

# River Voices

Spring 2017

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*Editors:*

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Michael Dietz

*River Voices* is a literary magazine published by the English Department at Muskegon Community College. It showcases and celebrates the work of current students, faculty, and alumni. While the magazine has experienced a four year hiatus, it has been rejuvenated for its published authors and readers alike for this special Spring 2017 edition, and will henceforth be published annually.

We encourage submissions of poetry, prose, essay, art, and photography year-round and are currently accepting submissions for the Spring 2018 edition. Please visit: [muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices](http://muskegoncc.edu/rivervoices) for further details.

In addition to our gratitude to contributors, special thanks are also due in part to Becky Evans, Mary Tyler, Gretchen Cline, Jessica Dennis, Peter Koryzno, and Sadie Boxer for their encouragement, support, and assistance.

Cover: *Beauty of Imagination* in ink, graphite, and colored pencil  
by Kaytee Walker

*Kaytee is a current MCC student and hopes to pursue a career in art. The editors celebrate the excitement the piece captures and how it incorporates itself into the theme of this year's rejuvenation for the magazine. "Every book holds a story that allows one's mind to explore the infinite. That is the true beauty of imagination" (Walker).*

International Photography:

An interdisciplinary travel-study course, offered by MCC in 2016, provided students with an on-site, international experience which included cultural and biological field studies. The hybrid course contained online and on-campus components as well as incorporated a seven-day visit to Belize where emphasis was placed on the past and present Mayan culture and its effects on the tropical rainforest ecosystem.

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*In his heart he heard the newly awakened voice speak, and it said to him:  
“Love this river; stay by it, learn from it.”*

—Herman Hesse,  
*Siddhartha*

## *I Dance In Circles, My Careless Arms Fly*

---

Sarah Olivas

I dance in circles, my careless arms fly-  
He whispers sweetly in my eager ear -  
My head thrown back, I laugh the darkened sky.

He beckons me in the night; offers lie –  
I close my eyes and sing my song; My dear  
I dance in circles - My careless arms fly.

He watches frost slowly spread beneath my  
dancing feet atop this bridge – I don't fear  
my head thrown back; I laugh the darkened sky.

He reaches jealously to tear at my  
hair and dress demanding that I come near -  
I dance in circles - My careless arms fly.

He screams as thunder and lightning strike – Cry  
my untamed eyes deny his try to tear  
my head thrown back - I laugh the darkened sky!

I press my hand to my lips and kiss. Nigh  
he waits calm - Counts the stroke of midnight near-  
I dance in circles, my careless arms, fly -  
My head thrown back, I laugh the darkened sky.

NOTE: The villanelle is one of the more demanding fixed forms of poetry, first appearing in Jean Passerat's poem "Villanelle (J'ay perdu ma Touterelle)" in the early 16th century. It is a nineteen line poem following an A B A rhyme scheme with only two rhymes throughout; furthermore, it consists of five tercets and a quatrain, with the first and third lines of the opening tercet recurring alternately at the end of the other tercets and with both repeated at the close of the concluding quatrain.

## *Rattlesnake Song*

---

Grace Young

As a young girl, rattlesnakes hatched in my lungs. It was during my fourteenth year that I heard them singing for me, in time with each breath. The doctors told me that they were originally named Non-Hodgkin and Lymphoma, but they had fallen from my throat and into my chest where they made their home. They told me I was sick, that I could fight it but it may not get better. Each day as I drowned in my sheets, these serpents grow. Their rattlers start to sing nocturnes too big for my throat. The pills and vials and I.V. drips only seemed to anger them as they grew fiercer and fiercer each day. Every time I coughed, I felt that one would rise from my chest, sprawling out in front of me. The snake would take this opportunity to tell me I belong to it, before unlocking its jaw and swallowing me whole. I will float on its belly for eternity, silence and blackness.

It is at this point that I truly believe I am sick, and I wonder if it has spread to my brain.

At sixteen, I am no longer me. I am venom, skin, stone, and teeth. I am cement veins beneath translucent skin, veins to a wilting willow. Mom has started letting me lie under the oak in the backyard. I do not know if she thinks the fresh air will help, or if she, too, has given up on the thought of recovery. I am able to hear things I could not before: kids stumbling over the cracked sidewalk near my front porch; the vibration of the neighbor's pickup truck; a lone crow perching above my bedroom window. The wind cradles me as I wander in and out of consciousness. I hear the oak whisper my name, the grass spreading a soft goodbye. The sunlight shines upon me beneath a deep, cloudless blue. These are things we forget to see and hear in our learned deafness. A thought stabs up, starting at my toes and rambling through me. It stifles everything else, and my thoughts are lost. The things I will miss: birthdays, Christmas, and being pinched on Saint Patrick's Day. Eating rocket pops at the park. My father yelling at me to get up in the morning. I will not graduate, marry, or have kids. My heart will not be stolen or broken. I will never be eighteen, thirty-seven, or eighty-three. There will be no parties that I could not attend. My name will not be on any guest lists. I won't write a bestseller, cure a disease, or speak to the nation. These rattlesnakes will keep singing until they can compose a symphony from the ash left behind.

I will live a remarkably ordinary life, just like everyone else. That is the thing about us, I am me and you are you, but we are both extraordinarily unimportant. We will die a second time when all who loved us are gone and we are permanently forgotten. Death is all around us, the inevitable, but it still tastes

like metal between my teeth.

It has been a month since that day beneath the oak, and I am not bed-ridden. The doctors told me that dying would be like when the movies fade to black, you know, after the boy who got the girl rides off into the sunset. Except this is my life and there are no ending credits and, most importantly, no sunsets where I am going. I want my ashes to be scattered under the oak. The rain will mix with my bones and feed the soft leaves before they fall. My leaves will fall like snow and stick to my family's shoes. They will take me with them around the world and keep me in their pillowcases to help them sleep. What dreams will they have of me then?

Two weeks have passed and I'm in the belly of the rattlesnake. There is only darkness and I am no longer aware if I am awake or sleeping. Suddenly, there is too much to think about. These thoughts go nowhere as I drift in and out. I haven't opened my eyes in six days. I miss my cat. I never finished that science report.

Sometimes I hear voices between the emptiness. A muffled *she looks so grey*, a reprimanding, *don't say that, what if she can hear you*.

I can hear you.

"Darling, I love you, I want you to know that. I need you to know that."

I love you, too. Know that I love you.

They touch my face and hold my hands. I try my hardest to send love through my fingertips to tell them it's okay.

I am afraid.

"The doctors said it should happen soon. We will have to say goodbye, you know, let her know it's okay to go."

"But it isn't okay. I can't just let her go."

My chest aches for my mother, my father, myself. I cannot think of anything but the times I told them I hated them, took them for granted. There are so many things I should have done, so many things I should have said. I cannot breathe. My hands are wet with tears that are not my own, and the room is filled with a terrible drowning, hacking sound. I am so cold.

I don't know why they say your life flashes before your eyes. This is so slow and painful. I linger on every moment and wish I were *there*. I cannot be there because I am *here*, in *this* moment. The one that all the rest were leading up to.

Let it all go.

There is a single crow outside my window. Nothing. A branch of the oak snaps off and falls to the ground, fleeing from the rain. Silence and blackness.

Let it all go.

*the unwritable*

---

Lizzie Peoples

cool winds sweep across the porcelain  
cheeks blow carefully crafted curls back  
to bare breastbone dainty fingers reach  
for long arms wrap around tiny waist

church bells ring as communion  
dress is tainted red

## *I'm Stuck on This Line*

---

Michael Dietz

I'm stuck on this line that's been churning  
in my head since it flew in through the car window  
the other day:

*Your smile is like ice-cream.*

Now, I'm confronted with a plethora  
of questions about your smile, like

*What kind of ice-cream?*

for, everyone knows chocolate is one swirl  
while strawberry cheesecake quite another.

*Is there candy*

*inside or on top?*

*Are there nuts?*

Both, I think, but definitely  
nuts. Small, chopped ones,  
inside *and* on top. Now I want to know if it's a sundae  
in a bowl or three balls on a cone because  
(and I think you'd agree)

those are two different parlours  
on either end of town,  
and when discussing your smile  
I'd prefer to be specific. Furthermore,  
the mention of a sundae begs the question

*Which day of the week?*

After all, a sundae on a Sunday  
is more local, like Country Dairy, while  
a cone in the car on a Tuesday afternoon  
during a rainy lunch break is much more  
like Hudsonv--no, Blue Bunny.

*Have we discussed weather yet?*

because this could be  
the factor that freezes or melts  
the reader's attention. And then there's  
the size to consider! And the company kept,  
and the reason to enjoy such a specific treat,

for it could be an entire gallon, drizzled  
with the salty tears of a recent breakup,  
plopped on a lap in the blue glow  
of a Nicolas Sparks movie on channel 218  
in the middle of the night, or

it might be the kind of birthday soup  
one gets on a paper plate that's been pushed aside  
on the picnic table at the nephew's party  
after watching six, ten-year-old boys  
compare tongues and blow green  
spit bubbles in a disgusting display of *see-food*  
(and I assure you,  
your smile is neither one of those  
kinds of ice-cream).  
Your smile is like

two large waffle cones  
of Country Dairy's *Peanut Udder Bliss*  
we each bought for each other from our favorite parlour  
near the east end of town on a Saturday  
evening in July after a long day  
of planting flowers in the garden at home. It's like  
eating it while we walk across the street  
to sit on our favorite bench  
near the docks under that huge willow and laugh  
at our playful puppy chasing a gaggle of geese  
back into the river that reflects

the lone birdhouse sticking up through the reeds.  
It's like the ethreal sunset that happens to be  
unlike anything we've ever seen before  
thanks to the refraction in the warm, slightly humid,  
summer air filled with echoes of laughing children  
playing in sprinklers; a sunset that's  
erased the horizon

line I've lost interest in  
after looking over at you,

bent up, licking the melted chocolate that's dripped  
down the side of your palm  
through the soggy napkin,  
doing the one thing that's scooped me

off the clunky line of a poem  
that wasn't even written yet:

smiling.

### *Wake Up and Grind*

---

Michael Dietz

I would love to, Ronald McDonald.  
I really would. Every. Single. Morning.

That's really the best time anyway,  
wouldn't you agree? With the senses hyper  
sensitive; and the brain fogged over

by those filthy dreams where we find ourselves  
frolicking with the beautiful,  
unfrolickable people of the world, performing  
deeds that would make even a cheap

customer blush. And what's more  
is, while I can't speak  
for every man on the planet,

it regularly happens to be the one  
time of day for me in which

half the work has already been erected.

## *Ladylike*

---

Danielle Warren

If you cross your legs,  
no one will mistake them  
for an invitation, or worse, you  
for a man; and don't say "fuck,"  
it's too vulgar for such a pretty mouth,  
darling, don't eat too much,  
a girl should never be seen  
with a stuffed mouth, God forbid  
a stain on her shirt;  
sweetheart, please, stop burping,  
gases don't come out of girls,  
what would he think if he heard that?  
You know, when you get mad,  
just count to ten, only boys (will be boys)  
should wrestle and yell, babygirl,  
the world is willing you to wilt,  
because you are a flower, fragile;  
pretty princess, do not drop your head  
lest your crown shall fall,  
and your silk slippers may soil,  
there is nothing dainty about dirt,  
so keep clean; the world is watching,  
dear, make sure you apologize,  
even if it's not your fault,  
it's ladylike.

*Please Wait.  
We'll Be Happy*

---

Tirzah Schmuker

please wait.  
we'll be happy  
you said.

and i guess  
the only virtue i'm missing  
is patience,  
smothered by the phantom rasp  
of soggy steel wool carpet  
on my cheeks  
and i wonder when i began losing  
pieces of myself

maybe when the windows,  
steamed  
from body heat and  
sticky palms,  
yours and mine,

became gilded  
from ice and  
labored breathing--  
alone, frozen  
from aching reminiscence

of ice-cream stains,  
soaked jeans,  
and stolen flannel shirts  
sweet nothings  
absinthe vapor in my lungs.

and maybe i'm weak  
for letting you  
go, because i lost  
my grip on patience  
long ago  
in order  
to cling tighter  
to you,  
but like all beautiful things  
you damage on contact.

and maybe if i waited,  
we'd be happy--  
but I can't wait anymore.

### *The Wallpaper*

---

Tirzah Schmuker

The wallpaper  
waxes apologetic,  
complementing  
everything  
and losing  
personal  
definition.

## *Since I've Had Enough*

---

Brenna Buckwald

I am a castle  
and the moat that surrounds it,  
as well as the enchanted forest.  
I am the whole damn kingdom.

So you do not  
get to talk to me  
as if I am anything less.  
You do not get to berate me  
for saying what I think,  
and for looking how I want to,  
just because it is not  
what you deem appropriate  
for a young woman.

I am a grown woman.  
I am a kingdom.  
I can keep myself together  
without your help.

## *On Writing with Stephen King*

---

Alexis Smith

to write with King would be to turn off  
all the lights and listen to your dark half  
scream “redrum” to the rhythm of someone tapping  
on a typewriter missing some of its keys

unable to tell the pathologists  
that yes you are awake  
and would appreciate it if  
they did not cut you there

to visit the cracked gravestone  
of the girl buried in pig’s blood  
and to wrap rosary around your neck  
as you pray for forgiveness

or to try to hide your handcuffed wrists  
palms infected with blue eyes that itch like sores  
or to beg for medication withheld  
by a girl with fire in her hands

it would be to find Pennywise in Joyland  
holding a bouquet of balloons  
while he whispers about how we all float here  
we all float here just for you

## *Not Quite Clear*

---

Elizabeth Robin Carpenter

Her lipstick stains remain  
upon your lip, though clearly  
some attempt  
at cleansing has been made.  
Did you deliver comfort?

Or a rush of regret?

Surely she got drunk  
on the dregs of your passion.  
Many times you have had a certain  
sparkle within you, but what was once hot  
enough to melt the strongest resolve has long  
ago turned into a coolness, hard as cobblestone.  
What could be transparent is instead clouded  
the color deep of pre-dawn.  
Your fragility is the weakness hidden  
beneath your ever smooth facade.  
You manage  
to shine after all  
this time, but she has drained you  
of all that made you tempting.  
You are no good to me  
empty.  
No good at all.  
Wine glass.

## *imPerfection*

---

Brittany Strach

The wind is soft, pleasant and warm, the most loving of caresses, but still she shivers. He takes the worn leather from his shoulders, places it against her skin. They share a smile, a suspended moment before he leans back, hands behind his head, relaxed, and she leans forward, hands poised to grasp, taunt like wire. She picks a daisy from the meadow, studies it as it dangles from her fingertips. The petals are silky. Fragile. Just the slightest touch and...

*He loves me.* One perfect white petal falls like snow. Then another. *He loves me not.*

The chant brings up a memory of shouting. His walk was a wobble, his speech slurred. In the morning when he could think straight, he apologized.

*He loves me.* In this perfect moment, he straightens up, begins planting feathery kisses against the base of her neck. She tells herself to remain still. *He loves me not.*

He glances at other women when they pass. On the phone, there are long pauses where their breaths hang in the air like a question.

She looks at him as he plucks the flower from her grasp.

“He loves me,” he says, pulling off the very last petal. She returns his smile, but her mind completes the chant. *He loves me not.*

## *Speak Up*

---

Anna Dunnigan

That's right, all you  
have to do is tilt your head back,  
take a deep breath,  
and shout your thoughts to the sky.  
"I just bombed that math test!"  
That's right, Becky,  
tell the heavens how you've failed.  
"Was there homework?"  
Whoever is up there  
says to work on page 34,  
parts A and C.  
All of the answers are there.  
You just have to speak up.

## *Cry-It-Out Method*

---

Eileen Taylor

She recalled how her mother was courteous enough to let her pick out her own twisted switches from the oak tree that survived every storm. “The thin ones whisked through the air, and stung the most. The thick ones were slower, but they hit the hardest.” She spoke fondly of her father, and remained silent of her aged and shrunken mother. Her mother had raised her to co-sleep with insecurity, attached to her skin that she wanted to cut off with the pair of scissors in the junk drawer.

\* \* \*

Glasses still fogged, she announced to her parents that dinner was done, her mother eating the overcooked spaghetti with her crooked and bent fingers. She snapped at her mother, “My mother would never let me eat with my hands.”

“Good thing I’m not your mother,” her mother quipped.

Her words did the opposite of her intentions. They did not whip through the air, cutting to the bone. Her daughter could finally sleep-train her insecurity, so that it might cry out but it would no longer incessantly cling to her, clawing at her skin.

## *I Took a Step*

---

Tyler Wehner

I took a step.  
A step that felt heavy  
as the rain that pattered like tiny footsteps,  
that chilled  
my skin to the touch.  
Beneath my feet sticks  
cracked like fire  
that warmed my shoulders.

Another step.  
It was colder, bitter really.  
My eyes darted to the left.  
Then to the right.  
The rain had turned to snow, white  
feathers floating down  
from the dark sky.

I took a third step,  
hesitating as I held my breath.  
The cold air stung my lungs, and sudden  
as a blink, I felt warm.  
It was a soft, comfortable warmth,  
like coming home with the fireplace on.  
That nostalgic feeling of comfort as if  
my mother blessed me with a hug.

It wasn't the kind that made you  
shiver. It was relaxing, like the trees  
that swayed in the wind. Leaning  
towards each other as if they were in love.

Another step.

The birds were singing to me  
as if they were telling me a  
story. I listened like they were my friends.  
The song that I could write myself.  
It was comforting, even as snowflakes  
balanced on my arms.  
A fervent feeling that only I  
could experience at this moment.

And with my last step  
the sky opened and the sun  
looked down on me, impassioned.

And with that, I wrote my poem.

## *In a World Full of Assholes, Be a Quasimodo*

---

Aaron Ponce

Have you ever seen such a deformity?  
Confined to his own morbid conformity  
crowned king of fools and hailed up high  
he only saw that they loved - nigh,  
worshipped him because his ears were dry  
though underneath it they pooled toxicity  
it required no explanation no specificity  
as long as it was on that day for the fools  
where he wore a crown and given jewels  
he felt most honored but every story unspools.

What a joy it must be to be oblivious to the hate  
to have a Frollo to guide you from plate to plate  
though baited and distracted by a sour teacher  
the sort of man with rod like a Sunday school preacher  
who carried contradictions as he tried to leech her.  
The hunchback wasn't even content to let it go on  
had set about quenching the hunger of the dragon  
when beauty was in danger because of methodical serpents  
when beauty herself kept on reaching out for more fragments.

The villain is ever present to snuff out his Esmerelda  
he won't carry it out himself so don't let him sell ya  
he will incite the mob to turn in on its own  
he will gather up ropes and hurl out the stone  
and the good little hunchbacks will become emboldened  
to steal away from his Frollo what it was he had stolen  
for although he had no ears to hear he had eyes to see  
so when injustices were done upon him well, he,  
he usurped his mighty oppressor and threw him away  
and found his way to his little loves grave that day.

*Inbetween*

---

Kiara Dejong



*Focus*

---

Kiara Dejong



*October 13th*

---

Taylor Hermanson



*Choo Choo*

---

Taylor Hermanson



## *I Once Asked My Mother*

---

Devin Sweezer

I once asked my mother to stop  
drinking.  
When she asked why, I warned  
her of the dangers it could bring.  
Yet my mother remained  
unmoved.  
And down came a plague of venomous words.

I once asked my mother to stop  
shooting heroine.  
When she asked why, I warned  
her of the consequences it could have.  
Yet my mother remained  
unmoved.  
And down came a plague of poverty and theft.

I once asked my mother to stop  
dating abusive men.  
When she asked why, I warned  
her of the hurt it could cause.  
Yet my mother remained  
unmoved.  
And down came a plague of purpled skin.

I once asked my mother to stop  
trying to contact me.  
When she asked why, I told  
her that I moved on to better places.  
And my mother sent an army to stop  
me from leaving.  
But I took that staff, and I crossed the sea

then I let the waves crash down behind me.

## *I Will Never Let You Go*

---

Anna Dunnigan

I climbed the steps two at a time, my feet connecting with the concrete to make nice, echoing slaps. The parking garage was mostly empty, only a few abandoned cars scattered around and my rusted truck, still running, near the exit. I reached the top of the stairs and threw myself against the heavy door. I instantly felt the rain on my face, slicing into me like shards of glass. The wind was howling, drowning out the sounds of the passing cars on the street below. I hesitated by the door, squinting into the storm, until I saw her.

We just got done having another fight, though I couldn't remember what it was about. I could remember her screaming at me – my arms would be blue where her delicate fists hit me, and my leg radiated pain from her kicks, but none of that mattered. All that mattered was that I got her back into my arms.

“Grace!” She was on the other side of the roof, pacing near the edge. Her mouth was moving, though the wind drowned out anything she was saying to herself. Her black dress was soaked through and torn at the bottom, and she only had one shoe on. Her body stiffened at the sound of my voice, but I ran towards her before she could move. I grabbed her arm and spun her around to face me. In her red and puffy eyes, I could see all of the hurt and confusion she was carrying inside, and my heart shattered like glass.

“Stay away from me!” She tried to wrestle free from my grasp, but I just pulled her closer to me. I was desperate to keep her. She cried out when a flash of lightning illuminated the sky, followed by a loud crack of thunder. My angel was so scared and I knew I was the only one that could make her feel better.

“I'm sorry, my love! I promise I will never hurt you again!” She opened her red stained lips, but I crashed my mouth onto hers before she could say anything. Her mouth, soft and warm, tasted like cherries and brandy. I kissed away her running mascara and doubts of our love. I kissed away her fear of the future and the memory of our fight. I kissed her until she ran out of breath and pushed against my chest for air.

“Don't worry, baby. I will always love you. There won't be a day that goes by where you aren't by my side.” I kissed her once more and tenderly led her far away from the edge of the roof and back down the stairs. She shivered in my arms, the rain finally sinking into her bones. I took her to my truck, laid her in the back seat, and took a second to stare. She was so beautiful in that moment, with her wet hair and flushed cheeks. Her bottom lip was trembling and her eyes still had tears escaping them.

“Please don't cry, Grace. It breaks my heart to see you so sad.” My fingers brushed against her cold skin as I buckled her in. “You're safe with me.”

I kissed her a final time, closed her door, and climbed into the front of the truck. I looked back at her in the rearview mirror and smiled at her. “We’re going home, love. We’re going to be happy.” And with that, I sped out of the parking lot.

\* \* \*

Panic flooded my veins as I ran through the abandoned parking garage to find a way out. He had parked his car near the exit, so my only option was to climb up to the roof. I heard him cursing and acted, knowing time was not on my side – up it was. I looked back over my shoulder just before running up the stairs. He was still slumped down on the ground, holding onto his left leg. I had tried to punch him off of me, but his meaty arms wouldn’t loosen their grasp, leaving me to stab the heel of my shoe into his calf. I took the steps two at a time, my feet connecting with the concrete to make thunderous claps. I threw my body against the door and ran onto the roof, searching for a fire escape. The wind was howling in my ears and the rain fell hard, pushing me further to the ground. I got to the edge of the roof and began shouting at the people below, praying someone would hear me.

“Help! He’s going to kill me!” The cars on the street kept driving. “Please!” I started jumping up and down and waving my arms, but the traffic continued to flow.

“Grace!” The sound of his voice made my stomach lurch and I froze. I looked over the edge of the roof once more and contemplated jumping, but he had run over to me before I could muster up the strength to do it. He grabbed my arm and spun me so his face was only inches from mine. He was breathing heavily and on his pants was a growing red stain, but it was as if he didn’t notice. In his eyes I could see all of the darkness and danger he kept hidden, and my heart dropped to my stomach.

“Stay away from me!” I tried to pull myself away from him, but he tightened his grip on me. I cried out, as it felt like he was going to snap my arm in two. A flash of lightning lit up the sky and the thunder followed soon after.

“I’m sorry, my love! I promise I will never hurt you again!” I opened my mouth to scream, but he slammed his mouth onto mine. He tasted like stale cigarettes and rubbing alcohol. I beat against his chest but he wouldn’t stop grinding his mouth against mine. He kissed me until I couldn’t breathe anymore and released me when I felt I was about to pass out.

“Don’t worry, baby. I will always love you. There won’t be a day that goes by where you aren’t by my side.” He kissed me again before wrapping his arms around my torso and pulling me towards the stairs. I screamed and thrashed and kicked, but he held tighter and pulled me like a ragdoll down the stairs. I was crying heavily, my body shuddering with every breath I took. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, making it impossible to stop shivering. He dragged

back to his truck and threw me into the back seat.

He stared at me, the predator eyeing its prey before smiling sadly. “Please don’t cry, Grace. It breaks my heart to see you so sad.” He grabbed some rope from the floor and tied my wrists behind my back and my ankles crossed over one another. He kept groping me, his calloused hands scraping against my skin. His face hovered over mine before he kissed me again, stopping only to put a gag in my mouth. He slammed my door and climbed into the driver’s side, revving the engine. He looked at me through his mirror, and I saw him for what he was. A monster in a man’s skin. “We’re going home, love. We’re going to be happy.” And with that, he sped out of the parking lot.

## *Public Speaking*

---

Brenna Buckwald

Hands are shaking  
Heart is racing  
Did I just stop mid-sentence?  
I can't remember what I was saying

I am an actress that forgot her lines  
Walking from stage left to right  
Tried to picture the audience naked  
And started to cry  
So the crowd picked up a hum of conversation  
Knowing that when asked if they liked it  
They'd lie

Blood rushing to my face  
Fingers pulling at the lace  
Of my dress  
I am a mess never to leave my cave  
Again

I am a kid trying to fly a kite  
Not being able to hit the wind just right  
Pull the string tight  
It breaks  
And finally the kite flies  
Out of reach  
Then out of sight

Sweat beads up on my forehead  
My feet are lead  
I drag myself to the podium  
Look up—the crowd is dead.

## *I Will Write*

---

Grace Young

My Grandmother's eyes  
could look straight through a man  
and still sing you to sleep.

But, as she looks up through the empty, neon hospital,  
her song becomes static.  
I weep into her paper skin.

“Darling, do not cry for me,” she whispers,  
“you see: lives are meant to be spent.  
Now I am in great debt,  
and I am tired of borrowing from the people I love.”

That night,  
as I slept to heart monitor lullabies,  
She wrote me a letter.

Child, my funeral will be a party.  
Everyone should wear their favorite dress,  
no matter if it isn't black.  
Dance for me.  
I want to hear all the secret shower singers,  
all the tabletop drummers  
and expert air-guitarists.  
Everyone must bring a single sunflower  
and find someone else to give it to.  
There will be no tears.  
There will be a sunlight symphony.  
Do not be afraid.  
I will write,  
though I won't send postcards.  
I will construct astounding sunsets  
to whisper goodnight.  
I will make mountains in your name.  
When the sky is weeping,  
I am grieving with you.

You will see a girl with beautiful eyes.  
She will look straight through you,  
and you will know that I am there.

## *I Hate Riding in the Car With You*

---

Michael Dietz

I hate riding in the car with you sometimes.  
Not because I don't enjoy your company,  
or because you are a terrible driver,  
but because it can never just be silent

enough for me to make another connection  
between myself and the moon, stationary  
behind the blur of the seventy-mile-an-hour landscape,  
or to consider the detail missed

in the grass and gravel on the shoulder at this speed.  
But this, I think, must be  
how watercolors are painted, or how—  
what are those called?—impressionists!  
see the world, with no definitive lines,

just swooshes and smears of color. So,  
I suppose there's beauty in every perspective,  
fast or slow, and even in the refrain  
of the song that is distracting me on the radio now,

dancing toward the climax with its new partner,  
the sunrise, who just spilled over the dark tree tops  
across that lovely, haze-filled field where  
those deer are having their breakfast.

## *Candy*

---

Rick Amidon

You hold out a palm full of  
Small parti-colored hearts.  
Valentine's candy.  
I choose an orange one. *My Pal*.

I give it to you.

Your turn. A white one. *Tell Me*.

I choose *Coax Me*.

You, pink, *Already Did* (you make this up).  
Me, light green. *Please Be Mind* (a typo).

We eat your entire pocketful.

I point at your rainbow palm.  
We hold hands and soon I have colors also.

*Why are we here?* I ask you.  
You think about this.  
*To be good to each other, you say.*  
*To share candy.*

## *Room 209*

---

Rick Amidon

In room 209, they said, but I couldn't find it.  
In desperation, I tried 109 as an approximation.  
Then, impatient, I scaled the outside wall  
up to the second floor, only to find the roof.

## *Ending*

---

Jennifer Lance

You sit with me and we spit the past out  
across the darkened horizon  
while the beach grass whips  
at our naked legs  
and the wind shuffles  
wave breaks. We turn,  
fists interlocked, hand in hand,  
we snap wet-drunk bodies close.

Gulls circle, shrieking, seeking kills,  
their wingtips geometric  
against the star-smeared sky  
as night opens its mouth to us. We encircle,  
encompass, and lean heavy  
into each other's shoulder  
while the dead go quietly out to sea.

## *A Fine, Quiet Evening Out With Lust*

---

Michael Dietz

*I'll have a glass of your pinot, please* I say,  
looking up over the rim of my glasses  
at the server while I place the menu I've  
consulted down flat on the table. *Of course,*

the accented reply. While he's gone to get  
the bottle, I unroll the silverware, take  
the triangled cloth, flap open the flesh-  
colored napkin, spread it (with couth) on my lap

under the table, and convince myself that  
this white wine—with notes of ripe apricots and  
hints of pressed pears, per the menu—will pair well  
with salty meat. I rub my fingers around

the rim of the thin, empty glass and slowly  
down its long stem where I cup the round base  
in my palm while I wait, thirsty and patient  
in the noise of the restaurant. When he comes

back, he grips the bottle by the neck and bares  
the label so I read *Mondavi's Private  
Selection* and asks if this is okay. *Yes,*  
I consent. He un-pockets his wine-key and

begins unwrapping the foil. I watch him  
carefully screw the spiral inside the cork  
and pump it out with a *POP!* He leans over  
to make the bottle spit a bit of the gold

grape juice into my upturned glass. My eyes, not  
once leaving his profile, catch his lashes  
in the flickering eye of the votive that's  
watching the both of us in our awkwardness.

He asks me if I would like to taste it first,  
and that is when I notice his eyes are blue  
behind the sandy strands of the long hair he  
tucks nicely behind his ear. *Yes. Yes I would,*

and I do, but not before I swirl and smell  
the aroma from the bowl of the glass. I  
close my eyes, because this seems appropriate,  
and I throw the sample back, down my throat, past

my tongue, and nod for more. Once again, he leans  
in, closer this time, and I see that behind  
him is a bow of black apron strings running  
down his legs. I would have thought for him to pour

the entire bottle for the time he spends,  
tipped over me. I can smell the musk of him,  
faintly, and when his necktie flops out from the  
front crease of his apron, the breeze it makes is

pleasant; earthy. When he finally pulls back  
the tie so as not to let it slide into  
the wine, I see that his hand is rough and his long,  
round fingers, are manicured, and I feel my

eyes tracing him again, up, up to his face,  
stippled with a subtle nine-o'clock shadow.  
Now I can almost hear the brisk of it on  
the razor blade from earlier that morning.

With a final *glug* from the bottle that flags  
his ascent, I flatten the napkin on my  
lap again, carefully. He notices that  
I am flush and asks if that will *be all for*

*now, sir?* I assure him that it would be. *Oh,*  
*but sir;* I say as he turns to attend to  
his section of the restaurant, *you may leave*  
*the bottle.*

## *A Model of Love*

---

Breanna Johnson

She's not the prettiest picture he's ever taken.

She has a splattering of freckles and there are some unplucked hairs between her brows. When he parts her lips he can see a tooth that's been chipped from a fall she took not too long ago. But her pallid skin provides a beautiful contrast between her scarlet hair when the flash illuminates the room. She's the best model he's ever had. She moves wherever and however he wants her to with no real communication needed just a nudge here and there. He runs a finger appreciatively down her thigh feeling the soft, cool skin there. He shivers in anticipation as his eyes find her in the frame and the flash lights her up.

"Incredible, my beautiful girl," his voice is a hoarse whisper.

He moves to part her thighs in a new angle but for the first time since before they started he meets resistance. His brows turn in and he pushes harder. The angles look harsh and too stiff.

"What's wrong with you are you trying to ruin my art?" His temper explodes as he shouts.

He's met only with silence.

"You're a wretched, ugly girl!"

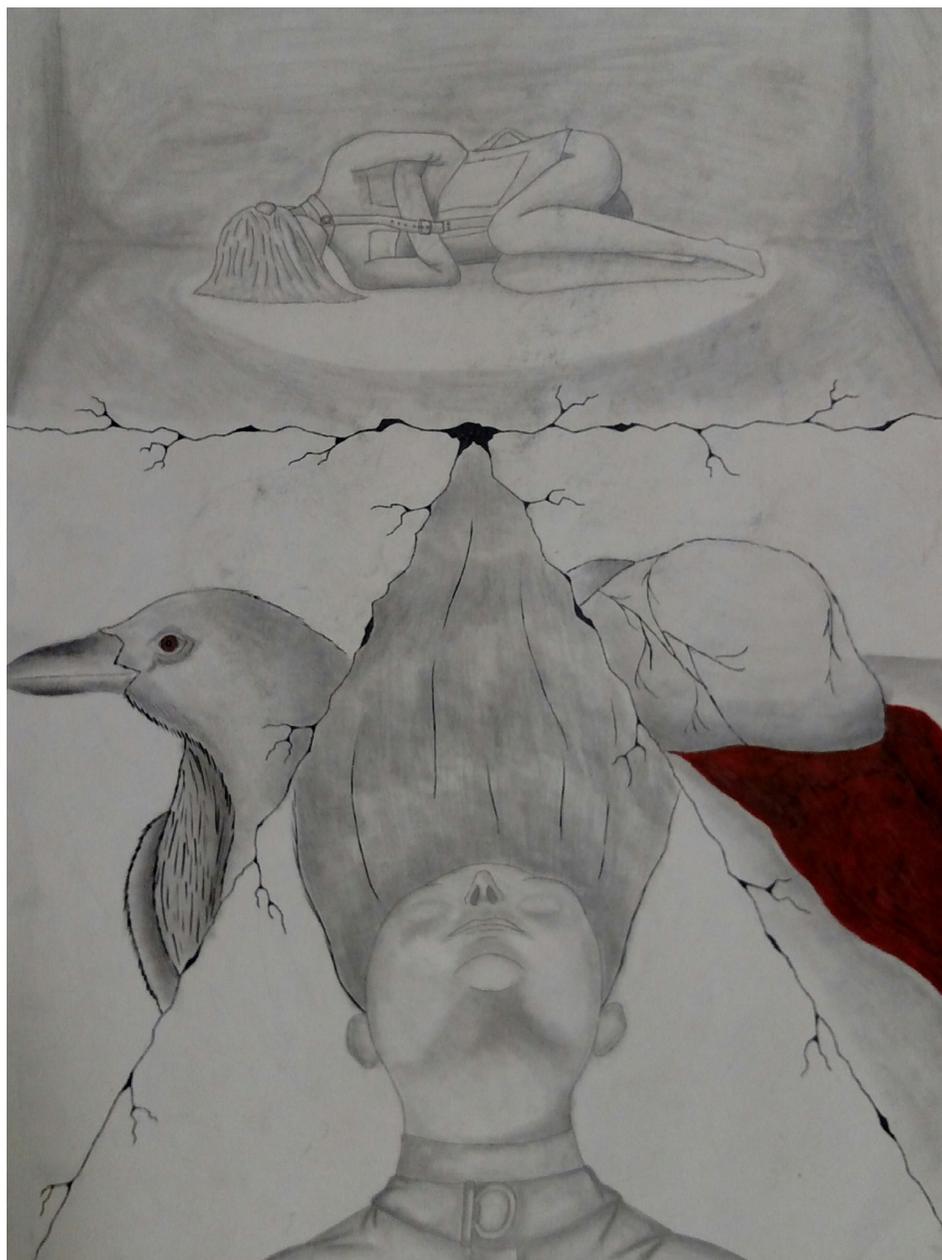
More silence.

Rigor Mortis has set in.

*A Shattered Mind*

---

Jordain Johnson



*Graphite and Pen*

*Vicious*

---

Jordain Johnson



*Acrylic*

## *Wildflowers and Granite for Flight 93*

---

Tirzah Schmuker

there is not enough time  
to bask in your voice,  
tinny and flat,  
(a recording i can't erase  
even as it transposes  
static into breath  
that had been full  
and warm and wet  
on the curve of my neck  
while i wrinkled my nose  
at the morning on your lips)  
as my knees buckle in longing  
for those fuzzy-teethed kisses  
a quarter down the quarter-mile  
backbone of Ground Zero

there is not enough closure,  
nothing but ash,  
in the collision  
of jet fuel and flesh  
(the irregular melted edges  
of a debit card  
scrape white lines  
into my fumbling fingers,  
darting glances  
at a closed casket)  
hollow condolences  
in eight percent of human  
remains recovered  
when plastic possessions  
are all that has been offered

*finding the mistake*

---

Alexis Smith

“Chris died for you”  
the yellow church sign read

that’s funny  
i didn’t think i knew a Chris

at least not one that i was close with  
let alone one that would die for me

but i will confess that i do feel  
special

Chris did something that big for me  
and i didn’t even have to ask

of course it isn’t fair  
and i should probably thank him

since it’s too late  
to shake his hand

\* \* \*

i read this poem to the church  
they told me i needed to be saved

and then they added the ‘t’

# *Hands*

---

Kaytee Walker



*Ink*

*Classic Still Life*

---

Kaytee Walker



*Graphite*

*Belize Student Trip*

---

Kevin Boluyt



*Belize Student Trip*

---

Matt Paquin



*Belize Student Trip*

---

Alex McGuire



*Belize Student Trip*

---

Tyler Schaub



## *Adopt a Road*

---

Catherine Puiasis

So says the sign.  
In my mind's eye,  
a new road winds,  
turning, twisting,  
but it has life.  
Alone it lived,  
'till it was mine.  
I treated it  
like a new kid:  
made it dinner,  
named it Eli,  
even clothed it  
in shirts, in skirts.  
but then I blink,  
Lose the image,  
avert my eyes.  
And then I think,  
'Hm. How silly!'

## *A Most Unlikely Trio*

---

Samantha Plough

Once upon a time in a land far away, there lived a lonely grammar tool, Parentheses. Parentheses was part of the AA (Afterthought Association) which mainly consisted of brackets, commas, and dashes from across the nation of Grammovia. They worked together to add afterthoughts throughout the papers of college students everywhere. The most popular (and accepted) tool was Comma, but Parentheses was up on the list of most qualified. Despite his qualifications though, Parentheses just didn't quite fit in most cases. He always seemed to throw off the aesthetic of sentences and was continually degraded by the other (more interesting) Afterthoughts.

One day, while trying to insert himself into a sentence, Parentheses had a thought (a most glorious thought). Since he continually threw off the flow of sentences inside stories and essays, he would try to integrate himself into the KWO (Key-Word Organization). He thought himself unique enough to be a part of such an elite organization, all he would have to do is convince everyone else of his merit.

On the other side of Grammovia, the KWO was having an amazing time composing sentences. Their "star players" were *Italics* and Quotation Mark. These two had an *incredible* record for being the cleanest sentence enhancers. They made sentences better and more understandable. Having such highly desired tools made the KWO one of the most well-loved groups in the nation.

With such high standards, Parentheses was worried that he wouldn't be able to hold his own against the others. As time went on, his fears became a reality. Whenever Parentheses tried to add himself to a sentence, everyone would revolt and throw him out. He just couldn't get the hang of it all, so on his eighth attempt at enhancing a sentence, *Italics* decided that enough was enough.

"Parentheses, you need to go back to the AA." *Italics* said. "There aren't enough opportunities here for you. Everyone already has a spot. I clarify and emphasize specific words in a sentence. Quotation Mark has his own duties when it comes to bringing "slang" to the table and identifying quotes. We both have already covered major titles of books, movies, and any other titles. I just don't see where you could possibly fit for an extended period. You must have other talents that can help you elsewhere."

Parentheses thought on this for a moment and said, "You are right, *Italics*. I don't belong with the KWO. Both you and Quotation Mark have been nothing but kind to me. You have shown me that even though many tools think that I am chunky, choppy, and ill-fit for sentence structure, I do have useful traits. I can do my job as an Afterthought, or I can assist Quotation Mark in the CA (Citing Assembly).

There are so many options for me in Grammovia that I cannot waste my potential on something I wasn't meant to do. Thank you."

## *Fireflies*

---

Danielle Hill

Dad walked out on us when I was born.

Mama said that bastard went for cigarettes with a suitcase and never came home. She died in the accident.

Darren—I mean, Shane, says we don't need them, we'd make it on our own.

Darren—I mean, Shane, hasn't been the same since Mama died in the accident. It's been his choice to call it an *accident*, though I know it was on purpose. Now he's trying to make up for it. He gets up early in the morning and leaves my door open so I don't get scared without him. He helps me remember my lunch. He always walks me to the bus stop. He's always home to walk me to our farmhouse. It's a big house and it's just Darr—Shane and me. At dinner, he makes sure I'm full, even if that means he doesn't eat that night. Before I was big enough, he'd either help me in the bath or we'd take a shower together in our underwear.

Sometimes he works late and I have to walk home by myself. When I have to, I look to the trees for the Protector that Mama would tell me about. The Birch. If I needed help she would help me. Shane would call her a liar or tell me not to listen to her. She only told me stories after she drank all six of the bottles.

Today, my walk home is silent. The trees around me have lost most of their leaves, so they look like white and brown, bony hands pointing me toward home. I make it there and open the backdoor with the key hidden inside the light. As soon as I open the door and put the key back, I turn on the TV and watch *Dragon Tales*. I hear my stomach growl and look at the clock. It says 5:52, Shane is usually home by now. I sigh and go to the almost-empty pantry: Mac and Cheese, some Knorr Pasta sides, and a few cans of tuna are all that's left.

I decide on Mac and Cheese. Boiling water is easy enough, it's keeping it from boiling over that I find really hard to do. And, of course, it has to happen right as Darren walks in.

"Zeke, I'm—ZEKE!" he drops the grocery bags and leaps to the stove, turning down the heat and removing the pot as it hisses like a snake is coiled on the stove. His tight shoulders turn to the sink as he drops the hot pot with a scream. If it's in pain or stress, I'm not really sure.

"*Damn it, Zeke,*" he sighs and he flips cold water on, his fingertips under it. His shoulders are like a rubber band in my rubber band gun right before I shoot it. The silence is so thick it's hard to breathe. I want to hug him, beg him to forgive me. Maybe if I do that, he'll turn back into the brother I had before his accident. His and Mama's accident. The brother who would smile when he

saw me; who used to let me ride on his shoulders; the one who pushed me on the swings out back or taught me to whistle with an acorn top.

I know I won't though.

If I tried to hug him, he'd just get more mad. If I even so much as breathed too loud, he'd probably yell at me and send me to my room without dinner. The last thing I want is for him to be mad at me.

He sighs and grabs the pan. He dumps the water, rinses and wipes the bottom of the pan and the stove off then he fills it again. He replaces it on the stove and he rubs his neck. I can't look at his face. Darren—I mean Shane, turns to me and says, "Next time, turn the heat down after the water boils. Okay?"

I nod.

He sighs again and goes to pick up the groceries, and put them on the island I sit at now. He strips the bags down and puts them in their places in the cupboard or fridge while he cooks dinner. He's a good big brother, but I wish he would smile more. He finishes making dinner and I eat it all up. After, I ask to be excused and he nods.

I head upstairs, turn on the shower and get in. When I come out, a towel just out of the dryer sits on the toilet, still nice and warm. I wrap up in it and for a breath pretend it's Darren hugging me. I tell myself real quick, *His name's not Darren anymore, Zeke. It's Shane.* It's been a while since he's done that.

I go into my room and my pjs are still warm from the dryer too. Shane, knocks on my door and asks, "Are you ready for bed?"

"Yeah," I call out softly. He comes inside, grins gently and picks up my towel. "Come here, Shorty, your hair is still wet. We don't want you getting sick, do we?" He puts the towel over me, puts his hands on either side of my head and asks, "Ready?" Before I answer, he's already shouting playfully like I'm in NASCAR as he towel-dries my hair. He then pulls the towel off and gasps, "You look...fab-u-lous!" I chuckle and push my hair down. He tucks me into bed, my lion in my hands and leans in to kiss my forehead.

"How are you, Zeke?" he asks.

"Good," I lie.

He raises an eyebrow and says, "Tell me the truth."

"Well, Darren—I mean, Shane. I...I don't like being here. I don't like having new names."

His face drops and he looks so sad. I already want to take back what I said, but I can't. He looks away from me and I see him clench his jaw, "I know, Zeke. I don't like having a new name either. But, until they forget about the accident, we have to. It's so we stay safe."

"I know but...I kind of miss Mama too."

He reaches out and rubs my shoulder, "I know. But...it's over with. It's you and me now, remember. Us against the world." He holds up a pinkie and I

take it to seal the promise. His hand moves from my shoulder and brushes my hair down again. Dar—Shane sighs again and his face gets sad, “I’m sorry about yelling at you earlier. I shouldn’t have. You just scared me is all.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologize and try to not cry.

“I’m sorry more, Zekey,” in his voice I hear that he’s sorry for a lot more than just yelling at me earlier. I hear he’s really, really sorry and has been for a long time. For a long minute, he plays as just my brother and not everything else that he’s had to be. He starts blinking really fast as tears pool in his eyes. Finally, he stands, turns off all the lights except mine. “All right, Zeke, show or story?”

“Will you...check for monsters first?”

He smiles and nods. From his palms, orbs of softly glowing yellow-white light pour into my room. They float around like flower petals. They go into my closet and glow so bright I can’t see, they go under the dresser, under my desk, down the hall and finally under my bed.

“All right, this room is monster-free tonight,” he then lays down in bed next to me, putting his arm under my head and asks, “Show or story?”

“Show,” I answer and he nods. The orbs around my room begin to change colors and glow. They swirl and twirl until they give way to characters. An unspoken story plays for me. Show-time passes and the characters get dimmer and dimmer until finally, they become fireflies that never die until sun light comes in my room. I look up at Shane and see he’s sleeping. Hard. I smile and my eyes find the light switch.

With a wink, it flips off and I’m left with my brother-pillow and fireflies.

## *Do Not Enter*

---

Danielle Hill

### *DO NOT ENTER*

It’s a sign that reads across my brother’s door.

It’s about as many words as we say to each other.

Every time I read it, I think about *O Brother Where Art Thou*,

“*Do. Not. Seek. The Treasure.*”

I want to seek my treasure.

After all, he only sits on the other side of the door.

## *The Home of a Maya*

---

Cameron Amaya

You have not seen what it can be like  
in the lost places between spring break resorts.  
Where the only thing thinner than the children  
running, playing through the trash-ridden streets,  
are the starving dogs they chase for fun.  
You have not seen the lucky ones as they stroll  
to school, their homemade bags slung over their shoulders,  
excited as our children are on Christmas morning.  
You have not seen the young boys, not even 10,  
bareback, shoeless, shoveling mud from the road after  
the last rain, holding their hands out for change as you pass.  
You have not seen the women walk down the road,  
sometimes for miles, bringing basic food and dirty water  
home to a shack with clay walls and a tin roof.  
You have not seen the working girls in broad daylight,  
surviving the way those who have nothing  
are forced to when there is nowhere left to turn.  
You have not seen the military trucks patrolling  
to keep order from the gangs and drugs.  
You have not seen the scars in the hillsides from a civil war  
brought upon them, unwanted, by us.  
You have not seen the expressions of a man  
who became a friend, as he tells a story about  
when he and his brothers slept on the roof, just in case  
the rebels came at midnight to drag them from their beds.  
But most of all, you have not seen  
the photos of the girl, now more family to me  
than some who have always shared my family's name.  
Starved, malnourished, scared,  
insects on her skin, in her hair, abandoned  
by the mother who could no longer keep her  
alive. No, you don't see her.  
You don't see them.

## *Breakfast Sestina*

---

Alexis Smith

Whenever we sat in the kitchen you called me honey,  
and I asked you if I should paint the kitchen lavender  
or pastel yellow, but you just sipped your sugared coffee  
and said “I want whatever you want,” and went back to the paper.  
I looked to the naked archway and imagined a painted tree  
with marked measurements of future children there, my mind light

with all of the possibilities. And as soon as the morning light  
broke through, you asked for your toast with honey,  
please, and read out loud an article about how a boy fell from a tree  
and how they found a brand new animal the color of lavender  
while your toast browned. On the closest piece of paper  
(this time the grocery list) you sat your coffee

cup down (spilling stains) and discussed how your coffee  
tasted burnt but how beautiful my eyes looked in the light  
and it was no big deal, but still you crumpled the paper  
in frustration but oh how I shouldn’t worry, honey,  
I would do better next time. Now when I look at the lavender  
coffee maker and the beginning brushstrokes of the tree

I am reminded of how it’s been 9 years since I started that tree  
and it’s been 13 lovely years with him, still no children, I still burn the coffee  
but instead of wrinkling paper his hands now create lavender  
bruises. I sometimes forget what it’s like to make someone’s eyes light  
up, or that some people prefer their toast without honey,  
or that none of it matters because I’m still the dog that fetches the paper

for him every morning, waving hello to the paper  
boys as they ride away free. He tells me he wants to cut down the tree  
in the front yard because it is ugly and I forget to call him honey  
when I protest. I didn't burn the coffee  
this morning, yet still he wasted it on my skin, new scars lightly  
blossoming on my collarbone. He decided he wants the kitchen lavender,

and while I doubt he even remembers that lavender  
is my favorite color, I blush all the same. I hand him the paper,  
his hands brush my hair behind my pierced ears so lightly  
that I don't believe those are the same hands that maim our tree  
later on that day. I brew a new batch of coffee  
and delicately dab my new collection of scars with honey.

I finished the painting of the tree in my coffee-stained robe,  
it was the last time he called me honey, the walls were an ill lavender,  
the paper still on the front step when he brought me to the light.

NOTE: The sestina is a structured poem consisting of six six-line stanzas and a final triplet, all stanzas having the same six words at the line-ends in six different sequences that follow a fixed pattern, and with all six words appearing in the closing three-line envoi.

## *Visit from Dad*

---

Emily Buffum

She sits still as a porcelain statue  
save for her miniature fingers that  
twirl thin tufts of golden locks.  
She'd woken *before* her alarm and  
readied herself in record time and  
now she sits

still and  
ready to spring at the rare sight of  
his golden hair tucked away from  
the skies of his eyes that watch over  
a thick tar-striped mustache seated above  
a black leather jacket stretching  
around a pot belly-ledge that hangs over  
stiff, worn, faded denim.

He will cradle her dirt-brown eyes and  
light them like beacons to  
cut through the clouds and  
slice through the fog,  
no weather can get in their way;  
this is their day!  
Still she sits.

She hears the sound of his voice and  
recalls the jokes he would tell and  
she smells that nicotine-leather as  
she imagines their hello-embrace  
while she sits

she feels the pang of each second passing.  
The stubborn hands of the clock won't sit still.  
They must not be aware; this is their day!  
They tick and they tick and they tick, and

they force her to let go of  
another one of their days and  
they leave her with just  
another one of hers.

***Dr. Gleeson:  
A Story of Creation Told in Three Parts***

---

Michael Dietz

Part One: God

There was the aorta. A throbbing hook; wet, as though it were an earth-worm writhing in the sun on the sidewalk. He looked down and could see the fluorescent bulbs reflecting on its moist surface behind his own dark silhouette which encased the two white flashes of his club-master spectacles. With every pulse his eyelids expanded and contracted slightly with the thick tube.

His left hand was suspended above the tray of instruments held by the nurse, "Dr. Gleeson," while his ring finger, banded with pale yellow as seen through the latex, twitched directly above the scalpel

with

the

pulse.

"Dr. Gleeson, the sutures you requested." The tray tapped his finger tips and the contact smeared red blood and orange iodine on the sanitized white surface where each instrument lay, neatly assembled like tally's counting backward. It had been 8 hours.

"Hmph," his obsession bumped like a vase on a shelf and teetered, rolling around in place until he switched. Dr. Gleeson palmed the suture spool and tweezers which lay like a lowercase *i* beside the scalpel and began folding over the muscles, layer by layer, tucking the scarlet serpent back to sleep. Later that night, alone at home, he stared into the storm through the large window in his study with sleeves pushed past his elbows and necktie askew. His beaded forehead glistened in firelight while he drank golden scotch from a glass filled with round ice that rattled. Lightning cracked the sky and he dropped the glass. The ice scattered the floor, melted near the fireplace, and through the water a tiny, curved image of a pair of black, leather loafers could be seen leaving the room just ahead of the closing door.

## Part Two: The Fall

The yellow cab sloshed away up the blackened street. She turned and broke the stippled puddle in front of the wide steps that led up to the entrance of her building. The hiss of the rain in the black, outside the yellow aura of the streetlamp, drowned the muffled clunking of her purse as she ruffled for her key. She huffed. Her dangled purse swayed the yellow sundress at her knees when she buzzed number six, but when the other buzz replied and she gripped the knob, the white came and faded with the fumes. Her eyes rolled back with her body and she saw just inside the yellow light a few glistening black leaves of the large oak she loved so much waving goodbye. Her purse fell and a tube of lipstick chased her heels down the steps as they were drug away and swallowed by darkness.

\* \* \*

He flicked the clear liquid that hung in the bag. Water dripped down his temple when he adjusted the head-mirror banded around his forehead, reflecting the light to center stage: opened beneath him on a crude gurney in an empty warehouse lay a sleeping woman in a yellow sundress, neck cocked to the right, pulsing jugular exposed. The thin, pink line pulsed in a nest of red sinew until he brought down the silver scalpel and punctured. It spat diagonally across his clinched, white teeth and club-masters, and he salivated at the taste of the iron.

### Part Three: Satan

The synchronized flick of the quintupled switches ignited the fluorescence in quick succession across the ceiling, illuminating a stainless steel room with an electric hum. The door shut with two echoed clicks. A white coat swayed at his knees while black leather loafers ticked the tile and carried him near the wall of square refrigerators to

WHITMAN, EVE

Cold cascaded to the floor when he pulled out the steel slab. The wheels roared loudly from the silent, black hole in the wall that spewed the shadows on the white sheet which made distinct the features of the body that lay beneath it. His manicured fingers grasped the top corners, peeled back, and revealed the post-prepped torso of a young woman with raccooned eyes, purple lips, and a throat filleted with surgical precision. The man stood tall and gazed down his nose through club-master spectacles. He bent at the hips and inhaled deeply the decomposition. He opened his mouth. His hot breath fell like a fog down the cold hills of her grey face. He licked her left cheek and whispered with a metallic hiss into her dead ear.

“Sslut,”

“Dr. Gleeson to post-op, room 402,”

His eyes broke their fix and flit to the burlap-covered, wooden intercom.

“Dr. Gleeson, post-op, room 402 please.”

He stood straight, sucked his teeth, and covered the body. He rolled it back into the makeshift mausoleum, adjusted the collar of his white coat, and clicked out of the silver room into the yellow day.

# *Red Light-Green Light*

Tirzah Schmuker

## CHARACTERS

The Father     *In his thirties*  
The Mother     *In her thirties*  
The Daughter   *In her teens*

## SETTING

*A moving vehicle, on the way to church. A six-seater truck and mini-van respectively. Both should be lightly cluttered, fast-food bags and tools.*

*While the Mother should be staring straight ahead out the windshield, the Father should be looking at his passenger. This scene should be enacted in a series of tableaux, leaving characters frozen as the Daughter moves from automobile to automobile. Mother should have hands at ten and two. Father should be gesticulating wildly.*

FATHER: It's not that she has no concept of money. It's that it doesn't matter how much we outspend our budget, if SHE wants something. But if I want to get, oh, a new hammock or something, suddenly it's "do we have money for that?"

DAUGHTER (*picking at the threads of the fraying seatbelt*): Mmm.

FATHER: Or, or, if she isn't there we can't go to the movies or take a TRIP TO FLORIDA! But if I'M at work, then it must be time to go mini-golfing.

DAUGHTER: I'm sorry. (*pause*) I wish you could've been with us at *Disney*.

*(LIGHTS GO DOWN ON TRUCK AND RISE ON MINIVAN)*

MOTHER: I wish he wasn't so particular. If I get ONE detail wrong in my story, then the whole thing is wrong and he has to—to SWEEP IN and retell the entire thing. Just because I don't say something word for word doesn't mean the gist isn't the same. For once, I would like to be able to tell an entire story without someone jumping in with contradictions.

DAUGHTER (*staring out the passenger-side window*): Mmm.

MOTHER: It makes me feel invalidated. And you kids don't help. You do the same thing, like you're ganging up on me.

DAUGHTER: I'm sorry. (*pause*) I'll try to be better.

*(LIGHTS GO DOWN ON MINIVAN AND RISE ON TRUCK)*

FATHER: And she's buying another band-aid solution, like if she could just buy the right thing she could be content. Like the kids are actually going to USE those oils.

DAUGHTER: I know. I'M not planning to.

FATHER: Exactly! Meanwhile, another five-hundred bucks goes down the drain, and I might have to pick up a second job again.

DAUGHTER: You've had two jobs? I don't remember that.

FATHER: I've had three! I wish she could be content. I wish she could be happy. I wish we were enough. (*pause*) I'm sorry. I said I wasn't going to talk about it.

DAUGHTER: It's okay, Daddy. You need to vent. I get it.

*(LIGHTS GO DOWN ON TRUCK AND RISE ON MINIVAN)*

MOTHER: And he knows why I am buying those oils! I hate the medicines that you kids are on. The side-effects have turned your brother into a zombie. I mean, hasn't he been a lot more lively and active since we lowered the dose?

DAUGHTER: Definitely. He's having his bizarre hyperactive moments again. I actually missed them.

MOTHER: Exactly! And I want all of you to be drug free. Becoming a nurse has just made me more certain that I don't like pills at all. Wouldn't more natural solutions be better?

DAUGHTER: If they even work. (*Mother glances sharply at Daughter*) What?! I doubt 'Essential Oils' can cure asthma, Mom.

MOTHER: No, but they can help with the side-effects of ADD, the restlessness, which your sister could really use.

DAUGHTER: If you say so.

MOTHER: I do. (*pause*) Anyway, I'm sorry you had to see your Dad and I...

DAUGHTER: Have a loud discussion?

MOTHER: ...last night.

DAUGHTER: It's okay. It's better to know that couples fight than to go into a relationship with unrealistic expectations.

*(LIGHTS GO DOWN ON MINIVAN AND RISE ON TRUCK)*

FATHER: She gets so unreasonable about my involvement with our old church. And about my involvement with the new one.

DAUGHTER: I know she wanted you to cut back on the time you spend on the drums.

FATHER: It's more than that. It's "Why are you still supporting the old church?" "Why not stop playing for *Covenant Life* and play for *Harvest* instead?" "Why

don't you become a small-group leader?" "Why don't you join a small group?" "Why don't you fill up your life with other stuff and give up your commitments elsewhere?"

DAUGHTER: I don't see anything wrong with playing for *Covenant Life*. But why don't you want to support *Harvest*?

FATHER: It's not that I don't want to support *Harvest*. It's that she's constantly pushing for more involvement for me without examining her own. She isn't involved in any aspect of *Harvest* ministry yet. And while she technically signs up for small groups, she doesn't actually ATTEND any of them because she has "a lot on her plate." And when she was a small-group leader for the high school ministry, she was late a lot, disliked going there, didn't do extra things with her groups, and left as soon as she could. I mean, what impression on her small group was she trying to leave, exactly?

DAUGHTER: Beth always made time for us and had little get togethers to celebrate the holidays. She was my favorite small-group leader because of that.

FATHER: And if your mom had put in more of an effort, she could have given them a similar experience. As it is, right now, I'm more involved than she is, so I don't think she has the right to complain.

(LIGHTS GO DOWN ON TRUCK AND RISE ON MINIVAN)

MOTHER: Your dad is gone too often playing the drums. I wish he'd cut back.

DAUGHTER: I don't think he's gone that often. And it's one of the few things that actually makes him happy in his life.

MOTHER: But he's in three bands! That means he can be gone anytime from three to six nights a week. That's a lot of time to be spending away from the family. Especially since things are falling apart at school and at home—Jonah's failing another semester at school! Being more hands off isn't going to help. Both of us need to be MORE involved. Not less.

DAUGHTER: I honestly don't think having you two home more often will change anything. And besides, two out of the three bands are Christian.

MOTHER: But not for our church! Shouldn't he be devoting his time to our actual church community if he's going to be gone so often? So we can actually see him perform on Sundays?

(LIGHTS GO DOWN ON MINIVAN AND RISE ON TRUCK)

FATHER: It's just, she asks me for help with these things.

DAUGHTER: What?

FATHER: She asks me to point out when she's overreacting, to watch her

spending, to try to push her to be involved, to curb some of her impulses. She ASKS me! Then she gets so angry when I try to talk about it AT ALL.

DAUGHTER: Yeah.

FATHER: She's so over defensive. And she hides so much from me. Fast-food wrappers in the trash can and *Starbucks* charges on her credit card; candy bars pushed to the back of the fridge.

DAUGHTER: Really?

FATHER (*staring out driver's side window*): It's like she thinks I'm going to hurt her. She makes me feel like a monster. Does she even trust me? (*pause*) I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to hear all of this.

DAUGHTER: It's okay. It makes me feel special—trusted. Like a grown-up.

FATHER: You shouldn't have to.

DAUGHTER: (*pause*) Dad, the light is green.

(*LIGHTS GO DOWN ON TRUCK AND RISE ON MINIVAN*)

MOTHER (*swipes at eyes*): It's just, I know he doesn't mean it the way he says it. It's his tone. The way he says things. He just sounds so judgmental, so harsh. And it h-urts.

DAUGHTER: Yeah.

MOTHER: I know he has Asperger's. I know people are difficult for him. I know he doesn't hear the way he says things. I know. It's just—I don't know if I can deal with this anymore. I'm so tired. I wish he could just leave things alone.

DAUGHTER: Don't you trust him?

MOTHER: I-I don't know. (*pause*) Can we drop this?

DAUGHTER: (*pause*) You can let me out here.

(*LIGHTS GO DOWN ON STAGE*)

# *Winging Home*

---

Jessica Tanis



*Mitten Weather*

---

Jessica Tanis



*Zen*

---

Michael Dietz



*Red Trees*

---

Michael Dietz



## *The Flood*

---

Grace Young

If I could just stop trying to save you  
I could have written a book by now.

Fantasies of maidens with snake skin scars  
healed wounds from the battle  
this story doesn't end.

The noose forgets how to hold her  
her sword rusts in the kitchen drawer.  
But I remember this will only ever be a fantasy.  
This is why I will write you a thousand letters,  
because it means I am not writing your eulogy.

I will sing you to sleep  
before my tongue becomes a tombstone  
daisies sprouting from my lungs.

I would cry for you  
pour my soul into yours  
if it means my salt water  
will quench your drought.

I would shed my skin  
wrap it around you  
so you could dissect me  
before you could ever do it to yourself.

I will baptize you in candlelight  
give you a thousand silk sorries.  
Promise the sky is not weeping  
when the walls are peeling from their studs  
and your bed is floating in the flood.

I will comfort you  
tell you it's a leaky bathtub  
when you already know it's a hurricane.

I guess,  
I could have written a book by now,  
but what would be the point?

## *Little Girl in Earth*

James Huth

as strong as Indian porcelain  
you are, little girl, covered in warmth  
of earth and forlorn hearts, when

Humbled, divine grace blesses and  
brushes over your forehead  
Your eyes burned

Blue,  
and skin stained

Ash  
in the Bhopal disaster  
of 1984

Life left your body,  
almost as quickly as the gas  
took over; your lungs swollen,  
full of toxic fumes.

all this to become (what could have  
become of you) the picture-perfect  
Porcelain poster-child  
(buried in) to feed the marches thereafter  
of the world's worst industrial  
Disaster.



## *An Old House by the Lake*

---

Tyler Wehner

It's a mean world outside, where you and I don't dare go  
into a world of pain and misery. A world where men  
spit on their enemy's graves.

You can't see the guns to their heads, or the slits on their  
wrists. The man who's about to dive onto solid cement.

These are just people who long for a kiss on the  
lips. Where children cry, and are left in the dust,  
as if they dig their own hole to be thrown in.

The world is like an old house by the lake: the memories swim  
through the calm water and through the crashing waves  
where everything is moving; in a world where you just stand still,  
but like a leaf on a tree, you can keep hanging on  
even when you know what the wind has planned.

## *Alan Kurdi*

---

Emily Buffum

Stand up for what is right  
they say, but do they know  
what comes next?

For you, dearest Alan, a wave came  
over your tiny frame (still adorned with baby pudg)  
and toppled you.

Now you lie face-down in rocky sand  
head turned to one side  
fully clothed

as if you collapsed,  
tuckered out from a long day  
at the beach.



Your clothes soak up ocean  
with each passing wave  
your lungs must have, too.

How else could foamy water flow  
all the way to your mouth  
and not wake you?

Your parents did save you  
from the bombs and the bullets  
from the refugee camp

but not from the sea  
that plucked you from your escape  
boat—a risk worth taking.

You're lucky, dear Alan, to have a name—  
the only one of 55,000 dead Syrian children  
immortalized in peaceful slumber.

## *humanity washed ashore*

---

Cameron Amaya

face down, as if giving  
the earth one last kiss goodnight.  
does your Mother's body swirl  
within the sea,  
still clutching her other Son?  
will tears stain the sand  
with your Father's wailing roar  
when he finds you motionless?  
do you curse us,  
for allowing you to die  
because your family  
prayed to our God  
by a different name?  
did you cry out to  
a world that turned its back,  
before being stifled, silenced  
by saltwater?

## *Calico Critters*

---

Anna Dunnigan

I pull at my shirt and pack it full with bunnies and chairs and babies and teeny tiny pieces of food and carry them to Abbey's dollhouse. Abbey's not my favorite cousin, but she has the best toys so we always play in her basement. Sometimes I just play by myself though because she gets sick every other day. She's pretty gross.

Today we're playing the game *Family*. I got the bunnies because they're prettiest and softest and I'm oldest. Abbey's stuck with the old panda bears. We chose what parts of the house we get to play in fair and square. Rock paper scissors. Rock beats scissors and Abbey always picks scissors. She's pretty dumb. I get to play with my bunnies and babies in the dollhouse's kitchen, big bedroom, and living room. She got the attic, bathroom, and small bedroom. Fair and square.

The bedroom gets set up first. The beds are pushed against the wall just like my house and I put blankets and pillows on them. The tables get lamps and books and everything is pink to match the walls. It's just like a picture from one of my grandma's boring magazines that she gets so she will look fancy. Next the kitchen. Everything has to be blue, obviously. I make sure it is all neat and put away and that all of the food is out for when the bunnies get hungry. Time for the living room. I make sure all of the family is in there sitting around the TV just like mine does. Perfect.

Then I look over at Abbey's bathroom and attic and nothing is organized and the pandas look out of place and none of the furniture matches the walls. She is pretty stupid if she thinks that looks good. I look at her face and see her nose leaking and her eyes get crinkled because she is smiling. She loves her dumb half, even though it makes no sense. I look back and mine and it looks different, like I tried really hard to make it nice. Abbey doesn't have to do that. She just puts whatever she wants wherever and people think it's adorable. I don't get called adorable anymore.

I don't want to play anymore so I give her my bunnies and let her have the whole house. I don't like to play games I'm not good at so I pick up a coloring book. I'm very good at coloring. Way better than dumb, gross Abbey.

## *Blueberries or Creamsicles*

---

Anna Dunnigan

The old lady store is empty except for me and dad. We are picking out paints for the dollhouse, even though it's only half done. He decided letting me show him how good of an artist I was would work better than handing him packets of 46C's. The aisle we are in has every shade of every color ever imagined and I don't know where to start.

"How about this one?" He points to a color that looks like celery.

"No. I want my house to be sweet like cotton candy," and I grab a light pink tube.

"So like this?" He hands me a grape soda.

"Exactly!" Together we grab all of the mints and chocolates and bubblegums and marshmallows and fill our blue basket that he let me carry. "I want the bedroom to be the same color as my house's bedroom." Dad nods and reaches for an orange creamsicle. "No, not the bedroom in your house. The bedroom in *my* house."

His hand dropped and he looked like he shrunk three inches. "What color is that?"

"Blueberry!" I smile at him but he must not see it because he looks angry. He throws a tube of paint that is more purple than blue in the basket but I don't tell him that's wrong, and then he takes the basket out of my hands and walks me to the front so we can pay. He must really hate the color blue is all I think on the silent ride home.

## *Love-Handles*

---

Alexis Smith

My body had always been a quiet one until one day I woke up and there they were, rolled beneath my ribs, formed to my sides. I felt them before I saw them, my hands instinctively kneading the skin that now felt like dough. It was much more flesh than I was used to. Mom never warned me about this.

I peeled back the sheets and inspected them in mom's standing mirror. I probed them from different angles: side-to-side, front-to-back, this way and that way. I smacked, they jiggled and wiggled like a woman would. I talked and they talked back, loud and proud. Loud enough to make my brothers blush. Loud enough to make my father look away. I silenced them with a t-shirt.

"Mom I woke up and I was fat," I told her over orange juice and scrambled eggs. I wouldn't cry. She stared at me, I stared at the blurred edges of my plate. Before the tears spilled I stood up and offered the evidence, hands at my sides.

"See? I don't want them, I just woke up and they were there," I trembled because Mom hates fat and I hate it now too.

"Lexi-Lou, those aren't fat, those are your love-handles, they're your curves, your hips, part of what makes you a woman." I really started to cry then, hoping all my tears would suck my love-handles dry so I could be quiet again.

"Stop crying and be thankful, your Momma never had curves," she said. "Trust me, all the boys are going to want to date you," she said.

"Every girl in school will be jealous," she said.

But the girls just looked at me funny and the boys didn't like me back and I wasn't thankful. I did stop crying, though.

## *When You Accept Yourself*

---

Sarah Olivas

when you accept  
the nature of yourself  
you can stop  
hanging  
your bloody body  
stripped of flesh  
out towards others  
with expectations  
to be lovingly caressed.  
you can remove  
your hand from the red  
burner that has already taken  
so much of your flesh  
that you are mostly left  
with scar tissue  
which you have  
learned to accept  
as normal,  
in the same way  
you have learned  
to accept  
the decomposition  
of aging friends  
who also drag  
their bleeding bodies  
into bed each night  
where they must  
stitch themselves together  
with hardened hands,  
as normal.

## *Spooky*

---

Gage Williams

The cool autumn breeze rustles the vibrantly colored leaves outside, creating the sound which ushers in a dull monochromatic morning light through the bedroom window. It is a 10am light, a Saturday light. As the sun crosses the sky above the clouds, the dim grey spot-light moves across the room, revealing evidence of a crime.

Exhibit A: Clothes all over the floor. Not incriminating in itself, but certainly supporting evidence of a larger crime that had taken place. Socks are strewn across the room, shirts and towels draped over office chairs and telescopes, and balled up underwear lying in... disturbing and confusing places.

Exhibit B: The surfaces that were supposed to be designated to some kind of productive activity, are all in disarray. A dusty globe and a tambourine crowd together on a nightstand. Empty glasses cases (the contents of which had been lost or broken long ago) and dental molds are scattered across the top of the dresser. The alarm clock, which should be on one of the two surfaces mentioned prior, is actually sitting inside of a dresser drawer - as much as it can, anyway. The cheap plastic shelf in the corner of the room is bending dangerously underneath the weight of law and Spanish textbooks that had not been moved since the day the school library had gave them away for free, and they were brought home with the best of intentions. The desk, however, is the most atrocious. Resting on top of it is a precariously balanced Nintendo 64 and a 10 inch screen TV, and below those are layers upon layers of credit card advertisements, union letters, and extremely important government documents.

Exhibit C: The bed. The comforters and sheets, twisted and knotted, are a clear sign of a struggle. In fact, the regular non-fitted sheet is missing entirely. The bed itself is entangled in its own shroud of mystery, the lead suspect in the case of "what is making this seemingly scentless smell that seems to repel all human lifeforms?"

Most damning of all is the suspect lying in the carnage and foulness of the bed. The crime - countless murders. The victims - minutes, hours, and days. Draped across the bed, limbs twisted and pinned beneath him, he groans and contorts his face as the spotlight forces its way into his eyelids. After pretending to be asleep for an immeasurable amount of time, and failing to fool even himself, he reluctantly opens his eyes to the crime scene he knows is waiting for him. It had been there for months. Everything was everywhere, and the room seems to be shrinking, increasing the pressure of the foul air inside of it.

His arm flops into a half open dresser drawer and pulls out the alarm clock for him to squint at. In a dull, red light, he looks at the names of his next

victims without remorse, then back at the rising tide of miscellaneous objects and tasks that seem to unfairly accumulate just because a person exists. Nobody signed up for this, yet here he was. The burden of being alive is being rightfully expected to do things.

“I’ll do it tomorrow.”

And he didn’t.

*in this moment*

---

Sarah Olivas

his brown eyes meet mine  
and a wildfire is born  
beneath my belly –  
it spreads through my body  
like the blood in my veins  
and the heart that beats  
beneath my breast  
betrays me  
my reason and leaves  
in its place pure passion.

it is but a moment  
in which time has ceased  
to proceed –  
my brown eyes fixed in place  
widen with excitement  
as my every thought is seized  
by the desire to run  
my fingers down the length  
of his face - to draw his body  
to mine in one boundless embrace

but before my passion  
possesses my acting body  
or my eyes can even blink,  
the reality of this for-  
bidden  
moment forces me  
to turn my gaze away.

## *Utopia*

---

Eric Emmons

Bright, warm, and soothing. The air felt fresh, and swept in and out of my lungs. I sat on the porch watching my kids play in the backyard. My two girls, Anna and Bella, played in the sprinkler with their friends whose names escaped me once again. I smiled as my wife walked past me down the white, wooden stairs and into the backyard. I told myself she looked beautiful, her alluring smile captivated me every time I saw it. Her eyes were also something of legend, enchanting my soul. I hoped to be enchanted again but she didn't make eye contact with me. She was too busy watching the kids. That of course is what I always would say.

It was almost noon, and it was time for work. At least I didn't have to work early in the morning like the rest of the world, cursed with their minute, disappointed, dull lives, like zombies walking with their heads down, never climbing the ladder of success, endlessly stuck at the bottom. I stood up and let the beautiful wooden rocking chair swing as I stretched my body preparing for another grueling day at work.

"Have a good day, Daddy is heading to work," I yelled to my kids and wife. They played tag around the yard. The sound of the sprinklers and their screams drowned out my call. I turned around and headed through the door into our house. It was a big house with three, nice, wooden floors and white and light-blue walls. I walked into the kitchen and opened the large, white, fridge and looked inside for something to drink before work. I moved aside the kids' pop and reached into the back of the fridge and found some wine. I pulled it out, grabbed a glass, and poured it. I looked across the kitchen into the living room where the large, sixty-something inch television was still on, playing that dumb action movie with big explosions, and car crashes like it always did. But I didn't mind, I typically didn't care what was on the television as long as I got to watch my sports on Sunday.

I checked my watch and noticed I was running late. I took one last swig of my drink and set it down. I ran to the door, grabbed my jacket, and headed out the door. I walked out the large, white door and was stunned once again by how bright it was. My eyes always hated the light, such an irritating thing, such an irritating feeling. I walked down the driveway careful to avoid the sprinklers, they rotated round and round, like life, round and round. I did admire what they did to the grass though. The lush green grass in my yard was the envy of the neighborhood. At least I thought so. My neighbor Jack was always jealous of my lawn. I could always see it in his eyes when he would mow his lawn. Jack was a nice guy though, his kids were best friends with my girls and he always invited them over

for lunch and dinner.

I got to my vehicle and stopped to admire it, as I did every day. A beautiful Mercedes-Benz with a pure white paint job and one big, black stripe running down the center. Of course, the downside of having a white car is the fact that you have to wash it every day. It was frustrating how much work had to be put in to enjoy it, but it was worth it. It was also very new, so it still looked gorgeous. I got in and turned it on, the radio and air conditioning immediately kicked in, and the motor purred. I backed out of the driveway and headed down our beautiful street. All the giant, eccentric houses lined the way. I waved to some neighbors as I passed them.

I arrived to work just on time. Because I arrived a bit later than normal, my usual parking spot was taken by some shmuck in a truck. I looked up at the big dark grey building. The shadow it cast seemed to sweep across the city. I worked as an executive at Tochter and Unfall Industries. The owners, Tod Tochter and Josh Unfall, both were successful businessmen who partnered together to create an empire. The billion-dollar company had investments all over the world and I was in charge of overseeing the three-hundred plus employees. I walked in and past the front desk.

“How are you doing today, Sir?” the secretary asked while I walked towards the elevator.

“I’m fine, thanks Linda... oops I mean Lyssa,” I corrected myself because I was bad at remembering names.

I walked down the beautiful hallway and headed up the elevator to the 13th floor where I worked. I was alone and the elevator music began to sink into my head. The typical jingle with a typical rhythm, predictable but that was the way I liked it. It seemed like the second I got into the elevator I was at my destination. I stepped out and headed to where I worked, the far end of the building in a nice big office.

It was a bland office with white, pasty walls. It was a nice little room though, a couch in the corner, an ivory coffee table, and my desk. The walls were lined with my accomplishments. There was a picture with me and the senator, a picture of me and a few of my friends when we won the local golf tournament, and a few newspaper clippings of me from different local newspapers throughout the years. I’d accomplished a lot, and people were finally starting to give me the credit I deserved. After all I did spend a lot of money to go to the most prestigious business school in the world, and, on top of that, I put hundreds of hours into community work. If there is anyone who deserves a raise it is me, not that I should complain. I make three figures, have a nice car, a giant house, some of the best wine money can buy, and truly one of the most beautiful watches ever put into production. Life is good.

As soon as I sat down at my chair in my office there was a knock. I

stood back up and opened the door. I was surprised to see Tod Tochter.

“Hello Sir, nice to see you!”

“How are ya doing?” He replied in his soft, kind voice, although something seemed off.

He was a well-spoken man and he wore a beautiful dark suit, one that implied money and power, a beautiful suit, one I would love to attain.

“I’m doing well sir, how about you?”

“Very fine indeed, but I have something to talk to you about.”

“Ok, well, I’m all ears.”

His face looked a little grim, and for the first time I realized maybe this was not good news.

“Well... I was looking into our financial files, and to cut straight to the point... we found what you have been doing.”

In shock I took off my glasses and set them down. I felt the room warm up. I felt my blood boil. How dare they accuse me of such a thing, I have been nothing but a blessing to this company. They were lucky to have me. I heard something like a tiny scream, but I couldn’t quite tell what it was. It echoed in my head like a bell in a church, repeating its obnoxious noise over and over. I slammed my fist on the table.

“You think with a narrow mind Tod, you don’t appreciate me near enough!” I stood up.

He looked at me with a blank expression “You don’t see it do you? You’re blinded by who you think you are, and that’s battling with who you really are! I’m sorry about what happened, but that doesn’t change who you should be here at work.”

I didn’t want to hear anymore from him. I walked over to the door and looked in the Tod’s eyes for the last time. The man always bugged me, his crazy ideas and controlling behavior. Something about him seemed slimy, and I could never put my figure on it until now.

I stepped out the door and walked down the hallway, it seemed to spiral and spin, like a top, not quite with precision but still spin. I saw all the faces peering out of cubicles at me. They probably wanted to get a glimpse of me. They do that now and again.

I got into the dark elevator and it descended downward, I felt like a creature being descended to my hell. I got down to the main lobby and my head was spinning. I ran past the secretary Linda, she looked confused. I finally saw my car, the big black stripe permeating the surroundings. I got in and drove home as fast as I could. I needed to be able to breathe and for some reason I couldn’t.

I flew into the neighborhood, passing the stupid, little children who were out playing. I could see Jack still out admiring my lawn. I swung into the driveway and ran into the house. I walked through the living room and I heard it again, that tiny scream. It echoed through my mind. I passed the table which

still held the contents of the day, a beer, and some chips. I finally got to the porch. I needed to see my wife and kids. I needed some peace.

I stepped onto the hard wooden floor of the porch and looked out. The sprinkler in the neighbor's yard still spun around, and my two girls and my wife still played in the sprinklers with their neighbor friends.

"Honey can you come here?" I shouted.

My wife looked at me. She looked stunned to see me back from work so early. She turned around and kept playing with our kids. She ignored me. Jack walked out to his porch and called to my family, they got up from the lawn and headed into his house. Tears started to run from my eyes, I was hoping they would wash the day away but instead they kept me feeling hollow.

I ran inside as anger surged through me. I kicked my foot through the dark blue wall next to our kitchen. I walked through the kitchen and back into the living room and slumped onto the couch. There was a beer can lying on the floor next to the couch, I kicked that too. It went rolling toward the TV.

The TV played the stupid new stories that it always plays, like it's on repeat, nothing ever new. I listened to the obnoxious noise of the anchor man reading the news: "A mom and her two daughters were killed in a tragic accident today."

I felt the tears swell in my eyes again. I clicked pause. The screen flashed a pop up asked if I wanted to delete my recording. I never deleted recordings. I sat there in the silence, waiting for my family to come back inside from playing. They would come in soon, they had too. I heard that scream once again inside my head, the scream someone made before they died... echoing like an obnoxious bell ringing over and over in my head. Oh, how I hate this hell I call utopia.

## *There's a Story Here*

---

Sarah Olivas

somewhere lost in flowing  
strands of greenery,  
of a girl who lost  
her virginity  
by force. Forever  
now a blue  
ribbon girl of hurt,  
whose garden  
can only birth blood-  
stained buds  
that refuse to bloom,  
no matter how many  
raw fruits she consumes -  
mangos, raspberries, red  
cherries - She will never carry  
a child in her womb.  
Her garden, too marred  
by the talons of a predator  
who dug too deep -  
She paints this secret  
she will not keep.  
Her unbearable  
blue ribbon  
will never be his  
symbol of success -  
Her red apple  
lips are not his  
conquest.

*(Inspired by Maria Tomasula's painting, "Please Don't Go")*

## *An Old Photograph*

---

James Huth

An old photograph,  
of your mother,  
sowing her wild oats,  
that she keeps in a box  
under her bed where she sleeps,  
dreaming of better days  
where the sky didn't match her mood;

Grey.

Hair,  
beaten and burned,  
ripe with old age,  
cut and torn,  
tugged, and tossed away;

Grey.

Cold pocket change,  
metal you use to keep  
breathing,  
not by inhalation,  
but by economisation;

Grey.

Eyes,  
hidden behind fluid emotion  
and in time, film,  
but not of cinema like,  
for they are open and wide,  
but no old memory,  
or being,  
or coin,  
shines through.

## *The Impact of Decisions*

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Nicole Spence

To whom it may concern: I have a seventh grade education. As a child I had a very hard life and became homeless at fourteen years old because of family problems. I did not want to quit school but kids were beating me up every day for over 2 years. Police were called many times. I was a mathematical wizard and was studying pre-algebra when I left school. I am writing to remind you that the impact of your decisions may affect the future for you.

Being homeless was a very difficult position to be in during life. I didn't like it. It was hard to stay out of trouble while others were trying to take advantage of me. Eating out of the garbage was not fun, and neither was sleeping in abandoned houses. While there were not many plus aspects of being homeless; there were a few. I didn't have to pay rent, go to work, or worry about what others thought of me. My friends were very giving and understanding because they were also in poverty. The downside of being homeless is that I was constantly worried when I fell to sleep; I could not get a good night's rest, and it was cold in the winter time. Sometimes I slept in unlocked churches at night because I was afraid. Society was cruel.

I was looked down upon, as if my existence was a terrible thing. When people noticed me walking they cringed and yelled obscenities at me. The dirt on my face prevented them from knowing my age. I ate from garbage cans, drank from fountains, and found a way to get small bits of money collecting tin cans. It was enough to purchase a can of beans and loaf of bread. At the age of sixteen; I forged a work permit to land a job at a local hamburger stand. Later, I lied and said that I was emancipated to get more hours at work. I decided that I would find some way to live somewhere, so that I did not have to wrap myself in insulation and stay in abandoned houses. A coworker offered me a bedroom in her place for one hundred and fifty dollars rent each month. I went to stay with her and decided that I never wanted to live on the streets again. It was the best decision I'd ever made in my lifetime, and to this day I have never looked back. I have always thanked God for the roof over my head, and have never regretted bettering my life.

After I turned twenty years old I decided to pursue my General Education Diploma, and went on to my Certified Nurse's Aide, then completed my Commercial Driver's License. These career decisions were difficult to make because I did not have an education. I was unable to understand the full implications of my dissatisfaction. The jobs that I'd held required me to be available all of the time, with no benefits, low pay, and inability to work at a second job for additional income.

I took a job as a truck driver because my mother had cancer. I didn't want her to lose the house or the car. I sent her everything I earned and sometimes I had to eat out of a suitcase because I did not have money to go out, but I was used to the hardships. When my mother became well again; I returned to care work. After I accepted the position, my clients began to abuse me physically. The laws did not protect me because there were no consequences. I wanted out badly. Later, I tried to become a school bus driver and found that the pay was terrible. I'd been thinking about applying to the teaching program, but avoided college because of the cost. I realized eventually that I had to choose education. After twenty years in the workforce; I realized that I would go back to school because I believed that I deserved more. I knew that education would be the key to freeing myself from poverty. I was afraid that my seventh grade education would not be enough.

When I enrolled into college, it was very difficult. It took me three months just to understand how to get enrolled. The management at the college were unknowingly unhelpful at informing people about what they needed to do. I was on the phone every day. Sometimes I just needed to sort different information about the application process. I felt very confused and wanted to give up. When I arrived for the initial testing I was afraid of failure. My stomach hurt and I could barely take my tests. I discovered then, that I had an eighty- eight percent reading level. It seems silly, but I felt better.

The first day I walked into college I had tears in my eyes because I felt so passionate. "I'm here! I'm here!" I wanted to shout. Finally, at last after all of the hardships I felt that I had already made it. As I walked down the hallway I wiped my eyes and nose on my sleeve and continued to class. I didn't care if anyone saw me. I knew that everything I accomplished would be a single accomplishment and would celebrate each grade.

The first month of college was difficult because I had many family problems. Everyone was fighting and I had to move out of my home. I could barely get my work done, and I knew that I had to raise my grade. The next point I want to make, is that you cannot let other people define who you are, by their drama. People will try to ruin you simply by their words and actions, because they are jealous of you. Hard work and persistence is what will eventually make you a place in life just like it did for me.

The impact of your decisions can stay with you for life. I tried to build from the bottom and work up. I really believed that if I pleased my employer I would get a raise and eventually become management. I learned in that twenty-years; there are no guarantees in life. You either get a break or you do not. You cannot put faith in what other people say. There are many people in life that will give you their opinion on your situation. Many of those people are biased and only out for their own best interests. Sometimes to use you, or to get something from you. No one has to live with life's decisions except for you. You can

change your mind. You can better your life, or you can be satisfied being a home-maker, or relying on other people for your own happiness. However, I prefer to be in the driver's seat.

*Environmental Pervert: a Graphic Piece on  
What We Do*

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Robert Zavitz

I'm a thief, a rapist, and a murderer. You give me the world to take care of, and I take it all for my own. I take it, I rape it-- I force it to give into me, to give me what I want, and I shove it away from me when it doesn't give me exactly what I want anymore. It's all for my own gain. I market the fruits of its own labour and take all of the profits as my own. I use them to boost me forward as it declines into decay, into hopelessness, into permanent death.

It's not just my world, either, else this could be "justified" in the twisted, sick mind of an environmental pervert-- that's what most people are who have some idea of what they're doing and still do it to Your creation.

And I steal from our children, from our friends' children, from our families' future that at this rate will never be. I am killing them before they are even born. My hands wring their necks as my hands pluck from the Earth all of its life. I slaughter them with every slash of the angered teeth of my chainsaw. I dig into their hope and steal it as my shovels and machines rip open the earth and leave it a waste. I starve them of advancement, of prosperity, as I waste the meaty bones of my plastics, metals, papers, water, and more. They cannot feast on the prosperity we today have. They cannot feast at all as the nutrients in the earth disappear to feed my appetite, to feed my greed.

And the money in my pocket, in my bank, in my numerous possessions-- it is all worthless. I will die, which will be the best thing for this world as my body will feed the trees growing up around my grave. I will die, and I will no longer have the money I saved up, never used-- never used to do good on this Earth, to do the Earth well like it has done me.

So I continue to modify the landscape, as it dries up before me and I do not care. I slaughter the precious, rare sites that will one day totally vanish. I pollute our world so it rots away in agony, in modifications done by our laziness and bad habits. I remain ignorant and refuse to realise how inter-connected we all are, how each creature affects the next, how I cannot live without them. But as I speed through my fast-paced life, I speed our entire future toward death. I am a thief, a rapist, and a murderer. So are you.



## *The Simple Act of Breathing* (Preface)

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Aaron Ponce

*This excerpt may be read as a preface to Ponce's novel-in-process "The Simple Act of Breathing." Entrigued by the frustrations of cerebral palsy, he "began to research the causes and reasons for [the] disability and realized there was a story lurking in the mind of the victim of my narrative, more so than in the mind of my criminal" (Ponce). Portions continuing the narrative will be published in future issues of River Voices magazine.*

I found that I was more nervous than I thought I would be on the way to the graduation party. A sickly feeling had flooded my stomach and I thought I'd start trembling like a scared child. I thought my teeth would be prone to chattering in that state and I gripped my steering wheel tighter in what felt like feeble fists. I pull into the driveway, and it went on for an infinite amount of time through a sea of pine trees. It was the perfect place to make a blood sacrifice.

One of my classmates greets me with a gorilla sized hug and promptly spills a good amount of Natural Ice all over my hoodie. He takes a sip from his beer without an apology and throws an arm around my shoulder to not so gently guide me into the thralls of seventeen and eighteen year olds. It doesn't take very long for the other graduates to spot me and most have a similar reaction to his. You'd think I was some straight edge goodie two-shoes, the way they all crowd around me and congratulated me for popping my party cherry.

I keep my ears open to the pointless banter. I retreat into myself, and drink what seems like a limitless supply of beer because when one cup is finished, someone brings me another.

People started talking to me about classes. Started talking to me about other parties. They asked if I remembered obscure memories from our time in school and I was surprised to find that I had no recollection of the things they were speaking of. I had kept my head down and my eyes glued to my papers. I had kept my mind full of hidden judgements. I gave my classmates attention, I listened to their troubles but it all went in one ear and out the other. I held doors open and responded with "You're Welcomes" when handed a "Thank You" but I never made eye contact. I knew their names: Alissa, Gabe, Morgan, Tom, Beth, Sara and Sarah with an 'H.' I knew that basic information and that they were sopranos, cellists, quarterbacks, and chess prodigies but I didn't know what their favorite foods were or if their parents made them run cross country. I didn't know who had issues with pimples, or who slept around the most. Was graduating the same high school, enduring the same teachers, and marching in band really enough to give you common

ground? I didn't think so, but these people were alien to me and they appeared to believe that those simple commonalities were enough to warrant inclusion. I was over analyzing everything, and I knew I wanted to leave.

I wouldn't deny that there was a slight fuzziness in my vision or that I felt myself stumble over my own steps, and I wouldn't deny that I knew I was drunk but there was an overwhelming need to remove myself from the situation. My nervousness had been accentuated, and I did not feel a greater need to fellowship more in this most ancient of high school traditions. No one much noticed as I made my way away from the bonfire. I was a novelty, an anomaly of a peer and that unique quality had faded quickly. I suppose I didn't expect that newfound love to last, but it was somewhat nice while it was there. Eventually though, I was sitting in my parents Subaru.

I didn't know how to have friends, or what to say. I didn't know how to have fun with the stupid casual things they had fun with. I started the engine. My dizziness I felt had dissipated, the alcohol was relinquishing some of its hold, and I shifted into drive and found my way around the cornfield and passed the other cars.

The long stretch home was the best. Those empty country roads bordered by fields of corn shrouded in an absence of light. If I had just pulled off the road I could walk on forever it seemed, and I could abandon my car, abandon industrialization, and technology. Abandon social conventions, and feeble mortal aspirations. I could abandon all of that and be alone with my thoughts. The simple sounds of the car engine pushing the box of metal forward and the wheels rumbling over the concrete, it was calming, in that way that whale sounds are to people who can't fall asleep. I wasn't sure if I was better for this feeling but I did know that all of those voices drove me nuts. All of those memories, and ideas that I didn't share in.

We lived in one of those suburban communities just on the outskirts of the city proper. Some place between there and the country. I turned down a side street when the country highway had turned into a four lane highway. It wasn't the normal route I took home but it was the sort of way to go when you wanted to take your time. I took the next turn a little sharper than normal and I was only a few blocks away from my house.

I had come to an immediate stop. My foot pressed against the floor as if itself braced for impact and I could hear my breathing accentuated in that silence above the whisper of the engine turning. "Oh shit." I found myself saying through the purr of the motor, and I stepped out of the car. I left the door open, my hand gliding over the inside surface as if ready to brace myself from taking any more steps into the situation I now found myself in. My headlights showed her there, lying on her back, her arms sprawled out to her side and one leg atop another. She wasn't moving. I took simple steps forward and I already felt a fear of discovery come over me. I looked up the road and then back over my shoulder

and tried to peer up and down the other areas of the intersection. There was nothing. I knew she would have to cough, stand up, say ouch, or something. Even cry. Any sort of noise was better than this eerie silence, because in that quiet nothingness was an eruption of truths that I did not want to be involved in. “Hey, are you okay?” She was dressed in little smiley heart pajama pants and shirt. The faces colored in shades of green and purple and her hair done up in a small ponytail. It must have been two o’clock in the morning and my blame shifted around to her parents because how could they have let her come out at such an ungodly hour. She should have been in bed by ten comfortably quaint under a blanket, under the protection of a dim night light in the corner. But she was there. I noticed the pool of blood forming under her head. My heart sank. I looked at the front of the car as I made those centimeter seeming steps toward her body and there were no discernable markings that she had even impacted against the hood, but my own eyes knew that it was the reality. I had just killed this child.

I knelt down beside her and lifted her slightly and rolled her onto her side. The blood had begun pooling in her hair and it stuck slightly as I rolled her. It didn’t appear to be seeping out anymore but the gash in her skull was apparent and sickly. I apologized a thousand times in my head and a hundred out loud. I moved for my cellphone but then I looked up and down the road again, over my shoulder and to my left and right. It was quiet, small forests of trees obscured the scene from any surrounding houses. No one could see me or judge me. If God was up there he was the only one watching, but why would he let this happen to me. It was already a confirmation that I should have stayed home, that only disaster would strike if I ventured out of my house, pursued social circles, or entreated to try to do new things. For one reason or another I curled my arms under her neck and under her knees and her hands flopped about at her side and I carried her to the Subaru and put her in the back seat. I quickly slammed the door and sat with my frightened fists against the steering wheel, and I felt I had already come too far. I shifted into reverse and backed out into my original street before driving forward in adjustment and back on out toward the country road.

There were only devils on my shoulders prying and primping me up with their pitchforks and spewing fire into my mind. I could not be caught they told me, I told myself. Think of all that work you had put into yourself. All that work. Wasted. There was a dead girl laying on my backseat and I found myself worrying about degrees and perceptions. I pictured my face plastered on television and on rag journalism that popped up on my Facebook feed. It was petty, it was a sort of evil, and I knew it. My heart retracted deeper into my chest cavity. My stomach sank. Some kind of flight instinct infected my brain and I was fast becoming some deplorable monster. My left fist was stuck as though melded into the steering wheel and my right hand was shaking at my side so that I moved it to join its mate and hid its anxiety in a tightened grip against the leather. There was an abnormal calm in that drive. As the yellow lines melded in front of me at fifty-

five miles per hour. As every headlight passed over my eyes I imagined that they had telescopic eyeballs extending out of their windshields to peer at the sin I was committing. That calm persisted, and I made sure to keep my eyes locked on the road in front of me.

It was a strange feeling not second guessing where to go to hide a body. Where once I admired the empty spaces of the country as a place for reflection and solace I now saw them for a new awful potential. I turned down another mirrored road out there in the middle of nowhere. One that had far less commuters, so that it was practically none, and when I had gone a good enough distance I parked and shut off my lights but let that familiar engine hum continue. With a turn of my key I knew I would hear the chirping of crickets, and the obnoxious guttural croaks of frogs, but above all that I would hear the expulsion of my breath from my heavy heaving chest. The keys did not turn, and the engine persisted. I tried to stare at my reflection in the rear view but the absence of street lights made that impossible and I wasn't about to turn on the interiors. At that moment I was happy to be a void in the darkness. But, I felt eyes on me, maybe of the girl's ghost, maybe of God, but I could beg forgiveness later. In those moments I was ashamed with the knowledge that I didn't know who the hell I was anymore. An overachieving antisocial son of a bitch it seemed, and a murderer.

I took a deep breath and opened up the back door and collected up her body. I expected it to be cold and stiff, but I wasn't aware how long it took for a body to do that. I had never had to experience such a course of action as to warrant the reward of that sort of knowledge. Now I had it. Like an incurable infection, and it was going to sit inside my thoughts like a cancer.

There was a ditch at my feet when I turned around, and I made a first step to go down its steep edges. I stepped over the reeds and they dragged against my jeans. I took another step and the girl grew heavier in my arms. The clouds began to part overhead so that the full moon's light shone full and bright against her face and I locked my eyes there. I didn't know how I could have done this, and I thought of my sister and it sickened me that someone could possibly do this to her, but I still persisted, and took yet another step like some fucking devil, like a malicious and selfish imp. Then her eyes opened wide as if startled by the wild, and I was taken aback in a panic and I dropped her and fell back against my ass into the wet grass. I saw her rolling down the side of the ditch until a subtle splash rang out toward my ears. And I scrambled up to my feet, back up to the top of the hill. Once there I gave an urgent stare up and down the road, and saw no one, no witnesses. The moon was obscured as it once had been behind the clouds, and it must have been the shock playing tricks on me. I was satisfied with that answer, but my instincts urged me down the hill, urged me to go down and fetch her out. Planted in my place I waited for a sound of life in my ears, it did not come.

When I pulled into my driveway later that night I could not bring myself

to go immediately inside. I knew I had made the wrong decision, because any sane good person would know that. Yet, I made the decision I made and it was then that I was afraid of my truth, the truth of who I really was, of what evil I was capable of. Then I cried, a deluge of tears till I knew my face had absorbed them and my skin was blotched with that salted dryness. As if crying was enough, but crying was never enough to clear your soul and this was going to be the first day of the rest of this life, and I had no idea what to make of it. Not anymore.

## *Structure*

---

Alexis Smith

“Nucleus.”

*The organelle that contains the DNA and controls the processes of the cell.*

The crunch of tires rolling into their white gravel driveway was monotonous enough that she hardly noticed. Nor did she notice her brother recoiling into his pillow fort, whimpering low in response to the crunching. Her ears turned the sounds inside out, ignoring them the way her mother would. She continued reciting.

“Cell wall.”

*A rigid structure that surrounds the cells of plants and most bacteria.*

Rather than jumping from the sound of leather work boots meeting the deck she paused—they were lighter, quicker steps than usual.

“Cyto-”

The back door opens not with a *bang* but with a *shhhh* and she started to lean in, brow furrowed. An unfamiliar *clickclick* made her jump.

“-Skeleton,” she finishes on a light breath, waiting for the slam of the door closing. When it doesn’t, her brother crawls out from his pillow fortress and gazes down the hallway.

“Sissy, what’s daddy doing with his favorite toy?” He asks.

She looked outside and caught a glimpse of him just before he was swallowed by the woods, head held high and gun black as a pupil in his hand.

“Cell” She read.

*The membrane bound structure that is the basic unit of life.*

Even after they heard it, they left the door open.

## ***Writing Prompts***

created by Aaron Ponce

### ***We Meet Again***

If there was one thing he hated it was feeling out of place. Everything that existed around him was a reminder of how he was supposed to feel. None of it was his. At least not in that moment. It was a recollection of previous occurrences. It was the memories of well-rehearsed incidents. Ones that closely resembled the absences of his bubble. It was private within but in front of him he knew everyone had used that toilet seat.

### ***A Lot of Sense***

A cat ate my dog. He had been just a tiny little thing. The dog was all fluff and four paws with four little claws. In truth he was not really mine, but my late wife's who had died. I swore I'd take care of him. Which I tried to uphold but, the sign said tigers were fed at dawn and it was only five-dollar admission. He was small enough to conceal, so it turned out to be a good deal, because to feed tigers the zoo food it was six dollars a meal. I'd say I felt guilty but even my wife wouldn't deny how happy a hunting tiger must feel.

### ***Send-Off***

He smashed the bottle across Angeline's face. The people all cheered as he sent her away. She sounded her horn and smoke bellowed out of her top and eventually Angeline was safely to sea.

### ***Apocalyptic Magnification***

Microorganisms erupted in a panic. Poor old Janet was dead. Their neighbors and family were living there but were quickly being stricken by oppressive decay. Those that were left would still wind up dead because they still had the maggots who would force-ably remove the land of their homes.

### ***Solutions***

The police could, he thought, shoot him in his shoulder, his arm, in each of his finger digits. They could shoot him in his thigh, in his waist, or in his crotch; god forbid. They could shoot him in the ass or right on up. In each knee cap or through each calf. They could blow away bones in all ten of his toes so that he could only crawl away. Or, he was hoping they would just not fire at all. But, they shot one and all and mostly missed all the places he'd hoped. All because he reached for, what they asked for, a measly ounce of dope.

*(little) words*

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Michael Dietz

I am laying in bed with a swollen throat  
that feels as though I have swallowed  
a broken bulb, and with a body  
as heavy as a shivering sack of white

flour, and Poetry comes in the memory of a friend  
who recently said to me that she liked  
my poems. Although my head is pounding,  
I have the tea boiling, and the fireinside is blazing

because all I want to do now is write  
more poems. Words are  
like that, you know; like rain drops, or little  
atomic bombs that drop into deserts.

I am so glad I told the stranger  
yesterday that her eyes  
were beautiful. They sparkled just  
like September Sapphires, where I found myself

drowning and burning  
at the same time (and now  
that I think of it, having been the last  
day of September, I am really glad I said it).

She nearly cried and said she hadn't  
heard that in so long, that I made  
her day. When I left I wondered,  
given her reaction, if she'd ever heard it at all.

I took part of her load  
with me. Here it is, sculpted  
first from the kind words of a dear friend,  
and then from the two peppermints

through which another sees the world.

*A Poet by the Sea*

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Taylor Hermanson



*Behind Me*

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Michael Dietz



