The Great Lake Review
Art and Literary Magazine

The Great Lake Review showcases all the creative talents SUNY Oswego has to offer.

We congratulate those who have submitted and have been accepted into this year’s edition, and encourage those who either didn’t submit, or did but didn’t get in, submit to editions in the future.

Every semester we look for Oswego’s most enthusiastic students to join our editing staff. Our meetings are fun and we work hard to put together the fantastic book you hold in your hands.

May creativity never cease in your being and hopefully we’ll see your name on the cover of your own book someday.

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Fall 2012
# The Great Lake Review
## Art and Literary Magazine
### Fall 2012

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Man’s Best Friend
David Graf

Clayton made sure to throw his tie over his shoulder so that the blood didn’t get on it. The coughing had become increasingly painful and persistent, but he knew that the office coverage would not pay for treatment and he certainly couldn’t afford it out of pocket.

“I am sad to inform you that your condition is terminal,” the doctor had said about seven weeks ago. He hadn’t seemed very sad at all.

“How long I got?” asked Clayton, without batting an eye.

“Well, generally it takes two to three months, but—”

“Thanks doc,” he said, cutting off the doctor and walked out the door.

He had it all on the surface: a steady job, a beautiful wife, and a beloved dog. Until his diagnosis. Since that day the family seemed to be crumbling beneath the surface. Though it certainly wasn’t the root of their issues, it definitely wasn’t helping them either.

He’d bought the dog when he graduated from college, a beautiful chocolate lab named Buck that had started to age like his owner and very recently had gotten sick. His wife hated that dog, especially now that it left smelly messes all over the house for her to clean. She begged for him to have the dog put down and he refused. This was one of the countless subjects over which they fought and never came to an agreement.

He flushed the blood down the toilet, straightened his tie, and walked back to his desk. Time seemed to stand still as he waited for five o’clock. He had been showing up late every day for quite some time now and it didn’t really seem to bother him much at all, although he felt obligated to at least leave on time. Since the diagnosis, most of his time had been divided between the bar and walks with the dog. His wife could tell he was sick but since he hardly came home, she really didn’t know the severity. Clayton planned on keeping it that way. As the sickness had gotten worse he realized that the only way to keep up the charade was to stay away. He hated disappointing her and after three years of failed pregnancy tests, he couldn’t bear to add to that with
his medical news.
   "My god that dog smells," she said as he walked through the door.
   "Nice to see you too sweetheart."
   "Honey, don’t you think it’s time we take care of it?"
   "Take care of it?"
   "I talked to the vet and he seems to think that there isn’t much left we can do other than put it down."
   "Is that what we do with the sick around here?" asked Clayton. "Put them down after all they’ve given us?"

She stared blankly back at Clayton. Outbursts like this had become more and more frequent since the sickness. Clayton whistled for the dog and brought him upstairs; they’d be sleeping on the couch tonight.

Their marriage hadn’t always been like this, but she’d wanted kids and he couldn’t give them to her. That alone was enough to put a strain on the strongest of marriages. He dealt with it by drinking, heavily, and long walks with the dog. She had found other men. Most recently she had been seeing a handsome construction worker. He was tall, strong, sensitive. Everything that Clayton was not at this point in their marriage.

His wife was not the only thing that continued to suck the life out of him. It was his tenth year working at the phone company on Tompkins Road. When he was hired he told himself it would only be until he could find something better, and there he was a decade later, realizing nothing better would ever come around. The diagnosis had made work that much more dreadful. He would forever be remembered as a Verizon sales manager and he hated that. He hated the sales meetings where they gave him the same motivational techniques that never worked. He hated his boss who made him stay late or come in early. But most of all he hated the fat secretary who always said, “Someone’s got a case of the Mondays,” whenever he didn’t acknowledge her half-assed small talk.

Clayton left for work the next morning, his back sore from the old couch. As soon as he walked through the door his boss popped out from around the corner.

   “Hey Clay, just want to remind you I need you to stay until seven tonight. Sound good? Thanks.”
Clayton rolled his eyes, nodded his head, and trudged off to his cubicle in the back of the office.

The day dragged on and he continued to put forth a lackluster effort.

“The last weeks of my life,” thought Clayton, “and I’m sitting here.”

Nearly half of his day was spent in the bathroom dealing with the incessant coughing. Everyone noticed but no one asked. He’d been at the office as long as anyone else so they all knew not to bother him. He was glad because he really didn’t feel like wasting time coming up with a lie.

He dreamed of the day every night. One morning he just wouldn’t wake up and that would be the end of this hell. There would be no one left to disappoint, no more time wasted. He wondered how his wife would react. Of course he still loved her, but a rift had grown between them, and the sickness had turned that rift into a canyon.

“I’m doing her a favor,” decided Clayton in his head. “When I’m gone the dog won’t be far behind and she can find a real man to have kids with.”

Meanwhile, his wife was back home enjoying her usual afternoon appointment with her construction worker friend. She too, still loved her husband, but couldn’t handle receiving almost no attention from him.

“I’ll call you,” she said to the man as he hopped in his truck. He pulled out of the driveway.

She went back inside and found the dog asleep under the couch. The same place Clayton had left it this morning, only now a pungent odor radiated from its direction.

“God damn it.”

She kicked the dog’s rear end to move it out of the way.

“I'm too young to be taking care of an old man already.”

She scrubbed the tile floor. Faint traces of blood had stained the couch she was under, but she didn’t seem to notice.

When Clayton got home his wife was nowhere to be found. He went upstairs and found her asleep on the bed.
When he came back down he could hear the faint whine of his dog. He sprinted to the back of the house to find it tied up on the back porch. Disgusted, he untied the dog and brought him in the house. They’d be sleeping on the couch again.

At the end of the week, Clayton woke up for the early shift that he had been given the night before. As he opened the drawer to pull out a pair of pants, he noticed jeans under the dresser. Clayton didn’t wear jeans. He didn’t own a single pair. He stood holding the denim for a minute. It wasn’t a shock to find them. He had known she had been cheating on him. The jeans in his hands took away all innocence though. There was no longer reasonable doubt.

“It’s a shame.”

He kissed his dog on the nose and left for work. Traffic on Erie Boulevard gave him time to process what he saw that morning.

“So that’s it. The last person who cared at all about me no longer does.”

Clayton’s anger was not with his wife. He was angry with himself for dragging her through all of this. For taking a perfectly healthy marriage and killing it. He was glad to be dying, because he didn’t know how to live with himself anymore.

The office had the mood of any other day. Clayton could feel beads of sweat gathering on his forehead. He could see his boss making his way across the office. Probably coming to ask about a report he never filed, or the fact that he hadn’t been to work on time for two months straight.

“So Clay, I understand you were late today?”

Clayton nodded without turning his attention from the computer screen.

“You’ve actually been making quite the habit of being tardy lately. There’s also a great deal of work that hasn’t been handed in. I’m sorry, Clay, but this is unacceptable and I’m going to have to let you go.”

At those words he felt it coming. It felt like lava roaring up his throat. He tried to push his way out of the cubicle but couldn’t. Finally it hit with the force of an eruption. The most painful cough he had ever felt. It seemed to last hours even though it was only seconds. The entire office turned to
stare at what was transpiring. A pool of blood formed on the grey carpet. When it finally ceased, everything went silent. Clayton stood hunched over, trying to recover. He stood, nodded his head and then walked to his car.

He contemplated driving into oncoming traffic, but couldn’t muster the courage. He pulled in the driveway behind a grey pickup truck that he had never seen before. He walked through the front door to hear voices upstairs, as well as Buck scratching at the back. Immediately he ran to the whimpering dog and let him inside. Then he turned his attention to the voices upstairs. It was fairly obvious what the voices were. Clayton sat down to contemplate his options. The long cough at work had told him that his time was nearly up.

As he sat there in thought, he listened. He could hear laughter. Clayton hadn’t heard her laugh like that in years. In a twisted way, he was happy. And that’s when it hit him. He knew exactly what he would do.

Clayton grabbed food for the dog, in case he lasted longer than expected. He grabbed a few personal items out of his safe in the basement: a watch that his father had given him when he graduated high school, a 1970 Hamilton.

“They don’t make those anymore,” he said aloud.

He stuffed the watch among some clothes, food, and toiletries in a duffel bag. It wasn’t much. He didn’t expect it to be a long trip. No longer did Clayton concern himself with what he was leaving behind. For the first time in a long time, his wife was happy.

Before leaving, he dug around for a pad of paper and a pencil. Once he found it, he began to write:

“Lots of Love, Clayton.”

He didn’t know what else to say. Buck could sense something was going on and followed his master around. Clayton took one last look around the house, whistled for the dog, and walked to the car. The dog followed and jumped in with him. He set out into the city, onto the interstate northbound to his parents’ old camp up on the lake. Just a man and his dog.
From the Train
Nathan Valeska

Glimpse of Happiness
Kristen Burke
I Promise
Heather Cook

If in this world of darkness,
You cannot find the light
You only have to look to me,
And I will clear your sight.

When the night seems too long,
And you can’t wait to see the dawn,
  if time stands still,
And you can’t seem to find the will.
  I will help you go on.

I adore everything you are.
When you feel that no one cares
Just let me in, I’ll be your friend.

I’ll help you chase your dreams.
  By your side I will stay,
  I’ll be there for you everyday
If you just can’t find your way.

I only ask you this my love,
  Please don’t ever leave.
I cannot be perfect,
And at times I’ll make you mad.
But you’re the only thing that matters.
   The only one who ever will.

Don’t try to do this on your own.
Life can sometimes be so cold,
   But I am here,
And I can keep you warm,
   So long as you stay.

I love who you are,
Not how you’ve been.
Trust me enough; take me by the hand.
   I’ll promise to never let you go.
   No matter the challenge,
   No matter the road block,
   No matter the pain.

You can believe that I will stay.
   I won’t ever run away.
Indian Summer
Vala Kjarval

Gentle Hands
Emily Griffin
Nothing
Seamus Lyman

I leant up against my register in the grocery store. Out of the seven registers we have, only mine was open for the entire night. I don’t mind it, there usually aren’t that many customers that come through here after ten. There were a couple of guys restocking the shelves but I didn’t talk to them, they were an odd bunch. One was a very large young man; he had long hair that went to the top of his chest. He was arrogant, he acted like he was brilliant and better than everyone there. The other guy was shorter and older. He had thinning gray hair and a rough five o’clock shadow. He didn’t seem to like me very much. I was new to the night shift, and this was only my second or third time doing it. I liked it so far. My boss let me bring my iPod and I could use my phone, even though no one would be awake during my shift.

I was listening to “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin when a customer walked into the store. It was about ten thirty. I quickly put my iPod to the side and greeted the customer with a smile. They walked on practically ignoring me. I thought, “Well that’s just great, tonight is going to be a great night!” I was terribly wrong. My iPod refused to turn back on and I was stuck listening to the elevator music that played from the grocery chain’s mass produced radio station. They never played anything good, and they filled it mostly with advertisements. It’s pointless to have advertisements when no one is in the store, because I am certainly not going to rush over to the deli and try the new soup of the day.

The younger guy that was packing came up to me to buy two donuts and chocolate milk. He had an angry look on his face.

“You alright?” I asked.

“Yeah, why?” he said.

“You just looked mad or something.”
“Oh, well I’d rather not be here,” he said.

“Do you have a reason other than the fact that it’s the overnight shift?” I asked.

“Yeah actually I do, my wife is at home and our son is sick. I’d much rather be home with them tonight.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Well if you just put your mind off it I’m sure the time will fly.”

“Yeah,” he said in a sarcastic tone as he walked to the back of the store.

The customer who ignored me earlier finally came up. He had a shopping cart that was filled up to the top. It rolled smoothly on the glossy floor. I had never seen any of our carts move as nicely as this one. It was almost like a ballet, beautiful yet boring. I had to remind myself that it was just a shopping cart.

“Hi, how are you?” I asked.

“Fine,” he grunted. He started to throw his items onto the register’s belt.

“Do you have your advantage card tonight, sir?” I asked, as I always do.

“Yeah, I’ll get it in a minute.”

I scanned his items one by one. The register beeped with each scan. Occasionally I would have to type in a code for produce, bananas 4011, and McIntosh apples 4152. I went back to scanning his items. He had a lot, more than most families buy on a Sunday afternoon. Finally we reached the end, he had already started to bag the items and place them in his cart.

“Your total comes to two fifty two oh nine, sir,” I said.

He swiped a credit card and kept bagging. I helped bag some of his items. He had a lot of frozen foods, a couple bags of chips, and prepackaged deli meats. He got three
gallons of milk, fat free, 2% and chocolate. He had a lot of produce, which I found odd for the night time. I processed his card and had him sign the receipt and gave him his own copy. He didn’t look at me at all. I quickly bagged his ground beef and chicken and sent him on his way.

“Have a great night, sir,” I said. He just kept walking.

The older man from packing came to my register now. He just had a big bottle of mountain dew, good choice for the night shift. He, too, seemed to be a little grumpy. Being me, I asked him, “What’s up?”

“Nothing, just stocking the shelves, you know,” he said.

“Do you like it back there?” I asked.

“I would be a little happier if they actually paid me decent money to do this. As it is I have to go to my other job at nine,” he said.

“Oh wow that’s a bummer,” I said.

He went on to tell me how he’s trying to put three kids through college, private colleges, and he has another kid soon to be in high school. His wife lost her job that she had for twenty years, and he was left to support the family. I felt bad for him, I mean my parents helped me get through college but I didn’t go to a private school, and I’m taking on a good portion of the debt. I don’t understand why he would do that to himself, why not tell his kids straight up? That’s what I would do; tell them that we can’t afford it. But hey, it’s his life not mine. I cleaned the front end for the third time, it was the only thing I could do now. No customers, no one was awake to talk to, and of course my iPod was broken.

After a few hours the old man came back to the front end to buy another drink.

“Why do you put yourself through this?” I asked.

What do you mean?”
“Well, why didn’t you tell your kids the situation? I’m sure they would have understood if you just told them,” I said.

“I can’t do that to them, they worked too hard to just lose the opportunities given to them,” he said, “plus, I have a helper up there,” he looked up, “he’s got my back.”

Suddenly I realized something, the difference between the old man, myself, and anyone else who was in that store that night is that he believes that everything will get better. He thinks that he can be saved, that one day he will have the money to pay for his kids’ educations without working. Too bad he doesn’t know that we’re stuck here. We’re not going anywhere.
Salvation in the Sludge Garden
Kenneth Packard

I sat in a Victorian garbage gut
In the middle of Sludge Garden,
Where pollutants tickled my nose hairs and
Towers, towering towers, towered above me,
Lodged there for as long as my memory
Cares to inform me, but I do know
That I rarely ever saw the sun,
For the smog was so thick that it created
Almost an airborne sunlight mesh throughout
The garden, only allowing slight remnants
Of light to grace my presence,

But despite the humidity
Despite the mold caked faces
Despite being tied down by
Waterlogged newspapers
Gaining further strength
From curdled milk glue,

I found something.

And that something was a barrell of black powder,
Or in lame fucks terms,
A shotgun,

And since it had been “I can’t for the life of me remember”
Years since a women had touched me,
I felt that there was solace to gain in its
Homicidal philosophies,

I saw the shotgun in the looking glass of a
Corner murder mart,
And since knew it was for sale,
I saved up every coin and fingernail I
Had peeled off my fingers out of boredom
And made the shotgun mine,

But as I brought the shotgun outside
And began to give it the
Privilege of my last kiss,

I found someone.

And that someone was a young girl
Hunched over and holding her belly,
Vomiting more vomit than someone
With the death-dealing death flu,

I dropped the shotgun and went over
To her, I swear her hair looked like
It had been molested and gnawed
At by decay’s hair dresser,

And her face looked like
A piece of dough that had
Been improperly roled by
An unskilled baker,

And her eyes looked like a
Horrifying surrealist painting
That depicts a blood spewing
Black hole,

But in her eyes there was something
More, something very faint
That reminded me of a breathless
Landscape, the sort of landscape
That can only be fully inhaled
After glancing at it for hours on end,
Until the suns sunset metamorphosis reveals
An orange glow, that resonates on everything
You see,
That is what I saw in her eyes.

I don’t quite know why
I got down on my knees
And held her as tightly
As I could, But what
I do know for sure
Is that immediately

After, several gold blossoms
Began to blossom in a blossomless
Sludge Garden, and the girls disease
That had been eating her alive
Began to recede, and unoddly
Enough I lost any urge to kill myself,

The little girl and I walked away hand in hand,
And as we did, the blossoms derooted themselves
And began following us, like younglings trying
To stay close to their mother, and with that
They followed us out of Sludge Garden,

I should mention now that I haven’t been
Back there since then and I don’t think
I ever will, because I feel like those last
Moments with the little girl and the
Blossoms were the greatest in my entire
Life, and the only memories I need of
Sludge Garden.
Cede
Vala Kjarval
I am uncomfortable. The last time I was in this dusty auditorium was on the first day of school when the principal jovially read to us from the student handbook. I look up and notice the stage is still framed as it was for last year’s major musical – “Grease,” giant black and white pictures depicting younger versions of old celebrities stare down at me and I shrink under their gaze.

Everyone else, however, is content, and even a little excited.

This is just a club meeting, I remind myself, looking to my left where my friend Meagan sits, after she’s done I can get out of here.

I wish to myself that I was sitting at the end of the row, instead of in the middle with all these people surrounding me, probably judging me; I don’t belong here. One of them, a girl with dark skin and dark, perfectly curly long hair, keeps elbowing me in the side each time she turns to look over her shoulder when the door in the back creaks ominously open.

“Hey, Karuss!” exclaims another girl, blonde with a stature just like mine. The girl next to me waves dramatically, and then turns around in her seat again.

Meagan nudges me in the arm and I look up from my hands, fingers twisted around themselves nervously. She flips her short, blonde braid back over her shoulder and adjusts her silver framed glasses.

“We can go home after this. No worries!” She grins, and I can feel how happy she is about this meeting.

I let out a long sigh. Some days, I really wish Mom didn’t work in the afternoons. I just want to be in my room, alone, to be in peace after a chaotic day in school.

I hear the clicking of high heels on the stage as a figure emerges from a door covered in yellowing photographs. It creaks closed with a puff of dust. The figure clicks over the wooden stage, dust in her wake, and stops
under the yellow stage light.

“Hello Mrs. Sylvester!” the kids around me echo. The figure on the stage smiles, and puts her hands on her hips as she surveys her audience.

I notice her dyed blonde hair is pulled back on one side with a pin. That revealed ear is covered in piercings. There must be ten silver and gold mini hoop earrings, maybe even more.

“If you are a freshman, you aren’t allowed to join up. I’m sorry, that’s totally a school rule,” she says with an exaggerated sigh. Nobody in the audience moves. She steps down from the stage onto the grey carpeted choral risers, and then walks down to the tiled area of the floor in front of the grand piano. Up close, she looks different. She seemed so much younger up on stage.

“Who is this? That friend of yours, Meagan?”

“Yeah! I told you I’d have another person.”

Mrs. Sylvester smiles and nods.

“What’s your name?”

I mumble my answer, sinking into the red cushion of the auditorium chair.

“Can’t hear you, kiddo.”

“I – it’s Katie. Katie Morton.”

“Ah!” her voice is loud and echoes in the big, nearly empty auditorium, “So nice to meet you. I’m guessing you’re a Sophomore like Meagan, right?”

I nod almost invisibly.

“Welcome. You’re now a cast member for our retrospective mini musical – 21 Years of Shows.”

My eyes snap open and I grip the wooden arms of the chair I sit in.

“N-no! I can’t – I was – I mean... I was only waiting for
Mrs. Sylvester grins, and I know she is glad for this reaction. She reaches behind her and picks up a neon orange sheet of paper from the back of the piano.

“Come join our mini musical! Any student grade 10 or higher is free to join. No auditions! Just show up in the auditorium – Wednesday, September 13th, 2006.”

Meagan turns to me and laughs in my face. Her blue eyes reflect the soft stage lights above us and she looks just a little mischievous; she had planned this.

“It’ll be fun, I promise,” she adds.

Mrs. Sylvester clears her throat.

“Well? Are you interested? We need everyone here – there would be a missing part if you leave.”

All of a sudden, I feel the anxiousness of the other kids around me, as if they wait with bated breath. A headache is starting above my eyes, and my ears are ringing. I can’t hear myself think. I let out a long sigh.

“Alright. Yes,” I agree reluctantly. As sheet music is passed around, all I hear is my own self-consciousness cursing me for giving into peer pressure. “This musical is the farthest from being alone!” it screams, “You’ll make a fool of yourself like you always do. You can’t sing! You can’t dance! You’re not good at anything. You couldn’t even speak up enough to get out of this! They will hate you!” I fold my black zip-up sweatshirt over myself and frown.

I know, I agree to myself, I know.

Ignore it! I tell myself, Just ignore it!

My right ankle is killing me. Melissa, the choreographer, is directing us to sing the opening number while doing jumping jacks, in order to simulate how hard it actually is to sing and dance at the same time. I notice, while singing out-of-tune and out-of-breath, that Melissa looks almost exactly like Mrs. Sylvester – only her hair is short and
very curly. She even bellows just as loud – which she’s doing now as she also does jumping jacks – but I can’t focus on her words of encouragement. I can barely breathe. I am too fat for this sort of thing. I stop to catch my breath before the rest of the cast does. Meagan notices, and as she jumps, she travels over to check on me.

“That’s enough for now! Take a break. Alvera – I mean, Mrs. Sylvester – will be in with more work for you guys! You’re all brilliant!”

She mutters something incomprehensible as she walks off stage and alights into a front row seat in the auditorium.

“You did well, Katie!” Meagan whispers. I sit on the stage, following the trend of the cast and let out a long sigh.

No... No I didn’t, I think, but I thank her in a small voice anyway.

Mrs. Sylvester parades onto the stage with some mismatched-sized pieces of paper clutched in one hand and a microphone grasped in the other. She turns her head and speaks over her shoulder to Melissa.

“We’re working on projecting,” she says with a sarcastic tone. Melissa laughs, picks herself up and glides all the way back to the last row of the auditorium.

“You can hear me, right?” Mrs. Sylvester laughs. Melissa flashes a thumbs up and leans back in her seat, crossing her legs.

“Lines, anyone?” Mrs. Sylvester asks excitedly. The others in the cast exclaim in a babble, somehow elated by this announcement. One by one, the pieces of paper are handed out. They are mostly for our scene from “A Chorus Line,” with some adjustments, as there are more girls than guys in the cast.

I get my line – my only line – and somehow everything seems extremely official.

On neon pink paper, the words ‘I’m Bebe Benzenheimer, from Boston, Massachusetts! [Speak with a
Boston Accent.]’ stare up at me in a vivid typeface. I allow myself a small laugh. In another rehearsal, I told the group that I grew up on Cape Cod as my little-did-they-know fact. Speech therapy in elementary school, along with six years in New York, removed most of that accent.

“Wicked ah-some!” I exclaim sarcastically, invoking that accent like a fond memory. It is the only word I still can’t remember to make “New York” enough. The girl on the other side of me giggles.

“She picked a good line for you,” she says, reading over my shoulder. It’s Karuss, the star – the one with the most lines and the best voice. She clings to two full sized pieces of paper. I feel humbled by her compliment. I smile, missing the cue to stand as Mrs. Sylvester motions for us to line up.

“No points if Melissa can’t hear you without the microphone!” she says.

I stop smiling and the nerves start.

“The points don’t matter!” Melissa calls back.

When it is my turn, I am shaking visibly. I say my line. Even I can barely hear it. My eyes are glued to the paper.

“I’m not getting Boston from that,” Mrs. Sylvester says. She holds out the microphone, which I reluctantly take. I am the only one to need it so far.

I repeat my line again.

My voice, sounding nervous, echoes out over the speakers.

“Nope!” Mrs. Sylvester exclaims in a high-pitched, staccato note, “Still not enough Boston. Work on that – we’ll practice this every day.”

And that’s it. I still shake as the others take their turn. Karuss has to step forward and act something out, but I can’t pay attention.

That was the loudest I’ve ever heard my own voice.
While my self-consciousness criticizes me again, I let out a shallow breath.

No, I answer it, I can do this. I have to.

It is an overcast Sunday that threatens to rain. Perfect for the-Sunday-before-Halloween weather, but not so much for a musical. This old building freaks me out a little. We had arrived behind where we would be performing, and I never looked up to catch what it was actually called. All I know is that inside this creepy building, one floor is labeled “The Senior’s Center for the Arts.” Dead ivy crawls up the side of a crumbling brick wall. Strange bronze lion statues with holes where eyes should be sit where the walkway begins. Despite their missing eyes, their gaze could easily follow your every move. A tiny spider darts in one of the Lion’s eyes and out of the other. I back away by a foot or so. The only tree I notice on the lawn has lost most of its color. The green grass is contrasted with a carpet of dead, dry, brown leaves. I crunch over them as I carry my ugly sized 12 character shoes with me. I am grateful, at least, that they are comfortable, despite the heels. I’m nervous, and I wander away from the crowd just a bit. I don’t need their nervousness, too.

I hear crushed leaves crumble as someone runs towards me bearing a neon green tee-shirt.

“You left your costume on the bus!” Meagan says, exasperated. My heart skips a beat in nervous realization. I hold it up and see the plain typed-out logo – ‘21 Years of Shows’ arched over ‘Port Jervis Senior High School’s’ with ‘Retrospective Mini Musical’ arched opposite under that.

“Thank you!”

“No problem. We’re getting set up in a couple of minutes,” she says, pausing and choosing her words carefully, “– I know this is really difficult for you to do again... But I believe in you. You’ve done so well so far. Remember Saturday? You got your line spot on. I am proud. This will be so worth it.”

I can’t smile right now, so I nod. We walk back to the crowd together as they file onto the walkway between the
two eyeless lions and up crumbling cement stairs.

The girls are directed into a small room that has two tables. On one sits an unplugged coffee maker without a carafe, a couple glass pitchers of ice water, small paper cups, and a paper plate with sliced lemons. The other has a number of medium-sized glass plates with various finger foods – bread, cheese and crackers, cookies, donuts, vegetables and fruits – those sorts of things.

“Don’t eat the cheese!” Mrs. Sylvester warns. The room is filled with nervous laughter as she leans on the door frame, “Hurry and change into costume and character. The show starts soon.” She leaves again, and the room is suddenly in a chaos of girls trying to look their best, all of us in the same style tee shirts, each with different neon colors.

I notice there are assigned spots along the wall to put our things. My name is on a neon green sign that matches my tee shirt. I sit down and force the shoes onto my tights-protected feet, buckling them as close as possible on the outer edge. My sweatshirt gets thrown to the floor in a lump as I pull on my tee shirt over a moronic-looking forest green leotard. I bought plain black slacks for the costume, as was required. I had disobeyed the rules and wore them on the bus. I am too nervous to eat right now anyway, so I can’t ruin them with food. I check them in the mirror and find that they don’t seem all that badly wrinkled. I’m still not ready for this. Within a few minutes, Mrs. Sylvester and the band teacher, Mr. Pacer, ask us to file into another room to the right of the floor – not stage – where we will be performing.

I remember to force a smile as I see just how close to these old people we will be, and how small a space we really have. I notice strange buzzing and soft crashing sounds to my left. There is a large, steely blue dragonfly suicidally trying to escape the room through the glass panel in the white door to the porch. As it bashes itself into the glass, I empathize. I too would run now, but I am almost as hopelessly trapped. I let out a sigh as the lights go down and Mr. Pacer begins to play the opening number on the small piano in the back corner.

For a moment, I forget how nervous I am as we all sing through the major part of the show. Everyone is so happy that I feel their silent laughter and I smile genuinely.
Even though my self-consciousness wonders what I’ll screw up at today, I still sing.

The “Chorus Line” scene begins with a change to blue light. The song on the piano ends, and we line up as we had rehearsed each week before.

Mrs. Sylvester always told us that when we are nervous, we should focus on a spot on the wall, and not on the audience. I wonder vaguely if the audience can hear my heart beating frantically.

When it is my turn to say my only line, I grin theatrically and step to the spot on the floor marked in blue tape. I am almost in the personal space of the elderly woman in a wheel chair smiling out at us. I look up and stare at my spot on the wall, pointing my thumb at myself. I open my mouth to speak my only line —

But a black, hairy spider is crawling up the wall into my spot. Even with my terrible vision I can see its eerie eyes staring back into my soul. It must have been the size of the palm of my hand.

I am still standing there, pointing at myself with my mouth agape, but no words come forth. The impossibly large spider mocks me as it cleans its front legs, or sharpens its teeth – whatever it is that impossibly large spiders do. The silence crushes me as I stand there like an idiot.

Mr. Pacer clears his throat. The impossibly large, black, hairy, judgmental spider never takes its thousand and one eyes off of me, even as it creeps up the wall to settle into the crevasse between the wall and white plaster ceiling.

“And who are you?” Mr. Pacer says in a clear voice, shuffling paper to play the nonexistent part of the casting assistant. Tears obstruct my vision, and the impossibly large spider blurs away.

“Bebe Benzenheimer. Boston.” I say. A tear falls onto the brown leather shoe of the elderly woman in front of me. She reaches out a cold, bony hand and pats my arm. The wheelchair creaks as she shifts her weight. Her expression tells me she doesn’t mind my screw-up.
Karuss begins her lines as I step twice back into line. We break into dance. My arms feel heavy and my legs move like lead, but I dance anyway.


Why though? I ask myself, Wouldn’t it be more pathetic not to try at all?
Bone Deep
James Leach
Parasitic Fascination
Kristen Burke

Rocket ship across the sky.
A firework of light
It stings my soul
It burns my eyes
But I don’t dare look away.

Like a bug attracted to a beam.
I’m drawn in
With no rhyme or reason
I’m flying to you
Towards certain doom.

I’m a lover or a fighter.
But in this match
You’ve already won.

I’m tearing apart
Piece by piece
Rip, rip, rip.

These wounds are self-inflicted.
Parasitic fascination.
I simply can’t resist
I’ll take my piece of heaven
And hold it till it’s gone.
Metaphor of love from the eyes of foolish young men

Harry Christopher Moore

While walking carefree along the beach of life, a pretty seashell may catch your eye. Halting all forward motion of your normal life’s routine, you take the time and effort to pick it up. Making yourself familiar to all its unique qualities. Having never seen another seashell before, you admire its flawless beauty. You think you’ve found the perfect shell for you.

Moving forward again, another shell catches your eye. Comparing it to the previous shell, you start to notice imperfections that had been overlooked. So you throw the first shell away and move on with the new and improved. But as you continue your journey along the beach of life, more and more shells appear on your path. The more shells you pick up, the more you forget the details and reasons why you loved and picked up the ones you left behind.

At some point do you realize that it’s impossible to pick up and love every shell you see? Do you settle for the one in your hand?
Or do you continue to live your life that way until you’re too old and can no longer bend down to pick them up?

At that point, would you think about the first shell and wonder if someone else picked it up and kept it?
Side Effects: loss in sex drive
Emily Tran
You Look Better in Red
Andrew Schneider

The soft lights of the ol’ Hipster Café cast ambient shades of reds and peaches. A couple requested a small table discretely hidden away from the rustle and bustle of the bar. “Where do we take it?” asked the man while the woman watched his eyes trace wildly over the anonymous faces all about the place. She sat poised and sophisticated wearing a scarlet dress that gleamed like satin under the ruby lights of the Café window. At their feet sat a black duffel bag filled with stolen money. Annoyingly she put out her cigarette and a moment passed while she watched the final ribbons of white smoke fade into the hot red lights above them.

“I’ve found a better deal…” she led on. Looking up, she could see his eyes ignite in horror as if her words had been Death himself.

His hands were clammy and cold, and his face was flush and wet, “What do you mean? We got away. There are rules to play by!” The man was almost yelling now and his voice was brimming with desperation. He looked pale and nervous as he sat uneasily atop his high-rise chair. The woman, still perfectly poised in her seat, silently revealed her clenched hand beneath a red and white checkered handkerchief and placed it delicately on top of the table in front of her. The man drew back in horror seeing the glaring metal of her small pistol. The silencing boom brought chaos to the bar as beads of scarlet red spewed romantically.

“I never could stand a coward in a suit…” she said beneath her breath, “besides, you look better in red.” Still calm amidst the confusion of the bar she reached down inconspicuously and clenched the nylon straps of the black duffel bag. Laying in a sea of red that mirrored his love for her, he watched mesmerized while her scarlet dress disappeared into the night.
Birch
Sasha Padilla
I know what this looks like; an old hag with ruby, claw-like nails sitting in a forsaken carnival stall just outside the city.

See the way the dust floats in the early Sun? It settles on the torn edges of Tarot cards, telling me your fate far too easily.

That irksome nagging behind your eyes has guided you to me to fix your faith. To be clear, the Fool card stares up at me, reversed.

What more do you want of me? All I own is a deck of cards with black borders. Your shoes are worn; your blue eyes are tired, judging your reflection.
You
are skeptic and grow weary of me, child. Come, let Madame Zephyr
tell your fortune. Let me
take your hand...

Seek
not the troubles of a broken home – your untidy trailer and untidy children will only run you ragged for a short while longer.

Is
that what you’ve been asking? Solace from the pains of two jobs, no husband, and no patience? You feel there is no other solution.

The
door will open when you are brave enough to close the other. The cards tell me you are only lost – what you seek is
Wrong

for what will be left behind. You
have love. See it in the eyes of
your blonde three-year-old.
I regret to know the

Path

you are walking down – yet
there is time to turn around. Do not
give up or walk away without
knowing what you are capable of;
How Could I Not
Michelle Slowik

The tiles that I always thought were white, I now see are tainted with mysterious stains. A brownish black color is gradually corrupting the pureness of the white. The walls are beginning to take on the same color and a faint odor is invading my nostrils. I can’t place where I have smelled this before but it is very familiar. My head hurts and I’m so confused. There is a metallic and salty taste in my mouth and I see the red drops falling onto the carpet. A soot like substance seems to be consuming all of the air in the tiny space I’m trapped in. What is happening? Why is no one around? There are usually hundreds of people in this building and it is seemingly barren now. In the background I hear some kind of crackling or snapping noise and it sounds like it is getting closer. My vision is fading and I can’t focus on any one thought. A wave of exhaustion has hit me and I am fighting to remain conscious. It is getting harder and harder to avoid the darkness invading my mind and thoughts. Maybe it would be easier to just give in and slip away.

... 

Jacob was the kind of guy a girl could see herself ending up with. He was romantic, thoughtful, and caring. To top it off he had dashing good looks and a perfectly toned body. The summer I met him I thought I was going to lose myself in the depth of his shining grey eyes. I watched as he emerged from his morning swim by the flat rocks on the edge of the campground. He could not have looked more glorious as his muscles flexed to lift himself onto the rocks to get his towel. Watching the way he moved gave me such pleasure because no human should be that graceful at six o’clock in the morning. While in my daydream state I hadn’t noticed him look up at me with an embarrassed smile on his face. He wrapped his towel around his waist and proceeded to close the distance between us with his long strides.

When Jacob finally reached where I was sitting he said, “Were you enjoying the view?”

“It would be hard not to,” I responded.
Flashing that adorable grin again he said, “I’m Jacob, and you?”
“Scarlet.”
“Well maybe I will see you around Scarlet,” Jacob said as he was turning to leave.
“Hopefully.”

The room is so smoky when I can finally lift the veil of darkness from my eyes. My breath is coming in rasps. It’s so hot in here that I can see the carpet starting to melt by the door. I start to hear loud crashes outside the room like the ceiling is collapsing. The throbbing pain in my head is back and I can feel the dried blood under my nose and in my hairline. Why is no one coming to get me? Someone must realize I’m missing, I hope. I try to scream for help, to call out in case anyone can hear me but my throat is too dry to make the noise. Helpless, I am completely and utterly helpless. The familiar darkness is sweeping over me again, just as I start to feel the tears stream down my face.

We took a walk along the lake. The stars were magnificent, they were like little fireballs burning brightly in the sky. I often admired Jacob when he wasn’t looking and tonight wasn’t any different. He looked so beautiful under the gentle glow of the moon. Ever since the first day we met, we have both made a point to see each other throughout the day. This night was the first time we have been alone together. It felt so nice to just be with him. A part of me always wanted to be with him. I remember him looking down at me at that moment with a curious look on his face.

“What is it?” he asked.
“What do you mean?” I responded.
“I want to know what you’re thinking.”
“Why?”
“Because I don’t get you. You’re so mysterious and keep everything to yourself. Let me in every once in awhile Scarlet,” he said as he bent down, grabbed my face, and
kissed me with an intensity I have never felt. I didn’t even have enough time to reciprocate the passion before he pulled away.

“Why did you stop?” I breathed.

“You didn’t kiss me back.”

“Oh,” I said and leaned into him and planted my own heated kiss onto his full lips.

“Wow, maybe I should ask what you’re thinking more often, I like the way you change the subject.”

“That was my way of showing you what i was thinking, I’m scared of my feelings for you Jake.”

“Don’t be because I feel the same way, let’s just be together and take it one day at a time.”

He bent once more and this time invaded my mouth with his tongue. A deep moan escaped his throat as he came up for a breath and then he was back with a hard kiss. I let the walls down that I put up to protect myself from getting hurt and just let the passion consume me. ...

Why is this happening to me? I can feel the heat from the flames in the other room now. They are coming in my confined space through the crack under the door and I can see the door slowly disintegrate because of the heat. Fire has always fascinated me. If too much wood is added you get burned, if not enough is added it goes out, but when you build the embers underneath the kindling it won’t burn out. This fire surrounding me is not the ember kind of fire. This fire is blazing, it is destroying the whole building by consuming it from the inside out. I can’t believe I’m trapped here. I need to get out, I can’t die like this. The room is so hot but inside I am so cold. This feeling scares me. I just need to close my eyes and clear my head for a minute. Just a minute...

... We were on Jacob’s couch watching a movie and making out. His hands were gently caressing the back of my neck and the base of my hairline. It was
sending shivers down my spine. The feeling was very sensual, I could not get enough of it. He gradually moved to massage my back. Slowly he slipped my shirt off my shoulders and then over my head, slightly messing up my hair in the process. When he went to push the strands of hair out of my face he gently placed a soft kiss on my parted lips. Before he could pull away I wrapped my hands in his hair and brought my mouth up to meet his. Our tongues intertwined and in no time the kiss got deeper, hotter, more intense.

He picked me up and carried me into the bedroom. After placing me on his bed he stripped off his shirt and undid his belt. Jacob’s abdominal muscles were cut so perfectly that I couldn’t help but steal a pleasurable glance at them before he slid on top of me.

“Are you enjoying the view?” he teased while unbuttoning my jeans.

“How could I not?” I replied back.

I lifted my pelvis up to help him slip my jeans and then my panties off. He gently tossed them both onto the floor beside the bed. I flipped us over so I was on top and slowly unbuttoned and took off his jeans. I sat up to admire him laying on the bed in nothing but his briefs. The very familiar, embarrassed smile crossed his face and I couldn’t help but blush at the memories it brought back. Jake grabbed my hips and gently threw me onto the other side of the bed. He wrapped his arms around me so his hands were flat on my back and unhooked my bra. Slowly he caressed each breast and slid his hands to grab my face. The kiss was hard and passionate. His eyes were full of desire and lust but there was something else I noticed in those grey eyes of his. I could not place what it was because it was a look unlike any I have seen him make.

He got off the bed to take his briefs off and retrieve a condom from his night stand. I slipped under his comforter before he was back. Sliding in beside me, I felt his hand slowly trace up my thigh and over my torso. Eventually he reached behind my neck and pulled my mouth to his. He whispered something in my ear.

“What?” I said.
“Scarlet, you are so beautiful and have made the time we have spent together the most enjoyable time of my life. I love you so much and never want to lose you.”

“What?” I repeated.

“What’s wrong Scarlet?”

“I...I can’t do this. I need to leave.”

I grabbed my clothes and quickly threw them back onto myself. As I bolted to the door and then to my car I heard him saying something. I didn’t even turn around to hear what he was saying. Not even a minute later, I was gone.

... 

Jacob means everything to me, he is my whole life. The only person that understands I need to be loved and taken care of. How could I not have said those three simple words back to him? What the fuck is wrong with me? Now I’m trapped in this burning building, yearning to escape so I can see Jacob one last time. I want to finally tell him how I feel but somewhere deep inside me is telling me I won’t get the chance. My breath is getting weaker every second that passes by and I can’t even spill those warm salty drops that were ever so present the night I screwed up. I am barely conscious but the last thing I see before the darkness encapsulates me for what seems like the last time is a white foamy substance. It is invading the room and making the heat and the flames disappear. I hear voices in the background and hope springs to my conscious that maybe I will get the chance to be with Jacob....if only I can get that chance.
Snot Bubbles to the Floor Saves Tree
Emily Tran
Love Thy Neighbor
Marisa Dupras

It was a black Akita, I concluded after the incident, possibly a mixed breed, but definitely some Akita in him with those pointed wolf ears and curled up fluffy tail.

“Wanna go for a walk?” my mom said that day, as she did almost every day that summer. I knew these walks were her way of spending time with me before I went off to college, five hours away.

We didn’t usually walk too far. We’d go down our street, North Ridge Drive, past the bus stop I’d waited at every morning for eight years, and down two more streets before turning back. Still, it was enough exercise for us; the roads were long and hilly.

Somehow I always wore dark clothes; short black shorts and a dark tank top with my brown hair in its usual ponytail. My mom always seemed to contrast me with light, pastel colors and her light blonde hair. She literally took on the image of optimism while I was the opposite. She appreciated the sunshine while I complained about the heat. We left our house, a yellow house with giant triangular windows, and walked down the steep driveway.

As we set off, I studied our neighbors’ houses. Some were out in an open, suburban type lawn, but others were hidden behind long driveways and veils of leafy trees. Superficially, it wasn’t unlike the past three neighborhoods we had lived in, except maybe for the size of the houses. I deemed one house down a dead end “the castle house” because it looked to be about five stories and was made out of marble. It had white pillars and tall, elaborate, white fencing around it. When I asked, my mom told me they had looked at it when we moved into the neighborhood and it cost a million dollars. Most of the other houses on my street were colonial and half as expensive.

When we reached the bus stop area we saw a family outside their colonial, pale blue house, working on their lawn. My mom waved at the wife. She simply stared for a minute and then turned away. My mom pretended she had not waved. They made a purposeful effort to ignore us and continued to trim bushes and pull weeds. That’s Connecticut
for you. We never did anything to annoy them, unless they considered the invitation to our Halloween party annoying.

They were all alike here. No help, no concern, no Christmas cards. I remember the day we moved in. The very first person to show up at our door was our next door neighbor and all she brought with her was a livid, sarcastic attitude. She was furious that our moving truck had ripped up a tiny scrap of her lawn. She demanded money for it. There was no plate of cookies, no “hello welcome to the neighborhood.” We still don’t even know her name. My dad still rants about that moment.

Once we got past their house, we resumed conversing about plans, plans for the summer, for going to college, for visiting me at college.

I heard something like feet padding towards us fast.

I turned around and saw a big, black dog running up to us. His tongue was lolling out and he looked like he was grinning. As the dog ran up to me my mom cringed, she had this thing about big dogs running up to her. I immediately started petting this Akita, and discovered he wasn’t wearing a collar. His black fur was pristine; he looked like he had come straight from the groomers.

“Who’s dog is this?” I asked.

“I think he’s those people’s dog actually. They must have just let him out,” my mom said.

“There’s a leash law…” I pet the dog as I walked. I didn’t mind when it licked my arm. “Seriously, who lets their dog loose without even a collar? What if he doesn’t come back?”

“Well, they just moved here, maybe they used to live in an even more rural area,” my mom said.

“They don’t exactly look like hicks.”

My mom’s silence agreed with me.

We owned a second home in upstate New York, a tiny town called Saranac where everyone called each other by first name, and left their doors unlocked at night. It was
where my parents, and I in a way, grew up. It was the middle of the sticks and people worried more about woodchucks than crime. All the houses, included ours, were small and cozy. They get run down from the long winters, but on the inside they’re usually all like stepping into a grandmother’s house. So imagine my surprise when we moved here, to our giant house isolated on a steep hill, above all the neighbors, and with our own veil of trees.

I threw sticks for the dog to fetch. As much as I was enjoying the friendly Akita, I tried to coax him to go back to its home as we got further and further away from it. So far no cars had gone by. I started bitching to my mom some more about the people not obeying leash laws.

The road started to slant downwards a little. I heard a whirring sound and paused, it was hard to tell if it was just wind or a vehicle. Then red pickup truck appeared. My mom automatically moved off the road to the nonexistent shoulder space on the side, and expected me to follow. Instead I held the dog’s shoulders and waited for the truck to pass. His ears turned forwards as he watched the truck get closer fast.

He seemed like he knew better, but then he started trotting into the path of the truck. I hesitated, trying to grab a collar and remembered he didn’t have one. I hesitated again as the truck was only feet away. The dog just kept walking towards the truck. I made a half assed attempt to grab the dog around its neck, but he broke free.

The truck screeched to a stop just before hitting him. The dog put his paws on the driver side door. The driver opened his window.

“Watch your dog!” he yelled. He wore a baseball cap and had five o’clock shadow.

“He’s not our dog!” my mom and I both shouted simultaneously.

The man just threw his hands up and drove away, shaking his head.

The dog returned to me. I hugged him and kissed the top of his head, “why didn’t I stop him?”
“You tried to,” my mom said, “It’s alright he’s perfectly fine.”

“But I hesitated when he started going towards it.” I said.

“Maris, you didn’t know he was going to do that. It’s fine,” my mom said.

“No it’s not fine! He could have died!”

“Calm down,” she said, “He’s not dead, he’s happy as ever, look!”

The dog, as if sensing my mood, decided to head back to its home. I glanced back and watched him run away. I felt like ripping off the next branch that stuck out into my path. We reached the third road. The houses had slowly transformed from million dollar castles to three room, portable homes with roofs starting to cave in and paint peeling off. Connecticut has strange towns like that.

“I still can’t believe those people would just fucking let their dog run around. He obviously doesn’t know to stay away from cars. Oh my God that pisses me off so much.”

“Alright, stop with the swearing,” my mom said.

“I don’t wanna stop swearing. I’m really upset right now.”

“I noticed, but I don’t like to hear my daughter say the F word,” she said, sounded hurt. I decided to keep my curse words inside my head as we turned around and headed back. We were silent.

I was thinking about my dog that lived with my grandmother in Saranac for most of his life because my mom didn’t want him to scratch our new wood floors. He got hit by a pickup truck just like that once when he was young. His name was Rielly and we got him as a stray when I was only four.

Rielly was my playmate every single time I went to Saranac, more so than my cousins and brother. We chased each other around in the lawn and hiked together. Eventually when I was deemed old enough to drive my grandmother’s
golf cart, I’d give him rides to the river so he could wade and
snap at minnows. He was a mixed breed, possibly a cross
between a Labrador and a bull terrier. He looked mostly like
a lab except for his small ears and brindle colored fur. As a
child I used to enjoy using all different color crayons when I
drew him. Unlike the black Akita, Rielly’s fur seemed to
always get dirty no matter how much I brushed him. He
always remembered me after my absence. When he got
older, he liked to sunbathe by the window. When I first came
downstairs every morning, I was the only one he would get
up for and greet. We always seemed to be able to
communicate. He sensed when I wanted him to follow me,
and I could tell when he wanted me to follow him. Everyone
said, “Rielly lives here, but he’s Marisa’s dog.” when they
told someone else about him.

My grandmother had a cable with a run line that she
clipped his collar to. One day when he was a wild puppy, and
I was a child, he somehow got loose from that cable and ran
into the road and a pickup truck hit him. His back leg and hip
were hurt badly.

I wasn’t there when this happened. If I had been
there, I probably would have run into the road after him,
endangering myself. My childlike and some would say,
stupid, love for that one dog would have driven me to do
that.

My grandmother told me how when she rushed over
to the road, the truck driver had already gotten out to see if
he had killed my dog. He carried my dog into my
grandmother’s car for her and offered to pay for the vet
bill or do anything he could to help. She thanked him and
declined. Rielly was taken to the vet just down the road and
fixed up. His hip suffered from arthritis later in his life, but he
lived to be fourteen years old.

He passed away only three months before my
encounter with the black Akita in my Connecticut
neighborhood.

I tried to hold back tears now. My mom probably
sensed something was wrong seeing as I had actually shut
up for a while.

“Are you thinking about Rielly?”
She has that mothering ability to read my mind I thought to myself. I nodded in response.

She hugged me. “I’m sorry sweet girl, he lived a full life.”

I just hugged her back, for once I didn’t feel like talking about it.

When we walked past the house that owned the Akita again, the family was still outside working on their lawn. The dog was still loose, running around, digging up the lawn they were working on so determinedly in the heat.

“I’m gonna tell them to fucking put their dog on a leash,” I said.

“No. Maris. Don’t say anything to them,” my mom said in a hushed voice.

The son looked up from his soccer ball and stared at me like his parents did. I stared back. Yelling wouldn’t change these people. We left their sight eventually.

The next few days before I returned to New York for college, I laid in bed for hours thinking. I wondered if I’d ever come to miss this town I spent my adolescence in. I’d moved five times in my short life, but this house in Connecticut was set apart from the rest in my mind. I wonder if those neighbors would have offered to pay for Rielly’s vet bill if they had hit him. I can’t believe I was so hesitant to stop their dog. The dog was nearly hit because of me, and then all I thought of doing was yelling at his owners. I was from Connecticut now, and that’s what I would tell everyone I met at college.

I decided I might miss watching the neighbors out my window from my high point at the top of the hill. I learned what I could about them from that window, since they never introduced themselves. When I came to think of it, the entire time we lived there on North Ridge Drive, not one neighbor ever invited us into their house. After a while, we stopped trying to invite them.
In Sunday school you sat ready to learn
Ready to learn about how not to burn
For eternity, and lovingly you accepted
You expected it true, and maybe it is.
I wouldn’t know.
Neither would you.
But Sister Raincloud said,
“Help us, Jesus, again”
And chased it down with Amen

Sister Raincloud taught a lesson
A whole unit on creation.
Brought crayons to make an impression
you sat there with attention.

And you, little bug
raised your hand up
Wanting to know up above
Where the dinosaurs came from

There are bones and bones and bones
And I’ve read books so I know, know, know.
But you said you like the idea of eternity
So you accepted it too, that maybe it is.
I wouldn’t know.
Neither would you.
But Sister Raincloud said,
“Help us, Jesus, again”
And chased it down with Amen
If our ancestors came to be
On the 6 day creatively
When did the dinosaurs begin?
Before or after original sin?
We know we weren’t around
The same time as the dinosaurs
But there bones were found
So it can’t be lore.

Sister Raincloud took a breath
And without a blink she said,
“Child, how long is 6 days to God?”
And you lowered your head.
You said an apology, graciously
To someone who you hurt carelessly.
You said, “I’m sorry God. I thought not.”
And chased it down with Amen.
Daydreams
Vala Kjarval

Pocket Watch
James Leach
Word Master
Kristin Bacher

You have this way with words,
So literal, so lyrical,
Just so goddamn satirical.
They bend,
They break,
They bow.
You say jump,
And they ask how.

You bend them and befriend them
You control them. You console them
The words as they flow
Down the pages as they go
And you’re the only one
Who knows
How the story
Really goes
How the words
Will end
And how
To bring
Them back
Again.

59
Hiddleston
Christie Maldonado
Sestina
Harry Christopher Moore

Around the world alone I was moving,
across oceans blue and forests so green.
Searching to find in my heart the music.
Tired and jealous of people laughing.
Always looking out at nearby water.
Hoping on cloudy days to see starlight.

My childhood was always filled with starlight.
But in many places we’d be moving,
like a stream pushing a leaf on water.
Thinking of the past makes my heart so green.
However, most times I would be laughing,
and I would sing and dance to the music.

Such peaceful joy I found in the music.
Always gazing up to look at starlight.
My friends and I would always be laughing.
Going on road trips in my car moving,
around exquisite mountains full of green,
swimming in creeks of refreshing water.

I saw a girl playing in the water,
and she filled up my heart with sweet music.
Her beautiful eyes of such brilliant green,
much like fireworks against the starlight.
Standing in the currant swiftly moving.
We spent hours together that day laughing.

And since then, we have continued laughing.
Walking along the rocks near the water.
Enjoying the clouds in the sky moving.
recognizing in nature the music,
while laying outside watching the starlight,
holding each other on the grass so green.

And when I am sad I think of her green
eyes and warm smile. And my heart starts laughing.
Her glowing face is like blinding starlight.
Her smooth embrace is like flowing water.
Her inviting voice is like soft music.
Like a candle flame her body moving.

Now we move freely through the grass of green.
Enjoying music while we are laughing.
Near the water gazing at the starlight.
How to Babysit, Properly
Corinne Elizabeth

First, arrive half an hour early so that you can “observe” the child in its natural setting. At this time you should take detailed notes. Second, ask the parent about all allergies and emergency contact information. At this time take more detailed notes. When the parents have left, immediately remove all household hazards from the child’s play area. Examples of such hazards include: all sharp-edged objects or furniture, any easily tripped over toys, and any plush items the child may roll onto and suffocate from. Now that the child is safe from all physical harm, you must realize that all T.V. programs and movies are crammed with violence and therefore emotionally harming the child. Turn off the T.V. and remove the remote from reach. The child will now become agitated. You should attribute this to exhaustion. Take the child to bed and turn off the lights. The child will fuss but rest assured this is normal. Now, you should realize that you are only one person. Should an intruder come you will be overpowered. Invite over a friend (preferably male and trustworthy, like a boyfriend), remember you don’t want to wake the child, so one should be enough. When you realize the parents are on their way home ask your friend to help you pick up and then leave so the parents will have room to park. When the parents finally arrive home, assure them that their child was completely safe and that you would love to come back anytime.
Land of the Free
Nichol Dye
The Dust
Joshua Stockwell

Dust flies up behind us
Red dust
Redder than blood
The dirt roads of nowhere
Traveling from light to dark
Darker than the night before
Before we split
Split in separate directions
Upstate, Downstate,
Different state
Some stayed
Stayed in an old town
Full of red dust
No dreams
Worth dreaming
The dust got to them
Captured them
Ate them alive
Stuck in routines of
Traveling from light to dark
Throwing up dust
Red dust
Swallowing them
Taking them
Keeping them.
Tears
Nicole Montera

Dripping down my face,
oval by oval.
Blurring my vision to see past it.

Clear, salty and wet,
and they are mine,
whether I want them or not.

Weightless, but a burden,
an arrow through the arteries of my heart.

Simple, but disliked
these tears release fright.

Itsy bitsy to the eye
Colossal to the heart.
Bass
David Owens

Communal
Vala Kjarval
Coming back from class,
I stop to watch the geese gathered around the lagoon.
My gaze always upsets them.
Sometimes they hiss,
but most times they stop grazing and waddle away.

There are one or two in particular
Who stand sentinel on the outskirts,
Assessing me with eyes either wide with worry
Cold with militant calculation,
The look of a General
Who has shepherded his flock through the bitter winters
When ice covers the lagoon like the stoic face of a sleeping God
And the wind is cloaked in snow.

I wish they had no compulsion to return my gaze,
So I could slip in unnoticed and spread a beach blanket
on the slope of the hill slanting into the cool water.
But each time I try, the General squawks orders for them to move away
slowly, to avoid panic, but brisk enough so that I am never one of them.
I want to be the General,
Marking the horizon while my friends get drunk and watch
the baseball game.
I want to look into the sky,
Blue with white brushstrokes and wonder what might be
coming down.
Or stand on the shore of Lake Ontario and assess the first
clipper ships
sailing in from the east, and signal to my tribe.
There is no reason to panic, but
we need to be moving now.

The Labored Posts
Nathan Valeska
Overtaken
Brittany McCann
Grandmother
Danielle Walters

I used to walk
barefooted on pavement
with you
always scolding of
stones that could stab at my feet.
Flipping a cartwheel in the soft
damp grass in the brink of dawn
linking my fingers with yours.

As we ambled through the park
listening to the rumble of running children
dashing quickly across the platforms
of the playground
hummingbirds whispering lullabies
that seeped into my impressionable mind.

I’d sit with you on the bench
and you’d beg me to play
with the other kids
in a game of Red Rover.
I never cared for games.
I just wanted to observe you.
The wrinkles around your
eyes and lips
spilling childish secrets
never figuring there’d be a life for me
without you in it.
I don’t want to see the sky
And remember that I used to dream.
Surround me with concrete
Electricity flowing
Like the creeks I once played in
Now polluted.
Low clouds still form shapes
Surrounding rooftops and skyscrapers
With smog-bunnies and dragons
Of imaginations past.
All childhood playmates
Are now grown and gone
Flown to their own dreams
Did they get there? I’ll never know.
The stars
What stars?
Outshone by arrogance and ambition
Hover hidden away till I deserve them again
I turn off the flow.
I wipe away the smog.
I call on a friend.
To splash stargaze stumble succeed stay
And dream again of a world untouched.
A Curse in Paradise
Andrew Schneider

ACT I SCENE I

(DESBIAN walks down an old road in the middle of a desert. It is getting dark and in the distance the sound of coyotes can be heard. DESBIAN begins to run. He sprints toward a large building far off down the road. He arrives at the door, the howl of coyotes becoming louder, and he sees the pack on the horizon as the sun finishes setting. He approaches the front door and sees a star with a name on it.)

DESBIAN

(Reading out loud)

Desbian Pritchard, Improv-Actor… Now that is strange—and with no windows? Well this must be the front entrance then… I suppose it beats spending the night out here, that’s for sure.

(Turning the knob, he pushes open the front door. It is pitch black inside as DESBIAN walks in. Behind him the door slams shut.)

DESBIAN

What the hell? I just walked in—where is the goddamn door knob?! I can’t see a thing.

(He reaches in his pocket and lights a cigarette. Suddenly, huge spotlights on the ceiling above him began to illuminate the huge building. One by one the whole building becomes illuminated and DESBIAN can see the entire open area of the square building. Along the walls, MEN and WOMEN in costume stare motionlessly at the center of the room.)
DESBIAN

(His cigarette drops from his mouth.)

Jesus Christ! What the hell are all of you doing in the dark like this? I hope I haven’t interrupted a performance. (Pauses) Is this a company?

(DESBIAN looks for the door again, but it is gone entirely. In the same moment a platform rises up from an opening beneath the floor in the center of the building that presents a masked DIRECTOR. Next to the DIRECTOR is a table with three piles of paper. DESBIAN watches as the man pulls the table off the platform, and then he steps back on to the platform.)

CAPED MAN

Come now, Company, your scripts have been prepared. (Looking around in disgust) Look alive you mindless drones! You… you simple fools!

(Some of the faces around the room began to take notice.)

Now, I have given some of you new lines to make this day more special and well… (Smiling) unforgettable… that is, at least for some of us.

(The DIRECTOR pauses and smiles at a beautiful WOMAN in a red dress standing against the wall.)

Well then, come get your parts. I suppose these sheets are the only life you will ever have in those worthless skulls of yours!

(The DIRECTOR does not notice DESBIAN. The platform lowers him back into the place beneath the stage. DESBIAN watches as the people spring to life. DANCERS began to dance in unison toward the table from all sides in pirouettes
with streamers attached to their feet; HEAVY SET WOMEN sing Italian opera while marching to the table; KINGS, KNIGHTS, FAIRIES, MASKED MEN and WENCHES swarm about each other toward the table. BEAUTIFUL WOMEN in colorful dresses that fit tightly down to their knees, or that bow out like cones, are wearing all sorts of fancy cocktail hats. They are waltzed in by SLICKED-BACK MEN in white and black suits, some wearing top hats or fedoras, some have ties on with tuxedo shirts, and others have brightly colored bowties. They condense around the table coming and going like bees dancing, taking their scripts and returning to their places in their same fashions.)

DESBIAN

(To himself)

What a fantastic scene. There is something odd about all of this and about that man in the cape… he appears to have some type of spell over all of these actors, but how?

(DESBIAN walks over to A MAN with a mustache wearing a cherry top hat and a tuxedo jacket with long coat tails. The man is mumbling under his breath into the paper that he has put to his nose.)

DESBIAN

I’ve never seen a company with such a… shall I say “artistic” majesty about it… Quite a strange procession this all is, wouldn’t you say so?

(DESBIAN looks expectantly at the MAN, who pays him no mind.)

DESBIAN

(Aggravated) Say Fella… Listen here! I mean… just a minute! (Grabbing hold of a petite arm)
(The MAN’S face stays buried in his script, DESBIAN lets him go, and looks around for someone else to talk to. He spots a WOMAN wearing a blue-plumed dress at the end of a row of line dancers. He steps in front of her.)

DESBIAN

Oh… Hello, my name is Desbian, I am an actor. You see I came through a door (pauses). It was right over there behind that man. (Pointing to the wall)

(The WOMAN still reading her script only seems to realize she has lost pace with her line. She looks up past DESBIAN and continues forward.)

LINE DANCER

Oh dear, this is not in the script. Where has my line gone without me? I need to find my line…

(The LINE DANCER tries to walk right through DESBIAN. He stumbles backward, moving out of the way.)

DESBIAN

The script? I have a funny feeling about these spooks! Why on earth would I be in their script?

(He hurries through the crowd to the table where the director left the SCRIPTS and picks one up.)

DESBIAN (Reading aloud)

Scarlet Davis…

(SCARLET looks about the table as DESBIAN is reading. She is looking for something and DESBIAN walks over to her, holding out her script.)
DESBIAN

(Smiling) You know it says here, today is quite a lovely day for you... uh...Scarlet? I mean congratulations, I’m sure you will make a fine wife.

(DESBIAN pauses to bow, SCARLET watches him cautiously.)

You see I haven’t gotten a word outta’ anyone around here... everyone has their nose buried in one of these.

(DESBIAN offers up the SCRIPT and SCARLET snatches it from his hands. She reads through the first lines then looks back up at DESBIAN.)

SCARLET

Who are you?

DESBIAN

Ha! Why I am an Improv—actor and my name is Desbian Pritchard. I have spent the last seven years traveling the world to find the most unique companies, you know kinda’ like this one. (Looks around and smiles) However, this Company is by far the strangest.

(SCARLET looks back down at the SCRIPT, and then up to DESBIAN.)

SCARLET

No, WHO are you? What is your STAGE name? EVERYONE here is given a stage name, not to mention none of this is in the script.

DESBIAN

Well of course it isn’t. I don’t suppose anyone could have
known I’d lose my way through that door, or the door itself. (Smiling again) Funny thing too, there must be another improv-actor named Desbian Pritchard here; I read his name on the front of the door, I…

(SCARLET more human now, looks all around.)

SCARLET

Go to the wall! And try not to be noticed, and whatever you do, don’t tell anyone that you are not an actor here. (Looking around again) Alright?—and don’t ask me anymore questions until I come to you. No one here can talk to you. They have been here too long. I am the only one here with any sense left. Now hurry before the lights go out.

(She brushes past him, and smiles as her eyes look over once more at a fairly startled, but quick minded DESBIAN. DESBIAN notices a spot on the far right wall. The lights go out before he manages to get there. Stepping on a few people before finding his place, he settles in the darkness.)

DIRECTOR (OFFSTAGE)

Hello, fine vessels!

EVERYONE

(Droning)

Hello, Director.

(All together)

DIRECTOR

Oh wondrous day! What say we let our lively play (Pausing to chuckle) BEGIN!

(Suddenly the stage erupts, red and white spot lights break
through the darkness, showing a speakeasy at center stage. A HEAVY VOICED JAZZ SINGER is on stage with his JAZZ BAND. The dance floor is filled with nicely arranged COUPLES twirling one another about. The BARTENDER is leaning on his elbows as a full bar faces the band, raising their glasses and bobbing their heads. The entire scene is a bustling night club. SCARLET is sitting alone at a glass table in front of the dancers. The DIRECTOR enters from out of a dark corner through a walkway of dancers to SCARLET’S table.)

DIRECTOR

(Proposing an oversized ring)

Sweet Scarlet, delicate and primrose of this, thy paradise, I ask you… Won’t you accept this ring as a token of my everlasting love? And join me forever in marriage and theater.

(From behind, DESBIAN has broken through the crowd of dancing couples. SCARLET sees the shuffle over the DIRECTOR’S shoulder and DESBIAN takes the opportunity to wave hello.)

SCARLET

(As if stirred to realization, her mild calmness slips from her face.)

Oh, yes, your proposal.

DIRECTOR

What did you say!

(The DIRECTOR whips around to see DESBIAN.)

How unexpected. A brave new serf in a freed knight’s armor… Chillingly chivalrous. Well I suppose you are due a
proper ado… Desbian!

(DESBIAN looks around, as a small circle is cleared around him.)

DESBIAN

Well let’s not spoil a party on account of me moseying in. (Chuckles.) How does this place work anyway? Maybe when the lights go off, a hundred stage hands come in to set up whole stages in the blink of an eye. No. That sounds foolish, doesn’t it? Or maybe, you… Well surely your voice is the only one heard… One might be inclined to call you divine… perhaps, but no. You wear emotions too thickly, hmmm…

DIRECTOR

(Laughing in disbelief.)

I’m afraid you are very unaware. Emotion is so hard to come by these days Yours will certainly be sour. Detain that man!

(DESBIAN is taken away and the DIRECTOR returns to face SCARLET who hopelessly looks on to DESBIAN.)

I had not wished to write you. I wanted to save you as long as I could! I have been so lonely and all of these faces are blank and gone, I have only myself and what is left of you.

SCARLET

There is no love here, only the want and the wanted! I see now, there is no other way. Men of earth will never find the colors to create a heart, but they will never stop trying, and so this is our curse.

(END SCENE)
ACT II SCENE I

(One spotlight is on DESBIAN, surrounded by actors. Three actors break in from the crowd and grab DESBIAN from behind. They overcome him and drag him away from the DIRECTOR. Thick cables come from the ceiling. They tie his head, arms, and feet, rendering him unable to move his body. The actors begin to walk away from him and return to the wall before DESBIAN calls upon his aggressors.)

DESBIAN

You fucking PUPPETS! Look at me! (Struggling) You, sir, what is your name?

ODDYSEUS

(Spits.)

Bottom, eh you know, Pyramus and Thisby?

DESBIAN

Wrong. You are the mighty Odysseus, and you have just returned to your castle in Ithaca ready to reclaim your home from wicked suitors hungry for your wife. That man there is the head of them all. How shall we handle him?

(As he points across the stage, another spotlight shows the DIRECTOR, who holds SCARLET by her arm as he fixes her body to strings that fall from the ceiling. She is in tears as the DIRECTOR drops to his knees on a blank stage. They cannot be heard, but her head shakes from side to side in protest. Both scenes stay lit and all else is in blackness.)

ODDYSEUS

He who robbed me of my wealth, stayed well-beyond his
welcome, and made force his entry upon my wife?... HA! He shall be mine to punish!

(ODYSSEUS retrieves his sword and armor and joins Desbian.)

DESBIAN

Yes, he must be yours to punish, but please won’t you cut me free of these strings, so I may help you?

ODDYSEUS

You are a friend of the Greeks. I will be happy to free you and gain your alliance in the final feat of my journey, and to help me re-claim my home.

(ODDYSEUS cuts the strings with his sword. DESBIAN turns to other actors around him.)

DESBIAN

And you sir, who are you?

TRISTAN

I am the puppeteer. Here is my beloved Veronica.

DESBIAN

No Sir, she is the beautiful Isolde and you are the mighty and brave Tristan! That cruel man there (pointing to the DIRECTOR) is the King who seeks to stand between your most spiritual bond. Now, gather yourselves and join me!

(TRISTAN and ISOLDE gather weapons and armor that are placed before them.)
DESBIAN

And you Haggard, what might you be?

CALIBAN

Why I’m a Court Jester, cast away because I could not dance.

DESBIAN

Ah, what a beautiful Caliban you will make then. Yes, and this will be your deserved revenge against him, your Prospero.

(Turns around and points to the DIRECTOR)

(The DIRECTOR grows more violent, pulling SCARLET by her hair and raising her off her feet, he points at DESBIAN and sees the new actors as they slowly transcend one another into a vengeful army. SCARLET cries in contempt as she is suspended by strings above the stage. The DIRECTOR moves away from DESBIAN and his parade of actors, running up stairs that rise up from the stage before him.)

DESBIAN

Quickly! We must stop our enemy while we are still free of his fantasy! (Turning to SCARLET) Scarlet do not fear, the Director has lost his power over these freed actors. We will save you!

TRISTAN

But what are our parts?

DESBIAN

Your parts will be lived in unpredictability, and each deci-
sion is your own. You LIVE your character. It is life in play… An unhinged performance of the names you now bear… become it! Break the cuffs of your draw-strings, and call upon your parties… Today we are awake, NOW WE CUT OUR STRINGS!

(Actors from all around begin to break mold, new characters form, and an army is soon covering the stage. High above, the DIRECTOR stands on a huge plateau; from his mask down he wears the armor of a Samurai.)

DIRECTOR

So it would appear you have spoiled my beautiful fantasy… Yet these are MY walls, and you are not the first actor to dare challenge my mighty will! HAHA, yes, now look into the darkness and feel the terrifying creatures that even now shake the ground of this battle field! You see here, what is not puppet is everything else, and these are my beasts!

(The stage has become an open grassy field and DESBIAN stands in front of his acting army. Violent strikes of thunder and lightning crack from out of black clouds. Behind the DIRECTOR, a huge figure can be seen in the darkness. Great rumbles grow louder as a giant figure approaches.)

DIRECTOR

(Shouting down)

Here is your Cyclops; he is for your Odysseus from Ithaca!

(The giant CYCLOPS is in plain sight and his mighty head bends forward to unleash a horrible roar towards DESBIAN and his men. The ARMY begins to fidget, and DESBIAN turns his attention to ODYSSEUS and his men.)

DESBIAN
Odysseus, you must take him, he is for you... You mustn’t fear this battle. You are mightier, more frightening, and all of Greece declares you as its humble hero! Go now, strike swiftly, BLIND HIM, and he will fall to you.

ODYSSEUS

Grecian swordsmen follow me into battle against this great titan! Archers ready your bows for his mighty eye, and rain down upon this giant a dark cloud of your arrows! (Raising his sword) Fight for Ithaca!

(ODYSSEUS and his men attack. Cries can be heard from the CYCLOPS as arrows pierce his eye and send his mighty arms into violent thrashes. In a final rampage the CYCLOPS blindly swings his mighty fist into the plateau holding up the DIRECTOR. The entire structure crashes down. The CYCLOPS sits motionless as the last of his tired breath seeps from his collapsed corpse. DESBIAN watches as the DIRECTOR stumbles up from the debris.)

DIRECTOR

(Wounded and enraged.)

Here is your army! My King of Marke, and his men of Cornwall—come! Storm this field!

(From out of the darkness hundreds of men barrel across the field towards DESBIAN and his men.)

DESBIAN

Grecians! Quick, hold your shields at the front lines. You, archers, rain down your arrows.

GRECIANS

Yes sir!
DESBIAN

Tristan!

TRISTAN

Sir?

DESBIAN

King Marke is yours alone. You must take him. He is coming for you, to kill you. For all the Tristans that have died before you and for your love, claim him and mount his head atop your sword. Today, we shall retell your story, and you shall live to see it!

TRISTAN

I will return bearing his blood!

(TRISTAN breaks into a sprint for KING MARKE who is galloping in front of his army on his horse. In seconds, TRISTAN jumps at the horsed man and lunges his sword into the chest of the king. The horse and two men are spun out of control, and fall as the army approaching overruns the two men. A black cloud of arrows smothers hundreds of the KING’S ARMY and the few that make it to the GRECIAN SHIELDSMAN are met with swords until all that remains are defeated corpses of KING MARKE’S ARMY.)

DESBIAN

Tristian! Call out to us if you are still alive! (Pauses) Ahh! Your death will not be forgotten!

(All is quiet on the field and in the distance the DIRECTOR can be seen, unable to move from the injuries of his fall.)
DESBIAN

You coward! Don’t you see? We are freed puppets! You can control spirit and will no more—now face us!

DIRECTOR

(Laughing hysterically)

You are no different than me! You have the control now, just as I did when I took it from the DIRECTOR before me! You will never leave here, no one ever does. HAHA, they’re can only be one DIRECTOR and now you will be him!

(DESBIAN watches in horror, as the strings holding SCARLET lower her body, her face is in tears. Her feet reach the floor as the great field fades and the stage is an empty building again. She is released and runs through DESBIAN’S soldiers to meet him.)

SCARLET

It is true Desbian, it is all true! None of us can leave. I told you to hide yourself—I wanted you to be mine and mine only. Now I am yours and everyone will forget themselves. They will be whatever you want them to be. You will forget what friendship, love, and compassion are like. You will be our Director and soon you will tie us all to strings. Tomorrow I will not know you.

DESBIAN

No, I won’t! I won’t be him! I refuse! I am DESBIAN PRITCHARD, I am DESBIAN, I AM DESBIAN!

(DESBIAN falls to his knees, his hands hold up his shoulders. Before him a MASK appears. He looks up and
the DIRECTOR has gone. SCARLET watches in tears as DESBIAN reaches for the mask. His hand holds its face and he draws it from the grass. Climbing from his knees he places it on his face. He turns to face his army, and his mighty arms rise above his head.)

ARMY AND OTHERS

DIRECTOR! DIRECTOR! DIRECTOR!

(Lights out.)

(END)
The Girl Inside of Me
Heather Cook

Sometimes I run in the wrong direction.
I’m the cause of my own destruction,
But that’s just the girl inside of me.
Most of the time,
I’m a mess.

My life is just one big test
That I fail every now and then.
At times I suffer from melancholy,
But I don’t let that define me.

I can’t always wear a smile,
I’ve walked too many lonely miles,
But that’s just the girl inside of me.

I don’t wear a lot of makeup,
And I don’t have designer clothes.
At times I don’t act much like a girl.
I’m more comfortable in jeans and boots,

I don’t like to wear a dress,
And I’ve never been to a tanning booth.

Every now and then I like to get a little dirty,
And some say that I’m not pretty,
But that’s just the girl inside of me.
I’m not that hard to understand.
I don’t want a boy,
I want a man,
Someone that will take me as I am,
And never expect me to change.
I can be difficult,
And hard to love,
But there’s something worth keeping here.
I promise you I’m worth it.
You’ll find it in the girl inside of me.

Undertones
Vala Kjarval
Haiku 10
Anthony DiGennaro

Donkey Elephant
controlled by the same farmer
divide and conquer

Wave of Mutilation
James Leach
CHARACTERS

SHAY O’DEL - Early thirties. Noble and confident. Returns home, Fordel, to an invasion and is captured. Prisoner of King. Married to Bielza O’Del.

KING - Mid-sixties. Invading the northern territories in order to make it the new home of his people.

BIELZA O’DEL - Late twenties. Strong willed and intelligent. Married to Shay O’Del and returns with him to Fordel. Tries and fails to save him before he is taken. Appears as a starvation induced hallucination.

COMMANDER TAOL - Upper teens. Captured Shay O’Del. Is commander of his troop after Shay O’Del kills his Chieftain.

BOLL - A younger Cheiftain, his land was captured by the King after his Chief was killed early on in the King’s retreat. An ally of necessity, he does not serve the King happily.

TULKAS - Of the same generation as the King he is a general who serves almost too loyalty. Milder in manner than the King and Boll he often steps between the two in times of dispute.

SETTING

Play takes place in a large tent with a map table set in the middle with small figurines marking troop movement. The tent is sparsely decorated, showing signs of nobility but little in the way of comfort.
TIME
Scene 1 is in the evening and the tent is lit by lanterns and a central fire. Scene 2 is during the day and the tent is well lit from the outside through the canvas.

ACT I

Scene 1  Within the tent.  Now.
Scene 2  Still in the tent.  5 days later
ACT I SCENE 1

(KING stands over a large table with a map in the middle, BOLL and TULKAS read off reports while KING adjusts pieces on the map. COMMANDER TAOL enters with an ornate blade in hand)

COMMANDER TAOL

(Saluting)
Commander Taol, m’Lord, returning from the For’Del campaign.

KING

That was fast. Why isn’t Hull reporting personally?

COMMANDER TAOL

The attack was a failure, Lord, Hull was killed during the retreat.

KING

Failed? How is it that fool fails when others are victorious?

COMMANDER TAOL

The town was so small Hull ordered a direct attack in the night, but more were capable of fighting than we first guessed.

BOLL

More than guessed? How hard can it be to pick out a clan’s warriors?
COMMANDER TAOL

They were all warriors, sir; man, woman and child alike.

TULKAS

They didn’t surrender after seeing the Light’s power?

COMMANDER TAOL

At first it seemed they had but they countered just before
dawn and took the light first, after that Hull ordered the
retreat.

TULKAS

And they pursued after claiming victory?

COMMANDER TAOL

Only a few pursued, Hull took the Chief’s wife. We were
laden with our wounded and unable to outrun the few that
gave chase caught us at the valley’s lake. During a feint
one man crept into our camp and retrieved the woman. Hull
remained near his tent and was slain.

BOLL

Hull stayed back while his soldiers fought?

(Turning towards the KING as he says.)

That is a trait far too common in this army.

COMMANDER TAOL

If he hadn’t we wouldn’t have caught the sneak who killed
him.
TULKAS

If he hadn’t we would be short a woman and and still have a general.

KING

(KING takes the blade from TAOL and unsheathes it.)

You caught him? Has he survived the trip?

COMMANDER TAOL

Yes, m’Lord. Hasn’t said a damn word the entire way, though.

KING

Well, bring him here.

(TAOL turns and exits)

BOLL

The priorities of this campaign have gone too far off course, if we are caught between the mountains and the sea we shall be conquered in full.

KING

Your tongue is far too loose, remember who killed your Chief, Boll.

BOLL

AYE! With an arrow. If the death machines weren’t so close behind you would not have found me so complacent.
KING
(Steps toward BOLL with fists clenched)
You dare speak so to me?

TULKAS
(Steps between them but looks at the KING)
Boll is right, we need to move forward or this quarrel will be the least of our problems.

KING
I will not tolerate this insubordination.

(The tent door reopens and, pushed by TAOL, SHAY staggers in with hands bound behind his back.)

KING
(Still angry he steps to SHAY)
And who are you that thinks he may stand before me?

SHAY O’DEL

(SHAY looks the KING in the eyes, standing to his full height.)
I am Shay O’Del, emissary of For’Del. I have come to demand the reasons for these transgressions against my people.

BOLL

100
Come...?

TULKAS

Demand...?

SHAY O’DEL

(Turning his head to the two generals)

I’m addressing the one with the crown, not you.

(Turns back to the KING meeting his eyes)

So have out with it.

KING

(Temper rising)

You come before me bound and defeated and presume to demand?

SHAY O’DEL

Bound I may be but my people are not defeated, we have pushed you out once and next time we won’t be taken by surprise.

(Motioning to nearby chairs)

And are not ambassadors usually given some hospitality?

KING

I have had enough haughtiness this day, your people stand in the way of my expansion. Surrender or die.
SHAY O’DEL

Expansion...?

(SHAY looks around at the two generals)

...No, not with this bunch. Your men are hardly fed. You are keeping the bulk of your army together and sending out small attack parties. No, you are here in desperation, not in glory.

KING

Desperate! Ha!

SHAY O’DEL

(SHAY looks over at the map table, taking it in before the KING steps between SHAY and the table)

Who are you running from?

KING

Nobody.

SHAY O’DEL

And I’m the Queen of Fey. You are making straight for the mountains, only taking towns that lie in your way. No, if you simply wanted more land then the northern plains would suit you better. Your plan ends at For’Del, which you have now discovered is easily defended. You need the mountains between you and the North, ergo, you are being chased

KING
(KING is silent a moment, breathing deeply)

I have given you the only answer you need and now I will have answers of my own. These mountains are maze-like, what are the best ways about it?

SHAY O’DEL

Ha! And might I also place my home on a silver plater for you? No, you may enjoy the maze and I will laugh at your failings. If you don’t wish to talk when you have the chance then you are a fool.

KING

Hmmph.

(Turning to TAOL)

Bind him to a tree outside and ensure he never sleeps and feed him not a bite. Have him beaten every once in a while as well. Tomorrow he shall have the honor of marching at our head.

(Back to SHAY)

After a few days of this we shall see how tight yor lips remain.

(SHAY gets up and TAOL pushes towards the exit, at the door SHAY turns back to the KING and shakes his head. They exit, scene ends)
ACT I SCENE 2

(Gunshots can be heard in the distance frequently but not rapidly. King stands over the map table, reads reports, moves a few pieces before throwing the whole thing over. TULKAS steps back casually dodging a few pieces. TAOL, battle weary with bloodstains limps in and stands by the entrance.)

KING

(Shouting at TAOL)

How is this happening?

COMMANDER TAOL

(Saluting)

M’Lord, they fire iron from afar, piercing even the thickest mail. And they use the winding paths through the trees and even go into the caves to stay out of the Light’s range.

KING

Then leave the blasted things behind, we fought for centuries without them. Follow them into the cave and fight man to man.

COMMANDER TAOL

We have tried but our forces are bottlenecked and few of them hold back our many.

TULKAS

There are also more than initially reported, other villages must have come to their aid.
KING

(Shouting)

Bring me the Ambassador.

(TAOL exits, the KING paces back and forth. A moment passes and SHAY, hands bound before him, is pushed into the tent and falls to the floor. SHAY is battered and bruised, his ragged clothes hang looser than before. TAOL follows as SHAY pushes himself up to his feet.)

Tell me how to counter this, NOW!

(SHAY is sways where he stands, his gaze shifts from the KING to the remains of venison over the fire)

You will get nothing until you speak. All you have to do is tell me from where they are coming, where do the cave routes go?

(BIELZA enters from stage right and walks towards SHAY whose gaze becomes fixed on her. No others notice her appearance)

BIELZA O’DEL

You are wasting away, lover, how much longer will you remain stubborn?

SHAY O’DEL

Until Kale is victorious...

KING

What...?
(BIELZA places her hand on his cheek and SHAY swoons but recovers with a shake of his head and turns back to the KING)

SHAY O’DEL

Feast while my brother fights? No.

BIELZA O’DEL

(Rolling her eyes)

That’s what I figured. You could at least mislead them, no? Give some false info, that would get you fed and help Kale

(SHAY looks back at BIELZA)

SHAY O’DEL

You know I’m no good at lying.

KING

(Backhands SHAY with a gauntleted fist knocking hm to the floor)

AHHHH! Curse you.

BIELZA O’DEL

(Catching SHAY as he falls to the floor)

You could at least try or are you so willing to sacrifice the rest of you life just to die an honest man?

(Shay reaches a hand up to BIELZA and forces a smile.)

Of course you are.
TULKAS

(To the KING)

You have driven him mad, you cannot hope to get anything of value from him now.

(SHAY, slower and more strained, forces himself up again to look the KING in the eye. He opens his mouth wide trying to loosen his jaw. At that moment BOLL hurries into the tent)

BOLL

We have tarried here too long. They have taken the harbor and move south. Only one messenger made it out to send word.

KING

(Pause)

They move like the locust.

SHAY O’DEL

(Shay raises an eyebrow)

Would that be Nobody chasing you to the mountains?

KING

And what’s going to stop them coming after your people?

SHAY O’DEL

Conveniently enough,

(Sitting down in a chair)

You are.
BIELZA O’DEL

That’s not very noble of you dear.

SHAY O’DEL

(Looking at BIELZA)

I’m not in a very noble mood.

BOLL

Who the hell is he talking to?

TULKAS

Our King has driven the man mad with starvation and now he sees spirits.

KING

Enough!

(Shouting at SHAY)

They tore through our country in less than a fortnight. Once done with us they will take you.

SHAY O’DEL

Will they? We’ve stopped you, haven’t we?

(SHAY begins slumping down, head resting on his chest, and eyes drifting shut.)

I’m not too...

(Yawns)

...concerned.
KING

What will it take for you to listen, dammit?

SHAY O’DEL

Hmmm...

(Opening his eyes)

A decent nights sleep, maybe? A flank of that deer would go a long way, too... Oh, and maybe for you to stop killing my family and friends.

KING

(Pause)

So be it.

(Then to TULKAS.)

Send messengers to all our captains, tell the to stop all skirmishes immediately.

TULKAS

(Beat)

Yes, my Lord.

(TULKAS salutes and turns and exits motioning for TAOL to follow. SHAY falls sleep, BIELZA kisses his forehead and walks off stage. Lights raise after a moment. TULKAS re-enters)
All the fighting has stopped.

(KING kicks SHAY awake)

SHAY O’DEL

Biel...? Oh. Now what do you want?

KING

The invasion of the Southlands has ended. Now, we must turn our attention north.

SHAY O’DEL

We? Not yet.

KING

We don’t have time for this.

SHAY O’DEL

You don’t have the time, and I won’t help you until we have some guarantee of peace when this is all done.

KING

We don’t have time to negotiate a treaty!

SHAY O’DEL

Why? The conditions are simple: you will relinquish your crown and live under the mountain law set forth by those you have, and would have, killed.
KING

I will not accept those terms.

BOLL

But I will, he will no longer rule,

(Turning to the KING)

Willingly or not.

KING

Tulkas, kill this traitor!

(TULKAS makes no move and stands in thought)

You too?

TULKAS

You... Have not been a capable King.

KING

Traitors, the both of you.

(Shouting as he draws a dagger)

Toal, aid me!

(BOLL draws his sword and steps toward him. KING throws the dagger which hits BOLL in the shoulder and he drops his sword. BOLL drops to a knee clutching the wound. SHAY springs forward, grabs BOLL’s blade and brings it down on the KING’s collar before he has a chance to draw his own sword. KING falls motionless. SHAY looks the other men in
the eyes clutching the bloodsoaked sword. TAOL enters in a hurry then stops when he sees SHAY standing over the KING’s body.)

COMMANDER TAOL

So... An agreement’s been reached, then?

(Blackout.)
I’ve Got an Egg Addiction

Emily Tran
Dead but vibrant colored leaves blanketed the ground while some scurried in front of me, rustling in the autumn breeze. As I lumbered through the unkempt grass I stared intently at where I was stepping in order to keep my mind off of the creepy and dilapidated buildings.

After a few minutes of navigating through the overgrown field, I looked up and saw the one we were looking for. It loomed over me; a magnificent 13-story relic of an abandoned insane asylum. Its broken windows and daunting gothic architecture stood as a testament to the forgotten ones who once were housed here. The dark clouds behind it stirred menacingly, which heightened my anxiety of breaking into Building 93.

Since it closed its doors in 1996, the Kings Park Psychiatric Center had been used for many purposes: as shelter for the homeless during cold winter months, as a safe haven for local druggies, and as a place to showcase amateur graffiti. But for those who went to high school on Long Island, breaking into the Kings Park Psychiatric Center was, in essence, a rite of passage. The objective was to go as far as one could into any one of the many buildings. The brave explorer had to try not to get lost in the indistinguishable hallways and patient rooms and then make it out unscathed. My good friend Kate was incredibly enthused about trespassing into the haunted hospital; I did not, however, share the same feeling.

Kate’s main objective that afternoon was to take pictures and document everything she saw in a way that was never before seen by others. She loved her photo class she was taking in school and kept trying to get recognition from her teacher. These pictures were sure to grab his attention.

Slung over her left shoulder was her tattered and worn Jansport backpack. In it we packed water bottles, two handkerchiefs, a flashlight, and her high-tech camera. Her long, auburn hair was tied back into a loose bun to secure it away from her face. She had on old, ripped jeans and a plaid shirt--clothes she didn't care if they got ruined while on our mission.

The psych center had been taken over by the state
after it shut down. During its heyday it used to be a self-sustaining city, complete with a power plant, firehouse, piggery, dairy and horse barn, bowling alley, and even its own railroad. But because of the asbestos and lead that the buildings contained, it would cost the state several billion dollars to tear down the buildings. So every door and window is boarded up with plywood and the grounds are patrolled by local police.

As we skulked our way closer to the building, careful not to be seen, all the horror stories I heard as a child quickly crept into mind. A classmate in grade school once told me he broke into one of the decaying doctor’s houses and a ghost-dog had chased him down the stairs and out through the first story broken window. I told him he was full of it.

Another time my Social Studies teacher told us he’d broken into Building 93 on Halloween with a few of his friends. They had gone all the way to the eleventh floor, and when they walked into one of the rooms, they heard a faint whisper of a female’s voice before the door slammed shut. No matter how much they pulled, the door wouldn’t budge. They had to call for the fire department to rescue them, and they got charged with trespassing. Obviously, Mr. Douglass had made this up to scare us away from going inside any of the buildings.

Though I didn’t want to believe in ghosts, these stories suddenly seemed to carry some veracity.

We walked up to the chain-linked fence that was meant to safeguard the brick building from hooligans such as us. As we searched for an easy entranceway, I noticed the vines attached to the building. They snaked their way toward the top and had entered through the broken windows on the lower floors, slowly taking 93 as its prisoner.

Kate finally spotted a hole underneath the fence dug by previous intruders. The ground was still wet from yesterday’s rain so the hole had turned into a muddy mess. The only way past the fence was to army-crawl through the cold, wet ground.

“Here, hold this for a second.” She handed me the backpack and volunteered herself to go first. She rolled up her sleeves to her elbow and laid herself on the ground. The hole was awfully shallow so she used her legs to propel the rest of her body forward. Kate wiggled her way under the
fence and stood up on the other side. She tried to brush herself off but the mud was already set into her jeans and caked onto her flannel as well. I handed her the backpack under the fence and got through the hole following the same method she used and ended up just as filthy.

The sun started to set behind the building; the day was ending earlier than I’d gotten used to during the long summer days. I felt as though I was about to walk into some kind of horror movie, the kind where even the protagonist doesn’t escape at the end. I think Kate started to think some of the same thoughts, because we had both been walking slowly in complete silence.

“That guy in class told me that the open window is somewhere in the back of the building on the south side,” Kate whispered.

“So why are you whispering? We’re outside.”

“I don’t know. I’m nervous, I guess.”

The window was easy to find but difficult to maneuver through. Kate had to hoist me up while I cautiously avoided the shards of broken glass laying in the window opening. Once I made it in I swept away some of the glass so it was easier for her to get in. She was significantly taller than I, so she didn’t need much help. Kate kneeled down and opened the pack and started toying with her camera. This place was supposedly lousy with asbestos so I kneeled down with her and grabbed one of the bandanas to protect my lungs. I wasn’t too sure if a bandana would really do anything, but it made me feel safer.

We began to walk down a dark hallway. The paint on the walls had flaked off and littered every inch of the floor. The overhead lights were all broken and the glass had scattered and mixed in with the paint chippings. Every step we took created a loud, crunching sound, breaking the strange and eerie silence.

I stayed behind Kate as she walked down the long, dark hallway, taking pictures of whatever she found interesting. It seemed that everything was worthy of documenting. She took pictures of the room with the single chair facing the bare wall. Then we walked down to the next room; it was a bathroom. The mirrors were cracked and the ceramic sinks were in pieces lying about the tiled floor. She took pictures of that, too.
She took picture after picture until I finally got tired of observing from behind. So when she wandered into the next patient room I kept walking and turned down into a different hallway. There were no windows down this hallway to let in any sunlight. I took off the backpack and fished around for the flashlight then continued forward warily, shining the light a couple of feet ahead of me. At the end of the hall, it opened up into what was once a recreation center. This room was a real mess. There were wooden chairs thrown around everywhere. Some of the pipes that used to be attached to the ceiling were lying upon the dust-covered dining tables.

I took a few steps into the room then noticed the ground wasn’t crunching under my feet anymore. I shined the light directly down and saw I was stepping on some type of clothing. I looked closer and realized it was actually a straight jacket. I followed the restraints of the jacket with the light to where they were resting upon a ledge of a gurney. I started taking steps back away from the unsettling image. It was like the hospital had closed over night without any warning. All the items they left behind began to conjure up vivid imagery of what it had been like to be a patient here.

I noticed that this was the first room I saw where the paint hadn’t peeled off onto the floor. It was still intact. In fact, there was a large mural that perhaps one of the patients had painted. It showed a group of people watching two old men playing a game of chess and next to it was an older woman with her white hair tied into a bun, sitting in a chair and crocheting. A man in a grey and white uniform held up a set of keys to a locked door. I wondered if that was supposed to represent a particular guard who had worked here—or all of them.

I realized I had spent too long investigating the room and I hadn’t told Kate where I was going. It was probably time I head back to find her. I walked down the long dark corridors to where we had split up. I checked all the surrounding rooms of where I left her, but she wasn’t there. I figured she probably ventured on further.

“Kate!” I called out.
No response.
I walked down another hallway but it seemed the further I proceeded alone in those dark decaying tunnels of
Building 93, the more my imagination started playing tricks on me. I kept thinking I saw shadows moving next to me, but when I redirected the flashlight, there was nothing.

I walked faster as panic started to sink in. The end of the hall led to a giant room filled with beds and dressers. Some of the dresser drawers were pulled out and had clothing still folded in them. One of the beds near the window had weeds sprawled over it.

I turned around, unsure of where to go. Maybe she had gone upstairs. I began to search for the staircase, and my pace picked up to a hurried jog. I felt a drop of sweat hit my wrist. I wiped my face with my sleeve and it drenched the cloth. The light of my flashlight bounced from floor to ceiling as I kept running the halls.

“Kate! If you can hear me, answer me!”

I kicked something with my foot as I was running. It made a squeak and I saw an abnormally sized rat scamper down the hall and into the nearest patient room. I let out a girly-like scream and quickly went back to running down the hallways yelling for Kate. I ran up and down every hallway to the point where I didn’t know where I was. I finally stopped to catch my breath and pull myself together.

I leaned my back against the closest wall and slid to the ground. I laid the flashlight on the floor in front of me so I could open the backpack and grab one of the water bottles that we had packed. I twisted the cap open and brought my head back, then hovered the bottle close to my lips as most of it poured into my mouth and the rest trickled down my shirt. I could feel my cracked lips when I licked the water off of them; they were in desperate need of some lip balm. That was when I heard something moving. It sounded like footsteps around the corner.

“What happened to you?!” Kate suddenly exclaimed. She ran over to where I was sitting on the ground and picked up the light. “You took the flashlight before it got dark. I’ve been walking alone in the pitch black. This place is creepy as shit. We need to leave.” She looked just as frightened as I felt.

“Yeah, you have no idea.” I got to my feet and with one motion I fastened the pack and swung it over my shoulders. “Let’s go.”

“Follow me; I think I know where the window is.”
I followed her to the window. I jumped out first and waited below for her to toss the bag to me. She jumped out and we both ran blindly in the darkness. After we crawled through the muddy hole under the fence we kept running toward where we had parked the car. I looked back at the ominous building behind us and I immediately stopped running.

On one of the top floors I saw what seemed to be a silhouette of a man standing in the window, looking down at us from above. Stunned by what I saw, I grabbed Kate’s arm.

“Look! Up top--in the window!” I cried. I looked at her to make sure she stopped to look at where I was pointing. But it was gone when I looked back. “There was a figure in that window. I saw it but it’s gone. There was someone up there,” I claimed. As I tried convincing her of what I had seen, I heard what I was saying and couldn’t believe it myself.

“You’re just paranoid, Jess,” she told me dismissively. “We were in there for too long; I still feel on edge too. Come on, let’s go back home.”

She tugged on my wrist to turn around and follow her back to the car. We continued running down the field of grass and back to the deserted parking lot where we left her car.

Kate turned the engine on and we both sat there in the dark waiting for the heat to start. She took out her camera to review some of her shots while I wrestled with some of the unnerving images in my mind.

I wondered what the person who wore that straightjacket had done to be put into it. Thousands of mentally ill all housed in one place. There were probably many that were violent toward others. I remember hearing stories of patients killing other patients and the staff would cover it up as accidental deaths. I could imagine screams echoing through the corridors night and day. It made me feel sorry for those who had lived here.

Then my mind went back to the silhouette in the window. There was something about it that made me believe it wasn’t just some homeless man. And it certainly wasn’t a figment of my imagination like Kate had told me. I believed it was a ghost. Just one of the many patients that died in the Kings Park Psychiatric Center and never left.
Night Alone
Nathan Valeska
A Goodbye Letter
Briana Larocca

We were conceived on August 5, 1966
The two of us; twins; a most infamous pair.
We would be the symbol of New York,
Glitzy, sharp and shiny, we stood out.

As always, one twin must be older.
That was North.
Born in 1968
He made history

I wasn’t far behind.
Born in 1969, South Tower
Grew 1,362 feet tall in 2 years
A giant by most standards.

People came from all over the world
To take pictures with us.
We stood proud for them.
We were iconic.

We endured all of the elements,
Every year proving to be strong
Yes, so strong and reliable.
Who knew we had a breaking point?

25 years into our lives we were tested.
An attack on my brother North
Almost brought us down.
We held out, we were strong.

We spent 8 years housing 110 floors
We were sold and bought
Worth 3.2 Billion dollars
But only for a short while.
North was hit first.
Floors 93-99 were gone.  
Dust, glass, and people filled the air  
He was hurt, and going down.

I should have said it then.  
I loved you North.  
My only brother, my twin  
Always by my side

I saw you crumbling,  
Crying, shaking, and bleeding  
The blood of hundreds.  
We weren’t strong enough.

I could not stand any longer,  
I too was struck.

I crumbled,  
Cried, shook, and bled  
The blood of hundreds.  
I wasn’t strong enough.

I begged and pleaded,  
Watched you burst  
Into a fit of flames  
Goodbye my brother.

We were conceived on August 5, 1966  
We died on September 11, 2001  
Please don’t ever forget us.
I Carry Your Heart
Rebecca Hess
Sitting at the counter in that Jacksonville diner, Rob arched his back, slumped it back down, then rolled his neck around as several hollow pops sounded from it. His mouth tasted like stale coffee, but he didn’t mind that. If he had a more social existence, he might be more concerned how that stale coffee smelled coming from his prickly face, but instead he traveled highways and interstates delivering boxes filled with boxes in his Peterbilt truck. Every now and then a waitress would give a lonely sigh and ask him if he got tired alone out on the road. She would only ask this when the diner was quiet and close to empty. He always replied the same way.

“I’d rather be out on the road than stuck in a cage.”

It was at this particular Jacksonville diner where he knew he had to stop. Rob always tried to hunker down into his trips and not stop unless his bladder was about ready to burst, or his eyes were just a bit too heavy, or his stomach was grumbling curse words. For some reason, though, Jacksonville always seemed to have its lights shining extra bright for him, regardless that the night was dark and thick like a canvas tent. And so he stopped.

When the waitress took away a syrupy plate from him, he sucked the tip of his thumb and pointer finger. He liked how they always tasted like maple syrup and bacon after eating this kind of a diner meal. He wrapped up a ten dollar bill in the receipt and patiently sat, not too concerned with when the change would come back, or even if the change was correct. For some reason, he was at ease and knew it was okay to stay at this diner just a little longer than usual.

Two headlights directed themselves into the gravel parking lot. From the scarce reflection of the lights, he could see the car was barely running and had seen better days. He thought to himself, who hadn’t seen better days? But
tonight was an okay night. Better days or not, tonight was an okay night.

He turned back to his coffee and inhaled the last, light brown drops. The sugar that never fully dissolved into the coffee fell slowly to the top of the cup and into his mouth. As he put the cup back down, the same soothing noise of a diner cup clunking gently on the diner counter filled his ears. The same, yet always slightly different jingle of the bells on the front door rustled in his head. He turned slowly and saw a young woman with her head down, not sad at all but focused on something. She was wearing a dirty pair of jeans that had a worn outline of a thick wallet in the back right pocket, but without a wallet. She wore a brown leather belt that held the heavy pair of jeans up on her thin frame, and a black t-shirt that was worn to gray on the seams. The front of the t-shirt said something. Black Sabbath or maybe Rolling Stones. There was a huge difference between the two, he thought to himself, but it really didn’t matter to him. Out from the bottom of the shirt popped out a tan belly, firm and round. A woman of her size with a belly like that had to have been holding a baby somewhere deep inside. He smiled on the inside. The concept of “mother” was something he always found a lot of beauty in.

“What are you looking at?” she said as her hands furiously weaved a perfectly messy ponytail on the top of her head.

He thought, how did you do that? But instead of speaking, he pretending there was more coffee in his cup and took another sip. His heart beat once, extra hard, and then went back to normal, as though to warn him that this was important.

She threw her car keys up on the counter as she pulled a money clip out of her deep front pocket and gave the waitress an order. Something about orange juice, a pack of Tums, and toast that was extra burnt. All Rob noticed was her mess of a key chain. On it was a car key, and a
few anonymous keys hooked onto a key chain, along with a wooden girl whittled out of wood with tiny legs and a fluffy dress. One of the arms looked like it had been knocked off and the other was glued back on. A hole was screwed into the hair of the wooden figurine where it connected to the rest of the key chain.

The waitress clinked a glass of frothy orange juice down in front of her, along with a pack of Tums that the young woman peeled open. She tossed a few in her mouth like they were candy, drank about half of the glass of orange juice, slammed it down, sighed, and looked back at Rob. She leaned her head forward, raised her eyebrows, smacked her tongue and said, “Hi?”

“Where did you get that wooden figurine?” He hadn’t asked anyone something this personal in a long time.

She just stared at him. With her mouth somewhat open, she licked the leftover Tums from the inside of her cheeks and froze that way in thought for a moment. She sat up. She stared at him again.

“Why?” She said, skeptical.

He smiled at her just a little. Her skepticism turned into a smile. He could see most of her teeth. One of them was chipped just a little in the back. It was kind of cute.

“No freaking way,” she said. Her eyes squinted until they were hardly there. “Rob. Rob?”

She laughed, and hid her face, slightly bashful. He smiled back at her.

“Holy smokes, you look just like you, but different. You’ve got hair on your face. When did that happen? Oh, god. When was the last time I saw you?”

He could feel his face was bright red. He tilted his head down just a bit.

“Years. A lot of years. Where have you been?”

“Around the world and back again. Wow. God, look at you. What are you doing in Jacksonville?”

“I’m a truck driver. Just passing through. What about
“I’m getting the hell out of Florida. Heading back up to Philly. Or wherever. I just got to get myself out of here.”

She sat there with her orange juice, talking and sucking the froth from her lips. She spoke about how her mom had given her an ultimatum. Her mom knew a good guy that would be “good for her” and that she could finally settle down with. She explained how she knew better than what her mom was offering. She explained that this boy, an apparent Southern gentlemen, turned out to be the kind of guy she had tried to avoid, and oddly enough, somehow was a lot like her daddy.

She paused and it seemed like she was counting slowly to ten inside of herself. Then, staring at the ripped metallic paper from the Tums roll, she said the following quietly and gently.

“Rob, I’m having a baby. This guy I was with told me all the wrong and right things to get me to where I am, and my momma was okay with it. She just wanted me to settle down like I never have wanted to. She knew better. He knew better. I knew better. Now I’m running away from a bunch of people that frown upon babies outside of wedlock, but frown even more on freewill. What the hell was I thinking, Rob?”

Inside his head he said a lot of things.

“It’s okay. You’ll be fine. I wish you ran away sooner. I wish I could have been there for you. Why aren’t you a kid anymore? Why didn’t you keep in touch? It’s going to be okay. Can I marry you? You have crumbs on your cheek from that toast you just inhaled, and I haven’t seen anyone prettier in my life.”

As though she had heard his thoughts, she wiped her face and the crumbs were gone. Just like all of the signs on the highways passed him, and were gone. Just like all of
the angry people tried to pass him on the highway, and were gone. Everything was so fleeting. He thought, “I’d rather be out on the road than stuck in a cage,” but couldn’t this just be the one time when things could slow down?

“It’ll be okay.” He couldn’t think of anything better to say.

She put her hand on his. It wasn’t romantic, but rather it was grounding, and heavy in a good way, like a mother tucking him in to bed and putting a heavy hand on his back. “You’re safe,” is what it felt like.

“God, remember that motel you lived in? Remember all of that shit we used to get ourselves into?” She laughed with glossy eyes. He smiled and laughed towards his knees. His face prickled with happiness.

They talked. For what was only a few hours really seemed like a trip to the moon and back. Where had he been living? What were all of those keys on her key chain for? What happened to those kids they hated from the school bus? Is it going to be a boy or a girl? Where is he going? Where is she going? Why had they not kept in touch?

She spoke through a yawn, “I’m so sore.”

“You’re tired, too.” Call it telepathy, but he could tell they were going to have to leave that diner soon. “You have a place to stay tonight?”

“Yes. She’s parked out front with a gaslight on. What about you?”

“I’ve got a couple of bunks in the truck. They’re designed so I can bring my family with me some of my routes, ‘cept I don’t have much family. Let me buy you a tank of gas.”

Headstrong as she always had been, she asked the waitress for a marker. She took one of the cheap paper place mats from the counter and told Rob she would be right back.

Not a few minutes later the familiar bells jingled as
she came back into the diner with a backpack and told him she was ready to go. He tipped his head to the waitress, left a few dollars, smiled and said a very sincere thank you. He wasn't interested in goodbyes, and he was especially not interested in the one that was about to happen. He thought of all of the possible ways for him to suggest that they could keep in touch. The bells jingled as they exited the diner. They were a happy noise, and somehow it made his heart sink a little more.

About five steps outside of the door, she stopped and stared at him. He looked at her as she nudged her head towards her car. His heart was a hot air balloon when he noticed what she had done with the cheap paper place mat and the marker.

Scribbled out in big letters read the words, “SHE’S YOURS.”

She smiled at him and said “I left the keys on the front seat. She gives me enough trouble as it is.”

“But you can’t just leave it here. It’s gotta be worth something. Scrap metal, at least.”

“Listen. I’m sure someone could use it more than I could. And you know how I feel about keeping things caged up. I hereby set that old girl free. And anyway, you said you had extra bunks in that truck.”

In his head, he picked her up and hugged her. Her feet were off the ground and her arms were around his neck. Her belly stuck into him and was soft and thick. Her cotton shirt was worn and soft, and she smelled like flowery shampoo and the best smiles of a diner.

But in real life, he just smiled at her. This was good.

They looked at each other and without saying a word, they both seemed to say, “Let’s go.”
Napoleon
James Leach
Monologue of the Trix Rabbit
Harry Christopher Moore

When will it be my time God? Please tell me when?
Every time I try to have myself a taste of that treat,
It gets taken from me as they step on my feet.
I sneak around the best I can.
Seems like this torment will never end.

“Trix are for kids Trix are for kids!”
F*** you! I was a kid once too.
And did I get them then? NO!
It’s not fair I say.
And who decided this rule anyway?

Why am I a silly rabbit?
It’s not like eating Trix will form into a habit.
I just want a taste of one bowl.
I can’t even eat them in my rabbit hole.

They never seem to bother Toucan Sam.
Tony the Tiger never gets hassled by the man.
Sugar bear gets his share.
They let that whack job Sonny eat his stuff
and he’s coo coo for those cocoa puffs.
The only one who I can relate
is Lucky my little Irish mate.

I swear to God one of these days I’m gonna snap, crackle
and pop
And they’ll be cleaning up these pestering kids with a mop.
The next kid who takes my Trix is gonna get a punch in the face
And I will finally enjoy that fruity taste.
Where Butterflies Never Die

Olivia Martinez

In the land where butterflies never die
there is no night or day,
only a small ivory orb lights up the wisteria fogged sky.
The gnarled trees in the fog are shadows reach up high
with no hope of seeing anything between them.

In the land where butterflies never die,
butterfly wings are a pair of dark cyan
and lavender fading into amethyst in a pattern of an angry skull.
Each eye socket gets its own wing on top
while the bottom holds half of the tooth full jaw.

She walks in the land where butterflies never die.
Guardian to this realm, her wings match that of the butterflies.
Her dress flows like darkness wrapped around her
only letting her arms, chest, and face be bare.
Markings stream across her skin, looking like onyx vines.

She walks in the land where butterflies never die
towards the obsidian pool of truth.
She kneels over; ebony hair spilling over her shoulder.
She reaches a glowing hand over the pool,
making the water ripple navy blue to violet.
In the land where butterflies never die
the truth is illuminated.
The pool shows a silver skeleton
with its hands crossed over the chest, eye sockets looking at her.
Butterflies will float on through the fog filled air but not her.

For In the land where butterflies never die
she is no butterfly.
And she will have a human end.
Clock’s Consistency
Danielle Walters

I want to rip the clock
from the wall
tear it apart
see what exactly
makes it tick.
Trace my fingers over
the hands and face
in all their perfection,
soft, smooth
numbered set
to unchanging, impatient time.
I want to understand how it keeps
in motion with no sleep
able to control its ticking
audible only to those who sit in
emptiness of silence.
I long for it to whisper to me
consistency.
Stint of Flower Gates
Danielle Land

Storms are kept in the spine,
Just like the spine is kept
Towards the brain.
The glow of the backwashed,
Fluorescent in mind,
Will degrade itself luck with time,
Like time.
Dash, dash...
The sound of the plane goes
Crash, crash.
The floral patch grinds.
The scent of the flowers,
As they shade the sky
With whatever colors
Were chance to find.

All smiles.

The love in leaked stomach;
A surmise in sight,
Curb nicely together,
Like fuck in the night.
Dreams regard dreams,
In spaces with queens;
Their trances complete
In the loft, it seems.
Vexing the elegant voices
In tune with the isolate
Pleasures,
Caught in the soon.
The lifeless king chainsaw
And the grace away,
Like a strewn line of flowers
On the black and white gate.

Swamp
Emily Griffin
Mac n Cheese Is Good With Ketchup on Black Friday
Emily Tran
Hallowed Day

K.M. Aleena

The fog lurks under shrubs
and across the street. The air
murmurs about a bleak wind
coming in from the north –

I feel it. The leaves relinquish
their orange grip on the ends
of twigs; they glide along
the air thickening into fog.

I see them settling in an arbitrary
artwork – abstract, like modern,
but effortless and ancient.

Hands in my pockets, I walk
down the middle of the road,
lingering longer than I should,
hoping to get caught in the storm.

The Sun sets with the echoes
my steps make on the empty,
sodden black top.
Already, dimness is due.
The headache of a long day pervades the stillness –
I can no longer stay here.

The wind whips to remind me – my hope is wrong –
a whisper among trees:
*Get out of the rain, kid.*

I hear this
in those restless leaves.
Nothing more.
So I move on.
Clear
Danielle Walters

Clear- the answer my brother would give me as a child when I would ask him to pick a color.

Invisible air, dense water
dew on photosynthesis
highly substantial life.

Clear puddles of tears
imperceptible souls drift away from flesh they cling to.

See-through vase with flowers that wilted three months ago.
I never think to throw them out.

Clear- the color my mother would paint her nails she never liked anything gaudy or bold.

The thick pane within my father’s glasses too big for his face.

The thrill of bubbles in the opaque container my Grandmother kept in her purse for whenever I was bored.
The telephoto lens I gaze in
capturing memories as they speed by me
impatient to get away.

Clear- my brother never was good
at picking colors.
Unclean
Emily Griffin
we’re nice
people