Inkling 2007
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# INKLING

## Table of Contents

- **Tree at Enchanted Rock** by Patrick Stockwell
  *First Place Poetry Winner (Tie)*
  
- **Bernell’s Boy** by Kim O’ Brien Jones
  *First Place Poetry Winner (Tie)*
  
- **Beachcombers** by Pam Waldren
  
- **Monty** by Joseph Loving
  
- **Starfish** by Ken Turner
  
- **Smokin’: A Matisse Self-Portrait** by Pam Hulbert
  
- **You Turn Yourself Around** by Patrick Stockwell
  *First Place Prose Winner*
  
- **Blondes and Brunettes** by Yara Arreola
  
- **The Shadow Within** by Nhat Ho
  
- **Aromatherapy** by Jessica Chance
  *Third Place Poetry Winner*
  
- **Last Meal** by Lenisa Kelly
  
- **Pizzamania** by Megan Lucero
  
- **An Observation** by Patricia Clay
  
- **Bellyshots** by Elizabeth Williams
  
- **The Red Light** by Kenna Oaks
  
- **Schließende Zeit** by Edgar Murillo
  
- **The Arcs of Time** by Jennifer Legault
  
- **I Love You Most When** by Jacquelyn Brooks
  
- **Rainy Day** by Kelly Coleman
  
- **Dog Walking** by Greggory Adams
  *Second Place Prose Winner*
Fly by Lindsay Braun 48
Winter Wolf and Caribou by Ken Turner 49
   First Place Poetry Winner (Tie)
Safe at Home? by Kim Jones 50
Intruder by Aaron Cohen Brown 53
Dangling from Devotion by Yara Arreola 57
Effigia by Jacob Sandy 58
The Cat by Gaylord Anguish 59
Magic Mountain – A Mostly True Story by Patrick Stockwell 62
Hollow by Meaghan Lucero 64
Beyond the Shadows of the Bark by Jennifer Legault 65
Good Morning by Cheryl Williams 66
Mirror Image by Jessica Chance 68
Tidbit by Michael Wainright 71
Contemplations at Sunset by Jennifer Legault 72
Roommates by Lenisa Kelly 73
Luger by Michael Alose 76
Duct Tape and a Harley by Patricia Clay 77
   Third Place Prose Winner
Untitled by Cheryl Mallams 81
Dinner by Greggory Adams 82
Street Jazz by Daniel Colvin 87
Recollection by Jacquelyn Brooks 88
   Second Place Poetry Winner
First Place Poetry Winner (Tie)

Bernell's Boy
Kim O'Brien Jones

I'm sitting in a booth
at an east Texas icehouse.
Waiting in the smoky shadow of blues
for the local boy done good.
Listening to the rumble of Ducati on the rocks,
the clink of cubes and glass
a juke box's rhythmic whirl.
The deep lonesome moan of a stool
sliding across old pine floors, crooning.
Swinging jazz, cold beer, and
Louisiana hot sauce hissing back at me.
With soft sandy boot falls,
two-stepping into my heart,
his enters.
Tall and thin, dark and smiling,
hat in his hand,
picking my cold steel
heartstrings and asking,
Ma'am, is this seat taken?
No, I say, just me.
Just Lovett.
Beachcombers
Pam Waldren

The boy lies motionless, one arm over his head, the other at his side. His head is wet, covered with sand, and waves slap gently against his still body, rocking and pushing it upon the shore. The sun touches him, gently caressing his shoulders, back and the pinkness on his cheeks.

“He looks dead to me. Does he look dead to you?” I lean over to my husband who watches the scene intently on a propped-up rented beach lounge.

“Yep.” Sam takes a long swig of his Coors, and the breeze blows his blond hair back, revealing a slightly receding hairline. I reach over and trace along its edges with my finger and then down to his eye where a crow’s foot has landed. He’s still cute, I think, even after all these years. I then look back out at our boy.

“Hey, Ricky!” I cup my hands to my mouth to carry the sound. “Are you dead?” Ricky lifts his head, smiles, nods quickly, then plops his head back down on the sand and closes his eyes. Dead again.

“Didn’t he do something weird last year?” I say, feeling a new laziness in my veins. “What was it?” My left foot hangs over the edge of the lounge into the sand. I watch the grains cover my freshly-painted, pink nails, then spread my toes apart, letting the rest fall between the slats.

“Drew giant pictures of naked ladies in the sand,” Sam says, placing his hand on the cooler between us. “The lifeguard had to come tell us to get him to stop.”

“That was it! Now I remember.” I let my head fall back on the lounge, still propped up so I can see our children playing in the water. I take a sip of my own Coors, play with the fizz in my mouth, then swallow. “Listen, do you hear it?” In the background, an old ZZ Top song floats through the air. “Remember, in college, we went to that concert?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll never forget that. Those two guys out there with their long, blond beards and those guitars. That was really something.” He looks over at me. “Mmmmm, you were great that night.” His eyebrows move up above his sunglasses, and he looks me over from head to toe, then out toward the crashing waves. “Andrew’s way out there. Do you think we ought to call him closer?”

“I don’t know. Looks like he’s found some sort of lost treasure,” I say.
Andy is out far enough to where the waves don’t knock him over but simply roll over him. He pushes with his feet to rise above the wave, at the same time adjusting his mask to his face. He then jumps straight in the air and curves his body sharply down into a semi-dive, his fins poking up toward the sun. A full minute passes. He comes up, his buckteeth reflecting light from the sun on the water. He motions for us to join him. His father and I shake our heads back and forth simultaneously.

“Look at Katie over there.” I point to our daughter who is talking to a blond, shaggy looking boy holding a surfboard in his left arm. “Looks like she found a cute boy to talk to!”

“Looks like a moron to me.” Sam’s tone changes to a low growl. He opens the cooler, tinks his empty can in and retrieves another. I look from the beer to his still-flat stomach. Amazing, I think.

“Oh, come on! You were young once. You remember what it’s like!”

Sam abruptly sits up, his legs straddling the lounge. He brings his free hand to his face, adjusting his mirrored sunglasses, then yells, “Katie! Katie, come back over here!”

Katie looks over at us, shakes her head violently as if to say, “No way! Are you crazy?” then looks back at the boy.

“You’re being ridiculous, Sam! Leave her alone!”

“Oh, my God! Somebody get some help!” Our attention is diverted to the screams on the beach in front of us. Two elderly ladies in skirted, one-piece swimsuits bend over Ricky, their faces shrieked with horror.

“I’m okay! Really!” His palms face out, and he fans them back and forth. “Just a little trick!”

The one with the blue flowered swim cap scolds him with a wiggling, pointed finger, then looks over at Sam and me like we should be ashamed of ourselves for producing such a son. They walk away, shaking their heads at what the world is becoming. As soon as they are far enough away, Ricky falls back into the surf, hugging his stomach, shoulders shaking. He laughs uncontrollably.

“He gets a real kick out of himself,” I say, reaching into the cooler. I play with the warm sand between my toes some more, then look over at Sam’s feet. I’d been admiring those feet for fifteen years. I run my pink-painted toe along the familiar length of his foot, stopping randomly to rub the curly brown hairs.
“Do you know what I like?” I asked. “I like it when we’re mad at each other, at night in our bed, and you reach over with your foot and touch mine, like a peace offering.” I pause, enjoying the nostalgic feeling. “You want to see if I’m going to forgive you, because it’s your fault, as usual.” I giggle at my own joke, then continue, “And we silently lay there, our feet touching. Feet have a language all their own. Don’t you think Sam?” I run my toe along the curve of each bony, well-memorized joint.

“Sam!” I say. “Don’t you agree?” I look over at his face. His eyes are following a dark-skinned beauty with long legs in a barely-there, blue-striped bikini walking the length of the beach.

“Hey!” I pull my knee up high and swiftly kick him hard in the calf. “You dirty old man! You haven’t heard a word I’ve said!”

“What? Ow!” Sam glares over at me and rubs his hand over his calf. “I heard you! You called me a dirty old man! Well,” he stops, thinks for a minute, and I can see by the little curves forming on the edges of his lips that he is up to no good. “That’s exactly what I am!” He reaches over and dumps his beer all over my chest, then moves his arm down the length of my body, pouring the cold, fizzy liquid all over me, ending with my hair.

“Aaaaaahhhhh!” I scream, kicking and slapping the air. “That’s cold!” I stand up, run down to the surf, while Sam chases me, throwing the empty can aside.

“Don’t trip over the dead kid!” he screams, and I leap over Ricky, who wakes from the dead in record speed. I swim out to join Andrew in the water and then turn around to see Katie joining us, along with Ricky and then Sam. The water is cold, and we splash each other and jump over waves until it is time for lunch and then home, where we will play ZZ Top music and talk about our day at the beach.
Monty
Joseph Loving

I was starting to get tired of these chocolate-covered walls.

“Will someone get those damn kids away from that wall and tell the ones staring in the window to go away,” I said.

“But, honey, there are no children in the room, and plus we are on the third floor,” said the clown who strangely resembled my wife.

“You shut up and stay away from me. I will not fall for your trickery, clown!”

“Okay, I’m going to get the nurse. I think they gave you too many pain killers, again.”

“Shut it!” I said as she walked out of the room. “Holy hell, this place is going insane. Those kids really want my chocolate wall,” I said to myself.

Now these kids looked like those cliché “Tiny Tim” type beggar kids with dirt and soot-covered faces, tattered clothes, and hungry-looking expressions. So I tried to think of a way to get them out of my room. I chuckled and thought, “If I only had some gruel.” Then I remembered I still had the food from lunch that I never ate. So after making my old man grunts and moans to get a hold of my mile-away food tray, I started to pick the food that they might like and throw it out the door.

“Humm? Let’s see. I have pumpkin pie. Everyone loves that,” I said as I threw it out my hospital room door. “Damn! No one budged. That’s strange. Who in the world hates pumpkin pie with its sweet mouth-watering flavor, its soft crust and cold mushy texture,” I said loud enough for them to hear. But that plan backfired on me and now I wanted the pie. “Well, then let’s see what else I have. Woo hoo, asparagus!” I said and threw it out because I hated asparagus. “Oh, hell yeah. Now I know they are definitely going to leave,” I said as I picked up this juicy, tender, warm piece of sirloin. The smell of some of the spices made my mouth salivate, but these kids had to go. So I threw it, and as I did, time seemed to slow down, so slow that I could hear the wind flowing past that piece of meat, making that “whooshing” sound on every rotation, and I could see my face turn from a frown to a large smile of satisfaction. As the meat was about to cross the threshold into the hospital abyss, my wife started to walk into the room, and that smile I had quickly turned to a “Oh shit” frown as it hit my wife in the face.

“Damn it! This better be the last time you break your leg!” my wife said as she pulled
the piece of sirloin from her now sparkling, grease-covered face. “You are so lucky you married me ‘cause there is no other woman in this world that would love and care about you enough to sit through this kind of behavior. Now let me clean my face.”

“You got that right, angel,” I said as I looked over towards where the kids had been.

“They’re gone! Yes!”

“Who’s gone?” she said from the bathroom.

“No one, no one, no one at all.”

“Ha, ha, I love you, baby. Oh yeah, the nurse said there is nothing she can do about the hallucinations.”

“Awesome, I am having too much fun anyways,” I said as I looked out my bedroom door.
Starfish
Ken Turner

Love and Creation
The Electric Embrace
The feeling of pride
Being swallowed in awe of the moonlit night,
The Kiss that kills all anger
When hope shines bright,
Remembrances held within
Released into the lunar light.
Buoyant hearts that float
Like Starfish on the midnight tide
Strand themselves against their will
On shores of longing deep and wide
And give themselves to dry and die
Forsaken in the sunlight lie
Till a Lover or a Dreamer spy
A gem for their collecting eye
And plucked there from eternal sleep
A heart! A heart has found
To keep.
Smokin’: A Matisse Self-Portrait

Pam Hulbert
"It's been more than two years, maybe," Elodie told me, a tiny hand raking through her honey-colored hair, unearthing some random grey strands to stand out from the rest, voice thick with buried desperation and fear. She was afraid that she'd never write again and that her too-old-for-her husband would look into her blue eyes rimmed green and know that in her heart she stopped loving him the minute he'd compared her to a television that was always turned on and changing channels. She went back to the plate in front of her then, pushing the remaining bits of potato into concentric circles of cooling tastelessness. "I think that parts of me are dead."

"You seem pretty functional to me."

She narrowed her eyes playfully. "Yes, I function. I do those things that are expected of me. I teach. I work. I buy groceries. John says I make good love. Well, used to say that. I am always something for someone else. My energy is not mine. The craft suffers for it." She spoke in wooden lists.

"What do you write about?"


"Only sad things, then?"

"Grocery shopping isn't always sad. I wrote once about my mother and father and how they came to meet. They met on the train to Argeles. Actually, they met at the station. But they kept looking at each other all the way there."

"What happened next?"

"They got married."

"That's it?"

"Well, no. You can read it if you want. Just Google my name. I'm at Columbia College. Chicago, not New York."

"I'll do that," I said. "So it's a true story?"

"Mostly. I wasn't there, you know, so I had to make up some of the talking. But they both cried when they read it. They were happy. And it got published," she said, and looked sad
again.

"I think that's still pretty wonderful. I can't imagine writing something."

"You don't write, but I can tell that you read," she said, a lilt of nearly forgotten French
peeking out from around the ends of her words. "Besides, you don't know me. I have
personality disorders. I like control and order. I like to count the number of fries on my plate
and group them into pairs and circles before I eat them. I spend too much time arranging things
too perfectly now to write. Words are no good unless they're all fucked up."

I changed the subject. "So how long have you been here?"

"Since Thursday. Early."

"What? Oh, no. I meant in this country."

"We came when I was thirteen. My father's business. He was an insurance man."

Elodie had been at a teaching conference for three long days, had heard some two thou-
sand writers bellowing at each other about authenticity and pedagogy and how much they
loathed their students whose crappy output soiled their mental palettes even as it filled their
pockets. And when the congratulation swelled and broke, most were left with nothing but the
need to screw themselves into believing for one more day that they were elevating their
collective, individual arts. She had to fight to wrest any scrap of validation from the dry wells
of vapid maneuvering.

Now at the end of it, she was sitting with me in a turquoise booth in some nameless
diner in Austin, Texas off 183 below Burnet, fabulously disheveled and world-weary smart,
knowing already that within the hour she would throw herself into my arms and that I would
know just how far to take things. She excused herself, slid off the bench across from me, and
made a crooked dash for the bathroom. I questioned whether or not I was about to make a
mistake of some sorts, knowing all along that I didn’t care.

It was like we were falling into something preceding something. I imagined the phone
calls, the sneaking. I hoped she would at the very least remember me when the day was new
again as some canonized version of myself, the aging musician guy with long shock-red curls, a
youthful belly, and crisply rendered tattoos up both my arms.

I noticed her moving toward me again, seeing such gentleness in the way she smiled
down at an old man as she passed him, her olive face pleasantly brighter, fresher, lips newly
reddenes. She looked good to me, especially at thirty-eight. I marveled at the way her front
teeth pushed gently against that upper lip, accentuating a sustained fullness there past many springs. Her eyes met mine, and she shrugged toward the door.

I left too much money on the table, and we stumbled drunkenly out into the thickening Texas air, scant weeks away from the full on liquid summer these people seemed to relish. A light sweat began collecting across both our skins like foreplay, and I noticed the first bead of it coagulating in the divot above that mouth of hers that curled in like Christmas ribbon. She smiled at my focus. Her tongue flicked out and up to collect that bit of salt, and I found myself more than a little jealous of the taste.

We began walking aimlessly toward the highway. She leaned into me despite the humidity, and I extended my right hand. She lifted my arm over her head like she was ducking under a velvet rope, leaving it resting lightly about her knotted shoulders. I began instinctively to rub.

The guttural throb of another Austin blues band drifted past us on the night, and I remembered that I was supposed to be at my friend Dave's performance, part of an annual music maelstrom that descended on these parts, his big break supposedly. I'd only stopped at the diner for a quick bite, finding instead too many cups of coffee, a painfully artificial grilled cheese sandwich, and this dazzling European expatriate. I checked the time on my cell. That was more than five hours ago.

I noticed that our steps had fallen in time to the music, so I risked giving her a twirl. Elodie responded without hesitation, anticipating my blunt move, spinning to arm's length with distracted ease. She laughed out loud when I pulled her back in to me and looked up through my eyes and into my skull with absolute relish. I felt that tickle in my legs, my chest, the one that comes with true surrender. Dave would have to let this one slide, 'big break' notwithstanding.

"Are you a dancer then?" she asked.
"Hardly. I hokey-pokey with the best of them."
"Hokey-pokey. Isn't that a child's dance?"
"Actually, yeah. We used to do it at the skating rink."
Her eyebrows lifted symmetrically. "Show me."

And on the corner of Burnet and some street I can't recall, we performed together the dance of the fourth grade. Elodie laughed out loud like she was indeed that age as I sang every
verse I could remember, making some up as I went. I watched her as she turned, admiring her trim hips and slightly-flattened bottom in perfectly distressed Levi's, forgetting for the moment that she was nearly nine years my senior. She could have been any one of the coeds tramping these streets, moving from club to club with underdressed purpose. The moment crystallized, like some flying insect cast in resin, preserved, motionless, stored quietly on some high shelf in memory like a thing that should be forgotten but isn't. Not ever.

Afterwards, Elodie laid her head against me, and we began walking again toward nowhere. I had a room down in the city, as did she, but it was too far on foot. I checked my wallet for cash.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I don't know. I thought maybe you'd want to find somewhere close by to, uh, maybe get some privacy." My eyes must have looked hopeful because she smiled up into them. I thought she might cry.

"I would really like that. But can we walk some more first? This night has become something for me. More than a distraction. It is good for me to spend time with you. It's," she paused, "it's helping."

"Helping?"

But she didn't want to talk about it anymore. I contented myself with her insistent presence at my side. My hand moved down the back of her red cotton t-shirt and crept below the waistband of her jeans, catching a pulse below her hipbone.

Her silence was almost better than the thickness of her voice. As we continued toward the highway, she somehow found a way to pull closer to me. I decided to try and hail one of the cabs that was always coming by at this hour, looking for out-of-town drunks dredging the roads after last call.

"What is your last name?" she asked, as if she sensed that I was becoming too task-oriented.

"It's Hunter. My dad's last name is Lodge. They named me Diego after the painter, Diego Rivera. Mom likes him. But when I got old enough to realize my name sounded like some cheap motel in Vegas, I took my mother's maiden name."

"I wondered. You look very Irish."
"I do have a grandmother from Belize."

"Diego Hunter. I like it. It's like a stage name. Musicianly."

"I made everyone call me 'River' for a while, till River Phoenix died. Then I switched back." I paused. "What's your last name?"

I thought she was going to say something luxurious like Delacroix or Poulain, like some Renaissance painter or my own personal "Amelie."

She laughed. "Smith."

Elodie Smith, wife of John Smith. It sounded "writerly."

I grew tired of waiting for a cab to pass and used my cell to call information. When the car arrived, Elodie climbed in without protest, and we made it to my hotel. On the way in, she noticed the bar was still open.

"Want to get a drink before we go up?" she asked, "My conscience needs a little more lubrication before we do this."

"Sure, I'm thirsty."

We sat at one end of the crowded bar, waiting twenty minutes for warm Heinekens. I ordered extras to avoid the wait again, and seeing no available seating, we settled on a foot-wide railing near the entrance. Elodie kicked off her mules and leapt lightly on top of it, landing on her backside with a giggle. I stood between her thighs and leaned back, the warmth of her reassuring me all over again. She wrapped her free arm around me and caressed my stomach lightly. We didn’t talk much.

I thought about how easy it is to throw aside any aversion to infidelity. She was looking for a transition, and I figured we might have a few months before she figured out I was that rebound guy and left me for a one bedroom over Sixth Street, where she could write about affairs, divorces, and red-haired Texas guys. I wanted to pack as much Elodie as I could into those leaking days.

She shifted and then her breath was on my neck.

"I have to pee," she said.

"Right here?"

"I thought you might let me up first." The warm air moving across my collarbone grew moist, and her lips crawled slowly up to my ear lobe. "I'll be right back. Finish your drink."

I watched her walk into the lobby a hundred paces before she stopped and began looking
around in confusion. She turned, questioning, and I hooked my thumb to the right. She smiled and dropped into a curtsy, stood and waved at me with her fingers like a one-handed typist, then disappeared.

Her saliva was still on my skin and my back still warm from the press of her thighs, her belly, her small breasts. My puffed-up libido was shivering. There had been girls before on nights like this, after the stage was broken down and everyone had stopped by to offer the obligatory "good show, man." But this was so over-the-top right I could barely stand the elation.

When I first looked at my phone, it had only been fourteen minutes. I figured that she wanted to look perfect for me, that this was a big deal to her, too. She'd said it was helping.

Another ten minutes went by. My beer was empty, so I struggled through the drunks and made my way to the restrooms. After ten more minutes, I asked an older woman in a weird plaid jumper if she'd seen anyone who looked like Elodie in the bathroom. The pit in my stomach widened into something much larger with her response.

I told the girl at the desk to send Elodie up to my room if she asked, knowing that the question would most likely never come. I cleaned out my mini-bar, and once I was properly wasted, I proceeded to wander the streets near the hotel, hoping to catch her somewhere close by. I saw a lot of pretty girls, but I still wanted the little French cheater who left me in the cold to do what was really the right thing all along. I woke up outside the hotel on a bench next to some drunk kid, who, when he realized I was conscious, promptly asked me if I knew where he could get something to drink. I slid him a twenty and went back to my room. An hour later, I was headed home to Houston.

As I drove, it occurred to me that she'd told me where to find her. Columbia College, Chicago, not New York. I found her bio on the school site, and after a little digging, I unearthed the story about her mom and dad from some online journal featuring non-fiction writers, which I liked a lot. A couple of other stories came up, short and mostly forgettable. Then there was this little picture of her in a group of instructors at some function somewhere. You could only see her face and her left side just past the waist. I enlarged it as best I could and printed a grainy copy, savoring it for a month or two until it stopped being sad and started pissing me off. I filed it in my desk and tried to forget, surprised at how long it was taking to put her down. She'd never even kissed me.
After a few more months, I began thinking about her again. I could smell her body, that slightly musky B.O.-mixed-with-perfume-but-somehow-sooo-sexy European transplant cocktail that's driven me bananas since I was in high school. Maybe she was still interested, but she just chickened out. I could send an email. We could find a diner and order fries, and she could sit there and push them around again, and I could watch and we wouldn't rush anything. We'd just talk, for hours or days if she wanted. I'd keep my cool, and maybe then she'd want to finish what we started, to be the cliché, to leave her husband and move with me to Austin to that apartment on Sixth where the girls went by all day long and the boys trailed them and acted like boys. I went to the computer and looked her up.

I had to read her updated bio twice to get a handle on the words:

*Elodie Smith, M.F.A. (Northern Arizona University, 1990), Associate Professor of English, Creative Writing/Literature.* Ms. Smith is a full time member of our staff, whose published works include the short story collections *Faintly* and *The Evidence Against My Boyfriend* and the non-fiction essay collection *Argeles*. She is currently on sabbatical, at work on a new collection of short stories, tentatively titled "You Turn Yourself Around: How I Used The Hokey Pokey to Learn to Dance Alone."
Blondes and Brunettes
Yara Arreola

“I still can’t believe you’re considering this,” my mom said to me. We sat side by side on the beige leather loveseat in the waiting area at the office of Dr. Gary Turner, one of Los Angeles’ most prestigious plastic surgeons.

“Mom, please don’t start. We just had this conversation on the drive over here. We had it last night, the night before, and a million nights before that.” I stared at the beautiful bronzed blonde in front of me as she flipped through a *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She wore a lemon-colored tank top that barely covered the pair of cantaloupes she had underneath, matching flip-flops, and blue jean shorts. Her long hair was obviously bleached white-blonde. Hulk Hogan blonde. The typical Californian girl, I thought. I looked over at the friendly receptionist, also a blonde, as she sat behind her neatly organized desk, staring at the oversized LCD computer screen as she typed, stopping every ten seconds to answer the ringing phone. I eyed each of the other ladies in the office and noticed that my mom and I were the only brunettes.

“Your nose is beautiful! It’s what makes you unique.” She reached out her index finger to gently flick the tip of my nose the way she always did, but I turned my head. My mom sighed. “Why do you want to look like that fake Barbie doll anyway?” she said, nodding her head toward the yellow-wearing blonde.

“Mom!” My eyes darted to the blonde, who was glaring at us. She scoffed, threw down the magazine in the empty chair next to her, and strutted out through the glass front door. “That was so rude of you! I can’t believe you just did that,” I said.

“She looked ridiculous!” My mom picked up a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine from the side table next to her, leaned back, and began to flip the pages. “That orange skin, the white hair, those watermelons. Ugh. When she’s old, she’s gonna get skin cancer, her hair’s gonna fall out, and her boobs will be the only part of her that isn’t sagging.”

I stared at my mom, studying her unpainted face, and she probably felt it because she stopped flipping and turned her head to look at me. I could see an abundance of crow’s feet in the outer corners of her dark brown eyes. Her eyebrows were thicker than my father’s, and her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back in the same bun she had worn every day since I could remember. And she had the nose. Grandma’s nose. Great-grandma’s nose and great-great
grandma’s nose and a hundred great-grandmas’ noses before that. “Well, that’s her business, not yours,” I said. I slumped in my seat, crossing my arms and staring at the shiny wood floor.

“That’s what’s gonna happen to you.”

“Mom—“

“Sit up straight.”

I slid down a little further, still staring at the floor. “Number one. I’m dark skinned naturally, so I don’t need a tanning bed. Number two. My hair is brown naturally, and I like it, so I don’t need to bleach or color it. Number three. My boobs are big naturally, so I don’t need implants.”

“And your nose is perfect naturally, so you don’t need a nose job. Now sit up.”

“It’s not perfect! It’s huge!”

“But you’re pretty like that. Sit up.”

“I look like a toucan!”

“Maria, your nose is fine! And sit up! Or you’re gonna think you need back surgery to fix that hump you’re gonna get.”

I knew she was right. Not about the nose job, but about my slouching, but I sat in the same position for a little while longer before I inched my body up.

“You know they have to break your nose.”

I sighed. “I know. I’m the one who first told you that.”

“I watched a program on that health channel, the one where they show the surgeries on TV. I saw how they do it. They shove this metal stick up your nose, and then they pound down on it with a hammer. That’s how they break it.”

I sighed again. “I know, Mom. I watched that program with you last week.” I shifted uncomfortably and looked over at the receptionist, wondering when she was going to stop typing and answering the phone and announce that Dr. Turner was ready to see me.

My mom put down the magazine on the table next to her. “I still don’t understand. It’s dangerous, honey. It’s surgery. What if something goes wrong?” She turned her whole body to face me and reached her hand up to stroke my hair.

“Mom, this is one of the best doctors in L.A. He’s been in practice for over 23 years, one more year than I’ve been alive.” I knew pushing her hand off my head would hurt her feelings.
Instead, I stood up out of the couch and pretended to stretch. “You know, I don’t know why you came. I told you not to because you were just gonna be negative.”

My mom stared up at me. Her lips were turned down, emphasizing the creases around her mouth. “That nose is part of our family. My mother had it, and so did her mother. Why do you want to change that?” Her eyes began to water. “That’s part of our family,” she said again.

My heart began to feel heavy.

“Miss Jimenez?”

I looked over at the receptionist, who was now standing in front of the desk.

“Dr. Turner is ready to see you if you’ll just come this way,” said the receptionist, gesturing toward a hallway.

I looked at my mom. Her watery eyes had overflowed, and her tears spilled down over her cheeks. I looked back at the receptionist, who seemed to ignore my mom’s tears and maybe even her presence.

My mom stood up and wiped her eyes with her hands. She looked at me straight in the eye and said, “Just go.”

I felt my stomach churn as my heart weighed down.

“Go. Go and fix your nose. Make it better.” She turned her head and stared away for a moment. Then she sighed, walked past me, and marched out of the office.

“Miss Jimenez?”

I looked at the receptionist. She tilted her head, causing her blonde bangs to fall over her blue eyes, and she brushed them off her face with two of her manicured fingers.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.” I turned around and followed my mom out the door. “Mom!” She stopped walking but didn’t turn around. She just stood there, her bun facing me.

“What?” she said.

I walked toward her, the gravel of the parking lot crunching under my brown boots. I placed my hand on her shoulder and walked in front of her so that I was facing her. My eyes met hers, and I smiled slightly. Mom, I love you, I thought.

She lifted up her hand and, with her index finger, gently touched the tip of my nose. She tapped it twice, and then she smiled. “Okay. We can go home.”
Aromatherapy
Jessica Chance

Coffee beans beneath
my feet. Calluses buff to
feminine smoothness much
like the sweet, hazelnut
air in my face. Resting
nose atop an oversized mug

and closed eyes away
from the chatter—clasp
it tight, fingers almost
touching on both
sides; soak up its
heat. Swirls of toffee
and purple behind a beat
press my cashmere-covered
chest into wood. Slide down

the stir spoon, and float
through the clouds—a
spa with specks of
cinnamon. Slow jazz, little
mouths and soft clanking
dishes fizzle far away. Light
blues and browns relay
me like a passing
torch—bubbles and crumbs
applaud my arrival.

Winter scratches my
face—I fall from
the sky. Bells clank with
a shutting door. I place
paradise back on its
plate. Light flutes, laughter
and tapping
creep back in. Just another
small mouth at my
table.

I take a bite
of my biscotti.
Last Meal
Lenisa Kelly

"Is this it?" I said to Lieutenant Morrison as I unfolded the small piece of white paper he had handed to me.

"Yep, that’s it." Lt. Morrison jumped to the left quickly as one of the side-order cooks named Ramon slid by him with a pot of boiling hot penne with only a mutter of a heads up.

"Watch yourself, Lieutenant," I said just as Meagan came by with two unclamped lobsters in hand.

"Yes, well." The Lieutenant started nervously trying raise the volume of his voice to compete with the clanging of dishes. "Seven o’clock on the dot Martin. You know…"

"The routine. Yeah, I know."

Lieutenant Morrison quickly scurried out of the kitchen like a boy that had wandered into the wrong restroom. It wasn’t until he made it through the double doors of the kitchen that I saw him rub the sweat that had accumulated on his hairline into the rest of his scalp and finally breath a sigh of relief. My father always said it was unnatural for a man to feel comfortable near all those woman’s gadgets in the kitchen.

"What about barbequing, Pop? You like to barbeque," I would ask.

"Grillin’ is different, son. Barbequing outside is a man’s kitchen, damn near a birth right."

I dipped a small tasting spoon into the hollandaise sauce I had simmering over the stove. I blew some of the dancing steam away from the tip of it and lifted the spoon to my lips. I closed my eyes, swishing the yellow concoction in my mouth, swirling it with my tongue and forcing it between the crevices between my teeth. I smacked my lips together, letting the thick, warm air of the kitchen mix with the lingering taste of the sauce. Needs salt, just a pinch.

At somewhere near eleven-thirty, when the last of the city’s elite had paid their checks, the credit card machine had been settled out, and the dishwashers’ hands were pruned and stiff-jointed, I locked up and made my way home. A fifteen-minute drive and a thirty-minute shower later, I was sitting in my bed listening to the opening sketch of Jay Leno with my head turned away from the television. I reached into the pocket of the pants I was wearing that were now lying over the foot of the bed and unfolded the note Lt. Morrison had given me.
“Peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a steak, medium rare, a cup of pudding with a grape soda,” I read aloud so that I could hear them each individually and all on their own. I lay down in my usual spot on the left side of the bed and re-read the food request, holding it up to the light so I could see the outline of the ceiling fan against the lines of the loose-leaf paper. Over the past three years, there has been seventeen small pieces of paper, each intentionally thought of and all voluntarily cooked by me. And even though it became a regular occurrence, it always surprised me how little thought Lt. Morrison and the other guards that brought those pieces of paper to me put into them. I guess if they thought about each item the way I did, they wouldn’t be able to do their jobs. Prison guards like Lt. Morrison and inmates change when they entered those doors. Like bread that’s been left out, they harden.

I folded the paper back to its original state and held it between my middle and index finger, waving it slightly back and forth through the wind of the blowing air conditioner. I placed it in the delicate body-shaped indentation that curved slightly towards my still lying body on the right of the bed. I slept next to the papers so that I could dream about them. The way I figured, the man I would be cooking it for had probably been dreaming about it for quite awhile. My first-year culinary teacher once said to me, “You have to know why the food is so special to the customer, in order to know how to make it right.” I forgot that teacher’s name.
Sarah stood in front of the mirror, brushing her hair for the fifth time this hour. She started with the comb from the roots of her hair all the way to the ends, being extremely careful not to brush too fast or too hard. Just then, her sister Andrea walked in the bathroom doing this crazy dance with her legs crossed.

“Hurry up, I’ve gotta pee,” Andrea said impatiently.

“Why didn’t you stop at the other bathroom, you know the one downstairs right next to the television you were watching?”

“I don’t like that bathroom.”

“Fine, make this the fastest pee you’ve ever done in your life.”

“Aye aye, Captain!”

Sarah walked out of the bathroom and headed towards her room at the end of the hallway. On her way over, she ran into her little three-year-old brother, Zachary.

“Hey, Zachy, what are you doing, little man?”

“Pwaying with my twuck.”

“Oh really?”

“Yup. Yu wook pwetty, sissy.”

“Aw thanks, bubba. You know when you get older, girls are going to love you.”

“I aweady have a girlfiend.”

“Ha ha, you little player.”

Just then, Sarah heard the bathroom door open; her sister was finally done. So she turned around and started walking towards Andrea.

“Geez woman, what took you so long?”

“When duty calls, duty calls.”

“Gross. Anyways, how do you think I look?” Sarah asked while putting her hands on her hips and tilting them slightly to her left side.

“You look like you’re about to go to some fancy-ass dinner. Didn’t you say that you two are just going to the movies?”
“Well, yeah, but you can never be too sure. What if he wants to go out to eat afterwards,” Sarah said and then straightened her blouse by pulling the bottom of it slightly over her blue jeans.

“Why are you so worked up about this? You two are ‘just friends’ anyway,” Andrea said sarcastically.

“Yeah, but I have a feeling tonight might be the night he pops the question.”

“You mean, ask you out?”

“Duh!”

“Ha ha, you are so retarded sometimes, but that’s why I love you.” Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

“Ah, he’s here,” Sarah exclaimed while walking towards her room to get her purse.

“I guess I’ll get it,” Andrea said while bending her back over like the hunchback of Notre Dame, pretending like it was the most challenging task she could ever do. When she made it to the door, Zachy was already standing there waiting for the door to get opened.

“There’s a giant waiting outside, sissy,” Zachary exclaimed while opening his eyes up as far as they would allow him.

“Ha ha, well, that giant is Sarah’s friend.”

“You mean a good giant?”

“We’ll see,” Andrea said while finally opening the door. Standing there was a 6’2”, 200- pound senior with caramel-colored skin who was also the champion wrestler at their high school.

“Come on in, Thomas,” Andrea said while stepping back to welcome him in the house.

“Hey, thanks, Andrea. How are you doing today?” Thomas asked.

“Uh, I’m breathing and still have all my limbs. Chances are I’m not too shabby.”

“You’re so funny.”

Just then, Sarah came walking down the stairs. As she walked by Andrea, she let off a scent of vanilla and brown sugar.

“Geez, woman, did you make some cookies while you were upstairs, because you smell fan-tas-tic,” Andrea said while rubbing her hand in a circular motion on her stomach.

“Very funny,” Sarah said while giving Andrea a stare that told her to cut it out.

“Well, are you ready?” Thomas asked while tucking his hands into his pockets.
“Yeah, what movie are we going to go see again?” Sarah asked.

“Um, I was thinking we could just go grab a bite to eat if that’s all right with you.”

“Sounds wonderful, I mean… sure, that’d be fine.”

Sarah turned and gave her brother Zachy a hug and kiss. Then she turned around to Andrea and gave her a hug.

“I’ll see you guys later,” she said as they both headed out the door.

“Excuse me? You better have her home by eight thirty-five, mister,” Andrea said in a masculine voice.

“I’ll have her home by her curfew, sir,” Thomas replied while giving her an army salute.

When Sarah and Thomas pulled up to Pizzamania, she didn’t know what to think.

“You like pizza, right?” asked Thomas.

“Love it,” Sarah said, but what she was really thinking was: *Aw man. Pizza? How romantic! Well, I do like pizza. I guess it’s not that bad.*

They sat down at the nearest table and started looking through the menu.

“Hmmm, the supreme looks good and so does the pepperoni. What do you think?” asked Thomas without taking his eyes off the menu for one second.

“Um, I was thinking more along the lines of the spinach and artichoke,” said Sarah.

“Wow. That’s so gross. Ha, but we can have them split the pizza straight down the middle. That way we can both order what we want. What do you say to that?”

“Aw, man, you must not realize how big of an appetite I have,” Sarah replied while staring at him with the most serious look on her face.

“Awesome, dude. Me too. I was just worried that you’d think I was a pig or something. I should have already known that you’re not like most girls. I mean, you’re practically fifty percent guy.”

“Yeah,” Sarah said in a sheepish voice. *Oh GOD what’s going on? Now he thinks I’m half man. What’s next, a slug on the shoulder? I was so wrong. I can’t believe I ever thought that he’d ask me out tonight.*

Thomas walked up to the counter to place the order. On the way over, he tripped on his shoelace and quickly broke his fall by grabbing onto some woman’s pizza.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. I’ll buy you a new pizza,” Thomas exclaimed to the woman who owned the pizza that was in his bare hands.
“Maybe you should watch where you’re going next time. What if that was my kid I was holding? What would you have done then?” the woman asked while placing both hands on her broad hips.

“My deepest apologies. Please, let me buy you another pizza. It’s the least I can do.”

“Forget it. Thanks to you I’m no longer in the mood for pizza. Just give me my $13.56 that I paid, and we’ll call it even.”

Thomas handed her a twenty and told her to keep the change. After he placed his order, he walked back to the table where Sarah was sitting.

“Man, that lady freaked out,” Sarah said to him.

“Yeah, she did. It’s not like I meant to do that. Trust me, it’s not like I wrote on my agenda today, ‘Grab crazy woman’s burning hot pizza with bare hands.’ I feel sorry for the next guy to run into her today,” Thomas said while picking out the last bits of pizza sauce from underneath his finger nails.

“Yeah, I know. So what did your friends say when you told them that we were going to hang out tonight,” Sarah asked.

“They didn’t really care. They just told me that I’d better not stay up too late because we’ve got wrestling practice tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, that’s good. They sound like good friends,” Sarah said. Great. Just what I wanted to hear. More hopes washed down the drain. Here I am dying right in front of him. He may as well just take a knife and cut off the little bit of hope I have left.

After that, Thomas continued to talk about how people automatically assume that he was some sort of tough guy just because he was the head wrestler at their school.

“What it is that automatically makes strong guys mean? Look, I’ll tell you because you’re different from everyone else, but sometimes I feel like dropping out of wrestling and signing up for art. I’m really good at drawing pictures, and when I draw, it’s like I get to express a part of me,” Thomas said while shoving the last bit of his pizza inside his mouth.

“Well, forget all those people. You need to go with what you enjoy doing. If they don’t want to accept the fact that you have a so-called ‘sensitive’ side, then you don’t need them any ways.”

Well, I guess this friend thing isn’t so bad after all, Sarah thought.
“Sarah.”

“Yes?”

“You’re a great friend.”

“Thanks. You are too.”

“Seriously though, I can talk to you about anything, and you actually listen. I’m really glad that we’re friends.”

“Yeah, me too,” she said. “You wanna know something funny?”

“What’s that?”

“Well, this is going to sound absolutely ridiculous, but I thought you were going to ask me out. I mean, I was really hoping that you’d ask me out. Isn’t that funny?”

“You thought I was going to ask you out?”

“Yeah, pretty crazy, huh?”

“Yeah, it is,” he said.

Sarah felt her chest begin to sink.

“Wait,” he continued, “not crazy in a bad way. I just never thought that you’d ever want to date a guy like me. You’re just so fun and nice. I was afraid that I might scare you off, considering I’m a giant and all.”

“Really,” Sarah asked, and let out her biggest smile.

“Yeah, um, so would you like to go out? Like as boyfriend and girlfriend sometime?”

“I don’t know,” Sarah said sarcastically. “I’ll have to think about it.”
An Observation
Patricia Clay

Glass river reflection of a rising moon
split by rippled rings of falling leaves,
the last of their kind cluttered on the bank
discarded dressings melt meaninglessly.

Long cold winter brings bitter winds,
no songbirds to warm semi-sunny afternoons,
cottonty fabric falls gently over fragile flowers
barring brittle ice below its form.

Deep beneath seemingly dead debris
a heart, warm and caring cradles roots,
the great, the small, the seed, the shoot
await spring's sweet silent signal.

Southern breezes begin to blow
whispering across branch and barren bough,
calling to come forth from common slumber.
to break ground with bright bloom and leaf.

With icy fingers' final grasp released
the earth gives grace to field and furrow;
sun and showers give no shelter to decay
when summer sleeps impatiently behind in wonder.
The Red Light
Kenna Oaks

“See you later, sexy,” he mumbled from underneath that shaggy, calico mustache.

We came to an abrupt stop on the corner of 51st and Main, and I quickly located the sticky door handle and unpeeled my thighs from the worn leather seats warm from the summer night. Exiting the car, I gasped for air that wasn’t tainted with his Old Spice and slammed the door so loudly I thought it might fall off the dingy rust bucket.

As the ’68 Chevelle bolted, it coughed up a rising cloud of gray toxic fumes that almost overshadowed the dull glow of the street lamp. The pollution lost the battle as it rose and thinned to become one with the pungent aromas of Chinatown and the sidewalk pee of the homeless. I sat down on the mangled concrete curb and stripped my feet of their six-inch heels. The once-clear slippers had become blackened and scratched with the endless nights of walking through the grime of the city streets. My soles, toughened with calluses, would now lead me on. I rose and yanked on my miniskirt with a shimmy, then began the four-block journey to my apartment.

Heavy night air punched at my chest with every breath as if trying to penetrate my very soul. The conscience that I had thrown out with the morning trash so long ago seemed to be embodied in that air. The bulge of dollar bills stuffed in my bra protected my heart from anything, and just in case that little white angel tried the direct route through my lungs, I stuffed a fresh cigarette into my tightened lips and lit the end. I breathed in slowly and deeply and held it there as I gathered everything I wanted to forget about that night to let out with the smoke.

I needed something stronger to drown out the memories of that night and the one before and the past two months. Pall Malls simply weren’t going deep enough anymore.

I made my way home under the violent glare of the street lamps, clinging to them like life preservers so as not to be sucked into the hells of the alleyways. I knew that was where I was bound anyway but not just yet. I made the decision a while back, when the preachers with the screeching microphones on the corners promised me a hell-bound eternity, that I wasn’t going down without a fight or at least a sedative. The pain of this world was more than enough to bear.
When I finally jiggled the stuck door to my apartment open, I flipped the switch only to find that the bulb must have been on its way to hell too. It dimly flickered as if shivering for fear of going out and being lost to the darkness. I sunk down into my dusty corduroy couch and dug through my purse to find the pills. I downed a handful with a swig of Jägermeister and put my head back on the lumpy pillow. When the first drink’s burn was gone, I took another. That was all the fight I had left.
Schließende Zeit
Edgar Murillo

It helped when you made a game of it. It helped you forget about the gray powder snowing down, and it helped you ignore the sound of church bells in the distance. There was no color there, only us choking on our laughter at the expense of other, less worthy peoples.

Many of the daily occurrences where truly remarkable. I witnessed a little girl somehow find her grandmother by some miracle. The grandmother surrendered her ration to the little girl, so we shot her for being a wastrel. Somewhere there’s logic to this.

They stood in lines like frightened stickmen, begging for dirty soup water. It was barely enough to sustain their little frames. Myself, I grew afraid to eat. There was death in their eyes, and if it rained, they gaped their mouths to the sky. East was death.

One night I shared a cigarette with a companion of mine. He had a sadistic look about him and an affinity for focusing sharp objects into the ones with the pink triangles. I’ve seen him do it. *Ein, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, sechs.* It was music to him.

The stink was so bad rats wouldn’t go there. Only cockroaches that we swept away like so many other lives. Who was I to judge? I asked my companion if he agreed with his job. He said nothing, only smiled.

The less we fed them the thinner they got. As their faces grew tighter against their bones, their features became much more angular in fashion and their fish eyes stank deeper into pits of wet leather circles. In many ways it made the job easier. It was easier to kill something resembling the monster we were told they were. They were shopkeepers, bankers, masons and children. Monsters.

The killing was perfect. Sometimes we marched them straight to death after the train. Mengele himself would arrive at times to personally sort them for labor, direct extermination or bizarre medical experiments. Was this truly the answer to the Jewish Question? I told myself *this is my duty* and this was for the Fatherland, but I didn’t believe it in my heart. Children were ripped from their mother’s arms and placed with the old to be gassed. To avoid hysteria, we told them they would be showered. Those who knew better wept in the undressing area. Those who didn’t die after 25 minutes often choked violently on their last
breaths. Through small windows we watched and laughed, though my laughter would always fade away sooner than the others.

My companion would sometimes help hammer away gold and silver teeth from the bodies. It wasn’t too difficult for him. They always seemed to die with their mouths open. He often liked to show off his prize. That’s when the Sonderkommandos usually took the bodies to be burned. When the crematoria could not keep up, they burned them in open pits. It gave me a terrible headache. The doctors told me I wasn’t eating enough, but I knew it wasn’t the case. From the chimneys, the black smoke rose towards the empty white skies, and I knew they would find peace. Peace was something that eluded me in those years. They seemed to remind me of it when their dust would drift towards the earth and onto my clothes. It stained and was impossible to get out no matter how hard I tried.

I had nightmares where I would run from skeletal figures clawing at me and asking why. I saw myself wading through blood that grew thicker and more pungent. When I could wade no longer, I went mad and shot myself. I awoke bitter and in terrible fright. I used to cheat myself into believing that I had no other choice and was only following orders. Compliance is still guilt for the walking insane.

Through veils of barbed wire they would stare at us. Their eyes always followed us, and I was afraid to look back. Sometimes it became difficult to distinguish the dead from the living. When we placed them in trenches, some of them moved. They were a tangled mess of arms, legs and ribs. Those who still moved made it look like a pit of worms. I met eyes with one of them. I was unsure whether the withered creature was a man or a woman. There was no defining feature to tell the difference anymore, and it was trying to cover its genitals. I could see in its eyes that it was asking to become the dust.

Other guards circled the pits and shot anyone still close to life. Blood would spray onto the silver-colored snow, and red seeped down towards the earth. On a particular day my companion was eating chocolates. He threw little fragments at them and watch them struggle for the morsels. The winner would be shot before it could place the bait in its mouth.
I was handed a torch and told to light them. I felt nothing. I had no desire to torture them anymore than they were and no desire to refuse. In the flames, I saw their only deliverance and my damnation. I heard a man coughing near me and a shot was fired. The noise startled me. Its blood squirted onto my hand. One of them quickly crawled up towards me. He clasped tightly onto my leg and begged me for mercy. His face was twisted and ghastly. In my disgust I tossed the torch into the pit and ensured our final destinations. The screaming was hideous and agonizing. My companion offered me a chocolate. He said it would be good for me and I could use it. I resentfully accepted. When I wiped my stained and sticky hands, I found it to be no different than the one that had clasped my boot.
The Arcs of Time
Jennifer Legault

The shadow of the hourglass adorns the white wall,
grains of sand colliding in a rush to escape their glass compartment,
until that last desolate grain lands, and they must journey to the other side.
How strange it must feel to be that last grain. That last breath.
Figures pass by the shadow, running, walking, skipping, falling.
And the little girl in star-patterned pajamas stares. She smiles. She sees.

The tinkling of the wind chimes accompanies the whistling of the wind,
the chimes colliding in perfect harmony with the wind, softly, gently.
The sound of beauty, of nature, of freedom, resounds sweetly in the summer air.
How lovely it must feel to be the instrument of the wind.
The girls play jump rope in the backyard, singing, laughing, living.
And the little girl in star-patterned pajamas stares. She smiles. She hears.

The shadow of the concrete arcs erases all there is of time,
the blades of grass colliding upon themselves due to the swift movements of the wind.
The concrete stands still, immobile, with etchings and carvings on its facade.
How infinite it must feel to be the everlasting commemoration to something that is no more.
The weeping willow leans far over the arcs of time, swaying, reaching, weeping.
And the little girl in star-patterned pajamas stares. She sees. She hears. She feels.
I Love You Most When…
Jacquelyn Brooks

In drowsy denial of morning,
I wrap my arm around you,
Shielding myself from dawn,
Against your able back.

How I ache to remain,
Outlining your contour
With the curves of my own,
Until a later hour

Navigating dreams in your warmth,
So rudely interrupted by
The alarm clock’s
Screaming disapproval.

It is in these moments
When time taps out
The seconds ‘til departing
That I love you most.
Rainy Day
Kelly Coleman

I love Sunday mornings. The sound of sizzling bacon and popping eggs and the smell of freshly squeezed orange juice fills the room. I always make breakfast at 8:00 bright and early. I love watching the sun as it seeps through the shades in the kitchen while I sit and drink my coffee. When the light reflects off of the crystal vase that I have on the table, it illuminates the whole room with an array of rainbow light. But on this morning, I can see in the distant sky that it is getting black as night. It looks like a storm is brewing.

Of course, my drunk-ass husband is lying on the couch drinking a beer. He doesn’t even lift his head to take a swig of beer. He still has the beer-soaked, sweat-stained shirt on that he went to sleep in. I don’t even think that he has moved off of the couch. He has a cooler right next to him where he can just reach down and get a beer out if it. He has been on a binge ever since he got laid off of his job.

Things used to be good between us. I was happy at one time in my life. I think the happiest I have been was when we went on our honeymoon two years ago when we went to Alaska. That’s where I found Pookie. I fell in love at first sight. She was a beautiful Alaskan Husky. She was barely two months old when I got her. Her eyes were as blue as the ocean on a clear day, and her fur was as soft as a cotton balls. She was my baby since I could never have kids. She goes everywhere with me. She even sleeps in the bed, right down the middle like a little kid does when it is storming out.

“Here, Pookie,” I say as I whistle for her to come. “Come, baby.”

She doesn’t come. That’s weird. She is always by my side when I make breakfast.

“Hey, doof head,” I say as I slap my husband on the foot with a big metal spatula.

“Where’s Pookie?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I thought she’s with you,” Jack says, wiping the slobber dripping from his mouth.

Just then I feel a cold breeze blowing through the house. I look at the side door, and it is open.

“Oh shit. You left the damn door open again,” I say as I slap him across the head with the spatula. “How long has it been open?”
“I don’t know. Maybe an hour or so,” he says, rubbing his head. “Why did you have to hit me with the spatula, you dumb ass?”

“Because you are such a drunk. What is so important that you had to leave the door open? You know that Pookie loves to run free outside,” I say to Jack, pointing at the door. “So what is it? WHAT!”

“Uh, I had to go pee.”

“YOU WHAT! You mean to tell me that you couldn’t make it to the bathroom?”

“No, I was already squirting out even before I reached the door,” he says while laughing. “Sorry, baby. It won’t happen again.”

I knew that it was a lie even before he said it. He always does this when he is drunk, and Pookie always gets out.

“SORRY? YOU’RE SORRY? No, I don’t think so. You get your lazy, drunk ass up and go and find her,” I say, pulling him up and pushing him out the door.

“But, but it’s raining,” he says, whining.

“Go. And don’t come back until you have found her,” I say, slamming the door in his face.

I sit there, waiting impatiently, chewing on my nails like I did when I was a little girl. The only thing that I can do is watch the rain. The sound of the rain pounding on the roof is the only thing that calms me down. Man, is it pouring. It is a drunken sky with confetti-falling raindrops, pouring out of it like a faucet on full speed. The lightning makes a spider-web light show that lights up the whole sky. And when it thunders, it sounds like a bowling ball spinning down a lane. I kind of feel sorry for Jack, but then I think to myself, “He deserves it.”

He finally returns an hour and half later. Pookie is in his arms, soaked to the bone.

“Aww. Poor baby,” I say as I grab her out of his arms and wrap her with a blanket. “It’s okay, mommy’s here now.” I hold her in my arms like a baby and rock her back and forth.

“Oh, gee thanks, hon,” he says sarcastically. “You care more about that damn dog than you do me.”

“Well, maybe if you weren’t such a drunk, then maybe I would pay more attention to you,” I say, laughing at him. He has an imprint of the spatula across his face where I hit him.

“What’s so funny?”
I tell him. I can’t stop laughing. I am laughing so hard, I almost drop the dog. “Sorry, babe. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“It’s okay. I deserve it after what I did.”

“Yeah, you do. Do you want to come and help me wash Pookie?”

“Uh. Okay.” He sounds surprised.

I really like it when we do things together. It feels like old times. Pookie loves it when the both of us give her a bath. She always jumps all over the tub, splashing us and licking us all over. I think that more water lands on the floor than in the tub. I splash Jack and get him in his face.

“Oh no. You’re gonna get it,” he says as he wipes his face with the towel.

“Yeah, right. Love to see that,” I say.

I’m leaning over the tub, and that’s when Jack comes up behind me and pushes me in. Pookie loves that. She gets excited and starts to jump on me.

“That’s for the spatula,” he says, laughing at me. “I really didn’t care about the water, but the slap in the face hurt.”

“Ha ha. Real funny. Hey, babe, come here and give me a kiss.”

“Oh no. I’m not falling for that one.”

“Then come and get Pookie out for me. I need to get these wet clothes off.”

When he leans over the tub to get her out, I grab his neck and pull him in with me. Pookie is really excited; she jumps out of the tub like a kid that just has eaten a pound of chocolate. “Two can play at this game buddy,” I say.

We get caught up in playing that we forget about Pookie. She is running and jumping everywhere getting everything soaked.

“Pookie, NO,” I say as I try to catch her from running around.

After I dry her off, I call my husband to come in the room. “Jack, could you come here for a sec? I need some help cleaning up.”

I’m hiding behind the bedroom door when Jack comes in the room. I smack him with a pillow. Whap! Right in the kisser.


“You’re gonna get it, missy,” he says, pointing his finger at me.
He comes running at me. I try dodging him, but he picks me up and throws me on the bed. He starts kissing my neck, and I have to stop him because I can smell the beer-soaked breath.

“Hey, hon, before we get any further could you please brush your teeth? I can smell the beer,” I say as I pinch my nose.

“Yeah. Sure,” he says as he jumps out of the bed, prancing to the bathroom like a ballerina.

“I swear I think you could have been gay. You do that too well.”

As he brushes his teeth, I sit there and gaze at him. He is crazy beautiful. I don’t know how I ever landed him. He’s a tall man with a medium build, pitch-black hair, deep blue eyes, and succulent lips. “Wow, after everything he still gets to me,” I say to myself.

“What you looking at?” he says with a mouth full of toothpaste.

“Nothing. Just you.” After he is done, he comes and breathes a puff of air in front of my nose.

“Is that better?” he asks.

“Why, yes it is, Mr. Shaw, and if I didn’t know better I would think you’re being a smart ass,” I say as I pull him closer to me, tear off his shirt and start to kiss his chest.

“If that’s all that is it takes to get attention from you,” he says, “then I should leave the door open more often.” He strokes my hair ever so gently. I love it when he does that. It gives me chills that shoot up my back and make me tingly all over.

“Hey, got any beer left?” I say as I kiss him on his neck.

He looks at me with a confused expression on his face and says, “What? You really want one? I thought you hated beer.”

“Not tonight. I thought we could get sloppy drunk and make love again, all night, like we did when we were dating.”

“Okay. I’ll go and get it.”

“Make sure it’s cold. You know how I hate hot beer,” I say as I yell at him running down hall.

He comes back with the ice chest full of beer, hands me one and says, “Here you go, hon. Nice and cold for ya.”
I crack it open and take a swig. I can feel the cold liquid going down my throat and descending to my stomach. And then I think to myself, “Oh great, it’s going to be long night.”

“Cheers, babe,” Jack says as we slam our beers together.

“Cheers.”

But the night doesn’t happen like I want it to. I get really drunk and pass out. I wake up with a headache which feels like a hammer that is pounding on it from the inside. That is the one reason why I don’t drink beer. It always gives me the worst hangovers.

“Hey, here you go, hon,” Jack says as he hands me some aspirin and water. “These will help.” I grab the aspirin and water, trying not to uncover my face. The creeping sun that is poking its way through the shades is blinding my eyes.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Hey, were you having a bad dream last night or something?”

“No. Why?”

“You were talking in your sleep about me getting my shit together or you were going to divorce me.”

“Really? I said that?”

“Is it true?”

“Well. Yeah and no. I mean we need to talk. You really need to stop drinking everyday and go out and find a job. I can’t do this on my own anymore. It takes two to make it work.”

“Well, I was going to make it a surprise and tell you over a nice dinner, but you always have to ruin it with your mouth. I did get a job,” he says as he gets red in the face. “And I start in the morning, if it matters any to you.” He walks out of the room as he shakes his head with disappointment.

I’m speechless. I sit on the bed for a while trying to gather my thoughts, which seem to be in a blender of mixed emotions. When I finally come out of my trance, I get up and go downstairs to where Jack is making a racket in the kitchen, throwing pots and pans.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s just that you have been distant for awhile, and I didn’t know how to talk to you.”

“So do you want a divorce?” Jack says as he gazes into my eyes. I hate it when he does that. I can never say what I mean when he looks at me with those eyes.
“No. Not at all. I love you and always will.” But what he doesn’t know is that I have already had my lawyer draw up divorce papers in case he goes off the deep end again.

“Good, ’cause you know I will take you for all that you got,” he says as he smirks at me. If he had not done that, I would have thought he was being serious.

“So let’s talk about your new job,” I say, grabbing his hand to comfort him.

“Well, you know Ben, right?”

Ben was one of his loser friends that he has known since high school. I can’t believe he would stoop that low and ask for his help. Ben himself can’t keep a job. But I’m going to give Jack the benefit of the doubt.

“Yeah, I remember him.”

“He’s the one that got me the job for me. I’m working at an ad agency that pays really well.”

“Good. I’m really happy for you. But please don’t mess this one up.”

“Hey, babe, let’s go and sit on the porch,” he says as he hands me a cup of coffee.

“Okay.”

We sit on the porch, drinking our coffee, watching the sun rise. It is a nice moment, but I still have doubts about the whole situation. He grabs my hand and squeezes it, showing me that he won’t let me down. I squeeze back to show that I support him.
Second Place Prose Winner

Dog Walking
Greggory Adams

You can tell the size of the gun by the size of the click! A handgun is a smaller click! A bigger gun like a shotgun has a meatier clu-chok! sound. This had the meatier sound to it.

“What’re you doing on my property?” I heard the gun owner ask. I hadn’t yet “assumed the position” one normally takes when being held at gunpoint. My hands were still down at my sides rather than in the air. If they had been in the air, he would have noticed the leash in my hands, sans dog.

I had taken her out for a walk on the request of my wife; she had some catering clients at the house, and you know how dogs can get when they’re excited around new people.

I turned my head to the side a little and spoke over my shoulder. “Looking for my dog.” I explained. “She ran off into some of the high grass over here. I’d let her off the leash to run a little bit, and she took off.”

“Tress-passin’ more like it. You and your mutt. Turn around. Slowly.”

I did as he asked and slowly turned around. Pointed right at my head was a double-barreled shotgun. I was strangely calm at everything that was going on. Maybe adrenaline kicked in at a supersonic rate and was keeping me from freaking out. I had nothing to compare it to as this was the first time I had ever been held anywhere at gunpoint. The man looked to be in his mid to late forties. He wore overalls that were so greasy and stained you couldn’t tell if they were originally blue denim or the gray-and-white pinstriped kind, a t-shirt that had been white only until the first time he had worn it and a hat that you only find for sale in truck stops and rural gas stations. It had Tweety-Bird on it with the words “Even I need a little puddy now and then.” It, like the rest of the ensemble, was covered in grease. He hadn’t shaved in several days, and his-salt-and-pepper hair was sticking out from under the sides of the hat. He eyed me up and down, not taking his eyes off me even when he spit some tobacco juice out of the corner of his mouth.

“Look,” I said, starting to hold up the leash.
“Don’t make any sudden moves!” His eyes went wide with anger. “Yer trespassin’! I’m within my rights if I shot you where you stand.”

I took in a deep breath and looked around. “Well,” I started out. “I trespass here all the time, didn’t think it was a problem since there were no signs up. There’s a gap in the fence and a natural worn trail.” I pointed. The sun was going down behind me, over my shoulder, so he had to squint a little to see where I was pointing. The gun stayed trained on me during the whole conversation.

“Your house is way up there,” I continued, hitching my thumb over my shoulder. “My house is over there. This area is mowed on a regular basis. I figured it was done by the developers.”

Indeed, this particular piece of field sat in an interesting place. Bordering it on three sides were neighborhoods, the area that was now to my right being a newer part; the section directly in front of me had been around for twenty years or more. The fence on my right was just poles and wire, probably put up years ago. There was a gap in between two poles that we had used to enter this part of the field. All of it used to be farmland: his farmland or at least his family’s. Now piece by piece it was being swallowed up and urbanized.

“No, I’ve been mowing it. Let’s the few deer that are left come up.”

I nodded.

He pointed at the leash with the shotgun. “What kinda dawg?” His voice was less gruff now, and his eyes weren’t so wide.

“Lab,” I answered. “Chocolate. Six months, still training her.”

“Good dawg,” he nodded in approval. “Lole and purty smart.”

“Yup,” I answered, pursing my lips and taking in another deep breath. The adrenaline was wearing off, and the continued sight of the gun pointed directly at me was starting to make me nervous. I could tell he wasn’t nervous; the gun was just as steady now as it had been when he first found me.

“So, did you grow up on this property?” I asked, hoping friendly conversation would get him to lower the gun. He nodded. The gun stayed. He didn’t say anything. I pressed a little more.
“Bet it was pretty country out here.” If he were as old as I thought he was, this area
would have been the middle of nowhere when he was a kid. He nodded again, more
reflectively this time, and (gun still trained on me) looked around him.

“Nearest house was a mile that way,” he said, waving off to his right. “Used to hunt
right over thurr.” He pointed with a slight raise of his nose. “Right where yer house is.”

He paused for a moment, and I could only wonder if he meant the general direction of
where my house was from when I pointed or if he actually knew exactly which house was
mine. I thought of my wife meeting with her clients.

“Used to be a pond over where the school is now.”

“So you had the whole run of this place, huh?”

He nodded more slowly this time. “Daddy only sold a piece when momma got sick.
Had to sell a little more when she went in the home. Had to do the same when daddy died.”
His eyes were moist. Selling off the property you had known and loved for years only to
watch it disappear right in front of you, while hoping the proceeds would pay to make a loved
one well again and they die anyway, would be hard on anyone.

I couldn’t think of anything to say. For some reason a feeble sorry didn’t seem
appropriate. Sure, I could be sorry that it happened, but saying “sorry” felt like I was
apologizing for the people who had unknowingly moved in on his land. Those people, who
had found their dream home sitting on a plot through which he used to chase fireflies as a kid.
Now their kids were doing the same in their front and back yards. They were getting an
education where he used to go skinny-dipping, and they were skinny-dipping themselves in
swimming pools located where he used to belly crawl to hunt rabbits. How could I apologize
for living the American Dream? What was I supposed to say? “That’s the breaks?” “Gosh,
that’s tough?” “Shit happens?” Those weren’t really appropriate either.

So I said nothing. Thankfully, even if I did want to say something, my dog came
bounding out of the brush, panting and jumping, excited that I had found some company, and it
was someone she had never met before.

“Chips! Get down!” I ordered. She obediently sat down and looked at me, wagging
her tail and awaiting her next command.
“Smart dawg,” he said slowly and gently reached down to pet her head. “Chips,” he said thoughtfully. “Chocolate lab, named Chips. Chocolate Chips, I get it.” He chuckled softly.

I slowly reached down and connected the leash to her collar. “Let’s walk,” I said to her, her command that she could get up and start walking. We walked to the fence, and I slowly turned around to face him again once I was completely off of his property.

“Were you really going to shoot me?” I asked. During the entire confrontation my mind had been whispering over and over, “He won’t shoot.” There were too many houses too close by that if he had shot me, people would have known who did it. He would have spent the rest of his life in prison, away from his dwindling paradise. To shoot me would have ultimately destroyed everything he had. It made no sense for him to do that. At least that was the reasoning playing over and over in my mind. Still, one wonders. So I asked.

He didn’t answer. Just stared at me a moment, cocked the gun in his elbow, and slowly lumbered up towards his house. Didn’t say a word.

I’m not sure I wanted him to.
Winter Wolf and Caribou:  
A Poem in Two Perspectives  
Ken Turner

Winter wolf’s moan to caribou warns  
Lurking death in midnight forest waits,  
Drawing deep its icy breath  
To smell the icy fear she well anticipates.  
Steady hoof and darting eyes  
Pounding heart that knows the drill.  
The rituals of winter’s woe  
The hunter starves without the kill.  
The agile buck, with lowered rack  
Snorts and bellows with uneasy stance.  
Creeping paws give slow advance  
With lowly growls and bristled backs.  
Moments long in life’s review,  
Merely seconds in brutal nature’s course.  
Lies dead Majestic Caribou,  
Feces well Winter Wolf with no remorse.

Caribou stands as winter prey,  
Stares down Death in winter’s grey,  
Raised brow and unsure stance  
Steadied for the deadly dance.  
To the distance lends his eye  
Death in packs  
He hears the cry  
Glance to family circled here  
And back to devils drawing near.  
Seconds split, when action needs  
Decisions come with angels’ speed.  
Lunges forth the Winter Wolf  
To take the breath from sprinting hoof.  
Swing the racks of numbers bold  
Send the devils to the cold  
Where, once again, they will lay in wait  
For Caribou to chance his fate.
Safe at Home?
Kim O’Brien Jones

Hank exited the parking lot of Hamilton Mortuary where he and his wife Ellen had just finalized the funeral arrangements for their twenty-year-old son, Tommy. A cold, unforgiving rain blew across the road as Hank drove with both hands gripping the wheel. He could see Ellen out of the corner of his eye, her head resting on the passenger door window, her quiet sobs audible only between sighs of the moaning wind.

“It was my fault,” Hank said, his voice trembling like his heart. “I shouldn’t have forced him to go to U.T.!”

Ellen raised her head, still looking forward. “It’s not your fault, Hank,” she said, wiping tears from her cheeks. “It’s nobody’s fault.”

He knew she was wrong; it was his fault. Hadn’t he been the one who pushed Tommy to play baseball? Hank had a good job and could have paid for college without much of a sacrifice, but no, he had to make sure his son received a full athletic scholarship. And for what, so he could brag about his kid to his friends and maybe have it a little easier when he retired?

Headlights from passing cars momentarily hindered his vision as a torrent of rain poured down on them. Even with the wipers and defoggers on high, Hank still couldn’t see the road clearly. He wondered if Tommy had been driving through a similar rain just before the accident.

The brake lights of the car in front of him suddenly flashed, and the once-sparkling rain drops upon his windshield turned red like globules of blood. He slammed on the brakes without thinking. The car fishtailed to the right before again straightening, then stopped just inches from the car they followed. Was that how it had happened to Tommy, so suddenly? he thought.

“Take it easy!” Ellen stared at him as she yelled.

He sensed more anger than fear in her voice.

“Okay, okay,” he answered.

She turned back to the window and stared out into the cold, wet nothingness. Her eyes reflected in the glass were no longer blue and bright; they were tired and dark.

She’s aged twenty years in the last day, he thought.
“We should have sent him to Rice instead of U.T.,” she said with a hard voice. “Then he wouldn’t have been trying to drive two hundred miles home, in that damn car, during that damn storm.” She clenched her fists and raised them up toward her eyes. He could see the anger spread across her checks, down her neck and into her heart.

“I know,” was all Hank could answer.

“You know?” she yelled turning back to him with those dark, cold eyes.

They sat at a light for what seemed forever, the turn signal making that annoying click while the rain, like a death shroud, covered the car. He started to feel a little claustrophobic so he loosened his grip on the wheel and stretched his fingers in hopes blood would return to them. Then he lowered the temperature on the defroster; he was hot and clammy.

Finally, the light changed, and Hank made the left turn onto Main Street. The whole road was a kaleidoscope of shops and bright neon signs that glared back at him. He slowed as he looked for the florist.

“It’s up on the right,” Ellen said. “About a quarter mile.”

“What’s it called again?”

“Kathy’s Flowers.” Ellen rubbed her forehead with her hand. “Or something like that.” Hank found the shop, but there were no spaces nearby to park. He circled the parking lot for a few minutes, then, frustrated, parked where he could and shut off the engine.

“Look,” he said turning his gaze toward her. “Why don’t you stay here? No use us both getting soaked.”

Ellen just nodded. Her tear-smeared cheeks took on a haunted glow from the parking lot’s light that loomed over them.

Hank exited the car without umbrella or hat and then walked in slow, steady strides to the flower shop. The rain washed over him.

An elfin bell tolled as he crossed the store’s threshold. He walked past shelves of stuffed animals and baby novelty items until he reached the main counter where a cheery teenager stood.

“Hi!” she said. “I’m Heather. May I help you?”

“I need flowers.”

“What’s the occasion?” she said with a perky voice as she placed a catalog on the counter. Hank’s throat tightened, and all he could do was look at her.
“I need flowers for a funeral,” he said after a moment.
“Oh,” she said, replacing the book with a smaller pamphlet. “Is it a local service?”
“Yes, tomorrow.”
“We can make an arrangement similar to the ones you see here,” she said, turning the pages. “Baskets of flowers start at $50.00, and standing sprays start at $75.00.”
He stared at the pages of seemingly joyous funeral settings.
“Here’s a nice basket of carnations,” the girl said, pointing to an arrangement of red and white flowers.
“No carnations!” he said. After all the flowers he had bought for Ellen over the years, all he could remember was that she despised carnations.
“Okay,” the girl said as she continued to flip the pages. “We have lots of others to choose from.”
“Bigger,” he said, spreading his hands.
She raised her head to look at him. “Sir,” she said with caution. “Will this be for the death of a family member?”
He lowered his head from her gaze and nodded. “My son,” Hank said, feeling his lips start to tremble.
“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said. “Let me show you some beautiful casket pieces then.”
*Casket, why did she have to say that word?* Hank thought. He wanted to shake her shoulders and scream, “SHUT UP;” but he didn’t; instead, he just said, “Thank you, please.”
The girl then opened the book to a series of pages, all containing coffins blanketed with flowers. Hank’s eyes looked at them, but his mind could not see.
*I can’t do this,* he started to say over and over to himself. *God, don’t let me break down in front of this little girl, please!*
Then, miraculously, he felt Ellen standing beside him.
She wrapped her arm around his, entwined their fingers, and rested her head on his shoulder.
“That’s pretty,” Ellen said to the girl while pointing to a casket spray of red roses. “But we’ll need it in orange and white, U. T. colors. Tommy loved playing ball for U.T.”
Intruder
Aaron Cohen Brown

He didn’t hear the sound of water; he looked down and realized he was peeing next to the toilet. He quickly shifted, but he was already finished. He tucked himself away and looked down at the yellow puddle as it ran into the grout and circled the toilet. He was too tired. He’d clean up the putrid mess, which stung his nostrils when he breathed, in the morning. He flushed the toilet and clicked off the light as he stumbled out of the bathroom.

Jack fell onto his bed face first and tilted his head to the right so he could breath. He felt himself sink into the security of the warm fabric that surrounded him. He sighed heavily as he closed his eyes. He couldn’t keep pulling doubles; it just took too much out of him. He rolled over onto his side and grabbed hold of his pillow. The darkness of the room enveloped him. He was at nothingness, without a care in the world.

His eyes shot open at the sound of a small crash that echoed up to his room from downstairs. Jack lay unmoving, listening intently.

He was too tired. It must’ve been his imagination.

Another crash like small bits of glass hitting the floor.

Jack sat straight up in bed, wondering who could be here at this hour. His wife and kids had gone to her mother’s for the weekend, leaving him to get some rest from the week. Luis had left long ago and took with him most of Jack’s beer supply tucked away in his stomach. There was no one else. Jack’s heart pounded in his chest so hard he feared it would break free of its bone prison.

Another sound like heavy footsteps.

Jack knew what was happening. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he knew. Slowly he climbed out of bed, feeling the cool carpet between his toes. He made his way slowly and silently to the dresser across the room. He didn’t move; he stood listening to see if his presence was known.

He didn’t hear any movement indicating that his presence was known.

Jack reached up to the top drawer and pulled on it. It didn’t budge. His wife’s voice echoed in his ears, constantly reminding him to fix the top drawer on the dresser. In that instant, he was so relieved that she and his little boys weren’t there with him. He pulled on the drawer again, finally breaking it loose.
He reached inside under piles of clothes he’d never seen before and finally found the gun at the bottom. He pulled it out and tried to push the drawer back in, but again it got stuck. He made his way back to his bed, stepping over the clothes he had thrown on the floor just hours before. Jack reached under his mattress and pulled out the key to the lock in the trigger of the gun. He couldn’t understand the purpose of the lock. It only slowed him down. Finally, he got the lock free and checked the cartridge.

Jack looked at the door, gripping the gun tightly in his hand. He climbed to his feet and made his way across the room and opened the door a crack and looked down the darkened hallway, holding the gun in his hand like he had seen so many times in all those action movies. He pulled the door open the rest of the way and stepped out of the safety of his room.

Jack stood at the top of the stairs and peered down. He couldn’t see anything in the darkness but the sounds of someone shuffling on the carpet were unmistakable. Slowly, he began to make his way down the stairs, carefully avoiding the one that squeaked in the night and woke everyone up in the house.

Jack reached the bottom of the stairs and froze. He could see the silhouette of a large figure moving in the darkness in the living room in front of him. Jack’s hand started shaking as he clenched the gun tightly in his palm, the cool sweat making his hand clammy as he stepped into the hallway.

The figure stood in front of the television, messing with some wires, his back to Jack. Jack shook his hand to try and stop it from shaking. Slowly, Jack raised the gun at the intruder. The silhouette, finally freeing the device of the wires, turned around and saw Jack standing there holding the gun at him. The light from the moon peeking through the windows gave Jack an otherworldly presence in the darkness of the room.

For what felt like an eternity, the two stood unmoving, staring at each other. The figure moved slightly, and Jack noticed a darkened object in the silhouette’s hand. The figure raised the hand with the object towards Jack.

“Hey!”

Jack didn’t even realize he was the one who yelled. The figure stopped. Suddenly, his knees buckled, and he fell to the ground hard, dropping the flashlight that he had concealed in his hand. The DVD player shattered into pieces on the floor beside the figure.
Jack stood frozen, his mouth hanging open. Slowly, his eyes shifted down to his arm, and he finally noticed the smoke dancing out of the end of the barrel, and he realized he had fired the gun. He looked over the end of the gun at the figure curled into a ball on the floor in front of him.

Jack clicked on the light in the living room and cautiously made his way to the fallen figure. Jack knelt beside the man and turned him on his back. The figure held his stomach tightly, his knuckles turning white from the pressure. Jack slowly moved his gaze to the figure’s face and slowly reached up and grabbed hold of the top of the mask covering his head. Jack ripped it off and looked at the man’s face.

The boy looked back at him, water filling his eyes, hot tears streaming down his face. He couldn’t have been more than sixteen.

“Oh, Jesus!” Jack cried as he threw the gun aside.

Jack threw the boy’s hands off of the wound and covered it with his own. Jack looked down as blood seeped through his fingers and covered his hands.

“Ah, shit! Fuck! Don’t move!” Jack screamed, panic filling his voice.

He placed the boy’s hands back on the wound and pressed down hard. Jack scrambled across the floor, tripping on the carpet before reaching the little table that held the phone by the kitchen. He grabbed the receiver off of the charger and shuffled his way back to the boy. He reached the young man and placed his hand on top of his. Blood stained the buttons as he tried desperately to dial the phone.

Jack placed the phone to his ear and held it with his shoulder as he pushed his other hand on the wound and pressed as hard as he could.

“All circuits are busy. Please remain on the line.”

“Fuck! Goddamn it! Fuck!” Jack screamed as he threw the phone across the room.

Jack looked down at the young man. His eyes filled with tears from the pain, and he constantly strained and winced as he contorted on the ground in front of him.

“Fuck, somebody help!” Jack screamed at the top of his lungs so hard his voice broke.

The young man coughed, blood escaping into the air and speckling his face like the freckles on a small child. Jack screamed again, knowing no one could hear him.

The boy started to shake violently under Jack’s hands, his entire body riddled by the seizures.
“No, no, fuck no!” Jack pleaded, pressing harder on the boy’s wound.

The young man stopped moving. He stopped doing anything. Jack watched as the boy’s hands fell limp under his, the blood slowly poring out onto the carpet surrounding them. Jack grimaced.

“No, no! Fuck! Somebody help me! Somebody please! Help me!” His screams echoed through the empty house, falling on no one’s ears but his own.
Dangling from Devotion
Yara Arreola

I dangle
from an iron chain
that runs through
your veins.

I breathe
your rancid redness,
the bitter liquid invading
my tunnels; I choke
  repeatedly
  innocently
  foolishly.

I climb
up and down the chain
like an ant crawling
on bare flesh,
my grasps on each link
like bites you swat.

I see
a slit, a cut, a path
  to a brisk breeze,
  to a sparkling sunrise
  to a see-through sky,

But your briefly tender scab is my stop sign.

    I dangle
    for you.
The Cat
Gaylord Anguish

He was lying on the front cement porch, under the seat swing, when I first noticed that there was something wrong. The fur around his neck and lower jaw was matted with a bloody-looking substance, and his body was convulsing. I had been carrying a bag of groceries which I placed on a chair, then kneeled down beside him. I carefully inspected his body, but there was no external sign of injury, and I picked him up in my arms. As I stood up, I heard the front door open, and my daughter walked out. She saw the cat in my arms. She was silent. Nearly in tears, she asked what was wrong with him. Her hand reached up and stroked the fur.

Ten minutes later, we were on the way to the vet as the cat lay quietly wrapped in a blanket next to my daughter on the back seat. The convulsions had stopped, and I could smell the excretion that is part of death. I pulled over and leaned into the back seat. His eyes were open, as was his mouth, and his tongue hung loosely down and out of his lower jaw. There was no sign of breathing, and I looked up at the tears in my daughter's eyes. I stroked his fur, pausing at the chest, hoping for movement. There was none. He was dead.

The vet had suggested poisoning as the cause of death, perhaps something from the garage. Living out in the country ruled out the possibility of cat-murder by a human. When we arrived back home, the rest of the family gathered over the box containing the dead cat, and like always happens when one of our animals dies, we began the funeral ritual: the spade, the hole a couple of feet deep, and the placing of the body in its final resting place. We all stood around the grave site, which was just outside the pool fence and alongside the house. Words referencing what a good cat he had been and that he should rest in peace were spoken, then the hole was filled in. We fashioned a grave marker and placed the cat's name on it. The kids did cry that night. The cat had been in the family most of their lives.

It was days later, a warm late August evening, the sun just finishing its decline into night, when I reached over and turned the light on near the fireplace so that the words on the daily newspaper would stay readable to me as I sat in my comfortable chair beside the fireplace in the great room. I was in the middle of reading an article on how Bill Clinton had out-debated the sitting president in one of their pre-election debates when I first heard the sound coming from outside. I did not pay any real attention but went on reading. Then the sound came again, like something hitting against the fence that surrounded the pool. This time I put the paper down and walked over to the glass wall that fronted the pool area. I watched,
and I listened for it again. The outside pool lights were on, and I could see past the pool to the animals grazing in the back acre, but no sounds.

By now the night had arrived, just the lights making the area visible, and I walked out onto the pool area and slowly, silently, walked around the pool, stopping now and again to listen. Other than my own imagination, I saw nothing, and I went back in. The house had eighteen rooms and I checked each, thinking that maybe my wife and the kids had come home and that would be what I had heard. But they hadn't.

I sat back down by the fireplace, picked up the newspaper and again began to read. My mind would not stay with the reading as now and again I would glance over the paper toward the outside, still wondering what had made the sound. Minutes passed before I could relax as I sipped on a cup of coffee that had lost its warmth. Then I heard another sound like a door closing, again, and again. I dropped the paper, the coffee spilled into my lap, and a chill ran down from the back of my neck. This time it was coming from the front porch area. I stood up and didn't move for a moment, like I was frozen, wondering what it was, what it could be, and I walked out into the front entrance hall and opened the door.

He was standing just past the outer screen door, his eyes looking up at me as if to say about time, and his tail was waving in the air behind him. I stood there, looking, not believing, for a moment, and his front right paw reached over and pulled at the screen door. It had been his way of letting us know he was ready to come in, and I opened the door. He slipped in and rubbed up against my leg as he passed. I watched as he walked down the hall, his tail swinging high behind him, and he vanished into one of the kid's rooms. When I got to the bedroom doorway, he was already lying on the bed, as he always had done.

As I stood there, trying to make sense of what had happened, I heard the front door open, and the kids ran down to me. They all stopped as I pointed toward the bed, the cat, and there was silence. Nobody spoke, but we all had the same thoughts. How could he be alive?

Later that night, as we all sat around the kitchen table, we decided it was him, without doubt. He had the same markings, did the same things he always had done, and knew where the food bowl and litter box were located. Yet, we had buried him days before. The only answer we could come up with was that we had buried another cat that may have looked like him.

Flashlights lighted the grave marker just outside the pool fence alongside the house. The grave was undisturbed, the marker was where we had placed it, and I began to dig into the newly-filled soft soil and then into the undisturbed soil when nothing was found. It became apparent that there was nothing there, no cat body, nothing, and I stopped digging.
To this day we have no answer. It happened over fourteen years ago, and, yes, that cat did finally die of old age years later. We've discussed the happening many times among ourselves over the years and still no answer. If we had buried some other cat that happened to look like ours, the answer would be in the cat body in the grave. There was none. If the cat had not been dead and simply clawed its way out and appeared on the front porch, then the grave site would have been disturbed. It wasn't.

Over the years we have had many other cats. I don't think any one of us can even remember the name of that cat, who, back then, lived, died, and lived. Nor do we have an answer that will qualify as an explanation for what took place. Though we may have forgotten that cat's name, we all know what is meant when one of us says, "The Cat."
Magic Mountain: A Mostly True Story

In Memory of Robert R. Stockwell, Sr.

Patrick Stockwell

When I was just a little boy, my family took a trip to Disneyland. I don't remember very much about the trip at all. The vacation photos tell me nothing really, except to confirm my fear that I was, in my short short pants and matching T-shirts, arms laden with plastic souvenirs, well, I was a little annoying. I do remember two things about that trip, both fuzzy like pictures in dusty frames. Just images really, made clear now by the memories of those older folks who had shared the experiences with me.

The first memory is one of confused fright. I was standing behind my father, looking through the gates into the park, anxious to get in there and have my way with all the fun. The scene I see in my head is one of several large furry animals walking on their hind legs with great purpose directly toward me. They looked like all my favorite Disney friends I knew from Saturday morning cartoons, like Mickey Mouse, Goofy. Even Donald was there as might be imagined. But somehow, they didn't look quite right. I was terrified, obviously unaware that park employees were sweating mercilessly inside the matted polyester.

My sense memory calls my father's scent into being: Mennen's Afta Shave, Consort Men's Hairspray, a little paint thinner that he always seemed to carry in his skin like strange cologne. I remember ducking behind Dad's left leg as Pluto, Mickey's dog, tried desperately to reach me around him, and feeling safe at last when he gently pushed the man in the funny clothes ahead to terrorize another small visitor.

Sometime later that day we rode on the mountain ride that I had always assumed was Magic Mountain though I know now that ride is part of another park. The image I have is that of me in my father's lap in some mining car contraption flying through tunnels like the chase scene from Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. My dad held me so tight it hurt sometimes, but I didn't care. It was the first time I ever rode a roller coaster, and most of us know what a rush that is. I was, needless to say, ecstatic. But later, in my teens, I learned that my father's experience of that ride was much different, why he'd held onto me as if life depended on it. Because it did.

We were near the end of the line, late to board the ride, and the cars began crawling slowly along before Dad had time to buckle us in properly. We pulled into the tunnel out of the
sight of the ride's operators. I was sitting next to him, and he drew the seat belt across both our laps. But there was no clasp to fasten it to. My father pulled me into his lap, stretching the belt tight across us with his right hand. He wrapped his left arm across my middle and leaned into the side of the car, wedging us in as best he could. He locked his right leg into the opposite corner as a brace and held on anxiously, letting me experience the thrill of the plunging and climbing. He was the only thing holding us in the cart, which sometimes tipped nearly 90 degrees to the side. But he never said a word.

When he told me this story, I was afraid for my life in hindsight. It was the old "Why didn't you hold me with both hands or hold on to the rail, or something?" scenario. When he told me why, I didn't get it. In fact, it took me years to get a grip on what he'd done.

"I wanted you to think we were belted in, that we were safe" was all he said.

The thing is, he didn't know what the ride would do, the climbs and falls, the hairpin turns on thin scaffolding over seventy feet of black air. He'd never been there, and he couldn't see the obstacles coming. But he knew he was strong enough to hold us in, so he did it. He held on silently and let me enjoy the ride through Magic Mountain.
Hollow
Meaghin Lucero

I was a lost child.
I rummaged through
The black leather streets
Only to find silver fragments
Of you.

I collected every single
Triangular piece with the tips
Of my pencil fingers
And pasted them delicately
To my purple chest.

I would have cried
Tears of wood,
But I knew they would
Wash you further
And further away from me.

Dust-bunny filled teddy bears
Couldn’t help me this time.
They only made me sneeze.

The red mucous poured
Down over my sandpaper
Lips. I was something else.
You really should have
Seen me glow.
Beyond the Shadows of the Bark

Jennifer Legault
Good Morning
Cheryl Williams

The alarm clock trilled faintly in the bedroom where she lay sleeping. Sunlight broke through the haze of dawn to peek in through the slats of the bedroom shutters. Sunlight would not find a warm welcome here. Covers pulled high over her tousled hair, only a slender foot had escaped the bundled nest she had created. Bobbie knew that she had been waiting all semester for this break from the school year. He couldn’t help but smile at the little sound from under the mounds of covers. No, she didn’t snore.

The bed shifted under his weight as he lay back down. Gently he tugged away the cover that sheltered her from the invading sunshine. “Hey, baby, you getting up today?”

The answering stretch from under the covers was long and sensuous. A bare leg slipped out from under the pale blue quilt that her grandmother had made for their wedding to encircle one of his legs. The soft pink of her skin beckoned him in ways that mere words never would.

“Baby, what are you and Iris planning for the day?” He laid short, soft kisses across her neck. Lingering on smooth curve of her breast, he kissed the tattoo of a rose and heart that she had gotten last year for her birthday. He pulled the covers down just a little bit more.

“No.” The one syllable was drawn out as she tried to pull the cover back over her head. “I don’t have to get up and go to school. I am on spring break.” She scrunch her eyes tightly closed against the invasion of light.

Bobbie’s quiet laughter filled the room. His head lay on the pillow next to hers. “How about having some breakfast with me before Iris gets here?” His hands reached back to caress the sweet skin of her knee.

“This is just not right!” Her indignant reply was completely lost as a low moan followed his caress, her leg clutching him just a little tighter as his fingers grazed her ankle. “You should be shot. No, branded. Or better yet, you should be staked out naked in the desert for all of the little critters to feast on your bones.”

His mouth laid more kisses along her jaw. “It may be spring break for you and Iris. The rest of us are just jealous.” His mouth closed over hers with a much more interesting good morning.
“Come on, let’s go to a Denny’s. Or, we could stay home if you would prefer.” His hand slowly stroked back up her calf towards her knee.

“Why, Mr. Ellison, I do believe you are trying to seduce me! Whatever would that old biddy you call a wife say ‘bout this?” The low southern drawl she used never failed to make him smile. She was no Scarlett O’Hara.

“Probably tell me to get busy so that she could get on with her spring break.” He watched the sun play out across the smooth ivory of her skin. Even after all these years she was her most beautiful in the early morning light. “And tell you to treat me right so that she didn’t have to.”

The smoky texture of her laughter lingered around him as she returned the soft kisses. “Okay, I’m awake. And I am hungry. I can call Iris to let her know that I am going to have breakfast with you and can meet her later at her place.”

“Do you want to go to Denny’s or I-Hop?” He sat back to allow her the room to sit up in their bed, giving her the room to complete the stretch that had always been so important to her in the mornings. She reminded him of the cat.

Her eyes slowly opened to gaze up at him. The smile was barely there in the early morning light. “How ‘bout we just say we went for breakfast and stay home instead? Your old biddy of a wife won’t be home for a while.”

What a great way to start spring break.
Mirror Image
Jessica Chance

My hands were still sweaty as I fumbled with my keys, trying to find the right one for the front door. They shook uncontrollably—I dropped the keys. Frustrated, I snatched them up, found the right key and walked inside.

“Who’s home?” my mom yelled from the kitchen.

“It’s me,” I said, dropping my gym bag in the entry way and kicking off my tennis shoes.

“Oh good! Dad will be home any minute, and we can eat.”

A faint garlicky and tomato smell floated around the living room and made it warm. I pulled the rubber band out of my damp hair and fluffed it around while I walked towards the kitchen.

“How far did you go today?” Mom asked as she stirred spaghetti noodles around and around in a large pot of steaming water.

“Uhhh, I rode the stationary bike seven miles, did the elliptical for three, and ran two and a half miles,” I said.

“Wow. That’s pretty good, Meg.” Mom looked at me over her gold-rimmed glasses. “You look tired.” Her brow tensed.

“I am.”

“You hungry?”

I really was very hungry, but I didn’t want her to know that. “Sure.” I shrugged and went to my room.

I stood in front of my full length mirror and examined myself. I looked awful. My hair was completely frizzy and tangled—my face still pink and sweaty. I lifted my sweatshirt and grabbed the fat that was around my belly. God, I was so fat. I turned and saw even more fat sitting on top of my hips. Ugh. I still had a little while before mom would call me to the dinner table. I lay down on the ground and started doing crunches. Each time I rolled up from the carpet, I could feel the beads of sweat from my neck run down to my lower back. “64...65...66.”

“Meg! Dinner’s ready!” Mom yelled from the kitchen.
I stretched out completely trying to relieve some of the burn from my stomach. My head spun a little, so I closed my eyes and shook my head.

Dad was already sitting at the kitchen table. He had loosened his tie and untucked his shirt. “Well, hey there, girly,” Dad said, putting one arm out for a hug.

“You don’t want to hug me. I’m all sweaty and disgusting,” I said.

“Been workin’ out, huh?”

“Yeah, a little.” I walked past Dad towards my seat. He grabbed the waist of my pants.

“These are lookin’ big on you, Meg.” He pulled on them again.

“Whatever. They’re supposed to stretch out like that.” I swatted his hand away and sat down.

Mom put a heaping pile of spaghetti in front of me with a piece of garlic bread on the side. Steam still rose through the parmesan cheese from the sauce that was full of different green spices. My stomach growled.

“Eat up!” Mom said as she sat down with her plate.

“So guess who I saw at work today?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know,” Mom said.

I stared at my plate as Mom and Dad engaged in a normal post-workday discussion. The piece of bread probably had at least 120 calories in it. I would have to run at least another mile to burn that off. Oh great—ground beef in the sauce. My stomach rumbled again.

“You gonna eat?” Dad tapped his fork on his plate as he interrupted their conversation.

“Oh, yeah. I just didn’t know where to start,” I smiled.

“Okay.” My dad had no hesitation to continue his story. He turned back to my mom, putting another fork of noodles to his lips. “So anyway, Daniel said…”

I twirled some naked pasta around my fork. There’s not any fat in pasta. I’ll just eat the noodles that don’t have that sauce on them. It felt so warm in my mouth. I could feel the trail of heat go down my throat, through my chest and into my stomach. It felt so good.

After dinner, I put my almost untouched plate in the sink and headed towards my room again.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked.

“Oh, I have to do some studying.”

“That can wait. Why don’t you stay out here and visit with your dad and me?”
“I really have to study, Mom.”

“Pleeeeeease?” Mom clasped her hands together and squinted her eyes, smiling. “It would mean so much—“

“Ahh, fine. Okay.” I sat down on the couch. Mom came and sat next to me while Dad sat across the room.

“So anything new and exciting?” Dad looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

“No, not really.” I looked at my mom as she started twirling my frizzy hair in her fingers. “Why would you want to touch that?” I asked her.

“Why not?” She looked at me, puzzled.

“It’s all dirty and gross.”

“No, you’re being too hard on yourself. I love your hair.”

As Mom and Dad started talking again, I felt the food moving around in my stomach. Did I eat too much? I wanted to leave so badly, before it was too late.

“I really have to get to studying,” I interrupted them and stood up.

“Oh, um, okay,” my dad said.

“Sorry. We’ll talk later.” I walked out of the living room and stood in the hallway out of their sight. I could hear them begin to whisper.

“I wonder what that was all about,” my mom said softly, “and her deal with food lately? It’s strange.”

“I know,” my dad said, “but don’t say anything about her weight. She gets so defensive.”

“Not to mention the way her clothes have been fitting her,” my mom said.

My heart dropped into my stomach. I went into my room and shut the door while tears streamed down my face. I knew they saw how fat I was, too. Even my mom saw that I was obsessed with food. I stood in front of my mirror again and glared at the cow staring back at me. I lay down on the floor and did some more crunches.
The greatest Men in history
are remembered
for strange tidbits:
ever lied, Oedipus
Complex, killing God,
Crucifixion, Aryan race,
kites, keys, and lightning,
morphine and heroin (suicide?),
sitting under a tree, et cetera.
Great Women are remembered
for being women first:
Abolishing sexism means
abolishing gender as a word
as an idea, as a concept, or making
many many genders, like mushrooms.

Egyptians believed they lived
as long as their names were
remembered: Immortality.
What if we relived the tidbits
we're known for for forever
and ever after? I am already
slipping down fast. I hope
this isn't a true (inside)
sanity or I'll live out eternity
with the help of a lobotomy.

If it sells, enhance and
repeat: Capitalism. All
we get is the tidbit to consume
with our eyes (Technology)
as advertising budgets
reach billions. I know I'm
American because my school
had a bias called American English
Latin Greek Hebrew Egyptian.

The dark age comes anon
so I hope they find this song
and dig my bones up bit by
tidbit till all the pieces fit.
The info-archeologist
will reconstruct me at the
museum. School buses
will unload, children will awe
at my size, (line joined by line
forming a letter joined by letter
forming a word joined by word
forming a symbol joined by symbol
forms abstract thought) then stick
gum on the language.

And what a silly poem this will be when
heroes are known by name like you or
tidbit: but you already know this?
Tell me
television
what should my vision should see.
Your well read,
punctuated,
dotted even?
I love the mall or Church.
I hate school (at least
the Learning part).

Great people break
the norms out of necessity
not principle?
Things that are expensive
are better than things
that are cheap.

Great times Breed
Great Women, or
vice versa?
Not "who
will be remembered?"
But what!
Contemplations at Sunset

Jennifer Legault
Roommates
Lenisa Kelly

“Go in,” I told myself, “just place one foot in front of the other and walk right in.” But no matter how much I commanded myself, my body would not obey. Instead, my feet turned in the opposite direction, away from the unfamiliar restaurant where my date sat patiently waiting for me, a man that would never show, and toward the familiarity of my two-bedroom apartment three blocks away.

The walk home was colder than usual for a September evening, but then again it could have just been me. Other than the weather, everything seemed to be the same. The same half dead glow of the streetlight at the corner of Shadow and Dusk, the same disheveled, bearded man on the corner, asleep in his own urine but content nonetheless and the same blazing neon open sign on Antonio’s Restaurant calling to the masses like moths to a porch light at the darkest hour of the night. If all was the same, then why am I not? How could I have altered myself in the midst of my own unchanged world? The questions followed me those three long blocks looming in the darkness, creating an uncomfortable tension, like a person being closely followed but too afraid to look over their shoulder. Each step brought me closer to home, closer to my place of refuge, and away from the overbearing question that so threatened my sane mind.

Sanity. As I opened the door to 1321, the rush of the cold air inflowing from the frosty September night wafted by my face like a wisp of a horse’s tail. I knew the window was open, cracked seven inches, no more, no less. That’s how she always did it, seven inches exactly, whether it was intentionally calculated or not.

She didn’t stir, not even the slightest. Reilly was the lightest sleeper I had ever known. She could hear a car alarm three blocks away in the middle of a REM cycle and know the exact time it went off and how long it took the cautious owner to turn it off. But when I entered the room, she never moved a muscle. She just lay there on the couch, curled up like a newborn covered in the innocence provided a by triple-count Egyptian cotton comforter. Whether it was the jingle of my keys, the melody of my footsteps walking down the hallway’s hardwood floors, or the rhythmic tone of my breathing as I exhaled the world outside and inhaled the
safety of the apartment that two childhood best friends had made into a home, whatever the indicator, it kept her at ease.

Her comforter had slipped from under her chin as she stretched in mid-sleep. I pulled it back to its proper location, caressing her forehead, then slowly moving to her cheek. She was even more beautiful when she slept. Her left hand fell from beneath the sheets into the open air, and something caught my eye. It was a glint of expense, a shine of decadence, a twinkle of commitment. I leaned in closer; it was a ring. I stood up and walked to my room.

“Rest. All I need is rest,” I told myself as I climbed into the bed fully clothed, too emotionally exhausted to even take off my shoes. It was no more than a minute later that I felt myself fall into a deep sleep. Sometimes I could feel when my body had finally fallen asleep, when my mind was so relaxed that clarity was an open field I could clearly see from a distance. “I can get closer,” I told myself.

Reilly’s hair was like the ocean at one in the morning, thick, dark waves cascading over the beauty of her naturally-striking face. She held an apple in her right hand, as red as freshly spilled blood upon a stark white floor. I looked deep into her dark brown eyes, though they looked like the color of an abyss. I felt her say, “it’s okay.” without even mouthing a word. It was her eyes; they spoke to me, they understood me, they said the words of comfort that I needed to hear though my ears went deaf. I moved to get out of the bed, placing one foot at a time onto the floor that was surprisingly warm: one step, two step, three step, four. Why was she moving away?

“Reilly!” I tried to call out to her, but my voice was gone, not a word could escape. She wasn’t walking but was clearly moving away from me. A door appeared out of the nothingness, large and dreary. She glanced over her delicate shoulder at me in remorse, keeping her eyes down as if she didn’t want to go but had no other choice. “Reilly, wait!” I again tried to call out, but nothing still. She closed the door, but it was no longer a door but a window. The window showed my reflection like a mirror, asking me for a look. I obliged.

My eyes opened to the glare of the red numbers of my alarm clock flashing midnight. “Power outage,” I thought. I rubbed my eyes as I stepped out of bed and headed towards the living room.

I found Reilly not on the couch where I had left her, but at the kitchen table staring at two objects in front of her. It seemed like it was becoming an ongoing theme. For the past few
never really had anywhere to go, but I didn’t want to take the chance of running into the two of them together.

Reilly was deep in thought staring at the two objects. One, the crafted, plastic keychain I had made her when I went away to summer camp. The other, the ring I saw earlier that made my heart drop. I stared at her for a long minute. She was clutching the keychain with desperation and twiddling the ring in her other hand.

She always carried that keychain; she said it meant a lot to her. That summer was the first time that we had ever not seen each other for more than two weeks since we met in first grade. That summer was good to her. She matured, blossomed, and since then everyday had gotten more beautiful.

I kept staring. We were like two passing ships in the night, aware of each other but with no real interaction. Matt, the new boyfriend, seemed to be the new captain of her vessel while I felt like I was left to swab the poop deck. She glanced up from her daze.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I replied, “you look busy.”

“Naw, just confused,” she corrected.

“About?”

She glanced down at the keychain and the ring then back at me.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

But we didn’t need to. I knew, she knew, we both knew what was coming next. I finally realized why I couldn’t bring myself to go into the restaurant, why I had been avoiding her the last couple of months, and why she sat in serious contemplation of the worthless keychain and expensive ring that lay in front of her.

“Sure,” I said.

I walked over to the table and stood still over her. Our eyes fixated on each other, and without notice or warning, I kissed her.
Luger
Michael Aloise

In trains we came,
To work they said.
Repay our debt.
They lied.

My friend is sick.
Alas, we are offered no respite.
Dig the pits,
Stack the Dead,
Burn the bodies.

Forced to burn our own,
Mother and Daughter,
Father and Son,
Families…
Disintegrated by flame.

Ours is a world of bondage.
Cruel wires encase us.
We are too weak to climb.
Guns trained upon our heads.

Guards gnash their teeth,
Their contempt is seething.
Finger lay on trigger.

This is our world,
His world.
Help him, die.
Deny him, die.

Quotas to be met,
We stack our dead,
Ignite the flames,
We release them…

Our breathing labors
Ashes hang on air,
Now part of us.

My friend.
He will be a part of me.
Soon.
Anna Rae looked at her red face in the mirror. She tried to get the redness to go away by applying cold cloths, but it wasn’t working because every time she thought about her job, she started crying. Jobs weren’t easy to come by in small towns.

It was almost five years ago that she moved to Henrietta, Texas, with Tom. They found a place to live, and then she went to the unemployment office. A week later, they sent her for a job at Swenson’s Metal Works. And now, today, the thought of losing her job made her cry.

She paused in her sobbing when she heard the Harley pull into the yard. The front door of the trailer opened and closed. Anna heard footsteps. Tom’s helmet hit the breakfast table, and the refrigerator door opened.

“Where’s the cold ones?” Tom asked. He looked around the refrigerator door when she stepped onto the tile floor. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Oh, ah, I...”

“That woman thing again?” Anna Rae shrugged her shoulders and started to answer, but Tom interrupted. “Whatever. Don’t share.” His head went back into the fridge. “Beer?”

She pulled a six pack out of the freezer. “I went by the cycle shop this morning, and you weren’t there. Where you been all day?”

Tom shrugged his shoulders. “Round,” he said. The recliner in the living room where he sat had grown lopsided from the way he fell into it every night. “Dinner?” he asked as the chair settled into place. Once Tom fell into his chair and located the remote, he didn’t move.

Anna Rae took a package of hamburger out of the freezer. “Thirty-five minutes,” she said, pulling a box of Hamburger Helper out of the cabinet. Anna Rae served him supper in the living room. She sat at the breakfast table eating alone.

Today she noticed that the carpet was old, worn and dirty. The linoleum floor in the kitchen was cracked and curling at the corners. The breakfast table was one that Tom found by the dumpster outside the local café. He brought it home and duct taped a piece of plywood onto the frame. The two chairs were repaired with the same tape across the vinyl seats and backs. After five years there wasn’t much within those walls that wasn’t held together with the grey
tape. She had to find a job, but the outlook was grim. An empty beer can hit the tile floor and rolled to a stop at her foot.

“Babe, get this stuff.” Tom held the empty dishes in the air as if offering sacrifice to the gods that be. “And a beer.”

“Can’t you get up just once?” she asked, and he ignored her. She put her dishes in the sink, grabbed a cold beer and walked the five feet to the living room of the one-bedroom trailer they shared. She stood between Tom and the television. She hated the forty-two inch, hi-def, surround-sound, cable-attached, all-sports-channel TV that occupied a third of their living space. This permanent resident didn’t do anything except entertain Tom at the cost of one hundred and seventy-five dollars a month out of her now non-existent paycheck.

“Move! I’m missing the—” Tom sat up in the chair and squirmed to find a way to look past her. “Damn it, babe, I missed the shot. Now I have to watch it on replay.”

“We need to talk,” she said, taking his dishes.

“Cold one?” He held up his hands. She threw it at him.

“Tom.” She took a deep breath. “Do you want to marry me and have kids?”

“Why ruin a good thing?” he asked settling into his chair. “I’m watching the game.”

After cleaning the kitchen, Anna Rae went to bed. When she finally crawled out the next morning, the sun was making alternating lines of dark and light across the carpet as it tried to break through the window blinds. Tom was still asleep in his chair, and the television was still on when Anna Rae finished showering and dressing. With resume in hand, she headed for the employment office. On the way she stopped at the bank to cash a check to buy groceries. The stores in town wouldn’t take her checks since Tom wouldn’t stop overextending their bank account. She pulled the eighty-eight Nova into the parking space and went inside.

Mrs. Cheadle waved at Anna Rae to come to her window. She had been a teller there for thirty-two years and knew every customer by their account number. “Oh, dear, why don’t you rewrite this for twenty,” she said, handing Anna Rae her check. “That way it will clear.” Mrs. Cheadle smiled at her. “You can’t afford another overdraft fee,” she whispered.

“I just deposited my paycheck three days ago. Are you sure?” Anna Rae felt faint.

“Yes, dear, but,” Mrs. Cheadle said, turning her screen so Anna Rae could see it, “that’s where Tom came in and got a cashier’s check yesterday. You must have forgotten about that.”

Anna Rae stared at the bank computer screen. “Yes, of course, now I remember. How
silly of me? Thank you.” She took her check, tore it in half and left the bank.

Before stepping off the sidewalk, she looked at her car with balding tires, fading paint, a cracked windshield and crumpled bumper from the night Tom hit a light pole on his way home from the bar, and she looked at the seats covered with grey duct tape. If she hadn’t already cried a river, she would have at that very moment. She put the key in the ignition. The car started but belched a grey cloud of smoke. It was officially dead! “Perfect,” she said, getting out of the car and kicking it as hard as she could.

Dale Swenson was coming out of the bank. “Problem with the car again?”

She smiled and looked at the beaten fifty-four year old man. He had tried to keep his company open and continue to employ thirty-six of the town’s inhabitants, but he couldn’t turn the economy around. “I could use a ride home.”

“Sure,” he said and opened the car door for her.

Tom was standing on the deck when they pulled in front of the trailer. Anna Rae stepped out of the car. “Where’s the Nova?” Tom asked, walking to the driver’s side of the car and leaning toward the closed window.

Dale rolled the window down and said, “Died in front of the bank.” Anna Rae watched for a reaction from Tom. “I’ll give you a lift into town so you can check it out,” Dale said.

“Great idea,” Tom said, getting into the car. “Later, babe.”

That night, Anna Rae ate dinner and set a plate in the microwave for Tom. She went to bed early because she found depression to be emotionally draining. When she woke the next morning, she listened for the sound of the television. There was only the sound of the birds. Anna Rae took a cup of coffee outside and sat on the deck, enjoying the sunny spring day. She closed her eyes and listened to the silence, but her moment was disrupted by the sound of a motorcycle.

“Anna Rae,” a man’s voice called to her.

“Yes,” she said without opening her eyes. “Tom’s not here.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know.” Anna opened her eyes as a deputy walked toward the deck.

“You lock him up again for drunk and disorderly?” she asked.

“No, ma’am.” They both looked down the road at a big white van that was stirring up the dust as it drove toward the trailer. “I need for you to let us into the house peaceably.”

Anna Rae stood up. “What for?”
“The television. Bobby from down at the rental place come to get it.”

She walked down the stairs as Bobby got out of the van. Another man got out and went to the back of the van. “I just paid you last week. What’s the deal?”

“Tom stopped by last night and got a refund. Said he needed the money more than the television, and he’s goin’ out of town. Said I should come out and get it today while you was at work. I told him I was sorry that you got laid off but glad to hear you got another job so fast. He says ‘what new job?’ and I says ‘you didn’t know?’ and he says nothin.”

“Oh.” Anna Rae opened the door for Bobby and his helper.

Bobby stopped in the entry and turned toward her. “Tom did mention that he’d be by tomorrow for the Harley. I wish I’d known he’s selling it ‘cause I been lookin’ for a bike. He’s got a buyer from over Wichita Falls. Got a good price, he said, already got a cash down payment from the guy. Mentioned he don’t want nothin more to do with a woman what won’t tell him the truth and all. Says he might be lookin’ for a new place.”

“Really?” Anna Rae pulled open the kitchen drawer where she kept important papers. The title to the Harley was right where she put it a year ago. “Hey, Bobby, can you haul off that chair, too?” Bobby nodded as he and his helper set the television on the dolly. Anna Rae presented the title to the deputy. “Who does the Harley belong to?” she asked.

“It’s in your name,” he said. “Tom can’t sell it unless you sign it over to him.”

“Thank you very much.” She turned to Bobby. “I’ll see you fellas later. Tell Tom I said that you can take anything you want out of here. I got business in town.”

In that moment, Anna Rae knew that there was nothing holding her to this place. She owned her clothes and the Harley that was parked in the shed. And there was the hundred dollars a week that she put in savings at the other bank in town for the past five years, the rainy day account Tom never knew about. Anna Rae threw a few clothes into a knapsack. She grabbed the Harley’s keys off the counter and headed out the door. As an afterthought, she went back inside and grabbed the roll of duct tape Tom kept by the front door, just in case.
Dinner
Greggory Adams

Amber’s entire family is in town, which means that once again there is going to be a large dinner at my house. I find this out when Amber pokes her head in my office, scrunches up her nose and asks me, “Is that what you’re wearing tonight?”

“Jeans and a t-shirt, pretty standard fare with me, babe,” I answer. “How long have we been married now?”

Amber mimes a ha-ha face. “Would you mind putting on at least a shirt with a collar? Then come downstairs. I need you to set the table.” She turns on her heel and is gone again, as quickly as she appeared.

Chips, our chocolate Lab, who has been lying at my feet and gazing out the window, raises her head and cocks it to one side.

“I know,” I say quietly, petting her on her head. “I didn’t hear her say ‘please’ either.”

I emerge from the closet in one of the few shirts I own that has a collar, a black and red soccer jersey from South America. In big white letters across the chest it says “Quilmes.” I have no idea what it means. Amber’s Brother Number Two gave it to me when he got home from spending two years in Argentina doing missionary work.

Before I know it, the family starts arriving. First, Amber’s mom and dad to help finish getting dinner ready. Brother Number Three (the 16 year old) is in tow as well and plops on the couch, beginning to channel surf.

Brother Number One arrives with the one lone grandchild. He takes the remote from Number Three and slides on the couch next to him, my big screen home theatre setup dwarfing his 20 inch T.V. he took with him when he joined the Air Force and uprooted his family (and the only grandchild) to the other side of the country. His wife puts the child down, and as usual when they are at my house, both immediately suffer a condition I like to call “Child Amnesia,” meaning they both forget they have a child and leave it to the rest of us to watch her for them while they are here.

Once free, the toddler makes a beeline for the stairs and begins to climb. Her grandfather saves her from a tumble, drops her in the lap of her father who is intently changing
channels, looking for something that he’s interested in. She hops down and goes straight back to the stairs.

The toddler’s mother asks if she can help, but I think secretly she hopes the answer is no, because when my mother-in-law tells her she can make a cold spinach dip and hands her a recipe card, she stands awkwardly with one foot on top of the other, biting her lip quietly saying, “Ummm,” over and over.

I finish setting the table amid the confusion and chaos of:

“Should we use these plates, or these?”

“The baby’s on the stairs again!”

“Actually, we’re going to do buffet style, so take all of the plates off the table and just leave them on the counter. Oh, no, not those plates. Get the white ones from the other cabinet.”

Brother Number Two and his young bride stroll in just in time to sit down. I reach out to shake his hand and give the half hug that guys typically do when he stands back and gives me the once over.

“I’ve been looking for that football jersey,” he says, referring to soccer by its more appropriate name. “What are you doing with it?”

“You gave it to me,” I answer flatly.

“I don’t think so,” he answers, walking around to the other side of the table. “I think you’re going to have to give it back.” He then hugs his mother like he’s the Messiah returned.

“The food is ready,” Amber’s father announces, poking his head through the dining room door. “Come in the kitchen, so we can bless it.”

We all gather together in our familial groups, everyone looking to Amber’s dad, the patriarch. He nods at me, his hand out, palm up, saying, “Patrick, this is your house.”

It is a small gesture, but one that means the world to me. It’s as if he understands what I fight so hard for, the sanctity of my home. I know that when they leave, all three siblings and the two wives will not have washed one dish. Most will be left sitting on the table, and any plans I have for watching television are over as Amber’s entire family will sit around my television and dominate the remote. It has played out this way several times before, and I don’t see that changing tonight. Amber’s father realizes this, and even if those five words fell on deaf ears, I am grateful for the attempt on his part to remind everyone else they are in my house.
I ask Brother Number Three to say the blessing on the food, which he attempts to do but cannot without laughing because Brother Number One keeps rubbing his hand up and down Brother Number Three’s thigh. Thankfully I hear the word “Amen,” and dinner is off. Almost.

"Is there somewhere I can put my purse?” the wife of Brother Number Two asks. They’ve only been married a few months. She’s not yet out of her teens, from a very wealthy family in Southern California. While not poor, Amber’s family is not rich. The two families are indeed from different social circles. The bride’s mother spoke nary a word to any of us and only once or twice to Amber’s mother. Amber’s mother, being the kind and generous person she is, set all that aside and still does her best to welcome the new bride into the family.

“Put it wherever you want,” I shrug.

“Well, you don’t understand. This is a Coach purse,” she explains, saying the word “Coach” very slowly as if she’s a kindergarten teacher explaining a new concept to a five year old. “It cost a lot of money. You can’t just set it anywhere, especially when there are...” she looks around at Chips and the cats in their various positions around the room, “...animals around.”

“Yes, Chips has been known to go into Amber’s purse and steal her credit cards. I ended up with three dozen cases of Milk Bones delivered to the front door. Thankfully, I cancelled the order of Omaha Steaks. You wanna talk expensive.”

She looks at me with a look of confusion and, I think, a little pity.

“Here, sweetie,” Amber says, taking the purse from New Bride. “I’ll put it somewhere safe.”

Plates are dished out, and I hear Amber’s mom ask where the cold spinach dip ended up and look to see Toddler’s Mom duck into the dining room. Amber’s mom continues searching the fridge before finally giving up and going to sit down.

I somehow end up last on the plate line and, when I walk into the dining room, see that somehow I’m also not even sitting next to my wife. I take a seat across from Brother Number Three and next to New Bride. Her plate has the tiniest portions, just this side of not being rude, and I hear her whisper to her husband that she wants to go out to eat after they eat here because she doesn’t like anything on her plate.
“But Babes,” he responds with his mouth full and less of a whisper, “there’s a ton of food here, and besides, we don’t have the money to eat out a lot on this trip.”

“Just have your parents give you some money, Babies!” she answers, calling him by his pet name, making his mind up for him.

“Hey Babies,” I call out, “Can you please pass the salt?” It goes unheeded. I could reach across New Bride’s plate and grab it, but I’m trying not to become a total Neanderthal in her eyes. I’m barely homo sapien, not knowing what a Coach purse is, let alone caring.

The conversation turns to plans about what to do the few days everyone is together. No one can agree on what to do, on what day, and at what time.

“Let’s go down to the Galleria!” New Bride exclaims.

“I want to go to the shooting range,” Brother Number One calls out.

“Shopping does sound like fun,” Brother Number Two chimes in. Babes and Babies are quite the power shoppers. Before ending up with Babes, Amber and her family used to tease Brother Number Two about being a metrosexual, the term used to signify a (usually) straight man who spends a lot of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle.

“I want to do something together,” Brother Number One protests. “Shopping is just going to split everyone up. What’s the point?”

“Oh, but the shooting range isn’t?” New Bride retorts, using her fork to slowly spread her food around on her plate, giving the appearance she ate something.

“Well, we could go shopping for a new gun for you, then take you to the shooting range to learn how to shoot it,” her husband offers. She smiles at the idea suddenly revolving around her.

Other ideas are thrown out, including a trip to Galveston on a particular day.

“I’m in class that day,” I call out as everyone around the table continues planning. “I have class all day that day,” I say a second time with the same result.

I glance at Brother Number Three across the table from me.

“Purple elephant snot shot green Pez at the wounded donkey,” I say flatly. He bursts out laughing. If what I say doesn’t matter, it shouldn’t matter what I say.

“Oh, but Patrick is in class that day,” Amber, sitting at the other end of the table, realizes with disappointment.

“So?” Brother Number One asks before quickly saying, “Oh, plan B then.”
This conversation fizzes and soon turns to other things, news about high school friends and old neighbors who have since moved on. I quietly finish my dinner and can hardly contain my quiet laughter when New Bride’s light bulb goes off and she asks, “Wait, so are going to go buy me a gun or not?”

Each time I attempt to join in the conversation, I am over-talked by some other member of the family. Time and again I begin to say something and am cut off by all three brothers, my mother-in-law, and at one point even my wife. I feel like the runt of a litter, continually being kicked away from a teat.

I turn back to her brother and resume my gibberish, trying to say the most nonsensical things that pop into my head.

“Scotch tape sometimes tastes like earwax.”

They discuss politics.

“I’m Henry the Eighth I am!” I sing out.

They move on to movies and discuss a new movie starring Matthew McConaughey, whom Amber’s mother has an admitted heavy crush on.

“I just love it when he takes his shirt off,” she gushes. Her husband rolls her eyes.

“Mmm. If I were a woman,” I say to Brother Number Three, who erupts into laughter. He enjoys the game, and it’s nice to have one person listening.


“Yes, eating nothing has the tendency to do that,” I mutter. This is when the table goes quiet and everyone looks at me. Amber’s eyes are especially lit with fire. Brother Number One shakes his head, and the conversation slowly builds again.

I smile and grab my plate to take it to the sink, then head upstairs to my office. Chips gets up and follows. I know I will hear more about this later tonight.
Second Place Poetry Winner

Recollection
Jacquelyn Brooks

Written on every line of your face,
I see the burden of recollection.
Its weight oppressing your shoulders,
Sliding like a falling boulder
Settling in your stomach,
Invading your soul,
Rendering you helpless,
While the mind voices mutilate surrounding silence.

The metallic taste of despair fills my throat,
Watching you, blind to relief.
Wishing I could slide a warm hand
Over your wrinkled brow, like an iron
And remove all worry
Or at least throw back the curtains,
And raise the window,
To allow in the jasmine-laden sunshine of today.
Inkling Contributors

Prose and Poetry

Greggory Adams is a freshman history student who enjoys writing and spending time with his new daughter.

Michael Alose is a sophomore history student who pursues reading as a hobby.

Gaylord Anguish is a sophomore who creates stained glass pieces. He is retired and works as a piano tuner.

Yara Arreola is a sophomore studying child psychology who enjoys writing, shopping, painting, drawing, watching television, and eating sushi.

Jacquelyn Brooks is a sophomore English student who works as an event planner. She enjoys writing, good conversation, and Beat poetry.

Aaron Cohen Brown is currently pursuing a career in film-making as screenwriter, director, and producer.

Jessica Chance is a sophomore English and kinesiology student. Her hobbies include writing, yoga, mountain biking, general fitness, and salsa dancing.

Patricia Clay is a sophomore English literature major studying history and Spanish whose interests include writing, reading, gardening, and playing Sudoku.

Kelly Coleman is a sophomore whose interests include watching baseball, camping and spending time with family.

Kim O’Brien Jones is a floral designer in pursuit of a career as a writer. She is also affiliated with the Houston Collie Rescue.

Lenisa Kelly is a sophomore nursing student. Her favorite things are people-watching, reading, and Rice Krispie treats.

Jennifer Legault is a sophomore studying neuroscience. Her hobbies include playing piano, painting, and drawing.

Joseph Loving is an art student who enjoys international music.

Meaghin Lucero is a sophomore chemical engineering student who enjoys swimming, reading, history, writing, practicing an active religious life, and spending time with family.

Edgar Murillo is a sophomore English student. His hobbies include aviation, horseback riding, archery, and radio-controlled modeling.
Kenna Oaks is a freshman studying psychology. She is an avid cyclist.

Ken Turner is a freshman education major and musician. He enjoys singing, playing drums, and taking care of his family.

Patrick Stockwell is a sophomore English student who enjoys walking his dogs, reading, cooking, bonfires, film, and TV on DVD.

Michael Wainwright is a sophomore biology and English student. In his spare time, his various pursuits include photography, writing, indie entertainment, and driving fast.

Pam Waldren is a writer. She also grows roses and plays the piano.

Cheryl Williams is a sophomore education student.

Artwork

Lindsay Braun is a sophomore studying communication design. She enjoys music, photography, and tubing down the rivers of the Texas Hill Country.

Daniel Colvin is a freshman photography student whose interests include religion, photography, music, and the arts.

Nhat Ho is a sophomore architecture major. His main interest is the Grande Coffee Frappucino, with whip, from Starbucks ($3.57, including tax).

Pam Hulbert is a community education student. She enjoys gardening and all forms of art.

Jennifer Legault is a sophomore studying neuroscience. Her hobbies include playing piano, painting, and drawing.

Cheryl Mallams is a sophomore who enjoys photography.

Rachel Moses is a photography student who enjoys studying different cultures and all forms of art. She hopes to one day share her love of photography with others through teaching.

Jacob Sandy is a freshman studying photography. His other interests include music and art.

Patrick Stockwell is a barista who, when annoyed, will serve you decaf.

Elizabeth Williams is a sophomore accounting major whose interests include photography, reading, and gardening.
Fall *Inkling* Staff

From Left: Kelly Coleman, Joseph Loving, Harry Perales, Lenisa Kelly, Jessica Chance, Patrick Stockwell, Yara Arreola, Dr. Rebecca Tate

Spring *Inkling* Staff

From Left: Lenisa Kelly, Shellie Callahan, Nico Gadberry, Courtney Lumpkin, Kim Lumpkin, Jessica Chance, Patrick Stockwell, Kelly Coleman, Greggory Adams, Kenna Oaks, Ashley Crooks, Harry Perales, Nhat Ho, Joseph Loving
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; Kim Carter, Assistant Professor of English; Dr. Greg Oaks, Professor of English; Catherine Olson, Professor of English; Dr. Van Piercy, 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.

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