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Cover Art: Constellations          Benjamin Asher Simpson-Hathcock

The cover art is inspired by the Jack Johnson song “Constellations”. The artist is especially drawn to the line: “Of the stories across the sky/ We drew our own constellations.” To him it means we all possess the freedom to write our own stories; we have the power to draw our own constellations.
# Inkling

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First Place Poetry Winner

Three-Year-Old Eggs
Marilyn Comer

Stacks of memories from floor to ceiling,
narrow passageways through the piles of paper.
Walking into your house is an assault
on my mind, my soul, my nose.
Mickey Mouse covered with dust and cobwebs.
In your closet, the woolen Indian blanket
crawling with bugs eating it away like cancer.
Everything from your life categorized and stacked,
everything precious destroyed.
You are too much, but not enough.
Did you really think you would find
the 1968 copy of *Life* magazine to read again?
The anger grows inside me, and then I remember
Disneyland, Knottsberry Farm and ice cream cones.
You dropping me off at school always expecting
a kiss good-bye. Even when I was in
eighth grade and only wanted to kiss boys.
Your beard was scratchy and
you smelled like English Leather.
I was too much for you and not enough.
Three-year-old eggs in your refrigerator
and your porn collection. My inheritance.
Naked women smiling at me with
legs spread, exposed and used up.
They used you up until there was no place left for me
in your life. All your things crowded out
anyone who cared. You wouldn’t let them in.
There was just too much stuff in the way.
Too much, but not enough.
Friendsters
Heather Sienko

Lynn opened my front door like she owned the place. “Hey there, bestieeee. Want to go out dancing with me tonight?” She walked over towards me and started playing with my hair.

“I don’t know. You know that’s not my scene,” I said, turning my attention back to House and taking a bite of the only guys that have never let me down: Ben and Jerry.

“There will be lots of boys,” Lynn said as she lifted her eyebrows a few times at me, trying to entice me.


She threw herself next to me on the couch and flung her legs over my lap, causing one of her bright yellow flip-flops to fly off. She gave me a huge hug. “Oh, Friendster, we need to get you out of this funk. He’s not worth it. No need to be gloomy.”

“Ughh.” I leaned my head onto hers. “I just don’t get it.”

“Me either.” She squeezed me tighter. “So let’s forget him!” She jumped up like the Karate Kid and started punching the air. “I’ll beat him up for you. You know I will. Take that son of a bitch out. I’ll be like . . .” She banged her fist against her chest, “you wanna mess with me?” She snapped her fingers and zig-zagged it down. “Boy, you don’t want to mess with me. I’m your worst nightmare.” I busted out laughing and threw my fluffy purple pillow at her.

“HI-YA!” She karate chopped the pillow, making it fly back into my face.

“You’re crazy; you know that?”

She let out a huge exhale as she dropped back onto the couch next to me. She fanned her face with both of her hands. “Goodness, that was a workout. Sooo, are you in? We can egg his house after.” She let out her special, practiced evil laugh.

“Ughhh.” I fell over on my side and cuddled with the pillow.

“Come on. Come on. Come on,” she said as she shook my legs.

“Okaaay. I’ll go.” I kicked her hands off of me. “BUT only because I love you and your attempt to cheer me up.” I sat up and pointed my finger in her face. “And don’t you dare try to set me up with a guy again. I will do whatever the heck that kungfu stuff you were doing on you. I mean it, Friendster.”

“YAY.” She grabbed both of my hands and dragged me to the bathroom. “Make-over time!”

I walked out of the bathroom in Lynn’s deep red, strapless dress that fell just above my knees and wearing her black snake skin heels that made me grow five inches.
“Oww, Oww! Honey, you need to show those curves off more often.” Lynn winked at me and walked towards me like a man would. “Hey there, pretty thing.” She put her right arm around my waist and turned her head slightly towards me with a raised eyebrow. “Watcha doin’ later? You wanna, you know, make my wildest dreams come true?”

“LYNN.” I laughed and pushed her away from me. “You need to lay off the caffeine.”

Lynn giggled. “I know, but coffee is like my addiction. But hey, at least I’m not an alcoholic or something.” She pulled her long, freshly curled brown hair over to one shoulder. “Okay, girly, turn and face me.” She leaned in to touch up my smoky eye shadow that she kept calling her masterpiece. She lifted her right hand and said with an Italian accent, “Alright, it’s a perfecto!” She kissed the tips of her fingers.

I looked in the mirror. I felt pretty tonight. If only he could see me now, that bastard.

“Alright, let’s get this show on the road,” Lynn said, cutting my thoughts short. She had changed into a short pink halter dress that made your eyes go straight to the “twins.”

“Okay, Friendster. Here’s the deal,” Lynn said, as she turned her Mustang into the club’s parking lot, hitting the curb with her back tire.

“Booty bump!” We both screamed in unison. “Jinks! You owe me a Coke,” we screamed again, pointing at each other. We started to laugh.

“Okay, anyway,” Lynn said, brushing her hair away from her face with one quick sweep. She parked the car and turned the engine off. “So, if you don’t want a guy to talk to you, send me a signal like . . .” She put her right arm over the left and smacked them together a couple of times like an alligator, clapped her hands twice, and then brought both fists into her armpits and flapped her arms like a chicken. She then ended with a loud “AAAAAYOOO” as she swirled her arms in a stirring motion. “And I’ll come to your rescue.” She looked at me with a forced, serious face.

I cracked up laughing and she joined in. “Lynn, if I do that, I won’t have to worry about a guy EVER coming up to me again.”

“This is true.” She giggled. “Okay, then just pull your right ear,” she said as she pulled on hers.

“I don’t want any boys coming up to me, so we don’t even need a signal.” I looked at her in time to see her frown before she put an understanding smile on.

“Oh,” she said just above a whisper. She cleared her throat. “I know it’s only been a week, but try to have some fun tonight. It will help.”

We walked up to Lynn’s favorite club, The One Legged Crow. “Follow me,” Lynn said over her shoulder. She walked past the long line of people. Most of them gave us the stare down or rolled their eyes as we walked up to the doorman. She whispered something in his ear that I
couldn’t hear through the loud music coming from inside. He whispered something back into hers. She giggled and gave him a flirty slap on his arm. She gently brushed his face with her right hand while smiling. “Thank you, Tom.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me through the door into a different world.

It was a dimly lit, large room full of people dancing their hearts out. Different colored lights were flashing onto the dance floor from the ceiling with the beat of the music. There were women dancing in cages. Men were standing near the cages, staring at the barely dressed women like they were dancing just for them. I swear one guy was drooling. We continued to walk towards the dance floor that barely had any room for me and Lynn.

“Ooh baby baby, La La La La La La La,” Lynn sang with the music as she shook her shoulders side to side and walked through the packed crowd of people. “Ohh drop it to the floor.” She smacked her hands onto the floor, leaving her booty in the air, and then rolled her body up in a sexy way. “Make you wanna say it.” She hip-bumped me, causing me to stumble into a guy.

“Sorry,” I said quickly and turned back to Lynn and slapped her. “Watch yourself, woman!”

I felt someone grab my hand. “Hey, so I think you fell for me,” said a guy three inches shorter than me with a unibrow and something green in his teeth as he winked at me. Awww, poor guy, I thought. Looking for love like the rest of us, but getting nowhere, just like me. I smiled at him.

Lynn got between us and was about to say something, but I grabbed her arm. “It’s okay, Lynn,” I said. “Have a good night,” I said to the guy and pulled Lynn away, leaving the guy with a smile.

“Daaaaance with me.” Lynn took my hand and spun me around. “Loosen up, woman. We are here to have some fun.” She danced and flung her hair side to side as the song changed to an Enrique Inglesias tune.

“Ughhh,” I moaned and threw my head back. I really just wanted to be at home. “I’m going to go get us some drinks,” I screamed over the music. She gave me a thumbs up and continued to dance.

I walked through the sweaty mass of people who continued to bump into me. One guy grabbed my ass, but I think my pissed-off look made him pee his pants. He walked away fast, like I had a contagious disease or something. I rolled my eyes and continued to squeeze through the sluts and players dancing like they should be alone in a bedroom.

I began to order two daiquiris when a familiar face caught my eye. I turned to look at him directly and saw that he was with a girl. He had her pinned up against the back wall with one of her legs around his waist as they made out. That bastard, I thought. I looked around for Lynn. It was like freaking “Where’s Waldo?” until I finally found her because her goofy sprinkler dance
move caught my eye. I headed towards Lynn feeling like a football player as I pushed my way through the people again.

“Well, hello there,” said a pretty decent-looking guy who stepped in front of me.

I stopped and looked at the guy. I didn’t say anything. I just moved him out of my way. I had to get to Lynn before . . .

Fail.

Lynn’s face went pale. She stood frozen in place as she looked directly in his path. I picked up the pace, parting people like the Red Sea. I was in my zone with Lynn as my focus. Nothing was going to get into my way.

“Well, hello there,” I said as I reached for her arm. She turned to me, didn’t say a word, and let herself fall into my arms. I hugged her and shifted my eyes back toward the fool.

“He’s already moved on.” I could barely hear her say over the music.

“He hasn’t moved on. He is just being him. He came to the club and found that slut. I’m sure he’s realized that no one is better than you.”

Lynn didn’t say anything. She pulled away and looked at him, only this time there were tears filling her eyes. “I can’t do this,” Lynn said as I watched her searching the room. Her eyes locked onto the exit and she pushed her way toward it. I immediately followed, trying to keep up with her. She busted through the doors of the club causing them to slam against the outside wall. She was walking fast and running her hands through her hair. All I heard was the slamming of her high-heeled shoes on the cement sidewalk.

“Lynn, wait up.” I ran awkwardly in my heels, trying to catch up with her.

Lynn stopped in her tracks but continued to look at the ground. “You know, I thought I would be okay when I saw him again, but I’m not.”

“It’s okay that you aren’t. That’s normal. It’s never easy to run into an ex.” I walked up to her and put my arm around her shoulders. “I honestly don’t even know what to say to make it better because I know I would be just as upset if I saw ’you know who.’”

“Yeah, I know. I just didn’t expect him to be here. He never would go dancing with me. He supposedly hated it.” Lynn kicked a rock on the ground.

I leaned my head onto hers. “Yeah, he’s an asshole, but you know what? He can’t ruin our girl’s night. I won’t allow it.” I turned her to face me. Her makeup was running at the outside corners of her eyes. “Okay, bestie. Here’s what we’re going to do.” I wiped the black streaks off of her face. “We’re going to go in there, and you’re not going to let him take your fun away.”

“I don’t know, friend,” she said and looked back at the ground.

I dabbed her eyes one last time, fixed her tangled hair, and then took her hand and dragged her back into the club. I pulled Lynn through a group of laughing girls and a group of guys that were eyeing
those girls. We walked past Lynn’s ex. This time he noticed us. Lynn stopped like a rock and made me lose my balance for a second. His eyes became slightly larger, and he moved the girl away from him. I shook my head at him, and I squeezed Lynn’s hand to give her a little comfort. I pulled Lynn away.

I brought her to an open area, well, a not-so-crowded area for a club. I spun her around a few times and joke booty danced on her. She was still stiff. I started to do the running man and made a silly face at her. Didn’t work. “All right, you’re making me go there,” I screamed over the music towards her.

I began her dance. I snaked to the right and snapped my fingers; I snaked to the left and snapped my fingers. Then I stuck my booty out as I rolled it in a circle and did a three-sixty with my arms over my head. I stopped and faced her. I lifted my right hand and made the “peace” sign. I opened my mouth with a huge cheesy smile and bugged my eyes. I moved my right hand horizontally over my eyes, shook my hips, and then repeated with the left.

Lynn giggled. She lifted her head up and joined in at her favorite part. I saw out of the corner of my eye that John was watching us. I stuck my tongue out at him as Lynn and I bumped our hips together. Then we ended with her famous sprinkler: we both put our left hand by our ear and stretched the right straight out in front of us. We looked at each other and started pulsing to the left with our right arms like a sprinkler would.

I walked through my front door, exhausted. I knocked the shoes off my now blistered feet and headed towards the kitchen for my guys. I opened the freezer door and started to reach for the cookie dough ice cream. I stopped mid-reach. “Not tonight, boys,” I said as I shut the freezer.

I began singing a song that was stuck in my head from tonight. “Oh baby baby, La La La La La La La.” I shook my hips and flung my arms in the air. I made my way through the kitchen doing the same move as I found my way to the living room. “Ohh drop it to the floor.” I spun around the living room, and my singing turned into humming. I tossed my hair side-to-side a few times and opened my bedroom and fell into my bed.

I grabbed my cell phone and texted Lynn: “I love you, friend!”

A minute later, I heard my phone chime: “Love you mooooore.”
Euphonic Rest
Zoe Williams

I play the keys on your scarf as the feathers in your hair waltz to unknown voices. Hands circle around endlessly, but my gentle, curious gaze remains on the simple way you curl up when you wish time would stop. The fluff and fleece grasped near your lunar chin, and although your lips do not smile, your whispering breath tells me sweet, soft jokes about lotus petals, and the silence right before the orchestra sparks magic with the flick of a wand.
Sailor
Elizabeth Bodeman

You meander through my mind
You might as well be standing on my chest
I’m drowning with each breath
Short and shallow

Waves crash upon my deck
I’ve allowed myself to be stranded out at sea
To the unpredictable mercies of emotion
Willfully captive

As the tide turns calm
A fire lit inside me burns to flee
But the smoke makes for a foggy distraction
Due north is lost on me
You are seventeen when you meet her. It is your first night at college, and you are taking a shower. The water comes out in warm spurts and mingles with your hot tears. You can’t stop thinking about your mom’s hand resting in your dad’s hair as they drove down Washington Street, leaving you behind. You stood in the middle of the grooved street, watched the turn signal come on and watched them turn out of sight. Finally, when even the hope of them had gone, you went inside. The posters of Einstein and Degas hanging on the cinderblock walls of your dorm room seemed a poor substitute for parents. Suddenly, the shower door opens, and a girl enters the small, square space. Impressions scatter like beads. Naked. Tall. Naked. Red hair.

“Hey! I’m Jodi, your suite mate. Sorry to jump in like this, but my cowboys comin’ and I gotta be ready.”

You stare at the drain in the floor and wish this shower had two exits. Anything to escape. You wish frantically for a button to push. A magic button that would deposit you instantly into your parent’s hotel room and leave you cozy in a double bed with two familiar lumps snoring in unison across a brown carpet aisle. You understand that. It is what makes your life yours. But this? Naked in a shower with another girl? Trees might as well sprout red socks for leaves. Ceiling fans fling noodles. Weirdness doesn’t exist to equal this.

“So, where are you from?” she asks as she braces one of her feet against the green tile and begins to run a blue razor the length of her freckled leg.

You answer her because, really, what else is there to do?

“A small town in the panhandle. You probably haven’t heard of it.”

“Probably not. Do you party?”

You know she’s looking at you, but your eyes stay fixed on the silver drain. The soap bubbles circle, and when she moves light hits them and they reflect a sudsy rainbow.

“Um . . . some . . . a little. Graduation night.”

“Cool. You wanta come out with me and Rod? I don’t drink, but he drinks enough for both of us.” She talks slowly. It reminds you of the little silver pitchers of warm syrup at IHOP.

“Uh, sure. I guess. Um, I’m pretty much done. Can I get by?”

She moves and you squeeze past, feeling the wet slime of the wall on your back as you climb out of the shower. You wrap a towel from home around your dripping hair and look at yourself in the silver-flecked mirror. You have enough good sense to smile at the absurdity of what just happened. Winking at yourself, you say, “It’s official. I’m in college.”

You fall in love with Jodi that night. Not in a “creepy teenaged boy’s dream” way, but in an “oh, wow, life is bigger than I knew” way. You become inseparable. The weeks pass in a blur of laughter, cigarettes and junk food. When you call home, your mom talks about the lilac bushes blooming outside
the back screen door and the way your little sister looked on her first day of school, and you talk about Jodi. You tell your mother that she eats tomatoes for breakfast and that she helped you find a job. You tell her that she is five-foot eleven. You describe all of her different pairs of cowboy boots and the little yellow truck she drives.

Your mom says, “I’m glad you made a friend, Sis. I bet she helps with not being lonely. Make sure you go to all of your classes and don’t get behind.”

You listen to her voice, small and fuzzy through the receiver, and roll your eyes. You want to tell her you don’t need her advice anymore. You want to tell her what it felt like to wake up on a Tuesday morning and decide to bleach your hair. You want to tell her what it felt like to sit in the beauty salon with wet colored rivers running down your back and the feeling of freedom burning in your chest, but you don’t. Instead, you snap at her when she asks if you’re coming home for Thanksgiving and then hang up on her when she reminds you to call your grandparents.

You go home with Jodi for a weekend and meet her little sister Laney. She is the cool to Jodi’s heat. One blonde, one red-headed and two different dads that neither have met. You think, for a minute, of your own dad. He whistles “Grand Old Flag” when he’s happy and will only eat hamburgers with ketchup and mustard on them. He drives the same blue car he has driven since you were three, and he will always stop to help someone with a flat tire. To not know him would be . . . weird.

Jodi’s mom, Sheila, comes home with pizza and barely puts it down before she hugs you. She’s wearing a yellow sundress and smells like baby powder. As soon as the pizza is gone, she is ready to go out. The three of you leave Laney home watching a movie and drive two cars to a bar. Somehow, Sheila gets you in without a wristband and orders beer. You look at the brown icy bottle wrapped in a napkin and stall. This is not something you’re allowed to do. You are relieved when Jodi winks at you and orders Cokes instead. You have fun that night. There is the Cotton-Eyed Joe, a kiss from a guy in a black felt hat, and a feeling of freedom. When the bar plays the night’s last song, Sheila is still having drinks delivered to your table.

In the gravel parking lot, Jodi and her mom get into a fight over keys. They are on the ground, and Jodi is sitting on her mom’s chest when the bouncer comes out to break things up. He gives Jodi Sheila’s keys and Jodi throws you hers. You start up the little yellow truck and ignore the angry honks as you cut through cars and trucks to get right on their bumper. You see Sheila hanging out the car window, waving and yelling at people, and you remember the day your mom taught you to drive. She was so nervous she got the hiccups, and your little sister giggled non-stop. You realize you are a long way from home in a strange city.

Jodi stops to get her mom some food before you all go home. At the Whataburger, Sheila goes into the bathroom and doesn’t come back out. She is passed out in one of the stalls. Jodi squeezes between her mom and the toilet, grabs Sheila under the arms, and somehow manages to get her back to the car. You walk beside them, opening doors and just trying to be invisible. Back at the house, Laney comes out when the cars drive up. She goes right to Sheila’s car and helps Jodi carry their mom up the stairs of the porch. You stand on the bottom stair and don’t go up. You sit on the greasy bumper of the truck and listen to the night sounds of crickets and traffic.
You and Jodie drive home the next day with a painful awkwardness riding on the console between you. As you pull into the parking lot of the dorms, you say, “I’m sorry. That must suck. Your mom, I mean. I can’t imagine.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jodie’s voice bounces around the truck and lands nowhere. Her freckles float on her pale face, and her red hair flies with the jerky movements of her emotions.

“I just mean, I’m sorry. Your mom. I feel bad. I . . .”

“Oh my God . . . shut up. Just shut up and get out. If I don’t go see Rod, I’m gonna explode.” She pounds the palm of her hand against her Garfield steering wheel cover.

You slam the door and grab your green duffel out of the truck bed just as Jodie speeds off. As you slowly climb the stairs to the third floor, your throat jams up and your eyes start to burn. You try to talk yourself out of crying, but it doesn’t work. By the time you get to your room, you are more thankful for a door that locks than anything else in the world.

You don’t see Jodie for days. She doesn’t come back to the dorm. You are worried but don’t know what to do, so you go to classes and eat lunch on the sunny picnic tables in the quad. It is only two weeks until Thanksgiving, and you begin daydreaming about home. Finally, one night at two a.m. you wake up to someone banging on your door.

“Aren’t you that girl Jodi’s friend?” It is the dark-headed girl from down the hall who works crossword puzzles.

“Yes.”

“You should go downstairs to the lobby . . . and bring a blanket.”

You grab the blanket your aunt made you for your birthday. You take the stairs two at a time and slam the door open so hard it bounces back and hits you in the shoulder. Red paper. There is red paper everywhere. You are confused. You don’t see Jodie and can’t understand why you’re in the lobby in the middle of the night holding a blanket covered in cherries and wearing nothing but a t-shirt. You bend down slowly and pick up one of the papers. It is the second time you have seen Jodi without her clothes on. A Xeroxed picture of her posing on an unmade bed. Unflattering angles and naked hope. You remember her telling you she was going to do it. A surprise for Rod.

It has black Sharpie words on the edges: 

*Have you seen this ho? She keyed my truck. She’s a psycho-bitch. Stay away from her.*

The crossword puzzle girl is standing behind you breathing hard. Her breath smells like eggs.

“I heard they’re all over campus. Some girls saw her at the bar tonight getting wasted. They said they heard her boyfriend was cheating and that she keyed the side of his truck in the parking lot. They got in a huge fight and . . .”

“Where is she?”

“On the couches in the center.”

You run across the polished floor and find Jodie lying on one of the couches. She has a black eye and a swollen lip. Her favorite shirt is torn down the middle. You sit on the edge of the couch and put your hand on her forehead.
“Jodi, Jodi, it’s me. Open your eyes. What happened?”
“He cheated.” Her words are slurred, and she smells like beer and puke.
“Let’s get you out of here. Can you walk? ‘Cause I’m thinkin’ I can’t carry you, my giant, drunk friend.”

She laughs. You were hoping she would.
“I’m totallyyy wasted. Thought it might be fun. Didn’t wanna think . . . Carli?”
“Huh?”
“I’m sooo not having fun.”
“No shit—really?”
“Ooooh, you cussed. I’m telling your mama, young lady.” She waggles her finger at me and dissolves into drunk giggles.

As you help her up the stairs, your mind skids across all that this will mean. You know there will be much harder days to come. You wonder how you will handle it all. You think about Jodi saying she would tell your mama. You realize with a quick sob that that is exactly what you want to do too.
The New American Way
Madison Paige Estes

It’s almost midnight when he gets home.
He watches his kid sleep and sees how she’s grown.
Yeah, she gettin’ older while he’s away,
getting older every day.
When the sun’s out he’s tired,
and every night he’s alone.
In the morning the wife’s busy,
at night she’s cold as stone.
He wonders how long this can keep going,
running on empty, and pain starts showin’.

It’s getting hard to stop a family from breaking,
harder to stop a bank from taking
anything and everything they own.
Yeah, it’s getting harder to make a home.
Food stamps, credit cards, interest, loan,
paycheck-to-paycheck, debt just keeps growing.
Every day waitin’, just waitin’ for payday.
It’s the new American way.

Started with nothing,
and they’ve gone nowhere since then.
She works till eight, he works past ten.
Little girl sleepin’ in the other room,
God they love her, but they had her too soon.
And now they got another one on the way.
They used to talk the night away,
but now he don’t got much to say
‘till he’s had a drink or two.
She don’t know what to do.
She tries not to give him hell,
‘cause he ain’t much, but he ain’t sittin’ in a cell.
He’s puttin’ in extra hours for a little more pay,
save a few dollars for a better day.
He ain’t much anymore, but she prays he’ll stay.
It’s getting hard to stop a family from breaking.
Ain’t much left they got for taking.
Yeah, it’s getting hard to make a home.
Food stamps, credit cards, interest, loan,
paycheck-to-paycheck, debt just keeps growing.
Everyday waitin’ for payday.
It’s the new American way.

They’re watchin’ the TV, the president’s on.
He’s talkin’ about hope, but they ain’t got none.
He’s talkin’ about change, but there ain’t much they seen.
Only “change” they know is what’s left after they’re wiped clean.
Wife waits to weep,
‘till she thinks he’s asleep.
She don’t know he stays up all night,
worrying about how he’s gonna make it right,
wondering how they’re gonna put a present under the tree.
They ain’t got enough food for two, but they stretch it for three.
They don’t know how they’re gonna buy a crib, buy diapers,
and keep gas in the car too.
Red, white and blue, yeah well, they’re mostly blue.
Them stars ain’t shinin’; they’re burning out.
Keeping dreams alive is a struggle they know all about.
Trying to keep hope, but they don’t know how.
It’s just the way things are now.

Everyday, waitin’ for payday.
It’s just the new American way.
Anniversary
Courtney Turner

Christina is sitting at her vanity in the bathroom, getting ready for our two-year anniversary dinner. One of the four lights, second from the left, is out. It has been for a month. I’m propped in the door frame, watching her as she leans close to the mirror to brush powder on her eyelids. She swaps the eyeshadow for mascara and catches my eye in the mirror. With the black wand held absently in mid-air, a smile spreads from her painted mouth through her sparkling hazel eyes. “Put on a tie. Bocca Felice is a nice restaurant.”

The corners of my mouth twitch as I say, “Okay.”

She focuses on her eyelashes and gushes about how much she loves Italian food, how she cannot wait for the fettuccine alfredo with chicken and mushrooms.

I take my tie to the dark kitchen and wait for her there.

She turns the light on as she enters the kitchen where I sit at the head of the table. I look up from my folded hands to see her twirling in place. She is dressed all in stunning obsidian black. The dress is new. The shoes are new. The clutch purse is new. I don’t know when she went shopping, but I saw the bags shoved in the guest room closet yesterday. She must think I’m dense enough not to notice how tantalizingly low cut the dress is, the way it hugs her every curve like no other dress ever has.

Looking up at her, I smile and tell her, “You’re beautiful,” and she flashes her radiant smile again.

In the car she says, “Will, I need you to develop magical powers so you can help me.”

Normally I wouldn’t take her seriously, but two weeks ago I had a headache. When I got the aspirin out of the medicine cabinet, I knocked over the empty orange Depakote bottle. So when she asks me to develop magical powers, I say, “All right.”

She checks her hair in the sun visor mirror and says, “One, I need you to make humidity go away.”

“Okay.”

“Two, I want to switch bodies with Simon for a day.”

“The cat?” I ask.

She says, “Yes.”

“Okay,” I say. “Is number three a million more wishes?”

“No. I’ll make it easy for you.”

At this, I take her hand and kiss it. Even in her mania, Christina is so thoughtful. I hold the familiar citrus scent to my face for a few wistful seconds and wish the moment could last forever.

Christina continues, “I need to be able to use sixty percent of my brain.”

“You don’t want to use the whole thing?”

“No, that would probably drive me crazy.”
“Okay,” I say. “Done.” I glance over to find her smiling to herself, at peace for the moment. She withdraws the hand I’m still holding and rests it on the back of my neck. She strokes my neck, tugs softly on my hair, and reaches around to caress my ear with her fingers.

I feel every touch in my gut. “I’m driving,” I say, wishing she might do anything that was not a sign or symptom.

She is trying to put her bare foot in my lap as she says, “And you look good doing it.” She laughs, but it is a low sound, not the sound of pure joy that makes me feel like bubbles might erupt from her mouth.

I caress her foot for a second, then push it back towards her, and she turns to face the front. She turns the volume up on some inane radio song I know she doesn’t like and pouts for as long as she can concentrate on it. Within a minute, she’s smiling again. “I think we should get a dog,” she says. I open my mouth to speak, but she rushes on. “I’ve been doing some research, and I think a Labradoodle would be perfect. They’re smart and cute. They have curly hair and . . .”

I don’t hear the rest of the perfect attributes because she is talking too fast, but I say, “Maybe.”

I ask if she’s going to get the Depakote prescription refilled, and she smiles. She strokes the back of my neck again and says, “I don’t need it anymore.” She leans over the arm rest to whisper in my ear, “We can get married now.”

I asked her to marry me less than a year ago when she had been on the Depakote only a few months. We lay on opposite ends of the couch with our legs all twisted and watched the credits roll on her favorite movie for maybe the thousandth time. I felt her legs tense up as she stopped humming along. She said no, that I deserved better, that she was not worth the trouble. I remember wiping the tears from her cheeks and telling her she was worth more trouble than she could ever give me. More tears spilled from her eyes, but she was smiling. She promised she would be sane one day and would marry me then.

She is telling me she is ready to get married now, and I grip the wheel tighter and keep my eyes on the gray road ahead. Although my breathing is constricted, I manage to say, “Christina, please put your seatbelt on.”

I hear the seatbelt click, but she has stopped talking for the moment.

I loved Christina when I met her at a friend’s housewarming party. Everyone was dressed in flat black, but she wore sequined navy. We ended up next to each other on the black leather sofa. I held out a pack of gum and said, “It’s apple-flavored.”

She snatched it from me and shouted, “I love apple-flavored things!” and we both laughed.

But I didn’t know she was manic. I didn’t realize anything was wrong until the first time she tried to hide a car full of shopping bags from me. A few weeks later she told me the universe wanted her
to have a baby any way, with anyone. She loved me, but the universe did not care. That was when I called her mom.

During a brief stay at a St. Anthony’s Mental Health Clinic, Dr. Lanahan diagnosed Christina with bipolar disorder. He prescribed the Depakote, which she has been taking until now.

I called her mother yesterday.

I drive past Ristorante Bocca Felice, but Christina does not notice. She’s adjusting the air conditioning again.

“I put in my two weeks,” she says.

“What?”

“Two weeks ago.” She laughs. It is the happy laugh, but it leaves a sour taste in my mouth. She holds both hands in front of the air vents and tells me, “You’re A/C is on the fritz.”

“It’s fine,” I say, turning the whole mechanism off. “Why?”

“It’s hot. Aren’t you hot?”

“Not the A/C,” I say, my voice rising. I take a deep breath to steady myself and continue, “Why did you quit your job?”

“I can’t just sit in an office waiting for the phone to ring, can I?” she asks. I don’t answer, but she continues, “And Oprah? Well, she gave all these cars to people who really needed them, and she built a school in Africa, so . . .”

“And how did those things turn out?”

I glance at her, and she’s frowning. She answers, “Great,” with a little quake in her voice. After a pause, she persists firmly, “Well, I’m looking around, and there are children in need, animals in need.” She is counting on her fingers, her voice rising with every word until she shouts, “The. Planet. Is. In. Need.”

I want to ask what she is going to do about all this need, but she is having trouble breathing. At this point, logic is not going to do anybody any good. I turn the air conditioner back on and take her hand in mine, squeezing softly. She squeezes back, and I hear her breathing relax. We continue like this for several minutes before she lets go of my hand and reaches for the center console again.

I hold the wheel with both hands as I pull into the driveway of Saint Anthony’s. I see her mother’s silver Camry parked close to the square brick building’s front entrance where Dr. Lanahan waits in his familiar blue button down and khakis. A young nurse in pale pink scrubs is standing slightly behind him. Christina grabs the sides of her seat. I can see every muscle in her arm tense. Her fingers look fossilized. As I stop the car in front of Dr. Lanahan, I notice the nurse is holding a syringe at her side.

“Will?” Christina says.

Her hazel eyes are wide and wet, so I turn to study the veins in my hands that are still holding tight to the wheel.

“Will,” she says, louder now. “This isn’t the restaurant.”

There is a soft knock on the passenger’s side window followed closely by the sound of the
power lock. There is a second, louder knock, and I look up to see Dr. Lanahan bent over, peering into the window. Christina’s made-up face is distorted as she screams, “Will, you can’t do this to me!”

I bow my head and close my eyes, and she’s gasping for air and saying, “Please, no. I love you. I’m cured.”

Every breath shudders in my chest. I look up and say, “It’s only two weeks,” before I unlock the door. When I hit the button, Christina’s door opens. She’s still screaming, but I can’t make out words anymore. The car shakes from the violence of the struggle two feet to my right. Dr. Lanahan turns to the nurse and nods. She steps forward and pushes the poised syringe into Christina’s upper arm. The car is immediately still. All I can hear is cars passing by on the street and birdsong. I bring my sweaty hand back to the wheel and rest my forehead on my knuckles.
Bedtime Story for a Runaway
Erika Marie Sivils

Sway me gently with your
rhythms of unstated fear.
Your dilated pupils expand but
your heart contracts with the
beating noise of an empty home.
Moist hands wrap around cardboard boxes
filled with long-distant memories.
Pages turn in the late afternoon gray.
Sunbeams of thought drift to silence.
Scattered tears on old piers drifted
away long ago. Only cracks of
lightning stir the dead dogs from
their sleep. Clear cries of old
skies sneak inside the tender rye.
Blinking lights flash in dancing glows
around the walls before eyelids
blink to rest. The sound
of a familiar song sweeps the
silence of a dusty room.
This expanse we call home
unfolds itself before dusk.
Raven
Michelle Morin

The howling wind shook the rafters of Ed Sawyer’s ocean-side mansion and woke him from his drunken slumber. He wiped the crust from his eyes as he looked around his mahogany-paneled study. He looked without taking in the details of the large, masculine room, details that his late wife had slaved to get right for him. Grace opted for mahogany because it was not subtle; subtlety wouldn’t do for a man’s room. Two of the walls were lined with the ancient books that had been passed down to Ed from his father: legal texts, autobiographies, and political manifestos. They were all dry, dusty, and of no interest to Grace. Another wall paid homage to Plutonian Shore’s chief industry and favorite pastime: fish and boats. Grace had little patience for those endeavors as well.

The fourth wall was Ed’s favorite. It housed a large, marble fireplace above which Grace had placed a portrait of herself. It was beautifully rendered, and Ed was sure that it breathed whenever he could bring himself to look at it.

Ed fell asleep in the leather armchair next to the fireplace, beneath the portrait of his beloved wife. He couldn’t remember coming home from work or if he had gone in at all. He must have; otherwise, his boss, Putnam Shore, would have sent one of his subordinates to check that Ed was coping. Ed thought of Currer and Ellis Bell, secretaries at the law firm where he worked and twins to boot. They were beautiful girls, inside and out; the sisters were the only ones in the whole town of Plutonium Shore who seemed to remember that he’d had a wife and that her name had been Grace. Ed often felt that they were angels sent from heaven to offer him comfort and the promise of salvation. Their sweet nature made him want to cry. He did not deserve their deference or pity.

Ed got up from the chair and staggered to the bar behind his desk. He poured himself a scotch and drank it neat; then he took the glass and decanter to his desk. He sat down and looked at the cool, hard wood of his desk. His chin sagged to his chest, and his heart was heavy with grief; he hoped that he would be able to forget it if he drank enough.

And thus he sat, trying hard to push out of his mind the guilt and reflection that had come to him too late—thoughts of how his arrogance and infidelity had been his undoing and had robbed him of the only person who had loved him wholly and without consequence or regret. And thus he was sitting when he heard the familiar “click, click, click” of his wife’s expensive high-heeled shoes as she strode towards his sanctuary.
Ed looked up at once and said in a hoarse whisper, “Grace?” There was no answer. He shook his head slightly in an effort to clear it and poured himself another scotch. The glass was halfway to his lips when he heard it again: “click, click, click.”

He put his glass down on the table and, with a wry smile, imagined Grace on the other side of his study door. She would open it, take one sweeping glance at the scene before her and then chastise him for making rings on the furniture. Since she’d been gone, he hadn’t used coasters because he couldn’t find them.

He was imagining the noise. He was drunk, and the dark room was making him melancholy. He looked around the study for some sign of life. He felt a sudden chill and half-raised from his chair. “Grace? Is that you? Have you come back? Can you ever forgive me?”

The wind howled in reply. Ed could hear the waves crashing against rock. He went over to the window and pushed aside the curtain to peer outside. Water splashed against the window, and Ed had the distinct feeling that the ocean, in all its vastness, was sweeping ashore to swallow him whole. He shook this thought away, abruptly replaced the curtain, and made his way back to his desk. He downed his scotch and was pouring another when he heard it again: “click, click, click.” The sound echoed in his head. He closed his eyes and, with amazing clarity, saw his sweet Grace walking down the dark hallway towards his study, the rhythmic sway of her hips and the athletic curve of her calf accentuated by four-inch heels.

He hurried to the study door with the decanter in his hand. He threw the door open and was surprised at what he saw, although he shouldn’t have been. The hallway was as dark and empty as it had been on the day Grace died.

Ed closed the door and turned back into his study. He paused to survey the room and swayed as his vision blurred. He shook his head as if he were bothered by flies and rolled his shoulders back several times. He muttered incoherent encouragements to himself, threw back his shoulders and swaggered inelegantly towards his desk. He stumbled and almost dropped the decanter. He fell into the front of his desk and remained that way for a moment. Then, he leaned across it with his arms spread wide to turn on the lamp, palms flat against the cool wood, the decanter just to the left of his right hand. He thought of how Grace used to bend over the desk this way, before . . . Ed didn’t want to think about that, about how he had ruined it all. He fingered the crystal lovingly and thought of sweet Grace. The decanter had been a wedding present.

And thus he was thinking when he heard that noise again: “click, click, click,” the sound of Grace walking briskly towards his study door. He raised himself off the desk and spun around. He felt that chill again, and what was that smell? His eyes swept the room; it appeared to be empty, but that smell . . .
he knew that smell. That heady, seductive perfume . . . he only knew one woman who wore that fragrance, but she couldn’t be there at his house, the home he’d made with Grace. Or could she? No, her father had sent her away after Grace . . .

And there was that noise again: “click, click, click . . .” Ed spun back around just as the fierce wind howled outside and his study door blew open, banging against the wall behind it.

Ed ran over to the door and peered down the dark, empty hallway. He closed the door with a snap and went back to his desk. He finished pouring his drink, downed it in one swallow, and sighed audibly as the liquor burned his throat. He walked back around the desk and sat down again with his shoulders slumped and his chin on his chest. The grief pounded a tattoo into his heart.

And thus he was sitting when the chill traveled up his spine and made him sit up straight. It was an eerie feeling, like some hag dragging her nails up and down his back. Ed squeezed his eyes shut tight and tried to shake the image from his head. It was no use; he knew he was no longer alone. The hag was there in the room with him.

He opened his eyes and saw her sitting in his leather armchair next to the marble fireplace, underneath the portrait of his beloved wife. Her long legs were crossed; her feet were clad in the evidence of his betrayal: the vintage, satin lace-up Louboutin’s she had seen in an auction house magazine and begged him to buy for her. Her dark hair was long and wavy and framed her youthful face. Her lips were parted in a knowing half-smile. Her fingers drummed aimlessly on the arm of the chair. Her right leg wagged up and down. The yellow shoe was like a sinister pendulum, hypnotizing him to remember the details of Grace’s final hour: Grace brandishing the photo, screaming at him, reminding him of the first time she caught him cheating and how he had promised to stay away from Raven. The shoe blurred in and out of focus as Ed remembered how Grace had laughed without mirth and said, “Liar. But if you don’t end it with this girl, you will lose me forever.” Ed went numb as his eyes focused clearly on the shoe, and he realized how easy it had been for Grace to keep her promise.

And thus sat Raven. Ed stared at her with his mouth open. She continued to watch him; his look of horror was at complete odds with her triumphant glare. She looked like an apparition but more solid. Her features seemed to waver like a mirage with the chill in the room.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked in a voice that he hoped was threatening.

She laughed in reply. “Why have you come here? Haven’t you caused enough trouble for me?”

Raven smiled and continued to drum her fingers on the arm of the chair.

“It’s over between us! How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t want you anymore!”

Raven’s smile broadened, and she said one breathy word: “Liar.”

Ed stood up and made his ungainly way towards her. “I am not lying. I can’t keep seeing you like
this. Just stay away from me or . . . I’ll tell your father!”

Raven gave a low chuckle and leaned forward seductively: “Liar.”

Ed’s hands gripped in fists at his sides. He swayed slightly as he fought the cold revulsion in his heart and said, “I will. I don’t care what happens to me now. I’m not afraid of your daddy! He can fire me. But I want you to leave me alone.”

Raven leaned back in the chair and twirled her hair around her finger. She looked bored.

“I mean it, Raven. I should have ended it with you when Grace found out about us last spring. But I was weak. I never believed she would . . .” Ed took a haggard breath and continued with force, “I should have known better. You’re too young and too stupid to understand real love. Leave me alone. I don’t want you anymore!”

Raven threw her head back and cackled wildly. “LIAR, LIAR, LIAR, LIAR, LIAR, LIAR!”

“I am not a liar—”

“Liar,” she said, and giggled like a school girl.

“You ruined my life. You ruined everything!” Ed paced wildly and pulled at his clothes and hair as he bellowed, “Why did you do it? I stayed with you, betrayed my wife again but that wasn’t enough for you! It wasn’t enough that I bought you the goddamned shoes. She had to know! You sent those pictures! You made sure that she knew that I . . .” His voice cracked and the next words were barely audible: “failed her.” The chill that shook Ed’s soul turned his voice to ice as he glared at the apparition.

“You are a cruel, manipulative little girl. Get out of here; you’re vile and evil and I never want to see you again!”

Ed turned away from her and went back to his desk. He kept his back to her as he poured himself another drink. He was shaking and covered in sweat, but he swallowed the drink defiantly, resigned to his fate because he knew Raven would never leave him alone. He thought about this as the liquor burned his throat, and the finality of this realization lessened the effect of Raven’s presence. He lowered the drink in his hand and opened his eyes to the ceiling. She would never leave. Raven would remain, along with his guilt, for as long as Ed lived, like a vicious ghost, a haunting reminder of his betrayal. He felt the chill move over him, heard the sea crashing into the rocks, saw the crystal chandelier above him shake with the force of the gale outside.

He turned to face the vision. Raven stood up and moved towards him like a queen in her castle. In her hand was a gun. She held it out to him, and madness gave way to clarity as he took it and fell to his knees before her on the Axeminster rug. “Please,” he begged without conviction. “Go away. Please. I’ll do it. I swear I will.”

With her lips parted slightly in a small smile, Raven whispered, “Liar.”
Ed put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

And thus he was found, his face blown away and bloody on the Axminster rug, when those heavenly twins, Ellis and Currer Bell, arrived the next morning.

When she heard the news of her lover’s death, Raven Shore sneaked away from the boarding school she had been sent to after Grace’s suicide to attend his funeral. Ellis and Currer were there to offer the girl comfort and the promise of salvation. Raven stood between them and smiled.
The Wolf
Cheryl Kutcher

He puts up a wall of sharp teeth and claws
To guard himself from the unseen dangers
That lurk within the foreboding shadows.
He is a vicious, relentless hunter,
Dominant and cunning, patient and skilled,
His frightening talent outmatched by none.

He stalks through the dark forest, alone, one
With nature, tearing dirt with deadly claws,
Each step precisely placed by a paw skilled.
His eyes hold knowledge of waiting dangers
And glimmer with depth; he is the hunter,
Prowling stealthily through moonlit shadows.

Night’s mistress caresses him with shadows;
As he howls in pleasure, they become one.
To her, she draws him: a fearsome hunter,
Taut muscles rippling with power and claws
Promising blood, unspeakable dangers,
Imminent doom to challengers less skilled.

No matter how vicious and fiercely skilled,
He cannot always hide in the shadows.
Beneath the menace and seeming dangers,
Only the fortunate and the brave one
Has the honor to see past the great claws
To more than simply the brutal hunter.

Angry passion flares within the hunter
If his loved ones cross paths with foes ably skilled.
He snarls, bares his teeth, and unsheathes his claws
When sinister threats, concealed in shadows,
Imperil his kin and his little one,
Naïve of the ever-present dangers.
Instinctively, he shields them from dangers;  
The scent of ire arouses the hunter,  
Yet he is gentle, for his little one.  
With wisdom of hazards, as well as skilled  
With means to protect, this burden shadows  
All he does, torn by Worry’s icy claws.

Combating dangers constantly, the skilled,  
Majestic hunter slips through the shadows  
On starless nights; one, with devoted claws.
Witching Hours
James McAuley

She quivers, turquoise hanging from her ears, covering her breasts. My teeth dig into her flesh. I carry hatred, release my hurt in spasms of seed. The darkness of the room ebbs under the tanned glow of her curves. The moon sheds night, reflecting the sun onto taut sinews. She explains that I can make her spine curve cartoonish contortions but I cannot move her heart. I shut down her face with my words. Trembling, our hearts stop in the vacuum between day dreams and memories. My fingers dig like tears into the soft threads of her teddy bear. I rip him in half. White fluff sifts over her nakedness as I wipe her from my lips. In the dingy red shadows of a lava lamp, the night creeps, and my playlist dims. I search my phone for willing victims. Doubt is my cousin, foreign and familiar in the same moment, daring me to make impossible leaps. I count the pieces of my heart. I do the math. I break what is left into jagged shards and stab them into the fertile earth of passing women who don’t bother questioning the black hole in my chest.
Abused
Kathleen “Kitti” Ballard

I am the crumpled paper
covered in the fading marks that
were left on the page after
you tried to erase the meaning there.
The soft eraser burns my face
as it moves across the surface.
You blow and I am wiped
clean of dust and residue. Your
hand slaps me, and my marks
fade further into nothingness. You
rewrite your sentence, the pencil
never slowing as it dances,
leaving gray shades of words
over my mountainous landscape.
The dance stops and your finger,
soft and warm, runs me over,
and you smile, kiss me, then
leave me alone in the
cold dark room. Not even
looking back as you shut
the door, leaving me only with
the notes on our time
together.
I Dream of a Wasteland
Courtney Rector

Blistering wind scorches a path of trellised tears across the wasteland’s watery ink, the heat scratching at your back like a week-old scab, begging for fingers to pull it back and reveal its gaping maw. You try to resist, stuffing hands and heart into pockets of putrid air, buried beneath the breath of bitterness.

Who is this dark cannibal who beats at your back and breaks his beak upon your limbs? Who is this devil? This madman? To flee is fanciful, a childish delight of whimsy wrapped in satin and pricked with rejection.

You remember to thirst, if for no other reason than a man remembers to yearn for more than he is and what he was meant to be. Scratch that out on a hollow tombstone, in swirls of ebony and umber. Here lies . . .

Why even bother? Who will read your story? Who will care, when no one dares cross the cerebral shores of yesterday’s pain to give your eulogy? Breathe deep and taste the innocent regrets of tomorrow. Toast to memories so soon forgotten.
Dance! Revel! Dream!
For what is the dreamer without
his fanciful flights and his
tapestries of spun speech? He is
me, the pauper. The hunger,
the eternal wasteland of all the words
I could not write.
Today will be the day. I will come out of my shell and win his heart. Of course, professing my undying love and devotion in a cemetery seems to be a little morbid. My classmates and I are going to the Salem Lutheran Cemetery to do research for a geology class. I would go into further detail, but hell, I don’t even understand it. My plan is all worked out. I told Richard I needed a ride home after the tour in the cemetery was over. That’ll give us some alone time, and maybe I can tell him about my feelings. If I somehow do not screw it up.

Our trip is at seven o’clock in the morning, and since it is now October, that means cold weather for me. I dress both warmly and comfortably for this eerie trip. Pulling my mocha-colored, semi-short hair into a tiny pony tail, I take a glance at myself. My jeans hide my hips well, and my black sweater helps show off my hourglass figure. Giving myself a nod of approval, I apply lip gloss onto my naturally pouty lips. I’m not the prettiest girl in the world, but I know for damn sure that I am cute. After spraying some Juicy Couture onto my wrists and neck, I grab my panda backpack and head out the door.

I am the second person to arrive at the cemetery. After being dropped off by my mother, I wait patiently for the rest of my class. I try to imagine myself asking him to come inside my house or to go have breakfast together, but knowing me, I can’t pull off something like that gracefully. Seeing a red car pull up to park, I already know who it is, and my heart starts to race. He looks tired, but happy to see me as he waves while getting out of his little vehicle.

After locking his car, he walks up to me while fixing his glasses and putting on his black jacket. Richard is not like the typical Asian everyone pictures. He isn’t short, he doesn’t have an accent, he isn’t a Kung Fu master, and he most definitely doesn’t eat everything with chopsticks. He does, however, have black hair. I find him adorable, especially his braces.

“Good morning,” he says shyly, automatically putting a smile on my face.

“Morning, sicky. Feeling any better? I brought you some tissues and some cough drops,” I say jokingly. He doesn’t like people taking care of him or worrying about him.

He sighs and laughs a little. “You know I don’t need them. I’m feeling a little better though. Thanks for asking.”

“Well, I brought some for you just in case. Besides, I don’t want you to blow your nose into a leaf and accidentally get poison ivy!”

“Oh, of course—because I always tend to pick up dirty leaves and blow my nose into them.” He laughs at my reasons, and I can’t help but laugh too. That’s why I like him so much: I say ridiculous things and he doesn’t make fun of me for it.

“Okay, you got me there.” I continue my giggle fit as he calls me cute, which, of course, makes me blush a little. Coughing slightly, I get my composure settled, and I play with my hair and place my
bangs to the side of my forehead. “By the way, thank you again for giving me a lift. Mom needed my car
today; her car was giving her trouble. Also, I didn’t want to walk home from here. Knowing my luck, I
would run into a serial killer or something.”

“It’s alright. I don’t mind. Besides, you’d most likely run into a zombie before that happens.” We
both laugh again as our professor calls us to join into a group for our tour.

The tour is long and drags out, which is surprising because the graveyard isn’t that big. Taking
pictures and touching headstones seems disrespectful to me. I wouldn’t want some kids walking onto my
grave and taking photos of my headstone, but then again, I am getting cremated. I told my parents I want
my ashes put into a Hello Kitty jar. They laughed, of course, thinking I was joking; too bad I was being
absolutely serious.

While taking pictures and listening to our professor lecture about types of rocks used to make
headstones, I feel the ground beneath me getting soft. Before I can even look down, my foot goes through
the soft dirt and slips into a hidden hole in the ground. I yell as I fall onto the newly buried grave;
my shoulder hits the headstone as my backpack flies into someone else’s face. This cannot be happening
to me.

I hear the whole class laugh at me as I feel Richard trying to help me up. He asks if I am okay.
The only word I can mutter is “ouch,” which of course gets even more laughter from my classmates.
Richard grabs my backpack and guides me to a bench to look at my ankle, taking off my black Converse
while doing so. Trying to ignore the laughter, I brush the red-brown dirt off my sweater and jeans.

“Good news: your ankle looks okay. How is your head?” Richard says as he pulls leaves out of
my pony tail and slides my shoe back onto my foot.

“It’s fine, but my dignity is almost gone,” I say, trying not to get mad. When I get mad, I tend to
cry. It’s annoying, but that’s how my personality works, I guess. Getting up after tying my shoe, I brush
the rest of the dirt off my thighs. Cute outfit is ruined. Awesome.

“I’m sure your dignity is fine. Think of it this way: you have a funny story later.” He smiles at
me, and I feel a little bit better. I nod as he walks with me, making sure I do not fall or trip onto something
else. I am a hazard to my own health, you know.

I look back at the poor grave I fell on top of. No damage, thankfully. Still, I pat the soft dirt,
attending to smooth it out and fix the flowers I knocked over. I whisper “sorry” to the grave as well. I
know the recently deceased will not hear me, of course, but it makes me feel a little better. Again, I’ve
got this respect-for-the-dead type of thing. It could be because half of my family is of Native American
descent. Regardless, you don’t mess with the dead.

The class continues with the tour, and my mishap is completely forgotten when someone else
trips over a broken headstone. Looking at it from this angle, I can’t help but chuckle a little myself, but at
least I ask him if he is okay before laughing at him. Our group finishes our assignments first, as usual.
After saying our goodbyes to the rest of our group, we get into our vehicles. Well, I get into Richard’s vehicle. For a guy, his car is extremely clean. It even smells like donuts, which is funny because he doesn’t eat them. I play with the little cartoon bobblehead on his dashboard as he puts his backpack in the backseat. I think to myself that this is what we need—some time alone.

The drive home goes well. We joke and talk about silly things. He informs me he is going to a convention for Halloween weekend; I, of course, wish I could go with him. He tells me he’ll get me a present; this, of course, makes me happy. My last boyfriend never got me gifts, not that Richard is my boyfriend, but it would be nice if it were a possibility. As he pulls into my driveway, I curse the fact that I live so close by.

He puts his car in park and looks over at me. Getting a little nervous, I pull my backpack onto my lap as if it is a barrier. Why am I so anxious? Looking over at him, I smile a little. “Thanks again for the ride. I deeply appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem.” He, in turn, smiles but gets all shy with me.

Sighing to myself, I know this is not a good time to announce my feelings to him; he’ll probably have a heart attack or something. “Thanks again. You were my knight in shining armor today.”

I open the door as we both laugh. Not paying attention while getting out of the car, I hit the top of my head on the roof of his car and fall onto the pavement of my driveway.

I hear him mutter “Oh, shit,” as he takes his seat belt off and gets out. For the second time today, he helps me off the ground.

“Brittany, are you okay? Jeez, you are klutzy today. More than usual.” Which is true; even I find this to be ridiculous. This is why I will not tell him my feelings. I have already embarrassed myself enough today. If there are any more of my hazardous ways, I will throw my klutzy ass under a rock.

I hold my head as I look up towards his face, and for some odd reason, I think this is my window of opportunity. I smile a little and laugh, mainly at myself. “Yeah, I’m fine; maybe I’m crazy as hell because of all these bumps on my head. But, you know, if you are that worried, you should come inside and play a video game with me.” I wink and laugh, hoping I’m not making a complete fool of myself.

“Uh-huh, aren’t you worried about me beating you?” he asks as we enter my little house.

“Nah, I’m not too worried. I’ll even go easy on you,” I say, full of confidence, as I drag him onto my porch and start unlocking my door. “Fighting games are my specialty, you know.”

“Alright, you’re on. But if I win, what do I get?” he asks as we enter my little house.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll think of something you might like,” I say, trying to sound sexy. As if. Imagining me being sexy is like a pig learning to fly; it’s not going to happen. It is funny to think about, however.
We play games for a while in my living room. Unfortunately, due to my stubborn nature, I beat him way too many times. Little does he know, if he won, I would have given him a little kiss. Instead, I am given a little surprise myself. He shyly leans over and kisses my forehead ever so slightly. It is sweet, and I find him even more adorable when I see his normally tanned skin turn slightly peach.

“What was that for, huh?” I nudge him with my elbow while sitting cross-legged on the sofa next to him.

“Well, I thought since you hit your head so much today, I should kiss it better.”

This, of course, makes me say “Awe” in my head. I smile and hug his arm, rubbing his bicep with my fingertips. “Well, thank you for caring. Want to go again?” He nods, and I smile as we play the fighting game again. Maybe falling and hitting my head today wasn’t so bad after all. Too bad I didn’t fall on my face where my mouth is.
Appreciation
Jennifer Osobka

I’m a salty chunk of Milano Salami you
picked up at the neighborhood dolceria. As soon
as you take a bite of me, the
sodium chloride ions hit the tip of your
tongue and make you scrunch your nose. It’s
not a bad taste, just a little powerful,
a little smoky. There’s a lot of fat
in between the bits of pork—I am
the product of an Italian man
who liked to feed his little piggy a lot
of little napoleons and pizza pies. I was
sitting in a warm, dark closet for about
twenty-five years until someone opened the door, and
when they did—whoom! chopped me up as
soon as the old lady got her skinny,
gangly hands on me. Put me in between
slices of pumpernickel, psshh, pumpernickel, so I couldn’t
escape. Then the old witch tried to feed
me to some noisy women who were going
on about their stupid cats. They ate my legs.
Weren’t even Italian. But then the rest of
me got picked up by a good Catholic
boy who keeps me in the nice, cozy,
cold meat drawer in his fridge. His mama’s
gonna make a hero out of me.
Shore Lights
Asad “Asaeda” Badat
Bird, House, and Tree
Second Place Art Winner
Tammi Horrigan
Uh-Oh

Paige Jackson
Love Like Winter

Luis Lima
New Frontier

Mike O’Hara
Chicken

Amy Hammond
Lady of Leaf
First Place Art Winner
Linh Hoang
Wolf in Men’s Clothing

Corly Iris Galloway
Jellyfish
Third Place Art Winner

Meghan Persons
Arabic

Asad “Asaeda” Badat
Steer Skull

Linh Hoang

Calliope is Lone Star College-Tomball’s creative writing club, and it was formed to promote creative writing among students and alumni. The club holds bi-monthly meetings at which members share writing, discuss writing activities within the community and on campus, plan events, and discuss writing-related topics. As well, the club hosts one open mic per semester. Any student or former student interested in writing is welcome to join.

In the fall of 2011, Calliope and *Inkling* invited Dave Parsons to the LSC-Tomball campus for an interview and reading. The event was informal and open to students, staff, and community members. On November 29, 2011, Parsons met with a Tomball audience. He was generous and affable, reading several works for the gathering and discussing writing and life openly and warmly with Calliope interviewers. We’re pleased to include the interview (really, more of a conversation) he had with Calliope members in this volume of *Inkling*.

**CALLIOPE:** How long have you been writing poetry?

**PARSONS:** Since college, when I was in my twenties.

**CALLIOPE:** Can you talk about the role poetry has played in your life?

**PARSONS:** It saved my life for all practical purposes, in that one of the reasons I started writing poetry was to stop hitting people. I was a violent person when I was younger, and I learned I could write a poem,
and it expended the same amount of energy as getting in a fight. I got no stitches and didn’t get arrested. It made me more civilized and brought me into society. Really, I feel like I need to write.

**CALLIOPE:** You were a violent person? Were you boxing or playing football?

**PARSONS:** No, I was just violent. I came out of the Marine Corps in ‘62, active duty, and stayed in the Reserves for eight years. I was a Squad Leader and then a Recon Boat Team Leader.

**CALLIOPE:** What you think is the most important advice for aspiring poets?

**PARSONS:** Read. The key to being a successful poet is finding your voice—because everyone has—and I really mean literally *everyone* has—something unique to say. We’re all individuals, right? We’re like snowflakes. We all have something to report that’s individual and unique and that would be interesting to everybody. But you have to find your voice to do that. The process is to find another poet whose voice is similar to yours. It usually relates to their experience but not always. Then just try it on. Try them as a model, and then eventually you’ll be able to cast them off, and it’ll just be you. You can’t do it in two weeks. It’s a process because it comes from reading a lot of different voices and seeing what’s working for them that might work for you.

**CALLIOPE:** It’s a discovery.

**PARSONS:** Yes—it’s a journey, and don’t be in a hurry. There’s pressure to publish because you think you can say you’re a poet if you publish, but that’s not true. You’re a poet if you’re writing, if you’re working on the process. One thing the poet Ed Hirsch says all the time is that he hates it when people say poetry is a craft. It’s not a craft. It’s an art. The thing that makes art successful is that it’s a unique entity that ends up being what we keep and treasure. That’s what you’re trying for. You’re not making a quilt that’s like everybody else’s quilt. You’re doing something so unique that it’s going to be as unique as you. And even though it’s going to have its own life, it’s coming out of your uniqueness, so it’s art. That’s the thing I always come back to when I feel like I’ve gone off my road—and I usually go off the road by trying to please someone else.

**CALLIOPE:** The idea of voice—this is a very complex thing for new writers to try to grasp, and sometimes even established poets find it difficult.

**PARSONS:** It’s really difficult to identify. I guess the closest thing to describing it is that when you read someone, even if you’re reading Stephen King, you can know without seeing the title of the book that you’re reading Stephen King. That’s his voice. That’s something identifiable.

**CALLIOPE:** What are your responsibilities as Poet Laureate?
PARSONS: You’re representative of a lot of great poets in Texas, and one of the best things you get from it is a lot of invitations like this. I’ll be going to Abilene College, Tarlington State University, and Texas A&M in the next couple of months. I never got those invitations before. So, you get to go to these places and represent poetry. That’s a responsibility, and it’s also good for you because you get to experience all the poets in those places. You sit there, and they read, and you think: I’m glad they didn’t see that guy when they picked me. There are great writers in this state. That’s the joy of it—you get to go meet them, and they lionize you everywhere you go because you’re the designated person that year.

CALLIOPE: Do you have to write occasional poems?

PARSONS: They opened a new flag park in Conroe called The Lone Star Monument and Historical Flag Park, and because I was poet laureate of Montgomery County, I had to write a poem for that event, which is a difficult thing for me to do. I do not like it. So, yes, that has happened.

CALLIOPE: Do you ever have something published and wish you could change it later?

PARSONS: Oh yeah, all the time. In fact, my New and Selected Poems will be published by TCU Press this year as part of the laureate series, so I had to pick poems out of three books, and then we put new poems in. I changed which poems I wanted eight or nine times.

I think all artists feel that way. Some famous artist was recently caught sneaking into the New York Museum of Art. He was trying to change a painting in the permanent exhibit.

CALLIOPE: Are you ever surprised or appalled by responses to your work?

PARSONS: Well, that’s interesting. One of my most successful poems is entitled “Memories of Camp Matthews,” and it’s about learning how to shoot in the Marines. I composed it in Finnish Rhapsody, a form invented by the poet John Ashbery. In this form, you have two independent clauses in each line saying the same thing in a different way. I wrote it as an assignment in graduate school, so I didn’t take it seriously. Then, when I was getting ready to do my thesis, my advisor, Ed Hirsch, said, “You need one more poem.” I didn’t have any more poems. All I had was this exercise, so I used it as a stopgap.

When I was done with school, I didn’t send it out for publication until finally I had to send five poems to somebody, and I had only four, so I just grabbed it and stuck it in. Well, they published the poem, and I thought, God this poem must be better than I thought it was. Four months later, the editor said, “Hey—one of your poems was chosen for an anthology.” When I asked which one, he said, “Memories of Camp Matthews.” I was like, “What? You’ve got to be kidding me!” So now that’s one of my favorite poems.
CALLIOPE: Another great poem of yours is “Comforter.” There’s a particularly powerful line that stands out towards the end: “what was saved without being chosen.” Could you elaborate on what that line means to you?

PARSONS: In that particular poem, the idea was that in any close relationship there are moments that become poignant. They’re surprising sometimes—yet you realize that this is something you’ll never forget. It may not mean anything to someone else. It’s a very personal, intimate memory, and it can be the most benign of moments.

I have a poem called, “Evidence” in my new book, and it’s about one morning seeing my wife’s hair in the sink. We’re the opposite of each other—I’m a slob, and she’s the type who would immediately get that hair out of the sink. I loved seeing it there because it was symbolic and emblematic of us living together. It’s not exactly something you would think you’d write a poem about—finding hair in the sink—but it triggered a poem.

CALLIOPE: It’s absolutely beautiful.

PARSONS: Wow, thank you.

CALLIOPE: One of the things critics frequently say about your work is that the poems simultaneously achieve intimacy and universal appeal. Did you employ any specific techniques to create that balance?

PARSONS: Well, I have to say this—in writing advertising copy, which I did for twenty years, that’s all you’re concerned with—audience and universal appeal. Really, though, it’s a two-edged sword. You catch yourself writing ad copy again, which could be problematic, yet I think it’s one of the things that helped me, if what they say is true.

The motion of the poem, the image and all that is irrepressible—that’s what I have to write. But whenever I go back with that other side of my brain and start editing, I’m aware, just like I am writing ad copy, of the reader. So I think that’s been very helpful. You know, the poet Robert Phillips was in advertising for years and years, and if there’s anyone I identify with as a poet, it’s him. I don’t write like him. I wish I did. I’ve always told him when my poems grow up, they’re going to be just like his.

You can see in his work that he’s always aware of the reader, and some people are never aware when they’re editing their work. They just feel that the thing is what it is, and I have respect for that too. I think, generally, if it’s a good poem, it’s going to relate to someone. Also, this lack of awareness is what has come with the Billy Collins era of poetry. I’ve got mixed emotions about it. Billy Collins was the first poet on the national scene who really wrote approachable poetry that even a kid could get. In some ways,
it was great because it freed people up. They didn’t have this inhibition about poetry that it had to be some kind of code. But, on the other hand, it also caused a lot of not so good poems to be written.

CALLIOPE: Some people are scared by not having the rules anymore.

PARSONS: I’ve always liked to describe form poetry like a cup you pour tea into. Free verse is poetry you pour onto the table. It makes a form, and that’s the form that works. But now, especially with language poetry, it just seems there is no transforming moment. For me there has to be a transforming moment—a point when the poem is talking about something besides what it’s talking about—when there are two levels of communication going on, when there are writing strategies like metaphor and simile, and it’s not just gimmicky language. Some of this new poetry is just gimmicky language. I don’t think it really rises to the level of true poetry.

CALLIOPE: Can you give an example of what you mean by gimmicky language?

PARSONS: When you get to the end of the poem and realize the poet has talked about something in our lives, and he’s done it in a very clever way, but there are no writing strategies. There are no metaphors, no similes, no message beyond the message. We’re in a time of compressing everything. We’re all looking for things we can do quickly, like read a poem quickly and easily understand it. There’s nothing like, “I’ve got to read this again.” That’s another thing about it: you read it and you don’t have to read it again. There’s no reason to read it again. There’s no reason to ponder it. It has no depth. It is what it is. It’s simply like talking to someone who’s very intelligent and clever.

CALLIOPE: So it’s cleverness without the depth?

PARSONS: Right. I think that’s a good way to put it.

CALLIOPE: Did you ever think you would be a poet laureate and writer?

PARSONS: No, not until I entered the creative writing world through my teacher, Stanley Plumly. I had no intention of doing that. I made a really good living in advertising, and for me to decide to be a poet—I almost lost my marriage over it . . . again. Luckily, I didn’t, but it was like: “What? What are you doing? Are you crazy?” I quit advertising and took a fellowship at the University of Houston where the money earned went to pay tuition. It was a stupid business move. I guess I was 41, so to do that at that age was like . . .

CALLIOPE: . . . huge. Thank you for doing that.

PARSONS: Oh, thank you.
CALLIOPE: When you write a poem, do you let the form dictate the subject matter, or do you know in advance that you’ll write in, say, couplets?

PARSONS: No—I absolutely let the poem dictate the form every time. Sometimes, different aspects of the poem dictate it. If the poem is about two people, or myself and another person, I use couplets because it feels it ought to be couplets. I have a poem in Feathering Deep that is probably the most abstract looking of all my poems. It’s about a previous marriage, and it needed to be in that form to convey that situation. I can’t even tell you why. You just know when you see it on the page that it is working.

CALLIOPE: Who are the teachers you feel impacted you the most?

PARSONS: Stanley Plumly. He absolutely formed what I think about not only my writing, but about teaching writing, approaching the poem with aspiring writers. You just can’t teach it. You’re kind of there to show where the potholes are, but he was brilliant.

I’m a failed poet, the kind of writers that taught me, I should be Poet Laureate of the United States. That’s how good they were. I mean they were just wonderful. And I was just lucky to have them. I had Robert Pinsky, Howard Moss, poetry editor for The New Yorker for thirty years, Ed Hirsch, Gary Hongo, Frank Bidart, and Lisa Ziedner—she’s fiction. I also had Richard Howard. He was the professor who came into the classroom and said, “Don’t raise your hand to ask any questions. If you have a question see me after class and get an appointment—I’ve got too much to say.” Everybody was like, what arrogance . . . you could just see the class reaction, and after thirty minutes we realized he was right—he had too much to say! (laughs) He was brilliant.

CALLIOPE: Whose writing style impacted you the most?

PARSONS: Ed Hirsch’s writing impacted me a lot. Ted Hughes, not his form, but his ability to come at a subject from someplace you would just never believe. And his images are so incredible. And older poets like Yeats, of course. Some of Wallace Stevens’ stuff is stunning, and I use one of Wallace Stevens’ poems to introduce poetry, even though I don’t like the poem that much, “Antecdote of the Jar.” Richard Wilbur—some of his stuff, not all of it. He has a poem entitled, “The Writer” which is my favorite poem for teaching poetry. It’s got everything that you want to talk about the first time you sit down with people to talk about what makes a poem a poem.

CALLIOPE: You said you wrote a lot of bad poems, at what point did you did you say, “this is good?”

PARSONS: I’m still writing bad poems. For one thing, you start to notice things that get published. You send all this stuff out, and you think you know what you like, but they may surprise you when they choose something. So I have to say, publishing is problematic, but one of things where I think people
make mistakes is when they send stuff out. They send stuff to places they want to be published in. But they don’t think: "Is this poem really for that? Who’s reading this poem? I think that I recognized that in myself when I first started sending stuff out, so I became a lot smarter about that.

CALLIOPE: When you write, do you start with an idea you want to convey, or do you let the ideas flow from the writing?

PARSONS: I start with image, when some image strikes me. I’ll be driving down the road, and I’ll think of an image or see an image and just write it down, and that opens the portal to the poem. For “The Texian,” the poem I had do to for the Flag Park, I read three books about Texas history. I could teach that subject now. And, believe me, the story of Texas independence is not anything like you think it is. It’s really a lot more interesting and a lot more unbelievable how we got to be a nation before a state.

The people involved are the most interesting people. I recommend one book in particular, The Texas Iliad, which is a wonderful book about Texas history and which gives insights into the people and the battle.

CALLIOPE: One last question: This is a big question. You’re so active on the poetry scene. What do you see as the role of poetry in contemporary society?

PARSONS: Poetry has developed through academia. It used to be that people went out and experienced the world and wrote poems, but now most of the respected poetry is coming through writing programs. It’s been institutionalized, and it has the institution at its center, rather than being grassroots, which is what I think we need to try to reinstitute. I’m not against academics, though. I think that’s what creates informed readers. If MFA programs do nothing else, they create informed readers, which creates a market for small press books. So to me that’s fantastic. I wouldn’t have three books if it wasn’t for a small press or these programs. But for it to be the way it used to be—where it becomes a fabric of our society, for how we behave, for decision making and politics—it’s got to make that leap to not being looked at institutionally. I don’t know what to do about it, but I do think more academic poets need to take risks with what they write about.

CALLIOPE: Thank you for being with us and sharing your wisdom today.

PARSONS: My pleasure. Thank you for having me.
My first thought as I knock on the green front door of this stranger’s house is, I honestly thought Mary was kidding. I look across walls of the entranceway for any sign of a doorbell on our next-door neighbor’s house but find none. I slide my weight to my other leg and begin to tap my right boot against the welcome mat with some flowery pattern on it. I knock again. My sigh turns into a smile as I turn around to face her. She is leaning up against the brick entryway. She looks up at me, a deep wrinkle between her eyebrows.

“Well, babe, guess we’ll have to come back some other time,” I say, hoping she will just quit this already.

“William Thorton, this is not some kind of joke,” she says sternly. “Plus her damn Cadillac is sitting in the driveway, so she must be home.”

She forcibly pulls me behind her with whatever she can grab of my shirt to get to the front window and peeks in past the decorative pink curtains. I carefully touch her shoulder.

“She probably isn’t home. Maybe someone picked her up,” I say. “Yeah, maybe she’s been picked up.”

“Picked up by who, Will? Her demon spawn? I don’t think so. She can’t hide in there forever.” She looks up at me and I can see heat through her bright eyes. I step back with my hands in the air. She bangs on the door with her fist, a good thirty times.

I hear a car pull up into a driveway right across the street. Turning around, I see Nancy and Jim getting out of their car—their eyes already on our garage door. I begin to scratch my head. I really wish Mary had let me try and wash it off before dragging me over here. Our front door isn’t even closed. Nancy spots me first. She looks at me as if I were a stray puppy before waving quickly and following Jim into their house next door. I can feel warmth flush up my neck and into my cheeks. I can only imagine what they are saying.

I turn back around, and Mary is testing the door knob now. The jiggling seems to echo through the street.

“Babe, she probably doesn’t even know about it, and I’m sure her kids have nothing to do with it,” I say and immediately regret opening my mouth.

“Will. Don’t even start with me. I’ve told you how this woman looks at him. She AND her rotten kids. They look at him as if he weren’t human. They look at him like he’s a—another species, a monster. You can’t tell me you haven’t noticed!” Her eyes seem to be watering. She takes a deep breath and leans her back against the front door while still looking at me with wide, waiting brown eyes.
I speak softly. “I have noticed they keep their distance from him, and perhaps they aren’t his friend, but I don’t think they did this, Mary. I’m not sure who did, but it wasn’t them.”

She shakes her head. “No. You’re wrong, Will. For once, you are wrong. You don’t see what I see.”

I run my fingers through my hair and lean against the brick column of this stranger’s house. In a second, she is already knocking on the door again. I look at my watch, and my heart drops.

“Mary? What time did we tell him to be home from Kara’s house?”

She stops knocking and faces me.

“I told him 4:30. Why? What time is it?”

“It’s 4:00. I think we should drop this—” I refrain from saying nonsense. “—and try and wash it off before he gets home.”

Her brow scrunches.

“Mary, just like you, I think whoever did this should be called out on it, but this isn’t right. We shouldn’t just be knockin’ on this lady’s door because they look at Jason weirdly, all right?”

She looks down at the floor. Her blouse, silky blue and stained with sweat, is falling off one of her shoulders, and her bangs are wet and matted to one side of her forehead. She begins to nod.

“Okay, Will. Let’s clean it off before Jason sees it. You’re right. You’re always right.”

I open my arms, and she falls into me. I fix her blouse and brush her hair to the side.

“Babe, it is going to be alright, and Jason is right for this world, no matter what anyone else believes. You hear me?” I wait a few seconds, and then I can feel her nod in my chest.

As we walk towards the bright red letters, I have my arm around her sturdy, little shoulders. She walks inside to get the soap and sponges we use to clean the cars, plus some bleach, while I walk around the edge of our house and grab the bright green hose. I turn the nozzle as far as it can go—until the hot summer water shoots out of it. By the time I walk back to the scene of the crime, the water is chilled. From right to left, I spray, and the wet paint begins to drip and fade. First the F, then the A, and finally the G.
Finding Bottom
by Courtney Rector

The smell of menthol cigarettes and White Rain greeted me at the door. The VFW hall was packed, all of town having turned out for Friday night bingo. Lola, my esteemed mother-in-law, sat in the very front row, her putrid-pink muumuu-covered ass hugging every corner of the folding chair like a drowning man clinging to a life preserver.

I doubt she’d have ever known something was wrong if Gerald Teegs hadn’t dropped one of those numbered balls and sent it rolling down the center aisle.

“Jesus H. Christ, Gerald! That better not be my lucky seventeen,” Lola yelled at the shriveled gentlemen hovering over the spinning basket. Her voice echoed in the sudden silence, the only other sound the *tnk, tnk, tnk* of the basket as it continued to whirl.

Gerald continued to stare at me—failing to scurry after the dropped ball—and not even flinching when Lola elbowed her way to the bottom of the stage to glare up at him. Lucky for Gerald, by the time Lola made up her mind to scale the stage to give the old-timer a bitchin’, she seemed to notice the disheartening quiet that had settled over the room.

I didn’t take my eyes off her orange head, just watched patiently as she turned around and got her first look at me.

“You crazy bitch!” Lola shrieked. “What the hell have you done?”

I think I smiled then. Must have. I must have smiled as she bulldozed her way past gaping bystanders, because something made her draw up short of reaching me. Maybe it was the look in my eye, not the smile. Maybe it was the blood.

The fingers of my right hand twitched, and I took my eyes from Lola’s face to stare at them. Fresh pearls of crimson slipped from my fingertips, dotting the pale linoleum at my feet like freckles on ivory skin.

On my wedding day, two long years ago, Lola looked me up and down as we stood together in the church foyer and told me my eyes weren’t right, the irises too dark for a girl with my fair skin. “Like looking into a dark cave,” she’d said. “The kind that don’t have no bottom.”

A mama dog had wandered up to our trailer sometime during the night. I found her underneath the back stoop just before Ray left for work, her belly bloated with puppies and her fur coated in ticks. She was some kinda shepherd mix—one eye bright blue and the other dark as mud, but with that look in her eye that said, “I know you don’t want me, but I got no place else to go.” I tucked her tail further up under the house and went inside to pack Ray’s lunch.
Ray’d been working at the trailer plant for longer than we’d been married. He had friends there, and his boss didn’t give him too much hell—not sure if that was on account of Ray’s family name or his reputation for punching first and asking questions later. Fortunately, the company had a strict no-drinking policy during work hours, and that kept Ray and his cronies from getting into too much trouble during the day. Durham Trailers didn’t care what its employees did once they clocked out, but they were real proud of their safety record and quick to terminate anyone they thought would tarnish it.

“There better not be any of that brown mustard on my sandwich, Dakota,” Ray said as he made his way out of the bedroom and into our tiny kitchen. He was concentrating on fastening his belt buckle as he walked, not bothering to really look at me as he spoke. Not that I wanted him to look at me. Most days I just wanted him to forget I even existed.

He finished with his belt and pulled open the fridge door, saying, “I swear sometimes I think I married the dumbest bitch in the county. Can’t tell brown from yellow.” Grabbing a Bud Light from the top shelf, he made quick work of the twist-top while reaching into the fridge door and snagging the bottle of French’s with his free hand. He still hadn’t looked directly at me, but even as he guzzled his morning beer, he managed to toss the bottle of mustard so that it smacked into my coffee mug, knocking it over. I barely had time to rescue his two sandwiches from being drowned in the bitter brew. “Clumsy bitch,” he said.

I wrapped the sandwiches in a paper towel and placed them in his lunch sack before unwinding a half dozen or so sheets and setting to cleaning up my mess. “I told you I didn’t use brown mustard last time,” I said. “I don’t even buy it anymore ’cause I know you hate it.”

It was stupid. I knew better.

The refrigerator door slammed shut with such force that it rattled the cabinets, and in the next instant I was pinned between Ray and the kitchen counter, his left hand in my hair and my soft belly pressed into the sharp edge of the Formica. “See. Stupid,” he said, shoving his hard chest against my back and making tears prick my eyes. “‘Cause it sounds like you just called me a liar.”

“No, Ray,” I whispered. “I just meant that I learned my lesson last time.”

He didn’t let up an inch as he ran the cold mouth of the beer bottle down the side of my neck, just kept me pressed firmly in place like he had all the time in the world. The stench of beer turned my stomach almost as much as his touch. “That’s the trouble with you, Dakota. You’re too stupid to learn.”

I heard whimpering, and it took Ray asking, “What the fuck is that?” for me to realize it hadn’t come from me. He was off me and headed for the back door in an instant.

The mama dog. Oh, no—

“You’re gonna be late for work again,” I said just as his hand grasped the doorknob.
“Fuck.” He stopped and turned around, and I did my best to look anywhere but at that door. “You hiding something from me, Dakota?”

I concentrated on his work boots, on the smears of axle grease and red clay marring the tops. “I found an old mama dog out back this morning. Looks like she’ll drop pups soon. Maybe even today.” It didn’t pay to lie to Ray; he’d make you regret it. My only hope was to get him to leave before he had a chance to do something awful.

“Just what we need around here. Another fucking mouth to feed.”

My breakfast churned in my stomach.

I looked at the clock on the microwave and then at his chest. “It’s ten ‘till,” I said. “You can still make it on time if you hurry.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I’ll call the pound. Have ‘em send out one of the boys to pick her up before you get home.”

I watched him move toward me and resisted the urge to flinch when he grasped my chin with hard fingers. “You do that.” He chuckled and I knew I wouldn’t like what he said next. “Then again, I could always use the target practice.”

He was out the door and in his truck before I realized I was crying. I listened to the sound of his pickup ripping up the gravel drive as I slid to the floor. Outside, the mama dog started her whimpering again, and for a few moments we were just two lonely mothers with nowhere to run.

I cleaned up the mess in the kitchen and then phoned county services. They promised to send someone out before nightfall despite my pleas for immediate assistance and repeated calls. Melba, the dispatcher, told me before she hung up on me the last time to stop pestering her ‘cause I was shit out of luck.

Five hours later, no one from county services had arrived, and two pups had already been welcomed to the world. They were dark, wiggly splotches of fur, and both looked healthy enough despite their mama’s ragged condition. She was struggling with delivery of the third when I heard a vehicle cross the cattle guard and sweep into the front yard. Ray wasn’t due to get off work for another couple hours, and he and his buddies from the plant always headed to the bar after their Friday shift, so I figured it was the mailman, Gus, coming to complain about the bullet holes in the mailbox again.

When I rounded the corner of the house to cross into the front yard, my feet went numb and I stumbled to a halt at the edge of our dirt drive. It wasn’t Gus.

“You’re early,” I said.

Ray crawled out of the truck cab and took one look at the stains on the front of my jeans, at the smears criss-crossing my t-shirt. He reached back inside the cab, grabbed his hunting rifle off the gun rack and strode past me with a smile.
“They’re on their way to get her.” I ran to keep up with his long stride. “Melba promised they’d get someone out here today.” I grabbed his arm to hold him back and ended up sprawled on the grass, his long shadow looming over me. My left cheek stung and I placed my hand over it to quell the heat.

“If you’re smart, you’ll stay on your back,” he said. “Only place you belong.” He spat a long line of chew onto the ground beside me and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. Then he was gone around the corner, and I was left scrambling to haul myself out of the dirt and catch up with him.

The first two blasts sounded as I made it to my feet and rushed around the corner of the trailer into the backyard. The third one came as I plowed into his larger frame, my arms braced around the slight curve of my belly for safety. For a moment, we were nothing more than a tangle of arms and legs, and then I was flat on my back again with his thighs straddling my hips. Ray fought to keep hold of the gun and pin my arms down at the same time.

“You fucking bastard!” I yelled as I scratched and clawed in an attempt to free myself.

Ray let go of the rifle in favor of snatching me by the hair with both hands and slamming my head into the dry dirt. Once. Twice. Three times. I tasted blood in my mouth and a mixture of salty tears and East Texas red clay. Then my vision clouded and it didn’t hurt anymore.

I woke up after dark, lying in the dirt, to the buzz of mosquitoes and the licking sounds the mama dog made as she worked to clean her babies. Rolling onto my side, I opened my eyes and searched the long shadows under the trailer for her and the puppies. I wished I’d kept my eyes closed. The mama dog looked up at me for a moment, whimpered, and set back to bathing the blood from her pups. I didn’t have the heart to make her stop. To yell at her that there was no point anymore.

Instead I hauled my aching body off the ground. Once on my feet, I steadied my weight with one hand against the house. I was sore all over. Head to toe. Not only did I have a headache from hell, but two fingers on my left hand wouldn’t stand right, and my right knee throbbed. I didn’t care about the knee or the headache or even the damn fingers. I only cared about the empty ache in the pit of my stomach. Instinctively, I searched out the softness of my belly with one shaking hand even as I felt a warm trail of fresh blood soak through my jeans and trail down my leg.

There was light shining from the windows, flickering an array of colors on the ground at my feet, and I knew Ray was parked in front of the television, beer in hand. Like always.

I managed to open the backdoor without a whisper of a sound. Easing inside, I kept close watch on the back of his head as I walked the few feet into the kitchen. It wasn’t until I made it to the island that I realized what Ray was watching—our wedding video. I grasped the counter hard with both hands, the knuckles blanching white as I fought to stay standing.
I closed my eyes tight against the images on the screen. Me in a hand-me-down wedding gown, Baby’s Breath sprinkled throughout my thick braid of red hair. Ray in his daddy’s suit, staring at me like I was the prize of Dunbar County and he couldn’t wait to get me alone. Me so naïve. So blind.

I heard the preacher ask if any man knew a reason why these two people shouldn’t be joined as I turned back towards the door, tracing my path by the drops of blood that ran down my thighs and onto the linoleum.

I stood there for a moment, hating Ray Leavens for the two years of hell he’d put me through. For murdering those poor pups. For taking away every bit of hope I’d ever managed to scrape up.

“Hope,” I whispered so low only I could hear. That could’ve been her name. The sweet baby I’d never have a chance to hold.

I picked up the rifle he’d left leaned against the wall by the backdoor as I thought about the last thing Ray Leavens would ever take from me.
Late Nights and Lovers’ Fights
Racheal Robertson

I have as we do lips that speak
only to let your mouth move. Wordless.
In the silence your vowels fall tired and
short, so we sit in silence as the
walls sink in, lights off, the moon shuts
down in death behind the clouds concealing grey
screaming. The nights of feelings not said.
Fall through the rabbit hole, your mind,
mine as well, as we rehearsed we go
together. Follow the trail to reach your dream
in the shallow pool. Waiting. Your swim
is weak, you strange fish. Torrid taunts
of tantrum and turmoil rush cold waves
against your cheek. Cry sprays foam, seeps deep
in your pores and secretes through motionless
mouths the thoughts you think, but nothing.
Your goal is reached. Relief. It’s splendor
and too it comes, you sleep, not I.
No. I am spackle spaced out on
the plain white ceiling collecting dust and casting
shadows on the air between my particles,
you’re water. I spread free, cry and sprinkle
on the window caught between the dead fly
and the spider on the web in the
window sill. A quick blow, from where?
The web breaks free its hold as the
fly and I as one tumble down
the floor side. Look up, the spider died
and the sun’s rays shine through for
me to see the morning once more.
The trouble with a flying refrigerator is you never know where it is going to land. I watched the giant, golden refrigerator in the back of a pickup driving by jump up in the air after the truck hit a bump in the road. It began sailing through the air, almost gracefully like a trapeze artist, flying in my direction, a gift from Heaven. It landed in the street, right in front of where I was standing. Cars were swerving around it and honking at the refrigerator like it landed there on purpose. The Dodge just kept on going, and they never even looked back except for the giant black and brown, hairy dog hanging his head out of the window barking at me.

This refrigerator was a sign that my life was about to change. The city gave me what I needed when I needed it. I had my favorite dumpster I slept in. They usually didn’t throw food trash in my dumpster, and that was good because it kept the rats away. Most days I found food that was not too rotten, in the restaurant dumpsters down the street. Joe, who ran the gas station at my corner, let me use his facilities and even gave me coffee on cold days. Occasionally, people brought me food or gave me money. Now the city had given me a refrigerator.

I looked at my beautiful, new refrigerator. It was gold and only had a few scratches from its recent landing. In my eyes, this could be the start of my new life. I could sell this refrigerator. Joe from the gas station might buy it. The truck could come back; they would give me a nice reward for finding their refrigerator. I was dreaming of all the money I was going to get when the blare of a horn reminded me that I had better get this refrigerator out of the road. I tipped it up right and walked it back and forth until I had it all the way up on the curb. I wondered about who it belonged to before.

I started to picture the house and the family that this refrigerator came from. The house was warm and inviting. The husband and wife were happy, and the wife always cooked meals that were delicious. They had been married for ten years and had one boy and one girl. They sat around their huge, rock fireplace at night playing board games and eating popcorn. They never argued and the children made good grades.

They would be so happy I found the refrigerator that they would invite me to their house to eat a meal with them. We could become friends. As their way of thanking me, they might even offer to let me live with them.

The Dodge came driving up, waking me up from my daydream. A lady with gigantic blonde hair the size of a rosebush and dressed from head to toe in cotton candy pink got out of her truck. Even her toenails were pink. She was the most strikingly beautiful woman I had ever seen. She smelled like flowers and cigarette smoke.

She said, “That’s my refrigerator. Thank you so much for finding it. I didn’t notice when it flew out of the truck.” The dog growled at me, warning me not to get too close. His fur was standing straight out.
I smoothed my hair back with my hand. “No problem, ma’am,” I said in my most courteous voice. “I worked really hard to get it out of the road to keep it safe for you. I think I even strained my back.” I moaned slightly to let her know how much I was hurting. I smiled at her and showed most of my teeth.

“How will I ever get the refrigerator back in my truck?” she asked. She looked unhappy. “I was on my way to donate it to the homeless shelter. We just had this old thing in the garage, so I thought I would help the needy. You’ve got to help others when you can.” Her words came out in a rush, and she wasn’t really talking to me but at me in the way people talk when they are talking to themselves.

“Sure thing, ma’am, I would be happy to help you. My name is Reginald Walker. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” I reached out to shake her hand after I wiped my hand on my pants to make sure it wasn’t too dirty for such a lovely lady to touch. “You can call me Reggie.”

She held out one finger to me and gingerly shook my hand, introducing herself as Gretchen. “When was the last time you had a bath?” she asked. She began digging in her purse for something, pulled out a small clear bottle, and began rubbing the clear liquid all over her hands. She offered some to me.

“Hand sanitizer,” she said and smiled.

I shook my head no, and she dropped it back in her purse.

“It’s been a while since I had a bath, ma’am. Joe from the gas station over there—” I nodded my head towards the station, “—lets me wash up in his facilities, but there’s really nowhere for a guy like me to shower.”

“Are you homeless?” she asked, taking a step back from me. She pulled the hand sanitizer out of her purse and squirted some more on her hands and began rubbing it on her forearms.

Joe from the gas station waved. “Hey, buddy, what you got there?”

“My refrigerator,” Gretchen said. “He is about to load it in my truck. Weren’t you Reggie? It flew out of my truck. Wouldn’t you like to help him?”

Joe held his hands out in front of him and said, “It’s not my problem, lady. I gotta get back to work. Ol’ Reg here will help you out. He’s a strong one. This guy right here is.” He patted me on the back and walked back to the gas station. “See you tomorrow, buddy.” He waved his hand over his head as he walked away.

She then walked out into the street and began waving her arms at the passing cars. She stood in the middle of the lane blocking traffic. Finally, after a few minutes, an older model light blue Dodge Dart pulled into the gas station.

All I could see of the people in the car was some white curly hair sticking up above the dashboard. Then I noticed that it was two little old ladies as they slowly got out of the car. Both of them had on gigantic sunglasses that wrapped around the side and swallowed half of their faces, along with tennis shoes they wore with their jogging suits.
“Are you okay, honey?” the driver asked Gretchen. “You look like you are in distress.”

The passenger walked over to me and said, “Hi, I’m Myrna. Do you want some of my home-made oatmeal raisin cookies?” She handed me a baggie of cookies tied up with a purple ribbon. “She smiled and reached her hand out to me and shook my hand. She didn’t even wipe her hand on her pants afterwards.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Myrna walked over to Gretchen and the three ladies started talking. While they chatted, I began straining and grunting, trying to lift the refrigerator onto Gretchen’s truck. My hands were slippery with sweat, so every time I got a good grip on it, my hands would slide down the sides. I squatted down, grabbed hold of the giant monstrosity, and managed to hoist it onto Gretchen’s truck. The sweat was rolling down my back and sides. My shirt was soaked.

“Calm down, honey,” the driver said to Gretchen. “Someone will stop and help.”

I walked over to the ladies and tapped Gretchen on the shoulder.

“It’s in your truck,” I said. “Would you like me to ride in the back so it won’t fly out again?” The dog began barking.

“Hush, Rufus!” she yelled at the dog. She pulled a milk bone out of her purse and handed it to me. “Would you give this to him? Maybe he’ll quit barking at you if you give him this treat. And yes, I think that would be great.”

She had one of those split windows in the back of the truck cab, and Rufus was sticking his head out of the window and growling at me. Slowly, I crawled on my hands and knees up to him in the bed of the truck and held the treat out to him, stretching my arm out as far as it would go, so if he decided I would be a better treat, I could get away quickly. He grabbed it with his mouth and almost inhaled it, and then began wagging his tail and ducked his head down so I would pet him. He started licking my hands.

Myrna walked over to the truck and said to me, “We are going to follow you to the shelter. Oh, here’s your cookies. I think you must have dropped them when you were loading the refrigerator in the truck.” Her face had permanent smile lines etched in to her wrinkles. This face had smiled more than frowned in her long life. Her bright blue eyes twinkled as she gave me one of her sweet smiles.

I sat with my back resting against the refrigerator. Rufus climbed through the window into the back of the truck with me and lay next to me with his head on my lap, all the way to the shelter. He would raise his head up occasionally and sniff the air and turn to look at me. I scratched his head and enjoyed his company. The wind blew in our faces, and I shared my cookies with him. He thanked me by licking my face and letting me scratch his head. The wind blowing through my hair reminded me of the time I used to have a motorcycle. I loved riding through the winding country roads, feeling the sting of bugs on my cheeks and the freedom of the open road in front of me. I pushed the thoughts of my old life out of my mind as I sat in the truck bed and soaked up the fresh air, the sun on my face, the unconditional love of a dog and some of the best oatmeal cookies I had ever eaten.
We got to the plain white building that was the shelter. I had been here before once or twice. However, this place had too many rules for a free-spirited guy like me. Gretchen hopped out of her truck and walked into the shelter.

Myrna and her friend walked over to the truck.

“Reggie, would you like to come in with us? We work here as volunteers. We will make sure you get in today. You can get some clean clothes and a hot meal. You can even get some more of my cookies,” Myrna said and patted my hand.

“No, ma’am, this place isn’t for me. They want you to stick to a schedule and punch a time clock. I just don’t fit in here,” I said. “Besides, the city takes care of me.”

“Ida and I were afraid you might say that. We have seen you on the corner with your sign. It breaks our heart to see a young man like you on the street. You look so much like my son Douglas,” she said. Myrna’s eyes started to get kinda watery. “He was a drug addict. The police found his body in a dumpster. He had my picture in his pocket with my phone number written on the back. That’s how I found out. The police called me to tell me he died of a drug overdose. I didn’t know where he was for the last five years of his life. Let us help you, son. Please.” She looked at me pleadingly. “We have an idea we want to present to you.”

“I’m listening,” I said.

“Sometimes we take on special projects and give a little extra help to people that might need it.”

“We have an apartment above the garage and you can stay there in exchange for some work around the house,” Ida said. “Myrna and I share my house since we lost our families.”

“Tonight, we are going to play board games and pop popcorn. You would be welcome to join us. Wouldn’t you like to sleep in a nice bed with clean sheets, son?” Ida said. “We want to see you get on your feet.”

The director of the shelter, Pastor Frank, came out with three men, Gretchen, and a dolly.

“Reggie, I hear you saved this refrigerator for us and helped Gretchen put it on the truck. How’s it going?” he said. He and some of his teams went out feeding the homeless. He always tried to find me and bring me food. He never gave up on trying to get me into his program. I stood up and motioned for Rufus to get back in the cab.

“Hi, Pastor Frank. It’s nice to see you again,” I said.

“Are you ready to get off the street yet?” He said to me.

Ida and Myna smiled at me kindly like my mom used to when she was alive.

“Maybe. These ladies here said they would give me a place to stay in exchange for some work.”

He winked at the women and said, “Reggie is your next Good Samaritan project?” They nodded to him. “And Gretchen, thank you for the refrigerator. We will put it to good use.”

Gretchen was grinning and said to me, “I’m so happy I helped a homeless person today.”
I patted the refrigerator and said good-bye to it before the guys took it away. “Stay cool, my friend.” I laughed to myself at my joke.

The three guys lifted the refrigerator out of the truck effortlessly and onto the dolly before I could even help them.

“Um, ladies,” I said as I remembered there was a restroom at the back of the building. “I’m gonna go use the facilities before we get going if that’s alright with you.”

Ida nodded to me.

I walked to the back of the building and could feel my heart racing. I was sweating and my head began to swim. How could I tell those sweet ladies I couldn’t fit into their world? I would disappoint them like I always did everyone else in my life. I began walking through the field behind the shelter. I had to get away from them. As I kept walking, my head began to clear, and my heart slowed down. I felt a cold, wet nose on my hand.

“Rufus. What are you doing here, buddy?” I could hear Gretchen calling him in the distance. He whined at me. “Go home,” I said to him in my firmest voice and pointed in the direction of Gretchen’s voice. He lay on the ground and stared at me with those big brown eyes. I started walking again and looked back at Rufus. He was crawling on his belly trying to follow me and whining. When he saw me looking at him, he stood up and began wagging his tail. I swear he was smiling at me. “All right, come on, boy; let’s see what the city has for dinner.”
Third Place Poetry Winner

Long Distance
Madison Paige Estes

Long
An entire ocean parts us for now.
I ache for you with an affection and desire
expanding like a conflagration, started with a single spark.
Like a wildfire devouring oxygen, my love and lust consume
my consciousness and even my dreams where I lack all control.
I stay up wondering what it will feel like to fall asleep next to you
or to wake up so tangled in each other that we don’t know or care
which limbs belong to whom, where one ends and another begins.
I think about how your touch will feel, hot and surprising,
like the tip of a flickering flame, yet at the same time,
it will feel familiar as well because I know you.
I know the hand behind the tender touch.
I know the face that stares into mine
with an expression of love
that matches my own.
I think of the day we
close the distance
between
us.
I was following the blue footprints criss-crossed with black scuff marks to Ms. Madison’s three-year-old classroom. Inside I was amused at how giant my size thirteen Vans looked next to these blue ones. The walls were a clean white, plastered with butterflies made out of handprints and stick figure families and dogs bigger than houses. Behind each pale door were shrieks and giggles.

Stopping with the footprints, I looked into the open classroom full of kids, all sitting at round tables on miniature chairs that were still too tall for some to touch the ground.

Immediately I scanned the heads for my nephew as they all turned wide-eyed to look at the new face in the room. My eyes landed on him about the time he looked up.

“Uncle Ryry!” he screamed as he jumped up and ran to me wearing that smile that made my heart turn to jelly as another similar face flashed in my head.

When Ashley had called me earlier, the pores on my hands had opened up as I struggled to slide the phone into talk, cursing myself for getting a touch screen.

“What’s the matter?” I answered without a hello.

“It’s nothing. I just need you to pick up Andrew and meet us at the cemetery.” Like most favors to Ashley, this was not a question.

I ran through the reasons I couldn’t, wanting to go curl back in my bed with the pillow that smelled like him under my head like I was sleeping on his chest again.

“It’s Bex. I can’t leave her now, not today,” she said, and all my excuses left.

“Okay, where is his class?”

“No, your sister already called ahead and arranged everything.” Her smile got so big, I wondered if it hurt her face.

“Where’s Mommy?” he asked, those big brown eyes staring at me, making the face flash in my vision again.

“I’m going to take you to her,” I said, noticing the entire room’s eyes on us and the teacher approaching.

“You must be the uncle,” she said. I couldn’t help but think that, for stating such an obvious thing, it was really good she was only teaching three-year-olds.

“Yeah, do I need to sign anything?”

“No, your sister already called ahead and arranged everything.” Her smile got so big, I wondered if it hurt her face.

A giggle erupted from the boy in my arms. “She’s not his sister!”
The smile fell, and she looked at me closely. “Only family can pick up. It is in the handbook they are given at the beginning of the year.”

“Marriage.” I held up my hand, showing her the ring, hoping she didn’t ask any more questions because I could already feel that familiar knot at the back of my throat.

“Oh.”
Something in her voice told me she knew.

“These refs are just like the rest in the league,” my dad screamed at the football game on the screen. “I don’t know what happened, but none of them can make a call worth shit. See! See that pass right there? Come on, ref! Get your head out your ass! He dropped that!” His voice boomed off the wood paneling on the walls and the tile floor.

This was our ritual. After dinner during football season, my dad and I would come downstairs to the den and turn on the game. He always sat in his big old recliner that squeaked and jumped every time he flung forward to yell about the refs, the coaches, the players, the fans not happy enough to be there, or a touchdown. I opted for the long leather couch so I could stretch out.

This night though, I was sitting on the far edge away from him, running over the words I needed to say in my head. I reached in my pocket, playing with the ring Andrew gave me the night before. Mom had been in on it, fixing my dad’s favorite meal and laughing at all of his boring stories from the day. His team was winning.

It was then, or I never would.

“Dad,” I said softly, my voice popping like the old records Mom played around the house.

He didn’t hear me, and I felt my courage slipping out with every breath I took. I cleared my throat and tried again, spitting it all out with the last of my strength, “Dad, I’m gay.”

He kept staring forward at the TV, but I could tell he had heard me because he stopped talking. His hand was busy turning his wedding ring around his finger with his thumb.

“I met someone,” I continued, hoping if I told him how happy I was that he would see. “I love him, and we are talking about getting married.”

At these words he looked at me. I couldn’t place the look in his eyes. There were too many emotions in them. He sat there studying my face for a minute until the silence was broken by a whistle on the screen and a scream of “Touchdown Broncos!” that rang out of the speakers.

“You know,” my dad said with a half smile, “the thing about refs these days is they may not always make the calls I want them to make because it makes the game harder for my team, but that doesn’t stop them. No matter how many times they make those calls, I still love football.” As he said this, he leaned back in his chair with a smile like he had done something good.

I knew this was his way of telling me that he loved me. It wasn’t the exact words, and it didn’t need to be.
I was lucky.

Later that same night I got a call from Andrew. I don’t know if it was the fact that he didn’t respond when I answered with “Hey, Angel” or if it was the sniff, but I could tell he wasn’t lucky like me.

“I’m on my way,” I said, picking up my keys and walking out the door. “Stay on the line with me until I get there.”

“I love you, Ryan.” His voice sounded like a pot bubbling over.

“I love you, too.”

When I got to his house, he was sitting in the bed of his truck, illuminated by the streetlight above, with a box next to him full of his stuff. His forehead was in his hands, his phone still against his ear. Without a word, I climbed into the truck and pulled him onto my chest.

The familiar scruff on his cheek scratched into my neck. The minute my arms were around him, it was like his body deflated, and I felt my shirt grow wet. I squeezed tighter, kissing the side of his head. “I love you for forever and a day.”

We lay there long after my arms grew numb and his tears ran out—just two warm bodies in the cold night air, waiting for the sun.

After that night he moved in with me.

A few nights later, we were spread out on the couch in the den, which had been transformed into Andrew’s room, watching some horrible sitcom rerun. My head was in Andrew’s lap, and his fingers were absentmindedly playing with my hair. I felt like I was in heaven.

I picked up his other hand off my stomach and kissed the ring I bought for him, lacing our fingers together. When I looked up, I saw him looking back at me. His brown eyes were staring into mine like I was something amazing and new, and part of me never wanted to get off this couch or look away.

The door opened at the top of the stairs, breaking the silence and making us both jump.

“Ryan.” My dad’s voice bounced down the stairs. “Can we talk about something?”

“Sure, one sec. I will be right up.”

“No, I will come down there,” he said as I heard him step on the second to top stair that never failed to squeal.

I sat up quickly, running through ways I could sit that wouldn’t make my dad uncomfortable. My parents had been very accepting of Andrew, but I could tell some things still bothered my dad. This maybe should have bothered me more, but Andrew made sure I was thankful.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him chuckling. He pulled me back next to him with the hand I was still holding and kissed my forehead.

“You are gonna get worry lines before you are twenty-five if you keep that face up.”

As my dad came around the couch, he stopped short, looking at Andrew. “You’re a Broncos fan?”

The excitement tumbled out clearly in his voice as he saw the jersey Andrew had on.
“Yes, sir, ever since I was twelve. John Elway was the reason I became a quarterback.”
“Elway was a legend,” my dad said, looking at Andrew like he was a completely new person.
“Dad, you said you wanted to talk about something?” I asked, as a happy feeling raced around my veins.
“Oh, yeah right,” he said sitting down in his chair, shaking his head like a dog would shake off water. “I was wondering if you were thinking about going to that march thing they do?”
“The Pride Parade?” I shifted slightly into Andrew, worried where this could be going.
“Yes, that thing, ‘cause we have a reputation to keep up. With the business and all.”
“Yeah, and . . .” I felt my anger build up in my guts and felt Andrew lean forward like he was going to take any hurtful words before they got to me.
“And this family stands up for their rights. It would be a shame if you didn’t stand up for yours.”
He made eye contact with me for the first time since I showed up with Andrew at the door. “Just think about it.”
“I will,” I said, too stunned to think of anything else to say.
Two months later, Andrew and I took the day long road trip to San Francisco and walked the entire way holding hands. At one spot, there was a group of protestors screaming at the people walking by and holding up signs. Andrew pulled me over so we were right in front of them and kissed me. At first, all I could think was what they would do, but then they all faded away. My hand came up to the back of his head just in time to feel something cool and metal hit him hard.
“Fuck,” he whispered under his breath. He dropped his head onto my shoulder and brought his hand up under mine to rub the impacted spot. I pulled him farther away and turned him around so that I was between him and any other flying ignorance.
“Baby, are you okay?”
“Yeah,” he said, looking up into my eyes and offering me half a smile.
“I am going to kill whoever . . .” The rest of my sentence was cut off by his lips on mine again.
“Let’s get married.”
“What?” My brain was trying to fight through the fog of anger and the lingering mist from that kiss.
“We are halfway to Canada now, and we both have our passports.” He pulled my hands up to his chest. “I want to be able to call you my husband.”
Those words set a thousand smiles free in my stomach as one escaped out my mouth.
“Yes!” I screamed, jumping into his arms, our smiles meeting in the middle.
That next evening we eloped in a small chapel. Even with no one there and both of us in rented suits that didn’t fit us right, it was the best day of my life. We stayed a night in a cheap motel, sharing more love than some people have in a lifetime.
When we returned, my mother was not happy, but I promised her we would renew our vows and do a big wedding on our first anniversary.
Three months after that, a year ago today, I got the call that ripped everything apart. I remember I was sitting on the couch of our small apartment, trying to go through my music theory homework, when the phone rang. The moment it did, my stomach dropped. Andrew.

“Ashley,” I said, hearing the hope in my own voice.

“Something’s happened,” she barely whispered. “Get to the hospital.”

The coldness of the hospital rushed out the sliding glass doors to meet me. I was a robot programmed to do one thing, and that was to find the piece of me that was hidden here.

Walking up to the counter, I looked at the nurse. “Andrew Sims.”

“One moment please,” she said, bored as she walked out of sight.

When she returned, she looked up at me. “Are you family?”

“Yes, would you please just tell me where the fuck my husband is?” My voice snapped as my calm reserve faded and desperation set in. Something was really wrong.

“The rest of your family is in our back waiting room. I will take you to them.”

When I got to the back room, I immediately registered three things: the doctor was in the room, Ashley was clutching my nephew, walking back and forth crying, and Bex was curled up in a chair, and there was blood on her shirt.

“What’s going on? How is he? What happened?”

When Bex’s eyes looked up at mine and I saw the pure agony in them, I felt my heart disappear. It didn’t drop or go in my throat; it was physically yanked out of my chest. Everything went numb.

“No,” just made it out of my lips as I watched Ashley hand baby Andrew over to her husband and walk towards me nodding, tears flowing out her eyes like the insides of drains.

Bex and Andrew were out all day shopping for things for our upcoming wedding when he started to cough up blood. According to the doctor, a blood clot was knocked loose and got into his lungs. Essentially he drowned in his own blood.

The doctor asked if we wanted to say goodbye. When I walked into the room, I almost didn’t believe it was him. His skin was pale, far too pale to be my Andrew. I reached under the covers and pulled out his hand. There on his hand was my ring.

An inhuman gasp broke out of me as I leaned over and softly kissed his lips. “I love you for forever and a day.”

Looking in my review mirror, I see my nephew looking out the window confused. “Where are we going?”

“We are going to see Uncle Andrew,” I say as I take the turn into the graveyard.

“He’s my name steak,” he says proudly, making a laugh erupt past my lips.

“Yes, yes, he is.”
“Mommy says he was a great, great man and that he is an angel watching over me,” he says, sitting up straighter in his seat. “Are we going to heaven to see him?”

The simple question throws me off balance as I park the car behind Ashley’s van.

“We can’t go to heaven yet; it’s not our time,” I say, almost choking on these words.

Walking up beside Ashley and Bex, I hug Ashley close, feeling her strength like it is pouring into each of my pores. She pulls away without words, kissing my tear-stained cheek.

I don’t even remember when I started crying.

Stepping around her, I look down at Bex, sitting on the damp blades of grass. I drop down next to her and grab her hand with mine. She looks up at me, and I am startled to see the same darkness in her eyes as the man in my mirror this morning.

I think back to the painkillers lying out on my bed and to what I was about to do just before I got the call from Ashley. It is surreal to think I was going to end it all the same day I started to feel again.
Every Saturday night, Edward goes to see Roxanne Feltley at the community theatre. Roxanne sings, acts, and dances, and she is the one who puts Summerby’s shows together because no one else in town has a bachelor’s degree in musical performance—well, no one else in town has a bachelor’s degree. And Roxanne is the one who came up with converting the old church hall into a theatre—“Acoustics,” she said, “are the key to a beautiful performance.” Edward thinks that she could say that nudity is the key to a beautiful performance, and every old biddy from here to three counties over would show up in their ruffled underclothes with their titties hanging down to their knees. Roxanne has that kind of effect on people.

Tonight, she is putting on a performance that she calls the Little Texas Operetta. Edward thinks she wrote it herself. Everyone on stage wears clothes that look as though they were taken right out of one of the old pictures of Edward’s grandparents (who’d been dead for over forty-five years), and Roxanne doesn’t have any makeup on. Edward thinks she looks beautiful with her unwrinkled face and unrestrained laugh.

“I hear there’s this land for the taking,” Roxanne sings. “Let’s journey into this Texas sun.”

Edward leaves before the performance is over.

Edward and Norma have been married for sixty years. They tied the knot when they were eighteen, and Edward was heading off to the army to fight the commie North Koreans. He told her that if he died, she could have his Coupe Deville—Edward’s parent’s had money. Norma said she couldn’t drive, and he couldn’t die in North Korea without giving her a child. “This is the best I’m gonna get,” she told him. Edward privately thought she was right.

When Edward gets home from the Little Texas Operetta, she’s in the kitchen, stirring something that’s bubbling and steaming over the stove.

“Smells good,” Edward says. “What’s for dinner?”

Norma doesn’t turn around. “Where you’ve been?”

Edward sits at the table and takes off his old fishing hat. “Oh, getting a cut,” he says. “Starting to look like a hippie boy, you know. Didn’t want people to think I was smoking pot on the back porch.”

When she turns around, she isn’t smiling at his joke. She holds a wooden spoon against her large hip, and her makeup is streaky and a little orange. “Don’t look any different,” she says. “Still look like a hippie boy, but grown sixty years too old and a hundred pounds too fat.”
Edward waves away the insult. He’s been fat for thirty years now; she’s been fat since the day she was born. “Sure, I do,” he says. “Get your glasses checked, Norma.”

She places a bowl in front of him, larger and fuller than the one she places before herself. The chair groans in agony when she sits down. “That’s fine,” she says, sniffing and holding her chins up in great dignity. “Don’t tell me where you’ve been. Lord knows I’m just your wife is all.”

Edward swipes a hand across his face and feels stubble there, just as old and tired as rocks out in some lonely desert sun. He says, “For God sakes, Norma, I’ve been down to the barber’s for a trim. You’re jumping at shadows.”

Norma sips at her dinner and some brown juice trickles into the collar of her dress, never to be seen again. “I don’t jump at shadows,” she says. “I jump at what’s in them.”

Edward pushes away his bowl, barely half-eaten and already cold. “Don’t feel so well,” he says. “Think I’ll lie down for a bit.”

Norma doesn’t look at him. “I’ve made up the guest bed for you,” she says.

Edward hesitates at the door. “Goodnight, Norma,” he says.

The back of her head nods, and he dismisses himself to sleep.

Roxanne is on a roll, and the name of that roll is the operetta. Edward looked it up in his dictionary at home that morning over dry toast and bitter coffee with Norma. The dictionary said an operetta was an opera with a less serious story, a type of musical entertainment. Edward thinks it could, quite frankly, be equated with hell.

For one thing, Roxanne seems to be obsessed with American history. Tonight, she is doing her own adaption of *The Young Pioneers*. She is Molly. Her hair is in dark ringlets that hang down her back and rest serenely against her two white breasts. Edward thinks she looks beautiful but that pioneer women probably wore their hair up for practical reasons, if nothing else, and that they probably didn’t show that much cleavage.

Edward has forgotten his hearing aid; he can’t hear anything she’s singing. So he lets himself watch the curve of her leg outlined beneath the thin fabric of her dress, the way she twists her hands too much, and the dimples that pop out when least expected. He’s surprised when the curtain draws closed and even more surprised when the janitor asks him to please leave—that the show ended forty-three minutes ago, and his wife gets angry when he’s late. Edward says, “Mine too,” and the janitor sends him off with a laugh and a hearty slap on the back.

*Old men and old women,* he can see the man thinking. *Oh, man, old men and old women, is there anything funnier?*

When Edward walks to his truck, he sees the red eye of a cigarette and recognizes the flip of her hand and the flare of her hair. Roxanne likes to take a cigarette break behind the community theatre. Edward files away the information for later and hopes that he remembers it. Nowadays, filing away
information is more like sending a paper boat out on a stormy sea—sometimes it comes back so ripped up and soggy that you can’t recognize it for what it is, can’t imagine it ever being a boat. More often than not though, it just doesn’t come back.

Edward knows that something’s wrong when he comes home because supper is a burned grey mass at the bottom of the pan. Norma is watching *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and large red letters spell “mute” at the bottom of the screen. He grabs his forgotten hearing aid on the table and twists it into his ear. The world comes back to life in buzzy, hushed music, and Edward hesitantly walks into the living room.


As soon as he says it, he sees the tin of shortbread cookies on her lap. Of course she ate something. This is Norma, not some sick baby monkey at the zoo. Norma always eats.

“Should call Channel Eleven,” she says. “You’ve got the one barber in the county who can cut hair longer. It’s a miracle.”

Edward’s stomach growls. “Didn’t get my hair cut today,” he says. “Stopped by Fleck’s, had me a beer with some of the boys from church. You know us Methodists, Norma, we like ourselves a few. You Baptists wouldn’t understand.”

She doesn’t smile, her face shiny in the light of the television. “We Baptists think you Methodists are going to hell.”

Edward laughs. “Oh, Norma,” he says. “Just a beer is all.”

Norma shrugs, turning back to the television. “All sin is the same is God’s eyes,” she says.

Edward swings his hands, bringing them together in a clap. “Think I’ll make me a sandwich and go to bed. Don’t feel too well.”

“You never feel well nowadays,” Norma says. She unmutes the TV.

Edward runs a hand through his hair. “Well, nowadays I’m old,” he says. “I feel like a battered old truck just puffing along on too little gas and in too much heat.”

Norma says, “You have plenty of gas.”

Edward laughs but trails off when he realizes that she isn’t, “Goodnight, Norma,” he says and his only answer is the laughter of a live studio audience.

Four hours later, he’s in bed and paying for the copious amount of mustard he put on his sandwich. He watches the shadows of the tree outside the guest bedroom’s window and thinks: *Is this it? Do we all grow older just to grow older?*

Seventy-eight years old and still a prisoner.

He goes to sleep and dreams about Roxanne and the way her dark hair lies against her back.
It is the seventh month that Edward has gone to see Roxanne, and he has seen her twenty-eight times. He sits in the same seat, near the middle of the theatre and towards the left, an aisle seat because sometimes Edward has to pee and he doesn’t want to have to fight past people just to get to the john.

Tonight, Roxanne isn’t in the show. Another woman, Anne something or another, said that she wasn’t feeling too well and was taking the night off.

“But I saw her car in the parking lot,” Edward says.

The young woman next to him smiles widely and says, “What was that, honey? Do you need something?”

Edward looks at her. Her eyes are grey and expressionless like Norma’s. “Wasn’t talking to you,” he says.

She looks a little hurt, and the guy next to her must be her boyfriend because he says, “Hey, Grandpa, she was just trying to help. How ‘bout showing some manners?”

Edward stands up shakily and wipes his pants, “Son,” he says, “when you’re eighteen, you should show some manners. When you’re seventy-eight, you can moon the Pope.” The girl gasps, bursting out laughing, and her boyfriend blushes as he tries to figure out whether or not he’s been insulted.

“Goodnight,” Edward says to them, and the girl, still laughing too hard to answer, nods. Her boyfriend gives her a confused look and then looks at Edward, throwing up his hands. Edward shrugs and leaves them to it.

He is heading towards his car when he sees the red eye of a cigarette.

“Shouldn’t smoke those things,” he says to Roxanne, who jumps a little and coughs. “Not if you want to live to my age.”

She eyes Edward’s wrinkly face and overgrown potbelly. “What if I don’t want to?” she asks.

Edward thinks. “Then have another,” he says after a moment.

Roxanne laughs, a high, clear sound that seems as though it is engineered for an audience.

“Think I’ve seen you before,” she says. “A lot.”

Edward feels himself blush. He hasn’t blushed since he was forty years old. “Might of,” he says.

“Might of been by a time or two.”

“Middlish, aisle seat, right?” she asks.

Roxanne shrugs. “Nice to have a fan,” she says after a moment as though settling on a nicer comment. The words, you don’t have anything else to do, huh? trickle just below the surface of her face.

Edward says, “Heard you weren’t feeling too well.”

Roxanne shrugs. “I never feel well,” she says. “In this place.” When Edward doesn’t say anything, she adds, “I wanted to be on Broadway. Be a star.”

“You’re a star here,” Edward says.
“What’s a star in a place like this?” she asks. She doesn’t let Edward answer. “I’ll tell you: a weed that’s just slightly taller than all the other weeds. A weed in a field where nobody goes because if they did, they’d pull me right out of the ground and throw me out.”

Edward scratches his head. “Well, all us shorter weeds think you’re the bee’s knees,” he says.

Roxanne laughs. “And all the flowers think I’ll strangle them.”

Edward doesn’t know what that means. He says, “You’re good at what you do, Roxanne. All of us like you just fine. And you’re something to look at too.” He fidgets when he says this.

Roxanne fidgets a little too. “You don’t think my work is soulless? That’s what my drama teacher always said: I was soulless. Or something.”

“No one’s soulless,” Edward says. “Specially not someone who worries that they are.”

Roxanne smiles a little. “Thanks, Mr.—?”

“Hayes,” Edward says, “Edward Hayes.”

She nods. “Well, thank you, Edward Hayes.”

“Anytime,” Edward says and starts back towards his truck.

“Hey, Mr. Hayes?” Roxanne calls just before he gets in. “You got a wife?”

Edward turns around. “Yeah,” he says.


“All right,” Edward says and watches her light up another cigarette before he starts up his old Ford and drives away.

Norma, he thinks, as he drives down the winding, dark road, would love the operetta.

When he gets home, Norma is running their old love letters through the paper shredder and laughing a big belly laugh that shows off her slightly crooked teeth.

“Norma,” Edward says, “what are you doing?”

“You’ve been going to some strip club, Edward?” she asks without turning around. “You’ve been down to watch young girls at the park? Been wishing you done things differently?”

“No,” Edward says. He runs a hand across the stubble on his chin. “Haven’t stepped in a strip club for over thirty years. Probably wouldn’t even let an old geezer like me in anyway. Be afraid I’d have a heart attack.”

Norma holds one last letter in her hand. “You wish you did things differently, don’t you?” she asks. “You wish you hadn’t married a big, fat, stupid pig like Norma Higgs, don’t you? Couldn’t give you children, couldn’t keep you pleased, just sit around on my big butt all day and eat. You wish you hadn’t saddled yourself with Ninety-Ton Norma, eighth-wonder-of-the-world Norma.” Her eyes are wet.

Edward bends down slowly and takes the letter away from her. He opens it up and Norma leans in. The letter is short and the paper ragged with age. “Been thinking about you,” he reads out loud. “Sometimes I swear I can smell your perfume. I dreamed about you last night, Norma, and I dreamed
about us living in a little house together with a garden and a couple kids rolling around the front yard.
What do you think? Just been thinking about you. Hope you are well, and I send you all my love,
Edward.” He looks at Norma, whose face is a mess of cakey makeup and shining tears.

“What do you think, Norma?” he asks, and his voice is hoarse.
“Ain’t got kids,” Norma says shakily.
Edward laughs. “Ain’t got a garden, either.”
Norma gawks at him, shocked, before giving into laughter herself, and it sounds like Norma: big
and loud and echoing, like a rushing river caught in a cave.

“You’ve always been crazy, Edward,” she says.
“I love you, too, Norma Hayes,” Edward says and leans in to kiss her on the lips.

Edward takes Norma to the community theater to see Roxanne Feltley every Saturday night.
Rumor says Roxanne’s leaving for the Big Apple to take her chance on Broadway. Her last performance
for the fine folks in Summersby comes in March on a night humid with the promise of rain. After she’s
done, Norma gives her a lonely standing ovation.

Before they leave, Edward shakes Roxanne’s hand and slips her a note.
He hears her open it as they walk away, and he knows what it says:

*Sometimes all it takes to be a flower is a little growing room.*

*Sending you all my love,*

*Edward Hayes.*
**Contributors’ Biographies**

**Poetry and Prose**

Kathleen “Kitti” Ballard is a productive visual and literary artist. She likes to let her work speak for itself, and she says she will continue to let it do so in the future.

Elizabeth Bodeman has always been inspired by the small, beautiful moments in life, and she has recently started to use creative writing to document those moments.

Rachael Robertson, a renaissance woman, is a writer of poetry and fiction, a singer, and a thespian.

Marilyn Comer is a retired homeschool mom pursuing an English degree. She is president of the LSC-Tomball chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, and she enjoys creative writing and karaoke.

Shannon Dudley has a passion for writing short fiction and poetry, and she likes to read anything she can get her hands on. She looks forward to turning her passion into her major at a university.

Madison Paige Estes enjoys normal things like reading, writing, and dressing up in a reverse bear trap costume and going to the movies.

Cristyn Jones is a sophomore majoring in education. In her free time, she likes taking photographs, listening to music, and the study of anthropology.

Cheryl Kutcher is currently working on her Associates of Arts degree and will further pursue English as her major. She enjoys spending her time reading, writing, and learning.

JeanAnn Mangold says that she always looks out for elements of beauty and truth in everyday life. She is a housewife who enjoys riding motorcycles and being with her friends.

James McAuley works as a bartender and is pursuing English as his major. He says he gets his inspiration from good bourbon whiskey, late night T.V., and cold-hearted women.

Michelle Morin is a sophomore who will major in communications at the University of Houston. She has a passion for writing, music, and yoga.

Jennifer Osobka is a poet majoring in mathematics. She delights in daydreams, writing short stories, and reading classical literature.

Courtney Rector has interests that include vampires, zombies, and all things spooky. She is an English major.

Heather Sienko is a sophomore majoring in Physical Therapy. She likes to express herself through writing and dance.

Erika Marie Sivils is an avid writer of poetry and fiction. She is a communications major who also enjoys coffee and traveling.
Brittany Tenison is an English major who likes dragging her boyfriend around to coffee shops and bookstores.

Courtney Turner has an affection for art, animals of various species, and office supplies. She is currently an English major in her sophomore year.

Zoe Williams likes to wear feathers in her hair. She washes dogs for a living and does not quite know what she wants to do with her life. She also enjoys creative writing, Japanese culture, and loud music.

**Artwork**

Asad “Asaeda” Badat is a sophomore majoring in civil engineering and fashion design. He has a passion for singing, and he can be found flying on his magic carpet looking for his Princess Jasmine.

Corly Iris Galloway is a freshman interested in art, reading, steampunk, and *Skyrim*.

Amy Hammond is a freshman who loves drawing, writing, and art.

Benjamin Asher Simpson-Hathcock is a freshman working on his associate of science degree. His hobbies include photography, music, church activities, and running.

Linh Hoang is a sophomore majoring in graphic communications, and he is interested in drawing, painting, and photography.

Tammi Horrigan is a sophomore and a full-time student who enjoys softball, aikido, graphic design, family time, hunting, and fishing.

Paige Jackson is a freshman majoring in photojournalism. She spends her free time hunting, fishing, fourwheeling, taking photographs, and swimming.

Brittany Lenz is a freshman who likes reading books (in large quantities) and working with her art.

Luis Lima is an English major. He enjoys reading, writing an occasional poem or short story, photography, and daydreaming.

Mike O’Hara is a freshman art major who is interested in drawing.

Meghan Persons is a sophomore majoring in education/art. She especially likes painting and drawing.

Joanna Tine is a sophomore majoring in creative writing and illustration.
Inkling Staff and Calliope Members

Inkling Selection Staff

From left to right, top row: Madison Estes, Erika Sivils, Kathleen “Kitti” Ballard
Bottom row: Nathan Boyle, Michelle Morin, Zoe Williams, Vinh Do, Luis Lima, and Daniel Harrison

Selection Meeting

Calliope Members

From left to right: Luis Lima, Madison Estes, David Alverez, Zoe Williams, and Nathan Boyle
INKLING
(THE CREATIVE ARTS MAGAZINE OF LSC-TOMBALL)

SUBMISSION FORM

1. Name: ___________________________________________________________________________
2. Address(street, city, zip) ___________________________________________________________
3. Cell and Home Phone Numbers: ________________________________
4. Student ID Number: _____________________________________________________________
5. Email address: __________________________________________________________________
6. Title of poetry/prose submission(s): Title and medium of art submission(s):
   1. ___________________________________ 1._______________________________________
   2. ___________________________________ 2._______________________________________
   3. ___________________________________ 3._______________________________________
   4. ___________________________________ 4._______________________________________
   5. ___________________________________ 5._______________________________________
   6. ___________________________________ 6._______________________________________
7. Biographical statement (to be used in contributors’ biographies if your submission is chosen).
   Example: Jane Smith is a freshman English major who has a passion for drawing, animals, and raindrops on her nose.
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________________

I hereby warrant that each of the works submitted with this form are my original works and that I own any copyrights that may be applicable to them. I authorize Lone Star College-Tomball and the staff of Inklung to mechanically and electronically publish the above submissions as they determine to be appropriate and to perform the pieces at Inklung readings, subject only to any additional written instructions, which I may furnish.

____________________________________________________
Author’s Signature

******DIRECTIONS******
1. Magazine submissions are collected in the fall semester. Submissions received after December 1st will be considered in the following fall’s selection.
2. Only original, unpublished works are accepted. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable. Please notify us at Inklung@lonestar.edu if your piece is accepted by another publisher.
3. Only LSC-Tomball students (enrolled in credit courses at the time of submission) are eligible to submit.
4. All submissions must be accompanied by a submission form available on the Inklung website (lonestar.edu/inkling).
5. All writing must submitted electronically. Email your pieces and the submission form to Inklung@lonestar.edu
6. Art may be submitted electronically to Inklung@lonestar.edu or dropped off to either of the advisors’ offices: Amy Hirsch, C223C or Melissa Studdard, E210C.
7. Maximum entries per person: six (6) writing submissions and six (6) art submissions
8. Writers and artists selected for publication will be notified by mail. Expect notification by February or March.
   NOTE: Hard copies of artwork will be returned after selections.
   NOTE: Submissions selected for publication are automatically entered into the Lone Star College-Tomball Inklung Creative Arts Contest. Winners will receive cash awards ($100, $75, $50).

SELECTION PROCESS

All entries are submitted to Inklung advisors. Advisors substitute, in place of the author’s or artist’s name, a number; thus, only they know the identity of the individual contributor. Each staff member is then given a duplicated copy of each submission to be considered for the current issue. After final selections are made, the staff members’ copies are returned to the advisors and destroyed, thereby prohibiting the circulation of unauthorized copies of anyone’s work. The last step in the selection of materials is a staff meeting where the Inklung editors, staff, and advisors meet to discuss and vote upon the final selections for publication. Only after final selections have been made do the advisors reveal the identity of those individuals whose works have been chosen.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Inkling* staff, editors and advisors would like to extend their sincerest thanks to Lone Star College-Tomball for the opportunity to publish another spectacular magazine!

This year, as in years past, we owe a debt of gratitude to our writing and art contest judges. Lone Star College professors Eleanora Cavatore, Amy Fowler, Steffani Fridares, Angela Furtado-Rasmussen, Ginger Fray, Lisa Lundstedt, Paul Nimon, Greg Oaks, Bo Rollins, Earl Staley, and Ava Veselis lent us their expertise and helped determine the six contest winners for this 22nd edition of *Inkling*.

In the fall of 2011, *Inkling* and Calliope (Lone Star College-Tomball’s Creative Writing Club) instituted a reading series at LSC-Tomball wherein students can both hear the works of award winning authors and participate in an author interview. We’d like to thank sponsors of this year’s reading series: the LSC-Tomball Library, the Vice President of Instruction, Dr. LeeAnn Nutt, and the English, Education, and Mathematics Division. With their support, *Inkling* and Calliope were able to host on-campus readings and interviews with Texas Poet Laureate Dave Parsons and American Book Award winning author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Additionally, *Inkling* would like to express our vast appreciation to Udo Hintze, former *Inkling* editor and LSC-Tomball alumnus, for his tireless efforts transcribing and editing the Parsons interview for publication in this year’s magazine. And, of course, tremendous thanks are due to authors Dave Parsons and Chitra Divakaruni for sharing their time, their talent, and their stories with us.

We offer heartfelt thanks to the English, Education, and Mathematics Division staff and the Office of Student Life for supporting us throughout the year, to LSC-Tomball Office Services for their enduring assistance, and to English professor Doug Boyd, longtime *Inkling* proofreader and grammar guru, for his discriminating eye and volunteerism.

Finally, special thanks go to the talented and inspired students of Lone Star College-Tomball. Each year we collect hundreds of submissions, and in the end, we are only able to showcase a handful of the creative works that LSC-Tomball students have to offer. Many thanks to all of the student contributors, this year and in years to come. This magazine would not be possible without them.