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# INKLING

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Exposed

Daniel Colvin
First Place Poetry Winner

The Day a Strange Bird Flew Into My Coffee
Jana Moore

How cliché that it had to be the downtown coffee house
but that’s where she landed,
my creative muse,
my writing idol,
my teacher,
magician,
good witch of any which way you care to go.

And the day was not abnormal:
no Times New Roman rainbows
appeared in the sky
above The Ground Floor café,
but I was summoned
to sit with her students and listen
as infant poems were squeezed from the stacks
and adolescent stanzas were eased out of
denim pockets or alphabetic resting places
with the nervous thumbing through of notebooks
and curious looking faces.

I am certain of two things:
people who would not otherwise write
and poems that would not see the light of day
were drawn into being
with one gaze,
one syllable,
sometimes one lifted brow
from this woman,
the muse
arriving always
with her long hair swept up
and pinned in the loveliest
haphazard hairdos
with gauzy sea-green or black or purple
shifting layers of earthy dresses
so they too could flow easily
between the categories.
But the first lesson you learned
when you enrolled in a class of hers
was that categories didn’t exist,
and when anyone dared to list her
under presumptuous narrow words,
she simply tilted back her head
and swallowed them like swords.

She knew how to chew
the bottom out of underhanded criticisms
and would show you how to tread water
while you unraveled the anchor.

Then came the first time you heard
the woman read.

She held classes in her living room,
and wouldn’t you know it,
the walls were purple,
the rug was soft,
the chairs and sofa were velvet,
the paintings were originals,
and the candles were everywhere.

For every poem her voice produced
a sacred instrument,
and she didn’t speak in flutes
or violins.
I tell you she picked the heavy ones,
the hardest ones to play,
pipe organs,
accordions.
The words
came out
on staccato
monotone
oboés
so that her ego could not enter
and fiddle with the meaning.
She was
just like
a medium
channeling
one word at a time
from the poet
who wrote it
so your ears could stand to hold it
truth by truth by
rhythmic gift of truth.

And when she managed to coax
a hideous beautiful truth out of you
onto paper
into words you wouldn’t recognize
your own voice saying,
as you shook and shattered
and squinted and scattered,
at the moment you would have landed
and fractured,
she caught you
and held you with eyes or hands
until you wanted to write
again.
Carpe Confection  
Tiffany Thor

Chelle eyed the death-by-chocolate cake with the intensity of a pubescent schoolboy who just stumbled across a peephole into the girls’ locker room.

“You going to have a piece?” Miriam asked, tossing her empty plate into the large trash can that had been dragged into the office kitchen for the celebration.

The question broke Chelle’s trance, and she hyper-blinked as her eyes refocused on reality.

“Um, no. Thanks,” she said with a slight smile. “I’m watching my weight. You know, trying to lose another, oh, 40 pounds.”

“All right, then. More for the rest of us!” Miriam replied.

“Okay, everyone, back to your desks. Party’s over,” Dave, the Office Manager, announced with raised hands as he motioned for them to retreat back to their cubicles. “Happy birthday, Pam.”

Oh thank God, Chelle thought. Yes, let’s vacate the premises before someone commits a crime.

The chatter of excitement died down to a low murmur with an occasional cackle from some leftover conversation piercing the air.

Watching my weight, Chelle thought as she made her way back to her twenty square feet. Watching it go up.

She sighed deeply and plopped down in front of her computer. Her rickety chair wobbled under her weight, releasing a loud, metallic droning noise as she pivoted to her right as if to wail, “Uncle!”

Chelle shifted to balance on the seat. She rested an elbow on her desk as her free hand grabbed her mouse and shook it back and forth quickly to awaken the computer. With another loud sigh, she propped her head up on her hand and waited for the screen to greet her with today’s calorie count.

“Oh my God,” someone said to no one in particular while passing through the cubicle maze, carrying a small paper dessert plate and fork. “That was the best cake I’ve ever had!”

Chelle rubbed her forehead, then moved her hands down to cover her eyes. She drew in a deep breath and separated her fingers, then peeked through her hands at the total before her: 562.

562? And it wasn’t even lunch yet?

With another sigh Chelle scanned the list of “calories consumed” so far that day, foods she should remember adding into the system after she ate them. 562. With a goal of 1500 per day, that didn’t leave much room for a rewarding piece of cake.

“Unless that’s all I eat today. Hm hm hmmmm…” she said under her breath, rocking her head back and forth matter-of-factly.
She released another drawn-out sigh and eyed her emails, her head again resting on her hand. Maybe if she just ate some crackers that would help fill the void. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a sleeve of Ritz. She tugged on either side of the package top, but the wrapping didn’t budge. She grabbed one flap with one hand and tried to rip along the sleeve’s seam with the other. The seam ripped haphazardly, releasing a small puff of air and sending crackers flying in all directions. As she reached down to pick them up off the floor, her chair rolled over one, crushing it into dust. Oh well, she thought as she downed two at once.

Ahhh, the buttery explosion of Ritz crackers accented by the hint of salty aftertaste. That was surely worth 240 calories, she thought as she downed the last one and added it to the log.

Mmm, yummy. But no chocolate cake.

The number 802 stared back at her.

Water. Water would surely fill her stomach and take her mind off the piece of paradise that floated like an earthly island against the whiteness of the laminate kitchen countertop.

She made her way to the kitchen and pulled a glass down from the cabinet. Turning to walk to the water cooler, she passed the cake, slowly, her eyes never looking away.

Maybe if I just smell the cake I’ll feel satisfied, she thought.

She tucked her hair behind her ears as she started to slowly lean into the cake to breathe in its intoxicating aroma.

“Hey, Chelle, whatcha doin’?” she heard from out of nowhere.

She stood up quickly and headed back towards the water cooler.

“Nothing. Just getting water,” she said with a smile, raising her glass as if to prove that was truly her intention.

It was Dave, the Manager. Or Mr. Personally Impersonal, as Chelle called him. He liked to smile and tell new hires he had an “open door” style of managing; in reality what he meant was so long as the front doors were open, you’d better be working. He was always trying to act like he knew his employees had a life beyond the office walls, but he treated any conversation outside of deadlines like a fire drill—staying low to the ground and finding the nearest exit.

Dave reached into the cabinet to pull out a glass for himself.

“Um-hummm,” he said, shooting her a sideways glance.

Chelle smiled back and gulped her water as if it was the first she’d had in days.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air.

“Well, back to work!” Chelle said.

She walked past the cake, employing every ounce of restraint she had to keep her from nonchalantly sticking out a finger for a drive-by drag along the icing on the side.
Back at her desk, the number mocked her: 802.

“Chelle, get a grip,” she said aloud to herself.

She minimized the window with the caloric count and clicked on her Internet icon.

A chorus line of chocolate-covered Raisinettes immediately greeted her.

Damn pop-ups, she thought. Has IT not heard of pop-up blockers?

She closed the annoying ad and scanned her news-related home page to catch up with the world: war here, killings there, another Hollywood break-up, and fruit crops freezing everywhere.

Fruit. Now, why didn’t she think of that?

She again reached into her satchel and pulled out a small Tupperware container of sliced strawberries and a plastic fork. She speared a large berry and placed it on her tongue. As she bit down into it, she felt the explosion of its sweet juice trickle down her throat. She took two more and leaned back onto her chair as if in ecstasy. Oh, how she loved fresh strawberries, the soft and succulent innards encased within the tantalizing outer texture created by its seeds. Oh yeah, she thought, this is definitely worth 160 calories.

“Hey, Chelle!”

She opened her eyes to see her cubicle neighbor, Dan, peering over the top of their shared wall.

“Looks like someone’s really enjoying their strawberries. We gotta get you a boyfriend, Chelle,” he teased. “You know what I like? Really fresh ones sprinkled with sugar to make them even sweeter. My wife sometimes makes double-chocolate-dipped ones that are just incredible. You know, when I’ve been a good boy,” he added with a wink. “Well,” he said, looking down at the stacks of paperwork on his desk and breathing in deeply, “back to work!”

Chelle glared at the spot where he had just been standing. He just had to say the “c” word, didn’t he, she thought. She sucked on her teeth and put down the container. She pulled up the calorie count and added the strawberries to the log as she watched the total change: 962.

She looked at the clock: 11 a.m. And 538 calories left to spend for the day.

Chelle rubbed her face with her hand, her mouth open as she moved her hands down her chin and paused. It’s close enough to lunchtime, she thought. I could just go have my lunch. But then I have to walk past the cake. Damn it. Someone please come by to ask if I want take-out. Please, please, please.

“Chelle?” she heard from the hallway.

“Yes?”

It was Denise. Oh, how happy she was to see Denise. Denise never brought a lunch but was nice enough to go get take-out for everyone who wanted it. Rumor had it she was actually out working up an appetite with Freddie from Finance—and not in the gym. The take-out run was her cover-up. She
was, undoubtedly, coming by for lunch orders. Where would it be from today? Who cares? It wouldn’t be chocolate cake. Surely, wherever it was was had salads.

“Hey, Chelle. Did you get those prelims I sent about the Q4 earnings?”

Chelle’s shoulders dropped as they felt the weight of disappointment. “Uh, yeah. I was just about to look over those.”

“Great! Let me know if I need to add anything.”

“Hey, Denise,” Chelle called as Denise turned to walk away. “Are you doing a take-out run today?” she asked, adding a smile like a child asking for candy.

Denise stopped and leaned back to look into Chelle’s space. “Oh, nope, sorry. I wish. But I have a lunch date with the dentist’s drill today. See ya.”

Chelle sat staring into the hallway for a moment before she spun around in her chair and returned to her emails. Pulling up the reports Denise had sent, she looked over the numbers to check for mistakes. She felt a yawn creep up as she stared systematically at the graphics. Her mind began to wander as she flipped through the pages…yes, yes, she got it, correct, yep, oh goody, graphs, that should be exciting, chart, chart, pie chart.

Pie chart. Like little slivers of pie…or cake.

“All right, already,” she said under her breath as she stood up and headed for the kitchen, stopping short of the doorway. I can do this. She put her hand up to the right side of her face to shield herself from seeing the cake and moved to the freezer. She pulled out her Lean Cuisine and walked backwards to the microwave, careful not to turn toward the cake. Two minutes, thirty seconds to salvation.

Ha-HA, she thought triumphantly. I win! She patted herself on the back and began moving her shoulders back and forth in a small victory dance. I did it, I did it, I did it, she chanted in her head as she moved her feet to a beat that only she could hear.

“Dare I ask what you’re doing?”

Startled, Chelle stopped in her tracks and swung around to see who it was. It was Debby from HR. Skinny, snotty, shitty Debby. Worse yet, though, Chelle was now facing the cake…dead-on.

“Oh MAN!” Chelle let out, throwing her hands up into the air. “Well, I was celebrating how I outsmarted the chocolate cake,” She motioned toward the counter. “But, quite frankly, you just burst my party balloons by making me look at it. Again.”

“I’m sorry, Chelle. Really I am,” Debby said, the corners of her mouth curling up into a smug smirk.

The microwave dinged. Chelle grabbed her boxed lunch and shuffled back to her desk, defeated.
As she peeled the film off the formerly-frozen feast, she tried to convince herself that this was going to do the trick. I mean really, she thought, this is better than...I don’t know….airline food. Airline food sucks. And certainly has more than—Chelle picked up the box and looked at the nutritional content on its underside—370 calories and 4 grams of fat! What is it with airline food anyway? That fruit they always give you, it’s the world’s smallest fruit. Like there’s a whole orchard of miniature apple trees somewhere, producing these teeny, tiny—

“Chelle! Whudup, Mon Cherry?”

Cherry, Chelle thought. Seriously?

She didn’t have to look up to know it was Greg the mail guy—or “Correspondence Distributor” as he liked to be called. Greg always sprinkled his conversations with various foreign languages, all of which he grossly mispronounced.

“Hey, Greg, what’s up?”

“SSDD, meinen freund. S...S...D...D;” he said as he tossed a bound stack of envelopes into her inbox like a stylized free throw shot. “Hasta mañana.”

“See ya, Greg!” she said, raising her fork to him before sinking it into the last bite of plastic-like penne.

She maximized her calorie count screen and logged in the latest, then scrolled her eyes down to the tally at the bottom of the table: 1332.

Chelle shifted her eyes over to the clock: noon. Five more hours of my workday, 168 calories left to consume. I can do this. Lunch helped a bit. Yeah, I can do this. I’ll just go straight to bed when I get home. Totally doable.

She shrunk the window again and reached into her satchel, pulling out her iPod. She put the ear buds into her ears and began to hit a work groove.

She gasped as she felt someone tapping her on the shoulder.

Chelle spun around, the ear buds ripping out of her ears as the cord caught the arm of her chair. She placed her hand on her chest as she caught her breath.

“Pam, hey, how’s it going?” she asked, puffing.

“Hey, Chelle.” Pam leaned onto Chelle’s desk top. In her hand was a plate with a huge piece of chocolate cake.

The enemy has infiltrated my base camp, Chelle thought.

“So, how’s your birthday been so far? We’re what now—29?” Chelle asked, her eyes shifting from Pam’s eyes to the cake and back again.

“Mm hm, 29. For the sixth time, but who’s counting?” Pam said with a chuckle. “Today’s been great!” she added, a small spray of chocolate cake flying from her mouth. She made a belated attempt to
contain it with her fist. “Did you get some of this cake? It’s another one of Sandy’s creations. It’s unbelievable!”

“Uh, no, I didn’t. I’ve actually been trying to avoid it all day. Swimsuit season begins in approximately 132 days, 15 hours, and 11 minutes, ya know?”

“Oh, forget about it, Chelle! It’s low-fat! I told Sandy if her cake made me regain a single ounce of the 80 pounds I’ve lost, I’d tell her husband about the P.O. box she has for the credit cards he doesn’t know about.” Pam let out an ornery chuckle under her breath. “So she altered the ingredients to make it low-cal, low-fat.”

Chelle sat, frozen with shock.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she asked, her speech slow and monotone.

“About the credit cards?” Pam replied.

“No, the cake.”

“No, huh-uh.” Pam continued to shovel cake into her mouth in between responses. She snorted another small laugh. “I wouldn’t kid about something like that. HEL-LO!”

“Well, just how low-cal is this cake, Pam?” Chelle asked, still speaking dryly in disbelief.

“It’s only 250 calories a slice. Can you believe it? I didn’t. I made Sandy give me the recipe so I could recalculate the caloric counts of all the ingredients myself.”

Chelle drew in a long, deep breath and held it. She closed her eyes, scratched a nonexistent itch under her chin, and slowly let out her breath. She turned and looked at her computer, pulled the calorie count window back up, and looked at the current total again: 1332. She highlighted the column of calories consumed from the crackers through the Lean Cuisine and clicked for that total: 770.

7-fricking-70?! she thought. I could’ve had three pieces for that. 770. And some extra icing!

“Screw it,” Chelle mumbled, pushing herself away from her desk and starting for the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Pam asked.

“The kitchen. I’m getting myself a piece of that damn cake!” Chelle replied.

“It’s all gone,” Pam yelled after her. “I got the last piece.”
The Work of Hands
Angela Broussard-Moore

Her palms were coarse as pigskin,
hands used for over half a century
to wash windows, floors, chop wood
and midwife the babies into the world.
Her hands were dirty from shaping the soil on the farm,
yet at the end of the day her fingers were never weary
but were the source of making a way
before they would be cleaned and placed to rest
from the power of one day’s work forced.
Every morning she restarted her day
working her fingers to the bone as planned.
Maybe she had hands truly made for a man.
A Moment in Love
Liem Nguyen

It took me ten minutes of driving from my house to the Park and Ride on the 249 Freeway where I got a bus at 6:00 a.m. to my office in downtown Houston. I parked my car in a lot and walked to the station.

It was late in the fall and still dark this early in the morning. A cold wind touched my face that caused pain like a sharp cut. I tried to hide my head under my hood. Off in a corner, I saw a woman standing alone. She was small and became smaller when she embraced herself to keep warm. Her long, black hair covered half of her face and went down to her waist. I thought, “She is Asian, and she is new here.” After taking this bus every day for five years, I knew every passenger although none of us talked to each other.

When the bus came, she passed in front of me. I held my breath, surprised to find that she was my neighbor, a Vietnamese. I nodded, and she did the same in return. At that moment, I saw sadness in her eyes. She sat in the front seat, and I sat in the back seat of the bus. I felt sad. Perhaps I was sensitive to her sadness and her sense of exile, she who was earning a living in a foreign country. On the bus, I saw her back bending like a bamboo tree that has endured all the hardness in life. Next to her were white and black Americans. She seemed lonely like me, a man who has been going to work more than five years in this deadly silence.

When I got off the bus, I didn’t see her. She had gotten off the bus at an earlier station. In the evening I took the bus back to the station at the Park and Ride on the 249 Freeway. I looked at every passenger at every bus stop to find her. I missed her, and my efforts were in vain. I didn’t know why my soul felt so chaotic. It never had happened in my life before. That night, I dreamed about her, standing lonely at a bus station, looking at me, but I couldn’t reach her.

The next morning, I saw her again at the same corner of the bus station. I felt some relief. I nodded at her and walked toward her. She nodded and smiled at me. I knew that she wanted me to go along with her. On the bus, she moved to the back seat with me. I felt she was something that belonged to me. The bus made a quick turn that pushed our bodies to press against each other. Neither of us wanted to leave this position that warmed us on this cold morning. Perhaps she and I had the same idea: American passengers thought we were a Vietnamese couple. I was single, 45 years old, and this was the first time I sat so closely to a woman that I could feel her warmth. I imagined that one day I would embrace her in my arms. She got off the bus a few blocks before my stop. In the evening I didn’t meet her on the return trip.
One week later, I was surprised to see her standing at my bus stop at 6:00 in the evening. I asked, “Why are you standing here?” I felt so excited.

“Oh, I want to go with you.”

“With me?” My heart was pounding in my chest. I smoothed my hair to distract from my pleasure, which I was sure must have been all too visible on my face.

“Yes, from now on I will go with you on the returning trip.” She smiled. “I left my company at 5:00 p.m. My bus stop is on a dark corner, so it is better to come here to get the bus with you.”

“Why does your husband not drive you to work?” I knew her husband. Often as I left my house in the morning, I had noticed him driving her to work in his car.

“He left a month ago,” she replied, her eyes glistening a bit.

On the way home, she told me the whole story about her husband. He’d gambled. Free trips on buses took him and other Vietnamese from Houston to gamble at casinos in Louisiana. He left home in the evening every Friday and came back home at midnight on Sunday. He lost all the money that both had saved. Then he quit his job and never returned home. I embraced her to comfort her. She didn’t show any resistance.

One morning she came early to my home. She told me that she sold her car to pay off her credit cards that her husband had used to gamble. I was willing to drive her to and from the bus station in my car. I had more time with her. She brought me something to eat in the morning and a sandwich for lunch. I was so happy that she took care of me as a good wife would, although between us was a big age gap. She was only twenty-five years old.

From Monday through Saturday she sent her five-year-old child to day care, and on Sunday she stayed home with him. The boy called me “Uncle.” Sometimes she worked a night shift, and she sent her child to me to take care of him overnight. He slept with me on my bed with his teddy bear between his thighs. He flapped one of his hands on my hand and mumbled, “Papa, mama.” And then he fell asleep. Perhaps she wanted the child to be familiar with me so that one day I could be his stepfather. This idea made me happy.

On Christmas Eve, I took her and her son to church. After mass, I took her and her son to climb a nearby hill on which stood a statue of the Virgin Mary. I prayed and hoped that she would be my wife. I turned to her; I saw her smiling.

“What did you wish for on this holy night?” I asked.

“Wow, I can’t say. I have to keep it a secret.” She shook her head, and her long hair flew in the cold wind. I had bought some gifts for her and the boy.

Walking along trees embellished with small colorful lights, I told her that I would have to return to New Jersey to see my mother the next morning, and I would be living in New Jersey in one week.
I felt her sadness as though there was something that she couldn’t tell me. She held my hand tightly and put her head on my right shoulder. I smelled her hair, and an easy feeling came over me.

The day when I returned from New Jersey, I saw her letter stuck on her son’s big teddy bear, leaning on my front door.

I read her letter.

I couldn’t wait for you. I have to move to California. On Christmas Eve, my wish was ‘God, help me to hear news about my husband.’ A miracle happened; the next day, someone phoned me that they had seen my husband hiding in California. He had borrowed a lot of money from the casinos in Louisiana, and they had orders to force him to pay his debts or to go to jail.

My house in Texas was confiscated by the bank because I couldn’t pay the mortgage for three months. I decided to quit my job; I had enough money to buy tickets for me and my son to fly to California. I have gone to California to help him although I will have to work day and night to pay his debts. He saved my life from a sinking raft full of boat people. Before I was allowed to settle in the U.S.A, I had been living on a Malaysian island where I was threatened by local gangs and police who raped every girl they could lay their hands on.

I will follow him to the north, to the south, or to every corner of the United States. I am a bird, and I fly forever to seek my mate.

I give you this teddy bear, which often sleeps between me and my son. It will make you warmer in this cold winter.

Thank you for helping me and my son like a good brother.

I took the bear. It was cold, and I saw some of her long, black hairs entangled on it.
The Fruit Is
Kelly Coleman

The aroma that
lingers in the
air which
the sliced fruit,
brings, sits on
the cutting board
and waits for
what it truly
desires. When it
touches the tongue’s
receptors and is
slaughtered by the
tiny knives in
the mouth, its
juices trickle down
the gaping hole
to the
deep dark,
where they collide
and replenish the
cells.
The remaining juices
calm the imbalance
of bubbles down
in the pit
until next time
when the one
victim comes
and saves it
from disaster. It
waits in the frigid,
wet place where
it lives.
Woe is Burgundy

Melanie Hahn
The Ghost of Shadow Lake
Leslie Field

The sky was clear, and the air was crisp. The morning dew was just settling on the grass. A misty vapor rose from the warmth of the lake, which billowed onto the shore. The lake was lined with majestic oaks draped in moss, which would soon, with the help of the morning sun, cast a shadow around every bend, swallowing up the entire lake.

The only ripples on the water were made from large-mouth bass eating their morning meal, and I sat on the front porch of the cabin, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee, wishing like hell that I had handy my rod and reel.

As the temperature dropped, the fog on the lake grew, and I thought this could be the morning—the morning she would show.

“What do you think, Dad?”

I looked behind me. My son was standing behind the screen door I’d made when he was just a baby—thick wooden edges with a mesh grating in the middle—no glass.

It looked like he’d just gotten out of bed. His eyes were a little crusty, he had pillowcase face, and his socks were half off his feet, flopping around when he moved.

“I think this might be it,” I said, and Jim’s eye’s lit up.

“Really?”

I nodded my head and at the same time exhaled a plume of smoke.

“How much time do you think we’ve got?” he asked.

I looked at the sky—no sun in sight. Then I checked my watch. “Bout an hour,” I said, and Jim took off, heading deeper into the cabin.

He soon emerged fully dressed and flew out the front door and down the steps.

“Jacket!” I yelled.

“Dad, I gotta go wake up Eddie.”

Eddie was our neighbor’s son and Jim’s best friend. The two had known each other their entire lives and were like brothers.

“Jacket,” I said again, and Jim turned around, ran back up the steps and into the cabin.

He came out seconds later, and as he ran back down the steps, I could see his jacket was twisted and he was trying desperately to get his left arm in the sleeve. He disappeared around the house, still fighting to find the opening.
I smiled at his enthusiasm, but I too could feel the excitement beginning.

Just then, a car pulled into the lane leading up to the cabin. It was my younger brother, Jared. He got out, grabbed a huge duffel bag off the backseat, and walked across the yard toward me.

“Morning,” I said, and reached out to shake his hand.

“Morning,” he said in return.

“What happened to you last night?” I asked. “I thought you were staying over.”

“Man, I hate sleeping over here.”

I lifted my eyebrows at that statement. Whenever Jared was “in between” homes, he always crashed here at my place, and he sure seemed to be without a place to stay more often than not.

“Is that right,” I said, not really asking a question.

Jared gave me his “salesman of the year” smile, patted me on the back, and said, “Your beds are too soft, man. But that’s okay I don’t really mind. Besides, my date ran a little late.”

“What’s in the bag?” I asked, and I took it from him so he could sit down. The bag was bulky, and it weighed a ton.

“Wow!” he said. “Would you look at that view? It’s gonna be perfect. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the fog that thick before.” He sat in silence for a moment, then whispered, “She sure is gonna dance.”

I looked out at the lake. It was definitely something to see. The fog boiled and rolled and eased its way onto the bank, where it looked like an invisible wall was keeping it closed in. She would dance all right. Nothing would stop her.

About that time, Jim and Eddie came flying around the house. It looked like Jim had finally gotten his jacket on right.

“Uncle Jared, did you bring it?” Jim asked as he ran up and hugged his uncle.

“You bet I did,” he said, and after he hugged my son, he pulled the duffel bag out of my hands.

“Oh, cool!”

“This is perfect,” the boys cried, as they went through the bag.

I looked over at Jared and lifted my chin.

“Gear,” he said with a secret smile. “Jim asked if I would bring it. Seems he and Eddie are gonna climb Big Sally.”

I shook my head and chuckled, “Rookies.”

“What’s so funny?” Jim asked.

“What’s your plan there, big guy?” I asked, ignoring his question.
“It’s not a ghost, Dad, and we’re gonna prove it.”

“Hmmmm,” I said thoughtfully while trying to keep the laughter inside. “So you think Big Sally’s the one, huh?”

“She’s got to be. She’s the tallest tree for miles.”

“‘Bout forty-five feet,” Eddie added.

Jared and I exchanged amused glances as the boys ducked their heads back down to the duffel bag.

“Coffee?” I asked with barely contained laughter.

“Sure,” Jared answered, and we both walked into the cabin.

“Where the hell did they get that idea?” I whispered as we went inside, and I let out a little chuckle.

“I thought you told him.”

“I didn’t tell him shit,” I said. “Well, what kind of gear did you bring them?”

“The same shit we used when we did it.”

“You kept it?” I asked, and I couldn’t keep from laughing any longer.

Jared laughed along with me. “Had it stored over in Ma’s garage. So, you gonna let them do it?”

“Hell, what were we—thirteen and nine?” I thought about it for a minute. “I don’t see why not. She’s pretty easy to climb, and besides, they’ll never know for sure unless they try.”

Big Sally was the oldest oak tree in Groaten County. She may have been tall, but that was nothing compared to her width. Her branches reached to near a hundred feet across and were as thick as two grown men. She sat back about fifty yards from the lake, and it was believed by many that she was the reason the ghost appeared.

Jared and I thought the same thing once. We climbed all the way to the top, stood on her uppermost branch, and tried to prove our dad wrong.

We had tied one end of a long rope around my waist, and the other was tied to our gear. The “gear” in question was actually two wooden oars. Each oar had a square piece of ply board nailed to its flat end. The object was to climb to the top and, as the ghost appeared, wave the oars high above the tallest leaves to prove she was just a shadow.

It was Jim’s turn now and Eddie’s too. They would soon find out that not everything was so easily explained away.

“All right, let’s go help them,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s go.”
Everything was done, as it had been a generation before, and a half an hour later, the boys were at the top of the tree, pulling up their gear.

Jared and I walked down to the edge of the lake. I could see the boys better from there, and it was the perfect place to watch the ghost appear. Now, all we had to do was wait.

Ladies are fickle. Sometimes she didn’t show. But when the sun was in just the right position, and the weather was cool, while the lake was still warm, she’d show herself—and what a sight it was to behold.

“You boys all right?” I yelled.

“We’re good, Dad. We’re ready,” Jim hollered back.

“Good,” I called out. “Because here she comes.”

The sun was rising behind us, and as I looked up into the tree, I could see two oars sticking out of the top, just above the highest branches, waving back and forth. I turned around and stared at the lake that was just inches away. The fog was so thick I could no longer see the surface of the water, and the world around us was quiet.

I watched her rise from the murky depths. Her smoky white face and sunken, shadowy eyes were more vivid than I had ever seen. Her silver-white hair billowed around her face even though there wasn’t a breeze to be found. She continued to rise out of the water. I saw her ghost-white arms and the torn sleeves of her ragged dress. I was mesmerized, hypnotized, and unable to look away. She was amazing, and her movements matched those of the fog.

“Get back! Get away from there!” I heard the boys yell, but I couldn’t turn away.

She had always been real to me. Even when I had tried to prove that she didn’t exist, she had still been real—but she had never looked like this.

Her dried, gray lips parted, and the fog whispered, “Stay.” She beckoned, and I longed to oblige. I felt her warmth, and I was drawn to it. I lifted my hand to her and reached into the fog.

“Daddy, please!”

I blinked. She was right in front of me. I gasped, thinking it was my last breath. Then she touched me. I felt her cold feathery hands on mine. I stumbled back and grabbed Jared by the arm.

“I think… we’d better go get the boys,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” he said, but his eyes were locked in place.

We stood for a moment longer, rooted to the ground, while her soft words continued to hover in the air, “Stay.” I backed away, turned, and then walked to the old oak. Jared was right at my heels. “Stay,” I heard right at my ear as I felt a feathery like touch on my neck. I turned suddenly—but there was only Jared behind me.
Together we reached the tree. The boys were on their way down, and they were coming down fast.

"Take it easy," I yelled. I knew they were scared, and even though it was like climbing down a ladder, they could still fall.

The oars were already on the ground at the base of the tree. They had obviously abandoned them when all hope was lost that the ghost was a fake.

I reached up to the first branch and grabbed my son. Jared caught Eddie, and the four of us turned toward the lake. I knelt down in between the two boys and pulled them to me, holding them close.

The fog began to lift, and the sun was rising in earnest, casting a shadow over the entire lake. The lady was gone.
Vision
Ken Turner

Sometimes our vision is born
Like Lucifer* at morn,
A grain of light piercing the swallowing darkness,
A merciful pause in the storm.

What we gain in that moment
Are the wings of eagles,
And we soar
Out of the night and into that light
At a billion miles an hour
Until, the other side achieved,
In all its glory and its power
We are no longer what we were.
We glide on the currents of conscience
With clarity of heart
And then

With a start
The arrows come one by one
Of deeds done,
Mistakes to come,
The crippling routine of life.
Reality levels the Mariner's bow,
And we become the Albatross
Plummeting from that light
Back into the fight,
The fight we know well
But stronger now,
And in love's name I'll tell

That so long as vision is borne in our mind
Hope is ours, yours, mine,
Like a feather
Such a lonely thing
But feathers...  
Oh, they do make wings.

* Lucifer is the morning star
On the day of her husband’s funeral, she had worn a red blouse underneath her black trench coat, buttoning just the middle button on the coat, leaving the rest to reveal a startling red blaze going up from her waist to the beginning of her neck. Earlier she had smoothed over her lips with scarlet lip gloss and applied a sparkling gold eye shadow to her lined eyes.

She tried to pay no attention to the baleful glances of alabaster complexions complete with sagging jowls surrounding her, enveloping her like waves on an island in the middle of the sea. The preacher read the eulogy aloud, and she could hear their words, forming into quiet whispers, filling the silence in between the preacher’s pauses. She could see their glittering eyes rise up from the coffin in hopes of catching a glimpse of the latest controversy that had enriched their mundane and eventless lives.

“Look at her,” said a whisper traveling on the wind. “She has no shame, wearing red to Gary’s funeral. Poor old fool, he would be turning over in his grave if he could see her now.” A man’s voice replied, “Agnes, show some respect and stop jabbering for once!”

It was fall, and the leaves from ancient trees in the cemetery looked as if they had been set ablaze, falling off and catching the breeze, every now and then getting caught up in tiny tornadoes on the ground. She inhaled deeply and could smell the funerary roses, thrown in scarlet heaps on top of the coffin. She looked across from her, and in between the sea of black she could make out a simple brown robe and a bald head. Her eyes opened widely, and she stretched her neck to get a better view. When all was said that needed to be said, and all of the “my condolences” were received, she walked up slowly to her old friend and extended her hand. He softly held it in his rough hands, his brown robe still, resisting the gusts of powerful wind.

“I’m so sorry about your husband. Your loss is also mine,” he said. “I received the news yesterday.” He looked down to the ground, and the two of them shared a silence, a fleeting calm in the torrent of emotion around them.

“Thank you, Li. I’m glad you could make it here,” she said. “It’s always nice to have an old friend around in moments like this.” She had gone to a private school with Li when they were younger. Ever since then, they had remained close friends. He was her only childhood friend that attended her wedding. When he decided to be a monk, she had supported him and signed up for his weekly meditation classes at the university on Wednesdays.
“You’re going to go to the temple next week, I hope. I’ve been missing you in meditation class,” he said. She hadn’t been to her classes since her husband got sick. As she thought about it, she realized she hadn’t been out of the house at all, except to go to Wal-Mart or the cancer hospital. The only people she had had contact with were hospice nurses and doctors.

“Oh,” she replied as she tucked a strand of onyx hair behind her ear. “I’ll try and make it. It’s been so hectic these past couple of months. I haven’t been able to focus at all. The things these people are saying—” She choked on the last word. “They say things that hurt me very badly. They think that I’m too young for all of this, that there is something insincere about my motives. I loved him. I was a good wife and a damn good friend.” She put her hand over her chest and tightened it, slowly releasing it as she regained control over her feelings.

“It’s normal to feel such a way. I know you loved him. Do not cling to death or to life. Through this hardship you will know your strength.” He had the same kind and inviting eyes that she remembered from so long ago. It felt good to see someone she knew again, and for a moment the darkness in her heart dissipated.

“You’re right, Li. To be happy in comfort is not real happiness. Somebody said that. I don’t remember who.”

“Daoren said that. Keep on studying! I hope to hear more next week,” he replied with the same calm aura, the same gentle smile he had since she met him.

“I have to be leaving now. They are waiting for me in the home. Thank you again for coming. It means so much to me.” She lifted her arm around his shoulder for a polite hug, and as she felt his back, she had an intense desire to hold him stronger, but instead she held back and hugged him as if she was saying good-bye to a friend or to one of her husband’s sons. He barely touched her back, and she could feel his hands on the trench coat, and suddenly she felt embarrassed that she had worn the red blouse beneath it.

She walked into the funeral home, taking slow strides, picturing herself in suspended animation in her mind, stepping towards the crowd. As she was passing by the huge oak trees, with bromeliads and Spanish moss strung throughout the branches, she looked up into the great, heavy boughs and saw a cardinal in one of the trees. He appeared striking against the lichen-covered wood, his proud, red feathers blatantly showing the whole forest that he would not fly, but he would stay through the winter. He would remain loyal to his woods, to this graveyard, and would not go with the rest of the birds who migrated to warmer parts of the world. She breathed in a heavy sigh, mustering all her strength to deal with the hoary accusers and her husband’s sons, who no doubt had something malicious and snarky to say to her.
A blonde head made its way through the crowd towards her. He was looking older than usual, and she noticed that the dark circles around his eyes were darker, the bags beneath them heavy with wrinkles like veins flowing towards his temples. He walked past her and cast a downward glance, stopping to focus on her shoes.

“Nice Jimmy Choo’s, I bet they were a steal,” he said with a heavy emphasis on the word “steal.”

“They were a gift,” she said, as she squinted her eyes, blinded by the reflection of the sun on his gold Rolex.

“I see,” he said. “Well, I’m glad to see my father’s hard-earned money going to good use.”

His grey eyes barely glistened in the afternoon sun beneath his heavy eyelids.

“Are you planning on living in the house, or are you going back to China?” He avoided eye contact with her and chose instead to stare at the blouse with one raised eyebrow.

She could feel the anger rising like a flame in her body, burning her face and ears. She wanted to scream at him, to shove him down and step on his alabaster face with the Jimmy Choo stiletto, and to tell him she wasn’t Chinese, she had never been to China, and if he knew his geography, he would know that she was Korean. She wanted to squeeze his fingers and put them on the map, and then rub his face on the United States and tell him, “This is where I’m from, asshole.”

“I’m sorry? I’ve never been to China. Didn’t Gary tell you I was born in Seattle? And anyways, I’m ethnically K-o-r-e-a-n.” The bird flew by in a flash of scarlet, off into the distance.

“Oh, Koreeean. I get confused with all those Asian countries.”

She stood still for an instant and closed her eyes, calming the raging fire with a cool stream, directing her emotion away from her target.

“Well, all things aside, I want you to know you really made my father happy. I don’t know how.” He paused to look at the time, and then made contact with her eyes. “But you did. I’m sorry about your loss. I know you were expecting it a little sooner.” His last words sliced their way inside of her, but she refused to show him any sign of weakness. After all, she thought, does a zebra parade an injury around lions? She decided she would no longer play victim to his taunts.

“He lived a long life. I know he’s in a better place, and I’m happy that I shared my time with him. My only regret is that it wasn’t longer,” she said.

He glanced again at the sparkling watch. “Well, I’ve got to pick up Tim from school. I don’t want him to have to ride the bus,” he said, quickly pivoting on one black loafer towards the door. He had been upset ever since he found out Tim got rejected from the prestigious prep school he himself had once attended. He stopped at the door and turned back around.
“I forgot to give you this,” he said, handing her a note from his blazer. To her surprise he gave her a polite Hollywood-style hug and then went off towards the door. She opened the card which read:

Dear Kim,

We express our sympathies for your loss. If you need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to call us. You have always been a valued member of our family, and we hope to get to know you better. We are having a dinner on next Sunday, and you are invited to come over.

With Sympathy,
The Dawsons

She closed the letter and read it over again to get over the initial shock. The Dawson family had barely spoken to her during the past eight years that she’d known them, except to make sarcastic remarks about her age or to criticize her cooking on holidays. She put the letter away in her purse and looked out of the window into the parking lot. She could make out in the distance the blue heads of old men and women getting into their cars. The clouds were moving like smoke, some putting out the sun for small minutes at a time. She imagined that her husband were here, that they were sitting beneath the old oaks, laughing and listening to the funeral chimes, unfazed by time and age, kissing, and playing like children in the grass. She could hear his voice on the wind, rising and falling, whispering in her ear, telling her how he had never been more in love and how beautiful she looked in her red blouse, his favorite color.
Dark Night
Ridah Kamal

Horned moon, red-faced sky,
snoring and crying winds.

I lived in a cage, dark faded
curtains, an old wooden bed,
and a big stone in my chest,
my cough.

My fogged-up window shivered
with chills, and an old oak tree
scratched its long sharp nails
on my wall.

The sky grumbled in pain when
lightning brightened my room.
Scared I got when I saw a foreign
shadow in a broken, rusted mirror
and screamed.

I looked again and realized it
was no one. It was just me.
Third Place Prose Winner

Brotherly Love
Kim Lumpkin

Back in 1915, we lived in a two-bedroom shack behind the church where Daddy preached every Sunday. My brother Vincent was ten years old at the time, dreaming of becoming a preacher just like our father and his father before him. I still remember us sitting in the hot summer sun in the grassy field behind the house where my brother would come up with the most wonderful sermons. He would wear his overalls with one of the straps hanging down, no shirt or shoes. You could see the dirt between his toes from walking across the field.

Although he didn’t wear a preacher’s robe, he would preach just like Daddy, using a tree stump for his pulpit. He created a circle of pews around his pulpit from the cut logs spared from the long winter fires. I would sit there in my Levis with holes worn in both knees, wearing no shirt or shoes, listening as the only member of his congregation.

Vincent would say, “All rise as we sing ‘Amazing Grace.’”

I remember cupping my hands, pretending that they were a hymnal. I would sing with my brother, “…who saved a wretch like me....” He had a voice like a thousand angels. I, on the other hand, had the voice of a thousand hound dogs, but he didn’t seem to mind. He was just glad to have me there, and I was grateful to have him.

“One day, Roger,” he would say, “I’m going to go to the seminary in St. Louis, where they’re going to teach me to be a great preacher, just like Daddy.”

“One day, Vincent,” I would say, “I’m going to fly a fighter plan and shoot the enemies down.”

“Well, Roger, if you’re going to do a tough job like that, then I’ll have my congregation pray for your safe return home just in case the enemy by chance ends up shooting you down and taking you prisoner or something.” Then he would bow his head and begin to pray with his imaginary congregation, pray that I would come to my senses.

There wasn’t much for Vincent and me to do in those days, so, most of the time, we had to create our own fun. Dad took one of his broken tires off his Ford pick-up, tied some heavy, braided rope to it, and then hung it from the old magnolia tree down by the creek. That was fun for a while ‘til Dad caught Vincent and me swinging on it and then jumping off onto the other side of the creek. He took off his cowhide belt and gave us both a good lickin’.
He then told us, “That was one sure way to get you killed. If ya’ll were to ever fall off and drop down into the forty-foot creek.” He shook his head and looked straight at Vincent. “I expected more out of you.”

“Dad, it wasn’t Vincent’s fault,” I told him. “It was my idea. Besides, I’m not ready to die. I got big plans. Dad, I was just preparing for ‘em.”

“Well,” he said, “prepare for stunts like that after I’m gone and no longer responsible for you and Vincent. The next time you decide to do something dangerous, make sure you don’t take your brother. Are you listening to me, young man?”

“Yes, sir,” Vincent moaned.

Most of the time when Vincent and I would get into trouble, it was usually my fault. Vincent and I laid low after that for a while.

Then he came up with the most brilliant plan. Vincent went out in the pasture to look for sticks that looked like a wishbone off a chicken. He took some of the elastic from his britches and tied it to the two shorter points of the stick, making a slingshot. Afterward, we would gather milk or cola bottles and take ‘em down by the creek. Next, we took a log and placed each of the bottles equal distance apart, lining them up on a log on one side of the tire swing. We knew that we wouldn’t get a spanking for making a slingshot because the only thing dangerous about that was if Vincent and I shot each other with it, but we would never do something crazy like that. But Vincent thought that finding tiny pebbles to shoot at the bottles would make the bottles less likely to break. He also placed the log just so that when the pebbles hit the bottles they would fall in a nice soft grassy patch just for insurance.

“Dad won’t whip us for shooting the bottles,” he said. “But, he sure as hell will whip us if we break the bottles, and he gets charged by the milk man for us breaking ‘em.”

I nodded my head agreeing.

“Since you’re the fighter pilot, Roger,” he said, proudly handing me the slingshot, “you can take the first shot.”

I grasped the longer end of the stick, which made a handle for me to hold onto in my right hand. With my left hand, I placed the pebble securely around the elastic,pinching them together between my index finger and thumb. I stood on the opposite side of the tire swing in a stance as if I was shooting an arrow through the tire to hit one of the bottles on the other side. I closed one eye, using the other as a scope to scan my target. Then I aimed, pulled back on the elastic as far as it would stretch, and shoot, and, with a plink, the bottle fell over and landed on the soft green grass behind.

“Great shot, Roger,” Vincent said from behind patting me on the back. “You definitely have a firing arm.”
I was speechless as I handed Vincent the slingshot. I couldn’t believe my own eyes at what a perfect shot that was. We continued taking turns playing until the skies turned a pinkish-purple.

Then Dad cried, “Dinner, boys! Come in for supper.”

That was music to a young boy’s ear after he had been playing in the hot sun all day.

We never knew what we were having for supper because of Dad being a widower. A different church lady would come by every night, bringing us dinner. Sometimes it was real good, and other times it was very bad, depending on what church lady did the cookin’. That night it happened to be Miss Bessie. She owned the local hotel and lived there with her three daughters, who were the same age as Vincent and me. She was a pretty good cook, and her cornbread was always so golden and sweet it was like eating a cake.

Of course, she had some sitting on the table that night, and just as I was going to grab one and stick it in my mouth, Dad’s enormous hand came down, slapping my hand. I quickly pulled my hand back, comforting it with my one good hand to pull some of the sting out, but it was too sore and red. You would have thought I was stung by a bee.

“What’s that for?” I said.

“First you need to wash up,” Dad said, grabbing both my hands. “Have you seen all the dirt on those hands?”

I looked down at my hand cradled in my dad’s hands; they were so much smaller and definitely dirtier. I had so much dirt underneath my nails I could have started a garden, and the dirt on the creases in my palms was so caked on it looked like a road for an ant village.

“Well, now that you mention it,” I said with a smile as I raced all the way to the washroom.

As I was leaving the room, I heard Dad ask Miss Bessie to join us for dinner because we boys didn’t deserve to eat such a fine meal as hers without any company, and I heard her accept the invitation.

In the washroom, there was a ceramic pitcher with a bowl and a bar of soap. You would pour some water out of the pitcher into the bowl and then soak your hands in the water, taking the bar of soap between your palms and building up a nice lather. You scrubbed and washed your hands in the bowl ‘til they were presentable. I was so famished that I didn’t spend a lot of time lathering my hands. I just wanted to get back in there and have a piece of Miss Bessie’s golden delicious cornbread. My mouth started watering just thinking about putting the moist cake on my tongue.

Consequently, I ran back so fast to the table that when I pulled the chair out to sit on it, I slid off landing on the other side. My dad held out his hand to help me up and then asked Vincent to say grace. Yet I knew that if he said it, we would never get to eat, so I volunteered.

I folded my hands together, closed my eyes, and in my fastest speaking voice I began, “God is good, let us thank him for the grub.”
Then I opened one eye, and I saw Dad’s face turning all red, his eyes pinched together and his hand raised as if he was going to slap me across the face when all of a sudden, I heard Miss Bessie chuckle.

“Oh, Paul,” Miss Bessie said. “Your boys are just the most well-mannered boys I have ever seen.”

“How,” Dad replied turning his eyes off me and toward Miss Bessie. “Thank you, Bessie.” Then he cleared his voice as if he were clearing out a house full of frogs.

“Hey! Dad, can I have more sweet potatoes,” I said moving my pork chops, corn bread and greens out of the way to make more room on the plate.

“Did you offer some to Miss Bessie?” he said raising his eyebrows and wide-eyed.

“Miss Bessie, you’re the best cook ever,” I said. “Can you and the girls move in with us?”

Miss Bessie started to laugh and said, “Why, Roger, you are just as cute as a baby goat, but I can’t live with you and your pa, honey. I’ve got a hotel to run, and your pa doesn’t need any more responsibility than he already has. Thank you for the offer, though.”

Out of nowhere, Dad started laughing so hard he had to hold his stomach from all the pain. Vincent and I looked at each other in utter confusion, and then we started laughing. I am not sure if it was laughing because he was embarrassed by what I had said or the fact that Miss Bessie just called me a baby goat. It was nice to see, though, because since Mom passed away, we hadn’t seen or heard him laugh. Whatever it was, it was the best dinner we had in awhile. Even the greens were good, and I don’t even like them because eating greens always reminded me of eating wilted, wet lettuce. But that night, they were the best I’d ever tasted.

After dinner, we watched as Dad walked Miss Bessie out to her car. Vincent and I were curious to see if he was going to kiss her, but they just stood outside her car laughing and talking. Dad helped her put her dishes in the trunk of her car; then they hugged each other as if they were longtime friends. We watched as Dad waved goodbye as Miss Bessie drove off down the road. He continued waving ‘til all the dust settled back on the road and she was completely out of sight.

As Dad walked back up to the house, Vincent and I shuffled around to act as though we weren’t watching Miss Bessie and him. We both scurried, sitting on opposite ends of the couch and grabbing a book along the way. Dad walked in, and he must have spied something because he asked me about the book.

I said, “It’s really good, Dad. You ought to read it sometime.”

Dad started laughing and said, “I have, but it’s better when it’s read right side up, mister.”

I was so embarrassed. Vincent threw one of the gold paisley couch pillows at me and started laughing at me. Dad, laughing too, grabbed one of the pillows and threw one at me. The next thing
I knew we were all laughing so hard and tossing around the gold paisley couch pillows. It was a good thing those pillows were small and round because if they were any bigger, I would have been doomed the way Dad and Vincent ganged up on me.

“Hey, boys!” Dad said, trying to settle us down before we went to bed. “Ya’ll need to wash up and get to bed so ya’ll can get plenty of rest for church in the morning.”

“Okay, Dad,” Vincent and I said in unison as we started toward the washroom.

Then I ran back to Dad and gave him a big hug. He hugged me back. Then I said, “Dad, I love you, and I really miss Mom.”

He looked down at me, smiled, rubbed his hands through my hair, then walked into the kitchen to wash the dinner dishes. It was a job he and Mom used to do together. I sat there a while in the dark ‘til he finished washing the dishes. He didn’t even notice that I was watching. Then he took his pipe out of his pocket, walked out onto the porch, and lit it.

I remember the sweet smell from the tobacco to this day. I can remember the bright orange glow from the top of the pipe every time he took a puff. Some nights I would see him talking to the stars as if Mom was encased in one of them, listening. I sat on the floor in the corner of the dark room, watching him every night ‘til I fell asleep.
Pelican

Janet Powell
Second Place Poetry Winner

August 11
Nicole Sanders

In the mid-afternoon
of a sticky spring day,
the sun lost its strength
and began to slip behind
the tapestry of trees.
We walked along
hand-in-hand
along a path that
seemed to flow endlessly.
We reached the bank of a river
and found a patch of ripe blackberries,
squishing them.
Their bloody nectar
ran down our fingers,
staining our hands
the colors of exotic birds
and our lips naturally-pigmented by nature,
my short hair glued together by the fruit’s sugar.
A blanket of night caressed the land,
and the fireflies awoke
from their nocturnal slumber.
It felt like we had fallen
into the sky.
The stars were in reach and we batted at them,
catching them in our sticky hands
then letting go.
My hair brushes my back now,
and the blackberries are no longer in season.
The river we loved so much turned out to be
thick caramel oozing to nowhere.
One More Hit
Thomas Miller

All I need is one more hit. No, what am I saying? One more hit could never be enough. I gaze at the clock to the right of my bed on the nightstand that I’ve had since I was a kid. Three in the morning, damn it. For the past four hours the only thought in my mind is the orgasmic feel of the heroin entering my bloodstream. It’s been 18 hours since my last hit and 16 hours since I crawled back to my parents’ suburban porch begging for help. I’m lucky they took me back in since it’s been nearly six months since the last time I spoke or saw the both of them. What a fucking disappointment I must be: their 24-year-old son, a college graduate and a heroin addict.

The cold sweat drips furiously from every part of my body, causing the white sheets of the bed to become drenched. One more hit. No, I can’t. A sharp, nauseating pain creeps to my stomach as I stare at the ceiling fan above the bed. I begin to move my head in the same motion as the fan trying to get my mind off the heroin. The process repeats in my mind: cooking, injecting, and relaxing. What the hell am I thinking about? I need to stop thinking and go to sleep.

The first time, the best time, it all seemed to be a dream. I was too drunk. I must’ve blacked out, and I went from being in a club to a girl’s apartment with a needle in my arm. The first shot was amazing: seeing the blood enter the syringe then back into the vein that was bulging out of my skin like I had never seen before. My eyes slowly closed, and my head slowly tilted back as I slipped into a trance that was better then any feeling I had ever felt before. I knew I was hooked from that one hit.

The nausea intensifies, which causes me to close my eyes. I try to get out of the small bed, but I crash onto the floor landing on my right arm. Trash can, trash can, where is the damn trash can? I look up and see the trash can in the corner of the small room next to the window. I try to stand up but quickly fall back on the hard wooden floor. I crawl over to the trash can and...
begin vomiting. It’s been over a day since I had anything to eat, and I don’t know what I’m vomiting. This could all be solved with one hit. No, I can’t. Think of Mom and think of Dad and their embarrassment of having a drug addict as a son.

I try to stand on my feet, which is extremely hard, and I quickly pace over to the corner of the bed where I collapse on the sweaty pillows. The pain in my body is horrifying, so I let out a quick scream, hoping my parents will hear the cries for help, but they don’t. I feel the blank white walls close in on me as I lie on the bed and gasp for my next breath. I can’t catch my breath and it scares me. I begin to weep like a little kid.

“Mom!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “Dad!”

“One more hit, one more hit, one more fucking hit,” I scream as I grasp a pillow and begin to squeeze as hard as I can.

I hear the door slowly open, and I look up. “Mom,” I say.

“Hey, baby, shhhhh,” she gently says as she puts a glass of water with a straw next to my mouth. I slowly sip the water and feel my body being hydrated. The feeling of hydration causes me to become sleepy as my mother strokes the back of my sweat-covered head.

“Go to bed, sweetheart,” she softly says in my right ear. Her voice soothes my mind, a mother’s touch; my eyes slowly begin to close.

My eyes open the next morning to the thumping sound of the raindrops splashing into the window. I look over to the clock: 12:30 in the afternoon. I must’ve been out for almost eight hours. It was the most sleep that I’ve had in the past six months, but I still feel tired and exhausted from the last six months of abuse that my body has taken. I get out of bed and stand up. I can feel my brain colliding with my skull, causing a splitting headache that makes the dizziness return. I stumble into the bathroom and drop to my knees in front of the counter. The spinning of my brain causes me to put my head between my arms as I lean against the counter and try to regain my composure. It doesn’t help, and I waddle two steps to the right on my knees to where the toilet is, and I begin to throw up. The thin, yellow liquid pours out of my
esophagus and the sight of the yellow vomit only makes me throw up even more. I wipe the vomit and spit from around my mouth and stand up to flush the toilet.

I turn the hot handle of the shower to as hot it will go with hopes that it will help soothe the pain. I know it won’t. Nothing will help except one thing, and that is the white powder that I called my best friend for the past six months. The friend who I would go through hell and high water for, the friend who will never let me down, and the friend who helps me feel secure about myself. I can’t go back, that is why I’m here, I need help, and I want help.

The steam pours out the shower letting me know it is ready. I step in and feel the hot water beat against my skin, but I don’t flinch. I stand underneath the nozzle and let the hot water beat into my skin until it releases all the stress and tension in my body. My body feels better but not my brain. Every second is a second full of thoughts of heroin, and they’re thoughts that will never go away. I’m going to be sixty-year-old man still thinking about the sensation of the liquid entering my bloodstream. What have I done to myself? I wasted money and, most importantly, my life. How can I ever expect to get a job in law enforcement as a forensic expert? They won’t hire a former drug addict. I lose track of time and notice that my skin has turned dark pink from the extreme heat of the water. I turn the shower off and step out to dry myself off.

After I dry myself off, I look up at the mirror above the sink. I haven’t looked at myself in over six months. I don’t know if it was because I didn’t care or if I didn’t want to look. The formerly tanned skin turned pale white, the syringe marks on my left arm, and the lesions on my face that make me look old and worn down. I can’t bear the image in the mirror, so I leave the bathroom to get dressed.

I make my way down stairs and the first sight I see is my mother sitting on the couch watching Dr. Phil. Oddly enough, the topic is drug addiction.

“Hey, Mom,” I say as I walk up from behind her and wrap her in my arms.

“Hey, sweetheart. How you feeling?” she ask as she grabs my arms and hugs me back.

“A little better. I think I need something to eat, though.”
“Do you want me to make you something?”

“No, I’m just going to get some cereal,” I say, releasing my grip from around her warm body and heading into the kitchen. I open the pantry door and look around. She bought me Lucky Charms, my favorite cereal. What a sweetheart. I feel terrible that she remembers my favorite cereal and I forgot to call her on Mother’s Day and her birthday. I wasn’t myself at the time. I don’t remember where I was, but I do remember I was shooting up. God, I’m such a piece a shit.

I grab the milk from the refrigerator along with a bowl and spoon from the counter before I sit down to eat. As I begin to eat, my mother comes over and sits across from me.

“Where is Dad?” I ask.

“He’s at work,” she replies. A moment of silence sets in, causing me look up at her. My blue eyes and her blue eyes meet, causing a sensation of guilt to tingle down my spine. My right leg begins to shake uncontrollably as the sweat begins to accumulate on my forehead. Her eyes begin to water, which increases my nervousness and the guilt turning in my stomach.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“I just can’t stand seeing my only son in this condition,” she says while wiping the tears from her eyes.

“I know, I know, Mom. It’s not your fault.”

“Listen, your father and I were talking, and there is rehab facility on the other side of town that we think you should go to. You won’t be able to leave for the entire three months, but I’ll be able to visit you and will every chance I get.”

“What’s the name?”

“Green Grove Detox Center. It’s really a good place. You can have your own room and your own bed. You’re father and I will pay for it.”

“Can I think about for a couple of minutes?” I say while finishing my cereal.

“Sure, I need to know within the hour though.”
“All right, I’m going outside to smoke a cigarette,” I say while reaching in my right pocket to grab my cigarettes and lighter.

“I’ll be in the living room if you need anything,” she says while getting up from the kitchen table and heading back to the couch. I put my dishes in the sink before stepping out of the back door leading to the patio.

The huge back yard brings back memories of playing football and baseball with my friends as kids. The pond surrounded by flowers varying in many colors creates a calmness I haven’t felt since moving to the inner city to go to college. I spark the cigarette before taking a seat on a patio chair to gaze at the landscape that my mother has made.

The nicotine is a relief but not enough. The nervousness is still rushing through my body as I inhale and exhale the smoke. All I need is one more hit, and I’ll be ready to go to rehab. Where am I going to get it from? I have no money and nothing to my name besides the clothes on my back. I take a long drag from the cigarette and hold my breath till the smoke is forced from my lungs by a series of coughs. I can’t stop sweating, so I stand up and begin pacing back and forth through the lawn. Three months. That is a long fucking time. I don’t think I can do it. I turn around and look through the window at my mother and realize I’m not the only person I am hurting. I got myself into this situation, and I’m the only person who can get myself out of it. I put the cigarette out and head back inside.

“I’m going, Mom,” I said.

“Good, I’m proud of you. You made the right decision,” she says as she stands up from the couch and walks over to me and pulls me in with her arms for a hug.

“I love you, Michael,” she says.

“I love you too, Mom,” I say as I tighten the grip around her. For the first time in six months I know what I truly need and what I have to do.

“Go upstairs and get your things together,” she says.

“All right,” I say as I turn and head up stairs. I walk into the room that smells of sweat and vomit to grab my clothes. I grab my wallet off the nightstand and sit on the bed to look for
my ID. I find it in the back of my wallet, and as I pull it out a blue bag falls on the floor. I look at it for a second. I know what it is. My heart begins to race as I stare at the heroin and think of the pleasure that this one bag holds. I pick it up off the ground with my right hand, which begins to shake uncontrollably at the thought of the heroin entering the bloodstream. This would feel so good, one last hit, the last hooray. My stomach begins to turn with the anticipation of the heroin as I stand up and walk towards the bathroom.

I put the bag on the counter and look up at the mirror into my blue eyes, my mother’s blue eyes, and it hits me. I can’t do this. I quickly grab the blue bag, open it, and pour my former best friend into the toilet. I toss the blue bag into the water and watch the white powder dissolve into nothing. I flush the toilet and head back into the room to grab my clothes. The sensation of doing the right thing rushes through my veins, and I smile to myself. The next three months are going to be hell, but I’m actually looking forward to living a life of sobriety. I walk downstairs with my clothes where my mother is already waiting for me.

“You ready?” she asks with a beautiful smile on her face.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”
History
Kenna Oaks

How can I ever repay
the fresh earth that breathes
life into the blooms of pink and white?
Your leather-lipped Bible sweats
on the chipped cedar pew.
Your spotted, transparent skin wrinkles around
a beating story and covers my folded hands.
How do I pass beneath a speckled sky
and keep my eyes busy on the puddles?
As the planks guide the locomotive
steam clouds down a straight steel way,
your heart moves the generations attached
to the wall behind the yellowed glass.
Pickled jars, sweet breads, warmed stews
line the aged cabinets of labor.
The dove coos a melody to break the darkness.
I bury my flowing locks in a pillow.
A warm brush over my brow
awakens my pupils to the gray curls
that nestle above a lined pout.
Snowblind
Shellie Callahan

The sound of the crackling fire woke me from the nap I hadn’t realized I’d needed. I heard it first—the stillness that comes only just before dusk when sleepy children refuse to let leaded eyelids take over and exhausted adults retire with cups of tea to lounge chairs. When I opened my eyes to see the darkening sky outside glinting off of the snow, I wasn’t surprised about the time displayed on the clock over the mantle, only by the silence. My house was never silent.

I sat up slowly, rubbing my palms into my eyes and brushing the brown bangs I’d neglected to trim from my face. Stretching my arms over my head, I moved this way and that until I felt the small cracks of my joints popping back into lubrication, and then I let my bare toes fall to the hard wood floor. It was cold, and a shiver started in the recesses of my pelvis and creepy-crawled up my spine to the base of my neck where the cold spread, causing my shoulders to shake.

There was a lukewarm cup of tea next to the couch, and I picked it up as I stood, wanting to heat it again in the microwave on my way to find my two should-be-sleeping children. The cold from the floor followed me through the house, hardwood turning into icy tile when I reached the hallway leading into the kitchen, and I silently cursed my desire for beauty instead of practicality. Halfway through the two minutes I’d set the microwave for, I heard giggle coming from the direction of my backyard, and I felt the corners of my mouth tug upwards in an unfamiliar expression.

Once the bell dingled and I took the cup from the appliance, I tiptoed over the tile, avoiding the coldest spots, until I reached my dining room window where I could see the backyard. Strands of Gabrielle’s long auburn hair were slipping from beneath the pink yarn of her cap to frame her cheeks, blushing from the powder falling from the gray-blue sky to carpet the wonderland the girls had spent the last two weeks making—and remaking—as the sun tried its hardest to melt the compacted snow. Gabrielle’s little arms were wrapped tightly around her uncle’s shoulders as he tickled what I could only assume was my older daughter half buried in the snow.

A warmth filled the pit of my stomach as I watched them. I shook my head, thinking it was the tea, and I knew the thought had to be true when Izzie’s small, thin, six-year-old frame climbed out of the snow, shaking her head and brushing at her clothes to rid herself of the tiny flakes sticking to everything. Gabrielle looked up and, noticing me, tapped her uncle on the shoulder, who in turn pointed towards me, causing Izzie to turn as they all started to wave at me. And for a minute, Izzie looked so much like Riley that my iced-up insides twisted in the grinder, and I tightened my grip on the mug as one hand wrapped around my stomach, trying to hold everything together.
While Gabrielle had gotten my dark navy eyes and curling dark hair, Izzie had inherited her father’s brilliance—straw-straight hair the color of honeyed wheat and large, rounded cerulean eyes. I forced a smile across my face and sipped at my tea, turning away before I had a chance to see Izzie’s face crumble as it did almost daily when I couldn’t bear to look at her.

I sat in a chair at my breakfast table, facing away from the window, and pulled my legs up to my chest. My toes curled over the upholstered seat as I pressed my knees closer to my body and rested my cupped hands on the peaks of my folded legs while still clutching the teacup. The door opened and closed behind me with the soft click of the latch and the quiet swish of the storm seal brushing the tile floor. And I ignored it, refusing to turn as I let the spicy liquid fill my mouth again.

“Sleep well?” His voice came softly, breaking the stillness.

“Fine. Warm,” I responded, taking another sip of the tea as I tightened my hand around the cup. I heard his rubber soles squeak on the dry tile as he pulled off snow boots that had to be soaking and his wooden chair legs scraped over the floor as he pulled it out.

“Doesn’t look like it,” my brother-in-law replied as his warm fingers cupped my chin and turned my face towards him. I shifted my eyes to the table where his purple and red knitted gloves lay on top of his black snow glove. His mother had knitted his gloves last year for Christmas. He’d probably get a new pair again this Christmas. Gabby would get a new hat, Izzie a new scarf, I’d get gloves, too, and legwarmers. Would she knit Riley gloves out of habit? “Your eyes are swollen, and you still have huge bags.”

I swatted at his hands as I finally looked up at him. I opened my mouth to speak and couldn’t find the words—so I swallowed another mouthful of tea and wished it were red wine. His fingertips were surprisingly soft as he stroked over my jaw line. I’d always expected a mechanic and a drummer to have rough, scratchy hands.

“Why don’t you go lay back down? I can handle things here,” he said softly, brushing my hair behind my ears as I finally met his warm caramel eyes. “I was just going to have them cut out the sugar cookie dough we made earlier and make dinner.”

“I don’t like to sleep alone,” I finally admitted, clearing my throat and frowning before bringing the cup to my mouth to take another sip. But it was empty. “I hate being alone. So I don’t sleep. And he’s not coming back, so I might as well become a bat.”

“Nicole,” he replied, his brows knitting as he stood up. “He didn’t leave on purpose. Stop blaming this on him.”

“Of course he didn’t leave on purpose,” I said, setting my teacup down on the table and wrapping my arms around my legs, hugging them to me. “He just refused to go to the doctor. Where are the girls?”
“They’re sweeping snow off the porch because they didn’t want to come in yet,” he replied as he moved with ease around my kitchen, finding pots and pans, noodles, and sauce. Riley had insisted when we moved in that we set up our kitchen like his mother’s kitchen. He’d never been very good in the kitchen, and he needed all the help he could get, even if it was just muscle memory of where the forks were. “Nikki, he’d been fighting since he was sixteen—”

“So he should have known then,” I interrupted, letting my head fall back against the chair back. “He should have recognized the signs from the start. He should have made an appointment.”

“Nikki, he was tired,” he said, letting the skillet hit the stove with a loud clang of metal on glass. “You weren’t there the first time. You didn’t see how bad it was.”

He stopped and glanced up at me. Taking a deep breath, he dropped his eyes to the floor, sliding his tongue over his bottom lip quickly. After a moment he went back to his work, shaking salt into the noodle pot.

“How he got new colds as soon as he got rid of an old one.” His voice was quiet, softer than it had been only minutes ago. “How he was confined to his bedroom for three years. How we had to wear masks just to see him. And how I wasn’t even allowed in the room unless it was to tell him good night.”

I shifted my eyes to the floor as he continued to bang around, pouring the sauce into the saucepan with a slopping sound and dropping the noodles into the water with a splash.

“He was my best friend,” he said. “My only sibling and I looked up to him. I wasn’t even allowed to see him.”

“How can you not be angry then?” I asked, wiping at my eyes. If Michael had seen it all before, how could he be so okay with Riley just letting himself fall apart. On our anniversary in January, he’d been fine, and now? Now he’d been in the ground for a little over a month. “How can you not be upset?”

“Nik, I am upset. I am angry. I just don’t put it all on him,” he replied quietly, breaking the sizzling hamburger apart with a wooden spatula, the small thumps echoing off the metal of the pan. I looked up at him and shook my head.

“I don’t know how you can be so calm, standing in my kitchen— 1400 miles from home,” I said, clutching at my knees. “Surrounded by snow. And you don’t even like snow.”

“Because a week after I got home from the funeral, I got a phone call. And you didn’t want to be alone,” he said, continuing to stir the hamburger around in the skillet.

I opened my mouth to reply, only to hear the storm seal brush across the tile again, followed by the heavy stomping of snow boots. With a sigh, I unfolded my legs from the chair and looked over my shoulder as the girls took off their coats and laid them over the bench in the mudroom. They were still too short to reach the hooks.
“Mooooommy,” Gabrielle said, giggling as she braced her hand on the bench and pulled hard on the bottom of her boot. Izzie sighed and crouched down, jerking the boots off of Gabrielle’s feet before sitting to take off her own and then put them away. Gabrielle ran over and slid her arms around my waist as she stood between my legs, and I smiled slowly, running my fingers through her hair.

“Hi, baby,” I replied, watching from the corner of my eye as Izzie came over and stood next to me. She slid her arms around my neck, hugged me quickly, and went into the kitchen with Michael.

“Mommy, we made a so-man and a so-lady,” Gabrielle said, her speech still not developed at almost five. I smiled because it was cute but made a mental note to call the speech pathologist. A check-up couldn’t hurt.

“That’s right,” Mike interjected from the kitchen where I looked up to see him adding the meat to the sauce and then stirring it before tasting. He began to add spices to it as he spoke again. “And tomorrow I told them we could make snow babies to go with the parents.”

“Can we make the cookies, Uncle Mike?” Izzie asked quietly as she pulled open the fridge and pulled out a juice box, which happened to be sitting next to the bowl of sugar cookie dough. When Riley had first gotten sick, I’d moved all of the girls’ snacks and juices to the bottom shelf of both the pantry and the fridge so I wouldn’t have to walk up and down the stairs every five minutes. They were so used to getting these things on their own now that I’d decided to leave them.

“Iz, you know the rule in this house, no dessert before dinner,” I said, responding for Michael as I pulled Gabrielle into my lap and hugged her to my chest. She giggled softly but settled in my arms as if she was still a baby, her head against my shoulder and her legs across mine, feet dangling off the side of the chair.

“I’m almost done with dinner, honey,” he said to her as she forced the straw into the top of the box with a scrunched nose. She always scrunched up her forehead and nose whenever she was concentrating—or was disgusted. “You want to get the bread?”

With the straw sticking out of the corner of her mouth she climbed onto the little stool and pulled the bread from the breadbox. We always got the kind in the silver package that already has the butter and spices and you just put it in the oven. It was easy, and the girls loved it. Izzie sucked harder on her juice, dimpling the sides of the box as the straw slurped out the last of the liquid. Leaving the bread on the counter, she walked to the trash and tossed the now-empty box before finding the pan for the bread as well as the cookie sheets. I laughed quietly as she closed the drawer with her foot and carried all the sheets to the counter, putting the bread on the right one and placing it on the counter next to Michael.
“Here. Cookies after dinner?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips and raising her eyebrow, looking between the two of us. Sometimes, I couldn’t believe she was only seven. Going on twenty-five. Mike and I shared a look, and we both laughed.

“Come here, Izzie,” I said, holding my arm out to the side. She walked over slowly, dragging her socked feet along the marble. When she reached me, she wound a lazy arm around my waist and pressed her head to my shoulder as I circled my arm around her. “How about, after we cut out the cookies, I’ll put on a movie for Gabby and Uncle Mike, aaaaand you and I can make the frosting.”

“All by ourselves?” she asked, twisting her head to look up at me.

I smiled at her and nodded even as Gabrielle started to whine in my arms about being left out. “Just you, me, and the food coloring,” I said, looking over her head at Mike, who was smiling at me and mixing all of the spaghetti in a bowl.

“Can I still make one for Daddy?” she asked, and I looked back down at her. Her eyes were bigger than normal and her brows raised, a grin spreading over her face. “Cuz, he’s gonna hafta help Santa, right? Nancy said when her daddy went away, he went to work for Santa.”

I bit my lip and looked back to Mike, trying not to laugh even as my eyes teared up for the twentieth time. Riley working for Santa, honestly. “Sure, baby, we’ll make your daddy cookies,” I answered her, hugging both girls closely to my chest.
Blue
Lenisa Kelly

The ring around her sagging,
aging eyes that blocks her view
of the black and white family photo.
With her wisdom as her “seeing glasses”
with those shiny metal rims, she asks
me to turn off the lights
so the fireflies will come by the window.

The moonlight bouncing off the hairs
squeezed of their color by the
large knuckled, rough hands of
slavery, civil rights, and now webpages.
She slowly rocks back and forth,
letting the creak of the old wood rubbing
together play the instrument
to her hummed hymn.

The scent downwind that told me
it was violets thrown in with an arrangement
of pink and white lilies,
but now “was” comes first
in our conversations about her.

The backdrop that covers you
now one year later, but still
the grass juts through
the soil, given its moist
luster by your body once laughing
with an open and gaped mouth.

The freshly laundered blanket, warm
from two bodies, one
small and one large, wrapped
together in a gift you gave me when
I was small, though I was a girl, still
soft as its cotton.
Little Victories
Claudia Arce

They sat on the diving board with their legs dangling over the side. Bright cherry streaks of melting Popsicle ran down their arms and splashed into the pool. He used his clean hand to adjust the angle of her hat so it shaded her nose better. He took the wispy end of her braided pigtail and grazed her cheek to tickle her. She squealed and giggled as she swatted his hand away, smearing him with the Popsicle. He chuckled and licked the cherry from his arm. He could feel the skin on his back and shoulders begin to tighten from the stinging sun. He’d slathered Samantha with a coat of SPF 30 so thick it gave her skin a pearly luster, but he’d forgotten to put any on himself. He flicked the wooden stick onto the pool deck as he slurped up the last of his treat.

Suddenly, Samantha shrieked, pulled her legs up and began to scoot herself backwards on her bottom, scraping the fabric of her bathing suit. Her popsicle hit the water and a swirl of red slowly drifted towards the bottom. His head whipped around, eyes darting, looking for whatever had frightened her.

“What? What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a bug! A big bug!”

“Where?”

“It’s on the board. Oh, Poppa, now it’s on your leg! It’s going to bite you!” she cried, her eyes wide with concern.

Tony looked down at a scraggly creature that vaguely resembled a stinkbug perched on his knee. This was her mother’s doing. Every bug under God’s blue sky sent her into a panic that was punctuated with shrill cries of “Kill it! Kill it!” He didn’t want Samantha to be so afraid of something so small. He wanted her to be brave and curious and even a little tough. He took her hand and looked in her eyes so she’d truly believe him.

“Baby, it’s okay,” he said. “It’s just a little bug that wants to hang out with us because we’re having so much fun. It won’t hurt me, I promise.”

“It’s going to get you!” she insisted.

“Not all bugs bite people, sweetheart,” he assured her. “There are lots and lots of them that don’t.”

She looked at him, eyes full of doubt, her small pink toes curled tightly.

“I promise,” he said.
They both looked down at the bug as it continued to crawl along, unaware of the trauma it was causing. Samantha inched forward slowly, peering with growing interest, occasionally glancing at him. He felt a surge of pride as she looked up and smiled at him.

“He’s not hurting you?” she asked in awe.

“No, he’s not. See? He’s just being a bug.”

She giggled and continued to watch. Suddenly, he felt a painful bite on his thigh. Tony’s eyes shot wide open and watered. He mouthed a silent curse over her head. His gritted his teeth, but pasted a smile on his face just in case Samantha looked at him. Redness and pain radiated from the bite. He chuckled ruefully and shook his head. It was worth it.
Broken Passion for a Double Dealer
Alexandra Norton

I glued my eyes shut. Uncracked
eggshell hid your true colors inside.
On my wall, hanging pictures,
smiles of guile. My efforts were
the sun, yours the moon.
Gullible me. I only saw
a glow, ignoring the quantity.
Shadows in your attic hid
novels stacked up high. Thick
layers of dust besiege them.
The crusty paper, written and dated
from the pens in my home,
the ink gushing from the center
of my heart. Now it’s empty.
Espionage crushed your egg.
Secrets bled, spreading poisonous lies
seeping through clouds and raining
onto me. I suffer the sting.
Havoc sinks through my veins.
You move on, never looking back.
Audrey Hanson remained silent on the way back from Parson’s Funeral Home. They had provided a limo to the burial site for her and the kids as part of their “bronze” package. There were several packages to choose from, all with names like “ruby,” “emerald,” and “platinum.” She hated them for making her feel like she didn’t love her son. She hated herself for not being able to afford something better. But the charcoal-colored leather seats were soft, and the tinted windows blocked just enough sunlight that she appeared to be okay for Alison and Jeremy. Truth is, her bottom lip was quivering and her eyes were weighing heavily with tears. One flinch—one blink—and she knew she’d lose it again. It was time to let someone else grieve.

Her brother Peter insisted on riding to the burial site with them, and she was glad the driver accepted. He was reading The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein to the kids on the other side of the car. Jeremy was hanging onto his every word, but Alison had already fallen asleep. Her lavender dress was contorted, the skirt pushed up around her waist, exposing her tights. Her head lay on Peter’s thigh with her arm and leg left dangling off of the seat. Lavender. That was Mama Kent’s idea. She insisted everyone wear bright colors instead of the traditional black to the ceremony because he had been born colorblind she was convinced Ricky could see them from heaven.

Ricky. That’s all it took. Audrey alternated her crossed legs and scooted to face the window more, trying to avoid gaining the attention of Peter. She gripped the brim of her hat and adjusted it to shade her face. She could not handle being asked if she was okay again. She stared out the window at the trees blurring past her until she could hopefully regain her composure, yet she wondered if she would ever be able to think of him again without sadness and regret.

Ricky committed suicide on his nineteenth birthday. He didn’t leave a note, but if he had, it would have been the most he said to his family in a year. Instead, he left a lot of questions. His girlfriend Misty found him in his dorm room. He sat slumped over on the carpet with his back against the wall. His legs were outstretched before him, almost reaching the bed. On the nightstand to his right he had a biology textbook open to a chapter on mitosis with a highlighter resting on the spine as if he’d taken a break from studying to break away from life. In Ricky’s hand was a .44 Colt 1860 Revolver, dating back to the Civil War. The medical examiner concluded that he must have used both hands to fire the gun as his hands were too small to cock the hammer and position the grip at the same time. Ricky was desperate to go.
His father gave him that gun three years earlier for his sixteenth birthday. He collected Civil War antiques, and when Ricky was younger, he let him fire it, just once, into the woods. The power of it made Ricky’s ears ring and caused him to scream. Audrey heard the shot, followed by the scream, and ran outside to find Ricky’s father trying to calm him. Audrey was irate that Ricky was allowed to shoot the gun, and his parents got into another one of their shouting matches. Words were exchanged, curses were flung, and in the end Audrey won that battle. But Ricky didn’t give up on that gun. He was in awe of it. He’d beg his father to take it out so he could watch him fire it. When he got a little older, he found the key to the gun case in his father’s tool box in the garage. After that he could take it out and look at it as often as he liked. After getting away with it countless times, Audrey finally caught him examining it in his bedroom. She ended up grounding him for a week and demanding that Ricky’s father get rid of it.

So when Ricky unwrapped the present his father had given him, revealing the dangerous chrome barrel, Audrey was irate.

“He’s not a kid anymore, Aud!” Ricky’s father had said. “Let the boy have a piece of history! Hell, he knows how to shoot it already anyhow! He’s been pinin’ for this gun for years!” She eventually caved in and agreed to let Ricky keep the gun as long as his father supervised him. They separated a year later, and she was under the impression that he took that damn gun with him.

She blamed him for Ricky’s death. She wasn’t surprised that he didn’t show up to the funeral; he didn’t even really say anything when he got the call either. She had Peter do it for her because she didn’t think she could bear to hear his voice. If only he had been there, if only he hadn’t become a coward and just taken off like that. Half of the time, he didn’t even want to see the kids, especially Ricky. He moved clear across the county, and when she’d call him, he was too busy. He didn’t want to hear it. It wasn’t his problem. When Ricky and the Thompson brothers set fire to the upstairs boys’ room of Doley High School, his father ignored her claims that he needed supervision—he needed his father.

Ricky started getting into more trouble, skipping school, getting caught smoking pot on Asher’s field. She even witnessed him stealing money out of her purse one night when he thought she had already gone to bed. She started counting her checks. She locked up Jeremy and Alison’s piggy banks in a safe in her bedroom. After Ricky got pulled over for drunk driving in her car at two in the morning, when she believed her car was in the driveway the whole time, she had to start hiding her car keys. No one would help her try to control Ricky, not even his own father.

“Audrey,” Peter said, interrupting her mid-thought. “We’re here.” She exited the limo and walked with the rest of the family members over to the plot reserved for Ricky.

“Here, honey,” Mama Kent said, handing her the framed picture of Ricky used during the service.
“Thanks,” she replied softly, only glancing at it for a second. She had stared at it during the whole service and didn’t think she could look at it again. Even with all the magic modern make-up can do, it didn’t look like Ricky in the casket. She had actually wanted it closed during the funeral, but once the director said that they were confident they could cover the wound and make him look semi-normal, Mama Kent insisted it be open.

Audrey glanced at the photo again. It was actually a picture she took of Ricky only a few months earlier. He was down by Swan Lake feeding bread to the ducks. She had taken the younger ones there to photograph them playing in the leaves. It was a beautiful autumn day with reds, golds, and yellows dressing the ground below. When she caught sight of Ricky sitting by himself near the water, she started to walk over to say hello. But as she got closer, she noticed he was smiling, and something inside of her told her to take a picture. Adjusting her lens to full zoom, she got as close as she could to him while at the same time trying not to crinkle any of the leaves beneath her feet. She ended up getting the most perfect, candid shot. And when he noticed her, that beautiful smile was gone once again.

As she watched the casket lower into the ground, a passion ignited inside the core of her, burning like fire. She let out a long harrowing moan, one last protest to God to give her son back to her. But it was too late, and she collapsed. Peter and others rushed to pick her back up. As he held her, she went limp on his shoulder, sobbing into his jacket.

“Did you see Keith?” he whispered. She looked up from her pool of tears across the empty space where the casket had once been. And there he was, almost entirely hidden by the crowd.

“He came after all?” she asked.

“He just got here,” Peter replied.

“I can’t believe he dared to show his goddamned face!” Audrey said between clenched teeth. She didn’t make eye contact with him again, but she sure tried. She hoped that he could feel her eyes on him, that he knew how unwelcome he was at her son’s funeral.

After the burial, Audrey rode with Peter back to the funeral home to pick up his vehicle. The rest of the party made their way back to her house where they were to have dinner and help with her affairs.

“You know, Aud, you really gotta talk to Keith sometime. It’s not like he did anything to you or those kids,” Peter said, apparently looking to start trouble.

“Oh, he didn’t? He abandoned us, Peter. I’d say that’s something.”

“Audrey, you lied to that man for seventeen years!”

“He left, and now Ricky’s gone. You’re not going to convince me of anything else. That man was a quitter! Sure he quit me, but he didn’t have to quit Ricky. He gave him that damn gun—after I told him not to. I buried my son today, and you want to talk to me about forgiveness?”
“You’re right,” Peter agreed, sarcastically. “Except he should be forgiving you and not the other way around. He’s the only father Ricky ever knew, and your lie drove him away. Seventeen years he had to listen to people tell him that Ricky was his spittin’ image. Seventeen years he cared for that boy. You’re tellin’ me that wouldn’t drive you away?”

The rest of the ride was quiet. Audrey once again stared out the window at the blurred trees flashing before her. She thought of Keith, of the past. She couldn’t forgive him. Sure, it was her fault. She sighed—that was the first time she admitted it to herself. But Ricky had needed him. She needed to not forgive him for Ricky.

As they approached the house, there were a number of cars in the driveway. Through the dark grey screen of the sun porch, she could see silhouettes of people eating the pre-made appetizers. As she opened the door to go through the house, she saw more people. They were huddling around Keith, who was sitting in his old chair in the living room. She stood peeking through the doorway, trying to catch the conversation.

“Oh, man,” Keith said, laughing. “Have I got another one for you! Remember back when we lived in Clearwater for a while? Well, back then Audrey left earlier than me, and it was my job to bring Ricky to school in the morning. Everyday we had to stop for the same damn train. Ricky was five or six at the time, and he’d always ask me—‘Daddy? Where’s the train goin’?’ Well shoot, I didn’t know! He’d ask me everyday, and finally I just started tellin’ the poor kid, ‘Miami.’ It didn’t stop there, though. He’d still ask me everyday, and I’d always tell him, ‘Miami, kid! Miami!’ Well, finally I got some common sense in this old head of mine, and I figured if I wanted to miss the train and get to work on time, I better start leaving ten minutes earlier. The very first day we did this we stopped at the light where the train usually went by. Ricky wasn’t talkin’ my ear off like he usually does, so I asked him, ‘Hey, Ricky? Where’d the train go?’ And you wanna know what he said?”

The crowd looked at him, waiting for a response. “He said, ‘Your-ami?’”

Everyone began to laugh, and Audrey surprised herself by laughing with them. It was the first time she had even smiled in days. She remembered when he told her that story all those years ago, and it was just as funny now as it was then. Once the crowd took notice of her, they went back to giving their apologies for her loss. But it was Keith’s loss, too. She finally made eye contact with him, and he gave her a wink. Just then, Mama Kent tapped her on the shoulder and asked her if she was okay once again.

“I’m gonna be fine, Mama,” she replied. “Just fine.”
65% of C. How impressive. Your trainees build my white defense—you bandit of plaque. Your iron seeds swim across the board while some jump, escaping to my eye. Slices, chunks, or ground with garlic. I’ll toss you. Masquerading in aid—explain the holes that fold me in half while fire barrels into my voice. And that inevitable sting? Tempt me, mistress in red. I know of your tough exterior. But it won’t fool me. I’ve tasted the soft side. The goo. Your burn. Now shed my layers, and I’ll use your good stuff.
“Can I pour you a drink?” Jimmy unzipped his backpack and produced a half-empty bottle of Jägermeister. He peered at me with bloodshot eyes and shook the bottle. The brown liqueur sloshed back and forth.

I opened my mouth to respond but was interrupted by Fred: “Jesus, Jimmy. Put that away.” Fred snatched the bottle away from Jimmy and pushed it back into the backpack. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m thirsty!” Jimmy frowned.

“Well, we can have a drink later, at a bar. You know—someplace with tables and chairs?” Fred re-zipped the backpack and nudged Jimmy away. “This is Las Vegas: there’s no shortage of bars. You don’t have to bring your own.”

The three of us turned and leaned over the railing of one of the Riviera Hotel and Casino’s skyboxes, suspended high above a section of the convention floor. Below us, hundreds of mostly white guys in black T-shirts sat at tables, tapping away at laptop keyboards and washing down doughnuts with cans of Mountain Dew. This was HaxCon, the country’s premiere Network Security convention. I’d been assigned to take photographs and to shadow my magazine’s top reporter as he interviewed people like Fred and Jimmy, a couple of “penetration testers,” better known as hackers. My reporter had been delayed. I’d spent the last twenty-four hours bumming around with Fred and Jimmy while we waited for him to arrive in Vegas.

Fred leaned close to me, smiling thinly. “Sorry about Jimmy,” he whispered.

I shrugged. “No need to apologize.”

I’d gotten the impression that Fred was embarrassed by Jimmy. I felt Fred wanted to impress me, most likely so that my magazine would produce a favorable profile on the two of them. For this reason, I didn’t tell Fred that last night, at the HaxCon party, Jimmy pulled me into the men’s room with him and asked me to hold his stuff while he dropped Ecstasy at the sink.

“Thanks for being cool.” Fred smiled more broadly.

I fidgeted with the convention badge looped around my neck: a miniature circuit board fitted with an LED display that scrolled the name and date of the Con. Some of the hackers had figured out how to re-program the badges on the first morning of the convention, and I’d seen people walking around with curse words and personalized messages scrolling across their chests.
Someone down on the convention floor caught my eye. I squinted, following the top of his head as it bobbed through the crowd. “No way,” I thought.

“Hey, when’s your reporter getting here?” Jimmy asked me.

“She already told you: not until two o’clock,” Fred huffed.

Jimmy glanced at his watch. “Have you two had anything to eat besides snack cakes and soda?” he asked. “It’s lunchtime. We should get sandwiches or something.” He smacked Fred in the stomach.

“I spent most of my cash just getting here,” Fred grumbled. “I’m not paying seven dollars for a pimento cheese sandwich.”

“There are other means,” Jimmy countered. He wiggled his fingers in the air. “The food’s just lying on the table down there,” he pointed at the lunch counter down on the convention floor. “Look how crowded it is. No one will even notice.”

Fred shook his head. “No stealing.”

“Well, I’m bored,” Jimmy sighed. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“I know you’re not hurting for money. Go to the casino.”

“Nah.” Jimmy waved the idea away. “Like the Motörhead song goes, ‘You know I’m born to lose and gambling’s for fools,’” Jimmy said, quoting “Ace of Spades.”

“Yeah, but the Dead Kennedys said: ‘If I wind up broke well I’ll always remember that I had a swingin’ time!’” sang Fred. “Vi-va Las Vegas!”

Jimmy frowned. “Dude, they didn’t even write that song; it’s a cover. Besides, since when do the Dead Kennedys trump Motörhead?”

“What?” Fred sounded genuinely offended.

I only half-listened to their exchange because I’d just confirmed the sighting.

“Oh, God.” My hand flew to my throat.

“What’s the matter? Are you going to be sick?” asked Fred.

Jimmy piped up, “How awesome would that be, to puke over the railing from way up here?”

“No,” I breathed. “It’s just…it’s Eric.”

It was Eric, walking across the convention floor, hauling a laptop bag and looking just as good as the last time I’d seen him. I could tell he’d just had a haircut, though he still hadn’t combed his black mop. He made his way past the T-shirt counters, perusing a HaxCon program.

“Who’s Eric?” asked Fred.

“My ex.”

“It’s hot up here,” said Jimmy, fanning himself with his copy of the program. He was right: sweat trickled down my sides, dampening my t-shirt. “Let’s go down there,” he continued, pointing at the convention floor. “Get sandwiches and ice.”
Fred sighed loudly. “Fine. Let’s go.” He waved me toward the door. “Just don’t get caught,” he warned Jimmy.

“I can’t go down there now,” I balked.

“Why not?” The two of them stared at me.

“I just told you. My ex is down there.”

“What’s the big deal?” Jimmy blinked at me from beneath his floppy knit cap.

“Eric hates me,” I asserted.

The two of them exchanged looks. “Why?” asked Jimmy. He twirled a dreadlock around a black-polished fingertip. “What’d you do to him?”

I chewed my lower lip hesitantly. “Never mind,” I said. “Let’s just say...I lose it around him. He has a crazy effect on me. I can’t describe it.”

The silver hoop in Jimmy’s eyebrow rose toward the ceiling. “That sounds like someone you should be with, not someone you should avoid.” He pushed me out the door.

“Is he still down here?” Jimmy asked.

We neared the lunch line. Eric passed by, holding a cell phone to his ear. He was giving whoever was on the other end of the line a piece of his mind.

“Yeah, that’s him.” I pointed surreptitiously.

“Wow. Eric’s cute,” Jimmy blurted. I shook my head, warning him to lower his voice, but it was too late. Eric heard his name, turned around and blinked curiously at the three of us. His eyes fell on me. Recognition gave way to shock, followed by revulsion.

“Sheila.” Eric bit out my name. His shoulders tensed. I could tell he was debating whether he should hang up his phone, come over and say a proper hello, or just pretend he hadn’t seen me and keep walking.

“Listen, I’ll call you back later,” Eric said into his phone, snapping it shut with one hand. He lifted his chin in our direction, in greeting.

“Hi Eric,” I waved. “Guys, this is Eric Steinmann. Eric, this is Jimmy and Fred...Smith.” Like most hackers, Jimmy and Fred didn’t give out their real last names.

“Mr. Smith...Mr. Smith.” Eric, ever polite, didn’t miss a beat, only shook Jimmy’s and Fred’s hands. Then he turned to me, his black eyes boring holes into my skull. “What are you doing here?” he asked, barely controlling the tremor in his voice.

“Same as you,” I shrugged. “Covering the Con.” I fingered the lanyard around my neck, holding the press badge up for Eric to see. I rested my hand on the camera bag slung over my shoulder.

Eric’s jawcontracted.
“Are you a reporter?” Fred asked Eric.

Eric tore his gaze from me, glanced at Fred and nodded. “I write for Source Code.” He reached into his shirt pocket and produced a dog-eared business card. He held it out for Fred, who took it and read it, his eyebrows rising.

“Wow, Source Code,” Fred breathed. I closed my eyes to keep from rolling them.

Eric grinned. “Are you still with Effete?” he asked me.


“Well, look,” Eric said, backing away. “I’ve got to cover a talk that starts in ten minutes. My photographer got stuck at the airport and isn’t here yet, so...I have to go figure out what the hell I’m going to do. Nice seeing you.” The last part was directed at me and was an outright lie.

Fred pocketed Eric’s card as Jimmy called after him, “Sheila’s got a camera.”

I glared at him.

“You could help him out,” Fred said to me. Then, turning to Eric, he said, “If your guy doesn’t show up.”

I willed Fred to shut up and die.

Eric chuckled nervously. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” Fred touched my shoulder and pushed me in Eric’s direction.

“Conflict of interest,” Eric mumbled.

“You mean Source Code and 31337? You wouldn’t have to tell them.”

“There’s more to it than that.” Eric stared hard at me. “Isn’t there?”

“What talk is it?” I asked, growing increasingly frustrated.

“Elliptic Curve Cryptography on the TOR Network.” He glanced down at the HaxCon program. “Track 12.”

“You really need pictures?” I couldn’t believe I was asking the question, that I was considering doing this.

Eric glanced at his watch. “You know I do,” he said tersely.

“We’ll walk down there with you,” volunteered Fred. “We’ve got nothing to do until two o’clock anyway.”

“Nah, just forget it.” Eric took another step away. “I’ll figure something out. Thanks anyway.”

“No, Eric, wait!”

I watched my hand reach out to grab Eric’s sleeve as if from a vantage point outside my body. Why had I always acted this way around him, as if my body were disconnected from my brain?
Eric stopped. He stared at my fingers, tangled in the fabric of his sleeve, as if a tarantula had just landed on his arm. I let go. “Are you sure about this?” he asked me.

His question reverberated in my head.

When it came to Eric, I’d never been sure about anything.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I’m sure.”

Eric stood next to me at the edge of the casino floor. He raised his voice to be heard over the slot machines: “You came through for me today.”

The talk was over, and I’d handed over his memory card. Fred, Jimmy, Eric, and I’d walked down the hall, away from the conference rooms.

“No problem.” I didn’t know what else to say. I worried that Eric wouldn’t say anything else, either, and that this would be the end: that he would simply thank me and then walk away, maybe forever.

“I didn’t think we’d ever work together again,” he said. The barest hint of a smile twitched across his lips and then disappeared.

“Well, we didn’t ever really ‘work together’, did we?” I blurted.

Eric’s eyes glazed over instantly. “Don’t,” he warned.

“I have to,”

“No, you don’t.” He shook his head, glancing uneasily at Jimmy and Fred. “Not here.”

“I do,” I insisted. “I have to let you know how sorry I am—for everything. I mean, I have to try.”

“Why?” Eric snorted derisively. “Why apologize now? And not before, when it might have made a difference?” His pale cheeks reddened, his black eyes gleamed fervently. I felt very small in the face of his fury. How could I tell him that this was why I hadn’t stuck around and talked things through before: because I’d been afraid? Would he even believe me?

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, simply.

“Yeah,” he said, hurling the word at me. “I agree.” He turned and walked quickly away, not looking back.

“That was cold,” Fred whispered.

“I messed that up,” I moaned.

Jimmy appeared at my elbow, a beatific glow on his face. “You’ll get another chance.”

“But he won’t even talk to me now.”
Jimmy’s eyes sparkled with inebriation. I smelled the Jägermeister on his breath, herbal and potent. He held out a crumpled paper cup. “Trust me, your man won’t get far,” he assured me.

“He said he’s leaving tonight.” I took the proffered cup, sipping his drink. The liquid traveled down my throat, simultaneously warm and cool, settling in my empty stomach.

“Nope,” Jimmy patted his backpack, indicating his laptop. “I changed his flight plans.” He mimed typing on a keyboard. “He leaves tomorrow.”

“No way.” I almost dropped the drink.

“Jimmy!” Fred’s eyes widened.

Jimmy ignored him and addressed me. “I see how the two of you look at one another. All you need is a little more time together.” He rummaged in his pack and produced a tattered canvas wallet I instantly recognized. “He charged his plane ticket to the AmEx in here. It wasn’t too hard to figure out which airline.”

He placed the wallet in my hand, the silver rings on his fingers catching the light of a thousand casino bulbs.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

He hesitated.

“Sometimes,” he said, “it’s best not to ask too many questions.” He winked at me. Fred looked aghast.

I ran my thumb over the embroidered pattern on the wallet: skull and crossbones that had once been white but had long ago faded to gray. I remembered giving Eric the wallet, years ago, and seeing the smile on his face. Tears stung my eyes.

“You should find him and give it back to him.” Jimmy patted my shoulder. “He’s probably going nuts looking for it—if he’s even noticed that he lost it,” he laughed.

I stood still, hesitant.

“This is Vegas, after all,” he continued. “Gotta take chances.”

“I thought you said gambling was for fools,” I sniffled.

“Lemmy said that,” he laughed. “He also said, ‘That’s the way I like it, baby,’” he added, quoting the next “Ace of Spades” lyric and prodding my back with a bony finger. “Now, go.”

I sprinted across the casino and into the lobby where I caught sight of Eric. He stood near the front desk, storm clouds in his eyes, having another stern conversation on his cell phone.

“Eric!” I shouted. Everyone in the lobby turned to stare as I ran toward the desk.

When he spotted me, Eric’s face hardened even more, and I thought for a moment that he would close the cell phone and throw it at me. I lifted his wallet into the air, waving it like a white flag.

His mouth fell open. I reached his side, panting and sweating.
“Is that my wallet?”
I nodded, out of breath. “Jimmy...found it on the floor.”
He snatched the wallet from my fingers, flipping it open and digging through the contents.
“He didn’t steal anything,” I said, lamely.
“Never mind cancelling the card,” he said into the phone. “I just found my wallet.” He
snapped the phone shut and stuffed it in his pocket. He stared at me. “Thanks,” he said curtly, starting
to turn away.
“Eric!” I leaned against the front desk, still trying to catch my breath. He stopped and looked at
me. “I saved your butt twice today.” I sounded pathetic.
“Yeah,” he acknowledged. “So?”
“So, come on, don’t you believe in third chances?” I smiled mirthlessly.
Emotions warred on his face. I gripped the edge of the desk.
“Come on,” I repeated. “I just want to talk to you.”
He stood still as a statue.
“You still carry that wallet,” I pointed out desperately.
Finally, one corner of his mouth twitched up.
Ever so slowly, he took a step toward me.
At Forty
Jana Moore

I would like to speak
passionately of my work,
saying it is in my blood

to have the brown skin of a woman in Rio,
to welcome each morning from rice fields or mountains,
to push my hands through,

the wind
the water
the topsoil

and feel life vibrating underneath,
and have children filled with rhythm
and have a hand in what I eat,

to be worth eleven cows,
know I can work harder than any man,
look at my house recognizing my sweat
and find a foundation anywhere I stand.
Enchanted

Daniel Colvin
“Why do you have to be so goddamned mean all the time,” Kirsten asks, glancing into the rearview mirror at the blackness behind her. “You’re such an asshole sometimes, ya know?”

At 2:20 in the morning, she is driving down the highway with her drunk, raw-knuckled boyfriend in the passenger seat.

Normal people are sawing logs by now, she thinks.

“Shut up,” he says, glaring with weasel-like eyes. “Shut up or else.”

“Or else what? You’ll hit me, too?” she snorts.

Before she even glances back to the road, a flash of movement erupts, and she sees her keys fly out the passenger window. The power steering is suddenly gone, the steering wheel goes tight, and she grips with all her strength to control the car.

Shannon, currently reeking of whiskey and sweat, likes to fight when he’s lit and feels his machismo is threatened, which unfortunately for Kirsten is often. She has seen him hit two different guys—who offered her drinks—with a pool stick and beer bottle respectively. Tonight, they’d happened upon Darrell, an ex-boyfriend of hers from high school, who was playing bass in the band jamming on the tiny stage in the corner. When Darrell handed Kirsten an ice-cold Rolling Rock as a long-time-nosee, Shannon punched him square across the nose without a word and then kicked him in the groin. Darrell dropped to his knees, and Shannon backhanded him, spraying blood across a barstool and onto the underside of the bar. In shock, Kirsten was dragged by the arm out of the bar, glancing over her shoulder at Darrell as he lay writhing on the floor. “C’mon,” he’d said, and now here they were.

“What the hell are you doing, you son of a bitch?” she screams. She’s in the slow lane and clicks on her hazards as she pulls over into the emergency lane. Pulling on the door handle, she tumbles quickly from the car, feeling cold, wet metal. Walking towards the trunk, gravel crunching beneath her boots, she glances into the darkness, hoping for a reflection or shimmer from her key ring.

“Oh my God, where are they?” she asks, kneeling and rubbing her hands along the ground, careful to graze the surface lightly with the tips of her fingers. It is cool outside, the heat long dissipated from the expanse of road deck. “Where the hell are they?”

“You won’t find them. I threw them in the grass,” Shannon says, nodding towards the sloping expanse between the shoulder and the feeder road.
Kirsten turns to Shannon, chin tucked low into her neck, and stares hard in silence. She can think of nothing to say and decides on, “Fuck.”

He stares back, walking forward to meet her, and stops, leaning over slightly from the waist so that his taller frame bends to put them nose to nose.

“What? You got something to say to me now?” he asks.

Kirsten still staring, now not breathing, closes her eyes and leans her head back.

God help me, she thinks as she inhales deeply through her nose, summoning whatever ounce of courage might be coursing through her veins, and thrusts her head forward with all her strength towards her target.

A sharp stab of pains explodes across her forehead and then a throbbing numbness follows. She opens her eyes to see Shannon double over with both hands raised to his face. A string of mumbled curses muffle through his cupped hands, now streaming crimson.

“You bitch,” he says, glaring at her, trying to stand upright and then doubling over again.

“Is that all you’ve got?” she says, wanting to rub her forehead but afraid it will show weakness.

“Big, bad, tough guy gonna cry now?”

Kirsten feels her eyes squint with this challenge. She has never hit a person, ever. Not even an animal. A raw feeling ripples up the back of her neck, and she feels the hairs on her arm stand on end.

Shannon lunges at her, stained hands glistening in the flicker of the hazard lights, and she realizes it’s time to shit or get. Glancing towards the grassy slope, she spies a gas station on the corner and decides to get. Skirting easily around Shannon, who is rubbing his eyes with the backs of his fists and turning to trail her, Kirsten runs down the slope. Her feet slide, and she straightens upright and locks her knees to keep her balance. Her heart flutters as adrenaline dumps into her bloodstream, and she feels a cold sweat bead instantly on her brow.

Oh God, my boots, she thinks, imagining the grass and mud caking into them.

Reaching the feeder road below, Kirsten bolts across the street, holding out her right hand like a traffic cop as she passes in front of a distant car approaching with its right turn signal on. Glancing over her shoulder, she sees Shannon still on the slope, hunched over again and moving in slow circles. She sees one hand grasping his face and the other sweeping the grass in wide strokes.

That asshole is looking for the keys, she thinks, turning towards the station lights and scraping her boots along the ground to dislodge the clumps that feel like rocks beneath her.

Please be open, please be open, please be open, she thinks, passing gas pumps and an overflowing trash can.
Her stomach rolls and cramps as she yanks the front door and feels it clank against its frame. Under the blinking fluorescent light, she notices a small blue and white sign wedged between the glass and burglar bars and reads 1:00 am as closing time.

“I am so stupid,” she says. “What did I ever see in him?”

Kirsten never really liked Shannon *that* way; he was just someone to fill time, a rebound in techno-speak. When her high school boyfriend dumped her three days before prom, she scooped up her pride and went to the dance with little sister, Megan, as her date. The two had little to nothing in common, with Kirsten wearing Izod and Nike and Megan sporting rock tees and smelly Converse. Though strikingly similar in features, they might as well have been from separate universes. It was their mother’s idea that Megan go as Kirsten’s date.

“You might as well not waste the ticket, and besides, maybe Megan will meet a normal guy without tattoos,” were their mother’s exact words.

Instead of Megan meeting someone nice, Kirsten met Megan’s stoner friends. The girls ducked out of the dance early and spent the better part of the evening slumming with long-haired, Metallica tee’d guys who said “dude” way too often through choked coughs as they passed weed and cloves around. Kirsten’s stomach churned from the mixed smells, and she moved to the perimeter of their gaggle to get fresh air.

She thought she should have stayed home as she watched one of the metal heads spit and pinch at his tongue as he passed a joint.

“What’s your damage?” she heard from the darkness behind her.

Startled, she stood frozen with a knot in her stomach. A tan guy with shoulder length brown hair emerged from the shadows with a crooked smile.

“I said, what’s your damage? Why aren’t you over there with the rest of those knuckleheads?”

“Um…” was all she could manage as she glanced back to the shadows, wondering if any other surprises lurked there, too stunned to answer.

He laughed, grazing her shoulder with his as he passed and circled her, “I’m Shannon. Who’re you?”

“K-Kirsten.”

“K-Kirsten, you want a smoke?” he asked, chuckling and holding out a smashed pack of Camels he pulled from his jacket pocket.

“No, thanks.”
“I see manners school worked for you.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”
She watched as he circled again in front of her, like a wolf with prey, and she traced his steps with her eyes, not moving her head, and chewed the inside of her mouth raw.
“What’re you doing in a place like this?” he asked. “You belong at the lake with the jocks, don’t you?”
“That’s my sister.” She nodded in the direction of the only other person wearing a corsage and pearls in the field.
“Her?” he said, staring from one to the other and back again. “Who’d a thunk that shit!”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Nuthin. I see the resemblance, but dude, she’s so cool, ya know?”
“Where does that leave me then?” she asked, curious.
“Standing in a field talking to a guy who’d like to get to know you better, if you know what I mean,” he’d said, kicking the grass with a combat booted foot, locking his gaze with hers, not blinking. Then he winked and that crooked smile appeared again.
Kirsten giggled as a warm shiver coursed through her. Her fingertips got warm, and her ears were on fire.

Now, she shivers again, not from the warmth of that flirtatious exchange but from the dark figure running towards her with a tightly set jaw, slit eyes, and smears of blood all over his face. She sees him rub his nose with the back of one hand, not flinching, and realizes adrenaline has granted him a second wind. Without hesitation, she puts her foot up on the middle rung and scales the fence nimbly to the other side, ducking into the grass, hoping he won’t catch sight of her through the shadows.
“Kirsten, you bitch, where are you?” he says through clenched teeth. “Where the fuck are you?”
She holds her breath again, exhaling only briefly through small, deliberate puffs, and prays the scent of her perfume and cigarettes is masked by the wet muck behind her.
God, don’t let him smell me, please.
“Kirsten, baby, come out. I wanna talk to you,” he says. “C’mon, baby, I’m not mad anymore. Hey, look! I found your keys,” he says, jingling a ring between his index finger and thumb.
Silence.
“Kirsten, goddamn it! This is your last chance. You get out here now, or you’ll be sorry!”
Kirsten, hunched and still, watches from her vantage point in the shadows. She covers her eyes briefly with one hand and holds onto a splintered fence post with the other.
“Kiiirrsten, this is your last warning. If you make me come looking for you, my nose won’t be the only thing you pay for.”

Glancing behind her, Kirsten guesses the slope into the bayou is about three feet back. She slowly creeps backwards, foot, palm, foot, palm, towards the ditch. Once at the edge, she goes prone, sliding both feet out behind her, leaving her palms on either side of her cheeks as she presses her chin into the wet earth.

“Oh, please, God, don’t let there be poison ivy in here,” she mutters, pushing with her hands to slide further into the ditch.

“Kirsten, you out there?” he calls as she sees his dark form roost on the top rung and hears him spit again.

Inching her way further along, she begs the grass to keep her secret and be silent. As she slides over the edge, her left knee finds a rock, and she bites into her own shoulder to stifle the pain shooting up to her hip. She freezes as she hears his boots thud onto the ground.

“You’re really pissing me off, you know that?” he says. “It’s one thing to take a beer from dip shit, but this is entirely different. What are you thinking? Punching me in the fucking face, then running off like a goddamned coward. If I didn’t know you better, Kirsten, I’d...” his words trail off to an indiscernible mumble.

Kirsten cannot see him but knows from the rustle of weeds against his jeans that he is walking her way.

“Goddamn it, Kirsten, where the fuck are you? I’m tired. C’mon out so we can finish this.”

As he rambles on with the one-sided conversation, she hears him pace parallel to the bayou, back and forth, above her head. She opens her eyes and sees that the overcast sky has opened up to reveal a crescent moon. Dew reflects light off the blades of grass around her, and she is paralyzed with a thought.

He’s going to see me, she thinks, slamming her eyes shut again and holding her breath until her chest feels like it is on fire.

Kirsten left Shannon at a Denny’s once, shortly after they started dating. Sitting in a half moon booth waiting for eggs to be delivered, she had brushed loose hairs behind his ear with her forefinger, and he had reacted by swinging his arm out sideways and hitting her in the cheek with his elbow. In shock, she bit back tears but could not contain the flush that raced across her face. She didn’t know if anyone saw what happened but slid out of the booth anyway and walked stiff-backed with her purse clutched tightly in her hand out to the parking lot. Outside, she ran to her car, thankful that she’d left the doors unlocked, climbed in, fumbled getting the key into the ignition, and then peeled backwards out of
her spot, not looking to see if anyone was behind her. She caught sight of him standing outside the front door of the restaurant watching her, marking her, as she sped away. When she walked out the front door for work the next morning, the gas cap was off her car, and a length of clear tube was hanging loose from the tank. Her stomach churned with nausea as she called her father for help. Even without hard proof, she was now certain it was Shannon.

She no longer hears his movements because the water is sloshing and mosquitoes are buzzing about. Sliding the rest of the way into the water, she bites her lip as the cold envelopes her, sticks the bottom half of her face into the water to mask a groan, and digs her fingers into grass roots and dirt to keep the current from taking her.

As she begins to lift her head out of the water, she sees movement above and instead dips further into the darkness. Her right ear throbs as the current forces water into it, and she releases her grip on the bank to hide her arms before she is noticed. Shannon lingers above her, looking at the sky and then towards the woods. She can see the red tip of a Camel in his mouth and imagines his eyes squinting from the smoke billowing up into them.

Drifting downstream, she grabs blindly for leverage underwater, feeling branches scratch and rocks strike against her skin as she is pushed along. Keeping as much of her body submerged as possible, she hopes he will think the top of head nothing more than turtle on a late night swim. She watches his form shrink as the distance between them increases. She turns about face and lifts her mouth from the water for a breath and gasps at the sight of the bridge quickly approaching. Wet stones on either side of the underpass glisten in the moonlight, and an arched blackness marks the center. Drifting slightly off-center, she is certain she will slam into the wall instead of passing under. She back pedals with all her strength and finds the only reward for her effort is a stitch in her left side. She grabs her side with her right hand, losing her fight with the current, feeling her teeth clench and muscles tighten as she is whisked into the darkness under the highway.


**Procrastination**

Kim Lumpkin

The second hand
rhythmically moves
while my head
pounds, thrashing
my brain
back and forth
into my skull
with every tick.

Just one more day
is all I ask—
to finish something
that should have
been done
a week, no
a month, no
a year ago.

I used time,
crumpled and
wadded it up
into a ball
like the foil
used on my
hamburger
at lunch.

The alarm chimes
like the cathedral
bells of an
ancient church
telling me
I am too late.

I tried to
retrieve it
like a child
begging to
stay up past
his bedtime
to watch his
favorite
TV show—

My whole body
quivers like
being caught in
a lightning storm
dressed in aluminum.
The last grain of
sand has dropped
from the hourglass.

Without success,
used up and
thrown away
too late, for the
garbage man had
picked it up and
carried it to a landfill
completely out of
my reach.

I know time has
done its final
disappearing act.
My head sings
guilty of my own
wasteful disease.
Duy carefully picked his steps around countless number of video game cases, opened and unopened, laid wildly on the wooden floor. He tried not to look at the big pizza box decorated with leftover crusts, spilled ranch and ketchup which, when he got close enough, also covered a bowl of what looked like milk, cereal, and ramen noodles combined. The familiar scene didn’t surprise him; he knew his buddy would only pick up stuff whenever he needed to look for his car keys, wallet, or half dirty jeans to re-wear.

“Vince, up! Damn, man, it’s 3 p.m. C’mon,” Duy said and wrenched the blanket with both hands.

“What, dude— it’s Sunday,” Vincent mumbled, covering his face with what he thought to be the comforter but indeed was his dirty shirt, and curled up to one side.

“It’s Thursday, you crazy head. Anyway, you got to hear this! Guess who I just met?” Duy said, partly sitting himself on top of the tall speakers that connected to the flat screen TV hung artistically on the wall.

“Don’t sit on my Bose, you ass. Who? Chocoball Mukai?” Vincent chuckled with closed eyes, scratching his head with his wrists like a happy cat sunbathing and curled up a little bit more.

Duy ignored his friend. Vincent had always loved to throw out just random Asian porn stars’ names as if that would one day make Duy confess that he, indeed, had pictures of naked women stuffed in his all-time favorite math book collection.

“That’s a male name, you stupid! I just saw Snowy at the mall. Snow-y, man!” He beamed and picked up the PlayStation3 controller, waiting for the news to sink in Vincent’s head.

It didn’t take long. The name shocked Vincent the way cold water would a cat.

“Snowy? Snowy who?” Vincent was now half sitting up, facing Duy with both eyes opened.

“Our Snowy. The girl with black long hair that you adored; the only third grader that could beat me in multiplication. Snowy Phan,” Duy said, nodding his head with the smile that said Yeah! Baby!

Vincent pushed himself out of bed toward Duy, landed on the Madden NFL 2007 disc, broke it, and carelessly kicked it aside.

“Dude, tell me. Where did you see her?” he said, sitting on the other tall speaker.

“At the mall, I told you, The Woodlands. Here, play me.” He handed Vincent the other controller; his eyes fixed on the demo video of Virtual Fighter 5.
“No, later. But, what do you mean you saw her at the mall? After 10 years hearing nothing from her, she couldn’t just freaking pop out of Victoria Secret?” Vincent could hardly hide his excitement; he blankly took the controller but leaned toward Duy eagerly waiting for the answer.

Snowy was an orphan who’d gone to Duy and Vincent’s elementary school in Vietnam. At the time, Vincent’s parents were both working for the U.S. Embassy. People said that at a young age, kids could easily pick up different languages and make friends with strangers; that’s why Vincent was sent to a normal Vietnamese school. The first part was right; Vincent mastered Vietnamese in one year, but he hardly made any friends. Duy was his only good buddy until Snowy came. She was the smartest girl in her whole orphanage, so they collected all the money they could to send her to school. She soon became Duy’s math competitor and Vincent’s English student because she wanted to travel the world one day. They were all best mates until third grade when her family suddenly came to the orphanage to take her back. She moved away that summer. After that one year, Vincent’s family went back to America. Duy stayed in Vietnam for another year before immigrating to America as well. None of them ever heard about Snowy since then.

“I don’t know, man. I walked past her in the mall in front of a jewelry store. She recognized me at once. It took me a bit longer, though. She was tall, pretty and stuff, but she looked a lot older than I expected her to be, and plus...” Duy stared at the controller, tried to see if he could press all fourteen buttons at the same time.

“What, plus what?” Vincent said, leaning forward.

Before coming, Duy had tried to find a way to lay everything out nice and easy. He knew that in both of their minds, their memory about the childhood friendship had never lost its innocence. He was more than happy to see Snowy again, but, at the same time, he worried that describing too many changes to those pretty old times together might break them into pieces.

“She’s getting married, Vince,” Duy let out softly.


“Yeah. She was shopping for her wedding ring,” Duy said, no longer playing with the controller.

“So, she’s on K-1 visa?”

“Yup. She’ll get the green card in about...”

“Twelve to sixteen months,” Vincent finished with a slight smirk on his face.

“Right.”

Everything suddenly fell into silence. The room filled with music from the demo of the fighting game. Duy kept his head down, sneaking up only once or twice to examine his friend’s reactions. It didn’t take long for thoughts to overflow Vincent’s head.
“That is just stupid, you know!” he yelled and sprang up for no particular reason.

“Actually, I don’t know, Vince! We haven’t seen her in so many years. Anything could have happened. And plus, if that was her choice, I just don’t see we have any rights to question, man,” Duy said, trying to look away from Vincent.

“I don’t care, and you know how most of those marriages are. They are just contracts between old, fucked-up losers who have nothing to offer but a green card, and girls who are just too desperate to trade their lives for the same damn piece of paper,” Vincent said, kicking all the game boxes around him.

“Oh c’mon Vince, you’re not calling Snowy stupid, are you? I mean, you know her, she wouldn’t do that kind of thing,” Duy said, still sitting down.

“What if her family put pressure on her or something? You saw the way they took Snowy away from the orphanage. They acted as if she was something that belonged to them that they could just leave out somewhere and pick up later or something,” Vincent said, letting out a deep sigh. He sounded more like he was trying to explain to himself, not Duy.

Duy was surprised to see how clear the memory about Snowy’s family remained in his friend’s mind. He was even more surprised about the way Vincent reacted toward the wedding news. He acted as if he hadn’t known anybody who got married at 18, which he did. Besides, he remembered telling Vincent about many Vietnamese who earned their citizenships by marrying Americans and had never heard him say that many negative things about them. Duy wondered whether he should feel happy or sad to know that after all those years, Vincent still cared about Snowy.

“I want to know all the shit that had happened in those 10 years, Duy. I’ll go ask her straight up. You have her address?” Vincent said and stood up to grab a shirt on the floor.

“Well, you wanna wait? She wanted to meet up with us tonight anyway. Seven p.m. We can pick the place.”

“You pick.” Vincent threw himself back down on the tall speaker. His shirt was inside out.

“How about my mom’s place? I bet she wants to see Snowy, too.”

“Cool, that way if her husband is a total asshole, when I beat him up, your mom won’t call the police,” Vincent said and laughed.

“A’ight. Until then, give me a ride to my cousin’s auto-shop. Somehow my dad found a rusty piece of crap, a so-called car, and thought my cousin could fix it up for me. Don’t even laugh, dude! It is not funny,” Duy threatened, pretending to throw the controller at Vincent.

“Okay, okay. Throw me my jeans behind the speaker, Chocoball.”

They were walking from the parking lot toward Duy’s family’s little restaurant when Vincent suddenly stopped.
“You think that guy will be there?” he said with his hands in his pocket.

Duy turned around to examine his friend. Vincent was wearing black Converse, dark distressed jeans, and a striped button-down with a black Dockers jacket outside. Duy could tell he was trying to make a tough impression in front of Snowy’s fiancé.

“I don’t know, maybe not,” Duy lied, rubbing the back of his neck with his right hand.

“You’re lying. She said they would both come, didn’t she? Whatever, let’s go,” he said and passed Duy but then stopped again at the front door.

“Why don’t you go in and see who is in there? Hurry,” Vincent said, walking toward the side of the building.

“Gosh, dude. What for? Chill, man! It’s just like a childhood friend’s reunion with an extra guy, you know. C’mon, let’s just go in,” Duy said, straightening his shirt and slapping dirt on his jeans.

“Hey, Duy, did Snowy still keep her long hair?” Vincent suddenly asked.

Duy thought it was rather funny how nervous Vincent was. He had tried many times to make his buddy pay less attention to the video games and the life behind the laptop screen to put more thoughts into real people and real life, but he’d never succeeded. Now, seeing Vincent struggling to stay cool before meeting with a girl, Duy wondered why he didn’t think of this method before.

“Yes, sir. Long, black and smooth,” Duy turned to Vincent with a wide smile.

“Let’s go then,” Vincent said pushing the door open.

“There you are,” Duy’s mom said, walking toward them. “How early, Duy! Daddy just went to the back. He needs your help with the plates. And remember to take some more ice on your way out.” She then turned to Vincent. “And you, come here. Where have you been? I miss hugging you,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron and reaching up for Vincent’s neck.

“Oh, c’mon, Mom. Vince never has to help with anything, and don’t you miss hugging your son, too?” Duy said, smiled at Snowy, and nodded at her fiancé.

“It’s good to see you, Mrs. Tran.” Vincent hugged Duy’s mom loudly, with eyes fixing somewhere on her back.

“Okay, okay. You guys can stay here. I’ll come back there and help. C’mon up here, Andy. You have helped plenty,” she said, gesturing to Snowy’s fiancé, who was standing near the kitchen, to join the crowd in the front.

“You are a lot taller than you used to be, Vincent,” Snowy said, finally breaking the awkward silence.

“And you look… prettier,” Vincent replied, looking embarrassed.
“That’s very kind, Vince.” She continued, “Let me introduce. Duy, Vince, this is my fiancé, Andy. Andy, this is—”

“Vincent Curtis. Nice to meet you,” Vincent said, interrupting Snowy. He turned to face her fiancé and reached out his right hand with his back looking stiffer than usual.

“Andrew Johnson. Nice to meet you too, man,” Andrew said, leaning forward with a smile to shake Vincent’s hand. “Wow, strong grip!” he beamed.

“Thanks,” Vincent said, still keeping his back straight. He then turned to Snowy and reached out his hand again. “I’m more than glad to see you again, Snowy!” His voice got softer at the end.

“Yeah, me too,” Snowy said, hesitating for a moment before reaching out her small hand.

“Oh, c’mon, just in case you don’t know, Snowy, in America, we hug!” Duy joined the scene, wrapping one arm around Snowy and swung the other wide open.

Snoopy giggled. “You always know more than I do, don’t you, Duy? Then let’s have our third grade reunion hug.” She beamed at Duy, spreading her arm toward Vincent.

Vincent paused with his hand remaining in the front.

“Well, in that case, let me show you guys how we, Americans, hug the right way.” Vincent smiled for the first time and flung his arms around his friends.

“C’mon, help me show them, Andrew,” he said, leaving the circle opened between him and Snowy.

“Oh yeah, sure!”

Duy let out a sigh of relief. He couldn’t ask for anything more than that. Forget about things that had happened in the past ten years since they’d seen her last. Forget about what would happen in the next ten years. All that mattered was the warmth that they all felt right there and the happy feeling he had when he thought about how Vincent would describe the sweet smell of Snowy’s hair when he got home.
The Drink  
Colleen O’Brian

He pours another glass of whiskey, Jack Daniels to be correct; the drinking cup contains four ice cubes, three-fourths whiskey, and a dash of Diet Coke to top it off. He then begins to stir it around with his index finger, trying not to spill any over the rim. This is his fourth refill and his usual ritual before passing out. Paul is his name, and he is my father.

He is a hard-working man, but the drunken dad is who I know. When I awake, he is gone, and when I get home, he is, well, who he is, my dad, the alcoholic. I have never seen my dad fall asleep without having his regular to put him out. Our most intimate conversations are when he is wasted, and I always regret opening up my heart because he never remembers.

I love him, though; he will always be my dad. Yet, I have wondered: will he be alive to walk me down the aisle or be there to see my first-born? He has told me, Don’t worry about things you have no control of. Worry about the things you can fix right here and now. I never understood that. I guess he just says that to make himself feel better about his life.

It was about two months ago when a major heart attack occurred in the worst area: where two arteries connect, which is nicknamed the “widow maker.” He had to get a couple of stents placed in the linking intersections. On top of that, the doctors said he had the worst liver enzymes they had ever seen. The entire ordeal made him more hopeless. The day he got released, he went to the liquor store and bought his usual. From that day on, I knew there was nothing I could say or do to fix his addiction.

Before picking it up, he sips the layer along the rim so it doesn’t spill during the trip to the chair. Now, with the drink less than a half an inch from the top, he turns his body and does a full circle, trying to figure out which way to go. I glance over the bar, seeing his eyes glazed and red. He smiles from embarrassment, knowing that I know.

I move my body side to side, pulling my legs out from under me; I relieve my tingling limbs by readjusting my position from sitting Indian style to resting them on the coffee table. I’ve been settled on the edge of the couch where I could spy on him. The bar attaches to the kitchen, which links to the living room where I sit. My dad stumbles his way back to his chair by the fireplace and places the drink down on the ledge. He grabs the blanket folded over the backside of the chair and sways over my way.
“Love you,” he says, placing the blanket around my legs. His eyes never meet mine.
“You too, dad,” I say, staring ahead.

Unbalanced, he staggers back and settles. He carefully picks his drink up and rotates the chair to the TV and then lounges his legs on the fireplace’s mantle.

He likes the warmth of the fire, and he usually ends up sprawled out on the ledge with a little pillow supporting his head, or he’ll pass out where I am sitting. Sometimes he’ll even light it up when it’s 70 degrees out and sleep in the chair. One winter when it was cool out, he got a little too close. I think I was about 14 or so, the same age as my sister is now, and his robe caught on fire. He jumped up and landed on the brick floor. I woke up the next day and saw bruises on him; I asked what happened, and he shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t put two and two together until he saw the charred fabric a couple of days later.

I flip through the channels, looking for something to satisfy him, and in between each station is silence, and through that silence I hear my mom and my younger sister studying in their room. That is their ritual, every night before bedtime: flashcards and Spanish.

“What you want to watch?” I say.

“Whatever,” he replies.

He sips his drink, which is now about half-empty. His feet are crossed, and he rubs his toes together. He sways the chair back and forth, making it groan, which comforts me. From when I was a baby, I have always rocked myself to sleep, and that chair started it all. It’s been around for some twenty-odd years.

Giving up, I turn to the news and drop the remote to my side; it sinks into the creases between the two cushions. The blanket unwraps around my feet. I look, realizing the movements of my toes have peeled a portion over to one side. I uncross my legs and reposition myself, bringing the warmth of the blanket up to my chest. My eyes linger in his direction, and I watch.

His head bobbles and the glass dangles in between his figures as the last shot accumulates to one side. The chair comes to a halt, squeaking its last breath. A snore rumbles, jolting his chin downwards to his chest.

The nine o’clock news segments come to a close, and I curl up, lying on my side, tightening the blanket. I close my eyes as the commercials roll, and I rock myself, gently moving my hips side to side.

They’re done. I hear the door close and the water running as my mom blows her nose. Footsteps creep pass with an alternating pop as my sister’s left foot meets the brick floor. My sister
rustles her papers and organizes her books, stuffing them in her backpack. The water shuts off, and my sister’s footsteps then pass again. The stairs whine as my sister heads up to bed. Startled, I jolt and open my eyes as a loud grunt and a murmuring groan arise from my dad. His head now leans facing the fire.

I take a deep breath, exhaling loudly. The same routine every night, I think to myself. Dad wasted, passing out in the chair, while mom and my sister study in the bedroom. Dad is still passed out, sister finishes her work, and mom takes her makeup off. Dad is passed out, sister goes to sleep, and mom lies in bed by herself.

My dad, now constantly snoring, keeps me from falling asleep. It has been so long since I’ve slept in my own bed. Since the day he came home from the hospital I haven’t been able to leave his side. Yet he doesn’t even know.

I sit up and stretch, twisting my back side to side, making it pop. I grab the blanket and carry it over, dragging it on the floor. I turn the volume down, and then I press the power button. The crackling sound and the constant snoring fill the room. I tiptoe over to my dad and drape the blanket over his lower half. Then I effortlessly retrieve his cup from his hand and kiss his forehead.

“I love you, Dad,” I say.

He snores back at me. I stare at him for a while. He looks so innocent but at the same time so pathetic. I’ve always thought it was so normal to have a dad that drinks every night. He lives such an ordinary life. He does his duty, and he loves us. So why do I blame him? Sometimes I feel like I am the only one in this family that isn’t blind.

I give him a final glance and then walk to the kitchen. I pour out the rest of his drink, which reeks, and then wash out the Dave and Busters’ glass.

My little sister is so naïve to his sickness. On his last birthday when he turned 51, she got him that glass to add to his collection. He loves it, but she should have used her common sense. My mom, on the other hand, ignores the situation as much as possible because she hates conflict. She turns a cold shoulder and dismisses reality. She is powerless over his addiction. We all are. That is why nothing has changed, and the same customs always follow.

I walk to the kitchen table where my sister’s backpack lies and grab a chair. I haul it with me to the kitchen and place it under the cabinet, the one I can’t reach. I stand on it and yank on the handle until it opens.

The one-liter Jack Daniels bottle that is three-quarters empty stares back at me. I grab it and lean down, placing it on the counter. I bend back up to realize there is a second bottle about half
empty. Two used bottles, and, yet, that doesn’t count for the empty bottle next to the Diet Coke can on the bar. I clutch the second one-liter bottle and situate it on the counter next to the other one. Then again rolling back up, I close the cabinet door and step down. I grasp the chair, heaving it to its original position and hurry back to the kitchen.

I take both bottles and place them in the sink. I unscrew the tops and tip one straight up. The alcohol dispenses out rapidly. It takes a few seconds for the whole bottle to become weightless. I then repeat again; the second one empties slower. With the bottle still in my hand, I open the cabinet door to throw it in the trash, and as I do so, I hear a noise. I stop directly in my tracks, the chair squeals loudly, and a deep grumble cracks the silence. I immediately feel a rush of panic wave over me. I become hot and shaky. The chair bounces back, and his feet pound on the floor.

He stomps on the brick and clears his throat. Grunting and half snoring, he drags his feet along, his footsteps become louder and more distinct. I toss the bottle in the trash, but it’s over flowing. It falls down, clanking on the carpet, which saves it from shattering. I bend over to pick it up; it’s in my hand, and he sees me.

In shock I stare. I have three empty bottles in my possession, and I just gaze at him. He supports himself on the counter, swaying to and fro. His eyes link to mine in a blank daze. His mouth opens, and nothing comes out. Then he takes a step forward from the shadow and cries out, “They’re dead!”

In disbelief I respond back, “Who?”

“Where are they? I can’t find her. I thought she was with you!” he yells. “They lied. She said it wasn’t you, but it is. Where is my daughter? Is she dead? I know she is. I tried to tell you. I can’t find her,” he screams, and his eyes glisten.

He stumbles forward, taking baby steps in my direction. His eyes never leave mine. I taste the saltiness and realize I’m crying.

“She’s dead, my daughter. No, you’re dead, she’s dead,” he desperately screeches out.

I scamper towards him, the bottle still in my hand, and I wrap my arms around him. I can feel the pressure of the bottle pressing against his back. He stands there weeping; timidly he finally puts his arms around me. We hug for a long time. He cries in my arms, and I cry in his. He repeats over and over, “She’s dead, you’re dead, my daughter.”

Then out of nowhere, he lets go. His tears fade, and calmly he steps backwards, his eyes still in a daze. He doesn’t speak a word; I stand in front of him in shock. My arms dangle to my side with my hand still attached to the bottle. For a few seconds he stands there motionless. Then
he turns around and begins to pace back to the living room. He passes the chair and the fireplace and heads to the hallway to his bedroom. I hear the door open moments later.

I immediately drop to my knees, banging them on the brick floor. The bottle releases and clanks, rolling away from my hand. I ball up and begin to rock back and forth uncontrollably. I whimper every time I take a deep breath. Then I feel a hand stroke my back. I gradually lift myself up and wipe my hair away, which is sticking to my face. I open one eye hesitantly, and all I can comprehend is the color pink.

“It’s okay, shhh, I’m here, I’m here, shh,” mom says kneeling beside me in her pink pajamas. “He was sleepwalking. It was only a dream. I heard the screaming. Are you okay?”

“I just didn’t know what was going on. I was pouring out everything, and then I saw him. I thought he was going to… but he just…” I say, gasping in between breaths.

“He won’t remember. I’ll clean this up. Why don’t you take a shower and try to fall asleep?” She reaches out and hugs me tightly, whispering, “I love you” in my ear.

I take a deep breath, snatch the jug, and stand up.

“I love you, too,” I say as her hand clasps around the bottle and mine releases. I stagger my way up the creaking stairs and to my bedroom where I will rock myself to sleep.
The Soul Is
Shellie Callahan

The freedom of driving
in your pale car down the
quickly passing curves of a Texas highway.
The laughter soaked into the
dark stain of the old wooden floor
in that tiny East Texas house.
False-happiness hidden in the
golden glimmer of ice-cold tequila
spilling across the warm glass dining table.
Euphoria came from a gleaming card,
turning white rocks to fine powder,
disappearing up red Sonic straws.
Shuddering fear, then gasping giggles
erupting over the sight of
dried blood
clinging to fingernails the day
after the flashy affair.

The soul is the comfort
in my dark, glossy tresses
one year after. The corruption
that fell through every crack
of the trip has now
permeated into the very atoms of
that soul
itself.
The Things We Don’t Know
Samantha Maddox

My head resting against my seat, eyes closed and mouth full of smoke, I listened for the tiny echo of a pebble against the far away cement after stretching my feet out between the rails on my balcony.

The pebble never made a sound, but my feet resting outstretched in the sun led me to wonder how it could possibly be so hot in late October, especially this early in the morning. With no feasible explanation for this inquiry, all global warming theories aside, I opened my eyes, fixed them on my wiggling toes, and was immediately bothered by the chipped toenail polish on my pinky toe.

The tail end of my cigarette fought its way through the thick Houston air and settled itself comfortably onto my bottom lip. “Finally,” I thought, “a problem I can fix.”

I exhaled, closed my eyes, and pulled my feet back into the shade. The screen door behind me slid open without warning, startling me out of my comfortable morning haze.

“Good morning, Miss Thing,” said Evan as he handed me a mug of the strongest stuff around.

“Well, good morning, sir,” I said. “You’re up early. And you made coffee, too. What a sweetheart.” I set my glass on the cement beside my chair, reached for a cigarette, and handed it to Evan with a slight smile.

“Ah, truly the breakfast of champions,” he laughed.

“Most definitely.”

I tossed the butt of my cowboy killer over the rail and nestled back into my seat. A moment or two of coffee sipping and smoke swirling passed before Evan bluntly stated, “It’s really annoying.”

“What is?” I asked.

“That I think about him so much. And now that I talk about him so much. I mean, I just woke up, I’m trying to enjoy a quiet moment on the porch with my best friend, and he’s all I can think about. The only topic of discussion I can even offer. Annoying.”

“Well. I don’t think it’s annoying. I think it’s cute. It’s…happy.”

“Yeah, well, it annoys me. I don’t know. I guess I’m just not used to this feeling. I don’t know what to do with it. Where to even go from here.”

“I think wherever it goes is a good place to be. And you know what, even if it isn’t, it’s in a good place right now, and the only thing that can ruin that is your worry and doubt and awkwardness about it.” I paused and took a deep breath. “Love isn’t always painful and tragic, Evan. Love can be cute. Love can be interesting. Love can be... annoying.”
“Yeah, I guess.” He took a drag of his cigarette. I closed my eyes again.

“Oh. Your dad called,” he said.

“Ugh. Yeah, I’m aware. Wasn’t that message just a tad on the ridiculous side?”

“How do you figure?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It was just painful or pathetic or desperate or something. I mean, really.”

I set my empty coffee mug down again and shifted my weight uncomfortably to the left, before deciding on another cigarette. I lit it and settled back in, bringing my knees up to my chest and wrapping my free arm around them as if to secure their proximity to my body.

“Steph, he’s making an effort. I know it wasn’t a great one, but it’s an effort,” he said, putting both hands on his coffee and both elbows on his knees.

“Evan,” I said coldly, “it’s been two years.”
He curled up one side of his nose, furrowing his brow a bit, and relaxed back into his chair.

“Damn,” he said.

“Yeah. Damn.”

A bird or two flew by, and I noticed how cloudless the sky appeared. I exhaled in small puffs and closed one eye as if trying to imagine each tiny puff were some colossal cloud off in the distance.

“So. What are we doing tonight?” I asked.

“God. I have no idea. I think Marshall’s having a party, but we all know how Marshall’s parties turn out.”

“Oh Jesus. I don’t feel much like another evening spent cleaning up the vomit of friends I hardly like to begin with.”

“Most def,” Evan laughed. “I might call Brian. I want to see him, annoying as that really, truly is. He’s one of the only people I have much of a desire to see these days. It’s weird. I’m in this totally social funk.”

“I know how you feel,” I said.

“Yeah. But like, I can’t even explain it. I feel like,” he paused and admired his newly lit cigarette as it sent a stream of gray spiraling up into the air, singular at first, then spreading out and disappearing altogether. “I feel like this smoke.”

“What? What does that even mean?” I asked half laughing.

“I don’t know. It’s just the only thing I could even think of.”

I nodded as some very vague yet somehow comforting confirmation that really, I knew exactly what he meant. He softly smashed his cigarette into the ground and gathered our empty glasses. As he pulled the sliding door open and stepped inside, I stared out at the sun for just a second and said, “I think I’m going to call my dad.”
He stepped back out just long enough to gently tug the back of my ponytail and said, smiling, “Yeah. I know.”

I could feel the moisture beginning to build between my palms and the steering wheel, so I rolled down the windows and stuck my left arm out to catch the wind. The air was cool, and the smell of sunset and dusk rushed in, calming me until my intestines slithered back into their knots, reminding me that this was no time for comfort. I turned the stereo up and changed the song to something slower, something less nerve-wracking and less potentially vomit-inducing, because I could feel it coming on.

Just as my fingers pulled back from the seek button, my phone let out three dull, quick chimes. I flipped it open. One new text from Evan.

“Good luck. Just breathe.”

I pulled into the parking lot and threw my car into park. I rolled the windows up again and cranked the A/C to full blast while I attempted to regain my composure. The clock on the console read 7:24. I was early, five minutes or so. I decided to wait inside.

“Two, smoking please,” I said with a small, uneasy smile.

“Right this way,” the hostess said. She was a petite brunette whose sheer normality I almost envied.

I followed her to a quiet little table in the back and seated myself in the chair against the wall, partly so I could people watch and partly so I could see the door. I passed the time trying to pick out which couples in the restaurant were happy and which couples were not. I used this same methodology to help determine which couples were fairly new and which were merely comfortable with one another, far too afraid to ever leave for fear of being left with their incomplete selves. I spotted a few families, some laughing, sharing, and smiling; others quiet, pushing their food around with cold metal forks and even colder stares. I believed the quiet families the most; at least they were honest.

The door kept opening and people kept walking in, but no one I recognized. I stopped myself after three glasses of wine and asked for my check when I realized the kitchen was closing.

I closed my eyes at every red light on the drive home and imagined I was six years old, sitting on my father’s lap, windows down and music loud. With his left arm around my waist, the other on the wheel, the ends of my ponytail in the wind would sting his eyes, but he wouldn’t mind. Our reflection in the inappropriately positioned, rearview mirror, laughing, smiling, tan, gave no indication of what was in store for us, and as I turned the engine off in front of my building, I tried hard to swallow the lump in my throat.

My apartment was dark, save for the answering machine sending a small flash of red light pulsing through the air.
But there was no message for me, no half-assed excuse, and no apology. Just the landlord reminding us that rent was due two days ago.

The sound of my phone was a sharp and unpleasant, awakening me, from an equally sharp and unpleasant dream, and as my hand fumbled across my nightstand to find it, I was oddly relieved by the crude interruption.

“Hello?” I asked.
“Oh my gosh, Stephanie. I am so sorry.”
“Evan? Are you okay? What time is it?”
“Yes, yes, I’m fine. It’s like two in the morning, and my shift just ended, and my ride home flaked out on me.”
“Aw, yeah, it’s no problem. Just, uh, let me grab a Red Bull or something, and I’ll be there in fifteen,” I said.
“Thank you so much. What the hell would I do without you?”
“Have a really boring walk home, I guess.”
I pulled up to Evan sitting on the curb and rolled down my passenger-side window.
“Hey there, little boy, you want some candy?”
“My mom always told me not to take candy from strangers,” he chuckled as he hopped into my car.
“Well, do I really count as a stranger if you see me every night in your dreams?”
“Oh god,” he smiled. “You are so lame.”
“Shut up. I’m delirious.” I paused. “So how was work?”
“Same old, same old,” he answered. “Wow, you really are delirious, hun. You just missed our turn.”
“No,” I said. “We’re just taking the long way.”
But really, I hadn’t intended on taking the long way at all, and I wasn’t even sure what the long way entailed, but it sounded okay, and it was better than admitting my mistake, and, hell, it might be fun.

Evan reached his right arm out the window while his left searched for a new song and turned it up. I watched the road curve ahead of us in an unusual manner and tried not to let the semi-cool air or rustling trees distract me too much. Evan smelled nice, like caramel frappuccinos and cologne, and I wondered for a second if he ever thought I smelled nice and then quickly dismissed that thought as entirely awkward. Evan has a way of sensing my most awkward trains of thought and interrupting them before they become fully developed. He turned the music down again and asked, softly, “How’d it go?”
“How’d what go?” For a moment I think maybe I really forgot what he was referring to.

“Uh, duh. Your dad.”

“Oh, right. Hah. Uh, three lonely glasses of wine followed by an empty answering machine and a two-hour nap. So I’d say it went pretty well.”

I sensed his head turn toward me abruptly and then turn slowly back toward the window.

“Wow, Steph. I don’t even know what to—”


He grabbed my hand as I was reaching for the volume and held it for a minute, then brought it up to his lips, kissed it softly, and squeezed once before letting go.

“Oh my God,” he said suddenly. “What is that?”

“Whoa… I have no idea.”

I slowed down, and we both stared through my windshield. “Turn off your lights,” he whispered.

I flipped them off and came to a complete stop. We sat in silence. There were no other cars in sight, and just at the horizon line, at the end of this long empty road, an orange-pink glow was emanating from behind the top of a small hill. Complete darkness surrounded us, with the exception of a million distant stars and this beautiful, ominous light.

“What do you think that is?” he asked.

“Maybe the sun just…decided to rise early.”

“Man. I have no idea,” he said. After several moments of nothing at all he added, “You know, part of me hopes we never find out what it is.”

I turned on my lights and slowly pressed the gas. “I was just about to say that.”

Evan stuck his head out the window and closed his eyes and didn’t say a word as we slowly made our way up the hill, along the curves of the black pavement, through the stillness of the empty night. Just as we began to believe that this moment might really be infinite and unparalleled and eternally beautifully, we came up over the hill and saw the awe-inspiring orange-pink glow for what it was.

There, to our right, stood three enormous light poles, fluorescent and absurd and annoying, lighting up the empty parking lot of “Rusty’s Used Tractors.”

Evan pulled his head back inside and sunk into his seat, and just as the words were on the verge of escaping my mouth along with a stomach full of the breath I had been holding, he turned to me and laughed, “Well, shit.”
Old Duke: The Dog with Mange
Kim Cordova

My old dog Duke has a bad case of mange
sittin’ on the porch waitin’ for a sign.
He’s ornery as can be, ain’t gonna change.

Here comes nosey Miss Nettie just in range
of old Duke, who decides to cross the line.
My old dog Duke has a bad case of mange.

By now Miss Nettie sees Duke acting strange.
Guess she never noticed old Duke is blind.
He’s ornery as can be, ain’t gonna change.

Came as a pup from a drunk in La Grange.
Folks around these parts thought we’d lost our minds.
My old dog Duke has a bad case of mange.

Most look at Duke and ask if he’s deranged.
There’s no stranger dog you will ever find.
He’s ornery as can be, ain’t gonna change.

Sadly, Duke and his momma are estranged.
No doubt about it, he’s one of a kind.
My old dog Duke has a bad case of mange.
He’s ornery as can be, ain’t gonna change.
Daddy’s Girl
Kenna Oaks


Her father had her by the wrist and was leading her through the automatic doors of the Walgreens. I could only guess that she was a few years younger than me, fifteen or sixteen perhaps, but she was throwing the tantrum of a toddler. She had her hair in a stringy ponytail, her clothing a typical T-shirt and blue jeans, but her face was red with panic and wet with her tears of refusal.

It was 9:00, the night before Valentine’s, and I was out with the other procrastinators scrounging up the remaining tacky cards and abandoned heart-shaped boxes of chocolates. I was searching through the orphaned envelopes and comparing them to my chosen cards, hoping to find a match when I saw them come in. Instead of heading straight for the bare aisles that were lined with red and pink crape papers and signs, the father paced up and down the back aisles, still with a tight grip on the belligerent girl. Her complaints became muffled when she buried her face into her one loose hand, but it was obvious that she was still troubled.

I laughed it off to myself at first, thinking that the young girl had just entered womanhood and was forced to go buy her first round of products embarrassingly with her father. Poor kid, I thought, shaking my head, wondering why her mother would make her endure that.

I finally collected a matching envelope for my card and traveled to the front of the store to stand in the ten-person line. I noticed that the gifts got smaller and more mismatched with each person farther back in line, a punishment for those of us who aren’t quite as punctual as we should be on special holidays. There was a sign on the sliding front doors that announced proudly that the store would open at seven in the morning. Good luck to those Valentine fools. It would take the teamwork of Cupid and Santa to restock the bare shelves for those last-minute lovers.

In the back, the girl’s father had found his desired aisle and was squatting down to examine each product before his selection. His scan was short-lived as the girl yanked on his sleeve and continued her tearful rant, trying to beckon him away from his purchase. He glared up at her, and his stern mouth spoke slowly as his bushy eyebrows sunk over his eyelids. At this, the girl once again hid her hysterical face in her palms. The father picked out a pink box off the shelf, rose, and grabbed the girl’s elbow to lead her up the aisle and into line behind me.

I was now one person away from the front of the line, but I had not turned to see the event taking place behind me. No need to further embarrass the poor young woman over this late night run for feminine products. She sniffled repeatedly and attempted to cover her discomfort from the slew of customers that crowded the store front.

“What the hell were you thinking!” her father said.

“Daddy…” she broke out into a louder sob.

“You aren’t a baby anymore. Stop saying that! Wipe your face. You’re taking this test.”

It was four years ago when Justin jerked the Camaro into the grocery store parking lot, barely missing the blue-haired grandmother cautiously backing out her Cadillac. I unbuckled my seatbelt and sat back to look him in the eye, hoping that he would come with me, hold my hand, tell me that he still loved me. Justin just looked out the window with his hand rubbing his stubble nervously. A line of leftover sweat from his after-school practice gleamed in the setting sunlight. The droplet leaked out of his sideburn and ran down the crevasse of his neck, following the wet path already worn into his thick skin.

I broke the silence by opening the car door and made my way into the store, wiping my nose on the sleeve of my sweatshirt. The bell above the door welcomed me, and the cashier behind the counter looked up at me through his spectacles. I redirected my eyes to the floor and paced to the back of the store, trying to avoid his glare or probing questions. I found the aisle I was after and made a quick swipe of the box, not even pausing long enough to study my options. Tucking it away in my purse, I looked up to find the restroom sign. I found my reflection instead, peering back at me from the mirrors that lined the rim around the top of the store. The clerk was still behind the counter at the front, but he had his back to me, restocking the cigarette racks lining the wall behind the cash register. I made my way to the bathroom and bolted the door behind me.

Justin became very distant in the following weeks, leaving me alone to find a solution to our problem. We were only in high school with too much inexperience on our hands to take on such a serious commitment. A baby. Marriage. College would be out of the question. Not to mention our reputation and our families’ names. I knew that Justin wouldn’t look at me the same way if I didn’t rid myself of this burden. I wanted him to tell me that he still loved me, that I was still beautiful. I wanted everything to be back the way it used to be, and I knew only one solution that could make that happen.

One little phone call would put our relationship back on course. One little injection would make my body forget. One little act would change my life forever.

The Camaro filled the empty parking lot of the dead shopping center. The afternoon sun beat down on the fading rag top and the flecking red paint on the hood. Next to an abandoned grocery store and hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant was the clinic that was identifiable only by small lettering on the black-tinted windows. I looked across the parking lot into the bright glow, thinking about what I was about to do.

“We’re here, baby. Isn’t it that one over there?” Justin asked, nodding his head in the direction of the clinic door.

I shook my gaze from the blinding light to peer back at the shopping center.
“We can’t undo this,” I said through the knot balling up in my chest.

“You’re about to undo all of this. What are you talking about? We already made this decision,” he said.

“No. The procedure. We can’t ever get her back,” I said, the knot now blocking the flow of air in my throat. I felt Justin’s eyes following my entangled thumbs as they worked to tear at the hangnails around my jagged cuticles. My eyes went back to the orange sun that was sinking behind the empty sign tower at the edge of the parking lot.

“Baby,” he said, putting his large, calloused hands over my sweating palms. “Don’t you want your life back? What’s gonna happen if your mom finds out? What’s gonna happen to us? Don’t you love me?”

“Yeah, I do love you, but...”

“If you really love me, if you really care about us, then you’ll go in there and make sure that nothing gets in the way of us.” Justin leaned across me to kiss my forehead with his chilled lips and then opened my door.

I climbed out of the car and gasped for a breath through the knot that gripped my throat in its tight fist. The fall air was warm and thick, but I kept my jacket zipped up so that it scratched the underside of my raw chin. Once inside the clinic, I signed myself in and sat back in one of the musty chairs that lined the glaring white walls and closed my eyes.

Justin and I continued our relationship after the event, but he turned cold. The deep mysterious brown around his pupils had once held a flame when he looked at me. The day that he dropped me off at the clinic, they turned dark and watered down. After the procedure, his eyes rarely met mine. I felt defiled in his view, much like my own mother’s.

My mother found the free clinic’s pamphlet in my trash can two weeks after the abortion. It was another two weeks before she would utter a word to me and that was to read a bumper sticker out loud.

“Abortion Kills. Choose Life,” my mother reminded me. Her voice held a morning cackle that cut deeper than her normal, nurturing sound that I remembered.

I only glared at her through my tightly-squinted eyes, barely open from the morning sun rising through the windshield. She never liked for passengers to put down the visor. She said it blocked her full and safe view of the entire front window. I think that she enjoyed the natural, interrogation-room lighting. She liked the fact that I couldn’t hide in any shady corner and try not to think of what I had done to a life. My mother wanted me to be ashamed in full view of the world, of her, and of God. She seemed to enjoy seeing the drips run from the corners of my eyes and the tip of my red nose.

My mother read everything that she found regarding abortion out loud to me, never making eye contact, just reiterating the words of honorable daughters, wives, and mothers on the subject of discarded children. One morning I woke up to a clipped church newsletter article that had been shoved under my
door. The bolded headline met my stumbling morning feet, *The Place for Abortionists in Hell*. I crumbled it into a ball without reading past the title and wiped my tearing eyes with the graying paper, letting the black print run onto the tips of my fingers.

God, why? I threw myself back on my bed and buried my face into the flat pillow. None of this was supposed to happen to me. I did it for Justin. I did it for my family. I did it for my future. And now God damn me. Why? God why? The thoughts swam around in the tears that soaked the pillow. Muffling my pain in the fluff before me, I beat my tight fists against the headboard and let the emotions overwhelm my weak body. A gentle voice calmed my heart and silenced my rage. *You are loved,* I heard Him say. *You are forgiven, my child. Be still and know.*

My mother often left magazine articles on adoption, the joy of babies, the meaning of motherhood, and the abhorrent sin of premarital sex in the bathroom shelves or tacked to my bulletin board. Anytime a news anchor or a fiery Sunday morning priest would do a story on one of these topics, she would turn up the volume on the TV. She hoped to find a captive audience in her form of silent punishment. We never discussed what had happened and she never outright disowned me, but I could feel in each of these reminders a stinging pain she intended to induce. How dare I go one day or one minute without thinking of my baby? Killers don’t deserve to smile or laugh or forget their actions, my mother wanted me to believe.

It was my turn to pay. I stepped up to the festive associate and laid out my chocolates and card. While digging through my purse for the three pennies I needed, I glanced back at the two behind me. The father had a pregnancy test in his trembling hand. The girl was banging her covered face into his arm, but he stood stolid. He kept his large veined eyes focused on the door.

"Why, why, why," she repeated.

The woman behind the counter took my change, and our eyes exchanged sympathetic glances, now both aware that one dad just lost his little girl.

My stomach sunk as I took my Valentine’s bag from the Walgreens cashier and walked across the parking lot’s bland orange lighting to my truck. I sat back in my seat and watched the young girl jump up into her father’s Ford and slam the door. One little girl’s life was going to change tonight. I knew the thoughts swirling around her head. Positive. Nine months. Him. Marriage. Breakup. Alone. Adoption. Abortion. G.E.D. Disowned. Dishonored. Depressed. Life was about to get very complicated. I had been there, and I wanted nothing more than to tell her that it was all going to be all right.

I started my truck and leaned my forehead against the chilled window to look up at the night sky. The off-white moon was half awake. The stars went about their usual business, twinkling, guiding, and outlining a couple of dippers. Father, be with that girl tonight. Be with her like you were with me. Love her. Guide her. Calm her. Amen.
The Joy of the Kill
Edward Frame

I sit and breathe quietly
like a bottom-feeding fish,
waiting for my next kill.
Chirping birds and the breeze
blow the olive monsters around.
My feelings are dry like
a mouthful of dirt.
My heart skips for a second,
watching as the animal grazes
and licks his cherry lips.
My eyes glow with
an uncontrolled fire that cannot
be washed away.
Not having a consciousness,
I aim my rifle and
peek through the sight.
There he is, my kill,
waiting to be taken.
Lick the lips and don’t think,
just shoot.
Dominion is a small town, a community outside of a city, and a place where the summers are cool and the winters are cold. During the winter months people stay indoors and throw potluck parties at their houses and jamborees at the community center. Men and women hold gloved hands as they walk down Main Street, peering into Carter’s Jewelry Store and sniffing the sweetened air just outside Martha’s bakery. When the snow begins to melt and the smell of grass starts to waft in the northern wind, the people of Dominion emerge from the homes, bright-eyed with light sweaters the colors of the buds that now grow on the ends of the trees in the fronts of their yards. Dorothy’s Dress Shop is bustling with orders for custom, handmade wedding dresses, and the church is packed every weekend with guests of brides and grooms awaiting the exchanges of vows, kisses, and well wishes.

The people of Dominion look forward to spring, to the look of love in the eyes of lovers, the dance of the lights glinting off of ringed fingers that catch the sunlight, and the smiles of families becoming extended and more complex. I also look forward to spring in Dominion but not for the same reasons the people of Dominion do. I know better. Spring in Dominion means weddings, and for a videographer, spring also means money.

“Ouch,” I yelled, hitting my head against the trunk’s hard underside. I let out a huff of wounded air, rubbing the spot were my head hit as I retrieved the rest of my equipment from my red Camaro. There was no blood, but the sharp bolt of pain that ran through my body was little distraction from the pair of fingers that had just pinched my left butt cheek.

“Careful,” said the woman standing behind me, her fingers still in prime pinching position. “It’s a wedding, not a funeral.”

She was a good-looking woman, brown hair pinned up high to show off her long, swan-like neck, pearls lining her collarbones, about five foot four, no more than a hundred and thirty pounds, and a smile like a fox trying to coax a rabbit out of its hole.

“Right,” I said in a drawn-out tune, turning around to shut the trunk.

“You must be the videographer slash photographer…” She drew out the end of “photographer,” leaving a space for me to fill in my name.

“Lawrence. Lawrence Anderson,” I said, reaching out my hand to shake hers. She grabbed it with a firmness of a man on an interview but caressed it like a Southern belle that expected me to curtsy and kiss the veins between her knuckles and wrist.
“Oh, like Laurence of Olivier,” she said, adding an “of” where one wasn’t needed and misspelling my name without uttering a letter. I noticed the smears of mascara she had under her eyes; there are always a lot of smudged eyes in spring in Dominion. “I’m Meredith. Meredith Stevens. Bridesmaid,” she rolled her eyes, “and sister to the bride.” She spoke with an air of arrogance and spite, as if the latter part of her sentence somehow demeaned the first part.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, picking up my video equipment, being careful to stay directly in front of her so as not to give her opportunity to pinch me once again. I tried to pass by her, doing an awkward dancing shuffle, as she tried to stay in my scope of view. Finally after pivoting twice to the left and zagging to the right, I managed to get by her still in mid-zig.

“See you later, Laurence,” she said, reaching her tiny, prying fingers out once more, making contact with the underside of my right cheek this time. The smell of stale whiskey on her breath finally hit me once I had gotten downwind. She, like so many other Dominion bridesmaids, wore the perfume of envy in spring, which, unsurprisingly, smelled a lot like Paul Masson cut with just a splash of Diet Coke.

As I neared the open white picket fence of the Stevens’ estate, I peered back towards my Camaro, peering over my shoulder at Meredith still leaning at the edge of my trunk. She did a flirty, finger-flashing wave with her right hand, holding the side of her bubblegum pink dress with her left. She smiled, showing just the slightest bit of teeth, like a hyena waiting for a chance to snag an appendage from under the noses of a pride of lions. I reached into my pocket with my free hand and pushed the button for the alarm. The car made a loud beep, startling Meredith, causing her to drop the slack of her dress and place her hand over her chest. I turned around and cracked a small smile as I crossed through the gates and into the garden.

“Are you the photographer slash videographer?” asked a large man in a black tux walking steadily from the left towards me. I knew that walk.

“Umm, yes.” I stuck out my hand to shake his. “Lawrence. Lawrence Anderson.” His grip was firm and serious as if his hand had swallowed my own into the center of his palm.

“Bill Stevens, father of the bride,” he said in a stern voice that seemed to bellow from his bowels and boom in every direction. His face was scrunched into a permanent scowl, leaving his sagging jowls waddling with every shake of his head. “Why don’t you go ahead and set up your equipment, and we’ll be getting started at exactly fifteen-hundred hours.”

“I knew I recognized that walk,” I thought to myself as I did a silent head nod and watched as he briskly walked past me towards the back of the house where a frazzled man in a chef’s hat was waving him over with one hand, shouting in Italian, and shaking the other in a fist inside the kitchen. It was the walk of a man always on the go, a man on a mission, a military man. My father was a military man,
Third Infantry, always on the go, always had a mission. Bill Stevens, the military man, tripped over a stray root just on the outskirts of the cement walkway that surrounded the house. If not for the assistance of the frazzled Italian chef, Bill Stevens, the military man, would have fallen flat on his face. Needless to say, I was a little disappointed. Weddings in Dominion usually have a lot of people tripping over themselves and their own tongues, it was one of the many perks of the job.

The earthy smell of rosemary and sweet cherry blossoms filled the air of the garden as I passed the kitchen towards the gazebo where dozens of rows of white chairs were set up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the large, clumsy, hippo-like figure of the military man once again bounding toward me in a sluggish gallop.

“Son,” he said, huffing loudly. “Here you go.”

Mr. Stevens, the military man, handed me a check, one of those standard-issue checks that the banks give to the customers that either don’t have the time or don’t have the desire to customize them for their own personalities. The script of his name and address was in average black ink, no cursive or oversize Victorian letters, just regular black script with the title, “Colonel,” at the front of his name commanding its payee’s respect.

“Half now, half upon completion of the job,” said the military man, staring directly in my eyes. Before I could comment he had turned around, bounding back towards the kitchen where the chef was now waving a red sauce-soaked ladle and shouting Italian obscenities.

“Fottere, fottere,” yelled the chef, droplets of red sauce firing into the kitchen like garlic-soaked bullets. One semester of Italian can’t make you fluent, but it can teach you how to curse with the most flawless of accents.

I chuckled a small laugh to myself, folded the check in half, pulled my wallet from my back pocket, and tried to put it with the other thirty-six dollars I had in the money slot, only to release my clear plastic picture holder from its place and drop it on the ground where it floated down onto the grass beneath one of the white guest chairs. With a “woe is me” sigh, I took a couple of steps forward, left my camera equipment at my side, placed my bent knee on the razor-cut, florescent green grass, and shoved myself between the small space under one of the white chairs.

“Last chance, buddy,” I heard a scratchy deep voice say from above my bent-over body. “You could still get out.”

I grabbed my check from between a small patch of lucky clovers that had missed the gardener’s meticulous eyes and gas-powered mower and pulled my head from beneath the seat, being careful not to hit it as I went to stand up.

“What is with you?” asked a guy in a white tux with a small pink and white lily sticking out of the chest pocket.
“Nothing’s with me. I’m just saying.” The red-haired man in a black tux and lopsided pink bowtie turned a cautious eye to look over each shoulder and whispered, “You still got time.”

There are three types of men in Dominion: the kind that think they need to get married to grow up and be seen as men, the kind that don’t want to grow up and still be seen as men, and the kind that get married to be men but secretly wish they had never grown up. The first kinds are the grooms; the second kinds, those are the best men; and the third kinds are, well, they’re like my father.

“Are you still drunk from last night?” asked the dark-haired man whom I presumed was the groom.

“No,” said the red-headed best man letting out a small belch and catching it in a clenched fist. “Okay maybe a little, but I’m serious Jason.”

“Shaun, stop, okay?” He shuffled his weight slightly, stomping on the ground lightly and turning his face from Shaun’s begging eyes. “I’m getting married, and if you had any sense, you would start trying to, too.”

I tried to coil myself into as small of distraction as I possibly could, holding my breath so as to not catch their attention. I attempted to tiptoe slyly one step at a time from behind the row of white chairs past their backsides.

“That’s just it, Jason. You don’t need to get married to prove anything to anybody.”

“Oh come on, Shaun!” the groom yelled in disbelief, throwing his hands into the air. “We’re not talking about this anymore. It’s done, okay, done.”

I heard a pause of silence that made me tiptoe even faster. I was just three feet from a clear enough path from which I could run if they decided they wanted to call me the—

“ Videographer slash photographer?” I heard Jason, the groom, say in a louder than conversational tone.

“Damn it,” I whispered to myself under my breath. “Yes, umm, Lawrence. Lawrence Anderson.”

“Jason Weinhart, the groom.” He put his palm to his chest. “And this is Shaun Childs, the best man.” He patted Shaun on the back hard with one hand and displayed an open view of his best man with his other. I reached out to shake each of their hands, their wrists fidgeting with what I could only guess was fear or guilt of being overheard.

“So,” chimed in Shaun with a nervous scratch in his throat. “How long you been in the photography slash videography business?” He chuckled at his own joke, followed by Jason as a polite backup. Though seeing people trip over their own feet and tongues and watching the attempts of best friends and ex-wives trying to cease the ceremonies are perks of the job, small talk had to be the biggest downfall.
“About four years now,” I said politely, smiling and chuckling more at Shaun’s lopsided pink bowtie than at his ill attempt at humor.

“Wow, so you must love—” started Shaun.

“Love,” finished Jason. The two laughed like frat boys, throwing their heads back at their own joke.

“I guess so,” I said, smiling only to myself. I turned my shoulder, picked up my equipment, and started walking past them at the end of the rows of chairs and towards the altar to set up the camera. I take that back. Small talk was the second biggest downfall to my line of work; the first was the assumption that I loved love.

“See you out there, Lawrence,” yelled Jason like “there” was a sporting match we were about play against each other.

“Good luck,” I yelled, rebelliously, following suit.

Truth is I never cared much for weddings. The freak-outs of the mothers doing last minute arrangements, the controlling bellows of the fathers as they fight to pay off each bill and show whose family is more well-off, the jealous tears of the “always the bridesmaids never the brides,” and the knocking knees and chattering teeth of the groomsmen who have girlfriends who are sitting in the second rows were only small things that got me through the day. The statistics say that fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce, but in Dominion, it’s more like eighty-five percent. Most of the weddings I do are for women who loved the wedding videos but ended up hating the men they married. I’ve never filmed a marriage that lasted more than five years. As a matter of fact, I am usually pretty good about guessing how long it will last. It’s all in the look of the bride and groom right as they are about to kiss. I figure a couple more and I’ll be able to predict it down to the month. So far this one’s odds are slowly dropping on the happiness meter.

“Yoo-hoo!” sang a high-pitched voice steadily getting closer towards me. “Are you the photographer slash videographer?” A portly woman with an oversized, loud pink church hat was prancing towards me with the daintiness of Doberman with ballet slippers on.

I sighed to myself. “Yes, ma’am. Lawrence. Lawrence Anderson.” I placed my right hand out to meet hers.

“Stephanie Stevens, mother of the bride.” She hugged me into her bear-like bosom, shaking me as if I was a long lost child of hers. “We’re already to start. Can you believe it? A wedding actually starting on time?”

That was a strange occurrence; I’ve never seen a wedding start on time, not once in four years. This wedding could be changing up its odds.
Third Place Poetry Winner

Mary
Claudia Arce

I'm glad I did not see,
on that bitter day,
your small blue lips,
which would never suckle life.
Murmured prayers scraped
my ears, so I stared
at my gleaming shoes, which
came and went beyond the edge
of my poplin skirt, and
a fragile petal that had wilted
in the searing heat
and sank to kiss
the slender excavated
roots that danced
like threads in the earth.
I wanted to hide like a dusty
teacup in the dark
corner and let my intestines
fill with milky azure
ice and crevasses. The grooves
of my brain hid
a picture of brown curls and
a crisp gingham ribbon. I tried
to find it, but it flew
away when the slimy cord
of life laughed at us
and slithered around
your pink neck.
My tiny sister, you are
the bright blue of a dry
sky that blinds
me with pain.
Crazy Aunt Rachel always said if my daddy weren’t the death of me, my momma would be. Momma always said she was crazy cuz she was never blessed with a baby.

“All this goings on!” she muttered under her breath, slamming drawers open and closed in the tiny kitchen of her one bedroom mobile home. “And sends you out dressed that way in weather like this… child!” She stopped a moment to adjust her curlers and relight her cigarette and peered at me. “When was the last time you had something hot to eat?”

I shrugged my shoulders. Cold cereal and leftover baloney sandwiches had become breakfast, lunch and dinner.

“Child!” she exclaimed again. “Three o’ clock in the damn morning, and I get woken up by a banging on my door to see you standing there and red taillights driving off.” She pointed to her bedroom, through which was the bathroom, with the spatula in her hand. “G’on, get washed up. I may not be rich, but we are not bampkins. I do not have filthy face and hands sit down at my table.”

I turned around to hear “aw holy hell” among the clutter and clatter of frying pans and skillets being slammed on the stove. “Just as dirty from the back. Just run you a whole bath and get behind your ears, too! Lordy.”

I crept through the bedroom, not turning on a light because I didn’t want to wake up Uncle Mink. I had just enough light shining in to make my way past the bed and into the bathroom. Uncle Mink sounded like he was chopping the whole forest down.

After my bath I gorged on grits, sausage, and fresh corn bread while Aunt Rachel sat there glaring at me while she finished some more cigarettes and talked to herself.

“Hasn’t got the sense God gave a duck.” She took a long drag and saw me staring at her. “Not you, dear, I mean your momma and your daddy. Use a napkin, child. You’re dribblin’ syrup. Now, where did your momma and your daddy go this time?”

I shrugged and opened my mouth to answer when she pointed at me with her cigarette and ordered, “Swallow before you speak to me,” and blew the smoke out the side of her mouth.

“Momma said something about a job for Daddy in Tus’loosa or something like that, but that it weren’t no job for kids to come to and that if everything went the way it was supposed to, they’d be back shortly. Can I have some more milk?”
“May I,” she corrected me, tapping her cigarette into her ash tray and getting up to go to the fridge. “So you don’t know where they’re going or when they’ll be back or even what they’re doing?”

“I just tole you,” I started.

“You’re not talking back to me, are you?” she asked closing the refrigerator door. I shook my head no. “Okay, I just wanted to make sure, because for a moment...” She stood looking at me for a while then walked over to the table. “I know what you told me,” she said, gripping the cigarette in her lips while pouring my milk with one hand, the other on her hip. “Tuscaloosa. Just half a glass, honey, then I want you to go to sleep on the couch. I have a hard time believing they went all the way to Alabama to get a job when there’s plenty of work here in Texas. Uncle Mink’s always needing a hand in the fields and offered your daddy a job more times than I can count.” She set the milk down on the table and then put her hand on top of my head. “Child, if there’s anything I can tell you, is learn how to work. Hard and honest. Not like your daddy. First thing you’re gonna do is help me clean these dishes, but not till after you get some sleep. Almost four in the morning. I gotta make your uncle some breakfast in a couple of hours.” She pointed at the couch with her nose. “You go lay down. I’ll go get you a blanket.”

I had to trade her two sugars for the blanket, one on each cheek. She went back to her bedroom, talking to herself again. “Poor child, just a damn shame your momma’s momma ain’t around no more. Put her right over her knee and tan her hide, grown woman or no.”

Aunt Rachel is the sister to my momma’s momma. She’s been gone for a long time. They told me she went to the reservation to live with Jesus, but I know better. Last time I was here Aunt Rachel was talking to herself and said my momma’s momma was rolling over her grave. I don’t know why she’s rolling around on the ground, but I don’t think Jesus rolls around. ‘Sides, we ain’t Indian.

Later I could hear Uncle Mink’s booming voice right above me. “Rachel, we gotta rascal on our couch!” I cracked open one eye and peered at him in time to see two massive hands coming towards me. He picked me up blanket and all and wrapped me in a big bear hug and brushed his whiskers against my face.

“Mink, let the child sleep now! And come and get your coffee,” Aunt Rachel ordered. Uncle Mink kissed my forehead and carried me into the kitchen and put me on his lap as he sat at the table.

“Here now, he can sleep after I eat. I want to see the boy.” My blanket dropped off my shoulder, and I started shivering. Uncle Mink reared back and gave me the once-over. “Rachel, where’s his clothes? Where’s your clothes, boy?”

“He’s wearing them, Mink.”

“He showed up in these rags?”
Aunt Rachel nodded and handed him a mug of coffee. Uncle Mink shook his head back and forth. “Take him into town later and get him something warm. Grounds all frosted over, and he’s just in a T-shirt and some jeans.”

“I plan on it,” Aunt Rachel said, leaning against the sink and blowing some more smoke. “I think his momma planned on it, too.”

Uncle Mink left for work after pulling some quarters from my ears and telling me I could only get something sweet with them and maybe one of those new fancy games they have where you put your quarter in and shoot down space ships or outrun ghosts while eating white dots.

After I helped Aunt Rachel clean the table and empty her ashtrays, we went into town. She bought me two pairs of jeans, three shirts, and a coat. She picked out a Sunday outfit and told them to hold it for her. If it looked like I was going to be here on Sunday, we’d come back for it. They said, “Sure, ma’am, no problem,” which I thought was right nice. Aunt Rachel and Uncle Mink travel a lot with their little trailer to different oil fields. Sometimes they go back to places they been before, but I think they’ve been everywhere because Aunt Rachel says Uncle Mink never met a stranger and she didn’t either.

“Hurry, child, we gotta get back to watch my soaps,” she said. I stopped to look at some green army men in a bag. I was trying to decide between them and a pack of Tootsie Toy cars I had been carrying around. She watched me for a second and then asked, “What are you learning in school right now?”

I shrugged.

“Haven’t you been to school?”

“Yes, ma’am, I go sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” She clicked her tongue against the top of her mouth and went down the aisle, stopping at the coloring books. She came back with the biggest, thickest coloring books I’ve ever seen and some pencils and crayons.

“Choose the race cars or the soldiers. Come on,” she ordered. I put the army men back on the shelf. She let me go past her and steered me to the checkout.

“You’re gonna spend some time working in these workbooks, you hear me?”

I nodded back to her and put my cars on the counter. I reached my hand in my pocket for the quarters Uncle Mink had given me.

“Child, put those away,” she ordered. “Save them for a rainy day.”

I didn’t know why I would need them for when it was raining, but I obeyed. I remember one time Aunt Rachel told me about when she was my age and everyone was all depressed because they didn’t have no money and how sometimes it felt nice to walk around and feel a jangle in your pocket.
I put two quarters in each pocket and just walked around feeling them in my hands and making them dance off each other. After that I decided I didn’t want to spend them, but just in case I did, I got some washers out of Uncle Mink’s toolbox to use instead, but it ain’t the same.

We made it home, and Aunt Rachel turned on her TV to get it warmed up and set me down at the table in front of the workbooks.

“Now,” she said. “I want you to practice your letters and numbers for a while, then you can play with your army men.”

“Aunt Rachel, I got race cars,” I corrected her.

“Yes, that’s right, you did. Now, you sit here and practice your stuff in these books and then we’ll practice your reading later, okay?” She marked the pages she wanted me to work on and then went to the couch and lit a cigarette. I couldn’t wait to get started. It felt better than Christmas. Aunt Rachel gave more than Santa. Momma and Daddy told me last time he was supposed to come that they think Santa forgot where I was. After I get a bit better with writing my alphabet, I’m gonna write him a letter and set him straight. I’ve been saving one of my quarters special for the stamp. Later that day, after I showed her how good I could do my numbers and letters in the workbook, she told me she was proud of me and to go get her purse. Nestled down inside was the bag of army men I’d been looking at. She said now don’t expect this everyday, but just keep doing good like I was.

When Uncle Mink got home, I couldn’t wait to show him how good I did in the workbooks. He grabbed me in a big bear hug and swung me around and didn’t even yell when my feet accidentally knocked a lamp over although Aunt Rachel looked like she wanted to hit Uncle Mink with her spatula. He wrote something down on a piece of paper and asked if I could read it. I said it might take me a minute to read his handwriting. He said to take my time.

“If you can read this,” I sounded out, “then you know I have a candy bar in my truck.” I looked up at him. “Really?”

“I’ll race you,” he said, starting to get up off the couch. I took off like a flash. Everytime we’d come to visit, Uncle Mink would always let me have candy, but I always had to do something to get it. Sometimes we’d play washers in the backyard, and when I won, he’d give me a prize. He knows I like Watchyoucallit bars the best.

I came back in and jumped in his lap.

“Here,” he said, taking the bar out of my hand and sticking it in the pocket of his overalls, “I’ll keep it right here till after dinner okay?” I could see Aunt Rachel nodding her approval. “Now do your Uncle Mink a favor and go get me a beer from the fridge.”

I jumped down, and Aunt Rachel had one open and waiting for me to take back to him.
Uncle Mink and I sat there on the couch watching *Wheel of Fortune* while Aunt Rachel finished cooking supper. I did my best to guess but didn’t get any right. Uncle Mink drank his beer and every so often let out a heavy breath. After a few minutes I heard the rustle of a candy bar wrapper and looked to see Uncle Mink unwrapping the candy bar while looking over his shoulder at Aunt Rachel, who had her back to us. He looked and me winked, breaking off a chunk of the bar and handing it too me.

“Shhh,” he said putting his finger to his lips. Then he turned back to the T.V.

That’s how it went for the next few days. I helped Aunt Rachel around the house in the morning and sat at the kitchen table working in the big workbooks during the afternoon while Aunt Rachel watched her soaps. Every now and then she’d talk to the people on the shows, telling Lucy he was cheating on her here or calling Richard a liar there. After she watched a couple, she turned the TV down for a little while, and we practiced reading. We were reading in “John” the day the man in the uniform came to the door.

“Child, why don’t you go in the bedroom and play with your race cars,” she said. She opened the door and put on a big smile. “Why, hello, Officer! What can I do for you? Child, go on to the bedroom now. Please don’t make me tell you again.”

I went to the bedroom, but I didn’t play with my race cars. I looked out the window at Aunt Rachel and the officer standing on the porch. Aunt Rachel didn’t have no jacket on, and the wind was blowing the tip of her cigarette around. The officer pulled something out of his pocket and showed it to Aunt Rachel. She looked at it a long time and didn’t say anything, then nodded her head when she gave it back. The officer talked real quiet, and I didn’t hear what he said. Aunt Rachel didn’t say much, just nodded now and then. Her eyes started to get real shiny, but she didn’t cry. She thanked the officer, and then after he left stood there on the porch, looking in the distance. She stayed out there a while, then finally came in and sat on the couch in front of the TV but kept the volume down. From behind the bedroom door I watched her smoke three cigarettes, not daring to come out until she told me to.

“Come on, child,” she said standing up. “Let’s go get your Sunday clothes.”
Contributors’ Biographies

Prose and Poetry

Greggory Paul Adams has been in school so long he honestly doesn’t know what year he is, so don’t ask him although other students have begun asking him if he teaches at Willowchase.

Claudia Aree is a self-professed PBS and NPR nerd who enjoys reading good and bad books and claims possession of the Astros.

Angela Broussard-Moore is a sophomore who enjoys reading, writing, and sometimes arithmetic.

Shellie Callahan is a sophomore who is planning on transferring to University of Houston and majoring in Creative Writing.

Jessica Chance likes to write poetry while practicing her yoga and participating in the MS 150.

Kelly Coleman graduated in the spring of 2007 and now busies her life with pursuits other than school.

Kim Cordova is a sophomore nursing major who enjoys cooking, writing, and yoga.

Leslie Field is a sophomore English major who enjoys writing when she’s not reading and bowling.

Edward Frame is a sophomore who enjoys baseball, basketball, fishing, and hunting.

Nico Gadberry is a sophomore English/philosophy major, wife, mother and taxi for two children. Squeeze in reading, mix in a pinch of good Mexican food and a Margarita and stir.

Amanda Gobeil enjoys writing and art history and is a sophomore English major.

Nhat Ho is now an architectural engineering student at University of Texas.

Ridah Kamal is a sophomore biology major whose goal is to cure cancer.

Lenisa Kelly is a nursing/creative writing major whose hobbies include breathing, smelling, touching, and writing awkward things to describe herself.

Brittany Long is a sophomore psychology major who appreciates metalsmithing, horseback riding, and drawing or painting when she’s not doing creative writing.

Kim Lumpkin is a working mother who enjoys creative writing.
Samantha Maddox is a sophomore English major.

Thomas Miller is currently trying to get into medical school when he’s not playing football or writing.

Jana Moore feels compelled to jump out of the car and hurdle the fence whenever she passes a green meadow, stopping only when she gets to the middle.

Elizabeth Myles is a freshman criminal justice major who enjoys reading, writing, running, and watching weird movies with her husband.

Liem Nguyen enjoys reading and writing short stories.

Alexandra Norton, Lexi to her friends, enjoys fashion, music, and hanging with friends.

Kenna Oaks is an avid cyclist with admittedly horrible tan lines.

Colleen O’Brien is a sophomore who likes fishing, off-roading, trucks, family, and friends.

Nicole Sanders is a sophomore artist who enjoys sewing, drawing, music, and playing guitar.

Tiffany Thor is a voice-over artist, mom, wife, and aspiring writer, who, when she’s not traveling, painting, or sketching, saves Chocolate Labs from certain doom.

Ken Turner is a sophomore history major and professional musician who watches Sesame Street with his son and tames wild squirrels.

Artwork

Daniel Colvin is a sophomore photography and business major who enjoys music, people, and photography—although not always at the same time.

Melanie Hahn is a graphic design major who enjoys photography, digital imaging and fine arts.

Nadia E. Muñoz is a freshman who likes drawing and concept art as well as traveling and experiencing different cultures.

Janet Powell is a sophomore who enjoys watercolor.

Maria Remy, this year’s cover artist, is a sophomore majoring in advertising and public relations. Riding her bike and taking pictures of what she sees are her hobbies.

Nikita Stolyarov is a sophomore who enjoys photography and trains.
Inkling Staff

Fall 2007

Back Row, From Left: Shashi Ambiee, Shellie Callahan, Leslie Field, Trisha Brittain, Brittany Long, Nicole Sanders
Front Row, From Left: Kristina Leonard, Ken Turner, Joe Moreno

Spring 2008

Back Row, From Left: Greggorry Adams, Ken Turner, J. D. Pannu, Tamara Richard, Jennifer Bernhardt, Lauren Hicks, Joshua Chrisman, Andie Alexatos, Oneida Garza
Front Row, From Left: Robb Wallace, Shellie Callahan, Paloma Moreno, Paige Boyd, Tiffany Thor, Morgan Cronin
SELECTION POLICY

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 Lone Star College—Tomball 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; Melissa Studdard, 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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INKLING SUBMISSION FORM

(PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)
Name: ________________________________________________________________
Address (street, city, zip): ____________________________________________
Phone Number: ______________________________________________________
Social Security Number or Student ID Number: _____________________________
Email address: _______________________________________________________
Title of the submissions (only one title per line):
1. ___________________________________________________________________
2. ___________________________________________________________________
3. ___________________________________________________________________
4. ___________________________________________________________________
5. ___________________________________________________________________
6. ___________________________________________________________________
7. ___________________________________________________________________
8. ___________________________________________________________________

Major/Occupation: _____________________________________________________
Circle one: Freshman/Sophomore
Interests or hobbies (to be used in author biographies if your submission is chosen):
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

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

______________________________________________________________
Author’s Signature

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

• Submissions should be turned in as soon as possible. The deadline for all submissions is February 3.
• Only Tomball College/Willow Chase students (enrolled at the time of submission) are eligible.*
• DO NOT place your name on any of the submissions. Write your name ONLY on the submission form.
• Manuscripts must be typed using standard 12-point font.
• Use only one submission form per author for written manuscripts.
• Use a separate submission form for artwork.
• Maximum entries per person: six (6) poems, two (2) short stories/creative essays, and six (6) artwork pieces.
• Short stories/creative essays may not exceed 2600 words in length; manuscripts that exceed the word length will not be considered. WORD COUNT MUST BE INCLUDED ON THE FIRST PAGE OF EACH PIECE.
• All artwork (drawings, graphics, photos) must measure no more than 20 inches x 20 inches and include artist’s name and title on back. Pieces will be published in black and white. All artwork will be returned.
• Staple or paperclip all submissions to the submission form.
• At Tomball College, place your submissions in the Inkling mailbox in S-150 (Office Services) or in the large black box with the yellow sign located in the library. If you prefer, you may slide your submissions under Dr. Tate’s office door at S257L or under Dr. Oaks’ office door at E152.
• At Willow Chase, leave your submissions at the front desk.
• Only writers and artists selected for publication will be notified by mail. Expect notification by March.

NOTE: Written manuscripts will not be returned, so don’t turn in originals. All written submissions will be shredded at the end of the selection process to protect the author’s work. Contact Greg Oaks (281-401-1827) or Rebecca Tate (281-351-3340) for artwork return (April).

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

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