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# Manastash

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# *Manastash* 2011



Volume 21



"Gladiolis" (oil on canvas)  
*Audrey Schlecht*

*In memory of Kisten Michaelson*

*"Make no judgements where you have no compassion."  
Anne McCaffrey*

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"Eiffel's Moon" (charcoal)  
Audrey Schlecht

1  
Walt Whitman: March 27, 1892

Preston Ham

Looking back I sometimes ask  
    should I have celebrated myself? Was I in on the secret?  
O I longed to be controlled by my whim, to filter the world through myself.  
    I have been filtered so many times, with nothing but grit left,  
    I seek a memory,  
    something that is unprov'd!  
Was all I knew the immediate inside of my head? Was the outside foreign?  
    It was dangerous to Live like a poet, but the danger was our own  
    aggregate head and I am a poet.  
I am the inside;  
    all the outside is within us all and I was and am the divine.  
I must ask—  
    are there long term effects of guilt, Or anxiety, or cowardice?  
Often I thought I was  
    a sherpa to a rich, contumacious Figure, who wanted to turn back,  
    whose breath was contrition, skin a baptism,  
    eyes the holy of holies.  
No, it was not wrong "To rise thither with my inebriate soul!"<sup>1</sup>  
    Be done with schooling at age eleven seeking employment,  
    teaching intermittently to know thy self.  
If one cannot teach, one must remove oneself from the  
    classroom of over sought knowledge and under  
    achieved intimacy.  
Consequently I was credulous in freelance soul building, for  
    free men on free soil has been the only institution I have known.  
I have sought an unachievable reward.  
History decides the right, let it  
    thus be so, and let us celestial souls, bred for infallible  
    mediocrity, rise  
"To feed the remainder of life with one hour of fullness and  
    freedom!"<sup>2</sup>

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1 Walt Whitman, "One Hour to Madness and Joy," in *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, (Vintage: New York, 1992), 262-63, line 27.

2 Lines 29-30.

## Citizen Shane

Scott Stoops

"based" on a true story

A stuffed pink pig sits on a bullet-riddled piano, the frame and boards all shot to shit, the keys broken and black, splayed like busted teeth.

Shane Ballard is shirtless in his drive, and holds his .30-06 under his arm, smoke sighing from the barrel in the noon light. He stares down the stuffed pig and spits into the dust, then, lifting the rifle carefully, takes aim. He wobbles once, then fires — crackling thunder, echoing loudly, signifying nothing. He's missed the pig again. Slowly, the rifle droops back under Shane's arm, and he opens the bolt, expelling the used shell and loading another.

He looks out across the expanse of sun-baked weeds and dust to the gravel road that slithers off from his drive and into the distance, ending at a blinding point on the horizon. Shane thinks he sees something on the road, coming his way. He closes the bolt, spits.

Applause. Another cheering crowd in Lowndes County: the smiling and toothless, the great un-washed — all beating their hands together like bricks in the city park. It's been turned into a campaign ground, a wooden stage erected at the center, and, like a light in a dark room with open windows, it draws the crowd like moths.

First on stage is a fat man, his girth almost spilling out of a monochromatic grey suit. He's got on a ten-gallon cowboy hat, bolo tie, and he's smiling under a salt-and-pepper moustache. He claps his hands as he waddles across the stage.

Next up is Shane, and he walks out like a conquering hero, smiling and waving to the crowd, wearing a burgundy suit, bolo tie. His hair's slicked back, shining in the sun. He takes his spot at the microphone, in front of a huge banner of his face in profile, the words "SHANE FOR SHERIFF" emblazoned across it. The crowd cheers louder as he waves, clears his throat:

Shane's face in a mirror. He's in a mock greenroom, the crowd's noise beating through thin plywood walls like an eight-oh-eight. *They're all out there for me*, Shane thinks, running his fingers along his moustache that, like bike's handlebars, runs down his cheeks and connect to his muttonchops.

Shane bares his teeth to his image in the mirror, runs a finger across the

enamel, picking at yellow flecks on the white. He smiles at his image in the mirror, *they're all out there for you*.

Shane runs a hand over his nappy hair, slicked back with grease, wet in the light, creasing back stray hairs to his dome. He picks up a comb. *In a sec Monty will spill in here in his ridiculous grey suit and ten-gallon hat with cronies in tow*, Shane thinks, lifting the comb to his head, *in a sec he'll tell me it's time to go meet my public. They'll be pushing through the door like rats, egging me on*.

Shane runs the comb through his hair as his face grins back.

A newswoman in a smart pantsuit on the outskirts of the crowd in the park, smiling into a camera:

"We're here at the campaign fundraiser for the person everyone's been talking about — Shane Ballard, the controversial new Republican candidate for Sheriff of Lowndes County, who's running against three-time incumbent Wesley Munns. Ballard, a twenty-five-year-old man who claims to have never left the county, is running on what he calls a 'Pro Pornography' ticket, where he espouses that he will raise individual's rights in the county, while maintaining strict order — a program that he calls his 'Snakeskin Boot Initiative.'"

On television, the image changes from the newswoman to Shane, at a podium in a dimly lit auditorium, sweating in a powder blue suit. He looks out into the crowd, listening, and then cocks his arms and pushes his chest up against the podium. His voice drips into the microphone:

"Well, ma'am, I believe what a man does... what a man does in his own home, by his *lonesome*, and seein' as long as he ain't hurtin' nobody, well I see that as a matter of personal *right*. When a man, or woman, mind you, chooses to watch pornography, or do whatever may have you in their own home, then that is their personal freedom granted by the Constitution of the United States of Americuh..."

Shane stands up straight against the podium and, looking wistfully out into the darkness of the crowd, motions with his hand and says:

"...and anyone that tells you otherwise is a got-dang Communist."

The image on television cuts back to the newswoman, who's holding a hand to her ear, seemingly listening, confused. Suddenly:

"Yes, it seems like something out of fiction, where a man would run for public office on such controversial grounds, but that's Shane Ballard for you, folks. And here in Lowndes County, it's seemingly even harder to get his message across, a place that people often call the 'buckle of the Bible belt...'"

The newswoman continues.

Shane's in the crowd, moving from person to person, smiling and shaking hands in his burgundy suit, all the time being crushed by Monty in his ten-gallon hat, by his campaign manager toting a white clipboard, and all the people pawing at him, their hands dry and cracked yet moist on the palm, hungry for a handshake from someone they've seen on television.

Excerpts:

A man in overalls and a fading ball cap, wedge of chewing tobacco in his lip: "Shit, pornography! All the stores carryin' it have been driven away or shuddup by the got-dang Women's Coalition and them Church groups and such. You get porno back in Lowndes and I'll vote for you sure as shit!"

Shane shakes the gloved hand of an older woman with an upturned nose, her other arm being held lightly at the elbow by what is presumably her son — both with jet black hair, dressed nicely. Her hat bobbles on her head as she speaks: "I don't agree with the more... *controversial*... parts of your re-gime, I mean pornography, *really*? What's to be done about the children? What they need is more *prayer* in their everyday lives, the *schools* for instance..."

Three men in grey tweed jackets are crowded around Shane, his campaign manager and Monty behind him, wriggling around him like fish through holes in a net. One of the men in grey is shaking Shane's hand, standing close: "...and you can bet son, that the Klan, the whole of us... you'll have our votes come election day."

Monty smiles and pats Shane on the back as gunfire erupts on the fringes of the crowd. Supporters are shooting in the air, whooping and hollering, the pistol smoke settling eerily over the crowd, who stand, still chatting, mostly unphased.

The Klansmen is still shaking Shane's hand, smiling, not letting go. He nods to Shane:

"Some fans, huh?"

Shane smiles, nods.



Two messages on Shane's answering machine he will never listen to:

"Shane, it's Monty — look, Munns ... okay, maybe I didn't have my ducks in a row on Munns, but, I'll see that it gets taken care of. But... er, you just can't trust Paul, okay? You can't... he has no clue what to do, he's not a campaign manager, he's a glorified prick with a clipboard. I'm paying for this race, okay? I'm funding the thing, and we gotta drop Paul if we wanna soldier on, okay? We got people's *interests* to uphold, Shane, think about it... I'll, I'll be in touch."

"Shane, Paul — we gotta get rid of Monty. This is bad, this is real fuckin' bad, and I know Monty took all that fuckin' money from those guys, but we

gotta get rid of him. He's bad business, we ain't got a choice on this one, Shane. Drop Monty or we're done, you saw the shit he got us into tonight! Get rid of him!"



Cracked aqua linoleum tiles cover the floor and go running halfway up the bathroom walls. Dirty toilet, used paper huddled around its base. The shower's sliding glass doors are cracked and broken, the tub's filled with cardboard boxes and porno magazines.

Shane's face stares back at him from the mirror, cheeks soggy and bruised, one eye black, the other's brow swollen. Shane tears up bits of toilet paper and, twisting the bits into cones, stuffs them into his clotted and bleeding nose. He sticks one a little too far up and recoils, sneezing flecks of blood and mucus on the mirror, sink.

"*How the fuck did we get into this,*" Shane thinks, rubbing the mirror clean with the side of his fist, "Did they talk me into this, or was this what I wanted all along?"

Shane recalls an interview as he rubs at the mirror, not so much cleaning it as smearing it:

"I wanted to get, I guess, my views out. I wanted to change people's opinions, I think a lot of people in the community tend to steam-roll others, especially if the other's views are... *controversial*..."

"Like yours," the reporter says, leaning over their tape deck, smiling.

"Yeah..." Shane begins, "Sure. I guess that was the reason I wanted to run in the first place, to open people's minds..."

Shane sighs into his sink basin, hunched over it. He looks up to the mirror, the blood and mucus smeared across it, fogging it, clouding his face.



A rifle's report, expanding like oil in water — dirty thunder clapping across long rolling hills that comb away into the distance, folding into mountains.

Shane's shirtless in jeans and suspenders, a Marlboro pinned to his lips as he lowers his rifle and turns to Monty, who's sitting on a makeshift stool of wood pallets, drinking beer from a can.

"Nice shot, Sheriff," Monty says, setting his beer down on the white clipboard.

Shane grins and turns back to the expanse of hills, firing again into the stillness.

From far and away, a police cruiser comes rolling up, stopping on the hill near Shane and Monty. Shane lowers his rifle, turning and watching the oncoming cruiser, while Monty stands up, drains his beer, and brushes his white tee off.



The passenger door bangs open as a policeman gets out of the car, toting a briefcase. Monty stops a few feet from the car, and spits in the dust as Shane saunters over to the cop, holding his rifle loosely against his belly.

"Officer," Shane says, nodding.

"Ballard," the Officer responds, tipping his cap to him, then nodding to Monty.

"Is it all there?" Monty says pointing at the case, taking a step forward.

"Should be," the Officer says, extending the case. Monty grabs and shakes it, nods to Shane. Shane pulls a wad of cash from his pocket, hands it to the Officer, who runs his finger across it, inspecting it.

"Good luck on the campaign trail, Ballard," the Officer says as he stuffs the cash in his pocket and turns to get back in the car.

The cruiser pulls off, tire treads gargling dust and gravel as it goes, leaving behind Shane, Monty, the briefcase, and a cloud of dust which settles to the ground slowly, dropping among the weeds and expended bullet casings in the low wind.



A television is on in Lowndes, beer suds slipping down the screen. A newswoman's at a desk, crowded onscreen by decals, news tickers and graphs.

"... Our wall-to-wall coverage of election night continues as we take a look to Lowndes County, where the controversial Republican candidate for Sheriff, Shane Ballard, stretches his lead further after the surprising drop-out of the incumbent, Wesley Munns. Shane's looking at 72% of the vote, with..."



"All those people didn't put all that money together to have our boy drop out of the race."

The Sheriff's office — the walls are mostly bare, save for a stuffed moose head and a framed photograph of Shane, black-eyed and bruised in a dandelion yellow suit, shaking hands with the Mayor of Lowndes. It was sunny that day, and the light had jumped vibrantly from Shane's new Sheriff's badge, making a star as it leapt from the silver of the badge to the camera lens.

Shane's hands are in his lap, the badge on his desk, sitting like a gun between Shane and a man in a dark suit across from him. The man's head is cocked to the side, waiting for a response from Shane, who knows he's not giving one.

"Everybody's gotta answer to somebody someday, Ballard," the man says, before he gets up out of the chair, and spitting on the wool carpet, leaves the room, banging the door behind him.

In the silence, Shane stares at the door for a long time, before he sighs and lifts his hands from under the desk, settling them slowly on its top. A pistol's in his hand, and Shane leans back in his chair slightly as he thumbs the hammer, letting it fall back on the firing pin slowly.



A car radio's tuned to a talk show, dialogue buzzing through speakers:

"...and under Sheriff Ballard's *Snakeskin Boot Initiative*," the host continues, condescendingly, "eight adult bookstores have seemingly sprung up overnight. Heck, even the local smoke shops have begun to carry filthy magazines and videotapes hidden away in some backroom where the lower class can paw through them. It's a decline of our culture, people, and God wouldn't want us doing such things. God, my fellow Americans, doesn't love Shane Ballard for what he's done. No, it's his financial backers, notably Montgomery Fatts, who have seen a windfall from the increase in business and lacking moral standards, the criminals, who see laxer laws and get away with smoking *marijuana* on the regular, and it is us — good, God-fearing Americans who see our lives, our lovely Lowndes County stripped of her Godly veneer, succumbing to the whims of Sheriff Ballard and his cronies..."

The host continues.



"Yeah, one of the neighbor's called, about a disturbance..."

Shane's standing on the stoop of a house, speaking to a man half-hidden behind his door.

"Oh it's nothing, Sheriff," the man says easy-like, "you know how girls can get. Me and my daughter, we's just having a little *discussion*, s'all."

Shane looks the man in the eye, his pupils pins, the whites bloodshot. Shane knows inside the man's closet, maybe in the basement, maybe in his bedroom, there's a white hood and robe hanging, and with it, a handshake, sealed by cash, coming with the caveat that this man and his *group* would have Shane's back in the election, that Shane will have their back as Sheriff.

"Yeah, okay," Shane says, backing up a little, tapping his toes on the boards of the stoop, "just try and keep it down, y'hear?"

"Yessur," the man says, winking at Shane as he closes the door.



One-hundred days after the election, there is a party held in Shane's honor at the Lifted Skirt — a gentlemen's club on the outskirts of town. The club's crowded, quick, with people eager to talk to Shane, give him their congratulations. But there are also men there, the ones in dark shirts and ties, the ones holding briefcases, who dart glances to the back room of the club, to a gun-metal grey door that opens at intervals like one of those bobbing treasure chests that go in a fish tank — letting men in holding



briefcases, boxes, or something tucked under their arm, letting them come out empty handed. The men in dark shirts and ties watch, and wait their turn.

Shane's in the back room, same as Monty, sitting at a card table under an orange bulb and cigar smoke. Shane's in an all-white suit, with a single black leather glove on his right hand, and he greets the people as they saunter in with offers and bribes — trying to force promises from their new Sheriff for a price. Shane takes their money and gifts and handshakes and promises them something, which Monty scribbles down on the white clipboard. After the men leave, Monty and Shane exchange glances, either snickering at a promise they've made but will never keep, or exchange a sober look--how deep is this going to go?



#### SHERIFF MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD

LOWNDES COUNTY, MISS — One hundred and twenty days after his election, Sheriff Shane Ballard of Lowndes County has gone missing. The police man-hunt, organized eleven days ago, has thus far come up empty handed. Deputy Cartwright, who's been with the force for more than fifteen years described the chase as "futile... [Ballard] had been making back-room deals and bargains since before he took office... people [like that] tend to disappear sometimes." Cartwright would later call to have his statement retracted.

It is no secret that Sheriff Ballard stirred up controversy, which began before his election, during debates and fundraisers and continued as his Snakeskin Boot Initiative allowed dozens of adult bookstores and magazine stands to spring up overnight in Lowndes. Oftentimes Ballard's political backers, notably Montgomery Fatts, an adult bookstore owner himself, were cited as the source of these laxer laws. Further adding controversy to Ballard's regime was the unexpected and surprising dropout of three-time incumbent Wesley Munns, who has since come back into the public eye following the disappearance of Ballard. "It's a shame, what happened," Munns told us over the phone, "but people like Ballard, oftentimes when they make crooked deals, they get what they deserve." Murmurs around Lowndes say that if Shane Ballard is not found, there will be another election held, in which Munns will participate...



Shane looks from his drive out across the immensity of the land, across the fences like black nappy stitches crisscrossing the earth, to the gravel road and a low rooster tail of dust on it, slowly growing closer.

It's a Ford Bronco kicking up the dust, and Shane slowly starts to back up towards his porch as it nears. He's just quick enough that he's under the

shade of the porch's awning, just rested his rifle against the door-jamb and lit a hand-rolled pinner when the Bronco comes to a screeching stop in his drive.

Shane leans up against his porch door, smoking, as the two men get out of the car and saunter towards him, both stopping just a few feet off, like they don't want to come any closer, like their bowling shirts and jeans need more sun.

"Let's go Shane," the driver says after a moment, nodding.

Shane looks at the driver from under his brow and then to his rifle leaning against the door jamb. The other man watches and fingers a holstered pistol at his hip, unclipping the back part of the leather so the gun can be pulled free.

Shane looks back at the speaker, then slowly turning his whole body, looks again to his rifle. The man with the pistol takes a step forward and cocks his head, his hand twitching, ready to draw the gun. A long moment passes, thick as smoke.

Shane slowly turns back to the men and, dropping his pinner to the ground, reaches his hand into his pocket and fishes out a star badge, silver, reading "Sheriff." And maybe because he's mostly drunk, or maybe because everybody's gotta answer to somebody someday, Shane Ballard drops the badge to the ground, and stumbling lightly, saunters down his porch steps and follows the men to the truck.



## The Phantom Train of Marshall Pass

Loren Bayles

On down the Marshall Pass line an eerie whistle blows.  
The Phantom Train climbs Rocky Mountains steep.  
Pull the throttle wide-open, pile on the coal!

The apparition rolls over rail, plowing thru ice n' snow,  
gaining on an engineer with a promise to keep  
on down the Marshall Pass line. An eerie whistle blows.

Promised to be in Green River, careening thru passes cold,  
he drives the rider train toward No. 19.  
Pull the throttle wide-open, pile on the coal!

Passengers gab of the mad engineer who drives the Iron Ghost.  
Behind them from hell a whistle screams  
pull the throttle wide-open, pile on the coal!

Burning coal fast as time, hundreds of miles still to go,  
the track disappears into darkness like steam.  
On down the Marshall Pass line an eerie whistle blows.

He has to outrun the madman, that lunatic come for his soul.  
A nightmare to escape and a schedule to meet,  
on down the Marshall Pass line. An eerie whistle blows.  
Pull the throttle wide-open, pile on the coal!

## Ode to a Ginger

Meagan Dea

“**C**arrot top.”

“What did you just call me?”

“You heard me – CARROT.TOP.”

It had begun. An innocent fourth grade girl, washing her hands outside the bathroom, minding her own business, when...

BOOM! Discrimination.

It was the first, but most certainly not the last, of ups and down in my ginger journey. Now don't take me as one of those self-pitying folk who sit in their room all day. Shedding soft tears, journaling about how terrible her life is. I'm nothing of the sort. But the trials and hardships of a redhead are unique and must be brought into the light.



First things first, I need to make clear to you some redheaded lingo.

**Number one:** *Ginger*. Now this word may have been previously used as a derogatory term, circa South Park's "ginger episode," but we have taken the once hurtful phrase and morphed it into our own. It is now a word of hope and a word of strength.

**Number two:** *Fredhead*. Fake redhead. It's been attempted since the dawn of time (or shortly after), but everyone has to come to grips with the fact that out-of-the-box redhead will never be a possibility. Yes, it's a tragedy, but move on.

And finally, **number three:** *Carrot top*. *Day-walker*. *Fire crotch*. The three most common terms used against a ginger. Carrot top has always been a classic, but its effect is minimal. Day-walker (thanks again to South Park) is a term I've been called many-a-time, and although I'm still not completely sure what it means, I know that it has something to do with redheads, and people always think they were clever enough to be the first to call me that. You're not. Finally, the real zinger, *fire crotch*. I was immune to this slanderous term until my freshman year of high school, and ever since, it has haunted me. I recall trotting down the hall, enjoying my day, when out of nowhere, a voice bellowed the wretched words.

“Hey, FIRE CROTCH!”

Now this isn't something that you can just shrug off, because every single person in that hallway knows it's you. Oh, the horror.

I was able to pass through elementary school and middle school relatively unscathed. But in high school, I finally had to come to grips with the fact that I was different. Kind of a Harry Potter different, except I had no Hogwarts and was stuck with the Dursley's for all eternity. My freshman, sophomore, and junior years passed over me like a thick and heavy fog, but senior year, it was different.

There's an instant camaraderie that gingers tend to have with one another. We understand each other and can empathize with where the other has been. It's a sort of bond that transcends all words, a bond that cannot be broken. This type of union was formed my senior year of high school with Evan, Rachel, Scott, and Jacob. We began to speak on all matters of importance, such as sun block, Aloe Vera, and discrimination. We finally came to the conclusion that we were no longer going to hide who we were. We were going to be the few, the proud, the gingers.



### Twin Day, 2008.

We decided that we were going to come together and show our ever-strengthening bond to the rest of the high school. On this day, we all came to class in matching red shirts, with the words "RED POWER" displayed for all to see. In hindsight, there's a good possibility that we looked like a group of communists, but regardless, there we were. We were red, and we were proud.

After this momentous occasion, our fellowship exploded into a frenzy of all things ginger. A ginger-call was invented and could be heard across the school's courtyard by two passing redheads, or on the road as two gingers crossed paths. If one were to hear a bellowing *KA-KAW*, they would surely know that gingers were near. It was a sound of hope, a light in the darkness if you will. When that call resounded throughout the hallways of Union High School, we knew we could raise our heads up high and be proud of who we were. We were no longer alone.

Many heard of this redheaded clan and wished to be included as "honorary gingers." Although we indulged their desires, we knew that they could never fully understand the true meaning of being ginger. It was a burden they would never have to bear.

Although times were indeed changing, there was still cruelty through towards us in various forms. Some said we were "the cancer of the earth." Others unearthed old myths, such as redheaded children being the result of unclean sex. Although these accusations are most likely untrue, the sting of being pinned as having no soul will always be there. But we had each other, and we marched on.

It would be unfair of me, my dear audience, not to include out setbacks

as a clan in this account. Oh yes, even the strongest of unions can be shaken, and ours most certainly was not immune to such trials and tribulations. Springtime revealed a time of hardship for us, a time where we would all be put to the test, I even more so than the other. Oh yes, springtime seems innocent enough, what with the flowers blooming and the sun shining. But that sun would surely lead to the ruin of me. I had a dark secret that I was able to keep concealed all through the fall and winter, but that spring, there was no hiding it. While every other ginger was gaining a pinkish hue from UV rays, I was becoming tan.

"Hey Rachel, how's it going?" I smiled as I walked down the hall.

"Oh, it's going goo—WHAT IS THAT?!" Rachel stood, gawking at my exposed arms.

I peered down and knew instantly what she was speaking of.

Yes, I am, in fact, a redhead who tans. When my secret was found out, I was rejected. My fellow gingers began to refer to me as the "mudblood" or "half-breed." How could anyone love such an atrocious creature? I am happy to say that after weeks of anguish, I was finally accepted back as a ginger, although the scar of my mistreatment will forever be etched into my soul. Going through this hardship, however, caused us to grow even closer to each other, and we knew that there was nothing that we couldn't face.

Throughout the year, our bond only grew stronger, and by the time of graduation we were ready to go out into the world with our heads held high, saying, "Yes, I'm ginger. And yes, I'm proud." It was a bittersweet time in all of our lives, because we knew it was time to go our separate ways. We were all departing for different colleges, and that graduation night was the last we would all be together. And so we left, hurt but not broken, independent but not alone. Although our fellowship was broken, our bond of friendship would last forever.

At first, adjusting to the solitary ginger life was difficult. I desired to be around those of my own kind, around those who truly understood what I was going through. Sometimes I would forget that we had all gone our separate ways, and in that moment of ignorance, I would let out a loud *ka-kaw*, only to be met with complete silence. But even though I was alone physically, I knew that in spirit we were all still together, and it gave me hope to push on. I know that my fellow gingers would be proud of where I am now, just as I am proud of them.

I felt as though I was prepared for adult gingerhood, but I had no idea what the real world would be like for a small, frail, innocent redhead such as myself. I was attacked, abused, and left for dead. Emotionally. But just like the Good Samaritan rescued the man on the side of the road, so I was nursed back to health by a group of people who saw passed my Gingeriness. These



dear people saw the girl underneath, the girl who longed for companionship, the girl who wanted much more than to simply suck souls out of people.

One thing I have learned from my post-adolescent ginger years is that gingers cannot, under ANY circumstances, try to relate their problems to that of any other race. Jews? No. Hispanics? Uh-uh. African-Americans? Most definitely not. I made the mistake once and only once. One bright and sunny afternoon, I was hanging out with a few friends, enjoying the weather and each other's company. One friend brought up my gingeriness, and the conversation went a little something like this:

"Hey Megan, shouldn't you be inside? Can soul-suckers really survive this long in the sun?"

"I'm sick of this discrimination," I proclaimed. "I know I'm different, but that doesn't make me any less of a person."

I turned to the black fellow next to me for affirmation.

"See, him and me. We get each other. We know what it's like to be discriminated against."

As soon as I made the comment, I instantly wished I could vacuum it back into my mouth and erase it from existence. The look on this guy's face would suggest his feelings on the subject were identical. Whoops.

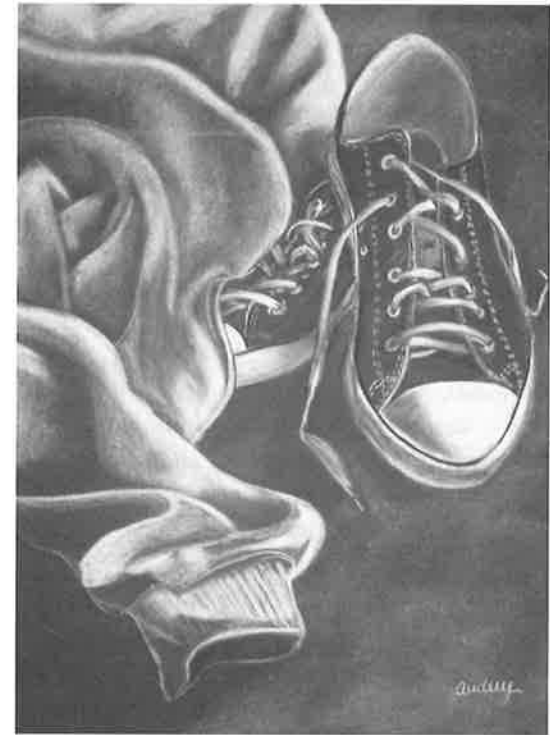
Sometimes I can still hear the faint *ka-kaw* of the ginger-call, or see the ghostly faces of my redheaded comrades. While discrimination still happens just as sure as sunburn in the summer, I can stand up tall and know that this is not the end. Oh yes, scoff now. Believe that redheads will never amount to anything. But we will never give up. And one day we will rise above.

So to all of you gingers out there who have felt hurt, abandoned, or abused, know that you are not alone. Raise your head up high and believe that change can and will happen. Be silent no longer; open up your mouths and let out a great and powerful *ka-kaw*. Do not be ashamed of who you are. Embrace it, and the rest of the world will follow. Perhaps not today or tomorrow, but someday, we will be able to walk out of our doors without the fear of discrimination or harassment. Above all, we must believe that this change is possible. We must never surrender that hope.

And so, in the immortal words of William Wallace,

"They may take our lives, but they'll never take our red-headed freedom."

Or something like that.



Untitled (black and white charcoal)

Audrey Schlecht

## Rowan

*Crystal Sauby*

The night I knew you were coming was a cold one;  
 the middle of fall, and the leaves were all brown,  
 crisp-crunching under my feet. Even then I wanted you  
 desperately, but my heart quailed. I'm still so  
 young, I thought, still in school, and I'll get fat.  
 "We'll be okay," your father said, and wiped away my tears.

When you're hungry, you scream until tears  
 stream straight from your eyes, barely a pause of one  
 second between the wretched howls, and I stroke your fat  
 cheeks, softly calling your name. Still, your brown  
 eyes swim until finally, exhausted, you rest, and so  
 I slip the bottle between your angry lips, and you

suck busily, with soft wispy slurps as you  
 flutter your little hands against my chest, tears  
 all forgotten. I cover them gently with one of mine so  
 I can warm your cold little fingers. I've only slept one  
 hour tonight, and before I sleep again, a mess of sticky brown,  
 a squishy gift from your lower half, trapped in creases of baby fat

awaits me. The night before you came, I was so fat  
 and warm with your heat, I couldn't sleep. My belly rippled as you  
 sharply kicked within, not quite overdone but nicely browned,  
 finally. Fourteen hours I shivered with pain, holding back tears,  
 aching to shout at the nurse who blathered through each one  
 of the contractions, something about breathing deeply, so

bossily. Eventually, I let them talk me into drugs so  
 I could rest. In drowsy relief I gazed at the fat  
 ugly babies on the wall. Before long, I would have one  
 of my own. Just after dawn, they said, "Push." You  
 had a head full of hair, they told me. I didn't care. Sweaty tears  
 itched my face as I numbly pushed until finally your red-brown

and angry head broke free. Dark with damp, your thin brown  
 tufts of hair curled from a cutely awkward head. I was so  
 afraid you'd be an ugly baby, I couldn't contain the tears  
 that spilled down happily as your little tongue, pink and fat,  
 explored my finger. A crowd jostled in to see you  
 and you answered the clamor with a perfect wail, just one.

They smile now, your fat cheeks, as I lean over you.  
 The leaves once again are brown. Our tree sheds tears  
 reluctantly. I hold you up so you can see them fall softly, one by one.

## Back Roads

Jamie Chipman

What I like about driving and going nowhere is the control. I choose the music, the temperature, the speed, the route. I have nowhere to be and can therefore go anywhere, do anything. I drive and allow myself to fill up with all the things that I've been trying to pretend weren't there, things I've been trying not to deal with. Some days I fill up so much I feel like that fat guy Kevin Spacey shoved full of spaghetti in *Seven*, like there is so much out of my control that one swift kick to the stomach, and I'm going to be face down in a plate of worries. But driving leaks it out of me, and allows me to accept the things I can't change. While driving, I let all the things that have been nagging my sub-conscious to come forth and claim my consciousness.



I like the back roads, they wind and plummet, marked by yellow signs with speeds I try to double. I skid around a corner and drive towards my father. I often picture my life as this giant mirror that my father put his fist through and shattered. Now I live my life by jumping from one glass shard to the next, all while trying to make it reflect the things I want. It amazes me how hard kids try to please their parents. I'm angry at how long I tried to please him. Twenty-six years, that's how long it took me to give up. I've given up and now, I'm left to reconcile my childhood. I've learned a lot from my father. How much should I have learned? My mind flashes all over the place. I watch my brother Russ lie to my father; I wish he were better at it. My father looks to me, and though I know it's fruitless I tell the same bad lie. He grabs my collar and forces me to my toes. He's so angry I can see it in his teeth, tightly clenched as if they'll shatter beneath the torrent of his rage. He releases me and before I can right myself, I watch Russ tumble down a flight of stairs.

I lazily tie my horse Lightning to a tree in the middle of nowhere, and look in horror as he runs off. My heart pumps as I chase after him, and my spirit drops as I realize I'll never catch him. Four days of chasing after him, and deep down, I know I won't be bringing him home. The camping trip is over. I know we have to leave. I try one last time to capture Lightning, my father helps; by the time we give up he's even angrier than before.

He thrusts the rifle into my chest, "Go get your saddle back."

"Dad," I protest.

"Jamie Lynne!" His tone leaves no room for debate, and truth be told, even if it did, I'm not that brave. I lift my rifle and aim. At first, I aim at the heart, and then, realizing I might miss and sever the strap, decide to aim for the head. I've always been a natural shot. I don't even like guns, but I can hit pretty much hit anything with one. It seems as soon as I pull the trigger, Lightning drops. I smile at my shot, then I'm disgusted with myself. The rifle suddenly feels heavy and awkward in my hands. I lean it against a tree and realize I'm trembling.

"What are you waiting for? The blood to soak your saddle? Go get it!"

I walk towards Lightning and with every step, the finality of what I've done sets in. I move to undo the saddle strap and pull back when I feel how warm his flesh still is. I shake so badly, I barely get it undone. The blood caresses the edges of my shoes while I try to free my saddle. I tug at it helplessly until my father pushes me out of the way, tugs it free, and tosses it to the side.

He grabs the back of my neck and forces me to look at what's left of Lightning's head. "This," he said, "is the price of your laziness."

I shouldn't have learned that much.



I pull into a gas station to get a cup of coffee. It's hot and passably fresh for gas station coffee. The smell fills my car and reminds me of my grandmother. Some of my earliest memories are of climbing into her expansive lap and drinking from her coffee mug. I'd wrap my small hands around the chipped navy blue mug, smile at the golden elephants walking across its surface and drink in the rich, milky liquid. There was a time in my life where it felt like the safest place in the world. Our relationship is now more bitter than even the worst coffee. What my father couldn't teach me about conditional love, my grandmother did. The safe place I knew as a child is now a hot room where the disappointment suffocates you.

She wouldn't be so disappointed in me if she wasn't so disappointed in herself. She wants to fix her mistakes through me, for me to live the life she tries to pretend that she did. She lectures me on my romantic choices, while she glares at her husband. Her eyes are filled with a hatred that took fifty years to create, to cultivate. A hatred so intense it lives, it moves and breathes, and fills the seat next to me.

I watch as dissatisfaction dawns upon her face in the same slow rhythm as cognizance upon someone waking. I tell her things she doesn't want to hear, and she resists like she's snoozing her alarm. Like the buzzing, I persist until she sits across from me fully awake to who I am.

"You'll never be happy," her voice is thick with condemnation.

"I am happy," I try.



She appears not to hear me, "You can't have a family. You need therapy."

I try to explain, but I'm saying things just to hear myself speak. She hears nothing. The problem with people, especially the people who love you, is that they don't understand a version of happiness outside of the one they've imagined for you. I talk and watch the happiness she has for me fall apart in her head. As if I've reached inside her and crushed my own dreams.



I drive faster until the speed strips my mind of my grandmother. I turn up the radio because I can, and skip to the next song. "Hungry Eyes" comes blaring out of my speakers. My mom used to love this song. My mother is the one person in my life who has shown me unconditional love. Unfortunately, she has no such love for herself. Some people truly have addictive personalities. My mother is one of them. I'm convinced that if I cut up Sweet Tarts and let her snort them she'd get addicted to the sugar rush. It would be easier if she was constantly on drugs. Then at least there would be this parallel, this line drawn from which I could garner acceptance. Instead my mother's fallacies are like the tide. They recede, leaving me to trace happily in the sand, creating times when I can call her, and she uncharacteristically gives me advice I can actually take. Then, just as I grow comfortable, the tide returns, erasing the happiness I've written and forcing me to leave or drown. She leaves me slowly, just as she leaves herself. Her very soul has begun to erode away. I see it in her teeth. Every time I hug her hello, they are a little browner. Every time I hug her goodbye, I know the next time I return, they'll be worse. I wait for the day they rot away, the day when her teeth are gone, and with them, everything she could have been. She knows it, too. Deep down it's there. Deep down, she wants something different. But she lives her life like a New Year's resolution — everyday, a new broken promise to herself. I try to help her keep her promises. I desperately want her to succeed. But it's impossible to hold her together when every part of her being is yearning to burst into innumerable pieces.



The road signs pass my car so fast they're almost a blur. It reminds me of playing the alphabet game with my brother. There is no one in the world I should be closer to than Russ. Only a year younger than me, I've shared more life experiences with him than any other person in the world. I think of the last time I saw him. As I stare at him, hair matted, shirtless and sprawled on my mother's couch, I know that I don't know him at all. He takes a long drag from his cigarette and blows it towards the fireplace. His red, squinted eyes and the smell coming from the back bedroom tell me I've just missed him smoking something else. I stare through the haze of smoke and am sad and angry. People often ask me, "Is Russ smart?" There is the implication in

their question that if he isn't, then that explains it. The truth is, I don't know the answer. And truly, it doesn't matter. It's like passing a graveyard and wondering, 'Were they ready to die? Were they happy?' It doesn't matter, they're decaying. He's decaying. He decays slowly on my mother's couch while she brings him coffee prepared carefully with cream and spoonfuls of guilt.



My odometer turns and so does my mind. Not far, mentally, I stay in the same run down, smoke-filled, single-wide mobile home. But I'm no longer looking at Russ. I've turned my head to stare at my brother sitting on the floor clutching a video game controller. If my family were to be broken down statistically, then Jason would be the outlier. He's the only relative I have that isn't a loud, type A, thrill-seeking junkie. I wonder how he makes it living with my mother and my brother. I would go crazy. Jason just plays video games and listens to bands I've never heard of, probably because when he's in my car and plugs in his favorite CD, I feel like someone is screaming at me. I watch his clothes get blacker and his grades fall, and I'm concerned. At the same time it's hard to be critical; he's surviving. Then I'm sad because that's my standard for him. A standard lowered by my mother and brother and the impossible circumstances they create for him. I wonder, with all the screaming he hears in life, why he would choose to listen to it on a CD. I guess he finds sanity in their screams.



I turn my car around and head home. I think of nothing. I sing along with the music and turn it up loud enough that I can't hear myself. The mile markers fall away, and so does my tension. Some people litter the roads with trash; I litter them with bad thoughts. I roll down my window and toss the bad things behind me, leaving them to decompose.

I get home, step out of my car and stretch. I've been sitting for hours. I lean against it, drinking from my long cold coffee and listen to the *ting ting* sound my engine makes after being driven hard. I like that sound; it relaxes me, and slowly, the rest of the tension inside me ebbs away and is replaced by boredom. I've always figured that if I can get bored or be bored, then things must not be that bad. Because if there's room for boredom, then there is room for something else. So I slip my keys into my pocket and take comfort in the fact that in life, just as in driving, I can go anywhere and do anything.



## Snowfall

Leah Hovde

Last  
 Sunday  
 a  
 snowflake  
 like a whisper, floated and rested on my eyelash, an interlocking  
 of crystalline lattice.  
 With new geometric patterns,  
 never one the same as another.  
 Like wonderings, they vanish from their haven of cold, falling  
 pounding and spiraling down into the ice-diamond  
 and jack-frost air, to build  
 Everest to a cataclysmic being of sought after glory. Ice is a blade lying on  
 the heights  
 of it all. It cloaks The Cascades into picturesque and fathom-deep  
 Christmas Dreams, where deadly threats claim fingers and scald faces into  
 blue burns. The Arctic, here, welcomes the ice.  
 A final home  
 where it has been sky birthed.  
 To rest on kernel, on kernel, on kernel, on a sugar drop and breathe caught  
 and eye-glint  
 marvel, all made from the matter of ice and crystal.  
 Feeding in the zero below that sunlight catches and reflects in millions and  
 the all achievable millions in the grain of one, that now rest on  
 my eyelash, the figment of would-be torrents, as the smallest pearl-glass.  
 My eyelash twitches,  
 slightly,  
 the  
 snowflake  
 melts  
 away.

## Eight

Leah Hovde

When I was seven, I thought grown-ups didn't fight  
 like us kids. No, they didn't kick and scream and pull hair,  
 or call each other names. I imagined them politely  
 standing or sitting to talk things out, and  
 then they would shake each other's hands, nod and smile  
 and go on their way to work or the dry cleaners or McDonalds.  
 That was me, when I was seven. Now, I'm eight—it took a long, long, time  
 but I finally turned a year older and had a little bit less time for  
 baseball and playing video games and TV shows and running around at full speed  
 pretending my Lego jet could fly.  
 It wasn't a big surprise or even something that jumped out at me—like  
 the closet monster I could have sworn was real when I was five.  
 It crept up on me—like the way bedtime comes too soon, and  
 the way the sun goes down at camp.  
 Too many news shows turned off real fast at ten o'clock—my parents acting  
 like the news was boring.  
 They tried to hide the stories about  
 adults and their fights that went bad.  
 I knew things were not the way I thought they were.  
 I knew it before the Hendrickson kid—a big guy one head taller than me  
 pushed me down for no reason that I knew. Then I got up and he was already gone.  
 I thought about how, when he is older,  
 he won't be different.  
 I thought about how,  
 if he got worse,  
 I wouldn't be shocked.

## Sacrifice

Jamie Friedman

My friend comes up to me and says he has some news about the wedding. He is not sure if he will be able to come.

"Training," he says, with a serious look upon his face.

"What for?" I ask, carefree and blissfully happy.

"CRO, if I get in the program."

Now I am confused. I don't know what that means. My parents were both in the military, but I was born after they got out, so I know nothing about that world. All I know is my friend is in the Air Force.

He pulls me aside and begins to explain that he may not be able to see me for two-and-a-half years. No contact with the outside world. Part of the training. Being placed in the wilderness and charged with the task of surviving, while being hunted. Part of the training. And if he is captured, a beating and torture is eminent. Part of the training. I think, *great, he can out maneuver anyone*. Until he tells me that everyone gets captured. They are tortured, with needles, and truth serum, and who knows what else in an effort to prepare them for the hardships they may face.

My head starts to spin, and it feels as though the floor will soon have a meeting with my face. He reaches out and supports my elbow.

"I can't. No more. Please don't tell me anymore. I can't bear the thought."

He tells me it will be ok; it will only make him stronger; it will improve his ability to save others. The motto says it all, *So others can live*. But what if I want my friend to live? Not to have to run out to the front line and rescue those who need the help? Selfish, I know, but I have known this kid since high school; he is innocent and young. A good man. And now he will be gone, maybe forever in this line of work.

He smiles. Gives me a hug, and says thank you.

He needs the support.

He turns.

Walks away.

Into an oblivion where I do not know if he will return.

How was I supposed to go back to making coffee for the masses after that bombshell? Caramel macchiatos and white chocolate mochas really didn't seem like the most pressing matter. But sure enough there is a line waiting

behind the gleaming chrome cash register with people eager to waste four dollars on a "high end" coffee drink. Businessmen who want to suck down a stale drip coffee. Skinny girls who somehow justify getting a nonfat sugar-free white chocolate mocha with full-fat whipped cream, like the calories in the whipped cream really aren't there. Pour, squirt, foam, stir. Pour, squirt, foam, stir. Eventually the faces just become a blur, the smile on my face is pasted on, painted like the ladies of the eighteenth century, wearing lead-based makeup that slowly eats away at their faces. By the time the clock says eight, I am more than ready to leave. Stripping off my milk-soured black apron, I head for the door, calling *goodbye* to the rest of the girls and head out to my car.

In the car I feel safe. Secure. The seat hugs my backside in all the familiar ways. I flip the ignition; the car comes to life with a soft purr. I turn the stereo up, way up. As I pull out of the parking lot, the cool swing tenor of Frank Sinatra pours over me, calming my soul. There is something about the combination of the sweet music and the amber soft glow of the street lights that makes my tired muscles relax. Singing along and drumming my fingers on the top of the cool steering wheel loosens me up, and I let go of all the stresses of the day.

After weaving my way through the light downtown traffic I pull up to my apartment complex, noting the smokers on the corner and the party going on in apartment A15. Knowing them, the cops will show up tonight to usher the drunkards into the tank. At least I live on the second floor; that way I can pretend like I don't live in a neighborhood that more resembles a demilitarized zone than the cushy suburbs where all my customers come from. But I like living here. It makes me feel in touch with real life, or at least more aware that life isn't always puppies and rainbows.

I unlock my twin dead bolts, slide in the door, and scoop the mail off the floor where the hurried mailman dropped it through the slot. I throw the mail and my keys on the coffee table on my way to the bathroom. I will think about that later, probably just bills anyways.

I allow the small bathroom to get steamed up by the shower as I strip down to my birthday suit and examine my face in the mirror. I look tired, older. When did that happen? I only finished my bachelor's two years ago, but already I seem to have lost that glow of innocence, that sparkle of youth. Now when I look in the mirror, I can see the unpaid bills and lack of a sex life in the slight crinkles at the corners of my eyes and the slight downturn of my mouth. Maybe the shower will help rejuvenate me. I step in, feeling the hot water beat against my skin. I breathe deep, allowing the steam to reach deep inside my lungs and penetrate my tired muscles.



*Warm skin against frigid metal. A single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. He shakes, fighting against the urge to scream as the pliers tug at his fingernails.*

I open my eyes and try to shake the image as I stare at the wall tiles in the shower. I rest my head on them, feeling their coolness against my wet forehead. I would rub my eyes, but I don't want to see that room again. Quickly I get out of the shower, towel off, and throw an oversized t-shirt over my head. I glance in the mirror and think, at least I look awake now.

Barefoot, I stroll back out to the front of the house where I commence making a cup of tea. It is cool outside, not quite winter, but fall is definitely in full swing, and even after the screaming hot shower, my apartment still feels chilly. When the teapot squeals, I pour the water over a tea bag and insert a spoon into the cup to encourage the tea to bloom. I stir standing under the harsh florescent lights.

*The light is shoved in his face. Roughly he is grabbed by the neck, head snapped to the side, as they slide the needle into his veins. They sit back and watch as he squirms against his restraints, fighting for all he has. When they start to ask him a question, his eyes glaze over with fear. They are supposed to be on his side, and yet they put him through this. He struggles, trying not to reveal the truth, but ultimately the elixir wins out. As he utters the truth, they advance on him with a set of jumper cables. The truth is not acceptable.*

Gripping the mug, I walk stiffly to the couch and sit down. The remote touches my knee, so I flip on the tube and flick through the channels. News. War movie. Girls who didn't know they were pregnant. News. Buy this revolutionary coffee maker for only three payments of. . . .

*He can't feel his hands anymore. The leather cuts into the skin of his wrists. His feet are shackled to a braided cable and bolted to the concrete floor. They've stuffed a sock in his mouth and placed duct tape over his lips. He trembles, watching them move closer and closer with the poker, recently pulled from the fire and still red-hot. Watches them move it closer to his bare chest, asking their questions and awaiting his head-nod of the truth. When he won't give it to them, they apply the poker to his bare skin. White hot pain flashes behind his clenched eyes, his body goes at first rigid, and then to a sickening slack, as his mind tries to remove him from the pain.*

The forgotten pile of mail lies on the next cushion, so wearily I slide them onto my lap. I look them over, a pile of bills mostly, but one is from the Humane Society. Intrigued, I slide my finger under the sealed envelope flap and try to slice it open. But my finger catches on the corner of the inner envelope, which bears the picture of a cute little dog, in desperate need of rescue. I look down at my hand and realize that the stinging in my index finger is from the partial crescent of a paper cut delivered by the envelope. I stick my finger in my mouth trying to assuage the blood.

*He is strapped into an old school electric chair. But instead of giving him the juice that he expects, a doctor comes toward him, pulling a cart of medical equipment. The doctor reaches for the scalpel and slices down his forearm. He then takes a pair of spreaders and applies it to each side of the wound. Slowly, as the interrogators ask him the questions, the doctor tightens his grip on the handle, forcing his skin to separate. As the pressure builds up, suddenly the spreader slips, splitting the skin of his forearm in a crazy zigzag with a bang!*

Bang! I jump as a car outside backfires, and then skids around the corner and back out of sight. My heart is racing. Why should I be allowed to sit here, on this couch, doing nothing important when my friend must be lying somewhere, slowly dying for his country? I feel jaded, like my life of mundane consistency is worthless. Like I should be doing something.

The angst building up inside of me forces me up off the couch — I have to move, to go somewhere. But the hour is late. There is nowhere to go. Slowly I reach for the light and start heading towards the bedroom. Maybe all I need is a good night's rest.

The doorbell rings. I walk to the door, suspicious of the neighborhood, the partygoers lurking downstairs. But peering through the peephole, I see my friend. I unlock myself and throw the door open. But the look on his face stops me cold. My mind races to the fact that he is telling me goodbye. That this is it. He is leaving. Tomorrow. Today. Tonight.

"They didn't accept me."

"What?"

My world is turned upside down with relief. He won't be going; he won't suffer. He won't be put through unnameable torture for the good of his own country. Someone else is going in his place. I am absolutely elated until I stop and look into his face. His eyes are downcast and there is a tear sliding down his cheek. I never realized that for him, not going would be torture. The worst kind. Knowing that there are people out there who will need his help, he will be halfway around the world, sitting on a couch watching the news. For him, those people are real. They exist even when they are out of sight.

I reach forward and place my arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug.

He smiles. Says thank you.

He needs the support.

He turns.

Walks away.

Into an oblivion where I do not know if he will return.



## Si an Bhru Sestina

*Marcus Bingham*

Deep green hills define this land,  
ancient ruins through fog-dense air  
left behind by ancient druids: drunk  
Gaelic rituals that I embrace.  
Beside the Boyne, I set my backpack down  
and trace the river to my Celtic past.

I heft my load and take my hike past  
the forest glen, and enter the land  
my ancestors settled, Drogheda, down  
beyond the valley. A late autumn air  
calms my pace like a motherly embrace,  
as I wonder why I am so drunk

on nature, why I am so drunk  
on the heritage that defines my past.  
In the pub, I feel the close embrace  
of cheery folk sing about the land  
known as Erin, while the air  
is thick with smoke, as we down

our black and tans. Later, I sink into my down-  
filled bed and dream of Cu Chulainn. I'm drunk  
from the pagan power apparent in the air,  
the power of the clan, the power of the past,  
the power of the season, the power of the land.  
I awake with the ancient stories I embrace.

Si an Bhru appears; crystal walls embrace  
the spirit of the Tuatha de Danann. I climb down  
beyond the kerbstones, into passages that land  
me inside the tomb of Dagda Mor. I'm drunk  
from the glisten of the setting sun shining past  
the gemstone walls, making the dead-still air

tingle with energy. Outside, high up in the air  
a score of swans swirl the sky, like the embrace  
of the mythic lovers Aohngus and Caer. This past  
is mine, this dirty noble tribe of men kept down  
by foreign hands. The cup of culture I have drunk  
from will forever bond me with this land.

The day's chill air blurs the past and chases  
me down the hill to land me back inside the cozy  
embrace of drunk denizens, descendants of Newgrange.

## Addendum Circle

*Preston Ham*

When a sprocket is still, its teeth can be seen.  
 When the sprocket spins, the teeth cannot be seen.  
 With movement,  
 the low points disappear.

The sprocket is just  
 part of the contraption.  
 There must be a crank,  
 a chain, a tire, a force.

Indecision is the visibility of the gaps.  
 When a sprocket is moving,  
 the gaps between teeth  
 disappear, creating  
 an imaginary circle.

## Fractured

*Ryan Riehle*

Don't speak to him—  
 the Hadji.  
 Might be a spy—  
 language gap.

Guard duty,  
 we're drenched;  
 he's shivering.

Time to go,  
 the bird is here.  
 We climb into the Seahawk.

Blindfolded prisoner  
 with zip-tied hands,  
 maybe innocent,  
 needs a drink.  
 Give him Gatorade—  
 through the black camel netting.

He's in the corner—  
 might shit himself.

In the cabin,  
 my eyes trace lines through tempered glass  
 where unseen rains caulk the sand.

Suddenly, the bird  
 loses pitch.  
 My stomach  
 in my chest the pilot laughs,  
 "You awake?"

Restless in bed, I think back  
 to the not knowing gnawing—  
 I should feel something.  
 but I can't fill in the gaps with lies.  
 My memory  
 is rippled  
 glass.



## The Limitations of Capture

*Preston Ham*

Text: "What r u doin?"

The evergreens sway and the moss trembles,  
 The ground is alive with dark dirt,  
 wavering grass, hidden invertebrates, and ever-prowling scavengers.  
 A squirrel looks down the path and spirals up a nearby spruce, watching.  
 Ahead a deer pauses, face turned back down the trail, body ready to run.  
 There is a brook flowing, trickling,  
 running, as an enduring friend.

Text: "Hiking with my dad. He made me."

The brook babbles meaning through the air,  
 the screeching of a hawk calls out to the sky,  
 and a decaying log excretes aromas  
 of death and life into any open nostrils.

Text: "Yeah? Send me a pic."

## A Life Wasted

*Jamie Chipman*

Jerry had so much food in his mouth he couldn't swallow. They say don't bite off more than you can chew, but chewing wasn't the issue. Jerry's fat cheeks and wide mouth allowed him the capability of chewing no matter how full he stuffed his mouth, but sometimes he bit off more than he could swallow. The hash browns and bacon in their salty gravy, pressed against the back of his throat; he felt gagged, like he was trying to swallow his fist. His thick tongue sought to part and parcel his food. He swallowed in parts, but still left his esophagus feeling stretched, his throat with the remembrance of being choked. Such was Jerry's life.

Jerry spent his life filling his plate, then his fork, and finally his mouth with too much of everything. More than he could swallow, more than he needed. Now his failures fell over his pants in the form of fleshy love handles and a great big gut. He extends his arm for his coffee, and his tricep jiggles, hanging like someone has covered his bone in warm bread dough. His thin lips caress the edge of the mug as he drinks the hot, black liquid. The coffee smells better than it tastes; he inhales deeply before putting his mug down. His nose is bright red, covered in smatterings of little purple veins. The blotchy redness spreads high upon his cheeks, unflatteringly marking his drunkenness.

Jerry remembered his first beer. He was eight. He'd just finished fishing with family and friends. He was sitting in front of a campfire next to his Dad. His Dad had grabbed an ice cold Milwaukee's Best from the cooler they were sitting on, and pushed it into Jerry's small hand saying simply, "Here ya go son." He didn't like the flavor at first; it foamed and bubbled in his mouth like bitter pop rocks.

By age nine, Jerry's dad had left to start a new family with his new wife. By age ten, Jerry was at his Uncle Tom's house drinking on a regular basis.

It was only yesterday that Jerry had been faced with the consequences of how he'd spent his life treating his body. He had recently gone to the doctor's office to complain of some fictitious pain in order to score pain pills. Unfortunately, the doctor had taken his current condition and history of complaints far more seriously than he'd intended. She sent out for a battery of tests and sent him home with not so much as one Vicodin. His next visit was even worse. He'd never figured that his liver was in good enough

condition to donate or anything, but hearing the words, "If you don't stop drinking you will die," uttered simply from a young lipsticked mouth was quite a shock. Jerry's first instinct was to run out of the doctor's office and pretend he'd never come. But Dr. Brooks bore down on him with a very serious look that demanded his attention and her small frame was blocking the path to the door. He sat there for twenty minutes while she explained to him the dangers of continued alcohol abuse.

Little did she know that every word she uttered only made Jerry want to drink more. When he was finally free of the hospital, he felt himself vibrating with an uncontrollable, unpleasant energy that sent him practically running to his truck. *One last hoorah*, he'd told himself as he pulled into the parking lot of the nearest bar.

Jerry unconsciously folded all of the food on his plate together then shoved another gigantic portion into his mouth. His hangover permeated through his whole body, as if old, angry men were flowing through his veins and pounding their cane's into his organs. He reached deep into his cargo shorts and retrieved a small pink pill. He rolled the fifteen milligram oxy between his fingers and debated his next choice. On one hand he was in genuine pain. On the other, it didn't seem that pills were going to be a whole lot better than alcohol on his liver. Finally settling on the idea that he already had it so he might as well, Jerry popped the pill into his mouth with the promise that he just wouldn't get any more.

Jerry's headache left him so quickly he was sure part of it was the mental relief the pill had given him. The yellowness of the Waffle House table glared at him. If Jerry's life were to be told in colors, the first one would be yellow. The funnel cake booth was packed with yellow. Yellow cabinets, yellow counters, yellow lemonade. Jerry could feel himself there pouring a funnel cake right now, and with that thought his memory took over.

While pouring a funnel cake Jerry heard Sammy call out, "Special K has landed." Instantly he felt nauseous; anger made his skin hot, but shame turned his blood cold. Special K, Krista, was his baby mama, although the phrase attributed to her a greater status and increased affection than he'd ever actually felt. She was really just a drunken, wasted night. He deliberately did not turn around, and instead redoubled his focus upon his task. But he felt her presence behind him, floating and bobbing about like a freshly released helium balloon. His neck prickled, waiting for her presence to become forcefully known, for the balloon to hit something and burst.

Sammy's voice continued, "She's staying outside. Bob's distracting her."

Jerry turned, "He'd better, he invited her down here."

Sammy was looking out the window, a deceitful smile on her lips, "Aren't you going to check out your daughter? She looks just like you."

Making no effort to move, Jerry looked directly at the bags of mix blocking his view, "I can't see her from here."

Sammy burst out laughing, "You're fucking hysterical! I don't know why your dumbass knocked that dumb bitch up in the first place."

Jerry turned to pour another funnel cake; he didn't know either. He'd never wanted to be a father. The day he found out that Krista was pregnant was the worst day of his life. He could still remember every detail of that day, right down to how much ash had accumulated on the end of his joint by the time she left the room.

"I'm pregnant," Krista told him. The excitement in her voice was almost as bad as the actual news. *Almost*.

"You're not keeping it," Jerry countered in a definitive tone; desperate to supplant the idea deep into her psychology.

"Of course I am! We're going to be a family," she said, a great big smile plastered on her stupid face.

"No," he insisted, "we're **not**. You already have one kid you can't take care of."

"This is different," she insisted, the smile never leaving her face, "We'll be doing it *together*."

"**No**," he continued, "**I** won't be around! **EVER!** For any reason. Get rid of it."

Krista stared at him eyes filled with a delusional, manic happiness, "Don't be silly," she said, "You're just scared. You're going to be a great daddy!" And with that she swooped down, kissed his cheek, and left him to watch a 1/4 inch of ash fall from his joint and turn to dust.

Jerry raised his wide hand to his cheek. It had been decades since that moment, but sitting here in the Waffle House, remembering that moment still filled him with the need to wipe the disgust of that kiss from his face. His body started to fill with a delightful haziness; he knew he should feel bad. That he should feel lonely. He just didn't. He liked being alone. He had always hated close personal relationships. They were so much maintenance. They demanded too much commitment. Too much time. Truthfully he didn't even care much for his family. He'd used his erratic funnel cake schedule as an excuse to avoid his mother for years. Of course there was one show in Redmond, Oregon that brought him close to home. His mother always came and it was always the same conversation.

Jerry's mom hugged him. It was an awkward hug. An embrace that said, 'We don't do this often.'

"How have you been? I never see you. How come you didn't call me when you were in town?" His mom released her questions rapid fire.

Jerry fixed his eyes on his mother's thinning hair, "Ya well, I uh, see you when I can. It was late, I didn't think you'd be up."

His mom took a defensive stance, hands on her hips, "Did you not know you were coming to town? You could have called **before**, and let me know you were coming."

Jerry turned his head slightly, "Well, uh... So do you want a Funnel Cake?"

Jerry took another drink of coffee. Thank god she was dead. Jerry had loved his mother. All sons loved their mothers. But what kind of relationship were they ever destined to have? What kind of relationship had she expected? Perhaps if his father hadn't left; perhaps if Jerry hadn't reminded her so much of him; perhaps if alcohol hadn't been such an issue, then *maybe* they would buy each other hallmark cards on special occasions. Jerry unconsciously shook his head; that was enough perhaps to be confusing, not to mention unrealistic. The bottom line was that, as a child, his mother spent most of her time at the bar. So much so that Jerry felt closer to the bartenders he ended up talking to when he was trying to get a hold of her. As for his father, well, he left. One day he was there, the next day he wasn't. Jerry had only since him once since then, in court, when he'd sued him for college money. It hadn't been out of spite. Jerry had been living off twenty pound bags of white rice, barely scraping together money for tuition. At first Jerry had tried to appeal to his father's sentiment by explaining the situation and asking, almost pleading for help. When his father refused, claiming he simply didn't have the funds, well then, why not sue? He didn't win much, he'd still graduated with immense student loans, but the five grand had definitely perked up his lifestyle. Ironically, his father had given him his first beer, and it was his money that afforded Jerry the luxury of his first joint.

Jerry felt an inappropriate smile flit across his face and covered his mouth self consciously. Jerry had met his own daughter only once. He'd always expected her to show up on his door step at some point, but it actually took longer than he expected, twenty three years to be exact. When he opened the door he knew exactly who she was. For one he didn't get many visitors. For two, the resemblance was uncanny, lucky for her, her mother wasn't much of a looker. "Why now?" Jerry asked.

She didn't pretend to misunderstand, "Well, for one. Your not exactly an easy guy to find."

"And you didn't take that as a hint?" Jerry retorted. He didn't intend to be so mean, so abrupt, but this conversation was never going to be what she wanted so there was no sense in sugar coating it.

She shrugged, "Ya I figured. At first it hurt my feelings, then it pissed me off. But I looked for you anyway. I actually found you three years ago."

"So why didn't you come see me then?"

"Once I found you, I just didn't see the point. It was weird. It was like once it was possible to find you, to meet you, I didn't care anymore."

"Okay," Jerry found that in most situations it was best to say as little as possible.

She continued to stand awkwardly on his porch, "It's my birthday today. You probably didn't know that. Anyway, all my friends were asking me what I wanted to do and nothing sounded good. So there I was sitting at home and I thought 'fuck it' I'm going to go meet my Dad. So here I am."

Jerry looked passed her, so her face was hazy and the scenery behind her was clear as day. There simply was no perfect way to handle this situation, "Well, it is your birthday. Why don't we go out for a beer?"

"Really?" She seemed surprised.

"Why not? I owe you that at least." Jerry said thinking it would be weird to invite her into his place, and that it was getting increasingly awkward to have her standing on his front porch. Just wait here and I'll grab my keys. Ten minutes later they sat across from each other at one of Jerry's regular bars. Jerry slammed his shot of Crown and took a swig of his Fat Tire, "So, uh, what do you do?"

She took a long drink of whatever well drink she'd ordered, "I do make-up at JC Penney. Glamorous, huh?" She gave him an insecure shrug that reminded him of Krista, and he had to suppress an involuntary shudder.

Jerry forced a laugh. "So look, why don't you just tell me what you want from this."

"I'm not really sure. I guess I just want to know why?"

Jerry finished his beer and flagged the waitress for another one, "Why what?"

"Why you didn't stick around? Why you never tried to be part of my life?"

Jerry shrugged, "I never wanted you." Her face blanched. "Look, let me try to put this in a way where you can understand. You watch romance movies?" She nodded. "Okay, well you know how in the movie there is always the girl who's totally in love with the guy but he doesn't love her back so he's the asshole?"

"I guess."

"Well, what makes her happiness so much more important than his? He can't make himself love her. Just like I can't make myself love your mother. Just like I can't make myself love you."

"How do you know? You don't even know me?"

"I don't have to. I know what it entails to be a father, and I know that I never wanted any part of that. No matter how great you were, no matter how great it could have been, I would have always hated what I had to give up to be a part of your life."

"That's horrible."

"Is it? Why is it horrible to seek personal happiness. I did what I did because that was the way for me to attain the most happiness out of a shitty situation. No matter what people say, no matter how many fronts they try to pull, ultimately they do what's best for them. I did what was best for me. Now either you get that, or you don't. And if you don't, then you're not really my daughter, at least not in anyway that counts."

She began to worry her lower lip, "Can we be friends?"

Jerry watched her closely. At first he'd seen himself in her, but the longer they sat there the more he saw her mother. The way she bit her lower lip when she was nervous; the way she fiddled with her straw, and adjusted her clothes obviously uncomfortable with her weight. And most importantly the way she wanted to cling to him in anyway despite the fact that he was obviously not interested. How do you tell someone that it's not personal, that you just don't *feel* what they wish you would? "No," he finally answered, "we can't be friends. Unfortunately I am your father. And that very biological fact will prevent us from ever having a true friendship. You'll always be wanting and hoping that things will change between us. You'll always want me to change my mind and try to be a father to you. And I know enough about myself to know that *that* will never happen. Trust me, it's better to never have a father, then it is to have one that leaves or fails."

She looked away from him, running her fingers across the sticky bar table, "But I need this," she pleaded.

Nothing she could have said would have reinforced his decision more, "Look, I know you've been raised in a world that tells you that family is important. But there is really only two reasons that families stick together: One, shared experiences, which we don't have. Two, shared genetics, which we obviously don't have enough of." She looked like she was about to cry so he stood up put enough money on the table to cover the bill and offered, "I always knew I'd be a bad father, that's why I never wanted to be one. I'm sorry your mother brought us both into this."

Jerry finished his coffee, that had been four years ago and he hadn't seen or spoken to her since. The waitress stopped by to fill his coffee cup, and with the customary, "Let me know if you need anything else," left the check. Jerry watched her ass as she walked away; she was decent for a Waffle House waitress. A little chunkier than he liked them, but she had a cute face.

"See something you like?" Sammy's voice cut through his haze. What was she doing here? "I thought you only liked prostitutes?" She laughed as she slid into the seat across from him.

Jerry smiled, "Ya, well I like to know how expensive something is going to be before I pay for it. What are you doing here?"

Sammy cocked an eyebrow and shot Jerry an arrogant look that reminded him why they weren't closer. "Seriously? You don't remember calling me?" Jerry's hands reached automatically for his pants pockets, looking for his cell phone. "You don't have it. Shocker. I tried calling you on my way to your place."

"What are you doing here?" Jerry asked. "When did I call you?"

"Last night, about 3 a.m. Melissa says hi, by the way. She very much appreciated the wake up call."

Jerry remembered now. He'd called her because he needed to tell somebody. It had seemed like a good idea last night, but now that he was staring at her he regretted his decision. He certainly didn't need somebody *telling* him what to do. And Sammy was the mouthiest bitch he knew. He glanced at his watch; 3:00 p.m. "Well you certainly took your time. I tell you I'm dying and you wait twelve hours."

"Give me a break, it would have been eleven but I had to track you down. I don't even know why you own a fucking cell phone, you never have it."

"Whatever... Eleven isn't much better."

"Well," Sammy helped herself to a drink of Jerry's coffee, "I had to get everything ready for your rehab."

"What?!"

"Oh calm down, I'm not taking you to Betty Ford or anything. Not that either of us could afford it anyway."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jerry felt anxiety tightening his insides.

"You'll see," Sammy smiled.

Jerry was starting to get angry. Angry at himself for ever calling Sammy, and angry at her for her need to make everything a fucking game, "I don't want your help. I'm good."

Sammy rolled her eyes, "Obviously, the 3 a.m. phone call you made shit faced, that you don't even remember, clearly states that you have everything completely in hand. I mean do you even have a plan? Do you even plan to *try* and quit? Or are you planning to just drink yourself to death?"

"Of course I'm quitting," he shot back, stuffing his words with a confidence he didn't feel. The truth was he didn't have a plan. Until this moment he'd lived his life exactly as he did most days. Protocol stated his next move was to go home, shower, have a couple of beers, couple shots, couple bowls, then hit the bar. He knew he had to break his routine. But where? Once he paid that check where did he go? His cabinets were stocked with liquor, all of his friends drank, all the places he went for fun served alcohol.



Sammy sighed, "Look, I know you probably regret calling me in the first place. But I *know* you. I can help. I already cleaned all of the alcohol out of your place."

Jerry's head shot up, "How the hell did you get in?"

Sammy rolled her eyes again, "Seriously?"

Jerry laughed, she had a point. Sammy wasn't a virgin at breaking and entering. When she was fourteen she'd broken into a competitor's booth and destroyed it. That was the first time that he knew of, but certainly not the last. "I thought you gave up criminal behavior?"

"Never," she smiled, "besides, you left your window open. Don't worry, I closed it on my way out."

"Am I supposed to thank you for breaking into my place?" Jerry asked, making his voice sound put out even though he really didn't care.

"Just pay your check, and then I'll drive you home. I'm getting too old to be climbing through windows anyway."

Jerry took his wallet out of his pocket and retrieved the appropriate amount of cash, but didn't make any move to put it on the table, "Why are you here?"

Sammy shrugged, "You think I want to do Funnel Cakes without you? I mean it'd be like fifty percent more work."

Jerry glared, "Fuck off, we both know I work harder."

"Ya, right. Now let's go." Jerry threw the money on the table and followed Sammy.

Climbing into the passenger seat of her beat up car was like sitting in a land fill, "Do you ever clean this thing?"

"Yep," she started the engine, "I never miss a year." The five minute drive back to his apartment was a violent one; Sammy treated every drive like it was a death race.

Jerry got out of the car as quickly as possible, "I don't see how you think making me ride in a goddamn car with you is helping. A five minute drive, and I already need a drink."

"Bite me, asshole," Sammy retorted, getting an expensive suitcase from the trunk.

Jerry unlocked his door and stepped inside, "What's in the suitcase?"

Sammy threw it on the bed, "Your rehab." She opened it, "I got five ounces of weed, a zong, a pipe, rolling papers, and of course, alcohol detox meds."

Jerry smiled, he was confused and yet he wasn't. Sammy did know him, "So, let me get this straight; in order to get me sober you're going to get me stoned?"

"Well, when you first told me I thought, 'Wow, what a great opportunity for Jerry to really square his life away. He can quit drinking and doing drugs,

start developing real relationships and live happily ever after.' Of course, then reality set in, so I called my mom and got a bunch of weed."

Jerry laughed, "Fuck you, Sammy!"

"Seriously, have you ever been to rehab?"

Jerry grabbed a bottle of water from his fridge, "No, I heard they don't let you drink there."

"Yeah, well I have. My mom was in and out of that place all the time. And let me tell you, it's really just substitution therapy there anyway. They take away alcohol and insert Jesus. We're pretty much doing the same thing here. I'm just substituting weed instead of Jesus. Trust me, this is safer," she tossed him a bag of weed. "Now are you going to roll us a joint or what?"

Jerry took a drink of water, and swallowed somewhat surprised; the lump that had been building in the back of his throat since he left the doctor's office was gone. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all, he thought, as he caught the bag of weed and grabbed the rolling papers, "Absolutely."

Jerry rolled two joints in record time and just as he lit one, Sammy asked, "So how many joints do you think you've rolled in your life?"

Jerry shrugged, "Millions probably. I've rolled a lot for you."

Sammy laughed, "Funnel Cakes... to improve my 'customer service' skills."

Jerry coughed and passed the joint, "Uh, yeah! You're a bitch when you're sober."

Sammy smiled pleased with herself, "Remember that bitch that was all in my face about how much funnel cakes cost?"

Jerry started laughing, "Ya, the one who asked you how slept at night? To which you replied, 'Well, with all the money I make ripping you off, I bought an excellent mattress.'"

Sammy was laughing, "That was hilarious."

"And that's exactly why it's better for you to smoke."

Sammy handed him the joint back, "Bullshit! You're only a customer if you fucking buy something, ergo she wasn't a customer, and that could not be used to discredit my customer service skills."

"Whatever." They smoked the rest of the joint in silence.

Sammy broke the silence, "So do you regret it?"

Jerry felt immediately uncomfortable, but he'd known it was coming, "Regret what?"

Sammy raised an eyebrow, "What? Well I don't know, how about that I was your one phone call?"

"So, we're friends," he answered stalling.

"Oh, give it up. Do you regret it?! Your life. The fact that it's coming to it's end, or downward slope anyway, and you don't have anyone."

Jerry shrugged, he'd asked himself that same question yesterday so he felt pretty confident answering it now. "No. What's better? Sixty years of doing whatever you want? Being beholden to no one but yourself? Having all the fun you want? Being *happy*. Or, what? Maybe two years of having someone hold your hand when most of you is dead and the rest lies dying?"

Sammy looked at him more directly, studying his face, "The idea..." she gestured sarcastically, "is that you find someone to have all those experiences with."

"That," he answered with finality, "would have never made me happy. Being with someone else means sacrifice, it means compromise, no matter what, you give something up." Jerry could feel the weed slowing everything down, it felt good, it felt right. "Look, I know what most people would say, "That I've wasted my life." But truly, I've *lived* my life. I never passed up on an opportunity to do something because of someone else. I never let anyone but me dictate my happiness. I don't regret the things I've done *or* the things I haven't done. How many people dying with someone holding their hand can say that? That once their life was theirs, they *truly* made it their own?

Sammy looked thoughtful, "Not that many I guess. Life is about compromise."

"Exactly!" Jerry exclaimed. "People don't live their lives, they compromise them. They sacrifice them for others. So *I* say that it's *those* people that have wasted their lives."



## Untitled

*Hilary Allison*

"He who gathers thistles may expect pricks."

-Spanish Proverb

I

My thistles aren't purple thistles,  
lovely, a bit dangerous  
and purportedly sweet.  
My thistles are the brown kind,  
growing in the strip of brown grass  
and broken glass outside my bedroom window.  
Dying from the moment they were born,  
clouding my already dismal view  
with thorns.

II

My thistle and I,  
we're inextricable linked.  
Any loveliness is a put-on,  
a ruse.  
Any personal benefit you might discern,  
could never be put to use.  
Because we're thorny,  
and covered with bristles.  
We've the subtlety and sweetness,  
of ballistic missiles.

## The Red Line

Ryan Riehle

A hoopoe darts across the concrete squares.  
He's camera shy and halts before a red line,  
probing with his needle curved beak—  
but he dare not—the Humvee is watching.

His black and white tail feathers bound  
as he scurries about the gray space  
wondering if the razor wire could support his weight.

He hops upon a concrete divider  
beside an empty water bottle.  
When he catches the sight of men dining,  
his orange-tinged fanned crown flares  
revealing black feathers tipped with white.

Trying to get a better picture, I approach this bird.  
But he hops  
and snags a grape from someone's plate—  
breaching the finite lines—  
soaring from our sight.

## On the Seduction of a Female

Joe Savidge

Let me tell you, one woman to another, beware of  
that man. Slow. Methodical. Maybe diabolical.  
He'll love you like a lover, and he will be thoughtful  
as he runs his hand down your hip, kisses its bone, gives it  
a lick. After that then this: he'll spit his wit with poetic  
intent meant to steal your sense. A fake friend. He's bent  
on smelling skin's soft scent. It's love for you, for him pretend.

I offer my shoulder. You need me. I'm your consoler.  
Befriend and nurture, I will help you. I'm a soul-searcher  
with kind intentions. Wise. Patient. This wine leaves us shaken  
while a fire's flames lick and coil until our hearts are taken.  
We've become one roaring soul. Oh! We are like freedom. Yes!  
I think to myself: *Remember that line for another time.*  
I hide in her hair and grin. *Again I win, beating bad men.*

## The Face of Pure Evil

Kathleen Brown

His fingers hooked the smooth wood handle and he slid the door closed in front of him. The tiny room gave Abram a heightened sense of claustrophobia. For a moment, he felt like the room was shrinking, collapsing around him and squeezing him inside of its worn wooden grasp. Without thinking, Abram sat shyly on his hands and tucked his feet under the bench. On the other side of the rice-paper-thin wall, he could hear the rustling robes of Father Noah as he situated himself in front of the small, mesh-covered window that separated the two of them.

"Father," he took a deep breath to steady his voice.

"Yes, my child?"

Abram could hear the recognition in the old man's comfotingly familiar husky voice.

Back when his legs didn't reach the floor and swung back and forth, kicking the back wall, Abram could tell Father Noah knew it was him. "Forgive me Father—" thump— "for I have sinned—" thump— "I pushed Tommy—" thump— "so that I could get to the swings first—" thump.

"You are forgiven, my son."

As Abram's voice changed, cracking and squeaking with every other word, Father Noah was the only person that he would talk to. "Forgive me Father, for I have sinned."

"And what is your sin?"

"Well there was this magazine that Tommy and me found at the gas station, you see..."

And on it went, every transgression, impure thought, and act of disobedience had passed through the screen and had been filtered back in the form of divine forgiveness.

Even with his knees bunched up to his chest, the familiar walls made Abram feel like an impatient child.

"Father," he started his confession, "forgive me—" Abram's breath caught in the base of his throat, and he couldn't say anymore. His heart picked up to an unsteady gait and his breathing became ragged, as though he couldn't take in enough oxygen with one breath. His mind started buzzing with the reality of what he was going to do, what he had almost said.

In the stillness of the tight space, he knew that Father Noah could hear his sudden agitation.

"For you have sinned?" the Father prompted, an attempt to set Abram back on his derailed confession.

The air in his lungs was all but gone, and Abram answered him in a rough whisper. "I don't know, Father."

Out of the corner of his eye, Abram could see the outline of the Father's face through the screen. His eyes were closed, and his lips were in a prominent puckered pout that always became more pronounced when he was worried. He let Abram's words hang in the air for a moment, the echoes and unanswered questions bouncing between them as they each thought in silence.

"Abram," the Father shifted in his seat, and Abram knew that he was trying to look at him through the screen. He could almost feel that studious dark-eyed gaze that had always stopped him from sticking gum under the pews. "In Leviticus, our Lord says, 'When anyone is guilty in any of these ways he must confess in his head what way he has sinned.' Now tell me, do you feel guilty?"

Abram nodded his head slowly. "Yes Father."

"And why do you feel guilty?"

The young man shrugged in response, knowing full well that Father Noah couldn't see the small gesture, and let the question linger.

The Father kept prodding. "Have you sinned, Abram?"

"No," he finally replied.

"Then why has the Lord brought you here?"

Standing up suddenly, the top of Abram's head hit the low ceiling of the room. "Father, forgive me," he mumbled and slid the door open, frantically pushing his way out of the confessional.

The stained glass windows cast a shattered glow in blues and purples as the light of a quickly setting sun pierced through them. In contrast to the dark confessional, the evening glow was almost blinding. Abram stumbled down the narrow aisle, out of the church. The sound of his tennis shoes slapping the cold marble was like a smattering of cynical applause from an unenthused audience. Out in the chilly October air, Abram had to stop running to avoid knocking over an early trick-or-treater draped in a white sheet and attached to his mother's arm.

Oh God. His mother. Abram hadn't talked to his mother for weeks. He hadn't even called. There was no way he could look her in the eyes now. It didn't even matter that her apartment was a five-minute walk from the church and she was just waiting for him to stop by and say hi. She always knew when he was hiding something and he simply couldn't tell her. So he turned in the opposite direction of where his mother lived and walked away.

On the streets of Chicago, it was easier to breathe. People walked past,



ignoring Abram, just the way he liked it. He began to relax. It felt good to walk into the wind, being tunneled between the tightly packed buildings. His hand traced the grey walls and cool shop windows as he walked, not really caring where he ended up.

Abram stopped in front of an Irish tavern and mildly considered going in before he remembered that he didn't actually like bars, or any place where drunken people gathered. Three young men that Abram vaguely recognized from Northwestern stumbled out of the open door, wearing what looked like Dollar Store Halloween costumes. Their drunken mumbles turned into raucous laughter as one of them tripped on the steps leading to the sidewalk and went sprawling onto his face.

The tallest of the two left standing swaggered down the stairs and stood over the limp figure. "Well, looks like we're short one man."

The other man found this outrageously funny and doubled over. The tall man looked at Abram as though expecting him to laugh at his joke as well and was highly offended that he didn't. His eyes examined every inch of Abram, lazily. "You'll have to do. Come on, we have three invites to a party, and it's against my own personal religion to let a good party go unattended."

The other man straightened up and came down the steps. "Bill, you don't got a religion."

"Sure I do," the shorter man looked quizzically at Bill. "Every Sunday morning, I kneel and pray that my hangover will go away."

This brought them both to knee-slapping fits of girlish giggles.

"Well, are you coming?" Bill managed to ask.

Abram started to back away cautiously, shaking his head. "I don't have a costume," he tried to reason.

Bill reached down to where his fallen companion lay, tore the ghoulish, twisted mask off the unconscious body and slapped it onto Abram's face. "There now," he grabbed him by the elbow and towed him down the street. "The face of pure evil is going to party tonight. I didn't spend three ninety-nine on that mask for nothing."

Under the rubber mask, Abram started to sweat. His vision was narrowed by the slits cut out for eyes, and the long mangled nose made it difficult for him to catch his breath. He let his feet move sluggishly as he followed Bill and his friend through the increasingly populated streets to a downtown apartment. Bill pushed the buzzer on the intercom and walked into the building without waiting for a response. A few stories above them, Abram could hear loud dance music and the murmur of a crowd of people. The ding of an elevator door sliding open brought a slutty Little Bo Peep clinging to a half-undressed, fully drunken pirate into the lobby. They stumbled out before Abram and his new companions stepped into the elevator.

Abram was back in a dimly lit room. He helplessly watched as the door closed in front of him. The face that looked back through the stainless steel wall wasn't his. Attached to his body was a grotesque red face glaring maliciously through slanted yellow eyes. Trapped behind the molded rubber, Abram wanted to laugh at the irony. Oh, if Father Noah could see him now — the face of pure evil.

With a startling jolt, the elevator jerked to a stop. He watched the mask melt away with the door to reveal a hallway full of drunk and dancing demons, superheroes, and fairies. Abram trailed after Bill like a lost child as he forced his way through the crowd to the door, stopping to talk to various friends and hot girls. Somewhere between Cat Woman and the keg, Abram lost track of Bill and was shouldered to the wall as he tried to inch his way back to elevator.

"Hey," said a scantily clad angel with red curls falling across her bare shoulders as she leaned against the wall next to him. The thin strings of her white halter had come untied, and the only things keeping her dress up were the large feathery wings hooked under her arms. "Do I know you?"

He could smell beer rolling off her breath with every word. "Uh, no, I don't think so." Abram moved to go around her, but she put both hands against him and pushed him back against the wall.

"Oh well," she leaned into his chest and looked up beguilingly. "You know, most angels don't go for the whole demon thing," her hands moved up to finger the collar of his shirt, "but I'm a bit of a rebel. I think it's pretty hot."

"Thank you," Abram answered as courteously as he could while trying to push her away.

She giggled and hiccupped at the same time. "You know, this party is so boring. We should go somewhere else. I have an apartment a few blocks down that's just *heavenly*."

"No, that's okay," he grabbed her firmly by the wrist and moved her aside.

The girl snarled at Abram and jumped back, shaking off his hands. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

The question caught him by surprise. He bit his lip as he considered the multitude of answers he had for that particular question. *I'm stuck at a party in an ugly mask that makes my face itch* was one of the top contenders. But that wasn't the first response that came to mind.

All of a sudden, the sweaty Halloween mask wasn't a confining prison anymore. It wasn't blocking Abram from the world; it was protecting him. He had been walking the streets in his very own rubber confessional. The corners of his mouth turned up underneath the feral-painted grin. Leaning in close to the angel girl, Abram whispered his confession into her ear.

Her spine straightened in surprise. "Oh." She eyed him warily, looking slightly disappointed. "Are you sure?"

He nodded, and she shrugged and vanished into the throng.

Abram moved confidently through the group, slowly making his way to the elevator. Safe and alone inside, he tore off the mask and watched his face. His hair was stuck to his forehead, and he could see little difference in himself. But he could feel it. The tightness that had been gripping his chest for so long loosened its grasp, and he breathed deeply for the first time. The everlasting voice in the back of his head screaming to get out was gone, released through a rubber mask in a barely discernible whisper to a complete stranger who would probably wake up the next day and not remember him at all.

The door slid open and this time Abram didn't watch his reflection slip away. He tossed the used mask into an overflowing trash bin and stepped out into the dark streets, ready to go home.



## Higher Learning

*Joe Savidge*

1

Class ended, and I staggered out of the building and into the warm autumn night, drunk off of my lofty ambition of dropping out of college. I figured leaving school would help me become a real human being, not just a state-controlled test-subject. I dialed my father on my cell phone to let him in on the good news.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, Dad, it's me. Listen, you're not going to like what I have to say, but it's for the best. I'm going to drop out of college."

"What? You worked so hard to get there. What's wrong?"

"Well, it's—"

"It's only your second week. You're just nervous."

His defensive tone made me imagine his angry face with black-pitted eyes.

"No, it's more than that. There's something weird about these teachers. I was sitting in English, and the professor asked everyone to write a page-long story, and then read it aloud."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You should have seen her hungry eyes as she listened to the stories and jotted down notes. I was pissed. She had to be looking for her own story ideas. My old high school teacher, Mr. Barnes, he was always taking notes as people read their writing exercises aloud. I'm sure he submitted stories the next day to some high-powered New York editor."

"Mickey, you're thinking too much again."

"No I'm not! It's the perfect plan. Beginning writers must be full of great ideas. A teacher could rip off those ideas and be the next author who is praised for writing with 'fresh wit and brilliant insight.' You always told me that greed is what will destroy the world. I was pushed over the edge today when I saw the professor's eyes gleaming as she took notes. Her pen was like a fork, and she stabbed, bite after bite after bite, like a homeless man in a trash can."

"You need to slow down. You're starting to sound as crazy as your brother. How much coffee have you had today?"

"I'm officially engaged in a rebellion against the thievery that lies behind institutional education."

"Hold on. Your mom is talking to me." My father's voice gained sweetness. "Yes honey, I know I'm pacing. It's Mickey. He's telling stories again. Yeah, I'll tell him. Your mom says 'hi.'"

"Tell her 'hi' for me."

"Honey, he says 'hi.' I'm going to put the trash on the curb."

"What's mom doing?"

"Oh, she's watching a show—" I heard the familiar creak of the back door opening and then closing, "—while she sees how quickly she can empty her martini glass."

"Dad, listen to me—"

"No! You listen to me," he whispered through urgent breaths. "You can't just walk away from that scholarship. Do you know how many people would kill to have that much financial help?"

"Didn't you listen to anything I just told you? These professors are hired thieves."

"Mickey, I don't believe any of your stories."

"It's happening in my music classes, too. Because I won the full-ride scholarship, I get one-on-one instruction with Mr. Sarlsby. He's one of the top professors in the music department. He practically drools over the music I come up with. And he's recording every lesson. He says it's so he can analyze my playing to help me get better."

"Mickey, if your mom hears any of this nonsense, she's going to make you go to the shrink again."

"I don't have to do what she says. I'm eighteen now."

"You're right. And that means your mother and I aren't legally obligated to take care of you. If you drop out of school, you're on your own. You can get a job and support yourself. Your mother and I aren't supporting a bum. We already made that mistake with your brother."

"If I stay for the scholarship money and your support, then I'm just as greedy as anyone else."

"No, Mickey. You're talented and privileged."

"I'm sick of hearing that."

"I want you to call me tomorrow and tell me you're staying in school. Otherwise, I'm telling your mom. She'll drive over there and she'll take you to the shrink herself. Understand?"

"Yeah, I understand."

The smokers crowded the front steps as I made my way to the dormitory. I switched directions and headed towards the back entrance. I knew that secondhand smoke could kill people, but the real reason I didn't walk through the front door was because the people on the steps looked like trashy human beings. Their smoke floated downwind and made me gag on the putrid smell. I rounded the building only to see the back steps being occupied by two female smokers. A cigarette didn't belong in my classical vision of the female mouth. I continued walking and decided to make another telephone call.

"Speak to me," my brother answered.

"Hey, Ricky. How's it going?"

"Not bad little buddy. I'm just tryin' on my new snake-skin boots. Killed the son-of-a snake myself with a nail gun at the jobsite the other day. How's college? Meetin' any girls yet?"

"Yeah, a bunch," I lied. "Why are people screaming?"

"Oh, these girls are always makin' a big deal about it when I walk around the house in my underwear."

"I thought you were trying on your boots."

"I am. I have the decency to wear my underwear when I break in a pair of boots."

"That's nice of you. Listen, I have something important to tell you. I want to leave college. Is there any room in your house for rent? I'm planning on moving to Colorado."

"Whoa, buddy. Why are you going to leave that scholarship? Colleges need brainiacs like you to keep 'em in business. What're you going to do here in the mountains, anyway? You know I smoke inside the house and drink before noon. And seven other people live here. Friends and strangers come 'n' go at all hours. You'd hate it here."

"I'll keep my room well-ventilated, put a lock on the door and spend all my time outside."

"Well," said Ricky in his squealing hillbilly accent, smacking his lips. He always sounded like a redneck, but he really put it on thick when he was egging people on to join in his idea of hilarity. "You gon' need a plane ticket, which is 'bout four-hunnerd, 'n' 'bout a grand ta get started with rent and livin' 'spenses till ya find a job here."

"Quit fooling, Ricky. Fourteen-hundred bucks?"

"Yippers. But 'cha better hurry 'cause I got a few girls here who're thinkin' 'bout movin' in. I'll try and fight em' off for a week till I hear back from ya, but make it quick cause these girls really like me."

"Yeah. Of course they do. They always do. Ricky, I got a serious question."

"Shoot."

"How do I become street smart?"

"Think business and go smoke cigarettes till you throw up."

"Quit fooling."

"It's the truth. And hey, don't tell mom and dad that I'm supporting your insane plan to sabotage your free college education. How pissed are they?"

"Well, they don't exactly know about it yet. But it should be fine."

"You can't bullshit an old hillbilly like me. Mom's probably going to make you go to her shrink again."

"Not if I escape first."

"I'll be cheerin' for you. By the way, make it eight-hundred plus a plane ticket. I got a few dollars I can loan out if you need it."

"Really? Thanks, Ricky."

"No problem, little Mickey. You hear that noise?"

"I don't hear anything."

"That's my point. A man has it made if he can stand on his front deck in his snake skin boots and underwear beneath a gorgeous Colorado sunset without hearin' a complaint from no one. I tell ya, these Colorado sunsets last for hours. Must have to do with the high altitude. There's always a little bit of light poppin' up over the mountains, like that's nature's way of sayin', 'Don't go to sleep yet.'"

## 3

It was time to think business. I had been walking during the whole conversation with my brother, and now I was in a small plaza of businesses and restaurants. I walked into a pizza joint. The kid standing at the counter looked quite sickly and unfit for food service. His pale face was partly covered by his feces-colored, greasy, matted hair which scraped the shoulders of his once-white-now-grease-speckled work shirt.

"Hello. Is a manager present?"

"This is him."

I swallowed the voices in my head that were commenting on the scruffy nature of this hired buffoon. "Well, I'm looking for a job. How long would it take me to make twelve-hundred dollars?"

The greasy twenty-something-year-old stared back at me, his unidentifiable serpent neck tattoo and lip ring glaring down on me.

"Well," he said. "Let's see. At nine an hour, thirty hours a week—"

"That's only two-hundred and seventy dollars," I whined.

"Even less after taxes."

"I need twelve-hundred this week."

He exaggerated an 'aw, shucks' frown and swung his fist in an upward arc across his stomach. "Then I'm sorry to say that the restaurant business isn't the trade for you."

I sighed through my nose. "I'm doomed to a life of subservient collegiate instincts. I'll never be street smart. I can't even jaywalk without feeling nervous." I staggered back a few steps and crumpled onto a chair.

"Bummer. Sounds like you need a cigarette. I was just about to take a break. You can come if you want."

"No, thanks," I replied. He shrugged and turned away. I thought of Ricky's instructions and I figured now was as good a time as ever to start improving my street brains.

"Actually, why not?"

He turned around and nodded towards the front door. "Meet me around back."

"Okay." I walked out of the pizza joint. I wished I hadn't worn a coat. I took it off and tied the sleeves around my hips. Around the side of the building was a back step and a dim light. The manager had a smoke dangling from his lips. He brought his lighter to his face and fired. His thin, sharp-featured face seemed sinister in the glow. He handed me a cigarette. I didn't know if he noticed that I was shaking. I put the cigarette in my mouth. His hands brought the lighter to my face. I puffed and noticed his tattoo was a fire-breathing dragon. I stepped back and tried to keep from scrunching my face. I put the cigarette to my lips and sucked again.

"You're not inhaling," he said.

"What do you mean? I'm sucking the smoke right into my mouth."

"No, no. Breathe the smoke into your mouth and then suck in again real quick so that it goes into your lungs. But it's not like weed, so don't hold it in. Blow it out quickly."

"Right into my lungs? Isn't that unhealthy?"

The kid stared at me silently, until finally I felt like the buffoon. I wondered if there was a reason to smoke that trumped smoking's negative effects.

I laughed it off. "What's a little damage?"

After a few slow, modest drags without coughing, I grew brave and loaded up a large store of smoke in my mouth. I sucked it in quick and felt a pressure rise into my brain. I coughed out the smoke. My head began to spin as fast as my gut was churning.

"Whoa, man. You're turning green. Take a seat."

Feeling clumsy, I sat down. "Thanks. You got a name?"

"Prince."

"Mickey. You know what's really wrong with me? I need twelve hundred dollars in one week so I can get out of college and move to the Rocky Mountains. Where am I going to get twelve hundred bucks in one week?"

Prince had one foot on the back step. His elbow rested on his right-angled leg, resting his head. His cigarette occupied two fingers of his other hand. "The cigarette racket."

"What?"

Prince took a long drag of his cigarette. He stared up at the sky as he blew out his smoke. His hesitation to explain the cigarette racket seemed deliberate, as if he enjoyed holding the answer I needed.

"Premium cigarettes in Washington are about seventy bucks a carton. In Idaho, they cost about forty. If you buy them in Idaho and mark up the price as little as ten dollars before you sell them in Washington, you can flip a decent profit.

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Of course it is."

"I need twelve-hundred bucks before I can move to Colorado. If you divide twelve-hundred by ten, that means I need to buy a-hundred-and-twenty cartons. Won't it look strange if I buy a-hundred-and-twenty cigarette cartons from a gas station?"

Prince laughed. "How'd you get into college with such a narrow head?"

"Are you calling me stupid?"

"No, no. It's just a generalization. Anyways, all you have to do is travel around Idaho and stop at every gas station and smoke shop that you see." Prince's eyes glowed.

I was thinking he had a good idea until I did some math. "So, if I buy a-hundred-and-twenty cartons at forty bucks each, that's forty-eight hundred dollars."

"How'd you do that math so fast?"

"I did ten times twenty, which is twelve-hundred, and multiplied by four."

Prince whistled and rolled his eyes.

I took offense to his sarcasm. "Listen, just because I'm good at math and I go to college doesn't mean I'm an idiot. Your plan is stupid. If I had the money to invest, I wouldn't need to do this. It's illegal, anyways. I'm not going to become a pizza-making criminal who spends his little paychecks on cigarettes and tattoos and other worthless junk."

Prince crossed his arms. The cigarette dangled in his hand like fish bait. His face was grim, but the rising moonlight highlighted a joyous, maniacal twinkle in his eyes.

He spoke playfully. "You're feistier than I thought. Look, I didn't mean

to be a dick. I was just kiddin' around. And besides, I'm the one with the investment money and the motor home. I've been planning this for a while, and I need a smart, reliable partner. I need someone who I can trust. There's something I like about you, like you're tired of feeling strangled by the top button of your plaid shirt and your hip-choking jacket. You need adventure."

I cast suspicious eyes on Prince. Surprisingly, I wasn't offended by his evaluation of my clothes. I was impressed by how well he read my feelings. "Yeah, I guess I do need adventure. But, if you're going to help me out, where are your profits?"

"We could sell the cartons at a twenty dollar markup and split the profit. That's twelve-hundred bucks for each of us." I felt a businessman's street smarts take sprout in my chest. "That's a lot of money. Can we sell that many cartons in a week?"

"It'll be easy. Smokers love to save money."

"I still have one other problem."

"What's that?"

"My parents are going to send me to a shrink if I drop out. That's before they kill me."

Prince was tapping his fingers against the side of the building. "Tight-asses, huh? I never went to college, and I can think perfectly fine. What are you learning there, anyway?"

"I'm a music major. I'm on a full-ride scholarship as a cello player."

Prince's eyes widened. "Oh, shit. You're throwing away a full-ride scholarship?"

I was dispirited to find that even a rebel like Prince saw my plan as stupid.

"You got balls, man. That's the coolest thing I've heard in a while."

Before I could soak up Prince's appreciation, a sudden screech caused my neck to snap around. A man leapt out from behind the door and into Prince's face. The man's blubbery face squirmed and emitted a red glow.

"Prince! How many goddamn times do I have to tell you to stop taking so many smoke breaks? You're lucky that we're short staffed, or I'd fire your ass right here! You got a delivery waiting. Get moving!"

The man turned to head inside. He grunted at me. "And who the fuck are you? This ain't a fuckin' coffee shop!" The door slammed.

Prince said, "Wait here." He returned a minute later. "Come on. You can come with me."

"Managers can't smoke whenever they want, huh?"

"I'm just a delivery guy and a cook. Don't worry. I only lied to you before I knew your name."

I wasn't alarmed. "Your boss was pissed."



Prince scoffed. "Don't mind him. I quit. He'll figure it out when the customer calls up lookin' for the pizza that you're going to eat with me."

I stared at Prince. His fingers tapped against the top of the pizza box. His pale skin made him look like a chunk of the moon. Did he look more like a frog or a lizard or a lion? I had never seen anyone as strange as Prince, which made me wonder why I wasn't afraid of him. I followed him to his car while I dreamt of the freedom that awaited me in Colorado.

4

"Oh no you're not, mister! I'm coming to get you right now. You better be waiting for me in your dormitory."

I imagined the angry bulldog behind my mom's face. "Mom, don't come. I'm fine."

"We'll let Dr. Lockman have the final say on your mental state." She hung up.

The morning sun didn't cheer me up.

Prince grunted from under the hood of the motor home. "That didn't sound good."

"My mom is driving here right now."

"As soon as I get these spark plugs put into place, we can go."

"I can't just leave. My mom'll have a heart attack."

Prince disengaged from his mechanic work. He pointed a greasy tool at me. "You can't let your mom rule your life."

"She might be right. Maybe I'm psychotic."

"Dude, you're a genius musician."

I blushed.

"Most genius musicians are insane. On some level, you probably can read people's thoughts. I barely know you, but I believe you have that ability. I wouldn't be surprised if those college professors are stealing your music."

"I think I was overreacting."

"Either way, the bottom line is that if you follow your mom's every command, she's going to suffocate your talents. If you follow your heart, something amazing might come your way."

I looked at Prince. His crazed ambition made me feel safe. I thought of my mom. She would arrive in a couple of hours with her arms outstretched, and she'd pull me in for a hug. The memory of her uptight perfume snapped me into consciousness. Despite a loathing towards my mother and college, I ended my rebellion.

"I have to go back to my dorm room. I can't disappoint my parents."

Prince didn't try to stop me.

5

Dr. Lockman leaned towards me. His beady eyes stared through his frameless designer glasses, down his large, shiny nose, and into my eyes.

"Your mother alerted me to some of your...delusions. You think your professors are stealing your music?"

I broke from his gaze and swept my eyes over the surrounding bookshelves and shiny, dark red furniture. "It's an idea I've had."

He sat upright in his tall, black leather chair. "This reminds me of what you said when you visited me a couple of years ago. You thought that the government and certain pharmaceutical companies were working to use popular coffee shops and fast-food restaurants in order to conduct large-scale experiments in which drugs were added to everyday food and drink items."

"I don't believe that anymore," I lied.

"Unfortunately, that is of no significance. You now have a pattern of mental illness. We need to act now. It is best to fight mental illnesses before they become worse."

My mom emitted a harsh breath. "What's his condition? How do we fight it?"

Dr. Lockman locked his fingers together after he rested his elbows on his stomach. "My guess is he is suffering from acute anxiety and depression, which, if left untreated, could lead him on a path towards schizophrenia."

"How do we treat him?" My mom glanced at me like she was unsure she knew me.

Dr. Lockman eyed me like I was a test subject. "We start with some anti-depressants, and if these episodes continue, we move into antipsychotic medications. And, of course, I'll need to meet with Mickey at least twice a month."

"That's no problem. He can stay at home more often," my mom squeezed my hand.

6

The moonlight invaded my bedroom. I left my bed and walked to the window. I began to lower the blinds, but I stopped their descent halfway. A small red glow hung inside the darkened cab of a familiar motor home parked across the street. I stared for a moment before a head emerged from the window. Moonlight reflected off of his lip ring. My heart raced. I reached over and flipped on my bedroom light. Prince looked into my window. We waved at each other. He grinned and nodded.

Minutes later, we were driving towards Idaho. "I followed you from your dorm room to here."

"Good thing you did! I'm supposed to start popping pills to fight my mental illness."

Prince scoffed. "You got a gift. There isn't hope for any person who can't see that."

## 7

Ricky moved frantically about the kitchen in his blue jeans and white tank top. He took pride in building six-inch-tall sandwiches. He continued to place beer cans on the kitchen table for me and Prince. "Drink up, drink up. And what happened when the cop looked inside the motor home?"

Prince said, "He wanted to look inside the bedroom. I just turned on the porn with the remote control. The cop got embarrassed when he heard dirty talking and heavy breathing. He decided to leave us alone."

"And you sold all the cigarettes?"

Prince chugged from his can. "They were all gone in a couple days. No problem."

Ricky grinned. "I gotta hand it to you two. That's one hell of a business move."

I smiled.

## 8

Ricky jumped into the living room. "I scored a date for tonight when I was walking through campus."

"Why were you walking through campus?" asked Ricky.

"Looking for girls. And it worked. She says she's going to a concert with her two roommates. Are you guys in?"

"I am," said Prince.

I slouched on the couch. Ricky looked at me. "Come on. You've been here for two months and the only time you leave the house is when you go to work. You need some cheering up. I know something is bugging you."

I sat up. "I can't help but think that I made a mistake. Maybe I could get my scholarship back if I wrote an apology letter."

Ricky sat next to me and put his arm around my shoulders. "Life's too short for regrets."

Later that evening, Ricky, Prince, and I were sitting in a beautiful concert hall. The girls were boring to me, but the first few musicians were talented and held my attention.

The announcer introduced the next musician. "Next up this evening is a talented cellist who is a professor at the Washington State University of the Arts, Mr. Sarlsby."

My eyes popped. I leaned towards Ricky and Prince. "That's the guy! That's my old professor!"

Professor Sarlsby began to play one of his original pieces. After half a minute, the music took a recognizable turn. My date whispered into my ear, "Isn't he amazing?"

I stood up and shouted. "You goddamned thief!" My anger reverberated throughout the hall. Professor Sarlsby stopped playing and looked up at me. The rat dropped his cello and backed off the stage. I chased him, quickly followed by Ricky and Prince.



## Small Town Mythology

Hilary Allison

There was a hanging on 7th and Pine,  
 a lynching, in the truest sense of the word.  
 A father and son, the wrong choice in bar,  
 an unsolved argument and a night in jail.  
 Angry locals dragged them to the tree.  
 Some people say you can still feel the terror in the air,  
 that on particularly dark nights,  
 there's a specific chill in that spot.  
 A sadness that hangs, even now.  
 But I can sense the melancholy everywhere,  
 chattering in the bones of the oldest buildings,  
 creeping terror in the gridded streets.  
 And sometimes nothing is more terrifying,  
 than a dead-end street.

## Fireflies

Caitlyn Byce

I  
 “Caitlyn... look,” my dad said, pointing out into the darkness and what I knew was the thin forest belt surrounding us, an attempt to be comforting for those only a moment from death.

I smiled, as much as I could smile right then, and saw the dim yellow lights slowly glowing brighter then dimmer.

“Fireflies,” I retorted. The fireflies, our family photo album, were full of memories that were each unique and lovely. Their glow igniting sounds, touches, and emotions that had been taken for granted.

My gaze lingered before I turned my attention back to Grammy who lay in the hospice bed. She didn't look anything like herself, and though I wanted to remember, I didn't want this to be a memory that stood out when I saw fireflies.

## II

Grammy handed us the jars—the ones with the holes in the lids and the labels torn off, marking them permanently as firefly jars. My sister Kae's fair face echoed my own excitement and a giant smile (one of the few features that marked us as related) revealed her impatience. We didn't wait for Grammy as we sprinted up the dark stairway lined by pictures of relatives we barely knew and went through the kitchen my sister once got fed 10-year-old Cheerios in (yes, they do go bad). We slid into the mudroom that was the only room safe from static electricity shocks because of the linoleum floor and out onto the screened-in porch housing metal garbage cans filled with birdseed for the mass of bird feeders outside the house. Finally, we made it out into the small yard with the screen door slamming behind us and releasing us into the muggy Michigan summer night.

We saw our prize—twinkling yellow lights that were the butts of the bugs we looked forward to catching all year long. At long last, we could catch the light I pretended belonged to fairies, with Grammy standing next to us in the yard near one of the numerous bird feeders. Occasionally we looked at her, a silent question of how deep into the woods we could chase. Finally we'd return to her side for her approval of how many we caught before releasing the lights and returning inside to fall asleep in the “VIP room” housing the large brass bed surrounded by pictures of more relatives we had never met, or could barely remember.

## III

Her leg was gone, a stump that felt like a pregnant lady's belly. Grammy explained that she still felt like she could wiggle her toes and sometimes it felt like she had strong cramps in her calf. She didn't mention the pain was more like phantom stabbing and that she wanted to be on pain killers for it. She left to go "put on her leg" before surprising us with the jars, empty but so familiar. Kae and I looked at each other, both smiling as we were ushered out into the small yard of this new condo. We ignored the fact that, had anyone else mentioned trying to catch fireflies, we would have disdainfully complained about being too old. The thin line of woods was a feeble comparison to the 17 acres we had once explored on West F Avenue, but we smiled and laughed as we saw Grammy happily leaning over the railing, elbows and a prosthetic leg supporting her thin frame.

## IV

The fireflies that had made the beach grass all the more magical were almost all gone, only a few had lingered, with their lights dull compared to what I remembered. It was supposed to be the last time we would see each other before she passed away. It was a sudden shock after she had done so well at Kae's wedding, only to find out soon after that doctors were only giving my Grammy three to six more months to live. I thought she was really going to die that time. Pancreatic cancer had made her stomach begin to bloat, but she and Granddad still seemed to ignore the fact that she was going to pass away.

It was bittersweet, sitting on the boardwalk, Grammy letting her foot hang over the curb into the sand we'd spent a week on every summer since she and Granddad had sold their last boat. She had spent most of her summers here. My parents had their first kiss next to the red lighthouse we walked out to the day before, visible from any beach in this area, right before I had gotten pooped on by a seagull and Grammy's ever-present camera flashed around my dad's body as he tried to clean it out of my hair with a maxi pad.

## V

The fireflies were long gone, though I had often mused that fireflies in snow would be majestic. It was the second time it would be the "last time." Grammy had made it to Christmas, and we had foregone our "Cabo Christmas" tradition to spend it in dirty snow, but with people worth dying for. She was doing well, better than anyone could have guessed. We all ignored her requests not to buy her Christmas gifts and laughed at my mom who bought Grammy socks. Fantastic, fuzzy socks with forest green frogs poised to jump; my Grammy would have once gasped at them and

shaken her head. Instead, she had put one on, and my cousin's child, Byce, Grammy's great-grandchild, asked why she didn't put the second sock on, bursting into a fit of giggles when we reminded him that she only had one foot for the silly socks to go on.

Everyone else had left the room when she asked me if I thought Byce would remember her. She was afraid that he wouldn't remember all the fun they had together making forts propped up by her stump, the little-man-walking that turned into a tickle monster, or any of the other hundreds of small things. She wanted to make him a scrapbook.

"I remember Dandy," I said in reassurance, remembering my great-grandfather, her father, handing me a bag of gold foil-covered chocolate coins. I had only been three, and it was my only memory of him, but I had only met him a handful of times. Grammy got to see Byce at very least once every three weeks since his birth.

## VI

I had held my breath when she had held hers. I had cuddled her teddy bear to her side as she had done to me when I was little. I had clung to the spasms of her hand around mine, imagining they were for me, an acknowledgment of my presence at her side as she died. I didn't know. I would never know if she had meant it for me.

*Why had I not been able to say 'I love you,'* I yell at myself silently, angry that I hadn't been able to fix her hair the way she would have wanted it to be fixed.

I still feel the anger burning in my chest. They had buttoned her collar up one button too high. Her single leg had been at a strange diagonal. They hadn't placed her hands correctly, and the cuffs of her shirt weren't even.

Granddad's fingers echo against that box, bringing me back to the present: a graveyard on a rainy day, and I watch the daisy fall from fingers next to the tiny box holding her. The two taps echo. I. Love. He missed one.

"You missed the third one." My voice fails to sound like my own, but Granddad's smile reassures me. He taps the box a third time, tears in his eyes. He'll be okay.

I. Love. You. Three taps. Three squeezes. Three reminders. I place two more daisies next to the one that he had dropped.



**& Beauty***Aaron VanScyoc*

the ampersand,  
 an hourglass  
 figure-8  
 but losing mass  
 & an endless fast

track diet        days  
 mean new ways  
 from finger-throat  
 & diaries

track snacks—  
*and* squeezed  
 from & to +  
 from beauty  
 to size 3 to 1  
 but never back  
 to        zerO  
           obese  
           obsessed, over  
           O-round, rolling

to hell  
 with health

& beauty

*"That's all we have, finally, the words, and they had better  
 be the right ones."*

*Raymond Carver*



## Contributors Notes

**Hilary Allison** is a student of English and Anthropology at Central Washington University. She is the lead singer in The Whereabouts, enjoys mustaches, fried foods, Rainier beer, and will probably be in college until she is very old indeed.

**Loren Bayles** is convinced that writing an author's note for a magazine no one reads is a purely narcissistic exercise from which no good can come.

**Marcus Bingham** lives in Ellensburg, Washington with his wife, Levon, and two cats. A produced playwright, Marcus has been involved with numerous theater companies as an actor, director, and writer. He is graduating with honors from Central Washington University in June, 2011.

**Kathleen Brown** is in her second year at CWU. She likes thunderstorms and midnight walks. This is her first Manastash publication.

**Caitlyn Byce** is a senior at CWU. She enjoys reading any book put in front of her and reading books off the *New York Times* top 100 book list. Writing has been her passion for as long as she remembers, and she hopes this will be the first of many pieces she gets published in her lifetime.

**Jamie Chipman** is a CWU student.

**Megan Dea** is a CWU student.

**Jamie Friedman** is a senior attending Central Washington University and working towards a degree in English Literature and Composition. She has always carried a book with her, and often finds pleasure in writing. She looks forward to new opportunities.

**Preston Ham** is a CWU English Literature undergraduate who enjoys poetry, rock climbing, and cycling. Preston is in love with Washington, from the deserts to the forests. He is most influenced by Robert Hass, John Ashbery, and Ted Hughes.

**Leah Horde** is a Writing Specialization Major. She likes scented candles, swimming, lounging around, jumping rope for exercise, cats, kittens and puppies. She enjoys writing and reading all day long and hopes one day to write 24/7 and get paid for it. She owes her love of books to *The Bellmaker*, by Brian Jacques, and crosses her fingers each day in hopes of having her own book series.

**Ryan Riehle** is 31 years old and has lived in various areas, so he doesn't really have a hometown. He did three tours in Iraq when he was in the Marines for five years. He has held numerous blue-collar jobs and is currently striving to become an English teacher and an author.

**Crystal Sauby** finally decided on English after changing her major five times (no joke). She doesn't write as much as she'd like, though, because she's too busy taking care of her 7-month-old son, reading, and playing World of Warcraft.

**Joe Savidge** lives in his 1995 Buick Regal Gran Sport. The luxury car is fully equipped with a concert sound system, a sunroof, dual temperature controls, and a luggage rack with chrome spoiler. He is seeking a roommate, preferably a smaller person with good hygiene.

**Scott Stoops** does not believe in baldachins, beams, canopies, coverts, domes, fans, vaultings, groins, housetops, plafonds, planchements, plasters, roofs, roofings, timber, topside coverings, or any other overhead surface of a room.

**Aaron VanScyoc** is a Senior English Literature major with a Creative Writing minor and an occasional poet with a nigh-pathological difficulty with self-description.

## Art Contributors Notes

**Katie Berberick** is interested in creating a space for viewers to gain an experience. In her current work, she is manipulating color and line in order to strike certain moods or emotions. She works with layers and the intention of giving a sense of depth and light. She leaves her work open because she believes that art should have a unique impact on different people.

**Kandy Caballero** is originally from Waterville, WA. She is a graphic design student at Central Washington who loves art and photography.

**Audrey Schlecht** is a graphic design student at CWU and is excited and inspired by all things art. Still life is her style of choice, which she loves to mimic through the great contrast of charcoal to the deep hues of oil in her studio works. With a paintbrush in hand, Audrey can easily lose hours filling a canvas and looks forward to opportunities that may be opened.

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