# INKLING

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Second Place Poetry Winner
First Place Prose Winner

Parts Discarded
Linda Leschak

My doctor says I have an unusually large uvula which he feels is undoubtedly the cause of my wife’s irritation late at night. He has scheduled me for minor surgery at the community hospital a week from Monday. “Quite a simple process,” he says. “Completely non-invasive, practically an outpatient procedure really, snip-snip and you’re in and out.” Just like that, I think—walk in with a uvula and out without.

My doctor has studied my chart enough to know that I’ve never had any form of surgery, not so much as a root canal—ever. He knows I’m nervous about this, so he’s provided me with a long list of names, men who have had this procedure before, sort of like a “Men without uvulas support group.” “Hello, my name is Gabe, and I’m (choke) uvulaless.”

I’m looking over the pamphlet he gave me, having now taken my favorite seat at Eddie’s, draining my first of several Heinekens. The reading is fairly interesting, all about the fleshy thing that hangs from the top of my throat, all about how, in some cases (mine in particular) the thing becomes enlarged and blocks the air passage during sleep which, in turn causes snoring. Not just any snoring, but the kind that wakes the neighbors, the kind that sucks in the walls and ceiling, the kind that makes one’s wife wonder if her husband is actually breathing or just pulling air through one of those noisemakers that he has somehow erroneously lodged in his throat.

Technically, the procedure is called a Laser-Assisted Uvulopalatoplasty, which they’ve of course shortened to LAUP. Yeah, like lop the thing off, I think; after all, isn’t that what’s going to happen to mine? I see old Eddie walking up on the other side of the bar, a glass in one hand, a towel in the other. This is how I always see Eddie.

“You look like someone just shot your mother,” he says, drying another glass and stacking it on the top of the ever present pyramid of clean ones. I’ve never seen him take one from this stack, but I’ve watched him add hundreds to it. “What’s a matter?” he asks.

“Ah, nothin’ really.” I slide the pamphlet under my napkin.

“I got me a new petition up, if you don’t mind adding your name.” Eddie always has some sort of community outrage thing going on. Lately, he’s been trying to oust the pizza joint that opened up next door. At first he claimed the delivery traffic would interfere with his customers. I always thought that was pretty valid since some of us need the entire parking lot by the time we’re ready to
drive home. But now that the place is open, Eddie has a new gripe. Seems the ventilation isn’t the
greatest and the smell from the ovens wafts in at all hours of the day and night, giving the bar a
starchy, doughy smell that clings to everything. Eddie claims the last thing his customers want to go
home smelling like is pizza dough.

With a slight nod, I tell Eddie that I’m game, and he wanders off to the back room to retrieve the
petition. Over the years, Eddie’s gotten himself involved in several political issues for the sake of
the community. I often wonder why he does this when the bar seems to keep him so busy. “How’s
Gloria?” I ask when he returns carrying a clipboard.

“Ah, she’s at bunko tonight. Or something, I lose track.” He slides the petition in front of me,
and I add my name to the list. I order another beer.

I’m back to my pamphlet when Pete walks in. Pete’s in his mid-fifties, a small-shouldered guy
with a sunken chest and chin. His comb-over gets more dramatic each year; when Pete’s looking his
best, he’s not ugly. He walks up and takes the stool next to mine. I think this a little odd since Pete
usually ignores me, prefers the more lively of the crowd. “How’s it goin,’ Gabe?” A friendly smile
like somehow we’re good buddies.

“I’m about to lose my uvula, Pete. How’s it going with you?”

“Well, not so good,” he says. “Kathy is fixin’ to file on me.”

I look at him, wondering whether he heard me at all.

“I knew it was comin,’” he says. “Seen the signs before.” He pours back his JD and nods at
Eddie for another.

I take a long hit off my beer and feel the cold slide down my throat, over my massive uvula
and into my waiting gut just where I want it. “Well, this’ll be what...three exes now? Or is it four?”
I’m wondering how he snared even one, let alone several.

“Yeah well, wives come and go, eh?” He jabs me in the ribs with an elbow. “Nothing like a
good friend though, eh?” Another jab.

“Bet you still got all your body parts, though,” I mutter. Pete doesn’t hear this and moves off
to join a couple of young blondes who’ve just walked in and are helping themselves to one of the few
tables in the back.

I’m back to my pamphlet now, but I’m thinking about my own young blonde waiting at home.
Darcy is my second wife and younger than me by twelve years. She likes to tell me how my first
marriage was just the practice I needed to get it perfect. But sometimes I wonder what she sees in this
Grecian Formula candidate. Darcy works at the children’s book store downtown and loves what she
does. She loves her short commute, loves our small three-bedroom house with its two-car garage and
white picket fence. And she loves the fact that “we’re trying,” as she likes to tell her friends. We’ve been married three years now, and, in all that time, she’s never really asked for much more than that. Darcy’s wonderful really. But she doesn’t seem to understand that real men don’t whack off body parts just to please their mate. All she knows is that she can’t sleep at night and it’s my fault.

It’s getting on toward happy hour, and the place is starting to fill. Eddie is working the shine off another glass while aggressively pursuing more signatures. Seems Eddie can multi-task pretty well. Pete has gotten nowhere with the two blondes and has moved on to other prey. From my perch, at the end of the bar, I can see the whole place, hear the bits of conversation that I normally manage to tune out.

“I bust my ass at work then go home to the same…”
“…and then she says I’m spending too much time golfing. Golfing!”
“…the damn thing cost more than I make in a month.”

I’m trying to get back to the tuning-out mindset when Sandy walks in. Sandy is our town’s version of Terry Bradshaw, big burly guy with thinning, dirt-colored hair and a laugh that makes you know he’s there. Sandy and I go all the way back to high school when, as seniors, we took the football team one game shy of state. Sandy acts like he thinks that was yesterday, always reenacting key plays, sometimes pulling me into the action. “Hey, Gabe, how’s everything hanging?” His standard greeting.

“Fine until Monday,” I mumble into my fourth beer. I’m starting to give up on a thorough read of the pamphlet and slide it into my coat pocket.

Sandy is in high form, drinking and joking and reliving the glory days, the only person I know who truly has never quite grown up. I can’t help but wonder if Sandy’s still in possession of his uvula or for that matter, whether he’s ever sacrificed a thing in his life. He stands at the other end of the bar, slapping backs and ordering beers. I know he’ll be here until Eddie closes up and sends him home. It’s like that every night. That’s Sandy’s life.

When I see him like this, I can’t help but remember him at Darcy’s and my wedding. He had agreed to be best man in spite of how he thought he looked in a tux. “Just a big hairy bear in a monkey suit,” he said. All the women adored him, though, and he danced more than Darcy and me at the reception. He caught the garter, and we all thought that would be the end of the big hairy bachelor. But nothing really changed after that, not for Sandy at least. Darcy and I, well, that’s a different story. We had some rocky times in the beginning. Took us a while to fall into an easy, comfortable pace with each other. But after three years we’re good, real good.

Like our last anniversary when I thought she might want something romantic for a change, so I surprised her with reservations at Chez Anthony’s downtown. She pretended to be impressed, pushing her escargot around on her plate. We ended up leaving hungry and somehow found ourselves at a
favorite pizza place close to home. Pizza of all things! After a while, the kids working there stopped staring at us, me in my suit and Darcy in her black dress and pearls. We laughed and drank beer until late that night, then went home to some of the best “trying” we’d ever had.

There’s a long mirror behind Eddie’s bar, and I can see my reflection from where I sit. What I see now is a middle-aged fool sitting alone with an empty beer in his hand and a lopsided grin on his face. I signal to Eddie for one more, and I pull the pamphlet out, thinking I’ll give it another try. This time I bury myself in it until I’m done, and I come away with more of an understanding, less of a fear. I think I’m gonna be just fine.

While I’ve been reading, the two blondes have moved to the bar and are mildly flirting with Sandy. He takes it like the perpetual single guy he is, flirting right back. I seem to have missed something during my reading, though, something about me. The girls are giggling over Sandy’s whispered secrets, and one of them throws an occasional glance my way. She’s wearing blue jeans that are faded in all the right places and are so tight I wonder if she needed help getting into them. Same with the flaming red halter top, filled to the brim by a generous gene pool.

“Hey, Gabe.” Sandy finally waves me over. “C’mon over and say hi to my new friends.” Sandy knows I’d never do anything to hurt Darcy, but sometimes I think he gets caught up in his own reality and forgets there’s anything else.

The three of them are smiling over at me. Gene Pool looks me full in the face with hazel green eyes that suddenly remind me of home. I slap a twenty onto the bar and get up to leave, “Thanks, but I gotta go. I promised Darcy I’d pick something up for dinner.”

That’s when Sandy walks over and lays a hand up on my shoulder all buddy like. A flicker of desperation hurry across his face before he catches it. “Little woman gotcha by the short hairs?” he asks. But he can’t quite mask the jealousy in his voice.

The rest of the group is looking our way, and I suddenly wonder why I’ve put up with Sandy’s lack of substance all this time. “Nah, more like the throat,” I answer. They all laugh like they know what I’m talking about.

In my headlong charge out the door, I don’t see the lanky teenager struggling under the weight of six pizza boxes while he deftly maneuvers toward his car. I take him out with one clean sweep of Eddie’s heavy wooden door. The kid is momentarily airborne, jettisoned backward over the sidewalk, arms flailing wildly while pizzas sail around him like pepperoni Frisbees. Five of them have escaped their neat white boxes and are attempting to free fall back to earth. They finally slop down in a series of pasty, wet landings and lie strewn across the sidewalk or drooping over the curb. One of them even hangs dead center over the spiked hood ornament on the kid’s car. It reminds me of one of the pictures in my pamphlet, a slimy, wet mass dangling down the middle of the gaping grill.
Out of the six pizzas, there is but one single survivor.

"Ah, man, I'm real sorry." I offer him a hand up and brush him off as best I can. He's looking at me like I'm a total idiot, and I think maybe he's got me pegged. The guys have rushed over to the window and are gawking at us through the glass. They're all howling; the kid's face is turning about as red as the pizza sauce.

"Don't mind them. It was my fault. I should watch where I'm going." I reach for my wallet. "Lemme pay for those."

The kid's face brightens when I hand him three twenties. "Thanks, man." He reaches for the lone survivor.

"I'll be needing that one, though." I open the box to see what I've just bought. Ah, mushroom and olive. Darcy's favorite.
There Is
Patricia Clay

There is an abyss in the midst
of dreams accidentally abandoned
among veils of black silky satin
coverings on crystal polished glass
that fragments light from winter’s world
where blue barely possesses the sky
and green fills fields in summer,
while ancient angels cry for release
from type-cast marble frozen forms
and black letters linger on white pages
silently screaming forgotten names
of fallen faces.
The Rainman
Karl D. Heady

It’s been three days since the man across the street first came out of his house; he only comes out when it rains, and he doesn’t go back inside until it’s done raining. I’ll see him every few weeks or so; he lives across the street.

The streetlights on our block flickered down the row after his first step onto the concrete doorway. They went completely out on his second step. Then the rain started, immediately after he locked the second bolt on his door.

He turned away from his door and sat on the second step of the concrete stairs with his right leg crossed over his left, leaning back slightly like he was sitting in a large chair. He pulled an umbrella from behind his back and shot it open to the whiplash of lightning striking nearby. The umbrella had white spots, like splattered paint, and two patches on it. He rotated the handle and spun it around a few times, allowing the rain to fall gently on his head before the umbrella covered it.

All the lights were out, except one above his door, which barely managed to stay on more than a flicker. The light seemed to come on only when he switched positions on his steps, from step two to step one and so forth.

He had a thick, white beard and thick black glasses that had thick, magnifying oval lenses. He was bald, black, and old, and he reminded me of an elderly man rocking back and forth on a rocking chair on the balcony of a large white plantation home of the South. I wondered if he brought the rain out with him, and if, maybe with luck, the rain would quit when he went back inside.

For three days I’ve been watching him. I’m sure he’s seen the fog of my breath in the windowpane of my house when the lightning strikes, but I can’t help but wonder why he sits there; his pants are soaking, and I’m sure his feet have goose bumps.

“Hello there...mister!” I don’t think he hears me, so I call out across the street again, “Sir, are you okay?”

Every drop of rain seems to find a puddle to splash. There is a current of water about two feet deep in the street. Luckily, the curbs are larger here than most cities; the sidewalks are not yet flooded, just the street.

The rain settles to a murmur as he calls back, “Yes’m, I’m doing just fine. How are you doing this lovely afternoon?” He shouts with a large grin full of white sparkly teeth that shine with the brightness of sunlight.

“I’m okay, I guess. Do you have room under that umbrella?”
“We can squeeze tight, kiddo. Come on over.”

Lightning strikes twice and he sits down again. It starts pouring.

I make it halfway across the street before I realize that even though I’ve watched this man for three days, he is still somewhat of a stranger, and it’s even stranger that he opens his umbrella for the rain; he’s not running away from the dark clouds and sparks of light that seem to terrify everyone else. I leap across the other half of the street and find myself staring at him from his sidewalk.

“Why do you sit like that?” I ask.

“Huddle under this umbrella young’un, and I’ll tell you.”

I pause for a second to think. He moves over, and the thunder strikes hard and loud. I leap to his side like a cowardly dog. He chuckles heartily, leaning far back, pointing his long nose to the sky, holding his chest with his left hand, and squinting his eyes. The oval lenses magnify his eyes, and I can see that there are gray clouds in his pupils like a rolling fog; they seem darkly animated.

“It’s natural to be frightened, my dear.”

He holds the umbrella over the both of us and places his arm around my shoulder. He smells like the air before a storm; he smells like nature’s hint of rain even though he has been sitting here for three days.

“Why don’t you go inside?” I ask. “It’s a lot warmer inside, mister. I’m sure the rain won’t care whether you’re inside or out.” I’m not too sure if he or I know what I meant.

His eyes squint and show the creases of age in the corners. The rain is much worse. His mouth hides his smile as he looks down between his legs.

“Are you good at keeping secrets? I’ve got a mighty big one to share.” He looks at me with a gleam stuck in his eyes.

Two trees from down the street bend over with a large, stretched-out groan. I shriek, causing him to jump up, and thunder cracks all around us. His light goes completely out, and the wind whips and whistles in circles around us. I have to cling to the rusted railing on the stairs while he continues to hold the umbrella upright, looking out into the darkness.

“I brought this rain to you,” he yells loud with wide eyes studying my reaction.

“What?”

“I said I’ve been making it rain for three days.”

“Why? Why would you do that?”

“I’m the Rainman. The rain follows me everywhere, but when I come home, the rain here is different. The droplets are bigger, and the lightning doesn’t sting as much. The thunder sounds like my father’s voice; it’s a pleasant memory.”

“Can you turn the rain off?”
He stands staring at me like I had at him from his walkway after crossing the street; he looks confused. I look deeper into his eyes, and I can see the clouds in his eyes slowly disappearing. He steps up to the top step, and the light above his doorway comes on like a spotlight, illuminating the walkway up to his door. I hear his key slide into his lock; the storm clouds are rolling back behind his house. The lock clicks, and as he slowly creaks the old, wooden door open, the remaining clouds sweep away behind his rooftop, creating a clearing for the sun.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Sometimes I get carried away.”

“It’s okay, mister.” I pause and took his dangling, calloused hand into mine. “Sometimes I miss home, too.”
Winter Walkway

Carly Peden
First Place Poetry Winner

The Steps Led Down
Anastasia Voight

The steps led down to mystery,
Hard steps, roughed with water imagery.
I hesitated at the top,
As going down meant coming up.

There was time when new steps or stairs
Beckoned, teased with novel airs
And fresh perspectives. I would rush them,
Up or down, impatient, seeking stone or gem.

There was time when each new view
Of life brought delight anew.
Life to gobble as I could.
Now I question if I should.

Will I attempt those tempting stairs?
Should I cast aside age-cautioned cares
And force reluctant knees to bend?
Insist that creaky bones descend?

Round unexplored bend down there
May be friends with thoughts to share,
But they could be worn and gruffed like me:
Soured and stiffened as I be.

The stairs led down to mystery
Hard steps, hard choices, hard memory.
I hesitated at the top,
Then turned away
As going down meant coming up.
Sympathy for the Angel
Patrick Stockwell

Chapter One

Terrence Blatwell was the owner of the Agape Christian Media Center and Bookstore. Thin and hard-looking, his appearance matched that of his shop. The man had a penchant for tweed jackets, the kind with the patches already on the elbows, and brown pants. I’d never seen him in anything else. He always put forth the image that he was a thinker. He was very well-read, but unfortunately most of the books he cracked open came from his own shop. Mr. Blatwell was extremely proud of the place and made sure to keep a good stock of collectibles, new material, and religious classics. There was a row of bookshelves along each outside wall and double-sided display cases down the center, forming two long aisles stretching the length of the main floor. He liked to refer to these as “God’s own bowling lanes.” The display cases were packed full of gifts and craft items for the soccer moms, while the bookshelves held the latest published opinions in religious wisdom. Every day, would-be scholars circled the perimeter like sharks, their disdain for the regular shoppers as transparent as mine for them.

The classics were kept in a reference library behind closed doors and were not available for sale. These were the real deal, if that can be said. Blatwell’s collection was certainly superior to that of any local university, and some considered it among the finest in the state. The door was locked at all times, and you had to be a religious scholar or clergyman to get the backstage pass. While the main floor smelled like the cheap potpourri that Mrs. Blatwell and her sister made themselves in the family’s garage, the air inside this section was musty, like an old university library. This was one of the few things I truly loved about the job.

I also loved the little shaded patio Blatwell kept out back for his private study, which he let me use, too. The space the bookstore occupied used to be some sort of restaurant, and this had been the outdoor dining area. It was centered around a moderately large oak tree and consisted of six small tables and twenty-plus potted plants. Mornings were Blatwell’s time. Afternoons were mine.
He liked to call the privilege part of my benefits package. This was the only benefit the man provided me as a part-timer, so I indulged in a few of my own. They didn’t know it, but I often drank a little while I studied. Then sometimes I slept out there after closing down the store, to save bus fare. The store was three stops closer to school than home. I just had to make sure I was gone by 5:30 every morning when he arrived with his teapot and the latest Methodist hardback.

For as much as his place of business reminded me of old, unused treasure, Mr. Blatwell’s twenty-seven-year old daughter Lavonne did not. Physically, she was the living incarnation of every good thing her father’d missed out on himself. The girl wore confidence like a second skin. She wasn’t perfect, but whenever she moved past my space, my nose fed on the invisible bouquet of her passing. She smelled like jasmine oil, cinnamon gum, and a light summer sweat. The fact that she could never be mine made the mix that much more memorable. I loved hearing her talk about spirituality with such well-articulated conviction that she could convince most anyone that she was not completely full of it.

“You know I’m right,” she liked to say, swinging her short, unnaturally red bob as she made a point. This always seemed to induce an impressionable hypnotic state and melt the convictions of any random lay philosopher. Once in a while, she’d nearly get to me.

But Lavonne wasn’t the reason I took the job at the Agape Christian Media Center and Bookstore. And the pay was certainly laughable. No, it was the reference section. I needed source material for my graduate thesis, The Immaculate Perception: Religiosity in 21st Century Christian Printed Media, and Mr. Blatwell was hoarding the mother lode. He’d promised me access once he thought I’d earned the right. I needed to graduate, and a complete argument was the only thing standing between me and a diploma. In my mind, behind that door were all the keys I’d ever need to let my light shine on the faithful, to enlighten the ones who’d listen. This was an old obsession of mine, to descend on the untested opinions of the storefront Christians I encountered, confounding their belief system with as few well-chosen words as possible.

But, lately, in my glass-is-half-full moments, I’d been conditioning myself to think that the experience would nurture my ability to interact with the repressed without making faces at them just after they’d turned away from me. I’d just never had any real religion, just the Easter-and-Christmas-Eve-recovering-Catholic-trail-of-tears-and-guilt story that you hear about so often. I’d never really started believing in order to have stopped. God didn’t seem to smile at me the way the faithful always
assured me he did, so I lost track of him altogether. You might call me an agnostic, but that is too well-defined a term. Fence-straddler might be a more appropriate choice. I guess my real religion is the quest for the best-defended argument.

Lavonone sometimes found me before work, reading on the patio before my shift. We got along okay inside the shop, but it was open season if she caught me out back. She hated my secular reading material—the Tao, Nietzsche—though she herself had read many of the same titles. One day, she’d come out back to brush her teeth after lunch. Apparently, a customer had been holding down the fort for quite a while in the shop’s only bathroom, and she was leery of going in after. She finished, used a bottle of mineral water to rinse up, swallowed loudly, then sat across from me. I was trying to get through Kafka’s Metamorphosis in the original German, becoming distracted by the growing awareness that she was getting ready to pounce. She threw her toothbrush on the table to get my attention. It was a neon green kid’s brush. I looked up from my book, deciding to strike first.

“And are you all ready for the first day of kindergarten today, Ms. Blatwell?”

“Lack of conviction, Andy. That’s your issue,” she said without missing a beat, as if issues could be identified with only seven words. This was the umpteenth time we’d walked this road.

“Oh, could you please respect the fact that I am trying to change the subject? I’m not in the mood.”

“Just admit it, and I’ll back off. You know I’m right. You have no convictions about anything. That’s why you won’t talk to me about them.” Her molten green eyes always went cold when we talked about our beliefs. All the light seemed to drain away.

“I could sit here and do this with you, but I gotta work in...” I grabbed her wrist and looked at her watch, “seventeen minutes. If you can wait, my thesis will be done very soon. It will contain my professional opinion in detail. If you can hold out, it will answer all your questions.”

I looked back down, hiding a politician’s smile and praying that I’d ended the exchange. I moved my lips as I read, hoping she’d get the hint. She stared at the top of my head. I sensed the change in her tone before she spoke and braced myself for the onslaught. She knew I knew she was right.

“As if you’re going to finish that paper anytime before you’re forty-five, you pretentious, patronizing little bastard! You know, you used to act just like this in class. So clever. So well-
defended. It was why I started talking to you. But now, I just want to scratch your eyes out, which is ultimately unladylike and unsatisfying. I am still right, and you are wrong. You have no convictions. And you are going to admit it. I’m so tired of being pissed at you. Ever since you started working here.”

I met her stare. “You helped get me the job.”

The emerald eyes flickered again, and we both softened. She dug in her pocket and pulled out a pack of Big Red. She popped two pieces in her mouth, then silently offered me the last one, which I refused. She stood up, spun around a quarter-turn too far in a botched attempt at leaving in a huff, and went back inside. I breathed in, quickly, deeply, my nose in the air. I’d smelled the jasmine the whole time she was sitting there, but the dregs she left behind held the deeper, lower notes of her spirit. It was thrilling.

“Stop smelling me!” she called through the open door, knowing without seeing.

I closed the book and stood up, stretching to ease the tingle in my backside that the hard benches always seemed to induce. It was nearly time for my shift, and Lavonne had left me too distracted to finish my chapter anyway. I noticed she left her toothbrush, so I picked it up. As I put it in my shirt pocket, I caught a whiff of her toothpaste. Cinnamon. She was, to say the least, consistent.

As I made my way inside back down the short hallway to the main floor, I passed Blatwell coming out of the can, looking too pulled together for a man who’d just seen a fellow about a horse (his phrase, not mine). In that moment, I wondered if a guy as uptight as he was ever accomplished anything behind closed doors. He looked at the book in my hand, snorted inaudibly, and put his hand on my shoulder. He never made any physical contact with anyone unless they’d misbehaved. I knew I was in for it.

“Can I see you in my office, Andy?”

“Didn’t you just leave there?” I couldn’t resist.

His eyes flattened, and I saw the first sign I’d ever noticed of any family resemblance he’d passed to his daughter. Funny how it only came out when I’d annoyed one of them. “Ten minutes, if you don’t mind. I’ve got to finish some things up.”

“No problem.”

As I stepped out behind the counter, I heard the restroom door close again, and it dawned on me
that he’d been in there since before Lavonne had come out to talk to me. I stifled the laugh, not wanting her to think it had anything to do with her. She was with a customer over by the potpourri, and as this was the one place in the store I was sure not to approach, she knew she could go there to cool down after one of our exchanges. Our eyes met, and she mouthed something at me over the top of the woman’s head. I must’ve have looked puzzled because she rolled her eyes and mouthed it again, more slowly.

You...know...I’m...right.
In the Mornin'
Bailey Noel Cox

Powdery silver mist clings low to the earth
  dog’s ears perched
    she stares hard
      senses saving sight
        clenching onto air

Following the wind’s advice,
  she begins to run,
    landing light in the deep open
      wakeful to the trees.

Mini spider webs tent the foliage
  elaborate and pure,
    spiraling about a spot
      connected blade by blade.

He wakes with a caution:
  “Englishmen die in this,”
    muddling through morning,
      inspecting her view,

Fashioned and lost in early light
  amid moments near,
    staggered by an instant found
      certain of the dawn.
The Bounce
Jeff Conklin

His life was over. Lost in a whirlwind of warring emotions, he threw himself off the top of a forty-story building. The wind blew by him as though he were chained in front of a wind tunnel. Air tore at him as he fell, tried to rip the very skin from his body as the g-force increased the further he fell. “Men weren’t made to take this kind of abuse,” he thought to himself as he plummeted toward the asphalt that would soon be indented with his impression. The floors flew by in a dazzling light show as the sun glinted off the glass of the building; he felt as though he was racing the light to see who could reach the bottom first. Twenty-eighth floor. Twentieth floor. Eleventh floor. Second floor—but there was no smack against the unforgiving black top—instead, he bounced.

He didn’t understand. Life, experience told him that he should be dead. Nonetheless, flying through the air he went, this first bounce catapulting him right over the top of the tallest building in the city. “Why?” he thought to himself. As he soared over the city, the sky beckoned for him to come closer. The next bounce shot him into the heavens, and he found himself bathed in the warmth and light of the sun. He felt renewed, recharged. Then he began his descent. Bouncing again, he saw that he was approaching his parents’ apartment. His bounce brought him up just high enough to reach their window, and there they were, out on the patio. “Be careful, son. Come home soon,” his mom called. “I’m proud of you, son,” his dad yelled. He looked back behind him as he bounced on and saw his parents hugging each other and waving to him, encouraging him.

Caught in reckless abandon, forced to go wherever the next bounce took him, he wound up bouncing into a park. From his vantage point in the air, he spotted his wife and daughter having a picnic. As he fell down and was about to bounce again, his eyes locked on his wife. In that brief instant before he was sky-rocketed again, love poured through their bond like an anchor cutting through the water. Then she moved her lips in the words “I love you.” He bounced. His daughter chased after him. “I want to play, too, daddy,” she said. As she ran alongside her father, her attempts at bouncing were nothing more than short jumps and skips, like a rock bouncing and skipping off the water. They were quickly approaching a lake at the end of the park. She stopped chasing after her father, but he kept bouncing. Her words were but whispers carried to him by the wind, “Thanks for playing with me, daddy. Hurry home soon. We love you!”

His last bounce was high. Briefly he saw his parents again, then looked down at his wife and daughter. The little one was jumping and waving both hands at him, his wife had never looked so beautiful, and then he covered his face as he crashed in the water as a mountain falling from the sky.
Lovely Face

Aleksandra Yoder
The Lighthouse at Marion Strait
Kim O’Brien Jones

I long to glimpse the lighthouse at Marion Strait
And at last spy the entrance to my homeward gate.
Like a mother I called to in the cold, foggy night,
Against dark stormy skies, she stood strong and forthright.
My world was a reflection in her pristine glass,
the oncebeckoning beacon to my peaceful past.

Now crystal and candle is deaf to my woeful calls.
Her granite bones lie scattered as driftwood on shoals.
Wind-pierced, salty eyes laden with rain
search for her bright fiery heart.
But all that remains is an abyss upon an
endless ocean without chart.
A mournful gale blows me closer to dark rocky shores
in a night moonless and angry.
My once-trusting ship is wayward and small,
drowning in a sea, eagerly hungry.
Without your light, I am doomed to drift.
Third Place Prose Winner (Tie)

Peculiar Shade
Steven G. Childress

Helen heard the bell over the door and automatically peered down through her reading glasses at her watch. She checked her computer screen. Dr. Rosner did not have another appointment until after lunch. Helen slid the frosted-glass window back just enough to peek into the small waiting room. A very old man wearing a sweater with holes under the arms and wrinkled khaki pants stood just inside the door, leaning on the back of a chair, his eyes closed.

Helen knew Dr. Rosner was getting ready to go to lunch. Helen also knew how much Dr. Rosner hated to be late for his lunch.

He’ll be in a bitchy mood for the rest of the afternoon, Helen thought. She sighed as she thought about it. The young doctor’s ability for bitchiness rivaled any woman’s Helen could think of. She slid the window all the way back.

“Sir?” Helen said. “May I help you?”

The old man stiffened and looked up. He pushed away from the chair and staggered past the low table strewn with magazines. He dragged his heavy-soled black shoes across the carpet as if he could barely lift them.

Helen stood from her chair and slipped her reading glasses from her nose. She fingered the beaded eyeglass chain that held the glasses around her neck as the old man dropped both hands flat down onto the counter in front of her. Helen was startled by the clearness and color of the old man’s eyes. That funny color that some people would swear was blue, but to Helen looked green.

“Please…I’ve got to see the doctor,” the old man said.

“What’s wrong, sir?” Helen said, tearing her eyes away from his to look at her watch. The old man tilted his head to the side and looked past Helen. “Is there a doctor here?” Helen sidestepped in front of him, blocking his view.

“I believe Dr. Rosner has left for lunch, sir,” Helen said.

A door clicked shut behind her.

“I’m off to lunch, Mrs. Strands,” Dr. Rosen said coming out of his office.

Helen sighed, crossed one arm across her chest, and cradled her head in the palm of her other hand. She peeked between her fingers and watched Dr. Rosner hang his lab coat on the coat rack in the corner. He adjusted the collar of his shirt and looked at Helen, one eyebrow raised.

“Doctor?” the old man said.
Helen dropped her hands to her sides and looked at Dr. Rosner and shrugged.

“Doctor, please,” the old man said. “I must talk to you.”

Helen moved aside so that Dr. Rosner could see the old man at the window. She could feel Dr. Rosner’s eyes on her. She didn’t look up.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Dr. Rosner said. “Unless it’s an emergency, you’ll have to come back at one o’clock.”

“Please, doctor, it is an emergency,” the old man said.

Helen turned and looked at the old man, then the doctor.

Dr. Rosner stared at Helen with a deadpan look on his face as he spoke. “What seems to be the problem, sir?”

“I...I’m,” the old man began, looking down at the white countertop between his hands, “I don’t know how to explain this. Well, I was sitting on a bench in the park across the street.”

Dr. Rosner brought his wrist up in front of his face and looked at his watch. “Yes, and?” Dr. Rosner sniffed and fiddled with the watch.

“It was so cold last night,” the old man said. He looked at his hands, rubbing them together.

“The police kept pushing us out of the warm places. The shelters are just so...”

Dr. Rosner folded his arms over his chest. Helen glanced down at the shooting star screensaver on her computer screen. The old man looked back and forth from Helen to the doctor.

“I didn’t get much sleep last night,” the old man said. “The sun felt so good there on the bench. I fell asleep.”

Dr. Rosner pursed his lips, and then said, “Sir, is something wrong with you? Are you in pain?”

“No, I mean, yes!” the old man slapped the counter with his palms. Then he held his hands up in front of his face. “There, that’s it. Look at them. Look at my hands.”

“Sir, I don’t see what—” Dr. Rosner began.

“My hands aren’t old. They shouldn’t be old,” the old man said. “I shouldn’t be old.” He turned his hands over and back as he looked at them. “I’m not old. I am not an old man.”

Dr. Rosner glanced at Helen and scratched behind his ear while slipping his other hand into the pocket of his slacks. Helen crossed her hands in front of her body and traced her fingers over the blue veins in her hands that seemed to rise against her skin and thicken a little more with every passing year.

“Sir,” Dr. Rosner said, “I’m going to have my receptionist make a phone call to a colleague of mine.” Dr. Rosner put his other hand in his pocket and spread his feet slightly as he looked at the old man.

“But I’m here, now,” the old man said, hands pressed flat on the counter as he looked at the doctor.
“I’m just an M.D., sir. My colleague specializes in these types of cases.”

“Types of…” the old man said. He blinked several times and looked down at the counter. “I see. You think I’m crazy.” He looked up at Dr. Rosner. “I won’t waste my breath trying to convince you that I’m not—”

“‘Crazy’ is not a term we like to use, sir,” Dr. Rosner said.

“To hell with your terms, sir.” the old man said.

Dr. Rosner stood there looking at the old man.

“Sir, everything will be fine,” Helen said. “If you could just be calm…”

“Be calm?” The old man said still looking at Dr. Rosner. He turned his eyes to Helen. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Helen said nothing and looked into the old man’s eyes for several seconds. The translucent purity of the old man’s eyes shocked her. I was wrong, Helen thought. They are very definitely blue. The most peculiar shade of blue.

The old man glanced over at Dr. Rosner, then turned slowly and moved towards the door. His heavy shoes rasped across the carpet.

“Sir?” Dr. Rosner said as he stepped over and opened the door into the waiting room.

The old man steadied himself on the back of a chair and opened the door. He turned and looked back at Helen, and she saw his eyes again. Then he turned and was gone.

“What a nut case,” Dr. Rosner said as he checked his watch. “Damn! I know they’re all just sitting there at the restaurant, waiting.”

Helen walked over to the window that looked out onto the sidewalk and the park across the street. She twirled the plastic rod and louvered the mini blinds open and squinted into the brightness.

Dr. Rosner grabbed his black leather jacket off the coat rack and looked at Helen’s profile as he put it on.

“We can’t save the world, Mrs. Strands.”

“I know that,” Helen said. “But there was something. Something in his eyes.”

Dr. Rosner patted his coat pocket, looking at Helen. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys.

“I’m going to lunch,” he said. “Be back at one.”

Helen heard a door close and a few seconds later, the sound of Dr. Rosner’s Jaguar. She leaned up close to the window blinds and looked out.

Cars, delivery trucks, people on the sidewalks. A bus came to a whining, whooshing stop on the corner. Then she found him, just across the street. Standing by an empty park bench. Several joggers on the path ran by the old man as he stood there looking down at the bench. He bent down stiffly, put
his hand on the black wrought iron arm of the bench, turned, and eased himself down. He put his hands in the pockets of his sweater. He turned his face to the sun.

Helen stood looking through the blinds and pushed away thoughts of her lunchtime slipping away, with bands of shade and sunlight, cool and warm and cool, there on her face as she watched him watching the runners and skaters and cyclists go past. She drew a quick breath, held it, her eyes glossed shiny, her fingertips warm on her parted lips, when the old man looked up and down the path and, when no one was near, bent down and looked under the park bench as if he had lost something valuable down there.
Hope: Inspired by Li-Young Lee’s “The Hammock”  
Janet Hudson

When I laid my head in cancer’s lap,  
I thought how the diagnosis brought about  
fear like when you have a scary dream and awaken  
only to find that you are in a nightmare living  
each day one step at a time. Proceeding down  
the path set for you by so-called experts only to find  
that their expertise sometimes lacked the one ingredient  
most needed and I don’t know where my path will take me.

When cancer laid its head in my children’s lap, I worried  
for my children, wondering what the influence on  
their lives would be. Would cancer dominate  
their thoughts for years to come, worrying  
unconsciously about their future and mine?  
I prayed, Dear God, save them from needless  
apprehension about their future: Amen,  
and I don’t know where their paths will lead them.

I don’t know which road God has in store for me  
or my children but I live life with hope springing up  
like bubbles in champagne perpetually rising  
to the top because I know that whether here  
on earth or in heaven above, nothing  
can take away what resides in my soul.  
Life or death, the singing will continue  
and my children will hear what they choose to learn.
Fleeing Rita
Greggory Adams

I'm sitting in my own personal hell.
I left my house almost six hours ago, on a trip that under normal conditions takes only four hours. I'm sitting on a highway in a place that normally would be about two and a half hours from my home. Like I said, under "normal" conditions.

Rita has left things any way but normal.

My wife left the house three hours before I did, accompanied by her mother, little brother and what we deemed our most important things. It's amazing what you consider important when the news is blaring that a Category Five hurricane is headed right for you, and the mayor of the fourth largest city in the country has ordered a flurry of mandatory and voluntary evacuations as well as asked all employers to please let their employees leave if they wish to do so.

The storm is still three days away, and this place is turning into a ghost town.

Twenty-four hours ago we went out in search of gas and drove to three stations. The first one had cars piled up twelve deep in line. The second one was completely out of gas. The third was almost out. I topped off our tank, grateful to pay nearly $3 a gallon for supreme and laughing at the irony that only the day before I'd been grumbling about the high gas prices.

Another mile ticks off on the odometer. It only took twenty-two minutes for that mile to pass by. I could have walked it faster.

My wife calls. They made it to her grandmother's an hour ago. She informs me that I'm in for a long wait to get through this patch of traffic but that once I do, it's smooth sailing and normal driving time from here on out. I'm surprised she was able to get through. I've had to try to make some phone calls and have been denied. "System Busy" is the angry message my phone gives me, beeping at me like I'm an idiot.

"It didn't work five minutes ago. Why try again?" it mocks, beeping at me every time I hit the send button to try to place a call.

I keep the phone call with my wife very short. It's not that I don't want to talk to her. It's that I'm so frustrated on so many levels that I don't want to inadvertently take it out on her.

I'm okay with the prospect of coming home to nothing, really I am. Stuff, it's just stuff. Like I said, it's amazing what you consider important when you are trying to grab whatever you can carry and stuff it into your vehicle and leave with 2.8 million people doing the same thing and three million more thinking about it.
The dog sighs in the backseat. She has surprisingly been good this trip, no whining, no trying to jump in the front seat, no pawing at the window. I reach around and pet her head. She licks my hand for a moment, then changes position, laying her head on the pillow I put in the back seat.

One pet here, the other two at home. I wanted to take them, but it wasn’t plausible. Amber’s grandfather is highly allergic to cats and will not allow them in the house. Her grandparents live out in the country on a farm. I don’t want to take the chance of the cats running off, since they are de-clawed, and I won’t allow them to be stuck in a cage for who knows how long, so I left plenty of food out for them.

I don’t care if I lose every material possession. It’s the thought of losing the animals that has me the most upset.

The car continues inching forward. In the distance I hear sirens. A string of ambulances, police cars, and white vans marked “Prisoner Transport” fight their way through the cars sitting idle on the highway, making their way over the shoulder and disappearing into the darkness.

Even the prisoners are getting out before I am.

I think the next time there is a massive evacuation I’m going to commit a crime first so I can get out of town in a hurry.

“What are you in for?”
“Nothing really, just hitching a ride.”

Another mile clicks on the odometer. Fifteen minutes for that one.

Seriously, if I die and go to hell, and if hell is custom-made for each person, this will be mine: sitting in a car in the middle of a highway not going anywhere.

I turn off the I-pod that has so far supplied my evacuation soundtrack and turn on the radio, skimming the stations just to have something to do.

I get to the classic rock station: Golden Earring’s “Radar Love” is playing. I shake my head and hit the scan button again.

“I’m on my way, home sweet home,” Vince Neal’s voice croons. You’ve got to be kidding me. I hit the scan button again.

“Mama, I’m coming home…” Thanks, Ozzy. Now shut up.

Scan.

Maybe oldies.

“She’s got a ticket to ride…”

Oh, give me a break.

I suddenly feel like I’m in a bad movie.

I turn off the radio and go back to the I-pod. Glancing over, I see the old van full of Mexicans
that I’ve seen twenty times already. The lanes are going in spurts; one lane passes the other, then vice versa. All at a whopping four miles an hour. I nicknamed them “Slow Van” because I passed them a long time ago. They’ve only caught up with me because I took a twenty-minute stop at a rest area that I left an hour ago, which means it’s less than three miles behind me.

There is also “Young Family” who is three cars ahead in the next lane over. Every so often I look up to watch a moment of Finding Nemo on the DVD screens through the window.

Another one is “Cute Girl in the Yellow Jeep.” She and I were side by side for almost a hundred miles until traffic broke up a little and I was able to get some more speed leaving her behind. She spent most of her time on her cell phone. Her system must not be busy. I noticed at one point when we were yo-yoing back and forth as to who was in front and who was behind that she had a dog in her back seat too.

I think there is some sort of requirement that says if you’re female and you own a jeep, then you must be cute. They won’t even let you take a test drive if you’re not.

“Yes, ma’am, how may I help you?”

“I’m interested in buying this jeep.”

“Ooh, are you sure? I think maybe you’re more suited for a Gremlin I have on the used lot over there.”

“No, I’d like to buy this Jeep.”

“Ah, ma’am, I’m not sure how to tell you this: you don’t quite fit the image we’re trying to convey with these vehicles. You see, you’re too ugly to own this jeep. Now why don’t I show you the minivans?”

I’m sure right after lunch on their first day of training they flip to the “how to determine if she’s hot enough to own a jeep” section of the manual.

Cute Girl fits the description, even down to the ponytail coming out the back of her baseball cap.

When traffic breaks up and I speed off I look in my rearview mirror to see if she is keeping up. I feel let down when the jeep gets smaller and smaller behind me.

Up ahead of me the driver is holding a digital camera out of his or her sunroof, taking a picture of the miles long line of cars in front of us. He or she has a bumper sticker on the back that is curled up on one side, starting to peel away from the bumper. Curled up it reads,

“God
less America.”

If this hurricane does what they are saying it will, He just might do that.

Another mile gone. Twelve minutes. I’m picking up speed; hope I don’t get a ticket.
Another ambulance comes by. This time it’s trying to make its way through the center of both lanes. As it goes by, a truck flies by behind it, the driver using the newly-worn path to his advantage just like Bruce Willis did in Die Hard 3. Three other cars from opposing lanes get the same idea, and in a moment that shouldn’t be comical but at this late hour is, each car ends up inadvertently cutting the others off so that none of them get out of the lane they were sitting in. Drivers grumble, honk, gesture, and pull back to where they were to begin with.

I’m half-tempted to cross the median, turn around, and go home. The only reason I didn’t stay was I knew that if Rita didn’t kill me, my wife would for not evacuating. I think most wives would feel the same. No sense in causing undue worry and stress.

I creep up to a homemade sign on the highway on the edge of a gravel road. Someone had been enterprising earlier in the evening. “Hot Dogs $1, Sodas $1, Hamburgers $3,” it reads. At this late hour the proprietor has closed up shop.

The left lane suddenly breaks open, and twenty cars go past me. I take the car out of park and put it into drive, expecting my lane to do the same thing when a flash of yellow catches the corner of my eye.

Cute Girl is back!

I’m ready for the highway affair to recommence when she continues on by. I watch her tail-lights stop about eight car lengths in front of me. She has come back into and out of my life that quickly.

My lane never moves.

I stare at the sign for twenty minutes.

I am in hell.
To a New Love
Virginia Villanueva

Before you get too involved with me
before my heart gets attached
before I miss your presence
before my love is snatched,
I want to tell you something.
I have to let you know
I want to be with you right now
more than I will let it show.
I'm going to give you chase
and I'm going to hide my heart.
I'm going to make it difficult
before we even start.
It’s no insult to your beauty
and it’s no insult to your charm.
It’s simply a way for me to not get hurt.
I’ve seen too much of harm
So before you start to like me
before my heart gets broke
before I risk this heartache,
just remember of what we spoke.
Handle With Care
Harry Perales

He had fallen purposely, helmet-first, onto the pitch black porch simply because he was tired of pretending to be entertained by what was happening in the heavens. He was also semi-curious as to whether or not his head gear was able to perform its primary function.

Charlie had come with some acquaintances to stay for the weekend on his friend Elliot’s private land, which had been left to Elliot and his sister Melinda by their late grandfather. There was going to be a meteor shower, and everybody wanted to see it in the clear Texas night without influence of city lights. Charlie didn’t care so much about the spectacle, but Melinda had asked him to tag along, claiming it wouldn’t be any fun without him.

The high fields of grass made the land seem miles wide. There were cattle there that belonged to Elliot’s uncle, roaming throughout, and to keep the cows at bay and other undesirables out, a wire fence surrounded the double-wide trailer they were staying in. They even had a fishing hole around back, yards away, which would be useful if any of them knew how to.

When they arrived earlier that day, the group tried to make suggestions on how to spend the time until the shower that evening. Charlie suggested either buying a Slip and Slide and covering it in Vaseline, making strange food dishes, or playing a drinking game to Joe Pesci movies, which would consist of taking a shot every time the actor says “muddah fucker” or some sort of variation of the term. The others usually ignored him, but Melinda was his perfect audience, always having a smile and an infectious chuckle waiting for him.

The girls eventually decided on going into town for a few hours, and the boys decided to go looking for ‘shrooms that may have developed in “patties” left in the pasture. Elliot and the others figured it would make the meteor shower at least a little more memorable, but Charlie had reservations.

“Honestly,” he said, “the idea of taking an afternoon to survey cow shit just doesn’t tickle me as much as it probably should.”

Charlie stayed for the next hour or so in the trailer alone. It had been furnished by Melinda and Elliot’s mother, who seemed to have as much a fancy for floral potpourri themes as she liked a down-home country look. Texas pride hung on the walls along with maroon flowers and angels. There were two bathrooms, three big bedrooms, and around eight beds. Honestly, Charlie didn’t think it would be so bad to actually live here, except it wasn’t furnished with cable.
When the girls had come back with some groceries from the local food mart, Charlie helped them put everything away. It was then that he noticed a closet down the hallway to the master bedroom where Elliot stayed with his girlfriend. Inside were a few cleaning supplies: brooms, dust pans, and jugs of bleach. He looked up to the top shelf and noticed a helmet nestled in between some blankets and pillows. It was white with silver trimming, but it had dingy black scuff marks on it and a few decal stickers. The prominent one on the front said, “Handle with Care.” Charlie put the helmet on, gave it one good whack with all his might, and didn’t feel a thing. Wearing it, he made his way into the kitchen, hoping for some kind of acknowledgment.

The girls were too busy pouring themselves shots of Malibu to notice Charlie, and Melinda had gone to the bathroom. He picked up a beer and went to the living room to sit back down on the couch, alone.

As the boys returned, unsuccessful from their expedition, they began an early start on drinking as well. By the time night fell, the whole party was pleasantly buzzed. They soon made their way out the front door and onto the deck chairs to watch the skies.

Outside, everybody else “seemed” too entranced by the stars to notice Charlie’s pratfall, which he found slightly annoying. But what really chapped Charlie was looking up to find Elliot and Elena sitting together, with his hand in her shirt.

What bothered Charlie most was the fact that Elliot dragged everyone out here to show his girlfriend a side to him that didn’t exist. He cared about astronomy about as much as astrology, but he figured Elena would find the setting “romantic.”

Charlie didn’t like the guy Elliot had become. Years earlier, he felt Elliot would have probably been content in the backyard with a box of marshmallows and a pair of binoculars, but now he wanted to seem like a big shot with a plot of land like some kind of “suburban cowboy.” Elliot was fake. Charlie felt that way about everybody there, except for Melinda.

Melinda was the only one to notice him fall on the porch.

She had gotten up and sauntered towards the screen door when it happened. She stopped and looked down in Charlie’s direction.

“Hey,” Melinda said. “There’s my church hat.”

“It works,” Charlie replied from the floor.

“Why ya layin’ on the deck, Charlie?”

“Because it’s safe.”

She let out a slight rum-giggle and walked over to him with her arms stretched out, grabbing Charlie’s hands to pull him up. When he made it to his feet, he wrapped his arms around her and held tight as they walked into the empty trailer, and he noticed she felt much warmer than the wooden planks.
She let him hang on until they got to the kitchen area. He let go and sat at the table while she made her way through the refrigerator. He sprawled his arms out forward and then placed his right hand on his face. He soon pulled it back to observe it.

He began to remember a crime story he had seen on the news years ago, in which a young girl was either brutally murdered or just died suddenly (he couldn’t remember). The reporters had interviewed somebody like a Native American shaman who lived in the woods outside of the small town and knew the girl. The shaman began to explain that she was destined to die young no matter what because it was in her hand. He began to talk about palm signs, the idea that your fate is mapped out on the lines in your hand. The “lifeline” is supposedly the most important and longest and maps out the major events in your life, including your day of death.

The girl had no “lifeline.”

Charlie couldn’t remember if this was an actual news story or a movie he had seen on late night cable. He didn’t even think palm reading was something actually practiced by the Native American people. Either way, he had noticed a new line on his palm that hadn’t existed before this night. It was perpendicular to a longer one, possibly symbolizing a “cut-off” point. He began to feel a little uneasy, being that he couldn’t remember which one was his “lifeline.”

“You want something?” Melinda asked Charlie from the freezer.

“Anything good?” Charlie said, still admiring his palm.

“Well,” her face turned a kind of displeasing “interesting is more the word.”

“What?”

“Who in the hell made a pizza with green peas and carrots on it?”

“While you were gone, I was bored, hungry, and slightly curious.”

“I didn’t know you knew how to make pizza.”

“Actually, I took a store-bought, frozen one and threw a bag of mixed vegetables on it before I put it in the oven.”

“Well, how was it?”

“It tastes as funny as it sounded at the time.”

“Well, do you want me to chuck it out for you?”

“I suppose, if you feel like chucking.”

“I do. Danke.”

She pulled out the pizza resting on the metal pan with both hands and made her way towards the backdoor. She freed one hand and opened it, looking out into the black night.

“It’s really dark,” she said, “but I’m gonna try and make that big tree by the shed.”
Like an Olympic discus competitor, she rocked back and forth. She then flung the pan into the darkness, which was directly followed by a slight thud and a clamorous metallic crash.

"Uh oh," Melinda said. "I think I hit Elliot's car."

"We'll know tomorrow," Charlie said, still admiring his palm.

Melinda closed the door. As she passed by Charlie, she reached over and smacked the back of Charlie's hand, causing him to hit his face.

"Stop it," she said. "You're making me nervous."

He crossed his arms on the table. "Do you know anything about palms?" he asked.

"Depends," she said. "Trees or casino?"

"No, like palm readings or fortune telling."

"Actually, yeah."

She came back and sat in front of Charlie at the small table, looking at him directly with her arms folded in a mocking fashion. She had hazy but striking gray-blue eyes and a few freckles on her cheeks. Charlie had also noticed her lips were a little off-center, and she had a dimple in her chin. She quickly glanced up at Charlie's head and let a grin out.

"You look like the cosmonaut that didn't make the cut," Melinda said. "I love it."

He began to thumb the bottom of the tablecloth with his left hand.

"Whose helmet was this? Or whose is?" he asked.

"I don't know, probably one of daddy's friends." She began to run her fingers through her long black hair, twirling around the ends. "They come out here with four-wheelers and junk every now and then."

"So you were saying you knew how to read fortunes?"

"Well, Momma's Romnichel," she said, putting her hands back on the table, "which is the fancy name for 'gypsy,' and she was raised in that life."

"Really?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah. The older women taught her how to read fortunes and stuff. When the men went off to work, the women were expected to bring in extra money by peddling flower bouquets and telling fortunes. I mean, she wasn't like one of those mystics in a shroud and jewels or something, but she occasionally told fortunes when she was younger and every now and then did it for kicks to her Gorja friends."

"What's a Gorja?"

"The fancy way of saying 'you,' that is. You don't have any Gypsy in you I know of, right?"

"Not a bit."
“Alrighty. But, anyways, when she got older, she stopped telling fortunes.”

“Why?”

“She told me she felt uncomfortable doing it.” She began to run her finger on the table. “Said it lead to a really awkward situation.”

“What happened?”

“Well, she was at this baby shower years and years ago for this woman she worked with at Hermann Memorial. Momma, not knowing anyone else and being shy and looking for small talk, brings up to the ladies that she can read fortunes, and she says she can guess how many children every woman in the room has.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. I guess she felt it fit the ‘theme’ of the occasion, ya know. So she gets a pencil from somebody, some yarn, a match...wait, maybe not.”

Melinda’s head cocked to the side as she was apparently trying to remember each detail.

“Yeah, I’m not really quite sure on exactly how she did it, and Momma never told me the specifics because she didn’t want me to know how to do it for fear I might start.”

“That’s crazy.”

“So anyways, she does her little trick, and she’s able to tell every single woman how many children they have, without even knowing a lot of the women there. And these were mostly Mexican ladies, so you know they had to have like bundles of kids each, right? But, every time, Momma was right.”

“Wow.”

“So everyone’s like amazed at this, and then she gets to her friend who had worked at the hospital with her.”

Melinda paused.

“Now, her friend had only been married three months, and so the baby was technically conceived before the wedding. But her family didn’t really care. They figured if they were married when the baby was born that’s all that mattered. But, Momma read not only that she had the one baby, but also...another one.”

“Huh?”

“Momma told her it was obviously a mistake because, working at the hospital, she had seen the sonogram and knew she wasn’t carrying twins. But her friend just stared at her and began to cry. Her mother and husband were there, and they tried to console her but she ran into her room, bawling.”

“What was wrong?”
“Turns out, Momma found out later that girl who worked with her got pregnant with some boy when she was like thirteen and had had a clothes-hanger abortion, which nobody but her and the lady who performed it knew about. But it came out, in the reading.”

Charlie gave Melinda a slightly over-exaggerated look of shock.

“That’s fucking nuts.”

“That isn’t? So, after that, Momma didn’t feel right doing the fortune telling thingy anymore.”

“But did you ever learn anything?”

Melinda sat back and looked up at the ceiling. She let out a slight sigh, “Geezus, I’m so loopy right now.” She then put her elbow on the table and laid her head down on her fist, which appeared to smother her right cheek into her eye socket.

“Well,” she said, putting her hands back on the table. “I did learn one trick from my Grandma Mabel.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s just really how to read palms, nothing as elaborate as Momma’s. I couldn’t tell you how many kids you’ve secretly had or anything.”

Charlie put his right hand down opened up on the table with a “thunk.”

“Read it,” he said.

“I dunno,” she said. Ya might not like where the future’s a-headin’.”

“I think I can take it.”

She eyed at his hand curiously and then grabbed it. Charlie watched her study his palm. Her nose crinkled. She began to read his hand like she was inspecting a diamond.

“You got a lot of little rivets and slashes,” she said.

“Is that good?”

Melinda didn’t answer. Charlie looked at her hands touching his. He noticed she had one or two Cracker Jack rings on her fingers. Soon he began to wonder what she could possibly be “reading.”

A puzzled look came over Melinda’s face. “That’s weird,” she said.

“What?”

“Okay, yeah. I think I got it.”

“Okay, well, tell me.”

“Okay.” She paused again. She placed her finger on the longest line in his palm and just stared at him, letting out an uncomfotting sigh.

“Well?” Charlie asked.

“That there’s a line.” She moved her finger down his hand. “And that there’s a line.” She then began rubbing his palm rapidly. “Charlie, you scratched your ass too many times!”

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She began to laugh as Charlie retracted his hand and let out a sarcastic “ha ha.” But she playfully pulled it back and placed it back on the table. Charlie suddenly stopped resisting and quickly glanced at Melinda with a pleasant curiosity as to why she grabbed him back.

It seemed as though time had skipped ahead, but she was still laughing. He saw it in her eyes, too. She began caressing his hand with hers and slowly her laughter died out. “My grandma used to say that,” she said, softly smiling at Charlie.

After a moment, Charlie brought his hand up from under the table, gently placing it over hers, and grinned back at her.

They didn’t say anything for a while, but then Melinda’s eyes glanced up at Charlie’s helmet and then returned to his.

“Charlie?” she said faintly.

“Yeah?”

Her smile turned a tad coy-yet-devilish. “Handle with care.”
Third Place Poetry Winner

There Are Rooms Up There:
Lines inspired by reading Sharon Olds’ “The Moment”
Patrick Stockwell

There are rooms up there, in my
mind, tattooed with the best and
the worst of everything I’ve
ever known. I look at most things
and can’t remember much about them,
like a drugstore Monet in a plastic
frame or the principle action of some
ridiculously dry British sitcom that
no one ever really understands.
There’s lots of falling
down, lots of apologetics.
The worn carpet trail ends inside
the room where I raised
my tabernacle. The floor here
is strewn about with bits
of a child’s occupations, crumbs
of a boy’s life lived in a grey matter cell
of ample imagination and
infinitesimal courage.
But just outside this empty temple,
across the hall and to the right,
there is a room without corners from
which a slight bit of lost warmth is
tunneling out across the dim,
hoping for someone long expected
to come inside to stay.
He navigated the vast expanse of marbled black and white tile like an ice skater wearing socks, aiming for the silver-haired woman in the information booth. She shimmered like a mirage under the spotlight directed from the vaulted ceiling, and somehow it seemed imperative that he reach her. He kept a grin on his face and concentrated on not tripping on the smooth tricky surface.

She looked up from her book when he was a few feet away and watched expressionless until he leaned one elbow on the polished wood counter that extended in roughly a circle around her.

“Hi,” he said happily.

She recoiled slightly as the fumes from his extended happy hour reached her. “May I help you, sir?” she said in a voice that reminded him vaguely of his no-nonsense sixth grade teacher Miss Wooten.

When he looked at her blankly, she pointed to the large sign in front of her and waited with her dark, level eyebrows lifted in question.

“Yeah, I need some information.” He looked at her hopefully and put both hands on the wooden surface for support.

“Young man,” she said, tapping a lacquered nail on the wood, “I can only give information if I’m actually asked a question. The center will close in fifteen minutes, so I suggest you hurry.”

“Okay, Ms. Elizabeth Pringle answer lady,” he said, squinting at the nametag pinned to her beige cardigan. “Here it is.” He scrubbed his hand over his forehead to help him concentrate. “You like me, right?” He patted her bony shoulder with affection. “Sure you do. Everybody likes me,” he slurred. “Life of the party and all that. Only thing though.” He leaned forward and thumped his navy blue suit lapel for emphasis. “Some people aren’t gonna like Robert Norris if I do something tomorrow. Gonna lose lots of love. Yep,” he said blinking. “Might not like me at all tomorrow. And I want people to like me. I need it. So,” he looked at her plain, sharply-angled face, “should I? You know, do it?”

“That’s it? That’s your question?”

“You bet,” he said, trying to perch on the counter. “One for the ages.”

She wagged a stern finger at him, and he slid off, almost dislodging a fern. “All right, Mr. Norris,” she said like she was talking to an impaired child. “No one else seems to require my attention right now, so suppose you tell me,” she began.
He frantically shook his head and made zipping motions with his hand and mouth. In spite of the liquor fumes blowing around in his head, there was the one thing he knew he had to keep inside, at least until tomorrow.

"Relax, Mr. Norris," she said, as tart as vinegar. "I neither want nor need sordid details. Just nod or shake your head at the appropriate moments. Ready?"

Robert nodded in relief. He really needed help from this nice Miss Wooten-type lady, and as long as it stayed inside his head, it would be okay, he told himself. When she chuckled, he realized he’d said it aloud and grinned back at her. "Ready, ready, answer lady."

"I conclude from your attire that you work in a fairly prestigious position."

Robert nodded and shrugged dismissively.

"I conclude also that this is a matter of moral imperative."

Robert stared at her, shocked enough to dislodge a few brain cells from the tequila. She not only talked like Miss Wooten, but she also seemed to see right inside the muddled dilemma in his head like his teacher had when he hadn’t wanted to rat out friends in middle school for stealing school property and some pretty vicious bullying. He’d chosen silence and approval of his peers then. Miss Wooten had looked at him sadly. "One day, Robert," she’d said, "it’s going to be necessary to do what is right and bear with the consequences because you will lose you if you don’t."

For twenty-nine years he’d squeaked by as oblivious as he had to be. At least until now.

Ms. Pringle nodded as though all his years of pleasing and waffling were written in his eyes. He felt incapable of even moving his head. Her green eyes behind the silver frames studied him until his eyes dropped. It was bizarre and unsettling to be so very drunk and yet feeling twelve years old again.

"One more question, Mr. Norris. Might innocent people be impacted if you sit on this?"

Robert sucked in a painful breath, attempted a non-committal shrug, and ended up resting his swimming head on the counter with his eyes closed.

"I’ll take that for yes. Here’s what I’m going to do, Mr. Norris. I’m going to write you a message on a piece of paper and put it in your suit pocket where no one else will see it for you to read later when you can think again."

He opened his eyes and held a shushing finger to his lips. He watched the ceiling spin and dip while she wrote.

"There." She tucked the folded page into his inside pocket and patted it. "Now, I will call you a cab before you fall down. A very nice man will see you out."

Robert nodded and waited, almost falling asleep until he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.
“Careful with him, Don,” he heard her say from a great distance. “He’s harmless and really quite adorable. He’s going to have quite a head on him tomorrow, poor lad. I hope for his sake... Well, never mind. Just pour him into the cab, will you?”

The sunlight from the opened drapes lasered into Robert’s eyelids in a painful red haze. He opened his gummed eyes to a slit, and the pain got worse. So did his stomach. After crawling to the toilet and emptying bile-flavored tequila for what seemed like half a minute less than eternity, Robert braced himself on the tub and pulled himself to a standing position. He was still wearing his suit, his now rumpled and vomit-streaked suit. Robert groaned. The only thing he remembered clearly from the night before was trying to medicate his mental morass with booze. Judging from his present, sorry condition, it had been a mistake to challenge the bartender to mix him the encyclopedia of tequila drinks.

He slumped under the shower for a long time, letting the stinging hot spray deal with cobwebs and stink. There was something, something swimming around in his mushed-up brain demanding an audience. He just couldn’t quite get it to the surface.

Reality hit about the time the hot water ran out. Shivering and sick, Robert groaned again. “God, oh God, what am I supposed to do?” And why did he have to be the one to find it? He’d brought the disturbing inconsistency to his boss Mr. Preston and been told in no uncertain terms, “You didn’t see that.”

At the time he’d grinned and said, “See what?”

“Good man,” Mr. Preston had said, giving his shoulder a light approving punch. “I know you’re a team player. Trust me, Robert. This is nothing for you to worry about.”

Unfortunately, he did worry and had asked an engineer friend with another company about the implications. “Are you sure, Matt?” he’d said, feeling his stomach began to quiver. “I’m no engineer, but I don’t see how a little speck like that could cause trouble.”

Matt had scratched his chin and looked at him. “The thing is, Robert, it might. Maybe it wouldn’t, at least for a good long time, but then maybe it would cause production to shut down. It might even go boom. It’s a big chance to take. Somebody or somebodies at the top are playing fast and loose. Mega millions resting on a deal like this. Sucks to be in your shoes, buddy. And another thing,” he said crunching a beer nut, “we never had this conversation, okay?”

That’s when his nightmares started. Why did he ever ask? It wasn’t the kind of information he was wired to handle. With age he’d gotten more sophisticated at hiding his need for approval, but it still defined and drove him. In third grade, the same year his dad had died, he had not been invited to a friend’s birthday party, and he’d been so stricken that he couldn’t eat for days. He’d even wet the bed. At that moment the rejection and his loss seemed to carry equal weight.

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He’d known someone in college who’d prided himself on defending causes, the more controversial the better. Charles Gas had been a regular sight outside the student union building, bellowing through a bullhorn and absorbing catcalls and spitting with a fanatic’s satisfaction.

Choosing scorn and rejection seemed unfathomable, even horrifying to Robert. Unlike Charles, he was no Braveheart wannabe. He needed affirmation, not a sword.

As the date for shipping the defective pipes grew closer, his anxiety grew to the point that he felt like he was buried up to his neck in sand, watching the tide come in. He’d been so disturbed that he tried over drinks to broach the topic with a co-worker his age.

“Are you kidding, Robert?” Bruce had said. “Why are you even thinking about it? I mean, you’ve got it all going for you: good looks, brains, and upper management thinks the sun shines out of your fair arse. You’re on the fast track man, and the way I see it, this is not your problem. Kiss of death for your career if you touch this puppy, so forget the whole thing, and let’s order another round.”

He’d tried. He loved the approval he got from his job and was willing to work killer hours for his “atta boys.” People liked him there. He made sure that they did, remembering birthdays, anniversaries, and names of offspring and in general spreading joy around. He never allowed himself to have off days. He grinned and expressed fascination with boring stories even when his head was killing him. People would automatically begin to smile when they spotted him, and he basked in it.

Since his mother had died two years before, he occasionally realized with a sense of disgust that the workplace had become his hospital where he got approval treatments, a weakling feeding on endorsement to keep emotional miles between the adult Robert and the devastated eight-year-old he had been.

He’d done a fine job of shutting out that accusing voice. Until lately. Now he felt tortured by the possibility of familiar faces staring at him with loathing. He was equally terrified that something might go boom.

All the way to today he’d swung between the two horrors. Today he had to put up or shut up. Today the pipes would be painted for shipment, and the minute, potentially dangerous flaws would be undetectable.

He muttered a feverish litany of “Help God!” and “Why?” for the time it took him to dress in a crisp white shirt and mood-appropriate dark gray suit and muted tie. It wasn’t until he was gingerly removing the contents from his disgusting suit that he found the note. He sat on the side of his bed and unfolded the crisp white paper.

In a burst of cosmic comedy, his alarm radio came on with the singer jauntily warbling, “Jump, jump, go ahead and jump,” as he read in neat school teacher script:
Dear Robert Norris,

“You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” Eleanor Roosevelt

and I agree on this. This is your divine appointment. Best get on with it.

The Answer Lady,

Elizabeth Pringle

Robert closed his eyes and heard Miss Wooten’s grave, “...you will lose you if you
don’t.” And surprisingly, his father’s deep voice, “I know the rest of the boys ran away, Robert,
but you have to apologize and pay for that broken window out of your allowance.”

Before the song ended, Robert Norris took up his sword. He made the call.

He waited until almost closing time and walked a firm straight path across the back and
white tile, this time in casual chinos and polo shirt. She looked up and watched him as he lifted
the oversized bouquet in rueful salute. He hoped his grin worked. He hadn’t used it in a while.

“That’s quite a backbone you’ve developed, Mr. Norris,” she said, her approval brisk and
unemotional. “I’ve been following you in the news, and I don’t think you’ve been having a very
pleasant time of it. Doing right seldom engenders popularity. I have a question for you this time.”

Robert waited while she looked into his eyes with her schoolteacher vision.

“You’re not sorry,” she said as though she had pulled both the question and his answer from his
head.

“Not,” he said slowly, his mind still wincing away from the blasts of rejection and censure. It
had gotten so bad that the police had to give him escort to and from the hearings. He’d had to move and
get an unlisted phone number. It had been only a little worse than having Ebola, but even so, once he’d
chosen, it was as though it was the only thing he could have done. “No,” he said, “I’m not sorry, but
next week is the trial, and I seem to be a bit short of friends. Are you by any chance available, answer
lady?”

She was.
Second Place Prose Winner

Language
Jonathan Wing

My wife and I just don’t speak the same language and probably never will. I don’t say this to be amusing, provoke deep thought, elicit a battle-of-the-sexes type argument, or sound in the least bit ironic. I mean, literally, she and I don’t speak the same language. Her name is Mihoko, and I met her on my first stay in Japan eight years ago. To this day, she can’t even say my name right: Neisan, she says (they all say, really). I’ll tell you though, it’s Nathan, and nothing else.

“Mom says you need to make dinner.” This is our daughter, Yuki.

“Honey,” I say. “Daddy is working. Tell mom to make it.”

“Dad!” she yells. “I’m hungry. Mom’s hungry.”

She is our family translator, the reason Mihoko and I have stayed together this long she is seven now. She was raised learning both English and Japanese, thank God, and for what I don’t understand of her mother she gracefully explains to me. And vice-versa.

I look at my daughter’s smile. It’s half-Japanese, half-crooked, fully beautiful. She’s wearing green tennis shoes and a long skirt with rainbows and dinosaurs. I nod and turn to the kitchen to make what I know best: hamburgers. No one wants to eat anything else I can cook, Yuki has said. I suspect her mom told her to let me know.

I was living in Shinjuku, a ward of Tokyo, teaching English to Japanese high school kids. I didn’t much care for Japanese things, though. Sushi turns me over. The people are too quiet, too polite. And television in Japan, it’s not like the American classics I love. MTV played music with voices pitched high and everything too fast. Most channels had weird variety shows with people competing to see who could sing Japanese songs the best: opera style. It was just the kind of stuff that jarred me inside to points of nervous confusion. I didn’t ever want to think about it.

I just kind of did the whole Japan thing because—as strange as it may sound (and believe me, it is)—it was easier for me to find a job teaching English in Japan than it was in California. That and I really didn’t care to be in California then.

So I was ready to leave when I was at Roppongi Drinktown, a bar southeast of Shinjuku. Roppongi is the area of Tokyo where all the foreigners—Gaijin, as they call us—gather for drinks and small nights in Love Hotels with Japanese women. Not all of Roppongi is like that, I should add. When I met Mihoko, she was with three other friends. They all had somewhat misshapen teeth but didn’t mind smiling excessively with them. They also shared this: long straight eyelashes, black hair
with bangs that rolled over their foreheads, mini-skirts with polka dots and jean-jacket tops.

I sidled towards them and put my Asahi on the table. I figured I might as well enjoy Tokyo while I was still there. “Are you ladies having fun?” I asked, standing at the side of their booth. They giggled and chattered fast among one another. One of them spoke English. Well, sort of: “Yes! Yes,” she began, “My garufriend like you. Okay?” She was laughing and pointing at Mihoko, who was wearing pink earrings with disks of gold at the ends.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“What your name?” she asked.

“Nathan.”

“Ah, Neisan. She say you very kawaii.” I looked at her, then stared into the amber waves of my drink. She paused to look at her friends and bit her lip. “I mean, like a, happy super cute!”

I sat down next to them, and we talked long. We must have worn her friend out; she was a pipeline for our broken messages.

It wasn’t long before we commenced a ritual of meeting there every night. I saved money by not buying drinks and instead paying her friend to translate, so all was fair. When that got to be too much, we bought for one another as lovegifts these small electronic voice translators. You type in what you want to say, and it would speak it in the other’s language. This was how we would live for the years that followed.

Mihoko and I have been arguing a lot lately. Yuki is tired of it: it is almost always over a simple miscommunication. A few nights ago, we argued about Yuki, by her proxy.

“I will not have Yuki going to a Japanese school,” I told Yuki to tell Mihoko. She spoke Japanese to her, to which Mihoko would think carefully and quietly respond.

“Mom says that Japanese education is better,” Yuki said. She had gotten in a fistfight a week prior to that with a young blonde kid in her class at Nishimachi International School for Foreigners (all American, really). Having taught English in the Japanese school system, I myself favored the international schools. Many times when I’d be teaching students about prepositions, subjects, pronouns, verbs, there would be an old Japanese woman, Miss Tane—she directed the program and would visit occasionally, and she would tell me I’m wrong, the way an old Japanese person tells anyone they’re wrong: so indirectly you have no idea what they are trying to do.

“Mr. Neisan,” she said once, rapping her fingers on a clipboard, “you sure subject come before predicate?”

“It’s just basic sentence structure,” I said. “I’m just teaching them English.”
“Do you know English?”

“Yes, of course. I’m speaking it right—”

“How you know subject before predicate? Predicate before subject?”

“I really don’t know if it matters.”

“It matters, Mr. Neisan,” she said, moving in closer with eyes beading tightly, “that you teach children how to speak English correct.”

And Mihoko wants Yuki to be taught under this?

“Yuki,” I said that night. “What do you think?”

She said, “I don’t care. I mean, I have friends at Nishi. But if I have to go to a Japanese school, then fine. Just as long as you two shut up.”

“Ask your mother why she thinks Japanese education is better than American.”

She asked her, to which Mihoko laughed and said something.

“She says ‘Look how you turned out.’”

“What does she mean by that?” I asked.

“She says ‘You’re too stubborn to learn Japanese.’”

But that wasn’t fair. My resistance to learn the language came in three parts: it seemed much too hard, I didn’t have time with the hard hours I’d work for a local American company in Tokyo, and I just hardly cared for it. I thought we had been doing fine without me learning it.

And I knew why Mihoko hadn’t learned much English: she was afraid. I thought this because she spent most of her days shielded away from the world, most of her days soaked in Japanese books, magazines, and television.

As I pack the half-beef into misshapen cold wads and pound them tight into the skillet, I look up over the small white counter and across the room to where I see Mihoko reading, facing me, her eyes busy walking over the pages. It has written mostly Japanese characters on the cover. But there is some English I can see in the glare of the room: Conversational English for Japanese, Vol. I, it reads.

She lies in bed with me later that night. I kiss down her neck as she props up to continue reading that book. I think to myself about how funny it is that we have lasted this long. I notice her moving through those pages and watch her eyes as they rock back and forth as if they are boats steady at sea. Boats require a captain and a cautious, dependable love for the sea. I think of boats and think of how Mihoko and I really do speak a language, one without words.

I wouldn’t be afraid to admit that I had probably first married her for the sex. And I doubt she’d be afraid to admit she married to be under my family’s money.

I remember when I called home to Dad to tell him I was marrying a Japanese woman: he
thought his son had lost it. You can’t marry someone who doesn’t know English, he told me. I insisted then that I could.

“How are you supposed to keep her happy?” he asked. “Women need to be happy, or all hell breaks loose.”

“You’re so old, Dad,” I said. “It’s the nineties. Women are independent.”

“Japanese women?”

“All women.”

“And you want that? Independence?” He was laughing at me. “You know what that means. Spending your money—our money, my money. Affairs. Secrets. Lies.”

“Japanese women aren’t like that,” I told him. “You can trust them. They’re not from California.”

I was wrapping the phone cord around my finger, watching Mihoko laid out nude over my couch at my apartment then. “Dad, she’s just...awesome. Wait ‘til you meet her.”

I look over at her now in bed, reading that book. I suppose you could say the sex is not so frequent now. I suppose you could say I’ve had to force myself to find actual reasons to love her. I try, I do. I look up at her face, and, with cheeks glinting light, she smiles down at me from the pages.

“I rub you,” she says.

“What?” I say. “You what me?”

She scans the pages, tapping her fingers against the spine. “Ah,” she says, “I love you.”

I think it is the first complete thing we’ve shared in our own words. I respond with the same. She smiles and laughs tenderly.

In my senior year of college, I had to return from Japan to finish up my last semester. The English job in Tokyo was really an internship of sorts. It wasn’t related to my school, though: I was a marketing major at Stanford. I t was more or less because I had needed time away from school and family. I needed to make my own money. I needed a new experience.

Mihoko and I had just decided to get married. I never did get to really explain anything to her when I had left though. It was too frustrating through our electronic translators. She was there with me at Narita Airport in Tokyo to see me go. She wore a white cardigan and a long plaid skirt. I told her through my translator that I had to leave and that I’d be back. She smiled at this and kissed me long and hard. It was the kind of kiss that said she had expected me, that she loved and wanted me. She didn’t have to use words for that.

That year when I returned to California, I spent most of my time with a girl I had met through my dad’s family. They, too, had money. I think this is the one time you could say I had been unfaithful to someone. I know—seemed at that time that I wasn’t going to return to Japan. Mihoko was really just
a memory. Someone I couldn’t speak to about anything, anyway. But in hindsight, I realize I had never really left Mihoko. I did, after all, tell her that I wished to marry.

But instead, I had spent my free time with this girl. Her name was Nancy. She had long sun-colored hair and wore varicolored headbands, T-shirts of seventies rock bands, and daisy dukes.

Nancy and I would run about the wide, warm California streets, hardly ever saying a word. It was really no different than what Mihoko and I had, only this one did speak English. We just chose not to. We rather spent our time following one another, kissing, counting bricks along the walls of the houses in old neighborhoods, holding hands in mysterious alleys, going to carnivals together to make out in the cold, dark Ferris wheel seats. Occasionally we talked about what we hoped for. They never lined up. Nancy was too much a free spirit to ever settle down. She’d live like this forever, I thought.

She told me one night when I was distant: “I suspect you could never love anyone.”

Nancy was probably right. But I began to think, then, that though Mihoko and I had only been able to talk through translators, we both loved many of the same things: television, reading, butterscotch ice cream, science, paintings, lovemaking, Van Halen, coffee, robots, movies with John Cusack. Is that not enough to be in love with someone? I’d ask myself.

Around the time I was working on my final class thesis and preparing for graduate school, I received a letter. It had airmail stamps painted along the bottom of the envelope: from Tokyo. It was written by Mihoko’s friend who had originally introduced us in the bar. It read:

_Nathan-san,

This Mihoko-san’s friend, Kazumi. I write you now to tell you about your girlfriend Mihoko. She want me to tell you that she is having baby soon. She will name it Yuki. She wandering if you come back to see her and baby. Please call, write, or come soon. Thank you.

Kazumi_

The note, though in such broken English, was enough to remind me of the promises I had made. She needed me. I wanted to be a man and save her. I wanted to be there for this child.

Later that week, I boarded a flight to Tokyo. My parents freaked. “What about school?” they asked before I left.

“I’m going to be a father!” I told them. “You know what that’s like? To feel like you’re going to be a parent? Do you remember?”

That was eight years ago. So I guess it is fair to say that I married her for good reasons.

I had always been afraid to mention my past of adultery, though, knowing how hard it would be to explain through our language barrier. I’m glad I came back, too. For Yuki.
I turn my head back to stare at her. She is smiling at me from the pillow she has propped up, her back forming a wide curve into the back of the bed.

I point at her book. “So you’re learning English?”

“My name Mihoko,” she says. “I like to reading and dancing.”

“Good,” I say. “Me too.” I look down the sheets and back over to her, letting my eyes climb the cracks of her skin, over her shoulders, round her hair, to grab hold of her seaweed-colored eyes.

“Want to dancing?” she asks with a smile.

I nod and take her hand from under the blanket, curl out from the side of the bed and pull her near the side of our bedroom. I turn on the radio and find something decent to dance by: a local Tokyo FM station is playing love classics in Japanese. I have no idea what they are, but Mihoko smiles and laughs and kisses me. We dance.

I lean close to smell her cheeks and think of all the ways I could say my dad was wrong. *Couldn’t make a woman happy? He should see this now.*

My eyes look down and over to the doorway, where I see Yuki standing. She’s smiling and clapping. She speaks some Japanese to her mother, and they laugh together.

“Won’t you join us?” I ask.

Yuki jumps in between and holds our legs warm and tight.

I lean in to whisper to Mihoko and say, “I rub you, too.” We smile the same shape.

I think I have finally figured it all out. I look at her moving her hips slow as Yuki holds on, and I watch her eyes swimming to shore. They are greenish-brown and hypnotic, and, I think, *she looks to me like a perfect fit.*

The song stops, and the radio DJ announces in broken English the next song, from England: *Hounds of Love,* he says, by Kate Bush. I listen closely to the chorus:

The Hounds of Love are hunting.

I’ve always been a coward,

I never know what’s good for me.

I smile, and Mihoko and I, we whisper broken words back and forth to one another. Yuki giggles and jumps and dances, forming great gymnastic shapes in the warm, crisp air. I touch Mihoko’s half-parted lips with my fingers, to feel their heat, and then I kiss her.

Tomorrow, I decide, I will go to the bookstore down by Yoyogi Park, South of Shinjuku, and I will buy *How to Speak Japanese for Dumb, Stubborn American Husbands of Japanese Women, Vol. 1.*
The Old Sack
Harry Perales

My grandfather died before I lived,
and I had always wondered
what kind of man he was.
I was 12 when my grandmother passed.
On the day of her funeral
after we left the overcrowded church,
we followed her, lying in a creaking
wooden carriage, down the road,
walking behind her. The dust off
of the road lifted into our hair and eyes,
and I recalled it was the only time
I saw my father cry. In the rusted
and cobbled cemetery, where we had come
to visit my grandfather many times before,
to brush off the pale crinkled flowers
and add saints and Madonnas to his grave,
I watched men in cowboy hats and
sweat-stained shirts digging where my grandfather once lay,
where the sun-bleached saints remained.
They pulled my grandmother’s coffin close,
and before they put her down
they gestured to the perspiring man
holding a torn rice sack to come forward.
It was a stitched brown burlap,
which looked used many times before,
with a brand label painted on which had faded away
and tears lining the back. It was cement,
I thought, or dirt or rocks.
They opened her casket
and laid the sack beside her.
I looked to the headstone,
and it was brand new:
"Rafaela y Valentin Perales Izaguirre."
The sack was my grandfather.
He died before I lived,
and I only met him once,
but it was easy to discern
he was a humble man.
Third Place Prose Winner (Tie)

The Traveling Man
Kim O’Brien Jones

As slits of premature dawn jutted out from behind short but heavy curtains, Doug Davidson opened the lids of his eyes a crack, looked about the gray and black furniture before him and realized he was sleeping on the wrong side of the bed. He lay there on his side, left arm bent under the pillow, the blanket covering his legs then folding across his hips, leaving his chest exposed as he tried to blink away the last bits of sleep. A gentle hand slid over his hip. Long fingernails walked across his lower belly, giving him a delightful shiver then traveled upward, nestling in the hair of his chest. He felt a light breath, then an even lighter kiss at the base of his neck. An impish sigh filled his right ear. He sighed back and caressed the arm that wrapped about him, gently urging firm breasts against his back.

He loved the way Janey often awakened him, like traveling from one dream state to another. Usually he would run his hand over the new diamond ring he had given her for their tenth anniversary.

“Keep your hands off that, fella,” she would croon. “It belongs to me.”

“Just checking to make sure it’s still there,” he would tease back.

Then he would roll onto his back, and she would kiss him, and if it were the weekend, they would entwine their souls in that half light between night and dawn, between dreams and conscious thought, for a few precious moments before their son Harley awoke. God, he loved Saturdays!

But this morning, he ran his hand over hers…and felt no ring.

“Where’s your ring?”

“That thing’s so big I always take it off at night,” said a strange feminine voice in his ear. “I bought it in St. Martin. Do you like it? It’s a yellow topaz.”

He dropped the foreign hand as if it had burned right though to his heart but made no other move. He lay there, his mind freezing for a moment, then clearing. He was in St. Paul, check. On a business trip, check. And staying at the Hilton downtown, check. But…who was the woman lying next to him?

Suddenly, on the shelf of the nightstand just next to Gideon’s best seller, his phone began to play an elevator version of “Sweet Home Alabama.” It was Janey.
“Answer that phone,” said the woman behind him. “God! I hate that dumb song.” She started to get out of bed pulling the sheets with her as she did.

Doug’s thoughts swirled like water in a commode, then drained from his head. He hesitated a moment, not knowing if he should grab the sheets or the still-ringing phone. In his panic he reached for both, grabbing the sheets with his right hand as he stretched his left over the bed’s edge toward the phone.

“Hey!” the woman yelped, the covers leaving her body in a long taffy pull.

“Sorry,” Doug said. He began to slide off the bed. “Ouch,” his head hit the nightstand as his hand wrapped around the phone.

He caught sight of her as she strutted toward the bathroom, her head high and her long auburn hair flowing behind her in some unfelt breeze. He lowered his gaze in denial and took a deep breath in hopes of quieting his pounding heart then flipped the phone open.

“Hi,” was all he could confess.

“Hi, honey,” Janey returned in a dreaming half asleep voice. “Did you make it last night without me?”

“What?” Doug hoped she couldn’t hear his shock.

“I said did you make it through the night without me?”

“No,” he said. Then after he heard the bathroom door close, he said, “I love you, baby.”

“Yeah? I don’t think you sound too sure,” she teased.

“I really miss you, Janey. I really do.”

“Doug, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped the sheet around himself. “It’s just cold and miserable here. Can’t wait to get back to saner weather.” He hoped she believed him. “Think I’m getting tired of all this traveling.”

He could hear Harley in the background saying, “Daddy, can I talk to Daddy now, Mommy? Please? with chocolate and cherries on top, please?” his two reasons for living giggling madly on the other end of the phone.

Janey always let their four year old sleep in their bed when he was away on business trips. They were safe and warm in bed, and he, well, he was in a living hell.

“Someone wants to talk with you,” she said. He knew she was smiling as she spoke.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, son?”
“Daddy?” he hesitated, then yelled, “did it snow?”

“Oh, yeah,” Doug laughed. “It snowed a whole bunch.” Still holding on to the sheets, he struggled to the window and with his index finger pecked behind the curtain. A piercing glare stabbed his eyes, and for the first time that morning he realized he had one hell of a hangover.

“The whole place looks like it’s made of vanilla ice cream, Scooter,” he winced.

“Can you bring me some, Daddy?”

“Well, I think it might melt on the plane.” He thought of those big hopeful brown eyes in Alabama and smiled. “Hey, how about I take a picture of it with my phone?”

“Oh.” Slight disappointment.

“Got something else for you too,” Doug added.

“What, what is it?” Harley yelled into the receiver.

“Hey, don’t yell. I can hear you,” Doug whispered with a smile. His head felt as big as a basketball as he turned and looked for the fire truck purchased yesterday. “It’s a surprise.” Thank God, he saw the toy; at least he was in his room, not hers.

“A ‘prize and a pitcher?’” Harley asked.

“Yep.”

“When you coming home, Daddy?”

“This afternoon. Can I talk to Mommy again? I love you!”

“Mommy, Daddy wants to talk to you,” Harley yelled. “I love you too, Daddy!” he added and kissed the phone.

“Honey, you don’t have to yell,” she said softly in the background. “I’m right here, Pumpkin.” There was a fumbling noise as his son handed the phone to Janey.

“Somebody’s excited,” she laughed.

“Me too,” Doug whispered back.

“Sure you’re okay, big guy?” she asked again.

“Yeah, my head’s a little fuzzy,” he confessed. “Had dinner and drinks with Bob and Jimmy from United Securities last night. Guess I overdid it.”

“Well, take a couple of aspirins and a nap on the plane.”

“I’ll do that.” He rubbed his right temple. “Hey, the plane lands at 1:30.”

“Okay, I’ll be outside near baggage pickup.”

“Great, I’ll see you.” He heard the shower turn off. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He flipped the phone closed, started to get dressed and thought of how he had gotten himself into such a mess. The answer rose in his mind like a fart in a bath. It was ego, pure and simple. He had
turned forty-two months ago, and since then he was feeling a little well…unconfident? Like that line from that movie Janey loved. What was the movie called? Moonstruck! Right! And the line? “Why do men cheat?” Answer, “Because they fear death!” That was it because somewhere between his first and sixth scotch he remembered thinking, I could have that woman if I wanted. I still have what it takes! Fortunately, after downing his sixth scotch, he really couldn’t remember much more.

Doug sat on the edge of the bed putting on his shoes, his back to the bathroom door when she re-entered the room. He could see her in the mirror that hung over a long low dresser. She had her head tipped to one side as women often do while they put on earrings.

“Well,” she said, straightening her skirt, then looking at her watch. “I’ve got a meeting in ten minutes.”

He didn’t know what to say and just lowered his head and cradled it in his hands, hoping to keep it from exploding.

“Hey,” she said. “Don’t take it so badly.”

He could hear her rummaging through her things on the dresser by the TV. After a moment, from the corner of his eye, he saw the hem of a short, straight, navy blue skirt, long slender calves and the toes of pointy, red leather stilettos. She was standing right next to him, but he still couldn’t raise his head to look at her.

“Well, Dave,” she said.

“It’s Doug.”

“Sorry, Doug. Anyway, I had a great time. You were, well…interesting to say the least.”

Oh God, interesting? What the hell did we do? he thought.

“So, if you’re ever in Houston and in trouble?” She gave a quick soft giggle. “Give me a call. I’ll cut you a break.” With that, she placed her business card on his knee.

“And Dave,” she added.

“Doug.”

“Whatever. Don’t make the mistake of confessing last night to your wife. Consider that your free consultation.” She turned then walked out the door.

He read the business card. Hermann and Hermann Family Law, Prenuptials, Divorces, Child Custody, Rachel H. Hermann, Attorney at Law. He closed his eyes and laughed to himself for the term “screwed by a lawyer” now had new meaning.

He took a shuttle to the airport, and just before entering the terminal, remembered Scooter’s picture. He looked around and found a taxi parked by a plowed mass of snow; its icy peak rose a good two feet higher than the roof of the vehicle. He snapped a picture of the scene with his phone, then
pushed another button to view it and make sure he had taken a clear image. A selection of four pictures showed on the screen. The last one was of the taxi but the other three...he clicked on the first image. The photo was dark but he could see a hand and a ring. It was Rachel’s yellow topaz. Her hand was resting on...

“OH MY GOD!” he said, frantically erasing the first three images from the phone. When he finished, he looked up and realized he must have yelled because an airport cop was staring at him.

“Sorry,” he said panicking, and then lied, “My stock just dropped twenty points.”

The cop nodded as if knowing how Doug felt, then walked in the opposite direction, chuckling to himself. Doug entered the terminal and loosened his tie. His head was pounding. His hands were sweating.

*Oh, God, what if Scooter had seen that? Christ, what if Janey had seen it?* he thought.

He found an empty chair by the window and plopped down. He thought he might puke. *God, God, what an ungrateful ass I am. I don’t deserve them.* He scanned from left to right, his eyes jumping all around as if looking for an answer. The scene before him was filled with hundreds of people running to make their flights, all of them seemingly half-crazed.

That was it. He was quitting his senseless job. No more traveling, he’d get something in Mobile, close to home. He needed to start spending more time with Janey and Scooter. Last night was nothing more than a sign, a big bright neon sign, but still just a sign that his life had to change. He would make it up to his family. He would start doing things with them. Maybe next season he’d even help coach his son’s soccer team. And today, today he would go home and start from the beginning again. He’d romance Janey like he used too, buying her flowers, taking her for romantic dinners. And he would never ever give her a reason to suspect he was capable of being unfaithful.

*Yeah, he thought, I’ll start now. I’ll call that little flower shop Janey always says is so cute. What’s it called? Kathy’s, that’s it!*

“Kathy’s Flowers and Gifts. This is Ellen. May I help you?” Ellen Martin said.

She finished taking the order and turned to her co-worker, Nancy.

“Got a live one, Nan,”

“Yeah, what you got?” said the older woman.

“Three dozen red roses plus Stargazer lilies all for the bargain price of one hundred and ninety big ones.”

“Ooohh, can you say…”

“Guilty!” they chuckled in unison.
Burning Embers
Virginia Villanueva

Dead leaves covered the ground,
as I stood shivering in the cold winter.
Black night engulfing our young bodies,
my brother holds me to chase away the shivers.

A fire burns where we once used to live,
and memories offered up as smoke to the sky.
While unforgiving frost eats through my skin,
weary faces look on as our parents cry.

Trapped in the flames, a baby whimpers.
The heat surrounds protecting crib.
No way in to save my baby sister.
The firemen hope they'll make it while she lives.

They emerge from the flames with faces hidden,
a bundle wrapped in their arms as they bring
my baby sister to her loved ones
as we all heard misery sing.

Two years now, and I still remember
my brother holding me as I sobbed that day.
His strength he gave as I crumbled slowly
and watched as my sister passed away.
You Can't Understand My Nightmare

Linsey Welborn
A Father’s Love
Tammy Johnson

Chapter One

My father never told me he loved me until the day he killed my mother with an ice pick, which was the same day she had killed the family German shepherd, the postman, her favorite radio disk jockey, and the little boy’s turtle from next door. I had never really realized before that my father loved me.

“’I don’t want you turnin’ out to be the messed-up psycho your mama was,’” my father said while cleaning off the ice pick with a T-shirt he pulled out of the laundry basket, my mother’s Woodstock shirt. “Lindy, I love you, baby, and you behave now.” He winked at me, slipping me a roll of hundred dollar bills, the keys to the Mustang, and his military dog tags. His face was weathered and old as he gently cleaned off her face with a towel off the workbench; then kissing her forehead, he closed her eyes for the last time.

The room was silent as I watched him pick up my mother’s lifeless, bloody body off the garage floor and patiently, lovingly place her in the passenger seat of his beat-up, old Chevy truck. He buckled her up, put her New York Yankees cap on her head, and climbed in the driver’s seat. He didn’t look at me as he drove off, and he kept driving until the truck stopped at the bottom of the Mississippi River.

No one ever pitied me because no one could ever find me. While my mother found her death at the tip of an ice pick, and my father at the bottom of a river, I found my life on I-10 heading west to nowhere in particular. I just cruised along the highway with the top down, letting the sun dry my tears and the wind take my pain away with it to the east. I had never felt freer.
A Garden of Therapy  
Janet Hudson  

Upon waking on a sultry  
summer morning, I walked through  
the house looking for Mother.  
I would not find her  
in her bedroom  
or in the kitchen and  
I would know that she  
was in the garden  
digging in the rich fertile  
soil of therapy.  
She taught me how  
to break up the subjective soil  
with a hoe of humility.  
She told me that  
the stubborn nut grass weeds  
would come out easier  
if the dirt were loosened.  
She showed me how to put  
my weight into the shovel  
to turn the earth  
so the soil could breathe  
and you could find the nut  
to prevent the spread of pestilence.  
She explained the difference  
between worthless weeds and  
promising seedlings and illustrated  
how the bright bulbs of  
daffodils, iris, and amaryllis  
are to be carefully dug up, divided,  
and wrapped in newspaper,  
waiting to be replanted  
when the time was right  
so they could emerge as a flower  
full of God’s beauty.
“It’s sticky and yucky.”

“Just keep moving,” Ann Marie said as they crossed a small bog.

“Can’t we stop now?”

“We barely got started. Stop complaining.” Ann Marie glared back at her sister who turned six a month ago. Willow was smaller than other girls her age. She couldn’t carry wood or water or help with the animals because they were bigger than her. “What do you want me to do, carry you and the food?”

“No, but slow down. I’m tired,” the little girl said as she continued to trudge. “How far do we have to go? It’s taking a long time.”

“’Cause you have to stop and whine. I swear, Willow, you complain more than anyone I know.” Ann Marie bent down and rolled up her pants legs so they wouldn’t get wet. “We have to cross the wide part of the creek, so be careful to stay on the big rocks. They’re slippery.”

Ann Marie led the way but paused just before the landscape turned upward on the opposite side of the creek. She looked back at Willow with her brown, wispy curls blowing across her face as she made her way across the creek. Her tiny, pink mouth was open just enough so that her tongue peeked out between her lips as if that would help keep her balance as she jumped the rocks in the creek. Ann Marie giggled to herself when she thought of Willow slipping and biting her tongue. That would really smart.

She didn’t mind doing the chores around the house or even helping her brothers with their chores around the farm, but Ann Marie hated the brat tagging after her. Willow wasn’t her responsibility. She didn’t ask her mother to have another baby, and she certainly didn’t understand why she was being punished for her parent’s late-in-life miscalculation. “Come on, brat!”

“My boot came off again,” Willow cried, staring at her boot caught between two rocks.

Ann Marie put the bundle of food on the sandy bank and went back for Willow. She picked up boot that was two sizes too big for her sister. Before Ann Marie reached her, Willow lost her balance and fell in the muddy creek.

“You’re hopeless!” Ann Marie dropped the boot she was carrying and reached to pull her sister out of the late summer muck. All the fish had either gone further down the creek
with the majority of the water or were holed up somewhere in a cool mud hole, waiting for the next rain. “I told you to scrunch up your toes to keep the boot on. Just be glad it’s not winter or you’d be froze.” She looked at the muddy figure before her and started laughing. “You look like that little pink pig Papa brought home last week. Get that boot on and come with me.”

“I’ll get mud in it.”

“Just do what I say,” Ann Marie said, jerking the other boot out of the mud. She wiped Willow’s foot with a slap and then shoved her foot into the boot. “Hurry up, little piggy. Papa is going to send out a search party before long. Try not to lose your boots again before we get to the top of the bank.”

Ann Marie picked up the bundle of food and climbed the embankment without waiting for Willow. She stopped at the upper creek where the land leveled out and the water from the natural spring below pooled before it slipped through the outcropping of rocks to join the water in the muddy creek bed below them.

“Get over here so I can clean the mud off your clothes and out of your hair. I don’t want Papa to think I pushed you down in Muddy Creek. Get those boots off.” She took Willow by the shoulders and shoved her into the pool. She forced her head under the water and held her there by her brown tresses. Willow came up choking. “I could drown you if I really wanted.”

“I’m telling Papa,” Willow cried.

“No, you won’t because I’ll do it again on the way home and every time Ma makes you come up here with me. Even in winter and maybe you’ll freeze.” Ann Marie dunked her sister again and then pulled her off into the tall grass where she let her catch her breath. “Put the boots back on.”

Ann Marie watched her little sister do as she was told. Then they climbed to the high meadow where their father and brothers were branding the young calves. She didn’t wait for Willow or even acknowledge her presence. Instead, she found her favorite spot and sat on a large round boulder that jutted out of the ground. The hard surface was hot from the midday sun. Ann Marie watched the little wavy lines of heat move like snakes in thin air.

By the time the air snakes started to bore her, Ann Marie was looking Willow eye to eye. Her eyes were deep gray like the winter afternoon sky before the snow fell. Willow crawled up beside Ann Marie and put her head on her lap. She spread Willow’s clothes away from her body and over the hot rocks so that they would begin to dry. Ann Marie stroked her sister’s brown hair and marveled at the silver streaks that ran through it. She liked the way Willow’s hair glistened in the sunlight. She turned her gaze to her father and brothers, watching them rope the calves, brand them, and then let them loose to find their mamas.
While Willow rested, Ann Marie recalled the day her sister was born. There were two midwives with her mother that day, an old Sioux medicine woman named Old Silver Fox and Sabalee, the wife of her daddy’s Negro hired man, Russ. Her father and brothers had gone to Fort Worth to buy cattle and wouldn’t be home for three days. Old Fox would whisper something to Sabalee, and then Ann Marie would be sent out to the well to get a bucket of water.

“S’okay, Lyddie,” Ann Marie would hear Sabalee say as she placed a damp rag on Lyddie’s forehead. “Difficult child at birth, easy child in life.”

Finally, on the second day Old Fox took Sabalee outside to talk. When they came back inside, Sabalee packed a lunch and sent Ann Marie down to the creek to find Russ who was watching out for some of the cows who were birthing calves. When Ann Marie finally returned, she was allowed to hold Willow while the two women tended to her mother. On the third day, before she left for home, Old Silver Fox pulled a hand-carved flute out of her bag as a present for Willow.

Ann Marie was cleaning the house and preparing supper later that night when her father returned to the house. Willow was asleep in the crook of her mother’s arm, and her brothers were down at the barn unloading the livestock.

“I don’t like that woman in my house,” her father said to her mother as he picked up the flute and toyed with it. “What kind of magic did she make on this thing?”

“Old Fox is harmless. It’s a simple child’s toy,” her mother said in her ever-calm tone.

“Don’t want my kids thinking they’re injun,” he said. “Who would marry our daughters if they was of a mind they’re injun? If I’d known, I’d a thought twice before takin’ to the likes of you.”

“Don’t,” she said. “And don’t complain about the eighty-eight acres of land fed by a creek that you got title to when we married.”

“It’s from her.” The piece of carved wood cracked in half under the pressure of his strong hands. “That’s what I’m against,” he said, walking toward the door.

Ann Marie saw her mother’s shoulders drop as the air went out of her body. She shifted Willow to the middle of the bed and turned her back to the doorway of the bedroom.

“Come on, hound,” Ann Marie’s papa said as he walked to the back door. “Let’s get that fox what’s been raiding the hen house. It’s a good night to catch a thief ‘cause there ain’t no moon.”

Willow stirred from her place on Ann Marie’s lap as their father and brothers approached. She gathered her damp dress about her and slipped off the higher boulder. Ann Marie stood and tossed the food pack to their father.
Josh and Rowdy were taller than their father by a good three inches. They were ten months apart in age, and strangers always thought that they were identical twins. Everyone in the family knew they were far from identical. Josh had brown eyes like their mother, and Rowdy had green eyes like their father. Josh was left-handed like their father, and Rowdy was right-handed. When they started school, Lyddie began parting their hair on opposite sides so the teachers could tell them apart.

“Hey, minnow, did you grow since this morning?” Josh asked.

“No,” Willow said, giving him a big smile.

“I think she shrunk when she fell in the creek,” Rowdy said, patting her on the head and giving Ann Marie a wink.

“I lost your old boots,” Willow said, tilting her head back and laughing. Ann Marie imagined that she looked like a coyote howling at the moon. “Ride?” she asked, grabbing for Rowdy’s hair.

He stepped closer to her. She jumped from the rock onto his back, and they took off across the open field. Josh shuffled through the sandwiches and fruit in the knapsack. He sat in the shade of the big boulder, and when he finished eating, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

“Thanks for lunch, Annie,” her father said. “Did you and your ma get the garden in?”

“We’ll be finished tomorrow, but I’d rather be here with you, Papa.”

He patted her on the back and said, “Summer’ll be over soon, and your brothers are going to Kansas to bale hay for old man Crowder. You can help me for the month that they’re gone. Now, you little chicks need to get back to the house and help your ma with the garden.”

Josh handed Ann Marie the empty knapsack and gave her a swat on the rear with a long piece of prairie grass as she and Willow turned toward the house.

“I expect fried chicken and corn by sundown,” Rowdy called after the girls.

"With mashed ‘tatoes and Muddy Creek gravy," Willow called back as the girls disappeared into the creek bed below the meadow.
All Used Up
Patrick D. Connolly

With a smooth, quick flick the matchstick came to life, sprouting wings of reddish-orange flame that danced and flickered around its head. Jack held it a moment, upright, watching as the tiny fire ebbed its way down towards his finger and thumb. He lit his cigarette then, a Camel, and with another flick sent the match flying away just as it went out, extinguished and all used up.

He leaned back against a tall, firry pine in the corner of the yard and enjoyed its shade as a cool ripple of late morning air blew the moisture from his face and brow. He’d risen early this morning, even before the sun’s first rays peeked out to tickle the valley floor awake. There had been a lot of work to do today, a lot of boxes to pack and things to sort through, possessions he knew he would never need or use again, but he had sorted through them all and boxed them up anyway. He smoked his cigarette slowly. He still had one last task, but he was in no rush. He had plenty of time.

When he finished his smoke, he flicked the butt off to the side, not out into the yard but out in the middle of the cobblestone path that wound its way from the garden and gazebo right up to the back patio. Someone else could pick it up later. With a final glance around and a brief, regretful smile flashed to no one in particular, Jack reached down and picked up an axe that was leaning against the tree. Hefting it way back over his shoulder, he let loose suddenly with a mighty swing, stepping into the blow like a ballplayer at the plate. The blade buried itself deep into the tree’s trunk with a resounding THWACK! Again and again he swung the axe, chipping and chiseling and cleaving out large, sticky chunks of wood as the tree bled out its sap in sad, silent protest.

When he was done, he stood back and fingered his chin as he eyed his work. Nodding his head, certain that his aim had been true and he had lined everything up properly, he lifted one of his beefy arms and placed a large, calloused hand on the tree at about shoulder height. A moment later he shoved, leaning into the giant, bleeding tree with all of his two hundred forty pounds. It groaned, timidly at first, and then it began to pop and crackle, too, as the remaining bit of trunk splintered apart. The great pine seemed to bellow and roar its final objections as it wobbled there one long, final moment more and then went crashing down violently through the roof and upper floor of the house. The damage was obscene, with branches and siding, plaster and two-by-fours, cracked, splintered, and strewn all about near the place of impact, and though he’d built much of the house himself with his own two hands and gallons of sweat, Jack couldn’t help but smile.
Memories, some good, some bad, came flooding forward, and he savored the bittersweet
taste in his mouth as he lumbered around to the front yard, took a crumpled note out of his pocket,
smoothed it, and stuck it to the door. He then walked out to the driveway, stepped into his overburdened
Chevy truck, and drove on down the road without glancing back.

The note read:

My Dearest Karen,

Per the "agreement," the house is yours, effective 12:00 noon today. Congratulations.

Much love, Jack.
The Man Bearing Much
Heath Ceren

Gazing upon Him hanging from the cross before me,
His hair sweaty, tangled, matted with blood, as if weeping.
It hangs down, covering his eyes and
Hides agony He does not want the world to see.
All around, the thick mist of death surrounds us.
The scent of desiccated blood mixed with
Old, splintered wood is unbearable.
I walk to the man that hangs, and lift my arms.
I touch His feet. I feel this man’s own blood and
Sweat, pouring over calluses that have helped the world.
I step back, taking a drink from my water jug and embrace the
Feeling of cool, refreshing liquid slide down my throat.
I feel like a taut rope for I enjoy the water,
Yet I am helpless because I cannot share with this man.
The silence of the crowd is almost deafening.
A man they all wanted dead now hangs like a rag doll,
And all they can do is stand and weep
As they know He’s bearing more than He lets on.
Flashlight Shot

Casandra Cruz
Voices
Inspired by Yusef Komunyakaa’s “The Brain to the Heart”
Greggory Adams

Voices, or I should clarify,
A single voice not heard
In reality in over a decade
Yet heard daily, the same phrases
Over and over like a Grammy-winning CD
On repeat.

Constant naggings, correctings,
Can’t you do anything right?
I can ignore so many other things
Tune out so many other people,
Yet this voice I cannot
Escape.

I try to let it go,
I try to drown it out,
I try to smother it,
I try to bury it deep,
My biggest fear is that I’ll
Give it away

In much the same manner
I received it. The CD player cannot
Be unplugged. The play button is jammed
There is no pause. There is no stop.

You can’t hear that?
I wish I were you.
“Romantic love is basically a misunderstanding between two assholes,” Jeremy said. “What you call ‘true love’ is nothing more than good, old-fashioned regular love coupled with the desire to screw.” His hands were raised to emphasize his point, and Annie’s gaze momentarily left his face to focus on the black cross tattooed to his wrist, its dark outline a contrast to his tan skin. That external contrast of ink on flesh brought to mind the main internal conflict that she saw in Jeremy: a stark faith in Christianity that seemed unreal in the light of his sailor’s mouth, the litter of beer and emptied shot glasses before him on the table, and a penchant for occasionally punching people in the mouth.

Jeremy held the attention of his friends like an old-school, brimstone-and-hellfire preacher might keep his flock in rapture. Annie thought it was more because of the sheer audacity of what he said than of any faith in his theory. This was not the first time she’d heard that line from Jeremy. All the same, it never failed to both shock and hurt her. She knew why it shocked her but wasn’t too sure why it hurt her. She wasn’t sure she wanted to examine why, either. Jeremy was funny, but he was a blowhard. When he paused to take a drink from his longneck, she managed to speak, “How can you believe that, Jeremy? I think you’ve just never been in love.” She hoped that was it, anyway, her hand moving almost without conscious thought to the silver heart that hung from her neck, squeezing it tightly as she watched Jeremy for some sign that he didn’t really mean what he said.

Jeremy’s face, broad and unremarkable save for his intensely bright blue eyes, swung toward Annie, the ghost of a smile on his lips. “No, kid. I’ve been in love. I’m in love right now,” he said, spreading his arms, “with y’all, and all the rest of my friends. And all of humanity, for that matter. God is love, you know. It’s a pure thing. When you guys talk about love, I think you’re really talking about possession. Love is freedom, man. It’s happiness, and to be really real, it can’t be contingent on various bullshit things. It has to be, you know,” he paused as he searched for the word, “unconditional.”

“Nobody loves anyone unconditionally, man,” Calvin said. He sat next to Annie, also facing Jeremy. His face was handsome in a classical way, his profile almost Roman. He ran a hand back through impeccable hair, shaking his head as he seemed to search for something to prove his point. “What if someone you loved cheated on you, man? You’d have to let them go then, wouldn’t you?”

Jeremy shrugged. “I don’t know, man. I don’t think I would. ‘Cause you know, why do people cheat anyway? It’s because we’re often driven by biological urges. That’s another problem with humans, man. They equate love with sex. One doesn’t have shit to do with the other. I mean, I might have to break up with a chick if she went out looking for sex with somebody, but, you know,
there might be extenuating circumstances or something. And I’d have to know what they were. I mean, when you look at all the evil shit people do, is fucking somebody while you’re in a supposedly committed relationship that big of a deal?”

“Fuck yes, it is!” Annie exclaimed. “That’s violating trust! How can you build a relationship when trust, sacred trust, is violated?”

“Nothing sacred about an agreement between two people on exclusive screwing, unless maybe it’s marriage, and I think marriage is pretty much bullshit too. There ain’t nothing important in the world but God. Most people put their faith in the concept of idealistic love. I mean, even plenty of Christians do. But that’s where they fuck up. Love between two humans isn’t salvation. Nobody gets happy ‘cause they’re in a good relationship. The love of Christ is salvation. The love between two jerks is not. I’m telling you, love doesn’t make you happy. You gotta be happy first, and then you can maybe have a decent relationship.”

Annie was surprised to find herself agreeing with Jeremy, her head seeming to have decided to nod along with him without her brain ordering it to do so. She’d learned that lesson hard enough herself. Declarations of true love and promises of devotion had seemed like salvation to her ears before, but she hadn’t had a relationship with any of those romantics end in anything beside tears and a ritual burning of love letters and gifts.

Her last major boyfriend had been a perfect case in point. Not only did he have that emaciated rock-star look she loved, complete with multiple facial piercings and the ink of dozens of different tattoo artists gracing his thin body, he’d also been a poet and a guitarist. He was a creative genius, able to explicitly express his thoughts about Annie and her beauty. He was just the sort of person Annie had envisioned for herself. He was also just the sort she’d always thought was out of her league. In the end, it’d turned out he was. “I’m a tiger, baby. I’m wild. You can’t keep a tiger chained up with only one lover,” he’d told her, lacking the beauty his work always showed in those final words to her.

Both Jeremy and Calvin had been there for her through that one. Calvin was no surprise. He’d been her best friend for years. Jeremy had been the “crazy Christian thug-looking guy” who Calvin had moved in with after answering an ad in the paper for a roommate. They’d been acquaintances before then, but Jeremy had helped to cheer her up as much as Calvin had, his off sense of humor and ever-present grin making even the worst of her troubles seem to be unexceptional. When he offered to “punch the guy in the face. You know, just to make you feel better, not ‘cause I’m real violent or anything,” smacking gum in his mouth with that trademark grin on his face, she’d decided he was worthy to be admitted into her admittedly small circle of close friends. Since then, she, Cal, and Jeremy had been extremely tight, despite their vast differences in theology, philosophy, and everything else.

Calvin snapped her from her self-absorbed memory by slamming a just-finished shot of tequila down on the table, saying, “I’m no expert like you, man, but my parents were as sure of marriage being
a sacred thing to God as they were of me being an abomination to Him.” Annie looked to him briefly; he was trying to derail the conversation toward himself, which he was wont to do fairly often. Usually she was happy to oblige him, being of the mind that Calvin had been through enough in his life to be given the right to talk about it whenever he felt like it. She couldn’t tonight, though. She wanted to listen to Jeremy tonight. Even more so, she wanted to prove his theory wrong.

Jeremy wasn’t derailed either, which was surprising. He was typically just as willing as she was to let him air out his emotional troubles. “Nah, man. Jesus says you shouldn’t get married if you can help it. Marriage is a way to get out of the sin of sex if you can’t just concentrate on God,” said Jeremy.

Annie said, “Well, if no Christians ever got married, then Christianity would die out, so that can’t be true.”

“Yeah, I think God knows us dumb-ass humans won’t be able to keep it in our pants. But those of us who do, you know, get extra props from the King o’ Kings,” said Jeremy.

“You’re full of crap, dude,” Cal said. “And you’re getting off topic. If you don’t believe in love, how are you ever going to be happy?”

“Calvin,” Jeremy said, “you’re missing my point.” He turned to Annie, looking her dead in the eye as he replied to Cal. “I never said I didn’t believe in love. I said I just think our notions of romantic love are B.S. You know, I’m pretty sure I could be really happy with somebody, and, you know, it’d be all the better because my love is unconditional.”

Annie felt a heat rise to her cheeks and hoped the blush wouldn’t be too apparent. She’d just been to the beach recently, so hopefully the tan would cover it up. “Unconditional sounds pretty good, I guess. But you say that you love everybody that way, so what would make it special for a certain person?”

“Well, you know. Love and a desire to screw,” Jeremy said with a wink. “Plus, having a good time with each other.” He looked away from her at last, now looking to Calvin. “See, I love Calvin here, and we have a good time together, but sorry, buddy, I don’t have any desire to screw you.”

“Don’t worry, man. You’re not my type,” Calvin said, looking away with an embarrassed look on his face.

Jeremy looked back to Annie. “But, you know, certain people of the female persuasion I have a good time with, wouldn’t mind having sex with, and.” only now did Annie catch even the slightest falter in Jeremy’s voice, “you know, love.”

Annie looked down now, her chin resting on the top of her chest and her eyes focusing on that silver heart that rested a few inches below her collarbone. She also noticed that her shirt was rather lowcut. She imagined she’d noticed that when she put it on, but several beers ago it had escaped her notice. Lifting her head back up and looking at Jeremy once more, she said, “Are you saying this ‘cause I have on a sexy top?” She tried to make her tone light and jokey but didn’t think she had succeeded.
Now Jeremy looked away. “No. I like you, Annie.” His Adam’s apple bobbed visibly as he swallowed.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Calvin said, his voice becoming more than a monotone for the first time in the evening. “Where the heck did this crap come from? You know, don’t even tell me. I’m going home.”

“You don’t have to leave, Cal. You know me, I just like creating uncomfortable situations for people.”

“That’s true, but nah. I really don’t want to hear this.”

“Oh, all right then. Well, bye, man. I’ll see you soon,” Jeremy said.

“Bye,” Annie echoed.

“Yeah, see y’all,” Cal said, making his way to the door.

After he was gone, Jeremy said, “Man, what’s gotten into Cal?”

Annie shrugged. “I dunno. He gets weird sometimes.”

“Well, you think we should go after him?”

“No.”

“Oh, all right,” Jeremy looked away once more.

Annie thought about yawning and saying she needed to get going as well. Calvin’s abrupt exit had provided her with a perfect chance to escape this conversation with Jeremy. She thought that would probably be for the best. But she didn’t do it. She didn’t know why. She thought maybe it was simple curiosity. After a long pause, without even knowing why she was doing anything except quashing Jeremy’s hopes for romance, she said, “So, you like me? I don’t think anyone’s put it to me quite that way since junior high.”

An embarrassed sort of half-smile, half-frown formed on Jeremy’s lips. “Yeah, well. I’m really not good at this sort of thing.”

Annie reached over to the other side of the table, putting her hand on Jeremy’s upturned palm. She didn’t know if the electricity she felt when her fingers touched his own rough digits was static or something in her head. “I don’t believe it. Your ability to say the most vulgar and blunt things to people is… legendary.”

“Well, this isn’t fucked up or vulgar. At least, I hope it isn’t.”

Annie stood up from her side of the table. She supposed somewhere she had unconsciously known that there was more to Jeremy than he let on. It wasn’t something she thought about. The face he presented to the world was complex enough that one had plenty on his hands trying to figure him out without having to look deeper. She was quickly finding that what did lie deeper was worth investigating.

She wondered if Jeremy could feel her heartbeat where her fingers still touched his hand. She could feel it thumping in every extremity. It surprised her. She spoke as she walked to Jeremy’s side, sitting next to him. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”
She was close to him now and could see beads of sweat sparkling on his forehead just at his hairline. Blonde lengths of hair were usually impeccably slicked back, but a few lengths had escaped on either side to frame his face. She wondered if their breaking free of whatever gel or spray he used was the result of time alone or if even his hair was shocked at the result of his admission of “like.” He breathed deeply before he said, “I don’t know. I guess now I’ve had enough to drink to be able to say it, or maybe God just gave me the strength at last.”

“You know, I think I might have liked you too, uh, that way, once I got to know you better,” Annie said. “Before you started spouting this anti-love shit.”

“Well, has the boat completely sailed on that?”

Annie didn’t reply immediately. With speculative hesitation, she said, “Maybe not.”

She noticed Jeremy’s hand was trembling ever-so-slightly, and the way his head slowly moved down toward hers, she knew what was coming. She didn’t stop it but closed her eyes, feeling warm lips pressing against her own. She smiled beneath the kiss, her mouth opening as she felt Jeremy’s doing the same. Then he abruptly pulled away. Opening her eyes, she exclaimed, “What’s wrong? Is it my breath?”

Jeremy laughed nervously. “No, your breath is fine. Well, at least as good as mine is, I’m sure. I just didn’t know if you wanted me to kiss you or not,” he laughed. “I got scared,” he said, looking a little sheepish. “Didn’t wanna be too forward.”

Annie laughed with him. “Yeah, well, don’t worry. If I open my mouth, it means I don’t mind. If I just sit there with my eyes open, looking pissed, then I might not be having a good time.” She paused. “What exactly do you want from me, Jeremy? I mean, do you really think we could have something, or is this just, uh, the desire to screw?”

“No, no way! I really do like you, Annie. I think you’re great, you know. You make me laugh. I’m usually making people laugh. It’s nice to be on common ground.”

“But you don’t believe in true love. You know, most girls kind of like the idea of a guy being truly, dearly in love with them.”

“Well, you know. It could be, just maybe, that I’m a little bit full of shit.” Annie smiled, and when Jeremy leaned in for a second kiss, there was no pulling away for a long time.
Let us not to the marriage of my minds
Admit impairment. For self is not one
When cauterizing blade divides, unbinds
Connecting corpus. Shock I also shun.

Halt! Desist! Let my frontal lobes alone!
Let them not by probe or pick be shaken.
Temporal tempests beneath protective bone
And dura, mine to be or not mistaken.

Depression’s dark cloud is oft time’s fool. Dooms
Edge close. So to bear these weeks and hours
Bring me capsules, cream and green. Banish glooms.
For I’d sickle not Earth’s roseate flowers.

If this be error and upon me proved,
Let my shrink scribe not such soothes behooved.
Second Place Poetry Winner

I’ve a Clock to Measure my Life
Linda Leschak

It’s really a muscle
   that’s all. It moves
   viscous fluid through me.
But it’s flawed
   Why? What made
   mine different from yours?
Mine hiccups
   like a drunk
   skips like a schoolgirl.
Mine flutters
   and stalls, staggers
   Along—defective motor.
It bucks and
   kicks like
   an angry bull
Burps and
   gulps like
   a fraternity party.
Its time is abstract,
   marching to a
   syncopated beat.

They say
   mine’s enlarged—
   call it abnormal
That it bulks and
   grows like
   a bicep
Waxes and swells
   like the sea
   at high tide
Bulges and balloons
   like a second
   trimester.
It won’t last
   longer than its time,
   dying as it lives
Not so unlike yours—
   keeping time
   more accurately
Bouncing along
   to its own
   measured pace
While mine
   stumbles and trips
   dragging forever behind.
Yet in the end
   it’s all a measure
   of one’s own time,
In the end, we all
   just beat ourselves
   to death.
Inkling Contributors

Prose and Poetry

Greggory Adams is a sophomore creative writing and history major who also enjoys collecting antique toys.

Heath Ceren is a business/marketing major who also enjoys sports, poker and writing.

Steven G. Childress is a writer currently working as a chef.

Patricia Clay is an English literature major, now a senior at the University of Houston. She also likes camping and spending time with her family.

Jeff Conklin is a sophomore who enjoys reading writing, video games, movies, and music. He is considering majoring in English.

Patrick D. Connelly is a sophomore level English literature major. In his spare time, he likes reading, writing, and the outdoors.

Bailey Noel Cox is a sophomore nutrition major with an English minor. She is an avid runner and also enjoys nature, music, and friendship.

Kari D. Heady is a sophomore economics student who plays the drums and enjoys reading.

Janet Hudson is a sophomore who works as an office manager.

Tamara Johnson is a sophomore anthropology major. She is also a rock climber and backpacker with interests in reading and writing.

Kim O'Brien Jones is a creative writing sophomore student who also works as a floral designer.

Mary Lavender is a writer and homemaker with a degree in history. She also enjoys reading, travel, bird-watching, and cooking.

Linda Leschak is a sophomore, recently retired from a career in technology. Her other pursuits include photography, scrapbooking, and spending time with family.

James Lovern is a sophomore who enjoys studying history, being awesome, and eating pizza. He is currently in pursuit of general coolness.

Harry Perales is a sophomore creative writing student. He is fan of 60s Mexican rock bands and 70s Italian horror films. Harry is currently learning how to juggle.
Patrick Stockwell is a sophomore literature major with three dogs and three cats. He is also into music, movies, reading, and short story writing.

Virginia Villanueva is a full-time sophomore student who enjoys volunteer work, gaming, and the pursuit of the written word.

Anastasia Voight is a retired biology teacher who enjoys silk painting, gardening, and playing with her dogs.

Jonathan Wing is a sophomore English major with interests in music and recording, writing, languages, film, graphic design, umbrellas, and sandwiches.

Artwork

Melissa Carroll is a freshman who plays guitar. She also enjoys writing and photography. She is currently learning French.

Casandra Cruz is a sophomore who enjoys reading and playing video games. She also enjoys fashion.

Aerial Davidson is a freshman photojournalism student who enjoys dancing and sewing.

Danny Doba is a junior who enjoys scuba diving.

Nathan Hoskins is a freshman studying hotel and restaurant management. He enjoys playing guitar and computers. He is currently plotting to dominate the world.

Michael Hudson is a freshman who enjoys photography.

Carly Peden is a sophomore psychology student who enjoys reading and hopes to pursue scuba diving and rock climbing. She is currently president of Phi Theta Kappa.

Linsey Welborn is a freshman studying graphic arts. She also writes, works with Photoshop, and plays lacrosse. Linsey also collects My Little Pony toys.

Aleksandra Yoder is currently pursuing general studies at Tomball College.
Fall *Inkling* Staff

From left: Greggory Adams, Marilyn Rodas, Harry Perales, Tina Richardson, Janet Hudson, Kim O’Brien Jones, and Cara Valinoti

Spring *Inkling* Staff

HOW SUBMISSIONS ARE SELECTED

Works for publication, including artwork, are submitted to Dr. Rebecca Tate or Dr. Greg Oaks, *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 selected for publication are considered as entries in the Tomball College Creative Writing Contest. Each anonymous work is then submitted to a panel of faculty judges: Doug Boyd, Professor of English; Dr. Greg Oaks, Professor of English; Catherine Olson, Professor of English; John “Bo” Rollins, Professor of English; Katherine 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
- Office Services Tomball College

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SUBMISSION FORM

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

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

• Submissions should be turned in as soon as possible. The deadline for all submissions is February 3.
• Only Tomball College/Willow Chase students (enrolled at the time of submission) are eligible.
• DO NOT place your name on any of the submissions. Write your name ONLY on the submission form.
• Manuscripts must be typed using standard 12-point font.
• Use only one submission form per author for written manuscripts.
• Use a separate submission form for artwork.
• Maximum entries per person: six (6) poems, two (2) short stories/creative essays, and six (6) artwork pieces.
• 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.
• All artwork (drawings, graphics, photos) must measure no more than 20 inches x 20 inches and will be published in black and white. All artwork will be returned.
• Staple or paperclip all submissions to the submission form.
• At Tomball College, place your submissions in the Inking mailbox in S-150 (Office Services) or in the large black box with the yellow sign located in the library. If you prefer, you may slide your submissions under Dr. Tate’s office door at S257L, or under Dr. Oaks’ office door at E152.
• At Willow Chase, slide your submissions under Melissa Studdard’s office door at 225A.
• 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. Contact Greg Oaks (281-401-1827) or Rebecca Tate (281-351-3340) for artwork return (April).

NOTE: Submissions selected for publication are automatically entered into the Tomball College 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.

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