Great Lake Review
Art & Literary Magazine

We strive to be the creative outlet needed for artists and writers of all genres at SUNY Oswego. The Great Lake Review fosters creativity and encourages work that resonates with our peers, that pushes boundaries, that surprises, informs and captivates.

Please send your art and writing submissions as attachments to glr@oswego.edu.

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Untitled
Vala Kjarval
Carrots
Chantal Le Blanc

I walked to the bridge over the ravine, tried to act grown up and recite all I saw like a man’s voice in the picture show, primly patting down my jeans like a skirt and simpering.

Then the dead boy came. He floated down the river towards me perfectly still. His eyes wide and motionless, arms, legs, orange hair spread wide like Lucy doll, fallen to the floor after sleeping the night through, loved but momentarily forgotten and flung.

If his eyes could see, would they notice the patch of blue wavering between clouds, fearful of being smothered again? Would his water-logged ears hear the tapping of the old yew tree bending back and forth, teetering indecision between its fellows? Feel the slip of fish slimy and scaly flitting beneath his body or see me being grown up?

I’d never seen a boy without his shirt or pants, just plain white wet boxers, so named I thought for the breed of dog that snapped if you came too close, yet still begging for attention with silent eye and stiff ear.

Then, inevitably, as Huckleberry in my father’s voice told me before, the boy begins to turn, a lazy, horizontal pirouette.

My eyes flash to the red marks on his back just as he slips under the bridge.

It’s not until I’m sitting at the dinner table, my sister passing the carrots, that I start to scream.
Layers of Acquaintance - A Chance Encounter

Rhiannon Throop
Universal
James Musial

Once obedient,
a rainbow rogue
pops on directions hand.

Ephemeral
hopscotch zeppelin,
dodge pollen fighters.

Who kissed you alive,
filled you with
toddler exhaust?

Tip toe on smog needles,
oily being
destined for combustion.

Forget your form,
carbon fat
father of mist.

We are half second particles,
suspended in skylight
dependent on starlight.
Untitled
Vala Kjarval
Sunflowers
Tim Gallogly

I said, How are you?
and you said, Well, I’m wanted for attempted murder in the state of Colorado.
and I said, Why don’t you come up here for a few days?

~*~

You’re leaving, and for that I’m relieved. I can’t wait to get you off my hands. You’re standing in line at the bus station, waiting to buy your ticket. Where will you go? Back to New York, to await your trial at your parents’ Washington Square Apartment? To Maine, to finish the blueberry harvest with your ex-boyfriend, twice removed? Or will you do as you’d threatened and hop a bus to Mexico to escape the law?

You’re wearing a navy blue neckerchief with tiny white polka dots, like a Forties film star. The scar that stretched across your face when I first met you is nearly faded. When that girl hopped trains all the way from California to a Brooklyn bar just to smash a bottle over your face, she wanted to give you a mark that would last forever. Did you deserve it? Did you did sleep with her ex-boyfriend before it was certain they were through? Or was it one of the hundred rumors that hover around you, the dark girl, the miniature Cleopatra?

What will I say to you when it’s time for you to board your bus? Will I hug you? Will I say, “I’m sorry,” or will you? Or will I just stand back and say, “Good luck,” and give you a stiff wave? As it happens, we just stand awkwardly in line, staring at our shoes or other people carrying luggage and preparing for departure. I watch my friend from the Border Patrol scan the crowd. He told me they’re looking for a Peruvian guy with a limp they call “the Wounded Gazelle.” I’m dying to tell him about you so he can check your ticket and make sure it’s for New York, not Mexico—that you’re not doubling your chances of being sent to prison. He’s a good man, and he wouldn’t give you any trouble; but you’d never forgive me for that.

The boarding call sounds. I look at you and shrug my shoulders.
“What happened?” you said. You laugh and shake your head.
What did happen?
You move forward in line, wave to me, and turn around. “Good luck,” I say to your back, and mean it.

I.
I first heard you speak in our beginning fiction workshop at Brooklyn College, when you tore into a paraplegic kid’s story so hard that the teacher had to restrain you. This is not a story. It’s just wishful thinking on the part of the narrator. And I totally don’t buy the life-after-death aspect. It’s just some guy reminiscing about how much he enjoyed all the groupies he had in life. And what makes it worse is that I get the sense that this is all supposed to be poignant.

I photocopied the mystical poems of Hafez and Tagore, cut them into tiny squares to leave in piles in pizza joints, cafés and bodegas for the poor in spirit to find. I, while watching a pornographic live video chat, interrupted the webcast to tell the model, I hope there’s someone in your life who tells you that they love you. I consistently interrupted my girlfriend’s smooth, Midwestern brow by taking Tolstoy far too seriously, or waking her up out of a dead sleep with tears in my eyes to say, I don’t want to leave you, but it feels like God’s eroding my love away. I chased after God the way some chase after heroin—not caring what it cost as long as I could feel the needle flush, the world slow down, the caustic rush of thoughts dissolve.

Because of the little ‘uh’ at the end of all your sentences, that inheritance from your Jewish father (I would have thought twice about it, had he told me he was a taxidermist-uh!) Because you were, in spite of your steady diet of coffee, pizza and ramen, in spite of your non-existent sleep habits, in spite of your tirades about your horrible luck with men and the flabby, salacious Gentile who eyed you every day on the train ride to school, and in spite of your constant proclamations of utter misery, you moved like a Buddha through the carnival sideshow of your world.

Did I love you? No. You were the dirt beneath my fingernails, and I was the bleach stain on your black blouse. You lived by the hair of the dog that bit you. Besides- I loved my girlfriend and no other. But sometimes as the bus took me through Brooklyn, past 13th Ave. and its throngs of Hasidim with their black hats and curls, through streams of Chinese market-goers screaming out fish prices on 8th Ave., and finally to the tall brownstones and booming sounds of Reggaetone that told me I was home, the thought of you came upon me like a nicotine rush.

A handful of months later, I sat on the floor of Barnes and Noble, a road atlas open on my lap as you picked a book from the Fiction section and studied it in your hands.

“What’s your poison?” I asked you.

“Nelson Algren. God! I can’t get enough of him.”

“Just so you know, you’re going to be fine with Josh.” I tried to reassure you that my brother was the ideal person to escort you to Denver.

“I know, it’s just that I’ve only been hitchhiking once, and it was with my best friend, and we were high the whole time.”

“I’d trust him with my life. I trust him more than I trust myself,” I said.
She bent down and grabbed the atlas. “Besides,” I said, “He looks like James Dean.”

“Oh great, another twenty something white guy who thinks he’s—“

“No, he’s not an idiot. He almost went to Chiapas this summer to live with the Zapatistas.”

“Oh, so he’s a revolutionary. Wait, what do you mean, ‘almost’? Actually, never mind. I’m sure he’s very sassy, but we really have to figure out our route.”

“Your mom’s sassy. And a route doesn’t really count for much when you’re hitching- beggars can’t be choosers. All you can do is cut up some cardboard, buy some giant sharpies, make a few signs, and get ready to smile.” I gave you a huge, fake smile.

“I am not doing that.”

My plan was to go to the Twin Cities and see my girlfriend, and you and Josh would continue west to Colorado- you to spend the summer with some friends, Josh to do who knows what.

(Selfishly, I hoped he would fall in love with you. A buffer between you and me. A human shield.)

The summer before I met you, I hitched from Philly to Nashville in under forty-eight hours. Before I left, I buzzed my hair, shaved my beard, put on non-descript jeans and a white T-shirt and slung my guitar over my shoulders. I couldn’t have looked more all-American if I stuck the stars and stripes in my back pocket. I was an archetype, a harbinger of freedom, slipping into rigs and the beds of pickup trucks, passing through tobacco fields and foggy mountains, through Richmond, Goldsboro, and Raleigh, keeping truckers and house painters and young marrieds in the thrall of my boundless naïveté.

We left from my parents’ house, got one short ride, and for sixteen hours tried everything to get out of Syracuse. We took turns lifting you on our shoulders when you got tired, which made you look less like a dark-clothed, dark haired femme fatale and more like a Muppet. I quickly took you down when you joked that people might think we kidnapped you, or were child molesters. (You made me hold your silver bracelets while you put on sunscreen, and I couldn’t even fit them around three of my fingers.) We got picked up by a trooper who was kind enough to take us to a better spot, where we were promptly picked up by another trooper, not so kind, who let us off at the bus station with a warning. We walked through the desolate outskirts of Carousel Mall, looking for an onramp to route 81. Finally, it was dark, and we still had no ride, so we found an abandoned woodlot, climbed the chain link fence, threw a sleeping bag over the barbed wire, and lay down on a bare dirt plateau, trying desperately to go to sleep while unseen animals snorted and hissed around us.

We got a few rides the next day, but added together they still didn’t
amount to more than a hundred miles. My brother and I just looked at each other and shook our heads when you said things like, *We’re never gonna get out of upstate New York, or, Why didn’t we just take a bus?*

How, we’d say, *how in the hell are we ever supposed to get out of here if you keep saying shit like that?* It didn’t escape our notice that you didn’t join in when we’d babbled on with our last ride about the Law of Attraction. *Thoughts really are things,* we said to each other. *We really do create our own reality.* You were silent. You wouldn’t sit with us at McDonald’s later that night when we got to Jamestown. You said, *So you really think if I just stopped being negative, we’d magically be lifted out of New York?* and I said, *All I know is it never took me this long to get through one state before.* You picked up your pack and moved to the other side of the restaurant, because you knew that we were blaming your strange, unlucky life on you.

All in all, it took us three days to get out of New York. We split off in Erie, PA and within five minutes I got a ride straight to Milwaukee, a two-hour bus ride to Minneapolis, where my girlfriend awaited. And as for you and Josh, it didn’t take the two of you long to split up. You got stuck in a rainstorm and arrived soaking wet at your friend’s house in Pittsburgh. Josh got tired of watching this bearded bike-mechanic’s collection of bad horror movies while the two of you hung out behind closed doors. After a few hours, you exploded out of his bedroom, running buck naked toward the bathroom while he chased after you, whipping you with a ratty blanket, nearly tripping over Josh, who by this time had had enough. He hopped a train, got stuck in Kansas City for five days, narrowly escaped death in a lightning storm in which seven people were killed, hopped another train, was caught and dragged at gunpoint to a police cruiser and held for twenty-four hours under the Patriot Act (he’d had the ill luck to hop a Haz-Mat train), was put on a Greyhound bus to Topeka by a Chinese couple who met him at the police station (there to visit their son), and when the bus arrived, Josh hid under his seat, escaping the driver’s notice through every ticket check. He stayed on all the way to Denver, and scouted out a place to sleep, in the bushes by the public library.

That night he dreamed he saw you step out from behind a bush of thistles. You walked toward him and kissed him hard, without feeling. Your eyes were black- no whites, no irises, just black. You said, *I’ve been gone and I have put out the great lights of the deep. I hear their songs and I talk to the stars; I darken some and let others shine. I have looked out and have seen this night- this is the night I will conceive and bear a child.* And the two of you were clapped together like magnets, and all he could feel was heaviness, all he could see was fog.

~*~
I stepped into the cab of my ride’s truck. When we shook hands and introduced ourselves, he didn’t turn his body to face me, only his neck. He was squat and unshaven, and his eyes were bloodshot. As we pulled onto the expressway and got up to speed, he pointed to the median, a cigarette between his fingers. He said, in a genial tone, “You’re not going to pull anything, are you? Because I don’t have any money, I don’t have a girlfriend, and I don’t have anything to lose. So if you were to try anything, I’d just jerk the wheel here and send us over the median.” He smiled over at me. I laughed. He started laughing too, and we carried on like that for a few moments. “You’re all right,” he said, and held out a pack of smokes to me. We blew through pack after pack, and in return, I agreed to buy him a Red Bull for every state we passed through. We chased the sun through time zones. In Indiana, he became more and more restless. As we approached Chicago, he was going a steady thirty miles per hour over the speed limit. A driver pulled up beside us to shake his finger at us, and my ride threw an empty can of Red-Bull into the guy’s window and left the guy swerving behind us.

When we got to Milwaukee, I shook his hand, and thanked him. He wished me luck. I can’t say it didn’t scare me to careen down the highway like that, but I was thankful for anything that shortened the distance between me and my girlfriend’s door. I stood in the neon light under the awning of a bar, awaiting my girlfriend’s college roommate, who offered me a shower, a spare bed, and the possibility of real sleep. It started to rain, and I stepped out into it, trying to keep awake. When I saw a girl with a buzz cut and a sun dress wave to me from a tiny, boxy car (that had to be her roommate), my relief was indescribable.

~*~

There’s something magical about visiting the childhood home of someone you love. In her teenage bed, I slept off the thousand natural shocks that a hitchhiker is heir to. I lay on my stomach and told her everything: my hallucination in Indiana, when I thought the cars on the overpass were black horses; the kid with the Technicolor bong that would barely fit in his trunk, who, when told we wouldn’t smoke with him, picked up his speed, roaring at a hundred miles per hour over the flat back roads of Allegheny County, stop signs be damned; I even told her about you, stammering out the truth of how it was between the three of us, Josh and I taking turns standing guard for you at night while you babbled on endlessly about Captain Planet, or whatever else it took to keep someone awake with you, and the next night, how we took turns holding your hand when you cried. I told her I held your hand— that I’d wanted to hold it. She laughed and ran her hand through my hair. Timmy, my love, you are a glutton for truth. She told me she didn’t care; all that
mattered was that I was there with her.

We went out to brunch with her father, and after, we walked the few blocks to her mother’s house and helped her weed the flowerbeds. We sat under the weeping willow where she first dreamed of becoming a teacher, where she had her first kiss, where she’d cried when her parents got divorced. I reveled in her photo albums and precocious elementary school art projects- colorful masks and a series of pictures in which cats jumped over rainbows and swam in milk waterfalls. After a few days, we packed up her dad’s minivan, bid him goodbye, and drove out to his cottage on Pelican Lake. A fireplace, a bedroom, a yard full of wild strawberries, and five days alone- the longest time we’d had since she moved out of Brooklyn.

And within two days it was utterly ruined. I don’t know if God actually wanted me to break up with my girlfriend; if, like Abraham holding the knife to his son’s neck, ready to sacrifice him at the slightest nudge from the Almighty, I was called to give up what was most dear to me. The feeling might have stemmed from the fear of idolatry, branded into me by my Pentecostal upbringing and its constant threats of hellfire for even the smallest defection from God’s will. It might even have even been the genuine blossoming of an unacknowledged realization that something in the relationship wasn’t working. Whatever the case, every time I brought it up to her, I felt like I was attempting suicide- the same gut feeling that there was no alternative, the same last-minute fear for the one who I was leaving behind, the same tearful voice reasoning with me, talking me down from the precipice.

The tiresome list of the places we cried: on the beach; in bed; on a picnic table; on a swingset in the rain. We cried until we laughed: how could two people who loved each other so much ruin such a perfectly good summer? We watched an old home video of her twelfth birthday party, watched her lift her long hair, whitened by the summer sun, away from her blue eyes. The same eyes that watched me now as I lay on her living room floor, exhausted by a grief that had no name.

~*~

After my brother nearly died and then wandered for weeks without purpose in Denver, after I left the girl I thought I was going to marry weeping in a café parking lot in South Chicago, after my brother and I met up and walked through Chicago and Gary, Indiana, after we spent half a dozen nights under bridges and countless hours holding up cardboard signs, waving at blank, indifferent drivers in desolate Indiana towns, after our last cigarette was smoked to the filter, the Law of Attraction loomed like a mocking demon behind a court bench, ready to pound the gavel at the sight of us and anyone who ever failed. Weren’t we positive enough?
Didn’t we banish all doubting thoughts? Didn’t we hold our desires ever before us, waiting for them to manifest before our eyes?

II.

You and my brother walked into the natural food store where I worked, and the August heat came in behind you. I vaulted over the counter and gave you a long hug, picked you up and swung you around like a doll. You struggled out of my arms and smoothed your clothes and contorted your smile in a vain attempt to look like you’d suffered an indignity.

Josh opened his hand and rested his palm on top of your head. “What do you weigh, eleven pounds?” You couldn’t have looked less like a murderer.

You stood by, pigeon-toed, and listened to me and Josh debate about what to have for dinner, then walked through the aisles of produce and organic junk food to the back of the store, where hundreds of whole herbs were stacked in containers on a shelf reaching to the ceiling. You filled sandwich bags with cardamom pods and fennel, curry spices and jasmine tea, then walked back up to the front and dropped them in front of me on the counter.

You said, “You’ve got an Indian girl here; you might as well take advantage.”

The three of us drove home together and sang along with Townes Van Zandt covering the Rolling Stones: “Send me dead flowers every mornin’, send me dead flowers by the mail. Send me dead flowers every mornin’, and I won’t forget to put roses on your grave.”

After dinner, we sat on the steps in front of my house and caught each other up on the news of out lives. Josh leaned up against the railing and rolled cigarette after cigarette for you and him. He told you about his time in Nashville working as a labor organizer, and about his new girlfriend, who was still in Nashville, but wouldn’t be for long.

We heard an engine rev on the other side of the road, and saw our neighbor on a four-wheeler. His tires spun and kicked up gravel as he sped across his driveway. Chained to the ATV was a flatbed trailer with no wheels attached. He gunned it over the stone and whipped the dragging metal frame to one side, then to the other, jetting back and forth, looking behind to see if he’d made any progress. The end goal of that progress was a mystery to us.

“Does he do that all the time?” you asked.

Josh choked on a mouthful of smoke. “No, he came out especially for you.”

“No joke, we’ve never seen him out of the house,” I said.

You put out your cigarette in an empty flowerpot. “All right, will someone tell me why my life is a bad Seinfeld episode?”
We sat there in silence for a few minutes while you and Josh tried to blow smoke rings, the blue smoke rising into the hazy evening.

“Let’s go fishing,” you said. I told you we didn’t have a pole, that we’d get one tomorrow.

“Ok, but let’s do it first thing. I want to go soon.”

When Josh said goodnight and went upstairs to his room, you lay down on the futon we’d set up for you. I sat against the wall on the other end of the room and asked you what really happened out there in Denver between you and your boyfriend.

You told me you didn’t stab him wantonly; you’d taken your share of bruises, and tonight was particularly bad. You were both drunk, he’d backed you into a corner, and you picked up a kitchen knife and stabbed him. You said you met him outside the hospital a few days later on the way to the airport. Your bags were packed: you were leaving, for real this time. He nodded, then lifted up his shirt and showed you his bandage. They had to drain fluid from his lung, but he was going to be ok.

Where can a conversation go from there? You told me it was hot, and I said you could always go outside and sleep in the hammock.

“Are you kidding? There’s creatures out there! Can’t you hear them?”

I heard crickets like tiny faraway telephones, the whine of mosquitoes, the occasional note from a coyote.

“I bet you there’s a giant arachnid with a human face just waiting to jump on me.”

“Probably,” I said, and watched the cat cross the room to where you lay. I sauntered over in imitation of him, dragging my blanket beneath my knees across the gritty hardwood floor. I told you his name was Ziggy Stardust. He purred expectantly and rubbed his head against your outstretched palm. “He’s so needy,” you said, laughing, scorn and affection in your voice as you pet his dull, gunmetal fur. You fingered the nick on his ear, a remnant from his days as a barn cat. I leaned up against the edge of the mattress, pulling my blanket over me, and ran my palm down his length, firmly, yet gently. I moved over his back and tail slowly as if he were a sleeping baby and I didn’t want to wake him, as if he were a lover. You stroked his belly, and his knees bent with pleasure. I let you take over his back and I went softly beneath his chin. My fingers slid past yours and momentarily touched them, and you looked at me through the darkness, your eyes wide and dilated, as if to say, “It’s okay.” Our hands touched again and then fell into a rhythm, moving together in the same direction. Soon the cat lay down.

His purring, ever louder. My teeth, slightly parted and softly chattering behind my smile. The sound of crickets, now diminished. And our breath.

~*~
The next day, we bought a twenty-dollar fishing pole from Wal-Mart. That was how you wanted to spend your days while I was at work. I told you before you came that we had a good river. *It’s Oswego*, I said. *The right time of year, guys pull three-footers out of there every single day.*

Why did you want to go fishing so badly? I imagine it was the carefree nature of it, fed by images of Tom and Huck on the ol’ Mississip. Perhaps you hoped that the criminal charges and fickle, alcoholic friends waiting for you at home would be no match for dropping a line in the water and watching the river pass you by.

You convinced Josh to take you to the river while I was at work. One day, after an hour or so, you handed him the pole, propped your beer up against the iron railing, and approached an elderly gentleman in a canvas vest with colorful lures hanging from his cargo pockets. You tapped him on the elbow and asked him why this was such a good river for fishing. He put his hands behind his back and bent down to your level. “The old Charlie here? Yes, yes, this is a good river. When the fish swim upstream, they bump their noses against the dam. Once they’ve done that enough times to learn they’re not getting through, they have to turn around and come right back.” He laughed. “You can catch ‘em on the way up, or you can catch ‘em on the way back. It’s one giant fish trap!” You said, *thank you*, and grabbed Josh’s sleeve. You whispered to him to pack up the pole, told him you didn’t want to fish the river anymore.

I left my typewriter out for you while I was at work, but only once did the pile of pages go down. I looked at the typewriter to see half a page of beginnings of sentences and half-thoughts. You snatched the page from under me. “Don’t!” We spent five days like this, fishing, walking through the cemetery, you sitting motionless over the typewriter, pretending to write.

When I got home, I smelled cardamom and jasmine rice. My brother stood over the stove, and you stood by the window, your back turned to me, focused intently on something I could not see. I touched your shoulder and you turned around. You held a bouquet of sunflowers you’d picked up at the farmer’s market, small and not yet mature, their stems gleaming with moisture. They looked oddly conspicuous in your hands, but as you stood holding them out to me, your hair and shoulders backlit by the fading sun, I believed in them. I believed you were as simple and honest as you wanted to be at that moment.

You arranged them in a glass jar on the windowsill. You turned around and clasped your arms around me, resting your head on the middle of my chest. I watched your face as you looked out the window and thought I saw a trace of anxiety. What would I do if you wanted to stay? No matter how many days we spent in peaceful domesticity, I knew I could never fully trust you, and we both knew you would never respect me.

It was the only time we embraced in front of my brother. I told him
earlier that day that you weren’t bad. I’d always thought you were. I told him you weren’t as hard as I thought; that you were like any Christian girl we’d grown up with, who’d been confused, who’d seen some hard times. He looked at me like I was crazy. He never thought you were bad, just negative.

That night when we were falling asleep you said, “You’re supposed to say nice things about a person you’re sleeping with.”
“Like what?” I asked.
“I don’t know, tell them you like them, or that they’re pretty.”
“You don’t think I’m attracted to you?”
You laughed. “That’s not what I mean. Never mind.” You smoothed my hair, turned over and went to sleep.

~*~

I awoke when it was still dark out. Wind drafted in through the dilapidated windows, and the branches of the silver maple scraped skittered across the tin roof. I pulled the sheet over my head and rolled onto my side, ready to go back to sleep, when I heard you snuffling. You were lying face down, crying into the crook of your arm.
“What’s wrong, buddy?” I rubbed your naked back with the heel of my hand. “Hey.” You cried louder. You rolled over, sat up and stared at the wall. “Hey,” I said again. Sobs violently rocked your little body. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re worried about.”
The words erupted out of you. “What do you think I’m worried about?” Surprised, I jerked my hand back.
“You’re worried about the charges, aren’t you.”
“Hell yes I’m worried about the charges! Wouldn’t you be?”
“I have no idea what that would feel like.” My voice was soothing. I’ve learned never to say, ‘I know how you feel.’ I slid up next to you and wrapped my arm around your stomach.
“I never should have come here,” you said.
“What? I thought we were having a good time. And besides, it’s two weeks to the hearing. What else would you be doing?”
“I don’t know, but at least I wouldn’t be avoiding the problem. Do you realize I could go to jail for ten years? Ten years. Do you know how long I’ll last in there?”
“You don’t know that. They could drop the charges. You could be back in school—“
You cackled, “Oh, they’re not going to drop the charges. You can bet on that.”
“My point is, you are not in control. You never were. Everything could
change for you if you could just accept that fact.”

“I’m gonna look sideways at some seven-foot dyke in the laundry room, and she’s going to asphyxiate me with a pillowcase. No, fuck acceptance. I’m getting on a bus and going to Mexico.”

“Then the Border Patrol will catch you, and you’ll definitely go to jail, for twice as long.”

You mumbled something I couldn’t hear.

“What?”

You mumbled a little louder.

“I can’t hear you,” I said.

Finally you spoke up, and your voice was eerily confident. “You don’t care about me.”

“What are you talking about?”

German mystic Eckhart Tolle writes of a phenomenon he calls “the pain body,” an aggregate of past hurts that, when awakened, takes on a life of its own. It speaks through its host, and will go to any lengths to perpetuate itself, creating pain in others so they will volley it back. This residue of past hurts, Tolle says, is both personal and collective. The embarrassment of the first period, the indignity of suffering that every month. The betrayal of a friend, or the boyfriend who OD’d. The parents who gave up fighting and chose to live together in mutual disrespect. When triggered, the pain is in the driver’s seat. The host’s consciousness is obscured as if by a thick blanket, completely subsumed in this writhing mass whose sole purpose is to create more pain.

Your eyes pierced straight ahead, not looking at me. “I know you.” Your voice was high pitched and accusing. “Yeah, I know you. Oh yeah. You’re a good actor. You don’t care about me—you don’t care about anybody.”

I laughed. “You got me. I don’t give a crap what happens to you—that’s why I invited you up to my house. That’s why we’ve spent the past week sleeping together on my futon.”

“See? you’re laughing! If you cared, you wouldn’t—“

“Take it back.”

You sighed an exaggerated Broadway sigh.

“You are methodically destroying everything we’ve built over the past few days. Is this fun for you?”

You yawned and lay back down, facing the wall. You ran your finger down a crack in the plaster.

“Nadia, you are crossing a line, and once you cross it, there is no going back.”

Mumble, mumble.

“What did you say?

In a sing-song tone, you said, “…closed up inside.”
It wasn’t entirely clear whether you would die in prison or on the outside. I don’t know what I thought- I imagined you in your orange jumpsuit sitting across from me, talking to me through the glass. I imagined waiting for you, writing you letters. I wanted us to find God together. I wanted you to become someone who warranted my trust. You were right. On some level, I didn’t care. I would only love you if I could cure you.

~*~

I woke up to a raw, bleached morning. I dreaded seeing you roll over to face me, the residue of dreams fading from your eyes. I dreaded seeing the weight of what happened settle on you, seeing your face change when you remembered that I was about to scourge you from the gate.

I lay on my stomach under the giant oak tree in my backyard, in the shade of my small house, and I cried. I lay among fallen branches and wet patches of leaves never raked from last year, reached out through the wiry, unmown grass, resting my hand on the cool basement stones. It was the one and only moment I loved you. It all came at once, this acceptance of you, this realization of you as a creature unique in all the world, loved by your parents and friends, with interests and regrets and dreams of your own. The Teflon babe, the outcast teen- that was all a masquerade. Holding onto the things you think make you you. For a moment, in my absurd silver windpants and threadbare pajama shirt, sprawled out like a worm with my face in the dirt, I became fully human.

It could have been hours before you came. I heard the grass rustle and looked up. You were sitting on the wooden swing, which hung from the lowest branch, looking down at me, smiling.

“Forgive me?”

I sat up and slipped my hand into yours. “Forgive you?” I stared into the fields of tall grass, green as sea-foam, wind rippling through it like waves. “I forgive you, a million times over, but—“

Your voice was suddenly haggard. “But you’re still taking me to the bus station today.” You began to swing, scowling, pulling at the heads of the long grass with your hand. “You want to get me away from you as soon as possible.” I couldn’t answer, so I lay back down in the grass. I think at first it scared you to a grown man weeping with such force. I heard it in your voice, the way it softened and acquired a ‘pull yourself together’ kind of tone. Before long, fear turned to pity.

I imagined the house you and your boyfriend must have shared, late at night, in the last gasps of a party, ashtrays scattered all over the room- one on the arm of a chair, one on the edge of a coffee table, one tipped over on the floor beside a couple, passed out and entwined on the
couch, cushions pushing out at odd angles. You stand in a corner and whisper into your phone, tracing your finger around a small plaque hung on the wall, some Salvation Army or yard sale special bearing an ironic slogan that, whether sunny and happy or sarcastically grim, essentially means life is shit. Maybe he walks up behind you just in time to hear you say something like, *I have to get out of Denver.* He grabs the phone out of your hand and shoves you, then you shove him; he throws a fist, you throw one back, and it goes on like this until you’re in the kitchen, backed up against a counter. I imagine he spouts some drunk-boyfriend nonsense like; *You’re leaving, huh? You think you can leave, just like that?* His hands squeezing your arms, doing the work of his terrified heart, the work his words cannot do, as if by brute strength alone he could force you to stay. He lets go and backs away, falling over a garbage bag full of beer cans. When he rights himself, there’s a kitchen knife pointed at his chest. He dives for it. Blood, streaming down his bare chest, soaking the band of his underwear. Do you forgive the one who’s bruised you? The one who’s stabbed you? I haven’t been in a fight that lasted more than one punch since grade school. If my eye was black, if my cheek was bruised and my nose bloody, would I do the same thing?

“What if someone hit you?” I asked. “You might forgive them, but would you stay with them and take the chance on them hitting you again?”

“Well, yeah!” you said, like I’d asked you something absurdly self-evident. Everything was on the table now. Whatever chance at happiness we had, it was ground to powder. You got up and walked away. I rolled over on my side and looked at the tree beside me. If we wrapped our arms around it and stretched them to the limit, our fingers would never reach.

I couldn’t help but think that my own suffering (hollow-eyed and skull rattling and shot through with poison though it was) took place in a garden. There was always some protection, which I believe to have been divine. I surrendered myself to God once when I was seventeen- my steps, my path, my life, were all His. Then I took my life back and razed it, drowned it, dragged it through mud (you’re forgiven), yet there was always a way out. Even though I railed against the hand that restrained me, cursing it, it was still there, holding me back from decisions that could have destroyed me and other people, even when I was hell-bent on making them. I’ve never known love where screams echoed through the hallways. I’ve never known pure hatred. I’ve never reached into the sidereal night and torn it open with a kitchen knife.

~*~

I watched you pack and pretend not to notice I was there. Loretta Lynn blasted from your headphones as you shoved your clothes into bags. I
walked out onto the steps and looked into the field. I imagined you getting out of the car on the 481 and running off into the distance, helpless and disoriented, with no one to protect you, no one to stand guard for you at night or hold your hand when you cried. I imagined you burning my house down. I imagined you doing as you’d threatened, getting on a bus to Mexico and missing your court date, and when the Border Patrol finally put you in handcuffs, going to jail for twice as long as you’d imagined. I heard the car door slam and looked to see you in the passenger’s seat, your arms crossed, looking down the road in the direction of the highway.

~*~

I remember trying to sleep in that tiny patch of woods after a whole day sticking our thumbs out and getting absolutely nowhere. I remember holding your hand, your hot tears soaking into your sleeping bag.

I remember your rude kiss, like a windup toy set off and running, following its own agenda. Your lips were stiff and forceful, your eyes pinched as if in a nightmare, or in tears. I remember thinking you were a horrible kisser, and that maybe you were so beautiful that nobody ever told you.

I remember thinking, when you told me you might go to law school once you finished your anthropology degree, how much that would bother me if you were actually my girlfriend, but since you weren’t and never would be, I could listen and respond with encouragement, calm and disinvested as your student advisor.

I remember bragging to my mom about you, my unlikely friend, before the hitchhiking trip: You won’t believe the stuff that comes out of this girl’s mouth. She doesn’t care about anything.

I remember the words of a minister at a youth retreat: “A young woman is like a stick of gum- every time she gives a little bit of herself away, she pulls away a little bit of the wrapper. It starts with a kiss, with a lustful embrace. Why not go a little further? Why not pull the wrapper all the way off? And when the wrapper’s off, it’s only a matter of time before she gives herself away. After that, the gum starts to lose its flavor, and when it’s gone, it’s gone forever. When she finally meets the man she loves, the one she wants to marry and start a family with, no matter how she cries, no matter how many long nights she lies awake repenting, she can never get it back.” I remember vowing I would never let a girl like that get to me.

I remember your black bra lying in the corner like a vanquished cobra.

I remember the one time I actually took you fishing, when I cast a line fifty feet out into the stagnant water east of the marina, and watched it sink, to your chagrin. The bobberless line that skipped across the surface
of the fast-moving river sunk like a stone in the lake. Men in floppy hats and dark glasses laughed from their boats when I stripped down and jumped in the water to retrieve a line that was never destined to catch anything, that, when you finally reeled it in, became so snarled that we left the whole aborted venture behind us and never mentioned fishing again.

I remember as a child, I wanted to learn to play basketball. I spent hours on the court, hoping that someday I would get better so I could play with the big boys. Before long I was a big boy myself, and I still couldn’t shoot. To this day I frequently miss ten shots in a row. It’s fun for a few minutes, especially if there’s no one around. Sometimes I get lucky. But soon my jumps start to flag, my eyes glaze over, I take stupid shots. Backwards, over my head, half-court with my eyes closed, lying on the ground. If someone shows up, I make a show of it- pretend I’m not trying. You have to protect yourself somehow, right? What can you do after that? When you try and fail, over and over and over again? You can go home. You can flail out blindly, striking your knuckles on the corner of a wall, grazing doorjambs, swinging your elbows wildly, throwing your head back and feeling it stutter through glass.

I remember standing the week after you left in the uppermost level of a parking garage, realizing I’d stayed there twelve dollars longer than I could afford. After pinching my fingers white while trying to retrieve coins lodged in unreachable places under the seat of my car, I chose that moment to cry out to God, “If you’re out there, this is the time I need you.” I remember feeling that I couldn’t possibly deal with one more failure.

I remember kneeling in the corner of an attic room after my prayer was answered, after God smiled behind the smile of the parking lot attendant, saying, “You’re free to go. Don’t you worry about it.” And I remember how I shook that man’s brown hands, and how, in moments of silent prayer when I’m caught in traffic or pulled off to the side of the road, I imagine I can still smell the trace of his cologne on my steering wheel.

So why am I digging into all this, if my sins are forgiven? My lack of love, my harshness with myself, my harsh judgment of you, hidden until now? It’s tempting to wander among the tombs. It’s tempting to do penance, to walk back through with a garden rake, pulling obsessively at tufts of dead grass. (I’m sorry. I was wrong. Forgive me.)

A lamb, when it’s born, isn’t white for a long time. It comes out in a layer of mucous- weak, green, and blind. It takes some time to stand up, and a little longer to walk without falling, and even longer to venture out to pasture. But then sun shines on the dust of birth, sweat loosens it from the skin, the wind and rain wash it from the wool and finally bear it away.

The sunflowers are dying now; on the windowsill in a jar half filled with water, carefully arranged and placed there by small, graceful hands. We
all want sunflowers to carry before us as we enter every room. Something beautiful, tied in ribbons, that we can hold out to Mom and Dad, saying, Look at my skin glow! Isn’t my back straight where it was bent? Don’t I stand taller now that I’ve dropped my burden? We want to be the hero in the movie who wakes up in a new and wondrous place amidst strains of glissandi on the harp and violin, saying, I was right all along. That world was not the final one. My desires were meant to be fulfilled. I was meant to be healed. But healing is elusive; we glimpse it from time to time, cloaked in amber, as if trapped behind the walls of a pill bottle whose lid we can never remove.

Sunflowers are the wrong flower. We have no yellow petals arranged in a radiant corona, no face that follows the sun, no head of five hundred seeds, all straining for life. Something darker, on the dark side of the mountain—clasped to the neck of the river, bathed in moonlight that filters through trees. I close my eyes and imagine you, a patch of nettles, deep green and strong in the shade, guarding some dark secret. Ready to sting the careless hands of passersby and the lolling tongues of dogs.
Sunlight
Aaron Gehan
Cherries
Amber Hickman

In the smell of the dying
autumn leaves of rich orange and yellow,
was the sweet scent of deep red
cherries in our neighbor’s yard.

When we were kids, my brother
and I were always drawn to this dark
tree that was protected by a bear-like beast
who was so gentle. So inviting.

How sweet these cherries are
on the outside, yet so dangerous inside.
We spit the pits like bullets, and go
home with blood red stained fingertips.

As we grew, we moved to many
homes with no cherry trees. My brother
grew gentle and sweet, with strong limbs, but dying
leaves always around him.

The beast that picked this fruit was not a gentle one. It spit the pit right through his head. The deep red juice poured out just below his ears. His limbs limp, no more growth. My brother forever rests in a dark, cherry casket.
Untitled
Brittany McCann
The Artist
Jake McAdam

I am in love with you,
My Mona Lisa.
Your perfection

My child and my life.
You are my creation, yet
I am your Slave

I found for you - The richest colors

I stole the royal greens and blues,
Well hidden within the storm.
I had waited out the universe to pick
The pinkest cherry blossoms.
For you I took the brightest yellows
From Apollo himself, and angered the heavens.

To find a red of pure passion,
I knew only my own veins could produce
Such a scarlet.

This scarlet fed to you,
And the spectrum devoured.

I gave to you my own complexion,
And from my own I gave you life.
My pallet dry,
Yet my skin host white pale.

I am in love with you
My Mona Lisa
Now I sit-
Enough for the Both of Us

Cala Glatz

Editor’s note:
Above is *Enough for the Both of Us* in its entirety; it has been blown up on the following three pages for clarity.
Dear Grams, I’m writing this without the intention to send it. I just want to talk, but I don’t want anything I say here to upset you. And really, it doesn’t matter if you read it, because I can’t be saying anything that you haven’t already thought. I guess it’s more for me, so I can try to sort out my thoughts and figure out the best way for us to enjoy the time that’s left. It sounds so dramatic: “the time that’s left.” Or melodramatic, like a scene Ted and I would have played out for you when we were kids. You would have gotten a kick out of it then, but it doesn’t seem so funny now.

You’ve always said that I grew up living out of a suitcase, carrying everything around with me, going from place to place. That’s such a powerful image to me now as you struggle to carry who you are with you. It makes me mad that we can’t simply collect those bits of you in a suitcase and keep it all together. When you lose things now, they might not come back, and that’s just incredibly sad. More sad for you or us. I can’t be sure.

I’m just trying to figure it all out and learn a little more about you before you go. Some things I’m ashamed to say I’d never heard before. Like the story of how you met Papa. I loved the look on your face when you described the way he strutted into that diner as if he owned the place. You “should have known right then.”

I love hearing about all the crazy things you did as a kid: smoking corn silk and beans from that weird tree, and stabbing your sister in the gut with a knife (mom told me that one).

It’s the knowing that eventually I won’t be able to get these stories from you that is the hardest. I may still get them, but they’ll be told through a filter, through someone else’s memory of how they went. Anticipating the end of the stories, and dwelling on what’s to come is the worst. I will try not to dwell. I will simply try to remember.

If I were actually talking to you now, at this point I would say “I love you.” and you would say “I love you too.” Then a big hug. I don’t want you to feel bad for the things you won’t remember. I will remember enough for the both of us.
Dear Grandma, I'm writing this without the intention to send it. I just want to talk, but I don't want anything I say here to upset you. And really, it doesn't matter if you read it, because I can't be saying anything that you haven't already thought. I guess it's just a way for me to sort out my thoughts and figure out how we can try to enjoy the time that's left. It's not dramatic like in Os Ted and I would have played out for you when we were kids. You would have gotten a kick out of it then, but it doesn't seem so funny now.

You've always said that I grew up living out of a suitcase, carrying everything around with me, going from place to place. That's such a powerful image to me now as you struggle to carry who you are with you. I'm mad that we can't simply collect those bits of you and keep it together. When you lose things, it's not right to me, and that's just incredibly sad for can't be sure.

I'm trying to figure it all out and learn a little more about you before you go. Some things I'm ashamed to say I'd never heard before. Like the story of how you met Papa. I loved the look on your face when you described the way he strutted into that diner as he owned the place. You said "should have known right then!"

I love hearing about all the crazy things you did as a smoking corn silk and beans from that weird tree, and stabbing your sister in the gut with a knife (mom told me that one). It's that eventually I won't be able to get those stories. It's the hardest. I may still get them, but through a filter, through someone else's memory. Anticipating the end of the rest, and what's to come is the worst. I will try not to let it. I will simply try to remember.

If I were actually talking to you now, at this point I would say "I love you," and you would say "I love you, too." Then a big hug. I don't want you to feel bad for the things you won't remember. I will remember enough for the both of us.
“Damn it Pennyfeather, how could you leave me here?”

David couldn’t be sure if he was dreaming or not. Finding himself once again at a banquet held by the Royal Historical Society, he wasn’t entirely sure how he had gotten there. He remembered being introduced to some people who were apparently rather important, as well as talk of a “get together” that had been in the works for some time, but that was about it.

As the grandson of the famous archeologist, Professor David Michael Preston Sr., in the event that the apple did indeed not fall far from the tree, the society was keen on the idea of brown nosing him as much as possible. In any case, it was safe to say that he had become quite familiar with the massive dining room of Primrose manor.

He had been to so many of these kinds of things that his memories of them ran together, but he was certain that he hadn’t enjoyed any of them. The food was always too foreign to him and he hardly knew anyone. What’s worse was that the people he did know, he wished he didn’t. The only thing about the banquets he found at all tolerable was the desserts. The society had always possessed excellent taste in baked goods, especially when it came to cakes. David’s favorite among them had always been the “gateau de somethingorother” and he vowed to have at least one slice of it whenever he attended one of their events.

As the night wound down, David decided it was time to make his move. He was sure he had spotted the cake amongst a myriad of trays, table and carts, with more kinds of desserts than there were people. It was in his sights, and soon it would be in his mouth. Salivating, he quickened his pace; soon all of his patience would be rewarded. 20 feet, 15, feet, 10 feet, so close he could almost taste it.

“David, old bean! Not sure if you’ve heard this one!” It was Reginald Beauregard and he had roped David in for a fourth retelling of his famous joke of the evening. Beauregard was a towering man who, after a few drinks, had trouble remembering his own strength. He hooked David around the waist with one of his massive arms, knocking the wind out of him and corralling him into a small crowd that he had assembled around him.

“Beauregard!” David gasped, struggling to refill his now empty lungs. He stared up at Beauregard who was beaming down at him, his eyes slightly out of focus.” This wouldn’t happen to be the one about the archeologist’s mother would it? I was hoping I could snag a slice of cake.”

“Nonsense!” He bellowed. “You’ll be able to get some cake later,
but this joke is going fast! A few more vodka gimlets and I might not even remember my name!"

Casting a longing glance toward the table of desserts David relented, giving Beauregard his full attention.

“Jolly good then, jolly good! So there’s this fellow Bartholomew Thorndike who just got back from an excavation in Egypt. Now he’s a bit of a tosser this Thorndike, lives with his mother. So anyways, he’s just gotten back from Egypt where he stole a mummy and brought it back with ‘im sarcophagus an’ all. Now one day he goes off to a museum in France an’ takes the mummy with ‘im to try an sell it but leaves the sarcophagus behind in his study. Now, his mum is doing a bit of light cleaning and sees the sarcophagus an’ thinks it’s some kind of new bed or something, so she decides to take a nap in it. Well wouldn’t you know it, the authorities caught wind of his little scheme an’ raid his house while he’s away. So they find his mum asleep in the coffin an’ you know what happens next?

However, it soon became apparent that not even Beauregard knew. For a few moments he simply stood there with his mouth agape. As he did this David let his eyes hover back over to the table just in time to see Cornelia Primrose carving herself a sizable slice of cake. Now panicking slightly, he peered around the room until something in his periphery caused him to do a double take in disbelief. On a nearby vacant table was an unattended plate of cake. He turned around to see Beauregard still deep in thought.

This was it, the chance he had been waiting for. He casually, but cautiously made his way over to the table. Upon reaching it however, his hopes were dashed when he saw Collin Canterbury, the society’s oldest living member heading towards the table as well. Canterbury, or the Flycatcher, as some called him was an exceptionally old man. Bald save for a few wisps of silvery hair and nearly toothless, he had a tendency to leave his mouth open when he wasn’t speaking. Time had been rather cruel to him and these days his mind seemed neither here nor there.

He arrived at the table almost the same time as David, circling his chair like an old dog, holding himself up just long enough to find the right spot to plop down in. He beamed at David who returned the gesture hopefully.

“Good evening Mr. Canterbury.”

“Good evening lad... have we met?”

“Uh yes, you knew my grandfather, Professor Preston.”

“Right, right, I imagine that makes you his grandson then, Daniel was it? In any case, how’s he getting along these days?”

“He died several years ago, you attended his funeral.”

“Did I? Terrible shame, he was a good man your grandfather.
Hard to imagine we can engage in such frivolity when a man like him is no longer with us. I can’t even remember what tonight’s occasion was.

“Oh it’s just another party...” But David stopped himself and shot a quick glance at the cake, “I mean, it’s uh... my birthday.”

“It seems I missed that particular detail, how dreadful. Had I known, I would have brought a gift. If there’s anything I can do to make it up to you.”

“Well, if you wouldn’t mind parting with that slice of cake, I’ve been meaning to have some all night.”

“I daresay it’s only proper that you of all people get a slice on your birthday! Here you are.”

David felt an elated sensation overtake him as he reached for the plate; he smiled at Canterbury whose mouth fixed into a wide grin. A moment later however, David would not be smiling, a dribble of drool dripped from the corner of the old man’s mouth and onto the cake. David gasped and a huge hand clapped him on the shoulder, it was Beauregard.

“You can catch up with this old fossil later, we’re ready to start again.” Defeated, David allowed himself to be shepherded back to where they had been standing.

“So as I was saying,” he continued, “you know what happens next?”

But this time David interrupted him. “They all said that brevity is the soul of wit and the joke ends so I can get some cake?”

David’s remark had gone completely over his head and he stared at him blankly. “Oh come now,” he said, slurring irritably, “you can wait until I’m finished can’t you?” David shifted uncomfortably, at the desert table the cake was growing smaller by the second and the gimlets seemed to have caught up to Beauregard who was having trouble finding his place again.

“Oh cork it you oaf!”

The shrill voice had caused several people to leap out of the way. It was Margaret Hawthorne, a tiny woman who was completely ignorant to the concept of an “inside” voice. She held a plate of cake in one hand, and a glass of wine in the other. Never at a loss for words, Hawthorne had always had a habit of cutting people off when she wanted to say something.

“Oh only you could forget how to tell your own joke Regi!” she shrieked.
“H-Hawthorne!” He stammered, looking flustered. “I was just getting to... oh, never mind, it’s just not getting the laughs it used to.”

“Oh don’t be too hard on yourself. I mean really Regi, you can’t expect much from a captive audience can you?”

She took a hearty swig that finished off her wine. “Do hold this for me won’t you darling?” She said, absentmindedly handing her empty glass to a man standing next to her. With her newly freed hand she picked up her fork and took a bite of cake.

“That looks superb!” Beauregard boomed, eager to make sure he hadn’t been forgotten. “Wherever did you get it?”

“That tray over there, but you better hurry, there’s only one slice left.”

“Oh never mind,” He said, looking over at the table. “Well here you are darling, you can have the rest of mine I’m finished with it.”

“I’ll take it!” David chimed in hopefully.

“Now, now, I offered it to Regi... say David is that you?” She seemed to notice him for the first time. “And here I thought you didn’t like our parties.”

This made David nervous. He knew that if he started talking to her that there would be no escape.

“You know it’s funny. Just the other day I ran into that butler of yours, what’s his name, Pencepecker?”

“Pennyfeather.” David corrected her, but she didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Right. So I bumped into him in the teashop the other day, said he was picking up a few things for you. I must say you have exquisite taste in tea. Jasmine Pearl tea is a favorite of mine.”

Over her shoulder he could see the last slice of cake, beckoning to him, tempting him. He hoped that soon it would be just the two of them. Then something happened, something terrible. He saw the plump figure of Cornelia Primrose moving in towards the dessert table, her dress creaking and groaning in protest as she bent forward. Her hand was reaching for the spatula, and her plate at the ready.

This was too much. He was being held up, talking to people he didn’t even want to talk to, allowing the one and only reason he had even gone to this party to slip away from him, right before his eyes, and last but not least, this was Cornelia’s second piece of cake when he hadn’t even had one.

“Excuse me,” he said, pushing his way past Margaret Hawthorne who looked flabbergasted. He elbowed his way over to the table just as Cornelia began to slide the spatula under the last slice of cake.

“It’s good cake, isn’t it?” he said dangerously, locking eyes with her.
“Delicious,” she replied, turning back to the cake. “That wouldn’t happen to be your second piece of cake this evening would it?”

She was surprised, and perhaps a little confused. “It might be…” she replied coyly. “But I don’t see how that’s any of your concern.”

“I think one piece of cake is plenty.”

She flashed him a wily grin. “Well, you’re an archeologist, I’m sure you’re familiar with the old saying ‘Finders keepers losers weepers.’ At least until the government asks for it back,” she added with a dry laugh, picking up the cake and sliding it onto her plate. “In any case, this is my first slice of the evening.”

It was fight or flight, his mind sprang into action and he began considering every avenue he could exploit to liberate the cake from her clutches. He could no longer censor himself, nothing was off limits, and it was do or die.

“I thought you were a humanitarian!” he shouted. “You’re killing your dress!” Her left eye twitched, he had hit his mark. In an instant a white flash decorated his pale cheek with a throbbing red handprint. He lunged forward, catching her by the wrist, her fork hovering inches above that bounty of whipped cream and sugar.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?” she gasped. “My husband is the head of the society! I’ll have you thrown out for this!”

“Don’t make a scene,” he hissed. “Just give me the cake.” And he tried to wrench it away from her.

It was much harder than he had expected. Primrose’s grip was far more formidable than he had given her credit for, but at the same time he had to be delicate, lest he destroy his prize in the process.

“Just give me the damn cake!”

“Don’t be absurd boy! You’ll learn now that back at the Cornwall Academy for Girls, they didn’t call me pincers Primrose for nothing!” And she pinched his cheek with her free hand.

“Ow, ow! You’re batty,” he cried.

Their struggle didn’t go unnoticed for long, and soon onlookers surrounded them.

“Can’t get enough of this cake right?” He said, trying to dissolve the tension that was building. Cornelia, embarrassed to be caught in such a compromising situation hastily relinquished the cake, but not before flashing him the ugliest grimace he had ever seen.

He had done it. The cake was his. It had all been worth it and his victory over Cornelia Primrose made it all the sweeter. He had his cake, and he could have eaten it too, but he used the few seconds it took to raise his fork to his mouth to make one last quip.
“Don’t be mad, I’ve actually done your husband a favor.”
What followed seemed to happen in slow motion. He could only watch in horror as that white-gloved hand slapped his plate to the ground. The cake splattered on the floor. He fell to his knees, no longer able to support himself.

“Shame,” said Beauregard who had meandered over to see what had caused the commotion. “That was some damn fine cake.”

David was on the brink of tears; he scooped up back onto his plate what bits of cake he could. He raised a trembling forkful to his mouth. He had come this far. He had no choice.

“What’s he doing?” he heard someone say.
“He’s not really going to eat that, is he?”

“Don’t judge me! It’s the gateau de whatever!” And at last he took a bite of cake. “What! Coconut! What the hell’s going on? I thought this was the...”

“Gateau de sirop?” Cornelia finished for him. “We set it aside for you on that table over there. We know you like it and you’re the only one who ever eats it.”

He looked up in the direction she had indicated, his mouth now full of coconut floor cake. Much to his despair she was telling the truth. He recognized at once those delicate curves, that seductive aroma, those dainty frosted flowers. How could he have missed it? How could he have missed the gateau de sirop?
When Dorothy Fell
Amy Lowik
Darwin Road
Ed McGuire

I clattered down the rusted tracks with Max, out from the edge of town where the weeds poked through the dust like thin stubble. The overpass panned overhead like a green steel shadow, cars, visible only by the ghosts of their headlights, rushing above us, while Max practiced his pace from plank to plank and I stumbled on rocks, methodically peeking behind for the 5 o’ clock Express.

On my left, a wall of yellow reeds hid swampy waters. Beyond the combed tips of their stalks peered faded houses I never saw people around.

On our right, the power plant buzzed goodbyes behind its grass clenched fence in the hill and Max said I didn’t need to keep looking back.

Up ahead was what he called Chernobyl; A hidden place in the forest fringe of town where the sky glows at night, the round cloud-cover lit pale orange like a cosmic tangerine.

We marched into the hush away from town, our shoes grinding loose stones and knocking on planks, and we came to our first gatekeeper, the only one we’d ever see, as the twilight faded and the stars quietly poked their eyes through the fleeting blue of the sky, to watch us.

A deer laid broken between the tracks, its eyes wet and gray and blind enough to think it could be looking at us. It wore a sheath of insects that bustled in its side, a cloud of flies whipped above the carcass, and its mouth hung open in unending surprise.
"My Boyfriend’s ’86 Ford Ranger that I Really Did Love

Lexi Jones

If a penny fell out of your pocket
it probably wouldn’t stop at the seat;
stained and saturated with decades-old cigarette smoke.

It would roll down next to the door,
with its crevices caked with mud
from owners who know how to drive before you knew how to breathe.

And once it hit the floor,
where shoes have touched that are long since out of style,
it would probably fall through one of the giant rust holes-

which is convenient for hooking up the CB antennae on the outside,
where the world can see that your left turn signal doesn’t ever work,
to the radio on the inside,

and hit the black pavement.
Hopefully someone would pick it up and decide to save up
for something a little more this century."
Yesterday as Justin and I were eating dinner,

Hey Justin, do you see that or am I crazy?

It's not what you see that makes you crazy,

It's how you interpret it that makes you crazy.
Sixth Grade Politics and Zebra-Striped Denim
Paige Waloven

The year that I turned eleven was the year that the twin towers fell, and it was learning what it meant to be a terrorist. We began to color one American flag after another. In the beginning of my imposed quota each flag was carefully planned out with each red strip outlined and colored evenly. The blue didn’t interfere with the fifty stars and every color had its own compartment. As the quota was extended my work became sloppy, and colors splashed onto each other. The red more violent as it scribbled across in heavy wide strokes. The blue became an impeding blob as it covered up the stars. The inspirational message we were supposed to write on the back dwindled to a smiley face.

After 9/11 I grew sick of all the red, white and blue but if I complained I was called ‘Un-American’, making me wonder what being an American meant. If I didn’t meet my quota on time then ‘the terrorists were winning’. Just what was a terrorist? I knew it was something terrible like moldy sandwiches and dirty underwear, something that disgusted my parents, and riled them up.

When my sixth grade class’s blue and red crayons turned into nubs, and we no longer had a quota to fulfill, was when Ashley arrived. The excitement caused me to break free of my windup doll shell and come alive. I sat at the edge of my seat and watched the new girl, Ashley; introduce herself causing her curly blonde hair to bounce as she moved around. I could barely focus on her face because I was concentrating too much on her denim. They were white-washed and had bits of zebra-striped fabric sewn into the bottom that jutted out in triangles of flair. My denim didn’t have zebra-striped flairs and I wanted a pair. The teacher assigned me the title of being Ashley’s buddy. It was a special assignment that I took with pride because it meant the teacher trusted me.

When I first talked with Ashley I realized that her voice sounded different. Her voice sounded more like a boy’s, rough, like she had a sore throat. She was taller than me and all knobby kneed with chicken elbows. She had high cheekbones and a nose that was too big for her face and squashed down. Her blue eyes were smaller than average and outlined in black. In those first few days I introduced Ashley to the world that was our sixth grade class. We played the question game and I quickly realized we didn’t really have anything in common.

At lunchtime Ashley sat at my table and talked with my friends. In gym class we ran side by side and did our exercises together. But when it came to teams she was placed on the team that had my best friend and I was on the opposite team. I helped Ashley catch up on the
reading in English, and I helped her review the periodic table in Science. She was very enthused and hyper. I didn’t, however, sit next to her in class. I sat in middle-back and in front of the teacher’s desk. I was envious of where Ashley sat. She sat next to my best friend, and whenever we had to work quietly I watched Ashley talk to my best friend, and watched as Ashley made my best friend laugh. But nothing Ashley told me had made me laugh that hard.

Although I had been impressed with those zebra-striped jeans by the end of the week Ashley had become my shadow I couldn’t run from. My tolerance was growing thinner by the minute. Wherever I went she was right beside me breathing loudly through her mouth. Wherever I sat she sat right beside me practically in my chair. Even in the lunch line her puke colored lunch tray matched my puke colored lunch tray. The only thing she didn’t copy was my fifty-cent ice cream cone, because Ashley never seemed to have any pocket change.

I made the mistake of telling Ashley that I liked her zebra-striped jeans when we were alone in the fifth grade bathroom. I wasn’t supposed to use the fifth grade bathroom because I was now in sixth grade, but it had become my secret spot. The bathroom had smoothed multicolored rectangular stones that went halfway up the wall, and a large circular fountain sink. The fountain sink made out of concrete and pebbles had pedals on the floor that you pushed with your feet to make the water come out. I didn’t know why I decided to share with Ashley the secret of the fifth grade bathroom, but it was there around the sink that I told her how much I liked her zebra-striped jeans and then I asked her where she got them. She told me that she didn’t buy them anywhere. Ashley’s grandmother had sewed in the fabric of a regular pair of jeans she got at the Salvation Army. Ashley must have been very pleased with my comment because she began to wear those zebra-striped jeans at least three times a week.

By the second week Ashley had become completely annoying. She became a buzzing bug that I couldn’t swat away. She hovered near my ear and just out of my reach. Also I was beginning to realize that she smelled like cat piss. Maybe she had always smelled but I was just now realizing just how strong she smelled and it churned my stomach. I came to an unsettling conclusion on the bus: I couldn’t keep being Ashley’s buddy. I had to take a stand or else I would end up smelling like cat piss with her forever.

It started at the lunch table the next day. I sat down and Ashley was right on my heels only I slammed my hand on the seat beside me and told her there was no more room for her. I heard her laugh she thought I was joking.

“No, there is no more room for you” I was too much of a coward to look at her and instead spoke away from her. When nobody interfered
to stop me Ashley took her tray and left. My stomach didn’t feel right as I picked up my carton of milk and stuck a straw in it. It was then when my friend’s curiosity turned into cold hard questions. Interrogating me until I broke. They wanted to know answers. They wanted to know the truth, the real reason why I sent Ashley away.

“It’s because she’s annoying right?” came the voice of my best friend. I looked up at her and it became the first sentence that gave me strength.

“She’s annoying and she copies me in everything! She tried to steal my best friend…” I said as I straightened up, but my heart was pounding and my palms grew sweaty. I took a sip of my milk and continued when questions after question continued to be catapulted at me. “I just don’t like her she smells like cat pee!” With that sentence it became the sentence that changed everything.

It was the sentence that riled up my classmates. Before I knew it my friends were plugging their noses and agreeing with me, and I still hadn’t comprehended what it was that I said. All I knew was that I didn’t want Ashley to rely on me anymore. Slowly as the reality sunk into me I knew that what I said was horribly cruel, but true, and it escalated. I thought that after that I was free of Ashley and being her “buddy”. Yet Ashley didn’t understand that our relationship was over.

During class I openly refused to be her partner and that had unknowingly become my second step at breaking our ties. The teacher was too preoccupied and didn’t seem concerned that I was no longer her partner and with that reassurance I officially became free. Not only did I refuse her but the effect seemed to trickle around the classroom. Nobody wanted to be partners with the girl who smelled like cat piss, or wanted to exercise with her in gym, or sit next to her in lunch.

The girls were surrounding me in lunch again excitement on their faces as if this was a new game that we were playing. They wanted to know more, all the reasons why they should be ignoring Ashley too… implying that they were looking to me to justify the reason that they too were joining in on this silent treatment. The questions came in rapid fire over and over, and then I said it again!

“She’s annoying! She always copied me and was trying to steal my friends! And she smells like cat pee!” I would say the same sentence again and again and the more I said it the easier it got.

The more I said it the more my hesitation lessened, and it became a powerful statement. Then I turned the table on my classmates, and put them under the light and asked them, “Do you want to be friends with somebody who smells like cat pee?” Because the truth was I needed their justification for why they were agreeing with me. It was the first moment in my life when I knew what true power felt like, and I didn’t want this feeling to end.
By the third week Ashley had become completely isolated from the class. At that time I really believed that it was Ashley’s fault. If she hadn’t copied me or followed me then things might have turned out differently. She was still wearing those zebra-striped jeans only the fabric on the knees was getting whiter and worn out. The fabric had become so thin that somebody told me she tripped on the school bus and holes formed on her knees. When I heard this all I could think was ‘good, now she’ll stop wearing those ugly jeans!’

During the third week when Ashley ripped her jeans, and continued to wear them, was when the drawings started. I didn’t hold the pencil but I might as well have. Instead I commanded from behind pointing and saying what was missing. The drawings had the same repetition: a small head with buck teeth and a bushy unibrow with a round lumpy body, and her ripped zebra-striped jeans. For the final touches we drew smell vapors coming from her body. Ashley’s appearance also began to morph into what our own morphed eyes saw. Then we dehumanized her and began to draw her as a rat: a disease infested rat with beady eyes and buck teeth.

The drawings filled up a notebook and passed from kid to kid. I watched the teacher write definitions on the board with chalk as the notebook circled around the room. I watched the faces of my classmates when they received the notebook and snickered, covered their mouths so not to make noise, and passed on the notebook to the next kid. I took my attention to Ashley who sat at the far end of the classroom. She was hunched over her desk and furiously copying down the notes. She was trying to act like she didn’t notice the kids snickering and mouthing words as they pointed towards her.

After lunch on my way back to the classroom I felt pressure in my stomach, paralyzing pressure, that caused me to stop walking and almost double over. I knew this feeling this familiar embarrassing feeling that could only be relieved in the safety of my own bathroom at home. I slipped out and walked in the opposite direction towards the fifth grade bathroom. The fifth grade bathroom was empty because they already had lunch and it was the perfect place to relieve myself. I didn’t care how loud I was because nobody was there to listen. I had dodged the embarrassment bomb, and I didn’t even want to think what would have happened to me if somebody heard. I flushed the toilet and walked out of the stall, standing by the circular fountain was Ashley. My mind went blank. My body felt sick with fever and the hairs on my arms and neck stood on end. It was just me and Ashley alone in the fifth grade bathroom and yet I was petrified. I was nothing without my class as support. I had to move my body; I couldn’t just stand there forever. I walked to the circular fountain sink.

“Are you following me again?” My voice cracked and quivered.
as I asked. I stepped on the pedal and rubbed my hands together as the water gushed out.

“Why are you being mean to me? What did I do to you?” Ashley asked forcefully.

“You were just annoying me…you always…copied me…” I said, pumping the soap machine so many times that the soap spilled over my palms. That feeling of power I had felt before left me barren and empty. Ashley wasn’t wearing those zebra-striped jeans today like she was the last time we were in the bathroom together. But the conversation was different.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to do anything wrong! I’m sorry!” Ashley confessed. “You were supposed to be my friend!”

The last remark was like a slap to my face and I quickly rinsed my hands. I ignored Ashley and left the bathroom, but Ashley was right on my heels again. She kept saying things to me…things that made me look like the villain. She kept saying things to me…things that made her look like the victim. She kept saying things and I was backed into a corner. I was shaking so hard I could barely open the door. Ashley was right behind me when we entered the classroom. We were both late and all eyes were on me, but there was no sign of the teacher. All eyes were watching me, because I was caught fraternizing with a girl we were supposed to be ignoring. I kept my eyes down and walked to my seat. I had to think fast…kids were approaching me…their attention focused on me, and ignoring Ashley. I could still change things around, and explain myself before a misunderstanding happened. I was an eleven-year-old addict who was addicted to that feeling of power and I wasn’t ready to give it up. The questions started and blurred together and my brain couldn’t comprehend. Once again I was being interrogated. My tongue moved on its own. My brain acting before my heart.

“Ashley had really bad diarrhea in the bathroom…I caught her! She stunk up the whole place…I almost vomited.”

I had lied. A lie that was so big and powerful it had breathed life into beastly monsters that consumed all the nice inside me. Up until then I had spoken the hard truth, but the game had completely changed because instead of playing with the truths I was dappling in lies. What was worse was that nobody questioned my lie, and nobody challenged it. Loud waves of “EW!” erupted like a nuclear bomb; a mushroom cloud that suffocated the whole class. I had to apologize…I had to make things right…set the truth right…but I didn’t want to lose-face in front of my friends.

“I feel bad for Ashley…you know? We should do something for her…like…give her soap as a present…” I said.

The idea came out in fragments, but my friends filled in the blanks. What the hell was I doing? I was no longer myself. I had become
a stranger. The words felt dirty and wrong on my tongue. I wanted to wash my own mouth out with soap. My hands shook so violently I hid the evidence under my desk. My face was smiling but I didn’t feel happy. My friends simply agreed with me when the teacher walked in and everybody went back to their own seats. No matter how many times I said it to myself it didn’t become easier. It had only become more wrong. I didn’t want my classmates to see me as a traitor and I didn’t want them to bring Ashley soap. I began to think of the teacher. I had sat in front of her desk this whole time and she didn’t notice anything? The teacher who didn’t notice the drawings or the way we all ignored Ashley? How oblivious could the teacher be? Surely she would notice if the students brought soap and put it on Ashley’s desk. She would notice it and she will stop it before it happened. The teacher had to stop it.

The next day there was no miracle. I hadn’t prayed hard enough. The teacher had been running late, she was always running late, but the classroom was unlocked and unattended. My friends were already there and Ashley was running late too. Only five students were able to smuggle bars of soap, white dove bars, into school and they were arguing on where to put them. They were undecided on if they should place the bars of soap on top of her desk so she would see it, or in her desk so she would find it when she reached in. I suddenly felt sick and considered going to the nurse’s office. My stomach hardened and it became difficult to swallow. I was probably catching a real nasty cold. This sickness-like feeling had been getting worse the past couple of days. I wanted to leave but my friends caught sight of me. They decided to ask me and make me the deciding factor. I didn’t want to answer because I was afraid if I did I would vomit. But, my tongue betrayed me once again.

“Put them in the desk” had been my final cowardly sentence.

The teacher and Ashley both came in late. I noticed that Ashley was wearing those zebra-striped jeans again and the holes had gotten so big I could see the skin of her thighs and calves. She didn’t look so much like a rat today. She looked more human. Her face was softened yet she walked tense and lethargic. Her hair wasn’t in a ponytail it looked clean, and her hair curled around her face. I was finally seeing the girl who had confronted me in the bathroom. My mind flashed with a montage of different type of Ashley-like expressions: smiling Ashley, laughing Ashley, and none of them looked like the Ashley in front of me. The teacher told us to take out our notebooks, and when she turned her back to write on the broad there was a thudding noise. It was the thudding sound that could only be described as five bars of soap rolling out of Ashley’s desk and landing on the floor. Two sounds followed after that the first was the cruel laughter of my classmates and the second was the sobs of Ashley. I sat frozen at my desk. I neither laughed nor cried. I just stared horrified at the scene that I had created.
The teacher turned back around, and it only took a couple of seconds to look at the scene before her and already figure out what was happening. The teacher hollered at us, her face got all blotchy red, like the red we had used to color the American flags, and she screamed some more. It was the first time our teacher had even screamed at us. She took Ashley in a comforting arm and led her out of the room. When the door slammed shut behind them a wave of realization poisoned the class as if a canister of mustard gas had been released. It was the second time the class witnessed Ashley crying. The first time we overlooked it because it didn’t seem real to us, and we didn’t understand the psychological scars our words and actions caused. The second time was more real, we saw somebody who was once innocent, and destroyed her…no I had destroyed her…it was my fault. I was the terrorist in Ashley’s life. I had made things unstable and not safe anymore for Ashley.

When the teacher opened up the door and called me out into the hallway all I could think about was that the teacher had stopped me. The teacher stopped the terrorist. I made a promise to myself that I would never be such a coward again. Confronting Ashley in the hallway I confirmed this promise. I had no right to violate somebody else just because I didn’t like them or felt threatened by them. Even though I was punished immensely I didn’t blame anybody else but myself. I even thanked the teacher, because it made me open my eyes, and realize that Ashley was the true victim and I was the true villain.
WHAT WILL CATTLE RANCHING IN THE AMAZON LEAD TO?

UDDER DESTRUCTION
To me we’re marketing hope.
My Dearest Whoever
Annie Hidley

My Dearest Alec, or Alaina, or Sasha, or Josh, or Eva, or Brendan, or Olivia, or Derrick, or whatever perfect name I have picked for you,

First and foremost I want to tell you how much I love you. I want to tell you how important love is going to be in your life. I want you to walk through your life and love everything you see, whether it is the blatantly obvious beauty in flowers or architecture, or whether it is the way fresh mud is smeared on your shoe and it takes you a few extra minutes to clean it up—I want you to love the mud, look at everything for its beauty.

I want you to be brave and do everything that you want to. I know you are not going to be stupid, and if something looks fun I want you to do it. I want you to laugh at everything! Do not, under any circumstances, take anything too seriously.

Here is who I am right now. I am twenty-one years old, I feel like my life is just beginning. I go to college and I have learned how to be an English teacher, but right now I really want to work in a college. I want to be a Community Services coordinator, or a counselor. I want to write books. I want to have a flower shop, and I want to plan weddings. I want to be a kayak instructor and I want to choose the soundtrack for movies. There are a million things I want to do and I want you to know that it is ok to want to do a million things. When I graduated high school, the card my mom, your grandma, gave me, said “All who wander are not lost.” She knew me before I was born just like I know you. She knew that I loved discovering, and that the road would take me exactly where it was supposed to. She knew that everything that happened to me would end up being good, and that I would love and learn from everything I did. I have wonderful, brilliant, funny friends, and I hope I stay in touch with them so you get to meet them, and they get to teach you how to be funnier than I can.

Friends are SO important—make lots of friends, and choose them! Surround yourself with the happiest, most energetic people—people you admire and strive to be like.

I love reading, and I am going to read to you every night before you go to sleep I promise. I hope that you tumble into books like I have—that you find magic at the turn of every page, that you learn big words and meet people and are continually thirsty for the beauty of words together.

I love to exercise and I do it multiple times a day. I love to run, and I love
to do yoga. I love breathing hard and sweating and feeling cleansed. I think you are going to too. When I grew up, my parents made me ride my bike EVERYWHERE. No joke—to school, to my friend’s houses, to the grocery store (they harnessed banana boxes on the back of their bikes to carry our groceries). And I was mortified, and I was so stubborn, and made it so hard for them. In hindsight, I cannot thank them enough, because I am so strong now. I am never going to be fat, and I appreciate so much the healthy lifestyle and mindset they have instilled in me. It’s ok if you hate me sometimes. I can handle it, because I have something so amazing and wonderful that nothing in the world could ever make me feel too gloomy—I have you.

I am in love with lots of boys but none of them is fantastic enough yet to be your father. When you are born, I want you to know that I chose your dad for you—that I picked someone who I know is going to unconditionally love and support you in all of your adventures. I chose someone who I know is going to teach you everything you will need to know, who is going to be the voice of reason when I have an irrational day. I chose someone who loves you as much as I do, and who loves me like the world stopped when he met me. We are going to make sure to unfurl the world at the feet of you, encourage you in everything you do, and we are going to let you soar. I love you more than I am ever going to love any guy, because I will get to watch your hands grow from fitting inside my palm to being bigger than mine. I am not going to ever be able to find any flaws in you like I tend to do in boyfriends. I hope you don’t look for flaws like I do—it’s an exhausting waste of time and not worth it at all. I hope you remain relaxed about everything, realize that nothing is as big of a deal as it might seem.

I have known love most when I walked along the sandy shore of Carolina scattered with sea shells and watched the sun rise, promising me a brand new day. I hope you get to walk along many beaches, and collect many sea shells. I hope that every time you watch the sun rise it takes your breath away. I hope that the wonderful pinks and golds never get old for you, and that every day you witness a miracle.

I have known love most when I was fifteen and thought I wanted my life to be over, but looked out the window and saw every tree God made for me, saw His hands outstretched, giving me everything. Realized that everything beautiful was made for me to SEE it, if only I opened my eyes. That’s all you ever have to do—just keep your eyes open.

I have known love most when I read the note my dad, your grandpa, wrote to my high school English teacher when I was sixteen years old, “Annie has so much potential. Help her find her light.” I am so glad that Pete and Laurie get to be your grandparents. When I want to be lazy and drive you to
soccer practice, they are going to get you on your bike and ride over to the field with you. They are going to make you wear your helmet. They are not going to buy you lots of frivolous presents, but they are going to teach you how to build things, and how to safely ride a motorcycle. They are going to teach you how to sail, and how to scuba dive. They are going to show you how important being healthy is, and how to take care of your body. They are going to teach you how rewarding it is to save money, and show you how to manage a bank account and start an IRA. They are going to show you why its important to get good grades, and they are not going to show you my high school report cards when they do this. They are never going to want to stop holding you, and even though I’m going to want you back, I am going to love them for that.

I want you to know that life is beautiful.

I hope that you have freckles, but even if you don’t I will look at your face and see a sunflower every time. I hope that you always feel like you have just been kissed by the sun. I hope you spend as much time as possible in the sunshine, soak it up and let it help you grow.

I hope you love to swim. Even if you are not good at it, I hope you find complete euphoria in the way your limbs move you in the water, in the weight of it around you and the calming silence when you put your head under. I hope you jump off every rope swing you see and I hope you don’t have a thought in your head except the exhilaration of the splash. (Please be careful for rocks. I promise all of this is so much better when you don’t have broken bones).

I hope you love feeling grass between your bare toes, and I hope you never worry about dirt, or stepping on worms, or ants.

I hope you love every living thing with all the energy you have.

I hope you realize that all energy gives back to each other, that everything is a circle, and everything moves forward, always.

I hope you remember this when things seem bad, when it seems like you can’t go on. Because it will happen, and my heart is going to shatter for you. But think about all the grass, swaying in the wind in perfect unison, breaking back down and becoming ground, growing again. You are moving forward too, even if it doesn’t feel like it. New light is going to filter in and it is going to feel like the first light ever. You are going to get to see the very first sunrise, you are the very first person that is ever going to be YOU.

Don’t ever, ever stop dreaming. I want you to hope for EVERYTHING! Believe that you can do something—and you CAN!

Celebrate every moment of your wonderful life. Smile more than you do anything else. You are never, ever going to be alone.

I hope you realize that the more you love yourself, the more everyone
around you is going to love you. No matter what you look like or how you feel about yourself, I promise that you are going to discover that you are absolutely perfect, and that the people who love you for exactly who you are, are the people who are able to witness all your glorious light shine from you. You are going to illuminate rooms, and I cannot wait to catch the rays. I love you SO much already, and I don’t even know who your dad is going to be. I don’t know what you are going to look like, and I do not care. I don’t know if you are going to be able to walk and run perfectly, but we will go on lots of adventures no matter what. I don’t know if you are going to want to be a painter or a doctor, and I don’t care at all! I am going to be fascinated by everything you learn and I can’t wait for you to tell me stories about your day. I want you to embrace who you are as a person—who you are as part of the pulse that beats all around you. When you are happy, your life is going to be a good one. Never feel comfortable slipping into sadness. Of course it is ok to cry and to feel sad—but it never means that you have the right to make anyone else’s day worse. You are going to be wonderful—and YOU have the power and the opportunity to enrich the day of EVERY person that you meet. You get to decide not only if you are or are not going to be happy, but if you are or are not going to make someone else’s day happier too. It really is as simple as making one decision. You are going to move mountains, and I am so excited, and so lucky, that I am going to get to be there to see your life unfold.
Untitled
Joseph Ray
Incomprehensible, senseless discussions
   Happen, happen, happen,
And operatic cries of ghost-like figures
   Bleed through the untimely walls
With no more than twelve green stations
   To guide their party forward.

Four hours past the bell strikes,
   And his world is not at rest.
   He turns the switch off
Smashes the bulb with a baseball bat,
   But the light still shines through
Through the trees, and he laughs.

He laughs so hard that he hurts,
   So hard that he pops a pill,
And energy passes him on to a fifth hour
When the unknown thoughts of his world
   Happen, happen, happen,
And he laughs so hard that it hurts.

White light now shows its ugly face,
   Disturbing all of the inner peace.
A small, beautiful creature opens her eyes,
   And, at last, the light goes out,
Closing doors as darkened joys
   Happen, happen, happen.
Winter Roses
Patsy Conrad

Dad hurls the wheel of the tan, clumsy mini-van to the right and we pull into the driveway across the street, buried with three feet of snow. As soon as the engine is silent, he, my mom, older brother and sister, quickly gather the boxes, carefully wrapped with the shiniest red and silver paper and escape out of the car. I am left alone, still buckled in the farthest back seat. Emptiness fills the air, silence only broken by the slight rustle of my winter jacket and rattle of the van shaking in the harsh wind.

I unbuckle the strap that secures my life, turn around to face the frost banded back window and witness the slam of the glass door as they enter the warmth of Gram’s house. Light gray smoke puffs out her tall brick chimney, forming ash clouds in the pale blue sky. Looking at Gram’s house, I notice how big it really is. It is much bigger than most of the cottages around, abandoned by their inhabitants, who like the birds, fly south for the winter. No matter the size, my favorite climbing tree still towers over it, looking lost and leafless, bare and shivering in the cold.

The world is white around me, snow weighing down the trees and suffocating the earth. Gram hates the winter. She says it’s too cold for her bones and does a number on her garden. She always says spring is her favorite season; it’s when she gets to watch the flowers bloom. I however, enjoy the snow, the way it makes the ground sparkle like diamonds. It’s the typical winter weather we get here in Buffalo, especially living right off Lake Erie.

We’ve done this tradition of going to Gram’s house for a scrumptious Christmas breakfast ever since I can remember. I look forward to it the most when Christmas is just around the corner, but there is something different about this year. I am not as excited as I normally would be. I guess with Gram having her frequent hospital visits and us not being able to decorate our Christmas cookies this year has a little something to do with it. But even so, something more is missing. It’s like I’ve lost the spirit altogether. Suddenly, I am distracted from my trance by a loud holler and arms waving in the air.

“Paatssyyyy! C’mon! What are you still doing in there?!” Shaun shouts his brows wrinkled and eyes squinting from a distance. He begins to strut toward the vehicle, head down, blocking the flurries from blasting into the side of his face.

I have been day dreaming in the van for a while now so I hop over the middle seat, slide the heavy door open, exit and sink deep into the shimmering snow. I slam the door shut and hustle to meet my brother who’s already at the end of the driveway.
“What were you doing in there, weirdo?” He says with a smile, as he puts his arm around my neck, giving me a noogie.

“I don’t know…just thinking I guess,” I reply, pushing him away and immediately fixing my hair.

“Don’t think too hard, you’ll hurt yourself.” He laughs and gives me a nudge with his elbow. “Come on, kid. Let’s get you inside. People are waiting to see you.”

We carefully walk up the ice-shelled steps, gripping our hands tightly around the railing. As my foot enters the house, I am hit with the smell of sizzling bacon, fried eggs, butter soaked toast and salty, crisp hash browns, all coming from the stove. My stomach begins to rumble like thunder off the lake.

“Hey! Merry Christmas!” my family shouts in unison.

I smile faintly and mumble the holiday phrase back. The room is packed with chatting relatives, all standing up, due to the lack of chairs and also space in Gram’s famous, but tiny kitchen. I begin to maneuver through the crowd, stopping to hug them and wish them season greetings but really in search for Gram. I spot her sitting in her stationary position, located at the end of the circled dining table. Her elbows rest gently on the wood, chin held by her aged hands and gaze observing the outer winter atmosphere. She is absorbed in her window view, unaware of the events surrounding her. She breaks her concentration and our eyes meet. Her face matches the grey of her hair, blending in with the ghostly white of her cotton sweater. But as we smile at one another, her wrinkly cheeks blush a light pink.

I sit down next to her; happiness and joy finally emerge from deep within me. It’s unusual to not see a Marlboro light burning between her fingers, but the doctors said if she had any chance of beating this, she’d have to give up her habit. And after 67 years of smoking, she did.

Placing her hand on my knee she asks, “How’s my girl doing?”


“Ah, don’t you worry about me. I’ll be alright. And cheer up, Grumpy. It’s Christmas.” She winks. “Grumpy” the word triggers something inside of me, haunting me ever since it left her lips.

“Breakfast is ready.” An announcement yells from the stove. My appetite has disappeared, along with any holiday cheer I started to feel.

* * * *

Weeks pass and Gram’s kidneys start to fail. She is now permanently living in the hospital, stripped from her home, family and life.
I hate hospitals and so does she, the way they smell of plastic and medical equipment. We walk through the blank halls in silence, Mom carrying flowers, Dad searching for the room, my brother and sister strolling along, me falling back behind them.

We enter the room and Gram is lying under the white sheets of the hospital bed, in a deep slumber. The sickness has taken a toll on her. She has lost all the pinkness of her cheeks and the jiggle out of her laugh. Tubes surround her nose and keep her breathing steady. Mom removes the shriveled flowers from the vase resting beside her bed stand and replaces them with the fresh roses we bought. They’re her favorite.

My family is lined up against the wall of the silent room, all staring at Gram sleeping. This is our time to say goodbye, but I’m not ready, not like this. Does she even know I am here? That it’s me, the one she made peanut butter and toast for every morning when Mom and Dad went to work? When her chest becomes still and her heart stops pumping, will she remember me? Remember the way we played cards at the round kitchen table for hours or did those endless puzzles? Will she ever forgive me?

The silence is broken by the whimpers coming from Shaun, who never cries. As much as I feel my heart sink to the deepest part of my stomach, I know she’ll be in peace soon, looking down from the clouds with her husband, who died before I could collect a memory of him.

It is time for us to leave, visiting hours are over. Dad walks over and kisses Gram in the center of her forehead, whispering, “I love you, Mom”, in her ear. As he turns and leaves, tears charring his cheeks, the rest of my family follows behind, saying good-bye in their own way. I tell them to go on without me.

Alone in the eerie hospital room, I walk up and sit in stiff chair planted beside her bed. I begin to weep hard. It was like filling a water balloon too tight and watching the liquid burst out. I had held it in for so long but now that we were alone, I can tell her how I really feel.

I remove a wrinkled white piece of notebook paper from my jean pocket and start reading all the memories we shared together. I remind her about the way she always waited for me at the top of the hill as I sprinted off the big yellow bus just to give her a hug and spend the rest of my afternoon with her, until Mom and Dad got home from work. I read everything I had written down, crying harder as every memory mentioned brought me back to the feelings of happiness we shared. But in my last sentence, I apologize for not being happy on our last Christmas. I sit with my head in my hands; elbows resting on my knees and salt streaking down my face. I slowly stagger up from the chair, kiss Gram on my cheek, hug her tightly and walk out.
Dad is driving the van home from my basketball game, Mom’s in the front seat. I’m alone in the back seat, staring out the foggy window into the frozen scene. I begin to reminisce about all the fun I had with Gram throughout my life. Suddenly, I feel something inside me break like a rubber band snapping after being stretched too hard. It is as if a part of me has abruptly disappeared. I then realize…she’s gone.

I keep my focus out the window, trying to keep my whimpers as quiet as possible so my parents don’t know I’m crying. Dad turns the van down our street just as the phone launches into a piercing ring and Mom answers it.

“Hello?.. Oh, hi Ellen… She did?.. Okay… Thank you for calling.” With a sigh she hangs up the phone.

“She’s dead, isn’t she!?” Dad blurts out, his voicing breaking. Mom sighs again and shakes her head yes, not able to utter the news. Dad pulls into the driveway and they rush into the warmth of the house. I sit there alone, in silence, staring at the white crystals falling from the black sky.
Cutout of Darkness
Chantal Le Blanc

The blue silk wrap slips off your shoulder and snake-like, pools on the bottom of the stairs.

Running your fingers along the smooth grooves of the banister you watch your bare knees rise from memory to the carpet of the upper hallway.

The one pearl earring you remembered to put in this morning winks at you from the mirror, a pink wink in the light that bursts, angular, from the one shade you forgot to close.

You avert your eyes.

In the bedroom she’s still there, your Ophelia preserved in a teacup.

This morning as you had on a program on swans, the spider, up until now content in the corner of the ceiling, released her body on a silken thread, and you watched her, slowly, lower herself into the day-old tea on the bedside table.

She lies there still, the follicles on her black body spreading out.

Your hand is on the hairbrush before you remember it’s too full of hair to use.

You comb your hair with your fingers and imagine when she felt the first brush of water, how she decided instead of climbing back to the safety of the web to slip and embrace the bitter wetness.
Memory
Rhiannon Throop
“Let me go, let me go!” She wails, shouting at the top of her lungs; but no one listens. It’s times like this she feels no one even hears her, like they’re all deaf or have no ears.

In her mind they’ve turned into apparitions, mere figments of her imagination. They’re like those black and white movies, gray on the skin, eyes dark. She can’t control them, can’t stop them. All the drugs they’ve dispensed down the tubes, straight into her veins, weaken her. She can’t change it, what’s happening. She can struggle all she wants, pull her arms till they wrench out of their sockets in pain, because it’s not doing her any good.

They’ll take her to that room again, the one with the startling white walls that are padded soft. She’ll hug herself asleep like she has for the past few nights because of those nightmares. It’s always those same nightmares.

Tears are streaming down her face; and all she can do is scream and fight to stay focused as the drugs take their toll. She can’t go back, she won’t go back; she refuses.

“You have to relax, Tara. If you fight, it will only get worse. The only one you’re hurting is yourself. I’ve said this countless times. Your outbursts will not be tolerated, you know that.”

“It’s not true. It’s not true! It’s not true. I didn’t do it. It wasn’t me, it’s not true.”

Tara stares straight into the doctors light black, calm eyes. There’s a detachment in Tara’s voice. No longer is she the innocent victim, but a person who shouldn’t be there, who shouldn’t even exist. She tilts her head ever so slightly and sneers at the doctor.

“You put her in that room again and you’re going to regret it. You hear me you filthy bitch? She didn’t do anything wrong, so let us go!” Lira screams and fights the orderlies off as if the drugs were never put in her system. But they manage to hold her down anyway. They won’t get away, and they both know it so Tara cries.

She cries her heart and soul out because she knows what will happen. She can’t run from this place, they’re always watching her. They’ll put the restraints on, the white jacket that forces you to love yourself, and keep you from hurting others. But Tara doesn’t want to love herself, hold herself, hurt herself or others. She just wants to go home and sleep in her bed like a good girl, waiting for mommy and daddy to finally stop ignoring her and tell her that they love her.

Tara is dragged into the quiet room, feeling beneath her bare feet, the soft cushions on the floor. A bright light goes on as she’s pushed
against the far wall. She hates this room, the silence it brings and the memories it provokes. Memories - No, not memories, lies!

They’re lies they’ve told her to keep her here. They tell her she’s crazy, but she’s not, not in the slightest. In fact, everyone is fine and dandy. No one died in that accident, they’re all fine. Her parents still love her and they’ll come visit her soon. When everyone realizes she didn’t do anything wrong she’ll get out.

Tara rocks back and forth in that same spot. All she remembers floods back, but they’re not real, just images put in her head by that stupid bitch. Tara stops crying and looks out at the doctor who’s getting ready to close the carefully padded door.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I was protecting us. They were the ones who did me wrong, pushing us aside like we were trash. They deserved it.” Lira growls at the doctor. “They deserved it.”

The doctor shakes her head. “So you hold no remorse for what you’ve done Tara?”

Tara shakes her head. “I didn’t do it. You’re all lying, playing a mean trick on me.”

The doctor shook her head again. “No one is lying to you, Tara. You’re only lying to yourself, and until you see the truth, you must stay in this room. You need to calm down and think clearly about everything that’s happened. Accepting your situation is the only way to break free from this.”

Tara looks away from the doctor to stare blankly at the wall as the door is closed.

“They can’t keep me here forever; they’ll see.”

“You mean us, don’t you?”

Tara tries to cover her ears and moans when she can’t. That voice is what did this, what made all of it happen.

“I never did anything wrong. You did.”

“Now, now Tara. That isn’t true; you made me, so it’s your fault, too.”

Tara finally looks up and sees the other girl across the room from her. Her eyes are cold and she’s covered in black ash. She sees through Tara, like she knows what she feels, what she’s going to say. And she does.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t do it. You know that, Lira.”

“Of course I do, but they don’t. You should know that by now.”

“You saw it, you know who did it. You can tell them what you remember,” Tara whispered.

“No, I can’t. But you can. Besides, we both know what happened that day, don’t we?”

“I didn’t do anything.” Tara turns to the door. “I didn’t do it! You’re all lying.”
Tara’s eyes grow heavy, the sedatives taking hold fast. The white room gets dark, lights out.
Tara is alone with Lira now. Their breathing is heavy as they try to stay awake a little while longer.
“We know what happened. Why we’re really here, don’t we?” Tara smiles drowsily at where the door should be. But it’s hard to keep track of everything when it all blends together like different paints poured in a single bowl.

Lira is gone. The lights are out, and the only one left is Tara. Only they know the truth; Lira remembers even if Tara is in denial, but oh she remembers too. She just doesn’t want to face what she’s done, but her mind always reminds her, especially in her sleep. What her family was like. How they were very bad girls and ended up in here.

Nine years ago…

“They forgot again didn’t they?”
Lira, Tara’s friend paced back and forth in anger while Tara sat silently trying to finish her homework. She stared down at the equation which was usually the easiest problem for her, but she couldn’t seem to concentrate on her work, not with Lira pacing like that.
“Yes, they forgot again. All they think about is Tyler; dunce can’t even tie his own shoes properly.” Tara didn’t look up at Lira, just nodded and wrote down the answer on the slip of paper.
When Tara could no longer hear her shuffling feet she glanced up. Tyler, her cousin, stood in front of her giving her a weird look. Tyler’s parents had died in an accident about two years ago. Tara didn’t know the details, much less cared. She hadn’t known her aunt and uncle, hadn’t heard of them until the actual accident when her father received the phone call. Perhaps it had something to her mother and father always working. They had always been so busy, never taking the time to call or visit family in the city. And moving when she was seven away from the city only made the distance greater. Despite this, they decided to take in Tyler.

The moment Tyler came into the house her parents drooled over him. The brat got whatever he wanted, and she was all but forgotten. During her birthday, holidays and even vacations she was left alone, until Lira came to the neighborhood. Lira was now her best friend, her only friend, although that didn’t bother her much. Lira liked everything Tara liked, and she hated everything she hated, including Tyler.
“Can I help you with something?”
“Who were you just talking to, nutcase?” Tyler smirked at Tara. She had the inexplicable urge to smack that look off his face. But then he’d just be given a treat and Tara would be reprimanded.
“I was talking to Lira. She must have run off because of your hideous face. “ She went back to finishing the rest of her calculus, but he ripped the paper from beneath her pencil.

“Hey! Give that back you little worm!” Tara moved from behind the desk and ran after him all the way to the spiral staircase in the hallway.

“I wouldn’t talk to me that way if I were you. You could get into a lot of trouble with my aunt and uncle. And besides, what kind of gibberish is this anyway?” Tyler stared at the paper, the way a caveman might stare at a television screen.

What a moron.

Tara heard Lira’s voice and turned around, but she wasn’t behind her. Maybe Lira was hiding. She didn’t much like Tyler and seeing him would probably make her puke.

Tara glared up at Tyler and he grinned back. “What do you want from me now?”

“There’s a party is tonight, and aunt and uncle are supposed to have a big surprise. Bet you didn’t know.”

“We’re not having a party. What are you talking about?” Tara frowned at him. She couldn’t believe that her parents would have a party without telling her. That at the very least they would have told her about.

“They forgot your birthday last year. Do you really think another party is going to make a difference to them? They didn’t even acknowledge you during Christmas. Well, perhaps your father, but he only said ‘morning’ and walked away, so that doesn’t really count.” Lira leaned against the side of the entrance to the dining room. She looked at Tara as if surprised the thought would even occur to her.

And she was right. Why should Tara think they would remember to tell her about this party if they’d forgotten about her birthday again?

But it’s a party they didn’t tell her about. Maybe they remembered and decided to hold another party for her. Tara smiled and Lira just looked nonchalantly at the wall.

“I bet it’s for me. Mom and Dad forgot about my birthday again, so they’re probably making up for it with an even bigger party.” Tara smiled broadly and waved at Tyler as she ran in excitement. “Thanks for the update, bonehead!”

“Uh, wait!? What?” Tyler stared after Tara in complete ignorance for a second as she ran past the staircase and down the other hall towards the secondary staircase leading to her room upstairs. As she left Tyler slowly sat down on the stairs and grinned smugly.

Tara was excited about this party. It’s all that filled her head the rest of the day. She couldn’t help think that maybe her parents hadn’t forgotten her after all. Tara tried to convince Lira that this was a good sign; that her parents had finally gotten over ignoring her. Lira remained
skeptical and refused to go to the party with her. She saw this as a trick, maybe something Tyler came up with as a joke. No matter what, she couldn’t get that happy smile off Tara’s face. Lira was unsure, but she felt something bad was going to happen. It was a feeling she couldn’t understand, but she trusted it nonetheless.

“When you presume something, rather than go off and try to confirm it for yourself things can be distorted and then, well, things get crazy.” Lira walked out of the room as Tara prepared, not a single word of what she’d said reached her.

Tara dressed in her best, and only, light blue dress in front of her mirror in her bedroom. She even did her hair in curls, something she’d never done. She wanted this night to be perfect for her parents. Tara walked past her armoire on the right of her tall wooden dresser, and grabbed her shoes. All this time she has hated Tyler, but for once he’d done her a huge favor. Maybe she should be less harsh to him. After all, he did lose his parents.

“Please, don’t even think that. He hasn’t changed from being a little worm. He’s spoiled by your parents, and besides, he was flaunting the fact that they hadn’t told you about the party. He’s not the kind of person to suddenly do something nice for others. It’s just not his nature.” Lira sat silently on the bed watching Tara as she dressed for her ‘big night’.

“Don’t you think I know that? But in his moronic way he helped me look my best for Mom and Dad.” Tara glanced back at the mirror on top of her dresser and smiled at her reflection. Pulling her shoes on, she looked at Lira with seriousness. “For the first time in two years they aren’t ignoring me. They’re doing something for me, not Tyler.”

“That’s all good, but I still don’t like it,” Lira glanced up at the clock on the other wall near the door. “It’s time for you to go, don’t want to be late to your party,” she said begrudgingly.

Tara ran up the stairs down the hall, past the spiral mahogany staircase that led to the front door of the house. Her skirts flew as she headed right and stopped, breathing before she silently opened the parlor door. She saw more than a dozen people sitting down around the room.

This is one of her favorite rooms, because of it being so bright. The room was unusually large and filled with several armchairs, and a couch with the flat screen television and its accessories against the farthest wall. The guests were all smiling, laughing and hugging Tyler and Tara’s parents. Tara, of course, didn’t understand why that was if it was party for her.

Silently, she walked to the center of the room where her parents stood. Her mother was smiling brightly, her pearl white teeth perfect, as always. She had brown hair and brown eyes, and was
wearing her pretty black work suit. Her father was wearing an Armani
dark blue suit, and had a glass in his hand, probably filled with
champagne. In the light of the room, the champagne seemed to match
his blond hair.

“What’s going on?”
“Oh, Tara. Shouldn’t you be in bed?” Tara’s mother stared at her
in confusion, a drink in one hand and a cigarette appearing in the other.
“No. What’s going on? I thought this was my birthday party.”
“Your party? Who gave you that idea? This is Tyler’s party. We’re
celebrating his adoption.”

Tara smiled exuberantly. “So that means he’s leaving?”
I wouldn’t go that far, Tara.

Tara looked around but Lira wasn’t there, though she swore she
heard her voice. She was probably hiding behind the people here, and
she just couldn’t see her. So much for not coming to the party.
“No, Tyler is staying. From now on he’s going to be your brother.”
Tara stared at her mother as if she’d gone mad. She glanced
back at Tyler who was plugging something into the television. He glanced
back at her and grinned.

He knew this party was for him and he didn’t tell her. That worm,
he knew and he embarrassed her in front of everyone. And her parents,
they really did forget her birthday again. Not even a ‘sorry that we forgot
about it’. In the end it was always about Tyler, and that would never
change, would it?

Tara was just beginning to build up that rage when Lira appeared
beside her and whispered in her ear.

“Attention, everyone. I have a surprise for you, even you Tara.”
Tyler grinned again and bowed. “For the past several months I’ve been
making a documentary, with the video camera my new parents got me. A
special thanks to Tara for all the material.” Tyler pushed play.

The video took a couple of seconds to start and at first the film
seemed upside down, but wait… no, that was just Tyler holding the
camera the wrong way. A couple of seconds went by and suddenly on
the screen was Tara. She was sitting in the park under a tree, laughing.
Everyone smiled while they watched the film, complimenting Tyler on
how well he’d made it. Everyone except Lira and Tara.

It seemed fine at first, but then Tara started talking to herself.
There was no one beside her or behind the trees. The camera zoomed in
and found no one even remotely near her. Everyone glanced up at Tara
and she stared wide-eyed at the screen. Why was she talking to herself?
The film fast-forwarded and continued on like that for half an
hour or so. It was a video of her. She always talking to herself.

Then Tara began to recognize the scenes: the park, her house in
the kitchen, the pool, the backyard and the lake. All of these places were where she met Lira to hang out. But why wasn’t Lira in the film?

The last scene was in the library, where Tara was doing her calculus homework earlier. Tara shook her head and stared at the screen, waiting for Lira to show up. But she never did. Instead of Lira’s voice, she heard her own speaking in her place.

“They forgot again, didn’t they?” Tara sneered at the window across the room when she spoke.

The camera zoomed in closer to her face. Tara sneered, and the film was suddenly cut off. Tara ripped the cord out of the television and smashed the camera into a pile of film tape and plastic chunks.

Tyler backed away to her parents, and she saw it. The same look on everyone’s faces as the one Tyler had given her earlier. They all whispered and stared, unsure of what to say or do.

“What did you do to Lira you stupid little…!??”

“Enough, Tara.” Tara’s father pulled Tyler behind him. “Explain to us, what exactly were we watching, sweetheart? Why was Tyler...why was Tyler filming you talking to yourself?”

Tara couldn’t believe her ears as her father stared strangely at her. He believed this, believed Tyler over his own daughter.

Lira stood beside her now.

“I told you not to trust the little worm, but you wouldn’t listen to me, would you? No, now they think you’re crazy.” Lira laughed as Tara cried in anger and sadness.

“You believe him. That monster, that -- that little – little… ughhh! You believe him!? Over me?” Tara moved closer, fists clenched at her side, eyes glaring daggers at Tyler. “He could have messed with the film to make it look like I was talking to myself. Tell them the truth. You deleted Lira from the film to make me look crazy, didn’t you, you maggot?”

“No way, I just filmed it. I can’t help it for you’re a nutcase, cuz.” Tyler laughed and the other guests began to get up slowly.

Tara turned on them. “Where do think you’re going?” She cried; Her tears were streaming now. “Sit back down; no one leaves until they hear him say it!” She turned back to Tyler. “You’re lying.”

“And you, my own parents. Do you think I’m crazy? Huh…You choose that thing over me? You forget my birthday, don’t even acknowledge me when we go out! Which is never, because Tyler has to go everywhere. You’ve forgotten all about me every single day for the past two years and you are so ready to brush me aside, huh?”

“Sweetheart.” Tara’s mother placed her drink down on a small table beside her. She stared at her daughter with confusion. “Sweetheart, what are talking about? We just celebrated your birthday two months ago, remember? How do you think you got that dress? It was a gift from
me and your father. Honey, if something is wrong you can tell us, you know that.”

That anger just kept building, and confusion swelled in Tara’s mind. Then Lira whispered in her ear again.

“They’re lying again, see? Now they don’t even want to admit their mistakes. Let me handle this. I’ll take care of them.”

Lira scowled at them.

“You were never good parents anyway. Tara doesn’t deserve scum like you. Tara is the best kid you’ll ever have and the only one you’ll ever appreciate.”

Lira grabbed an iron rod from the chimney set on the opposite side of the room and ran as Tara’s parents stared after her in shock. She closed both of the doors, sliding the rods in-between the door handles. Lira was furious. No one hurt Tara like that, not now and not ever.

Lira grinned, “I’m going to take good care of them for us. They’ll never forget you after this.”

She ran to the kitchen, and grabbed the mechanical lighter the chef used, from one of the drawers and ripped some of the dirty dish rags from under the sink. She headed back to the door and heard Tara’s parents yelling and arguing with the guests. They were trying to find a way out, but the only escape was this door. Lira could only guess that since the parlor was on the second floor that they couldn’t open the windows. Tara’s father always did like old fashion houses, so the windows wouldn’t really budge after a long time of not being used.

Tara stared at the door and cried some more. Lira sighed.

“How could they believe him? I’m their daughter!?”

“They always said they wanted a boy.”

“Well now they’ve got one, haven’t they? They adopted him, that monster.”

Lira shoved the rags into the cracks under the door and lit them up. Running back she grabbed the alcohol Tara’s mother loved to drink and soaked the edges of the door. The flames spread and consumed the entire wall.

Tara was still crying when Lira began to comfort her.

“Don’t worry, after this they won’t forget you. They’ll learn their lesson soon enough. As soon as they apologize I’ll let them out.”

But they never did apologize. Instead they panicked as the fire and smoke spread. Lira grabbed more of the alcohol and smashed the bottle against the door, making it slip into the room they were all in. Lira thought she was in control, but the fire climbed up the walls and spread throughout the house.

Tara finally woke up from her crying fit and saw the fire. She ran to the kitchen and grabbed the phone, but Lira stopped her.

“Why?” Tara stared back at the fire spreading towards her. “Why
can’t I just ignore them, like they ignored me?”

Lira grinned holding the last of the alcohol bottles, and helped Tara out the back door.

The firemen came less than an hour later, but by then, the house was already swallowed by massive flames. Tara was found lying on the concrete sidewalk outside of her house. She was waiting, still waiting, for mommy and daddy to remember her and pick her up.

Tara screams as she wakes up. There are tears trickling down her cheeks as she stares at the light bulb above her. The lights are on and she’s still hugging herself again and she’s back in that damn room.

Tara stares blankly at Lira. Lira stares at the wall blankly.

“We didn’t do anything wrong. They did. They ignored me and treated me like crap. I was nothing and he was everything. I was smarter than him, well behaved and nicer. And yet they chose him.”

“They always said they wanted a boy.” Lira smiles. “Now they’ll have him in death.”

“You did it Lira, not me. I was crying the whole time. I didn’t know what you were doing.”

“Don’t lie to yourself Tara. It’s not healthy. After all, I am you.”

“No, you’re not.” Tara stares at Lira as she sits in the far corner of the room, where the light from the bulb couldn’t reach. “We all know what happened Tara, just admit it.”

Tara tries to shut her out by grabbing the sides of her head, but she can’t because of the jacket. She shuts her eyes tightly so as not to see, trying to ignore Lira as best as she can. Tears run down her cheeks as she tries to hold them back.

When her Mom and Dad brought Tyler home from the hospital, how shocked they all were. There were dark circles under her mother’s eyes. Her poor father, there were tears dripping slowly down the sides of his face. Tyler was being dragged inside by her mother, his face covered in dirt and his hand bandaged.

Her birthday party: no one was there; no one came.

“Lies!”

“No, Tara.” Lira said.

There was everything from yellow, red, and green balloons to chocolate and vanilla cake, but Tyler was the one having the most fun. Tara was too distracted by the strange girl standing outside her window smiling. No one had come to the party except Tyler’s friends. Tara didn’t really talk much, and all the other kids didn’t bother her whenever she stared off into space.

At Christmas the tree was a bright pine green from top to bottom, with angel and Santa ornaments. The gold star gleamed at the very top, and presents littered the bottom. Her parents sat not too far from her on
the couch in the living room of their house. They were smiling at her and Tyler. Tara didn’t pay attention to this, since she was busy staring at the far end of the room where a young girl stood, hiding in the shadows staring out at a wall. Out of the corner of her eye she glanced quickly at Tara and her parents behind her…

Tara glared down at the alcohol bottle in her left hand, and the torn kitchen rags in the other. She watched as bright red and yellow flames combined and consumed the length of the door and walls. They climbed the parlor and burst encompassing the door, sliding swiftly under the door, smoke exploding into the other side of the room where her parents and cousin were trapped. The iron rod, in-between the door handles, glowed a deep red, as fists bashed against the doors and voices screamed out in desperation, agony, and fear as the flames and smoke filled their lungs and burned them from the inside out. All Tara felt was anger, but why?

She set the bottle down, sat in a corner of the small hallway and cried for a moment. Staring at the burning doors she suddenly stood and ran for the phone to call for help. Her lips curled into a smile, as her hand dropped the cordless phone, before she could dial those three life saving numbers...

Tara saw herself covered in black ash and surrounded in smoke, escaping the flames that would consume everything. She sat on the sidewalk, not too far from her burning house, the concrete cold under her bare hands. In one of them she held a bottle of wine her mother used to drink during parties. A sly smile crept onto her full lips and into her eyes gleam a mischievous light. Sirens could be heard in the distance as she began to lay down on the sidewalk, crocodile tears leaking from those devious eyes.

“…until you see the truth…”

“Sweetheart, what are talking about? We just celebrated your birthday two months ago, remember? How do you think you got that dress? It was a gift from me and your father.” The memory played again of her mother’s voice...

Tara moans, pushing herself till she was off the wall she had slept against, and her face slapped itself lightly onto the padded floor. The floor was white, just like the walls, and the light bulb above dangled, shining brightly and casting shadows on the walls. Its light never seemed to touch the corners of the room. Tara struggles to pull her arms from around herself, grumbling as she persisted, but to no avail. She wouldn’t get out of that thing no matter how hard she tried.

“…see the truth…”

Tara breathes in slowly, unsteadily, as her mind traces everything back. Seeing visions of her mother and father smiling, of miserable Tyler mocking her at every turn. But was it real?
“I know what happened, what I did. But why can’t I just forget?” Tara cries out and tugs at the material holding her to herself. Groaning, she succumbs to the inevitable. Tears drain out of her eyes again, but this time she actually feels them. She feels them drip down the side of her cheeks and watches them hit the soft white of the padded floor. She tastes the salt on her lips and hears her heart hammer at the feel of it.

She gazes at the light above, unblinking, as it casts no shadows. The floor is soft as she rests her cheek against it, but it does not comfort her, soothe her, keep her sheltered. The room is ghastly bright, white everywhere; and it radiates an unforgiving glare into her eyes. She lies there sobbing, repeating it over and over again, in the terrible light.

“No more lies.”
All that is and was Before
Cala Glatz
A Mother’s Love

Eric Wojtanik

(VIRGINIA sits on a floral print sofa centered perfectly between the salmon hued walls of the family room. OSCAR kneels on the floor driving a plastic truck along the plush carpet. He periodically crawls to the coffee table, snacking off a plate of celery.)

OSCAR
How long has mommy been gone?

(VIRGINIA caps her nail polish, blowing across her freshly painted cuticles. She glances at the wall clock.)

VIRGINIA
Only about two hours; I wouldn’t expect her back for awhile bud, dates can take a long time especially if you like the person you’re with.

(Keys RATTLE offstage, OSCAR perks up as ROSEMARY and HEATH enter stage right carrying grocery bags.)

OSCAR
Mommy! You’ve been gone forever.

ROSEMARY
I’m sorry sweetheart. It was an eternity, wasn’t it? (beat) Don’t be rude; introduce yourself to mommy’s friend.

(OSCAR stands and sheepishly walks over to HEATH; he fidgets with the wheels of his truck.)

OSCAR
Hello, I’m Oscar Timothy Donnerson, and I’m almost six years old. I have a pet turtle, his name is Patrick but my friends call him Peggy.

HEATH
It’s very nice to meet you Oscar. Have you been a good boy recently? (OSCAR nods) Good I suspected so. It has always been my belief that good behavior should be rewarded.

(HEATH reaches into his paper bag and removes a colorfully wrapped chocolate bar. He offers it to OSCAR who SQUEALS excitedly.)
ROSEMARY
Heath heavens no! (snatching the candy bar) When on earth did you buy this? I never saw you put it in the cart. I certainly would have remembered.

VIRGINIA
Big mistake, you're in for it now.

HEATH
I, I bought it at the counter when you left to heat up the car. Rosemary honestly I don't-

ROSEMARY
I wish you would have asked me first, the whole incident could have been avoided. Now my nerves are working up, the mere presence of the substance... I'm feeling light headed. You didn't purchase any more did you?

(ROSEMARY sets her bag on the floor and inspects the rest of HEATH'S groceries. She removes two more chocolate bars, SNORTING indignantly.

HEATH
I'm confused. Is he allergic?

(ROSEMARY moves to the fireplace downstage right. She tosses the chocolate inside and stokes the fire. OSCAR follows her watching the bars liquefy.)

ROSEMARY
Allergic? No, should he have to be? Do you know what chocolate does to a person?

HEATH
Well in my experience it induces satisfaction...

ROSEMARY
Chocolate can speed up your heart rate, stimulate high blood pressure and cause panic attacks. Those who say it's not addictive are simply fooling themselves. I have never met one single chocolate fiend who wasn’t terribly overweight either. Not to mention the effects it has on a person’s mind.

(ROSEMARY digs into her purse. She removes her wallet and
fans through money. VIRGINIA stands and approaches her.)

HEATH
What possible effect could chocolate have on the mind?

ROSEMARY
Why it’s very similar to the effect it has on one’s teeth, – here you are Virginia – inevitable decay.

(VIRGINIA pockets the money and exits the house.)

HEATH
Don’t you think you’re over-reacting? I love chocolate. I’m not obese or mad and these certainly aren’t dentures.

(OSCAR reaches for an ornate porcelain doll propped up on the mantel. ROSEMARY, horrified, rushes to stop him.)

ROSEMARY
No, No, NO! How many times has mommy told you never to touch her doll figurine? If anything ever happened to her I would…(to HEATH) See what you’ve done? He’s all worked up; it wouldn’t surprise me if this pungent chocolate stench has unbalanced his serotonin levels. I probably won’t even be able to put him to bed tonight. (to OSCAR) Now you go up to your room, and stay there until I say so.

(OSCAR nods and exits upstage left. ROSEMARY grabs HEATH’S scarf off the coat rack and hands it to him.)

HEATH
I had no idea this would make you so upset, it was never my intention to –

ROSEMARY
Oscar’s father owned a chocolate store. He was a horrible man who abandoned his family and moved to Bavaria in pursuit of his self-proclaimed passion. He has since remarried with a glorified milk maid. Goodbye Heath. I shall see you at work on Monday.

(HEATH opens his mouth to retort, but thinks better of it. He turns and exits twirling his hat back on top of his head. ROSEMARY SIGHS, moving to the doll on the mantel. She gently lifts the doll, caressing its cheek. She turns the doll upside down, removing a concealed plug. She shakes several individually
wrapped nuggets of chocolate into her hand and replaces the
doll. One-by-one ROSEMARY unwraps the chocolate pieces and
pops them into her mouth a look of utter enjoyment melts onto
her face.)

ROSEMARY
Boy does that hit the spot.

(ROSEMARY waltzes about the room balancing the remaining
pieces in her palm. OSCAR creeps back into the room, upon
seeing his mother he drops his head in shame.)

OSCAR
Mommy?

(ROSEMARY turns startled, she notices her son’s diverted gaze
and stuffs the remaining chocolates into her mouth. She crams
the wrappers into a flower filled vase and wipes her mouth.)

ROSEMARY
Yes, what is it hun?

OSCAR
I’m hungry; may I please take my celery snack into my room?

ROSEMARY
Yes of course. (Grabbing the plate). If you’d like I can smear them with
some peanut butter.

Would you like that?

OSCAR
No, I’ve been a bad boy.

ROSEMARY
Darling you made a mistake, but it wasn’t your fault. I fear I was a bit
harsh; after all you were under the spell of that rotten substance. I know
you didn’t mean to misbehave.

(OSCAR runs across the stage and hugs his mother. She rubs
his back.)

ROSEMARY
There, there no need for tears. I know what will cheer you up. I’ll make
you some sugar free pudding. Would you like tapioca or butterscotch?

OSCAR
Butterscotch! (beat) Mommy, what does chocolate taste like?

ROSEMARY
Good heavens it was so long since I last tried it, but to tell you the truth I can only remember one distinctive thing about it.

OSCAR
What’s that?

ROSEMARY
The second after I tried it I spit it right back out and cried till I was given a glass of warm milk to wash the taste away.

OSCAR
Yuck. (beat) I bet you it tastes like dirt.

ROSEMARY
You know, you’re probably right, but I certainly don’t want to find out anytime soon, do you?

(OSCAR shakes his head. The pair stand, and ROSEMARY leads her son offstage. LIGHTS DOWN).
We walked along a broken-down pier, fingers locked in pockets, Shoulders braced against the wind. Across the water,

The steely sun sank,

A retreating kraken, below the smooth line

Of silver-blue horizon. Our lungs were filled

With words unspoken, the absence of phrase

Shuddering through our chests, colder Than the chilly, salt-drenched air.

A single seagull broke the silence.

You were the first to hoist a white flag, your hands In one fluid motion Snatching my wrist like a sail rope.

Calloused hand on hand, we Adjusted our direction.

By the time we left the harbor, The sky had darkened, A flock of wheeling seagulls Called to the climbing night.
Untitled
Vala Kjarval
“God is another name for mom.”
-Anonymous

Daughters
Amber Hickman

My first union blessed me
with a child. I saw its body

parts through a clear, nicotine stained hose
attached to a shop vac with blades
at one end. Petite

legs and feet – iridescent
skin – little violet veins.

Fingers and toes that could’ve curled
their innocence around mine.
A miniscule heart that could’ve beat
against my breast.

Its eyes closed, but translucent. My first
brown eyed girl…

Four years after, in 1980, she was born
again. Beautiful brown eyes, dark skin, thick
black hair – I couldn’t stand
to look at her.

Maybe it was my first daughter – or maybe
the way my husband looked at her

when she started growing breasts at age
eight - or was it when he started calling me
by her name as he took me
from behind?

It took me thirteen years
to perform
my psychological feticide – and then when he tried again to fuck her eleven years later. By then I had my Masters.

God is another name for Mom, I guess I was just playing my part.
My paranoia stems from something incredibly specific. It’s nothing really strange or out of the ordinary. It happens to be my neighbor. He has lived in the same house for as long as we have been in the neighborhood, which has been my whole life. His name is Steve. This is all I really know that is concrete about the man. I don’t know how old he is, his last name, or what he does for a living. All I know is his name, and that he assaults our neighborhood with constant acts of what I consider perversion, and that I may be in the wrong for distrusting everything he does.

Everything that is responsible for my paranoia started the summer before I turned eleven. It was a hot summer and as a rule, whenever the weather got too hot for us to bear, we would play in whatever water we could get our feet into. ‘Us’ typically being all the kids in the neighborhood. That summer, it was the creek behind our neighbor’s house. My family is good friends with another family that lives a few houses down from Steve. They have four children, all girls, whom my sister and I became close friends with. We would do our own things, usually chalking on our driveways and attempting to climb too-tall trees, before we realized we could do these things together. Unable to cross the roads by ourselves, we took to shouting our names and other childish interests to each other. Eventually our parents got the gist and set up play dates, which quickly escalated into full on get togethers for children and parents alike. My mother became like their second mother and my sister and I were always welcome to the grape juice in their fridge.

So naturally we started our adventure out behind their house. They kept their bit of the creek clean, just like how they kept their large, open yard clean. The grass was cut evenly; there were no trees, so no residual leaves cluttered the lawn. The water behind their house was almost crystal clear. Little bits of grass floated on the top as well as strings of the algae that clung to the cement underneath. We dabbled behind their house for a while before moving towards the drainage tunnel farther down the way.

It was a creepy thing to us kids. A large hole underneath the road, set into a hill. It was a short one, with sunlight visible at both ends. But it narrowed out on the opposite side so that it was impossible to stand straight and exit. Weeds grew extensively all around it and when a car drove over the noise was deafening. Of course when we first expressed a kind of frightened curiosity about it, our parents insisted in being with us whenever we wanted to explore it. I’m glad of
this, because if my mother hadn’t been with us that day, I’m not sure what would have happened.

To get to the tunnel, we had to pass Steve’s back yard. It was unlike our backyard, and any other backyard I had ever seen. The grass was uncut, running rampant. An old car squatted near a raggedly sawed off tree trunk. It was lacking windows and a bumper. It was also mostly shaded by large trees and a two story shed with a glass roof. Our group consisted of myself, my mother, my sister, and two of the daughters, Beth and Deanna. My mother seemed to want to hurry us past his yard, and kept us on the side of the creek that was furthest from his rundown keepsakes.

Before we made it half way past, he stepped out from his back door, dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts and a crow bar in one hand. The problem with Steve is that his face is not remarkable. I could not describe it. For some reason, we stopped moving. My mother edged around until she was in front of us as he called out a greeting and continued approaching us, crowbar still in hand. He was smiling. This much I remember from his face. He was smiling as he stopped, uncomfortably as close as he could get. The creek was the only thing separating us. One of his bare feet was resting just a few inches from the water, which was less clean. The algae over ran the top of the waters, and the grass clung over the sides. What would a normal adult do? Address the other adult perhaps. Or maybe even say hello to our entire group.

He targeted my sister first.

My sister was five at the time. She was tiny. I could put my thumb and pointer finger all around her arm. Her long black hair reached her knees like mine had when I was her age. She was adorable, and ignorant. He called her by her name.

“Why Cecie, you’ve gotten so big. Hello there dear.”

We had never spoken to him at this point. I wondered how he knew her name. This is the first encounter we have had with him. He continued to name each one of us children, but when it came to my mother, he halted.

“I’m so sorry, but I have forgotten your name.”

She was standing between us at this point. She said something sharp, ridiculed him. She had more reason to be angry with him than any of us children at that point. It was her sitting on her porch, cradling me as a little child when one of his delinquent sons started shooting out windows in the surrounding houses. It was she who when, after putting me to bed when I was just a year old, ended up calling the cops because he was grinding metal in his garage at ten o’clock at night. There were many things leading up to that moment that made her openly glare at the man in front of us. I don’t remember anything about his face, just that he
told us, in quite sulky tones, that we were on his property and shouldn’t dilly-dally.

We didn’t go to the tunnel. Deanna and I voiced our disapproval, but only for a moment. My mother quickly shut us up and when we realized he was still standing near the creek, crowbar dangling at his bare knee, his unmemorable face watching us retreat, we remained quiet willingly. We stayed silent until we were safe in their backyard, up on their bare cement patio. That bare space, void of any trees, felt safer than his sheltered backyard. We stood there in a little circle, my sister holding my mother’s hand. My mother looked like she was internally seething. When she gets mad, the space between her eyebrows gets wrinkly, her lips purse, creating more lines around her face, and she breathes through her nose quite hard.

At the time, I had no idea what was bothering her except for the fact that our neighbor had just been very disturbing. Even in my ten-year-old mind, I was shocked that a man we hardly ever talked with had approached us. Worst of all, he had stopped our adventure into the creepy, frog-infested tunnel. I was angry at him for that, but not the fact that he had forgotten my mother’s names, or knew my sisters. If my mother hadn’t been there, I don’t think I would have thought of him any differently than I did about vegetables. They existed and that was normal, and I didn’t have a problem with it. Yet her anger and the stories she would later tell me would change my opinion about him forever.

He has never done anything since then. By anything, I mean he has never kidnapped one of us and kept us in his garbage-infested house, padlocked to the floor and laughing at our misery. Nothing that I ever imagine ever happens. Except that he still remembers all of our names, ten years later. I was grown. I had not seen him, but his presence weighed heavily on my mind.

The things that he had continued to do were disturbing. Following after my sister and I on a bicycle when we were out for a walk. Coming out of his house in nothing but a pair of jeans and a flashlight as we were about to go for a walk late at night. He proceeded to walk down the street, shining the lights in house windows and through the gaps between the houses. We were safe inside our garage by the time his porch lights had come on, so great was our fear of him at that point.

Ten years later, and we still have no proof that he is what we think he is: a pedophile, a drug dealer, an insane man who lives in a house by himself but always has different sorts of people coming and going. We have no proof, and yet my opinion of him hasn’t changed for the better. I still think he is strange and if he moved our neighborhood would be all the better without him.

I was gardening. It was the summer before I turned twenty. And like most summers, it was hot out. I had long ago given up wanting to
explore the tunnel under the road. I kept to the safety of my own lawn, where I worked to bring color to it. I had just finished replanting a baby maple tree. It was a long, dragging process. I had to make sure the roots stayed intact otherwise it wouldn’t survive the replant. It had been moved from one flower bed in the back yard to one right up front in the open, where it would have room to grow and flourish. I was right across from his house, and somehow, I was unnerved. He had been out in his garage all day, puttering loudly.

“Hey now, when you’re finished here why don’t you come over and help me work on my yard?”

I looked up, startled; I hadn’t heard or seen anyone approach. It was Steve. His face, still bland, was smiling at me. He was holding a shovel. Why did he walk everywhere with heavy working implements in his hands? I tried to be polite. My lip curled at one end of my smile and my laugh sounded hollow. All I could think was that I also had a shovel. It was an irrational thought but at the time, I was inexplicably frightened for my safety.

He kept talking. “You do some good work. Your parents should be proud, having a young lady to work around the yard as hard as you do. Those flowers you replanted up by the house look terrific. Sure you wouldn’t want to help me out? I’d bring you some lemonade. It’s a shame you haven’t been brought any. You need to stay hydrated.”

“My mom is in the garage. My father is out back.” I hadn’t meant it to sound so defensive. His sentences blended into one another, casual and harmless, but to me they were hiding an undertow of danger. I hardly knew him, but I did know that he was always doing yard work. He was quite capable of it himself.

With a shrug and a nod he walked back to his yard, calling over his shoulder, “It was good talking to you Merriya.”

He had remembered my name after ten years. I was petrified. I felt violated. My personal space had been invaded by his presence. I knew nothing about him. I hardly remembered his name. My mother calls him “Cletus” whenever she would have anything to say about him, which is hardly ever, unless he does something that creeped her out. Our neighborhood nickname for him is “The Junk Man.” His real name is hardly used. He is not a part of our daily lives, except that he is. Every time I leave my house, I look to see if he’s outside. I never walk my dog right in front of his house; we always move to the other side of the street. It would be easy to nab anyone walking past.

My concern is that I have somehow wronged this man. That our whole neighborhood has the wrong impression of him, that we are all wrong. If we had not been accosted by him ten years prior, our brief exchange would have been completely normal. If we had been on speaking terms all those years, it wouldn’t have been strange that he
remembered my name. He might just be a kindly man with a terrible memory and incredibly strange timing. He could be a loving parent, a hard worker and a dedicated member of society; all of his personal life is secluded from my knowledge.

He came back later in the day. I was exhausted and resting in the shade of one of our larger maple trees. Beth had joined me an hour prior to help plant flowers all around our mailbox. She had brought iced tea with her. We were talking, our empty glasses in hand when he came over, standing just beyond our yard, in the gutter of the street. That gutter was exactly how the creek had been. A barrier between us for some reason he did not cross.

“Now this is what I like to see,” he said, another smile on his unobtrusive face. “Two young ladies relaxing after a hard day’s work. I see you already have something to drink. That’s good.”

I didn’t say anything. Beth, who never really had a problem with him since her mother never fed her stories about how odd he could be, did. She said something about how hard work is good for the body. He agreed a little too enthusiastically.

“How you doing Beth? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

Her laugh echoed the one I had given him earlier. Hollow, and fake. After he left, her smile disappeared.

“Is it just me,” she said slowly. “Or is he even creepier now?”

It wasn’t just me. That was for certain. I told my mom everything that happened. Her reaction was exactly the same. Her lips puckered, her brow furrowed, and she breathed out hard through her nose. I found out then that she wasn’t like me. She had no doubt in her mind that he was a messed up individual. The things she proceeded to say about him went far beyond insults. She condemned the man. I remain unsure. His ever-smiling features would never stick out in a crowd, but maybe that was the sad thing. He would be remembered by us for the rest of forever as the creepy neighbor. He probably thought we were the creeps. We kept treating him rudely after he had the cranial capacity to remember our names for ten years. He had probably needed all those years to work up the courage to say something.

Or maybe he was secretly enjoying the fact that we harbored fear of him. Maybe he knew, and he tormented us on purpose. I have no way of knowing. I think about it more often than I should. Are we doing this man a wrong? He could just have poor judgment. He certainly makes bad calls. He once tried to cut down the large tree in his yard after it had died. By himself, with a chainsaw. He realized this wasn’t smart, and decided he was going to cut the branches overhanging the road off. He blocked the road with gasoline cans and a cat carrier. Cars going by stopped, argued with him, got him to move the things out of their way, and continued, usually with shouts lingering behind their vehicle. As a
result of his lack of authority, he hardly got any branches cut. He was constantly moving the things in the road for cars to get by.

If I didn’t know him, or think that he would some night creep into our house and murder us in our sleep, I would have felt bad for him. But I didn’t. I put him in the wrong. Blocking a road with gas cans. Something that idiotic couldn’t possibly be normal. It wasn’t even legal, we found out later. Yet it is just the sort of thing someone with a lack of common sense might do. He could have been concerned that his yard work might accidentally hurt someone, so he tried to find a way to avert any potential crisis. At the same time, with all the clutter in his house and garage, he couldn’t find anything better to block a road than a highly dangerous and flammable gas can.

Then again, he once tried to mow his lawn with three push tractors that he had roped together, no doubt in an effort to make it a faster process. We watched him in the attempt. He lashed what looked to be bungee cords around the handles and near the hood of each tractor. Then he started each one individually, stood at the middle one, and pushed. The one he was holding surged forward; the other two held back on the elasticity of the cords and eventually began to tilt and halt his progress.

What seemed like a great idea to him was outright entertainment for us, sitting in our garage and watching him, ridiculing him and his inferior ideas. It hit me that he might just be dancing to the beat of his own drum when I attempted to use a broom tied to a hockey stick to sweep snow off our roof and gutters. It seemed like a great idea at the time, but when the broom lurched back and fell off the roof to hit me in the face and all the snow came down on top of me, I cursed myself for my lack of common sense. But my mother just laughed and said I might think it through a little more next time.

My paranoia keeps me in a strict state of mind. He is deranged, there is nothing normal about his thought process, and I wish he didn’t live near me or my family. Then sometimes I stop to think about what he might be like aside from the persona we have created for him. If we had stopped to get his side of the story any time he acted out of the ordinary, maybe he would have turned out to be just the neighborhood clown, a man to laugh at whenever he does something silly. Not the reason I keep my windows shut and locked even on the hottest of summer nights.
Mcmuffinheads
Aaron Z. Lee
Virginia, I’m Crying
Rebecca Wemesfelder

Virginia, I’m crying.
You’re haunting me, cut throat.
I wait in this motel for my call.
And your monsters haunt my sill.
The sun is daunted by you.
It stands back.
It only comes up in the sky
because Virginia has a hold on it
-with fishing wire.
Virginia. Hold me.
I’m weak and I am tired.
I fall to your sunrises
I fall like your ocean
I watch the black bats scratch at your sky.
Virginia, I’m crying and the sun slowly, unconfidently
rises to remind us of time.
The monsters hold the curtains open.
We won’t sleep. We won’t.
I’m haunted. And it’s comfortable.
We are the “used-to-this” people.
The sun is sinking low when you punch out and head home. The last rays of the day caress the back of your neck as you pass fast food restaurants and convenience stores. At the top of the arching bridge that spans the canal, the city stretches out ahead, looming gray against a purple sky.

Before reaching the bottom of the bridge, you hop the guardrail. There’s a trail beaten into the grass. You follow it to the crumbling tarmac path that runs parallel to the canal, and ends where the canal spills into the river. It’s a short walk that ambles beneath two overpasses; one leaving the city, and one leading back.

You walk slowly, listen to the water and think about nothing. It’s full dark when you reach the river and sit on the grassy bank. You take a bottle of beer from the six-pack in your knapsack, then roll a cigarette. It’s a warm night, one of the first really warm nights of the year.

You gaze at the stars reflecting off the water like tiny white blossoms, and imagine yourself sliding down the bank. Imagine your feet slipping into the warm water, the current tugging gently at your legs, waist, torso, until the river has you. With a smile on your face and bottle in hand you drift beneath the stars, the lights of the city fading behind you, fading into the night.
Untitled
Brittany McCann
A Cheap Cover
Zach Jennings

Of course you’re going to scrape the windshield for them. You’re a gentleman. They get in the car and she starts it, begging it to heat up quickly. The engine struggles for a bit, then triumphs over the bitter cold. You jab and scrape and brush to reveal the frigid glass. It’s that kind of snow that is soft but heavy, the top layer crusty and frozen. You’re not wearing gloves or a coat or a hat. You curse yourself for being such an idiot. But who wears all those things to a house party? Where would you put them? You go above and beyond scraping her car, brushing all the snow off the hood and the headlights and the roof and every single window. You even brush the back bumper so people will know when she’s breaking. She has three friends in her car too, one in the front seat already. You wanted to sit there, but that’s okay. It’s not a long car ride. Her two friends in the back squish together so you can fit in. Your comparison of scraping the car to carving the statue of David makes them all laugh.

She blasts some new pop R&B song on her iPod through the car speakers and everyone sings along except you. You’re a 26-year-old junior at a state school in a car with four girls who are there when they’re supposed to be. Of course you don’t know the song. You hate this kind of music. But you tap the beat on your thighs and now that you’ve heard the chorus once, you get the gist of it and hum the melody the next time around. All that tapping warms your hands.

She told you earlier the guys who live in the house are really cool. She’s been their friend pretty much since the beginning of her freshman year. She said these parties rarely draw more than 15 or 20 people. That’s good. You hate feeling cramped.

You don’t understand why girls go out in tight dresses and heels in the wintertime. Still, you can’t help but admire their dedication. Your support them as you all walk up the icy sidewalk and into the house. The guy at the door nods approval your way when he sees four girls with you. Either he’s simply impressed by you or he likes the ratio. The house is a sauna compared to outside. Sweaty people dance in the living room, breathing hot inebriated breath all over each other. Three of the girls in your group find some people they know and break off in that direction. She stays with you. She must sense your discomfort. She takes your hand and guides you through the madness back into the dining room where beer pong is the center of attention. You hand five bucks to the guy with the Solo cups and he gives you one.

“Thanks man,” you say.

“No problem bro,” he says. You can barely hear him above the
din of the music. It might be the song you heard in the car. You don’t know. They all sound the same. The guy with cups is wearing a powder blue Polo and jeans with so many holes you discover he doesn’t have hair on his legs. He wears a ball cap tilted sideways. His mouth has this kind of permanent smirk because he knows he’s awesome. It only takes you a few seconds to analyze it because you’ve seen that look everywhere, except in the mirror.

You don’t get a beer for your girl because she brought her own concoction of booze and juice in a green water bottle. She let you try a sip back in her dorm room and it tasted like Bath & Body Works smells. She looks adorable there, leaning against the wall, her eyes following all the people and the pong ball each time it’s thrown. The bright light on the ceiling makes her eyes sort of glow. They’re bright brown. Who knew that was possible?

“Do you want to play?” you ask her. You hope to stay by her side the whole time because she’s beautiful and you like her, but you also don’t know anyone else here.

“Sure,” she says. “I’ll sign us up.” It only takes her a minute and she smiles as she walks back toward you. She grabs your hand with both of hers and rests her chin on your shoulder. “You’re so cute,” she says. You smile just as big on the outside as you do on the inside.

It’s finally your turn and you make your way to the table. Lots of people are watching and you’re suddenly part of the center of attention. The light is brighter than it was before, directly over the table. You suck in your gut enough so you can still breathe normally. You know it’s ridiculous. You’ve seen pictures of yourself and you’re not fat. Regardless, your shirt feels tighter now. You don’t have a hat on, which is fine. But you think your slowly receding hairline will glare underneath the light. For a moment, your single dorm room is the only place you want to be. Then she rubs her nails lightly between your shoulder blades and you stop thinking.

She can’t make a cup to save her life but you can’t miss. After five wins or so, you settle into the spotlight. Maybe it’s her presence. Maybe it’s the beer. Finally though, you lose and your impressive run is over. Her friends call her into the living room to dance. She’s nice enough to ask if you want to join, but you decide to stay put. It doesn’t take long to realize it wasn’t the beer making you feel so good. You crack your knuckles, then move your wallet from your front pocket to your back pocket, then fold your arms, then scratch an itch that isn’t really there. You really want her to hold your hand again.

You wander as subtly as you can into the hallway that leads to the stairs and lean against the wall between you and the living room. The girls are singing along to some song. No one has texted you tonight, but you scroll through your inbox anyway. You check your Twitter. Why
would you do that right now? What would you tweet? During the next few songs you move around the house, stopping to lean on various walls. If anyone asks, you’re checking your phone because people you know are on the way. Why would anyone ask? It takes almost as long for you to empty your cup as it does to refill it. You ask blue Polo Solo cup guy where the bathroom is. He’s bobbing his head to the music, but one bob looks exaggerated, so you decipher that the bathroom is upstairs.

Cruelly aged carpeting covers the middle third of the wooden stairs. The patterns look as though they were classy once. You try but fail to imagine a wholesome family of four living in this house. A bedroom door is open upstairs and you peek in. All the coats are on the bed, which makes sense. Yours is in the car. There’s a poster on the wall that gives you thirty reasons why beer is better than a woman. Then you imagine how many people have had sex in that room. Suddenly, you’re glad your coat is in the car.

If you were a girl you would apply makeup touch-ups right now. Alone and locked in the bathroom, you turn sideways in the filmy and speckled mirror and check your gut-to-ass ratio. You bought this shirt, plaid with these little buttons on the shoulders, a little bit small so you’d be motivated to work out. You make eye contact with your reflection and you both roll your eyes at how ridiculous you are. Of all places to feel self-conscious, the bathroom of a college house is low on the list.

A knock on the door startles you.

“Hang on a sec,” you call out.

“It’s me,” she says. You unlock the door and she’s there, leaning against the doorway with one foot behind the other. Adorable. You still need to pee.

She crosses the threshold and locks the door behind her. Your heart rate finds a gear you didn’t know it had as she puts her hands on your hips and pushes you against the sink. Her lips are so soft. She tastes and smells like the mixed drink she let you try earlier. You run your fingers behind her ear and through her thick hair. You no longer hear the music, only her punctuated breathing and the creaking floor beneath your feet. She pulls away a bit and you nibble on her lower lip and she giggles. You can’t get enough of her eyes. The light bulbs above the mirror behind you reflect in them, like stars. You know that’s a tacky way of putting it but whatever. She’s undoing your belt and you tense up and she notices. Maybe she thinks you’re inexperienced and maybe she likes that. Or maybe she’s like what the hell, what’s wrong with this guy? Or maybe she just doesn’t know that you didn’t pee before you let her into the bathroom.

“I really have to pee,” you say. She sort of cackles then kisses you again, just a little peck with her bottom lip below your bottom lip so
it leaves this little wet spot above your chin. You lick your lips and she smiles.

“I’ll be downstairs,” she says. You turn and look into the mirror and see Paul Walker with your face superimposed staring back at you. Who’s rolling their eyes now?

You decide to share the surf n’ turf special for Valentine’s Day at Patz On The River. They have these cute little couples specials printed on pink and red menus. She orders an iced tea because she’s still a few months away from being able to drink in public. You order a Sam Adams and the waiter doesn’t card you. The candlelight flickers in her eyes. Those eyes.

You swore off frat parties seven years ago. You’re on Facebook in class, messaging her. She’s sitting next to you and the professor doesn’t notice that you’ve been typing this conversation. You used to have to write actual notes to accomplish this in high school. She’s probably never gone without a cell phone or the Internet.

“So what’d you do this weekend?” you type. It takes a while because it’s one of those Dell keyboards that’s super loud unless you treat the keys like you’re playing Operation.

“The girls and I went to a frat party,” she responds.
“Why?”
No response.
There’s this awkward feeling that’s never been there before when you walk with her out of the classroom. You say bye and she says bye when you part ways and you realize that was a stupid thing to ask. Why? What kind of question is that? She jokes around and calls you old man all the time but now you’re really acting like it. You might as well have called her a whippersnapper and told her to be home by nine the next time she goes out. On your way to your dorm you stop for coffee in the campus center. The line is kind of long and you’re sweating a little bit and you fidget. Instead of coffee, you get a smoothie, one of the low calorie ones.

Hours later, you’re up to your face in schoolwork when your phone vibrates. You forgot to turn the volume up after class. The first one says, “Message 1/2.” It’s going be a long one. After reading the first half, you don’t want to read the second. She says she likes you and everything; you’re a really sweet guy; she had so much fun. But she says you’re on different pages.

You feel this sort of predicted disappointment, like when you get a bad grade back on a test you didn’t prepare for. You zip up a hoodie
and put shoes on. It’s dark out and a walk sounds nice. A full-length mirror is on the hallway wall next to the door to outside and you force your eyes to stay away. You don’t want to see it.
Held/Bystand Heaney
*Chantal Le Blanc*

By the hedge of the marsh, daylight stills to a close. Arms of water reach into the grasses, fluidly circling the wide wrists of hazel, whose fingers grasp the eroding soil.

In precise, secret convulsions the sharp pluck of small waterstriders break ripples across the surface of stillness, forked between yellow moss and dangling twist-vine.

Wishing to subtly invade that barrier, you toss a pebble to those longing arms, skipping across their skin, causing several fantails of swirling emerald eddies before sinking into the marsh.

You could stay in the meadow sitting in the grasses, or press your toes and slip into the abyss, but you stay here, your face to the sun and your eyes to the murky brown and musk-scent of healthy decay in the deep places.
East Coast Sea Shells
Annie Hidley

“We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity - in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern....The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient. To dig for treasures shows not only impatience and greed, but lack of faith. The sea teaches...patience and faith. One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach—waiting for a gift from the sea.”
~Anne Morrow Lindbergh

I stepped back to make sure the painting was centered. Mom gave the bottom corner a nudge so that it hung level on the ivory wall. I still had the extra nails in my hand as I gazed at the oil colors. It was a portrait of grandpa, thirty years ago and in perfect health. He sat at the helm of Mom’s ‘33, Hunter, sloop-rigged sailboat, his red polo was wrinkled in the wind, and his aviator lenses flashed a bright blue that matched the water behind him. He looked completely composed. He looked like he was the Captain of the whole world standing there. You could tell there was absolutely nothing he was worrying about in that moment when his gaze joined together the seam of the rolling water and the dusky summer sky.

Mom and I had hung this painting as a replacement for the previous work of art—a portrait of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who was Princess Diana’s great great great great great aunt. This piece of artwork had hung in George Eastman’s house, and as a thank you to Grandpa’s aunt who worked for him at the time, Eastman had presented the painting to her as a gift.

A few weeks after Mom and I dangled the Georgiana painting in Grandpa’s living room, Dad came back home from Grandpa’s grumpy and shaky. “That picture has to go...every day your father sees the picture and it reminds him of George Eastman and how he killed himself, and Grandpa tells me how he was the one who found the gun, and how he saw him shoot himself, and how he got rid of the gun in the river, yada yada yada..... and if I hear it one more time I will shoot myself!” So we went over to ask Grandma if we could move the picture and before we got the words out, she said, “That picture has to go!!”

I looked back and forth between the painting of the young Grandpa, and the Grandpa who had just turned 94 over the summer,
slouched in his chair with crumbs on his blue sweater. It was Friday, so mom had helped him with his weekly shower that morning. His garden of lush white hair was smoothed down. He squinted up at the painting, turned to my mom, and asked, “Who is that old man?”

I wished I had known Grandpa then. I wished I had known him when he could button his own pants, remember his daughter’s name, and steer a boat. Mom did though, and she knelt next to Grandpa. “That’s you dad! Do you remember our boat?” I loved my mom for never letting the crumbling of her father make her sad. She always laughed at his repeated stories, never lost her patience with him, and spent hours every day listening and talking to him. I ran my fingers lightly over the texture of the paint. “We were sailing out the Genesee River,” she told me. “I always loved being on Lake Ontario because all you had to do was sail up and out of the St. Lawrence River and you would be in the Atlantic Ocean and from there….the world was accessible.”

Mom was in awe of the enormous blue ocean. She had never seen water that big. She was used to her dad taking her fishing in Lake Ontario, or by the Erie Canal. She saw ships bigger than she had ever seen before, here. She was wowed by the nautical themed shops in Gloucester. She pressed her little hands to the windows and stared inside. They were nothing like anything she had been in, in New York. There were fishing nets draped everywhere, and there were lots of men with beards.

She found this sailor in one of the shops made completely out of lobster claws. She begged Grandpa for The Lobster Man, but he wouldn’t buy it for her. Instead, they walked down the pier and took pictures of “Motif #1,” the red fishing shack on Bradley Wharf. They visited Mom’s Aunt Connie who wore white cat eye sunglasses, high heels and talked about how much she hated hippies. Grandpa smoked his pipe as they listened to the waves.

Mom and I pulled the zippers tighter on our jackets as we stared at “The Fisherman’s Memorial,” or “Man at the Wheel.” She wanted to take me everywhere her dad had taken her. The statue stood tall and green and looked out over the Gloucester Harbor. The memorial honored all the fishermen who were lost in storms between 1623 and 1923, and read, “They That Go Down to the Sea in Ships.” My Grandpa’s face in his painting was looking at the sea the same way the fisherman in the statue was. There was an endless love of the water and the possibilities stretching in front of them, and they were nowhere except exactly in the present.

I had loved New England for that reason too. When mom took me there, I fell in love with Salem, and Rockport. We saw the House of
Seven Gables and I totally understood why Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote eerie, creepy stories. I thought there was something about the rolling black Atlantic waves that whispered to everyone who lived on their edges, something that sent chills while at the same time a sense of home to ignited bones. I thought if I lived in Massachusetts and wrote, my fiction would take on a completely different vibe. I would probably write mysteries, make the settings old, creaking houses, and the characters sailors’ wives. I thought if I spent the rest of my life on the East Coast I would get to see the big ocean lapping every morning, watch seagulls fly effortlessly over the waves. I’d get to look out the window and see tall buildings, masts, and trees upright against the jagged, wise blue sky. I thought that I could change my attitude here. I thought that stormy days would be just another adventure.

I was constantly looking for my “place.” Mom had this theory that everyone had a place. Everyone had some geographic location that they were born to be at, that they should search for it, and when they find it, they’ll know. They’ll feel peaceful, and they’ll feel at home. However, both my mom and I thought that everywhere we went was our “place.” We both loved the freedom that being in a new place gave us. We loved listening to the ocean from all different shores.

“Maps hee-ah, maps hee-ah,” a man in a Red Sox cap shouted to us.

My best friend Holly and I had just arrived at the South Station in Boston. “Do we look that out of place that you knew we needed a map?” I asked, wiping the sweat from my neck as we dragged our bags to the counter he stood behind. Holly had filled an entire suitcase with food so we wouldn’t have to buy all of her meals, but since most of it was canned, it added on an extra few pounds.

The man in the red Sox cap picked up a map and opened it up to a page that showed Boston, Cambridge, and Charlestown. He circled places we might want to go, told us where “Hahvahd” was and how to find the bus station. He laughed at us as we waddled away, sinking under the weight of a month’s worth of clothes jammed into multiple bags for only a few days.

I wondered if I would look different if I had a Boston accent, if my mouth would tilt in a different way. I wondered if I would have a different sense of humor. I wondered if I would wear baseball caps in train stations, or if I would still pack peanut butter and jelly for a train ride.

Holly and I decided right then and there that the people in Boston were friendly. Even though we looked like ridiculous out of town trash balls, no one glared at us or hassled us. No one shoved us or rushed on the T before we could maneuver our bags up the steps. Everyone was kind, relaxed, let us enter trains first. There was not the sense of
urgency and self centered hurriedness that New York City possessed. There was no superior attitude or snootiness that Paris secreted. There seemed more of a work ethic than Savannah had acquired, and more structure and organization than San Diego cared to develop.

Boston held history. Boston was the beginning, the foundation of a nation. Boston had been through more than other cities had been through. Boston was pleasant, a small town with a simple subway system. People rode bikes, and people had families. People tipped their hats and didn’t seem self-conscious. I wanted to live there immediately, and badly. I thought that this is just the place for me right now. I thought the cobblestones were so interesting, thought of all the feet that had walked across them, thought of the couples who had kissed, the soldiers who had died, the blood that had been spilled on. I liked being able to feel the wind from the water, and know the ocean was close. I liked that this water was the same that lapped the beach in Carolina—the same water I had swam in a few months earlier on a beach I had loved. This was the same water that washed into France, and into Benin, two countries I had also left footprints in. I wondered if any of the shells I had were from any of those other places. As we walked by the tall old brick buildings with peeked roofs and window baskets, I felt comfortable, at peace, and at home.

I had many reasons for wanting to visit Boston this year. The top two were the obvious ones. To casually run into Ben Affleck and give him my number, and to meet and consequently marry a charming, comical Harvard genius who was going to make bank. Instead, at the end of the week I got on a train headed west with $300 less than I had come with, unshaved legs, and the disappointing realization that guys who go to Harvard are pretty nerdy. My goal was to look at Boston not through the eye of a tourist, but through the eye of someone who lived there, or at least someone who might live there soon. It was time for me to start looking at grad schools, figure out where I wanted to spend the next chunk of my life, and Boston was high on the list.

I was looking forward to catching my own vibrations from this place, curious to figure out if I could see myself here. I was excited to meet people, see what they wore, if they laughed easy. I was excited to inquire about colleges I would like to work at, figure out public transportation, and monthly rates to rent apartments. I was excited to find out which suburb outside of Boston would be best to live in, and if anyone had backyards. I had been to tons of different cities and they usually caused me anxiety. The big crowds, the bustle, the neon signs, the lack of green and the landlocked cement barrier of buildings that kept me from water. But Boston was different. Anywhere you were you could quickly get to water.
We met up with Paul, one of our friend's from high school, outside of his B.U. dorm building. He wasn’t wearing the faded Charlie Brown T-shirts that he used to wear in high school, but now had on a nice sweater and a classy leather jacket. We dragged our bags up to the 18th floor of his housing unit, and looked out the window at all of Boston, blue and lavender dusk cascading over the city as all the car lights moved in lines along the winding highway that crossed back and forth over the Charles River. Paul gave us a tour of his school, B.U.—where he taught, where he learned, where he carried out research with his team and professor finding ways to test counterfeit Malaria pills. He showed us Fenway Park and I pictured standing in the middle of the dark empty mound, pictured the lights blinding from above, pictured myself as someone who was interested in baseball. I felt a rising motivation to become interested in baseball, felt briefly that it was imperative to look for a boyfriend who played baseball, who wore those tight white pants that inevitably made his ass look awesome, who chewed gum and had dimples and blue eyes.

I continued constructing my pitcher dream boy in my head as we walked along the river, the lights from MIT’s boathouse a colorful sign against the black sky. We saw stars through tree branches, buds of leaves maybe just beginning to spring through. The warm day had quickly turned to a chilly night, and we climbed trees in the little park and looked for boats that might be slowly meandering with the tides. Paul introduced us to “B.U. Beach,” a little strip of grass in the middle of a street behind the university buildings. “I’ll show you why we call it that,” he told us as we sat down on the cold wooden bench on either side of him. “If you sit here, with your back to the road, and close your eyes—the cars sound like waves, and you feel like you’re on a beach.” The three of us sat there swinging our legs, fingers wrapped around the seat of the bench for a solid two minutes. We kept our eyes closed, listening to the conch like wind noise behind us, inhaling deep the fresh, cool March air, letting all of our worries roll away into The Charles.

Holly looked at the map and told me The Constitution was on the Freedom Trail, and that all we had to do was follow the red bricks until we found it. As we walked through Charlestown, letting the vibrant sun bring out our freckles, I fell more and more in love. I pictured walking up the steps into one of these old buildings and having it be home. I pictured throwing my coat on my couch in there, and I pictured the view. I wanted to have my kids here so they would have Boston accents. I wondered how different they would grow up if they lived here and said “Hahvahd” and played baseball, or if they lived back in New York and watched football on TV.

Since Ben Affleck directed “The Town,” I assumed he lived in
Charlestown and thought for sure I would bump into him as he exited one of these cute but elegant houses. My hopes were high as we walked towards our destination. We were in a great mood. We weren’t shivering or sweating, we were optimistic, we were excited about squeezing the most learning we possibly could.

We arrived at the place where the map said the “Constitution,” and saw not the handwritten and controversial document that we had expected, but instead, a huge and shiny tall ship resting in the harbor. Realizing the error we had made, my dread was quickly replaced by excitement. We ran through the airport-like security counter and across the plank bridge. The ship was immaculate. There were multiple cross bars suspended at the top of the masts, decks of polished wood, and white ropes curled in circles on the decks. We were given a free guided tour and I found a new demographic to seek out a husband from—sailors. We took a look at the lower decks, where canons lined the sides and hammocks hung from the beams.

We stood at the helm of the boat and looked out at the fantastic pretty blue ocean. The shipyard was behind us and boats moved back and forth in the calm water. I wanted to climb up the ropes and peer through binoculars at all the land sweeping up on both sides of the bay. I wanted to sail away, find an island to take a breather on and I wanted to sail back and feel like I knew all parts of the sea, and to call this shore home.

“This is Leah and Haley’s new house,” Mom told me as she showed me the photographs that my cousin had sent Grandma in the mail. All three of my mom’s brothers, their wives, their children, and their grandchildren had moved to South Carolina over the past several years. Mom and I were dusting the furniture in Grandma and Grandpa’s living room, making sure everything looked as clean and shiny as the portrait we had just hung. Myrtle Beach looked beautiful; our whole family looked so tan and so happy. I wondered how my life would be different if I had grown up in a place continually under in the sun. I wondered if I would have a happier disposition if I had gotten to play at the beach for six months out of the year.

“No you remember when we brought you here?” Mom asked me, leafing through the rest of the Myrtle Beach pictures. I didn’t, as I was four at the time. Mom told me I’d had a crush on Matt, the ten year old son of one of her friends. She told me we went shopping at Barefoot Landing, which was built in the swamps with boardwalks over the swampy areas. “Remember you were looking for alligators?” She asked, while I stared at her. “Remember we did see an alligator and it was really cool until we saw him EAT a plastic soda bottle!!” So Daddy
went and flagged down a ranger and told her. The ranger said, ‘Yes this is a big problem with litter and wildlife.’ She thought he would be OK but that there wasn’t much she could do about it….”

She told me that we walked through neighborhoods and noticed that all the driveways were white, not black like they were in New York. When mom looked closer, she realized that they were all made of crushed sea shells. She came to a picture of a swimming pool at her brother’s house. “This is where you learned to swim! You took your first independent strokes in a swimming pool in Myrtle Beach!”

We watched the sunlight trickle pink above the clouds, watched the sky start to burst into color, watched the foamy tide wash away words we wrote in the sand with our cold fingers. Holly and I were standing on the glistening edge of Hunting Beach State Park on Parris Island in South Carolina, doing yoga by the waves. We were bending our bodies with the natural contours of light that were folding in around us. We were instantly awakened by the sun’s light cascading upwards through the clouds, mirroring perfectly its own image in the marshy water below. There was such a contrast of bright, dark blue and crisp gold and we loved following the sun to the edge of the island. There was no sign of civilization as we plunged deeper into the palm tree forest, and the dirt path curled through the underbrush.

The big ocean was lapping. The strip of approaching sunlight was spooning with the horizon, and tall, dark silhouettes of palm trees reaching their branches toward the everlasting light. We whooped and jogged in the sand, dizzy with excitement about where we were. Holly and I were so ecstatic that we took off running down the beach, flapping our arms and giggling as we saw driftwood standing in the waves artistically, and, as far as we could see in either direction, absolutely nothing except ocean, sky, sand, and jungle. And then, slicing through the water in the reflection of sunlight, there were dolphins at daybreak! Multiple dolphins, jumping dolphins. Dolphins have sex just for fun. I had never seen a wild dolphin. Everything was exciting, and I could not get enough. I felt like I was trying to gulp in the view, but I couldn’t swallow fast enough. I felt like every single possibility in the world was stretched out in front of me.

At that very moment, under a blazing sun with chilly sea wind whirling around us, our feet sinking into the sand, huge and exotic looking palm fronds lining the beach, no city lights, no noise from the traffic—everything in the entire world was perfect. Everything in the entire world was right there. Everything I had ever needed or would ever need was encompassed in that moment of complete grace. Peacefulness, and thankfulness.

I loved every atom of every person, of every body and of every
I could barely pull myself away from being part of the biggest miracle of all. I spotted something beneath a beached piece of driftwood. It was a live sand dollar! I had never seen one before alive. Its mossy outside feelers were a brown color, nothing like the white shells of sand dollars that you can buy in stores. This was a real creature, and I was so excited to have found it. I flung it back into the ocean, hoping its life would be saved. In retrospect, it may have already been dead, but hopefully it found some freedom as it was flying through the air into the iridescent sunrise.

I stood in the surf and stretched, picked up some shells. I found the best ones. I loved how smooth shells were, how they symbolized protection, and home, while at the same time freedom, and not being afraid to leave things behind. I thought that shells were beautiful and I ran my fingers over all of them in my pockets.

The door of Grandma and Grandpa’s house swung open and Dad walked in, unclipping his bicycle helmet. “Much better,” he said with a sigh of relief, looking at the new painting hanging above Grandpa in his old chair.

“I guess he doesn’t remember much about sailing our boat because he hasn’t brought up any unbelievable stories.” Mom placed the photographs back on the table and turned towards me. “Grandpa used to be quite the boater! He had a canoe on the Genesee River as a boy and it was his pride and joy. All wood and varnish and shiny! He would put an old Victrola on it in the summers and play his records and sleep on the canal under the arch bridges. I always wondered if he took girls out on it!”

I pictured my grandpa similar to a young Walt Whitman, or an older Huck Finn. I was so disappointed that I had never gotten to meet this man. It was heartbreaking that no one had ever asked him all of his stories while he could still remember the true ones.

I picked up the hammer we had used to pound the hook into the wall, and the extra nails. I walked out into the garage to put them away, over to Grandpa’s toolbox, an old dark wooden one with bronze hinges and his name engraved on a panel in front. I said his name out loud, “Frederick Warner.” I wondered what he had thought of himself. I wondered where his favorite place had been. I wondered if he had ever wished he’d had an accent.

I pressed the clasp with the hand not holding the hammer. It stuck for a moment, and I had to jostle the box. I lifted the heavy lid, and there, scattered among the old metal tools, were sea shells.
Untitled
Vala Kjarval
Karaoke Night
Amber Hickman

at the Prickerbush. I sit at the bar, red plastic baskets lined with wax paper and unshelled peanuts strategically placed to make us thirsty. Drinking my dollar-fifty drafts from lip-stained pint glasses, I listen to drunken assholes get on stage, slurring songs through wet microphones. They aren’t rock stars.

What are you drinking? Jaeger I say. I see him smirk. That is no ladies’ drink. I know his intentions. He jets for another. I take a Cherrybomb this time.

The ringleader has called my name. It’s my turn to be the rock star. Girls, Girls, Girls. I am a motorcycle. I am Vince Neil. I am Mötley Crüe. I am the center of the world. I am the asshole. They don’t applaud

for me. They applaud for what’s under my tight white t-shirt, my tight blue jeans, my cowboy hat and boots, my pretty face, my pretty mouth.

I sway my hips to the bar and sit on the only stool with a broken foot. I fall to the left and am cushioned by a 400 pound man. I stack six quarters in front of me and order another draft. Hey Cowgirl, I’ll buy you that draft…for a blow job. I push my quarters toward the bartender and I watch my right hand – I wouldn’t suck your pinky if I could find it.

I take my draft and walk out on the butt covered deck, roll myself a smoke, and listen to the rock stars. I watch the flame of my lighter dance with my shaking hand – so hot, so pretty, so lethal.
Motherhood
Chelsea Mixon

motherhood.

pull over.
my heart is spilling through my teeth
exit 17
pull over.
just haven’t eaten in a week,
head between my knees

sit tight.
hours pass, and pallid walls
waiting room is still
sit tight.
just about six weeks along…
now Needle and the Pill

calm down.
i think i hear i’m screaming
can’t see to see…
calm down.
the cervix dilates, penetrates--
black hole forms inside of me

you’re fine.
the vacuum has been sanitized
along with baby mine
you’re fine.
for a thirty dollar co-pay,
blood, and iodine

you’re fine.
My Freak, My Monster
Aaron Z. Lee
FADE IN:

INT. UNKNOWN PLACE

A misty dreamlike setting with the background faded and unclear.

A young woman’s scream pierces the air.

A man runs over to a young woman who is kneeling over something on the ground. He stares down blankly.

INT. APARTMENT—DAY

A large messy bedroom with the blinds pulled down, blocking all the sunlight.

A large, unkempt bed sits against the wall, with JACKSON MORGAN, 32, lying in it. He’s gruff, well-built, unshaven, and has the look of a man who was once very handsome.

There is a cell phone vibrating on a night stand next to him. He stirs slightly, grumbles incoherently, but doesn’t make any real movements.

The phone continues to vibrate.

JACKSON
Alright, alright! I’m up...

He rolls over in his bed and grabs the phone.

JACKSON (V.O.)
My name is Jackson Morgan.

JACKSON
(Into the phone)
’Lo.
WOMAN
(Over the phone)
Jackson? Are you sleeping right now?

JACKSON
Oh boy, just the person I want to hear from.

Jackson rolls over in his bed and rubs his eyes.

WOMAN
(Angrily)
You’re still sleeping, aren’t you? What the hell is wrong with you? It’s noon!

Jackson sits up in his bed and checks the alarm clock on his nightstand. It reads 12:00 PM.

JACKSON
I am not sleeping. I’m up...

LISA
Don’t lie to me. You’re in bed right now.

JACKSON
You don’t know what you’re talking about...

LISA
I’m coming over right now.

There is a knock at the door.

Frowning, Jackson looks at his phone, gets up, and heads for the door. Before he can answer it, it swings open.

An attractive blonde woman in a tight-fitting suit and skirt, LISA ENDERS, 31, storms in. She looks extremely flustered.

LISA
This place is a freakin’ mess! How can you live like this? I knew you just woke up.

She continues to rant, but it is inaudible.

JACKSON (V.O.)
This is my agent, Lisa Enders. She’s a big pain in my ass, but she seems to know what she’s doing, which is why I keep her around.

LISA
(Continued)
...and you look like a fucking hobo off the street. You reek of booze and cigarettes! You need to get your fucking life on track.

She stops and they sit for a few moments without talking. The only sound from either of them is the sound of her heavy breathing.

JACKSON
You done?

LISA
No, I’m not.

JACKSON
How’d your date go last night?

LISA
Terrible. She was a total bitch.

JACKSON
I think I’m gonna make some lunch. You want some lunch?

Lisa glares at him for a few moments, then walks right past him and opens the blinds, causing the sun to shine in brightly.

JACKSON (V.O.)
She was never one for subtlety.

JACKSON
(Wincing and raising his arms to cover his face)
Ah! Take it easy on me...

LISA
How can you make lunch? You can’t cook for shit.

JACKSON
(Lowering his arms)
Who says you need to be able to cook to make lunch?

INT. KITCHEN-SAME

Lisa sits at the table in the middle of the plain, empty kitchen, fidgeting and looking around.

Jackson is at the stove, cooking up some grilled cheese and watching a talk show on TV.

LISA
Did you take a look at those scripts I sent you?

JACKSON
(Scoffs)
Of course I did.

JACKSON (V.O.)
And when I say I looked at them, I mean I read the first fifteen pages and the last fifteen pages. It’s an old trick a screenwriter friend of mine taught me. He said it was to get the best idea of the character you’re playing.

LISA
And what did you think?
Jackson walks over and puts a plate with a messy looking grilled cheese in front of her.

Lisa cringes, pokes it with her finger, then wipes her finger off on a nearby napkin.

JACKSON
I don’t know if they’re my kind of role.

LISA
You didn’t read them, did you?

JACKSON
I most certainly did and they’re not the kind of roles I’m into. No real depth, no story. They look like they were just drawn up to make money.

LISA
You know, you might actually want to take up a role once in a while. You know, to give off the impression you’re actually an actor?

Jackson watches the TV for a bit longer before returning to the table with a grilled cheese for himself.

JACKSON
I am an actor. And you can’t rush these things.

LISA
Jesus, Jackson, you can’t live off of The Cowboy forever.

Jackson glances over at a movie poster for The Cowboy on the wall. It looks a little dated.

JACKSON (V.O.)
The Cowboy is my one claim to fame,
back about ten years ago. One of the highest grossing action films ever. I even got nominated for Best Actor. That never happens with action movies.

JACKSON
I don’t plan to. I’m like that one dude from the movie about oil and Irish gangs and what not...

LISA
Except that man has been in all masterpieces. You’ve one good movie and the rest are mediocre at best.

JACKSON
(Looking back towards the TV) Thanks for the vote of confidence.

LISA
Well, it’s true...

Their attention turns to the TV.

HOST
(On TV)
And please welcome our next guest, Derrick Johnston!

DERRICK JOHNSTON, 28, strolls across the stage shakes hands with the host, and sits down. He is tall, handsome, well-dressed, and smiling.

The crowd greets him with a massive standing ovation.

JACKSON (V.O.)
Derrick Johnston. My best friend. My biggest rival. The most popular action star today. Sitting there like everything and everyone is there just because of him.
DERRICK  
(On TV)  
...my friend, you are looking dashing today.

HOST  
(On TV)  
You’re looking pretty good yourself, Derrick. How is everything?

JACKSON (V.O.)  
Maybe they are.

DERRICK  
(On TV)  
Everything is great. The wife is great...

HOST  
(On TV)  
Alright, well you’re probably sick of hearing this by now, but everyone is almost obliged to ask you and we might as well get it out of the way now.

Lisa glances over at Jackson, who is staring blankly at the TV.

HOST  
(On TV)  
Jackson Morgan has been quite controversial lately. The public intoxication, going drinking for a week straight at the bars, the fights, the brushes with the law...

Derrick’s smile fades slightly.

DERRICK  
(On TV)  
Jackson is my best friend. He is a good man.
HOST
(On TV)
But what about the rumors that he isn’t even a real action star? He doesn’t even do his own stunts?

DERRICK
(On TV)
Jackson has taught me a lot, you know. He’s a good actor...

HOST
(On TV)
But you, you’re the real deal, right? I mean, you’re a brown belt in jujitsu.

DERRICK
(On TV)
I have some experience, yes...

The TV turns off. Jackson looks up and sees that Lisa is standing next to the TV, glaring at him.

LISA
Seven straight days at the bars?

JACKSON
(Scoffs)
Since when do you listen to the media? They don’t know what they’re talking about...

LISA
What are you doing tonight?

JACKSON
I don’t know. Maybe read some Sylvia Plath, watch bad 80’s chick flicks, and go to bed at 8.

Lisa sighs, shakes her head, and walks over to the door. She reaches for the handle, but stops just short of grabbing it.
LISA
Take it easy tonight, Jackson.

JACKSON
I always do.

Lisa opens the door and walks out of the room.

LISA
(From down the hall, O.S.)
Try not to kill anyone tonight!

Jackson smirks.

JACKSON (V.O.)
Oh, Lisa. Always looking out for me.

INT. MISTY’S BAR-NIGHT

A dark, dirty bar filled with many sketchy-looking people. There are two people behind the bar, ASHLEY, 18, and SCOTT, 25, the owners.

Jackson sits alone in a corner booth.

JACKSON (V.O.)
Ah, Misty’s. By far the grimmest bar you’re ever gonna enter. You know, bikers...

Jackson glances over at a table filled with bikers, drinking and checking out Ashley.

JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)
...mobsters...

Jackson glances over at another table, filled with angry Italians in suits and with guns.

JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)
...and your garden variety depressed drunks just looking to drink themselves into oblivion.
He glances over at a man at the far end of the bar, his sleeves rolled up, tie loosened, and crying to himself in a mug.

JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)
This is the perfect place for me to go and not get recognized...

WAITRESS
What’ll be today, Jackson?

Jackson looks up and see DAISY MILLER, 19, standing next to him, smiling.

JACKSON
A shot and a brew, sweetheart, and keep ’em comin’.

DAISY
(Winking)
You take it easy now hun.

She sets down a shot and a beer and walks away. Jackson watches her as she walks away, but shakes his head and sighs.

He slams down the shot and takes a ship of beer.

He throws down another one.

Another one.

Another one.

He keeps drinking and Daisy keeps bringing them out.

Daisy walks away after handing him another. He watches her again as he throws down another.

However, his eyes go from Daisy to the three guys talking to two girls at the bar.

The girls don’t look amused by the conversation.
GIRL AT BAR #1
(Cringing)
Get away from me.

GUY AT BAR #1
Come on, babe. Let’s go have some fun.

GIRL AT BAR #2
Get the fuck away creep.

GUY AT BAR #2
Watch your mouth, bitch!

She makes a ridiculous face, but they simply frown.

JACKSON
Hey!

Everyone turns around and see Jackson, who throws down another shot. He doesn’t look at them.

The three guys don’t say anything. They laugh and shake their heads.

GUY AT BAR #1
You talkin’ to us, boy?

JACKSON
Yeah, I am. I don’t think the ladies are appreciating you fellas’ company. I think it might be best if ya left them alone.

The three men laugh aloud. The rest of the bar now has their attention on the situation.

The two girls take a step back.

GUY AT BAR #1
Why don’t you mind your own fuckin’ business, asshole?

Jackson throws down another shot and finishes his beer.
He stands up, a little wobbly.

The three guys all laugh again.

Guy at bar #1 pulls out a switchblade and everyone else backs away. He smiles and points it at Jackson.

GUY AT BAR #1
Come on, asshole. You feelin’ strong tonight?

ASHLEY
Leave him alone, Tony! Quit being a jerk! He’s drunk!

SCOTT
(Whispering)
Don’t butt in, Ashley!

Ashley looks annoyed, but backs down. Scott watches nervously, as does the rest of the bar.

GUY AT BAR #1
Come on, jerk off. Let’s see what you got...

JACKSON (V.O.)
I’ve seen douche bags like this before. Guys who think they’re big and bad just ‘cause they’ve got knives and talk big.

Jackson cracks his knuckles and sniffs.

JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)
I hate guys like that.

Jackson steps forward. Guy at bar #1 makes a move, lashing out with the knife.

JACKSON (V.O.)
This guy is fast.
Jackson dodges his stab.

**JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)**
I won’t say he doesn’t have a chance.

Jackson grabs his wrist and disarms him by slamming his forearm into the man’s wrist.

**JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)**
But...

Jackson punches the man in the gut and flips him over his shoulder through a table.

Guy at bar #2 tries to hit Jackson with a bottle, but Jackson blocks it with his forearm, smashing the bottle.

Jackson counters with a right hook that drops the man.

**JACKSON (V.O.)**
Sometimes, it’s just like the movies...

Jackson stands over the man he dropped.

**JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)**
It comes naturally, like everything is scripted. Like no one can touch me or hurt me and I’ll win every fight...

Guy at bar #3 smashes a bottle over Jackson’s head and he collapses to the ground.

The screen goes black.

**JACKSON (V.O. CONTINUED)**
And sometimes I get smashed over the head with a bottle. Nothing like the movies. Not at all.
Skeleton
Aaron Gehan
Shoreline
Lillian Stensland

As we read O'Hara in Literature,
And I pretend to be interested
In the discussion,
All I can think about is
You.
Every word I read
About the depth of
Black and
White,
Or the consistency
Of oranges,
Reminds me of you.
And as I form
Poetry
In my head,
While I’m supposed to be
Defining the word
Elegy,
All I can think about
Is the death of us,
And how much
Your warmth
Would rescue me
From these
Freezing
Rains
And lake effect
Snows.
Smile
Vala Kjarval
The Golden Hour
Fred Maxon

My grandfather sits, dressed in blue,
on a tartan blanket in the side yard.
My nephew roams,
crawling towards the blooming Rose of Sharon.
The sky is gold.
He picks up a tiny fistful of weeds and tries to eat them.
My grandfather opens his fist and takes them away.

I grab my camera to take a picture.

Later, my grandfather recounts stories
of eating cicoria-- dandelion greens-- and how his mother used to chatter
with the
Polish women in the field next door about chickens and territory.
My grandfather used to think they were fighting. His mother said “No,
that’s just how
we talk.”
Your hair tangles into mine, and
Gold on gold, we languish in the sunshine
Sparkling off the lake, a thousand years’ treasure waiting
Just under the surface. Your hands
Find mine, as though they were the first hands;
Intertwined and intravenous, injecting sweetness into me.
When we lie like this,
The park bench becomes heaven,
The lake becomes the entire world.
I want to wrap my arms around you, so like bands of stretchy sunlight
They follow you always, bright beams
Reflecting off your eyes and skin.
Summer is quickly folding into itself, winds
Beginning to sneak against our bare legs. I would hold
Every leaf to its tree if it meant
One more day of sunlight scented silence,
One more night under corn-ringed skies.
Two armies met by the mossy old well at the southern edge of the Miller’s Field. The Terrible Tower loomed before them, its blades cutting harshly across the sky, an indubitable engine of Lord Darrik’s sorcery.

Breath puffing, First Commander Velson and Second Commander Little Vel were armed and prepared for whatever battle might come with swords father had made for them. Neither spoke of the wind that bit their ears and cut their cheeks. They were men, after all, and men didn’t complain.

Velson, the older, howled and led the charge across the plain of untouched virgin snow, and when it crunched under his feet it sounded to Little Vel as if a thousand men ran after him. Little Vel followed, his sword above his head.

But before they were even halfway to the Terrible Tower, Little Vel was out of breath. He wasn’t as tall as Velson, or as strong, and the snow was knee-high on him. Still, he was Second Commander to the Prince of Shattertree; he couldn’t complain in front of the First Commander.

“There!” Velson cried, skidding to a halt, pointing with his long straight sword. Someone had emerged onto the steps at the bottom of the Terrible Tower. It was bundled and huddled in a long fur coat. The rickety stairs he stood on shifted when he turned to stare at them.

Velson’s cry bounded and echoed around the field, and fell flat, as all voices must when winter’s blanket lay on the land. The bundled man waved to the two proud commanders, and Little Vel held his sword up defensively against sorcery.

“Attack!” Velson cried, rushing at the man. Little Vel ran after his brother, swept along in the wake of his brother’s fierce charge. Velson kicked snow up in spurts, so Little Vel had to run off to the side to avoid getting a face full of it. The wading slowed him down.

“Oh no, not today! Go home to yer father!” the bundled man shouted at them over the cemetery silence of the field. Little Vel knew the voice; it belonged to Lord Darrik himself, master of the Terrible Tower, and he was certainly off to do no good.

“Ser Velson! We must free the prince!” Little Vel cried as he came up beside his brother. He swung his sword heroically in front of him. Lord Darrik was a sorcerer and a liar; he was not to be trusted, nor listened to. Even Father said so.

“No, no yeh don’t!” Lord Darrik shouted. He held up his arms, no doubt conjuring a nightmare. “The prince is my captive today. So go off and bother someone else with yehr sticks. A miller has work even when
the days are short and the snow is high.”

Velson turned and looked at his brother. Little Vel knew what he had to do. Throwing his head back, the younger brother howled like a wolf, AWWOOOOOOOOOOO!

In a heartbeat, a pair of shutters was thrown open from the windmill’s second story. A boy not much older than Velson saluted them.

“Halloo Men of Vel!” the Prince called. “Have you brought the legions?”

“Ho, Prince Darrikson! Lord Darrik says he’s got you captive. Is it true?” Little Vel called up to him.

“I ain’t no lord of nothing,” the bundled man said, now at the foot of the shaky steps. “Don’t go utterin’ such lies. And go! I said get!” Now he started down the gentle slope toward them, waving his arms and conjuring something really unpleasant. Little Vel could tell by the look on his face.

“Lord Darrik!” Prince Darrikson pulled himself through the window as he shouted, unwrapped against the bitter winter wind. He squatted on the little ledge.

“You, boy! Inside! I told you to mind the mill!” the miller shouted at the prince.

Prince Darrikson laughed triumphantly. “When I escaped the last time, Lord Darrik, I told you I would be free! I am no man’s man!” Darrikson let go of the windowsill, and for a gut-twisting moment, Little Vel saw him hang in the air like a bird. Then he dropped like a stone and hit the snow with a poof, as if he had been flat-diving in the water hole.

“What? Yeh’d better hope yeh’ve not broke a bone, boy! Yeh’re nothing but trouble, I swears it!” Darrik, who had been halfway to Velson and Little Vel, now started struggling back towards his son through the snow, cursing and trying to keep his fur cloak wrapped tight.

Velson was faster. He dashed through the snow like a wolf and helped Darrikson up. The prince was unharmed; in fact he was still laughing. He shook the snow off and accepted the extra plaid Little Vel had insisted Velson pack.

Then, with a last laugh at the huffing, cursing miller, Sir Velson and Prince Darrikson bounded off for the trees at the edge of the field, shouting like maniacs, mad with freedom.

##

Uncle Jeris saw him through the trees. “Little Vel!” he cried, holding up his spear. He must have been out hunting. He knew Father’s woods better than any man did. He knew them better even than Father himself.

Still, Little Vel couldn’t risk being seen. He ducked around a tree
and crawled along an upraised root, keeping low like a wolf in the weeds, careful to stay hidden. Not even Uncle Jeris could learn of the location of where Little Vel had been ordered to rendezvous with his brother and the prince.

After his run in, he had to wind around for a long time, just in case anyone else was following him. It took a while to pick through the skeletal black trees, but Little Vel eventually found Velson and Prince Darrikson at their secret fortress, called Shattertree. It was well hidden and deep in the trees, and now that snow had fallen, they had packed the walls with snow, making it almost invisible.

Underneath the snow, which was nearly ice now, Shattertree was a roughly circular fort of branch-woven walls that were lashed to six thick trees. There was enough space in it for a fire pit, but Prince Darrikson had declared that no fire should be lit within the walls, lest they burn the place down. Little Vel was glad to see it again.

He removed his hat (a ceremonial gesture of respect decreed by the Prince), and entered the fort through the crawl-hole. Inside, Velson was cutting a piece of jerky with a knife stolen from Father’s shed, and Darrikson was standing on the perch above.

“What can you see?” Little Vel called up to the prince.

“Nothing but branches and birds, my Little Commander. I saw wolf-prints a few days past, and I’ve been watching for him since. I think a wolf cape would suit my royal station, no?” he said.

“It would,” Little Vel agreed, settling near his brother.

“Did you hear the traders have come from up the river? A man stopped by to tell father this morning,” Darrikson said. “He said they left a mess of the river road.”

“Is Lord Darrik going to the market festival?” Little Vel asked.

“I would think so. He’ll probably take the ox and cart along with him, to buy supplies. The windmill is in hard need of some grease, and he thinks there will be someone selling walrus grease. But my father can’t drive that cart to save his life, so I s’pose I’ll have to go with him.”

“Can we have a battle today?” Little Vel asked. Aside from the morning’s successful siege of the Terrible Tower, they hadn’t done much warring of late. Indeed, it felt like all they did now that the snow had come was sit and talk, and Darrikson and Velson only seemed interested in talking about Wenna and her sister, the two girls from town they had met at the last trade fest. They had even tried lecturing Little Vel on where to lay lips on a lovely lady, should he live long enough to try.

“Not today, my smallest champion. I’m still sore from my captivity.”

“I’m going to the festival, too,” Velson said suddenly. He looked up. “Father is sending me with Uncle Jeris to fetch some things.”

“Can I go?” Little Vel asked.
“No,” his older brother said. “Father said it was only me and Uncle Jeris this time.”

“Oh,” Little Vel said. He wished he were a little older. Uncle Jeris was a hunter by trade, and worked with Father in the winter to bring in meat for food and wood for chopping and burning. Since he had come, he had taken Velson out several times to prowl with him, but he insisted that Little Vel was still too small.

Velson and Darrikson spent the day talking about what they would do at the market fest, and Little Vel had no choice but to listen and wonder what he would do. By nightfall, they were all bone cold. Shattertree was too small to light a fire in, especially with the half-canopy of bristly fir branches, so the prince and his commanders had to return home. Before they parted ways, Darrikson climbed down to Little Vel and said, “My spies tell me that there shall be a siege in four day’s time, at dawn. Bring your finest men.”

“Let’s go,” Velson said, climbing out of the fort. Little Vel hustled through the crawl-hole after him, and followed in his footsteps so that walking in the snow would be easier.

Velson didn’t seem to want to talk, so Little Vel thought about which of the Redhorns he would bring with him to the siege.

##

Little Vel woke early to see Velson and Uncle Jeris off. After they were gone, Father made his way out to the tool shed and Little Vel was left alone in the house. He didn’t like that, so he helped polish and clean the tools in the shed, and sharpen the teeth on the band saws. The next day, they swept and cleaned the house. On the third day, Little Vel was put in charge of the big stew that they set to simmer. Father let him add onions and carrots as he liked.

On the fourth day, Little Vel set out when he couldn’t wait anymore. It was too snowy to tell if it was dawn. Father was still asleep, snoring loudly from his bed near the fireplace. Feeling like a thief trying to slip past a guardian dragon, he hung his sword at his hip, stole a plaid, and crept outside without making so much as a sound.

It was snowing again. Lazy feathers of snow drifted down so thick he could barely see ten paces ahead, but Little Vel wasn’t afraid. He had his sword, and a handful of dried blueberries, and he knew where he was going. Once he was under the trees, the snow wasn’t in his eyes, and it was easier to see.

He was nearly to Shattertree when he saw a line of paw prints crossing his own path. Bending down, Little Vel used his fingers to trace the print. Wolf, he thought. It only took a few moments of inspection to verify that there was only one, but one wolf was still a scary thing.
Suddenly wishing Velson was with him, with the filched knife from Father’s shed, Little Vel almost turned around and ran back to the house. But the snow was thicker out there at the edge of the trees, and he could see more clearly beneath the canopy, even though it was darker. Swallowing, he started forward again, now with his wooden sword drawn.

“There’s nothing here that I can’t see,” he told himself. Uncle Jeris had told him to say that whenever he felt scared. Now he wasn’t so sure; wolves were as quiet as ghosts, but as real as…

What was that noise? It was in his mind. It was his imagination, overreacting.

Little Vel didn’t dare turn around. He kept walking, ignoring the crunching in the snow that didn’t belong to him. Maybe it was a rabbit; maybe it was a deer, but it wasn’t a wolf. It wasn’t a wolf.

It wasn’t a wolf.

He imagined Thoram Wideshield was beside him. Thoram was the champion of the Redhorns, Little Vel’s army. Edrin Stormbeard was with him, too, carrying a bastard sword longer than Velson was tall. Edrin’s beard was even longer than Father’s, and black like coal.

There was a growl behind him; low and throaty, and Little Vel couldn’t help himself. He turned. In the darkness, two eyes flashed like yellow moons. Wolf’s eyes. It paced back and forth, watching the little boy with the wooden sword, eyeing him, no doubt wondering if some other man wasn’t nearby.

The wolf was very real. It left footprints. It breathed little clouds. It slavered and circled, and Little Vel’s throat clamped.

It was very thin, and hair was missing in clumps from its tail. Along its back, silver hair shimmered like a moonlit creek. Little Vel held the wooden sword up defensively and took a step back. His heart beat like mad. He was not far from Shattertree.

He should have brought a lantern. He shouldn’t have come at all. Velson would have charged the wolf. And Prince Darrikson, too; they were real warriors. But Little Vel was an eight year old boy. What did he know about fighting wolves? Starving silver wolves with eyes like burning gold coins.

The wolf stopped pacing. It had made its decision, and Little Vel did, too. The wolf hunched, preparing to lunge.

“Edrin! Thoram! Attack!” Little Vel shouted, swinging his sword at the wolf. Startled, the wolf hesitated and backed up. The boy spun and ran, imagining his two burly commanders lumbering off to chase the wolf off even as he fled.

But they weren’t real, and the wolf was right behind him. He heard it bound after him when it realized it had been had. Snarling and snapping, the wolf bared down on Little Vel even as he
scrambled through a dense bramble of icy, dry thorns.

The snow-packed walls of Shattertree loomed out of the trees. The entrance, no more than a little hole the boys could crawl through, was twenty paces away. Jaws snapped at his back, and Little Vel turned, swinging his sword wildly. It caught the wolf on the nose, sent it thrashing into the snow.

Little Vel dashed forward like Velson, charging like a man, like a wolf himself. Little Vel threw back his head and howled, hoping for all he was worth that Darrikson was inside the fort with the spear he and Darrikson had made.

But there was no answer as he dove through the crawl-hole, and the wolf was close behind, trying to scuttle through the little hole. Little Vel thrust with all his strength and caught the wolf in the eye. Blood splashed and Little Vel jabbed again. The beast roared and tried to pull back out, but the boy pressed his attack, thrusting and stamping at it until it was outside of reach, howling and screaming like a demon loosed from one of the deepest hells.

Wasting no time, Little Vel dragged the stump that his older brother used as a cutting board over to the crawl-hole and kicked it firmly into place. Then he collapsed in the hard, dry ground, and cried.

##

When he had control of himself, Little Vel climbed into Darrikson’s perch to watch for the wolf. Crazed lines of crimson traced the snow where it had stumbled back and forth on its way back into the trees as if it had been drawing gruesome borders on his freedom.

He felt its eyes on him, though he saw nothing himself. Little Vel wished he could see the Terrible Tower now. That’s what Darrikson had named his father’s windmill when they first began to build Shattertree. If he could have seen it, Little Vel would have been able to call out to the prince, or even to Lord Darrik, and maybe they would get Father or Uncle Jeris to come rescue him. But he was deep in the woods now, and there wasn’t a man with a sword or spear in sight.

So he sat, too afraid of the watching wolf to try running for it. Once night fell, he couldn’t see anything at all. Wishing he could have lit a fire without burning Shattertree to the ground, Little Vel resigned to sleeping in the fort and waiting for rescue. He had never stayed outside the house alone before, but he couldn’t help that now; not if the wolf was still down there, waiting for him.

Bundled in his plaid, with his hat still on, Little Vel waited and listened in the pitch dark as owls hooted and things scurried in the branches above him. A few times, he heard the distant thudding detonation of a tree shattering in the cold, but never footsteps, or anyone
calling for him. And twice he heard wolves howling.

###

It was too cold to stay in Shattertree. Little Vel knew it even as he surfaced from sleep. His eyes felt hard and frozen; his fingers wouldn’t move. He clutched his sword, but he couldn’t let it go.

There wasn’t another choice. He would have to run from the wolf if it was out there. He had to go home, or else he would freeze out here. Velson, Darrikson; they weren’t coming for him. He knew that now.

He was in a snow fort with a starving wolf waiting for him outside. He wanted to cry, but the tears were too cold to come.

Little Vel kicked the stump aside slowly, wearily. Something inside him told him that if he lay back down, he wasn’t going to get up. Father called that something the Snowy Angel, and said never to trust it. When she whispered you to sleep, you didn’t wake up. Get up; go home, that was what Father said.

Why hadn’t Father found him? He didn’t ask as he crawled through the hole, holding his blood-stained sword in front of him. He had pierced the wolf’s eye, but had it been a killing blow? He didn’t know. He stood in the snow, too cold to feel its chill now.

Silver shafts of moonlight filtered through the trees, but they offered no counsel. The shadows under the canopy were depthless seas of black that Little Vel eyed warily as he wove his way towards where he thought home would be. He didn’t know, couldn’t know. He was so tired and cold, but Velson would have known how to get home. He wished Thoram or Edrin were with him, but this time they did not come.

No one came.

Movement breathed some life into him. It warmed him, and the warmth made him walk faster. He woke up a little more, realized that at night, even the wintery, snow-blanketed forest was alive and busy. All manner of birds called and clicked, and there were rustles around him.

Somewhere, a wolf howled. It was far off, though, and Little Vel kept his nerve.

When the response came, he couldn’t help himself. Somewhere, probably not half a mile off, another wolf cried out and accused the moon. Little Vel’s frostbit courage buckled. He dropped his sword and ran, holding his arms before him as he plunged through shadow and snow. The trees seemed to lean at him, scraping and plucking at his head and shoulders with branches naked of leaves, black and wet and frozen.

“Help!” he cried. “Help!”

Little Vel tripped over a root that stuck out of the ground like a leg and fell into a thicket of thorny brush. Something deeper in the thicket screamed, and Little Vel screamed, too, fighting his way through the
thorns and crinkling, wiry branches until he was free, running, tripping, tumbling, but away from the howling, away from fangs and pursuit. His breath heaved and Little Vel shouted for help, but the snowy silence swallowed his pleas and cries as if he were under water.

A light hove into view ahead of him. Little Vel didn’t care who it was; it was light, fire, warmth. Maybe it was the Snowy Angel, coming to whisper him to sleep. He ran at it.

“Vel! Little Vel!” A man’s voice. Father? It was too dark to see, and the light was so bright.

He ran through the trees, through the darkness at that light like it was the center of the world, like it—

Uncle Velson dropped something heavy and ran to him. He fell to his knees and slid in the snow, catching Little Vel and clutching him tight.

“Boy,” he whispered. “Vel, are you alright?” He held the torch out, but Little Vel yearned for it, for its warmth.

“Uncle,” he said. Little Vel hadn’t realized his teeth had been chattering. He hadn’t felt his nose burning, or his skin itching with frostbite. He buried his face in Jeris’ fur cloak, seeking his uncle’s warmth.

“Gods,” his Uncle swore. “Where have you been, boy?”

“Prince Darrikson was coming,” Little Vel said. He couldn’t remember what the miller’s son was coming to do. But it had been important. “The wolf!”

“Yes, I found it,” Uncle Jeris said, tossing the torch aside. He swept Little Vel off the ground and held Little Vel like mother used to, cradled against his chest.

Little Vel didn’t have the strength to ask what he meant. He felt like one of the icicles that hung on the eaves.

###

At home, while Velson drew a bath of hot water, Father held Little Vel in his arms. It was nice to be held. Somewhere out of sight, Uncle Jeris was bustling around, making noise and cursing.

He came over only long enough to touch Little Vel on the head. Then, looking at Father, he said, “I’m going back to get the wolf.”

Father nodded and watched Jeris leave, but he did not leave Little Vel’s side.

When the bath was ready, they put him in the water, and it hurt so bad he couldn’t help but scream. The big black kettle was filled with water so hot he couldn’t take it. It was like all of the worst sunburns he had ever had, all at once.

“It’s not that hot,” Velson said to him, sticking his arm in the
water. “Look. It’s not even boiling.” Little Vel didn’t care. It felt like it was. He screamed until he couldn’t anymore.

Afterwards, when he was warmed up, they laid him on Father’s bed and wrapped him tight in heavy furs. Father and Velson sat by the bedside, refusing to listen to Little Vel’s pleas to fetch Darrikson. Neither of them wanted to talk about the prince at all, or the armies, or Shattertree.

Instead, Father wanted to know about the wolf, even though Uncle Jeris had already left. Little Vel told them what he knew; it was starved and silver-backed. It had eyes like moons. He told them that Thoram and Edrin hadn’t been enough to hold it back.

“They aren’t real,” Velson said. “None of it is real.”

“I know,” Little Vel said. He yawned. “But they were there anyway.”

Velson frowned. Father left and brought them something to eat, but he didn’t ask anything more. After a while he left again, and the boys were alone. Vel asked, “Where was Darrikson?”

“He never went to Shattertree, Vel.” His brother left him to sleep, then, and Little Vel didn’t resist.

When he woke, the house was quiet and still. He rose and went to look for food, and found a bowl of berries, but he was famished. He set about looking for something better.

“What are you looking for?” Velson’s whisper nearly stopped Little Vel’s heart.

“My stew,” Little Vel said. “Where did it go?”

“Father put the rest of it in one of the empty beer barrels. Go sit at the table, and I’ll go get some.”

Velson took a bowl from the stack hurried outside. The door to the root cellar was out there. Little Vel fed some wood to the fire. The heat felt nice.

When the door opened again, it wasn’t Velson standing in the door, but Uncle Jeris. Snow blew in and ruffled his fur cloak, and in the firelight he looked drawn and tired.

“I got your sword, boy,” he said. He held the blade up for Little Vel to see. The tip was stained red. “It was lying in the snow near a deer’s nest.”

Little Vel hadn’t even realized he’d dropped the sword. Sheepishly, he went to retrieve it, but his uncle held on to it, fixing him with flinty eyes.

“I brought back the wolf, too.”

Swallowing, Little Vel asked, “Did you kill it?”

“No,” Uncle Jeris said. “You did.” He pointed at the red stain on the tip of the wooden sword. Little Vel turned the blade around to inspect
“Would you like to see the wolf?”

“Yes,” Little Vel said quietly. His uncle slid the fur cloak off his shoulders and handed it to Little Vel.

The wolf was sprawled in the snow. Its face was badly damaged. “Near as I can tell, you put your sword right through the eye and into the brain. I’m surprised it staggered as far as it did.” His uncle peered at him and his tone changed. “It takes a man to kill a wolf, Vel.”

The boy stared at him. “Why wasn’t Darrikson there?” he blurted.

Jeris shrugged. “He never came home. Word is, the miller apprenticed him out to a visiting smith as soon as they got to market.”

His uncle was still squatting by the wolf’s body, stroking it as if it were a hound.

“Why didn’t Velson tell me?”

“Because princes don’t get apprenticed,” Velson said. Little Vel turned. His brother was standing with the bowl of half-frozen stew in his hands, staring at the dead wolf on the ground.

“You should have told me!” Little Vel cried, brandishing his blood-stained sword. But Velson couldn’t seem take his eyes off the corpse. He wouldn’t even look at Little Vel. There were tears freezing on his cheeks.

Uncle Jeris laid a leather-gloved hand on Little Vel’s shoulder. It was huge, like a bear’s paw. “Now that you’ve killed your beast, Vel” he said. “What say you set your sword aside and help me skin it?”

Little Vel looked down at the sword in his hand, and then at Velson. His brother was shivering; just a boy. Uncle Jeris bent down and hoisted the big wolf up over his shoulder and set off towards Father’s shed, his footsteps crunching in the snow.

Vel leaned the toy sword against the house and followed his uncle.
We’re nice people.