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The Snow Island Review is the literary and art journal at Francis Marion University. It is named for the headquarters of General Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," who in the winter of 1780-1781 led incursions against and then eluded British troops by escaping to his wilderness retreat bounded by the Great Pee Dee River, Lynches River and Clark Creek. In 1974, Snow Island was named a National Historic Landmark.

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A&P Grocery: A True Love Story

—Austin Kemmerlin

[This is a short story written for my English 252 class. This is John Updike's "A&P" written from the point of view of one of the girls in the store.]

Sorry Jess, but we have to swing by the grocery store before we head back to the house, I said as I cranked up my car. Jessica, Jess, as she liked to be called is my younger sister. She is tall and lanky with a future that screams intellectual. She likes to impress Mom and Dad by using words like: "ambiguity" and "hominid". They of course pat her on the head like she is one of their poodles and continue about their business. It annoys me, but I know that Jess enjoys feeling smart. I don't have the heart to tell her that she is speaking out of context and how Mom and Dad neither understand, or most likely even care. She has the next ten years planned out all the way down to the color sheets she wants in her dorm in Ann Arbor. I am glad that she is so ambitious; it lets me know that I may actually be a decent mother.

My other sister Alex fit into Mom and Dad's niche like nicely worn pair of old gym shoes that you can't give up. Although she was slightly overweight, she was really pretty and popular amongst her friends at school. She was like the person that just made the final cut of a football team, but only because of the silver spoon that was stitched between her lips. She has never been a big fan of crowds and strange places though; I guess that is why she has been attached to me like glue for this whole vacation. I am not as close to Alex as I am with Jess. I'm sure a lot has to do with the six year difference between the two of us.

Mom and Dad took up much more time with Alex than Jess and I combined. When I was born, Dad was busy with his oil company in Texas, with Mom hand in hand spending his money just as fast as he was making it. I am twenty and that has been all I have known for my whole life. Jess has had it worse than I have. Since I was twelve, Mom and Dad would go on business trips and leave me to watch Jess for the whole weekend. She got away with this because our grandmother lives in the house next to ours and would check in from time to time. I have basically raised Jess so I know she is enjoying this summer together with me. By the time Alex came along, Dad had the

business up and running strong, which left him with plenty of time for his golf game, expensive wines and vodkas, and cocktails. Jess and I were pretty set in our ways so they made sure to buy Alex any and everything she wanted. I'm not jealous by any means; I just hate it when my parents put such a huge front on around family members and friends. Strangely, this vacation has actually been okay for the most part.

Like I said, it is nice to spend some time with Jess since I have only seen her once during the last semester. I attend Northwestern University in Illinois. I really enjoy the weather there. I have always been really decent at school, A-B student, but I believe they accepted me because of all of my humanitarian work that I have done throughout high school. The first three days here have been really relaxing, sort of put me into the regrouping stage since school just ended two weeks ago. Today I offered to take the girls to the Wacky, Wet & Wonderful Water Park. I find it sad that a real human actually thought of that name. I would hate to see their phone book listing; it would take up three lines at least. We walked and slid, and walked and slid all day until our bodies were slightly pink from the sun. Our feet hurt, Alex and I both had a headache, and Jess stumped her toe leaving. Just as we were buckling up in my Grand Cherokee, mother called. "Olivia sweetie; on your way back, pick up a jar of Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks."

"Umm mother, we are leaving a water park and only have our bathing suits on", I said. "We didn't bring anything else to change in. How come you or Dad go can't go?"

"Your father said for you to stop by because we are busy getting everything together for the McNeal's and the Green's. You know that your father is trying to get them to buy some of his shares of stock in our company," she said. "Olivia, you can't mess this up for us. Just stop by the A & P near the corner of Birch Street". Birch Street shopping center was two minutes away from our "sweet escape", which was what mother liked to call our vacation home. It was even posted on the front of our house in big white letters with a silhouette sun and beach in the background.

Instead of hearing Mom scream at Jess and me once the company left, I agreed to stop by the A&P to get the disgusting jar of fish. When we made it to the grocery store, there were no close spaces to park because workers were painting new lines on the pavement. Obviously a great deal of thought goes into the planning process of line painting because I overheard a man telling an old lady Thursdays are paint days since grocery stores are normally dead then.

After aimlessly wondering around the parking lot, I finally found a spot on the side of the building. Normally this doesn't bother me because I like to consider myself an athletic person. I played three years of high school tennis. The horrible part about parking so far away was the hot asphalt on our bare feet. Feeling every eye glued to us, we filed out of the Jeep and made our way into the store. As the sliding doors opened, the frigid grocery store hit our barely clothed bodies like a cold Massachusetts morning. Alex asked Jess why companies keep grocery stores so cold. Without missing a beat, she replied "So the food won't spoil." As sarcastic as that sounds, it could possibly be true.

I quietly laughed to myself as I scoured the store for the fish in a jar which is the hardest item to find inside a grocery store. Thinking you made sandwiches with herring snacks, I first checked the area near the bread. Jess said to try the meat area. Remember that fish is meat. Very funny, I said as we made our way back around to the front of the store. On our way to what we thought was our aisle of destiny, I noticed two cashiers with their eyes fixated on the three of us. I wondered what they were staring at until I noticed my bathing suit straps sagging off of my shoulders. When I am around family or close friends, I tend to be a bit over comfortable. I purposely made no reaction to the laser beam stares because I didn't like for people to know that I am easily flustered. As awkward as it was, the younger of the two guys was quite charming looking.

Our trio made a right turn towards the meat section passing cookies that I had to unlock from Alex's death grip. I claim full responsibility for her cookie weakness. I remember slipping Alex cookies when we were younger before Dad would take her to elementary school. They didn't like for Alex to have cookies because of her occasional sugar rush. Fearing she would not be attached at my hip, she scurried behind us as we walked off. Finally, we reached the back of the store where I then adjusted my straps.

At last, Jessica the genius found and asked the man in the meat department where the jar of fish was located. He directed us to a small area off to the side of the bagged shrimp. I grabbed the jar from the refrigerator container and turned toward the check-out area. Two lines were open, and I went through the one that had the cute guy working in it. I sat the fish jar down and noticed that the cute guy's name was Sammy. It was only 49 cents, which surprised me that Mom and Dad would serve such an inexpensive hors d'oeuvre. I handed Sammy a dollar that was tucked into my bathing suit top. He gave me that awkward stare that made me feel uncomfortable for giving him

my breast dollar.

Thinking we almost made it out of this chilling place in just a bathing suit, out walks a manager guy who really embraces being a "manager." Knowing why he was beaming towards us, I prepared my thoughts before he spoke so I could handle the situation in a calm manner. I have never been one for confrontation. Even in high school, where every day is filled with drama I never had to deal with huge outbursts. His nametag actually said "Mr. Lengel" on it which instantly led me to realize this would not go as smoothly as I originally believed.

"Girls, this isn't the beach," he said. Knowing that it indeed was not a beach, I was waiting for Jess to tell the man that we just saw a shark on aisle five, or that we actually found Nemo swimming in the lobster tank. Thankfully, her lips remained sealed signaling the start of my recovery.

"My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks", I said. I noticed Sammy the clerk staring at me with a sort of dazed look as if I just told him we were going to die in five seconds. I repeated my response to Mr. Lengel in my head to make sure I didn't say anything out of the way that would make Sammy stare like that.

Mr. Lengel replied with a simple "That's all right, but this isn't a beach." I nodded and reached for my change from Sammy. Alex, for some reason, felt the need to speak up saying: "We weren't shopping; we just came in for the one thing." It was as if Mom was right here with us having to throw in her opinion in. I noticed Jessica's eyes squinting. I was waiting for huge bursts of intelligent fire to burst out of those eyes, zapping Alex and Mr. Lengel.

"Makes no difference, we want you decently dressed when you come in here."

With my motherly instinct taking over, I responded by saying, "We are decent." Even though Alex shouldn't have spoken out, I knew that Mr. Hitler, Lengel, would not want his authority questioned by a fourteen year old. Making sure he had the upper hand before he turned away, he reminded us, once again, about the store policy.

Finally free from what seemed like hours, cute Sammy handed me the bagged up fish food. He had an interesting look in his eye that seemed alerting, like he was trying to tell me something. Fearing the policy police may return, I chose not to study his eyes or ask if he was okay. As the sliding doors unfolded unto the oasis of warmth, Jess asked me if I heard what Sammy told Mr. Lengel. "What did he say," I answered. "I think he just quit." That struck me in a way

that I am unaccustomed to feeling. I couldn't help but to think that something happened between the manager and Sammy because of us.

Even though the walk was horrible, being parked along the side of the building had its perks. As we neared the Jeep, I gave Jess the keys and told her that I forgot something. Walking back towards the store, I noticed Sammy walking across the parking lot away from an older Honda Prelude. He was too far away for me to call him, which was okay because of the awkwardness that would have ensued. There was a Starbucks across the street from the shopping plaza.

As he crossed the road, I approached his car. I noticed that his seats were stained and missing some foam. I also noticed a plastic bag in his back seat that said Goodwill on the side. This kind of thing has never bothered me though, and Jess is exactly the same. One of the main things I used to stress to her was to try to find the good within people before you make judgments, something Mom and Dad know nothing of. I reached into my purse and pulled out an old envelope. I tore it in half and wrote my name and number on it. Under my information, I wrote the word Thanks, putting an XO on either side of it. His window was almost completely down which allowed me to place it into his cup holder, knowing he would see it when he returned with his drink. I returned to the Jeep where Jess and Alex had the air blowing so high they looked as if they were taking glamour shots or skydiving. I sunk into my seat, made sure we were all buckled up and began to back up. As I adjusted my review mirror, I could see Alex looking at me. She looked me in the eyes and says "Olivia, do you think I can come live with you?"



Asheville

—Staci Poston

Aardvark

—David Doughty

It started to burn my fingers so I put it out and tossed it to the ground. I picked another at random from the pack and lit it. Maintaining the dizzy calmness was gratifying and kept me sane at times. I reached out my hand to feel the wind, which was also soothing.

As I inhaled my objective freedom on that somber winter morning, I saw him for the first time. He was young, wore plain clothes and looked as though he needed a shave and a shower. My eyes met his and I felt cold and still. He kept his gaze for a momentary eternity and then strode away after quickly glancing at his wristwatch. The ringing from my pocket startled me. I switched my cigarette to my left hand and answered the phone with my right.

"Hello?"

"Just reminding you that I'm visiting tomorrow."

"I know."

"I want you to clean up the place because I'm bringing your grandparents."

"I will."

"Okay. Have you found a job yet?" asked my mother. I took a long draw of smoke.

"Not yet."

"Are you looking?"

"Yes."

"Are you still smoking?"

"No, mom."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay...so, have you asked that girl to marry you yet?"

"I have a lot of work to do, mom."

"I thought you didn't have a job yet."

"Goodbye, mom."

"Goodbye, honey. I'll see you tomorrow. I love you."

"Yep."

I smoked a whole pack that morning. I wasn't addicted; I simply needed them. I smoked another pack around noon. As I broke into my last pack, I wondered if I had enough money for more. I decided to save that last pack for after the excruciating visit from my

mother and grandparents. I was going to need it.

That evening I gave in and had one last smoke before going to sleep. I sat on the balcony and stared at two small cats playing near their mother in the street. The street lamp flickered for an instant. Suddenly, there he was again. The same young man from before. He had appeared as swiftly as the smoke that floated from my throat. He stared once more, but I turned away. After six or seven drags, I turned back and he was gone.

I laid my pack of smokes in the table drawer next to my bed, making sure they were well hidden. I fell asleep in midair, before my head hit the pillow. Two hours later I woke and rushed to the toilet to relieve myself. After flushing, I drew water from the faucet with my hand, leaned down and wiped my face with it. I rose back up and stared at myself in the mirror. I really needed a cigarette.

I took the pack from its hiding spot, shook out a cigarette and placed the pack on top of the night stand next to a photo of my mother. I walked outside with the smoke already lit. I scanned the neighborhood, searching for the man from before. Instead I found a naked woman roaming the street.

"Jesus!" I exclaimed.

Her arms wrapped around her torso to keep herself warm. She was beautiful. Her ghost blonde hair waved from her head and clung to her shoulders. She walked slow and stared at nothing.

I ran downstairs and bolted out the door and into the street. She was gone. I spun around, looking in all directions until I found her. She was kneeling down and caressing the dead flowers in the garden outside my neighbor's window. I jogged up to her.

"Hey, are you alright?" I asked, concerned. She looked at me with a striking smile.

"This is a busy time for me," she said as she stood.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I found what I was searching for."

"What? What were you searching for?" I asked. She grinned mischievously.

"You." She said as started towards me. I began warily backing away from her. She lurched forward, grabbed my face and kissed it passionately. She pulled away and stared into my eyes.

"Give me your wallet," said a crusty voice from behind her. She closed her eyes smiled in a relieved manner.

"Right on schedule," she said as she stepped aside to reveal an old, dirty man holding a knife in my direction. I put my hands up with the cigarette still in my fingers.

"Whoa!" I yelled nervously. "I-I don't have my wallet on me, it's in my bedroom!"

"Listen to me. He's going to kill you," said the naked woman.

"What?! What are you talking about?!" I asked angrily.

"Who are you talking to, weirdo?" said the old man. "Just give me your fucking money!"

"He's going to kill you. I want you to relax," said the woman.

"Relax?!" I yelled.

"No, you relax, bub!" said the man as he stepped closer and switched the knife to his other hand. "I want your goddam money, and you're going to give it all to me right now or I'm going to slit your fucking throat and I'm going to take it from you and everything else you own! Your choice, asshole!"

"I told you, all my money is inside!" I yelled, frantically.

"You're not relaxing. Listen to me, carefully. It is your time," said the woman.

"My time?! What the fuck are you saying?!"

"Will you shut the hell up!" yelled the old man. "You are going to wake the whole damn town! Just shut up, and give me the money now!"

"It's your time. Your time to go. I need him to kill you for this to happen," said the woman.

"Fuck you, bitch!" I screeched.

"Hey!" snapped the old man. "Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?! I've got a fucking knife!" He brandished his weapon and stepped up so close I could smell the last man he murdered. "This is your last chance, asshole! Give me what you got, or you're dead!"

"My money is in the house!" I bellowed. The naked woman let out a heavy sigh before pushing me into the old man.

The first stab was unpleasant. However, as I fell to the ground along with my half-finished cigarette, I noticed that the repeated puncturing became less and less dreadful. The cigarette fell from between my fingers as I nervously gazed up into the face of the beautiful, exposed woman, grinning down at me.

"It's okay," she said. "Relax. It's your time."

"Why?" I asked, gasping weakly and gurgling a bit. She knelt down, stroked my hair and kissed my forehead.

"Why not?" she rebutted.

My head slowly turned to the side. I spent my last moments staring at

the cigarette on the ground next to me. I watched the bitter coldness eat away at the flaming ashes. The small, helpless light was no match for the taciturnity and ruthless inhumanity of the Angel of Death. It flickered for a moment longer, then ceased. My eyes gently closed. All was calm and dark.

I woke peacefully. My bed was surprisingly comfortable. I rose from the sheets and shuffled to the bathroom. I turned the faucet on and cupped the water in my hands. Inclining down, I splashed the lukewarm liquid on my face, and stood back up.

"Are you ready yet?" said the young, unshaven man who had appeared in the reflection of my mirror with his eyes fixed on his wristwatch. I spun around with wide eyes and backed away from him.

"What the Hell are you doing in here?! How did you get in?!" I asked, trying my best to be intimidating.

"Calm down, mate," he said, in a soft English dialect. I darted at the stranger, knocked him into the wall, and then bolted out into the hallway only to be stopped by the same man who somehow managed to appear right in front of me. In that instant I was too shocked to react quickly enough. He reached his arm out to me and touched my forehead with his index and middle finger. A strong, unknown force came from his extended arm; the next thing I knew, I was careening backwards through the air. I crashed heavily into the wall, but felt no pain. In a fraction of a moment he went from being meters away to being directly in front of me, kneeling down. He grabbed my throat and slammed my head into the wall behind me. Again, I felt no pain at all. "Enough of your impudence!" he said petulantly. "I've waited on this vile, mortal plane for nearly an entire cycle just to collect you. So, how about showing a little gratitude for old Devin, aye?"

I immediately became compliant. A sense around me told me that this man was important and I needed to do what he asked of me. I slowly nodded my head as my eyes were engulfed by his. He let me go, stood up and walked to my bedroom. I jumped up and hesitantly walked after him. He was looking around at my belongings without a single look of appreciation or disdain on his face. His eyes met mine.

"Choose something," he said.

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked, confused. He irritably shut his eyes.

"Pick an item to take with you on your journey. It can be anything, but only one item. And make it fast, we're already running late," he said in an annoyed voice. I pondered for a moment.

"What if I don't want to go with you?" I inquired. He quickly darted his cold eyes at me. I exhaled long and hard, then calmly picked up my pack of cigarettes from the desk and placed them in my pocket.

"Right then," he said. "Let's get going."

I didn't ask where we were going; I just followed him. I knew I had to. We walked downstairs and out the front door. The atmosphere was strange. The sky was orange and violet and moving rather quickly. The trees moved with the winter wind, but when I stretched out my hand, I could not feel it. A crow flew from a small elm tree, but its movements were very slow. I followed its flight with a semi-interested scrutiny until it landed on the ground near my white, motionless corpse.

"Oh," I said, insouciantly; in a voice that sounded warped and low. "I had forgotten about the girl...."

"Who, Angela?" said Devin, his voice sounding normal and untainted.

"She pushed me into him."

"Yeah, sorry about that. She does her job well, but sometimes when she gets impatient, she can be a real c—"

"Where are we going?" I sadly asked, interrupting him.

"You are going past the threshold; you have an appointment to see the Aardvark. I'm only taking you as far as the waiting room. Linda will take you from there."

"Who's the Aardvark?"

"All your questions will be answered soon enough. Now if you don't have anything more to ask, I think it's time to get going." He put his hand on my shoulder and I started to glow brightly. I looked at his face with a sudden admiration.

"Devin...why did you wait...for me?" I asked, earnestly. He shrugged casually.

"Why not?"

I was sitting in a chair. Everything was white and blank. Another chair appeared close by. Then another. Soon, ordinary chairs filled around the shapeless white room. A simple, white door appeared directly across from me. I scanned the room and waited for something to happen. After several moments, I stood and walked towards the door. Just as I was about to grab the handle, I heard her sweet voice. "Pete isn't going to let you in yet, deary."

I turned to see an adorable old lady sitting in the chair that I had just rose from. She was knitting what seemed to be an infinite sock and wore glasses that barely stood on the tip of her nose.

"Linda?" I asked.

"That's right," she said with a smile, never taking her eyes off her knitting.

"Where are we?" I asked, as I slowly and discreetly scanned around the room to see if anyone else was going to appear.

"We're the only ones here, darling, I assure you. As to your question, we are nowhere."

"Nowhere?"

"Well, some call it nowhere. Others call it everywhere." She looked up at me for the first time. "I call it home," she stated with a heartfelt smile. I smiled back. She patted the seat next to her. "Come and talk with me."

We talked for hours. Maybe we talked for days; there was no way of telling. We talked about me, mostly. My life had been laid out in a cascade of discussion for us to analyze. She offered very sage advice about how I should have handled my many mistakes and we laughed when we realized her wisdom was only in hindsight. Then, she asked me a very good question.

"You've brought your cigarettes with you. Why haven't you smoked yet?"

"Oh," I said, caught off guard. "I'm not sure. I think it's because I've forgotten to bring a lighter."

"So, did you choose the cigarettes because you thought you might need them in this life?" she asked. I thought for a moment. But before I could answer, the door swung open and out stepped an elderly man.

"NEXT!" he yelled, loudly and obnoxiously.

"I believe our time together is at an end, my dear," said Linda. I did not want to leave her. I think she knew that. She reached into her purse and pulled out an old lighter. "This was my late husband's," she said as she handed it to me. "You might need it."

"Why are you giving this to me?" I asked, looking at her with an appreciative grin. She beamed back at me.

"Why not?"

"NEXT!" said the old man, becoming irked.

"Alright, alright," I said as I hurried to the door. "Geez, why is everyone around here so damn impatient?"

"We have quotas to meet, kid. Something you wouldn't know about, not having a job and all."

"How do you know about that?" I asked as I entered the doorway and saw two more identical chairs facing each other in the

center of the room. The old man pulled a generic clip board out of his dress coat.

"Oh, I know a good many things about you, my boy," he said arrogantly. "My name's Pete. Glad we could meet. Now, please take a seat." I walked over and sat down in one of the chairs. "Not that one, you idiot!" he yelled. "That's my chair!"

"Oh, sorry...." I said, mockingly as I moved to the other chair. He walked over and before he sat down he paused and examined the chairs for a moment.

"Oops. My mistake; that was your chair." He said with a goofy face. I glared at him for a moment before getting up to sit in the first chair. He sat down in front of me and pulled a pen from his front coat pocket. "Well, let's get right to it."

"Get right to what?"

"We are now in the middle of processing your soul's worthiness."

"I don't quite follow...." I said. Pete clicked his pen open and made some sort of mark on the papers attached to the clipboard. "What are you writing?"

"You lied to your mother, correct?" he asked, ignoring me.

"I'm sorry?"

"You told her you had quit smoking."

"Oh...right."

"That's not good," he said as he made a few more marks on the clipboard. "Not good at all."

"Excuse me, what are you writing?" I asked again.

"Is that why you chose to take the cigarettes?" he asked, further disregarding me. "Because you thought she might be heart-broken if she found them laying on your nightstand next to her photo?"

"No," I answered. "I don't remember why I chose them. But I think mom knew I was lying anyway."

"I see...." said Pete, making several more markings on the important papers.

"What the Hell are you writing?" I said in a demanding voice. Pete instantaneously turned the clipboard around to reveal a crude, childish drawing of me in my underwear with silly hat and stupid mustache. He had drawn me holding up a sign that read LOSER. I sighed and sat back in my chair with my hand on my forehead.

"Okay, I think you're ready," said Pete.

"What? Ready for what?"

"To venture past the threshold. The Aardvark is expecting you," he said as he pointed to a door behind me that was not there before.

"What? That's it?" I asked. "We're done? You're just letting me go in?"

"Sure, why not?" he asked, bombastically, as he rose from his chair and walked to open the first door to yell "NEXT!" I stood to face other door; the door that was supposedly going to lead me to the Aardvark. I walked up to it, took a deep breath, closed my eyes, opened it and walked through.

I could sense the amazing flora and fauna that surrounded the landscape. I opened my eyes to find that I was in the midst of a glorious wilderness. The beauty and splendor were almost unnatural. I spun around and around to take in every inch of scenery. And that's when I saw him. A man dressed in a fancy white outfit sitting on a stump. The man's head was that of an anteater's. He used his long snout to gently take sips from his teacup.

"Hello, young man!" he said, excitedly in a crazy voice, right before hurling the tea cup in my direction. I ducked down just in time and it smashed onto a nearby tree.

"What the Hell?!" I shouted.

"Hell? Oh, no, my dear boy. This isn't Hell," he said. "Hell is on the opposite end." I frowned at the odd creature for a brief moment.

"Are you the Aardvark?" I asked, firmly.

"I am Seth," he replied. "I am the creator of your existence, the producer of the existence that allowed you come into being, and the designer of the existence that made your existence cease to exist." My frown turned into a confused grimace. I sat down on the ground and looked off into the stunning horizon.

"You know," I said, "I would ask you why you chose to have me die, but I have a feeling I know what you're going to say." With that, the Aardvark giggled.

"You catch on quick, my good fellow," he said.

"So this is it...I really am dead. This really is a different set of worlds I've been traveling through."

"Of course you're dead, you imbecile! You're talking to an Aardvark, for crying out loud. And these are, indeed, different worlds from that of your own. Haven't you noticed the abrupt change in plot length and writing style? Your story is told in an altered manner here!"

"Well, that makes sense, I guess," I said as I shrugged, non-

chalantly.

"Yes it does, and no it doesn't," said Seth. "Well, let's get going; we have a lot of sights to see!"

"No, I think I'll stay here," I said, defying him.

"What?" said the Aardvark, taken aback. "Are you certain?"

"I like it here." I said, stretching my arm out to feel the gentle wind. "I want my story to end here."

"Oh," he said, scratching his chin. "Suit yourself...." He pulled out another full cup of tea from his jacket pocket and returned to his stump. I laid back against the heavenly grass and pulled a cigarette out of my pocket. "Hmm," said Seth, curiously. "If you don't mind my asking, why did you choose to bring the cigarettes?" I put the smoke in between my lips and lit it with Linda's lighter. I took a long drag as I rested my free arm behind my head. Smiling, I exhaled the marvelous smoke and answered the Aardvark's query.

"Why not?"



DayDreams

—Caitlynne McNeill

Anna's Face

—Matthew Turbeville

As soon as it became clear that Mama was going to fix me up with Daniel McKenzie, I had to excuse myself for the bathroom. Mama squinted her eyes at me, like she would've shot hate rays at me if she could. Mama's always had this special power for embarrassing me at the most inopportune times. I just wouldn't have been able to handle the awkward exchange of words between Daniel McKenzie and myself. He's a few years older than me—I am only thirty-three, give or take a few years if you check my I.D.—and he's already balding. Mama just doesn't understand that I have standards. I guess you can't expect anyone who married someone like Daddy to understand how the real world works, a world outside of Shallow Pond.

I walked all the way down the hall and out the front doors. The church was having one of its regular "banquets," if that's what you can call it. There was fried chicken and macaroni and gravy, because there's always gravy. I went out into the real world when I was eighteen, and every year that passes by makes it harder and harder for me to understand how I ever lived in this place.

There is a stoplight in front of the church, where cars only wait on Sundays or Wednesday nights when people come to pretend they are happy while they are secretly alcoholics. Charles, my first boyfriend in college, who was also a psychology major, thinks I base my entire view of Shallow Pond on my family and neighbors. I tried to explain to him, back before we started sleeping together, when things took a turn for the worst: "Charlie—" (he hated that, he was serious and wanted to be called Charles) "—that is everyone in Shallow Pond."

At the stoplight, I did not hesitate in crossing the street. I missed the traffic-heavy streets of the big city, and the subways that I always enjoyed taking, even with the smell of stale urine and crowded, unwashed people everywhere.

This is probably why the car hit me.

It was only a light tap against my side, but it sent me toppling over into the street. I rolled and rolled, crying out as I did, wishing there had been a college course in this: Dead Pedestrians 101.

I remained still for a while, sprawled out on the street. I wanted to be dead more than anything. There came a light-and-

only-slightly-masculine voice from behind me. The man—my assailant!—hesitated behind me. I imagine he wasn't sure if he should check my pulse or make a run for it.

"Hello? Are you OK?"

Oh god. I recognized his voice.

"Wait. Jillian, is that you?"

He had recognized me too, which made me want to die even more. Even with my face pressed to the gravel, all cut up and disguised, he knew me. It is probably because I have a big ass. In high school, my ass was well-known. Not in a promiscuous way, though.

"Hi," I said, lifting my head just a bit to turn and look at him. "Hey there."

"Jillian, I'm so sorry, are you OK?"

Carter Adams stared at me, a part of him still concealed behind his car. He bent down to help me up, and when he did, I flinched a bit. Carter seemed hurt, even though he wasn't the one who'd just been hit by a car.

"I'm fine," I claimed, dusting off my dress which seemed fine, just a little dirty. I picked a few rocks out of my knees. The rocks were tiny and embedded in my skin, like they were moles that just belonged there. "I haven't seen you in a while." I was so embarrassed I could barely meet his eyes.

"I'm sorry our reunion's like this—I am really sorry. Can I take you to the hospital?"

"It's not that serious," I said. I remembered that I did not like Carter, and I spent the next five minutes trying to remember why that was so.

"Do you want to sit down?" Carter took my hand and led me over to a nearby bench. He sat me down with my knees touching his so he could look me in the eye and make sure I didn't have a concussion. I knew he just felt guilty. "You OK? I'm sorry, really. Jillian?"

I had zoned out: I was thinking about how Mama was probably going to make me marry Daniel McKenzie. She would guilt trip me into saying yes to him, whenever he eventually got guilt tripped himself into asking me to get married. I told myself: Just say no. That's what they taught us in high school about drugs and alcohol. I had always preferred sparkling grape juice to the real thing, so it had never been much of a problem for me.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Do you have a concussion?" Carter asked, confirming my suspicions that he had ulterior motives for sitting with me.

"How am I supposed to know that?" I asked back, rolling my eyes, which hurt a little. There must have been a cut on my face, and I could feel my skin bruising, stinging and chafed like dry lips.

It was just a little bump, I assured him. "I've taken falls worse'n that before. I've fallen down a whole flight of steps, too, at prom once when I was sneaking upstairs to make out with Robby Emerson."

Carter chatted with me for a few minutes before he remembered his car. It was sitting by the curb, still running with the driver's side door opened to reveal a messy interior. I laughed at Carter, and he smiled at me, which seemed weirdly charming.

I thought back to how I knew Carter, and why I had never wanted to be his friend. I knew that we had been connected by Anna, my best friend from middle school. I couldn't remember why I didn't like him then. There was an image of a creepy man standing in the corner of a darkened room. The man, on the television screen, had his face partially concealed in shadow, and every time I looked at Carter, the man was there, waiting.

Carter touched the back of my hand gently. I thought about how maybe he did know me, because of that expression "I know you like the back of my hand," and maybe I had been wrong not to be his friend all those years ago. I thought that maybe he could love me, and I could love him, and maybe it had been like this all along, and then I felt like a fool. Not because it wasn't possible, but because I hadn't thought of it earlier—an epiphany that could have saved me a lot of grief.

My knight-in-shining-armor gave me a lift home. He dropped me off at Mama's house—it had been my house too, back when Carter and I were young.

I opened the car door to get out, but Carter stopped me.

He said, "Jillian."

I said, "Yeah?"

He said, "I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner at my house Saturday night. I'd like to catch up—it seems like there isn't anyone left our age. We're all moved off or something."

"Most people are smarter than us." I smiled. "I'd love to."

I climbed out of the car. It was a grand exit, until my dress got stuck in the door and Carter nearly took off with a part of me still inside the car. Carter pressed the brakes and laughed good-naturedly.

"You OK?"

"Yeah, but, question. Where do you live?"

"It's out in the country. 2830 Morris Road. You can't miss it—just outside of town, towards Melbin."

"Towards Melbin. OK."

I smiled again and waved goodbye, straightening my dress with the palms of my hands and watching Carter turn left at the end of the street.

The address had seemed familiar, but only faintly. Like *déjà vu*.

Passing the long dirt road for the first time, I hesitate. I am surely mistaken.

The dirt road, which is clearly a road and not a drive, shoots straight back through a border of trees on either side. There is grass and grass and then fields, like a symmetrical map, folded exactly in two by the hands of God. I know this road like I know a favorite childhood storybook, the pictures and rhymes still imprinted in my mind.

I turn left onto the road and let my car cruise between the trees. I take in the familiar landscape: this place hasn't crossed my mind in years. Not of my own accord, anyways.

I roll down the window to inhale the fresh air. It is summer and warm, but not so warm that I can't enjoy a nice drive with the wind rippling around the car like a gentle current.

There are more trees up ahead, and they bend over like old men, unable to stand straight even with their walkers. The tops of the trees cast a certain shadow down over the road, making the visual a little eerie, all past and darkness, and maybe that's how it's always been.

Up ahead of me: the great big white house with its large porch and grand columns, towering over me. The former owners claimed the house was part of a former plantation, but Mama always told me that the house hadn't been built until the twentieth century, so, "Who are they kidding?"

Birds fly up into the trees, frightened. They disappear.

The house is too big to just peer around, especially from far away. I climb out of my car and grab my purse and walk around, over grass that is perfectly manicured. There is a box near one of the flowerbeds that is filled with toys. Toys for a young girl—and the toys are stacked neatly, precisely, in a strict order.

I climb the stairs to the porch and walk around the side of

the house to peer into the backyard. The old tire swing is still there, but the rope has turned dark with rot, and I can't see the trampoline anymore.

"Didn't know you were here," I hear from behind me.

I'm jump, startled. Turning around, I see Carter standing behind me with a glass of iced tea in his hand. He offers it to me.

"Thanks," I say. "I didn't snoop. I was just a little shocked."

Carter chuckles. "I figured."

"You didn't tell me you lived in Anna's house. I knew the address sounded familiar."

"I guessed you'd figure it out eventually."

Carter walks me inside, into the foyer and down one of the hallways. I glance at picture frames hanging on the wall. There's a little girl in most of the pictures, with brown hair and a tiny, thin face that almost seems starved. It's so different from the pictures of Anna that I'm used to. The girl has a heart-shaped birthmark on her neck; it seems like it's growing, even in the pictures.

I notice one similarity between them: like Anna, the girl in the pictures has bright blue eyes that seem to stab through the frame. They're fighting you; they're resistant.

Carter asks me if I want a drink.

I say, "Iced tea."

He gives me a look because he's thinking *We are grown, Jilian*. It's time to drink grown-up drinks.

I laugh, a little embarrassed. If I want to get a man, I've got to trick him. "Can I just have some vodka, please?"

A stranger look on Carter's face: "Vodka?"

I see the bottles beside him, half-full and ominous. "In a glass," I say.

"But—I mean—plain?"

"Am I supposed to have some—oh."

I wasn't a big drinker in college. Mostly, I hung out with the literary crowd who—while they had their fair share of Ernest Hemingways and Hunter S Thompsons—were a much more peaceful crowd, and not in a drugged-up way either. Charles liked to sit in his groups and talk about literary theory while I sat to the side and read my Nora Roberts. Charles drank beer sometimes, but you probably couldn't quiz me on name brands or tastes, really.

"Beer. Sorry. I had a stroke for a second—I love beer even more than vodka, how could I forget?"

I take a seat on the couch opposite Carter. All of the fur-

niture in the room is old and smells like death. It looks just like the furniture Anna's parents owned when we were young.

"Everything looks pretty much the same," I say.

"No kidding. The Waldens gave me a pretty good deal."

"I'm assuming the Waldens didn't leave their old pictures, too. Who's the girl in all your pictures?" I gesture towards one of the picture frames set up on a nearby table. "She's cute."

"Her name is Anna," Carter says, not bothering to look at the picture himself.

He grabs a beer off the tray by the couch and hands it to me. The beer is warm, which doesn't really make a difference to me.

"She's my daughter," Carter says.

"You have a daughter?" I sound surprised. I try to turn it into a happy sort of surprise, as if I'm delighted by the news.

"She's almost the age Anna was when she—"

Carter smiles.

I smile too, touched. "That's so nice that you named her after Anna. Well, I mean—you did name her after Anna, right?"

"It's the one thing we had in common, Jillian. When she left, that was the end of everything, wasn't it?"

I nod, swirling the beer in my hands. I don't want to drink it.

"Are you married, too?"

Carter nods and takes a sip of his own beer. "I was. She died two years ago, unfortunately. Horrible car accident in North Carolina."

"Oh. Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. That's just awful."

My knight-in-shining-armor has baggage. Great big boulders with handles that he can barely tote on his own.

"Anna was in the accident too—they were going to see Kathy's mother, Anna's grandmother—and luckily one of them made it out alive. Anna's been very sickly ever since then. She hasn't been in school much, and finally we relocated back to Shallow Pond a few years ago. I didn't even know you were back here—I would have called you up ages ago."

This all seems like too much at once. I was expecting a romantic evening with Carter, not a night drinking warm beer in our former mutual friend's childhood home while Carter's sickly daughter is upstairs in her room, crying over her dead mother. What if new-Anna, as I've come to think of Carter's daughter, is secretly plotting my death? Or, worse yet, what if she's already come to think of me as new-Mama?

I glance at my purse. My keys are inside. I can always make a run for it.

But Carter is staring at me, and he seems so nice, and he's grown handsome now. The years have been kind to him.

Anna's face was lit up by the blue-gray glow of the television.

The man in the corner of the TV set was examining his victim, and Anna was shivering with anticipation.

"Can we watch something else now?" Anna said, in that mock-fearful way of hers, like she just wanted attention.

I rolled my eyes. "Just finish watching the movie."

Anna got up and walked to the light switch. She flipped on the lights and stared at me in the new whiteness. I blinked up at her, then turned my head away, deciding not to give in and pay her any attention.

"Do you know Carter?"

We were in Anna's bedroom. There were old things everywhere: old rugs, old paintings, old knickknacks and plaques hanging on the wall. These old things made the Waldens feel like they had a sense of history, like they were an old family, and old money, too.

Anna walked over to a coat of arms that hung beside her dresser. There were two swords above it. Even then, I knew that the coat of arms didn't belong to her family, and that the swords were probably bought at an antique store.

She repeated her question: "Do you know Carter?"

"What type of question is that?" I wanted to pretend to watch the TV, even if I couldn't because I was too angry. Anna made me like this, all angry and raging.

"He's in love with me. Isn't that funny?"

"What's funny is that you think that makes you cool."

I didn't bother to look and see Anna's reaction.

Here's a part I'm not sure about—it could be real, or I maybe I made it up in my head, to make sense of things:

Anna (reaching up to the swords, touching the edge of one with her forefinger, running her skin along the blade): "Maybe I am cool, or maybe I'll be cool after I get up and leave. I'll be here one second and the next I'll be gone, and you'll remember me forever. Then I'll be cooler than you'll ever be."

...and taking her finger from the edge of the sword, examining it, seeing that it is burgundy and moist and dripping...

Anna laughed.

I put my lips to the mouth of the bottle and pretend to sip.

"What happened when she left?"

From the way Carter's described it, he and I remember high school in completely different ways. He thinks we were friends, and I remember Carter being at the bottom of the social ladder, picking at the bumps on his face and dying his hair black on the first weekend of every month. I don't remember being friends with him, not really, ever.

"Things changed," I say.

I sip the beer, finally. The room is getting warmer, and I'm starting to sweat even though I've only had a few drops of alcohol. I've decided not to marry my knight-in-shining-armor. He is very late coming to my rescue and I'm older now and in need of a few cats. I can make an online dating profile and get raped by a Craigslist killer, but I don't want to live in this house where Anna lived, where new-Anna lives, where Carter thinks about his dead wife all the time.

"Do you think she just ran away, like they said?" Carter purses his lips and stares at me. He's in serious thought.

"I...don't know. Do you have a bathroom I can use?"

I don't have any friends. Usually girls get their friends to call them, faking aneurysms and house fires to end a date quickly. I don't have any friends anymore, and I don't want to ask Mama for help. She'll just rub it in my face and tell me Daniel McKenzie is waiting, just a phone call away.

The walls around me are shrinking as the room slowly closes in on me.

I can't stay in this date for much longer.

"Sure, right down the hallway—well, you remember your way around the house, right?"

I nod, getting up to walk down the hall and get a plan together in the bathroom.

Halfway down the hall, with pictures of new-Anna and Kathy to my left and right, and I glance up the stairs to where Anna's old bedroom was. There's a part of me that wants to climb these stairs and have one last look before I tell Carter the CIA is after me and I have to go into hiding.

My right foot is on the first step and, before I can stop myself, I'm climbing the stairs for the last time.

"Where's Anna?" John Banger asked me one day after school.

I was standing on the curb, waiting for Mama to pick me up.

I looked at John Banger and smiled, wishing I had a cigarette to make me look cooler. "Probably just whoring around, like usual. You should really watch out around girls like her, John."

John Banger laughed at me. "Isn't she supposed to be your best friend or something?"

I don't know when I started to hate Anna. It might have been in high school, when boys started noticing Anna for her breasts. She refused to give into them, mostly for her Christian ideals, but I knew everything that came out of her mouth was a lie.

Everything about Anna made me angry. So, when she disappeared, I got exhausted with trying to figure out exactly how I was supposed to feel.

On the second floor hallway, on the way to Anna's old room, there more pictures:

First there are pictures of new-Anna, mostly older pictures. They are from before the accident because Kathy is in several of them.

As I get closer to the bedroom door (it is shut but I see the white glow stretching out across the floor) I see that there are pictures of Anna herself. Old Anna, with her blonde hair and blue eyes, piercing me with their neediness.

I have to smile at Anna. I don't know why.

There is something different about these pictures, but I can't put my finger on it. I squint my eyes at them, wondering why they seem so new, almost like painting reproductions made by struggling artists years and years after the original masterpiece.

The reproductions show the evolution of the Anna I knew then. The pictures change. It's like I'm watching the painter fix the shape of Anna's ears, the width of her face, the length of her jaw. I'm fast-forwarding through the creation of man to perfection, remembering something that Mama tried to explain to me once: People who die in their peak are glorified forever. We never see their bad sides, how they pick their noses or kick dogs when they're angry. They're perfect to us.

God, is that how people think of Anna?

I reach out to touch the door to Anna's bedroom but, before I can reach the door knob, the door is pulled open with a

suddenness that sends me retreating into the hallway.

I cry out:

There, standing before me, is Frankenstein's monster, Anna, the real Anna, the Anna who ran away, was kidnapped, whatever the truth was, frozen in time just how I remember her: but here there are bandages covering parts of her face. She's got a bad dye job and I can see her dark roots, out of place in her shockingly-bright blonde hair. Something about Anna's nose is off, and her lips aren't exactly the right shade of pink.

But her eyes—Anna's eyes are blue, blue, blue.

And there, on her neck, is a heart-shaped birthmark that I don't recall.

Downstairs, Carter stops me to ask where I'm going.

"I can't stay here," I say.

He presses, physically and mentally. I'm cornered against a wall, and I feel my three sips of beer settling in. "What's wrong?"

"Your daughter—Anna—she looks just like—you know, Anna."

"She had to have several operations after the accident to make her look normal again." Carter looks hurt.

I ignore the sympathy card and push him away from me. "She looks just like Anna. What is this? This is her house, her furniture—your daughter has her face."

The front door seems so far down the hall.

I remember the image of Carter I had in my mind all these years, and what Anna had said about him being in love with her.

"The past isn't so bad, Jillian." Carter's voice is lost in the hallway, like stale air that just sits around and refuses to die. "It's what connects us, Jillian! Why do you think you even came here?"

Past the gloomy trees, I drive, out into a darkness that isn't exaggerated by green leaves and crooked tree limbs. The road is just ahead of me now. The sky evolves from blue to dark blue to black, just like those pictures of Anna's face. The Annas are starting to blur together in my mind now, too.

Out from the trees she leaps, right in the path of my moving car.

It is Carter's daughter, her face wrapped in bandages. The muscles on her face left visible are distorted in terror. She waves for

me to stop my car.

She begs for help. From inside the car, it's hard for me to make out what she's saying.

Please take me with you I'm Anna just like the one you left behind before don't leave us behind again.

But I press my foot on the gas pedal and rev the engine and am off, the sky still fading around me, blue.

Aging

—Carissa Fazio

(At rise: Two elderly women sitting on a park bench in silence. Rose is eating cream puffs; Evelyn is holding a box.)

ROSE: Hi, I'm Rose. Do you come here often?

EVELYN: No, this is my first time. It's a beautiful park; I've always heard great things about it. I decided to see for myself.

ROSE: Yes, it's lovely. (Rose reaches into a bag by her side and tosses some breadcrumbs to the ground.)

EVELYN: Do they ever come?

ROSE: Who?

EVELYN: The birds.

ROSE: You can't see them?

EVELYN: No, I guess not... (Pause.) I'm sorry, I never introduced myself. I'm Evelyn.

ROSE: Nice to meet you. (The two sit in silence for some time, Rose eating cream puffs.) What's in the box?

EVELYN: Nothing, really.

ROSE: Can I look inside?

EVELYN: No, you may not.

ROSE: If it's nothing, why can't I just peek inside?

EVELYN: Because, I said so.

ROSE: But why?

EVELYN: Because.

ROSE: So you're really not going to give in. I'll give you one of my cream puffs if you let me look in the box—

EVELYN: I told you no.

ROSE: Fine. (Beat.) I had a box once...

EVELYN: Really? What was inside?

ROSE: A dried rose and a peacock feather... OOPS. (Rose covers mouth with both hands.)

EVELYN: A dried rose and a peacock feather? What dumb things to keep hidden in a box.

ROSE: I bet it's not as dumb as what is in your box.

EVELYN: Hey, it is not dumb. (The two sit quietly for a few seconds. Rose tosses some more breadcrumbs; Evelyn opens a bar of chocolate.) You want some?

ROSE: I'm allergic.

EVELYN: Oh, I'm sorry. I love chocolate.

ROSE: Hmm. (Pause.) So do you live near here? Near the park?

EVELYN: I don't live too far a-ways. I stay with my daughter and her husband. Keep the grandchildren.

ROSE: That must be nice. I had a granddaughter for a few days... (Pause.)

EVELYN: So, you have kids?

ROSE: Yeah. My son ran off with a stripper his junior year of college. They moved clear across the United States.

EVELYN: Oh.

ROSE: Zoe. Her name was Zoe. The stripper, that is. She told him she was pregnant with his child. They ran off and got married in a courthouse. Five months later she had a little girl; I had a grand-

daughter.

EVELYN: That's wonderful! Girls are a blessing—

ROSE: It wasn't his.

EVELYN: Oh.

ROSE: Yeah. The baby was half black. She had tricked him and he was furious.

EVELYN: Wow...

ROSE: He marched her right back to the same courthouse they were wed in, and filed for a divorce. I got to see a picture of the baby though. She was beautiful. Mixed babies always are. Her skin looked smooth as caramel, and she had inquisitive brown eyes, round as pennies. (Beat.) That's how I had a granddaughter for a few days.

EVELYN: That's too bad. Grandchildren really are wonderful.

ROSE: I bet they are...

EVELYN: Just the other day my little Billy came in and said, "Gran-mammy, how does your hairs stay so silver? Mommy has to dye hers, but your hair is always perfectly the same." Isn't that the sweetest thing?

ROSE: I guess. Is there a gift for your grandson in that box?

EVELYN: No.

ROSE: Oh. Is your husband still alive?

EVELYN: Yeah. He's been in the hospital with cancer for the past few weeks. That's why I moved in with my daughter and her husband. They didn't want me to go through it alone.

ROSE: Oh. That must be nice. Having your husband still, that is.

EVELYN: I am very thankful. I assume yours has passed?

ROSE: Yeah. About eight years ago from a stroke. One of the hard-

est things I've ever gone through.

EVELYN: That's really unfortunate.

ROSE: Yeah. (Beat.)

EVELYN: Yeah. (Pause.) Have you ever seen an octopus eating a rabbit?

ROSE: What? No...

EVELYN: Me neither. My granddaughter drew one this morning. A purple octopus eating a blue rabbit. They were on a farm. She's only four, so no one told her that isn't possible.

ROSE: That would be kind of hard though, don't you think? First there's the problem of how the octopus got onto the farm—

EVELYN: At least she has an imagination.

ROSE: Yeah. At least you have her for more than six days...

EVELYN: Sorry. I can't help it though. My grandchildren are my pride and my joy...

ROSE: Yeah.

EVELYN: Do you drink prune juice? It's on sale today at the supermarket, buy one jug get one free.

ROSE: What in the world would I do with two jugs of prune juice?

EVELYN: Drink them?

ROSE: Huh. That would be interesting...

EVELYN: (Pulls some knitting from a bag.) I'm making a scarf for my husband, Roy.

ROSE: Why would he need a scarf? Why not a hat for the cancer hair loss?

EVELYN: (Pause.) I made him a hat last week. This is a scarf to

match it.

ROSE: Well, that would be a sight. A man lying in a hospital gown, sick and weak wearing a hat and scarf set.

EVELYN: He likes them a lot. The nurses love to see him smile when he puts them on every morning.

ROSE: Well, that's nice. (Beat.) Is that's what's in your box? More yarn?

EVELYN: No. I carry my yarn in this bag.

ROSE: Is it a cake?

EVELYN: No.

ROSE: Is it a box of love letters from a secret admirer?

EVELYN: No. Do you come here often?

ROSE: Yeah, I come down here every morning to feed the birds.

EVELYN: (Pause.) Uhh, there are no birds. Just a pile of bread-crumbs.

ROSE: Yeah there are...

EVELYN: Where?

ROSE: I'm not telling you.

EVELYN: Oh. Well that's childish. If I can't see them, how can I believe you?

ROSE: Well... if you don't believe in the birds, then I don't believe you have anything in that box!

EVELYN: What? Stop with the box already.

ROSE: At least tell me who it's for.

EVELYN: It's not for anyone. It's my box, and it's for me.

ROSE: Hmm. I had a box once...

EVELYN: Yeah, you said.

ROSE: Ohh. Right. (Beat. Rose tosses more breadcrumbs.)

EVELYN: You know, it's stupid to keep tossing those breadcrumbs like that if there aren't any birds. (Beat. Rose reaches over and grabs the box.) HEY! (Evelyn gets a grip on box as well and they both tug at it.) Give that back! You can't just— (After a small struggle between the two, the box explodes open and glitter flies everywhere. Pause.)

ROSE: What is all this?

EVELYN: Glitter. (Beat.)

ROSE: Why do you have a box full of glitter?

EVELYN: I collect it. (Beat.) I've been collecting glitter since I was young. I keep it in this box. Or, I did...

ROSE: Why do you collect glitter? Isn't that kind of messy?

EVELYN: No. Not if it stays in the box. Geez, people can be so nosy. You know how hard it is to collect a box full of glitter? It's taken me a full 70 years to get this far. I scrape it off of birthday cards, and pluck it off of seats in the church after sweet little girls parade off in their Sunday best. This hasn't been the easiest thing to collect...

ROSE: I'm sorry I messed up your box, but why glitter? Why not stamps? Or bottle caps?

EVELYN: Those are so ordinary. Everyone collects those things. I bet you do. (Beat.) Besides. Glitter is so beautiful. I was going to bring it to my husband to show how much I have. Of course, now it's scattered in the breeze and all over this park bench. Scattered, like breadcrumbs.

ROSE: Why didn't you just show me the glitter? Why was it such a big deal?

EVELYN: Well, no one has ever seen all of it before. It's my special thing I do for myself. It's so beautiful and shiny. I didn't want to share it with anyone. But with Roy about to pass, I thought maybe seeing how beautiful this glitter is, he could find some hope in it to cling to, or at least to bring him comfort.

ROSE: (Tossing more breadcrumbs.) That's beautiful. I am sorry I dumped it all on the ground.

EVELYN: It's fine, really. I can always just tell him how beautiful it was, all fluttering down like snow.

ROSE: It really was beautiful. I'm glad I got to see it. (Pause.) You were right about the birds. They never come.

EVELYN: (Pause. Evelyn hands Rose the box.) Here. You can have this. Better late than never. (She gets up to exit.)

ROSE: (Pause.) Evelyn? Thanks. (Evelyn smiles and exits. Rose starts scraping glitter into the box. Fade to black. End scene.)



Deep Thoughts at Shallow Pond

—Kelly Gaskins

Bipolar Weather

-Cassie Dean

Blaring sun, blinding, always bright
Mania is overwhelming, yet blissful compared to normal
Unlike rainy sadness, depression is like a fog
A dense haze that oppresses the senses, morphing all colors to gray
Anger like thunder, sadness like rain
My pensive thoughts are like misty mornings, sun poking through
low clouds
No rainbows because this is reality, not a fairytale
Snow is rare, but ice after a fight is too common for comfort
Tornados of exhausting change, ripping my world to shreds
My favorite of all is a pristinely clear night
With its bright moon and distant stars, I feel I can finally breathe

Soar high above the sky and let the sun shine on your face
Lie beneath the moon and urge the wind to play its symphony

Bulimia Nervosa

—Carissa Fazio

Dissatisfaction with her body started this vicious cycle:
cramming carbs down her throat in blind fury
only after purging this morning's breakfast,
because cake and ice cream were not enough.

Cramming carbs down her throat in blind fury
she exceeds recommended calorie intake.
Because cake and ice cream were not enough
she ate three Big Macs and a Subway foot-long.

She exceeds recommended calorie intake.
She compensates through self-induced vomiting because
she ate three Big Macs and a Subway foot-long
followed by a dozen donuts and a large Domino's pizza.

She compensates through self-induced vomiting because
she tried to get help, but honestly, therapy feels better
followed by a dozen donuts and a large Domino's pizza.
Her bingeing habits cause unwanted weight gain.

She tried to get help, but honestly, therapy feels better
only after purging this morning's breakfast.
Her bingeing habits cause unwanted weight gain.
Dissatisfaction with her body started this vicious cycle.

Captivity

–Kaitlyn Grooms

[Note to readers: This narrative was derived from another story that was previously published in The Snow Island Review, entitled “Freedom.” It is beneficial, but not critical, to read that one first.]

My name is Malayna Reed. Something terrible has happened. It had to happen. The abuse was just too much. There was blood everywhere. The knife lay on the floor like a perfect flower in a garden, untouched, and covered in blood. Perhaps I should start from the beginning.

My boyfriend, Ben, and I had been living in a quaint yellow house right outside the city limits of Wichita, Kansas. Ben had been working for Alternative Energy Solutions and had gotten a hefty raise in pay. He was never around because he had to work all the time. I had to research and view houses before I finally settled on the yellow one in the godawful “gated community” as the snobby neighborhood committee called it. It took so long to find one he’d be happy in. I knew what he would want, so I picked one he wouldn’t dislike. When he proposed to me, I couldn’t say no, so I agreed. I almost called it off, though, after he asked me to choose an engagement ring for myself. I pushed through and picked the one he would have wanted me to buy.

It was okay when he was happy. He seemed to be having fewer problems here, probably because of his new job. Back in Texas, where my family lived, he would get angry a lot. We weren’t living together then, so he didn’t physically hurt me as much. There was a lot of over-the-phone abuse though. He would tell me how much he hated his job and sometimes I think he implied that it was my fault for keeping him there. If it wasn’t for me and my family, he could have moved anywhere (without having to get married to me) and gotten a better job. But finally, he fulfilled his dream and was happier here.

I’m not sure I ever loved him, but I had to stay with him. I thought I could help him get over his anger and rage blackouts. I never thought it would go this far. He loved me, I think, but not like a normal person would love their significant other. It was more of, I don’t know,

a “protective” kind of love. He wanted to keep me safe, not for my sake, but for his own. He wanted to show everyone -- his family and coworkers -- that he could keep a girlfriend. I don’t know if he ever cared about my well-being. When he hit me, he’d always say it wasn’t my fault, that he was just mad. He never once told me he was sorry. And he never would. He wasn’t going to change, and even if he did, I wasn’t the one who was going to change him.

Moving into the new house and staying busy kept him away for a while, so the abuse essentially stopped. I was happier because I thought he had changed, even if it was just a little. He always said the move was a new start, a new life; something better and more free. He always told me that. I asked if I could paint the bedroom a light blue to match our old room. He slapped me across the base of my jaw, knocking me to the floor. I covered my face, burying my sore jaw in my trembling hands. But I didn’t cry, not this time. I wasn’t going to give him the usual satisfaction. I stood up, using the bed for support, looked at the red veins in his eyes, and walked out of the room and down the hall. I went downstairs and sat at the kitchen table, without a word. I heard the front door slam shut, and hot tears fell from my burning eyes.

.....
.....

The front door creaked open. I had been cooking to ease my pain, to suppress my anger at what he had done to me; I always cooked when I was discontent. I heard him sweeping through the living room and through the open doorway of the kitchen. He put his arms around me without warning, his chin on my shoulder. He pressed his lips across my cheek where his hand had previously been. I turned around and tried to push him away. He hugged me tight as if everything was okay again. He told me, even, that everything was going to be okay and that it was a mistake. He always told me the same shit. I tried to push harder, shoving his arms. I gave up when he didn’t budge and turned back to my stirring. I told him to sit down; his dinner was almost ready.

I had already set the table for him because he always expected it to be done before he would even sit. He told me everything smelled good, and I grimaced. What an ass, to think everything was all better. I took the bread to him as he would have expected. I didn’t want to do

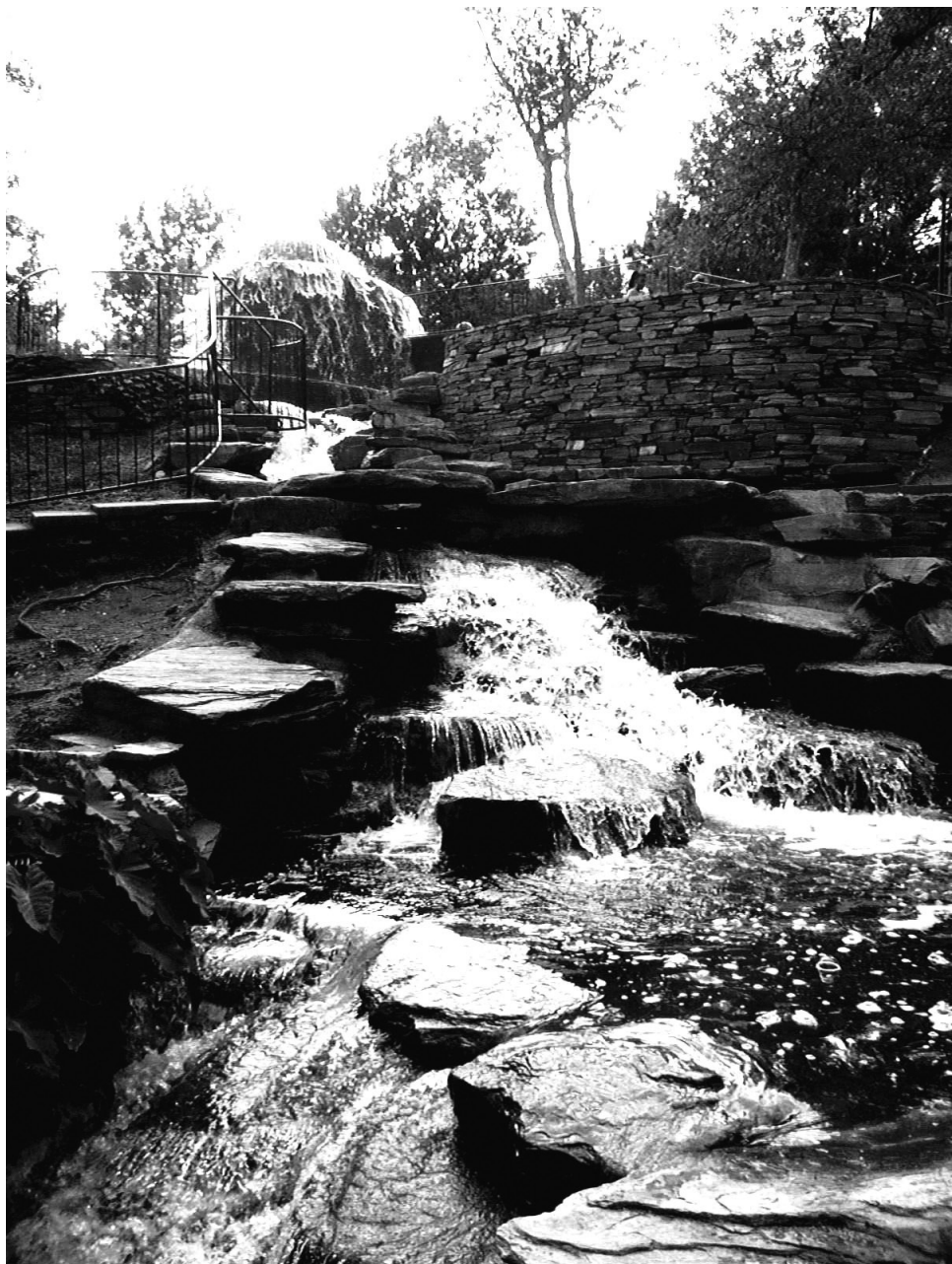
anything to displease him. At least he thought it was okay, so maybe I'd be able to sleep tonight.

I had taken out the new wine glasses -- a house-warming gift -- from the cabinet. I leaned over Ben, pouring the deep red wine into his glass. I placed a roll on his plate, again, as he should expect me to. I asked if he wanted butter; I didn't want to miss a beat. He did, so I went to the counter to grab a butter knife. I opened the drawer. The polished silver almost called to me, the voice of reason. I touched it, so beautiful and cold. I wanted to feel it in my hands, so I picked it up carefully, cautiously. It felt heavy, yet so light and free in my hand. I walked back over, slanting over the table, bent by the beauty of this object. I sliced a small sliver of margarine from the crystal dish. Before I knew what was happening, he jumped to his feet, knocking over the glasses I had just poured.

He grabbed my throat, the knife went in. We both fell to the floor, blood already gushing. Ben looked into my eyes, his pupils wide and angry. I couldn't take it anymore, I had been through enough. I felt my eyelids snap wide in rage, releasing all the past fear and pain within me. I was disgusted. That was the last thing he would ever see, that look of hatred in my eyes. My hair, tipped with his dirty blood, covered my face. All except my eyes, staring into his. I had done what I had wanted to do for a long time now. All the years of abuse were spilling out now, from his torn stomach.

I could hardly believe I had done it, but I wasn't satisfied, not yet. I pulled the knife out and jabbed with all my pent-up energy deep into his ridged throat. He never yelled, he hardly made any noise except gurgling. As much as he had beaten me and damaged me, it was my turn now. I would break him into pieces. For the first time, he would feel what I had to suffer all those years. With all this blood and damage, I was finally able to get back at him. He would be sorry this time. He would understand what I went through. But -- ha! -- he couldn't tell me he was sorry with the shining silver metal protruding from his neck! But I knew he was, this time, he was.

I sat back and looked at him. I felt a beam creeping across my cold lips, something I had not felt in a very long time. The satisfaction of a smile. I am free.



Escaping Stones

—Kaitlyn Grooms

A Colder World

—Colleen Kennedy

A boy sits uncomfortably at the bus station at the corner of 3rd and North 4th street; the rain collecting in a puddle at his feet just inside the wet bus station overhang. The damp creeping under his coat. Black clouds of acrid exhaust roll from the mufflers of the cars and taxis. The city streets are slick with oily sheets of rain, reflecting clouded rainbows and the smug faces of the passerby's under umbrellas. Enveloped in the rain pelting the plastic ceiling of the station, a boy sits on a metal bench slightly shaking from the cold. The silence between them being constantly interrupted by the sound of her heels tapping impatiently on the damp concrete.

He looks up from the empty space between them, to her. She moves her brown Burberry handbag from her lap, and places it next to her, filling the space. She looks away, up towards the dirty bus ceiling. Her hands lay across her pressed skirt, her legs crossed tightly with their black stilettos. A small worn suitcase sits next to her. "You're not coming back, are you?" he asks her, looking down to her suitcase then to his old Dockers. Water drops slide down the side of the faded leather.

"What do you think of this new purse? It was the last one in the store; isn't it pretty?" she quickly glances at him, patting her purse with her long fingers with crimson nails. She bites her lip and crosses her arms tightly in front of her; the boy looks into her face. "Do you think Dad'll notice when you don't come home?" He asked her quietly. The woman sets the purse on her lap and digs to find a small baby blue cosmetics bag, and she starts fixing her make-up with a slightly shaky hand. "I don't think he cares anymore, darling," she says, the lipstick bleeding into the corners of her mouth, "At least not for you or me". "He only cares about his dear sweet Madame Sherry," she says into her pocket mirror, reaching up and touching the blue tinge under her jaw.

The boy stands up slowly from the bench, clenching his thin coat tightly around his frame he walks towards the edge of the overhang. Accidentally, he takes a step into a hidden puddle, gouged out by the unyielding elements. With soggy shoes and shivering body, the boy leans against the metal overhang edge with his arms tightly crossed. He then turns to face her. "Come home, Momma." the boy said, looking down 3rd street towards the misty red lights of the ap-

proaching Greyhound bus, and fumbling with the zipper on his coat. "We need you. I need you".

The bus crawls to a stop just outside the overhang's cold rain waterfall. The woman stands. Without glancing at the boy, she grabs her tiny suitcase, wraps her purse around her arm, and braces herself for the damp chill. "We'll all be happier this way, Honey." she whispers glancing down into the overhang's waterfall of rain. She walks through the water and steps onto the first stair of the hot, stuffy bus. Then the woman pauses, the hand holding her suitcase lowers slightly. The boy stops attempting to fix his broken zipper and looks up to the woman's back. Drops of rain roll down the back of her long wool pea coat.

She drops her purse and suitcase on the top of the stairs and turns, heading down the stairs towards the boy, while taking off her long wool jacket. She smiles, the corners of her blue eyes watering, and opens the jacket up and around the back of the boy, draping it carefully along his shaking shoulders. After glancing down and buttoning the two first front buttons of the jacket slowly, she looks into his eyes and smiles warmly. The boy does not respond. He only lowers his eyes to the ground, the puddles reflecting light off of his wet cheeks, his arms crossed. His cold hands curl tightly, hidden under the long coat. The woman moves into the boy, exchanging a hug. His face squished into her breast, and her hands resting gently on his shoulder blades. Soon they break away, and with a flash of a final smile, the woman rotates and steps up onto the Greyhound bus. The boy stands at the corner of the bus station, his arms still folded underneath the veil of his mother looking up and watching the bus door slowly close behind her. With a loud roar and a cloud of exhaust, the red tail lights of the bus fade away, leaving a boy whispering "Momma" into the mist.

Constrained Confusion

—Kaitlyn Grooms

Strong hands grasp and clinch
my delicate wrists
as i drag along
beside my prison.
I can't get away.

He is towering
over me. i wait
for him to allow
my next subtle move.
Nothing comes of pleas.

Overpowering,
he is my idol
—in my confusion—
for a convincing love.
He is my body's all.

Undoubting, i droop
into his control
in order to keep
my life in his hands
Where it must remain.

His forces linger
in my frozen mind.
If i try to melt,
i will fall into
cupped fingers closed firm.

I wander away,
drifting as i go
into the darkness
where his strength will stir
to mark my body.



Inferno

—Carissa Fazio

Chocolate Brownie Mountain

—David Doughy

Chocolate Brownie Mountain,
We just don't know why,
But we'll worship you,
Until the day we die.

Molten rivers made of,
All your cocoa blends.
We shall cherish them,
Until mankind ends.

Flowing down the streams,
Of scrumptious peanut-butter dreams.
Let's all travel upwards now,
To the top of Chocolate Brownie Mountain. WOW!

Endless mounds of fudge,
Reaching to the sky,
We don't want cake!
We don't want pie!

WE WANT CHOCOLATE BROWNIE MOUNTAIN!

Crossroads

—Shanae Giles

She first noticed me as I stared absentmindedly at the top button of her coat jacket. Shaking the daydream away, I took another shot of Jack.

"It's a little too early to be drinkin' that hard, don't you think?"

"Nope."

The bartender shrugged. "Alright then."

As I sat the glass back down, I caught sight of my wedding ring on my left ring finger. I slipped it off and sat it next to the glass.

The vibration from my cell phone surprised me.

"Hello?... Yeah, the guys took a lunch break, thought I'd tag along.... I know, Janie, I'll be on time for our appointment.... Who cares if I missed the last one, it's not like the Doc missed me?... He's always on your side anyway, Janie.... Yeah, just meet me at the bar in a few minutes. Bye."

"Anything else I can get for you?" asked the bartender, who was patiently waiting for my conversation to be over.

I rolled my eyes, set some cash on the bar, and picked up the ring as I turned to leave.

"Hey honey, I'll buy you another round."

I turned around slowly to see that top button I recognized. Her chest peeked out neatly in her suit jacket and her skirt was just long enough to cover up the important parts. Huge round brown curls framed her face. She was sinfully stunning.

"What?"

She grinned and patted the chair next to her. "Sit right here, and I'll buy you another round."

A man like me never turns down free liquor. I sat down next to her.

"Pick your poison." She sang to me.

"Bourbon, on the rocks."

"Bartender, a bourbon on the rocks please. And a Jameson on the rocks for me as well." The bartender nodded as he turned to fix our drinks.

"Jameson," I laughed a little as I turned towards her.

"That's a strong drink for a lady like you."

She grinned at me. "It's a man's drink."

The bartender sat our drinks down in front of us. I watched over the top of my glass as she placed her delicate lips up to the cup and took a sip.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Lilith." She took another sip. "And yours?"

"Jim. Nice to meet you, Lilith. And thanks for the drink."

"You seemed troubled. I enjoy helping troubled people."

She sat her glass down and ran the tip of her finger around the edge.

"Are you a shrink or something?" I asked as I sat my glass down.

"You could say that." She glanced down and I could see the frustration in her wrinkled brow. "Divorce or widow?"

I coughed. "Excuse me?"

She pointed down at my hand. "You wore a ring. Divorce or widow?"

Panic struck me in the middle of my chest as I felt for the ring. I sighed as I felt it in my jacket pocket.

"Ah, neither. We're going through some things." I glanced at my watch. "Shit, I've got to go, thanks for the drink. Lilith." I drank the rest of the bourbon and stood up.

She laughed. "I used to be one of those."

"One of...?" My phone vibrated in my pocket. "Thanks again, I've really got to go." I slipped my phone out of my pocket and turned to walk out of the bar.

"You're missing something, Jim." I heard Lilith's voice behind me and turned around. She held up my ring,

"Shit, must have fell out of my pocket when I—"

"Yeah, but I wasn't talking about the ring." She smiled at me. "I'm going to do you a favor." She put the ring in her jacket pocket.

"What the hell are you—"

"What you should have done a long time ago." She brushed past me and walked out of the bar.

I stood shocked for a moment. Regaining my composure I ran out of the bar. The afternoon sun blinded me for a minute as I looked around for the brunette.

Quickly turning to my left, I caught a glimpse of Lilith walking slowly down the sidewalk. Through some unknown intuition, I fought my urge to chase after her. I felt my heart thumped loud in my chest as I looked to my right and saw my wife waiting for me in the car.

Damaged Goods

–Kelly Gaskins

Next time I'll put my foot down
only to trip over it
and cry;
because I have to tell you
before I die
my tongue in green envy
and spit it in your face that
I'm sorry my fears
put a spotlight on your faults,
melting you down like wax
so I can remake you to my liking,
only to turn it down and weep
like a child with spilled milk.
Next time I'll tell you
about my scattered brains
and steel heart, that can
find no satisfaction.
Next time I'll ...
Next time ...
Next
time
I'll
tell
you
I'm
sorry.

Deliver us From Evil

—Shaquana Adams

I had a dream in which you had done something horrible.
You smiled and flaunted it,
And then told me you never wanted to hurt me.
While I slept, I twisted my body.
Trying to kick myself out of the dream.
You laughed in my face,
I gave my body one final jerk and out of the dream I went.
I woke up and I was already crying.
I clutched my pillow and said The Lord's Prayer.
On "But deliver us from evil"
My body shook violently with sobs.
I finished the prayer.
But, I couldn't let go of the pillow.
The dream was reality replayed in my sleep.
Deliver us from evil, please

Deserted

—Brittaney Massey

I still remember my father's face
his strong jaw, dark brown eyes,
a nose long and pointed,
his shirt a vibrant yellow
same as the diary he bought
me two years ago.

I am surrounded by endless fields
and roads of dirt and grit,
sheltered by the leaves of this oak
sprouted years before my existence.

I visualize the mud stained car
tinkering towards years of despair.

Lustrous yellow sun beams
heat the soil outside
the oak's shadow.

Smudges appear
on the perimeter of my face
as the dust surrounds me
when the car zooms away
far from my sight.

The sand in my eyes
seems to burn forever
my heart feels covered in filth.

He never said goodbye
but I remember him saying how beautiful
the sky was.

Despite the Circumstance

—Yvette McCray

Just because you're a dad doesn't make you a father
If you planned to just plant the flower and never water
Then why would you even bother?
A father's there to bait that first hook
To right-side-up that first book
There to hold his baby girl
Tell her she's the most precious in the world
And she never has to take abuse
Not give her some damn lame excuse
But be there to work his fingers to the nub
And show his joined creation some love
If not she'll feel rejected by every other man
To love how can her heart understand?
Who can best make his son feel like a man
Than an absolutely genuine father can?
But baby without a father, baby you go on
And after you cry your tears of rejection
Look in the mirror at your reflection
See the beauty in your pupils after you dry your eyes
And you shine baby shine after the sunrise
And you'll achieve at everyone's surprise
Even with that daddy full of lies
Eyes fixated on the prize, with the ability to realize
One can make it if he tries
Through any amount of trouble
Throughout any struggle
You are still here with a God given chance
Despite the circumstance

Entwined in Reminiscence: A Pantoum

—Kaitlyn Grooms

[with excerpts from *Scientific American Mind* (Sept 2010 ed.)]

In three pounds of viscous tissue,
a lifetime of accumulated impressions reside.
Neurons fire and information is retained,
and the makings of a memory collect like dust.

A lifetime of accumulated impressions reside,
gathered together in the folds of the brain.
And the makings of a memory collect like dust, ~
encoded in us through complex process.

Gathered together in the folds of the brain,
memories swim calmly through the creases.
Encoded in us through this complex process
in order to saturate our permeable minds.

Memories swim calmly through the creases
working together in perfect rhythm
in order to saturate our permeable minds
with the things we hold dear.

Working together in perfect rhythm,
neurons fire and information is retained
with the things we hold dear
in three pounds of viscous tissue.



Inked

—Elizabeth Graham

Faux Finish

—Alyssa Carver

A large, cement flower pot
sits in the backyard by the driveway.
Fanciful swirls decorate
the magnificent container.
Dressed up in its fancy, faux paint,
it appears to be an antique to outsiders.
But its owners know otherwise.

From the pot rises a tall-stemmed, scarlet amaryllis.
The neighbors stop on their walks
to “ooh” and “ahh”
over its velvety, symmetrical petals.
As their hands turn the blooms,
spiders lurk among its leaves,
poised for attack.

Hidden beneath the surface of the black soil
worms wriggle their way through the crumbly dirt.
Underneath the pot,
slugs gather together
to disgust any unfortunate souls
who dare to disturb their home.

Foliage

—David Doughty

A pleasant autumn sunrise rolled over the hills of Virginia on the morning Carl Brown met his fate. Ms. Margaret Green solemnly tended to her garden, getting ready for her fall harvest as well as protecting her few remaining petunias until the frosty grip of winter slayed them asunder. School children hopped arbitrarily to the bus stop, making certain to avoid treading on any cracks in the sidewalk for fear of injuring their mother's posterior. Leaves flew about chaotically, local squirrels gathered their last few rations, and the birds began taking flight to begin their journey southward. Carl Brown, of course, was unable to enjoy this lovely visage. For, on that exquisite morning, Carl Brown's immoral choices in life had finally caught up with him and he was consumed entirely in the shade of his own doom.

Three days prior, Carl rose from slumber and was greeted with the soothing sound of wind churning among the trees in the neighborhood outside. After preparing his black coffee, Carl sat on his back porch and gazed into his backyard with contempt. The yard was completely barren with the exception of a few patches of dirt near the far corner and a beautiful maple tree, whose leaves were as red as the blood that had leaked from each of Carl's unfortunate victims. Carl sipped his drink and smiled comfortably.

Dressed and ready for the day, Carl made his way to sit on his front porch. As he sat down in his wicker chair, the paperboy tossed a newspaper onto Carl's walkway. Carl smiled and took in a nice breath of October air. He enjoyed watching Ms. Green work in her yard and he loved to witness the suburban nature transpire around him. But what Carl relished most of all was the children that walked by every morning on their way to the bus stop.

"Hi, Mr. Brown!" said little Becky Black as she walked by with her red hair being tossed about in the fall breeze.

"Well, hello there, little Becky," said Carl with a warm smile. "Come here," he beckoned. "I have a surprise for you." Becky ceased walking and looked towards her destination, then at Carl. After a moment of hesitation, she made her way towards him.

"What kind of surprise?" asked Becky.

"A very special one," said Carl, reaching into his coat pocket. "Now, I know Christmas isn't for another couple of months,

but this reminded me so much of you that I wanted you to have it." Becky's eyes widened as Carl pulled out a miniature snow globe featuring a small red tree. Becky beamed and took the gift, instantly shaking it to watch the snow fall.

"It's so pretty!" squeaked Becky, staring at the tiny tree.

"It's an Autumn Blaze Maple," said Carl. "You don't see too many around here. But, I've got one. . . ."

"You do?" asked Becky.

"Yes, it's in my backyard," said Carl. He paused and then said, "Would you like to see it?" Becky took a moment to ponder his proposition.

"I don't know. I might miss my bus if I don't go soon."

"Oh, it will only take a minute, I promise," said Carl, standing from his chair and heading towards his front door. He opened it and gestured for her to walk in. "We can cut through the house; it's much quicker that way." Becky stared into his home, unsure of what she should do. She took a few steps towards the doorway. Suddenly, a voice came from the road.

"Ms. Black, shouldn't you be on your way to the bus stop?" Carl and Becky turned to see Officer Beige stepping out of his squad car. "Run along, now. School's where you need to be headed."

"Yes, sir," said Becky, obediently.

"Tell your daddy I said hello," said Officer Beige, passing Becky and walking towards Carl's porch.

"I will!" said Becky. "Thank you, Mr. Brown!" she said to Carl as she held up the snow globe. She looked both ways before crossing the street and skipped as she continued her trek to the bus stop. Carl watched her leave with disappointment brewing in his expression.

"Carl, what the Hell are you thinking?" asked Officer Beige.

"What?" Carl muttered.

"What were ya doing with that girl? You know kids have gone missing a lot in this town over the years, so what the Hell are you thinking by taking one into ya home like that?"

"I was just—"

"Listen, I know ya, Carl. You a good man with honest intentions. I know ya love kids and all, but these are troubled times. Ya know the kid next door to you is still missing. Poor Ms. Margaret; she seems well and all, but I know she's still devastated. Anyway, my point is if a parent saw ya inviting Becky into ya home like that, you'd be in some serious shit. D'ya understand?"

"Yeah...yes. Yes, sir," said Carl nervously. The policeman stared at Carl for an instant.

"Just watch it from now on, alright?"

"I will. Thanks," said Carl, blinking rapidly. Officer Beige took one last suspicious look at him and then walked back to his vehicle and drove off. Carl stood outside for a moment longer, then picked up his newspaper and walked into his home, shutting the door behind him. "You're getting sloppy, Carl," he told himself as he laid the newspaper on his dining room table. "That was too close."

Carl sat down in the nearest chair and opened the newspaper. He quickly skimmed through the pages until he found his treasure. He grinned with delight as he read the words aloud, "Bobby Green Still Gone, Mother Still Coping." He took a pair of scissors from the basket at the center of the table and delicately cut the article from the newspaper. Chuckling a bit, he stood, walked into his bedroom and opened the bottom drawer of his dresser. Moving the clothes aside, he found his old, worn portfolio folder. He sat on his bed and he browsed through the old articles of missing children and tenderly caressed photos of young boys and girls with a nostalgic smile.

As Carl continued his walk down memory lane, he began singing bits and pieces of his favorite childhood rhyme: "Little children sitting in the trees. Little children swingin' in the breeze. Plenty fine maples growing in a row. All the little children cried 'No, no, no!' The man with the axe was a-comin' around," Carl placed his new addition in the back of the folder. "Because the kids were in the trees and they wouldn't come down." Carl gently closed the folder and kissed it. While returning the folder to its designated spot in the bottom drawer, he eerily sang the last verse, "Long live the maple trees. . . ."

When he stood, he sighed deeply and walked back to the dining room to drink the remains of his coffee before it got too cold. As he turned to face his back porch, he lifted the cup up to his face and poured the drink down his throat. Upon removing the cup from blocking his view, Carl noticed something odd about his backyard. He scrunched his brow in confusion and tilted his head slightly to the left. Taking a few steps towards the backyard, Carl began to realize that the maple tree was not where it should be. His jaw dropped a bit and he squinted one eye so as to focus on the tree's location and make certain he wasn't insane.

Walking out onto the porch, Carl peered with his open eye while holding up a panoramic rectangle with his hands. While he

walked closer and closer to the tree, he confirmed that it was indeed in a different spot. The tree was supposed to be positioned 4.5 feet from the north boundary and 11 feet from the west. Somehow, in the time between Carl waking and now, the tree had moved closer to the house. Carl stared at the base of the tree, shaking his head. He held his chin as he scrutinized the ground for signs of unearthed dirt and debris. When he found nothing, he looked around the neighborhood, searching for the pranksters responsible. Carl spent hours trying to figure how the tree had moved. He eventually admitted to himself that he was just getting old and he needed to leave it alone.

That night, Carl had his dinner as he watched the evening news and was elated when the anchorwoman began speaking about his secret acts of evil: "Little Bobby Green went missing about two months ago near his home in Highland County. He was last seen playing in his front yard with other children. Bobby's disappearance brings the total number of missing children in Highland County to twelve." Carl held his hand over his mouth while he giggled with pleasure. "If you have any information on Bobby Green's whereabouts, please contact the Highland County Sheriff's Office." Carl turned off his television and put his arms behind his head and laid back as he basked in his infamous glory.

While Carl slept, he dreamt of those twelve children. Each one faded in and out of view. Childish giggles intertwined with yells of terror. This was the usual dream for Carl Brown and ordinarily he smirked smugly while he peacefully slept, but something changed that night. A voice grew from the laughs and shouts; a calm voice that spoke to Carl. "You murdered them." Carl stirred in his sleep. "You killed them, Carl. You're a monster." Squeezing his sheet and holding it closer to his face, Carl began to grimace. "You're a 'nobody', Carl. A 'NOBODY.' And when you get what's coming to you, no one will even miss you. The world will be a better place without you, Carl." Carl began sweating and moaning. He shook his head and gasped with each breath he took. "I'm coming for you, Carl Brown. I'm coming to protect the children. I'm coming to keep an eye on you. . . ."

The abrupt sound of scraping woke Carl from his nightmare. He spastically wriggled in his bed before turning on the lamp that sat on his nightstand. Carl was startled once more when he saw the red maple tree standing right outside of his bedroom window; its branches, provoked by the wind, slowly scraping against the glass. Carl's frightened appearance soon turned to anger. He ripped open the nightstand drawer, pulled out a flashlight and ran to his

backyard. "Who's there?!" Carl yelled, shining the light around the yard. "Who is it?!" Everything was silent but the neighborhood trees rustling in the wind and a dog, woken by Carl's shouts, barking in the distance. "Why are you doing this?!"

"Carl," called the voice from the dream, whispering softly with the wind. Carl turned towards the voice; the flashlight shook in his hand.

"Who are you?" Carl asked. "Show yourself!"

"You've been naughty, Carl," said the wispy voice. "Shame on you." Carl followed it around to the side of his house. He saw the red maple standing by his bedroom window.

"Where are you?" asked Carl with a shaky voice. "Whoever you are, quit moving my tree!" A gust of wind suddenly bellowed through the maple and it began rustling vigorously.

"YOUR tree? I think not." Carl couldn't take any more of the trickery. He angrily, yet fearfully marched back into his house and dead bolted the doors, closed the curtains and began pacing back and forth. It wasn't until he calmed down that he was reminded of his dream. He slumped onto his couch and stared up at the ceiling. "What's going on?" he asked himself. "I think I'm going nuts. . . ."

Carl slept on the couch for the rest of the night. He didn't dream; there was only black nothing. He woke late, and instantly jolted up once he remembered the incident from the previous night. He quickly jogged to his bedroom and opened the curtains on the window. The tree was gone. He skipped making coffee for the first time in 24 years and walked straight into his backyard. No tree. Eyes widened, he walked around to the side of the house. Still no tree. Carl slowed his pace and swallowed hard. The wind picked up as he rounded his house to the front yard to find the tree standing close to the road. With a confused face, Carl slowly approached the tree, frequently glancing about in the hopes to find a culprit. The paper boy rode by and flung the newspaper on Carl's lawn. Carl didn't notice. When he got to the tree he examined it and the ground around it; still lacking any sign of extracted soil.

"Good morning, Carl," said the tree. Carl jumped back in fright and fell to the ground. He looked up at the tree with horror dripping from his eyes. "Did you sleep well?" Carl remained paralyzed with shock. "Yes, I'm sure it's alarming; having a tree speak to you. You must be thinking that your mind has slipped into dementia. I assure you, Carl, that you are perfectly sane; disregarding the fact that you're a murderer, of course." Carl's eye's widened

in disbelief. "That's right, Carl. I know all about your little 'hobby.' I've sat in your back yard for years, watching you bury the remains of those poor children. You're a bad man, Carl Brown."

Turning on his stomach, Carl crawled away for a bit, then stood and began to run towards the house. "Running from your consequences again, I see?" asked the tree, mockingly. Carl halted and turned back to the tree. "Don't worry, Carl. I mean you no harm. We trees are a peaceful race; neutral when it comes to most natural circumstances. But your actions, Carl, are not natural. I've stood idly by while you've committed your awful crimes, but when you tried to lure little Rebecca Black into your trap using ME as bait, I decided to break the treaty between your kind and mine."

Carl continued to slowly back away towards his house. "I have the power to tear you in twain, but I'm not going to do that," said the tree. "Your demise will come soon enough, but for now my duty is to keep you from taking another young life. I've moved here to protect the children from you, Carl. No longer will you snatch them off the street. No longer will you break apart families and laugh while they cry in torment. No longer will you be a 'nobody' that casts an evil shadow over this lovely town! It is my personal goal that you never kill again, Carl Brown. Get in my way and you will be sorry. . . ."

Carl was on his porch now, slowly making his way to the door. He frantically tossed his welcome rug aside to pick up his spare key. As he fretfully unlocked the front door, the tree called to him once more, "Oh, Carl?" Carl reluctantly spun around to view the tree gently swaying in the breeze. "Don't forget your newspaper. . . ." Carl gulped and stared at the newspaper. He hastily strafed to it; keeping the tree directly in front of him. When he reached down and picked it up, he bolted to his house and slammed the door while the tree let out a somewhat sinister laugh.

Inside, Carl had pressed his back against the front door and slumped to the floor. "No, no, no! This isn't real! This isn't real!" he lectured to himself as he held his head in his hands and rocked back and forth. "Why is this happening to me?!" he asked while his breath became heavy and chaotic. Carl continued to shake and moan on the floor. Suddenly, he flung the newspaper at a nearby wall in anger. When it fell to the floor, Carl noticed a large photo of Bobby Green on the front page. Gasping, Carl quickly crawled to the paper on his hands and knees and read the headline out loud in a quivering tone, "Anonymous Tip Leaves Local Officers Surveying The Maple

Drive Area For Notorious Child Abductor....” Carl’s heart sank. He slowly faced the window next to his front door. After shambling to it, Carl peered out between the closed curtains and saw Officer Beige slowly cruising by. As the squad car became blocked by the view of the maple tree, Carl saw a single branch move about. The tree was waving at him.

All day, Carl sat on the floor near his front door, frequently peeking through the curtains at the tree. In the mid-afternoon, he saw Becky skipping down the sidewalk on the opposite end of the road. When she saw the tree, she halted and stared at it. She pulled the snow globe out of her backpack and held it up so it shared perspective with the maple. She smiled tremendously and looked around for Carl. Carl quickly jolted his head back so she wouldn’t see him. After a moment, he looked back outside and she was gone. Carl gulped with relief.

Carl fell asleep under the window. Once again, he didn’t dream. He was awoken by a chilly breeze the next morning. He slowly sat up, feeling very stiff from the hardwood floor. Suddenly, he noticed a single red maple leaf flowing in the air beside him. His front door was ajar. Before Carl could react, the door was flung open by a large blast of wind which brought hundreds of red maple leaves fluttering into his hallway. Carl cried out in fear and quickly jumped up and forced the door shut. He pushed his back against the door to keep the wind from further vandalizing his home. As he calmed down and slowed his breathing, Carl noticed the leaves that remained in the air in the hallway were slowly fluttering down to the floor. An aftermath breeze was stirring the leaves towards the back of his house. Carl’s eyes followed the leaves until he beheld a sight that made his soul jump about.

Gazing through his dining room and out the window, Carl saw that Ms. Margaret Green’s petunias had been relocated to the patches of dirt in the far corner of his back yard. Carl’s throat made a pitiful sound as he briskly walked to the back of his house. At the window, Carl’s expression worsened. He cupped his mouth with his hand and began to moan and weep. He warily stepped out to his back yard with tears filling his face and he tried to walk towards the petunias. However, every time he would step towards them, he would almost collapse. Carl stood stationary for a moment, staring at the flowers with a blank yet miserable face. After a while, Carl Brown became very, very angry. He slowly turned to look back at his house with an irate frown. Then, he quickly romped through his house to the front door, which he hurled open, scowling at the tree, who had

lost a large amount of its leaves overnight. Carl firmly walked down his porch steps, fixated on the maple that stood in his front yard with an innocent demeanor. Carl's stare of death was broken when he realized that Officer Beige was in the yard next door, consoling Ms. Green who was sobbing for the loss of her flowers.

"Good morning, Carl," said the tree. Carl faced the tree with wild eyes. He approached the tree and, before speaking to it, checked around to make sure nobody was watching.

"What have you done?!" asked Carl, in a hoarse, low voice.

"The question is 'what have YOU done,' my good fellow," said the tree, calmly.

"You took her flowers and put them –"

"Put them where, Carl? Put them in a place where you don't want people snooping around? Put them on the inadvertent graves of the poor young souls that you've so elegantly vanquished? Mark my words, the petunias relocated on their own merits. Perhaps I did engage them with a little persuasion, but in the end, it was their own decision to honor the lost child of their own loving caretaker."

The paper boy rode by and threw a newspaper onto Carl's lawn. Carl waited for him to ride out of earshot before speaking to the tree again.

"Stop it! Just stop!" demanded Carl. "This has gone far enough!"

"What's the matter, Carl? I'm just having a little fun," said the tree with a slow laugh.

"You took that poor woman's flowers away from her!"

"YOU TOOK HER ONLY CHILD!" bellowed the tree, making Carl step back a bit in fright. The tree was silent for a moment before speaking again. "I apologize, Carl. Forgive the pun, but I tend to get barky around this time of the year. Anyway, I was wrong to snap at you. It's not a tree's place to hold bias."

"Then why are you doing this to me?" asked Carl pathetically. The tree hesitated.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know, Carl. Something has compelled me to intervene. Your utter lack of compassion towards mankind has spun me into a foreign world of humanity. My heart tells me that I must take responsibility."

"You're a tree," said Carl, frustrated. "You don't have a heart."

"Do you?" asked the tree.

"Carl, are you okay?" asked Officer Beige, who had come over from Ms. Green's yard. "Who doesn't have a heart?" Carl

stared vacantly at the police officer before his gaze slowly drifted to the ground.

"Whoever took that woman's petunias," answered Carl.

"Yeah, I hear ya. I see they've been messing around with ya tree, there, too. Must be professional vandals, by the looks of it. Whoever it was, they know their landscaping. Mind if I look around ya back yard to see if they left any items or tools."

"Uh," Carl's heart raced. "No, they didn't leave anything, I checked."

"Ya sure?" asked Officer Beige.

"Yes, I'm sure. I know my own backyard," said Carl, somewhat huffy.

"Alright, alright," said Officer Beige. "I'm headed back into town, now. You take care of Ms. Margaret for me. Lord knows, this was the last thing she needed. And keep ya eyes open." He bent down and picked up Carl's newspaper. "I'm sure you've heard about the lead on the missing children's case. And now we've got some damn hoodlums wrecking people's yards. I tell ya, this town's going to Hell real fast." Officer Beige handed Carl the newspaper, put on his hat, and began walking to his squad car. He turned back for a moment and said, "It's a really nice tree, Carl. Shame, it's losing its leaves. Well, see ya around."

"It is a shame," said the tree as Officer Beige drove off. "I like my leaves." Carl glared at the tree, then turned to walk back to his house. "Don't you like yours?" asked the tree.

"What?" asked Carl, turning around in confusion.

"Your leaves," said the tree. "Do you like them? You're losing them faster than I am."

"What. . . what do you mean?"

"Hey, Mr. Brown!" said Becky, waving vigorously from across the street. Carl ignored her, and quickly turned back to his house.

"Your winter is coming, Carl," said the tree. "It's coming real soon. I can feel it. . . ." Carl huffed and hurriedly walked into his home. He could hear the tree playfully humming the tune of the Maple Tree Song.

After sweeping all of the leaves out onto his front porch and digging up all of Ms. Green's petunias from the dirt patch and putting them into a bag, Carl spent the entire day pacing back and forth in his hallway, regularly checking out the window to see if the tree was up to any more shenanigans. Somehow, Carl was no longer afraid of

the tree. He felt good about that, but he still felt uncomfortable and unsafe. He made several cups of coffee as contemplated how to solve his problem. He had already decided that, whether or not he was insane, the tree could never actually harm him. However, the tree was still being a nuisance and harassing Carl by trying to uncover his secrets. Whether or not Carl was insane, the tree was succeeding.

Carl came up with a plan. It was a good plan. Yet, Carl was unsure if it would yield the desired results. He sat next to a window in his living room, gazing out at the maple. It was nearly dark and the tree swayed in the crisp wind, suspecting that Carl was up to something. Carl continued to run the plan through his head over and over again, making sure he worked out any undesirable scenarios. He sat stationary for hours, well into the night, fixated on the tree that haunted him as it lost more and more of its leaves with every passing hour. Finally, Carl looked into his empty mug, placed it on the side table next to him and slowly stood.

"I have to do it," said Carl. "It must be done." Carl walked into the hall, put on his jacket and opened the front door. The wind began to pick up a bit. Carl momentarily stared at the tree before turning around and walking to the entrance of his basement. He serenely unlocked both deadbolts and the doorknob before entering. The wind became more rapid and the night somehow became even blacker. Clatters and clunks came from the basement. Minutes later, Carl began ascending the stairs to the first floor. With every step he took, the wind whooshed even more violently. He stepped out into his hall and shut the basement door.

Thunder clashed and rang across the land and Carl began walking down the hall towards his front door, dragging an old, bloodstained axe. As Carl walked out onto his porch and continued towards his target, the tree spoke to him, angrily.

"CARL BROWN! YOU DARE TO APPROACH ME WITH THE BLADE DULLED BY THE BONES OF YOUR VICTIMS?!"

"Yes, I dare," said Carl, calmly, as he steadily stepped against the brutal wind and towards the tree. The red maple leaves that had fallen from the tree flung about haphazardly around the yard.

"WHAT ARE YOUR INTENTIONS?!" yelled the tree as Carl halted right under its branches. Lightning began to show itself, thrashing about in the heavens as the thunder boomed menacingly.

"I intend to rid you of my yard. . . and my mind. . . and my life, for good," said Carl, picking the axe up and holding it with

both hands. The inexplicable storm grew louder and meaner, making the tree appear to be almost demon-like. Suddenly, everything gradually became calmer. The lightning dissipated and the thunder fell to a dull roar. The wind became tranquil and breezy.

"Very well, Carl," said the tree. "Do what you must. But know this: should you strike down my existence, your fate will be sealed. Mark my words, destiny will knock at your door, and you will meet your end at the hands of my brethren. Nature's wrath will consume you and your spirit entirely."

"I'll risk it," said Carl as he lifted the axe and struck the first blow. The tree remained silent while Carl kept a slow, firm chopping rhythm. After a while, the tree began to peacefully sing to Carl's rhythm.

"Little children sitting in the trees," WHACK! "Little children swingin' in the breeze," WHACK! "Plenty fine maples growing in a row," WHACK! "All the little children cried 'No, no, no!'" WHACK! "The man with the axe was a-comin' around," WHACK! "Because the kids were in the trees and they wouldn't come down. . . ." Carl put his foot on the trunk of the tree and pushed with his leg. The tree cracked and fell to the ground. Carl stood still, breathing heavily from his hard work. He tossed the axe to the ground and looked down at the now helpless tree. A light rain began, sprinkling around them. As the rain picked up, an aura of sadness filled the street. Carl Brown didn't notice, for he was a monster and not a man.

Carl picked up the tree and dragged it to the curb. He then turned to walk away, but the tree weakly called out to him, "Carl?" Carl turned back to acknowledge the tree. "Tell me, Carl. . . if a tree falls. . . and 'nobody' is there to hear it. . . does it make a sound?" With that, Carl spat at the tree, wiped his mouth and walked away to pick up the axe. As Carl walked up to his house, he heard the tree faintly utter its last words through the rippling rain, "Long live the maple trees. . . ."

Carl took the few petunias that were still alive out of the bag and placed them on Ms. Margaret's front steps. Then, he returned to his home and went right to bed. It was the best night's sleep Carl had ever had. He did not hear a taunting voice. He was not jerked awake by the sound of branches scraping on the window. He rose from slumber the next morning with a smile on his face and cheer in his soul. After making some delicious coffee, Carl went to observe his foliage-free backyard. He sighed deeply and happily as he sipped

his drink.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. Carl's coffee mug dropped from his hand and crashed on his concrete patio, splashing the drink on his slippers. His heart pounded and rapidly leaped in his chest. KNOCK. . . KNOCK. . . KNOCK. . . . Carl spun around to face his front door. The hallway was too dark for this time of the day. Something was outside, casting shadows through the windows. KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. Carl gained composure as he thought it was silly to stress over the tree's warning. It was probably just the mailman with a package, or maybe Officer Beige or Ms. Margaret, thought Carl. Or, hopefully, it might just be little Becky Black. Carl took a deep breath and walked to open the front door.

Nobody in the neighborhood that morning seemed to notice the sudden cluster of local trees that had gathered in Carl's yard overnight. In fact, nobody seemed to notice the sound of Carl being slowly ripped apart as his screams for help eventually turned into frantic, inaudible pleas for the sweet release of death. No, everyone was far too busy enjoying the magnificent morning that surrounded them. Ms. Margret Green, although happy to have some of her flowers back, somberly tended to her garden. Becky Black hobbled along sidewalk with the other school children, shaking her snow globe and whistling the Maple Tree Song. Red maple leaves flew about excitedly as a pleasant autumn sunrise rolled over the Virginia hills, greeting everyone with warm salutations. I must reiterate how truly breathtaking and aesthetically pleasing that morning was. It's a shame that Carl Brown had to miss it.



The Looking Glass

— Kelly Gaskins

Germany Calls

—Austin Kemmerlin

As steam fills the air and the final squeal of the breaks come to a halt
I cannot believe it's finally over, I'm home.
It's been a hard three years fighting those damn Germans.
I never thought I would make it back, but I'm home.
The pub by the station was where it all came flooding back.
That was when I saw her, standing in her perfect pink dress.
It had been three long years and I still didn't forget.
I promised her a dance before I left.

The door swings open as his boots hit the ground
I swear, I'd know that sound anywhere.
He left me on the dance floor behind our willow trees.
When Germany called to his heart and put him on her frontline.
Would he even remember me from our brief, wild romance?
My heart falls out of my chest when I hear, "You still owe me a
dance."

Healing

—Kaitlyn Grooms

There's no healing in words unspoken,
no truth in mouths clamped tight.

Healing comes only with unity
in hearts that are willing to fight.

Words should never be left
unspoken.

Human

—Brooke Mogy

I thought I saw a tear today
But it was a mystery
I tried to fathom its damp content
Or believe in its salty flavor.
And then! I realized just what I'd forgotten
Over the time that's passed us by.
Somewhere between coming and
Almost far gone,
I believe I just forgot.
I forgot
That you are human.
Sometimes I forget you are human
Probably 'cause you're always holding tight
With a grip of splintering ropes
But not that of a hand.
Sometimes I forget you are human
Because all I see is this polish
It shines on top of your head
Like diesel fuel or lead or something dark and absolute
But never resembling hair.
Other times I forget you are human
Because you open up and shine
Exposing a chatter, beating, hum.
It is bright and white
But nothing like teeth.
I admit I forget you are human
But it is days just like these,
Where you rain down slow,
That I begin to see.
I see a hand that is patched up with creases,
Meeting a cheek smoothed by the sun;
Where a little trickle of heart pours down
And beats for something more.
I want these days
All to myself!
So I can grip the patched up ropes
And gulp the toxic sky.

So I can feel the beating drums
And also be reminded
That I am human too!

Immediate Relief

—Vera S. Prioleau

Tiny brown specks of happiness
Fill the basket
As I sit, waiting.
Cocoa emissions fill the air:
Breathe in, breath out—

I take sip after sip
As steam rises from the dark brown
Lake of relief.

Cup after cup
Until the red light gets dim
And the glass is dry.
I sit back,
Finally able to relax,
And prepare to move on.

It's Time

—Andrea J. Wilson

Running in circles?

Stop and listen...

Feel that anger?

What will be left?

My blazing fury...

Where are the matches?

There's a crowd at the door, should I let them in one at a time?

Or tell them to straighten up and form a fine line?

Just let them come; hurry before he returns

I need more souls in order for my hell to keep its burn.

Places everyone, it's time to start the show!

Pain...suffering...plan...HELL BOUND

Yeah they're just running around

Do you hear a sound?

Yeah it's coming now.

When hell starts pouring down.

the one you been holding in?

It's time to begin.

Why do that? The end is too close!

He can have a few, but I want the most.

Given them power let them see

That hell is on the earth and earth

is within me.

Set everything free let the demons
go!

Welcome fools to Satan's Playing Ground

The Joker Pantoum

—Shaquana Adams

“Why so serious?” You growled in the movie.
Why the hell do you think I’m so serious?
You’re the villain, you’re the killer, and you’re the Joker
Pop up here, kill my heart there. You’re smiling.

Why the hell do you think I’m so serious?
Only on one day are you seen as the real you.
Pop up here, kill my heart there. You’re smiling.
Then you go off to terrorize me another day.

Only on one day are you seen as the real you.
A pale face and bloody smile. How appropriate.
Then you go off to terrorize me another day.
It’s supposed to be a day you pretend.

A pale face and bloody smile. How appropriate.
I suppose you think this makes me...stranger.
It’s supposed to be a day you pretend.
Why weren’t you an angel instead?

I suppose you think this makes me...stranger.
Oh that’s right you don’t care about your victims.
Why weren’t you an angel instead?
Because you were just too happy being the Joker.



Operating Motion

—Kaitlyn Grooms

Journey of the Outcast

—Lucas Berry

The old man stood at the podium. Not many earned the right to speak at a god's funeral. And the old man had been a great warrior once. A true Son of Barbaron. Now he was broken, weighed down by the years on his shoulders. Behind him the funeral pyre burned high as he surveyed the crowd before him.

"He was a man before he was a god, ya know. And he was a bad 'un. Mean as they come. You see, once, long ago, there was a smith." He said, "He was truly blessed, an artist with hammer an' tongs. He lived in a village in the Far North. An' he was mean as the Waste itself. Being the smith he was though, people still came from all around for his business. He was constantly working on large an' demandin' orders. A local hunter, the proudest horse's ass you've ever met, once asked him to do some tiny little order, a knife or somethin'. The smith laughed an' turned him down. The hunter, insulted an' pissy, left, cursin' the smith, who flew into a rage. Droppin' his hammer, he ran after the man an' tackled him. Snarlin', he beat the hunter to death with his bare hands. The village revolted. They had put up with his abuses until now 'cause of his great skill, but to kill a man whose back was turned? That was too great a crime."

"He was dragged before the Chief and the Elders. They sentenced him to death. As the Chief drew his sword to carry out the punishment, the Seer, oldest and wisest of the Elders, a bitter old woman sometimes cursed with the gift of prophesy, fell to the ground thrashin' and foamin' at the mouth. Suddenly she called out, 'The felling of a god will be the felling of this land. Her crops will burn and her people with them. War is come to this place, and only the wargod will save them.' No one moved or said a word for a long moment. The old woman got back up and was helped into her house to recover from her fit. The Elders decided to exile the smith, rather than end him themselves. If fate was with him, they figured, then even exile couldn't kill him. And so they gave him one of his own swords an' expelled him from the town for his crimes. Left to the bitter mercy of the North itself, he sat on a hill, beyond the palisade wall, and watched as they burned down his home. 'Demon of the Waste' they named him. And the last sight the smith ever saw, were the flames of his rage, eating his life. And so, this man before you, Decier the Smith, became The Demon of The Waste." The old man

bowed his head in memory and climbed down from the podium.

The funeral pyre burned higher and higher. Two massive men, mirrors of each other, walked to the podium. The twins, Tempest and Typhoon, were exactly alike except for two small differences. Tempest's weapon of choice was axes, whereas Typhoon preferred hammers. And where Tempest was eloquent and well spoken, Typhoon had been mute for more than 15 years. Tempest, like a blonde mountain, stepped up to the podium.

"Except for maybe one person," he shot a look at the tanned beauty sitting in the front row and smiled, "my brother and I knew him better than anyone. He was the best man I ever knew. Of course," This time he nodded to the old man who had just sat down, "We only knew him after he had changed. He was not a man to boast, nor did he hide things for modesty's sake. He was what he was all the time. And for that, we loved him." Shaking himself, the behemoth said, "This is how the story went as he told it."

"After he had been cast out, he wandered in a daze of hate and anger for a long time. All he did was wander through the snow killing things, and cursing himself, his village, life itself. Every living, breathing thing he came across, he killed. Finally, he made it to the edge of the Great Forest in the west. He was ambushed by a pack of Beasts, a pack led by one of the greater of their kind, one of those beasts capable of speech and magic. Decier always described this Beast as a huge black wolf with the head of a bear, standing on two legs. It offered him a choice: run and die painlessly, or stand and be ripped apart. He stood his ground and made peace with himself. Making peace with his death, he accepted that this was the fate he truly deserved. He could never truly describe what happened next, except to say that in that moment his magic came to him. He apparently blacked out, and when he woke up, the entire pack was dead, laying where they had stood, without a wound on them. From here, he had two choices: continue on as he was, or redeem himself by attaining the highest position our society has, godhood. He chose godhood. And so he traveled on foot to the long forsaken home of our people's father, the old volcano where Barbaron himself forged the first ancestor blade. Dragons had infested the place, drawn to the resonance of all the magic that goes into such weapons. Countless would-be gods have tried to reclaim the place, and none had succeeded."

"That is what drew my brother and I to it. For this is where we first met the wargod, not far from the mountain's base. We had the same idea, and so we joined forces. My brother and I had already attained our own status as battlegods, so we didn't mind sharing

the glory. The dragons knew we were coming, and it nearly cost us all our lives. We ended up trapped in three different places on the mountain, surrounded by dozens of slithering, scaled monstrosities. But Decier refused to die. Typhoon and I held our own, make no mistake, but Decier, he proved over and again that day that he deserved his rank. Drawing on his magic, he swept the dragons before him like a great wind. We won the day and took the mountain as our reward."

"While my brother and I left to proclaim our victory, Decier elected to stay behind, saying that his quest was not yet complete. After we had gone, he found Barbaron's forge deep in the heart of the mountain. There he toiled, day and night, doing what no man had ever done before. Barbaron himself created three ancestor blades. Decier was not content until he had crafted five. With the most powerful weapons in existence now his, he set out to claim his place. Twelve days later, a stranger cloaked in a great black fur arrived in our capital city of Cathrach. The stranger made his way directly to the Great Hall atop its hill and threw open the doors. The Council of Chiefs was meeting. Striding in among them, he threw back his hood. Decier, Demon of The Waste, was known to them. Panic erupted as he drew a sword from his back and slammed the blade into the table before them. The first to recover was the Chief of his old village. Staring dumbfounded at the sword before him, the chief asked 'You claim godhood? You claim an ancestor blade?' Decier smirked at him as the hall quieted and answered, 'No....I claim five.' He deserved his place. He was a fearless warrior, a good friend, and a great man. I am proud to have known him, and prouder still to have called him friend." Bowing their heads, the twins stepped down as the body of a wargod fueled its own funeral pyre.

Jude and Delia

—Sommer Turner

Jude and I both know our dealer won't be home anytime soon. We just saw him not even an hour ago at the bar. He was loud and jolly, drunk, sporting a Santa hat. 'Tis the season, I think to myself as we exchange him next month's rent for an eight-ball. When we spotted his keys abandoned beside us on the bar, Christmas cheer welled up in us, too. A dozen lines later, we're in the car. I absently fiddle with the only keychain, a small plastic-encased picture of a baby.

We don't bother to make our steps light as we walk through his kitchen side door. No guard dog, one less obstacle. This seems too easy. One flick of a switch — Let there be light! — and we see what we're working with. Who knew a guy who spends Christmas Eve plastered in a bar, selling coke, would have such a normal place? Jude begins rummaging through the drawers of the end tables, pocketing a dub sack and a book of joint papers. Evidence. There's more to be found.

"I'm gonna check the other rooms," I say, making my way down the still dark hallway.

"Yeah, do that," Jude says.

"Hell, maybe I'll even find you a nice present." My giggle echoes from inside the first bedroom. I pull the chord and light floods in. The room is sparsely furnished. Queen size bed — pitiful burgundy sheets and floral spread tangled together at the foot, one pancake pillow. In the corner, a flat screen TV. I snatch greedily at the wires. This will be a nice addition to our trailer.

"Come here! Got somethin' good!" I call out to Jude.

"I'm busy right this minute," he yells back. My shoulders shrug, knowing he's too focused on what he's doing. Over the sound of him carelessly plundering through cabinets, I hear a faint cry. Whatever. I dismiss it — probably just the liquor and coke messing with my head — and keep digging around. I find a blade in the sock drawer of our

dealer's dresser and ten bucks in the pocket of his tossed jeans. Before I get the chance to plunder through the closet, a distinct squeal unnerves me. Jude, too.

"What the fuck?" he whispers as he scampers, as quietly as he can, into the room.

"Sounds like... a baby?" I say, my voice low and panicky. We freeze still as tree trunks, our hearts hammering in our ears. Oh shit! — that keychain.

"A baby?!" Jude half whisper, half yelps. "Who the hell's taking care of it..? We gotta get outta here..."

"Not yet..." I say. Curiosity prevails. I step toward the door, propelled by curiosity. Jude grabs at my arm, but I push him away and follow the squeals, tracing them to the back bedroom.

Looking over my shoulders, I stand with my back against the wall. I take a breath, crane my neck along the door frame. Even in the darkness, I make out the outline of a crib. Sweat beads around my hairline, and I hear Jude shuffling down the hallway behind me. My shaky fingers run over the light switch as I step inside the room.

A baby boy lay inside the crib, tiny and red-faced. I gasp. Jude seems less tense as he runs his hands through his dark hair. For some reason, I reach out and take the infant into my arms. So this is what it would have felt like..., I think to myself. Jude wouldn't know, much less understand. He paces around the room. His eyes widen, and he darts for a plastic bag tucked under the airplane-themed padding of the crib. Another eight-ball.

"Hell yeah! We just hit the jackpot!" Jude giggles, having reverted to a kid at Christmas. "Now put that baby down and let's grab our other gifts, Delia." He shoves the eight-ball in his crotch. "I can't leave this baby behind," I say, swaying around the room, rocking the child.

"C'mon! I'll cut ya a line." He grabs my free hand and a book. I sit down on the floor beside him with the baby while he cuts the coke into three pretty little lines atop the surface of the book. A smile creeps onto his face. "Here ya go, babe."

I take them all, feeling them surge through my sinuses. I hold the baby closer, savoring his warmth. Jude snorts three lines next, then hops up, ready to go.

"Alright, let's get our shit and go. Seriously." He tries to sound reasonable as he hovers above me.

Giggling, I lay back and pull the baby onto my chest. "Let's stay and play house, Jude! We can clean up and stay here and we'll be a happy family..." His eyes sink into me like hooks, harsh and unamused.

"Get up, Delia! Help me grab this stuff."

"No. I'm staying here." A few seconds pass with no reply, but his face turns red and bitter. He storms out of the room, grabbing the TV, cord dragging on the floor behind him.

The kitchen side door slams. The baby wriggles ever so slightly against my chest. I cradle him and softly hum over the sound of Jude tearing out of our dealer's driveway.

Jungle Man

—Shaquana Adams

Damn near six feet tall, muscular, and hairy from head to toe,
A Tarzan gentleman if you will
Big feet with an arch so huge,
The better for walking away
Tree trunk calves,
 To help with the lifting of heavy burdens
Huge thighs of muscle,
 To later help toss off those burdens
A crotch that is covered,
Only to fool one into thinking it has nothing to do with who he is
A flab of stomach skin, the only soft spot on his body,
 He'd laugh if one touched the belly button; he'd laugh at
most things
Above the flab, some abs. How lovely.
 The better to attract his mate(s)
Next, a chest with pecs,
 One would assume a heart under all that muscle
And attached, long arms for holding,
 And later breaking
Further down, gigantic hands,
 For touching of course
Between the shoulders lies a neck one can't help but notice on a man
 Just right, not too muscular, but dare I say, gentle
And next his face,
His goddamned beautiful face
The part that pulls you in and makes you believe
Half full lips,
Just right for kissing
A bright smile,
That erupts one's own happiness
A soft voice
 Almost velvet, for seduction
Facial features that are soft and say: I come in peace
 But instincts say: He will leave you in pieces
Green eyes that send the looker into another realm
They cried once
And last his hair

Dark, wild, static, crazy
Soft, smooth, dark, wild

Smooth, dark, wild, crazy

Wild, dark, crazy, soft

Dark, crazy, wild, static

Static

I'd run my hand through it

He is a modern Tarzan, and like any jungle man he was an adventure

Yes

That's what we will call him

An adventure.

Love in the Technicolor

—Ashley Elvington

You look so good in Technicolor
Brilliant hues, like no other
Your ambiance engulfs me with all its light
'Til I'm no longer in black and white



Party Time
—Caitlynne McNeill

Moonlight Madness

—Jamie Byrd

I scratch my crotch, grab a pickle out of the fridge, dip it in peanut butter, and go sit outside in the dark to listen to the crickets tell me about their day. As I step out onto the Astroturf carpet, the light on the camper flickers and the steps creak under the weight of my furry slippers. It's nice outside so I decided not to wear clothes, they only cut and restrain me from total freedom and relaxation and if there's any feeling I like to feel, it's freedom!

The Chihuahua and weenie dog mix that showed up a few months ago, and has stayed ever since, is raising hell barking at the dogs that are coming up the lane from the neighbor's house so I grab my BB gun, a beer, and a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall to scare the bastards away. As I'm banging the butt of the BB gun against the Son of God himself, I hear the neighbor yelling at me to "shut up" and to "go inside!" I be damned! I'm not going in for anything especially some overbearing and loud mouth son of a bitch like him. It's my yard, and if I want to raise hell and make noise in the nude, then I will! I sit back in my lounge chair that is beginning to unravel and wait for those mangy mongrels to come close enough so that I can shoot them in the behind. Sure enough, they come just close enough for me to sting 'em good and go yelping off home to tell their jerk off owners about what I'd done.

After I scared them away, I fiddle with the tin foil antenna on the outside television set and try to tune in to the local news. I get the picture about as clear as a glass of river water and figure I've done well for myself. I sit back and begin to enjoy my beer when all of a sudden I see blue lights coming down the road.

Oh hell, somebody done shot somebody or they trying to catch that boy growing dope down the road again. I sure hope somebody has just shot somebody, though. I'd hate for my buddy to get drug back to the pen again. Last time he was in there, I nearly 'bout went crazy waiting on him to get out. Around these parts he is known as our agrarian amigo. Always there to provide a little mood enhancer whenever we need it.

I keep on watching those lights but funny thing is, they stop right dead in front of my house and shin some big ole' bright light right in my face and start yelling something about putting down my gun. I figure they have the wrong house so I tell 'em to get on from

'round my house, they must be got the wrong person, I ain't shot nobody but them nasty dogs from up the drive in over 6 months now. I keep drinking my beer and fiddle with the antennas some more trying to see if I can't get the picture a little clearer. Cops is coming on in a minute and I don't want to miss it. They keep hollering and yelling at me about my gun so I get just pissed off enough to show 'em my picture of little baby Jesus, pointing at it with my BB gun, and tell them aggravating suckers just where I think He's going to send 'em when He gets done with them if they don't leave innocent people like me alone.

Well, sure enough, I guess they didn't like what I had to tell them and they got all excited and all dropped on a knee and drew up their guns and pointed them dead at me. I figure I just better sit down and let them have some time to cool off, so I do just that. I sit there. Maybe while they down there on their knees they'll say a little prayer and He'll tell 'em to leave the poor ole' country folk as they are. Obviously not. That big-bellied sheriff keeps yelling at me to put my hands up, put my hands up, but hell, I'm petting my little dog trying to keep him from eating their asses alive, you'd think he'd be glad of that! But, he ain't. I can't seem to make any of these overbearing meatheads happy to save my life.

Next thing I know, this little wire thingy is stabbing into my left butt check and I'm on the ground all squirming around like a rattlesnake who just got gasoline poured all over him. I don't know why in the world they did that for. You'd think I was a good for nuttin' coon dog dat' done treed up a slick tree. I ain't no damn dog and sure don't know why they's have to treat me that way. Well, they all come running up to me, pointing their guns at me still and put them silver bracelets on me and shoved me into the back of the police car and took my behind to that big old' county hotel. Looks like I'm going to be without my agrarian amigo after all.

A Mother's Scream

—Andrea J. Wilson

My mother's scream; her very last.
It happened so quickly; it went so fast.

My father hit her, he abused her so bad,
Streams of blood, red rivers of sad.

She tried to fight back, but he was too strong.
He hit for the things she did right and the things he done wrong.

She crashed to the floor trying to get to me;
he rushed to her and grabbed her at the knee.

His gun fell out and I scrambled to it.
I pointed it at him and he dared me to shoot it.

"Put it down, darling, before you get hurt!"
"Yeah put it down! Before you both get covered with dirt!"

But I couldn't, my mind wouldn't let me.
Something got to change; someone needs to be set free!

I pointed it at her; a tear ran down my face.
"It is okay Mommy... You're going to a better place."

My mother's scream; her very last.
It happened so quick, it went so fast.

Mount Fuji's Slumber

—Carissa Fazio

Mount Fuji rests
silently, unaware
of the solid ships
being tossed.

Another mountain
of angry waves comes
crashing, devouring
deckhands and rowers.

There is no escape
from the sea;
gnarled claws snatch
men from labor.

Tranquil blues
and shades of grey poised
foaming at the mouth,
with intent to kill.

Objective Thinking

—Sommer Turner

Sitting in fifth grade English,
I was doing a math worksheet,
A compact calculator under
The left cover of my Literature book,
Where the weight wasn't quite heavy enough
To make a difference yet.
My teacher jumped up when another
Teacher told her, terrified,
"Turn on your TV and watch."
My eyes scanned over the calendar —
September 11, 2001— And the angel figurine,
Hands folded, sitting on her desk
While she cried and we all sat baffled.
After we saw the building crumble,
We kept our heads low, eyes to the floor,
And I focused on the purple plaid petals
On the keychain clinging
To my bookbag zipper.
What now?

Peanuts, Please

—Vera S. Prioleau

As my silver rounds enter the coin slot
I briefly reminisce...

My sisters and I wake up
To the sweet smell of buttermilk biscuits,
Drizzled in maple syrup
It's late-summer, 1996.

Still in our bed clothes,
Nappy curls all over our heads
We find ourselves picking peanuts
On a splinter filled stool.
It's eight o'clock,
As we settle under an old oak tree—
Our family tradition.

My steaming sweat clouds my vision,
As the mid-day sun sits high in the sky.
My arched right hand helps me to see in the distance.

I want to shout "I give up!
Please don't make me do anymore!"
But as the aroma of seasoning fills the evening air,
I know my work will be rewarded.

I slowly open the bag
Of plastic wrapped peanuts.
I think—good, but not the same.
Air-conditioned quarter feedings versus
Late-summer hand pickings: no contest.

The Predator

—Carissa Fazio

I am crouching silently, waiting. I have been waiting for an hour now, with no reward. When will you come? I can already feel the weight of your body dragging on the ground behind me, still warm with life.

My mind starts to wander; the sun is about to rise. The peanut butter sandwich I ate this morning has already settled. My stomach feels empty. My eye is twitching. My leg is falling asleep. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, cringing at the tiny needles that seem to pierce my left foot. I hate when my leg falls asleep.

I know you are there, somewhere. I also know you can't see me; I played that to my advantage. I don't know if you will ever see me. But you will know I exist for a split second, at the penetrating force of my bullet in your side.

I know this will be worth it, but you have yet to show up. I glance at the trees around me. They are tall, solid oaks reaching toward the sky. There is a brook, babbling to my left. Rays of fresh sunshine are peaking through the limbs, which is a welcoming contrast to the darkness I had been hiding in all this time.

I let my mind wander again. I envision your eyes staring back at mine, scared. I am sure you won't know why you are scared. I wouldn't either, if I were you.

Suddenly, there you are. You emerge from the foliage, silently. You are standing so still. I am almost startled by your appearance. My heart rate increases, slightly. I thought you would never come, but now the moment has arrived.

I watch as you walk toward the brook. Your steps are sure; your footing is light, but solid. You stare at your reflection in the water, still unaware of my presence. Perfect. The sun is shining brighter and it illuminates the space around you. I can see your reflection rolling over the rocks, yet always staying in place. It is in motion, though you are standing still.

I am the predator crouched perfectly still in the underbrush. I am the hunter, taking your life. You have no say, you have no rights. Just stand there, perfectly still. It will only hurt a little.

I look at the murderous gun in my hands. A weapon so powerful, so lethal. I look back towards you as I raise it to my shoulder, watching your ear twitch and your head perk up at the soft rustle

of my jacket. You look in my direction, and in that instant I pull the trigger.

That was it. No regrets. The echo of the gunshot is still ripping through the oaks, but you are laying on your side. I stand up for the first time in two hours, rubbing at the kink in my neck as I walk toward you.

You who were magnificent, you who were beautiful are now dim-eyed and still. Your blood colors the forest floor a vibrant red. Your sides are still warm. Your neck hangs limp, the weight of your head pulling at your stretched skin, still screaming for life. I stroke it as I imagine the mounted trophy it will become on my wall. I carefully slice down the length of your body, sternum to pelvic bone, the membrane tearing at the torture of my knife.

Preposition Proposition

–Staci Poston

To me

Through me

At me

By me

Around me

Over me

Under me

Behind me

In front of me

Beside me

On me

In me

Preposition me



The Path is Clear at Twilight

—Kelly Gaskins

Raw

—Carissa Fazio

In her purse she carried a wallet with a single debit card only she would touch, sunglasses, keys, Lysol wipes, hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, pens wrapped in layers of plastic wrap that she could peel back after every use, tampons, disposable toilet seat covers, and a pack of gum.

Every time she brushed her teeth, she would open a new toothbrush from its wrapper and use a new travel sized tube of paste, the whole tube. She wore gloves when receiving papers from her professors, slipping them into plastic sleeves in her binder. She washed her hands after every class with rubbing alcohol and ammonia.

Every morning she would scrub the community shower before stepping in, and then shower with a new sponge and dry with a clean towel. Afterwards, she would collect the clothes she wore yesterday, and wash them. She wiped every chair she sat in during all her classes, then spent the rest of the afternoon scrubbing her dorm room, and doing homework.

She met him in her freshman English class; he sat four chairs away, two rows up, to the left. He stopped her in the hallway after class and offered his hand as an introduction. She refused his handshake but smiled sweetly, and they went to lunch anyways. When they set their food on the cafeteria table, she dug in her purse and removed six moist wipes, and a bottle of hand sanitizer. She wiped the table and the chair, and then sanitized her own hands. They enjoyed their lunch together.

She dated the guy from her freshman English class. He had hair, and eyes, and the most inconvenient habit of leaving the toilet seat up. She stressed over that every time she visited his dorm. She knew that unless she wanted to touch the seat and disinfect the whole toilet, she just had to hold it. She got a bladder infection.

Things started to progress, but she didn't want him to hold her hand. She couldn't even imagine what it would be like to hold another human's hand, fingers laced together. She knew she didn't have enough hand sanitizer to accommodate that. One night when he walked her back to her dorm, they stood in the hallway and he very gently leaned in and kissed her lips. She stood there stunned for a moment, then rushed inside to disinfect.

She used her last bottle of mouthwash, and got paranoid

because she never leaves a space in her sanitary cabinet empty. She slept restlessly. The next morning she skipped her classes to go to the grocery store and restock on mouthwash. While she was at it, she picked up six containers of Lysol wipes, a hand sanitizer pump, bleach, ammonia, hand soap, and a roll of steel wool.

She went through so much soap that semester scouring her hands till they were red and raw. They would become so damaged that they bled at random, soiling her sweatshirts and floor. She would just clean some more. She was so ashamed of how they would bleed, contaminating her food, her desk, pooling in her lap during class. How did they get like that? She would scrub them all the more to remove the blood, the scabs. Her boyfriend from the English class soon felt unloved. He tried to help her, to be there for her, but she couldn't let him in. He got tired of the lack of physical intimacy in their relationship. No hugs, no touch, no steamy make-out sessions on the laundry room couch, followed with a feel-up and sex. No kissing, period. She didn't even let him in her dorm.

She cried the night he broke-up with her. She cried and reached for a tissue. The last one in the box. She blew her nose and went to the store to buy more, by the time she got home she didn't see a reason to fuss anymore. She simply spent the rest of her night scrubbing her hands with steel wool and a whole bar of soap.

People asked about her hands often. She used to get embarrassed. Some junior asked if they got stuck in a cheese grater. She didn't even eat cheese. Eventually though, they became a badge to how clean she was--her skin so raw, so pink, so raw.

The Reel Catch

—Amanda Taylor

The sun had not even risen
But I was excited as I leaned
Against the old wooden railing.

Bright eyed and ready,
I waited alongside my father.
He was tall, or at least he was to me.
“Don’t scare them away”
He warned, with a finger over his mouth.

I picked up the cup of dirt,
we had carefully chosen
Earlier that morning.
And plunged my small hand
into the soft earth.

The worms, slimy and squirming,
Felt strange against my fingertips.
And he showed me,
With a hook and a grin,
That it was easy.

Winding up and back
I tossed it out.
That string seemed to go for miles and miles.
But I still listened
For that satisfactory splash.

My father smiled down at me
And it became warmer,
Just as a hue of gold
Touched everything around us.

With a slight tug of warning,
The slow clicking began,
Then more quickly
And finally, there was nothing.

Just like on the small hook,
at the end of the string.

But my father still smiled,
"you'll get it next time."

Reflections upon More Difficult Time

—Katie Mitchell

I thank my God for winter's cold and nights
so dark and deep that nothing can be seen
because I know my love for dawn's first light
will be much stronger, mean much more to me.
I thank my God for violent, raging storms
and also for the breezes in the spring.
I am so thankful for the pains and thorns
but more so for the roses that they bring.
Because I freely welcome trials and tears
all of the smiles that follow are so bright,
and though it's hard, I never shun my fears.
It feels so good to finally see light.
I thank my God for all who came before.
Because of them, your love means so much more.

The Relationship

—Elizabeth Graham

The tire didn't fit
but it was there.
I took it for granted.
awkwardly filling space
uneven and skinnier
but still fit the axel.

It stayed with me,
always there
if I needed it.
Inhabiting the spot
on the back
of my jeep.

Sometimes I'd have a flat
and put it
where a real tire should have been.
A tire of bulky shiny rubber
one that matched the other tires.
Not a skinny frayed fill-in.

It couldn't stand up
to the whole journey.
It was made to fill in.
Only weekend trips,
once or twice across town
Until I found another,
another tire.

The Ruined Southerner

–Ashley Elvington

An Account of Others' Opinions of Me Becoming an English Major
(A Parody of Thomas Hardy's "The Ruined Maid")

Note: As I was previously a Nursing major, you can imagine the outrage when I decided to follow what I thought was best for me and become an English major. I received more negative comments than good ones, so I jumped on the opportunity to utilize my talents and write about this. I always get asked, when being born and raised here in the South, why I would want to learn "Proper Yankee language" or go to school for a major that has the word "liberal" in it. It's tough at times because even when I want to read a poem I enjoy around Christmas time to loved ones, someone has something negative to say. But I am proud of myself for doing what I want to do and I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it.

"Oh, Ashley, my darling, such a calamity!
Who would have thought we should meet in the City?
And from where such big words, such a smart head?" –
"Didn't you hear I've been ruined?" she said.

– "You left us in confusion, without rhyme or reason,
Before you never read poetry stuff during the Christmas season;
And now you speak big words and read constantly!"
"Yes: that's how we behave when we're ruined," said she.

– At home in the Pee Dee you said 'ain't' and 'ya'll,'
And 'darn tootin',' and 'purdy' and 'reckon'; but all
Of your talking is now suited for proper society!" –
"Some rewards are gained with one's ruin," said she.

– "Your hands were pen-free then, your shelf empty and covered in
dust
But now your collection has big names, from Tennyson to Thomas,
And your notebooks are full as any poet's!" –
"We never stop reading and writing when we're ruined," she joked.

– "You used to call proper language the talk of the snooty,
And you'd hoot, and you'd holler; but your current duty
Is to deny the language that made you so unique!" –

"Correct. One is quite generic when ruined," said she.

- "I wish I knew fancy words, could write lines of poetry,
And had a love for books, and could stand to stay inside the library!"

-

"My darling - a Southern bred girl, someone you will always be,
Can't wish for that. You are not ruined," said she.

Síolta Dé

—Donnie Pierce

Pausing now for Danu's night,
campfires flashed with flickering light.
Along the moonlit glistening streams,
they woke from childhood's pagan dreams,
recalling fearless Dagda's might.

New-bosomed maidens Maypole dance,
for braves to mate with their trance.
Where babes and fairies together run,
and hunted pelts dried by the sun,
the ritual feast on Eire's manse.

Sacred songs of long-dead kings,
every soul this day gladly sings.
For fattened calves and ample mead,
health and hearth their yearly plead,
the hopes of kinfolks' needed things.

Incessant rains on peat-stained hands,
dishearten not nor extinguish plans.
Washing away their fruitless deeds,
so great the promise of gathered seeds,
to harvest soon on faraway lands.

Though Brigit's light was the Lord's to be,
before the monks came from the sea.
This night's cross was Celt alone, where
Mother Nature's firmament shone, their
lives were blessed and truly free.

The tales of druids and wizards wand,
told 'round the fire under crescent dome.
The old crone's rage, nursemaid's fawn,
mussels boiled with fresh caught prawn,
will feed the clan's long trek home.
Another year, turn-of-the-wheel,
heaven's gate and Arawn's will.

This annual journey instinctively known,
to plant the seeds of breathe and bone,
and build the throne to Nature's weal.

Some days it all comes crashing down

—Shaquana Adams

Some days it all comes crashing down,
I feel I've accomplished much in little time,
But the weight of the world drags me to the ground.

Today I weep without a sound,
All I can do is get up and sigh,
Some days it all comes crashing down.

I think positively and try not to frown.
At times, sour memories plague my mind,
And the weight of the world drags me to the ground

Flashback to times in this little town,
I feel the need to question why...
Some days it all comes crashing down.

I believe I should be alright by now,
They say happiness is all in the mind,
But the weight of the world drags me to the ground.

I will gain more strength next time around,
As soon as my mind stops pressing rewind,
Some days it all comes crashing down,
And the weight of the world still drags me to the ground.



Peeking

—Kaitlyn Grooms

Something Special

—Lauren Cole

[A poem modeled after Snapping Beans by Lisa Parker.]

Laying on the couch beside Mema,
Her hip becomes my pillow.
She rubs my head like she does her prized teapots.
She tells me everything will be fine
As I cry into her back.
I tell her of how I miss home
And have lost my way
Because my heart is there with her
But my mind is at school.
I must make her proud
And fulfill her dreams of me changing the world
By being a doctor
And having my own white coat
As some sort of rite of passage to success.
She always said I was something special
And would do great things in life
But I feel as if I know nothing without her beside me.
I cling tighter to her back
As if I were playing a game of tug-of-war
And cry harder as I think of returning to school alone.
Back to a place where I am just another face
Another number
Another name
A place where I merely exist
And dream of the days until I return home
To be Mema's something special.

Special Smiles

—Whitney Page

I stare at the same worn
down photo of my family,
wonder about the special

smile of my grandma,
her false teeth glistening
in the sunshine.

Will she again sit in her
rocking chair,
humming a song
she knows by heart?

My brothers crowd around
her, their smiles
like Cheshire cats',
comical faces funny
as hysterical hyenas
playing pranks on each other.

My sister is the star,
her smile like a dozen diamonds
in the fading yellow of the photo,
her face mine only in this memory.

And me, I'm the baby,
Showing off my own grin
in the crowd of family around me:
not quite the center,
but perhaps the only one
whose smile is still the same.

To Be Young

—Kelly Gaskins

Mark my words
with a pen
in red.
They flow from
my lips,
a fountain of wisdom
gathered from the mistakes
of a young foolish girl.
Mark them as I speak,
lest they scatter
like roaches,
because as I turn on the light
in your mind
the dark things will flee
in fear,
gnashing their teeth and gouging their eyes.
Mark the follies of my youth
and repeat them
quickly, calmly, carelessly.
They will lift you
in the sky, soaring,
howling like a cry
for help.
Your blood will flow
like a river, bursting
from your veins, spilling
out on the earth,
covering the words I have left for you.
Leaving you lost, lingering
like a young foolish girl.

Too Young

—Brittany Hinson

5,419 days since I last saw your face,
Over 14 years since I last heard your voice,
14 years, 10 months and 2 days,
Since I first heard 3 words that still mean the most,
When you first told me you loved me,
I can no longer recall,
But only take the word of our mother,
That I replied at all,
Your gravestone burns,
More than the tears in my eyes,
I don't think I will ever understand,
Why it had to be goodbye,
I don't think I will ever know,
Why it had to be you instead of me,
Why someone so young,
Had to be set free,
Body from the soul,
Your soul still lives on,
It's in my heart,
It still keeps me strong,
I know you're here,
Always by my side,
But I long to hold your hand,
And tell you I'm sorry for that night,
People say I was too young to do anything,
Or that fate had set its course,
But nothing they say will change my mind,
Nothing will get rid of the hurt,
For every second of every day,
Since you were taken,
I've hated myself for surviving,
And having the future that I'm making.

Two Years Down The Road

—Kelly Gaskins

Lately me and you
lay opposite
head to toe
talking, blinking, screaming
our insides in silent distress.



Self-Portrait with Jeep
—Elizabeth Graham

Tyrannosaurus Vagina

—David Doughty

Rude couple's living room. Anywhere, anytime.

A Man, (20s), is sitting in a crude chair, reading a newspaper. Next to him sits a Woman, (20s), also in a crude chair, reading an old book. A simple phone (with cord) lies between them on the floor. Both are wearing comfortable clothes and have mundane expressions on their faces.

After a minute or so, the Woman quickly glances up at the Man, then back at her book.

WOMAN. How was your day, honey? Meet any new whores to cheat on me with?

MAN. (*Instantaneously and nonchalantly.*) Blow it out your ass, dear.

The Woman makes a face that says, "That's what I thought..."

WOMAN. Well, my day was wonderful, mostly because you weren't here. I had lots of crazy sex with that foreign girl who lives across the street. You remember her, right?

MAN. Well, if the bitch is in heat, I suppose she may as well lay with a stray.

The Woman momentarily stops reading, looks at the floor with a perturbed face, then she smiles and continues reading.

WOMAN. You know, you shouldn't be so rude while we have guests, darling. I'm sure you're giving all these wonderful people a poor impression of yourself.

MAN. (*looks up at the woman*) What guests?

WOMAN. (*gestures at the audience*) Look around, dumbass.

MAN. (*looks at the audience*) Oh...did you invite our neighbors over for a get-together?

WOMAN. (*under her breathe*) Yeah...but I'm thinking of telling them to go home and come back tomorrow. I'm not really in the mood for this today.

MAN. (*scoffs*) When are you ever in the mood?

WOMAN. (*smiles*) I was in the mood all day today while you were plowing your fat-ass secretary.

MAN. (*reading his paper*) She's not a secretary, dear. She's an office intern.

WOMAN. Well, tell your fat-ass office intern to clear your itinerary next Thursday, because I've scheduled a doctor's appointment for you. I'm concerned for your urinary health. Has your penis begun to shrivel? I ask because somebody has been pissing all over the toilet seat.

MAN. Maybe you should just start sitting down when you pee.

WOMAN. (*annoyed*) What makes you think that it wasn't you?

MAN. Well, for starters, I aimed with no trouble at all while pissing in your breakfast this morning.

The Woman stops reading again and looks straight ahead with wide eyes and a blank face.

WOMAN. You know...I thought I tasted failure.

MAN. You shouldn't talk that way about your cooking, dear.

The Woman makes the same perturbed face as before while still looking at the book. There is a few seconds pause before she speaks.

WOMAN. I spoke with an old friend from high school today. Her husband is the same age as you, and he has a six-figure-income. Isn't that fascinating?

MAN. It sure is. Imagine all the blowjobs he had to give in order to get promoted that quickly.

WOMAN. (*in false agreement*) Yeah. Imagine if you attempted to sexually please your superiors rather than playing grab-ass with your heffer clerk.

MAN. Heffer office intern, dear.

WOMAN. How much does that beluga whale get paid, anyway?

MAN. Interns don't receive a fixed income, honey. They get paid per assignment, if they get paid at all.

WOMAN. Oh, so she's a freelance whore?

MAN. Bingo. (*he turns the page in his newspaper*) Hmm, it looks like another Holocaust survivor is giving a speech at Town Hall tomorrow. Maybe-

WOMAN. (*cuts him off*) What, are you going to start poking fun at Jews?

MAN. First of all, I have nothing against them. If I did, I wouldn't have married the mother of all Jews. (*gestures to the Woman.*) And I would never 'poke fun' at the Jews. They were a very oppressed people. A lot of people like to make cruel, insensitive jokes about them, ANNE FRANK-ly, I don't have the patience for those who do so.

The Woman glares at the Man with a scowl.

MAN. Anyway, enough of this talk about Jews. You are hindering on my CONCENTRATION. CAMP you see I'm trying to read the newspaper?

WOMAN. Your childish jokes are beyond intellectually and morally low.

The Man maintains a smug look while he reads the paper. The Woman slowly forms a smile as she gives in to the farce.

WOMAN. Almost as low as the Jewish population in the 1940s.

MAN. (*elated*) Oh! Whoa! Wow, I did NAZI that one coming! Kudos, darling! Kudos!

WOMAN. (*proud*) Thank you!

The Man sighs with joy. The couple sits quietly for a moment, and then the phone rings. The Man answers.

MAN. Hello?

After briefly listening to the phone, the Man hands it to the Woman. His expression never changes.

WOMAN. Who is it?

MAN. The only skank I hate more than you.

The woman takes the phone.

WOMAN. Hi, mom...yes...yes I am still married to it.

MAN. (*coughs*) Hag!

WOMAN. (*to the phone*) I know...his imperfections are quite profound, aren't they.

MAN. (*coughs*) Buzzard!

WOMAN. (*to the phone*) Oh, of course. When isn't he making a complete ass of himself?

MAN. (*coughs, loud, long and dramatic*) Your mother is a rotting bitch!

WOMAN. (*to the Man*) I'm sorry, what was that last one?

MAN. Oh, pardon me. I said, 'your mother is a rotting bitch.'

WOMAN. Hmm. (*to the phone*) Yes? Okay... yes, I will tell him... okay, goodbye...I love you too, mommy. (*She hangs the phone up.*) (*to the Man*) Mother says she wants you to go to Hell.

MAN. What? Again? But we just visited her last weekend!

WOMAN. (*sarcastically*) Oh, ha ha. Insinuating that my mother is Satan...how original. When are you going to get some fresh material?

MAN. Whenever you get fresh material to clean out that Tyrannosaurus vagina of yours.

The Woman looks completely appalled.

MAN. Seriously, it's utterly offensive. I can smell it from here, and I bet they can too. (*gestures to the audience*) And at night, I can hear it roaring and scavenging for prey.

The Woman is now embarrassed. She takes a few moments to collect herself, then she speaks, just barely making her words out through her anger.

WOMAN. Well you know, dear, I believe that you, yourself may have the ability...to thoroughly cleanse the vagina of an actual Tyrannosaurus.

MAN. (*curious*) Really? How so?

WOMAN. (*loudly and angrily*) Because you are a giant douchebag!

The Man chuckles and goes back to reading his paper. The couple

stays quiet for a long time. They have forgotten about the audience. After a while, the Man clears his throat. A few moments later, the Woman slowly turns the page in her book. Another long silence. Suddenly the man softly mutters something about the weather report to himself.

MAN. (softly) Gonna be cloudy tomorrow.

The couple waits for a noise in the audience and the Woman suddenly looks up.

WOMAN. Oh, I forgot you all were still here. Uh...we don't really have any more entertainment lined for you. Our evening pretty much goes on like this well into the night. It gets pretty dull after a while. I'm sorry but we can't amuse you guys much more than we already have-

MAN. (suddenly) Nonsense! I'll tell them one of my classic light bulb jokes!

The Man props himself in his chair towards the audience, about to tell a joke.

WOMAN. (annoyed) Ugh...you mean one of the light bulb jokes that have been written for decades, yet you keep trying to take credit for them?

MAN. (condescending) Shh, I'll talk to you in a minute honey, I'm telling jokes to our guests right now.

The Woman looks at him with hatred.

MAN. (to the audience) How many women does it take to change a light bulb?

WOMAN. Oh, let me guess, you sexist asshole. It takes two women; (mocking the Man) 'one to change the light bulb and one to suck my dick.'

MAN. (to the Woman) Actually, no. (to the audience) It takes five women to change a light bulb; one to NOT cook my dinner, one to NOT iron my shirt, one to NOT clean and vacuum, one to NOT sexually satisfy me and one to nag me to death until I finally change the damn light bulb myself.

WOMAN. You are a dog.

MAN. If I'm a dog, don't you think I would have remained loyal to you?

WOMAN. Point taken.

MAN. Oh, here's a good one-

WOMAN. Another lame joke?

MAN. (to the audience) How many gay guys does it take to change a light bulb?

WOMAN. (rolls her eyes and gazes upwards) Oh my god.

MAN. (chuckles) No, we'll save that one for another time. But how about this one-

WOMAN. (*disgruntled*) Ugh.

MAN. How many black people does it take to change a --

WOMAN. (*cuts the Man off*) Whoa, whoa, whoa! Stop right there! Are you serious?!

MAN. (*confused*) No, it's a joke.

WOMAN. Idiot! What are you thinking?! There are African Americans here! (*gestures at the audience*)

MAN. (*hesitantly*) So?

WOMAN. SO, they are going to get offended!

MAN. (*very hesitantly*) Yeah?

WOMAN. I don't know how to make it any clearer...if you tell the joke, these African Americans are going to feel affronted...so, don't tell the damn joke!

MAN. What? So what if they get offended?! It's just a black joke!

WOMAN. You racist bastard! Did you forget about slavery?! A white man making a 'black joke' is beyond evil! And they are called 'African Americans!'

MAN. (*laughs*) First of all, I'm no racist. Second, slavery was an awful thing, but nobody here is a slave and I was never a slave owner --

WOMAN. But your ancestors --

MAN. (*quickly cutting her off, in a serious tone*) My ancestors lived in Sicily and didn't come to this country until 1922 and they were lucky to have survived the boat ride diseases, the murderous New York natives and the famine and poverty that plagued immigrants in those times.

The Woman is speechless.

MAN. That's everybody's problem when it comes to this sort of thing. 'All white men are either evil or come from evil backgrounds.' It's absurd. My jokes aren't meant to spite anyone, they're meant to entertain! Who cares if they get offended? That's their problem. Do you see all the women here? (*gestures at the audience*) They were probably offended earlier. How is this any different?

WOMAN. Uh...

MAN. You are a woman. Were you not offended when I told that joke about ironing shirts and nagging and whatnot?

WOMAN. Well, yeah, but --

MAN. And what about all the potential homosexuals in this group?

That guy (*makes reference to specific audience member, what he is wearing, where he is sitting, etc.*) needs to come out of the closet if he isn't out already; he's been eyeing me up all afternoon. And if he was offended by my impending gay joke, then he has a funny way of showing it; look at his big, goofy smile!

WOMAN. What I'm trying to say is --

MAN. And what about you? Are you or are you not doing the scissor tango with the foreign girl across the street?

WOMAN. (*disappointed*) Actually, I'm not.

MAN. But you want to, don't you?

WOMAN. (*begins to daydream towards the sky and smile*) Yes.

MAN. By the way, you, yourself are Jewish and you joined me by engaging in an offensive farce against your own people.

WOMAN. Yeah, So?

MAN. So, you see?! You didn't make a big stink about the jokes that pertained to your character because you know you can take it and you know they are just jokes!

WOMAN. (*thinks for a moment*) That's true, I guess.

MAN. And when I started to make a joke about people of the darker persuasion, it was actually you who insulted them by trying to protect them. These black people can take a joke just as well as you can, but you tried to self-righteously shield them from my crude humor.

WOMAN. Hmm...I guess I see what you're saying.

MAN. Also, not a lot of people are aware of this, but many Jewish civilians performed unsophisticated anecdotes about themselves and their own people during the Holocaust to maintain high spirits. Now, I am not certain, and I can't be 100% sure, but I'd be willing to bet that black people did the same thing during the time of slavery.

WOMAN. I understand your point, and I agree with you, but still, they are called 'African Americans'

MAN. Why?

WOMAN. 'Why?' Because...that's what they are.

MAN. Well, that's kind of silly....

WOMAN. What are you talking about, now?

MAN. Africa and America are locations. If you're going to characterize a group of individuals based on locations, make sure they are relevant ones. (*to the audience*) How many 'African Americans' in this room were born in Africa? (*waits*) That's what I thought. So, why are you labeled with the African continent? Is it because your ancestors are from Africa? My ancestors are from Sicily. I'm not 'Sicilian American.' I'm just American. I understand if you wish to be 're-minded of your people's past' but dwelling on the past is unhealthy. The darkness, no pun intended, is over and if we can't embrace you and treat you like one of our own by making fun of you, then great people like MLK died for nothing.

WOMAN. (*to the MAN, embarrassed*) They are called that because of their race!

MAN. (*to the Woman*) Why is it always about race?! Their race is 'black or dark-skinned'! Hispanics aren't called Mexicans because

they are Hispanic! They are called Hispanic! A location has nothing to do with individualism, unless the individual in question was born in the location or lived there. If a black man lives in Africa, he is not called African American just because he's black. He's just African, because it's where he's from, and his race is black. The foreign girl across the street, she was born and raised in South Africa, wasn't she?
WOMAN. Yeah-

MAN. But she's white! She came over here and obtained her United States citizenship. So you tell me, why is she not allowed to be called 'African American' but they are? (*gestures to the audience*) These labels do nothing but aid in the restraint of global unity. Why should race be brought up at all in this day and age when all it does is continue to keep us all separate? Why should I look at a black man and call him African American when I could simply be calling him my friend? And why, when my humor is light-hearted, should I not be allowed to make fun of whoever the hell I want?

WOMAN. (*thinks for a long moment*) Well, yet again you have made a several good points.

MAN. (*to the audience*) If there be a black man or woman here whom wishes for me to label them as 'African America,' then I will honor their request, so long as they honor my beliefs on how 'ri-damn-diculous' it is. And that goes for every one of every race.

WOMAN. Okay, well, before these people start burning effigies of you, do you think you could answer a question for me?

MAN. Yes?

WOMAN. Everything you've said so far has made sense...to an extent. But what about the few guests here who have heard what you have to say, and still feel thoroughly insulted?

MAN. Well, darling, that's a very good question....

The Man stands up and puts his newspaper down. He takes a SOAP BOX and TOP HAT from behind his chair.

MAN. And I have a few simple, yet very important questions of my own....

He places the SOAP BOX in the center near the audience and puts the TOP HAT on. He steps up on the SOAP BOX.

MAN. Why does everyone get offended so easily?

The Woman begins humming the tune of "America, The Beautiful" and continues to hum during the Man's speech.

MAN. Why is it a social crime to make a black joke in the United States of America? Why is it an unwritten rule that certain groups of people aren't allowed to be made fun of? Aren't Jews, women, homosexuals, and black individuals equal citizens in this country?

Does equality NOT include being an equal target of mockery and satire? I submit to you that it does! I personally believe that not only does directing offensive comicality towards everyone support true equality, but it brings us all closer together and makes this world slightly better! Yield to my advice! As long as you maintain a light heart, proceed in telling an offensive joke among mixed company! For we are in the greatest land of freedom! And in this land, it does not matter what gender you are! It does not matter where your sexual preferences lie! It does not matter what pigment and hue pertain to your outward appearance! All that matters is if you have what it takes to be a great American!

The Man spreads his legs, unzips his pants and reaches in to grab his crotch. The Woman is still humming away, slowly getting louder.

MAN. Grasp and squeeze! Hold on tightly! Never let go of your brothers' and sisters' arms as we cling together, holding hands across the nation and across the world!

The Man begins to pull an American flag out of his unzipped pants as he sings the last lyric of "America, the Beautiful," then wears the flag as a cape.

MAN. (*sings*) FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA!

The Man makes a glorious pose on his last note.

WOMAN. Pulling the American flag out of your crotch...nice touch, dear.

MAN. (*to the Woman*) Thank you, honey! (*to the audience*) And if anyone here has a problem with it, I'll be backstage with my fly still undone so that they may tenderly partake upon my ball sack.

The Man prepares himself to exit.

MAN. For the rest of you: Let us go on a journey to put the "parity" back in "parody!" Let us all walk into that bar together! Let us all approach the punch-line as one! And let us all join in laughter as we drink from the melting pot of good-spirited, offensive humor!

The Man exits, stage left, creating his own vocal fanfare. The Woman slowly stands, puts her book down in her chair and speaks to the audience, (giving the cue for the end of the play).

WOMAN. 'Fade to African American-' sorry! I mean 'fade to black!' (*to the Man who is O.S.*) Hey...hey wait a minute! (*she runs after him and exits stage left while shouting*) Does this mean you're not allowed to be offended by my Tyrannosaurus vagina anymore?!

(*End of the play*)

Untitled

—Myshel Watford

The sight of his glistening god-like body in the blazing summer sun did absolutely nothing for me. He looked back at me and smiled with his chiseled chin, shining green eyes, and pearly whites. Without thinking I put on a cheesy grin and gave him one of those half-hearted four fingered waves. Next thing I know, he jumps off the dock and into the cool water. Now was my chance to bolt up the hill and speed away in my car. Unfortunately, his protruding head over the top of the water stopped those racing thoughts in their tracks.

Once again, we find ourselves at my parents' lake house wasting the last two weeks of our summer vacation away. It has been almost seven months since Andrew asked me out. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. After all, he completely adores me and all the other girls want him. Most say I'm the luckiest girl at Journey Heights High School, but those gossiping bitches don't know anything about me. They are the reason I'm in this predicament with no way out. The whispers behind my back, and the judgmental looks; I don't think I can take it.

What else was I supposed to do? Tell poor, sweet innocent Andrew, "Hey, so yeah, you're super sweet and all, but I like chicks not dicks." It would be the end of my life as I know it. So now, I'm biding my time. Just one more year until I can get out of this hell hole of a town. All of the uppity, white wash, I-will-shove-God-down-your-throat-whether-you-like-it-or-not bastards. I will shoot myself if I have to stay here for much longer. The great thing about graduation in May is that I'm moving away to Andersonville for college shortly after. You know what they say, "College is the time for experimentation." Well I say, let the experimenting begin.

Sweet cheeks over there in the water has yet to come to the realization that he is S.O.L. You see, I have put myself on this pedestal just for him. He thinks that I'm waiting for marriage to have sex. Andrew can be so gullible. Up until this point in our "relationship" we haven't done the deed. Not for lack of trying on Andrew's part, of course. The truth is I'm waiting for him to leave me alone for five minutes with hot stuff that's staying next door. She thinks she's being clever over there. Sending over, what she thinks is, a nice friendly, neighborly wave when we just so happen to be outside at the same time. To my dismay all she's doing is mocking me. I sit in this utterly uncomfortable wooden lawn chair just waiting for the glimpse of her

perfectly tan body, golden hair, and white smile.

It is always the same daily routine with her. She will get up at eight to go for a jog down the road. When she gets back she changes into one of her many colorful and figure exposing bikinis. Then she swims around in the lake for a while, and takes in the sun's rays as though it would stop shining tomorrow. Late at night when I'm sitting on the couch, if I look through the living room window just right, I can see her checking herself out in the mirror as she sings into her brush. Once a week, mostly on Fridays, she will have people over for parties. Did I fail to mention that it is currently Friday afternoon? Earlier today I talked myself into it.

I'm going to go over to her house. All I want to do is see if she wouldn't mind me coming over to the party tonight, even if that means dragging along Andrew. I see her over in her back yard next to mine. She looks like a goddess just sitting there in her lawn chair with her shades on. I get up out of my chair and start walking towards her. I'm completely transfixed on her when I hear a voice from behind me.

"Hey babe, where are you going?" Andrew shouts from the water.

"Just next door," I shout over my shoulder as I scurry off through the small patch of pine trees that separates my yard from her yard.

Walking past the first few pines I'm about halfway to her. She looks up and smiles at me. For the first time I can see she has the most beautiful smile with perfectly straight and white teeth. Now my heart is racing, and I feel like I'm about to faint. My legs start to quiver, but I must remain completely cool. What kind of first impression would I make if I just ... oh shit! My unabridged attention to her gorgeousness must have made everything else irrelevant, because I sure as hell did not see that tree root sticking four inches out of the ground. Isn't this just great? My first attempts to say "hey" to the girl that I've been watching like a stalker for the past week, and I fall. Naturally with my luck, I fall flat on my face. Not just one knee down, but lying on the ground. I am completely embarrassed and hoping to die, but I scramble back to my feet. She has already made her way from her lawn chair over to me as I start to brush myself off.

As I look up to see her I'm met with the sweetest voice I've ever heard asking me, "Are you ok?"

"Yeah," I laugh, "Guess I didn't see that tree root too well." What a dumb thing to say. Guess I didn't see that tree root too well? What the hell is wrong with me? My chest starts to sink as the gaining

momentum of my embarrassment keeps thrusting itself further into my heart.

"Well, if it helps at all, you fell with such grace," she says smiling at me. She continues with a laugh and says, "By the way, that is my name. Grace."

Grace. It was like a cosmic sign. The one thing I had been looking for since I first realized who I was on the inside. As I reach out to grab her hand and look into those shining blue incandescent eyes that was it. The only thing I could think to reply with is, "Hi."



Solitude

—Carissa Fazio

Vampire Market: A Parody of Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti

—Janet Grey

Midnight and sun
Maids heard the vampires cry
"Come by our coven sometime
Come by, come by:
Angel and Damon,
Edward and Bill,
Lestat is waiting,
Come get your fill!
Sensuous voices,
Byronic air,
Classical features,
And extremely gelled hair.
Our skills they are many,
Our words they are sweet,
You'll be dazzled at our prowess,
No man can compete.
So drop by sometime
And we'll show you our skills
Just don't tell your fathers
Or just make out their wills."

Evening by evening
Through the books they rushed,
To Laura they were a joy to read,
But Lizzie simply blushed:
Reading close together
In the cooling weather,
With hungry eyes and mumbling lips,
With tingling cheeks and fingertips.
"No more," Lizzie said,
Turning away her head:
"We must not look at vampire men,
We must not buy their books:
Who knows what thoughts lie behind
Their dark and brooding looks."
"Come by," call the vampires

Striding 'round the bend.
"Oh," cried Lizzie, "Laura, Laura,
You should not scope out vampire men."
Lizzie covered up her eyes,
Covered close lest they should look;
Laura reared her glossy head,
And whispered like the restless brook:
"Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,
Down the glen come vampire men.
One owns a castle,
Yet sighs so gloomily,
One drives a shiny volvo
With great fuel economy.
How great they must be
Whose dates are so steamy;
How perfect to be with
One that's so dreamy."
"No," said Lizzie: "No, no, no;
Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us."
She turned tail and ran
With no thought to linger,
But Laura did stay
And put her heart through the ringer.

Laura stretched her eager neck
Like the badly-acted Swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like poem that wanders
When poet's brain is gone.

Backwards up the mossy glen
Turned and trooped the vampire men,
With their still repeated cry,
"Come by, come by."
When they reached where Laura was
They stood as still as death does,
Leering at each other,
Brother to Salvatore brother;
Signaling each other,
Brother with blood brother.

"Come by, come by," was still their cry.
 Laura stared but did not stir,
 Longed but tried to look demure:
The blue-eyed vampire bade her taste
 In tones as smooth as honey,
But non-fanged Laura spoke in haste:
 "Good sir, are you being funny?"

"No good lady, I save my strength for you
 As my brothers can well attest,
 Now if you'll bid the glen adieu,
 I'll show you what you've missed."

As the vampires led back up the glen,
 They each did give a pause,
 Facing her with crooked smiles,
 That briefly looked like jaws.
"You have much gold upon your head,"
 They answered all together:
 "But the veins we seek are red,
 And enrich the life far better."
And so she entered their domain,
A moonlit place both stock and strange,
Then sucked their blood goods fair and red:
 And gave hers in exchange.
 She never tasted such before,
 Though reading books had told her so,
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
 She sucked until her lips were sore;
Then flinging lingering thoughts away
 She went heartily astray.
When she awoke the moon was gone,
 Chased away by the dawn,
And so her heart sank like a stone,
 As she turned home alone.

Lizzie met her at the gate
 Full of wise upbraidings:
Dear, you should not stay so late,
Twilight is not good for maidens;
You should not loiter in the glen
And in the haunts of vampire men.

Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many?
But ever in the noonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more but dwindled and grew gray;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low:
I planted daisies there a year ago
That never blow.
You should not loiter so."
"Nay, hush," said Laura:
Nay, hush, my sister:
I had my fill,
Yet my mouth waters still;
Tomorrow night I will
Get more:" and kissed her:
"Have done with sorrow;
You'll be a woman tomorrow
Think what joy they'll give
When the vampires let you live."
As she turned behind the gate,
Laura's words did not satiate
Her sister's parting warning
"All that desire leads to strife
Before death and after life."

Early the next morning
When the first cock crowed his warning,
Neat like the bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie:
Fetched in honey, milked the cows,
Aired and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;
Talked as modest maidens should:
Lizzie with an open heart,
Laura in an absent dream,

One content, one sick in part;
One warbling for the mere bright day's delight,
One longing for the night.

At length the evening came:
They went with pitchers to the reedy brook;
Lizzie most placid in her look,
Laura most like a leaping flame.
They drew the gurgling water from its deep;
Lizzie picked stems from the golden rushes,
Then turning homewards said: "The sunset flushes
Those furthest loftiest crags;
Come, Laura, not another maiden lags,
No willful squirrel wags,
The beasts and birds are fast asleep."
But Laura said the hour was early still,
The bank was steep, the wind not chill:
Listening ever, but not catching
The customary cry,
"Come by, come by,"
Not for all her watching
Could she discern even one vampire
Laura did not stir or make a move toward home
Till Lizzie urged, "O Laura, come;
I hear the blood-call but I dare not look!"

Laura turned as cold as stone
To find her sister heard that cry alone,
That vampire cry,
"Come by, come by."
Must she then have no more such forbidden fruit?
Must she no more such vampish pasture find,
Gone deaf and blind?
Her tree of life drooped from the root:
Said not one word in her heart's sore ache;
But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,
Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way;
So crept to bed, and lay
Silent till Lizzie slept;
Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept
As if her heart would break.

Day after day, night after night,
Laura kept watch in vain
In Cullen silence of exceeding pain.
She never caught again the vampire cry:
"Come by, come by;" --
She never spied the vampire men
Strutting themselves along the glen:
But when the noon waxed bright
Her hair grew thin and gray;
She dwindled, as bare as New Moon's plot turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away.

Tender Lizzie could not bear
To watch her sister's Bella stare.
She midnight and sun
Caught the vampire's cry:
"Come by our coven sometime,
Come by, come by:" --
Beside the brook, along the glen,
She heard the tramp of vampire men,
That poor Laura could not hear;
Lizzie watched and began to fear.
She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride;
But after going to a vampire rave
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime,
With the first snow-fall of crisp Winter time.
Till Laura dwindling
Seemed knocking at Death's door:
Then Lizzie weighed no more,
Rife with considerable ire,
Knowing vampires' distaste for fire;
Pocketed tinder used for kindling,
Kissed Laura, and with last look like a knife
At Twilight, headed straight for the brook:
And for the first time in her life,
Began to listen and to look.

"Good folk," said Lizzie,

Mindful of Jeanie:
 "I've come for a donation
 To ease my sister's agitation,
 If you will cordially oblige,
 Laura's pain you can assuage.
 "Nay, first you must come with us,
 Honor and drink with us,"
 They answered grinning:
 "Our feast is just beginning.
 Night yet is early,
 Don't be so squirrely,
 Such gifts we give
 Will make you truly live.
 Sit down and feast with us,
 Be welcome guest with us,
 Cheer you and rest with us." --
 "Thank you," said Lizzie: "But one waits
 At home alone for me:
 So if you will not give what I ask
 I must return home with an empty flask."
 They began to show their fangs,
 Audibly growling with hunger pangs.
 One called her proud,
 Ugly and uncivil;
 Their tones waxed loud,
 Their looks were evil.
 Clawing, mashing, hissing, mocking,
 They tore her gown and soiled her stocking
 Brought her head back to the brink
 And tried to open her mouth to drink.
 However, Lizzie knew what they did not;
 Another way to make it hot.

 One may have a drinking problem,
 If one can't get the drink into 'em.
 Tho' the vampires tried their best,
 Lizzie won the strength contest.
 For once she found her lighted match,
 They found that fire was all they'd catch;
 Lizzie stoked their funeral pyre,
 And laugh as they burned in fire.
 Just in case they thought to flee,

She grabbed a stake and skewered three.
When the ash was blown away,
Lizzie finally went her way;
Though her blood from fighting dripped down
She walked with pride straight through the town,
And did not pause till her gate was found.
She cried "Laura," up the garden,
Found the front door and ran in.
"Did you miss me?
Turns out I make a good Buffy:
For your sake I have braved the glen
And beat the crap out of the vampire men."

Laura started from her chair,
Flung her arms up in the air:
"Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
For my sake the fruit forbidden;
Must your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted?'
Lizzie meanwhile took no heed,
But took her flask to catch her bleed;
Filled it till it reached the tips,
Pushed it till it touched her lips.
Laura drank with vampish haste,
Now that she had blood to taste.

Her lips soon began to scorch,
That drink was wormwood to her tongue,
She loathed the feast:
Writhing as one possessed she leaped and sung,
Rent all her robe, and wrung
Her hands in lamented pain,
Fighting fear she could not name.
Her locks streamed like the torch
Born by a racer that ran,
Or like the mane of horses in their flight
Or like an eagle when he stems the light
Straight toward the sun,
Or like the Jacob fan
At the Team Edward convention.

Swift fire spread through her veins,

And knocked at her heart;
Met the fire smoldering there
And overbore its lesser flame;
She gorged on bitterness without name:
Ah! fool, to choose such part
Of soul-consuming care!
Laura fell at last:
Pleasure past and anguish past,
Is it death or is it life?

Life out of death.
That night long Lizzie watched by her,
Counted her pulse's flagging stir,
Felt for her breath,
Held water to her lips, and cooled her face
With tears and fanning leaves:
And when the first birds chirped about their eaves,
Laura awoke as from a dream,
And once again heard the flowing stream.
She laughed in the innocent old way,
Hugged Lizzie not twice but thrice;
Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of gray,
Her breath was sweet as May
And light danced in her eyes.

Days, years, months, weeks
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;
Their mother-lives filled with baby cheeks,
Their lives bound up in tender lives;
Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,
Of not-returning time:
Would talk about the haunted glen,
The wicked, pale-skinned vampire men,
Their gifts seeming pleasing to the throat
But poison is their blood;
Would tell them how her sister stood
In deadly peril to do her good,
And win the fiery antidote:
Then joining hand in little hand,
Would bid them to together stand:

"For sisterly love may be quite fun,
But sisterly wrath gets the job done."

Wage

—Grant Adams

political friend said he makes hundreds in a day
that he gets what he wants, nothing in his way
and the figure of his wages
turns heads and checkbooks like wind does pages
with precision derision, waved it in my face and
asked me "What are poets makin'?"

I said...

"I make words
I clothe concept with emotion
I make marriages between ice and fire and deserts and oceans
and craft worlds
I make a woman feel beautiful with a necklace made of dull, cracked
pearls
or an angel feel mortal with divinity string until it snaps pull

I mold thoughts and lend sight to the blind
I make glacial hearts
and pulmonary puddles
depending on my current shade of subtle
and I make memories
nurture them to fantasies or
maybe watch them die
I make images you forgot about
or never questioned why
and fears
I pick the universe apart
and only sometimes put the pieces back
but everything I dismantle, I can track

with words,

I connect the dots of life
and sketch death's flat lines
I make sculptures of reason
and define societal seasonal treason

because I see strength in having something to believe in
I make youth see truth and breathe in easier ways
hurting self and others seems to be a theme today
children try to hate themselves and don't know why they feel that way

with words,
I make reversed what many self inflict
and remind them all that life's a gift
with words,

I make a fucking difference, what do you do again?"

Worry

—Stephanie Smith

A swirling gray mass looms over the horizon
and stops to hover over my yard.

Drip.

The first drop taints the packed dirt
I so carefully smoothed to perfection.

Drip. Drop.

It finds dents and divots

I never knew were there.

Drip. Drop. Drip.

The dirt dampens,
the dents deepen.

Drip, Drop, Drip, Drop.

Mud covers

all else.

Drip, Drop, Drip, Drop, Drip.



Under the Sea
—Caitlynn McNeill

You Know Where to Find Me

—Lauren Cole

I don't want his apologies. I want no part of him trying to bargain with God. He doesn't really care how he hurt my baby girl or me or my family. He has no remorse or feelings: he is as cold as they come. He keeps opening his mouth to apologies and I fixate on the little drop of blood that keeps easing down the side of his lip and drops onto the cold concrete floor below where he hangs. His grade-A, award-winning, priceless apologies that mean nothing to me are just his way of hoping that if he rights all his wrongs, that God will somehow look down on him with favor and pardon him and spare him from my wrath. Not even God Himself could stop me now or change his fate. I've waited for this moment for four years.

He keeps sobbing his worthless apologies and excuses. I feel my stomach churning and burning like it's on fire. I feel like there is a hurricane deep inside me turning upside all of my insides. I can't take his apologies anymore. He stares at me with those swollen, red, damp eyes that show the gates of hell reflecting from his soul. My stomach burns more and more. I place my hand over it in a protective kind of manner to try and ease the pain. I feel sick as I grab one of the beams above me to support myself. I can feel myself swaying back and forth like I am stuck on a boat in the middle of a storm. I'm not worried about the kill; in fact, that is going to be my favorite part. It's just those damn apologies that are making me want to die. He wasn't sorry when he raped my little girl. He wasn't sorry when he betrayed my trust. He wasn't sorry when he stole her innocence and her childhood. He robbed my baby of her only true happiness. This bastard wasn't sorry, but he will be soon.

A thirst for blood began to take the place of the burning and, in a matter of minutes, all I could see were those eyes—his dark, cold eyes. Those same eyes that held down my little girl four years ago and took her future away. Those same eyes that I watched grow up. I looked down at my feet and noticed how the blood on the floor was starting to pool as it dripped from his hands. His hands were raw from the rope and the plastic rubbing them. I'm sure he had shards of wood stuck in his wrists from grinding then against the joist. There was a chair over in the far corner of the basement, but I would not dare even give him the luxury of sitting down while he dies. Allow him the comfort of sitting after everything he put us through? I

might as well kill myself if I were to let him be comfortable for a split second.

The only thing that has kept him alive this long has been that same little girl that he made grow up overnight. My little angel whose halo burned out the night he did what he did. I know my parents will take good care of my darling daughter while I'm gone. I don't care if I get caught, in fact, I hope I do. I can't wait for his mother to come home and find her son strung up and dead in her basement. The look on her face, I can picture it now. It's the same look my heart has had since the beginning of all of this. I might never get to watch my princess grow up and save the world, but it is all worth it to keep her safe. There is no safety until that monster is put down. The justice system failed us once already; I will not let her be put in danger again. It was my fault it all happened in the first place. After practically raising him, I should have known the kind of beast he would turn into. Since he was only thirteen when it happened, he was considered a minor. He may be a minor in age, but he is as cold and calculated as any adult I have ever met. The judge said that a minor couldn't possibly be held accountable for his actions. My baby lost her childhood and all that bastard has to do is register as a sex offender every year. But, because he was a minor, nobody will ever know he is a sex offender because it won't show up on public records. I wish somebody could tell me what in the hell is the point of him even registering or going to court. He gets a slap on the wrist and my baby gets a slap in the face. The boy that she grew up with, practically a brother to her, betrayed her in an unthinkable way and he gets to walk away without punishment and with twelve weeks of free counseling to try and "heal him."

The burning returns and I realize that this needs to be done now. I was going to savor the time and his screams, but if I want to be back at home with my girl before his mom comes back and calls the cops, then I have to hurry. She gets off work from the grocery store at eleven. I know her schedule and his like the back of my hand. This has been in the works for a long time. I've been planning his demise since the day, four years ago, that my little girl looked me in the eyes and told me what happened. I wouldn't even consider it killing; I would call it a favor to society. I am doing the world a justice by ridding it of this garbage. Some might say I was cleaning up the streets so to speak. Four years after hurting my little girl and God knows who else, he now has his own little family. He and his girlfriend just welcomed home their own little girl. I know it is just a matter of time before she meets the same fate mine did. I

can't let that happen to another family or another child. I cannot allow somebody else to go through what all we have gone through when I know I have the power to stop it.

I never thought I could kill. I never thought I had it in me to end another human's life. After all, I am a devout Christian. I go to church, read my Bible, say my prayers, and try to follow the Ten Commandments to the best of my abilities. Now, I will gladly let hell have me before I let him lay another finger on my little girl. Hell can have me and hell can have him.

I was feeling anger like never before rise up in me as I thought back at all that he has done. He destroyed my family and now I will destroy him. I hate the way he keeps looking at me. It's as if he is pleading with me, actually thinking I might let him live. I spit on him. I spit in his face to degrade him the way he did my daughter. I grabbed the knife I had laying on the floor that I got from the kitchen. It was a brown handled steak knife that didn't match anything else in the drawer. I figured that I would use the "special" knife for a special job. I started with his feet and worked my way up to his hands that hung high above his head cutting little X's into his skin. His screams and tears of pain only made each cut more and more satisfying. It started as cutting for revenge and then quickly, with each passing plea, turned into cutting for pleasure. He deserved to know pain like no other. He deserved to hurt and cry and beg and plea. He deserved to die. His blood dripped down my arm as a sort of trophy for me to cherish for a little while. I loved the way it felt creeping slowly between my fingers and pooling under my feet. After the cutting was over, I turned my attention to the bottle of bleach that I grabbed from upstairs earlier. I took the bottle and dumped it over his head and watched it as it splashed over his eyes, his mouth, his clothes, and each little mark I had just made. His screams were like none I have ever heard. Those screams will forever be etched in my memory as one of the greatest sounds of victory. I took a step back and just watched my masterpiece hanging from the joist, screaming for his life, crying in pain. I didn't realize how much pride I would take in the whole thing. How much pleasure it would bring me. How exciting it would be and how much I didn't want it to end. I intended for that to be it, but I couldn't stand the thought of it being over already. I had to find a way to prolong this pleasure a little longer. I grabbed the metal chair I had denied him earlier and began swinging as hard as I could at his knees. All of those years of high school softball finally came in handy. I heard one loud pop and he screamed. He fell, all of his weight on one leg now.

I swung again and again and again until I heard the other one make the same familiar noise.

His screams were earth-shattering. I knew putting him in this virtually sound proof basement had been the best thing to do. This way I can do my job without the fear of somebody hearing and ending our game too soon. He looked so helpless hanging there, his whole body pulling on his arms now. Now he knows how it feels to be helpless with your arms held behind your back. I didn't want the fun to end, but I knew I was running out of time. I should have come earlier. If only it hadn't taken him so long to come around after I hit him over the head with the frying pan and drug him down him to be tied up and meet his fate. Poor thing didn't even know what had hit him. Breaking into the house unnoticed had been the easy part. The challenge was dragging the seventeen year old boy down to the basement and rigging him up before he woke up. All of the risks were now worth it looking up at him crying out in sheer agony. I've never known excitement like this before.

I took the bloodied knife and grasped it in my fist. I held on to it with a force and strength I didn't know I had in me. I turned the knife sideways and, as fast as I could, plunged it into his stomach. As soon as my hand hit his skin, icy cold chills took over my body. I drug the knife with as much force and determination as I had in me across the length of his stomach and watched the depths of hell spill out on the floor—gutted like the pig he is. My job is done.

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