

Editor's Letter

When searching for a common theme among this year's entries, we noticed a focus on seasons and the passing of time. In these pages we pass from moments of bliss and childish wonder to the dark depths of life's winter. Then, we return once again to its spring and vibrancy. Join us as walk down the path of life through creative poetry, prose, and artwork from Campbell students and North Carolina residents.

A special thank you to our wonderful, creative staff and our dedicated advisor Mr. Nathan Salsbury for all of their hard work on this years edition. Thank you to Dr. Gina Peterman for her encouragement, Mrs. Susan West for all of her support, and to Mr. Daniel Rodgers, Ms. Haven Hottel, Mr. Michael Brantley, and Dr. Cordelia Hanemann for imparting their knowledge of art, design, prose, and poetry to our staff. Also, a warm thank you to Victoria Berger for her assistance with the *Lyricist 2015* layout.

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2nd "Light is Fading"

Honorable Mention: "Ode to my Best Friend"

Lyricist Student Poetry:

1st "The Siren"

2nd "The View"

Honorable Mention: "The Epic of Salvation"

Lyricist Artwork:

1st "Champion in the Garden"

2nd "Union Station"

Honorable Mention: "Jake"

Lyricist Prose

1st "Blip"

2nd "Mommy"

3rd "In Grandma's Garden"

statewide poetry

In Search of a Potter

I imagine myself the clay –
soft centered amorphous –
awaiting definition as he begins
the steady turn of the wheel.

Stretched, compressed
coaxed from a shapeless mass
to a graceful vessel:
my emptiness now of value.

Embraced by the kiln,
I feel earth and fire merge,
infusing me with fragile strength
as I become the concrete form
of his passion.

-E.H. Locke

Light is Fading

A time there was, when winds were blowing

O'er the sandy shores of time

A time when I, almost unknowing

Wrought a world of words sublime

Now those breezes are yet stilled

Silence has fallen, as I willed

O'er the wanderings of my prime

A day there was, when I heard singing

Echoes from a distant land

A score of faint bells ringing

O'er a shore of silvery sand

Now fallen silent are the bells

And no longer the music swells

In silence they will stand

-Brenna Jones

An Ode to My Best Friend

When it snowed,
we wrestled in the sea of white.
When it stormed,
I held you trembling into the night.
Together we ran,
past the yellow of Autumn
through Summer's shine.
Nothing could halt our speed.

You watched my hair darken
and body grow.
I watched you grey
your proud speed slow.
Winters came,
the snow untapped.
Summers past,
I could not stay.
A pat on the head,
I left you at the door.
Little did I know,
each day you looked for me more.
As you waited,
my memory stretched thin.
As your fur covered the halls,
I forgot what we had been.

Mother called me home

face bare, lips cold.
My curled fist,
fought tears from the words she told.
Your head down,
thin and losing hair.
The house whimpered,
your damp final battle filled the air.
You breathed slow,

I held you close,
rubbed your trembling back.
“I love you,”
I said with my heart. “I hope you know that.”

-Andrew T. McCollister

Riding Lesson

A tribute to Christine Cronin.

She wrests my fingers from the reins,
Evades my writhing elbow,
Tells the girl on my other side to do the same.
Pins my hand to my hip and smiles up at me.
Then she clicks to my horse to walk, go faster
Till the muffled four-beat rhythm in the sand becomes a two-beat
melody
And we're breezing along the arena's long side, trotting,
Stetson's smooth easy stride eating up the ground,
Head raised and nodding, mane rippling.
And I find the world is steady and my back has become
A wall atop the power.
My knees relax against the saddle, legs growing into the horse's
sides.
I rise and fall in rhythm, my arms loose and resting at my sides.

-Megan Bean

Hold Steadfast

Hold steadfast, young lovers,
as you lie there leagues apart.
As your hearts are surely aching, growing cold in creeping dark.

Teary eyes and shaking hands
hold the words so wrongly kept.
Desperate to be spoken,
but instead they shall be wept.

And echo off the walls
of what was and used to be.
Dreams of past and future,
mausoleum of memory.

Through these halls you'll wander,
damning gods as well as men.
Waging war against unbroken hearts
so yours may heal again.

This struggle grants no solace,
but condemns an awful fate.
For love will only ruin
when in it's course, turns to hate.

Hold steadfast, young lovers,
fix your eyes on stars above.
For the only use of a beating heart
is to fill with honest love.

-Ethan Edwards

Other than the Night:

Midwives among the statues
of the families they serve and

the shadows that un-wind
and listen to the breath
from your unknown mouth.

Wall paper
slapped against
the new flat walls
listening.

It's this night
that swallows your words
as your pink floral dress
whispers from the floor.

Trapped in that holy place
where my soul rests in the
mirror of your eye.

-Eric L. English

West Virginia 2013

Green forested peaks

fading into far blue smoke.

Valley upon valley

below vertical slopes,

Nestled like cups

of freshness among the hills.

Roads flashing from

light to dark

Through tunnels under tons

of rock and earth,

Then flashing out again

into misty splendor.

Winding up and up

imperial sides

Growing out of cracked red
granite foundations.

Rattling over
rusted bridges

Into small
secluded towns.

The sun rising
over dark silhouettes

Of hills gray under
dawn-rimmed skies.

Hills forming walls
within whose bounds

Peace can be preached
to the poor.

Walls that draw eyes and hearts
up the steep sides

To the gold edges

of grace.

-Megan Bean

A Friend in Fall

He has the hands of a carpenter

that tell a story of an artist.

Lifting the cherry of a cigarette to his mouth,

he takes a puff.

It's fall and the mountains are on fire

with reds and oranges.

I want to ask if he notices how he smells

of smoke and dried leaves.

He looks up to me and says,

life is like a leaf falling on an autumn day.

-Eric L. English

After the Writer's Life, Hell Should Be Easy

The hours between midnight and six have a funny way
of making me feel on top of the world, or
trapped under the decay.

I cry the rivers in my bones dry, faded
flowers drown in the liquor store.

The hours between midnight and six have a funny way.

Volcanoes in my chest erupt, sprays
of ash harden my body, clogging every pore
trapped under the decay.

I burn out my lungs with a bouquet
of Marlboros, a smoke blur
of the hours between midnight and six and their funny way.

Skies in my veins that reflected day
are now dark since I ripped them open, a downpour
of being trapped under the decay.

Planets on my tongue shatter astray
into distant galaxies, a desperate detour
of the hours between midnight and six and their funny way.
I'm trapped under the decay.

-Sara Sellers

Here Lies...

That fresh start
The escape from old desires
and pent up stress

The migration to the east
served me well

I took a memory with me

And the vice grips clamp down
to keep it in place

But the hollow image turned
ghostly cold
as this bag of broken bones
becomes dead weight

So with ease
I leave the splintered collection
in the East
The final resting place

Rest in peace

-Eric English

On the Porch

I don't know what he thinks when he sits
beside that sun-faded chair.

With stiff muscles and a frozen tail,

he studies the girl next door.

The one racing around the oak tree,
her squeals bouncing back from the hills.

What do you want, old dog?
Laughter instead of that hollow woof?

A voice instead of a whine.

-Sara Sellers

The Dark is Here

The Dark is here, the Light is gone
If God is king, then we're his pawns
Don't act surprised, don't be alarmed
The darkness comes before the dawn

This sadness sings its sweetest song
This melody, goes on and on
The journey is tough, the march is long
No matter what, it still feels wrong

Don't know how to act, or what to say
So we hide instead, but plain as day
Our souls more fragile than ancient clay
Displayed, naked, on an open tray

The pain that leaves, we beg to stay
Abandoned, lost, alone we lay
What we cling to, we go astray
The highest cost, is what we pay

From tallest heights, to lowest depths
Our minds shift from life to death
Our time grows short, with each new breath
And sadness grows with each regret

Bolder still we grow, with each new step
We learn and still we choose to bet
Until chips are cashed, our life is spent
Face the wrath of rules we've bent

With sword and shield we face our fears
From days, to weeks, to months, to years
Among sharpest tongues and hurtful leers

We still stay true, our minds stay clear

-Josh O'Neil

Out of Mind and out of Time

Out of mind and out of time
For what we search, but do not find

One has to face their own demise
And stare death deep into its eyes

Face the fears which we despise
And conquer them and take our prize

We stretch our wings, we leave the nest
And leave our loved ones to their rest

We strive to triumph, and do our best
Some work with more, and some with less

Is life a game, or just some test?
The chips are in, we've placed our bets

Questions asked, unanswered yet
And demons faced, but not well met

Is this the eve of victory?
Will you be a part of history?

Will you choose to be an enemy
Or fall to darkness, and misery?

-Josh O'Neil

In Mother's Kitchen

Once crisp brown
with peach-apples
now crawling with burns.

The oven exhaled
a final gasp.
The room shrieked.
The flames danced.

She enters the furnace,
bloody eyes entangle in smoke.
Her words gargle in black soot.

Delicate arms

unhinge the window frame
and the dark cloud escapes
into the blue sky.

-McCollister, Andrew T

Passing Time

The bells ring distant in the night
The petals fall from off the rose
Dim and dying is the light
And heroes now in dust repose

The roads run on beneath the moon
On forlorn ways that time knows not
The path goes past the heroes' tomb
On its way to lands forgot

The flowers of our spring lie dead
Our summer's blooms in silence fell
Our courage, like autumn's leaves, is fled
And winter's winds have wished us well

Our worth has proved far less than gold
Our silver now is tarnished black
For brave men have their honor sold
And gone where none can gain it back

Our honor's past, our day is passing
All of our courage has done naught
Our faithfulness, like twilight dimming
And no more battles to be fought

The bell rings over evening shades
And coming night has veiled the skies
The rose's scented bloom now fades
And time's swift messenger now flies

-Brenna Jones

student poetry

The Siren

My ship then crashes through clamoring waves,
Piercing through eerie, macabre, fearful fog,
Still in pursuit of those odd serenades
That haunt, allure me, like a famished dog.

Below, as I recall from tavern-talks,
Lie corpses of all who've failed before me.
'Tis rumored that this marine aria crocks
Ships of those deprived of fortuity.

But not me! This aria is my calling.
Come all ye ancestors below, join me.
I invoke you here from your slumbering.
Come all ye sprits from below, aid me.

Above, stout clouds are thrust by Aeolus—
Thunder 'nd lightning holler in harmony;

Mists ravage radiating Artemis—

Intertwined is that music's melody.

I've sacrificed till I've become pallid.

Great Zeus, grant me this humble wish—hear me!

I need the genesis of this ballad

Materialized in front o' me—Let it be!

Scouring, Scouting—through ominousity

For seductive songs in the horizon.

Searching, Seeking—what suave monstrosity

Could imbue me with such strange ambition?

Eager, I am, to reach the inception

Of this divine descant drifting around.

Grant me celerity, Great Poseidon.

I'll burst unless I encounter this sound.

Alas! Thither! At last! Yonder! How near!

It sings and plays ever so deftly—yes!
Not even Apollo could play the lyre
Like this God-sent who outplays Orpheus.

There she is, leaping through the high crests now.
Her blond hair dwarves that of Aphrodite.
Half human, half fish—I wish I'd known how
Such bombastic beast could have come to be.

Like a bird-fish, she soars through the dense air.
Like a dolphin, she dives back graciously.
Always dancing, jiving, singing—sans care,
Jollier than Baachus could ever be.

As Neptune nestles her on soaring waves,
I see water drizzling from her sweet neck,
Onto her chest—this path, my eyes, enslaves.
My lust is fed by each drop on my deck.

Like Diane herself, halo brightly shone,

Her navy-blue eyes glimmer under th' moon.
Like Venus herself reborn from the foam,
From luscious lips, I hear her softly croon.

Now from all sins God has purified me;
Th' Lord bestows on me this revelation.

But with one PLUP, she disappears from me.
Dead, I am deprived of my salvation.

Just as I had reached my epiphany,
My ecstatic climax of euphoria,
Am I robbed—by God—o' my one reverie.
Silence drowns me in melancholia.

I then pray to God for her swift return,
For in her I found love and purity.
Redemption from my indulgence I yearn,
As I admire the Lord's sanctity.

But, to my relief, the songs resurrect.

Players' identities ambiguous,
Bassoons, basset horns, from the sea, erect,
Now pumping back my lungs with air of bliss.

One oboe penetrates through wayward waves;
Its steady high pitch infuses in fast.
Then a clarinet's lovely low octaves,
Interrupt th' orchestra—quiver my mast.

Swiftly, to my utter stupefaction,
Ascending by waves to the crescendo,
To my height, above the orchestration,
Is that singing lady with the lyre—Oh!

Oh! I cannot believe my eyes—so near!
So near to me is hallowedness—scorching!
Scorching are her eyes with temptation—dear!
Dear life of mine is now her—belonging!

Finding myself losing grip of th' steering,
I drag myself across deck, mesmerized—

Hypnotized by that sacrosanct singing,
Which, like Lucifer's light, ensnares my eyes.

But is this the same girl, I wonder?
The previous nymph was more hallowed and pure.
Could this be a malicious pretender?
But no, I must press on towards my cure.

Finding myself on th' edge of my galleon
I stretch my arms towards this fairest maiden.
My panacea—an aura away,
I trip and dive and die—to my dismay.

-Omar Hourani

The View

Red; the color of my skin.
My bones are made of plastic.
I wait for the game to begin,
This view is so fantastic.

I myself remain silent
Cheers overwhelm the air,
Presume me not to be violent
I'm merely a stadium chair.

"Three strikes you're out," he says.
Attendance is low at best.
These are my favorite days;
My mute contribution joins the rest.

The warm sky heats my seat,
Greasy breeze slightly relieves.
The opposition fears defeat

Triumph shall come with ease.

First pitch and I am ready,
Panorama has been conserved.
Wait, who's this man so sweaty?
No sir, this seat is reserved!

No use or strength to stir
Alas, I can't see through.
How would you feel, sir,
If I might sit on you?

-Alex Streb

The Epic of Salvation

Speak.

Call me from the church's hearth
Back from Hell and down to Earth.
Fill me with divine impression
That I may speak holy confession.
For you hold, within this day and hour,
That radiantly glorious power
To call me back from ancient pasts
And lead me here to salvation at last.
Call to my soul and lead me here,
For with your words, God is near.
You speak so oft' of holy refrain,
Here I can hardly speak God's name.
You call to me through darkest night,
To help me now beat back the blight.

Holy passion in me is dearth,

Unless I come to my own rebirth.

The angels gather in one accord
To bring me redemption I cannot afford.

Hold me now and keep me calm;
I listen – you sing the savior’s psalm.
You lead me now through my strife
And guide me unto eternal life.

I feel arisen out of Hell
And placed upon these safer swells.
Called unto abundant light!
Called unto eternal life!
Call now to those asleep!
You are the shepherd; we are the sheep.

-Jake Updegrove

Trying to write a poem

A silent room and ample time
So clock hands move, I choose to rhyme.
Muses today, will be made ill
As I degrade, the sacred skill.

Whitman weeps, Frosts cheeks aflame,
For this poem dumb and lame
I give up, and I'm bored
I'm going for Chinese!

-Meghan McAllister

Found it in the Wind

She stands on the cliff's edge waiting for reason.

Her breath short and her heart racing.

The crisp wind blowing; fall always was her favorite season.

Bird's eye view but not really seeing

The infinite hills and the cobalt sky.

Her mind clouded her view and tainted her heart,

Was there any value in her life?

She wrestled and with all her strength she fought.

She was determined not to cry.

She didn't want to look as weak as she felt.

Her life was full of hurt and lies

And moments that made her heart with fire melt.

Why did all this happen?

None of this was fair!

A young life with a soul that was broken

And a choice that no one should bear.

She took a deep breath and inched closer.

She was almost there now.

For a moment she was stronger and braver.

Her heart screaming and beating so loud

She could hardly hear her thoughts.

Another deep breath,

And another.

And silence.

She walked away.

On that cliff she found answers.

Things that only the wind could say

Something that only could be explained by wonders

And strength that could go on one more day.

She found hope and love so great and strong

That could only come from someone she had never known

She discovered that thing that all hearts longed

To have but most had left it alone.

She found a man who died so she wouldn't

He took her shame and hurt
From the beginning of time, he knew that moment
She would give him her heart.
She walked away from the shame of her past
And into the future with a hope that would last

“The thief comes only to rob, kill, and destroy. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in the fullest.” John 10:10

-Allison Mozingo

Sunflower

Content, yet restless for more.
Scared, but fearless
Born into a seed of limitation that is slowly erupting.
I am a sunflower, weathered by the storms, yet still vibrant.
From the stubborn and proud, the supporting and loving
Of the listening, but oh so very talkative.
I am from compassion, the mother that nurtures as I bloom.
From strength, the father that believes I can stand taller than a tree.
I am His, the love- true love, bubbling out of my core.
Scared, but always in His grace.
Therefore, I am Fearless.

-Holly Gabry

The Birds

(Birds flying south for the winter)

We soar towards the sun that burns dimmer
Slowly dropping and descending, the Usher of God's Night
Down, down the Light sank sneaking away
And Deserts the flock to face its lot

The Darkness spreads thick across the moonless sky
The stars shine bleak, the Light cannot comprehend it;
The dark blanket sedates the world below
Seduced and Sedated by the Black Lotus, aren't we all?

But the sun falls preparing to rise again
Endure one night or two,
Depending on the course of flight
And the sun will rise again in a new land

-Meghan McAllister

Life Shells

The teal tide of thousand chimes play
as silk sprites of frosty foam prance
'neath starry veil where angels pray.

Twinkling trinkets roll from sea spray
bright scalloped shells sing and entrance
The teal tide of thousand chimes play.

Silver sail wisps wander the bay
aglow with Sailor's ebon glance
'neath starry veil where angels pray.

Horizon's halo hums with day
Children with gold lantern flames dance
The teal tide of thousand chimes play.

Weak are we, works of crumbling clay
Fragile shells tossed while waves advance
'neath starry veil where angels pray.

Tides bring revival and decay
morphing grains on Life's pale expanse.
The teal tide of thousand chimes play
'neath starry veil where angels pray.

-Ashleigh Bilodeau

Something New

One day a girl looked at life,
She found it rather boring.
Dull was the word she used to describe it
When she woke up that morning.

Upside down, downside up,
She walked all over town.
Looking at her life close-up
She thought that she might drown.

She decided to look for it with a new perspective,
So she went to the park to change her view.
The girl found she liked being a detective
So she sat on a bench and continued to look for something new.
She sat on that bench for a while
Wondering just what to do,
Until a man came up with a smile
And asked if she was looking for life too.

-Cecilia King

Hate of Man

Why must we hate those of our kind,
Those to whom we are all tethered?
Though they may hate this endless bind,
We know what we have all weathered.

They blame all of the world's turmoil,
All things wrong and all that does break,
On those who did work Earth's soil,
Ignoring all the risks we take.

Out of caves and trees we do rise,
Rising high in the sky, we do fly,
Rising higher than they surmise,
To a great end they would leave by.

While they ignore all we have done,
They rise with us, for we are one.

-Michael Mahalik

Question

By No Means.

Your dreams will become reality.

Through effort and will, make them alive.

According to that causality,

Benefits go to those who strive.

There's No Way.

It all comes together in the end.

Through effort and will, do make it through.

Aim for the sky, your wishes please send.

There is no wonder that it is true.

Can't Be Done.

The price of failure is oppressive,

Under its strain, so many did break.

But offer your own works impressive;

Your future is yours, for your own sake.

-Michael Mahalik

What Happened

What happened to being thankful

For a mouth full of bread

Memories not on Facebook

And a roof over our head?

What happened to good memories

The laughter and the tears

Spending hours outside playing

Without any fears?

What happened to the thirst

Of knowledge and of life

Of feeling one another's burdens

And working hard through the strife?

What happened to the thought of time

Of Fate's seconds turned to hours?

Of making precious minutes count,

Yet not through hate or power?

What happened to the dreams we dream

As they fester in the wound?

Do they eat the soul alive

Or do they rot away by noon?

I hear people complaining

About equal rights, war, and gall.

But day in, day out, nothing will change

To bring happiness to all.

So look and find the light of love

And mention it far and wide,

Be happy with Fate's simple gifts

Or in a dark life hide.

- Micheala Mcneill

A Beauty Lost

She sits in the desk

In front of me

She is quiet and unnoticed

And yet she is beautiful.

She turns around and speaks to me

And we laugh of childish things

Paining parents and troublesome thoughts

And yet she is beautiful.

Her back to me, she sobs so sweetly

Her shoulders shaking silently

She hasn't said a word to me

But she is still beautiful.

Her skin is pale, her hair is wiry

Her head hangs low with heavy thinking

Bandages like garlands around her arms...

For she is still beautiful.

She no longer sits
In front of me
Did they not love her garlands?
I hope they shower her scars
With the sweetest kisses
For they are just as beautiful.

Her skin still pale, her hair now clotted
Her heavy thoughts now rest on rope
Her garlands loose in shimmering red
Her eyes gleaming, searching
For those sweet kisses
To tell her she's beautiful.

The world still turning on grinding gears
Metal desks rusted with silent tears
And never just as—

-Anonymous

Haircut

It seems to me that everywhere I look
everyone has short hair.

Their bangs are snipped.

Their necks all shaved.

Their sides trimmed.

And it all grows, and grows, and grows
only to be cut, cut, cut.

I grow too.

Longer, and longer, and longer my locks lengthen.

From every inch of my scalp each strand strengthens.

Down and out my hair flows

and with it no one knows

my silent rebellion against the masses of short hair.

I let nature take hold and grow out my hair.

Out! I go on and with me my hair.

No product to have and without any care.

Loosed from the blades, I go for a mile.

From here to there I am without style.

As my hair breaks the bounds of normality

I am quickly ostracized

as if it were part of my sexuality

I am categorized.

For piece of mind I watch pieces fall through the air.

I am snipped.

I am all shaved.

I am trimmed.

For Christ's sake, didn't He have long hair?

-Noah Merkousko

Nightshade

In the night,
Stars they twinkle
Like your smile.
Constellations are a thread
To your grin you tie it
With a bite, snap the string and swallow light.
Lips are sealed,
You shut your mouth
No sound comes out.
There's so much left to be said
In the nighttime's quiet
Silent shield, and whispered words are revealed.

Nightshade fades to a deeper black,
Twilight tightly becomes compact,
Hits like a shooting star, clear as day
I see the sunlight scamper away.

Where's your face?

Why do you hide?

Skies are my guide.

A stairwell made of stardust

Meets a heavenly plain

Lost in space is your heart and this place.

And you fled

Like a comet

I'm kept from it.

To a moonbeam I entrust

To write in light your name

Not yet read, still my eyes have been misled.

Nightshade fades to a deeper black,

Twilight tightly becomes compact,

Hits like a shooting star, clear as day

I see the sunlight scamper away.

-Jacob Berger

The Song

The mock bird sits upon a bough
And there I sweetly sing.
Angels fly around and round
To help my voice take wing.

And as music flies, my spirt soars,
And church bells then do ring.
The sinner sat with all he bore,
And sat peasants, serfs, and king.

For all that hear the melodious song
Was blessed that faithful day.
The mock bird sits upon a bough
And there I sweetly sing.

-Micheala Mcneill

The Path

He was a new path that emerged from behind me

But I can't turn the car around.

And his light is forever on

Shining

And I see his light from the side view mirror as I drive away

Because I can't turn back.

Sure, your main focus is on the road.

You play the songs on the radio as loud as it will go.

But when the slow songs play

And the road gets quiet

You sit there in the dark alone,

and there it is,

reflecting in the mirror.

Right there.

And you can't help but look

And wonder

What that path looks like

If it's shorter than the one you're on now

If it'll affect your route, or your destination.

If the pavement is smooth

Or covered in rocks.

But you can't turn the damn car around,

So you'll never know...

But this does not make my path any less worthy

Or the car less worthy for not turning around,

Or the driver less worthy

(This took me the longest to learn).

Not even the music that surrounds you

Or your friends in the backseat

Or the love of your life in the passenger seat

Can possess less value than that... path.

But it's just that constant state of not knowing that's what's driving

me crazy.

That same path
Would still be a path,
Whether I was driving on it or not.
That same path
Would still be there
Still stay strong
And continue to shine without dimming at all...

So, why can't I do the same?

-Anonymous

The Poet I Can Be

"I want to be a poet,
But I'm really not that good..."
"Son, haven't I always said
'Do what you think you should'?"

“But mom, you don’t understand
What I’m trying to say!

I want to write the world a poem
And be a poet someday!

I want to write the world a song –
A tune for every ear!

I want to write a novel thing
That everyone will hear!

I want to give the world some joy
And teach the world to love!

I want to bring them to that place
And help them rise above!

But see?! They’re stuck!
With no will to leave!
All they seem to know to do
Is fight, and hate and grieve!

The world is lost in itself –
It's dark and deep and bad.
All they ever think of poets
Is weak and lonely and sad.”

“But son, didn't I teach you
‘Do what you think you should’?
The world may not believe in you,
But I always knew you could!

So son, listen – please!
It's not as bad as it seems.
Bring the world that joy – that love!
Go and live your dreams!”

“I want to be a poet!
O, the dreams I dream!
But the world is blind and cannot see
The poet I can be!”

-Jacob Updegrove

Who Am I?

Who was I to you?

Was I the soldier
On the front lines
Struggling to do what's right?
Did I storm the beach
On Normandy
To fight the tides of enemies?
Or give my life
To be your light?

Was I a King's Guard – A prince's knight-
Protecting you
And keeping the fight?
Did I hold you close
And keep you safe?
And strike down enemies in your name?

Was I a poet
Praising your name
Writing of love
And other such things?
And did I speak
To bring you fame?
And write my heart on a page?

Who am I to you?

-Jacob Updegrove

The Wishing Well

Limestone archways varnished by softest light
are bathed in rivulets of dewed delight.
Diminutive limbs dipped in emerald sheen
Beckon me to a leafy glen of green.

Time's trellises trace my fleeting footfalls,
As slanting beams slither through checkered walls.
From ancient urn vessels sprout sun-stroked ferns
dripping golden dew like liquid lanterns.

Thousands of twirling tessellated pools
Varnish pond pebbles into teal-glazed jewels.
Reflections ripple o'er water's clear castle
alive with whispers of calm koi vassals.

Caressing clovers cool my tired toes
As o'er grey stones water trickles and flows.
My head descends on plush pillows of moss

as glowing cascades coat my mind with gloss.

Silver wishes skim soft sands of beryl
as my firm fingers unclasp a precious nickel.
Sinking slow the coin completes a caper
draped in foamy bubbles and dream's vapor.

-Ashleigh Bilodeau

A Year in North Carolina

Blossoms of dogwood
on a sunny warm day
on a sunny cool day.

Rising temperatures
and waking up early
because I wanted to.

Golden leaves
flutter in the air
and paint the sky.

Cold that makes others hide
draws us outside to enjoy
a rare winter-wonderland.

-Alexandra Streb

Time Goes By

Southeast I strode under the SUN,
As streaming sunshine slapped my face.
I sang soft songs of surreptitious stone-circles,
And soon saw solar seas in my sight.

Moments more, the MOON materialized,
Marooned in a stellar, murky mess,
Macerating my meek might,
Imbuing me with nightmares.

TYR trotted down from atop tall towers,
Towards me, leading two teams of terrible titans.
With Loki, they teased and tantalized the tiny people,
And tore down the land till triumph's time.

Oh one-eyed ODIN now here rode in odium
On top of his horse down the rainbow

To escort out Tyr and Odin's odd son Loki once more,
Orating an ode for the golden gods of old.

The other brother THOR troubled the skies with thunder,
Thudded, thumped, and thwacked things with his trusty hammer.
Thor thoroughly portrayed his thriving strength and loathing
Hurtling through this terrifying, thundering path.

Fairest figure of fertility, FRIGG,
Floated down towards Thor, feigning fury.
Frigg forever fixed a few problems by

Finally facing Thor and flinging him far by force.

I soon saw SATURN standing with his sickle,
And his sight sucked my strength steadily.
I sank to my sore knees into the soil,
Then stood up to go southeast once more,

To see the SUN.

-Omar Hourani

Reacting to a Storm

Distant sirens wail
The gale will not be belittled
Shrieks announce her arrival,
Prepare for her fury.

One hides in the cellar
Under a stale mattress.
Her body quakes
Her eyes drip.

Another forms a post
Under porch roof safety.

He grins at the wind

He sings to the storm.

The storm's laughter explodes

Her cruel amusement

Echoes amid the clouds

And deafens her audience.

One covers their ears

With sweaty palms.

“Please make it stop.”

“When will it end?”

Another reclines in

A chipped rocking chair.

He whistles a tune

And it's swallowed by a gust.

The storm unleashes her torrent;

A raging river replaces

What used to be solid ground.

As she saturates the earth.

One senses the surge,

And huddles in her haven.

Tears mimic the rainfall,

Darkness envelops the room.

The other thanks his Creator

For drought-ending nourishment.

He sets fire to a candle.

An orange blaze cuts the darkness.

The gale exhales one last breath

And departs with great haste,

Leaving nothing behind,

Only streams and rubble.

Both emerge from sanctuaries

To survey vivid green landscape

Saturated by Gale's nourishment.

I am gracious, they reflect.

-Alexandra Streb

Untitled No. 1

I am everything, and nothing at all.
I tried to make you better than the divine.
You're gone and
I am godless
Searching, blind, in vain for any traces of my faith.
Temporary gods fill the void
Chemicals, and decisions at 3AM
Driving fast till we forget
Forget the obligations, forget the money we don't have
Forever in between the lines of adult and youth
Blurred lines, blurred lives.
No distinction between the real and the fake

-Caitlin Wood

student artwork



“Champion in the Garden” by Logan Allen



“Union Station” by Jacob Updegrove



"Jake" by Shannon Wilson



by Matt Janus



by Matt Janus



“Ireland’s Past” by Paige Kelly



by Lexi Oliveira



“Property Lines” by Jacob Updegrove



“Roses” by Bethany Evans



“Flower Crown” by Bethany Evans



“Still Life” by Ashleigh Bilodeau



“Brandon” by Shannon Wilson



“Morning Rain” by Ashleigh Bilodeau



“Botany #1” by Jacob Updegrove



“Clear for Departure” by Logan Allen



“Shine On” by Logan Allen

STUDENT PROSE

Blip

Alexandria Streb

I am a blink; a speck on a grain of sand. I am a freckle on a particle of dust. I do not speak of my size. I am unmistakably seen. But do not bat an eyelid, for I will be gone. One day. One day is all life has afforded me. I am a mayfly.

For weeks I have existed in a state of dormancy. Since the beginning point of my lifespan in the depths of this lake, I waited in a fragile, egg domicile. I waited to hatch; to live. Not yet could I see, and my auditory senses were feeble, at best. However, my mind began to develop. Even as thoughts, urges, and instincts cultivated in my mind, something felt awry. It was as if a part of me was missing; like my microscopic brain had skipped a step in its maturity. Although I sensed my membership in a swarm of thousands of my kind, I felt utterly alone. My species is made up of a precise recipe: hatch, molt, reproduce, expire. Do I lack one ingredient?

Finally, the thin shell which holds my being breaks away, and I ascend to the surface, but my life still has not begun. My vessel is not yet ready to fare even the most fleeting life. As I rest in two additional weeks of dormancy and molting on the surface of Lake Norman, there is ample time to consider my short life. For the first time, I can see. I take in my new home. Warm, antique bronze water forms a foundation under my quivering body. Above, a steel blue ceiling carries on into eternity. Scattered in the sky I see snow white puffs of cloud, resembling pulled cotton. Traces of perished foliage enter my nostrils via steady movements of muggy breeze. The atmosphere is thick and warmed by a great sun that heats my nymphal skin. My home is beautiful.

The more development my ears gain, the more excluded I feel. It is all clear now. I am a blip; a glitch in the ecosystem. Ingrained in my species' bodies and minds exists the ability and strong desire to mate. As I wait in the molting state, a gentle hum of excitement crescendos throughout the thousands of immature mayflies. They buzz repetitively, "Strength in numbers. Strength in numbers," in a melodic and haunting hymn. The choir of blind participation excludes one being: me. I hear the song, but do not sing. I sense the carnal urges, but feel nothing.

As my clan rests in our last days before molting is complete, I vaguely see another cycle of mayflies add the second to last ingredient to our species' recipe in a further section of the lake. Several feet over the water's surface a swarm of mature mayflies engage in a mating ritual. From a distance, the untrained eye may see an eerie, black cloud dance above the lukewarm water. I see the truth. I know the reality of the act. Our purpose, the sole intention of the mayfly's existence on earth is to multiply. "Strength in numbers. Strength in numbers," my kin moan. Once our bodies are no lon-

ger useful, we die, leaving our offspring to carry on the cycle. As I consider the macabre make-up of my species, tiny specks precipitate from the dark cloud and land in my lake home.

My female curiosity dances around what it must be like to create another life. The eggs descend to the depths of Lake Norman where they will rest for a while. My origin is clear. "Strength in numbers. Strength in numbers." Once all infants, wrapped in their delicate armor, have been released from their mother's arsenal, the final ingredient is added to the recipe. One by one, my extended mayfly family abruptly separates from the swarm as they plummet to the water's surface. The spent insects find their final resting place here. Within one day, the mayfly transitions from parent to fish chum. My fate is clear. The black cloud finds its final resting place on the water's surface as it darkens a significant portion of a cove. I watch as swirls scatter the cloud. Large mouths peek out of the water and swallow dozens of mayflies at a time. "Strength in numbers," the molting mayflies around me continue, failing to notice the irony of their motto. The bass feast on my family as a man casts a line into the feeding frenzy. This will not be my fate. My rebellion has begun.

Today I will reach maturity. A fusion of emotions floods my being. Although I know my duty as a mayfly, I refuse to allow my one day on this planet to end in a mass grave yards away from where my life began. I vow to explore, to discover, to learn. I long to extract every bit of experience this day holds. An attempt to extend my life beyond an average life expectancy would be futile. A mayfly's makeup is only fit to endure twenty-four hours because we do not have the capacity to consume nutrients. I do not fret. My brief existence forces me to capitalize on every opportunity. My wings begin to tremble. Do I shake with excitement? It sounds as if autumn leaves are being crushed all around me. My body continues to quiver. I look to the left and watch my immediate neighbor's translucent skin tear in half. Two magnificent wings separate from his skeletal body like shattered ovals of sheer glass. My brother experiments with his newly functioning wings. As he hovers above the water, I gaze at the handsome creature. His slender, taupe body darts up and down, left and right. Two bulging eyes shine in the scorching sun that rises over Lake Norman. I count his wiry legs; one, two, three, four, five, six.

As I ponder why we need so many limbs, my body trembles more than ever. A sharp pain commences in the skin on my neck, travels down my back, and culminates at my tail. The nymphal skin that held me stationary peels away like a corn silk. I extend one wing. After weeks of tight quarters, my extremities are stiff. I extend the second wing. At last, I am free. I test my mature body by flitting in inconceivable patterns and assess the reflection that stares back at me from the water I used to call my home. I am beautiful. There are minimal physical differences between my brother and me. We share the same wings, size, color, and eyes. The only difference between us is my direction. I look backwards and see a loose swarm begin to form. From what I witnessed yesterday, the swarm will take several hours to develop. Once the black cloud has been

established, the mating process will begin. Enough time will elapse for fertilization to occur, the eggs will drop, followed by their parents, and my clan of mayflies will be no more. Not I, though. I will not take part in the death ritual.

Just as I separate myself from those who choose to obey the laws of nature, I am approached by a mayfly. "Sister, where are you going? Can you not see? The swarm is in the opposite direction of your heading," the insect calls. I initially ignore the reproach, but the male is insistent. "Sister! Can you not hear? You are going the wrong direction. The swarm is behind you. You are not permitted to vacate the area."

At this point I can take no more. I reverse my direction to face him. As I begin to speak, I notice he is not alone. A dozen additional mayflies show their support behind him. "I will not stay with the swarm. I am leaving."

The adamant mayfly and his company appear horrified. "You must stay with us. You must be a member of the swarm and you must mate," he barks.

Another mayfly adds, "Please! We need you. Strength in numbers."

One snarls, "You were created to stay with us. Fulfill your purpose, creature." The miniature group of law enforcers has since grown into a moderate swarm. Their initial pleas for loyalty have progressed into insults as they demand my obedience.

I remain determined and shout, "What law binds me to this place? I say again, I will not stay and be another ingredient to the mayfly's ghastly recipe." As I speak, I consider one of the mayfly's statements: *We need you*. The mayfly swarm, thousands strong, does not need me. I can produce only a handful of offspring, which amounts to a single crumb that falls from a loaf of bread. The pleas for me to stay, the reprimands, the insults, are methods of control. I discover more about my species by the minute. If one mayfly seeks freedom, there may be more renegades in the next swarm, and even more in the next. My relatives operate by instinct. Their instinct drives them to accomplish maximum reproduction, and I am a threat.

The initial prosecutor snarls, "*What law?* The laws of nature, of course. You defy our purpose, sister. 'Strength in numbers.' Come with me and be fruitful, my friend." His eerie demeanor chills my exoskeleton. We are a programmed species; brainwashed. The irate swarm launches unceasing insults; my apathy towards the species allows each hateful word to land in the warm lake and sink to oblivion.

"Nature does not bind me. Nature liberates me." With this, I connect with a wind current and rocket towards the shore. I glance back towards my moss green home, and know this is the last glimpse before I say goodbye forever. Faintly, I hear the furious mayflies' roars transform into a distant hiss.

Within minutes I am on the lake's bank. By now it is mid-morning, and there

is much to accomplish, for my journey begins and ends today. The air is thick, put in motion by a steady breeze. Warmth from a scorching sun has breached the shield of treetops, causing even the shade to be tepid. The dirt is a russet blur below my zooming figure. Massive poplars challenge my path, but they are no match for newborn agility. I exploit the swift body with which my late mother willed me, as I will not have use of it for long. My vitality rises and sets with the sun. At the end of the day, my life will disappear with the daylight. Although thoughts of imminent demise plague me, I am resolute to keep my mind above the grave.

I see the lake in flashing slivers between sturdy trunks. Although I cannot see them, it is easy to imagine my former tribe as they prepare for their carnal duties. The mini-swarm who failed to maintain obedience must have sulked back to the group, too fearful to pursue their outlaw. While I allow myself to indulge in feelings of pride and dignity, I come across something interesting enough to capture my attention. About seven feet below me on the ground is a curious creature. In order to obtain a better view, I descend towards the earth. Resting on a pile of dead leaves is a small turtle. I am delighted to happen upon another creature, and hope it is willing to make a friend. There is no use in wasting time with such little to spare, so I fly close to the turtle and hover directly in between its eyes. "Hello! I do not mean to impose on your slumber, but I would like to introduce myself. I am..." Realizing I do not have a name, my faint voice trails off into silence, which is quickly filled by my kind new friend.

"You are a mayfly. It's very nice to meet you," she says with grace. I notice her crossed eyes and fly backwards a couple inches to spare here gaze. "I am a box turtle. Pardon me, but what are you doing on land? I've never seen a mayfly separate from their swarm." The turtle is a magnificent creature. Saffron geometric patterns appear to be hand-painted on her protective shell. No more than the size of a cantaloupe, she takes up little space in her lush habitat.

The captivating creature causes my temporary reserve before words properly form. "I realize a mayfly's appearance on land is quite rare, but I suppose you may consider me an oddity." My friend looks intrigued and compassionate as she provides her full attention. I continue, "So I do not occupy an unfair proportion of your day," although I am more concerned about my own time, I do not let on any haste, "allow me to convey the shortened version. I am the mayfly species' largest and most dangerous threat." Before I can finish, the turtle chuckles and closes my thought.

"A little thing like you a threat? I doubt that. You refuse to mate and want to explore independence. I respect you for that," she says with a grin.

"Thank you, my friend. All I want is to experience as much life as I can, and I cannot be more grateful for your part in my short time." If ever I had doubts about my decision to leave the swarm, the turtle has extinguished them completely.

"I am honored to hold a place on your timeline, and I want to thank you for

holding a place on mine. Your eagerness to live is inspiring.” The turtle pauses and looks to the sky, as if she is aware of the sun’s position in relation to my life. “I am 23 years old, and nature-forbidding, I am less than half way through with my life.” Her attention shifts from the sweltering sky to a rocky beach at the lake’s edge as she continues, “Never lose the will to live, mayfly.” Two deep black eyes, filled with experience and knowledge I can never obtain stare into mine as she says, “Even when life takes all of your strength, don’t give up your will.” The black eyes close as she lowers her crinkled head towards the dirt. I gently rest between her nostrils before I race away. Gratitude consumes my soul as I reflect on a feeling no other mayfly has ever felt: respect.

To test my limits, I fly high above the ground, closer to the treetops than I have ever been. Both the sun and I have made much progress. My fast pace results in a necessary rest on a nearby limb. I look to the horizon and marvel at Lake Norman’s beauty. The afternoon sun casts golden rays upon water that reflects a clear sky. I am in a trance when my branch suddenly jolts. Only one foot away from me stands a brilliant robin. His blood orange chest juts out over tiny legs that grasp our now shared limb. Initially I hope he does not see me, concerned that I might be viewed as prey. Our eyes meet and I wonder if my life will be cut shorter than I expected as he hops one step closer. Just as I resolve to sprint towards safety, he opens his mouth wide and sings, “Hi!” I am startled and confused, but afford timidity no time.

“Hello,” I respond. “How are you?”

“Oh I’m just great. Just *great!* It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it? Just beautiful.” I have never heard such a lovely sound. Fortunately, the bird continues his cheery concert. “Every time I go for I fly I just *have* to stop on this limb. It’s a beautiful view isn’t it?” The pause beckons my response.

“Oh yes! Just *beautiful!*” I smile. The robin puffs out his chest and whistles a short tune. I am sure the enchanting song can be heard for miles.

“I’m not bothering you, am I? What are you doing way up here anyway? I saw the mayfly swarm on my way from my tree. Shouldn’t you be with them?” I waited for the pause that serves as my cue to answer.

“I have decided to explore a different route than my mayfly brethren. They will make do without me, I’m sure,” I say with a wink. “With such a short time on earth, I desired to experience life instead of waste it.”

“Wow, that’s great! Life is a wonderful thing, even when it’s short. Sure, I only have about two more months to live, but that hasn’t stopped me from actually living,” he transitions smoothly from speech to song. As he sings I watch and listen in awe. I did not know I was in the company of a friend with a short life span. The robin, fully aware of his near death, exhibits pure bliss. I desire to hear more but a quick glance at the sun persuades me to continue my journey. I thank the robin for all he has done to make my

life complete. I take flight and behind me he calls, “See you later! Oops. Never mind!” His obvious mistake causes a burst of laughter to escape me. The robin showed me joy and fun, thus adding to my already fulfilling day.

A hint of fatigue enters my body. I check the position of the sun and know there is not much time left. I push through the thick air towards a distant meadow. From far away I see shades of fuchsia, blue, and yellow. As I approach the natural garden, the colors become more vibrant. I am surrounded by the aroma of wildflowers and filled with satisfaction. I land on a small violet flower to catch my breath. Above me I watch the amber sky. The sun is low but my spirits are high. I hop from petal to petal, flower to flower and sing the robin’s song. The memories of my new friends keep me company as I laugh and sing until I am too tired to carry on the exuberance. Slowly, I creep through dusk’s air into another wooded area adjacent to the meadow. I turn around briefly for one last glance at nature’s kaleidoscope.

The horizon catches my eyes; it is an ebony silhouette that hides the disappearing sun. The last drop of strength I possess begins to flee my body. I search for a quiet, secluded place, somewhere fit to serve as my burial ground. A small fragment of an olive green oak leaf lies on the dirt. With little strength available for my use, I coast to my casket with a delicate landing. My head rests on the leaf while I reflect on my life; I have only good memories to comfort me. The sun tucks away behind the trees and I whisper, “Goodbye.” In the distance I hear the faint song of a robin. Night time has come, and one last thought persists in my mind: *it was a beautiful day.*

Mommy

Victoria Griffin

As animated mice and ducks bounced along the television screen, Sarah felt herself sinking into the couch. She would get lost between the cushions like a dime slipping out of a jean pocket. Maybe someone would flip the cushions in a few years and come across her body. Her golden hair will have turned gray and died, her fair skin will have taken on a deathly translucence, and the glimmer of her soul will have been lost from her green eyes.

Sarah gasped and felt as air poured into her lungs. She checked the couch beneath her, the walls around her, the two boys lying in the floor, and the girl asleep on her daddy's lap as he lay sprawled out in his armchair. Sarah had been the one to decorate this room, when she and her husband, Bryan, bought the house five years ago. She picked out the wall color, daydream blue, and speckled them with white picture frames. When she looked at the walls, she could almost pretend she was looking at the sky, and she could be anywhere in the world. Anywhere but here.

"Mom, I'm hungry."

"You just ate," Sarah said to her son without turning her head. Her twin boys were all stomach. Sometimes they seemed more like pets, begging for their next meal. The girl, Mary—she was all heart. She was only six, but her spirit was already shining through her eyes. Sarah was afraid for her. The brighter the light, the darker the world seems when the light's finally snuffed out.

She had been married three years when Sarah got pregnant with twins. Her friends told her how incredible it would be, holding her babies in her arms for the first time. They said there was nothing like it. They said she would be in love before she had time to think about it. When after six hours of labor, the doctor handed her a pair of blue bundles, all Sarah saw were shackles. Those babies chained her to this place, to this house, to this man. She was trapped.

Sarah was eighteen when Bryan proposed. They were sitting in the bed of his truck, parked on a dirt road that no one used anymore. It was the day before graduation, and the sheltered life they'd been leading, tucked away in the high school's cinderblock walls, was about to end.

They were talking about graduation—what the speeches would be like, who would trip up the stairs, who would get kicked out—when Bryan leaned over and

kissed her.

"I love you, Sarah."

"I love you, too."

That was a lie. When he asked her out for the first time, Sarah said yes because she had nothing better to do. She stayed with him for a year and a half for the same reason. She needed some distraction from the boredom, the repetition.

He dropped to his knee and reached into his pocket. Sarah's eyes widened, and her lips formed the word "no." She had been planning to work until she had the money for a plane ticket, maybe teach English overseas, get out of this backwoods town. But Bryan was down on one knee.

"Sarah, will you marry me?"

And it just seemed a lot easier.

"Yes."

Now Bryan was the breadwinner and the father of her children. She had a comfortable two-bedroom house in that same backwoods town, and she never had to worry about anything. This was definitely easier.

"Mom, can I have some ice cream?"

"Yeah, ice cream!" Both boys were perked up like meerkats on the floor.

Sarah checked the time on her phone. "It's too late for ice cream."

"Ah, come on." Bryan's voice emerged to the twin's delight. "Let them have some ice cream. It won't hurt anything."

Sarah sighed and got to her feet. As she made her way into the kitchen, she heard her husband call, "Bring me a bowl, too!"

The cold air sought her warm skin as Sarah pulled strawberry ice cream from the freezer. The carton was covered with a thin layer of ice, and it slipped from her hand as she tried to sit it down, landing with a clunk on the white countertop. She tried to scoop it into a bowl, but the ice cream was frozen solid, so she ran some water into the sink and filled it with suds. She could do the dishes from dinner while the ice cream thawed.

The sponge was coarse in her hand, and as she scrubbed the pan, remnants of tonight's lasagna dirtied the water. Sarah looked at the window above the sink, the windowsill littered with baby pictures. The glass was divided into four squares, black and opaque—little viewing holes. People could see in, but she couldn't see out. That was alright, she supposed. Why should a mouse look outside its cage? She put the clean pan on the drying rack and carefully reached into the foggy water, retrieving the cook knife she had used to cut the lasagna. It was stainless steel with a wooden handle that absorbed the water from the sink. She wiped away the sauce and cheese and scrubbed it until it reflected the light. As she held it over the

water, the handle resting against her palm, the tip of the blade pinched between the thumb and forefinger of her other hand, she rotated it back and forth, watching the light skip over its surface.

Then she held it still. Reflected in the the knife's smooth finish was a woman's green eye. It was rotten, like bread that had been left out to mold. It was dull and dead. It could have belonged to a corpse.

She braced herself against the edge of the sink, her breathing suddenly strained. Her high school senior picture sat beside photos of her children on the windowsill. Sarah stared at it, trying to remember who she was then. Her green eyes were luminous, even in the photo. Maybe she hadn't had plans, but she'd had dreams. She was going to see the world. Every night she fell asleep to visions of oceans and airplanes and foreign faces. Now the only foreign faces she saw were Mexicans at the grocery store.

When she was lying in bed at night, all that played through her mind were scenes from her past, decisions she'd made that were still haunting her. She remembered a conversation with Bryan, a year after they had been married, before she got pregnant with the twins. They were having dinner. They were living in a trailer at the time, and Bryan had just gotten back from work at the paper plant. It would be another few years before he'd get laid off and find his current job, sitting in an office selling auto parts.

"Bryan, I think I want to go to work."

He put his fork down and laced his hands under his chin. "Why?"

"I just need to do something. I'm in this trailer all day long, and I'm getting stir crazy."

"Why don't you call some of your girlfriends?"

Her head fell to the side. "You know that's not what I mean."

Bryan picked up his fork and continued eating. With a mouth full of green beans, "Well, you don't need to work."

"But I want to."

"You're not going to."

Bryan gave her a long, sharp look. Then he shoved a bite of pork chop in his mouth, and the conversation was over.

A tear dropped from Sarah's chin into the dirty water. The knife was pressed between her palm and the edge of the sink. She didn't know why she was crying. Every decision that brought her here had been her own. Every step had been made with her own feet. She could have said no when Bryan said, "Marry me." She could have said no when he said, "Let's try for a baby." She could have left him when he said, "You don't need to work." But she didn't. It was just easier to

say yes.

She had stumbled so far down this path, she wasn't even sure who she was anymore. That girl in the photo above the sink was nothing more than a ghost haunting the halls of her mind, moaning and whispering about dreams long gone.

Sarah looked down at the knife in her hand, the blade shimmering like her eyes used to. It was sharp and smooth. She laid the edge softly against her wrist, soft and white, and pressed until it broke through the skin. Blood leaked from the cut and trickled down her forearm. She moved the blade a half-inch toward her palm and sliced, this time deeper. Blood dripped into the dishwater, stagnant in the porcelain sink.

Sarah felt the sting of cool air on the fresh wound, and she thought that this was the most she had felt in a long time. She felt her lungs drawing in quick breaths. She felt the flesh covering her body. Staring at the blackened window, she remembered a moment long ago, something she had almost forgotten.

Sarah was fourteen. Her mother was on the front porch smoking, her one vice. She was a good housewife who cooked and cleaned and took care of Sarah. She went to church on Sundays and said a prayer every night. She prayed for peace and for her family's happiness, and she never asked for anything for herself. Sarah never respected her mother, not as a person. How could someone live like that? How could someone bear going to the grave with nothing to show for her life but a clean house and a yard full of kids?

Sarah made her way through the house. She pushed open the screen door and felt the welcome mat under her bare toes. Her mom was sitting on the porch swing, her hair wet from her bath, wearing pajamas and a cotton robe with one sleeve rolled up. Smoke surrounded her like a halo of smog, and she scrambled to toss away her cigarette and hide her forearm when she heard the screen door open, but Sarah had already seen the dark red marks. They lined her mother's skin like potholes on a country road, each one a reminder of her pain.

They never talked about it, but after that Sarah saw her mother differently. She wasn't sure if she respected her more or less, but she thought that she would rather die than end up trapped, burning herself on a porch swing.

The knife fell into the red dishwater. Sarah ran through the house, past the ice cream melting in the carton on the counter. She skidded into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. The polished mirror revealed her frenzied expression. She turned the faucet and tried to wash the blood from her skin, but the moment she removed her hand from the stream of water, it was again overtaken by red. Breathe. She felt the air rush into her lungs and slowly exhaled. Just calm down. "Sarah, are you okay?" Bryan called from the living room.

"I'm fine, just feeling a little sick."

She stepped quietly to the door and turned the lock.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, really, I'm okay."

I'm okay. I'm okay. The words echoed in her ears, the lies. Sarah plugged the drain in the bathtub and turned the knob, sighing as warm water flooded the tub. She just needed to relax. By the time she stripped away her clothes and mixed a cap of bath salts into the water, the tub was nearly full. The water was warm on her feet and ankles, then her hips and spine, her shoulders. It took a moment for her skin to get accustomed to the warmth, but once it did she felt her body begin to relax and let her mind drift, ignoring the red spreading like ink through the water.

When Sarah found out she was pregnant with her third child, all she wanted was a girl—a beautiful little girl with soft golden ringlets she could pin up with bows. But when the doctor handed her little Mary, she wished it had been a boy. What was there for this girl but to have dreams as big as the sky? To hope and pray and watch her life play out a million times in her fantasies, only to watch reality sulk along before her, demolishing any dreams that she once held. Mary would grow up being told she could do anything she wanted, so long as she believed. But in the end, there are decisions to be made. The road less travelled is a difficult choice to make when there are warm meals and warm baths waiting for you in the other direction. You say you'll get there someday. Maybe you'll wander back and take that road you passed. But way leads onto way, and sooner or later you wake up and look in the mirror, and the face you see is strange to you. You become someone else entirely, something else, and the person you once was drifts so far into the distance that you can't even remember what she looked like.

Sarah ducked her head beneath the water.

Holding her breath, she looked through the wall of water, the light on the ceiling like a glowing sun in the corner of her field of vision. What if she just stayed here, under the water? Who would miss her? Bryan would find another wife within the year. She was nothing but a chef and chauffeur to her kids. She had no friends anymore, since she spent her days locked in this house. Her dad was dead and her mom was living out the rest of her life in a nursing home that Sarah never visited. She had let herself slip away, and she didn't know how to get back to who she used to be—not with the chains of this life latched about her wrists. Bryan would never allow her to become the person she wanted to be, and what could she do, leave him? No friends, no family, no job, no experience, nowhere to live. She would starve before the first week was up. Bryan was no longer her husband. He was her keeper, and she needed him—she hated being dependent like a child.

She didn't have to be dependent on anyone. Sarah parted her lips and let the water rush in. She inhaled and felt it burn its way into her lungs.

It just seemed easier.

Her throat was on fire, and she felt a pressure like an anvil resting on her chest. She pressed her shoulders against the bottom of the tub to keep her head underwater, and she felt her throat closing itself off. The weight on her chest grew heavier, and she gasped for air. Her body begged for it, but she gave it nothing but water.

Burning. Her whole body was burning like she was on fire, and a weight heavier than all her past regrets was driving into her chest.

A tranquil kind of peace passed over her. There was a silence like she had never experienced, and she was calm and still. Death nestled close to her body, whispering pleasantries into her ear, preparing to bring her home.

Sarah pulled her head out of the water. She sat up straight and coughed and hacked the liquid from her lungs, drinking in the air and clutching her chest. She looked around at the bathroom, her eyes stinging. She was alive. That was either the strongest decision she had ever made or the weakest. Sarah just hoped she didn't regret it.

She pulled herself out of the tub, the water pink from the cuts on her wrist, and sat on the edge, wrapped in a towel. She sighed at the realization that she felt no better now than she did this morning. Her eyes were barely visible in the mirror across from her. They were still rotten.

"Mommy, mommy!"

Sarah put her hands on her knees and pushed herself up, then took a step toward the door, following her daughter's voice. She screamed when her bare foot slipped in a puddle of water, but when her head struck the edge of the tub she was silent. Bryan kicked the door down as his sons screamed. He found his wife's naked body on the floor, a towel strewn beneath her, blood seeping through the clear water like poison. He saw the cuts on her wrists and the blood in the sink, and later he would find the knife soaking in red dishwater.

Mary saw it all, too, as she peeped around her father's figure in the doorway. Mary saw even what her father did not, and when she was older she swore she would never end up like her mother.

She would rather die.

G.I. Johnny and a Bottle of Jack

Victoria Griffin

“If you blink, you’re dead.”

I felt the sweat drip along my spine, and I gagged on the tears I was fighting to restrain, their salty taste mixing with the stench of the high school bathroom. A door opened out in the hallway, and a class filed in from outside, rubber soles squeaking against the tile as their teacher hissed at them to be quiet. I thought about yelling for help, but the glock in Johnny’s hand kept me silent. His finger was on the trigger and I’ll be damned if I didn’t believe he’d pull it.

I’d sauntered in all smooth, jingling the change in my pocket and getting ready to check the stalls before I lit up. I had a couple cigarettes I’d swiped from my papaw that morning and the Zippo I used to start campfires in the summer. With any luck, I’d get to smoke both cigarettes before anyone noticed I hadn’t showed up for English. I saw Johnny as I was opening the door. It had already closed behind me by the time I saw the half-empty bottle of Jack on the tile—then the gun. I fell flat on my skinny ass without even a scream. My breath caught in my throat as I scrambled backwards until my back hit the wall.

I was huddled under the sinks, my arms wrapped around my knees. Johnny’s gun was staring down my throat, steady as his gaze. My eyes traced the outline of the gun’s barrel, the veins of Johnny’s neck, the furrow of his brow just beneath his dark widow’s peak. The shadows under his hard chin made his face look even paler, his eyes even more bloodshot. His voice was rough like gravel when he spoke. “You picked the wrong bathroom, Ryan.”

“Johnny...” I’d known him since we were kids in elementary school. He grew up just down the road from me. We played tee ball together. My voice rolled off my tongue in a trem-bling mess. “Why?”

I pressed my back into the wall when he didn’t respond, and I sank my shoulders in an effort to retreat. With every passing second, the gun seemed closer and closer, and I could almost hear the shot ringing through the halls, blood seeping from my skull, my corpse hunched over itself.

“My mom’s dying.”

Johnny didn’t lower the gun, and the sadness in his eyes didn’t make me any less afraid.

* * *

In elementary school, we called him G.I. Johnny. He used to spend every recess playing war.

The playground transformed into a desert. the wood chips were sand blown into our eyes by a dry wind, and the jungle gym was a giant boulder to hide behind.

Our hands were rifles and pistols, and frisbees were slow, floating grenades.

“Johnny, slow down! I can’t keep up!” I raced after him, keeping his shaggy black hair in my peripheral as my head swiveled back and forth, scanning for enemies.

“Every man for himself! Leave the injured behind!” Johnny held his hand in the air and mock-fired three shots. “Kill the evil terrorists!”

I stopped to catch my breath, and I let myself return to reality. All the other soldiers were frozen, watching Johnny. They looked on as he slung his invisible rifle over his shoulder and climbed to the top of the jungle gym. As he got to his feet and straightened his spine, he let out a roar of laughter, like the scream of a machine gun.

* * *

The gun had dropped a few inches, so that it was pointed at my knees instead of my head. My body was still curled into a knot, but my heart had begun to settle. My hands were still shaking, but I could breathe again.

“Someone broke into the house.” Johnny was still looking at me, but I wasn’t sure he was seeing my face. His eyes were glazed over, and he seemed to be looking through me. “Came up behind my mom while she was ironing and hit her over the head. They beat her until she stopped screaming, then took everything.”

The gun had dropped another inch, and Johnny’s eyes were hazy. If I could knock the gun out of his hands, I’d be able to grab it and turn the tables. It would only take a split-second.

“It was Danny.” His eyes cleared and locked on mine, and I abandoned my plan.

“He needed drug money. I overheard him talking about it in the parking lot. Then he comes in class today stoned out of his mind.”

“You don’t know it was Danny.”

The gun jerked back to head level, and Johnny’s eyes narrowed.

“Okay, okay.” I spoke softly, as though calming an animal. Then, just as softly,

“What are you going to do?”

As he looked at me, the dark sadness in his eyes slowly turned to anger. The hand dangling by his side curled into a fist, and his knuckles turned white. “I’m gonna kill him.”

* * *

We were in sixth grade when Johnny got the news. His dad had died serving his

country. He should be proud, they told him. He could fly the red, white, and blue and know his father had honored it. He went out with his boots on, just the way he would've wanted. Johnny didn't listen to them. What did they know? The man he'd thought was invincible turned out to be human, and the country he'd thought he loved turned out to be the reason he would never see his dad again—except laid out in a coffin, underneath that damned old flag.

That's it, the teachers said. He'll definitely snap now. How could he not? This is enough to push a right-minded kid over the edge, and let's be honest, Johnny was never quite in his right mind. They whispered and gossiped. They kept their voices low because all children were supposed to be the same, and they couldn't let Johnny hear. But of course he heard. He knew what they thought. He knew that everyone didn't take the "happy pills" his mom did, and he knew that no one would blame him for giving up.

Some people said Johnny had a screw loose, but I didn't think so. I always thought it was just a hot streak in his blood, a fighting side that wasn't buried deep enough. And it kept him from giving up when anyone else would have.

Johnny started working in eighth grade, at the Grocery Barn. He bagged groceries and tried not to look the customers in the eye because they were all talking about him. His mom had failed. She couldn't pull herself together long enough to hold down a job, and now she needed her fourteen-year-old son to support her family, just to keep food on the table. Everyone was talking about it.

"It's so sad, a crying shame."

"Bless their poor little hearts. I never thought it'd come to this, did you?"

"No, never. Not in a million years."

"But God has a plan for everything, isn't that right?"

"Yes, it sure is."

He heard it all as he was bagging groceries, just as he'd heard the teachers gossiping in the middle school hallways. Maybe he heard things about me, too—about my meth-head father or the No Trespassing sign nailed to the dogwood outside Papaw's trailer. Maybe they even talked about me living with my papaw, how a child should be with his parents. Maybe they talked about my mom leaving.

"Such a shame."

* * *

"Please don't do this, Johnny."

"Why shouldn't I?"

He was pacing back and forth like a tiger in a cage, the gun swinging wildly by his hip. I raised myself into a crouching position and froze when Johnny spun and raised the gun at me, his face flushed, his eyes narrowed.

"Just think about this. You'll go to jail, Johnny. They might even fry you for it."
"He doesn't deserve to live." The words sounded more like a growl. Johnny stepped to-ward me as he spoke, his eyes wild like a stray dog. His upper lip was curled, revealing the tips of his teeth. "He doesn't deserve to die with a warm meal in his stomach."

"Johnny, just think. Let the police—"

"He deserves to be shot down like an animal. He deserves to see blood soaking his shirt as his last breath wrenches agony from his worthless, dying body. He deserves to suffer."

I felt my hunched back heave and my hands begin to shake, and I fought to keep control of myself. "Johnny, you don't really believe that."

"Oh, but I do."

* * *

I heard a few years ago that they were sending Johnny's mom to the loony bin. They'd tried grief counseling, medication, time. Nothing had been enough. I even heard she had tried suicide. Maybe she hung a rope in the garage. Or maybe she took a blade to her wrist. She just kept calling her husband's name—the neighbors across the street heard her voice at night.

Johnny was the son, and she was the parent, but that dynamic had expired years ago. Johnny took care of his mother, and maybe that's why it was so hard on him when his uncle de-cided to send his mom to a mental hospital. He just hadn't been enough.

* * *

"What's your mom going to think, huh? When she wakes up and her son is in jail for murder?"

Johnny shook his head. "She's not gonna wake up."

"You don't know that."

"You didn't see her!" He was fuming, his eyes flitting about the room as though looking for something to punch—something to shoot. "You didn't see her head bashed in, her knees and elbows skinned, her body lying there useless. Just waiting to die."

He checked his watch and took a step toward the door.

"Johnny!" I reached my hand out to him from where I was crouched on the cold tile. "What would your dad think?"

He didn't lash out like I'd expected, but his eyes went cold, like a slab of marble.

"I'm protecting my family. Just like my dad did."

"You can't protect your family from prison. Or the grave."

He had decided. I could see that. He was backing away from me, and I was hold-

ing my breath. All the gossip he had ever overheard was written in the lines on his face. It weighed on him until even he believed what the old hens coo about in the grocery store lines. His boots clunked against each other, and he caught himself against the wall, his back hunched, his head tucked between his shoulders and the beige-painted cinderblocks. I stayed still, watching the gun dangling from his hand, and waited for him to straighten up.

There were several slow seconds, marked by my quickened heartbeats, before he turned and revealed his face.

Johnny was as tough as anyone I'd ever known. I'd seen him step on a rusty nail—went clean through his foot—without shedding a tear. He lost his dad before his childhood was half over, and he stood tall like a man and held his mama's hand the day they put him in the ground. Maybe that's why the tears I saw then pulled a terrible fear out of my joints. It slithered through my veins and stopped my heart. The sound of the bell was like lightning striking my temples. As the steady din of foot-steps and chatter grew, so did my fear. I saw the rage erupt in Johnny's eyes, like a low-burning match had hit upon gasoline.

I only questioned for a moment whether Danny's life was worth risking my own. I saw Johnny's eyes flicker toward the door and heard the voices just on the other side of it. I saw Johnny's jaw clench as he moved away from me. My body tensed. I lunged.

My hands left the tile. My knees straightened beneath me like a jackrabbit in stride. My fingers reached out, searching. Johnny turned. He lifted the gun. I was about to make contact.

He pulled the trigger.

* * *

There's a grave that no one visits, tucked away on a mountainside. It's marked only by a simple tombstone, nearly overtaken by the soft, green fingers of the forest. Beneath the soil is a cheap wooden coffin, and within that coffin is the rotting corpse of a forty-six-year-old meth-head. He left a legacy of bad debts marked by a bad name, and he gave that name to me.

I cursed him every time I got out of bed in the morning, every time I looked in the mirror, every time I heard someone say that you could tell the character of a child from the character of the parent. All my teachers and all my friends knew my fate had been decided. I would be the same as him. If I ever got a wife, I would drive her away. And if I ever had a son, I would make his life miserable until some chubby cop in a stained uniform finally showed up to take him away.

I would be all the terrible things he was and all the terrible things he never had time to be.

* * *

Midair. Gun at my chest. Shoot.

The safety was on.

I made contact with Johnny, and we both fell to the ground. The gun skittered across the tile. From my hands and knees, I saw him lying on his back, and I scrambled toward the gun. It was nearly within reach when I felt something grab my ankle. Johnny stepped on my back and pressed me into the floor. His hand dropped into my field of vision and picked the gun off the tile. I saw his feet in my peripheral, running toward the door as I struggled to stand. My limbs were weak, and the air felt thick and coarse in my lungs. The door swung open and swallowed Johnny. A second later, I stumbled into the hallway, crowded with people, like a heard of cattle shuffling through a ravine, and the faces were blurred by my spinning mind and the dim fluorescent lights. I called Johnny's name—a few heads turned, none of them his. Frantic, I beat my way through the people, ignoring their muttered protests.

"Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!"

I saw him.

A gunshot scattered the herd, but I was frozen. The sound of Danny's body thumping against the tile was somehow louder than the gun. Screams and cries swarmed the school, but I didn't notice any of them. All I saw was Johnny's face, a bit of blood on his temple, and a cool, sickening grin.

I still see it, all these years later. It's painted in the sky tonight. It's in the shadows cast by our floodlights. It's in the faces of my wife and kids. It's in the smoke rising from the cigarette beside my boot.

They were right about him—everyone who said he'd snap, everyone who said his past would catch up to him. All the old women gossiping in the supermarket knew that if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it could never pretend to be a swan. Johnny was only fooling himself.

Maybe I am, too.

Aloralethe

Ashleigh Bilodeau

A story inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe

The imagination is an altered world of being— a marvel which takes flight with the slightest inclination. Often, when rest is neglected an uncertain fog descends upon the human mind and all reasoning is skewed. The eyes perceive mischievous imps, with devilish grins, frolicking atop tin roofs amid their infected fancies. And the delicious scent of gardenias morphs into the fragrance of a fair nymph who guards a sloshing, tempestuous fountain. Even the pine tree shadows sprawl like thousands of icy spider legs beneath a fire-painted moon—from what I discern of the restless accounts of the sleepless.

Ah, but how I lost myself, that nightmarish night, amid those great novels of fantasy and dreamed those mysterious dreams, as they too once dreamed. Opening my eyes, I awakened as if from a great slumber and viewed the world through a groggy, distorted lens. How long I remained in the listless darkness called sleep, I cannot be certain. Sorrow is a sinister draught indeed. It is true that I had fallen quite susceptible, at times, to the elements of my own imaginings and tarried within this haunted room contemplating on the philosophical as well as the fantastic. To assuage my evil humors, I resorted to doubling my dosage of

opium. I prayed that my illness would abate. I pray you will not deem me mad, dear reader. My nerves had become shaken, my thoughts had become shaken, but alas I was not insane—nor am I now as I relate these perilous events to you, my confidant.

My hands grew sweaty against the binding of a leather volume, an adventure tale of fairies and the cruel sirens. I contemplated retiring from these enchanting tales for the evening to chisel a new sculpture. Happily, I envisioned my calloused hands chipping away the rough imperfections of stone to reduce the flaws upon the unfinished porcelain skin. Already I had created seven life-like beings, which I installed in my garden—seven stone creations endowed with the bodies of the mystic muses. They were my tributes to the arts—my masterpieces which gazed with marble eyes upon all who entered the sanctuary of my lush, green garden. Even now I shudder. Their gazes once fixed on me—I shiver.

I remember how a liquid tick of the clock drew me back from this reverie with its smooth cadences striking the eleventh hour. I sat stiff as a corpse within my cushioned chair beside my desk where at least twenty novels were stacked at odd angles around my heaps of parchment, inks, and quills. Outside, the rain pattered a soft requiem and carried an atmosphere of looming gloom. The incessant cascade weighed heavily upon my mind. My senses were drowsed and slurred as if I had drunk a flask of that forgetful wine from the river Lethe. How strange and distorted my thoughts felt. Yet *still* no freedom from nightmares, no freedom from a harmonious voice once loved so dear! Lightning casted a haunting hue

over the library windows as a soft knocking came to the door. Bemused, I sat still for a few minutes before whispering an uncertain “C-come in.” I heard the door click but no one entered. “Come in stranger. This storm is merciless and I am certain you are soaked. There is a hot kettle of tea and a plate of fresh biscuits on the table to warm you.” I waited in silence, a soft draft raising the tattered purple curtains by the windows. Outside, thunder growled against the window panes like an untamable lion threatening to destroy the bindings of his cage. But still, no one entered. I rolled the gold ring on my finger nervously, so nervously.

Who would come to my door on such a forsaken night? My family is deceased and my love is dead. Who then, would be knocking? I was miserably ill and completely alone. Death recently ripped the darling of my soul, too soon, from my arms. Nevermore could I hear her soft lips sing those heavenly *chansons d’amor*. Completely isolated, my soul felt desperately divided from happiness, from life itself. My heart heavy, I gathered my courage and approached the solemn door of sturdy oak with its frame and doorknobs outlined in a metal trim of filigree. A sudden chill crept eerily along my skin—the door was ajar. Hand shaking, I flung the door open. An expanse of tiled flooring stretched into the infinite ebony darkness, a shaft of cadaverous moonlight flooding through the gothic-styled windows that lined the hallway. My steps were hollow echoes resounding in deep, boisterous waves of sound that twisted my soul with their reverberations.

A flash of lightning illuminated the far end of the passage, revealing a

full-length portrait of a lovely lady with skin of an ivory complexion and misty, lifeless eyes. She appeared to gaze into the distance, the edge of her mouth turned down in a helpless, defeated frown. But lovely, oh how lovely was the construction of those lips! But there fell across the right side of her face an enormous spider web which stretched like a mysterious silken veil coated in thousands of dust motes. The woman from the painting clutched her hands in front of her, her chalk-colored fingers devoid of any rings or color. Seeing the beginning of an inscription at the bottom of the painting, I rubbed lightly and a few scrawling words became apparent: *Immortalized beauty, a song upon the stillest lips*. “I recognize this woman to be the fair lady Aloralethe, though I recall not when she was painted or by whom” I murmured to myself. The signature in the bottom right corner of the piece was surely the work of a madman, its calligraphy indiscernible. Some accent of the loops captivated me, reminded me—of what I cannot explain. There was something familiar in their character, as if I had seen this hand before, perhaps in a letter sent from one of my distant relatives or from a friend who attended a foreign art institution.

The sound of glass shattering snatched my attention from the painting. Running, I entered the chandelier-lighted dining room and discovered a vase lying upon the carpeted flooring. A pool of water flowed out from the sparkling remains of the glass, deepening the shade of the carpet to a hue of champagne—or blood. Within this liquid pile of bubbling red lay a blackened rose, its petals stiff and brittle with death. “How odd, I replaced this rose only yesterday and it

was alive with crimson luster. Perhaps it is a type of rose that wilts when brought into a mansion of melancholy, devoid of the warmth and sustenance of the sun. But, more significantly, how, alas did this vase fall?"

I took a step forward into the dimly lit room and heard a shiver-inducing shriek like that of a woman in great distress. My knees braced while the knuckles of my tightly-clenched fists became an unnatural white as if the bones had protruded through the skin. Minutes passed in undisturbed silence until I felt a furry head bump against my leg and a *mrrow* bellow from the soft pink lips of a cat with frosty fur. I patted Aloralethe's companion, sweeping my hand along its rigid and slightly deformed spine. Its obsidian eyes followed me— an uncommon, piercing listlessness pervading its visage. Suddenly, the silvery creature unsheathed its tiny claws and swiped at my hand before darting several feet away and hissing like a temperamental basilisk. The glowing light from the chandelier, which was dangling above, alighted upon the mysterious creature and magnified the white aura of its sinister fur. With a parting hiss, it bounded past me and scampered into the gloom of the hallway, its claws clacking against the tiled floor.

Re-entering the hallway, I heard a roar of thunder that rolled like a building crescendo, thrumming with discordant notes. Simultaneously, a sharp bolt of lightning brightened the dark corridor and fell upon a crooked and misshapen statue of Apollo, which I attempted to sculpt several months ago. It gleamed momentarily at the end of the hall, bathed hauntingly in the blue hues of the

lightning. Mysteriously, a silver chain with six golden rings dangled from the lyre clutched between Apollo's hands. "How curious, I do not recall placing any rings here. Who could they belong to?" I asked aloud. Beside the statue sat the pale cat, its ears pinned back and a hiss rumbling in its throat. Cautiously, I approached, my hand extended toward the fierce feline. Lashing its tail moodily, it crept backwards into the darkness until its form was swallowed completely by the obscuring shadows. Without knowing why, I endeavored to follow the emaciated creature into the antechamber beside the ballroom. When I entered, a misty, phantasmagoric form arrested my attention. Whether it was a trick of the moonlight reflecting from the assembly of mirrors that lined the walls or an apparition of the most malevolent intent, I could not be certain. With a sigh, it inclined its head slightly at an angle. "Aloralethe!" I called out to the shapeless being. "Aloralethe, do you live?" The figure flipped her silvery hair and floated into the adjacent room, the room we once used for entertaining guests with music and card games. The only reply I received was the echo "Aloralethe!" Heart beating madly, I pursued the pale lady. "Pale mistress! Speak if you be the departed Aloralethe! Speak whether 'tis true or no!" And thus she answered me, "whether 'tis true or no." "What is this sorcery? Fair one or demonic harpy, answer me true! Are you the departed Aloralethe? If no, dear spirit, wherever you be conjured from, tell if she was murdered!" A hollow, lifeless answer came: "she was murdered."

I followed no further, watching as the frail ghost slid into a pocket of moonlight and faded into a shroud of mist. Stranger still, an angelic song of

plucked strings filled the air, reminding me of the departed, but never forgotten, Aloralethe and her talents with the harp. So elegant was she, that the angels would envy her dexterous fingers with their effortless movements over the silver strings. Never could I attain such elegance, or grace, with my disfigured right hand. She was the quintessence of youth, the paragon of feminine brilliance with many years yet to live—yet youth is a fickle being that is subject to early departure. Yet, even this is of no consequence. My only concern became the source of the uncanny strains I heard pouring through the air, an enchanting yet deadly *nachtmusik*. I passed a disheveled card table where kings, jacks, jokers, and cards with values ranging from one to ten were scattered around. How great was my unease at the sight! Stepping quickly past, I ventured to check the shadowed corner where a single candle usually blazed for my beloved Aloralethe to play her elegant melodies.

There was no such light burning, only the threatening darkness and the encroaching shadows which seemed to shift with their own sense of corrupted life. Drawing nearer, I realized the harp was nowhere to be found. Only deep scour marks remained in its place. Someone had dragged the giant instrument away. Only a neglected music stand with deep scratches remained in Aloralethe's coveted corner, a half composed script propped crookedly against its wooden arms. Curiously, the ink of the last written note, far above the staff, trailed off the page in an erratic, shaken line. There were splotches of deep burgundy seeped into the very edge of the page, but I regarded them as mere splashes of red wine from a clumsy glass. Suddenly, I realized the score of music was from a song we

were in the process of composing together before her death. Many nights we sat close together, sharing our ideas for lyrics and practicing songs together under candle light. Of course, she wrote and played the music since *my* dreadful hand was so unsteady compared to her flawless grace. All my attempts at the piano and harp ended with shrill clumsy performances—embarrassing performances. Suddenly, an indescribable dread ignited within my stomach, fear of some cruel unknown burdening my conscience. Hadn't the harp been there yesterday? I cannot be certain—I tried to avoid this room since the parting of my darling, of my precious Aloralethe. “Surely this is the work of one of those idiotic servants. Since the death of the lady Aloralethe, they barely lift a broom. Too lazy are they to clear the cobwebs away or lift the mantle of dust. But then again, now that I reflect, I haven't seen them hereabouts. But for what could they need a harp? If they refuse to clean anything, why drag away the dear lady's instrument?”

Stepping silently away, I heard the uneven creaking of a door being opened and caught sight of a pale white shape disappearing into the opening that led to the stairs. “Whether 'tis that blanched feline abomination or that bewitched spirit, I shall follow.” Down the creaking stairs I hurried after, my shoes thudding noisily as I descended. Up ahead, I could discern a muffled pattering sound and approached cautiously. At the bottom of the stairs I stood in a musky, thick cloud of blackness. A stagnant, humid air engulfed me, drowning my senses in its oppressive atmosphere. The only light came from a thin crack that outlined the door leading outside. The pattering had decreased to a mere drip, drip, drip which I attributed to the rain.

Mrow! I heard the vibrations of those cursed cords and new the ghastly beast lurked somewhere about my feet. Hurrying to the barely discernable door, I felt along the frame and prayed my hand would touch the knob. After feeling blindly along the wood, my hand contacted with the metal and I twisted it violently. Luckily, the door opened outwards and I was admitted into the fresh night air of a tiny courtyard. Walking a few paces, I noticed giant drag markings that were partially covered in new grass— as if a rather large object had been pulled through here not too many nights past. Continuing forward, I came to the wrought iron gate leading into the garden and discovered the lock lying broken on the ground, the chain still wound tightly about the thick iron spokes. By degrees, my unease grew upon me like a debilitating disease. Despite my better judgment, I continued forward. Ahead, the garden stretched before me with six cadaverous statues beckoning with unbearable silence. An odd sensation tingled within me, drawing me to the motionless sculptures of elegant women, each poised in a dancing position. At the feet of all six resided brass plates with the words *my beloved* scrawled crookedly upon each. “I never wrote those words. I *never* wrote upon the six plates. Some vandal has desecrated my beautiful work!” I shrieked as a madman. The wind remained listless, whispering through the spiny fruit trees that lined the garden. Even the moon seemed fixed high above the grim limbs, a bleeding red drop within the expanse of a stratus sky. Everything in the garden began to glimmer with a hazy scarlet, an almost hexing glow reflecting from the dewdrops on the withered grass and wilted orchids. Even the cobblestone pathways that wound through the maze of statue and decrepit foliage

appeared as cadaveric creations.

To my absolute horror, a maiden of fiery light stood in the middle of the garden, her hand extended and motioning for me to draw nearer. My self-destruction was complete. I could not resist her beckoning gestures nor could I deny the tinkling harp-song that now played like a siren's requiem. In her presence I questioned once again, though this time tremulously, "T-tireless spirit, do you know who murdered my beloved?" A quiet, infernal hush descended. "Speak! You beckon but do not speak? You torturous creation! Have you no soul? Are you truly that far given to the devil?" This time there was a response—an uncanny response distant yet discernable, "Are you truly that far given to the devil?"

In that statement I felt the thousand horrors of haunting demons breathing at my neck, their talons of fire threatening to engulf me in their flame. Yet still I pursued! Still was some inner feeling that forced me onward to tempt that forsaken fate where it may lead. "Where then? Where is the fair Lady Aloralethe, still lovely though in death? Were it possible she abides even here, amid the cemented creations of my sculptor's hand?" A broken answer came chillily to my ear, "even here."

"Bewitching poltergeist! Do you mock me even now, when my soul is committed to the nether realm? Even now do you suggest that in cold blood I murdered my beloved?" There came a final reply as a softened sigh "I murdered my beloved..."

Upon these words, the illusion faded as a morning mist and I was left gazing into a fountain where my own reflection stared ghastly back at me. His hands, those of the reflection, were shaking violently and deep scoops of restless purple sagged beneath his wild eyes—this man could not be me. This desperate monster lacking the compassion of humanity— this shell of existence could not be me.

But then I beheld that feline phantom stealing into the deepest *cœur* of the hedges and felt that perverse inner imp drive me forward, to press further into the recesses. At the entrance stood two gardenia bushes with their pale, though healthy, blooms. However, a sickly sweet perfume pervaded from these blossoms and made my stomach churn with nausea. I also passed a blanched clock face high atop its decorative iron pole and regarded it but for a brief instant, long enough to count the few minutes to midnight. As I edged closer to the center of the maze, I discovered the foliage become darker and more tangled. Tangles of brambles lined the path and sharp thorns jutted forward to snatch and tear at the ankles of anyone who dared to pass. Even the handful of roses grew on a withered bush, its blooms drained of all pigment and life. At last the cat specter halted, climbing upon a stone pedestal to stand at the feet of a lovely statue with skin of pearl. The squinting ebon eyes of the feline glared maliciously at me as its tail twitched sporadically. Averting my gaze, I looked upon the visage of the moon-glazed, feminine statue and felt a parasite of ice within my veins. There stood in a gown of purest white, the fair lady Aloralethe. Her eyes were shut as if with sleep's sand and her lips were slackened and corporeal. Still beautiful was

she, though in death, that life-less songstress—a statue still divine! And those pale, elegant hands were posed as if to play, her favorite harp stationed where the strings could be plucked with effortless ease.

But before my first tear could fall, I heard the clock toll its crafted incantation: *bong! bong! bong!* —the midnight hour had descended. My terror was complete. That blanched lady with the stony skin, white like lilies, fell away as a masquerader's mask. That frail exterior was no more. A maiden skeleton gazed back at me while her cat accomplice, now a being of bones, glared from its position atop the pale pedestal. Upon the bony hand of the lady there sat an engagement ring, its diamond iridescent with the rays of the red moon. Her dress was flared at the sleeves like an angel; an elegant white veil was pulled back behind her greying hair. About their feet were cement blocks, ornately designed, and yet crooked, from the work of an unsteady hand— my hand.

The beloved I once longed to make immortal has withered. My dream is forgotten and now no more can breathe— no more to inspire— no more to grieve. How strongly do I feel it now, those coils of reverence and jealousy! Twined love and hate manifest in one unredeemable destiny.

Tacos de Lengua

Rasheda Boachie

Asado-steak. *Pollo*- chicken. *Lengua*- cow tongue. I wrinkle my nose at the last one. We stand in a line, mentally drained with the memory of our finals fluttering in the back of our minds. I look at the others; they've already decided, but we stand still for a moment longer until someone nudges me forward.

I exchange pleasantries with the man running the truck, testing out my Spanish, letting the letters roll off my tongue. Then I order: a *taco con barbacoa* and a *quesadilla con pollo*. The man nods, and tells me to study hard, stay in school. He gives me the food at a discount, and I thank him.

We take our food, and-after realizing that there are no benches-plop down on a cracked curb. The sun is reaching us, going through us and past us, erasing what was before and what will be and leaving us the gift of the moment...

We sit and talk about whatever crosses our minds; I mostly listen and laugh whenever someone strikes the treasure trove of humor. I sit and watch cars speed by, watch them with the contentment one feels after getting a good night's sleep. An ambulance barrels through the steady calm; I see the flashing lights, but I hear nothing.

We sit in silence for a bit, hoping to stall a little longer. Before long real-

ity creeps in, slowly taking over our thoughts until we accept it, stand up, and throw away the trash. We walk to the car and I do so regretfully, conscious of the reluctance I felt at the existence I was leaving and the one I was returning to.

The Frightened Boy and the Ferris-Wheel

Jacob Berger

“That Ferris-Wheel looks mighty high,” said Wallie in an apprehensive and slightly admiring tone.

“Why are you even looking at that ride, Wallie? Bawling Wallie could never go on a ‘big boy’s’ ride like the Ferris-Wheel,” Henry said as he flicked off Wallie’s baseball cap. Wallie hated when his friends called him “Bawling Wallie.” He did not even cry often; he merely disliked fast, hazardous, scary things. Why would he feel otherwise?

“Yeah, kiddie rides are over that way, buddy,” Philip, Wallie’s older brother, said as he hi-fived Henry.

“I am not a little kid!” said Wallie defiantly.

“Excuse me, the baby teeth and round cheeks fooled me,” Henry said, a little annoyed that Wallie was speaking. “Why did you even bring him, Phillip?”

“You know my mom made me,” Phillip was annoyed and a little embarrassed, “And it was all the crying that fooled me!” he added, putting the focus back on Wallie.

“Eleanor!” Wallie pleaded.

“What, am I your mother?” angrily asked Eleanor, sensitive because she was the only girl in the group.

“Yeah, Eleanor, why don’t you take care of the little baby. After all, you are a girl,” said Henry garnering another hi-five with Phillip.

“Shut your mouth, or I’ll make you cry like a girl!” threatened Eleanor.

“Relax,” began Phillip, “We all can hold little Bawling Wallie’s hand as he trembles to the seats.” Maybe this was Phillip’s brotherly way to stop the picking on Wallie and get everyone on the ride.

“Hold his hand? We’ll have to drag him all the way,” said Eleanor, clearly happy the spotlight was off her and back on Wallie.

“How about you guys just cut it out, huh?” Wallie asked, getting more upset. Wallie often wondered why he had to like the things his brother and friends did, why he could not just be scared.

“Shut up, Wallie. I’ll take you to the target shooting booth, okay,” Phillip suggested, getting bored of teasing his brother.

“Yeah, maybe you can win a teddy bear and add it to your collection at home,” Eleanor said while snickering.

“Nah, he couldn’t win anything at the shooting booth. He’s too afraid to even hold a toy gun,” Henry remarked, now laughing with Eleanor. Before Wallie could tell them to shut up, his brother did.

“Guys, I’ll take Wallie to the shooting booth, you guys can go on the jumbo slide, and then we’ll meet back here. I’ll go on the ferris-wheel with you guys as Wallie gets some cotton candy. There’s no problem, okay?” Phillip said aggravated and hoping to put an end to this game he was done with.

Wallie turned away sharply. He was angry that he was always made fun of, and he was embarrassed that he begged his mom to make Philip take him to the local fair after Phillip said no to every request. He was humiliated that he was excited to spend a night with his brother and his friends but turned out to just be a burden whose only purpose was to get a few laughs out of. As Wallie stared at the ferris-wheel, the ride’s bright, revolving lights made Wallie’s eyes water.

“Oh, look. We made Bawling Wallie cry, as usual,” Eleanor said trying to shrug it off, but she clearly felt guilt.

“No, *we* aren’t. The *ride* is. Come on, champ, I think you can hack that big ole wheel. I think you would only puke once or twice and only cry about half the night,” Henry felt no remorse and was only enjoying Wallie’s frustration to the fullest. Eleanor looked away uncomfortably and Philip rolled his eyes and muttered to Henry, “Man, you are such a jerk.”

Wallie turned on all three of them, “Why do you guys care if I go on or not? You guys can perfectly go on without me. Why do you guys want to force me to do something I do not want to do?” Wallie hoped to get them to be quiet rather than to get an answer.

“We don’t want you to go on the ride. We just like to make fun of you,” said Henry more bluntly than meanly.

“Yeah, we don’t expect you to really do anything other than cry...” Eleanor trailed off, continually feeling worse.

“Guys, quit it,” Phillip grumbled, but his expression told Wallie that he agreed with Henry and Eleanor. Wallie was stunned. He realized that he would rather be teased than to have low expectations for himself. Even though he did not want his brother and friends to force him to do something he did not want to do, Wallie at that moment wanted to prove that he could do much more than cry.

After a few dumbstruck seconds, the ticket collector yelled, “One seat open! Who wants to touch the stars on the grand ole Ferris-Wheel!”

“I do!” shouted Wallie, and he marched up to the intimidating wheel. The ticket collector looked at Wallie and seemed as if he were to turn Wallie away for being too small or young. But Wallie heaved out his chest and raised his head as high as he possibly could. The ticket man looked at Wallie with vexation, regardless he let Wallie into the rectangular booth, shut the doors, and started the ride.

The wheel crept up as slowly as Wallie’s supper was creeping up his throat. When Wallie was at the apex of the wheel, he did not look at the stars he was supposedly able to touch, but rather down at the ground. Before Wallie could gasp in fear or whimper in worry, he saw his

brother's and friends' mouths hanging down to the ground in complete astonishment. That is when Wallie smiled; for the first time in his life, *he* was able to look down on his brother and friends. Wallie continued to look down as the wheel descended.

The Ocean Song

Solomon Goetz

Before there were people to keep track of time, before even Adam and Eve, the Bible tells us that the Earth was engulfed in water. Before there was land or man, before there was the sun or moon, there was the Ocean. The Ocean is, therefore, the oldest living thing.

Not only is the Ocean ancient, she is massive, the biggest, most powerful force on the planet. She whispers a language unique to herself, one that no one can speak or actually hear; it skips your ears and goes immediately to your heart, to your soul. But in the early hours of morning, before the sun rises to distract you, if you walk down the beach alone and listen to the sea with your eyes closed, you can understand it. You can feel it in the breeze. Her voice sounds like warmth and memory, and although your feet would go numb from constant cold, her song will hold you captive in the wash from the waves until standing is no longer an option.

The beauty of the Ocean is that it is virtually unchanging. You

could visit the beach once a year for your entire life and every time you returned your memory would be jogged by a brisk nostalgia that never fails to freeze time and hold you in your childhood... if only for a moment.

In a lot of ways, all things begin and ends with the Ocean. If God is the father of mankind, then the Ocean is his bride, and all the people of the world are her children.

Lucy had only lived on Hatteras Island a few months, before she had lived in the rolling hills of Carolina on her family's cattle farm about four hours from the closest beach. Since before she was even born, her parents had made it a family tradition to spend a week at the ocean in some old beach cottage every summer they could afford. You could see the beach from the front deck, for it rose higher than the dunes emplaced to protect the highway from airborne sand.

It was midsummer and the sun was just beginning to crack over the horizon into a slow sunrise, beneath it the ocean looked terrifyingly dark and massive. Waves crashed in completely chaotic directions and anyone in a small boat would've been capsized and

swallowed by the ominous waves. She had a look of severe depression on her face, and by that I mean she had no expression at all, as if pain of the past few months had worn her face out leaving no energy even to frown. She was standing in the skim (the part of the water where the ocean deposits her sacred treasure of seashells and foam), just shallow enough that her rolled up pant legs would stay dry.

The previous winter, both her mother and father were killed by a drunk driver and she had moved to the Outer Banks hoping to find some escape; her parent's annual vacation had trained her since a kid to think of the beach and her inhabitants as an escape. Admittedly, she'd been a little let down so far, but today her ancient mother heard the voiceless cries and read her expressionless face.

The tide started to get stronger and Lucy could feel her ankles being gripped by the ocean's invisible tentacles, coaxing her to take a few steps deeper. She fought it at first because she was wearing work clothes from just finishing the graveyard shift, but her will had been weakened by months of loneliness and at this point she just wanted to feel something, even if it was the cold sting of a morning swim. Like an old dance partner, she could practically read the Ocean's thoughts

and offered her hand to let it take lead. She stepped forward and was immediately engulfed by the sea.

From out of nowhere, a wave swiped her off her feet and the current dragged her to where the water was well over her head. It was too dark to see anything but the water immediately around her and the few lights from on shore bobbed up and down as waves swished her around like a lost beach ball. She was rocked back and forth like a baby cradled in the Ocean's arms and although she strained violently, she began to sink. As she fell further and further from the surface, Lucy could feel the ocean playing carelessly with her hair.

Even though her whole body was submerged from head to toe in a sort of unsanctified baptism she began to feel warmth. It was rooted in her chest and moved in blotches to her toes and fingers. And when it reached her face last, she let out a laugh that in this world was only bubbles. But the Ocean understood her and released its grip, allowing her to float toward the life-saving air above. Lucy was never scared, only confused. She heard a song her father used to sing to her back when she was too young to understand what the words actually meant:

*“Mama, take this badge off of me
I can’t use it any more
It’s getting dark, too dark to see
I feel I’m knocking on Heaven’s door.”*

Lucy felt an ironic sense of happiness and although she realized that she was drowning, her mouth curved in a smile, her eyes closed and her mind drifted into a colorful dream of tropical fish and sea-turtles. Then the song again; but this time she understood:

*“Mama, put my guns in the ground
I can’t shoot them anymore
That cold black cloud is coming down
I feel I’m knocking on Heaven’s door.”*

As soon as her head broke the surface she inhaled deeply and let the salty spring air fill her lungs deeper than they’ve ever expanded before. The Ocean was preparing to pull her back down, this time a little deeper, and deeper and deeper again, until Lucy became a

part of the Ocean permanently. But, she didn't mind it, for the Ocean keeps no secrets from its captives and Lucy had known from the very beginning its intent.

But before she dove back into that pitch-black oblivion, something grabbed her hand and violently pulled her away. Lucy's heart could have stopped, she was sure it was a shark and *that's* not how she wanted to leave the Earth: violently. But it wasn't a shark, it was a man...a surfer.

In more ways than the obvious, surfers crave dangerous water. Although the water was too harsh for some small boats, any surfer with a basic neoprene wetsuit and a board under six feet would find these conditions ideal. He had strong brown hair that grew past his shoulders, dreaded naturally with the salt from the sea, and a short-curly beard that was a natural face warmer. He smelled like surfboard wax and had hands as soft as his heart.

The man pulled Lucy onto the nose of his board and back into reality. Without any hesitation, he slid into the water, pulled her in his place, and then began to push toward the shore paddling with his feet from behind. He never said a word while they were in the wa-

ter; there was a soothing sort of calmness about him, as if he saved drowning women often.

Then a rogue wave (which was simply the Sea responding to her escape) came crashing quickly behind them. The surfer looked back and smiled, and then picked up the pace of his legs as the giant carried them high into the air. With perfect timing, he slid back atop the board, laying on Lucy's back and squeezing her hands tightly onto the lip of the board underneath of his; she could feel that below the hard exterior of the board was a buoyant and soft foam core. The wave was now half below and half behind them and Lucy thought it would throw them from the board, giving the Ocean a chance to wrap around her again; this was now a scary thought.

But the surfer was more knowledgeable than she and he leaned sharply to their right. The board zoomed nearly perpendicular to the roaring mountain of energy. Behind them, she saw it crashing never more than two feet behind the board, the foam desperately chasing to catch her again.

Even though they were high above the water and traveling so fast that it felt like the power of the wave had gifted them with flight,

time slowed down. Lucy closed her eyes again and the salty aroma of the sea air felt intoxicating. Though they went over smaller waves ahead of them, and occasionally dropped a few feet at a time (to which the surfer would adjust his weight atop of her), she felt stable and secure, and wanted desperately to stand alone on the board and feel the wind in her hair and the sun in her face.

Then they stopped, the man slid off and was touching the bottom because they were almost at shore. He continued to push the board onto dry land and even though she was looking up at him to show she wasn't unconscious, he never looked down, just picked her over his shoulder (leaving his board near the water) and carried her up-shore.

She was laid down on a beach towel big enough to seat a family. Beside it was an open cooler with beer, a ukulele, and a small cardboard box with half a brick of surfboard wax still inside. When she looked back at him he was still standing, now looking down at her with a half-confused glare. He had folded off the top half of his wetsuit and the dripping sleeves dangled beside his legs. He was already eating a bag of baby carrots which apparently he took from the

cooler because water was pouring out of the bag.

“Kinda’ cold for a swim huh?” he said with a raised eyebrow and a mouth full of carrots. Lucy laid silent and wide eyed like a frightened dog who was backed into a street corner. He chuckled a little and then rolled so that he was sitting at the foot of the towel, next to her legs. “Yeah, yeah...I hear ya.”

She looked around again and realized a lot of things were missing; he had no umbrella, he had no beach chair, no big bag to put all of his clothes and snacks in...he probably carried all his gear across the beach in one trip. He had literally only the essentials, none of the beach paraphernalia that she sold the tourists in her part-time job at the local grocery store. Then she understood: he wasn’t a tourist at all, he was a local.

Some people on the Outer Banks (she had heard) had lived on the island for so many generations that they called themselves “natives” to differentiate themselves from the seasonal workers that had come back enough summers to call themselves “locals” too.

He reached across her legs and grabbed the ukulele that was

propped against the cooler, almost like he didn't know or care that she was there; he certainly wasn't acting like she had just tried to kill herself.

At first he hummed and strummed, only glancing back once to see if she was listening, then he broke into a full-fledged song.

“Someday I’ll wish upon a star

Wake up where the clouds are far behind me

Where trouble melts like lemon drops

High above the chimney tops

That’s where you’ll find me.”

His voice was soft and sweet and sincere, and she recognized it. It wasn't a ghost of her father, or even her imagination, that was “knocking on heaven's door”, it was him; he was singing on his board while waiting for the perfect wave...one that did eventually come. The Ocean's singing had convinced her to swim deep underwater, but the man's song was like a flashing beacon, beckoning her

toward safety.

She was nearly startled by the way he sang. For one, he was staring rather intently at the sea, as if he was singing *to* it, not just near it. Second, his eyes watered, and if it wasn't for his voice being choked occasionally in a way that always means emotion, then she might have assumed it was merely the ocean spray.

Then she felt a feeling she only ever felt in church back when she was young, before her parents had abandoned their attempt to believe in a God. She realized something right then that shook the very foundation of her soul: he was **worshipping** it. He wasn't just singing to the Ocean, he was singing to appease the Ocean, and, she had to admit, the ocean did appear rather calmer than when she was below it. She was partaking in a church service led by nature and Lucy finally realized why all of the locals hated tourists.

Tourists pour in every season and their children enjoy the water but never understand it. they leave cigarette butts and dig holes for fun when, in fact, any native considers the beach a sanctuary where no footprint should be left and only memories should be taken. Tourists, though unintentional, were insulting their Goddess.

The surfer wasn't just some "hippy" who loved the environment, he was an oracle dancing eternally with the waves of a monster, constantly on temple guard...they all were. And indeed, if Poseidon himself would've risen from those waters and offered the most brilliant display of power he could have mustered, the surfer wouldn't have been as impressed with him as he was with the Sea from where he came.

Now she understood why locals didn't leave the island even for hurricanes, though they knew themselves that all buildings would be destroyed and they would start their lives and businesses from scratch. But as long as the Ocean remained, and it continued to pound the land in a constant cycle that corrected the island, putting sand back where God placed it some ages before, then the locals would always be there ready to listen to its gospel.

Lucy closed her eyes still laying on the towel next to the man (who was now only humming and playing the same four chords on his ukulele over and over again) and listened to the ocean. She heard a white whisper that was unintelligible. It picked up and dropped off as random as the chop of the sea, it seemed to say "see me", though

Lucy didn't know if it was "see" or "feel". So she opened her eyes and the Ocean was drastically different. It had a lighter tint of blue, where it almost looked clear. There was a beautifully warm smell that was carried to her face so impressively slow that she had forgotten her near death experience.

Lucy was happy. She sat next to a stranger who knew how to soothe her broken heart, though he had only ever said two sentences to her. She wondered if he did this to every damsel in distress he rescued, but it didn't bother her whether he had or hadn't. The surfer looked down and smiled, his dreadlocks dripped saltwater and as each drop landed on her legs she twitched her eyes, which were looking back at him. The man was no longer singing to the Ocean, he was singing to Lucy. She felt warm.

And she had an epiphany, the ocean wasn't drowning her, it was taking her to him: her rescuer from chaos. Maybe this was love, or maybe she had lost her mind a little in her time underwater, or maybe she was dreaming, or (worst of all) maybe she actually had drowned. Now, she feared death, not because she was afraid of losing her life, but because she was afraid of losing this man and the

sea. Lucy looked out passed the waves and could see eternity, and it smiled back at her. She wished heaven had waves like these.

“Those who go down to the sea in ships, Who do business on great waters; They have seen the works of the LORD, And His wonders in the deep.” (Psalms 107:23-24)

In Grandma's Garden

Solomon "Sully" Goetz

My Grandmother was eighty-seven years old and never let anybody tell her what to do. I always admired that. Since I was a toddler, my mom and dad would drop me and my sister off at the end of her long and windy cobblestone driveway, back then what seemed like every weekend. I don't think it was because our parents wanted to get rid of us (though as a toddler I may have). I think they knew that Grandma had something special, something we were in desperate need of.

Grandma had some strange cascading beauty about her and she was my superhero, I don't think in my whole life I saw her frown (though, truth be told, she wasn't really the smiling type either). She was this brilliantly strong and independent woman...I guess that's why she figured two years of marriage was enough to throw our grandpa out of her life. For this reason, I never met him, and nobody ever talked about him. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure what he even did wrong, something terrible enough to stop her from looking for a replacement for the rest of her life. But, she had us. We made her happy, and she taught us what happiness really was.

I found out that Monday that Grandma had died. Regretfully, I wasn't

even aware she was still living. I hadn't seen her in years, not since I left, and I found myself wishing that I had come back into town a few times those past couple years just to see her.

The funeral was at her home, that same home we spent every weekend at, at the gate of her now depressingly neglected garden. Grandma's garden was incredible. If you saw only her garden, and nothing else, you would swear that she was a richer woman, and that every morning when the dew was still on the ground and your breath looked like clouds too pitiful to be lifted into the sky, you would find a dozen professional gardeners walking around to make sure everything was still in its place, and all the bushes were well shaped and fed.

Grandma wasn't rich, not really, not with money. She just loved that damn garden, and so did I...so did both of us.

It was something like four acres, and so, naturally, as a kid, it was its own world. There were hundreds of different flowers, only a handful of which I actually knew by their real names. Still, there was nothing I loved more than wandering around the paths hoping to get lost and require Grandma's rescuing. But I knew it all too well; I knew the statues by names I made up, chosen specifically by the backstories I invented in my creative childhood imagination. I knew which trees were easy to climb and which pond the painted turtles would crawl out of, so unafraid of human contact that when I would come to see them, only the youngest would retreat back into the water.

Her garden was an oasis in the middle of an eternity of rolling fields. If you climbed up the biggest tree, the one at the northern edge with bark so sharp it hurt to lean against, you could see over the walls, past her house, way beyond that labyrinth of a driveway. From there you saw that the only thing within eyesight were fields of short green tobacco plants.

On the day of the funeral, with all of her family and friends outside of the garden, it really did look like a palm tree bursting forth from the desert.

Whoever planned the funeral obviously didn't know me and Jo too well. Jordan was my twin sister (fraternally), but she was always called "Jo" because she carried some masculine strength of character, a lot like Grandma. Together we were the only children of our parents and because of that, our Grandma's only grandchildren with in at least a thousand miles.

We used to adventure the garden together, playing hide and seek for hours at a time, which eventually ended with Jo sneaking inside the house to be with grandma until long after dusk. I would emerge from my spot and decide it was more important to explore the botanical sanctuary. Whether or not the sun was up, there was always something to see within its green walls. Maybe it was weird that Grandma would leave me out there all alone, but I think she knew it was safe, it was my Asylum.

I always thought it was weird that people said twins could practically read each other's minds, Jo and I were never like that at all. But, we really did

love each other. She was my best friend, my partner in adventure and mischief. But girls and boys mature at different times I guess, because like a classic teenager, I drifted away from Jo, from our family as a whole...I even drifted away from Grandma.

When we were in high school, Jo and I became opposites. She made good grades and was a star athlete. She was amazingly successful, it's as simple as that. I, on the other hand, passed with mediocrity, like I always did. Instead of studying I would spend my time after classes walking to a creek behind our home and falling asleep wishing I could fly (or some other nonsense). Thinking back on it, I guess I was looking for my own "garden".

The way I saw it, my parents loved her and they pitied me. It seemed that every day they gave her life advice and asked about her classes, but when they spoke to me, I could see this desperate hope in their eyes that one day I would "find my way". That always tortured me.

The day we graduated high school, they surprised her by giving her the family car. And what did they give me? A goddamn journal and set of ballpoint pens: the final straw. I decided to leave.

That night I walked two miles until some old man offered me a ride to Raleigh (something like a hundred miles from my house). "Why the hell not? I said, "There's nothing left for me here." That man never knew it, but he was my ferryman across the river Styx.

All I had with me was that stupid journal and pen set, I wasn't sure why I hadn't dropped it yet, but it was my only gift, and I didn't want to lose it. Within five minutes of being picked up, we passed my Grandmother's cobblestone driveway, it had been years since the last time I made that trek. My eyes watered and I was thankful that it was dark enough the man couldn't see my face.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked. I'd never seen anyone smoke before, though I recognized the distinct scent of unburned tobacco, I guess my parents were a lot more protective over me and Jo than I realized. "Only if you let me have one." The man halfway chuckled and then obliged. We drove two hours into the night until we made it to Raleigh, my promised land.

I didn't even know how my mom found an address to send an invitation for the funeral. At the time I was living in a run-down apartment with five friends, on my third job as an aspirant writer that month, making just enough money to buy food, pay rent, and retain a cellphone. I wrote back that I would only come if she promised me nobody would ask anything about the night I left, or what I'd been up to since (I hated the thought of any more family judgment). She promised me no one would.

My mother was a liar.

On the day of the funeral Jo wore a nice black dress and a watch that still told time the old analog way that ironically takes extra time to read. Apparently

the blessed like to show off that they have extra time, and time is money. I'm no veteran of luxurious living, but I would tell that together her outfit probably cost more than that very car, years and years ago, that ruined our relationship. *Glad to see mom and dad's investment paid off* I thought sarcastically for majority of the service. I didn't pay too much attention to the ceremony, not because I was bored and definitely not because I didn't care, but because I didn't know if I could handle reminiscing about Grandma without breaking down. Even then, after not seeing her for over ten years, I idolized her.

I found out that morning from a cousin I had only met as a baby that Jo was now an Account Manager at Westshire Whisky, my favorite Whisky. I honestly thought she did it on purpose just to spite me, although obviously there was no way she could have actually known.

Jo never drank.

She was single, basically by choice, she was still the kind of woman to put work before her relationships. To be fair though, dozens of one night stands ruined me from ever being anything more than a Casanova. But her relationship wasn't what irked me.

Jo adopted a baby, a little girl.

She was under three years old by this point and her name was "Rose." My sister never appreciated alcohol or our Grandma's garden as much as I did, yet there she was: rich from a whiskey company with a daughter named after a

flower. Still, I liked Rose, she sat between Jo and me and smiled almost constantly. I missed having that childish happiness.

At the end of the ceremony we all took turns at the casket and said goodbye to Grandma. And when I got next to her I focused on how great she looked, trying hard not to cry. But all at once, I was bitten by an overwhelming nostalgia and it got difficult to stand straight.

I just wanted to sit down, but when I turned toward the seats from which I just came, all I could see was a sea of my extended family, people ready to bombard me with questions about my past few years now that they finally had the chance. I turned back around and saw the garden's gate, I had forgotten how inviting it looked with its brilliantly carved stones and white-steel bars that couldn't close. I needed a walk, and what better place than my childhood haven?

After a few minutes I found myself at a place I had all but forgotten: the garden's centerpiece. Four different brick paths came together at a large white fountain, which surrounded a kneeling stone angel, his arms were outstretched to the paths at both his sides with his palms and head facing heaven, as if the water from the fountain raining down on him was some blessing from above, a rain-storm in desert heat. It was obvious that water hadn't passed through its pipes for years.

The flowers seemed duller than I remembered, the colors were so much

quieter. I guess that it really had been a while because the very Hollyhocks that used to hide me as a kid, didn't even reach my belt. I pretended like it didn't disappoint me.

I sat down in front of the statue on the fountain's ledge and got ready to cry; I had put off my emotions about Grandma since I heard about her death and waited until now to let myself cope with all of it. I think subconsciously my mind preserved itself from a break down until I got among her prized flowers. If she could hear my sorrow anywhere it would be from this most sacred place.

However, as soon as I closed my eyes, I heard crying that wasn't my own, a baby's. It was little Rose, and she was sitting on Jo's forearm with her head buried in her mother's chest. It sounded like she had held off her emotions until now as well.

"Hey Richard," she said in a very soft voice, yet loud enough to get past Rose's now muffled sobs.

Nobody had called me 'Richard' in several years, I didn't even think my friends back home knew it was my real name. Ever since that man in the pickup truck first asked me my name, I told everyone I was 'Winston' after the first cigarette I ever smoked. He wasn't dumb enough to believe me but he didn't care enough to point it out. He just grinned and nodded, it was my way of forging a new future.

"Rose chased you into the garden and started crying. She found you bet-

ter than I could have,” Jo said halfway laughing. Then her face got serious again, I still hadn’t said a word to my twin sister in over ten years. “Do you want to hold her?”

Deep down where it hurt to breathe, I thought of Rose as Jo’s bold attempt at an escape from her loneliness, but I reached out my arms and took her from Jo anyway, simply because I loved children. I had always been proud of my ability to make kids feel comfortable and calm, but Rose’s instant positive change in attitude startled me.

“Mom said you wouldn’t be very talkative. You know she tried to keep tabs on you?” I held Rose silently. “Listen. If Grandma left you the property... I want to buy it from you...I want Rose to grow up here...like we did...you know?” She held one arm with the opposite hand, obviously uncomfortable.

I bit the inside of my lip, *did she think I was poor? Did she think I needed charity? Some money? Some help?* This angered me more than offering money should have.

“Well Grandma’s will is going to be read soon, we should probably start to find our way out of this old place.” She turned around and started to walk toward the path we came; I stood completely still with Rose in my arms and didn’t move a muscle. *‘This old Place’? This was my Nirvana, my safety net...from her.*

She walked six steps before she noticed I wasn’t following, and then turned around, “Listen Rick, I’m sorry about the whole car thing. It broke down

after a few years if that makes you feel any better.” She stared at my mouth and hoped to God it would make me laugh.

It didn’t.

“You think this is about the car?” I mistakenly whispering.

“Well then what the heck was it? Because I spent every single night trying to figure out why you just left,” she obviously took care not to cuss in front of Rose.

I swallowed loudly and then put down Rose, who must have realized something was wrong because she immediately ran down the path we came from. I took six bold steps forward, I got so close I could have blown toward her and forced a blink, because Jo wasn’t blinking.

“You think I cared about that car?!” I yelled in her face.

She didn’t answer. She still didn’t blink.

“Well it’s always about you isn’t it? Even mom and dad thought so. I’m through living in your shadow Jo...every time I fell nobody noticed...nobody cared...God forbid anyone saw me when my ‘better half’ was giving everybody a reason to look the other way.

I must have blacked out because although I yelled for a few minutes at my motionless sister, I forgot almost everything I said, probably by choice.

“Whatever...I don’t give a shit anymore...goodbye Jo.” I stormed off

clenching my fists so hard it hurt. I knew what I was going to do.

But before I got far, something tripped me, something I never saw coming: Jealousy.

And that was it, the whole world hit me at once. Every sad thought I had been running from ever since the very first time she left me during hide n' seek some twenty years ago, caught me at once. I couldn't stand. I fell to my knees and cried, the first time I cried, like this, in my entire disappointing life.

I cried about my parents and wondered why they gave up on me so damn young. I cried about Jo and wondered why we weren't more alike...we were twins for Christ's sake. And I cried, the hardest, about Grandma. I wondered why she spent hours with my sister and never ONCE walked the garden with me, never ONCE came to find me no matter how long I waited in the branches of that sharp-barked tree, watching her hold Jo until she fell asleep through the kitchen window.

I cried so hard that I heard music playing that I'd never heard in my entire life prior, so hard that I could taste my own spit and feel my own pulse, so hard that I wished I never left home, I wished that instead I would have laid face down in that creek behind my house and found Heaven...found paradise...found an escape.

Could you hear me NOW Grandma?! Could you see me NOW, a broken and crushed, kid all over again. Could you hear me scream for help sitting in the

mud praying to God it would rain so when I wandered back inside you couldn't tell I was crying?

I hated you Grandma.

I hated my parents. I hated my sister. I hated myself. I didn't care about anything anymore.

After sobbing or what seemed like an eternity, I opened my eyes and saw Jo sitting right next to me, looking straight forward, and probably ruining that until-then flawless black dress.

Her voice was broken, "I'm...so...sorry."

I had been deep underwater for 20 years, crushed by my own decisions. What, did she think this would just fix everything?

The funny thing is, it did a little. She was reaching deep into the sea from her boat of success and grabbing at my hand desperately swinging around trying to grasp a lifesaving breath.

"I wanted to ask you something really important to me..." I still looked silently forward, too proud to let her see my face.

"I want you to be Rose's godfather."

What? Why the hell would Jo want me to be responsible for her kid?

“Richard,” she continued, “I want her to be like you...not me.”

Now I had to look at her, she had tears too, and this time she couldn't look at me. “You don't realize it, but there's something special about you...you still look at the world like a kid. I left you in the garden because I stopped caring about it.” Now her voice was totally fractured.

“One day I woke up and didn't care any of it anymore. I decided that I needed to leave all of our childish crap behind and just grow up. But you know what? I honest to God wish I hadn't.” She looked back at me now, both of us in our twenties, completely shattered, and sitting in our nicest clothes on muddy red bricks.

“I'm jealous of you Richard.”

My pulse might've stopped, that's how it felt. Everything I ever thought nasty of my sister, I now had a literally painful regret for.

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from a pocket in her dress I didn't even know it had, lit one, and started to smoke. “You still think this garden is magical don't you?”

I sheepishly grinned and looked at my feet

“That's what I want Rose to have. You're looking for something, and I know one day you'll find it, and when you do, you'll have this weird personal fulfillment that everyone deserves: a Nirvana I'll probably never know.”

Jo put her head on my shoulder, this was the first time I had ever seen my sister crippled and it was terrifying.

“I’d love to be Rose’s godfather,” I told her. I took the cigarette out of her hand and put it out on the ground next to us. Then I put my arm around her and we sat there silent for a few more minutes. Eventually I stood up and pulled her on her feet.

We didn’t talk anymore, why should we have?

I swear, as we left, the flowers looked like they were watching us, like they had just shaken off a decade of dust and could finally breathe.

I have no idea why we trusted Rose enough to wander the garden alone for as long as we did, I doubt either of us forgot about her. When we saw her, she was picking Tiger Lilies and immediately ran to me with one as a gift.

To this day, Tiger Lilies are my favorite flower.

It turns out Grandma left everything to the both of us, she said that we would be able to divide everything evenly among each other, and it would be up to us to decide who got what specifically. Either Grandma knew us much better than we knew ourselves, or she just got lucky. Either way, I told Jo to keep everything, “I already got everything I needed.” The garden saved me, now it was going to save Rose too. I smiled, in a way that I’d never smiled prior, and haven’t

really smiled since.

I left Grandma's...scratch that...Jo's, happier than I was in my entire adolescent life. I told Jo and Rose that I loved them, and God, how I meant it.

Eight months after I told her I loved her, eight months after I said goodbye and made amends with my wonderful twin sister, she died of bone cancer.

I found out recently that she knew she was dying all the way back at the funeral, so did my mom and dad. She found out right after she adopted Rose and then spent years searching for me so she could ask me to be Rose's godfather. Only by chance, the timing worked out where Grandma's death brought us together. Apparently she was the reason my mom knew where I was, and where to send my invitation.

It kills me even today that I yelled at my dying twin sister.

It's funny though, I thought that Rose was Jo's escape from loneliness...and she was...but only in the same way that Grandma's roses were my escape from loneliness forever ago.

She left me everything, the house and the garden, and I moved in with my goddaughter, putting behind my adventurous lifestyle, I had a promise I damn sure intended to keep. I'm beyond grateful I have a chance to watch Rose grow...to watch all of the roses grow, in Elysium.

It's ironic that as I sit here writing in the same journal, with the same set of ballpoint pens that my mother and father gave me when I graduated high school, I can't help but disagree with my sister, Jordan, after everything that happened. She wanted me to raise Rose to be like myself, but I pray to God every night that she'll turn into her mother.

Most day's when I'm not writing, I like to go down and sit at the angel fountain, who at this point has received, as well as the rest of the garden, his full blessing. I go down and talk to Jo, and I know she can hear me.

Jo never let anyone tell her what to do, and I always admired that about her.

The Quest for the Quarry

Solomon “Sully” Goetz

It was the summer of 2008 when we first realized that a giant crater was resting somewhere on top of Knobly Mountain. Knobly was a chain of connected mountains along the border of Maryland and West Virginia, detailed with sheer cliffs on her face and grassy pastures on her peak. I’ve climbed that mountain dozens of times before but never once have I heard anything about any crater.

It was Ryan who noticed it first; he was a novice spelunker who took the liberty of ‘Google-mapping’ the whole mountain in the hope of finding caves we could climb into. Ryan was my big cousin, and in a lot of ways we all looked up to him. The other member of my party was much less of a spelunker and was simply tagging along for the adventure of the plan. His name was Charlie, he was the only one of us who actually lived on the land. He was an avid adventurer of most of the area (although he too had never heard of the crater) and like Ryan, he was also my first cousin. Both in maturity and age, Charlie was the youngest of us three.

We left somewhere close to 8:30 the next morning, armed with the knowledge that there was a giant hole to be found, and little else. We carried no water or knives (as we usually would) because we had no idea what to expect

and didn't want to be weighed down by even the most basic supplies. The Potomac River did flow at the foot of the mountain, so we weren't in too severe of danger, at least not of dehydration. When we finally launched, we never told anyone we were leaving. I'm not sure why, but we all wanted our journey to be kept secret until, if at all, we were successful.

We walked down a familiar path first, a dusty farm road that our grandfather used to transport farm equipment. The whole trail was in full view of the mountain, so as we pressed forward, we were forced to stare down the giant that might defeat us. Our path was half shaded and half lit. Although we all knew what lay ahead, at this point, we were content. We never spoke a word on that path; in some ways I would say it felt sacred. In our minds we aged a few years (in reality it was less than an hour) before we even reached our first obstacle.

It was an old railroad trestle bridge which was built sometime before World War II and hadn't been operational in over sixty years. The whole thing was covered in rust and graffiti, and it had large gaps where it was missing a few feet of boards. It rose almost two hundred feet over the Potomac and in between every ten inch board there was a small four or five inch gap, making not looking down at the river below impossible. I imagine in its heyday, that bridge was a modern marvel, but now it was simply a relic of an ancient world we never knew.

"Make sure to watch your feet," Ryan, being the oldest, was the safety expert of the fellowship. The closer we got to the middle of the thing, the more terrifying the drop below became. As we ventured out across it, we slowly began

to put our shaded and safe haven behind us in exchange for an open and lifted up booby-trap.

Some boards we stepped on were so rotten they literally broke underneath of our feet. We had to immediately lunge onto stronger looking ones ahead or we risked falling backward, and God knows what would have happened then. Although it was beautiful, crossing that bridge may have been one of the most dangerous things I've done to date.

Before us sat another man made beauty, a tunnel made of bricks that drilled all the way through the mountain. It was as old as the bridge we just crossed, and even more neglected. Although I've made the terrifying journey through that passage before, that's a story for another day. What did interest us was a very small stream that flowed from the tunnel, to the mountain side, to the river we had just crossed. At the point where it split into the river it fell off a set of miniature cliffs, creating a sort of waterfall. Though it was unsanitary, every time we crossed the bridge we made an effort to drink our fill as a sort of tradition. It may not have been healthy, but it always seemed to boost our spirits, and that was exactly what we needed.

Our hearts were beating in kind of way they never had before, and for the first time we realized the sheer magnitude of what we were about to experience. We were three kids with a mountain ahead, and we were prepared for whatever it could throw at us.

The only real truth we knew about it going in, was that our goal was on the right peak, and we were about to put that knowledge into action. Lucky for us, we knew enough about climbing to wear extremely worn in tennis shoes and jackets already torn asunder by rocks and trees years and years ago. At first our game was to sprint as far up as we could, then grab onto a tree to rest and wait for enough energy to try again. But, mountain trees have shallow roots and immediately some of them pulled right out under our weight crashing down our improvised path. Even logs and big rocks would plummet down, taking others with it like a mini avalanche. Gravity was not on our side.

Suddenly, Ryan, who was of course ahead leading the way, had an epiphany: a sort of game. We found the largest boulder we possibly could and braced with our feet on the rock and our back to the cliff and pushed with all the strength still left in our legs from the climb. First it simply slid, but as soon as it hit a little drop off it started to tumble, picking up speed and momentum, taking out rocks, trees, logs, literally everything in its way. We continued to do this the entire way up the slope; a few of them even hit natural ramps and launched dozens of feet into the air.

When we reached the first summit, our trip was only really beginning, it was a grassy null that had no trees and opened up so you could see half of Maryland. It was the perfect spot to pitch a tent and rest... if we had one, we instead were content to simply sit for a moment and catch our breaths. The rest of the

adventure was steadily downhill, rather, across the mountain chain we had just mounted.

Outside of that null was nothing but woods, we walked slanted through a few feet of leaves randomly tripping over jagged rocks hidden below them. This happened on and off the entire trip and severely damaged our already tired legs.

The next part requires a bit of a backstory for you to understand.

Next to my grandfather's farm is a governmental bomb testing facility, "Alleghany Ballistics Laboratory," or ABL as we always called it. It was, and still is today, an extremely secretive compound with watchtowers and bunkers, and the only thing we've ever actually seen was the occasional rocket or faulty explosion from across the river.

So it makes a little bit more sense why we stumbled across a fenced off area full of unexploded rocket shells. Apparently decades ago, ABL would test rocket propellant by launching shells straight into the mountain side. I found out only recently that the shells were only weights and we were in no real danger, but at that point, those rusted relics could have been the death of us. We had to cross it for it fell immediately in our path, and so we braved the trespass through the minefield.

It really wasn't as exciting as we expected; there were only a few shells and we stayed clear of them (other than the occasional, bad humored rock throw by Charlie). Nonetheless, we were more than relieved to crawl through a broken piece of fence on the other side.

At this point, our adventure had gone on almost six hours, and we were contemplating whether or not to turn around and quit. Still walking, we argued and argued, when, out of nowhere something incredible happened. I parted a patch of tall grass and, like a scene out of *Jurassic Park*, a new world opened before us. We were standing atop a semi-circle of cliffs that towered two hundred feet over the crater we'd so long been looking for.

I've been to California and seen the ocean turn to gold at sunset, I've been to the tops of lighthouses and seen the waves jump up onto cliffs, I've been to Niagra Falls and seen time stop as the falls gently misted your face, and yet, for some reason, none of them impressed me as much as this sight. It appeared tropical even though it was only sixty-five degrees, and there wasn't an ocean for hundreds of miles. There were two bald eagles crying and circling below our feet. The water was the bluest water I've ever seen, and I grew up on a beach.

When our jaws finally closed we looked at each other the look of success and began to descend the cliffs as quickly as we could, even if that meant leaping some sections and sliding down portions that were mostly dirt. When we got to the bottom and saw the water up close, we realized it really was blue, chemically blue. That's when we realized it wasn't a natural crater at all, though it may have

been there just as long.

It turns out what we “found” was a very old mining limestone quarry, three hundred feet deep and two hundred feet in diameter (as I said, the cliffs were two hundred feet over the water, meaning, in the center, the water was literally one hundred feet deep).

Being in a crater is unlike anything else. Especially with water, sound travels in the most peculiar way. You could whisper from a hundred feet away, and it’s like you’re whispering directly into an ear.

We spent a few good hours swimming from cliff-side to cliff-side in a scene that looked like any horror movie: a group of teens, care free, in mysterious water, over summer break. I half expected a tentacle to reach out from the water.

Now we were soaking wet and worn out, so it was luck that we found a much easier road home. An old manmade path took us right to the river at the foot of the mountain, which as soon as we waded across, brought us back on the farm we started.

And then we were home. Home in a new way, not just physically. I learned something phenomenal that day, something life-changing. Nature was my new best friend and I was content with that. If I didn’t believe in God before that trip, I sure as hell did after.

When we got back to the house, unannounced, soaking wet, and appar-

ently missed, we had a lot of questions to answer, but over the crowds of angry parents and jealous siblings, we smiled at each other. We were no longer cousins, we were brothers.

True story.

Six Feet of S**t

Andy was one of those men who hid behind his car. Four foot nothing with a Napoleon complex like you wouldn't believe, he acted tough behind the wheel, honking his horn and cussing and flipping people the bird. But the second he stepped out of that blue BMW he was meek as a baby sparrow. Of course nobody said that at his funeral. They talked about his good nature, his zest for life. The preacher told of Andy's church attendance—a devout baptist—and his assurance that he was in a better place, now. Surely the gates of heaven had opened for this man—just look at his resumé. A successful investment banker with a wife and three daughters. The preacher patted the widow on the shoulder and leaned toward the three girls—the youngest six, the oldest twelve—and told them their daddy would be watching them from heaven. And nobody talked about last November.

It was cold, bitter like a shot of espresso. The damp clouds covered the sun like a wet rag over a light bulb, and the wind pulled at Andy's suit jacket, a size too big. He was walking to his car. The goddamn construction around the bank meant the employees had to park two lots over, and that meant he had to pass every Mo, Dick, and Harry on the way to his car, and every one thought they were best friends. Hello, how are you? How are the girls? The wife getting along alright? You're a lucky bastard, ain't ya Andy?

Yeah, sure am.

The move to Georgia was all for Megan, and he'd said he was okay with it. His wife had grown up in New York City, but she had always hated it, even as a girl. She loved the country, and sometimes Andy could understand why. Sometimes it was nice to hear a bird chirping or drive past the edge of a forest. But more often he missed the anonymity of New York.

He dialed his wife's number as he climbed into his BMW and turned the key in the ignition, shivering as he waited for the air blowing onto his feet to become warm.

"Hey, babe. Are you on your way?" His wife's voice was tired, and he could hear the girls chattering in the background.

"Yeah, I've gotta stop by Michael's for a second. I promised him I'd take a look at last month's figures from the restaurant. But I'll be home for dinner."

"Okay." There was a loud noise in the background, like a baking sheet cracking against tile. "Goddammit. Would you talk to Anna for second? She's crying again,

and I just can't— Jamie! Put that down. No, I do not care if Daddy's coming home late. You are not eating cake before supper. Don't give me that look—"

"Put her on the phone, Megan."

"Sorry, what?"

"Put Anna on the phone."

Andy rubbed his temple and rolled his eyes, waiting for his youngest daughter's voice. "Daddy?" She choked out the word as though it were gagging her. Why was she always crying?

"What's wrong, Annie?"

"Everyone at school hates me. Don't make me go back."

Four months of kindergarten, and she's all ready to drop out. This one's got a great future. "You have to go back, Annie. Just a few more weeks and you get a nice long break."

She sniffled. "But—"

"You'll be fine, Anna. Just tell your mother I'll be home soon."

He hung up the phone and turned down the heat. The car felt like the inside of a toaster, waiting to pop him through the sunroof. It was still light out, but the sun was weak, like a dying flashlight.

Andy dug the flask out of his pocket, correcting the wheel as the car swayed toward the ditch on the right side of the road.

"Goddammit." He screwed on the lid with his teeth and tossed the flask behind him, hearing it clink against something in the backseat—the latch of a seatbelt, maybe, or one of Anna's toys. She was too old to be playing with those Barbies. Megan cuddled her. She cuddled all of them. One day those girls would be tossed into the world like it were a meat grinder. They had no idea what was waiting for them.

The porch light was on when he pulled up to the purple house, kudzu creeping along its face and encircling its window eyes. He parked in the driveway next to a gray Corolla, its paint chipped like an old manicure. Andy locked his wallet in the glove compartment before stepping out of the BMW, the gravel biting at his smooth leather shoes, and the car chirped behind him and flashed its lights once. The doorbell droned out its notes, deep and slow—the door swung open before the notes were finished.

"Can I help you?"

Angela stood behind the screen door, hands on her hips, fingers wrapped around her love handles. She always played this game, asking questions as though they'd never met. Strands of greasy blond hair dangled from an unkempt bun, and her pants were a size too tight, a middle-aged woman trying to fit into her college jeans.

Andy laughed silently to himself. She never went to college.

"I have an appointment."

"To see who?"

Whom. "Bethany."

"You're early. Sit down, and I'll get you when she's ready."

Andy opened the screen door and stepped into the house, feeling no change in the temperature. It may actually have been hotter inside than outside. It certainly smelled worse, like a litter box filled with old McDonalds bags—shit and grease. Andy pushed the door closed with two fingers and stood beside the couch, its paisley upholstery punctured and discolored. The fat woman glared at him for a moment, as though insulted that he would not sit, then made a tsk sound under her breath and walked into a different room. Two years he'd been coming here, and she still acted surprised every time he would not sit down.

A clock on the wall ticked off seconds like a metronome keeping time with the sputter of car engines passing outside and the creaking of the old house as it settled. A porcelain cat was in the corner of the room, its white tail wrapped around its feet. It sat crooked on the thick carpet, its neck swiveled backward, casting Andy a departing look with its blank, white eyes.

He looked away from the cat, up to the clock. It was getting late. The girls would be yelling for dinner, and Megan would give in soon—would spoon up the chicken and rice like gruel into a trough. The kitchen was an assembly line from six to seven each night, from pot to plate to stomach to sink. Then the girls would fight about whose turn it was to do the dishes until Megan finally told them all to go to bed and stood in front of the sink, wiping down everyone else's mess, her face twisted into a grimace, until her hands were raw and her legs were shaking. Andy's phone buzzed inside his jacket pocket. He plucked it out and silenced it, darkening the screen so he didn't have to look at Megan's face.

The fat woman was standing in the doorway, gnawing on a stick of beef jerky. She motioned to Andy as though swatting at flies and then disappeared in a back room. Andy started up the stairs, skipping the third one because it creaked. There was a bare spot in the upstairs hallway, and the smell drifting up from the first floor was partially masked by cheap incense and air freshener. Bethany's door was open. Andy adjusted his jacket and went inside.

The dwindling light drifted through the window like it were covered by a dark sheet. It was just bright enough to deepen the shadows on Bethany's face. She sat kiddie-corner to the window on the right side of the room, her body half-facing the door. She was wearing pink flannel pajamas that fit her like a near-empty sack of potatoes. The lime green paint on her fingernails was chipped, and her hands

were white like frosted glass, her knuckles contorted into stiff claws as they rested atop the wheels of her chair.

She grinned as Andy entered the room, and she tucked a thin lock of blond hair behind her ear, revealing clip-on earrings—fake sapphires. “Mr. Andy! It’s good to see you.”

Andy could make out the shape of her feet beneath thick socks—bent and twisted like clay. He pried his eyes away from the little girl’s legs, thin and useless like broken matchsticks. “How have you been, Bethany?”

“Good!” She watched him drop into the bucket seat beside her bed, and she brought her crooked hands to her lips and blew warm air onto her palms. “Miss Angela said we’ll go for a walk once the weather’s better. Probably not tomorrow, though. I think a couple’s coming.”

“To meet you?”

“I don’t think so. Probably Jeremy. He’s new. Autism. He’s only three.” She studied the chipped green polish on her nails. Andy wondered who had painted them for her.

“You’re not too old to be adopted. You know that, Beth.”

She nodded slightly, her eyes still downward.

“They’ll find you a home. Real soon.”

Her gaze remained on her lap. “I was so angry after Mom died. So angry at her.” Andy’s brows knotted. “It was an accident, Beth.”

She was silent for a moment, still looking down. “She was sick. Did you know that? She had cancer and no money. No way to pay for treatments.” Bethany’s fingers contorted stiffly in her lap. “Sometimes I wish she’d taken me with her.”

“Don’t say that.”

Andy watched her fidget. “She told my dad about me. Before she killed—” Bethany sighed. “She told me right before bed on that last night. Told me he never even knew about me. Why would she—”

“I’m sorry, I have to go.”

“What?” Her eyes leapt upward. They were so blue. He wondered if they were gray when the sun was out. “Please don’t go. You just got here.”

“My wife’s waiting on me.”

She didn’t argue, just slouched in her chair. “I want to meet her someday. She must be so good, to marry a preacher.”

Andy nodded and tried to keep her from seeing the shame in his eyes. “Well, she must be good to put up with me all these years.” His smile was toothy and fake, like a kid smiling at a present he hated.

Andy lifted himself from the bucket chair like a crane lifting a block of cement.

He grunted and straightened his back. "I'll see you later, Bethany. Next week." "Okay." She turned her chair to the right so she could watch him all the way out the door, and when he stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind him, he could still feel her innocent gaze piercing the wood, piercing him. He shuffled down the stairs, his feet moving like a sewing machine so that maybe he could make it out the door before—the fat lady was standing at the bottom of the stairs, her arms crossed. She held a dust rag in one hand, and her greasy hair was covered by a red bandana. "Have a good visit?"

Andy didn't answer. He sidestepped her and kept going, like a Nascar driver dodging a piece of rubber on the track.

He had already swung the door open and was reaching for the screen when he heard her hiss, "You done that girl wrong. You done her so wrong."

And then he was in his BMW, and the smell of leather and pine trees replaced the shit and grease.

The streetlights were on, reflecting off the dark pavement, broken glass glittering on the shoulder. Andy sped out of the neighborhood, working the gas pedal like a foot pump. His phone lit up inside his pocket, sending a muted light over the front of his shirt. He fished the metal flask out of the floorboard—he'd heard it fall from the back seat as he punched the gas—and took a swig. Then another.

An oncoming car flashed its lights, and Andy reached for his headlights, flipping them on and watching as they illuminated yellow stripes—his tires were straddling them. He weaved back to the right and took another swig of—he couldn't remember what was in the flask. Scotch? Bourbon?

Andy sped through a red light, not noticing the color until his front bumper was in the middle of the intersection. Honking horns drifted into his mind like a distant beacon through a fog. He pulled the car across the shoulder into the gravel, in front of an old building that used to be a convenience store. A single streetlight illuminated the gravel lot, so that he was like an actor on an empty stage, standing in a narrow spotlight, facing an empty auditorium.

He drained his flask then pulled the keys from the ignition and unlocked the console, tossing his wallet in the floorboard and fishing out an envelope, yellow and stained with fingerprints. His name was written on the front—no return address. It was two years ago, next week, when this envelope had appeared on his desk at work. "A woman brought it by," his secretary told him. "Blonde."

"What was her name?"

"She didn't say."

Andy watched his secretary walk out of his office, watched her hips swing back and forth in her tight skirt, then ripped the top of the envelope with a letter

opener.

Andy,

Please give her a chance. Her legs don't work, but her heart does. She deserves more.

Sitting in his empty BMW, cold creeping through the windows, his hands shook as he read those words. It was signed, Eliza. Below that was written, Bethany Linkhart—faint, red lipstick half obscuring the first name.

She deserves more.

Andy started the car. He pulled onto the road, ignoring the honking from behind him. A little convertible skidded into the left-hand lane to keep from rear-ending his BMW. He watched the road swim in circles, trees lifting their roots to dance along the highway, white and yellow lines swirling as though caught in a whirlpool. He made all the familiar turns to get back to the house, and he stayed mostly between the lines until he was three miles from home—and passed the hole in the guardrail.

The tires squealed the car fishtailed, and the world rushed by in blurs and spots like a bad panorama. His body jarred, and a bellowing sound pounded against his skull like a big fist against a wooden door. When his vision cleared, the BMW was smoking against a tree to the left of the road. Andy unlatched his seatbelt—on the third try—and ripped it off, pushing the door open and staggering into the chilly evening air.

By the time he stumbled home, it was past the girls' bedtime. But they sat perched on the couch, all in a row like china dolls. The oldest one stood as Andy drug himself through the doorway, her face stretched long and thin, her eyes heavy and round.

Megan sat on the stairs. Her face was drained of all expression, cold and empty. She didn't stand as he entered, and Andy stopped in the doorway, tripping over himself to remain upright, and waited for her to speak.

Her dark hair fell like curtains on either side of her face. She pursed her lips as she spoke.

"Get out."

Andy stayed rooted to the floor, the mud on his leather shoes staining the pristine white carpet.

Megan didn't yell, didn't raise her voice. She barely even raised her head. "I said, get out."

"But, Megan—" Andy's words were slow. He squeezed them out of his mouth like juice from a lemon. They burned.

"Come back when you're sober. Or don't come back."

“But, baby, I—”

She was on her feet, to him in a second, had a hand on his chest, pushing him back, out the door. He grabbed her wrists in his big hands and twisted them away from his body, begging her. Don’t make me go. Don’t make me go. Then she was on the ground. She was crying. I’m sorry, Megan. I didn’t mean to—

Was he speaking out loud? He tried to kneel on the floor beside her, but he stumbled, his knee crashing into her ribs, and she cried out in pain. His daughters sat huddled on the couch. Andy couldn’t make out which was which. They all looked blurry and indistinct. They all looked a little like Bethany.

Andy got to his feet and pulled himself through the doorway, grabbing anything he could hang onto, wrapping his hands around the doorframe, grabbing the mailbox with fingers bent into claws (like Bethany’s) and he hauled himself down the road, cars whizzing around him, headlights flashing angrily in his peripheral vision. Everything was in his peripheral vision. He didn’t know where to look. Then he saw it again (how long had he been walking?), the hole in the guardrail, like a hell’s jaws, unhinged, waiting to swallow him up. The jagged metal of the split rail glinted in the streetlights’ glow, beyond which there was nothing but darkness, deep and eerie.

Andy stood staring for a long time.

It had been on the news the day after he’d gotten the letter. Fatal car crash on Oak Highway early this morning. Eliza Linkhart, 28, lost control of her Celica and ran through the guardrail. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

He’d been sitting in the kitchen eating a boiled egg when that story played. “How awful,” Megan had said from across the table.

He nodded.

Eliza hadn’t known he was married. They met at lunch, at a diner a few blocks from where Andy worked. He took her number, scrawled on a napkin, with his right hand so she wouldn’t see his ring.

He stared at that gaping hole, that glaringly empty space. The bent and twisted guardrails looked like Bethany’s feet.

Andy sat down in the road, the middle of the lane, facing that hole. He sat cross-legged, his elbows on his knees, stretching his hips past their limits. When he felt like he was drowning in the space between those guardrails, he closed his eyes and waited for a car to rattle the asphalt, waited for the feel of tires over his spine. It never came.

When he got tired of waiting, he pushed himself off the ground. The world was beginning to right itself—the alcohol was leaving his system. He saw his car to the left, its front end crumpled like a paper airplane wrecked against a wall.

He walked four miles to the closest motel, checked in, and stayed there five months, until he suffocated alone in his room—choked to death on a bite of steak. “He was a good man,” the preacher said, as the widow wiped tears from her eyes. Three daughters watched the casket lower into the earth.

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