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BEST OF SHOW

WATER, THE CONSTANT

Jaqueline Willis
POETRY

DIE JUDEN AUS WARSHAU

Kathleen Franks

Boys and girls capped with their tiny gray hats
walk out in the street and abandon their flats.
Mutter, she comes, and Vater does too,
hands in the air, like prisoners do.

All of them, wearing their black winter coats,
have brought with them purses, and night bags, and totes.
Where are they going? Not one is sure.
“To work,” says Herr Finkel, “to work for the Fuhr’r.”

The line from the ghetto slinks out like a snake,
the hands of the adults beginning to quake.
Gestapo men bark their commands out like dogs
and then, without warning, one says he’ll flog.

Mutters pray quiet while their little boys cry
all of them wondering, “How will we die?”
The Germanfolk gawk and they laugh and they spit
at all of their old friends: the Goldbergs, the Schmidts.
Footsteps clop heavy on the streets of gray stone
and despite such a large group, each Jew feels alone.
The smell of the bakery’s pastries and rolls
reminds them of times when they weren’t seen as trolls.

Mutter sees black trains and wonders what for
just as her little boy asks, “What is war?”
Mutter says, “It’s when the dark fights the light.
But no matter what happens, our God hears our plight.”

The journey continues ‘til they see the smoke
Chuffed out and stinking like rotten egg yolk.
Below my feet I saw the odd and funny eyeball.
The room was flashed with bright white—I smelled whiskey.
Someone came in the Inn and called out “Murder!”
I leaned on the bar and felt my face grow warm.
I dizzied and reached out but only spilled glasses and ice.
A ruinous thing was happening down at The Bolero.
A man on the train had suggested a pub, The Bolero
and said for me to hold my tongue; to watch my eyeballs.
“They don’t serve beer,” he said. “Only spirits and ice.”
So amongst the dark mahogany I ordered whiskey
and by the third I could feel the gentle blood begin to warm.
With a smooth-haired lady I had discussed murder.
“Mi amigo, the days are not the same around a murder.”
She stared through me and asked to wear my bolero.
She placed it coyly around her torso and said it felt warm
as she stirred her drink and saw herself in my eyeball.
I tapped two fingers against the empty bottle of whiskey.
A new one slid down the bar followed by a bucket of ice.
She reached out and grabbed me with her hands like ice
and slurried something Spanish across the table about murder.
I uncorked the bottle and splashed us both more whiskey
and the jukebox melted on; Ravel’s “Bolero.”
Just then I saw a large shadow reflected in her brown eyeball
that stepped behind me. The breath was warm.
The slice of sunlight through the tiny window was warm.
The sweat on the glasses resembled the slowly melting ice
or the tears that sprayed helplessly from my eyeball
as the tall shadow ripped it from my skull screaming out, “Murder!”
I sat stunned at the table and took from her waist my bolero,
stood slowly and finished my melting glass of whiskey.
“Whiskey, mi amigos,” I said with a growl. “Let us stop for more whiskey.”
I felt the cold rush of air in my empty socket but the sip was warm
like the soft, warm velvet band on the inside of my bolero.
Denied my request, I felt slow and snubbed like great northern ice.
“It is polite to discuss such subjects as murder,”
the small boy whispered into my ear as he gathered from the floor the eyeball.
They told me later perhaps it could have been placed on ice
instead of resting like a bolero on the floor all wet and warm.
Whiskey leads to talk of murder and loss of eyeball.
THE PORCH

Holden Belew

In my childhood, my parents’ back porch was green. A wooden swing hung from one of the rafters under the wavy tin-roof. When it was nice out, I would sit there with my parents, with my sister, with my friends, with my dog. Carpenter bees would burrow into the wooden rafters. We would watch the sawdust of their labors float down to the ground, slipping between the cracks in the floor. Sometimes a wasp would fly by, and I would be ready with my water gun, quick to shoot it out of the air, and even quicker to run inside. In the summer, my dad would always be busy with his grill. I would stand outside and watch him stack charcoal into a neatly structured pyramid. He would reach down with his cigarette lighter and I would jump back, laughing as the fire leapt up from the coals.

Now, my parents’ back porch is grey. The wooden swing broke years ago. Instead, a green, metal swing that sits on the ground stands in its place. Its back is broken, but my dad stitched it together with strands of knotted rope. Four other seats surround it. A tall, teal chair, a black and silver stool, two wooden rockers with white-chipped paint. Different seats are filled with different sitters depending on the time of year.

In the fall and the spring, school keeps most of my old friends away. My parents sit out on the two rocking chairs with my dog at their feet, talking the nights away. In winter and summer, my friends and I return from college. Every seat is filled, and extra chairs are often brought in from the patio. We sit and talk and laugh until two or three in the morning, leaving behind nothing but empty beer bottles and cigarette butts.
Colors, mixing to form life. Wide strokes at first, that finally turn into miniscule details. A person’s soul splattered on a crisp, freshly cut canvas for all the world to see. An image from my imagination is coming to life. People, places, faces that I’ve never seen become my reality. The only sound to be heard was the scraping of the rough brush. Layers on layers, white to azure. Unblemished skin, flamboyant colors, city lights crafted from darkness. People in the city are bustling, each telling a story of his own. Monet, O’Keefe, and Da Vinci whisper words of inspiration from the walls. El arte es una mentira que nos acerca a la verdad, the genius of Picasso that is reverberating within my brain. Anything is real, anything is true. I am on a sidewalk in Paris and a terrace in Spain as music and sounds of the city transform into an image. Inspired yet independent, my soul through skill. Walls of a gallery, filled with different stories, some of pain and some of love. A person’s life can be understood through a single look. “It’s all in the eyes,” I hear Mr. Foster saying to me. No words written and nothing spoken, but I can feel everything. If only this could be reality for eternity. I am a creator and a destroyer, creating life and exposing death. I think of all these things as a stare at a blank canvas. What will happen today?
FIRST PLACE 2D

A GIRL ON THE RAILROAD
Diasuke Arata
The silver moon is an ever-opened eye,
cordless it hangs against a black canvas
like a ship that sits upon a golden horizon.
The silver moon peers down upon the world
and upon me, who scouts for love in a colorless city
where heels and boots beat against the softly-paved streets
and where no one knows another’s name.
At night, they go to bars to be alone.
A feral mutt laps up rain water
that has gathered in puddles throughout the alley—
and not a soul makes a fuss about it.
I hear the groans of passers-by
and forgotten pets who trek alone,
passing empty benches that echo the cry,
"Without you, I cannot be."
The unkempt clock tower that sits unnoticed
strikes twelve,
which is the sign that beckons me back home
beneath the stars,
and like clockwork, I obey.
The cord that holds the silver moon snaps
and casts the fragile moon down amidst the hills,
where it will spend its day in deepened thought
like Democritus of Abdera
until it is hoisted back against the darkened canvas
overlooking a colorless city.
“She sacrificed a lot for us. I remember us laying in the floor laughing until it hurt. I don’t even know about what—she was just so silly sometimes. She did a hell of a job. I’ll never tell my kids it’s going to be a tight Christmas though. That’s what she always said. There was that time she left. I walked home from football practice and fixed something for me and Haley to eat. Then I did that for several more days. She came back though. We ate hotdogs a lot. She was at every one of my football games in high school. She heard my testimony once, but I don’t think she wanted to believe it. She doesn’t mention it and we don’t talk about it. She struggled with alcohol on and off. She’s one of the funniest people I know, and she was one hell of a mom.”

“I’ve done my part. I’ve raised my kids. I wasn’t perfect, but wherever I was, you and Haley were right there with me. Right, honey? I was a good mom, wasn’t I?”

“She is a very complex woman. When you’re around her, she seems like one of those people who lays it all out there, but I think there is a lot left unseen. She is so steadfast, so certain about most things, but needs affirmation from her son about her job as a mom. She is a very strong and very stubborn woman, which I think makes it difficult for her to acknowledge some things from the past. Just because I don’t hear it, however, doesn’t mean she hasn’t acknowledged it herself. I think that’s what she means by ‘I wasn’t perfect.’ Still, even now, she seems so unfulfilled. Like she is desperately longing... grappling for something more. I don’t understand her justification that now she just wants to ‘have a good time’ and can’t help but to feel a little bit sorry for her. At the same time, I’m so in awe, so thankful and so indebted to this woman. Never mind the way she went about it or how she has or hasn’t come to terms with it now; she, in so many ways, gave me Hunter and he’s one of the most amazing people I will ever know. Good, bad or ugly, he is who he is because of her, and it’s one of the most beautifully entangled relationships I’ve ever been able to witness.”
SECOND PLACE 2D

UNTITLED
Miranda Hyde
BUT BY THE CONTENT OF THEIR CHARACTER

Kathleen Franks

You white folks have done so much to us,
she told me pointblank with a cocked-gun tone.
You don’t know nothin’ ’bout hard life.
Visions of lash-scarred Black backs and raw cotton-picking fingers
ran through my mind as I saw my own white
hands swinging the whip.
I saw myself as Christopher Columbus,
stealing the West Indies and slaughtering the Indians;
as the Virginian landowner,
using Negroes as a farming tool and
stringing them from trees if they forgot to call me sir.
I saw myself as a missionary deep in the Congo,
destroying cultures and cutting off tribesmen’s arms in the name of the cross;
as a prejudiced college student in 1963 Tuscaloosa,
screaming obscenities at Vivian Malone and James Hood—
How dare They think They deserve a White education?

But I was born in 1992 and I didn’t do any of those things.
I’ve never used the n-word or treated a differently-colored person any differently.
I’ve never thought non-whites any less apt
to learning or behaving or performing.
And I’ve never wanted to.
Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,
another white person wrote,
just remember that all the people in this world
haven’t had the advantages you’ve had.
I remember Nick Carraway’s dad and I stop myself
From making judgments until
I know the story, until I know the motives—
race is irrelevant.
I wasn’t present when the conquistadors spread
smallpox and stained the New World with blood.
I didn’t push the Native Americans out of their land
so I could take it over.
I wasn’t an auctioneer selling wives and husbands and children,
all separately, scattering them to the winds.
I never proclaimed “Heil Hitler!” and I’m not
responsible for the murder of six million Jews.
I’ve never put on a white bed sheet and burned crosses
in small, complacent yards
or hung daddies up from tall oaks just because.
I didn’t kill MLK on that Lorraine Motel balcony
and I never hosed anyone in Selma.

I’m not guilty of any of those crimes
and I will not be guilty of any either.
I refuse to be blind and to call out cruel names,
to generalize people so that everyone's the same.
She's right when she says I don't know the hard life:
I've never been persecuted or enslaved or pushed out of my home
and I've never been afraid just because of who I am.
But don't throw me in a category with the colonists and the bigots
who have trampled all over history with their spiked black boots and their power-hungry entitlement—
because that's not me.
We can't forget what's happened, but we can all live to spite it;
We can be friends: the whites, the Blacks, the Jews, and the Arabs.
We can see each other for who we are: in-di-vi-du-als
and give each other the chances that others were deprived of before:
To speak.
To live.
To choose who we become.
To see the world as seven billion people
Who are basically all the same
And who are beautiful in their diversity.
I have a dream...
1ST PLACE PHOTOGRAPHY

FIRST LOVE

Kelsey Smith
NONFICTION

SIXTH GRADE AND AFTER

Jennifer Dunivant

My parents were racist. I don’t mean that they were members of the Klan. I am also pretty sure they never attended a lynching. I would be surprised to learn that either of my parents participated in an integration protest. They did, however, honestly believe with every fiber of their beings that African Americans were not only inferior to whites, but that they also possessed some form of evil to be avoided. Since they raised me, they indoctrinated me, and I grew up fearing black skin. It wasn’t until I was eleven years old and in the sixth grade that I could entertain the idea that my parents could be wrong about something.

The transition from elementary school to middle school in 1984 was traumatic for me. I was faced with twice the number of students, half of them being unfamiliar and African American. This displeased my parents and caused me a great deal of anxiety. I was already a social outcast because I was “the fat girl,” and by now I was almost used to the bullying that accompanied my excess weight. The change of setting only made me retreat further into my head and away from the outside world. But then I met Andrea.

Andrea* (not her real name) was my first real best friend. She was smart and funny and she liked me despite the fact that I was a fat white girl. We both loved Prince and the Revolution and Madonna. She put up with my devotion to Duran Duran better than most. She made fantastic grades and came from a good church-going family who stressed the importance of ethics and education to her. As a result, she was a good influence on me. My parents didn’t care about that. All they could see was her black skin.

My dad was a taxi driver and he always picked me up from school in his big café au lait-colored cab. One day on the drive home, he began questioning me about Andrea.

“Who was that colored girl you was talking to?”

“Oh, that’s Andrea,” I said, “a girl in my class.”

Daddy looked at me in the rearview mirror. His eyebrows lowered over his hazel eyes to let me know that he was going to say something important.
“It’s fine to be polite, but you don’t make friends with ‘em.”

I remember just nodding my head in agreement. This wasn’t a road I wanted to go down with my dad. He had told me countless times that other people judge you by your cohorts, so if I hung around with black people, folks would assume that I was a “nigger lover.” And that was looked upon with great disdain by both my family and the members of the church we attended.

Despite my dad’s dire warning, things at school were fine for a while. I saw to that. Andrea and I hung out at school like normal; I just found a reason to be away from her or out of sight of my dad’s cab at pick up time. But then my parents started to take notice of my phone calls. My mother would ask me who I was talking to all the time, every time.

“Who was that?” my mother asked.

She was simultaneously smoking and setting her soaking wet hair with pink foam rollers, so her attention was focused on the reflection in her Clairol lighted makeup mirror.

“Andrea.”

“Ain’t that the little black girl your daddy saw you talking to at school?”

“Yes,” I admitted. I had a nasty habit of telling the truth when I was caught off-guard.

Mom looked up. Her cigarette was now drooping downward, and her hands were in her lap instead of tooling around with her hair.

“She ain’t to call here no more and you ain’t to call her neither.”

“But mom, she’s my best friend! She’s my only real friend!”

I began to panic. I had given up telling my mother about the harassment that I had to endure from most people day in and day out. She always just told me to ignore it. I finally had positivity in my life and now she was trying to take it away.

“You need to get you some white friends,” she said. My mother was utterly unmoved. She dismissed the idea of Andrea in my life the way she would
have dismissed a stray dog at her door.

“You do what I say and that is final.”

Her brow was furrowed, and she continued setting her hair.

From that moment on, I simply resolved to lie to my parents. I would run to pick up the phone first if it rang after school. When asked who I was talking to or who I was calling, I would say “Carla.” That was the name of a real girl from my homeroom class who happened to be white. This ruse worked for most of the autumn. I didn’t tell Andrea about my deception. I thought it was stupid that I had to do it and I didn’t want to subject her to the truth. Whenever I had to tell my mom who it was, I always covered the receiver so that Andrea wouldn’t hear my pitiful lies.

One day, mom answered the phone before I could and asked who it was. When Andrea said her name, my mom’s face turned completely red with rage. She handed me the receiver.

“You tell that girl you can’t talk.”

I did, and it made me sick to my stomach.

By now I was in constant turmoil. I had to do everything that I could to cover up my friendship with Andrea. I had a heart attack whenever the phone rang. I found myself always lying to Andrea about why I couldn’t spend the night at her house or why she couldn’t come to mine.

My grades, which were only adequate to begin with, started plummeting. The school responded to my falling grades by pulling me out of all my classes with the smart people (including Andrea) and shoving me into classes “at a more appropriate level” for my abilities. My parents responded by putting me “on restriction,” which for a poor eleven-year-old in the mid-eighties meant “no phone calls.” My grades kept falling, so every six weeks the school changed my level and my parents just lengthened my restriction another six weeks.

After Christmas break, I was finally left to rot in a group of students that was just a notch above special education and was full of kids with habitual behavior problems. Being surrounded by loud, unapologetic bullies in almost every class was nightmarish. I didn’t know how to cope. These were the kids I did my best to avoid in an average day and now I had almost every class with them. I just stared down at my desk whenever the harassment started, never looking up, never crying, and never showing emotion.

Now I could only communicate with Andrea during homeroom, choir, and P.E. class. Since almost no one else at school would talk to me, unless they wanted to call me Fat Mama Robinson or the more inventive Food World, Andrea began to feel like my only link to the human world. And my parents began to seem more like caricatures.
In early spring of 1985, I finally brought a report card home that wasn’t atrocious. After eighteen long weeks, I finally had no failing grades and was off restriction. After dinner I was free to use the phone, so I called ‘‘Carla.’’ As was my practice, I took the kitchen phone, a maroon and avocado trim-line, into the next room for some privacy and shut the door. During our conversation, Andrea and I were inexplicably cut off; no dial tone, just dead silence. I opened the kitchen door and my mother was standing there with the unplugged green phone cord in her hand.

“I know you are still talking to that Negro girl. She ain’t your friend and you ain’t hers. Get that through your head right now!”

Just as she was bending down to replace the phone cord, the other house phones rang. I gave my mother a pleading look to no avail. She plugged the cord back in and answered the phone.

“Is this Andrea Nance? No, Jennifer cannot come to the phone. Don’t call here anymore.”

Mom didn’t have to tell me to go to my room. Before I could belly flop onto my bed, my parents were in the living room talking about me. I could hear them speaking but I couldn’t make out many words. Why did just having a friend have to be so hard? I was so tired of worrying over this that my eyes couldn’t produce tears. My face swelled up but nothing happened.

Sometime later, my mom came in to deliver the news. I was ordered to completely end my friendship with Andrea. No more calls. No more talking to her in class. No more even sitting beside her in class unless seats were assigned. No more hanging out together during pick up time. Once mom left the room, my tears, bitter and silent, finally came. The next day it was school time again.

The early morning air was still cool, but the dogwood trees on Chapman School’s campus were flowering just the same. Vanilla and strawberry ice cream-colored blossoms filled my sight as I entered the doors that day. Fighting with my parents had been useless. I walked into the school with a sense of purpose. I went right to Andrea as soon as I saw her and did what I had to do.

“Andrea, I can’t be your friend anymore.”

My only consolation that day was that I was finally giving Andrea something that I hadn’t given her and that she deserved, and that was the ugly truth about my family. She looked more confused than angry or sad.

“But why?”

“Because you are black and that’s all they care about.”

The rest of the school year was lonely, but I mostly pretended that I was somewhere else.
I only had one other friend, the real Carla, but we just weren’t all that close. We couldn’t really talk on the phone after all the lying I had done about the faux Carla. She and I couldn’t laugh about the same things that Andrea and I did, although by all outward appearances we had more in common.

Unsurprisingly, I had to repeat the sixth grade. Andrea, of course, passed with flying colors and we never shared a class again. Once she went to seventh grade it was as though she was in a different world. We, in fact, only spoke once more although we both went to Lee High School.

I showed up for Senior Night at Lee High for the class of 1991 to watch some friends perform. Andrea and I were both there early, and our two separate groups of friends were interacting with one another. She very innocently asked me why she hadn’t seen me in school for so long. I told her that I had quit when I was 16.

She had a look on her face that was half disgust and half amusement when she asked if I’d had five babies yet. She was already laughing before I could respond. I was a joke to her. It stung, but I held her no ill will. I just reported zero births and let her walk away laughing and shaking her head. My friends asked me what that was all about and I just shrugged.

I did, however, harbor ill feelings towards my parents for quite a long time. They forced me to give up a good friend for no other reason than to just satisfy their need to keep “us” away from “them.” Segregation may have been abolished by law, but it was alive and well in their hearts. I can’t say that I truly forgave them. I can say that I grew up.

In the twenty-eight years since that spring of 1985, I’ve come to realize that my parents, like me, were indoctrinated by their racist families. Being children of the mid 1930s, segregation had been the way of my parents’ lives. The indoctrination they received from their parents was reinforced by the very society that they lived in.

I don’t try to excuse my parents’ beliefs. Yes, they were a product of the Jim Crow era, but they resisted new ways of thinking as adults, despite the changes that were going on all around them. In a way, I pity them because of the way they clung so vainly to the old ways. They may have taught racism to me as a child, but I take comfort in the fact that in spite of my upbringing, I have tried to teach my children a better way.
WHY I DON’T LIKE PEOPLE

Molly Keeton

Because the way her voice sounds like ear drums bursting
Because they said I didn’t know what “artisan” meant
Because of fake smiles
Because of “bless your heart”
Because you won’t shut up about your “accomplishments”
Because I’ve been heartbroken
Because you broke the line in front of me
Because my grandmother celebrates “Robert E. Lee’s birthday”
Because of Duck Dynasty
Because you look at me like I have two heads
Because of bad grammar and scholarly snobs
Because of the naked pictures on your computer
Because I don’t know how to shut up around anyone
Because of #YOLO and #SWAG
Because society wants me to be something I’m not
Because I still care what society thinks
Because you took my seat last class
Because I’d rather read than talk to you
Because I’m honest
At the time that I was about seven, my boyfriend was a black-haired boy with freckles. We were both in Mrs. Polo’s first grade class and we would play hide and seek on the playground during recess. My mom told me that it was puppy love, but that didn’t stop me from looking for him hiding on top of the rusty monkey bars. I always found him there.

When I was twelve, my boyfriend was a gamer that kept his hands glued to a PlayStation controller whenever he came over. I don’t think that he knew what hide and seek was, because he never noticed I was there to be found as long as the light from the television kept glowing. Mom would bring us popcorn and colas and we played virtual games instead.

When I was fifteen my boyfriend was a high school dropout with a lip ring who was convinced that he was destined to be a rock star. He worked at Burger King and he would give me extra fries whenever I stopped by. My mother shook her finger at the mention of his name. He didn’t know the game, but he was good at hiding whenever a bill was brought to our table at a restaurant. I wound up hiding from him and he never found me. I found another boyfriend shortly after, but he did too much seeking, especially for other girls.

When I was eighteen he was a ponytail and pair of scrappy sideburns that smoked strange smelling things. He didn’t seek much of anything except lighters and snacks, but he did an awful lot of hiding behind the smoke. I stopped looking for him eventually, or anyone else to play hide and seek with, for that matter. I started playing tag. My mother expressed her ease of mind.

By the time that I was twenty, a boyfriend was something to hide from and not go looking for. When I was twenty-three, I thought that tagged an “it” with a marriage certificate, but some people just like to play games.
2ND PLACE PHOTOGRAPHY

TIME

Lizzy Reburn
There was once a girl who could see through walls, or for that matter, anything at all. It started when she was very small, and heard her parents fighting. Her father was yelling that her mother was cheating on him with the girl’s kindergarten teacher. The girl hearing this believed it was her fault they were fighting in the first place. They were yelling so loud, her father was so angry, and then there was a scream. The girl closed her eyes and shut her ears, but she could still see them. Her father stabbed her mother eighteen times, and she could see every drop of blood with such clarity she could almost see the cells that gave the blood its color. Every gruesome detail was etched into her mind, and from that day forward, there was nothing she could not see through.

The girl grew up isolated and abused, not only physically and sexually by foster families, but also psychologically by the things she witnessed. She watched as perfect, church-going citizens got drunk and beat their children, spewing religious texts as they hit them. She saw fathers and brothers “training” their daughters and sisters on “how to please a man.” She watched the smiling cheerleaders vomit their already-diетed meals and cut themselves where no one could see. She lay in bed at night staring through the ceiling or the walls or the floor, unable to close her eyes to the horrors of the world so many people ignore.

She was only twelve when she realized how ignorance plagued humanity, how everyone was blind to what was right in front of them, even when there were no walls. She tried to speak up, to stand up, to clear the vision of teachers, parents, police officers. No one would listen to a young girl, just the other adults, other liars hiding behind walls of smiles and concrete. There were so few who were worth telling as most were hiding something. It was those few who could not believe that their friends, neighbors, and relatives were capable of hurting themselves or anyone else.

So she became one of them. She put up walls to protect herself, and eventually she was smiling and laughing with them. She shook hands with
the principal she had seen touching his son in the wrong places. She hugged the alcoholic who one weekend while drunk driving hit a woman and drove away. The little girl grew up into a young woman, and slowly she forgot. She forgot all she saw and lived an average life, because that was easier than seeing things for what they really were.
POETRY

THE ENDLESS

Katie Lindsey

Here is the endless stream of temptations—
sweet somethings whispered in my ear by
this soft, honeysuckle voice enticing
me with the thought of being free.

Here is the endless abyss where I stand,
seemingly perilous with my hands
clasped, white knuckles and chipped nails,
praying and pleading with this business of risk.

Here is the endless conflict.
Fuck analysis.
I jump head first
head l o n g
head strong.
I take the gamble.
I roll the dice,
and, oh man, do I taste life.
And I lick the plate clean
all over again.
As the late afternoon sun slid into the mountainous horizon, it cast a burgundy blaze upon the mammoth, gray hospital which stood five stories high overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca. A pensive doctor arose from a cold, metal chair in the break room and dumped the last bit of his lukewarm, black coffee into the stained sink and exhaled until he felt his chest tighten a little. He shuffled his throbbing feet toward the door of the break room, ignoring a faint headache that pulsated in his temples.

He stepped out of the room as a flood of fluorescent light bathed his graying hair with a dull, yellow shine. He slowly turned to walk down an almost empty, stone-colored corridor whose only sign of life was that of a young janitor who carelessly mopped while a pair of headphones dangled from his ears. As the doctor walked by, the janitor sloshed foaming, discolored mop water from the mop bucket onto the doctor’s well-worn leather shoes. All the doctor received from the janitor was a slight shrug of the shoulders and a sly smirk. As usual, the doctor gritted his caffeine-stained teeth and continued onward, leaving a trail of dirty, gray footprints in his wake.

Further down the narrowing hall, the doctor entered a nurses’ station, bereft of warm voices, but filled with the noise of office work. He hesitantly passed by a quiet nurse, who solemnly glanced away from packing up her desk to look at a miniature portrait of her family, framed in plastic, still sitting on her desk. The doctor quickened his pace and lowered his eyes, the same light blue eyes that were already partially hidden from sight by a pair of silver-framed glasses.

From the nurses’ station, the doctor entered the office wing of his floor, where he turned his hefty frame toward the row of offices on his right. From his view, he saw a young colleague who had his feet, warmed by newly shined shoes, propped up on a polished, cherry wood desk. The colleague took a slow, deep drag from an exotic Cuban cigar, and blew the smoke into the
air, obscuring the doctor’s view of the prestigious degrees and golden-framed paintings that hung on the colleague’s walls. The colleague hesitantly rose from his soft, leather chair and quickly shut his red oak office door. The doctor sighed and shook his balding head while scoffing at the cold attitude he just witnessed.

He came to his own office door, which had paint peeling in stripes, and glanced at the title painted on the frosted window. Clarence J. Thompson, M.D. His pulse quickened as he turned the icy door handle and opened the door. Sitting at his desk was a meticulously dressed man in his late forties, whose eyes were already locked with Clarence’s.

"Your chair’s a little bit old, don’t you think, Clarence?"

The perpetual grin that the man donned grew a little, pushing up his finely groomed mustache. The man’s well-combed toupee sat stiffly as he spoke in that deep, suave voice. “Time to get a new one, huh?” Clarence watched him pick sneeringly at the torn piece of leather on the chair arm.

“Maybe one with a few less patches and tears,” he said with a slight laugh.

Beads of sweat formed on Clarence’s head and began to trickle down his face. “That one’s fine, Robert. I don’t need a new one. That would be frivolous, a pure waste.”

“It’s Mr. Steiner, and you’re late,” Steiner glanced at his slick, platinum watch and then back at Clarence, “by about three minutes. And Clarence, time is money.” And with that, he raised his eyebrows, signaling to give Clarence a chance to talk.

Clarence grimaced at the platitudinous comment and cleared his throat. “I had an unexpected call, from my youngest daughter in college.” He reached up and straightened his spectacles. “She just got elected as the ambassador of her school—”

Steiner interrupted, “Ah, kids, expensive and messy. You know, Norman on the east wing had a three year old who once spilled grape juice on one of his Victorian rugs.” Steiner began tidying up Clarence’s desk. “I wouldn’t want that to happen. My Victorian rugs are irreplaceable.”

“If you have kids, you’ll find that they are irreplaceable, as well,” Clarence felt a slight shiver ascend his spine as Steiner cocked his eyebrows, his grayish-green eyes staring up at Clarence as he leaned back in the chair.

Steiner sat silent for a moment and then began, “Clarence, as you already know, budget cuts for this year are putting us in quite a bind.” The grin on his face seemed to grow a little.
"We've already had to let several nurses go. Believe me, I'm glad I chose you to decide who to drop, but we still need to make more cuts."

"But I already had to fire five senior nurses and a third of the janitorial crew. I can't keep doing this. What about the grants from our benefactors?" Clarence could feel a frigid mixture of anxiety and guilt welling within him.

"Clarence, do you know about the east wing's new MRI scanner?" The grin that Steiner wore was now cast aside and a grim look appeared on his face.

Clarence nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Then you know about the price of this new machine, right?"

"Yeah." Clarence shifted tiredly, his feet aching. "And its immense value to our hospital...the number of lives it could potentially save."

"Yes, of course," Clarence agreed.

"Then you know what you have to do." Steiner lifted his frail frame from the chair and stared coldly into Clarence's eyes. "And you decide: either more cuts from the nursing staff or janitorial crew, or the MRI machine."

Before Clarence had a chance to speak, Steiner slid past him and out the office door.

Clarence stepped out of his office, which had been filled with the aroma of Steiner's heavy cologne, and into the hall where he saw Steiner shake hands with the young colleague before the two left for drinks.

Clarence paced down the hallway and back to the nurses' station, now manned by a young man who sat filling out a stack of papers. He quickly glanced at Clarence and then turned back to continue writing. Clarence noticed a dirty pool of water on the floor just outside the break room door as he entered. He poured himself a cup of coffee and dumped creamer and milk into the cup. As he slowly sipped on the steaming coffee, two well-respected doctors came in.

The taller of the two drank the coffee straight before striking a conversation with the other. "So, Norman, what do you think of the new MRI machine?"

"Couldn't live without it. The thing finds tumors like you wouldn't believe," Norman, a short, rotund man, replied.

The other doctor took another sip and then responded, "I found a tumor in a patient of mine, saved him and us a lot of trouble." They nodded in accord.

After a few moments, the doctors left and Clarence stepped out into the hallway as the two doctors walked out of sight.
Clarence observed the empty hallway, now occupied with a deep silence that grew with every breath that Clarence took. He inched toward a fogged-over window overlooking the dark parking lot below. Several gray, leafless trees decorated the emptying parking lot, hanging solemnly over the young janitor, who was keeping beat with the music on his headphones as he hopped into a rusted Ford and drove away from sight.
Over the years, my house has worn down. The people coming and going through it have neglected it, and it’s fallen into decay. Take my living room: once it was neat and orderly with a few chairs, a couch, and a bed. Now the couch that I used to sleep on is piled high with clothes that no one wears anymore. The bed that my grandma sleeps in now always has several phone books strewn across it. There are dozens of unread magazines lying on the carpet, which has nasty pieces of food lodged in it that are never picked up or vacuumed. The nightstand beside the bed has lost part of a leg to time and stands with the help of another phonebook. My grandma tells me about how she’s going to get the place fixed up just about every morning, right as I depart for classes, but I always find it in the exact same condition as when I left it. The little old woman finds lying in bed worrying about everything a much more valuable use of her time.

If you leave the living room you find yourself in a small hallway, and every room in the house can be reached from here. The walls of the hall used to be solid white, but one night I took a compass and a pencil and drew circles all over them. My dad gave me this crazy look when he caught me, but I didn’t pay any attention. Once I drew enough circles, I began filling them in with names: one each for me, my parents, my uncle, grandpa, and grandma. The people who were there at the time I got to sign the circles in their own hand. To top it off, my dad, a decent artist, drew a detailed apple on the wall. I filled it in with a worm with a smiley face. The little circles dot the walls now. Not too long ago my dad looked at them and said he must have been on drugs when he thought that was a good idea. I didn’t say anything.

My kitchen has been hit the hardest. Our gas was cut off a while ago, so the big white gas stove no longer works. It sits in a corner of the kitchen, gathering dust and burnt-out matches that we had to use to light it. Now we do any cooking on a hot plate, set on the kitchen table.
The table was once filled with things like snacks and bread, but now we keep all that stuff in the fridge. Rats make their way across the table, chairs, and counters of the kitchen now. At night you can hear them scurrying around the floor and in the garbage. The smell of moth balls laid out in an attempt to thwart the rat menace blankets the house, where once the air smelled clean, if not a little old.

The floors, walls, and ceiling of the house are beginning to crack and fall apart because no one cares. No one has the money or time for repairs, and everyone around me promises changes that never come. Years of misuse and disregard have left the house in shambles. My father stomps up and down it, finding new things to break every day. The trash piles up and up, and my grandmother files it away on couches, chairs, and dressers like an obsessive pack-rat. The house is dead, and I’m looking for a new place to call home.
The night hung heavy and humid
yet my skin carried the chill of the grave.
I felt the thunder rumbling overhead
and it left a ringing in my ears
that I knew I would be hearing for days.
I guarantee you this coffin is full of more life
than those lackluster beating hearts above.
Floating up through the solid earth
I can picture them perfectly in
their own tomb like homes.
Maybe if I could visit them and
fill their homes with the smells of
my home then they would acquire
the taste for life that I got too late.
Of course I can never leave and
the only time I will cross their minds
is when my name briefly crosses their lips.
“Oh, Mikey left us too soon,” they’ll say
before their brains grow legs to run from the subject.

“Requiescat In Pace Michael Armstrong of Johnsburg, Illinois”
The worn old headstone groans out a lie through
the carved words seen with each flash of lightning.
It was on December 15 that I finally came home from the psychiatric ward. Dad came to get me in his old Monte Carlo, a car without heat that everyone hated except for him, and drove me home in the freezing cold afternoon. I'd been gone for two months, committed to the eighth floor of the hospital for suicidal tendencies and depression, and now they'd let me out—just in time for Christmas. When we got home the house smelled like Pine-Sol and cookies, and the beige tile floors gleamed from meticulous cleaning.

"Go make yourself at home, darlin'," Dad said, squeezing my shoulder. "I'll be in the livin' room. Game's on. Mom's out shoppin'."

And as soon as Dad disappeared into the living room, I was alone again. I walked down the hall to my bedroom and shut the door behind me. I looked around the room at all my things—the pictures I'd forgotten of happy birthdays and weekends with my friends, my ragged pink stuffed rabbit, and all those cracked-spine books on the bookshelf. Then I saw that old tree.

I walked over to the window and peered out at the gray tree a little off in the distance, standing there, like always, reaching its branches out to a careless nature, the hole in its trunk gaping open like a bullet wound. The tree was dead, my parents told me before I'd gone, and that's why it didn't bloom in the spring—and as soon as the weather cleared up and the holidays were over they were going to get someone to tear it down. I couldn't believe they were going to get rid of it. It was beautiful in its ugliness, in its dry gray trunk and its twisted gray branches. It had something to say in its death.

I touched the frigid window glass with my fingertips, stroking the tree from inside my room. Thanks for still being here, I wanted to say. Thanks for keeping your promise.

Quietly the door opened, and Mom came in as if she were trying not to wake a baby. She petted my hair with her gentle hands. She looked right at me, her eyes wide and cautious, like she wasn't sure what I would do.
“Hey, baby,” she said kindly, smiling a little. “I’m sure glad to have you home.”

I grinned back, feigning confidence. “Me too, Mom. I’m feeling better.”

“Good, good,” she said, and looked out the window at the tree, too. “That poor tree. Mr. Pollard said he’d knock it down last week, but if you ask me it’s going to fall down on its own... that man’s so slow about doing things.”

A warm streak of panic rose in me. I swallowed my tears and stroked the glass again. “Maybe it’s better for it to go on its own,” I said, shallowly. “It’ll choose the right time.”

“No,” Mom said, and snapped her gaze from the tree to me. “It’s already dead, and God decided that. God decides when things live and die, and if that tree were still alive we’d let it stand. It’s gone, honey. It’s already gone. We need to put it out of its misery.” She cleared her throat and touched my arm with a tender pat pat pat. “Dinner will be ready in about forty-five minutes—I made your favorite.”

Mom walked out of the room in a hurry, like she had a pressing matter to attend to, and I was left with just the blue stillness of my room and the little clear raindrops sprinkling now on the window. I saw the tree standing out there all alone, apart from the rest of the bare woods, and I knew the ending wasn’t going to be anything like it should be, peaceful and dignified and by its own timing. Instead, an old man with a chainsaw was going to cut it down and leave nothing but a little crooked stump.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered to the tree. “I remember where the rope is.”

After dinner, when my parents were watching Law & Order reruns, I snuck out of my window with one of my dad’s emergency flashlights. It was staggeringly cold in the black dark—the warmth in my body rushed out of me in one jagged exhale and I found myself shivering, barely able to breathe, alone. I walked the hundred yards or so to the tree, until my house was a little postcard scene with bright yellow
lights and a lit Christmas tree shining from the rooms. I ran my fingers down my tree’s coarse bark. I held the flashlight in my mouth and climbed a little up the tree using some of its lower-hanging branches, and reached my hand in its hole, feeling around until I touched the comforting nylon braid. I pulled it out as if I were a doctor taking the beating heart from someone’s chest. I was amazed and godlike. I worked my way out on one of the thicker branches and knotted the rope around it, stronger and tighter than before, then tied a bigger loop around my neck, not too tight, but tight enough to keep it from slipping. I turned the flashlight off and dropped it on the ground—it made contact with a quite thud.

“T’m glad to see you again,” I said, patting the branch.

And with one last, deep breath, I jumped.
The last time I saw him was my junior year of high school. We were friends, sort of. We had a peculiar relationship. While it seemed to me that we were good friends, he always appeared to be distant in some way. I knew we were friends though. Even when I was alone, he was there to talk with me. We walked in the halls together, sat in class together, ate lunch together, and we would hang out on the weekends sometimes. He would tell me to come to his football games and I would. I felt inclined to support my best friend, especially since his other friends were not the best of people. I told him once that I would always be there to help him when his friends were being jerks. I think it all comes with being popular. They expected him to be the best, date the best girls, smoke the best drugs, and talk about the best things. I kept an eye on them. It was my duty as a friend and I took it very seriously. When I got sick, I had no other friends. People really seemed to avoid me, afraid they would catch my disease. But Max, my best friend, would be there to help me and make me feel better. Unfortunately, his friends convinced him to abandon me and he eventually did. I understood. He was not as strong as I was, and the pressures of high school society overwhelmed him beyond rescue. I remember the day he told me to go away and his friends were there to humiliate me. I just smiled and told him that I would be there for him if he needed a true friend. That was the last time I saw him.

I was sick for a while and eventually my family had to hospitalize me while the doctors treated my ailment. It was really painful and I came close to dying a few times. Max was gone, everyone I knew was gone, and when I was healthy enough to go home, I had to start all over. I got home four years ago and now I have started my life. I never forgot about Max, though, and one night while I was writing in my room, one of my new friends, and also my roommate, told me to find him on Facebook. My curiosity was aroused, and after about ten minutes of searching, I found him. I was shocked and I felt inclined to meet him and say hello. I wanted to find out if he remembered me and why he ended our friendship. I wanted
to let him know I was alright and maybe grab a coffee. My roommate helped me find out where he was. He lived a few towns over. I dropped my things and got in the car. I knew where to find him. I drove for a couple hours, my head was racing. I had often wondered what happened to my best friend and now I was going to meet him. There was no need to call him up. It was something my roommate said, “If he was your true friend, he will be excited to see you. Why call? That would imply that you aren’t close enough to visit each other whenever you want.” I could not have agreed more. I did feel like he was right. He usually was right about all kinds of things.

Max lived in a house in a nice suburban neighborhood. I was really happy to see that he was well off. I pulled up and parked along the sidewalk. It was pretty late, but he never used to care when I would show up at late hours to hang out. Why should he be any different? I wasn’t allowed outside when I was sick, so I couldn’t see anybody back then. But I am cured and my family cannot lock me in my room anymore.

I went up to Max’s front door and rang the bell. The lights were on inside, so he was probably still awake. I was sick with anxiety. Long years had passed since his friends forced him to walk out on me, but they weren’t here anymore. High school and its petty concerns were long behind us. It was time to say hello to old friends.

I realized that I never let my hand off of the doorbell and I quickly pulled my hand back. I must have rung it for twenty seconds. That was unacceptable. I would ask my roommate about that later. I had been zoning out lately.

The door opened and a man stepped through the way. I knew it was Max, but he looked confused at who I was. He looked at me suspiciously and asked, “Can I help you?” He sounded just like him.

“Wow, it has been a long time, Max,” I said and smiled, “a long time.”

“Do I know you?”

“Of course you do. We went to high school together. We were pretty good friends.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, but I don’t remember you.” I was sure he was lying to hide his excitement at seeing me, but I decided to play along. I love games.

“We would hang out all the time. But then I got sick and I had to go. You went on, though. And it seems for the better.” I looked at his house with admiration. “Much better.”

“Really? Well it’s been about almost twenty years. What was your name again?”

I told him and his eyes got wide. He began to shake and I could tell he remembered me. We would be good friends all over again. A woman came up behind him and frowned. “Who is it, honey?”

“Get back!” screamed Max. “Go and get the kids and go in our room and call the police!” Max seemed frightened. Why? I didn’t know, but I was scared. What was going on? The woman was
startled. “What’s happening?” she asked.

“Just do it, I will explain everything soon. Go now!” She ran to obey his orders.

“Was that your wife?” I asked. “She seems very nice.”

“What are you doing here? They put you away…in that place. They let you out? What are you doing!” He looked like he wanted to cry. It hurt me to see him so upset.

“I came to say hello.”

“Please. Leave me alone. Leave my family alone. Don’t do this to us. I can’t go through this again!” He was about to shut the door, but I held it open.

“What are you talking about?” I think I might have yelled. “You abandoned me because your friends were evil. But now that they are gone, we can be friends without their haunting stares. They can’t pull you around on puppet strings anymore.”

“You killed them, you maniac!” He pushed on the door, but I was stronger. Just like high school. “They told me you would stay in the institute forever! You’re crazy!” It pierced like a knife when he said that; a long bloody knife that gashed at my heart and into my stomach. “You butchered them and they took you away! Why are you back! You would have killed me too if they hadn’t have shot you!” My eyes went to my shoulder and saw the lumpy scar where the bullet entered me.

“I had no choice. We were friends.”

“No we weren’t! I didn’t even know you until you were on top of me with a knife in the locker room.” He was crying now. “Please, why are you here? How did you find me?” He was trying to shut the door, but I wouldn’t let him.

“Why do you play such games, Max? Why don’t you remember? When we would hang out and talk and you would speak to me through the vent in my house and write notes of encouragement and leave them in the secret cupboard in my closet. Only you could have done it, Max, only you. I saw your fingerprints and heard your scent in my head!”

“You’re insane! You’re a killer! You stalked me and my friends and tried to kill us, you whacked out son-of-a-bitch!” He finally managed to slam the door. My hand was bleeding from holding the jamb. My roommate came out of the bushes. He wasn’t wearing a shirt and his hair was gone, but it was him.

“Max was just surprised, that’s all. But for now, they are coming.” My roommate pointed to the street and the police cars raced to a stop surrounding the yard. “I will see you later.”

“Okay.” I turned and sat on the top step. My mind was full of voices again, just like when I was sick. I was in the “institute” for fifteen years. Now the police would probably take me back because of Max’s lies. That was fine with me. He needs time, and I have all the time in the world to wait for my best friend. My best friend. My best friend…
POETRY

UNFOUND

Molly Keeton

He told me he left y’all a clue,  
my purse,  
but he’s just teasing you, watching you.  
It’s been two years now,  
two years I’ve been with him,  
two years he’s had my body,  
and my soul.  
I remember when he took me,  
I’d seen him before,  
I thought he was hunting,  
but I guess he was,  
Me.  
I tried, Mom,  
I tried to fight.  
I tried kicking and screaming.  
What was my brother doing?  
Where was my brother?  

He took me,  
up into the trees,  
tied against his sweaty body,  
between him and the tree.  
They looked for me,
but no one looked up.
No one ever looks up.

Then they left and we left.
We went to his home,
And he did things to me,
so many things.
I threw up all over him.
He went on the search for me.
He gave my parents his prayers.
He cleaned up after himself.
No one in this tight, little community noticed.

Now I'm here,
in his bed,
at his kitchen table,
in his pillow,
pieces in his home.
Listening to him,
waiting to be found.
1. She stared at the ceiling.
2. Her eyes followed the prominent crack to the other side of the room.

4. She loved him.
5. They were to be married on Sunday.
6. Sunday was pure white with pale lace.

7. He only wanted her money.
8. They were to be divorced on Monday.
9. Monday was pink like the line on the test.

10. She grew falsely for nine months.
11. He was never there anymore.
12. Tuesday was green with envy.

13. She needed a baby before he came home.
14. Her victim looked into her cold eyes.
15. Bones crack.

16. The blade tore the woman’s flesh.
17. The baby screamed in unison with its mother.
18. Wednesday was scarlet like the blood that gushed from the wound.

19. He will love this baby.
20. He held the child as the phone rang.
21. Thursday was black with fear as the evidence was revealed.

22. She screamed as they closed the door.
23. He never came to visit her.
24. Friday, Saturday, Sunday were all gray like her new gown.

25. Her eyes followed the crack once more.
26. She twisted her wrist in the leather strap.
27. Bones crack.
POETRY

EVERYTHING HINDERS ME

Anna Grace Usery

Like a welling tumbleweed burrowing,
In my delectable tissues
Pink and sensitive to the
Stabbing pains I receive,
When I think about everything.
Everything, like a looming being
Of constant cognitive dissonance
Eating like acid, searing
Holes inches deep, the seraphim
In my brain protruding deeply
Into my spinal cord seeping
Slowly up my back,
Blotting, burning, berating my heart.

I can’t find a release except
Through words and phrases and
Beer soaked napkins dabbed with
A few drunken hearts.
WHY I WON’T SIT STILL

Whitney Berryman

Because malnutrition has a swelled tummy,
PAPER-thin arms, and large, troubled eyes
Because dehydration paralyzes both mind and body
Because fire and shelter can make all the difference
Because slavery was never truly eradicated;
          it merely evolved
Because in the beginning, freedom was our portion
Because joyful are the voices of those delivered from sex trafficking
Because my favorite thing to do is give,
especially to those who cannot give me anything in return
Because people do not smile often enough
Because the word “unloved” carries the most tragedy
Because a young boy does not know what a hug feels like
Because a little girl does not believe she is beautiful
Because daddies walk out and leave
          brokenhearted mamas weeping
Because I blamed myself when my daddy never came back
Because children grow up too quickly;
          the world of experience snuffs out their innocence
          with its hardships, perversions, and cynicism
Because we abandon our dreams and doubt our potential,
          settling for unfulfilling jobs and suburban neighborhoods
Because people are the heart of my Father
Because people also are my heart.
Life is a wheel that spins slowly,
the grand circle of joy and despair.
If I can, I'll try to stop the wheel
and live forever without time or lines.
I feel the burns and smell the stench,
and I see the light, the crash of thunder,
the sour flavor of death on my tongue.
That wheel turns as it wants,
now spinning faster and faster,
tearing gum-drop buttons off my jacket
and sewing hooks on my shirt with thread,
then hooking it together again.
I will stop this nonsense wheel
and send it crashing down because
when life moves too fast, we can't see
if trees waltz with the wind, or fall with fatigue.
If I draw a picture, then walk around in it,
will the life that spins finally slow?
If I listen to the beautiful sounds of time
will it stop and rest on a note?
I know if I stop a speeding train with
a solid wall, it will derail and explode.
So if I stop the wheel, I may live forever,
but the world will derail and explode
into many rocky shards.
We ran across the neighborhood yelling and screaming under the cover of our secret identities. Our capes flapped as we leapt from yard to yard and tussled in the dirt.

Danny wore robotic skin cobbled together from tinfoil and tape. His utility belt held makeshift ballistics he would use to shoot ping pong balls and rubber bands at squirrels and stray cats. More of his time was spent designing his gadgets than actually using them. He ended up trading his cape for an office and a six figure salary as a defense contractor for the government.

William wore a different cape each week. One week he would be psychic, convincing us that he could control our every move if he wanted to. The next week he would be a shapeshifter, climbing up trees and calling out to us in a low, deep voice. William never traded in his capes. Instead, he fashioned them into a curtain, only parting it for groceries and the mail.

Alex wore all black and would throw pinecones at us. He would scamper back to his secret lair by the creek whenever we would fight back. Several parents in the neighborhood would call their kids inside when he ran by cackling. Alex traded in his cape for a badge. He never cackles anymore.

None of us chose any existing superheroes to emulate. None of them could ever possibly imagine going toe-to-toe with the extraordinary power held by the superheroes in our minds.
BLURRED DREAMS

Katherine Canlas
Orange, brown, red and yellow dappled the dry and voiceless autumn leaves that hung so loosely from the molting trees. There was a tangibly sweet chill chasing the tail of the breeze as we looked for witches flying through the trees. Mom called us back inside for supper, cornbread and beans. We raced, laughing our way into the open door of our happy, red brick house. The carved eyes of jack-o-lanterns watched over us, never blinking, always winking, smiling.

We painted faces on yours and mine. You were a jester. I was a pretty, smiling ghoul, the bride of Frankenstein. We begged our parents for permission to leave and to bound out carelessly into the streets. With our impatient, innocent eyes we visualized our old, cotton pillow cases stuffed full of treats. We chilled on the steps outside, counting down the minutes until dusk. We heard laughter from far up high and searched with wide eyes for witches cloaking in our trees.

At night we marched the livened streets. Shadows, black, were cast by the tree branches. You jumped at the silhouettes, nearly losing your hat. I smiled. We rang a doorbell and tried to scare the young man who opened it. He laughed at our childish zeal as we squealed, “Trick or treat!” He gave us candy and we left his cluttered doorstep. We moved on briskly with our feet. The air was chilly but we didn’t mind. We were invincible. We kept on trudging with eager eyes.

Other ghost, goblin and ghoul children joined our motley flock. We eyed their costumes and gawked at the similar decorations that hung from the trees.
There was one down past our neighbor’s house that looked real and chilling. It was a grotesque, witchy creature. I noticed your timorous frown. Your smile, once lovely, was gone. You kept staring at the ugly thing head on. “Don’t leave!” I plead, clutching your shoulder, “It isn’t real. It’s Halloween. It’s just for laughs.”

I made a goofy face covered in smudging paint and you managed to laugh, but your laugh was as real as the plastic thing that had the attention of your eyes. As we went from house to house, the magical breeze turned ill and the leaves that fell were mostly brown. We headed home. There was a rustling in the trees. “A witch!” I cried with ecstasy. You turned to me with a dead, meek smile and said, “Sis, it’s just a bird.” It was then that I saw your spirit had chilled.

That night I sat in bed awake. Nothing for me again could ever take that chill away from the otherworldly fall air. The excitement, sugar rushes and laughter were as real to me as cavities. A tap came from my windowpane and I smiled. I mused to myself, “A witch just flew by!” I was certain it was. My blue eyes lit with wonder. I knew that sound wasn’t the scraping branches of the trees. She was out there. Content, I fell asleep to the laughing lullabies of the leaves.

The chill of October still electrifies the fiery, undying curiosity in my eyes. You laugh at me now, because I’m still searching for witches amidst the trees. I smile like the jack-o-lantern, always watching for their dance between the leaves.
There was drizzle. It was confederate blue outside.
   It was dusk and comfortable.
The trail was thick silt and there were red clay cliffs
   hiding the rest of the world;
My horse was tied to a sapling up against chirt;
   I was unloading my gear for camp.
My dog hopped down from the saddle.
I saw a man approaching and could tell by my dog’s
   silence and calmness that he meant no trouble.
   He was older but still with blonde strands
   falling from his Stetson onto his felt collar.
He said, “I mean no trouble.”
   I said, “I know. My dog told me.”
   The fire would be easy tonight.

I was lost and approaching panic.
The drizzle was still there. A cloud, holding.
I was looking for her. I knew where she was.
Why was this stretch of road suddenly roaring and fading?
I was lost. Completely. Wandering.
I came out of some stand of woods as a child being born from misery and anxiety.
Why here?
III.
Then I saw her with her sister on a parking lot median. Tall and grassy.
The dead, yellow grass that shatters under your feet,
it shattered under my feet as I approached;
   They were red-faced and loud.
   Their targets were two chefs with straight smiles
   Who stood with crossed arms.
I got there just in time it seemed.
   I pulled them both away,
   my arms engulfing their shoulders,
   the swords and shields rattling.
   The grass shattered like praying mantis bones.
   We left.
The chefs’ chests puffed like pastries.

IV.
She is the strong and silent one;
That hidden engine which is only revealed through searing display,
like the eye of a hurricane or an apple from that tree,
which leads me to assume that
this was just my first thought of the day, or
the last thought of yesterday, or
both meshed like watered sand and raising flags this morning
to grab my attention;
Resembling Court Street on the Fourth of July.
Squatters of the land, helpless at the Divide,
Tom from mothers and snatched from brides.
We match our destinies and fight our fates,
Muster our belongings and take the bait.

Our sons wander for work, for those price-tag jobs,
While brothers struggle to escape the unemployed mobs;
Even helpless mothers can't avoid the fiscal famine.
Yes sir, our pockets are deep and barren.

Our appetites are large, but our stomachs hollow,
Though there's no time to wonder and wallow.
To better the future, we march with hopeful strides—
So, we keep on paddling through the dark tide.

All roads lead to the great City, the place of dire hope,
But little do we know how tough are the ropes.
So cry—cry and mourn the lost generations,
The ones that starved but couldn't save the nation.
All in all, it was turning out to be a pretty bad night. Nowhere to crash means I have to sneak back into enemy territory. It’s late as fuck, too. Meaning one of two things: mom’s waiting up for me or in bed by now. Good or bad, determined by the roll of the dice. Except not really. The waiting up, the crying, that all ended ages ago. Wait, fuck. Am I monologuing? The world around me is kinda hazy at the moment, which makes climbing over this fence a tad difficult. I manage, with all the grace you’d expect from someone who’s had just over a few too many. I land unceremoniously in my sharp and overgrown bushes, letting my body slide down into the soft, wet grass. The stars are nice tonight, I guess. For a sec I think about my dad, and watching the stars with him. And then for a little longer than a second I’m thinking about my dad.

“You okay?” My stranger asks me. He’s looking down, looking everywhere but my eyes.

“Just solid, baby. Help me up though,” I answer in reply, and in a flash I’m pulled back on my feet, damn near being carried to my window. I’m thankful for my support, but I’m pretty sure I can walk on my own two feet. I pass through from the outside world into my room, a world composed of progressive rock. I know I like it, but I can’t get a grip on the name of the song playing. Other, somewhat forcefully pressing concerns are demanding attention. Just as soon as I start to relax, as soon as the clothes come off and I’m content to spend the night with my stranger, I hear a click—the click of a door opening. Someone walks in then, and they move to switch the lights on. I do what every sensible, level-headed person does in this kind of situation: I freeze in blind panic. Mr. Stranger does the same, and I have time to think this is actually pretty funny before the lights flood my room, revealing what the neon green night light doesn’t. My dad looks at me for a moment, then looks at Mr. Stranger for a moment, then sighs. The first sound from him in six years is a sigh of disappointment...
"I think you should leave. Now," my dad commands Mr. Stranger. Without a word, the guy gets up and walks out. Guess he was just grateful that worse didn't happen. So now here we are, my parents, both of them, staring at me. It wasn't the family reunion I would have hoped for. I don't know what to say, and neither do they.

“You wanted to see her,” my mom says before walking out of the room. Before I notice it I've screamed an obscenity in her vicinity, then I remember my dad in the room and another pile of shame gets piled on top of me. My face is burning, burning hot, and my tears aren't helping. I cry for I don't know how long, and the entire time I'm waiting for my dad to do or say something. I'm not looking for much. Just to be hugged, for him to say “I missed you” or...

“Hey,” I whisper.

“Hey,” he says back. There's another uncomfortable silence, like we can never talk to each other coherently again.

“I missed you,” I say.

“Me too. Come on,” he says, turning to walk out my door. In a moment I'm fully clothed once again and on my way into the kitchen, where he’s pulling out food. He’s making French toast. I watch him whisk the eggs and milk together. “Still like it the same way?”

“Yeah. I take my coffee black now though.”

“Better. No kid of mine should be drinking sugar water at your age,” he said while getting the coffee ready. The food didn’t take very long to make, and the night on the town had left me a lot hungrier than I knew. I hadn’t noticed until I started eating, but I was still a little drunk. I slowed down because I’ll be damned if I’m going to throw up in front of dad. Something had to go right about this night, something not make me look like a failure.

We talk a little, about my life mostly; how school and work are going and how things are with mom. At least I can say I’m doing alright.
with the first two: straight A’s, and in line for a promotion. I can’t bring myself to look him in the eyes though, and soon we’re both at a loss for words again. This wasn’t going to get better, was it? There was something gone between us, and I was pissed. Nothing would ever be the same, because I was a messed up kid now. It could have been any other night, and maybe it wouldn’t be this bad. I wanted so bad just to tell him I wasn’t a lost cause.

“Your mom says—”

“Doesn’t matter. Don’t care,” I say. I really just can’t take talking about her right now. Just the thought brings the image of disgust and reproach that’s written in her face every time she has to deal with me.

“She’s your mother, Kriss. You need to listen to her, even if you don’t agree. Shutting her out won’t help either of you,” my dad says. But what does he know?

“She’s your ex-wife. Obviously you didn’t.” I’m spitting venom in my words without wanting to. Isn’t it weird how people do that? Mom says no to something, and children throw a fit. Say they hate her. Big brother has to go to work instead of coming to the big game, and all we can say is he’s a selfish prick who doesn’t have time for you. We’re always on the lookout with our lovers and strangers alike, for the slightest sign of weakness, and then we tear them apart. Is that what it means to be human? “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

A few small scraps of French toast are left on my plate. I pick at them listlessly.

“How long are you here for? Why are you back?”

“Couple weeks. Daryl’s gonna put me up. I came back for work, and to see you.”

“I’m just glad...” The words stop in my mouth. I’m just glad you could find your way back to this two-bit town, to your rejected life, rejected family, rejected daughter. “I’m just glad you’re back.”

“I’m home.”

“For a few weeks.”

“Until my work is done.”


“Taking care of my daughter.” The words were small and quiet, coming from a man who never settled down; a man who drifted from place to place, never quite happy with what he was doing. They left me staring in shock, watching my dad. I
couldn't see him through the tears, just a twisted shadow. Was that all he was, really? Was my dad really here for me, or was this some doppelganger come to leave me again. Daddy...

I hug him, and I guess that's enough because it'll have to be. I can't hold myself up anymore. I can't talk through the sobs. I can't see anything. My daddy picks me up and carries me to my bed, and he's a damn sight better than some stranger.
POETRY

CATHARSIS

Katie Meherg

The brittle bones of her shoulder blades create a jagged landscape of hilltops along the black sleeves of the extra small shirt that swallows her. Happiness is a number on the scale but she has not reached that number yet. She slides on a pair of sunglasses to hide the dark circles that shadow her sunken eyes as she steps out of the insipid apartment walls to momentarily meet a friend for shopping, chitchat or even lunch. She smiles as she laughs but every bite that she reluctantly takes she regurgitates with crumbs of her life that she hopes to forget into the mouth of cold porcelain.
She kept asking me questions. “What are we going to do now? Have we saved enough for this? Can they really just do this? How long did you know?”

I downed another shot of bourbon while she panicked. We were sitting at the kitchen table. It was that good kind of bourbon—the bottle you keep up in the cupboard for celebrations. The morning light shined through the windows.

I had worked as an assembly man for GM for nine years. That morning the boss man called me into his office. “Sit down,” he said, “I have some unfortunate news.”

My heart sank. I couldn’t even bear to listen to his clichéd lines—things like “It’s this damn economy” and “You’re a damn fine worker” and “I’m sorry.” Sure he’s sorry. Sorry while driving that brand new Mercedes. Sorry while playing golf at the country club and drinking mint juleps. You can shove that sorry up your sorry ass, I thought.

I bought a pack of cigarettes on my way home. I hadn’t picked one up in over ten years. Adrianne practically begged me to quit. “I love you too much to lose you,” she said. I loved her then. I bought the pack because I couldn’t stop thinking. That nauseous guilt kept rising. “It’s strange when shit like this happens,” I said to myself. I shouldn’t feel guilty. I didn’t do anything. I gave it my all for almost a decade. I can’t help what happened.

* 

She wasn’t asking questions anymore—she was making statements now. I looked into her sad blue eyes and the guilt started back. I poured another shot of whiskey. “Just when you think it’s going good,” I drunkenly mumbled. She didn’t hear me, or didn’t care.

“You can’t sit there and tell me you had no idea this was going to happen. We could have prepared,” she said.

“I didn’t know,” I said. That wasn’t completely
true. I had been hearing rumors for a couple of months. “Setbacks,” they said. “Economic downturn,” they said. But this kind of talk was always there. Everybody was always talking, I thought. Talk, talk, talk. Just a bunch of chatterboxes. Always talking at me or anybody else that half listened. Most of what they said was about as interesting as the seconds ticking on a clock. Tic, talk, tic, talk.

“Ronnie!” she yelled. “Have you listened to a word I’ve said?! Jesus! My parents were right. You really can be a rude fuck.” I poured another shot of whiskey. This was damn good bourbon. It was smooth. Most bourbon kicks you in the face—overpowers your taste buds. This one had all the fire but didn’t burn you. It was nice.

* 

I called James after I lit up a cigarette. James and I had been friends for eight years. He worked at the plant with me. James had worked there longer than me, so he didn’t end up getting canned. Our families went camping together sometimes. He got along with Adrianne too. When he was around, she didn’t seem to yell at me as much.

“I heard what happened, buddy,” he said. “You going to be alright?”

“Yeah. But right now I just want to get fucked up,” I said.

“I hear you, man. Meet me at the bar,” he said.

I sat there for about ten minutes before James walked in. It was dimly lit and filled with smoke.

“Ronnie, man. Let me buy you a drink,” he said.

“What will you have?” the blonde bartender asked in an attractive accent.

“I’ll have a shot of Wild Turkey,” I said.

“I’ll have a margarita and your number,” James said.

“I think you’ll have to settle for the margarita,” she said.

“Oh come on now. That’s a wonderful accent you have. Where are you from?” he asked.

She looked at me and asked, “Your friend thinks he’s hot shit doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. He thinks he’s God’s gift to women. But seriously—where are you from?” I asked.

“I’m from Mars,” she said.

“Funny,” I said. “Seriously, though. Where are you from? I love your accent.”

“I’m from France. A little town in South France. Nobody here has ever heard of it,” she said.

“I know you get that a lot. I’m not using it as a
line. I just like pretty accents. It makes me think of all the beautiful places I’ll never get to visit,” I said.

“How sad,” she said. “You will get to go one day.”

“Maybe. When I’m old and decrepit,” I said.

“I’m sure you’ll still be as good looking as you are now,” she said.

“Now, I don’t know about that. You’re beautiful though,” I said.

“How about you give my friend your number,” James said.

“Maybe,” she said. “If he plays his cards right.”

After James left the bar that night I sat and talked to the bartender. Her name was Emmanuelle. She was so pretty, I thought. She had a way of carrying herself that made her incredibly sexy. If I wasn’t married, I thought. If I wasn’t a grouchy old fuck. It’s been three months since Adrianne and I fucked. Maybe I should take my wedding ring off.

Adrianne kept talking at me while I sat there at the kitchen table. I punctuated her worried outburst with another shot of bourbon. Damn,

this is some good stuff.

I said, “Look, this whole yelling at me thing isn’t doing you any favors. I know things are shitty right now. I know I need to find another job. I know my drunk ass is pathetic. But can you, just once, please be quiet, please?”

She sat there in silence. For five seconds.

“Fuck you, Ronnie. You think I’ll take this shit? This is how you treat somebody after ten years together? Is this what I deserve?”

*

Emmanuelle told me to hang around and help her close. “Sure thing,” I said without pause. Life is sad, I thought. Even doing the right thing gets you bad consequences. I just want somebody to talk to that isn’t yelling at me. I helped her put the chairs up on the tables. I mopped. I helped her wipe down the bar. As I was finishing wiping down the counter, she came up and hugged me from behind.

“You wanna go to my place for a drink?” she said.

“Is the Pope Catholic?” I said.

“Do you know any better jokes?” She asked.

“Maybe, but you gotta get me that drink first,” I said.

“Deal,” she said.
I was awakened by the sun shining blindingly. I looked at the blonde lying next to me. I knew I should feel guilty, but I didn’t. All of my life I’d been going against my instincts: going to work at eight every morning, not drinking too much, going to church, living with a woman who doesn’t love me. I deserved this, I thought. It is nice to be wanted.

I lay there next to her for a few minutes and watched Emmanuelle sleep. She was the most beautiful girl I’d ever been with. I made the mistake of getting married too young. I made the mistake of not going to college. I made the mistake of getting a job in a factory. My life was just one long series of mistakes I was forced to live with. For the first time my life didn’t feel like a mistake. For the first time I wasn’t miserable.

* 

Adrianne and I sat at the kitchen table in silence.

“Where were you last night?” she asked.

“I went fishing with James,” I said mockingly.

“Now I know that’s a lie. Where were you?” she asked.

“You really want to know?” I said. She paused. She looked like she was about to cry.

“I don’t want to live a lie, Ronnie. I want the truth,” she said.

“What truth? That I’m miserable? Or that I spent last night with somebody else?” I asked.

She didn’t say anything for five minutes. She just grabbed the bottle of whiskey. Grabbed my glass. Filled it half way and drained it. She refilled the glass and drained it again. After that one the bottle was empty. She got up from the table, walked to the cupboard and pulled down another bottle and another glass.

“Well, there’s no sense in saving this one,” she said as she put the bottle and the glass on the table. She opened it, and then poured herself a double. “I guess I might as well tell you.”

“Tell me what?” I asked.

“You’ll overreact,” she said, and then gulped down the whiskey.

“What do you have to tell me?” I asked.

“It’s about James.” She said.

“What about him?” I asked.

“I’m fucking him,” she said.

I grabbed the bottle and opened it. I poured both of us a sizeable drink. “I guess you’re right,” I said. “There’s no point in saving it.”
Second Place 3D

BROKEN

Allison Montgomery
Beggars can’t be lustful choosers.

“Tortillas are it for the week,” his mother said.

While the homeless child wraps his scarf across the dumpster,

Cattycorner from the risqué cabaret today,

The horseplay of adult proportions preys.

He smuggles his mouse-eaten tortilla

Into the house of flesh to grasp the kisses

From misses with accents streaming vicious

Only for a few pennies,

Because we’re all mad here.
Maybe I look like a bitch watching
You hang from your idealistic nails,
Mewling sharply, only fueling
The whipping winds' lashing tongues

Gulping drips of blood, metallic red wine
From an unwilling vein, a bane.
Change is a poison, naïve dreamer,
Reaching for the stars, a catalyst.

You'll fall, a broken doll in the storm,
Without the weary grace of falling,
And the hard, merciless ground is
Every bit as close as it might appear.
We were in the kitchen when it first began. Bill was leaning over the kitchen sink, looking out the window to the back yard. I could smell his sweet sweat under the odor of gasoline and grass. In one hand, he held the glass of lemonade I gave him; with the other, he wiped off the beading sweat drops forming on his forehead. He didn’t look at me. I don’t think he wanted to look at me. I didn’t know what I wanted. He had lovely, sharp eyes when they weren’t clouded by drunkenness. I wished he would look at me with those eyes, but then I would see the hurt in them. His face normally hides all of his emotions, but those eyes were windows to his thoughts. I didn’t want to know what he was thinking.

Don’t know if it was just the unusual hot day’s humidity hanging in the air or if it was the tension. However, something was there, making it hard to breathe. He shifted over and turned toward me. I jerked my eyes down, afraid of what I might see. Bill began to clear his throat and said, “Clair…” But then he stopped, not saying anything. We were only a few feet from each other, but I felt so distant.

I was about to answer, but then Junior burst in, leaving the door wide open, allowing the autumn wind to sweep in the few lucky leaves that had escaped the lawnmower’s blades. They scattered across the clean linoleum tiles, the floor looked as if it was bleeding, reflecting the red leaves. It reminded me of the church’s stained glass.

“Look!” Junior said, shoving the bulging toad in his father’s face, oblivious to the storm brewing. If Junior squeezed that toad any tighter then I would be cleaning blood off the floor. Bill ignored him other than a slight nod. Junior then looked at me, hoping for a better response. “Look!” he said again as if we didn’t understand him the first time. The poor toad’s beady eyes looked as if they were about to pop out.

“Junior, let him go,” I said, breaking his naïve heart. It was as if someone had deflated him. The beautiful smile that showed all his missing teeth turned into a scowl.
“But why?” Junior looked down at his toad as if it were his new best friend; his lips were already beginning to turn into a pout. “I’ll take good care of him. We got a box out back. I could put him in that. I can catch him flies and everything!”

“He don’t want you to catch his flies for him, he likes doing that himself. He don’t belong here with us. He likes his muddy creek. He don’t want to be in that box,” I tried to explain. Junior’s frown was about to turn out into a blown out tantrum.

“But...” Junior begun.

Bill interrupted, “Go do what she says,” making the decision final. Junior slouched over his frog while dragging his feet out the door. Over Bill’s shoulders, through the window, I saw Junior hesitantly releasing his new beloved friend out back near the creek. Junior wasn’t mine, at least not from blood. Raised him like he was mine, though. Bill already had him when we first met eight years ago. Junior was just a baby then. Bill seemed lost, not sure what to do with a brand-new baby.

When most daddies leave the mamas, the mama still knows what to do. She’d be hurting for money, but she knew how to take care of the baby. Some say that women were born with that knowledge. Others say that they learned it from their own mamas. I think you just know after you give birth that you gotta do whatever it took to care for it. If you don’t know what you are doing then you gotta learn.

Daddies don’t always know, and they don’t always learn as easily. Maybe that’s why so many of them leave the mamas. Too scared to lean, too scared to fail. Bill was different though, the mama left him. It was a one-nighter Bill told me. He got the call a several months later saying that she was pregnant with his baby. Bill never did get a DNA test. No point, he had said, that baby needed a daddy and she had told him it was his. A month after the baby was born she just up and left. She left Bill. She left Junior. Junior was even still breast feeding. Bill filed a police report, but he knew that she decided to leave and wasn’t coming back.
So there was Bill at my church. He gave up booze, or so he had said. He found religion, kinda needed to with a new baby and all. He was sitting in the pew in front of me, trying to soothe the crying baby. I guess I felt bad for him ‘cause the next thing I knew I left my seat and took Junior from him. With a few gentle words I hushed Junior. Bill looked at me, cradling Junior, like I was his savior. I looked in those clear blue eyes and saw the need, the want for me. That’s when I fell for him and those eyes of his.

I remembered those eyes when I had the affair. Instead of the carpenter’s eyes looking at me, it was Bill’s. The carpenter’s face with Bill’s blue eyes. I don’t know how it happened at first. Bill had put a hole in the wall during his last drunken rage. So, I called the carpenter in. He was about my age; we had gone to elementary school together. He came and fixed the wall. I was mad at Bill for breaking his promise once again, so when the carpenter flirted, I flirted back. I didn’t mean for anything to happen. I was just mad. I just wanted to have a little bit of fun. But two weeks later the carpenter was in my bed. I hadn’t seen him since; the wall was finished by then. He had called, and I ignored him. I wished I could scrub away that memory like dead skin I scrubbed off in the shower. But it was there, stained in my mind. The guilt twisted my stomach, making me sick.

Finally, I had to tell Bill.

At first, he ran off to his favorite bar. Didn’t come back ‘til late that next morning, still staggering drunk. I yelled at him, said that is why the affair started in the first place. I was tired of having a drunk for a husband. I hungered for the attention and care of someone sober. He promised to quit over and over. But after a stressful event he was on his booze again. This was his fault just as much as mine, I had told him. I had told myself. He had pushed me into this. He had sobered up, but still hadn’t talked to me. This morning, just to avoid conflict, he cleared the gutters and then mowed the yard, even though bad weather was expected. The sun still shined thought sometimes those weathermen were wrong.

The scream broke my train of thought. I jolted, knocking over my untouched glass of lemonade on the table. “Go get Junior,” Bill told me. The shrieking scream of the tornado siren almost drowned out his last words. It was as if a switch flipped for him. He had that intense look on his face that men get when it comes to protecting their family. He was serious. Any insecurities that were there before was washed away with this new task. I got up and ran out to the back yard, yelling for Junior. The sky had turn to a yellowish green. It seemed unusually quiet in between the siren’s screeches.
"Junior!" I yelled, "Junior, c'mon!" Out towards the creek I saw his blond head bobbing out of the ditch. "C'mon, quickly!" Panic began to rise in my throat. I was beginning to sound hysterical. Junior ran to me, his face bent in concern. He heard the alarm in my shout. The siren then seemed to pick up where I left, screeching in a high pitch voice. It sounded like nails scraping a chalk board. I couldn't help but shudder.

"It's ok, ma," Junior said, taking my hand reassuringly. "I'm here."

"C'mon we gotta get back inside." We hurried back toward the house. Junior looked sadly behind.

"What about Ted?" he asked.

"Who's Ted?" I pulled him urgently towards the house.

"My toad," his voice cracked, as if he was offended that I didn't know who Ted was.

"Oh, he'll be alright," I said, the toad already out of my mind.

"How do you know? He don't have a house like ours. Can I go back and get him."

"No." I saw tears pooling in his eyes. I sighed, "He'll be alright, I promise. He probably has some hole he can bury himself in. Don't you worry about him." It began to rain.

We entered the haven of our home. I could hear the news blaring in the living room. The sirens still screamed in their whining intervals. Bill was on the couch, his eyes glued to the screen. The weatherman was pointing at areas on a map behind him. A giant blotch stained the map with yellows, reds, and blacks. "It's heading towards us," said Bill, translating the weatherman. I sat on the edge of the couch with Junior on my lap. He was really too big to sit on my lap now days, but I liked him there. He was comforting.

"Everyone in Morgan County needs to take cover. There are rotating clouds forming. A tornado can easily form at any moment. Anyone in this area needs to find shelter immediately," the weatherman said evenly. I was getting jittery.

"C'mon, let's go to the shelter," Bill said steadily. How can he be so calm in the face of danger? He picked up his storm radio and the mag flash light. I took Junior's hand. I followed Bill out where the ferocious storm was forming. The wind tugged at my hair, throwing it over my face. The trees creaked, bending dangerously, limbs would occasionally break. The leaves seemed to fly horizontally. The sirens still screamed under the whistling of the wind. My heart thudded heavily; pressure was building in my chest. I felt the pulse in my neck. Bill reached the tornado shelter first.
He had to rip the door open, the wind fighting against it. But Bill managed to open it. He nodded at me. I pushed Junior ahead. Junior hurried down the steps into the dark, small, space. I followed behind him, feeling Bill’s breath warm on my neck. Once we were all in the underground room and Bill managed to shut the door, he turned on the light. There were two long benches on either side of the room. Junior sat in the corner, against the far wall. I sat next to him, still holding his hand. Bill sat across from us. He turned on the radio and immediately a weatherman’s voice boomed, echoing in the room. It was a different voice from the TV, but it had the same even tone. I tried focusing on my breathing, pushing away the claustrophobia building within me. I pulled Junior tight to me. I think he was saying something, but all I could hear was the wind above us and the snapping of branches.

I looked at Bill. He was hunched over the radio, focusing on the weatherman’s words.

“There has been a confirmed touchdown of a tornado,” his uniform voice said through the small box. Touchdown. There had been a touchdown. I tightened my grip, but Junior didn’t pull away. “The tornado is heading towards Highway 20. If you are in this area you need to find shelter immediately.” I thought of our neighbors, the Hendrickses. They were an older couple. Did they make it to their shelter? Or how about the Johnsons down the road? They had a baby. Did they even have a shelter? No, but they had a storm room. Was that enough to protect them? Or the Browns? Wait, weren’t they on vacation?

I looked up at Bill. I saw the worry in his eyes. Those blue eyes. He looked up at me. I felt the pressure on my chest grow stronger as if someone were sitting on me. Soon, it became hard to breathe. The walls seemed to be closing in. Isn’t this when we say our last farewells, just in case? Is this when we say what’s on our hearts, like I love you? Then, before I could stop myself, I blurted out my heart’s desire: “I want a divorce.”

Bill’s eyes widened. Then, he blinked a couple times with raised eyebrows. “What?” he asked barely in a whisper. I bit my lower lip. I did not mean to say that, did I? Where did it come from? Now, of all times? What is wrong with me? But I felt a release on my chest and I could breathe again. The screaming siren continued to blare in the background. “What?” Bill repeated, louder this time.

A small “Sorry,” was all I could mutter. I looked down in shame and scooted away from Junior while releasing his hand. Oh, poor Junior.

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking for the divorce? I meant it was you that, that…” Bill trailed off,
glancing at Junior.

“Then ask for one! Say something, anything! But do it sober for God’s sake!” I burst out. I couldn’t help myself, I was screaming. Screaming at Bill in this small room under ground with a tornado heading our way. I was blinking back tears or rage.

“I don’t want one,” said Bill. He too was blinking back tears. “I was going to forgive you, I think.” He looked down as if he was still thinking out that last part.

“Why would you want to do that, Bill? After what I did. How could you forgive me?”

“I don’t know. I was praying about it.”

“When, at the bar? Or after you dragged yourself home drunk?” Where was my humanity? How could I do this now? I was beginning to itch. I wanted to scratch away this skin revealing new pink skin underneath. Maybe I could scratch this woman away and a new one would be there that loved her husband. Bill looked at Junior who was sitting next to us, almost disappearing in the corner’s shadow. How could I do this to Junior?

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking right at me. His eyes were sincere. But they always were. I had believed him every time. And I got hurt every time. But this time I hurt him back. “I know I have issues. But we can work through them. I can forgive you.” He said it stronger this time. The problem was that I didn’t know if I wanted his forgiveness. How horrible was that? “I’ll stop. I swear, this time. I will attend those AA meetings they have at church. I’ll do anything.”

I opened my mouth as if I was going to say something, then shut it. Truth was, I didn’t know what to say. Junior began whimpering in between us. The wind was getting louder. I could barely hear the siren’s scream. I scooted back to him.

“Sorry, Junior,” I said, taking hold of his hand again. “It’s ok, it will pass soon.” Then the wind picked up a new intensity. I could hear things hitting the door. I buried my face in Junior’s hair and prayed. The first time I prayed since the affair. I think I was afraid to talk to God after that. Maybe that’s why the storm was here. Didn’t God use disasters to take out the corrupted in the Old Testament? But Junior wasn’t corrupted.

I could smell Bill’s sweet sweat. I glanced up and saw that he had moved off his seat and knelt down before Junior. He took Junior’s other hand. His lips were moving as if he was talking to himself. I wondered what he was praying about. The storm? Junior? His alcoholism? Me? His eyes were pinched shut. I turned my head down again.

I have always heard that a tornado sounds like a train. Well, this sounded like a hundred trains were running us over. Any worries I just had were
replaced by this noise. I couldn’t hear anything but the trains’ whistles. I couldn’t hear the weatherman still warning us on the radio. I couldn’t hear trees being ripped out. I couldn’t hear our house being separated by its seams. I couldn’t hear our cars crushing as they were rolling over like dice. I couldn’t hear the siren’s screams.

A few seconds, minutes, maybe an hour. How long were we crunched down in a bundle prayer, tormented by the sounds above us? I don’t know. But then it was over. My ringing ears picked up the voice on the radio that seemed pointless now. He still talked, warning the small town next to us. We got up, not speaking to each other. All of our eyes were stained red from our tears. Bill pushed the door open. He had to give it an extra shove as if something was blocking it.

The light that streamed in blinded me. Blinking it away, I climbed out of the shelter. Nothing could prepare me for what I saw. Rubble. Everywhere. Our house was gone, and left in its place were splinters of what once was. Sinks, broken plates, fragments of windows, cloths from furniture. It was thrown everywhere among the broken trees. The very few trees that somehow managed to remain standing were bare. I looked over at my neighbors, also emerging from their holes. The Hendrickses was holding each other’s hands. They looked as if they just finished a battle and were looking at the remains. The Johnsons also appeared. The wife could hardly stand, she was crying so badly. Her husband supported her. I could hear their wailing baby. The Browns did not show up. They were on vacation, weren’t they? Everyone’s homes were a mess. Further down the street I could see a house still standing, but a tree had fallen on it, cutting it in half. Cars were everywhere, laying on the backs and sides. One of the Hendrick’s was sitting in a tree. Shingles lay on the ground as fallen leaves, piling in autumn.

I could hear sirens. I jumped, but then I realized it was fire trucks making the noise. The men that were swallowed by overlarge, yellow jackets jumped out, running towards us. Some ran to the others. “Are y’all ok? Everyone in your family accounted for?” one of them asked.

“Hm-hmm. Yes,” said Bill hoarsely, “We all made it. We’re ok.” The fireman nodded and went to the Browns’ house next to us, searching for our missing neighbors. I saw Mr. Hendricks rummaging around, picking up a few things. A photo, a broken teacup, a doll, a painted tile that had belonged to their fireplace. Mrs. Hendricks followed him, careful where she stepped. I could still hear Mrs. Johnson’s crying mingled in with her baby’s. She was on her knees in the dirt, her husband hovered over her. Paramedics were beginning to arrive.
“Daddy, it’s all gone,” Junior said. His face showed the shock that must have been on mine.

“Not all of it,” Bill replied, somberly. He walked towards the wreckage that was once our home. He had to climb over boards piled up. I was afraid that he would injure himself; a lot of the boards were splinted with dangerously sharp tips. Nails poked out of them. I wanted to call him back, but I didn’t. I watched him work his way through the mess. I stopped Junior from following. He didn’t resist. He looked up at me; I saw his eyes that he inherited from Bill. It was as if he said you can’t leave us now. Junior didn’t say this, but that look affected me the same.

“Why don’t you go see if you can find Ted,” I told him. Junior looked as if I couldn’t be left alone, but he decided to let me go and headed toward the ditch. “Be careful,” I shouted at him. I didn’t know why I sent him away. Maybe so I could also trudge in our house’s remains and not worry about him stepping on something sharp or maybe to avoid my shame.

Bill picked up a couple of things just to put them back again. He looked up at the sky and rubbed his hand on his head. Maybe he was talking to God. I carefully rounded most of the debris. I met him in what would have been somewhere in the back of the house, now just a colossal mess. Bill bent down and picked something up. At first I thought it was just a piece of glass from a window or something. But then when I looked at it closer I noticed that the glass was too thin to belong to a window and it curved slightly. Then I placed it. It was our glass cups, maybe even the same one he was holding earlier or the one that I knocked over. It couldn’t have been that long ago, but it felt as if it was a scene from last week. It was unbelievable that just a half hour ago, this was the same kitchen Junior brought his toad in. Bill let the small broken glass go and it shattered on the ground below. I looked up to check on Junior, and in amazement I saw that Junior had found his toad. He was chasing it in the yard, avoiding broken trees and stray boards. I couldn’t help but smile as I took Bill’s hand. Bill turned his gaze toward me, with those pretty, blue eyes of his. That’s when I saw it again: the need, the want for me. He then looked up as if he was surveying the mess in front of him. I followed his gaze. What a mess. Where do we begin?
Ten years old, asleep. Resting peacefully until
A siren invades my dreams. I search

For the source, but it evades me until
My mother shakes me awake. “Get up.” The siren

Was not in my dream, but a waking
Nightmare. A nightmare rated as an

F4. We hurry to the basement, as the wind
Howls like a malignant spirit overhead.

I sit on a couch in the basement, my mother, arms crossed in
Worry, stands at the foot of the stairs

Waiting for my storm-watching father to come
Back to us. We emerge the morning after

Unscathed. As we drive to see
The damage, I see houses untouched standing next to

Absolute rubble, my young mind not understanding
How the storm chose which houses to take.
1ST PLACE DIGITAL MEDIA

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Lisa Harris
The crumpled, faded Autumn leaves
hang from wooden nooses, furled
fetal-like, to a time before one grieves.

A widow sits hunched, hounded by grief,
her mouth dully, solemnly curls
like the crumpled, faded Autumn leaves

that sway as the wind numbingly breathes,
caught in a blunt breeze as they whirl
fetal-like, to a time before she grieved.

As a loner’s unknown thoughts heave
his animosities upon him, furling
back like the crumpled, faded Autumn leaves.

A youthful man whose longings of love were cut brief,
on an unkempt bed he silently curls
fetal-like, to a time before grief.

The aging, withering earth grieves,
mimicking in an undying feeling of distraught
the crumpled, faded Autumn leaves,
that pile fetal-like, to a time before thought.
POETRY

SNOWBLIND

Caleb Billings

My eyes opened to a world wiped clean and encased in a white shell. Nothing belonging to the future mattered and would stay buried till the thaw. I stepped into the still white void where the variety of nature was now uniform. The ground’s milky white complexion was yet to be spoiled by footprints and car tracks. It was almost blinding the way it threw off the rays of the morning sun. The only sounds came from skeleton trees groaning under the weight of the snow. The purity of the earth pierced my brain and wiped it clean of any future plans or past sins. My mind had never been as clear as it was at that moment.
That dance studio wasn’t much. It was basically two trailers that had been attached and converted into a dancing space. It didn’t look like much on the outside, just some yellow walls with a three-car parking lot and a large sign denoting “Jane Kohl’s School of Dance,” but it held so many hopes and dreams and ambitions. It consisted of two dance rooms, the larger of which could be divided by a partition into two much smaller spaces. The floors were gray rubber dance floors. The walls were yellow, and a ballet barre stretched across the back wall of both rooms. The opposite wall was floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Over in the right corner was the sound system, the walls it sat against decorated in calendars, drawings by students, and a set of tie-dye Mickey Mouse ears. The cramped dressing room had benches painted a soft yellow and blue and gray lockers for the student teachers.

The entire building smelled of leather and new shoes. There was an eternal scent of KFC and peanut butter lingering in the air. There was always music playing, and every once in a while, an hour would be devoted to the click of metal taps on the floor. And those taps always started out jumbled and confused, but by the end of that hour, something clicked and those taps would be almost perfectly unified. Every inch of every wall that wasn’t a part of the dance rooms held decades’ worth of pictures of previous recitals. “I do not try to dance better than anyone else. I only try to dance better than myself.” Mikhail Baryshnikov said that. They sold t-shirts with that quote on them. I always wanted one, but I never got one.

That studio was at all times a blur of black, pink, and tan. Classical versions of old television themes played often. Ms. Jane, the owner, had a tiny little office just off the front hallway, and oh, how special it felt to be invited in. In room two, at the very back, there was a costume closet hardly bigger than a handicap bathroom stall, but it held years of costumes. It was like magic.

That studio. It was small, at this point too
small. The people coming to it kept growing and changing, and eventually they had to find a newer, larger space. We all wanted a new studio; we needed it. The new space is professional and spacious, and it holds the potential for all of these new hopes and dreams and ambitions. But it just doesn’t hold the same magic as the old studio.

I haven’t been inside it in years. It’s actually rented out to the Domino’s Pizza across the street for use as a training center. The outside looks exactly the same, except for the sign, but I’m sure all the joy and magic went to the new studio, the only remnants being glitter left behind by the costumes.

Driving down Gunter Avenue, I can’t help feeling a sad nostalgia when I pass that tiny building. It was the beginning of one of the most important chapters of my life. I walked into that studio for the first time a shy, timid little girl, and by the time I walked out for the last time, I had blossomed. I could dance. I could get on a stage and know that I belonged up there. I dreamed there. I learned there. I grew there. I changed there. And most importantly, I fell in love there. That small, yellow studio gave me one of the most life changing gifts a person can get. It gave me a passion for the arts. It gave me courage and conviction to chase after my dreams.

I may not dance much in my adult life. Dance may just be a thing of my past. But it will always be a part of me. I doubt I will ever hear music and not see the dancers in my mind’s eye creating choreography. I doubt I will ever hear the theme to I Dream of Jeannie and not want to do tendus at the barre. That studio gave me love. And for that I am eternally grateful.
ART FACULTY AWARD

13,250

Stephanie Gile
POETRY

ASTRAL INFINITY

Siler Head

We were born of an infinite darkness
Creatures of space, with no time limitations
Orbiting light, with gravity to bind us

Rock and ice, pulled and pushed
Molded to spheres, and filled with oceans
We were born of an infinite darkness

Stars put in place by a heavenly artist
Eyes drew lightbeams and made the connections
Orbiting light, with gravity to bind us

Are we alone? Such eager acceptance
Though parallel worlds defy this assumption
We were born of an infinite darkness

Universes defined by the solar plexus
Escape is no more than impulsive reaction
Orbiting light, with gravity to bind us

Astral planes where life is weightless
Matter recycled through collapse and collision
We were born of an infinite darkness
Orbiting light, with gravity to bind us
The night is empty and quiet as we speed down the interstate at seventy-five miles per hour. We pass slow cars whose lights are too bright and an eighteen-wheeler sleeping over on the shoulder. I'm still hyped up from seeing my favorite band for the third time, my throat scratchy and dry from yelling the lyrics as loud as I could, and my legs stiff from standing and jumping for somewhere close to three hours. The car is dark except for the blue light on the radio displaying the time in skinny, segmented digits. We talk about camping, the Amish, socialism, and music. The conversation flows from subject to subject seamlessly, effortlessly, and we ride the waves as they come, with the music playing benignly somewhere off in the distance.

The universe is shaped exactly like the earth. If you go straight long enough, you end up where you were.

He turns up the volume and the words swim through the air, swirling like fall leaves in the darkness. He starts singing and I join in—there is a grand unity. Time goes slowly as the song plays itself out and we use our voices to give meaning to the moment, living it without thinking about the next one, or the one after that. As the guitar strums and the drumsticks tap on the rims, I feel like I'm a part of everything. I'm the sun and the moon and the sky and the ocean. The white dashed lines on the road zoom underneath us and I'm flying over the dry green earth, gliding through the sky, adjusting my wings to the changing winds of the night. There's nothing that can make me land. Every stop is just a rest on a tree branch, and then I’m off again—

The universe is shaped exactly like the earth. If you go straight long enough, you end up where you were.
There are times when it matters, I suppose
When I walk my dog or fill out a job application
I suppose it matters to them.

And I suppose in this state or this town or this year
It remains important or relevant to some.
I suppose some things never die and some things,
Supposedly, are never turned a blind eye.

My parents, my siblings, my girlfriends past and present
All suppose that this shell is what I am most.
I suppose that’s alright at times, I suppose.

But suppose I wasn’t. My dog wouldn’t know.
She doesn’t suppose; follows her heart and her nose.
Smart people, thinkers, those with eyes wide open
Don’t suppose and instead let their minds grow

But I suppose to suppose is a natural start.
So strive to solve simply supposing and so
Start at suppose but move to “I know.”
BEST POETRY

UNTITLED #1

W.J. McCormack

There you go with your halfcocked smiles, Hiding eyes that are begging not to cry
Hair a mess, everywhere, frizzed, falling out
Up and Down, Up and Down. The stairs stretch as the legs get squishy
from the flights, and the lungs fill, breathe, fill, run
No matter. Late, not in time
Helpless, running late, all for not, worthless, wanting, waiting
Spilling, crying, terrorizing, malicious, wasteful and naked
Oozing illicit thoughts of the good
Not knowing the process, not caring to learn
And it rolls over us like a lukewarm hand
Up and Down, Up and Down, the hills and creeks filled with the blood of our fathers, and fathers of them
and the fathers of those before, and we cross through it and it covers us
We scramble to wash, but can’t
Try to cleanse ourselves, but can’t
The soap gets red, redder until black
Black Death, and life all intertwined and all about the way. Moving slowly through
Not remembering how it happened, as it happens again again and AGAIN
There you go with your tear drops in a jar
No one cares. No one justifies. They mock, throw rocks, spit and tear down
Shrines that bring us true healing
Where we read the words of Platonists and Existentialists who
discuss what matters and how we ultimately won’t conduct ourselves
in times of moral deficiency
“Holy” medicines and alien technology taint the mind while they shock and dope
and tell anecdotes of their pre-grad misconceptions of what true romance was
They debauch and depart into the night. Up and Down, Up and Down, sliding, oozing, Electric
Eclectic, making noises of the jungle, banging, rearranging
The boys call out to their ladies, “Soup, Soup” Fever, eating, sweating, dying
Crashing through the wall and emerging a broken rack that once held a suit
Made of death and cotton
Wandering, wanting a piano to play the songs of yesterday
We don’t remember the crackle, the sliding of the needle off the record, off the record into the arm, off the record, whispering behind big wooden doors
Shooting, Dallas, Books. Who knows? Do we, Mr. Kennedy? Will we? We walk and talk
and grow and live and die and what for?
Will there be a parade? Will the candy hit the pavement?
Children running, crying, sticky, dirty life
Will the rain come and clean the papers that tell stories that no one reads, and if they do, will they care or learn to?
Glances, plain, non-distinct glances through pain and panes of glass
colored with saving and grace and crackers and grapes that don’t fill, but feel fake and put on
No place in it. Up and Down, Up and Down. Sleepless, rolling, sweat and salt, dog licks,
comfort, sleeping. Door knocks as eyes close, waking, shaking, fucking distractions
Pulling us away from what we need to do, what is it we want?
Up and Down, Up and Down, faking, work, drudging. Wondering of it all
When the Son of the Sun makes his way to Venus’ curves and slurs of bodily enhancements that
don’t advance but impair worth and the sense of it
When the moon droops perfectly across her breasts and the X’s are clear and smeared, we see
true beauty, Don’t we?
Up and Down, Up and Down, dad wasn’t there; Mom was with her friends, Mr. Jack and Mr. Jim
who drank the same names and did things, said things, in front of the house with the red shutters
chipped paint.
Life oozing out and it, but life it won’t be. Clorox, and Q-tips, and Cocaine make sure of these things.
What business does it have?
Being here. Being a part of what?
Yodeling, smoking, cutting and gnawing the tips off of cocks and cigars... the Rabbi walks, smirking
smut, curlly haired fucks with their grins and sins aplenty as they scar those who would become men or
had tried to become boys at least.
What is the difference? Separating the just and unjust
and marking the ones who will ride the waves
Up and Down, Up and Down, flames aches and tear
We won’t see it, or hear it, or be there
It will happen, before us, after us, but never with us or around us
We will hear the cries, the lies, the makeup and the faking, the moaning and coughing as the trees make
their rounds about the room,
filling it with a smoke even a bear could love, making the world stop
Listen, listen, listen, sink back in
Hearing the cries and not ignoring, not walking by half-hearted and ignorant
Be a part, a broken part of a malleable whole
Something worth the effort
Time was running out.

As dusk nestled in, the stars began to twinkle in sight one by one. It was a time for lovers to gaze in awe at the beautiful waxing of the moon and the illustrious glimmer of those tiny illuminated prickles against the darkening sky. However, the fact of the matter was this: the more stars that turned on their magnificent lights for the rest of the world, the closer Hero was to failure. He only had until the one thousandth star appeared in the night sky to find her.

There were no leads. There were no mystic dreams or magic fairies to guide him. Hero was alone in this, with only instinct to act as his North Star. Yet, where had that led him? A dingy little Walmart deep in the hypocritical South. Hero could practically taste the religious disdain for his quest hanging in the air around him. The cloak of skepticism for the unknown and a pure hatred stemming from ignorance pressed on him, like the weight of fine suede fabric sullied with blood-red wine stains.

Feeling nothing but a crushing blankness, a preoccupying despair, Hero closed his eyes. He felt his back touch a solid wall behind him. It was ice-cold. His knees gave out and he slid to the ground.

Hopelessness was dizzying as frantic thoughts spun his mind, taunting him like children spinning a helpless one on a merry-go-round. He could just feel his spirit slowly drifting away from him—a worthy price for his immense failure. Through closed lids, Hero could almost make out the treacherous stars that were winding down the end of his quest, like grains of sand ticking away time.

What was the name of that thousandth star? Alpha something? Or was it a beta star? Was it part of a celebrated constellation, like Gemini or Orion?

How could the scientist in his prim little lab even give a name to so ruthless a creature?

The cold air stung and, desperate as he was,
Hero couldn’t detach himself from the worldly senses that kept him rooted while his spirit was falling away from him. He supposed, with bitterness dripping from his thoughts like wet venom, that this is why he had failed so harshly. He was too attached to this physical world, bending to the horizon and bound by gravity. The open spaces were nice and gave him a feel for freedom, but in the end, his body still felt the cruel winter and the rainy season just as acutely. He was still attuned to earthly feelings.

Maybe he had been too ambitious in challenging the soothsayer. Hero felt disgust just from imagining how the soothsayer’s wrinkles would cringe into a mocking smile at seeing Hero returning, defeated.

The idea was unbearable. It was enough to force Hero’s eyes open.

And there she was.

Hero couldn’t doubt the feeling. He tilted his head and studied her. For all the relief he felt, it was as if the moon was striking her with a unique celestial light, making her stand out as if she was the only one in the dark parking lot. His eyes were fixed on her and only her. Hero saw her back, her flowing raven hair that almost blended with the night, as she trailed away from him. He knew that she was the one beyond a shadow of a doubt. In that moment, his soul connected with hers, resonating from the deep bond they had shared in a previous lifetime.

She stopped.

She had been walking with the father, who paused too as she stopped pushing their cart full of groceries. The tension was clear in her stance, since she was fighting the impulse that Hero felt.

She turned, slyly glancing over her shoulder at Hero.

He stretched out a hand tentatively, his mouth agape as he felt the energy flowing between them. Her eyes reflected age and wisdom, but nothing in her face revealed the same. Her skin was taut and youthful. She was possibly fifteen in this new life, Hero mused.

The father spoke, glancing back at Hero suspiciously. Embarrassed, Hero imagined that his ragged appearance that had come from a natural negligence of his earthly presence was a cause for worry. For the first time in months, Hero felt self-conscious of his scraggly garb.

However, she didn’t mind. She didn’t reply to the father.

Hero began to close the distance. He had to do this; now was his moment.

The father began to drag her away. He was alarmed by the stranger now rushing towards them, eyeing the daughter with no shame. Cold despair drenched Hero as the possibility of
losing her again became real. No! He couldn’t let her get away! He had wagered too much on this quest to leave a failure. Hero saw her reluctance as she kept glancing back, an even sense of restlessness in her eyes apparent as they were illuminated by the moonlight and by the parking lot lampposts.

Hero was desperate now as he sprinted after them. They were already too far away though. He cursed his physical limits as he began to run out of breath; finally, Hero was hunched over and huffing, watching with anguish at the pair of fading figures—one of which had been his lifeline.

A last ditch attempt.

“What’s your name?” he yelled as loudly as he could with his failing breath. He looked skyward and prayed that she could understand him as he listened to his echo resound.

A name—a word as sweet string of letters—carried back to him in the darkness. Then she was gone, like a dream vanishing with the loneliness of a morning awakening. But the name hung in the air, ringing in Hero’s ears.

Hope.

There was no room for doubt now.

And as she sat in the car, she evaded the glance of her overbearing father. She was breathless. Invigorated even. She would finally sleep soundly tonight.

She wondered who that had been—the man with the desperate eyes that gleamed with soft hope at seeing her. She wondered why she gave out her name, despite her father’s warning and despite her knowing the dangers of strange men. In retrospect, she knew she had no control. The impulse had overridden her. The word had come tumbling out of her mouth before she could even think.

Hope.

And she didn’t regret it. She checked her phone furtively to see if it was charged.

Then she leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. She could almost make out that one-thousandth star shining right above her.
MERIT AWARD 2D

EBB & FLOW

Caitlin Dickens
Bright lights shining down from the beams
The stage is set, we are waiting ready,
The orchestra stirs as the choir murmurs
Instruments chirping, strings humming steady.
The crowd is buzzing before the fall
Of the baton to signal the crash of the drums,
That is when I will slam my hands down
On piano keys, the O Fortuna thrums.
For now I wait, stomach in tight knots,
The air is stuck in my throat as I try
To relax, the pulse of the silence deep.
All the others do the same, we all sigh.
As the conductor rises, the crowd grows still
Then it begins, the mighty music’s grandiose thrill.
Poetry

Marlboro Reds

Dylan Schrader

Old friend, every time I flick the Bic you never cease to please, as there’s nothing like your thick, white smoke to cure the anxiety that comes like a train with no conductor, or to bring me up when I’m feeling so low I just might fall into the depths of hell. With you I’ve thought about things that I couldn’t tell a soul, and even though your kisses are toxic, to tell you to leave my life is laughable, as I know you’re my best friend and therapist (even though they tell me you’ll kill me ten years sooner {at least}). To listen to them talk is pointless, because I know there is no conceivable way they can sell me against your understated charm, even if you’re doing me irreparable harm.
The street lights popped on, illuminating rows of brick houses with neatly-trimmed yards. The sidewalk circled around a pond where two boys sat fishing in the fading light. Mark stood for a moment and watched the boys cast their lines into the water. As soon as the hook would break the surface, the boys would reel madly. They came up empty every time. Mark continued walking.

Each house resembled the next. They all were built with the same tan bricks, with the same grey shingles, with the same stout chimney leaking no smoke. If Mark squinted his eyes, he could spot a difference or two. The house on the right had a ceramic grill out back. Behind him, a striped hammock replaced the hanging wooden porch swing. A canopy hung over one backyard, shading a family from the fading sun as they sat and talked and drank. But these small differences couldn’t make up for the fact that they all seemed so distant to him.

As the lights from the windows grew brighter, Mark began to peer inside. He had hoped to catch a glimpse of a familiar face, or even just a bored housewife passing by the window. Once, he thought he saw two children playing in the kitchen, but he couldn’t be sure. Everything just looked blurry and distorted, and he didn’t dare come any closer than the sidewalk.

Mark kept on walking until he got to the tan-bricked house with blue azaleas outside. He slowly made his way up to the porch, careful not step off into grass. He knocked on the door. A woman in a spotted black and white blouse opened the door. “Mark! What a nice surprise,” she said. “Come on in. It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s good to you too, Mom,” Mark said as he walked past his mother and into the living room, where his father sat watching TV. “Hey, Dad.”

Mark’s father turned around in his large, plaid armchair. When Mark was younger, it had always seemed to him that his father, thin and short as he was, always looked like he was being swallowed up by a plaid monster.
“Hey, Mark, it’s been awhile. Come sit down,” his father said, pointing his son to the couch. “You just missed dinner, but I can get your mother to heat up a plate of lasagna for you if you’d like.”

“No thanks,” Mark replied. “I’m not going to be staying that long tonight.” The plan was to tell them and go. The quicker they knew, the less painful it would be for the both of them.

Mark’s mother walked into the living room and turned off the TV. She sat down on the couch next to Mark and said, “So, how are you and Stacy doing? Are you two still seeing Dr. Valcheck?”

“Yeah, we are. Things are just fine.” Stacy had left two days ago. It would have been easier if she had cried, but she just stood there with a frozen look on her face before slowly making her way out the door and into her car.

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Mark’s father dragged his recliner around to face him, then said, “I saw a commercial the other day that reminded me of you.”

“Yeah? Which one?”

“The one with the talking dog. You know how much your mother and I love talking animals. It’s just pure comic genius!”

“Yeah, I know, Dad.”

“Anyway, so this dog reminded me a lot of Comet. You two always used to go everywhere together.”

Mark nodded his head along to his father’s story. He had remembered the dog but could not picture it. He only saw the waiting room with its high-backed chairs and floral paintings. He saw the nurses scribbling on charts and the doctor with the bags under his eyes. He saw the blood in the sink, circling the drain as he turned on the faucet.

Mark’s mother turned to him and said, “When are you and Stacy going to have us over again for dinner? We miss seeing you two.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Mark shifted in his seat. “Has it really been that long?”

“Over two months at least,” his father said. “We’ll get around to it eventually,” Mark replied.

Mark’s mind drifted off while his parents gossiped about the neighbors. The day he received the results still seemed blurry to him. He remembered leaving the doctor’s office and stepping out into the bright parking lot. Everything buzzed, a low, droning hum. It seemed to cover him, smothering his thoughts and senses. His parents were still talking. He watched as his mother laughed at another one of his father’s cheesy jokes. Their smiles were as bright as he always remembered them.

Mark looked at his watch and said, “Well, I
“Guess it’s time for me to go.”

“Can’t you stay a little bit longer?” His mother said, reaching for her son’s hand. “We hardly get to see you anymore.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be coming home a lot more often from now on. I promise. It was really great to see you both again.”

Mark’s father got up and led him to the door. “I hope you do. You should stop by and pay these lonely old people a visit.”

“I love you both,” Mark said, hugging his parents.

Mark’s mom smiled and said, “We love you too. Take care, Mark.”

Mark stepped outside. The street lights shone brighter now, and the windows seemed clearer. He could actually make out the scenes in some of them. In one, a family gathered around a television. Mark stopped and watched through the window, imaging himself sitting beside them. He saw himself laughing freely, not worrying about anything but what would happen to the characters on the screen. He turned away and started walking again. Mark passed the pond. The two boys had long since packed up their poles and left. He thought about his parents. They had seemed happy, and he didn’t want to shatter that happiness. Not yet, at least. They could learn their son is dying another day. The streetlights shone on as Mark walked away.
To wear a goofy-looking, patterned, short sleeve, button-up shirt is an admission.

For those who festoon the thing over their bodies with little thought and at least a healthy amount of not giving a damn, the shirt works out alright. They leave it untucked and they let it flow. Hell, they might even leave one too many buttons unbuttoned for various reasons. They glide around town from the post office to the beer store or the bait shop with palm trees or large mouth bass in odd combinations of colors and design. They have admitted to the world that this was the first thing they pulled off the hanger; or the arm of the couch and that they like it and so what.

Then there are the men who have tried that game for too long and have been wrangled by their wives or their co-workers. Or perhaps they never did get to slide along about their business with the true freedom of a somewhat ludicrous patterned shirt flowing about them and always watched from a safe distance wishing they weren’t in loafers and slacks. Now on their way to dinner with their wives, they click their key fobs and run their right hands along the back of their pants, just under the belt, to make sure their new pride is tucked neatly like a bed sheet at the Holiday Inn.

But palm trees and large mouth bass were never printed onto shirts in order to be held firmly in place by leather belts and khakis. Just like grown men were never meant to wear pleated shorts and loafers when they take their wives out for a steak dinner. Or ever.

The physique of a man matters not while in one of these shirts. Hell no. In fact, society tends to expect a well-fed gut under these shirts. Chest hair, unsightly or not, comes in handy while wearing these shirts since one might choose to allow the one-too-many buttons option be exercised. Various gold chains or faded tattoos can be added as an accessory and in some regions of the world is usually the custom but never the rule. There is only one rule for wearing a shirt like this: to do so with style.
Perhaps that sounds funny or absurd to someone who thinks of themself up to snuff in the world of fashion. It probably should because that is not the style in question. Men who choose to wear these shirts are admitting that they care not for the fashions of the day, nor the ramifications for dismissing such issues. Instead, they merely seek to be free. And maybe sometimes a bit ironic as well, but that comes with the territory of true freedom at times.

Sometimes they are referred to as Panama shirts or Hawaiian shirts. These shirts also tend to only last a few hours out of the day at the most before being removed in favor of the ultimate in attire freedom: the freedom from attire. Shirtless men are swooned over as often as shirtless men inspire reverse peristalsis. Some fall into neither of those categories and are happy to be largely ignored because that allows for great freedom. See?

My father showed me the way of shirtless bliss. Most of the photographs I have seen of my dad growing up in rural east Alabama were of him and his brothers in their yard, shirtless. Birthday pictures consisted of my dad in his yard holding his cake, barely covered, save a pair of handed-down, cut-off jean shorts. He always said his mom warned him and his brothers that if they “ruined” their good clothes there would be some sort of hell to pay. Whenever they got home from school or church they would remove anything not absolutely necessary to play football or “army” out in the yard. I imagine having a birthday cake in close proximity proved to be too dangerous for a young fella in his good clothes.

When I played traveling soccer my dad was bestowed the nickname, “Caribbean Barn.” Crammed five deep into a hotel room in mid-summer, our family would somehow remain in high spirits. Of course I was happy, everyone was there for me and I got to go play a game I loved. And as everyone loaded up the provisions for a day at the soccer fields in July with no shade, my dad would pull on one of his shirts; palm trees and sunsets stamped all over it. Besides the fact
that my mom would never have let him crank the minivan without a shirt, he knew it best to not broadcast his desire for true freedom so early in the day. But about midway through the first half, as the sun was starting to bake everyone’s necks and soft boil their brains, my dad would slink away from the rest of the parents and find a good spot. That’s where he would peel that shirt off and bask in all his bare-chested glory. At first I’m sure all my friends’ parents were in a bit of shock. Not many of them, if any, grew up knowing the true liberty of being shirtless on a sunny day. Or in Coldwater, Alabama. All my friends thought it was awesome. “There’s ole Caribbean Barn,” one would say. “Soaking up some rays, Mr. Wilson?” Somewhere in the stands was my mom, probably with her head hung a bit low or at least trying to talk to some of the other moms to keep them from noticing her husband.

But not too long after this began, I started seeing Panama shirts of all flavors popping up in the stands, and not just on our side. Dentists and architects and anesthesiologists were grabbing these things off bargain racks when their wives weren’t looking. They wanted to taste the freedom even if they couldn’t take the full plunge to shirtlessness.

Nowadays seeing one of these shirts tucked in is akin to seeing a grown man wear sandals and socks. Or skinny jeans. Or visors in a bar. At night. It’s not right. It defeats the purpose of wearing the shirt, of owning the shirt, of being the shirt. It’s admitting to defeat; to a defeat at the hands of what could and should be but won’t be because you have fallen in love with the idea but won’t marry it. It is a shirt for any and all socio-economic levels, but it is one that should not be cloistered for anyone or any occasion.
MERIT AWARD 2D

ROSS

Hunter Campbell
COME LIE BENEATH MY SHEETS
OF PAPER, LANGUIISH IN THE
CURLED OF MY DOUBLE-STACKED ‘a’ AND ‘g’.
OTHER LOVERS MIGHT TAKE YOU
TO THE CAFÉ, TO THE BEACH,
I’LL BE DON JUAN WHEN I TAKE YOU
WHEREVER THAT YOU PLEASE.
I CAN MAKE YOU ANY GENDER OR ANY SPECIES
THAT YOU WISH,
JUST SLOWLY STROKE MY SPINE AND I WILL FALL OPEN
IN YOUR LAP.
YOU CAN CARESS MY CREASES AS YOU WATCH ME
RECREATE THE LOVE OF A MILLION LOVERS.
I CAN TEACH YOU SO MANY NEW THINGS,
AND I’LL NEVER BE JEALOUS
WHEN YOU TRY THEM WITH NEW PEOPLE. IN FACT,
I’LL INSIST THAT YOU DO.
YOU CAN EVEN TAKE ME WITH YOU,
OR LEAVE ME AT HOME WITH THE OTHERS
YOU’LL ACCUMULATE BECAUSE OF ME.
NOW COME LIE BENEATH MY SHEETS
OF PAPER.
AND LET ME BE
EVERYTHING.
I see her hustling and know her mind is somewhere else and I can see her chew and chew and keep the spinning plates up and pour the coffee with grace, keeping it from splashing on the white business shirt of a man who pays her no mind. Sure she is just a tool, a servant, to bring the food and take the plates away, but she hides beneath that weathered skin that has slackened over the years. The faded floral dress and the apron still fit her well and pour over the curves like a constant black stream over green, mossy rocks. The hair is nothing to her. She saddles it each morning and keeps it under reigns throughout the day until she can feed and water it when she leaves the diner. When she asks me if I need more coffee I can smell the faint wafts of strawberry or rose that have clung to her wrist that is smooth and sinewy. As a whole she is a wiry and thin vine that swings from one end of the diner to the other, but each part of her tells some secret or some sin. Her lips are still full like ripe berries leading her face. The shoulders are sharp and wide as though she has carried almost everything. The legs are long and thin because she has never had time to sit down. And her eyes are small, deep pools of frost that are stiff in the daily grind and all the pleasures lost.
She had hair the color of corn silk and my wife always secured it back with a bow or a barrette. Sometimes, in the middle of playing, her hair would come unclipped and she would bring the bow to me and sit on my knee as I would part her hair with my calloused fingers and gently secure it again. She would smile, slip from my grasp, and dart back to her activities.

My son's hair was darker and curly like his mother's. He was older and he liked to play video games. My wife used to worry that they would make him crazy, but he never seemed crazy to me. He seemed brilliant, like the one Christmas light in the entire strand that shines just right. My wife always used to tell me I was nuts when I'd point to that one light, but she couldn't see what I could see. The boy was that one bright light. He had everything in its proper place. I think he could have changed the world.

The door clangs open and someone comes in. I feel their hands dart first to my bindings—still in place—and then to the papers that are secured on my bedrail. A rustle. I hear shuffling feet, a plastic chair with metal legs dragged across the linoleum. He sits down. A pen clicks to life. I hear writing for a moment, and I try to look at him, try to see him, but I can't see anything but the fire.

"Wade, can you hear me?" he asks. "Wade, how are you feeling today? Are you feeling alright?"

My lips move, but I don't think I make a sound. "Nod if you're feeling alright, Wade. Can you do that?"

I nod.

"Is it hard for you to talk this morning?"

I nod again.

"Wade, I need you to nod."

I nod.

"That's okay, Wade. You don't have to if you don't want to."

I want to scream, but all that comes out is a scratchy hiss.
The doctor leans over, his ear to my mouth. "What was that, Wade?"
I try to scream again.
The doctor straightens up. "Do you know where you are, Wade? Do you remember what happened?"

Remembering is not my problem. Forgetting is my problem. I want to tell him this, but more than that I want to unmake my new world, with the stoop-necked doctors’ insistent questioning, their prodding at my mental problems, the too-sparse room, the stiff mattress beneath me. I want it to go away. I close my eyes.
I hear him writing something and then the door bangs shut again.

We had a cat that the boy liked to call the Queen of Hearts. She was more of a suicide King, though, because she kept running into the house to save her kittens. She had seven but could only save three. They meowed by my boots until I couldn’t stand it anymore.

"Wade, can you tell me about your family? Can you tell me about your daughter?"
I won’t.
"Do you remember her name?"
I do.
"What did she look like, Wade?"
The fire had created large, pink bubbles that ran the length of her cheeks and swelled into her eyes. Her hair was singed. They put a tarp over her and zipped her into a bag that was too big for her.

"What about Jonathan? Do you remember your son?"
No.
"What about him, Wade? Do you remember what he looked like?"
His bag fit.
"Your wife, Wade. What did she look like?"
I see her as I last saw her and I’m blinded by the fire all over again. A monitor beeps.
"Wade, calm down. It’s going to be alright,
okay? Can you hear me, Wade? Can you nod if
you hear me?”

I nod.

“Just one nod, Wade? Can you nod just once?”

I nod.

“That’s alright, Wade. I’ll be back in the
morning to check up on you.”

When I got home from work, the house was
still. So no one noticed me come in. And no one
noticed the sharp smell of gasoline hanging in
the air as I splashed it onto the outside walls,
kaleidoscope puddles forming at the base of the
house. I stood outside my bedroom as I had done
several times in the recent past, watching the
shadows cast on the blinds writhe and thrash. I
tried not to hear the sharp sounds of my wife,
cutting into the quiet. I stepped so close that my
work pants touched the gas-drenched walls of the
house, and when I squinted, I could see them. It
was enough motivation to strike the match and let
it drop.

“Wade? Are you awake?”

I hadn’t been.

“Wade, at least try to talk to me. I know you
can talk, Wade. They say you talk in your sleep.
Did you know that?”

I didn’t.

“‘Maya’ and ‘Jonathan’ and you say
your wife’s name, too. Do you remember her
name?”

I clench my fists.

“Her name was Penny. Do you remember her?”

I swallow hard. I don’t want them to sedate me
again. I don’t want the pain of that drunken sleep.

“You say another name, too. He was another
victim of the fire, but I don’t know how you know
him. Do you know who I’m talking about?”

I shake my head.

“You say the name ‘Cory.’ Tell me, who was
Cory?”

The monitor starts beeping. I’m afraid that they
will sedate me again. “Shhh,” he says. “Don’t
get worked up. Just try to talk to me. Who was
Cory?”

No. No. No. No. No. “NO!”

The doctor jumps back. I can see panic in his
eyes and I feel powerful.

“That’s good,” he says to me. “That’s the first
thing you’ve said in weeks, do you know that?”

I don’t try to speak again. I don’t want to hear the
name. I close my eyes.

“No, Wade. Don’t go to sleep, now. We need to
talk about Cory."

No, we don’t. No, we don’t. No, we don’t.

“NO!” We don’t. We don’t. I won’t.

“Okay. Not right now, then. Right now, we can
talk about your wife. Did you love your wife?”

I see it clearly, then. She’s in our bed, her
blouse a silk puddle on the floor. Her skirt is
hanging from the bed. His jeans are crumpled
in a pile, not far from her blouse. And his belt is
on my bedside table. I see all of this before I see
them—his back rising up from our sheets, her
fingers lost in his hair.

“Wade, calm down.”

How can I? Right now they are in my bed.
Right now they are—

“Wade!” His hands are on my chest.

Stop them! Stop them! Stop them! “Stop!”

The hand vanishes. I hear him walk to the door.
I hear it open.

A wave of pricking and poking and touching
and “Wade, calm down” and ice in my veins
again and my tongue never so dry in my life as
I’m carted out of solitary and down a hall where
an IV is hooked up and a monitor beeps to remind
me that yes, I am still alive and yes, I will be until
I’m cured. And when I am cured I will be taken
to prison where I will be raped and humiliated
and, yes, eventually killed because my wife
cheated on me and I couldn’t take it—

“I think the medicine is working.”

“He’s starting to lose
Focus.”

A white light above me fades in and out of
view.

I didn’t know Maya and Jonathan were home.
Parent teacher conference. Some parent she
was. They were in the next room.

“Another sedative. He’s getting worked up.”

Ice.

Focus.

Focus!

Because when you lose focus your wife cheats.
When you lose focus, you kill.

“Was that too much?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are we losing him?”

I lost him already.

I’m carted away, down another hall where the
paintings blur at my sides, reminding me of the
puddles of gas at my feet the night I murdered my
own children. My stomach lurches as I remember
Maya’s messy hair, only slightly singed above her face. And, as I looked at her, the Queen brought out her kittens, laid them by my boots, not knowing that I had done this. And they cried in small, shrill voices as their brothers burned.
MERIT AWARD 3D

UNTITLED

Clay Krieg
POETRY

ARTILLERY SHELLS

Holden Belew

We gather, laughing, around crowded cars and dense trees still dripping from rain A fuse is lit and the smell of sulfur rises with deep echoes bouncing off bottomless laughter and shrieks Fuses are lit again and someone tips over the cardboard firing tube sending sparks shooting like cannonballs green and red and blue towards the scattering crowd I stand, laughing, as shells and smoke and people flood down the empty street More fuses are lit, more laughter is heard, until the crowd shrinks to nothing.