

MANA STASH

Volume 24 | Spring 2014

Short Stories
Creative Nonfiction
Poetry
Photography
Art

Cover photograph by Megan Burch

CWU | Central Washington University

CWU is an AA/EEO/Title IV Institution. For accommodation e-mail: DS@cwu.edu • 14020314TS

Manastash 2014

Volume 24

Central Washington University
Student Literary Magazine

MANA STASH

Volume 24
Spring 2014

About *Manastash*

Manastash is an annual literary magazine, highlighting the best creative writing and art of Central Washington University students. All writing, poetry, art, selecting, editing, and producing is student work.

Content is solicited every fall quarter. During winter quarter, the *Manastash* editing class sifts through hundreds of submissions, reading and choosing the works that demonstrate the greatest craft and imagination of the CWU student body, in Ellensburg and beyond. Once selections are made, the class begins an editing process as pairs of editors review each accepted submission, providing authors and poets with responses aimed at improving quality.

After the editing process concludes, the *Manastash* production class starts its work during spring quarter. This work includes a crash course in page layout principles and methods. It also involves learning software and creating page designs—for poems, prose, artwork, and the cover. Finally, the production class assembles all the materials, creating a single file that is ready for printing and distribution (the work you are now holding).

Unlike many literary magazines, *Manastash* has the lifecycle of a phoenix. After this edition publishes, a new one will begin afresh in the fall. It will start with a call for submissions and incorporate new groups of student editors and production specialists. Like this year's students, that next group will start with nothing but a stack of submissions. They will read, select, edit, compile, design, preflight, package, and produce—all from scratch—creating another volume of the finest creative work Central Washington University students have to offer.

Table of Contents

Lesson in the Stars	
Shaylynn Gould	1
A Few Hours in Baghdad	
Olivia Fuller-Newberry	2
Perfect.	
Renae Nicole Budmats	6
Fleeting	
Darin Greif	7
Hope	
Kara Composano	8
Someone to Watch over Me	
Suzanne J. Soule	13
Aqua Vitae	
Ambrose Johnsson	14
Baggage	
Josh Allen	15
Fears	
Megan Burch	19
Strawberry Lemonade	
Kathryn Landoe	20
Marriage: There Was a Nice Ring to It	
Natalia Zalischi	25
You Are	
Renae Nicole Budmats	28
Rite of Virility	
Donson Curtiss	29
A Lifetime Discovered	
Megan Burch	30
Tin Man	
Cody Jacob Welch	44
Prius: Vehicle of the Future	
Megan Epperson	45
Mental Illness Is Not an Excuse to Be an Asshole	
Kathryn Landoe	47

Standoff	
Chloe Allmand	50
The World According to My Hens	
Holly Heflen	52
How Jekeva Killed the Detroit City Assistant Deputy Comptroller	
Kareem James	53
No Returns	
Steven Dougherty	68
The Pack	
Renae Nicole Budmats	70
Memories in the Fog	
Citrina Truver	71
Odd Tendencies	
Brittany Allen	78
A Great Uncle	
Megan Burch	80
Taylor Street	
Daniel M. Fisher	82
Food Fight Friends	
Chloe Allmand	88
Salamander	
Kathryn Landoe	90
Sisters	
Citrina Truver	91
OCD	
Megan Burch	94
The Drums	
Laekin Dunoskovic	96
How to Become a Princess	
Kathryn Landoe	97
Contributors' Notes	101
Publishing Notes	104

Art and Photography Section

Blue, White, and Sand	
Ryan Bailey	
Flowing Stone #2	
Ryan Bailey	
Go with the Flow	
Laurel Fisher	
Great Wheel	
Madeline Osborne	
Hard Living	
My H. Trinh	
Koko	
Maxie Reavis	
O the Bridges You'll Cross	
Brittany Victoria	
Orange	
Savannah Meiners	
Solana Farm	
Kathleen Legault	
Untitled	
Laurel Fisher	
A Walk in the Woods	
Kathleen Legault	

Lesson in the Stars

Even in this dark world,
clouds of night roll back
and reveal wonders untold
in deepest folds of black.

Beyond is a universe
dyed the vivid hues of life,
and the haze that disperses
exposes rivals of strife.

Starlight never fails to smile.
It knows you'll see a brighter day,
For even from 25 trillion miles,
somehow light still finds its way.

A Few Hours in Baghdad

The other medics and I are enjoying one of our favorite sitting around the ER desk waiting for something exciting to occur discussions; as medics, we prefer masking our struggle with the realities of war with denial and humor. We like chatting about how we would prefer to die when the time comes because we know it's not a matter of if but rather of how and when. The how is always the most entertaining. One of the medics argues that an explosion is the best way to go because it's quick, painless, and way cooler than dying some other way. Another wants to know exactly how being blown into bits is cool, so the argument continues with more in depth details. Those of us listening from the side lines enjoy a good laugh at the effort we put into such morbidity.

A scratchy voice cuts through our laughter like a razor blade. The critical announcement coming from the medevac radio shatters our idealist world. An Improvised Explosive Device (IED) hit an Engineering unit and three casualties are heading our way. My heart races, my hands shake, and the pre-jitters lurk in the pits of my stomach, but only for an instant. We jump up to take our positions while the thump, thump, thump of the helicopter approaches, as if competing with the beating of my heart.

"It's here!" shouts a nurse at the entrance.

The smell of bleach still saturates the air from sterilizing the area from the last batch of trauma patients. I feel sweat trickling down my neck, and I notice the other doctors, nurses, and medics sweating as well. The trauma room is stifling; it feels as though I'm standing in a sauna. The sweltering heat only adds to the anxiety surrounding us. I go through my mental list: Needle, catheter, syringe, tape.... Screeching wheels of a gurney interrupt my thoughts. Time comes to a standstill. They are here.

Instantly, the switch occurs: transferring patients, providing blankets, moving backboards, finding information, and my least

favorite, switching the oxygen setup. Screaming fills the air until somebody replaces the oxygen mask, instantly suppressing the insanity. I lean over and look into the eyes of a man clinging to life. I see panic and fear, yet hope and determination. He pulls his mask off long enough to plead his case, "Please, I... please, I want to live." His eyes ask if we can save his life; he wants to hear the promise that he'll see his family again. The doctor can't make those promises yet, and replies, "We will do our very best. You have the best working on you."

We immediately cut off his clothes, and his skin comes with it. I look down to see his blood pooling at my feet. A strange, uneasy smell fills the air. Why the hell does burnt skin have to have a sweet scent? It doesn't seem right. Skin and blood-soaked clothes lay in a heap at the center of the room. The other teams attend to the agonies of the men who fill the additional two beds.

I notice him across the room with a look of horror in his eyes. He has a stabilized femur fracture. He watches his friends, his brothers, suffering. What is he thinking? How does it feel to know that he survived when the man standing only a few feet from him may not? By now, my job has become second nature, so I ponder his dilemma while I work. This man will be able to run on his own two feet again, but his friends will never have that opportunity. Grief suddenly overwhelms me. There is no room for emotion when the balance of life weighs on the shoulders of the few standing around a trauma bed, so I force myself to focus only on my tasks. With blood drawn and IV's started, I run to the lab, dropping off the blood for testing and picking up more blood pouches.

Rushing back from retrieving the packs of blood, I overhear their commander at the desk, his voice raspy and filled with emotion, "...but I was supposed to protect them." I look up to meet his

blood-shot and watery eyes. His tear-streaked face breaks my heart. Seeing somebody of such high rank, a grown man, crying like a child is unbearable to watch. I have to move on to the next patient.

I step back into the trauma room, still stifling with heat. The smell of carnage, like a freshly butchered animal, impinges upon the lingering scent of bleach in the air. I jump in to replace a Velcro tourniquet since the material is drenched with blood and can no longer hold itself together. I hold the thigh: meaty and warm. It is grotesque: there's nothing past the knee. The fat moving reminds me of the fat on a slice of roast beef. I know I won't be eating roast beef for dinner anytime soon. The nurse has me replace her, and I grab hold of the other leg, along with the barely attached foot, while she wraps them together. Hopefully the surgeons can reattach them.

New tourniquets on, the wounds dressed, chest tube in, and now the Doc is re-assessing the shrapnel wounds and the still-attached leg. The morphine does its job and the room is silent except for the beeping machines, ripping of plastic bags, and the constant shouting of orders at each station. Slowly, one by one, we run the patients up to the operating rooms to pass the torch. The slop of a mop interrupts the silence.

I busy myself by cleaning the Velcro tourniquets; I have to rinse that blood out. The amount of blood the tourniquets soaked up surprises me. Suddenly it hits me: that could have been my blood on the floor and my body torn apart by shrapnel. My world could have been the one turned upside down. The patients' lives and the lives of those around them will never be the same. All it took was an instant, one explosion, to change their futures. Life can change so quickly. I feel anxiety gnawing in the pit of my stomach. I know before my tour is up, I am going to experience how quickly life

can end. And I want to ignore it, but I know I will have to face it eventually. In the meantime, I'll slip back into indifference along with the other medics. I must enjoy this new moment of tranquility and air-conditioning before the scratchy voice returns on the radio to usher in another chaos- and adrenaline-filled moment. We'll finish the discussion about death by explosion once the fresh scent of bleach replaces the smell of blood, and maybe we'll swing by the mess hall for a big bowl of ice cream after our shift.

Perfect.

“I love you.”

“I fell in love with you unconditionally.”

“I fell in love with you quickly.”

“I loved you for everything you were.”

“I loved you for everything you made me feel.”

“I easily forgave you for your past.”

“If only I could have looked past your innocence.”

“I already saw you as perfect.”

“I could see you as being perfect.”

“I only wish I knew...

that we hadn't felt the same...

that we wanted something different.

We lied to each other

to make it seem

perfect.”

Fleeting

Stop.
Just stop.

I can feel the hurricane
behind your eyes.

Though my words may spill
out of my mouth and splatter
onto the sidewalk,
it is my face, and my awkward
hands who relinquish
this simple truth.

Unequivocal affection.

Breathe.
Just breathe.

Trust me as if you didn't
know the definition
of deceit.

Hope

A Letter to my Birth Mother

On April 26, 1991, you signed a paper and gave me to another family. You sent me on my way with only a short letter asking that I be raised in a family full of love and kindness. Before you finish reading this, you should know that I have grown up in a wonderful home that overflows with love and creative outlets. I was allowed to have pets, and I was treated no differently than any other member of the family. So why am I writing this to you now? I want you to know what my life is like, and, hopefully, one day I will get to know what yours has been like as well. There are so many things that I want to share with you, but for now this small compilation will have to do.

Horses

I would rather spend all day in a musky, old barn than anywhere else in the world. My favorite activity is to spend hours in a saddle flying over lavishly painted jumps, gracefully trotting perfect circles, or leisurely hacking through the woods.

I started riding at the young age of seven by going to Lang's Horse and Pony Farm summer camp. When I was tossed on the back of a fat, blue-grey Shetland Pony I knew that I would be a horse girl for life. Every week my mother and father drove me to lessons in their hunter-green dodge minivan; rain or shine I had to be around horses as much as I could.

When I turned fourteen, my present was a seven-year-old Morgan gelding named Firecrest Gambler, or Gambler for short. He is my best friend and my most challenging opponent. When I have a bad day, I know that a few minutes with him will make it better.

He can clear a four foot jump with room to spare and is always teaching me something new about myself.

Falling off a horse is a lot like finding out that you're adopted. When you smash into the compact dirt from five feet up someone runs over to ask if you can move. When first told that your parents are not who you thought they were, your adoptive parents instantly want to know if you're okay. There is no time to process or react. Everyone around needs to know if you can still feel your legs, or if you can hear what they are saying. While I have broken many bones riding, more than I care to re-count, the biggest injury I have had was the emotional trauma in learning I no longer knew who I was in relation to those around me. Riding Gambler and having my fair share of bumps and bruises helped me to become a quick-minded person. Having less than ten seconds to choose how to handle a mis-behaving horse will make anyone a stronger person.

While trotting around the show ring on my perfectly groomed horse I have a few seconds to wonder if you would be at the horse shows cheering me on from the stands like my adoptive mother does. She has never missed a chance to see me ride; in all my fifteen years on horses she has been there for every show, for all the worst falls. Even the ones she didn't know would hurt the most.

Hair

Did you know that we have the same hair? I know this because I have an old photograph that I sneak a peek at when I get sad or angry. In my head you're seventeen and sitting on an old yellow couch with what looks like a grape juice stain on the far left cushion. You're wearing a chunky pink sweater, floral print pants, and an infectious smile across your face.

When I was ten, I had my hair colored for the first time; blonde highlights that I loved for a total of three weeks. The chemical process of the coloring fried my curls, and I had no choice but to wear my hair up. I walked around elementary school with a shockingly blonde bird's nest of frizz on top of my head. Last year I finally did some research on curly hair and learned that the best way to have beautiful curls is to never touch them. I threw out my brush that day and spent more time paying attention to what my hair needed, like special shampoos and conditioners that don't have silicone in them.

The first time I saw the picture of you I noticed your hair right away because it's my hair, too. I often wonder if you would have taught me what to do with my hair. Would you have warned me never to dye it because it will turn into a frizzy mess for the next year until it grows out? Would you have told me to never brush it in the morning unless I wanted to straighten it, or to shower at night and sleep on a silk pillowcase with my hair loose around my head or otherwise risk looking like a poodle in a hurricane the next day?

Heartache

I started to search for you a year ago. I've had the thought in my head for a long time but last year something finally clicked. I started with what I had: two letters from an attorney to my adoptive parents about changing my name after birth and all the final documents that completed my adoption which included a birth certificate without names and a letter from the World Association of Children and Parents [WACAP]—the adoption agency through which I was adopted.

I started with WACAP not expecting to find much. I sent an email to the only contact information that was given for the Seattle office. Three days later I got a response from a woman named Sarah. Sarah became a lifeline for me through the long process of getting access to closed case files, and she would become emotional support for me when the news became too hard to handle.

In our first e-mails I gave her the bare minimum that I had at hand: I was born in Seattle, your name, and a faded photo of you holding me as a baby. I checked my e-mail every morning and night wondering when I would get the message that I was hoping for more so than I cared to admit. One afternoon in early June 2012 I heard the PING from my inbox, and something inside of me clenched in anticipation:

Dear Kara, I think that I have located your birth mother, Angie, but I'm not 100% sure it is her and I have yet to get a response from the letter I sent. So no real news yet.

-Sarah Dietz

I began to forget about the search. I was so wrapped up in preparing for college that time moved as a blur. Then in early October I got a phone call from WACAP. As I listened to the voice on the other end, my heart sank. I listened to Sarah talk for five minutes as she tried to explain to me what she was calling me for. The tears began to stream down my face as I processed the words that she was saying:

Someone to Watch Over Me

I saw a star up in the sky.
I swear it winked at me.
It's like you sent a message
For only me to see.

I think about you often
And wonder how you are.
I'd ask you this myself,
But Heaven's just too far.

You're not here for me to see
Or talk to everyday.
It's not the same as it once was
Before you went away.

So until we meet again,
I'll search for one more sign.
While you're watching over me,
I know I'll be just fine.

I want to reiterate what I said on the phone that though my phone call with Angie was very brief it was apparent to me that she felt that she had no choice but to not be in contact with you in order to protect you from what she feels would be painful information.

-Sarah Dietz

Hope

After months of waiting for you to change your mind about not wanting to know me, I started to look elsewhere for answers. Sarah helped me dig up medical records that told me about your preeclampsia and a family history of high blood pressure. I learned, by scanning files of information, that I have an aunt and three living grandparents. Does your family ever wonder about me like I wonder about them? I hope that one day I will get to invite them to the birth of my child and share the joy of being a mother, the joy you missed out on with your first born – and maybe your only – your daughter.

Your birthmother has made some difficult decisions, both at the time of your birth and now. I believe that she is doing it because she believes it is the right thing for you. That may be a small comfort in light of your disappointment and loss, but I hope it does provide you with the knowledge that she cares for you.

-Sarah Dietz

Aqua Vitae

The
 ocean cures
 all ills, and drowns them
 deeper than fruits of
 stills. Pickled sorrows
 drift away, and salty
 seas
 lead troubles
 astray. When even drink
 can't stop the thinking,
 the water frees you
 while you're
 sinking.

Baggage

If the army gives you a twelve month vacation to the Middle East, you will need a few things if you plan to make it back alive and keep your sanity. The packing list is very strict and your chain of command will check your bags at least five times before you ship out. Pack some sensible items that you will use every day like extra uniforms, toiletries, a few pairs of boots. Bring a pen and work on your penmanship because you won't be able to use your cell phone; there's no reception there. You can expect a letter to take at least three weeks to get back to the U.S., which makes correspondence very frustrating after enemy mortars destroy the small aluminum building that housed all the land-line phones, severing all other forms of communication.

Bring a gas mask, which you will never take out of your duffel bag except to sneak into your buddy's room to scare the crap out of him while he is sleeping on a dirt-encrusted paper-thin mat. This will not be a good idea later in the deployment when everyone is paranoid and has a tendency to react to the threat of danger without thinking. By then, the idea of suddenly awaking a sleep-deprived and war-rattled soldier will have lost its appeal.

Masked pranksters are not the only hindrances to peace of mind. Some general in an air-conditioned office thought it would be a good idea for soldiers to wear earplugs in combat. The army desk-jockeys will take pride in making you sit through multiple briefings to teach you how to properly insert them into your ears. If you want someone to sneak up on you without your knowledge, go ahead and wear them. You'll most likely use them to drown out the sounds of mortars falling around you while you're trying to sleep. Your sleep will be interrupted when whistling mortars arrive. You will think that cars are raining from the sky as the thundering explosions around you couple with the cries of familiar voices. For the first few months, the mortars will cause you to

panic and throw all your gear on as you run for a bunker to take cover. After a while, however, you will operate under the notion that you are already dead. This will relieve some of the pressure that you feel about dying.

Bring melatonin or some other type of sleeping pill. Someone will break into your room in the middle of the night and try to kill you. This will make it difficult to sleep for a while. You will lie in bed at night with your eyes open and listen to debris hit the side of the make-shift sandbag walls as Blackhawk helicopters hover overhead and shine their lights through the holes in the ceiling. You will strain to hear the sounds outside and decipher the creaks and steps to avoid being caught off guard. You will hold your breath at every knock at the door, not knowing if it means a new mission or news of the death of a friend. Your paranoia will continue after you come back to the U.S. You'll find that your house can mimic the sounds of war as you reassure yourself that you are safe.

You will be told to pack a poncho and several pairs of cold weather pants and shirts. It may seem foolish to bring Long Johns to the desert when it is 130 degrees, but you will need them after an all-night trek across the Tigris River when all you have is what you put in your waterproof assault pack. Your chain of command will not supply a small boat on such short notice, so you will have to swim across the cold black waters of the Tigris in the middle of the night to catch weapons smugglers. Without your waterproof assault pack, you'll be walking ten miles in the cold with wet socks squishing in your boots.

You will also need to bring two kinds of eye protection: clear and dark lenses. The dark lenses are worn during the day because the sand reflects the sunlight into your eyes. You have to wear the

clear lenses at night to protect your eyes from shrapnel. They will get scratched and dirty almost immediately because of the harsh environment, so you will have very limited vision at night. This will become apparent during a night raid of a small village when you are sprinting into a building to avoid the threatening shots of a concealed sniper. Your glasses will fog because of the heat, and your night vision goggles will blind you just enough to cause you to run directly into a tangled pile of barbed wire. You will struggle for what seems like hours trying to pry away from the barbed wire that has clenched its sharp teeth into your legs. But the pain of lacerations is nothing compared to the threat of a bullet the size of a magic marker plunging into your chest at 3,000 feet per second. You have seen your buddies fall prey to snipers, so you find a way to free yourself as blood covers the barbed wire. Avoid becoming sniper bait by bringing three pairs of dark and clear lenses.

You will also be required to bring a pair of "death tags." This is a brand new pair of dog tags that have never been worn. They are placed in a sealed envelope, to be given to your family if you die in combat. If you are able to bring these back from deployment yourself, you have done something right.

It is good to have a letter written to your loved ones saying your last goodbyes. You will give this letter to a close friend at the beginning of the deployment and he will give you his. You will both promise to give the letter to the other's family if one of you doesn't make it back. You will convince him that he will be able to throw his letter away when he gets home safely. You will bring your letter back to the U.S. with you. Your friend will not. You will give his to his family and offer your deepest sympathy, telling them that their son died a hero so that others could survive. You will be angry with yourself because he was taking your place as the gunner when he was hit by the grenade that was meant for

you. You will never get over this.

Most importantly, you will want to bring back some good memories along with the bad ones. Laugh when you remember the Iraqi soldier that looked exactly like Snoop-Dog. Cherish the Thanksgiving you spent eating cold rations in the back of the truck before a mission. Take pride having spent the Fourth of July in combat fighting terrorists. Bring back the picture of you and your buddies that was taken in front of the old check point building full of bullet holes and charred craters, because some of those guys will return with an American flag draped over them. Try to leave remorse and anger there.

There is no place for it here.

Fears

I'm afraid of mold.
Specifically I'm afraid
of spores floating up my nose
and making a home in my
warm, wet lungs.

I'm afraid that if I wash my
hands too many times
the skin will all flake off,
leaving a trail behind me
as I walk.

I'm afraid of the dark
because there is possibly
a man who picks locks
and stands silently right
where I can't see him.

I'm afraid that there's some
elaborate conspiracy and
that all of my friends
stick around just because
somehow, they took a wrong turn,
and now they're lost.

But mostly, I'm afraid that
all I am is afraid
and that if I take the pills
that mop the fear
out of my brain
there will be
no more me.

Strawberry Lemonade

“Shit,” Angie whispered as the hanging doorbells chimed. More customers. If only they had waited until the group of rowdy teenagers left. She had already had to replace a burger because “it tasted funny” and clean up a glass that a spiky blond-haired kid had broken, and she was sure none of them were going to leave her a tip. She wiped her hands on her apron and tried to smooth the flyaways that had escaped her messy bun.

Angie peeked over the booth wall and sighed. It was only John. He’d been coming in several times a week for a month now. He reminded her of her old uncle Travis, sad and sweet and so lonely. Within the first week of meeting John, she found out that his wife of thirty-six years had died seven months earlier. Now he had no one except an aging dachshund waddling on her stumpy legs. Angie strode over to the table where John sat.

“Welcome! How are you tonight, John?” Angie chirped, stepping around his folded up walker that leaned against the table.

“I’m doing well, Angie. Well, as well as I can be,” John said with a pathetic laugh. “The doc said I need to eat less sodium. But what does that overpaid quack know?” John’s laugh quickly dissolved into breathy wheezing.

“Ha ha, yeah, I know how that is.” Angie forced a polite laugh. “Can I start you off with a strawberry lemonade?” John always ordered strawberry lemonade. He had told Angie he loved the cringe right before the tart lemon was replaced with the sickly sweet strawberry. She hovered her pen over the notepad, waiting.

“Yes, of course. That’s a great memory you have. Not like mine. You get to be my age and your memory is one of the first things to go.” John smiled at Angie as though he had just shared the secret of life with her.

“I’ll be right back with that lemonade for you. Sit tight!” Angie said as she turned on her heel and placed her notepad and pen in her apron pocket.

Back at the service station, Angie washed down three aspirin with a glass of water. The pounding in her head had been getting steadily worse throughout the night.

She checked her watch. Thirty-three minutes left. Angie puffed her cheeks and exhaled. Was her shift ever going to end?

As the teenagers got up to leave, Angie thanked God that the only customers left were John and a young couple. She wouldn’t have been able to handle a rush.

“Here you are!” Angie announced with a well-practiced smile as she placed the strawberry lemonade in front of John. “Are you ready to order?”

John looked up, holding Angie’s eyes with his own for a moment before turning back to his menu with a sigh. “Oh, I don’t know, Angie. What do you suggest?”

“Well,” Angie said, lingering on the L’s. “That depends.” She cocked her hip and shook her pen between her thumb and forefinger. She and John did this dance every time he came in. “What are you hungry for tonight?”

John smirked and raised an eyebrow. “What are you offering?” His eyes drifted down Angie’s body, resting on her chest a moment too long.

Angie took a shuffling step backwards and laughed uneasily. “Our special tonight is prime rib for nine ninety-nine with endless shrimp for an extra three dollars. You might like that. Or if you’re

in the mood for something lighter, we have a spinach Cobb salad with chicken and avocado that is absolutely divine.” Angie stabbed the air with her pen, punctuating ‘absolutely divine.’ She glanced up briefly when the couple got up to leave, then turned her attention back to John.

“I’ll take that then.” John folded his menu and handed it to Angie. “If someone as divine as yourself says something is divine, then I trust your judgment. Can I also get a side of mozzarella sticks?”

Angie quickly scribbled down the salad, but paused before writing down the mozzarella sticks. “Are you sure you want the cheese sticks,” she asked. “They’re full of sodium, and your doctor said—”

“That quack doesn’t know a thing!” John interrupted. “I know what’s good for me. I’ve been eating cheese sticks all my life and I’m not dead yet!” He let out a loud guffaw and took a long drink of his lemonade.

* * *

When Angie returned with John’s salad and cheese sticks, John had covered the table with photos of a lake in the woods. Some were of a cabin on the lake, surrounded on all sides by perfectly calm water, with a single wooden bridge leading back to land. John pushed some of the pictures to the side so Angie could set his food down. “This is my cabin I was telling you about last week,” he declared proudly, handing her a picture of the cabin during an autumn sunset.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. She tried to swallow, but her mouth had gone dry. After briefly glancing at the picture, she handed it back to John.

As John gathered the pictures into a single pile, he said, “I’m sure you’d love it there. The lake is gorgeous, especially at sunset. There’s not a single soul for miles, unless, of course, you count the squirrels and deer.”

Angie pursed her lips. “It is beautiful,” she repeated. “But I doubt I’d like it there. That’s just way too much water for my taste.”

“Oh, right. Right.” John stroked his patchy grey beard and nodded. He put the pictures back in the inner pocket of his thick Carhartt jacket. “You mentioned you can’t swim. I remember now.” He laughed again, and Angie laughed politely with him. She wished he would stop laughing. She wasn’t in the mood tonight.

* * *

At last Angie’s shift was over. John had left minutes before, and the place was empty. He had left a large tip that almost made up for what the teenagers hadn’t left. She made a mental note to make sure she brought him a piece of apple pie on the house next time.

Her headache was a dull, yet constant pain now. She zipped up her jacket against the cool summer breeze and slung her purse over her shoulder, thankful to be out in the fresh air. A streetlamp washed her baby blue car in a yellow glow. Angie walked toward it in an exhausted daze, like a moth to the flame.

A loud crash and frustrated whisper made her jump. She blinked a few times, looking toward the sound’s source and letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. After a few moments, she could make out John struggling to get his walker in the back seat of his car. Angie looked up at the night sky and silently cursed herself and God. “Need some help with that?” she asked, walking in the opposite direction from where she wanted to go.

Marriage: There Was a Nice Ring to It

Scene I

John looked up when he heard her voice. Angie watched a dark hole spread across John's face as he grinned. "Thank you, Angie. That would be so helpful." He moved aside so Angie could wrestle with the walker. She wedged it in front of the seat, but it got caught. As she wiggled it loose and tried pulling it out for a second attempt, she felt a sharp prick on her neck, like a bug bite. Her vision blurred, and she fell forward. Her head collided with the walker.

"I really appreciate your help, darling," John cooed. He grabbed her legs and pushed her onto the back seat. After fitting the walker in on his own, John got into the front seat, pulled out of the parking lot, and drove away.

Aria lifted her hand to eye level, and she stared at the beauty that lay secure on her ring finger. She had never been much of a ring wearer before, but now she would have to be. The ring still felt heavy to her finger. Aria had insisted on tattoos, but Charlie had been persistent. She didn't have the heart to tell him how void the foreign metal felt to her tiny finger.

It's just a piece of furnished metal Aria thought to herself. She couldn't disagree whenever someone made the comment that the ring was beautiful, it was. Tiny diamonds nestled delicately in an infinity symbol. A one karat diamond lay in the middle, giving the impression that a tiny bow lay imprinted below Aria's knuckle. What is the big deal? Aria thought to herself. She didn't understand the need that most women felt when it came to wearing an engagement ring, nor a wedding ring for that matter.

If you're married, you're married. Why do people have to scream it to the world with something so flashy? Aria thought. Charlie knew how much Aria loved him. She knew he did. Why did she have to change her ways then? 'A tattoo is basically the same thing,' she had said to him one night before he had asked for her hand in marriage. "And it's even more permanent," Aria had insisted; though Charlie wouldn't budge. Aria didn't have the heart to tell him why the ring caused her torment. She couldn't tell him that the ring reminded Aria of her mother, of her stolen childhood.

She stared at the tiny object that was now to be a part of her hand for good. Taking in its beauty, Aria tried to get used to the weight her finger now felt. "Why do you have to be so heavy?"

she asked the ring, as if it could hear her. "Why do I have to wear you? Why can't you just go away?" Aria frowned at the tiny diamonds. She didn't think she was ever going to get used to them looking back at her.

Scene II

She lifted her hand to eye level, and she stared at the beauty that lay secure on her ring finger. The image of her security: Charlie. Aria had never been much of a ring wearer before, but now she would have to be. The ring still felt foreign to her finger. Aria had insisted on tattoos, but Charlie was persistent. She didn't mind so much. He wasn't usually old-fashioned, but it was his grandmother's engagement ring. It was sacred.

The story went that Charlie's grandfather, Charles, had sold his last horse to buy Charlie's grandmother, Martha, the ring during the Great Depression. Though Martha, who didn't know that fact, thought Charles had stolen the ring, and she had said that she would have nothing to do with a thief. Instead of being discouraged, Charles simply told Martha that she was being a stubborn woman, and that she would come around when she realized how much Martha meant to him.

Aria stared down at the tiny embellishment of diamonds inside an infinity sign. They were so perfectly placed that the karat diamond laden in the middle made the ring look like a delicate bow nestled on Aria's finger. Infinity she thought to herself: such a dramatic word, such a long time. I can do a lifetime with you, Charlie she thought to herself, as she continued to stare at the beauty he had given her. A symbol for the promise they were to

make to each other in front of all their loved ones.

It was less than a month until Aria and Charlie were to pronounce their "I do's." The tiny, silver band lay as a constant reminder that Aria was now one of two. Her lips perked up into a smile. She would never have to be without a date when she went out. She would never have to worry about being alone. Aria knew she was ready for the work that inevitably came with marriage; moreover, she knew the work was worth it. She knew that Charlie was worth it. He was worth the foreign feeling of a heavy ring laden on her tiny finger.

You Are

So alive you can't disappear, yet you are dying.
So drugged you can't stand, yet you are tripping.
So alone you can't converse, yet you are babbling.
So dazed you can't drink, yet you are thirsting.
So temperamental you can't eat, yet you are starving.
So stressed you can't sleep, yet you are hallucinating.
So sober you can't relapse, yet you are sinking.
So low you can't fall, yet you are sinking.
So done you can't begin, yet you are using.
So addicted you can't withdraw, yet you are resisting.

Rites of Virility

—for James Joyce

The street lamps lifted feeble lantern light
toward a violet sky. My career at play
resigned in gantlet streets—blind streets—where night
had chased the tribes to her through muddy lanes.
She called with tea, tossed her hair aside,
summoned my foolish blood to bare her chalice
safely through. O Love! I anguished and cried—
at last I heard her speak against the silence.
And she appeared—my soul luxuriated—
Araby, I whispered, annihilating
my youth and all the intervening days.
Child's play, ugly monotonous child's play.
Yet the darkness within held only for me
this creature derided by his own vanity.

A Lifetime Discovered

Calm down. It's okay. Just another day. You can do this. These are the things that I tell myself as I walk into the classroom. I straggle behind the rest after shoving my backpack into my locker. The smiling pencil with my name on it sneers at me. Finally, I decide that waiting outside is worse than just going in. I take my seat, pressing myself into it. Trying to hide there.

Don't notice me. Don't notice me. Don't notice me.

The teacher prowls the room. Making sure we're all neat and tidy. Perfect children in perfect rows. Something is out of place. In my head she's thinking "Why is there a D in this sea of As? Why is there black in my palette? This does not belong here. We must fix this."

I turn my focus to the front of the room to forget their stares. But then there are lines to count. Lose count, start again. Now group them into twos. Threes. Fours. Fives. What did she say? I missed that last part. I need to pay attention now. I narrow my focus. Look at the teacher. Eyes. Nose. Mouth. Eyes. Nose. Mouth. No, I need to pay attention. Toes curl under. Nails dig into palms. I will pay attention. My mind finally settles down. Lets me pay attention. Just in time for a test. Pieces of paper in neat piles glide across the tidy rows. There are little multiplication facts on the test. 100 of them. 100 chances to fail. 100 chances to get something wrong. ReadyGO! What happened? Pencils go to paper furiously scribbling. I look at the first one. 5×3 . One times five is five. Two times five is ten. Three times five is fifteen. I look around me. This is going to take forever. Why can't I do this like the other kids? Be perfect like them?

"Eyes on your own paper."

My eyes dart back down to my unfinished test. The other hands

are halfway down while I sit here with nothing. 3×8 . Eight times one is eight. Eight times two is sixteen. Eight times three is twenty-four. A pencil clacks on the table. Someone is done. I'm barely started but they are done. How can they do that? 4×3 . Four times one is four. Four times two is eight. Four times three is twelve.

"Time. Put your pencils down."

I flip over my paper, hiding my shame. The teacher collects them, inspecting each one. For my work, I get a concerned frown. I hang my head, hiding my face. Words come easily to my pencil but numbers get caught and jumbled, and, before I can untangle them, time is up.

"The scores aren't quite where I would like them. We'll have to work on that tomorrow."

Groans. I sink into my chair. I don't belong here. I don't know what they know. The shuffle of popsicle sticks pulls me from my own mind. Not again. Don't do this to me again. Please.

"Who's going to play with Megan today?"

She did it. A name is called but I don't hear. If I close my eyes it will go away. It doesn't and we all get into our neat and tidy line to head off to lunch.

I take my seat at the edge of the group. Backs turn to me. I pull each thing out of my lunch bag and set it all out. Nothing to trade. My food is made of Deutsch Marks. I swirl my plastic spoon in my applesauce listening to the conversations around me. Always listening. A sudden idea comes to me. I pile all kinds of things into my applesauce. Fruit snacks, bits of sandwich, some yogurt. My classmates notice and egg me on, putting things of their own in.

Our creation stares up at me, and I swear it blinks.

“Eat it. Eat it. Eat it.”

I tip the little plastic cup into my mouth. I gag on the thing. My mouth rebels against the sticky savory slime. My legs run to the bathroom and I can't stop them. I lean over a toilet and spit up the concoction. It looks like I've thrown up and that gives me an idea. I tell everyone that I threw it up. I'm in the spotlight for a minute.

Love me. Love me. Love me.

One by one we all filter out to the playground. I linger, taking the time to study my sandwich. Each little hole and crevice tells its own story to me and I must listen to each and every one. I am dismissed, and I drag my feet over to the door. It is time. I pause at the bottom of the stairs and peek around the corner. Casually, I walk out into the fray. I make my way through the covered area and slink between two fences.

“Megan!”

I tense and pretend that I didn't hear. Picking up the pace, I make it to the rock. My rock. I drop behind it and crouch. I keep my breath silent and listen for the footsteps. Footsteps that are going to take me away. I see the small feet that belong to the footsteps and hold my breath. The seconds tick away like hours. The feet wiggle back and forth and spin around but finally they get bored and walk away. I am free. I slip from behind the rock and into the stand of trees. Heart pounding and chest heaving, I run through the clearing before I slip behind a hill. From here I have a clear passage into another, larger stand of trees. This is part of my forest. No one finds me here. My trees keep me safe.

“Megan?”

Frozen. I blend into the shadows and hope that they don't find me. There is no way. My trees keep me safe. They won't give me up. The footsteps are in my trees. The footsteps don't belong in my trees. I see eyes prowling for me in the dark.

Don't find me. Don't find me. Don't find me.

I press myself up against a tree, trying to melt into it. The eyes give a final blink and the footsteps take them away.

“That was close, wasn't it?”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

“When are they going to leave us alone?”

“I don't know.”

I sigh and continue on my trek, now joined by a lanky boy with a shock of dark hair. I make my way along the back fence of the field. The boys playing their sports pay no mind to me.

“Look at them. Playing their dumb games.”

“Yeah. Who even would want to run around like that?”

“Stupid boys.”

“Hey! I'm a boy.”

“You're not a stupid boy though. They're stupid boys.”

The boy nods. I smile. He would never leave me. Not like Erin, who wanted to play with the girls. Not like John, who wanted to play with the boys. Now I would never be alone. He smiles at me, as if he knows what I am thinking. We walk in silence, just enjoying each other's company.

A single drop of water splashes off of my nose, then another off of my cheek. Then the skies open up and the rain comes. The boys whoop and the girls scream. I keep silent and keep on my course. I walk on the path and the boy walks up near the trees, the rain water splashes up between his bare toes. We are apart yet together somehow. It is one of those things that I just accept. I pick my way around the groups of kids. Finally, I make it to my spot. The best spot in the world. It is tucked between a portable classroom and a young fir tree. In here, I am safe. No rain gets in. No dirty looks get in. No one else gets in. Everything leaves me alone here.

As soon as I get here I leave. Not physically, but mentally. Slipping into my own mind. A single drop falls on the crown of my head but I don't notice. I am busy.

"Why can't I stay here forever?"

"Because it's not real. You know that."

"I don't want to know that."

"But there is so much waiting out there for you."

"They don't care about me. No one would miss me."

"They would and you know it."

"No one wants to play with me, and all the adults do it yell at me. No one would miss me."

"Stop talking like that."

I sulk but relent because I know it is true. Someone would miss me. But all I want is to disappear. Just leave and never come back.

Miss me. Miss me. Miss me.

Time is running short. I could just sense it. I would have to go back to the classroom. Back to their torment. Back to the perfect children in their neat rows. They want to consume me and spit me back out just like them. Perfect, just like them. I want nothing to do with this. I could be my own person as lonely as it was. I don't need their approval to go on.

The bell rang, and I am pulled back into the real world. I slog through the rain to my classroom. I wait for everyone else to climb the stairs, not wanting to fight for a position. I am still half in and out of the dream world. Everything is right here. I never want to leave.

"Well I'll see you tomorrow."

"Who are you talking to, Megan?"

"No one."

* * *

We sit in silence. She's drawing; I'm watching. We're holding up the wall as we call it. She's anti-social; I'm here for what's behind the wall. Using one to get to the other. It's not right, not fair, and I know this but I can't stop. Can't stop yearning. This yearning is a new thing, a phase. It will pass. All of this will pass. It's just that middle school is a hard place full of stress that makes you do strange things. Strange things like talk to people who aren't there. I know that they aren't there but I can't seem to stop. Can't seem to get them to go away. It's why I haven't been sleeping well lately. Caffeine was never really of interest but now it is essential. Head on my hand. Eyes closing. Voices fading away. Everything is warm and soft in dream land. But sleeping in class is frowned upon so it's Mountain Dew that I rely on.

“What’re you drawing, Elizabeth?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

She doesn’t want to tell me. I want to pry but force myself to shut up. Not to ask those kinds of questions. I know that I don’t like to be pressed like that. We sit in silence for a while longer. She’s drawing; I’m watching. I can feel the restlessness within me. Starting in my gut and moving outwards. My legs start to jump and wiggle. They’re trying to get up but I keep them on the ground. I twist my neck and hear the pop but it isn’t enough. I roll my hand into a fist and crack my knuckles one by one. That’s satisfying. I can sit for a while longer. It’s been like this lately. I get so restless but then I crack my knuckles or straighten my pencil and it’s okay. I’m okay.

“Let’s go inside”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“What if I carry your backpack?”

“Fine.”

We had a deal. If I carried her backpack places, she would follow. I picked up the backpack and grunted with the weight. It was a black monstrosity packed full until it bulged strangely. I dragged the pack into the room and dropped it.

There she was. Sitting at her desk and looking at me. Her smile preceded her. Hitting me before anything else could. My body hummed and I smiled back. Heart pounding. Hands shaking.

Lungs struggling. Panic. Oh my God. What is happening? This isn’t normal. This can’t be normal. I keep smiling awkwardly. I fall into a chair. I need to sit. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Okay. I can do this. Elizabeth draws.

“How are you girls?”

“Good.” I spit out.

Elizabeth draws.

“Do anything fun over the weekend?”

“Math homework.”

We laugh at the joke. Silence hangs between us. I thrash for something to say but she just smiles and goes back to her work. I exhale. This can’t be normal. I’m not normal. The bell rings and I stand, both reluctant and grateful for the way out. I nod to Elizabeth and leave.

“We need to talk.”

The day has passed in a blur and now I find myself in her classroom again. Always back here. Something’s pulling me back here. Back to this teacher.

“Okay.” She turns to me. “What’s up?”

I swallow and try to collect my thoughts but they flit and jump out of my reach. I smile, buying time.

“There’s something going on.”

“What? Is there something going on with your friends?”

“That’s not it. It’s hard to explain.”

“Well you have to try.”

Another smile. “Okay. It’s like this.”

Heart pounding. Hands shaking. Lungs struggling. Panic. “It’s like this. I see you. Like in my mind. But you follow me around. Like an imaginary friend but not. You know?”

“No Megan, I don’t think I do.”

“It’s like someone to talk to. A friend.”

“But you have friends.”

“Not like this. Not one who understands me like this.”

The silence hangs like a wet blanket between us. I close my eyes. This was a mistake.

“You’re going to have to give me a chance to process this. We can talk about this later.”

We never did.

* * *

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Did you do the reading?”

“Yep. What about you?”

“Nope.”

Elizabeth shakes her head.

“You’re a senior now. Just do the work.”

“I didn’t feel like it. I had other things to do.”

Elizabeth goes back to reading in her white binder. I go back to silently talking to myself. We sit there until the bell rings. We stand and file into the classroom behind us. My hand pauses briefly on the door handle. Heart pounding. Hands shaking. Lungs struggling. Panic. Every day. Every single damn day.

I spend the rest of the day planning. Thinking how I’m going to do this. The same thing, just a different teacher, English this time. It’s lunchtime and that same door handle is slick with my sweat. I knock and she looks. She holds up her phone, indicating that she wants me to text her and leave her alone. I won’t allow that. I’m ready now. She sighs and comes to the door.

“Make it quick.”

She turns and I follow.

“I don’t have your number anymore.” I reply to the unasked question.

“Cleaning out your phone?”

“Yeah.” No. I have no self-control.

I lean against a table and stare at her in the dim light. Something smells like raw broccoli.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

“It’s just so complicated. I don’t know where to start.”

It started in Ashland. That moment. Watching her walk to the back of the bus. Sitting with me. I still love the smell of my tarot

cards. I have learned that I suffer more from what I want to do but don't than from the actions that I take. These words I take with me. So much to sift through. Where to start?

"It's just that I am... I am obsessed with you. Kinda. Not really. That sounds wrong."

Her face doesn't change. I wish more than ever that I could read minds.

"It comes with something like an imaginary friend. God. This is so hard to explain."

I cradle my head in my hands. Forcing the tears back in my eyes.

"I'm glad that you told me. Otherwise, I would have just thought that you were one of the clingy ones. Megan, can you make the apparition go away?"

She used my real name. She's taking me seriously.

"I can sometimes, but they always come back."

"Megan," she pauses. "I think you might have a mental disorder."

What? I'm fine. I am not crazy. I Am Not Crazy. This can't be true. This can't be right.

"I've never thought of that." I have.

"You might consider counseling."

I cross my arms. She notices.

"You're not very receptive to that idea."

"No. I'll look into that. I just stand like this." I'm uncomfortable.

Only crazy people need therapy. I'm not crazy. I'm not. I swear.

"It really helps. You should look into it."

We left it there. Just put everything on the table and walked away. It was wonderful and terrible at the same time. Wonderful because it was a release. Terrible because she knew too much. It was hard keeping a balance. Get what you need without alerting anyone that you need it. But sometimes pulling that alarm is what you need. What you need so much. Need it until it pulls you apart and you have to give in one more time.

The rest of the day is floating. Back and forth with no steering. Mental illness. Mental illness. Mental illness. I don't even know what to do with that information. What do you do with a mental illness? It's not like you can take a round of pills and it goes away. A great story to tell at parties. No. This is here, forever. Something that doesn't go away. Ever. Every damn day. No vacations. No breaks. No weekends off. I'm not crazy. Elizabeth might be crazy. But not me. I'm the grounded one. I keep her from floating off and getting lost in her own mind. Lost in that white binder. I'm the sane one. Apparently not.

I lock myself in my room and cry. I cry for the moment. I cry for things passed. But mostly I cry for things yet to come. All tainted with illness. Every moment from past to future is tainted. Nothing natural. Nothing normal. Everything broken. All I can do is cry. For days I cry for myself. Scream out for myself. Me. Me. Me. I don't see the broken person right in front of me. I can't deal with her. I have me to deal with me. I ask her for advice then tell her to shut-up and do what I want. I don't listen. But it's okay because I'm mentally ill. I can't help it. I snarl and gnash my teeth because I'm mentally ill. I alienate myself because I'm mentally ill. I wallow because I'm mentally ill. Just let me be. I'm mentally

ill. I can't help it. I'm mentally ill. I won't change. I'm mentally ill.

School is out. I search for a job for a while but no one wants to hire a seventeen-year-old in this economy. Each rejection pounds me deeper into depression. I don't work hard enough. My parents are disappointed. Every look pounds me deeper into depression. I spend my days not getting out of bed. Every hour pounds me deeper into depression. All I do is watch *Bones* on the internet until I can't stand my own company. In this wallowing self-pity, I send a message out to my former English teacher. An unlikely life preserver is thrown out to me. It has a name written on it. The key that unlocks everything. The thread that ties everything together. OCD. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

All the thoughts about fires and car accidents and deaths were OCD. All the touching and counting and repeating and fear were OCD. All the responsibilities and shame and pain were OCD. All those sleepless nights were OCD. It's all OCD. That is all that it's ever has been and will be. If I take it away, what's left? What parts of me are OCD and what parts aren't? Is there anything there if you take the mental illness away? Who am I?

Summer is over and college looms. My life changes in an instant and my OCD rears up and roars. Tears everything apart in its rage. Too much change this fast needs to be punished. Eventually, I resort to anti-depressants. Little blue pills which I dissolve in water because I can't swallow them. They make me violently ill for a week then put me in the hospital. I change to another little blue pill that still makes me ill but not as bad. Something changes. Something shifts.

No longer am I as depressed. I'm sleeping better than ever. Things are looking up. Until something happens. The voices leave. The people in my head are gone and I can't find them. Where did

they go? It's empty and lonely here now. No one to talk to. No one to confide in. No one who's always there. I am truly alone for the first time in my life and it's terrifying. I try and pull my companions back. But as hard as I yank, they just slip back into the void and I can't find them again. The words that came so easily to my pen are now just as jumbled as the numbers. Nothing is there. The words are gone as well. This will not do. No more of those little blue pills. They need to leave. I'll have to figure things out on my own.

Tin Man

Full of false dreams and farewells oh well
 my guest I guess we were nothing
 just tin fragments of magnetic attraction
 but it happens
 you're half today I'm half tomorrow
 we all are just tethered up in knots
 maybe missing a link
 or are we just strung out on suspicion of a tin man
 can you see who is coming?
 His face is opening

So sweep out sleep spindles
 look what you've awoken
 it's the tin man with a thin span of attention
 suspending radio signals by their feet so cynical
 we all are
 we are receiving sirens signing
 the shore line is safe now
 the rocks are all round and ground down
 hollowed and fit with tin skin
 to put a person in

So I try to find my lines
 but were they really words or frequencies?
 Was I always hollow?
 Or just empty

Prius: Vehicle of the Future

1.
 Toyota dealership with a cowboy hat wearing owner
 who talks too loud in the dealership commercials.

Cara, near-sighted and plain, sits behind the reception desk,
 reading an issue of *Good Housekeeping*—"Cute curtains. The
 dealership needs them."

Across the street, GM sells the third Chevrolet Malibu of the
 day,
 while the Toyota dealership hasn't sold anything for two weeks.

If only Timothy could sell just one Prius, Cara thought,
 looking out the front windows at her muscled, bored son.

2.
 During the new moon, which conceals lover's flights,
 Timothy wore his red-faced smirk as he pressed into the GM
 dealer's daughter.

Flushed with excitement, Emma writhed in the back seat of the
 powder blue Prius
 on the Toyota lot, whimpering as Timothy finished fast.

3.
 Late in the afternoon, Cara watched Timothy lead a young,
 well-groomed
 couple through the isles of spotless vehicles.

Mental Illness Is Not an Excuse to Be an Asshole

When I was growing up, I was known as the Tantrum Queen. I would scream my head off so loud that the neighbors would call the cops. I would throw things, pull hair, and kick holes in my bedroom door. But I grew out of that phase.

My brother, Jared, has not. He is eighteen and is still going through the terrible twos.

Let me put it into a little perspective: On the Mercalli Intensity Scale, I was a V, and he is a XII. The Mercalli Intensity Scale was used to measure the strength of an earthquake based on how much damage was caused. A V on the Mercalli Intensity Scale is described as “strong,” awakening sleepers and knocking pictures off walls and small objects off shelves. A XII, on the other hand, is “completely devastating,” “All buildings are damaged and most buildings are destroyed.” Now, I know he never destroyed the house, but that’s always what it felt like.

Jared’s destruction knows no bounds. He steals money not only from our parents, but also from his friends’ parents. He lies about where he is and the people he’s with. When our parents ask for help around the house, he refuses to lift a finger, but when he wants something, he expects them to drop everything and cater to his every whim. I remember several occasions when he has wrestled my father to the ground and throttled him. Once, he even pushed my mother across the room.

This might seem like normal teenage behavior, but I have two other brothers and a sister—I know how teenagers act. We’ve all thrown our share of tantrums, but none of us have ever come close to his magnitude.

And I hate him for it.

You’re not supposed to hate your family, but I do. I hate my

His after hours smirk hidden in his pocket, Timothy flashed a boyish smile at the young woman—“Yes, the Prius is economical: spend more now and get more later.”
The couple bought the powder blue Prius.

4.

One month later, Emma waits to approach until Timothy is closing up for the night.

He is shocked to see her, especially lookin so desperate. After a nervous twitch, her lips parted to speak:

“I’m late.”

brother. He is the most disrespectful person I have ever met in my life, and I go to a public university, so I've met a lot of disrespectful people.

Jared has oppositional defiant disorder, depression and fetal alcohol syndrome. (My mother would like me to point out that he is adopted, and she does not drink.) That combination of mental disorders doesn't make his behavior okay, but it explains it. It also makes me hate myself for hating him. You're not supposed to hate your family and you're certainly not supposed to hate people with mental disorders.

Now, I don't hate people because of their mental disorders. My mother has depression, my father has ADD, and my sister Kaitlyn (also adopted) has Asperger's and fetal alcohol syndrome. I love them all dearly. The difference between them and Jared is that Jared is making no effort to better himself. My mother calls me every Sunday, and every Sunday I hear the same story. Jared didn't want to do something, so he said, "I'm 18. I'm an adult. I don't have to listen to you. I can do what I want." He has been diagnosed with depression three times by three different doctors and is still not taking his pills. And it isn't that he doesn't believe the doctors. He knows damn well that the doctors are right, but chooses not to take his pills not only to spite Mom and Dad, but also to have a fail proof excuse at the ready any time he needs it. He just does not want to get better.

I know it is possible to get better, though. Kaitlyn used to be just as bad as Jared. I specifically chose a four-year university, despite my father wanting me to attend community college, just to get away from Kaitlyn and Jared. Once I left for college, I deliberately chose to go home as infrequently as possible so I didn't have to be around them. But now, Kaitlyn has grown up and matured to the

point where I just don't want to see Jared.

So why should I feel sympathetic towards someone who doesn't even want to attempt to change?

I should not feel guilty for hating Jared. If he were any other person who treated my parents or me that same way, I would no longer put up with it. I would cut him out of my life without a second thought. In fact, society would encourage me to drop him. That same society that requires me to love Jared unconditionally would see this as an abusive relationship and urge me to seek help, to get out as fast as possible.

I try to be understanding, but I refuse to be manipulated, pushed around, and walked on simply because Jared doesn't have any consideration for others.

I do not love Jared. Perhaps at one point, I did, but not now. I just don't have the energy to deal with his shit anymore. Twenty years from now, when he's a broke, unemployed, friendless ex-convict and he finally decides to get his act together, I'll consider reconciling with him. Until then, he is not my brother.

Standoff

You freeze, little
spider, when you realize that I have you
trapped. You know you're helpless,
and I know it too. Knowing is enough
for me, but sometimes
people need proof.
I don't want to crush you.

Some people need to crush you, little
spider. Because if you're dead
at their hand, they must be alive.
You and I are the only
breath in the room.
I won't run if you don't.

But that's the difference, little
spider. *He* needed to crush
me, proof that our standoff
was as simple as predator
and prey.

I need to crush you, little
spider, because I can't bear
your mirroring insignificance
another second. It's not you I'm afraid of,
you never gave me a reason to be.

I didn't give him a reason to be afraid either, little
spider. But I could kill
you because I know you would understand.

We're only really afraid, little
spider, of what we understand for certain.

I'm sorry, little
spider, for understanding so well.

The World According to My Hens

Chickens, you may not have noticed
when comings and goings
whittled down to mostly goings.

You probably didn't pay attention
when just a single spirit was left
to haunt the growing spaces.

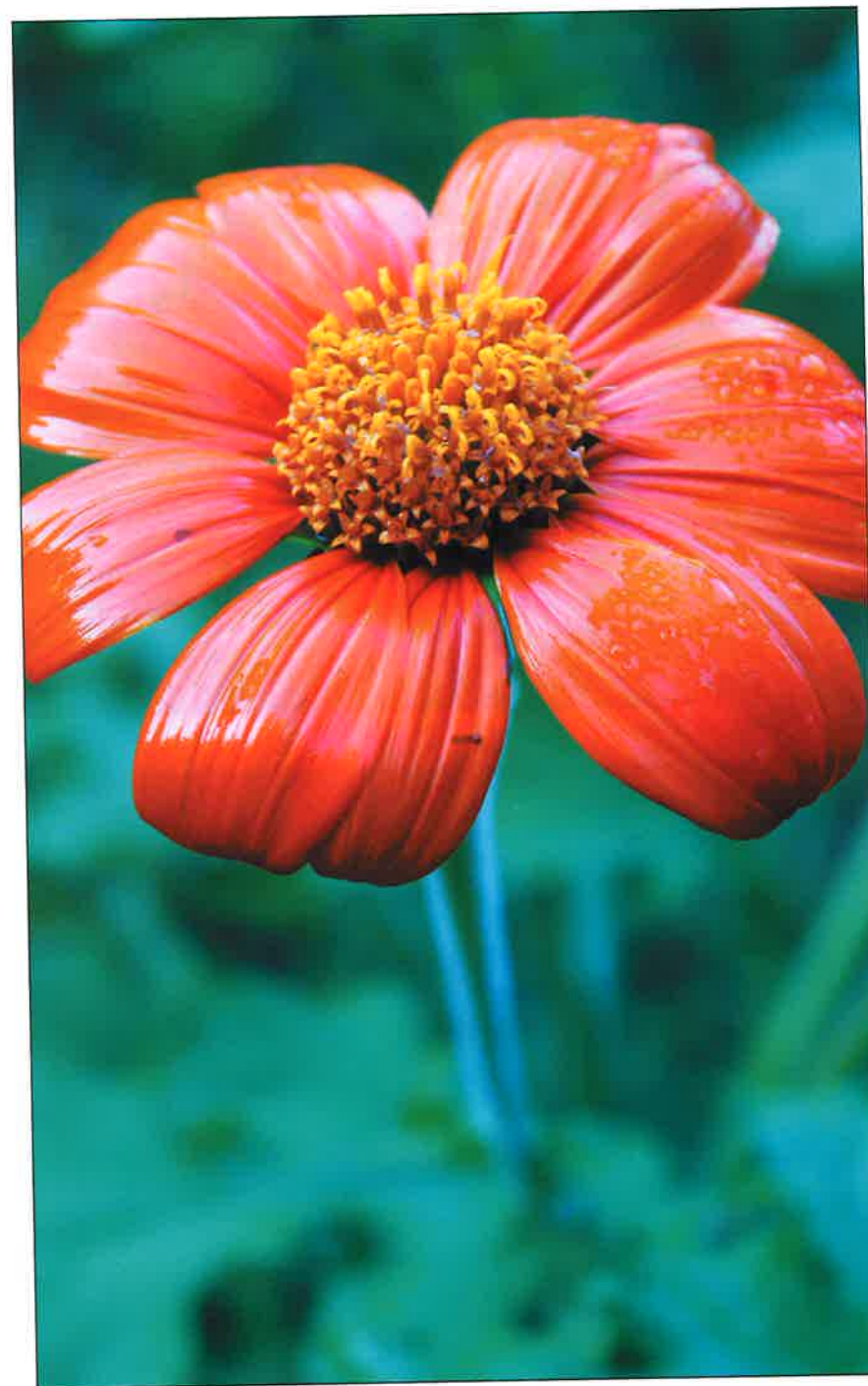
You were never the brunt of my fury,
like the DVD collection,
watched ragged in a quest for peace.

You, my chickens, didn't care much
when the heat and the lights
were on less and less.

Through the floorboards, my indistinct weeping
didn't wake you, did it chickens,
as it did my short-term roommate.

You must have even liked it, chickens,
when no longer were there small arms
rushing and pawing at you to stroke your feathers.

However, Chickens, you must
have heeded the single fact that you
weren't fed or watered as frequently.



Orange

Savannah Meiners

Go With the Flow

Laurel Fisher



Flowing Stone #2

Ryan Bailey



Blue, White, and Sand

Ryan Bailey



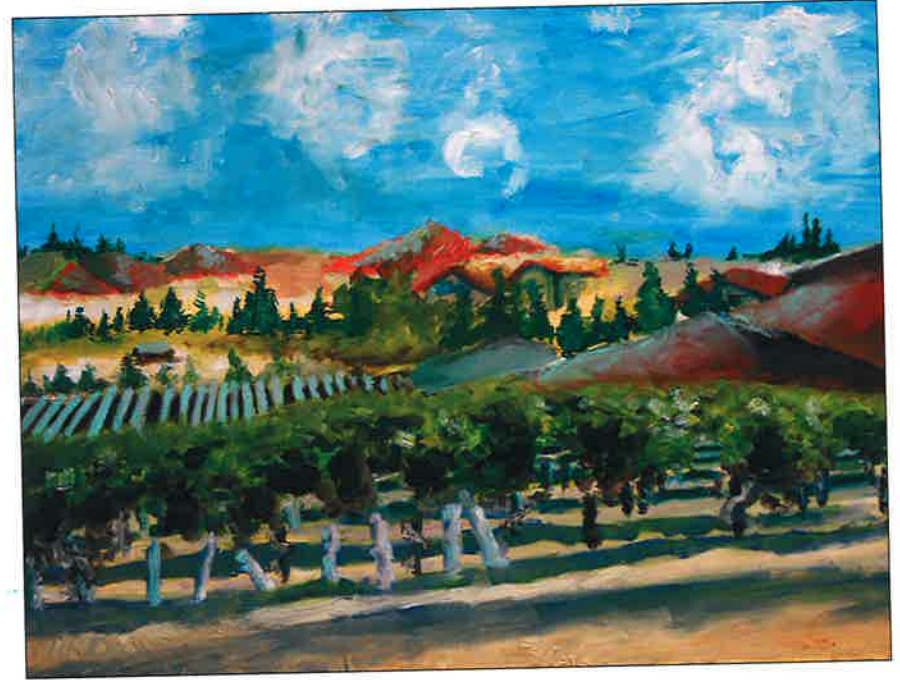
A Walk in the Woods

Kathleen Legault



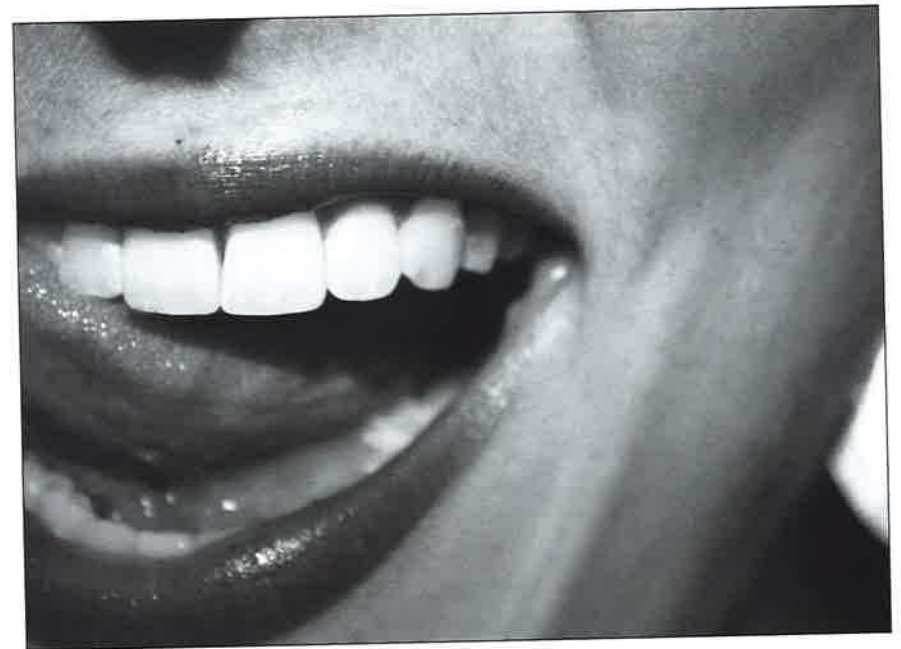
O the Bridges You'll Cross

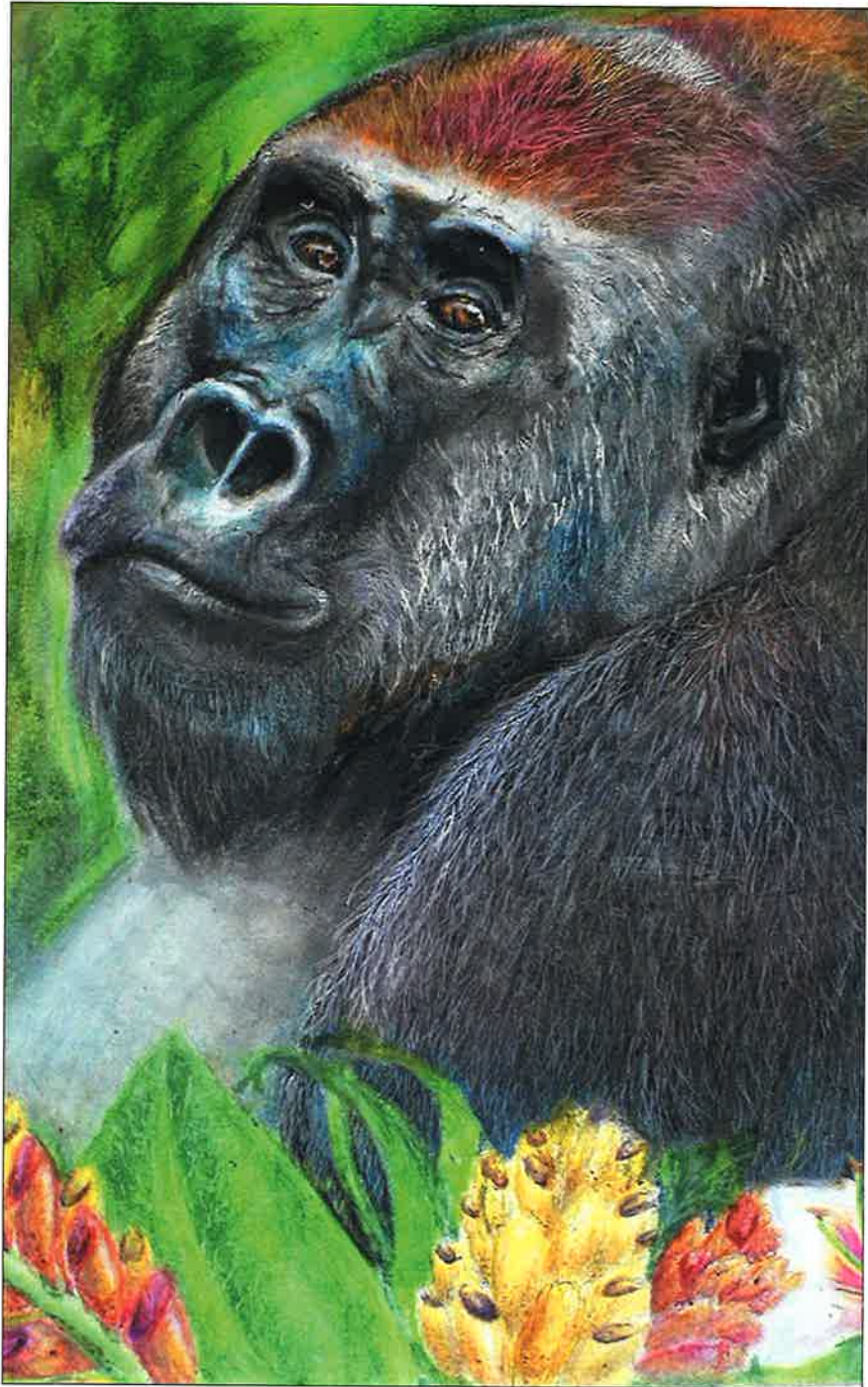
Brittany Victoria



Untitled

Laurel Fisher





Koko

Maxie Reavis



Great Wheel

Madeline Osborne

How Jekeva Killed the Detroit City Assistant Deputy Comptroller

It took not having a car horn for me to realize how necessary one is. Picture me in the left hand turn lane behind a blind motorist and a stale green light. What I do is I roll down the window and I scream at the top of my lungs, “I have no horn!” This happens often. I get cut off—“I have no horn!” I’m at a four-way stop and someone, some asshole, decides to go and they goddamn know I have the right of way—“I have no horn!” I’m merging onto the freeway and a mother of four in a Cashmere Pearl Town and Country is inches away from me, oblivious, turned all the way around, she’s in her backseat, becoming the backseat, fishing for a binky, fucking with one of the two headrest mounted DVD players, skipping to the Elmo part, rationalizing with a toddler, not driving on the freeway, not at all. She’s in the kitchen. She’s in the fucking playroom, and I’m looking through the window. I’m a nosy neighbor. I’m practically inside of her house, and she doesn’t notice me. She has no idea—this chick has no idea that I’m here, can’t see me at all—can’t see my tats and my piercings and my giant tits, can’t see my Mohawk—I roll down my window and I scream, I wail like a fucking banshee with a skinned knee, “I HAVE NO HORN!” And it works. But it doesn’t work. Because as soon as I get to my destination, I forget what happened. The journey is erased as soon as I unbuckle my seatbelt. I still don’t have a horn and I just know that one day it’s going to catch up with me.

So, the thing with the comptroller started with a drunken voicemail I sent to my friend, Toaster. It was last autumn, in Detroit, sometime in the middle of the night. This is how the message went: “Heya, sweet cheeks. This is Linda Ortega. Formally known as the artist known as Jekeva. I’m just calling. Saying, hey. Writing two epic poems. Scorchers, they are. One’s called “Big Beast in Town.” The other one is called “Alive at the End of the World.” Either would make Ginsberg’s “Howl” seem like petty larceny. Am I



deep or what? You hear that noise? I got this cat. I'm a hell of a cat owner. Maybe that could be one of the titles. "Bitch is a hell of a cat owner." He's hungry. You hear him screaming? I didn't kick him. I just looked him dead in his peepers and said, 'What's up, brother?' Anyway, Toaster, oh Toaster. Toast with the most. I'm sending out an S.O.S. The Police. Sting and shit. Really, here's the score: I want you to find as many people as you possibly can to come over here and decorate my walls. I have all this negative space and if I stare at it too long, I'm afraid I'll become it. I need art on these walls. Canvas. Charcoal. Smokers welcome. Single black female. Give me a hoot, you wise owl. Love."

I woke up on my couch the next morning and Toaster was standing over me. I must have forgotten to lock the door. He said, "Ms. Ortega, you're one voice mail away from an intervention." I honestly had no idea what he was talking about.

I've known Toaster for about two years now. We used to fuck. Well, I used to make love to Toaster, and Toaster, like some kind of magician, would simultaneously fuck me. I eventually learned asking Toaster to love me (or just implying it, really, I never asked him to love me, I never said those words) was akin to throwing a toaster in a bathtub. What happened, how we met and fell in fuck/love was, I moved to Detroit by way of Yakima "The Palm Springs of Washington" a couple of years ago. Yakima, just so you know, is to Washington what Hepatitis C is to Pamela Anderson—she's so physically beautiful, people tend to forget the necessity for dental dam. They see the forest, and they miss the Hep C tree. I came from there. When I moved to Michigan, I immediately fell in with the hopelessly disillusioned sort. The rebels-making-up-a-cause type. I came here on a 40,000 dollar scholarship to attend the Center for Creative Studies as a graphic arts major. I dropped out after two semesters.

About a month after I left school, I went to a party in the Cass Corridor—a relatively bohemian enclave of the city. It was in some kid's basement apartment, and it was packed. Everyone, including myself, was pinky-dipping pure sassafras MDA. And everything in the apartment, every nook and cranny, was conducive to advocating, activating, and maintaining psychoactive euphoria. There were smoke machines and black lights. Psybient techno blared from PR subs and my ears inhaled the sounds, and my lungs expanded and contracted treble and bass. Millions of cotton swabs swept slowly, seductively, up and down the inside of my elbow and on the back of my neck. Smoke was everywhere. And this kid, whoever he was that rented the apartment, this kid had a projector ported to his PC in the middle of his living room. The view for the projector hit the back of these egg-shell white double-cell vertical blinds that hid the only window in that room. And, by the season of Mother Mary, he was looping old Christmas cartoons muted. The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. That's what we were watching off the projector. Under the blinds, under that window, this kid had a crystal-blue inflatable kiddie pool filled with hot water from the kitchen sink and frothing with some sort of vanilla scented bubble bath product. It could only hold about three adults at a time.

I was against a wall on a folding chair in the back of the living room, a bee-line to the pool, when I overheard a conversation between the kid and this guy with ink-black hair slicked into this vomit-inducing Steven Segal pony tail. Pony-tail boy turned out to be Toaster. Toast and this guy were talking about the smoke. Specifically, they were talking about how the smoke created condensation around the window above the pool, and how that condensation had frozen due to the cold outside. The window was frozen shut. So, Toaster leaves the room, and 5, 15, 45 minutes later, he returned. And he was wearing nothing but white boxer

shorts emblazoned with tiny red hearts. And he had swimming goggles and a snorkel on his face, and fins on his feet. He was holding a hair dryer. He made his way through the crowd, through the smoke, stepped into the pool, drew up the blinds, plugged in the dryer, aimed the business end toward the window, turned it on, and a potential viral video began. Someone should have said something. 5, 15, 45 seconds into it, Toaster dropped the hair dryer into the pool. By the grace of Thor, nothing happened. Thing is, most bathroom destined electrical appliances are affixed with ground fault circuit interrupters. I read about it somewhere. Happened in the '80's. It's a mechanism that trips the circuit and kills the current if it senses that you fucked up. Toaster fucked up. And just before it happened, just before he dropped the hair dryer, our eyes locked. I could see the fear deep in him—a man in touch with his feelings. That very instant, that nanosecond, I made up my mind that if he lived, I'd sleep with him. Toaster lived. He leapt out of the pool and fell onto the floor. He wasn't hurt in any way, just scared shitless, and no one knew what all the commotion was about. I was the only one who saw it. I rushed over to him.

“Oh my God, are you all right? I saw the whole thing.”

He said, “I thought I saw a shark.”

I hooked my arm under his and helped him up. Some of the vanilla scented bubble bath splashed on him when he fell. I smoothed out the bubbles and beads of water on his shoulders, like dusting him off. I brought my hands to my nose and they smelled like ice-cream. He was still in goggles. When he was upright, at attention, I took the goggles off of his face. He had these seaweed green eyes with sporadic flecks of gold. I quickly got over the fact that he had terrible acne. He looked like what would happen if Edward James Olmos and Seal had a son. It's going to sound strange, but if you

were to squint your eyes long enough, there's something sexy and distinguished about that look. I squinted long enough.

I say, “You're lucky. If this were 1979, you'd be toast.”

“Funny you should say that. My name is Toaster.”

“That is funny.”

“It's a pretty good story...the Toaster thing...not my most recent brush with death. Maybe we should go somewhere a little less crowded and talk about it.”

We did go someplace. We didn't do much talking. Toaster has what I like to call patriarch forearms—these sparsely haired concrete pipes that pulse and gyrate and flex without will—it just looks like he could lift anything. Cradle anything. Like grandpa. I don't, by the way, want to fuck my grandpa. I just think about the security I found in his arms. One day, before meeting Toaster, I made that connection. And Senior Toast had those forearms. And his hands—I'm a hand girl—those hands—I just wanted to be Toaster's puppet. Long story short, after about three months of casual encounters, I realized that I was more like a marionette. Toaster never intended on getting into anything serious with me, and I never led him to believe that I wanted anything more than what we had. One day I just told him I'd rather we stopped sleeping together. He agreed, and we became something like best friends. Sometimes, when all the sex is out of the way, it's just easier.

So, back to the couch. The morning after the drunk dial. Toaster was standing over me.

“Ms. Ortega, you're one voice mail away from an intervention.”

I sat up, felt liquid swoosh in my belly from left to right, and I cleared the sleep out of my eyes. When I opened my mouth to speak, it was as if I had gorged myself on saltines the night before.

“What are you talking about?”

“You really have no idea? Wow. Ok. I got a message from you at about 4AM this morning. You were obliterated.”

“4AM?”

I grabbed my cell off the coffee table and checked my outgoing call history, just to feign concern. I really couldn't remember calling, but I knew that he didn't have a reason to lie about it. I sat there and pantomimed: what a terrible thing to do—it's just irresponsible behavior—I'd never under any normal circumstances—we should get to the bottom of this.

Toaster reset, “It's not the fact that it's Tuesday that concerns me. Aren't you supposed to be getting ready for work right now?”

“I was fired yesterday.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake,”

“This asshole left me a \$1.05 tip on a \$90 ticket. He was there for four hours. He had me running around all over the place. The coffee was too cold, then too hot. The sink in the men's room was too hot. The pestering was incessant, but it's my job. I know that. And I treated it as such. I swallowed every ounce of dignity I had. He hit on me. I actually flirted back. Save giving him a blow job, I was ostensibly this asshole's whore,”

“Asshole whore, really?”

“No, asshole's whore. The tip was like a slap in the face.”

“So you told him off?”

“Not even that. I went and talked to one of the bartenders, and another customer overheard the conversation. You can't complain about tips in front of customers.”

“And the customer that overheard the conversation said something to your boss? Why?”

“Because customers are assholes, Toaster.”

“Do you think it's because you're black?” he replied, trying to lighten the mood.

“With these tits?” I shot back and laughed. It created enough breathing room for me to get off the couch and snatch Toaster's cell to check the message. I keyed the code for his voicemail and plumped back on the couch to have a listen. He continued, “What's the next move? Just to put it out there: everything will be alright.”

“I don't know. Why don't you have a seat? You're making me uncomfortable.”

“I can't sit on the couch because there's cat dander everywhere. I'm allergic, remember? And these two chairs,” he points to the one next to the door that leads to my patio, then, to the matching one across from it, “—have wet paint on them for some crazy, Ms. Ortega reason. And your floor is just—”

Quick tour of my home: Coming from downriver Michigan, head north on I-75 for about twenty minutes until the Clark exit. Then, make a right on the first street off that exit, even though it looks like it leads to nothing. Go down to the first stop sign—it all looks something like the remnants of an actual neighborhood. There's a

block of three two-story houses across the street and to the right—mine is the one in the middle. Hook that right, pull a U-turn, and park behind my car. Any furniture—coffee tables, end tables, rocking chairs, TV stands—on the grassless front lawn have been discarded by my downstairs neighbor. Any of it is up for grabs. Just across the street is a tortilla factory that begins production at 7AM, 7 days a week. Smell the goodness and smile. Welcome to Southwest Detroit, affectionately called “Mexican Town.” Turn around and ring my bell—it’s the one on top. When I open the door, there’s a flight of stairs behind me. That’s where we’re going. My neighbor’s door is just to the right of the bottom of the steps. Walk the planks, creaking up to my place, and at the head of the steps, just about the entire interior of the apartment can be seen: tiny bathroom straight ahead, and from its vantage point, a door leading to a kitchen in which I could extend my arms and touch the walls, then, a single bedroom with a door in the far right corner pocket that leads to the kitchen, and, behind me now, behind the stair case, is the living room. Let’s go in there. Shitty brown carpet stretches out ahead, but, to the right, maybe 8 feet ahead and creeping into its own expanse, is a small area with checkered linoleum; it’s a cut off space with three mirror-plated walls and a dinner table dead center with a stereo as a center piece and no chairs. To that area’s right is a door leading to the patio, and a teal microfiber chair that I spilled paint all over. Still in the entrance, and to the immediate left, next to the couch, is the chair’s twin brother, also drowning in paint. In front of the couch is a nearly dead coffee table I found outside when I moved here, and in front of that, deep right, is a TV that’s never on; and everything, everything is enclosed by naked walls with no sense of humor; and the floor—I almost forgot—the floor is riddled with toenail clippings—like spent bullet shells. The chick that lived in this place before me was an in-home pedicurist, and there isn’t a

day that I don’t find evidence—they’re like eagle talons—there is no vacuum on the fucking planet—

“—ever since you told me about the previous tenant, there’s no fucking way I’m sitting on your floor.”

“Suit yourself, Toast.”

I got up and headed to the kitchen. There, I saw my cat. A puddle of cat on the kitchen floor. I leaned over and picked him up. His eyes were still open. I don’t remember any sounds coming out of my mouth but something must have happened because Toaster rushed into the kitchen. I must have been crying because he took his hands and cradled my face—took his thumbs and parted away wet underneath my eyes.

Toast goes, “Oh no. What happened?”

“This fucking happened is what happened!” I must have screamed. “My cat is dead. He’s diabetic. I left his treats out. I never gave him his second insulin shot, and he gorged himself and died. And I was on the couch. And where were you? Where were you when that asshole was hitting on me? Where are you, ever? You piece of shit! Get the fuck out of here!”

I began hitting him. I know I did. I held onto the cat and I started swinging my fist at Toaster—they landed anywhere, everywhere. Toaster said something about being there for me, but I couldn’t stop. He made his way downstairs and out the door. I ran to the den, opened the patio door, stepped to the ledge, and I launched the cat at Toaster’s car. I missed by about ten feet. And he pulled off.

I ate. A few hours after toaster left, I ate. Ceviche and tortilla chips. Then, I picked up the computer. I remembered my voicemail.

Still didn't remember calling, but I remembered what I heard and it made sense—the walls and all that negative space. I logged onto Craigslist. I posted an entreaty, a wish, a supplication, a petition in the strictly platonic section:

Dear Whomever,

I really don't know why I'm here. I'm not a freak. Not to say that any of you are freaks—live your lives. Have at it. Post pics of your dicks. We all just want to connect, right? I get it. I must say, I'm not looking for that kind of connection right now. This is the strictly platonic section, yet and still, I've ran into pictures of penises. Again, do your thing, but I'm **NOT AT ALL INTERESTED IN THAT**. I just want someone, anyone, to come over and help me decorate my walls. That's it. I have all this white, and I really need to look at something else. I'll take the first response that's serious.

Within an hour I received an email from a man named Seth. He said he'd love to come over and paint. He said that he had just recently started painting—he owned *Best of the Joy of Painting* by Bob Ross on VHS, and he was eager to get out of the house and try his hand at painting without Bob's soft affirmations of life and love playing in the background. Seth seemed innocent enough. I emailed my address and asked him to come over around 8PM that evening. He replied yes.

Seth looked like Carl Winslow from *Family Matters*. He was a short, portly, chocolate man with a welcoming smile and a mustache. He looked to be somewhere in his 40's. He had a wooden case that transformed into an easel, and three blank 24x24 white canvases. He had a black eye, too. Before I got the formalities out of the way, before I even shook his hand, I asked him why he had the shiner. He told me he got it in Karate class. It made perfect sense. I led him upstairs and I didn't feel the least

bit concern for my safety. I was pretty sure that if I had to, I could have taken him. He was the physical embodiment of a Hallmark card. A get well soon card, with a picture of Carl Winslow on the front, petting a golden retriever in a lush green park at dusk. Seth looked like a born hugger.

Once we were situated in the den, I asked, "So, Seth, what is it that you do for a living that you'd need Kung Fu lessons for?"

"It's actually Karate," he laughed, "and I'm the Detroit City Assistant Deputy Comptroller. I'm a fed, but I'm not the kind that gets into any danger."

"What in the world is a Detroit fed comptroller? Am I in trouble? Do you have a warrant?" It was a futile attempt at whimsy. Seth, trying to assure me, goes, "No, not at all. I assist in the management of the city's budget. Debits and credits. Money accountability. It's very unglamorous, and I certainly can't get you into any trouble. Unless you're lying about your department's revenue. Then, hi-ya!" His attempt at whimsy was worse than mine.

He decided to change the subject and said, "Really interesting place you have here, Jekeva. Interesting part of town." He started unfolding his easel. I go, "I'd like us to take vinyl charcoal and draw all over the walls, really piss off the parents. Figuratively. What do you think?"

"Sounds fun. So, no canvas?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Carl."

"Actually, it's Seth. I know it's hard—we just met and all."

I wanted to die. I had to say something. "Seth, we're going to spend maybe a few hours together so we should get this out of

the way: Get comfortable around me. We're about to take on something really cool and exciting and I need you to loosen up. We're here to let go and just have fun. Strictly platonic fun, but fun none the less. Do you understand?"

"I got you. This is all pretty new to me, but I'm excited. Let's get to work. Charcoal?"

And, we got into it. Seth drew these surprisingly elaborate landscapes a la Bob Ross—happy trees with happy little squirrels, secluded lakes and log cabins. I drew random appendages—legs here and hands there...feet under the windowsill. I drew a life-sized picture of Seth in a cop uniform on the inside of the patio door. I don't know why, but Seth drew a dog collar around the neck of my drawing of him. I didn't ask. I was just happy that we were creating a moment.

"So Seth, why the Karate classes?" I asked. He continued drawing what looked like a snail just above one of my electrical outlets.

He goes, "I'm going through a divorce right now. 22 years of marriage. I'm in the process of coming out of my shell. I married Marie straight out of high school and I immediately closed myself in. She did, too. It was an amicable separation. No kids. We're both just starting our lives right now. I decided to get into everything. You only live once, you know? He stopped and looked up and over his shoulder, over to me, and said, "I'm happy. I'm honestly happy."

I had to kill what was happening. I went over to the stereo and put in the first most abrasive CD I could find: Dead Kennedys, *Bedtime for Democracy*.

"Seth, I'm thinking about bringing the phrase 'Deez nuts' back. It's been an awful long time. Someone needs to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"Deez nuts, Seth. I want it back into our popular vernacular."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"It's a phrase that we used to say in the nineties. I think Snoop Dogg came up with it."

"Use it in a sentence."

"You can use deez nuts in a sentence."

"I don't think I follow."

"You can follow deez nuts."

"I got it."

Time passed. We switched to canvas. After an hour or so, I decided I wanted to listen to Sam Cooke.

"Hey Seth, do you like Sam Cooke?" Right then, Seth opened his mouth, and the world stopped. He sang the first two verses of "A Change is Gonna Come."

I was born by the river in a little tent
And just like that river I've been running ever since
It's been a long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will
It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die
Cos I don't know what's out there beyond the sky
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will

I couldn't breathe. To my atoms, it shook me. The man's voice

confronted and razed a hell in my life that I didn't even know existed. I began to cry—I collapsed and sobbed and convulsed. It was like an Appalachian Pentecostal revival, minus the snakes, and the only thing I thanked God for, was that no one was around to see it. When I came to, I walked over to Seth and I hugged him. We hugged for an eternity. He was a born hugger. I left the den and went to the bathroom—not to actually use it, just to regain control. I put my hands on the sink and I stared into the mirror. I thought about Toaster. I owed him an apology. He was a shit, but he was my friend. Toaster. A few years before I met him, people called him Steve. His mother called him Steve. What happened was, he was at some party and he was tripping on acid and everyone there was tripping on acid, and someone suggested that someone go get a guitar. And Steve, Steve heard that person say: go get a toaster. So, he said he'd get it. And he took off. And even though he lived right around the corner, it took him two hours to come back. And when he came back, when he walked in, he had a toaster in his hands. I thought about my car horn. Why Jekeva, why won't you just take care of it? And my job. I lied to Toaster. I took a carafe of orange juice and I threw it in that guy's face. And I spit at him. And my boss and three of my co-workers had to restrain me. Once outside, I took a bobby pin out of my hair, removed a valve stem cap from one of my boss's tires, pressed the pin into the stem and released the air. Actually, I did that to all of the tires. And I stood there in the mirror. And things were working out. And the song was still in my head. Seth's voice was still in my ears. The bathroom door was open—there was no reason to close it—and I went, “Seth—I just had an Ah-Ha moment!” From the den he laughed, “Was it with deez nuts?” And then the lights went out.

Those were his last words. Seth had decided to nail a pastel drawing of clouds onto my ceiling. He stood on a micro-fiber

chair and hammered home a nail into a live radiant heating coil. He died instantly.

I never told anyone that ‘deez nuts’ were Seth's last words. I just said that he died happy. His funeral was on a Tuesday. I found “A Change is Gonna Come” on vinyl and I laid it in his casket. I gave his pastel artwork to his ex-wife. When I moved, I unhinged the patio door and took it with me. \$300 bucks out of my \$550 security deposit.

I still don't have a horn.

No Returns

I stuffed your pieces into drawers;
presents, gifts and junk I bought
believing pillow lies.
I can't return
half-painted houses, hopeful condoms.

I can't return
the dice we bought in love
and fear of next days.
We bought the dino plushie
for our son. Our Jude
who never saw
a day, betrayed by you
for silver plans without my smiling
Stegosaur; the dollar store
won't take returns.

I can't return
the fabric never woven
into couples' costumes,
waiting for you
to come and teach me how to sew
us back together tight like open skin
against the flow of blood
between us and your legs;
we'd sigh or thank that flow.

I can't return
to me, before I met
the me I bought
for you
at the dollar store.

I can't return
the dreamy gauze
you burned,
to bandage wounds you left me for.

The Pack

The group leader, Daciana, assumed complete dominance over the pack.

Her word was law. They wouldn't dare defy her or they would suffer greatly.

The posse followed her without hesitation into the darkness of the world.

One brave female, Ralphina, rebelled and urged the pack that Daciana was leading them astray.

Daciana was made to feel undermined, which angered her intensely.

She sunk her motives deep into the minds of her gang.

Daciana was the leech that sucked away their senses.

And the lone stray stood by herself, helpless in saving the others from falling into despair.

She was no longer under the control of Daciana, though Ralphina missed her company at times.

Her separation from Daciana showed to be the best thing to help Ralphina in her journey.

What has become of the pack? They relentlessly follow their guide with blind eyes.

They protect Daciana, who should have stepped down from her throne long ago.

Memories in the Fog

I had a hard time with depression in high school. I always think back to that time as being covered in a thick fog. It sounds cliché, but that's how it feels now, after the fact. When I was in it, I didn't care enough to put words to the feelings. I never wanted to do anything or go anywhere. I didn't care. School was nothing to me except a passing torment that I had to sit through patiently. My home life wasn't much better. My favorite part of day was the bus ride to or from school. It was the only time no one expected anything from me. I could simply exist, occupy a bus seat, and dread. Dread school, dread home. No one spoke to me. No one interrupted my peace or solitude.

Usually, when people feel depressed they turn to antidepressants and therapists. Not me. I chose to keep my depression private. I did not want to talk it out with a therapist. I did not want pharmaceuticals to clear my head. Even without antidepressants, I had moments of clarity. Times when I rose above the fog and I was able to simply enjoy where I was. Every one of those moments was with a group of nearly 200 students I called family. The members of the marching band and color guard. I was closer to them than to anyone.

Years later, it occurs to me how much they actually meant to me. I would have been nothing without them. I would have drifted through high school with no fond memories and no friends. I would have never been able to lift myself from the fog. As it is, I have few really clear memories of that time, but still, I have them. They are memories of sweat and blood, tears and medals, black eyes and broken bones. And I cherish them. They are my reward for working hard to fight the fog.

I first recognized my depression after my mom had been dead for a year. I had been in color guard nearly the same length of time, but that was all it took to get me hooked. I was devoted to the

color guard. I didn't care about school or anything else in my life, but I kept going so I could continue with the one thing that still mattered to me. My grades were abysmal, and I was constantly on probation. But my attendance was perfect. If I hadn't gone to school I couldn't have gone to practice, so I dragged myself to school every day.

I wallowed in this state for two years, working hard at the end of terms to bring my grades up to a passing level. I'm fairly certain that my teachers skewed my grades in my favor, because even though I couldn't be bothered to do quality work, I still made passing grades. I know that I didn't often deserve the grades I got. But I did the work so I could continue with color guard, because that was what I cared about. I meant something to those people. At the very least, I filled a spot on the field. Without me, there would have been a hole. An empty space. Something missing. I was vital. That's what I told myself. I can't bear to inconvenience people, and leaving a spot empty in a show that hundreds of people have worked on for months would have been an inconvenience to say the least. So I kept on working.

My band and color guard were selected to march in the inaugural parade at the beginning of my junior year. My dad had given up on my schooling. He didn't care about the grades I brought home as long as I went to school. When he found out that my band got selected to march in Washington DC, he was adamant that I would go. I wasn't against it. I wanted to go. But he still felt it necessary to remind me that I was going. He seemed to be trying to win an argument that wasn't occurring. He paid entirely for my tour. I didn't need to raise a dime. As the event drew nearer, it was easier to keep my head clear. Life was easier. It's generally hard to get excited about anything when you're in the fog, but I was. I was excited.

That's when I made my mistake—or not really my mistake. A mistake was made. A mistake I thought was mine. A misunderstanding. There was a meeting for everyone going on the trip. The first part of the meeting was a speech from the mayor, saying how proud Vancouver was that we were going to be representing the state at the parade. The second part of the meeting was used to determine code words for if we got in trouble in our free time. My mental state was my most carefully kept secret, but I told my friend Molly that I wished something would happen to me on that trip. Something that would make the code words necessary. It's not that I wished I would get hurt, or robbed, or lost. I just wanted someone to save me. She warned me that what I was saying could get me in trouble. She was worried about me. I'm not ashamed to say I liked that. I wanted people to worry about me. Maybe that's because I couldn't have cared less about myself. Maybe it's because ever since my parents got divorced, nobody had noticed that I was struggling.

She told the band director what I had said. She told me she would, and I was okay with that. I think I wanted people to know that I was struggling, but didn't know how to tell them. I wanted them to just see it. I wanted someone to come and help me. I had expected him to ask me why I told Molly that I wanted something to happen. I had expected him to ask me to explain. He did neither of those things. He set up an appointment with the school counselor for me. I was terrified.

She didn't ask me to explain either. She asked me about suicide and depression. I answered truthfully. Yes, I had thought about suicide. No, I didn't anymore. Yes, I still felt depressed. Apparently, my answers worried her. She felt the need to tell the vice principle, who felt the need to call my dad. I cried when she told me they had to call him in. I cried and cried. I could have dealt with

anything else with dry eyes, but not that. I was terrified that he would be mad that he had to come to my school right after he got off work. I was terrified that he would be mad and blame me for things I couldn't control, things I didn't think were even that big of a deal. He wasn't, and he didn't. He laughed at my watery expression when I told him I didn't know why I had said that I wanted something to happen on the trip.

In the end, I had to promise everyone—the counselor, the vice principle, the band director, and my dad—that I would be on my best behavior. That was the only way they felt like I could be trusted to go on the trip. It was a promise easily made.

It was only later, well after my required post-trip counselor appointment, that I realized there had been a miscommunication somewhere along the way. The counselor had been under the impression that I had wanted to get lost in DC and never come home. That idea certainly had not been helped when I had said that I was depressed and had previously been suicidal. That wasn't what I meant at all. I didn't really want to be lost. I already felt lost. I wanted to be found.

No matter what my intentions were, the damage had been done. I slipped slowly back into the fog. The trip was tainted for me. I spent my time actively trying to not get into trouble. Many of my friends knew something about the incident, and teased me good-naturedly about purposefully getting me into some sort of situation that would break my promise. At one point, my group of friends and I stood at the top of a great concrete staircase overlooking the Potomac River.

"I wonder if you would die if you fell," Thanh, one of my friends, said.

"Probably only a few broken bones," I said, looking down the stairs.

"Let's just push Citrina so we can find out," Tyler replied to her, grinning at me.

"No doubt Mr. O would blame me. He'd think I did it on purpose!" I said, laughing along with their joke. But I didn't really find it funny. Just true.

Whenever we had down time, I was sleeping. When I wasn't sleeping, I avoided the chaperones and Mr. O, the band director, as much as possible. I knew that they were watching me to make sure I was on my best behavior. It was embarrassing. I didn't want to be reminded of the mistake I'd thought I'd made.

The days flashed by. Before I knew it, we were waking up in the early hours of the morning to get ready for the parade. It was the day that I had waited for. It was what I was good at. I was good at color guard. I was good at marching. I no longer felt watched and uneasy. I knew what I was doing. Chaperones didn't have to worry while had had my uniform on and my flag in my hand.

With the parade drawing nearer, my excitement came back full-force. It burned away the thin veil of fog that had fallen over me. Everything that had happened up to that point fell away. It didn't matter anymore. I finally got to do what I had come for. The sightseeing was nice, and it's likely I will never have a chance like that again, but even that dropped away with the thoughts of the impending parade. Parades have always been my favorite. I find it's impossible to be upset while the cadence of drums marches your feet forward, and an army of instruments pushes at your back.

Unlike parades at home, where everything went by quickly, we had to wait for our turn at the starting point. It made sense, there was so much more security at a parade to celebrate a new president. We sat in our bus at the pentagon for hours, waiting to go through the security checkpoint. Once we were through—with only a minor setback concerning some tubas that were almost forgotten—we bussed to the staging area for the parade. We waited there for another hour or so in a big heated tent, waiting to be called to start.

It was dark by the time we started marching. Temperatures were low, but spirits were high. We marched proudly in the below freezing temperatures. Most of the parade route was empty except for the police and other security, but we marched for them. When we got to the square, where President Obama waited and watched, we marched despite frozen fingers. The square was lit up like day. Crowds of people sat on bleachers watching history march by. Signs on both sides of the street told the members of the parade to look up and to the left. And even though we were told not to, we did. There, in his glassed room, stood President Obama. Watching us. Waving at us.

We were giddy as we waited for our bus to come pick us up. We huddled and hugged for warmth as much as to tell stories of the parade and share in our collective euphoria. My group of friends and I gathered around Thanh, laughing as we tried to shield her from the cold, while she gripped hand warmers, desperately trying to regain feeling in her fingers.

When we got off the plane at the Portland airport the next day, reporters and proud parents had come to welcome us home. Most of us. No one was there for me. My dad was at work, and I had no one else. I hardly cared. Life was back to normal. I was back

in the fog, but the memories from the day before, while I was marching, proud and happy, were fresh in my mind. They kept me just a bit higher. They made it easier to remember what it felt like to be happy. That made it worth it. I have dozens of little memories of happiness—moments of clarity, scattered along in the fog, that helped me to drag myself clear of my depression. I have big moments too. Shining ones, like that euphoria after the parade. And tarnished ones, like the days leading up to the parade, where I was happy but couldn't make myself forget. They all make living easier to manage. The memories I have from those events are my rewards for keeping my head clear for extended periods of time.

I'd like to say I got better quickly and that I was finally able to enjoy the wonderful things that were happening in my life. But that's just not how it works. People don't just get better. I still get depressed sometimes, and I still don't take antidepressants. I'm not better, and I'm not sure I ever will be. High school was the hardest time in my life so far. Still, I got through it. The important thing was that I made those memories, even while I was struggling to keep my head out of the fog. They help me when I feel down, when I have doubts, when I feel alone. I can only get better from here.

Odd Tendencies

My mother had been a fascinating creature, a writer: One of those professions famous for odd tendencies. She wore a lot of jewelry, all of the time, until she had to write. Then it was all removed and set aside as if she ridiculously thought the rings on her fingers would somehow interrupt the flow of creativity from her mind to the pen in her hand.

I can recall one conversation we had about literature when I was just barely beginning my second year of college. I was going into the family business, art, not specifically writing like my mother, but the freer, visual form. We were discussing authors and I mentioned that in my required English class we had just read a work of Alice Walker's entitled: "Everyday Use." I began by rambling on and on about how misunderstood Dee was, how she was a courageous woman merely wanting to outlive her sedentary mother and sister. I ranted and raved for about twenty minutes then took a pause. My mother interjected: "I like Alice Walker. Her works are very relatable."

I was shocked, confused.

"What do you mean?" I said. "You are a well-off white woman. Who are you to identify with such a work?"

She looked hurt not necessarily by the labeling of her situation, but by what I now recognize as my educated ignorance.

"Writers write about what they feel they know. They write from experience and for the most part they do not write to only audiences of family or people of similar fate. For what would that do?" she said, rising from her spot on the window seat in the living room where we had both been sitting. She walked slowly, almost aimless in motion, but obviously there was purpose in her mind. She played with her hair that had only moments ago been

haphazardly thrown into a messy bun and continued as though there had been no pause:

"What would that do... we'd have more experience of literary déjà vu than epiphany. From what I've learned, writers want people to feel something, whether it's guilt, or sorrow, or joy, or understanding, that feeling itself makes the text relatable." She paced back past the window, stopping for a moment to play with the large agate ring she wore on her right index finger and gaze out at, what, I don't know. Then she turned to me and her mind was obviously back in that moment as she looked straight into these eyes which almost mirror hers.

"I'm a woman who was once terribly and wrongfully ashamed of my background," she said with increasing emotion, "as Dee was, ashamed on more than one occasion of my own family. Now they're gone, but my own history isn't. So don't ask me who I am to identify with such a work. Sometimes I hardly know who I am, but I'm learning. That is why I write, so that hopefully one day I will inadvertently find myself on paper and understand why I'm here."

My mother was a fascinating creature, an intellect, one of those professions famous for being able to call someone out on their shit. She wore a lot of jewelry, all of the time, until she had to write, then it was all removed and set aside in order to keep nothing between her and her work. In order to keep focused, for she had a story to write, questions to answer, her self to find... and apparently so did I.

A Great Uncle

I'm playing cribbage for the first time
and I wonder what it was like
playing in Boogie Manor,
after nights of driving aimlessly
with a six-pack and friends,
trying to get lost and find
your way out again.

Once someone bet you couldn't go
a year without a smoke.
Well, you did, and with the money
you saved, you bought another pack.
You never smelled of smoke though.
I just remember the smell of the gel
that slicked back your hair so well—
Even your wife didn't know it was curly.
Yet I never saw you play cribbage.
And the only thing I know of Boogie Manor
is the sign that now hangs in the garage.

There's a picture in my house
of you and Aunt Rhea,
and the first thing I always notice
is your smile that I know did not fade
after the camera was put away.
I also know your socks are orange
in that picture even though I can't see them
because they had to match the bright
orange shirt you're wearing.

Behind a door that doesn't get opened
much now, the train table stands alone,
a ghost town waiting where you left it.
Crowding the edges of the room, were boxes
filled with canceled checks
and every pay stub you'd ever received—
receipts that date back to when color was new.

I bought purple shoelaces, your favorite color,
to lace up my Converse. Just like the ones you once wore.
I wore them to the funeral where we sang Beatles hymns
and the only words I could think were:
You're a good kid. We like to help good kids
These are the last words I remember you saying to me.

After your sister, my grandmother,
left us when I was a child,
you couldn't stand
listening to the cello,
music that I never heard her play.
And I never understood how sounds
could pull tears from the eyes until
I heard the first train horn
after you'd gone.

Taylor Street

—for my mother, Roxanne

Stagehands, rigging crews, lighting technicians, and set designers scatter throughout the Paramount Theater in downtown Seattle; work is moving forward on an impossible deadline. As I balance atop a sketchy ladder, the cell phone in my hip pocket vibrates. It's Dad. I ignore the call and focus on the task before me. The energy in the room demands urgency; we've got to make some progress.

Applesauce: Grandma used to make her own. I'm not sure if she grew the apples, but I seem to remember that she did. She made it with full apple slices and cinnamon. Delicious.

Bear Dog: Or just Bear. Bear was Grandma and Grandpa's yellow lab. He was mixed, but I'm not sure what the mix was. Husky, maybe? He had the tail of a husky.

Corvallis: Grandma's town, and my second home throughout childhood. Many of my fondest memories are from events that took place in Corvallis.

I sneak away for a smoke. The only quiet spot I can find on the busy street front is the dirty, dank loading dock. I return Dad's call.

"Are you busy?"

"Yeah, I'm at work."

"Well you should try to get down here."

Dentures: I remember when Grandma had to get dentures. It made me sad. I liked her teeth; her gold caps added to the sparkle of her smile.

Euthanasia: Grandma had to have Bear Dog put down. I never talked to her about this; I wish I could have had the chance. She saved his ashes, wanting them to be buried with her.

Fudge: Grandma made the best fudge. Sometimes she'd make it with peanut butter, which was my favorite kind.

His tone speaks volumes; this time is different. Dad is a strong man. The course of events in his life would have tested the resolve of weaker men, men who break under the pressure of adversity. The virtues of honor, strength, and triumph define my father. The uncharacteristic tone of defeat in his voice knots my stomach.

Giggles: Grandma loved her family so much that it took no effort to get a laugh out of her. Looking back, I recognize that it was our mere presence in her home, not what was happening or being said, that made her laugh so much. She was always happy when her family was around.

Hot buttered rum: Grandma introduced me to hot buttered rum. I don't recall the occasion, but I do remember finishing the entire bottle, which was nobody's intention.

"How much time do I have?"

"The priest just left. Last rites have been given."

I leave immediately.

Interstate 5: The road to Grandma's house. So many childhood road trips down this corridor. When I was young the trip seemed excruciatingly long. Kelso was our halfway point; it became our ritual to stop for Izzy's Pizza at the Three Rivers Mall.

Jeep: Grandma loved Jeeps. She had the same one as long as I can remember, an old white Cherokee with a stick shift. I was always into cars as a child, and I thought the fact that she drove a jeep with a stick shift was cool. She bought a new one two years before she died, which she left to me and I'm driving now. It's a Compass.

Knitting basket: I remember being young and seeing Grandma's knitting basket. The needles were huge, the size of sausages. She had regular-sized ones, too, but those big, fat needles always puzzled me. I just couldn't imagine what they were used for or how she managed to handle them.

The five-hour drive to Corvallis drags on with every mile marker I pass. The Uncle Sam billboard in Chehalis, the strange semi-truck on top of the pole at the wrecking yard, the pulp mill in Longview, the Columbia River Bridge—all these familiar landmarks seem spaced further apart than I remember. The pace is torture. Day turns to evening as I glance at Portland in my mirrors and continue south.

Lanyard: Grandma used to wear one on the earpieces of her eyeglasses. I think it had rhinestones, but I'm not sure about that.

Mervyn: Mervyn was my grandfather. I think it has been twenty-one years since he died, but I'm not positive. My grandmother spent those years alone, missing him, waiting to see him again.

Novels: Grandma was a reader. She'd always send me home from our visits with a book or two. I still have several on my bookshelf from her I've yet to read.

Exhausted from the drive, I park on Taylor Street behind Mom's Kia and join my family in the kitchen. We hug, and exchange few words.

"Go say hi to your grandmother."

In the living room, I find her on a hospital bed, catatonic and laboring for breath. The horrifying reality of this day's significance is clear.

Oregon State University: Grandma loved The Beavers. She worked as a bookkeeper at the university bookstore. She was proud of her Beavers and always looked forward to The Civil War football game between Oregon and Oregon State.

Pink plastic toy shopping cart: When we were children, my sister Christina, my cousin Nicole, and I would often spend time together at Grandma's house. They played whatever games little girls play, and because I was the youngest and the only boy, they would never include me.

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*: Grandma introduced me to this film after I noticed it on her shelf. We never watched it together, but years later when I saw the film for the first time, I was speechless. My Grandma was a total badass disguised as a sweet old lady.

Roller skating rink: There was one in the next town over from Corvallis. Christina and I loved going to the rink when we visited Grandma.

I sit with Grandma for a while. Uncomfortably perched beside her on the bed, I take care to avoid her broken arm. Weeks earlier she had taken a fall, but considering her weak state the doctors had worried about the trauma of surgery, so the fracture remained untreated.

I find myself choking as I try to speak, as if the painful struggle of her breath has offered me its cottonmouth. Mom insists that Grandma can hear me, and needs to hear me. Mom tells me that it is important to say good-bye. I whisper 'I love you, Grandma' through parched lips, but I just can't say a 'good-bye.'

Squirrels: Grandma and I would sit on the porch, watching squirrels run in the trees. I would talk to them by clicking my tongue; she thought their response to this was wonderful.

Tomato Soup: I hated it, she always tried to get me to eat it.

Urine: There was a time when Westin, my mother's Maltese, peed on the carpet. Grandma and I were the only ones in the room; she was wide-eyed and embarrassed on the dog's behalf. The expression on her face was priceless.

Vaporizer: A friend had recommended my mother introduce medicinal marijuana to Grandma as an option to deal with the pain she was enduring. She used a vaporizer.

Mom, Dad, Christina, and I sit quietly at Grandma's side in her living room. We attempt conversation, but the futile, inappropriate efforts fade. Distracted by our own thoughts, it takes a moment before we notice the silence. Deafening silence. Alarming silence. Crushing, terrifying, very real silence that, moments before, was filled with the erratic, staccato rhythm of Grandma's struggling breath.

My mother's wail, breaking the silence, cuts me in half. Gripping the arm of the sofa for balance, I feel my head swell as my vision blurs. I see my family hovering over that goddamn bed, and my stomach turns. I rush from the room.

Westminster chime: Mom and Dad bought Grandma a clock for Christmas. I remember how conversation would stop, on pause while the clock chimed, because Grandma loved hearing it so much. She would rock in her chair, staring at the clock as it chimed, with that beautiful, familiar smile adorning her face.

Xmas morning: ...at Grandma's house. Christina and I would be up at dawn, pouring our Christmas stockings onto Grandma's living room carpet, eagerly awaiting Mom, Dad, and Grandma as we restrained ourselves from the beckon of all the presents. The anticipation was the best part.

Yucca Valley Golf Club: Several years ago, Grandma gave me my grandfather's old set of golf clubs. They mean a lot to me, and I still use them regularly. The covers for the woods have a leather patch displaying the logo of the Yucca Valley Golf Club. When I asked my mother about the significance, she told me about Grandpa's involvement with this club, including an annual desert golf tournament that he helped organize. Who knew?

Zigzagging: How Grandma walked to the car, while holding my arm, after a-few-too-many glasses of Riesling at her birthday celebration. We went to her favorite restaurant; it was a wonderful evening.

At the conclusion of every visit, Grandma would follow us to the sidewalk outside her house as we'd prepare to leave, and we would part ways with a hug and a kiss at the car. As we'd drive away, I'd steal a glance back to see Grandma standing on the sidewalk, smiling, waving, watching her beloved family disappear from sight around the southbound turn at the end of the block.

Today, Mom and Christina remain in the back room while Dad and I greet the men who have come for Grandma. They are sincere and respectful, but I hate them. I tell the younger of the two to be careful; she has a broken arm.

The men take Grandma to their van and drive away. This time it is Dad and I who are left standing on the sidewalk. We quietly watch her van as it makes the southbound turn from Taylor Street, and disappears from sight.

Food Fight Friends

The little girl looked down at the scale,
wondering how a number could come creeping
like a disease to ravage her empty.
The number would come to her in secret,
like an emissary for a hunger
that held her under its command.

As she got older the girl lost all command
of food. Her submission grew in scale
to dominate her mind as her body would hunger
for forgiveness for being all wrong. Creeping
after her, the number always followed the girl like a secret.
Too heavy in her mind, the number never revealed itself as
empty.

The number gnawed away at the girl's mind until it was empty,
leaving plenty of room for the number's three digits to take
command
and whisper their secret.
The girl couldn't look at the scale,
but the number would possess her feet and take her creeping
down the hall at night to face the scale's needle pointing, always,
to hunger.

Finally the girl formed an alliance with hunger,
her best and most destructive friend who kept her empty
enough for her to feel full. Together, they would go creeping
to the kitchen where hunger would lose command
and leave the girl to tear herself apart alone on the scale.
Her mother tried to ask, but the girl said she was fine, always
holding tight to her secret.

The girl trusted her only friends: the number on the scale and
her hunger, to keep her secret,
because secret friends are a kind of hunger.
But the girl's friends had built a trap, left her at the bottom of a
hill she couldn't scale
no matter how empty
the girl left herself for them. She couldn't command
them to leave her, for her fear of loneliness without them never
stopped its creeping.

Sleepless nights the girl's thoughts would start creeping
through possibilities of what it would be like to tell her secret.
But that would mean giving up command,
the one thing the girl could never sacrifice. She felt only hunger
understood her, her head was so empty,
cleared out by the number on the scale.

Even years of hunger weren't enough to stop the creeping
command to remain empty.
The girl swallows only her secret as she stands alone on the scale.

Salamander

I make my home in fire.
 I sleep where others cannot tread.
 I swallow flames,
 red tongue licking lips,
 and spit out the bones,
 charred, cracked.

Your blazing breath does not burn me.
 I've been to Hell to bathe in the gift of the gods,
 but the flames did not consume me
 the way you do.

Sisters

My sister Xylia and I are very close in age. She's only a year and a half older than I am. Because of the small age gap, many of my family members talk about us as if we are a set. We're "the girls." I'm often described as the nice one. But what does that make Xylia? The mean one? Can we only be described in comparison to each other? To me, we're more like silence and sound. That's still comparing one to the other, but at least that description encompasses more of our personalities. She is often described as dominant and abrasive, just like sound. Sound shouts its meaning from the rooftops, regardless of the situation or audience. Even when they're quiet, sounds exist to be heard. That's who my sister is. She demands to be heard. Silence can only exist in the absence of sound. I'm much the same. Quiet, calm, reserved. I can only be myself in the absence of Xylia. Even so, silence wouldn't exist without sound. As with many siblings, I can't quite tell if I hate her, or if I'm glad we're related.

We never really got along at first. Our mom used to tell a bunch of stories about how Xylia picked on me when I was a baby. When I was born, she would climb into my crib and beat me with stuffed animals. When I could crawl, she opened the front door so I could crawl my way to the busy street outside our house. As we got older, our relationship didn't change much. When I was in first grade, she threw a sawed off tree branch at me and I had to get ten stitches above my left eye. If you look through our family photo albums, you'll see several pictures of her and me together—her arm looped around my neck like she's strangling me.

But our relationship wasn't just her tormenting me, and me letting her. When we finally got separate rooms, I was still pretty young and prone to nightmares. She never once turned me away from sleeping in her room when I got scared. When our parents divorced and we had to go live with our dad, we stuck together.

Neither of us liked our dad, so when the courts granted him full custody we had to help each other if we wanted to survive. The help we offered to each other wasn't what you'd expect. I helped her sneak out of the house, and she started fights for me.

She has always been very adept at starting fights with our dad. In some ways, those fights made my life harder. When our dad was angry with her, I would be the one he yelled at because he knew that Xylia would never listen to any lecture he gave. She always stormed away in a huff when she was finished arguing. I just let people yell at me, and he takes full advantage of that after a fight with my sister. But she helped me by starting some of those fights too. It seems counterintuitive, but when he was yelling at me about her, the wrath wasn't really directed at me. It was much easier to deal with his shouting at me when it was about Xylia. Maybe she never started them on purpose. Maybe there's a part of her that has to make every fight about her and it was never about me at all. But I like to believe that she was starting them to help me out.

Most of the fights she started for me were while I was being yelled at about school. Our dad liked to yell at me about school because I was never as good as Xylia. She's always been the smart one. I knew I could never be as good as her, so I never tried. My work was especially bad in math. My dad would scream in my face until I had shown him that I could do my math problems on my own. Then he would wait in tense silence as I completed my work in front of him. Even as a freshman in high school, the only resistance I ever offered was a silent glare, which was often softened by the tears streaming down my face. Some days, when I didn't understand how to use an equation, or when I couldn't do my multiplication tables quickly enough, he would ask me if I was stupid at top volume.

On those days, I would cry until I was lightheaded and I couldn't cry anymore and all I could do was gasp for air. But then I still had to force my brain to figure out the equation. On several occasions, when he was in the middle of yelling and I was in the middle of crying, Xylia would find something she didn't like in what he had said. It could have been anything. Anything. Maybe she sought out the opportunity to fight. Maybe she purposefully looked for things she could take some sort of offense from. She would argue just as loudly as he did. And just like that, the spotlight was off of me and on to her. After his fight with her was over, he would lecture me, just like always. But he wasn't yelling about how stupid I was, so I was off the hook.

It didn't occur to me until much later that maybe she started those random fights on purpose. That maybe she was trying to protect me the little bit that she could, in the only way she knew how. Since then, we've grown remarkably close. She visits me at school, and I stay at her house all night and play games with her when I'm back home in Vancouver. There are still days when I want to hate her, when I don't want to talk to her. But there are also days when I look back on all the shit we've been through, all the torment, and I find myself feeling lucky—blessed even—that I got her as a sister.

OCD

I almost had a melt-down
in Aisle 3 because they didn't have
my soap. I've been using the same soap
for years. How can they not have
my soap? It's my soap.
Why don't they have it?
I tell myself it's only soap.
It'll be okay.

Walking home, I stepped on a crack
and I thought about walking all the way
back to the store and starting again
just so I could do it right this time.
Instead, I struck a deal,
to not step on any more
cracks all the way home.

A sudden thought pushes its way in:
what if my house is on fire?
Those things that I didn't
bring to school with me
gone. Our whole lives turned
into ash. I hope the cat got out okay.
My nails dig into my palms,
pull me out and I scrape
out that thought and throw it away.
It's not mine.

Finally back from the store,
I walk through the cafeteria
I touch each chair with my
free hand. When I stop at
the drinking fountain I count
each sip. One. Two. Three.

Sitting in class, I count each
piece of paper on the wall
and regroup the words on the board
so they nicely pair off
with each other until I realize
I have no idea what anyone's said

The Drums

The sound of the drums hit me with their pounding. The performers pound with their mallets while I am walking by—barefoot in the lush grass. My feet glide on their own and I cannot help but to follow their lead. My arms rise slightly while I unintentionally step onto a stage all my own. The beat of the drums hits me and off I go—dancing, I close my eyes and impulsively let go. I feel strangers, people passing by, gaze at my fast moving body, gawking in awe. The drums pause as another song starts, changing my movements from graceful to hurried. Music enters my ears and leaves through my feet, stealing attention from everyone around. I did not know I could dance like this and even now it is not me but the melody itself, using me to show its beauty. Finally, my feet start to slow as the song comes to an end. Pausing, I open my eyes and acknowledge the crowd gathered around me. They applaud as I foolishly stumble away, embarrassed, leaving my stage, never to return there again.

How to Become a Princess

Start with a dead mother. (If you wish for a challenge, you may off your father instead.) If your mother died in childbirth, congrats! You're one step closer to becoming a princess. If your mother is unfortunately still alive, do not fret. There are ways to deal with the problem. Starvation is a popular option. Wake up before your mother and collect the eggs from your flock. Hide them in the hollow tree in the woods near the river. Steal the fresh loaf of bread your mother baked, and when your mother sends you out to pick berries, have yourself a feast. Bring back only a handful of berries, and tell your mother they were all you could find. Tell her that she should eat them; you aren't hungry. Don't worry. This will not hurt your plan. As your mother, she will insist that you eat them instead. Repeat this until your mother withers away. Be sure to hold her hand and cry as she lovingly tells you from her deathbed to be good. With this method, it will be nigh impossible to convict you of matricide. If you do not have the time or patience for this method, you may try mixing in some belladonna berries with the other berries you bring back. Just be sure not to eat any yourself.

When your father returns three months later from his trip to town, be sure you look properly forlorn and mournful; rub some dirt into your face and don't pick the twigs out of the bird's nest of your hair. When you hear his horse and rickety cart approaching, rush to your mother's bed and weep over her body. The next time your father returns from town, he will bring with him your new stepmother. Hopefully, she is a noblewoman, for she will be your free ride to court. However, if your father married low a second time, you're shit out of luck.

After your stepmother moves you closer to the castle, you can ignore her. She is of no consequence. Become acquainted with a castle servant instead. Castle servants are the eyes and ears of

court. They will know the prince's routine. Learn it. Find out when he leaves the castle grounds and where he goes. Take daily walks along his route. Dress modestly—not cheaply—for these walks. You don't want to be too showy, but you also don't want to look like a peasant. While walking the prince's route, sing to the animals. One day, he will run into you, enchanted by your beautiful voice. (If you sing like a toad, perhaps it's best you give up on your dream of becoming a princess right now. An angelic voice as pure as gold and as soft as silk is a necessary trait for a princess.)

When you run into the prince, or rather, when the prince runs into you, be coy. Do not tell him your name. Do not tell him where you live. In fact, don't tell him anything personal. In a quiet, breathy voice, vaguely mention something about forgetting the time and needing to be home right away. Run off in the middle of the conversation. Avoid his route for at least a week. Pretend he has the plague (which he may very well have—be cautious). This will give him time to go crazy wondering who you are and if he'll ever see you again.

If by the end of the week the prince has not invited all the eligible ladies of the kingdom to a ball, then you may return to taking daily walks along his path. Repeat as necessary until the prince sponsors that festival.

There are many paths in the woods, so if your prince does not have a regular walking route, explore some of the side paths.

Path number one: Every forest has at least one hidden tower. Spread the word of a maiden shut away in this tower. Don't be afraid to play around with your story a little. Perhaps she was locked away in the tower by an evil witch. Maybe her tower is guarded by a ferocious dragon. Have fun with your story! Once

the town is properly abuzz, find the tower, scale it, and heave yourself inside through the single window. Soon, news of a fair maiden in a tower will find its way to the prince's ears. As a prince, it is his duty to rescue you. Be warned: this may take years. In the meantime, do not cut your hair.

Path number two: Commission some dwarfs to make you a casket of glass. (Sure, now you're rich, but what's the point of buying a crystal or diamond casket if you're only going to use it once?) Have this casket hauled out to the forest, somewhere along the prince's daily route. Lay inside it. The prince, willing to kiss just about anything with lips, is sure to find your lips just as kissable—if not more—as a frog's.

Path number three: Develop a unique and valuable skill. Learn to charm dragons, spin straw into gold, or play the hurdy-gurdy. (Note: Previous attempts to seduce princes with the hurdy-gurdy have been inconclusive. Use only as a last resort.)

No matter which path you take, it is bound to end at the prince. Guaranteed. When it does, you will receive an invitation to a royal ball. It will be a three-night ball (all the best balls are, and the prince will have nothing less than the best), so you're going to need three dresses. Write this down. Three dresses. One as sparkling as the stars, one as shining as the moon, and one as brilliant as the sun. On the first night of the ball, wear the dress of the stars. On the second, the moon. And, of course, on the third, the sun. Don't start with the best and the peter out; you want to build up to the good stuff. Besides, if the prince has arranged for this ball, you've already got this in the bag. He'll probably propose on the first night, and you won't even need the other two dresses. (Have them prepared just in case, though.)

If he does not propose to you by the stroke of midnight on the

first night of the ball, gather your skirts and disappear into the night, ignoring any and all of the prince's attempts to call out to you. If he does not propose by midnight of the second night, run away again. Princes love flighty maidens. If he does propose by midnight of the third night, keep your cool. Don't scream, faint, or do anything to make him suspicious. Flutter your eyelids, get that ring on your finger, and live happily ever after. If he does not propose on the third night, then there is something seriously wrong with him, and you do not want him. Relocate to another kingdom and start again.

Contributor's Notes

Brittany Allen is a sophomore here at Central. She's an English: Writing Specialization major, Political Science and Art Studio minors. Originally from Ohio, she now love to call the Pacific Northwest home.

Josh Allen is an English major at CWU. He served in the Army Infantry for over four years and deployed for a 12-month tour in Iraq.

Chloe Allmand is a Writing Specialization major and a junior at CWU. She works as a publications writer in the CWU Publicity Center, and loves writing, Mad Men, and tea.

Renae Nicole Budmats is a small-town girl with a flair for poetry and a zeal for everything theatrical. She draws inspiration from her friends, her enemies, and this amazing human experience.

Megan Burch, a most triumphant writing specialization major, thinks it would be most excellent to tour with Wyld Stallyns. Be excellent to each other, and party on, dudes.

Kara Composano is an English Major graduating in June 2014. She is a member of CWU's Equestrian Team, and her life revolves around her time spent in the barn.

Donson Curtiss is an English major in his junior year at CWU. A native to the Wenatchee area, Donson has developed a deeply rooted affinity for his Northwest home.

Stephen Dougherty is a little tent who likes to get his disco on.

Laekin Dunoskovic is a senior here at Central Washington University majoring in English Writing Specialization. She has been very involved on campus being a part of several different organizations on campus.

Megan Epperson is a senior pursuing a B.A. in English: Writing Specialization with a minor in American Indian Studies. Poetry will be one of her focuses when she goes to attain her M.F.A. after she graduates.

Daniel Fisher is a Central Washington University student.

Olivia Fuller-Newberry is a Central Washington University student.

Shaylynn Gould transferred to Central with an AA from Pierce College. She is a music education major and intends to teach choir. She loves to write, draw, ride her horse, and make music.

Darin Greif has been studying music for four years at CWU. He has an insatiable passion for art and expression, and uses creative writing and jazz improvisation as his favored mediums.

Holly Heflen is a sculpture major with a strong interest in English. Her art and poetry have accompanied her through some dark times, which have served to enrich her subject matter.

Kareem James is an English major at CWU. He was raised in Downriver Michigan. He adores his fiancé, and they are the proud parents of two boys. Kareem lives in Selah.

Kathryn Landoe is in her third year at Central. She likes spending her days sleeping, studying the supernatural and spooky, and singing along to Sondheim musicals. She also appreciates alliteration.

Ambrose Johnsson is a Central Washington University student.

Suzanne Soule likes to sing, read, and write poetry. She dedicates “Someone to Watch Over Me” to her mother, who lost her battle with cancer at the age of 44.

Citrina Truver is a senior English major at CWU. When she isn’t sleeping, she is usually reading or generally avoiding any real work she has to do.

Cody Jacob Welch is a CWU senior majoring in Anthropology. In his free time he writes music and poetry inspired by people watching, hiking, and working for minimum wage.

Natalia Zalischi is a junior and a transfer student here at Central. She loves cats, long-distance biking, and, above all, writing.

Editorial Staff Layout and Production Staff

Chloe Allmand	Seana Blake
Megan Burch	Megan Burch
Donson Curtiss	RJ Contreras, Jr.
Laekin Dunoskovic	Donson Curtiss
Crystal Gruber	Laekin Dunoskovic
Megan LaPlante	Brittany Keller
Maili Levay	Sarah Mitchell
Cassandra Mehlenbacher	Stephen Zeringer
Sean Norris	
Lindsey Remmerden	
Daniel Selzer	
Citrina Truver	

Cover Design and Photograph

Megan Burch

Page Style Design

Megan Burch

Art and Photography Section Design

Sarah Mitchell

Faculty Advisor

Joe Johnson



MANA STASH

Volume 24 | Spring 2014

Short Stories
Creative Nonfiction
Poetry
Photography
Art

Cover photograph by Megan Burch

CWU | Central Washington University

CWU is an AA/EEO/Title IV Institution. For accommodation e-mail: DS@cwu.edu - 1402031475

Manastash 2014

Volume 24

Central Washington University
Student Literary Magazine