relatives in this state. Was that why these people were stopping to stare? Once, a strange man actually walked right up and opened my trunk not only just ogled my most intimate parts, but thrust his unfamiliar hands under my hood and began touching me where only my most trusted mechanic was allowed. I felt violated and exploited. Why was this happening to me? Why wasn’t my family protecting me? It wasn’t long before I realized my fate.

One morning, just before sunrise, a light rain began to drum its fingers across my roof and down my hood echoing deep throughout my lonely compartments. The air began to cool down quite a bit from the stuffy humidity that had lingered from the day before. Some of the lights in the house were on and I could see my owner and her mother talking. My owner was walking back and forth across the room, sometimes her hands carrying things to some destination point that I couldn’t see beyond the half drawn drapes, and then returning, empty again and free to flutter the way they always did when she spoke. At one point she stopped to rest them upon her belly that had lately been stretching her normally baggy shirts taut against itself. Smiling, her mother stood from her seat and joined her, placing her hands in the same spot where her daughter’s had just been. I knew they were feeling the baby moving inside of her because she had just pulled me to the side of the road only a few days before and had her husband do the same thing with his hands. My thoughts were sent reeling back to when we were younger. I had longed for years to feel her little feet kicking against my seats again, and now I yearned for the day her unborn child would fill the emptiness of my backseat.

The slam of the screen door yanked me back from my reverie to find my owner’s husband dashing through the raindrops, an umbrella in one hand and suitcase in the other, to his father-in-law’s Oldsmobile. He continued to make trips back and forth from the house to the trunk with the luggage that I had carried here from back home. Where was it going? I could hardly see through the rain streaming down my windshield that was becoming opaque with moisture. Through the spots where it had not completely fogged over I watched as the old man came out from the house and settled into the driver’s seat of his boat. In the doorway, their bodies blackening the light that cut into the earliest shades of dawn, my owner and her husband wrapped...
their arms around her mother before stepping through the wet grass and into the dry interior of the Olds. My window had completely fogged over and I could hardly make out the red taillights as my family pulled away, leaving me behind. I never saw my owner again.

Now I sit here, in this dark hell, looking at my broken body, still beautiful but wasted. My high curved back and rounded fenders still to be admired, but only a shell encasing my damaged transmission. Unable to move, my once proud tires have gone soft with disuse and their rubber beginning to stiffen with dry rot. I look around me at the dismembered bodies of the other vehicles that have been left here in this prison and wonder if I, too, will be forgotten and given up on like all the rest.

To my left sits a small Toyota truck, not very old, but its body still rust-eaten and lusterless just the same. Brought in only a few months before me with a blown head gasket, it waits patiently for its owner to visit, but he never does. Only once did the large double doors open to reveal the shiny crimson Toyota Tahoma that had replaced it and his owner who brought with him stacks of speaker cabinets and amplifiers, cords and wires, which were piled into the little Toyota’s bed. The equipment was familiar to my neighbor, who, during its prime had carried it all back and forth from band practices and late-night gigs. Now, together with its load, they wait to head for a destination that will never come.

Through my passenger side mirror I can just see the tiny windshield and the long black seat of a 1970 snow mobile.

Although we are from the same generation, I had long out lived the once loved machine. From what I can see, its body is covered in an ever thickening blanket of dust since 1985 when it was dragged into its resting spot. Now it lies, lifeless like one of those dry gray flies that lay dormant in a window sill waiting for the warm air of spring to breathe one last chance at life into it. It is a constant reminder of what I may become.

Alongside the powerless tools on shelves and in boxes, the non-conveying belt and breathless compressor, the embodiment of my most tormented and deranged nightmares, stands the twisted and tortured body of a ten-year-old motorcycle. No matter how hard I try not to look, I catch the reflection or its one large headlight, one of its only parts still intact, staring back at me in either the round mirror in the corner or in my very own rearview. Even if I manage to look away, and try to focus on something else in the storage, there is always something, some random part, like its windshield, mirrors, gas tank, or padded seat that conjures up its unwholesome image. Its body almost completely stripped of its shell, it is now just a mere skeleton of the daring youth it once was. For me, the motorcycle haunts me, as does the loss of anything so young, but, too, is a constant reminder of how lucky I have been to have lived for so long.

A new young couple had found me on the side of the road at the old man’s house about a month after my owner returned west. They brought me home and tried to include me in their family, but I had fallen ill.

I no longer had the energy I once had; I was
Broken

running on only two of my four cylinders. When they finally took my engine apart, they found scraps of metal inside my block. They tried to help get me new parts but they could either never find them, or if they did, there wasn’t anybody who could put me back together. Two years ago, my owner bought me a brand new engine. We were all so excited once it was in. That excitement was crushed the moment they tried to put me into gear only to find that I was unable to move. My shiny new plates were stripped from me and I was left here with my old parts littering the ground around me: hideous black objects that used to be alive inside of me now decaying in pools of black oil.

Now I just sit here waiting...waiting.

This Is Eternal
Kimberly Saunders

Orange embers flew into the air like restless fireflies illuminating the smiling faces surrounding the dancing flames. The fractured log sent its last waves of warmth into the night as the freshly placed wood began to ignite with the fire’s licking desire. Dan returned to his designated lawn chair already fitted to his body from the past two hours spent sitting and readjusting among the plastic. He threw a dark hood over his vibrantly red hair and folded his arms close to his chest in attempts to resist the on setting chill of a one a.m. wind.

Across the pit of ash and blaze Jaime and Chris caught themselves in a conversation comparing predetermination to the human choice. Their voices carried an intensity softened by understanding that only two people who have been friends for years could encompass. Every now and then Jaime would pull herself up straight in her seat then push her hair behind her ears right before she was about to make a point in her defense. Chris would listen intently as his sneakers mingled with the long grass forming patterns beneath his footprints. To his left Kim sat, legs folded underneath her small body, observing the minuscule mannerisms of her favorite characters. Whenever a break in the conversing occurred she would throw a memory from the past week of quirky musicals and late night chocolate binging to Chris, which he would catch and return with a burst of laughter. This would then tangent off into a critique of present Broadway, which Meb would willingly dive into and leave Jaime and Dan rustling through their own non-theatrical thoughts. But soon conversation would conform to a similar topic in
This Is Eternal

which all five of them could lose themselves in the words tunneling around them like a hurricane of opinions.

“I really like what this one author said about the existence of forever. She said forever is whatever you want it to be. It could be right here, right now. It’s what we make it,” Jaime shared from behind her dark eyes now scanning our faces for a reaction.

“I like that,” was all Kim responded with as she sat back and let her mind analyze and inspire what she had just heard.

Dan began a short monologue describing the meaning of forever in conjunction with religion. Once through with his version of infinity, Meb jumped in with spatial existence and the world beyond the stars. But after a few minutes of mathematically breaking down human existence compared to the timeline of the universe, complaints of overanxious brains settled the dispute into a more relaxing position. The night grew old as their words began to drip with drowsiness and bodies sank even lower with heavy exhaustion.

Spread among the rising smoke were five faces so content with their place among the living, they were caught in-between the world and waking where nothing mattered but being exactly where they are. Around them a city slept with pleasant dreams that couldn’t compare to the euphoria surrounding this circle of souls perfectly pieced together with their counterparts. It was as if during these few hours spent together they lived inside a bubble that shielded them from worry and harm. Money didn’t matter; those who had it and those who didn’t were not concerned with such differences. College was the past and the soon to be future that was only discussed in a light-hearted manner forcing all thoughts of good-byes to come into the engulfing flames where it could be combusted and forgotten. Jobs that took over their lives by day were set to rest with the daylight that had disappeared behind the horizon. Right now wasn’t about what was or what could be, it was focused on the simplicity of existing in a single moment shared with people who understood and accepted of part of who you are. Right now was what forever should be.

“I think it’s time I got going,” Chris softly declared as he stood up to unwrinkle his button up plaid shirt.

“What time is it?” asked a chorus of sleepy voices.

“Three,” he responded in the glow of his wristwatch.

“But it was just one!” Kim exclaimed still rooted to her laziness.

“Well now it’s three.” Chris let a small laugh escape his lips as a common thought spread through the group now attempting to extinguish the dimming fire.

The saddest part of happiness is how quickly it passes by leaving you elated for only such a short amount of time. All you can do is hold on to that feeling and hope you can share the starry night again sometime soon.

Five bodies slowly dragged themselves across the shadows and into the light of the house where they put away empty soda cans and retired their apathy. Now was time to start the engines and drive into the darkness.

Kimberly Saunders
This Is Eternal

where each stood alone and unguarded against the world. Soon sleep would overtake their bodies and bring them into dreams that could never compare to the utopia they had just lived within for the past four hours.

How My Parents Met
Brittany Cali

They say love burns, but you actually set her window on fire in a toilet paper war across the quad then went clattering through the dorm in your ROTC boots and ripped jeans While your roommates threw water at the flames, you slammed into her door banging and yelling that you were sorry, it was the people above her you were aiming for
Wilmington, North Carolina—beautiful, tranquil, and full of spoiled rich kids with daddy’s money to feed their cocaine addictions. They’d work their 10 hours a week after school at the local Starbucks or Hollister and spend the rest of it on the beach with coolers filled to the rim with Bud Light and breezers. I know because I was one of them. My name is Alley. I was born somewhere else, but that’s not important. What is important is that I called North Carolina home. I was raised there, surfed there, drank there, and had all my connections within a ten-mile radius, just in case one of them bailed on me, because it gets really frustrating when you have the funds without the resources.

Michelle was just like me—student at UNCW, perfect daughter, and up for anything that seemed like a challenge and anything that was fun. She could deny things as straight-faced as I could.

I can still feel the salt drying to my skin from our first time out that morning. It was one of the best feelings in the world to us. We would go for days without washing the ocean from our hair. The sun had only just started to rise as Michelle and I sat there, bobbing up and down like apples in a barrel—sand covering our boards, holding firmly to the new coat of wax we had vigilantly applied the night before. We caught that one wave just as the sun was starting to appear beyond the swells; that wave that
Cocaine Undertow

gives you the ego of a God and makes you crave more. We took it as far as we could before it disappeared into the break.

The smell of the ocean was always captivating after those long nights that never put us to sleep—taking the stench of cigarettes and beer from our nostrils and replacing it with cocaine and saltwater. We'd get to Wrightsville Beach just before 6 am to wait for the ocean to awaken. Then I would see a big grin cross over her face as the surf began to peak a half a mile out. I knew what she was thinking and I trailed her as she paddled on—daring to confront it. We rode that wave until there was no where left to go—nothing left to lose. We always assumed there'd be another one right behind it. All we ever thought about was this feeling; a sensation to which nothing else could compare. It was a high that twisted a bond between the two of us.

Now her board is leaning there against the railing of the deck; it's still covered in sand that sticks to the drying wax she had so carefully applied a week earlier. There's a ding in the nose and I smile when I think of how it got there. We had both gone under at the same time, her board taking the brunt of it. Still attached to our leashes, the boards had dragged us along the bottom with them. When we finally came up for air we looked at each other and started to laugh - another close call. I

have this picture of the two of us that day - sitting on our boards and waiting for the wave. Looking at that picture now, I can see our dilated pupils and runny noses which were pink underneath from early that morning - not from the salt water.

And here I am, far away. There's no ocean, no undertow, and no Michelle. I stopped by the beach on my way out; I had to say my goodbye. I threw my leash to the waves and placed our picture in my glove box. I never looked back.

They put her leash in the casket before they buried her.
it was worth it
Marci Zebrowski

you have to hold your breath
take delicate deliberate steps
up
the tight wet back stairs
you’re drunk and late and clawing
at the bottom of your bag
praying your rain-pruned fingers find
the cold metal that is your key

you stumble
hard
through the door
hit the wall
a light flicks on
and
you have to seize your heart
take small steady gulps:
in (1, 2)
out (1, 2)
of dank and moldy air

he looms—
a silhouette in a dirty yellow square in the shadows
—fuck you
sigh your bag falls on the floor
with your stomach

you’re late he whispers—you don’t think don’t
act don’t let him know how close you are to—
he tells you that your first customers have gone
to other girls
you pity them and envy them—
at least they aren’t with him

your spine hardens and you know apologies
are trite and forgiveness
is divine and he is
no saint

please is the only word your brain will allow
your lips to release
before he reaches you feel like such a coward
and all you can think is exactly what he wants you to
think: I would have pushed me down the stairs too