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

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

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The Wearied Traveller
Justin Tabeek

The wearied traveler drifts off into the sunset as the uncut grass moves in unison to the winds of change. What he was, where he had been, and what memories he had wore on him to the point of isolation, rejection, and ultimately anger. As the direction of the wind reversed itself and began to mirror his discontent, his prayers for rain, the last remaining purifier in this world, began to befall him. Thunder beckoned him towards a most irrational place underneath a tree, but there was certainty to his movement. He stared at the frame of the tree in its wondrous size, and with momentary light given from the crash of electricity above he saw carved marks permanently tattooed: initials with a heart around it. Suddenly he knew that he had found the one certainty in life: no matter how far you go to become lost, the past is always there in some shape or form. He suddenly felt a surge of momentum to turn back towards the path he originally departed from, but as fate often has it, his progression was suddenly and violently halted as a surge of electricity found its most convenient conductor, namely his body. He fell into darkness with a lack of consciousness, prone next to the tree, all of his transgressions and actions summarized in this brief encounter with nature.

Who is this man? He’s the person you see on the streets with their head down in an alley, begging you for change so you can provide medisomal to help them leave life sooner. He is the wandering man in public spaces nobody wants to notice but cannot help but mock and stare at. He is the person you hope your children never become; mostly for their sake, but also for your own. He is the forgotten soul, the man who became lost within life’s rabbit holes and never found his way back, a tangible reminder to the weary that it could always be worse. Luckily for this wanderer he no longer remembers his past, but is that ultimately a blessing or a curse? Something to consider the next time you feel lost within the collective flow of life itself.
There was a time when I walked with an electric godliness, 
unparalleled grace and undeniable charm, 
and all the streets of this concrete empire would tremble at my gait. 
I was king of the pride, with a lush mane and holy face.

I was a ‘69 Pontiac GTO, 
painted canary yellow while carrying the guts of the jungle, 
a demon with a motor masked by the promise of solemnity. 
Now I’m a long-neglected ’70 Datsun, 
a dull, weathered orange that sits in the rain and swallows oil, 
too stubborn to yield to

the years that peel swiftly like petals from wild flowers. 
These years are drops in sheets upon sheets of rain. 
These years speak languages I’ve never even heard of, they 
bring about equations that break my ancient math, they

ask me questions about memories too painful to conjure, 
questions of God and sex and regret 
and everything in between that puzzles me.

The mechanisms that once pulsed with a live charge 
are now frayed, stripped wires. The mechanisms 
of my mind, 
those three pounds of wet meat that once 
processed algebra and women, 
that labyrinth of tissue that became all white noise and static 
with every girl’s hand on my thigh, 
those mechanisms are now the bent antenna 
of the old television set, idling at the curb.

There was a time 
when a girl’s warm breath on my neck 
unwound me from the pedestal I coiled around.
Wasp
Jennifer Schifferle

Happiness is a wasp
So essential to life
But when it gets close
It stabs like a knife

And it can be feigned
So eloquently so
And this burns
More than you know

So just push
Cut them away
Out of the realm
Of everyday

Face the facts
It’s so bitterly true
Love is a fairytale
That died before it grew

So let’s strike a match
On this aimless time
And escape into
The words of this rhyme
I sat on the cusp where the grass met the dirt, and the ground was cold. The sky was incredible. It was a pillow of light blue with a tinge of lavender, with soft pink and gold light streaming down from the curve of it, the wave of it, out over the lake and into where I was walking. I cried because my feet hurt, and because maybe I was pregnant. I cried because I watched a kid walking trying to carry this huge project that looked so hard and awkward, and I wanted to help him, but couldn’t. I cried because I walked past someone with a Mohawk, and because my boyfriend didn’t have one. I cried because I had ever smoked cigarettes, and I cried because I wanted some drugs so badly. I cried because I wasn’t hungry, but at least my thirst was back, and I cried because I was happy about that. I cried because I didn’t want to be a teacher, and because I felt like no way should I even be a teacher if I was thinking these things. I cried because I wanted to be exercising but didn’t want to change clothes. I cried because I really thought I was fat. I cried because I hated having sex when I was cold. I cried because I really, really wanted to write—write something good, something someone could dig their teeth into, cried because I didn’t know if my own writing was good or not, or even how to tell, cried because I didn’t have even five free minutes in my day to write. I cried because my teachers were so nice, and because I didn’t look forward to work. I cried because I had an exam due that I hadn’t started, and I cried because the man I should marry was in Scotland, and I didn’t want to be with him. I cried because every time I fucked my brand new boyfriend I thought of how I used to fuck my ex, and how my boyfriend used to fuck his ex, who I worked with. I cried because I had no idea how to choose who to be with, and because I fell in love with everyone. I cried because I was scared that the people I loved I just happened to, not that it was what I was supposed to do. I cried because I was scared of tumbling into love with this new one, and what if all of a sudden I tumbled out? I cried because I couldn’t even find the place inside myself that wanted to be calm. I cried because I wasn’t tired. I cried because I missed my family, and because I so badly wanted another tattoo. I cried because I was making such great friends at school, finally, and they would all be gone in a few months. I cried because of all the people who had died. I cried because I couldn’t get a good picture of the sunset to show the other man I should have married. I cried because the waves were rolling furiously, and I wished so much that they were warm so I could jump in. I looked up at the streaks of light, the beams of wispy pink and gold like I had never seen before, shooting, tumbling out of the solid blue, the precipice of blue clouds that rose at the zenith of the sky, the rolling light that looked like rain, that looked like angels, that penetrated the lake below it and scooped up everything beneath in a gentle embrace. I cried because heaven was falling down.
Frozen
Ryan Bergman

Encased by time, and here you stand
frozen to the ground.
Unmoving like a statue, built to stand the test
of time.

Time moves like a glacier,
cold, slowly and unforgiving.
Those who get in its way are only added
to the masses.

So here you stand, frozen in time.
Neither going, nor staying.
Neither living nor dead.
He’s hoping you stay around long enough to make a difference.

Reckless O Soul, Exploring
Annie Hidley
It wasn’t a summer
for blackberries,
more for the
red cliff plummet-
horse hooves
hard over,
like a whir of ghosts
ascending past us.

Listening to your voice-
felt like hearing the round
that shot John Lennon.
White as surrender,
still as December-
Quiet as the hundreds of pills,
that were trying to crawl…
back up your throat.

You wanted comfort,
an ambulance,
forgiveness,
someone to sing you to sleep.
But all I could think was-
Fuck you. Fuck you,
for thinking that it was alright
to leave me here alone.
Ray Sather laughed to himself. He had just stumbled upon an old picture of his daughter eating cake for the first time. Of course, most of it ended up on her face. Ray didn’t have time for the past though; he had found what he was looking for. He had found his rope, already tied in a noose on one end. He walked over to the kitchen of his apartment in his large, squeaky red shoes, passing the stacks of empty pizza boxes and cans of Mountain Dew bottles filled with spit-up chewing tobacco.

He tied one end of the rope around a large pipe running horizontally under his ceiling. Stepping up on a chair almost as if he was in a hurry, he placed the noose around his neck, struggling at first to fit it over his fuzzy, orange hair. Now, when most people are about to off themselves, they will usually take a moment to reflect on their shitty lives, write a note, maybe let out a tear or two. Not Ray. Ray acted as if it was a rainy day and he was bored and needed something to do. He took a heavy sigh and closed as eyes. Just as he did this, he heard a soft knock at the door. Who dares interrupt his rainy day activity? Was it a sign to not go through with it? No, Ray didn’t believe in divine intervention. He decided to put off the whole suicide thing and answer the door, mainly out of curiosity. Ray rarely received guests. He swung the door open and immediately looked down at the little boy standing at his door. A big smile appeared across the boy’s face.

“Hi Giggles!” the boy said to the clown standing in front of him.

Ray recognized him instantly. This boy was at the birthday party Ray had just performed at an hour prior. Ray hated kids. And clowns. In fact, Ray was terrified of clowns. The weird hair, the overly flamboyant antics, the painted smiles, the forced happiness. It all freaked him out. So why would somebody who hates children and is petrified of clowns become a clown for a living? He was in desperate need of a job and decided it was the best way to face his fear head on. That, and it was easy. He had the opportunity to get paid to make a fool out of himself for the entertainment of annoying kids. So with that, Giggles was born.

Ray’s favorite part of the job was the ability to hide his face behind an absurd amount of make-up. It was the privilege to be somebody else for once, Giggles. Luckily, Giggles was moderately successful. Business came calling on a consistent basis. He didn’t believe in doing TV commercials or making websites to advertise himself, like those whore sell-out clowns do. At the end of the day, Ray was good at what he did. Unfortunately, not many people appreciated him. The performance he just arrived back from is a prime example. It was the 8th birthday party of some asshole named Kyle. As soon as Giggles showed up, Kyle and his friends did nothing but throw paper plates at him, make snide comments, and generally just be little douches. No one even wanted a balloon animal. Most children are all the same to Ray.
There was one boy at this party that he actually noticed though. This boy was sitting away from all of the other kids. Nobody even said a word to him. This kid was the only kid even amused by Giggles though. He laughed hysterically at everything he did, in his little area of solitary. In fact, the boy reminded Ray a lot of himself at that age. Secluded, outsider, alone, but always enjoying life. Ray longed for that simple enjoyment he once had that the boy demonstrated. Now this boy was standing at Ray’s door.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Ray said, still in full Giggles attire.

“I don’t know,” the boy said, still smiling. Ray figured the boy must have followed him back to his apartment, since he walked back. He was not comfortable with the fact that a child was invading his personal man-cave.

“No, I don’t have a…mom or something?” Ray asked awkwardly.

Without saying a word though, the boy walked right past Ray, into his apartment. Startled, Ray grabbed the kid.

“Hey, can I help you with something? Just what the hell do you think you’re doing here anyway? You don’t follow a man home and waltz into his home. Just get out kid, go home.”

The boy’s smile quickly dissolved into pure sadness. He began sobbing uncontrollably, gasping for breath every once and a while. Ray stood there for a moment, scratching his neck, defeated and unsure of what to do. Thinking fast, he began juggling beanbags he handily kept in his comically large pockets. After a few moments, the boy stopped crying and his smile began to return. As the boy cheered up, Ray began to speak.

“Listen, you can’t stay here. I have a phone; you can call your mom or…”

“What’s that?” the boy interrupted, pointing to the noose hanging in the kitchen.

“That’s for…hanging…plants,” Ray responded with a heavy sigh.

The boy stared at Ray blankly, somehow getting the sense he was lying.

“Are you a sad clown?” the boy asked.

“I’m not actually a clown, kid. It’s just a job.”
The boy looked around for a moment before jumping to the next subject on his mind.

“Can I go to the bathroom?” he asked.

Ray pointed him to the direction of the bathroom before sitting down on his couch, letting out a heavy sigh. He was beat, and felt slightly sick to his stomach. He removed his clown wig and nose. He was not thinking about why this strange child was in his apartment right now. He was not thinking about getting the boy back home. All he was thinking about was how much he wanted to sleep. Just as he closed his eyes, the boy emerged from the bathroom.

“What are these for?” the boy said, holding a needle and a bag of heroin.

“God dammit, where did you get that?” Ray said, quickly rising to his feet and snatching his drugs out of the boy’s hands.

“It was on your sink,” the boy said.

“Yeah, well you shouldn’t touch needles. That’s mine, what right do you have following me home and walking into my house and touching my things?” Ray shot back, frustrated.

“And don’t you start crying again,” he added.

The boy did not cry though. Instead, he simply asked:

“Does it hurt?”

Ray found this to be a difficult question to answer, for he didn’t really know what “hurt” was anymore. Six years prior, Ray seriously injured his back after falling off of a ladder. It hurt. He was prescribed a dosage of Morphine pills to help with the severe physical pain he was experiencing. He grew dependent on the sensation the pills gave him, and craved more. He was sick. He was soon introduced to heroin, a similar, but more powerful alternative. It was love at first injection.

From that moment on, he changed greatly, becoming increasingly hostile towards his girlfriend, Melinda. One day she took their daughter Chloe and left, unable to trust Ray anymore. It hurt. Ray slipped into a deep state of depression, mainly living off of Hot Pockets. He often resorted to using Craigslist to fulfill his sexual needs. He quickly discovered that the only thing that made him feel better was the heroin. The sensation Ray experienced whenever he shot himself up felt like heaven.
The suspense of finding a vein to hit was something that excited him. The rush of his sweet medicine hitting his bloodstream was euphoric. It didn’t hurt anymore.

So that’s exactly how Ray responded to the boy’s question.

“No, not anymore,” he said.

“But it’s like a shot, right? Those hurt. Why would you want to give yourself a shot?” the boy asked.

“None of your business,” Ray said, growing increasingly frustrated.

“But isn’t it…”

“I said it’s none of your business, now leave me alone!” Ray said, interrupting the boy.

“You’re mean. Clowns aren’t supposed to be mean, they’re supposed to be happy and make people feel good, but you’re just a mean man!” the boy responded angrily.

This sudden confrontational hostility caught Ray off guard for a second. He wasn’t in the mood to fight anybody, let alone an eight-year-old. So he just gave up and sat down. “Whatever kid, I already know I’m a piece of shit.”

The boy just starred at Ray with a look of utter disappointment in his face. He then turned away and stormed off into the other room. Ray tried closing his eyes once again, still longing for sleep. A sudden wave of nausea came over him though. He didn’t know where it came from. Following his gut, he shot up and ran to the bathroom. He barely reached the toilet before he let out an explosion of puke. He sat on the ground for a moment, leaning on the toilet. He felt weak. His insides were churning, his head was throbbing, and his heart was pounding a mile a minute. So what did Ray decide was best to do in this situation? Shoot up. Ray flushed down his sick and sat on the toilet, grabbing his drugs. He quickly cooked up the heroin, rolled up his oversized clown sleeve and wrapped up his arm quickly, searching for a vein. His arms were filled with small insertion holes. The thrill of the hunt. After multiple failed attempts, he finally found a vein. He knew the second the heroin hit his bloodstream. There it was, that euphoric paradise. He felt better. He sat there for a while and laughed to himself. The only time Ray ever really laughs is when he gets his high.
Ray eventually got up and exited the bathroom. The boy was now sitting on his couch, holding something in his hands.

“What you got there?” Ray asked suspiciously.

“Are you sick? I heard you throwing up,” the boy said, changing the subject.

“I’m fine, what is that?”

Ray grabbed the piece of paper out of the boy’s hands before waiting for a response. It was the photo of Ray’s daughter he was looking at earlier.

“Where did you get this?” Ray asked, beginning to lose his temper.

“I found it on top of that box over…”

“What did I tell you about touching my fucking things?! Just don’t do it! Now get out!” Ray yelled, interrupting the boy. It was the most emotion Ray had remembered displaying in recent memory. He expected the boy to cry, but the boy once again starred at him blankly.

“Is that your daughter?” he asked.

“What’s it to you, huh? I said get out!” Ray sniped back.

“What’s her name?” the boy asked, seemingly ignoring Ray’s requests.

Ray starred at the boy for a moment, dumbfounded by his own lack of authoritarian presence. He was beginning to feel defeated by this young child. What really bugged him though was why this kid cared so much. Nobody ever cared.

“Her name is Chloe,” Ray said more calmly. “That was from a while ago, she’s about your age now.”

“Why don’t you have any other pictures?” the boy asked.

Ray paused for a moment, hesitant to say aloud what he knew to be the sad truth.
“Because I haven’t even seen her since she was a toddler. Her mother took her from me. I wasn’t fit to be her dad. I got real mean a couple times, and I hit her mom. It was wrong, so wrong. And I…I dropped her, I dropped Chloe. I was high. She…Melinda called me dangerous. She took Chloe and she left. I didn’t fight it; I have no right to be that girl’s daddy. I’m just a fuck up.”

Ray wanted to cry, but he produced no tears. It still didn’t hurt enough. He started feeling sick to his stomach again.

“Do you love your daughter?” the boy asked.

Ray had never thought about this. He had forgotten what it was like to truly care about anything, let alone love somebody. In that moment he realized why he still held on to that photograph.

“I do love her, more than anything.”

“Then why were you trying to kill yourself?” the boy asked innocently.

“Because I…I’ve given up hope. She doesn’t even know who I am anymore…” Ray weakly said, feeling increasingly nauseous again.

“But she’s the only reason you’ve made it all these years. You’re a good clown, Giggles. You can make a good living. Stop being sad and make something of yourself. Be there for your daughter. Redeem yourself. It’s never too late, Ray,” the boy said confidently.

Ray could not believe those words just came out of that kid’s mouth. It struck a chord with him; it was exactly what he wanted and needed to hear. Before he could properly take it all in though, something was unsettling to him.

“How did you know my name?” he asked the boy.

The boy simply giggled and responded:

“You know how, Ray.”

Ray did indeed know how.
“I’m hallucinating, you’re not here right now. You never were,” Ray said, now hunched over, clenching his chest. “That means I’ve taken way too much today…”

Ray collapsed on the ground and began seizing. In the middle of his overdose, he began laughing after he realized something.

“I want to live now…” Ray muttered out to the boy, before shutting his eyes.
The Watcher
Marissa Hill
Look above. Look within.  
Now is the time to begin.

Pick a color. Paint your world.  
Share your spirit watch it swirl.

Dare to dance between the cracks.  
Step out of line. Never forget.

Never forget who you are.  
Don’t lose sight of your dreams.

Step back out of your shell.  
Can’t you see what’s happening?

Little girl so lost, feeling so alone.  
Come back to me, now you’re grown.

Remind me of the lost.  
Fill me with youth.

Share with me the dreams inside of you.  
Hold my hand. Be my guiding light.

Shattered mirrors due to endless tears.  
Wishing I could forget this night.

Look at me and what I’ve become.  
No light shines from above.

Grey and white fill my eyes.  
What happened to the color?

So tattered by your lies.  
Paint me a color.

Make me bright.  
Remind me who I am.
True Self

Show me this night.
Pick me up off the floor.

Give me courage to breathe once more.
Little girl so lost, feeling so alone.

Please show yourself you are not alone.

Precious China
Kate Loperfido
That year black tees promoting death metal bands were just as common as Abercrombie and Fitch hoodies in those middle school hallways. Homosexuality was embraced, or at least realized. Girls and guys a like, saw their heavily lined and mascaraed eyes in the shiny, aqua blue tiles that ran horizontally through the beige tiles on the walls. Milky blue lockers broke up the monotony of the tiling in groups of five to twenty.

Besides the adolescent realizations of sexuality, eighth grade was important. It was the final chance to be “big man on the totem poll” before you became the scum, aka. high school freshmen. Cliques that had begun to form in sixth grade, were now solidified. By becoming a member of one of these exclusive groups I had the right to be an individual, to stand out. Many of my crew rocked out to “Disturbed” and were the same kids everyone hated because we pulled A’s without opening our books. While we got along really well, their shaggy, dark hair and band tee’s weren’t really my style, so I blended in with everyone else in bell bottoms and teeshirts. I just wanted to make it through the day unnoticed so I never wore anything really unique; neither did Nick.

Physically, Nick was very normal. He was average height for an eighth grade boy with a build that was gradually moving from the pudginess of childhood toward the leanness of many teenagers. His dirty blond hair was kept neat, and he even styled it at times with the spiky fringe of bangs that most boys preferred in the middle school years. Nick’s unlined eyes were his most attractive quality because when he smiled they would warm and shine with complete happiness. His skin wasn’t perfect because of acne and freckles, but then most adolescent and teen faces have the same bumpy affliction. Though he tended to wear the same clothes a little too regularly, it shouldn’t have really mattered. He favored a blue stripped tee over band tees, but the jeans were a bigger problem. They rose past his waist to the region of his belly button, and Nick would tuck his tees into them so that he could cinch everything with the same brown belt every day.

That’s were the normalcy ended. In the halls he would turn around and randomly smile at people, which isn’t done when dealing with disaffected youth. Then, when something was humorous, Nick would laugh really loud and long. This stood out because nobody would do so; it wasn’t cool. Sometimes he would even bark like a dog in excitement and found the strangest things interesting, like his own snot. He would blow his nose and then examine the contents of his tissue, even going so far as to call out, “Cool!” mid inspection.

While these things were weird to everyone, I rode the same bus as his so perhaps I saw even more than my classmates. Everyday I would climb those stairs and be hit with that smell of cheap, plastic vinyl and children’s sweat and he would be sitting in the front, a social pariah.
Misfit

My heart would go out to him, but every day I would walk past him, smiling or saying a quick “hi” if I felt like it. From there, I would head straight to my seat in the mid-back near the rest of the eighth graders, close to the high schoolers who couldn’t drive. They were every eighth graders idols because they lit their lighters so that they could press the tops into the cheap, blue vinyl and melt grinning faces into the fabric. The profanity and lewd comments that decorated the patched holes and seat backs were their art work as well. I wanted to be them, not the boy trapped in the front.

Nick hadn’t always sat there; originally, he started sitting with us. However, he was different from the rest of us. He was loud and energetic, even at seven o’clock in the morning. People couldn’t relate to most of what he said, so they tormented him, and once they started, they couldn’t stop. Bobby Kents was just one of the group when he picked on the boy.

Nick’s energy countered Bobby’s laid back, dark brood. Bobby kept his hair short and his eyes were a deep brown that usually only smiled when he was making one of us younger kids unhappy, but his superiority complex was even worse and made him so difficult to deal with. It wasn’t until his dad died that he calmed down and grew up, but unfortunately, Nick never met that Bobby.

The worst part was that occasionally they were forced to sit together on the bus during the afternoon ride, and this made for some friction. There was one afternoon when Bobby started in on Nick, but it didn’t go like every other trip before.

Bobby taunted with, “Your mom is so ugly that if she stood on a street corner she wouldn’t make a buck fifty,” and Nick snapped.

He picked up the seat belt and whipped Bobby in the face with the metal fastener with a solid clink as the mental connected with jaw and teeth. The blood started, a slow flow from a split lip, and ran around Bobby’s teeth and out the side of the mouth.

Bobby, his dark eyes tightening and mouth slack, grabbed the belt from Nick and whipped him back on the arm leaving behind a red splotch as the clink again resounded. Tears started pouring from Nick’s eyes, and heaving sobs were interrupted by the wide hipped, lisping bus driver Linda. She had shimmied her hips through the thin aisle and now stood before the two boys.

With her oversized, wrinkled finger stuck out at Nick she leaned on the seat, into his face, and wailed, “To the front of the bus.”
She always seemed to do that, even the time another boy took a liter bottle of pop and knocked Nick on the head for “being obnoxious.”

Sadly, Nick did not have a buffer of friends and so he was left to face such treatment alone. The same was true for even after we had reached the school because the cruelty didn’t stop on the bus; it bled into class and through those beige hallways and drab classrooms that were all the same.

After nine periods, they would all blend together. There were plain white walls, with dry erase boards were occasionally broken by colored, inspirational posters or windows. Some of us would use those glass panes as our escape from the lecture and faded yellow desks. Others stared at the clock, willing forty-five minutes to fly by. I would doodle or take notes to pass the time. Nick would stick his finger up his nose and pick. Not the “thumb itch pick” either. It would be a full out, finger up the nose event, and the contents of that pick would then go into his mouth.

It was things like that that made him a social outcast; he was the victim. Insults were thrown at him, and they were not the ones that could be brushed off. These insults were a special breed of degradation specially designed with the intent of doing damage. Middle schoolers are professionals in this arena, and unfortunately for Nick, he was no kind of contender. In fact, even if Nick was singing in chorus, people would laugh and some times that hurts even worse than the words people said.

That day, Ms. Artoll stood at the front of the class behind her upright piano, playing scales, her alto ringing out, “Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti, Do.”

Nick opened his mouth and out poured his bass tones, and the class giggled. The sound grew and people began laughing out loud, grinding sounds built around mockery, as they shifted in their black, straight back chairs. After all the snickering of retarded and loser that day and those before it, the laughter must have been too much. His temper went off and he screamed a sharp squeal of pure anger and frustration.

Nick threw himself onto his back on the floor; his light green polo with it’s ketchup stain made a colored contrast to the standard white tiles. His fists flailed in the air and he screeched and squalled. When he started this, Shane, his only friend, tried to calm him. Nick kicked him in the shin for his efforts.

When Ms. Artoll finally had him calm, no one really cared. Everyone knew that the boy would just burst out again later.
His temper was always like that—a roman candle, quick, hot, and ending in fireworks. He was one of the first of a very few number of boys whom I have ever seen cry, and he did so regularly. This seemed weak to me, but I didn’t think Nick had any other responses in him so I tried not to judge him.

In cases like this, Nick should have had more than just Shane to support him, even if his endless chatter did grate nerves. His only friend argued with him regularly and, with no one else to turn to, Nick often went to teachers to talk. The boy wanted basic, normal interaction, but many of the teachers found his attention harassing or inconvenient, and so, just like their students, they were rude or cold to him. Worse still was both students and faculty were aware of the harassment, but only a few of each were sympathetic.

Our English teacher, Mrs. Fleeter, was one of the few who took the time to care, not just Nick but about all of her students. That’s why I would sit in her room tenth period and just relax because she was so calming, her room, so comfortable. The windows let in tons of light and the walls were lined with book shelves and brightly colored crates of children’s literature. Posters of The Outsiders and other books lined the walls and her podium and desk faced the classroom so she could see everything that went on at all times and was ready if a student was raising their hand.

It was there that we would sit around and talk some afternoons, just her and I, and it was during one of those times that I brought up Nick. I knew that she had spoken to him often, and that she was worried about him because her emotions always flashed across her face when she did. I was concerned in my own way as well and unsure of what to say, but because it was just her and I, I tried.

“If he would just chill out and calm down things would be easier for him. I don’t know what to say to him, and I feel bad, but it’s like he doesn’t even want to fit in,” I explained.

Mrs. Fleeter nodded, her brow wrinkling a bit between the eyes, and said, “I am as well, but you students need to understand. You know, he and I were talking about Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key. He said, ‘That’s Me! I’m just like that!’” I knew Nick had been referencing a portion of the book in which the ADD diagnosed main character admits that his actions are rarely within his control, and it feels like something else makes him act the way he does. She continued with, “I don’t know what to do for him when everyone else doesn’t give him a chance.”

I looked her in the eye, knowing she had told me for a reason, so I was honest, “It’s hard.”
Her lips bowed a bit and her head dipped into a slight nod, “Imagine what it’s like for him.”

Taking that into account was even more difficult than I had imagined. Though it must have been that loss of control that caused Nick to be caught by a preppy girl using a pair of metal scissors to cut a zit from his face during technology class. The girl told everyone of course, and it was thrown in with the countless other rumors that people spread. I didn’t take part by passing it on, there really was no way to stop it, or so I told myself. But everything in life has a cause and effect and these rumors and stories fed something in Nick. They were why my best friend, Johnny, found him crying on the ride home from school.

Nick was curled up, knees pressed to the back of the seat so his feet would dangle, just like everyone else. His cheeks were flushed and coated with frustrated tears, and though his face was turned to the window, the pain penetrated the air around him. As if calling out for help, the rippling traveled through his limbs causing hysterical rocking. As he walked toward the front of the bus, Johnny experienced a strange empathetic connection and felt the rage ricocheting around inside the boy as if it was his own.

“What’s wrong? Are you alright?” Johnny’s squeaky voice flowed soothingly from thin lips, even as the bus pulled up in front of his yellow, one story house.

Nick, probably sensing the gentleness in Johnny, latched on to the concerned blue gaze of my best friend. “I don’t have any friends! I just want to die!” his voice slipping out around spit and stuttering breaths.

“Don’t say that, you know that’s not the answer! I’m your friend!” Johnny replied, his voice smooth and sincere, and he meant it, even though he knew nothing more than the rest of us about Nick.

While no child should be faced with such a scenario, especially not someone as strapped for time and as caring as my best friend, Johnny had done everything someone so young and inexperienced could be expected to do. He had to rush down the aisle to get off on time because of his brief stop, but before he climbed down the stairs he paused and looked at our bored driver saying, “He’s crazed; I’m worried he’ll do something desperate!” It was just what they had taught us in health class, try to calm the person and tell an adult. With that, his little legs climbed down the stairs, jeans folding at the knees while his hand grasped the metal hand rail, wondering all the while if he would see Nick the next day in school.
I distinctly remember watching the torture people put Nick through. I remember one time when a group of guys had Nick in their sights and were beaming him with insults. I was sick of the cruelty and decided on a whim to step in, my round stumpy, five foot figure filled with adolescent disdain for immaturity. I looked them in the eyes and haughtily said, “Why don’t you guys grow up and leave him alone. Find something better to do.” They stopped instantaneously, their faces no longer twisted in smiles of mocking joy, and turned to walk off through the throng of teenagers shuffling through the hall.

With the faded blue lockers at my back, I glanced from the retreating backs to Nick’s enormously open eyes. They were huge above his slack jaw because of cheeks temporarily paralyzed by shock. Then his smile came out, a lopsided, warm bow that started at one corner of his mouth, moved gradually to the other, and eventually went all the way up into his eyes. “Thanks,” he said, then launched into one of his energetic, long talks.

I interrupted with, “Look, they’re idiots, but it’s not like we’re friends,” and walked away.

Then there was that winter day. I was headed to science, stressed about being late. The usual noise filled the air with kids telling raunchy jokes that weren’t really worth laughing at and talking about plans for after school. Voices crackled in puberty and other cracked up in laughter. Books smacked against each other as kids pulled them from the bottom of stacks in lockers or hit the floors with a plop when someone accidentally dropped them. Tinkles of giggles drifted from groups of highlighted pony tails, blending with boys rumbles and squeaks as they flirted with their female counter parts.

Green text book clutched to my chest, I ignored the noise as I rushed to get to Mr. Nyteari’s classroom. There was only one long hallway to cross so there was really no reason to hurry, but the hustle was part of my everyday ritual. I watched my feet move over the black and white speckled floor tiles, hoping that it would keep me from tripping over my own sneakers or someone else’s.

There were close to 200 people in that hall at the time; lockers were slamming all around me, their noise ricocheting through the hall. When a locker slams it does so with a loud and solid metallic thud. The metal on metal should clash to form a clang noise, but because it seals when properly shut, the sound is muffled to a solid thunk. Of course, if the locker swings backward into the one beside it, the ringing, clanging sound is produced. Even in the noisy, obnoxious flood of teenage chitchat and shuffling, this sound stood out.
The locker door must have swung hard to make that strong of a reverberation on the back swing. I don’t know, I didn’t see it, but the sound made me glance up from my inventory of feet. Nick lay below the swaying blue door. A boy laughed loudly on the opposite side of the hall from him. My mind helpfully supplied what my eyes had not seen, and I knew Nick’s head had impeded the closing of the locker.

Nick’s back was curled at the base of the lockers. His knees were pulled in towards his stomach so that his jeans brushed his tan, knit sweater. His arms were wrapped around his head just above his ears and touched at the crown. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, unable to stop the flow of silent tears that poured out of tear ducts and from between lids. The skin around those eyes, his forehead, his cheeks, even down to his chin had flushed red so that it was difficult to see the freckles and acne imperfections. The lips that smiled so rarely, were curled in, allowing teeth to bite down on them to hold in sound and push out pain.

The laughing continued as he rocked side to side the slightest bit. Beside him, on the ground lay a black binder with a few loosened page corners showing from the mouth. My pulse accelerated, and my knees went a little weak. Inside, my heart and stomach shriveled down to nothing. My feet however, remembered how to work without any say from my frozen brain, and they turned me away from Nick.

Moving quickly I crossed the threshold of the classroom and moved to my seat as the laughter still filled the hall outside. The chatter died down as others entered their classes as well. Everyone filed in the room and sat behind the black lab tables. Our chitchat continued as students walked into class together in pairs and groups. They were cut off when the bell rang, and I turned my eyes to the television screen for the daily episode of Bill Nye. Mr. Nyteari walked to the front of the room and class began.
I believe every day of life,
Just a little beyond the flutter of the eyes,
Lay the hidden truth.
The best a person can be.
The highest potential,
The unbreakable.
No Worries.
No troubles.
The most relaxed state.
The highest of hopes.
The determination.
The achievable dreams.
The success.
The readiness.
An individual at his or her best.
It is the next second that throws them off.
Construction Reduction
Matthew Hotaling
The day that I decided to murder my wife was no different from any other day. It was not the end of the world and nor was it the long-awaited zombie apocalypse. We were eating dinner like any married couple would do; you know the kind. The kind that pretends their happy when all they really want to do is jam a knife into the other’s jugular and watch them bleed out. Perhaps I think a little too extreme, but I believe it comes from a place of truth and perverseness within the human soul. I tend to embrace the primitive side of human nature. It is survival of the fittest in the world we live in today. All I’m saying is that I am not a crazy person for having thoughts of this nature. Then again, crazy people never realize that they are crazy, so maybe I am crazy. But, if we take this a step further, admitting that I might be crazy may exempt me from this. If I admit that I’m crazy, it could be that I am just merely disturbed; a man that needs help. I like to think of myself as the latter bunch.

“How is the steak?” My wife asked from across the dinning room table.

Our rectangular wooden table rocked its weight to my side as I placed my elbows down on it; one of the legs had a chip on the bottom causing it to be uneven. Whenever a person put more weight to one side the table would slant that way. I was afraid it would break one of these days. My wife never placed a tablecloth on it unless we had company over. Was I not deemed worthy enough for the $15 piece of cloth? Did we really have to demote ourselves to just man and wood like in the days of the cavemen?

“It’s good, honey,” I lied with a fake smile.

It sucks. What is this bullshit? Well done? She knows goddamn well I like my Sirloin medium, maybe medium-well in certain circumstances. Stupid bitch. I couldn’t even get a decent meal in my own home anymore. I felt my hands ball up into fists as I gritted my teeth. I would have honestly rather eaten sandpaper and most likely have enjoyed it more than that blasphemy.

“I made it just how you like it. Is it too overcooked?”

It was at that exact moment that I knew I had to kill her. A man could deal with the late nights, awkward dinners, the affairs with coworkers and the lack of communication; they are all things we expect in a partner. But add a lack of sex and overcooked Sirloin steak to the mix and we have a serious problem. I did not make a completely rash decision by deciding murder was the only punishment that seemed fit, it was completely logical. I chewed on a peace of steak in my mouth for what seemed like five minutes before I swallowed it. I reached for a glass of water to wash the putrid taste of shit out of my mouth and salivate my tongue.

“It’s perfect. You know exactly what I like,” I lied again.

“I was thinking about taking a trip down to my parents house this weekend. They haven’t seen me since I got pregnant. I want to see them while I’m still fat.”

Right. The baby. It occurred to me that this would complicate matters for me. A man can kill his wife over steak and not be considered an ass for it. Everyone knows this. But a man who murders his pregnant wife would be looked down upon in the small town I live in.
Secrets never stay hidden for long here. Murder was off the table, at least until after the pregnancy.

“Your not fat. Your beautiful.”

I should’ve gotten a medal for the amount of lying I did everyday. She wasn’t ugly or anything, but she was no Grace Kelly either. But what can I say? I am a gentleman.

“So what do you plan on doing after the baby is born, Rich?” Dan asked me.

Dan was my wife’s father. He was a portly man with a thick, greying beard and a slightly balding head. He had a fair complexion and towered over me. My slender build and chocolate-brown hair that rested neatly on top of my head was no competition. I couldn’t even grow a full beard except in tiny patches which I also blamed my wife for. My father always told me women would try to de-masculinize you. I never listened to him because he was crazier than a bat on heels but now I understood his logic.

All of this to me seemed inconsequential to the point I was making. Dan used to intimidate me when I first started dating his daughter, but it lost its effect by around date eleven or twelve when I had sex with her. We used to mate like bonobos monkeys in our early days. Not anymore. Blue-balls for life.

Her mother, Carmen was in the kitchen cleaning dishes with my wife. Carmen was an attractive woman and there was no denying it. Her sandy-blond hair billowed in the wind when she walked and her green eyes always burned into your soul with a pure honesty that I could not describe. She had large breasts which she passed down to her daughter and a perky little nose that I often fantasized about. I often wondered if she was as good as her daughter was at sex. She had a pale complexion that contradicted my naturally darker one. I thought for a moment before I answered Dan’s stern question. What did he expect me to say? Murder your daughter?

“Just take it step by step.”

Carmen and my wife walked into the living room and sat on the couch next to us. Carmen wrapped her arms around Dan and my wife mimicked this action making me shudder.

“Do you know the first thing about taking care of a baby?” He asked condescendingly.

“Stop teasing him, Dan,” Carmen said, playfully slapping his arm.

“I just want to make sure that our grandson or granddaughter grows up in a safe living environment like we provided for our little pumpkin,” he said.

“Dad, I’m not a little girl anymore. Please don’t call me your little pumpkin,” my wife said rolling her eyes.

Dan grunted in response and shifted his weight in his seat trying to get comfortable.

“So will you come back here after he or she is born? You know your father can’t travel like he used to. I would hate to see him or her every few months,” Carmen said solemnly.

It was my turn to roll my eyes, so I rubbed my forehead so I could hide it. Maybe I should kill her parents too... If I learned anything it’s that you cannot leave loose ends. Her parents would have to go, but not yet. The baby would come first, then my wife would go.
Her parents, being heartbroken would naturally decide suicide was the only option. There was no way I would drive down there with the baby every few months, not a fat chance. I thought about the possible ways I could get rid of them but soon came to the realization that forging suicide was too messy and complicated. I could do a lot better. I was a real estate agent in town and if that taught me anything it was a good sell.

Funny side note: I would show some houses to my female customers and wonder what it would feel like to have a threesome with my wife. This is the stuff I think about in the model homes, but I am getting carried away. The point is, I would have to sell their deaths and clear my own name in the process. I knew if I just had patience that the answers would come to me in my dreams. I just had to wait. And masturbate. Too often for my liking.

Two weeks came and went and still I had nothing. I sat staring up in my bed at the ceiling in the dark. My wife rolled over onto her right side so she faced me. She mumbled into her pillow and took a deep breath. That was another reason to add to the list. Mumbling in her sleep. A trait that annoyed me to no possible end. She had to go. I couldn’t sleep at nights just wondering what in hell she was dreaming about that she had to mumble. I brought this up to her once but she just shrugged it off. I even offered up sex on the table but she laughed in my face. Apparently she was superstitious that no sex should be had with the baby in her womb. I suppose I understood and almost respected her for it, but it was clear that I would receive no special treatment. Not acceptable in my own home. I had an itch that Avon hand-creme just could not scratch. I felt like I was loosing my mind.

My father always told me that women would try to control you and that I should never let this happen. It could possibly have been the fact that he was a drunk bastard that always made me walk away and shrug it off, or the fact that he admitted-to seeing demons in the walls. Either way, it was clear that my father was wise beyond his years. He would roll over in his grave if he saw me today. A disappointment. A pushover. But not anymore! It was my duty to prove to my old man that I could be a person he respected.

She mumbled some more until I felt a warm hand rest on my left shoulder which made me jump in surprise. I looked over as my heart beat like a cheetah and saw her inch her face closer to mine. She kissed me on the lips for a brief peck and pulled back letting out a yawn. The scent of her breath wafted over to me and I felt light-headed. If she did anything right, it was that she always smelled fantastic. Her hair smelt of mangoes and her breath of citrus. Odd for the middle of the night, but I never found it a problem. I loved fruit. It got me hard.

“What are you doing up, Rich?” she asked still yawning.
Devising ways to kill you. Sorry honey, no luck tonight as usual. Not to worry though. Tomorrow night will be a breakthrough for sure. I promise. lets fornicate.
“Can’t sleep. My mind keeps wandering. Just go back to bed, honey.”
“You’ve been up late all night. What is bothering you?”
You.
“The baby. Keep thinking about what your father said. What if he’s right? What if I’m a terrible father? I haven’t sold a house in months...” I trailed off.

She kissed my left shoulder blade and wrapped her arm around my shoulder and cupped her hand over my right breast. A shiver shot down my spine.

“I love you, Rich. I have faith in you. Don’t let my dad get to you, you know how he is. You will be a great father. I have no doubt in my mind,” she said confidently.

She always knew how to make my fake problems feel better. I leaned back and rested my head on her large, firm breasts and exhaled through my nose. I thought for a moment that I would miss her when she was gone, but that feeling subsided as-soon as it arrived.

I thought my wife went into labor. I actually found myself jumping off the walls, scrambling for the keys and manuals and phone numbers to call our friends. I temporarily forgot about everything. In those few hours all that mattered to me was getting our baby out into this world and into my arms. Our baby. Our baby! I found myself looking into the future and imaging what life would be like with our family, growing old, having a second and maybe a third kid. The more sex the better. I was happier than I had been in years.

No dice, however. False alarm. They were just false contractions after we arrived at the hospital. The baby was not coming—not yet. When we arrived home, it was as if a wave of hatred washed over me all over-again, consuming me. All I wanted was to strangle her neck until her face turned blue. I looked down at my hands and found them shaking. This scared me more than anything. I always had the thoughts, but had never experienced physical signs until then. It was getting worse and I felt myself detaching from reality more often.

Maybe I was crazy after all.

I thought of poisoning her oatmeal but shoved the thought aside just as quickly as it appeared. Too clean. Plus, I refused to kill her until we had sex one last time. She owed me that much. But I knew poison was not the option. I could still do a lot better. It was going to be biblical.

We all try to fight the inevitable. It is part of human nature. We are who we are and no one and nothing can change that. I’ve tried to deny that I was a product of my parents, but I couldn’t deny it any longer. I grew up being ashamed of my father when I was a teenager. I tried to ignore the fact that my father was psychotic and schizophrenic. He was also a terrible drunk, but I came to realize he had no choice. It was the only sane thing in his life at the time. My mother drove us away from him before he could do any more harm by the time I entered the ninth grade. I tried to tell myself I would never end up like him but I knew in my heart that I always would. My mother suffered manic-depression often. She didn’t want to admit to herself that she was no better of a role model for me than father was.
She committed suicide soon after I graduated high school. I was not present to witness it, but eating yourself to death would have put a toll on me that would have surely messed me up more than I already was. When you look at the gene pool that my parents brought together to make me, you arrive at the conclusion that I was fucked from the start. If this does not rationalize my actions than I suppose I too am psychotic. I never found out my father died until well into my graduate studies. He had carved out his own face with a blunt knife one day while taking a public bus downtown. There were several witnesses. He had been claiming that demons were crawling around underneath of his skin and he had to dig them out. He bled out before he died. I can only assume that it was agonizing pain. A fate that seemed cruelly fit for my father.

I stood in the small, cramped room in the maternal ward of the hospital in my blue gown and gloves and mask I had to put on. My wife was squeezing my hand until my fingers turned blue and her knuckles turned white. Around me the nurses, doctors and gynecologist hooked her up to machines I could not even describe to you, mostly because I had no idea what they were called. One was beeping, monitoring her heartbeat and another counting her contractions. The doctors looked like Smurfs to me. Where was Papa Smurf? My wife was screaming at the top of her lungs as I told her to keep breathing and pushing as I was instructed to do. This was it, the moment I had been waiting for. We had purposefully not wanted to know the sex of our baby during our ultrasound appointments; we wanted it to be a surprise.

I once-again felt that same feeling engulf me as earlier when we had the labor scare. No hatred filled my heart, but nostalgia did. I thought back to a time before when I was a little kid. Before I would lie awake at night listening to my mother crying from the other side of our thin walls in my old home. Before my father turned to the bottle for a solution to his troubles. He was always a proud man—too proud to admit he had a problem and needed help. A time when I remembered being happy. I was no older than five or six and my parents had taken me to the park. The neighbors always said I was a splitting image of my father and if I had a picture of him in our new home now, I would contest to that. I was on the swing set when I got a little too confident in myself and jumped off when I was too high and landed right on my left knee scraping it against the wood chips and hearing a sickening POP! My dad ran to my side immediately followed by my mother. I was bleeding and though I cannot remember what exactly it felt like, it was excruciating pain. My parents took me home and cleaned me up, nothing broken or sprained. As he tucked me in that night I always remembered what he told me to this day:

“Richie...someday you are going to have a kid of your own and everything will become clear. Whatever troubles, doubts and worries in your life you have will disappear. Your life will have meaning and you will have nothing but love to give. Don’t lose hope in yourself...”

Before I knew it, as if time were moving in slow motion yet speeding up all at once, the doctor had our baby in his arms, covered in blood and placental fluid. I had a sensation of gag in the back of my throat but I did not care. Nothing did at the moment, just the three of us.
It was as if the world around went black and a beam of light from the sky was shining down on us like a giant spotlight. Everything went quiet except for the sound of our baby wailing. The only thing I heard was the gynecologist announcing:

“IT’S A BABY GIRL...”

I felt my face grow flush and my eyes heavy. My eyes watered up and a single tear rolled down my cheek. Goosebumps arose over my flesh and I saw my wife for the very first time; beautiful, like an angel. She was glowing.

“I-IT’S A GIRL...” I trailed off in amazement. “WE HAVE A BABY GIRL...”

“W-WHAT DO YOU WANT TO NAME HER?” My wife asked me out of breath and sweating profusely.

Dark circles were underneath her eyes and her complexion was pale. The umbilical cord wrapped around her wrists as the doctors wrapped the baby up in a blanket and handed her to my wife who gently held her in her arms.

“I DON’T KNOW,” I said in awe.

“AFTE...”

“CLAIRE?”

I thought about it for a moment unsure of how I felt naming her after my mother. What if the sheer fact of her sharing the same name meant she was given the gene that destroyed my mother from the inside? What if...

“CLAIRE... CLAIRE-BEAR...” I said unable to keep a smile widening from one corner of my mouth to the other. “MY LITTLE CLAIRE-BEAR.”

“CLAIRE,” my wife cooed as she looked down at our baby.

It was more than I ever could have hoped for. My savior, my good luck charm. My angel...my two angels. And I had nothing in my heart except love. I stroked my wife’s sandy-blond hair that she got from her mother as she burned her emerald-green eyes into my soul.

“I LOVE YOU, JEN,” I said—and meant it.

For the first time in a long time.

It had been several weeks since the birth of our baby girl Claire and everything had been normal. We had been having sex almost everyday. Chalk one up for me. We actually began communicating again and she would come home early to relieve the nanny we hired to take care of our baby when we were off at work. My beautiful angel, Jen, owned a greenhouse selling flowers; a professional gardener you could call her. We had a beautiful garden in our backyard that I never noticed until the other week. It occurred to me that maybe she had never had an affair at work but she was merely tending to her garden out back. It made sense because I had never paid attention to her back when I was lost. But now I found myself. Gardening was her affair. I surprised myself at how intuitive I had become, like I was Albert-fucking-Einstein. Or Gandhi even.
Funny side story: A customer I showed a house to once told me he had sex in his wife’s garden in the middle of a hot summer’s day. Maybe Jen would have sex with me in the garden. Her tulips looked like they needed watering...

We were sitting at our usual spot at our kitchen table eating dinner while Claire was asleep in her crib upstairs. Still no tablecloth, but I was over it. I looked over at my wife and my heart skipped a beat. She looked so beautiful with her perky nose; like a bunny rabbit. I cut open a piece of steak that she had cooked and put it into my mouth and my face dropped. Fucking overcooked!

“How is the steak, honey?” Jen asked me smiling.

I looked at her as I watched before my eyes the color drain from her face. Her face reflected darker and darker shades until it was like a black-hole was smack-dab in the middle of it. I felt the rage begin to enter my soul in waves yet again. Nothing mattered anymore.

“Rich...” she trailed off as my hands shook and I dropped my fork and knife onto the plate with an echoing CLANG!

I spit out the dry steak onto my plate and took a swig of water to swish in my mouth and spit it out onto the table as if it were listerine. The putrid taste of shit was back in my mouth.

“Terrible,” I muttered trying to catch my breath.

“Excuse me?” she asked confused.

What do you not understand about terrible? Fuck your garden!

“It tastes like shit. Can you ever cook a single steak just how I like it? Just once!” I shouted jumping up from my seat rocking the table slightly.

“I-I’m confused. You’re scaring me, Rich,” she said trembling.

“I like my steak medium-fucking-well, goddamnit! Not dryer than Satan’s asshole! This is bullshit!”

Jen coward into her seat as she dropped her utensils onto the table. I realized that my father was right all along. You think a woman will respect you, and she deceives you for a while. But in the end, you see them for the demons they really are. I looked down and without realizing what I was doing I had the steak knife clenched in my hand. In a flash of light that reflected onto the metallic knife from the chandelier above our heads I saw a reflection on the knife that made me yelp and jump backwards in fear.

My father.

The hazy and distorted reflection that was supposed to be my wife as I rotated the knife in my hands had the vague resemblance of my father. It suddenly became clear to me, why I was so unhappy all the time. My father was living on through my wife. Mocking me, letting me know how much of a disappointment I was. How much I did not deserve a decently cooked steak. And boy did that really piss me off. Every man should enjoy a good Sirloin.

“Rich! W-what are you doing? You’re really scaring me,” she whined.

“Don’t play coy father! I know it’s you in there! And I won’t end up like you. Not ever,” I wheezed as my chest heaved up and down with my growing adrenaline.
“W-what are you talking about, Rich? Your father is dead! It’s me. Your wife.”
“Stop it! I won’t end up like you. I am not weak like you were! I am stronger!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

I suddenly felt rejuvenated and empowered. This was all a test that I had to pass. My father’s test to prove to him I was a man. I could take care of my baby on my own. I had to kill my wife. It was the only way. I inched closer and with each step I became more confident. Jen fell back in her chair and smacked the back of her head on the ground. She cried out and rolled over onto her knees and was about to sprint away when I grabbed the back of her hair and yanked her backwards. I brought my face close to hers and smelled the scent of coconuts. Instant hard-on.

“I will never be like you and mom,” I whispered into her ear.

Jen cried out and in one fluid motion I whipped her around. Everything that succeeded this happened in slow motion. From the baby monitor in the living room I heard Claire begin to wail. I looked up above me, momentarily taking my eyes off of Jen. It was in that mili-second that I realized I had made a fatal error. Never to take your eyes off of your victim. By the time I brought my focus back to Jen she had gathered enough strength to wiggle out of my grasp. She whipped her body around mine and started running around the corner of the table in the direction of where I normally sat. I whirled around and grabbed her wrist with my free hand. Her blond hair whipped against the side of my face blinding me. Berries this time. Twelve o’clock down below. I raised the knife in-front of me stabbing the air but I already knew it was too late and I missed. I had put all my momentum and body-weight into the stabbing motion that I felt myself gliding through the air, letting go of Jen’s wrist. Before I knew it the knife was flying in the air in front of me and my body was colliding with the edge of the table, my extended arm being bent underneath my chest.

Because of the chip on one of the legs the table rocked slightly and tilted over to where my body had collided, but by the time my hand had reached the handle of the knife it was too late and the force of my hand being crushed from my abdomen sent the blade of the knife directly into my groin. The table buckled under my weight and gave out underneath me and sent me crashing into the floor. The blade drove farther into my groin as my pelvis smashed straight onto the hard floor beneath me. My entire body was paralyzed and I could not move, only blink.

It was at that moment that I realized the irony of my situation. My father had given into his fear and killed himself. My mother has given into her fear and killed herself. And now I had given into my own and had driven a knife into my own genitals. God, you gotta love the irony in that shit. This is how I came to the solidifying fact that we are exact replicas of our parents...to an extent. We will never escape our own destiny. We can try to avoid it for so long, but in the end, we become our parents. And because of it, I had driven a knife into my own penis. Shit.
I wish I could say it was my wife’s fault but it wasn’t. That damned steak! It was the goddamn steak that was the end of me. I was also slightly disappointed in myself. Months upon months of planning. Months of staying up all night plotting and all I did was pull out a steak knife. A steak knife? Really, Rich?

I could not hear the sounds of Jen crying or the sounds of sirens coming down the street or the ambulance taking me away. Nor could I hear the sounds of Dan or Carmen comforting Jen. I knew I should’ve fucking killed them. Like my father said:

“In-laws are the hemorrhoids in the butt of life.”

None of these things I could hear. The only thing I could hear besides my own thoughts was the sound of my Claire-bear crying as Jen carried her out of the house escorted by the police as I bled out onto the floor, unable to move or talk. My Claire-bear.

And the only thing I worried about was not being able to pick her up when she fell down, clean her wounds, and comfort her at night. I prayed that she would not grow up to become like I had. Maybe without me in her life she would grow up a normal and happy girl into a beautiful woman, but I knew better. She was doomed to get the sickness that had infected me, and this thought alone disturbed me the most. But not more than the thought of my wife teaching her how to garden and one day tending to her own garden when she owned her own house one day.

Fucking overcooked steak.
Old Man in Ink
Katie Loperfido
The guitar screamed through its solo, alternating between highs and lows in a bluesy rhythm. As one would expect from a live performance by a high-quality rock band, it didn’t cut off after the brief minute allotted on the album version, but instead it just went on and on, seemingly for hours.

Dan was a short and skinny seventeen year old with long brown hair, who adhered to the “grunge” style of dress decades before Nirvana came along and made it cool. That night, hanging out with his high school buddies beneath the stars in Syracuse, he experienced the thrill of hearing David Gilmour’s guitar blasting through the solo to Time. The four of them wandered around, heading nowhere in particular while they casually shared a bottle of whiskey. There was no band and no other people on the streets at that moment, but the music was definitely there. Dan was the only one who could hear it, but it was just as clear to him as any live show could have been. It was real, it was loud and it was intense. He was having a good trip -- an LSD induced hallucination powerful enough to leave his ears ringing. It was grand events like this that had him dropping acid at least twice a week.

Usually they were what he called, “intellectual trips.” He would take the stuff and then go about his day, contemplating anything and everything. So deep were his philosophical thoughts while under the chemical’s influence that he could ponder any random word or phrase to the point of shattering the walls of meaning that surrounded it, connecting it to other ideas that nobody else had ever thought of and eventually take things to the very limits of human understanding. For him, acid was an intellectual steroid. It made a lasting impact on the way his mind worked, and made him grow more and more “intelligent” with every hit.

It started out at something Dan would do with his friends. Most nights, they would hang out in this one guy’s basement. Dan barely knew the kid that lived there, but he was a friend of a friend of a friend and so forth, and the place had turned into their regular hangout spot. It wasn’t much, just a typical basement with creaky wooden stairs, concrete everywhere and a sort of dungeon feel to it, but his parents didn’t mind letting them party there so it was one of their few available options. All they needed was a record player and some lawn chairs and they were free and clear to experiment with any kind of drug they could get their hands on while jamming to the music. Other nights, when the weather was nice, the drug addled crew could take to the valley streets and how beneath the full moon.
Taking drugs wasn’t even something Dan had been pushed into. Although it had begun as a social activity, peer pressure didn’t play much of a role when he first decided to take the plunge. Addiction was something he actually aspired to and he idolized the most notorious drug-abusing rock stars, like the guitarist of the Rolling Stones.

“If I were Keith Richards, I’d be addicted to everything,” he would joke with his friends.

The problem with drugs, for awhile at least, weren’t the issues that modern day D.A.R.E instructors like to warn middle schoolers about. The physical and mental addiction, ruined relationships and all that weren’t of concern to him. In fact, they were his medication for the feelings of depression he already had, and they’d actually created a number of relationships for him.

Prior to the drug days his circle of friends was small. There were only two or three guys he hung out with even semi-regularly and girls almost universally overlooked him.

Drugs were part of the quest for uniqueness, disconnecting him further from a world he didn’t quite fit in with. While other guys his age were excelling in school, athletics or art, he was pushing his limits in the field of mass consumption of mind-altering chemicals. And while it helped him achieve his goal of standing out and separating him from the squares, it also provided the security of a group of people he could identify with. Parts of his built-in social circle were much more far-gone than he was, which for him, was fine.

Dan could only associate with other mad men like himself. The ones whose drug problems dwarfed his own and whose crazed ramblings could only be understood by a fellow acid freak. Insanity was an appeal – something he romanticized.

Like many other days, Dan decided to spend a little down time listening to Pink Floyd’s The Wall. He sat in bed, with a tightly packed bowl in hand and set the fragmented marijuana bud ablaze. Bringing it to his lips, he inhaled the smoke deeply and held it in for a few seconds before exhaling. He had a fan turned up high pointing towards the open window and he made sure to place a towel firmly over the gap between the floor and the bottom of his door. The room had once been white, but cigarette and other smoke had saturated the outside of the wall, turning it a pale shade of yellow. Sitting there, taking sporadic hits, he just quietly absorbed the music from the record player and contemplated the lyrical story of a rock star who was slowly losing his mind.

Floyd was the perfect drug music with its wailing guitar solos, bizarre sound effects and deranged themes. He collected their records like he collected chemicals, devouring anything he could get his hands on. Nothing could top a night of getting completely twisted and throwing on a new Pink Floyd album. For him, those were the high times.
“And you run and you run to catch up with the sun, but it’s sinking
Racing around to come up behind you again
The sun is the same in a relative way, but you’re older
Shorter of breath and one day closer to death

“8-Ball, corner pocket,” Dan called, lining up his shot after a long swig of his beer. His friend Mark was pouring himself another round from a fresh pitcher as he watched Dan try to sink the winning shot. It was lined up nicely for him to finally win a round.

“YE--- FUCK!” he yelled as the 8-ball fell, followed shortly by the white cue-ball. Scratching on the last shot turned what had looked like certain victory into a brutal defeat. Mark just laughed at him.

“You do that every time man. Maybe pool’s just not your game.”

“Ugh, well then what is?” Dan remarked sarcastically.

The set everything back up and played for a little while longer before last call was announced and Mark went up to order a few bottles for them to leave with. Dan waited by the pool table finishing his beer, wearing a pair of worn out jeans and a flannel shirt. The hair was shorter than in his high school days, but it was still longer than your average 22-year-old’s at that time.

This had become the routine. At least a few nights a week he and Mark headed down to the bar to shoot pool and drink as much as they could. It was either that, or stay at home with his girlfriend Karen. The other guys he used to hang out with had mostly fallen by the wayside. Some had been arrested or gone to rehab and others he just lost contact with. Along with their departure went the harder drugs he’d once spent so much time abusing. Now the only thing that still had a hold on him was alcohol.

This wasn’t something Dan was in denial about. He still wasn’t happy and he recognized that his addiction was at the heart of most of his problems. He’d managed to graduate from high school, but flunked out of Onondaga Community College in less than a year because he spent more time drinking than studying. He and Mark discussed their alcoholism frequently, and Mark would say things like, “I’m not an alcoholic, because I don’t need to drink all the time. It’s just that when I start, it can be hard to stop.”

To make matters worse, his girlfriend of three years, Karen, had just broken the news that she was pregnant. Dan went speechless when she told him. Through his mind coursed thoughts of all the different implications of what she had just told him, but he couldn’t articulate anything.

The thing that kept popping up was images of his own childhood, living with an alcoholic father. He never got along very well with his dad, thanks to his father’s own drinking and judgmental attitude towards his nonconforming son. The thought of following in those footsteps now that he had a child on the way scared him.
At the same time, the evidence of the many problems that come with addiction continued to mount. Mark and a number of his other friends were nailed with DWIs all within a short time of each other. It seemed only a matter of time until Dan would get busted for getting behind the wheel while intoxicated too.

Another friend of his, a timid kid named David who’d always been the first guy to quit drinking for the night and didn’t really mess around with drugs, developed a crippling addiction to cocaine completely out of the blue. He was the last person it should have happened to and when he wound up in prison for his drug offenses, the reality of the situation weighed all the more heavily on Dan.

He finally decided to quit drinking. For the most part, he’d already kicked the harder drugs, and it had finally reached the time to go completely clean. It wasn’t something that could happen overnight though and for the majority of Karen’s pregnancy he gave into temptation frequently.

“Maybe I can keep drinking and still be a responsible parent,” he would think to himself on the nights when his craving for alcohol became unbearable. At least a few nights a week he’d slip into the old routine of going to the bar with Mark or just sitting at home with a case of beer.

His son, Daniel (with a different middle name) was born on January 8th, 1988 and the idea of continuing his alcoholism and trying to be a parent immediately began to seem absurd. He reaffirmed his intention to quit drinking, but the stress began mounting quickly. Worried about all of the shit that had hit the fan having a kid around and seriously in need of an alcohol fix one night, he told Karen that he was heading out to pick up “just a six-pack.” He borrowed her car, a beautiful but slightly worn down cherry red Firebird and headed out.

After hitting the store and grabbing his beer, he climbed back into the Firebird, flipped on the radio and immediately began drinking. The Eagles song, Hotel California blasted out of the speakers, and Dan sang along.

“Mirrors on the ceiling, the pink champagne on ice. We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.”

The mellow song was soothing and he alternated between singing and taking long gulps from his beer can. After polishing off the entire six-pack, he rolled up to Mark’s worn down, grey apartment building to pick up his partner in crime. Mark brought with him bottles of liquor and juice. For awhile they just drove around, going everywhere and nowhere while throwing back mixed drinks. Dan’s tolerance was in decline from cutting back and the alcohol hit him quickly. He drove in a haze, tearing through back streets, trying to avoid police and high traffic areas.

The road they found themselves on was full of curves, with bright yellow signs warning them to slow down.
Then Mark yelled something to him. With the music blaring Dan couldn’t hear and turned to his friend to get him to repeat himself. He didn’t even notice the latest batch of signs warning them about the upcoming curve in the road until he’d driven past them into a ditch.

The Firebird laid dormant, with the front end completely smashed. Rather than getting out of the car to inspect the damage, Dan reached into the back seat to find the bottle of liquor still intact and poured some into his mug along with an equal dose of juice.

“Well, we’re fucked now,” he said to Mark, taking a deep gulp of his drink. “Guess we might as well just wait for the cops to get here….”

When the cops did inevitably show up, Dan was cuff ed and shoved into the back of the police car. While at the station, he was questioned about his addiction.

“Do you think you need help with drinking?”

“Yes,” he answered honestly. He couldn’t deny it or rationalize what had happened. He knew it, the officer knew it and finally he stopped trying to fix the problem on his own and asked for help.

This was the night of August 19th, 1989—the last time Dan had a drink.

Home, home again
I like to be here when I can
And when I come home cold and tired
It’s good to warm my bones beside the fire

“What are you still doing up?” his twenty-two year old son asked, having just come down the stairs, car keys in hand. “It’s 10:30, way past your bedtime.”

“Yeah it is,” Dan responded groggily. “I’m just waiting for some music to download.”

He was sitting on the couch with his laptop, iTunes open and downloading some new album. Ever since he got an iPod and his kids showed him how to use it, he’s spent a substantial amount of time and money collecting digital copies of the albums he still had on vinyl sitting in a cardboard box in his study. Little things like these were how he spent his time now, collecting music, watching TV on the couch with his wife, or just reading in front of the fireplace.

“What are you downloading now?”

“Just some more Pink Floyd. There are still a couple albums I’m missing,” he responded.

“Nice. I’m going to have to raid your computer for some music again pretty soon,” his son said eagerly.

Dan’s musical taste had certainly been passed down to his son. Fortunately though, it would seem music was one of his only youth appreciations that he passed on to his kids. He’d been very honest with them about his experiences with drugs and alcohol, in the hope that they wouldn’t repeat his mistakes.
He’d gone through addiction, and while he managed to turn his life around, it wasn’t something he wanted to see his kids have to overcome as well.

If you were to meet him today, you’d never know that Dan had once been a serious junkie and an alcoholic. He left that life behind completely and, in a way, became an entirely different person following that August night.

Twenty years removed from his last drink, the closest thing to a mind-altering chemical that enters his system is the caffeine in his morning pot of coffee.

Now Dan is the portrait of the stereotypical American dream. He and Karen split a few years after their second child was born, but he’s since remarried. He owns a home and a golden retriever, has a Master’s degree in Business Administration from Syracuse University and a good job with his own office and a little piece of metal with his name on it that sits on his desk.

He’s been trying to play catch-up ever since that time. Even so, he’s done much better than most, effectively building in twenty years what even the most successful people usually need thirty or forty years to do. But although his new lifestyle is a bit more boring, spending his evening reading or watching TV on the couch with his wife with flames cackling in the fireplace, he would tell you that he’s never been happier.
"Waiting for Dark Hearts"
Molly Martindal

An awkward blanket,
a sudden silence.
A face gone crimson,
a loss of breath.

Waiting for,
the tip of your tongue
to form the words,
your mind can’t find.

A dead watch battery,
a moment still.
Wishing for
uncomfortable to die.

Waiting for,
the moment to pass,
so you can look back,
and someday laugh.

A calming inhale,
as you face your fears.
Face the faces
that face you.

Waiting for,
dark hearts
to accept
a dark soul.

A cloud of embarrassment,
a mind fogged.
Losing vision,
speeding cars on a busy highway.
Waiting for Dark Hearts

Waiting for,
your mind to clear.
For nerves to stop dancing,
and thoughts to stop racing.

A good explanation
will get you out of this one.
Hopefully before
silent pleas swallow truth.

What Intervenes is Golden
Joseph Donegan
She sits near me now, as my heart flutters with anticipation.
That timid laugh, a joke told and ideas exchanged.
The raw intelligence of a great mind, yet the strong beliefs of a well-grounded female
She has left me speechless at her looks.
The party has started to die down and I am still dumbfounded.
She turns to leave before flashing the smile
that would absolutely light up my life.
I absorb the moment, yet say nothing.

The long night transitions into
cold morning as I am left alone again.
I stir in bed reliving the moment,
thinking of the words that wouldn’t come.

O, how I pine for her!
She is the distant light leading me into the shore of a relationship.
All that needs to me said is still inside of me.
To sale toward her and be one with her,
I must throw off the covers of shyness and tell her how I truly feel!
Heads down, thoughts meander between noises

Collegiate hoofs and distorted banter amplified by pace

Look abroad, undergraduates surgically attached

Mind replacements in the name of their god i.

Squirrels chasing sustenance in between monoliths

Imbalance between man and cohabitant obvious

Inhale passing nicotine puffs,

the subtle smell of liquor on a passing mouth

Is it fall already?

Give me the the latte enemas, room for cream please

Class disperses, back to marching

Head down, thoughts meander between noises,

What exactly have I learned from all this?

The next step suddenly seems frightening.
Have you ever wondered what’s on the other side of the fence? Of course you have. We all have. Then again, perhaps you haven’t. Perchance, you find comfort in the fence. You might have been the one to build it. It’s a white picket or a wrought iron. It’s just chicken wire you found in the old shed out back. You painted it yourself, carefully selected that radiant shade of red. Then changed your mind and tricked the neighbor into whitewashing it for you. One corner is a little crooked because you fixed it yourself last fall. Wait, wrong fence. Yours was done by the best contractors in town. It’s so straight it makes the ground beneath it look uneven. It’s got a gold gilt gate and gargoyles on the posts that frame it, but the lock doesn’t work. It’s all rusted through.

No, you’ve never been on the other side of the fence. You know that fence like the back of your hand. Have seen it every day of your entire life. But you have no clue what lies on the other side. You’ve stood on your side and gazed into the distance and wondered so many times you’ve lost count.

Wondered what? You’ve wondered: why is the fence there? And you had to ask: is it keeping something out…or in? Just which side on the fence are the monsters on? You don’t know the answers to these questions, but you’d be willing to bet the farm that whoever lives on the other side does. After all, they clearly know how to grow greener grass.

It mocks you while you pull the weeds, glares at you while you trim the hedge, and silently condemns you when you forget to water the flowers. It’s the itch you can’t scratch, the mystery Holmes never solved, the circle you left unfilled on your final exam. You try to ignore it. You pull out your favorite book, open its age creased spine, and start at the end because everyone knows that’s the best part. But you keep glancing out the window, so you turn your chair around.

Your foot starts tapping. One, two, three. One, two, three. It’s one of Wagner’s early works. You can’t imagine where you’ve heard it. But you know one thing. It’s from the other side of the fence. They probably listen to Wagner all the time over there. They probably never sit in their chairs and wonder what life is like on the other side. They know. They know because the wall isn’t a prison to them like it’s become to you. It’s just a fence to them. An insignificant line in the sand that they can cross whenever they care too.

They have nothing tying them to their side of the fence, like you. They’re as free as the birds you’ve watched fly over the top of that very fence. Their life is better and all because they were born on the other side of the fence.

You can’t decide if you hate them or if you’re just plain old jealous. Maybe it’s a bit of both. You want to hate them though. You know it’s not rational, but you want to hate them for everything. For the way their grass is greener. For the way they’re free. For the way they’re just so damn privileged. But most of all…you hate them for the way they’re on the other side.
You haven’t turned the page even once in the past ten minutes. You just keep rereading the same sentence over and over. Over and over. There’s a breeze flowing in the window that keeps disrupting your concentration. Every time you get to the end of the sentence: whoosh! It smells like sticky summer grass and crushed flowers and...something else, something far away. It’s mysterious and magical. It reeks of adventure and when it blows past your ear, caressing your cheek, you swear you hear it whisper bits of grand stories from the other side.

That’s crazy talk, for sure. At least, Aunt Millicent would say so. But what does she know anyway, you wonder. Has she ever been to the other side? Of course not. She’s spent her whole life on this side, probably never even daring to dream what might be waiting for her someplace else. She’s quiet and complacent. She always follows the rules. And you’ll be just like her if you don’t do...something.

And there’s the crux of it. You have to do something and you have to do it fast. Your foot’s tapping a new beat now and it sounds strangely like a death march. You’ll learn the pan flute or run away to the circus. You’ll do something so abominably crazy, and maybe even a little stupid, that they’ll never confuse you with Aunt Millicent. You’ll be the one they tell stories about for years to come.

Your book is on the floor now. You’re not sure how it got there. The world is kind of cock-eyed too now that you think about it. Sometime during the midst of planning your rebellion you’ve begun to tip your chair backwards. A few more inches and you would have landed flat on your back.

You start to lower yourself back down to the ground but something catches your eye right before your chair meets the ground. From this angle you can just catch a glimpse out the window. And through that window you have a clear view of the fence.

It’s like time stumbles for a moment, tripping over this second, making it stand out from all the rest. Something about this angle, perhaps, or maybe the blood is rushing to your head. Either way you suddenly see the fence as it really is. This fence is your Everest. You only need to reach its peak and scale down the other side in order to make your peace. You tip your chair a little farther to get a better look. There, beyond your Everest is the Promised Land. Just waiting for you on the other side.

You’re out of your chair and out the door before the legs ever hit the ground. The grass whips past you so fast that your poor legs will probably get whiplash later. Your hat flies off behind you. You couldn’t care less. Nothing can stop you now. You’re gaze is locked in on the fence, rapidly approaching. At this speed you’ll be able to vault right over it.

Twenty yards. Ten. Five. And you’re there. For the first time in your whole life, your hands are touching your prison wall, taking in its rough texture. There’s no time to think about it though. Your feet are already finding purchase on the bottom. You’re pushing and pulling. In a matter of seconds you scramble to the top. Funny, but you always thought it was much taller.
It sways a little under your weight when you finally stop. You grasp the top posts in a death grip and swing on leg over the other side for balance. After a second the old, creaky thing settles and seems to decide that it will hold after all. That’s good, you think, because you could stay up here forever.

It’s unbelievable. It’s everything you thought it would be. It’s nothing like you thought it would be. To your right you can see your home and the surrounding village. The hills that surround the only home you’ve ever known are monstrous. They’re the richest green you’ve ever seen. But really, it’s not the scenery that gets you. It’s the people you can just make out, moving around down there.

They look trapped compared to the freedom you now know. They go about their lives, their daily routines, oblivious to the liberty you’ve just discovered. You wish you could feel some modicum of sympathy for them, but it’s their fault you’re just now escaping.

To the left is where you belong. A river sparkles in the distance, mountains rise up to meet you, and you can just make out the puffs of smoke from what must be a nearby village. You see a flash from the nearest grove of trees, the promise of adventure. It’s a chase you can’t resist. With on final mocking salute goodbye you scramble down the fence and leave it all behind.

Your feet hit the ground with an ominous thud. It’s the kind of sound that tells a story all by itself and those stories are never very pretty. You see the flash in the distance again, but the urge to chase it is gone. In its place is a growing unease. Something is wrong.

A twig snaps somewhere in the distance. You spin fast, searching for the culprit. There’s nothing there. You’re alone. Or are you? A wolf howls in the distance. The sun begins to set. You take a few steps backwards toward the fence. This can’t be the same place you set from the top.

Another step back and you run into the fence, its solid presence a reassurance in the foreign land. A pair of yellow eyes peaks at you from the distance. The sun has completely set now, leaving you scared and alone in a dark, creepy place. You spin around toward the fence, planning to scale it quickly and head straight home. This is not an adventure. It’s a nightmare.

Only, you can’t. The fence you climbed just hours before is now a sheer wall. There are no footholds for you to grab though you scratch your hands along it frantically. You’re trapped.

No! It can’t be. You hadn’t really meant to stay. You’d been bluffing when you said goodbye to everything. You just wanted to visit. And now you want to go home. You want to see your family again, to curl up in your own bed, safe and sound. You’d jump through hoops for a piece of homemade apple pie. You could sit by the fire and read that book that you dropped. Anything would do. And you’d do anything.

Because it’s always better on the other side.
Abbey Road with an Oswego Twist
Annie Hidley
In 1945, Hitler sat in a bunker practically by himself. I mean, sure he had a few remaining stooges, but really how comforting could they be? Pretend you’re trapped in a bunker for the rest of your life and tell me you don’t feel for the guy. I’m just being humane. He had hopes and dreams like everyone. Very few people take the time to consider he had a great interest in painting. And while we’re being fair, he didn’t actually kill anyone himself. He was just the visionary. I wonder if he ever tried an oil painting of a gas chamber. Doubtful, he wasn’t the type to get his hands dirty. Like I said, he only dreamt up his masterpiece and let others construct it. That’s how things go wrong. You’ve got to ensure the gears you use will only crank one way. But my point here is that Uncle Adolf sat there, with his little moustache and mountain of problems and nobody to really talk to. Don’t misread me, I’m not saying he was a good person, and if you paid more attention you’d know I just told you he was a monster. But the way I see it is if I ever felt that trapped, I’d take drastic action too.

I consider this internal dialogue as I sit the butcher shop lobby. I’m number 12 and my surroundings become relevant again.

The little old lady next to me hacks something up her throat every few minutes, and she abruptly swallows it back down right after.

She probably wonders why it won’t go away, the bronchial adenoma. It kills slowly and without reason. If I was alone, I’d dwell on my hatred for it.

Instead I will observe.

Fat Tony slices the new shipment of meat, labeled as ham. It’s the meat of the day. Press, slice, press, slice, press, slice. Slice. Pig tissue interests me, he does not. Blue collar bores me, but no matter how much I hate it I must respect it. Gears are needed.

I notice the snotty teen standing at the register. He is idle, waiting for Tony to do the work. The slicing. He glares at me, the snot does, then looks away, and glances again. I stare.

Seven is up.

A woman approaches the counter. One pound of beef, half pound of turkey, and three pounds of ham. I smile. She has a family, two daughters and a husband who often works late. She wears her suspicions like a raincoat, hoping they will keep her dry from the truth.

Today, she is soaked.

I mark her plates down to pass the time, already knowing where it would lead me to. A duplex on Rivera Street. White house, blue car, garage open at day, sometimes at night. She doesn’t work, but runs errands often. She’s lucky, having a family and all. I’m an orphan.

I don’t steal from people, ever. Even those I covet.

There is a psychological theory that shorter men often try to compensate their height by acquiring power. Brutally, tyrannically, or by some other adjective a scholar may select. They call it the Napoleon complex, properly named. It’s presumptuous really, just because so many have been short, it must be the source of power. Consolidate in a small body, expunge more directly.
Never attack Russia.
It happened with Attila too. Monsters, they disgust me.
Snot is staring at me again. Tony cuts more ham. Press. Slice. Thin cuts. Leaner is meaner according to my gym trainer. He lived and died by that motto.
Morbid comedy.
Eight is up.
A balding man walks in unsure of himself. He fidgets with a list that his wife gave him. She could be pregnant or just lazy. Either way, Tony could slice a great deal off of her if the delivery was brought. Ignorance is bliss for Italians.
People never ask me, what do you do for a living? What could one do, I think. In its own essence, what definitizes the actions of a being to create ones self? I couldn’t answer anyways. I’m not much for conversation, I’d tell them to get them off my back.
Nag, nag, nag. The old thing hacks and swallows. A snuffle for dessert. I’d say she’s got about eight months left to live.
Deadlines are important.
Nine is up.
Balding and bearded fat men will never be in style. Shameful, trends aren’t like the deli, you can’t take a ticket and wait for it to be called. He orders salami. It’s like injecting fat right into your veins, just what he needs. He might beat the old hag to a coffin. He should try the ham, it could save his life.
Irony.
I like the change from paper bags to plastic ones for two major reasons. First, I never have to listen as intently to hear orders so intently. Second, the grease from fattier meats always wet the bag. People checked to see if their product was alright because of this. Despite how bad it may look in the plastic, only a few ever take the time to check it. Now, if a product makes it out of the store, it can’t be returned. When faced with swallowing your ten dollars you spent on bad deli or taking a chance on its odd appearance and texture, most people in this economy are risk takers.
The American Way.
Tony continues slicing. It’s mostly the machine at this point, the blade so sharp and Tony so old. The glider does all the work. He’s just a gear.
Ten is up and beautiful. I don’t covet, not since my wife died.
I think nothing more of her, lean turkey anyways.
Arts and crafts have always been my favorite. Glitters and such. Dedicated people can never determine what their masterpiece is because they will do their work until they die. I’ve done pretty well though, considering my materials.
Everyone talks about their dreams, but that’s negligence. Nightmares count too. Lots of dreams turn into nightmares. As a child, I had plenty of nightmares. This one night I dreamt I was in a maze, squares and linear structures that seemingly led to nowhere. And millions of others looking for a way out. I was terrified. I woke up and stabbed my cat. In my house, we all slept with knives under our pillows. He scared me in my moment of terror. I buried him in a beautiful coffin I made.

Ten is getting impatient. Her running gear makes her feel insecure, ugly even. She shouldn’t, she is beautiful. Chemotherapy is ugly.

I don’t know if I’m ready to admit this, but I’ve noticed this town is full of shit stinkers. I’m ready for a move. Yes. Deli only lasts so long, but I’ve been coming here for a while now. Nostalgia.

The newspapers need me.


Eleven is called and she anticipates it. Eighty-five year olds can anticipate. I treasure the elderly, more than most. Gems of our past, filled with wisdom. Youth bring death to them. Old people hated Kennedy, check the polls, Stalin had 88% approval to Kennedy’s 9%. It’s a fickle world that needs structure, not randomatics.

Stalin brought structure, but he’s a monster.

Monsters… the people that call them monsters are monsters. Dig into their closet and see what you find. We’re all monsters. Some of us, the world puts you on the hook for twelve million people, even when you didn’t touch a single one. Some kill zero, some kill seven.

She said the ham looks delicious today. I did great.

The old thing hacks and shuffles out the door. I approach the counter and hand down twelve. Snotty stares at me. I stare back. Tony stops slicing and squints at me.

“What would you like sir?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay, is there anything I can help you with?”

“You already have.”

The snot looks at me like I’m handicapped. Tony continues slicing. Press. Slice. Clean cuts, thin to win. I rip my note sheet from my pad and set it face down on the counter. Smiles, be polite in victory and defeat.

“Thanks for all the practice.”

Accept the change. Know it. It is time to leave, it must be. Take a cab to a park, cut across, another cab to your car, leave town. Just as you planned.

Then the real work starts. Professional, structure, hack, slice. A monster. I’m proud of the path I’ve chosen, the one that chose me. Pain is what I’ve seen, everything else is free parking as they say.
The boy picks up the paper as I leave, perplexed and intrigued by my ruse, though more interested in the possibility of telling this insane story to a friend. And he will, detectives and journalists will require it. It has an address to a duplex on Rivera Street and a treasure map. He might dream he’s a pirate. At the bottom it reads *dig five feet deep, to find the pigs bones you’ve let people eat, tell them if an unfaithful man was a tasty meat.*

My dream was to be a poet.

*To Follow*

Marissa Hill
Angel in Disguise
Zenda Lynette Daniels

I saw your broken wing
As dark as a black rose
I fell for you
without any explanation at all.
Heaven sent
was this a clue
or just my imagination.
I treated you like a damsel in distress,
your knight in shining armor
there to rescue your broken wing from your fall.
I knew it hurt so
I waited
and waited
and waited until it healed.
I gave you
seconds,
minutes,
hours,
days,
then months
and what did I get in return.
A bruised icebox,
fragile and worn,
still beating despite this fail.
But in the end
I was the only one to be blamed.
Time waits for no one
and I defied the laws of life
just because of you and your broken wing.
Successful running is not wholly unlike a piece of complex music played by an orchestra. There are downbeats and rhythm and the occasional hitch in timing to grab the audience’s attention. There are crescendos and decrescendos, fragile silences and moments of triumphant uproar.

For both runner and musician there is theory to tackle and assimilate if one wants to reach the elite tiers of performance, how best to incorporate all the requisite elements.

Effective running, like classical music, is often most appreciated by those who are invested in the respective art themselves. Running is easy, monotonous, and boring to the couch potato, just as the untrained ear cannot usually differentiate between Bach or Brahms and nails on a chalkboard. But as a string quartet would lose its ethereal sound if it played with kitchen knives rather than horsehair bows, asthma can threaten or altogether slay the artistic nature of running.

I would know; asthma’s been my running partner for years now.

Seventeen million Americans have asthma. Their lives and lifestyles vary as wildly as the composite life on this planet. Some live on respirators, others compete in the Olympics every four years. The one thing that binds all of these individuals together is an inexplicable inability to catch a breath.

Of those seventeen million, this is the story of one.

I’ve had asthma since about a week before I was born, and the way my mom tells it, the doctors were taking bets as to how long my lungs would last post-grand entrance at birth. For a couple weeks after I was born, a large oxygen tank was as much my companion as my own shadow. Most of my baby pictures prominently feature an elaborate mask, wires, and a tall aluminum cylinder. Years after, every time I walked into my pediatrician’s office, he’d recount stories of my chest collapsing on itself every time I took a breath.

Even before I hit my teens, I realized asthma was one of those things that made people look at you differently. Because my chest made noises with every inhalation, I became an anomaly, a pitiable object, a statistic. One in seventeen million.

Even doctors with entire alphabets of qualifications after their names and dozens of years of research under their belt can’t pinpoint what asthma is, but every asthmatic knows what it does. It cuts off that natural, comfortable rhythm of inhale exhale. Asthma stuffs the bottom of your lungs with hot fluff that you only feel when you’re trying to catch a breath. Asthma’s not a constant annoyance like a cold or coughing, it’s the kind of disease with the capability to rear its ugly head at any time. Each of those seventeen million sufferers has what the medical profession calls a trigger. Triggers are things that set off asthma attacks in an individual. While doctors can offer suggestions as to what may be an asthma trigger, they’re very much an individual, personal ordeal. Dust can set off an asthma attack, or the family pet. Summers suck if mowed grass sets you off. Cold air can quickly curtail any endeavors when it burns the lungs into submission.
Running a Symphony

My biggest trigger is exercise, that moment when the body kicks itself up a gear to deal with sustained exertion. The esophagus shrinks, the lungs clamp down, and I have to do more with less.

As a kid, I loved playing dodgeball in boy scouts after school. We’d split up the troop, throw four or five rubber balls into the middle of the gym and go at it. To me, dodgeball was like playing war, just without the guns. I’d dash over the wooden floorboards, yellow fluorescent lights glinting off thick layers of wax on the basketball court. A ball flies at me, streaking through my peripheral vision. Caught, one kid’s out. Then another red rubber ball comes screaming in and I used the ball in my hands to block it. In the next breath, I’d throw myself as much as the ball, hurling the rubber sphere at the other team with every ounce of my small body. I was good at dodgeball, and I loved the thrill of the game, the spike of adrenaline.

But after that throw, or maybe the next one, or perhaps a few minutes later, I’d notice I was breathing with half a lung. That’s really the best way I can think of to describe asthma, it’s like being unable to use the bottom half of your lungs to store oxygen. And when asthma set on me like weights on my arms and legs, a pressure smothering my chest, I’d get hit with a ball I didn’t see coming, or three in rapid succession as my focus turned inward to keep oxygen flowing in. That night would require a quiet exit before the end of the scout meeting, mom and I rushing home to get my nebulizer.

For most of my childhood, I didn’t rise to the challenge of multitasking that asthma required. It was my glass ceiling, the reason I wasn’t out there busting my ass on a sports field with the rest of the kids in my school. Asthma decided which friends I could have: those who loved sports but weren’t so athletic. It told me what sports I could play: baseball, golf, basketball only if I was careful…that was pretty much it. My sports were those where moments of physical explosion were countered by minutes of waiting, watching, catching a breath.

Mom always speed bumped my attempts at playing more physical, and physically demanding, sports, quoting the doctors when I was born when mentioning that my “lungs probably won’t ever completely heal”. In hindsight I know she was trying to look out for me, trying to do everything in her power to keep from finding me passed out or asphyxiated on a football or soccer field. But as far as I was concerned, she was part of the problem, and often became my enemy when I couldn’t scream at my condition itself.

She wasn’t unreasonable, or really anything different from the mom who reminds their kid to strap on a helmet before riding a bike. But it wasn’t just what she said, it was how she said it. My mom’s my height, a little over five and half feet tall, and unfortunately almost as round. So when she told me not to run as hard, not to play as rough, I saw her excusing me to become like her: out of shape, physically incapable of a lot of the things I enjoyed as a kid. And whenever she’d bring up asthma, it was as an inexorable force, something not to be denied. Asthma couldn’t be handled, couldn’t be mitigated. It felt like whenever the subject was broached, she expected me to live my life under its cruel fist.
The tension between my mom and I occasionally broke into shouting matches, mostly on my part, maternal pronouncements like thunder answered by teenage whining, elusive and unsubstantial like the howling winds. Those nights when baseball practice ended in a sweaty wheezing mess were usually followed up by a verbal sparring match.

“You have asthma David, you have to be careful. You could really hurt yourself.” It was the Mom Voice, the one every mother seems to possess and instinctively employs when their child has done something wrong.

Then a spark of lightning, an indignant teenager taking the bait.

“I don’t care if I have asthma, it doesn’t matter! Everybody else can do it, I will too!” I was whiny in those moments of vulnerability, scared as much as anything, mad that the world was so unfair. There were kids in school who absolutely lamented mandatory soccer practices and football scrimmages after classes let out each day, and all I wanted was the chance to step on those fields.

“But you’re not like everyone else. Not everyone needs a puffer every time they run.” A valid, concerned, motherly response.

“I’ll just work harder. I don’t mind working harder. My lungs are muscles, the more I use them, the stronger they’ll get. I won’t have to be like this anymore!” More whining. It never helped my case when it came to her. In her mind, I should be grateful for the things I could do, and it infuriated me.

And there it was, my own self-defined truth. To be at all was to be an asthmatic.

Asthma was my boss until my senior year of high school. My best friend Lee had been like me for most of his life: chubby, slow, but still athletically-inclined. He’s a good deal taller than I am, much larger, and generally if he could do something, I could do it better when it came to outdoorsy things like hiking or football. He was my self-esteem safety net: there’d always be one person who wasn’t in as good a shape as I was.

Unfortunately for that self-esteem, Lee decided to join the Marines when he graduated high school. He’d left as my chubby awkward friend, but three months later when I went down to South Carolina during a warm, sunny southern winter to retrieve him from bootcamp’s custody, I couldn’t find him. There were no chubby kids there. The first time I saw him, he barely resembled the best friend who had left several months before. Rather than a chubby kid with a respectable paunch and shaggy black hair, he was sporting a high-and-tight buzzcut and looked unnaturally thin. He was dressed head to toe in Marine Green sweats, dirty gray sneakers pounding the pavement effortlessly. When I asked his parents what he was doing when I saw him for the first time, they explained that he was on his last motivational run of bootcamp, a five mile run he finished in just over half an hour.

My safety net was gone.
Standing in the concrete stairwell of the enlisted servicemen barracks his family and I were staying in, I looked up into the pleasantly cloudy night sky and vowed that if Lee could lose dozens of pounds and get into the best shape of his life, I could overcome a little thing like asthma.

When I got back to the blustery, dismal winter in Syracuse a week later, I realized that the cold weather, piles of snow wedged onto sidewalks and all-consuming slush are not nearly so conducive to outdoor activity as the sunshine and 70 degree weather in the Carolinas had been. My motivation took a serious blow before I’d even started.

But I had seen someone turn their lifestyle around, seen what happened when you get off the couch and make an effort. If Lee could go from my sympathy case to six-minute-miles in thirteen weeks, I could do something of similarly herculean proportions.

I realized at the time, and appreciated even more later on, that miserable Syracuse weather was exactly what I needed. Snow, slush, freezing winds and the not-so-infrequent blizzard would give me every excuse not to run, not to exert, not to endure. If I could stick with running through all of that, I might just maybe be able to overcome my asthma.

My first attempt at running came near that gradual thaw when winter misery is countered by an equal, or almost equal, proportion of chilly but sunny days. I lost my running virginity on one of those pleasant days.

Because it was cold and snow still covered most of the ground, it made sense to me to wear long jogging sweats and a thick hoodie. Rookie mistake. Any winter runner knows to dress for temps a significantly higher than the thermostat indicates, but hindsight’s 20/20. The longer a person runs the more the body heats up, meaning that a thirty degree day mitigated by hoodies and sweats soon feels like seventy or eighty.

I found a stretch of quiet street close to my house, a couple hundred yards between an intersection and a very special, very nondescript telephone pole. That stretch became my track, to be scampered up and down, my own personal proving grounds. Lower middle class suburban houses lined both sides of the road, siding and paint peeling, gardens in rooftop gutters, driveways occupied by equal parts old car and garbage cans.

The moment of truth came at that intersection on a quiet afternoon under the warm winter sun. The sky was baby blue, uninterrupted except for the occasional wisp of cloud. The first step was the hardest, a tentative, unsteady note wafted into silence. And so began my first piece, unsteady, not so unlike the first concert played by elementary students.
Everything was an experiment. How high do I lift the knees? What’s too fast, fast enough? How much strain is too much strain? Do I move the arms? Arch the back, or slouch forward?

The first time or two up and down the stretch were a blur of colors ignored mostly for the sake of my trial and error process. I reached the telephone pole and turned around, chest heaving even through the sweatshirt. The cold air froze my throat and lungs, stinging with every inhalation; I could feel my airways tightening. As with most of my asthma incidents, I began to get a very distracting headache, the kind that simply impose themselves on the front of your forehead. My eyes felt like they were swimming, as if I had been sitting in the dark when bright lights were suddenly thrown on, vision blurring between clear and fuzzy.

The notes were there, shaky and unconvincing, ugly probably. Running wasn’t yet music, but I’d started a study of the art.

And so I jogged from the intersection to the pole, and walked back, trying to grasp a full breath of air, trying to breathe enough to make the return run something other than herculean.

That first day I was out for about twenty minutes, running when I could and walking when I thought I might pass out.

The next several weeks passed much the same. Slowly I got to points where I could run longer than I’d walk, five minutes, eight, twelve, and after each session I would stumble through my front door, collapse on the living room floor, lungs literally gasping, every breath thick and wet like an old man suffering from pneumonia. Seated, I would set up my nebulizer.

A nebulizer is the asthmatic’s lifeline. Mine was a tiny white rectangle roughly the size of a shoebox. Most of the box is a strong motor that adds vaporized albuterol into air, which is then inhaled via sexy plastic facemask by the asthmatic in question. Albuterol is the elixir of life; it opens the airways, frees the lungs, and erases the symptoms of an attack in a dozen minutes or so. And so I pushed my lungs past their limits, past the wet, mucus-y protests until I could run that stretch of a few hundred yards four, five, six times without stopping, each time saving myself from some serious injury with the judicious use of my little white box.

By the time summer rolled around, I’d left my original stomping grounds for a track of road about a mile long, full of rolling hills and plenty of panting. At one point, I was approached by a guy who lived in one of those gracelessly aging houses along my original strip, asking where’d I’d gone, and why I never ran anymore.

I sheepishly admitted that I no longer scampered from intersection to telephone pole because I could run longer, and had taken to running the roads around my development.

* 

It was that first summer that I really started thinking of running in terms of music. The hours spent “pounding the pavement” really instill a sense of your own natural rhythm as a runner. You have those speeds, tempos, which are boring, or comfortable, straining, stressful, or strenuous.
Unless it’s a really long run where I’m apt to lose focus or even interest, I don’t like listening to music. I’d prefer to keep my mind on my own rhythms. Once the baseline of the pounding feet is established, beaten shoes stomping cracking pavement, a second harmony sneaks in, imperceptibly at first as exertion begins to take its toll. Soon the quarter notes manifested in the feet are joined by half notes of breath, in…in…out…out.

Each runner has their own mental filter while running, varying degrees of mental jumping jacks they find comforting. For me, in the moment of running, thought acts like the melody which rises from the established rhythms –harmonies- of foot and lung, dancing higher into my concentration before sinking again as bum…bum…in…bum…bum…out demands my attention. The regulation of this internal music is pivotal for any success in running.

As in a concerto, a run is never completely predictable. Sometimes a foot catches on pavement, a rock, or your other ankle, an odd eighth note, and that delicate timing grows a personal touch. Each runner’s music is an individual piece.

* 

By the end of last summer, I’d done enough running that I’d lost some weight, gotten a little faster, and more than part of me wanted to see just what I was capable of. I wandered across a local race at a beautiful nature center about ten minutes from my house. It’d be a three mile race, t-shirts and bragging rights for all finishers. I signed up as soon as I could and ran my way through the weeks before the race. I’d trained hard enough that I didn’t always need to collapse and recover with my nebulizer after a run, and I was appropriately excited.

I wanted my parents there for my first race. I prefaced it as such because regardless of how well I did, I didn’t want this race to be my last, just my first. My dad was more or less neutral on the topic but came out for moral support nonetheless. My mom was a different story. Because I haven’t lived with my mom since high school, most of the gains I made were experienced second-hand by her, relayed over a phone call rather than witnessed in the moment. She was excited for me, proud, and confident –I think- that her twenty year old son wouldn’t needlessly endanger himself. But she was worried too, I don’t think moms ever really stop worrying about their kids. She wanted to make sure I was going to be okay, nothing was going to happen, and I think the invitation to watch the race gave her at least the peace of mind that if something did happen while I was out there, at least she’d be there too.

On race day, I was a ball of nervous, anxious energy. I was torn between wanting to get in one last training run and scared shitless that I’d somehow hurt my feet or legs. When I got to the open grassy field that marked the starting line, I took a place near the back of the pack and waited for the gun to go off. The portly race director was wiser than I however, and chose an air horn to start the race as “a gunshot in the woods doesn’t usually end well”.

Running a Symphony
And so two hundred or so runners took off, running, jogging, or walking their way through meadows and forest trails.

It was a bright, hot, humid August morning, all blue skies and searing sun. I started with an easy jog, still unsure whether I’d be able to run three miles without a break. It was important to me that I not walk, finishing time be damned. In every race I’ve done, walking has been a sign of weakness to me, an indicator that I didn’t have the stuff to stick out the entire race, I wasn’t prepared, I didn’t train hard enough. Better to run slower than to walk at all.

For the first mile or so, I enjoyed the scenery, most of the race being run on rich brown mulch trails flanked by columnar old trees. Every so often a squirrel would scamper over the trail or the shrill cry of a bird would come from deep within the trees, piercing the relative quiet. On a day where mere standing was rewarded with sweat trails, my short-sleeved shirt was drenched and the panting began.

By the second mile, I had to ignore everything but the course under my feet. The trees and the animals and the sounds all faded from perception and my heartbeat and the deep whirl of heavy breathing became more noticeable than the runners I was slowly passing. From time to time, the course would break out next to the lake around which the race was run, exposing views of mirror-like blue water and vital trees mixed in deep browns and bright greens under the blazing summer sun. In those moments, my focus would shift from the metronome of scampering feet to the world around me. Time and again however, my consciousness sunk within my own body, evaluating and regulating pace, taking stock of whatever energy I had left, making calculations about how fast I could finish without ever really knowing how much ground lay behind me. My body felt like a thousand pounds, each leg filled to the brim with lead or mercury or something other than blood.

If running was a piece of music, I had become the conductor, so focused on making everything happen at exactly the right time that the beauty of the run was left for later appreciation.

An eternity later I saw a man with a camera, and the soft commotion of a crowd somewhere beyond the treeline and I knew the end was near.

Before I knew it, the trees were gone and the sun was glaring angrily and a hundred yards away was a finish line in the middle of the parking lot. I shot past my family and realized I still had gas in the tank. As the line drew closer, I accelerated to a full sprint, surprising myself with the ability, watching the electronic clock tick away the seconds, willing myself to be there, to be done.

I hit the line, the clock beeped and I stumbled away from the finish into the crowd of happy, animated finishers, gasping for enough air and willing my eyes to find a cup of cold water to drink or bathe in; either was fine with me.
Twenty-nine minutes and three point eleven miles after I’d started, I was done with my first race. I’d passed the rite of initiation. For twenty years, asthma had dominated my life. On August sixteenth, 2009, the score was 7,305 days to 1.

*7,305 is 20 (years old) times 365 (days in a year) plus 5 (leap days)*
This strangling of my soul is starting to get old.

Wrapped up, tangled up, half way gone, but never whole.

I sit and hide in the moment for awhile.

I can act like one of them as long as I pretend to smile.

And no one will know what lay beneath.

My skin may be as soft as silk, but my soul is brutally scarred.

You learn to hide, once your tossed aside, wall it up; it’s already been done.

Place another block along the thickening veil.

Seal it with a hurtful memory; take your pick, you have so many to choose from.

Add another scar to the already lackeyed soul.

What’s one more in a never ending hell?

So caught up in time I can hardly see the light.

Untangle your claws from life tonight.

Piece by piece I will undo every block you have forced me to put in place.

I will yell as high as I can through time and space until you are nothing more.

Never again will I tremble at your nonexistent power.

You are nothing but damaged and soulless.

You lie to yourself and to everyone in front of you.

Telling them stories of my supposed deceit.
We were never close, we were never family.

We may have like DNA but you will never be a part of me.

Like frayed ropes, secrets unravel after awhile.

Blame me, curse my name, swear all you want until you go insane.

YOU are the only one to blame.

Watch me as I float above you like I will for the rest of my days.

I will never live in your shadow; I will not run from fear.

I am living proof. I am the truth.

You are a lying, rotten, pile of shame.

Hello Day, Good Bye endless night.

So long, farewell, I have taken flight.
Even the Ones We Forget Sometimes
Annie Hidley

I cried into the ground I came from, felt it with my hands. And he was smiling, somewhere in my head, with my hands as his hands, his hands were mine, and into the dirt I plunged them, sinking fingertips into moist soil, letting tears drip down and try to grow the seeds. Letting words come out and try to heal me, he tried to heal me, holding onto the moment our minds would clear. We’d been filled with each other, our chests exploding, so fulfilled with each other, next to each other. He was ground too, and I was digging, prying, looking for our seed before he was dry, and my eyes would never be. I was soaking wet in the rain, and in the sun and nothing fell down on me. The sky was too high to reach, and I was so beautiful he said, beautiful before he broke me, buried me in the ground I escaped from. I was gulping for air and swallowing darkness. No, I saw it go blue, I saw it blue, brilliant blue, the sky was somewhere and what if I drowned, or died? Would it be less dark there? I longed for rain and still, none came down. I would not drown or die for him. And still I did it for him, all for him.

I was sitting with my eyes straight ahead, a number, while he tried to hold my hand. He tried to make me ok, but he will never realize that it is never ok. I didn’t blink and I didn’t move. This was the last thing I was seeing whole, as I was whole, the last thing I would see was this wall, grimy posters and stucco paint, and I could see everything clear. No tears to blur it, nothing obscuring vision. This was what he wanted.

The lights above us buzzed, a receptionist, and squeaky glass windows of a waiting room. He said after it’s over we never have to think about it again, we never have to worry. Are you kidding me? I wanted to scream. Just to see fear in his eyes, the fear I felt in every limb, I wanted to kill him instead of our baby. But he’s not the one who’d die.

When I first found out I was so scared. So scared. I made sure to drink wine and lift heavy things, but before I went to bed I’d cradle my belly, I’d cradle our baby. Something we made! With us connected, what came from it would be more than pain, but life! A life! Something that would bind us, hold us, something to tie me to him. Even if he never knew, and had his life away, alone, I’d get to look at him every day. He was eighteen and stupid. And I was so happy then. For a second. But then he made me do this, and he buried me. Our child, though, would never be buried. There would be no funeral. No bitter tears. The earth would crust over and blow dust in my eyes. But still no tears would fall.

He said it needed to be gone. And I was going to name it Jack or Amy. And it would have had his mouth and my eyes, and I was so sad, so empty. And I thought I hate you. I will never forgive you. And I thought it hard, and close to his head, so maybe he would hear me think it. How three months before I’d been thinking I love you, when it was only two people to worry about, when we were perfect together and didn’t need anything, didn’t want anything. Only each other. When only each other was enough. And now this was too much. A baby cried in the next room. And it was my pounding heart, my silent stare. I wanted to wrap the baby blanket around a body, and in my arms, but all I’d get to feel was hospital sheets, cold and sterile, and I’d be all alone. Holding nothing where a life should lie.
Even the Ones We Forget About Sometimes

It was one mistake, in one night, so why should that child have to pay the price. It’s not your decision! He’d yelled as I’d pulled away, and I could taste dirt in my mouth.

And then another voice yelled, a baby voice, a voice unknown to anyone. What about MY life? Did you let ME decide my fate? Did you give me the chance to prove you wrong, and to make the hard work worth seeing MY life unfold? I couldn’t think, couldn’t let myself think. The world where we weren’t going to again, but had been before, was spinning, tumbling, my life of pictures, memories captured in open New York air, naïve bliss of what I’d have to do, I NEVER thought it would come to this.

It was wrong, so wrong, all wrong. He said that doing this would be right. He had perfect hands. And I wasn’t ready to let them go to feel a different warm. To feel whole hands that fit in my palm, to want to protect something. I wasn’t ready to be adult.

My phone was ringing, it played rap that I’d always danced to, and now it made me want to throw up. Probably my parents calling, asking where I was. It was up to me now, to decide whether I wanted to answer. To let them really be my family. I’d never chosen them. But I had chosen him. And he’d stopped trying to hold my hand. There would always be separation now, a part that could have made us whole, but being gone we would never be touching, never, like before. How could you realign after a shatter like that? Especially when only one of us would feel devastation.

And they called my name. In a dream, a vivid, pulsing, silent nightmare, I stood up, stood on the ground. The one thing that was solid, the thing my baby would become. He walked beside me, behind me. I don’t remember what I wore, or what I carried. Only that this was worse than dying, because I would be aware. I shut out the part that came next-the sterile surgery, the part where they removed a part of me. And I went home with him, still, and silent, numb. I went home holding only my hands, sheltering only my empty body that I never wanted to let anyone touch or be inside of. I couldn’t believe I’d let him come so close. This close, we were almost touching, his hand on the stick and he was shifting, the subs were pounding I wasn’t strapped in. I wanted to know that I could die, have that be a possibility, if a crash happened, it happened. I wanted nothing more than to collide. To be ripped, crushed, set ablaze. To feel ANYTHING besides this. Early December wind frosted the outside of the car windows and our breath steamed up the inside. And I’d NEVER felt more alone.

He drove slow, no one on the roads in the morning. Salty slush, everything was gray, and everything was brown. The sun was hazy through a snow filled sky that created soft light. I looked right into it and felt a good pain that singed potential tears. Driving off the road would be worth it, to just stare into the sun. Dead branches, like limp limbs, dead trees were dead bodies, everything was dry and dead. His static voice rambled something. “What the fuck,” I thought. Leave me alone. You made me murder it, I never want to hear you talk again. How did this happen? We’d been so perfect. And now I wanted all of everything that had ever happened between us, every spark that had flown to be gone, to have been gone. And I was writhing inside this haunted, sinner’s skin, I was shivering.
I wanted to be hurt so I could feel, chilled to the bone so I could feel every layer. Even the ones we forget about sometimes.

Winter has always brought cold and now would always bring death; would bring me turning my face away from every thought, burying that moment deep down and deep inside. Down like I was ground this time, like the secret that was being churned and sifted, I became just a container to keep out and keep in the cold, and inside like he had been, like I’d loved him for, him learning every part, feeling every part, as I traced the lines that light had run, the creases, sweat and the blood. And even though he’d been so inside, only the baby would have felt my heart beat from the inside, only the baby had. It beat faster closer to death. I wonder if it knew. He said it wasn’t really death, it’d never been alive. He buried his pain in justifications as heavy as shovels of dirt, and what it would have been was killing me.

I’d never done anything that selfish. I had sacrificed someone else’s life to save my own, to protect a relationship that didn’t need protecting because I only wanted it to end. I had gone against every moral, I had done what I was so glad my mom had never done, here I was, alive and beautiful, always, taking that from someone else, for me, so I could live. I had made a life ending decision, that didn’t fulfill me in any way, I had chosen my destiny and chosen someone else’s. I had just rippled everything around me, taken out something that should have been good, taken out someone that should have gotten to see this gray winter and the dirt and the grime of the world if even for a second it meant it got to see sun. Beauty in spring and the rebirth from decay, beauty in two bodies touching and connecting, beauty in eyes that never stopped seeing, or looking past what was really there. I could have given that as a gift, that could have been my gift to the melting, covered world. To provide something beautiful for someone else to share, for another body to be touching someday. And what I took was someone else’s chance, what I left was me, half there and half empty, waiting for something else to happen. I felt skinless, raw and burned, I felt like it had been ripped and sucked and only left was what I didn’t want anyone to touch. I was fragile and damaged. I didn’t want anyone to know. I wanted people to understand without knowing, without me having to tell them. And the only boy who knew would never understand.

I was the girl he loved and held so close, and I was crying now, really crying, and he couldn’t do ANYTHING. And I still couldn’t look at him in the car, and I recognized every part of where we were and still didn’t feel at home.

I never knew anything until that moment. I never knew what real love was until it was unconditional, a mother to her child, and then it was gone. I never knew how much my parents must have felt for me, how afraid they must have been. How if they hadn’t given me up before I was born, they never would. I never knew what loss felt like, not crying at my grandpa’s funeral, wishing my grandma knew that her husband had just died, not standing at her funeral the year later and being happy knowing they were together. I never felt anything so full and so passionately, but all underneath being so numb. I never knew anything at all. Because what did I need to know. I had everything I thought I’d needed.
I had the world underneath and held by my hand, the clouds there because my fingertips skinned them, making designs and making it rain. Nothing had ever happened unless I’d wanted it to, unless I’d drawn it there. I had always made myself who I was because of who I was, and because of the people I was touching, feeling, the people who were alive around me, teaching. But what did I have now, I was so powerless after doing the most powerful thing. The most cowardly thing. It happened and I didn’t want it to. And I’d always known what I’d wanted. Sky and love and beauty. And everything had always been for me. What was meant to be was meant to be and I’d altered it, somehow, changed the course of something that should have been bigger than I could control. Life so small, everything had always been in my hands. And I’d given him control of me, control of everything I would become by giving him nothing; that was my gift to him. To have nothing.

He whispered to me my name, shattering the last peace I had, breaking apart my other world, the world that only I had always been in. We were starting over with nothing, and the sky was still gray and the earth still brown, and still he could not see how I was buried, and I was still cold, and really nothing had changed. A little more empty and a little more real. Whatever he wanted. I loved him this much that I let him lead me, that I let him whisper my name. The sky surrounded us. So small, so fragile and so strong, holding each other up and letting the wind whip us, letting the world lash. Everything wouldn’t be harder now, everything wouldn’t be dark. It was a decision and a step, a step towards the rest of the life I’d get to unfold, a wave crashed against the slimy breaker wall, lights flickered somewhere, somewhere someone was warm at home. It was over with, done, the sooner I stopped thinking the sooner I could move on. I let the sun burn me, wanted total exposure, felt a moment of hazy warmth, had been touched by that it would be ok. I looked up finally, from the ground I grew from, the ground that nourished me and let me blossom. And finally, I let him hold my hand.
He was scrutinizing with undeserved impact
a Platonic school of thought,
accusing all philosophers
of being closet poets in his argumentative Manifesto.
“Naïve,” said the chemicals.
“For certain,” said the spectators.

Well, darling
I’ve been shaving my legs for Schopenhauer,
and wearing my little black dress
for Aristotle long before my eyelashes brushed your page.
I’ve rolled in the sheets with Hegel
only to be with dissatisfied with the mechanics of his fervor.

I’ve been snorting
lines of Nietzsche
off of broken glass, then in my catatonic euphoria
of height that creeps
in my sinus cavity and skips to life in my mind.
To snuff out the candle,
and tuck razors in the crooks
of my knees to remind me of Socrates.

The bitter morning to snap
the caps of Bentham’s hedonistic mushrooms
to catapult my reality
into the shimmer and pulse
of breathing clouds,
tingle of the spine,
the throbbing and panic of yesterday’s sobriety free binge.

Whiskey, like Kant
to serve as breakfast tea. The bottle lights up
like a lantern of sickness in the sunshine.
Fathoming the trip
I stumble down the stairs.
My head veering off
like a car accident into feminism,
a fine day to pass the bottle to Mary Wollstonecraft.

Tourniquet tightens
   as the syringe is tapped,
and I’m reveling with Marx
with help of a substance
more fantastic than the last.
Stunned my body wreathes
in this blatant hysteria
and then came
the telephone pole
when my hands came off the wheel.

When I see light behind my eyelids
   and my sight focuses,
no recollection of how I got to lecture,
sleepily hung over smile
   and a stretch knowing
that I’ve always been a poet first.
The philosophers may have their play
in my panic of making sense of this world.

What a maddening dream?
The Three Roads out of Mullica Hill
Collin McNamara

I pumped the accelerator, eying the traffic light as it faded into the humid haze of the night in my rear-view mirror. It flicked from green to yellow just before disappearing beneath the rise of the road. 11:09 and I was only on my eighth pass. Not very good time, by the benchmark of my typical performances. Just the night before I had already made a baker’s dozen by then. Look at that; you lay off the gas just a bit, try to be conservative with those gallons, and just look how it snowballs. Oh well, it sure as hell wasn’t a race. Keeping one hand on the wheel, I hunched over and rolled the driver side window all the way down.

The air rushing in was like a gush of luke-warm water. It was a hot night in late July, and while there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, the stifling humidity made the air thick. Everything in the car felt like it had sat out in the morning dew, covered in a film of slick moisture. I hadn’t anticipated the radical climate shift from upstate New York to southern New Jersey – which still doesn’t make any sense to me. Somehow, the Thruway had connected me to the Turnpike, and the Turnpike to the Bahamas. It was far too hot for the state to be considered part of the Northeast, even at that time of year. My wardrobe of button-up shirts was not well suited to the weather in the least, so I was forced to spend most days in the air-conditioning at my uncle’s house and my night drives in a sweat-soaked t-shirt.

Uncle Brendan had taken me in for the summer. The man had a reputation as a saint amongst the family, although I don’t think it was a title he endorsed. He was a pastor, but by no means was the Second-Coming. He was as flawed as the rest of us. His fifty-something years had seen a negligent father, a suicidal mother, a pornography addiction, and the destruction of his own marriage. But he still gave life the old college try, a lot more than I could say for myself.

Just a month beforehand, I had made the conscience decision that nineteen years on earth had been quite enough, thank you very much. I raided the medicine cabinet and downed a cocktail of my fathers high blood pressure medication and anti-depressants with a Rolling Rock. But I had always been mediocre at everything, and dying too had made the list. Dad found me seizing on the love-seat and rushed me to the hospital, where I learned the bitter taste of activated charcoal. And if you think the day you decide to kill yourself is a dark one, well then let me tell you – the day after is much, much worse.

My mother gave me her car the next day, and a week later I was driving the congested asphalt to Mullica Hill, New Jersey with the intent to “find myself.” I didn’t make a single stop and sped the entire way. I made the trip in record time: what is typically a five hour drive was cut down to four and change. How I wasn’t pulled over can only be called a modern miracle. I got off at NJ-Turnpike Exit 2 and drove through fields of strawberries, tomatoes, and sweet corn until I came the three-way intersection that I would become so acquainted with over the next month.

And that’s where my Jeep sat once again. It was really the only intersection of any importance in Mullica Hill, a town which contained essentially three roads.
The Three Roads out of Mullica Hill

There was main street, riddled with antique shops and tea parlors (as well as my uncle's home); 322, which went back the Turnpike; and 45, which went nowhere. I'm sure at some point there was a town or hamlet down that road, but I never tried to find it. All I ever saw on 45 were endless rows of trees. Dark, deep, lovely woods.

Passing under the street light had been the focal point of my nights ever since I arrived. Daytime was for eating, writing, being counseled, helping out around the church and the house, and wasting time. But night-time was for driving. Back and forth I would go: Main street, left turn; 322, U-turn; back down 322, left turn; 45, another U-turn; back to Main street. Rinse, lather, repeat until the gas light comes on, then head back to go to sleep. That little light-bulb took away my choices. That little light-bulb was my nightly saving grace.

That night, I had three choices and a full tank of gas: Main street and a bed. 322 and my home. Or 45 and the trees. That night, I chose 45. I chose the trees. I chose the end.

I gave the Jeep all the gas it could ever want, and it roared with approval. The speedometer began to climb. Fifty-five, sixty-five. The air rushed in like a geyser. Seventy-five. The trees began to blur into a great black wall on either side of me. Eighty-five, ninety-five. I'd rehearsed this a thousand times in my head. One hundred. All it took was one right turn. One slip of the wrist and that would be it. Done. You can put it in the books.

I readied myself for oblivion as the speedometer continued to climb. One-ten. I took in deeps breaths that let the warm air penetrate my chest. Come on. You could do it once, do it again. Cut the thread. Finish the book. Your story has been over for a long time. It's time to go.

My muscles started to freeze. The steering felt cemented in place, like it couldn't be turned with the strength of ten men. Do it. My mind began to send searing of shrapnel memories into my eyes. I was nine years old, watching the police take away my father in cuffs. Do it. I was ten, looking up at my mother, telling her I had leave her to live with dad. Do it. I was thirteen, sneaking Jim Beam from the liquor cabinet to numb my brain while pop slept. Do it. I was sixteen, holding my father in my arms as he wept like a child at the loss of his second wife. Do it. I was seventeen, making love to the only girl I'd ever loved and lost. Do it. I was nineteen and I was -

Alive.

I pumped the break and came to a stall in the middle of the road, letting my head fall onto the steering wheel. Everything poured out of me like white water, erupting in tears, sobs, gasps for air. I writhed and wrenched, tears mixing with sweat, exorcising it all. A bittersweet release. My mind emptied until all that remained was that single thought: You are alive.

I turned the car around and headed back toward the streetlight. I didn't wait for it to turn green - I just took the right turn onto 322. It was time to go home. It wasn't time to right the wrongs, it wasn't time to save the world, it wasn't time for poetic justice. It was time to just go home. To go home, and to stay alive.
Our cat didn’t know what she was getting herself into when she chose to live with us. I was five years old when she showed up in our backyard, and she was nothing more than a calico mess. Her hair had been matted and dirty, her skin most likely swimming with disease unknown to man. She had a thin, frail-looking frame, and when she walked, she staggered a bit, on the brink of fatigue. My mother firmly warned me to stay away from her, her motherly protection setting in.

“You don’t know if she’s a nice kitty or not, Jenna. She might bite,” she would say. “Leave her alone.”

But the cat never left. She hid in our bushes for days, her tiny pink nose peaking out between the patches of brush. After about a week and a half, my father took pity on the poor creature and fed her a can of tuna. It was empty in a matter of moments, and she graciously rubbed up against my father, purring contently. A small glimmer of hope embedded itself in my heart, a childish hope that maybe we could keep her. My mom is allergic to animals, especially cats and dogs. Whenever we went over to my aunt and uncle’s house, they had to lock their dogs in the basement before we got there. On those rare occasions when they didn’t, Mom’s eyes would swell up like golf balls, itching and watering painfully. With enough time, her throat would swell up, shooting fiery pain through her chest. Given those frightening circumstances, having a pet was just something that would never work out. We gave the poor cat away to a loving family that my aunt had lined up. They lived an hour and a half away, and the fact that I’d never be able to see her upset me tremendously. I cried for hours straight and yelled at my mom for taking the cat away. In a dramatic tantrum, I refused to talk to her, to look at her, or to kiss her goodnight.

Days later, the cat came strolling up from the woods behind our house, her tail dragging on the ground and her head bowed low, looking exhausted. When she saw us, however, her demeanor changed entirely. Her tail wiggled behind her in glee, and her soft, tender purr reverberated through the yard. She seemed to leap to bridge the gap between her and us, and as she did so, my steel-blue eyes widened in wonder and excitement. I knew my mom would disapprove, but I ran toward her anyway and plopped myself cross-legged in the middle of the grassy yard, ignoring the fact that I was wearing a skirt. When I stroked the cat’s fur, she purred loudly, and as her face rubbed up against mine, I laughed in a childish manner. She had traveled miles and somehow managed to find her way back to us, a feat that was nothing short of amazing.

Though she had only been with the other family for a short time, her fur seemed cleaner than when we first found her. The mats that tarnished her coat had been brushed out, leaving her fur sleek and soft to the touch. The patches of black, brown, and white that danced upon her back shined brightly in the summer sunlight. She had clearly been bathed and taken care of, but for some reason, she had come all this way back to live with us. My mother, even after all of her fuss, knew that we couldn’t get rid of her at that point. I smiled in quiet satisfaction and moved my hand around in the air, amused at how intently my new cat followed things with her eyes.
Light Switches

When I brought my hand up, she jumped, and when I brought it down, she crouched low to the ground. With her paws outstretched in front of her and back arced upward, she resembled a wild animal, and it reminded me of the tigers that I used to see on the discovery channel.

“You’re a good little tiger,” I said, still motioning my hand around, watching her movements with enthusiasm. “You’re my tiger.” As if sensing my words, she rubbed her small head against the back of my hand, urging me to pet her. When I did, I couldn’t help but smile as I thought of a new name for her: Tiger.

As much as I would have liked for Tiger to sleep inside, mom still couldn’t bare to be in the house if she was there. Our garage was old, and the inside were tainted with grease and dirt from my father’s and brother’s mechanic endeavors. There was hardly any room to move; the space was consumed by snowmobiles, cars, bicycles, snow-blowers and other toys that we kept around. Volleyball nets hung from the ceiling, and chairs hung on the walls. On the left side, there was a work bench, drenched in grease and sawdust, but long and useful. Along the right wall, there was a vent, too small for any man to climb in and out of, but just perfect enough for Tiger to come and go as she pleased. My dad jury-rigged a bed out of some old towel and blankets and placed it on the work bench for Tiger to sleep.

“This oughta do,” he told me, putting Tiger in the middle of her new bed. It wasn’t much, but with my mom’s allergies, it was all that we could do. Tiger didn’t seem to mind, though. She was just happy to be part of a loving family, of our loving family.

The longer we had Tiger, the more attached she grew to us. Whenever we left the house, she would watch like a hawk until we returned. Her excitement would be so overwhelming that when we returned, she would practically run out in front of our car to see us again, her tail straight in the air and head bobbing up and down. I would hop out of the car just to rush toward her, matching her excitement. Then I would pick her up, and stroke her beautiful fur, a habit that went on for years.

On one particular occasion, however, this routine became hazardous. Mom and I were on our way home from a late-night grocery run, and the clock on the car radio glowed as proof that it was past my bedtime. I was in my own little world, singing inside my head, my lips moving to the words and head swaying to the beat on the radio. An occasional yawn disrupted my lip-synching, and the more time that passed, the heavier my eye-lids became.

I would have fallen asleep if my mom’s voice wasn’t swimming in and out of my consciousness, “Wake….honey…..home.”

Confused, I opened my eyes and she repeated, “Jenna, wake up, we’re home.”

The driveway was pitch-black as her cherry-colored Explorer approached it. When I gazed out the window, I could see the clearest night sky of my young life, and the stars shined vibrantly above me. On the driveway, only the light of the foggy headlights were visible, illuminating just enough to see directly in front of us.
It was one of the rare occasions when my dad didn’t leave the lights on, and my mom glided up the pavement with the strong sense of confidence that all experienced drivers seem to possess. The darkness didn’t seem to faze her, but I was too young to ever consider questioning my mother’s driving.

Just as I closed my eyes again, a distinct thud broke my thoughts followed by a pained purr. My eyes instinctively flew opened as my mom slammed on her brakes, the car jerking forward before coming to a complete stop. I sat straight up in my seat, straining my neck to see what had happened, though part of me already knew: our driveway was flat, and that thump wasn’t natural. A curse word rang out in the car, and disbelief was etched into my mother’s features. Her hands clasped the steering wheel tightly, and she turned her head slightly to look out the window. I followed her glance and saw that just outside, a dark figure limped away from the driveway, dragging its lifeless feet from behind it.

Mom and I sat there for a moment trying to process what had just happened. She put the car into park and turned off the engine; the silence set in to an unnerving degree. The seconds dragged on and I started shaking, the anger mounting inside of me, ready to boil over. By the light of the moon, I could see her stony expression more closely. The frown that lined her face added decades to her beautiful face, and her eyes seemed much harder than their usually vivid state. Her eyebrows were furrowed in mix of rage and confusion. Tears--of anger, of sadness? I had no idea-- poked at the corners of her eyes, threatening to fall.

“You killed her!” I suddenly blurted out. “Mommy, you’re a killer!”

“JENNIFER LEE!” she bellowed. I could now see the anger in her eyes. The only time that she ever used my full name was if I was in trouble, and I cringed, preparing for the worst. “Just…I…stay here!” she responded, taking control of her emotions.

She quickly pulled off her seatbelt and pushed open the door, shutting it loudly behind her. At that moment, I couldn’t imagine hating someone more. I watched her bound across the yard, looking for my mangled cat. Not able to just sit back and watch, I climbed out of the seat, and followed suit, tailing closely on my mother’s trail.

Tiger had managed to drag herself to our backyard, where she lay sprawled out at an unnatural angle. Her breath came in heavy pants, and with each one, I winced. Tears ebbed at the corners of my eyes, threatening to soak my face, and I scrubbed my nose to fight them. Under the dark of night I couldn’t see the blood, but I knew it had to be there. She had been crushed beneath the tires of a car, all because she wanted to greet us upon our return--it didn’t seem fair. My mother ran to the garage, leaving me hovering over the helplessly animal, uncertain of what to do. I wanted to pet her, to comfort her, to take her small body in my arms, but knew it would increase her pain. It was Mom’s fault. How could she be so reckless? How could she even let such an accident happen?

By the time she returned with a bright red blanket in her hand, I lost the battle, tears soaking my skin. I blocked my mother’s path to Tiger, shaking with anger and sadness.
Light Switches

“I hate you! Tiger’s gonna die cause of you. I’m gonna lose my kitty--,” I sobbed hysterically.

“Jenna, I told you to stay in the car! Get out of the way!” she said, pushing past me. Then, she swept Tiger up in the blanket, cradling her to her chest like a mother would cradle her baby. I followed her angrily into the house, chanting “she’s gonna die” over and over, dragging my feet on the ground. Each time I repeated the phrase, my mother winced, and I knew my words were ebbing away at her, but I didn’t care. She deserved to hear it. She needed to hear it.

She rested Tiger, swaddled in the red blanket, on the blue and tan countertop right below our cabinets, something that would usually be forbidden under any other circumstances. Mom flicked on the light switch above the sink and opened the wooden drawer with a sense of rigid necessity, pulling out a tattered old phone book with a missing cover. She flipped through it, searching desperately for someone- anyone-who could help. I stood next the counter, my glance cast at the ground. My shoes were untied, but mom was too busy to notice, and I listened closely as she called a seemingly endless number of animal hospitals. Every time she hung up the phone, I grew a little more hopeless and a lot more angry.

I took a good glimpse at the woman standing before me. The phone rested in the crevice of her neck, between her ear and shoulder, and she paced slightly as she talked into the phone. The tone of her voice was harsh and demanding when she dealt with the doctors. Despite her emotion though, her words came out smoothly, and she never once seemed to falter. The expression she wore, however, told a different story. Her brow was furrowed in frustration and her eyelids opened and closed at a rapid pace in an attempt to hold back the tears. Worry lines were dark against her light complexion, and they seemed to glow against the dingy light of the kitchen. All of this, however, only seemed to fuel my anger toward her.

My hands shook at my sides when I look at her. “I never gonna talk to you again! Ever!” I screamed at her after she finally found an open doctor.

She placed the phone on the counter and bent down on one knee in front of me, bringing her hand to my cheek.

“Sweetheart, I know that you’re upset, but you need to calm down, okay? I’m doing the best I can right now,” she whispered, her voice cracking softly at the end.

Her hazel eyes stared intently into mine, and tiny speckles of yellow swam in and out of her outer pupils. Her eyes had always had a bold edge to them. Something about them seemed so stern, yet compassionate at the same time. Tears leaked out of the corners, her composure cracking.

Looking at her, I realized for the first time that she was just as afraid as I was. For the first few months that Tiger lived with us, Mom refused to get close to her. Doing so could quite literally have killed her. Now, just a few years down the road, Mom had grown to love the little fur ball that lived in our garage; a fact that I somehow overlooked until that moment. I had forgotten all those times that mom would let Tiger sneak into the house on those frigid winter nights.
She would pick Tiger up, and cradle her to her chest, rocking her back and forth in a comforting rhythm. With each stroke of the cat’s thick fur, Tiger would let out a long, steady purr that always put a smile on my mom’s face. Of course, after a few minutes, that smile would fade away as her eyes started to swell; it didn’t take long for her allergies to take control. Then, I would have to take Tiger and tuck her into her little bed in the garage, as Mom ran to the bathroom to wash her hands, chest, and face before the reaction continued. After she finished, she always said “never again” about petting Tiger, but this happened almost every week.

As I stood, staring into those eyes, I understood that this incident was just a mistake. Mom had never wanted this to happen. Tears now flooded my face, my cheeks turning scarlet in embarrassment for how I had acted. Seeing this, Mom’s compassionate nature went into high. Much like she would do with Tiger, she scooped me up in her arms, cradling me to her chest, and stroking my dirty blonde hair. My tears soaked into her shirt, leaving large spots of wetness on the sleeves, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Shhh,” she cooed. “It’s gonna be okay, baby.”

Her soothing voice sunk into my subconscious, and though I still wanted more than anything to be angry, part of me felt completely at ease in her arms.

“We need to get Tiger to the hospital, alright, sweet girl?” she whispered, releasing me to stand on my own two feet.

I nodded my head, wiping the remainder of my tears on my right sleeve and sniffing a bit. Mom stepped toward the counter to pick up the bright red bundle in her left arm and with her right, she grabbed my hand. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Tiger, the image of her mangled body still transfixed in my head. I knew that if I looked at her I would break down again, so I studied the ground, knowing that I had to be strong. As we made our way to the door, I slipped my hand under the light switch, pushing it upward. When we stepped outside, that light was the only thing I saw except for the blackness of the night.
Lightsticks and Slow Shutter Speed
Annie Hidley
On the Day They Exhumed South Bay Cemetery
Sarah Georgianna

On the day they exhumed the South Bay Cemetery, we rescued the boys’ toy soldiers. Sneaking to their room, we stole the thick plastic bag they came with and smuggled them like prisoners in small groups. From under beds and dressers, or wedged next to walls, we were their saviors who crossed enemy lines. We became our mothers and sought them out.

We saved them from melting in the sun, or lighter fluid or BB guns. And you licked your thumb to clean their faces, marking them as ours.

And with the wounded hidden in our shirts, we tiptoed to the furthest corner of the yard. Each one was washed, and each one had a name.

Here Lies David, I’d say. And Daniel, you’d add. And we’d nod. We knew they were good names.

Each man would be dried on our shirts, and lined up on the edge of the fence. And with the whole town smelling like the sickly-sweet of a giant sneeze, we buried them.

Clawing our hands for shovels, we dug narrow graves and piled mounds of dirt. Each grave had a stick for a marker, each marker had a “t” for a cross. And we knew each man had a name.
The first man I killed was a complete accident. I hit him in the back of his head with a bottle of tequila. He wasn’t looking at me, I couldn’t tell what anyone was doing or saying in that crowd. With everyone pushing and screaming and cursing like they were, how could I. Too many beers on a warm day had clouded my senses. The bottle kind of floated through the air after I threw it in this beautiful arc, going cork over bottom several times. I thought it looked like a rainbow, the way the light kept glinting off the handle. It landed hard on this guy’s head and split it like a watermelon. I was surprised upon its landing and that the bottle didn’t break. He crumpled on the narrow dirt road and lay still. Nobody even noticed, they just kept pushing and screaming, their feet crushed his face worse than the bottle ever could’ve, and for that I’m more sorry than anything, for his mother’s sake. Others were throwing them too, the bottles; they were like cannon balls between the buildings lining the avenue.

I stood there watching the blood when I felt two strong hands grab my shoulder. It was a man yelling at me, in Spanish, and I didn’t know what he was saying, I could hardly hear him anyway. All I could do was watch the blood flowing through the cobblestone street. He kept yelling, panic taking control of him, and I started to feel uneasy. I noticed the crowd had passed us by and it was just the two of us, and the bleeding body. I turned to see police in full riot gear behind me. One of them was bent over the man with the bleeding head. He looked up; all I could do was gaze back in remorse at the lifeless mass, unable to move. The other man was standing there, still yelling at me and trying to drag me away. The cop turned and said something. The police started yelling at me in Spanish. I still couldn’t understand them. They began struggling with the other man as he continued to yell. I tried to step over to help him when I heard a whistling in the air, right next to my head, and then everything went black.

I opened my eyes and leaned on my elbow to get a better look around. There were streams of light coming in through two windows lined with bars. The light illuminated the dust and dirt floating everywhere in our cell. It was filthy. I saw a guard walk past the one wall that was made of bars, not clay, and he eyed my collar curiously. I crawled to a wall with the symphony playing in my head, and leaned on it to try and stop the pounding drums. As I reached up to feel rolling hills where my normally flat head was, scarlet flakes of blood cascaded through the light onto the floor. The man from the riot was seated on the only piece of furniture they allowed us, a wooden bench. He was gazing at me intently. I coughed onto the back of my hand and studied the floor as he spoke.

“Padre, you’ve come a long way from home. What happened out there?” He said to me, in English now.

I thought back on what had happened earlier that day, the drums in my head receded and memories came flooding back. It was early yesterday morning. I had recently begun a youth soccer organization with the church I was sent to. It was one of the first things I was able to do right during my time in this foreign country.
The man, prodding again, said, “How did a man of God end up in a Guatemalan prison, for murder?”

I was still in my head though, sights and emotions taking control of my senses, not allowing me to hear his question, so I thought to myself.

The religious town was accepting of the idea, and people seemed genuinely excited to get their kids involved; plus, they love soccer. I was on the sidelines of the first game, watching the kids run around and fumble with the ball in the way only kids of a certain age can. I felt relieved that after the two years I had spent in the country, doing nothing but trying to build churches and raise money, I had an afternoon with nothing to do. That was what I was good at, the physical side of my job I mean, like raising money, handling paperwork, and organizing events. The soccer game was supposed to improve what I wasn’t good at; actually helping. Giving advice that really means something to people, that would really help them live a life that would take them to heaven was something I wasn’t too familiar in handing out. Some friends from the church offered me some beers, teasing that maybe the alcohol would liven up my sermons. I had laughed with them, knowing my people skills were sub par, and accepted their drinks.

“The others were drinking too, the parents of the kids I mean. I think it was the heat and the alcohol that combined to rile everyone up, I know it affected me. The town loves soccer and it was the parent’s chance to play vicariously through their kids. It was because of the soccer game. The game I organized.” I said to him.

I could tell he was confused. I leaned my head back against the wall and thought about the first two churches I had helped build in neighboring towns. One accidentally burned and the other flooded shortly after completion. The third one never got finished; the volunteer workers lost their zeal, and I couldn’t inspire them to continue.

The same guard from before was sitting within hearing distance on a stool, staring at me again. He had pulled out his rosary from his undershirt, and was thumbing it. I recognized him as a regular to my church every Sunday; he had yet to miss a service since I was dropped off in this country. He always sat in back and held his daughters hand, and let her donate the money when the basket was passed around.

“How did it all start?” my cellmate asked. “The riot? Do you know?”

“One of the kids in the game pushed over by another kid, that was the first straw.” I told him. “I guess the one who got knocked down, his mom came out onto the field and started smacking the other kid. Then that kids mom came on the field and started smacking her. Then the husbands of the wives got involved. Then all the husbands and wives did. I stood by and watched. I was unable to do anything. How could I! When the cops showed up everyone took to the streets. It was like a frenzy came over them. And I was way past control.”

“What happened though, Padre? What possessed you to throw that bottle during that riot? That is what I saw.”

“I… I don’t know what came over me; it was like I couldn’t stop myself. I chased after the crowd to try and stop them and calm them down.
When I finally found the words to speak, I couldn’t. Maybe I couldn’t because it was too late.” I could hardly speak now, a lump moving up my throat, “It was too late, wasn’t it? No one would listen to me. No one would listen! All my work, to start something good like a soccer league, and now it was causing a disaster; I was ashamed amigo. I couldn’t think I was so upset, and there was a bottle by my feet and I just threw it. I just threw it…” I stared through the floor of the cell. My tears made dark spots in the dirt.

The other man waited several minutes before speaking; he told me softly, “you need to find absolution for what you’ve done.”

I sat up, whipping my cheeks with my sleeve. “I can’t find absolution here amigo, not in jail. Maybe not at all. How can God forgive me for this?”

“Padre, you’re the padre, remember? God forgives all who repent in His name, and blesses them with an eternal gift for it.”

I stood up knowing he was right, but was startled when the guard jumped off his stool and came over to the bars.

“Padre?” the guard said quietly. “I need a blessing. I know I’m doing the right thing, but I need your blessing.”

I felt a little awkward after my moment of weakness, but assumed my role after a second. “My uh, my son. What troubles your conscious?”

“I heard you. I heard what you say to your friend,” his thick accent slowed him down, and his cross was hanging outside of his shirt on a gold chain. “I can not feel good for jailing you. For jailing a priest. It is not what God would want. I would like to confess to you Padre, for sins I am about to do.”

“You want to, confess about sins you’re going to commit? Usually pre-meditated sins are-”

“I don’t know this word, meditated?” He said.

I waved my hand, showing him it didn’t matter, and to go on.

“I must confess for this, padre.” He took a key ring off his belt and flicked through them, stopping on one near the end. He slid it into the door and turned it. Large, creaking bolts slid out of position and the door stood ajar an inch. He pulled it open fully.

“For this sin, the law says I am breaking, Padre, but my heart says is right.” He bowed his head.

For some reason I thought back to the soccer game I had planned. Again, things I tried to build became the stage for destruction to act on. Was accepting this offer another decision I would regret? I didn’t know, but I knew I needed to confess to another priest, for that would surely give me absolution. I had to get to church. I blessed the guard, forgiving him and grabbed my amigo, “You should come with me; I’m the reason you were arrested. You tried to save me from my delirium back in that riot and the cops thought you were an accomplice.” I said, looking at the guard to see if my new friend could come, and the guard nodded.
I thought maybe saving this man’s liberty would be an act of good in my life riddled with disaster. Maybe it could shine light on my failing faith in myself and as a man of the cloth.

“Padre, I have deep faith in our lord.” My amigo said, “The bible has gotten be through hard times in my life. I shall accompany you through yours. I know myself to be innocent, and I would gladly go with you, to help you as Jesus would.”

We walked down the corridor, leaving the guard sitting on his stool, thumbing his necklace. Unsure of where to go, we fumbled our way through the jail silently. Luckily it wasn’t very big and we found the hall leading to the glass double doors. An exit sign flickered on and off above the doors as light poured into the hallway.

“¡eh!”

We turned around to see a different guard frozen at the end of the hall behind us, hand on his gun. He looked young and scared; I looked at my friend. As I opened my mouth to speak he spoke first, “We should let him put us back. Maybe this is God’s-”

I shook my head, “I’m too close now. We’re too close now. God put that guard there to let us out; He might not give us a sign as clear as that again. We need to take this chance amigo.”

The guard started walking towards us slowly, speaking slow too, but still with that look on his face.

“If this is a sign though Padre, it’s pretty clear.” He said

“No… No, it’s not. He wouldn’t lead us to believe we could escape then snatch it away.”

The guard was closing the gap now, his hand was off his gun at this point and he looked relieved I think. Relieved he wouldn’t have to harm us. Both his hands were up now, almost like he was surrendering to us.

“Yes Padre, he would. That’s how He teaches sometimes, you’ve read the bibl-”

I felt like I did during the riot right before I threw that bottle; confused. Confused about His will, about what I should do, about what was right. I was confused about why I led this life. That’s when I started panicking. “No! He wants us free!” I made a move towards the light at the end of the hall.

We started running towards the door. I heard the young guard yelling. My heart was in my throat and I couldn’t think. I couldn’t understand what he was saying. I was getting closer to the door, I could almost feel the iron handle around my fingers. I slammed into the door with my shoulder and ran to the nearest cop car. The keys were in it. I turned the engine over and looked through the windshield to see the front door swing shut. My friend hadn’t followed me out. For a second I put my hand on the shifter, but instead threw the door open and ran back, towards the jail.

The guard was walking slowing towards my friend, who was just on the other side of the door. He was holding his ankle crawling towards me. The young guard was holding the gun in one hand and the other was palm up facing me. His face was red and he still looked afraid. He started yelling when he saw me come in. The guard kept staring at my friend on the floor, then back at me. His hands were shaking.
Alexander Longo

I reached down and grabbed my friend's sleeve and started pulling him. The guard started shouting, my ears were ringing and I looked down and saw him mouthing words as I dragged him through the doors, but I couldn’t make out any sounds at all. I saw the light above the door go out as we passed through onto the stoop.

The guard, still scared, taking slow, faltering steps, followed us from a distance. I dragged my friend across the gravel path to the idling car. I got him into the passenger’s seat as the guard came outside into the light. His hands weren’t raised and we both froze, staring at each other. I looked up as the clouds blotted out the sun. Sound came back and I heard the guard’s radio buzz, which made him jump. I used the moment to slide across the hood and jump in the car. The guard fumbled with his radio but gave up, raising his gun again. I slammed the pedal down and drove straight at him. I couldn’t think; my thoughts had escaped from their cell. The guard, misery and fear streaked on his face, shot three times, but they all missed me. I was going to kill again.

As I drove at the guard, about to let my emotions take over for a second time, I heard a weak voice say, “No, Padre.”

As time slowed I thought about the bottle crushing that man’s head, the blood streaming through cobblestone. I thought about the church I gave sermons in, the sun shining through stained glass onto my flock. The guard’s knees shook and his next shots went wide of the car and I realized how close I was to him. I felt a hand on mine and it pulled the wheel down and we swerved right, spraying the guard with pebbles. I thought it was God, shepherding me, showing me the way, showing me the way to absolution. God had placed His hand on mine to save me from sin. But my friend let go of me once I got the car back on the road.

I drove towards the exit. The guard disappeared in the rear view, still standing there arm extended, the clouds above the jail moving away in our direction, shining light on him just before I turned the corner. I drove and drove, while the sunlight disappeared behind the clouds again.

My friend didn’t say anything and neither did I as we drove towards my church. We pulled up to the little plot of land it sat on, on top of a hill, overlooking town. A nearby farm’s sheep had wandered close to it and were mingling in the grass. I pulled up and looked at my passenger, and again he spoke before I could find anything to say, “Go Padre, and find your absolution.”

I walked up the narrow dirt path to the church on shaky legs. The wind rustled my clothes and I realized for the first time how dirt smeared my black shirt and white collar had become. The heavy door whined as I pulled it open, shedding light on the cheap rug inside. Confession hour’s had begun and I walked into the side of the booth I’m not accustomed to sitting in.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned, it has been… It has been two days since my last confession. I have been unable to confess because… of what’s happened and where I’ve been.”
“My son, the path to righteousness is riddled with doubt and remorse, God wants us to overcome these vices and confess. The path cannot begin without confession. Tell me your sins, and receive your penance.” The other priest talked slowly, his age reflecting through his words of advice.

“Yes. Yeah, I know. I know about the search for forgiveness, but I don’t know if I deserve His forgiveness after what I’ve done.” I talked slow too, but for different reasons.

“All of His children are blessed with eternal life in Heaven my son, as long as you confess to Him what He already knows. Absolution waits at the end of this road, all you have to do is speak. Try, and maybe the words will find you.”

I took a deep breath. This was what I was waiting for but it didn’t feel right. I thought after it might, and decided to get on with it. I spoke quickly now, feeling uncomfortable about what I had to confess. “Yesterday, I killed a man in cold blood. He had done me no wrong. This has offended God for in His name I’ve sworn to do only good for man. My life has been devoted to Him and yet it is riddled with disaster. I don’t know if what I’ve done can be forgiven Father. I doubt if He even looks upon me as a helper, a spreader of His word, which is what my purpose on earth is. My conscious is in ruins and I seek absolution for these sins.”

There was a slight pause before the priest spoke, “My son, the Lord has put us all here for a purpose. In His plan He has used you for a good we as men have no way of understanding. Your life’s work may seem all for naught to you, but know it is meaningful to our Lord. You are a part of a larger plan, the ending you may never know. You have been blessed with the knowledge of His word and the courage to search for His forgiveness, do not let your faith falter, and do not let temptation become you. The Lord has given unto us one burden, and that is being inclined to sin. But repent and you shall be saved, as is written in His book. Repent my son, and you shall have His forgiveness. Maybe it is God’s will to use this experience for a greater good; to shepherd your soul or another’s to heaven? We cannot know His will. Your penance is to do just that, discover His purpose for you. Good luck my son, I can say no more. I bless you in His name.”

I looked through the small amount of light that lived in this box, and felt... I felt nothing. The confession left me empty, and did nothing to give me back my strength. I was weary, and my legs couldn’t carry me past the rows of benches. I had to kneel several times on the way out of the church, each time I looked up to see the crack of light between the doors shining on the alter behind me. Our Lord gazed upon me from His deathbed with sad eyes. I wondered what He had wanted for His Son at the moment of His death, watching Him being nailed. I wonder if God wished His son had a friend to be there with Him.

When I was able, I walked to the car and felt the breeze kiss my cheek. The clouds lazily moved and adjusted above. I sat down and let my eyes follow the cracks the bullets had made in the windshield. They moved to no beat and had no purpose or direction. My friend was breathing heavy but didn’t say anything. I looked through the glass and saw the sheep eating grass down the hill. It was getting late, the sun still hidden from view.
The rest of the field was green as a clover, the wind skating across the grass making it bow. The bullet holes in the windshield distorted my view, like a broken mirror might.

“You were right,” I said, “I was wrong. God wanted us to stay in that prison. He wanted me to pay for my sins. Everything I’ve done in His name has turned to ash. And now at the end of the journey, I have been denied my salvation. There is no absolution to be found in there. All my life I’ve never done a good thing, I haven’t given one person inspiration or hope.”

He took his hand off his belly and a line of blood stuck to his palm, connected to a hole in his gut, but broke off as he laid it on the armrest. “I’m dying Padre.” He wheezed at me, looking me in the eye.

I froze when I saw the blood, and swallowed another lump growing in my throat. “Holy shit. Holy shit, you need a hospital! I can get you into town amigo we can save you!” I didn’t know what else to say, so I went to start the engine.

“No Padre. No. I won’t make it, it is His will.” He said. I felt my stomach turn and wanted to apologize, to say anything, something, about how sorry I was for getting him involved in this, but I couldn’t speak. “I want you to do something for me,” Each syllable he uttered was strained and lined with anguish. There was a pool of blood by his feet in the shape of a cloud. “I want you to,” his pain appeared on his face for longer this time, and he struggled to pronounce his words, “to give me my last rites before I leave this world.”

“This is all because of me,” I sat there with distorted shame, trying to make it right somehow, “I could-“

“Padre, you have my forgiveness, as you shall have God’s. Him and I want the same thing from you. For you to do what His plan has laid out for you. Some priest cannot give you absolution, only the things you do in life can. That wasn’t my,” He coughed up blood onto his knuckles and rested his hands on his knees, “first time in prison. I agreed to go with you, to try and redeem myself with a good deed. Now I know how we can both find absolution. I need your blessing to make it to His Kingdom of Heaven. I’ve found inspiration from your situation; it caused me to do a good thing. Thank you for that padre. Now hurry, I feel His warmth already.”

He didn’t look at me again, his chest slightly moving. He gazed on the sun as it peeked from behind the clouds, and the green hills, rolling away from us. I said the last rites and nothing else. He let his last breath out as the sun set behind the clouds, moving over the town. I felt, somehow, lighter. I put my hand on my white collar and rubbed it with my thumb. I thought about my flock, entering my church with the sun on their backs. I thought about the blood flowing through the cobblestones, being washed by the rain.
You trudged ahead, despite the effort
Others judged you and called you deperate
You did everything you could, without a moment’s pause
And your examples didn’t obide the laws
They were scribbled and hard to read
And you were tired with no mind to heed
They laughed at your faulty design
And insulted your unique and beautiful mind
But you trudged forward before uncertainty could creep in
No use living in personal sin
You took your muse and stayed inside
Afraid to face that world outside
Until
One
Day,
One
Soul
Said they loved it…
Beautifully Imperfect

They saw the beauty through the imperfection

And understood the lack of direction

Took your work and showed the world:

I sat at the end of the dock, toes trailing along the surface of cold water. The air hung above the lake thick with swirling fog in the preternatural light of the oncoming dawn. I shifted the blanket around bare shoulder, tank top insufficient to block the early morning breeze. The beginning songs of morning birds erupted from trees, cascading over the water and echoing back off the cabin.

Safety announced with the presence of wildlife, I watched day break upon the sleepy valley. Pink light filtered through green leaves. The lake became a blurry mirror, casting light and color back into the world.

I sighed, pink fading to blue. Another day of waiting lay ahead of me. Waiting and hiding, that was what our lives became. Traveling only by night, moving through darkness like slaves trying to escape their masters. We were trying to escape. They came from the endless void of space, no offers of peace, no promise of knowledge. They wanted to destroy us before we ever came close to destroying them.

Pulling my legs into me, my cheek rested on my knees. The messages lay hidden within our own. Language manipulated to keep us from noticing until it was too late. Their plan worked. No one saw it coming and those that made it out of the cities, that avoided capture or death, lived in hidden places far from civilization.

Eyes closed. I listened to the noises around me. Stark contrast to the silence that enveloped the world before they struck, it provided a measure of reassurance. They stopped our radios, our televisions. They destroyed our means of communication leaving us crippled and blind.

Tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. The ensuing panic caused the first deaths. People not knowing what else to do took to the streets, rioting and killing anyone that stood in their way. Governments responded with force, isolated pockets of attempted control without means to coordinate larger actions.

The first tear slid across my cheek, its path warm, resting place denoted by the wet spot on my pants. Two days later, the power went out. In darkness we waited, uncertain who was there, or when they would come. The world shook with echoes of explosions, some ours, most of them not. Morning came and, with it, the mourning started. Pieces of bodies littered the ground. Rubble piled the bottoms of craters forming landscapes hitherto unknown.

I sniffled lightly, sore eyes staring out at the water. We ran then, moving by foot and avoiding roads, keeping to what cover we could find. Our world destroyed yet we lived. Hope remained with the living. Hope that one day we could rebuild, that maybe we wouldn’t forget the lessons of hardship.

Footsteps moved up the dock behind me, boards shaking beneath the movement. Gentle fingers moved hair away from the edge of my face, caressing my cheek.

“We think they’re gone.” He sat down on the dock next to me, arm around my shoulders. “No one’s sure yet.”
A weak smile moved across my face. “You’re right. You’re always right.” Head resting on his shoulder, my toes reached down toward the water. Cold fog brushing against the skin, I scanned the lake. “But for now, let’s just be.”

*Aftermath*

*Benin*

Annie Hidley
Sunflower
Jennifer Schifferle

Why do you grow with such great might?
Mighty head lays silent on the ground
Dirt, ants, moving and squirming
Between the fine petals your
Creator yearns to know why
Is it hard to be such a lovely flower
Had I such beautiful thick stems
I’d think I were superior
To all other plants, powerful
Rays of yellow that leap in and out
Of my crown, for all of time
Until, you wither away and kneel
Before the ground
Where you once came and i
Saw you as seed.
“Get up boy.” Phil shouted in the doorway, flipping on the light switch. “Today’s the day you shoot an animal.” Charlie rolled over and saw his father towering over his bed. Charlie’s vision was fogged with sleep but through his squinted eyes, he still saw the intensity burning in his father’s emerald eyes. Phil was a serious man. He was tall, extremely muscular and carried the resemblance of a lumberjack. His face was coarse and covered with a light brown, scruffy beard. Phil was the typical outdoorsman. He loved hunting, fishing and found any physical activity enjoyable. Charlie on the other hand, wasn’t anything like his father. Charlie preferred reading books and creating fantasy stories of his own. He often wrote stories where the King died, leaving the Queen and Prince to rule the world. He enjoyed exercising his mind not his body. Phil frequently commented on his “pansy ass” and told him he was built like his mother. Charlie never knew his mother; she died giving birth to him. Whenever Phil made these negative remarks, comparing Charlie to his mother, Charlie never got upset or embarrassed. He actually took it more like a compliment and was proud to resemble the mother he would never know. Nevertheless, today was Charlie’s thirteenth birthday and instead of celebrating it like normal kid, Phil decided to “make him a real man” and take him hunting.

“Why you so tired boy? Get up. Get ready and be downstairs in five for food.” Phil stomped out of the room and Charlie heard the weight of Phil’s body boom down the stairs. Charlie removed the blue blankets surrounding his body and felt the morning chill coat his skin. He took off his red flannel pajamas and put on the stiff camouflage clothing his father laid out for him the night before. Charlie walked down the hall to perform his morning pee and brush his teeth then headed down the stairs for breakfast.

“You’re two minutes late.” Phil barked, tossing down a plate of runny scrambled eggs and two pieces of un-cooked bacon. “Eat fast. No more wasting time. Gotta get the killin’ when the killin’s good to get.”

“Dad you know I don’t eat meat.” Charlie said, staring at his grotesque morning meal.

“What’d I tell ya about that boy? It’s Phil now that you’re a man...or soon to be one I should say.”

“Sorry Da—err, I am mean Phil. But I don’t eat meat remember?”

“Boy I heard you the first time. What kinda man don’t eat meat?” he said pacing the kitchen, “It’s unheard of. You’re wasting time.” He grabbed his camouflage winter coat and headed for the door. “Meet me in the car. Ya better eat boy. Don’t wanna hear you complaining you hungry out there.”

Phil slammed the door behind him and not long after Charlie heard the rumble of the old truck. He took his plate from off the table and scraped its content into the black garbage bag tied around the handle of the refrigerator. He walked toward the door and stepped his already cold feet into the boots Phil set aside for him to wear. Charlie put on his heavy winter jacket and left the house, entering the icy wind.
Hunting

Phil was settled comfortably behind the steering wheel, glaring at Charlie to hurry his “pansy ass” up.

The ride to Phil’s hunting cabin was long and remained silent. Phil spent most of the ride spitting his tobacco into an empty beer can that sat in the front of the truck. Charlie stared out the window and created stories in his head that he couldn’t wait to get home and start writing. He thought about the casualness of today, his birthday. But that was how his birthday always felt, just like any other day. Phil informed Charlie at a young age that no celebration of any kind would take place the same day his beloved wife died. Though, it seemed ironic that Phil devoted that same day to shooting animals…either way, the day was planned for and there was no way to change that.

The truck struggled up the long, snow-covered driveway, back tires fishtailing off the path. Phil gritted his teeth and pressed harder on the gas pedal as snow shot out from behind the truck. Charlie tightly gripped the door handle as Phil drove through the compacted snow and finally reached the top of the hill. He parked the car along the side of his small log cabin, made solely for one. Phil built this cabin right after his wife died, leaving Charlie with his parents. It took a long time for him to “deal” with his grief and accept the fact that he still had a son.

Charlie opened his door and stepped out of the truck, sinking to his knees in snow. Phil slammed his door on the other side and immediately opened the back to unload the gear. Charlie hurried over to help. Phil handed him the case holding the two guns and Charlie sunk deeper into the snow. He struggled with the weight of the case, arms too frail to manage.

“Good thing the tree stands are up”, Phil teased, “you’d kill yourself trying to set those us.” Charlie gathered his composure and headed into the cabin. Phil closed the back of the truck and followed closely behind, carrying the rest of their hunting gear. The cabin was cold, so cold their breathing was visible. “Get your gloves, hat and whatever you need to stay warm. I don’t need ya comin’ to find me, cryin’ like a little girl ‘cus you’re cold.” Charlie rushed to put on his stuff. “We’re already late, dammit.” Phil, already dressed, opened the gun case and assembled both guns in under two minutes. He stared down the barrel, aiming it at the cabin door and out of the side of his mouth asked, “Ya remember how to shoot right?”

“Yea.”

“Well good ‘cus I ain’t wasting no more time. Ya ready boy.”

“Yea.” Charlie repeated and followed Phil out the door and into white woods.

They hiked deep into the woods. Charlie tried to keep up best he could, but Phil was too fast. Charlie was glad Phil carried both guns. He knew he would have passed out in the snow by now if he had any more weight to manage. Finally, Phil stopped at a tree and removed a gun from off his back.

“You’ll be here. I’ll be in one of the trees not too far away. Stay quiet and shoot whatever ya see. It’s gonna be a lot different than shooting the beer cans in the back yard. You’ll be shoo- tin’ a live animal. Then maybe you’ll start actin’ like a real man.”
Charlie took the gun and watched Phil disappear into the snow. He looked up the tall tree and became uneasy about the climb. He wrapped the gun around his shoulder, resting it against his back and climbed up the metal stakes. Charlie reached the stand and crawled on top of it, pressing his back to the tree. He had never been this high in a tree before and he actually liked it. The only thing he feared was freezing to death. The snow had already melted and seeped through his snow pants, icing his bony butt.

Charlie sat hunched in the tree, clasped his gun to his body and waited. He looked around and everything seemed dead. The trees were coated in snow with no sign of any animals. Charlie had never imagined killing an animal before. He didn’t even kill bugs when he found them. He knew that it was something he had to do. He had to shoot an animal if he wanted any chance of a relationship with his father. Charlie didn’t hate his dad. He just didn’t understand him. Charlie knew Phil blamed him for his mother’s death. Charlie also knew Phil blamed himself for pressuring her to get pregnant right away. Charlie’s grandparents explained this to him many times growing up but it still never made sense.

Charlie began to think about the story waiting for him at home when this dreadful day was over. He thought about having the King come back from the dead and reclaim his thrown as a ghost. The Prince would fight for the Queens rule and have a royal dual in her honor. He always had a hard time ending his stories. He found himself unable to stop writing. He never finished a piece, just set it aside and started a new one. Charlie thought until his eyes became heavy like the limbs of the trees. It was eerily quiet. Two or three hours must have passed by now. The little sunlight that tried to shine through the thick gray clouds has faded even more. His body was numb and shivering harder with every gust of wind but still, Charlie managed to drift off to sleep.

He dreamt of his mother, her soft thin hands reaching to brush against his cheeks. She wore a white gown that danced in the breeze of her spirit. She glowed in his mind, her curly hazel locks fluttering behind her. He tried to speak but she placed her index finger gently on his lips. She soared closer to him, resting her cold lips on his forehead. He reached to embrace her floating figure but she swayed backward, her figure lightly fading. He tried to run after her but his legs were immobile. She was fading fast but before she disappeared, she mouthed the words I love you.

Charlie woke with a jump and nearly dropped his gun out of the tree. His body was sweaty and no longer felt cold. It was completely dark out and still no sign of any life out there. He wondered about Phil and if he had killed anything. He figured he would have heard the gun but then again he didn’t know exactly where Phil was and wasn’t about to go find him. Charlie wondered what time it was and if this year of his birthday was finally over. He knew Phil would pick on him if he didn’t kill an animal but Charlie didn’t care. He wanted to go home.

Suddenly the sound of breaking sticks echoed throughout the woods. Charlie clutched onto his gun, afraid of what it might be. It was very hard for him to see through the darkness but he squinted anyway. At first, he couldn’t tell where it was coming from.
Hunting

It sounded like it was all around him and getting louder. As the noise grew closer, he spotted movement in a batch of snowy bushes a decent distance away. The animal moved slow and was hard to identify. Charlie could faintly see the bushes shaking off the blanket of snow when suddenly the antlers of a deer perked up. Charlie grabbed his gun and aimed it at the bushes. He held the gun just as Phil taught him. His hands shook violently but he knew this was his chance to prove his manhood. Charlie closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. He heard a loud grunt as the animal fell into the snow.

Charlie’s ears rang from the piercing sound of the gunshot that still echoed off the trees. He was stunned. He could not believe he had just killed an animal. He didn’t feel happy, sad, proud or even disappointed. He didn’t feel anything. He was completely numb. The woods had fallen silent again and Charlie knew he had to make sure the deer was dead and not suffering. Phil would be proud of him but mostly surprised that he actually did it.

Charlie climbed down the tree and headed in the direction of the dead deer. He made sure to mark down a specific path, remembering distinct trees to get him to the deer and then back to the tree stand. The last thing he wanted was to get lost in the woods. He had no idea how to get out of here and no idea where Phil was either. Charlie knew this day would not be over until Phil said it was over. Shooting the deer wouldn’t end it any quicker but at least it would give them something to talk about. Even if Charlie knew the way back to the cabin, there was no way he could carry this deer out by himself. He needed Phil for that especially.

He was half way to the bushes when he thought about his mother again. What would she think of his killing a deer? He couldn’t know and would never know. Phil never talked about her in depth or told what she was like. He only referenced her when making fun of Charlie. Charlie kept walking and thinking. He was cold again and thought about using the deer as a blanket. He approached the front of the bushes and saw the deep red blood soak through the ground. The blanket idea was out of the question.

Charlie trudged through the thick red snow. He had never seen so much blood before. It caused his stomach to be queasy. He wasn’t sure what a dead deer would look like and was afraid to find out. He trekked along the front of the bushes, only hearing the sound of his feet crunching atop the icy service. He rounded the corner and saw the dead animal sunken into the snow. Charlie’s nausea grew with each step he took; making sure the deer was truly dead. He finally reached the side of the animal, not facing what he had done yet. He looked up to the tree-tops and wished he could see the stars and apologize to his mother for what he had done. Keeping his eyes closed he turned his face back down to the corpse. Charlie opened his eyes and saw the large beast lying stiffly in the snow. It was definitely dead and there was a lot of blood. As Charlie looked closer, the deer was lying on top of something. It looked to him like a blanket. He bent down next to the dead carcass and lifted its frozen leg. Charlie quickly turned his head and vomited the little he had in his stomach. Phil’s camouflage jacket, soaked in blood, was buried beneath the dead animal.
I didn’t cry until I said goodbye to Nick, the space where his two front teeth were missing was at eye level when I hugged him, wrapped my grown up arms around his tiny little body and missed him before I even let him go. Both our freckles were popping out in the heat and sun of August, but his red hair embodied summertime. I thought about the first day I met him. It was my first day at camp ever, I was a new counselor and I was scared shitless, I was so worried about doing something wrong, and not doing enough. I was worried I wouldn’t be as good a role model as I wanted to be for them, all the bright little faces, expectant, waiting to be taught and shaped. Nick was the first kid I met and he was crazy. He ran around and jumped everywhere he went and didn’t listen and loved to sing as loud as he could which was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen because of his missing teeth and funny little voice. Whenever he talked he scrunched his whole face up. He was 6 and a few weeks in I found out his dad died when he was 3, in a snow mobile accident. He had a red headed mom who he loved, and a big brother he loved even more. Anthony was the only person he listened to.

Nick was beyond frustrating. One time I was holding onto his shoulders, looking him in the eye yelling “YOU CAN NOT CROSS THE STREET WITHOUT ME,” and he bit me, leaving a toothed ring on my arm except for the gap where he didn’t have teeth. He never sat when he was supposed to, but he loved playing games. He loved playing connect four with me and he got so focused, trying to win. I always tried my hardest to win too and when he beat me he would light up, so proud of himself, say “It’s ok I usually don’t see the diagonals either.” He was kind of tall for his age but so so skinny, his basketball jerseys hung off of him and his skinny little white arms were always reaching for something. He acted so tough, he was a bully, making fun of the girls and getting angry when he didn’t get what he wanted. He played with the older kids when he could and was the most athletic one of the 5-7 year olds. He was stubborn, defiant, and cocky. One day we were eating our lunch outside and storm clouds started to slide into view, blocking out some sun, the wind turned from a gentle breeze to menacing. I was looking around, gathering the kids to go inside, and Nick was standing in front of me with his little lunch box covering his face, sobbing. “Nick!” I knelt down, took his hands, asked what was wrong. He could barely speak through his tears and as he wiped them away with the backs of his forearms stuttered, “I’m, s-s-scared of th-th-thunder!” And flung his arms around my neck and I felt my whole heart open up for this tiny person. I wanted to pull him inside me and protect him from everything. I couldn’t help but laugh a little. I hiked him up on my hip, patted his back and pulled his chin up so he could look at me and believe me. “I promise you will not get hurt. I will never let anything hurt you and you will be fine. It’s totally ok to be scared but nothing bad is going to happen and it’s going to be alright.” He nestled into me like a little baby. He was a still a baby. He hadn’t seen war yet, or seen anger. He hadn’t seen sadness; at least not that he could remember. He hadn’t felt heartbreak or loss yet, or the kind of pain that comes with wisdom. He was so fresh and free.
I didn’t cry until I said goodbye to Nick

I found freedom that summer and it wasn’t because of the sun or no school, it was because I could look into any one of these children’s faces and see hope. Hope, enthusiasm, peace and ease. I saw trust and a yearning to have fun and to learn. I saw everything I wasn’t; everything I thought I had let go of, or lost. And their little hands helped me find it when we made crafts like time capsules. Nick wanted to be a NASCAR driver when he grew up, and he had me write “Elementary School” for him because we were in a hurry. I found it when we played capture the flag, or kickball, and when I was up to kick I got a home run for my tiny team and they cheered like no one in high school had ever cheered for me in a sport before, 20 miniscule palms outstretched to high five me as I jogged through home base, saw their excitement spreading through the whole of their little bodies.

This is what I want to get back to, I thought, watching them race around the bases and laugh at themselves when they tumbled. After almost 20 years of searching out all the knowledge I could and spending my life trying to figure everything out, I felt like I finally had. Standing in a seagull poop strewn field, staring at a graveyard and mausoleum, not caring about the weird tan line I would go home with from my sweaty STAFF T shirt, I felt like I finally had. This is what I want. They congratulated each other, jumped up and down, didn’t worry about how their hair looked or what brands their clothes were, weren’t trying to impress anyone. I want to always be able to get this happy, about things that are this small. One of them came to me asking me to tie their shoe. I don’t want to have to control everything, or feel like I have to do everything myself. They weren’t afraid to ask for help, or of being wrong. They said what they thought and once they said or did something it was over. They didn’t dwell in the past and they didn’t worry about the future. They didn’t regret and they forgave instantly. The sun cradled all of them in the field, their shadows running behind them, yelling at each other to pass it over here, getting completely caught up and immersed in the game. In what was happening at that exact moment. I felt everything in me melt and warm up, I felt coldness leave and worry disappear, at least for a minute. They said Good Try! without me telling them to, and didn’t think twice about grass stains. I shook my legs out, ten pairs of eyes wide and holding their breath as the pitcher rolled the ball toward me. I got ready to kick, to run, to let the sun light me up like it did them, and I couldn’t stop smiling.
Why I Use my Hockey Gear as a Halloween Costume
Daniel Coant

Nothing says my step-dad beats me on a regular basis because my mom is an unattractive, uneducated, no talent whore than dressing up as a hockey player for Halloween. Your real dad put you in hockey at a young age. He loved you and was willing to shell out the $500 a year on fees and equipment. Then your mom decided it would be a good idea to get caught by your dad taking it via your neighbor’s penis. Dad headed for warmer climates and left your mom to go to the local pubs and flirt it up with those pool playing hunks. Perhaps she failed to notice that these hunks were actually hairy fat dudes that played pool in a dingy bar with cues more bent than an old guy with a hernia. Regardless, your new dad - naked chick tattoos, wife beater even in the winter, and all - was now the man of the house.

Everything was good at first. He would take you down to the bar because he knew Gus on a friendly basis. Gus would let the whole underage thing slide as long as you sat in the corner and only drank Pepsi. Your step-dad even tried to take you to the local titty bar. Unfortunately, when the bouncers turned you away because you were thirteen, it was a long four hours while you waited for your step-dad to come back to the car. Drunk and horny from watching all the pussy he wasn’t going to get tonight, he informed you that he had to “get home and bone your mom. That’s how you keep them from leaving you; you feed it to them every night.”

After a few months things started to go down hill, especially that one afternoon when your step-dad had to renew your hockey fees. You are reminded of the day every time you walk into the kitchen and see that tea kettle with a dent in it that looks suspiciously like your right cheek bone. Jesus, he sure flipped out over that $500. Or should we say $300 because he downright refused to buy you new equipment until “your shorts and cup have holes in them big enough for your nuts to hang through.” You scraped by the next two years but eventually you reached a fork in the road - either get new skates, or amputate your toes. Electing to attempt to wring some cash out of your cocksucker step-dad, you ask him at the peak of his Monday night scotch buzz. Since alcohol, through some mathematical anomaly, equates to love in your twisted family, your dad generously coughs up the eighty bucks necessary to buy a second hand pair. Of course, when you return home from the store the next evening you find your mom bleeding on the floor. Through her incessant sobs she is trying to convince your step-dad that she didn’t steal eighty dollars from him. You remind him that he gave it to you last night, for which you receive a projectile cordless phone in the neck for your honesty.

A few months pass and Halloween comes around. Again, during his Monday night homemade moonshine (money’s tight) buzz, you ask him for some money to buy a Freddy Kruger mask and glove. Apparently a Halloween costume isn’t in this year’s budget as is evident by your dad’s blistering right hook to your eye. Instead, you have an ingenious idea. You can just wear your hockey equipment as a costume.
Why I Use my Hockey Gear as a Halloween Costume

The kids at your high school Halloween party understand that your costume screams “broken home”. They attempt to put a positive spin on things by saying, “I really like the way you used eyeliner to make it look like you have a black eye.”

“Uhhh, yeah, eyeliner.”
The waiting room was a scene of apocalyptic chaos. It was the Fourth of July, and while it’s true that this day is often associated with a higher number of hospital visits (due in no small part to the idiotic misuse of contraband fireworks at drunken barbecues), this place was in utter pandemonium. Some kids had gotten tanked and had themselves an old fashioned roman candle fight – indoors. The drapes caught fire and they ran in panic, leaving the place to burn. The entire apartment complex went up in flames not long after that, and all of the victims – all god-blessed thirty-three of them – were taken to Saint Mary’s Hospital by ambulance.

I wasn’t paying much attention to the calamity around me: the moaning children writhing with pain from untreated burns; or the nurses hustling to and fro, overbooked and understaffed; or even the little bundle of joy that had found a comfortable seat, full diaper and all, on my right shoe. No, I was trapped inside my own head for the time being, mulling over the lifetime that had passed up until this moment. And if this sounds at all poetic, believe me: it wasn’t. I was shitting bricks. I shut my eyes tight and groped through the darkness, if only to escape the terror of the moment for a little while.

Just as I was beginning to drift away from the buzz of chatter, a hand on my shoulder roused me back into reality.

“Sean, it’s time.”

It was the ever sensitive voice of my father, an ironic contrast to his massive mitt that steadily pat me on the back.

I exhaled an acknowledgment, but made no effort to move. I kept my eyes closed and brought my hands to my face, wiping away the cold sweat. My father made no effort to push me up from my seat, not even a gentle nudge. He knew I was scared. The silence he left pained me, because it left no doubt in my mind that he thought I wasn’t ready. He was right, of course.

“I can’t, Dad. I’m scared. Let me just sit here a bit longer,” I said in a nervous falsetto.

“Take your time, son. But you can’t put it off forever.” My father’s voice was calm and understanding.

I dropped my hands and unglued my eyelids, turning to face my father. My eyes met his; two of a perfect pair. It was the very mirror image I had seen for much of my life. His expression was simply of one who cares, not one who judges. The fear in my eyes must have looked like a silent scream to him, because he immediately moved to quiet it.

“Don’t look so down, bud. You know as well as I do that you’re going to get through this. But the longer you sit here, the longer it will be before that pit in your stomach gets filled,” He said with a warm, inner smile. It was soothing, but it didn’t keep my legs from feeling boneless.

“Sean, your whole life I’ve told you that you think too much, and typically, I was kidding. But now is unlike any other time you’ve ever experienced in your twenty-two years on Earth, and there is nothing to it but to do it. No thought required. If your thoughts are too much of a burden, do away with them. All that matters is that you get up and walk through that door.”
There was nothing stern in his voice. When one speaks the truth, no yelling is required for it to hit its mark.

“Alright, Dad. Alright.”
And with a huff I forced myself to my feet, gently nudging off the infant squatter. The floor felt like a moving target.

“Dad, can you...can you go with me?” I felt like such a child.

“Of course, son. But only to a point. That last stretch, that’s for you,” he said, placing his hand on my back again and turning me to face the white door just ahead. “Come on, bud. Let’s go for a walk, you and I.”

We strode past the screaming masses, paying them no notice. Dad pushed the door wide open and we stepped into a long white corridor. At its end was a brightly lit room with the door ajar, and beyond that, only God knew. As we walked, I found my pace slowing with every step. It was either that, or the room was getting further away as I got closer. Who can say? But either way, I knew I couldn’t remain silent, and perhaps this was the universe’s way of granting me time for my questions to be answered.

“Dad, I’m not ready, am I?”

“The hell you aren’t.” I hadn’t expected that. “Sean, no one is. No one is ever, ever ready. And those who are, well, they’re deceiving themselves. But you’re better than that, you always have been. You’re a smart kid who can spin anything, but you’ve never been able to lie to yourself. You can’t just tell yourself that you aren’t afraid and actually believe it. But that’s alright, because that fear is a sign of your character.”

“What are you saying, Dad?”

“That you are a good man, son. A damn good one, and you haven’t a thing to worry about.”

I stopped and turned to face him.

“You mean that?”

“Absolutely.” There wasn’t a hint of sugar-coating in his expression. He meant what he said, and what he said was the highest praise I’d ever received in my life.

“I always remember as a kid, Dad...when you used to tell me someone was a ‘good man,’ it always seemed to carry such weight. Like there was nothing better you could say about a guy.”

“That about sums it up,” he said with a natural smile. “Now let’s keep walking.”

We continued down the hall. My feet felt lighter, and moved with less hesitation. The room was coming in clearer view. I still had more to say, and my chest still felt empty.

“Dad, did you ever really believe I could do any of the things I wanted to do? And what happens to them now?” It sounded so selfish, but it was burning at my collar.

“Get that out of your head. Your dreams were never a plan for the future, and you aren’t a prophet. Sure, things didn’t play out the way you pictured when you were a little pissant, but what of it? This is now, son. All your possibilities are now resting at the end of this hall.
And besides, fulfilling your ambitions doesn’t make you a good man. And really, what else do you need?”

He had to be pacifying me.

“There you go again, tossing that around. There’s no way you can really think I’m a ‘good man,’ not after all this shit. Growing up...I just...I saw too much, Dad. And you always say I’m just like you.” He brought his hand up to my head and ran his fingers through my curls.

“You are just like me, Sean. I’ve always told you I was sorry for that. But you take all the gifts that I misused and abused and make something good out of them. Sure son, you’ve fucked up before, and Christ knows I have. But he is a good man who wants to be a good man. And I thank God everyday that I’ve never doubted that that is exactly what you want to be.”

I smiled for the first time in what felt like ages. If I hadn’t spent all my tears as a kid, I’m sure there would have been a few of them too. We were nearly at the door. The light was blinding, and the hallway dim; I couldn’t see inside.

“I always imagined this is something like what death would feel like,” I said.

“Well, you’d be wrong. But it’s close, I’ll grant you that. Now, cross that threshold, bud. Your future, though not quite how you envisioned it, is on the other side. Believe me; it’s better.”

I took a deep breath and prepared to take the plunge. Just as I was about to take that step, I turned back to my old man one more time.

“What do you think of her, Dad? I know this wasn’t planned or anything, but I think I did alright.” I put my hands in my pockets and grinned.

“She’s a fine woman to your good man. I love her like family, so you’d better take damn good care of her, or you know I’ll find out.” He smiled back.

“Thanks, Dad. You don’t know how much that means to me.” I hugged him tight, and he spoke into my ear.

“Hell, I wish my old man had said these things to me, but there’s a lot he didn’t say. I know I was a better dad than he ever could have been, but I screwed up too. But it seems it can only get better, bud.” He kissed me. “Or at least that’s the general trend.” He smiled, this time with his eyes.

“Now get in there.”

I turned back toward the door and put one foot in front of the other. When I reached the light this time, I dove head first.

Crying, a rush of light, and then...

“Mr. Farrow?”

My eyes unclenched, and I was back in the waiting room again.

“Mr. Sean Farrow?”

I glanced about the room; the same scene of chaos that I left however long ago. Except my father was no where to be seen.
“Mr. Farrow? Sean Farrow?” The nurses voice chimed once again. I answered the call. Rising to my feet, I walked over to where she stood beside the big white door that led to that long, dim corridor.

“Yes, I’m Sean Farrow,” I said. My voice didn’t sound like my own. A smile formed at the young nurses lips.

“Mr. Farrow, would you like to meet your son?”

It was an odd question, and odder still that moments ago I had been asking it to myself. But none of that mattered now because I had a purpose. Sure, it wasn’t the purpose I had picked for myself all those years ago as a rug-burned baby, but life would be predictable if it imitated our desires. No, I had a purpose much higher than anything I ever pursued or attained. I didn’t have to be the next big thing, I just had to be Sean Farrow, a father, and a good man. Yes, a good man. That would do.
We’re nice people.

This publication was a product of hard work, dedication, and no SA funding whatsoever.