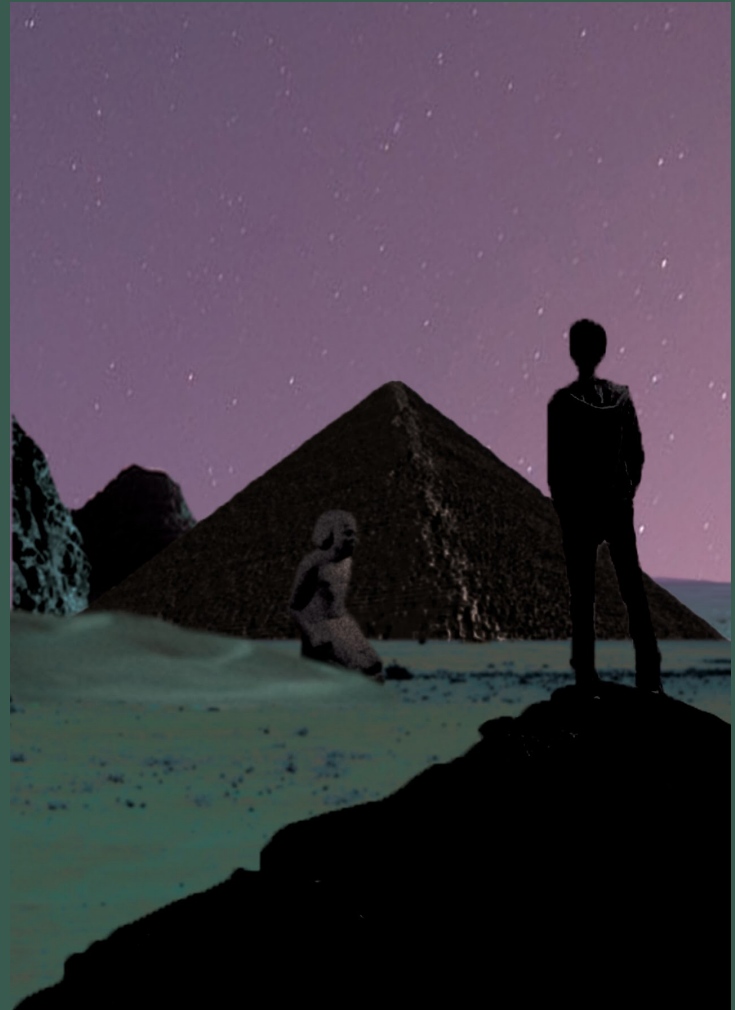


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Prose Spawning Pool 2020

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SpawningPool
Chapbook

Prose

Spring 2020

Shippensburg University

Spawning Pool is a literary arts chapbook published at Shippensburg University by a small and dedicated team of undergraduate students. It is composed of prose pieces submitted by undergraduate students of the university.

Spawning Pool accepts rolling submissions throughout the year, and we publish our chapbook every Spring semester. Spawning Pool is a publication of *The Reflector*, which also accepts submissions year-round, and is compiled each Fall semester.

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-Trent Betham

Charlotte Goes for a Run

Charlotte was getting fat. The scale said she'd only gained six pounds, but there was a roll around her waist that hadn't been there before, and when she'd gone home for Thanksgiving break, her dad had asked her if she'd been working out. When she said no, he glanced at her mom. They went on a Thanksgiving Day hike and her thighs ached through the whole dinner afterward. She had two helpings and was generous with the gravy.

The afternoon she returned to Pittsburgh from break, Charlotte put on her running shoes and tugged a rain jacket over her sweatshirt. The jacket said "Captain" and had Forrester School plastered across the back. Charlotte had played three varsity sports in high school and they gave her an award for it at graduation. They also gave her an award for English and another for her contributions to the peer tutoring program. She had a boyfriend, too. His name was Jamie. They dated for three years and he played football. He wasn't very good, but he still got angry when they lost.

When she looked in the mirror she thought she looked almost the same. Her butt jiggled, though.

She locked her apartment door and passed a young couple in the stairwell. They looked a few years older than her and were carrying groceries. Charlotte gave them the close-lipped smile she gave to strangers and people who smoked a lot of weed. Her sneakers squeaked on the stairs. They were bright yellow, expensive. Her best friend Lucy had given them to her for her twentieth birthday. Lucy was in a sorority at UNC and she sometimes took days to respond to

Charlotte's texts. Charlotte kept the sneakers in the original box.

It was drizzling and chilly and Charlotte did some stretches. She couldn't reach her toes. A bus roared by and she jumped. She thought about going to the movies but started running instead.

At the intersection of Wightman and Forbes she had to stop while the light was red. She jogged in place, feeling stupid. Across the street a blond woman with a high pony tail was doing the same thing. Her butt didn't jiggle. When the light turned green, Charlotte ran as fast as she could. She crossed the blond woman in the middle but was out of breath when she got to the other side. She looked back and saw the pony tail slip around the corner.

Charlotte turned up her music as she faced the first big hill. "Someday Never Comes" by Credence Clearwater Revival. Her dad's favorite band. She tried to watch the ground in front of her so she wouldn't think about how much further she had to go. When she looked up, she felt sure she wasn't moving at all, sure that the top was in fact stretching further away from her with each step.

Fuck this, she thought, I want to walk I want to walk I want to walk.

Fuck you, she thought back, It's just a stupid hill.

So she kept moving, although at a pace that would offend her high school track coach. Her hair was wet with mist and sweat and she regretted wearing the heat-trapping rain jacket. She could feel the dampness on her inner arm and for some reason this made her squirm. She was certain she'd never sweat there before. It felt greasy and gross, like

she was sweating out the pizza she'd ate last night, all four slices oozing out of the space between her forearm and bicep.

Charlotte started walking before she reached the top of the hill. She could hear how heavy she was breathing even through the music in her ears. She opened her running app to see how far she'd gone and almost threw her phone at the nearest tree. Only half a mile. Half a mile and she felt like she couldn't run another step.

Walk, then.

And so she walked.

As she walked, she passed one big, beautiful house after another and remembered why she'd moved to this neighborhood in the first place. It was unusual for an undergrad to live here and not South Oakland, which was closer to the university and the house parties. Charlotte was drawn to Squirrel Hill instead, a short bus ride away from campus and a neighborhood of odd combinations – old money and Orthodox Jews, haggard-looking grad students and shy immigrant families with ties to the universities. It shouldn't work, but it did – grand old houses on the same block as graduate apartment buildings, Presbyterian churches across the street from Jewish Community Centers, Gyro places and Thai restaurants, kindergartens beside retirement homes.

She loved it here – or, she wanted to. She walked past a family-owned foods store she had always meant to enter. “Since 1948!” read the proud sign by the door. Briefly, she told herself that today was the day – she slowed her pace and thought about how she would walk right in, make small talk with the cashier, buy a cold drink or maybe a fresh deli

sandwich. She watched as a white-haired man pulled up in a Volvo, parallel parked with ease. He got out, reusable bag in hand, and strode toward the OPEN sign. Charlotte could have followed him in, slipped through the door behind him and into the nearest aisle, taken refuge among the canned vegetables and corn starch. But she kept walking, staring at the entrance and wondering what it was like inside, thinking that it wasn't hers to know and probably never would be.

She wasn't supposed to be here. She didn't know where she was supposed to be.

She figured she should start running again, but was nearing a busy street with plenty of people to gape at her slow, puffy appearance, so she hung a left and plunged deeper into the world of houses she would never live in. She ran, thighs aching with each step, calves burning, knees cramping, entire legs begging her to stop.

Charlotte tried to remember when, exactly, she had stopped working out. She had been pretty good about it freshman year. Her dorm at Pitt had a small gym on the third floor and she would use the elliptical machine for twenty minutes every other day before showering and heading to class. But something about her second year in Pittsburgh had thrown her off course. Her days revolved around work and school and commuting to work and school. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she folded t-shirts and arranged sock displays at the Banana Republic on Walnut Street. On Tuesdays and Thursdays she sat in classrooms for hours on end, not learning much of anything. Weekends were for double shifts and homework. In between, she sat on buses and ate buttered noodles for dinner.

All that changes today, she thought, and imagined how in a few months' time she would be herself again, fit and self-assured. She would exercise regularly, start a blog, earn money from sponsorships, kiss overbearing managers and seasonal displays goodbye, become the English department darling, make friends, and go out on Friday nights. She would be popular and sooo busy and maybe find a new boyfriend, someone she met through one of her new friends, a confident athlete-type who fell in love with Charlotte the moment he met her. She imagined her Instagram feed, filled with pictures of nights out with friends and day dates to Phipps Conservatory, Pirates games, hip new coffee shops on the Southside. She would eat out more, order in less, and blog readers would beg her for recommendations. She and her new boyfriend would run into fans on the street. She might even start vlogging.

Charlotte ran, ignoring her screaming legs and relishing in this imaginary future, the kind of future where maybe she would live in one of these houses one day, because her boyfriend was in finance and she was a famous writer. They had four kids – three with blonde hair and one ginger, even though Charlotte had dark hair and olive skin. Charlotte's boyfriend-now-husband built her a huge library with a mahogany desk where she wrote her bestsellers. The kids were well-behaved and they were all sports stars, except the youngest, who was a certifiable genius. Charlotte was president of the local arts council and ran the youth soccer club and the whole family ate dinner together every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday night, gourmet dinners cooked from ingredients she bought at that damned family-owned grocery

store (Since 1948!).

A beat-up Jeep drove by and honked twice at Charlotte, sleazy driver with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, and she suddenly remembered that she was not some fabulous writer with a fabulous family and a fabulous house but a tired, lonely college sophomore with no friends and a roommate who brought home forty-year-old men she'd met online. She stopped running.

It was not always like this. Charlotte thought about senior year of high school, days spent going from classes to practices to club meetings, sneaking in time with Jamie after lunch and on weekends. He wore salmon-colored t-shirts and looked at her like she was the most wonderful thing in the world.

When they broke up, they both promised it wouldn't be forever. She drove all the way to upstate New York in February, carefully easing her Jetta through miles of snow and ice, thinking about what she would say the entire time. His roommate was gone for the weekend and they lay in Jamie's extra-long twin bed for three hours, talking about where they'd been, where they were now, where they might one day be. Afterwards, they went to the movies. Charlotte held his pinky the entire time, sad but sure. A month passed, then two, then six. It was nearly a year later and she was waiting for him to call.

"Hi Charlotte, I've learned a lot and so have you. I miss being with you. I'm coming to Pittsburgh to get you back."

Or maybe he wouldn't call her at all, just show up at her apartment one day. Her breath would catch as she spied

him through the peephole. She'd open the door with a "long time no see" or "look what the cat dragged in" or maybe just a shocked "what are you doing here?" – she'd work out the exact line later. He'd say he was sorry and so would she. She could see the Instagram post in her head: Jamie's arms around her waist, goofy smiles on both their faces. We're back, bitches, the caption would read, and their high school friends would rejoice in the comments. Screw the imaginary new boyfriend, Jamie would be back. He would build her the library with the mahogany desk. The four kids she had been picturing obviously looked just like Jamie, had his blue eyes and freckles. How did she not see it before?

The song in her ears was one he had shown her. She picked up her pace as she walked to its beat. Yes, yes, this future was much better than her blogger/vlogger/writer fame. It was the future she had envisioned a thousand times over three years, one with sleepy Saturdays and trips to the lake with Jamie's family. They had a big wedding and Jamie had tears in his eyes when she walked down the aisle. They sent their kids to their old prep school and Jamie worked for the Penguins. They laughed about the time they spent apart. It was good, they told each other, but we could never be apart for long. "Remember how unhappy I was then?" Charlotte would shake her head. "Thank God I got over that!" Jamie would grin and kiss her forehead.

Except Charlotte hadn't changed since the day she drove to break up with him. She still skipped classes and fell asleep to Netflix every night. Jamie posted pictures with his new girlfriend and Charlotte distracted herself with Cheetos and online shopping.

Future Charlotte was happy, past Charlotte was happy, present Charlotte wanted to hurl herself out a ten-story window.

This thought made her run again, and this time she sprinted. She bounded by the big houses, swept past a woman pushing a stroller with what was surely a palpable gust of wind, and she was a track star again, about to break her record for the 400 meter, leaving everything behind but the road in front of her, forgetting, for just one, lovely moment, her very self. She was not flying but gliding, an eagle in the wind, and it was only forward motion. She would run herself right into that glorious future if it took everything she had.

Forty-two seconds and her body gave up. She stopped, breath heavy but faint endorphins tickling the tips of her fingers. I am not okay but I will be okay, a little voice told her. I know I will be okay because I can still run like that, even if for only a minute.

She reached the main street of the neighborhood and her phone buzzed. She had finally finished one mile. It took her sixteen minutes, but she didn't care. She could once run a mile in seven minutes, and one day she would again. She just had to keep trying.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and Forbes Avenue was bustling despite the mistiness. Charlotte glanced into each shop window as she passed. Inside Dunkin', two mothers sat by the fireplace with their toddlers, sipping hot coffees and talking with their hands. The bagel shop two doors down was empty save for a grumpy-looking teenage employee behind the counter and an equally grumpy-looking old man by the window, judging his newspaper with a furrowed brow.

Next door, the owner of the bookstore smoked a cigarette in front of his shop, legs crossed in a blue Adirondack chair. He pushed his long gray hair out of his face and nodded at Charlotte as she walked by.

She waited at the intersection of Forbes and Murray, watched a bus screech to a stop across the street, people pouring out and bounding off in different directions, quickly, quickly, heads down, bags held at the shoulder, off to the next meeting, to work, maybe to home. The light changed and Charlotte crossed the street, joining the little throng and thinking that there was something nice about being part of a crowd of people living their lives, day in and day out, riding buses and walking through mist, inhabiting this city which somehow still held onto the rhythm of its long-ago steel days.

Outside the Number 10 Café, the man with dreadlocks was selling his CDs again. Charlotte had seen him many times in and around the coffee shop, watched enviously as he made friendly conversation with the owner behind the counter while she sat in a back corner with her laptop. She had never spoken to the dreadlocked man. He belonged; she didn't. But he smiled as he saw her approaching, smiled like he knew her.

“How are you today, my girl?” he asked. Charlotte glanced behind her, thinking he must be addressing someone else. No one was there.

“Fine, thanks,” she said. “How are you?”

“Darling, I'm wonderful. Look at this drizzle – my CDs are glistening, just like you. Have you been running?”

Charlotte nodded.

“Go in and get yourself something to drink. Reward

yourself for that hard work. My music is playing inside – lots of empty tables just waiting for you to sit and enjoy!”

Charlotte made a noise somewhere between a laugh and yelp as Dreadlocks nudged her through the door. The café’s red and blue tables and warm yellow lights were a contrast to the endless gray outside. A baggy-eyed young customer glanced at her briefly before turning back to his textbook. There was no one at the counter.

The middle-aged owner emerged from behind a curtain at the sound of the doorbell. He pushed his glasses up his nose and stood at the register, unsmiling.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi,” she said. “How are you?”

“I’m alive,” he said, “And you?”

“Same,” she said, “barely.”

Charlotte laughed, meaning it as a joke, but he nodded gravely, as if he could hardly believe they were both standing upright, holding this conversation across jars of stale cookies and CASH ONLY signs.

“What’ll it be?”

She ordered a cappuccino like always, tipping him her change plus a dollar extra, hoping this would make him like her more and that one day they might talk like he did with Dreadlocks, easy-breezy, no awkward jokes. She wondered if her interaction with Dreadlocks was a fluke – he probably didn’t recognize her, was just being friendly. He was selling something, after all. The owner didn’t know her either – no one did. No one but her roommate and manager at work. When she passed classmates on the street in Oakland they stared down at their phones.

Charlotte watched Dreadlocks greet a man outside with a clap on the back, gesturing to his CDs. She pushed her drink aside. When she got home, she would leave her running shoes by the door and make buttered noodles for dinner. Tomorrow, she would try again.

By Emily Schoenberger

An Aardvark and My Sister

An aardvark is medium-sized. But she might have a different opinion about that. She burrows underground at night eating all kinds of bugs with her long pig-like snout. But in the morning you can see her walking along the southern path. She mostly creates burrows in which to live and have children. Her creation is also made for shutting herself away from predators such as lions, leopards, cheetahs, hunting dogs, hyenas, and pythons. Which makes her seem rather quiet. However, she has been known to softly grunt while she eats as well as loudly as she makes her entrance.

My sister and an aardvark have a lot in common. They are both medium-sized. But might have different opinions about that. My sister buries herself at night taking all kinds of drugs with her nose, mouth, and arm. But when the sun rises she can miraculously walk a straight line even though some say it's downward. She mostly digs these graves for herself because she wants to imagine what it would have been like to actually live and to have kids. Her holes made it harder for strong people to get a hold of her trying to get off her crack and or cocaine addictions. Her bottomless pits made it harder for skilled people to revive her as she overdoses on painkillers. The shallow ditch within her made it difficult for quick thinkers to get professional help when she needed it most. And even though she got through it all. Her deepest and darkest trench still lets men that only want that one thing in. The cavities spreading throughout her body still lets people take what is hers and hers alone. The crater consuming her soul is the snake in the grass. So this girl just stays quiet.

Only making soft grunts while she eats struggling to find her grand entrance.

So the aardvark comes out of her burrow and begins to walk the southern path. She walked along until she stumbles upon my sister who also notices the aardvark right away. As both my sister and an aardvark stare at each other surrounded by long strands of dry grass they start to hear roars, growls, and hisses of lions, leopards, cheetahs, hunting dogs, hyenas, and pythons. They both looked terrified as they don't know which beast is going to strike first. But in an instance, the aardvark disappears underground leaving this girl all alone with some of the most dangerous animals on the planet.

As the creatures are about to close in my sister starts to get flashbacks of her younger days. Her twelfth birthday party which she was gifted tickets to see Mariah Carey, graduating high school, and going to college. Then seeing the dark times from first snorting cocaine and a frat party, getting sent to the hospital because of a pill overdose, being put in rehab because of her heroin addiction. Reliving all of this trauma causes her to have a breakdown in tears promising herself and everyone that if she gets another chance she will do better so the cave in her heart can be filled. And with seconds to spare as each predator begins to pounce my sister screams to the top of her lungs, closing her eyes tightly and clenching her fist. Everything stops suddenly as she hears a faint beep of a monitor get louder and louder. She opens her eyes to see that she is in a hospital bed. Frantically moving around a nurse comes to check on her. The nurse tells my sister that she's been in rehab for four weeks, has had the same dream,

and that there is nothing to worry about you're safe. As my sister gives a sigh of relief and stares at the white ceiling fan she turns to her left to look out the window. And just past the thin short grass is an aardvark walking with her children. This makes my sister smile and cry tears of joy knowing that finally, she has found her grand entrance.

By Bruce Washington

Jonesy

As usual, I had no idea why I was in such a foul mood after work. The new boss, Grant, was an asshole who thought he could tell me how to do the job I'd been working for a decade. Ten hours, ten hours in a hot sawmill while the high, reedy pitch of his voice married the whine of the saws, drilling my skull from the inside out. Receiving dental work would have been a more pleasurable pastime. My brain, which felt as though it had decided to bounce around my head like a tennis ball, had barely retained enough energy to drive my '05 Dodge Dakota home.

With my forehead pressed to the steering wheel, I twisted my face into a sort of grimace, trying to psych myself into a grin. I sat there, trying to stretch the face of Grant's millworker "Jonesy" into that of Jake's husband "Xavier" or even Katie's "Papa". I straightened my neck and looked in the rearview mirror.

I saw my eyes, gray-green and saddled with pouches of sleepless nights underneath. Jake had always loved my eyes. In the photos from our honeymoon they tended towards a lime green, matching the plastic lei that Jake had insisted on wearing that entire trip. I stared into my own eyes harder, trying to bring back that sparkle. Xavier's eyes had sparkled, but Jonesy's eyes were bloodshot, with slight pink impressions left around them from his safety goggles. My hair, once thick and black as oil, had apparently lost a war with my eyebrows. It was currently making a strategic retreat towards the back of my scalp. Meanwhile, my victorious eyebrows grew bushier and the wrinkles trenched in the no

man's land of my forehead grew deeper.

I remembered two-year-old Katie pulling on my hair, perhaps ripping a chunk out and starting the irreversible tide of baldness. She'd been doing so as Jake and I sat in the social workers' office getting ready to accept custody of our little foster daughter. Countless piggyback rides, playtimes where "salon" was the game of choice... Katie had done a number on her Papa's hair. Now I sat, parked on top of her hopscotch drawing on the driveway, with sweat and sawdust in his remaining hair.

Frowning at myself in the mirror, I decided that there was no way I could put Jonesy away for the night. No way to pretend that the shift wasn't sitting on my shoulders like a rock, breaking my heart and stooping my spine. Or that I couldn't feel ten years' worth of sawdust rattling around in my lungs with every breath.

I reached out and pulled my keys from the ignition. A simple engraved keychain hung next to the Dodge key.

XAVIER JONES, it proclaimed on one side in big silver writing.

On the reverse, they had engraved a simple two-line note.

Papa- Happy Father's Day 2014

Love, Katie and Jake

My grip tightened on the keychain, and as I left the truck and started walking towards the front door of my home, I felt Jonesy melting away.

by Ryley Flanagan

Emergency Room

The ticking of the clock, and the faint murmur of Criminal Minds on the tv are the only sounds that can be heard in the room. The seconds feel like eternities. The room has lots of chairs, but I am the only one here. I look back and forth between the doors. The one that I came in through, and the ones my parents went through a while ago.

I check the time and realize it has only been half an hour since my parents went back. It feels like I have been here for three hours. I sniffle and grab a few tissues from the box on the table. Is she ok? Is she even alive? What happened to her? Why hasn't someone come to get me yet? Have they forgotten that I am even out here? The tears start pouring out of my eyes and I can't take the anxiety of not knowing. I jump up out of my chair and look at the big doors one last time before heading back to the door that I came in through. I walk back up to the desk, where the nurse sits looking rather bored.

“Can I help you?” She asks.

“I was wondering if you could tell me the condition of a patient who is here in the ER? My parents went back to see her a while ago and I have been out here by myself waiting, I just wanna know how my sister is,” I explain.

“What is her name?” The nurse asks not looking up from the computer in front of her.

“Stephanie Gold,” I say, “She was brought in by ambulance about maybe an hour ago.”

“I have no update about her condition here. Sorry,” She says before going back to whatever she was doing. I

quietly thank her, before sniffing again and heading back to the waiting room. I sit back down on the awkwardly placed couch. I pull my feet up and sit sideways taking up the entire couch. No phone, no one to talk to. All I have is my fears racing through my head. The silence is almost suffocating me when the big doors open again.

“Ms. Gold?” A nurse asks and I jump out of my seat.

“How is my sister? Is she ok?” The words come tumbling out of my mouth.

“Your sister wants to see you.” She says with a gentle smile. I follow behind her until we reach a door that is cracked open. “Whenever you are ready.” She says before heading off to complete her next task. I take a deep breath before opening the door and seeing my parents sitting on one side of the bed, and my sister laying on the bed covered by a stack of blankets. I place my stuff on the floor by the door and walk over to her bed and grab her hand.

“You’re ok?” I ask her with tears in my eyes.

“I’m gonna be fine.” She says giving me a small smile. I squeeze her hand and smile back at her as all of my anxiety washes away. My big sister is ok, and that is all I need to know.

by Sam Goss

Gris

“She’s gone... I wish I was gone, too,” I whisper as tears well in my eyes. “I can’t stand being all by myself,” I continued quietly. “What should I do?” I said as I stared at the picture on my phone. I stared at it often. It was my screensaver after all. It helps keep the smile I loved so much in my memory. It’s been a year and details are getting a little fuzzy. Today is worse than yesterday. The tears won’t stop. All I can remember is the last day I got to hold her. The day red tears ran down her cheeks. She felt cold as ice. “God, I miss you...” I said softly as the tears trailed down my cheeks. Eyes burning, I blinked the tears away. Sniffing a little, I grabbed the bottle of pills on the nightstand opening it with shaking hands. Memories of another night like this flared through my mind. I promised I would never try again. She promised that she would never leave me. I guess we’re both liars.

“Forgive me...” I said quietly, looking once more at the picture. Before I could lose my nerve, I upended the bottle into my palm. Hand shaking, I shoveled the pills into my mouth. I choked as the little green pills clogged my airway. Gagging and gasping for breath I grabbed the bottle of Everclear 150 proof. I was going to go out with a bang. I took a long draught. The spirit burned my tongue, my throat. I was on fire.

With shaking hands, I took another long drink. Tears pricking my eyes as the spirit burned its way through me. It was an effort to keep the liquor down. My body revolting against the foreign invasion. I kept chugging until there was nothing left. Then I reached for another bottle. This one

went down easier than the last. It wasn't long before the room started spinning. The bottle slipped from between my sweaty fingers. Time stood still as the bottle shattered against the cool, gray linoleum. Shattered like my heart at 9am on a Friday. Within minutes, I was on the floor, too. My knees cracking as they hit the ground, glass tearing its way through my flesh. Then I was convulsing on the floor, black dress hiked up past my thighs. My arms flapping around like a fish out of water. It was finally over.

As consciousness left me, things started to get a little weird. The ground beneath me shattering. I was falling down a long pit, into the abyss. Was this hell? As I fell, I saw weird places in shades of blue, gray, yellow, green, and red. Square trees, and funny shaped bees. I fell forever. When I finally stopped, everything was in shades of gray.

I looked around in wonder, then fear, as the world begins to fall apart. Buildings are crumbling and shattered hands break from the ground like the skeletons of long-dead giants. Fearfully I take a step, then another, and then I'm off running through the new terrain. I make my way through buildings. Leaping onto the rafters of long forgotten buildings as I go. I didn't know when it happened but eventually my world turned from gray to red. Red like blood. I stopped in my tracks, remembering tears of blood, running like a river.

I began to tremble. I guess this really is hell. The thought hit me like a fierce gust of wind. Wait. I was being blown away by the wind. I screamed as the wind tore at my eyes, as I was tossed back in the direction from whence, I came. "I have to keep going," I said as I looked around at the broken terrain through slit black eyes. I took a step forward,

fighting against the raging tempest. This red world is fighting back. The wind howls loudly in my ears as another gust comes to knock me down.

Pushing forward, I realized I could change my body into a new shape. I could turn into a large block. With this newfound ability, I found the strength to weather the storm. I grit my teeth, pushing through the red haze. As I forced my way through, I saw a large black tower through slatted eyes. I worked slowly towards the top. The wind, a howling demon in my ears as I pushed onward. Relief flooded my body as I reached the top of the tower. Relief that was short-lived as a giant black bird swooped in, blocking my path. The bird let out a yell that shook the tower. The force shoved me back down the steep tower steps. I pushed forward, forcing myself into the shape of a block. It was hard, but I could resist the birds powerful voice. The bird took a step forward unleashing another ear-splitting scream. I glared, looking into its dark face. Its hateful eyes met my black ones. Something about its eyes cracked a hole inside my chest. So, I pushed back. Grunting with effort, I forced my way through. In a flash, the bird disappeared, and I was lifted into the clouds. I was being pulled into a lovely green world. This place is calm and serene. The opposite of the angry, red world. The opposite of the life I left behind.

I like it here. I could stay here forever... Lazing away in the soft green grass. The sun, like her smile, on my face. No more dreams of cold bodies or crimson tears. I could be finally at peace.

by Kay Kittrell

Chemical reaction

When people meet each other, it's a chemical reaction. It doesn't matter if you're visiting an old friend or bumping into someone at the grocery store for the first time. Your vibrations mix with those, even in the most subtle of ways. You are influencing them as they are you, and change is bound to happen. You are the base of elements churned into complex structures, and every time you interact with someone- every time you breathe, blink, walk- you are sending out ripples to the cosmos. They can be as penetrating as a sunbeam or as subtle as a microwave in the universe. A signal that despite being subtle is glaring in its ability to transform and change. Even in your most stagnant moments, your atoms are humming.

by April Petesch

The Doppelgänger

I'm not crazy. You've probably heard that about me. But I'm not.

It's a long story. And you have to trust me. Whoever you are. I'm writing this now because things have gotten way out of control, and I need to write this before I never have another chance to. I know you and a bunch of other people are probably looking for me. But you'll never find me. All you'll find is this, and I can only hope you believe it. Even though I barely can.

It started five days ago.

*

Every day starts out the same. I wake up, get dressed, feed the animals, do whatever work needs done around the place. This is probably a good time to mention I'm a farmer. I do all kinds of things on the farm, and I enjoy it. This isn't a story about farming though.

I don't remember much about that day. But we went hunting. And that's when it started.

"Move over," I whispered to Ron. We had just gotten to the best spot in the woods, where all the deer showed up. The first day of hunting season is a big deal, and I wanted to get the first kill. We might've been looking for five minutes before a gunshot rang out. But it wasn't one of our guns. Cody was the first to ask the question we were all wondering, "Adam, isn't this all your land?"

"Yeah," I said. "No one else should be anywhere nearby." I stood up to go look for whoever was poaching on

our land. Ron stopped me, though. “You’re going to scare all the deer, and then we won’t get anything. If we hear another shot I’ll go with you to look.” My mouth was open to say “fine,” but I stopped in shock when I caught sight of a man standing amidst the trees and underbrush out further into the woods. “There he is!”

Ron and Cody looked out in the direction I was pointing. But by the time they realized which place I meant, the man was gone. “I don’t see anybody,” Cody said. “He was right there!” I shouted a little too loudly, and Ron shushed me. “Sorry. Whatever, maybe he’ll leave now.” I was still a little confused. No one lives around us for miles, and the man looked creepy. It’s hard to explain, but even though I couldn’t make out what his face looked like from the distance I was at, I could tell something wasn’t right about him.

We caught two deer and a rabbit that day. And I forgot about the man. Until three days later.

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I was out working on the farm. As I rode the tractor along the gravelly path to the woods, I thought I heard the sound of a laugh. Not just a laugh. My laugh. I stopped the tractor and looked around. I was in the middle of open land, the woods just ahead of me and the barn way down the road behind me. There wasn’t a single place where someone could have been hiding, yet I could have sworn I heard that laugh. I got off the tractor and headed straight into the woods, somehow knowing deep down that this was where I would find my answer.

I started searching. It had been a busy few days, and I

had admittedly tried to forget about the mysterious poacher. But it kept nagging at me, and I finally decided to go look around. I went to the spot that we had gone hunting three days prior. I tried to track a line of slightly trampled leaves, but it didn't lead anywhere. I gave up and sat down on a tree stump. The sun shone through cracks in the trees overhead, and the rustling sound of leaves from the wind filled my ears. I was lost in thought, until I realized something. There was no wind.

The leaf rustling was coming from the woods, less than twenty yards away from where I was sitting. I stood up fast, and whipped around just in time. Before I even saw his face, I knew he was the one from the other day, just by the eerie feeling I had both three days before then and at that moment. But I was not at all prepared for what I saw when his face came into view. His face was my face.

Standing there, I saw myself. He was dressed differently than I was, but he looked exactly like me. For what seemed like a long moment, we just stared at each other. His height, his face, his hair visible underneath a camouflage hat- it was all exactly what I would see if I looked in a mirror.

He was as shocked as I was. But he gathered his composure faster, and took off like lightning through the woods where he came from. After a moment's hesitation I ran after him. I don't know what I would have done if I had caught up with him, but after ten minutes of chasing him I burst out of the woods, and he was nowhere in sight.

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I called Cody as soon as I got back to the house.

“Remember that guy from the woods the other day?”

“What guy?”

“The guy that was poaching and you didn’t see him but I did.”

“Are you sure you even saw him? It could have just be-“

“Cody, I saw him. I saw him then and I just saw him now. Up close.”

“How do you know it’s the same person?”

“I just do, okay? Now will you listen to me?!”

“Okay, okay.”

“He looked exactly like me.”

There was silence on the other line. Then, he started hysterically laughing.

“I can’t breathe... Oh gosh... Where did you see him, in the mirror in your bathroom?”

“Cody! I’m serious! He was in the woods again, and I started chasing him after I saw him, but he disappeared again. I don’t know what to do but I’m really confused about this whole thing.”

His laughter finally slowed down, and he sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you. You’re just going to have to figure out if he’s dangerous, and get rid of him if he is. Call the cops, consult a sci fi movie, something.” He started laughing again. I hung up.

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That evening I got online and started researching the topic of doppelgängers. They’re apparently mythological creatures, or paranormal beings, and every culture has a

different version of them. One term stuck out to me the most. Evil twin.

What if I had met my evil twin? What if this person, or thing, was here as a harbinger of bad luck, or as a double-goer that would pose as me, ruin everything I had, and take over my life? I decided then that I wasn't going to let this happen. Whatever this bizarre entity was, I was going to get rid of it.

I decided to kill my doppelgänger.

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The next day I went back into the woods, this time armed with my gun. I looked everywhere. Back where we had gone hunting, back where I had stood, stunned, face-to-face with him. This time I heard no rustling leaves under his footsteps, no laugh which I shared with this mirror man.

I sat again on the tree stump. Had he vanished? Why would he have met with me those two times, only to just go away? Evil twins don't go away. They go away when they've finished what they've started. And this just started.

I began walking through the woods. As I walked, my anger started rising within me. I had to find him, stop him from ruining my life. I had too much to live for to just let this creature take over.

That's when I heard the pickup truck.

I bolted out of the woods to see him, in my pickup truck, driving casually down the road. It took him a few seconds to see me, and he was just as shocked as he was the day before when he noticed me standing in the woods.

How could he be shocked? He was here to ruin my

life! This thing comes out of nowhere, starts following me around, and now has the nerve to be shocked to see me?

All I heard was a gunshot and shattering glass.
And that was it.

*

I know this story might seem kind of blurry. It was a blur for me. But you have to believe me. This is the real story, no matter how crazy it may seem.

I'm writing this from a train station miles away. I left quickly, but the cops are probably already there. They don't react lightly to matters like these. I just hope they'll believe this account. I plan to give it to some police station at a stop on the way to where I'm going; they'll get it back home.

It's only starting to sink in now what I've done. My intentions were to save my life. But it seems I've ruined it myself. I'll always be on the run now.

As I look back on the times I saw him, my doppelgänger, I realize he wasn't just walking around looking like me. He was being me. Hunting, working on the farm, driving my pickup. Who knows how many times he's been me without me knowing. And now I know. He was me, and I was him.

There's only one difference now.
I've become the evil one.

by Madeline Cardinale

A Visitor in the Womb

My first year of college, my freshman year, I was in a weird stage of my life. Slowly figuring out who I was, what my beliefs were, the whole nine yards. During this time, I had become close to one of my coworkers named Lindsey. Now, Lindsey was the type of friend that you really shouldn't bring home to your family to meet. The type of girl that everyone tells you not to be friends with.

My freshman year was a time where I rebelled heavily. What I saw in Lindsey was freedom, something I could only experience with her; & Lindsey saw in me solidarity. It was during our friendship that I began seeing an older man at school. Not too much older than me, he was 22 & I only 19. I don't know if it was because I knew I shouldn't be with someone more mature, or the fact that Lindsey also was seeing someone who was 24. We were each other's rocks; we told each other everything. Both of us hated the man we were in love with because they treated us less than what we deserved. For me, my relationship ended months after Lindsey's, & I only gained a broken heart from it. Lindsey, on the other hand had gained an unexpected visitor growing in her uterus.

It was the beginning of November when I got a text from Lindsey saying she was pregnant. I was in class & she began freaking out. After class she picked me up & she took more tests to be sure. Now, I love her to pieces, but I believe that if you are not using any form of contraceptives, then you are essentially trying to get pregnant. You're playing a game of chance, & eventually chance will win. Lindsey wasn't sure what to do or even to tell her baby's father that she was expecting. We drove over to the Planned Parenthood center

before it closed & talked to someone. At this point, Lindsey was too shaken up to even comprehend what to do; so all the information was given to me. I remember looking for hours & researched extensively to find out information for her. I knew at that point that I was more pro-choice, but after doing research & seeing my friend's life completely change, I knew that I believed it is a woman's choice to decide whether she wants to keep the fetus or not.

I gave Lindsey all the information she needed, & I told her we could make an appointment & I would go with her if she wanted me too. At this point she had told her mom & her baby's father. Her mom wanted her to keep the baby & the father wanted her to abort it. It was also during this time that the father had gotten his actual girlfriend pregnant as well. As I tried to be there & support Lindsey, it was hard for me to watch her struggle with this decision while still be physically intimate with a man she knew didn't love her.

Eventually Lindsey had decided to keep the baby, & the father moved away to start his new life with his new family. Lindsey's daughter, Phoebe, is one of the cutest babies. Every time I'm around her I always feel a pain of guilt because I know that deep down I had wanted Lindsey to go back to school & better herself before she became a mom; but becoming a mom is the biggest blessing Lindsey could have ever received to change her life for the better. I tell Lindsey all the time how great of a mom she is to Phoebe, & how amazing Phoebe is. While I am pro-choice, I will always be thankful for the decision Lindsey made to keep her daughter

by Abigail Kauffman.

The Chain

You see nothing, and therefore, you feel everything. You can feel the wind, cold and fresh air against your face. You can feel the soft ground beneath your shoes. You can hear things too. You can hear the wind as it blows. You can hear the trembling of the earth under you. You can hear the beating. The soft beating of a million different pulses. You know they are the pulses of some other living things since you feel your own heart's dull beat, and it matches that of the others at times. But you see nothing, but the grey-black which engulfs sight when you chose to close your eyes. You see only this heavy darkness, but from that void comes the power to sense everything.

There is a hand clasping each of your own. You know it is a hand, but cannot say how you do. The hands are different as well. One feels strong, the other is weaker. One is bigger, the other smaller. One is rougher while the other is smoother. These comparisons come from holding both and knowing the way they feel against your hands, the neutral party. Clinging to them, you find companionship in your infinite void.

Sometimes, you try to speak. You utter out syllables and sounds that match the noises and symbols you imagine in your head. The responses are always similar. One voice utters words in a soft whisper, with a language entirely incomprehensible to your own. The other answers in a grunt, making chatter with an alphabet foreign to yours. Often, you don't speak at all.

One day, you feel one hand tug at yours. The motion

is sharp after an eternity of stillness. Are they playing a game? you muse to yourself. Maybe I should tug back. This decided you pull on the creature which had pulled you.

The tug came again, this time harsher than before. This entity who had shared a lifetime with you now seemed to be dragging you over. You frown to yourself. If this stranger wants a game, you can play it too. In fact, you can play it better-so you tell yourself. You yank your companion hard until the stumbling of their feet reaches your ears. You can hear them try to speak unintelligible phrases. “Xlnv lm!” they screech at you. Once again, the stranger grasps at you, pulling at your arm now. Their fingers dug into your flesh, sharp as they dragged.

This angers you. What have I done? Nothing. I never hurt them. What could they be mad about? Why are they hurting me? Then, an idea slips into your mind as a snake slithers into a garden. They want to hurt me. They don't have any reason-except they like to hurt. You try to wrench your arm free, but find that the grip is stronger than your wiggling. “Ovg nv svok blf!” The stranger screeches again. This time, a tone of desperation filling their words.

They are not mad, they are scared. They need help! Of course. They must in some sort of pit, with me as the only one they can hold on to. I must help them. They are scared to be. Seeing this, you try to drag them to you, but they resist. Their hand on your arm suddenly becomes two, and the pulling once again intensifies. They don't want help?

Then, it hits you. This stranger doesn't want to be pulled out of the pit. They want to pull you into it. They must want some sick revenge for their own fate. Instead of taking

out their pain on the world or the cause of their demise, they want to drag you into the abyss of their pain. No. No, I will not go with you.

As terror fills your bloodstream, you try to free yourself from your fate. You can feel nothing now but the two arms that are tugging at your own. You hear only the strange grunting of that traitor you had trusted. There is no way out. You can't hold off forever.

Then, you do something new. You never tried it. You never needed to. You open your eyes.

The traitor you spent your lifetime holding onto stands above you, on a platform you never had sensed. On it, there were dozens of people with their eyes, their stances, their arms, and their minds open, with such kindness it was hard to understand what could make these souls so happy. They were all different looking, with different colored bodies, and eyes, and shapes, and different expressions of their mood. You could hear their heartbeats once again, though they were louder than before, and almost happier if you allow yourself the joys of imagination. Surely, whatever happiness there is up on this strange platform is shared with those where you stand now, because why else is this traitor-this stranger, trying to pull you up if not for their own cruel gain? You look back. There is a long chain of people. They held hands as you did. They seemed happy. Seemed. But compared to the people on the platform, with their great smiles? They were alone.

You turn your attention to the one who tried to pull you up, who was giving you this time to see and understand. "Why?" you ask.

“Dv ziv xlmvxgvw. De zrv xomnvcgew. We are connected.” They whispered softly until their foreign tongue became your own.” With careful intentions, they started to pull you up to the platform and this time, you follow, crawling up to join the others. As the stranger lets go of your hand, you expect to feel a loss of this strange feeling of safety, but instead, you feel even closer now that you are free. Your smile joins theirs as you begin to stand with these people, all free just as you are. You feel a slight tug. Behind you is the other who held your hand. You had forgotten about them. They frowned, leaning to keep a hold of you. They don’t understand. They don’t know. Their eyes aren’t open, and they remain in this chain that they believe is keeping them happy.

“What about them?” you ask your friend on the platform.

They smile. “What about them? Who will help them up?”

You begin to tug on their arm again until they too can open their eyes. “Dv ziv xlmvxgvw. We are connected.”

by Isabella Brignolla

Middle School

Just another day with my face in the dirt. Third time this week and it has no sign of stopping. Always the same routine: Pierce pushes me down, I try to pick myself up until I'm put back down by Tanner. I turn to get my face out of the dirt only to find Pierce squatting down with his crotch two inches from my face with the only thing protecting me from it being his jeans. No one helps, no one ever helps. Every single freakin day since December of my 6th grade year it's been this way. A kid who had arms that a needle could poke straight through and never stood up for himself because he never had to, was always easy prey. I try to stay away, find a friend or a teacher to cower behind and get them to help, but somehow Tanner and Pierce always manage to find me when I'm all alone. I head back in and keep going about my day, trying to not let it get to me. But it does, it always does. I'm sick and tired of this. So you know what, I'm telling my parents.

I am brought along to this conference like a victim in a court case. The judge and the representatives of the defendant bicker at each other until a verdict is made. The vice principal, Mrs. Cashdollar, tells us that the boys will receive detention, the first time. The second time she says the boys will get suspended two days. The third time the boys will get suspended for a week, but my dad yells at her, "How is this helping my kid? The boys stay at home, learn nothing from their actions, and come back the exact same." The vice principal assures us that everything will be handled. Apparently, no one received that memo cause for the rest of

my 6th grade year I tasted dirt each and every day.

However, middle school wasn't all bad. While there, I decided to join the drama club. I figured since I liked singing and being the center of attention, this would be perfect. While there, I met friends that I would have until the end of high school. My best friend, Evan Misal, gave me my love of classic rock by one day showing me the beautiful melodies of Bon Jovi. Evan and I were inseparable in the drama club. We would talk about classic rock, video games, TV shows, and we'd just mess around with each other. The bad thing was, he wasn't in the same playground group as me, so he couldn't protect me from the bullying. To this very day, he still has my back and I'm happy that in those days in the dirt, I still managed to find time to plant the seeds of friendship that would blossom into beautiful flowers later on down the line.

But as the days of bullying continued, I went to church hoping to find a reprieve. I found that solace in Pastor Mick. He started preaching at my church just as I was starting 6th grade. He was always there to listen to my pleas and he taught me about the saving grace of God and to love thy neighbor as yourself. In the church with stained glass windows of Jesus, he baptized me to be a follower and confirmed me as a member of my church. My faith grew in that small Greencastle church as this man inspired me to do more in the church. He asked me to be a worship leader and to be on a committee while I was still in middle school. I still perform those duties to today. When I was about to finish middle school, our church found out that Pastor Mick was being transferred to another church. On the day of his move, I helped him move out of the parsonage and with tears in my

eyes wish him goodbye. I knew God sent him to be there for me in my darkest hour and to make me strong in my faith, a driving force within me still today.

Not only was Pastor Mick a saving grace for me, but my Gram was also always there to be shoulder to lean on, even though she was very frail and probably couldn't support my weight. I walked to her apartment almost every day after school and we would sit and talk about anything. We would some days talk about memories of her working in DC and taking my dad to Busch Gardens. We would talk about the Judge Judy episode playing as we sat there watching. I would also talk about drama club and band, with the friends I made. However, I never brought up the bullying cause the time we spent was a time of peace and love, not a time of anger and hate. We would go out to eat, sometimes at Cracker Barrel, others at Bob Evans, but our favorite was always Texas Lunch, a family dinner in Chambersburg. I would always order breakfast for dinner and she would always get a good old-fashioned BLT. We would go back to the apartment and we would listen to the band Chicago. Being into classic rock, I always enjoyed the fact of a group that we both enjoyed, my favorite song is Old Days and hers was Saturday in the Park. I loved the times we would spend together and that was how it was throughout middle school. When I got to high school, she started to have heart problems and she was in the hospital. One night I was coming home from doing the musical Oklahoma and when we got home, my dad sat the family down. He said words that I will never forget, "Gram had two options for what she could do. She could either have surgery with a minimal chance of survival or go home for two

weeks before she would pass. But God gave her a third option and she passed away in her sleep.” I was broken hearted, but I knew that like Pastor Mick, God had made us closer in my darkest hour to show me what true love and happiness was like.

As I think about those times, I’m thankful. I’m thankful for all those days of humiliation, torment, and sadness; without it I wouldn’t be me. I learned that I’m a lover, not a fighter. I learned that I solve problems with my words rather than my fists.

For the last few years, middle school went well with no bullying. Pierce and Tanner were moved to a different part of the school where I never saw them again. I learned to take insults not as insults, but as observations about me; either to ignore or take into consideration. My friends became my solace if I ever needed it. And as middle school changed into high school, I found out who I truly am.

I took the experiences of middle school bullying and became an optimistic person saying that the worst had passed. I saw others in high school being bullied and going through problems similar to mine. I became a big brother of the high school. I helped others through their problems like bullying, family troubles, bad relationships, sometimes even suicidal thoughts, and counseled them in times of need. Of course problems like family troubles and arguments still came for me and I faced them, solved them, and pushed them aside. However, they were nothing to the extent of my middle school days. High school was the best time of my life, I made tons of friends, loved playing in the band, and I don’t think it would’ve been the same if not for those days of my

face in the dirt.

But there is actually one more part to this story. Junior year of high school, I'm waiting for my bus to arrive and take me home when a figure starts walking towards me. I recognize him as Pierce, one of the boys who bullied me in middle school. He had been absent from most of my years of high school and my mind races with possibilities of what might happen until he just stops and says hey. We ask how each other is doing and how school is going. After breaking the ice, he says words to me I thought I would never hear, "Hey listen, I'm sorry for everything I did in middle school. That was a shitty thing to do to you and I shouldn't have done it. I had stuff going on at home and I took it out on you and you didn't deserve it. I'm sorry." I could hear in his voice and see in his face that he truly meant it and it took everything in me to hold back the tears. I thanked him for the apology and he left. On the bus ride home, the waterworks ran free. I never thought that I would be able to close the book on that chapter of my life, but because of him saying that, this is one story that I'm glad got a happy ending.

by Keric Ellis
