



2011  
The  
Crucible

*Shadows of  
Illumination*

# The Crucible



*The Literary and Arts Journal*

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We would also like to thank all who submitted to this year's *The Crucible*. Without talented creators like you who are willing to share their creations with the masses, a publication such as this would not be possible. Many tremendously talented people attend LHU, and we hope you all continue with your creative endeavors with much success.

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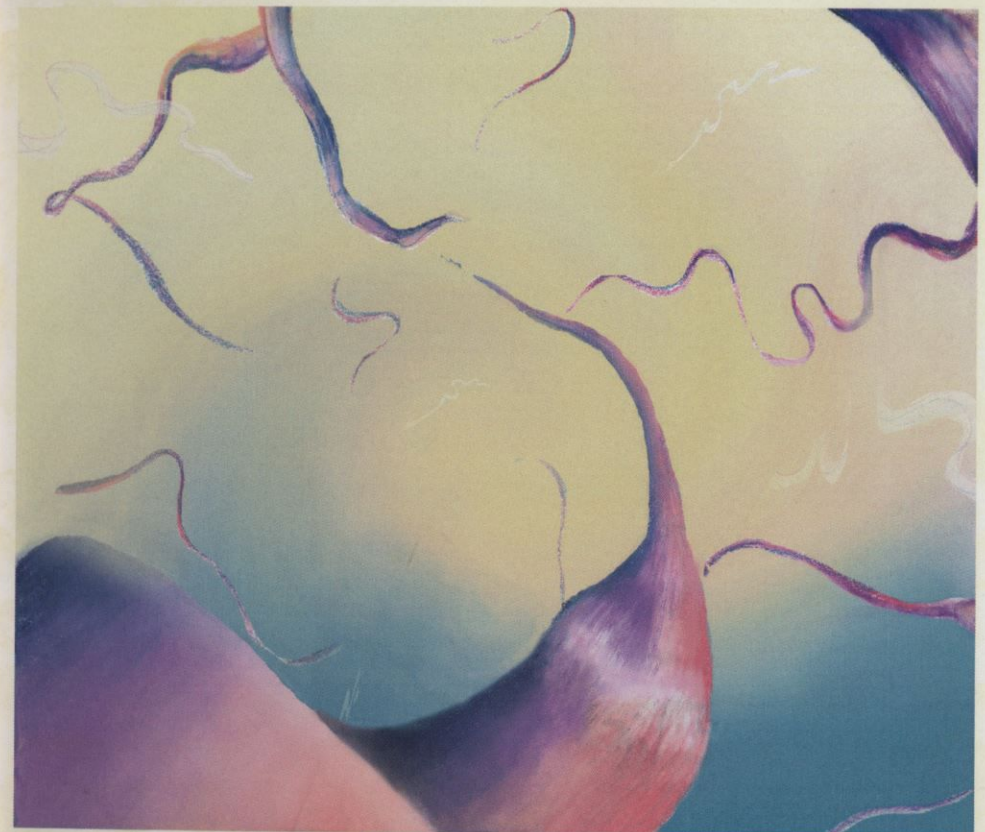
## Preface



Shadow and light play all the time. They mingle in the shade of tree branches and the dapple of sun poking through. They scuffle in the moments in the twilight when gloom creeps between city buildings and daylight reluctantly gives in. But the secret and luminous exist within us, too. Every day we face difficulties in our lives; as college students, family members, friends, loved ones, and as human beings.

In the following images, stories, and poems, you'll find a battle between night and day. Each submission has been carefully selected and placed in a fashion which challenges the reader to consider the roles we assume in society and the impact this has on ourselves and others.

There is darkness and light within all of us and, most importantly, there is space between.



*Purple Haze*

LaKeshia Bauman

## *The Nature of Man by Amy Burke*

"What's all that sulfur and brimstone for if you don't put it to good use, eh?" The unearthly face grimaced in response; this was not only uncharacteristic, but also strangely beautiful. He stared into his hand. True, he was not omnipotent, but he had the whisperings of power that his savvy opponent lacked. They were, however, only whispers, and what was at stake was nothing short of life itself. And so, the indecision deepened, and the grimace turned into gritted teeth.

"What's this hesitancy about? Just throw down your cards or yank some new ones, Gabe." The impatient mouthing off was something Gabriel had grown used to from his opponent. The "*What? It's no big deal,*" attitude got Gabriel's goat for sure. It was an ill-formed strategy that Azazel hoped would throw Gabriel off his game. When he first nonchalantly began talking about the fate of souls, Gabriel would get steamed and spout scripture for about an hour in response—this was something Azazel soon learned to back off from.

"Azazel, we aren't talking about a plague of frogs—this is human life. The most precious of..."

"Of the 'Most High's' miraculous creations...yeah, yeah, yeah... see the thing is, we're playing cards here. If you were really concerned, you wouldn't be here. Just play your fucking hand." Gabriel was interrupted by Azazel as usual, and his face returned to its regular nondescript expression. He put his cards down deliberately, one at a time, and then inhaled deeply.

"Three kings high! And you were worried about the fate of humanity? Well, chief, you've got this one. So what were the stakes? No possessions for a day—barring, of course, those already in process..." Azazel reached for the cards, but Gabriel stopped him.

"A week, Azazel, and those in process must be stopped. Also, we know it's only fair if I deal."

Azazel scowled, "Who cares about fair? Let's throw caution to the wind, Bub. Try something new—someone will win, fair or not. Maybe live it up while you're down here for once. Did you even have a sip of that drink yet?"

Gabriel started, "I've told you before, the last one who drank was kicked out..."

Azazel spoke over him, "Now Gabe, if you remember, I was there. I mean that was long before I, well... another thing, let's not play that 'holier than thou' routine. You may not be downing the liquor, but you're playing cards for souls. They'd sure as hell kick you out too if they knew about this setup. Not that I'm complaining—you're stiff company, but at least you participate in the conversation, unlike these drifters." Azazel was referring to the damned souls floating behind him. The putrid masses sort of hovered, sort of bounced directionless around their table. The souls, unbeknownst to them, were in a place of waiting. The original idea was for the soul to find its own way to the appropriate afterlife. Demons, however, had begun to steal them. They took many undeserving souls to be tortured and mutilated. When Azazel caught Gabriel trying to liberate the souls, they decided on a game to let fate determine the outcome.



Every few months, they would meet in this place of waiting with a deck of cards. There was no need for poker chips as the goopy blobs sufficed for them, as well as the antes. This was a place that was undetectable and unanticipated by all others, like an air pocket caught within a Ziploc bag. Sure, demons had been stealing souls from all sorts of waiting places, but only Azazel and Gabriel knew about this specific air pocket because they had made it so. Gabriel's whispers of omnipotence just out of grasp surrounded the location as a barrier, keeping all others (except for newly waiting souls) out.

"Anyway, this being the last hand for tonight, let's go double, no, triple or nothing. No more of this chump change. You win and you get all these souls for your little rehabilitation project. When I win, and I say *when*, you will destroy Las Vegas. My corrupt-soul count would be outrageous." Azazel put his hands behind his head and rocked back in his chair. Gabriel's side project of helping souls reach their true destination had forced him into some morally grey areas. He had rained down a few unauthorized plagues after losing low hands to Azazel. He had also killed corrupt men and women (who were close to death) here and there, but destroying a town like Las Vegas would surely be noticed. Each soul he saved became a greater burden on his own, amplifying each risk. He realized that maybe it was more than just the souls' well-being that he had in mind—perhaps he was developing a taste for poker.

The infection of sin is a slow process for those completely pure, but Gabriel trudged on believing that good intentions would pave his way. "Well, viva Las Vegas, I guess," Gabriel panted. His being seemed to disregard the severity of the situation while his soul wailed, warning him against this dastardly decision.

"All right, Gabe, my boy!" roared Azazel, as he imagined the re-creation of Sodom and Gomorrah. He reached for the deck and began to shuffle. Gabriel grabbed the cards from his hand and began to reshuffle. His pulse rose and resounded within his ears. He sat in silence, trying to tune into a whisper of omnipotence.

"Well, deal the damn hand already; if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to cheat," Azazel sniggered to himself. He looked into Gabriel's innocent face and felt unexpected pangs of nostalgia. He remembered righteousness of will and the incredulousness that came with defiance. He found Gabriel an intriguing specimen treading the very thin line between the greatest dichotomy known to man.

They began the game. The two's and three's in Gabriel's hand soon told him that Las Vegas was doomed. His stoic expression crumbling, Gabriel asked, "How exactly does the torture work?" His tell-tale tone seemed to go over Azazel's head entirely.

Azazel recoiled as if he had been struck. "Now, Gabriel, you wouldn't be interested in something like that?" The silence endured so long that it startled Gabriel when Azazel begrudgingly began. "Well, it's different for everyone. I have a very special process which ensures each soul's acceptance into a hellish demise." He hesitated, "The longer you contain a soul that has been kept in waiting, you begin to see changes in it. Now these blobby guys over here are just about to turn. See this one here? When all this gunk starts to clear, you can see its true nature; this one is destined for good." Gabriel saw a startling clarity beneath the gunky mass.

Gabriel was confused. "How can you ensure an evil nature for each if they are destined for good?" The room became still. The tension created by this conversation had not only made Gabriel very uncomfortable, but he realized that Azazel was squirming under the pressure. Whether by guilt or because he didn't want to further stain Gabriel's soul, Azazel was disturbed. It occurred to Gabriel that while Azazel was able to torture and cheat, it still clearly affected him. If he was still this visibly affected, was he really the demon that Gabriel perceived him to be? Gabriel wasn't sure whether or not this scared him more than the idea of losing his hand. Could it be that bad?

Azazel shuffled the cards around uncomfortably in his hands and watched Gabriel try to hone in on the omnipotent whispers. It was tragic really, watching this naïve, childlike creature throw his existence down the shitter. He shrugged and wondered how much and if he really cared. Then Azazel gave a smile that strongly resembled a snarl. "I eat the purity out of the soul." Though his voice was barely audible, the disturbing notion seemed to reverberate through both beings. He looked at the souls floating around the room and licked his lips. "Have you ever wondered what it was like to be God? Have you ever wanted to be as close to divinity as possible? I have been so devoid of grace and innocence... Haven't you ever wondered why I don't cheat you, why I don't kill you? You are nothing. We are nothing!" Azazel seemed agitated. He paused and inhaled. "When I consume the purity within a soul, I *am* God.

Those words resounded in Gabriel's ears; he was horrified. What did that mean for the souls of the innocent? How could he possibly eat the purity from the soul? But mostly he thought, "What is left after you eat the purity?" Gabriel wasn't sure whether he really wanted to know any of this, but it was similar to watching the fall of an evil city. It was beautiful in its tragedy. Each moment in time framed—one mother grasping for the child she had been separated from, or a lover watching her man's life slip away, all faces so contorted with pain and loss that Gabriel could only marvel from afar. It was curious, this connection people felt with each other, and for him, taking that away was Gabriel's ultimate realization of beauty. He was oddly attracted to this idea of death and damnation—fascinated, but he abhorred it at the same time.

"Even the most righteous of men have some evil within them," Azazel shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The uneasy feeling Azazel was experiencing was well deserved. Gabriel put two and two together. Despite all the good deeds that a man had done in his life, Azazel whittled souls down to the few sins each had committed, even if they had been absolved by God. A soul could never completely rid itself of the stains of its sins, a constant reminder of its humanity. Azazel would reduce a soul to a memory or shadow of the worst it ever was. To consume the good from someone and become God... To reduce a soul to only its most evil moments; Gabriel was blown away. It was worse than he had ever imagined, yet horrifyingly intriguing. Azazel saw what he believed to be Gabriel's mortification and said, "How about this? Forget Vegas. You'll probably get kicked out if you destroy a city without authorization anyhow. If I win, you consume one soul right here, right now, and you can liberate the rest. If you win, they are all yours."

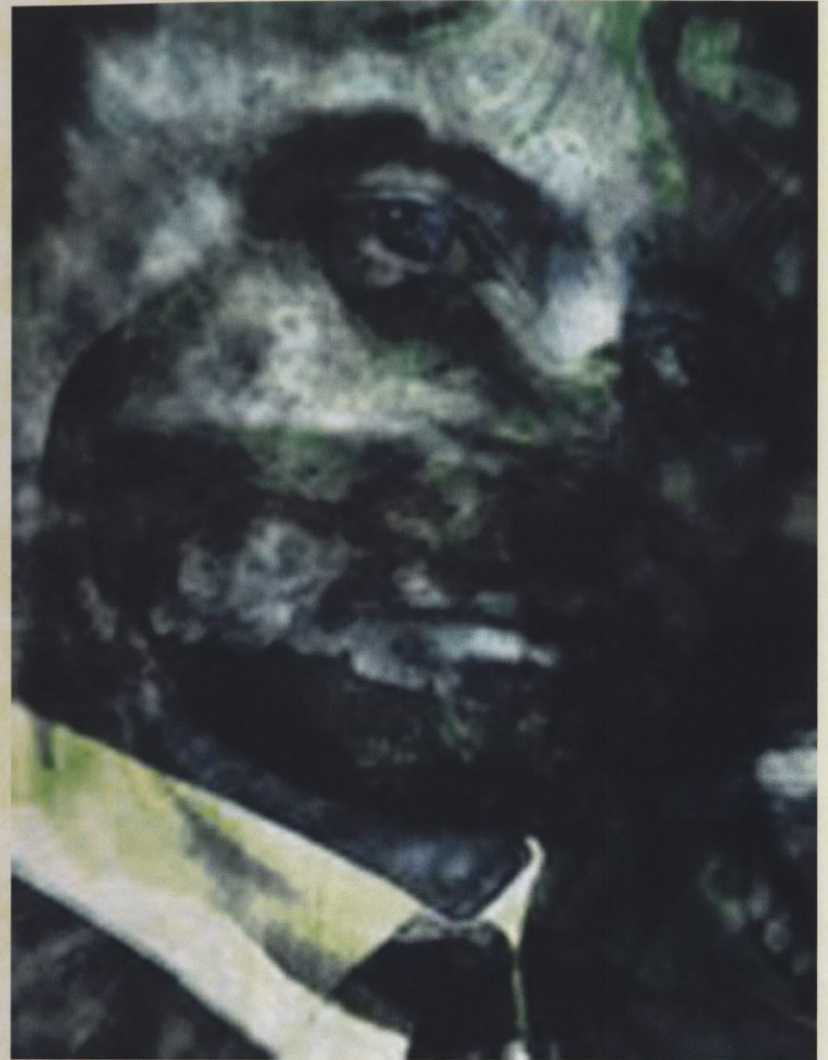
Gabriel was sure Azazel was right. He would be banished if he destroyed Las Vegas. Others had joked about how this city of sin was the second coming of Sodom and Gomorrah. But there was always an innocent within the guilty to be spared. And so, the question became: was he more committed to saving and sparing souls, to not getting caught, or to playing poker?

"But what is the price of a life? A soul?!" he exclaimed. Gabriel was wrought with the pressures; he could give up and have them all devoured by Azazel, rain down fire and brimstone and be kicked out of paradise, or he could play and possibly win. The other option was too horrible to think about. Gabriel saw no other way, nodded once, and laid down his cards. Azazel looked at the card that lay in a semi-circle in front of Gabriel. His poker face was hard and unflinching as he laid his cards before Gabriel. He never broke eye contact as each card made the hand more worthwhile than the next. Finally ten cards lay face up on the table, causing a realization that forced Gabriel into the fetal position. His pair of threes jack high was no match for Azazel's two pair of kings and sevens. The rush, the urge, the need for Gabriel not only to play, but to win, transferred into a sudden and overwhelming despair. Azazel was already standing and sorting through the souls in order to find the one with the most clarity.

Gabriel sank to his knees in terror. Panic surged across his being as he rebuked himself and his choices; his face contorted with the pain and severity of his predicament. Azazel witnessed this moment in time and for a split second was captured by the unnatural mixture of such beauty in such tortuous pain. Gabriel cried out to the Lord.

"Not Here! No! We must be unseen!" Azazel frantically grabbed a soul and thrust it upon Gabriel. He looked at it with tear stained eyes, cradled it close to him, and began to devour it. Gabriel lay in rapture, writhing in pleasure.

Poker was nothing compared to this.



*Untitled*

*Andrew McCune*

## *The Collector by Helena Blackwell*

At night  
you leave your body,  
drift through the dim chill.  
Internal compass impervious to churning clouds,  
silver moon backlighting an endless mountain range.

Flying east above ruler straight highways,  
you follow the serpentine river;  
city lights pepper the landscape.

Straight on until you arrive at his home,  
a stately Victorian,  
elegant, somber in autumn tones.

Entering silently through a closed window,  
passing as a beam of moonlight, unafraid,  
though he is bigger,  
stronger,  
faster,  
and you are in some way  
an intruder.

You are not afraid because in dreams  
we are as ghosts,  
and ghosts do as they please.

Standing on the third floor in his bedroom,  
where he chained you to the radiator,  
you never protested.

This room, spotless, sparse,  
muffled history of a crypt  
above the little dollhouse kitchen,  
over the living room complete with Christmas tree,  
picturesque,  
lights casting a whimsical glow on the snow outside.  
Asleep, his limp form on the bed,  
pale, corpse-like,  
haunted.

You're not here for his wallet,  
you didn't come for his passport,  
or as a spy, to ferret information.  
You did not yearn to place  
your lips on his, or caress his sleeping forehead.  
You came for what belongs to you.

Ignoring him, your eyes seize upon a glass case above the bed,  
displaying his dolls,  
numerous,  
varied.

Dolls gleaming with pride, like the warm hardwood floor,  
pride, his diplomas hanging, dangling letters after his name.  
Pride, in the tenure he'd recently received.

Each night, he polishes their shoes.  
He brightens their faces,  
wiping away dust with a soft rag,  
his eyes serious, intense.

Empty doll eyes, glittering blue,  
golden, pale, or dark, with braids in their hair,  
some in suits, one doll  
in an ivory wedding gown; beaming, magnificent.  
Some dolls frail, others voluptuous, ruby-lipped,  
some are so painfully young.

There she is---toward the end of the row, a doll.  
With your face and your name  
in tiny jeans and snow boots, faux fur,  
favorite blue shirt he tore from your body,  
falsely promised to replace.

Doll,  
shiny silver necklace like the one you wore last year  
found on the ground, shaped like a key  
from a pair of miniature police issue handcuffs,  
little tattoos, your faded grey pea coat.  
You brush aside cobwebs,  
and smooth her ragged brown hair.

Clutching her in both hands, you stare her down,  
your own eyes shining back at you.  
Cold in porcelain, perfect replica  
more precise than life.

Perhaps you take her to the river and crush her little body  
with the hooked end of a crowbar,  
shards of her face littering the parking lot,  
one brown glass eye rolling into a patch of snow.  
Maybe scattering her remains in polluted water, unceremoniously,  
murky blackness rendering her invisible,  
little pea coat disappearing into the depths. Maybe you leave her in  
a dumpster, smashed so the broken edges shatter his hungry hands,  
should he come looking.



Or instead, you fly home with her, close to your heart, holding her dear  
like a daughter,  
throwing away her miniature handcuffs.

With a dainty paintbrush  
you craft a crooked smile on her cold, inanimate face,  
cover the grayish bruises on her pale, porcelain  
thighs.

Suppose you've befriended a  
kind elderly woman you met at a craft fair,  
maybe her name is Edna, comfortably plump.  
Edna sells afghans:  
pink, striped, brown with yellow,  
lurid zig-zag patterns.

Edna clucks at the state of the doll,  
her gnarled, arthritic fingers clean doll parts,  
untangle the mats in her hair, and because Edna likes you,  
she makes your doll a new red dress, scarlet-petal frock.  
At Halloween you give the doll a witches' hat  
she dances on your mantel  
your own yellow brown eyes greeting trick-or-treaters.

Either way, there is an empty space  
on the shelf where his other dolls were gracefully placed,  
their eyes glittering,  
trapped.

Before he even awakens,  
aching,  
he will know-

even before you dream yourself  
out of the moonlit window,  
he will know

that he will not play with your doll,  
he will not dress her,  
he will not defile her,  
he will not discard her  
at his choosing.

He will feel  
in his hollow socket heart  
the hollow pocket  
where the doll he stole  
went  
missing.

## *Masterpiece by Rachel Mazza*

A brief tale in the style of Poe...

Bound in some secret place, the princess sat while cobwebs ensnared her heart. Her four temperate rooms were lavishly furnished with trinkets and tokens from those who held her dear.

But the fair and solitary maiden kept the company of the pen, and the pen alone, as she one day hoped to have her works unleashed upon the world. Though she wrote of passion, her own heart lay entombed within her bosom, never daring to flutter or pulse. She gazed upon lovers, locked in fate's game, from her window seat. Amorous sentiment passed their flushed lips for a night, a fortnight, or more as they danced as one. The princess scorned this callowness, turning her own cynical eyes to the heavens. Love, thought she, is an affliction of fools. For just as buds of spring languish under winter's icy fingers, love waned with the moon.

In a castle riddled with ornate, drafty turret, and fireplaces with embers long grown cold, a painter dwelled in his secluded chambers. Despite his lack of years, a stormy life riddled with misfortune and abandonment was reflected upon his grim countenance. Gods and cherubs adorned the painted ceiling of his rooms, which, once beautiful, had been reduced to ruin with the slow decay of time. The omniscient deities served as sole witnesses to the deeds that transpired in the gallery.

While the iron princess sought consolation in the warm embrace of the page far away, this tormented soul frowned deeply at the absence of his image in the glass of a silver mirror. With the brush of his craft in hand, he stared into the void of the mirror, seeing neither good nor evil, but an iridescent grey fog. The vapor swirled and twisted like a serpent upon its prey until the image of the princess suddenly presented itself to him. So fair was the princess that she ensnared his indifferent stare, and for the duration of four days and nights he watched her.

Considering the room around him, walls laden with the artwork of his own creation, he found himself dissatisfied, always dissatisfied. His previous works no longer evoked mirth within him, and he discovered the ghostly faces staring back at him, veiled in tattered gowns, were quite dull and altogether lifeless. With his back to the walls, the artist found that his hand passed through the looking glass. He perceived warmth he had long ago turned from as he stepped through the mirror and entered the rooms of the princess.

A grey mist suddenly assaulted the eyes of the princess. Her head ascended from her work as if a whip had been cracked beneath her nose.

"What fantastic figment hath divulged its person from the confines of the page I inscribe? 'Tis a mournful thing when I see before me a phantom from my mind when I am certain I no longer record the fabrications of my thoughts!"

"I am neither specter nor apparition of your mind. A heart beats within this being," said the painter.

The princess turned her fair face to the window. "Then I do not meet thee with a friendly welcome. Declarations of worship and affection fall upon my deaf ears. Remove thyself to whence you came and leave me."

Ignoring her warning, he placed a hand beneath her chin and turned her dark eyes toward his face, studying her while she frowned.

"Your beauty is adequate..." he said and released her, "...nothing more. But the diligence with which you pursue your craft is truly striking. I will leave you now."

Astonishment presented itself upon her face. The princess was uncertain if she should feel the scorn of the deepest offence or the joy of the highest compliment. She would uncover the meaning in the words of this intriguing stranger.

"Wait," she called to him. But he had already gone, leaving nothing but a trail of evanescent gray fog.

After long reflection, the princess returned to her work, but somewhere in the mysterious reaches of herself she hoped the stranger would return. Four days thereafter, such an occurrence transpired. The mist again crept into sight, and so the artist did appear.

"As I searched for my reflection within the mirror, your image did present itself to me. Though no sense can explain it, this is how I came to be here. For if a maiden should appear, she must be worthy of my notice," he said and took hold of her hand.

The princess snatched her hand away. "You cannot fill the vacant chambers of these halls, but you do amuse me, so you may stay."

Given consent, the artist remained. Then, he departed, but returned again in four days time. The two fell into this practice without complaint and continuously met each day after four had past.

And slowly, the dust and cobwebs began to clear from the heart of the princess. Each smile shared and each hour spent in company elicited a steadily growing cadence. Like the stone of a grave long forgotten, the exterior of the infernal organ began to crumble. The princess found herself unable to prevent her rebellious heart from falling victim to love. She fought it valiantly in refusing to allow her thoughts to stray to the painter and even by denying him the right to visit. When he sat before her, she tried to find fault in his demeanor or appearance, but only found herself enjoying the sight of him all the more.

It was not long before love had sprung upon her like a beast released from a trap. She felt the presence of the spectral emotion at all times. She could no longer write as all her poems were polluted with amorous rhymes. As a ghost haunts one who has wronged it in life, the princess was haunted by love. She no longer found comfort in solitude and wandered through her lonely halls like a woman possessed. Four days became too long to wait to see the face of her beloved. Where did he go during those four interminable days and why could he not be with her every day?

She asked this question the very next time the painter returned after his puzzling absence. A rare look of interest crossed his usually indifferent face.

"Would you like to witness for yourself the place I reside? Would you leave these kindly halls and come with me?" he asked laying a hand on her cheek. "Speak the word and we shall leave."

The princess felt her heart leap within her chest.

"Of course!" she cried running to his side. "I always long to be with you."

A sinister grin the princess mistook for joy was upon his lips. "I promise you, my spirited maiden, I will never be without you again."

He took her hand, and once the gray mist cleared, the princess looked upon the dark gallery. She found the cold room rather drab but not unbearable. She contented herself with gazing at the various paintings hanging on the walls as the artist disappeared into another room to retrieve a gift for her. The paintings were surprisingly animated, she noted, depicting cloudless skies and trees in full bloom. There were, however, several large pieces covered with thick black sheets that emitted a rather forbidding air. What was behind the veil, she wondered, her hand creeping close to the sheet. Why were they covered? Just as her fingers curled around the corner of the covering, the painter returned, carrying yet another large framed canvas covered with a sheet.

He set it down before her, bid her to sit upon a stool and, with a dramatic flourish, he pulled the covering away. The princess gasped. What lay beneath was a beautiful rendition of herself, sitting at her desk with pen in hand. She noticed but one thing that was off. Where her heart should be, white canvas shone through.

"It is lovely, but unfinished," she commented.

"So it is," replied the artist. He selected a brush and palate from a table. "Shall we finish it? It will be an easy task now that you sit before me. This painting, I think, shall be my masterpiece. The others there..." he gestured to the veiled canvases on the wall. "...they had potential, but, in the end, they were disappointing. I'm certain you will not be so."

"I hope I will always be within your expectations," the princess replied with a smile upon her lips.

"I will make certain of that, my dear."

With those words, he lifted the brush from the palate and ever so gently touched it to the heart of the painting.

As if someone had plunged a knife into her heart, the princess suddenly fell to the ground, clutching her heart.

"What's happening?!" she cried, struggling to draw air into her lungs.

A bright light began to shine from her heart. It grew in intensity before it burst like a child's balloon and passed from her body and into the painting.

A great wind stormed its way in through the stained glass windows of the gallery. It raced around the room, throwing the black veils off of the hidden paintings. Beneath

the shrouds, the dark secret was revealed. On the tall canvases hung the lifeless forms of what were once beautiful girls. Their dead, straw-like hair was of all colors; their forms of all sizes were displayed like dolls forever, behind thick glass frames. The holes that once housed bright eyes were vacant and bare in the midst of a shriveled, decaying face adorned still with jewels and lace. Those once sweet, smiling faces had been contorted into masks of horror and disbelief. And in the middle of these loathsome beings, right where a crumbling heart would have been housed, was a great black void that the princess discovered she could not look away from as her own life poured from her body in waves of amber and gold.

"Why have you done this to me?" She sobbed as the light left her eyes, and they began to shrivel into thick black dust.

The painter watched the scene unfold passively, apathetically. He gave no reply or explanation even as the princess became very still and her chest opened, and her golden heart fell out upon the floor. Only then did he pick up the precious organ and place it on the table. He opened the heavy glass of the frame, stuffed the lifeless form of the princess inside, and sealed it up tightly. Then, with the beating, golden heart still in his hand, the artist turned to the mirror and stared deeply into swirling gray mist.

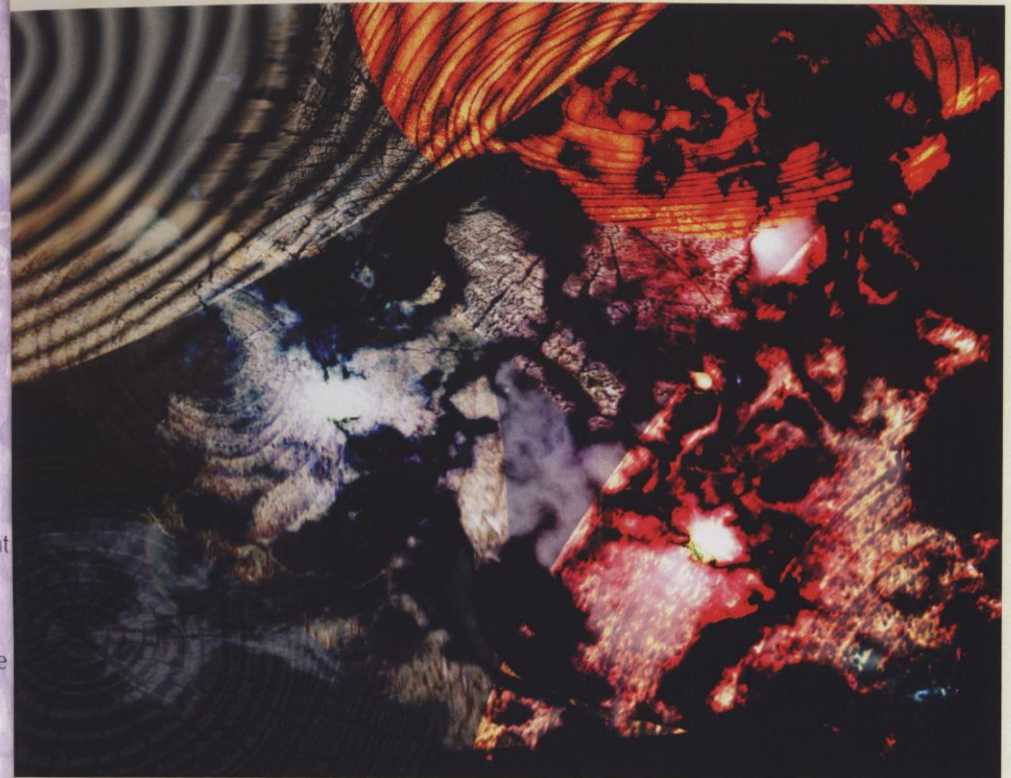
Still he saw nothing but fog looking back at him. Deeply angered, the painter stormed over to the frame encasing the princess and dropped the heart in front of it.

"My masterpiece," he sneered. "You are nothing more than a disappointment just like all the others. Still, I cannot find what I seek!"

He turned away from the princess with the intent to sulk in some secret place when a sudden noise from the mirror caught his attention. There in the middle of the swirling gray fog was the smiling face of a beautiful girl, laughing, as she played with a kitten.

The artist walked slowly toward the mirror, all previous chagrin forgotten. The image of the girl remained, and a smile curled upon his face.

"Perhaps you will become my masterpiece..."



*Untitled*

*Scott Andrew Hockenberry*

## Quota by Sarah Ricker

I should be at the office right now. I should be proofing copy for print. Typing that memo for the sexual harassment seminar. But this is just too important, and I can't stop. I've got to know how many.

*Eight thousand, eight hundred and five times three hundred and sixty-fi so... three million, two hundred and thirteen thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five.*

It's nine-thirty a.m. and, already, I'm losing time.

Day in, day out. One after another, they just keep adding up. The never-ending pull toward the future. The never-ending pull toward your death. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

The truth is, we've all got a quota to meet. Preprogrammed genetic code hiding beneath the surface, dictating our future with every step we take. There are only so many jobs you will have. Only so many cans of soda you will drink. Only so many men you will sleep with. Everyone's list is different. But once your number is up, that's it.

Most people don't notice. Most people think they have the world at their fingertips. And then...

Flash.

Hit by a car. Paralyzed. You'll never walk again.

Flash.

Faulty illegal fireworks. Blind. You'll never see again.

The reality is, we are all just ticking time bombs wrapped up in a sticky mess of bone and flesh. Well, that's the truth if you're like me.

If you're like me, you believe this with your heart and soul. You believe it so much that your life has been reduced to counting and recounting every single move you've ever made. Trapped in the perpetual fear that this is your last sip of coffee. This is the last book you'll ever read. This is the last time you'll hear your favorite song on the radio.

If you're like me, you have spiral bound notebooks of every size, shape and color stacked on every available surface of your mid-town loft. You try desperately to keep track of everything you've done. Everything you do gets recorded. Everything counted, tallied, balanced. The never-ending check book of your life.

And if you're like me, you just met your quota for speech.

Flash. Mute. You'll never say another word.

*Eighty-six million, seven hundred and seventy-three thousand, two hundred and seventy-five.*

The average person breathes an average of twenty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty times per day. It's in my notebook, right next to how many

times you blink: twenty-two times a minute. Nine hundred and sixty times in one hour. Fifteen thousand, three hundred and sixty times in a sixteen-hour day. Sixteen because we sleep, of course. And just as I take breath number two hundred and eighty-four million, six hundred and twelve thousand, and four hundred, I collapse, shattering the glass of my living room coffee table.

Flash forward two hours. George Washington Hospital Emergency Room. My ass sits in one of those pale blue gowns with a million snowflakes, on top of crepe paper, on top of green vinyl, cold as hell. A nurse is wrapping this big blue band around my arm and yelling, "This'll just take a second, darling."

I'm not deaf.

"I'm sure it's nothing serious... probably just an infection," she yells, the band getting tighter and tighter.

Yeah. Nothing serious at all.

I don't know what they expect to find, an explanation and a cure, I guess. But I can't speak, so I can't explain. There's no cure for this. It doesn't matter what caused it. The well has run dry. Too many drunken conversations at the bar. Too many long-winded participation points in college. I should have kept track better. No. I should have estimated lower. Maybe I could have saved up just enough to give this nurse a piece of my mind.

"There, see – one twenty over eighty. Normal as can be," the nurse says, ripping the blue band off my arm. "The doctor will be right in."

Great. But what does blood pressure have to do with my ability to speak?

I'm getting itchy in this cotton snowflake abomination. I won't even bother computing the number of bare asses it has covered in its lifetime. Or how many boiling hot washes it's been through to keep it sterile. They say hospitals are the number one place to contract an illness. They say half the time you walk in healthy and come out with at least the rhinovirus. Fortunately for me, I reached that quota five years ago on cold number sixty-three.

Then, in walks this middle-aged, white-lab-coat-type, carefully scrutinizing my chart.

"So, having trouble speaking, I see," he says, meeting my eyes with a smirk.

Understatement.

He's rubbing my throat. He's got the tongue depressor pulling down my lower jaw. He's saying, say ahhhhhh.

"No worries, we'll just run some quick tests and see what's going on in there." He says, shoving a gigantic Q-tip down my throat.

This is a complete waste of time. Damn those paramedics.

He's in the room with me for exactly two point five minutes, enough to feel me up, shove something in me, and offer up some annulment of fear. I can't say I'm

surprised, though. That's Western Medicine to a T. According to *The Times*, the national average for doctor-patient face time is exactly seven minutes. And he still has to come back and give me the results.

I'm busy counting the major organ systems off an illustrated chart on the wall when he returns. Circulatory. Digestive. Endocrine. Integumentary. Immune. Lymphatic. Musculoskeletal. Muscular. Nervous. Reproductive. Respiratory. Skeletal. Urinary. Vestibular. Fourteen total.

"Gastro-esophageal Reflux Disease resulting in Aphonia, the complete loss of the ability to speak," he says, head buried in the chart. "Basically, when a person prepares to speak, the vocal cords come together and vibrate due to the airflow from the lungs -producing the sound of voice. If the vocal folds cannot meet together to vibrate, sound will not be produced, resulting in Aphonia."

Acid Reflux. You're fucking kidding me.

He's saying he can't help me. He's scribbling on his prescription pad: two months speech therapy. He's saying, stop wasting my time.

I'm cocking my left eye up as he rushes out the door.

My insurance better cover this.

Flash forward to my empty apartment. Glass crunching under my stilettos as I pass the coffee table where I fell. This happens more often than you'd think. You just never know when the clock is going to run out, and there you are. Changed forever. Three hundred and sixty-five tables later, it starts to get under your skin. Maybe I should start investing in hardwood.

Sixty-two messages are blinking on the answering machine. My phone is ringing off the hook, but what can I do?

Nine forty-five A.M. "Alexis, what's keeping you this morn-"

Beep.

Ten eleven A.M. "Lex. Pick up. We need you at the office to go over the Troegs Accoun-"

Beep.

Ten fifty-seven A.M. "Seriously. Client meeting starts at 12:30. Where are y-

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Delete all messages? Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

Flash forward to an oversized mahogany desk. Framed doctorate degrees read Dr. Elizabeth Janis. Certified Speech Pathologist. A pile of paperwork splayed over the dark wood. She's asking way too many questions, and all I can do is nod. "Any history of speech loss?"

Left. Right.

"Any family history of speech loss?"

Left. Right.

"Any allergic reactions in the past three to five years?"

Left. Right.

"Any history of mental illness?"

Right. Left. Right.

I'm getting the feeling she doesn't believe me. She just keeps scribbling shorthand on a pad of legal sheet. I've seen this before. They write in short hand to keep you from glancing down at their notes, to keep you from recognizing your initial diagnoses and cheating the system.

Flash forward six months. This time, it's a white robe. No more snowflakes. No more professional courtesies.

It turns out Dr. Janis didn't believe me after all. Five months into treatment after getting nowhere, Janis shows up to our daily session with twelve candles. All different scents. Bayberry. Sandlewood. Frosted Cranberry. Vanilla. Fresh Cotton. Tree. Black Cherry. Jasmine. Lavender. Orange Ginger. Fresh Balsam. Cinnamon Spice.

The combined smell is enough to gag the most avid candle user.

And I cough.

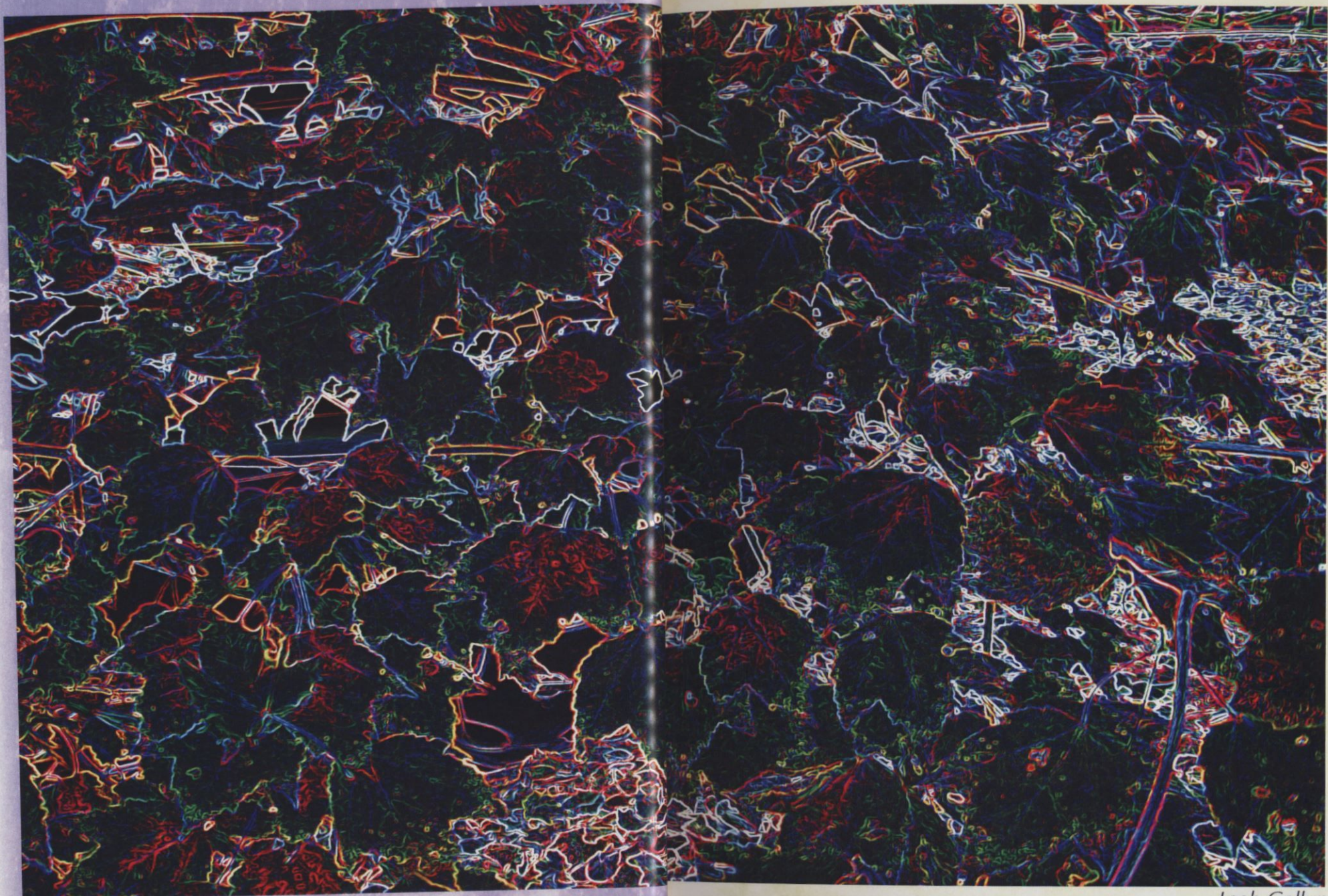
And she stares.

And I breathe.

And she scribbles.

Psychogenic Aphonia. My final diagnosis.

According to Western Medicine, I never lost my ability to speak. Now it's meal-time at four thirty. Meds at five. Lights out by nine. And every night, I'm pacing back and forth in the confines of my ten by eight room. I'm filling the notebooks. Running the numbers. Begging for this quota to be up.



*Acid Rain*

*Leah Gallup*

## Nothing Yet by Shannon Caitlin Glynn

for Kristopher Robin

I don't believe in God, never have. I've never read the Bible. I've attended church on the holidays which require it, but only to appease my family. I don't consider myself an atheist. I consider myself nothing because I am nothing, and even if I was a believer, it wouldn't matter because I am in no way worthy of any type of mercy anyway.

I am locked away within the four walls of my bedroom, the morning sun glaring through the window. There is a towel shoved hastily under the door, and I am busy on the carpet drawing scraggly lines of powder with a shaking hand on an old textbook I never gave back to my high school after I dropped out junior year. I lean down with my cut-off straw and snort. There is an explosion in my nose, and I swear I can hear the snap-crackle-pop of brain cells. I can taste the cocaine in the back of my throat. But I'm not satisfied yet. I fumble for my pipe in the pocket of my sweatshirt and reach my other hand deep down into my sock and emerge with a dimebag bulging with yellow rocks. This is the last of my stash. Greedily, I stuff my pipe to the brim with these mini boulders. I light up, suck in, breathe out, and calm down. "Just one more hit," I tell myself, "just one more." I bring my lips back to the pipe and breathe in again, feel the crack cloud deep in my lungs. I exhale and feel my pupils stretch wide like a smile.

"Okay, okay," I announce to nobody. "Just one more, just one more," I promise to no one, and hit the pipe once more. My throat burns, my lungs flutter, and a passionate pleasure ripples throughout my being. Within seconds, my blonde hair meets the carpet, and my eyelids slide over my blue irises. My back, once knotted with muscle, is now all bone, and those bones poke against the floor, but I feel nothing. I'm noddin'. Oh, fuck yes, I'm noddin' real good.

I awake in the evening to the raindrops tapping at my window with their fingertips, the skies as clouded as my mind. Dejection has me by the throat, and there's only one way to fight him off. I dig into my pants pocket expecting a bag, but there is none. Standing up slowly, I am miserable. The damp and dismal feeling presses hard against my chest and panic sets in; my whole body tenses as I bound out the door, stuffing my pipe and lighter in my pocket as I go. I leave for work late as usual and in the same clothes I fell asleep in and jog the six city blocks to work. I work for a produce company on Pattison Avenue, between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> streets, right behind The Linc. From nine o'clock at night to seven in the morning I pack boxes of produce: gala apples, onions, navel oranges, broccoli, rutabaga, bell peppers, eggplant. I pack and stack, pack and stack, pack and stack until the trucks arrive, at which point I haul the boxes to the back of the eighteen wheelers where they will eventually be delivered to whatever destination. But fruits and vegetables aren't on my mind tonight. That's not why I'm here. Most of the people who work here are addicts, mostly pill-poppers. I see them dealin' them out daily: Benzo's, Perc's, Oxy's, Xanax, Vic's, Klonopin, Hydro's. Luckily, there's a guy I work with who also sells rock and sometimes hooks me up at no cost when I don't have the cash as long as I eventually get him the money. I can see him from my station, packing boxes, and I hurriedly wave him over.

"Lou!" I call, "Over here!"

Lou stops packing, and his eyes meet mine. They're a dull brown and completely empty with no smile lines at the corners. He shuffles over slowly, stiff from the cold and old age. His head is down, blue hat covering the tufts of white hair left on his sixty-eight-year-old head. His chapped hands are jammed in his pockets in an attempt to protect them from winter's breath. He reaches me after awhile and smiles a nearly-toothless grin, probably from years of using crack. This is my future. It makes no difference to me.

"What can I do for ya, Blakey Boy?" he asks, clapping my shoulder. Lou's wife and children left soon after Lou started using, and he hasn't heard from them since. That's when he moved here. I think he looks at me like a son.

"You got any rock, man? I smoked the rest of my shit last night. I don't have any money on me, but I can get you forty by next week. Hook me up with a fourth gram?"

Lou removes his blue cap, tousles his remaining hair, and places the cap back on his head. He sighs.

"I ain't got no more rock," he says to me, looking at the ground.

"That's bullshit, man, I know you do!" I sneer, balling my hands into tight fists. I dig my nails into my palms.

"I ain't got no more," Lou repeats, shaking his head.

"Come on, Lou! I told you I'll bring you forty next week! Just break me off some rock, man!" I raise my fists and clench my jaw.

"I ain't got no rock, and that's that! An' you better put them fists away before I pop ya one good, y'hear? An' even if I did have rock, I wouldn'ta given it to ya anyways! Why dontcha go play yourself some baseball or somethin'? You gonna end up like me you keep slavin' to the rock, y'hear? You keep it up an' you ain't gonna be nothing' in this life! An' I don't wanna see that!" Lou barks, spit frothing at the corners of his lips. "We both best start getting to work on these here boxes," Lou suggests, and walks away.

I am outraged, and I look around the place to make sure no one has been listening in. Across the way I can see Joel, a "good guy" with a religious background, and he's staring at me. He's one of the few not addicted to drugs, but he's still a dirty dropout like the rest of us scumbags. I start packing Granny Smith apples. From the corner of my eye, I see Joel walking towards me. I pack faster. He's getting closer. I'm throwing the goddamn apples in the box. Stupid fucking apples.

"Blake," he says calmly, and I whip my head to the right.

"What the fuck do you want, Joel?" I growl.

"I know you've got a problem. I wanted to offer you something." Joel's voice is so composed.

"My only problem is you. But tell me, Joel, what is it you think you can 'offer' me?" I scoff. Joel smiles.

"What do you imagine God is like, Blake?" he asks, and I roll my eyes.

"I don't imagine there is one, Joel, because I'm too old for imaginary friends and so are you. Get the fuck out of my face, man." I shake my head in disgust and go back to packing apples.

"I'm a believer," Joel continues. I crack my knuckles, clench my jaw. "I'm a believer in both God and you. I go to Holy Trinity Church on Baibrige every Sunday. You're always welcome. When you have God, you're never alone." As he finishes talking, I shove him to the ground, chuck an apple at his head. I miss.

"Fuck you and your God!" I roar and pick up apples in each hand and hurl them. I kick over the box, and I run down Pattison to South Broad where I stop abruptly to catch my breath. My lungs are not that of a healthy twenty-four-year-old male. I rub my temples in an attempt to think clearly. "All right," I say to myself, "I'm gonna get my rock." The streets of south Philadelphia are deserted except for the people walking out of bars to grab a cab or walking into the bars to grab a drink. The bars are open for about two more hours. An idea takes over.

It is just after midnight, and I am stalking an ATM a foot away from an alley veiled by evening, brick in hand from a nearby construction site. The hood of my sweatshirt is over my head, and I wait. My hands tingle with anticipation, and a vicious grin spreads across my lips. My legs twitch, ready to lunge. I am waiting. I wait and I wait and I wait in an agonizing silence until I see a shadow walk up to the machine. A man slides his card into the slot. I gauge the situation. He is shorter than me, about 5'10 with a medium build, no older than twenty-one. He is wearing an unbuttoned jacket, and, from this angle, I can see a cross on his tee-shirt. I can take him. The cash comes out, he stuffs the wad of bills in his pocket, and turns from the machine. I emerge from the alley quietly and follow him with quick, short footsteps. The street is deserted except for us. Eagerly, I walk faster. I am just inches from the man. I raise the brick up high and with a swift motion smash it over his head, and the man collapses to the cold cement. I bend down, reach in his jacket pocket, and pull out the money. We are still alone.

"Nice cross on your shirt," I chuckle. "If you loved Jesus so much, you wouldn't be taking out money to get shitfaced, you dumb motherfucker," I whisper in his ear. I walk off, tossing the brick back into the construction site, turn the corner off of South Broad, and head down Walnut Street, all the while counting the money.

I don't feel bad for what I've done. I don't care that he could be injured or dead. I don't care that I took his fifty bucks, or that he worked for it. I feel no remorse, and I should, I know I should, but I don't, and that's what makes me hate myself. I continue down Walnut and turn the corner at 13<sup>th</sup> Street where I enter the "Gayborhood," as we call it. I continue to walk against the wind and the cold until I reach a ratty door on the corner, complete with peeled paint and splitting wood. I pound on the door rapidly. I ring the doorbell.

"Lenny, open up!" I call and I hear footsteps from the inside and the door swings open.

"Blake! Whaddya want, kid? It's one in the morning!"

"I just got fifty bucks. Can I get a fourth gram?" I beg, stretching out my hand with the cash crinkled in it.

"Ay yai yai!" Lenny smacks his forehead in frustration.

"C'mon, Lenny, I'm dyin' here. Please? Just break me off some rock, huh?" I am desperate.

"All right, all right. You stay put. I'll get your stinkin' rock just so long as you stop makin' a ruckus out here. Boyfriend is sleeping. I'll go get it. I already weighed bags out tonight. Gimme a sec." He closes the door, returning seconds later with my fourth gram, which I rashly unwrap and jam into my pipe. "Hey, hey, hey, whoa. Not on my stoop, kid. Get yourself home safe. Go." And I go, breaking into a run all the way home.

My roommates are sleeping when I leap through the door and sprint up the steps into the safety of my room. These four walls aren't much, but they're mine, and that's really all I got. I bounce onto my bed and break out my already-filled pipe. My heart is racing. I light up, suck in, breathe out, and calm down. The rest of the night is a mere memory now. This is all that matters. I smoke and smoke and smoke and sink off into sleep.

"Blake! Open the goddamn door!" one of my roommates yells while she pounds on the door. I sit up and rub my eyes and try to remember fully the events of the night before. I remember yelling at Lou and Joel. I threw apples. I hit a man with a brick. It all begins to come back. There is more pounding on the door. "I said open the door!"

"I friggin' heard you!" I yell back. "God dammit." I trudge to the door and open it. "Yes, Princess?" I question in a mocking tone.

"Pack your shit and get out," she says.

"What? No, fuck that! Why?" I ask, rage building.

"You were smoking that shit in here again. We all smelled it last night when you came home. And you came home before your shift was over, which means you didn't go to work, or you left early. You know the rules. None of that bullshit in the house, and you need to keep your job to pay your share of the rent. Now, pack your shit and get the fuck out. If you're not gone in two hours, I'm calling the police." She slams the door shut.

"Shit," I say aloud. I sigh and walk down the hall to the bathroom. I look in the mirror. My 6'2 frame is lanky, and I have absolutely no muscle. My eyes, a cold blue-grey, have no depth. My blonde hair is shaggy and past my ears, flipping out from underneath my backwards baseball cap. My face is emotionless, and I feel detached from the rest of the human race. I am being kicked out of my house, and I will be fired from my job. I have no friends, nowhere to turn. I am alone.

I grab the few belongings and articles of clothing I have and put them in a book bag. Without saying goodbye, I leave and head towards Bainbridge. It is eight o'clock in the morning, and clouds are hovering over the city. I stagger down the city blocks, eventually ending up in the doorway of Holy Trinity. I don't believe in God, never have, but I walk in anyway. The service has already started, and I glance around to look for Joel, but when I can't find him, I take a seat by myself in the last pew.

I don't consider myself an atheist. I consider myself nothing because I am nothing, and even if I was a believer, it wouldn't matter because I am in no way worthy of any type of mercy anyway. But today, I bow my head in silence and beg for it.



## *Brain Power by Adam Russo*

Endeared Leary,  
Mr. Counter-culture King,  
maybe you did have something right.

You, Harvard psych,  
and the rest alike,  
viewed the mind in small details—  
the nestled neurons in patterns  
fixed, controlling even the slightest twist of a wrist.

Until, yes, the mind is mixed with more than manic.  
Panic. Yes, Panic—  
terrifying realizations.

But as the long soul realizes his  
inferiority,  
and such thoughts begin to frighten him,  
nothing gives way but  
Enlightenment.

And so you turned from the lens,  
instead looking to the night sky,  
thinking, "why,  
why didn't we look at the big picture"—  
the similarities  
between the Universe and our own  
small brain. The connections  
were there  
all along.

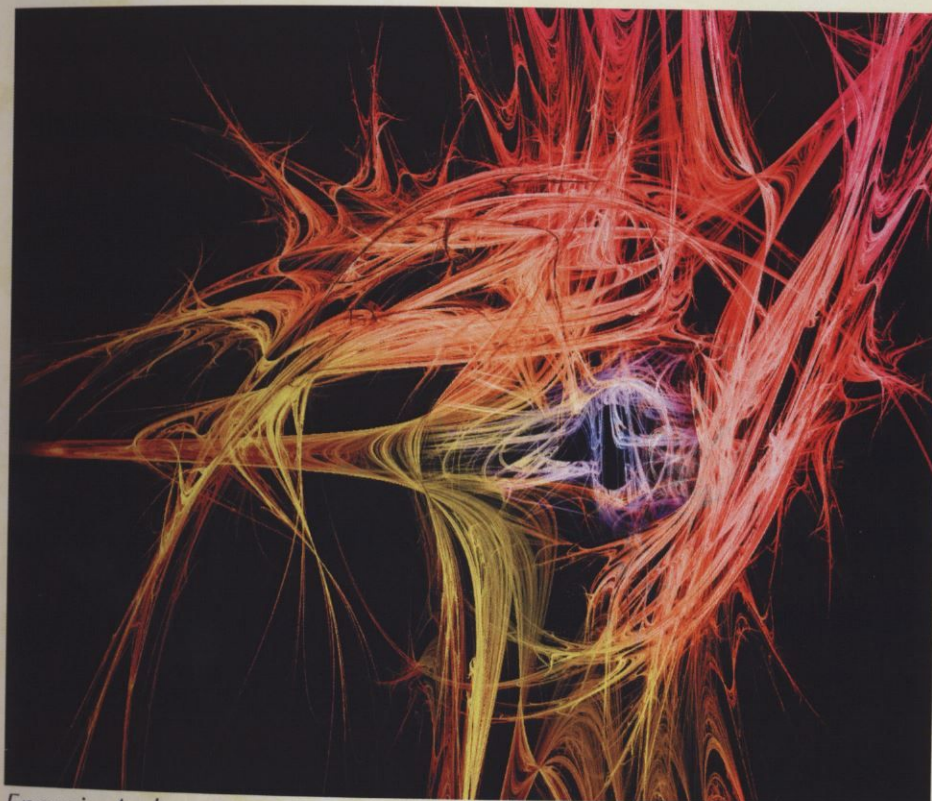
Our mind is the Universe.  
A neutron star, what else  
but a nano measurement of a neuron.  
A spiraled galaxy, what else  
but one cell in the cerebellum.  
I shall repeat: Our mind is the Universe.

And so, deep depths the Northeast reasoned rational,  
You proved incomprehensible.  
With a voice so loud,  
You pronounced, with a festive poise,  
the defined wanderer as the true guider—  
The True conscience.

So, I must declare to you:  
Transcendental Thoreau, Pantheist McKenna,  
Sixties Trippy Tim,  
that your peaceful, care-free culture conscience—  
yea. The life white-beard wigs wailed a whim—  
these ideas are not only digging out of a grave,  
They lie within a malcontented beast.

## *Breaking Hearts by Caleb Park*

Love is murder,  
this men have found to be true,  
for it is the prevalent cause of heart malady and disorder.  
Its casualties are many and survivors few,  
yet we can't help but fall in love.  
Intoxicating beauty, irresistible intellect,  
of these one can never get enough.  
Women just as easily fall for dialect,  
hearts break and mend,  
just as men tell all  
of the lives that begin and end,  
of the tide that will rise and fall.  
I do not mean to dishonor love's majesty,  
there is no greater rapture than the touch of a lover.  
I simply speak of man's strange tragedy,  
that what we hold dearest ourselves, we sell cheapest to one another.



*Energia Ardente*

*Amy Detzel*

## *Gone at Sixteen by Tasha Hartley*

Sweet 16...  
New driver's permit...  
New driving tales...  
High school, friends and boys.

A little headache starts,  
followed by the symptoms of a simple cold,  
taking simple medicine, that doesn't work.  
The fever spikes.

Guardians on vacation...  
Only a 16 year old boy to help, to comfort...  
Morning comes...  
Foam is at her mouth like a mad dog...  
shaking uncontrollably,  
a full fledged seizure.

Sweet 16...  
Hospitalized, no final good-byes...  
No final high school memories,  
Gone forever,  
a simple headache...  
My head is killing me.

Sitting alone,  
my party...  
Family.  
No friends,  
no one danced.  
Not even my crush showed up.  
LOSER.

When will the next party be?  
I gotta call her...  
I gotta tell her...  
I told him I liked him...  
She'd be proud...  
I dial the number...  
I can't. She won't answer.

YOU DID THIS TO ME!

Why her?  
Why 16?  
What could she have been?  
What could we have done?

Sweet 16?  
Tormented 16.  
Hellish 16.  
Short 16.  
Gone at 16



*Hot Sauce and Garlic Salt*

*Nicholas Avlonitis*

## Appalachia 'Shine by Rachael Estudante

It took me ten minutes to gather the nerve to get out of my car and onto the Hawkins' doorstep. I knocked twice. I wasn't sure if this was supposed to be a date, but my nerves were prepared.

Joe answered the door. He gave me the once over and raised a skeptical eyebrow. I blushed. My tube top, jeans, and flip flops didn't seem to fit his idea of fishing attire.

"C'mon in, I gotta grab ma bait and tackle." He motioned a large lazy hand to follow.

I followed and was intercepted by his mother and sister. Both of them were hearty and unkempt women. I caught them giving my general appearance a skeptical eye. The only lines I'd cast were from the side of a bridge, so, for all I knew, my outfit would do. I moved to meet Joe in his room, trying to calm the color in my cheeks. He gathered up his rod and bait, then turned to me.

"Ya wanna drink tonight?" It wasn't a question so much as a dare. I was always down for a good dare.

"Sure."

"Alrighty. Follow me, buddy." He chuckled and disappeared down the hall.

I followed him out the back door and down into a root cellar. The room was stuffy, dark and cold. The only light came through the open cellar door and glinted off several shelves of homemade canned goods, making jars of carrots and beans look like pickled entrails. I could hardly see. Apparently, it was just enough light for Joe to work. I saw his shadow methodically working while glass clanked.

"A jug or a jar?" he asked.

"...What?" I was lost.

"Of moonshine. Should I fill a jug or a jar?"

"Moonshine?" I asked in disbelief.

"You've never had moonshine, have ya?" He was pleased. It was a dare. "We'll go with a jar. I don't want you to get sick."

"Where in the Hell did you get moonshine?"

"We make it. Where else? Ya know the Durandetta's farm 'tween here and Clearfield? We trade 'em corn in exchange for a couple jugs of whiskey ev'ry year. Sometimes they throw us a couple cuts from a cow they butcher, too."

I didn't reply, but instead thought over his response. Moonshine. I'd figured the whole moonshine gig was isolated in the more Southern states and had basically died out after prohibition. Apparently not. I suppose we were in Curwensville, which was nestled in the Appalachians.

Joe screwed the lid onto a jar, and we headed to my car. He gave me directions to our fishing spot, and we headed out.

"This won't do," he tsk'ed and replaced my ambient indie mix CD with one he'd brought along. We listened to Merle Haggard the rest of the car ride.

"Here, here. Turn HERE," he commanded. I was caught off guard. I didn't see the turn off until I scanned twice. The road was hidden by thick trees. I took the road and followed it about a mile, flinching at every rut my undercarriage endured.

He guffawed and teased, "Be a lot easier to get down this road if we were in my dad's truck. I guess you can always get out and push if we get stuck." I scoffed and rolled my eyes at this. After ten minutes, we reached a point where we had to leave the car behind.

"We got 'bout a mile ta walk. Grab all yer stuff."

I grabbed our poles while he snagged his bulging knapsack. He led me down an overgrown, paved path. Trying to keep up, I stumbled over rocks and fallen tree limbs, ducked under unruly branches and danced over mud puddles. I was beginning to see why my outfit had been scrutinized.

"Here we are," he said, pleased, as he plopped down his knapsack on an ancient concrete slab that looked over the Susquehanna. "It's the old Lumber City Bridge. There used to be a town here. Part of the town's under the river. The bridge fell out and this's all that's left. Perfect place to make a fire and fish. Now before we do that, let's get some firewood before it's dark."

I was assigned the kindling while he took on huge logs and boughs. We collected a decent pile, enough – he said – to keep the fire burning for a good five hours. He turned to making the fire while I took a seat on a ledge left behind from the bridge. I watched intently.

He fashioned the kindling into a teepee and lit it, walking me through the process of how to make a fire "the right way." After the kindling had caught, he added larger pieces of wood, which gave me time to admire his figure.

He was 6'5" and built. Dying sunlight accentuated his sinewy arms. The firelight lit his stern face and gave a healthy glow to his dishwater hair. Dark blue eyes were made navy by growing shadows, and the slight bumps of the bridge of his nose were silhouetted by sunset. His brow furrowed in concentration while his muscles tightened as he snapped thick branches to feed the flames. He was into this fire.

"All right. Let's fish," he said more to himself than to me after the fire was blazing. By then, it was dusk, and he baited his hook using firelight, though he did it so naturally that I believed he could've done it blindfolded. He stood up to cast into the river, then sat down on the concrete slab's ledge. He patted the spot next to him, so I came and sat too, but not before sending my own line sailing halfway across the river.

We sat in silence for a while. The fire cracked and popped. It was only late April, so the warm which washed over our backs was welcome. Our feet dangled about ten feet over the languid, shallow water: ancient Susquehanna in no hurry to meet up with the Chesapeake. Her healthy moss green hue had faded quickly

when light had disappeared. However, if you looked closely enough, you could see the reflection of the first stars. The surface was smooth and regal, as if thousands of years of flowing had earned her the right to settle her rapids and relax on her journey. The only disturbances came from the occasional hungry fish.

On the opposite bank, three mountains squatted against the sky, cradling the last pinks of sunset among their weathered peaks. They reminded me of grumpy old men who might snap at you for trespassing onto their property. The darkness that lay over them intimidated me. I noticed now that except for the fire, Joe and I were steeped in darkness. My mind took to conjuring up what sorts of things one might encounter in the woods, at night, in the middle of nowhere.

Joe must have sensed my discomfort, for he teased, "Ya all right ov'r there? We can crack op'n that jar a 'shine. It'll help loos'n us up." He fumbled in his knapsack and presented the mason jar. The lid scraped as he spun it off with a quick flick. He took a generous swig then thrust it at me. I grabbed it, taking the dare with a straight face. The alcohol kicked in my mouth and blazed a trail down my esophagus.

Apparently, I hadn't maintained my straight face too well. He delighted in this and let out a triumphant laugh, then took the jar back. He took two more pulls then thrust it back towards me. Just as I reached for the jar, a shapeless animal let out a menacing cry. I started, almost dropping the jar in mid exchange. He roared with laughter. "Don't get out much, do ya?"

"... No. Not out here. Don't tease me," I chided.

"Sorry, sorry. I gotta have a little fun with you bein' all freaked out, ya know?" His smile was infectious and further warmed by firelight. "C'mere," he said and put his arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer to him. His lips touched my forehead and lingered there for a bit.

He turned abruptly and instinctively, snatching his pole. He let out a whoop as he began to reel in a fish. I smiled to myself as I watched him intently and took another swill. He caught my smile.

"Told ya I could show you a good time out here, din't I? Yer havin' a pretty good time, ain't ya?" He nudged my shoulder. I nodded. He was right. This was the first time I'd actually taken the opportunity to enjoy the Appalachians, and I loved it.

Joe reeled in his catfish with vigor, swinging it out of the water, within inches of my face. I would've recoiled, had my attention not been on the full moon, heaving its way into the night sky, flattered by a thousand stars, winking coyly.



Joe Cigarettes

Helen Rogers



Untitled

Helen Rogers

## *Blue by Regina Gonzalez*

Outside a farmer's market,  
purple black guts lay everywhere.

Like bombs filled with sweet liquid,  
the blueberries burst under careless children's feet.

They bleed out onto the dirt like a fallen comrade  
leaving behind a dirty pool of thick, sticky  
death.

Bright and luminous like a downed helicopter in a swamp  
gleaming in the Vietnamese sun,  
flat and deflated like dead jungle animals left to rot.

The death of these midnight orbs is vicious guerilla warfare,  
a murder with no clues.

But they stay silent like the hunted,  
crumpled and hiding, hoping their side wins



Untitled

Andrew McCune

## Twelve Steps Down by Shannon Caitlin Glynn

I walked down these streets with confidence once. My shoes pounded against pavement, my eyes luminous with the lights of buildings punctuating downtown Philadelphia. I was well-known here, comfortable, a corner dope dealer catering to most of Philadelphia under a fake name. I stood hooded on these streets, the little white girl with big brown eyes and basketball shorts hanging down to her ankles on Kensington and Somerset, Bridge and Hawthorne, 52<sup>nd</sup> and Market. I handed out hard drugs to the already hardened, stuck stacks down my pants alongside syringes, rolled papers and extra dope and wet that I saved for myself because, I gotta get my own fucking fix too, you know?

Later, when the sun closed its eyes and the squad cars came out, they asked what a girl like me was doing in this kind of neighborhood. I just shook my head and told 'em, "I'm lost officer," and they opened their car doors and drove me to the closest el station while I popped pills in their backseat, and when I got out, they said, "A girl like you should be more careful."

I nodded and turned away, patting my full pockets, laughing.

You see, I took your money to feed my own damn addictions. Your 3<sup>rd</sup> shifts and nine-to-fives went to my own 'good cause' you know what I mean? I sold your children a bag of oregano and cornstarch for fifty bucks a pop to facilitate my own needs. Coke, Bud, Speed, Horse, and Perks. The good shit too, the pure shit, the real shit. You don't know drugs the way I know drugs, and you can't tell whiskeys apart by the way they smell. You haven't been where I have, on York Street a block from York-Dauphin Station with a cool barrel pressed against the back of your head and a gritty voice against your eardrum.

My city breathes, the cracks in the sidewalk swallowing the city smoke. Philadelphia told me that I was wasting my life on her corners, that I was destroying my talent, that my worth had gone down some. She told me that I am Philadelphia, not Harlem or Detroit or Chicago or the Bronx. I am Philadelphia, and I matter. In the summer-time winds I heard her, on 22<sup>nd</sup> and Mifflin, slamming dope inside a dirty bathroom, and when I came out, raindrops were falling on my shoulders from her smog-swelled skies, and she cries, "Why, child? Why?" but I have ignored her until now.

Now, I roam Philadelphia with fingers furred into fists, pushed into my pockets. I have left my former life for good months ago. Today, I walk past those widowed windows of broken-down buildings and boarded-up houses that are home to many I used to serve. Past customers crawl back begging me, "Baby girl, you got some shit? Pretty girl, you got some shit to sell?"

And I say, "Nah, man, no more of that shit." And he says he's packing heat.

I say, "Fuck you." And do I miss it? Do I miss the smoke clouding my lungs, lifting needles from walk-in clinics, the rush of open-air sales and the dope sickness when I ran dry? Sometimes.

I stand on 17<sup>th</sup> and Locust outside St. Marks Church at 9pm on Friday night, back against the cool brownstone, staring past the red, rusting cast iron gates. I speak to no one but watch them puff their cigarettes, and they smile and laugh and amble into the church slowly and deliberately, chatting and speaking of sobriety. I stay put, with my head hanging from the neck, shoulders hunched and entire body curled forward towards the grass. My hands are tight on the nape of my neck, frigid

fingers forced into flesh. I close my eyes and push the cries crawling up my throat back down into my nauseous core, and the nails of my hampered roars rake my insides the whole way. Philadelphia is nothing but big blurs of bright lights and shades of grey from where I am standing. Philadelphia is dark alleys littered with broken crack pipes. She is abandoned houses with my signature in spray paint on the walls, dirty syringes on the floors, lines of blow off my finger on a Saturday afternoon and a bottle of vodka in my high school locker. My city looms over me. Right now, Philadelphia is just my closet in which I have shoved more than one skeleton and buried them deep.

Strangers make their way down Locust Street; high school students savor their first taste of Philadelphia night life; college students, home on a semester break, walk in groups into the bars on Spruce and Cypress Streets. Husbands with their strong arms around their wives' waists pat pregnant bellies; old couples out for a night on the town head to the Academy of Music or the Kimmel Center.

While I watch these people, I make the minutes stretch like the drugs, scrape the bowl and smoke the resin, shove my fingers into the crevice of the dimebags for the very last of the powder. I pace the winding path to St. Marks, giving my failure some elasticity before I am snapped back to my own cruel reality. I watch these people live out the life I could have had, the one which feels so incredibly out of reach from this five-foot-nothing whirlwind of a girl.

The last of the smokers on the steps of St. Marks file into the church. Reluctantly, I follow them inside. I take one last look at my city. I know I will be coming out of this a different person. Philadelphia looks different through the windows. Philadelphia is full of second, third, and fourth chances. She is songs of opportunity yet to be sung. Her neon lights are dimmed, her corners secure, and I am safe. She is forgiving, my city, as long as I can find it in me to forgive myself. At this moment I resolve to not give up on myself as Philadelphia has not given up on me. I sit in the back after pouring a cup of black coffee, listening, listening, to every goddamn word these people say because I'm going to turn this life around.

*A Soul is Not Enough by Regina Gonzalez*

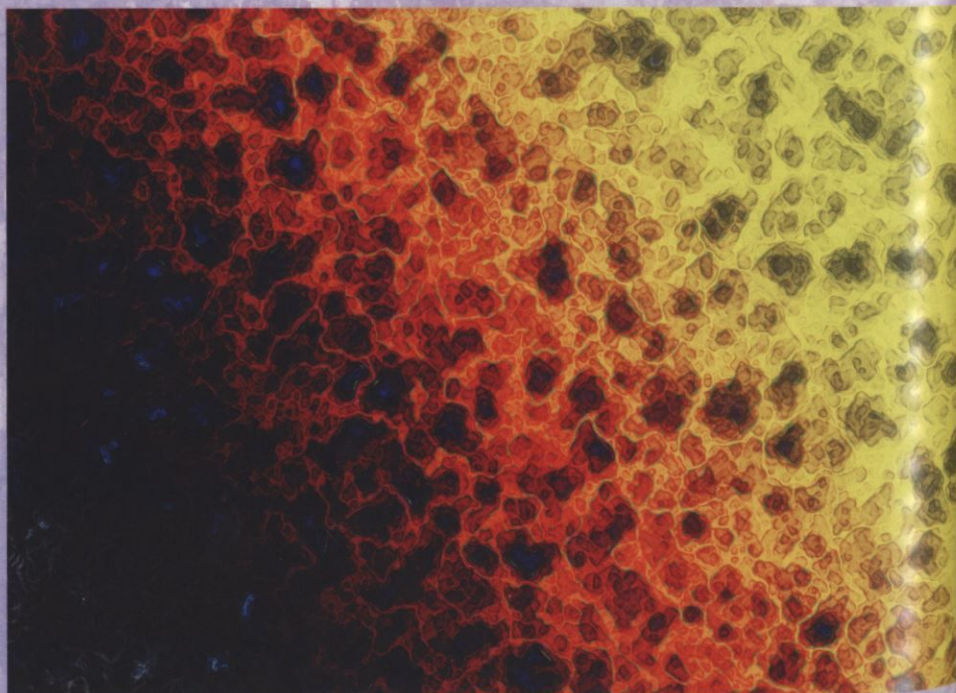
Kiss the overheated lips of death  
too soon  
leave me dry heaving  
guilt and regret in a lonely  
grave like parking lot

Give to me the gift  
of a calendar  
filled with searing "what ifs"

Have your hand  
go limp in mine  
and let me inherit  
that repeated scene of agony

Let broken ribs of emptiness  
plunge their way into my lungs  
and leave me broken  
beside you

Just please don't leave me  
myself



*Untitled*

*Kane Bjalme*

*I Love You by Regina Gonzalez*

Frustration wrapped up  
in a neat little  
five-foot-something package

Misplaced bitterness is  
a flash of dark hair and  
darker eyes as she  
storms away after another  
"mistake" you made

Words aren't tools here  
they are weapons  
weapons hurled at him  
for the sole purpose  
of hurt

Depth and reason  
are lost to the outsider  
so let us in  
you master of words

Shed some light  
and let those gleaming  
weapons of yours shine



*Untitled*

*Sarah Prewitt*

## *Silence by Helena Blackwell*

The poem I never bothered to write---  
all harsh words and gutteral utterances took its stead.  
I wanted to portray the rainbowed prisms made plain upon your face,  
each human interaction another chance to learn compassion.  
Light pouring forth within me  
from the blackened cracks between which  
no natural meanness could decay,  
nor runes predict a fearful outcome.

Light, illuminating cobwebs and floating dust motes.  
Show me where to shake them loose,  
free me from the bitter bits of life,  
free the pulp from the rind,  
freeing tartness, dripping down a wayward trickle;  
my heart bursts forth to mend.

Meanwhile dishes mold and mildew in a murky sink,  
and hungry bill collectors clamor for my empty bank.  
Kitchen witch scavenging an empty fridge,  
collapsing, exhausted, on an empty bed.  
List of things left undone always longer than the  
tasks I'm failing, losing to my limitations.

Weary, I wonder where my will has gone  
to prove a Zen-like fondness  
for all things harsh and complicated,  
all things mundane and basic.  
I craved fairytales and princesses and dreamed of rainbow kisses,  
fantasies of angelic embraces,  
my elven wings useless to withstand these earthly winds,  
marooned as every dawn begins.

I awaited something grand to take me to a better dimension,  
music, love, or just hard working,  
or the goddess in a fiery chariot.  
But no white knight ever came,  
no divine directives, or ruby shoes to click together.

Oh, October with your soggy weather  
coating unjust and just and me.  
I am but a simple beast,  
burdened with a mental twist,  
were I a bear that could burrow in your rocky breast.  
Finding comfort in the cold and craggy respite like every tender bulb,  
heat-seeking shoots pushing slowly up  
a tunnel much too long to see the light of May,  
biological magic summoned all the same.

The seed must wait to find its time.  
No guiding words spell the safest hour to reveal its budding face,  
and when wolfish winds subside,  
no guarantee to keep it from the rabbit's gullet---  
just a ruthless trust  
and programmed thirst  
for the life source that will nourish  
but eventually rot its fragrance  
in the detritus that shrouds another's spore.

Unfortunate we walk these ways without a map,  
pitfalls plenty, ankle-twisting rocks await a tangled misstep.  
An eyelid's wicked weight,  
heavy footfalls sighing on the carpet,  
old cranky planks bemoaning my existence,  
the whining of my heart as it echoes through the distance,  
awaiting some chance as if to sublimate.

This is why good Christians pray to Jesus  
and heathen Muslims sing to Allah;  
but my pagan witchcraft pointing north,  
four directions sire my wishful wind  
and feed my lust for life.  
Their fairytales have failed,  
the air and fire, rain and earth  
must somehow be enough.

But what a bitter battle,  
to fall in love with all this earthly stuff.



## *Vagabonding by Jared Conti*

No longer am I a drifter  
making my own path,  
along the highways,  
the by-ways,  
the dusty, cracked roads  
leading me nowhere.

No longer am I content  
hopping a freight train  
of boxcar blues  
to all points (three pointing back)  
between here and there,  
unknown.

Give up these ghosts,  
muttering ceaselessly,  
wavering in and out of focus.  
They make for strange bedfellows,  
business partners, dinner guests.  
Let me dine in peace!

Hungry for something  
other than baked beans  
or a tin of sardines,  
stomach turning as we  
flip-flop,  
jump the tracks.

Trading in my handkerchief and stick,  
all I can pack on my back.  
Maybe a two-piece luggage set  
small enough for both  
to carry on.  
Can't give all of it up  
and I'm not about to let  
anyone else get a hold of it  
at the baggage claim.

No, where I'm headed,  
all you need  
is that ticket.

Only...  
I'm still looking for my seat.



*Untitled*

*Lee Timko*

*Frail Little Writer by Adam Russo*

I find comfort here with my cheek on your thigh.  
Seven years of laughter, tears, and a baby go by.  
What shall I do but gently, contentedly sigh?  
I look up, and you twirl my curl in those long,  
Oh, so strong fingers of a distant writer.  
Have you been here the whole time, I wonder?  
Or, like always, shall I leave the room and recite her  
Another draft you promise has a happy ending?  
I put her to bed, return, and hear the speed  
Of your fingers sprinting across the keys.  
Do you have time for me?  
You swivel, hang that jet black hair to the side,  
Crack half a smile, but then you're back,  
Back to pounding the fuck out of those keys.  
Come pound the fuck out of me.  
I don't say it, for I know the routine.  
So I lay back, crack open Irving,  
And wait.  
Wait for you to empty that unnerving sorrow,  
Wait for that lamp to go off,  
Wait for you to go off on top of me,  
And wait, finally, for your little ear  
To rest just above my heart.



*Untitled*

*Kelli McCloskey*



*Wood*

*Zachariah Young*

## All the World Should be Gay by Joshua Miller

I caught the rarest of rarities while staying in New York City. It was like any other morning. I woke up, took a shower, brushed my teeth, put on clothes, and walked to the dreaded Mecca of human sardines: the Metro Subway Station.

Rushing.

Pushing.

Spanish.

Chinese... Korean.

I-pod.

Britney Spears.

Linkin Park.

Crowded train.

Driving Ambition.

No stopping.

I had been living in the city for a month and had become accustomed to this new world of mine—a world of disconnect, what's in vogue, and no glee in sight.

And then it happened. I was riding in a subway car that had between ten to fifteen people in it. I sat next to a man who appeared to be a few years older than me. He seemed peculiar. But then again, peculiar and strange people come every square foot of every mile of the Big Apple. (As they say, "normal" is a relative term). However, this guy was different somehow. He wore a hot pink shirt with a logo that read "Jesus' Bitch". Normal. His pants were lime-colored and cut up (quite significantly, I might add). Normal. His shoes were mismatched: one with an image of Tupac and the other of the Great Buddha. Questionable, but still normal.

I saw it. It was on his face. Not the tattoos overtaking his neck and traveling up to his cheek bones. Not the piercings on his ears, nose, eyebrows, and bottom lip. It was the shape of his mouth. He was smiling. I could not believe it. He was smiling? Really? After all, no one—*no one*—actually smiles and acts all happy-like in public anywhere, let alone in NYC.

Interestingly enough, I could not stop staring at this kooky customer. He finally caught me looking at him, and I thought I was in trouble. *You never make eye contact with anyone on the train.*

His eyes were locked on mine. "How are you doing?" he asked me without reservation. No one had ever asked me that before while I was in the city.

"I'm fine," I said. "How are you?" I dared to continue the conversation. I immediately thought maybe he would turn out to be one those people who you'd run into in a public setting and wouldn't stop talking.

"I'm doing well. Thanks for asking." It was a simple reply. No hesitation. Not too much enthusiasm. It was a simple, yet pleasant, reply... I just couldn't believe it.

After we exchanged pleasantries, he just sat there: *smiling*. And a funny thing happened. "Jesus' Bitch" smiled and made eye contact with this woman who was struggling to keep her baby under control. And she started to smile. Then he smiled and made a funny little gesture at the baby. And the baby began to smile and loudly laugh. That caused a group of tired looking men who were standing up and speaking indistinct Spanish to smile and chuckle. Across from me was a very elderly, wiry Asian woman facing the window. When she turned her head around, he smiled at her, and they began to speak to each other in Chinese. She smiled and laughed.

As the train came to a stop, the old lady exited the car as she exchanged goodbyes with him. A group of three young guys came in. He smiled at them. One of them turned the other way and said to his friend, "That's gay."

Overhearing what one of the three stooges had said, my colleague's smile quickly disappeared as he said, "Yeah, it is." They simply brushed his comment off and went back to their business.

When the next stop came, my colleague began to exit while smiling, saying, "Enjoy the rest of your day."

Before I could even reply to him, the doors closed. That was last time I ever saw him.

I thought about that word: *gay*. It's come to have so many meanings. It's come from being an expression of happiness, to a definition of sexuality, to synonymous with stupid. What about its original meaning: an expression of happiness? When did it become *gay* to be gloriously *gay*? To be deliriously joyful? What's wrong with being happy and showing it?

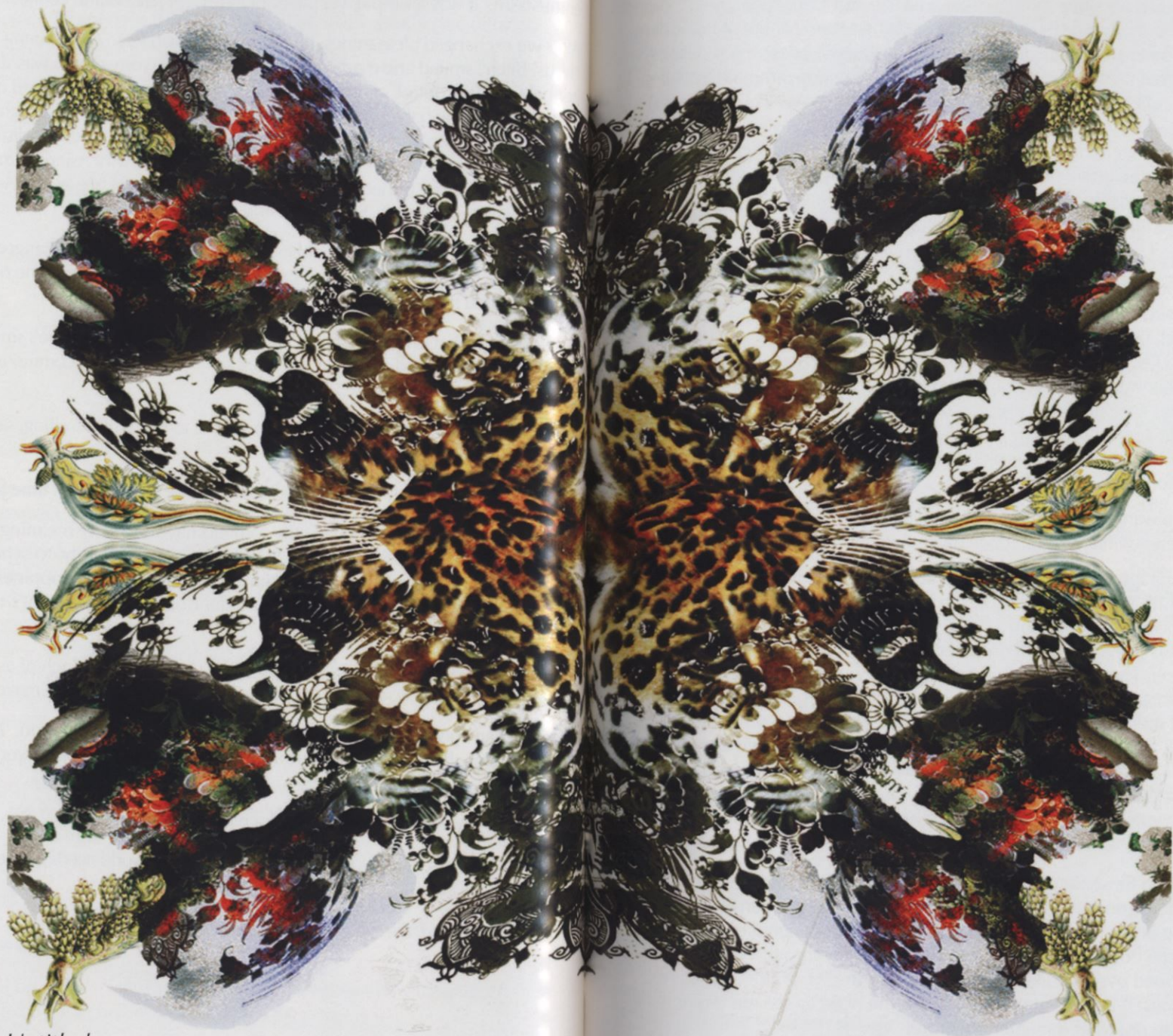
We say that this world is cruel. But we make up this world. Each of us affects one another. So, since we're all here together, we might as well try to make the best of it.

Maybe I can't give you \$5. Maybe I don't have any food to give you. Maybe I can't fix everything that you're going through. Maybe I can't understand you, and you can't understand me.

But a smile could make all the difference in this world.

So be gay. Be merry. Spread the love. God knows our world needs gay people, now more than ever.

*Because, in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.*



Untitled

Francis Wertz

## Finding Grace by Aimee Walton

The world is always silent in the winter, just like that Christmas song, "Silent Night." Something about snow drifts down and quiets the sounds of life. It meanders like big, puffy cotton balls and gently coats the treetops tonight. I descend the stairs, carefully gripping the rail. Why they've built stairs all the way down the hill outside, snaking between the college dorms is beyond me, but that's not what's on my mind. There is a twinge in my belly like a butterfly gently opening and closing its wings. My hand instinctively rests there as if to capture the fragile creature. And then, the pain comes. A cramp rounds the curve of my hips, collides with my belly button, and rests there like an anvil crushing the butterfly. I'm lost in the snow globe world, and the butterfly, when the hush is pierced by a raw voice stripped naked by betrayal.

"Mary!" I jerk a little, my feet almost skidding off the edge of the step I perch on. A man stands at the base of the steep hill, looking up at me from beneath his hat. A scarf conceals most of his face, leaving only his bright red cheeks and the tip of his nose exposed. His cap has tilted down, revealing only little slits of his eyes. Tears crystallize on his raw skin. Suddenly, I realize he is the very man I was rushing to meet. I want desperately to run to him and step into his arms, but I'm not sure he'll welcome me, so I carefully pick my way down to the bottom. His dark figure hunches in stark relief against the fuzzy white landscape. The pang in my tummy has turned into a full blown ache. He looks down on me now, even though his shoulders are rolled forward.

"What do you want?" he asks in a practiced tone. His arms cross tightly in front of his chest over his heavy winter jacket. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Several months ago, before my encounter at the bottom of the stairs, I didn't know what grace was. It sort of crept up on me the way I suppose it always does because you never know you need it until you find a hand, open and waiting, offering it to you. I used to think grace was just a nice word my parents liked to roll around their mouths because it tasted sweet. They were religious people. They went to church every weekend, prayed before every meal, made sure the Bible lay open on top of the piano as if there was no dust gathered there. They thought they taught me so well. "Never drink alcohol, Mary," they'd admonish me. "Dancing is just one romantic step away from sex." Dad would stare me down sternly, his brows furrowed, his rough, strong hands clasped before him. I'd nod my head, all the while struggling to be good enough. Mom would step in then, put her arm around me, and lay her well-meaning hand on my shoulder. They had praying hands.

"She'd never do those things, Donald," Mom would say, "She knows better." She'd smile proudly down on me. I'd bow my head slightly and try to convince myself it was the easiest thing in the world to forget the burning taste of alcohol on my tongue, pretend I'd never let the bubbly liquid slide like fire down my throat. When I left for college, freedom slipped over me like intoxication, and the weight of their stares couldn't reach me. I just wish they were here to see me now, to see me regret it all so they don't think I'm not their daughter anymore.

A few months ago, on the second day of my senior year of college, the morning summer air was just beginning to whisper promises of fall. It wanted to play with my hair and chase me down the sidewalk in great gusts, and I decided it

was the perfect day for hot chocolate. As I stepped into line behind a myriad of other students in Starbucks, I felt someone nudge my back. I turned around, expecting to see a friend. Instead, he stood there. He jostled closer to me, his eyes on an open book. "I'm sorry," he mumbled absentmindedly. I accepted my warm cup and stepped outside, back into the teasing breeze. He appeared beside me as I crossed the street. We stepped into my first class of the day together, and he sat next to me.

"Do you have an extra pencil?" he asked. His voice was muffled, stuffed somewhere deep in his open backpack as he rummaged through it.

"Just a pen," I said, finally taking the time to look at him. His chin had a dimple. He smiled in thanks and his flinty eyes crinkled at the corners in a friendly way. He tossed his head to reveal a high forehead beneath his unruly brown hair. As he leaned forward to retrieve the pen from me, his breath smelled like caramel, chocolate, and a cool wind.

"I'm unprepared," he shrugged sheepishly. "This isn't my normal kind of class anyway. I don't know anything about art. I'm just grabbing credits where I can." He looked around, his gaze resting on the incoming students. They were art students, I could just tell. They had aloof stares and tight, black jeans. Dangly jewelry dripped from their wrists and ears. They held themselves like solitary geniuses. He didn't belong, in his khaki pants and button-down black shirt.

"What's your major?" I offered the standard question to a new college acquaintance. I can't figure out if we're proud of who we are or just hiding behind a passive piece of information.

"Religious studies," he flashed me his dimpled, crinkled grin again as if knowing I'd assume all kinds of things about him based on that one fact. His fingers were long and capable, and I wondered if they were praying hands.

"I'm Mary," I offered. "I'm studying art history."

"Ryan." He opened his mouth to say something else, but the professor cleared her throat and began to hand out the syllabus. She clicked off the harsh lights and started a slide show that explained the major art movements from the 1800s to the present. A hush fell over the classroom as her voice droned on like bees humming softly. Heat pooled between Ryan and me like molasses, and when he handed the pen back to me at the end of the class, I smiled.

"Keep it. You might need it sometime." I slipped it back into his hands, burning like an ember in his palm.

Sometimes it's easy to forget time as it sidles by, leaving you in a wake of half moments and snippets of laughter and gentle voices. Days that I spent with him aren't concrete to me. They're ideas that flash before me in tiny epiphanies when I suddenly remember the good and the bad.

"I'm a Christian," he informed me one day, about a month after we met. We sat inside Starbucks, at one of those little tables by the window. The woods outside had turned golden and copper, and leaves crunched underfoot, permeating

the air with the burnt scent of fall. His fingers wrapped around the warm cup in front of him as he looked directly into my eyes.

"So am I," I hastily replied. A little part of me, somewhere down deep, coiled into a little black knot and squeezed hard. I never meant to lie to him. Even I knew that church attendance doesn't make a Christian. My eyes flitted back to the window and focused on the morphing forest.

"You are? That's great! It's just that, I really like you, Mary. And I'm not sure I could date someone who doesn't share this kind of faith with me. It's so much a part of me..." He trailed off, probably sensing something lost. His silence pulled me back.

"My parents brought me up in church," I offered. That was a complete truth. The Bible on the piano lay open, its pages untouched and unloved in my mind's eye, and the knot grew tighter. I smiled brightly, though, and chuckled a little. How strange that all along I'd been running from my parents' religion, and there I was caught up in his. He reached his hand across the table and brushed mine softly, like a hint of spring.

"I didn't want to come on too strong about this, but it's so important to me." His grey eyes searched mine, hope swelling like a wave behind them.

"No, I understand. It's instilled in you. Kind of like it's hammered into you from a young age." My father's hard-working hands flashed through my mind.

He recoiled just a bit at that idea. "I wouldn't say it was hammered into me. I chose this, Mary."

I smiled gently and nodded. "It's a decision." The coffee pots in the background purred and the steam hissed as it rose up, up towards the ceiling, looking for escape that just wasn't there.

My very first kiss was like sharing air. I was sixteen years old and my parents had no idea I even noticed that boys had resonant voices and sinewy muscles. They didn't know that I'd realized boys might be ugly the first time you ever noticed them, but that the second and the third and the fourth time, they turned into alluring mysteries. Travis had taken my hand that day behind the bleachers after school and leaned into me. His breath was tangy on my cheek, and then his lips touched mine and his mouth opened slowly. He pulled the air out of my lungs and breathed it in. It wasn't as romantic as I thought it would be. Actually, it felt awkward like a fawn trying to find her footing. I thought that's how kissing would always be. I was wrong. Of course, I knew that long before I met Ryan, but Ryan was different than all the rest anyway. His nose always slipped along my cheek before our lips met. His hand always curled into my hair just a little, as if he wanted to pull me closer even though he couldn't possibly. He never stole my breath. He offered his own.

A month had gone by since I told him my lie over coffee and autumn leaves. We sprawled on his bed, quietly watching a movie. When I moved into his arms, he didn't stop me. His body made a question mark around mine, his nose buried in my black, curly hair.

"You smell like... like... I don't know. Just really good."

I giggled low in my throat, my heart thrumming against my ribs slowly. "It's shampoo." Flickering images projected from the TV fluttered over us, resting momentarily on my knees, my hands, my face, his eyes. When I turned to face him, our bodies pressed together, our noses touching. He looked into my chocolate eyes, his own on fire.

"I can't. We can't." His voice was smooth and husky. "It's not right, Mary." I slipped my hand under the loophole in his jeans and rested it on his hipbone, my hand burning its imprint there. He closed his eyes. His eyelashes rested on his smooth cheeks like a shadow, like a doubt, but he never said no again.

Have you ever noticed how reality shocks you when it slams into you like a train wreck? Sure, you've always known that if you don't study for that test in Economics, you're going to fail epically. Naturally, when you make love and forget where you are and how it all works and that you're playing with life, you're going to find yourself sitting on the toilet one day with a pregnancy test in your hand. The breath will go out of you, and a chill that has nothing to do with the changing seasons will wrap its fingers around your stomach and squeeze with all its strength. That's how I felt, I mean, three weeks later when the little pink plus sign popped up on the plastic screen. And then, I couldn't move, I couldn't think, I couldn't bear to cry because that would mean that the next moment had arrived, and my life would go on and it would all be true. Before I knew it, I was banging on his dorm door and praying that his roommate wasn't there. When he opened the door, my tears made him swim before me. I opened my mouth and out it came, and the guilt came too. *Daddy, I thought, I didn't even dance.*

"I'm going to get rid of it." I said "it" because I didn't want the baby to be real. I said this flippantly because I wanted to pretend the tears weren't drowning me right there in his doorway.

"What? Get rid of the baby?!" His mouth hung open and he backed away from me as if I'd given him a resounding smack. "No! You can't do that. We've already done enough. My God, Mary... I knew this was wrong." As he sat heavily on his bed, he let out a gasp of air and rested his head in his hands. I glanced out the window, not wanting to look at him. Snow fell gently against the pane. Why does it snow in November if it's not really winter yet? What's the rush? "Mary? Did you hear me?" I tore my eyes away from the wonderland outside and focused on him. "I said I won't let you."

"Really? Well, that's brave of you. What about me? I'm the one who has to carry this. I'm the one who has to take care of this. What do you think is gonna happen now? I can't just call up my parents and announce that they're going to be grandparents!" I had stomped into the room and slammed the door shut behind me. My heart broke little bits at a time, leaving ragged edges for him to stumble over. The tears started again, and I sagged against the closed door.

He stood up and wobbled towards me. "I'm not going to just leave you with this. I'll help you. We have to make it right." Fear lit in his eyes and spread like wildfire to me, but he took my hand and led me to the bed where it had all begun. We stood there, looking down on it as if afraid to touch it.

"I'm not going to tell my parents, Ryan. They don't need to know." I looked away, looked down, looked at the snow that fell inevitably.

Why is it okay to kill when what you're killing is as teeny tiny as a fern's frond, but still alive? That's what my parents always told me: abortion is murder. "Babies have little fingers at one month, Mary," Mom would say softly, as if imagining me in her own belly. Here, she'd shake her head solemnly. "I hate to say it, but girls who have abortions are hopeless. They're on their way to Hell in a hand basket."

Two weeks after I told Ryan I was going to have an abortion, my mom's words rattled around in my mind, as I shuffled through the white powder that coated the sidewalks, despite the best efforts to clear them. Planned Parenthood offices tend to crop up around colleges. I guess I'm the reason why. I was layered in woolen gloves, a fleecy sweater, and my puffy winter coat. I'm not sure if I was trying to protect myself or the little thing growing inside me. I plodded along, determined to face my fate, when it stopped me in my tracks. There was a Nativity scene nestled between the CVS and Subway. It settled back between the buildings as if ashamed to be among the storefront windows, which already held Santas, garlands, and Christmas trees. A feeble light glowed softly, illuminating the faces of Mary, Joseph, and their precious Jesus. You'd think they'd be plastic and definite and holy. But they weren't. They were lowly, hardly worth the trouble. Maybe the owner was embarrassed that his Jesus was missing the tip of one of his fingers. They unfurled like pink petals and reached for Mary, even though Joseph was closer. Mary's visage was smudged with a bit of mud, and Joseph looked the worse for wear from his journey to Bethlehem. But there they glowed, waiting for the three kings from the east. And then, I realized that Jesus wasn't reaching for Mary. He was reaching for me. His little hand opened, and he waited for me to take his offering: grace. Tentatively, I stretched my hand out and touched his cool, little fingers and took his gift. It smoldered warm and crimson in my hand and tumbled its way into my heart. I turned around and walked away, then, back to the university. My hands trembled inside my warm gloves. My heart thumped against the cage that held it tightly. I gasped for breath with each step, my own fingers unfurled over my still-flat tummy.

"Hello?" came my mother's voice from the other side of the phone. I had just returned from my wintry walk, and I had to tell them the news.

"Mom?" I heard some shuffling, an attempt to get comfortable. I sat on the edge of my bed, my knees curled up, the cell phone pressed up close to my cheek, and I took a deep breath. "Mom, I have to talk to you about something."

"Ok. What's wrong? Mary, did you fail that test the other day? You have to be careful with your grades. I don't want people thinking you're not a good girl. I know you don't really want to flunk. You know, you just have to try harder."

I cut her off there, and with trepidation, exhaled. "Mom, I'm pregnant." It came out in a little squeak because I was trying so hard to keep from crying again. There was silence on the other end of the line. I stood up and walked over to my window, next to the heater, and leaned my heavy head against the pane. "Mom?"

"You're what? I must have heard you wrong. It sounded like you said you were... pregnant?" Her voice choked off in disgust or sorrow. I couldn't tell. "How

could you do this, Mary? Who is he? What are you going to do? I thought we taught you better than this!" The words toppled from her mouth and careened towards me. *How could I?*

"Leah? What's wrong? What's all the shouting for? Did she fail her test?" I heard my dad's voice in the background. Whispers and gasps reached my ear in little spurts, and then he took the phone from her. "You're no daughter of ours, Mary." His tone was bitter and lost and breathless all at once. "You're no daughter of ours."

Sometimes sorrow is so big that it cracks your chest open and bleeds, and you have to curl up into a ball just to hold yourself together. I dropped the phone to the floor. The screen broke as it made a shocking clatter. When I sank down on the silky, turquoise bedspread and buried my head in the pillow, I wondered if I'd ever get to go home again. Would they want me? A few hours later, I grabbed the phone and dialed Ryan's number. We needed to meet, to talk. He deserved to know that I wanted *her*. At least, I thought of the baby as "her." Her name was Grace.

You know how they say your life flashes before your eyes just before you take your last breath? Well, that is everything that comes to me as I stand before Ryan at the bottom of the stairs after I called and told him I had something important I needed to say. I can't get my voice to slip by my throat, though, so I reach for his hand instead and sink onto the last step. Then, I realize why the past months have returned to me. A crimson flower blooms beneath me and settles there in the perfect white snow as if trying to bring vitality back to the dead winter world. I'm not losing *my* life. I'm losing *hers*. Ryan stands above me, waiting for me to speak. When I drop his hand and wrap my arms around myself, his face goes white.

"Mary, are you ok?" He crouches down in front of me, steadying himself on the frigid rail.

"I wanted her to live!" I gasp before the sobs wrack my body and the cramps grip my belly. He slides slowly onto the frosted stair beside me, hat askew, gloved hands clasped. The flakes perch on my eyelashes and turn my tears into glitter. *All this for nothing*, I think. *All this loving and sorrow and guilt for nothing*. We make quite a picture, he and I, two shattered people losing it all in a silent world of white.

By the time we arrive at the hospital, I'm convinced she's gone. The EMTs insist that I calm down, take a few deep breaths, and lay back because I'm not doing myself any good. I try, I really do, but nothing helps. Nothing, that is, until Ryan finally looks me in the eye and reaches for my chilled hand.

"Sssshhh," he whispers softly, his voice shattering into a million icy splinters, "It's going to be okay. We're going to be okay." For some reason, I believe him.

*Her tiny fingers lay like a baby starfish in my palm. They're turning purple as the pink life bleeds out of them little by little. And then, I feel her heart tremble one last time...* I startle awake from the dream, my arms empty and cold. Grace is gone, so how is it that my body still curls over the memory of a milky pearl of life that barely existed? I settle into my inclined hospital bed and uncomfortably pull the covers up around my chin, seeking some warmth. Ryan was here before I drifted off into sleep. As my eyes closed, he kissed my forehead and said he'd be back when I

woke up. He's not here, though. No one is. Do you know what it's like to be alone? I do. The fluorescent lights hum overhead. The machine I'm hooked up to whirls and beeps to its own rhythm. I gave Ryan my parents' number so he could call and Mom and Dad would know where I am. I gave him their names so my parents would be able to find me. *Do they want to find me? Do they want me anymore?* I am numb as if the cold has yet to leave my body when the door opens just a crack and a beam of light from the hallway shoots into my dim room. It hangs there, unsure, and then the door finally swings wide. Mom stands in a halo of light and peers in at me. Ryan hovers behind her, his head drooping heavily. He glances up shyly and nods before disappearing from view. "Mary?" Mom whispers.

"Mom!" My breath shudders and my mouth gapes at this apparition. "I thought you didn't want me?" I whimper as she hurries toward me and folds me into her arms. Her salty-sweet tears roll softly onto my cheek and mingle with my own. "I thought you didn't want me..."

"Mary, I am so sorry. So sorry, baby." She cups my chin in her hands, now gentle with love. "I could never have let you go."

"Where's Dad?" I ask hesitantly.

She looks into my eyes, sorrow glazing her own. "He'll come around. I promise." I wish I could be as certain as she seems, but right now, I'm just grateful that she's come for me. When I finally sit back from her embrace, we are not alone. A nurse stands in the doorway, waiting for the right moment to join us.

She flips open her chart, looks over it for a moment, and then sinks into the chair next to my bed. "Your baby's still alive, Mary." She is plump and soft, and her eyes are tender. "You've had a threatened miscarriage and you're not out of the woods yet. You'll need complete bed rest and..." She continues, but I don't quite hear the rest. Ryan has appeared in the door again. He's leaning against the jam, his shoulders are hunched, but his eyes are raised to something unseen above us. When he finally looks at me, a weary smile touches his lips.

"Grace," I tell the nurse. "Her name is Grace." A butterfly flutters softly within me.



*Illuminated*

*Andrew McCune*



*To Dance When We're Old by Aimee Walton*

My head doesn't reach your shoulders.  
I'm too short, but my hair tickles your neck,  
and you puff it away.  
You sputter and cough: "I'm going to shave your hair one of these days."  
I curl my fingers into the waves at the nape of your neck:  
"No."  
Your arms wrap around my back, and you have to lean down.  
When we are old, you'll be stooped, and I'll have grown a couple inches  
from stretching to reach you for years.  
We will switch places, your sunset hair, turned dirty auburn, will brush my cheek.  
When we are old, we'll still be dancing to the beat of our own hearts, to the ab-  
sence  
of any music that can be heard by the human ear.  
If I can ever teach you to dance.



*Landscape*

## A Rumbling Race by Caitlin Burke

Charlotte Elwood darted through the fruit market doors, turned left down the sidewalk, and headed straight for home. Her legs swished back and forth against each other, the resulting friction causing her thighs to heat up. The burning sensation continued through her skin and into her furiously working muscles. Charlotte wasn't accustomed to making such rapid exits. If this became her daily routine, she'd be instructing fitness classes at the new GetFit in no time.

The crosswalk light turned red. Somewhat frustrated, Charlotte stopped, her chest rising in and out as she attempted to catch her breath. Looking down at her feet, she felt throbbing pain. This was Charlotte's first chance to examine her foot after leaving the market. She had stubbed her toe about ten feet out the door and never had a justifiable moment to pause and assess the situation.

The white man flashed on the crosswalk signal. *Go go go!* Charlotte immediately bolted across the street and kept straight on College Avenue. Where was Emily? *She's probably at a stoplight not too far from here. Walk faster. Stay focused.* A burst of laughter shot out of Charlotte's mouth. She loved her sister. Whether it was the silliness of their little competitions or the seriousness with which they took them that amused her, she didn't know. Whatever it was, those walking alongside clearly didn't understand what was so funny and she quickly gulped down her laughter and kept on toward home.

Emily worked weekdays from eight to four-thirty as a physician's assistant fresh out of grad school. The dedication and efficiency with which she handled her job made up for the time lost by late-arriving patients. Today, Emily was conveniently on top of her game, and she completed her final piece of paperwork at four twenty-seven on the dot. This gave her approximately two minutes to gather her belongings and navigate the populated stairway to the main floor, one minute to traverse the parking lot and start her car, and twelve minutes to get home. Emily knew the final task of driving home was only achievable in such a time with the aid of constant green lights and an elevated speed of five extra miles per hour...but she could do it. She could do it.

Charlotte continued to hustle home. Her thighs had started to itch about two blocks back—an indication that she could be in better shape. *I'm not a speed walker, I'm a runner! It's natural for my legs to itch. Perhaps I should jog...no I'd look rather silly running home in jeans.* Instead, Charlotte resorted to what she called "wogging." Whenever there was a break in the number of people on the sidewalk, she would do a little jog and then start walking again.

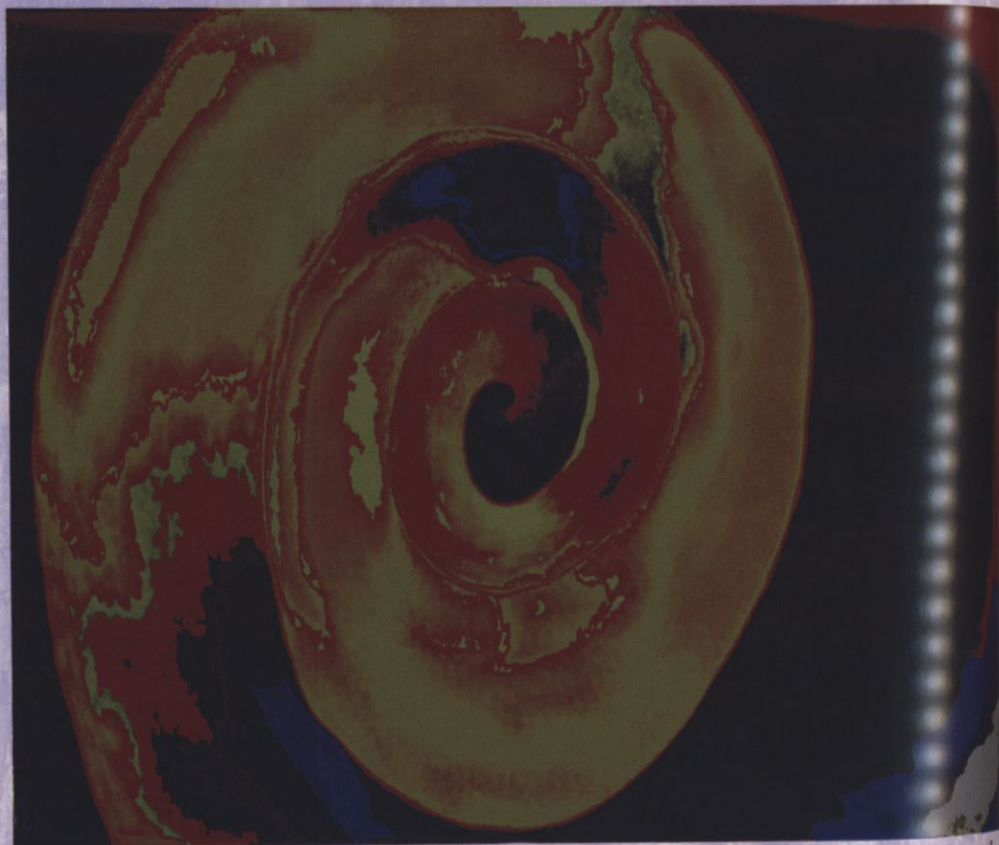
She checked her watch. It's about four forty-three, which meant that if all went well at work, Emily should be on her way home now, if she wasn't already there. *Wait a minute! Jeff's visiting from out-of-town today. Ugh! Mom's probably gonna tell him we have it the moment he sets foot in the door.* This thought encouraged the drive in Charlotte's legs. Now, she felt the intensity of a professional race walker, arms pumping as much as possible with her bag of apples, hips swinging briskly from side to side—embracing any additional motions that would help her legs move faster. *Push through the burn. I can do this.*

As Charlotte continued on her mission, she found no time to marvel at Christmas window displays delicately placed in each shop window. She didn't even notice the Santa Claus handing out candy canes on the corner of College and Allen Street. Instead, she watched the concrete sidewalk intently, swerving skillfully around on-coming walkers. What about the shoes of fury that traveled purposefully with almost the same vigor that Charlotte did? She wove her path around them. *Four thirty-five—it's gonna be close.*

Emily cleverly decided to take the longer way home—longer with substantially fewer traffic lights. *Perhaps if I drive a little bit faster without the disturbance of numerous stops and starts, I'll get home sooner!* Making a calculated turn down Vista Avenue, Emily committed to her course and accelerated over the crackling dried leaves. *Where is Charlotte, anyway? I wonder if she got my message.* Emily had found a moment earlier in the day to leave her younger sister a voicemail re-emphasizing the legitimacy of calling dibs—just in case. *Perhaps mom bought a new one! Hmm...well, whatever the case may be, I wanna get home before it's gone!*

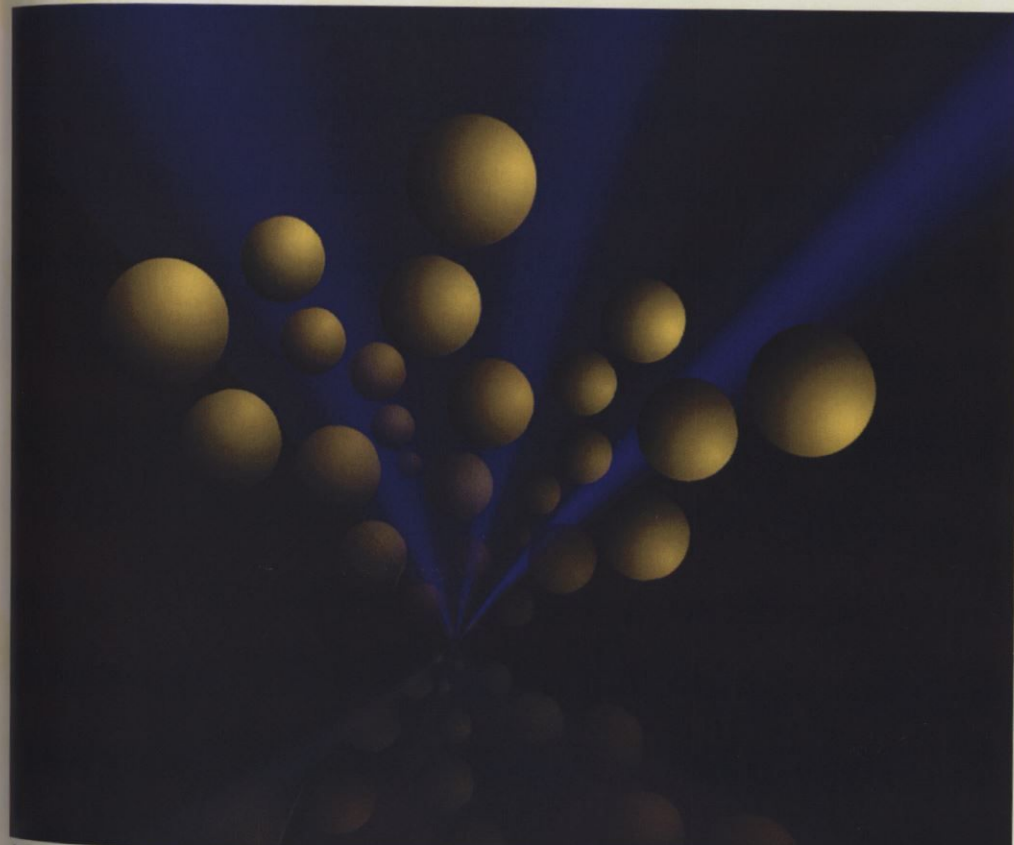
The house was close now; about two more blocks and Charlotte would be there. *Almost there, keep going.* She could almost taste it—the delicious Oreo cream soaking on her tongue. The whipped cream sliding down her throat and *oh, that chocolate cookie crumb crust!* There was only one more piece of Oreo cream pie, and Charlotte wanted to eat it. As she turned the final corner in her race for the delectable treat, the sight put her intense drive at ease. It wasn't necessarily a good ease, but that which came from contentment when she realized the outcome. There, glistening in the driveway, sat Emily's teal Nissan. *She beat me.* Charlotte laughed again. Yes, it was silly, but she had *really* wanted that pie!

Realizing her defeat, Charlotte slowed to a sluggish walk, her muscles grateful for a peaceful moment. Initially she felt as though she wanted to collapse—but there'd be plenty of time for that inside. Upon opening the door, Charlotte dropped her bag and headed straight for the kitchen, during which time she was halted by a shocking sight. There stood Emily, keys-in-hand, purse over shoulder, white coat still hiding her thin frame. She looked at Charlotte, back at the table, and then at Charlotte again. There, at the table, sat their brother, Jeff, with pie crumbs on his plate! Emily turned purposefully toward Charlotte and, with a firm voice declared, "Come on. We've got an errand to run."



*Nautilus*

*Andrew Richards*



*Untitled*

*Erica Chesterton*

## Author Biographies

**Helena Blackwell** is a mutant time traveler learning better how to fit into this dimension. She elucidates, *"I find inspiration in quiet, dark places and hang on to vivid anchors: cocoa, snowy woods, and talking to animals. I collect perfumes and tea that smells like flowers. When Venus visits earth, she lingers somewhere in the bonds of the jasmine molecule. My business is in stories, penny hexes, and not taking myself too seriously."*

**Amy Burke** is a double major in Philosophy and English writing and hopes to eventually work abroad with disaster relief. She loves philosophy, camping, hiking, reading, writing, and long walks on the dike.

**Caitlin Burke** graduated with a degree in English secondary education in Fall 2010..

**Jared Conti**, a senior English major, helps keep Lock Haven's coffeehouse scene flavorful and melodic.

**Rachael Estudante** is from Clearfield, Pennsylvania, and is currently attending Lock Haven University where she will complete her BA in English Writing in Spring 2011. Her writing is heavily influenced by Appalachia and Central Pennsylvanian culture. "Appalachia Shine" draws on an experience she had while deep in the heart of Appalachia with a fellow native. The piece focuses on the traditions and landscape of the area and is meant to showcase the unique culture still thriving in Central Pennsylvania.

**Shannon Caitlin Glynn** is a senior English major.

**Regina Gonzalez**, an English major with a creative writing concentration, will graduate in May 2011. She explains, *"When it comes to writing, my inspiration is simple. I take what I see and what I've been through and transfer it onto paper."*

**Tasha Nicole Hartley** is a senior majoring in English and minoring in psychology. Her poem, "Gone at Sixteen" is about the death of one of her best friends, who died five days before Tasha turned sixteen: Alicia died of meningitis while at home by herself. Tasha tells us the loss *"was a devastating event for our small group of friends; we were all very close."*

**Rachel Mazza**, an only child for most of her early life, amused herself by writing stories about mystery solving cats. She is an avid lover of adventures and identifies herself as an amateur ghost and treasure hunter and has spent much of her time volunteering in a haunted Victorian mansion, which has provided lots of writing topics. Rachel is double majoring in English (writing emphasis) and Communications (print journalism). She hopes to work for a publishing company as an editor or agent and strives to see her name on the bestseller list one day.

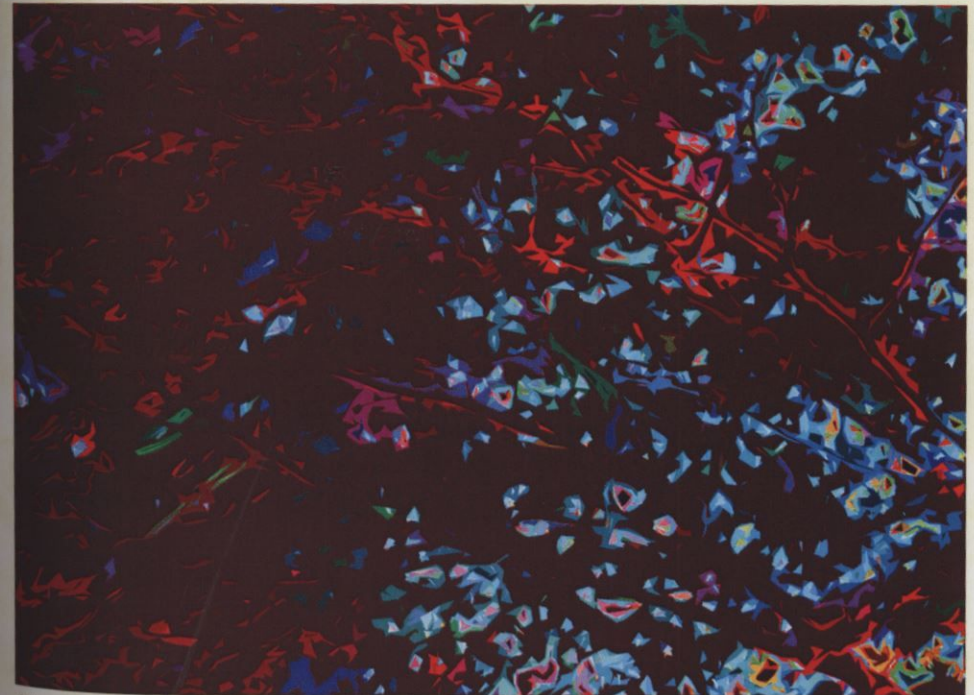
**Joshua Miller** is a Fall 2010 graduate of Lock Haven University with a B.A. in Political Science and minor in Theatre and is the author of "All the World Should Be Gay." He explains his story, stating, *"It's interesting: one of the first pieces of advice someone gave me while living in New York City for a summer was to never smile in public... even if I really was happy. 'All the World Should be Gay' is an anecdote that gives commentary on why we--'we' being (young) Americans--are so concerned with looking cool or saving face, rather than just being... happy."*

**Caleb Park** is a History and Secondary Education major with a concentration in Social Studies and will graduate in Spring 2014. He has written a complete volume of poetry and is very excited to be included in *The Crucible*, stating, *"My poem is about the human condition of wanting to be loved truly but throwing it away when you find it."*

**Sarah Ricker** is a 2010 graduate of LHU with a major in English.

**Adam Russo** is an English major with a writing concentration and will graduate in the spring of 2011. Adam says, *"Poetry has always been a small factor in my life, but recently, I've found that poetry contains a great deal of power. Poetry moves, poetry makes us stop and think, poetry vibes. But most importantly, poetry enables the artist to showcase what is seen through his or her eyes--a moment in time unlike any other."*

**Aimee Walton** is a senior studying English and creative writing. She's been writing since she was a little girl and can't think of anything else she'd like to do! She plans on applying to Vermont School of Fine Arts to get her Master's in creative writing and would like nothing more than to be an author.



Untitled

Leah Gallup



*Higher Self*

*Jeanney Wharton*



*Reflections*

*Jeanney Wharton*

## Artist Biographies

**Nicholas Avlonitis** explains his inspiration as an artist through a quote from internationally renowned British street artist, Banksy. "I'd been painting rats for three years before someone said 'that's clever it's an anagram of art,' and I had to pretend I'd known that all along."

**LaKeshia Bauman**, originally from Lock Haven and a 2008 graduate of Central Mountain High School, is currently a second semester junior working on her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Drawing and Painting at LHU with minors in both Political Science and Geography. She plans to graduate in the fall of 2012.

**Kane Bjalmé** is senior art major at Lock Haven University.

**Erica Chesterton** is a sophomore art student at Lock Haven University.

**Amy Detzel** is a sophomore art student at Lock Haven University.

**Leah Gallup** is a senior in the BFA program at Lock Haven University.

**Scott Andrew Hockenberry**, born in Jersey Shore, PA, was a student at LHU and now attends Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. His work is mostly photography, but he also enjoys acrylic painting and drawing with graphite. He has shown his work at open and juried shows at LHU as well as contests online and the PA High School State Digital Photography Competition. He states about his artwork, "I picked up a camera my sophomore year of high school and haven't put it down since."

**Kelli McCloskey** is a Lock Haven University art student.

**Andrew McCune** is a super senior, interested in everything and committed to nothing. He chose to keep his pieces untitled. According to Andrew, "Honestly, fuck titles for them, titles limit them by trying to encapsulate meaning with words."

**Sarah Prewitt** is a senior at Lock Haven University pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts with a specialization in Graphic Design. She hopes to work as a conceptual artist in either the video game or film industry.

**Andrew Richards** is a sophomore this year, majoring in the unknown. Working with mixed media throughout the previous years has inspired him to pursue these interests further, with the desire to one day advance from doing freelance work to find a career in design with a well-known organization; modeling is another interest he would like to work into his future plans. For the time being, he will continue to produce artwork at LHU and hopes to find a profitable way to spend his down time.

**Helen Rogers** is a senior and majors in graphic and web design. However, she finds herself naturally attracted to all concentrations of art, which has always been an important part of her life. She feels that art has a unique way of inspiring and communicating with people.

**Lee Timko** is a senior at Lock Haven University in the Fine Arts program. Currently working toward his BFA in graphics and on-line design, Lee also enjoys painting and printmaking and plans to continue his exploration in both.

**Francis Wertz** is a 21-year-old web developer from Renovo, PA, majoring in Computer Science at LHU. *Wakka Wakka* was created for a required art class in the fall of 2010 and is a composite manipulation of five assigned images.

**Jeanney Wharton**, a designer and student at Lock Haven University, has had a passion for art for many years and is pursuing a BFA with a specialization in Graphic Design. Her quest is to turn her art mediums into electronic art as a graphic designer.

**Zachariah Young** is a 2-D art student at LHU. He explains his work, "I do a lot of my artwork in charcoal and enjoy the graphic quality that you can get from taking details out of figures and making certain characteristics more imaginable." Zachariah is from the Jersey Shore area and hopes to end up doing some kind of conceptual art in the future.



Tigerlilies



Leah Gallup