

Manastash 2010

Manastash Volume XX 2010

Volume 20





Welcome,

Now that you have opened this 2010 volume of Manastash, you will find some of the best poetry, prose, artwork, and drama submitted by Central Washington University students. Due to the overwhelming number of submissions, we have expanded the number of pages to showcase a broader spectrum of work.

We, the Manastash Editorial Staff, want you to read and discuss the works within.

Please enjoy responsibly.

The Manastash Staff

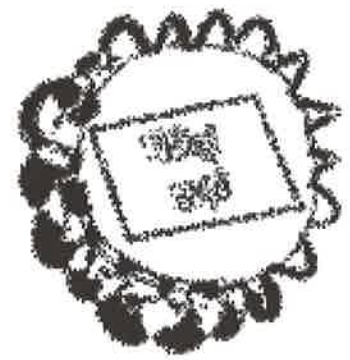




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Six Recovery Haikus

by Xavier Cavazos

i am going to
blame god-the-father no more
for my injections

i am going to
cross-out the names of all the
faces that blamed me

i am going to
inject a hallelujah
back into this face

i am going to
be more abundant with my
mouth and *i-love-yous*

i am going to
be, is, am, are, was, were- more
than ever now- *yes*

i'm going to be
i am going to be more
i am going to



Woman in the Moon

by Stephanie Kirstein

Helen stood on the still, silent surface of the moon, her face tilted upward. The blue orb of the Earth hung above her, glowing brightly in the star-speckled expanse that stretched out in every direction. The world seemed to be waiting there patiently, as though it had all the time in the universe. Which, really, it did.

Helen tore her gaze from the spectacular sight before her and looked around. The moon was just as still and peaceful as she'd always imagined. She felt strangely light and free. Nearly weightless. If she pushed her feet down hard against the blue-gray surface, she would bound across the moonscape with hardly anything at all to hold her down.

The peaceful moonscape evaporated in one rude, shattering moment. Helen was not alone in the serenity of the uninhabited moon. That peace existed only in her imagination. No, Helen was not alone at all.

She only wished she was.

Instead, Helen stood at the edge of the one of the largest, busiest, noisiest crowds she had ever experienced. Even the high ceiling of the planetarium's Yuzuki Gallery was not enough to make the crowd bearable. If anything, it amplified their noise so the gentle hum of excited voices became a mind-numbing, thought-interrupting roar.

Helen massaged her temples, trying to alleviate the headache that was rapidly gathering strength behind her eyes. The worst part, Helen thought miserably, was that she had invited them – or rather, they had been invited for her, in her honor. Tonight was her night, after all, the celebration of her great achievement. She wanted them to see what she had been working on for so long, the culmination of years of work and a lifetime of passion. She wanted everyone to experience “A Lunar Retrospective: the Impact of the Moon on the World and its Cultures.”

She just wished they could enjoy it elsewhere. Far, far away, preferably. And more quietly.

Something across the room caught Helen's eye. Dr. Dunbar, the director of the planetarium, was waving impatiently at her, a meaningful look in his eye. Helen didn't have to waste much thought trying to guess his meaning. She'd better start schmoozing, and fast.

Helen inwardly rolled her eyes. She hated this part of the job: the glad-handing, the small talk, the feigned smiles. Put her in a library or the planetarium's observatory, and she would be right at home. The party scene was definitely not her thing. However, the



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museum needed money, and Helen was often called upon to charm would-be benefactors into handing over enough money to keep the planetarium running.

Helen hitched on a smile that she hoped found the middle ground between pained and frighteningly cheerful. She pasted the image of the calm lunar surface in front of her mental eye, trying to hold onto some of that serenity.

Calm, cool, and collected, she thought, repeating the words to herself like a mantra. Calm, cool, and collected.

Reluctantly, she stepped away from the wall and pushed her way into the crowd. Her cheeks already ached with the strangeness and insincerity of her expression.

Scanning the crowd for familiar and important faces, her eyes were drawn, as though magnetized, to a tall, gangly, dark-haired man wearing a shabby blue blazer and standing by a large reproduction of the "Earthrise" photograph taken by the crew of Apollo 8. It was Derek.

A greeting for Mr. Miller, the nearest hot-shot V. I. P., froze on her lips. Mr. Miller looked at her with a puzzled expression, but Helen barely noticed him.

Derek had seen her. No, not "seen." He saw her now, he was still seeing her. His impossibly bright blue eyes were fastened on her face, not even blinking when someone passed in front of him and interrupted his view.

Helen's frozen brain surged back to life, and suddenly it was working at warp speed. Thoughts were rushing at such a rate that Helen felt dizzy.

Why was he here? How did he get in? What did he want? Was he angry? Sad? Forgiving? Vindictive? Did he want to ruin this? Did he want to be friends?

Mr. Miller cleared his throat.

"This is quite the exhibit, Dr. Ross," he said cheerfully. "You must be very proud."

Helen closed her eyes again, pulling herself together.

"Yes," she said at last, opening her eyes and giving Mr. Miller a very forced smile. "Yes, thank you for coming. Please enjoy the exhibit."

Helen slipped away from Mr. Miller's side and disappeared into the crowd before he could reply. She could almost see the disapproving glare Dr. Dunbar would give her later, but she had more pressing concerns than chatting up some high-level executive with deep pockets.

Helen fought her way through the crowd to a large photograph of a Chinese Moon festival celebration. Leaning against the wall next to the photograph, Helen tried to think what to do next.

This, Helen thought ruefully, was exactly why she didn't do relationships. Everything became so messy once hearts and hormones got involved.

*

Derek had been Helen's first real relationship, the first time she'd actually let things really get serious. She'd dated before Derek, of course, but it was always casual. A date or two, maybe three if the guy was decent, but that situation rarely presented itself. She didn't have time for anything more serious, anyway; she was too busy with her work to have a relationship, even if she wanted one.

Derek had changed everything. They'd met at the planetarium, and Helen remembered that first meeting as clearly as she remembered her own name. Helen had been walking to the café for lunch when Derek accosted her, a desperate look in his eyes. He asked her to tell him everything she knew about space – in two minutes or less. Since everything she knew about space could fill several books and dozens of hours, she just stared at him. Seeing her expression, Derek laughed and explained himself: his nephew, Nicholas, was visiting him on a break from school, and Derek had brought him to the planetarium as a last resort, since Derek was at a loss for how to entertain eleven-year-olds. Now he was facing the prospect of appearing stupid as well as boring, since he knew nothing at all about space. Derek begged Helen to help him redeem himself in his nephew's eyes. Intrigued by the idea – not to mention Derek's charming manner and gorgeous blue eyes – Helen agreed to help. She spent the next hour with Derek and Nicholas, showing them around the exhibits and referring to herself as Derek's friend so some of her coolness would rub off on Derek. At the end of the hour, Derek thanked Helen profusely for her help and asked her if she would like to join him for dinner.

On their first date, Helen realized right away that Derek was different from the other guys she had dated. When she started talking about her work, he didn't just nod and smile vaguely, waiting for the conversation to turn to something more interesting. Derek leaned forward as she talked, and his eyes never left her face. He asked intelligent questions, he laughed at the right things – not just when he thought he should laugh – and he never seemed bored. The conversation turned to other things: harrowing tales of Derek's travels, anecdotes from their college days, funny stories of their experiences in the city. When the check finally came, Helen found herself disappointed that the evening had come to an end.

That date had been followed by a second, then a third, then a fourth. Helen waited for some inner voice to tell her to stop this foolishness, but it didn't come, and Helen realized that she was falling for Derek more and more each day. She loved his laugh, his quirky

sense of humor, the warmth of his embrace when he held her close. If this was what relationships were like, she thought, they weren't really so bad.

They'd been dating for six months when Helen invited Derek to the planetarium's observatory late one Saturday night, when the planetarium was officially closed.

"Are you sure we're supposed to be here?" Derek had asked, looking around the large, domed room.

"I do work here, you know," she said, laughing. "I have the keys, so we're not exactly breaking in. Relax."

She led the way to the massive telescope in the middle of the observatory. After looking through the end of the telescope and fiddling with a few knobs and dials, she turned to Derek, grinning.

"Here," she said. "Come say hello to Luna."

Derek peered into the end of the scope.

"Wow," he breathed.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" said Helen.

"I've never seen the moon this close before," Derek said.

"It's so bright."

"We actually use special filters to reduce the amount of light coming through the scope," Helen said in her best scholarly voice.

"Otherwise, the moon would be too bright to look at comfortably."

Derek looked up and smiled at her.

"Here, you take a turn."

Helen leaned forward to peer through the telescope. The moon was full and as bright and beautiful as ever, its glowing white surface etched with the mottled gray of craters and lunar landforms.

Helen felt a pair of strong, warm arms wrap around her waist. Derek pulled her close to him, and Helen's attention strayed immediately from the distant moon to the very near warmth of Derek's embrace. She closed her eyes, smiling.

"I love you," Derek said, whispering in her ear.

Helen's eyes opened. The smile fell from her face as Derek's words reverberated in her head.

For next few days, Helen avoided Derek. He called many times, leaving messages because Helen refused to pick up the phone. Finally, she worked up the nerve to call him and end the relationship once and for all. The silence at the other end of the line followed by the hurt in his voice when he asked her why was almost more than Helen could stand. Still, she kept her voice even as she told him that things just weren't working out between them, and they were better off apart. When the call finally ended, Helen stood staring at the phone for a long time, her hand still resting on the receiver.

In the following days and weeks, Helen tried to convince herself that she had done the right thing. She didn't want a

relationship, she told herself. Her work was more important, after all; it would certainly survive longer than the fleeting memories of some foolish romance.

*

Helen glanced over at the "Earthrise" photograph again. Derek was still standing there, his face impassive, his hands slipped casually into his pockets, his eyes still focused on her. He didn't look like he would be leaving anytime soon.

Helen knew one thing for sure: she wasn't going to try to get through the rest of this long night with him standing there the whole time. She had to talk to him.

Helen closed her eyes again, envisioning the calm, silent moonscape and trying to force the serenity of the moon onto a mind that was anything but serene.

She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. The crowd had thinned somewhat, and Helen made her way quickly and purposefully across the gallery, doing her best to project an air of confidence that contrasted sharply with the nervous, fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach.

As she drew close to Derek, Helen was surprised to find him smiling. Not the sort of falsely cheerful smile she herself had put on earlier, but a genuine one.

"Awesome exhibit, Helen," he said, gesturing toward the photographs and artifacts that filled the gallery. "You did a great job. I knew you would."

"What are you doing here?" She winced a little at the forced iciness in her own voice, but she continued to stare steadily at him, her gaze cold.

Derek didn't miss a beat.

"I was invited, wasn't I?" he said, shrugging.

"Yes, but that was before —"

"I really like this picture," he continued, ignoring Helen and turning around to look at the "Earthrise" photo behind him. "It's a classic. You have a poster like this up in your apartment, don't you?"

"Derek, please —"

"The one you got from your dad, right? The one he left behind when he —"

"Derek, you can't be here."

The words tumbled out faster and harsher than she'd meant, but they had the intended effect. Derek stopped talking, and when he turned back toward Helen, he looked surprised, almost hurt. For a moment, her heart softened, but she fought that feeling almost as suddenly as it appeared. She couldn't let herself be weak.

"I'm sorry, Derek," she continued, her voice calmer, colder, more formal. "I thought it was clear when I broke up with you

that you were no longer invited to the opening. I apologize for not spelling it out for you.”

Derek folded his arms across his chest.

“Well, I’m already here,” he said. “It won’t hurt for me to stay for the rest of the evening, will it?”

Yes, it will, thought Helen, but to Derek she said, “I really can’t have any distractions tonight.”

“Then how about this?” said Derek, taking a step toward Helen so that they were less than a foot apart. “Give me five minutes – just five minutes – to talk to you. Alone. Then I’ll leave and I won’t bother you again. Sound reasonable?”

An uncomfortable shiver went down Helen’s spine at his proximity. She tried to ignore it.

“I have to stay here,” she said. “Dr. Dunbar will flip out if I –”

“Just five minutes,” Derek said. “They can do without you for that long.”

Helen couldn’t really argue with that. Five minutes wasn’t a very long time, and if it meant that she would be free of him for the rest of the evening, then the five minutes would be worth it.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s find someplace quiet.”

Helen turned and walked through the chattering crowd again, Derek right behind her. She led him out the gallery door, down a hallway lined with chattering guests who had spilled out of the gallery to escape the crowd, up a flight of stairs, and through a wide archway that led to the planetarium’s permanent exhibits.

The noise from the crowd downstairs had died away by the time they crossed the threshold, and they now stood in a large, quiet, high-ceilinged room devoted to the Solar System. Giant models of each of the eight planets and their moons were suspended from the ceiling. During the day, bright lights would have illuminated the planets and the informative panels that provided facts about each one. Now, however, the only light came from the fluorescent lights in the hallway, which cast an eerie glow over each planet and turned Helen and Derek’s faces into shadowy masks.

“Could you have picked somewhere less creepy?” he asked, looking at his altered reflection in a glass-covered panel that stood next to him. His voice echoed in the vast room.

“You find museums creepy?” Helen asked, amused in spite of herself.

“No,” he said defensively. “It’s just different being here at night, that’s all.”

Helen crossed her arms.

“Okay,” she said. “Five minutes.”

Derek chuckled softly.

“Typical Helen,” he said, shaking his head. “One-track mind. Hard-headed ‘til the end.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

“No,” he said, “but it’s part of it.” He stared at the floor for a moment, stalling. Then he met Helen’s eyes.

“I just wanted to tell you that I get it,” he said finally. “I understand now.”

Helen stared at him. She couldn’t fathom what he meant any more than she could read his face, shrouded as it was in shadows.

“What do you understand?”

“I know why you left.”

He said the words with such certainty that Helen felt a flutter of panic in the pit of her stomach.

“I already told you why I left,” she said quickly. “I don’t love you. It’s as simple as that.”

She waited for the words to strike him. She waited for him to falter, to turn away so she couldn’t see the hurt take its toll. But he didn’t. He stood there, as strong and as unflinching as ever.

“I know that’s what you told me,” he said evenly. “But I think there’s more.”

The panic fluttered again. Stop talking, she wanted to tell him. Stop talking and go.

“You left so I couldn’t leave,” he said. “You left so I wouldn’t be able to hurt you like he did.”

This time it was his words that struck out, hitting her like a blow from a fist and knocking the air from her chest. The panic was rising, almost beyond her control. Almost.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, her voice shaking slightly. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know better than you think I do,” he said quietly. “I know how much it hurt you when your father left.”

“That’s enough,” Helen said louder, but Derek wasn’t listening.

“I know that you keep that ‘Earthrise’ poster on your wall because it was the only thing he left behind when he moved out,” he continued.

“That’s not-”

“And I know you work as hard as you do because you’re still hoping you can make him proud enough that he’ll come back.”

Helen stared at Derek, her face hot, her blood pounding in her ears. She felt exposed, as though Derek had pulled back the curtain and finally seen the dark, twisted insides. For once in her life, she couldn’t think. Survival kicked in, and it screamed one thing: push him away and run.

“You don’t know anything,” she spat at him, taking a step

away. "You think you know me, but you don't. That's your reason, Derek. That's why we can't be together. You don't know me."

"There you go again," he said, raising his voice. "Pushing me away. It's what you always do, isn't it?"

"Stop using that psychological crap on me!"

Helen took another backward step and bumped into something hard. She glanced behind her and saw that it was one of the informative panels.

"I'm not trying to mess with you," Derek said. "I'm just trying to tell you that I get it."

"No, you don't!"

Derek stepped forward and took her hand. Helen flinched, but his hand held on to hers, his grip firm but gentle.

"Yes, I do," he said. "You've spent your whole life keeping everyone away so you won't get hurt. You're beautiful, Helen, and brighter than anyone I've ever met, but you're so isolated that no one can reach you."

He took her other hand in his. Up close, Helen could read the sad, solemn expression in his shadowy features.

"I'm just saying that I'm willing to try."

Helen's eyes met his, and her resolve began to slip away. A part of her – a large, insistent part – wanted to tell him that she was willing to try too, that he was worth the vulnerability that she'd sworn she'd never let herself feel.

Derek must have seen these things in her eyes, because without a word, he closed the distance between them and kissed her.

For a moment, Helen resisted. Then that rebellious part of her took over, and she was pulling him toward her, deepening the kiss. She wanted him close to her again; she wanted to feel the heat of his body, the solid reality of his presence. She had missed him so much, and only now was she willing to admit it, even to herself.

The coldness inside of her began to give way. She allowed herself to imagine everything that Derek was offering, to see the future as he saw it. She saw herself in a long, lacy dress – champagne, not white, because she'd never liked stark white wedding dresses. She saw them making a home together, deciding where to put the cereal and peanut butter and arguing over whether the toilet paper should be pulled over or under the roll. She even saw a row of pictures on the wall, one for each year of the life of a child who had Derek's blue eyes and Helen's cautious smile. It could be nice, Helen thought. She could love a life like that.

Then the old panic rose inside of her again. Old memories came rushing back. She saw herself, ten years old, huddled on her bed as she listened to the sounds of her parents' angry shouts. She saw her father throwing clothes into his suitcase as he yelled, red-

faced, at her mother. She saw the "Earthrise" poster hanging on the wall as she stood at her parents' bedroom window and watched her father's old red car take off down the road for the last time.

Then the images shifted. Now it was Derek's voice she heard reverberating through the wall, Derek's face she saw contorted with rage, Derek's dark-blue car she watched driving down the dusty road and out of her life forever.

"No," Helen murmured.

Her hands found Derek's chest, and she pushed him away, hard. He staggered back a step. She could see enough of his face to tell he was bewildered.

"Helen –"

"No," she repeated, breathless. "I can't do this. Go away."

She closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. She visualized the lunar surface again. Calm, cool, collected, she thought. Calm, cool, – Derek's voice intruded.

"Don't do this, Helen," he said. "You can't push everyone away forever."

Helen opened her eyes. She summoned enough strength to keep her voice steady when she spoke.

"I told you, you're wrong," she said. "I don't push everyone away. Just you."

She could tell she'd hurt him this time. His head dropped slightly and she heard him take a deep breath.

"Fine," he said. "Fine. If you want to be alone, go ahead. I'm done."

He turned and walked toward the exhibit's entrance, his footsteps echoing in the vast room. Helen watched his shadowy form walk away until he disappeared through the archway. Then she turned away, leaning against the panel behind her for support.

She couldn't hold on anymore. Her composure came crashing down, and the tears she had been holding back slid silently down her face. She didn't bother to brush them away; she let them fall onto the shining glass surface of the plaque before her. After a few moments, she realized what she saw reflected there.

Her tear-streaked, shadowy face stared back at her from the glass. Next to her image, the hanging model of the moon was reflected as well, its cold, silent face mirroring her own.

*

A week passed, and Helen sat on the couch in her living room late at night. She hadn't bothered to turn on any of the lights; only the television was on, and it cast a flickering blue light over the otherwise dark room, leaving Helen barely distinguishable from the deep shadows that filled the room.

Helen had not even changed out of her work clothes. Her

feet ached to be rid of their cramped leather shoes, and she knew that her dark blue, tailored suit was wrinkling as it pressed against the upholstery, but she couldn't will herself to use enough energy to do anything. She'd been sitting there on the couch since she returned home from work, and the same melancholy that had filled her for the last week kept her rooted to the spot, unable to even think of moving.

Helen stared at the TV, her face blank. *Apollo 13* was playing on some movie channel or another. The film was one of her favorites, and on some other night, Helen might have watched with rapt attention, waiting for her favorite parts and reciting the best lines along with the actors. But tonight, Helen felt too drained, too tired to muster up any feelings for the characters or the story. Scene after scene flashed by, each one making as little impression on her mind as so many blank sheets of paper.

Tom Hanks's character appeared onscreen. The look on his face caught Helen's attention; it was familiar somehow, in way completely unrelated to Helen's many, many viewings of the movie. She recognized the scene at once: the crew had just been told that they would no longer be able to make it to the moon. Tom stared out the window of the ship, and for a long, lingering moment, his expression was filled with sadness and longing for the place he would never be able to go.

For the first time in hours, perhaps even days, something broke through Helen's melancholic stupor. After a moment, she realized that that something was anger.

She wanted to shout at the screen. She wanted to scream at Tom to leave and not look back, to never give that cold, unreachable place another thought. The moon can't love you back, she wanted to tell him. It is a piece of rock, cold and distant, and it will never be anything else.

Helen slammed her fist against the arm of her chair. The tears came again, and she couldn't summon the will to stop them. Nor could she stop Derek's words from echoing in her head, just as they had again and again over the past week.

Helen wanted to deny what he had said, but the truth had caught up to her at last. She was cold. She was distant. She would always be alone.

Helen looked up, her head still in her hands. Her gaze fell on the Earthrise poster that had hung on her wall ever since her father had left.

Helen had looked at that poster every day for most of her life. Every inch had been committed to memory years ago, but now she felt as though she was seeing it clearly for the first time. Now she understood what the photograph really was: the earth as seen by

someone far away, someone completely cut off from everything that could tie a person to that bright blue globe. Only someone who was utterly detached from the world and everyone on it could see that view.

Helen wasn't aware of deciding to do it. She only knew that in a moment, she was on her feet, a clear intention blazing in her mind. The flickering blue light glinted off the glossy surface of the poster as Helen reached the wall, gripped the poster firmly in each hand, and ripped it from the wall in one quick, violent motion. She crushed the poster in her hands, crumpling the aged, glossy paper into a ball. She stared at it for only a moment; then she let it drop from her hands and fall among the shadows on the floor.



Transience is Thread

by Stefan Milne

It is our pinnacle, point of convergence,
crescendo in the ether.
It is molecules in mountains. Threads

of shoelaces tripping dictators & foot
soldiers. Long dead, forgotten gods, nervous
stage hands & ballerinas all moving behind

curtains that will not lift & will not lift & will not lift.
Screams that catch in the throat like
diamonds. Whispers which seep through millions

of lives like the slow ascent of a cool flood
through our fabric. The trickling river of
time, pushing through lakes & pulsing over polished

stones before it's welcomed by the ocean
& tossed back into the clouds & it kisses the river
again & again.

It is the infinite/ephemeral of the universe swallowing
itself whole, as lives bleed hours, seconds & years.
Until stars become teethmarks & we all waddle in cosmic

saliva & live through the body, through the veins & through
the birth canals as renewal, as we live redolent in that afterbirth
of being, that scent which will not leave us.

&

we all sing, we can't help ourselves for this,
we sing because we don't know what is
there, but know that somehow—

like the threaded lines of strangers' palms folding
together, becoming tangled—it touches.

Processing

by Shannon Thorp

I lay in bed trying to ready myself for the day.
I held my mother's Black Hills gold cross necklace
and whispered a quick prayer for a miracle.
The night before I had told my mother there was still hope,
that miracles have happened before.
A few tears leaked from her staring eyes
and she pressed her lips tightly together.
I had dreamt he would open his eyes
before they could cut out his organs,
and he would come home. How could anyone
doubt God after such a miracle?

The counters were littered with flowers.
My mother was particularly fond of a stuffed toy cow
glued to a milk can;
ugly weeds sprouted out from the top.
My father sat at the chimney and smoked.
Through a door I had heard my mom whisper on the phone:
"She thinks Jesse can come back."
I ran back up the stairs to my room.

The next day we saw him dressed for football,
around his neck were puka shell necklaces.
I pulled my cross necklace off
and wrapped it around his folded hands.
The funeral home held a terrible smell
I would later realize was the smell of lilies.
When I kissed him on the forehead, I felt the chill
more strongly than the shame for the surprise it brought.

Later, the faces of his friends filed in.
Some I had chased around the house
so many years ago, trying to kiss.
Others I was much too shy
to even be in the same room with.
I was struck by the story of each friendship.
Later, I sat with Jesse's best friend in his room.
A kitten that had shown up that day, the day of the funeral,
to which everyone thought was such a pleasant surprise
and perhaps a miracle (to which I had scoffed)
sat with us, on the blanket.
He told me that later, without my parents knowing,
I would have to reach into a hole in the ceiling of Jesse's closet
and get rid of all the beer stored there.

I felt honored, but then the kitten pooped on the bed and I had to “get the fucking cat out” of there and we didn’t talk more.

A week later I returned to 8th grade to find everyone my friend. A boy I had never spoken to except about a science project professed his undying love for me. One teacher gave me the homework I missed, and when all the other teachers let me off the hook, I was upset. I explained away my emotions in clichés, which seemed to fit how it all looked on the outside, but not resting true on the inside.

We ate lasagna every night that first week, and never remembered to return the pans.

Uninhabited

by Julie Thomson

Lanie picked the fluff out of the hole that had been created in the car seat cushion by the puppy. She never thought she’d have to deal with being removed from her home, but the landlord had to get everyone out. The old apartments that she lived in were being torn down because they were declared “unfit for human habitation.” She loved her apartment dearly, and it had been her sanctuary since her mother Beverly died when Lanie was 18.

They were a pair of drifters. Her mother always seemed to be running from her family, telling Lanie that they disowned her when she became pregnant, and refused to let them ruin her life. Beverly would sell her paintings that she did in the area to the small shops that tourists would frequent, never making any new friends. One time stood out to Lanie in particular. Beverly had painted a picture of the children building sand castles on the beach. Lanie joined in the building, but didn’t engage the children in conversation much, because she knew she would never see them again. It was one of the first times she could remember feeling different and lonely.

Time would drag on and Lanie would ask to attend school. Beverly insisted on home schooling since Lanie’s father had left because she was afraid that Lanie would suffer bullying. Nothing her mother did ever seemed to make much sense to her. It was because of their lifestyle that Lanie had rarely spent time with family. She had only met her grandmother once, and this was when she was roughly five or six.

When Lanie turned 17, her mother was diagnosed with a severe form of depression, and she was in and out of hospitals throughout the following year. She was lonely, and Lanie had managed to make some friends in the area, which added to her mother’s feelings of isolation.

Lanie could remember when Beverly had reached a point where she would threaten to harm herself if Lanie didn’t promise to come back home after spending time with her new friends. At one point, Lanie had a date and invited him in to meet Beverly, who had spent the day painting a dark picture frantically. Beverly took one look at the pair of them and began to cry, threatening Lanie that if she ran away with that boy she would lose herself.

“Don’t leave me,” Beverly had sobbed. That boy slipped out the front door while Lanie hugged her mother, and never contacted her again.

Though she did everything she could to keep her mother happy, Lanie could not help her. In the end, her mother had taken

her own life with a bottle full of sleeping pills, and Lanie felt she would never understand why fully. Her mother had seemed to spiral out of control so quickly out of loneliness, but Lanie had made a few good friends. She could not understand why she was excelling and her mother had not. Lanie decided to stay put, take their savings, and put money down on her small grungy apartment.

Now 22, Lanie worked at the coffee shop on the corner, submitting the last of her mother's artwork once a week to be auctioned and sold. She regretted doing it, but her mother had always taught her that it was essential to survive and enjoy life at the same time. Though she loved her mother's artwork dearly, she had to get rid of it because she was not making enough money to hold up her own hobby: fostering abused animals. As the puppy sat in the seat next to her in the severely dented Oldsmobile, Lanie began to wonder why she hadn't tried harder to save up and get into a better place.

"Well Chewy, it's just you and me for a while," Lanie sighed as tears squeezed the life from her throat, up and out of her eyes. She pushed her long brown hair away from her face and behind her ear.

Lanie turned the key, not knowing where exactly she would go, and the car fought life, as usual. After the engine turned a few times, it sighed and grumbled to a start, almost in pity it seemed, and she moved forward slowly. Looking in the rearview mirror, she saw what she considered to be a rather pathetic lifestyle. A small weed resembling a clover had plagued her potted plant, and her single laundry basket was filled with her mother's old clothes that she'd taken to wearing herself. The majority of her paycheck went to rent, and she had spent the rest on groceries typically. The only savings she had kept were whatever was left over from selling her mother's artwork.

Chewy whistled and whimpered for a moment until he rotated in four circles and slumped down on the passenger's seat. A few blocks down the road, Lanie decided to stop at her coffee shop. As she parked the car, she patted the pup's head and got out, locking the door behind her. Her head was foggy as she tried to remember exactly what city it was that her grandmother lived in. George, her boss, was standing outside smoking and shaking his head at her.

"I suppose you're here for your artwork check?" George smirked a little.

"That, and I've also come to tell you that I'm going to have to quit. I've lost my apartment and I'm leaving the area. I'm sorry to spring this on you, but I just can't stay any longer." Lanie hated herself for giving up on the area she had grown to love.

"Well, I'm honestly not surprised. Your mother got around the country quite a bit, so it was only a matter of time before you went too. Business is tough though, Lan. I just couldn't pay you what

you deserved." He handed her the check.

"Thank you for understanding, I feel horrible about quitting right now, but I just cannot afford rent anywhere else. That apartment was sort of like the only thing I had left. It's all I could afford," Lanie sniffled a little and gripped her paycheck.

"Take care of yourself, Lanie." George smiled for a brief moment and then let the wrinkles drag his face back into a frown.

Lanie peeked inside of the envelope to look at her check, and then smiled with relief when she saw "400" had been written out. She looked up to meet George's eyes, and he had turned away from her, opening the shop door, and disappearing inside. Lanie looked up at the coffee sign on more time and retreated back to her car. She sat down on the hood, where there were rust patches forming, and Chewy yelped from inside, excited to see that she was back.

"I hope that his business does better, soon." She could barely feel the air leaving her mouth as she whispered to herself. She was unsure of what to do next. Leaving felt so strange and foreign to her, as if she'd be leaving the country and not the city. It had been so long since she had jumped from place to place with her mother, and she didn't know if she could handle it on her own.

"Purgatory," Lanie decided. She got up from the hood and shuffled around to her car door slowly, getting in and turning the key.

It was a few hours away from where she was, but she had recalled a piece of mail that she had come across one day when her mom was busy painting. The return address had said "Purgatory Rd. Rhode Island," and she had thought it was a funny name to give a street. All she could remember was that her grandmother had lived in a very wooded area, with a large piece of land. She couldn't even see the road from where the house was, and there was a pond in the backyard where a goose and a few ducks would chatter at one another. The house was brick with white trim, had a large back yard that extended out to the community pond. On side of the house was a garden that grew out of control, concealing a path that wound through from the front of the house to the back. Lanie got lost in that garden once. In her younger years, Lanie was freer to discover things on her own and figure out her own way around. She always played by herself like she had in the garden. Beverly had become more possessive of her as she grew older, in fear that she would one day leave her, just as Lanie's father had.

Lanie calculated the distance between the northwestern side of Hartford and Purgatory Road would take roughly three hours. She pulled a detailed map of New England out of her glove compartment to look up the quickest route. She could take the freeway most of the way there, and cut across to the highway the rest of the way. Chewy drooled on the corner of the map, and Lanie

looked at him for a moment. She was envious that this puppy only wanted food and love. He didn't need to worry about staying warm or shelter or if he would be left behind. She reached behind the seat and dug up the food scoop, taking some puppy food out of the small bag and placing the scoop on the floor. He was severely underfed when she adopted him, but he had been gaining a little weight over the last few weeks. It was quite the opposite for her, however. Lanie had been losing weight over the course of the year. Her grandmother was her last hope for shelter, and she hoped that she would be received well.

It wasn't until she was two hours into the drive that she began to feel nervous. Here she was, sixteen years older than she had been when she last met her grandmother, and she would be showing up unannounced, with a car full of clothes and a dog. She had had no contact whatsoever. What if her grandmother had died? What if she resented Lanie for never writing to her or calling? Her hands felt cold and sweaty, all at once, and she became very aware of her surroundings and the condition of her possessions. She only really remembered her grandma as a middle-aged looking woman. She had no gray hair to speak of, her figure was hourglass, and she seemed both laid back and old fashioned. Lanie had very few memories of her grandmother, other than her looks. She had no idea how she would handle a situation like this. Her brain would not stop churning negative scenes of being turned away with nowhere to go.

*

She nearly passed Purgatory Road, turning in time to narrowly miss the sign beside a ditch. The weather was transitioning from the summer sunshine to a misty rain, which was typical for this time of year. Lanie drove ten miles an hour below the speed limit so that she could carefully examine the extravagant properties for any sign of familiarity. Thick lines of trees concealed many properties, while others had displays of ponds and fountain-filled gardens. The road got bumpy, and as she bounced up out of her seat, she saw the flicker of red between clumps of trees.

"Maybe that's it! What's the harm in going down the driveway, eh pup?"

Chewy whimpered once again and jumped up to the window as if in anticipation of a treat. He panted and slobber dripped onto the door handle. The humidity from the mist combined with the panting of the dog seemed to be creating a fog inside of the car. Lanie had to use her sleeve to wipe it off the inside of the windshield. The house they were approaching was definitely the one that was planted in her memories. Her stomach felt light and fluttery as if it would fall away from her body. She didn't want to get out of the car now that she was parked in front of her only known relative's house. The only thing that she knew would remove her from the car

is that her puppy had to do its business. Her nerves were making her shake.

"Let's get you out I guess," Lanie sighed and took the dog's collar, opening the car door.

"Can we help you, miss?" a man said suddenly.

"Oh god! I'm sorry you startled me! Ugh, yeah, hi. I'm Lanie, Lanie Peterson. I was wondering if you could tell me if Margaret lives here?" Lanie held her hand out to the man who couldn't have been more than five years older than she was. He stood a good six inches taller than she with dark brown hair and green eyes. His freckles were prominent and his hands were covered in what looked to be oil. He looked very similar to her, she thought.

"Lanie, wow. We never thought you'd show up," the man stared at her in disbelief. "You had better come inside."

"Do you mind me asking who you are?" Lanie hesitated behind him, not quite sure as to what was happening. She felt defensive and guarded suddenly.

"Well technically speaking, I'm your cousin, Malcolm. I'm your dad's nephew." He was holding a small piece of metal in his hand and an oily rag in the other.

Lanie followed him slowly inside and felt both humiliation, and curiosity.

*

Chewy ate from a glass dish in the kitchen, confined to the linoleum, as Lanie sat in the living room. The silence between Malcolm and her seemed to leave a high pitch ringing in her ears. As the rain picked up outside, Lanie barely noticed the tapping against the windows, or the random flash of lightning in the distance. Her eyes were fixed on the pictures above the mantle. There were people who had features similar to her own: the dark hair, the green eyes, and the rather sheepish sideways smile. The freckles on her nose even seemed familiar among these strangers. Her mother had light hair and fair features, which made her question how much of her appearance was that of her father's. Lanie wanted a closer look, but she was too afraid, too stiff, to get up from the rocking chair.

"Hello Lanie, I'm Rachel," a woman said as she came down the stairs. She looked like the people from the pictures: freckles on the nose, dark hair, and piercing, catlike eyes. She was no taller than Lanie, but looked to be much older.

"Are you my umm, my aunt?" Lanie forced herself to stand, but her legs felt unsure of themselves.

"Yes, I'm your father's sister. I'm sorry, this must come as quite a shock, but we've been wondering if we'd ever get to see you again." She spoke quite calmly, as though any sudden movement or loud noise would send Lanie away for another twenty-two years.

"Oh, I have to be honest. I didn't even know I had other relatives; I just came to find my grandmother. How did you know her?" Lanie was confused. She was under the impression that this was her mother's mom's house.

"Well, Margaret was our mother. She died a couple of years ago. I'm sorry we weren't able to find you and let you know," Rachel said, but this time she seemed more reserved. There was a deep sadness in her eyes, but she kept a mostly straight face.

"She died?" Lanie didn't really know what to say next. Her plan was to charm her way back into her grandmother's life and hopefully get herself on stable ground financially. Chewy trotted up happily and jumped in her lap.

"She left us something to give to you, Lanie." Rachel hesitated. "You look so much like your father. I'm sorry, but I just cannot get over it!" She was excited and her eyes became glazed as she stood up and walked over to a box by the fireplace.

Lanie took the shoebox from Rachel and untied the twine holding it shut. She opened the lid slowly and found dozens of letters and a stuffed bear. As she shuffled through the stack, she saw that all of them were from a Tyler Peterson – her father. The dates ranged from a few years after her birth, to last year.

"My father wrote to me?" Lanie stared at Rachel in disbelief. "Why did I never get any of these?" They moved so frequently and had such low contact with anyone, but surely her relatives knew where they were.

"When you were here as a child, my mother wanted Beverly – your mom – to come to her senses and stop running around with you. Every time one of us would pin you two down, you would move away somewhere else. Your father wanted to be there for you, and we all wanted to know you. Beverly came reluctantly, but she found out that my mother, Margaret, was trying to keep her from leaving the house until Tyler, your father, got there to see you. My mother confronted Beverly about allowing your father to see you, and how he was already on his way, but she took off with you and we haven't heard from either of you since. Your father left letters here hoping Beverly would bring you around again. He knew it wasn't likely, but he still hoped. He's been trying to find you, to tell you that you have a brother and a sister. To bring you home." It was at this point that Rachel began crying. She held her hands up to her mouth and stared widely at Lanie, waiting for an answer.

"What?" was all Lanie could seem to choke out.

"I haven't called your father yet, but he lives about 15 minutes away. If you want he can come right now. Where is your mother?"

"She died. Actually she died a few years ago." Lanie was having a hard time grasping all of this information. "Why did my

mom move me all over the place? Why didn't I get to see my dad sooner? I was told that he didn't want a kid, so he abandoned me. I've been told I wasn't wanted by him – by any of you." Lanie was talking more to herself than anyone. She wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

"Beverly and Tyler dated very briefly. When she became pregnant, your father admitted to her that he wasn't ready. Beverly became upset, but tried to make it work with him. She would force him to take her places, using her pregnancy as an excuse. He told me at the time that he wasn't sure it would ever work, but that he wanted to be there for you, despite his insecurities. After you were born, Tyler admitted that he didn't love Beverly. It probably wasn't the best timing on his part, but he was scared. Beverly acted irrationally. She told all of us, in the hospital, that as soon as she was out, she was leaving. She didn't care where; she just couldn't raise you with us around. Beverly felt that because my brother was not ready, we would try to fight for custody of you, as her family was falling apart at the time and couldn't help her.

"We thought she was just upset, but when we came back to the hospital the next day, you were both gone. Tyler thought it best to let you go, because he didn't want anything bad to happen to you, or to cause more upset with your mom. It was the wrong decision, and he's regretted not trying harder all of these years to find you."

"So then the letters are from him to me?" Lanie was coming to terms with the fact that her family was full of strangers, but she had the sudden urge to know them all. "I have brothers and sisters then?"

Rachel smiled and nodded, gesturing towards the mantle. Lanie was suddenly aware just how like her father she must look. These kids, both under the age of sixteen, looked like her five and six years ago. She walked more closely to the mantle, still afraid to reach out and touch them. The reality of what her mother had done to her all of those years was sinking in. She had been on the run from Tyler and his family, not because she was a free spirit who couldn't be stifled. That might have been who she was when she became pregnant, because Lanie certainly hadn't heard her mention any of her own family, but it was these kind people she ran from.

Chewy whimpered once more, and Lanie became aware that she'd been standing there for a few moments. Her knees were stiff. She was no longer nervous, but curious and angry. She loved her mother dearly, but she had always felt that her mother was a tad unstable and too unwilling to talk about Tyler or his family. She rarely even mentioned Lanie's grandmother. She was curious about her siblings, and about her father. She wanted to know what kind of life they had and how he treated them.

"Could you call him please, Rachel?" Lanie picked up the photo on the mantle.

WHY DO I SEE RED?

by Austin Gunderson

Where do I go to flirt with NASCAR glory without breaking the speed limit? Southeast Lake Holm Road. Head north from my house past Lake Holm and up over rolling hills and you'll collide with the Green River Valley where the highlands fall away. But the road doesn't end at the precipice. The little yellow sign at the head of the plunge screams "10 MPH," while the little white sign, the one which actually carries the force of law, mutters "40 mph." I smile, tap the brake pedal, and drop over the edge.

The corkscrew maneuver which ensues is not for the gastro-intestinally timid. Asphalt curlicues hug the forested hillside in a series of drunken switchbacks. Narrow lanes writhe and contort, doubling back around blind outcroppings in serpentine pleats reminiscent of the old Burma Road, only vertical. Far below me the churning river waits. An unsecured Thomas Guide in the back seat smacks against first one wall and then the other. G-forces swirl. I punch the gas on a brief straightaway, slip around one final corner, and break out into the open. I've caught that jerk who passed me in the rolling hills no-passing zone.

And then I hit my brakes. The light is red.

Where am I? A major intersection? A busy thoroughfare? A neighborhood alive with frolicking children?

Nope. I'm at the stem of a T-junction. In the epicenter of nowhere. There are no houses, no children. There is no traffic, no danger, no movement in any direction. To the right the road winds away into the silence of Soos Creek Valley. To the left a dull roar drifts from the freeway overpass. The stillness is suffocating. The world slows, pauses. I need to turn left. The light doesn't change.

I have entered the tranquil limbo of government babysitting. This stop light is here to make me safe. To keep me from hurting myself. To bring law and order to an uncivilized crossroads. To regulate what once had been free.

Oh, yes. Things were not always thus. There was a time – long, long ago, or maybe a year ago – when the only law in these here parts was an ancient, battered stop sign. With stoic consistency it kept the peace – and that without thousands' worth of annual electricity bills! But the stop sign was getting on in years, and the Babysitter State had extra money just lying around. So the powers that be, in their infinite wisdom and out of their limitless generosity, decided to step in. They built three stoplights.

Oh, but when I say it like that it sounds so simple, so trivial. They did so much more. They installed pedestrian signals and painted

crosswalks. They poured sidewalks and erected lengths of chain-link fence. In other words, they regulated everything.

The light is still red.

I look around, bored. The sidewalks extend twenty feet in all directions. Then they end. They just end. Beyond the shortsighted concrete slabs, the weed-laced shoulders narrow. A vision slips through my idle mind: this tableau, ten years hence. The sidewalks are broken, their slabs fractured by the tenacity of lateral roots or tilted by the topsoil's gradual creep. The chain-link fences are rusted and torn, slumping askew beneath the incremental onslaught of Himalayan blackberries. The strips of white crosswalk paint which once straddled each lane of traffic have long since been ground into the asphalt by unnumbered tires spinning in single-file procession. No one has ever clutched the fence to keep from plummeting down the embankment. Not once has Joe Citizen slogged through the roadside mud just to reach the precious security of the sidewalk. Never has Jane Taxpayer made a beeline for the crosswalk before traversing the empty road.

The pedestrian signals blink, then change. Miniature cyan men pause midstride upon the LED displays. No one crosses the road. No one is here. No one is ever here. No one lives here, no one works here, no one walks here. No one. Ever. Except the jerk and me. We sit motionless before the bloody little circle of light.

My gaze wanders to the shiny bumper of the F-250 before me. To the sticker which reads, "I'm not pampered; it's called a job." I begin to laugh softly. I feel a strange kinship with this jerk. We're both here, waiting in endless abeyance. And still the light is red.

A few months hence, a lingering aftertaste of guilt over my self-righteous annoyance will impel me to look up the county zoning directives which govern the future development of the land surrounding this intersection. My research will confirm what is obvious to my eyes. The forested hillsides to my right and left are designated "RA-5": rural areas where only one house is permitted for every five acres. The river bottom before me is designated "A-10": an agricultural area where only one house per ten acres is allowed. The embryonic sidewalks will never support pedestrian traffic sufficient to justify their existence until the county zoning laws are overhauled.

Usually I don't get so unsettled by petty inconveniences. I've never had much trouble with rules. I even obey the speed limit! Laws are necessary. Without laws, order is subverted by anarchy and society disintegrates. And laws only work if the majority consents to their implementation. If I were to slam my car into reverse, swing around the jerk into the left-hand lane, barrel across the intersection, and run the red light, I would no doubt be accosted by justice: either a police officer would materialize to nab me, or the jerk, incensed at my

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recklessness, would phone in my license plate number. But if I, the jerk, and everyone else at every other intersection within a ten-mile radius were to simultaneously run the red lights by which we were annoyed, the law would be powerless to stop us.

But it's not that simple. The reasons I sit here go far deeper than the fact that I don't have the means to challenge the muscle of Uncle Sam. I sit here because I believe in law and order. I believe in obeying rules if only to set an example for others. I believe it's my government's responsibility to keep its citizens safe. I believe in duty and loyalty and patriotism. And I believe that my compliance is being taken for granted.

When a citizenry's submission is assumed, there's nothing a government can't do. And what a government can do, it will do, if for no other reason than that it can. Government wants to be God. The problem is that it's comprised of people as selfish and ignorant as anyone else. And since they deal in other people's money, they have no innate incentive to spend it with restraint. Instead, they spend it in places like this. And still the light is red.

Oh, the foresight of government planners! Where would we be without their fathomless intelligence? Well, let me answer that question. We'd probably be three miles away by now! I'm supposed to feel safely regulated, but all I know is anger. This intersection may be relatively insignificant, but to me it represents everything that's wrong with government. Our glorious and compassionate Babysitter State makes it its business to seize upon a perfectly innocent and self-regulating system, whether a complex social institution or a humble little T-junction, and eliminate all possibility of human error. Once it would've been sufficient to look right, left, and then right again before turning left. No longer. Now we wait for the light to change.

Things usually work well when left to themselves. Then government steps in, regulates everything in sight, and gums up the works. The bigger the government, the more works get gummed. A principle easily forgotten by the insecure masses is unmistakable this misty morning under the rosy glow of the eternal red light. Why would Americans, of all people, want to hand over their lives to the Babysitter State? America came into being as a refutation of such governmental meddling! I shake my head and settle back in my seat — unwilling to grapple with such disturbing questions, unwilling to rebel against the regulation. I sigh and roll my eyes heavenward.

And the light turns green at last.

Art

by Bethany Staten

I have developed a special kind of memory.
Fish in my left hand, knife in my right.
Making sure to watch the backbone.
The movement is simple, really, and it's all in the wrist.
An art, some say.
Rewarded by, \$7.25 an hour. No benefits.

My gloves are thin and I can feel yielding, rubbery flesh.
If my knife slides too far
Through the fish in my hand
A gash appears in my left glove.
I do not pause. The cold, thin blood soaks
Into my skin as surely as the scent of fish sinks
Into every pore and clings there.
I carry it with me
And send friend and stranger alike
Skittering away.

Despite my squint, the scent of death stings my eyes.
Or maybe they sting because I have not slept for
Sixteen hours. I am not sure.
This day, like the previous, and the one before that
For the past thirty years, have run together
Like paint, the dull gray of scales, the pale white of bone,
And the pinkish-red blood of fish.

Desert Polaroid

by Allison Riley

1

The road through the desert was a long one,
cracked beneath the rippling heat –
the kind that left you sticky and exhausted
from nothing more than sitting.
But in my magic teleportation
I escaped.

My head rested on scabby knees,
the hot air an aura in which magic could exist.
And eventually my parents' voices would fade away,
the torrent of wind was no longer abrasive.

And when I woke
my six-year-old mind was filled with wonder
at the inexplicable circumstance of arriving someplace,
with no recollection of travel.

2

Now I drive up alone from the desert floor,
the summer heat surrendering
as the way grows steeper, recoiling into the night,
and mine are the only headlights on this deserted road.

I don't believe in magic;
I am no longer amazed by the power of sleep
in which a child can lose herself.

I know every curve of the blacktop,
watch as the needle on my dash creeps towards empty
and the palms give way to pines.

3

I can no longer visit that little pink house, cradled in the mountain
shadow,

Obscured behind the oleanders and slump stone
in the recesses of my memory.

There are strangers lying by the pool,
the orange tree's cut down,
and the cat next door long laid to rest.

Do You Bleed in Rhythm?

by Stefan Milne

I have hardly anything in common with myself... -Franz Kafka

He's here on the sidewalk with the others but isn't paying attention; instead he thinks of himself. He doesn't like it, being lost in the crowd; he wants to stand out, but it's impossible with this many people. There is a stillness in his features that's at odds with the bustle around him, a certainty written in the lines, pores, and hairs. He thinks himself a different type of man, better dressed, better bred, more artistic, intelligent, original—an outsider to the uniform masses. He thinks about the windows on the canyon of buildings around him, how they are made of sand, billions of grains fused to reflect each other.

This is the photographer.

The air in the street smells of fried foods and exhaust layered on the clean aftermath of a rain. His building is glassy and tall, and he doesn't consider its immensity, as he puts in his security code and grasps the steel handle and walks in and up to his studio.

Inside, he switches on the hundred-watt key light and pulls down the black cloth backdrop. He taps his wingtip-clad foot—a rhythmic, syncopated, jazzy, pitter-patter—on the chemical red floor.

The photographer is a skinny man who never dresses in color, only black, gray, and white. He favors vintage suits; he wears a tieless, gray, slim cut, three-piece pinstripe. His hair is shaggy, all black and peppered grey, falling and rising in tousled waves around his sharp nose, over his small, blackout eyes. His tattoos, trailing down his arms, arcing across his chest, scrawled across his stomach, are all-black. A tree with snakes that turn into roots and eat the branches. An 88. The Richard Avedon print of a hairless man covered in bees.

He thinks of the model that is coming. She is younger than he, prettier than he, prettier than most. He has only seen her in her portfolio. She has sculpted lips, big, big almond eyes, a body like a whisper, cool and evocative; he can almost smell her from the 8x10 glossies. A hit of undiluted pheromones soaking the imagination. He hopes he'll be able to convince her to take off her clothes for those nudes he has been seeing in his head. He thinks about how the light will spread across her skin, about the haunted whites of a woman's bare stomach on a black and white silver gelatin print, about how the shadows eat away at that white and, in places, engulf it completely, before it tilts back into visibility at the rise of hips. He turns up the heat to eighty-seven.

He takes off his blazer and rolls up the sleeves of his white dress shirt. The studio is an office space he converted himself (using the last of the money from his trust fund), a large room and a small one. The large room is set up to shoot, and the small room

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is more of an office with a desk and a mirror. Prints cover the walls of the small room—nudes, still-life photos, street-photography, and portraits. The biggest of all the photos is a self-portrait, split vertically down the center and separated by images: dismembered body parts, a rotting bird, a baby shoe, wrinkled hands intertwined, and a silhouette of a head at the center.

He walks into the small room and looks out the window. The sky is marbled grays with a beam of sunlight cutting through the cloud cover. The office is on the ninth floor. The street plummets below, cars stopping, honking, changing lanes. The other office windows stretch out, around, up and down, glinting the sunlight, reflecting more windows and more in those, all stacked up, and all the people in them breathing and beating hearts and adjusting feet in bad fitting shoes, and they can't see each other, only the arrows of light reflected.

He doesn't know what music to put on for the model. *Blonde on Blonde*? No, he's out of weed. He needs something young. Can't come off like some aging hipster. Can't come off like himself, he thinks. *Lonesome Crowded West*? No. He sits down to think and rolls and lights a cigarette. He blows a thread of smoke towards the ceiling. *Bitches Brew*? He listens to it too much, but it's just better than everything else. He puts the CD in.

Bare knuckles rap at the door, once, twice, as the cymbals start.

"It's open. Come on in," he shouts.

The door squeaks. The photographer turns. It's not the model, no sculpted lips, no almond eyes, no canvas for shadow and no whisper of a body. It's a man dressed in a grey, pinstripe three-piece, a shaggy black-and-peppered grey-haired man—a tattooed man.

The photographer stares (reasonably sure he hasn't dropped acid today). "Who are you?"

"The model."

"What?"

"The model."

"No, no, I'm sorry. My model for today is a woman." He grabs the portfolio and shows it to the other man. "A young woman."

"I don't know what to tell you."

"What's your name?"

"The model. All you need to know." The model scowls.

"Brought my camera. You can put it in the pictures. I take pictures of you. You take pictures of me. It's the only way I'll feel comfortable." The model has the same voice as the photographer's thoughts, quick and light, a voice that barely touches the air.

"Please just leave, sorry for any confusion." He stubs out the yellowing butt, smoke billowing from his nostrils.

"We're the same."

"What?"

"The same."

"Yeah, yeah, we look the same. It's weird. Especially with the camera." The photographer searches for a difference between them, but can't find one. He shakes his head, trying to clear the mirror-less reflection. "Man, you gotta go."

"Let's wait for your model, if she comes, I'll go. But if not we shoot."

When will he have a chance to shoot himself again? It is strange, and the man seems like a creep, but he doesn't appear dangerous. The photographer can put himself in a picture too. A double self-portrait. Diana Arbus twins sort of thing, but odder. He can get his nudes another day. He can't pass this up. "Okay, but you can't take any real pictures. You can use the camera, but no film in it."

"Okay." The model stands the same as when he walked through the door, shoulders rigid, feet soldier style. "Would you like me to get naked?"

"Not right now."

"We'll see."

"No, not right now."

The model unbuttons his shirt and opens it over his chest—the 88. He stares at the photographer with needles in his eyes.

"Stop, I want some shots of you clothed first."

"Okay. But then naked."

"Sure," The photographer says. "Go over and stand on the sheet, and do what I say. You can set up your camera." He wonders if he can find a screwdriver and take the mirror out of the bathroom. "Hang on a second. I'm gonna grab a mirror out of the bathroom, and I'll be right back."

He looks through his tool box, tosses the gaffer's tape, the pliers, the drill, and finds the Philips head. He unscrews the mirror off the bathroom wall and puts it under his arm. He sticks the screwdriver in his pocket.

He walks back with the mirror and finds the model standing on the paper, his tripod set up. The photographer places the mirror on the rolled out backdrop beside the model and his camera, so that the model and camera are reflected into the photographer's camera. He moves back and looks into the lens.

"Ready?"

"Hang on." The photographer adjusts the focus. Click.

"You need to tell me when you take one, because I need to take one too," the model says.

"You don't have any film."

"I need to document, even if the document is only imagined."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The model shakes with laughter.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I'm getting very angry with you," the model says through a tooth-riddled-grin. He tells the photographer about a condition he has, a rare condition. All of his facial expressions and reactions

are mixed up; he has had it since childhood. When he is angry, sometimes he may laugh, sometimes cry, sometimes sigh. It is like this with all his emotions.

"What is it called?"

"Nothing. There's no name."

The photographer, after a moment of confusion, keeps going—click, click, click—and the model snaps his shutter back, and rolls of film are spent, pictures of them together, pictures of them both in the mirror, doubles, triples, quadruples of the men, cameras merging into cameras. The photographer wonders if he will be able to tell which of them is which in the prints.

The photographer notices the clenched jaw, the slumped shoulders, and tears in the eyes of his subject as they continue to shoot.

"We need to get naked," the model says. "I'm getting impatient."

"Yeah, we can move into nudes. But I'm not getting naked."

"We need to see each other naked. To see how we match up."

"I know what I look like naked. I'll just tell you if we match."

"We need to understand each other," the model says and drops his pants.

The lack of underwear surprises the photographer. The lack of circumcision does not.

The model unbuttons the rest of his shirt, takes it off, then his shoes, his socks. Naked. The photographer can't help but stare deep into the other man's belly button.

"Get naked."

"Fuck you, man. I'm not getting naked."

"So that's the idea. You get me in here, get me naked, take my picture, take advantage of me?"

The photographer can't see what is in the model's eyes, can't read the inflection in his voice, can't read the body language, can't understand the man in front of him. This scares him—that he can look at a person with no discernible difference from himself and not know what the other person is thinking or what he had thought or done: to not know the why of the man. He can look in the eyes and understand nothing. In the lips, and nothing. At the skin exposed... nothing. Hear the voice. Nothing. The words. Nothing. He is naked and nothing. But not an ordinary nothing, not a nothing of absence, it's a scream, an inescapable, all-consuming nothing.

Looking at the naked man before him, the photographer asks what he means by "take advantage."

"You are taking photos of me and forcing me to expose myself, without exposing yourself. It is unfair," the model says.

Again, the photographer doesn't know what to say. They stare. The pause between them reaches its ninth month, the doctor thinking c-section, before the photographer averts his eyes.

"Can we keep going?" The photographer says. "Or am I exploiting you too much, hurting your sensitive little temperament? It

was you who wanted to take your clothes off, and, if you remember, it was you who showed up at my studio with a camera saying you were my model."

The model doesn't speak. Feeling emboldened by what he takes as a victory, the photographer prods again: "Have you gotten over your ego? Done with the prima donna bullshit?"

The model doesn't speak.

"Are we going to do the nudes?"

Neither man moves. Miles Davis's trumpet burns a note and fades into the din of the band. Sweat trails down both men's faces, yellowing the edges of their collars.

"What do you want me to say now?" The photographer screams.

When the model answers the question, his voice flutters through the taut throat of rage before turning into a lullaby-like sound: "I know things about you."

"What?"

Silence.

"What!" The photographer screams again.

"I know what you are, who you are." Pause. "A narcissist."

"What are you saying? You need to shut the fuck up, and get the fuck out of here, man," the photographer says. He turns and over his shoulder: "I don't know what you are talking about. I'm gonna cut you a check and you can go. This is done."

The photographer goes to the smaller room and walks to his desk.

"I don't know why you're telling me this."

"Because it's everything. Don't you see? Nothing is cut and dry. No black and white. Red maybe," the model says.

"What does this have to do with anything?"

The model grins, his eyebrows rising.

"Do you bleed in rhythm?"

"You're high."

"Can we find out what rhythm?"

"If you're looking for drugs, I don't have any."

"Is it four-four, two-four... are you—" Pause. "Are you a seven-eight man?"

"Just leave or I'm calling the cops."

"I know you murdered a duck."

"What?" The photographer scowls.

"Waded into a pond, squeezed all the life out of its little neck. Watched the pile of feathers float." Laughing. "Did it just to exercise your superiority. Give yourself a place in the world. Told yourself it was for art." Startled, paranoid eyes. "I know about you, about the wife you left for a younger woman, a woman you stayed with for two weeks." Crying. "I know about your dad hitting you. I know about you stealing rolls of film when you were young." Scowling. "And I know that you get the youngest models you can find, convince them to do nudes and then seduce them. I know you."

"How the fuck do you know this shit? Who are you?" The photographer says, backing up.

"Who."

"What?" The photographer is still backing up.

"No, who."

"What are you talking about? Are you fucking stalking me?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"To find your rhythm. Do we share a rhythm?"

"Are you threatening me?"

Now: the photographer is backed against the wall, against his self-portrait, against him. He's in the mirror. He is him. He is not him. He is afraid of him. The model is the one naked, but the photographer feels exposed. He doesn't know the man in front of him, but the man knows him. This can't be. No one can know him. He is separate unto himself, an individual, and for another to know him, would destroy that self. If another knows him completely, knows everything, is him, then who is he? How can he go on existing?

"Tell me what I'm going to do, if you know so much about me."

"Who is I?"

"What?"

"I? I. I. I. I, I, I. Roman numeral one. You know: I, me, the first word in identity, take away the id and it's an entity, a solipsistic we. Get it? I, yourself."

"Who the fuck are you? Stop talking about you and I."

"It's interesting though, isn't it?"

"What?"

"That you and I don't exist without anyone else, because you and I, whatever those words mean are just, everyone we have ever met and all these things we've been taught by other people, so really we are all just mixes of each other. You don't exist without your parents or lover or the guy who sold you a hotdog three days ago. You see? It's horrible isn't it, only knowing that you exist, that's all that you can know absolutely, but knowing that without others you wouldn't exist at all? So are the other's just you, or are they really there and if they are then who are you? You can only see yourself through these things you can't truly see."

"I've had enough of your goddamn head games. Just tell me what is going on."

"You don't get to know what's going on. You can only guess. You can only see the reflections of what's going on, not the reality. That's how it is. I didn't start it or choose it. But that's it."

"Just tell me how you know about me. I haven't told people all of that. I have to know."

"You don't get to."

The model walks forward, and the photographer can't backup anymore. He doesn't know why the model is walking towards him.

The model's face launches into a manic cacophony of emotion, arching eyebrows, sneers, smiles, tears, scowls, his skin bending, contorting as expressions ricochet off each other. He moves right up in the photographer's face, five inches between the noses, and stops. The photographer isn't sure if the tobacco breath he smells is his or the model's.

"Don't threaten me," the photographer says, only loud enough that it reaches the other man's ears.

"I'm the one who should feel threatened." He sticks his hand in the photographer's pocket and takes the screwdriver out. The photographer tries to stop him but can't.

The photographer cowers.

"You don't understand how it weighs on you to know, to have someone else's joys and failures, their tragedies and hopes all piled on. You only can handle your own. It's all one person can take," the model says and promptly plunges the screwdriver into his own neck. The blood gurgles out, spurting from the jugular onto the floor, and the trumpet pours blood into the air, the drums beating out the pulse, the bass in the veins, the puddles of red growing, clouds of it expanding, being swallowed by the red of the floor.

Stumbling back, he looks at his own face pressed cold against the cement, blood covered. He looks at his shirt and sees the blood that sprayed all over him. He doesn't know what to do with the body, who to call. If he leaves, perhaps the body will be gone when he gets back. Perhaps, so he grabs his blazer and walks to the door and takes the elevator to the street. Did this happen? he asks himself again and again. He doesn't know where he is going, or what, exactly, he will do.

He steps onto the sidewalk and begins to walk, the breeze cooling his face, tossing his hair about, the blood splattered on him seeping through the fibers of his shirt beneath his blazer. Around him as he walks: a man with ill-fitting shoes, a cop waiting out his pension day by day, a girl talking with her best friend, the best friend holding a secret between them, and further, out on other streets, other cities, derelicts, hookers, junkies, workaholics, charity workers, droves of nine-to-fivers, newlyweds, cancer survivors, single parents, CEOs, you... All the heads bob to the rhythm—the left, right, up, down, of shoes along the sidewalks and all of it with the idiosyncratic pulses in the multitude of hearts and veins... and none in unison.

A walk into the woods

by Ashley Minyard

I travel in it
I am made of it
and
it
is
made of me...

Precipitation of melancholic-drowned rainclouds
atmospheric wonder
we are made of lightning
we are sustained by thunder.

It is cataclysmic
my pulse,
raging against my ribs
inviting in the salt
that makes up the
effervescence
of stars
to find home
in my lungs.

Strong and inevitable,
like father Ponderosa
deep-rooted
solid
nested in
the earth,
feeding on wisdom
of a planet
that never speaks in words.

Should the roots grow
into that which is known?
something haunting?

With my eyes
I shall wonder what it is I will see:
for the cornea is structurally sound
embedded in
my lavender miasma
shining to the world
already green.

Much like the root of a tree
my eyes are connected
to my most internal organ: mother earth.

The diving mist creeps
along the sullen wet earth
like it's part of its mystery
not a hindrance of wonder.

Shutter-struck,
this is
what it is:
the trembling pulse of a world untouched
but suffocated
still
by the world that surrounds it!

Star-gazing fields
are awake
watching closely
a raging cumulus
moving
over head
it
opens its mouth
awaiting heaven's emotion.
It unravels
its skin
preparing
for
a
breath
made by clouds

Into the woods I went walking

....
I am awake

A San Felipe Memory

by Allison Riley

Running madly in the dusty wind,
 slipping down the soft dunes,
 a watercolor wash of sand
 swept the mile out to the sea;
 The sky was blinding overhead,
 as we danced in the white-hot wind,
 And whooped our piercing cries
 charging the mile out to the sea.
 And in the town the air hung thick
 with filament and promise,
 strung up among the paper lanterns in the street,
 between the firecracker vendors,
 the coca-cola stand and carniceria;
 a surreal world unknown to us 'til now-
 in this sparkling foreign universe
 of street artists, children,
 prostitutes and beggars.
 We were Tom and Huck together,
 battling pirates, slaying enemies,
 blasting bottle rockets in the white Mexican sand
 (my hands always a bit too close).
 I scraped my shin on a fence post,
 and you laughed as it dribbled red
 against my cold white flesh, water-chilled
 and throbbing. *Suck it up, you said, rub some dirt in it.*
 You laughed, but still walked me to the tent,
 two of my hobbling steps for every one of yours.
 You wiped my cut with alcohol
 (more for your enjoyment than mine, I suspect)
 and patched me up, like big brothers do.

Manastash



The Hours Passing

by Bethany Staten

*Chi dara fine al gran dolore?
L'ore.*

*Who will put an end to this great sadness?
The hours passing.*

Mark Z. Danielewski, *The House of Leaves*

Phone Call

I am a sophomore in college and it is early September. I've had my brother's number for three months, but I'm too afraid to call. Too afraid that when I talk to him he will tell me, in a strange new voice, how much he has changed and experienced in the past six years without me. On I-90 heading west to my dad's house for the weekend, I finally call him. The phone rings and rings, and I begin to hope that he won't pick up, that I can just leave a message, when a deep voice answers.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Justin, this is Bethany. Your sister. Remember me?"

He laughs and responds, "Of course I do. How are you doing?"

Before I have a chance to respond, a voice in the background on Justin's side of the phone asks a question I can't quite hear. Justin answers, "Hold on, I'm just talking to my sister."

I don't hear the rest of their conversation. My heart expands and then drops into the pit of my stomach. I smile so widely my cheeks begin to hurt. My vision begins to blur, the highway in front of me turning into a smudged watercolor, and I realize I am crying.

Justin returns to our conversation. "Hey, Bethany, I am at work right now. I'll call you back later, okay?"

"Sounds good. Bye, Justin."

"Bye, Bethany."

He doesn't call back and I cry later on because of that, too.

News

It is the beginning of December. I am home visiting my mom. I am in bed sleeping when my phone rings. When I open my eyes it is too dark to see. My curtains allow only the soft glow of pre-dawn light. My phone continues to ring, and I realize with a jolt how early it must be. I scabble to find my phone with a sense of urgency now, amid clothes and clutter.

I finally grasp it and sit up, muttering a sleep-laced, "Hello?"

Manastash



“Bethany? This is Dad,” he replies quietly through the phone. I can barely hear him, but something in his voice makes my heart stutter, pause and then continue on with a frantic, uneven beat.

Something has happened and I know it with a quiet, uneasy certainty that comes to rest somewhere deep within my bones. I begin to panic before he utters another word. “Dad? What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Justin,” he pauses, and the rest of his sentence chases itself around in my mind, all ending with the worst possible conclusion. I want to scream for him to continue, but hope and pray and wish that he does not. “He was in a motorcycle accident, going ninety miles per hour. He hit the side of a car and was thrown from his bike. His body hit a stop sign, and, and...” My dad cannot continue.

I can’t breathe. I can’t think. Nothingness settles down upon me, and I sit in my dark room, my mouth agape, my mind replaying a scene with a stranger and a motorcycle, my body numb.

“No,” I repeat the word, over and over again until it blurs together and no longer makes any sense.

“I read all of this on Justin’s mom’s Myspace page. Raelene and I haven’t talked since our divorce, and she didn’t feel it was important enough to tell me my stepson died. I’m so, so sorry. Go back to sleep.” He hangs up before I can reply. I do not care.

My fingers clasp the phone tangle, and I realize I am gripping it so tightly that it is creaking from the force. As I lower my hand, a heavy weight dislodges itself from somewhere near my heart and sinks into the pit of my stomach.

Funeral

I am not invited to my brother’s funeral. No one tries to contact me, and so I take it upon myself to visit Raelene’s Myspace page. It is riddled with pictures of Justin, and at the very bottom, after all of the condolences from people I have never heard of talking about how much they knew and loved my brother in a way I can no longer relate to, the address and time of his funeral. The funeral will be Thursday, two days from now. I copy down the address and prepare to leave. No one is expecting me, and if I get lost somewhere on the way, I will have no one to call for assistance. I don’t care. I need to see him again, one last time.

The drive is quiet and without complication. I arrive at the chapel a half hour early and sit in my car, unable to leave it and face reality. I sit in silence and wonder if anyone will recognize me. As I think about what my brother will look like, still and silent, I imagine that he didn’t die at all. He lives with me, and he is still my brother. We talk about everything and nothing at all, and petty fights flow in and out of our conversations with the ease of the passing years as

we grow up together. When he gets bored, he texts me. When a boy breaks my heart, Justin threatens to kill him for me and tells me I’m better off. We sit in a room in complete silence, but he is there and so am I, and nothing else matters.

The sound of a barely familiar voice forces my attention outside of the car. It is Raelene with an unfamiliar man with black hair and thick eyebrows. They are holding hands. I look everywhere for my younger brother, Alex. I had hoped so much to see him, too, to sit by him in front of Justin’s coffin, my arm around his shoulders, the distance between us forgotten. We would come together as brother and sister because of the loss of Justin and stay that way for the rest of our lives. I don’t see him. He didn’t come. I finally exit my car and follow her into the chapel, but she doesn’t notice me. Last time we stood side by side, the top of my head barely reached her shoulder. I am taller than her now by at least a head. I feel like a ghost.

The chapel is cold and still, the same temperature as the world outside. The beige carpet is soft below my feet. In front of me is a table littered with Justin’s things. I see the movie *Romeo + Juliet* among the pictures and knickknacks Justin held dear. It is one of my favorite movies. We could have watched it together. Next to the table is a tri-fold board decorated with pictures of Justin. I scan the board and see pictures of unfamiliar faces, smiling and happy next to my brother. I see no pictures of myself among the years depicted on the board. It’s like I never existed.

Justin’s casket is made of a light-colored wood, and it’s all I can look at when I first step into the viewing room. Not him. The pews are filled with people I don’t recognize. No head turns with recognition as I pass. The face I look down upon is unfamiliar, distorted by his death and the six years since I last saw him, and nothing like the pictures I’ve seen. He has a goatee and beard. I would have never imagined my brother with facial hair. He doesn’t seem real, and I try to pretend like he’s not, that this isn’t really my brother but someone else’s. It has already been so long.

His fingers are broken. Looking at him makes the bile rise in the back of my throat. I want to throw up but realize I probably shouldn’t. Too impolite.

All around me are strangers. People I have never met. People who know my brother better than I do. Most faces are dry. I feel obscene sobbing so loudly. They saw him five days ago. They had the chance to hear his laugh, recognize his voice, know his favorite movie, wish him happy birthday. They have had years to get to know him and days to mourn his passing. I have been mourning for six years.

The Best Revenge

by Jeff Suwak

The smile gave him away. I couldn't forget that smile if I tried.

It was in a place named Trudy's in a dead end town across the river. I was over that way on business and got out of the meeting later than expected. There was a championship fight on that night that I didn't want to miss. By the time I got out of the meeting, the sky was getting dark, and I knew there was no way I'd make it home in time for the fight, so when I saw Trudy's neon sign flickering beside the road, I figured I'd give it a shot.

A dim, jaundiced light cast shadows at weird angles over the dozen or so people slumped over stools inside the bar. Their heads lifted momentarily at my entrance, flat eyes swimming in the bad light, and then slumped back down again. The place stank of decades of stale smoke. They only served canned beer and rotgut wine, multi-colored bottles of the stuff lined up neatly along the wall behind the bar like exotic brands of antifreeze.

A guy at the far end of the bar eyeballed me from the moment I walked in, as guys in places like Trudy's are wont to do. I ignored him, ordered a steak and a beer from the wrinkled redhead behind the bar, and asked if she was getting the fight that night.

"Yep," she said, slid over an unopened can of beer, went into a freezer beside the bar, and walked back to the kitchen with a frozen slab of meat in her hand. The guy at the bar watched me throughout the exchange. I measured him up from my peripheral.

He was your typical ex-jock. Big, meaty shoulders, habitual forward lean due to too many bench presses and not enough back work. Flab that had once been muscle hung off his bones like rubber sheets on a clothesline.

I guessed he didn't like the way I was dressed. I looked like someone who has money, because I do. Guys like him hate guys that have money. It reminds them of the imaginary forces that ruined their lives. I felt him watching me and I knew he had bad intentions. I cracked my beer and took a drink and watched the television.

The common misconception of many idiots like him at the bar is that anybody with money is a pussy. You can't tell them otherwise. Even after you kick the shit out of them, they won't accept it. It's a matter of divine justice in their minds. They need to believe there is some kind of balancing factor in the universe. The idea that a guy can be better looking, better employed, AND kick their asses is just too much for them to bear.

"Who do you like in the fight?" He called over.

"Evans," I said.

"Evans?" He sneered. "You must not know shit about fighting. Garcia is the most talented pound-for-pounder in the world."

"Yeah, but Evans is the toughest."

"Evans is a bum. It won't last past the first round."

"Maybe not, but if it does, I guarantee Evans wins."

"I guess we'll see," he smiled, and that was the smile I could never forget. *Holy shit*, I thought, *it's Edgar Beavers*. He was heavier, and his hairline started farther back, but the smile hadn't changed a bit in twenty years. That smile had haunted me for more than half of my natural born life.

Edgar terrorized me from kindergarten to junior year. He'd been blessed with a mutant thyroid gland and was always twice the size of everybody else his age. He hit puberty somewhere around the fifth grade. It happened overnight, too. One morning he just walked in and was suddenly six feet tall and had hair on his balls. He'd strut around the locker room naked waving his hairy nuts in our faces. He was the meanest bastard I've ever known, meaner than any grown man I've ever met. He wasn't a bully. Bully is far too benign a term for what he was.

Edgar went on to become the biggest football star the town has ever seen. His picture was in the local sports page every weekend. The girls squealed whenever he walked by, and the boys cowered. He had everything going for him: popularity, athleticism, a rich family, but none of these things ever fulfilled Edgar. No, his true passion lay in the torment of his fellow human beings, and that was the only thing that could ever truly satisfy his soul.

I was an easy target. My father was a drunk, my mother was dead, and my jacket sleeves came up two inches short of my wrists. Plus, I was poor, so none of the teachers gave a shit what happened to me. So it was that I became Edgar's favorite object of torment.

To his credit, Edgar was no dumb brute. He had an aptitude for bullying that bordered on genius, possessing the subtlety of a true artist. He once had a cheerleader pretend she liked me, record our telephone conversations for weeks, and then play the tapes at parties so everyone could hear me confess that I was a virgin. That stunt alone ruined my hopes of a social life forever.

By tenth grade I accepted the fact that I would never have a normal life. I resigned myself to simply survive until the end of high school. But that wasn't enough for Edgar. It would never be enough for him, not until he snuffed out every last remaining shred of my dignity. For weeks I offered no resistance, but Edgar probed deeper. He wanted to find the last nerve left alive in my heart, and grind it under his cleated heel. Near the end of my sophomore year, he found it.

I was walking to class when he shouted across the hall that the reason my mother had killed herself was because she'd given birth to a retarded son. Without a thought I dropped my books and charged him, swinging blindly, only vaguely aware in my blind rage that he was hitting me, too. I got on top of him somehow and was in such a frenzy that I didn't even notice the security guard pulling me off until he spun around clumsily and attempted to put me in some kind of wristlock. Slowly I regained my awareness. Nobody was wristlocking Edgar. It was just assumed that I was the one to blame.

I stood there, blood running down my face, staring in disbelief. The guard kept shouting. Edgar smiled at me over his shoulder. The whole school had gathered around us. The guard said something about me being on drugs. Nobody was holding Edgar back. He just stood there and smiled. He was rich and popular; he could do no wrong. Me, I was just some loser with bad teeth and short sleeves.

All at once the cold realization hit me that this was how life was going to be, forever, and that there was no escaping it. It wouldn't end at high school. It wouldn't end after. It would just keep on going. The world had been rigged for me to lose. The other team had home field advantage, the best equipment, and all of the referees on its side.

Without initially realizing it was happening, I started to cry. It started with a sob, then became this kind of pathetic little whimper, and then the tears just started flowing. The harder I tried to hold them back, the harder they came. I was powerless to stop it. I just stood there with the whole school watching, blubbing like a little baby.

Edgar burst out laughing. The rest of the kids followed suit. Even the security guard snickered. I turned and ran out of there. When I got outside I kept running. I ran until I got sick, then I ran some more, and I didn't stop until I was miles away from that place. I never went back there again.

In one way or another I kept running for a long time afterwards. Eventually, though, I stopped. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and learned how to fight. I found a new school, a new life, new talents that I had never known I had before. But I never forgot. You never forget things like that, not really. You just find deeper places to hide them.

And now, by some incredible coincidence, here he was: Edgar Beaver, the bane of my youth, sitting at the far end of the bar smiling that goddamn smile. It was like the gods were granting me some kind of reward. I didn't know what I was being rewarded for, but only a fool turns his back on that kind of divine gift.

Now, I've heard it said that success is the best revenge, and I

will not argue that that may be true. But for me, personally, kicking the shit out of someone has always been far more gratifying. So I sipped my beer, watched the television, and contemplated the proper way to proceed.

I couldn't just ask him outside. Only low lifes go around picking fights. If you want to do it right, you have to get the other guy to pick it. It's a delicate art. Luckily, I am well versed in the nuances of the craft. I never did anything but smile.

As soon as the fight started on television I had the bartender bring Edgar a beer. He looked at me kind of funny, nodded his head, and turned to the television. I just kept smiling. At the end of every round I bought him another beer, and gave him another smile. After every smile I took another bite of steak. It tasted better than any steak I have ever had in my life. I can remember it to this day.

Evans was winning, just like I said he would. He got beat badly in the first, did a little better in the second, fought even in the third, and then started taking over. Edgar grew more and more enraged. The longer the fight went, the angrier he got and the more beers I sent. By the end of the eighth round Edgar had five beers in front of him, plus the one in his hand, and it was clear that his fighter was going to lose. I bought another beer and this time I raised my own in a toast, winked, and drank it down.

He was out of his seat and halfway around the bar before he realized it was a bad idea. He read my body language, my eyes, and knew that he'd been set up. He knew that I wasn't afraid. More importantly, he knew that I wasn't afraid because I had good reason not to be afraid. A man can sense the difference between real confidence and fake confidence in a situation like that, just like silverback gorillas fighting for dominance. Somehow, when the testosterone begins to flow, we just know.

He realized he'd been set up and slowed his stride a bit, but it was too late for him to turn around. His friends were watching, and if he turned back now he'd look like a coward. Guys like that have nothing but their barroom reputations to stand on. They'll risk death to maintain them.

He said something threatening. I got up and walked outside. He followed. The whole crowd shuffled out to the parking lot and formed a ring around us. Edgar puffed up, gestured profanely, shouted and pounded his chest to try to mask his terror. He was doing all that he could to drag the affair out until somebody stepped in. One look at the inebriated apes surrounding us, and I knew no one was going to break this up. Edgar finally accepted the inevitable and came after me.

I let him swing some haymakers, slipped them, stepped away from his sloppy attempts to tackle me, and watched him get tired.

It didn't take long for him to slow, and finally to stop completely, standing there with his arms low and slack at his sides, gasping for air.

I didn't need him tired to take him out. I could have done it at anytime. I just wanted him to know, and everyone else too, that this was all that Edgar Beavers ever was: a one-round knockout fighter late in the tenth, gassed, with no energy, with no guts, a guy that didn't have what it took to go the distance. I let him feel that for a bit, let his friends see it, and then I shuffled into position for the left hook to the liver.

Most men in a fight will swing for the head to try to get a flash knockout, but if you really want to give somebody a hurt that stays around for a long time you go for the body. Those shots linger, they make a guy piss blood, they make him toss and turn at night trying to find a halfway comfortable position to sleep in. You get a guy with a good body shot, and he'll remember you for days.

I thought about telling him who I was, but decided not to. It didn't really matter if he knew. It only mattered that I did.

I took a step forward and uncorked the left hook, felt the solid, satisfying crunch of it sinking home. Edgar let out a gargled scream and fell to the gravel clutching his side, eyes wide in shock at the pain. I watched him squirm there for a few seconds. The crowd was silent and embarrassed at his whimpering. They stood around looking uncomfortably at each other wondering if they should do something. I walked through them, got in my car, and drove off. It was dark by then and the sky was full of stars.

A few miles down the road I turned the radio on and heard that Evans had knocked Garcia out late in the eleventh round. "Garcia just didn't have what it took in the later rounds," the commentator said. "Even in this day and age there just isn't any answer for a hard-nosed fighter with a strong work ethic and unwavering determination."

"Damn right," I said, turned off the radio, and kept driving.



Superheroes Anonymous

by Rhonda Watts

Characters:

FLOYD, Captain Valor

PAM, The White Raven

GREGORY, one half of The Incredi-Twins

CRAIGORY, the other half of The Incredi-Twins

FELICIA, Probability Girl

BASIL, Superheroes Anonymous group leader

Scene: The basement of a community center. A table with a pitcher of water and a stack of paper cups stands to one side. The characters sit in a semi-circle on metal folding chairs. The superheroes wear civilian clothing and stick-on name tags. Basil wears a black turtleneck and skinny jeans and has a soul patch. He reads from a clipboard.

BASIL: Okay, people. First of all I'd like to welcome all of you to the first ever meeting of Superheroes Anonymous. Welcome. Welcome, welcome! A little about myself. My name is Basil and I, just like all of you, used to be a superhero. I know it can be hard to adjust to normal life after you hang up the tights, but that's why I'm here to help! So now why don't we go around the circle and introduce ourselves. *[Standing]* Hi. I'm Basil, and I'm a superhero. *[Sits back down; turns to Craigory on his right]* Now, how about you?

CRAIGORY: *[Clearing his throat]* Uh, okay... do I have to stand up?

BASIL: If you feel it in your heart.

CRAIGORY: Oh, um, no... no, I don't feel it in my heart. *[Basil shrugs and smiles]* Okay, well, hi. I'm Craigory and I'm a superhero.

BASIL: Hi, Gregory.

CRAIGORY: No, not Gregory. *Craig-ory.* *[Points to Gregory]* That's Gregory. *[Gregory gives a small wave]* See, our mom, she wanted to name us Greg and Craig, because they rhyme. But Greg is a nickname for Gregory, right? So she figured Craig must be a nickname for Craigory, so that's what she named me.

PAM: Oh, you're brothers!

GREGORY: *[nodding]* Twins.

FELICIA: *[jumping up]* Is it hot in here?

[Felicia walks quickly to the water table and pours herself a cup, gulps it down, then pours another, which she drinks while the others continue talking.]

BASIL: Ah, twins. Why don't you tell us your story, Craigory?

CRAIGORY: Well, being twins was part of our identity--

BASIL: Of course, you feel defined by your twin, you feel you can't be your own person... classic child psychology.

CRAIGORY: No, I mean it was part of our super identity. We're the Incredi-Twins.

[Felicia pours herself yet another cup of water and gulps it loudly, still holding the pitcher in her other hand.]

PAM: *[To Felicia]* You okay, sweetie?

[Felicia nods.]

BASIL: Go on, Craigory.

CRAIGORY: Okay, well... About ten years ago we discovered our powers... well, we thought they were powers. Now it's more like a curse. See, I can move stuff with my mind, and Gregory can--

BASIL: Let's let Gregory tell his own story.

CRAIGORY: Oh, okay... so, uh, you know, everything was great for a long time. We saved a few cities, defeated a few super villains... everyone loved us. But then, about two years ago or so, I started... I don't know... *changing.*

BASIL: Changing? How?

CRAIGORY: I wasn't just using my power for good anymore. See, I used to only use it to move really heavy stuff that I couldn't pick up myself. But now I was using it to pick up the TV remote... to make the fridge door open and a beer come out and into my hand... I got lazy.

BASIL: *[sage]* Ah, yes. The most common superhero pitfall.

CRAIGORY: So, yeah... that's why I'm here.

BASIL: You're in the right place, Craigory. Let's all give him a hand, shall we?

[Everyone claps. Felicia throws her cup away and, still holding the pitcher, returns to her seat. She drinks from the pitcher as the conversation continues.]

BASIL: *[Looking at Floyd]* Now, you've been awfully quiet, sir. Would you like to go next?

FLOYD: *[Already sitting tall, he straightens even more]* Oh, all right. Hello, everyone. My name is Floyd, and I am *[heroic voice]* Captain Valor!

[Everyone looks at Floyd meaningfully. He notices their expressions and drops

his bravado just a smidge.]

FLOYD: Sorry. Old habits, you know.

BASIL: That's okay. Hi, Floyd. Well, of course, we all know who you are, but why don't you tell us your story, anyway?

FLOYD: Very well. I was born on a cold winter's eve to a young Romanian woman with a--

BASIL: You don't need to tell your *whole* story. Why don't you start with when you discovered your abilities.

FLOYD: Oh. All right. I was a young man of nineteen. I fell from a fourth-story window, and, as I saw the ground rushing toward me I had enough time to think, "I wish I could fly," and the next thing I knew I was. Flying, I mean. So, of course, I had to find out if I had other powers. I can run extremely fast and I am very, very strong. Plus, I'm not too shabby at Jenga, but I don't think that's because of my powers.

BASIL: Mmhmm.

FLOYD: So, anyway, My experience was much like Gregory and Craigory's. I fought crime, I prevented disasters, and, most of all, I rescued people. That's what I became addicted to.

BASIL: Rescuing people?

FLOYD: [*nods*] Yes. It got to the point where I was rescuing maybe forty, fifty people a day. Sometimes they didn't even need rescuing, but I couldn't stop.

BASIL: Wow. Thank you Floyd. Let's give him a hand, everyone.

[*Everyone starts to clap, but they are interrupted by a loud SCREAM offstage. Floyd, Pam and Felicia all jump to their feet. Gregory and Craigory look alarmed. Basil looks panicked, but not because of the scream; it's because he's lost everyone's attention. He tries to call them back.*]

BASIL: Now, everyone, don't worry about th--

FLOYD: Someone is in danger! We must help them!

BASIL: No! Sit down!

[*Gregory and Craigory move closer together and talk in hushed whispers to each other. Floyd begins to pace quickly. There are more screams, then a cry for help.*]

SCREAMER 1: [*offstage*] HELP!!! OH NO!! WHAT IS THAT?

SCREAMER 2: [*offstage*] It's a MONSTER!! Run!!!!

[*More screaming.*]

FLOYD: [*stops pacing*] Okay, everyone, what are your powers? We

need to figure out how to defeat this monster, whatever it is!

PAM: I am the White Raven! I can become invisible and I can manipulate electrical charges.

FLOYD: Can you propel them in bolts? [*Pam nods; Floyd turns to Felicia.*] And you?

FELICIA: I'm Probability Girl.

[*Everyone stops and looks at Felicia blankly for a second.*]

FLOYD: And that means...?

BASIL: Everyone, please, we need to calm down. We've been making some breakthroughs, but if you all go and use your powers now, we'll lose all that progress!

[*Everyone ignores Basil.*]

FELICIA: It means I can calculate probability, odds, fate. Sometimes I can even change it.

CRAIGORY: [*in awe*] Cool.

FELICIA: [*blushing and giggling*] You really think so?

BASIL: [*standing*] People, please! Have you completely forgotten the reason you are here? You're supposed to STOP BEING SUPERHEROES!

[*They finally turn their attention to Basil, gaping. Floyd stares at him hard, a spark of recognition.*]

FLOYD: Hey, I know who you are. I'd know that shout anywhere. You're my arch nemesis, the Crude Cretin!

BASIL: I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just--

PAM: Hey, you're right. It is him. I thought he died in that meteor storm a few years back.

FLOYD: So did we all. But that must have been part of his diabolical plan.

BASIL: We really need to get back to--

FELICIA: Yes! He wanted us to think he was dead!

GREGORY: So no one would bother him while he made the next step in his plan to rid the world of superheroes forever and take control!

[*Basil stares at everyone, wide-eyed, panic rising.*]

CRAIGORY: Superheroes Anonymous was just a ploy, a way to get us to stop using our powers!

FLOYD: [*a horrified gasp*] To stop *rescuing people!*

97 words for mahmoud
ahmadinejad

(6/20/09, Tehran, on CNN)

by Xavier Cavazos

since
you
are
a civil
engineer
i will
try not
to be
evil

however
since
the elections
this
must be
said

never
again

Neda

in the streets
of Tehran

the men
that huddled
around
you

their arms
spears
of resuscitation
on your chest

never again
Neda

you
already
in black

BASIL: All right, fine. You caught me. I am the Crude Cretin. You have divined my evil plot. But you can never stop me! The monster that rages outside will soon destroy the entire city, leaving nothing but blood and dust! You will never be able to defeat me! BWAHAHAHAHAHA!

FLOYD: You disgust me.

BASIL: BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

FLOYD: Come on, everyone! White Raven, Probability Girl, Incredi-Twins! With our powers combined, we can rid the world of the Crude Cretin and his vile beast!

[The superheroes surround Basil, who shrinks down, collapsing on the floor.]

BASIL: Ahhhhh! Noooo! No! Nooo... [his head falls to the ground, then silence.]

FLOYD: Now, for the monster! Follow me!

[A battle cry as the superheroes rush offstage.]

THE END

Manastash



Manastash

you already
Neda
 the divine

Neda
 the voice

Neda
 the calling
 of
 your
 name

never again
Neda

never
nunca
nada

nothing y
nadie
 which means no one

there is no one
 like you
Neda

nadie
como
tu

no
no hay

nadie
nada

nothing
nunca

never
 never

No.



The Pretty Dress

by Ashley Minyard

Open me up
 And glue me back together,
 rubber cement
 leaves surgical smells.

Sometimes I feel less whole
 mutilated,
 covered in scars,
 wasted with bad choices.
 And those times
 that we call *sometimes*
 my muscles feel tight;
 I shudder.
 Earthquake in my spirit
 throwing off my equilibrium
 causing a sickness
 that makes me feel fatal;
 false.

Grinding my teeth.
 Chewing on rubber.
 A stubborn feeling in my chest
 I cannot budge.
 The anemic
 fragile flap
 that covers my heart
 stretches and bends,
 weighs me down
 caves me in.

It is a bit much
 so I shut down externally
 the eyelids on my internal person
 open...

Sometimes I hate these feelings I have to feel:
contain and appease
fairness, have to, broken...
 Empty words that *feel empty*
 that *feel* lost.
 for all eternity.

On my knees
 there is a hole in my heart.



I wish I could stand
but the wind will carry you my scent.

Rubber cement leaves surgical smells.
And I never wanted to smell broken,
To be reeking of your glue,
I wanted to be pretty,
Just pretty....

That is why I wore this dress.



Pity and Burnt Chicken

by Brianne Kreppin

Shelley worked in an ice cream parlor across the street from Dave's Car Wash. Her dark tan stood out amongst the pale northwesterners around her. Her brownish-blond hair was always pulled into a tight ponytail while she worked, swinging down her back as she flitted from the 24-flavor ice cream case to the cash register, smiling and chatting the whole way. On the rare sunny day, Shelley stopped while wiping down tables to turn her face up to any sunbeams that made it through the sticky finger-printed windows.

In the three months Shelley had worked in the ice cream shop, she had mourned the fading of her tan and bleached her hair platinum blonde in defiance of the cloudy skies. As much as she missed the sun, Shelley didn't miss the busy streets and crowded city she'd left behind in California. The Northwest had clean air and downpours she had thought only existed in movies. California had sunny beaches, but sunny beaches reminded her of her of one heart-breaking moment with Paul.

The sun reflected off his hair, bringing out hints of gold and red that were invisible indoors. He was facing the water, hands hanging down at his side, palms spread wide. Shelley always wondered if he worshipped some personal god of the morning waves. He turned when he heard her bare feet padding through the sand, a smile crossing his face that was all for her. And then in a moment he was gone, sprinting towards the waves. She chased after him, catching up before he veered his course, heading for the lighthouse several miles down the coast. It'd been like that as long as she could remember, Paul and her running along miles of beach before anyone else had stirred. Something about the sunrise and ritual they had should have been romantic. Shelley had wished it was. She'd dreamed of the lovely story she'd tell her children when they asked how mommy and daddy met. Childhood friends who, one day while drinking orange juice and watching the sunrise, had realized they were in love. Instead, during his first year at community college, Paul fell head-over-heels for Lauren Elizabeth Martin.

The bell on the door jingled with a welcome distraction. A few youngsters wearing jerseys and one haggard looking mother came in. Football season was in full swing. Shelley was glad for the interruption, a brief reprieve from remembering the wedding. She scooped nearly perfect vanilla ice cream balls into a stack, then draped it with hot fudge. On top she swirled whipped cream carefully into a spiral like the ones she saw on waffles and pies in commercials. A sprinkling of nuts and one cherry for the center

of the swirl completed her masterpiece. Shelley pretended she was Michelangelo when she built towering sundaes, carefully putting the lid on to-go orders so as to not disturb the nuts nestled delicately in the whipped cream. Ringing up their order, she smiled and wished them a wonderful day. She'd gotten good at faking happy. She wished she'd perfected the skill before the wedding. Maybe then she wouldn't have...well, Shelley stopped herself. She'd promised herself she wouldn't dwell on the past.

The jukebox in the corner of the ice cream parlor clicked and whirred starting up "I'd Really Love to See You Tonight" by England Dan and John Ford Coley. Shelley took the opportunity to sweep the floor, singing almost inaudibly as she danced with the broom. She wished she could sweep the moment Paul had told her he was getting married, was in love, into some back corner of her memory. Her disbelief had been plain, but Paul hadn't understood. He assured her that even though he'd only known Lauren for a few months, they were a perfect match. They both loved bowling and Pink Floyd, they both hated olives and scary movies. Perfect. Shelley and Paul had shared the beach; Lauren had ruined the California beach as effectively as she had ruined Shelley's chances at happily-ever-after with Paul. Shelley tried to be angry with Paul, who had faithfully met her for her morning run and waited till the sun was just breaking the horizon to tell her the news. She couldn't blame Paul, though.

Shelley's content memories turned on her; pleasant moments with Paul were tainted by her self-pity. The sweet way he'd helped her learn to camp, setting up tents and lighting campfires in the little fire pit in his back yard. They'd never used the tent; instead, they slept under the stars enchanted by the constellations. Paul had told Shelley the stories behind the upside-down queen Cassiopeia and the chained lady Andromeda. Often Shelley would stop by Paul's house and find him concentrating intently in the kitchen. His father had died from complications of diabetes when Paul was only eight, and it had become his dream to make everyone he met healthier. He wanted to open up a healthy restaurant in some trendy part of California. Shelley loved sitting at the island in the kitchen and taste-testing as he went. He'd cook a recipe dozens of times till he had perfected it. He was patient like that. For her 18th birthday, when she'd been fascinated by Chinese art, he'd made eighteen brightly colored origami cranes and hung them all around her house so she found them in the most unexpected places all day. He'd been her best friend.

The clock finally hit 9 p.m. and Shelley absent-mindedly began closing up. The door jingled as she locked it. She preferred to walk home after late shifts. Even in the cold weather, she still enjoyed the sounds and feel of the night. She was in no hurry to get home. No one would be there. It was on her walk home Shelley let her mind

wander back to the wedding day. She'd been invited of course, as his best friend. Lauren had offered to make her a bridesmaid, but Shelley had declined.

"It's your day!" she'd exclaimed. "I'm sure there are people you want close to you." She'd carefully avoided being involved in the wedding, not sure she could sit through it without crying tears that would obviously not be polite snuffles of joy. She had convinced herself at the time she was going to put on a good show, rationalizing her absence would be harder to explain than any emotional outburst. Looking back, she knew she went simply to assure herself that Paul was in love with Lauren, that she never had a chance. As if by causing herself enough pain, she'd finally be able to let go.

The thick wood door leading to the groom's dressing room was chipped and scratched from years of abuse by church-goers. Shelley studied the long grains running up and down, curving but never meeting. Her cheek was pressed against the door and her hand hovered just above the door knob. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop; instead she had leaned against the door for support, feeling herself fall apart before she could even wish Paul well. With her eyes closed she listened, shocked at the conversation floating out.

"I just don't know. Can you marry someone not knowing if you really love them?"

"It's just cold feet," his brother Eric reassured, "Everybody gets a little skittish."

"She proposed to me, you know? I thought maybe we'd be engaged awhile, give me a chance to sort through everything..." despite the thick door Shelley could hear his sigh as clearly as if she were in the room. Shelley held her breath, willed her heart to stop beating so she could hear what would come next. Her imagination ran wild. He could still snap out of it, decide he was madly in love with her instead. Or more likely any moment he would open the door and tell her it was all a joke, he'd known she was listening. He wouldn't even understand what a cruel joke it was.

"You're serious?" Eric sounded surprised. "You know you don't have to do it. Well, mom will probably disown you, but I was always the favorite son anyway." Eric was teasing, he never took anything seriously. He didn't know the right thing to say Shelley thought, but she did.

"I love you," she said after pushing the door open just enough to see his face. In probably the scariest and most humiliating moment in Shelley's life. Both men stared at her. She couldn't read Paul's expression; his face looked like it had been paused mid-transformation. Eric was easier to decipher as he looked back-and-forth between Paul and her. He was, Shelley realized, amused. He gave Shelley a wink and slid past her in the doorway.

Shelley unlocked the front door to her apartment, reluctant to go inside to another night of insomnia and inevitably poor late night TV. She flipped a light on in the kitchen to start fixing dinner. She'd already prepared the ingredients and now readied a pan to cook chicken parmesan. It was Paul's favorite. Every little thing she did brought Paul to mind. Her new life in Washington was a chance to start fresh. Create new memories. So far, after three slow months, she hadn't done much in the way of moving on. Shelley would breathe a sigh of relief when she was able to forget about Paul for any period of time, and always immediately regretted thinking about him again. She'd turned down her co-workers' invitations to go out. She just couldn't muster the energy after a day of smiling at customers to make idle conversation about the latest movie (she hadn't seen) or the coolest new band (she hadn't heard).

Shelley shoved the pan of chicken in the oven and sank into a bean bag chair on the floor. She stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars dotting her ceiling in carefully plotted constellations, her only personal touch in the room, and reluctantly let herself fall into her nightly routine of punishing herself with her own stupidity. She knew now that's what it was.

When Eric had left them alone, he'd left them in silence as well. Shelley could do nothing but watch as understanding dawned first on Paul's face followed closely by shock, finally his face conveyed the most painful emotion of all for Shelley, pity. His whole face softened as he struggled for words.

"Shelley..." her name hung in the air. In the end, he had to look away before he whispered, "I'm sorry." He didn't have to say more. She understood.

Even with all the doubts about Lauren, he still didn't love her. It wasn't Lauren's fault. Shelley had no one to blame but herself. She had waited too long, not done enough to show him how she felt. Tears of humiliation and a broken heart welled up in her eyes. For the first time in her life, she ran away from Paul, the man she'd always been chasing.

The talk started the next day. A friend of her mother's had stopped by and casually noted how she'd missed Shelley at the wedding.

"Busy with graduation plans?" She inquired, making it clear she expected to be contradicted. Shelley had merely nodded and hid in her room. The more depressed she became over the next few weeks, the more she seemed to notice people's sideways glances. Her parents noticed, but made no ground in attempts to discover what was wrong. High school graduation caught Shelley almost by surprise, dragging her out of her depression only long enough to wonder how she had reached such an important milestone with so little to show

for it.

Shelley roused herself from the beanbag chair as the oven timer beeped angrily. Pulling the dish out, she saw with dismay she had burnt it. The chicken would be dry. She set it on top of the oven to cool. She had never been able to cook like Paul. She had never had his patience. She had been the one who had gotten bored after Paul, and she filled Eric's room only half full of balloons. The prank, to have its full effect, really required completely filling the room. Eric had made them feel like amateurs when he had plastic-wrapped their bikes together and then managed to set them in jello using a kiddie-pool and the walk-in fridge at his work. For the first time in a long time, a memory that included Paul made Shelley smile. It also reminded her of her escape from California. Her escape from being watched and her escape from being reminded.

The day after her graduation, Shelley was home alone. She almost didn't answer the door; there was no one she wanted to see. Her friends had stopped calling and stopping by after weeks of being ignored. Compared to Paul, they were little more than acquaintances anyway.

"Who is it?" Shelley yelled from behind the door. It was easier to get rid of people if you didn't open the door.

"It's Eric, and if you don't open the door, I'm going to assume you're being held hostage against your will and call in S.W.A.T."

"I'll be waiting when they break the door in" Shelley called back. Eric was the last person she wanted to see: the only witness to her impulsive confession.

"What if I happen to have a tin of my mother's mint brownies? Does that sweeten the deal?" Eric was nothing if not persistent. Shelley opened the door. Paul and Eric's mother, who she'd grown up calling by her first name Mary, had probably sent the brownies over as a graduation present. They had always been her favorite. Eric was holding not only a familiar cookie tin that had frequently been passed back and forth between the two families, but also a gift wrapped in shiny yellow paper. Shelley raised her eyebrow.

"I just want to go on the record saying that I in no way helped pick out your gift. You know how my mom is, no daughter to spoil... Open it now so I can report back on how girly and excited you are about it."

"Alright, alright, hand it over. In fact, hand over the brownies, too. Last time I let you hold mine they all had bites out of them when I got them back."

"I didn't technically eat any of your brownies!" He made the familiar claim, holding his now free hands up in defense.

"It counts if you eat half the brownies, even if you don't eat

a whole one, jerk.” Shelley glared ineffectually as she struggled with the ribbons. It took scissors and some shredding of paper to get the present open. Inside was a scrapbook carefully filled with pictures of Shelley, Paul, and Eric as kids, newspaper announcements of sports games and honor roll, as well as photos from the graduation ceremony. The front was inscribed with a nice dedication, *The daughter I always wished I had*. Shelley knew it was meant to be nice, but in light of recent events, the idea of being Mary’s daughter was painful. Eric peeked over her shoulder shaking his head.

“Good thing she only had sons or I don’t think I would ever have made favorite child. Aww, geeze, are you tearing up? I’m telling her you were so disappointed by her present, you cried.” Shelley slugged Eric in the shoulder, sniffing a little. “She has to know, I told her you would like a check better!” He laughed as he dodged the next half-hearted blow. Shelley was relieved that Eric had not changed. He never wavered once in his light-hearted banter, treating her the same as always.

“Tell your mom I loved it,” Shelley said, managing a smile.

“Will do, kiddo. Oh, and before I go, I wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Sure, if it’ll make you leave, I’ll move mountains.”

“A friend of mine is leaving for Peru, year long mission trip. He’s keeping his apartment up in Grey’s Harbor while he’s gone; well, his parents are keeping it for him. Damn expensive way to store stuff if you ask me. Anyway, he asked me to look after the place. I told them I didn’t have that kind of flexibility, but I knew a gal who would make a great house-sitter.”

Shelley had turned Eric down at first, but as days slipped by, and she found herself doing nothing but wallowing, she’d caved. Now here she was, apartment sitting. Of all the people who had tried to help Shelley, it was funny that Eric, who didn’t seem to have a care in the world, would understand what Shelley had needed. But was she wasting Eric’s kind gesture by simply wallowing in a new place? She asked herself the same question every night.

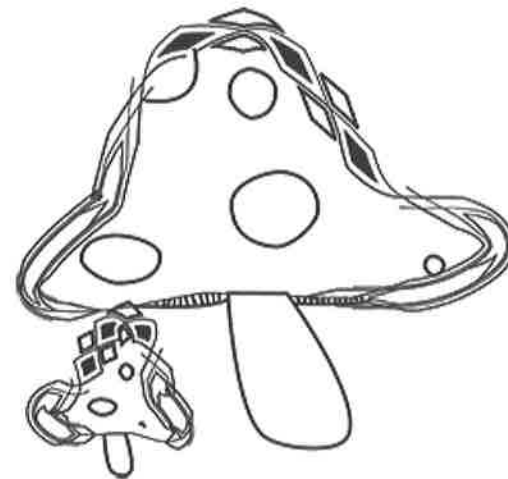
Shelley was grabbing a plate from the cabinet when someone knocked on her door. She was so startled the plate fell and cracked on the floor. Shelley opened her door wide unceremoniously to inspect her surprise guest. Two girls she’d seen often coming in and out of the apartment next door stood smiling with a two-liter bottle of soda and a pizza.

“Hiya neighbor,” the short brunette holding the root beer chirped. She had on a teal shirt with the picture of a platypus and “WTF?” printed in block letters. The taller girl had lighter brown hair that curled just short of her shoulders. She was wearing the kind of shirt tourists buy with a picture of the Canadian flag.

“You’ve been here awhile and we realized we’d never really been introduced, I’m Molly and this is Kate.” The girl in the platypus shirt continued, acting as spokesperson. “Want to join us for some pizza at our place? It’s Hawaiian!”

Shelley paused, getting ready to turn them down, when she caught a whiff of the burnt chicken cooling in the kitchen. Eric would tell her to stop being such a pansy, the thought made her smile.

“Yeah, sounds great. One sec.” Shelley stopped by the kitchen, scraping the burnt chicken parmesan, Paul’s specialty, into the garbage can before grabbing her keys and heading out the door.



Vodka Circus

by Julie Thomson

At nine p.m. the vodka circus rolls in,
one shot.
Two more shots follow, and the clowns show.

They blur as they dance to the beats,
their laughter is contagious.
I laugh with them, and our inside jokes.

The music is loud as we take turns in the ring,
a shot or two more.
We spin and twirl to the beat in our ears.

Our feet leave the ground a few times,
falling acrobatically.
Someone catches us and we are tossed upright.

The motion feels fluid and almost elegant,
in a drunken stupor.
Our most dangerous act is coming up.

We jump on to the silver immobile elephant,
a topless jeep.
Hanging off the top and out of the sides at full arm's length.

The red and blue spotlights on us immediately,
though the elephant is sleeping.
There is a request from the new audience for a death-defying stunt.

The tightrope blurs as we teeter on the edges,
in need of a balancing pole.
We walk only a few feet before we fall to the ground.

The blood-curdling scream is not from a scared audience,
but from a fellow clown.
The scream is of laughter, and the crowd applauds.

The Vodka Circus rolls in every once in a while,
requesting an audience.
The music plays, and the clowns still show.

The tightrope event that led to a
minor violation
Has been canceled due to lack of interest.

Why We Serve

by Nicholas Conley

The razor slid down his cheek, cutting a path through the foam coating his face, leaving a bare streak. His mind wandered as he went about his morning routine, cleaning himself. Another pass of the razor swept away more foam. The faint aroma of coffee brewing in the kitchen drifted in through the doorway to the bathroom. His girlfriend, Amanda, would soon have breakfast ready. He winced in pain as the razor bit into his skin as he shaved. Muttering a curse of annoyance under his breath, he touched a couple fingers to the spot on his jaw cut by the razor. There was a little blood but nothing serious, just enough to form a droplet that fell into the sink, streaking the white porcelain red. The stark contrast of the colors made the blood even more vibrant. He stood transfixed by the sight of his blood in the sink. A haunted look passed over his face like a ghostly veil as his eyes became locked on the blood. His hands began to tremble as memories resurfaced. He steadied himself on the sink but was unable to look away from the red line on the pale porcelain.

He was no longer in his bathroom standing over the sink shaving. Now he was standing over another sink, this one in a tent in the middle of the desert, with his hands covered in blood. He was dressed in desert fatigues with patches of earthen colors from tan, to brown, to black. The front of his fatigues were drenched with blood so thick it almost appeared black in the light let in through the small hole covered in plastic that served as a window. He felt numb standing there, a gruesome sight, with the water running into the sink. No one would have thought him weak if he had fallen to the floor crying right then, not after what he had gone through. For some reason, he was unable to cry. He couldn't make himself believe that it had really happened. It was impossible. It was only with a great effort that he was able to push his hands under the lukewarm water and begin washing away the gore.

It had been like any other day in the desert. The oppressive heat was a constant discomfort that made the most mundane tasks nearly unbearable. Wearing full combat gear as they did on patrols was torture, and unfortunately for private first-class Eric Windmere, it was his unit's turn to make their rounds. The soldiers gathered together around a large tan humvee. The massive vehicle was an imposing sight to begin with, but the soldiers on the military base had welded all the steel plates they could get their hands on to give the people riding inside more protection. The extra plating gave the humvee the look of a knight's armored warhorse. Even stationary, the humvee seemed to be pawing the ground waiting to charge

headlong into the enemy. While the soldiers waited, the topic of conversation drifted from one thing to another, never resting on any one topic for long. Complaints, however, were always a popular topic to come back to.

"How do they expect me to kick some insurgent ass, when they don't even give us all the shit we need," one of the soldiers said, kicking the humvee to emphasize his objections.

The soldier in question was one private Jordan Ramirez. He was a relative newcomer to the unit. Eric didn't have much time to get to know the new addition, but then Ramirez didn't give people much of a chance to get to know him. A loud and bombastic young guy, the most he ever said about his home was that he came from the inner city of Los Angeles. Ramirez liked to boast and made sure that everyone around heard him. He had the presence of someone trying desperately to look bigger than he actually was.

"Quit your bitchin', Ramirez," the lieutenant said, walking up to the humvee. "We got a job to do, so we do it."

"Sorry, sir." Ramirez stuttered a little too quickly for his façade.

The lieutenant spread a map over the broad armored hood. He was going over the area they would need to patrol to make sure everyone knew where they would be in case things took a turn for the worse and they had to make it back to base on their own. The patrols were all routine now since the fighting had all but subsided. Mostly the patrols were hot and uncomfortable work that just needed to be done. They weren't likely to encounter any trouble as they were only going to be a few blocks from the base.

"We don't even get to ride around today," a soldier standing next to Eric muttered. He was a friend of Eric's from home, a lanky man who couldn't weigh more than a hundred and fifty pounds named Sean Jefferson. They had been classmates in high school and both enlisted in the Army when they graduated. Joining the Army was something Sean expected to do throughout his life. Sean's family had a history of military service, but Eric was the first in his family.

"Maybe they just want you to lose some weight," Eric responded, mockingly.

"Take a good look at the map. I'd hate to have to come looking for you because you got lost," Sean said, jovially rising to Eric's challenge.

"Maybe you should hold my hand." Eric offered.

"Shut it, you two," the lieutenant interrupted them.

"However, they bring up a good point. I don't want anyone getting complacent out there. Let's get this done safely so we can come back and get out of this gear. Hooah?"

"Hooah!" the unit shouted.

Despite being raised in a strict military family, Sean had a soft heart. He wasn't as enthusiastic as some of the other soldiers at the prospect of combat. He said every day he could serve his country and not fire his weapon was the day he was most proud to be a soldier. He had fallen in love with a girl from his hometown and had asked her to marry him before he deployed. Sean was in a hurry to start a family, and he talked about his fiancé often. Eric thought it was a little ambitious to believe that anyone could start a family so soon after graduating from high school. Nevertheless, when Sean talked about his fiancé, it was plain for Eric and anyone else listening just how struck Sean was with her.

Eric's unit moved out away from the base to begin their patrol. Many of the men were eager to get underway so they could get back to the base and shed their gear. They walked along the streets, taking in as much of the area as possible. The drab earthen colors of the brick and mortar buildings looked as if the whole city had been shaped out of the very desert that surrounded it. Various stalls owned by merchants were the only source of color. Many of them were selling rugs and tapestries that would have been even more vibrant than the surrounding buildings, if not for the light coating of dust that muted their color. The sharp contrast between the walls of a building and its windows made the soldiers uneasy. The walls of the buildings reflected the light of the dominating sun overhead. The glare from the walls made the windows look like black pits, devoid of all light. The sunglasses the soldiers wore helped to cut down the intensity of the sun's overpowering brightness, but the glasses still left the windows too dark to see through. It was impossible to see if there was anyone standing in the window looking out. Eric often wondered how many windows he had seen that had death inside, sharpening his scythe and patiently waiting to cut him down. It was an unnerving thought, to say the least.

There was not much talking between the men. They were keeping their attention on all the people around them. Every movement of the people in the crowd caught the eyes of the soldiers trying to spot an ambush before they were caught by it. Every quick movement, every person darting into or out of an alley way kept the soldiers ever alert. Every time a woman flapped a rug out of a window to clean it, the soldiers' eyes darted to the noise. An innocuous shout between friends across the crowded market sounded to the soldiers like an enemy coordinating an attack.

But even with all the commotion, the patrol was turning out to be quite routine. The villagers were going about their day. Many people were milling about the market looking at the wares presented by the merchants. The crowd thickened the closer the soldiers moved to the market. They could see women at the market

gathering food for dinner. At first, Eric thought it was odd to see women completely covered from head to toe in cloth. Some of the women were covered so much even their eyes were hidden. Other women wore less to cover themselves, some even wore western style clothes, but all covered their heads. Eric learned later from one of the Iraqi translators on base the women did this as a sign of respect. There had been a few people who shouted at the soldiers in Arabic. Eric never learned Arabic, but that didn't stop him from being able to gauge the tone of the villagers speaking to him. With time, every soldier grew accustomed to hearing the more common words used to describe him, not all of them friendly. A person's tone of voice could convey hostility just as easily as a clenched fist. Eric picked up on a few of these words amidst the others. Most of the people Eric's unit passed, however, were content to ignore the soldiers.

From his position in the middle of the unit, Eric could not see the man who appeared out of an alley brandishing an assault rifle. The lieutenant, who had been at the front of the line of soldiers, stopped not more than a few feet from the man as he was bringing his assault rifle in line with the column of soldiers. Without any time to shout orders, the lieutenant raised his rifle and opened fire on the man. The sound snapped the rest of the soldiers to attention. They crouched down and raised their rifles, scanning for more enemies.

Eric's heart was pounding, and his senses were alive with the sudden rush of adrenaline. The people in the streets were screaming and scrambling for cover to avoid becoming collateral damage. The commotion made it hard to see if individuals in the crowd were armed or not. The soldiers had been stopped next to a wall that stood eight feet tall. The wall spanned the distance between two buildings and enclosed a garden area.

"Eyes up!" someone yelled.

"Shit, shit!" Ramirez muttered to himself, his usual hubris drained away, and his voice tight with fear. Ramirez let slip what they were all thinking.

Eric could see three more men with guns standing on top of the building across the street from them. The soldiers, with their backs to a wall, were like prisoners lined up in front of a firing squad. Eric's heart hammered as he gazed up at the figures on the roof through his rifle sights. The men on the roof opened fire. The soldiers responded in kind. Eric could hear bullets zipping by, making popping noises as they struck the wall behind them, showering the soldiers with flecks of concrete. The air became thick with the smell of gunpowder as the soldiers tried desperately to fend off the attack. Eric's basic training kicked in, helping to ease the panic back just far enough so he could fight for his life. He lined up the sights of his rifle with one of the men on the roof. He squeezed the trigger to let

off a burst that caught the man in the left shoulder just as another soldier's bullet caught the same man square in the chest. The man fell back below the lip of the roof and disappeared from sight. The soldiers' disciplined training allowed them to take steady aim at their enemies, whereas the men on the roof were trying to wash the soldiers away with a flood of bullets. Another soldier's bullet found its mark, striking one of the ambushers in the hand. He ducked behind the cover of the rooftop with a shriek, leaving his comrade standing alone. Before the soldiers could turn their attention to the last man, he turned and ran from view.

The whole encounter had taken mere seconds, but to Eric it seemed as if the terrible event would never end. His heart was beating so hard that it almost threatened to rip out of his chest. He checked himself over, looking to see where he had been hit. Those men had them dead to rights; he had to be hit somewhere. Satisfied he had made it through unscathed, Eric looked to the other men to see who was wounded, who was dead, and who was still alive. Amazingly, beyond some frayed nerves, everyone was unharmed.

The clatter of another assault rifle sounded through the streets again from an adjacent alley. Eric and his unit all turned in unison and fired on the new threat. The man was riddled with bullets and slumped to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Eric thought he heard a distant gurgle, but dismissed it as his imagination.

"Everyone okay?" the lieutenant called out.

"Christ, he's been shot!" another soldier cried out from behind Eric.

Eric turned to see who the soldier had been talking about. Panic seized him anew when he saw Sean lying on the ground writhing around with his hands clenching his neck. Eric dropped his rifle and knelt down beside his friend, placing his hands on Sean's neck as well. Sean's hands were already slick with blood, but with Eric there holding his neck, Sean grasped at Eric's vest and pulled himself up toward him. Sean clung to Eric as if that would keep him from dying. Sean's eyes were wide with terror, and tears streaked down his face. Eric tried to say something that could comfort his friend but nothing would come out past the shock and disbelief at what he was seeing. He was dimly aware of someone shouting orders, the lieutenant, most likely.

"Ramirez, get on the radio. Tell command we have casualties and to send transport. Taggart, Phillips, find something we can use as a litter."

Sean was trying to say something as well, but the only thing that would come out was a gurgle and a cough that spat blood into the air. Eric could guess what Sean wanted to say, that he should tell

Sean's family that he loved them. Sean's grip on Eric loosened and eventually his hands slipped away to the ground. His eyes no longer held the terror they had before. They were lifeless now. Eric's unit had traveled less than a hundred yards, carrying Sean's body on a door the soldiers had broken off its hinges, before they were met by a humvee charging through the streets.

When they had returned to the base and Sean's body had been taken away, Eric could only stand there, numbly, not knowing what to do. Sean's blood stained Eric's fatigues, and dripped from his fingers as he stood staring into nothing. He was barely aware of what was going on around him, even when someone walked right up to him.

"Windmere," it was the lieutenant "you okay?" His voice had an understanding tone, as if the lieutenant had been the one watching his friend die instead of Eric. Eric could only nod.

"Why don't you get cleaned up?" the lieutenant said, taking Eric's gear from him.

The aroma of coffee still drifted into the bathroom, but this time Eric was no longer aware of it. He sat on the tiled floor, his head in his hands, crying. Finally unable to hold in the grief of his friend's death, his breath came in ragged gasps between sobs.

"Hon, breakfast is almost ready," Amanda said as she came into the bathroom. She saw him sitting on the floor, crying, and without saying a word knelt down and held him to her chest. She lightly stroked her hand through his hair and whispered to him, "It's okay." Eric wanted to scream at her. How could it possibly be okay? His friend was dead. Sean would never be able to raise the family that he had wanted to have so badly. Eric had watched as Sean bled to death in his arms, powerless to halt the fates. She could never understand what it was like to go through the things he had. She could never know the fear of being in an environment where anyone could be your enemy. She could not know the anguish of seeing friends maimed by an explosive or killed during a firefight. The grief and terror was as much a constant as the uniforms they wore, like an ever present death shroud.

Eric thought once he was able to return home, he would be able to put all of the misery he suffered behind him. He wanted nothing more than to get on with his life, but the memories he wished he could shut away were as much a part of him as his own shadow. Eric thought he would go through a rite of passage and come back as a model citizen. He expected to come back to the accolades of his fellow Americans. What he returned to was much different. There were no more grand parades through the streets celebrating the return of the country's heroes. No more pictures of a couple kissing in Time Square on the cover of *Time* magazine. Not

even a misguided animosity that led people to spit on him and call him a "baby killer." All that awaited him was an empty expectation for him to be the same way he was when he left. This indifference that Eric saw in the people he thought would rejoice at his heroic sacrifice on their behalf infuriated him. Not only did the experiences Eric had during his time in the military leave scars so deep, they felt as if they rent his soul, but also the training he received forever excluded him from the people he was supposed to rejoin when he arrived at home. He was trained to gauge threats, to be suspicious, to fight, to kill. All this was dismissed by all but a few of the people back home. Everyone just expected him to flip a switch in his head and go back to being normal.

So Eric ignored all of his feelings and tried to bury the memories which haunted him. He tried to be what the people, and he himself, wanted. No one thought he wanted to talk about it; so he kept everything to himself. Eric tried to ignore the fact that he could not go into a room without knowing the exits or assess everyone who could be a threat. The behaviors he had been trained for lingered like a leash chained to a wall, keeping him from moving forward.

After Eric regained some of his composure, Amanda helped him up and then wiped some of the tears from his cheeks. She led him through the house, down to the kitchen where breakfast was waiting. Two places had been set on the table. One had a plate of bacon and eggs, with a cup of black coffee, and the other had a small bowl of cereal and a cup of yogurt. The warm scent of the coffee and food was comforting. Even though the food was colder now than when it was first ready, small wisps of steam curled up into the air from the plate. Eric sat down to his breakfast, and Amanda sat down to hers.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked him.

"Talk about what?" he said flatly.

Instead of pressing the issue, Amanda decided to change the topic.

"Are you excited for your interview today?"

"It'll be nice to have something to do instead of sitting around here all day," Eric said.

"I'm sure they'll be thrilled to have you."

"We'll see."

"Having been in the Army should look good on your resume. They teach you how to work well with others right?"

Eric shook his head with a mirthless chuckle. A silence fell on the table as Amanda tried to think of something she could talk about that might engage him.

"Remember that your parents are throwing your 'welcome home' party tonight at their house, so try to get home early."

“What’s to celebrate?” he said.

Eric sat for a long time, staring at nothing in particular on the table. The silence was thunderous. To Amanda, it seemed as if Eric was staring off at some distant place. It twisted at her heart to see Eric in such distress, but it could be worse, she thought. Finally, Eric roused himself from his brooding.

“I have to finish getting ready, or I’m going to be late,” Eric said standing up from the table, his breakfast barely touched. Amanda gave him a warm smile, hoping to thaw his cold expression as he left.

She tried to be understanding, tried to help him any way she could. She wanted to be there for him, but she was just happy to have him home. Even if “he” was someone who was different from the man she knew when he was deployed. Eric felt alone with only the memory of dead friends for company. He had forsaken the memory of his closest friend in an attempt to be able to fit into the role that was expected of him. The role he wanted to have for himself was the same as the people, but he was beginning to see just how insurmountable the past could be.

Maybe Sean was the lucky one.



Noticing the Onset of Fall,

The Boy Embraces It and Remembers His Mother

-for Mom, October 2009

by Josh McKimmy

Dead leaves whisking past his sneakers in their autumnal sweep
 Remove the boy from campus, from the windy hay country
 To Yakima Valley orchards, and urge him to pick from the tree a Red
 Pickers left behind, water-cored, ripe enough for cider, less crisp
 Than the air or wind that surrounds.
 Rocking to the rote motions of familiar footsteps
 His mind plays a slideshow
 Of fall’s colored leaves and sweet things
 That always arrive around his mother’s birthday.
 Yearly, she can count on nature’s gifts;
 He considers her lucky.

Nightmares in the coffee shop

by Sophia Worgan

It was thirty minutes after closing time,
 And I lounge in a warm pool of blood
 Watching as the fiend fondles presidents.

I heard him coming and
 Tried to escape through the window.
 My hair was caught in the trap of heavy fingers,
 ...*Rapunzel, Rapunzel.*

Backwards I fell towards the cold grey floor,
 My bones cracked like timber.
 I took the pain, hugged it close
 While thick red coated my mouth.

While I laid in my dilapidated heap
 My tears turned to sleep in my eyes.
 Tossing and turning, dreaming of

Happily ever after....

Graduation Night

by Jeff Suwak

Luke stood just inside the woods looking up at the full moon through a window in the treetops, waiting for Susan's mother to leave. Crickets chirped and buzzed all around him in their secret meditations on the suburban night. It was summer and the air smelled of fresh cut grass cooling in the humid air. Far away the highway hummed with cars, like waves rolling back on a beach.

The front door opened and Susan's mother appeared. She crossed the walk to her car, stiletto heels clicking the whole way. Luke stepped back into the shadow of a tree. She got into the car, started it, and backed out of the driveway. The headlights swung around and momentarily passed over him before the car drove off down the road. He watched the taillights disappear around the bend, waited a moment to make sure they didn't turn back, and crossed the street to the house.

Susan leapt out the door before he could knock and threw her arms around his neck. She kissed him all over his mouth, his nose, his eyes, hooked her hands into his belt and pulled him inside, kicked the door shut and pushed him back against it, kissing his mouth every time he tried to speak until finally he managed to blurt out, "Jesus Christ, what do I look like to you?"

"A piece of meat," she laughed, tackling him to the floor. She laid on top of him, clamping her mouth all the way around his and sucking like a vacuum cleaner.

He twisted his head to escape, but she only fastened her mouth to his neck instead and held tight, sucking at it like a toothless vampire, slurping and slobbering. Luke pried her face away with both hands and scrambled to his feet. He lifted his hands defensively, backpedaling like a boxer. "I don't want to do it woman, but I will."

She came after him like a demented suckerfish, chasing him in circles around the living room with her arms outstretched, smacking her lips together. He ran a few laps around the room before turning and tackling her in a headlock. She thrashed around frantically but could not escape. She tired, slowed, and finally went limp.

"You done?" He cranked the headlock on tighter.

"Maybe," she said, voice muffled in the crook of his arm.

"It's a beautiful night. We should go out on the roof."

She was quiet a moment. "Okay."

"No more suction mouth?"

No response.

"I'm not letting you up until you promise no more suction mouth."

Quiet for another moment. "Not for twenty minutes," she said, "but after that, I can't promise anything."

He held the headlock a moment longer, deliberating. "Deal," he said and let her up.

They laughed and Susan went to the refrigerator and got two beers from the freezer. They crawled out the window onto the roof of the back porch and laid on the soft, warm shingles looking up at the stars. A long field stretched away a hundred yards behind the house with another house at the end of it. Past that was the wood line with the highway just beyond it, headlights speeding through the dark spaces between the trees.

Susan sipped her beer. "It's a little skunked," she said. "Matt threw it in his woodshed like a month ago when his father came home in the middle of a party we were having. It's been in there ever since. It's not bad though."

He took a sip. "It's not bad."

"So I talked to my advisor today. She said that after you finish summer school you can go to community college for a while and maybe get into my school in less than a year. If you get good grades. She said there's a community college that has a matriculation agreement with the university." She smiled at him. Silver moonlight in all her raven hair. Her dark eyes like some ancient landscape. She said something but he did not hear what she said. Just looked at her face. That thing about her beyond beauty. The existential mystery of everything she did, everything she didn't do, as though the gods themselves had planted within her some unsolvable riddle for which he was doomed eternally to try to solve. They'd been together a year and a half and he still thought that way every time he saw her. Every time. "I got some brochures and stuff for you."

"That's cool," he said, looking away from her to the highway. "Is your aunt going to throw that graduation party for you?"

"I'm not sure, yet. But I think she will." She shrugged and sipped. "Know what's really funny? When I asked my advisor about you she said that if you had a hard time in high school you might have a really hard time in college. I just laughed. The teachers have no idea how smart you are."

"I'm not that smart." He shook his head. "I just think a lot about things that most people don't think about at all. It makes it seem like I'm a lot smarter than I am."

"You're so full of shit. Everyone knows how smart you are. The other day Charlie told me, Man, Luke's got balls to do so bad in school when he's so smart." She nudged her head into his arm. "My genius."

"I'm not that smart."

"Well, we'll see. I've got those brochures and stuff in my

bedroom. I'll go get it."

"Let's just sit out here and drink these beers. I'm ready for another one. Want another one?"

"I'll get it," she said, jumping to her feet and crawling back inside the window.

He shook his head and watched a little star floating just outside the moon like a balloon tied to it. The distant highway lonesome hummed. He wished she wasn't so beautiful. That wasn't true. But he wished he didn't love her like he did. That wasn't true, either. Goddamn it, he thought. Goddamn it.

She came back with the beers and brochures and sat close to him with the papers in her lap. She went through each item like a game show model showing off a prize. He nodded and mumbled, watching her face the whole time. "Sounds good, doesn't it? I think it's really cool. And the school isn't far at all from mine. It'll be like we're going to the same school already."

He sipped his beer. Opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind, sipped his beer again.

"Well?"

He looked away. Back to the star floating outside the moon. "I'm not going to college. I don't think I'm even going to summer school."

She was quiet. He couldn't look at her. He couldn't. He drank his beer and watched the trees.

"You're dropping out?"

He shook his head. "I think of it as going all in."

"What will you do?"

"I'm going to be a writer. That's all I ever wanted to be."

"I know. So why not go to school for it?"

"The kind of writers I want to be like didn't learn to write in school. They learned it from life. I want to be a writer like that. I want to see things."

"You can see things at school. We'll be in a different city. People come from all around the country to go to school there."

"It's not just about the people. It's about me. I want to see things. To see everything. I want to know what it's like to get lost in the desert. To hitchhike across country without a dime in my pocket. Those are the kinds of things I want to see and know." He stopped talking. Everything he tried to say came out sounding stupid, so he just hung his head and went to the old standby, "I'm sorry."

She popped her beer open and took a drink. They were facing away from each other but he was watching her in his peripheral vision. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. He always loved the way she did that. "You can go to school to be a writer," she said distantly.

"Not the kind of writer I want to be."

"You can teach English." She turned to him in excitement, as though she'd stumbled upon some perfect conclusion to their problem after all. "You could still write and you wouldn't have to worry about whether or not your books made a lot of money. You could teach and I'll work at the hospital. We could buy a house in the country so it's quiet for you to work."

"I don't want to be an English teacher that writes sometimes. I want to be a writer that writes all the time." The excitement disappeared from her face. His heart broke.

Susan took a big swallow of her beer, looking away. "What about me?"

His internal organs liquefied at her broken hearted tone, knowing he was responsible for the way it sounded. "I love you. I'll always love you and I'll never love anybody else the way I do you. It's not possible." He put one arm around her and pulled her close. She leaned against him but didn't hug back.

"We can't be together if I go to school and you go someplace else."

"I know that."

"Then why go someplace else if you love me as much as you say you do?"

"I don't know. It's just the way it is."

"Why?" Her voice cracked.

"I don't know," he said in frustration and pulled his arm away from her. They sat very close but not touching. He didn't know the answers to her questions and he didn't know what else to say. All he did know was that he loved her more than he could ever put into words and that for some reason it just didn't matter. "For me, being a writer is more than just writing. It's about a certain way of living and I can't live that way if I'm a teacher."

"But we'd be together."

"We'd just end up hating each other."

"I could never hate you."

"Yes, you can. It happens all the time."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. This doesn't make me happy, you know. It kills me. Just because I won't cry in front of you doesn't mean I won't cry. I can't explain it. It's like I don't have a choice. No, it's like I have a choice but the right one has already been decided for me. If I choose anything else I might be happy but it won't be any kind of happy that I'm supposed to be." He shook his head and stopped talking, knowing his words weren't helping either of them.

They were quiet. Sipped their beers. After a while she got up and crawled through the window. He sat there and looked at the

moon and its anchoring star. He finished his beer slowly, thinking of what to do. There was no sense in it. She was the best girl he was ever going to get. He knew that. She was the best girl there was, period. He knew that, too. Goddamn it. He finished his beer and went inside.

He found her curled up in the middle of her bed with the lights out and the sheets twisted and tangled around her like she'd been rolling around in them. She was facing the door when he opened it and rolled away to look at the wall when he entered.

He closed the door and slid his hands over the bed in the dark until he found her and then lay down in next to her. "Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Then what's wrong?"

"It's not you."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm scared," her voice cracked.

He pulled her closer. She started to cry.

"Don't cry."

"I can cry if I want."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, but I don't want to stop."

"You'll find a better guy. You're too good to be with me anyway."

"That's bullshit, but that's not even what I'm crying about."

"Then what?"

"I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Everything." The word seemed to jar something loose, and then she was really crying.

He rubbed her shoulder, not knowing what to say. Brushed her hair back from her face. Why the hell doesn't anybody ever teach you how to make a girl stop crying? he wondered. It seemed like he was going to spend half his life doing it, anyway. It would be nice if someone would give him a damn pointer or two.

She laid her head on his chest and wiped the tears from her face. "Why is everything so complicated all of a sudden?"

"I don't know," he said. "It'll be better when you're at school. You'll meet somebody else."

"My mother keeps telling me that. I told her I'm in love with you and she said oh, Susan, I was in love with a boy like that once, too. You'll get over it. There's different kinds of love. The man you marry will be a different kind of love."

"She's right."

"I know, but I don't want that," she started to cry again. "I want the kind of love we have. I don't want anything else."

"Neither do I," he said. "But I can't live the life you want to live, and at some point we have to get serious about that. It might as well be now. It's not going to change. Not for either of us."

"I know. Everything is just changing so fast all of a sudden. It's scary."

"Think I'm not scared? Hell, if you screw up, you wind up with a college degree at least. If I screw up I wind up in a ditch or something. Pumping gas."

He wiped the tears from her cheeks. First one, then the other. Smoothed out her eyebrows with his fingers. Leaned over and kissed her tentatively, not sure what the rules were, anymore. She laid there staring at the wall crying, eyes fixed straight ahead. Then, as if reaching some private conclusion, she rolled over and kissed him back hard.

He waited for her to do everything first. He did not take her clothes off until she took off his. He did not touch her anywhere unless she touched him in that spot first, and he did not go inside her until she guided him in.

It was like no love they'd ever made before, so intense at times that it was almost like they were fighting. Other times they stopped completely and just laid there, kissing softly, saying *I love you* over and over again into each other's mouths. She came that way, with their bodies barely moving. He followed soon after.

They lay naked in the dark and talked late into the night about everything except the future. They told every story they'd ever had between them, some of them twice, and they laughed like they hadn't laughed since the first night they professed their love for each other.

As the window blinds began to lighten, Luke glanced at the clock. Less than an hour to go before her mother came back.

Susan laid her head on his chest, looking up at his face. He ran his fingers through her hair, watched the gathering light turn her gleaming eyes blue. Car doors slammed and engines turned in their driveways. Birds sang. The young lovers laid in the very center of the bed glancing at the clock, each looking in secret as though pretending it was not there would make it so.

"Is that clock right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He kissed her.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you."

He pulled her close and squeezed so hard that he forced the air out of her lungs, but she only buried her face into his chest and did not stop him. He could feel her tears warm on his skin. He

brushed the hair back from her face, kissed the crown of her head.

Twenty minutes left until he had to go. Twenty minutes marking the final boundary between future and past. They clung silently together in that borderland with all that had been between them and all that would and would not be looming ahead, knowing that once crossed, the old country from which they came could never be reclaimed again, and with the sun rising outside the window, and the clock ticking away within, the lovers held onto each other as tightly as they could as though the world outside the bed possessed some terrible gravity.



Still a Boy

by Makaela Dokken

I'm 21 and I still don't make my bed.
 Dirty jeans lie collapsed on my floor, like fallen soldiers.
 An economics textbook picks a fight with Wolverine and Spiderman.
 The desk is pimpled with pens, paper clips, loose change, and unfinished homework.
 My guitar, my baby, cradled in its stand, waits for me to pluck her strings.

Spaghetti-O's will always be my favorite food,
 Though I've graduated from red Kool-Aid to Bud Light.
 No longer do I spoon my broccoli to the dog, or smash it in a napkin,
 My appetite is Armageddon.
 I politely inquire about dessert.

I'm 21 and Mario Kart will never get old.
 Rainbow Road, Moo Moo Meadows, I always come in first place.
 My research paper, half written, lingers on my computer screen.
 Not quite loud enough, my consciousness complains about my procrastination,
 If only I could research Standard Karts and Projectile Turtle Shells and Princess Peach.

I think bathroom jokes are funny.
 Clutching our bellies, spilling our drinks, my roommates and I cackle,
 Curse words and crude humor taste good on our lips.
 This couch is old and smells, but it's given us a place to laugh, to think.
 A nineties action flick flashes on the flat screen.

I'm 21 and adults still seem boring.
 They don't go to house parties and play six games of beer pong,
 Or have to decide between "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" and "Girls Gone Wild."
 I'll never stop listening to my heavy music, "that screaming crap."
 Glasses rattling, ears ringing, the beat of the bass in my chest – it's bliss.

My future is bright.
 The noon sun shines through my window and all I want is to pull the blinds shut,
 Close my eyes for just five minutes next to my girl.
 My boxers are all twisted.
 Just five more minutes.



The Bald Chimp Sestina

by Ashley Dykes

"Only if we understand can we care. Only if we care will we help. Only if we help shall they be saved." –Jane Goodall

Face pressed up against scratched glass walls,
I watch her. Clumps of coarse hair
gather below the climbing nets. Chimps are carnivores.
The clumsy toddler, gawking at my side,
recognizes a similarity: Susan the Chimp's hands are pink
and fleshy –playing with a sock monkey puppet.

She used to be a governmental lab puppet;
pharmaceutical big shots *used* her to get big on walls-
treet, by feeding her little pink
pills. Susan is barren –like sunburned men without hair.
It was just a small price, just one little side
effect. But the money hungry carnivores
will not suffer like their carnivorous
prime-ate relative. No, the puppet
will still be played, swayed from side to side
like a pendulum in front of a bored executive. Even safe walls
are still walls. Within them Susan's hair
falls out, revealing her: chapped and pink.

Men are pink
carnivores,
hairy
monster puppets,
building walls
out-side.

Susan sleeps mostly on her right side
with a cottony soft blankie. Her favorite color is pink-
like my daughter's curtains and walls,
like fresh salmon or raw sirloin served to carnivores
who dine out with their families. Or like a ballerina puppet
with tulle ribbons woven into her hair.

As an infant, Susan had a soft, white tuft of hair
on top. Back then she sat (for photos) beside
her performing circus cousins. Brilliant puppetry

by bendy muscular men in pink
speedos. Chimps are carnivores
who fish termites from holes in dirt walls.

From inside her glass walls, Susan's lost hair
is swept by carnivores as she watches us from the inside.
Her hands are pink, playful; in here she is her own puppeteer.



Manastash

Manastash

Out, Out, Brief Candle

by Ben Grogan

The wind tore around my body at speeds I could barely comprehend. Each air molecule was a soldier in a titanic army, launching an assault on my eyes until I could see no more of the world than an aqueous blur of colors. The rush of atmosphere past my ears drowned out any thoughts I might have entertained, subduing my consciousness to simple emotions. Exhilaration. Fear. A joy like I had never imagined before. The feeling of a first kiss, but in a context far outside romance.

A jerk, a quick pressure on my ribs, and the gaseous torrent subsided. Pulled from my reverie, I wiped my eyes and was delighted by what the new clarity revealed. The world sprawled out thousands of feet below me in a quiet stupor. The sounds of life didn't reach this high. Neatly plotted squares of crops dotted the landscape, separated by irrigation channels and crumbling roads. The word 'pothole' meant nothing up here.

I felt free from purpose, meaning. All that existed was that moment, that happiness. As I dangled from my parachute in the middle of the troposphere, I thought of Shakespeare:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time...

Macbeth's soliloquy drifted through my mind, as it had frequently done since I'd read the play a month prior. It seemed absurd to be thinking of literature while skydiving, but time as Macbeth knew it was earthbound. Until the gentle pull of gravity deposited me back on the ground, I was in a timeless world; the eternal expanse of the earth mocked the impermanence of life, the stress of mortal burdens.

I appreciated how different I had become from a not-so-distant form of myself. I felt like the world appeared to me at that moment: calm, secure. Stable, even though it was spinning like a top through its orbit around the sun. It felt like a petty pace, but I was hurtling through life at a reckless speed. I appreciated how different I was from Macbeth; I was not about to crash and burn.

In three years I would think of Macbeth and draw the stub of a candle, flickering flame and all, inscribed with my favorite line and have it tattooed on my arm. But I didn't know that yet.

I had never considered myself to be involved in an identity crisis. I wasn't confused about who I was, but that wasn't to say I was confident. It was my last year of high school, and I was anticipating major life transitions which I felt inadequately prepared for. Though I wanted to try something new, my introversion and lack of direction catalyzed a fear of breaking outside of the familiar. In one of the last classes of my high school career, A. P. Senior English, we were reading *Macbeth*, and it made me think about change.

I thought about what I had been. In middle school I woke up every morning wondering if that day was the day I would shoot myself in the face. It was a time I care not to remember, but think of often regardless. I rode the bus home each afternoon daydreaming about the simplicity of death. I hated my life. *Hated* it. I still don't know why. But I do remember the hopelessness. The feeling that there was so much in the world I had no understanding of or control over. I remember sitting through classes, absorbing every syllable that my teachers uttered. My thirst for knowledge was never satisfied; I enjoyed learning. But many of the facts, perspectives, ideas I was exposed to, sent me into a deeper state of loathing of the world. Why should we need a civil rights movement for people to be treated equally? Even after one, why are people still not equal? If religion is so great, why are so many wars fought in the name of God, so many people killed over something as insubstantial as belief? If chemistry has become so advanced, why is it so difficult to get cheap medicine to disease ravaged places in a time of global prosperity and easy transportation?

The world was a terrible place. It didn't make sense. Happiness was fleeting, arduous obstacles infinite. I saw no purpose in living if the only light at the end of the tunnel was death. A logical mind weighs pros against cons. Suicide? Pros: Get to the same place everybody ends up, skip everything in between. Bypass the human condition. A treat like finding a breath mint when your mouth tastes of garlic and cigarettes. Cons: squander a potentially satisfying life, should my outlook change. Like throwing away the lottery ticket before you see the final number.

How easy it would be to pull the trigger; not even have time to feel the bullet breaching my skull. No pain, no more worries, no regrets. I was smart, but even I couldn't think at 850 feet per second. The fantasy always ended when I thought of the aftermath, and not because I wouldn't get to live a full and satisfying life. Not everybody felt the way I did, and I was cognizant of the emotions other people felt. Empathy was the only thing holding me back. I couldn't stand the thought of what my death would do to my mother.

Picture: Mom walks into the house at 3:40 on a Tuesday afternoon. She is fatigued from eight hours of trying to satisfy an

ever-angry employee. He hates his life almost as much as I hate mine, and takes it out on her. It's too bad the union is barring her from sending him a pink slip. She thinks maybe she will go ride her horse to unwind, find the joy in life. She walks to my room, hoping that today wasn't as bad for me. Maybe she'll see me smile; a small act that carries enough weight to make her forget the stress she carries home from work. She delicately knocks on the half-open door.

"Ben, you in here, honey?" She pushes the door open and looks to my chair by the window. She sees my silhouette slumped over, head and arms resting on the windowsill, and thinks I'm crying.

"Oh Ben, I know this is a hard time for you. I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can get for you?" She walks into the room and sees small maroon flecks on the window, the even spray of a splatter painting; ugly art forever etched in her mind. The windowsill a reservoir of my vital fluids, a shadow on the wall from blood that slid down like a waterfall not long before.

"No. No no no no." The same word repeated over and over again, the more times she says it, the more she hopes it will change what I have chosen. Then she cries. She kneels down and hugs me, ignoring the half-congealed blood that smears over her favorite sweater.

Or maybe I was in the bathtub, so nobody would have to clean blood out of the carpet.

Maybe in the back yard, already rolled into a tarp before I pulled the trigger so that the police officers could pick me up and haul me away easily. Save Mom the trouble of actually seeing me. No, she would have to unroll it, not willing to believe the blue cylinder leaking crimson contained her son.

And then I couldn't end my life. I craved the convenience of death, the *satisfaction*, but I couldn't subject my mother to that. No other person brought any comfort or happiness into my life, so how could I repay her by throwing it all away?

After a couple years of that, I resigned myself to living. I still hadn't found meaning in life, but the depression had faded. Middle school ended, high school started, progressed. I thought I should have some general purpose, so I walked through the halls of Ellensburg High School wondering what significance my existence had. I could never answer that question, but Macbeth could.

Winter was ebbing away, and the students in Ms. Day's English classroom couldn't rip their eyes off of the melting icicles. The dead, monotonous gray of the Kittitas Valley in February weighed heavily on many of my classmates. Ms. Day walked to the

front of the room and leaned against the whiteboard.

"Today I'm giving you guys a break. Everybody get in a circle, let's have a class discussion." The students stared sullenly out the window, unresponsive. "Unless you would prefer a timed essay? I have a great one about the subtle motifs in *Macbeth*!"

The class sprang to life, and in an instant the tables were arranged in a lopsided circle. Ms. Day dragged a stool into the middle of the circle. "Julia, you're moderator. Today I think we should talk about the progression of Macbeth's character throughout the play."

Julia, my classmate and friend, bounced up to the stool as Ms. Day returned to her desk. The discussions we held while Ms. Day relaxed and watched were the best. It always progressed the same way: we would start talking about a book, then quickly fly off on philosophical tangents. Ms. Day never made any attempts to retard our motion away from the topic or correct us back to our prompt. I slouched down in my chair, prepared to watch the rest of the class argue about who-knew-what. It never failed to entertain me. I wished I still had some Vicodin from my neck surgery to help me relax.

I drifted off until Tyler began to read:

...And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

The power of the statement caught my attention. I injected myself into the discussion and followed along on my neighbor's book. Tyler finished reading and started rambling, so I flipped to the end of Act V to read the passage again to myself. I was intrigued.

"Macbeth was obviously upset about his wife offing herself!" Mandy said.

On a good day, Mandy, my arch-nemesis, had to do nothing more than think of speaking before I was ready with a retort. Suddenly energized by the soliloquy, I was feeling feisty. Every cynic likes to play the devil's advocate, a role I reveled in. For the first time, I raised my hand. Julia granted me permission to speak.

"That's not what it looks like to me... The guy pretty much just said it doesn't matter. I don't think he cares about Lady Macbeth at all at this point, he doesn't give a shit about anything." I turned towards Mandy and looked her in the eye as I spoke the last few words, directly to her. She didn't like that much. We started bantering;

she got upset and I got excited.

Mandy was squat. Had her hair not been short and black, she would have borne a slight resemblance to an Oompa Loompa. Once in a while I would picture her wearing a frizzy red wig and chuckle to myself, feeling only slightly guilty for how cruel the image was. Her patience and temper rivaled her sub-par height, which I found convenient. Getting Mandy riled up was one of my more enjoyable high school past times. It was easy to do; she was very opinionated. Even if I shared her beliefs, I would happily adopt the opposite stance in an argument. All for the sake of facilitating discussion, I told myself. This time, however, I actually believed what I was saying. Macbeth meant every word of that soliloquy. And then it hit me.

After waiting my entire high school career I finally got my answer from a treacherous noble. I knew my place in the world. My purpose was to jump through the hoops of life and die. The utter simplicity of it stunned me. It didn't matter what I did with my life. Whether I did nothing or accomplished great things, I would die and be forgotten, nothing more.

This was where Mandy and I were fundamentally different. The concept of nothing liberated me. I could only imagine how Mandy felt about it; I put myself in her shoes. Mandy was a devout Christian, almost to the point of zealotry. Her life was based on the hope that when she died, there would be something else waiting for her. Something better. And all the mysteries of the world could be conveniently explained by God. The thought of everything she could accomplish and experience being erased with her life was unbearable. She couldn't accept that there was nothing, so she chose belief. And then I knew religion was not for me. I was pleased by how the word of my savior, Macbeth, could be so terrifying to others. I didn't need a purpose.

Macbeth had just delivered the punch line: life's a joke. I laughed.

Mandy cried. The bell rang, signaling the end of class. I looked at her for a moment and left.

As I floated down to the earth, I started laughing again. I had never seen the world from this perspective before. Everything was so miniscule and irrelevant, I felt as though I had transcended the shackles of society. Though gravity was tugging me steadily back to the ground, I didn't feel like I would be trapped back in my old routine of worry, doubt, and insecurity. Because none of it mattered anymore. Macbeth had taught me that after your life has been lived and your body is spent, death is there to release you. I had not

changed, but my perspective was fundamentally different. I didn't care about the purpose of life, so I could better enjoy the experience of it.

Until the world had looked so small, jumping out of a plane 10,000 feet in the air, I hadn't fully appreciated Macbeth's observation that I was nothing but a "poor player... signifying nothing." The cars below were starting to take distinct shapes again, no longer the image of walking shadows on the ground. The sights and sounds of the real world invited themselves back into my life. I took the handles of my parachute and tugged, experimenting with how the chute jumped and bucked in different directions. I guided myself towards the landing field, and with the ground now close I realized how fast I was actually falling. I snatched my legs up to my chest and skipped along the ground on my butt, leaving ragged grass stains on the jump suit. I sat in the grass for a moment, savoring the flight and not trusting my legs. When I stood up at last, the world was back to normal. The trees, the birds, the people, each so big and full of life.

I will never forget how small it all looked from up in the sky. How small we really are.



About the Contributors:

Xavier Cavazos owes most of what he currently knows to the English Department faculty here at CWU and has been accepted into the M.F.A. Program at Iowa State University.

Stefan Milne ... [sic]

Shannon Thorp graduated from Central spring of 2009 and is currently interning with Campus Crusade for Christ.

Julie Thomson is a CWU graduate with a BA in the English Writing Specialization. After graduation, she moved to Connecticut where she is continues to write in her spare time. She hopes to work her way into publishing one day.

Austin Gunderson is a senior undergraduate majoring in Film and Video Production at Central Washington University. He was homeschooled by his parents through high school. In 2005 he was promoted to the rank of Responder at the Intl. ALERT Academy, and in 2008 he graduated with highest honors from Green River Community College.

Bethany Staten is a soon-to-be Central graduate and a hopeful teacher candidate. Besides teaching, her passion is writing, especially those things that she has never been quite able to come to terms with.

Allison Riley is an English Literature major attending Central for the remainder of her B.A. After graduating she plans to return to California to complete her degree in French, Education and begin a Ph.D. program. She loves her fiancé, talks about her cats too much, and thanks Bob Dylan for a soundtrack to life.

Ashley Minyard is a double major for Central Washington University and a connoisseur of all things literary and imaginative. She spends most of her time with her husband, looking for art and exploring Washington State. She enjoys chocolate milk topped with whipped cream and has a secret passion for Yeats on rainy days.

Jeffery Suvak left the military a little over year ago in order to devote his time to writing. The writers he respects most are Cormac McCarthy, Jim Harrison, John Steinbeck, and Robert Allen Zimmerman. If he ever manages to create something on par with even their worst stuff he will consider his writing career a success.

Rhonda Watts' play was born out of her curiosity about the day-to-day life of the Superhero, especially those seeking to leave the business, and her lifelong dream of being a writer for Saturday Night Live. She would be interested in converting "Superheroes Anonymous" into a musical, but only if she could use all Queen songs. Other genres for conversion she has considered include a short story, a sitcom, a comic book, a poem, an art house film in Swedish, an interpretive dance, a theme park attraction, or a cereal box, though she thinks its existing form is adequate.

Stephanie Kirstein has been in love with the written word for as long as she can remember. She graduated with a BA in English in Fall 2009, and hopes to use her love of writing and editing out in the "real world." Stephanie is thrilled to have her piece published in *Manastash*, and she'd like to thank her mother, Carol, for all her love, support, and editing help.

Brianne Kreppein is a CWU graduate who is currently spending her time focusing on her writing. "Pity and Burnt Chicken" is the first piece she's ever submitted for anything but a grade. She hopes to someday write a book that will make someone, somewhere, laugh out loud.

Nicholas Conley is a student at Central Washington University. He often spends his time reading and writing. He hopes you enjoyed reading his piece.

Josh McKimmy loves wild grown food, chocolate, Michelle; hates waiting for spring, traffic lights, and packages in the mail; is in a love/hate relationship with the bench press, chicken eggs, and \$5 footlongs; loves to hate McDonalds; hates to love the romantic comedy.

Sophia Worgan has nightmares about her work.

Makaela Dokken is a student at Central Washington University.

Ashley Dykes sometimes hides in the bathroom from her beautiful daughters so that she can read and write poetry in peace.

Ben Grogan is a senior at CWU, graduating with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering Technology and minors in Energy Studies and Creative Writing. He hopes to begin a writing career in science and technology after becoming established in the engineering world.

Daniel Donovan is a senior at Central Washington University. He is majoring in Fine Arts with a focus in sculpture and ceramics. This is his first time submitting a piece for publication.

Travis Rossignol is a student at Central Washington University.

Leilani Leighton is currently attending CWU at the Lynnwood campus. She is a junior, working on her Bachelor's Degree in the Business Administrative Management program (ITAM). She is enjoying her experience at CWU and is looking forward to graduating in Spring 2011. In her spare time, she enjoys photography, time with her family, canning / preserving, and volunteering for the non-profit organization, United States Naval Sea Cadets, where she volunteers as the Administrative Officer as well as the unit photographer. She appreciates the opportunity and is excited to be able to appear in *Manastash* this year.

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