



The Reflector

2015



The Reflector

Shippensburg University's
Journal of the Arts

2015

The Reflector is the annual Undergraduate Arts Journal financed by the Student Association of Shippensburg University. We accept fiction, nonfiction, poetry, interview, and artwork year-round. Works are considered for publication based on a blind submission policy. Submissions are accepted electronically at reflect@ship.edu.

For questions regarding our submission policy, contact:
reflect@ship.edu.

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Letter From The Editor

Dear reader,

I like to meet people.

Well, I guess, more accurately, I like to meet characters and personas. Personalities fascinate me and inspire me. I have felt stronger connections to characters, cried harder at their losses and grief, felt happier for their triumphs than some people I have met.

I like meeting characters in the privacy of my bedroom or living room. On a lawn chair on my deck, twisting and reading at weird angles to catch the last beams of sunlight.

Meeting people can be hard.

Being a senior about to graduate, I now have a chance, and duty, to reflect upon the past four years of my life. What I was most excited about for college was the prospect of meeting people, learning from people, finding and meeting my future wife and best man. I was quickly disappointed when, while waiting for class to start, everyone was on their phones. I was disappointed at the same cookie-cutter type people I found in my dormitory.

Don't get me wrong; I have met some amazing people at Shippensburg and have some great relationships, but it took all four years to happen. My point is that we often do not know the people around us well. We do not know what the person sitting three seats behind us is thinking, what the person sitting on the other side of the room is writing, or that the person sitting right behind you, over one to the left, will be your future partner.

The Reflector's goal is and always has been to give the students a voice and outlet. Inside this book, the people sitting in your classroom share themselves. The person you always seem to see at Sheetz shares an experience never spoken in these pages. The person in your science class shares the character they created and love. The worker at Reisner shares their unique perspective.

Inside these pages you can meet someone. Inside this publication, you get a chance to meet the students at Shippensburg University. Inside these pages are the characters and personas that we can fall in love with, relate to, cry with.

I have been with this journal for all four years of college. I started as the Prose Editor and worked my way up, stopping at each step of the ladder, to Editor-in-Chief. Now in a few weeks, I will graduate. I will carry these publications with me all my life, always carrying the people I never met, but know so deeply.

Thanks for reading,

Alexander Strickler



“People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact it’s the other way around.”

-Terry Pratchett



Conscience

Runner up for the Balutis-Stevens Award for
Artistic Excellence
Emma Hergenroeder

Sobbing, Anne Marie ripped the purity ring from her finger and hurled it at the creek. It sparkled as it plunked quietly into the water. She watched the ripples, her hands shaking and her spine rigid.

Thoughts of Friday night flashed before her again: the loud music, the furtive glance at the distracted chaperones, and the giddy dash to the empty third floor of the high school. She hadn't meant for things to happen the way they did. She and her boyfriend Derrick were just planning to make out, which was as far as they had ever gone. But there was something different about it that night. She couldn't remember who undressed whom; all she could remember was how it all felt, and that what started as a fire ended in cold emptiness.

Anne Marie snapped back to the present. "Stop it," she begged her thoughts. She sank down to the grass, staring at the spot where her ring had disappeared. Her hands wrung her long skirt and she drew her knees up to her chest. Something rustled in the brush behind her. She quickly looked over her shoulder, pulling her brown, tear-soaked hair away from her eyes. It was just a rabbit.

She listened to the wind in the trees and she thought of what her mother said when she was little, that the wind was from her guardian angel's wings. Her throat constricted and her gut twitched uncomfortably. She shrank deeper into herself, her tears falling into her lap. "God, I'm sorry," she prayed. "I won't do it again, I'll go to confession, I'll do whatever you want, just leave me alone for two minutes."

Her discomfort intensified and she had a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Please," she said. "Let the whole thing stay here in the woods. You know what would happen at home. I can't do it. Please don't ever let Mom and Dad find out. They don't deserve it." She roughly wiped her eyes. "I don't want to hurt them." She shook her head. Her hand went to the cross hanging from a delicate chain around her neck. Clutching it, she lay down and buried her face in her arm.

That evening, when she wheeled her bicycle into the garage, all evidence of her time in the woods was gone. Her face glowed, scrubbed clean and demurely painted at the mirror in her best friend's bathroom. She could see her parents on the porch: her mother was sitting reading a magazine and her father was watching a squirrel in the yard. She tried to keep her voice and glance casual as she greeted them.

Her mother looked up and smiled. "Hi. How are you?"

"Fine," Anne Marie replied. She forced a smile and thought she pulled it off well.

"Where were you all afternoon?"

"Rachel's house."

Her father nodded. "What are your plans for the evening?" he asked. "I thought we might have a game night."

Anne Marie could not imagine maintaining a convincingly serene façade for hours on end. "I can't. I have homework," she lied, and felt a twinge in her stomach.

Her mother shook her head. "Don't work yourself too hard," she said.

"She did go to that party last night," her father pointed out.

Anne Marie studied a knot in the wood of the porch.

Her father looked up at her. "I'm glad you've got your priorities straight. You're so responsible. You know, whenever I see other families and the way their kids act, and then come home and see you, I'm reminded just how blessed I am. You're different."

Anne Marie's throat constricted.

"Hey."

Anne Marie looked up.

Her father smiled. "You don't have to be shy about it. I'm proud of you."

Anne Marie nodded. "Thanks."

"Are you okay?" her mother asked, frowning. "You seem bothered."

Anne Marie replied quickly, "I'm fine." She glanced at her cell phone, pretending to read a text. "When's dinner? I have homework to get to."

"You've got another forty-five minutes," her mother answered.

Anne Marie went inside. As she passed through the kitchen, her eyes fell on one of the bible verse plaques that decorated the wall: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." She winced and rushed upstairs to her room. She locked the door and sat in the corner, hugging a pillow. She dared not make a sound, but her mouth stayed open in a silent scream.

Sunday morning, sitting in the pew with her parents during Mass, Anne Marie suddenly realized that she had not gone to confession and it was too late to do so before Communion time. Her heart rate increased and she stared at the crucifix over the altar, forgetting to listen to the sermon. She knew that what she did Friday night with Derrick had been a mortal sin, the worst category of offense against morality. To go up for Communion and receive the Eucharist – no mere symbol but the real presence of Jesus Christ – in an unconfessed state of sin was to commit another sin just as severe. But if she stayed in the pew when her family processed forward, they would know something was amiss. She had never stayed in the pew before.

Her stomach churned. She would not consider receiving Christ in an unworthy state. No matter what she had done already, she would not profane the Eucharist that way. She clenched her jaw at the thought of the consequences: her parents were sure to wonder, and they might even ask her what happened.

When the Communion rite came, Anne Marie could barely breathe. Her cheeks flushed as everyone in her pew stood up from the kneelers and she alone sat back. She kept her eyes down and turned her legs to the side so people could file past her to the aisle to process to the front of the church. She could see that her parents simply stood next to her, waiting for her to rise and exit the pew. Her hands shook. Staring at her paisley skirt, she gestured for her parents to walk past her. For a moment, they did not move, confused. Then they stepped around her and joined the Communion line.

Anne Marie let out a small gasp. It was done.

Walking out of the church after Mass, the family was quiet. They did not stop to talk with their friends. They went straight to the car and got inside. Her father sat in the driver's seat, but he simply held the keys in his hand. There was a long pause.

"Anne Marie –"

"Don't," her mother interrupted.

"I'm her father. I have a right to know!" he retorted.

Her mother shook her head. "No, you don't! It's up to her whether she goes to Communion or not. It's between her and God."

"Why else wouldn't she go unless something had happened that we as parents should know about?"

"She could have broken the fast, simple as that! Accidents happen," her mother said, referencing one of the stipulations for making a proper Communion.

Anne Marie's father looked in the rearview mirror. "Was that it? Did you eat within an hour of Mass?"

Anne Marie opened her mouth, shrinking into the back seat.

"Don't answer that," her mother said.

Her father scowled. "Why not?"

Her mother sighed. "It's not our business why she skipped Communion, no matter what it was for."

Her father looked out the window in exasperation.

"Anne Marie," her mother said.

She squeaked out a reply. "Yes?"

"It's okay that you didn't go to Communion. It's a good thing. I wish more people loved God enough to actually think about whether they're prepared to receive Him. Most people just go up to Communion without a second thought." She glanced back at her. "I'm proud of you for being conscientious about that and I want you to feel free to always follow your conscience about receiving the Eucharist. So if you ever decide to skip, we won't ask why."

Anne Marie glanced at her father in the rearview mirror. He was no longer scowling, but he gave no other indication of his opinion.

"However," her mother continued, "I think you understand the value of trust. We've never had an issue with that. And at this point, we trust that if something happened you would tell us. Is that right?"

Anne Marie swallowed and stared at the backs of her parents' heads. "Yeah," she said. "That's right."

She kept her head down at school that week. For the first time, she wished she went to public school: no one would have cared about what she did there. At St. Leo's, her classmates stared at her, grinning to one another and whispering. Anne Marie fixed her eyes on her books, but she

knew they were watching. Her cheeks burned from blushing. She found a sticky-note on her locker that read, "How's it feel, slut?" As she crumpled it and dropped it in the trash, she saw a cluster of girls at the end of the row, smirking. Wednesday afternoon, two boys, seniors, ploughed through her in the hall, dashing her books to the floor. On cue, the one turned to his partner, saying, "Did you see that ho jump me?" Anne Marie silently picked up her books, her fingers searching for them through blurred vision.

When school let out that day, she hurried outside to the parking lot. She was walking quickly towards her car when she heard someone call her name. At first, she assumed it was another would-be persecutor, so she ignored it. The call repeated desperately and Anne Marie recognized the voice. She paused and looked around to see her best friend Rachel rushing after her.

The blonde panted as she came to a halt. "I think you should come over for a while."

Anne Marie shifted and dropped her gaze. "Rachel," she groaned.

"I'm serious. I saw how your day went. Which, by the way – Mike and his dumb-face wingman? Jerks. Forget 'em."

"I don't wanna talk about it."

Rachel held up her hands placatingly. "You don't have to. But the last time I saw you was Saturday."

"I don't feel like hanging out."

"Even if I have a whole bag of mini Krackel bars and my parents aren't home and I promise to help you with that math homework?" Rachel haggled.

Anne Marie hesitated. Her glum look wavered and she almost smiled.

"Do you still have that episode of *Sherlock* recorded?"

"Duh," Rachel grinned, grabbing Anne Marie's wrist and leading the way to her car.

Four hours later, Anne Marie was sitting on Rachel's couch, hugging her knees to her chest, and Rachel was sprawled on the floor, staring at an imposing sheet of trigonometry. Balled-up candy wrappers littered the floor.

Rachel suddenly scrambled onto the couch next to Anne Marie. Her normally impish expression was replaced with concern and thoughtfulness.

“I have to tell you something,” she said.

Anne Marie looked at her. “What?”

“I am like the last person who will ever judge you, and I am totally here whenever you need me.”

Anne Marie smiled sadly. “Thanks.”

“But I think you need to tell your parents what happened.”

Anne Marie blinked and stared at her.

Rachel turned to face her and put her hands on Anne Marie’s arm. “Honestly, I’m only saying it because the whole school knows already.”

“Well that makes me feel better about the whole thing.”

“It’s the truth! I don’t know if someone heard you and Derrick on Friday night or what, but it’s out. Everyone knows. And some self-righteous little gossip is gonna tell her parents, who’re gonna call your parents. You don’t want them to find out from someone else, trust me.”

Anne Marie was quiet. “Yeah, but they might not find out at all.”

Rachel studied her. “What’s the big deal with telling them, anyway?”

Anne Marie rested her chin on her knee and listened to the ticking of the clock on the wall. “I don’t wanna hurt them,” she replied. “They worked really hard to raise me the way I am.” She winced. “The way I was.”

Rachel emphatically shook her head. “Woah, hey – one mistake does not make you some completely different person!”

“It’s awful big to call it a mistake, Rachel.”

“But you’re not a bad person!”

“Will my parents think that?” Anne Marie retorted. “They think I’m special, like I would never do something like that.”

Rachel sighed. “Don’t you get it? You’ve already done it, girl. You can’t change it. What matters now is how your parents find out: from you or from the neighbors.”

Anne Marie scowled. “They’re not gonna find out from the neighbors.”

“Well what if they do?”

Anne Marie looked away.

Rachel's voice softened. "I'm just trying to help you."

"I know." Anne Marie grimaced and turned her head back to Rachel. "You're right."

"So you're gonna tell them?"

Anne Marie stammered. "I don't know. I... They won't look at me the same again."

Rachel took her hand and squeezed it.

"I don't know if I can tell them. I mean how do you say something like that?" She lowered her voice, mocking herself: "Hey Mom and Dad, guess what? I had sex." She bit off her words and hid her face against her leg, rubbing away a tear with her pants. She shrugged, returning to her normal voice: "But it's like you said: if I don't, and they find out, they'll think I'm a liar too."

Rachel's forehead was creased with concern and she chewed her lip, thinking. "Is there a way you can, I don't know, blame it on Derrick? Have you talked to him?"

Anne Marie scoffed. "Yeah, we talked on Monday."

"And?"

"He doesn't want me to tell them. I think he's scared of my dad."

A realization came to Rachel. "Is Derrick eighteen yet? If he is —"

"No, Rachel! He's seventeen. It's not rape." She paused. "And I don't want to throw him under the bus anyway. It's not his fault."

Rachel snorted. "Uh, what? Of course it is! Or wasn't he the guy who ran you upstairs?"

Anne Marie surged to her feet and whirled on her friend, yelling, "Don't you understand?"

Rachel froze, staring at her.

Anne Marie's chest heaved and she grew quiet again. "You said it yourself. I've already done it, and I can't change that. I made a mistake. I did. It's my pile of crap, and if I'm gonna tell my parents, that's what I have to tell them."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because that's what my dad taught me: suck it up, take responsibility, and own your mistakes like a grown woman."

The next evening, Anne Marie helped her mother with the dishes. She was drying a mug, the personalized one her father gave her mother years ago, when she dropped it on the floor. It broke into three pieces. Anne Marie grabbed her hair and spun away, biting her tongue. There was a long silence in which she stared at the wall. Then she dropped her arms to her sides and turned back to see her mother's reaction.

Quietly, her mother asked, "Are you alright?"

Anne Marie blinked and looked down at the destroyed mug.

Her mother stepped away from the sink, drying her hands. "Did it hit your foot?" Her forehead was creased with concern.

"No. I'm okay," Anne Marie said. Her voice broke. The next instant, she was wrapped in her mother's arms, her tears soaking her mother's sleeve. The pain of her classmates' words, the stress of her secret, and her prodding conscience boiled out of her in heaving sobs. She clung to her mother with all her strength.

"Shhh," her mother crooned. She rubbed Anne Marie's back.

"I'm sorry," Anne Marie said. "Of all the things I could have broken, it just had to be your nice mug."

"Oh, sweetheart. It's just a mug. Don't worry about it."

Anne Marie cried until she was exhausted. Her mother held her tightly, stroking her hair and continuing to croon. When Anne Marie was quiet, her mother pulled back to reach for a box of tissues to hand to her. Then she went to get the broom.

"I have to ask," she said when she came back. "Is anything else bothering you? I wouldn't have expected you to react that strongly." Anne Marie shook her head, but she grimaced in an effort to hold back new tears.

Her mother looked into her eyes. "Are you sure?"

Anne Marie looked back at her. She wanted to say it. She wanted to get everything off her chest and stop keeping the secret. She thought about what Rachel had said. She didn't want to lie to her parents anymore. She opened her mouth to speak but then quickly closed it, biting her lip.

"I'm just frustrated with some school stuff," she said. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her mother knelt and gathered the fragments of the mug. She swept up the shards that had splintered off the main pieces and then dumped them in the trash. She started to leave to put away the broom, but on the threshold she paused and turned back quietly. "By the way," she said. "I notice you aren't wearing your purity ring."

Anne Marie glanced at her own hand and then stared at her mother. Her mind went blank, unable to manufacture any explanation other than the truth. "I lost it," she said.

Her mother regarded her. She pressed her lips together. "Do you want another one?"

Anne Marie shook her head in silence.

Her mother's face and voice softened. "I guess it doesn't feel like something you can replace, does it?" she asked thoughtfully. She smiled with a sad expression Anne Marie had never noticed before. "I lost mine too when I was about your age. I don't remember where. I never told my parents – I thought they'd be mad since it was expensive."

Anne Marie raised her head. "Are you mad?"

"No." She frowned. "You know you can tell me things, right? I won't ever be upset at you."

"I know, Mom."

"Were you going to tell me?"

Anne Marie stared at her. Eventually, she shrugged. "I didn't want to bother you."

Her mother fell silent. A few moments later, she left to put away the broom, glancing back on her way out. Seizing the opportunity, Anne Marie slipped out the back door. She wheeled her bike out of the garage and swung onto it. As she pedaled down the driveway, she thought of her mother finishing the dishes on her own, and she felt a pang. Her vision blurred and she quickly rubbed the tears from her eyes. When she looked up again, she saw a rabbit sitting by the road. For a moment it froze, quivering as it sniffed the air. Then it turned and dove down a hole and out of sight.

Stargazer

Aron Weibley

While lying at the bottom of the ocean,
I have seen more of the sky's bright stars,
Than landlocked eyes could ever fathom.

My Mother Has MS

Amber J. Pound

My mother is not drunk
 though she stumbles and weaves
like a lumbering pachyderm sans trunk

My mother is not drunk
 though she trembles and shakes
like the Titanic before it sunk

My mother is not drunk
 though she fumbles and trips
like an otter slogging through BP's gunk

My mother is not drunk
 though she rages and flips
like an angry man yelling punk

My mother is not a drunk
 though her mother was before
 her brain has turned against her

My mother is not a drunk
 though all the symptoms match it
 it's not possible to catch it

My mother is not a drunk
 it's not been self-inflicted
 the doctors diagnosed it

My mother is not a drunk
 I swear it, I swear it, I *swear* it.

The Green House on College Street

Hannah Carroll

Back when the green house on College Street was still white, you made me macaroni and cheese. You followed me across the porch when my mother came to pick me up. My foot rested on the top of the stairs and you took two steps forward and opened your mouth. I turned back to hear, but the words jumped back while I jumped to the ground.

"I'll see you tomorrow," you finally settled on.

"You will!" I called back.

And you smiled. We were 17.

We took pictures for your mom on the steps before the house was green, but after I said yes in the library after school. You managed to catch the words after all. My dress was black, and your eyes were full of light. We danced in the hotel ballroom just like every teenage romance movie promised that we would.

We used to walk everywhere from there. We used to get ice cream. You stopped ordering your own when you figured out that three-quarters of mine would eventually become yours, but you always let me pick the toppings anyway. It was the first time I met somebody who would let me pick the toppings anyway.

"Do you want Twix?" I'd ask.

"Whatever you want." And you'd smile.

I began school, and it was a forty-minute drive both ways. I wasn't ready for anything more, so I started college from the outside looking in. You worked and I worked. Things were simple, and you were there. I can remember sitting in our favorite place, the little café where the door is in the back. We'd get a table by the window and watch the world move outside. They kept the lights at a dim, and always played the radio softly, like they didn't want to disturb anyone. Songs I grew up with on my parents' scratching LPs would trickle softly through the conversations. I always scanned the menu for something that cost less than what you were ordering. You usually paid because it made more sense; you worked more and had fewer expenses. But still, I didn't want to be a burden.

Sitting with you, I thought back to the time at the beach just after graduation. We were standing together in the surf. The current was strong, and in it, we played a game. We challenged ourselves to stay in one spot while the water attempted to pull us wherever it pleased. It could barely be done. Some were small and easy to stand against. Others were so large that I never stood a chance. Once I reached out to you to help me stay grounded, but we both fell victim to the sheer force of the wave. I swear we played for hours. On that day, we always stood up again.

When my second semester started, I found myself braving the seas alone. You were hiking with a group through New Hampshire and Vermont while I moved into the old McCune hall for the College Experience.

For five months, you skied and hiked and camped, watching the New England winter become spring from the front row. You wrote to me every day like a journal, and sent a collection of letters home about once a week. I probably wrote you back 3 letters for every one you sent me. Eventually, I became more consumed with college and I began to find new people while you adjusted to life on the trail. Coming in from class, I bee-lined for the mailroom every single day. I looked for the little white envelope filled with your flashlight-written words.

But then, there was one that was different. Everything began to feel heavier as I read the words over again trying to make them change. My hands shook because they didn't know what else to do. I rocked my little dorm chair back and held a tissue as I read. You were offered a job.

You were going to be the head cook for the camp for the summer. I was so proud of you and so sad at the exact same time. You were going to live your life and do something you loved but we were finally facing the reality that I wasn't coming along.

Our signatures dwindled from "I love you," to "love," to simply nothing at all. Some things aren't meant to last forever. When you came home at the end of that summer, my hair was too short, yours was too long, and your house was newly green.

I'm From

A response to George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From."

Terri Hoover

I'm from Sunday drives after church

with old gospel hymns

floating in from the background

I'm from strong family values

teaching, learning and hanging

with the generations before

Grandma crocheting beside her sewing table

Pappy smoking his pipe on the couch

one year old spit on a one hundred year old harmonica



I'm from Sunday afternoon dinners

with steaming bowls of orzo soup

salted chunks of ham and chicken

smells of fresh sugar cookies eaten before dinner

canned peaches warmed into cobbler

Grandma pushing cloves into apples to dry

Pappy cracking black walnuts on the back porch

fifth generation children in the same backyard snow



I'm from lazy Sunday afternoons
the tick tock of the kitchen clock, the bring- bring of the old dial phone
slow rocking of the family rocker, the creaking of hinges on the back door

Reversed Priorities

Emily Fulker

Try explaining why

you NEED a Frappuccino
to a child in the peaks of the Andes Mountains

who eats nothing but maíz tostado and potatoes
because his parents take the meat first

\$5.57 could buy him a day's worth
but it only buys you a quick caffeine-high

You're inside the dirt-floored schoolhouse because it's hailing
and the children wander in and out
with bare toes the color of clay

Watch a crowd of eyes watch you
as you stomach the fat-encrusted coye
a delicacy

saved and prepared for you
with honor—the plate of legs and guts you are picking apart
scavenging for a shred of meat that you will pretend to enjoy

You offer them boiled sections
and fingers embrace the treat
while palms face open to accept more

The slippery rodent leaves a sour flavor on your tongue

Automatic Poetry

Emily Fulker

My eyes are a camera
lens at its widest aperture
setting, focusing on the metal
bar and softening the ground
below. Body in focus and
mind a blur. Muscles
contracting sing my thoughts
to peace. The inhales and

exhalations. Knees orbiting,
feet pushing as the oaks
float by between dashes of
honey sunshine. Rabbits play
hide-and-seek from between
cornstalks. Insects murmur
steadily on each side of the
pavement. Words

waft through my thoughts
and join together without
much expenditure, creating
lines and stanzas that
mimic the cadence
of the pedals.

The Tale of Daisy and Renault

Brayden Burleigh

Once upon a time, there lived a princess, beloved by her tiny kingdom in the mountains. Princess Daisy lived in a small castle that held untold splendors and riches, and she willingly used her vast wealth to help her people with whatever they needed. You would think that she was as beautiful as she was generous and loving, but she wasn't. However, she wasn't ugly or downtrodden. You would think her health would shine as much as her fabulous jewels and gold, but she didn't. However, she wasn't diseased or ill. You would think that she had hundreds of suitors lining up to betroth her, but she didn't. However, she wasn't unloved or hated. None of these truths made her sad. She was very personable, intelligent, and unique. And again, her tiny kingdom loved her. Her kingdom was all she needed to be fulfilled and happy.

But one day, a dark figure crept out from a nearby mighty kingdom and approached Daisy as she held a festival for a newly wedded couple. The figure told her that soon... very soon... too soon... Her precious kingdom would be destroyed. This terrified her, and it angered her kingdom that this creature should spout such slander and evil, especially to their beloved princess. However, the figure had not said this out of spite, but plain truth and good intent. The merry moment fell dead. The kingdom was in an uproar. Many of the villagers ran to the princess to find ways to protect her, and a few villagers tied up the figure and planned to burn it at the stake. The princess stopped them, and freeing the figure, she asked it what she could do to protect her kingdom.

The figure told her there was one way, but it would cost her dearly. She replied that she was willing to pay any cost, but the figure said that no amount of her endless wealth could save them. Then, she asked again what she had to do to protect her beloved kingdom. The figure told her that she must fall into an eternal sleep, but in her absence, the kingdom would be spared. Not wanting her to suffer, the figure asked her a second time, and then a third, if she was willing to sacrifice herself, to slumber eternally, never to awaken, and certainly never to behold the faces of all her people. Her heart broke, but nonetheless, she agreed. She seated herself in her throne room, and the figure tapped her forehead. Daisy fell into the deepest of sleeps, from which nightmares and dreams dared not to be.

The kingdom was spared from the unknown horrors that awaited them, but her citizens wallowed in heartache and grief. They turned to every doctor, scholar, magic user, and person they could find who might be able to awaken their precious Daisy. And each of their answers to the kingdom was the same. No. No. No. No.

Time passed, and one child heard that true love's kiss could undo any curse or spell. At first, nobody cared to listen. What could a child possibly know? They continued mourning. Seasons passed, and the depression mellowed their stone hearts to at least try. Each and every villager approached the slumbering princess and laid a gentle kiss upon her forehead. And with each kiss, Daisy remained asleep. And shortly after each kiss, each villager collapsed into eternal sleep like their beloved princess. Thus, the entire kingdom slumbered eternally.

The tiny kingdom in the mountains faded from memory as the ages passed. Rumors turned into stories, and stories into legends. But one child, a boy named Renault, had heard the legend. Now, Renault was a very impressionable and imaginative boy. You would think he was a knight, noble, valiant, and strong, but he wasn't. He was only a little boy of seven. You would think that he was talented and wise beyond his years, a living reincarnation of a god, but he wasn't. He was just a simple kid. Very sincere and loved stories, and trapped within his small world, he wanted to make a story of his own. He asked his teacher if it was true, that Princess Daisy and her kingdom were still sleeping deep in the mountains. His teacher told him to speak with the wise woman at the edge of the city, for she knew.

From his classroom, Renault traveled to the wise woman's hut at the edge of the city. Many men were afraid to approach the wise woman. Why? Renault didn't know, but that didn't stop him from knocking on the hut door. The door creaked open, and he expected the hideous hag to do something horrible to him. But a beautiful plump woman with a hearty smile greeted him. Renault was confused. He asked where the wise woman was, and she replied that she was the wise woman. He said that she couldn't be because he's not scared of her like many of the other men in the city. She laughed a deep and hearty laugh. She told him that fools tend to fear those smarter and wiser than them. She could tell that Renault was no fool. She asked him what he wanted, to which he responded that he wanted to hear more about Princess Daisy. The wise woman professed that Princess Daisy's kingdom was believed to have existed in the mountains many miles away. She pointed to the tiny bumps in the horizon.

Then, she asked if he really wanted to find the lost kingdom, for he may never return. He said yes, and she put a leather helm on his small head to protect it from harm and fools. Renault thanked her.

From the wise woman's hut, Renault traveled all day and all night, and by the next morning, he arrived at the foot of the mountains. He didn't know where to start. The mountains were so vast and some pierced through the clouds. Resting on the branch of an old oak tree, a great horned owl told him that it could take him three lifetimes to comb through even half of the mountains. Renault told the large owl that he would find Princess Daisy and her lost kingdom. The owl asked him a second time if he was prepared to enter the mountains, for he may never return. He said yes. The owl advised Renault that the only way he could find the lost kingdom was by becoming hopelessly lost deep in the mountains. Then, the owl swooped down and handed Renault a simple wooden sword to help him clear a path to Princess Daisy. Renault thanked it.

From the foot of the mountains, Renault traveled endlessly through the halls of the mountains and beneath the canopy of the dense forest. It didn't take him long to become lost. It didn't take him long to become tired. He was haggard and worn from the journey, barely able to keep his sword from dragging behind him. Finding a moss-covered rock to lie against, he fell asleep and dreamt. Dreamt of Princess Daisy. Dreamt of his home and family. Dreamt good dreams. Dreamt like it would be his last. When he awoke, he noticed overgrown stone pillars collapsed on the ground or barely standing. He looked passed those pillars, and he came upon a quiet village. At first, he didn't enter. He wondered if it was too late to turn back, to return home. He asked himself a third time if he was ready to enter the lost kingdom, for he may never return. He said yes, and beneath a couple of vines, he picked up an abandoned wooden shield to guard him from what lied ahead. Nature had covered the town in a great green blanket, and there was nothing the forest didn't hold. Beneath the vines and moss and leaves, Renault saw the villagers, frozen in time and asleep. He walked forward and came upon a small castle. It, too, was overgrown and held within the cradle of nature. He crept inside and wandered into the throne room, where he found Princess Daisy still slumbering. He jumped up and down with joy that he had found the lost kingdom. Running up to the throne, Renault knelt before Princess Daisy and rose. He knew of true love's kiss, and he assumed that he must've truly loved her to undertake this legendary adventure. So, he kissed her on her forehead.

He grew woozy, and his vision began to blur. His sword and shield fell from his hands. He fell onto his stomach and mustered what little strength he could to crawl to Princess Daisy. He cried what few tears he could before he fell upon her feet. And Renault lied there with Princess Daisy. And he, too, faded into legend with Princess Daisy and her lost kingdom.

Tadasana (Mountain Pose)

Emily Fulker

The muscles in my abdomen
stitch together and tighten
as a knitter pulls each
row of an afghan
taut. In response,

my back straightens,
opening my chest like
French doors, and in comes
the calmness that You

braid into me. Toes
fan out to form a half-
circle beneath, while
heels are tent

stakes hammered into
earth. Arms raise
to make a snow-
angel in space, and I
lean backwards to form a

crescent moon of
vertebrae. I pull my arms
down, swimming to the
surface of a pool, and release

torso downward from
the hinge of waist. Fingers
waterfall to toes while
the fibers in my calves

expand. The spark travels
up hamstrings and untethers
the knotted rope in my lower
back, used to record

stress. My stomach is first
a balloon, then an empty juice
box. The current travels
to shoulders and I hold elbows

to let it disperse.

The Problem with Hemingway

Alexander Strickler

I

We all still dream of the ideas we love, loved, praying for who we can still become all shuffling like Uncle Jerry at his brother's wedding working on his first drink. Kevin's eyes were much bigger in my dream, large and brown and full of life; I remember them partially closed and thinking he looked empty like my grandmother on her deathbed. We all call on Hemingway's spirits for courage but Dad still won't talk about his mother dying and hasn't switched from the same-boxed wine after two decades. I put in one ice cube for good luck in hopes to be loved tonight, continue to not get caught buying Kevin's liquor. "Because it's quicker," Kevin says, winced-faced on summer nights. Smoke and stolen shots like when we camped in the Adirondacks and Kevin threw water bottles at Mom. They exploded on the walls while Dad stayed in bed sleepy with wine. Kevin lost sight cursing in Mom's face, thumps waking up Lily when he thought Mom should pray to Hemingway's spirits. She stayed up all night watching him lay dead asleep, her heart breaking, watching so he didn't choke on puke.

II

Leaving the next day, I couldn't imagine an all-day car ride hung over when I struggle going to morning classes and picking up my pen like Hemingway must have done. I don't write or do anything worth the effort those mornings. The only solution to hang overs is drinking more like when I drink with Dad then leave him alone, buzzed. Like when Maggie wanted to just leave, be gone but I screamed and she looked like she was walking on ice like when the streets froze over and I shuffled to the bar and found myself peeing in the alley trying to catch Hemingway's spirit that hovers above bars all those nights that are in memories like showers. Like catching butterflies, pointless once I get there standing in piss. My eyes can't turn what they see into art when I drink. Hemingway's spirit is the card I play when I am so tired the next day I feel it in my balls. I'm a writer. It's all seems futile anyway; I draw designs with an empty rum bottle in a dirt field over and over. I don't have the view to see the full design but I love it.

As I Sit

Angelo Ciccio

As I sat on the old, beat up porch swing,
Floating back and forth like a piece of drift wood in the ocean,
I thought of the times we would spend together.
Dreaming. Crying. Cursing, and Praying.

I looked over to see nothing but a vacant seat next to me this time.
The swing must have noticed before I had.
The feeling that was once proportionate now only consumed one side.
The squeak in the chain had returned.

Without thinking, my hand moved from my leg to rest on yours.
But it just fell through the memory,
Like a baby bird tumbling from a nest.
I realized. My hand was no longer caged to you.

With one smooth and swift motion, I was released from the swing.
I made my way to the tree that was in the front yard and sat under it,
Like a ladybug resting on a blade of grass.
Remembering how you never liked to sit there.

Morning After

Andy Dixon

The morning sun slips through the openings in my blinds and illuminates the side of my striped bed sheets. I'm still enamored at the beauty of the girl snoozing beside me. Her dark hair rests around the nape of her neck with the ends relaxing on my pillow. My hand rests between her shoulder blades. She has dark tan skin that radiates in my fingertips. It's a warmth that feels forgotten. It's hard to imagine that we met only a couple of hours ago.

My original plan last night was to meet some friends at the bar. I was walking across the parking lot and patted my pockets, only to realize I forgot my keys. I hurried back up the steps to my third floor apartment and caught the scent of cigarette smoke dancing outside of my door. I peeked my eyes around and found her leaning against the edge of the apartment balcony with a cloud of smoke trailing away from her.

I delayed my plans and gathered the courage to join her, with a lump lining the inside of my throat.

She sleeps peacefully. The blankets rise in cadence with her deep breaths. Her body shifts positions and she faces me now. I caress the back of my hand along her cheek pushing strains of her hair away from her eyes. She wakes slightly and gives me a tired smirk.

We shared past relationships and pain of their pitfalls all night. She had a boyfriend who decided to stop loving her. I had a girlfriend who slept with my best friend. Our emotional scars brought us closer.

The morning sun grows, and John Q. Public starts his day. A car engine revs in the parking lot outside. I gaze at her still, appreciating the start of my day. I shimmy my body closer to hers under the shared blanket and wrap my arms around her. My eyes feel the effects of sleep deprivation and I struggle to keep them open. I'm afraid to close them and lose this moment, but I succumb to sleep.

My alarm jars me awake. The sun highlights the silent bedroom, and my morning daze wears off. Emptiness hits me. I slide my hands across the bed hoping to touch her again. I can't find her. Her spot is vacant. The warmth left with her.

Sonnet of a Wanderer

Bejamin Anwyll

The meadows bore their bellies for her feet,
The clouds all held their breath to find her face,
Loneliness was lost upon her cheek,
And a broken man was healed by her embrace.
The dandelions ruffled up their blooms
And hoped their most that she would pass on them.
The wind restrained itself to pillowed plumes
And did its best to never chap her skin.
With eyes that showed a wanderer his home
and palms that propped a frightened face to hers.
The loneliest no longer was alone:
new hope flowed from one last forgotten store.
Now, huddled in the cold for her return,
he keeps her ember live but slows its burn.

Where I'm From

A response to George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From."

Cameron Orr

I am from here,

Where's here?

I am from the fertilizing fields

That smelled MY odor and bullshit from miles away –

the door slamming, constant fighting, and loveless marriage

long nights with my pillow crushed and sealed over my ears

the repetitive nights of consoling her saying, "you deserve better"

staggering to school with torn clothes, trying to find places to sleep tonight ...

I am from the suburban area where a white picket fence constitutes happiness

the town where if I didn't see it, then it never happened

the place where "I'm sorry" gets repeated

over and over and over and over and over

I'm sorry.

From a place where sperm donor and father are synonymous terms

the place where monetary value and social status

outweigh morals and happiness

where the cold nights of sneaking away to my neighbors house because

I just cannot sleep with all the fighting

"I'm going to the gym" turns into hours and hours of waiting...

the place of questioning and asking of why is dad not here?

I am from there.

But this does not define me.

I am from the suburban town that is now just a visiting place for me

From the town where the brick houses and million dollar price tags

are big enough to cover

up the lies and falsehoods of their home.

Where I am from has created who you see

But where I am going is who I want to be.

Pebbles

Casey Hedash

Open your eyes to everything,
and remain attached to no thing.
For vices take a toll
causing you to extoll energy on
side streets you don't want to stroll.
No longer will you dream, heaving
to stay on track, up with the stars.
The superstar is in you, even out on mars.
Simple might seem silly,
but simply, mountains are moved
by many pebbles repositioned over time.

Misconceptions

Emily Isbel

The air was cold and crisp, like the first bite of a fresh apple straight from the fridge. She had asked me to meet her at our spot, the one where no one else ever came. The old and rickety wooden bridge over Stony Creek was shaking more than usual in the November wind. I could taste the snow in the air as I walked to meet her. I looked ahead and saw her there, stationary at the edge of the bridge. Not moving about as she usually did, just standing there staring at the river four stories below. I wanted to run to her and grab her in my arms, she looked freezing just standing there, but the amount of layers I had on made it difficult to move fast.

It was a yellow dress she had on; knee length with a little cap sleeve, cinched tight at the waist. She had first caught my eye in that dress and now she wore it on every special occasion we celebrated together. But why was she wearing it now? It was typical of her really, to do the unexpected. She hated order and rules, "I live the life I love" was her mantra. She was obviously beautiful, but it was her spirit that attracted me to her. We had gone through so much together this past year, between the rumors and having to hide our love, but she never let it faze her. "How do you do it?" I once asked. She had asked what I meant, but wasn't it obvious? Gossip travels fast through a town as small as ours, and the snide remarks about our relationship have taken their toll on me emotionally. She had just laughed and with a smile on her face she responded, "As long as I know that you love me, then nothing else matters." Such a simple response, but one I should have expected from her. Nothing could get her down and I could count on one hand the amount of times I had seen her upset. "You know how much I love you," I had responded and with another smile she had said, "Of course, to the moon and the stars."

I was thinking about that day as I was walking closer to her still. I could see my birthday present to her shining off her neck in the slight rays of the sun peeking through the sky.

Miniscule beams of yellow bounced off the diamond-encrusted necklace like fireworks on the fourth of July. It was in the shape of a moon and star with our initials "W" and "E" engraved on the back. This had always made her smile, "WE can do anything, WE will conquer

the world, WE are unstoppable..." She would go on and on with these phrases, each one making her giggle. One time we had made a list and I pull it out when things get rocky to remind me of the good times.

Less than twenty feet from her and I could finally make out all of her features. Her long red hair was blowing like a tornado around her face and her skirt was swirling up like a ballerina practicing turns. The restless energy that had gotten her in trouble so many times before had taken over her body once again. She had gone from starring down at the creek to spinning in big, slow circles with her dainty little laugh that made her open her mouth and smile like the sun. I couldn't help but smile, only thirty degrees and she made the world around her look like it belonged in the ninety-five degree July heat. It was a happiness in her I hadn't seen in quite a while and it brought joy to my heart to see her like this.

Something had changed in her when the cold began. She had started to keep to herself more than usual, making excuses to stay home rather than spending a night with me and our friends. I had asked her why and she had told me that the world felt too big for her and she didn't belong. She had looked so sad but I told her that she would always belong in my heart. "Of course," she responded, "forever and ever." There was a period of time where she got better, her light shining bright once again, but after October the brightness began to dim. "It's because of the weather. I become sad when the sky turns gray," excuses began to pile up like presents under a Christmas tree. I couldn't do anything but be there for her she said. She said that she would explain everything when she was ready, but I was still waiting for that day.

Ten feet from her and I noticed that despite her smile and laughing, she was sobbing big fat tears that were flowing as fast as the river below down her face. I ran the last couple of feet to her and grabbed her arm, making her stumble out of her turn. "Elena, what is it?" She was never one to cry. I had been concerned when she had asked me to meet here, but now I was more confused than ever. She responded to my question with a kiss, burning with passion. She held me tight in a hug, whispering in my ear, "Do you know how much I love you?" I pulled back and took her face in my hand, hot tears burning against the icicles that were my hands. "Of course I do, and I love you even more!" She smiled through her tears and said, "Then you'll let me go."

Time flashed before my eyes. Memory after memory came into view: the first kiss, the first touch, the intimate and the simple. Lying together under a tree, trying to beat the July heat, our legs tangled up talking about everything and anything. Wearing matching bathing suits

to the town pool because we could, helping each other get ready for the homecoming dance earlier this year. So many wonderful memories like sneaking out late at night just for one "I love you" followed by one more hug. They kept playing in my head like someone had morphed them all into a movie. I couldn't comprehend what she was saying, I couldn't talk, I couldn't move. She was talking crazy! I could never let her go.

"Whitney," she said and I flashed back into the present, "I love you." I went to grab her, hold her, keep her...but everything happened so quickly. She shoved me backwards with all of her strength, the wood of the bridge beneath me catching my fall. I sat up and looked, but she was not there. I started screaming her name, but she did not appear. The tears had found their way onto my cheeks and they were falling faster and faster as I crawled to the edge of the bridge. I looked in the river and saw a beautiful yellow flower now floating along the rapids, shining like the sun against the dark sadness of the rocks.

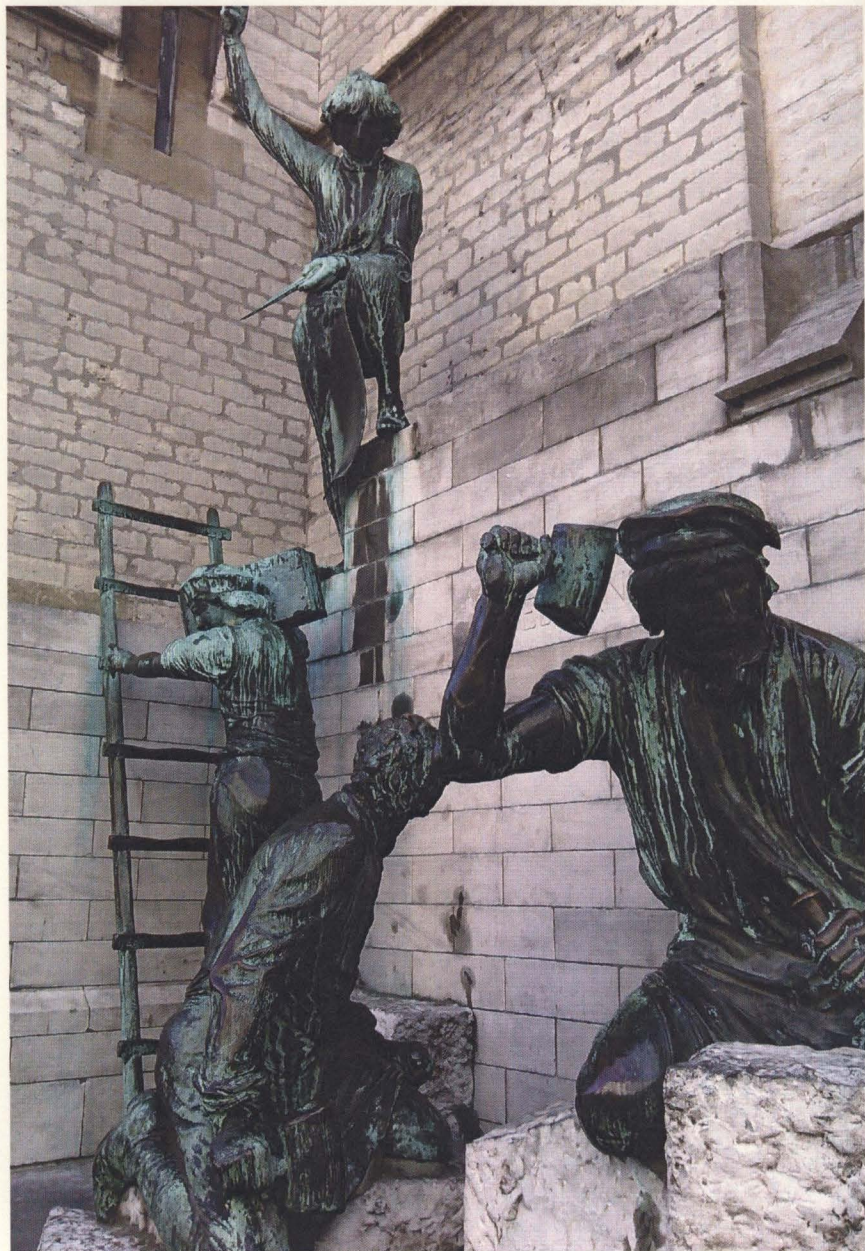
To the One I Love

Erin Napoli



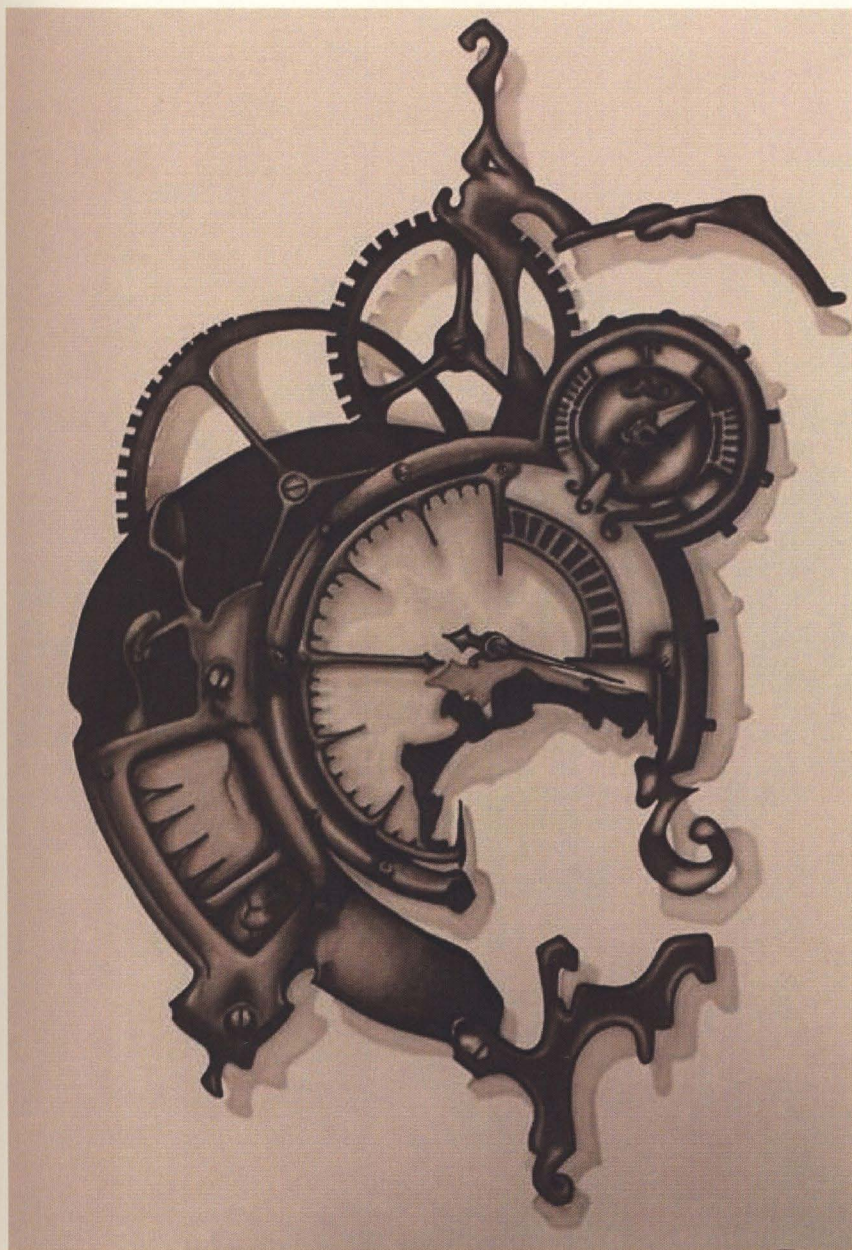
Antwerpen

Sara Landis



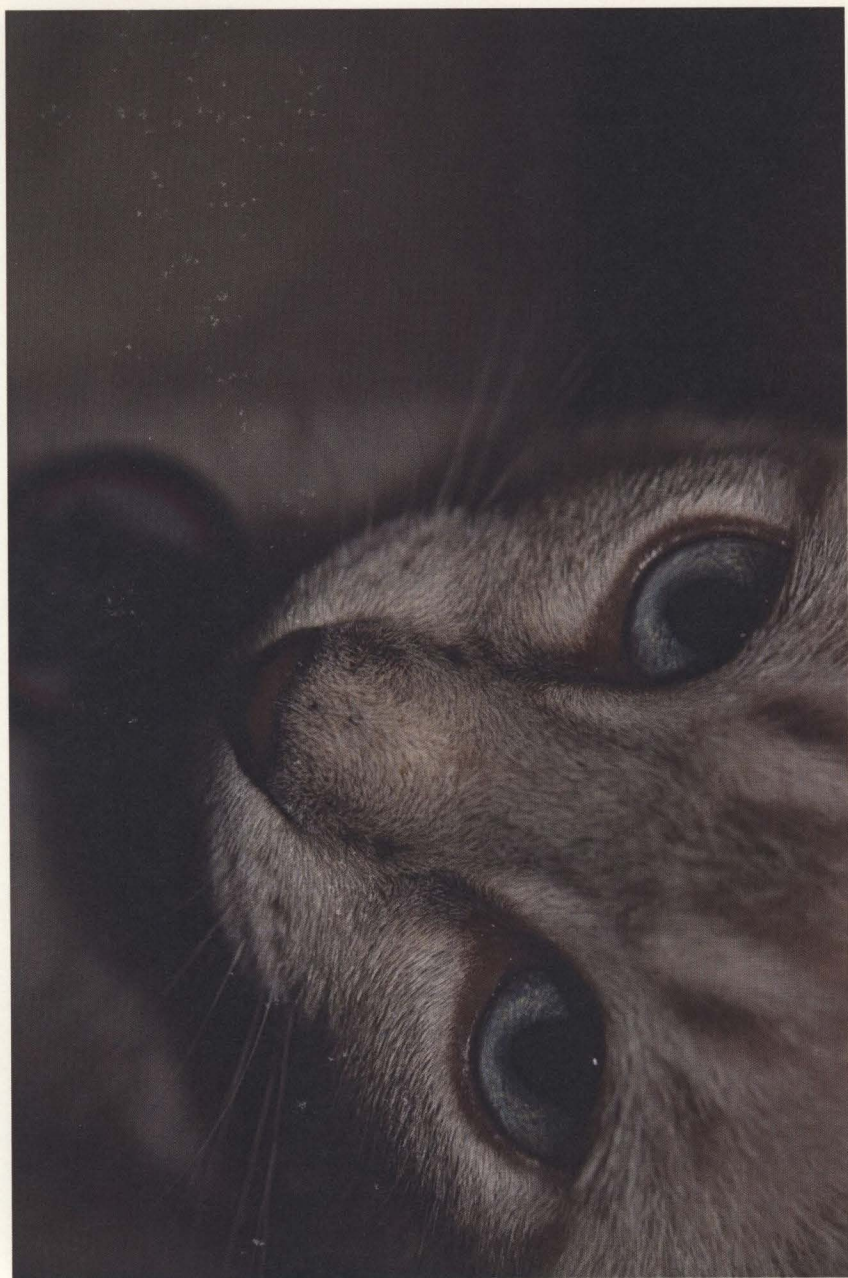
Clockwork

Rachel McCarthy



Intensity

Madelyn Moyer-Keehn



Epargyreis clarus

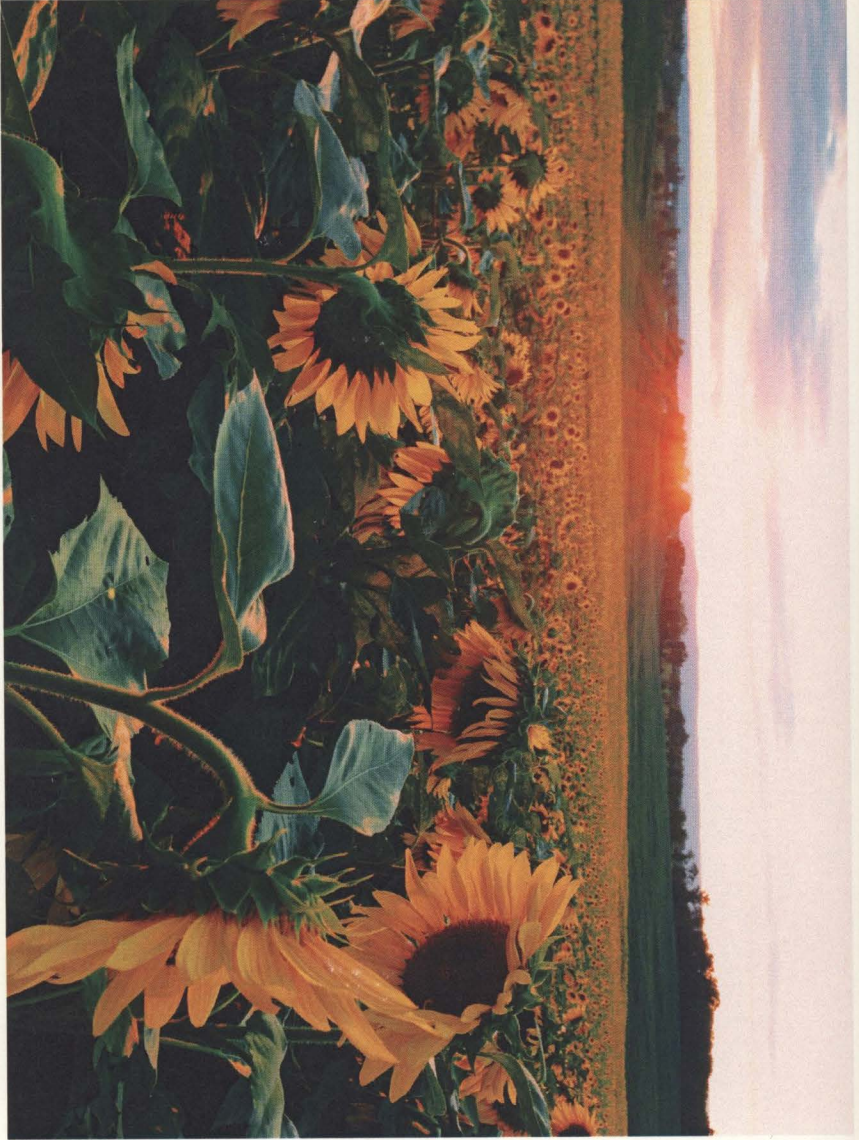
Alex Heckman



Sunflowers

Winner of the Balutis-Stevens Award for
Artistic Excellence

Zachary Stansbury



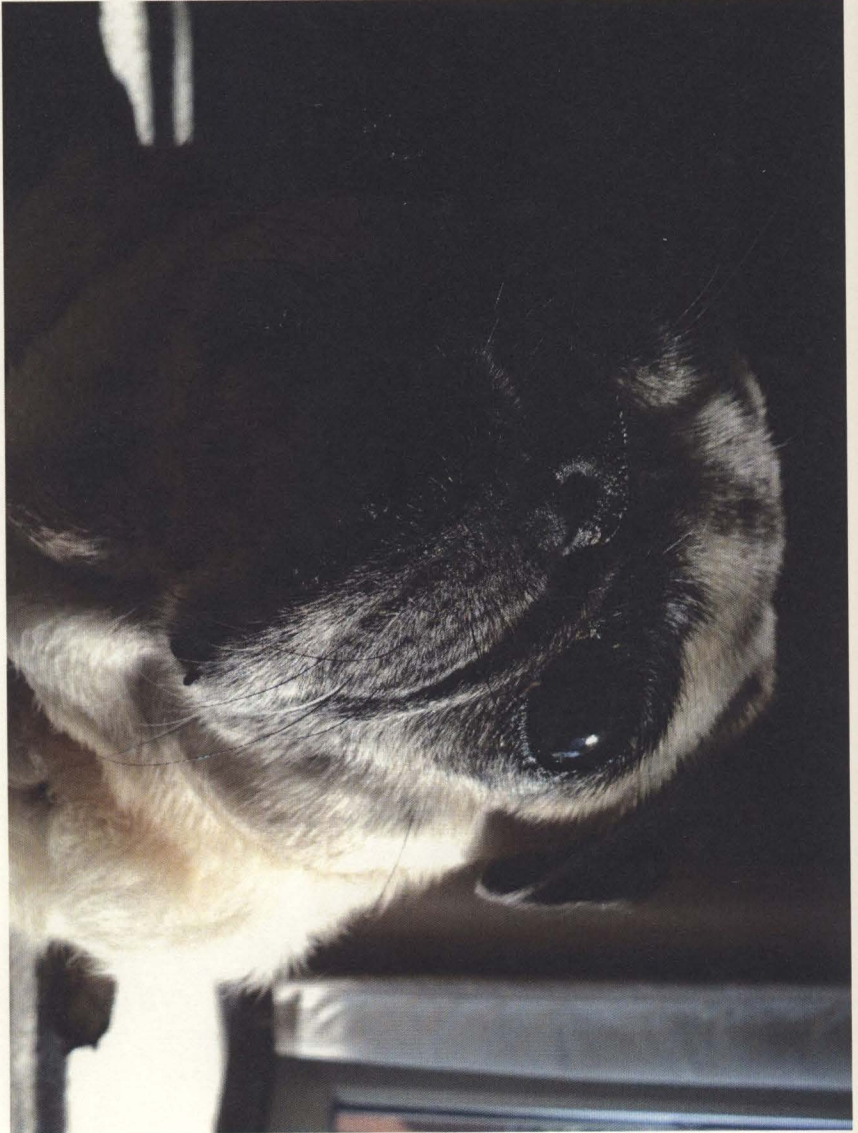
Post

Alexander Strickler



Wags

Alex Heckman



Chlorine Tears

Erin Napoli

Time to face the harsh truth,
There's a point when it ends,
Each and every year,
The flowers wilt,
Leaves on those strong maple tree branches fall,
Dreary shades of brown, orange and red swap
The green, crisp scene.

The outdoor oasis is lifeless,
All that remains are the fossils.
In digging up the earth, I uncover,
Old inhabitants, rotten pasts, life's skeletons,
The final moments of my dissolved happiness.

Those sizzling days, when dad attempted to 'cannonball' into the pool.
I told him he was "way too old".
The barbeque grill, if open, would burst out a sharp aroma,
Sweetened mesquite rub.

As the heat calms down, waves subside.
I plunge towards the surface,
The chilly fall air clasps around me,
I shield myself, wrap up in a towel.
I choke on the dry air,
Beat on my chest.
My heart is barred,
Eclipsed, like the once promising sunlight.

H Town

Hillary Thomas

Horseheads, a little town set in the heart of nowhere, upstate New York.
Its introduction is fit only for an episode of the Twilight Zone.
I can see Rod Serling now, lurking in the background, cigarette in hand.

The land is lovely, but its appearance is a mirage,
an illusion which holds nothing of good faith for its people.

If you should wish to pick up we can do so outside of the Arnot mall,
or perhaps take a trip to the Southside
if your appetite requires a more expensive product.

The school here is littered with trash children
whose mother doomed them by getting knocked up
by the guy in the back of your English class.
Besides inhaling, exhaling, sniffing sideways,
and blowing your fucking brains out
there is little to be accomplished here.

If you are looking for a dose of culture we could take a trip to Ithaca
and mingle with the know-it-all Cornell hippies
who, fresh off their first semester, hold the key to the universe.
Grab a slice at Pudgies or a chicken speedie from On A Roll.

Today

Christy Yi

Today you are ten. You are wearing the pink party dress with white dots that your godmother bought for you last week because she could not make it to your birthday party. The cheap polyester scratches against the backs of your skinny knees but everyone says you look like a princess. Your long, dark hair is in braided pigtails. Someday, when you are older, you will cut it all off for that smart “Businesswoman of the year” look but today, two thick braids sit on either side of your head on which sits a blue, paper party hat.

You tug at the thin elastic under your chin and look at the cake your mother baked. It was made in two circle cake pans this morning. Now it sits on the table assembled with chocolate icing and rainbow sprinkles. Your mother promised the inside would be French Vanilla. You count the cold candles and find that there are ten.

You have been asking your mother all morning when your father will get there. He is on a business trip but promised you on the phone a few days ago that he would be home in time for today. He didn't pinky-promise because that's not possible over the phone but he had called you bunny-butt and said “I'll see you soon.” Now the party has been going on for two hours and he still has not arrived. You look for your mother to ask her again where your father is.

You can hear her talking in the kitchen with her friends and you carefully peek around the corner into the room. Your mother leans heavily against the kitchen counter. There is a half empty bottle of wine in front of her but there is no sign of a wine glass anywhere. There are tears on your mother's face. At your grandfather's funeral her eyes had looked puffy and pink all day but you had not seen her cry.

Your mother picks up the wine bottle and tells her friend, “She was such a beautiful baby. Covered in blood and shit and screaming. Screaming so loud and she was so beautiful.” Your mother drinks a great gulp of wine and then takes in several gasps of air. You see the pale skin on her collar bones rise out and then into her chest like it does when she gets the hiccups.

“She was so beautiful and she almost killed me when she ripped her way out of me that day. The doctors said I lost so much blood but we really felt like a family that day. I needed two blood transfusions but we were a family.”

Your mother’s voice cracks on that last word and she puts the wine bottle back on the counter and lifts her hands to her face. Your mother stands in the kitchen with her face hidden in her hands but you can see tears dripping down her small wrists. You think she probably stands that way when you are at school and the house is empty.

You pull your head back around the corner. You quietly walk back to your French Vanilla cake and sit in front of it. Someday you will be thirty. Your mother will call to make sure you received your card in the mail. You will look at the yellow greeting card with lilacs drawn on the front and will say, “I did. Thanks for the Olive Garden gift certificate.” You will think that maybe you will get the lasagna after work. But today you are ten and you wonder when your father will get here.

The first time I understood
what it means to be lonely

Joshua Neil

It's a funny sort of thing

It happens in a moment

It happens after reading for three hours

It happens after five hours of Minecraft

It happens after finishing a twelve pack and 4 episodes of Anthony Bourdain

It happens on that three am walk to PT

It happens when you're writing a paper at two o'clock in the morning

It happens when your friend won't come visit you at work

It happens when your wife falls asleep before you

It happens when it's Friday night and you're the only one around

It happens when your friends go out to drink and you can't

It happens when your family is upset you don't visit

It happens when your grandmother is in the hospital and no one can get you
there

It happens when you can't speak Russian and you're missing out

It happens when you're walking the streets at four am

It happened whenever I was twelve,

And I realized I was the only one in the library.

my memoir of cat-calling

Katie Miller

I am eight and you name me *pretty thing* and you back me into a corner in a department store in a suburban town and expose yourself to me and I have a hard time looking at grown-ups after that.

I am eleven and you name me *dyke* because I refuse to put my hand down your pants in gym class and I do not want to cry in front of you so I try to just play basketball like an eleven-year-old girl should.

I am thirteen and you name me *baby* and put your hand on my thigh and I have to resist the urge to throw up, to cry, to scream.

I am fifteen and you name me *hey sexy* and I laugh at you with my friends because it seems so stupid but I spend the next hour checking over my shoulder.

I am sixteen and you name me *nice tits* as I am walking with my mother and I shrink into myself and attention has never made me feel so ashamed and I have to pretend I am not phased.

I am seventeen and you name me *that wasn't so hard* as you put your clothes back on and leave my paralyzed, blacked-out body to rot in the dark and I sit in the shower for hours the next morning trying to scrub both the shame and the memory out of my skin.

I am eighteen and you name me *can you kiss your friend for us* and I hold her hand tighter and cross the street and turn my head so she won't see me cry for how scared and small I am that I can't protect her.

I am nineteen and you name me *look at me when I'm talking to you* and I do not look at you but I worry about the price I will pay for that because we have been killed for even less than that and I run home and triple check my locks before I can sleep.

I am twenty and you name me *why don't you smile* and *look at those legs* and *bitch* and *tease* and *damn girl* and I carry pepper spray with me everywhere I go because nice words can turn into hands on me in the dark, into me gasping for air, into me dead on the street, into battle scars that I have to work so hard to hide.

You name me *object* but I am a woman and you had every intention to bury me but you had no idea that I am a seed.

80 minute warriors

Mallory "Waldo" Williams

Sweat pours off faces while blood drips from knees
as my team's intensity spikes and our lion hearts beat as one.
Grass stains are covering shorts just as mud is drowning our cleats.
Our jerseys are torn and battered, but
our soul still shines through the rips and tears.
We want this,
more than the opposition.

If you listen closely you can hear our rivals
verbally picking each other apart.
Bruises are swallowing elbows.
Jaws never stop clenching mouth guards.
Our intensity never slows
even with our muscles writhing in pain.
With our neck hairs standing firm, goose bumps paint our bodies.
The win was stolen in the last couple minutes but we continue
to starve the enemies' lungs from their breath.
With each passing second
pulses soar for the final whistle.

Despite the anxiety, smug grins cram our cheeks
because scoreboards don't matter.
The win is etched in our skin.
Our suffering,
For the fidelity of the game.
For the army of soldiers next to us.
For the love of rugby.

Hulking Out

Mallory Williams

I'm the commotion queen.
Like a modern Jekyll and Hyde.

By day a soft smile and wave as
my neighbors walk to their cars.
By night a disturbance hell
seeping up through the floor.

To my walls I'm the hot-blooded Godzilla.
Tables flipped, chairs smashed,
endless holes in the drywall,
there is no stopping me.

The demolition of my place
can last any span of time.
It depends on how much shit
from the week I let get inside my head.

I'm the stoic master of the universe,
physically incapable of reaching out.
I deal with things my own way,
even if I have to spackle a few holes.

The high comes from the roar of the ransack
retreating to silence and hard exhales.
The adrenaline and blood boiling heartbeat
calm me in the most haunting way.

When I exit my room I put on my mask
to become everyone's gentle giant again.

Michael

Paul Deichmann

I never thought I'd see him in Philly. I hadn't seen him in years. Ten, maybe. And I certainly never thought it'd be in the line for coffee in 30th street. If you haven't seen the station before, it's pretty thrilling: high ceiling with red and gold inlay, a big old bronze angel at one end with wings stretched high, so you remember how high the ceiling is. The station hummed with a level of activity not uncommon to a Friday rush: the tourists with big cameras strapped around their neck paced rapidly around the station, looking for their terminal, while the regulars attempt to avoid them, with dark sunglasses and posture which says *I'm going to somewhere. Shut up.* I was one of those, with dark sunglasses and a somber black blazer. No one ever asked me for directions. Today, I'd managed to arrive with enough spare time that I could get a coffee to take with me.

And he came stumbling into the Starbucks, tripping over his own feet. Like not a day has passed. His hair hasn't thinned, lucky boy. Michael was always running into someone. I heard him when he said, "Oh, I'm so sorry miss. Didn't mean to hit you." His automatic phrases remain the same, it seems. I feel like I'd heard that odd apology hundreds of times.

We broke up while I was abroad for my final undergraduate semester. I hadn't seen him since. We had exchanged emails instead of letters, intrigued by their novelty. I still remember striking the keys of the last line I ever wrote to him: *It's really been a lot of fun. I'm sorry things had to end this way. Bye, Helen.* I hadn't felt well for days afterward. Lying in bed in Italy, the doors slamming in the afternoon winds.

And now here we were. I couldn't run away—and I would have left my drink, trust me—but he was between me and the exit, so I tried to hide with stillness. I turned around and began to stare at the black and white photo of an espresso machine.

"Hellen!" a barista cried out. My perfect cover blown. "Macchiato for Hellen!" I mumbled thanks and tried to pick it up without anyone knowing who grabbed it.

"Helen?" Michael said. "Not just any Helen, but *Helen*?"

“Yeah, it’s me. Hi Mike.”

“Helen. Hi. It’s crazy to see you here. It’s been ages.” The shop was turning to watch us, wanting to see the sappy reunion of old friends. It makes people feel better about their lives. Michael continued on script: “How, uh, how are you?”

“I’m pretty good. You?” I replied.

“I’m good, yeah. I see you still get the macchiato.” I nodded, took a sip of my drink. He looked around at the crowded shop, pointed to a table. “Helen, you don’t happen to have ten minutes to talk?” The gentleness of his question surprised me. Mike had always been the one who would declare *We are going to have a date now*, or *We will now begin making love*, usually half joking. He sounded like he was talking to a stranger.

“Mike, I uh, I would love to, but I can’t. I have to go catch my train. Maybe another time.”

“Yeah, sure, of course,” he said. “Train station and all. I’ll ah, see you around I guess.” I tried to walk out without running.

30th street station was teeming. All the trains were leaving soon. I looked all around, making sure I wasn’t about to bump into a high school teacher of mine, or my parent’s priest. I saw only strangers with bags, rolling and carrying, drifting like dirt being drawn into the drain. I watched another woman check her watch, take a better grip on her bag, and begin to run.

I queued up by my entrance to the tunnels. Because this was a booked train, an Amtrak employee checked all our tickets as we shuffled down the escalator.

Once we boarded the train, I walked three cabins to find an open seat facing in the direction of the train’s movement. As I squeezed myself into the window seat I began to relax, to dissolve into the routine of travel.

A man, heavy-set with a big bottom lip, sat down next to me. I mumbled a hello, and he didn’t reply. I pulled a book from my bag, and began the process of finding where I had stopped reading--I’d forgotten a bookmark. I suddenly became aware that someone was whispering in the heavyset man’s ear. I tuned in for the last second of whatever he was saying:

“So I was wondering if you would let me sit next to her.” It was Mike.

“Of course,” the man said. He stood up and maneuvered into the aisle. “I’m Robert by the way.” Robert and Mike shook hands, and Robert walked away. Mike sat down.

"Hey Helen." The train lurched and we began to fall towards New York.

"Mike, how did you--"

"I promise I didn't pay anybody off." He rummaged through his bag.

"See? I already a ticket and everything."

"I didn't think that you would have--whatever." I handed him back his ticket, and stared out the window for a moment. I heard him rustling behind me, trying to see whatever I saw. "Why are you going to New York?" I said.

"A bachelor's party. You?"

"I live in New York."

He blushed. "Oh, sorry. What were you doing in Philly?"

"I was... I had a meeting with some colleagues."

"Oh." He tapped his foot.

"What do you want, Mike?"

He coughed and stuttered a bit, then: "I want to know how you are," he said, staring at the floor. "I haven't heard anything from you in nine years. It's been a long time. And it seems like if we run into each other, we should catch up, no?"

"I suppose, Mike. I ah... sure. How are you?"

"Good, life is good. How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks."

"What are you doing these days?"

So we swapped stories for the rest of the ride. He told me about the horrors of getting an MBA, and how long it had taken him to find a job. And in typical Mike style, he hadn't liked the job when he found it. So he had started his own business, a bike share program in Philly. I told him about MFA and my adjunct positions at NYU and Columbia and SUNY Purchase. I almost forgot that I didn't want to talk to him.

We pulled out from Iselin, NJ. I realized we'd get to Penn Station soon. I started to gather my things, and the conversation lagged for a second.

"So are you seeing anyone?" he said. All innocent in eyes and tone.

"Mike."

"What?"

"You're not serious."

"What?"

“Did you really just ask me that? We haven’t even been talking for two hours and you ask me—“

“But I didn’t mean anything by it.” I noticed he was turning red. My fingernails had started to dig semicircles into my wrist. I saw someone across the aisle turn from her kindle to watch us through her bifocals.

“You didn’t mean anything? You don’t just get to ask that, Michael.”

“Why not?”

“Mike, I really don’t think we should—“

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “But why don’t you think we should? Helen, I care about you, but I haven’t see you in years. I don’t know where to go from here.”

“So just don’t talk.”

“I refuse. I’m going to talk to you,” he said. Then the train began to pull into Penn Station.

“Let me out, Mike,” I said. “I need to move quickly. I have to catch the subway.”

“Sure, sure,” he said, standing up. “Hey, uh, I’ll be in the city till Sunday. Why don’t we exchange numbers, so we could meet up?” We were standing chest to chest in the train’s aisle. I looked down.

“Uh, well, I guess,” I stuttered. There couldn’t be any harm in giving him my number, right? I could always choose not to answer. We swapped digits, and the train came to a halt. “Bye Mike. I’ll see you around.” he started to go for a hug, but I was already turning away, and I didn’t stop.

“Okay, yeah. See you soon Helen!”

I clomped up my three flights of stairs to my one bedroom apartment in Washington Heights. My keys were buried in my bag, and the key to the door stuck in the lock. I filled my electric kettle, flipped it on, and collapsed into bed.

I woke up six hours later, at three in the morning. I had memories of crazy dreams, loud and frightening. I forced myself upright and stumbled into the kitchen, still mostly asleep. I had a missed call and a voicemail. Michael’s voice came over line:

“Hey Helen,” he said. “I bet you forgot to save my number. My friends and I are going out tonight, but it won’t be anything crazy, and I’d love a chance to get away from them. When you get this, call me back, and maybe we can meet up for a drink tonight.”

I glanced blearily at the clock. I'd missed that window, certainly. I decided I'd have my tea after all, and I started the electric kettle again. I went to my desk and spent fifteen minutes trying to remember my password to my first ever email account. Turns out it was Michael with a one for the i and the l.

I reread one of his emails from a few weeks before it went bad. He'd been cute, asking what I'd done that day, and telling me about his trip to the Cloisters that weekend.

Early afternoon on Saturday. Mike texted me. "*Hey Helen! I'm only in town till tomorrow. Wanna get a drink tonight?*" As always, he persists.

We met in a café near my house. I got there early, so I could watch him walk in. I wanted to expect him to arrive this time. I did, and he did. He came in to the shop taking little strides, throwing his head back and forth in search of me. Evidently, he couldn't see me, because I had to call out to him.

"Sorry about that," He said. "You blend right in here." He plopped onto a chair, looked around. "Neat place. What's good?" He was smacking on some gum.

"It's an old bank turned into a coffee shop," I said as I clutched my mug a little harder. "I like their chi."

"Ohh, that's why there's a vault in the back," he said, nodding. "I thought that was an odd choice for interior décor." He looked at the ceiling and seemed to contemplate for a long minute. "And, you know, when I said for a drink, I meant like a drink drink."

"A drink drink?" I mocked him, because it was easy.

"Chi it is then." He leapt to his feet and bounced off the table next to us to get to the bar. While he stood at the bar, his phone began to buzz on the table. I saw the first message before others piled in and obscured their content: "*hey man where did u go? Were worried.*" He sauntered back with a look in his eye that I knew was trouble.

"Mike, what's up?"

"So," he said, "why aren't you seeing anyone?"

"Mike. I'm not going to talk about this—"

"But I am." He sipped from his drink. "I think it's something you should talk about."

"Mike, shut up."

"You have to understand why I'm curious. You broke up with me years ago, never got in touch when you came back, I can't help but wonder what you're up to."

“And why, exactly, is who I’m dating the most important part of that fact?”

“I guess it’s not, it’s just that—“

“Mike, try not to suck so much.” He guffawed. It was an old line we’d traded back and forth.

“Why,” he asked between gasps, “did we even break up?”

“Michael, every time you wrote you asked me if—“

“Oh yeah, right.” He stared into his mug. “I’m not the way anymore.”

“Well, good. It was a shitty way to be.”

“I’m also sorry about all the messages I sent you, afterward.”

“Yea, those sucked too.” He took a moment and a deep breath.

“Helen, I need to say something,” He said, staring into the table. “Do you still want to be with me?”

“Mike, what are you even—“ He cut me off and kept going.

“Do you think this could be our second first date? Can we start over?”

“Michael, shut up. No. We’re not doing that.”

“Helen, I’ve got to tell you something.”

“What?”

“In a few months, I’m getting married. The party is for me.” I don’t know why my ears starting ringing, or why my hands clenched over and over.

“Great news, Mike.”

“But I don’t want to do it. I want to be with you. Please. Will you try again with me?”

“Mike, you’re really asking—just, I need to leave.” I stood and ran from the shop. He followed me.

“Just listen Helen,” he yelled, as he ran after me. “I want to try again. I never got over you.” I kept running from him, and he followed. I saw, a quick flash out of the corner of my eye, a man dial his phone after he saw me being chased. A good Samaritan, I hoped. After a few minutes of running, I was half a block my apartment. I stopped.

“Helen, please,” he gasped. He wasn’t in very good shape.

“Mike, this is crazy. Go away.” I didn’t get out my keys or move an inch.

“Helen,” he walked closer to me. “Helen, do you remember how great we were together?” I saw over his shoulder a police car, whipping its search light back and forth. I turned and ran towards my building, and Michael followed, again. “Helen! Please.” The siren came on, and the car rushed up between me and him.

“Ma’am,” the officer said as he got out quickly, “are you alright?” I said nothing, just looked at Michael.

“Say something Helen! We’re perfectly fine, right officer? I’d never hurt you—“ The cop pushed him back as he came closer. “Right, Helen?” I turned and ran, and Michael tried to follow. The officer shoved him down. I never saw Michael again.

Chew

Mollie Fenby

Do me a favor,
and eat your words.

I hope they cause small
incisions
as they slide
all the way
down
your gaping throat.

Perhaps you'll forget
to chew them.

Almost Not a Daughter

Runner up for the Balutis-Stevens Award for
Artistic Excellence

Nicole Carey

My frail, 1-pound body dripped
with wires and cables instead
of chunky baby fat. I was a grenade
in my parents' minds, never
knowing if I'd go off or survive. I'll remember
the stories of my father's wedding band—
how it fit up my entire arm. Born
3 months premature: welcome
to the world, baby girl.

Where No Poppy Shall Grow

Nicole Umbrell

Hear me well,
For the tides will tell,
What has transpired here.

Their crimson crests,
Once white,
Now kiss the trodden shore.

Across the sands,
Man does lay,
Like so many shattered seashells.

Wrapped in barbed wire,
Laid bare, not beneath,
A cross of painted white.

But on the sands,
On the sands they lay,
Beneath a cross of driftwood,
Where no Poppy shall grow.

The Penny

Rebecca Orner

“Wait a minute. So this penny was made the same year you were born?” Kevin turned the penny around in his fingers, briefly looking up at his grandpa.

“Yep, 1950. That was a good year.”

“So this penny is ... how old are you?”

His grandpa laughed. “64 years old. That makes it really, really old. That penny has been through a lot.”

Kevin let out an awed sigh and looked even closer at the penny. He knew it was old. It looked different from those new pennies that he got back from the cashier when he bought a pack of gum. It was worn down around the edges with little flecks of green against the browned copper. The back was different. It didn't have the building that was normally on the back, just the words “One Cent.” The front was the same. Abraham Lincoln. He knew Abraham Lincoln. He had just learned about the Civil War in school. He couldn't remember the exact dates, but he knew it happened sometime in the 60's. That must mean that the penny was around during the Civil War. He wondered if Abraham Lincoln had ever held the exact penny that he held right now.

Then he tried to picture every single moment that this penny could have lived through. He wondered who touched it, who used it, who picked it up off the ground thinking it was their lucky day. This penny had a story, but it wasn't telling it.

Listless Mornings

Olivia Gill

1. Stretch (for his sleepy company)
2. Wiggle (numbness from my toe tips)
3. Pull (woolen blankets up, no, back
down—chafing is only tolerable if the
source is his cheeks)
4. Squeeze (the lifeless cloud beside me and wish for his
rhythmic thumps, only to be granted the melancholy
echo of my own)
5. Drink (coffee, black)

Third Party Perspective

Olivia Gill

Each morning
you're the grass wrapped
in dew, unable to shake the dampness
of his leaving from your porcelain
frame.

Single breaths disperse
into the air—free from his smokey
collisions. Your chest rises and
falls with no inspiration to move
any faster or slower.

You shun the memory of waking up beside those
fairy-curved eyelashes and yank the shades to meet
the floor to forget the sun's talent
it had to illuminate the seaweed
flowing through his iris and shining
on the jagged teeth you once cringed
from, once loved.

The Smoking Gun

Olivia Gill

After four days of clouds and rain, the sun finally came back from its hiatus. It shone strong and bright, in hopes the people of the rural Montana suburb would excuse its absence during the first days of Spring. Gleeful cries echoed from the mouths of the rowdy neighborhood children on Huckleberry Lane. Little bodies ran rampant across the residential lawns playing endless games of hide and seek. Windows stood as an open invitation to the outside world, inviting its fresh warm air back in after a long winter. Curtains were pulled back welcoming the sunshine's anticipated encore presentation of lights and shadows.

Yes, the air was especially full of life today and Howard Blake wanted in on it. Reclined in a plastic lawn chair on a patch of flagstone in his backyard, he took pleasure in the glory of another Saturday afternoon. His mouth curved into a smile when a small pair of Velcro strapped shoes appeared from behind his Chevy, flashing their red, blue, and green soles on the black pavement. It was Timmy from across the street, the little boy he and his wife, Sheila, babysat on occasion. A tuft of Timmy's red hair peeked out from behind the rearview mirror as he inched his way from behind the car to see if the coast was clear. When he saw Howard he smiled, exposing the voids between his teeth, and placed a stubby index finger over his mouth. Howard silently gave Timmy a reassuring zip of the lips and closed his eyes.

A light breeze carried the sweet aroma from the Gardenia bush up to Howard's nose. He lay there, letting the sun penetrate its warmth down to his bones. Greedily, he sucked in the air through his teeth and up his nostrils, taking advantage of the oxygen he'd soon be deprived of. This moment was cut short by a sharp tickle erupting from the back of his throat throwing him into a fit of coughs. Sitting up, he reached for an old cracked ash tray in the basement window well near his chair and spit out a slimy green residue into the bowl. When the coughing subsided he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. It wasn't long before his mind started to nag him for a cigarette, but he wanted to wait until Sheila left to indulge himself. It's not that she banned him from smoking, but ever since the diagnosis he felt guilty lighting up in front of her.

Despite the death sentence from his doctor, he hadn't planned on quitting, but the relationship he had with the company of twenty was certainly estranged now. He felt for the rigid grooves of his lighter, gracing his thumb back and forth to quiet the urge and drifted into a meditative state.

In the back of his subconscious he heard the kitchen screen door creak open and slam shut. Sheila came out with a basketful of laundry and started pinning Howard's underwear, socks, and shirts to the clothesline that extended horizontally across their backyard. She hummed a tune with no particular refrain and went about rhythmically pinning, clipping and shaking out the damp clothes. When she was finished she took the basket back inside and returned with a bottle of sunblock. Eyes still closed, Howard felt her presence behind him, which was confirmed by a cooling sensation that spread across his head. Without a word, Sheila drizzled the lotion in circles on top of his bald head like she was icing a sticky bun. It oozed down the sides of his head but Sheila was quick to catch the runaway SPF with her calloused fingers before it dripped on his shirt. In silence she gingerly rubbed it into his scalp, neck, and ears.

"Howard Blake you've been sitting out here all afternoon in this blazing sun. For god's sake put on a hat."

"I guess I lost track of time," Howard sighed.

"Well you just lost all your hair. I don't want you losing your skin too."

And with that Sheila stalked back into the house. Howard was going to miss her quick wit and bluntness about things. He was grateful that she didn't allow him to wallow in self-pity. If anything he was the one who felt bad for her. People were constantly calling the house inquiring about his health. It wrenched his stomach to hear the snippets of phone conversation when Sheila would report, "He's so weak right now" or "It's hard to keep him awake" and "He's doing the best he can." The best he could do was nowhere good enough. He was supposed to be the strong one. He was supposed to be taking care of her. Luckily Howard was able to retire early from the Postal Service to start treatment, so he could provide for her financially, but after he was gone the closest he'd come to her would be his name on a stamped envelope. He wouldn't be there to sit beside her at dinner, or put his arm around her waist in the middle of the night while they slept. No more wrinkled kisses, no more movie nights, no more beach walks. Howard found himself with too much time on his hands but at the same time not enough.

Enough time to think too much about his life and not enough time to change it. Hopeless thoughts spun webs of regret in his brain and he was left with the conclusion that he would go out of this world a pathetic coughing sack of muck. In the back of his mind he knew he needed to quit. He knew he was killing himself with each puff, but the thought of quitting felt like a castration of his character. To many people cigarettes were an addiction, but to Howard they symbolized a noble man, one that as a boy, he wished to become, in spite of his father's bad example.

His mind drifted back to the memory of his first drag. It was the summer he and his friend Louie Simpson were allowed to ride the trolley into town by themselves. This newfound freedom reeled them with adrenaline. Their routine was always the same: browse the toy stores, play some basketball, drink bottles of Root Beer, and head to the movie theater. Most of the movies they saw were Cowboy Westerns. The unanimous favorite starred Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. On the trolley ride home they quoted lines from the movie in gruff voices to random passengers. They would jump from seat to seat saying, "You see, in this world there's two kinds of people, my friend: Those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig." Old ladies gave them disapproving looks while most people either ignored them or gave mild grins.

On Howard's twelfth birthday, Louie got him a poster of Clint Eastwood giving an icy stare dressed in cowboy attire with a cigar jutting out of his thin lined lips. "The Man with No Name" turned into a household name. Stores overflowed with cowboy paraphernalia. To anyone else Clint was simply a movie star. To the boys Clint was Blondie, a courageous bounty hunter seeking justice on a horse, while dawning a perpetual five o'clock shadow. They idolized him, but for different reasons. Louie saw Blondie as an alter ego that could hide his nerdy tendencies, and Howard saw him as a father figure. Since the facial hair was impossible to emulate for the time being, Louie stole a cigarette from his dad's toolbox and the boys took turns sucking in the smoke. When Mr. Simpson noticed his cigarettes were dwindling, he found a new hiding spot where neither his wife nor his son could get to them. But this didn't stop them from smoking. They got the older boys on their school bus to buy them packs of Marlboros, even though they charged them double the price.

One afternoon Howard was playing a game of Jax outside his front stoop with his sister Denise. Despite being three years younger than Howard, Denise was better than him in about every game. Kneeling on the slab of concrete outside the front door, Howard caught a glimpse of his mother and father arguing. Not that this was out of the ordinary but recently Howard's stomach had started to wrench into knots when they fought. Howard got up and closed the front door to drown out their voices. It was embarrassing having their neighbors give them sympathetic looks. It made him mad, while Denise was too young to pick up on the expressions. Forcefully, Howard threw his ball into the concrete.

"Howie you're cheating!" Denise cried.

"I can't help it if my ball bounces higher than yours," Howard said, smiling sheepishly.

Denise indignantly watched as Howard's ball soared into the air giving him an ample amount of time to grab four relics, and win the game.

"Rematch!" Denise demanded.

"Okay, I need to use the bathroom first," said Howard.

Opening the door, Howard cautiously made his way across the brown shag carpet, afraid of what he would walk into. They were in the kitchen. "Phew," Howard thought, and took the steps two at a time. As soon as he closed the bathroom door, he heard a dish break and muffled sobs. The knots in his stomach grew tighter and tighter. He took a cigarette out of his back pocket and lit one. This was the first time he'd ever smoked in the house. He hoped they would smell the smoke and stop. But they didn't.

Howard crept into the kitchen, crunching on shattered glass crystals. His father had his mother pinned to the floor. Howard felt his heart beat out of his chest and his palms break into a cold sweat. They didn't notice him in the room.

"You make me act this way, you dumb bitch," he shouted. "Some mother you are. Funny how I never have to discipline the kids."

"Please stop, I'm sorry I'm sorry" his mother wailed.

At that moment, Howard though he had no gun, believed he morphed into Blondie. Taking the lighted cigarette from his mouth he grounded the butt into his father's ear cavity. His father yowled in pain, instantly falling off the top of his mother and clutched his ear.

"What the hell is the matter with you, you little shit?!" he yelled.

A tear escaped down Howard's cheek and he ran blindly out the front door past Denise. He sat on the bench at the trolley stop until it was dark. When he returned home his father was gone. He never saw him again.

A hot buzz tickled his ear, waking Howard up from his flashback. He swatted at the fly circling his head and accidentally brushed his finger nail across the top of his head. He immediately regretted this action, as a sharp sting simmered across his scalp. Wincing, he reached for his khaki safari hat from under his chair. He was still getting adjusted to his baby bald look. He never thought he'd go out of this world with the same style he came into it. Before starting the chemo, he had a thick bristly bush of black and white hair. Howard remembered feeling disappointed at the sight of premature greys when he was only twenty-four, but there were a few black stalemates that refused their retreat until he was sixty-five. He remembered the insecurity that sprouted along with them; scared Sheila would find him less desirable, so he would part his hair on the left side where his youth prevailed. Howard did this out of habit until he decided to shave his head two days ago. He got tired of seeing himself left behind on his pillow when he got up in the morning. Each time he threw away the strands of himself was a reminder of his sickness, and his sickness inevitably stamped a daunting expiration date on his life. He yawned and closed his eyes again. It was just a matter of time before his ashes would turn to soot.

"Yes, dinner is at five o'clock. I just put the baked potatoes in now. Uh-huh...Oh I'm sure he would love that. He always talks my ear off about how good your chocolate cake is. I'll make sure we have extra milk. Ok Denise. See you then." Sheila hung up the phone, unraveling the long cord from around her wrist and yelled out the window to Howard, reminding him his doctor's appointment was in a half hour.

"Thank you dear," Howard answered.

Howard parked in the farthest spot from his doctor's office and finished his cigarette. He took out two sticks of Spearmint gum and took a swig of water. "Let's get this over with," Howard said to himself and slammed his car door shut.

"The doctor will see you now, Mr. Blake," the nurse called to Howard from behind her desk.

It had been five months since his diagnosis. Dr. George had told him he would see one more Christmas. Howard doubted anything had changed, because he hadn't. Of course there were physical changes seen in him besides the hair loss. The color had drained from his face, and he was now a pallid hue. His weight loss was dramatic, and his wardrobe consisted of sweat pants and undershirts. As Dr. George was explaining the next round of chemo treatments to him, Howard nodded to show he was paying attention, but all he could think about was getting his fingers curled around a slender cigarette. He felt for the plastic cellophane wrapped Marlboro pack in his pocket, but remembered it was empty.

"Okay Howard, I'll see you in two weeks. If you have any questions don't hesitate to call."

"Will do. Thanks a lot," Howard replied. As he pulled his hand out of his coat pocket to shake Dr. George's hand the cigarette pack fell out onto the ground. Howard stooped over quickly and threw it into the trash can.

"That's the first step. It's never too late to quit," Dr. George said encouragingly.

Howard gave a grimace and walked quickly out to his car. He fished out a fresh pack of Marlboros from his glove compartment. Pulling one out he held it to his nose, and took in its delicious tobacco scent. His mouth watered as he got out his lighter. Just as he was about to light the end, a car beeped at him.

"Hey buddy, are you coming or going?" asked the impatient driver.

"Sorry," Howard muttered.

The cigarette dropped from his mouth onto the ground. He didn't bother picking it up.

Pulling into his driveway, Howard found Timmy waiting for him on his porch. He was lying on his stomach, with a Popsicle in one hand and crayons in another. He was engrossed in his coloring and only glanced up to acknowledge Howard's arrival, then went back to work. Howard bent down to retrieve the stray crayons that had gravitated into the crevices of the porch steps.

"Mr. Blake I made a picture for you."

With wide eyes and a blue mouth, Timmy waved a purple heart up to Howard's face.

“Wow you’re quite an artist Timmy I’ll put it on the fridge so me and Mrs. Blake can look at it.”

“I also bought you something from the ice-cream truck.”

Timmy pulled out the bulging rectangle from his back pocket and handed it to him.

The box could’ve held a case of cigarettes or a deck of cards, but seeing as Timmy had bought them from the ice-cream man and was only six-years-old, logically it could only be candy.

“Why thank you Timmy!” Howard said with enthusiasm. “I used to love these when I was your age.”

Timmy beamed with the pride at his independent purchase and was happy Howard was impressed by his gift.

“You’re welcome. I thought you liked that kind. I got to go now and wash my face before supper so my mom doesn’t know I had a Popsicle.”

Timmy gathered his crayons and went on his way. Howard watched him cross the street and smiled at the thoughtful gifts. He examined the candy cigarette box. LoneStar was painted in black playbill lettering, accompanied by a brown horse against a yellow backplash in the shape of a star. He sunk them in his other pocket where his real cigarettes didn’t reside and went in the backyard to his chair.

The anxiety of his anticipated doctor’s visit had left him, but the urge to smoke had not. In reality that’s all it was. An urge. Unfortunately Howard hadn’t been able to distinguish what was a habit from what was a fictional trait, to what was essential to his character, until death was in his peripheral vision and his bifocals were no longer needed. At one time cigarettes had saved him and his family’s life. Now they were declaring a mutiny on his body. Would he surrender the remainder of his life to them, or let go of the prop that had once made him a hero? Howard was aware of these thoughts but never openly admitted them to anyone, let alone himself. If this was the end, he decided he would bravely greet death, but first he had to say goodbye to Blondie. He sighed, pulling out a chalky stick, and let its sugars disintegrate onto his tongue.

Rose

Alexander Strickler

Last spring (I don't know the month) I found myself on the phone with my father. "She's on life support," he told me over the phone. "This will probably be the last time you see her. We decided to pull the plug and see what happens."

Pull the plug? "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I've come to terms with it." *How do you feel? Because I am unsure.*

For the second half of my life, almost every time I saw my grandmother, she was in the hospital. No one ever knew what was wrong. Before it all started, her table beside her rocking chair was completely full with orange and white prescription medicine bottles.

They thought maybe all her meds collided with each other inside her, causing kidney failure and liver damage. They told her: you should quit smoking. But, of course, she never did. The last time I saw her outside a hospital bed was at her 50th anniversary party. I remember focusing on my glass of champagne because I thought we had nothing to talk about. I didn't try, though.

The last time I saw my grandmother she was only allowed two visitors at a time so we visited in shifts. I sat in the waiting room absently watching an old action movie on the TV. There was a constant sound of trickling water from the wall fountain. No one really spoke in the room except my brother when he made mean jokes to my sister. *What a dick, I thought. This is a sad time. We are supposed to be sad, or at least quiet.*

When it was my turn to go in to say goodbye, my grandmother didn't have her dentures in. Her mouth was a tight little hole surrounded by wrinkles all pointing inwards from years of sucking nicotine. *I didn't know she had dentures,* I thought. She smiled a little when she saw me.

"Today is a good day," my father said. "She is awake and responsive." She couldn't talk but her eyes watched me, waiting to see what I would do. I watched her watching me, both of us waiting. She was so small and frail and nothing like the fiery woman my father talked about during dinners.

I noticed her gown was very loose and saw a red splotch on her chest peeking out from behind. It was surprisingly vibrant. It was a little red rose; Rose was my grandmother's name. Months later my father told me it wasn't a rose but a cardinal; her favorite bird. She got it with my aunt later in her life despite the protests from my grandfather.

My father said something about my schooling and she nodded. I looked her in the eye. *What do I say?* I said "I love you, Nanny." She smiled big with her mouth closed. "Good bye," I said to the tattoo, newly discovered. What else don't I know about this woman?

I wanted to ask about the ink but I didn't think the hospital was a good place. I looked at it and then at my dad for silent answers but he wasn't looking at me. *What is he feeling?* I shuffled to the window and looked out. *Why don't I feel anything?* I could feel her watch me.

At the funeral reception my father drank vodka straight with his siblings, each laughing or staring at their drinks when the story called for it. I didn't sit at the table with them but stood on the outside straight-faced and quiet. I had no stories to offer.

Of the three funerals I've been to I've cried at each one. Usually this can happen because I pick out someone who dearly loved the recently deceased and watch them. I start to cry watching them cry, their pain like a jump-start. This time I watch my aunt. She is crying for someone completely different than I know. She jump-starts my tears. Cardinal behind the gown. She cries for the Cardinal; I cry because of the gown.

Kevin

Cory Hahn

Kevin has been in the inside for a long time. He never before had gone inside the house of one of our robberies. I told him never to go down that road because loafing around only gets people caught. An uncomfortable amount of time has passed by and no one has come out. The absence of the moon made Randall and I almost invisible to anyone who would happen to pass by. This was ideal for us, as the bushes turned out to be an extremely convenient spot to see our latest victims' front door. The only light available was the light from the doorstep that Kevin had disappeared into. Crouched next to me, Randall's silhouette turned to my direction.

"Yo man, you think he's gonna be chill? It's been a while since he's gone inside."

"He should be." I said. "We've done this shit a billion times already, when we are good to go he'll send us the text. He's probably just playing nice right now."

I knew he wouldn't be playing nice though. Normally by now, the poor bastard would be out of their house, sweating like a bitch and barely fulfilling his task. Why can't he follow simple instructions? It would always go the same as I envisioned. We would send Kevin to the doorstep, he told a story to lure them out (His friends were in a car wreck, he was lost, wanted them to jump his car), and the stupid bastards would almost always immediately come out. People are either always too stupid, too trusting, or both. My leg wouldn't stop twitching and my eyes shot back to Randall. He checked his incoming texts and shut his phone. Almost immediately after, he repeated the process.

Randall closed his phone again and gripped his bat tightly. "We can't exactly jump somebody if they don't even leave their house. We need this hit, man." He gripped the bat even tighter, his knuckles started to become white. "If we finish this one we will probably be able to sell enough shit to actually go out on our own and stop doing this."

"I know you want out, man." I said quietly. "If we get caught, that's it. We're done. They said last time if we get caught doing anything else we were going to be tried as adults."

Randall rose up a little bit. His voice got a little louder. "You will

be tried as an adult, asshole. I was eighteen last time, remember? If we are caught I'm not getting out of it. I'm going to jail for a long time, and my kid was just born. You only do this shit because you want to go and runaway with your girlfriend like some fairy tale. I have to do this because I live in the real world, man. My kid needs to have a dad. He needs food on his plate."

The night grew quiet. "Kevin has the hammer in his back pocket still, you know." I said. "No one will mess with him when he brings that shit out." The porch light flickered from 20 feet away. Only two lights were on in the house, but we were too far away to see if anything was going on inside. God only knows what Kevin was doing in there. The man who answered the door seemed easy enough to handle. He was short from what I saw, and seemed like he had really let himself go. Kevin is a ticking time bomb. He can handle this.

"Are you sure it was just that one guy in the house?" I asked.

"Definitely." Randall answered. "I staked this house out for a few days. It's only one guy. He leaves for work at nine a.m., and comes back around five. He never goes anywhere else. He seems pretty boring, actually. This place should have been perfect because there aren't any neighbors for at least a few miles."

So were the hell is Kevin? I was always afraid for him. He was always bullied in high school, and Randall and I were more like his caretakers. He was an introvert to almost everyone except us, especially since his mom offed herself when he was 13. His dad had always taken it out on him and he would come to school with bruises and black eyes. I get the feeling that he only takes part in our "operation" because he wants us to accept him. Even though we treat him as an equal, he always let off the impression that he was never as good as us.

I watched his movements, and I felt like Randall was about to snap. "Man, I don't know what to do. If we get caught, that's it for good. We need to either get Kevin, or get out of here."

Randall would sometimes lose his cool, and it scared me. Sometimes he would hit too hard.

We heard a loud crash come from the house. Something bad was definitely going on in there. And then we heard the sound that made us both jump. Screams of someone obviously in pain. It was hard to tell who it came from, as the house was muffled. It was one of the most unsettling thing I have ever heard..

"We can't just leave him, man."

Randall gleamed at me. "It's past the point of no return. I'm not

dealing with this shit, and Kevin probably isn't ok. We have to make sure his ass isn't dead, or worse. We either go in now, or leave before there is time for the cops to get here. In fact, the cops are probably on their way."

We heard some smacking noises from the back of the house.

I could tell Randall was struggling to keep something in. Something that scared me. I knew we couldn't just leave Kevin, but I knew we couldn't get caught again either. "Kevin is fucked up, man. I'm not ready to risk my life for his. Yea, he has helped us in the past, but you and me both know that it's only a matter of time before he does something that completely ruins all of us."

"Lets just go in and do this ourselves." I said. "I'm sure they will be caught off guard if we just break in as fast as possible. Who knows what the hell they are doing in there."

We heard more screams from within the house. This was bad.

Suddenly, his phone lit up and his eyes grew wide. I looked at his inbox. I opened my mouth, unable to hold my relief.

"Holy shit, its Kevin!" I said. "What does it say?"

Randall looked at me, shaking. "It says 'you guys need to go. NOW'."

"What the hell does that mean!?" I said.

"We should probably listen to him man," he said.

I'm not one to let someone down. I'm going in, and you are either with me or you aren't Randall. I leapt over the bushes. He must have understood my mindset as well. He ran with me.

I knocked on the door. No answer. I asked Randall for his bat.

He gave it to me. I remember smashing into that doorknob was the easiest thing I have done since I can remember. I wasn't taking this risk for Randall, or for me. This was for Kevin. He was too troubled and if he wasn't ok, there was going to be hell to pay.

We walked into the house. The smell was something you can't picture in your mind. It was unbearable, but it wasn't of death or rotting, just not natural.

We began to search the house. This house was extremely well maintained for a guy living alone, I thought. The living room was filled with oddities and family portraits. One picture made Randall extremely unhappy. It was a portrait of the owner of the house with a little girl.

I could only assume it was the target's daughter. We finally made our way to the kitchen.

And then we saw Kevin. He was holding his knees in the corner of

the room. His normally innocent demeanor was rocking back and forth on the ground. He was never like this. Ever. He wouldn't even look us in the eyes. What exactly had he done?

"What the fuck happened!?!? What he do to you?!" Randall screamed. "Tell us right now!"

"Well..." Kevin said. "I wanted to do this one on my own. I wanted you guys to be proud of me for once." His face succumbed to the tears that he couldn't hold back. "I tried to talk to this guy and tell him our situation so he would understand. But he turned his back and started to call the cops. I'm pretty sure he knew what I was doing."

"So what exactly is going on?" I said. "Why are you so afraid?"

"Well," Kevin stammered, "He wasn't the only one in the house." I became rigid. There was no way any cops or heroes could have been here. "Randall?" I asked. "Should there have been anyone here but the fat guy?"

"That was all I saw." He said.

I began to feel a swelling feeling of suffocation inside. "Who did you see in here?" I asked Kevin.

Kevin began to sink lower.

"Where is the man who answered the door?" I asked. My voice grew louder. "Where is the dude who answered!?"

Kevin made a head nod to the back door. I took it as a sign, and I ran through the disgusting kitchen, and found something more atrocious.

The man laying on the back porch was unrecognizable. His face looked like it had been beaten in beyond recognition. This was definitely the man who had opened the door. But this time, the image of his face was something I knew would be burned into my memories forever. This was the result of something no sane human could ever accomplish. I almost gagged as I took in the whole situation. This didn't happen on accident. Kevin did this.

It was then I started to realize the fact there was a little girl in the house.

"Randall!" I cried. "Let's check the upstairs."

"I'm already on it." He said. He was up stairs already.

"I might need you..." He said.

I accompanied Randall to upstairs, shuddering as we both walked away from this poor man's unrecognizable body. I walked past Kevin, who was barely able to remain in his fetus position, cowering on the kitchen floor. I began to wonder if the boy that we had protected all of these years was the real Kevin or a shell.

“Don’t go up there!” Kevin yelled. “I haven’t checked there yet!”

He obviously had. Beds were overturned, drawers were smashed, and cabinets were open. I really don’t think Kevin was who we thought he was. He had twenty minutes alone in this house, and this is what he does?

We checked the master bedroom upstairs. I climbed the stairs through the immense silence. The smell from downstairs was quickly overtaken by the smell of sprays that were meant to cover up a smell. Kevin had definitely been here. This man (or what he used to be) was obviously going through some tough times. His house was adorned with pictures of what I can only imagine is his ex-wife.

We made it into what looked like a children’s room. It was very well decorated, and the walls had *Dora the Explorer* paintings on them. The floor was even painted to represent an episode. I noticed a small trickle seeping from the closet. Randall did too.

Randall beckoned me over. With a certain uneasiness, he ripped open the closet. Although he could see what was in there, I couldn’t. He instantly pushed me away. He turned to look at me. His eyes turned to me, his eyebrows raised as high as they could on his narrow forehead.

“What have we done,” he said. Randall still held on to my shoulder. He gripped it hard. His hands beckoned me to look, but his body prevented me. I knew Randall when something bothered him, and I was afraid.

I became uncomfortably anxious of what I was about to see in that closet, even though it was predictable. I never thought I would see such a thing. Randall ran down stairs, and I heard him making a commotion, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t. My senses were overwhelmed at this point to even acknowledge what he was doing. I had already seen the beaten man downstairs, and so had Randall. What could possibly be worse? I was too afraid to look, but I knew that I couldn’t leave the house without undertaking this task.

I finally choked up the courage to look at what made him so upset. There was a tiny figure in the closet. It had a floral pink dress on, and a large gash in its head. It wasn’t placed in there by accident. Someone had done this on purpose. I have done some pretty horrible things in my life, but none were this horrible.

It then began to all make sense to me. His daughter was here when Kevin arrived.

I arrived downstairs. Randall was poised above Kevin, holding his bat. The only emotion his eyes gave out was anger.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t do the same to him what he did

the that man and his daughter.” Randal breathed heavily.

“I didn’t mean to,” Kevin cried. “I panicked. I didn’t think that he would fight back like he did. Or that his daughter was even here. I only shot because I was afraid!” He sobbed. “I Just wanted to do the same thing you guys did. I didn’t mean for any of this. She surprised me, and I didn’t mean to do it. So I hid them both. Just like you guys always told me to do.”

Randall looked at me, and we both knew. What we had done was irreversible. Kevin was always unstable and our mistake was welcoming him. He didn’t need us. He needed someone, but not us. What we had driven him to do the unthinkable, and what I will never forget is that he did the unthinkable for our acceptance. He was someone that could be saved, I always thought, and so did Randall. We were always his friends. Someone to be there for him. Always the kindest person, Kevin had always obliged to help us.

I guess some people are too willing to prove themselves that they will do anything for you regardless of the consequences. Some people have trouble distinguishing reality from fiction. I guess Kevin was one of those people. We tried to help, but every time I saw that little girl in my mind, I knew what I did next was the right thing to do.

Song of Yearning

Paul Deichmann

We don't belong everywhere. Sunset's amber
fingertips cannot massage
our feet aching from uneven ground. Shards of glass
hold colors well, the orange and pink from
the end of twilight and
the red of my cuts. And whimpering
for change is no avail. There are no ears to hear
a quiet sound. Fields are hosts to one story homes
with lights flickering in windows
which never push back
the dark that hugs the stubble fields. The night
has tongues, they reach to what we'd rather leave
untasted. Which flavor of you
of me
have we yet to reach?

East and West

John Watts

“... like valour’s minion carved out his passage till he faced the slave; which ne’er shook hands, nor bade fare...”

“What the hell are you readin’ in there, boy?”

“It’s Shakespeare, Pa. Macbeth. One of the Bouldersons gave it to me. Tryin’ to learn one of the longer bits.”

“Well, put it down and get ready for supper. Your mother and I have somethin’ to discuss with you.”

Henry looked up from his book, gray eyes staring intently through the canvas tent flap. He could hear his father walking on the dry, crunchy grass outside, and he felt a knot growing in his stomach. Ever since his family had set up camp here with the rest of the migrant workers, Henry had felt uneasy. Everyone said times were tough. The newspapers they found thrown out said that times were tough. The farmers were packing up their families and trying to get out while they still could, muttering “Times are tough” under their breath. Times had been tough for several years now, what seemed like forever to Henry, and they showed no sign of getting better.

He pushed himself up from his well-worn blanket, and checked himself in the piece of reflective glass that had once been part of Grandma Josephine’s mirror, broken when the brawl had started in the last camp they had stayed in. His dark brown hair was getting too long for his taste, and a few errant whiskers were forming on his face. He frowned at his appearance, quietly lamenting the loss of the razor back in Iowa. He had hoped to look nice, in case Florence Boulderson would walk by, but he dismissed the thought. He stuffed his bookmark, a small flier for a talkie that had been in a theater a while back, into the book, and hid it in the folds of his blanket. There would be time to practice the lines later.

“Henry,” his mother finally spoke, “what he’s trying to say is that this is a golden opportunity. I know this might not be what you want to do, but things are tough right now. They won’t always be that way, though. Just try it for a year or two. Maybe by then there’ll be a little more money to be made, and you’ll have better prospects. Please do this for us? We wouldn’t ask you to do this if it wasn’t in your best interests.”

Henry stared into the fire pit, watching the orange flames lick the side of the iron pot. "When will I leave?"

"There's two trucks of workers leaving tomorrow morning. The one you want will be going to Virginia, and you can make your way from there to Pennsylvania."

"Where's the other one going?"

"California."

Henry felt the word settle into his mind. California. He thought of the talkies, and the big studios that were there, in Los Angeles. His mind ran wild with possibilities. Perhaps there were theaters, he thought. Shakespeare could be performed in them. Perhaps he could try to be in a movie, working with someone like Mae West. His closed his eyes as he imagined the signs outside a theater, with his name and picture on all of them, advertising in garish colors the latest film. He had only been to a movie once, before the stock market crashed and the fields had turned to dust, when his father had owned a small hardware store that had become a casualty of the crash. His father paid the ten cents to take him to the theater, and he had sat enthralled as second by black-and-white second unfolded on the massive screen before him. The action and the romance of it all had sunk its talons deep into his mind. He had kept a flier of the film, and it was currently marking his page in Macbeth.

"Henry?"

His mother's words shook him from his reverie. "Hmm?"

"Did you just hear what I said?"

"No," he mumbled, "I didn't."

"You'll be sure to get on the truck to Virginia, tomorrow, right? It's the best possible opportunity right now."

"Yeah, I'll be on the truck." Even as he spoke the words, he was unsure if he meant them.

His father nodded approvingly, "Good. Get your things ready tonight so you're not rushing in the morning. I don't know if..." His words trailed off. They all knew without saying it that it was unlikely that they would see each other again. His father's head slumped forwards, and he stared at his worn leather boots for some time.

When he made his way to the fire pit, his mother and father were already sitting, eating the thin cabbage soup out of tin bowls they had scavenged. His mother had a look of worry in her dirt and sweat-streaked face, and his fathers eyes were narrowed angrily, his mustache quivering slightly as he ate. The three ate in silence for several minutes, as children

from other families in the camp were running around, screaming and yelling. Some of the men were fixing some tools while women were hanging laundry air out. The drought had made water difficult to come by and maintain, and the general rule told to all migrant workers in the camp was to only use it sparingly for drinking and cooking. Even then, people received glares from their neighbors.

Finishing the soup in his bowl, Henry's father finally spoke: "We need to talk."

"About what?" Henry said through a mouthful of soup.

"I found you a job."

Henry swallowed hard and stared at his father. "Doing what?"

His father reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a notice.

"Says here that a new coal mine opened up in Pennsylvania. Northumberland County. They're looking for young folks to work it. I can barely do this farming shit anymore, let alone work a coal mine. You could do it, though. You might be able to earn a little money. It's not much, but it's something."

Henry just stared at the notice. "I don't know if I want to do this."

His father glared. "Don't be a damned fool. Your mother and I have talked this over. It's the best option you have. You don't know the first thing about working the soil. You're well old enough to be doing some kind of work. If I'd had my way..."

Henry got up and dusted his pants off. "I'm gonna go take a walk. I won't go far." His father looked up, but their eyes did not meet. Henry walked past several tents and a trailer, all filled to bursting with other families. Some of them were migrant workers, displaced when they lost everything after the stock market crash, and forced to travel to farms all over the country. Others were new: farmers who lost hundreds upon hundreds of acres of crops when the drought tightened its grip on their roots. They all looked the same. They were all gaunt, their clothes were frayed, patched, and dirty, and the faces of the men were poorly shaven or not at all.

Their poverty was written into their eyes, downcast and dark, as if desperation had anchored the bloodshot and dust-caked orbs towards the ground in defeat. Even the children, when not playing with whatever sticks and rocks were available, had grim countenances.

Henry sauntered through the camp, coming to the trailer of the Clifton family. The eldest son, Bud, was sitting on the dirt, leaning against the trailer, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette and staring through the smoke into space, like he always did. "Hey Bud. Whatcha doing?"

“Sitting in a shithole waiting to die. You?”

Henry couldn't help but smile. Bud's response was always the same. His mother had long since stopped berating him from swearing, even in front of women and children. Bud, on his part, had long since stopped caring about what his mother thought. Bud's round face and scrawny upper body were obscured by the smoke, but Henry knew that he was smiling in anticipation for a comeback.

“Just walking around. I don't know.” Bud's face fell in disappointment.

“Well, if you don't know, who does?”

“Not a clue.” Henry sat down next Bud, and leaned against the trailer.

Bud took a long drag on the cigarette and passed it to Henry. “So... you get to have a little fun with Florence Boulderson yet?”

Henry rolled his eyes and passed the cigarette back. “Nope. Don't think it's gonna happen.”

“And why is that?”

“I'm leaving tomorrow morning.”

“Oh?” Bud turned to look at Henry. “You and your folks packing up and leaving this delightful place?”

“No, just me. Pa found out about a mine opening up out east. He and mother seem to think that the drought will ease up, so they're staying and I'm going to the mine to make a little money in the meantime.”

“Well, your parents are damn fools if they think this will get better. Might as well wish to shit gold bricks or something. But hey, at least there's some money to be made out east. That's something, I suppose.”

“True, it's just that...”

“You want to go out west and be a fancy-pants actor. Lord knows I've heard you talk and talk and talk about it. Let me tell you something though: No way in hell is it gonna happen. The world doesn't need more actors. Just you wait and see. Sooner or later, the stock market crash is gonna catch up to them, then there won't be any more talkies. But farmers, or miners? Times may be pretty tough here, but elsewhere, there'll always be farms to run and mines to dig up. And they'll need people to do it. Your problem s you don't want to get your pretty hands dirty. Besides, who'd want to put your ugly mug in front of camera anyway?”

Henry stared blankly into space. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Take my advice. Go to east. You might actually make some money that way. Besides, if you go that way, you might even be able to take Miss

Boulderson with you, or perhaps send for her at some point. With her parents in the condition that they're in, I doubt they'll be going anywhere for a while."

Henry considered the thought. Florence's parents had been hurt when a tornado had ripped through the area a month previously, and had been relying on Florence and her two brothers to keep earning what meager food and money they could. "I don't think I could keep her and her parents on a miner's wage."

Bud looked straight into Henry's eyes. "Then leave 'em. Just take her."

"I don't know if I want to do that."

Bud shrugged and took another long drag on the slowly burning cigarette. "Suit yerself. The option's there for ya. What is they say? Carpe dime?"

"Diem," Henry muttered. "It's diem."

"See, I figured you'd know."

"Right." Henry pushed himself up and walked away from the trailer, waving dismissively as he left through a thick cloud of silver smoke. "Seeya around, Bud."

"I reckon so."

Henry made his way further through the camp. The field they were all gathered in had once been a bountiful and verdant field, prime for grazing herds of sheep and goats, but the grass had since turned to brown dust, crumbling underfoot. The soil, the very foundation for growth, had grown sterile and empty of all sustenance.

With nothing to keep it alive, everything else disintegrated. Henry had once thought that the people looked just as dead as the ground they walked on. Perhaps, he thought as he walked, that's what made the talkies better than the real world. No dashing hero swings in to make it rain in the real world. No voluptuous woman gives the ground bedroom eyes to make the crops grow in the real world either. But on that giant screen before the teeming masses, men became gods and reality was their plaything. Limitless possibilities.

While his mind had been elsewhere, his feet had carried him to the Boulderson's tent, and he stood for some time before he said anything. "Hey Florence!"

After some shuffling, Florence emerged. Her green cotton dress was in need of repair and cleaning, but didn't take away from the wave of her blonde hair, the soft curve of her cheeks, and the shy smile on her full lips.

Henry would remember the way she looked that day, dirt and all, for years to come.

“What can I do for you, Henry Adams?”

Henry struggled to find his words for a moment, and after nervously push back his hair, he said, “I don’t suppose you’d accompany me for a walk.”

Florence looked down on at the ground for a moment. Henry was pleased to see a hint of a blush forming on her face. “I would be delighted to. Just let me make sure my parents have everything they need.” She hurried back into the tent, and Henry could hear shuffling coming from the inside. He was fairly certain he heard the hushed tones of her father murmuring “What does the Adams boy want?” but he paid it no mind. He stood alone for several moments before Florence final returned, drawing a shawl over her shoulders as the early evening air grew cooler. The two walked together in silence, neither speaking nor looking at each other until they were outside the borders of the camp, walking in the direction of a dilapidated barn a quarter mile out.

“Do you like it here, Miss Boulderson?” Henry asked nervously. He immediately felt stupid for saying it.

“A silly question, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.” An awkward silence began to hang about the two, like a thick cloud obscuring them from each other. Henry decided that, after a start like that, he might as well say something else stupid. “Florence?”

“Yes, Henry?”

“I think you’re beautiful.”

She paused a moment, and her face became unreadable to Henry. “Thank you.”

Everything tumbled from Henry’s mouth at once. “I’m leaving tomorrow morning. On a truck to Virginia. There’s a coal mine that’s hiring in Pennsylvania.”

Another pause. “I see. Why does this matter to me? I assume you didn’t ask me to walk with you for you to tell me that I’m beautiful and then leave.” The two had finally reached the old, run down wooden barn, and they stopped.

Henry locked eyes with Florence for a moment. “No, I don’t suppose I did ask you to walk with me for just that... Come with me. Leave with me. I could take care of you. Better than what’s out here for you.”

Florence gave Henry a wry smile. “I don’t think I want to do that. I can’t just leave my family here. What if the drought breaks? There’s too

many what ifs.”

Henry nodded silently and stared down at his feet. He could feel her blue eyes boring into his forehead. His heart was racing in fear and dejection, and he could feel his face become red and warm with shame, as if a teapot were boiling over. He closed his eyes and imagined a crowd seated before a stage. The monologue he was reciting in his mind of was overshadowed by the booing and jeering for his poor performance. His inner heckling kept him from noticing that Florence had taken his hand, and had leaned in close to whisper into his ear.

“I won’t spend my life with you in Pennsylvania. But... perhaps we could spend the night together. Just one night?”

That night, Henry and Florence made love in the barn. The world around them had stood still, and even the old musty hay and the skittering mice did not divert their attentions. Their eyes were locked together the entire time, and their hearts were beating like war drums, a harbinger of chaos and passion. When it was over, they had held each other and whispered about what they wanted from life. She laughed when he told her that he wanted to become an actor, and he had frowned slightly when she said that she just wanted to at least live long enough see it rain again.

Henry never spoke of what they had done to anyone, and he would always remember in his later years that his night with Florence was unlike any other experience he had had with women. He had no way of knowing that night that after he left the camp, he would see Florence only once more.

The next morning, after hurrying to dress and pack his few belongings, including the worn copy of *Macbeth*, into his canvas rucksack, he stood out at the end of the long dirt road leading to the worker’s camp. The giant Ford trucks were parked, and some folks were already loading some items onto the backs. Henry tapped the shoulder of a middle aged woman whose name he had forgotten, to ask which truck was going where, and she pointed to the truck going to Virginia, where she was going.

Henry reached into his bag and pulled out the job notice and the talkie flier he had used as a bookmark. He wanted to walk to a truck, any truck, but his feet kept him anchored to the dirt, as if God himself had commanded him to stay put. He saw Bud and Florence off in the distance, at the camp, going about their daily routines. Nothing was changing for them. But for Henry, the world was opening itself up to him, all he had to do was to pick which way to go. The job notice exuded the promise of certain money, something he had not had in a long time. The talkie flier, however, was but a brilliant light to blind the viewer to just how much of a shithole they were

waiting to die in.

The last passenger had loaded onto the trucks, and Henry was the only one not on a truck. The driver from the east-bound truck got out of the cab. "Hey, jackass, are ya getting in or what?"

Henry stared at the job flier, crumpling it into a ball and muttering "I don't think I want to do this." He waved the eastward bound driver on. Disdaining fortune, he ran to the westward bound truck, threw his bag in, and jumping into the truck bed after it.

On Walking Past a Lamp Post
on King Street

Paul Deichmann

Everything around me is moving
I think. But I am
and the post is not and
what if we always move
around what we'll never touch. Moths
mistake it for the moon
and fly into the moon until death. You
in the desert will march an imperceptible circle
because we all have uneven legs. Maybe
forward motion is a myth. I am looking for
my circle and it's center. If you have ever searched
for spare change to buy a coffee
a bad coffee from across the street
you know something of mental poverty
and aimlessness. Maybe
progress is repetition, the way the ultimate down is the direction
the earth is falling.

Black Widow

Madelyn Moyer-Keehn

The first things that Rhiannon saw upon entering the glass doors of the Baltimore Convention Center were the masses of people with vividly colored hair. Everything was a blur of pink, blue, green, orange. Colors surrounded her in every direction. Each wig was tailored perfectly into mermaid waves and dramatic spikes with enough hairspray that the scent lingered and mingled with that of sweat and greasy food. There was barely room to push her way through to the stairs narrowly avoiding bumping into the caked on layers of colored makeup on cosplayers' arms. Her own costume, Black Widow, would be ruined if the thick oily makeup got on its black spandex. She continued up the stairs to the first floor of the building carrying a map of the building and a schedule of events highlighted in order of importance. Rhiannon had spent months sewing her costume, searching for the right shade and style of wig, and putting hours of overtime in at work to afford travelling to the biggest anime convention on the East Coast. A man dressed as Sailor Moon, revealing his unshaved legs below his short pleated skirt, slammed into her and glared. *This isn't what I expected*, she thought to herself, *but I'm here and I know damn well that I'll make this worthwhile.*

Rhiannon's planning started five months earlier when she and her long-term boyfriend Jeremy were living together in a quiet suburban town in New Jersey. Within a few months the two had formed a weekly schedule of sitting down and watching a show together, and for three years they stood by it. They strictly followed the unspoken rules: don't schedule over TV night. Don't watch ahead. Don't invite anyone to TV night. Punishable by death, they'd joked. The nights spent cuddled together under a fleece blanket on their hand-me-down couch were ones that made long days working as a manager at Wegman's bearable for Rhiannon. Once they started a series, even if it sucked, they kept with it every week until the season ended. Or until it got cancelled, which usually happened first. It was almost exclusively anime series and they made a pact to go to a convention together once they could afford it. Rhiannon's promotion gave her that chance to go together, even if Jeremy only worked weekends at a movie theater. He said time and time again that he was searching for a job, or that he had just applied, or he just showed her the stack of job ads cut out of the newspaper. They piled up on his desk and would conspicuously appear in his little metal trashcan every Sunday night.

When she came home one Thursday in May for TV night Jeremy's car was missing from the driveway and the windows were dark. Even the living room, where he was usually perched on the couch anxiously waiting for her, wasn't lit. The neighborhood was eerily quiet and her apprehension grew with every ring of the phone against her ear. He didn't pick up and an hour later when the episode ended he still hadn't returned her call. She fell asleep on the couch with her face against the screen of her phone and awoke in the morning to find Jeremy passed out in their bed. His tall lean body stretched across the bed taking up most of the space. Her brown eyes stung and her blonde hair was damp and plastered across her face. She peeled it off of her pale cheeks with one hand while rubbing smudged eyeliner from under her green eyes. Rhiannon, still groggy from exhaustion and concern, crawled into bed and rubbed her fingers through his dark hair. She wrapped her slender arms around him and snuggled in close. She was almost his height, but curled up beside him, she felt so small. The smell of beer and an unfamiliar perfume drifted towards her. She dropped her hand, disgusted. His green eyes snapped open and he sat up, the bed creaking beneath him. Their eyes met, her heart thudded in her chest, and her breath caught in her throat as if she was choking. Her brain throbbed in her head and her muscles tightened.

"Where were you last night?" Rhiannon asked, trying to hold back the shaking from her voice.

"Out," Jeremy replied. His eyes flicked away from hers, staring up past her towards the ceiling.

"I'm serious, Jeremy, I called you for hours. I stayed up most of the night waiting for you to come home. What happened?"

He shrugged. "What's it matter to you?"

Coldness spread through her body and Rhiannon's eyes filled with tears. "Why would you even ask that?" Her voice came out stern but her stomach was twisting.

"Because you don't seem to care about me anymore. If I hadn't stayed out last night you wouldn't have even realized anything was wrong. But since I wasn't here you called me and you missed me and now you want to fix the problem," Jeremy said flatly.

She stood up and shook her head, "What problem, Jeremy, I don't even know what you're talking about."

“And that’s the problem. You don’t even realize that there is a problem. That’s why you don’t care,” he said as he pointed at Rhiannon.

Her head felt like it was spinning. She struggled to remain standing and steadied herself on the bedpost. Rhiannon took a deep breath in and held it for as long as she could before exhaling and pulling her hands through her hair. She looked at Jeremy, but there was no love in his eyes or concern for their relationship. There was no emotion at all. His face was blank and his words were spoken as if he were conveying instructions not discussing a relationship.

His lips were in a tight line and he glared at Rhiannon as he started to speak again, “Even now you don’t understand what I mean, so why should I bother trying to explain it? If we can’t get on the same page after three years together, then it’s never happening.” He rose from the bed and began to pack his clothing into trash bags while avoiding eye contact with Rhiannon. She continued to ask him to stay, or to talk, or to explain himself, but eventually she realized that she wouldn’t get an answer, and Jeremy couldn’t be convinced. Over the past few months he had done this every so often. She would come home and he would sit slightly further away on the couch, or when she leaned in to kiss her he would lean the other way then laugh like it was an accident. Her hand would lie between them palm up, and his would be clutching his phone.

Rhiannon’s heart skipped a beat when she glimpsed a guy that resembled Jeremy holding hands with a Powerpuff girl, but when she looked again he was much thinner and taller than Jeremy. She shook her head and blinked it away. She adjusted the hem of her auburn wig and continued along to a dark room with a large projector showing episodes of a series she’d never heard of. Pieces of her blonde hair were sliding out from under it so she pulled it on tighter and tucked the hair back in. She sat in the back row and leaned back in the metal chair. Her hands were shaking and it felt like her stomach was twisting around. In the darkness she was glad that none of the other people in the room could see her. After a few minutes she fixated her eyes on the screen and tried to lose herself in the show that was on.

When the episode ended the people in the room began to disperse back into the hallway and she followed behind a group consisting of a Princess Bubblegum, Han Solo, and the Joker.

“I’m planning on going to some of the signings now so I can get in line,” Rhiannon overheard Han Solo saying. She listened, hoping they

wouldn't notice. But also hoping they would. She looked around the hallway and noticed that everyone was in clumps while she walked alone.

"You do that, but those lines are too intense for me. I'm about to go look for a few figures that I've been wanting to buy, where are you headed, Marvin?" Princess Bubblegum asked.

The Joker replied, "I'm just sticking around in the anime screenings. They have some good movies running today that I haven't seen yet."

Rhiannon followed along behind them and caught up to Princess Bubblegum when the group split up. She tapped her lightly on her shoulder and asked, "Can I tag along? It's my first year and I'm not entirely sure where I'm going."

The girl nodded and said, "Sure, it's always nice to have company. We pretty much always split the group up after the first few hours anyway. I'm Jessica, what's your name?"

"Rhiannon," she replied, "How many years have you been here?"

She laughed. "Five, but don't be too impressed. It doesn't get much easier. We might still get lost going to the Dealer's Room. Can I see that map?"

Rhiannon tapped on the glass of Jeremy's foggy car window, shivering and covered with layers of snowflakes. They shimmered in her hair, the only thing twinkling on an overcast day, and tickled her nose when they landed on her. He rolled down his window and leaned his head out.

"What do you need?" He asked. His voice was quick, and his eyes shifted to the numbers on the dashboard.

"I just wanted to say goodbye, silly, come on and kiss me," Rhiannon said with a smile. Her hair fell in through his window as she leaned forward to press her lips to his. After a quick kiss he leaned back in his seat.

"I'm going to be late for work."

"I wish you didn't have to go," she said, pouting.

Rhiannon handed her the map and glanced around them. The crowds seemed to be smaller now as more people were going to panels, but there were still clusters of people sitting in corners talking and taking pictures together. The outer walls of the building consisted of large glass panels. *I wonder what people think when they walk by and look over here. Do they even look long enough to realize how strange it is to see Ariel kissing Anakin Skywalker down the hall? Do they wonder what's going on or just laugh it off and keep walking?* Jessica pointed to a numbered square on the map and the

two navigated through the main lobby again and down to an escalator leading to the lowest floor of the building. There was a row of grey doors propped open with staff members conspicuously standing out in their bright blue t-shirts standing at the doors. They went through the first door and into an enormous room filled with rows of stands set up with piles of merchandise.

“Wow,” Rhiannon said softly.

“Cool, isn’t it?” Jessica said with a smile. “I remember my first time coming here. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe just how much stuff they had here, or how weird some of it is.”

They crossed through a few of the rows before they spoke again.

“Are you here alone?” Jessica asked.

Rhiannon nodded and answered, “Yep. Just me. You came here with those guys you were with earlier, right?”

“Mhm. Marvin, the Joker, and Gabe, the Han Solo. We went to high school together and live in the same hometown. We graduated a couple years back, but since we’re all home from college in the summer we always meet up to come back.”

“That must be nice,” Rhiannon said.

Jessica pulled a comic book from a box and shrugged as she flipped through it, “Sort of. But it’s kind of weird. I mean, we’ve all changed a lot in college, so we don’t spend as much time together here as we used to. We mostly just come together to save money now.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry,” Jessica continued, “I guess that was a little weird. I forgot for a second that this is your first con. If I get too personal just stop me, okay? With everyone liking the same stuff here, it can be easy to feel pretty close pretty fast, like we’re all old friends or something. But if that’s too weird just tell me, really.”

“No, no. It’s fine,” Rhiannon said, “I’m glad I found someone to hang out with here. I was pretty nervous about coming alone.”

“So you don’t have any friends interested in anime or anything?” Jessica asked.

“Only my ex-boyfriend, unfortunately.” Internally Rhiannon cringed. *You’ll look pathetic. Don’t lay it on too thick. She won’t want to talk to you.*

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Jessica said.

Rhiannon shrugged and spoke again, “It’s okay. It’s been a while. I’m over it.”

The two walked in silence and looked around while intermittently picking up pastel colored alpaca plush, faded comic books, and key chains of

characters they recognized. When they reached a case full of figures Jessica's eyes lit up. There were brightly colored Pokémon, various Survey Corps members from *Attack on Titan* in their khaki jackets, and rows upon rows of characters from series she didn't even recognize. Each was intricately detailed and included various props from the series they were from. She examined each choice, staring intently at a row of Sailor Scouts, and then picked up each box in the stand looking for the one with the most accurate paint and searching for minute damage to the figures. Rhiannon looked around at the people walking through and saw a mix of characters and people in everyday clothes stopping to chat and take pictures together. A tap on her shoulder startled her and she sat the box gently back on the table before turning around.

"Can I can your picture?" A boy in a grey striped shirt and an orange hat with cat ears, looking vaguely like Kyo from *Fruits Basket* was standing before her, smiling shyly.

"Sure," she said. Rhiannon, trying to get into character, attempted to pose like Scarlett Johansson. She could feel her face turning red. *This pose was a terrible idea.*

He took her picture and reached out to shake her hand. "Your costume is amazing. I'm so glad I ran into you! I saw you earlier and I've been trying to catch up with you ever since," he said quickly, panting in between.

Watching him bounce away, Rhiannon smiled to herself and pulled her shoulders back. She flipped her synthetic wig hair over her shoulder and tried to mimic a Black Widow sort of smirk. *I feel like a badass.* As she watched a group of Waldos, all clad in shades of red and white striped clothing, as they ended up in the same area and the surrounding people giddily pointed and shouted out, "He's the real Waldo!" "No, it's this one!" "It has to be this one!" She elbowed Jessica and pointed at the group. The two girls laughed together, dissipating the uncomfortable atmosphere that had settled after their earlier conversation.

Looking into his watch, Jeremy stared at the tiny black mark swirling around the numbers. It was a gift he received for their second anniversary from Rhiannon just a few months before. 7:00 pm, two hours before she got off of work. He checked his text messages, but the little green button was blank. No messages. He brushed his fingers through his hair and threw his feet up over the coffer table, knocking his slippers off in the process. While flipping through the channels, he checked his messages again. A red circle

appeared in the corner. One New Message.

Sydney

Hey Jeremy

Jeremy

Hey

Sydney

What r you up to?

Jeremy

Not much

Sydney

Can I come ovr?

Jeremy

No I dont think thats a good idea

Sydney

Y not?

Jeremy tossed his phone to the corner of the couch and groaned aloud. The remote fell to the floor with a loud crash, knocking the mute button. In the silence, Jeremy's ears rang and he could feel his heart's pounding pulse in his veins, under his skin, in his eardrums.

Stay away from her, Jeremy thought. His toe tapped on the floor, thudding against the wood. It echoed off the walls and back into his pounding ears. *You made a mistake*. He could hear the ticking of the watch. It was the loudest thing in the room. Tick. You fucked up. Tick. *She doesn't deserve this*. Tick. *This is your fault*. Tick. *Forget it happened*. His phone buzzed and vibrated the couch. Rhiannon's name popped up on the screen.

Rhiannon

Hey babe. On my way home.

He looked away again and back at his hands, staring at the jagged edges of his bitten down fingernails.

The crowd began to disappear and through a hole in it she glimpsed a man that resembled Jeremy again and froze, but shook it away and thought, *No, don't get yourself worked up over this again. You're having a good time. Jeremy isn't here*. Just as she was about to turn away, he locked eyes with her, and from across the room she could feel Jeremy's icy gaze. His dark

brown hair was left uncut since she last saw him, and it hung down over his thin shoulders. A white and red hat with a green check sat on the top. He held a plush of Pikachu and a Pokèball hung down from the belt hoop of his loose jeans. His cosplay was a loose interpretation, but it was clear that he was dressed as Ash Ketchum. Jessica turned back from the cash register and opened her bag to show Rhiannon what she had bought, noticing her distraction as she looked up from her bag.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Rhiannon shook her head slowly. She was still focused on the place that Jeremy had been standing moments before. After a minute of the uncomfortable stare down he had turned and walked in the opposite direction. Self-consciously she adjusted her wig and wiped her fingers under her eyes to remove any smeared makeup.

“Was that the guy?” Jessica asked as she led her into a different row.

“Yeah, that was Jeremy. I can’t believe he’s here.” Rhiannon said quietly.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. You look like you could use some fresh air.”

“Jeremy, hey, it’s Rhi. I might be home a little late tonight, okay? I have to stay late and help with some issues here. Someone messed up their hours and the HR department couldn’t figure out how to fix it.”

Jeremy looked down at his phone and a voicemail popped up on his phone. He pressed it and the message started to play, he hung up and deleted it, leaning back on the couch with the TV on. *Why listen when the message is always the same*, he thought, *she stays late every night. Surprise. Surprise.* He pushed through his missed calls and pressed a number that he had engrained in his memory.

“Sydney?”

“Yes?” a girl’s voice answered.

“I’m alone here for a while, wanna swing by?” Jeremy asked.

“Sure,” she said back, “See you soon, babe.”

Rhiannon and Jessica pushed through the doors and walked out into the sweltering heat. Rhiannon expected to feel relief when she walked out the doors, but instead the overwhelming humidity pressed in all around her. Even outside the Convention Center there were swarms of people of all ages in costume. They walked toward the Baltimore Harbor and Rhiannon began to feel better. When they reached the Amphitheatre they sat down amidst

convention goers and families visiting the harbor, the latter exchanging odd looks as they looked over at the costumed women.

“If you want to talk about it, I’m here to listen,” Jessica offered.

“There isn’t much to talk about,” Rhiannon answered, “When I started working more he got jealous and suspicious. I tried to tell him I was saving up for us to go to Otakon, but he didn’t believe me. He didn’t explain why, he just said that it seemed like I didn’t care, and without answering any of my questions, he left.”

“Oh, geez, I’m sorry,” She said, “That’s so weird. You haven’t heard anything from him since? Not even a phone call or anything?”

“Nope. That was it. I tried leaving him a few messages after he left, but he never answered his phone, so I stopped trying. The night he left he smelled like booze and perfume though, and I’ll never forget how it stuck to the sheets after he left.”

“You’re better off without him then. You can spend your weekend hanging out with us, if you want, we’ll show you a good time,” Jessica said.

Rhiannon’s hands twisted together and she waited anxiously on her couch to listen for a knock at the door. She and Jeremy had been together for a few months, but they usually went to friends’ parties together, went to dinner, or saw a movie together. Her new apartment felt empty and quiet without the stomping and pawing of children and dogs as she was accustomed to when she lived with her friend Alex and her husband, Bill. Once they announced that they were having their third kid she decided it was time to move into her own apartment. Rhiannon turned the television on and pulled a thick wool blanket around her shoulders. Her short blond hair tickled against her collarbone when she leaned forward for the remote. Three short knocks at the door pulled her up off of the couch and she let Jeremy in. It was drizzling out and his usually dark brown hair looked black. She smiled and greeted him with a kiss and hung his damp jacket on the doorknob.

“Do you need anything? Are you thirsty? Hungry?” she asked.

“Nope, I’m good,” Jeremy said back with a grin.

She sat down beside him and he wrapped his arm tight around her shoulder, pulling her close to his side. Rhiannon felt warm and comfortable, even against his damp clothing she could feel the heat of his body through his thin grey t-shirt. Jeremy leaned over and kissed her on the forehead and Rhiannon’s heart skipped a beat.

“What do you want to watch?” she asked.

Jeremy shrugged and reached across her for the remote the smell of

his cologne and Pantene shampoo was intoxicating. He flipped through the channels and landed on the *Science Fiction* channel, which was showing a made for TV movie about tarantulas the size of Grizzly bears attacking suburban neighborhoods. The spiders' jerky movements were slow and deliberate, but the people ran and tumbled on their sidewalks laying long enough for the spiders to sidle over and eat them. She locked eyes with Jeremy and then he brought one hand up to his mouth, mimicking the spiders' fangs, and pretended to lean down and eat her head. They laughed and tickled and laughed some more, falling onto the floor and pulling each other closer.

Rhiannon and Jessica exchanged phone numbers and separated for dinner. Although she could have joined them for dinner, it still felt to her like it was intruding, so she told them she needed the time alone to go back to her hotel and relax. She went into the mall and grabbed a hamburger from McDonald's, no mayo, and extra pickles. She searched through the crowded food court for an open seat at an empty table, but they were all full to capacity. Looking around at all of the people she tried to imagine how it would have been to be there with Jeremy. She pictured the two of them, herself still in her Black Widow costume and him in his Ash costume, sitting down together in the Convention Center watching people pass by. They'd laugh when a particularly funny Deadpool would walk by, or smile when a little girl dressed as Elsa flounced about. Walking to the terrace, she saw Jeremy sitting alone outside. Her appetite vanished and the smell of her greasy fast food became sickening. She snapped out of her internal scenario and locked her eyes on him. *It's not worth it. Don't do it.* She thought. *But it's been so long, maybe there was a misunderstanding, there had to have been. I just need an answer.* She bounced back and forth, still inside the building, and decided to go outside. *Everything that happened, all of the miscommunications, all of the arguments, all of the suspicion had to be for a reason.* She adjusted her costume, opened the doors, and sat down across from him.

"Hello, Jeremy," she said, shocked at the forcefulness of her own voice.

"Hey, Rhiannon," he responded.

She paused, not sure where to go next, not sure what she even wanted to ask him anymore. *This was a bad idea. It was a terrible one, actually, the worst idea.* She opened her paper bag and pulled out her burger. He stared at her, but she kept her eyes down on her food for a few moments

before looking up. *You can do it.* Rhiannon sat still for a moment, trying to gather composure, and looked up at Jeremy. She stared straight into his eyes and sat her food on the table.

"I'm surprised to see you here," he said.

"Me too," she replied curtly. Her body shook with adrenaline. She felt strong, she felt powerful, and she felt like she could do anything.

"You look like you're doing well," he went on, "I never thought you'd go for Black Widow." He made the spider teeth motion at her and she stood up. She stopped chewing, stopped breathing, time stopped altogether. The beats of her heart went so fast that they tripped over each other, like they were running, running from him, running from the situation, from her feelings. She considered doing the same. It would be so easy to turn and run the other way, but she stood facing him and didn't move.

"I have to go, Jeremy," she announced.

Jeremy looked up, "See you around."

"No. You're not off the hook. Not like that."

Jeremy leaned back, startled, and blinked a few times before responding, "What do you mean?"

"It wasn't me. I know I wasn't the problem. I figured it all out, and you can't make me feel like this was my fault anymore. I'm not running back. I'm not apologizing. I'm not pretending to be a perfect little mouse for you anymore. You screwed this up, not me," she spoke quietly, but forcefully, giving each word like a punch. His mouth fell open, his eyes opened wide, and he stayed silent.

Rhiannon grabbed her food off of the table, took a bite from her burger, and walked back into the mall feeling happier than she had in years.

Underground

Madeyn Moyer-Keehn

From under the floorboards she could hear the creaking of the footsteps above her. A voice echoed through the house, "Annabelle, where are you?" Her heart raced and she clutched a faded blue elephant to her chest and a blanket around her shoulders. She had found the hiding place once while playing with a friend. Its edges were noticeable only when she lay down on the floor looked at the lines in the wood. Her tiny knees were becoming sore on the damp, cold floor of the hole. The footsteps left the room, but Annabelle wrapped herself tighter in the thick fleece of the blanket. Distantly, she heard the woman's voice again, "Please, come out, Annabelle." Sweat dripped from her forehead and down her face, landing on her worn out overalls. Through cracks in the floor, she could see the light coming from her room and a small portion of its light blue ceiling. She leaned back and closed her eyes until a sudden flash of light shined through. Her mother reached into what was once a hiding place from the Underground Railroad, but had become a long forgotten oddity under a rug, and pulled Annabelle out. Her mother's eyes stared menacingly into her own, "Don't you ever do that again, Annabelle." Annabelle rolled her elephant up into the blanket and dropped them both back in, quietly saying, "Be safe down there."

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