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

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The Great Lake Review
Spring 2011

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# Table of Contents

## Poetry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>Kaline Mulvihill</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942 (Abridged Version)</td>
<td>Rebecca C. Wemesfelder</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarless</td>
<td>Melanie Hoffman</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suddenly There was No Party at the Epicenter of a Beatles Tune</td>
<td>Melissa Bamerick</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Forest of Faces</td>
<td>Rachel Walerstein</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mermaid</td>
<td>Annie Hidley</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynics and Potholes</td>
<td>Liz Sauchelli</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blending</td>
<td>Steve Russomano</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bedtime Story</td>
<td>Katie Scutt</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;E</td>
<td>Logan Underkofler</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unravel it Back Together</td>
<td>Zach Jennings</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumed</td>
<td>Michelle DeLeo</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riptide</td>
<td>Michelle DeLeo</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flying</td>
<td>Phil Marcus</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Duet, Featuring Nature and the City</td>
<td>Zach Jennings</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First White Wall</td>
<td>Annie Hidley</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer for Lucia Valdez</td>
<td>Justin Tabeek</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Non-Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shake</td>
<td>Lauren Harsma</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Things that Matter</td>
<td>Katie Scutt</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle Scars</td>
<td>Brittany Sperino</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Wild Game Inside a Wild Mind</td>
<td>Zachary N. Gatewood</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Art

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Semi-Twilight Zone</td>
<td>Joseph Donegan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brilliance</td>
<td>Michelle DeLeo</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ripple Effect</td>
<td>Michelle DeLeo</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 17, Panel 4</td>
<td>Joseph Donegan</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bedtime Story

Katie Scutt

They begin their nightly ritual, each sharing one thing they learned that day. Tonight she has a new word: knight. She tells him all about knights riding horses, fighting monsters and saving princesses. Although tired, he’s glad to listen.

When it’s his turn, all that comes to mind is the morning news and the monthly bills, and he doesn’t want to give her nightmares. He promises to have two tomorrow. But she’s wide awake now and wants to know what he learned in school when he was a kid. Tucked beneath her covers, she studies his thinking face.

Suddenly, something comes to mind. A poem, or maybe part of a poem, he’s not sure. He sees himself as a boy; about as old as she is now, reciting it before his class. He had chosen the shortest in the book, which his teacher had double checked, but it was there. A simple little rhyme by some old English guy.

“The world is so full of wonderful things,” he tells her, “That you and I should be as happy as kings.”

She laughs. He says it again, loud and clear for all her toys to hear. Then he checks beneath her bed and in the closet, just to be safe. He tells her he loves her and kisses her head. In the doorway he pauses to watch her breathe before turning out the light, and after closing the door halfway, he prays that what he teaches her will always be true.

He lingers in the doorway to watch her breathe before turning out the light. And somewhere between her door and his he stops, wondering, hoping, that what he teaches her isn’t a lie.

He lingers in the doorway to watch her breathe before turning out the light, and as he does he feels a tiny pang of regret, and hopes, prays, that what he teaches her isn’t a lie.

He lingers in the doorway, watching her breathe. And just before turning out the light, he feels a tiny pang of regret, and hopes that what he teaches her isn’t a lie.

They begin their nightly ritual, sharing one thing they learned that day.

Tonight she has a new word: knight. She explains that it’s different than nighttime. Knights ride horses, fight monsters, and save the princess.

Then it’s his turn and he has to think hard, but can only recall the morning’s news, which would surely induce nightmares. He apologizes, admitting that he has nothing to share.

She asks him to remember something he learned in school, when he was a kid. Lying warm and silent beneath her covers, she studies his thinking face.

Finally, something comes to mind. A poem, or part of a poem, he’s not sure. He sees himself as a boy; about as old as she is now, reciting it before his class. He had chosen the shortest in the book. His teacher had double checked, but it was there. A simple little rhyme by some old English guy.

“The world is so full of wonderful things,” he tells her, “That you and I should be as happy as kings.”

He lingers in the doorway, watching her breathe before turning out the light. And as he does, he wonders at how
hard it sometimes is, and yet, how easy too.

She asks him to repeat it and he does, loud and clear for all her toys to hear. It’s a good story, she says, and thanks him. He tells her he loves her and kisses her head, breathing deeply the scent of that no tears shampoo.

He lingers in the doorway, watching her breathe before turning out the light. And as he does, he wonders at how hard it sometimes is, and yet, how easy too.

Tonight she has a new word: knight. She explains that it’s different than nighttime, that knights ride horses and kill monsters and save the princess.

When it’s his turn he has to think real hard. He remembers what he saw on the news that morning, but that would surely induce nightmares. Finally he admits he has nothing to share. She asks him to remember something he learned in school when he was a kid. Again, he thinks hard. Finally, a poem comes to mind, or part of a poem, he’s not sure.

He sees himself as a boy, about as old as she is now, reciting it nervously before his class, an assignment they all had to do. He had chosen the shortest in the book, a simple little rhyme by some old English guy.

He recites it for her now, remembering the words as best he can. “The world is full of wonderful things,” he tells her, “That you and I should be as happy as kings.”

She asks him to say it again and he does, loud and clear for all her toys to hear. She says that it’s a good poem and thanks him. He tells her he loves her and kisses her head, breathing deeply the scent of her no tears shampoo.

He lingers at the door, watching her breath before turning out the light. And as he walks down the dark hallway between their rooms, he hopes what he taught her wasn’t a lie.

He feigns confusion, claiming that he was never a kid. Which of course makes her laugh, giving him a moment to think. He was never very fond of school, even as a young boy, so long ago.

Finally, a memory surfaces so vivid that he is lost for a moment. He’s standing before his class, about as old as she is now, and very nervous. It was an assignment they all had to do. Memorize and recite a poem. He had chosen the shortest in the book, a simple little rhyme by some old English guy.

He recites it for her now, remembering the words as best he can. “The world is full of wonderful things,” he tells her, “That you and I should be as happy as kings.”

She asks him to say it again and he does, loud and clear for all her toys to hear. She says that it’s a good poem and thanks him. He tells her he loves her and kisses her head, breathing deeply the scent of her no tears shampoo.

He lingers at the door, watching her breath before turning out the light. And as he walks down the dark hallway between their rooms, he hopes what he taught her wasn’t a lie.
The Semi-Twilight Zone
Joseph Donegan
Raven
Kaline Mulvihill

He was a raven among the doves,
A battered soul, without any love.
He was a stain on a clean, white shirt,
A young boy, who always got hurt.
He walked the tight rope,
A young man with no hope.
He jumped through fire,
A fool with too much desire.
He died one night,
A brother and son who lost sight.
I don’t know where he does his puzzles anymore. The last time I saw the table it was covered with puzzle pieces. There were pieces of sky, grass, and the red walls of a barn; the steeple of a church; the brim of a yellow straw hat. Along with these cardboard keys were papers: confetti of bills and lilac envelopes and newspaper clippings and Hallmark cards offering their deepest sympathies and condolences and watercolor flowers. My grandfather’s hands were on the table too, full and square-fingered but shaking, and so far away from his puzzle.

At my mother’s suggestion I’d brought him dinner: white rice and kielbasa. He didn’t eat rice, he told me, not plain, so it was a good thing the sweet sausage was made with a thin carmine sauce. My dad said he’d been eating sweets for dinner: chocolate-covered peanuts, oatmeal raisin cookies, jelly beans, and fruit breads and carnival-colored gumdrops. He used to have a pantry, I remembered, when he lived in a house, one stocked with canned pie fillings, cereals and oyster crackers with edges like coins that he liked to put in his soup. There was a box for cookies, hazy and yellow so you could never tell what was inside: molasses ones the copper color of good soil, round white sugar ones with dents in their centers like belly buttons.

I ask him where the pans are. His eyes are too bad to read the numbers on the stove dials. “Your aunt Janet marked the knobs,” he told me in his soft careful voice, and, looking, I see thick black lines drawn in sharpie at the sevens and twos. “But I still have a hard time reading the numbers.”

When the food is hot, I portion the rice into a bowl and pour the kielbasa over it. He takes it to the table and sits down, and I grab a glass for milk and join him. I look down at the tablecloth, then up at him, thinking of the last time I’d seen my grandmother awake, the tray of food the nurse had left for her, how she couldn’t manage more than the milk and the apple juice. My sister and I had been too embarrassed to reach for the fork. I look up, at his ear, and ask him what he’d had for lunch, if my uncle had visited, if he’d gotten his air conditioning fixed.

It’s never been easy for me to talk to my grandparents. They’re wonderful people, and I fear that I’m not, and talking about the goings-on of my own life (which, during that summer, were as mundane as a summer job opening line at Panera) always made me feel insignificant and trite. Their troubles were greater than mine, even if they were far, far in the past. That day was no different. My grandfather had just lost his wife of sixty-five years, and I could think of nothing to talk about but the weather, and who had come to visit that morning.

The spoon shakes each time he brings it to his mouth, but he drops nothing. When Grandma passed, Grandpa wanted her things gone. My mother criticized his hastiness, but I understood: every time he looked in her room, at her sweaters and necklaces and books, he saw her. He didn’t need those things to remind him, not then, because he was thinking about her all the time already.

It’s the same way with Parkinson’s, like packing boxes one item at a time and moving out. It’s a degenerative disease, not one where abnormal tissues grow and warp and poison the body. Cells in the brain that produce the chemical that controls muscle movement are destroyed, and as a result the victim is slowly rattled from their body. Tremors are only part of it. Automatic movements, like blinking, slow, along with speech, and the ability to perform dexterous movements deteriorates. Muscles ache. Balance is compromised.

My grandfather used to golf when I was small. My aunts and uncles would buy him putter-shaped magnets and biographies of golfers and boxes of white balls, pockmarked like teenage skin, for Christmas. He’d never seemed nimble to me when he was that age, but I could still picture him on the green, club in hand, the same way he used to carry around a hose in his garden to fill his birdbath or water his flowers. It suited him. But as I’d watched him struggle to hold a spoon steady, I found it hard to imagine him putting for birdie.

He used to draw, a skill he’d passed down to my father, and to me. We have three of his pieces hanging in my house still: a painting of a mallard; another, large and all grays and greens and blues, of a white horse and a stone wall; and a pen-and-ink barn, done in pointillism, with millions of tiny dots swarming out like clouds of mosquitoes in summer.

He used to carve, and birdwatch, and do the crossword in the Sunday paper. Now he eats candy for
supper, watches Lawrence Welk, and gets sweaters for Christmas.

When he's finished, I take his bowl and his glass to the sink and wash them. There is one beer can in the drain tray, just one, and even though my grandma never really drank, something in my chest breaks when I look at it, the same way it did when, at the hospital, I watched him hold her hand and kiss her forehead and say, “Hey, hot stuff,” the same way it still does when I look at him and he's got that look on his face that I can't quite place but looks like ire or unease or confusion.

He crosses the kitchenette to the cupboard and takes out a package of cookies, probably oatmeal.

Another symptom of Parkinson's is difficulty starting or continuing motion. I look at him and his cookie and wonder if losing her, his wife, is best friend, the women who wore a blue dress at their wedding and mothered his five blue-eyed children, had stopped him entirely or just slowed him down. He was stooped and he was careful, but I always thought that was a character trait, not a symptom. I wonder, now, if he became less of himself when she passed, or when he grew old, when everything he loved to do and the woman he loved to love was shaken from his grasp.

Is who we are defined by the things we do?
The people we talk to?
Do we lose that somewhere? Is it stolen from us with shaking hands and aching limbs?

“It’s not just the slowness and awkwardness of movement but the fear of falling which increasingly limits activity,” one book on Parkinsonism states. I think about it as I sit with him in the living room, watching the news or golf or a variety show. Is this man, my grandfather in his cough-syrup slippers and rope-knit sweater and bright sad eyes, the same as he always was, changed only by a new fear of falling?
You’ve been studying my door for a while, and by now you know the thing like it’s your own: iron banded oak with a vertical grain. Seven feet tall. Three and a half feet wide. Three inches thick. It’s a bit of an odd door for the neighborhood. You notice the other doors don’t have reinforced iron bands and you know they’re not quite so thick. It makes sense, though, because I’m rich, and that’s why you’re here in the first place, isn’t it?

The lock is a triple tumbling mechanism with a deadbolt the size of your big toe. I’m a paranoid man in my old age, what can I say? You curse under your breath for the thousandth time, wishing I had installed at least one window, which would make this a hell of a lot easier. It’s not the door that’s your problem. That, you can open easy. You just wish I had windows so that you could come into my place and rob me blind through a stealthier entrance. It rubs you the wrong way knowing that you have to enter the one place where I can catch you in the act.

Except I can’t catch you in the act, can I? You’ve waited until I’m out of town. Shit. Guess the game’s up now, isn’t it? Just march on in and take my money. This is easy for you.

It’s dark out, and the street is empty, except for that drunk guy over there who stares at you cross-eyed and babbles to himself, wondering why there are two of you standing in front of my door.

You pull out your nifty lock picks and go to work. The triple tumblers are easy work for you. When you’re with your mates, you like to boast about the time you beat a quadruple tumbler. The deadbolt, though, now that will require some ingenuity.

Oh, it won’t? Fuck. You take out a slim crowbar and force it through the crack about where you suspect the deadbolt to be. Then, you take out a small sledgehammer and deliver a quick blow to the other end of the crowbar. The impact makes a loud clink, and the deadbolt gives way, smashing through wood on the other side. Damn, guess I should have thought of that. The drunk guy, hearing the noise, looks up and smiles foolishly, clinking two of his bottles together in mock salute.

You gingerly test the door. Sure enough, it swings open. Darkness greets you when you step in. So do I. Gotcha’ good, didn’t I?

You get a little blood on my door. I’ll have to clean that off later.
Inside, outside.

1942.

Hiding inside.

Hiding in a secret cabinet castle.

Quiet. Inside.

We never go outside

because black spiders

are outside.

They crawl and fester through the city

like spiders on a dead, decaying corpse.

A corpse that was once a “who” and not a “that”.

Not just a body. They were a human.

A body that starved from love

and from food and water.

A body starved from potential.

Life wrung out like an old dish rag,

as the black spiders rung out their bells.

Loud.

And deliberate.

And mean.

But I was quiet. Inside.

Hiding inside a secret cabinet castle.

Hiding inside.
Then it was August 4th, 1944.

And the bells stopped ringing outside.

Outside of my secret cabinet castle,

And they started ringing in my own ears.

They rang because my heart stopped beating

And my life needed some sort of a sound.

They rang because the door to our secret cabinet castle was found.

It was so quiet inside.

Now all I could hear was a ringing.

And hurting.

And smashing because the black spiders had found their way inside.

Inside of our secret cabinet castle.

Inside our souls.

And veins.

My papers flooded the floor and I could see

the handwriting of what was inside of me.

Now, spilled out onto the floor like water.

And the black spiders wrung it out like an old dish rag.

In 1945, I won a war.
Mitch’s beard itched against the couch cushion. The Chinese food container lay open and unfinished on the glass surface of the coffee table. The smell always made him wonder why he ordered it. Slowly sitting up, groaning from the effort, he scratched his beard aggressively with all ten fingers. Mitch hadn’t intended on spending his Saturday afternoon inhaling trans fats and taking catnaps. But, once again, it happened anyway.

He picked up the lunch shrapnel, unconsciously aware of the multiple cup rings on the coffee table, and caught a whiff of his own stench. A shower had to happen. He itched his forehead and felt grime accumulate underneath his fingernails. Pathetic, he thought. With every step he took down the hallway toward the kitchen, a percentage of one giant fart came out. “Crop dusting” is what Mitch and his friends called it in high school. Disgusting, he thought.

He held farts in when Kelly lived there. She’d left only three months ago, but the apartment already looked like it had always been a bachelor pad. The frilly curtains and decorative wall hangings and candles that never got lit all left with her, along with Mitch’s sense of security.

After showering, Mitch decided to leave his apartment and take a walk. The late afternoon summer sun dried his hair completely as he began the all-too-familiar trek to Angee’s Bar and Grill. He’d normally have driven, but he saw a very drunken night approaching. Binge drinking, much like Chinese takeout, had become an automatic on weekends.

The hanging bell jingled as Mitch pulled the bar’s front door open. Three bored waitresses and Lauren, the bartender, turned their attention toward him.

“Mitch!” Lauren shouted. Her tone implied that she was happy to see him. He wished more people were like Lauren. She walked over to him with her arms outstretched for a hug. She always hugged with her arms around Mitch’s waist, making him feel strange with his arms around her shoulders. But he couldn’t complain. “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have the usual,” Mitch said, perching himself onto a backed bar stool.

“You’re gonna have to go a different route, man. You ran us dry the other night.”

“The next best thing works.” Bummed that they were out of his favorite, Mitch couldn’t help but be charmed by Lauren’s relentless spunk.

He took a swig of his beer. A group of three came in and sat at the other end of the bar, splitting Lauren’s attention between Mitch and them. Mitch used the break in conversation to finish his beer and ask for another. The wooden bar’s contoured edge cradled his inactive arm as his drinking arm did curl after curl toward his lips. Mitch had to remember where he and Lauren were in their conversation as she kept bouncing off, tending to other patrons. The growing number of consumed beers made this increasingly difficult.

Mitch had seen his reflection in the mirror behind the bar—head poking up from behind the line of liquor bottles—countless times. He had memorized the owner’s family photos hung up around the mirror. He knew that the third stool from the right squeaked. He knew the bathroom door didn’t lock, so one had to be on guard while peeing, a complete conflict of interest.

“You seem down,” Lauren said, pulling Mitch’s gaze away from his own sad reflection. In his snap back to reality, Mitch noticed he was the only one left at the bar. Had he really been there that long?

“When did I become so weak?” Mitch asked, not expecting an answer. “I’ve been content with a subpar existence for years. You know what it’s like at the bank; you worked there. It’s only gotten worse since you left. And I’m still down about Kelly leaving. You know, I’ve only ever been dumped. I’ve never done the dumping.” Mitch, talking more with his hands than his mouth, spilled his beer all over the neat pile of bar napkins Lauren had just finished stacking. It didn’t faze her in the slightest. He really wished more people were like Lauren.

“Maybe you should talk with your hands in your pockets,” Lauren said. “Listen, you know you can’t do anything about Kelly or anybody else in the past. But you do have the ability to change other things. You remember when I quit the bank. I hadn’t looked back since.”
He nodded and hoped she understood how much he appreciated her candor. Getting down from the stool without stumbling proved challenging. Lauren never accepted his tips, but he decided to leave it on the bar anyway. The door jingled again and he struggled home.

Mitch’s beard itched against the couch cushion. Half of a six-pack sat on his coffee table, condensation dripping down the cans. The dry dead taste in his mouth always made him wonder why he drank so much. He sat up and put his feet on the floor. Where he would normally feel dusty shag carpet, he felt a wet spot. Like usual, he’d fallen asleep with a beer in his hand. *Mature,* he thought.

Suddenly, the ‘voicemail’ ringtone on his phone went off. It was probably a concerned message from his mother; she left a lot of those. She probably left them because he only called her back about a quarter of the time. Mitch didn’t like lying to her, but he couldn’t stand the thought of telling her how he was really doing, either.

He punched his password in and waited.

“You have one, new, voice message,” the mystery woman stated.

“Oh my god, I know,” Mitch said aloud to himself.

“You have two, saved, voice messages.”

“Ugh, you don’t think I know that?” Mitch rubbed his eyes. He really hated that woman, whoever she was. She only had to record those lines once, but he had to hear them every time. Finally the message played.

“Um, hey Mitch. This is Allie Clark from high school. I know this is crazy random, but I’m coming home for the week and I heard you were still around. Maybe we can meet up for lunch or something? Let me know either way. My number is 814-204-3820. I’ll talk to you later.”

Mitch couldn’t believe it. He had to replay the message. The last time he’d seen Allie was the day after their high school graduation. Her voice sounded raspier in the voicemail than it had that day.

Suddenly, Mitch cared about his appearance. He tested the limits of his sparingly used electric razor. His reflection in the mirror, specked with dried toothpaste splatter, had dark circles under his eyes. He had hair on his shoulders—not enough to be gross, but enough to annoy him. He had a spare tire where six-pack abs used to be. Six-packs were much easier to get at the 7-11. Tweezing his sporadic shoulder hairs, Mitch realized he was being stupid. He hadn’t seen Allie in 13 years. *She’s not going to see your shoulders,* he thought. *Beard or no beard, she’s not going to touch your face.*

During their junior and senior years in high school, Mitch and Allie, quarterback and future valedictorian, were sure to be the statues on top of the cake. That prediction shattered when Allie broke up with Mitch the day after graduation. He’d always thought that her speech would be the last time he’d be happy to see her.

His phone rang again, this time with the ‘text message’ ringtone. With one hand full of beard clippings, Mitch flipped open the phone to find a text from Allie.

“Hey u..im in town now. How bout lunch? The Bistro still there?”

Mitch’s heart raced. He felt flushed, like an adrenaline rush subsiding. He said, “yes” as emphatically as one could via text.

*This is something Kelly would do,* he thought, as he rifled through his closet, looking for the black button-up shirt that Lauren had said was slimming. The rest of the outfit wasn’t difficult to assemble, considering only one pair of jeans fit him comfortably anymore.

The short drive to The Bistro seemed even shorter. Would she look the same at all? He parked and began walking. Three shops stood between Mitch and the restaurant when Allie appeared from around the corner. The sun reflecting in the shop windows didn’t shine brighter than she did. Layered blonde hair barely brushed her shoulders. The empire waist of her shockingly white dress wrapped around her subtly fit figure. She walked with a grace that didn’t seem possible in flip-flops. *Perfect,* he thought.

Without words, Allie exposed her bleach-white teeth and reached out for a hug. Her hands felt warm against his back. She smelled faintly like strawberries. Her cheek felt like silk against his newly shaven face. Her waist was so small he could grab his elbows.

“It’s so great to see you,” Allie said. Her breath rushed over Mitch’s ear, sending a fierce chill down the said. Her breath rushed over Mitch’s ear, sending a fierce chill down the back of his neck.
“I can’t believe you’re here,” Mitch said, sounding much less calm than he’d hoped. “What made you decide to come back?” The restaurant’s air conditioning completed the chill that Allie had started.

“It’s kind of a long story that starts with my boyfriend leaving me. I guess I just needed to get out of the house for a while. I took vacation time, scooped up Jake and headed back.”

“Whoa, hang on. Who’s Jake? Not your ex-boyfriend, right?” Mitch didn’t look up from his menu as he spoke. Some part of him was happy to hear she’d been deserted.

“No, definitely not! Jake’s my son. He’s five now, starts kindergarten in the fall.” She bit her lower lip, looking nervous, realizing this was breaking news to Mitch.

“Oh, I never would have guessed,” Mitch said. Allie’s teeth released her lip and an unsure smile stretched across her face.

Mitch’s eyes still gazed at the menu, moving back and forth but not reading. *She got what she deserved,* he thought.

Allie received a call that she had to take and went outside, the thwack of her flip-flops getting quieter with every step. *Snap out of it, jackass,* he thought.

If he still had his high-school age and physique, nothing would have been different in The Bistro. The place never really deserved its pseudo classy name. Peach colored paint peeled in random places. The booth’s cushions were red sparkly plastic, like the chairs in the bowling alley downtown.

“Let’s go to Third Base!” Allie said, rushing back to the booth. “I mean after we’re done here.”

“What about Jake?”

“He’s with my mom. She hasn’t seen him in ages anyway. It works out for everybody. I’ll drive, to the bar at least. First drink is on me.”

“You should be more careful then.” She didn’t get the joke.

Memories bled into the moment as they drove to the bar; driving Allie to prom in his dad’s Model-T; standing side by side on the back of the senior homecoming day float; almost wrecking his car on the seasonal road as they approached the spot no one but they knew about; the first time they said they loved each other; the pride he felt during her graduation speech; the shock he felt when she, with words like burrowing burdens, told him it was over.

Allie’s abrupt use of the brakes rattled Mitch back to the present.

“You pick a song on the jukebox and I’ll get us drinks,” Allie said, adjusting her dress as she ran around the car to catch up to Mitch.

He slid two quarters into the jukebox and selected their song, knowing what it had meant to them years ago. *This could be bad,* he thought. She stood at the bar, her back to Mitch, and her head dropped down as the song started. The hyper spark seemed to fade inside her.

“I’m sorry about your boyfriend,” Mitch said, walking over to her, wishing she would turn around.

“I’m sorry I screwed you over, Mitch.” She finally turned to face him. A tear had etched a glossy line down her cheek.

“Why did you do it?” The question Mitch wanted to ask for 13 years seemed to take a weight out of his chest.

“I was stupid. I freaked out. I was going away to school and I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to handle the long distance thing. I should have told you why I did it. I shouldn’t have done it so abruptly. I shouldn’t have done it when I did. I shouldn’t have done it at all.” She bit her lip, this time trying to fight back more tears.

Mitch took his drink from Allie’s hand, tilted it back, and didn’t stop until it was empty.

“One more, please,” he called to the bartender.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Alright, alright,” Mitch said. A part of him wanted to comfort her, to wipe away her tears. He didn’t, though. “What you did to me has affected me in every relationship I’ve been in after you. I always have this fear that they’ll leave. And I’ve been right every time. Kelly left me three months ago. Every time it happens is harder than the last, and it all started with you. I don’t know if I can fall in love again; each time I’ve fallen, it’s been from a lower place.” Years of built-up pressure released with every word he said. “I didn’t realize
how badly I needed today to happen until right now. Thanks for the drinks.” He left his beer unfinished on the bar.

Mitch didn’t care that he had to walk back to his car. Lauren would want to hear about this, he thought. But another long night at a bar was the last thing he wanted. He finally made it back to his car and drove home.

He woke up refreshed. The three beers still sat patiently on the coffee table, no longer cold and appealing. Feeling a wave of inspiration, he took the cans and poured them into the kitchen sink. It’s about time I clean that coffee table, he thought.
Scarless
Melanie Hoffman

In the summer when the clouds shift,
I notice a kingdom deep into the horizon.
And the soundtrack of the iridescent abyss,
Is the synchronized breath that’s shared between a kiss.

I’ve been told that it’s a beautiful land,
And I should succumb to the unknown.
But I’m still shackled to my ways,
Of keeping my insides unshown.

Even still, my nostrils burn from its endless smell
Of vanilla, and sun-kissed tangerines;
Curiosity overtakes caution,
And so I scamper past on feet unseen.

Devotion is just a sea of sensations felt in vain,
At least it is to me.
And I’m unsure of what you’ve heard,
But I’ve evolved from constructing my own pain.

I won’t be coaxed into a world of unrequited bliss,
In order to maintain the status quo.
And though I’d never tell you this, I’m terrified
Of dying without having any scars to show.
The biggest house fire of the year had been put out just before I arrived at the station with my six-year-old. He stifled a few coughs as we walked through the garage, the air weighed down by the scent of burning, trucks blanketed with a thick layer of ash. We followed sooty footprints towards the kitchen where I put Aiden to bed on a couch in the corner and poured myself a hard drink with the guys while I told them about my latest fight with Jenn. We had fought about me quitting smoking again, her wanting me to stop because of the boy’s asthma, me arguing that he’s been fine all along. She called me crying two hours later, as usual, begged me to come home. As I went to leave, I realized that the kid had gone missing. Those drinks had kicked in and my feet felt numb as I searched the house with the guys for my little blonde haired boy.

He was in the dirty seats of the rig, his face pale and blue. Jay pulled his limp body and placed him on the ground to check for a pulse and breathing. As I leaned in close, there was a faint wheeze that I, in retrospect, wonder if I imagined out of sheer reassurance. I was pulled away, replaced, staring at my blue faced baby while the words “epi” and “02” filled the air around me, making my own breathing hard to catch.
Suddenly there was No Party at the Epicenter of a Beatles Tune
Melissa Bamerick

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.
It was the last week of January, 2008. In Hancock, New York, a dot on the map along the Delaware River, it was bitter cold. Most of the town had gathered in shivering groups along either side of Main Street. Little kids with red runny noses clutched miniature flags in gloved hands.

A reporter from a local news station moved through the crowd, a video camera in hand. “Did you know Justin Whiting?” the reporter asked. The footage would be aired later that evening. “Town mourns fallen soldier;” the headlines would say. Justin, a graduate of Hancock High, had been killed in Iraq. He was 27 years old. They called him a real American hero.

A hearse appeared where the road crested the top of a hill and the crowd grew silent. All eyes turned to watch as the hearse rolled slowly down the street followed by two black cars and two yellow fire trucks, lights flashing, sirens off. The wind howled bitterly. The procession crawled down the tiny stretch of road, finally ending outside of the funeral home.

A team of men in military uniforms emerged from the cars. They formed two lines on either side of the hearse and carefully removed the casket. A silent signal passed among them and they began their orchestrated march, polished boots tapping in unison, the casket hovering between them. Justin’s body disappeared into the funeral home, where it would wait until the wake.

Earlier that week, I was sitting in my high school journalism class. We were on a tight deadline, struggling to get the paper out before the end of the month. As a senior and co-editor, it was my job to rally the troops. We were hard at work when our teacher, Chris Stein, interrupted us. “Whoa,” he said. We knew that sound; it meant big news.

Chris stood before the class to read an article from the associated press. A couple of watchdog journalists claimed to have evidence that Bush and his administration had falsified nearly 1,000 reports of al-Qaeda having weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. These reports were issued before the war started. The article called it “an orchestrated campaign.”

“This is beyond negligence,” Chris said, “This is corruption.”

We listened in rapt attention. Our class had been following current events all year and understood the story’s significance. If the evidence was real, it meant that the US had been fighting a war based on lies. Lies manufactured at the highest level.

“It’s an atrocity,” Chris said, “a crime. And who do you think is paying for it?” Nearly five years had passed since the war was declared. The death toll of American soldiers was nearing 4,000. The Pentagon was planning to send 3,200 more. For what? If there were no weapons in Iraq, then what were our soldiers fighting for? What were they dying for?

I refused to be surprised. I harbored a dim view of America: a nation of sheep, owned by pigs and by ruled by wolves, as Orwell would say. This news was just another log to heap on the bonfire of my anger. An orchestrated campaign. And of course, the American people had bought into it. Why wouldn’t we? They pull the strings and we dance. But what did I know? I was seventeen years old. I couldn’t do anything except stay angry and point fingers. That was easy to do, until Justin came home.

The Whiting family owns a beef farm a mile down the road from us. In our neck of the woods, as my mom says, that makes them neighbors. Randy Whiting, Justin’s dad, had inherited the farm from his father. I don’t know if he enjoyed being a farmer, or if he did it because it was family tradition. Either way, he’s a hard working man. Whenever we passed in the car or on our bikes, he’d be out there. A trim figure standing straight as an arrow in the pasture surrounded by a herd of cows, or mounted on his tractor, cutting and baling a hay field. Always a wave and a smile.

Randy had served in the military when he was younger, but when he met his wife, Estelline, he gave it up to become a family man. He was an outdoorsman who taught his three kids to hunt, fish, and trap. They would all grow up to become soldiers.
When I was little, the Whiting kids were already grown. I didn’t think I had any memories of them. Until, as we drove to Justin’s wake, my mom said that Justin and his sister used to baby sit us. Growing up, we had a lot of sitters. Most of them I don’t remember. But when she said that, it sparked a memory.

“Did he have red hair?” I asked.
“Yes.”
“He built our tree house.”
“That’s right.”

And then I started to remember. I was very young when I knew Justin, six or seven. I can recall only a hazy image of him. In my memory he is a giant, tall and strong.

My brother Kevin, who is four years older than me, remembers wrestling. Kevin and I, and our two sisters, used to jump on Justin’s back and cling to his legs. The four of us all at once; shouting, giggling, grabbing and pulling all over the poor guy. And he never got tired of it.

What I remember best is that day he built the tree house. There was a lone oak tree in the field behind our house. The branches, which were too high to climb, had always teased us. One day, Justin showed up with boards and nails from the farm and went to work. As I recall, it was complete surprise.

In December 1999, Justin enlisted in the army. He was nineteen years old and fresh out of high school. A year later, he had earned the Green Beret and was trained as a Special Forces combat medic. In 2004, he was deployed to Iraq where he served two consecutive tours in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Global War on Terror.

In 2006, Justin was honorably discharged. He came home, reconnected with old friends and hunted with his dad. But he couldn’t settle down, not while other soldiers were still fighting. He told his father that he felt he was needed over there. And Randy, treading the rough road of an honest father, had encouraged his son to do what he felt was right. After only a six-month vacation, Justin re-enlisted and was sent back to Iraq.

On January 19, 2008, Justin was running combat operations 16 kilometers south of Mosul. His vehicle struck an improvised explosive device—a land mine. The explosion wounded three men, the rest were unharmened. Justin was killed instantly.

Standing outside the Emory Methodist Church, silent and shivering, Mom and I waited to pay our respects. The line crawled along the sidewalk toward the open church doors. In the middle of the street, seven veterans stood in a row, staring straight ahead, each holding an American flag. As I stood there, Chris’ words came back to me: An atrocity. A crime. I grew hot with anger and tried to push it away, to think of Justin. I didn’t think I should be angry at someone’s funeral.

Once inside, we removed our jackets and scarves and held them in our arms. The line continued around the pews to the front of the church where the coffin waited. It seemed like the whole town was there.

In the rear vestibule, pictures were being projected on a wall: two boys sit on a couch, the table before them littered with boxes and colored paper. The red haired boy has an arm around the smaller dark haired boy, both wear matching grins. Another picture showed the same boys, a little older now, with a girl, kneeling in a snow covered field around the body of a recently killed deer. It was replaced with the image of a man in tan and brown camouflage, holding gauze and scissors in gloved hands, bent over a bloody out-stretched leg.

How many lives did Justin save as a medic? How many did he take as a soldier?

A folding table stood against the wall. An old yearbook lay open to the class of ’99. Justin’s senior picture shows a grinning boy with bright eyes. It was the face from my memory, the same smile. A football jacket and jersey were also laid out. Whiting, number 44; blue and white. The same colors I wore on the court and field, the same paw print on the shoulder.

I looked at these relics for as I long as I could, even as the line moved forward. I desperately wanted to stay, but the line pushed me along. Past the scenes of Christ’s crucifixion etched in stone and hanging on the wall. When we reached the front of the church, there it was: Justin’s casket, draped in the American flag.

Mounted behind the casket was a large framed picture of the soldier in his uniform. There seemed to be no sign of emotion in his face. No trace of fear, no glimmer of happiness. It was the face of a man who knows
where he stands, knows who he is. A serious face, a proud man. Not the face of a sheep.

As the line moved past the casket, some of the people put a hand on it and bowed their heads. Others looked at it uneasily and moved on. Justin’s family waited on the other side. Randy, wearing a black suit he probably hadn’t worn in years, stood beside his two remaining children. Justin’s older sister, Amanda, and younger brother, Nathan, both wore army dress uniforms. Their faces were set in the same clench expression as their father’s. As the people passed, they shook hands with Randy and his family. There was a lot of crying.

But I couldn’t cry. Not for Justin and not for his family. It seemed that all my tears had boiled away in the heat of anger. And as I stood there in that crowded church, surrounded by shuffling feet and muffled sobs, the flame grew. *What right do we have to mourn? I thought. Shouldn’t we know by now what happens when a government betrays her people, when the people swallow lies? How many have to die before the lesson sinks in?*

I didn’t want to be angry, and I thought that perhaps I didn’t really understand. I looked to my mom, standing beside me. Her eyes were on the casket, lips were pressed thin, trembling to hold the dam against stubborn tears. What did she see that I didn’t?

Inside that dark wooden box was what remained of Justin Whiting. The man who built our tree house. Number 44 running down the football field. The boy who hunted with his father, laughed with his brother, and held his mother’s hand. Gone. For what? I didn’t want to believe that he had given it all up for nothing, that his death meant nothing more than another wasted young life.

Haven’t there been enough of those? Every town has at least one. You know, the kid whose life is cut short in some meaningless act of youthful stupidity. Bar fight. Reckless driving. Drug overdose. A kid remembered by the way they died. Their name invoked as a warning from parent to kid. “Careful. Don’t be stupid now,” they say, “Remember...” Fill in the blank. In our little town, that name was Evan Appley.

I was a freshman when Evan died. I wasn’t there, but I know the story. Every kid in town knew before his body was in the ground.

It was a Friday night in March 2005. Three seniors at Hancock high school, star players on the varsity football team, were cruising down a back road outside of town. They were drinking beers and playing mailbox baseball. The car was barreling down an unpaved road toward the river. Some of the houses were acres apart, surrounded by dense woods. The trees crowded close to the road, the branches joining together like the church ceiling, blocking out the stars.

A mailbox came into the path of the headlights. The car slowed suddenly, jerking toward the edge. Batter up. A boy’s head and torso sprung through the passenger window, a metal bat raised. Before he could swing, his head collided with a tree and his body was pulled from the car. His friends picked him up and put him back in the car. They tossed the bottles in the woods before driving to the next house to call 911. By then, Evan Appley was dead. He was eighteen years old.

I cried when I found out, although I don’t know why. I was a freshman, Evan was a senior. To me, he was just another jock. He probably didn’t know my name. I cried for Evan. Why couldn’t I cry for Justin? Was his death any less meaningful than Evan’s? Justin died as a soldier. Isn’t there supposed to be honor in that?

The hippie in me screams that war, any war, is wrong. How can destruction and death be a viable solution for anything? What reason can justify it? It doesn’t make sense to me. Even little kids eventually learn how to share a sandbox without fighting over boundaries or throwing sand in each other’s eyes. Why can’t we share the world in peace? Of course, I know the world isn’t as simple as a sandbox. I know that war isn’t always a matter of black and white, right and wrong. As I’d just learned, all sides harbor their share of villains.

But there are also men like Justin, who vow to defend their country, and become pawns in a game of greed and lies. How could Justin have known this? As far as he knew, he was fighting for those who couldn’t fight for themselves. In the name of freedom, for a country he trusted, under a flag he believed in. Does it matter if it’s true? Is it enough that men like Justin are willing to give their lives for what they believe? Enough to make their lives meaningful, to make their deaths honorable?

My uncle Terry used to say: *Whether you live or die doesn’t matter. What you live for and what you are willing to die for, these are the things that matter.* The first part seems easy. We decide it every day. But the second part... We don’t want to think about that, and we hope we never have to prove it. Justin did.
Forty years ago, during the Vietnam War, men would flee to Canada or Mexico, anywhere rather than fight. They refused to kill and they refused to die. Justin wasn’t drafted. He enlisted, twice. He raised his hand and swore to defend his country and the freedom of his people, and to follow the orders of his superiors. He could have done anything, been anything. He chose to be a soldier. It wasn’t a political decision. It wasn’t a career move. For Justin, that’s who he was.

The war was on. The troops were already there, fighting and dying under the same oath he had taken. His place was with them. He would go because he was needed. He would fight because it was his responsibility. And that’s honorable. That matters.

Justin and Nathan were both stationed in Iraq, and were able to see each other two or three times a month. They shared breakfast the day Justin died. Nathan later recalled that his brother’s last words were “I’ll see ya.” That was it. Wasn’t he afraid of dying? Maybe Justin understood my uncle’s wisdom better than I. He knew what he was living for, and he was willing to die for it. Maybe the rest didn’t matter.

I stood before the casket, trying to make sense of it all. And I thought of the tree house. It was the best memory I had of him, but the image was fading like an old photograph. How quickly we grow and forget.

In this image, we’re standing before the oak tree. With my head tilted back, I gaze upward along the side of the trunk. Wooden planks had been nailed in to make a ladder. Where the trunk splits into three, sheets of plywood were laid flat and anchored with two-by-fours. My brother and sisters peer over the edge. I want to be up there with them, but it’s so high and I’m afraid I’ll fall. But then, I get this feeling. I can’t see him, but I know he’s there, standing just behind me. And maybe it’s only in my mind, but I hear his voice say, “Don’t be afraid. I won’t let you fall.”

I won’t let you fall. Isn’t that what he lived for? I don’t remember if I said this then, but I’ll say it now.

When I turned away, there was Randy and his family, with their pride. In my confusion of sadness and anger, I saw their pride as ignorance. They saw Justin’s death as some glorified sacrifice. They didn’t understand what it really was. But I did, or so I thought.

There we were: Randy with his pride and me with my arrogant anger. I wish I could say that I shook his hand and gave him a hug. But I didn’t. When the time came to move forward, I stood half hidden behind my mother as she expressed our grief. Randy looked at me and for a moment our eyes met. He attempted a smile, which I may have returned. I don’t remember. I just remember the feeling of guilt that settled like a brick in my stomach, and only began to lift when I was finally outside, breathing in the bitter air.

It’s been almost three years since Justin died. Soldiers are still dying in the Middle East, although now it’s called Operation New Dawn. Those in Hancock who remember Justin think of him less and less. On the Whiting farm, the hay is baled and the cows are fed.

A twenty-five foot flag pole now stands atop the tallest hill on the Whiting farm. Randy had it raised on the Memorial Day following Justin’s death. At the base of the pole is a plaque. It reads: “In memory of SSG Justin R. Whiting and to all who have given their lives to advance the cause of freedom.” At night, a spotlight illuminates the flag from below. Passersby on Route 97 wonder what it’s doing in the middle of a farm.

When I pass the Whiting farm and I see that flag hovering high over the countryside, I remember Justin and I try to see it through Justin’s eyes. I also think of Randy, and that hug I owe him. A man who buries his son... doesn’t he deserve a hug?
I was never a big fan of swimming in the ocean, but my father had always had this way of persuading people, and I fell for it every time. We’d played the scene out countless times before: Running through the breakers, swimming for the horizon, stopping when the lifeguard blew his whistle at us. That day, though, he grabbed my hand when I wasn’t ready and pulled me in without looking back, his laughter thrown into my face by the wind along with salt that stung my eyes and forced them shut. I tried to pull away, but my running feet fell into colder, looser sand, and the waves started to carry me by the time I realized I couldn’t feel the bottom anymore. The water pressed against my chest, climbed up my throat while my father attempted to pull me close as the rip tide grabbing for my knees tried to tug me out to sea. Both of his hands were wrapped around my one wrist for just a moment before the ocean took hold of my ankles and whisked me away. I felt the salt water fill my mouth first, nose second, ears last.

The wave tucked me under and I was rocked so violently that my hands were left grabbing and my mouth opened to scream, but there was nothing. Something grabbed at my waist and I tried to swim away, but when I realized it was my father, I gave in.
Was that a sneer? Maybe it was just an awkward, “Oh, nice to see you here,” sort of smile.

Why is your mouth agape? There must be something in my-no. It was just a trick of the light. I think.

To believe they can stand the tests of time, but this wind is blowing them about. Surely the breeze is but a trifle.

I walk past these faces everyday- and yet this is the first time they have looked back.

Gazing upward instead of glaring down into pixels helps I suppose. My thumbs thank me.

Of those I saw some were funny, one very serious and detached. All had scars in their countenance- wooden and staunch.

I wonder, does anyone else see them there? Or has imagination been hacked completely; firewood for mass production of the very things that dull them.

It is raining. The striplings shake and shiver in the cold; much like I do as I walk about. The rain has blurred their faces.

Perhaps we aren’t as distant as thought.
Brilliance
Michelle DeLeo
Mermaid
Annie Hidley

Hazy gray, the sun drifted half down behind the horizon

The waves rolled onto the rocky beach,
Then plunging into the stones
Making sounds like glass
Being sprinkled on tiles,
Like wind chimes tapping a window.

The lake was a mirror in March
Catching all the strips of light
Spooning with the edges of the shore
Seagulls dipped and dove on
Invisible waves that were currents in the sky
Their voices were swallowed
In the wind that took off over the road
I was thinking about him,
Thinking about his hands
Wondered if my skin would ignite like that again
And as I turned to face the waves,
The wind,
And squinted at the clouds that Were billowing in,
Bright green, dark green, a flash of scales
A form thrown up onto the smooth, white stones
Seaweed tangled in golden hair
Eyes bright blue and gills on her neck
The mermaid grabbed at the shells on the shore
Dragging her iridescent body across rocks
She gasped for air and wiped her eyes
Goosebumps rising on her arms
Webs between her fingers stretching tight
As she looked for something to hold onto
Her tail slithered behind her
Bright green fins
It pounded the ground like she was trying to stand
I tried to call to her but my voice
Swirling upwards like smoke
Drifted away with the wind
She pushed back her hair
It trailed past her waist to her fins
And propping herself up on her hip,
She pushed off, arms stretched
And dove right back in.
I walked to the place where her body had been
She hadn’t noticed anyone was around
One long golden hair was caught under a rock
The ripples she’d made were fanned out
Bubbles broke silently on the shore.
I sat on the couch and stared longingly out of the front window of my house. Despite the clattering sounds it made on the roof, the rain came down rather gracefully. As I looked through the window pane I mindlessly focused my attention to one misshapen rain drop that was creeping down the glass. It gradually glided down to the window sill, leaving a watery streak in its path. No playing outside today, I thought. Stupid rain. I was snapped out of a midsummer daze by a loud thumping noise. Someone was knocking at the front door. I felt my lips form into a smile as I recognized the familiar pattern of the incessant banging. I hopped off the couch and whizzed to the door.

I pulled on the antique handle of the heavy door and there on the porch stood my friend Alex. The rain dripped from his light blonde hair onto his face which had slightly freckled from the sun. His white shirt was damp and his athletic shorts were the same color green as the frogs we’d often catch. Well, I should say that he would catch. His small, athletic body was fit for chasing after the frogs’ long leaps and swiping them in mid air.

“Hey Brittany,” Alex said as he flashed a smile. His presence on the porch seemed to light up the dreary day.

“Hey, guess what I learned today!” I exclaimed. He asked what and I told him how I had learned the word “stupid” wasn’t actually a swear word and now I could say it all I wanted. In fact, I had been saying it all day long about anything I could think of.

He shook his head at my innocence and laughed, “You’re such a goofball.”

“Alex! You’re not supposed to use words like that!” I said with mock authority, putting my hands on my hips.

“Hey, if you can say stupid, I can I say goofball!” He made a good point. He always said words my mom considered bad. Secretly, it was one of the things I liked most about him. Although we were the same age, Alex and I differed quite drastically. It was a wonder to some that we were even friends. What they failed to understand is the one thing we had most in common was how we thrived off of each other’s differences.

“So, do you want to go play on the Parkers’ trampoline?” Alex asked eagerly. The Parkers were my neighbors that lived across the way; living in the outskirts of town meant lots of space between neighbors. I looked at him befuddled, wondering if I had heard the question wrong. The Parkers said we could use the trampoline whenever we wanted, but we weren’t allowed on it in the rain. They didn’t want us to slip and get hurt. I felt my face contort into an expression of confusion.

“Come on,” Alex coaxed. “You know you want to.” As the word “no” began to creep from the back of my throat to my tongue, I swallowed it hard. Alex smirked with a sense of victory when he saw me doubt my standing position of always following the rules.

“Well, I mean, that is a pretty stupid rule,” I said, putting emphasis on stupid. I was blatantly trying to justify myself so I wouldn’t feel guilty for what we were about to do.

Alex nodded in agreement. “A very stupid rule. It won’t be a big deal. We’ll just sneak over, jump on the trampoline for a little while and then come back here. Who’s gonna know?” He shrugged nonchalantly. The way he said it made it sound foolproof to my seven-year-old ears. Instantly, I felt the shadow of doubt lift from my mind and I managed to push my overbearing conscience into the background.

“Let’s do it!” I grinned. As much as I wanted to grab my sparkly, pale pink raincoat, I didn’t. People who didn’t take risks wore raincoats. I was a rebel now and I was ready to get drenched. I closed my front door behind me but not without difficulty. I loudly called the door a “stupid old thing” and slammed it shut. We walked around my house to the backyard and took off our shoes. Alex said it would make it easier for us to be sneaky without them. The ground felt slick beneath my bare feet. I wiggled my toes around a bit to get a feel for the wet grass. The green blades slithered in and out of the crevices separating the digits on my feet.

“Okay,” Alex whispered. He had a mischievous look in his eye and I could see the excitement building up inside him, like the colorful Lego bricks we would stack one by one, trying to reach the ceiling. He was in his element. This was the look I had seen many times before and what resulted afterward usually meant getting
in some kind of trouble. For a split second I felt a wave of reluctance fall over me. Then I heard Alex say reassuringly, “Just follow me and do what I do and we’ll be fine.” I nodded, placing all of my faith in him. Even if we got caught, I knew I wouldn’t be in it alone. Alex would never leave me by myself to take the hit.

We moved slowly and quietly from my backyard towards the front of my house. We casually walked across my driveway, heading towards the Parkers’ side yard. As I walked across it, I felt the rocks squish into the sediment and the mud collect between my toes. Maybe we tried a little bit too hard to act casual. Instead of just two kids walking, we took our steps carefully and made a point to keep looking around, checking windows for peeping heads. If anyone had looked out, they would have become suspicious immediately.

Once we hit the grass of the Parkers’ side yard Alex looked at me, pursed his lips and pressed his pointer finger against them. I then pushed my lips together and slid my pointer finger and thumb across them, as though I was zipping them shut. We crouched low near the bushes lining the edge of the backyard, like lions on the hunt. We tiptoed as though every move we made could be heard. In reality, the rain had increased in intensity and volume level; it hushed any noises we made while we snuck around. As I whipped my head back and forth to make sure we weren’t being followed, my curly wet hair whomped me in the face. My clothes were soaked, my small feet were covered in mud and pieces of wet grass of varying lengths stuck to my legs. I looked like I had just crawled out of a swamp.

I felt my stomach twist into knots as we got closer to the trampoline. The magnificent trampoline of wonders, the Mecca of my childhood. The purple ring around the edge of the large black circle illuminated it in the colorless atmosphere. The closer we got to the trampoline, the closer we got to the house. My muscles tensed up and my hands balled into fists as my eyes darted from side to side, scanning the landscape for witnesses. I made sure to follow Alex’s every move. If he crouched low, I crouched lower. If he stopped quickly, I stopped quicker. We soon came upon an area in the Parker’s backyard that possessed the ability to blow our whole operation. If anyone was home, they could now see directly where we were from the dining room’s bay window. Alex dropped to the ground, rolled out of the view of the window and did an army crawl to the base of the trampoline. He kneeled next to the trampoline and motioned me with his hand to come to him.

**Just follow me and do what I do and we’ll be fine.** His words echoed through my head. I gulped and nodded at him, wondering when the theme music from *Mission: Impossible* was going to begin. I dropped to the ground with a thud, not nearly as swiftly as Alex had and rolled awkwardly. It was very unlike Alex, who had just propelled himself like a bowling ball down a lane headed for a strike. I pulled myself forward with my elbows; they dug into the soft, damp ground. As I did my pathetic army crawl to where Alex was, I saw him chuckling at me. It wasn’t the mocking kind of chuckle, it was more of a patronizing laugh. I must have looked like a clumsy cadet on her first day of boot camp.

Alex stood up and stretched his head out, peaking around. I doubted that he could have really seen much through the thick curtain of rain. He climbed on to the trampoline, placing his hands on the edge, pulling himself up and lifting one leg at a time over the side. He peaked over the edge at me.

“Come on up!” he smiled. I felt the weight of sneaking around ease off of me as I climbed onto the trampoline. I was careful to make sure the purple cover fully concealed the long, silver springs as I climbed on. My skin had been pinched in those stupid things one too many times. The feeling of anxiety I had felt a moment ago was replaced with euphoria. We had made it to the trampoline. A sense of risk that we could be caught at any moment kept my energy up.

Alex and I began to jump. The trampoline made a distinct squeaking sound when the springs stretched and contracted as the black material formed to our feet. As we came down, it pushed us back up into the air. I’d jolt myself into the air as forcefully as I could. I was invincible when I was midair, arms outstretched towards the sky as if I was going to reach right into light gray abyss. The smile on my face felt permanently glued there as we bounced up and down. We ran and slid from one side of the trampoline to the other. As we did, the friction between the wet trampoline and our feet made a sound that resembled a tent being unzipped. When we competed to see who could jump the highest Alex won; when I landed my feet slipped forward and I found myself on my back laughing at myself. We played Don’t Break the Egg but I cracked within the first three minutes. We tried our very hardest to be as quiet as possible. However, once in a while one of us would let out a loud laugh or quick holler and the other would then follow suit by drowning out the sound with “Shhh! Shh! Be
quiet!” But then we would both laugh because we knew we were the best rule breakers around and no one was going to catch us.

We had been on the trampoline for almost an hour when I heard the ominous squeak of the Parkers back door opening. Alex and I both froze. He was facing and looking at me with intensity, but he didn’t look scared. I was facing the back deck and I watched as Mrs. Parker came out the back door, guns blazing. She was a big woman with dark hair and dark eyes. Despite her rough appearance, she had always been a generous and tender lady. But now that she spotted us on her trampoline in the rain all of her tenderness seemed to drain out of her. As I looked at her, I failed to find the women who made us lemonade on the warmest days of summer and hot chocolate on the coldest days of winter. She fumed so violently it was as if every raindrop that touched her instantly turned into steam as a consequence of encountering her dangerously hot surface.

“And what exactly do you two think you are doing?” she scolded us at the top of her lungs. The rest of the words she screamed all formed in one relentless banshee sound that made me cringe. She waved a single finger at us, as though that somehow made her more threatening. She stepped down the stairs to come off of the porch towards us. The bulletproof feeling of being a little renegade slowly began to slip away from me. At that instant, Alex grabbed my arm and jumped off of the trampoline, pulling me with him. I looked at him confused and then he mouthed one word: Run! The rebellious feeling filled me once more.

I picked up my feet, moving my legs as fast as they would allow. Alex led the way as we ran to the edge of the property line. As I ran across the saturated grass, I felt the ground pull out from under me. I slipped and landed hard on my backside. Stupid grass. It hurt but I failed to notice the pain at the time. Alex looked back and saw me on the ground. He jogged the few yards back he was ahead of me and helped me up, smiling the entire time.

“Come on, Brittany!” he yelled, grinning ridiculously. We ran past the bushes of the back end of the Parkers’ yard into the woods. Certainly we could have ran directly through the side yard to get to my house, but by running into the woods we were shielded from Mrs. Parker’s penetrating glare. Even though Mrs. Parker couldn’t see us anymore we continued to run. The trees that stood tall above us acted as an umbrella, protecting us from most of the rain. The sharp rocks and twigs on the forest floor poked and prodded at my bare feet. The thorns and branches clawed at my clothes and bare legs, leaving lines of red. Alex and I fought our way through the forest. Despite the cuts and bruises nature was inflicting upon us, we laughed and smiled the entire time like prisoners of war who had just successfully escaped from their evil captors.

We didn’t stop running until we stumbled out of the protective cover of the forest into my backyard. I fell to the ground melodramatically. Alex laughed and deflated beside me. I looked over at him, laying next to me with his eyes closed, facing the somber sky. “Do you think she’ll tell on us?” I asked, sort of worried now that the buzz of being a miniature anarchist was wearing off.

“Nah,” he reassured me, keeping his eyes closed. “However, there will be hell to pay the next time we go over there. Remember that one time we played in her garden, ruined her precious tulips and then she made us scrub the porch clean? It’ll probably be some stupid punishment like that.” I sighed in relief. Scrubbing the porch wasn’t that bad.

“I’m all cut up from the woods,” I sighed, “I think I broke my butt when I fell.”

“It was worth it though, wasn’t it?” Alex opened his eyes, turned his head and looked at me with a sense of accomplishment. That’s what it was too, an accomplishment. Yes, we had gotten caught, but we had gotten to do what we wanted and we had a good time doing it.

“Definitely,” I replied. I turned my head towards the sky and closed my eyes. I was so soggy already that I couldn’t even feel the water from the grass seeping into my clothes as they suction-cupped to my skin. My breathing began to slow and I felt my heart pounding lightly against my rib cage. I became so concentrated on just inhaling and exhaling it no longer felt automatic. I beamed as the crystalline raindrops collided with my dewy skin. One of the scratches I had acquired from the less than friendly branches in the wood stung whenever a raindrop crashed into it. I winced at first and then smirked to myself. It was a bittersweet feeling having battle scars. Maybe the rain wasn’t so stupid after all.
Max had his best suit on. Dry-cleaned to perfection, the tailored and pinstriped number felt and looked as natural as a second layer of skin. A light green shirt and an eye-popping white tie completed the ensemble. He had shiny black shoes and a shiny black briefcase. He had a shiny smile and a shiny silver watch. He stood out, even in Manhattan. His presence flooded the subway car. People noticed. People stared. His midnight black hair, styled immaculately, rested above a face with deep green eyes women got lost in. His broad shoulders and slim, apparently muscular build led people to many positive assumptions. He looked so calm and collected and smooth in this clogged artery of a subway car.

The monotony of the nine-to-five routine was getting harder for Max to make interesting for himself; taking the J train from Lorimer Street, crossing the East River into Manhattan, switching to the N train at Canal Street, and finally getting off at 42nd. Which train ran express when was as easy to remember for Max as his own birthday. Little things began to stick out and become unbearable to know.

“I just traveled six miles and it took me forty-two minutes,” Max grumbled to himself as he walked up the steps into the moving city air.

The wind dried Max’s sweaty face. Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said for the moisture that was trapped under his lavish suit. That was another thing about the subway. Could there be a more accurate comparison to hell? On the subway, Max was being taken somewhere he didn’t want to go along with hundreds of people that were probably sharing the same sense of imprisonment. And it felt like there was no air whatsoever. Sure, there was air conditioning in the subway car. But in every seat, and standing, hanging on to every handrail, was a fellow human being breathing hot air all over the person next to them. Every day it got harder for Max to put up with.

“Guys, can ya please gimme money fo’ somethin’ ta eat?” called out a wheelchair-ridden homeless man on the corner of 43rd and 7th.

It was the same line everyday of the week. Max had a bitter feeling for this particular homeless man. A while back, Max had given him six inches of a chicken teriyaki Subway sub. The man then proceeded to ask Max what kind it was. Would he have not eaten it if it had been a veggie sub or a BLT sub? Beggars can’t be choosers.

Two more blocks and Max would be in front of his building. Well, it wasn’t his building; it was the one he worked in. He worked for a marketing firm. There’s no point in describing his job, because, no matter how hard he tried, not even Max could make it sound interesting.

Almost every morning before Max went to his desk, he went into the bathroom, but not for traditional purposes. Instead he stood in one of the stalls, closed his eyes, and imagined himself back home.

*     *     *

Port Allegany, a three-traffic-light town in rural, back-woods Pennsylvania: A junior in high school, Max was a jubilant kid. He didn’t fit in with one particular clique. His immediate group of friends consisted of a jock, a marching band member, a computer nerd (or as they called him, a gamer), and another drifter like himself. He always thought of himself and his friends as The Breakfast Club.

The hill: Max played guitar; a sun burnt maple colored Fender Flat-Top acoustic that sang to him every time he picked it up. Max drove about three miles out of town on a back road that switched from asphalt to dirt and became severely uphill. He reached the top. Cool evening autumn air made every sense feel alive. The sunset was about to harmonize with the color of his guitar. Sitting on the hood of his rusty white Pontiac, Max strummed chords he felt the sky wanted to hear. Mother Nature approved and began playing along with him as the wind made the tall grass and trees come alive in song. The ambers and oranges and purples of the dimming sky compelled Max to write down words that came into his head.

On my hill I’ve
Seen the other side of
What my life has been
All this time.

He didn’t quite know what they meant, but he loved them. And they fit perfectly with the chords he was playing. He ended up finishing the whole song that night on the hood of his car.

Max opened his eyes and saw the present. He was back in the immaculate bathroom. It was so pristine that it almost came full circle back to disgusting. Gold faucets? Marble? Broadway mirrors? Really? He checked himself in the mirror, as if he was about to go on stage—at some point, vanity had crept into his life—and made his way out of the restroom and to his desk.

Phones ringing - bosses yelling - subordinates apologizing – phones ringing – necks, backs, and knuckles cracking – exasperated sighs – whispered swear words – loud swear words leading to subordinates apologizing – unnecessary trips to the restroom – coffee.

Lunch!


Five o’clock!

Those were the highest points of Max’s week; five lunch breaks and five five o’clocks.

Once again, Max survived the systematic and suffocating insanity of the trip home and made his way up to the third floor of his Lorimer St. apartment in Brooklyn.

“Are you ready for tonight?” Karen, Max’s girlfriend, asked him before he had a chance to shut the door behind him.

“Yeah,” Max replied, trying his best to convey excitement and anticipation. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m so glad we have the top apartment!” Karen shouted. “We have the rooftop all to ourselves! Did you know Michael and Renee are coming? I haven’t seen them in so long!”

“That’s great,” Max replied to Karen, who was already making her way up to the bathroom to start getting ready. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

He kicked off his shoes onto the floor next to the shoe rack, not onto the shoe rack, though. He was too tired and annoyed to actually take the time and exert the energy to bend over and place them where they belonged. Straight ahead of him was their apartment sized washer and dryer. Something about the dryer being above the washer had always seemed unnatural to him. He cracked the toes on his now shoeless feet on the welcome mat. It was sweet, temporary relief. Turning to his left and sliding his feet down the fake wood floor of the short hallway, he made his way into the kitchen. To him, the kitchen should have been bigger considering the grand size of the apartment overall. He opened the fridge door, adorned with various photos of Karen and himself, and cracked open a Bud Light that had been patiently waiting for him all day.

“Ahhh,” Max naturally sighed. He recognized the sadness of the fact that only these little moments could bring him happiness anymore.

He made his way up to the bathroom and went in, finding Karen in the shower. The glass wall of the walk-in shower was already steamed up. Max joined her and they felt the hot water and inhaled the steam together.

“How was your day?” she asked him.

“Meh, it was a day,” he replied, hoping she would just let him leave it at that.

“Wow, that amazing, huh?”

Max recognized her tone as one that wouldn’t stand for an answer that short.

“It’s just the same routine every day,” he said. “I take the same train at the same time and deal with the same infestation of humanity along the same path and I walk to the same building and take the same elevator to the same floor and I walk to the same bathroom and picture the same place in my head and I get the same feeling every time I look into the mirror.” He felt light-headed from the combination of ranting and taking a desperate breath of air consisting mostly of steam.

“What feeling is that?” Karen asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“The feeling that I don’t belong here,” exclaimed Max. “I hate the way my head looks popping out of
an arrogant suit. I’m a walking contradiction.”

“Your head looks just fine when you’re in your birthday suit,” she said as she smiled suggestively. She pressed herself against him and kissed his neck. The combination of smooth skin and supple lips sent his troubles flying for a rapturous few seconds.

“Maybe tonight will cheer you up,” she said optimistically, after an engaging kiss.

“I hope so.”

The cold air outside the bathroom shocked Max’s damp skin. Karen instinctively checked her cell phone for texts.

“They’re on their way,” she said in a panic. “My hair isn’t even close to dry!”

Max didn’t bother giving a response because he knew it was an emergency he couldn’t defuse.

They both got dressed in front of the 4’x 6’ bedroom window that had no curtain. It was hard to avoid, considering the window took up more than half of the wall, vertically and horizontally. There was an elementary school across the street that mirrored the apartment building’s number of floors. So whether it was daytime or nighttime, there was probably a student or a late-working janitor getting a free peep show.

Feeling much more like himself in jeans and a T-shirt, Max went up to the roof and filled the coolers with beer and wine and ice. He plugged in the string of white Christmas lights Karen had strewn along the black metal railing that ran along the whole circumference of the rooftop. His bare feet tickled as he walked along the miniature golf style grass that carpeted the roof’s surface. Now the area was lit up and boozed up. Suddenly, Max heard the obnoxious buzzer going off downstairs, letting him and Karen know that company was waiting at the front door. Karen, with her midst-of-the-jungle thick blonde hair still being fashioned, shouted up to Max to go down and let them in. Annoyed, nervous and submissive, he made his way down the four flights of stairs from the roof to the ground level.

“Hey, pookie!” Lila, a mutual friend of Max and Karen’s, sang as she threw her long and skinny arms out for a hug. Her thick brown curly hair itched Max’s face as they embraced. She was half Jewish and had four middle names. Next to Lila was a guy that was at least three inches shorter than her and Max never found it to be worth the time to remember his name. Max, along with the first two guests, climbed the stairs back up to the apartment.

“Hey Kare-Kare!” Lila shouted, running over to Karen and giving her a strangling hug. Yes, Lila was animated. “I brought some wine and some beer and some VODKAH!” The excitement spilling out of her mouth when she said “VODKAH” would make anyone want to get sloppy wasted.

“Oh, thanks babe,” Karen replied once she escaped from Lila’s loving death-grip. “The coolers are all on the roof. Make yourselves at home.”

“We’re not going anywhere until we do some shots,” Max exclaimed, wanting desperately to reach the level of intoxication at which he wouldn’t feel socially awkward. As the shots were being poured, the buzzer rang again. Five people were down there this time, only one of whom Max knew. Upstairs they went and then up to the roof. Karen got the music started. Drinking and conversing and random dancing ensued. She introduced Max to the people he hadn’t met. They were all equally as successful as Max. They discussed their jobs and where they lived and it all reminded Max of how stuck he felt in New York. He talked about his job but no matter how hard he tried he couldn’t make it sound enjoyable. Max’s beer can quickly became empty and he used it as an excuse to escape the conversation. For the next couple hours, Max drank more than he talked. The crowd had grown to approximately twenty-five people. Karen was comfortably bouncing from group to group – coworkers, random friends and family – and chatting away with every single person. Max kept pulling his phone out of his jeans pocket and acting like he had text messages to answer. He stuffed his phone back into his pocket, grabbed another beer, walked awkwardly to the west end of the roof and leaned on the railing. He gazed up into the night sky and took a deep breath. “I miss stars,” he whispered to himself. His eyes traveled down and fell upon the lights of the nighttime Manhattan skyline, reflecting like a rippling fire on the surface of the East River. “I miss trees and fresh air and country sunsets and backyard baseball games and homecoming parades and playing the guitar around a campfire.” Max wished that somehow his soft longing words would become actions and find their way westward over the George Washington Bridge, and out onto the interstate and the two-lanes and the dirt roads.
Max, already done with his newest beer, grabbed another one from a cooler and went downstairs and locked himself in the bathroom. He had nothing but the picture of home in his head. He had nothing but the smell of autumn leaves and freshly cut grass in his nose. He had nothing but the sound of the glass plant’s rejected bottles clanking and smashing on the ground. He had nothing but the taste of his mom’s sausage casserole in his mouth. He had nothing but the chill of the cool country breeze splashing over his skin. It didn’t really occur to Max that he seemed to do all of his reminiscing in bathrooms. Being an only child, he always felt more comfortable in solitude. He put the lid of the toilet down and sat on it like a chair. Switching his beer from his right to left hand, he grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket. It was mass drunk texting time. He check-marked everyone in his contact list and sent a text saying, “I feel like I’m trapped.” He, in a somewhat selfish way, knew the vagueness of his text would promote prompt and concerned responses. He was right. Seeing the words his old friends sent back to him gave him that pre-cry ache in the back of his throat. That, combined with the amount of alcohol he had consumed, added up to a full-on cry. He wept as he responded to his friends’ responses. His hands were shaking so bad he couldn’t even finish them. Getting up and realizing how tipsy he was, Max set his beer down and looked at himself in the mirror. The typically cool, calm and collected façade was melting. He stared at his reflection as the tears plummeted into the sink that his hands tightly held on to. Something about the tortured and sad look on his face made him feel more real and human than he had felt since he made the move to New York. It was scary and refreshing all at the same time. Max and his reflection jumped when there was a loud knock on the bathroom door.

“Max, are you in there?” Karen asked. Her tone had a combination of concern and annoyance in it. Max opened the door without a word and Karen became purely concerned. She came in and locked the door behind her. “What’s wrong dove?”

“I can’t do this anymore,” Max said. His lips quivered so much it was hard for him to form the words correctly. He was now sitting back on the toilet and Karen sat on the floor, resting her arm on his knees. “Do what? Do what?” Karen replied. It didn’t take her long to start crying along with Max. She gazed up at him and the look in her eyes made it even worse.

“This city, it’s so hard and cold. It’s made me so hard and cold. This is the first time I’ve cried since I moved here. I used to be a caring, emotional person and now I’m just a drone in a mask and a costume. I’m fake around you, around everyone. It’s like I’m a part of a shitty play that I don’t want to be in but the music keeps playing and the other actors keep on acting. I feel obligated to keep performing because of how loving you are and how nice your friends are. But I can’t keep faking it. I hate the hot garbage smell on every block. I hate that the only trees I see are growing out of sidewalks. I hate that the birds aren’t scared of people here. I miss my friends talking about hunting season. I hate hunting, but I love that they love it and I love hearing about it. I miss playing five card stud at my best friend’s camp. All anyone plays here is hold ‘em. That’s not real poker. I…”

“Okay, okay. You’re drunk and you’re rambling,” Karen said. “Let me take you to bed and you can just crash for the night.”

“You don’t get it,” Max replied, slurring his words. “I can’t keep living here. This city and all of its mouse-in-a-maze occupants are the reason I’m so miserable.”

“You’re just drunk, Max. Please just sleep on it.”

“I’m getting on a train and I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Karen left the bathroom without another word. Max locked the door behind her and passed out on the cold tile floor. The screen on the back of his eyelids played scenes from home for him while he slept.

* * *

“So what are you gonna do?” Max’s friend asked him.

“I don’t know man,” Max replied. “I just know I wanna get the hell outta this Podunk town.”

The two boys sat on the hood of Max’s car on the top of the hill. It was about an hour until sunset on the first day of summer after high school graduation. Max had his guitar and was sporadically plucking chords to accompany the anxious conversation they were having. The future was so scary and exciting.

“Play me that song you wrote,” Max’s friend requested.

“Which one?”
That one about the hill or whatever.

“‘This hill?’”

“No, you dumbass. Jericho Hill.”

Max began playing the song. The lyrics only seemed to make sense when he played it up on the hill.

“Max, that song makes it sound like you never want to leave this ‘Podunk town’.”

Max chuckled and said, “I guess I’ll have to change the lyrics then. This summer will be the last I ever see of Port All-gay, Pennsylvania.”

* * *

Max was either already awake, or the loud metallic clank of the bathroom door unlocking woke her up. A hoarse “Hey” escaped her lips.

“Hey,” Max replied, gazing out the huge bedroom window into the obnoxiously bright daylight. “I’m really sorry about the way I acted last night. I said some things in really harsh ways.”

“Yes you did.”

“I put you in a really awkward position with all those people here.”

“Yes you did.”

“But I was serious about leaving today.”

Silence wrapped itself around Karen’s lips.

Max got down onto his knees next to the bed. He put her hands in his and looked right into her eyes.

“I really do love you, and you love it here. But I don’t. It’s not fair to either one of us for me to continue the charade.”

“This is true.”

Max began packing up his things as Karen got out of bed and began getting ready for the day. The apartment consisted mostly of Karen’s things. Max kept it pretty simple; a real big duffle bag and a backpack contained all the things he wanted to take with him. The furniture could stay. Max didn’t want to take anything that would remind him of New York or the apartment. An hour or so passed and Max was done packing.

“Can I go with you to the train?” Karen asked. Her voice was weak.

“Of course you can.”

Karen and Max headed toward the subway station on Lorimer and Broadway. They always seemed to have to wait at least ten minutes for a train. This time those ten minutes were filled with awkward silence. Once the train came, they got on and sat down. After they crossed the river into Manhattan, the train dipped underground. Max looked at his and Karen’s reflection in the window across the train car. Karen’s head usually rested contently on his shoulder during these rides. This time, however, she stared into her lap, picking at her cuticles, on the brink of crying. Max felt numb, but knew that this was the only way he could end up happy. The typically monotonous train ride was different this time because it was the last time.

“Next stop: 34th Street,” the conductor called over the loudspeaker. Karen and Max stood up and their seasoned subway legs maintained their balance as the train came to a stop. They walked up to 34th Street and continued to Penn Station.

“One ticket to Denville, please,” Max said to the worker behind the bullet-proof glass. The worker looked at Max and then Karen—actually crying at this point—and probably assumed it was a goodbye moment. The train was scheduled to leave at 3:10. Max looked at his watch and it read 3:02. They walked briskly to the elevator that led to the platform of track number 6. This was it. This was the kind of thing you see in movies; the goodbye. Max looked into Karen’s teary eyes and saw the damage he had done. Her tears were falling
because of him. “I’ll always love you,” Max whispered as he gave her a hug.

“Text me when you get home, okay?” Karen replied. “And I’ll always love you too.”

Their embrace ended and Max entered the train. Leaving the city, the scenery changed from city to suburb to rural quite rapidly. The hour and twenty-two minute trip flew by. Max found his way to his car, parked in a lot which he paid for monthly, and got in. He pulled out of the lot and made his way over the George Washington Bridge, and out onto the interstate and the two-lanes and the dirt roads. He knew where he had to go first.

As Max pulled up to his spot on the hill, the song he wrote finally made sense to him. “I have to learn how to be happy again,” he said aloud. “Wherever I am, I tend to focus on where I’m not.”

The breeze picked up and brought the grass and the trees to life, as if to say, “Let’s write a new song.”
Cynics and potholes
Liz Sauchelli

The potholes feel the same, even though the traffic patterns changed.
Different car in a different lane
A song that didn’t exist years ago plays on a better stereo
But the drive is the same even though the color of your bedroom isn’t
And cynics we’ve become because romance has run its course
The paycheck appeals more than the heart that’s attached to it
High school undercurrent, we weren’t on anyone’s radar [we dress a lot better than we did then]
A tone you didn’t favor before, we used to care about affairs of the heart so much more than cynical, but I can’t
describe you, you the girl who wore pjs and hoodies to school
We didn’t care as much then and then we cared too much until we stopped caring altogether.

Ripple Effect
Michelle DeLeo
“Metaphors of a Magnifico” by Wallace Stevens

“Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village….
That will not declare itself
Yet is certain as meaning . . .
The boots of the men clump
On the boards of the bridge.
The first white wall of the village
Rises through fruit-trees.
Of what was it I was thinking?
So the meaning escapes.
The first white wall of the village . . .
The fruit-trees . . .”

Men in uniform, a marching army. I begin to think about Jon, who just asked me what I thought about getting married. About marrying him. I picture Jon walking behind another guy with a shaved head, another guy with heavy boots, I picture him holding a gun. I picture the fear in his eyes, or the determination. I picture him in 9th grade, the first time we kissed. I think about all the things he’s said to me since then. I think about how he has little brothers. I think about him shooting someone. I think about him killing someone.

I picture him crossing a bridge—first with twenty other men, and he seems like a big man—tough, brawny, confident, there to accomplish a task. Then I picture him crossing the bridge alone, and he looks like a little kid, his hat is too far over his eyes, his backpack looks too heavy. I want to run up to him and hug him, take away all the weight, the pain, tell him he doesn’t have to do any of it. And then suddenly, he is surrounded by twenty other men, and I want to take all the fear from them too. I feel like I could handle the fear better, I could find a place to hide it, so they would never have to feel it.

Then I see them walking into a village in an ancient Asian town. I don’t know why I picture them as Asian. And I see two little girls in the window of a hut, watching big men in camouflage stomp through their town. Past the fruit trees. I know Jon is thinking about me. As he walks, he thinks about me. He is doing it for me. He thinks he is saving something—saving whatever they tell him he is saving.

He thinks about me waking up in the morning. Thinks about how light streams in when we wake up together, how he loves when my hair is on his chest. He is thinking about how I try to cook breakfast for him, wearing only his shirt, and I get the eggs everywhere, and he cleans up for me while I sit at the table and watch him with my head on my hand. He thinks about how my hips move, and how I taste. He thinks about coming back to me when he is done here, and that is what gets him through it. I am his fruit trees. The beauty ahead of him and behind him. The first white wall.
We stood in the light of an old gas station
in rural New Hampshire—
pining for fine single-malt scotch,
drinking cheap blended whiskey instead,
but mixed with ginger ale—
blending not only in the whiskey.

There was blending all around:
in the slow crawl to black
at the edge of the light;
the commingling of smoke
from rival brand cigarettes;
the trampled, brown grass,
kicked in tufts
much larger than an average divot
into the burning maw
of the dust and gravel.

And one other blend, where our mouths met.

She smelled of old books,
and a little of sweat,
and I could almost feel the carbonation on her tongue
from the ginger ale mixed with whiskey,
piss-yellow and delicious.
The diamond is neatly lined in pure white chalk. The batter’s boxes are perfect four by six feet rectangles. They extend exactly six inches from home plate. You sit inside the dugout that you have become so accustomed to. Your life as a baseball player has become nothing more than that of a benchwarmer. Inside the dugout your brown eyes appear from your pulled down maroon cap. The white A stitched into the cap reveals that you’re from Auburn. Your mind races through hurdles of thoughts. What if you could hit? You have hands second to no one on the club.

Five years ago you could hit. What happened? The question you could never answer. Your eyes appear still, wide and intense. The thousand yard stare. But a thousand yards is a long way. You stare at something much closer.

Your concentration is broken with an interruption from coach. Coach Muce, a man whose years have yet to show. His knowledge of the game combined with your desire to learn make for the perfect storm. You stare into his eyes. They sit behind his oversized bifocals. His bald head is hidden behind his cap. “You know, Gatewood, you would make a fine coach someday. You seem to see and know what is going on all the time.”

You, not even thinking about what he just said, casually nod. Coach turns away and your eyes try to refocus on the previous point. You begin to scan the third base coach as he flashed the signs to the batter and runners. With no hesitation you jump up and holler “BUNT! BUNT!”

It is the summer of 2010 and you found yourself working two jobs, taking two online classes and coaching a baseball team. You decide to coach your brother’s 13-15 year old team in the city’s Babe Ruth League.

You walk onto the field for your first game. By this time you already have your pregame superstations. Your nerves never could be cured before a game, not even as a player. You quietly pace and watch as your team warms up. You never wanted to be on the losing side of things and thoughts of what if we lose this game already begin to clutter the mind. Your brain reminds you of how your season ended a year ago.

It was only a year ago. You coached the high school summer team. You sat and watched as your team raced out to a 6-0 lead. You helplessly pleaded with yourself to make a move as it crumbled quicker than you even knew was possible. It was the game that you could never get over. It was there on opening day of a new season as if you were watching it live. Your pace becomes a bit more frantic. The simple thought of being helpless again on the diamond begins to drive you mad.

You exit the field and rush to the bathroom. The mirror offers you an opportunity to look yourself over. You see a man afraid. Afraid of what was and what may be. You scramble for the faucet. Quickly turning the cold water on and forcing water to your face. You look up and see a man who needs to find confidence in himself. The confidence you never had more than just briefly.

You stare into the mirror. You have got to motivate yourself. The game has yet to be played kid, you begin to think. This is what you want and you have to go take it. You have to go out there and confidently motivate your boys. In an instance your brown eyes close. Too many contradicting thoughts.

At that moment your mind finds comfort inside the rundown bathroom. Written on the side of the bathroom you find a quote. A quote you wrote when you played several years ago. Time faded the quote just slightly but was still legible: *You just got to believe.*

Your eyes focused on the quote for nearly a minute. You wonder why on earth anyone would believe in this quote. But you do. You know deep down that worrying about losing never led to winning. Your confidence is found and as you exit the bathroom you take one last look at yourself. Your face is as lifeless as road kill and you take one last deep breath.

The field is ready for infield and outfield. But you’re slated as the visitors and have to wait your turn. You call the kids over and have them jog to the nearest foul pole, a ritual you started the year before. You jog as well to clear the mind for the speech you desperately need to give. They don’t realize it but the speech is more for you than them. It is one last chance to convince yourself that this is an opportunity to put the ghost that hunts
you to rest.

You touch the foul pole and your mind instantly clears. Your team lines up around you and you begin.

“This is it boys.” Your words seem so meaningful as they trigger the next set. “All of our practices lead us to today. Today we play defense behind G. We play aggressive on offense and we look to score whenever possible. Remember greatness is as only great as your last effort. It is the effort you put forth that will get the W today. We set two goals for this season. 1st to win the regular season and 2nd to win the championship, and today boys, we go out there on that field and go us on the right track. Bring it in.” The words effortlessly fly out of your mouth. You feel instantly relieved and for the first time that day your concentration is ready for coaching. As the words race off your tongue thirteen anxious faces look off in all directions. A few glare into your eyes. A couple more stare at the ground and gently sway back and forth, a nervous habit. Eric, your youngest brother is gnawing on his glove strings. He has done it since he got his first glove. His heavy set cheeks glowing red from the heat. His overstuffed body offers no relief.

The cool breeze whistles throughout the air as you confidently walk back towards the field. The damp dew seeps through your hole filled shoes. Those shoes have carried you onto the diamond every year as a coach and no hole would prevent them from doing so. Your eyes scan the opposite side of the field and you realize it is time to warm up.

“Get some pearls, Pete!” you yell to the nervous thirteen year old. His face is stunned as if you had called him names. You quickly realize he doesn’t know the pearl term yet.

“Baseballs, Pete! Let’s Go!” Your voice stern and focused as you impatiently wait for the kid to realize he is even on a diamond. You look for a bat. No Fungo bats. You would prefer to hit infield with the long slender wood bat with a barrel designed for textbook ground balls. Instead your eye catches a white Easton. Its blue outline reminds you of Penn State. You instantly think of your favorite coach, Joe Paterno, and you know. You know this is just becoming another one of your silly superstations.

Your first superstion started when you were four. You had always wanted to be a catcher and you would always put the leg guards on and alternate strapping them. Without hesitation you would crouch down and start to get a feel for how they felt on that particular day. Once you reached home plate you grab a handful of dirt and roll it gently through your fingers. Your hand separates dirt from rock in a purifying manner. Finally you find filter out the dirt. Your hand is left with two rocks. A swift back hand toss lets them fly behind the backstop.

You know of no one who has more superstitions than Coach Muce. You reflect back to your first JV game. He lined his four lucky fungo bats against his favorite section of the dugout. Before every pitch he touches he each one ever so gently. He always had his watch placed on the clipboard with the day’s lineup. You never were picked to place the watch. No, he reserved that for the games starting pitcher. You remember watching though. He would hand the watch to the pitcher, but not until he was done warming up in the bullpen. He never took his eyes off the pitcher, to ensure that the watch was placed ever so perfectly.

You find yourself at home plate with Easton bat. You toss a pearl into the air and hit a shot out to left field. Warm ups run smooth. You are pleased as you huddle the team up for one last pre game talk. You feel much calmer than earlier.

“This is it boys. The sun’s out, the umpires are here. This is what our hard work has left us. It has left us with the opportunity to become the best. Remember, if you make a mistake you’re only as good as the next play anyway. So keep your heads up and make the plays. We’re alright, SK on three.”

You scramble to find your lucky sharpie pen. You have never coached a game without it tucked inside your hat. You always left it just shy of the right ear as the ball point side stuck out towards the ground. Your maroon cage jacket sways in the breeze. One last thought weighs heavy in your mind like a paper weight on a single sheet. Your mind wonders as your eyes scan. Finally down the right side line you spot what you’re looking for.

Her hair dark brown hair is pinned up with bobby pins. She stands under a heavy set man with a heavy mustache. His hair is gelled back underneath his Auburn maroon baseball cap. There your parents stand as they have for so many games. They’re isolated, as if to say we are here for our children, not to socialize. That is the way it has been for as long as you can remember.
Your mind briefly drifts off to a game in Liverpool seven years prior. You were 16 and a benchwarmer. On the bus drive over you are told by Coach Muce that you are going to replace Dan at first base when he leaves for a chorus concert. Your heart begins to race. Your mind shoots thoughts of automated machine gun fire. You hadn’t seen quality playing time since freshman year when it was mandatory. You try to find and maintain focus but you’re too amped up.

In the second inning Coach told you you’re going in. Your heart and mind are all over the place like an elderly driver. You trotted out to first base, long past your catching days but the routine was still the same. You reached for a handful of beautiful soil. You used your hand like a Brita for dirt. After a few seconds one rock clump remained caught in between your index and middle fingers. You quickly tossed it out towards right field just across the foul line.

You took the baseball you brought and began to throw groundballs to your infield. First to Kurt at second base, he scoops up the ball and fires a dart back. The mitt pops that beautiful sound you love and in an instant your mind eases. You throw it one over to Steve at short, his return throw you scoop it out of the dirt.

The first inning in over a year and the first batter hits a hot shot just to your right. No time to process what is taking place. In baseball, if you think you have already lost and you know this. You take two quick strides to your right. Kurt is yelling to you, but your mind is dead set on making a play. You make a third step and dive. You quickly stumble back to your feet and race to the bag. The pitcher was late getting over and it was you vs. the runner. You can’t beat him with just your feet. You dive with your glove out stretched towards the bag. The glove hits as the runners lead foot lands right on your glove.

You stand up with a little grimace on your face. You’re a little sore but ok. You scan the crowd, hoping he is there. One glance you don’t see him. “He has to be here” you think to yourself. He hasn’t missed a game ever.

In the fifth inning another hot shot to your left this time. You played off the line just a little bit since the batter was right handed. You instinctively dive immediately. You felt the ball hit your chest and scrambled to find it. There it was, an arm’s length away. You grabbed it with your right hand and instantly tossed it toward first base. You couldn’t see him, but you felt your pitcher rushing toward the bag. You heard the ball hit the mitt and the foot hit the bag. The umpire hollered, “Out!”

You popped up to your feet and again began to look for him. “He has to be here” you repeat to yourself again. “Over a hundred baseball games and this is the one he misses. You just made the two best plays of your baseball career and he isn’t here.”

It was your father who bought you your first glove. You were only four years old. You would sit by the window and wait for him to get out of work. He always wanted to toss the baseball around. You lived in Pennsylvania then. The house had a small side yard. It ran alongside the neighbor’s row of walnut trees. Your arm then wasn’t what it is today. You use to hear those trees leaves rustling as they instead of your father caught the ball.

You nod out toward your parents, it’s only the second game they have seen you coach the other was a Father’s Day massacre the year before. Your gift to your father was a visual ass whooping of his son’s baseball team. “Not today,” you mumble to yourself.

You turn your attention to John, your leadoff man. “Get us started kid, be a leadoff,” the words you have uttered for as long as you can remember throughout your baseball career. His helmet fits perfectly. The gold and black he puts a foot into the box and eyes you for the signs, you just quietly clap your hand together. Just a bit louder than a golf clap. He touches his helmet to acknowledge he understands. Your second full season as a coach begins.

The game drags on like a college movie. You’re secretly in a chess match with the other team. No one not even you, are able to find the king. You desperately plead with your team to keep it close and look for their opportunities. Suddenly, you find yourself in check. The top of the seventh inning down a run and chances have been grim to this point.

Finally, a leadoff walk to start the inning. “Now were set,” you think to yourself. This is the position you love. You call time out and head toward home plate. You pull the lineup card out of your back pocket and reach for that sharpie tucked away in your hat. There is no move to be made but you feel it eases the mind to make
A young looking 15-year-old awaits your words anxiously. You utter your favorite phrase “Got to sacrifice kid. We need him in scoring position.” You believe in the sacrifice bunt like Christians believe in the Bible. Kyle hates to bunt and he stares blankly back at you. You can feel his hatred for this task. His thick black hair hangs out of his helmet. His orange S.K. Post jersey flaps in the breeze.

You walk awkwardly down the line, looking over at Trent. He is the fastest kid on the team. His speed isn’t great though and you flash the signs quickly. Your hands swipe your chest across the horizon. You touch your right hand to your left and then your left to your right. You slide your right hand down your left arm and touch your left elbow. You touch the brim of your hat and then swipe the belt. You tug your left ear with your right hand. Finally, you say “Do a job now, kid.”

Your eyes focus on the pitcher. A smart coach would throw over to see if the bunt was on. But you know it is just a parent on the other side. You assume he won’t have him throw over and to your amazement he does. “Back!” You belch with all your might. Trent goes in standing up. You plead with him to widen his lead. He is too nervous. The pitcher goes into his windup and Trent breaks for second base. You become sweaty not from the heat, but because it isn’t a steal, Why is he going you beg yourself to answer the question, but you can’t. Kyle misses the bunt. The catcher snags the ball and stands up and heaves the ball toward second. Your voice is raspy as you yell with all your might “Down! Down! Down!”

You watch helplessly as the ball and runner approach the base simultaneously. Please get under the tag you plead to yourself. The ball hits the mitt as the runner slides. Instinctively you throw your hands in a safe motion. You’re convinced he was under the tag. He has to be or all is lost. The umpire, without hesitation, motions safe. Your heart stops or so you think it does. “How in the world you wonder did this workout.” But there is no time for worry. You scream Trent’s name. “You have to pick up the sign. Bunt means see the ball on the ground!” Your voice cracks in desperate need of water.

You turn to Kyle and give him the green light. You have allowed him to look for his pitch and go get us a run. “Get your papers, kid,” you say, knowing you’re the only one who knows the meaning. But the phrase allows you to stay in command. You find a comfortable spot just in front of the coaching box, your eyes glued to the shortstop. You’re watching to ensure he doesn’t sneak up on your runner. No tricks today, it’s not April Fool’s Day.

The pitcher goes into his windup and Kyle takes a healthy cut. The ball meets the fat part of his bat and sails down the right field line. Kyle, a left-handed batter, gets out of the box in a hurry. Your arms act as a giant windmill as you wave Trent around third and watch the ball. “Stay fair!” You beg of the baseball gods. The umpire points toward the inside of the field. It is fair. Kyle rounds second and you’re not holding him. It wasn’t your style to wait for the next batter to get it done. You always believed that not waiting would provide for a better shot at peace of mind at the end of the day.

The right fielder hit the cut off about the time Kyle hit third. Your arms furiously waved him home. You begin to run with him. You watch as the cutoff release the ball. “It has to be perfect,” you think aloud. The catcher stands above the plate, waiting for the ball. You see Kyle begin to lose his footing a little bit. You implore with him to slide. “Down! You got to get down!” He goes into his slide. Feet first, he goes in. The ball hits the catcher’s mitt. The heavy set catcher had shown he was nimble on his feet to this point.

It’s going to be close. You become nervous. You rush down the line right behind him. For one reason or another you always have followed the runner down the line. Perhaps in hopes of getting a better look, or even convincing the umpire to call him safe.

The catcher was just a tad late with the tag as Kyle slides beautifully into the plate. He is safe! You watch as your bench becomes exuberant. You look at the score board and see the score change from 2-1 home team to 3-2 visitors. You let out a big sigh of relief and a small fist pump. You look down the right field line. Dad nods his approval. For a brief second you feel important. Your dad had never been one to yell if you made a mistake on the diamond. He was always a teacher. He was your own personal coach who helped you with baseball more than anyone else, and deep down you wanted to show how much you appreciated it with a victory.

You think back to that day on the bench when Coach told you that you would make a good coach. You
remember the game in Baldwinsville when he promised to do the twist if we could manage a victory. You never laughed so hard inside that 1950’s McDonalds. He put a few coins in the jut box and as he twisted along with the song his face lit up in shades of red. You doubted it for many years, especially the way last year’s season ended. Those ghosts briefly disappear. For the first time you realize that maybe just maybe you can do this. You glance towards the bench and see the kid’s faces. They light up the shade covered field. You have arrived in this league. One last thought dances through your mind as you pass the concession stand following the game. Inside the tiny shed they call a food stand burgers and hot dogs permeate the nostrils. The smell isn’t enough to cancel out the taste of victory. You catch a glimpse of the trophy. You look at it for a brief moment. The brown wooden structure has seen its better days. The sliver plaque on the bottom lists the previous champions. You allow yourself one future thought. You envision picking that up at the end of the year and hoisting it in victory. Your smile fades off as you walk to the car. Just 14 more games of this peaceful chaos relax big guy.
Prayer for Lucia Valdez
Justin Tabeek

Beep.

How may I help you today?

Joe business calling to expand business; another building, another deposit, not a problem.

Beep.

Florence Upper-Class Legacy calling to disconnect service, letting you know the perceived class difference she can sense over the telephone..."do you need me to spell that name correctly for you young man?"

Beep.

Jack the frustrated mechanic venting in the guise of overpriced service, but in reality to vent his discontent at having to work twice as hard as most just to be slightly above the poverty line. He speaks the dialect of the semi-literate, too tired to turn on anything at night to stimulate thought. Jack knows the futility of speaking to me-the process symbolic of a lifetime of such an existence-the phone call simply being the only resistance he has left in a world where labor has become synonymous with slavery. You take offense to his language momentarily, until you realize you ultimately reside within the same class as him.

Break.

Fifteen minutes without robotic rhetoric, spent around vending machines and individuals with their heads down, ashamed of the stasis that is their daily plight. The only soma? Excesses in caffeine and carbohydrates, an eventual ascension towards a lack of health that could likely prohibit them from working, and perhaps that is what some are aspiring for.

Beep.
Janice Dozens making the monthly rounds, calling to up arrangements to pay debts she has no intention of paying, much less the means outside of taxpayer money to do so if she could; a well she continues to tap dry. Sometimes she even has a young son of hers call, well equipped with mom’s personal information, doing her dirty work while takes her mid-afternoon siesta from all the work she has not been doing. Sometimes, a son or daughter is even instructed to call to help mom out with the bills, ruining their credit by pretending to be eighteen so the family can have power for another month. They say poverty is a cycle, and this is true: I watch the windmill increase in power steadily with each successive day, with each Janice dozens that seems to multiply.

Beep.

Your frustration at this point makes you wary of Lucia Valdez, her broken english indicative of a likely lack in citizenship, or a request eventually for interpretation: you spend a quarter of your day lost in translation as spanish flies above your head often. You guess this incorrectly, as Lucia Valdez begins to tell you a story; the kind of story that wrenches you physically and emotionally away from any sense of the immediate responsibility of work, locking you in the moment at hand.

You find out Lucia’s moving into this new place to escape physical abuse from a husband that was just incarcerated for attempting to kill her. She states she would have stayed at the old place, if not for the new place being so close to the soup kitchen and the hospital, where her son gets treated for terminal cancer. She speaks openly of her worries about not being able to afford living at the new place, speaking of a job interview that did not go well, mainly in part because the makeup she used to hide the beating she received lead to the manager interviewing her acknowledging how bruised she was. Luckily, she states, she received lots of candles from the church to cut down her power costs, candles which her son Gerry—who spent his twelfth birthday recently listening to his father make promises to come back and murder him and his wife—prefers as opposed to the electric anyways.

You’re supposed to worry about the length of the call and get back to the Janice Dozens and Florence Legacies of the world, but for that given moment you are frozen in the experience of Lucia’s confession.

Lucia continues to speak about her daily ventures to the church and the hospital, and then home to live by candlelight, as if she’s hiding from the nazi’s. “It’s not much” she says, but she has peace for the first time in her life, and Gerry has never been happier. They spend each evening by candlelight reading the bible, and afterwards she watches Gerry draw and color, his favorite hobbies, which also happens to be the only one Lucia can afford at this time.

Your manager begins looking your way as the clock continues to whittle away, but at this point you have given up your monetary occupation temporarily and indulged your humanity.
Lucia then states vehemently how thankful she is for having been able to have such a good listener to talk to, and how grateful she is to be alive with her new place, which she states is proof of miracles. That’s right, an apartment—which she explains was just converted from a cellar into a place a slumlord has the nerve to charge someone to live in—is proof to Lucia of miracles.

Suddenly, your troubles? Miniscule.

She states she would love to keep talking, but she needs to watch her minutes on the telephone—she is only allotted so many—but in closing she has one request to make of me, which at this point I am moved to literally do anything:

Pray for her.

Pray for Lucia Valdez.

You get off the line, you get on the phone with another person, and then you go home. The cycle continues, but even months later you remind yourself to remember Lucia Valdez. I am not a religious person by any means, but sometimes some people, some stories, enable you to remember that your temporary suffering is the permanent experience of another, and that some people spend lifetimes trying to stay alive with little to no chance of doing so. It reminds that you may not be able to afford glamorous things, but that someone just a few miles away finds joy in used coloring books that he colors in by candlelight. You realize the majority of the world can be fit into stereotypes and archetypal behavior, but there is also exceptions that remind you that there is someone worth saving, that there is always someone else out there that needs a break more than you.

I’m still stuck answering the phone daily as various members of our declining society, but no matter how bad it gets, no matter what happens next, no matter what life never entails me, I remember one important daily:

I remember my prayer for Lucia Valdez.
I’d always been slightly resilient to flying. Nevertheless, it is still the safest way to travel. The doors were closed and pressurized. As the plane pulled back to leave the Fatherland behind, I noticed something small and black moving around the cabin.

It was a fly.

I cannot help but wonder how many flies hitch rides on planes. What is often half a day for us is often half a lifetime for the flies, those disgusting little insects the spread diseases and are just a nuisance.

They serve our in-flight lunch. I have the chicken and potatoes. I saw the fly buzz around the window. I wonder if its tiny brain knew that it was over 30,000 feet above the North Atlantic. I am sometimes amazed at this marvel. Imagine how it would feel to be under an inch in size to know this technological achievement.

After about seven hours, we land in New York. It’s the last leg of the journey home for me. Strangely, it seems to be the same thing for the fly as well. It has at most a day left. I wonder what he’ll do with the little time he has. Will he waste it on the return trip, or will he be able to explore a tiny portion of what I think is one of the greatest cities in the world?

We finally come to a halt at the terminal. Flying has become so routine for me, I unfasten my seatbelt before the pilot tells me to. I reach up and retrieve my bag from the overhead. As I head for the exit, I notice the fly one last time. It leaves the plane and heads off on some adventure. It might be able to get over the Hudson in a day.

The crowd in back reminds me that I am leaving the plane. I step out of the exit and onto the gateway.
We’re nice people.

Front and Back Cover Art: *Breed Unity: A Lesson in Tolerance* by Joseph Donegan