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We enjoyed reading all the submissions this year; without them, the publication would not be possible. We are proud to have so many talented students here at Lone Star College – Kingwood. It is important to have a publication such as ***StarBursts*** that not only gives students the opportunity to hone their writing for a public audience, but also provides the college with the opportunity to showcase student work. Having an outlet that encourages creativity promotes student success by kindling curiosity, and as Leo Burnet once said, “Curiosity about life in all its aspects, I think, is still the secret of great creative people!”

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Treasured Hands

Uneasy hands, heavy feet both shaking silently.
Moving loads and crowding lines scatter before flash back eyes.
Noises fade, years condense and past instances make their way.

Little fingers crawl protectively towards aged treasured hands.
Patient Hands that feed the unwilling appetite
Of a child whose hunger was only satisfied with trivial play.

Hands that clothed the frenzy schoolgirl who still insisted on play.
Calming hands that cured nighttime horrors and tummy aches.
Those worn hands that knew farewell was only moments away.

With resolution to never let go, stubby young fingers start to squeeze.
Hold on tight and form your post, they take shape in their six-year home,
Hands ragging don't let go.

Force and words can't wear their young strength.
They refuse to let go the hands that memories hold.
To no prevail, their hands break loose and separation is what ensues.

To those hands that held my little world,
I now look past the streams of people.
Silently waiting to hold those treasured hands.

– Susan Cabanillas

The Before

By Bay Berger

Nothing. That's what I was supposed to see. That's what I was supposed to feel. Absolutely nothing. Everyone before me and everyone after me has had the same experience. No one has any recollection of what happened before. Believe me, I have asked. I have asked so many times that people have become suspicious. "Nothing," they say each time with a look of confusion. Sometimes they laugh, but they shouldn't. I know something no one else has ever known.

"The Before," as I call it, was mostly purple. Above my head, purple orbs hung like clouds. But they weren't clouds. If I stared at them for too long, shadows would begin to writhe unnaturally beneath the orb's bubblegum surface. I'd hoped those bubbles would never pop. If a time came when their terrible movements somehow captivated me, odd shapes would creep over my vision. Purple turned to gray. Only then would I tear my eyes away. I didn't dare to tempt the darkness.

There was a light constantly perched on the horizon. At times it was ferociously hot. A dip in the lilac sea would ease the scorching temperatures, but I would emerge from the water as dry as I had been on land. No fish made the ocean their home. Not an animal scurried. "The Before" was uninhabited. I was all alone. Yet, somehow it never felt lonely. There was always a sense of calm, even when the winds would blow. Especially when the winds would blow. That's when everything would go silent. The overwhelmingly loud sound of breathing, which steadily pulsed through the atmosphere, would diminish. I enjoyed it when it was quiet because then I could hear my own breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Surely I was breathing for a reason. It gave me hope that this purple place might one day release me.

In actuality, I do not "know" something no one has ever known. I just remember what everyone else has forgotten. They've pushed it from their memory to make room for this life. But we existed prior to birth. God does not hand pick our eyes and ears from a shelf and then plop us on Earth to do as He commands. Nor are we merely clumps of continuously multiplying cells. It is not all blackness until we feel the merciless cold and see the friendly doctor's face.

Yes, I remember that too. Exiting "The Before" was like sluggishly drowning in quicksand. My arms flailed and reached for anything to grasp, but there was only emptiness. I didn't know why I was desperate to stay, but I dreaded leaving. Down, down, down I went. I frantically looked around, turning my head left and right. As I sank deeper, the only place to look was up. Up at those bubbles in the sky. Except now, pairs of widely opened eyes stared back at me. The outlines of hands pushed and stretched the outside of the orbs until I was sure they were going to burst. I kept looking until sand covered my eyes and scratched down my throat as I tried to scream. No sounds came out. No use in screaming anyway. I slid further below. During my last seconds in "The Before," I saw the creatures, each with its mouth gaping open to show a wet tunnel of gruesome teeth. The sand filled my ears. I could feel only the rumbling of their howls. They had escaped their circular prisons.

That's when I felt the cold. I had never been cold. Words I didn't understand were shouted by people, other beings like me. I was grateful for that. I could breathe again. The rest of my story is as the human experience goes. I was a baby, then a child, and then a young adult. I went to college, got married, and then divorced. I eventually quit searching for an explanation of "The Before." I only mentioned it occasionally, in sweeping generalizations after a couple of beers, that I suspected a world beyond the womb. Perhaps the womb was "The Before." However, I never openly admitted that theory for it made me slightly uncomfortable. I always kept the conversation light-hearted because each time I suggested the idea I was met only with assurance that I was wrong, or flat-out crazy. I've had half of a century to contemplate that I am crazy. Maybe I dreamed the purpleness, and those eyes, and those long, sharp, intruding hands...

No, "The Before" cannot be an invention of my dreams. For if it was, I would never have awoken. I did not ask to be born. I did not choose to be brought into now. Some force sucked me in, slapped me with the hand of reality, and made me alive. This life of pain and doubt is meant for those who don't know what precedes birth. As bad as "The Before" may sound, given the chance, I would gladly crawl right back to that warm paradise and stay forever.

You see, I live in fear. Those things walk among us all. Just as I was born, so were they. I feel their eyes following my path when I walk the streets. I blink back tears as they smile their sharp teeth in my direction. I pretend I do not see them dancing in dark alleyways or crouching under parked cars. I pray they don't see or smell me, but they do. When I take a shower, the steamy imprint of their hands forms on the glass. They climb higher and higher until I'm sure those long fingers will begin to curl over the top of the shower door. When I lay in bed I am finally able to hear them. Outside my window, they screech like a rusty train nearing its station. Every night the train gets closer. I do not want to know what happens when they take off their skin and are no longer shadows. I cannot fight or appease them. I think they're angry that I remember.

I write this as I sit in my closet. Tonight is the night that I return. Those things were born with me and I hope they will die with me. I cannot fathom where I will go, but I do not fear the unknown. For in the unknown exists a potential for greatness. The "After" will be undoubtedly greater than here. Everything is in order. I have no family left and no friends to find me.

What's that?

Oh, God.

They are here. ☆

Almost Like Hope

By Stephen Garza

As the sun rose over the hill, I suddenly began to feel the weight of another sleepless night fall on my shoulders. Driving in his car made it feel almost like he was still here. The way it smelled reminded me of how we used to drive together to our favorite spot, but he was gone now. Only I would be making the journey. It was difficult to keep my head focused on the road; my mind hasn't been able to focus on anything lately. It keeps flipping through a million different memories. My hopes were that if I could get to our favorite spot, and just sit there for a few moments, perhaps then could I find some clarity in my life.

The drive was long and tedious, but when he was with me, it never felt that way. He would always laugh and make jokes and fill the empty space with conversation. We always got there sooner than I expected.

Driving now, I felt like I would never reach my destination. It took all of my strength to keep the car moving forward, and to keep from speeding far beyond the limit. Yet somehow, I was able to find myself down the familiar road until I reached my destination.

When I arrived, everything looked the way it always had. A small house built with red and pink bricks surrounded by shrubbery – someone's quaint home. It greeted me without the usual warmth I felt when arriving here, and I slowly made my way out of his car and began to walk toward the side of the house – where my true destination awaited me.

I walked toward the backyard of the house – the gate was open, though not as welcoming as before. As I reached the open door, I felt myself instinctively hold my breath as I gazed upon a small floral city. It was as beautiful as ever, though many of the flowers were losing color and form due to the weather.

I stepped inside the yard and was abruptly brought back to the memory of the first time I had been here. He told me the owner of the house always kept up the garden for anyone to visit; hence, the gate was perpetually open. Though no one really ever saw the mysterious gardener outside, the flowers, bushes, trees, roses all were well kept up.

Walking through the trees and bushes made me think of the night he first proposed to me in this exact garden. We were sitting on a bench that was surrounded by red roses and pink lilies. It was springtime, and the fluorescent beauty was at its peak. I remember he was more jittery than usual that day and how he swayed as he walked – which was unusual. I remember sitting beside him and how his hand shook under mine. I remember saying yes, without hesitation, when he finally could ask the big question.

That was a distant memory now. I kept my feet moving, slowly making my way through the makeshift path that would lead me to the fateful bench I once sat on. I did my best to observe every azalea, begonia, bluebell, and camellia as I walked by – taking in every inch of detail as I made my way forward until I reached the spot.

When I reached the center of the garden where the bench was, everything was nearly identical to how I remembered it, except the burning red roses I remember once being there were replaced by an unfamiliar snowy flower. I took the final few steps I needed to take and finally sat down.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

The world seemed quiet, and in that moment time did not exist. It was only in this moment that I allowed a few tears to fall from my eyes. I couldn't allow my mother and father to see me cry, they always told me how strong I was to them. I couldn't cry in front of my friends, or his family. I didn't want them to know how broken I truly felt. Here, however, in the peace of the lonesome garden, I finally was able to let a few unwanted tears break free.

I didn't notice anyone walk up, until my eyes finally opened. I quickly wiped away the tears and focused on the figure in front of me. It was an older man, with blue jeans on and a bright green shirt. His hair was thinning, and he had concern in his eyes though his mouth was smiling. He sat next to me on the bench without saying anything, and I instinctively scooted away from him a few inches and turned to face him. He didn't seem to notice my actions and simply stared forward – seemingly in thought.

“What’s bothering you, sweetie?” The old man asked.

I looked down, contemplated what to say. I settled on the truth.

“My husband died.” I whispered. Hearing those words come from my mouth made me shake. “It’s not fair.” I continued. I knew that was a childish conclusion to make, but there was no other conclusion to reach.

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” The man said. “I’ve never married, so I can’t tell you I understand.” He admitted. “However, I have felt loss and pain over the years, so in that respect, I do empathize with you.”

We both sat there in silence for a few moments until he finally stood up and turned to me. “Help me to the door?” He asked. I nodded and stood up.

He reached over and put his arm through mine as I helped walk him to the house. He led me through an area of the garden I never really noticed before; he walked deliberately but we eventually made it to the house.

“Wait here,” the man said as he stepped inside. A few moments later the man stepped out with a flower in his hand, a red rose, like the ones that once resided by the bench.

I stared at it in wonder, and finally took it from his hand.

“Thank you.”

The man smiled at me and disappeared into his house one last time.

I stood outside the door for a while after he walked in, and just stared at the gift I received. It wasn't much, but something about it made me feel a strange sense of warmth within my soul; it almost felt like hope. ☆

A Seat at the Table (The Feeling is Not Dormant)

Sometimes I feel I don't belong
I feel alone
Excluded
A closed circle, I'm not to be included
I don't have a seat
It's either taken or hidden
With this, I'm not an ounce smitten
It's never ever cute
Yet people still laugh and chuckle
Just because my skin's not ivory and always honeysuckle
Just because my hair is kinky and so versatile
Just because my tongue is rich and listening is worthwhile
The truths I speak are sometimes missed
The truths I speak sometimes receive a hiss
These truths of myself, of my lineage are washed out
No wonder my seat at the table is left out
They either don't care or don't know what I'm all about
And so recognizing this distance from them, I'm only left to shout
Shout the real to debunk the fake
Shout in the hopes of peeling them awake
But...
Are they listening?
Or are my shouts that blistering
As they cut into their subconscious
With a dissertation so presumptuous
Are they awake, conscious?
Or do they refer to the vestigial weary
As merely an idea, not more than a theory
A fact
That has inflamed the membranes of a torn community
If that's the case
Go ahead, put someone else in my place
I see another table awaiting me

—Gabrielle Moore

I Will Never

His mind is a trickling stream which I will never hear.
Restless ears listening for words he left unspoken.
Perhaps they float on by before they gently disappear.
Perhaps get caught on jagged rocks becoming broken.

His happiness is a bright light which I will never see.
Weary vision fading from seeking his direction.
Perhaps I crash on a bygone island of what should be.
Perhaps the blindness I endure is his protection.

His love is a hot summer day which I will never feel.
Frigid skin longing for the touch of a peaceful hand.
Perhaps his sidewalk shadow is all that was ever real.
Perhaps he drifts freely from my world to his dream land.

I will never know.

—Bay Berger

Transition to Light

Blackness,
As dark as the night sky
Nowhere can I run
Nowhere can I hide

A terrible feeling
Blossoming around
All light we have
Falling to the ground

Deep I plummet
Beaten and broke
Some have shattered
But, we have not been forsaken

For that reason I know
I can rise and keep fighting
No matter what's coming
If sickly or frightening

I grab the hands
Of those who have fallen
Give them the hope
Inside me I'm feeling

Sharing the wisdom
Being sent through my soul
Or helping the fallen
Who have abandoned their roles

Spoken its words
Spoken its teachings
Hoping above all
They may hear what I'm preaching

We each have a light
Unique on its own
It battles the blackness
Around us it has shown

From love that we share
Hope of all living things
Or surviving our lives
To obtain all our dreams

So we fight, this long war
That has lasted a lifetime
But still every time
The sun still remains to shine

So light will shine on
Wherever it lies
Deep in the ground
Or from thoughts in our minds

Tendrils reach out
To touch the forsaken
Beaten and broken
Now healed and forgiven

So accept the light
Accept its great blessing
For you to look forward
To what you may bring

So never look back
Don't make any regrets
Accept the power of life
The blackness you shall forget

Blackness
No more around us
Light, forever burning brightly
Inside us

– Amber Barfield

Favorite Printed Words: A Found Poem

An angel and a devil fell in love.
She moved like a poem and smiled like
a sphinx.
Remember, all passions start from love or hate.
But beware – you never know whether they will end in
delight or sorrow.
His light to my dark. His truth to my lies.
His sacrifices to my selfishness.
Truth is a jealous, vicious mistress that never, ever sleeps.
I needed to hate someone and you're the one I love the most, so it fell on you.
I'll be your mess, you be mine.
That was the deal that we had signed.
And you almost killed me
But I didn't die.
Hope in this world bleeds out of the barrel of a gun.

– Brittany Carroll

Best in Show

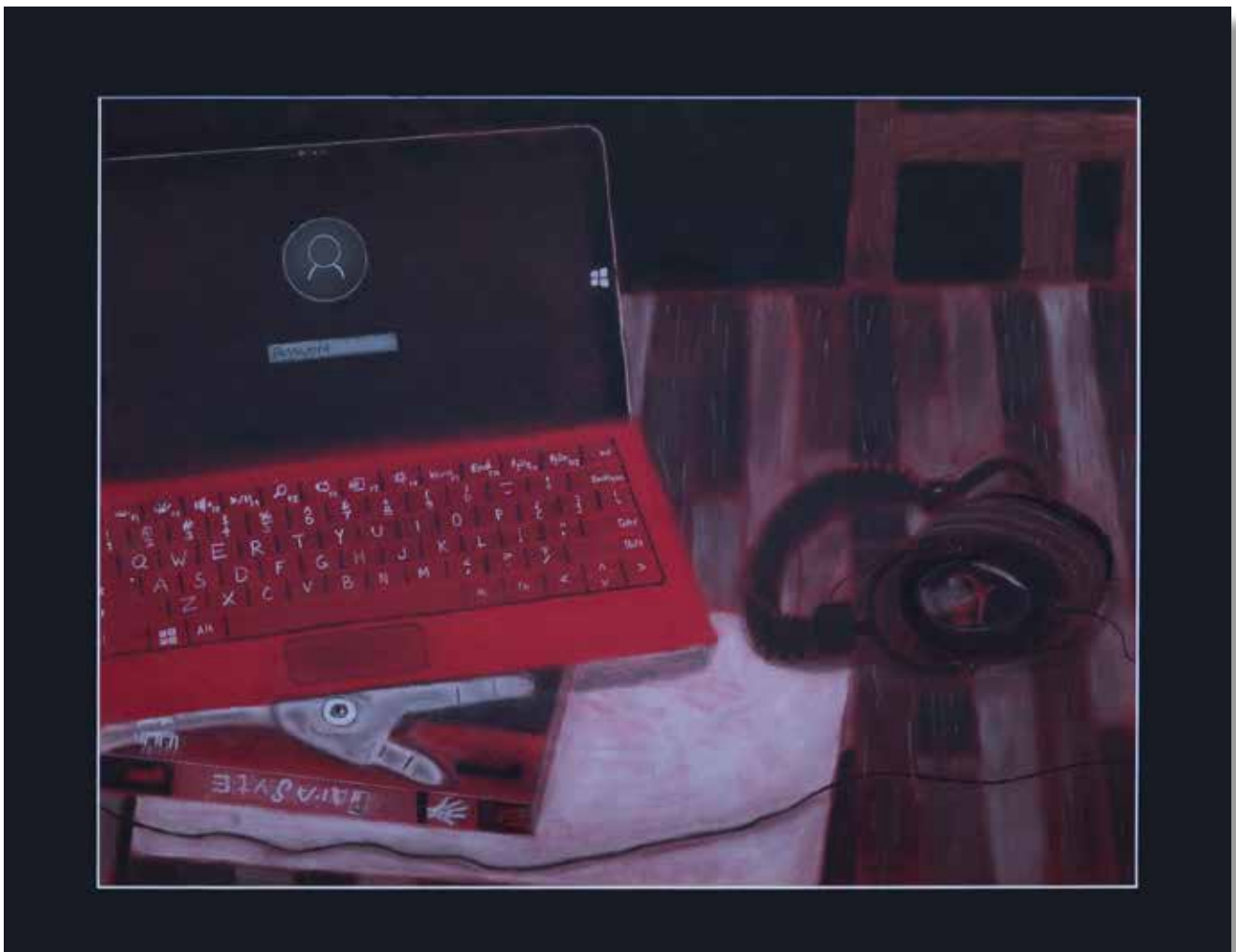


"Business Meets Pleasure"

Jacob Walters

Collage

2nd Place

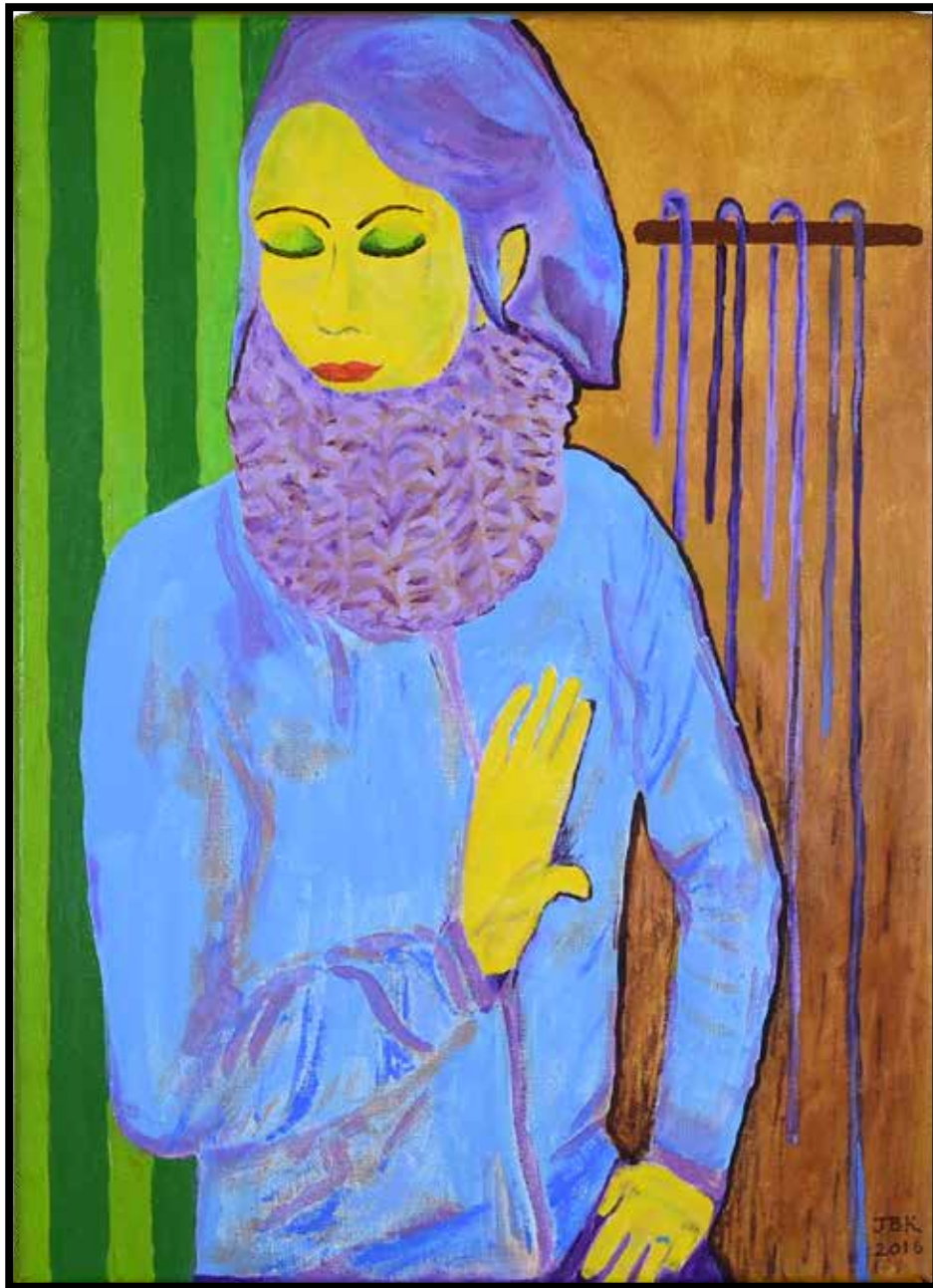


"Surface"

Justin Maxwell

Charcoal

3rd Place



"Jennie"

Judith Kirkeeide

Acrylic

Honorable Mention



*Gray scale study of
"Drowning Girl"
by Ray Lichtenstein*

Emily Bayes

Acrylic



"Child's Play"

Magan Porter

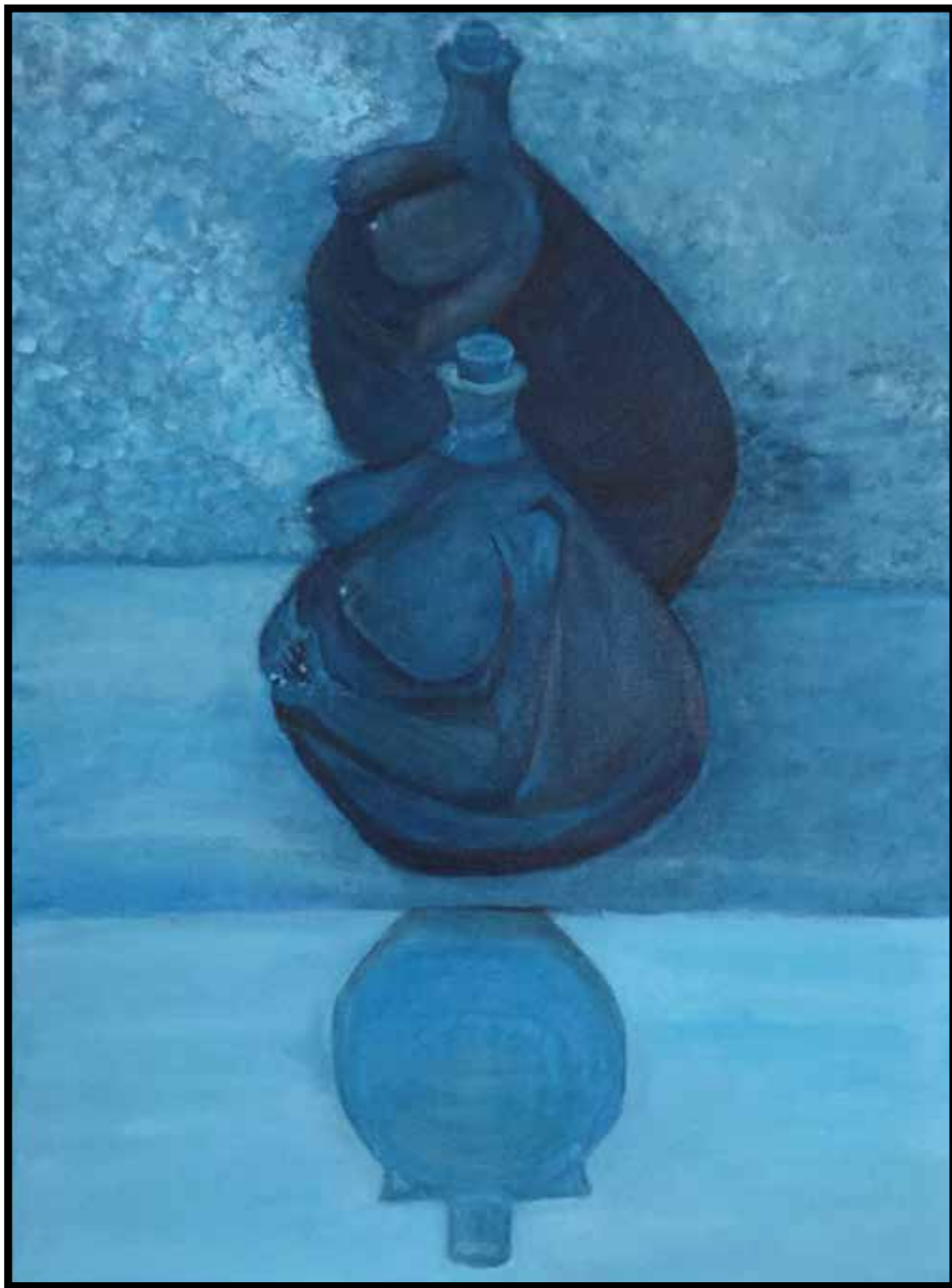
Photograph



"The Last Thing I Saw"

Kimberly Koltcz

Photograph



"Mom's Pottery"

Iris Varianti

Acrylic



"Alice in Wonderland"

Magan Porter

Photograph



"Spotlight"

Kimberly Koltcz

Digital



"Reflection of the Soul"

Magan Porter

Photograph



"It's a Red Roof Day"

Judith Kirkeeide

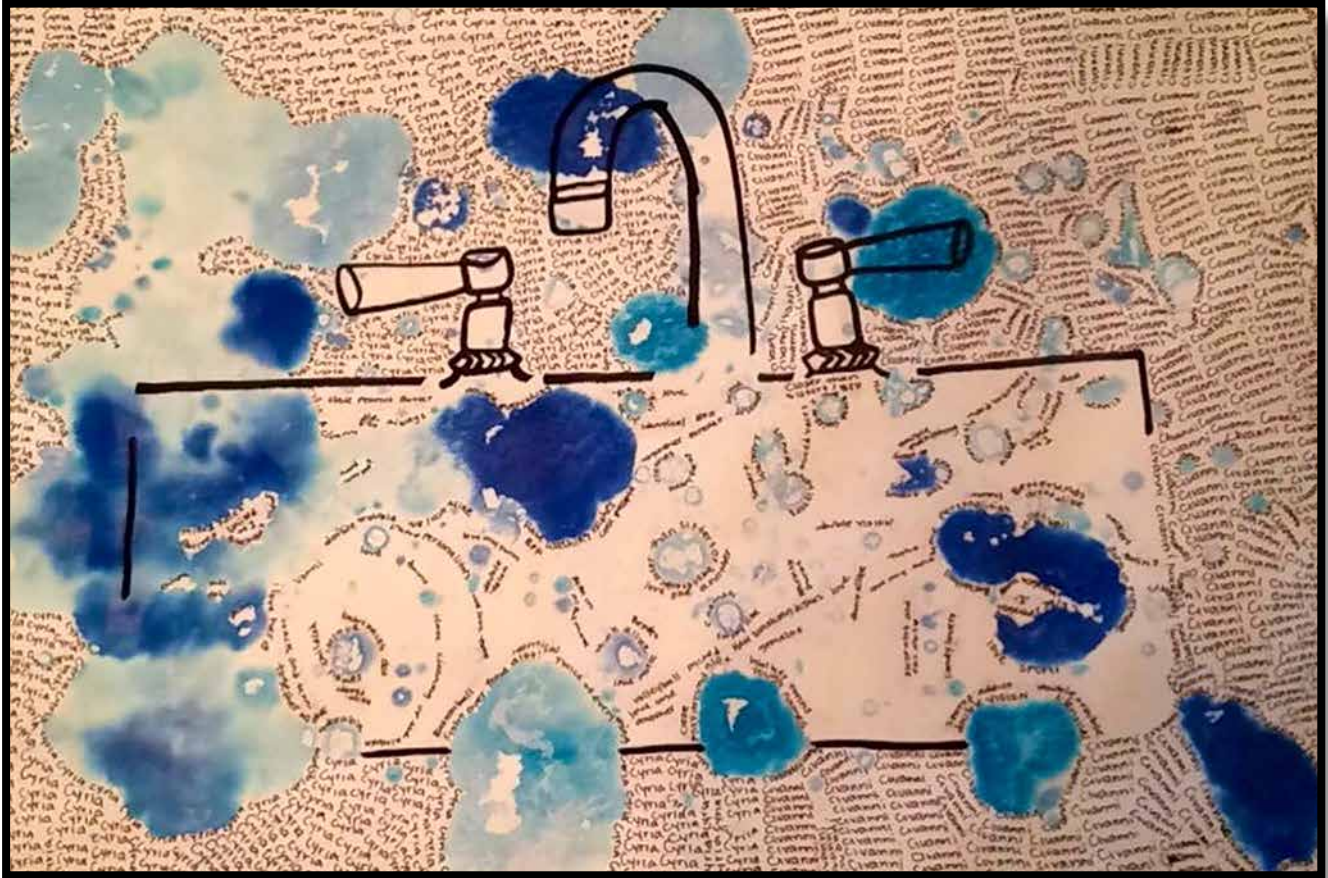
Acrylic on canvas board



"Sliced"

Kimberly Koltcz

Mixed Media



"Twin Trouble"
Cy'ria Walker
Watercolor

Family Ties

From the subconscious of your mind
 Or the crevices of your heart
 Family has many forms
 Nothing can tear its meaning apart

Family can fall outside of blood
 Blood is just one single meaning
 Outside the walls of biology
 The expansion of family is
 always gleaming

When family is formed
 It first appears from life's awakening
 New bonds, Familial ties
 For each new friend you begin seeking

From a mentor telling of wisdom
 Or a stranger in need of help
 Like a child in need of parents
 Family bonds you begin to shelve

The moment you start to care
 Or worry your heart dry
 A family is born
 With many never ending, love filled ties

Through the eyes of one soul
 Nothing is ever coincidental
 Everyone you consider family
 Fate has brought, it is not accidental

At the dawn of each day
 Many fateful chances you arise to meet

Guiding you down many roughs
 Entering a world without words,
 something so deep

This world is emotional
 Of course pain will follow
 But life without hurt
 Ironically has boundless sorrow

So yes we take the pain
 we take hurt, and grasp tears
 Because love we have that's endless
 Blocks out any unwanted fears

But some may be blind
 Unable to see the family ties
 That bond to many others
 Outside of space and time

But recognizing this is funny
 Because you don't know what is there
 Not until it is unfortunately gone
 And your heart feels great despair

So family brings a message
 Written deep within its ties
 Acknowledge the ones you love
 Before they are lost, or they die

Cherish the cares in your heart
 Or the ones in your mind
 The binds of family are never ending
 Always search for more to find

—Amber Barfield

A Forbidden Love

By Michael Duff

Death stared up at the exposed sky in the clearing of the trees. He watched the stars as they danced and sparkled up above as if they were moving to some unheard beat and putting on a show for anyone watching from below. It was hard for him to imagine being a human and looking up at the night sky, not know that in just a small split in dimension past the stars, there lay a whole other world in which none of them could see. In their cultures, there were so many theories about what lay beyond, some ridiculously beyond reason, while others were close. And yet, the answer was so close that if they knew, it would drive them insane.

As Death lay there in thought, the sound of the wood snapping, crackling inside the campfire mixed with the sound of the crickets in the wild filled his non-existent ears with its ambient melody. Suddenly, the melody was broken by a single giggle coming from the other side of the campfire, which startled him. In the faint orange glow of the campfire he could see a smile stretching across Hailey's face as she buried it inside one of her fictional story books which Death always saw her reading.

He examined her closely through the glow of the fire. Her eyes hidden by the reflection of the campfire in her glasses, and a strand of her red hair that she had put up in a ponytail now hung in her face. She was such a beautiful creature, yet so strange. Here, Hailey was surrounded by a collection of Mother Nature's proudest creations--all on display, and yet here she was with the full of her attention focused on a simple collection of words stapled together to create a make believe tale. It was something he could never truly understand about her.

"What are you reading that is so interesting?" Death asked, finally breaking the silence between them.

"Hmm?" Hailey looked up from her book for the first time in forever. "Oh, I'm sorry; I just wanted to finish this chapter," she explained.

"Yes I see that, but what is so interesting about it that has grabbed your attention so much?" Death asked.

"Oh it's nothing, it's nothing," she answered.

"If it truly was nothing, you wouldn't be trying to kiss the pages like you have been doing. Now come on, what is so interesting, I'm curious?" Death insisted.

Hailey let out a small sigh before flipping back a page in her book. "There's just this one part that I found to be cute. It's this part in the story where the boy and the girl, the two main characters in the book, both finally admit their love for each other while they're on the bus ride back to their hometown for the summer. I don't know, I thought it was cute."

"Hmm...Would you mind sharing what the text says? It seems to have enthralled you greatly; perhaps you would like to share?" Death asked.

“Um, sure, I’d love too!” Hailey said in her peppy excited tone. She ran her finger down the page of the book until she found a starting point.

“She embraced him in her arms, holding him tight as if she feared he would slip away if she even let go for a second--after eight years of holding back how she felt for fear that he would not feel the same way as she, ruining their friendship. She could now hold him, not as a friend, but as a lover. As they held their kiss, all sense of time seemed to slip away, everything around them seemed to come crashing down, leaving only her and Matthew in the universe. She had waited so long for his kiss, and now in his arms, she never wanted to let go.”

Hailey stopped reading and let out another small sigh. Once more her wide smile draped across her face. After staring at the book for a little longer, she suddenly snapped out of her little daze and looked back at Death with a small grin.

“I know it’s cheesy, but I thought it was a cute little moment in the story. It’s been one of those stories where you know that the two characters are going to get together and you’re always waiting for it to happen in every chapter. It’s like you know that they love each other, but the characters are literally the only ones who don’t know it, and it drives you insane.”

“I will admit, it was a nice little romantic excerpt.” Death agreed.

“Oh, there’s even a cute little picture to go along with it,” Hailey said.

She got up from her seat on the log and walked over to Death, holding out the book for him to see. Since Death, being a spirit, was unable to physically interact with the book, she drew a small flashlight from her jean pocket and shined it on the page for him to get a close enough look. The illustration was of the two characters sharing a kiss in a loving embrace, just as the book described, but soon Death lost focus, and it was not the picture that had his attention. His focus had turned to Hailey.

This was the first time she had been this close to him since the first time he had met her a year ago. As he looked at her, he was starting to notice little details on her face that he could not see from a distance but were now visible dimly in the light of the flashlight. He could lightly make out the freckles that lined her nose and a pair of hazel eyes that stared directly into his hood, accompanying the smile she always seemed to wear. Yes, she truly was a beautiful creature.

“Yes, I see... it is very lovely...” Death finally said, patting his hand on his knee. He was glad that she could not see his face, for if she could she would have seen that he wasn’t talking about the story anymore.

Hailey let out a happy little noise in agreement and returned to her place on the other side of the fire. She reached behind the log and picked at the small piece of paper she had been using for a bookmark and

(continued on next page)

Student Literature

placed it between the pages and closed the book. They both sat there in silence once more, enjoying the crackle of the fire and watching as it danced back and forth in the breeze. A few moments went by before Hailey once more broke the silence.

“Can....can you fall in love, Death?” She asked.

“Can I fall in love?” Death repeated.

“Yes, like, can you feel things like love? I mean, I know you’re a supernatural being, an entity from a different world, but everything can feel love. Humans feel love; animals feel love, so I would assume that you could too, maybe?” Hailey explained.

Death looked down at the fire and placed another stick on to its burning heap and began to poke at it with another stick. “Well, I have felt happiness before. I’ve felt anger. I’ve felt sadness. I’ve been annoyed, and I’ve even felt afraid ... So I would assume that, yes, it is possible that I could feel love,” he answered.

“I see...” Hailey said nodding. “Have you ever fallen in love before, Death?” She followed up.

Death stopped poking at the fire for a second, his one last poke sending sparks flying into the air and landing on his robe. He thought long and hard, searching through the many decades he’d watched over the earth. He searched through the generations he had been through, the civilizations he had seen, all the way to the very beginning of time. He then continued to poke at the fire.

“No, Hailey, I don’t believe I have. I’ve never really interacted with many people before, unless you count Guardians, but they are protectors of life. I am merely the taker of life. The Guardians and I aren’t the most compatible of beings.” Death joked slightly.

“How about with a human? Do you think you would ever fall in love with a human?” Hailey asked.

“Huh, that would be something wouldn’t it? Death, falling in love with a mortal being that would be something...” Death laughed.

“Could you?” She asked once more.

“....Maybe, I believe the real question would be: If I were to fall in love with a human, could the human love me in return? If you ask me, it would be highly unlikable,” Death answered.

“You never know, Death. They say that there is somebody for everyone.” Hailey said in her ‘Let’s try and be positive!’ tone. She gave him a little smile to back up her positive statement, and although she could not see, Death gave her one in return.

“Yes, but I am not everyone, dear Hailey... I am Death. The rules of love are rather different for us,” Death explained.

“How so, are you not allowed to fall in love with a human?” Hailey asked.

Death fiddled with the fire some more, placing another pile of sticks on top making sparks fly every which way like fireflies.

“No, it is not that. It is more of the fact that we are not able to touch a human. You see, my touch, death’s touch, is meant to extract a soul from its host body. My hands were made to take life and nothing more,” Death explained. He picked up a flower that had been growing from the side of his log and held it up for Hailey to watch it wilt in his hand.

“You see, it is not that I would never want to fall in love with a human, it is that I could never touch them. I could never show them love. I could never give those people hugs, or those kisses you all seem to fantasize about. I could never hold their hand. I could basically do nothing.” He finished.

Hailey watched the flower wilt in Death’s hands. Her face had now gone from one of happiness to one of seriousness. She placed the book from her lap to the log next to her and leaned in closer to Death, illuminating her entire face through the glow of the fire.

“It doesn’t always have to be about physical affection. You see, humans have this thing called Internet Relationships; they aren’t looked on too well nor do they have that great of a track record, but they do exist. Two people, who have never met face to face without there being a phone or computer screen in the way. Two people who have never hugged or kissed a day in their life but are still madly in love with one another, because for them, it isn’t all about the physical affection; it’s about the mental affection they receive from one another. The love that they have for one another that comes from the heart and not from the hands. What I am trying to say through this rambling is that, not everyone cares about the physical aspect. Some people are in it for the mental aspect. And although you’re Death, you are a much kinder and less threatening Death than what is portrayed in the movies. And if someone were to be able to look past all of that, I believe they would find an amazing person hiding underneath that robe.” Hailey finished her speech off with her signature warm smile which Death was sure would’ve warmed his heart if it existed.

“Well...I don’t know how much truth there was to that, but thank you, Hailey. It’s nice to know that even though I may be creepy on the outside, you think there’s something decent inside me.” Death joked, trying to hide the fact that her words had carried some weight with them.

“You’re welcome, buddy,” she said in a cheerful tone.

They both sat in silence once more, staring at one another, Hailey giving Death the warm smile she always gave him in place of a hug, while Death’s black void of a hood stared back at her, unable to express anything. After a moment, Hailey readjusted her glasses and cleared her throat. (continued on next page)

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“It sure was a nice idea to come out here tonight,” Hailey said as she looked up into the night sky above. “It’s so beautiful out here...”

“Yes it is, something you almost missed being buried in that book most of the time,” Death remarked.

“Oh shut up!” Hailey laughed, shoving off his remark.

“It is a very nice evening though, thank you for inviting me out here, Death.” She said.

“Hey, every time I see you, you’ve either got your face in a story book or in a study book. Even though you do get some time to relax and be with friends, I felt as if you needed a change of pace. Just some time to get out and enjoy the beauty that Mother Nature created,” Death explained.

“I still can’t believe that Mother Nature is an actual spiritual being, you know, with a physical form and everything! I would love to meet her one day!” Hailey said.

“Yes, yes, she is a wonderful person. Maybe one day you will be able to, just make sure you mention how wonderful her work is, or else she’ll complain about it later on,” Death joked.

Hailey giggled at Death’s comment. The sound of her little laugh made Death crack a small usable grin as the sound of her laughter had always done.

“Hey, you know what would make this even better?” Hailey began. “Wait here!” She said excitedly.

She got up from her place at the fire and made her way to the tent they had set up behind her. She slipped inside the tent and then reappeared a moment later holding an acoustic guitar in her hands. With a skip, she hopped over the log and sat back down placing the guitar on her knee.

“Everything’s better with a little music, wouldn’t you agree?” She said as she began to fiddle with the strings on the guitar and adjust them. “Now, I haven’t played in a while, since I am always so busy with school, so don’t complain if it sounds bad, okay?” She explained.

After stroking each chord several times, she finally found the sound she was looking for and began to play a song. The song she played was one that Death had heard many times before; it was one that she had played many times in her dorm room while she laid awake late nights studying or when she was in the car. It was called “Eat Your Heart Out” from a little band she loved called Lydia. After missing two small notes at the beginning as she normally did with this song, she began to flow into the song as if she had become the track on the radio.

Death thought back to the hours she had practiced this song in the quietness of her room her first year in college, all of those times she threw the guitar down in frustration and after all the times she said she was done trying to learn guitar, she had finally perfected the song. Death listened as she began to sing along to the music, her beautiful voice colliding with the ambiance of the fire and nature, combining the noises

into a symphony of the evening. He closed his eyes as Hailey grew more and more into her song, her passion for music began to show. Her face contorting from a face focusing on hitting the chords correctly, to a smile that was hitting every string with passion.

As Death listened to her play, he thought back to what she had asked him. If he had ever fallen in love, and the truth was that he had. He had fallen in love since the day he had stumbled across her the night he was to take her life. He thought about all the time they had spent together after he had spared her life for a second chance. He had fallen in love with a soul he was supposed to take away from the earth. Once more his reply rang in his head; “Could a mortal love him?” She did say there was somebody for everyone, but did that include him? Did that include Death?

He opened his eyes once more. His gaze immediately meeting hers as her beautiful hazel eyes met his and her smile lit up the forest brighter than any fire could. He thought about his missed opportunity to tell her how he had felt about her. He thought about how ridiculous it was for Death to feel the way he did. He was the Grim Reaper, a symbol of death and despair, and the one thing humans feared the most. And yet, when he was with her, he felt more human than he had ever felt before. As her voice filled his ears, he reminded himself of who he was, and reminded himself once more that such things just didn’t happen. Yet, he wished they could. ☆

A Robert Frost State of Mind

By Barclay Stockett

I was on a bus with about seventeen other white Americans, our Haitian driver, and two translators. It was eye opening to be the minority for the first time in my life. I was sleep deprived, sweaty, and incredibly claustrophobic in the bus without air conditioning and windows that opened less than two inches. We had been on the noisy roads from Port Au Prince to Giotin, Haiti for about an hour when the first out of many unfortunate incidents occurred. I didn't even realize that the sound was coming from our bus until I saw the alarmed expressions on the faces of the locals. Not one, but both of the back left tires popped simultaneously. The result I'm sure must have been a pretty humorous sight.

Throughout my few experiences in both Haiti and South Africa, a pattern has emerged. Because of the communication barriers, the pothole-ridden roads, and many other factors, most events take about a minimum of three hours longer than they should, whether it's driving a mile down the road or attempting to buy a fish without getting gypped. It took about three or four hours to get new tires and get back on our way. There are not any real or enforced traffic laws in Haiti. It's chaotic, loud, and scary to be on the roads with so many other honking drivers and pedestrians. There is however, one unspoken rule that most everyone lives by: never ever drive at night. Due to our unfortunate car problems in the late afternoon, we didn't get back on the road until dusk. As it got darker and darker, the once full and lively road became quiet at a rate that seemed almost instantaneous. By nine pm we had become lost multiple times and it had started raining. The rain would not have been too difficult to deal with had our luggage not been strapped atop the bus. As we got back onto the road, and everyone started to get as comfortable as one can get, basically sitting on each other and with the remaining luggage taking up all the leg room. As soon as it felt like everything was finally going well, it began to get loud near the front of the bus. I looked at Jaques, a short Haitian man who had a huge smile and an equally brilliant sense of humor. He was serving as one of our translators on this trip. He must have seen the confused look on my face, straining my neck to try to understand what was going on.

"It is a dangerous town up ahead," he said nonchalantly, "the driver does not want to drive us through it at night."

"Why is it so dangerous to be out at night?" I questioned Jaques.

"Only the criminals are out at night" he replied like it was obvious. It was obvious, but I just had a hard time wrapping my mind around the fact that it was so bad that no one ventures out in the dark because of it. Eventually we got close to the border of the infamous town the driver was so worried about, and he came to a full blown stop and wouldn't move an inch until we had reached an agreement, which really meant a bribe. This proceeded to happen twice. Both times before we would enter into the towns our group leader, Kimberly, would stand at the front of the bus and ask everyone to pray for safety. Regardless of the precarious situation that we had entangled ourselves in, I felt completely engulfed in an overwhelming peace; I just knew God was going to take care of us. My friend Taylor and I began to sing together: "Savior, He can move the mountains/ my God is mighty to save/ forever, author of

Salvation/ He rose and conquered the grave/ Jesus conquered the grave.” Soon the entire bus was singing of His grace. The singing was suddenly interrupted when the lifeless road became alive with another vehicle’s bright headlights pointing straight at us and the driver blaring his horn without cessation. We came to a halt, and I heard angry voices shouting in Haitian Creole. All the windows were busted out of the van, and the men sounded furious. I had no clue as to what was happening, but the voice of Jeffo, our other young Haitian translator, is a memory forever embedded in my mind. As he listened all he said was “Oh my God.”

He was pressed for more details but didn’t explain the situation until the long bus was jerked back into movement. Within the narrow road we would pull forward, and inch back, pull forward inch back, and repeat until we had completely turned around. “Those men were warning us. There are Vole up ahead. Men with machine guns that just mugged them,” Jeffo said. The bus was in disarray. No one fully knew what was happening or what the plan was to proceed. All I knew was we were going in the opposite direction of the Vole, and also the opposite direction of our final destination. We traveled for about an hour in the wrong direction, but as far as we were concerned, any direction away from the Vole was the right direction. We eventually came to the first nice looking place I had seen outside of the capital, Port Au Prince. Our team leaders went in to request information and see if it was a safe place for us to crash for the night. They weren’t in there long before they came back looking disappointed and told us that we were not to stay there.

“This is not a Holy place” Kimberly said. I hadn’t slept in over forty-eight hours, so I was clueless as to what she meant. Regardless of if the place was “holy” or not, it had a toilet. I had been holding my bladder for the past fourteen hours for when we would stop on the side of the road, so I went into the hotel with a few others to use the bathroom. The lobby was completely deserted, but a porno was playing on the small television screen mounted in the sitting room. After recovering from the initial shock, I grabbed the remote and turned the wretched thing off and made my way to the bathroom. There were flies everywhere, but I’ve never been so happy to see a toilet in my life. Even if I was in a brothel. A group of us had walked in together, but being in the incapacitated state of mind I was in, I decided to walk back out to the bus on my own. My shirt was completely drenched in sweat, and I could feel it rolling down my temples. It was pitch black outside with only the dim light from inside the brothel windows to guide me. As I walked toward the open door to exit, I couldn’t see anything other than the bus on the other side of the wrought iron gate thirty feet in front of me. I didn’t even see him approach – then there he was – with his hands reaching toward me and a crazed look of excitement and satisfaction. I didn’t make a conscious decision to stick my chest out and glare defiantly into his wide eyes, but I did. He stopped dead in his tracks and gazed at me in surprise and retreated back into a shadowy corner of the building where I couldn’t see him anymore. I got back to the bus and climbed over people and luggage until I got to my seat in the back row and laid down. Everything felt hazy; I couldn’t understand what just happened.

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Now as I look back I realize what a close call this occurrence was. I could have been kidnapped. I could have found myself a victim of human trafficking. Every time I dive into my memories from Haiti, I am always filled with such a gratefulness toward God and His protection of me and my group.

Once the whole group was back in the vehicle, the gates to the brothel were closed because the owners realized we weren't customers. Only then did we realize that the bus wouldn't start. We were stranded. Again. For the next few hours I rotated between lying on the back seat of the bus, the sidewalk, and atop the luggage on top of the bus. If I rested in the bus I would become extremely claustrophobic due to the lack of airflow, but in juxtaposition, if I were outside I was a victim of the massive mosquitoes of Haiti, which I'm allergic to. This carried on for hours in the heat before out of the darkness a man on a motorcycle appeared seemingly from heaven. He offered to fix the bus for us, and after thirty or so minutes of haggling, Kimberly and the mechanic had come to an agreement. I was surprised by how amiable my group had been thus far. I hadn't heard a single complaint; this confirmed to me that I had come with an incredible group of people, who were not there simply to explore the world, but to love God and love people. Eventually we were on the road again, but it was still dark, so there was still a chance that the Vole were waiting to ambush weary travelers. Our driver took us to a local police station, which I observed was a normal place to camp out at night while traveling. There were dozens of buses, trucks, and motorbikes parked close to the police station, which only had one room within it dimly lit up, and I could see a single police officer inside. I felt like I was starving for air, so I made my way out of the bus and laid down once again on the sidewalk. My delirium was continuing as the night went on. As I laid on the concrete sidewalk and saw the bright starry sky, I watched two shooting stars before I finally lost all consciousness.

I woke up approximately two hours later as the sun was beginning to rise. My body was stiff, and I began to look around to get a glimpse of my surroundings in the daylight. Five feet from where I was lying, a man was urinating into a narrow concrete ditch. My head was so close to the edge of the ditch I could have rolled in during the night. I scrambled to my feet, dusted myself off, and tried to hide my embarrassment. At this point I had learned to expect anything to happen. *Que sera sera*: whatever will be, will be. It was actually an odd feeling when everything seemed to go alright. We stopped at the hotel we were meant to stay at the night before and ate breakfast. Some of us went for a quick swim in the pool to cool off. It was very strange to have come from sleeping on the sidewalk to seeing such luxury. I wondered how it stayed in business – being so far from any large cities. After breakfast we took a vote; we could either relax for a day and catch up on the sleep that evaded us, or we could continue so that we didn't lose any more time in the village we were traveling to. It was a completely unanimous vote. No one wanted to lose out on more time with the kids in Giotin. I once again felt very grateful to be in the presence of such selfless people who had good intentions. We were only about two hours away from where the road ends. Literally the road ended, our driver left us, and we had to walk for about an hour. I was invigorated the moment we stepped out of the bus. We were walking down the most beautiful beach I had ever seen, with aqua blue waves. I had to watch every step to make sure I didn't crush living sand dollars. After wading across a river, taking a canoe across the next, and then a steep climb down the mountainous terrain, we finally arrived in Giotin. This little village on the northernmost coast of Haiti stole my heart. I spent every moment with the children. I regularly got beat at soccer, danced with the children, tried my best to be a loving example of Christ, and tell them about the gift of salvation. Every day I fell so much in love with this village full of people that I would do it all over again. ☆