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Dare

Hannah Jenney
First Place Prose Winner

Taking Stock
Elizabeth Myles

I’m staring out the front window of the store, lost in thought, when Marie taps me on the leg with a tabloid. I look over and see her peeking out at me from behind a headline announcing new pictures of the Loch Ness monster’s baby.

“You okay, Angela?” she asks, putting the magazine back on the shelf.

“I was just thinking,” I say. My eyes stray back to the darkened picture windows. “Have you ever wondered why stores only have windows at the front?” I ask her. “And why they’re tinted?”

“Not really. Why?”

I shrug. “I’ve heard it’s so that it’s harder for the customers to tell what time of day it is. So people lose track of how much time they’ve spent in the store.”

“Is that true?” Marie asks, incredulously.

Before I can answer, Ben interjects from behind the book information desk, “Of course it’s true. It’s all part of the conspiracy to keep us shopping, trapped in a cycle of mindless consumerism.”

Marie rolls her eyes and heads for the coffee cart against the wall. The coffee’s meant for the customers, but at six thirty in the morning, the store’s still closed, so the first pot is all for us.

“Why do you think people love to shop?” Ben continues, half-hidden from view by the computer monitor. As I near him, I see that he’s got a pair of scissors in his hand and a couple of magazines spread out on the desk. He’s cut Madonna’s head out of an article in Rolling Stone. “It helps them forget how crappy their lives are and how little time they’ve got left to make anything of themselves.” He rips a piece of Scotch tape off the roll next to the computer and rolls it up into a skinny tube. He sticks the tape to the back of Madonna’s head, tapes it over the face of da Vinci’s Madonna of the Rocks in Art Digest and holds it up for me to see.

I know I shouldn’t encourage him, but I smirk in spite of myself.

Ben closes up his vandalized magazines and carries them back over to the sales racks. He crosses paths with our inventory manager, Todd, who’s preoccupied with flipping through the pages of an inventory discrepancy report.

“What if someone buys those and finds the pages all cut up?” I whisper when Ben returns from replacing the magazines. He shrugs and picks a speck of lint off of his Halo 3 T-shirt.
“What’s the word?” Marie’s eyes fall on the report in Todd’s hands as she fills a Styrofoam cup from the complimentary coffee pot.

“We’re missing four percent,” answers Todd, handing her the first few pages of the report. “Hallelujah,” she murmurs, eyeing the pages and blowing into her coffee. “That shouldn’t take long to find.”

When Todd turns around, I hold out my hand for my share of the report, but he hands it to Ben.

“These two can handle it,” he says to me.

Ben sticks his tongue out at me over Todd’s shoulder.

Todd and I are in the stock room at the back of the store, and he’s holding up a little wire shopping basket overflowing with empty cartons of stolen merchandise. He digs through the basket and comes up with a mangled copy of Appetite for Destruction.

“Someone shoplifted Guns N’ Roses?” I can’t suppress my offense.

“They tried.” Todd slips the CD out of its case. “Our gain.” He reaches over to a CD player sitting on the counter and pops the disk into it. He hands me the basket just as “Welcome to the Jungle” gains momentum.

Almost everything in the basket is a write-off, but there are a couple of other salvageable CDs, so I plug in the shrink-wrap machine.

“I want to talk to you about something,” says Todd.

I pull the heat gun off its hook on the wall, flip it on, and get to work making the CDs look brand-new again. “What?”

“Don’t tell anyone,” he says, glancing toward the door, “but I’ve been offered a job in Colorado.”

I blink at him, dumb with surprise.

“I’ve got a friend up there that works in marketing. I’ll be able to use my degree.” Unthinkingly, I lower the heat gun. Todd’s eyes widen, and he nods at the CD.

“You’re too close,” he says. “You’re going to burn it.”

Looking down, I see that it’s too late. I’ve burned a hole right through the plastic. I switch off the gun and toss it on the counter. “You’re leaving?”

“It’s not a done deal.”

“Not yet,” I say.

“Not yet,” he admits.
Before I can respond, the door to the stock room opens. Ben and Marie troop in with their reports in hand.

“All done!” Marie waves the papers in the air. “It only took thirty minutes.” When she catches sight of my face, her smile falters. Ben heads for the staging area, oblivious.

“Have the shipments shown up yet?” he asks.

As if on cue, the freight doorbell rings. Todd unclips his key ring from his belt loop and tosses it at Ben, who goes to open the door for the delivery driver. “We’ll talk more later,” he says to me under his breath, moving back to his computer.

“What’s going on?” Marie mouths.

I shake my head.

The door opens again, and Tanya, the front end manager, trundles through, pushing a shopping cart.

“What do you want?” Todd asks her.

Tanya shoves the cart, and it rolls into the counter, rattling everything on it.

“Watch it!” Todd steadies a stack of DVD cases before they topple.

“You smell good,” Ben tells Tanya, sniffing the air as he unlocks the freight door. “Like jalapenos.”

“Someone,” Tanya says, stabbing a finger at the cart, “dumped a carton of nachos into the movie drop-box!” She pulls a DVD out of the pile of returned rentals. As yellow cheese sauce oozes off one side of the case and plops back into the cart, the rest of us laugh.

Tanya’s face changes color. “We’ll see how funny you all think it is while you’re cleaning it up.”

“Clean it yourself.” Todd turns back to his computer screen.

“I’m too busy,” Tanya says. “And when Keith’s not here, I’m in charge. You guys have to do what I say.”

“Like hell.” Todd shows her the back of his hand.

“Keith’ll hear about this.” Tanya backs out the door and lets it slam shut.

“Bitch,” mutters Todd.

“You think Keith will really make us clean that?” Marie asks, biting her lip.

The phone mounted on the wall beside Todd’s computer rings, and he snatches up the receiver. “Yeah?” he barks into it.

I hear the delivery truck driving off and turn to see Ben sorting through the cardboard boxes stacked next to the door. I go over and try to hand him a box-knife, but he just waves it
away and whips a switchblade out of his jeans pocket. He stabs through the packing tape on the first box and rips it open.

Across the room, Todd slams the receiver back into its cradle.

“Bad news?” Marie’s over by Mount Trashmore, the corner where all of the store departments dump their bags of garbage at the end of the night. She lifts one, preparing to haul it out to the dumpster. A rivulet of trash juice, mostly coffee and milk, dribbles out of the bottom of it, and she drops the bag back onto the floor, disgusted.

Todd presses the heels of his palms against his eye sockets and rubs hard. “Vince just made a surprise visit to the store across town. He’ll probably be here by noon.”

We all groan. No one’s ever happy to see the district manager but especially not today. I look at the pile of boxes stacked up in my station and estimate that we’re at least half a day behind on receiving new inventory.

Todd catches Ben by the sleeve as he passes by, yanking him backward. “Why are you wearing this?” He points at the *Halo 3* logo on Ben’s chest.

“Lay off.” Ben shrugs out of Todd’s grasp. Looking around the room, I realize that, as usual, none of us is in dress code. Marie and I are both in ripped up jeans and logo T-shirts, too. But the shirt Ben’s got on was a promotional item we were only supposed to give away to the customers. It would be bad for all of us if Vince caught him wearing it.

“I need you to go across town and borrow some security tags from the other store,” Todd sighs. “And while you’re out, go home and change your shirt.” There’s a glint in his eye that keeps Ben from arguing.

“Get to work,” Todd says to me and Marie.

By nine thirty, we’re nearly caught up on everything, and Todd tells us to break for lunch. Marie and I exchange looks. Ben hasn’t reappeared yet, and we’re both wondering if he’s ever coming back.

Marie dumps the stack of magazines in her hands onto the counter, and we walk together to the door. “I’m starved,” she says. “What about you?”

“No,” I say, “but I’ll keep you company.”

The break room at the front of the store is little more than a glorified closet. Two-thirds of the cramped space is taken up by janitorial equipment and shelves of store supplies. A studded board nailed to the wall holds up a row of smocks and name-tags on lanyards. There’s a card table and two folding chairs pushed up against one wall and a dorm-sized refrigerator and ancient
microwave set up in a corner. Marie goes over to the fridge to retrieve her lunch while I sit down in one of the chairs.

“I can’t believe someone put nachos in the drop-box.” She pulls the tab on the packaging of a frozen meal. The cardboard opens with a loud RIIIIP.

I laugh. “I forget that you’ve only worked here for six months,” I tell her. “When you’ve been here as long as I have, nothing will surprise you anymore.”

My reply elicits a strange look from her, but before I can interpret it, she turns away to carry the little plastic food tray to the microwave.

“What is it about this job that you like so much?” she asks me.

“I don’t know that I like it,” I say.

“You’ve been here a long time,”

“It’s just a job,” I say. “It’s easy. And fun, most of the time. But it’s just temporary.”

Marie opens the microwave door and slides her lunch inside. She flicks her eyes toward the break room door in an oddly expectant way. I can’t say why, but that little movement makes me paranoid. I straighten up in my seat, suspicious.

“What?” Marie looks at me, her face a little pale but otherwise giving nothing away.

“Why are you acting so weird?”

“Me?” Her forehead furrows.

I make an annoyed sound and cross my arms over my chest. I look around the room. There used to be a TV in here but Todd moved it into the back. We watch Jeopardy! at eleven, followed by Jerry Springer, and when The People’s Court comes on, we know it’s almost quitting time.

My eyes return to Marie, but she’s got her back turned and is watching her lunch revolve inside the humming microwave. The smell of thawing lasagna gradually fills the room. My legs are crossed at the knee, and my right foot bobs up and down nervously. I try to make it stop, but I can’t seem to force myself to calm down.

I’m about to ask Marie, again, what’s going on. Before I can, the bell on the microwave dings, and, at the same time, the door to the break room opens, and Todd and Tanya march in.

“What’s going on?” I ask. My mouth is dry, and the words come out a little strangled.

Todd looks flushed, mischievous. Everyone is smiling at me. The door opens again, and the small crowd has to part to let another person through. It’s Ben. He hasn’t changed his shirt, and he’s carrying a flat, white bakery box.

“Happy anniversary,” Todd says to me.

“What?” I squeak as Ben lowers the box onto the table in front of me.
“Today’s your hire date,” Marie chirps. “It’s been ten years since you started working here.”

Ben lifts the lid on the box to reveal a yellow-frosted sheet cake with my name and “ten years” written across it in giant red letters.

“Oh,” I say, my hands balling into fists beneath the table. “Wow.”

“Surprised?” Todd wants to know.

“How long have you been planning this?” I ask.

“The last few days,” he shrugs.

“Do you know that no one’s ever worked at this location longer than you?” Marie settles into the chair across from me. “You’ve set a record!”

“That’s . . . crazy.” My smile feels strained, but no one seems to notice. Todd opens the little fridge and pulls out a bottle of Hawaiian Punch. Ben reaches across me to stab the cake with his switchblade.

“You didn’t pay for this with charity money, did you?” I ask Ben. He and Todd laugh, but Marie just looks at me questioningly.

“Ben once took fifteen dollars’ worth of change out of those donation jars we keep up by the registers,” I say.

“To order a pizza,” Todd finishes, sounding like a deeply disappointed parent.

“You did not!” Marie gasps.

“C’mon,” Ben says around a mouthful of cake. “That charity pizza was delicious.”

“Use a napkin,” Tanya demands, shoving one at him. “And hurry up and cut me a piece. I’ve got to be at the register before the store opens.”

When the little celebration begins to wind down, Todd pulls me out of my chair and into the hallway.

“Listen,” he says, looking at me earnestly. “What we talked about earlier . . . I think that when I leave here, you should take my place.”

“What? Why?”

“Angela,” he says, “don’t you think it’s time to take the next step in your career?”

“Career?” I almost laugh. “This isn’t a career.”

“You’ve been here ten years,” he reminds me.

I stare past Todd’s shoulder and out the front window, feeling cold all of a sudden. Outside, the wind is picking up, and trash is rolling across the parking lot. The sky’s darkening.

I force myself to look at Todd’s very young, completely unlined face. I shake my head.
“Well, if you change your mind,” he says, adjusting his glasses, “just say the word. There’d be no competition.” He hooks a thumb toward the break room. “Can you picture any of those clowns running the back?” He glances at his watch and pounds his fist on the break room door. “Break’s over, people!” he yells. As he walks off, the door swings open, and everyone files out, congratulating me again as they pass.

“You coming?” Ben asks me.

“In a minute,” I say, stepping closer to the front window.

Marie’s the last to exit. “Hey, Angela,” she says, licking frosting from the tips of her fingers. “It’s time to go.”

Despite the tinting on the glass, I can see that the morning has indeed faded away. It’s getting later all the time.

“I know it is,” I say.
Dream
Anthony Ramirez

When worlds collide both reality and mind,
what’s the difference in life and lies?
Where the cracks are appearing
and demons’ heads are rearing,
where Jackal’s all cackles and darkness is sneering.
Where rivers walk red and fill with the dead,
while sleeping so softly you snuggle in bed.
Where Logic is gone and Sanity’s fled,
where it all runs together inside of your head.
Where the blood in your skin
tells a tale of where you’ve been
over biscuits and a tea
while dancing madly with such glee.
Where your fantasies come true
and you needn’t have a clue
why the sex is red and blue,
and what she ever saw in you.
When madness comes a tapping,
a tapping, gently rapping,
where it sneaks in while you’re dreaming
just to giggle at your screaming.
A Leaking Faucet
Chantel Sigman

Drip,

Drip,

Drip,

A leaking faucet dripping bitterness,
Unfixed,
Can create a puddle
Of hate and unnecessary disappointment.

Drip,

Drip,

Drip,

They say one can drown
In only an inch of water.

Drip,

Drip . . .

Drip.
First Kiss
Carvin D. Joshua

You are worth your weight in gold
Worth a wait untold
The weight is worth the wait
No need for a scale I’m sold

The sweet smell of beauty dances in the air
Somewhere between your neck and the waves of your hair
My face lies there dreaming of the pair
Anticipating the first kiss we’ll share

A soft voice screams, “Wait” . . .

Can you hear it?
Is it just me?
Or was it the Spirit?
“Wait” . . .

This is heavy.

Some say you never miss what you never had. This is a lie
I’m experiencing déjà vu for the first time as I gaze into your eyes
We’ve been here before . . . at least in my mind
Soul mates . . . who’ve kissed thousands of times

Once again
You are worth your weight in gold
Worth a wait untold
The weight is worth the wait
No need for a scale I’m sold
The Field
Robb Wallace

I was just a boy, no more than nine or ten years old, when I found the field. I was walking through the forest playing “spaceman” or “cowboy” or some combination of the two when I tripped over a post that was lying on the ground. I picked it up, thinking I could use it as a weapon to destroy the evil aliens and renegade cowboys, and I found that there was barbed wire on it. I thought it was strange, but I didn’t care. I carefully pulled the barbed wire off, picked it up and started using it like a bazooka, blowing the enemies away without remorse. Then, I noticed that the post was not random. The barbed wire was attached to posts that were standing erect in the ground. It seemed random here in the middle of the forest, but I didn’t care. I was off in my own little world. I remember seeing an opening past the posts and running between them and jumping onto a large boulder. I looked around and saw a field of grass.

There was a big lake in the corner farthest away from me. My eyes swept to the other side of the field. There were only three trees in the entire field, but I was already imagining what the trees could be. One of them was going to be my pirate ship which I would climb to watch for the Royal Navy. I bounded across the field and climbed the tree, and before my very eyes I saw the sails of my ship flap in the breeze. I stood on the rail of my ship, holding onto the rope for support. An enemy ship drew near, and suddenly, with a loud BANG, our cannons fired at the ship. I jumped from my bow and landed in the grass. I looked up at the next tree, but this was no ordinary tree either. It was a circus tent, with wild animals, clowns, and trapeze artists. I walked into the circus tent, and suddenly I was up in the air, holding a long pole and walking across a tightrope in my silly spandex. I turned a cartwheel and stood on one hand while holding a chair on my foot. I flipped onto my feet and caught the chair in my hand. I spun on a toe and began to lose footing. I fell through the air towards my safety net. I landed in it and stepped down onto the floor and exited the circus tent.

I had no idea how this was happening, and I felt like I was losing control. I remember being slightly frightened yet excited as I walked toward the lake. I dipped a finger into the lake, and all of a sudden I was a duck amidst hundreds of other ducks. All of the ducks seemed to know where they were going but had no idea where they were headed. I didn’t really like being here. I headed toward the edge, but I couldn’t seem to escape from this one. I wanted to cry out, but nothing more than a quack escaped from my bill, identically mimicking my fellow ducks. Fear began to well up in my chest, and I began to sob, but a duck can’t sob, so it came out as more of a dry heave. I threw myself from the water and waddled around on the land. I wanted to be different than the other ducks, to be noticed, but as soon as even a few people noticed me, I was back on the grassy plain, myself once again.

There was one more tree to climb. I wanted to run from the field and never return, but there was no stopping what was happening. I fearfully walked up to it, but it was no longer a tree.
It was a tall platform. I looked in my hand, and I was holding a sniper rifle. I began to climb and sat at the top, waiting for the enemy to come. I was nervous and jumpy. Why was I at war? This was not my war. I was just a little boy. Before I could come to a conclusion, I saw movement. I looked through the scope of my sniper rifle and saw that my base was under attack. No less than thirty men were running towards my platoon. I took out three of them, but they noticed me. I managed to take out one more before I heard the first enemy shot and felt the pain. I looked at my arm and the blood flowing from it. I staggered backwards and fell from my platform. I landed in a bed where a nurse in a white button-up shirt with a red cross on it and a white miniskirt just like the ones they wore on TV came up to me and gently raised my sleeve. She pulled out the bullet, stitched it up, and kissed it to make it feel better. The whole time she hummed a lullaby that made my eyelids heavy. I don’t know what happened for a while, but I remember my eyelids shooting open. I was covered in a sheen of sweat. I ran home and was so glad to see my mother that I gave her an extra big hug.

That was fifty years ago. I went back to the field a few years later just to check it out, but I was too afraid to cross the fence posts into the field. I have returned periodically since then, but I have always been too afraid to go into the field. I sit on the rock at the entrance and think about what happened here. I went back just yesterday and sat on the rock. I thought about the things I saw and watched the clouds. I stayed late into the night and watched the stars. Eventually I stood up and came back home to write in this journal. I was too tired to finish writing last night, so I brought it back here, and I am sitting on the rock right now, thinking about what happened and running my finger up and down the bullet-sized scar on my arm.
You hold me closer than a lover
In your gentle hands.
Your fluid thoughts caress me
As they run down your arm.
With each stroke we create your work,
You and I, together.
You: the mastermind,
I: the instrument.
I will gladly give my life to help you,
My love.
Use my blood to convey your thoughts;
My life is meant to help yours.
My life dwindles,
My blood runs low,
But I do not regret anything,
Not one moment we spent together.
I told you my life is yours,
I only wished to help you create,
And we did.
We created a masterpiece together,
You and I.
Soon I’ll be gone,
And you will move on to another.
But don’t feel sad.
My life was yours,
And I was happy.
Show them our work,
Show them what we worked on,
Together,
My love,
Your pen.
Third Place Poetry Winner (Tie)

The Fall
Lindsey K. Gibb

When I go, I wish
To die in beauty like the fall,
With nothing left
To cry about anything at all.

Beneath the full harvest moon
I shall lay myself down,
Knowing sleep will come soon.

On my brow, a corn-husk crown
Adorned with golden wheat
And leaves of red and brown.

I shall be wrapped in gauzy,
White sheets of the crisp breath
Of dry burning leaves.

When I go, I wish
To die slowly like the fall,
Bit by bit, ‘til by and by
I’m no longer there at all.
Rail Walker

Martin O’laughlin
The Rose Garden
Hedwika Cox

The azaleas in my garden thrive in the acidic soil. Maybe it’s their abrasive affinity to the acid that makes them only bloom once a year. And once they flower, they trash their bed, shedding browned petals all over the others. But it is my roses that require more of my care, even when the azaleas’ summer leftovers smother the camellias, pansies, and gardenias. As for my roses, they crawl their sticky bushes along my trellis, flaunting their burgundy flesh, and beg for my pruning. And I happily fulfill their desire.

Colin and I moved into our first home a year ago after existing three years in a closet-size apartment, nearly clawing each other’s eyes out over my insecurities and his brash attitude. That was what my father’s live-in companion, Maggie, warned me of, just four years ago, while we were licking and stuffing vanilla-colored envelopes. Maggie, of course, was not the one I wanted here doing this with me, and I suspect she knew it, too, but there we were, silently mustering up spit to smear on the most expensive-looking envelopes I have ever seen. We had hurried through the process, and I don’t know if it was due to uncomfortable silence or the fact that both of our tongues felt like we had been chewing on cotton balls for the last two hours.

“Your dad and I think you two should wait just a little bit longer, you know, before you take the big plunge.” She was smacking her lips and tongue while her nose crinkled with the taste of glue. “Your brother and Kristi both waited three long years before he even popped the question. And here you are, bing, bang, boom, six months later in a wedding dress.”

“Yeah, but I’m not Micah.” I refused to look at her as I shuffled the envelopes into piles of twenty-five.

I hoped that she was done, but she went on. “I just feel that with more time, you and Colin can learn more things about each other, grow with each other, make sure you match each other, you know, just in case.” Just in case it doesn’t work out is what she meant but didn’t say.

If she knew what our love was, she would have known that I couldn’t wait years to be with Colin. He loved me, and I loved him, and that was all that mattered. If Mama were here, she would understand. “Follow your heart,” she would say.

Three months later after the envelope episode, I found myself standing at the threshold of white wooden chairs divided by a path of crisp pink and white rose petals. We whisked ourselves to the dance floor as the echo of Elvis pulsed through the speaker. The song “Fools Rush In,” so appropriately chosen, made Maggie raise her brow. The cake was cut, toasts were declared, and before we knew it, we were sitting in first class, hot towels on our forehead and champagne in our fists.

Paradise lasted for about a week in the big island of the Bahamas, and on our return, I came down with a wretched sickness that wounds most newlywed brides. Wedding bell blues, they call it. Some say it’s the depression after returning to the “real” life after vacationing in
paradise while others say it’s the comedown brides get after intense planning day-to-day when all of a sudden they have nothing left to do. Either way, it makes the new husband, especially Colin, even more miserable. Colin called it the DTs of wedding business.

For most, though, depression eventually wears off; I unfortunately had the perpetual kind. Financial woes consumed the both of us, and since my four years of school left me jobless after graduation, my days of playing “housewife” quickly grew tiresome. I became the little, white lab rat spinning around feverishly on a wheel that never stopped. I felt confined to the apartment walls yet made no effort to leave my cage. I tried to look for a job, but in a city where my degree was a dime a dozen, I was very insignificant, sometimes even unqualified really.

And my circles on my wheel became a routine. Right before Colin would come home from his job at the Kmart, I would change out of my pajamas and try to clean something, anything, maybe the kitchen or laundry, as if I had been slaving away all day. This last minute attempt was almost impossible anyway as the piles of white boxes still adorned with silver wrapping lined the white walls and cabinets. When the apartment was clean, it was still messy. Colin knew my scheme, though, and I knew he did, but he had his own problems churning inside his head. He hated his job, making only minimum wage, but I knew it was something just to get by during grad school. A means to an end, I would tell him, but he never was convinced. It was a good thing, too, that we had kept big money items like the vases, coffeemaker, and china place settings still in the boxes because the stores eventually gave us full credit for all of them. In fact, at some of the stores, we were able to buy groceries all month long.

Colin’s battle was a slow one. Our acidic relationship infected everything around us. He struggled with the fact that he couldn’t take care of me. He felt responsible for our financial situation and often told me that it didn’t make him feel like a man. Then after a little while, it was purely my presence that annoyed him. He would tell me that I wasn’t trying, that I needed to be more aggressive in my job search. Maybe I did; in fact, I was sure of it, but my brain felt weak; I was still sick.

I called him Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He refused to console me with my continuous depression and resented the fact that I couldn’t pull myself together with the snap of his fingers. Even after I finally hired on as an administrative assistant, his anger distorted his feelings for me. His ugly words often cut deep, leaving me bawling on the tile floor in the bathroom. My knees were always tucked close to my chest, my body violently rocking back and forth. For what it was worth, my mind was already delicate, so much so that his apparent hatred towards me almost eased the attraction to the razor to my wrist. Clinically depressed, I may have been, but suicidal, I was not. Hours later, he would find me curled up, my cheek to the black and white checkered tile, still, but not sleeping. He would silently pick up my frail body, and with my head on his shoulder, I would grip his neck with my arm, and he would gently lay me down in our bed. This was my light at the end of the tunnel. Break me, I would murmur in his ear, break me from this nightmare.

We moved three times that first year, each time to a little bit bigger apartment, thinking and hoping that this time would be better. Colin would look at me with optimism in his eyes and
rationality in his brain and say, “All we need is a little space, and we’ll get along much better.”

And soon after we had settled in, I would think to myself, *Here we go again.*

One night after another lengthy fight, Colin and I ended up across from each other at our old oak kitchen table, both staring at our hands. He had already packed his clothes and threatened to leave for the seventeenth time. My tears only stopped when my sobs finally choked out my breathing, disguising my face as a smeared makeup mess with raccoon eyes and marshmallow swoleness. Usually by now, I would be in bed angry, he on the couch, only to start the same routine the next day but with a different topic.

But tonight he looked up at me and said, “Do you really still want to be married to me?”

I met his eyes and said, “I couldn’t imagine being without you. Even with all the pain.”

“Well, I think we should get some help then. Love and marriage shouldn’t be pain.”

“I just can’t do it.” I put my hands over my cheeks and wiped. “I just think that if we see a therapist within our first years of marriage, then we’re already doomed. What are we going to do when you hit your mid-life crisis?” I cracked the corners of my lips in a grimace at the thought.

“It just shouldn’t be like this, you know? It should come more natural. I feel like we’ve been married already for twenty years.” His tired eyes looked large as quarters.

“I just would rather you feel more comfortable talking with me than with a perfect stranger.”

He leaned his head down and ran his fingers through his flaxen hair. “Sometimes, I can’t. I just can’t open up... to you.”

“I promise to do better. Please don’t leave me,” I said. I was on my knees now, crawling across the carpet.

He slunk down to the floor like jelly to meet me at my kneel.

“Love me,” I whispered, looking into his swollen eyes.

“I always will,” he whispered back, “and I’m trying, too.” He held me tight that night, letting me finish my sobbing in his shoulder and stroked my hair with his hand.

After that we did try, though; we tried so hard, although some times were more successful than others. We tried spending time apart; he sweated it out at the gym while I started a potted rose garden on our three-foot patio. We even adopted a boxer-mix puppy; her brindled coat and forgiving attitude slowly dulled the thorns remaining between Colin and me. When we finally bought our first house, two-story, red-bricked with an acre backyard, he looked at me as if his fingers were crossed this time and said with a twisted grin, “Hell, you said you needed space.” Maggie called the house a gamble, though. But she would.

I planted my roses that year in our acre yard, carefully clipping and pruning them daily. I knew that with all of the care and delicacy that I put in them, they would bloom for me ten-fold next year. They had started off small and slightly malnourished in a one gallon pot but were now full-fledged with bright crimson blooms radiating from the thorns.
And now sometimes when Colin and I lay in bed at night with our legs crisscrossed between each other’s and snuggled within the cotton sheets, he asks me if I think that we got married too soon and if we should have waited. But I always answer that if we would have, I wouldn’t have known him any more than I know him now. And each day together we grow and learn to love each other more, from what we went through and what we haven’t yet begun. Our love began as a seed, and we have to cultivate it each day so it thrives even further.

Micah called me last night from Flagstaff. He told me Kristi was still killing her ivy off in the house and thought he’d plant a cactus instead. And Maggie and my father still haven’t taken the plunge. “Better safe than sorry,” she says. Then again Colin and I are starting to experience more happy days than sad ones and are, in fact, thinking about planting a new garden, maybe in the front yard this time over by the old wooden fence. Perhaps some day lilies or baby’s breath. But for now, my crimson roses grow wilder each day, growing, wanting, learning the path of the fence. And every now and then I grasp them tight in my fist to feel, thorns and all.
I watch my own children now, their
flaxen ringlets and flyaway pigtails skimming
along the surface of the awakening shrubs
in the distance, as ours did many seasons ago.
Like mad bees they buzz about
the foliage, pollinating the plants
with purpose: to find the plastic treasures that
await them this time each year. They pry them apart.
What’s inside does not matter so much
as the anticipation, the excitement of the outcome
unknown, of having discovered something, even
something less than extraordinary.

I look in my own basket and see the prizes
my eggs yield—coal karats on a platinum band,
black and white words printed on stock paper,
mechanized means of staying connected
to those with whom I’ve lost touch—
custom trinkets that mark me indistinguishable
from my neighbors. And for a moment I want
to trade them for a wax whistle or cluster of
thingamajigs in all the colors of the rainbow.
I’ve Done it Again  
Therese Crews

I’ve done it again,  
Made your words into a cloak  
Worn to hide your faults.

Every lie I swallowed,  
Their fermented bite like wine.  
I’m drunk off your deception,  
Giddy and in denial.

I gathered my resolve,  
Ready to shake you loose,  
A bucking bronco to a cowboy.

I was ready to erect walls in my heart  
To keep you out and me in,  
Prepared with my stucco and drywall.

But when you smile like that,  
With your eyes alight with love,  
I find myself marooned on Island Heartbreak  
With you at the helm of the rescue ship.

Let myself sink into your quicksand,  
Drowning in you, all just you.  
Then I know:  
I’ve done it again—

Let you blindfold me,  
Another round of emotional S&M,  
You dominating me,  
Making me bend to your will.

You’re pulling my reins,  
Leading me across the barren wasteland  
I also call your heart.

I’ve rearranged the roads on the roadmap of my heart,  
Breaking bridges and flooding towns,  
So they could all lead you in.

I just didn’t have a way into yours.  
I’m lost in translation:  
No GPS here, no MapQuest to lead me.
But I keep driving, hoping for a sign.
My low gas light blinding me,
Saying, “Go back, let’s stop.”

My comfort food becomes old voicemails,
Twinkies become memories,
Cookies are letters.

I gorge on the good times
To keep from craving you.
Our waning passion, passing like the moon.
I long for you and the past times—

The times when time stopped,
Kisses became our language,
Caresses replaced thought,
And when I can’t breathe, I know

I’ve done it again,
Let you convince me to miss you.
But as you walk away and I feel alone,
I just know.

I’ve banished my feelings
To please your ego,
Turned down the volume of my wishes
To cater to yours.

And when I decide I want to stand up,
To take back my mind and soul,
You pat my hand and shake your head
And obediently I stand.

But now, this time,
I’ll stop where I stand.
Look you in the eye and say,
“I won’t do it again.”
“Where are we going?” he asked, sounding a bit irritated as I led him on foot down the
darkened neighborhood street.

There weren’t many streetlights on the road but just enough that we didn’t need a
flashlight to navigate our way to our destination.

“You’ll see,” I said secretively, giving him a smile and pulling him along with one hand
while a wadded up blanket rested in the crook of my other arm.

“You’re taking me out to kill me with no witnesses and to bury me in some cow pasture
where I won’t be found until next spring, aren’t you?” he asked, jokingly, his mischievous smile
melting the look of irritation off his face.

“Don’t think that thought hasn’t crossed my mind,” I answered, smiling back. “No, I just
thought it would be nice to get away from everyone.”

I jerked a thumb back over my shoulder in the direction we had just left. We could faintly
hear the sounds of laughter floating through the still night air from his house where our friends
were gathered.

He nodded in agreement, picking up his pace to walk beside me instead of behind me.
He kept my hand in his, swinging our linked hands, not intertwined into what I often thought of
as the “couple hand hold,” just cradled safely in the other. To some it might have seemed strange
or silly for two adults who were alone to not even be holding hands properly, but it was a big step
for us.

We had been going out for a month now, still in that time when we missed each other
the moment we left the other’s sight and stuck in between that stage of moving from our old
friendship into our new relationship.

To put it mildly, we were taking it slowly; the rule “once bitten, twice shy” held too true
for both us.

That’s not to say I didn’t want him to kiss me. I had thought about kissing him since long
before we moved beyond our strange friendship into a just-as-strange relationship. But it was
working for us—at least that was what I told myself.

“We could have at least taken the car,” he complained.

“Oh, brother,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Walking won’t kill you.”

“Ah ha, that’s how you’re going to do me in!” he retorted.

I responded by rolling my eyes, again.

I led the way down the street and into the park. The park wasn’t very big, just a small
play area, a parking lot, a wide open area where kids played soccer, and a baseball field. I passed
by the playground; the swings creaked slightly in the gentle breeze that flowed through the air,
across the soccer field, and through the gate into the baseball field.
“What are we doing here?” he asked, raising an eyebrow and surveying the field with disdain.

“I wanted to look at the stars,” I finally answered, marching towards centerfield.

I dropped his hand and shook the blanket out, laying it out on the grass. I stretched out on it and grabbed his hand so he would lie next to me. Our hands were the only part of our bodies touching, his pinky wrapped around mine.

Stars sparkled upon the black canvas that stretched far above us. The glare of the streetlights was far enough away that it didn’t interfere with stargazing; there weren’t houses nearby, either, and only the occasional car passed by.

It was a silent, peaceful night, cool enough to be able to enjoy being outside but not too cold that you were left shivering, wishing you were back inside. And the beauty of the great expanse took our collective breath away. We lay there for several seconds without speaking a word; he didn’t ask me any more questions, just let both of us get lost in the brilliant lights overhead.

The wind picked up a bit, rustling the leaves on the trees loudly and sending it wafting across us. I shivered involuntarily.

“Are you cold?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“I’m fine,” I promised, smiling reassuringly.

He didn’t answer, and we both lapsed into an even longer silence that drifted into almost awkward, leaving us wondering if we should leave or not. How long were you supposed to stargaze anyway?

The lights of a car appeared at the corner, washing slowly across the fields, landing upon us for a just a moment, and then moving on. In the next instant the car was gone, and the field was back to its pristine quiet almost as if the car had never passed. And neither one of us moved either.

I tried to prevent myself from fidgeting. I didn’t like to sit still for too long, and the silence that stretched between us was only making it harder. I attempted to keep myself still by imagining how I would describe everything around me—if I were writing this into a story.

I envisioned myself typing the words of how the grass felt springy under the blanket, of how I let my free hand graze the tips of the cold blades on my side of blanket, of how the wind occasionally wafted over us sending shivers down my spine, and of how our chests rose and fell in unison as we looked into the heavens above. I would explain how my heart raced just from being near to him, near to the one who for some crazy reason had chosen me to be his.

I would marvel over how he could choose me, wondering if perhaps this were some cruel joke being played on me, as if we were in one of those silly teen flicks. Of course, if this were a movie like that, I would be Julia Stiles or Rachel Leigh Cook, who ended up with Heath Ledger or Freddie Prinze, Jr. I smiled to myself at this thought. Of course, I would choose him over an actor any day.
But even with that thought, it didn’t help my doubts much. That was another one of our many problems, my doubts and fears. I was too often consumed by ridiculous doubts, and I was much too afraid to voice them, afraid that for some crazy reason they would be true.

I sighed softly, suddenly not liking where my little exercise had taken me. And with the introduction of these thoughts, I began to feel a little self-conscious about my impromptu date. I had really wanted to spend some time alone with him, though. It was so good to be alone. Oftentimes, I felt as if our relationship wasn’t just ours but everyone else’s.

I supposed it was those careful, prying eyes, always watching us that made our relationship so difficult. Where was the fun in holding hands or kissing if everyone was eagerly watching you, waiting for it to happen so they could comment and, in the case of our friends, crack jokes at our expense? I had a good sense of humor, but when it came to our relationship, I had to work very hard at seeing the humor in any joke. Our relationship, a relationship I had waited for what felt like forever, was very serious and important to me.

“Hey! A shooting star,” he said, interrupting my thoughts and lifting his free hand to point out in front of us.

I barely had time to register the star streaking across the sky, seemingly falling to the ground. I briefly thought about what it would be like, if stars actually hung from our atmosphere, to catch one or to be standing where it fell. It would be pretty neat to take a star—shaped like the five-pointed figures we draw and call stars—and hang it from my ceiling.

“Wow,” I breathed, amazed at the phenomenon.

“Make a wish,” he whispered into my ear, his breath hot against my face.

I turned to look at him and found his face only inches from mine. My eyes lingered momentarily on his eyes before being drawn down to his lips. I wondered what it would be like to kiss them. I didn’t have the courage to initiate the first kiss, though. No way could I do it. Unconsciously, I licked my dry lips and felt my face redden, glad that it was dark and he couldn’t read my thoughts.

“Come on, close your eyes and make a wish,” he needled.

With a great sigh, as if I were making some great sacrifice, I closed my eyes, and pretended to play his game. I didn’t believe in making wishes on the first star of the night nor falling stars. It was ridiculous and fake and had lost its meaning somewhere along the time when I was a child. I opened my eyes; his face was still very near to mine.

“What did you wish for?” he asked, close to a whisper.

“If I tell you,” I began, “it won’t come true.”

I wasn’t about to admit to him that I hadn’t really made a wish. I tried to think about what I would tell him if he continued to push and prod, trying to figure out my wish. I didn’t want it to be something silly, and I thought about maybe using this as a moment to get him to open up, such as by telling him I had wished he would tell me something he had never told anyone else.

Before I could get in any farther into my musings, I realized his face was drawing closer to mine, and my face reddened all the way to my ears, burning hot on my face. A sudden
well-spring of panic surged through me, but I was too afraid to move. Before too many of my thoughts could swallow me and my fear could drown me, I felt his lips against mine.

He pulled away after a moment, staring into my eyes.

“Is that what you wished for?” he asked.

I felt my lips attempting to twitch into a smile at the corners of my mouth. I didn’t want to tell him no, but I didn’t want to tell him yes, either.

“No,” I finally answered, trying to keep control of my face. “I wished for Matthew McConaughey.”

He stared at me for a moment. A second later he laughed a loud boisterous laugh, grabbed my face, and kissed me again.
An Anomalous Indulgence
John Cobb

I killed Mr. Steward’s dog,
And no one else knows.
I took the life of his wretched little soul.
No more barks or yelps, just silence and peace,
The glimmer in his eye ceases to be.

I killed Mr. Steward’s dog,
And no one else knows.
The man sits on his stoop and rocks all alone;
His old wrinkled hands that use to love and spoil
Now lay in his lap as they fumble and toil.
He will never again feel fur on his hands,
No more pats on the head for his faithful best friend,
Just silence and pain as his tired eyes search
For his furry companion who lies lifeless in the earth.

I killed Mr. Steward’s dog,
And no one else knows.
I stole the joy from the old man’s soul.
The red collar I kept for my eyes and his ears,
And I give it a loud shake from year to year.
Reflections
Michaëlle Yeo

A large window sits in the middle of the wall, an explosion of vibrant color in the dull, smoky atmosphere. The wallpaper around it is tattered, its pattern barely discernible, and the plaster beneath it is cracked and gray with dust. Now and again, the scene shimmers as though it is only a reflection in the water, easily distorted by a restless fish or a stray pebble. But even as the world flickers about it, the window remains still intact, never stirring.

The rich velvet of the curtains is not faded with age nor is the thick, gold rope which hangs from either side of the window. The complex pattern of loops and whorls can barely be seen in the dim light. The large chandelier hanging from the huge sloping roof has long burned out, and the crystals hanging from it are only disturbed by the tiny patter of spider’s feet. The lamp near the large, oak door in the corner lies broken on the ground, and the oil has left a dark stain on the pale, threadbare carpet.

The room is lit only by a single candle, grasped in the hand of a small child, crouching on the window seat as she gazes at something in her hand: a mirror. The seat underneath her crumbles steadily into dust, yet she seems to feel no fear of the impending danger. Instead, she stares, her eyes unmoving, into the mirror.

She sees a young girl; it must be herself. It is, yet at the same time, it is not.

Her own face is pale, with sunken cheeks and dark caves beneath her eyes. Her golden hair lies across her shoulders, limp and damp, and the red bow has faded to a dark brown. The yellow party dress she wears has lost its shine, and it lies in rags across her frail body.

Yet the girl in the mirror is different. Her cheeks are full and rosy, and her blue eyes sparkle. The bow in her hair is a vibrant red, and her hair flows softly in a golden wave down her back. The yellow party dress she wears is beautiful.

As the two girls stare at each other, their eyes widen in surprise. The girl sitting next to the window is silent, looking curiously and intently at the image before her, like a tame animal. The girl in the mirror also stares, but her eyes are full of fear. The image in the mirror begins to fall away as though someone were dropping it. The girl in the mirror disappears, screaming for her mother, and the glass shatters.

The girl at the window is greatly confused and begins to wonder, is she inside or out? What scared the girl away? They could have been friends, perhaps. And then the girl remembered the mirror girl’s last words: her scream for her mother.

“Ma-ma.”

The word came out awkwardly onto her lips as though she had not spoken it for a long time. Yet she repeats it, over and over again, enjoying the sound.

“Mama . . . mama . . .”
Memories flood her mind, blurry and faint, but full of color, light, laughter, and music. Her eyes sparkle; she feels a strange emotion . . . happiness.

She begins to get up, but as she does, the seat finally collapses. The floor groans, too old to withstand the weight. It opens like a huge, dark, cavernous mouth. She falls, screaming, the sound no longer human. At last, there is a dull thunk.

The screaming stops.

Margaret sat at the window seat, nibbling at the sweet bun that her mama had given her and contemplating the image in the mirror. What had that been anyway? At least the mirror was broken now, and she was fine. She smiled as she surveyed the scene before her: the couples swirling across the dance floor and the crystals of the chandelier sparkling. Then the scene flickered. She blinked. After a time, the scene changed again, and the room became dark and damp. The room continued to change, and then it stopped. She was in complete blackness and felt as though she were falling endlessly. At last, the scene returned to the party. She shook her head and rubbed her temples, brushing it off, though fear still clawed at her chest. She rested her head against the rich silk of the curtains and closed her eyes, hoping that when she opened them again the hallucinations would have stopped.

She never opened them again.
Brazilian Fences
First Place Poetry Winner

4 in the a.m.
Anthony Ramirez

What I’m thinking about
is the couch cushion between us.
That enormous island of doubt-inducing,
fear-mongering, plushy goodness.
The way you sat on one end unknowingly,
unwittingly breaking my heart.

What I’m thinking about
is a future that may or may not be.
One where you’re not mine,
and I can’t call myself yours.
A future?
A nightmare.

What I’m thinking about
is your sweet face—
my heartstrings play desire,
a parting, goodnight embrace,
a drive in cold attire.

What I’m thinking about is
the way your body molds to mine,
when we sail on rhythmic notes,
kisses, shivers on open throats,
in sailboats cut from pine.

What I’m thinking about is
ocean waves,
bodily craves,
neon raves,
shallow graves.

What I’m thinking about is
pink pillows and monkey jokes,
melted cookies and That 70’s Show,
chocolate milk and tickle fights,
wake-up sex and late night drives,
Dragonball and déjà vu,
a dash of me,
a pinch of you.
Faggot
Lindsey K. Gibb

A ball of spit and hate
Thrown up from the lungs
Lands on my face.
A Night of Wild Mind Gone Mad*
Debra Mohajer

I dreamt last night of lemon trees
And crates of purple yarn,
Of monkeys climbing skyscrapers
Cats dancing in a barn.
My dog was reading from a book,
A rabbit chased a toad,
Snakes slithered down my chimney,
Babies raced down the road.
It all seemed like a journey
To Alice’s Wonderland,
Especially seeing G. W. Bush
Singing in a rock ‘n’ roll band.
Is this the result of wild mind?
Am I going totally mad?
Or perhaps it was from eating
Last night’s mushrooms gone bad.
I wonder what Freud would think of
A night of wild mind gone mad.

*For my writing teacher, Katherine Reynolds
True Colors

Theresa Goolsby
James is supposed to be right back with another load of his things to move in, and I’m in the middle of a full blown panic attack. An enormous red-headed EMT pushes me back down onto the gurney as I fight to sit up. My throat feels completely constricted, and my eyes jump around looking for any sharp object that I can lodge into it for some air. A Velcro band is strapped around my arm and squeezes my bicep hungrily. At the same time, a dirty plastic mask is shoved over my mouth and nose, smothering me with oxygen.

Someone apparently saw me run to my front yard, gasping for air, and called 911. Now my private life is unfolding in front of complete strangers, and I’m center stage like a woman in childbirth. I lose all modesty as I fight for my next breath. Flowing images of reality stop and are replaced with still snapshots coming moments apart. A dark figure I saw moments ago at a depth is now right over me. I can see that it’s James, trying to look into my eyes as they dart about.

“Breathe in through your nose, Dani.” His voice is calm but urgent.

I do what he says, and finally the oxygen begins lifting the iron-crushing weight off my chest. I begin crying, first out of relief that I can breathe again and then out of embarrassment. I’ve managed to keep my issues private for years. I’m mortified that everyone will be thinking of this moment when they run into me at the grocery store. I’ll probably be on YouTube! I’m still crying hard, but with James holding my hand, I’m slowly becoming less hysterical. For the first time, I get why people say someone is their rock. When James holds my hand, there’s a physical coolness and calmness that he transfers to me. A confused EMT worker takes the plastic mouth piece off my face.

“Are you okay, Miss?” I can’t tell him whether I am or not. I just need James to send them away.

They carry me, still on the gurney, into my house and ask where the bedroom is. I really don’t want to go there, so they deposit me with a crunch on the vinyl couch in the front room. In the confusion, I hadn’t even realized they had put a blanket on me. I immediately rip it off in disgust. They put it back on, and I rip it off again. My heart begins to race again, but James assures them that I’m fine and that he can take it from here. The EMTs clear out as fast as they came, assuming from my vitals that I will survive.

James sits in front of me on the matching vinyl ottoman.

“You were panicking about tonight.” It’s a statement, not a question, but I nod anyway.

“Well, you sure know how to throw a welcome party!” He laughs, and in a matter of moments, he has me crying with laughter as he describes old Mrs. Buckley across the street.
stretching her already long neck out her front door (James swears she’s Plastic Woman) and all the other hysterical things I missed while my mind thought it was fighting for its life.

I absolutely love James’ laugh. The first time I heard it was when we had been dating just a short time and it was time for me to give my usual, “by the way, I’m a crazy OCD woman” warning. I’m usually met with dumbfounded looks when I first mention my issues. If I tell people too soon, they don’t understand why I would even mention it. If I wait too long, they accuse me later of not letting them know I was a nutcase from the start. When I mentioned some of the details to James, he laughed horribly. And then he apologized profusely for laughing. It had been the most genuine laugh and the most genuine apology I had ever heard.

“You really shouldn’t worry so much about having struggles with life. We all have them,” he told me. “I think everyone has at least one all-consuming struggle that tortures them throughout their life. Sometimes you can never guess what another person has to deal with, but it’s usually always there. I can’t imagine someone not having one.”

He told me that he had lost over a hundred pounds a few years ago but still comes home once in a while, eats a full bag of Chips Ahoy!, and hates himself afterward. This isn’t something anyone would guess from looking at him. I had met him at the Y and hadn’t been able to take my eyes off of him as I watched him gently explain the leg press machine to an elderly woman. I was instantly attracted to him as I watched him take the time to thoroughly wipe down the machine first with the cleaning spray, his muscles flexing with each movement.

“My aunt’s struggle is biting the inside of her mouth. She can’t stop. All day long, biting new fresh areas as old areas heal. It might seem the smallest thing to anyone else, but she has spent years of her life trying to control it. Maybe you could tell her about the bacteria in her mouth, and that would help her to stop.”

I laughed at his openness and found myself telling him things my family didn’t even know. Like how it started when my older brother came home from school announcing that there were probably millions of microscopic mites living in our blankets and pillows and feeding off of our skin at night. I looked in horror at my parents. They were always the ones to reassure me when my brother would try to scare me with tales of ghosts and boogiemen. They both nodded as if he had told them a basic fact like that the sun provides all of earth’s energy.

“Well, no one in our family has allergies, thank goodness,” Mom told me later when I was still incredulous that she didn’t consider bugs feeding off of our skin at night as that big of a deal.

I’m not sure if she noticed right away that I had started washing my sheets and pillowcases every night before bed, taking them out of the dryer just moments before putting them back on over the plastic mattress covering. The plastic cover had been my first allowance purchase after my brother’s life-shattering proclamation. On nights that I tried to skip washing them, I couldn’t sleep. I usually ended up sitting in the linoleum front hallway, trying to escape the invisible bugs until morning. Mom would find me sleeping on the bare floor with no pillow or blankets and tell my father I had been sleepwalking again. I let them think that so they wouldn’t
know that I was afraid of something I couldn’t even see and that everyone else treated as if it were normal.

As the years went by, additional fears were stacked carefully on the preceding ones like the pieces of a Jenga puzzle. After reading a study about how cell phones disrupt neuron patterns in the brain, I stopped calling anyone and switched to texting. When I see a person with a cell phone at his ear, I want to rip it out of his hand! I’ve learned some coping mechanisms. You wouldn’t believe how many times I tell myself every day to “just look away, Dani.” Most of my OCD behaviors fortunately take place in the solitude of my own home.

At 35, I’m the only person my age that I know who has never lived with anyone since they’ve left home. Just the thought of having that many million more dust mites crawling around in bed is more than I can handle. I also enjoy being able to wash my sheets at night without sneaking around and worrying that my family members think I’m crazy.

Finally, I realized this was it. I couldn’t imagine loving or trusting anyone more than James. He never complained about not spending the night with me, but I would lie in my warm, sterile sheets at night and miss him so much it physically hurt. When I told him that I thought we should take the leap and go for it, it had been his idea to have a trial run at sleeping together first. I probably should have listened to him. I was afraid he’d turn and run before he even got his things moved in.

James asks me again if I’m feeling any better, and when I tell him “yes,” he leaves me to go into the bedroom.

“What are you doing?” I try not to sound worried, but I already know what he’s doing. I can see him in my mind retrieving his things, telling me we need more time and running out as fast as the EMT workers did. I’m sure he’ll be gentle even with this. Then slowly he’ll stop calling every day until he can escape from my crazy life quietly and without incident.

As he comes out of the room carrying my enormous load of sheets and pillowcases, I ask again what he’s doing, truly curious at this point.

“Seeing as I’m going to be the man of the house from now on, it seems only right that I should be the one making sure there’s not a single flesh-eating monster on our bed!” My anxiety lifts immediately as he makes me laugh again, and I feel totally normal with my psychosis.
Smooth Sailing on Puget Sound

Alan-Michael Smith
Third Place Poetry Winner (Tie)

Pet Viking
Jason Redfern

We got him last Thursday
From the Viking store
My very own Viking . . .
I had always wanted one.

Traffic home was bad
He got restless
The rear axle is gone . . .
We need a new car.

I offered him a drink
Some milk, maybe juice
He threw a rock at me . . .
He must only drink mead.

I awoke the next morning
He hung from the ceiling
I tried to scold him . . .
Vikings are strong.

He’s in the yard now
He dug up our tree
He’s making a boat . . .
I get the message.

It’s Sunday now
We went to the beach
He seems calmer here . . .
He sets out to sea.

I say goodbye
I don’t want him to go
But I know now . . .
Vikings should be free.
The clock winked at me. The LEDs horizontally bounced red beams across my heavy retinas. It read 4:04 a.m., just a couple of hours before the rising of the sun.

Tucked underneath the cover, I lay on my side with my knees aimed at my chest and with my hands tenderly cupping my chin. Without altering position, I stared back at the clock for a prolonged period, gazing, anticipating, and batting my eyelids. A seep of saliva suddenly tickled the side of my mouth, dribbled down my cheek, and was eventually absorbed in my pillowcase. At 5:52, I felt my husband shuffle and reposition his slumberous body. Little did he know that he was minutes away from waking up to the last day of his sweet, wretched life. “Only eight more minutes until I kill you, Robert,” I thought to myself. “Only eight more minutes until I’m free.”

The alarm blared. His arm shot out from under the covers, leaped above my still body, and slapped the clock into submission. In the whole decade Robert and I had been married, I had never whacked the snooze. I simply chose not to. Robert, on the other hand, enjoyed whacking not only the snooze but also anything else with a pair of legs and silicone breasts. He let out a grunting protest of a yawn and lay motionless for an additional minute before lumbering to the bathroom; I finally got out of bed as soon as I heard the running water hit his skin. A warm shower is Robert’s early-morning ritual. Mine was the hot, spicy, black, chai tea straight from India that I was about to assemble.

As I sat in an upright, fetal position on the floor of our immaculate kitchen, my vision began to blur. From time to time, I would catch a glimpse of the beautiful vapor elevating, dancing, and swirling from the cup of tea that I snugly held above my curved knees. The steam was so unbound, careless, and liberated—free to wander off and evaporate in any direction, free to be free, free to exist and disappear as if being alive and dying at the same time.

“Why the hell are you sitting on the floor?” said that voice I could recognize for miles and whose physical presence I suddenly noticed. From down here, he looked much taller and stronger than he ever did, aside from the huge bags under his eyes.

“Oh, good morning,” I said, quivering my head. I looked up at him and smiled. He was wearing his usual weekday set of garments: a white dress-shirt underneath the trousers and jacket that matched in color and fabric. “Care for some tea? I made it extra special for us today.”
“Don’t mind if I do,” he said. He sniffed it a little before taking a pretty large and delightful sip. “Well, I hope you didn’t down it all in one sip!” I hesitated as I jumped to my feet. “This one is particularly for us to share today,” I whispered and took the cup from his hands. I stared at it as a brought it towards my mouth, and then as the rim touched my lips, I looked up into his eyes and swallowed that bittersweet taste of arsenic.
Alone

Hannah Jenney
Little Black Box
Therese Crews

There’s a little black box
I’d like to put my heart in
To protect it from charming young men

With their sweet smiles and perfect faces.
This little black box will keep my heart safe—
Even when all it wants is to be out.

I can’t take that chance
Not again—not with you.
But maybe I’ll let it out,
And, instead, in the box, I’ll put you.
My roots run deep through a long line of alcoholics—more so on my father’s side. Every evening before and after supper, Grandpa tended to sip his Kentucky-borne whiskey on the rocks in his red leather wingback chair while my uncle Patrick consumed his vodka with a side of ice. Sometimes when Pat wanted to be found after his three-day binges, you could easily discover him at the Sahara casino slots sitting on the little gold stool, dropping quarters like a gumball machine. Dad was the older brother, and he was a beer man who loved his Bud Light the best. Twelve-packs quickly turned into daily cases of twenty-fours during his unemployment phase, and after I moved three hundred miles away for college, he quit cold turkey which I assume is quite a feat for a man with several DUIs under his belt.

But the one thing that these three men had in common was my grandmother. She was a tall, thin-mouthed Baptist woman who wore brown stockings that bunched at her ankles. Mounds of jewelry decorated her chest and glimmered of pearly whites, golds, and silvers. I like to think that she grabbed her entire collection with both hands every morning, truly blindfolded, and then arranged them on her neck. She was a proud Mississippi social climber who struggled with arthritis most of her adult life. Her remedy: a crystal decanter placed delicately on a long silver tray. The decanter consisted simply of a clear water-like drink with a single raisin submerged and sunk to the bottom. This is only grandma’s medicine. Don’t you even think about touching it, she warned us in between her swigs of her homemade tonic. It’s not for little girls who don’t know any better. Even in family pictures, the woman never even really smiled.

Luckily my father’s personality clearly resembled his father’s. Like his dad, he was a seemingly happy guy, a jokester, grinning ear to ear as he told his tenth knock-knock joke at the dinner table. Unfortunately, he had dropped one addiction for another—NASCAR. And he did have his neurotic tendencies like when he left his keys in the door overnight, washed his screwdrivers in the dishwasher to “clean off the grease” before he carefully put them away in his Craftsman toolbox, and boiled water on the stove to sterilize his glasses; these are just some of the things that make my mother worry about him, especially when the metal on his frames melted away to a clear yellowish pulp in the pot. So after this bout of amnesia landed him in the hospital once again, my mother wrung her palms and asked too many questions as usual.
“Did you see the doctor? I mean, did he say anything? I knew it. As soon as I leave for a coffee, he shows up.” Mom tried to peer around the corner of the doorway of room 411 as if she was going to catch a glimpse of the neurologist striding away to his next target.

“I just got here.” I smirked at her. “Besides, you can’t cure crazy.”

“Whatever, he’s your blood, not mine.” She rolled her eyes at me.

I thought about poor Dad; Grandma sure did do a number on him. Dad said that when she punished him, she made him pick out his switch from the old willow tree. The branches were viney in form, green on the inside, and molded easily, to his unfortunate disappointment, to the contours of his backside. When the red lines finally turned into even redder drips, she would consider his lesson learned. Dad, despite a plethora of all previous “lessons learned,” would raise my sister, Ruthie, and me much differently and far less violently. Regular punishment at my house consisted of Mom running after me trying to break a wooden spoon on my butt, but Dad would eventually catch me and make me stand in the corner for a good fifteen or so and give me the “you know it hurts me more than it hurts you” speech. And for this reason, Grandma decided she would show my parents how to raise children—her way. During an extra long summer vacation in Louisville, Mississippi, I eventually became immune to her punishment of flyswatters and splintered wooden spoons and fought back with the skill of my tongue. She was far more competent at this game than I—years of practice—and she lashed back at my smart aleck words as she said, Your father never wanted little girls. He wanted little boys instead. You can’t imagine his disappointment when he found out you were a girl. She scoffed at my tears, and it was over. She won. This was just a few of the many obnoxious words that escaped from her mouth.

The thought of her voice still enraged me, but my mother’s quavering voice ruptured my agitated thoughts.

“Your dad loves you, you know?” Mom gripped the coffee with one hand, and since she couldn’t fulfill her nervous habits one-handed, took her free hand and pulled the strand of hair out of my eyes and tucked it behind my ear.

“I know, I know.” I looked down the hallway from our doorway, watching the nurses deep in gossip at the main desk.

She turned, tousled her hair, and walked into the hospital room, motioning with her hand for me to follow, which I did.

“Dad, are you awake?” I bent over him and tapped his shoulder.

“Depends . . . do you need money, or are you just glad to see me?” Even though his eyes were closed, the corners of his mouth curved into a smile.
I squinted my eyes at him, cleared my throat and said, “Well, I could always use the money. Are you offering?” I smiled back and waited for his reaction.

He opened his eyes, probably thinking his years of comedic quips had finally backfired on him, and with two hands, he held his stomach, permanently bloated from years of overindulgence, and a chuckle rumbled from the pit of his chest. He shook his head and said while laughing, “Everyone’s a comedian.”

He looked at me and circles of tiredness and sadness framed his blues. Perhaps he was thinking what all of us were thinking—the last time we were sitting in a hospital, he was the one holding Grandma’s hand.

Her last days consisted of her becoming even more bitter than I ever thought was possible. She insulted us to our faces, calling my sister “fat” or “piggy” depending on her mood. She was living with my parents at the time, in my old room, and she made it clear that I wasn’t welcome for laundry or even dinner. She destroyed the coffeemaker, microwave, and the dishes; tried to stomp the dog with her walker; and hid my mom’s trinkets and money throughout her room. Something in her made her so hateful to us, and when they had to admit her into a nursing home after three falls in the bathroom, she told my father, You are not my son. You are nothing to me. I had thought to myself, I am from this woman; my blood comes from her.

My eyes were tired in memory. And I had a headache. I pressed my temples with my knuckles for a minute and focused back on Dad who was dazed in his own thoughts.

“So what year did you go back to this time, Dad?”

“2006,” Mom whispered. Her arms were crossed, her mouth firm. “He thought Grandma and Patrick were still alive.”

He took off his glasses, grimaced, and rubbed his eyes and temples with his fists and yawned. “Huh?” he asked. Apparently he hadn’t heard a word.

“Nothing,” Mom said as she made bug eyes at me. I had made her mention Grandma. “Just talking.”

It was no lie that the even the memory of Grandma put a bad taste in everyone’s mouth, especially in my mother’s. Over the years, Mom’s seed of loathing for the woman grew slowly, but she managed to hold everything inside. She followed through with her daughter-in-law duty and always treated Grandma with utmost respect, even though it was only conveyed one way. But when I was in my twenties, I liberated a secret to her that I had kept for years. As a child, when Mom was working nights, Grandma would bathe my sister and me brutally, taking the washcloths and burning our skin with the scrubbing. Little girls are never clean enough, she
had told us, etching crimson stripes all along our naked alabaster bodies. It was torture for us as the scars in our mind would always outlast the physical wounds. Mom had asked why I hadn’t told her and even blamed herself for having to work. She had wept in my hair for a moment or two but then vehemently tossed her body back from me with a sense of clarity. *She will not destroy my family as she did hers,* Mom had said. She always play-threatened that she was just going to push her down the stairs one day. And every time Grandma fell, I would always nudge Mom and ask, “Was that you?” She would smile and say, “That was her this time.” As if she really would.

I heard my stomach rumble with my lack of breakfast, and I guess Dad must have heard it, too, because he started massaging his. He motioned for my Mom to get closer as if he had a secret he had been holding for years.

“Babe, will you check with the nurse and see if I can have a cheeseburger? Fries would be good, too, but if all they offer is a cheeseburger, I’ll take it.” *Typical,* I thought.

“Dad, you’ve already eaten.” I answered for her. She was shaking her head.

“I know. It was all healthy, though. I need some grease.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Good lord, Dad, do you want them to wheel you next door and put a heart monitor on you?”

“Will it get me a cheeseburger?” he asked, smiling ear to ear with his eyes twinkling.

The remnants of his facial message may have surrounded his bright, blue eyes, but the puffiness and dark circles gave him away. Mom always said that the eyes are the windows to your soul, and despite his constant grin and blasé attitude, anyone could see that Dad has had a rough life. He managed to overcome his sickness when he was predestined not to. For instance, it was a fact that I never knew Grandpa. All I know is that it was either a heart attack or cancer or maybe even a combination both that killed him, but it was the alcohol that broke him down. Patrick even died last November—heart attack. My aunt, who had separated from Patrick that summer before, found him face down in three-day bloat in his little Las Vegas trailer park. Empty, plastic vodka bottles littered the sink, floor, bed, and bathroom. It was a rude awakening for Dad.

But not right now. Cheeseburgers trumped everything today.

“But you remember what the doctor told you yesterday?” I asked him.

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to have to stop eating all that crap.”

“Okay, okay. I just don’t understand how my blood pressure or weight has to do anything with my memory loss.”
Mom stepped in. “No one does, but somehow when your blood pressure rises, you tend
to, well, time travel.”

I pulled my hair back in a ponytail. “Plus, you’re a freak of nature,” I said.
“Freak of nature? Well, you must take after me then.” He winked and smiled at me.

“Where’s your sister?”

“Stuck in traffic,” Mom said, closing her phone into her hand. “She texted me.”

I got up and walked to the other side of room by the floor lamp and chair. My rubber
soles squeaked across the floor. This room was much bigger than Grandma’s at the hospice,
but my memory seems faded since I only visited her once. Our differences almost culminated
in blows after she had just moved into my old room two years ago—she was not at the
hospice yet. I was walking down the hall when I overheard Grandma on the phone talking to
her brother. She was reporting to him that she thought Ruthie was just plain fat and gaining
weight by the minute. She stared at me as I stopped and stood in the doorway watching as she
delicately laid down the phone after her goodbyes. Caught! I thought. My words flew violently
at her as I accused her of emotionally abusing our family. I flung years of frustration on a
woman who always denied any wrongdoing, and my words left no interjections for hers. After
I had said my mouthful, I left, slamming the door behind me, and I could hear the wobble of
her walker following me. Mom said that I was acting no better than she, doing before thinking.
Mom told me that if I didn’t forgive her, I would turn out just like her. So weeks later, after her
final falls, the woman lay on her deathbed in the hospice, all shriveled under the blanket, and I
went to say my final goodbye.

I sat next to her, and she fluttered her eyes, gray and large like silver dollars. It was as if
she were utterly surprised by my presence, but I was, too, a little bit. And after Dad had tried to
talk to her with no success (her hearing was nonexistent), she grabbed at my hand and stared at
me silently and certainly not smiling with the same thin-lipped mouth she always had. Did she
know this was our goodbye? She gripped my hand and squeezed it. And when the nurses told
us it was time to leave for the night, I had to peel Dad off his chair, said goodbye, and walked
out the door. As we crossed the threshold of the hospice room, I could hear a faint weeping
coming from her bed. But I didn’t turn around, I couldn’t.

I pushed her face into the back of my head. Was I just like her? I sighed and stretched
my legs out in front of me, watching Dad watch nothing.

“So you have your memory back now completely, huh, Dad?”

“That’s what they tell me.”
“Did they tell you that I am your favorite daughter, or do you just remember that?” I smiled.

“Sure, I remember.” I saw the wheels turning inside. “And when Ruthie comes to visit me, she will be my favorite.” He grinned proudly. I knew he was okay when he started asking for cheeseburgers.

I laughed. Always so political. He was a great man. He had endured through his suffering, and we loved him for it. I stretched out my legs longer this time, yawned, and put my arms above my head. I looked at my feet and focused on the bruise I made last week. It wasn’t so purple anymore. I started thinking about my own neuroses. My clumsiness was frequent, often falling down the stairs because my legs always seemed to know where they were going without consulting my head first. My forgetfulness intoxicated me, sometimes making me leave my keys in the car, sometimes while it was running, or even making me leave my keys in the refrigerator. My worries and preoccupations with life, death, and whether or not I had gained weight this week consumed me. And like my family before me, I also developed my own private relationship in college with the goddess of stupor.

Mom tells me I closely resemble Grandma, her nose, her good teeth, and even her worries. But my eyes—those I got from my Dad.
A Coyote in Death Valley

Alan-Michael Smith
Why?
Angel Ponce

Why kill another gangster for a different color if deep within we all share the same colors?

Why steal from our ghettos *sin dinero* if we all live the same scenarios in our *barrios*?

Why snitch on a homeboy when caught by the men in blue? Maybe you shouldn’t have done the crime if you couldn’t handle the time.

Why get mad behind bars when your name is not called at mail call? Just remember, homie, who’s the one that left his loved ones first?

Why hold a grudge on your girl when she tells you, “*Papi, ya no te quiero encontré un amor más sincero,*” when who knows how many times you played her?

Why say, “I’m too *chavalon* to take care of that baby”? You weren’t too *chavalon* to make the baby.

Why smoke dope and brag about the killing you did a day before? Boy, have you ever heard what goes around comes around?

Why make your old lady cry, cry, and cry when she’s the one that put money in your books and bought you those “G” Nikes you always wanted?

Why skip the schoolhouse for an ounce when you can go, learn, and one day make your *jefita* very proud?

Why live this life of pain and tears when you’re hurting? I guess some of you might just be saying, “It’s just faith,” but is it, homies?
The Cancer of Thought
Paloma Moreno

I am haunted every day
Haunted by the “what ifs” of life.
They spread and infect.
The “maybes” and “coulda’ beens”
Aggressively eat at the now.
   Get them out.
   Cut them out.
The blue gloves
Holding that beautiful tool,
   That’s what I need.
My shivering body covered
With sterile drapes,
Ready for surgery, with
   Only the infected area
Exposed to the scalpel,
The vile, intruding words
   Will soon be gone.
Staring at the calming
Walls, that are anything but
Walls because I can see now
   The sparrows gliding in a
Cloudless sky.
I can finally breathe, but wait
   What if? Maybe?
   Fuck.
This Town Ain’t Big Enough for the Both of Us

Udo Hintze
Glue Pudding
Robb Wallace

Back in the days of old, back before even your grandparents were born, while Christ still roamed our desolate mound of soil, there lived a princess. This average princess lived in an average castle, had an average father, spun average flax, had an average BMW (350 Z! Nice!), rode average ponies, but this princess had a secret that wasn’t so average.

Our story, however, takes place in the early 1300’s. There lived a man, yes, a man, and not just any man. Well, he was just any man, but because he is the main character, he is not just any man. Preventing myself from further digression, I shall go on. He spent his days at work, earning a living for family. He spent his nights asleep, dreaming of what life would have been like without the paparazzi he got from my writing this story. His wife was very pretty, and he had two sturdy, handsome little boys and a pretty little girl. They were very obedient and never did anything their papa wouldn’t approve of.

One day his wife was cooking dinner (chicken nuggets, chili, and tuna casserole, mmmmmmmmmmm-mmmm) when the telephone rang. She wiped her hands on her apron and picked up the phone. “Hello . . . why, yes, I am unhappy with my long distance provider. (This was also the very first telemarketing call as far as I can surmise, but I can’t be sure of it.) I most certainly will listen to you . . . what’s that? You have a deal on a package of cable, internet, and phone lines? I’m all ears, let’s talk.” So they talked and they talked and they talked, and when they had done that for a while, they chitted and they chatted. Hours and hours they spent on the telephone. (Hey, it was the first telemarketing call; he didn’t know how it worked. Give him a break.) They had just moved into a conversation about last week’s new CSI Miami (she had missed it), when she remembered that she had been cooking dinner. She told him that she had to let him go but promised to talk again next time he called and to have a KitKat ready for him. (I know it was a bad pun on the way I used “give him a break,” but you know what? I’m writing, not you.)

She ran into the kitchen and checked her chili, but it was merely at a simmer. She ran to check her chicken nuggets, but they were merely a bit crispy. She ran to check her tuna casserole (wow, this is a lot of running), and the cheese was just a little dark. She let out a relieved sigh and then remembered the banana pudding she had forgotten to mention earlier and ran to her oven to check it. She threw open the door and gasped. Her finger flew to her mouth. She had burned it. After finding the antibiotics (wouldn’t want an infection), she ran back to the oven. After repeating this seven more times (give her a break, she was blonde), she finally threw open the oven just as her husband walked in. She pulled out the pudding (wait, do you even bake banana pudding?) and placed it on the stove to cool off. Her husband came to the table to eat his meal, and she hurriedly brought out the chili and the tuna.
“Hey, I read the earlier part of the story, and it also says I get chicken nuggets,” he said with a face full of flashbulb (the paparazzi, remember?). She ran back and brought out the chicken nuggets, and her children came to the table, and they all sat down and ate. After they had finished all of that, one of her boys and the girl asked about dessert (one boy got sent to his room without dessert because he had taken up a rather unruly tone when he asked for the gravy).

She ran (man, even I’m getting tired from all of this running) to the kitchen and grabbed the banana pudding. She scooped her children a spoonful each, and she gave her husband two; however, due to much complaining, she was forced to take back part of his portion (notice how it doesn’t mention that she was the one complaining. Typical). While her children shoveled it in, the husband took a bite of it, and his eyes flew open.

“Have you any decency, woman? Why would you serve me something like this? It tastes revolting, and it’s sticky enough that I could use it to . . . make things stick to other things.” He squinted in confusion before continuing, “I hereby decree from this day forth . . . ”

“You’re not a king. You can’t decree,” his wife interrupted.

However, he merely spoke louder as to overpower her voice, “ . . . from this day forth, that this concoction shall be known as paste a.k.a. (that means “also known as.” Ha ha, I feel smart now) glue and shall be used to make things stick to other things. And you, my dearly beloved, shall be forced to make this forever until you get it right. In the meantime, we will sell what you mess up.”

Every day from then on (and even ‘till today to the best of my knowledge), she began her pudding, but she always got the phone call and messed it up. Who was her husband, you might ask (and even if you didn’t, well, I will tell you). His name was Mr. Elmer (you know, if you think about it, it’s almost like she was the main character). That’s right. You see this is why some children have been known to eat glue; they have been checking to see if she ever got the pudding right.
Basketball
Kenny Bacak
Cryptic Love
Lauren Martell

Round and round like a whirlpool’s twirl,
The next degree of time will soon unfurl.
A snake sheds its skin, a clam forms a pearl.

Like the power of a semicolon; thoughts were divided.
A flutter of an eyelash marks true feelings guided.
With the drop of a hat, two lives coincided.
Just a Little Poem
Chantel Sigman

Just a little poem,
Words suppressed into meaning,
Trying to be deep and clever,
Infusing words with feeling.

Meters and alliterations
Carefully come into play,
But do they help, or only deter you,
From saying what you need to say?

Some days relief flows steady,
My fingers racing to keep up with it all—
Others I sit there grasping to relate
To the random words that fall.

“Out, damned spot! Out . . . ” *
(I say, addressing the stain on my soul),
But the forced removal spreads it further,
Blurring lines and creating a hole.

* From Macbeth by William Shakespeare
This is for all of you Jessie Jackson, Quanell X, Al Sharpton idolizers,
Only in the light when something bad happens,
Throwing a personal pity party for yourselves with extra ice cream,
Shining the light on the wrong part of the situation/issue.
Somebody pass me a tissue, so I can wipe these fake tears from my face before they stain my shirt.
People say I’m cold, but that really doesn’t hurt, ‘cause I speak my mind like a speaker box,
Just to reach the masses
Like teachers in communication classes.
You have to understand everything is not all about race.
So race this message up to your brain and think before you speak,
And don’t think out loud ‘cause that’s how your thoughts get leaked.
And don’t be so quick to play the race card, like the ace of spades,
‘Cause that’s how you get trumped with a two kings, a queen, and a joker
Called Politics, Policy, People, and whatever other factor you wanna throw in to mess up stuff.
Some people call it a monkey wrench. I laugh ‘cause there’s the race card already.
Early Morning Frost

Rachel L. Whitten
I saw him standing there on the corner as I approached the intersection, holding his sign that read, “Need money for booze.” For a brief second I wanted to chuckle. At least he’s honest, I thought. But the deep grooves in his leathery skin and his sunken, lifeless eyes made me think the sign was less a display of his resounding spirit for survival and more a symbol of losing all hope for anything other than finding the quickest road out of this so-called life.

I reached over to turn down the stereo as I slowed my car to a stop.

“What’d you do that for?” my sister Becky asked from the passenger’s seat.

“I dunno,” I replied. “It just seemed rude or something to pull up next to him with the music so loud.” I turned to look at her as the car reached a stop. “You know, showy or something.”

“Next to who?”

“The guy there on the corner.” I turned my head and nodded in his direction.

Becky rolled her eyes away from me and shook her head, “Whatever. Like I was saying, I was thinking of doing some volunteer work this year for Congressman White. With the way the government’s going right now, we can’t afford to lose any of our seats.” A glob of ketchup fell from her bacon-double-cheeseburger onto her white silk blouse as she sunk her teeth into a large bite. “Omigod,” she screamed, a bit of bun falling from her mouth as she looked down. She swallowed hard. “Look at my new blouse!”

“Here.” I pulled my purse up from the passenger floor and dropped it onto the console, then hunched over slightly to rummage through its contents. “I think I have a spot remover wipe or something.”

“Oh, way to go, sis,” Becky said, nudging me with her elbow as she held her burger up away from her body. “Now that guy thinks you’re digging in your purse for change.”

“What?” I looked up at her, and she motioned toward the corner with her burger. I turned to see him within feet of my window. “Oh.” I sat up straight and tossed the wipe at my sister, then put my hands at ten and two on the wheel and stared dead ahead. I could feel his presence outside my window—the intense burning of his stare—and I half-expected my cheek to light up in spontaneous combustion from the force.

“Don’t turn and look at him,” Becky said in a tone that would’ve been tagged with or else in our younger days.

“I’m not looking,” I replied, trying to speak without moving my lips. “But he’s not going away.”

“Well, eventually the light has to turn green.”
He rapped slightly on the window with the splintered skin of his knuckles—like a
snapped tree branch scraping against a house at the mercy of a storm.

I sighed deeply. “I can’t not look,” I said to Becky, dropping my ventriloquist act. “It’s
not like I don’t know he’s there!” I slowly turned my head towards him, and I could see the
blueness in his eyes peering through the dark shadows cast by his wiry and sun-bleached, flyaway
hair. How magnificent they must’ve been when they still held a sparkle, I thought, and I wondered
if he’d ever known the gift of a compliment.

He jutted his hand towards me, and I shrugged my shoulders slightly, mouthing, “I don’t
have anything.”

He nodded once, then looked down and walked slowly towards the line of cars building
behind me.

“Oh, thank God he’s gone,” Becky breathed. “You know, I was thinking the other
day . . . ” Her words drained into white noise as I watched him in the side mirror make his way
to his next hope. With each step his jeans slid lower and lower on his hips, and I wondered if they
fit when he first reached my corner. I thought of the stack of outgrown jeans at the bottom
of my teenage son’s closet; they might fit him.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Huh?” I turned my head back towards my sister. “Oh, yeah. Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“So anyway,” Becky continued, dabbing at the stain on her blouse, “I told them I’m not
spending $10,000 a year on a private school and expecting my son to be served dried-up soybean
burgers at lunchtime.” She wadded up the stain wipe and poised herself to toss it into the Wendy’s
bag.

“Wait!” I held up my hand. “Are you gonna eat your fries?”

Becky twisted left-and-right as she looked for a place to throw the wadded wipe, finally
placing it in the door pocket. “No, here, do you want them?” She reached into the bag and pulled
them out, taking one before handing them over to me. “By the way, I really like your new car.”

“No, huh-uh.” I looked in the side mirror and saw the man walking back to the corner
from two cars behind. “I thought I’d offer them to him. Oh, and thanks.”

I felt the weight of Becky’s eyes on the back of my head for a moment before she
responded, “Oh, for Chrissake, Tiff, what the hell has gotten into you?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, my gaze still on the man in the mirror.

“You can’t feed them. They’re like stray cats: you feed one a coupla pieces of food, and
the next thing you know, they’ve taken over your neighborhood corners, and your property values
are going down.” I heard the crunch of her burnt fry between her teeth. “You know, he probably
chose this life. Like a wart on the ass of society.” She pulled down her visor and flipped up the
cover on the mirror, then began fiddling with her thick, blunt coif. “He should get a job like the
rest of us and stop living off everyone else.” She wiped her pinky finger along the bottom of her
glossy lip, then flipped the visor back up against the headliner. “What?”

I stared at her for a moment, then closed my eyes and shook my head slightly.
“Okay, fine. So go ahead and feed him the fries. Maybe next time you can give him his own meal deal. Better yet, why don’t you just leave him your car and some money so he can go get whatever he wants? Maybe he’ll be kind enough to bring you something as he drives by you and the kids walking home... or are you going to give him that, too?”

I shifted my eyes sideways towards her, then back to the windshield.

“Seriously, sis. We were raised by the same hard-working parents—parents who taught us you get back from life what you put in. Don’t tell me you support government handouts,” she said with a smirk.

I saw the man coming up beside me from the corner of my eye and mumbled under my breath as I hit the power button on my window, “Yeah, I do, actually. Don’t tell anyone. I don’t want to find a burning donkey on my front lawn.” I hit the window button again, “What the—?”

“Your window lock is on, Little Miss ‘We Are The World’.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a sign.” Becky leaned over towards me and proclaimed emphatically, “Let him suck off someone else!”

I positioned the fries on my console and put my hands back on the wheel. “Something this greasy would probably upset his stomach anyway. Hey, do you really think he chose this life?”

Becky propped herself up with her elbow on her windowsill. “Well, shit, I’d let everyone else support me while I did nothing if I could. Is this light ever going to turn green?”

I smiled to myself, trying to hold back a laugh.

“What’s your problem?” she asked.

“You know, sis, we’re stay-at-home moms. Technically, we do let other people support us while we do nothing.”

“Speak for yourself! I take care of the kids and the house—and I make sure my man is also taken care of, thank you very much.”

I reached over and patted her on the head. “Aw, that’s cute. But be honest. Our kids are in private schools all day, we have maids to take care of the houses, and, yes, we take care of our husbands—but, sweetie, that just makes us glorified hookers with all the help we have doing everything else.”

Becky’s jaw dropped open as she made a small gurgling noise.

“Oh, look at that. She’s actually speechless,” I said, laughing.

“I’m not—I’m not speechless. I just don’t know where to begin. First of all—”

As my laugh died down, I returned my attention to the man, now back at his post on the corner. A plastic produce bag was whirling around him, taunting him as a wind pocket played a game of keep-away. The bag kept floating down, down over his head, only to spiral upward just as he’d reach up and almost catch it. On his third attempt he jumped just enough to catch it between his palms and draw it down to him.
I watched as he feverishly tore at the bag with his hands to remove the orange rind I could now see it had held. As Becky droned on about the complexity of coordinating her domestic help, I watched the man hold a large piece of the peel to his nose and close his eyes, then bite into it and tug at it with his hand until it broke in two. He squatted down on the pavement as he began to chew, his arms stretched out over his knees. I could see the joint of his jaw grinding to churn through the hardened remnants that even the thinnest of orange peels becomes once devoid of its juicy innards.

“Uh, green means go,” I heard Becky say.
“Huh? Oh, yeah, thanks.”

I hit the gas and went through the light, glancing out my window for one last look as my car turned the corner past him. He had picked up his sign and was banging it against his knees with one hand as he finished his meal with his other. It was flipped to the other side, and I felt an emptiness in my stomach as I read his other message: “Which way do you go from here?”
Standing Firm

Jessica May
SELECTION POLICY

Works for publication, including artwork, are submitted to Dr. Rebecca L. Tate, Kimberly S. Carter, or Amy M. Hirsch, *Inkling* faculty advisors. They substitute, in place of the author’s name, a number; thus, only they know the identity of the individual contributors. 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 faculty advisors and destroyed, thereby prohibiting the circulation of unauthorized copies of anyone’s work. The final step in the selection of materials is a staff selection meeting when the *Inkling* editors, staff, and advisors meet to discuss and vote upon the final selection for publication. Only after final selections have been made do the advisors reveal the identity of those individuals whose works have been chosen.

CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST INFORMATION

All *Inkling* submissions for publication are considered as entries in the Lone Star College-Tomball Creative Writing Contest. Each anonymous work is then submitted to a panel of advisors and faculty judges: Laura Boercker, Associate Professor of English; Doug Boyd, Professor of English; Kimberly S. Carter, Associate Professor of English; Amy M. Hirsch, *Inkling* Advisor; Melissa Kirkpatrick, Professor of English; Dr. Greg Oaks, Professor of English; Catherine Olson, Professor of English; Dr. Van Piercy, Professor of English; Katherine Reynolds, Professor of English; Dr. Bo Rollins, Professor of English; Kathy Sanchez, Professor of English; and Dr. Rebecca L. Tate, Professor of English. Each judge picks his or her top five in both poetry and prose. Next, each work is assigned a point value ranging from five to twenty-five. The total for each work is added, and the top three highest numbers become the first through third place winners.

Special thanks to:
- Doug Boyd, Professor of English
- Robbie Powell
- Patty Blaschke

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Contributors’ Biographies

Prose and Poetry

Andreina Alexatos is a sophomore who enjoys reading, writing, playing piano, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and philosophy.

John Cobb is a sophomore business major who spends his free time playing soccer and guitar; he also enjoys rock climbing.

Hedwika Cox is a private person who enjoys creative writing.

Therese Crews is interested in photography, writing, dancing, theatrical performances, and living life to its fullest.

Durell M. Forte enjoys reading and writing, and spends much of his time working.

Lindsey K. Gibb is a sophomore who is active in the LSC-Tomball Drama Program, and she is an avid knitter.

Jennifer Jones is pursuing an Associates of Arts degree. She enjoys reading, writing, and watching reality television.

Carvin D. Joshua is a freshman business major and a family man whose interests include the Christian ministry and music; he shares them both through gospel rap.

A. D. Kearney enjoys reading and writing. He has performed in Count Dracula, Proof, and Fools on the LSC-Tomball campus.

Lauren Martell is a pre-physical therapy/exercise and sports sciences major who enjoys soccer, running, and spending time with her friends.

Debra Mohajer loves singing, writing, reading, and painting as well as drawing and sewing. She is self-described as having a “heart for the arts.”

Paloma Moreno is an education major who enjoys school, work, reading, and writing. She also confesses that she has a special affinity for bright colors.

Elizabeth Myles is a criminal justice major who enjoys creative writing.

Angel Ponce uses his knowledge of psychology for volunteer work and anti-gang/drug efforts.

Anthony Ramirez pays frequent visits to the snack machine to invest in his chocolate addiction, supporting vendors everywhere. He also enjoys various combinations of nerdy activities.

Jason Redfern is a sophomore who enjoys computers, tabletop games, golf, and hockey.
Chantel Sigman often goes by the alias “CeeCee,” and enjoys reading, dancing, yoga, and spending time with her family.

Tiffany Thor is an English major, voice over artist, mother, and wife who is working on a post-feminist fiction novel with the working title, *Please Proceed to Baggage Claim*.

Robb Wallace is deliciously random and enjoys writing and listening to music when he is not hanging out with his friends.

Kristin White enjoys writing, reading, and listening to music, and in her free time works with teens at Magnolia Church of Christ.

Michaelle Yeo likes to read, draw, and play tennis.

**Artwork**

Kenny Bacak is majoring in mass communications and enjoys photography, sports, music, and the company of his friends.

Stephanie Bailey is a petroleum engineer major who enjoys painting, cooking, camping, and the arts.

Trisha Brittain is majoring in elementary education and enjoys reading, ceramics, and horse riding.

Eric Dela Cruz is majoring in graphic design and enjoys drawing and painting.

Theresa Goolsby is a close friend of mother earth, fighting for human and animal rights while pursuing a plethora of artisan crafts, including karaoke.

Udo Hintze is an English major and mudlogger who likes collecting comic books, reading sci-fi novels, and writing poetry.

Hannah Jenney is a photography major who enjoys music, dancing, fitness, acting, and sports.

Jessica May is a sophomore majoring in family and consumer science; she enjoys photography.

Martin O’laughlin is studying to become a nurse and enjoys school, working, reading, and writing.

Alan-Michael Smith is interested in traveling, photography, and music. He is a sophomore political science major.

Rachel L. Whitten is a communications major who enjoys spending time with her wonderful friends. Rachel is interested in sports, writing, and photography.
Inkling Staff

Before the Selection Meeting . . .

Back Row, From Left: Robyn Arcia, Anthony Ramirez, Jessica May, Dennis Alfaro, Sandra Cardenas, Chris Fischner, Robb Wallace, Chantel Sigman, Rosie Cruse

Front Row, From Left: Theresa Goolsby, Trisha Brittain, Edgar Bocanegra, Lindsey K. Gibb

After the Selection Meeting . . .
Inkling Advisors
Before the Selection Meeting . . .

From Left: Amy M. Hirsch, Dr. Rebecca L. Tate, Kimberly S. Carter

After the Selection Meeting . . .
INKLING
(THE CREATIVE ARTS MAGAZINE OF LONE STAR COLLEGE-TOMBALL)

2010 SUBMISSION FORM

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1. Name: __________________________________________________________________

2. Address (street, city, zip) ____________________________________________________

3. Phone Number: __________________________________________________________________

4. Social Security Number or Student ID Number: __________________________________________________________________

5. Email address: __________________________________________________________________

6. Title of the submissions (only one title per line):
   1. ____________________________________________________________________________
   2. ____________________________________________________________________________
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   7. ____________________________________________________________________________
   8. ____________________________________________________________________________

7. Major/Occupation: __________________________________________________________________

8. Circle one: Freshman/Sophomore

9. Interests or hobbies (to be used in author biographies if your submission is chosen):
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

I hereby warrant that 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 Inkling to mechanically and electronically publish the above submissions as they determine to be appropriate and to perform the pieces at Inkling readings, subject only to any additional written instructions, which I may furnish.

___________________________
Author’s Signature

**********DIRECTIONS**********

1. Submissions should be turned in as soon as possible. The deadline for all submissions is November 9, 2009.
2. Only Lone Star College-Tomball/Willow Chase students (enrolled at the time of submission) are eligible.*
3. DO NOT place your name on any of the submissions. Write your name ONLY on the submission form.
4. Manuscripts must be typed using standard 12-point font.
5. Use only one submission form per author for written manuscripts.
6. Use a separate submission form for artwork.
7. Short stories/creative essays may not exceed 2600 words in length; manuscripts that exceed the word length will not be considered. WORD COUNT MUST BE INCLUDED ON THE FIRST PAGE OF EACH PIECE.
8. All artwork (drawings, graphics, photos) must measure no more than 20 inches x 20 inches and include artist’s name and title on back. Typically, pieces will be published in black and white, but some may be published in color. All artwork will be returned.
9. Staple or paperclip all submissions to the submission form.
10. At Tomball, place your submissions in the Inkling mailbox in S-150 (Office Services), or take your submissions to any of the advisors: Tate, S257C; Hirsch, S114; or Carter, N211A.
11. At Willow Chase, turn in your submissions to the front counter.
12. Only writers and artists selected for publication will be notified by mail. Expect notification by March.

NOTE: Written manuscripts will not be returned, so don’t turn in originals. All written submissions will be shredded at the end of the selection process to protect the author’s work. All original artwork will be returned. Contact Kim Carter (281-351-3352) for artwork return.

NOTE: Submissions selected for publication are automatically entered into the Lone Star College-Tomball Creative Writing Contest. Winners will receive cash awards ($100, $75, $50), and the art piece chosen for the cover will receive a $100 cash award.

*Lone Star College-Tomball staff members who are also college students are eligible for submission to the magazine and to the contest.