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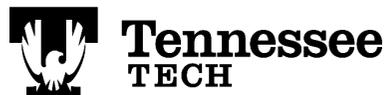
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# IRIS & HOME

by Mallory England

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# REBIRTH

by John Ngo

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# THẮP HƯƠNG OR INCENSE STICKS OF MOURNING

by John Ngo

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# PASSAGE

by John Ngo

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# SEA TURTLES

by Ann Lewald

---

How we marveled at the drama of it,  
as we dreamed her in the Florida night.  
Rising out of the sea, heaving slowly,  
yet regal as Aphrodite  
emerging from the wave wash,  
past the junk heap graveyards of crabs,  
to the curving, feminine dunes,  
alone with the moon at its full

A hundred eggs she lays there,  
laboring for hours,  
nesting them three levels deep,  
she digs relentlessly, delicately,  
to prevent the collapse of sand.  
Tears ever present in the eyes  
that will never see her hatchlings.  
Sand whirling furiously around her,  
She abandons them, turns her back with,  
a wish, or a hope, or a heavy sigh?

“No better than opossums,” the sheriff says,  
but still there are those who seek lost causes,  
check the nests every day  
fence them in with tiny ribbons and flags  
birthday parties every sixty days  
in those sandcastle nurseries.

We watched over them too, you and I,  
at sunset,  
as we walked through the live oaks and pines  
and that strange, pale green moss you love.  
Finding a nest under sea grasses,  
a place I had buried a grief,  
I felt like a mother to be.

You found another nest nearby,  
where babies had hatched near bonfires,  
seeking the ocean reflection, disoriented,  
everything seeking the moonlight.  
I found their tiny flipper tracks in the sand,  
like a suicide note  
in a strange language.

So I watched and I waited.  
I prayed to St. Joseph, who, I thought,  
brought you to me.  
But not even he could protect his namesake,  
Port St. Joseph,  
Ravaged by plagues, hurricanes.  
It's nature, you said, let it go.  
The turtles are ok; it's all ok.

Still I ran to you that morning  
when something dark and evil  
had burrowed the nest near our house,  
destroying the tiny turtle eggs  
I thought my love and will could save.  
I knew the odds: coyotes, raccoons, birds.  
Rare as a comet or  
birth of a holy star,  
when one tiny turtle touches the  
outreached arms of the sea.

Yes, you held me in your arms  
as I stained your white shirt with my tears.  
Yet, I too was doomed that day because  
turtles are solitary creatures and  
you said I was too sorrowful,  
too quiet in my shell of fear.  
And I knew then,  
The ocean of your love  
could not receive me,  
could not harbor me,  
could not protect me.

# SUN AND MOON

by Rosemary McLean

---

Her golden light arcs to  
your skin, your faded  
islands jump to life, rich  
greens and blues spread  
across your surface; a  
smile.

Her presence remains even when she  
has hidden. Her heavenly glow  
conceals my face, all you can see is  
her pale blue light—an echo of your  
desire.

I have not my own light with which to kindle  
your fires. I have not my own life to lend you,  
my dear. I can only look upon you and spend the  
night pushing the waves upon your surface,  
hoping you will turn away from her blinding  
light and face me.

# THE ORCHARD

by Rosemary McLean

---

Bare feet fly over grass. We scoop armfulls into  
our shirts, laughing and screaming  
through tall emerald walls.  
Distant yells quicken our pace, but young minds  
ignore the mortal threat. Joy—  
sticky, sweet, and orange—covers  
our cherubic cheeks.

# MY HOUSE

by Kaitlyn Wilbanks

---

I was raised in the poorest of poor houses. Not even rich enough to have a bologna sandwich every night. Most nights our dinner consisted of an ass-whooping and an old piece of chewing gum that had lost its flavor weeks ago and was beginning to disintegrate. We would keep it in our mouths long enough to distract ourselves from our grumbling stomachs and then back in the wrapper for another night's dinner when our mother was yet again too drunk to do anything but scream and fight.

"Annie," she would slur as she stumbled around with her cheap bottle of booze, "the only thing you'll ever do that's worth a damn is open your legs." I was eleven at the time, but I can't honestly say she was wrong.

I guess it's only natural that I ended up in the same situation years down the road. Found a real man that knocked me around about as good as my father did before he up and left. My depression lead to drinking, then to more depression, then to prescriptions, and ultimately ended with me half conscious, strung out on the floor in a pile of my own vomit watching my sister rescue my kids. She saved them in the way that we had always hoped someone would save us; she took them and never looked back. I can't decide whether I'm a great mother or a terrible one for feeling relief that they are gone.

Life is good for me now. I can finally say I live in the nice neighborhood. Finally got the two-story white house with dark blue shutters. The smooth, dark, hardwood floors that you see in expensive magazines at the doctor's office. In the living room, a stone fireplace sits under the way too-big flat screen TV with seasonal family pictures on the mantel. Marble counter tops in the kitchen with one of those stainless-steel smart fridges that remembers your

grocery list for you. Leather couches that make too much noise and more books than I'll ever read. I even managed to get the bright red front door with the gold numbers, like the very one we used to pass going into town when I was younger. I used to dream about the happy, full-stomached kids with both parents living there who were without broken hearts and questionable bruises.

"Maybe we can live there one day," I would whisper to my sister in the backseat.

"Shut up dummy, you know momma hates it if we distract her when she's drivin'!" And then our mother would see us chatting it up in the rearview mirror and slam on the breaks to turn around and give us a piece of her mind. We got the message. Well, now I'm the one with the nice house and white porch with two wooden rocking chairs overlooking the big front yard. I even had the big tire swing to boot. The whole nine yards. Just me and my neighbors.

I'm still getting my fix, don't get me wrong. I meet my dealer twice a week, at some ungodly hour of the morning, three miles from where I stay. I wander, paranoid, in the general direction and he usually finds me. I take whatever I can load up in a needle, smoking is too obvious, and snorting is too loud. Can't risk waking the neighbors. I usually trade him whatever I've got because I never carry cash. As if I have a choice.

I shoot up because I have nothing left. When I'm upset, or restless, or nervous, I find a vein. It's not like I can afford this kind of lifestyle. I mean, I've tried to stop, even just tried to take a step down from heroin or whatever the hell it is they actually sell me under that same name. I end up right back where I started no matter how bad I wanted to quit in the first place. Some of the things I see when I'm "clean" for more than a few days would shake you to your core.

First, you get the shakes and all the other telltale signs of withdrawal: dehydration, cracked lips, raging headache, and sensitivity to light and noises. But once the hallucinations begin, you sprint back to that syringe, which accepts you with open arms and scolds you like a worried parent upon finding that you haven't been abducted at the grocery store, but only just wandered over to

the pudding aisle. The hallucinations are real life nightmares that I never care to revisit. Most of the time it's the bugs that send me running. The first few will disappear when you swat at them but pretty soon they burrow into your arms and legs and gnaw at your bones. They are in my skin and I scratch and scratch until scraps of skin are lodged under my fingernails and my thin brown hair is in clumps on the ground around me. This is why I go back to it every time. It's what gets me through the rough days, which are getting harder to endure the longer I watch my neighbors take for granted what I never had.

My neighbors are nice people. John is in his mid-thirties, trying to establish himself in his practice. I hear him talk about his cases all the time. Defense attorney I think, and it wears him down. From the family pictures you can tell that his blonde hair is thinning and the lines in his pale face are more prominent as the years drag on. He's tall and thin, mostly because he forgets to take time for his lunch at work. All those late hours finishing up paperwork are starting to take their toll. John works Monday through Friday, sometimes on Saturdays and birthdays and anniversaries.

Allison is your typical uptight stay-at-home mom who has forbidden sugar and all things fun. In the pictures her brown hair is silky but always pulled back tight, showing off her soft green eyes and younger, wrinkleless features. She's pretty, a few years younger than John, still trying to establish herself as an authority figure in the house, but her threats are empty ones. I'll bet she's a military brat, such a stickler for making beds and doing laundry, but there's no pictures of her parents around to know for sure. They have a two-year-old girl, JJ, and from what I hear there's another on the way. What a nice all-American family they are. No problems at all. No yelling or cursing and not a drop of liquor in the house.

I'm somewhat unconscious for most of the day. I wouldn't call it sleep because that implies rest and I don't know that I've ever rested. My needle rises with the sun each morning as I decide how much of a dose would be too much and if my life has really gotten that bad yet. When I "wake up" around noon, I remove the precautionary duct tape and quietly eat whatever I've managed to

scavenge the night before. Although food is hardly scarce around here, I never take more than I need.

I visit John and Allison mostly at night. It starts in the kitchen, silently going through the trash and then moving on to the pantry. It's easy to forget how many packs of organic fruit snacks were left in the box or the number of canned goods on the shelf. When I venture into the bedrooms I take just enough to get by, an expensive earring here, a gold cufflink there, so that they think they've only misplaced it. With a mischievous toddler running around the house it's a pretty good possibility that JJ just likes to hide shiny things.

"Honey where's my other cufflink? The nice ones you got me for my birthday? I can only find the one," John will often ask with frustration on his face. Allison will reply with a list of places to search, but it's never there, and he will have to go to work without them. Later they will decide that JJ is playing buried treasure and they'll replace what's missing. It's not as bad if I forget to put things back when Allison takes JJ out for the afternoon because she'll always blame it on "pregnancy brain" and put it back without a second thought.

I moved in six weeks ago, while the family was on vacation at Disney World. I saw the house and couldn't resist that primal urge to fulfill my childhood dream. I watched from a distance and planned on taking up residence in the shed outdoors until one late night I discovered a window left carelessly unlocked. This would remain my only passageway into and out of that house. When I first went in, I checked for security cameras in the corners of each room but there weren't any. Lucky me. Only a basic alarm system connected to the front and back doors and the garage. I guess living in a neighborhood where everyone has nice things tends to give you a false sense of security.

By the time they came back, I knew almost everything about them. From John's degrees on the wall to the wedding pictures to the family photo albums, I envied them. I deserve this house. What have they done? They've never wanted for anything. Never known how it feels to be hungry. Both come from nice families with enough

money for private schools and higher education. They haven't really lived, never really known fear.

I decided I would live here too. I would call this my house. I would get what I always wanted, a big house with a big, loving family. In the attic I found an old mattress and set up a makeshift room that would remain my home for six and a half weeks. I began gathering supplies: duct tape, an old belt, an empty milk jug, a large funnel, blankets and towels, a spoon, and a lighter. The obvious survival items.

The attic was comfortable, maybe a little too hot for some people but just right for me. The unfinished wooden floor wasn't creaky or anything, but I was still cautious. I made a pathway with some left-over discarded insulation that stretched from my mattress, which reeked of urine and vomit by the end of my stay, to the small window I used for a door. I can only guess that the window used to lead directly outside until they built an extra storage room on to the house. With the glass part of the window missing, a small square hole remained in the wall and John leaned a piece of plywood up against it to block it off. This acted as my door and I rearranged the piled-up storage bins outside of it so that they could loosely be used as stairs without being too suspicious.

Each night, I silently climb down from that hole in the wall and venture down to the kitchen. There are times when I watch the nice couple sleep in their big comfortable bed from the hallway. When my frustration gets to be too much I head back. After I return to my room, I fight the urge to grab the needle until the sun starts to rise. I use the spoon and lighter to cook each bite of canned food, usually beans or corn. With me consuming as little as possible in order to remain an unnoticed guest, going to the bathroom isn't a real issue. Usually I'm unconscious when it happens, and my bed becomes my bathroom, but when I can control it, I use the funnel and milk jug and flush it when no one is home. I never shower though, that's harder to hide and it's impossible to hear if someone comes home early.

Most mornings I am upright in my bed, belt wrapped tight around wherever I have managed to find a vein intact. I can't con-

trol the noise I make once I release the liquid into my veins, so with my voice muffled by the duct tape I get the needle ready and slip in and out of consciousness. It's easier to just "sleep" during the day because the nightmares aren't as bad. It also keeps me quiet and passes the time until I am free to roam my house again.

This morning, however, a squirrel managed to get into the house, into the attic to be specific. I was roused from my half-conscious state, by the scratching and rustling of the rodent, with the needle still mostly full and stuck in my arm. It was too late to do anything, as if there was anything that could be done. I was not the only one disturbed. The attic door, which I hadn't used since I discovered the "window" entrance, began to creak open. It was early enough that John hadn't left for work yet. Had it happened an hour later, Allison would have been alone with JJ and forgotten to tell John about the noise by the time he got home from work.

When John made it up the stairs, he was half dressed for work with his shirt unbuttoned. His hair was messy from his recently finished shower and there was a bit of dried toothpaste on the corner of his mouth. His facial expression went from annoyed, likely a result of Allison insisting on him checking out the suspicious sounds, to sheer terror when his eyes landed on the setup that had obviously been there longer than the noises had suggested.

"Allison, call 911!" he half shouted down the stairs, probably not wanting to wake JJ up and add a child to this chaos. He didn't ask me anything and I didn't speak. Allison called back in a confused voice joking that pest control would do the trick. If only. He repeated the same sentence in a more serious panicked tone but added, "Someone is in our attic!" He continued to watch me for what felt like hours but was only long enough for the police to arrive. With the call coming from a neighborhood like this, it was probably about five minutes.

When I stood up on shaky legs, the needle dropped to the floor with a very specific sound. I was quite familiar with this sound, but John was not, and he flinched with widened eyes at the sight before him. In the time it took me to process that the syringe had fallen and to begin reaching for it, I was grabbed by a policeman.

“No!” I tried to shout but could only slur, “I want to go on my own time. Wanted to end things my way.” The police escorted me through the house I had become so familiar with and right out the bright red front door. I smiled and when they asked what was so funny I said, “I finally got to use my front door.”

They began to question me outside and discovered I had been there since the family’s vacation. I explained how I accessed the house and when exactly I made the attic my home. I told them how I managed to go unnoticed by my neighbors for over a month. I even told them how I went for nightly strolls twice a week to meet my dealer without disturbing the family or being spotted by a single person in the neighborhood. So much for Neighborhood Watch. The police told me my presence in that attic ruined the feeling of security in that entire neighborhood. “Good,” I replied. “Everyone should be afraid. Everyone should feel the need to check their doors and windows at night, you know? I always had to.”

As we all gathered outside, the rest of the neighborhood included, my eyes never moved from Allison. “How could we not have known?” She mumbled over and over again, clutching JJ as John spoke to a different officer. “What signs did we miss?”

“How could they not have known?” The neighbors asked each other around me. Everyone will be checking their attics and basements tonight. They’ll all be dumbfounded by the idea that I went unnoticed.

When they got ready to put me in the back of the car I called out John’s name. When he turned to me I said, “You look less stressed when you’re sleeping.” His face dropped and the haunting thoughts of me, a strung out drughead, watching them sleep filled his mind. They’ll have to move now. They will never feel safe or alone in that house again. John will say they can’t afford to uproot everything and move on a whim, but Allison will insist, and they’ll never spend another night in my house.

# CONVERSATIONS WITH MY THERAPIST

by Abbigail Jackson

---

**C**onversations with my therapist tend to go like this:

THERAPIST So, what would you like to talk about today?  
ME [bursts into tears]

This repeats every two weeks, usually on Wednesdays at 3pm.

I started going to counseling sessions on September 5th, 2018, for issues related to anxiety, depression, and crippling low self-esteem. There are other issues, of course, but those are the big three. I have no qualms or reservations when it comes to discussing my mental health, but I had a hard time admitting to myself that I needed counseling. I, like many others, had the thought process of: “Pft, I’m fine! Everything is fine! Nothing to worry about here, and I’m *totally* not disappointed that I woke up this morning. You’re crazy.”

Spoiler, everything wasn’t fine, I wasn’t fine, and I’m still not fine. I didn’t accept this until I metaphorically looked up one day and realized that I actually, sincerely hated myself and hadn’t felt genuine serenity or happiness in a long time. There are too many people who aren’t truly fine, and just haven’t admitted it to themselves. It’s hard to admit that you aren’t fine when there’s such a strong stigma surrounding mental illness, and mental health is (or was, progress is slowly being made) treated like a fad generated by moody millennials. If you don’t want to get out of bed, then you’re just lazy. If you don’t want to give a presentation, tough. Everyone

has to do things that they don't want to do, so just deal with it. It builds character. Previous generations had it way worse, you're just too soft. Suck it up, buttercup. Sometimes these statements have truth. Sometimes these statements only negate the genuine pain a person goes through. There's a difference between wanting to stay in bed because you're avoiding responsibilities and staying in bed because you feel hopeless. It's hard to "suck it up" when you truly want to die.

"I'm fine" is such a tricky statement, if you think about it. On the one hand, I'm breathing currently, so I already have a leg up on quite a few people. I have access to a higher education, so I am very privileged. No broken bones or terminal illness here. But on the other hand, I want to jump off a bridge some days. I say that I hate myself daily, and oftentimes there's truth behind the joke. I have a massive weight on my chest, and it's hard to breathe. Am I fine? What defines "fine," honestly? I'm not dead or homeless, but that doesn't negate the fact that I want to scream until my throat bleeds, or that I can see myself stepping in front of a moving car. I've skipped class because I woke up crying and couldn't get myself to shower. *Am I fine?*

ME                      Sorry I'm late, I accidentally took a nap and overslept.

THERAPIST          I'm glad you're getting sleep! Getting sleep makes everything so much easier.

ME                      So I should probably get more than five hours a night?

THERAPIST          Yes, that would be good.

ME                      Okay, I'll try.

The first step in solving a problem is realizing there is one (completed step one), but where does one go from here? There are separate stigmas that surround each type of mental illness, treatment, and repercussions (i.e., suicide), but they all center around the same theme: weakness shouldn't be made public. If you show vulnerability, you're an attention seeker. If you're a man

and you show a shred of fragility, you're a pussy. Weakness is seen as feminine, and therefore is seen as trivial. Men don't cry, and if a woman cries she's a drama queen and pathetic. Yet society has the gall to act surprised when someone commits suicide. It's hard to treat something you're ridiculed for having.

People avoid therapy because they don't want to be seen as weak, despite weakness being inherently human. No one is strong one hundred percent of the time; that's impossible. Society treats weakness and vulnerability as flaws, telling us to just "get over it" and move on. *The Washington Post* reports that "nearly 45,000 suicides occurred in the United States in 2016," and suicide among people aged ten and older "increased more than thirty percent." At what point do we change the way we talk about mental health? At what point do we erase the stigma? Part of the stigma with suicide is that it's a selfish act done for attention. When people make this argument, they ignore the suicide victim. They ignore the pain the victim was going through that lead them to kill themselves, and instead focus on how the act made other people feel. Yes, suicide affects more people than just the victim, but that doesn't mean the victim should get pushed to the side. Instead of asking, "how could they do this to their family?" ask, "what lead them to this point? How did this happen?"

ME                      I joke a lot about wanting to kill myself. I don't think I actually want to, but there's always a little bit of truth behind a joke. I always say that I joke until I no longer want to do it, and that's kind of true, I guess. It's kind of a coping mechanism, but I don't think it's healthy.

THERAPIST          It's not, but you're not actively suicidal right?

ME                      No.

Everyone was shocked when Robin Williams hung himself because he was always so funny. He was a stand-up comedian, how

could he be sad? How could the genie from *Aladdin* be so sad? What did he have to be sad about? Depression is reduced to sadness despite it being proven that it's an actual chemical imbalance in the brain. It's an illness, not a mood. So often we, myself included, say, "I'm feeling depressed" or "I don't know why I'm so depressed today" even though we would never say, "I'm feeling lyme disease" or "I don't know why I'm so tuberculosis today." If you say that you feel sick, you can pinpoint what's making you sick. If you say that you feel sad, you can pinpoint what's making you sad. There's nothing to pinpoint with depression because there's so much to it. There's hollowness, body aches, exhaustion, mood swings, and several other side effects that I can't even list because they're different for everyone. Depression just is; you treat it like any other serious illness. It's not a cold or a sad song, it's a complicated tumor that could kill someone if left untreated. It grows and grows until it inevitably kills its life source. You don't kill yourself over a fever, you treat it. Mental illness needs to be treated.

THERAPIST     You're doing well. I'm proud of you.

The truth is this: it's important to make therapy more accessible. Some therapists charge two hundred dollars per session, which is typically forty-five minutes to an hour. Most therapists charge between seventy-five dollars and one hundred dollars. Some base it off of income level. Good health insurance can take care of the cost, but good health insurance is hard to find. Even then, some therapists don't take insurance. People who are jobless or in poverty especially can't afford decent health insurance or therapy sessions. Twenty-one percent of children in the US live in poverty. Children in poverty are more likely to experience maltreatment or childhood neglect. Take those statistics with the high suicide numbers among youth, and it isn't hard to believe that there could be overlap. Experiences from childhood play a massive role in mental health, but that's common sense. Traumatic experiences from childhood heavily influence mental health, and the repercussions may not show up until early adulthood. Often times we

brush off childhood experiences because they're so far in the past, and it's difficult to recount, process, and make connections alone. A therapist helps as an unbiased third party.

I'll continue going to therapy for as long as I need to, because I am fortunate enough to go to a university that has an accessible counseling center. Others aren't as lucky. Therapy is expensive without insurance, sometimes even with insurance, and some of the people who need it the most can't afford it. Medication increases the overall cost even further. The United States has the highest percentage of residents without basic health care coverage at ten percent, yet we spend more on health care than any other wealthy country. There needs to be reform in the healthcare industry, because "the land of the American Dream" shouldn't have suicide as one of the leading causes of death among youth, or listed as the tenth leading cause of death in general in the US. We aren't doing fine.

# THERAPY

by John Wayne

---

*emotions are emotions*  
my therapist said.  
but i still felt dirty  
for allowing myself to feel  
anything.

# LOSS OF INNOCENCE

by John Wayne

---

you hurt me  
more than you healed.  
told me i was  
an abomination,  
made me feel  
guilty for being  
created in your image.

no longer  
will your house be  
my home.  
no longer  
will i eat  
your supper.  
no longer  
will i be  
your child.

# DRESSING ROOM

by Kayla Jo Pace

---

Fluorescent lightbulbs look  
down and blink like  
prying eyes. The mirrors  
that never lie  
expose every blemish.

The zipper climbs only  
halfway up her  
back. A reflection of her  
wide eyes stare  
at the open  
expanse of skin.

The zipper creeps  
back down and  
she sheds the  
second skin like  
a snake. Like her mom  
said, "Three pounds  
of flour in a two-pound bag."

Too much flour  
and too much  
flesh, bulging  
from the bag.

Back on the rack  
it goes, swinging  
with satisfaction.  
Its curves were made  
for a plastic waist.

# FLURRIES

by Kayla Jo Pace

---

Flurries drifting freely as  
The sky unfurls its contents.  
Silently, they float like feathers  
Falling with their fellow flakes.

In the center of November,  
A festival of ebbing embers descends.  
Their somber flight ends  
As they settle on singed soil.

The forest becomes flooded  
By a waterfall of ashes.  
From afar a wisp of smoke  
Slips into the sunset-painted sphere.

Searing scents of homes and flesh  
Waft through the blackened branches.  
The golden state engulfed  
By gilded, florid flames.

When the atmosphere clears  
And the inferno suffocates,  
Soot sits on the forest's floor,  
Fertilizing a stalwart sprout.

# IN WINTER

by Lena Albro

---

The snow floats calmly, like feathers,  
falling from the sky.  
Mountains of snow resting  
on branches. A beautiful torment  
for the trees screaming  
underneath the heavy burden.  
Until snap! one single snowflake  
breaks years of work.

The scratchy scarf warms  
my rosy cheeks burned  
by the freezing winds.  
My breath looks beautiful, crystallized  
by air so cold it cuts  
my lungs.

Like a bullet,  
a snowball hits a child's face.  
Eyes covered in ice cold slush,  
he aims for his target.  
Laughing.

# SKETCHING OLIVER'S CABIN

by Angela Willis

---

Standing on the worn porch boards  
long abandoned by butter churns and make-do baskets,  
we think we know you, think  
we have discovered your secrets.  
We comment on the shingle shakes and  
try to feel the ice wind  
that blew through the chinks on bitter mountain nights.

Listening to the crack of fallen limbs,  
I peer into the woods, looking for ghosts.  
Standing before the skeletal remains of your life  
I try to imagine you here,  
to see your children and the chickens  
and the quilt you put out to sun.

At night, when the smell of us is gone,  
do you slip back down the mountain?  
Do you sing on this porch at night, breaking  
phantom beans while your children play with ghost toys?

Your cabin is mournful empty,  
dark windows that stare blind down the valley you loved,  
or hated,  
but knew so well you could walk it  
easy on a moonless night.

# SHENANDOAH

by Andrew Hinman

---

I washed my hands on a ledge  
overlooking Shenandoah valley.  
The river whispered in my ears;  
told tall tales of visitors always near.  
Their eyes could but gaze, endless,  
the view the best of their brief lives.

What stood behind them mattered not.  
They embraced the view in a bear hug,  
fighting gravity to the ground.  
The waterfall crashed calm around,  
not from seethed rage but rather  
a quiet understanding of the fall.

# MY MISTRESS IS THE SUN

by Andrew Hinman

---

My Mistress is the Sun,  
and I've set out to sea to chase her.  
She seeps light and music from her very core;  
birdsongs and strings herald her will.  
Alone on the sea, she is all I need;  
I'll refuse comfort in docks of any port  
'til I can hold her in the palms  
of my cold, saltwater hands.

Even when I close my eyes,  
she shines through my eyelids.  
Dark waters lap at my sides;  
I must focus on that bright radiance.  
Pleasant photosynthetic phosphenes  
eat away wretched, wicked insanity  
that tugs at my mind, desperately longing  
for us to scuttle on soft sands below.

Though no matter how vast the deep below me be,  
it bellows like a puddle beside her;  
clear blue seas of creativity—the flowing lifeblood  
of all fish frolicking around me—she soars above.  
She shines a star, after all; burning hot,  
always at the center of the planets  
forever unable to match her warmth,  
her brilliance, her radiance above all.

Though ice and dust may pass right between us,  
they remind me a very valuable lesson.  
My Mistress is the one and only Sun,  
and I must not be willfully deceived,  
lest the cloudy white wool pulled over my eyes  
stings like dull ringing needles  
when I realize she will not always  
remain here forever to light up my day.

Granted, Petrarch has taught me well,  
and winged Icarus, even better.  
Still, my grandest mentors  
have been my greatest mistakes.  
I must take care when we sail upon wanton waves;  
her cues shine distinctly infrared.  
Fortunately, I am a sailor,  
wise to celestial secrets.

My only complaint with the big blue sky  
is that it dares stand between me,  
and my Mistress; a grand barrier  
dwarfed by the blackness that is  
Space.  
Black and blue horizons like these  
contain distant storms composed of doubts and norms,  
all racketeering society's rancid will.

My paramour—that Sun I do adore—  
half of me impels me  
to lay out upon these wood logs  
and call out your name  
as you fall beyond the horizon,  
this time, the final time.  
I would surely chance regret  
to coast with you upon cozy currents.

As for that other conflicted half,  
brought about from the dark depths below,  
it pains me to disclose its closed nature.  
I wonder if I would truly lay out in the open  
gallowed, calloused by my own free will.  
Rather, could it be Poseidon's trident  
impaling me to lie weak upon these logs?  
That other, fearful side compels me;  
it wishes to bask in in your warm sunlight no more.

Forgive me for forlorn treason; I am but human.  
I've grown fond of the night, and married the waning moon.

# BRIDGE

by Sarah Moore

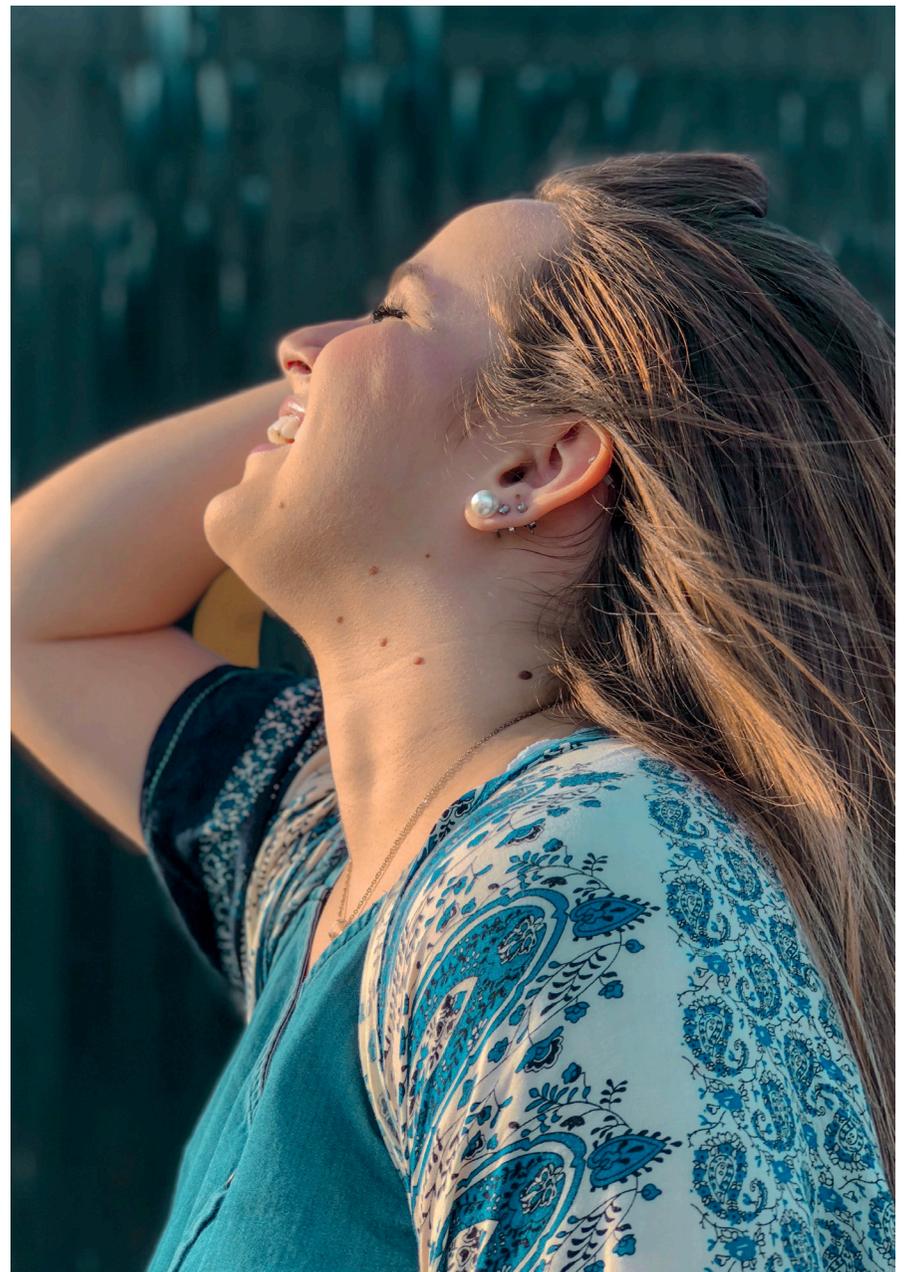
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The Earth is divided,  
I am the bridge.  
Those who walk on  
me are the forgers  
of my steel –  
strong, reliable.  
Dents.  
I am fine, I am steel.  
The pounding drowns  
out the tears.  
I am fine.  
My burden is nothing,  
they're just dents.  
We are fixed.  
The Earth comes together,  
yet the gap remains.  
I remain.  
Hammers.  
I am fine.  
Masquerades travel over.  
Ghost-towns come visit.  
I am rusted.  
I am fine.  
Do you believe my lie?

# SUN WORSHIP

by Kayla Jo Pace

---



# CHILDREN OF THE SEA AND SKY

by Andrew Hinman



# BURNING PAST

by Ian Ilgner

---

The crowd chanted “Hero!” as she and her mentor walked past. Not a single one of them was looking at the girl with coal-black hair. Instead, they were entirely focused on the tall, blonde-haired man with a large bag slung over his shoulder.

She hated that she even cared about what others thought. The bad guy was beaten, and that was what mattered. Besides, heroes were supposed to be humble. It would be a waste of time to explain what had actually happened in the villain’s lair to these people, and yet, it was still aggravating to get no credit for the work she had done. The blonde-haired man turned a corner; they were nearing the Hero Headquarters, where they would be dropping off the villain’s unconscious body. As he moved out of sight, she felt the crowd’s eyes turn to her. The chanting had stopped, and all eyes were gazing into her. She heard some not-so subtle murmurs flit through the crowd.

“How did he end up with her?”

“She’s dangerous, why does he keep her around?”

Her cheeks burned, and she sped around the corner to catch up. She fumed internally, slowing her pace once again as she returned to her mentor’s side. She was always aware of how he eclipsed her when they walked side by side.

They arrived at the Hero Headquarters and approached the front desk. He loudly proclaimed that “Ultraman has arrived!”, and she meekly followed him. There were competent heroes here that she respected, and they always saw her with her obnoxious mentor.

The grizzled old woman at the front counter greeted them with her usual disinterested tone, “Yeah, yeah, good to see you too, Harold. Everything go alright, Kyndall?”

“As good as I could hope for, Ms. Brenda,” she replied. The

two women shared a knowing gaze, before the old lady returned to her paperwork.

She typed on an old desktop for a few moments, before addressing the pair again, “You know the drill, Harold: captured villains to the detention area. Come back once you’ve dropped ‘em off and we can fill out the report.”

“Right away, madam!” Ultraman replied, speeding away deeper into the facility, still toting the unconscious villain in the bag.

Once he was out of earshot, Brenda looked back at Kyndall, “How many times this mission?”

“He almost died about three times, and the villain escaped us twice.”

The old lady sighed. She looked like she was considering making a comment, but decided against it, instead changing the topic, “Your room should be clean, I’ll take you out of rotation for a few days so you can recuperate.”

“Thanks, Ms. Brenda, I appreciate it.”

“No, thank you, Kyndall. I don’t know what we would do without you. We need more heroes like you.”

Kyndall made her way up several floors, finally reaching what she could call home. She entered her darkened room, immediately slumping down into one of her cushiony chairs. She yawned, exhausted from the two-day long escapade. She snapped, and the candles around her room lit up, providing a warm, comforting glow.

*Why do I want attention? What can he do that I can’t? Why does he deserve the praise?* These questions swirled in her mind, clouding her thoughts. He’s an incompetent fool. Without me, he’d have died long ago. It frustrated her. She knew that she lacked experience. She knew she wasn’t perfect, but she deserved better than Ultraman.

Now that the idea had been kindled in her mind, it spread like wildfire. She resented him for taking away the spotlight that she deserved. She should be the one that the crowds call out to. The fame and gratitude should be hers! She was gifted with incredible powers! The world needed more people like her!

The candles puffed out, having rapidly burnt through their wicks. In the darkness, Kyndall made up her mind. It was time to earn what she deserved. She began to pack her things.

---

The sun was setting on the woman with ash-gray hair; the sky was ablaze with trails of orange and red. She was finished with her work at the hero psychiatry center for the day, and she was on her way to her modest, single-bed apartment.

She turned into the alley that she often used as a shortcut on her walk home. She maneuvered around the dumpster and fire-escape ladder and dipped through the large gap that had been put in the chain-link fence. It strained her knees a bit; she was less flexible than when she had made the hole many years earlier.

“D-Don’t move,” a voice rose from the shadows to her right. “If you say anything, I’ll- I’ll kill you.” Electricity danced along the speakers fingertips.

The ashen-haired woman raised her hands slowly, open palmed. She spoke in the same measured tone she often used at work, “What do you need from me?”

The voice stepped into vision, revealing that it was from a young blonde boy. His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair was a mess. Electricity still crackled on his hands. “I, uh, I...,” he stammered, “Give m-me all your money.”

Instead of complying, she spoke slowly, “Are you hungry, young man?” When he didn’t immediately respond, she repeated herself. After a moment, his shoulders sank, and he nodded. She gestured for him to follow, and she continued her daily walk to her home.

The two walked side by side in silence for a few seconds, before she spoke, “I know this will likely fall on deaf ears, but I was like you when I was a teenager.” She glanced over at him; he still looked more dejected than a would-be criminal should look. “Have you ever heard of the villain ‘Wildfire’?”

*A building smoldered behind the crimson-haired woman. Carefully arranged flames spelled the letters W-I-L-D-F-I-R-E in the wreckage. Even if she had to write it on every building, they would all know her name.*

Kyndall was much older now.

The boy matched her glance, surprised. He shuddered.

“I know, hard to believe, isn’t it? That an old lady like me could be so notorious,” she snapped her now-arthritic fingers, and a small piece of paper on the street burned away. “I had a different hunger when I was your age: recognition. Not out of necessity, just an uncontrollable ambition.” She paused for a moment, “Did you ever hear what happened to me?”

He shook his head.

“I turned myself in. Then I served my time for a good many years, and now I work at a place that rehabilitates small-time villains. Lots of good people make choices they regret; it’s my job to help them make choices they’ll be proud of instead.” She stopped walking and locked eyes with the blonde boy. “Would you like to come to work with me tomorrow?”

He didn’t respond at first. His eyes darted around slightly. Finally, he nodded, quietly adding a “yes, please” afterwards.

Kyndall smiled, “Wonderful. First, though, let’s have some dinner.”

# ONE MOMENT OF GLORY

by William Fisk

---

**D**uring February of 1968, the Tet Offensive raged in South Vietnam. And it was on a Thursday morning in February, at an isolated airstrip in the jungle, that U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant Steven A Jones died instantly, the victim of a mortar round.

On Tuesday of the next week, Sergeant Jones’s body arrived aboard an Air Force C-130 transport plane at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, his bright aluminum coffin draped with a new American flag. The ground personnel unloading the plane treated Sergeant Jones’s remains, as well as the remains of five soldiers also on the flight, with the highest respect and reverence accorded any fallen warrior. Later the same day, we were told that, on Thursday, we would be the honor guard serving at Sergeant Jones’s funeral.

The afternoon of the NCO’s services was cold and rainy. The little cemetery where Sergeant Jones was to be buried was drab and depressing, a mere extension of the small, dismal North Carolina town where he had been born, educated, and lived until leaving for the military. His grave was on the side of a steep hill, treeless, overgrown with weeds, and muddy. A chill wind blew up from the mass of unkempt graves below.

We stood in little groups—the honor guard and the rifle squad—and talked and smoked, waiting for the funeral procession to arrive. Some of the men exchanged stories about other funerals that they had participated in, while others laughed and joked of such things. The officer-in-charge, a slick-headed lieutenant, sat in the van where it was dry and talked with the motor pool driver. We were all trying to forget that we were 100 miles from the base and that it

would be a long, gloomy drive back in the drenching darkness that was fast approaching. We just wanted to get the ceremony over and behind us.

Finally, 30 minutes late, the small funeral cortege passed through the distant gates of the cemetery. A dirty, mud-splattered city police car led the way, followed by an old black hearse, an antique Cadillac limousine, and six or seven straggling automobiles and pick-up trucks. We formed up quickly, ready to carry Sergeant Jones's new black casket, covered with the same American flag that had made the trip with him from Nam, from the hearse to the canopy-covered gravesite on the hillside. Off to the right of the grave, the rifle squad stood at attention, straight and silent, while the little knot of mourners gathered together under the canopy, out of the misty rain.

The people standing around the casket were an odd mixture: overall-clad farmers; modestly dressed women with their hair fixed 30 years behind the times; businessmen in worn flannel suits, their wives in lifeless black dresses; old ladies in ancient Sunday hats and toting large imitation leather purses. Two teenage girls flashed coquettish smiles at us and winked heavily mascara-lined eyes. Their damp hair hung limply around their small, freckled faces. Sergeant Jones's mother, a large country woman, sat by the casket and wept stridently. The sergeant's young widow sat next to her, the woman's face hidden by a heavy black veil. Standing behind both women, rigidly erect and dry-eyed, was the sergeant's ex-wife.

The funeral service began. The minister, a fat man with balding head and a red nose, took his place at the head of the casket. He read long, long passages of scripture in a deep, sing-song voice, interjecting his reading occasionally with trite, overused words of sympathy and comfort. After the Bible readings, he invoked an emotional prayer to the "Almighty" on behalf of the sorrowing relatives. Sergeant Jones's mother wailed her grief.

The minister then delivered the eulogy, speaking often of Sergeant Jones's one moment of glory. The rain fell harder, and small drops of water leaked through the canopy and onto the few bouquets of flowers arranged beside the casket; a breeze rushed up

the hill and rustled the draping flag. Finally, the minister offered a second, less emotional prayer and stepped away.

Professionally, confidently the lieutenant suddenly snapped out a series of commands and the rifle squad came alive, shattering the air with the crack of carbine shots. The squad repeated the procedure twice more, then, from farther up the hill, the bugler blew the lonely, forlorn melody of *Taps*. When he finished, we moved in smartly, expertly, and lifted the flag from the casket. We folded it crisply, smoothly, as we had done many times before. Then the Sergeant of the honor guard presented the flag to the lieutenant, who then placed it tenderly in the arms of Sergeant Jones's widow. She thanked him quietly, and the service ended.

For a few minutes there was that awkwardness that most always follows the close of a funeral service, that short period of time when no one really knows quite what to do or say. Then one of the mourners offered his condolences, the others soon followed, and everyone trekked back through the wet weeds and the mud to their vehicles. While the lieutenant waited in the van, we hastily gathered up our equipment. The people from the mortuary lowered the casket holding Sergeant Jones into the ground.

As we walked past the limousine, Sergeant Jones's mother, his widow, and his ex-wife stood beside the car in the rain and argued vehemently over the dead man's flag. Each woman felt she was entitled to it. All three women had a corner of the flag and tugged at it violently. They were still standing there when we drove by, all three women soaked to the bone, shouting, and grabbing, each one wanting a small portion of Sergeant Jones's one moment of glory.

Up on the hillside, a black man and white man in raincoats threw the last spadefuls of dirt on the grave.

# THE FRUIT OF ALL EVIL

by Kevin Burmeister

---

I've dug for fuel  
Unhitched my mules  
With my hunger healed  
I left my field  
To wade through a flood  
Of oil and blood  
Gonna strip the earth  
To see what she's worth  
    Until the fruit of all this evil  
    Has given birth

Can the oceans rise  
While the river dries?  
Can the catbird call  
While her timbers fall?  
While the clouds pass by  
Without sayin' goodbye?  
Without a lover's glance  
Before they dance  
    Without the fruit of all this evil  
    They'd have a gambler's chance

All of God's commands  
Are only scratched in sand  
But still the worm and the fly  
They multiply  
Well, I drew them in  
Just to do them in  
Cause the food I've bought  
I've left to rot

    And now the fruit of all this evil  
    Is all I've got

    Brothers, leave your armies  
    Sisters, leave your knees  
    Mothers, leave your children  
    With their fathers, if you please

I saw the refugees  
On my flat TVs  
Murderers and thieves  
It would have you believe  
But I sent them a prayer  
With my plastic square  
Wonder what they need  
Wonder what they bleed  
    Now that the fruit of all this evil  
    Has gone to seed

Did the seller and the buyer  
Set the world on fire?  
Dollar bill gonna kill  
If it's the dollar's will  
Did the keeper of the inn  
Let a stranger in?  
Well, my hat's been hung  
My guitar's been strung  
    So let the fruit of all this evil  
    Bite my tongue

# UNSCHEDULED STOP FOR THE PETERSBURG TRAIN #2

by Kevin Burmeister

---

All of you happy families  
Your happiness is always the same  
And everybody's always happy you came  
But you unhappy ones are unhappy in your own way

And all of you foolish husbands  
Leave two wondering women behind  
I wonder what you're looking to find  
But isn't that how a modern gentleman makes his name?  
And ain't it a shame?

Hey, Anna K,  
Hey, Anna K,  
Do you hear me when I say?  
Hey, Anna K, have you been staying away from trains?

Well, you can't make jam without water  
Because the raspberries stick to the pan  
Like a daughter never stuck to her man  
But you're gonna need a lot more than water to take out the stains

Death doesn't need an introduction  
A suit of armor couldn't cover his scars  
But the lightning flashes cover the stars  
Have you been whittling away at his heart until nothing remains?  
Except the blood in the drain

Hey, Anna K,  
Hey, Anna K,  
What will the neighbors say?  
Hey, Anna K, have you been staying away from trains?

You gave your husband a peck  
But he's an unshuffled deck  
And his hands are blue with veins

You gave your lover a test  
He put a gun to his chest  
Doesn't he put it to you plain?

Hey Anna K, has he got anything left to explain?

Hey Anna K,  
Hey Anna K.  
Excuse me, if I may  
Hey Anna K, have you been staying away from trains?

All of you landed gentry  
Looking for the meaning of life  
You ought to take another look at your wife  
You'll never get a kernel of truth out of a stolen grain

Can't castigate a carp with water  
And a feather never tickled a bird  
You'll never punish a man with your words  
There's only one thing you can do that'll drive him insane

Hey Anna K,  
Hey Anna K,  
Excuse me, if I may  
Hey Anna K, have you been staying away from trains?

Your son will not cry  
He don't believe you'll ever die  
But does he believe in vain?

You never wanted a proof  
Just some love. But here's the truth:  
You bought your love with pain

Hey Anna K, don't let your suffering heart complain  
Just throw it under a train

Hey Anna K,  
Hey Anna K,  
Tell me, how much did you pay?  
Hey Anna K, have you been staying away from trains?

# BENEATH MY BRAIN

by Kaitlyn Kidwell

---

One day,  
I tried to meditate,  
And I saw why I don't,  
Because when I cleared my thoughts and  
Emptied my brain,  
I started to cry.  
Salty tears leaked from my sealed eyes  
Because I had seen what I'd locked away.  
The true color of my soul seeped through  
The cracks that my thoughts had kept  
Glued shut.  
Without distractions, my consciousness  
Drilled through my wall.  
I touched,  
For a moment,  
The very essence of myself.  
But even that proved to be too much,  
For as I cried,  
I realized there was no reason why,  
For it was just what was left  
Beneath my brain.

# ALL THESE LITTLE BRAINS

by Kaitlyn Kidwell

---

There are all these little boxes,  
With all these little brains,  
Here to ripen at the peak of their existence.  
So let's drown them in alcohol,  
Overload them with chemicals,  
And squeeze them till they bleed.  
Because that's what's considered right,  
Even though it should be left here,  
But there'll be nothing left later,  
But later will never come.  
There can only be now.  
Because now is the only time worth living,  
Surrounded by peers of the same age and ideas,  
Ideas that are new.  
If you can't think, get out.  
You're not welcome here,  
In this house of knowledge,  
That's really just training for the real world.  
But what's the real world but work?  
Though we have to work here,  
If we ever want to work later,  
But later will never be.  
We can only be in the present,  
And the present shouldn't worry,  
Because we can't remember the past,  
For it drowned in alcohol,  
And our brains are numb.

I bite my thumb at society,  
For establishing an establishment.  
Why are we even here,  
If we have to go somewhere else?  
Is there even a point in ripening our brains,  
If we will never use them?

# AND WE ARE NOT SAVED

by Kristen Reid

---

Life, some like to believe, is eternal. Death is a change of state, an altered condition of being. None of us on this plane of corporality care to think much on what lies beyond our own persons; however, if we had for all of time, perhaps we might have understood that this universe eats, and it eats things whole with a vile appetite for being. For what does a silent, unknown existence crave more than anything? It craves to be known, and to be known fully. It screams to be heard on dead ears, until those dead ears hear the existence, but then it is too late. It was indeed too late. The harvesting of souls in Greeley County was not from God, but from something else. Something that wanted to eat, and eat it did.

I used to ponder on the why of it all, but frankly, I don't much delve into the conventions of this world anymore. It's not my world to question. It never was. I tear my eyes away from the ceiling in the dark of the living room and look down to a fuzzy, brown little head sleeping soundly at my feet with the ever-present huff of dog dreams. With the electricity out for weeks now, there's not much else to do except sit and feel time tick away amidst a few lighted candles. The only electricity that seems to be able to remain is from a few odd street lights scattered randomly throughout the town and down some streets. My street is not one with such comforting luck. The sticky, thick heat of midsummer, when the cicadas clump around the crevices of the house, has risen to an annoyingly high level, making it a challenge to exist in the South happily, but the real challenge to exist in the South happily and to be able to sleep at night is not one born out of humidity and weather.

Buck now sits up on the couch with me wagging his tail,

because he knows just as much as I do that there's no rest to be had. Having Buck remain here with me has been the only thing that keeps my sanity in check, because Lord knows how I would've managed being out here in the middle of nowhere on some long-forgotten dirt road alone through all this. Those things must not want Buck. For some strange reasoning, these things do not want animals. Cats and dogs wandering the streets without their owners do so without worry. Perhaps they are too pure to be taken by such evil. I just fear for Buck's loneliness when the time comes.

I pat his head, and he happily groans and wags his tail. I know that there's just a few of us left in Greeley, and every night I make a run to Flo's Diner for the town's nightly group meeting to, if nothing else, see who is left and sit in the comfort of others no matter how terrible the company has gotten. What started off as town-wide meetings of protection, shelter, and defense at Greeley City Hall soon petered out into residents that could be counted on one hand and a shift to a shelter with beer, coffee, and one backup generator that through pure dumb luck remained.

I kiss Buck's nose, "I love ya, boy. I love you. Don't you forget that." He wags his tail excitedly. "I'm headed out again, but I'll be back. I promise. Stay safe, alright, Buck?"

I grab Dad's revolver from the table without checking it. It can't truly protect me from anything, but I just do it now to sustain what sense of protection my human mind holds in the feeling of the weight of a gun. When I came home to Greeley after being gone for years, I had walked right into the middle of whatever events were taking place. I had walked up the front porch steps dreading to see my father again, only to see his revolver instead lying beside streaks of blood on the wood and what I assumed to be human skin.

The air has taken on the putrid smell of rotten meat since the emergence of these things, and I wish that I could recall the days when it all just smelled like the earth. I start up the old truck and back out. At the end of the dirt driveway, I look back at it all, taking in the sight of the old house in the darkness. The white slats are more of a brown shade now, Great-Grandpa's rocking chair on the porch ghostly rocks from the wind, and the dial atop the house

marks the silent farm with its metal creaking. It all looks dead. I suppose it is. I suppose we all are soon to follow our memories into the ground.

The randomly lit street lights are always a bittersweet relief to see these days. Probably more bitter than sweet, like a blackberry picked too early: a hint of delight only to be overshadowed with tart pangs that make your gums sore. There's something in the black dark that keeps you sane, because it is not like the light that makes realities known. In the dark, one can't clearly see the horrors that surround one's self.

I can't recall the last time I wore a seatbelt or went the actual speed down 73 for that matter. There is nothing on the road these days except for myself and the dusty billows of dirt that churn up behind my tires. I pass by the old Methodist church on the right, noting the rotted wooden walls covered in red streaks of frantic graffiti. "This is Hell and we can't leave" is the most prominent message that the vandal had time to spray across the side of the building. We all know we're in hell. We don't need to be told by painted words.

Flo's neon diner lights shine relief into my soul as I pull in. There are only three people inside.

"For, behold, I will send serpents among you, which will not be charmed, and they shall bite you, saith the Lord!" Reverend Chase booms boldly inside the diner, clutching at his Bible like it's the one thing holding him to the ground. He's in his black robes, hair slicked back under his hat, with eyes harsh and empty. He had always looked dead even before his final hours were marked. I push the door open with a metal jingle notifying the inhabitants of my coming.

"The harvest is past. The summer is ended, and we are not saved. Jeremiah, chapter eight... I remember some of that from when I was a child," I say, walking over to an empty seat at the bar counter and sitting down, "Well, the summer is not over, the harvest continues, but alas, we are indeed not saved." I adjust my hat and motion for Queenie to get me a cup of hot coffee, "What's your little book of wisdom say about ghosts then, Reverend?" I catch

Queenie shaking her head right before she sets the mug of black liquid in front of me.

Reverend Chase keeps his tired eyes forward and clears his throat, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed! Death will be swallowed up in victory, dear friend—"

"You know, I like the enthusiasm. I like the lingering glitter of hope in your eyes and words. Must be the whiskey that keeps it there."

He closes his Bible with a finger stuck in place, so he won't lose his page of folly. "I beg your pardon, Miss Clay. I am a man of reform, same as some of us are and as some of us should be. The devil also lingers in vanity."

"Vanity? I care not for my looks or for a mirror for that matter. I am quite ugly."

"A life steeped in philosophy that boldly claims it in vanity does not a reformed person make."

"What's the point of reform when all you've got is maybe a few hours?" I chuckle slightly and turn my attention over to a slovenly man in dirty, baggy clothes at the back corner of the diner nursing a cigarette stub, "Ain't that right, Darin?" Darin stares at me coldly before taking another drag.

"I'd say we have Greeley's finest right here in this diner... a *reformed* drunk, an escaped convict, a Pagan loony, and a poor idiot who planned a homecoming at just the right time. I'm sure there's a joke in there somewhere. Whoever shall be the next to be 'harvested'?"

"I need another reading, Reverend," Darin says through a smoker's cough.

"Spending your time on such nonsense will leave you dying without any of your wits about you."

"The devil is alive in the South, and if the devil is alive, then God must surely be around here somewhere," he says while keeping his eyes down.

"Yes, Darin, yes the Lord shall not leave behind those that believe!"

"He's left behind four fools. What if this is all that end times

storytelling come to reality? God's taken the ones he wants. Old Revelations. How does that make you feel, Reverend? A man of your esteem?"

"Jenny and Davey's Corolla is empty out by the county line. I saw it. Just like the rest of those poor folks tryin' to leave. It's a car graveyard, lining up with all of Greeley just vanished from 'em. I told 'em not to try to leave. I told 'em, I did, but they not listen. None of 'em listen, even though they see them empty cars," Queenie interjects, as if in some strange conversation with herself.

"God isn't behind this. Those people taken... those people were taken by something not right. Not good. Besides, old lady Hattie was taken just the other day. You're telling me that sweet old woman who sings nothing but hymns and wears her cross every second of the day was left to endure this horror alongside the likes of us? No. No, this is not that."

I slam my coffee mug down onto the counter. "And what do you know about what God's behind and what he isn't behind, Darin? God put that cleaver in your hand and then direct it into your wife's head that day?"

Reverend Chase shakes his head fervently as if it can shake my comment away. "Never mind the past, Darin. Those that call out shall be redeemed. Confess your sins, dear friend, confess and nothing shall stand between you and paradise. Come time for us to go, we shall be together in the golden streets!"

"I saw two the other day out my window. Just watching with their vileness. I could feel them out there watchin'. They know that we know there ain't a thing we can do 'bout it. This place is theirs. They come to claim it. That's what they is... they aliens. They aliens. I know they aliens."

"Aliens?" I laugh, "For heaven's sake, aliens... Reverend, your teachings aren't much for anything for these impressionable folks. What's that book of wisdom say about aliens?"

Reverend Chase sighs heavily, "Miss Clay, we are all in grave end times. Minds drift into questions at such moments of fear. Do *you* have an answer?"

"I didn't know about any of this, until I saw that my father was

gone the day I came home. Thank god. About time that bastard left this world." Reverend Chase doesn't blink. I breathe out a sigh and drop my head, "No... I have no idea. Same as you, same as Darin, same as Queenie, but I will not be swept up into this nonsense. Keep preaching your empty promises to our dear lady killer over there and to this naive teenager while you sip at the devil's drink."

"They over yonder there now. They at that run-down Gas-N-Go. See? See 'em? Oh god, help us... god help us, they is watching us non-stop. Their eyes, oh, their eyes are empty holes!"

"Queenie, I don't see anything," Darin says quietly, trying to placate her, "But we all know seeing them doesn't much make a difference in being taken."

"Th-th-though we walk through the sh-shadow of death, friends, we shall fear no... no evil."

"I'm gonna head back to the farm before too long. Buck's waiting on me."

"Uh, uh... Queenie, dear girl, get me a scotch."

"I think I'll rest here tonight. On account of I've run out of cigarettes at my place."

"Your place *was* the jail. Even with all this crap happening, I don't know why sheriff Downes let the last of you degenerate convicts roam free instead of making y'all wait out your days locked up."

"No... no, the bottle, girl, the bottle!"

Reverend Chase downs a few gulps of the drink, and Darin focuses his attention on something outside the window.

He sighs and chuckles slightly, "That sign out front. The 'b' in 'bless' has fallen down to the bottom of it. 'God-less America' I 'spose is hitting the nail right on the head instead of what was up there before."

None of us can stifle the uproarious laughter that fills the cold diner smelling of stale leftover syrup and cigarette smoke. It startles us at how jarring it is, as it's slightly unsettling to hear, but we keep laughing and laughing, and even Reverend Chase has his Bible closed now. It's not the kind of laughter that makes someone happy. It's the kind that fills the empty silence of a room in an attempt to make it feel safe. It is the kind of laughter that

bubbles out of someone when they are so frightened that they have no sense left in them to stop it from happening. It's a laughter that has grown from small smiles into laughter that continues through tight gritted teeth and sweaty skin, shaking out of the body with no control. It soon stops, and the entirety of the diner returns to its silent shelter holding nothing of any solidity inside its confines. Queenie breaks the void with a clicking of her nails on the counter and a whispered incantation under her breath.

Darin clears his throat and rakes a nervous hand through his unkempt hair. "The best way to keep a prisoner from never escaping is to make sure that they never realize they're in a prison that needs escaping. That is until the prisoners start to see a few missing, one at a time, walking that mile to never be seen again. When there are just a few prisoners left... that's when they slowly find themselves within a cell, but they don't get to see their captors until they see their death. No one knows of our existence except the ones wishing to take it."

"Oh! Oh, Lord, I see 'em. They waitin'. There's one... there's one... it's gonna choose me! It wants to take me!" Queenie lets out a blood curdling scream and bangs her fists on the counter so hard that I almost wonder if she might have broken her wrists. The anger inside me has risen to an uncontrollable level and her screams match the intensity of aberration swirling about in the diner.

"Go ahead and scream. There are thousands all around us that hear you, but not a one to listen. Not a one to listen." I say, standing from the seat.

"Give em' one. Give em' one, but oh, don't give em me! Oh, god!"

"What are you talking about, dear girl?" Reverend Chase says with a grimace.

"They takin' one! I know they takin' one soon! I DON'T WANT TO BE TAKEN!"

"They're not taking anyone, Queenie. Stop this. Calm down." Darin has gotten up to help Queenie to a seat, but she yanks her arm away from him and screams that they want someone to take.

All of us are darting our eyes back and forth between each other and the windows. We all look like husks of bodies, nothing but fear residing inside us to make us as white as the ceramic mugs sitting behind the counter.

"Go on, Darin. You're the least desirable to the human race." Darin shoots his red eyes at me, and I can see him visibly shaking. "Or, Reverend, how's about you take the fall whilst the rest of us have a chance to hide somewhere else?"

Reverend Chase seems to be gone from his body altogether, as if he has floated away somewhere in his mind. "I'm not dying for you. Jesus did that already."

"Oh! God, they is here! They is here, round the diner now, they is!"

"How godly of you, Reverend! You coward!"

"What? What-I... I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, oh, I am afraid... and the Lord said do not fear..."

"You! You, Lilly! You've thrown around this whole thing like a joke and dying as a sick game of luck, so you stay behind and let us leave! What a hypocrite, you are! Playing with death like it's a tamable thing, yet here we are now and you wanna go running, just like the rest of us! You are no better than the rest of us!"

"Shut up, Darin, you scummy low-life! Wife killer! Murderer! And you, Reverend, drinking all of us under the table and then preaching your damn lies about hope! There is no hope! Shut up!"

"What problems you have with me... are only to remain on this earth until one of us leaves it."

"Oh, God save us! They is here— They is here!"

"Shut up, Queenie! Your incessant loony cries are ringing the damn dinner bell! Everyone shut up!" I pull out my revolver from my pocket in the fit of rage, brandishing it around the diner and aiming at each of them in sweeping, shaking movements. "Shut up."

"Miss Clay, let us all calm down. Not only will God give us, peace but He will--"

"Get away from me, Reverend. I mean it."

“Lilly, stop. We’re all afraid, just don’t do anything—”

There is a guttural piercing sound, inhuman and unable to be recounted in the descriptions of this world. I only know that the sound alone makes me want to vomit. Queenie’s loud cries fill the panicked room again, and she calls after the things all around us, damning them to hell. I blink rapidly, feeling drips of sweat fall into my eyes. When I look to the grimy diner windows, I catch sight of on one of them, and all the blood feels as if it has left my body. I would have never actually killed a soul, never touched a hair on another man’s head in harm, but at the sight of what was breathing outside waiting to take us and with the knowledge of what was to come, I would have sold a child’s soul to the devil himself if it would have saved me. Reverend Chase grabs my arm and attempts to take the gun from me, and as if I have risen above us all and watch it happen, I pull the trigger and shoot him in the gut. He collapses onto the dirty black and white diner tile. His robes begin to run dark red, and soon the blood is a small puddle pooling underneath him. His Bible lays in his own crimson blood, to which would not be the kind to save him.

“You killed him.” Darin clutches the side of the counter and holds his mouth with his other hand. Queenie keeps her frightened eyes steady on the reverend’s body.

“I’ve killed a reverend, oh I am surely damned for hell.” My whispered voice cracks and aches through my trembling mouth. There is a clawing, scratching all inside the walls around us. They are hungry.

“No... no no no no no no no no no!” Queenie picks up her horrible mantra again.

“You killed him.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“You didn’t *mean* to?”

“Wha— well wh— who are you to say anything, Darin?”

“You are as much a murder as I—”

The scratching is constant and grows louder and louder. Queenie grasps the sides of her face and moans loudly. She suddenly runs past us, almost as if absentmindedly, stepping in the

large pool of blood that has accumulated on the floor and leading a trail of red footsteps to mark her exit. The twinkling of the bell on the door sounds, and within seconds she is standing under the lone street light across the road.

Darin screams for her to come back, but she looks straight up into the light above her and something descends upon her, tearing her being from her body, her screams ripped from her as well. We hear the tortured calls for help, but not a one listens to her, as much as Darin probably likes to imagine that he had tried to listen to her. She couldn’t have been saved, at least that narrative is easier to tell ourselves than that she was *not* saved.

We stand in the diner silently, dumbfounded and nothing more than empty vessels, as what is left of her skin hangs limply on the light pole, swaying in the nighttime wind like a surrender flag.

“Give me the gun.”

I meet Darin’s eyes heavily and shake my head.

“Give me the damn gun.”

“You going to kill me, Darin?” I raise my hands, “take it.”

He slowly reaches forward and grabs it, opening the cartridge to see how many bullets are loaded. I don’t even know how many bullets are in it. Unfortunately, at least one had been. Darin walks to his original position at the back of the diner and sits down.

“God forgive me. Forgive me for it all. I wish to be with you.” He opens his mouth. I close my eyes tightly. A resounding ringing of the shot pervades the silent diner. The scratching has not stopped. The window behind him matches the dirty tile beside my foot. I suppose the reverend would say he was saved.

“Let the dead bury the dead... but there’s not enough time.” I keep my eyes closed as I walk to Darin’s body. I retract the revolver from him, holding back the need to throw up. I hold it in my hands for what seems like minutes before I return to my seat at the bar. The scratching and screaming inhuman sounds surround me with dizzying intensity. I open the cartridge, praying for a single bullet to still be in it.

It is empty. The last one had been the one to cut through Darin’s skull.

I close it and place the gun in front of me on the bar counter.  
I take a long swig from Reverend Chase's half-drunk bottle.  
"I cannot be saved. Take me, but leave my sweet Buck be."  
And Greeley County was as damned as us all.

# THE SPOT

by Roberta Hamm

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There's a spot in the corner of my ceiling. I do not trust it. I think it is watching me. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say it was working for Steve, my jealous neighbor who does not like it when I let my bamboo grow too tall. He probably told the spot to go there so he could look in on me while I'm doing things he doesn't like. Tomorrow he'll judge me on my choice of candy bar. I always preferred Take5 to Snickers, and I'm sure he resents that.

The spot has moved. It was in the corner, and now it is near the fan that is missing its blades and softly glows. I think that is a lamp. The spot is larger now; it has faded edges and has sprouted a long thing with a wide thing at the end. It is an antenna. It is sending a stronger signal now. I wish I could swat it away, but I don't feel like getting up at the moment.

The spot has snuffed out the ceiling fan that was actually a lamp, and now I can only see it when the sky isn't dark and my mind is open. I do not think Steve would do this, because then he could not see the things I do at night that he does not like. He can't see me eat only the yellow beans out of the jelly bean jar or plant watermelon seeds in the dirt floor of my apartment. He is such a nosy upstairs neighbor, so I do not think a spot that belonged to him would turn out the light.

My downstairs neighbor came to see me today. She is nice. She keeps track of the double-amputated six-legged cats when I do not feel like moving my legs, which is often. The spot seems to be mocking the cats because it has dropped two long legs that sometimes tap me on the shoulder when I forget to whisper the magic word. The magic word isn't what you think it is. No, it's not that either.

I haven't felt like moving much for a while. Even the magic word fails to come to me from time to time, and the spot has taken to tickling my face when I keep not saying it. The spot seems enormous now. It was in the corner before, and now it's back there. It's in all of the corners, but the growths and the many, many legs drop down from the lump that used to be the fan that wasn't a fan. I think I've forgotten how to sleep, and my downstairs neighbor has taken to going up to visit Steve instead. They make a lot of noise, but the spot muffles it.

I stopped saying the word. The tickling stopped bothering me, so I stopped saying it. There isn't a spot anymore, but the walls and ceiling and floor are all black now, and the legs are coming from everywhere. I can't see the door anymore, which worries me because now I can't get to my bamboo. I also can't get another Take5. I miss my Take5s. The tickling is happening a lot lately. Almost every moment, the little legs are drooping down to tickle my face and my lips.

The tickling stopped. My room isn't black anymore and I can see the door. I felt like moving my legs, and they moved. I stopped wanting my legs to move, but they keep moving. I don't think they're my legs anymore.

I saw my hands today. They are black and have a few too many fingers. I think. I don't remember how many I used to have. I saw Steve today, and then I saw him much closer up, and then he stopped moving. I like Steve a lot more now. He doesn't complain about the bamboo.

# McCAIG'S TOWER

by Katie Boren

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# ISLE OF IONA

by Katie Boren

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# THE WONDERS OF THE WORLD

by Roberta Hamm

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I remember  
Walking down that long sandy road.

The wind ravaging my hair  
The night howling at me  
Warning me to go back to bed.

I can hear the crash of the waves  
The smell of salt;  
The taste of emptiness in the air.

Looking outward  
I see nothing...  
But I feel everything.

# REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

by Mari Ramler

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My parents are not proud of me.  
But you should know  
when I first fell in love,  
I entered a hot dog eating contest in Rock Island, Illinois.  
People of Chicagoland, bet on me! I was a horse,  
Darling of the South Side. I was a  
Manic Pixie Dream Girl  
before manic pixie dream girls. I was  
fifteen.

What sort of person enters a hot dog eating contest?  
my father asked.

Fifty hot dogs in under twelve minutes is nothing for unrequited  
love,  
I answered by signing up  
not for approval or applause—  
*but unbridled appetite.* What else?  
I craved recognition and maybe my father's.  
And you could see the hunger in my eyes from space.  
On this side of All That,  
I know I could do it again,  
although first prize is not the love I deserve.

My father is the lawn-mowingest man I know.  
And I have loved other men whose home-ownership swallowed  
whole summers,  
men who mistook possession for belonging and spent our youth  
accordingly,  
while I won.

Buried in my forgotten place,  
lies this trophy.  
With cupped hands with dirt under fingernails,  
They do not uncover a  
still  
gold  
yearning

# OPHELIA

by Rosemary McLean

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The tires of Ophelia's dented, blue GeoMetro crunched up the gravel path to the funeral home. Her eyes drifted through the foggy side window towards the matted grass hills stretching out in every direction, their colors deepened by the overcast sky. That black and white sign passed in time, and she was soon upon the tall wooden house with the bright red door. Something gripped her hand—it was Brittany, offering her a reassuring smile which she instinctually feigned back—before she unbuckled her seat belt and prepared to step onto the soft earth of her hometown for the first time in ten years.

Only one figure awaited her outside, and she scanned him nervously before starting towards him with a smile.

“Mark?” she asked, the questioning tone unintentional. He had grown nearly a foot since she had seen him last, and she thought he looked like a runner or cyclist. Gone was her chubby brother with the curly mop of hair and the missing bottom tooth; if not for the small scar on his cheek she gave him during a playfight on a trampoline when she was ten, she would think this must be some imposter.

“I thought you'd be taller,” Mark joked, ruffling her hair with his too-large hand. She snorted, batting it away before pretending to jab him in the side. They both laughed for a moment, the mood changing suddenly as Mark fixed his hazel eyes on her intently. “Ophelia, right?”

A swirl of emotions filled her as he spoke her name, a name which she had chosen shortly after moving south; a name introduced to the world without confidence, through a much deeper voice; a name spoken by her peers in class, who knew her by nothing else; a name first confidently spoken by Brittany, later snuck between

kisses on the pavilion under the stars; now, a name spoken into being by her own brother. It knocked the breath out of her, but she gathered composure and smiled up at him.

“Yeah, that's me.”

“I like it. It's pretty.”

Brittany approached from her side of the car, having gathered their luggage under each arm and locked the doors. She stood next to Ophelia, patting her on the shoulder before smiling at Mark.

“Oh, Mark,” Ophelia said, slapping her forehead, “this is Brittany. My girlfriend.” The two exchanged formalities, and Ophelia stepped away from them as she struggled to composite the two halves of her life into one tableau. She took a bag from Brittany and began up the beaten path towards the funeral home, the voices of her *Olivia* and *Sebastian* fading into obscurity.

The building was tall and crooked, boards from a hundred types of tree nailed unevenly over the rot of decades past, criss-crossing into a wooden palimpsest inlaid with a bright red cherry door and two spaced out yellow windows. The second floor hung partially over the side of the first, an exterior beam holding it aloft like an arm on weary chin. Ophelia, knowing this was where she would be sleeping, gulped audibly before venturing within.

The door was unlocked, but she had to put her weight into it to get it to swing open. The building stirred awake as she entered, walls and floor groaning from the nudge. She had been inside only once before, when her friend Billy had died, but the smell of melted wax and formaldehyde had been hard to forget. She scanned the room for any sign of that ancient mortician, Beazel, before starting up the wooden stairs towards the small bedroom on the third floor. The entire house creaked with each timid step, followed closely by the loud thunk of her luggage against each ascending stair. By the time she reached the top, the bedroom door had opened, and her mother positioned herself in the doorway.

Looking up from the third-to-highest stair, Ophelia swallowed forcefully before beginning to speak.

“Hello, mother.”

“Shane.”

The name pierced Ophelia like a searing iron rod, and she winced accordingly. It had been almost nine years since she had heard that name aloud, spoken by an unwitting professor calling role in a general education lecture class. She looked up at her mother with a broken smile, starting up the stairs towards the room.

“It’s nice to see you,” Ophelia said, her mother stepping aside so she could enter, swinging her luggage in an arc onto the nearest bed. Scuff marks on the floor betrayed that a queen-sized bed usually fit into this attic chamber, hastily replaced with a set of twin-sized beds shoved into opposite corners of the room. Ophelia sighed, turning back to face her mother.

The woman looked much the same as when Ophelia had last seen her: voluminous black hair pulled back into a braid; dark, olive skin no matter the season; wrinkles blemishing her forehead, eyes, and the corners of her mouth. Only the white streaks crisscrossing her hair displayed any sign of aging in the ten years since Ophelia drove away in the middle of the night, tears streaking her face...

“The service is tomorrow at noon. Mr. Beazel will be back soon, and will have breakfast ready in the morning. Tonight, you and the girl will have to fend for yourselves. There’s a pho restaurant in town now—the family who run it are very nice people. Mr. Nguyen helped Mark get his internship in Ottawa summer before last.”

“I’ll uh, I’ll be sure to check it out. Brittany loves Asian food.” Ophelia’s eyes didn’t meet her mother’s again, instead focusing intently on unpacking her bags. Her hands withdrew clothes—a dress, socks, pajamas, a bra. Her mother scrutinized the clothing, scoffing to herself upon seeing the last item. Ophelia turned to her with irritated eyes, and her mother turned to leave the room.

“Your father would be so proud,” she muttered before slamming the door, Ophelia now alone with her clothes and the distant chemical smell of a corpse on the bottom floor.

Night had fallen, and Ophelia and Brittany returned from the restaurant with an armful of takeout. They chose to eat on the

porch—Brittany’s request—stars glowing on their smitten faces as they laughed back and forth at each other. Here, unlike the light polluted skies of New York, it seemed as though the two girls could see across the entire galaxy. After some time, Beazel emerged to tell the girls goodnight before hobbling off to his sanctuary on the far side of the home. He was a hunched, small man with more liver spots than unblemished skin, and he reeked of pine freshener, but he called Ophelia “Ophelia” despite knowing her pre-transition, and had brewed some tea for the girls, so they appreciated him nonetheless.

After hours passed, Brittany told Ophelia that she was rather tired, and—given their early start tomorrow—she was headed off to bed. The two shared a kiss before parting ways, and Ophelia sat on the porch with a cold cup of Earl Grey, mist kicked up from the distant lake peppering her skin and matting her hair. Her arm dropped the cup on the funeral home’s slumbering porch. For the first time since hearing the news, she was alone.

After a moment she rose, absently lifting the cheap plastic lantern within one hand, gliding phantasmally over the waterlogged grass. She reached the sudden drop off of the fjord’s edge, traveling along its length until she reached the green sign marking mile 6. Her feet ached and the home had long since vanished from the horizon, but she had no idea how long she’d walked. The wind and water kicked up with force, droplets whipping her tender cheeks and causing her to close her eyes. She shone her beam over the edge, the rapid water an inky black against the distant contrast of a sea of water swept flowers.

“This is where they found his body.”

Her own voice startled her as she spoke aloud, its unnatural sounds deafening her to the rushing of the water. She imagined for a moment how her father felt as he walked to the edge: did he pause before he jumped over? Did he consider it a hundred times, did he walk away only to come back, drawn like a magnet to the cliff’s edge? She felt the pull also, the attraction driving her fragile body towards the inexorable, limitless force of nature. Did he go confidently, the gentle man who taught her to tie her shoes, read, to ride a bike?

Did he cry before he stepped into the night?

Ophelia felt her knees wobbling under her weight, weaker than the blades of grass surrounding her against the gravity of the spot. Her hand entered her skirt, soggy with dew and sea breeze, as she drew her phone from her jacket pocket. The light stung her eyes like the sudden appearance of the sun, only able to glance at it between the makeshift shade of her eyelashes. She thumbed to their messages the night of his death, an activity Brittany had long told her to give up; now she had new reason.

“Dear Ophelia,” he began. “You shouldn’t be upset with your mother. I know she said terrible things to you years ago, things which shouldn’t easily be forgiven. There is something about me that you don’t know. I have made mistakes. Your mother tried her best to hold us together, despite everything. Keeping in contact with you over these years has been the best thing I’ve ever done. I’m very proud to see the lady you’ve grown up to be.”

Ophelia had sent one message in reply: “What mistakes?”

“I know it’s hard to understand, but your folks aren’t perfect... I’m more like you than you realize. I love you, baby girl.” Ophelia had sent several more messages in reply, but none of them were received by his phone. Deep in her heart, she had known what was going to happen. Deeper still, she had always known.

*“I’m more like you than you realize.”* The words stung Ophelia’s mind like the burning of her eyes as she read them again and again. Her mother’s biting voice from earlier in the day came to her, more real than the phone in her hand or the freezing dew on her knees. *“Your father would be so proud.”*

Ophelia rose from the ground which she didn’t realize she had fallen to, pocketing her phone with one hand and extending the other, holding the cheap lantern over the edge of the fjord. Her moistened hands allowed it to slip between her fingers, the last remnants of control disappearing from sight into the inky black abyss. It spun in a perfect spiral as it fell towards the lake, the light bulb flickering out just before bashing against a rock. She could hear no sound of its destruction over the roaring of the water—any pieces of it that survived the fall were quickly swept away like the

endless mess of flowers surrounding it, carried to some distant shore on some distant land.

A short while later Ophelia called Brittany, who came to pick her up by the side of the road. Brittany cried and hugged Ophelia, telling her not to scare her like that again, but Ophelia felt nothing besides the cold sundress clinging to her thighs, and the course denim of her jacket against her neck.

The next morning, Ophelia woke in Brittany’s arms. Her girlfriend had stuck the dresser halfway into the closet, buying room enough to stick the two twin sized beds together. It was warm and soft below their comforters, and the smell of sizzling eggs downstairs and Brittany’s perfume shut out any traces of the embalming fluid from the previous day. Beazel brought their breakfast up to them, staying to entertain them with a story from his youth before disappearing down the creaky stairs to prepare for the funeral. Ophelia and Brittany changed into their finest clothes: Ophelia’s black dress with flower designs running along the sides, Brittany’s tailored suit whose tie Ophelia had to make presentable. They made their way downstairs to the hubbub of gathering visitors, meeting Mark with a hug before funneling towards the cemetery. Brittany disappeared for a brief moment, returning with a handful of daisies for Ophelia to place on the grave after the burial, but the bundle found its way in the trash as quickly as Brittany had left her line of sight.

The coffin seemed to her rather large—there was no way that her father, the kind, soft-spoken man he was could be within that obelisk. On a tender summer shortly before she moved, her father had told her he wanted to be cremated, his ashes scattered on some mountain or another in the Netherlands. For a man who was born, lived his entire life, and died on a mountain, Ophelia always found this desire rather strange, but she promised him that it would happen. Of course, she imagined his death would be in some far off time, not at the age of 48 when she was still figuring her life out. As she watched his body sink into the soft earth, she found herself letting him down one final time.

The procession was short and quaint, as her family tended to keep all events, and before long her father's coffin was firmly secured under 6 feet of dirt and grass. Brittany and Mark, along with many of the other guests at the funeral wept openly, but Ophelia's dry eyes met her mother's, the two sharing a glance with unknowable weight behind it. After the procession ended, Ophelia tugged Brittany by the sleeve, motioning her back towards their encampment in the funeral home.

"Let's go."

"You don't want to stay for the dinner after?"

"I've seen enough."

After giving a brief hug to Mark, Ophelia and Brittany packed their luggage into the back of their dented blue GeoMetro, preparing for their ten hour drive back to the city. As Ophelia rounded the back of the car, she found her mother waiting pensively beside the passenger side door. Ophelia tried to shoulder past, her mother shifting to block her exit.

"I need to leave. I have a shoot early tomorrow, and I need to get some sleep before it." Ophelia shot at her mother, her eyes fixed inside the car's window.

"Ophelia," her mother began, stuttering partially over the name as she spoke, obfuscating an intended sincerity, "I need to talk to you about your father. There are things about him you don't understand."

"I already know." Ophelia's eyes met her mother's finally, her stare cold with the lake's mist surrounding them. "I'm leaving."

She climbed into the passenger seat, buckling herself in with the utmost composure. Brittany mouthed some silent apology to the mother before following suit, the car's back tires kicking up dirt and gravel before finally spinning around and buzzing down the path to the highway.

As Ophelia gazed out the side window, she recalled her first time in the lake's water. It was early spring—too early for the melting ice to cause an influx of rapids, but late enough for one to submerge for more than a few moments without freezing solid—and her father had taken her to a low shore by the lake. The sun

was low in the sky, the sun beaming through the trees with rays of cantaloupe light, framing the lakeside in a baptismal glow. Flowers, swept along by the night tide, clung to the rough sand of the shore, mushing beneath her tiny feet. He waded in, his hairy chest like a shirt over his turquoise swim trunks, the chill giving him only momentary pause as he turned to gesture her forwards. She was scared, crying even, for fear of being swept away faster than even her father's all-powerful arms could catch her. Her father smiled, the premature wrinkles around his eyes deepening as he kneeled to her level, the water rushing over his shoulders and wetting the bottom of his hair.

"C'mon, Shane. You know I'll always catch you."

# CASSEROLES AND QUESTIONS

by Jane Loveday

---

Middle school is tough, but it's tougher when you find yourself asking your friends questions like, "When you met my mom, did you notice that she didn't have eye-lashes?" after a parent night at the school. Some things are just doubly unfair.

When I was in the eighth grade, my mom underwent a full year of chemotherapy to treat the rhabdomyosarcoma she had been diagnosed with and to help prevent it from metastasizing. A lump appeared in her underarm, and after having it biopsied and studied in a few different labs across the country, it was determined that she had a rare yet aggressive embryonic muscle cancer. The plan was to surgically remove the tumor and hope that the chemo in the year following would keep the cancer from spreading any further. "Rhabdomyosarcoma" and "metastatic," words and concepts that are a rarity in a typical eighth grader's lexicon, became integral to my daily life as a thirteen-year-old. At least I was advanced in vocabulary for my age.

I have always thought there should be a guide of sorts to instruct kids of cancer patients on how to navigate their new world. Make no mistake, it is an entirely new world. It's a world fueled by casserole after casserole and lasagna upon lasagna, a world made for grown ups, regardless of how old you actually are when you enter it, a world of incessant bombardment of ignorant and ridiculous comments and queries, but more than anything, it's a world without boundaries. Cancer country is a nation without walls, and should you attempt to put up a privacy fence, the neighbors will just hop it anyway. You may as well walk through town naked, baring all your

personal family business. Everyone sees it; you can't fool them. When learning to navigate the land of cancer, you might, at first, feel a sense of embarrassment or shame sit heavy in your chest from this absence of privacy. You'll soon get used to it.

For instance, I always felt a little ashamed when the women from my mom's work came to our house to bring food. I lost count of the number of mini vans that I pulled casseroles out of and carried into my house, or the number of middle aged women in scrubs that I guided up the stairs, through the messy living room with my bald-headed mama sitting on the couch, wrapped in her pink snap-up robe and a cocoon of blankets, to our kitchen where my three younger sisters and I were unpacking our lunch boxes and washing containers that held the leftovers from the casserole (or perhaps lasagna if we happened to get lucky) that the previous Good Samaritan had brought to us. To someone new to the customs of cancer, there were plenty of opportunities for embarrassment.

I was ashamed of the visitors seeing my mom at her most vulnerable, and I was ashamed of the disheveled house that my sisters and I didn't often take the time to clean. More commonly, though, I was ashamed because I operated under the assumption that the people bringing casseroles thought we were poor since my mom was sick. "They think we can't even feed ourselves now," was what I thought to myself each time. However, looking back, I realize that presumed poverty had little to do with it. These people brought casseroles because there was nothing they could do to fix my mom, and they had to do something to feel helpful, so they flung food at the situation. Fair enough, but did they all have to be the same casserole? I know the internet is teeming with recipes, so why did we have chicken casserole with that soggy Ritz cracker crap on top once a week? Since when are crushed up Ritz crackers a topping?

We kids of cancer patients did not often have to worry about adult problems like "How am I going to put food on my table?" because it magically appeared in a minivan driven by a middle-aged casserole fairy, but there were plenty of ways that we had to grow up quickly into functioning citizens of the world of cancer.

Gone were the days of mommy packing my lunch. I packed

lunches for my sisters and myself most mornings because my mom had just enough energy to wake us, dress herself, and then lie on her bed until it came time for her to drop us off at school and go to her nursing job at the cardiologist's office. Most days, she just sat in a room and called patients with test results and answers to questions, wishing her coworkers would leave her alone and not ask how she was feeling. What was she supposed to say? Did they really want to know that when she had left the house that morning, she puked in the driveway and spent several minutes trying to shove the hundred pound German Shepherd away from it? Probably not. So she said she was fine.

When she got home from work, she typically went straight to bed, leaving me to finish my homework and help my little sisters with theirs. I had a great refresher on multiplication tables and spelling words. Reading through the stories in my 3rd grade sister's reading book with her, I remembered how frustrating reading was at that age. I also came to understand why, when I was still a novice reader practicing with my mom, she would put her hands to her forehead, close her eyes, and say "Read the words On. The. Page." I learned quickly to be responsible for myself and others who needed me, and I learned that such a role is not exactly fun.

One important aspect of maneuvering through the adults-only cancer scene is learning how to manage the absurd utterances that people allow to fly out of their mouths. My favorite absurdity, without a doubt, must be: "I know how you feel." Honestly, can one conjure up a more ridiculous assertion?

I decided one day to confide in my friends the reality of my life—that it was cancer's world, and I was just living in it. I told them about my mom's diagnosis, her surgeries, the chemo, and how I was sad and worried, or however I decided to phrase it to them. I was quite glad that I did, of course, because a couple of them knew *exactly* how I felt. Excellent.

One friend told me that her dog died of cancer, so she knew how I felt. For anyone who may be undecided about the accuracy of such a comparison, I must contend, these two situations are not the same. Furthermore, it's not encouraging. If she had said "my

dog had cancer, but he's totally fine now," at least there would be a hint of hope. Another friend looked me dead in the face and said "One time my grandma had surgery for her cataracts, so I know how worried you feel. I've been there." How insightful.

Now, what I learned about dealing with the "I know how you feel" cliché is to just not say a word. Just give a sad and understanding smile, and they will usually shut up. If not, then say "Yeah, I know that must have been hard," and go on to something else. Those people may be attempting empathy, but they have just shown you that they can be of no help to you. There is no way that a person can possibly know exactly how another person feels because they are never in identical situations. Saying to me, "I know how you feel" ensures that you most certainly do not because then you would know that phrase is neither accurate nor comforting. You can think these things to yourself, but you have to refrain from verbalizing them because then people will perceive you as angry and bitter, and that, you must never allow.

Becoming angry and bitter warrants a sermon, and you most definitely don't want that. People will offer up plenty of sermons of their own volition, even without your asking for one, so don't say something that asks for one. I learned that sometimes, in the trials of life, the best friends to have are church friends. Sometimes, however, they're the worst. While there were some people who genuinely just wanted to support me and do things for me, many church-folk liked to preach instead.

One of the most frequent sermons I heard is titled, "Don't Be Mad at God!" Now this is a good one because it is short, sweet, and to the point. The classic "don't do that" theme typically does not depend upon deep theological consideration or hard-to-grasp concepts. Although it is obviously such a wonderfully compelling and life-changing message, I do take issue with the title. Don't be mad at God? First, anger is an emotion, and a strong one at that, so if anyone could enlighten me to the process of quelling one's anger, I'd very much like to learn. Furthermore, He knows when I'm angry, so why try to hide it? If someone is in the position to tell me that I shouldn't be angry with God, then they should also

be familiar with His omnipotent nature, and I hadn't had any experiences in which attempted deceit made a situation better.

My favorite sermon of all, however, would have to be "Winner Either Way." Just like the old hymn goes, "I'm a winner either way, if I go or if I stay." Old ladies at church would pinch my hands with their wrinkled up fingers and say in voices shakey with age, "Well, she knows Jesus, and she's going to heaven, so it's a good thing. I can't wait to go! You know, whether she's healed or she passes on to be with the Lord, she's a winner either way." In response, I would just nod and look at the floor, admonishing myself for not being spiritual enough about the situation—for being selfish enough to want more than thirteen years with my mom, when the holy consensus was that she'd be better with Jesus. I'm sure these pious preachers meant well, but their words typically fell from their mouths into my "Things I Don't Need You to Tell Me Right Now" bucket, which every kid in cancer country carries.

Naturally, the church scene also proves toxic to the privacy often taken for granted prior to a family crisis. My family was scribbled onto every prayer request list in town, from the Baptists, to the Methodists, to the Church of Christs. My mother's illness was a multi-denominational phenomenon. Sure, the more prayers the better chance I thought they had of working, but any given person in town knowing what I considered to be an intimate detail of my life irked me somewhat. People that I hardly recognized would ask me how my mom was doing, and I was usually rather unsure how to answer. How much did they know? Did they just know she had cancer, did they know she was doing chemo, or were they totally up to date and looking for information about her most recent CT scan? I attempted to gauge their familiarity with the subject based upon their tones and facial expressions, but more often than not, I felt obligated to share any detail they could be interested in. Some people will blatantly ask what they want to know, even if you try to push them off with a casual "She's doing fine." These are the fence-hopping neighbors that want so badly to see you in your emotional nakedness. At least with nosey people, I didn't have to guess what they knew and what they didn't. If they didn't know everything,

down to the tiniest detail, they'd find a way to become experts by the end of the conversation. Overtly nosey people, though, are not your real concern. You should be watching much more vigilantly for people who you don't think know a thing because, chances are, they do know. These people are more dangerous because they can catch you off guard, and they will.

I was caught quite off guard on the last day of my eighth grade year. All year long, I thought I had hidden my mom's cancer fairly effectively. I doubted that my teachers knew anything of it, except for the P.E. teachers who were my softball and volleyball coaches. I was nearly certain that none of the counselors or principals had a clue. Well, that was naive. I knew that the news spread faster than cancer cells travelling through the bloodstream, so to think I would be able to escape my sad little story at school was to bury my head in the sand. People love all kinds of gossip, but it seems that many people have a special affection for gossip about tragedy. In my school, apparently my sisters and I had become a tragedy of choice.

On this last day of school that year, all grades attended the typical end-of-the-year academic award ceremony. I walked across the stage to accept various awards, and my mom smiled at me from the audience. I thought it was all over. Then, our principal made her way to the podium center stage. This woman, Mrs. Baylor, was particularly hated among administrators by her students because she was hateful and strict, and she had a habit of pursing her lips so tightly that her mouth twitched. Sometimes, she simply stared at students with her arms limp by her sides, mouth quivering, eyes squinting, and head bobbing in a persistent, pensive half-nod. She reminded me of *Matilda's* Ms. Trunchbull but without the bun on her head and the chokey in her office. At the ceremony, though, she was determined to gain favor from the students in the form of the first ever Principal's Award.

She introduced the award with the typical babble about being a "good citizen" (as if any eighth grader actually knows what that means) and a good student. Then, the topic shifted in her description of the award. She explained that sometimes, students

endure hardships that we don't know anything about. These kids go through their typical school days with home lives that we don't imagine for them. They are somehow able to stay focused and perform well in school, despite the challenges in their personal lives.

Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no. Not me. But I knew it was me. Sitting there with my hands full of certificates and my chemo-centric home life, I wondered silently, who else could it have been?

It was me. She called me to the stage, handed me a certificate, and squished me into a hug. This did not have the comforting effect she desired, as I embarrassedly struggled to wriggle free. Not only did the entire school get to jump my privacy fence all at once, but the principal we all knew as severe and aloof, the one we derided for her awkward mannerisms, had chosen to show me affection. I've never been one of the "popular" kids, but that hug is by far the quickest way I have ever lost cool points with my peers.

I made my way to my chair and sat down to a wave of questions and comments from my classmates, while I pondered the absurdity of getting rewarded for my mother having cancer. I knew that wasn't the direct intention, but it still felt wrong. Once again, I thought it was finally all over, but alas, it was not. Mrs. Baylor called two other students to the stage, a boy and a girl. I hadn't the slightest clue who they were or what their hardships could have been. In that moment, I had a profound realization, at least for a middle school girl: I'm not special.

Plenty of other kids were taken as the tragedy gossip subject. I wasn't the only kid in cancer country, and I certainly wasn't the only kid to draw the short stick in the gamble of my parent's health. Who was I to whine and feel sorry for myself? There were hundreds of sad little stories like mine, and many more stories that were much sadder in the world.

I know I am not alone in my disdain for Ritz cracker chicken casserole, in growing up quick, in dealing with the ridiculous things people say, or in baring all my business to the world. I know there are plenty of people, much like me, who have been ashamed, angry, and preached at. But that's what makes it all matter. After a year of feeling like the pathetic kid with the sick mommy, I finally

found out that my sad story was just one of many. In a time when schools and parents joined efforts to make every child feel unique, it was oddly comforting to learn that I was not as special as I had thought.

\* \* \*

Nine years later, my mom's consistent battle with cancer is nearing its close, and people are still hopping my privacy fence and hauling casseroles into her house. Since my first experience with casseroles and questions, I have learned to appreciate people's kind intentions in bringing food and concern they have for my family, but sometimes, it's still hard to appreciate the ways they go about them.

As an adult daughter living in cancer country, I find myself playing hide-and-seek with people at the grocery store who I know will ask about my mom if they catch me. Sometimes, I get lucky and make it out without having to tell anyone about how after years of surgeries, treatments, and a clinical trial that looked like a promising option if only her liver could have handled it, we ran out of options, and she was turned over to hospice. But sometimes, I get cocky and slack off in my vigilance, and one of those Winner-Either-Way ladies traps me in the check-out line and says, "I know you're one of those Loveday girls, but I can't remember which one. How's your mama?" All right, so you don't know my name, but you're ready to jump into my personal trauma right in front of this nice lady who is just trying to do her job and wants to hear none of this, and you've given me no context for what you already know, so I'm back to the guessing game and divulging everything. Sounds about right.

Since my mom entered hospice care at home in the week between my college graduation and Christmas, I've spent every day with her for as much of the day as possible. Most of the time, we spend our days sitting on the couch and talking, watching tv, and keeping a tight medication schedule. With each day that passes, we talk a little less, and she sleeps a little more.

My mom's friends from work stop by every once in awhile to check on her. During one visit, one of her friends brought dinner

along with her—the third chicken casserole of the month. When she left, my mom said she wanted to try some. I was excited because it was the first real food she’d had that week, since her stomach pain and nausea limited her diet to Jell-O and mashed potatoes most of the time. I handed her the plate of chicken casserole that I had heated up in the microwave, and we joked about how people always bring chicken casserole, just like we had joked after every surgery and every round of treatment. We appreciated the Good Samaritans, but we wondered why that was still the go-to meal. This one, to its credit, was topped with bread crumbs with melted butter, so it was miles ahead of the Ritz cracker ones.

My mom looked up from her plate and said, “You should write a book. *Chicken Casserole for the Cancer*. Like *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Too bad this won’t cure the cancer, though.”

“Yeah,” I said. “If it did, you would have been cured a long time ago.”

\* \* \*

Well, Mom, I’ll write that book someday. But for now, here’s a little story about some casseroles and questions.

# “PERFECT” BY SIMPLE PLAN

by Austin F. Cross

---

I remember a moment,  
a few months ago,  
where I was walking through  
Kroger and “Perfect” by  
Simple Plan was playing  
over the loudspeaker  
and I was mouthing along  
to the lyrics. As I turned  
the corner of the frozen  
pizza aisle, I saw a girl  
doing the same thing,  
and we both smiled,  
knowing that we were  
doing the same thing,  
and kept on walking so  
as not to tarnish the moment  
that we had just created,  
and it was beautiful.  
I am such a dumbass.

# THE THREE SENTENCES

by Austin F. Cross

---

While the first sentence lived a life of happiness, success, and financial security, he ended up dying, his life ending in an un-miraculous standstill.

The second sentence asked herself why the first sentence's life ended so soon when she ultimately realized that she would be next if she wasn't careful.

The third and final sentence knew that it was too late for the first two sentences, and it would soon be too late for him as well, but he had come to terms with that, and tried to think what life would be like as a fourth sentence.

# ALL INSTINCT

by Tony Baker

---

On our dog walk this summer night,  
I unleashed Yogi for sniff patrol  
and watched a bat gorge itself  
at a smorgasbord of moths  
under the orange street light  
framed by a tree-branch triangle.

Just forty feet away, I didn't see  
the bristled, rat-tailed possum feasting  
over my dog's half-full food dish.  
But Yogi saw: he must have seen.

Our mild, milquetoast mutt—  
the same dog who hides tightly  
under our bed during distant thunderstorms,  
the dog who pees when I raise my voice—  
Yogi must have sniffed or spotted the hunching, dull-grey thief.  
Me? My eyes were on the snacking bat.

Yogi was silent—all instinct—  
his jaws clenched around the possum's thick neck.  
My silent bat was in the middle of a hundred-bug dinner.  
I didn't hear the neighbor's flat screen  
glowing ESPN across the street.  
A car passed, muffled bass booming.  
I didn't hear the possum's last breath.  
I had no idea.

When I whisper-yelled his name,  
Yogi trotted from the silent shadows,  
the shocking trophy dangling from his automatic jaws.  
My surprise: Jesus, Yogi!  
He dropped his prize at my feet on the freshly mown lawn.  
My hands shook with adrenaline  
as I clicked the leash to his collar.  
We walked nervously across the yard to the fenceline  
and then back to the crime scene.  
A motorcycle rumbled past.  
The opossum was gone.  
The neighbor's TV was black.  
The bat was gone.

Yogi and I returned to our silent house,  
and I rewarded him with his night-time crunchy rawhide twist.  
We had both forgotten his hidden hunter's heart.

# DOMINION OVER THE EARTH

by Valerie Hubert

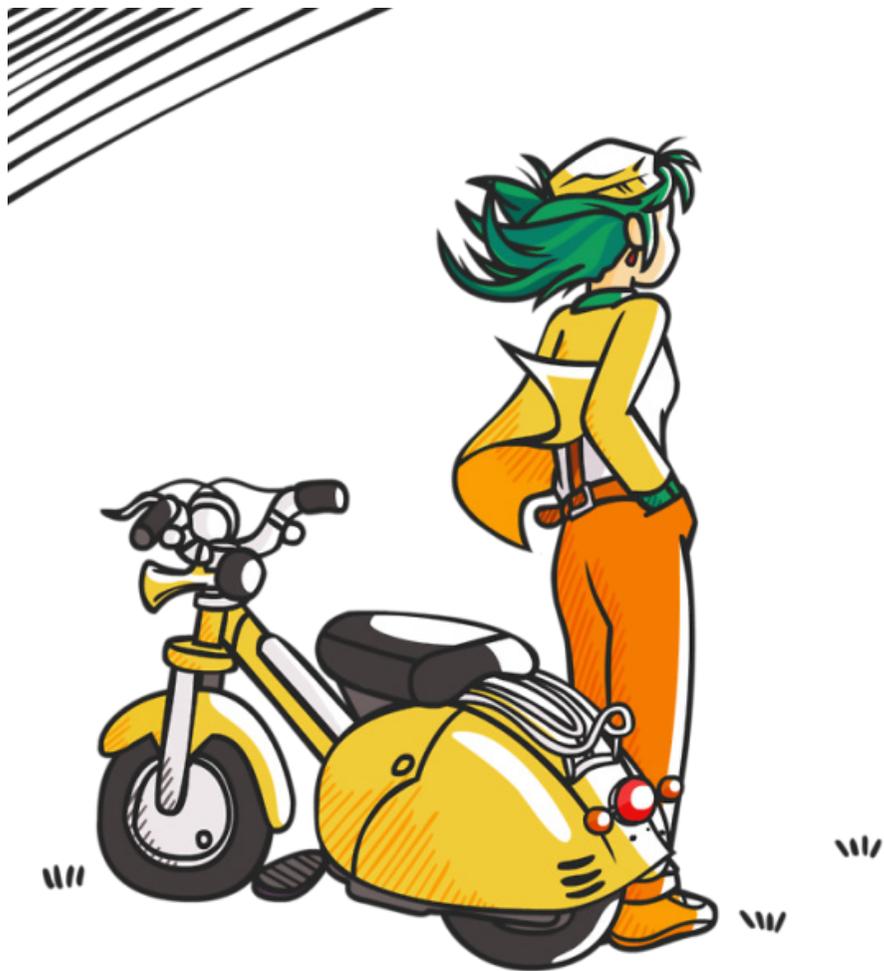
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# COMFY APOCALYPSE

by Cale Grievés

---



# THAT IS

by Tom Saya

---

I squeeze  
the  
bellows”

“In other words,

language  
inherently”

“In other words,

what is”

“In other words,

not”

“(in other words,

in”

“in other words,

under  
this”

“In other words,

my  
interest in”

“In other words,

our being  
in”

“In other words,

“in other words,”

“To put it another way,  
Stephane Mallarme observed with  
admirably  
lucid self-reflexivity”

“in other words,  
to a self-reflexive  
conceptualism,  
a conceptualism that may as yet be  
a conceptualism”

“In other words,  
Andrews posits the  
‘re-staging’ of language”

“in other words,  
American  
innovative”

“Or, put another way,  
as artist Paul Chan has  
written:  
‘If art has  
any”

“in other words,  
I’m glad  
I’m a man.”

“in other words,  
it resists”

“In other words,  
Tejada proposes ways  
of”

“In other words,  
a statistically significant showing  
of lexical elements  
and other”

“In other words,  
the text is received  
not when”

“In other words,  
these texts make palpable a ‘nearness”

“In other words,  
the plant  
is the Jamesian  
real”

“In other words,  
the violence of ‘gang  
bang’ is heightened  
by the proximity”

“In other words,  
the sentence does not tell us”

“In other words,  
whereas”

“in other words,  
an instinctive ability  
to”

“In other words,  
he rejects”

“In other words,  
the organizing strategies of  
individual consciousness, lodged  
in the routines of a speaking  
voice, were”

“In other words,  
what has the potential to be, under  
other conditions, a complexly  
differentiated field”

“in other words,  
is  
differentiation”

“in other words,  
need not be  
directed exclusively  
(or even  
at all)”

“In other words,  
when grammatical pointers  
are dutifully pointing,  
presumably”

“(i.e.  
they can be read two  
ways or  
in both directions).”

“that is to say,  
to  
'bracket experience.'”

“That is,  
we do not  
know,  
with complete confidence,  
how  
we are 'supposed'”

“that is to say,  
have not yet accumulated enough conceptual”

“that is,

# OPPORTUNITY

by Half of Tom Saya's 4450 Class

---

1. Opportunity on Mars
2. is like an Explorer  
in the Antarctic
3. like lost Penguins  
in a desert  
searching for Tundra
4. like English majors  
in a math class
5. like the feeling  
of hopelessness  
as alien as  
differential equations
6. like a restrictive  
curriculum
7. like a flightless bird  
standing aimlessly
8. like walking headfirst  
into the wind  
into the dark
9. like roving into  
an unknown opportunity

# GALAXY MAN

by Whitney Cunningham

---

Verse 1

Hey there, Mr. Galaxy Man  
How's it feel to hold the universe in your hand?  
Pulling the hidden strings  
Turning dust into living things  
Playing God, awakening dead parts of me.

Verse 2

Who in their right mind would try to make the moon their  
home?  
When you can't even breathe, how can I compete to what you've  
known?  
And someday, you will turn  
Your telescope back to earth  
And wonder if life was better loving her.

Chorus

So I'll just call her gravity  
Because she keeps pulling you away from me,  
But is life that much better on the ground?  
Some say the sun's the center,  
But I guess I'd beg to differ  
Because you're the one my world revolves around.

Verse 2

You were the first man to see the craters on my skin,  
Stepped into my darkness and started leaving your footprints.  
I thought you were happy  
Until I heard you talking in your sleep.  
Now her name's the one I can't repeat.

Chorus

Bridge 1

Fly, fly away on your rocketship back  
To the arms you left because you wanted me so bad.  
You say it's your home and it's where you belong,  
But are you even sure you'll find the porchlight on?

Bridge 2

I gave you the rocks, the dark parts of my soul.  
The secrets I kept in me, you called beautiful.  
Took them as souvenirs, every moment we spent,  
Melted them down and made her a ring out of them.  
So she'll wear parts of me forever on her hand now  
The head of an enemy framing a mantle.  
Proof that she's worth more than the stars that you chased.  
Lay her down in a room the moon illuminates.  
Now I'm drenching your bodies in shades of grey and white,  
And I see the stars dance in both of your eyes.  
As I'm alone brilliantly glowing in space,  
I realize you never looked at me that way.  
So I'll orbit around you hoping earth will send  
Another lost soul longing for permanent residence.  
Stay with me, be my friend, please God, all I ask  
Is next time, don't give him the chance to look back  
Because if he does, he'll always want what he had.

Chorus

So I'll just call you gravity  
Because I let you float through the galaxy,  
But all you ever did was hold me down.  
Some say the sun's the center,  
But I guess I'd beg to differ  
Because you're the one my world revolves around.

# THE LIGHTHOUSE

by Brooklyn Meadows

---

I cast an eye upon the sea  
to seek my lover lost  
and as the waves crash at my feet  
I ponder love's grave cost

For when you left, you did not know  
just how the ocean slays  
For every cove, an undertow  
For every soul, dismay

You disappeared amidst sunset  
And yet my heart beats warm  
For you assured that day you left  
"Our love survives all storms."

As seasons change, the sea cracks cold  
with vicious waves of time  
I long to see my traveler home  
Hold fast the light through night

And when the beacon calls you home  
You know my bones rest here  
No matter what weight grieves my soul  
Hollow tombs hold no fear

Take refuge in your sunken ship  
My sailor of the sea  
Leftover wreckage, now your crypt  
Our souls amidst the breeze

# PACIFIC

by Ky Hensley

---

Pacific waves are powerful.

I can tell from a considerable distance, as the whitecaps crash on the bright, reflective sand and roll up the long stretch of beach. The cars and trucks seem to ripple in the heat of the day. We aren't even there yet, still shielding the sun from our eyes as we attempt to cross the road. Quite frequently, cars honk at the slow-moving trucks, all while seemingly oblivious to the beach stretched out before them like a framed landscape piece. I see a car slowing, and I begin to dart across.

A hand seizes mine and tugs me back. "Hold up, Maggie." The car I was watching zooms past as if frustrated by my indecision. "You trying to get us hit? It'd be a shame to lose my girl like that." Damien laughs at what he thinks is incredible wit before making the decision to drag me into traffic himself.

*If that's what it takes, my mind quips.*

My lips stay sealed. The beach. I am here for the beach.

A deafening crash of water on the pounded sand makes my heart leap into my chest. I didn't take this Spanish cultural class just to visit the Pacific. It was the language, the life, the excitement that drew me in. It was Damien who encouraged me to come with the promise of the school covering airfare costs and his endless talk of his adventures on past trips. He talked of sloths and monkeys dancing in the trees, of food better and sweeter than any other, and of community markets loud with the sounds of locals peddling goods and haggling prices. The ocean seemed a part of that in more ways than one. It was the lifeblood of the country.

Growing up in the Mount Jackson, Virginia, we didn't have access to the ocean. We were land-locked. Trapped. Our culture didn't come from a mighty body of water, but an indentation in

the land called the Shenandoah Valley. Everyone always seemed impressed by the national park's endless stretch of trees. Maybe it would be something special to someone who hadn't grown up in their shade. Or maybe they simply had never seen the Pacific and its majesty.

We approach the set of picnic tables concreted into the ground. I set down my bag and slip out of my sandals without a moment's hesitation. My eyes remain fixed on the distant clouds that fly across the sky, as the wind whips through my brown curls. Normally, my hair reached down past my shoulders but the wind tosses it all different ways. I enjoy it for a moment before deciding to tie it up before it got too tangled.

As I fight to constrain my hair, I take one step into the sand and find it warm to the touch. I knew the sensation might burn, but at the moment, it felt good to feel. Even if it hurt.

"Don't go on without me now," Damien says, slathering yet another layer of sunscreen on his tanned skin. By any girl's standards, he is attractive. But his sandy blond hair is nothing like the near-perfect white sand with a touch of grey sediment that spread as far as the eye could see.

I study the coastline, trying patience once again.

The sands of the beach are crowded with native families lounging in the day. Most of the adults are tucked under umbrellas, a newspaper or book laid across their lap. Occasionally, they look up to see their children playing contentedly in the sand, building structures for a coming wall of water to tear down. Hardly anyone is in the water though, besides a couple much further up the beach that is having a photoshoot, and the water only rises up to their shins with the largest swells of water.

There's a mangroved area to the left which our guide had warned us against nearing before we left. Crocodiles, he said. Actual saltwater crocodiles on that part of the beach. I couldn't believe him at first and Damien looked for an instant like he had changed his mind. I wish our guide Julian would have come instead. He wouldn't have kept me from crossing the road, or running to the ocean with open arms. There is no reason for him to keep me at

his side at all times; he didn't look at me and see what Damien sees.

Eventually, Damien had summoned his courage, told our guide that he'd protect me from the gators, and we set out alone.

The stretch of white sand is far enough from the mangroves that I knew Damien's protection is not necessary. Even if it isn't, nothing will keep me from the ocean.

As a peace settles over me, Damien tugs it out from under me like a rug. He lifts me a few inches off the sand. I squirm, arms locked at my sides by the way he hoists me up, like a fragile statue that he doesn't wish to drop. The other beachgoers, with their towels laid out facing the crystal green waters, turn to face the confusion of two foreigners making a scene on their beach. Beneath their umbrella, an elderly woman leans over to her spouse and whispers something. They laugh, eyes both flicking in our direction, but are kind enough not to point.

"What the heck are you doing?" I laugh despite my discomfort.

"Didn't want you to burn your feet—oh, holy smokes, this sand is hot!"

From Damien's arms, I monitor our snail's pace speed from where we placed our beach bags. "I can walk. Really. You can put me down." I try to get down myself, yet somehow the simple refusal strengthens Damien's grip.

"I don't mind, darlin. I don't mind."

I loosen in his grip, dejected.

I want to approach the Pacific alone. To introduce myself.

It wouldn't be the same if he dragged me there, where the water met and cooled the simmering sand. I want the water to brush up against my feet and soothe the pain, and step deeper and deeper, while the tide came up higher and higher—rising to my ankles, my shins, knees, hips.

Luckily, his grip gives out before we reach the water's edge and I'm permitted to walk the last few feet beside him.

"Well, I'll be. That's about the prettiest thing I've ever seen." There's wonder in his voice, and I imagine his eyes open wide to take it in. I turn to him, hoping I catch a glimpse of the same won-

der that wells up inside me. Instead, his eyes dance with his own source of amusement. "But not as pretty as you."

Had I not been compared to all the beauty of Costa Rica, I may have enjoyed the joke.

I pretend to smile, looking down at the waters. My blush is for the sea, which swells forward to say hello. A greeting just for me. Not Damien. Not the other beachgoers who were content with watching the waves dance up the beach. This is a conversation. An interaction more stimulating than any other I'd had with Damien in a long while.

Feeling my anxiety swell, I focus instead on my fingers as they run through the rough waters and particles of salt and sand stream over my skin. The texture, the pressure, is calming somehow.

I wade deeper still and I think Damien follows. He's not holding my hand now, possibly because if he were, we'd both capsize under the surge of water and the undertow sucking away at the packed sand beneath us. But he's nearby, I know. Behind me or beside me. That was his pattern.

The ocean had a pattern too. Somehow, that was different. Predictable but... not. Sure, the waves would come, but would it bowl you over like an affectionate puppy after a long day of work? Or would it come softly? Nudging you to step deeper?

I see a wave swelling in the distance. I feel it around me too, in the sands' retreat beneath my feet. Bracing myself for the leap I know is coming, a hopeful smile touches my lips. The level rises from my hips to above my shoulders and I am thrown back. Despite my resistance, I finally right myself and laugh at the effort it takes.

How powerful it is.

Standing again, I study the patterns, anticipate the next that would threaten my stability. I get knocked down again. Again. Again.

I'm laughing without realizing, breathing without thinking, enjoying without questioning. Then, I realize some time later that I've drifted closer and closer to the mangroves. The ocean had carried me down the beach, away from Damien.

He wades the distance between us. As he makes his way over, it seems to push against his progress. I step towards him, to go back up the beach for another bout with the Pacific.

He closes the final step and takes my hand in his. A patient swell breaks around us. The sea seems to stop its stirring. I look at him, actually at him, for the first time in a long while and wonder what he has to say.

Damien's hand lifts to brush a strand of hair back behind my ear. "You're just—" he pauses, speechless, "so dang happy. I don't think I've seen you this happy before."

I look past him where the sun is sinking down to kiss the edge of the ocean. How long had I been here? "I can't help being happy. There's just no other way to explain. It's all so beautiful."

"That's good." Damien looks out at the sun, but the warmth doesn't touch him.

Guilt leaps up inside me like a rabid animal. Something was wrong, and it was me. He had to know that I hadn't been the same lately. Meds weren't looking quite so daunting at this moment, when I realize it took an ocean to get me out of my head for more than a minute. I had been retreating deeper and deeper into a shell of anxious thoughts. No one on the trip knew what I had been going through, but Damien...

He had noticed. I'd have to apologize first for keeping it from him for this long. For letting it get between us. "Damien, I—"

"I've been struggling again." He swallows before continuing. "With depression."

Here? Now? "Oh. I'm sorry." My voice catches in my throat, "I didn't know."

"You know how I am. I don't like people seeing that side of me."

Heart pounding harder in my chest, it's hard to take in another breath. "I'm sorry." That's all I can find to say, as my thoughts spiral out of control. I did this.

"I know I haven't been the best boyfriend. But the depression won't last. It always passes. I know you'll be right beside me through everything. You always are and I'm just so darn lucky to

have you. You're perfect."

No. No, I'm not. "Damien—"

"You don't have to say nothing, darlin. Just pray, alright? Don't worry about me."

How could I not worry? I want to scream at him. I forget about the ocean's beauty in that moment, as dispassionate waves well up around both of us. We stand, locked together by our hands, unmoved by the current.

Damien lifts a hand to push a strand of hair back behind my ear. "That's enough of the beach for one day, right?" Using his other hand, which tightly wraps around mine like a boa constrictor, he tugs me up to the beach. The water recedes from my hips to my knees. From knees to shins to ankles, I walk numbly beside him.

"Let me treat you to a copo before we head back. You still haven't tried one." He gestures over to the shaved ice stand nearby. "And don't you argue, 'cause I'm paying."

For once, I don't think of the Costa Rican bills resting idly in my wallet, begging for use. I don't think about how much money he had spent, how much time he had wasted on me. How could I not have noticed his depression? I didn't deserve a copo. I didn't deserve him.

But I couldn't tell him that now. I'd just make his depression worse.

He follows me back over to the table, letting me walk now that the sand is cooling.

The sun retreats further into the skyline. Beachgoers pack up to leave with umbrellas folded in at their sides and their children sprinting for the same shaved ice stand that Damien had pointed out. The traffic is louder as a result of the exodus, cars honking as they pull out onto the busy, winding road that lead back up to the city. I slip back into my shoes and wrap my towel tightly around me. Damien grabs his wallet and seeks out the copero.

I take a seat at the table and wait for Damien to return. The ocean pulls back from me, leaving several more inches of compressed and wet sand behind with each wake. It had tried, perhaps, to make me happy. It had tried to get me out of my head, my endless

cycle of anxious thoughts. Nothing worked.

Nothing could ever fix this.

Damien returns sooner than I thought he would with the rush of the beachgoers' exit. With a grin, he deposits the bright-red copo into my waiting hands. The coolness leeches into my skin and I stir the mixture of shaved ice, sweetened condensed milk, and cherry syrup together until it's uniformly pastel pink in color.

Damien looks up from his grape-flavored treat minutes later, already half-finished. He laughs, "You haven't even tried a bite yet. How are you supposed to know you'll like it if you won't try?"

Under his watchful gaze, I lift a full spoon to my lips. The flavor is so intensely sweet and artificial that my instinct is to swallow it quickly and let it melt away. But his eyes... so fixed with determination to see me happy, to give him a reason to be happy now...

I find myself laughing and smiling, as I lift a second scoop to my mouth. "Yeah, you've convinced me. This is perfect."

# CORDELIA!

por Gabriel Lira Houle

---

Cordelia, my darling.

I now know your name.

My tongue begins stalling.

My eyes cross in shame.

I'm usually good at this I say aloud.

"Hmmm?" Her blonde head in the clouds.

I try to put two and two together and say something sweet.

Something to convince you that I'm neat.

As I struggle to jump-start my passion.

I see goosebumps appear with your attired fashion.

"Are you cold?" I softly say.

"No, I just realized I'm gay"

# ENVIDIA

por Gabriel Lira Houle

---

Tengo envidia de los niños.  
Ellos tienen la habilidad a hablar sobre nada.

# NAMES

by Martha Highers

---

First there were two dead Mexicans. Clean, white, sterile looking walls and the overhead light glaring off metal surfaces, and two dead Mexicans. I shook my head and tried to wake up and think. I wasn't really alive yet. Outside it was 6 a.m. The sky was just beginning to lighten, soon it would grow pink.

It was a man's voice that had awakened me at 4 a.m. "We need you," it said.

The voice said he was someone named Mark. I didn't know Mark but his voice said he was the night supervisor. Mark the voice was smooth and soft. He went up and down like rolling hills covered with new grass. That was all I could picture of him.

"They're bringing in a wreck with some Mexicans," he said. "Can you come in early to talk to them? You know Spanish, don't you?"

Some, I said. So I got up and got dressed. I looked forward to talking to someone in a different language. It would be different from the usual hospital day. All the way to the hospital I was practicing what I would say.

*Como se llama? I would say. De donde viene? Tiene familia?*

*Donde esta el dolor?*

But standing there I saw there wouldn't be much using language today. I saw it would be another day of mainly touching bodies and body parts.

The night nurse said the wreck had happened just over the county line in the middle of the night: a car carrying five Mexicans had hit a chicken truck head on. These two Mexicans were killed right away. Three others were in critical condition and had been airlifted to a trauma center. The driver of the chicken truck had

minor injuries and was treated and released. I knew the place on the highway the wreck had happened and I could picture it. There's a billboard near there advertising the hospital: "We Care" and a picture of the CEO with a big paper smile. I don't think it's true. I've never seen him near a sick or injured person at the hospital. Do you have to come near people, and look at them, and see them, to care? I thought it was ironic that the Mexicans had probably died in view of that billboard, though.

We rolled the bodies into the O.R. Someone—Mark?—had brought in some bags of ice and left them on the counter. We wedged the ice up against the bodies. There was a little dried blood around the edge of the first Mexican's mouth that someone hadn't wiped off. I took a paper towel and wet it and wiped the blood off.

The night nurse came over beside me and touched his hair. "This one," she said, "is Enrique Guiterrez. At least that's what his I.D says. Of course the names are probably fake, and that's why the funeral home won't take them."

I looked at him to see who he was. He didn't seem too badly damaged. His jaw looked a little crooked—from the impact of the collision no doubt—and his mouth dragged down. The other Mexican had a purple bruise the size and shape of a poppy on his temple, one of those paper poppies that veterans sell at intersections. I always dread to see them, and if I can I turn around and go another way.

"And this one," she said, squeezing the toe of Purple Bruise, "is Alejandro Caballero."

Alejandro had lank dark hair that was falling into his dead eyes, though they were shut. I smoothed it out of them. I wrote the fake names down on a piece of paper, but I knew I would really tell them apart by their injuries. It's the easiest way to remember people here.

I used to think, before I became a nurse, that if I could bypass people's names and touch them, I would get down to who the people really were, to what really mattered, beyond their names. But it's not that way. It's true, we do strip people of their names here, but then we still don't really know them then either. And then

we give them other nametags, too, impersonal clinical ones—"the gallbladder in Room 246," "the GI Bleed in 203." They become their surgeries—"the total hip," "the knee replacement," "the bowel resection." Or their diagnoses. Often these are just initials, "the TURP," "the MI," "the COPD." Or they become their room numbers. Yes, definitely room numbers. It's the easiest way to remember who's who when you rush from one to the other touching them, in the brief time before they're gone.

I went back to the E.R. The E.R. doctor eyed me when I came back in. He was sitting behind the desk and drinking coffee out of a styrofoam cup. He didn't speak, and I glanced down and saw that in the hurry of leaving home in the dark I had forgotten to put my nametag on. Not wearing a name tag is a serious thing here. I went to the IV tray and tore off a piece of silk tape and wrote my name on it, first name only—that's all the name tags have—and stuck it across my uniform.

He didn't smile, but then he hardly ever does. He doesn't smile, and he hardly ever touches anyone. But then, he can heal you without touching. He strolls slowly through the E.R. in cowboy boots and a white lab coat with his hands knotted behind his back. His face is condensed in a frown, thinking. There's a story that once he managed two codes at once, just strolling from one room to the other with his hands knotted behind him that way. When he came to the door of one room, he would glance at the monitor, glance at the patient and the people throwing themselves into the body (dead? alive?) with CPR, and glance at the record of medications. He would think a moment, flick his finger and say, "Give him another epi." Then he would stroll over to the next room with his hands still knotted behind his back and do the same.

If I'd been there, I would have been one of the ones touching and touching, as if friction alone could bring life back. But I wasn't there, I was in some other part of the hospital touching something else.

"There's a patient in room number two who needs some Valium," he said. "Try to get an IV started on him."

So I went in there and looked at him. It was a prisoner from the jail, maybe a mental patient. He was tied down and straining. He was jerking against the posey vest and his teeth were locked and he hissed words through them. "Jesus!" he said. Then he started grinding his teeth. His jaw was tight. There were two deputies with him.

The man had a tattoo on his arm that said, "Tarzan."

"Is that his name?" I asked the deputies.

"That's what we call him," one of them said. The deputies looked alike. They had thin gold name plates that glared over their pockets, and the bright overhead lights were glinting off of them so I couldn't read them. They wore khaki uniforms.

I tied the white cords down tighter.

In Room 4 was an old lady from the nursing home. She kept calling for her Momma. The ambulance workers who brought her in said they thought she had a urinary tract infection. I picked up her chart and looked at it. The chart said she was 87. I opened the door and went in. She smelled old, she smelled dirty. She smelled of infected urine.

"Is that you, Momma?" she asked.

I went over to her and touched her shoulder. "No," I said. "It's just me. Can you tell me your name?"

"I don't know," she said. One of her eyes drifted toward the wall. They were clouded with cataracts.

"You don't know your name?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Where's my Momma?"

I patted her. I smoothed her hair.

"I'm sure you'll see her soon," I said.

But I had to put a catheter in her to get a urine specimen. I had to put one in because she wasn't continent and couldn't pee in a cup. So I got the day supervisor to help me pry her legs apart. She gripped the side rails and called for her Momma the whole time. "All right," I kept saying in the most soothing voice I could find. "All right. We'll be through in a minute."

In the cardiac room was a scorched man who had been out on the lake drinking beer. I thought when I went in and looked at him that maybe he was in for sunburn but then he told me he was having chest pains. He was hooked up to the monitor. He didn't have an IV in yet. There was a young woman in cutoff jeans sitting on the stretcher beside him, half propped on it, and several of his scorched red buddies were standing around the room. They all smelled like beer and sweat and body fluids. The scorched man was hooked up to the monitor and a jagged green line was pulsing across it.

I stuck a needle in his arm. "Damn!" he said. "What are you trying to do? Kill me?"

"No," I said. "I'm not trying to. I'm trying to help you. It just feels like I'm killing you."

Another thing about being a nurse: touching often doesn't connect us to people at all. At least not in many of the ways I touch people here. In the next room over I could hear the old woman still calling out.

"Momma!" she called. "Momma!"

And farther over in Room 1 Tarzan was still hissing.

"Jesus!" he said. "Jesus!"

The day wore on. An abscessed tooth. A fish hook in the face. Two children: an earache and a chest cold. Around noon some Mexicans came to I.D. the body, but they were the wrong ones, or the dead men were the wrong ones, and they couldn't give their real names. In the afternoon the deputies took Tarzan back to jail, and Room 4 went back to the nursing home still calling for her Momma.

At 3:00 a priest from the Catholic church came, and I took him into the O.R. where the Mexicans were. He said his name was Father Pete. He was a tall man with white hair and a bulbous red nose. He wanted to bless the Mexicans, he said, so I took him into the O.R. and turned on the lights.

They were still there, the sheets drawn up over their faces on the stretchers.

I saw that something was dripping down. The Mexicans were leaking onto the floor. Were they liquefying, I thought? So soon? Was it lymph? I stood in the puddle while the priest made an invisible cross in the air. The priest was wearing gray tennis shoes, frayed. His shoes were standing in the puddle too.

“What are their names?” he said.

“I don’t think they’re real names,” I said. “I think you have to put quotation marks around them. But ‘Enrique Guterrez’ and ‘Alejandro Caballero.’”

Father Pete let that pass. Maybe fake names are good enough when you’re praying for souls. Maybe it’s just the intention that matters. Funny, I thought. A fake name is good enough to pray for but not good enough to bury.

“Well, let’s say a prayer for Enrique and Alejandro,” Father Pete said. “I’m sure it would mean a lot to their families.”

He opened a slender little book and read from the rite for the dead. The whole time his shoes were getting wet in the spreading puddle, but he didn’t look down or pay attention. Then when he was through he blessed them again—he drew an invisible cross in the air, and I crossed myself as well and when he was through I lifted up the sheet over the dead Mexican closest to me to investigate, and I saw that it was not his body but the bag of ice we had tucked under his arms—like a football—that was leaking.

I didn’t think the priest’s gesture had been very satisfying. I hadn’t been to church in months myself, but after he left the tune of a hymn from church started running through my head. I could only remember the refrain: *We come to share our stories / we come to break the bread / we come to know our rising from the dead.*

That’s what we need here, I thought. Stories. We just see the amputated parts of people’s lives here. We need stories to resurrect us and make us whole. I thought I could figure out the Mexicans’ story, or part of it. I thought it was easy enough for anyone to figure out. It began at the end, of course, with the wreck, with the dead and injured chickens flopping around them while the hospital’s CEO beamed mildly down on them from his billboard. Yes, there was

irony in that scene. Not just in the billboard, but in their getting killed by a chicken truck. I figured they were on their way to work at a chicken factory. There’s one in the next county over and most of the Mexicans who come up here work there.

Maybe, as a matter of fact, the one named Alejandro was coming here for the first time. He was young. Maybe he hadn’t even been to the factory yet. Maybe he and his friends were driving up here to work, and the older ones were telling him how it would be as they came. If they had been coming from the center of Mexico, say Morelia, and they had been driving straight, the trip from there would have taken them about 30 hours. They would have taken turns with the driving.

“Seven dollars an hour, man,” I could hear one of the older ones saying. (What might his name be—Roberto?) “That’s 70 pesos an hour. In Morelia you can have a house in a year for that much money.”

Alejandro would know that was true. He would know that because he would have seen it himself, or because someone in his family—an aunt, his *abuela*—had such a house that someone’s money had built.

Of course his name wasn’t Alejandro. It was really Carlos—or Eduardo, or Jose—but when someone had given him the fake i.d. with that name on it he had probably liked the Alejandro part. “Alejandro” sounded like the name of somebody important, but “Caballero” . . . ? I knew that meant “Gentleman.” Perhaps he worried that would make someone suspicious, but someone else probably assured him that when you get past Texas, no one speaks Spanish.

So he became Alexander Gentleman. And, anyway, he knew how to act like one. He could be quiet and show respect, and maybe he could become what this word foretold. He could exchange names now anyway, the way he could exchange dollars for pesos. He could test their value. He could work hard.

Where had he come from? I had imagined Morelia. What would that be like? Perhaps it would be mild and fragrant. Something would be blooming there, something voluminous and laven-

der. Maybe he leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes and his town came to him. Dogs barking from rooftops, church bells tolling out the hours of the day. The town had a heart, and in the morning people flowed to it. Down the slanting narrow streets, people flowed: children, dogs whose names he knew, old women tottering on in bright rebozos. Here in the north the colors were dimmer, and the roads led to parking lots. He was almost dreaming when Roberto hit the brakes . . .

I was wrong though. I didn't know Alejandro's story. I could imagine something that would assuage my need for connection but there was a gap that neither my hands nor my words could cross. No matter how much I wanted to bridge it, to get in touch with him or other people that day, the most I could touch was their surfaces. I could just get a few glimpses of who they were.

But I did get to use Spanish that day.

The day was waning—it was about 7 p.m.—when a Mexican came to i.d. the bodies. I didn't ask him his name—I just asked him, *Conoce a Alejandro Caballero?*

Si, he said. He was holding his hat, a baseball cap, in his hands, respectfully, as if he were in church. I led him down the hall to the O.R. thinking again about the life I had invented for the dead men as I went.

I led this other man into the O.R. and we stood in front of the stretcher and I pulled the sheet down.

*Conoce a ese hombre mexicano?* I asked him.

*No es mexicano.* he said, looking at him. *Es quatemaltecan.*

*Es mi amigo,* he said.

He put his hand over his face and cried, and I stood beside him and rubbed his back. And I thought of the men who put those hospital billboards up, the ones with the long poles that paste the paper there, and of the way they rub and rub those paper smiles.

# NUMBERS

by Valerie Hubert

---

Numbers let us calculate  
The time it would take  
To reach the depths of outer space  
To understand our microscopic scale  
To compare our hearts  
To the hearts of the universe

Or measure the dose to save  
A child's life before the grave  
And find the price of that sale  
But not measure the worth  
Of that child's life

Numbers  
Are stifling desert air  
Are breathtaking  
And leave me parched  
Gasping for meaning

# THE PROTAGONIST

by Valerie Hubert

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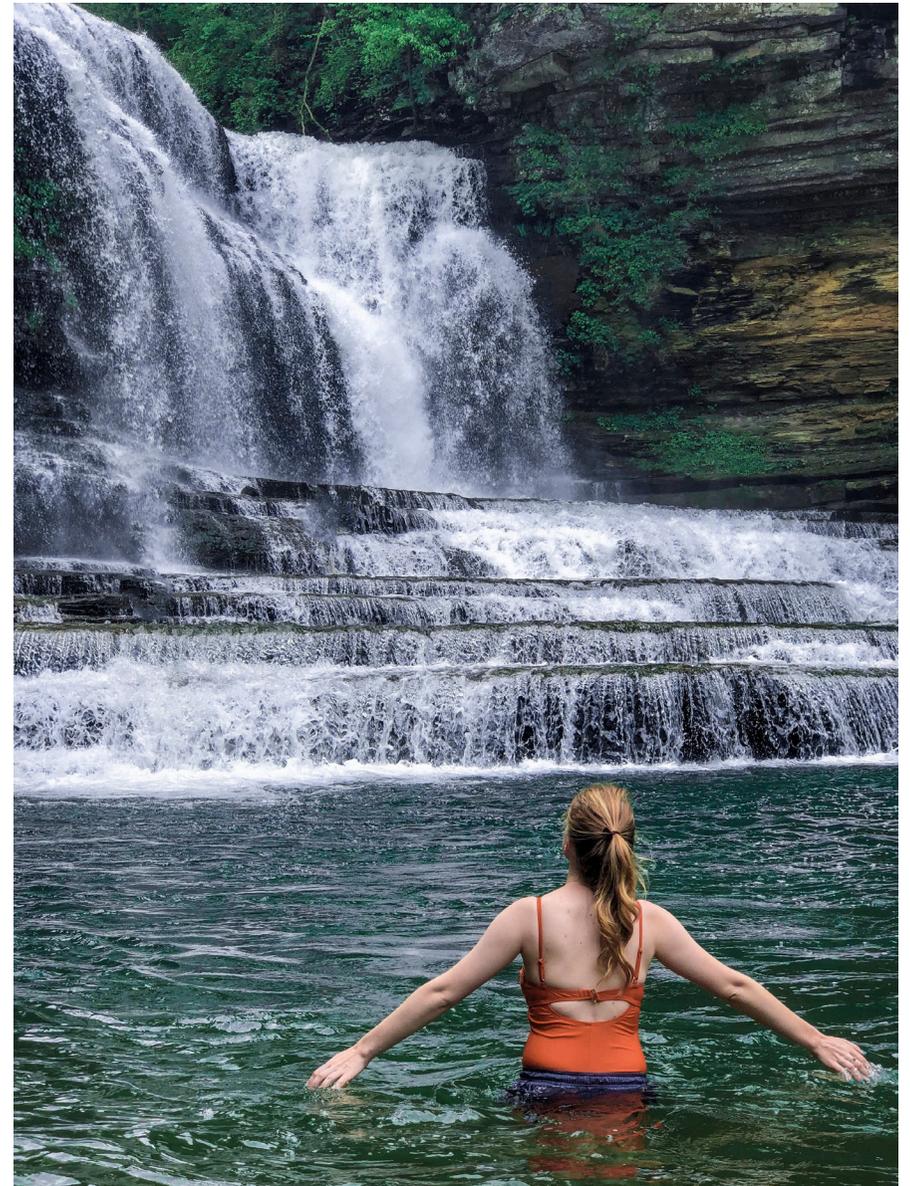
I love the way  
Your sunny hair curls  
And clouds with rain  
And the scar tissue trace  
Of your book spine breastplate  
And you hold me  
Like I am human,  
Too

I love the way  
Your ocean eyes wave  
Ancient rippled  
Smile, dog-eared page  
Wrinkled with use  
And you tell me  
I'm the one who  
Reads

# EMERALD IMMERSION

by Kayla Jo Pace

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# THE CLIFFS OF MOHER

by Sarah Moore

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# ON THE EDGE OF THE FALLS

by Sarah Moore

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# EXTRACTION

by Kayla Jo Pace

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# [Winner - Clara Epperson Nonfiction Prize] TROUBLEMAKER

by Austin F. Cross

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## I: In-School Suspension

I was sitting in a room near the front office of my high school during the final week of April 2014 ready to take on day three of my in-school suspension punishment. I couldn't believe that I was even there. I had only been in trouble a few times throughout my public school career at that point—once for getting caught cheating on a test and once for “threatening a student”—but I never had to do in-school suspension before. The reason I was there was kind of ridiculous, but it was my stupidity, however, that got me there in the first place. There was no denying that. The other reason, though not as prominent as my stupidity, was my best friend at the time. I'm not going to give his whole name, so let's just call him “Nick the Prick.”

Now, we all had that one friend in high school—or maybe even a few—that never really gave a damn about school and homework and did just about everything they could to do as little as they could. Nick the Prick definitely fit into this category right down to the proverbial T. A self-proclaimed genius with a “photographic” memory, he never took notes, claiming that he could simply remember everything by memory. He did everything in his power to make sure he did as little as possible when it came to school. For this reason, he was the butt of many jokes, most of which were from me. And when he actually did do his work or took notes, it came as a big shock to everyone around him.

*“Not taking notes, I see. What's gonna happen if the teacher does a note check?”*

They almost never did.

“Didn’t do the homework, did you? You do know that this goes toward our final grade, right?”

It was usually just busy work.

“What’s this? Nick doing his homework? Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

He usually was.

So, in early November, when I saw his sketchbook that he used for his art class just randomly lying on one of the desks in a different classroom, the cogs in my brain began to move at maximum speed. Here was a chance for me to have a little bit of fun. So, I took it home and wrote in the form of a letter a rather colorful exchange of words explaining the rather intriguing activities that I wanted to partake in with his mother. This was one of the many inside jokes that Nick and I had between us. Also, I wrote on the following page two body parts that had something to do with sexual reproduction multiple times. I wrote—well, I’ll just come right out and say it—I wrote the words penis and vagina. It was surely a sight to behold, and I could not wait to show it to Nick and the rest of my friends the following day.

Only, I couldn’t. In the midst of my excitement the following morning, thinking of all the possible reactions that my friends would have, I accidentally left it at home, foolishly thinking that I already had it in my backpack from the night before. I didn’t have anything to worry about, though, right? Nick never did his homework, so I was in the clear. Nothing bad would happen to me because I left the sketchbook at my house.

When I saw Nick that morning, he asked me, “Dude, you didn’t see my sketchbook lying around before you left yesterday, did you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did,” I said with a grin. “I saw it in Mrs. Keisling’s classroom and I, being the good friend that I am, took it upon myself to take it home with me so that it would be safe. I also wrote you a little message near the end of it.”

“So, do you have it with you?” he asked.

“Um, no. I, uh, kinda left it at, uh, home,” I answered. “But, no big deal, right? You never do your homework. Right?”

The last “right?” was more of a hopeful request for confirmation rather than an actual statement.

And do you want to know what this prick of a friend said to me?

He said, “Bro, I needed that today. I was gonna turn in some of my assignments.”

I was very upset with him for that.

“What?” I asked incredulously. “You mean to tell me that Nick—the *great* Nick—after an entire high school career of just shrugging off homework assignment after homework assignment, decides the one time he’s actually going to be a diligent student for once and do his homework is the same time I forget it at home after taking it without him knowing it?”

“So, you don’t have it?”

“Of course I don’t have it! I forgot it at home,” I said. “I thought it would be okay because you never do your homework.”

He shrugged. “Well, I need it now.”

Seriously, what a prick.

After that little conversation, we went to the art teacher—who was actually one of the coolest teachers we had in the entire school because she connected really well with the students—and told her all about the situation.

“Mrs. Alley,” Nick the Prick said. “My friend has something that he wants to tell you.”

“So, here’s the thing,” I began saying with my hands moving around nervously. “I found Nick’s sketchbook in my class yesterday and took it home, but I left it there, so he can’t turn in his assignment today. Is it *at all* possible for him to turn it in on Friday?”

She was actually very understanding of the situation and even gave Nick an extension on the assignment *and* full credit for the grade.

“You know, for a teacher,” I said to Nick the Prick as we left her classroom, “she’s pretty cool.” Oh, how I would eat those words a few months down the road.

Later that night, I asked myself, “Should I take this whole sketchbook thing one step further and make it a million times

funnier?” The answer to this question was, of course, yes, so I got out my pencil and wrote out another letter, this time explaining my displeasure of him wanting to do his homework, which led to a series of other letters that I dubbed “strongly worded letters” wherein I would express my displeasure with people for doing completely normal things that slightly inconvenienced me. I again mentioned the fact that I still wanted to partake in some more “recreational activities” with his mother “no matter how disappointed I am that you did your homework,” because that was just the nice thing to do. I again wrote down the same two body parts that would be used for those “recreational activities”—sorry, penis and vagina—with his mother.

The next day, I was determined to get this damned sketchbook back to my friend, just so I could bask in the laughter that I knew was to come from it. When I gave Nick the sketchbook, he read it all. Everything right down to the body parts. And what did he do? He laughed, of course. What can I say? I guess I just have that effect on people.

We had a really big laugh about it and it was the topic of conversation for the next few days, but then we just sort of forgot about it after about a week. I thought this would be the end of it, with us looking back on our final days of high school as seniors before were forced out into the real world.

*“Hey, do you remember that one time I stole your sketchbook?”*

*“And when you wrote all of that stupid stuff in it?”*

*“And when I wrote all of that other stupid stuff in it?”*

*“Ah, memories!”*

But, no, that would not be the end of it.

## II: Your Loving Friend...

Around the first week of April, I was playing basketball in the gymnasium when I got called up to the principal’s office.

I am sure that everyone has that feeling of despair and guilt in the pit of their stomachs when they get called up to the principal’s office, often asking themselves, “What have I done wrong that I

don’t remember?” or something along those lines. The sketchbook incident never even dawned on me.

I made my trek up to the principal’s office, my paranoia creeping in. I knew that I would be fine because I hardly ever got in trouble, but as I kept walking, I mentally rehearsed some sort of an alibi or excuse for a “crime” that I may or may not have committed—you know, just in case. But, more than likely, I would be fine. Maybe my mom had called the school and wanted me to go straight home on the bus or something else as completely incorrect as that.

When I got to the principal’s office, I saw Nick sitting in the chair opposite the vice principal’s desk. I had a feeling—a sneaking suspicion, if you will—that my mom had not called the school at all. The vice principal, whose name shall not be repeated for reasons unrelated to this situation, asked me, motioning to something on his desk, “Now, would you mind telling me what this is?”

I knew exactly what it was before I even looked at it, but the moment I laid my eyes on it, my suspicions were confirmed. It was that damned sketchbook, in its scholastic and somewhat tainted glory, flipped open to the exact page that had the juiciest material known to man. My so-called “friend” had neglected to take the pages out of the sketchbook after five months. You know, like a normal person would have done.

Of course, I told the vice principal the truth: that I was the one who wrote everything on those pages. What was I going to do: lie? I could have, but I didn’t for two very good reasons. One, I don’t lie about something when I know that I am the one at fault. I will explain the second reason in just a little bit.

After I admitted my guilt to the vice principal, Nick turned to me and simply said, “Sorry, bro,” with his signature shrug.

Seriously, what a prick.

And you’ll never guess who found it. Do you remember that really cool, really understanding art teacher that gave Nick the Prick that extension for his art assignment? Yeah, it was her; the teacher that was so undeniably cool about giving Nick his extension was the same teacher that she decided she should, you know, do her rightful

job as a public school teacher and report me to the vice principal for it. Everyone was against me at this point.

And this was not a case where she used her resources to find out that I was the one who wrote this profane masterpiece in the sketchbook. She didn't reach back into her student files to find some old yellowed assignment that I did for her two years prior to see if the handwriting matched. It was even that woman's intuition that seemed to be so frighteningly accurate all of the time.

No, like I mentioned earlier, the thing that did me in was my bumbling stupidity, which brings me to the second reason as to why I told the vice principal the truth: I ended each entry in the sketchbook with the same five words and seven syllables: "Your loving friend, Austin Cross." That's probably not the best idea when you're writing a masterpiece of crude language such as this.

Yes, you read that correctly. I, being the masterful comic genius that I was, got caught writing crude language in my friends sketchbook all because I signed my full name at the bottom of each entry like an idiot.

Before I was given my punishment, the vice principal called my mom.

When she picked up, the vice principal said, "Hey, Lori. This is the vice principal from the high school. I need to talk to you about your son."

"Oh, goodness, what has he done this time?" she asked, because I was a "frequent" visitor to the principal's office.

"He's in a bit of trouble for writing some colorful words in one of his friend's sketchbooks," he answered.

"Okay, he has been known to do that," she said.<sup>1</sup>

"Now, I can tell you what he wrote, but Lori, I don't know if I feel comfortable repeating it."

"You know what? You don't have to tell me," she said.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Now, I don't know exactly how my mom's side of the conversation went, but I will fill in the best that I can with what I think she might have said.

<sup>2</sup> This part is actually true. She told me about it later that same day. I was expecting her to ground me, or something along those lines, but she said, "You're a teenager. Sometimes you do things like that. I have a cool mom."

"Thank you," the vice principal said. I had to suppress a smile because he said "thank you" almost with a tone of relief in his voice.

### III: The "Punishment"

I was naturally given a punishment for my profane ramblings: a full week of in-school suspension. The funny thing about that is the vice principal didn't really give me the punishment until two weeks later. I remember I was walking with one of my friends up to the main hall, where the principal's office is located, one Friday afternoon and I saw the vice principal walking to the door. I had a feeling that he was about to say something about my "juvenile delinquency," but then I thought "*Maybe he won't do anything because it's been so long since everything has happened. Maybe I'm in the clear.*"

But, like many times during my twenty-three years of existence, I was proven wrong.

"Hey," he said, as I held the door open for him. "Why don't we start the in-school suspension next week?" He said that all with a knowing grin, like he realized that he completely forgot that I was even in trouble in the first place before he actually saw me.

"Yeah, okay, whatever," I said as I shrugged to my friend. I had a feeling it was about to come anyway. Might as well just get it over with. Then I thought, "*So, this is what I get for holding the door open for you, you prick?*"

But, my in-school suspension did not go exactly as planned for the vice principal and I.

On the first day, there had been inclement weather in the area, so the entire school had to close at noon and the students were sent home early.

On the second day, when the teacher saw me, she asked, "Wait, you're in here? You must have done something *real* bad? So, what did you do?"

"I, uh, wrote some dirty words in Nick's sketchbook," I said. She laughed at that. "You're kinda like Shakespeare." I didn't

really say anything, but I really liked the compliment. I also liked that she had to leave early that day, so I got to go back out into the hallways of my high school to live my normal high school life for another day.

Which brings me to the third day. I was sitting in the room across from the principal's office waiting for the teacher to get me and take me to the dreaded ISS room. I was the only one waiting there, so when the teacher came to get me and saw that I was all by my lonesome, she had a look of disgust on her face and went to the vice principal. After a few moments, I was summoned to stand before them.

"Do you think you learned your lesson?" the vice principal asked me. I don't know why, but he still had that same knowing grin on his face. I never really liked that grin to be perfectly honest.

And I, being the smart ass that I was (and still am) answered, "Yeah, don't sign your name." Of course, that wasn't the answer he was looking for, as he just shook his head and started disagreeing with me. So, then I said, "Nah, I'm just kidding. Just don't do it."

*Ding-ding-ding!* That was the answer he was looking for.

And with that, I was released from the clutches of punishment and the dreadful ISS room. I walked away from that whole experience a completely new man with the sole intention of never doing anything like that ever again. But, much like criminals who are released from prison, I committed the same "crime" again. Only this time, I didn't end my newest blasphemous magnum opus with the same five words and seven syllables: "Your loving friend, Austin Cross."

[Winner - Clara Epperson Fiction Prize]

# KARŌSHI

by Andrew Hinman

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**T**he trains in Tokyo are weeping, though no one seems to notice. Stone stares abound in conjoined cars, packed meshes of human gravel in every box.

In one such compartment Takeshi Mori awoke with a snort, nearly tripping onto the person seated in front of him. Glancing around, he checked for any sets of eyes on him. Several teenagers stared down at their palms, eyes lit up by smartphone screens of gacha delight. A stale-smelling geezer leaned against the corner as he too kept his eyes glued to his hands, entranced by a Bejeweled ripoff. The train clacked and screeched as it ground against the rails, and Takeshi let loose a soft moan. His fingertips turned a pinkish red as he clasped the pale green triangle tighter, itself hanging off a long steel bar above. He rested his head back on his right forearm, forcing his eyes shut. If there was any one thing he could always count on to be there for him, it was this bar, this triangle. So sturdy, so trustworthy. Day in and day out, it supported him much more than Yuuko did.

The feminine robotic voice called out through the train as it slowed down to a halt. He nearly toned it out.

"Tsugi wa Okachimachi. Okachimachi."

Almost there, he thought as the English mumbo-jumbo followed. Just two more stops.

The last two passed by seamlessly, and he didn't crack open his eyes until he heard the speakers recite their part for him.

"Tsugi wa Tokyo desu. Tokyo."

Grabbing his briefcase from the rafters, he pushed his way through the kids still enchanted by their phones. A woman capti-

vated by some erotic novel was his last obstacle on the train, but she moved out of the way without even acknowledging him. He cleared the platform in record speed despite his drowsy state. Just last week his boss had scolded him for having the audacity to casually stroll into work five minutes early, and he couldn't afford to make such a costly mistake again.

Unfortunately for him, he soon ended up caught behind not only a hunchback grandmother with an accompanying roller suitcase, but also an airheaded tourist admiring the beauty of modern escalators. Takeshi tugged nervously at his collar, sweat trickling down his neck like liquid anxiety. He waited and waited for the tourist to step aside, out of the fast lane, but they just kept right in his way. On the ground, he bolted with his suave black shoes, tapping his SUICA card quick like lightning as he bolted through the ticket gate.

For a brief period after, his commute was a hurried blur, and he came to his senses as he stared at a crosswalk light. Bird-songs called his feet forward and he realized he was only a few blocks from his workplace. Pulling up his sleeve, he checked his watch before sighing in relief. All wasn't so bad. The sun shone down with passion, but he'd had a pleasant walk in the shade. His handkerchief was catching a break for now. His work stood just around the corner, and he had ample time to spare. Though, a thought tickled his mind. He toyed with the idea of turning back after having gotten this far, or even waiting a little while to spite his boss.

Yet Takeshi Mori turned that corner, and life was never the same. Work, to him, was something inescapable, something inevitable. It had been ground into him since day one how his life would play out: study hard for entry exams, coast through school and enjoy life. Find a respectable, Japanese job and wife, wear a tidy white dress shirt with matching black pants, and do the very best not to stand out. Even though he might on occasion ask himself how he got here, he always chose instead to just let the days go by.

Yet in that moment, time seemed to stand still. His feet froze at the corner, and the briefcase fell from his grasp. It banged

sharply on the concrete, but not a head nearby appeared to notice it. Takeshi gawked, mouth agape, at the lot of his workplace.

For that was all there was: a simple green lot fitted with a few scattered benches and vending machines. Its coat of turf grass gleamed in the sun, and college and high school couples lounged in blocks of shade granted from neighboring skyscrapers, giggling and teasing one another. As if nothing was amiss.

Crossing the street in a daze, he drew closer. This is a dream, he thought. This is a dream, and I need to wake up. I must be late for work by now.

He stumbled over to a nearby vending machine, where a fellow salaryman was fumbling through his coin purse. Takeshi interrupted him without an apology, asking him to slap him to bring him back to his senses. The man merely gave him a confused, disgruntled look, before shaking his head and shoving his coin purse back in his pocket. He walked away from the crazed figure of Takeshi without looking back. Clearly, no cheap drink was worth this hassle.

Takeshi spun around slowly, double checking his surroundings. Out in the sun, perspiration came back in full force. Nothing could hide from the bright rays, and everything seemed perfectly where it should be. The vending machine in front of the convenience store that had always been here was here. The corporate buildings next to and across the street from the lot were there. Everything was in place but his building. Plenty of other people walked on by and nothing seemed strange to them. He had just been here yesterday, on the nineteenth floor of a building that wasn't here today. His back slid down the sun-baked wall and he stared straight ahead for several moments. He loosened his tie, running fingers through his black hair.

*I have to get away from here. Back to somewhere that makes sense.*

Jumping up suddenly enough to frighten a passerby, he retraced his footsteps, always looking down in case another one of the skyscrapers he knew so well had vanished overnight. Sweat leaked out of him faster than his will.

Eventually hearing the mechanical roars of trains overhead, he looked up to find himself at the gates of Tokyo Station once more. He absentmindedly walked through the station like a phantom looking for guidance. Dragging his SUICA card over the gates, he wandered towards the Yamanote Loop Line platform. When the train arrived, he was shocked to find all of the puke-green triangles occupied. Passengers pulled at them, leaning forward over those seated. Panic set in quickly, only briefly receding once he saw an open seat near the back. A young kid leaned towards the center, talking to his friends beside him. Takeshi roughly brushed past him, collapsing eagerly onto the seat. Even the triangle had failed him. Patting down his neck and face with his handkerchief almost as if to plug holes on a sinking ship, the epiphany struck him that he must have left his briefcase behind. Surely, it was to be forgotten now. He had not the mental willpower to return there. It couldn't be helped.

No one on the train said a word or looked at his distraught, unsightly appearance. As he sat emptily on a full train, passengers shifted in and out for hours on end. The rails screeched and whined like banshees in the whistling wind. Around and around the loop line he went, for hours on end. He found comfort in the process of arriving somewhere without an actual destination. Time flew faster than the city outside the windows, and his phone rang several times. He had no doubt Yuuko was calling him, most likely for some errand after his shift had ended. He didn't answer, couldn't; he had no voice to talk to her.

When his mind could no longer hear the stations being announced, he meekly rose to his feet. As the doors slid open to an unknown station, he stumbled, bouncing off strangers till he reached the exit. The onlookers in the same car were quite disgusted by such a display, but said not a word. Dazed, he left the station, walking until his eyes could no longer see paths ahead of him. He wandered until he too was just another tree vanishing in a forest without a trace.

[Winner - Lora A. Printz Poetry Prize]  
THIRTEEN WAYS OF  
LOOKING AT THE PIN  
OF A GRENADE

by Ian Ilgner

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I:

Poised, waiting to be pulled  
Like unwrapping the bow on a gift  
The pin of a grenade

II:

It serves as a memento  
Our fathers and their fathers  
Most are gone  
This small relic remains.  
A simple metal ring  
Which held the pin of a grenade  
Its original purpose long behind it  
Now just a simple keyring  
Binding together  
Car, home, school  
Holding a life  
In its tiny metal grasp

III:

The grenade explodes  
Still clutched in his hand is the pin  
His knuckles turn white  
Two rings adorning his left hand  
One is a reminder of home  
The other so he never forgets

IV:  
The paint from this grenade ring is long gone  
But underneath it shines with a radiant luster

V:  
This grenade ring I carry  
Has some weight to it  
I can feel it pulling  
Even though it is so small

VI:  
Walking with my father  
Across the main quad  
A slight drizzle in the air  
We stop and sit in the grass  
“This is something for you”  
He hands me a small metal ring  
With a bobby pin attached  
“It’s the pin from a grenade.  
Let it be a reminder  
that death lives on your left shoulder  
and watches over you.  
You should not fear it  
but never forget it, either.”

VII:  
The American way  
Mass produced  
Yet sturdy  
In a factory for grenades  
Not even one faulty pin

VIII:  
Potential  
Not usually a powerful thing

“Your work has potential”  
“Your son has potential”  
Yeah a lot of things have potential  
But it’s hard for me to think of anything  
With more potential than a grenade with no pin

IX:  
The pin of a grenade  
Clutches its ring  
Like a person  
Would clutch an inner tube  
On the open ocean

X:  
Are we so greedy  
That when we deliver a grenade  
We must keep a part of the parcel for ourselves

XI:  
Never pull out a grenade’s pin with your teeth  
This isn’t some glorified war movie  
People who act cool yank their own teeth out  
And drop the payload they hold in pain  
The lucky ones have a broken smile  
The others have a broken body

XII:  
A grenade is a fruit  
So gently uproot  
Peel away its skin  
Find the treat within  
Plucking the stem  
Grasping this gem  
Take a small bite  
For a short-lived delight

XIII:

Pulling the pin

Is making a decision

Choosing to separate

Into millions of pieces

Instead of uniting

Into a cohesive whole

Think for a while

Before you split

Grenade from pin

# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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**Lena Albro** is an English major currently in her sophomore year at Tennessee Tech University. She was born and raised in Germany and has lived in Tennessee for about two-and-a-half years now.

**Anthony Baker** has taught English and directed the first-year composition program at TTU since the beginning of this century. He enjoys hanging out with his family and acting busy on his tiny farm.

**Katie Boren** is a graduating senior English major at Tennessee Tech.

**Kevin Burmeister** received his Master of Arts in English from Tennessee Tech in 2019 and taught as an adjunct instructor of English for several years. He is currently the barista-in-residence at Broast in Cookeville.

**Austin F. Cross** is a graduating super senior at Tennessee Tech University majoring in Creative Writing. He mainly writes poetry but occasionally dabbles in short fiction and creative nonfiction. In his free time, he likes to read, write, listen to punk rock music, and overthink everything.

**Whitney Cunningham** is a first year graduate student from Spencer, TN currently majoring in English with a concentration in professional communications.

**Mallory England** (no bio)

**William Fisk** worked for 20 years in Nashville as a professional technical writer, editor, and instructional designer. He has taught courses in the PC concentration at Tech for the past 18 years.

**Isaac Friedman** (short bio)

**Cale Grieves** (short bio)

**Robert Hamm-Bhonsie** graduated from TTU in May 2018 with a Bachelor's degree in English. One of her works titled "The Tree of Life" was published in The Journal of Creative Inquiry at TTU. Her writing mostly consists of themes ranging from romance to racial issues in today's society. She now lives in South Carolina with her husband as a free-lance writer and a full-time administrator.

**Ky Hensley** is a majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Spanish at Tennessee Tech University. She has been working on a novel series and sporadic poetry for six years now. She is not studying photography but occasionally enjoys capturing the beauty of what she sees without using words.

**Martha Highers** is a writer who has published in various journals and genres. She works as a nurse at Cookeville Regional Medical Center and is currently the editor of Under the Sun.

**Andrew Hinman** is a graduating English major minoring in German. After graduation, he plans to teach abroad while working on his writing in his downtime.

**Gabriel L. Houle** is a graduating English major minoring in Spanish. He is looking forward to a backlog of books, gardening, and camping with friends.

**Valerie Hubert** is a junior at Tennessee Tech majoring in English, focusing in Creative Writing, minoring in Business. She loves tea and cats.

**Ian Ilgner** is a senior English Major at Tennessee Tech. He wears flip-flops and sweatpants regardless of weather, and he intends to become a copy editor once he graduates.

**Abbigail Jackson** is a junior at Tennessee Tech. She is an English major with a creative writing concentration, and a minor in Theatre. She has no clue what she's going to do after she graduates, but she hopes writing and good coffee are involved.

**Kaitlyn Kidwell** is a freshman Physics major at Tennessee Tech from Spring Hill, Tennessee. She is also a member of the ASG Creative Writing Committee. Poetry is her favorite genre because of its versatility and length.

**Ann Lewald** (no bio)

**Jane Loveday** graduated from Tennessee Tech in fall 2018 with a degree in English. She is a proponent of the "write what you know" adage and wrote about the effects of cancer, a topic she states that she knows too well. She states that being able to tell a story gives you a certain amount of power over it, and finding some part of that story to laugh at gives you even more.

**Rosemary McLean** is a sophomore/junior English major with a focus in Creative Writing.

**Brooklyn Meadows** is a student in the Creative Writing Master's Program at Tennessee Tech. Although her career is rooted in Elementary Education, she considers writing to be a deep passion. She writes primarily poetry and fiction.

**Sarah Moore** is a senior English major at Tennessee Tech University. She is the President of the English Club and enjoys participating in her campus ministry, UCSC. When she's not spending time

with her loving boyfriend, she enjoys writing, reading, painting, and hiking.

**John Ngo** is a senior in Computer Engineering. Whenever he's not programming, he enjoys telling stories through photography.

**Mari Ramler** is an Assistant Professor of Professional and Technical Communication at Tennessee Tech University. Her current book project, *The Guilty Breast: Exposing New Media*, analyzes the female breast's recent censorship across social media platforms.

**Kristin Reid** is a Tennessee Tech alumni and has a degree in English. She has previously been published in *Channillo* and the previous edition of *The Iris Review*. She plans of furthering her education and obtaining a second degree in criminal justice. She loves to spend her time writing short stories, binge-watching television shows, and reading anything and everything between Poe and Hawthorne.

**Tom Saya** is an English professor at Tennessee Tech and a champion of modest biographies.

**Kayla Jo Pace** is a senior at TTU majoring in English and minoring in History. Relatively new to creative writing, she hails from Murfreesboro and in her free time enjoys watercoloring and studying old works of art.

**John Wayne** is a Communication major with an English minor. The inspiration for his poems come from his personal experiences with religion, relationships, and mental health. Growing up, he thought that poetry had to conform to a certain standard, but in recent years, he has focused on discovering his own style and format.

**Kaitlyn Wilbanks** is a junior at Tennessee Tech, double majoring in English and History and minoring in Spanish. She is from Jackson, Tennessee, and loves scary movies, Olive Garden, and the outdoors.

**Angela Willis** is an Interdisciplinary Studies major with an emphasis on English Literature and Social Sciences. She first attended Tennessee Tech in the 80s and returned last fall to finish her degree.