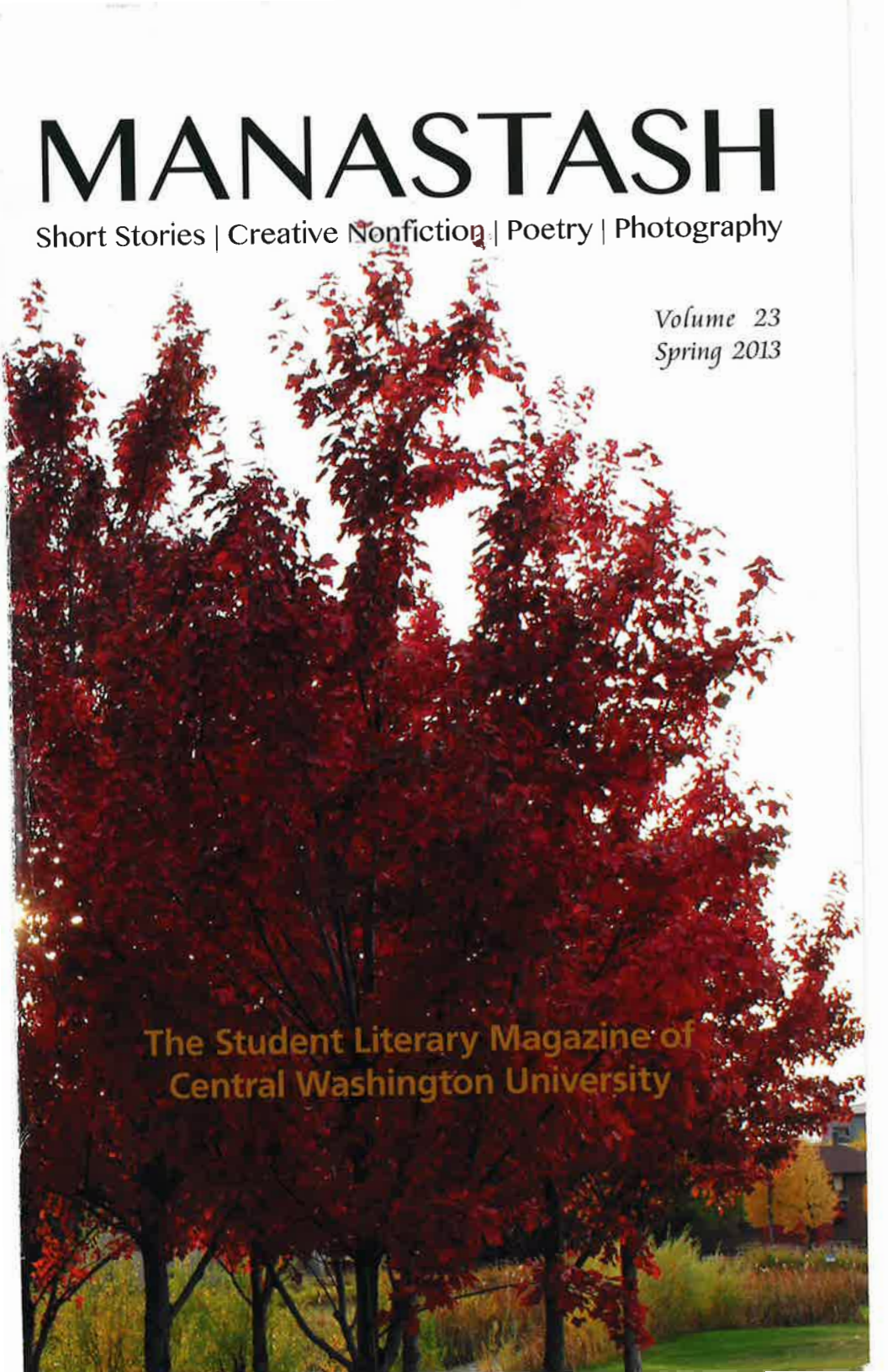


# MANASTASH

Short Stories | Creative Nonfiction | Poetry | Photography

*Volume 23*  
*Spring 2013*

The Student Literary Magazine of  
Central Washington University



# MANASTASH

Volume 23  
Spring 2013

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## Editor's Note

On behalf of my fellow staff, I welcome you to the twenty-third volume of *Manastash*, a student-run literary journal of Central Washington University. For five months, thirty students have pored over 250 submissions of poetry, short stories, photography, memoirs, and more. We have selected the best among those works, edited them, and designed the journal to feature them.

This volume of *Manastash* was produced by the classes of English 484 and 485 in winter and spring quarters of 2013. The class was divided into committees to disperse the work needed to accomplish such a prodigious task.

We designed a philosophy and set standards for the publication, implemented our own assignment plan and distributed the work, organized a master list with the status of each piece in consideration, sought out markets for the advertisement and distribution of our publication, and, finally, collected the distilled work of the editing class and designed a document worthy of holding the best works of CWU students from the past year.

Among these pages, you will experience the struggles and successes of Central students, feel the hearts and passions of our poets, visit fantastical worlds with surprising and endearing characters, follow the careful brushes and pencil tips of our artists, and see the vivid moments of life captured with the lenses of cameras.

We invite you to experience the creative soul of the students of Central Washington University, collected and bound for your enjoyment and our cultural posterity.

Sincerely,  
Jamie Klouse  
*Manastash* Editorial Staff

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## Three Flash Pieces

*Stefan Milne*

### I

*What We Talk About When We Try Not to Talk About*

For a long time he fancied himself a writer, clinging especially to the grandness of the word, its multitudinous associations, and the names that hang like ornaments—Chekov, Cheever, Carver—but he intended stories of such nuance, such subtlety, such quiet epiphanic weight, that they were over before he began—without so much as a

### II

*The Peculiar Sadness of the Semi-Learned*

“These ignorami weary me.”

### III

*Verschränkung*

Our father is a failed physicist, a sad disciple of Schrodinger. Every other day he buries our cat. Just to be safe.

## **And When We Were Children...**

*Alexander Hughes*

We were beastly and unashamed.

We imagined our beards  
and roared and turned our teachers into lumber.

We assassinated street lamps  
and shot bottle rockets through the windows  
of the kindergarten.

We fierce red-handed pirates  
stole the old man's cigarettes,  
his records,  
his ones and fives,  
his pornography  
and his sneer.

We built fortresses in strangers' trees,  
where we smoked and schemed small anarchies.

We grew our tails long,  
pissed out-of-doors,  
and sharpened our teeth shirtless  
in the muddy creek bed.

We stared down the sun til it blinked.

At day's end we sifted through the dead,  
shed our reptile skins  
and laid them to dry on the roof.

And every night we shrank  
and returned to our parents,  
who stooped,  
sighed  
and shook  
in their heaviness,  
dust  
and insincerity.



But we slept always  
with an ear to the exhaling earth  
and were reassured.

We trusted our own eyes,  
our own hands,  
our own gods.

We craved blood.

The planets trembled in anticipation.

## Satin

Lorrie Fox

*The narrator wishes to acknowledge that the plot of this story is true and correct, but the characters and location have been fictionalized. The fact remains that she has always remembered things about horses better than people, which could be called a flaw in her character. She hopes you will enjoy reading it.*

Rory called the black pony, Satan. But his real name was “Satin” because Vonda said his dark coat was smooth as *satin*. When she and Vonda met in grade school, Rory was a ninety-eight-pound, slender, twelve-year-old girl, with azure eyes and cropped scarlet hair. She wore her favorite jeans, a pair of twelve pocket bell bottoms, nearly every day. Vonda was a squat, egg-shaped, fourteen-year-old, jade green-eyed, flaxen-haired version of her mom—without the makeup that made her look like a peacock to Rory—and pudgy like her dad in the rear. She wore tapered leg jeans that Rory believed made Vonda look like more like a “Weeble”<sup>1</sup> than a real girl.

It was summer 1983. Vonda’s parents dropped Satin off at Rory’s house so they could ride together for a few days. Back then Rory’s family lived in a new mobile home on twenty acres, fifteen minutes east of Kittitas. Jessie, Rory’s pony,<sup>2</sup> looked like a miniature version of the draft horses<sup>3</sup> that pull the famous Budweiser beer wagon around in TV commercials. He was a big-boned and stout bay horse, complete with the thick and over-flowing black mane and tail, four white stockings and feathers<sup>4</sup> above his hooves. Rory thought he could fly, but Satin soared by them much faster—except once that Saturday afternoon.

Twelve times that Saturday Vonda yelled “Race,” and they were off galloping hard across the spent hayfield. Their finish lines varied, from this tree to that ditch bank; or from that rock to this stump; and sometimes just from fence line to a cross fence; the latter, both knew, was the most dangerous.

Rory glanced over at Satin when they stopped for a breather. All that hard running had made him wild-eyed and he stood in a marinade of sweat. Foam drooled from under his saddle pad, and threatened to soak the back of Vonda’s thigh. Rory watched as a waterfall of white froth flowed from the base of an ear behind his headstall, picked up speed beside his immense forelock, ran down his forehead and fell past his eye

down his rounded cheek, along his molars then traced the “S” curved shank of the curb bit<sup>5</sup> and dropped from there through the air to the ground. She could see the dark pink deep inside his nostrils as they flared hard for air.

On their thirteenth run Rory called “Race!”

Rory leaned forward and pushed Jessie as hard as she could while bareback; she urged him ahead with her legs and waved a willow branch at his rear like a jockey flagging a racehorse. Hooves thundered; dirt clods with grass in them flew every direction.

“You win by a nose!” said Vonda through the tears in her green eyes.

“Only because Satan’s winded, Vonda,” Rory said laughing, “Jessie and I do this all the time, run up this hill—”

“*Satin*, his name is *Satin*, not *Satan*! Rory, stop it!” Vonda yelled back.

It surprised Rory that the dark equine was so fast, considering that he was a taller, slight-built, Shetland pony carrying an adult-sized “Weeble” who wobbled on his back. She marveled at what it must be like to ride a pony that could run almost like lightning.

\*\*\*

School had started again. An Indian Summer held on late into September, keeping the long evenings warm past dark. Grasses had dried and faded into pre-winter yellows, but the Willow trees, which lined the creek bank behind their house, dawned motionless bright green leaves.

The phone rang. With an olive-skinned arm, Rory’s dad reached over his roll-top desk and gave the phone to Rory with his hand over the speaker, “it’s Vonda, she’s crying,” he said. “She wants to know if we can take Satin, she can’t keep him.”

“What? Why?” Rory begged.

“Talk to her, tell her yes if we are her best option,” he said.

Rory took the phone into her room, which stretched the phone cord to its limit, “Vonda, what’s up? Why can’t you keep Satan?”

“My parents...they got a divorce,” Vonda sobbed. “I’m moving to Wenatchee to be with my mom and she says we can’t...keep him. Can you?”

Rory expected Vonda to correct her but she didn’t, and really all she could hear was the agony in Vonda’s voice. It felt like a dirt clod was stuck in Rory’s throat. Vonda loved that pony and Rory knew how it tore her up to have to let him go.

Rory’s face reddened, “Maybe we can take him until you find a way to keep him yourself again, would that work for you?” She said, “My dad says it’s ok.”

The next afternoon, Rory's school bus dropped her at her stop along the Vantage Highway. She noticed that their light blue Chevy pickup wasn't in the driveway. *Mom and dad must be somewhere getting hay*, she thought. Rory ran from the bus stop down their long gravel driveway to the house and threw her backpack into her room. Looking out her window she saw a glint of Ginger, her dad's solid chestnut Appaloosa<sup>6</sup> mare,<sup>7</sup> busy having her way with what was left of an Italian plum tree. Rory stopped to catch her breath. She watched as Ginger stood on her hind legs and searched greedily for the last plums that hung between the dark green leaves of the tree, and gathered them in her long narrow mouth. Jessie stood close by and waited patiently for her to abandon a plum morsel for him to eat. Rory giggled at Ginger's fervor; her tail flipped up and down, ears pinned back beside her head, using her body language to tell Jessie to "Back off, these yummy things are mine!" Ginger returned to the earth to spit the pits out of the corner of her lips and reared up again in search of more plums. Just as Rory was turning to leave the window and start her chores, a spectral equine blur appeared from behind the lean-to in the back pasture. Satan had arrived while she was at school, and he began to run the length of the barbed wire fence line.

That evening, after her parents came home Rory decided to try out the black pony gelding<sup>9</sup> to see how he worked. Rory found her saddle in the tack room, which was too narrow for Jessie, so she thought it would work on Satan. Her dad had hung Satan's purple saddle pad and bridle on the spare sawhorse, so she grabbed them too, along with a halter, lead, a couple of grooming brushes and a hoof pick.

At first, Satan seemed nervous to be tied; he moved around and pawed at the railroad tie with a front foot, rooting his nose against the pressure of the lead. Rory decided to try a method she'd learned from a training book she had read, so she untied the lead rope from the railroad tie corner post and wrapped it upon itself instead. If Satan panicked and pulled back, he would be less likely to hurt himself. He hadn't yet learned not to fear being tied to something solid.

Rory placed the purple saddle pad on his back gently, and turned around to get the saddle. When she turned back around, the pad was missing from the pony's back. She set the saddle out of the way and went to get the pad from where it had landed on the off (right) side of the pony. The saddle pad was wet in a corner where Satan had grabbed it with his teeth and flung it by his front feet. Satan looked at Rory with his slant onyx eyes and shifting ears, obviously annoyed. She narrowed her eyes

and growled back at him. With the saddle in one hand and the pad in the other, Rory succeeded in putting the saddle on Satan and somewhat gently tightened the girth so it would stay on his back.

Rory managed to get the bridle on Satan without getting stepped on by his front hooves or bitten. Satan's eye seemed fixated on Rory and he mouthed the bit as he lowered his head in the direction she tugged the rein. Satan's response was soft as silk to Rory's hand, so much so that she thought maybe Satan really wasn't a bad name for the pony after all. Rory turned the pony's nose toward herself ever so slightly, which made the rein closest to her shorter than the off side rein as she prepared to put her left foot in the stirrup and mount. Rory bounced once on her right foot and her seat was in the saddle just as Satan's willful head rose up hard like he had just come out of a deep trance. As she tried to find her right stirrup, Satan took a deep breath and bounded forward with a burst of speed Rory had only imagined she could ride. She hadn't cued him: not with a rein, not with her leg, not with her voice.

"Sss...we're not rac-ing anyone...Sat-N, slooow down," Rory tried to connect with the pony, but he was off somewhere, probably racing another horse in his mind. She rode steadily, stride after lengthening stride. She saw the whites of his jeweled eyes emerge from their corners, and his nostrils flare. From under her flying bangs, Rory caught a glimpse of the cross fence in the distance. Satan's hooves rumbled upon the earth. Rory pulled gently back on the reins, "Easy Satan, c'mon." But Satan hollowed his back and flung his head high into the air. Satan's mouth gaped wide and blank eyes stared out from his mindless fury. He galloped on, oblivious to Rory's cues to slow down. In the next leap, with her seat slightly out of the saddle, Rory leaned forward and reached for the near side of the possessed pony's bridle. She grabbed the rein near the shank. Rory pulled the rein toward her middle with all of her strength in an effort to "double"<sup>10</sup> the pony. Satan's tongue hung from his mouth and exposed the shining mouthpiece of the bit. Thrashing his neck like a snake, Satan slipped the rein from Rory's grip. She felt the tenor of Satan's thundering hooves echo in her heart as he ran full-out, straight for the barbed wire cross fence. *Please don't get hurt, Satin, please! Vonda would kill me!* She pleaded. Rory reached for the saddle horn with both hands. She threw her left foot from its stirrup. *Tuck and roll, tuck and roll,* she thought. Rory gripped the saddle horn and swung her weight onto her left side. She closed her eyes. *I hope I don't get kicked,* she thought. Rory opened her hands. Her body dropped. Satan's hooves whirred by her like a bitter breeze. The force of landing on hardpan knocked the air from

Rory's lungs. Her body rolled like a corpse, once, twice, three times before it stopped. Rory's form lay prone and unnerved from adrenaline. Satan paced the fence, his hooves and reins trailing dust behind him.

\*\*\*

Rory heard heavy, cadenced footsteps coming toward her. The toe of a boot pushed at her ribs. Rory opened her eyes. It was a, short, square shouldered, olive-skinned, man in coveralls with Grecian Formula hair and sporting 1960s style black rimmed glasses, her dad.

"What the hell were you doing?" Rory's dad asked with arms wide. His eyes scanned the scene.

Rory sat up, "Did you see him take off with me?"

"Yeah...I said, what-the-hell-were-you-doing?" her dad's WWII military training took command of his communications skills, again.

"You couldn't wait for help? Your mom will *kill* me if something happened to you!" he griped.

"I...I...wanted-" Rory started.

"Yeah, it's always what you want, isn't it?" he turned and started to walk away from her, "I need a drink."

She fought back the wall of tears that pushed at her eyes, like a dam possesses a reservoir. The sting of her dad's words hurt her more than the hard landing caused by her emergency dismount from Satan. Rory tried to think back to a time when her dad didn't "need a drink." Back to a time when her dad would offer his help and they would work on a project together, not like they were in a competition for her mom's approval. She tried desperately to think back when his pain from the osteoarthritis in his joints didn't overshadow their lives, but she couldn't remember. What Rory did recall was that she had been four years old when her dad retired early from driving a truck for Zellerbach Paper Company in Seattle because his body always hurt. And she did recall that his drinking had gotten steadily worse since then. And she did recall that hardly anyone noticed that he always had a glass half-full of Macnaughton Whiskey in one hand. Not anymore did anyone take notice, not even her.

\*\*\*

Rory got up and brushed herself off. She opened the gate to the middle corral between the back pasture and the front dry lot where Ginger and Jessie stood and watched her curiously. It would be easier to catch Satan in the corral, she thought. With damaged pride, Rory found the halter and walked over to where Satan stood, calibrating his next move. He shied away when she tried to approach him, and trotted toward the middle corral. Rory hazed him in and shut the gate behind them.

She let Satan find a corner to stand and settle into for a moment before she tried to hold and halter him. Satan was wary of every move Rory made now. She talked to him calmly, and with a hand extended toward the pony. She walked up to him slowly and put her right arm over the pony's neck. Her right hand could then reach the crownpiece of the halter when she handed it under his neck with her left. Rory held the tail of the crownpiece and the buckle by the throatlatch together in her right hand. With her left hand, she pushed his headstall off over his ears. Satan took a step backwards, lowered and flattened his neck and dropped the bit like it had been gagging him. With the bridle out of the way, Rory methodically put the nosepiece of the halter over the pony's nose, pulled it up, and buckled the throatlatch with the crownpiece. Next, she held his slack lead with her left hand and loosened the girth, removed the saddle and pad together with her right, and set the saddle on a fence rail behind her. Rory glanced over Satan's shining black frame, *he hadn't even broken a sweat*, she thought, and turned him loose.

\*\*\*

The sky was a white sheet divided by blankets of gray that made everything below it cast bleak shadows. Rory was with the horses, and took turns handing Jessie and Ginger bits of an apple that she had brought to share. She glanced around for Satan, but he wasn't in his corral.

"Whoa! Damn you!" Her dad's voice boomed from out of nowhere and stunned Rory.

She stood motionless. Her father came out from behind the lean-to with Satan following him on a rope. Rory stared into them with eyes like two laser beams.

"Oh good, you're just in time," he said.

"For *what*?" Rory inquired.

"This pony's got a dangerous habit," he said, "running away with you, which means he'll run away with anyone!"

"What am I just in time for?" Rory said, handing Jessie the last of the apple.

"I need your help," he said, "we're going to drop him in a "Running W"<sup>8</sup> and teach him a lesson."

"What—" Rory started.

"I don't want or need any arguments from you," he snorted. "In Italy, we had a runaway team of Belgian draft horses that took off with a wagon. Me and Billy caught them up and he taught me to use a Running W so we could stop them. It worked then, it will work now."

"He's not a cart horse, Satan's a p—" Rory started.

“Shut up! We’re doing this my way! Either help me or get the hell out of the way!”

Rory’s shoulders dropped and her head hung low as she followed her dad’s instructions and led the pony into the twenty foot by forty foot pen that was in front of the lean-to shelter. Her dad rummaged around in the tack room looking for more rope, a surcingle, something to use as pads for the pony’s knees, and a blindfold.

“I wish you hadn’t run away with me, Satan, Satin, whatever your name is.” Rory whispered into the pony’s fluted ear as she stood with him and stroked his sleek black neck and shoulder. “I don’t like where this is going.”

Rory’s gaze fell to the shadow of her dad as he tied the ropes above the pony’s knees and again at his pasterns. Her throat felt like it was closing up; her face grew red. Her lungs fought for air, but she didn’t notice. Rory had not seen a Running W work, but she learned in the books she’d read that Running W’s had been used by men that tamed mustangs to take a foot from the wild horse if it tried to run away. What her dad was fashioning on the pony’s front legs looked scarier, and nothing like the pictures in the books Rory had read.

“Get rid of the blindfold and lead him forward,” her dad barked. He held two ropes tightly behind the pony.

“Okay,” said Rory, meekly, as she removed the blue handkerchief he had used as a blindfold.

The black pony’s onyx eyes sparkled as he started forward with a hoof that struggled to reach for sky and then struck the earth. Satan coiled his body like a spring. His forehand shot up above the fence with a force that pulled her dad off his feet. He’s going to jump the fence! Rory thought. The pony kicked at Rory’s dad, but his hind feet cracked loudly into a two by eight board and railroad tie post instead. Satan narrowed his eyes again. All of his earthly strength boiled over from his hindquarters and propelled his frame forward like a rocket, toward Rory. She felt his intention and tossed her body backward, and fell against the board fence behind her. A *crack* echoed like a gunshot. The profile of Satan’s head had struck the railroad tie that Rory had been standing in front of. Satan stood, bewildered. His nostrils grabbed for air. Then his lungs pushed out a green river stained with red. He staggered. Rory’s throat closed. Satan’s hind end collapsed under him. His front legs buckled. Satan’s forehand fell hard, until only his folded knees held his proud head above the ground. Rory crouched low and held Satan’s head against her chest. Rory’s tears spilled onto his Satan’s cheek as she stroked his face over his eyes



until their spark grew dim. She could barely breathe, it hurt her so much to have witnessed Satan break his neck. And even worse, she knew there was nothing she could do for him. Nothing. *Vonda's heart will be crushed when she finds out*, Rory thought. Then suddenly, Satan blew an eerie, screeching, neigh, reached out with all his fury and bit Rory mid-thigh. With his head in Rory's arms and the bruised flesh of her thigh between his teeth, Satan died.

Rory's dad was yelling words at her, but she didn't hear them. He tried to pull her from under Satan's head, but she didn't feel his hands gripping her arms. There might have been some color left in the sky, but Rory didn't see it. Her focus was on the pony's warmth leaving its body; the stench of the bloody, green-brown, bile that poured from his nostrils; and the intensity of Satan's gem-like eyes, so transparent now that Rory thought she could see his spirit running in their depth.

\*\*\*

Rory's dad looked at her and then the pony, put his hand on her shoulder, and cried with her.

"I didn't mean for this to happen, I—I hope you know that, Rory!" he said.

Rory reached for her dad's hand and looked into his eyes for what seemed like days.

"Why? Why him? Why Satan?" she cried.

"I need you to think, and think hard about what else could have happened here, and if it hadn't been here, how else could he have destroyed himself? A thousand ways, don't you think?" her dad said.

"But—" Rory started.

"He was set in his ways, and those ways included running away," her dad stroked the pony's cold neck. "Now we need to figure out where to bury him, or let the coyotes have his body up on our twenty acres of sagebrush. We tried, Rory, we tried, for Satan and for Vonda."

Rory stayed with the pony's body while her dad hitched a borrowed flatbed trailer to their blue Chevy pickup.

"We'll take him up to the property, huh? Rory's dad said. Can you see that? His spirit can run free up there on our hillside. I'm sure he'll find other horses up there."

## Glossary

1. “Weebles wobble but they don’t fall down!”: The slogan that Hasbro’s Playskool uses when advertising its egg-shaped toys. Hasbro Playskool began manufacturing Weebles in 1971, and continues to make children’s toys today.
2. pony: small horse under 14.2 hands or 56.8 inches
3. draft: heavy horse used mainly for pulling carts and farm implements
4. feathers: long hairs that grow from the fetlock, usually indicative of draft horse breeding
5. curb bit: a one-piece bit that has a solid mouthpiece, and shanks above the bit that put pressure on the poll when the reins are pulled by the shank below the mouthpiece.
6. Appaloosa: a spotted breed of horse bred mainly by the Nez Perce Indians, once known as a Palouse horse.
7. mare: a female horse of breeding age, usually over five years old
8. Running W: also called a “double safety rope,” it was an old-time training method used to train difficult horses to whoa (halt). It looks like a W in that two ropes run from the trainer behind the horse, through the surcingle and down to the horse’s pasterns. The idea is to have a handler at the horse’s head and when the trainer says “whoa,” if the horse doesn’t stop, the trainer would pull on one or both ropes, which took the horse to its knees, or laid it down on the ground; in theory, showing the horse that the human was both in control and not to be feared.
9. gelding: a neutered male horse or pony of any age
10. double: a training term and technique used by experienced riders to gather a horse from the rider’s position used mainly to discourage a runaway. At high speeds it can flip the horse and leave a serious potential for injuries to both horse and rider. It puts the nose of the horse at the rider’s knee, so inertia is generally what flips the horse.

## **Their Lofty Campaign**

*Hannah Hanson*

Wrecked and ravaged,  
fallen angels for none to see.  
We cower in corners, in shadows, in alleys.  
We hide from their world.  
Smells of eradication, and dirt, and visions of blood.  
Then a scream—  
an echo of our future and our past,  
ears too full of regret to fully discern.  
With Death now a welcomed friend, we bathe in macabre light.  
Here is where we meet our match,  
Here is where we make our stand,  
Here is where we convene with self, on this last page  
of trepidation,  
where we are silent protesters.  
Antagonism makes us all toys of Ares.

## The Abuse of . . .

*Katy Rutland*

Trailing behind  
a string of arbitrary syllables  
imparting no meaning but a pause  
a comma could accomplish  
a period  
a single  
    speck  
        speck  
            speck  
of ink  
tossed to the end of lines  
    in between lines  
in between words  
Unseen . . .  
Unnecessary . . .  
Unrequited use . . .

Too many dots on a page  
    change the type-face

## Mirrors

*Chloe Allmand*

I wanted to dig my fingers into their shoulders and shake them, to scream in their childish faces. You will never be ballerinas; you will never dance in New York, or Paris. You will want it because it's perfect and beautiful and wouldn't it be wonderful, but you will never get what you want from this despicable world of eating disorders, constant rejection, and blisters. Always blisters. The little girls who scurried past me in the darkness of the wings during what would be my last recital had no idea how it would end. I knew. And it filled me with a hate and bitterness that I hid behind both the hope of enjoying my last dance and the trademark tranquil ballerina expression. This veil in place, I rose onto my pointes, and fluttered onto the stage.

For the residents of the somewhat sleepy town of Walla Walla Washington, the summer of 2008 was unremarkable, another of many that came hot and nosebleed dry, yet otherwise indistinct. However, Walla Walla's normally tranquil Whitman College campus had come alive, and was pulsing with the hot blood of teenage dreams. One hundred some young girls and three young boys had come together that summer with one thing in mind—to dance, and most particularly and importantly, to dance ballet. If you could make it as a ballet dancer, there was absolutely nothing that you could not do. If you could be perfect, that was it. You would always be perfect. But this was the thing, this was always the thing for anyone wanting to dance ballet—first, you would have to prove yourself.

The drive from Aberdeen to Seattle takes roughly two and a half hours. My audition for Summer Dance Lab, an exclusive summer dance intensive, was to be at ten o'clock a.m. I insisted that my mother and I leave our house just shy of six thirty, and although she knew it was unnecessary, she agreed. My feet, enclosed in my best pink tights, danced across the mini van's dashboard, keeping time with the petite allegro my heart hammered out inside my chest. The pull down mirror was busy that morning, reassuring me of my reflection at least a hundred times. My dance bag sat open on the floor, pointe shoes, canvas shoes, water, extra bobby pins, makeup bag, nubby purple legwarmers—all accounted for. To my astonishment, none of them vanished in the five minutes between my last check, and my current rifling. Rolling along with traffic, it seemed we were crawling our way toward the dance studio where, within a few hours, my fate would be decided.

My mother, who never failed to be exactly what I needed whether I noticed or not, was a lightning rod for the waves of energy coursing out of what felt like my every pore. She watched the cars ahead through her glasses, her diligently lotioned hands rested on the steering wheel. Each time I sighed, or wriggled, she would pat or squeeze my hand, the smell of her Cherry Almond Jergen's seeping into my clammy skin. "You know what to do, Chiquita," she would say. "Go in there and give them your best, and that's all anyone can ask of you." To doubt my mother's wisdom felt sacrilegious, and I found myself calming beside her. When I recall this day now, I know that she was at least as nervous as I was. Not in the way a stage mom would be, terrified that if I failed, it would somehow reflect upon her. My mother was the furthest thing from a stage mom—she never commented that my extension could use work or scolded me for missing a triple pirouette. I had seen the stage mom species many times, the horrid kind of woman that sits in the front row at rehearsals, hissing scathing whispers at their daughters. My mother was the kind who treated me to ice-cream after recitals, not the kind who raised her eyebrows and questioned if I needed a second piece of pizza. I think the nervousness and apprehension my mother felt that day were not solely for that day's audition. It was because she knew if it wasn't this audition that finally showed me what I would inevitably discover in the world of ballet, there would be another audition that would. Would I ever become a ballerina? We both knew the answer; we had known it for years. It felt like a physical manifestation, a third passenger in our mini-van that winter day. The third passenger sat in the backseat, politely quiet, only beginning to lean in toward my ear. But not saying anything. Not just yet.

Twenty-five hands rest on the unyielding barre, the vast expanse of mirror reflects fifty legs. Twenty-five black leotards dip as fifty aching knees melt and bend. Plié. Fifty shoulders are held low, twenty-five pale necks reach long, and twenty-five spines stretch straight as twenty-five feet brush a path across the floor, and then return. Tendu. One hundred bobby pins and an entire can of hairspray hold twenty-five buns tight as fifty hungry eyes spot straight ahead. Pirouette. A girl in the middle of the second row traces her slick brow with thin fingers. Sweat. The girl in front of you at the barre closes front instead of back during frappes, her ears burn red with embarrassment and her thin shoulders tense as she struggles to regain the beat before being noticed. Perfection. Make it look easy, beautiful and desirable, without showing a single day of the years of training behind each step. Do not rock forward onto your instep, keep your weight in the balls of your feet. Turn out from the hips, never from

the knees. Keep your eyes off of your opponents, but do not smugly watch yourself in the mirror either. Relax your hands, use the floor, tight knees, stomach in, tuck under, regret every sweet that you have ever eaten. Do not fidget or blush under the instructors' stares as they scrutinize your barre work, your petite and grand allegro, your leaps and turns. Stretch your feet, pay attention to detail in each combination, execute flawlessly. Don't you dare yawn. Auditions.

After curtsying to, and thanking both instructors, I made my way down the studio steps in a daze. The Seattle chill bit through my thin tights, and I pictured myself, ten years before, coming down the steps of the studio I attended back home. Those were the days of my first lessons, when I would wear ruffled pink skirts over my leotards, and sprint to my mother's van after class, eager to tell her all I had learned. Back then, with my chubby cheeks and toothy grin, I had not feared whether I had shown myself worthy of the ballet world. I just wanted to dance, to jump and twirl and wear lovely costumes. When I climbed back into the front seat of my mother's van after my audition in Seattle that day, I felt the first whispered questions from the third passenger. Is it enough to want to be a ballet dancer? Will the ballet world ever want you in return?

The Summer Dance Lab program was a new world to me, a parallel universe where intensity and desire emanated from every leotard clad body. This was a place where girls did not dream of boyfriends, proms, and college. They dreamt of being Clara, Juliette, Odette or Odile, of thirty-two fouettes in succession and grand jetes that if they just reached slightly, they could pull down the moon. They dreamt of perfection. Two weeks of six hours a day of classes, each morning beginning with ballet and pointe, followed by two elective classes in the afternoon, either jazz, musical theatre, or modern. Competition, true talent, and impossibly heinous blisters were in every class room, the dorm we took over, and on the grounds as we trooped from studio to studio. With every class my need for the third passenger's whispers dwindled; I could see from my reflection that longing was not, would never be, enough to become what I so desperately aspired to. My tiny, wide feet, no matter how I strained and stretched them, would never look long and lovely in my pointe shoes. There was no confusing my own legs with the many lengthy and slender ones of the other girls in my classes. The mirror will never lie to you.

The letter lay on the counter, and I could tell from its position away from the other mail that my parents had seen it, and had been waiting for me to come home to open it. It was incredible how an otherwise innocuous envelope had immediately become sinister when I realized

what it may, or may not contain. I squeezed my eyes shut as I slit it open gently, and when I slowly opened them, there to greet me was, "Dear Miss Allmand, It is with great pleasure that we offer you acceptance into our program, Summer Dance Lab..." My giddy disbelief was mirrored in my parent's faces; I believe we had all been hoping for the best, but not really expecting anything to come of my audition the month before. I took the letter to my room, and read it over and over, until the words of the program director had become a mantra in my head, all adding up to an absolute truth, full of the certainty only a fourteen-year-old can have in her convictions - I was going to become a ballet dancer after all. I looked myself in the eye in my mirror and it seemed impossible that if I had made it this far, I wouldn't make it any farther.

When you're a dancer, the mirror is there during classes supposedly for your benefit; so you can see any faults in your steps, and to help you keep pace with your classmates during combinations. The mirror however cannot see what is happening inside your head or heart. The mirror will never know if you've wanted to be a ballerina since you were five and couldn't even hold susu without your ankles wiggling like sapling trees in a wind. The mirror can only reflect to you the exact qualities and shortcomings of your movements. The mirror lets you know when you're at a level of eternal mediocrity, and when it's time to be realistic. Following that summer in Walla Walla, the mirror became the most convenient place for the third passenger to lean during every ballet class I took. It whispered pityingly at first, but eventually it shrieked in exasperation at my naiveté, loudly enough to drown out the soft music of the piano, leaving the painful ring of truth in my ears.

I took to the stage for my last recital in the white and silver tutu of my dreams, I reveled in the applause of the audience far away from the hateful mirrors of the studio, and then I said goodbye. A few of us grow to become classic fairy tale characters, princesses in impossibly ornate tutus, or swans in black or white. A few of us grow to be perfect. Most of us just grow up.



## Lazarus

*Alexander Hughes*

Trouble is he's still open in spots,  
all pulled away from himself,  
and on clear days the sun shines right through him.  
Nobody cares to be around him anymore,  
we're all a bit scared.  
And his poor mother, imagine her state;  
she lost so much already.

Somebody strangled all the goats last week  
and we're sure it was him.  
He never used to booze much  
but now he's plowed dark to dark.  
He kicks the dogs when he's in town.  
He pissed on the priest's sandals  
and clubbed the tax collector.

He grins sometimes all the way back to his ears,  
and hums the songs we sang  
as we washed his corpse.  
There's something queer in his eyes  
that wasn't before,  
and the way he watches the children now...

He's living in that cave across the lake  
like a wretched gentile,  
barefoot and nearly naked,  
reeking and weeping.  
Last night we could hear him over there  
screaming at the moon:  
Put it back! Put it back!

He's not at all himself since he came home.  
He isn't anybody.

## The Man That Died Twice

*Jamie Klouse*

**I**n 2002, my friend shot and killed 11 people, was linked to 10 more and injured three others. He terrorized over a half-dozen states with murders, woundings and a climate of fear that descended over the Washington Metropolitan Area for three weeks. People stayed home from work, kept their children out of school, avoided going on daily errands—all for fear that my friend would find them.

Now when I say friend, I should also say I don't mean that I supported his actions—not even remotely. Just like everyone else in the country, I had no idea who was responsible during that October in 2002. I saw the reports on the news; I listened in on the radio on my way to and from school every morning. On the west coast, in my small town of Puyallup, Washington, we felt insulated from the events unfolding across the nation. Having been born in Tacoma in the 80s and having grown up just a few miles out of town, I was no strangers to gun violence—but at least we didn't have a sniper running around killing people from cover at 300 meters with a civilian version of an M16. To this day, I'm not convinced the man who killed those people was the man I knew. Surely, they occupied the same body as the body of evidence proved—but I maintain that the man I knew died long before his execution; long, even, before he committed those heinous crimes.

I knew John Allen Muhammad for years before those attacks took place. His calm and friendly demeanor often warmed my family's household. I met him around 1995. I was just into sixth grade. My parents had bought an old Volvo for my sister's sixteenth birthday that spring and needed a guy who would help them fix it up and take care of the rest of our family's cars. We had a brand new Beagle puppy named Cody. John would sometimes bring treats for him and greet him warmly at the door as Cody stood up against him. He knew all of our names: Bill, Andi, Katie, James, Britt... he had a special name for my older sister Jenny. First, he called her JennyPenny, then later simply Penny.

We couldn't know that John was planning something abominable. We couldn't know that he would later preach a holocaust of anger and death against white people. People like us. Could the man that offered me advice about life, and struggle, and God, really shoot a boy not much younger than me in the gut on his way to school?

What changed?

That is a question I've tried to answer for over a decade. Two months ago was the 10-year anniversary of his murder spree. Last month was the third anniversary of his execution by lethal-injection. I've always wondered what happened to my friend that died twice.

## 1. John Allen Williams

"Hi there, I'm John. I'm here about the Mitsubishi," said the tall man at the door. He was African-American with deep brown eyes, clothed in a charcoal grey jumpsuit spotted with black grease stains, and wore gigantic steel toe boots. At twelve, I was taller than most of my class, but this man towered over me. He smelled of oil and gasoline, but there was also a warm smell that even today I recall but could never identify. "Is your father here?" he asked, looking down at me.

"Dad! The mechanic's here!" I called, my voice filling the vaulted living room that the narrow foyer led to.



**John Allen Williams**

Dad rounded the corner from the hallway leading to the kitchen, middle-aged, stocky and well past balding—near-black hair bordering his bald scalp around the sides. Dad stared at me, "James, don't yell in the house." It was a common admonishment in our small house. I stepped back from the door as dad entered the foyer and greeted the man at the door. "Hey John! Come in. Thanks for coming all the way out to Puyallup."

"It's not too far of a drive from Tacoma," he responded. As the man stepped over the threshold, his presence seemed to only become larger. I might have been intimidated if it weren't for his soft smile, reverent manners and radiant voice. When he spoke, the sound rumbled upward from his chest and soared out like a Louisiana summer breeze. Dad ushered him into the living room. They stood beside the blue couches patterned in floral designs, faded by the decade since we built the house. Even though my father still stood several inches taller than me, even he was dwarfed by this man.

"You have experience with Japanese cars?" Dad asked.

“Yes, sir. I can fix them fine,” John responded, nodding.

“I appreciate your willingness come out here outside normal business hours.”

“I go where the work is. It’s really no trouble,” a kind smile spread across John’s face.

“Great, I’ll walk you out to the van.”

“Yes, sir.”

Out of curiosity, I followed them. John’s large boots made a heavy clomp as he walked down the concrete of the walkway alongside the front of house. Arriving at the driveway, we passed in front of the practically new green Grand Caravan, speckled with gold flecks in the paint. We’d bought it only two summers ago for a family trip down the coast. The tan Mitsubishi van was parked just on the other side of the Caravan. It was a strange contraption; it was quite tall and had no engine-cavity at the front, so the windshield sloped sharply toward to the bumper. The engine was under the driver’s seat and both of the front seats lifted up to access the engine. Dad handed John the keys and in a few seconds, he had opened the van side-door, flipped up the carpet flaps behind the front seats, undone the latches holding them down and tilted the seats forward to reveal the engine.

“Well, you seem to know your way around,” my dad observed, markedly less surprised than I was.

“Lube and tune-up?” John asked, looking up from the engine.

“That’s right. I’ll leave you to it. I’ve got dinner to cook before my wife gets home,” Dad said as he turned and marched back up the driveway toward the house and disappeared around the corner.



I stood and observed quietly as John pulled a toolbox out of his small blue truck parked beside the blooming cherry trees on the street and set to his work in the van. He moved quickly. I was surprised someone could be this skilled at anything. I was good at video games, but I still occasionally crashed my TIE Fighter or screwed up in a game of Double Dragon. This guy moved his hands with a deftness and confidence I had only seen in the movements of my parents on stage—mom conducting her choirs, and dad his bands.

He looked back at me once in awhile, smiling each time. He hummed quietly as he worked. I didn't recognize the tune.

"Why do you call everyone 'sir'?" I asked, curious about the way he had addressed my dad earlier.

"Oh, it's just a sign of respect. Something I picked up in the Army," the man responded.

"Our neighbor up the street makes my friends—his kids—address him that way. He's in the Army," I trailed off, realizing how young I sounded. "Should I call you 'sir'?"

He laughed into the engine of the van, "No, no, you can call me John." His grin reached ear-to-ear.

"Where are you from, John?"

"New Orleans," he responded, his voice muffled. New Orleans is what he said, but what I heard was something like Nuh'ohlins in his light southern accent. "Where're you from?" he turned my question on me, catching me off guard.

"From here, duh!" I said. His chuckle echoed through the engine of the caravan. "I mean I was born in Tacoma, but we've been here since I was four... I'm twelve now. That's eight years," I continued. "How long were you in the Army?"

"Oh, long enough."

"Have you ever been in combat?"

At that, he stopped working, lifted his head and shot me a somber look. His eyes were dark and sad. "I was in the Gulf War a few years back, but that ain't something you should be worrying about," he responded.

"I'm old enough."

"Ain't nobody old enough."

Rain hammered the ground as Dad and I stood on the porch, staring up the hill from the bottom of the cul-de-sac. At midnight, the only light in the neighborhood coming from yard lamps, garage lights and the solitary streetlamp up the block emanating a pale tangerine glow over the

black pavement. Katie's Volvo rolled down the hill, and the familiar small blue pickup following close behind. My dad's shoulders sagged as relief overtook him. From the moment Katie learned to drive the stick-shift, we hardly ever saw her. She was always off with her friend Summer or one of the boyfriends that we never met.

The Volvo pulled into the driveway and parked and the pickup pulled in behind it. Katie stepped out of the Volvo and approached the front door, hugged my father and entered the house. John stepped out of the Mitsubishi and came up the walkway as well.

"Clutch went out on the freeway. We can settle the bill later," John said. His familiar charcoal jumpsuit was soaked through and stuck to his frame.

"Thanks, John. I can't thank you enough," bags sagged under Dad's eyes.

John nodded, "You should get some sleep, Bill. She's safe."

In 1999, it was my turn to add a car to the family fleet. It took almost all the savings I had leftover from my paper route of four years to buy the car. I was turning 16 in less than a month, and I had already completed driver's ed. Looking through classified ads, I found a white '89 Ford Taurus at a local dealership. The dealer was asking \$1300. John came out and checked the engine, the suspension, the frame—we wanted to make sure the expense of maintaining the car wouldn't outweigh the low cost up front.

"Doesn't look like it's been in any accidents. No damage underneath, and everything seems in good condition. Nothing a tune-up can't fix," John had said. "The tires are a bit bald though, you'll want to replace those."

I took John's advice and offered the dealer \$1000, since I had to change the tires. The dealer countered with \$1100 and he would throw in new tires. I accepted. We met up with John at the house later that week.

"What would win in a race, my Taurus or the Caravan?" I asked as John replaced the fuel filter under the car.



James Klouse, 1999

“Well that’s a funny race,” John snickered.

“I bet my Taurus would win. The speedometer goes up to 120.” He slid out from under the car and looked me dead in the eye.

“Don’t you be taking this car 120,” I’d never heard John so serious.

“I won’t! I’m just saying...”

He pulled himself up and dusted himself off and relaxed a bit.

“Well, I bet your Taurus would get out the gate a bit faster, but if it were a long race, the Caravan would win. Lots more power. Now come here, I want to show you the distributor cap.”

John had become something like an uncle to me. At least, I saw him more back then than I saw him more than I saw my actual uncles—one had moved to Nevada several years prior and the other lived in not-too-far-away Federal Way, but has always been emotionally distant. My dad and I were plenty close, but my dad was my dad. There are some things you just can’t talk about because he’s also in charge of you. If you say the wrong thing, you could end up grounded.

My relationship with John fell somewhere between family friend and uncle—at the very least, it was a mentor. I felt like I could tell him anything and he’d encourage me, but keep me grounded. He carried himself with a kind of worldly experience. He had a friendly demeanor, but sometimes you could detect weariness underneath. He never liked to talk about himself much, but he liked to talk about me. He was always interested in what I was learning in school, where our soccer team was in the standings, how I felt about God.

Because my parents were so busy with their music programs, one or both of them would often be at work until late in the evening. John was our only alternative to crippling our family fleet for a day or two. He would come in the evenings to perform our oil changes and often even significant repairs. I often accompanied him to the driveway and he would show me what was wrong and sometimes let me help him fix it. Since he often missed meals at home to repair our cars, we eventually began inviting him inside for dinner after the repairs were finished. We Klouses always prided ourselves on hospitality.

Dad walked down the driveway to my Taurus, “Hey John, why don’t you stay for dinner? We’re going to be eating soon.”

John pushed himself out from under the car, “Oh I don’t know if...”

“I insist. You’re like family. Finish up with the Taurus and come inside.”

“Yes, sir,” he smiled. As we walked up the step to the front door, John added, “You know Bill, earlier today I was helping a woman that came

into our shop. She was rude and treated me like a slave. She acted like as a white woman, she stood above me. She called me boy. Then I come out here and you treat me proper. You invite me in for dinner. You're good people."

My dad simply smiled and said, "You too John. We like having you around."

While my parents prepared dinner, John and I sat at the dining room table. I sipped a root beer as he wrote up the receipt for the work.

"Learning in school?" John asked, keeping his eyes on his clipboard.

Looking into my glass, I replied, "Yeah, of course."

John glanced up at me. "Keeping up on homework?"

"Yeah," my voice trailed off as my eyes drifted to the windows beside the table.

"Something eating you?" John had set down his clipboard and was looking straight at me now. I slowly shook my head, remaining silent.

"Girls?"

"NO," embarrassed, the word tumbled out with more force than I intended. He smiled.

"What is it?"

I sighed and just spit out, "I just don't feel like I have any friends at school. Everyone is so mean."

"You know, sometimes things work out like that. Sometimes you just gotta keep your chin up and keep trucking. If you don't find some folks at school, you'll find them after. High school's just a blip in your life, James."

I put my root beer down and slumped in my chair. "I know... I just wish I had more people to talk to."

"Well, you can always talk to me," John said. As I looked up, our eyes met. I felt as if he was looking right through me. "God has a plan for us all," he said. "He challenges us all. You just have to rise to that challenge, and you'll come out stronger."

I considered this a moment. As always, it sounded like John was speaking from experience. I wondered what could possibly challenge him. He always seemed to have an answer, as if there wasn't anything on the Earth that he hadn't lived through. His dark eyes stayed on steady on me.

"You believe that?" I asked.

"I know."

One afternoon, John's wife, Mildred, had come to drop off my dad's keys at work after John had completed the work on Dad's car. I was sitting



in Dad's office, as he was my band director, and I occasionally enjoyed eating lunch with him.

"I'm looking for Bill Klouse," Mildred said, glancing around the room.

"I'm Bill," dad replied, waving her into the office.

Mildred looked confused. She had never met him before, but she looked as though she had mistaken him for someone else.

"Is something wrong?" Dad asked.

"I'm sorry! John led me to believe you were taller." Slightly embarrassed, she handed him the keys and the receipt for the work. She left quickly.

Dad looked at me and smiled, "How odd..."

A few weeks later, John came out to the house on one of the more regular calls. Upon greeting him at the door, my dad invited him in and then asked John about what Mildred had said. John's deep laugh filled the foyer, his shoulders heaving with his voice. Dad asked what was so funny.

"I told her you were six foot tall," John said.

"Why?" Dad inquired, curious.

"Because you have a six foot personality."

## 2. John Allen Muhammad

The last time John came to the house was to change the oil on the Caravan. Only a few months had passed since a pair of planes had set the tone of the nation for the coming decade. At 18, I had begun developing my own brand of world-weariness: the world was full of terrorists, Afghanistan was crawling with American troops and President Bush was rattling on about Saddam Hussein. I was terrified Bush was going to activate the draft and take us to war in Iraq. If there's anything positive that came of that, it's that only one of those came true.

"James! John's here," my mom called out. She knew I would want to help John if I could. Captain Picard shrank to a dot as I shut off my TV and ran out to the front of the house. John was parked beside the cherry trees along the street as always, but he was not alone. Beside him there stood a boy even younger than me. He looked 16 or 17. He wore a similar charcoal jumpsuit to John's and carried John's toolbox with



Lee Boyd Malvo

such an authority that I assumed he was one of John's co-workers. I was selling musical instruments part-time—there's no reason a kid can't be a mechanic, I thought.

"Hey John," I greeted him as he approached the Caravan.

He looked at me and responded curtly, "James..."

I was caught unprepared for his response. Trying to recover I asked, "Who's your friend?"

The boy stared at me coldly, his eyes emanating a deep enmity that I did not understand. It was disconcerting. I tried to seem friendly, but his silent stare put me on edge. I never got an answer.

Something was going on, but I didn't know what. It had only been a few months since I'd last seen John, but he had changed so much. The warm, friendly demeanor was gone and in its place was a cold and distant one. And who was this boy? I couldn't help but feel a bit of betrayal seeing him accompany John. He stood beside John as he opened the hood, usurping my place. He handed John tools and got his hands dirty under the hood, while I stood beside the van and my hands remained clean. I stood in silence and watched for a few minutes, then finally returned to the house.

John did not stay for dinner that night.

"I'm taking the car up to Goodyear," Dad announced as he walked to the front door.

"Why not just call John?" I asked, looking up from my book.

"I tried," he said, "But no one's answering the phone. I can't even reach Mildred—I think she changed her number. I don't know what happened."

In 2002, I sat near the end of my narrow brick dorm room in Cheney, Washington. The school year had barely begun, but by October the desk was already a mess of papers and soda cans. The only bare spots surrounded my mouse and keyboard. My freshman year roommate, Wayne, and I had been marathoning episodes of *Evangelion*. The desk began to vibrate, soda cans buzzed together and papers slid across each other. The vibration was soon



**John Allen Muhammad**

accompanied by Saria's Song, a custom ring tone I had programmed into my indestructible Nokia cell phone.

"Pick up the phone, man," Wayne said, as I searched the desk for my cell.

Finally, I found it, glanced at the Caller ID, then brought it next to my ear. "Dad?"

"James, turn on CNN."

"Why?"

"Just turn it on."

After racking my mind a moment for the Spokane channel number for CNN, I changed the channel. Staring back at me was John. There was such malevolence in his eyes that I didn't immediately recognize him. The look on his face was so foreign to me that he appeared like a completely different person.

"What is this?" I asked, confused. Beneath his picture was a title line: "Beltway Sniper Captured."

The anchor spoke behind the full-screen image of him: "John Allen Muhammad, one of the two suspects in the Washington, D.C.-area sniper attacks, is a twice-divorced, 41-year-old Gulf War veteran who converted to Islam 17 years ago and earned an expert marksmanship badge in the U.S. Army."

"Muhammad?" That wasn't John's name.

There was a moment of silence on the line, as though my dad was acknowledging my confusion, "They're saying John was the DC Sniper."

"You knew that guy?" Wayne asked.

I turned away from the TV and sat on my bed, "I don't know."

Dinner was in the oven and the smell of chicken, onions and garlic was wafting through the house. The sun having set over an hour prior, the family room was dark except for the light coming from the television set, which flickered on the walls. Dad and I were seated next to each other—dad on the recliner, me on the futon. On the television was the live feed from CNN leading up to John ~~Williams~~ Muhammad's execution. The unfamiliar name sat below the familiar face. His hair had grown out, he now had a beard. A face that I'd only ever seen smile before that day now stared at me with lifeless eyes. He was arrested seven years ago. He was scheduled to be executed that night, but I can't help to feel that he died almost a decade ago.

While we were waiting for dinner to finish and the execution to end, dad and I swapped memories of John. After awhile, I moved into

my bedroom and typed up a crude recounting of my time with John. I titled it, "Reddit, tonight my friend is being executed in Virginia." When I had read it and re-read it a few times, I submitted it to Reddit, where it was read by tens of thousands of people. In less than six days, over two thousand comments were made in the thread. Some people wanted to know more about John and were intrigued that I had known a different side of him. Others condemned me for trying to lessen the evil that he had committed. Still others believed I was outright lying about the whole thing—that I had never known him and was just trolling. One messaged me and asked to interview me on his radio show that week.

After responding to the comments for a while, my dad told me to come back to the family room. Mom sat next to me on the futon. The news anchor announced that the execution would begin shortly. We sat in meditative silence.

Malvo, the boy who accompanied John on his horrific shooting spree, was the same young boy I saw that last day I ever saw John. For his role in the shootings, Malvo was given multiple life sentences. He was two years younger than me. They testified that their actions were racially motivated. Malvo said the plan was to kill six white people a day for 30 days. I wonder if John would have killed me. What if I had been that teenager out in front of his school that took a bullet to the abdomen? He couldn't possibly have hated me the entire time. His warmth was far too genuine. I refuse to believe that John was hiding the "real him" that whole time. These were different people.

I knew him before and after he took Malvo under his wing. Other testimony in the trial stated that John had planned to use a ransom from the government to establish a Utopia for homeless black kids in Canada. He took Malvo along because Malvo was an example of the children John was trying to save. Does that mean he never would have taken me? Not even considered it? I can't say I wasn't disappointed. I thought John and I were close. No, I didn't and don't want to go on a shooting spree but all the same, I felt betrayed when I saw that I had been replaced. I was John's little buddy one day, and a complete stranger the next.

I wonder if John modeled his hatred on all that my family was. For how small our house was and despite the fact that I bought almost everything I owned after age 12 with money I earned working in paper delivery or instrument sales, our family did have more than most—certainly more than John or Lee had growing up.

I know what it's like to be two different people inside the same

lifetime. I've been at least two people myself. I haven't gone off and shot anyone, but I can say for sure that my methods and outlooks these days are completely different from even five or six years ago. While John sat in prison, making appeal after appeal, I was hitting my own emotional floor. I had dropped out of college, had a conflict of identity, alienated myself from some family and many friends. It wasn't long after John's execution that I realized I needed to change my life. I had spent nearly as much time wallowing in self-misery as John had spent on death row.

Now on a different life path, I'm sad that I couldn't have done something to pull John away from the path that led to those heinous acts. I worry that something about me that I could never change was what drove him to commit those crimes. He couldn't have been looking at brake calipers with me standing next to him one day and not be thinking what he was when he shot those people. I was everything he wanted to train his scope on. White, male, middle-class, loving family, privileged.

A few minutes later, the anchor announced that John Allen Muhammad had been executed by lethal injection. The country breathed a sigh of relief, Mom said dinner's ready and Dad turned off the television.

# Skinner's Refugee

*Landan Garcia*

A floating knife

Standard kitchen model

One that doesn't quite belong with the others

Kept in the side drawer

Ivory base, wooden handle and a short, flimsy blade

Deadly sturdy at the site of application

A frantic white mouse holding it

Ambling forward, shaking

Unsure what to expect

What's lurks around the corner?

BF Skinner's lab escapee,

Mashing the impulse reward button she's stolen

Electricity arcs from her pink hat with two pulleys

Psychotic ball of energy

bzzt!

She doesn't hastily plunge,

But threatening faces she stabs twice

Remorse rushing over

What'd I do, what'd I do!

bzzt! JUMpy LitTLE MOUSE bzzt! wITH a knIFE!

JumPY littLE bzzt! mOuSE bzzt! WitH a KNIFE!

Then she stops.

And

Breathes in a rolling fog

As a great door opens.

Feeling a chill psychosis  
Beautiful neurosis  
With socks and gloves covering her paws.

Her heart and thoughts racing  
Thrust down a white, sandy path  
Freedom from freedom  
Chosen exile from a hollow, walled world

Only the good, the good, the good  
bzzt!

You! You may come with me.  
I'm a good mouse, aren't I?  
Umm, stay there.  
No, you're fine.

Side to side from her peripheral  
Racing forward with the current  
The good, the good, the-

I forgot you were there.  
You need to go.  
I need to go.  
Go away, person.

Oak tree ahead.  
Shade cast from a familiar mystery.  
Smile, don't stab.  
Arms down.

Breathe.

Don't hide in the notch  
Everyone hides there.

Fresh air.  
Steady chirping.  
Safety.  
Crepuscular sunlight.

A passerby

Suitable shadow

From a city cloak.

Safety from the fog

You! Stay right there! Now keep moving forward!

What nice white fur

Did I see a kni—

Did you know about...?

What do you think about...?

Is this a qualifier?

bzzt!

Internalizing electricity through her hidden blade

While snakes slither amongst the ancient grove

Comfort until constriction

An oddly darkening path toward Disneyland



## Cold Blooded

*Patrick Hasseries*

Law supposedly existed within The Dike, but only the toughest vehicles could traverse its terrain. Regular patrols and monitoring were non-existent due to a lack of suitable state vehicles. Maintaining order was a fool's hope. Labyrinthine streams and oases wove through a colossal lake of sand, creating a haven for both wildlife and human recreation. Navigating The Dike was a task that took years to master, but our group luckily had a veteran guide—Jacob.

Jacob was the most recent boyfriend of my girlfriend's cousin. As we soon learned, he had spent many of his adolescent days at The Dike fishing, drinking beer, smoking pot, and holding bonfires. It was a place where he and his friends could enjoy themselves without worrying about the law. His usual hang-out was a small inlet surrounded by cattails on the edge of a marsh. Visitors, other than his friends and family, were a rare occurrence. The area was a solid ten to twenty-minute drive into the mercurial interior of The Dike, depending on which trails were flooded and how suicidally fast one wanted to drive. Jacob had spent years developing the spot for his personal use—maintaining a fire pit, keeping the area clear of trash and plants, and stowing away logs and boards in the cattails to provide impromptu seating or firewood. Jacob made sure his hang-out was ready to go when he and his friends showed up.

The general temperature was warm, but a cold spring wind bit into anyone outside the pooled body heat of our gathering. Everyone had crowded their truck beds around Jacob's Spot in order to provide seating. Most of us were in our early to mid-twenties, though there were some exceptions: a few high schoolers, a small herd of children, and Skylar, Jacob's pit bull.

Our group was holding a bonfire dedicated to ridding ourselves of unwanted, unsellable yet highly flammable items. I didn't know the bulk of our party-members. There was Jacob, my girlfriend Anjela, and her cousin Jolinda. The other dozen people, however, were unfamiliar to me—mostly friends and relatives of Jacob.

Light faded behind the silhouette of trees across the marsh. The color of rose wine saturated the sky. Mosquitoes whined, dancing about our ears like mad cultists driving themselves into a frenzy before leaping upon a ceremonial feast. Jacob responded to the fading light and hungry mosquitoes by lighting the bonfire. For kindling, he used boards that he'd

hauled from his family's old, dilapidated barn. The pests held at bay, we cracked open our cases of beer and roasted marshmallows.

A chorus of frogs crescendoed from all along the shoreline. I savored their primal yet soothing croaks. Jacob, however, had thoughts of savoring something else:

"Frogs' legs are delicious, you know. They taste sort of like a fishy chicken, but the rest of the frog is bittersweet, like antifreeze."

I didn't know if Jacob had personally tasted antifreeze or if he was speaking out of conjecture. The supposed taste of antifreeze was common knowledge after all. I could have asked, but my interest laid with a different question:

"Are the frogs around here even safe to eat?"

"I've eaten them plenty of times. It's still kind of early in the season; the big ones usually take a while to thaw out after winter, but we might be able to catch some."

Not much time passed before Jacob grabbed a flashlight and suggested we go frog hunting. Always curious to try new foods and interested in possibly catching a frog as a pet, I joined him without a second thought.

As we crept along the shoreline, I was oblivious to the subtle disturbances of frogs in the water's black, placid surface. Jacob, however, focused the light on a single spot, walked up, and plucked a palm-sized frog from seemingly nowhere. I felt as if I had just witnessed a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat for the first time.

We were only a few yards from camp, and moments later, we were back at the bonfire. Without even killing or stunning the thing, Jacob tossed his catch onto a flat board in the fire. Although burning alive is a horrible way to die for any creature, I felt little sympathy as the frog's body shut down almost instantaneously and died. Then the board cracked, and the frog disappeared into the fire's glistening embers. Several people poked around the fire with sticks, but no one could tell where the frog had gone. From an early age, my father drilled into me that "You eat what you kill." I felt bad for the wasted death, but accepted it as the result of something unpredictable.

We set out again, still determined to catch and cook a frog. Again, I saw nothing, and again Jacob magicked a bullfrog out of the water. This time, it was as long as my forearm. Jacob handed the frog to me, recognizing my boy-like craving to see one up-close. It held motionless beneath my fingers as we headed back for camp. I marveled at its long, drumstick legs and slanted, ridiculously proportioned toes. I stared into

its marble-sized eyes, caressed its soft, pale yellow belly, and admired the details of the brown spots covering its dark green back.

I handed the frog to Jacob when we arrived at our campsite. Anjela's face distorted as if she found the frog repulsive. I knew that, in actuality, it disturbed her for another reason. She had previously told me that she raised a group of tadpoles as a child and accidentally killed them. At the time, she was unaware that tadpoles lost the ability to breathe water once they grew into frogs. One day, she had opened her frog bucket to find her pets dead, floating, and blue from suffocation.

Skylar, Jacob's pit bull, came running up and sniffed at the frog in Jacob's hand.

"You wanna play with the frog, Skylar?" Jacob asked.

Skylar whined. Jacob dropped the frog, and Skylar bolted into action. Clearly terrified of its canine pursuer, the frog hopped around as if the sand was a bed of hot coals. We assumed that the frog would make it to the water before Skylar could catch it, but the game went on for several minutes as the frog repeatedly doubled back to avoid Skylar's gnashing maw. Eventually, the frog grew tired. Skylar caught it, and her instincts brought the game to a grisly end.

As Skylar lifted the frog in her mouth, she thrashed her head from side-to-side. There was a loud popping sound as her teeth pierced the frog's body. Noticing that something was wrong with her toy, Skylar dropped the frog to the ground. She stared at its motionless body and started to whine again. Jacob had somehow disappeared, but one of his friends tossed the frog into the bushes. Skylar charged after it. She then spent the next half an hour barking and whining, trying to get the frog to start hopping again.

The night wore on and a cacophony of mooing erupted from the water. The bullfrogs had awoken. It never occurred to me before that bullfrogs could have earned their namesake from this distinctly bovine call. The mooing goaded us back into our hunt. I watched Jacob walk along the shoreline, slowly but not too closely, yet I still couldn't tell how he located the frogs. Finally, I had the novel idea of asking.

"The frog's eyes glow when you shine light in 'em," Jacob said, "It hypnotizes them, and if you keep it focused right on their eyes, you can just walk up and grab 'em."

With this knowledge at my disposal, I set off on my own, for reasons I didn't entirely understand. Perhaps, deep down, I wanted to prove myself a capable hunter to the group. Over the next several hours, I came close to catching a frog on a dozen occasions. Jacob failed to mention how

slippery they were and that touching them broke the hypnotic effect. On the dozenth try, I caught a frog.

When I returned to camp, I found out that Jacob and the others had caught a few frogs as well. I looked in horror as they cut off the frogs' legs while they were still alive and then tossed the rest of the frog into the water. Jacob smiled at the sight of the beast struggling to escape my grip.

"Great job, dude! Would you like the honor?" Jacob said, offering his pocket knife to me.

I was fine with hunting, but this was outright butchery. I quickly thought of a response to avoid torturing and mutilating my captive:

"No way! I'm gonna keep it."

Jacob laughed and went back to his work without a second thought. Until now, I had been able to rationalize and dismiss what the others were doing to the frogs. Now, I felt disgusted. Despite my feelings, I realized that Jacob and his friends represented a different culture. They were raised on different values and in a different region than I was. Knowing that my complaints would only incite ridicule over my soft values, I played the good anthropologist and ignored my qualms with what was happening. I walked over to Anjela and asked her about keeping the frog, even though I knew she wasn't very enthusiastic about the idea.

"I don't like them, and we don't have a tank for it."

"What about your old fish tank?"

"I gave that to my cousin Megan for her pet lizard, remember?"

"Yeah, but it died. Couldn't we get it back from her on the way home?"

Anjela just stared at me.

"Fine, if it bothers you that much, I won't keep it."

I walked away from camp and hurled the bullfrog back into the water. There was a chance it would sustain some injuries, but the farther away it landed, the longer it would take to get back to shore. Thus, the frog was less likely to get butchered.

When I returned to camp, Jacob and some of his friends were getting ready to go back out and look for more frogs. One girl was carrying a low-caliber rifle, while Jacob carried a type of skewer that he called a "Frog Gig." I no longer felt the desire to join them.

Jacob and his frog-hunting companions returned an hour later with a dozen dead frogs. I tried to retain my typically stoic face while looking at one of the most grotesque sights I had ever witnessed. Streams of blood leaked out of the frogs from wounds left by Jacob's skewer. Their tongues lolled from their mouths as if they had choked to death on strands of

licorice whip. Jacob again went to work cutting off the frogs' legs and tossing the remains into the water. There was a board covered in more frogs' legs than I cared to count, but no one seemed to be cooking or eating them. Jake stopped cutting in order to have a beer and left the rest for the others to finish their work.

A young girl, about nine years old and apparently Jacob's cousin, was angrily trying to cut off the leg of a frog when it attempted to hop away. I was surprised, because it was one that Jacob had skewered. Moments ago, it had been lying on a board motionless and clearly dead. I wondered how something could have survived such a bodily shock. The girl grabbed her frog captive, lifted it up, and beat it against the log she had been using as a cutting board. Blood oozed from the frog's mouth. Jacob looked sick and disappeared again, but this time, I could hear him retching from behind his truck. That was when I realized the paradox that was Jacob. He could skewer frogs, cut off their legs while they were still alive, and throw their limbless bodies back into the water, but he couldn't stand to watch someone else do the same thing.

"Pussy," someone shouted when Jacob returned.

"You've got such a weak stomach, babe!" Jolinda chided.

"What? It's just work when I do it, but it's gross watching someone else."

Shortly thereafter, the girl with the rifle came back carrying a bleeding frog and offered it to Anjela.

"Please keep that away from me," Anjela said in a sharp tone.

The girl, in a stroke of serious bitchdom, responded by leaving the frog on Anjela's leg. For a moment, the anger in Anjela's face outshone the bonfire. She grabbed the frog and tossed it into the water. It landed close to shore but just far enough away to make retrieval impossible without getting wet.

"What did you do that for?" the girl shouted. "I told you I didn't want it."

"Just 'cause you were scared of it doesn't mean you had to throw it into the water."

The girl's ignorance was amusing. I knew Anjela well enough to realize that the frog's landing place was no accident.

"Oh, she didn't do it because she was scared," I said. "She did it to spite you."

Anjela completely ignored the girl and began scrubbing at her pants, attempting to rub off the frog's blood. Her conversation with Jolinda dwindled, and we both sat in silent contempt for our companions. Not

long after, it began to rain. Sick of the bad weather, sick of our company, and sick of what they were doing, we took the opportunity to excuse ourselves and pack up. Looking out as we pulled away, I thought that the group looked like a scene from some Scandinavian fairytale involving bloodthirsty trolls. That night, I saw only one leg roasted and none eaten—a waste of life.

Anjela's family consisted mostly of farmers and hunters. She was used to keeping quiet about animal death. In the sanctity of our car, however, we began to talk about how they could have at least made sure the frogs were dead before butchering them. Despite the night's events, we both still loved visiting The Dike. We just agreed not to go back with Jacob any time soon.

Two years passed, and I found myself walking home on a cold autumn night. Home was now an apartment in a fourplex with beige exterior paneling and a red front door. More specifically, home was the apartment on the bottom-left, covered by overhanging stairs to form a makeshift porch. My roommates were Anjela, who was now my wife, and our infant son, William.

While reaching to open the front door, I noticed something unusual in the bottom-left corner of the door frame. It was a tiny, triangular blob huddled under a leaf. The dying lamp on the wall next to our door was too dim for me to discern anything about the blob, except that it was some kind of animal.

My first assumption was a moth—one of the large black ones that populated the area during autumn. Not wanting it to flutter into the house as soon as I opened the door, I tried to startle it into flight by nudging it with my foot. The thing didn't move.

I knelt down, hoping my hands would be enough to scare the thing. That was when I noticed the two glowing, orb-like eyes. What I had taken for wings were in fact legs. What I had taken for a moth was in fact a tree frog. It had likely ended up here after taking a wrong turn on its way to the canal behind our apartment.

As I reached down to pick up the frog, Anjela opened the door, wondering why I was hanging around outside and making so much noise. Then she saw the tiny frog in my hands.

"Where'd you find that?"

"He was sitting in the door frame. He's freezing."

Anjela paused, quietly staring at the frog.

"It's actually kind of cute; it reminds me of William."

“Yeah, somehow it kind of does.”

“All right, I wouldn’t mind it if you kept this frog as a pet.”

I considered the offer for a moment. Winter was fast approaching and temperatures had plummeted. I knew from a previous research project that the local frogs could live for several years and survived the winter by freezing themselves in local streams. Keeping it in the house would prevent it from freezing and thus disrupt its natural lifecycle. The frog would probably die within a few weeks from the shock of its lifecycle being disrupted.

“No, I don’t need a pet frog.”

“Are you sure?”

I explained my reasoning to Anjela, and she agreed with me. She closed the door, and I carried the frog to the canal, where it jumped into the water and presumably burrowed into the banks with the other frogs—its family. I returned home and enjoyed the apartment’s warmth with Anjela and William—my family. Sitting in my recliner with William sleeping on a pillow in my lap, I took solace knowing that the frog and I would both survive to see another spring.

## **How It Should Be**

*Adam Lawrence Fisher*

Syncopated heart beats  
Rhythm from the soul fleets  
hands held  
lips touch  
a moment's breath failed to clutch.  
Seeing through unfiltered lenses  
breaking down my defenses.  
Lifted spirits  
heated passion  
always and forever  
my distraction.



## Dog Tags

*Kaitlin Abrahamson*

The darkness swept through the dead-end road. Street lamps flickered, the wind blew softly, and nocturnal animals were roaming the streets like they owned them. As everyone slept, waiting for the morning light, I hid under my covers—awakened by mysterious sounds. At the back of my split-level house, a sliding glass door slowly opened. A young man with sweat on his brow and silence in his step slipped out of the door; he looked around with caution and closed the door. An oak wood pile blocked a fast getaway, but he placed a foot on a log and inhaled, clumsily climbing the pile. When he looked up, he saw the light come on in my room. Startled, he froze in place. If I had looked down, I might have seen him. When I reached the window looking into the backyard, I decided that I was just being paranoid and that there was nothing out there. He did not move as I stared into the darkness. If only I had opened the window and looked below, I would have found him sneaking out of the house. When I backed away from the window, my brother jumped the fence and disappeared behind it.

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Having been diagnosed with ADHD, my brother, Nick, was one of the kids who never did well in school. He never did his homework, he lied all the time, and he stole from his friends and his family. I still remember the first time my dad ever called my brother stupid. My brother was twelve, which would make me six years old, and he thought that it would be a really good idea to roller blade down the slide in our back yard.

I stared up at my big brother with tears in my eyes, “Nicky, don’t do it. Daddy will get mad if he catches you.”

“If he catches me,” Nick flashed me a crooked smile. He tightened his helmet, and checked the straps on his elbow and wrist pads. Without warning, he jumped onto the slide. To my amazement, he slid down the slide without a hitch. It wasn’t until he was in the air that I knew it was going to end badly. The roller blades made him pick up speed; he somersaulted awkwardly and hit the ground. Hard. Too many seconds passed as he lay there motionless, so I ran to get my dad. When my dad asked me what happened, I told the truth. My dad came running down the stairs to my brother’s aide. By the time we reached the backyard my brother was up and walking around but he held his arm and winced every time he touched it.

My dad demanded, “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Nick’s face paled into a stark shade of white.

“Do not lie to me,” Dad said. Scared, my brother told my dad everything that had happened. The only thing that I remember from the rest of the conversation was my dad yelling, “You are so stupid. I don’t understand how you could do something so stupid.”

He’s not stupid, he just makes stupid decisions—at least that’s what I tell myself.

\*\*\*

The first time my brother was arrested he was 19 years old. I will always remember the date because it was the same morning we found out that my grandpa—my dad’s dad—died in his sleep. Up until that point, I had never felt sad and angry at the same time. By getting arrested, my brother was proving my dad right. My brother had snuck out of the house to meet up with his friend. They broke into a car and got caught by the owner, who held them at gun point until the cops got there. My brother and his friend were arrested at the scene.

“I swear that I didn’t break into the car,” my brother pleaded. “I didn’t take anything, and I didn’t want to be there. I tried to leave but then the owner of the car came out with his shot gun.”

It didn’t matter if he wanted to be there or not. He was still charged—guilty by association.

\*\*\*

The first word I ever spoke was “Nick.” He wasn’t always in trouble. At least when I was with him he never got in trouble, because we would always play James Bond 007 on his Nintendo 64 in the basement with the lights off. He taught me how to play when I was eight and eventually I got so good I would kill his character more than he could kill mine. We played so often, we got in the habit of telling each other our secrets. He would tell me how much he loved his girlfriend—how he fell in love too easily, how he didn’t want to go to school anymore, and how he wanted to go pro in soccer. We would eat nacho cheese Doritos and drink Coca-Cola, while we killed each other in the games. I was his fallback plan whenever he got bored with the people he called his friends. But I didn’t mind because we were always there for each other. Nick, my older sister Michelle, and I have always been really close. The three of us realized that all we have after our parents die is each other, since we never knew the rest of our family. So we made a pact that we would never let anything ever come between us and that we would always be there for each other.

\*\*\*

Deane. If her name was in the dictionary she would be defined as: slut, bitch, whore, home wrecker. These are the only words that can describe such an awful person. Her name is the one word that is never spoken in our family. The first time Nick brought her home I instantly knew I didn't like her, but I tried to accept her because my brother loved her. He dated her for three years and our family only saw her twice in that time. When I found out that she grew weed in her basement, that her ex boyfriend still lived with her, that she had a daughter from a different boyfriend, and that she was thirteen years older than my brother, I drew a line. I tried to tell my brother that she was not good for him and that there are plenty more women in the world. He ignored me. It wasn't until he ended up in jail again that I really yelled at him.

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A few months later, my brother and I made plans to catch up and play some N-64 because I had been away at college. As I made my way back home, excited to see my older brother, I got a phone call from my mom telling me that Nick had been arrested again—for the fourth time since he had hooked up with Deane. My heart sank, I didn't understand. The drive home is two hours, somehow that night it felt like four. When I asked my mom what happened, she told me that Nick had assaulted Deane and that the neighbors called the police to complain about the noise. The cops showed up and arrested Nick. I smiled to myself.

"Maybe now Nick will realize that she is psycho and break it off with her. Maybe Nick will finally come back home," I thought.

I never got to see my brother that weekend because he was held in jail until Monday and I had to go back to school. He called me to tell me that he was really sorry for all this. He said he was sorry for screwing up our plans and breaking his promise.

"Well what's going to happen now?" I asked, "Are you staying with her?"

"Well Kaitlin, I love her. But I'm going to Mom and Dad's for a few days."

"Why are you going home if you love her so much?"

"She has to get the restraining order against me lifted before I can go back over there."

I tell myself he's not stupid he just makes stupid decisions.

\*\*\*

January 12, 2009—the day I had to put my dog Snoopy down and the day I knew my brother wasn't dumb. I'd had Snoopy for fifteen years. He was really old and sick with blindness and arthritis. We did everything

together. He was very special to me and when the day came that I had to let him go, I wasn't ready for it. My mom made the appointment for Snoopy to be put down. I couldn't sleep that night. The next morning I couldn't deal with what was happening. I had to go to school because I couldn't watch my dog die. I've never been good at accepting death and when Snoopy was put down he took part of me with him. Once I got home I thought, "Why the hell didn't I go?"

I started crying to my parents and my dad said to me, "I don't understand why you care so much. He's just a dog." At that time I couldn't fake a smile like I wanted to.

I ran down to my room and shut the door. I didn't have anyone who understood. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and I was hoping that it wasn't my dad. I opened it and my brother stood before me.

I really didn't want to deal with him because he would just do something stupid that would piss me off. But to my surprise he held out his hand and said, "I'm so sorry, Kaitlin. I know Snoopy meant a lot to you and before they put him down, I took these off of him."

I took what was in his hand and it was Snoopy's dog tags. Just when I thought I had lost Nick, he surprised me with something so sincere that I thought he was the old Nick again. As I saw the dog tags in my shaking hands, I fell into my brother's arms and tears poured down my face. I realized all I needed was my brother because he understood how I felt. How could someone who is supposedly so stupid, do something so thoughtful?

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It was when he stopped calling my sister, stole \$500 dollars from my parents, and broke his promises to me that I realized I had finally lost him. On June 8, 2010, I called my brother because he forgot to call me back the night before. At first the conversation was casual. He asked questions like: How are you? How are classes? How are finals going? Then suddenly he stopped midsentence and asked if he could call me back soon. I could hear Deane's voice in the background. When I said yes, I hung up and got ready to take a shower because "soon" to my brother could mean hours. After my shower, I checked my phone and had six missed calls and a voicemail—all from my brother. Before I called him back I listened to the voicemail. It was Nick yelling at me, "Deane says I can't talk to you anymore. Don't bother calling me back." His words stabbed me. I dropped my cell phone. I started shaking uncontrollably; my eyes swelled. I couldn't breathe. I scrambled to pick my cell off the ground and called him back. No answer. I called again, no answer. I called

him again. I called him straight for thirty minutes and he never picked up the phone.

\*\*\*

Every time I think of my brother, I start sniffing and my eyes start to burn as tears cloud my vision. Honestly, all I want to do is hate him and cut him out of my life but I can't. No matter how many things he has done to me that I don't like, I can never give up on him, no matter how much I want to. Sometimes I sit by the phone looking for a missed call from an unknown caller. I hope that it will be him on the receiver telling me that he has left his girlfriend and is coming back home. I want to talk to him for hours on the phone. I want to pig out on Doritos with him while we share our secrets. I want to play 007 with him on the 64. I believe the boy who played video games with me is still in there. I believe the boy who saved my dog tags is still going to call.

## **My Ritual—An American Pantoum**

*Megan Epperson*

like a cat having licked & licked off its fur  
as sandpaper scrubbing off all but the skin  
i grind my teeth with spiral patterned, plastic bristles  
& in the mirror all i see is piss-colored coating on my teeth

as sandpaper scrubbing off all but the skin  
i leave my gums bloody & gleaming  
& in the mirror all i see is the piss-color coating on my teeth  
so i press that brush harder into every nook

i leave my gums bloody & gleaming  
protecting my whole being from bacteria & soft decay  
so i press that brush harder into every nook  
that lets in more fears & risks of cavities

protecting my whole being from bacteria & soft decay  
pressuring every crevice within my mouth  
that lets in more fears & risks of cavities  
must cleanse, must scour

pressuring every crevice within my mouth  
i have my-teeth-won't-be clean-enough fears  
must cleanse, must scour  
otherwise germs will take me over

i have my-teeth-won't-be-clean-enough fears  
these little required traumas will never go away  
otherwise germs will take me over  
every time i eat or breathe micro bacteria enter past my lips

these little, required traumas will never go away  
panicking i add more toothpaste  
every time i eat or breathe micro bacteria enter past my lips  
my whole mouth is bleeding now

panicking i add more toothpaste  
i grind my teeth with spiral patterned, plastic bristles  
my whole mouth is bleeding now  
like a cat having licked & licked off its fur

## Héroe

*Santos Herrera*

Jose was the only man I knew. El hombre de la casa  
and the father figure I never had, or at least the one  
who wasn't behind bars. He didn't wear a cape,  
but his love and good deeds waved behind him  
as if he was flying through the barrio. I was honored  
to call him hermano. My brother marched into the Marines  
at eighteen, as green as the uniform he would soon  
mud up into the color of his skin. A Chicano to the core,  
until he received the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor.  
Jose became one of the few and the proud; but, I was  
one of the few who wasn't proud to see him fly away  
and save someone else's world.



## Moral Imperative

*Jamie Klouse*

A thump woke Hayden to the blackness of her room. Her fraternal twin sister, Wynn, slept soundly in the adjacent bed. Hayden crept to the bedroom window to see the cold night sky warmed by a large fire in the distance. She ran out of her bedroom, stopped at the front door, pulled up her nightgown and carefully slid her feet into a pair of galoshes along the wall. As she slipped into the street, a figure approached, treading with care over snow piles scraped to the sides of the road.

“Hayden, get inside,” the figure called out.

“Daddy? What’s going on?”

“Get inside! It’s not safe out here.”

Hayden obliged. “Is that fire is near your lab?” she asked, as her father closed the door behind him.

“Take off your boots, honey.” He knelt to help Hayden remove the galoshes over her bare feet. He leaned in for a kiss, his brown trimmed beard scratching her cheek.

“I heard a thump and then saw the fire.”

Her father stared at her, deciding what to say.

“I’m old enough to understand, Daddy,” she said. He smiled.

“You’re eight, Hayden.”

“I’m old enough.”

“Of course you are. Look sweetie, I need to talk to your mother.”

He walked past Hayden to the master bedroom. Hayden sat in confusion on the furniture in the parlor. Curiosity gave way to concern. She could hear her parents talking in hushed voices behind the door. Hayden approached the door and tried to decipher the sounds.

“We’re innocent, Helen. I swear they’d done nothing, but they were just killing them all. I had to do something,” her father’s voice shook.

“Gods, what have you done, Oscar?”

“You remember before the Dynasty. We were Azurians too. They’re no different from us.”

Dripping with contempt, her mother replied, “But they’ll kill you now. The Enclave will brand you a criminal. Were the lives of a few refugees worth the lives of your daughters?”

“That’s not fair.”

“They’re going to imprison us all! You’ve doomed this family. How could you be so selfish?”

“Helen—”

A violent slap split the relative silence of the Stokes household. Hayden held back fear and tears as Wynn stirred in the bedroom across the hall. The door in front of Hayden opened, and her father loomed, his expression hidden in the dark. He stepped past Hayden and walked toward the parlor in silence.

“Mommy?” Wynn had finally woken and stood at the door of their bedroom, rubbing her eyes. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Go back to bed, girls,” their mother ushered them back into their bedroom. Hayden slipped past her mother, chasing after her father.

Shouts from the street penetrated the house, the sound of boots striking the ground in rapid succession echoed in the darkness. “Daddy,” Hayden said as her father turned toward her. He knelt to her level and held her cheeks in his hands. His bright green eyes shone in the darkness and searched her face. Hayden knew he could see her thoughts.

As the sounds outside subsided, all eyes shifted to the door. A harsh knock broke the silence. Wynn and her mother stepped into the parlor. Hayden’s father turned to her again.

“Remember, Hayden: inquiring mind and discerning eyes. Don’t believe everything they tell you. There are greater goods in this world than anything the Enclave says. Follow your heart, become the strongest person you can. Even if you fail, keep trying. You can’t learn if you don’t lose.” Another knock.

Her father stood and walked toward the door. Her mother grabbed his shoulder, tears in her eyes, “Oscar—”

He only nodded, continued to the door, and opened it. Lantern light and cold winter air poured into the house. Soldiers stood in a rank that extended beyond where Hayden could see. Her father stepped into the street and Hayden ran after him.

“Oscar Stokes.” An officer in a dark blue uniform trimmed with braided gold addressed him, a platoon of Enclave soldiers standing at attention behind him.

“Captain Bannam,” Hayden’s father replied. Against the show of force, her father seemed small and insignificant, dressed plainly in brown breeches held up by suspenders over a pin-stripe shirt, its sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The bright lantern light cast an aura around his shape.

“You are accused of disobeying an Enclave order and aiding the escape of Azurian criminals,” the officer announced. Window shutters all around them slid open silently.

“Refugees,” was all her father said in response.

“Criminals—and enemies of the Enclave. Your crime is treason and the penalty is death.”

Hayden ran barefoot into the snow and clutched her father’s leg. “You’re wrong! Father would never help criminals!” Her father knelt and hugged her, his warmth removing her chill.

“You would hide behind a child, now?” the officer challenged him.

Hayden’s father stood and firmly pushed Hayden away. She slipped in the snow and stared up at her father in surprise as the officer stepped closer and raised his pistol to her father’s chest. Her father looked down at her with a warm smile and said simply, “Learn.”

A dull plunk echoed in the street as steam poured from the barrel of the pistol, released by a compressed canister. Hayden’s father continued to smile, even as his body crumpled to the ground. Hayden felt the snowy cold of the ground melt away as his life essence pooled about her feet.

Ten years passed. Hayden now stood on the corner of the street, staring at the puddles of the previous night’s rain around her boots. Cobblestone streets stretched across the vast city of Laurel, capital of the Davvis Enclave. The Enclave was a relatively small nation, landlocked inside the failed Azurian Republic. Nearly half a century ago, famine had ravaged the countryside of Azuria and the small wealthy state of Laurel had closed its borders to protect its fertile lands, defending them fiercely. Not long after, a powerful family emerged from the ruling oligarchy and established the first dynasty, renaming the state of Laurel to the Davvis Enclave, after themselves. It seemed only fair to leave the eponymous state capital, now national capital, named Laurel.

Buildings crowded together, ending directly at the curb. The earthy colors of plaster and stucco façades intermingled with the occasional stone wall, outlining a courtyard or garden. Ornate green-painted streetlamps stood along the curbs of the larger roads, adorned with floral displays in celebration of the coming of spring. The morning sun cast a cold shadow across the street, so Hayden held her dark-blue uniform coat, trimmed with silver braiding, tightly around her just as a spring breeze numbed her ears. Hayden momentarily regretted cutting her hair. Now, it was short and messy, a dark brown contrasting the bright green eyes she and Wynn had inherited from their father. Hayden became aware of someone running up the street behind her, boots striking the cobblestone and echoing louder as the distance closed. A hand grasped Hayden’s shoulder and spun her around.

“I almost thought you’d left for the Academy without me!”

Wynn stood panting beside Hayden, wearing an identical uniform. Her jackboots were polished to a mirror-sheen, which made Hayden aware of the dust covering her own. Wynn's blond curls fell softly over her shoulders.

Hayden took a step toward the school, "Let's go, or we'll be late. 'Tardiness carries a heavy price,' remember?"

Wynn laughed, "Your Headmaster impression improves every time."

"Who can tell me the primary fuel source for the steam engines that power our country?" Hayden leaned back in her chair as Headmaster Bannam surveyed the classroom, seeking an answer covered by the previous night's readings. A hand materialized from the crowd of bored cadets.

"Ionium dioxide, Headmaster," Wynn offered without being called upon.

He nodded. "Do you know the specific ionium isotope?"

"232, sir."

"Very good Cadet Stokes," he smiled. "I wish the rest of the class had your enthusiasm for their studies. Now might anyone besides Cadet Stokes tell me the mechanism we use to capture the energy ionium dioxide emits?"

The room was so silent it might as well have been empty. Hayden looked side to side, the faces of her classmates blank as bed sheets. Wynn leaned backward to Hayden and whispered, "Say it!"

Hayden leaned toward her sister and whispered back, "Say what?"

"The answer. Gods Hayden, you know this!"

Hayden leaned back again. "Of course I do. Dad designed the damned things," she said, her contempt tangible. Wynn frowned.

"Do you have the answer, Cadet Stokes?" Both Hayden and Wynn looked forward startled by his attention. "Hayden? Did you have something to share?" he said with a smug look.

Hayden sat up straight and addressed the Headmaster, "The radioactive decay heats the reactor casing, which in turn heats water around the casing. The water becomes steam, then forces itself through a turbine, converting mechanical energy to electrical energy."

The Headmaster seemed surprised she had the answer and nodded, "Very good, Cadet Stokes. That was... definitive."

Hayden resumed her relaxed position in the chair.

"That will wrap up today's lesson. Next week, you won't have the pleasure of my instruction, as Professor Sheady will have returned from

his consult with the Air Corps.” The relief was palpable. “Also, don’t forget to take your sabers home with you after class. As you recall, we have a live war game scheduled in District 12 on Monday, and the school won’t be open. Be on time. Tardiness carries a heavy price.”

The sound of sliding chairs and rustling papers mingled with excited conversations as the cadets packed up their texts and discussed the upcoming war game. Hayden noticed Wynn lacked the enthusiasm that was near universal in the room. “Your swordsmanship isn’t as bad as you think, Wynn.”

“I can ace chemistry, but I’ve never been good with swords. I’ll never be as skilled as you.”

“You just need to practice more. I’m only good because I practice a lot and spar with people better than me. You can’t learn unless you lose,” Hayden said, walking toward their lockers.

“That’s what dad used to say,” Wynn muttered and caught up.

“Yeah, he never backed down from a fight,” Hayden recalled proudly.

Wynn turned and stood in front of Hayden. “Dad took risks, and that’s not something to be proud of Hayden. He was a traitor!”

Hayden was taken by surprise. “That’s not true.”

“You saw what happened that night. The papers covered it all.”

“Dad didn’t do those things, and you know it.” Hayden felt sick listening to her sister walk all over the memories of their father.

“And where did he leave us? Where did it leave Mom? He died, they took his pension—he left us with nothing. Mom was never the same. Now, it’s up to us to take care of her.”

Hayden looked away from her sister. “Yeah, we signed up when we were kids to take advantage of the living-stipend program. You don’t think it’s weird that the military starts training at 12 years old? It doesn’t strike you odd that the only life you’ve known for the last six years has been a military life? We’re learning to kill people.”

“Hayden—”

“And Dad would never have killed those soldiers without reason. He was saving Azurian refugees. He wouldn’t have stood up to the Dynasty unless something was seriously wrong.”

“He stood up and died. The Davvis Dynasty protects us from those criminals. They would have taken everything if Davvis hadn’t stepped up. You always act like you want to pick up dad’s torch, but there isn’t one. He died for nothing.”

Hayden stared at her in disbelief. Wynn’s eyes hardened with resolve. Hayden realized Wynn bore no love for their father. She had completely

bought the government lies. The government killed her father and now it had stolen her sister.

“Fine,” Hayden said, defeated.

Wynn softened. Reaching out, she hugged Hayden. “All we have to worry about now is Mom. When we both graduate this year, we’ll be lieutenants.” She pulled back and held each of Hayden’s hands in her own. “We might even have enough for mom to finally see a doctor. She hasn’t spoken in years, but I’m sure with help—”

Hayden nodded and began to walk again, “I’m sure we will.”

They reached the lockers and Hayden pulled out her saber and attached it to her hip. Wynn continued to muse, “I’ll get a position in research like I’ve always wanted and you... well, you’ll probably end up the youngest captain in the fleet.” She giggled.

“Yeah... captain. That’d be something,” Hayden replied emptily. They each finished packing their gear and walked out the large arched doors of the Academy. Hayden glanced up at the slogan scribed into the stone above the entryway—“To show undying loyalty to the Enclave and defend her against her enemies”—the last sentence of the Air Corps Academy mission statement.

“I want to take a look at the field in District 12 before they close it off for the war game. Let’s go by there on our way home,” Hayden said.

“Always the strategist. Well, let’s grab something at the market and we can make a picnic of it.”

“Picnic. Sounds good.”

The field in District 12 spread out below Hayden and Wynn as they stood on a ridge and viewed the valley. Already, carts were being guided by Enclave soldiers, laying out obstacles and digging trenches for cover. They would work all weekend to prepare the battlefield, and then the Air Corps cadets would battle out their war game with blunted sabers and low-compression steam rifles for the rest of the week.

The afternoon sun warmed the air as Hayden and Wynn pulled off their jackets, laid them on the ground, and settled on top of them to eat their lunches. Hayden watched the soldiers set up the field and took a bite of the sausage she’d bought at the market. She swallowed and turned to Wynn. “I’m sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to fight.”

Wynn nodded. “It’s okay.”

“You, Mom and me only have each other,” Hayden added.

“We’ll make it, together.”

Hayden smiled for a moment, then took another bite of the sausage.

The distant clop of horse hooves grew louder as a covered cart and single rider approached Hayden and Wynn.

“You two are cadets,” observed the officer sitting atop the cart, pulling the team of horses up short.

“See you back at camp, Lieutenant,” the single rider waved, his uniform bearing the insignia of a captain. He nodded toward Hayden and Wynn, nudging his horse to a trot.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Wynn responded and stood up rigidly, prepared to assume a state of attention. Hayden stood, but not at attention. Wynn dug an elbow into her ribs and Hayden straightened her form.

“You two need to leave. This area is off-limits until Command opens the war game.”

Wynn instantly obeyed and began packing up their picnic. Hayden sighed and helped. Trusting them to obey the order, the officer shook the reins and the horses moved forward once more. As the cart passed, Hayden glanced at its contents and was surprised to see faces staring out at her. Their eyes were filled with wild terror and silent pleas for help. The people in the cart were bound hand and foot, their mouths gagged with rags. Their clothing was tattered, their hair matted and their skin dusty like they hadn't bathed in weeks. Hayden stepped forward to investigate, but Wynn caught her sleeve and mouthed a silent “no.” Hayden pulled away from her.

She ran up to the cart and stood on the foot-hold at the back. Reaching up, she pulled the gag from one person's mouth, and he immediately began to babble. Hayden hushed him, but he wouldn't listen. The cart stopped. She stepped down from the back of the cart as the lieutenant rounded the corner. Wynn ran to catch up.

“What in the world do you think you're doing? I ordered you to leave the field, cadet!”

“Who are these people?” Hayden demanded.

“That's none of your business. All you need to know is you don't belong here.”

“Hayden, let's go,” Wynn said.

“Why do they look like they've been dragged behind a horse across Azuria?” Hayden continued.

“Cadet, I'm warning you. Go home, that's a direct order,” the officer said.

The man who'd had his gag removed shouted desperately, “They've imprisoned us for hunger. We're Azurians, not criminals. We've done nothing wrong.”

Hayden's eyes went wide. The officer punched the man square in the jaw and shoved the gag back into his mouth. Turning, he shouted, "If you don't leave, I'll have you arrested for aiding the escape of condemned criminals."

"Refugees," Hayden stated flatly, resting her hand on her saber.

"Hayden, let's just leave. He gave us an order." Wynn pleaded, pulling on Hayden's arm.

"Could you hurt these people, Wynn? They've done nothing wrong. Look at them, they could barely stand. Half of them look like they haven't eaten in weeks," Hayden shouted, and pulled away from Wynn.

"Don't do this, Hayden. You'll be a criminal, like father."

Wynn's words struck Hayden and she swayed from the weight of them. Father, a criminal. Hayden could bear it no longer.

"You have no idea what father was," she said, finally, "He was a hero and he stood up for those who couldn't stand for themselves. The Enclave kills Azurian innocents every day and tells us they're just criminals. Well they can't all be criminals, Wynn. It looks like all they want to do is eat. He died defending those principles. He died defending us."

Wynn stepped back from Hayden, coldly looking into her eyes. "He died a traitor."

"You're coming with me, Cadet. We can sort this out with Headmaster Bannam," said the officer as he stepped forward to place Hayden under arrest.

Hayden stepped backward, "I won't let you kill these people."

The officer laughed, "I'm not going to kill them. You are. 'Show undying loyalty to the Enclave and defend her against her enemies,' remember? It's part of this year's final evaluations."

The prisoner the officer had punched was becoming conscious once more and began to groan. The officer drew his saber, turned to the cart and drove his blade through the chest of the prisoner, blood trickling slowly down the steel. Wynn gasped. Hayden drew her saber.

"Drawing a weapon on a soldier is a high crime, Cadet. Put that away."

"These people aren't our enemies. You are," Hayden stated.

"What are you going to do with that dull piece of shit anyway?" He lunged at her.

Hayden parried the blade and drove herself forward for a riposte, but the officer managed to block the strike. He swung his blade high and brought it down for a powerful overhead strike. Hayden sidestepped the swing and crushed her dulled blade into the officer's face. He stumbled backward, his nose broken and bleeding profusely.



“You bitch!” he shouted, regaining his footing and swinging wildly at Hayden. Blow after blow, Hayden blocked, but the officer kept coming. His frantic onslaught drove Hayden backward until she was pinned against the cart. He brought his foot up and kicked her against the cart, pinning Hayden, then stabbed at her. A shoulder pressed into her side, knocking her away.

The strike narrowly missed her chest, entering the cart behind her. As she fell off-balance, Hayden saw that one of the prisoners in the cart had pushed her with his body, and his reward was to have the saber rake his face, cutting a gash across his nose and cheek. He took the wound with a muffled groan. Hayden scrambled away from the cart and stood in time for the officer to strike again.

Three quick jabs at Hayden were effortlessly parried but came too fast for her to retaliate. Filled with bloodlust, the officer coiled for a powerful jab and lunged at Hayden. She moved with the strike, pushing off her opponent’s blade with her own as he passed her. She spun with the momentum and brought her blade down with full force on the back of the officer’s head. He sprawled on the ground. Hayden stepped on his hand, forcing the hilt from between his fingers. She knelt and picked up the saber. It was still stained with the blood of the men in the cart.

The officer rolled over and groaned, clutching the back of his skull. “They’re going to string you up for this.”

Hayden ignored him and began cutting the bindings of the prisoners. Wynn had fallen to her knees, shocked at what she had witnessed. What she was still witnessing. “Hayden—”

“Help me untie these people.”

“You’re a traitor. Like father—”

Hayden turned to Wynn, her stomach churning in betrayal. “What? This soldier slew an unarmed man in front of you and you call me the traitor?” she demanded.

“They’re criminals, he said so. There must be a reason they were imprisoned,” Wynn said.

A warm voice erupted behind Hayden, “Aye, there’s reason fer it. We came t’ steal food fer the starvin’ folks outside the Enclave. Believe it er not, ya’aren’t the only people on this planet. The Enclave didn’ take kindly t’ that.”

“Stealing! You see? They should all be locked up, Hayden. Don’t you see? They’re thieves!” Wynn pleaded.

“Feeding the hungry should never be a crime, Wynn. Where are your priorities?”

“With our family!”

“What does our family matter when people are dying from hunger? You’d have them murdered for sport for wanting to fill their bellies?”

The argument was interrupted by a sudden movement. The officer had recovered his wits, drawn a knife from his boot and lunged at the group. Hayden saw the movement and dodged away. The officer’s stab went wide, but Wynn was caught, unable to move from her position. The knife dug into her shoulder. She cried in pain as the soldier drew the knife out for a second strike.

“Bastard!” Hayden shouted as the officer charged her once more. Hayden swung the officer’s saber downward and sliced cleanly through his wrist, disarming the threat, but in a rage, she spun as she had before and the blade met bone as it cut deeply into the back of the officer’s neck. The officer crumpled to the ground. He lay motionless, and Hayden watched as his blood pooled around her boots.

The man in the cart freed the rest of the prisoners as Hayden stood panting over the body of the officer. “Oh gods,” she muttered, then “Wynn!”

Hayden ran to Wynn’s side peeled back fabric to find the wound, but Wynn pushed Hayden away. “You’ve doomed our family, Hayden. How could you be so selfish?”

The realization that she and her sister had grown irreparably apart filled Hayden from the inside out, a look of disgust forcing itself onto her face. Wynn could never understand the compassion she had for the people suffering outside of the Enclave. Wynn did have one thing right, though: Hayden was now a murderer and a criminal according to the Enclave laws, and she would surely hang for what she did. And Wynn would hang beside her.

“Ya’ gonna help me with these ropes or ya’ jus’ gonna sit there lookin’ sorry fer yerself?” the man shouted from the back of the cart as he pulled the gag out of another prisoner’s mouth. Hayden climbed into the back of the cart and began cutting the bindings with the officer’s bloodied sword.

“Ya’ got a name, kid?” the man asked.

“Hayden. Stokes.”

“Name’s Lazarus Meacle. Call me Laz,” he responded, “We better get moving ’fore that cap’n notices his lieutenant’s missing.”

“We’ve got nowhere to go,” Hayden lamented.

“Good thing I’ve got a ship then, aye?”

Wynn looked up, surprised, “You’ve got a ship? How’d you end up in this if you’re a merchant?”

The older man laughed and jumped down from the cart. Now in the light, Hayden could finally get a good look at him. He wore a leather long-coat that parted at his belly and his trousers were held in place by a thick brown belt that had a loop for a saber. The blood from his gash ran down his face and was soaking into the cotton shirt he wore beneath the coat. “Ha! I’m no merchant, my lady. I’m a pirate, and half these boys’re on my crew!”

“A pirate?!” Wynn could barely contain her contempt, “You see Hayden, they *are* criminals! You’ve killed us all for a common thief!”

“Oh, now I’m no common thief, girl. Don’t go believin’ everythin’ yer government tells ya. We’re out rightin’ the wrongs those nobles o’ Laurel be doin’ to everyone else in Azuria.”

“How do we get out of here?” Hayden asked, interrupting the argument.

“Our ship’s east a’ here. Yer welcome t’ join us if ya’want.”

“I’m not going anywhere with these outlaws.” Wynn stood, turning to leave.

Hayden stepped toward her, “Wynn.” She stopped herself. The only way she could prevent any of them from being punished for this crime was to leave the Enclave and take the blame. Wynn would have to live with the stigma, but the blame would be placed on Hayden. She would never be able to return home or risk being caught and executed. She had no choice.

“Tell Mom I love her, Wynn,” Hayden said instead.

Wynn simply glared over her shoulder, then walked away in silence.

As Hayden, Meacle and the crew stepped out of the trees and into a clearing some five kilometers east of District 12, the ship stood before them like an iron castle. The hull had a dull grey finish, the entire length pockmarked with burns and dents. It was at least five decks tall with a dozen turreted guns on both sides and a pair of large batteries atop the bow and stern. Facing the small party, the bridge rose from the forward bow, with a plate of thick reflective glass separating it from the elements.

“The *Powdered Maiden*,” Meacle said. “She’s seen better days, but she manages jus’ fine.”

As the group approached the starboard bow, a hatch in the hull swung open and a man in Enclave uniform stepped out. Instinctively, Hayden turned to flee, but Meacle caught her by the arms. “Relax. That’s just our Cap’n,” he said.

The captain approached the group. His uniform had faded from

dark blue to a blue-grey. Golden braids bordered the epaulets, and large brass buttons ran down the front. His insignia had been ripped from the shoulder, but he still wore the ribbons of the various battles he'd fought. He held out his arms to embrace Meacle.

"Where have you been? I expected you back last night," he stated in a very formal tone, "And who might this be, Mr. Meacle?"

"We ran 'cross some trouble 'n ended up in a bit of a bind, but this young one grew a conscience 'n helped us out. We lost Airman Garry las' night, so we'll need a new helmsman."

The captain looked Hayden over carefully. His stern blue eyes unsettled her. His stare rested on her face, and, for a moment, she thought she saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

"My name is Captain Jim Keery, young lady. This is my ship. I see you're a cadet of the Academy," he said finally.

"Yes, sir. My name is Hayden Stokes; I'm a seventh-year Cadet preparing to graduate."

"I see. About to be promoted to lieutenant then?"

"Yes, sir." Hayden felt herself straightening to attention.

"How good are you with ionium reactor steam engine operations?"

"The best, sir."

Keery nodded. "Any good with a saber?"

Hayden opened her mouth to respond, but Meacle interrupted, "Ahhh you shoulda seen 'er, Cap'n! She took down a lieutenant like 'e was a pig swinging on a rope!" Hayden blushed and closed her mouth, simply nodding.

The captain continued, "Do you have experience with steering a ship?"

"No, sir," Hayden admitted.

Meacle chuckled, "Ha! At least she's honest, eh?"

"Well, we have no use for cadets onboard, Miss Stokes," Keery said, filling Hayden with disappointment. If she wasn't welcome here, she couldn't find a home anywhere. "Can you work with the rank of lieutenant?" he finished. Hayden looked up in astonishment and nodded with relief.

"First you'll need to learn the helm," the captain added as he turned toward the ship.

Keery led the group aboard, but Hayden lingered just outside. The hatch stood open and inviting, but she hesitated to step through it. Hayden thought of her mother but knew Wynn would always take care of her. Finally, Hayden thought of her father standing up for what he

knew was right and giving his life for it. A swell of conviction filled her.

Hayden turned and stepped into the hatch, then swung it closed behind her.

## Freedom

*Tim Mitchell*

On the long road of Route 66, where the blazing sun and the breeze mix  
When the clouds leave the open sky, happiness will cry

A moment to relive

Black gravel top and puddles of oil, years packed into the desert soil  
Not a single beat, not a single sound, the silence remains in all, profound

Peaceful,  
A moment to relive

Painting pictures on the canvas of the air, taking the world in perspective,  
if you dare  
Fulfilling the deepest potential of man, to push through the barriers, if  
you can

Creative,  
Peaceful,  
A moment to relive

Vast portions of natural land, innocent to the system's iron hand  
May your soul move you in any direction, as a brief reflection

Unbound,  
Creative,  
Peaceful,  
A moment to relive  
And the motor, soft in the distance, rumbles, the earth between the tire  
crumbles  
Heavy-set like a train, soaring on like a bird, hoping, breathing, relying on  
the word

Freedom,  
Unbound,  
Creative,  
Peaceful,

Freedom,  
A moment to relive

# Invisible Scars

*Megan Epperson*

Handprints on the body of a boy—fifteen years old

Ripples of finger grooves on all his ribs

Words thrown—slashing through

Blood pools upon the walls of his mind

Aching to pour from his veins—unseen wounds—a silent river stilled by  
frozen tears

Slices, burns, scrapes and cuts—a hot knife through flesh

Repeating, growing eagerness in licking flames of insults

Smoke inhalation—black lungs, no air—breathing the words through  
CPR

Burns, death?

His soul scorched—body still moving with muscle memory

We burnt him, we beat him—cutting him

No scrap shows, so our words won't cease

Words forever in his head—

Call them only words:

*faggot, bitch, whore, and more*

Scars are there—words dissecting willpower, confidence

Gashes fester with no treatment—actions labeled harmless—

No one may know what we did to him.

His life—BANG—his flesh shoveled off with a .22mm bullet

Only then, the scars will be ripped inside out

... shown.

## To Be a Logger

*Jake Tillet*

**T**here's my town. It's the one your GPS didn't know about. It's in Washington State, at least 20 miles away from the nearest Starbucks. There's no Wi-Fi and don't even bother trying to get cell service. It's rather nice, actually; nice and quiet. Things are more real out here. Our skyscrapers are called trees and we've got more grass than concrete. I've never been comfortable having it any other way.

I know it doesn't look like much, but back in the day this town was a pretty big deal. In the late 1800's, a man named William Carlisle founded it and gave it the name Onalaska. Its purpose was logging, but with it came much more. My town is filled with a rich history that no one knows or cares about these days. Onalaska has become nothing more than an unfortunate pit-stop on the way too bigger and supposedly better things. People are so focused on leaving that they never stop to look around. Rather than complaining, why don't people strive to make the town better? That's the question I asked, and because of it, I was ostracized. I became an outcast, a lone voice in a land of the deaf.

The only trace of the town's past is in its mascot: the appropriately named loggers. My family has been here since Carlisle and they've been nothing but loggers. I always felt that if anybody knew Onalaska, it was me. Of course, that doesn't mean much to people who don't care about heritage. I didn't have the right last name, so no one listened.

There was one person who listened, though. His name was Bill Huizinga, my high school principal. "It's a great day to be a logger," he'd always say. It was a reminder to stay strong even when the sun didn't shine. He ran the school like John Wayne and looked like Spencer Tracy. With him around, I wasn't alone in my ideals. I wasn't crazy. I had purpose, but cancer doesn't care about such things. It was a Friday when we found out and by Sunday he was gone. Just like that, everything changed.

For the next year or so, we had a substitute principal while the district looked for a permanent replacement. In our time of uncertainty, the last thing we needed was a lame duck. Unfortunately, that's exactly what we got. Whether people had cared about the town before or not made no difference, because now they were given no reason to.

My ideals were standing on unstable ground, but no matter what, every Friday I wore our school colors: purple and gold. It was a tradition



introduced by Mr. Huizinga to promote pride and unity. I'd look around on Fridays and I'd see blue, red, and green. There was no purple. There was no gold. Those colors were somehow stripped from the school's palette. I wore my faded purple flannel every Friday for three years, but my record was tainted by one day. The day I forgot. It was a normal day, which meant I walked out the door with a lingering feeling that I'd forgotten something. Of course, this time that feeling was justified. I got on the bus at 7:46 am and I sat, alone, in seat 23. Everything was as it should've been. My mind wandered, and my eyes drifted as I silently sat there gazing out the window. I caught a glimpse of my reflection and slowly, I looked down: blue, not purple. I spent that day avoiding eye contact and sweating profusely. I was ashamed. How could I have been so negligent? I was making a stand. How the hell was I supposed to do that in blue? What were people going to think? I had completely let them down. Their response was worse than I could have ever imagined. Their response was silence. I had committed a major travesty, and the only ones that noticed were the ones I told. I was already on the precipice of insanity and this did not help. Not only did I fail, but no one cared because they had no desire to. It was such a trivial thing, but someone had to believe it meant something.

I needed to do something that would get everyone's attention. I needed to be more than just Jake. What Onalaska needed was a Superman, but they would have to settle for me. I went about creating a uniform the likes of which would make any superhero jealous. I spray painted my grandpa's old hard hat and I built a wooden ax (given that I couldn't bring a real one to school without getting the wrong kind of attention). I found some old boots and I made a duct tape mask to conceal my true identity. My mild-mannered days were over. I became "The Logger", a physical manifestation of the spirit of Onalaska. I admit it sounds rather silly, but I needed attention, and this was the only thing my superhero orientated mind could muster. I thought if I could make myself more than just the sum of my scrawny limbs, then somehow, I could do anything.

It was the Friday of Spirit Week and I had it all planned out. My debut would be at the Homecoming game that night. Everyone would be there. Everyone would see. Wait, *everyone* would see. Was that really a good idea? I'd never been a stranger to standing out. My stubborn idealism had seen to that, but this was different. This time, I was wearing a duct tape mask. I even had pom-pom hair attached to the underside of my hard hat. The only thing missing was a cape, and trust me, it had crossed my mind.

At home Mom asked as she always does, “You gonna eat something before the game?”

I heard her, but somehow I didn’t respond. My mind was elsewhere. Mom noticed. Dad did too.

“I look ridiculous, don’t I?” I asked in earnest.

“A little, but isn’t that part of the point? To get noticed?” Mom replied.

“I guess.”

“Y’know, if your granddad was still around, I think he’d get a real kick out of what you’re doing,” Dad chimed in.

Grandpa was a true logger. He loved and respected the land. He fought for his beliefs and was certainly not afraid of giving his opinion. He died before I really got to know him. If anyone could understand me, I’d like to think it would be him.

I tied a black ribbon around my arm to remind me of why I was doing this. It was for William Carlisle; for my grandpa, Jim Wilson; for Mr. Huizinga. I was doing this for a way of life that was slipping away. I was doing it for the love of trees, grass, and dirt. I did it for all the unmeasurable ideals men and women have died for over the years. I did it because I couldn’t sit back and do nothing. Needless to say, I took this pretty seriously.

I arrived at the stadium. It wasn’t much, but every couple of years we slapped on a new coat of yellow paint. This rickety shelter was my Colosseum. I led the pep band through the front gates like a soldier storming the beaches of Normandy. The crowd erupted. This was my moment, the moment when everything I did started to mean something. Everything that came next was just gravy. People began wearing their purple and gold. They even began wearing hardhats like mine. I had done it. I was bringing pride back. All I had to do was completely humiliate myself. I was more or less the court jester of every game. I was loud and proud, but never rude or obnoxious. I was making the point that you could be proud without being a jerk. “A touch of class” was the phrase they had when my mom went to school here and it was an idea I tried to continue. I cheered for Onalaska, but that didn’t mean I booed the other side. If I had my way, there’d be somebody from their town just as crazy as I was. I thought people should be proud of where they came from no matter where that was. I’d run into people from other towns that would stop me in Wal-Mart.

“You’re that logger-dude aren’t you? From Onalaska?” they’d say.

“So, I’ve been told,” I’d say with a brimming smile.

“I just love what you’re doing,” they’d reply. “It reminds me of how

things were when I was in school. Back when we had pride in what we did.”

Now that I had gotten their attention, I could tone things down a bit. No longer did I need the pom-pom hair or duct tape mask. They had served their purpose, but now, it was time to get serious. I had studied Onalaska’s history and would share it with anyone who would listen. I wrote and spoke in support of the conservation of our local landmarks. I made short films promoting pride and heritage. On Fridays, while in uniform, I’d visit grade school classes. I’d pass out candy and tell them stories of our town with my own super heroic flare. I dedicated my entire being to an idea. I wasn’t the mascot. Anyone could run around like an idiot, hiding behind a giant mask. I was a symbol: the personification of an idea.

Things couldn’t have been better. People that had made fun of me in middle school were now forced to cheer me on unless they themselves wanted to be made fun of. I had changed the school for the better and to many people’s disbelief, I even got a girlfriend. What’s the phrase? It’s always clearest before the storm. Honestly, that sounds far too optimistic. That storm came down like hellfire on a hot summer day.

The school district found a permanent principal. He promoted pride, so I figured he couldn’t be too bad. In fact, this could’ve been the best thing since *Star Wars*. Unfortunately, this was not the case. He was that popular guy in high school that your parents told you not to worry about because he’d probably grow up when he got into the real world. Well, he didn’t, and now he was in a position of power. Pride was no longer the right thing to do. It was the cool thing to do. Every single person I had stood against was now being venerated by our new Führer.

I was pushed aside. Thanks for what you’ve done, but we the people of Onalaska have decided to ruin everything instead. Kyle, my mortal enemy, was now the ideal. He was what most people think of as a redneck: a loud-mouthed womanizing racist. Sure, he wore suspenders and, like me, got a beard early, but he knew nothing of what it meant to be a logger. No matter what I did, people still flocked to him. Eventually, the Führer began putting restrictions on what I could do as “The Logger.” Banning me from cheering at games was only the beginning. My “Logger” identity was next. The Führer claimed I had no right representing the school. I was not sanctioned and therefore needed to back off. I didn’t have the right? What right did he have? He led with selfishness, not caring about Onalaska as I did. He undermined everything I stood for, all the while claiming it was his right. Kyle became the figurehead for his campaign

to drive me out. The two of them were cut from the same silage. Kyle, a willing puppet, and his fellow brigands were given more and more freedoms.

It was senior year. I was still Logger, but all I was doing was beating my head against the proverbial wall. High school was coming to an end. On top of everything, my girlfriend ended up being a total psycho and was now dating my best friend. I was suffering from the hotdog of emotions: complete and utter frustration. I hated how they were bastardizing my ideas, but I couldn't give up. It wasn't in me to buckle under. I finally knew how Gary Cooper felt in *High Noon*. Cooper plays Will Kane, a marshal trying to do the right thing. A villain, Frank Miller, is coming on the noon train and Kane asks the townsfolk to stand by him and fight for their town. They turn him down, urging him to leave and save himself. They believe Miller won't be a problem if nobody puts up a fight. Kyle was Miller. It was easier to side with him. I was just a crazy idealist. By siding with me, they were siding against three quarters of the student body, several teachers, and the principal. In a small town like Onalaska the school *is* the town. Their poisoned pride saturated and I was left in the dust of their blasphemy.

I'm in college now, but Onalaska still weighs heavy on my mind. I try to keep up with the local news. My parents tell me I shouldn't, because it only makes me feel worse. Here are some of the sordid highlights. Last year the middle school was rated one of the worst in the state. They were told they either needed to replace all their staff or shut down. A superintendent who had been responsible for another town's demise was now at Onalaska. Many of the "right name" families have moved away like rats jumping ship. These families had been there for decades. Onalaska was all they knew and all they ever wanted to know. We never saw eye to eye, but it's sad to see that even they've given up. Things are getting worse, but that's not the scary part. The county has been hard on my town since its creation. Onalaska has yet to become incorporated. It enjoys the freedom, but the county doesn't. They would like nothing more than to see the town fold. They would disperse students to the surrounding towns, and Onalaska would become nothing more than a memory. This is the one thing that truly frightens me, and it is on the slippery slope to reality. Part of me is glad. They don't deserve Onalaska.

As bitter as I've become, one memory gives me hope. It was at basketball districts. We were far enough from Onalaska to find that Starbucks. I was in my Logger get-up, as usual (honestly, that's not much different than how I normally dress). I was lying on a bench outside

the court across from the heavenly aroma of concessions. The storm of squeaky shoes bellowed through cathedral-esque hallways as the teams warmed up. I closed my eyes in hopes to escape the chaos, if only for a moment. That moment came to an end when I felt eyes. Cautiously, I opened mine. I was surrounded by about seven young kids, all wide-eyed and curious.

“Excuse me, mister. You’re The Logger aren’t you?” they asked.

This far from Onalaska and they know of me? This can’t be happening. It’s just far too awesome.

“Maybe,” I respond casually.

“You do all the cool swingy stuff with your ax. You’re like a superhero.”

Where’d these kids come from and where have they been all my life? They think I’m a superhero!

“Can I play with your ax?” one of them asks.

“Fraid not. See, this ax is made of a special wood that weighs 14 bajillion pounds. I’m the only one that can carry it.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Uh-huh.”

I’m standing by this point. I look at the clock. The game is about to start.

“Well, looks like I’m needed on the court. It was nice meeting y’all though.”

“Swing your ax. Just once. Pleeeaaasse.”

“I really got to go. I’m sorry.”

Their dejected faces melted my shrinking heart. Truth be told, the only reason I said no was because I didn’t want to accidentally hit one of them. I walked away, feeling like *Shane*. Just as I was about to round the corner, I stopped. I tightened my grip on the wooden ax and I swung, engulfing myself in the flurry of its golden blade. I never turned around. I didn’t need to. I could hear their smiles.

Every time I wear my flannel I’m reminded of where I come from. I’m reminded of my failure and am driven never to repeat it. It weighs heavy on my shoulders, but it’s a burden I am content to carry. I’ll keep a flicker of hope lit, longing for a time that it’ll once again be a great day to be a logger, but until then, I’m just a skinny guy who thinks he’s John Wayne.

## Obstinance

*Kasey Eickmeyer*

Every creak of your bones, every joint's mellow grind is enough for me. I could close my eyes and drift like the sands of my youth, the wind shaping my landscape into something so backward, a mirror of what it was. The particles in my eyes swim, muddling my vision, making my mind splinter.

I peel back the skin surrounding the splinter lodged upright in my palm, waiting for the grind of keratin on wood. All we'd wanted was to swim, to push off the dock into the deep quiet, to drift along in a rush of skin and sweet nothing. I mirror your body, run my hands across the curves of your landscape.

We trudge and tremble through the unfamiliar landscape of city and noise. We are far too used to the splinter of wood in our homes to enjoy these repeating mirror images of concrete, these tributes to the daily grind. Our simple life is full, but quiet. We can let go and drift and shift, exist completely without having to swim

along with the rush of their current. We can swim freely, diving deep down, around familiar landscape or not so familiar at all. Our comfort is a snow drift on the side of the highway. We burrow and splinter each others bones, sucking marrow, our molars grind and I hang our scarves by the mirror.

I look for you inside the mirror,  
look for the two eyes like mine that swim  
with the lust after life's sweetness, echoing the deafening grind  
of the lopsided cog of my mind. If the landscape  
changes, grows ridges and valleys, if the trunks start to splinter  
and bubble with their sap, will we still drift?



**Perfect Summer.** *John-Paul Mann.*



**Program Leader.** *Hillary Matson-Pelley.*





**Life.** *Federico Sarria.*



**Homeless in Prague.** *Jennifer Lund.*



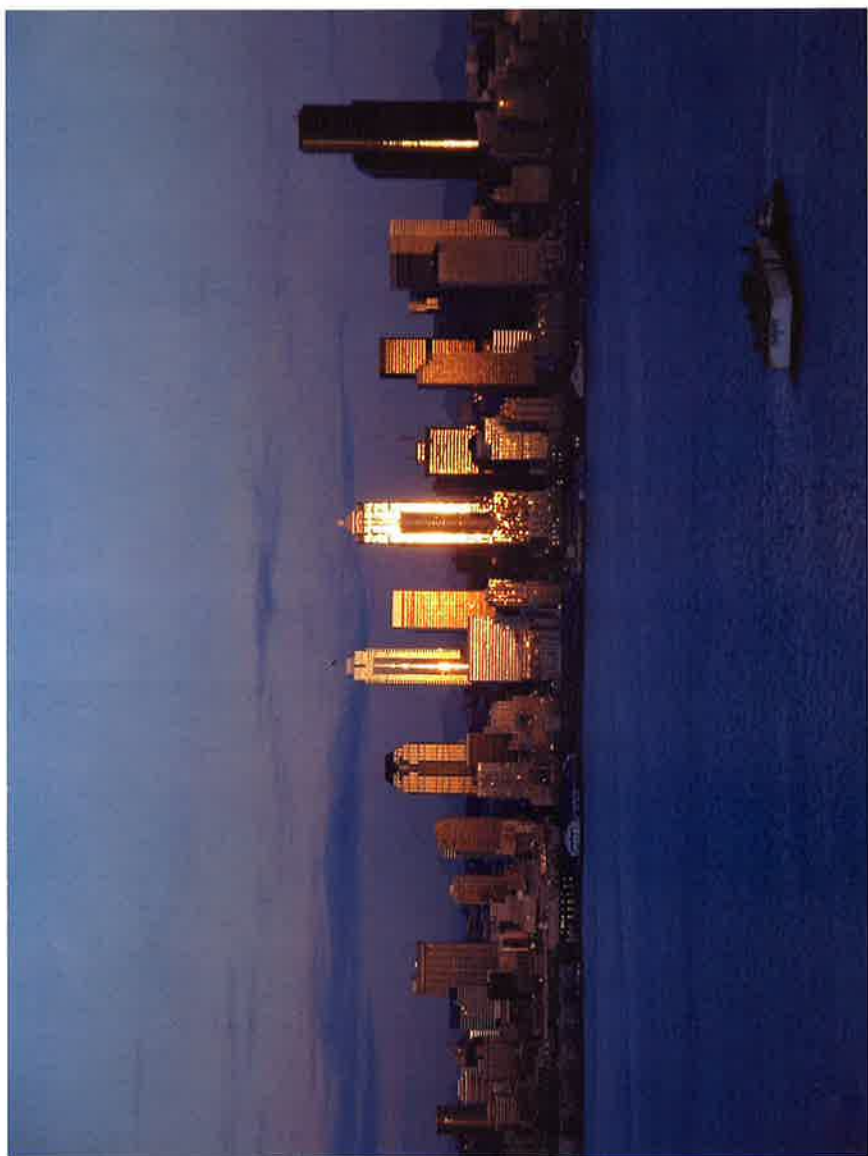
**No Trespassing.** *Angelica Orta.*



**Forever Trapped.** *John-Paul Mann.*



**Eyes of Prey.** *Federico Sarria.*



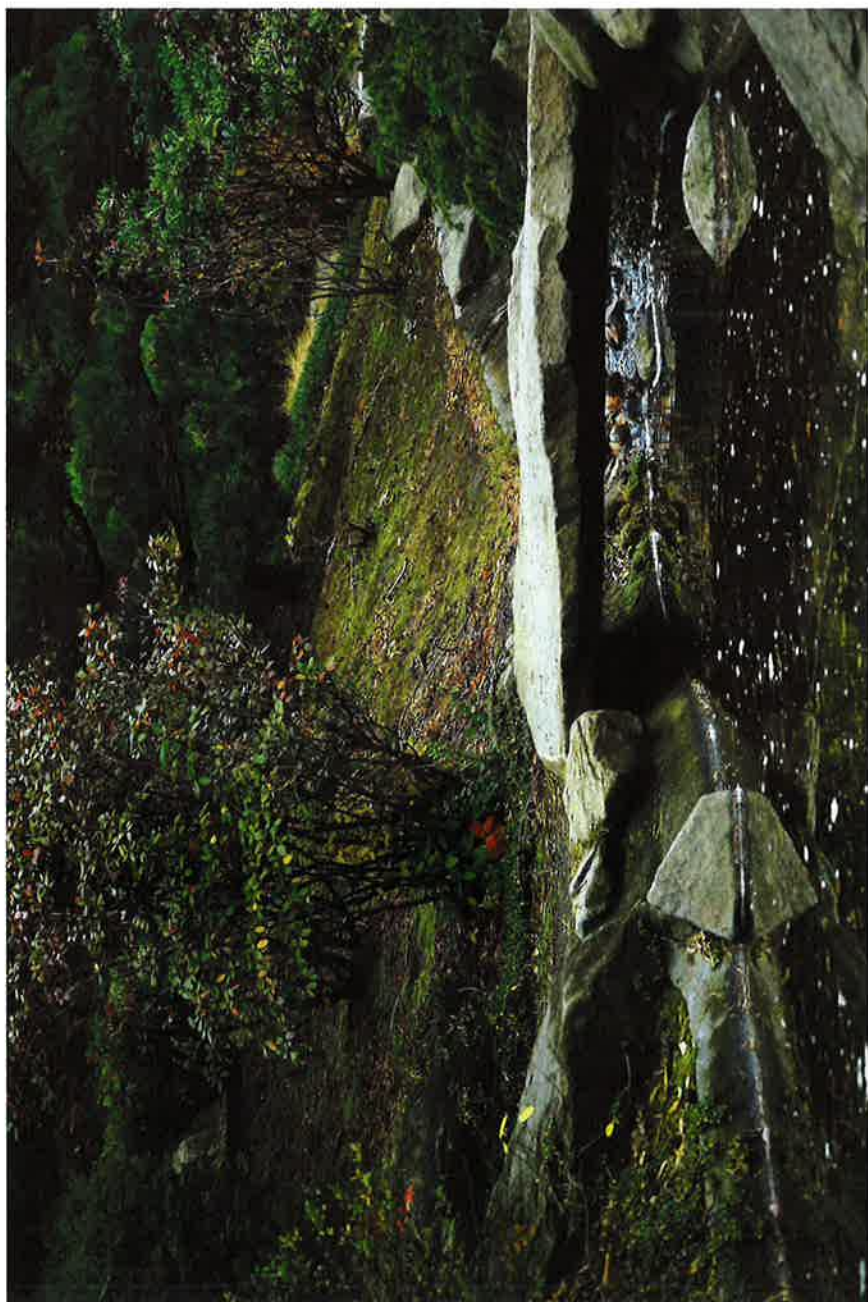
**Seattle in Gold.** *Daniel Smelser.*



**Autumn.** *Alexander Sylvester.*



**Prague Castle.** *Jennifer Lund.*



**The Garden.** *Alexander Sylvester.*

If it gets deep down inside of us, will we still drift?  
or will we unscrew from our casing, shatter the mirror  
cringe and yelp with the cooling, scratch 'till our nails splinter  
at the quick? Buck and contort 'til our visions swim?  
Or will we find solace, for the first time, in a changed landscape?  
Rest our heads on the breast of the concrete Mother Grind?

Grind us, Mother, and we will drift.  
Landscape us, shave the dying and browning limbs, crack our mirror,  
swim in our veins and tickle our tongues 'til our teeth splinter.

## The Sun Went Down on the Bad Things

*Alexander Hughes*

And we took to the night  
like pale gangsters in well-worn shoes  
lacking only moustaches,  
swung downhill  
toward silver waters  
and shoo-shoo-sugartown beyond,

rolled across the lazy troll's  
front lawn  
in sleek shined vintage souls,  
floated through the breaks  
in the cars  
past the traffic chatter  
to a sushi sakè shakedown,  
and scandalized the bronze clown  
with his face on a patchwork limousine  
homecoming-bound  
beside the big rusted ugly,

(And I'm curled in your pocket  
confessing my sins  
to the curve and swell of your hips  
and you're tucked in my hat  
like a Polaroid of a good dream)

and the copper-colored sky  
lowered its blanket  
over our miles of tiny blue crimes,  
and the sun went down  
on the Bad Things—  
if only for a time.



## Nothing Wrong

*Citrina Truver*

**I**t was Mother's day when we found out. The date will be burned into my memory forever. Sunday, May 14, 2006. I wasn't at home, singing praises to my mother like other girls. I was at a friend's house, working on a school project, blissfully unaware. Girls across the city Hoand even across the nation were making their mothers breakfast in bed: runny eggs, burnt pancakes, or soggy cereal with spilled juice and coffee that was either too strong or too watery. Other mothers were receiving gifts made by their children: handmade pottery, painted with an unsteady hand or a piece of jewelry that she may not ever wear. They received cards made in school claiming "I love you!" or "I don't know what I would do without you!" and "you're the BEST mom in the WORLD!!"

I was not doing any of those things. I was on the floor at my friend's house gluing blocks of text to a poster board, using utmost care to get it arranged just so. Making our poster look good was important to me, even though our project was kind of a sham. I did not think about my mom that morning. That wasn't unusual for me; I hadn't seen my mom in months and wasn't expecting to be able to see her for a few more months. I was used to it. That's all. It tends to happen when a parent is deemed unfit and a danger to herself and possibly others.

The last time I saw her, she was in her first mental hospital, wearing the dull grey scrub-looking shirt and pants that marked her: suicidal. It was such a difference from how she normally dressed: in bright tie-dyed t-shirts and sweat pants. Gray just didn't look natural on her. Aside from her clothes and surroundings, my mom looked exactly like I'd always seen her: Her long brown hair, streaked with gray, hanging down, the front portion pulled back and to the side in a little hair tie- no makeup, no jewelry. Her room was small: just a bed, a closet, and a window. The one florescent light in the room lit the walls in a sickly green color. It was undecorated. There were no pictures anywhere around the room to remind her of her daughters. It was a room that a person wouldn't be able to live in for a long time. It was lonely.

As a thirteen-year-old girl, I didn't see my mom as a depressed, suicidal woman. I saw her as my mother. Nothing special. Just my mom, dressed in depressing gray clothes. Even so, my visit was tainted with the knowledge that I was in a mental hospital. I couldn't keep it from my mind: the idea that everyone who said "hi" to me was probably psychotic, possibly dangerous. I was uncomfortable to say the least, and even

though I loved my mother, I wanted out. I was scared of that building and everyone in it, aside from my mother. I didn't think she belonged there.

On that Mother's Day, I knew I wouldn't see her, so I didn't think about her. We finished up our project and I was taken home, unaware that bad news was waiting for me to open the door. Unaware that I would never see my mom again. When I walked in the door, my dad met me in the entry way. Not the best place to reveal bad news, but that's how my dad does things. He has no tact.

"Your mom died this morning," he said. That was all I got. No explanation, no details, nothing. He hugged me, trying to console me; I stood stiff in his arms. I didn't want comfort from him. I didn't speak to him. I just went upstairs to my room after he relinquished his hold. My sister was in my room, playing computer games. I sat on the floor, leaning against my dresser. Letting it sink in. We didn't talk about it. She continued with her game. That's how we were. We can't talk about the important things.

The next day at school, I didn't want my friends to know anything was wrong. I didn't want to see their faces filled with pity directed at me. I didn't want to hear their sympathies. Frankly, I was embarrassed. Just thinking about them finding out made me want to crawl into a corner and hide from the world. All my friend's moms were nice, stable, alive. How could I tell them? How could I say it?

"My mom killed herself yesterday." I couldn't. I couldn't say it.

So, I plastered my old self on top of my new, motherless self and went through the week. My change went unnoticed. I sat in the lunch room, surrounded by my friends, talking and laughing like normal. Somewhere in the city, my mother's body was burning; flames were eating her brown hair that was streaked with gray. The ashes were being packed unceremoniously into a box while I ate my carrots.

On Friday, I did not go to school. I did not sit at the round lunch table at the back of the cafeteria with my friends. I did not talk, and I did not laugh. Maybe this was how my friends figured out that something was wrong with me. I never missed school. Even the teachers didn't know why I was out for the day. I told my track coach that I had to go to a funeral. That's as close as anyone got to the truth: I had to go to a funeral. No one had to know that it was my mother's. That was private.

While my friends were at school, I was sitting in a brightly lit, rectangular room. In one corner there was a table with pictures of her and flowers. Against the opposite wall, there was a table laid with refreshments. Between these two ends, four or five round tables were

scattered. I sat at one of these. I did not stand up. I did not speak, even when spoken to. I had my hair down and hanging in my face. I would have rather been at school. I was surrounded by people who milled about, talking to each other in funeral voices. Every once in a while, someone would come up to me and offer their condolences, voice their sorrows. I hated it.

Everyone was wearing a tie-dyed shirt, because that's what she liked. In fact, she made the shirts that everyone was wearing. They said it was more respectful than traditional funeral attire. But respect didn't keep them from playing generic classical music throughout the time we were there. She didn't like classical. She liked rock and metal. It seemed like hours I sat there in the white plastic chair at the round table covered in a white table cloth, looking down at my lap with a scowl on my face.

Anger clawed at my insides like fire, waiting to lash out at the mourners. I didn't want their sorrow, their sympathies, their "I'm sorry for your loss" or their "it's not real to you yet". I hated them for it. It was real to me. I understood the implications of death. And it would hit me again, and again, and again over the years. I found out there is no replacement for a mother's hug. At every achievement, every failure. I would understand again: you can't see her, never again. She's dead. And I would wonder "am I doing alright? Would you be proud?" Yes. I understood death.

When I went back to school after the weekend, nobody said anything. Nobody knew. My disguise was still in place, and no one noticed. Nothing was wrong. Nothing's ever wrong with me. A few weeks later I felt like I was going through school on auto-pilot. Drifting from class to class, not really paying attention to anything. Not really caring, as long as no one found out my secret.

"Why didn't you tell us your mom died?" one of my friends asked at the lunch table, where everyone could hear "you could have told us."

The world stopped for a second. My carefully developed façade shattered into a million pieces. They knew. They all knew. I didn't answer her. I couldn't. How did they find out?

"It's alright. We're here for you. That's what friends are for."

I was embarrassed. I wanted to escape. My friends offered their sympathies exactly like I didn't want them to. I built my façade back up. Nothing's wrong. Nothing's ever wrong. Eventually, like all lies—when told enough times—I started to believe it myself. I was fine. I was over it. But I still couldn't say it.

"My mom killed herself."

That phrase only existed in my vocabulary mentally. If people asked, as they sometimes will when you only talk about your dad, I answered truthfully . . . well truthful enough.

“She died.”

That phrase was usually enough to put a person off further questioning. At least, after they offered condolences, which I accepted with grace, while hating the words they spoke. And we could get back to a normal conversation. Every once in a while I got a courageous questioner who went further: “Oh I’m so sorry. How did she die?” Eventually, I could answer that question as well.

“She killed herself.”

Luckily, no one went that far until I was okay at saying the truth. I was still acutely embarrassed whenever I answered, but at least I didn’t have to come up with a lie on the spot. After a couple of times telling people the truth, I realized that once you drop suicide into the conversation, even if they were the ones who asked, people get uncomfortable. They don’t know what to say. They look down and mumble apologies before they shut up entirely. I’m not very talkative in the first place, so the conversation usually ended there in quiet discomfort for all parties involved.

When I got to high school, I had different friends. I just grew apart from a lot of my middle school friends. It happens. None of my new friends knew about my mom. A few of them asked right away, and I told them the truth. Eventually, I was even able to have a candid conversation about it without getting embarrassed. It was my senior year before I realized that the lie had become the truth. I really was okay with it.

I was sitting next to my friend on the bus ride back to school from a field trip. I had been talking about my mom in a vague she’s-not-here kind of way with some of my other friends during the trip. Most of my friends knew about my mom at that point, they all got the courage to ask about it eventually. This girl must have been wondering about it for quite some time and finally decided to ask.

“What happened to your mom?”

I can’t say I was surprised at this question. Everyone asks eventually. “Oh, she killed herself,” I answered calmly and candidly. I wasn’t embarrassed about it anymore.

Her reply was one of a kind: “You’re lying!”

I have to admit that I was thoroughly confused by this reaction. I didn’t answer her, just raised one brow and turned my head a bit to the right.

“You’re serious?!”

“Why on earth would I lie about that?”

“I don’t know!”

I was calm but she seemed frantic. I can only guess she was trying not to offend me. And I laughed. I laughed. That was all I could do. The situation was absolutely ridiculous to me. I’d never had anyone, before or since, not believe me. Maybe she didn’t believe me because I was so calm about it. I’ll never be sure.

“I’m okay with it. It was a long time ago,” I smiled at her. Nothing was wrong. And finally—finally—that was the truth.

## The Cruel Language

*Stefan Milne*

*Sometimes I have a speech impediment, which is—it's a hard word to say if you have one.*

*Zach Galifinakis*

The body, often,  
is a skittering,  
jittering mess,

subject not  
only to the conditions  
of conditions,

but also to scarlet  
fevered projections  
of the mind.

Some days  
my dictionary  
is all daggers,

not just the motherfuckers  
and cocksuckers,  
the vitriol and spleen,

but even the shiv  
lisp sticks  
lispers with:

in a better world,  
a better word,  
we say lithp.

The names of things  
sing their nature,  
their often ugly

consequence: concussion's  
cracked whip, laceration's  
slick slice, bloodclot's

clotted clatter. Words  
mar bodies. We can  
hear light glint

on their surgical  
tools, and even  
the tool's cut

is called  
hypochondria.  
So read symptoms

lists and feel  
symptoms swell  
in your every fibered

limb. Sticks's  
sticks and stones's  
stones.

Know your heart's  
heat is called  
heartburn, and once

you've swallowed  
its syllables  
your stomach's

embittered embers  
will roil  
and radiate

and rise until  
you speak in tongues  
of flame.

## Raw Nerve

*Katy Rutland*

I'm not where I am. It's too bright, too white. White walls. White floor. White ceiling. Whiteboards. Where I am is black and spinning, where lights flicker. Streetlights with bulbs going bad over musty alleys. A light-switch half-way between on and off in a humid room.

Someone sits next to me, a shadow of color against the white. I stare at her—yes, her—she is familiar. Her name?

"Katy," the familiar-unfamiliar person says, muddled voice dragging my eyes to hers. Katy. Her name or mine? Remembering is hard, but it's all I can do. I can't breathe. Knees cling tight to my chest while I try to disappear. "What's going on?" Her words are distant, vibrating through water or glass.

"S-scared," A voice. Not mine. Couldn't be mine. I don't stutter. I do when crying. Was I crying?

"Of?"

"D-d-don't know," Again the voice. It could be mine. My throat hurts, and the voice sounds pained. I stare at the familiar face— her blue eyes—hoping she has the answer.

Instead, her hand touches my knee. Gently pushes down.

I push away, slapping her hand, my legs recoiling. The wall meets my back, my head. The white vanishes, replaced by more spinning and dark green eyes. Christine's eyes. She reaches for me, caresses my thigh.

No. No, not Christine. It's not. Different person. I can't hit her. I know her. I do! My hands clench nothing. My foot slaps the floor, pushing my back into the unforgiving wall. The white reappears in a flash after my head smacks brick. Familiar blue eyes stare at me. I bury my face in my arms. Maybe if I wait, I'll look up and the world will make sense again.

You did this to me. In the span of two months you changed from stranger to friend to confidant. For the next two years you became my nightmare. You tried to control me and succeeded, taking advantage of my naivety and deciding everything from what I would have for dinner to where I'd go over the weekend. I hid you from my parents, brothers, and friends at your request, but that was only one reason. I was afraid they would shun me, and I would be left with only you.

The air in the room vanishes, and my head swims. Muffled sounds barely register over the heartbeat drumming my ears. Even that sounds



distant, no longer a part of me, dampened by a voice only I can hear. My hands tingle and twitch, pushing against something soft. Whatever is there shifts, a pale shadow slowly gaining form. What is it? Pressure on my neck reminds me to run, but the voice begs me to stay. I only know I have to get away, remove the threat, get to safety.

April stares at me. The small group of girls stares at me. Their eyes widen as the world slowly puts itself together.

My fists quickly flatten, pushing hard against April's stomach before ducking away from her hand on my neck. I can't hit her. I know her. Brown eyes, not green.

When I look up, several feet separate me from the group, and I'm drawing stares. The other girls laugh nervously, watching me with wary eyes and unsure smiles. I bring my fists down, shake my head, square my feet, try to loosen the tension twisting my shoulders and back.

"Note to self," April says into the awkward laughter while she adjusts her cardigan and glasses. "Don't touch Katy's neck."

I made excuses for you, dodged questions, lied. When you said you loved me and I said it back I felt nothing but a cold chill in my stomach and chest. You might have seen it in my eyes, a clichéd lack of spark or emotion. If you did, you didn't let on. You kept on as if nothing had changed, begging me to come home with you, using my good will so you would have someone to lie next to when your family couldn't stand you. Did you invent your "daddy issues?" Were those even real? Looking at it now, I wouldn't be surprised if they hated you as you claimed. Maybe your family saw what it took me two years to see.

The door is locked, right? It has to be. If not, she would just walk in. She has before. That can't happen now. Not tonight. Not ever. The text on my phone stirs my chest, twisting springs in my ribs to lock my lungs. "I'm coming over," the letters say at 4:17 p.m. I check the door again, unlocking and relocking the deadbolt and double-checking the chain. A quick twist and blinds block the white glare of snow outside.

Snow crunches outside.

My heart forgets to beat, constricting behind my ribs. The counter steadies me, and my feet keep walking, stumbling around the couch. The wall greets my shoulder, making my heart skip again. My throat vibrates, but I can't hear. The bathroom light-switch twitches under my hand, refusing to flip all the way on. The shower cooperates, and steam fogs the mirror, hiding my reflection.

“Katy, are you there?” Light knocking follows the words. I duck by the sink, sucking hot air in rapid gasps. My throat stays loose thanks to the warmth. Easier to breathe that way.

“Please talk to me, Katy.” Christine talks through the door. I cover my ears, hiding my face in my knees. The shower’s rain muffles other sounds, and soon I can’t hear Christine at all.

I should have figured it out earlier. But you brushed my questions and protests away, saying they were insignificant or pulling me close for a kiss or caress. You’d just gotten into a fight with your sister, or you were thinking about finally making contact with your birth mother. There was always some reason for me to stay. And when you kissed me that first time, did you think I was asleep? Yes, I pretended, hoping it was my imagination and not your twisted idea of friendship. And the next time, during a movie, you played it off. “Friends can kiss, it’s okay,” you tried to reassure me. I should have listened to my gut and run. But you were my only friend then, and you asked me to stay.

My phone vibrates. The sink counter bites into the back of my head. The brief moment of clarity lets me read, but the words destroy the short peace.

“Just remember that I love you.”

No. No, no, no! That’s not true! She can’t! Not after two years of manipulating my life, my words, my thoughts. My cheek stings, and blood tastes salty on my tongue. Nails dig into my scalp, pulling my head down, making me smaller. Easier to hide. My throat closes, trapping humid air in my lungs while my heart runs a marathon through my chest. Salty tears mix with the taste of blood. My chest heaves, trying to sob or breathe or scream, anything to release the pressure, but my neck refuses to let anything out. Despite closed eyes, I still see Christine’s face, feel her hands caress my skin, trying to arouse something I can’t understand. She forces my lips to part with hers, and I would have screamed had my body not been so intent to explore this new pleasure.

Long after the shower runs cold and the steam dissipates, I crawl out of the bathroom. The counter helps me to stand on shaking legs, and the clock informs me it’s 9:34. I check the deadbolt one more time.

Still locked.

When you moved out, I celebrated, helped you pack, settle in. I thought that finally you would stop sharing my bed, stop cornering me at night or just out of the shower, that you would find someone else to

occupy your time. When you stopped coming over to have the same conversation we'd had a dozen times, I counted it a small victory. You know what I found after you left? I found a label. "Victim." No, not you, though you played that card many times. You used it for sympathy, reminding me of your "troubles." You used me until I figured out that panic should not accompany arousal.

I stare at the ceiling, gripping the sides of my bed and hoping not to fall off. Dizzy, disoriented. Another moment to remember where I am as the nightmare blends with my reality. Christine pulling me close, whispering in my ear, her hand slipping beneath my cami. I blink, try to catch my breath. Eventually my bed stops spinning.

You're alone. The necessary reminder. Without it, it's possible to forget, to think she's right beside me, her hands exploring my stomach or neck. Heart trying to pound its way into my throat, I look right. Pillows and blanket. Left. An alarm clock blinking time. The ever-annoying floodlight peeking through my window blinds. Forcing my hands to release the sheets before pressing them flat on the cool mattress. One deep breath. Two.

Sitting up hurts. I grab my chest to keep my heart from falling out.

Staring at my quilt and listening intently to the soft lilt of Celtic fiddles buzzing through the radio grounds me. The alarm clock blinks a date, reminding me of the six months to pass since I last talked to Christine, of the nine months since she last touched me. I know that if I look at my arms or legs or reflection, long-faded bruises in the shapes of fingers would shadow my skin.

I roll over and ignore the floodlight outside, the tightness in my chest, the stirring between my legs. I flip my pillow damp-side down once before the sun turns the floodlight off and ruins any chance for sleep.

You can't hurt me now. You might come back with this excuse or that reason, trying to see me, trying to "reconcile," but your words won't back me into a corner this time. You were always so good at that, weakening my defenses with carefully chosen words and expertly timed touches, trapping me in my own head and body. You seemed bigger then. Not anymore. The secret is out. So even if I panic, even if I run, at least you won't see.

Sometimes I wish there were scars, visible, declaring that yes, I have a reason for feeling broken. Scars are more believable, but sometimes

I'm glad that only phantom bruises remain. I can pretend to be whole then, put on a smile and laugh so others believe the façade. Even my close friends are deceived. And if I ever find relief, rest, scars would only remind me, and I do too much remembering.

Bruises eventually fade. Do memories?

## **It's Tough to See Venice from a Cartwheeling Bus**

*Alexander Hughes*

The weathermen called for a mild dusting,  
and I'm writing a poem,  
trying to write a poem,  
thinking about writing a poem,

but twenty minutes after our bus is due,  
the night turns against us like the hand of an angry god,  
a squall of whistling white bullets  
exploding across creation,  
sucking the last lingering warmth  
violently from the earth,  
boiling us all instantly frozen  
at the bus shelter that suddenly isn't,

a mad sudden yelping scrambling for cover,  
behind garbage cans and thin divider walls  
and each other,  
our world shrunk to a shaken snow globe,  
claustrophobic and sickly-lit  
in the flickering sodium lights,  
two dozen strangers huddled together,  
shivering, shaking, shaking hands,  
sharing coats and hats,  
wary but weary,  
and everyone agrees,  
it never gets like this in Seattle,  
there must be some mistake,

but an hour after our bus is due,  
a different bus pulls in like a holocaust survivor  
and jack-knives elegantly into a fence,  
the driver pours himself out into the cold,  
borrows a cell phone to call in his immediate resignation,  
and as the temperature nears zero-degrees Kelvin,  
the absolute freezing point of all subatomic matter,

I'm passing out cigarettes like a Red Cross man  
in World War I,  
to Charlie with his great electrocuted silver bird nest beard flowing down  
over his belly,  
to the cauldron-shaped woman with rhinoceros legs  
in her Eleanor Roosevelt hat,  
whose body I use surreptitiously and unsuccessfully  
as a wind-break,

and to all the others,  
though by now some of us have simply swirled away  
into the violent white,  
and while rumors circulate of a yeti out in the dark  
picking off stragglers,

I'm trying to write a poem,  
a poem about Venice,  
a poem about a picture about Venice,  
but there is nothing Mediterranean  
about this smothering ice tomb silence  
broken by the odd curse or cough  
and what are surely the howls of blood-thirsty arctic wolves in the  
distance,

and in a hypothermic epiphany  
I realize I can't write my poem here,  
I'll go to Venice,  
I'll write my poem in pleasant, temperate Venice,

but then a second bus shudders in  
with all the grace of a dead bird crashing to earth  
and jack-knives into the first,  
and the fat woman in her Eleanor Roosevelt hat  
is already savoring us all with Donner Party eyes,  
our pathetic wagon train of stranded pilgrims,

but ninety minutes after it's due  
our bus limps in at last,  
a frightened half-dead thing,  
and hardly any of us are left,

but as a single sodden popsicled mass we shove inside,  
and I would forgive the driver had he a bottle in his hand,  
we collapse into the seats, thankfully strangers again,  
fingers and faces thaw,

and I am sure now I can write my poem,  
about shadows lurking in empty vases  
and windowsills stacked with lonely apples,  
as the sun rises or sets perfectly over an ancient empty Italian street  
    hungry for life,

but only ten minutes out,  
at the crest of a hill overlooking the freeway,  
our bus surrenders like fate to the maelstrom,  
our driver throws up his hands  
as we start our inevitable suicide slide,  
skidding past houses,  
caroming off parked cars,  
spinning faster and faster in a drunken slalom waltz  
toward the edge of the road  
into the blackest part of night.

# Remembering Wild Horse

*Katy Rutland*

I

Once we roamed free  
The rolling hills and steppes of our home  
Unfenced, untamed, undeniably ours.

Thunder came  
a storm like we'd never seen.  
It rode against the winds in the grasses  
tearing the soil and staining the sky red and black with its passing

We ran against the wind, away from thunder  
The storm kept pace,  
Overtook us  
Heartbeats stilled, never heard again as the storm shattered.  
Hundreds of storms replaced the one, each armed with lightning and fire.

Voices grew silent and eyes dim.  
The storms captured us, fenced us.  
We fought but lightning flashes stilled more and more hearts  
We, the proud who had been without number, grew small.

While trapped in barbed fences, we learned these storms had names.  
They called themselves cowboys, wranglers, ranchers,  
Men.  
They broke the weak and killed the strong,  
bending our proud necks or breaking them.

Horse Heaven, they called this place of fences, this place that had once  
been ours.

Soon I was alone  
watching the churning earth and toiling storms.  
Only I witnessed the soil watered with blood from my brothers.  
Watching, I knew the storms would overtake me as well –  
the storms that ran against the wind.



## II

Cresting the wide Columbia  
hills run wild, rolling and plunging  
their valleys as uncountable as the sagebrush covering them.

A storm broods in the distance,  
the sun unable to penetrate the turgid shadows.  
Lightning and water strike the earth,  
drumming against summer-dry soil.

Swift on the wind, the storm rides the flowing hills.  
Snakes, crickets, lizards, and even fleet-footed coyotes flee,  
burrowing beneath bushes blackened by last season's fires.

Braving the storm and standing taller than any man  
horses with hearts of iron withstand the lightning.  
Hooves flint across basalt cliffs  
while rain crashes against russet hides,  
scarred with welds and symbols unintelligible.

They run to war, running against the wind.

The winds blow, and soon the storm passes and thunder dies,  
the steady heartbeats fading as rain fades to mist.  
Only a memory remains as bolts in basalt rein in  
these iron hearts and iron hooves and iron eyes.

But the rain and thunder remember,  
beating the staccato of hoofbeats, the drum of heartbeats  
against iron sides and iron heads.  
Remembering those who ran against the wind.

## Below the Surface

*Alyssa Foland*

“Don’t be a pussy!” The boys screamed. I hate that word—not because of how it sounds, even though it sounds disgusting, but because it’s unbelievably and entirely offensive to women. However, the worst part of that taunt is that it works—we decided to jump. This would be the fifth or sixth time since the beginning of high school. Lily and I began scrambling up the steep hill to what we thought of as our personal diving board, or better yet, danger board. Our boyfriends, Casey and Joel, sat below on the boulders, sunbathing, and waiting for us. Casey was my boyfriend, so beautiful, so out of reach, even though he was by my side every day. Physically, no one could match him, especially me. I admired his tan, handsome face and six-pack abs that rippled every time he took a breath. Every girl in my high school seemed to want to be with him, but, amazingly, he was mine. Although sometimes I would have to remind him of that.

The dark water below looked calm and welcoming from the top of the water tower, which was old and termite-ridden. A horrific creaking noise came from the side bars whenever someone leaned against them. The hazardous conditions made the entire thing an accident waiting to happen. It should have collapsed years before, or should have been taken apart. But I didn’t care. My best friends and I went up there every year, usually on the first sunny day after winter—finally warm enough for bikinis. I stumbled onto the rickety tower and looked behind me to see if my friend was close to the top; she was still scaling the rocky edge that was never meant for people to climb on. At any moment the rocks could collapse beneath her feet, causing her to slam into the beams that kept the tower standing, or she could slice open her hand on a jagged edge if she were to grab for the rusty pipes. The cut would seem fine at first, but then it would turn yellow and begin to reek of puss as the tetanus would start to set in. At least, that’s what I’ve heard from my mother’s horror stories as a nurse.

Once Lily joined me, we laid out our towels so we wouldn’t get splinters in our feet from the decaying wood. We stood on the rusted side bars yelling down to the boys, ignoring the screeching that signaled too much pressure. Casey and Joel hooted and howled back at us, like dogs in heat.

They yelled for us to come back down, bribing us with sexual invitations. They humped and spanked the air as if they were getting

some invisible thrill. It repulsed me when Casey was so open about his sexuality, especially with me—newly deflowered and in love; sometimes I felt the urge to push back tears of embarrassment as the burning red rushed to my cheeks. But he gave me a promise ring, so I guess that meant I should be okay with it. I did love that ring. It was the only thing that reminded me he loved me.

Lily and I decided that their enticement was enough, so we readied ourselves to jump. We could think of nothing better than impressing our all too eager boyfriends with our diving skills . . . or lack thereof. Lily just wanted sex, but I wanted to prove myself. I wanted Casey to want me, even though he already had me.

Lily mounted the bars at the front of the tower. She stood on the unforgiving side of the unstable fence for a moment and looked back at me, stuck with fear. I told her I'd go first and that after she watched me do it, it would be easier for her. We traded positions and I looked down, seeing the tips of my unkempt toenails high above a black body of water, not knowing what lurked below. I imagined eels and snake-like creatures skulking beneath the surface, waiting for me. I knew that was impossible in our part of the Columbia, but I had watched enough Anaconda movies to give me nightmares about the water.

I stood there for five minutes before I looked to Casey and blew him a kiss. The boys, in unison, yelled for me to “jump, jump, jump!” This was my moment to shine, my moment to show him that his “simple,” “fragile,” “never says a word out of turn” girlfriend could do something reckless and exciting. I was the queen of that tower, if nothing else.

Looking down at my hand I saw my promise ring. I pinched my thumb to my ring finger and secured it into place. That was my first priority—don't lose the ring. At the top of my lungs I yelled “1 . . . 2 . . . 3!” And suddenly my hands were no longer grasping the bars that I had clung to. My feet didn't sting from the heated, splintering wood anymore. I was in the air, but couldn't decide how to position my body as I fell; that's what it was—falling. I went for the pencil dive, legs and arms pointed straight down. But at last minute I chose to cannonball, grabbing my legs and pulling them close to my chest. I gasped and hit the water, releasing my last cherished breath. The weight of my body had shifted the angle I was originally in, making me land on my side with a slap. A sharp sting trailed down the surface of my left arm and leg. Water consumed me, shocking my system like a million ice cubes covering my body, causing the burning to run deeper inside me.

I couldn't think about anything but getting back to the top of the

water. But when I came up to take my first breath something was wrong. I tried again and again to take in air, gasping and heaving like a fish out of water. My throat stung like it does after drinking something that goes down the wrong way. And my brain was clouded with too many thoughts at once. I'm going to die. Where the hell is Casey? Did Lily jump? Thank God, I still have my ring.

I could hear Casey and Joel's distant laughing, and looked up to see Lily still standing on the tower. My vision went from blurry to blind as I went under and re-surfaced again and again. I switched my gaze to the boulders and I saw the boys giving me a standing ovation, laughing, and shouting what sounded like "woohoo" and "bravo!"

I slapped the water and managed to gasp an incoherent version of "help." Fear crept into me as I focused on the thought that I might die, that this would be my watery grave all because I wanted to impress the boy I loved—a clichéd ending. The current was dragging me away from the boulders and I didn't have the strength to stay afloat anymore. I bobbed up and down like a fishing lure, at the mercy of whoever would reel me back in.

Between choking and splashing, I saw Casey slowly wading into the water to save me. I had no time to appreciate this act of valor; I only wished he would swim faster. When he reached me, he wrapped his firm arm around me, warm to the touch. Casey used to grab my wrist like that in public to show everyone that I was his. He ordered me to kick my feet—I'm sure my struggling didn't make his job any easier, but I always struggled; I didn't know how not to with him.

I could feel his muscles working as he swam hard against the current. Once he got me close enough to the boulders Joel helped pull me in. Casey made sure I was safely on dry ground, before he got out of the freezing water. He hovered over me, panting, and asked me if I was all right. Physically, I was fine, but emotionally, I wasn't sure. Huddled in a fetal position, I shivered and looked up at his face. Joel busted out with laughter, and Lily came up to his side, matching his pitch. He called me an "attention whore" and carried on. Casey even began to smile as his friend mocked me; he never did stay concerned for long. I continued to look to my boyfriend's face. He was my hero, my protector, at least for that brief moment.

I thought about the water tower and what draws us to it, why we come back every Spring. It's menacing in almost every way, yet we always return. We test its stability and don't consider the danger we're in. But I find that's the attraction.

## Seahorses

*Claire Hanberg*

Jewel-lit eyes twinkle and tapered noses  
Peep from tangled beds of waving emerald weed,  
Elegant spines and lustrous scales  
Armor the flanks of  
These impish destriers.

Prancing in pastures of plumed coral  
Flirting and flitting; fairylike,  
Dreaming of anvil hooves and  
Wind-woven manes  
Fanning their silken fins in surges of  
Salty currents.

## **A Supervillain's Report to the Board of Directors**

*L. Matthew Robischon*

**To:** MalaCorp Board of Directors <[MBoD@Mcorp.net](mailto:MBoD@Mcorp.net)>

**From:** Miles Malakith, CEO

**Subject:** Quarterly Report

**Sent:** Tuesday, May 7, 2013 8:35 AM

Dear Members of the Board:

I, Miles Malakith, am pleased to announce a significant gain in revenue from last quarter. Our tax breaks have once again mitigated our losses, and our technology projects have once again put MalaCorp ahead in the Capture-or-Kill-Super-powered-Menace-Captain-Alpha sector, with new projects coming to fruition.

The first of these projects I want to bring up is Project GOLEM. As you are no doubt aware, six months ago I deployed a team to recover a space object that was discovered in a paleontological dig in the Yuma Desert. We believed this object to be similar to the one that gave Captain Alpha his destructive abilities, and wanted it out of the hands of potential menaces like the previously mentioned vigilante. Unfortunately, this object turned out to be an autonomous military-grade attack drone that wiped out half of the research team along with several dozen bystanders.

Luckily the secondary team managed to disable the robot, but not before it emitted a strange pulse of energy. After recovering the object our techs got to work on studying it. Twenty-three weeks later, I am pleased to announce that our scientists have submitted their results: The object appears to be an interstellar drone used by an advanced alien race to probe unexplored space and report any star systems with planets suitable for colonization. Furthermore, the energy burst it emitted was actually a high-intensity signal that was broadcast at speeds exceeding that of light light.

In short: we reactivated a dangerous machine designed to find worlds to conquer. In so doing, we may or may not have inadvertently broadcast Earth's location to an aggressively hostile alien race. Luckily, we here at MalaCorp know how to turn every potentially world-destroying crisis into an opportunity. Right now, our boys at R&D are hard at work reverse-engineering the machine and we will soon begin mass production of our own autonomous attack drones based on the object's design, nicknamed GOLEM.

Now you're probably wondering: Miles, how are we going to control an army of mindless machines of pure warfare whose designs were based on a robot that was sent to destroy us? Well, hypothetical asker of rhetorical questions, I'll answer you with one word: CAIN. What's CAIN, you ask? CAIN is the name of our unrivaled automated network, which ironically started as a chess app for our MalaPad electronic tablets until it began exceeding its original programming.

When we learned that the AI was capable of learning at an exponential rate, we put the software to work overseeing all of our automated systems and our computer network. We dubbed the AI the Central Advanced Integration Network, or CAIN for short. CAIN has proven so effective that just recently we've begun contracting its use to the CIA, DOD, NSA, and Homeland Security to update all of their systems and run diagnostics checks. Eventually we hope that it will be put to use overseeing all of their data and electronics systems.

With luck, CAIN will be completely integrated into the national defense networks. Think about it; every satellite, missile, and unmanned vehicle will be controlled by one super-smart AI, thereby removing the dangers of human error. And now CAIN will oversee the operations and deployment of every GOLEM robot should the need ever arise. I imagine that will occur soon, such as the inevitable day when the government declares Captain Alpha an enemy of the state and gives us leave to capture or kill the caped troublemaker.

Now, some of our scientists have expressed concerns over the efficiency and reliability of CAIN in the event of full automated systems activation. Some words have been carelessly thrown around. Words like "self-awareness," "rogue behavior," and "attempts to gain unauthorized access to nuclear launch codes." Not to worry though, the CAIN artificial intelligence has personally assured me that the fail-safes we've put in place are working properly, preventing any unwarranted behavior.

We're confident that the military sector will see the need for CAIN in future conflicts, and our moles in the CIA seem to agree. Now you might be asking: Miles, why do we have moles in government intelligence agencies? Well, I'd answer but I think that these self-aggrandizing rhetorical questions are getting repetitive so we're moving on.

As you are aware, last year we began work on a prototype teleportation device called PANDORA. The PANDORA gateway was designed to create a portal that would theoretically transport information and matter to any location on Earth. Our human test subject, Colonel James Montgomery Hawthorne, bravely volunteered to be the first human to travel to another location via the PANDORA portal.

Unfortunately, our preliminary tests didn't account for the presence of organic matter, which caused some slight temporal fluctuations. In retrospect we should have used mice or something before testing it on humans. In the end, I can't really disclose the specifics of what happened but I can assure you that Colonel Hawthorne's family will be well-compensated. Now, I know you may be inclined to see this as a complete failure, but I refuse to accept defeat. You know what they say about when life hands you lemons. So I don't see it as a failure in human teleportation. Rather, I see it as a success in first contact with an interdimensional life form.

Now, you're probably curious as to what I mean exactly by "interdimensional life form." Well, my advisers wanted me to keep a lid on this but it's about to get out anyway: we've discovered an intact, living, breathing alien from another dimension. It's safely contained in our labs where our scientists are free to study it without restrictions. What little they've learned is that it's a female member of some combination of insectoid, reptilian, amphibian species.

We don't know much about it other than that it reproduces by laying eggs en masse, much like a bee or ant queen. She's already laid about two hundred eggs, about a quarter of which have since hatched. She likes warm places, and her kids really like the interns. Some of her larvae escaped through the air ducts and just attached themselves to our unpaid workers, literally just latching onto them at the base of their skulls.

Now, normally we'd try to remove those suckers but the interns don't seem to mind, or at the very least their behavior hasn't changed much. We have, however, noted a 200% improvement in work efficiency since the larvae attached themselves to their new hosts. It's gotten to the point where the interns don't even go home for the night, they just work at their stations until they collapse at their desks, regain consciousness several hours later, and then get back to work.

There does, however, seem to be a slight misunderstanding in their job instructions. I'm not sure how they went from official website maintenance to cataloging the biodiversity of local mammals, but I think a friendly memo should suffice. In any case I'm going to ask our scientists if perhaps we can grind the hatchlings down into some form of A.D.D. medication alternative. Failing that, I'm sure we can somehow use them as weapons to finally deal with the meddlesome Captain Alpha.

Anyway, back to the mother life-form. Our research department has dubbed her Subject LILLITH, while the interns prefer call her Muatagh-noteir, Mother of the Horde, spawn of the dark stars, matron of Great Horakath, who shall engulf the world in a glorious inferno of ecstasy



and ascension. Personally, I just call her Becky. Now, you're probably wondering just what Becky looks like. Unfortunately, it's a little hard to give an accurate physical account of something so grotesque and alien. If I had to give it a description, however, the word "abomination" certainly springs to mind.

One of the innate problems with Becky's appearance is that staring at her for a prolonged amount of time tends to drive people insane. This is the case whether you're sharing the same room with her or just looking at a still photograph (which is why I withheld any footage or images of her in this report).

Luckily, our doctors learned that administrating our experimental memory-erasing drug to her victims tends to bring them back from the brink of madness. I myself decided to take cautionary measures and took the serum after spending a few hours going over footage of Becky's capture. Three days later and no signs or symptoms of—FUTAGHA NAMEIR, HORAKATH. DOVEIR MUATAGH EMENDROM NOTEIR.

EROKA'MATHA MUFERTY CALAITH— in a crate of bananas heading for Brazil. Luckily we deployed a covert quarantine and cleanup team so if there is an outbreak it should be contained within the confines of Rio de Janeiro. Despite this close call, I'm reluctant to have Becky and her offspring disposed of. I'm quite confident the benefits of continued research outweigh the risks. In fact, I get a scratching sensation at the base of my skull whenever I think otherwise.

In closing, we acknowledge that MalaCorp's prospects seem questionable. After all, we've gained the unwanted attention of a cosmic empire, our MalaPad electronic tablets had to be scrubbed, and we failed to produce a functioning teleportation device. But with every failure comes a silver lining, which presents us with unforeseen opportunities. We are only beginning to tap into MalaCorp's full potential, which will bring this company to a new golden age. Our best days are still ahead of us, and they'll begin once we realize our goal for the past five years: killing Captain Alpha.

Sincerely,  
Miles Malakith, MalaCorp CEO

## Devil's Dance

*Santos Herrera*

A crowd of voodoo charmers gathers around  
the dancing flames holding hands in worship.  
Bare footed and eyes closed speaking in tongues  
repeating chant after chant, louder and louder.  
Flames stretch higher and fill with disembodied voices  
and laughter of the damned and the demons.

The charmers begin dancing in the flames possessed by demons  
taking turns cutting their wrists, passing around  
blood filled goblets and taking gulps as demanded by the voices  
in the flames. Slapping handmade drums to worship  
their god. Good growing quieter and evil getting louder.  
Throwing severed goat heads into the fire with the tongues

cut out and their eyes plucked and stuffed under the tongues  
of the charmers in order to see the faces of the demons  
they praise. Animals in the forest hear death getting louder  
and flee before the fallen angel comes around  
to feast on the fresh raw flesh of those who dare worship  
him. Foolish charmers continuing to raise their voices

calling the onyx lord to show himself and reply to their voices.  
A figure emerges from the fire and charmers hold their tongues  
in complete silence in the presence of the one they worship.  
Black cloaked with one hoof and one rooster foot, the father of demons  
and tortured souls breathing slow and heavy, looking around  
at the piece of hell on earth. He snaps his claw-like fingers louder

than a whip and every knee drops immediately. Their hearts beat louder  
And he can hear their fear. The same silent cries that voices  
before them screamed out. Charmers want to turn around  
and run but they know it's too late. They belong to him. Their tongues  
curl back trying to reverse what they've done, trying to recall the demons  
back to their gates and away from them, but their souls are sunk like war  
ships

One charmer looks up at the stars and tries one last attempt to worship another god, a god to save him. The moans of pain and suffering are louder than he can stand. *Lord, save me from these evil demons,* he says. The dark figure appears before him and screams for silence. His voice echoing in the mountains and the trees lean away from the sound of his tongue lashing behind his giant fangs. Satan wraps his hand around the charmer's neck and laughs because he knows there's no one around to save him. He smiles at the charmer and slithers his fork head tongue out like a snake and shoves it down charmer's throat. Forever owning his voice.

## **In Answer to John's Question, "What's a Constellation?"**

*Ashley DeGon*

*Inspired by "Answer to a Child's Question" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

They are a map of another time, holes pinpricked  
into a blue-black tapestry. They're the past;  
gone before they can reach our eyes. Burnouts  
who stick together, talking to one another  
rather than going somewhere with their lives  
like comets or meteors.

They follow you on your walk home, always  
keeping pace with you. Orion sees you  
when you watch him and asks that you look  
at who he is as a whole, not just his belt.

They are dreams and hero stories to which we aspire.  
We even try to purchase and claim them—  
as if we could tame them. The difference between  
the city and the country is whether or not you can see them.  
Yet they're always there. Our little gateways to the past.  
Where we gaze when we contemplate the future.

## Taste and See

*Mike Cordle*

He held his intestines in with one hand, and tried to push the head of the dead pig off his chest with the other. The head was heavier than he thought a head should be. It made him glad it was only the head. No doubt about it, he thought, the weight of the whole pig would make breathing impossible. He found this reason for thankfulness because his lung capacity was greatly reduced by the hole in his abdomen where his intestines and lungs and God knew what else were exposed.

When he breathed, he could hear air hissing in and out someplace near the bottom of his rib cage. He correctly assumed the pig had gouged a hole in the bottom of one of his lungs. It was the left lung, and the blood covered tusk he had been pulling on to drag the head off his chest was what had torn him open like a long, hard fingernail does an orange peel.

“Jesus! How much does this thing weigh?” Though David didn’t expect Jesus to answer him, much less care about the weight of the pig, his cry to Jesus was as much a prayer as it was a shout of exasperation.

His words were accompanied by the hissing of his lung. It was the first time he’d spoken since the pig attacked him.

Words. Speaking. He had always been good at speaking. Words were the main tools of David Hewitt’s career as a fundamentalist missionary to the Baruwaja tribe in the heart of New Guinea. He used words to get himself into the tribe, talking and selling his mission so well a used car salesman couldn’t have done better. Words, and more words.

He used words when he translated the New Testament into the Baruwaja language. He used words to garner financial support for his mission.

Even before he got saved, he used words well. Born in Chicago, he became the spokesman for a large street gang. Never once did he need to fire his .38 Special. Words, his words, were always enough to get what he wanted.

After ten years in the Baruwaja, he’d lost count how many times a wild pig had crossed his path. Usually they were more startled by him than he of them, and usually they ran off before he could give their presence much more thought than he would a siren in Chicago. Whenever a pig happened to challenge him on the trail he only had to use his ability to talk well, and soon their paths were parted.

Sometimes he sweet talked them, sometimes he shouted at them, and sometimes he sang to them. He didn't know what it was about his voice, perhaps it was a gift from God? Sometimes he wondered if it was a miracle wherein he was actually accompanied by angels he couldn't see, but that the pigs could. Whatever was at play in each situation, he was always thankful his words worked. And he always praised God for it.

A bead of sweat slid off his forehead and into his left eye. It stung. He used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat off his forehead and his knuckle to rub it out of his eye. He wanted to curse his luck that his struggle with the pig ended out of the jungle's permanent shade. He wanted to curse the dry, baked sword grass, and to curse the fifteen feet between him and the cool shade. The sun poured down on him like the blast of an oven full of baking bread.

So much for heat rising, he thought to himself.

He wanted to curse the sun, to use words he'd carefully disciplined himself to stop using when he became a Christian. Instead of cursing, he furiously blinked his eyes against the brightness of the sun as if it would lessen the heat, and the desire to curse.

He thought he heard some brush slapping and cracking against something in a dense patch of trees to his left. His heart pounded at the thought of another pig coming out of the jungle. He could smell his own torn intestines, not doubting the smell was strong enough to entice another pig.

"Swine!"

A curse word, an old one.

He said it again as he finally was able to remove the dead pig's head from his body. He lifted himself by his elbows and look around. That was when he noticed the sun was not only beginning to turn the blood he'd shed into pudding, but it was drying his exposed guts. It looked like something he saw in a gruesome war movie.

His heart pounded harder.

He looked at the gaping wound and could see his insides moving with the rhythm of his heart. With the tip of his index finger he gently touched a twist of intestine. It pulsed against his finger. He pulled back, frightened that it did not hurt to touch. Slowly, deliberately, he began to gently touch different exposures. At one point - though he could not see the point - he could feel a column of air against his finger when he inhaled. The hole in his lung. It scared him, making his heart beat violently.

What frightened him the most was that only the torn skin and parts of slowly bleeding muscle near the top of the wound hurt to touch. Nothing else hurt. That was when he noticed he couldn't move his legs. He lost the strength to hold himself up on his elbows, and fell to his back with a thud. For a few eternal moments he lay flat against the crooked New Guinea earth. Words came to mind. Go ye into all the world, Jesus had said. And, I'll be with you always, even unto the end of the earth. He wanted to curse again.

Instead, he muttered a prayer for help and forced himself back onto his elbows. He began pulling at the pale green sword grass, ripping handfuls of foot long blades that he used to cover the wound as an attempt to ward off the sun's drying power. The sword grass sliced his hands and would have made him wince were it not for the adrenal pumping through his ravaged body. When he finished covering his abdomen he began using his elbows to slowly drag himself backwards toward a large, car sized rock he hoped would afford protection from the sun.

Ten minutes later, and still a dozen feet away from the big rock, he heard the unmistakable sound of another pig snorting and scraping for food in the floor of the shaded forest. David swung his head round to see how much protection the stone offered. The move sent waves of pain through his chest so that he began to retch vomit mixed with blood. When the retching stopped he could see a large sow emerging from the trees and trotting hungrily toward the dead pig. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears, harder now from both fear and the energy spent in quite literally puking out some of his guts.

"Swine!"

For him, the word was the worst he could use.

David called himself a Messianic Jew. To get to that nomenclature he had gone down a path not any less rugged and twisted than the trail he lay upon.

David Isaac Hewitt's father was one of Chicago's most respected rabbis. So was David's grandfather. Before that his family was respected for their rigid orthodoxy back in the old country. Before that, well, they claimed lineage all the way back to the great medieval Rabbi Moses Maimonides. When David got into gang-banging, his folks just figured he'd sow his wild oats and get over it. After all, it wasn't the first time a Hewitt got involved in Chicago crime. David's great uncle kept books for one of Capone's works. Alas, when David left crime, he did so saying it was because he got saved. Saved by Jesus.

His mother asked if Jesus was a Mexican friend.

"No, mama. Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Christianity. Jesus the . . ."

She never let him finish. She screamed and told him he was as good as dead. That she wished he'd stayed a gang member, that she never wanted to see his face again. As she ranted and raved, his father first remained silent. Then he began to pray, *yisgadal vyis kadash, yisgadal vyis kadash*, . . . over and over, stuck on the first utterances of the mourner's prayer.

When this happened David rebelled against as many Jewish things as his new found faith allowed. He ate pork hot dogs and ham sandwiches until he couldn't stand them. He shaved his beard and cut his hair short. He said the words Jehovah and Yahweh as often as he thought about it. He even explored the idea of getting his penis changed to appear uncircumcised. Finally, after the anger settled and he knew for certain he'd never hear from his parents again, he went to a Southern Baptist seminary and became a missionary to the most heathen, most gentile people he could find: the Baruwaja tribe of New Guinea.

He went as a single missionary, determined to imitate the apostle Paul in as many ways he could. This worked for five years. On his first furlough back in the States he met Rachel, a petite California blond who was two years older than him and widowed with three children.

From the day David met her, he knew she was the one for him. It mattered not that she was older, or had children. For David there was ironic glory in marrying a beautiful widow legitimately . . . Unlike his Biblical namesake.

And contrary to her blonde indications, she was a Jewess. She called herself a Messianic Jew: a Jew who'd found the Messiah as embodied in Jesus, or Yeshua, of Nazareth.

David readily reinstated, as it were, the habit of tapping with a kiss the mezuzah that Rachel kept on her door post. In no time at all he too was calling Jesus Yeshua, and God the Father Yahweh, and re-familiarizing himself with Hebrew.

He learned to chant the psalms of David and Moses: Taste and see that Yahweh is good. Yahweh is one. Yeshua, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Full circle. Sort of.

And now, what seemed like a millennium later, he could see the other pig emerging from the shadowed jungle, snorting and shuffling sloppily through the brush. It stopped dead still when the sun's brightness pierced its small eyes. It sniffed the air.



David tried to will his heart from beating against his organs so that the sword grass covering his torn abdomen wouldn't shake. It was no use. The pig, a sow, cocked her head so she could see better from an eye angled directly at where David sat propped against the rock. At the feet of the sow, David saw his machete, and castigated himself for failing to drag it with him to the rock he sought shelter from.

With a loud, air clearing snort it trotted toward him. Desperately David looked for a weapon, a stick, a rock, anything with which he could strike the creature. Nothing. Nothing but dry strands of sword grass.

The pig came to his feet and used her nose to move them around, sniffing them hungrily. David willed kicking the sow but his legs were not merely weak, they were useless. David did not know it, but in his struggle with the boar he had fallen against a foot high, pyramid shaped rock and thereby broke his back. A perfect hit. Had he fallen just a bit to one side or the other he'd be very sore, but he'd still have the use of his legs.

It seemed like the pig took forever to snort and sniff its way to within range of his strong arms. He slugged the sow along the side of the head.

It squealed and then dove at his groin with the deliberateness he'd have expected from a well-trained German shepherd. The pain of the bite, and the momentary awareness of violation against his chosenness, dropped him into an unconscious darkness.

"Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good."

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. Yes, so taste and see that the Lord is good."

He could hear the words as if muttered by a man far away and in a deep, dank, sound absorbing hole. Who was it? What was that other sound? The sound of eating.

That smell? It reminded him of when he'd go with his grandmother to the butcher shop every Friday morning. Strange, it did not smell like fresh, sun warmed lamb. There was something more sacred, something nearer to the likeness of God than lamb.

"Taste and see that the Lord is good."

The sun did bear upon David like the sun of Sinai and for just one moment he opened his eyes to find the head of a grey, thick haired animal buried in his abdomen.

Yes, he said to himself before he died, taste and see that the Lord is good.

## **Fever Dream**

*Ashley Degon*

Clark and I held hands  
in the department  
store on the sofa and  
we discussed whether

or not our imaginary apartment  
on Roosevelt would have  
a dishwasher. I relaxed  
when he said something witty

about Seattle. How it was  
all about hand washing  
your dishes in the glow  
of the city lights.

He didn't have to say that  
so many problems  
sprawl out on the city  
streets that we didn't have

a chance to make up  
our own issues.  
He didn't say that  
they would cause a wrinkle

in *My Beautiful Rescue*.  
He ripped off my shirt  
a loose string that fell  
limply and clung to the sofa  
  
and still haunts me today.

## Channel "G"

Lorrie Fox

What is it like to be free, to be wild? Were you born into the wind? Did you cling to a breeze as it danced free until, once exhausted, you fell home to the earth on the banks of the Ganges somewhere downstream from your parents? Or were your seeds dropped from birds flying through, nesting nearby. Then an invader you are—a noxious weed from out of town, sent out to seek and destroy the regular inhabitants, although without actually being willful about it.

And then, there it was. A startling, gleaming, silvery flopping reflection in the summer sun as it flittered and flopped its body along surface of the Ganges. Fighting, or was it hunting, I wasn't sure, for water-skipper, or mosquitos whatever it is that fish crave enough to brave leaving their wild, swirling, fluid home. Surely it was at liberty. But the Ganges is restricted: men have agonized, toiled and bloodied themselves to keep her flowing through a single path, to keep her free of debris.

So I learned today that to be free is to float like a seed on a breeze or surface myself like a fish searching for a mid-day snack, and lay back and enjoy the sun—glittering, shimmering upon the Ganges.

## **My Transgender Lover**

*Megan Epperson*

Her lips, tangy like pomegranates,  
her favorite food, brush mine.  
The long, winding strands of lime-dyed hair  
slip between the pads of my delicate, craning fingers.  
Always full of dreams,  
she breathes them wordlessly onto my shoulder blades.

She's growing, developing,  
creating her true self.

A crease on the back of her  
knee captures my attention—  
The sleek texture of her,  
her hairless calves under my familiar palm.

She transforms before my eyes—  
one surgery at a time.

His lips, lemon-sour like a margarita,  
his favorite drink, skim mine.  
The short, spiky strands of obsidian-dyed hair  
slick beneath the pads of my delicate, probing touch.  
Always full of dreams,  
he announces them into the air.

He's grown, developed,  
created his true self.

A crease on the back of his  
knee captures my attention—  
The rough texture of him,  
his hairy calves under my hesitant palms.

I was in love with her, comfortable and known.  
I am in love with him, comfortable and new.

## Humanity

*Steven Dougherty*

*Years it took to suspect I was a monster:*

24.

*Why it took so long?*

*How Jessica, a nineteen-year-old I'd met at a party, tried to communicate her pain to me, her voice quivering:*

I feel like he used me for sex.

*My response:*

"Yeah he does that. See ya." I didn't care. Not because we weren't close, but because I was jealous; she had slept with my friend Brent instead of me, and it wasn't because they'd made an emotional connection or started out as friends, or any of the other methods for getting love that naive people like me believe in. Instead of flowers or candy or (insert cliché here), he'd sent her dick pictures.

*Definition of dick pictures:*

Pictures. Of his dick.

*Success rate of Brent's dick pictures followed by the success rate of his marriages:*

3 for 3, 0 for 1.

*Approximate size—of the joy I get out of that comparison:*

Huge.

*Number of women, out of three, who suffer some form of sexual abuse:*

One.

*First woman who told me about her experiences with sexual abuse:*

Hannah. It was over the phone, after I'd spent hours summoning the courage to call her. I laid on the bed, fidgeting nervously, with my glasses off so I could press the phone tighter against my ear. I didn't want to miss anything she said, so I could have the perfect response ready for when she

stopped talking. Even while she was describing how her step-father had lined her and her sisters up, softening them with the belt before taking them one by one to the bedroom, the only thing I could think of was what to say to make her feel better.

*Why I wanted to make her feel better:*

So I'd look good. It was the same reason I wanted to comfort Amanda, as she told me how her ex-boyfriend had raped her on the bed where we cuddled. I was pressed against her, her heartbeat thrumming through her skin and mine, into my chest where I imagined my own heart hid. I wasn't sure right at that moment though; as she told me how scared she had been, I knew I was supposed to feel something, pity or anger or god knows what. But there was nothing. No, not nothing. There was fear. Fear because of the nothing. I knew that the nothing was an offense, a fault, some sin against my own humanity. Amanda, young woman in my arms, heart hammering and lips suddenly sealed shut, waiting for some warmth from me, more than just the empty heat my body produced to keep itself alive. But I had nothing; I didn't care. I felt no pity; I wasn't even sure I believed her story.

*Most common compliment I'm given by women:*

"You're such a good listener."

*Five things I've heard women say:*

- 1: "Steve, you gotta teach my sister that sex is okay."
- 2: "It was technically rape, yeah, but like I said it was pretty much just sex so meh."
- 3: "If you're asleep, a guy can legally rape you."
- 4: "She's such a lying slut, she was fucking asking for it."
- 5: "I love you."

*Thing I did five years ago, on a field of young trees that will never grow because Yakima is too cold for oranges, on a property owned by an unbelievably racist man who shoots squirrels for fun, in the frozen hour of 4am:*

Cried.

*Why?*

Samara (rhymes with camera) left town with her boyfriend the day before. She had pink dyed hair, a gray eye and a green eye, wore elaborate

dresses that made her look like a doll, and played Dungeons and Dragons with my friends and me while *Futurama* played in the background and a Cthulhu plushie watched from the table. She seemed custom-made for a geek like me, despite her boyfriend. It didn't even bother me that she was taken; she was like an idea, a concept, a prize to be won, if I bided my time and waited for the right moment. I didn't want her; I wanted to own her. She was a thing to be possessed; not a she, but an it.

*Assumption I started this piece with:*

I am a monster.

*But:*

I'm walking to class, thinking of how I'll never be with that Samara (rhymes with camera) who lives in Seattle, doing photo shoots and costume design. It hurts a bit, but she was just another hot girl I wanted to fuck.

Except I remember asking her about her family, feeling my face burn when I heard how they had abandoned her. I remember telling her to keep drawing, keep drawing, even though marketing can be a tough job to land, even though making enough money to survive as an artist has never been easy. I wanted the world to see her art, and to be blessed with the little doodles and photo-editing tricks she'd blessed me with. I remember a drawing of a face she had made on a napkin while we were watching *The Boondocks*. My eyes and mouth wide, I lifted the napkin gingerly, resting it on the tops of my palms, holding my breath believing that something so beautiful must also be fragile.

I remember a drunken, eighteen-year-old Samara in the streets at 3 am, stumbling away. I pulled her inside, back into the shabby house with the peeling white paint and the beetle infestation, the house she could afford to rent and live in alone because she worked full time at Home Depot. She was drunk, couldn't finish her sentences, wobbling on her feet. I could have done things to her, things I wanted that she wouldn't have remembered. But I lay on the floor instead, listening to her snoring coming from the couch. I didn't use a blanket; I figured the cold would keep me awake, so I could make up for the front door's broken lock. I remember crying that night, wondering where she was trying to walk to and hoping that she'd find it someday. I remember crying on that field because my friend was going away.

I remember a time, before the emptiness and the fear, when I was still human.





## Contributor's Notes

*Kaitlin Abrahamson* is a senior at CWU. She is graduating this spring and majoring in English with a focus in writing specialization. Her brother still doesn't know this, but when she and her brother played the split screen deathmatch mode on Goldeneye, she would look at his screen to find where he was so she could kill him faster.

*Chloe Allmand* is a sophomore English/Writing Specialization Major. She is from Aberdeen, Washington, and currently works as a Publications Writer/Media Assistant in the CWU Publicity Center. After graduating from CWU, Chloe plans to attend graduate school and continue to pursue a career as a writer.

*Mike Cordle* was a fundamentalist Christian missionary in Papua New Guinea from 1989–2001. For seven and a half of those years he lived and worked among a small remote mountain tribe called Wantakia. In the end, Mike's autodidactic readings in philosophy, history and theology, combined with his severe ontological disappointment in God, led to the demise of his faith. He has written an as yet unpublished memoir regarding this journey with the working title of Nietzsche in New Guinea. Mike Cordle is a senior at CWU's Des Moines Campus.

*Ashley Degon* will (finally) be graduating this June with a bachelor's in English and a writing specialization. When she grows up, Ashley would like to be a copy editor at a publishing house. Her extracurricular activities include involve DJ-ing as Sid the Kid for 88.1 "The Burg" and singing in CWU's women's choir. Ashley enjoys hiking with her dog, Reggie, running, and making macrame bracelets that she intends to sell but usually end up in odd places.

*Steven Dougherty* was born in Clarkston, Idaho to a Hispanic mother and an Irish father. He grew up in Naches with his brother Sean amidst the burned remains of their grandmother's home. The family soon moved to Yakima. Steve spent most of his childhood days playing in his room, lost in his imagination. Today, he lives in Yakima and commutes to CWU. He is an English education major, working on his last few quarters.

*Kasey Eickmeyer* is a Sociology student who wishes to someday bridge the worlds of academic sociology and creative writing. For now, she is content in exploring both separately.

*Megan Epperson* I am a senior pursuing a BA in English: Writing Specialization with a minor in American Indian Studies. Poetry is something I am passionate about; therefore, it will be one of my focuses when I go to attain my MFA after I graduate in 2014. In addition to writing poetry, I am an avid reader, writer of nonfiction, and a novice painter—mostly of fairies. PS. Thank you to everyone who has supported me thus far!

*Adam Lawrence Fisher* is a Central Washington University student.

*Lorrie Fox* will graduate from CWU in 2013 holding a BA in English with a Professional Writing Specialization and a communications minor. Miss Fox, a non-traditional student, transferred to CWU from City University of Seattle, Bellevue in 2010. Her college career also includes an AA in Agriculture with Equine Emphasis from the College of Southern Idaho, in Twin Falls, which she completed in 1993. Miss Fox plans to combine her twenty years of experiences with horses and writing into a part-time career as a freelance writer for various publications.

*Landan Garcia* is a senior at Central, majoring in English. When not writing journalism pieces, he can usually be found hovering above the basketball courts in the Rec Center.

*Claire Hanberg* I am nineteen years old, and “Seahorses” is my first published work. I dabble in all of the arts, study history, and cherish the ambition to make a career out of creative writing.

*Hannah Hanson* is currently getting her bachelor’s in English with a writing specialization. She enjoys the outdoors, her cat, and all fun things.

*Patrick Hasserries* relishes good mead and writing of all forms. He has a wife and son, who are his reason for living and growing. He will graduate from CWU in spring 2013 with a degree in English writing and web design. You can find his portfolio online at [hasserip.wordpress.com](http://hasserip.wordpress.com).

*Santos Herrera* is a senior and the current news editor for *The Observer* student newspaper. He will be graduating in June with a degree in English language and literature with a writing specialization. After graduating, Santos will move to Portland in order to pursue a career with a post-secondary academic institution and focus on helping minority students apply for, attend, and complete a post-secondary education. Santos's work in journalism has received several awards and recognitions, including a Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence Award.

*Alexander Hughes* is a Central Washington University student.

*Alyssa Foland* is a senior graduating in June 2013. She is a writer, designer, and ukulele player. After graduation she hopes to join the Peace Corps. Her life mission is to change one person's life for the better.

*Jamie Klouse* is a Central Washington University student.

*Stefan Milne* is an English grad student. He thanks you for reading.

*Tim Mitchell* is a freshman at Central Washington University who enjoys the great aesthetics such as music, poetry, and film. He also hosts a radio show on the college radio station and plays the bass guitar in a progressive rock band.

*L. Matthew Robischon* I am a CWU English major senior. I was born in Olympia and am the oldest son of Fred and Bonnie Robischon. I graduated from Timberline High School in 2005 and received my AA degree in 2007. I was inspired to become a writer after reading Bram Stoker's *Dracula* while studying in community college, and I hope to complete my first novel some time next year.

*Amelia Rutland*, or Katy as she is known by most, does not like writing in the third person, attempts to live an Ephesians 3:20 life, and is a graduated English writing specialization major. After returning for a "victory lap," she is very proud of her BA. Though her time at Central has been filled with memories of thrilling workshop debates, spontaneous Shakespeare recitations, grueling grammar classes, felicitous fiction editing, and far too much alliteration, she is moving on in her writing journey to study creative non-fiction at the University of Idaho.

*Jake Tillett* has a great love for the imagination and an even greater love for storytelling. That has led him to the film and video studies major here at CWU. Jake is a senior with his fingers crossed about the future. He likes long walks in the woods and getting caught in the rain.

*Citrina Truver* is a junior writing specialization major. She credits her writing to her family for giving her a subject and Mr. Margolin for believing that she could do a decent job before anyone else did. She spends the vast majority of her time sleeping, reading novels that are far below her ability, and watching cartoons. Finally, she would like to publicly thank her Uncle John in writing for the intermittent doses of relative sanity.

**Editorial Staff**

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Marcie Carrell  
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