Lights and Shadows

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Any great work of art... revives and readapts time and space, and the measure of its success is the extent to which it makes you an inhabitant of that world—the extent to which it invites you in and lets you breathe its strange, special air.

—Leonard Bernstein

Gentle reader, first I want to thank you for taking time to take up our magazine and read.

Words are like small bits of stone and glass, which separate and alone have little meaning, but when brought together coalesce into memories and ideas; a kind of mosaic of language and communication. What you hold here is a collection of wonderful words: stories and poems of joy and anguish, triumph and failure. Each piece is a mosaic with its own story and all are ripe and ready to be read and enjoyed. Their variety and scope astonish me, all of them testaments to the richness of the arts here at the University of North Alabama.

Even broader, each piece in this magazine serves as a component to the larger puzzle that defines this year’s Lights & Shadows. It was an enormous task to assemble this large puzzle, and sometimes the picture wasn’t always quite so clear. Nevertheless, it is an honor to present this collection to you, the reader.

—Matt Braddick

Edgar Allen Poe once said, “Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.”

The writers, editors, and artists involved in this year’s Lights & Shadows have put their hearts and souls into this project with hopes to share a new perspective of reality with you. To them, the words, brush strokes, and pictures are their dreams, but to you, these things are depictions of reality. If you prefer the dark and dreary or the light and merry, you definitely will not be disappointed in this year’s collection of cognizant dreams. I truly hope that you will love these works as much as we, the editors, did when we first read them. My advice to those who dream, keep dreaming and share them as much as possible.

—Kali Mobley
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Biology Lab 1

Terri Barnes
1st Place 2DBW
The Words Came

William Underwood

Grasp the air with gentle hands,
Like reaching for fireflies in the night.
Press your fingertips against the stars
Hold the galaxy in its spin
Make possible those things
None else can do.

Dance with leaves as they fall,
Paint your heart with their colors
Find in them your freedom,
Then laugh
Don't stop.

Sing the songs that live in you,
Play notes on keys that are not there
Write the words that no one knows,
Find emotions where they hide
And show them to the world
The way God revealed them
To you.
A muffled thud  
(goes without said)  

Joseph Thomas Bullock  

"I'm dying out here"  
is the quote I'll begin with  
It's the truth  
insomuch that one could  
honestly decipher  
what is valid  
from what really matters  

I've never lived in a city  
without a skyline  
took close proximity  
to an interstate  
for  
given  
guess it was always there  
similar to infinitive phrases  
where the highlight of my day  
is crossing the bridge  
and I would love to spit  
over the rail  
just to see  
where it would land  
since I never got the hang  
of skipping stones  

"You can't do it that way"  
is an echo so haunting  
that it stalks my fingers  
from percussion of flesh  
for resonance  

but what I really want to be  
is valued  
like coupons cut from Sunday  
knowing that upon redemption  
some will be recycled  
discarded  
or worst of all  
forgotten  
left in the pockets  
of an old pair of jeans  
washed in a machine  
at the laundry mat  
where lint baskets are stripped bare  
by the next in line  
that never had a clue  

And I'll read this in the mourning  
to no one in particular  
to anyone who'd listen  
to a dial tone  
that finally gives up  
plays three high pitched notes  
then skipped-record  
goes on to say  
If you'd like to make a call  
please hang up  
and try again  
a  
gain
Rats!

Hayley Sylvester

I am not the kind of girl who jumps
on the nearest sturdy elevated object
and clutches her hair screaming
at the sight of you.
(Perhaps "encounter" should be the proper word.)
As with any rodent or pest, it must be
an encounter to see you;
I don't want to see you!
I don't know how you got in the laundry room,
but my hope is that you can get out
and stay out—
Safely, humanely, not a trip for the snare.
You've tripped the snare before, I hear,
like some carnival freak show act. You
snatched the cheese once and were spared
the snare, the snap.
And the second time you snatched the cheese
you weren't so lucky. Some part of you was left
on the floor in perfect red dots.

I can't tell much difference between
a mouse and a rat.
Not really.
I bet you're the size of a rat since you ate
out of an 8-pound bag of dog food.
Your kind carry the plague.
Do you have fleas? Have you been bitten by one? Any?
Maybe the fear of you stems back to the Middle Ages
when the sight of you caused
women to jump on chairs or tables
as they bled to death from every orifice.
You did it.
And it's only conditioning, the art of learning
that has been passed down to the generations
of domestic Olympic acts and squealing on sight.

I am not a domestic Olympian
nor am I afraid of the plague
but I'll be ready for you.
Next time we'll use peanut butter,
next time you may not be so lucky.
I have a pair of garden gloves and
a Wal-Mart sack with your name on them when
I finally do encounter you.
Levi Presnell

“A narrow fellow in the grass,”
“A fun’ral in [your] brain,”
Revered by many poets, but
Sweet Em, you are insane.

You talk of horses iron and strong,
And buzzing flies you’ve seen.
Oh, Emmy dear, it must be hard
To say the things you mean.

Your thymes are near, but still so far
(They never really rhyme).
Your meter, too, you never change:
“Amazing Grace” ’s time.

It’s good— that dashes have— no source—
Or— else we’d— have— run out.
Your— overuse— is clear— abuse;
You toss— them all— about.
the worst poem ever written about hats

Hayley Sylvester

many intriguing people have worn hats,
and they say you can tell a lot about a person
by the hat on his or her head.
each hat has a different personality underneath.

a Dapper Dan wears a three-piece suit and a bowler;
he carries around an umbrella as a makeshift walking stick,
smiling and tipping his hat at all the ladies he passes on the street.

Sherlock Holmes likes to solve mysteries in his flappy, plaid hat;
he smokes a pipe and plays the violin,
pondering the perplexing case he has to solve.

a feisty old lady’s hat is red and she wears a purple feather in it;
she is often seen with others just like her,
giggling joyfully that she’s “Pushing sixty and still sexy!”

Kris Kringle’s hat is bright red and lined with fur;
he coaxes his reindeer with a jolly laugh,
knowing all year has led up to this one night.

the swaggering cowboy wears many gallons on his head;
he rides on his trusty horse, catching the bad guys,
frowning as he’s being shot at before he can ride off into the sunset.

Abe Lincoln’s stovepipe hat made him nearly seven feet tall;
he spends lots of his time, sleepless, in the White House,
fretting over the senseless battles going on farther south.

the baseball fan sports his favorite team on his forehead;
he sits in the stands with his hot dog and beer,
heckling the idiot umpire for a ridiculous call.

the Queen of England is never photographed without her hat matching her dress;
she even wears gloves while she rides in her fancy car,
wavering mechanically to the crowd of well-wishers she rules over.

the college student announces his favorite poison pulled down over his eyes;
he sits awkwardly on the barstool with his friends,
buzzing philosophically like the neon sign in front of him.

Blackbeard wears his rank proudly on his head;
he likes to pillage and loot and raid as he pleases,
sneering at you as you walk the plank.

for me, as intriguing as I am,
I don’t wear hats, though I would like to;
I think I look stupid enough
without one.
Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all: the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintance—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sometimes you sense the most when there doesn’t seem to be anything there to sense. One afternoon, when I was about nine years old, I went outside after a long steady rain to sit on my swing, as I did at some point nearly every day as a child. I was never able to think clearly when confined in my house, surrounded by the constant input of my loving family. If I had something I needed to work over in my head, I had to be outside. And I had to be moving. So when I would tire of walking in circles around the perimeter of my house, I would invariably end up at my swing set, swinging only slightly if I wanted the gentle motion necessary to keep my thoughts moving, higher if I was ready to stop thinking and just feel.

On this particular day, I kept my feet anchored to the ground, bending and unbending my knees to start a small, steady motion. And I was surprised at what I heard when the motion started: Nothing. The rain had lubricated the chain links so that the rusty squeaking that had become an expected part of my daily meditation was conspicuously absent. I had swung many times after a rain, but this was the first time I had been greeted with this silence.

And the silence wasn’t the only absence I noticed. There was none of the musty scent that usually follows a rain; instead, I smelled in the air around me only a clean sweetness. The feel of the air was also unnaturally neutral, with the temperature not high enough for it to feel muggy, nor low enough for the moisture in the air to cause a chill. There was nothing to focus my senses on. The world around me was perfectly blank.

I sat on my swing, letting the pendulous momentum I had started continue to move my body gently back and forth. With no sensory details to stimulate my consciousness, I began to wonder if I was even really there, if I was any different from the nothingness all around me. I became Emerson’s transparent eyeball. And then I closed my eyes. Cut off from that last physical sense, I lost myself completely in the void. But it wasn’t scary, as being lost generally is. Instead, there was only tranquility more complete than I had ever experienced, as awareness of my physical body slipped away and I became unified with the silence. I don’t know how long I sat there, but it was a long time. The only conscious thoughts I allowed to surface were that I didn’t care what time it was and that I needed to engrain this experience into my memory, because even at nine years old I recognized its specialness.

I can’t remember what season it was that day, whether the pear tree near the swing set was filled out or bare, if I was at home that afternoon because it was summer vacation or simply because it was the weekend. And I can’t recall anything about what had been on my mind that had compelled me to go outside to my thinking spot. I only remember the feeling, that absence of sensations that allowed something deeper than hearing, smell, touch, and sight to come to the surface.

For the next several months, I would run outside after every rain, hoping to recreate the circumstances that had led to that wonderful experience. But as soon as I would sit down, bending and unbending my knees to start the swing’s motion, the chains would squeak and I would smell the normal mustiness in the air, and I knew there was no getting that feeling back.

Years later, I would sit in classrooms discussing literary theory, and we would talk about the concept of the sublime, how the philosopher Immanuel Kant says that it is the name we give to something that is “absolutely great.” That while beauty in nature is found within the boundaries of forms, the sublime is found in the boundlessness of the formless. The sublime, Kant says, “is that in comparison with which everything else is small.”

And suddenly I had a word to describe that afternoon so long ago, and an understanding of why the same physical circumstances never had the same spiritual result. It wasn’t the rain or the swing, but rather something formless and nameless that had triggered within me an openness to something beyond my physical surroundings. So when other folks react incredulously to Emerson’s descriptions of the connection between man and nature, I know that once, a long time ago, I felt what Emerson felt, and I can only hope that some day those formless, nameless things will combine in a way that will allow me to once again lose myself in the absence of sensation.
Drowning

Jesska Grotjahn

Olympic-sized pool
Sparkling against a green sea
Rolling hills and pointy trees
Stand sentinel watching over us
On top of the world
Which is really a slide
Down down into the deep
I'm a fish look at me
I can swim so good
Like an otter so I think
Mistakenly, no I can't
Breathe or float struggling
Rescue me
Strong arms lift me up
Save me from my fate
Shivering in a towel
Thinking how I despise
Blow up floaties
Watching his flip flop
Get sucked into the drain

Untitled

Jake Jones

2nd Place 2D B&W • Campus Bookstore Award
On the cross
Crown of thorns,
An excruciating look
Stitched in brown
On crushed velvet,
Is an orange stain
On the wood paneling.

A final banquet,
An artificial DaVinci,
Yellow in electric candlelight,
Fits perfectly,
In a splintered frame,
Over the buffet.

In an arched window,
Stained glass saints,
Glowing in the sun,
Green and red shapes
On Sunday shoulders,
And the children color
Their pictures of Jesus.
Obituary
Trey Canida

Bubba's dead, the newspaper read.
Happened sometime between segregation and the start of the NASCAR race.

Born in the North out of necessity, scapegoat for some things he deserved and some things he didn't.

Raised in the South—Heart of Dixie.
Lived on a big plantation, ate grits,
married his cousin, drove a pick-up.

Though he is gone, his memory lives on, survived by the thoughts and in the minds of Southern writers and the aspiring

who, in lieu of flowers, write stories with hackneyed dialogue and characters named Billy Ray and Betty Jo.

Visitation's tomorrow night, but no funeral.
He won't be buried—because then what would Southern writers write about?

Can't close the old wound yet, they have to bleed it dry first.

Deep Six
Pam Price

She died in her dining room floor from a goddamn car alarm.
The preacher spoke, and people cried
Into the handkerchief hands of others,
Or clapping thin paper tissues
Between papery fingers.

A jungle of black knee-highs weaved down the aisles
Like broken panthers in a cage.
The women were prepared for war
With their hairspray helmets,
Immovable as the artificial flowers.

Macaroni, turkey sandwiches, and cheese plates with crackers
Are the hors d'oeuvres of death
Served with god-awful hymns
And that inane drone of a preacher's tongue,
Beating like the wings of an insignificant insect.

It was cheap—words, tears, flowers, and food.
And none of it made sense, not to her.
She looked at everyone with eyes wide-closed
Like she wanted to be left alone
And let everyone acquiesce to their own demise.
Sozan Muhammad

After I finished my elementary school, I used to think all the time how stupid and inhumane it is to beat children in school, especially small kids. As I went to high school, my opposing beliefs against this system became stronger. I used to debate with a lot of people, especially my high school teachers, about that. I still remember how pleased I was when one day my dad came home and told us about news that was published in many newspapers. Yes, finally this useless system of beating children at school was abolished. It was announced that anyone who broke this rule would be punished. I was very glad about that, but I still knew that this rule would not be followed by everyone in a short period of time. Even one year after abolishing it, many teachers were still beating innocent children, especially the boys. I can say that 60 percent of the kids who quit school was because of this inhumane system. In the neighborhood I used to live, five kids gave up going to school. Every student had a terrifying picture in their mind of teachers who beat children, viewing them as monsters. Whenever children used to meet most of their teachers outside of school, they ran as fast as they could to hide themselves from them because of that scary feeling they had about teachers. Yes, the next day the teacher might ask him or her why he or she was outside, then insult them for whatever stupid reason they had.

Though I am 22 years old now, I can still feel that panic feeling of my childhood. Usually those feelings come back to me when I get sick; I don't know why I feel them again. Last night, when I was lying down on my bed because of having a stomachache and fever, suddenly, I was feeling what that small Sozan used to feel in elementary school. Though I was one of the cleverest students in the school and all the teachers loved me, I was still scared of most of my teachers. In spite of being praised by all of my teachers, I could never run away from that feeling that made me sick when I was a kid.

I don't think I will ever forget that day in my first week of going to school when I was little. I was scared to death of my science teacher. Her horrifying picture is still in my brain. She had long, black hair. Her eyes were brown, and she had dark skin. Her name was Runak, which means "bright" in Kurdish language, but I really suggest that she should have a name like Tarik, which means “dark,” because she never had a bright picture in our eyes. Because of her dark skin and the black clothes she used to wear, which were basically short skirts with dark colored tops, children called her “Mamosta Runaka Rash,” which means “Ms. Black Runak.” I am not a racist person, and I hate racism. I apologize and show my regards to anyone who reads this and has dark colored skin.

Every student was scared to death of that teacher. Kids used to make fun of her outside of school, describing her as ugly and having fat legs. That was a relief for those poor kids and was the only way to take their revenge on her.

My memory of her is very sad. I can still feel that feeling she created in me. One day while teaching in class, she asked me a question about the material we were supposed to read. When I looked up and saw her frightening, angry eyes, I got so scared. My tongue and throat became very dry, so I couldn't say anything after that, though I knew the answer. After she didn't hear anything from me, while she was coming towards me quickly, she was screaming, and then I was about to have heart attack. Yes, finally she was in front of me. All of a sudden, she pulled my ear hard and twisted it. My beautiful gold earring, which my mom bought for me, was broken in her hands into two pieces. The bottom part of it fell down on to the ground, and the rest of it was still hanging on my ear. Crying, I looked at the broken piece on the ground, but I didn't dare to pick it up. Then, she pulled my neatly tied hair and messed it all up. I can never forget how painful it was. While she was doing all this, she was screaming at me and saying, “Lazy girl, didn't I tell you to study?” I started crying loudly. This time she screamed so loud that everyone in the class was terrified. She said, “If you don't stop crying, I will pull out all of your hair and break your other earring.” I sat down on my desk and tried not to cry but my breath was about to stop and my tears were rolling so fast on my small, innocent face. My right ear was hurting me so much. I touched it in the hope that the pain would go away. My hand felt something wet. When I brought my hand in front of my eyes, though I couldn't see clearly because my eyes were full of tears, I could see a red spot on my hand. Yes, it was blood. My ear was bleeding because she twisted my earring hard, and wounded my ear. While crying in my heart, my small brain told me to quit school. I was thinking how we hear in media that teachers are earthly angels, but I said to myself while I was taking my breath through hiccups that teachers are earthly devils.

When I went home, my mom got so angry at what had happened to me. That night, I cried so much, saying that I didn't want to go to school. Certainly,
I couldn't convince my parents to let me quit school, but I was begging my mom not to come to my school because she wanted to complain about what my teacher did to me. "Mom, please don't come. That teacher will tell me that you complained. She will hate me forever. I am sure she will kill me next time by beating me so much." The next day, my mom came to my school and told the school principal that if that teacher beats me next time, my mom will beat her up ten times more. She was telling them how shameful and weak it is to beat small kids. Fortunately, she didn't beat me any more but I could feel how much she hated me. I was so happy when I finished that year because I knew she would not teach me any more. Finally, I got rid of that monster.

There were different kinds of beating in school. Ways of beating kids who didn't study were different from those who were troublemakers or made lots of noise in the class or in the hallway before the teachers came to class. There were different kinds of stakes: long ones, short ones, wooden ones, metal ones, thick ones, thin ones, etc. However, the scariest stake, which everybody in the class knew about, was that long and thin stake made of metal.

Students wished they could take revenge on those teachers who beat them. I still remember how happy my brother was, telling me about how he and his friends at school took revenge on their math teacher. Actually, she was very nice to me because I was very good in her class, but she used to beat students so badly. Most of the students, especially the boys, had a sign of her punch that she made on their body by her long nails. My brother and his friends made a plan to take revenge on her; though they were just nine years old. My brother told me while laughing loudly, "Guess what we did? When we knew it was her turn to come to class to teach, we put the trash can at the top of the door while opening the door slightly in a way that the trash can could stay at the top of the door." I screamed, "Oh my God, then what happened?" My brother was giggling, "What happened? Hopefully, what we planned happened. When she opened the door, the trash can fell down on her head. Dirty pieces of paper were stuck to her hair and hanging over it." I started laughing, "Then, what happened next?" He took a breath because of being tired from laughing and said, "Don't be stupid, Sozan, you know what happened next." I laughed and said, "Of course, all of you guys got beaten again badly." He smiled, "Yes, exactly. We got beaten by the long metal stake. But guess what? Though it was painful, everyone was so happy and still laughing because finally we did what we wanted." In fact, that was one of the happiest days in my brother's elementary school life.

I am very glad that this horrible system is fading in the Kurdish schools now though I know it still exists in some of them, especially in village schools or small town schools, but not in that painful way we had before. I have to mention that not all of my teachers were that evil but many of them were; they made us forget about our other sweet teachers. I am very happy that I didn't quit school at that time because at least now I can bravely defend children's rights everywhere in Kurdistan, which could have an influence on my society. Also, I can tell those of my friends who are school teachers to always smile at their students, make them happy, give them too much love and never, ever try to hurt them.
With Her Hair Down

Tiffany Nichols

There's a lady with her hair down.  
It floats around her body,  
like a first defense against the world.

It is a comfort  
to which her children come  
and rest their heads.  
No bed or blanket is more secure.

It is a gift  
that her husband still adores.  
Later he will brush it aside  
so that he might kiss her.
I wish to have been in this park
In those days before its death.
Autumn would just be taking hold here
And there should be a nameless force
Moving through the leaves
To coax them into
Unveiling their hidden shades.
And the buildings, the statues
(Formed by the hands of unworthy men,
shattered by them as well)
Would be reaching into the forever sky
To be seen by the moon
As it rose full and large
Through the fragile mists of color
Left behind by the sun.

There would have been joy in that
Painting from our Maker's fantasies,
Had I been there to see it,
But instead I am forced to
Live in this reality,
Where peace and beauty
Vanished so long ago.
Poetry

All that is left in this cloud
Of blood and smoke
Is a lone traveler
Searching through rubble
Of things that can never be again.
I am hoping to find souls
That may have survived,
But there only seem to be shells
With eyes that recognize
Only the fear of their last moments.
Why on that day
When they needed me most
Could my hands not save?
Why on that day
When I wanted it most
Could I not too have died?

Fiction

Kali Mobley

Christmas is a time of togetherness, or at least it should be. Sometimes, it feels like Christmas is a day of unwanted complications. No one really wants to go see their estranged families. Typically, people put it off until the last minute, and other people lie to their families and say they have to work on Christmas. There are a handful of people that hold the true meaning of Christmas in their hearts, but do not have the strength to share it with everyone they meet. What if one person gave love back to Christmas by affecting five other people, would it work? Could Christmas love be brought back to life?

Being a skeptic, I did not think it would be possible, that is until I met one person. This one person affected my life immensely. Every Christmas I think about her; she was a sweet girl from what I hear. So many people love her, but they were at a loss for love, like me, around the holiday season.

Well, before I get off on a tangent, let me introduce myself. My name is Harold Wick III, or Harry. I am a groundskeeper for the community graveyard. I know what you are thinking, “Who would want to do that for a career?” Well, I have been questioning that as well. Actually, my life has been nothing but a series of questions. In order to answer the question, let me rewind the time to two years ago, December 9, 2004. My father, Harold II, died. My mother had passed away six months before him, so I was left alone. Now, don’t start feeling sorry for me. I loved my parents dearly, and they were all I had. You see, I never married. I came close to it at one point, but it never worked out. It was one of those situations where you couldn’t agree for disagreeing. So, when my dad passed away, I inherited the family business and remained here in Wetumpka, Alabama.

I put all of my effort and pride into this stony patchwork quilt. I like to think that I am the dead’s guardian. I really figured this out last Christmas time, around December 22, 2005. I must say that it was a very peculiar day to say the least. I remember that I was raking the leaves away from one tombstone, and I
stopped for a break and looked into the eerie grey sky on that cold December morning. While I was looking up into that dreary sky, I felt soft wet kisses on my forehead; it was snow. Alabama's weather can be quite frosty during the harsh winter months, but it is very odd to see snow flurries in the Deep South. I could not believe it! I threw up my rusty rake into the sky like I was a mighty conqueror and started whooping and hollering like a buffoon. Ah. I felt like a kid again. It felt like I was the only person isolated in a snow globe on that morning until I realized someone was approaching me.

I gathered my composure very rapidly, but not fast enough. She had seen my charade and was laughing at me, which I hate. So, I picked up my rake and stomped off. That woman was not going to humiliate me on my own property. I guess she realized that she had hurt my feelings— more like my pride— because she stopped me.

"Excuse me, please... wait... I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Look here, it is a beautiful day. Please don't let me ruin it for you. You looked so happy," she sincerely said.

Since it was so close to the holidays, I decided to appease her. I stopped, turned, and looked at her. In my mind, I had already forgiven her, but when I looked at her, I just knew that I should do anything in my power to keep her from leaving. I'm not a really religious man, but I was thanking God for the ability just to see her. She was incredibly beautiful, especially in the snow. She looked like an angel with her soft chestnut hair, ivory skin, and cherry lips.

I saw her look away with embarrassment, and then, she softly said, "My name is Ann Chaddux. I just decided to visit my daughter's grave today. It is her birthday."

I saw her lips moving, but I did not hear a word that she had said. I was completely mesmerized by her solemn beauty. After 45 years of living without a woman of my own, I decided that the time had finally come for me to meet my Mrs. Right.

I guess she got fed up with me just standing there with a dumb look on my face because she suddenly yelled, "HELLOOOO, anyone in there?"

Being flustered, I quickly said, "Huh? What? Oh, I am sorry. You see my hearing is kinda rough, especially in this weather. What did you say your name was?"

"Ann, Ann Chaddux," she quickly reminded me.

"Ann, well, that is just a lovely name. Sorry for my behavior. I just don't like people seeing me act unprofessional. I run this here graveyard. It is my life. By the way, my name is Harold Wick."

After I told her what I did for a living, I thought she would freak out and run off, but she didn't. Instead, she gasped, "Oh, yes, I remember meeting you last year. Actually, I think my daughter did most of the talking at the time. Sorry, I was going through a very rough time. I lost my daughter last year on Memorial Day. Today is her birthday. You were raking the leaves next to her grave."

"Oh, well, I am sorry for your loss. I know how it is to lose a loved one. I just lost both of my parents last year as well. It can definitely be rough to say the least."

I thought about our losses. It is such a sad fact of life— death is— but one cannot escape it. People just have to learn how to cope with the Present. The holiday season did not help me any, and I assumed that it didn't help Ann either. Holidays are always a rough time for families. I guess Ann was thinking the same thing, because she had this grey cloud settle over her complexion. Finally, I tapped her on her shoulder, and yelled, "Hello, Miss, anyone in there?"

"Oh, I am sorry. I guess we are both hard of hearing in this weather. Can you believe that it is actually snowing in south Alabama?"

"I sure cannot believe it, ma'am. Ha, ha, ha... So, where is the birthday girl? I think she got the best birthday present ever— the snow."

"Yeah, she always wanted it to snow on her birthday. She could never understand why she could not have snow on her birthday and Christmas. I tried to explain to her one time that the South was not the place for snow." Ann started to giggle to herself about the memory. Then, she turned around and was looking for her daughter's grave.

"Ummm..." she mumbled while looking around, "OH! Elicia is right over there. Gah, you can barely see anything in this snow. I think the snow is getting thicker. Unbelievable!" Ann exasperated.

I helped Ann through the snow to see her beloved's grave. To make small talk, I agreed with her about the snow. After we finally got to the grave, I saw Ann's daughter's picture. She was beautiful like her mother. I turned to Ann and exclaimed, "Oh, wow! Your daughter sure was beautiful. I am truly sorry for your loss, but I know that she is in heaven right now looking down on you."

A few minutes after my comment, Ann replied bitterly, "Oh, I am sure she is somewhere happy. I really don't know what I think about God and religion. If He was an almighty God, then why did He let my innocent little girl die? I don't
think I can have faith in someone I can trust.” Then, she suddenly knelt by her
daughter’s grave and wept.

I was shocked by Ann’s comment. I really did not know what to do, and I
kept thinking to myself, “My mom always told me to never bring religion and
politics into a casual conversation. The topic ruins it every time.”

Well, I knew that things were down the shitter. Pardon my French, but it
was true. I didn’t know what else to do, and I turned slowly around to walk
away, because I had an undying failure in people skills. I should just be alone
like I have been all these years. As I was walking away, Ann cried aloud, “Harold,
thanks for your concern and company. I really do appreciate your kindness.”

When she thanked me, I could not take my eyes away from her eyes. My
mother once told me, “The eyes are the door to a person’s inner soul. Look
there to see the true identity of someone.” Her eyes were filled with so much
grief and disdain, but there was an ounce of hope behind all of that sadness. I
could do nothing to stop her pain. Nothing!

All I could think to say to her was “Merry Christmas!” Then, I returned to my
daily duties, which had increased due to the snow. I probably will never talk to
Ann again, which is truly sad, because I felt so much chemistry between us. She
made me want to attempt a personal relationship with someone, but it wasn’t
going to happen. I guess Santa Claus can’t answer everyone’s wish list. The
only thing that I’m going to receive for Christmas is lonely, bleak hours to
pass the day away.

My duties were boring like every other day, but it made me extremely happy
to see the beautiful outcome in my graveyard. I want my cemetery to feel like
heaven on Earth—just a personal goal. A few hours passed by, and the snow
had stopped a couple of hours ago. Ann left thirty minutes after I left her alone
by her daughter’s grave. I went outside to shovel some of the snow up in order
to let people enter the cemetery so that they could visit their departed.

I grabbed my shovel and headed out to the pavement. As I was walking to
the outer gates of the cemetery, I saw someone kneeling by a grave near Ann’s
daughter. I couldn’t make out the figure of the person, but I hoped that it would
be Ann at her daughter’s grave again. Instead of shoveling the snow, I decided to
go check it out. If it was not Ann, then I could make up some work excuse to be
over there with a shovel.

As I was approaching the figure, I realized that it was a man, and he was
kneeling at Ann’s daughter’s grave. Then, I had a sudden epiphany. Oh, no! I
made a complete fool of myself. I did not even think to ask or see about her
marital status. I thought to myself, “Great, Harold. Way to go!!!” These chastising
remarks compelled me even more to approach the man at the grave. My
curiosity was piqued, and I had to see if she was married to this man.

When I finally reached him, I couldn’t help but smell his pungent odor.
Actually, he smelled worse than that. It was a mixture of vodka, rotten eggs,
and an over-filled dumpster. If I didn’t know any better, I thought my nose was
going to jump off of my face and commit suicide, while my eyes watered at the
mere appearance of this man. He was in his mid-forties and dressed in brown
and green rags matched with a pair of sandals. Yes, he was wearing sandals in
the snow. He had a black-and-grey beard with red-rimmed eyes. I wanted to give
the man the benefit of the doubt. He was crying, and that could be the reason
for his red-rimmed eyes. Unfortunately, that was not the case. He had not shed
a single tear. My eyes drifted from his shaggy appearance to an object in one
of his hands. It was no surprise to me to see that he had a “brown bag” in his
hand. I could only use my imagination to guess what was in that bag. I felt an
overwhelming sense of pity for this man, but after seeing him, I felt ecstatic. Ann
could never be married to a man like this.

The poor drunkard finally became aware enough to realize that he wasn’t
alone. He looked up at me with his drunken eyes and started to cry. At his tears,
I inwardly sighed, “Great! What do I do now?” I just decided that today wasn’t
going to be my day. After this realization, I thought sarcastically to myself, “Gee,
Happy Holidays to me!”

Then a sharp, slurred voice broke through my thoughts and said, “Hey. Hey
man. How’s it goin’?”

For some odd reason, I decided to stay and talk to the man. I wanted to know
his connection to Ann’s daughter. So, I replied light-heartedly, “It’s going man.
How are you?”

“I’m all right. I’m just tryin’ to make it through the Christmas holidays. I
didn’t think that it was gonna snow. By golly! It sure did though. Ya want
some, man?”

“Oh, no thanks. I don’t touch the stuff. My name is Harold by the way,
and yours?”

“The name’s Benny Joe,” he said as he went for a swig from the brown
bag. Then he continued, “ooooh Yeah. That hit the spot. Mmmm... So, do
you know Elicia?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh, man, she was an awesome little kid. She was feisty, too. I sure do miss
Fiction

Who knows?... Would you like to come inside out of the cold? It's starting to snow again.

After some thought, Benny Joe finally spoke very softly, “I think you’re right. I really had no clue what to say to this drunk, sobbing man. What do you say? No! I just want to stay here. Maybe, Today will be my day. Elicia will come down and claim me for the heavens or deliver me to the depths of Hell. I just don’t want to be here any more. All I want for Christmas is to see the end of my misery. I am either six feet deep in booze or six feet high on drugs. I just want to be six feet deep in the ground where I can’t hurt nobody else. I just wanna be.”

After hearing this drunken confession, I decided to be a little more sincere to this stranger, and he didn’t need to be alone at the moment. He needed company and more than that he needed to know that he wasn’t alone.

“Benny Joe, you’re not alone. I am sure that you’ve made many mistakes, but your life isn’t over. You can change for the better if YOU want to change. I know that many people still love you. I, personally, have made many, many mistakes in my life. I am a forty-five-year-old man who has never been married. At least you have a wife. Isn’t that a positive aspect of your life?”

Benny Joe had burst into tears during my little pep talk, if you want to call it that. He managed to mumble through his tears, “Yeah, man, she loves me so much. She is an all right woman in my eyes. I’ve tried to change. Ya know, this the first time that I’ve visited this grave. I’ve been so scared about seeing it— seeing the reality of life, which is that it is.... Well, it is so short. I’ve been trying to escape my mistakes, but I really can’t do it any more. So, I came here to pray for my end, my final escape.”

“Your life isn’t over. You are what— 48? Look, I don’t know anything at all about you, but I know life isn’t worth wasting. Today, I’ve realized that I’ve been wasting my life, and that isn’t something that I’m proud of. The only thing I can do is change. So, why don’t you just make a serious attempt to change for yourself, not others?”

After some thought, Benny Joe finally spoke very softly, “I think you’re right.
She had short, black curly hair and was shaped like a ball. When I looked at her, I just wanted to pinch her little puffy cheeks, which were already red from the frosty weather.

"Umm... Hi ma'am, sir, and miss, and Happy Holidays to you as well. Your singing was very beautiful. I wish that you wouldn't have stopped on my account of being present. I am Harold Wick, the caretaker for the cemetery."

The daughter of the singing couple talked this time. She said, "Why, sir, you have the most beautiful and gracious graveyard imaginable. I just hope you know that God sees all the glory that you provide for his heavenly angels."

"Why, thanks! It's all I got, ya know!"

The tall quiet man with the sandy white hair finally spoke up and said, "Sir, my name is James, and I am a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force. This is my wife, Joyce, and my daughter, Deanna. We like to go around and spread great cheer for everyone during the Christmas season. We were singing to Elicia over there."

James pointed at her grave and continued, "Today is her birthday. She was such a warm, beautiful little girl. She kept Jesus close to her heart, and she did so many wonderful things for her community. We'll never forget about her; I loved her like she was my own daughter."

"Oh, I've heard many wonderful things about Elicia today. It's such a shame that I never had the chance to meet her. She sounds lovely."

Joyce spoke softly, "Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways, and I'm sure that there is a reason for everything. He's the only one that knows our purpose in life. Our job is just to try to live a righteous, dutiful life for our Lord and Savior."

"Amen, momma," Deanna said approvingly.

James put his long arms around his happy family and said, "Well, we need to go sing one more song to Elicia. It's her favorite— "Silent Night." Would you like to join us, sir?"

"Oh, well..." I was trying to think of something fast to say to get myself out of this situation, but I guess that I wasn't fast enough.

Deanna happily informed me, "You don't have to sing pretty. You just have to feel God's message through his song and verse."

"Aha!' I thought to myself. I could just tell them that I did not know the words to the song, and I did just that.

"That is just not possible, sir," said the round bubbly lady known as Joyce. There was just something unique about that woman. She had so much warmth, love, and acceptance in her eyes. She continued to say, "Well, it's just so fortunate that I brought our caroling book. So, you can join us." Joyce reached down into her large brown leather bag and pulled out a song book that had Rudolph and Santa Claus on the front cover.

"Well, thank you ma'am. I'm very honored that you'd like me to join you nice folks in your holiday cheer. I must forewarn you nice people that I can't hold a tune for the life of me. Ha. Ha. Haa."

Jim said jovially, "Don't worry Harold. I can't sing either, but my wife loves to go caroling. It's just for one song, and then we'll be out of your hair."

I went to Elicia's grave with James, Joyce, and Deanna. We stood there and started to sing "Silent Night." In the middle of the song, the snow started to grow heavy. It was like the heavens were trying to communicate with us about our song of praise. Perhaps, it was a sign of thanks from Elicia. I've never been a truly religious man, but this family was showing me a better side to religion. They showed so much love and care for others. They were not the typical church-going hypocrites with whom I usually come into contact. They were truly good people with colossal hearts of worldly love.

When we finished the Christmas carol, we went our separate ways, but I left them feeling somewhat a better man—a better human being. Since the snow was growing thicker, I went inside into my small, but warm office to wait it out. I couldn't close shop just because of a little snow. I shook off the snow and stomped my boots clean. Then, I went to my mini-refrigerator and pulled out a jug of apple cider. Ahhh, I love to drink hot apple cider, especially on a freezing day like today; it's so delicious. I poured some into my favorite cobalt blue coffee cup and put it into the microwave for a couple of minutes. I took a long whiff of the warm spices and started to pull the cup up to my chapped lips, but then, I heard a car sliding all over the icy pavement outside my office. I heard a few random honks, a crash, and then a few dings from tin cans hitting the pavement. I threw my cup down into the kitchen sink and ran outside to see what had happened.

I saw exactly what I'd heard: a car parked in my metal trash bins. There wasn't much damage done to the car from what I could tell, but I ran over to the vehicle to check on the driver. I approached the car and heard an angry rambling voice cursing up a storm.

"Excuse me, Miss. Are you okay? Are you the only person in the car?"

The woman was in a personal frenzy, but she finally snapped out of it so that she could snap at me.

"Yeah, what? What? What do you want now? Can't you see that I am having really, really, bad day?"

"Well, yes ma'am... I can see that you are having a rough day, but I just
want to help. You can call me Harry), okay. Please, will you just step out of the
car very slowly?"

"Ugh! Fine! Fine. I’m getting out of the car very slowly. Are you happy now?"

The lady got out of the car and appeared to be fine. That was true until she
decided to kick the side of her car. She started yelling, "S—! You piece of s—. Ugh! I
can’t believe this. Great. Just GREAT!"

When she finished yelling at herself and the car, she turned to look at me as if
I had something to do with the accident. I just stood there and smiled, but I guess
that was the wrong thing to do, because she turned back around and stomped
off toward the graveyard. I just stood there completely dumbfounded. Then, the
crazed lady stopped by a grave and knelt down beside it. The lady was very pretty.
She had wavy dirty blonde hair with big bright hazel eyes. I turned my focus back
on the car and noticed that it looked fine with the exception of the few dents
from the swift kick to the side and the minor bump into the trash bins. I surveyed
the pavement and noticed the black ice on the road. Alabamians are not used
to driving in rainy, icy, or snowy weather. In this case, snow and ice were both
present on the pavement. I guess the young lady didn’t have a chance facing two
out of three horrible weather conditions.

I looked back at the girl to see if she had calmed down. I had to squint through
the heavy white blur to see that she was near Elicia’s location. I approached the
young lady very slowly, and I finally reached her at Elicia’s grave. Before she had a
chance to speak, I said, "Today is her birthday. Do you know her?"

The girl was very confused by my comment and looked up at me,
expressionless. I found it very humorous and let a small insignificant chuckle flee
from my mouth without much thought.

"Excuse me. Do I know you mister? How do you know Elicia?"

"Like I was trying to tell you earlier, my name is Harold Wick, and no, you don’t
know me. I run this cemetery. I really don’t know Elicia, but I’ve met many people
today that did know her. I’ve heard many great things about her, too."

"Yeah, she was very special. We were born three years apart exactly. She was my
sister. Everything about us was divisible by three: the date of birth, the time of birth,
and the days away from Christmas. Very odd, I know."

"Well, in that case, Happy Birthday, Miss."

The young lady had crystal teardrops swelling in the dark corners of her eyes.
Then, they fell slowly down her cheeks. One by one they flew from her eyes
to rest on the top of the cold, grey marble tombstone of her sister, Elicia. She
replied very softly, “Thanks, Harry. I hope I can call you Harry. My name is Lexi by
the way. Sorry about the trash cans. I lost control of my car. I didn’t expect it to
be snowing.”

“I know. When does it ever snow? Well, it makes for a great birthday
present, right?"

“Yeah, I guess so. When we were little girls, we would sit next to a cool, large
window in the breakable room at my grandparents’ house. We would wish so hard
for snow on our birthday or for Christmas. We were not that picky. Things were
so simple back then. Now, life is full of stressful factors like dealing with deaths,
money issues, college dilemmas, and parental expectations of doing things the
right way. I feel like life only consists of disappointment after disappointment. I
just came into town from school. I was trying to make it
here before it got too dark to see her grave. I don’t come out here much. It
just hurts too much."

There was a moment of dead silence and reflection. I didn’t know what to say.
What do you say? All I knew how to do was make arrangements to see the dead
get buried, not making sure the people were okay with their lives without the
dead. Well, today was just different. I looked down at Lexi and saw that she was
pulling out a cupcake with purple frosting. It had two candles sticking out from it,
and Lexi was trying to light the candles. After three tries, the candles were finally
lit. She started to sing Happy Birthday to Elicia and herself. For some odd reason,
I joined her in the song. She looked up at me with biggest smile on her face.
Then, she blew the candles out.

“Thanks for doing that for me. My birthday never feels the same any more.”

“No problem. I really don’t know what it would feel like to lose a sibling. It is
just me here. I lost my parents last year, and I’m not married. So, this is all I have.
I’m truly sorry for your loss, Lexi.”

“Oh. It’s okay. You gotta live life to the fullest. That is my motto. I just try to
forget about all of those stressful factors and look for the positive side of every
situation. Sometimes I just break down. My car is a prime example of a sporadic
emotional breakdown. Other than that, I just try to be as happy as I can be.
So, enough about me... You’re all alone here? Well, that doesn’t sound cool.”
Lexi said as she stood up and started to look around the graveyard like she was
a surveyor.

I just stood there without anything to say. I just nodded my head and averted
my eyes from hers. I wasn’t good with too much social interaction, especially
in personally social situations. I guess that she thought my behavior was funny because she started to laugh at me. That makes two people to laugh at me today.

“Im sorry. I don’t mean to laugh. You just look so adorable when you get nervous. Aha! I have a great plan for you. Why don’t you come with me and spend the holidays with me and my family? It’d be awesome! I have an incredible person that I want you to meet as well. So, please, please, pretty please COME!!!!”

I thought about what she was asking, and then I thought about everyone I had met today. There had to be some logical reason for meeting these people today. That thought was reinforced by what Joyce had said earlier today. After realizing that, I decided that I would go with Lexi to her family’s Christmas celebration. She gave me her phone number and directions to her house. I told her that I’d be there around 2 o’clock, and she gave me that bright smile again.

With that reassurance, she turned to leave Elicia’s grave. When she got to her car, she picked up the knocked-over cans and trash bins. Then, she got in and drove off into the fluffy white clouds of snow. The moment she left my thoughts turned cloudy like the snow. What had I gotten myself into? I didn’t know Lexi or her family, but she’d invited me, and I’d accepted. I must say December 22 was definitely a very bizarre day to say the least.

Christmas morning came very fast. I woke up to the annoying sound of my buzzing alarm clock. I slapped it a few times, and on the last time, it had hurt my hand. So, I figured that it was time to get up. I already signed myself up for social doom when I told Lexi okay. Slowly, but surely I got up and ready. Ughhh! I was nervous. Aha! I have a great plan for you. Why don’t you come with me and spend the holidays with me and my family? It’d be awesome! I have an incredible person that I want you to meet as well. So, please, please, pretty please COME!!!!”

As I was driving down the road, all I could think about were horrible possibilities of what could happen at this dinner. I thought about how her family was a bunch of cannibals who needed a victim to be their next “dinner,” and I was that lucky guy. Another situation was that I would arrive to her house to find that it didn’t exist. Over and over these mini-movies of “what ifs” floated through my head. By the time I got to Lexi’s house, I don’t think that I even really saw her house. It took about eight minutes for me to snap out of it. I was here, and there was no going back.

I had arrived at Lexi’s house around 1:30, which gave me enough time to be introduced to the family and to sort out all conceivable awkward moments. As I was walking up to Lexi’s house, I actually realized that it did exist, and it wasn’t some dirty shack. It was quite amazing. The house had blue wood-like paneling, which was enhanced by the classic red brick foundation. It had that “homey” feel to it, which eased my nerves a little bit. I had parked my car off to the side in the grass along with all the other cars. I hoped that was okay with Lexi’s family. Then, I walked through the carport to reach the door. It had a gigantic Christmas wreath in the center, and there were bright lights flashing through it. I gave the wooden door three swift, but hard knocks, and I waited for an answer.

Lexi answered the door with a vibrant smile across her face. She yelled, “Merry Christmas!”

I smiled and replied softly, “Thanks and Merry Christmas to you, too.”

Lexi beckoned me inside, and I followed nervously. I walked through a small foyer into a red-and-black checkered kitchen, and as I was walking, all I could hear was my thunderously heavy, rapid heartbeat. It was beating so hard that I thought it was going to explode out of my chest. I walked in with my head lowered like whipped hound, and Lexi was practically pulling me through the kitchen into the dining room.

Lexi yelled to all the guests, “Okay, everybody! This is Harry, a friend of mine. So, don’t freak him out too much, okay!”

To that unexpected announcement, my head shot up in shock by what she had said. When I saw everyone looking at me, I realized that I wasn’t a stranger in this house. I saw Joyce, James, Deanna, Benny Joe, and Ann. Yes, Ann was there. I felt a big cheesy grin spread across my face. I had met these great people three days ago, and they were extremely nice and unique in some cases. I found out that Joyce and James are Ann, Deanna, and Benny Joe’s parents. Lexi was the daughter of Ann, who turned out to be the person that she wanted me to meet. I found out that Ann had two other kids besides Lexi and Elicia; they were Whitney and Myles, the most precious kids that I have ever met in my entire life.

Every Christmas for the past forty years never felt as comforting as this one. I found the true meaning of Christmas, which is family, love, and togetherness. These people had been through so much in their lives, but they were strong in unity and love. Everyone understood that mistakes in life were to be expected, but that didn’t change the DNA structure of this family. On December 25, 2005, I felt like I was a part of a real loving and close-knit family for the very first time. I was truly content with my life in that very moment.

After Christmas, I kept in touch with Ann, and six months later we were
happily married. Now, six more months have passed, and we are facing another wonderful Christmas. I am still happily married to the woman of my dreams, and I had never felt so much unconditional love until I became a part of the Chaddux family. Before last Christmas, I really didn’t know what the holiday season entailed, but now I truly understand the meaning of Christmas. It’s about binding love and family together for at least one day in this overly busy world that we live in. Now that I’ve found the true meaning, I don’t ever want to lose it!

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Reclining nude

Joseph Thomas Bullock

She is seventy-one
tilted back at 30 degrees
strung across a hospital bed
like a puppet
a gastric tube connected to the stomach
gives her the food
she’s forgotten how to eat
oxygen through her nostrils
cause her
brain won’t tell her when to breathe
a Foley catheter collects urine
in a bag
that is glowing
like a warm glass of beer
And in the background
on her television screen
the country music channel
plays something to the refrain of
"Will you miss me
when I'm gone?"
But she never left
can’t leave
must be turned on the hour
because pressure against her bones
has been known
to cause her skin to break down
So I try my best
to take a minute
press two fingers
across her wrists
watching the second hand
de the clock
counting the beats
while her tiny earthquake palms shake
from the Parkinson’s
Alzheimer’s
end-stage dementia
acronyms I had to translate

And some who can’t bring themselves
to wear this white uniform
might ask
how I’ve found the means

But I’m avoiding the question
because today
I wore blue
plastic hospital gowns
a surgeon’s mask
and latex gloves
as a shield
against the bacteria
resistant to antibiotics
swimming in her blood
and sputum

For the simple reason
that she needs a bath
after leaking
from the only opening
not hooked to machines
and this is the first time
that I have seen
a woman

full frontal
but not in all her glory
there are still electrodes
that need to be removed
IV lines that must be positioned
Boots and stockings
taken off
that keep her joints
from becoming rigid

And I know
what you’re probably thinking
cause I’ve said the same
myself
so many times
it might as well become a living will
“Lord, if I ever get ‘that way’
Please take me
from this unbearable pain
to the eternal rest”

But if God doesn’t
hear my prayer
someone better sign those papers
pull the plug
release me from the bonds
of this life
no longer worth living

And we’d all like to think
It’s that simple

But you see
I’ve read her chart
and the only visible means of support
is in the form of Medicare
no relatives or dependents
some might call her a burden
of the state
but I call her a human being
a masterpiece
the reclining nude
basking in the eerie glow
of an institution

And as I rub a washcloth
cross the small of her back
I hear a mumble
from the unresponsive abyss

Lips form syllables
from a tongue and gums
that no longer hold teeth
but she speaks
all the same
and I could easily ignore her
go about my tasks
change the linens
take out the laundry

But something told me
Instead to ask
"I'm sorry, Miss..."
"What time is it?" she says
"It's 9:30"
"A.M."
And I smile
because it was
the most beautiful thing
I'd ever seen

That red couch sits—
Bright and glaringly out of place
In my monochromatic den,
Reeking of mothballs and filth.
It used to be the focus of her living room—
Red curtains and Avon glassware to match, and
A huge portrait of a Spanish dancer,
Splattered with a red and black skirt,
Hanging elegantly above it.
It suited her.

I can still see her—
Those red-rimmed glasses,
Covering half her face,
And her ever-changing hair.
In the 70s, she was the only white woman with an afro,
But most of her final days, she sported
A striking fire-engine red bob,
Topped with a metallic gold turban.
She was exotic— bordering tacky,
But it suited her.

I remember her huge rhinestone-studded purse—
A sea of red lipstick and prescriptions.
Bottles upon bottles— one (or two) for every ache.
Days would pass without a word,
Then some days we all get frantic phone calls—
Updates on her newest diseases and ailments—
Always wanting something she didn't have,
Never accepting what she did.
They found her by the bed one morning,  
Amidst hundreds of blue and white pills  
Trampled into the shag carpet.  
I remember seeing her, surrounded by red roses,  
Wondering if that look of peace was  
Painted on like the red lipstick.  
She looks good—usually an awkward lie,  
But she really did look better than she had in years—  
Draped in a red dress, dripping with gold jewelry.  
She wouldn’t have had it any other way.
Dr. Diddle and the Potluck Dinner

Haley Henslee

Dr. Remus Diddle backed into the glass door, pushing it with his body to sidle into the fellowship hall. His arms were laden with serving dishes containing a broccoli casserole, a prune cake, and a tray of pigs in blankets. Diddle was beyond prepared; tonight was his first potluck dinner at New Canaan Community Church. He’d been a regular visitor there for several weeks, and he was planning to place membership. Contributing to the monthly potluck meal, he believed, was the very least he could do.

The five-foot-four-inch, balding proctologist carried his dishes with care to the long table at the end of the room, where the ladies from the congregation were spreading their own culinary creations. Diddle’s mouth watered as he surveyed the spread; four chicken casseroles, three macaroni casseroles, two hash brown casseroles, mashed potatoes, roast and potatoes, homemade bread, creamed corn, and various unrecognizable treats littered the dinner table, the delicious aroma wafting as far as the parking lot. The dessert spread was too sinful for church; rich chocolate cake, soft-baked cookies, Boston cream pie, banana pudding and coconut cake beckoned the hungry doctor.

Diddle found just enough open space to display his contributions to the dinner, then took a nervous breath before retreating toward the back of the room. The fellowship hall was already buzzing and crowded as famished members of the congregation awaited the arrival of their preacher, Chuck Hill. An elderly man, Raymond Gentry, stopped Diddle as he strode toward the corner, sticking his hand out. “Hi, young man— tell me your name again?”

Raymond reeked of garlic and mothballs. Diddle turned his head, breathing from one nostril. “Remus Diddle, sir.”

“Right, right... I remember now,” the old man said, letting go of Diddle’s hand to reach for a handkerchief. Snorting, he smeared it across his nose.

“Doctor, ain’t ye? Hind end?”

Diddle fought to maintain his smile. “Yes, sir.”

Raymond leaned forward, squinting his beady eyes from behind thick glasses. His breath reeked. “You a good doctor?”

No! “Some say so, I suppose.”

The old man turned to walk away, reaching out to pat Diddle’s shoulder. “I’ll be seein’ ye.”

There goes my appetite, Diddle thought, as the fellowship hall’s doors swung open and Chuck Hill entered. He was in his early 40s, dressed to the hilt in designer clothing and an overcoat, with a pretty, young wife on his arm. The preacher was tall and built, with sandy hair, blue eyes and a handsome set jaw line. His wife was the thin, blonde picture of perfection; she wore a long, black skirt, leather knee boots, and a baby pink sweater with a white fur collar that draped down over her shoulders. Large pearls adorned her ears, and she wore a large, sparkling lapel pin in the shape of a cat.

Their two young children— Spencer, age three, and Amanda, age five, Diddle remembered— trailed behind them, hitting each other. It wasn’t until Spencer wailed as loudly as a tornado siren that either of his parents paid any attention.

As Chuck allowed an elderly woman to take his overcoat, his wife, Marlee, stooped down to eye level with her children. “Now, Spencer,” she cooed, “if you scream like that again, Mommy will put you in time out. We know how Mommy hates putting Spency in time out.” She reached for his hand.

“No!” Spencer went limp, sagging against the linoleum floor as his flustered mother tried to force him to stand, and as his big sister giggled loudly. Chuck reached down to scoop his son from the floor. “Here’s my boy!”

The preacher’s booming voice silenced the fellowship hall. “We’re glad all of you could make it here tonight; looks like we’ve got a great meal!” There was a hum of approval. “Welcome to all our visitors. Just know you’re always invited to share our meals and attend our worship services— 9:30 a.m. Bible study Sunday mornings, 10:30 worship, 6 o’clock evening services or our 7 o’clock Wednesday night meetings. Let’s go to God in prayer.”

Chuck bowed his head, and the rest of the congregation followed suit.

“Almighty, merciful God, we thank you now for all the blessings...”

Diddle’s attention shifted from Chuck’s prayer to the shuffling near his feet. He opened his eyes just a crack to see Amanda, the preacher’s daughter, crawling around legs and under tables in a floral print dress, her big white hair bow dangling from the ends of her tousled brown hair. Diddle ventured a glance to the front of the room, where Marlee still stood, hands clasped reverently, eyes closed, head tilted upward, eyebrows stitched in concentration.

As soon as Chuck said, “Amen,” there was a mad rush toward the potluck table. The church members frantically filled their plates with a little of each dish,
chatting and laughing. Diddle hung back, waiting for the crowd to clear before he stepped toward the table to get a plate. He ended up waiting in line with a middle-aged woman with artificially black hair and a fuzzy blue sweater.

"I have a—" she started and stuck her hand out to him. "Amelia South."

"Remus Diddle," he said, trying not to stare for too long at her caked, white makeup, blue eye shadow and fire-engine red lipstick.

"I have— well, you're a doctor, right?" she asked. As he opened his mouth to answer, she continued. "I've got a rash I'd like you to look at. It's been all over my back for three weeks and I just have no idea what it is!" She reached for the hem of her sweater.

Diddle choked. "Madam, perhaps you should make an appointment with a dermatologist. They're better suited than I to diagnose skin conditions." Please, God, have mercy!

"Well, can't you do the same thing as any other doctor?"

"I, um, have to go; pardon me," Diddle spat frantically, backing out of the line and pushing his way out of the fellowship hall and toward the men's bathroom before Amelia could say another word.

Diddle stood in front of the bathroom mirror, splashing his face with cold water. He fought the thought that attending New Canaan was a mistake. "Just a few odd people, that's all," he muttered as he collected himself and made his way back into the fellowship hall.

By the time Diddle reached the serving table again, all the food was picked over. Most of the casserole dishes had been scraped clean, but he managed to fill his plate with enough food to sustain him through the church service. The only empty seats left in the hall were near to Mariee, Amanda and Spencer; he summoned up the will to take a seat near them.

As Diddle tried to eat his dinner in peace, the children bickered and whined as their mother reminded them not to play with their food or eat their dessert first. The last straw came when Spencer's Power Ranger action figure landed in Diddle's glass of tea. The doctor was about to get up and storm out of the church building when Chuck—who'd been making his rounds with a full plate in one hand, shaking hands with the other—sat down with his family.

"So, Remus— am I right?" Chuck extended his hand toward the doctor.

"That's me," Diddle answered with a curt nod. "How are you this evening?"

"Oh, fine, just fine," Chuck said. "This meal is something else. I tell you."

"Certainly," Diddle said, adjusting his green bow tie. "I hardly expected the variety, but I must say the food is excellent. I doubt the food I brought holds up to these fine ladies'."

When Amanda screamed, "Leave me alone!" Chuck cast a stern look toward his children. "Remember to love your neighbor," he said in a sing-song voice as Spencer and Amanda sulked.

Chuck took a bite of one of Diddle's pigs in blankets, chewing thoughtfully. "So, you're a doctor, right?"

Diddle nodded.

"I don't think I caught what part of the medical field you're in," Chuck said, eyeing him and awaiting his answer.

"Oh, well..." Diddle swallowed and fiddled with his shirt sleeve. "I'm a proctologist."

Chuck nodded slowly. "So, that's, say, about how much a year? Hundred thousand?" Diddle didn't answer. "More? Let's see, after taxes..." Chuck began muttering to himself, and Diddle glared at him, infuriated.

From beside the doctor, Spencer cried, "Mommy! What's a proc—" before Mariee could clap a hand over his mouth in embarrassment. She avoided eye contact with the doctor, blushing.

"So, uh..." Chuck began, finishing the pig in a blanket, "what, uh, what food did you say you brought tonight, Remus?"

"Oh," Diddle said, scooting his chair back and gathering his jacket, "just some finger foods." He reveled in Chuck's stunned silence. "Enjoy your meal, sir, madam. Learn to control your children and your congregation, minister, and perhaps I shall return. Good evening."

Diddle strode out of the fellowship hall, leaving behind his serving dishes and the unsatisfactory congregation. "Good show, old boy," he muttered to himself as he let the door slam shut behind him.
A Giant Lego

Tiffany Nichols

A giant Lego
Bit my knee
When I was crawling on the floor.

You might not think
Such things have teeth,
But my knee is very sore.

It seems giant Legos
Don't like knees,
Because this one made me bleed.

It also took
A chunk of skin
And left my knee quite blue;
And it stayed that way
For a day or two.

So the next time
I'm crawling,
I'll be sure the floor
Is free of giant Legos
With teeth.

Unstable

Brannon Burcham
Merit
Ode to [adult swim]

Jesska Grotjahn

sitting on a black bed
in a white room
watching [adult swim]
the white letters
on the black screen
called bumps
they captivate me
I'm addicted to the sarcasm
the wisdom that they share
Sunday through Thursday
from 9:30 to 6 am I watch
every night I'm glued to the tv
silence is mandatory
no talking when bumps begin
[adult swim] cartoons for big kids
shows with hardcore humor
political thought and fart jokes
15 minute bursts of creativity
sweet burst of bump in between
beautiful illustration and graphic design
make me turn to Cartoon Network
like clockwork every night
I must have the bumps to live
Its [adult swim] time

Dionysia

Elisabeth Melvin

Staring across a packed house
An endless sea of T-shirts and hair dye—
Red, blue, pink, black, green
The scent of beer, sweat, and pot
Compose a sweet memory
As the tiny creatures
Singing, celebrating, connecting
Worship and revere their objects of lust
A Time That Can Never Be Forgotten

Sozan Muhammad

I came back from school. It was such a rainy day. I still remember the date: April 5th, 1991. On the way back home, while I was walking on the street, my innocent eyes were unintentionally staring at my small feet but my pure mind continuously kept thinking about all I had heard from my friends that day, trying to understand what was going on. I was just seven years old. All I knew was that Saddam Hussein was not in Kurdistan any more and also I knew how much I hated him. Yes, I still remember one time when my mom and her friends were talking so pessimistically about how innocent people—kids, adults, and old people—were dying every day due to his inhumane and evil actions. My mom hopelessly said, “I think Saddam never dies. The only way he might die if God sends him a horrible disease like cancer.” After thinking for a while, I sped up my voice and said, “You know what mom? I think I can kill him.” Everyone looked at me and started laughing. I continued talking, “See, if I go to his house, they will allow me to go inside and they won’t think that I want to kill Saddam. I can take some poison and put it in his glass.” My mom looked at me so kindly and said, “See! Even our small kids think about killing that monster.” I went for a walk on the street and continued thinking. Everywhere you heard people saying, “We did the best job ever. That uprising will end all the bad and sad things.” I knew we did uprise against Saddam Hussein, but my small brain couldn’t understand what the word “uprising” meant. All I knew was that people were very happy because Saddam and his soldiers were not here in Kurdistan any more.

As I entered our house, I saw my mom. She looked very busy and confused. I shouted and ran to her, “Mom! My friends told me that Saddam is coming back tomorrow. They said that he will chemical bomb us. Is that true, mom?” My mom didn’t answer my question but said, “Honey, go and take a shower. After that change your sisters’ clothes and take care of them, then put all those clothes I put over there in the suitcases, but don’t forget you should hurry up.” I said, “But why mom? Are we going somewhere?” She said, “Yes, we are going somewhere. Now don’t waste time, sweetie.” She looked at me all of a sudden and said quickly, “Oh, don’t forget that you all should wear warm clothes, ok honey?”

My father came back with his car. I was so happy because some of our relatives were there. They all came to our house. I was a friend of their children, so I was very glad to see them at our house for we could have fun all together. The children were the only ones who were laughing. Everyone else was sad and worried. I was listening to them to see where we were going to have our picnic. Yes, I thought we were going for a picnic. I heard my dad saying, “Saddam’s armies are coming up to the Kurdish areas. They might be here tomorrow.” One of our relatives, a woman, started crying, “I am afraid that we will die this time.” After she said this, everyone started shouting at her, “Don’t say this. Don’t be a coward. God is with us.” I knew something bad was going on but I didn’t care. All I wanted was to have fun with my friends, and I was happy because we were all going somewhere.

It was the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims fast for one month: no eating and drinking from sunrise to sundown. Everyone was fasting except the kids. After breaking fast and having dinner, everyone started packing their stuff and putting it in my father’s car. They were all in a hurry. If any of the kids did something wrong, others yelled at them. I was very upset because everyone was very angry and looked scared.

My father’s car was very big. The reason why all those people were at our house was that they didn’t have cars, so they could come with us. While they were moving their stuff to the car, I heard someone saying, “People are evacuating everywhere.”

It was nine o’clock when we left home. It was a very rainy night. In the car, my father told us that none of the kids were allowed to play or even to speak one word except if we needed an important thing from them, so everyone should be very quiet. After all, I knew that we’re going to the border of Iran and we might stay for one week, then we would go to Iran.

While I was sitting down next to the window, my eyes were staring at the heavy rain falling down from the sky. It was windy as well. The wind and the rain were touching the car window and performing different kinds of dances. I could see lots of people walking on the roads while carrying their kids and heavy loads under the rain. I started feeling so bad and pity for them. Kurdistan is a very mountainous place. All those people should not have walked on those mountainous and hilly roads. I started feeling more pity when the car
was moving towards the top of the mountain. I could hear people crying and screaming. I knew that it was very cold outside. Everyone in the car was very quiet and looked at those innocent people so kindly. After a while I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was very quiet outside. I could see a few lights far away. There were no more people walking on the streets because we had been driving for a long time, and we were nearly on the border of Iran, just one hour away. We went to a place where there were some tents. My father stopped the car. Some people came to help us to move our stuff to those tents. When I went to one of those tents, I got frustrated. I said to myself, "We are going to stay here?" I still remember how my sister used to cry because she didn't like the place at all. It was very cold in those tents. The worst part was that it was very muddy. Whenever I would go out, my clothes and shoes became dirty and muddy. My mom told me that I cannot change my clothes whenever they get dirty. She said, "Honey, this is not home. Be careful, don't make them dirty. We don't have enough water to drink, let alone using it for washing clothes." We were using wood for making a fire. I couldn't complain for I knew everyone was so tired and sick of what was happening. I started being a good girl for I listened for whatever my mom told me to do though I didn't like it.

We spent about ten days in those tents. One day, my dad came back and told my mom to pack everything. I was happy because I knew we were going to Iran. My dad had some friends there who were Kurdish. I said to my sister, who was so eager to leave that place, "Finally, we will get rid of this place, happy now?"

We had to walk for one hour to get to the border of Iran. My dad told us that he could not drive the car. Those roads were very dangerous because first they were mountainous, which had lots of ups and downs and secondly, it had been raining for more than one week, so the car might get stuck in the mud. My father said that we had to cross a big river to get to Iran. That river was the separation point between Iraq and Iran. There was a guy with us whom I didn't know. I asked my mom why he was with us. She said, "The way we have to walk on it to get to the border is very risky because it has lots of land mines, so this guy knows the best and safest way not to get to those dangerous lands. He is just trying to help us reach there safely."

When we were approaching the border of Iran, for the first time in my life, from far away I saw that big river. I shouted, "Oh no, we have to cross that scary river?" When we got there I saw few people who were crossing the river. When I saw that scene, I was very scared. It was such a very huge river. It was so muddy that no one could see what was inside it. The floods were moving so quickly and mercilessly as if they were fighting with each other. If you stared at it for more than a minute, you felt so dizzy.

The way we had to cross that river was very dangerous and risky. There was something like a big basket, which was made of iron. The basket was tied to a big and long rope. In the land of Iraq, one end of the rope was tied to a tree while the other end of the rope, in the land of Iran, was tied to another tree. There were some people on the other side of the river, in Iran, who were pulling another different rope, which was tied to the basket in order to get us to that side of the river.

My sisters and I started crying because we were terrified. My mom was almost about to cry but was trying her best not to show it. My dad started hugging and kissing all of us, while smiling and saying, "Don't worry guys. I know you all are very brave. Just close your eyes and don't look at anything, ok, my dears?" He was trying to calm us down. He gave all of us money and said, "Look! As soon as you get to that side of the river, then after one hour you will be in a city where there are many shops. I know you guys love candies, right, dears? See! You can get them there."

My mom started praying and was teaching us what to pray, "When you guys are crossing, just keep asking God and saying \textit{Khwya Gian pana agrin ba to.}\"

My mom, my brother and our newborn baby crossed first. They got there safely. Since my dad had to go back to help our relatives, he couldn't come with us, so my two sisters and I had to cross the river with another man whom we didn't know. He was very nice and kept telling us while the basket was moving above the river, "Guys, don't open your eyes." All of a sudden, my youngest sister opened her eyes and started screaming and crying. I opened my eyes in the hope of calming her down but didn't dare to look at the river. I kept yelling at her, "Sawsan! Close your eyes please. Don't cry, honey." The poor man who didn't know what to do but all he could do was to put his hands on my sister's eyes. Finally, we got to the other side of the river safely. My mom hugged all of us when we got there. She was kissing my youngest sister and saying, "What happened, sweetheart? It is okay. It is okay." When finally my youngest sister stopped crying, she looked at my mom and said, "Daya, I dropped my money. It is inside the river." My mom smiled, "Don't worry, honey. I have lots of money. I will buy you whatever you want."

As I mentioned, my dad didn't come with us. He was on the other side of the river. He was waving to us and smiling. After some time, we left that place. The
sound of the scary river got lower while you got farther from it. We went to a city and stayed in the house of my father’s friend. They were very nice and helpful. We stayed there for almost twenty days.

Saddam Hussein’s armies came back to a small portion of Kurdistan but didn’t reach the major cities. Iraq was in a war with Kuwait at that time. Due to that reason, Saddam’s army became very weak, which was a very good advantage to us. We got out of this situation because hopefully that monster Saddam Hussein refused to send his armies to the Kurdish areas since he really needed them elsewhere. It was very important for him to use his armies in the war.

Fifteen years have passed since that time, but all the images I saw are still in my mind. My mom used to say that kids have good memories and will never forget what they see. Yes, it is very true for me. I might forget almost everything which is happening today but will never, ever forget those sad and horrifying childhood memories.

The Skies Alight with Crimson Flame

Eric Hanback

As I came upon an arch of iron,
Wrought by the unseen hands of my imagination,
A single red glow
Ascended into Heaven, and the skies shone clear with rage.

A reason, the echo implored, its power shattering spirits.
The clouds are bursting with flame, and the sun is chilled as ice.
My vision is hindered.

The streets are dust, unlikely to return.
A symbol of hope remains etched in the stone temples.
Peace, purpose, such lucid luxuries . . .

As the storm clouds gathered, the hourglass empty,
The hand of the real reached out and shook me,
And awoke me from my dream.
**Burned**

Misty Jones

I went to the bookshelves in my brain, neat, ordered, organized, to find my definition. I chose the book I knew contained my self-discovery, plain, paperback, pocket-size.

I read voraciously.

Before I finished I was stricken by a mass of thoughts and theories not my own. I was interrupted by my professors, my ranting father, television.

I put my finger in the pages, tried to save my place.

When I finally shut my teachers out, half-ignored my father, and put down the remote, my book was lost, its pages ash, my bookshelves burned.

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**Nightshade**

Jack Pylant

Beautiful to behold, Its glowing, translucent, trumpet-shaped flowers, open and close at night, gaining the appellation, Moonflower.

Finger-length and with white to purple color, when used to rouge the lips and cheeks of women of Italy, Spawned the name, Belladonna, for beautiful lady, whose eyes became luminous when pleasant things were seen, or when eyedrops bearing atropine came upon the scene.

Touched, smoked, eaten or imbibed as a tea, it will send you on an unpleasant trip. Or you might die.

A form of nightshade, like pepper, tomato or potato, but different. Tomatoes don't take you on a ten-day high. Or kill you.

Wholly poisonous, leaves and root, flowers and seeds and stems and fruit. All reek with an evil odor when crushed.

Hot as a hare, blind as a bat, dry as a bone, red as a beet and mad as a hatter, a mnemonic to remind us, for if a tiny part of the plant is consumed, All these symptoms may be manifest.
It goes by many names,
Poison Lily and Devil Weed,
Thorn Apple and Angel's Trumpet,
Zombie's Cucumber and Jimson Weed
and my favorites
Moonflower, Nightshade, Belladonna.

Used in rites of passage,
the Navajos call it Sacred Datura.
As a child in the cotton fields,
I called it Damned Jimson Weed
when I attacked it with a hoe.

Scopalamine, one of the myriad poisons it contains
is the Gestapo inquisitor's friend,
for it will make you tell the truth,
smoke phantom cigarettes,
or talk to imaginary friends.

Unlike ergot-infected grain or magic mushrooms,
that through sensory distortion, and suggestion,
probably begat biblical miracles.
Datura, like a living dream, is truly hallucinogenic and fraught
with many dangers.

Common in much of the world.
Used in witchcraft and in healing,
able to send the senses reeling.
So look and admire, but do not touch,
this lovely flower that yields so much.
Albert Einstein is credited with many great ideas throughout the years such as, “Great spirits have always encountered opposition from mediocre minds.” That quote is perfect for describing my life because I have always felt as if I was destined for great things. The dreams of great success began long ago when I was a small boy looking to stars, only to grow in need and strength with the promise of a single doctor who probably had no idea of what he was saying: He promised me a normal life. I had no idea what that was, so I set out to find it.

Prior to April 9, 1997, my life was as close to normal as anyone could possibly want. I had a family who loved and supported me while I set out upon a four-year stint with the United States Navy. I was able to drive myself anywhere I needed and wanted to go. I had control over my thoughts and bodily functions, but most important, I didn’t have to swallow medicines every day and night. My life was normal because I had not yet been bashed in the head by a humongous fuel-line attached to the aircraft carrier lying alongside my ship.

Ever since that day my life has taken some dramatic turns off the “normal” interstate highway. I had my first seizure in a mall. I was in a boutique store in Monmouth County, New Jersey. When my face hit the ground, it tore the skin off the whole right side of my face. A scar remains over my eye to remind me of that day—as if I needed a reminder. I couldn’t leave the ship for fear of ridicule and shame in myself. I felt like the Phantom of the Opera without the pleasure of a soundtrack to sing along to every day or a mask to hide my scarred face; I would have preferred it that way. Perhaps, I would have avoided questions, which I still answer to this day such as, “What happened to you?” or “Did you get into a fight? I’ll help you get him!” I’ve grown tired of these questions and usually answer them before the person asking can finish saying the words.

The doctors tried frantically to diagnose me with something that would keep me in the military— they couldn’t have wasted all that money it took to train me. Epilepsy was the final call, and I was to be medically retired. Someone had to give me the message, as well as comfort me during this frightening time. Anthony Panetteri was the name on his chest. The office was nice, but the desk was cluttered— his desk littered with papers, so disorganized not even an imaginary machine from the future could fix the problem. That was interesting because his demeanor was equally cluttered. He informed me I was being discharged, and I could still have a normal life. This would be the start of my new life because I was handed out a virtual list of things “not to do” for my own good— seizures might occur and I could get hurt.

According to the Navy doctors, it was highly recommended I refrain from the following activities: parachuting, mountain climbing, base jumping, skiing—water or snow, camping far away from medical facilities or personnel, operating heavy machinery, watching television for extended periods of time, operating a computer, swimming, taking a hot bath, consuming alcohol, driving a car… talking with people, looking anyone in the eye, giving consideration to any type of success, dreaming of the future. The last four I made up.

A normal life was summed up for me in a single list of do’s and don’ts. I began looking for what I could do in life. I knew my talents in the creative arts would bring me to the imagined greatness of childhood, but I had no clear road to get there and too many restraints that I never had before. I originally ignored the warning not to drive. No one would tell this man what to do— curses be to man for his sins. The curse we all suffer through is our memory because it will forever haunt us throughout our lives; remembering lives that were almost lost in tragedy and trauma can never be erased. My life is no exception to this curse, when one accident constantly comes forward in my dreams.

I was traveling at 45 mph when I went into seizure, according to my girlfriend at the time. Tania had the pleasure of watching this event from her rear-view mirror. The estimated speed of my vehicle was about 65 mph when I made contact with a parked Buick Roadmaster station wagon, which then hit the car next to it—a Honda Civic. The residents and some family friends were on the porch of their home when I launched onto the lawn; they all reported I had convulsions until the authorities arrived. Thankfully, my airbag never released; the impact was so massive it completely destroyed the sensor before it could come out. I was happy about this because my arms were locked in place on the steering wheel so tightly they folded it over to the dashboard at impact. The airbag would have caused a compound fracture and required surgery along with physical therapy. I decided to give up my right to drive out of fear I might hurt another person.

State law in Alabama says that anyone having a seizure must wait for six months without having a seizure before operating a motor vehicle. I have been
Non-Fiction

seizure-free for eight months once. I remember being six-months free before, but that was pretty short-lived. During 2004, the total count came to twenty-three. The longest time of convulsion I ever experienced was a complex-partial seizure, the worst imaginable kind I've been told, in which the brain completely shuts down for the duration of unconsciousness. I was out for almost five minutes. My sister said my eyes glazed over like a doughnut, and I leaned against the wall and slid down the support beam as if I were acting out a movie scene. The medical response team that arrived said that if she had taken any longer I could have died that day also.

Epilepsy became the focus of every conversation I would have with someone on our first meeting. After being friends with a person for only a short time, they found a connection of sorts. It never took long before everyone I met would either know someone with epilepsy, have ultimate knowledge of the disease—which is a disorder, not a disease—or become so frightened of me they would always try to avoid me unless they needed something. This is prejudice to me because I feel as if they are trying too hard to make a conversation on a topic they truly know nothing about. I have tried to show people the prejudice in their heart through my friendship, but it rarely helps. Many I come in contact with seem to be afraid to befriend someone like myself out of fear they will have to deal with a seizure. Employers are no different in today's society. I cannot count the number of jobs I have lost because of seizures. When a seizure occurs on the job, my close friends and I are known to place bets on how long it takes for me to hear, "We don't have enough hours on the schedule to keep you here, maybe we'll call you in a month or so." It usually takes one or two months before I open the "Help-Wanted" section of the newspaper.

The doctors told me that out of a large crowd, one hundred people suffer from epilepsy and forty of those people suffer from depression. If I didn't have depression before I gave up my right to drive, I certainly learned all about the condition shortly afterward. The normal life lies next to the setting sun on the horizon, too distant to reach. While this may be trivial to some, the freedom to be normal if I wanted to be normal would be enough to keep me grounded. It became more and more transparent of what a normal life is, why I couldn't have one and why I must try to achieve some satisfactory replacement for this normal life everyone spoke of so frequently. The American normal life rests on pretty greeting cards, amazing commercials, beautiful billboards, magazines and so on, displaying pictures of perfect societal life. My normal life consisted of asking for a ride to the store for cigarettes and then uncontrollably throwing them across the room because of a petit-mal—or minor—seizure. When people see me do this, they call me a freak and stare in shock.

Every person on the face of the planet lives in his or her own little world. Every person on the face of the planet tries to make that little world happy and normal. Scholars, doctors, and psychologists have no right to say there is a medical, psychological, or rhetorical definition of what a happy, normal life could be. Television programs and magazines flash images of families smiling back at us, business professionals at the top of their game, extreme adventurers going the distance for the thrill of a lifetime and rock stars who have it all. These images are pictures of normal lives.

To me, and I imagine other people who suffer from epilepsy, a normal life would be to wake up and not fall on the floor when I get out of bed. I would consider a normal life to be having days when I don't break a coffee mug or have to explain to a future employer, professor, or friend the epileptic condition and how they would not be at fault or responsibility should a seizure occur when I was at work, school, or anywhere else. I try to make my little world normal by finding a lover who understands she may have to drive us to the movies, dinner, concerts, and everywhere else she or I want to go together.

I try because I don't have a choice. I try to be understood, but I still get called a freak behind my back for being too outspoken and laughed at for my inability to keep quiet about simple issues when some things appear more important. I have never asked myself, "Will I ever have a normal life?" I only try to convince those around me that this is my little world. I try to make it normal, and I try to make it happy. Seizures are not the only thing in my world that defines who I am or what I will become. They simply define the path I must follow to achieve the greatness I deserve for trying so hard—to be normal.
Passing Time on a Porch

Jesska Grotjahn

Waiting is a son of a bitch
standing on a concrete square
Time passes slowly
when it's freezing
The anxiousness involved
drives me to insanity
When will you get here?
Ten minutes ok I'm waiting
Passing the time in odd ways
We put a squirrel in a mailbox
tried to catch a cat
threw sticks in the road
Extension cords are kitten bait
Feral kittens are not fluffy kittens
lying on pillows
When will you get here?
Ten minutes ok I'm waiting
turning circles in the leaves
rolling down a hill
pulling my hair
Oh how waiting kills me
Impatience is not a virtue
When will you get here?
Ten minutes ok I'm waiting
It's amazing how quickly
ten minutes turns into an hour
Is that you? No. Is that you?
God I can't take it any more
I need you to be here
unlocking your door
because it's effin' cold outside and
waiting is a son of a bitch
Chasing Bowser
Trevor Joiner

During the age of cooties and napkin notes from mom, there was only one game that my good friend, Josh, and I would ever play, and that was a game of pure creativity and imagination. It didn’t have a name. I don’t think we said “Hey, let’s play that game of pure creativity and imagination.” It was not a game that anyone could play. Not because we, the creators of the pure creativity and imagination game, restricted admission, rather, it was because to play required immense knowledge in the three things Josh and I (both second-graders at Ralph A. Gates Elementary) knew a lot about: gadgets, video games, and George Lucas.

Chess is to be played on a checkerboard, measuring no more or no less than eight squares wide and eight squares long.

It was essentially an elaborate “game” of make believe. We were yoshies, dragon-like creatures from the popular Super Mario video game series. Each recess, we would set out and battle the evil Bowser, who has unleashed his Koopa minions in an attempt to take over Yoshi Island, which looked a lot like the school playground. Yoshi Island was huge, compared to other playgrounds-turned-island. Looking due east from the edge of the blacktop, one could see a castle (a fort-like structure at the center of the playground), surrounded by the only sand on Yoshi Island. South of the castle was a vast plain (the two soccer fields, running lengthwise relative to the rest of the playground. They were separated by a mild slope that turned dark in color after noon and a single cypress tree at the southeast corner). West of the plain, there was a desert (the baseball diamond at the head of the “upper” soccer field). Further west was Bowser’s Castle (the second baseball diamond at the very end of school grounds, beyond the first diamond). However, this place was forbidden—by school code, that is—so no one ever dared to go there. We thought that the forbidden area tied in perfectly with our game. Sure, it all sounds incredibly silly, but when you are a kid, you don’t worry about what others think— I didn’t, at least. No, when you are a kid in school, there are really only two things on your mind: recess/fun and lunch.

In the computerized version of chess, you are allowed to undo a move, swap sides in mid-game, or even force the computer opponent to move.

At lunch, one day, back in the first or second grade, we introduced “technology” to our recess pastime. We took a few index cards and some tape and made what we affectionately called “clickers.” No, it’s not street slang, and in fact, they didn’t make any noise at all. The clickers resembled a paper cellular phone, overpopulated with crudely drawn buttons drawn on with the aid of the lines of the index cards. They were also folded in half. Bear in mind, this was before the modern cell phone. In fact, I think pagers were the thing then, so I think it is safe to say that we essentially created the first designs for “flip phone.” With these clickers, we could open doors, fire laser beams, and turn assorted objects (both imaginary and real) on and off. There was a plethora of other functions, and Josh and I often competed to see who could cram the most buttons onto a single three-by-five card, and still be able to read the buttons’ labels. Somehow, Josh always won.

In chess, white always goes first. Black comes second.

One day, we gained an arch-nemesis by the name of Billy Studley. I thought his name suited him perfectly. He was a short, chubby kid, with Coke bottles in front of his eyes. He reminded me of the Fonz, from Happy Days, only instead of denim jeans and a black leather jacket, Billy wore jeans and a black T-shirt—every day. He wanted to join our game so much that he was willing to do almost anything to get in. After a few days of him asking if he could play, he moved up to begging and false politeness. No matter how many times he asked or how many Little Debbie Zebra Cakes he would give us, we still held fast to our answer—“No.” Then again, it was somewhat nice getting free Zebra Cakes everyday. So, the persistent little chap started following us. He wouldn’t say anything, but he did mimic our every move. If we jumped, he jumped. If we crawled, he crawled. If we found a blue turtle shell (in Super Mario, blue turtle shells gave Yoshies the power of flight), he found one, too. We would move from the four-square area to the baseball diamond. From the solitary cypress tree at the far end of the field, to the low brick wall separating the kindergarten playground from the big kids’ playground, everywhere that Josh and I went, Billy was sure to go. But alas, we simply couldn’t get rid of him, so we let Billy join our game—only he had to be Bowser.

You must say “Check!” when you have moved one of your pieces into a position so that your opponent’s king can be jumped.

In order to defeat the mighty Bowser, you had to hit him three times with a turtle shell. In the video game, that is. Unfortunately, turtle shells are far and
few on an elementary school playground, so we had to improvise, making turtle shells out of whatever was fairly small and throwable. We found that wetting and compacting the sand surrounding the castle made fine turtle shells, indeed. The chase commenced. In our first battle, Billy... I mean Bowser... ran as fast as he could, while Josh and I lobbed turtle shells at him. It was not long before Bowser, who if you remember was short and chubby, succumbed to our wrath. On second thought, maybe it was exhaustion. The point is we got him. We defeated Bowser somewhere between the four-square court and the low brick wall. For some reason, though, we forgot to mention to Billy that in Super Mario, Bowser hurls fireballs at Yoshi. A second battle commenced, only this time, Bowser fought back. He was running toward the castle, which meant one of two things: either he wanted to lose us in the complex structure of tubes and slides, or he wanted a fistful of sand. It turned out that he wanted the sand. We continued to chase, moving as fast as our legs were able. While still running, Bowser scooped up a bunch of sand, left the castle, and headed for one of the water fountains. This confirmed it. He was going to strike! He stopped at the fountain just outside the men’s room, spending a second or two to wet his fistful of sand. We were still running toward him when BAM! I doubt that he actually aimed, but regardless, he hit someone.

Once the king has been jumped, the game is over.

Mr. Hamilton walked out of the restroom and directly into Billy’s line of fire. It seemed that from the instant Billy let go of the sand, any ambient noise was tuned out, and all we heard was “slish!” Then came the “splish” of wet sand hitting an expensive silk shirt, and what I believe were all but two or three of the thirteen or so words that you can’t say on television. All we could do was stand in complete horror, with mouths agape. We stared at the soggy, sandy blob, affixed to the principal’s suit, for a good minute or so. With a booming voice, reminiscent of thunder or an atomic bomb, he ordered Billy to his office. What happened after that, neither Josh nor I know. What we do know is that we never saw Bowser again, and the inhabitants of Yoshi Island lived happily ever after.

Matt Braddick

I can cast spells
and command armies.
The lands of planets run to my arms aiding me.
Time and space are my playthings.
You cannot do this but I can.

I could teach you I suppose.
If you’re patient
and have a penchant for games.
Conscience is a passing fad
for our kind.
No equals.

Walking from plane to plane
gets lonely sometimes.
We’re not gods,
We just party like them.
Men and monsters are my playthings.
You cannot do this but I can.

Sometimes you are born into poetry.
And words are your magic.
But enchantment for me is elementary.
Blessed is he who is
born into sorcery.
Poetry

Zachary Aaron

I played Rhett to your Scarlett
And we giggled at my grandfather's hat
Being too big for my head.
The tired elastic of my grandmother's old slip
Fit at your chest.
The lace was tattered on the bottom
And it floated when you twirled.
You made a grand entrance to the ball,
Lifting your dress over your shoes
To walk down the porch steps.

The massive magnolia tree
Was our Congress Street mansion
And Georgia clay stained our clothes red
While we sat under its muscled branches,
Collecting our treasures in the shade.

Our parents were Sherman's army,
Marching from Atlanta to the sea.
They searched the house for us,
While we hid outside,
And we held our breath,
As they called our names.
We cherished the last moments
Of our time together,
Before we said goodbye.

Savannah Afternoons

Zachary Aaron

I played Rhett to your Scarlett
And we giggled at my grandfather's hat
Being too big for my head.
The tired elastic of my grandmother's old slip
Fit at your chest.
The lace was tattered on the bottom
And it floated when you twirled.
You made a grand entrance to the ball,
Lifting your dress over your shoes
To walk down the porch steps.

The massive magnolia tree
Was our Congress Street mansion
And Georgia clay stained our clothes red
While we sat under its muscled branches,
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Our parents were Sherman's army,
Marching from Atlanta to the sea.
They searched the house for us,
While we hid outside,
And we held our breath,
As they called our names.
We cherished the last moments
Of our time together,
Before we said goodbye.

Jazz 3

Andrea Lavender

Merit
Savannah Nights

Zachary Aaron

A familiar groan from rusted chains
Is a comforting voice from my childhood.
I close my eyes and you are right beside me
Moving your legs in sync with mine,
Two soldiers marching in time.
The formation breaks and the swing goes wild.

We absorbed the buzz of the insect symphony,
As a thousand orchestras made their music.
Every night was a creepy crawler concert.
And we directed from our columns on the porch.

Sometimes parties drifted out the oversized windows
And the warm breeze brought Louis Armstrong
To us like a whispered secret.
We had our elbows perched on the window frame,
As we watched our parents slow dance.
And Georgia was the only thing on our minds.

The smell of the honeysuckle,
That had enveloped the ancient fence
Hovered over the small lawn.
Its thick sweetness infused the air
Like perfume in a stuffy department store.

Those hot nights in the low country
Made our clothes stick to our damp backs.
When the moonlight stole through the oaks,
The sweat on our faces began to glow
And we shone like tarnished silver.

Apologies
Always Work Best
With Teddybears.

Hayley Sylvester

"Just don't come back for a while, okay?"
The front door slammed in Tyler's face. A tarnished bronze 15-F stared back at him. He'd done it now, he'd pissed Katie off again. Why did she always get upset over the smallest thing? Things hadn't been so great for them since he asked Katie to marry him a little over a month ago. They'd never had a bad fight before. But suddenly everything he said or did rubbed Katie the wrong way. She began to breathe fire, and when she wasn't breathing fire she had smoke coming out of her nose, poised to breathe fire. She went from being so calm and laid-back to an uptight monster with blonde highlights the moment she got a diamond ring on her finger! Women were monsters, with scales underneath their clothes. He was certain of it.

Tyler sat down on the top stair of the landing and fiddled with the brim of his baseball cap, nervously bending it back and forth into a U shape. He'd never made Katie so mad she'd kicked him out of the apartment. They'd had arguments before, yeah, but she'd never been so mad she pushed him towards the door and slammed it in his face. She sure wasn't going to let him back in any time soon, as he'd heard the unmistakable click of the deadbolt and the metallic slide of the chain lock moving into place.

He didn't like it when she was angry, but there was no point sitting around and moping about it. Maybe he needed to give Katie some space, give her some time to breathe, time to hide her horns back underneath her hair, time for her fangs to retreat into her gums. . . .

In the meantime, he'd figure out a way to apologize and make sure his place in the bed beside her warm body would be secured. He put his baseball cap on and stood up, dusting off his jeans. He made his way down the stairs to the parking lot to his car. He'd drive around and let her stew for a while.

He glanced up at the window of their apartment and saw the blinds snap
back into place. Katie had been watching him the whole time, probably to make sure he wasn’t going to beat on the door and beg to be let back in.

Beg like a bad dog.

For a moment Tyler didn’t feel like he needed to apologize. After all, she was the one who took everything he said the wrong way. Ha! No way he was going to let her treat him like that!

He stuck his key in the ignition and started his car. His car, not her car, with all the glittery fairies and the blue dolphin air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror. The speakers blared out some loud rock music. Tyler could feel the blood in his veins begin to circulate with the rhythm of the music. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, and sang along with Bruce Dickinson in a mighty metal falsetto.

Somehow between leaving the apartment and driving into town, Tyler had lost his nerve and found himself walking into a Hallmark Card store. A Gold Crown Hallmark, whatever that meant. The last shred of obstinacy in his body broke as he heard the metallic tinkling of wind chimes on the door of the shop as he opened it.

What have I done? he thought to himself as the fragrance of something sickly sweet and very floral reached his nostrils and nearly knocked him over. Directly in front of him stood a table with various purses, Yankee candles, and a display of silver charm bracelets. To his right was a rack loaded down with multicolored Croc shoes. He tapped his feet together to make sure he was still wearing his own shoes. Yep. He looked down and wiggled his toes in his dirty trainers, proof that somehow magically upon walking into this gift shop he hadn’t been transformed into a girly man, an elf, or an oompa loompa.

Nope, he was still Tyler. He let out of a sigh of relief. Now to find Katie a card and go where no one could see him or accost him. Plus he didn’t want anyone to see him bumbling around looking for just the right apology or to know that he was apologizing for anything at all.

“May I help you find something, sir?”

Tyler gawked at the sales clerk until her lilac sweater blurred in his vision. He wished they made a sad bastard section with cards that said, “I’m a sorry ridiculous bottomfeeder and I don’t deserve your love, please forgive me.” or “I’m sorry I agreed with you when you asked me if your new skirt made your knees look knobby.” or “I’m sorry I’m a guy and don’t understand your severe psychopathic mood swings when you’re on your period.” He wished there was a section in the card store for that.

“Sir?”

Finally Tyler’s eyes came back into focus on the sales clerk standing near him. She had an enormous, gaudy flower pin on her cardigan that Tyler couldn’t help but stare at like he was a raccoon holding a tinfoil pie plate.

She softly cleared her throat.

“I’m sorry, sorry.” He tore his eyes away from the glittering pin and looked her in the face. Her lipstick was a bright, violent red. He didn’t want to make another woman mad at him for his inability to talk to them when they asked questions—just apologize profusely. He scratched the top of his head and frowned. He readjusted the dirty baseball cap on his head and pulled it down low over his eyes. “I’m fine, thanks… Sorry.”

The woman smiled at him. “Oh, no problem! If you need any help with anything, let me know. My name’s Peggy, and I’ll be glad to help you. We’ve got cards for all occasions—birthdays, baptisms, bereavements, bar mitzvahs…” She clapped her hands together at her witty little list and slowly walked away just in case Tyler did ask her for help.

“Where’s the sad bastard section, Peggy?” Tyler muttered under his breath when he was sure she was out of earshot. He examined the headings of each section. Variegated birthday cards for him, for her, for Mom, for Nephew. Batman, Scooby-Doo, Tweety Bird. Those wouldn’t work.

So he looked for flowers, maybe some roses on a doily on a table by a window. Roses always meant a lot to women. Didn’t flowers mean sorry? For my wonderful wife, to a loving aunt, you’re the best grandmother. Nothing! Sympathy cards, cards with Bible verses, new baby, congratulations on your new job, congratulations on your retirement. This was hopeless! Was there not an “I’m sorry” section? Ninety-nine cent cards. Nothing! Did he look frantic? He trudged to the very beginning of the cards and scoured them again. No luck. Absolutely nothing. What were the odds of going into a Hallmark store and not finding a single card that said “I’m sorry?” At this point, Tyler would have chosen any card with the word “sorry” on it. If he had to cross out the text and rewrite his own, he’d do it. If he had to buy one card with a good picture on it and then buy another card with the right words and cut and paste them together, he’d do it.
Because Katie meant that much to him.

It was insanity. But he loved Katie so much that he would be willing to apologize and grovel and plead for her to forgive him. The only problem is that he didn't really know exactly what he did wrong. He sighed heavily.

A few seconds later like her frustrated-man-in-a-card-shop-radar had gone off. Peggy appeared beside Tyler. “You sound upset. Are you sure there's nothing I can help you with?”

“Suck it up, Jy. She won't go away if you don't tell her.”

He cleared his throat. “I need an 'I'm sorry' card. Do you have any of those?”

Peggy smiled, revealing two rows of perfectly straight teeth and a lot of gums. Like a horse. “Well, may I ask what the situation is? Then I can lead you in the right direction. I'm not trying to be nosy…”

“Oh, crap. My fiancée is upset with me. She says I don't understand her.” Tyler felt very uncomfortable having to admit this to a total stranger, especially one who smiled like a Budweiser Clydesdale. Looked like one, too.

Peggy's fire engine red lips pursed. “Ah. I saw something this morning in the back. Excuse me.” She took her leave for a moment and left Tyler there to tend to his burning cheeks and ears.

He busied himself by looking for all the birthday cards with Garfield on them. He counted about seven so far.

She came back with a card after a short time. She handed him a small square card. “I saw this in the back today as I was going through a new collection. I think this should work nicely for you.”

He scanned the design on the front of the card. It had retro circles strewn haphazardly all over. There was no hackneyed slogan, just pink, orange, lime green, and brown circles of various sizes like a connect-the-dots puzzle that drew nothing at all. He opened the card and read the verse in plain, tiny print: “I love you. I'm sorry.”

So simplistic! So perfect!

Feeling better and surer of himself, Tyler nodded his head and beamed at Peggy. “This is great. Thanks, Peggy. I'll take it.”

“Wonderful!” she said with her annoying cheerfulness, clasping her hands together excitedly. “I'll be up at the register when you get ready.”

“Oh, I'm ready now. I'm on my way…” He followed her up to the cash register to pay for his card.

“Can I interest you in a charm bracelet or a refrigerator magnet for your fiancée?”

God, that was awful. A refrigerator magnet that said what a goddess she was.

Whoever “she” was. Tyler pretended he was interested in the charm bracelets and then shook his head because they were all hideous. He knew about plus selling, having worked in retail himself. Now he was a boilermaker, which allowed him to get dirt in between his fingernails and hang out with the guys after work and have a few beers. He was a real man and he didn't buy his woman no damn refrigerator magnets with whimsical slogans on them in cursive writing.

If he didn't get out of that store soon he was going to start grunting like Tim “The Toolman” Taylor from Home Improvement and beating his chest like a manly man. This Hallmark Gold Crown store was stifling his manly man-ness. He handed Peggy a five dollar bill and waited for his change. He had to get out of there.

“Thanks a lot, sir! I hope things work out for you and your fiancée! Good luck!”

Thanks for announcing it to the whole store, Peggy, Tyler thought to himself. He snatched the yellow paper sack from Peggy and grimaced at her. “Thanks. Thanks. Have a good afternoon.” He turned sharply on his heel and half walked, half ran out of the estrogen-filled shop.

Elated, Tyler stepped out into the sunshine and, just for good measure, pounded his fist on his chest and grunted. Still Tyler, still a man.

The girl at the checkout stared at him for a second. Tyler watched her eyes slide from the teddybear to the single red rose to the Michael Jackson’s greatest hits album and finally up to his face. She didn’t say anything but instead smacked her chewing gum and rigidly rang up his items. She didn’t even tell him the total of his purchase; she just rolled her eyes at him. Stupid Wal-Mart; cashiers. The girl—named Jana—probably had the personality of spore mold and lived off welfare. He paid her his money, waited for his change, and jammed the money and his receipt in his pocket. He took his bag off the spinner and walked away.

He couldn't wait to get out to his car and sing at the top of his lungs to “Smooth Criminal.”

He nearly got hit by an SUV as he was crossing in the crosswalk. He shot the driver a dirty look, stupid Wal-Mart shoppers on cell phones in such a damn hurry for the little Rollback smiley face, thirty-two cent price cut… dammit, he hated Wal-Mart. He got in his car without any more incidents of the potentially deadly type. He couldn't unwrap the plastic from his CD without a lot of trouble, but finally he got it opened and flipped to “Smooth Criminal” and he was happy all the way home.
Fiction

Fumbling around the glove box, Tyler found a pen and took out the card he’d bought for Katie at the girly gift shop. He couldn’t think of anything else to write on it, so he just signed his name in his illegible dude scribble. He put the card in the tan colored envelope, licked the adhesive—which tasted horrible—and shut it. He even used the little gold crown seal, which Peggy had pulled off a roll of stickers to keep the envelope closed. Blech, why couldn’t these innovative greeting card people come up with an adhesive that didn’t taste like ass? If cards could be perfectly square or round or have little sequins and ribbons and bows on them, why couldn’t the adhesive taste like bananas or something?

He got out of the car with his apology items and organized them in his arms so he could knock on the door and have Katie let him in. He had even practiced his puppy dog face while he was stopped at red lights on the way home. He had the card, the teddybear, the rose, the apology—he was most certainly on his way!

He took one last look at the fading sunset and then knocked on the apartment door, 15-F, his home, with the love of his life. He could already smell her light scent as he imagined his spot beside her in the bed.

The door opened. Katie sighed heavily and rolled her eyes at the sight of him in his rotten “Protect your nuts” squirrel T-shirt, holding a big fluffy teddybear and a single, red rose.

“Tyler, what on earth…?” She took the card he handed her. She opened it, read it, and smiled. “I love you, too.”

Poetry

Pam Price

I remember
When she painted the sky
In smoke and blood.

Her ebony hell-horse soared
As high as her savage hair
Against a sapphire dawn.

The crows had a breakfast of flesh.
There was plenty.

The tree limbs were sagging,
Severed by that igneous blade
Of death—of freedom.

I did not know
If she was there to slay us,
Or to gather our poor souls
And lead us
To Valhalla.

And maybe
She will set us all on fire,
And our ashes
Like our sins will ascend,
Swept away and scattered
Across another battleground.
Tryst

Hayley Sylvester

I tried being silent
And listening to you—
I just couldn’t understand

I tried being patient
But then I realized—
I have a short fuse

I tried contortionism
Bending over backwards—
I’ve run out of tricks

I tried luring you with money
Bartering goods for affection—
I’m broke

I tried seduction
That worked—
Though not how I intended

Now I’m trying walking away
I’ve been beside you all along—
And you never even noticed.

Untitled

Terri Barnes

Merit
I didn't know how I was going to do this. Nothing made sense. Everything was a monochromatic blur whirling around in my head. But there was one thing that stood out in my mind, this one thing highlighted in shockingly vivid red standing out from the rest of my world so full of gray layers upon more gray layers. All was fuzzy and unsure, which made my cheeks warm and butterflies rise in the pit of my stomach.

I smoothly maneuvered my car to the left lane. I had always loved driving. There was something about the knowledge of having complete control over something in this constantly moving, never resting, hectic world of ours. When I drove alone, I could sing with the radio at the top of my lungs, and when I had friends in the car, we would laugh and carry on in lively conversation. Thinking of my buddies and how this would affect them drove another stake through my stomach. But I couldn't stand hiding any more. Instead of the radio blaring, I had it turned off and could only hear the soft sound of the wind as my car sliced through it and the sound of the engine purring and the sound of the car on the road. Everything else was so quiet, and I was left defenseless and humiliated against the honest silence.

I was making the long drive home. I was 28 years old, writing for a newspaper in Maryland, and headed back home for Middle Tennessee. Some might say I should have had a wife by now and maybe even a kid on the way, but I wasn't ready for that life. There was a time when I thought that I would be ready one day, but even I knew there was little hope for that now. Somehow, I thought it would just be a phase or some sort of sick, twisted fantasy, but the only fantasy was of the thing that I couldn't be... that I would never be.
I had lived with the confusion and damning uncertainty for too long, much too long. And that was the whole problem! How the hell could I be expected to take a stance if I wasn’t one hundred percent positive as to what I was? I had once asked one of my good friends from high school if anything was ever one hundred percent, beyond a shadow of a doubt, undeniably certain. My conclusion to that universal question was no. Everything in life is about choices, making decisions, arriving at some random or carefully calculated place—everything is a choice. Well, everything but this.

Being gay is not a choice, no matter who said otherwise. Somehow, my older brother and I had once started that debate. He said it was a choice because homosexuality is a sin and God wouldn’t make His people like that. But I wanted to argue that every human being is born into sin by just stepping into the world, so in my mind, that was a transparent argument. And that was my problem with the whole issue. I know it’s a sin, a vicious, terrible sin, but I also had trouble hiding who I was or at least living with the possibility. That was easy for John to say, he had never had doubts or questions. He had been a star athlete in high school and had gone on to UT on a football scholarship. He had the looks in the family, which had always provided him with a pretty girlfriend. He was married now, a high school math teacher and football coach with a two-year-old daughter and a six-month-old son. And every time I looked into my niece’s and nephew’s eyes, I collapsed inside. I wanted to be a good uncle to them, and I wanted them to have cousins to play with and grow up beside.

My younger brother Jake was 24, and though he was fresh out of college (Vandy, on a nearly full-paid-ride, for academics to be exact) and wasn’t married yet, he had a fiancée of three and a half years, his high school sweetheart, an all-American, likeable girl. And my parents would say, “So, Jackson, when are you gonna get yourself a nice woman?” I’d just laugh and respond with some lame, half-ass comment as trite and overused as a teenager’s pick-up line. Maybe they told themselves that I was just taking my time because I’m not as social as John or Jake, or maybe somewhere deep within them, they wondered if I am and had their doubts, but they didn’t want to admit that one of their sons might be.

I hated having to live up to my brothers. Everyone had expected or wanted me to be the athlete that John was. I went out for the football team in high school and made second-string defense, but I had never enjoyed it. I did it because that’s what I thought was expected of me. And being in the locker room was just as agonizing. Here were my classmates, my teammates, my friends, all brothers to me, and yet I couldn’t look anywhere but into their eyes or at the floor because I feared what might happen if I let my eyes fall elsewhere. And I couldn’t be the brain that Jake was. He had a good head on his shoulders, while mine was floating around in the air like a helium-filled balloon bobbing up and down after a child loses his grip on the string. And as much as the little boy tears up and wants his red balloon back, the ribbon hangs just out of his reach as if God is merely holding it suspended in mid-air, simply teasing and taunting the small child, purely for entertainment purposes.

There was so often a point when I felt that God was just toying with me. At times, I thought I knew what He wanted from me—that He wanted me to be a good, exemplary Christian, but I also felt like He was testing me. And I didn’t know if I was supposed to stand against temptation or render to what I’d have to judge best to be His will. I just felt like God was playing some huge mind game with me, and then I felt like it was my fault for not being able to decipher His messages. I didn’t know what He wanted from me, but I also didn’t know what I wanted from myself. I was the middle child, the loved, but somewhat lonely middle child, sandwiched between the admired, star-athlete, first-born and the spoiled baby with the smarts.

It wasn’t that my parents didn’t love me. I knew they did, but I didn’t know if they’d continue to love me if I were to turn out to be something they didn’t want me to be. I didn’t like it; it’s certainly not how I envisioned myself and my future. I grew up dreaming of meeting the perfect girl whom I would date and learn to love and some day marry and have kids with. It’s not as if I saw myself with someone of the same sex for the rest of my life or bouncing around from one person to the next, having only one-night stands. But I also didn’t want to be torn between my conflicting feelings of desire and duty. I didn’t want my parents to be disappointed in me, not because I felt like I had to prove something to them, but because I loved them so much and they were such good parents to me. And because I did love them, I didn’t want to hurt them.

I also didn’t want to lose the friendship of my brothers. I looked up to them both, and their absence in my life was not something I think I could live with. There was also the matter of all my friends, and I felt like they were the people who knew me the best. I didn’t want them to look at me differently; but, then, I guess I couldn’t really expect them not to.

My mind and my soul ached. Not with guilt and not with regret, but ached from being tired of being unsure and blind and lost. I was lost, and I just wanted
to feel the string back in my hand and the balloon’s gentle and reassuring tugging. But I feared it was too late for that.

It’s not as if I had never felt anything for a member of the opposite sex. There had been a giri in college that I thought I had been in love with. I thought she had changed me, but after it was all over and done with, I doubted myself and thought maybe I just wanted to think I was in love to lessen the other feelings that tormented me. And maybe I had gone head-first into that relationship because I was away in Memphis, away from home, and I wanted to rebel. Or maybe I wanted to feel like an official adult by having an honest emotional, physical, and sexual relationship with a woman my age, who was adjusting to college the same as I was.

That was my poison— the fact that I was insecure in myself and was constantly doubting and questioning my motives and positions. And I hated it. I hated myself, and I hated this incurable disease that ran rampant through my veins. And I would cut my arms and drain the sickness if I thought I could, but I knew the disease would still be inside of me. I couldn’t make it go away.

“I just want it to go away!” I screamed as my vision became hindered by my eyes welling up with tears. “I don’t want this. I just want it to go away,” I repeated, this time a mere whispering murmur to myself I hit the breaks and grabbed the steering wheel so that my car was sitting half in my lane and half in the oncoming traffic’s lane. Maybe I’ll just sit here, I thought, until someone comes and crashes into me. That wouldn’t be so bad.

“Wow, man, are you okay?” he asked after I had stepped out of my car. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. What about you?”

“Oh, I’m okay, but it looks as though my car’s not. I think I lost control of my car on a slick patch of ice back there.” He laughed a hearty laugh and said, “I guess those caution signs are serious when they say watch for ice on the bridge.”

“Well, it looks like the railing slowed you down, but it didn’t stop you from hitting me.”

“Wow,” he said again. “I’m sorry I hit you. It doesn’t look like it did anything to your car, but if you want, we can take it in to get it checked out.”

“I’m from out of town,” I shrugged.

“Oh, by the way—”


“Jack, I’m Mike. If you want to Jack, you can crash at my place for the night, and we’ll take your car in to the shop tomorrow. I don’t think anything’s the matter with it, but I’d hate for you to get down the road and the car quit on you.” Images began to pour into my head, all simultaneously, all of what could happen if I agreed to spend the night at his place, and maybe that’s what I wanted. But I was too scared. I could have shaken my head and jumped back in the car and driven off, leaving Mike scratching his head, still standing on the bridge. But instead, I politely thanked him and sent him on his way.

This time I was startled by the horn from a barge, and I couldn’t remember if I had met Mike or not. I hopped out of the vehicle and a quick glance at the front of my car told me I hadn’t gotten hit, which was somewhat a relief and a disappointment. I had passed the test once again, but I wasn’t sure how many more times I could. My balloon was getting farther and farther from my grasp, and I didn’t know if it would come back down. And even if it did, who’s to say I wouldn’t lose it again?

I started the car back up and continued the drive home. I would be on the other side of the Tennessee state line any minute. So nothing had changed. I was still lost and still confused. I had the choice of continuing to hide or to come out of seclusion, but the choice of who I am was beyond my ability to change. I didn’t know what to do. I never asked to be like this; I hadn’t prayed to God every night when I was younger to make me what I now feared I was, but I did pray to God now in hoping that I wasn’t what I feared I was.

I couldn’t keep struggling. Everyone has a breaking point and even as strong as I wanted to be, I wasn’t Superman. I couldn’t bend steel and I couldn’t wear
Fiction

a cape and tights and I couldn't fly and I couldn't be something I wasn't. But I wasn't even sure what I was. But I would get up in the morning, and I would keep going. Nothing would change. I'd still be me. I'd still be a sports journalist for the Annapolis-Star, brother of John and Jake Lawford, son of Cheryl and John Lawford, brother-in-law to Laura and Holly, and uncle to little Sara and Jonathan. I'd still be me, but not without the people who loved me. Did they love me enough to accept me no matter what? That's what scared me the most. I was scared and confused and had been for such a long while. I needed to be saved. I wanted saving from this life of monotonous uncertainty, but nothing is ever certain. I only had faith to go on— little, weak faith. But it had to count for something. If I was certain of anything, it was that.

Dariin'

I wanna get lost
cause it's been a while
in you
since I've fallen
hearts only beat
with that wild cadence
once, in an almost

And maybe this
is just another crush
cause I've been known
to throw my nets
before they catch
dripping wet
and empty
but let me
act
like this is the one
and beg her
to wait for me

Sending postcards every season
yearning for my return
spreading her long, loving branches
with each
"I'll see you when ya find your way
back..."

Letter to the Waving Girl

Joseph Thomas Bullock

Darlin'
I wanna get lost
in you
diva it's been a while
cause I've fallen
hearts only beat
with that wild cadence
once, in an almost

And maybe this
is just another crush
cause I've been known
to throw my nets
before they catch
dripping wet
and empty
but let me
act
like this is the one
and beg her
to wait for me

Sending postcards every season
yearning for my return
spreading her long, loving branches
with each
"I'll see you when ya find your way
back..."
to the place where
streets curve
and force you to look both ways
gazing
at platinum mossy strands
that hang
like the grapes of Tantalus
or Rapunzel for the prince

Let her wait
And not forget me
Pray that I won’t age
like Ulysses
gray from the journey
unrecognized by friends
who lined the shore
to greet a stranger

If there was
any other way
believe me
I’d be headed down
on the next midnight train
to the Garden of Eden

But please, promise
that if this was the moment
when the stars were aligned
when the ship had arrived
when all that could have been
will fail to be
that you will
let me visit

every winter
Circling round your squares
throwing crisp leaves
at a beauty
that can never be bought
strolling
across your cobblestone feet
in a horse-drawn carriage
toward the cemetery
where your shallow grave
and tombstone reside

I’ll blow dandelion wishes
across your epitaph
that wild flowers might bloom
for the next passerby

Savannah
there were always
maids before thee
but none
with an accent
so wrapped in velvet
that red carpet
rolls from the tongue

Sweet Southern belle
you’ve got me
held captive
with your one-way avenues
and debutante blossoms
fragrantly tempting me
to abandon ship
Poetry

and swim back
to kiss the sand
between your heels.
Fair lady,
give me
two full spins of this
whimsical earth
and I swear to return
as ten-fold the man
I once was
when our eyes first met

Just keep your sight
upon the horizon
and when my vessel
breaks through these currents
to find its place
on River Street

Shine the lighthouse
strike up the band
and tell the Waving Girl
her sailor is coming home

Julia’s Day

Pam Price

I’m lying in bed half-awake, imagining being held, petted, and kissed by my true love, whoever he is. My head is on his chest and my arm drapes across his torso. My legs are tucked under his and he brushes through my hair, auburn strands curling around his finger tips. He’s kissing me on top of the head until—

“Julia! Julia! Jules, honey, time for class.” My mother, among her many functions, is a human alarm clock. I’ve tried to explain that a nineteen-year-old college student being awakened by her mother is a deep personal embarrassment, but then I am reminded that “not every mother is as considerate of her daughter’s schedule,” and I should have warm and fuzzy feelings about any maternal instincts she enacts.

I rub thick balls of eye crust from my lids and close my eyes again, hoping to go back to Mr. Right, but he is already gone. My eyes shift to the clock. 7:08 a.m. This is going to be a shitty day.

I have just enough time to shower, formulate the idea of a breakfast I will not prepare or eat, and rush out the door with my haphazardly packed book-bag, which is full of half-finished, loose-leaf notes and page worn textbooks that always manage to depreciate alarmingly by the end of the semester. My mother is in the kitchen, eyeing my jeans disapprovingly as I stuff a packet of peanut butter crackers and bottled water into a pouch on my book-bag.

“What?” I ask, stopping entirely and staring her straight in the eye.

“Oh,” she begins, “why don’t you wear a skirt today?” This from a woman who’s wearing grey fuzzy sweat pants.

“Mother, it’s November.”

“But st-”

“Gotta go. Love you.” I cut her off. And I am out the door.

It takes exactly six minutes to travel from my driveway and pull into my usual parking space at the college. Granted, I park under a cluster of trees in the lot on the far end of campus, but I don’t mind the walk, especially today. Today, I have a selection of nineties alternative rock in my iPod, and as the orange and yellow leaves are sailing all over the place like snow, it isn’t terribly cold. My hands are stuffed in the pockets of my heavy black pea coat, and I roll an irritating ball of paper that has been inside them between my fingers.
I look at my cell phone with the vague premonition that it might ring, and suddenly I cannot recall the ring-tone. I imagine it lighting up and vibrating, but what is the sound? I am aggravated by my useless memory, and I shove the phone back into my bag, deep and buried under a few notebooks. No one will call me anyway.

I approach the building where I have my first class and see the smokers hovering around the outskirts of the doorway, their breath and smoke lingering in the air like jet-trails. My mouth closes tight, careful not to inhale, as I walk past the five of them and open the old wooden door. As it closes, I pause and look back, thinking that smoking is more like a social club than a bad habit; the cigarette is your membership card. You can stand near any doorway in the world smoking a cigarette and eventually someone else will stand beside you, smoking, and you'll carry on a conversation in a language you don't even speak. The rest of us are just waiting for the bus, resting on a bench, or going into class.

I sit down in my seat seven minutes early, but the professor is already at his podium, leaning forward on one foot and staring blankly out the window as though he has no idea where he is. Maybe he doesn't.

"Dr. Attus. Excuse me, Dr. Attus?" A pesky girl named Anna Fergie, in a blue button-up sweater threatens Dr. Attus like a fly with her paper, waiving it exuberantly above her head. The professor rolls his eyes to face her, a laborious undertaking, and begins speaking softly with her about the criticisms of Jacques Derrida. I pray that Dr. Attus will take off his shoes and shove them down past the five of them and open the old wooden door. As it closes, I pause and look back, thinking that smoking is more like a social club than a bad habit; the cigarette is your membership card. You can stand near any doorway in the world smoking a cigarette and eventually someone else will stand beside you, smoking, and you'll carry on a conversation in a language you don't even speak. The rest of us are just waiting for the bus, resting on a bench, or going into class.

I sit down in my seat seven minutes early, but the professor is already at his podium, leaning forward on one foot and staring blankly out the window as though he has no idea where he is. Maybe he doesn’t.

"Mrn'n Anna," I mumble, pretending to retrieve something important from my bag. I hate looking into her weird, pale face.

"I like that top you're wearing," she says. I immediately begin making mental arrangements to burn it as soon as I get home.

"Thanks." I lie, and Fergie sits down, clasping her hands together over her books, looking quite proper and school-ish. Dr. Attus begins his lecture on deconstruction, looking troubled when one of his students, particularly Fergie, interrupts him with a question or superfluous opinion. The man wants to finish his lecture and go home since ours is the only class he teaches on Thursdays, but no one seems to be especially sympathetic to his situation.

One hour and thirty minutes later, twenty-three students are scrambling from their desks in a cacophony of slamming books, rustling papers, and zipping book-bags. People are lumbering up the aisle, kicking the bag I have yet to rescue from the floor, and in one instantaneous act, flip open their cell phones and start gabbing away to people across campus who have also just been dismissed from class. The entire student body seems to belong to a pervasive social circle of which I am not a part, like an unused domino set aside from the cascading milieu of black and white. I salvage the small, grey cell phone from the bottom of my bag, checking it as if I were as important as anyone else, as if I expect calls from all fifty-two of my closest friends, but the thing just displays no missed calls. No voicemails. No hip little text-message. Just the time, just another clock like my mother.

The smokers are gathered by the door again when I come out of the building. Maybe they are the same ones, or maybe these are a new assemblage of nicotine addicts casually flicking the ashes of their dependence onto the concrete, stamping them out with the end of a shoe. Headstones all look the same to me.

I walk toward the library, half-hoping to see a friend, fully aware that I will not, and I stuff my hands deep into my coat pockets and begin rolling that same ball of paper between my fingers. I can't bring myself to throw it on the ground. Who knows how long it's been there, or how long I've fixated on it.

Unless you're checking out a book to leave with, libraries rarely serve their purpose. I've heard more pleasant noises at football games than in libraries. It is a false quiet, a bait-and-switch. Concentration lasts only as long as someone's mucosal control; inevitably, in any section of the library, a sniffler will be nearby, making some interjectory utterance as if in apology or to say "I'm okay."

On three of the four floors of the college library hangs a "Quiet, Please" sign, but on three of the four floors of the college library, at least one person is illiterate. Always, at any given moment, some collection of girls is chattering and cackling, unresponsive to the sign above them. I always wish that I could take the quiet sign and bash them with it until the words are impressed in the skin of their face. And every day I hope to find some remote corner buried in stacks
Fiction

of old books that carry the wonderful old-book scent, countless hands smeared on the aged and yellowing pages. I want to block it out— all the giggling girls and sniffing people. I always hope, but it never comes true.

I study for a while, until concentration is so hopeless that I’m reading the same sentence over and over. I’m reading the same sentence over and over. “Yeah,” I whisper, eyeing a giri on her cell phone, “time to go.” I slam my book closed in exasperation, the pages clapping together with a “thwup.” Closing a book like that is the only way in the world to produce that sound. I wipe the lead dust off my hand from my mechanical pencil onto my jeans, making a long, dark smear on my upper leg. Oh well.

I listen to the ding of the elevator as it hits each floor and lean on a tall display table. I’m also fidgeting with that ball of paper in my coat pocket again. I just know I look clumsy, and I don’t care until I see him. When I see him, every bone in my body is crooked and every strand of my long hair is tangling into homely knots. My clothes are two sizes too big and my entire body is inadequate. But I can’t fix any of it; I can’t even manage to stop leaning all over the table. All I can do is fix a dumb smile on my face as he stops beside me.

And he is gorgeous. “He doesn’t ever feel this awkward,” I think, admiring the dark brown curls of hair hanging above his deep-set green eyes, a splash of freckles below them. He’s wearing a padded, dark blue jacket that crinkles when he reaches to rub his nose. I imagine how that jacket would feel against my cheeks and how it would sound, swishing as he folds his arms around me. My head is on his chest and my arm drapes across his torso. My legs are tucked under his and he brushes through my hair, auburn strands curling around his finger tips. He’s kissing me on top of the head when...

The elevator door slides open with a rattle. He lets me go in first and I stand in front of the button. “Which floor?” I ask, like I’m some kind of damn elevator operator. He doesn’t say anything. He reaches over to push the button for the first-floor, smiling and letting out a chuckle. “What a fantastic smile.” I think.

Elevators always entail some degree of awkwardness as you huddle together with people you have absolutely no reason to talk to other than that their shoulder happens to be touching you on the neck or some other odd place. But this guy, he is performing some type of mental calculation to determine the exact point at which to stand so as to be as far away from me as he possibly can in an elevator, which doesn’t thwart my imagination, where our eyes meet and our hearts beat louder than the ding of the elevator. We can’t resist each other and his jacket falls to the floor next to my pea coat and blouse. And, by some obligatory miracle, the elevator halts mid-floor, unable to move for several hours, but we don’t mind. We are completely occupied, hands wildly clenched around each other’s back and lips pressing together sloppily.

But the elevator keeps descending, opening at the first floor, and he doesn’t catch my eye; we don’t fall in love or make love. We’re just two people in an elevator.

He leaves, his stride smooth and assured, and I follow him out, out of the library and I hope he’ll be going my way, but he doesn’t. He heads sharply to the left, disappearing behind an administrative building. I walk toward my class, still eyeing the place he disappeared to, and I listen to nineties alternative rock.

I’m sitting in philosophy class not paying much attention because I’m imagining what might happen if no students showed up for any classes one day, and then I hear this voice saying, “stop imagining things.” I look around for a split second before realizing it was my own crazy brain talking to me. It sounds a bit like my mom. It keeps saying “stop imagining. Stop imagining and do something. Do something.” And you know what? That voice is right.

As the philosophy professor began discussing Diogenes, I decided that’s the only way to do it.

I keep working on my new credo all the way to the car and all six minutes home. And I know just where to start. I find my mother sprawling on the couch watching talk shows in her bare feet.

“Mom,” I begin, “would you help me pick out a skirt for tomorrow?”
Earthsong

Misty Jones

a palpable rush of air
heavy with passion,
laden with premonition,
playing on the strings of grass—
a harp of gilded green

soothing sky sounds
dripping from burdened clouds,
or heaven's uproar of percussion
soaking the land,
saturating it in rhythm

madly flapping wings and
budding insect throats,
like a thousand desperate sirens
in an endless choral sway
of crescendo, decrescendo,
silence—
determined to maintain the lead
in earth's pulsating song

Renovation

Mary Katherine Rowe

I was nineteen years old in October, 1999, when my dad drove me down a paved black road that wound down into a cabin-like setting in the midst of woods, water, and autumn burning bright. Fall leaves drenched the place with magnificent color: red, crimson, orange, brown, yellow, and gold. The cool air met my cold heart as I apprehensively accompanied my father toward the welcome area. We entered through a stonewalled walkway with wooden pillars supporting a tin roof. I do not remember if I said goodbye to my father or not. In fact, I did not even remember him being there. I just know it was so.

Downstairs was the detox floor where a temperate nurse cordially escorted me to my room and professionally checked all my things. I was asked to undress in my small room to ensure I had nothing to provoke suspicion.

That first week, I sat on my hard, twin, hospital-like bed with a simple, thin, white blanket and journaled in a hardback butterfly-shaped journal my mom had given me, groaning to my fifty-eight-year-old roommate, who looked seventy-two with wrinkling yellow skin, cigarette-stained teeth, thick plastic-framed glasses. Hers is the only face I recall in those first few days where I spent much of the time in our room with onh' a window, bedside table, and a door. Later, I would be promoted to a much more inviting living space north on the property. I would come to find more pleasure in this place and some form of acceptance.

Bedrooms lay strung tight like beads of a necklace around the detox floor. Not much breathing room. Activity pulsed within and around the work place that made up the nurses station. Busybodies checked vital signs and distributed prescribed medications, cracking jokes to each other. For them, it was just another work day. For me, it was hell. So much of the visit was a blur. My mind was hazy from prolonged drug use, and a life on the road bound me to a crazy world within.

Nearby my bedroom, a glass door led out to a wooden patio where I smoked many cigarettes, relieving the tension inside my body, watching the leaves fall, thinking about myself. I was unable to connect with anyone. Loneliness and fear stunk up the floor, dissonant sounds of dishonesty increased my self-disgust.

In a delusional state of mind, the corners of the detox floor seemed dark and cloudy, contrasting with a beacon of bright lights, white paperwork on white
Fiction

counters, happy people making up the nurses station. At mealtimes we trudged out of our rooms, past the bustling arena of health professionals, and through the door that led into the cafeteria where everyone ate together.

That dining area consisted of a large carpeted room and several round tables holding seven or eight rounded chairs. Some of us talked, some of us were silent in shock, some angry and loyal to our fear. I was disconnected, from myself, from others, from God. I was, however, able to enjoy the food. My body frail from frequent neglect, I ate plenty, gaining needed weight. I sat at my table, quiet and tense, without anything to say for fear of saying the wrong thing, and I made an effort to make it look like I did not care. I didn’t like myself, assuming others shared in this perspective. Near one of the doorways in the eating area there was a black piano I played for some comfort.

The only real song I knew was one my father taught me years ago, “Unchained Melody” by the Righteous Brothers. Music and memories stuck to me. For moments, the music methodically entwined me in its power. I loved and hated that song, playing it, hearing it, knowing it just like my father. My fingers passionately played the keys, providing a recognizable sound for my ears although it made me sick to my heart. My relationship with my father provoked much of my disillusionment, much of my fear, much of my comfort in isolation. I was alone in life and he tortured my soul.

Locked up emotionally and physically, my body tense from years of self-destructive trauma inside my mind; I was inwardly chaotic and jabbering incessantly, spinning sticky webs of insane thoughts like a spider, meticulously, naturally, brilliantly creating my trap for myself. Self torture. I knew nothing else. At terribly uncomfortable times, where situations were impossible to bear without self-medicating, my mind kicked into survival mode. A torturous cycle. Inside of my mind was like a helpless child living in the only neighborhood she’s ever known; dead-end streets on all sides made up of whores, gangs, and hysterical mothers clutching their children wounded from gunshot, disease, and suicide. I would try to think my way out, unable to get very far. I did not know how to confide honestly in anyone else, including myself, in order to get out of myself mentally. In fact, I could not stop thinking about myself. That was a huge part of the problem. It was not until years later when I discovered the meaning of selflessness that I could attain peace of mind. But at Warrior, I was there, raw and rotten like an apple underneath its tree, eaten up by bugs and animals, too many days disconnected from its source of life.

Due to my inability to enjoy my own company with another, for fear of meeting myself, I wallowed out the many different doors of the building, crossing the patios, and traveling over the paved basketball court, ending up as far as I could go, the boundaries of Warrior. Water flowed through this wooded land where I sat on rocks and sang familiar songs I had learned as a child, cleaving to the isolation that comforted me, tossing leaves into the small current that called me to come. I wanted to run away but stayed where I should, escaping here regularly, even after I made a few friends and felt more comfortable.

The rest of my stay at drug and alcohol rehab was a gradual progression toward health. I followed the routine with a gradual clearing of my mental state. A typical three weeks. I cannot remember much and sometimes disappoint myself with the fact that I did not change my lifestyle much from that visit. It was not the end of my journey, however. Warrior saved my life when I had no safe place to go. My own parents could not help me. The sweet serenity this place gave me was a stepping stone toward my survival, sanity, and spiritual sobriety. Today, more and more, I embrace every part of me; my shameful nakedness, my music I worshipped, my selfish lies I spoke. As often as I am led by grace, I discover who I am and what I do that causes pain— in me or others— that I might change. Developing from a rickety shack into a work-in-progress palace, my experience is like a room inside me with a door I can open to find my wrinkly roommate still listening, the leaves still falling, the piano still playing, and my heart still beating.
Liquid Emulsion on Canvas Tryptich
Amy Butler
Merit

Untitled
Kei Moriya
Merit
The Last Words, Ever
Matt Braddick

The Earth is blackened in crisp rabid fashion
and everyone but me is gone.
I'm here right here standing watching the buildings crumble
wondering where you all are now.
I hear beautiful ringing, humble.
The sun smiles at me, proud of its work.
I can walk through barricades, wow,
without restriction.
Anywhere and everywhere is Home and
Home is desolation
and I love being alone.

Was upstairs hiding
while the whole world ate itself bare.

What was the goal, the drive?
Death is a landscape
Forget is all around
and mankind is an empty Warfield.
I'll wait for the aliens
I'll wait for a chance to escape
and laugh at it.
Am I going to slip on my own shoes
and stop it all right here?
I'll go on for you Huxley
cuz I can see,
oh I can see,
and it hurts.

There will never be music again
but it's so loud.

I want to cry it's
so new.
A wanderlust that no one else will know.
It's all like a tree through a white window
if there were still leaves,
if there were still hearts to be.
History's dragging behind me
crawling on woman's knees
needing new breath,
begging for me to help her.
But there's nothing I can do.
Pull yourself together.

It's all over now watching the last sunset,
writing the last words ever.
Short Story

First Place • Amber Huett, Florence High School
Second Place • Kenya Thorne, Florence High School

Essay

First Place • Elliot Broder, Florence High School
Second Place • R.J. O'Connell, Florence High School

Poetry

First Place • Mason Estes, Brilliant High School
Second Place • R.J. O'Connell, Florence High School
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