



CTR

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Alone
Keegan Campbell

Be Healed, Be Cleansed

Joshua Knight

The American Flag on the playground whipped wildly in the gusts from the approaching storms, wrapping tightly around the flagpole only to tear itself loose once more. As American troops made their way across a middle eastern desert in tanks, planes, Hummers, and tightly-synchronized, steel-toed squadrons – made their way for freedom, oil, revenge, and the will of God – eighteen of us formed an awkward circle around a fifteen-foot flag pole in South Carolina. As we proudly recited the pledge of allegiance, emphatically and defiantly including the controversial “under God,” our class struggled to be grateful for an abstract concept that seemed so universal, so true. At fourteen years old, we couldn’t understand Freedom. However, we could understand, as our teachers had told us, that “those people” were evil, and we were good. Freedom and holiness, which seemed connected, were at stake, and America was their champion.

I had a pimple on my nose. As a late bloomer, I was just passing through the thick of puberty as the rest of my friends were clambering out of that greasy cave of anxiety and self-loathing. I was short and considerably overweight. My voice cracked constantly, and, at this moment, I had a monstrous pimple on the very tip of my nose. The war in Iraq, the defense of freedom, and the price of gas were far from my mind as I arbitrarily recited the pledge; all I could see was the bright-red monster resting between my eyes.

It was salvation week: a week when all classes were shortened in order to provide an hour and a half chapel service each day. While we handed out door-to-door flyers during the week, it seemed that greatest efforts of salvation were focused inwardly; as always, sexual purity represented the better half of the week’s moral doctrine.

After the pledge, The Principal, a heavy-set, spectacled woman, led the make-shift regiment in a prayer, and the flagpole-assembly was finished; the pimple on my nose seemed to mock me. It made me cross my eyes to look at it; the red beast made me look even more ridiculous. As I walked to home-room with Jordan, my best and only friend, I contemplated running into the bathroom finishing off the red bastard on my nose once and for all. However, the bell rang and tolled me otherwise.

Jordan and I sat down at our desks and opened our Bibles. (Home-room doubled as Bible class). Just as I opened to the book of Job, Kelsey walked into the room. The blond-haired, blue eyed beauty (save for the copious amount of hair on her arms – puberty spares not the Aryan) sat down in front of me as usual. Only this time, she turned around. I assumed she was going to talk to Jordan – he was tall, thin, and marginally successful with the

ladies, and she had given me no reason thus far to think that she was aware of my existence. But no – this time she looked at me and smiled. She stared for a moment and brushed her hair away from her face (the thick, black hair on her wrist creating a violent contrast to her platinum hair). As she began to speak, my heart began to pound. Her glossy lips parted to reveal an immaculate row of large, white teeth, “You have a really big pimple on your nose.” She said this and turned around without a word for the rest of the school year. Twisting in the terrible ardors of youth, I found a kindred spirit in Job, thinking that I, too, bore the weight of those mortifying, life altering boils.

The day trudged on. Salvation week was always a joke when it came to actual education. The more sentimental teachers would take it upon themselves to impart their own spiritual truths during their brief class period (our science teacher was especially fond of this), others would begrudgingly work through half of a lesson or, better yet, surrender the sundered period to games and “free time.”

Finally, after the class periods swiftly came and went, our assembly of pious and chattering youths filed into the auditorium; the real lesson had begun. There was a special speaker (Reverend Whatnot of Suchandsuch Baptist Church). Reverend Whatnot’s belly ballooned ostentatiously over his belt, which was fastened too tightly around his middle. He was red-faced and sweaty. Perspiration caused his bald head to shine brilliantly beneath the fluorescent lights, and this, juxtaposed with his reddened face, gave him an air of holy wrath.

Of course, I couldn’t blame him for sweating. The South Carolina summer had, as usual, refused to surrender to the encroaching fall, and, for one reason or another, the air conditioning never quite worked in the chapel (this could have been for monetary reasons, but I always thought it more likely that the faculty intentionally increased the heat in the chapel to add weight to their austere auguries of hellfire and brimstone). These inconveniences, paired with the presence of one hundred and fifty plus students, filled the chapel with a sweltering, stuffy atmosphere. As I settled into my assigned fold-out chair, I was already conscious that my armpits had begun to sweat profusely. Jordan looked pale and sickly.

The Reverend began to speak. To no one’s surprise, his focus that day was sexual purity. He painfully puffed and wheezed his way through the already belabored arguments. Truly attempting to rouse our interest in his outdated logic; the most painful of these attempts, the only one that survives in my memory, was his relent: “Hey now, guys,” he said, puffing a stifled laugh through his dry lips, “I’ll be the first to tell you sex is great.” He articulated “great” with a coarseness which I’m sure the collar-buttoned teachers had to find offensive. My mind immediately snapped to attention. “My wife and I,” he said, smiling “have it all the time. And I’ll tell you, it’s the best thing since

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sliced bread.” Now, what was a fourteen-year-old supposed to do with this information? I suppose a more pious student would have taken this as an incentive to wait until marriage to do the deed, but I instantly began to envision this fat, sweaty, all around gross man on top of his wife (whom I assumed was of equally vulgar), huffing and puffing violently, and eating a slice of bread.

This memory sticks out, not only because it was incredibly disgusting, but because it scared me and filled me with shame. At the end of every chapel, the speaker would lead a powerful alter call where, over inspirational praise music, he or she would ask questions that were, in my opinion, designed to make the audience question their salvation and “rededicate.” (Is there sin in your heart? Yes. Do you have impure thoughts? Goodness yes! Would you be ashamed if Jesus was watching your everyday actions, even when you’re alone? Late-night cable instantly comes to mind.) As a result, I know I personally had been “saved” seven or eight times since my arrival at that school.

As soon as I was able to force the disgusting image out of my mind, terrifying thoughts of hell took its place. “If I’m having thoughts like these in chapel,” I thought, “I must surely be unsaved, I must not have meant it before.” The eternal fear intensified the already heat-induced sweating, and, as a result, dark half-moons appeared beneath my armpits. Before, I had quietly prayed in my head, asking for salvation. However, this time I was determined to go to the front of the chapel and announce my faith to the world. Feeling relief in my newfound resolution, I was able to refocus on what Reverend Whatnot was saying. He was emphatically pressing the importance of mental and physical purity, gesticulating wildly as sweat flung from his bushy eyebrows.

Finally, he began the alter call. He intoned, “Every head bowed, every eye closed,” as the makeshift praise band began to pluck at their strings. I kept my eyes open. I was eyeing for the easiest route to the stage, ready to save myself from myself. In a low, rumbling voice, Reverend Whatnot called forward anyone who wanted to make a decision. I was preparing to awkwardly make my way to the end of the aisle when I noticed Jordan swaying awkwardly beside me. He was even paler than usual, grey even, and a sickly film of sweat covered his forehead. His eyes were neither open nor closed but fluttered violently between the two states. “Jordan,” I whispered, “are you okay?” He mumbled something incoherent and crashed numbly to the floor, scattering the fold out chairs across the room and ruining the perfectly lined aisles.

Silence enveloped the room; everyone huddled around Jordan’s unconscious frame. Mrs. Leviner, the vice principal of the school, quickly pushed her way to the pasty youth. I was in a state of panic, and I assumed someone was dialing an ambulance as we spoke. To my relief, Jordan opened his eyes as Mrs. Leviner knelt down to put her hand on his forehead. Even though he had regained consciousness, he still looked terribly sick. Mrs. Leviner rose and

faced the crowd. She shouted sanctimoniously into the audience, “The Lord is here, and all will be well. Go on with the service.”

With this, she grabbed Jordan’s hand and let him out into the lobby. Out of concern, I followed them. I was expecting her to call an ambulance, to give him medicine, to do something responsible. Instead, she told Jordan that he was spiritually sick, and he needed to be cleansed. My voice choked with fear and anger; I was unable to protest against her prattle. After all, in the wake of the convictions I had recently suffered, I couldn’t be sure she wasn’t right. I couldn’t be sure that I wouldn’t be the next to drop. But still, I knew in some deep, rational place that what she was saying was wrong. He needed medical help.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then, in a state of meditation, she lifted her wiry, wrinkled hand and placed it on Jordan’s forehead. “Be healed!” she shouted with the vigor of a televangelist as she pushed Jordan’s head back. He stared at her, confused and sick; he still hadn’t spoken since he fainted, but the contempt in his eyes made it clear that he didn’t feel any better after Mrs. Leviner’s intervention. She once again placed her hand on Jordan’s forehead; “Be cleansed in the name of Jesus.” After recovering from the force of her hand, Jordan stared her in the eyes and muttered weakly, “Call my mom.” I went to the office and made sure the secretary called his Mom, who quickly came and picked him up.

Even if he was spiritually sick, Mrs. Leviner did nothing to cure his malady, and, if anything, she passed it on to me. (It proved to be far worse than the monster balancing on my nose). Mrs. Leviner’s ignorance tore away my last hopes of salvation, at least her brand of it. I knew that I would never be like her. I went home that day, and I never looked at the school the same way again.

Mrs. Leviner’s intense separation from reality, while one of many spiritually caustic experiences at that school, finally made me desperate for change. Soon after, I convinced my parents to home school me once again, and I vowed never to send my children to a Christian school. The religious confusion planted at my core in that pivotal year still tears at me to this day, and I see similar effects in the few people from that institution with whom I’ve kept in touch (most of whom are either teetotalers or addicts).

I wasn’t surprised that there were no weapons of mass destruction, and I wasn’t surprised that no one knew exactly which God we were under. What did surprise me, however, was that when everything you know is framed in a religious context, and something happens to shake that foundation, the rest of the world shakes along with it. Freedom and Holiness were at stake, and they had no champion.

The Broken Man

Stephon F. Birch

The pieces are meant to fall in place, but
They shatter when they hit the ground.
There're people here to say they love me, but
I'm to deaf to hear a sound.

Brought to you by the Letter “C”

Alyssa Carver

We would start out on a Saturday morning in an ancient Mercedes, early to avoid traffic, to drive three hours (or what seemed like three hours) to visit my grandmother. Casey Kasem’s voice tells me the Top 40 songs of the week. Excitement would arise by the time he hit the Top 10, knowing my favorite boy band’s song would be coming up soon and we were getting close to our destination. There were three dark red spots on the roof inside the Mercedes, spots of blood to my overactive imagination, but probably just rust.

My grandmother, my dad’s mother, was a skinny, tall woman with large hips. Her hair was that old woman shade of blue-gray, and she wore Coke-bottle glasses just like my dad. Her name was Vernelle, one of those strange names that older Southern women seem to always have. We would drive all morning on a weekend every once and awhile to visit, and be greeted with the usual Southern lunch—fried chicken, rolls, and lima beans, always lima beans. I learned to love sweet tea at her house. After lunch, I would go sit in her living room and watch the History Channel on her old, busted, black and white television that just had a knob to change channels, no remote. At the time, the History Channel played so many World War II documentaries that I was convinced their “H” logo stood for “Hitler.” Now they just play doom-and-gloom, you’re-going-to-die-soon apocalypse shows, and things about aliens and Bigfoot.

Granny didn’t believe in any of that. She was a Christian woman, a god-fearing woman. My dad once told me that she used to visit every church in town, even the ones that everyone was afraid of (I believe his exact words were, “those foot washing Baptists and the people with the snakes”) and brought them food. She sewed too; my mother said the clothes she made looked store bought. She made me a baby blanket after I was born, and sewed my name into it, but she spelled it wrong. There were too many L’s. I’ve always thought she cursed me with that blanket. No one can pronounce my name right, “Elisa,” “Alice,” “Alisha.”

The thing I remember most about her is something I don’t remember at all: her voice. She hardly spoke. She was one of those people who seem to blend in with the background; always so quiet and timid. She didn’t even know how to drive a car until later in life when my mother taught her. I always heard stories about my grandfather, her husband. He flew planes and restored cars. When he couldn’t afford braces, he made them himself. I thought my grandfather was larger than life, and I’d never even met him. He died three months after I was born from lung cancer. That was the first time I heard the word “cancer.”

The second time was when my grandmother was diagnosed with colon cancer the summer after I turned ten. At that age, I was a mess. I was tall, chubby (well, fat if you asked anyone else), and had freckles that covered my entire face. My hair was nothing short of a disaster, since my other grandmother had been let loose on my hair with scissors. I spent most of my time being miserable with myself. I didn't believe in myself, but I believed in a few constants; Saturday morning drives and God among them.

The image of the hospital comes in snatches—sterile, white, and cold. When I think back on that time, when I can stand it, I picture myself as a better version of me: more caring, more sympathetic. But I just wasn't; I sat in the hallway wrapped up in my Gameboy, playing Super Mario Brothers, staring so hard at the game to try and pretend like nothing was wrong, repeating in my head, "I'm not here, I'm not here."

Someone in my family gave her stuffed animals while she was in the hospital. Among them was a cow that I used to play with to divert my attention from what was going on around me. Once, I overheard my aunt saying that my grandmother took a turn for the worst when she drank seven large glasses of water in one night. She said if you drink that much water, you start to kill your own brain cells. I never found out if that was true or not, but afterward, she was rarely lucid. I think she died not knowing my name, like she didn't know it when she made my blanket.

After her death, things changed. It was like I'd been baptized and reborn secular. I didn't go to church; I didn't want to. I decided I'd rather risk going to hell than believing in a God that would allow someone so devout and dedicated to suffer. I kept hearing, "There's a reason for everything," at the funeral, but if there was, I couldn't see it. Now, I realize that was because there wasn't one. A feeling of complete and utter disillusionment started shadowing me.

My dad sold her house, and had a garage sale to get rid of her old things. She had a mountain of fabric she used to sew with, and I refused to let anyone else have it. For a long time, I thought the only thing I had left of her was a bunch of cloth and a stuffed cow. I had a lot of stuffed animals during that time. They would fall off the bed as I tossed and turned; roll off into the Lone Sock and Shoe Wasteland to gather dust. But not the cow, never the cow.

After a few years, I started imagining that I saw her curly hair in the grocery store, or her Coke-bottle glasses in the car next to me, even though she rarely drove in life. One time I tasted her cooking in a Thanksgiving dinner. And once, briefly, I thought I saw her in the mirror, as I grew thinner, my hips grew wider, until I resembled her.

Chrysalis

Alicia Coleman

In the flickering glow of candlelight
The gaze of two meet nervously
Smiles, not words pass between.
A hand brushes a cheek softly.
Her face in his hands trembling.
Face to face, moving forward.
The wisp of not quite yet love
Evaporates in the air between
Lightly parted lips and teeth
The crush of those lips together
And a spark that glitters in the tear
In the corner of her eye, realizing
All that she ever was does not matter
To the one that holds her now
For all she was, is not what she is
For in this embrace she becomes
Something better, her true self.

Comment

Arielle Buckman

Facebook.com

Search bar: Donnie Rooks

Enter

His arm hangs over her shoulder,
Bud Light in the other hand.
His smile goes up more on one side,
like it always does before he
spits off some flattering line.

His fingertips dangle above her breast,
lace strap edges out of her pink dress.
She rests her hand on his chest,
and leans her lips to his ear.

Strands of blonde hair frame
her exposed fleshy chest.
The light catches a sparkle off
her beaded earrings.

Wall

Felecia Page: Aren't we cute? ;)

Comment?

Dream

Alicia Coleman

Laying along is the part of night I hate most
The pillow I face is cold where you were
My hand reaches to touch your warm cheek,
But you are not here for my fingers to find.
In the night, my toes accidentally slip over
To your side and I awake and withdraw quickly.
I am saddened for in my dreams you slipped,
Between the sheets and your arms around me.
In that dream, I breathed you in and felt you.
You kissed my lips, the hollow of my throat.
My heartbeat quickens and my chest heaves.
Your whispered desires fill my ears and mind.
I receive you willingly and our bodies join.
As the tide of our ecstasy reaches its aching peak,
Out breathing crescendos and we crash together.
As our bodies uncoil and we relax into each other,
My toes find that dreaded empty icy spot again.
I awoken to find you were never really here.
My hand touches your empty spot on the pillow
And tears fill my eyes as the ghost of you fades.

Fishers of Men

Joshua Knight

If God's speaking English,
Then the future is bleak.
Because there's a bitter distinction
In the way that we speak.

Between Sinners and sailors,
Devils and saints,
All these opposite symbols
That can't be interchanged

But if God were a Frenchman,
(as absurd as that is)
We might find some hope
For redemption in this:

When Jesus called Simon
and Andrew and Peter
from casting their nets
for fish earthly and meager

He asked them to follow.
And, with words sure and strong,
He promised to make them
"Pêcheurs d'hommes"*

* In French, "Pêcheur" means both "sinner" and "fisherman"

Freedom

Kaitlyn Grooms

My name is Ben 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 before the murder.

My girlfriend and I had been living in a small, yellow house right outside the city limits of Wichita, Kansas. I had been working for Alternative Energy Solutions and, with the increase in the market recently, I had been making very good money. Malayna had picked the house in the gated neighborhood as well as the pricey rock she wore on her ring finger. We had only been engaged for about a month, but I could tell she was happier here, probably because I was happier with my new job. I admit, back in Texas, when we weren't living together, I would get angry a lot. I wasn't happy with my job, and I took it out on her. I wish I could tell her I'm sorry about that now. But I can't, and I hate that.

I know she loved me; that's the only reason she stayed. I loved her too, but in a more protective kind of way. I let her choose our house and her ring, no matter the cost. I wanted the best for her. But I would just get into these frenzies, these wraths. I would almost black-out before I realized what was happening. I never meant to hurt her; it was just the cloud of rage that came over me. I would always tell her that I was just mad, that it wasn't her fault I hit her. I never once told her I was sorry, though. I suffer remorse for that now. If only she knew how I've changed, knowing now what I didn't then.

Moving into a new house had been therapeutic for our subdued relationship. We needed a new location, a new life, a new start. Something better, more free. The first time I hit her in our new house was when she asked me about painting our bedroom a different color. I didn't even realize what I was doing, until she fell to the floor, her hands covering her face. I don't even know why I did it; I felt so bad. She didn't even cry, like she usually did. She just got up and walked away. I left for work.

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I was happy to get home from work, but uneasy about walking in to the situation I had left this morning. I was greeted, unexpectedly, by a pleasant aroma in the house. As soon as I opened the door, I could tell that Malayna had been cooking for a while, working meticulously. I was pleased to know she was not upset; she never cooked when she was discontent. I hugged her from behind, my chin on her shoulder. I kissed her cheek as the steam from the boiling water reached upward toward her hand, stirring. She turned and hugged me softly. I saw her eyes were red, but dry; she had been crying. I told her ev-

everything was going to be okay, that it was a mistake, not her fault. She hugged me harder, accepting of my feeble apology, then let go, back to stirring. She told me to sit, dinner was almost ready.

The table was already set, and I sat down. I told her everything smelled so good, and she smiled. She brought the bread to the table, in a small wicker basket, covered by a white cloth. This was curiously satisfying, knowing that she did all of this for me, for us. She had even brought out the wine glasses from the shelf above the refrigerator, the new ones we had received as an early wedding gift. I wondered why this dinner was so nice, but I didn't want to seem ungrateful, so I just smiled at her, pleased at her hard work.

Malayna leaned over me, pouring the deep red wine into my glass. It flowed like a waterfall, so beautiful. She delicately placed one of the freshly-baked rolls on my plate. She asked if I wanted butter; I said yes. She walked over to the kitchen counter and pulled a polished, silver butter knife from the drawer. She came back over, slanting over the table, about to slice a small sliver from the stick of butter on the rectangular glass dish. Before I knew what was happening, I jumped to my feet, knocking over the glasses of wine she had just poured.

I grabbed her throat, the knife went in. We both fell to the floor, blood everywhere. I looked into her eyes, so immense, so deep. I saw no fear, only hatred. No pain, only disgust. She had loved me once, but no more. She had been through enough. That was the last thing I would ever see, that look of hatred in her sapphire eyes. Her long black hair, now tipped with bright red blood, covering her face, all except her eyes. She had done what she wanted all along. All those years of abuse had gotten to her. And the only thing I thought of was that she'd probably get off on self-defense. The jury would feel sorry for the innocent-eyed, petite Malayna.

I could hardly believe she had done it, but when she pulled the knife out of my torn stomach and stabbed me again – this time deep into my ridged throat – I knew it was not a dream. But it didn't even hurt. As much as I had beaten her and damaged her, she could not hurt me. That made my heart break. For the first time, I knew half of what she had felt all the years we were together. I couldn't imagine anything worse than the way I had made her feel. Even with all this blood and all the damage, nothing was worse than what I had done to her. I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I wanted to tell her I understood what I had put her through. She looked at me, a beam creeping across her perfect lips, forming a satisfied smile. She was free.

Freeze Frame

Mariah Spigner

Surrounded by a crowd of people I don't know,
my daddy raises the crack pipe to his grinning lips.
My mama is not in this picture,
and my daddy is having a good time.

Fast forward 3 years – 1989.
My parents are married,
and have one child together.
My mama is in this picture,
and my daddy is not having a good time.

Fast forward 2 years – 1991.
I am in this picture, an infant.
I have my daddy's eyes, nose, chin, and hair—
undeniably his.
My mama is in this picture,
and my daddy loves me.

Fast forward 6 years – 1997.
Behind the scenes of this picture,
me blowing out the candles,
is the fact that my daddy spent the morning
building my brand-new swing set.

Fast forward 3 years – 2000.
My parents have been divorced
for a year, and I still wait,
every Saturday, for my daddy.
Every week, I am disappointed.

Looking at it this way,
in still-frame fast forward,
I can definitely see the facts:
My daddy was a good one—
but only when he had to be.

Fruition

Shonda Massey

Butterflies and broken cookies

I discovered the power of pheromones my first day of third grade. I walked into the classroom, found my seat and there he was. The name on the racecar name tag read Robbie Wynn. As soon as I saw him, it felt like a hundred little butterflies started dancing in my belly all at once. At lunch, I sat beside him, on his right. My mom had packed two chocolate chips cookies in my lunchbox. He kept his eyes on them throughout lunch. After I finished my peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I opened the container with the cookies in it, took one out and gave it to him. He smiled at me, and said thank you. I smiled back at him and I felt the butterflies dancing again. Then, he broke the cookie in half, turned to his left and gave a piece of it to a girl named Keisha Johnson.

Robbie Wynn had the sexiest gap in the middle of his two front teeth I had ever seen in my life.

He and I had the same freshman algebra class with Mrs. Trignomi. To be honest, I didn't really learn much about algebra, though. I spent my time in class daydreaming about walking over to the other side of the room where Robbie Wynn sat and saying to him, "Robbie Wynn, you have the sexiest gap in the middle of your two front teeth I've ever seen." He would stand up, cradle my face like he did footballs on Friday nights and plant the most amazing breathtaking, saliva-filled kiss on my lips I could ever dream of. Then, he would sweep me off my feet—Mrs. Trignomi in shock, the other girls (and some of the boys) green with envy—and carry me away into the sunset.

Double A

After three and a half years of standing on the wall, I had moved up enough in my school's social hierarchy to be invited to my first party. But, all I can remember is arriving at the party after the homecoming game, being greeted at the door with a beer (which tasted like frothy piss) and drinking more after that. I woke up the next morning, braless, in a bathtub.

Well, I found out what happened to my bra Monday. Monday morning, my best friend, Denise, told me in chemistry that Hannah told Bryan and Bryan told her that I was a drunken mess at the party Friday night. Apparent-

ly, Robbie and I had been talking throughout the night and I told him about my crush on him. I told him I wanted to talk to him alone, and took him into a bathroom around eleven. I told him I didn't want to do anything, but I wanted to show him I liked him; so, I took off my bra and gave it to him as a token of my affection. Then, I fell backwards into the bathtub, where I woke up the next morning. Robbie Wynn took my double A bra and showed it to all his friends at the party. I found my bra Monday taped to my locker, along with a pack of double A batteries. You know, not every girl can out grow a C-cup like Keisha Johnson. I was teased for the rest of the week. After school, I went home and cried for an hour. Then, I made a Robbie Wynn voodoo doll and stabbed it over and over till there was no filling left in the center; it made me feel a little better. Then...I cried some more.

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I fell in love with Robert...

After high school, we both attended New Mexico State on scholarships: me, for academics, him for football. My boobs decided to catch up with the rest of me over the summer, and I went to college feeling like a well-rounded woman.

I spotted him one night while sitting at the fountain in the quad. I guess he saw me, too, because the next thing I knew, he was walking in my direction. I turned my head the opposite direction, trying my hardest not to look at him as he glided over. But I melted as soon as he put his hand on my shoulder. To my surprise, he told me he wanted to apologize for embarrassing me that day. He said he wanted to make it up to me somehow. So, we sat down, right there on the bench and talked. We had been talking for two and a half hours before either of us realized it. I went back to my dorm and lay in bed all night. I stayed up all night thinking about our conversation, every word, awkward silence, and nervous giggle lingering in my head.

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I don't hear from Robert Wynn anymore.

He and I dated for two years during college. He learned to trust me enough to show me who he was beneath the football uniform and behind the perfectly gapped smile. While my "off-beatness" (his word, not mine) and overall nerdiness kept Robert away from me in high school, they were the same traits that drew him to me in college. He taught me how to ride a bike. I introduced him to classic movies. We learned each other's insecurities, fears, and aspirations. We became each other's best friend.

But, over time, I realized we weren't meant to be together. We wanted very different things for the future, and I don't think either of us was willing to compromise. I wanted to get away from New Mexico and focus on my journalism career. He had a job waiting on him at his dad's construction company as soon as he graduated. He wanted to get married after school and start a family immediately. I wasn't even sure I wanted to get married at all, let alone as soon as I graduated from college. I couldn't see myself fitting in his world anymore. I decided it would be best to break up with him. It was a very tear-filled, emotionally taxing conversation. But, I knew it was the right thing to do. I didn't see the point in continuing the relationship if I knew, ultimately, it wouldn't work out. We tried to stay friends, but I don't think either of us could reconcile our old feelings. After graduation, I moved to New York to pursue my journalism career; he stayed home in Albuquerque. We drifted apart.

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reNewed

It's been five years since I last saw Robert. I moved to New York and began working for The Times. He stayed in New Mexico and took a position at his dad's construction company. During our nightly phone conversations, my mom told me he was got engaged to Keisha Johnson, that they were expecting their first child together ("we all know she'll be breast feeding," I joked).

For a moment, I imagined myself in Keisha's shoes--I didn't like the way they fit.



Gothic

Keegan Campbell

He is all she knows—

Kaitlyn Grooms

He is all she knows, before him only grief and
tears, he saved her, loved her, different;
His love overflows, inside of her, she mistakes
this, for commitment; he leaves, deep cuts in
her, when he goes,
his only difference, he called another to his
bed, by the same name, as not to get
confused; she drinks now, alone, as she's
always been, dying slower than she wants;
a lonely death still, she lies awake, his
love pulled out of her, into another,
who takes her spot; her time will come,
she will see, all he is, is different;
as different as the sea is from the ocean.

Her Betrayal

Kaitlyn Grooms

She walks into the room, spots him through the many, but notices only the wrinkle in his forehead; worried look pains her, she knows he knows, without words, the look in his eyes; he turns, she runs, pushing through the waves of the typhoon; he's gone, and she knows, he knows, forever.

The Immaculate Reflection

Joshua Knight

After the graham crackers and miniature cups of grape juice had been evenly administered, the time came for arts and crafts. As with all other with creative activities at The Second First Baptist Church of The Elect of Windsor County, all projects were divinely inspired, and thus meticulously controlled.

“Today,” proclaimed Thera Moore to her audience of seven year olds, “The Reverend Calvin is going to be preaching out of the Book of Matthew. He will be elaborating on one of the many miracles which Jesus preformed – walking on water.” She said this last clause in hushed secrecy; as if she was the first to reveal this life changing, scientific fact. “So,” she continued, “For today’s Sunday school picture, I want you all to draw a picture of Jesus walking on the water. Reverend Calvin just might show the best one to the congregation at the end of his sermon. And remember,” she added, with a hint of severity, “Be reverent”

Jonah Cardinal, a young boy in attendance, immediately felt a jolt of excitement go spinning up his spine. He loved to draw. He would spend hours every day drawing things – both real and imagined. So, as the other kids colored away in obligatory reverie, Jonah, for the first time, was truly excited to be in Sunday school.

He began first with the water. As a model, he thought about the lake on which his father used to take him fishing. He remembered the temperate weather; his father’s smiling approval at every captured fish, and those beautiful swans that always squawked at the two fishermen from the small islands in the center of the lake. “The Swans!” he thought, with building excitement. If he added the swans to his picture of Jesus, he was sure to win. So, after recreating the gentle, swaying water of his fishing lake, Jonah drew a tiny green island, brimming with magnificent swans. Next, of course, was the sun, which, under the idealism of a seven-year-old, took on a nigh anthropomorphic role the picture. He drew the burning disc in the top right corner of the picture, and its brilliant rays reached down a caressed the top of the water, creating a definite but subtle contrast between the world above and the world below.

Finally, he had to draw Jesus – the Caucasian one. He began with the feet, but, as he finished the left foot, his mind began to wander. The thought of the swans would not let him be. He remembered the last time his father took him fishing, the way the swans sustained a cacophony of terrified squawks as a storm approached the bank.

“They Scared Daddy,” he said, in the broken English of a four-

year-old, "Let's go help them, They Scared." "We can't son," his dad said with gentle laughter, "we need to head back, and it's too far away. Besides, they don't want our help." He began to turn the boat around. "But Daddy!" pleaded the child, "They looking right at me and asking for help!" His father responded gently, "Don't worry, Jonah, we'll come back soon and you'll see that are just fine." While this sated the child's fear, fate had other plans; Jonah never achieved that reassurance.

"If I could've walked on water," thought Jonah, "then I could have gone and helped the swans." He had a brilliant, but heretical, idea. The urge overtook him, and he had to obey: he drew himself walking on the water, not because he thought he was an equal to the son of God, but because he had so desperately wanted to save the swans from that inevitable storm.

For the remaining forty-five minutes of class he worked fervently upon his previously blank sheet of paper. He poured everything he had into that self image – that improved recreation of that dear and sacred moment; he created what was, in his opinion, and immaculate self-portrait, an enhanced recollection of his personal and limited experience. After completing his self-portrait, Jonah had to do but one thing to perfectly recreate his memory: the sun had to be shadowed. For the moment to truly resemble his past experience, and thus give his improved, buoyant self a chance to rescue the pleading swans, the storm, too, had to be present. In a dark, redemptive fervor, Jonah took a grey colored pencil and colored out the sun. The picture became dark; the warm hands which once embraced water now became forbearers of rain, trouble. Yet, despite this self imposed obstruction of light, Jonah couldn't help but let a few yellow streaks remain, streaks which highlighted his transcendent-self and the path which he would walk towards the swans.

Just as Jonah finished his masterpiece, a shriek sounded from behind his left shoulder. Thera Moore stared at his picture with a shriek decrescendoing from her dry, quivering lips. "My Lord!" she squealed in a mixture of terror and a-little-too-obvious excitement. "This...This is unacceptable. What is it that you have drawn here, Jonah?"

The rest of the students arose and gathered around the commotion. The assistant Sunday school teacher, a young and optimistic woman named Alyssa Caradin, took her place behind Jonah's right shoulder. Jonah turned around slowly, and, in his naivety, answered with fatal honesty: "It's me; I wanted to save the swans."

Mrs. Thera erupted in ghoulish howl of zealous fury, and the innocent children instinctively took part in her reproach. Mrs. Caradin, however, calmly placed her hand on the crone's pulsating shoulder. "Mrs. Thera, we really should reserve our judgment." She said in gentle, southern drawl. "He's so young; he doesn't know what he's doing. We certainly need not overreact" She turned to Jonah, "You weren't trying to cause trouble, were you?"

“No mam!” answered Jonah, elated that someone was willing to defend his masterpiece, “I just remembered the swans, and the storm. I wanted to save them, but couldn’t. If I could’ve walked on water...” Mrs. Thera interrupted him, “Enough, enough of this already!” her withered face was now drowned with sudden, inexplicable tears, “We cannot have this in our Church!” She went on, truly grateful for this chance to display her righteous judgment. Jonah quietly watched the tears roll down her face, creating glistening specks of imperfection upon her starched, tightly buttoned blouse.

“But...” Mrs. Caradin attempted to interject.

“No, Alyssa,” replied Mrs. Thera, cutting her tears with a harsh and final tone. “We must take him to Reverend Calvin Immediately! You take him off to the reverend’s office; I’ll fetch the reverend from the adult Sunday school class.” Alyssa nodded, full of quiet resentment.

With that, the quivering old woman snatched Jonah’s picture, his memory, from the desk and carried it off, walking a little straighter than usual. Jonah felt himself break in two. A part of him, the better part of him, was clasped in the pious, withering fingers of that ruthless prophet of truth, Thera Moore; His eyes began to well up with warm, desperate tears. Mrs. Caradin squatted down to Jonah’s level and smiled in his shining eyes. “It’s okay, darling,” she said, “I’m sure Reverend Calvin will understand, you’re not in any trouble.” Jonah hugged her neck, but he felt no comfort. “My picture,” he whispered in her ear, “I have to have my picture back.”

“We’ll get it back, darling. I promise.”

Alyssa Caradin immediately grabbed his tiny hand and led him down to the room at the opposite end of the hall. The office was empty. She walked him through the doorway and sat him on one of the two red, faux-leather seats facing the impending desk which oriented and centered the room. “Wait here, sweetie.” She said kindly, “your mamma and the Reverend will be here soon.” Jonah sadly watched her exit the room. He observed the room around him: the white-concrete walls; the litany of framed Bible verses which he didn’t have the patience to read; the various books, trophies, and figurines which littered the shelves; and the portrait of Jesus which hung above the wooden desk: smiling, arms open. Jonah started into the savior’s eyes and felt comfort. “He would understand,” thought Jonah, “He would want me to save the swans. He would know why.” However, this comforting train of thought was broken by Reverend Calvin’s entrance.

“Good morning, Jonah.” The Reverend’s deep and raspy voice erupted forcefully against the soft rattle of the air conditioner; Jonah stared at his feet. The Reverend spared no time, he quickly pushed Jonah’s picture across the table and made him look at it. Jonah quickly reached for the drawing, but the Reverend pulled it back just far enough to be out of Jonah’s reach. “Why did you draw this?” His voice rang with obligatory pity and dissipating patience.

"I wanted to save the swans. I couldn't save them then, but I could now, in the picture." Jonah desperately explained.

The Reverend leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. Directly beneath the picture, his black suit, grimacing face, and folded arms drew a sharp contrast to his savior. "Jonah, son, this is unacceptable. Unacceptable..." the Reverend began.

"But why is..." Jonah tried to ask, but the Reverend continued uninterrupted.

"When you take the son of God," The Reverend's voice began to mount with revelatory passion, "and replace his image with your own, you commit a most heinous sin. Son, you have made yourself a golden calf. Do you realize what you have done? Are you sorry for what you have done?"

Jonah looked at the portrait above the Reverend's head; he searched hard for the wrath of which the Reverend spoke in the still frame's kind, gentle eyes. He was unable to find it. "Jesus would want me to save the swans." He replied defiantly.

The Reverend let out a frustrated sigh as Jonah's mother entered the room – a soft, tired-looking woman. She sat down in hurried embarrassment. "What's the problem, Reverend?" She asked her voice sweet and brittle. Reverend Calvin, without speaking, pushed the drawing towards Jonah's mother. "Jonah," she asked in confusion, "what is this?"

Jonah responded frankly: "I wanted to save the swans." At this point, Jonah tuned out the adult conversation completely. His eyes remained fixated on the portrait hanging above the Reverend's head, and his mind spun in circles around better part of himself which rested upon the table. He rejoined the conversation, however, when the reverend spoke those devastating words: "I'll keep picture," he said, "and you two should go home for the day and return tonight for communion. Let him think about what he's done – try to explain to him the gravity of his actions. If you'd like, we can meet again next Sunday and we can discuss this incident, after Jonah has had some time to think."

Jonah broke into a wail. To consolidate the social damages which her blasphemous son had already created, Jonah's mother picked him up and put him outside the office, where he sat sobbing. Alyssa walked up to him with eyes full of concern. "Are you okay, Buddy?" Jonah couldn't control himself; He flung his arms around her and bellowed: "My Picture!"

Jonah's mother didn't say much on the drive home. She told him he had been wrong to do what he done, and, as punishment, he would have to wait in the

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nursery while she took communion that night. As much as Jonah loathed the thought of being packed into fluorescent room filled with toddlers, the intensity in his mother's voice caused him to stifle his protestations. "I know you've been through a lot..." his mother whispered quietly while grabbing his little hand. As they passed the graveyard, soft, warm tears began to run down her face.

Naturally, it rained; the silken grey clouds blurred the sunset, and Jonah was sure he could hear birds squawking in the east. When the time came to leave, the mother and son had to run hurriedly to the car as to not be washed away by the deluge, the great flood. As Jonah's mother started the car, a soft mist arose as the pulsating engine confronted the freezing rain. The second drive was quieter than the first, more tense. The rain exacerbated his mother's already austere mood, and over the course of the trip, the only noise heard was heavy, focused breathing. When the flailing ark arrived at the church, Jonah thought the great building looked most formidable through the melting windshield. With its two well-lit second story windows and its intermittently opening double-door, the building resembled a terrible beast – the great whale of his namesake. Despite the augury of doom that bellowed from the mouth of the beast, Jonah followed his mother into its belly.

She marched him straight to the nursery and handed him over to Selma Cloth, the lady who watched over the nursery. She was a large, tired woman with auburn hair. "A little old, isn't he?" She said with a smile. "He's in trouble," Jonah's mother responded, "He's not allowed to attend the children's service tonight." "Oh dear," Selma responded, unenthused, "well we'll take him; there's room for everyone in the house of God," she concluded dryly.

As he entered, Jonah saw Alyssa Caradin swaying gently in a rocking chair. Her hair hung like threads of gold around her ivory face, and her eyes went alight with sympathy with when they locked with his. Jonah though she was beautiful.

However, he soon noticed that she was but one of three women in a rocking trio. To the right most sat Selma Cloth, who, already beginning to nod in out of consciousness, was haphazardly crocheting a garment of unrecognizable shape. In the middle rocked Edna Morrigan, an aged Irish woman who had yet to lose her flaming red hair. And there, to the far left, rocking peacefully and serenely, was Miss Caradin.

As the three rocking women towered over Jonah in their wooden towers, he felt as if he was standing trial. Selma's nodding eyes spoke of an indifference which almost sprang in Jonah more fear, more resentment, than those cold, spiteful tears which Thera Moore had cried that morning. She carelessly plucked and prodded the unrecognizable garment in her lap towards a seemingly shapeless end. Its grey fibers sprouted, curled, and tangled in numer-

ous directions to no real avail. Jonah felt a sense of pity for whoever, out of familial duty, would be forced to wear that tattered garment (if it was indeed wearable).

Miss Morrigan, however, did not share in Miss Cloth's passivity. Her eyes, like her hair, burned with an intensity which, along with the fluorescent-lit, concrete walls of the nursery, filled Jonah with a feeling of infinite and eternal confinement. As she rocked in her chair, propelling herself slowly with her knobby, wooden walking stick – she carried it at all times as a result of some phantom injury – a thick cloud of bitterness, of expiration, could nigh be seen effusing from the Old maid's head. Edna's smoldering eyes flared with disgust upon seeing Jonah (undoubtedly as a result of her being dear friends with Mrs. Thera Moore). Her rocking ceased, and she began tapping her stick impatiently upon the linoleum floor.

Finally, his eyes reunited with Miss Caradin's, and he achieved a sudden release from the terror inspired by those two old crones. As she rocked, she held a pair of scissors in her hand, with which she was cutting human figure out of construction paper. He ran towards her, and she knelt from her chair to meet him in an embrace. "Why are you hear, little man?" she said with a smile; Jonah felt her words, her soft southern drawl, run over him like clean water. "I'm in trouble, and I can't go to the kid's service," responded Jonah audaciously. Alyssa let out a soft laugh upon hearing the monumental spite housed in Jonah's little body, "Well that's not good." "Nope," Jonah responded with a note of finality. Then something appeared in Alyssa's eyes: a spark, a call to adventure: "Would you like to get your picture back?"

Upon hearing this, Jonah's heart nearly jumped from his chest, and he nodded in exasperated concurrence, "Yes! Yes!" Alyssa reached into her pocket and pulled out a small, rusted key. "I would have gotten it for you if I had known you were coming back," she whispered gently. "I can't leave the children now, but you're old enough to go to the bathroom by yourself," she added wryly. Jonah was still exasperated, he could hardly speak. "Where is it?" he managed to blurt out. "It's In your normal Sunday school room – in Mrs. Moore's desk. The door is locked, but this key will open it. Do you know the way?" Jonah nodded in excitement. "Okay, go then! But hurry back," she gave him a little kiss on the cheek.

Alyssa made an announcement. "Mrs. Cloth, Miss Morrigan: Jonah is going to go to the bathroom. He has a tummy ache." The old crones glared at Jonah with what appeared to be the deepest suspicion. With his lip poked out and his hand over his stomach, he mustered up the best "sick child" performance he could, under such profound pressure. Everything rested upon this moment. Retrieving the picture was of utmost importance, and this was his chance. The old crones nodded in consent, and Jonah began to feel the bits of

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him, which had been so violently ripped away, fall back into place.

As he crossed the threshold of the nursery, a terrifying though gripped him: he only knew the way to his Sunday school room from the sanctuary. He had no idea how to reach it from the nursery. Returning to ask Alyssa was not an option; the crones would surely see through his clever guise if he were to turn back in. No. He had to find it on his own. After considering it for a moment, he decided that, instead of circumnavigating the whole church in search of his treasure, he would go straight to its heart, the sanctuary, from which every nook and cranny of the church was easily accessible.

Plastic signs hung on the wall which instructed members towards the major church facilities: Sanctuary, Cafeteria, Choir Loft, Baptismal Pool. Jonah knew that going directly into the sanctuary would be madness, as there was a host of people, not excluding Pastor Calvin and his mother, occupying those aged pews. So, instead, he decided to navigate himself towards the Baptismal pool, from which he would be able to peek into the sanctuary and orient himself to his surroundings. Jonah felt a surge of pride at his self-deemed plan of genius, and he began his journey.

With great care, the young hero traversed the asbestos-rimmed halls, carefully following every sign. Not a soul crossed his path as he made his way to the Baptismal pool. In fact, the halls were so unusually deserted that Jonah began to feel an eerie silence close in around him, like a fog. Still, he was grateful that his quest was moving along unimpeded.

Arriving at the entrance to the Baptismal pool, Jonah crept along the narrow hall, until he finally reached the white-tile pool, dry as summer. Upon entering, he immediately heard Reverend Calvin's voice booming through the lofty ceilings of the sanctuary. A strange, inexplicable terror gripped him: the terror of a thief. He huddled in the empty pool for a moment, and then he heard words most unsettling. Reverend Calvin's voiced soared in elegant vibrato, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you!" "Drinking Blood!" thought Jonah, to whom his mother and Sunday school teachers alike had failed to explain the process and symbolic significance of the Eucharist. Jonah understood Reverend Calvin's words on a purely literal, and terrifying, level. He had recently seen a special on the national geographic channel regarding cannibals. The images he saw and the stories he heard on the special, however second hand they were, caused Jonah to grip the corners of his father's old armchair tightly and stare in terrified amazement. Full of fear, he asked his mother if there were any cannibals in their neighborhood. She assured him that they were all thousands of miles away, but now he was forced to confront the fact that they may be all around him.

In his panic, Jonah began to feel the walls of the baptismal pool clos-

ing around him. He saw the light-blue tiles begin to chip and crack as they crept towards him at a slow, unrelenting pace. As the walls began to close, Jonah detected an even more disturbing aspect of the pool claustrophobic walls; in the slow, crushing approach of the baptismal walls, Jonah felt as if the cracking tiles were pulsating in a lumbering rhythm; Jonah saw the walls breathing. At that moment, Jonah remembered his namesake. He remembered Jonah in the belly of the whale. He shut his so tightly that the walls around him disappeared, and he prayed a prayer of desperation. Whether it was his own inner calm or divine intervention Jonah would never be sure, but at that moment he found the courage to peak once again from behind the baptismal wall, get a good look at the auditorium to orient himself, and flee from the enclosing baptismal pool, which slammed violently behind him seconds after his escape.

Jonah was relieved to be free from the stomach of the beast, but the building had let to lose its organic aspect. The walls churned around him, the doors tightened in the bolts, and Jonah felt the windows staring him, contemplating ways to impede his progress. The previously deserted halls now brimmed with invisible and malignant life. Jonah began his flight. He ran madly down the hallways, counting doors and checking landmarks. With each step the intangible hands in the hall pressed harder upon his little legs, attempting to thwart his rescue, until finally, in a state of physical and mental exhaustion, Jonah reached the door to Thera Moore's Sunday school room. The room behind the slit window was dark. Despite his overwhelming desire to enter into the room, Jonah was brought to a halt by that suddenly impending door. Whatever was filling the halls, trying to keep Jonah from his goal, was strongest behind that door. Jonah clasped the key from Alyssa Caradin in his pocket. He grasped it as if it would protect him. Hands shaking, he removed the key from his pocket and placed it in the lock. As the door opened Jonah a wave of relief washed over Jonah. Before him stood Miss Moore's desk, illuminated by a tiny desk light. The rest of the room was utter darkness; there was nothing but that infinite, luminous desk. Jonah walked slowly towards his goal, his treasure. With each step he became more and more oblivious to his surroundings. He was no longer in that room; he was no longer in church; he was no longer in time. He had found some place eternal, timeless, and, even in his adult life, Jonah would be unsure as to whether seconds, hours, or years passed as he approached reconciliation with his immaculate reflection.

Finally, after that ten-second eternity, Jonah reached the object of his monomania. The dim light shined wearily upon that dust wooden desk, that unworthy prison, that final barrier which stood between Jonah and himself. Jonah immediately knew the drawer in which his picture was hidden. It was as if every bit of light in the room was drawn towards it. Jonah slowly opened the drawer and failed to register the ostentatious squeak that sounded from

its rusty hinges. Then he saw it: alone in the drawer, a pariah from the other pictures, rested Jonah's drawing, his immaculate self image. He stood at the center of the universe, and around him spun frivolous and arduous details. He picked the picture up, his hands no longer trembling, and stared intently at the figure walking on water. All those tiny bits of him that had disseminated returned in a rushing, silent roar.

However, this sacred realm which Jonah had found was quickly disturbed by profane shuffling of leather loafers; Pastor Calvin was rushing towards him as There Moore stood at the door, her face filled with disgust. "You're now supposed to be in here, son" reverend Calvin spouted as he approached Jonah. Calvin knelt and attempted to gently pick up the enamored child. However, in the aftermath of his broken serenity, in the wake of that shattered world-center, Jonah lost control. He began flailing madly, beating against Reverend Calvin with his little fist, one of which still held tightly to his drawing. "It's mine! It's mine!" he shouted manically as Reverend Calvin lifted him over his shoulders. Tears began to pour from his eyes in warm, profuse droplets. The words which he spoke became increasingly incoherent as the Reverend brought him closer and closer to the church exit. The world was a blur, a cool and freezing wave pulling him ruthlessly forward. His mother and Alyssa Caradin were among the onlookers draw from the cafeteria towards his screaming. Both women stood helpless and confused as the child attempted to wrestle with what was to him a giant.

With the doors in sight, Reverend Calvin made a dash towards the double door, desperate to unload the irate child. Coming close to a full run, he burst through the doors and out into the parking lot. Jonah felt the sensation of being spewed from the mouth of the beast that he was previously so terrified to enter, and now, ironically, incredibly reluctant to leave. The storm had cleared, and the audacious summer sun still hung, a brilliant red bulb, in the seven o'clock sky, refusing to set. Reverend Calvin sat Jonah down as gently as he could and began reprimanding the little boy on his absolutely unacceptable behavior, but Jonah was deaf to the world, still drifting in shattered reverie; his mother was also running towards him crying and yelling words of disapproval in vain; the entire congregation went a light with stilted concern and sanctimonious murmurs. But Jonah was blind to his. He held the world in his hand.

As Jonah opened up his hand and took a desperate look at the picture, he felt his heart collapse upon itself in his chest: the picture was torn. In his struggle with the giant, in his escape, Jonah tore a hole in the middle of the picture, completely removing his immaculate reflection and leaving only the storm. However, to his surprise, he felt no tears; he felt hope. With quivering hands, he spread out his picture and lifted towards the sky. Though the hole which he had torn in himself, he saw the shape of the cross resting on the churches steeple, silhouetted by the indomitable, eternal, and beautiful blaze which filled the sky.

Life Source

Arielle Buckman

Most of her nails are yellow spotted with black,
and they grip her wooden cane as if it's her life source.
The other hand—long grey fingers and knobby knuckles
clutch something against her breast.
Strands of white hair fall over her face
and break at her hook nose.

Her glowing eyes are fixed on you.

She creeps forward, back arched over
so far that her cane becomes a third leg.
She fusses with her petticoat to extend
her lanky arm. With great effort, she relaxes
her crooked fingers.
Who can resist the shiny red apple?

Make Believe

Shannon Pratt

The red clay pit at the bottom of the hill was the perfect place to play. Lily Ann would spend hours mountain climbing, digging for fishing worms, finding treasure, and making clay pies, until her Mama called her inside for supper or, on certain days, yell that Daddy was being difficult and that she should go next door to her Granny's. Lily Ann would then climb out of the pit and walk through the small corn field that separated her house from her Granny's house.

One morning, when her Mama was in town and her Daddy was in the barn, Lily Ann was standing at the top of the clay hill, looking down into the pit, which was filled with rain water from a late-night storm. The Rio Grande is very, very big, she thought. Lily Ann knew that she must cross, however, because her nemesis, the outlaw Red John, was on her trail. He had been chasing her forever from town to town, shooting good guys along the way for no good reason.

Crossing was a treacherous journey, one that required the very best cowboy and the very best horse. Luckily I have my trust pony, Ranger. Starting from the top of the clay hill, Lily Ann was, at first, frightened of her daunting task; the other side seemed so very far away. I have to be a brave cowboy, right Ranger? She neighed Ranger's assent and began her long and perilous trek.

Slow and steady, she told herself. Carefully, very carefully, she braved the choppy waters. Ranger was a very tall horse, and Lily Ann was very high up. She willed herself not to look down at the churning white river. Just a little bit further. And the end was suddenly in sight. Lily Ann was going to cross the Rio Grande, something no other six year old cowboy had ever done! She must be a very good cowboy, and Ranger was, after all, a very good horse.

Safely on the other side, Lily Ann dismounted her pony and sat on the bank of the pit, her feet just touching the murky rain water. She took a deep breath and wiped her brow (it was a very difficult journey). Lily Ann watched the rushing water for a while, patting Ranger's chestnut leg as she did so.

"You did a good job, Ranger." She looked up at his white-spotted head and smiled at having such a loyal friend.

Then, quite suddenly, she heard a loud crashing sound, followed by the whinnying of a horse.

Fear in her eyes, she yelled, "Red John! He's gonna get us for sure, Ranger!"

Mounting her pony, Lily Ann kicked into his sides, begging him to hurry. Ranger, who was a very swift horse, galloped faster than he had ever

done before as desert scenes flashed by them. Lily Ann lowered herself into Ranger's shiny mane, grabbing his neck to hold on. All the while, she could hear the loud crashes and the sounds of the other horse. She realized then that the sounds were coming, not from behind her, but in front of her, right around the corner of a large boulder.

She patted Ranger's head and whispered for him to stop. "We have to be quiet. It must be Red John up ahead."

Dismounting her pony, Lily Ann crept around the corner, hoping to see her enemy before he saw her. But Red John was nowhere to be found. Instead, Lily Ann found her Daddy, standing behind the barn. His baseball cap askew, anger etched in every line of his red face, he was holding a broken whiskey bottle. Lily Ann, who was surprised and happy to see her Daddy instead of that roughneck Red John, made to rush after him, but, before she did, her Daddy slashed the whiskey bottle through the air.

Lily Ann realized that its target was a pony, white and chestnut except for the slashes of dripping red where the glass had gashed it. The horse whinnied and stamped its great legs, trying desperately to free itself from the rope tied around its neck. As it bucked more and more furiously, Lily Ann's Daddy continued to slash at its neck and sides, spouting off a steady stream of drunken curses.

Lily Ann stood still, not daring to speak or move. At least Ranger is safe with me, she thought desperately. Seeking his comfort, she reached out to pat its neck, but, turning towards it, she could not find Ranger anywhere. Her arm was still in mid-air, and she looked at her outstretched hand, noticing as she did the streaks of red clay that covered it.

Meaningless Words if Heard by None

Brad Johanniszen

Whispers fall on dormant ears
like a mid-night's blanket
of new and broken stars.
I hope like hell you stay asleep.

Like a mid-night's blanket,
I lie awake and cold and
hope like hell you stay asleep
so I can say I've said it once.

I lie awake and cold and
wonder what you'll think of me,
so I can say I've said it once,
and still hold my promiscuousness.

My heart begins to twinkle
like new and broken stars.
My eyes begin to form soft tears
as whispers fall on dormant ears.



Mushroom

Tony Gloster

Over the Left Shoulder

Jessica Upchurch

The promise of the night hovered over me all day and formed cocoons in my stomach. I took another look at the directions, and the pods cracked open when I realized how close I was to the location of the party. The neon butterflies escaped my stomach and flitted around in the car. At least they were pretty to look at, I thought despairingly. I looked out of the corner of my eye. Somehow my anticipation had taken on another form, and it had been waiting for me when I'd gotten into the car. The little gargoyle was buckled up in the passenger seat and grabbing at the insects with a malicious, permanent grin.

I took the next turn and spotted the house, finally. I'd taken a few wrong turns, and no matter how many times I'd circled back to find my starting point, I just seemed to lose myself further, and then I'd accidentally stumble upon the right road. I followed the driveway around to the side lot and parked amongst several other cars. I took a deep breath and swatted impatiently at the butterflies, then exited and made my way to the house. I looked back in time to see the gargoyle stuff something bright and frail into its stone mouth.

The door in the front of the house was a bright red and stood stark against its surroundings. I knocked, and when no one answered, I let myself in. It opened into a foyer and nothing but an umbrella stand in the shape of a rabbit greeted me. I passed no one in the dim hallway and only glimpsed two forms disappearing into a room. Thoughts of doubt ran through my mind, and just when I thought perhaps I'd come to the wrong place, my senses lit up. A doorway of verve seemed to jump from behind a potted plant. Lights and music drew me into the living room immediately. As if sucked into a vacuum of revelry, I found myself lost in a sea of bodies. Voices leap-frogged over my head and laughter invited me in further. The sudden explosion of life blinded me, and I didn't recognize anyone. A hand grabbed my arm, and the room came into sharper focus. Melanie came into view.

"What took you so long?" Her hand ran down to take my own, and she led me into the adjoining kitchen and put me where the drinks were being made.

Melanie handed me a salt shaker. "Tequila," she said.

The president of the Honor's Society sidled up to her holding a bottle and looked at me. "Tequila?"

Someone was standing near enough to hear and shouted in agreement, "Tequila!"

Melanie put a shot glass in front of me. I licked my wrist and put some salt on it.

“Oh,” she said, “you should know that What’s-his-name is here.”

I set the shaker down a little too hard and it landed on its side. Hastily, I righted it, took a pinch of salt and threw it over my left shoulder. Melanie’s eyes were narrowed at me when I looked at her. “Bad luck to spill salt,” I said by way of explanation.

“Right.” She set a lime next to the glass. “Anyway, he’s an idiot, and you’re going to have a great time without him.”

The president poured some of the tequila out of the bottle he was holding. The soft golden color reminded me of the caramel What’s-his-name loved to put in his coffee and on my finger. He’d comment on how sweet I was. Without thinking, I licked my wrist, took the shot, and bit into the lime. My eyes squinted shut from the kick of flavor, but I could feel the beginnings of relief as the bitterness and anxiety were already dimming.

A while later, I broke away from the group feeling restless. I shifted through the crowd leaving little ripples of movement behind me, and I let the music dictate the direction of my feet. Then I stopped like a bug hitting a windshield. My body recognized him before my eyes did. What’s-his-name nodded his head. “Hey.”

My fingers curled like his dark hair, and my stomach dipped. “Hey,” I replied trying my damndest to remember why I hated him.

“They’re smoking outside. Join me?” Not waiting for a reply, he turned away. A slithery feeling of despair wrapped around my shoulders. I pulled it tighter around me for warmth and followed him out the back door.

More people crowded the back porch and trickled out into the yard. Feather smoke hung heavy around the porch. Cigarettes pointed the way to the hookah pipe where more tobacco burned. He sat down in front of it and lit the charcoal. There was somebody occupying the other seat. He gave me a gargoyle grin. “Would the lady like to have a go?” He offered me his spot.

My head spun as I sat. Somewhere in my mind, I was noting how typical the situation was. “You picked her, and you never let me go,” my thoughts accused him as he handed me a hose. He clinked the ends of the hoses together, and my mind let the matter drop. I mimicked him, and we kissed the hookah and inhaled as if we were about to submerge in water. A fruit flavor rested on my tongue and the smoke tickled my throat. Eyes on each other, we finally exhaled. White smoke floated out of our mouths and clouded us, and the lights around the porch cast a multi-colored glow. The glow seemed to shift into a butterfly then disperse innocently again. My eyes trailed it as it joined the rest of the fumes.

When the pretty sight dissipated, he was leaning against the railing

talking to a short brunette with red lips. A person I had never seen before held the hose across from me. His blonde hair reflected the red and blue of the porch lights, and the hand that cradled the hose, I noticed, sported a sunflower tattoo; the leaves fluttered a little when his hand moved. He caught me staring and smiled at me like we were sharing a joke, then winked as if to seal a promise.

As if part of some complicated game, the guests began to sway about the house. Sitting on the couch then standing in a doorway, they disappeared and reappeared, and I tried to keep up. I looked for Melanie in the kitchen. I found her and climbed onto the counter next to her. She was talking with a girl we knew who suddenly caught sight of my bracelet. "Love!" she exclaimed and pointed at it with conviction.

My mouth opened to reply, but something bright flashed in the corner of my eye, and my head swung around to see the blonde stranger slipping in to the kitchen. I watched interested in what he was doing. I couldn't hear, but I knew he was whistling softly. He came near me, picked up two bottles of vodka and proceeded to empty them into the sink. I quickly looked around to see if anybody else had witnessed this. No one seemed to be aware. Then he began filling the bottles with water from the tap. He set the bottles back down and slipped out of the kitchen.

I pulled on Melanie's sleeve. "Did you see that?" I asked incredulously. "What?" she responded.

I leaped from the counter and, stumbling a bit, followed the stranger. I watched intently as the guy created chaos wherever he went. Here, he knocked a cup out of someone's hand; there, he stole the ping pong balls. He used the ping pong balls to peg people in the back of the head, and little tiffs broke out. A girl raised her voice and demanded to know who the hell hit her? She looked at me, and I pointed to the stranger. The girl walked toward him, but passed by him completely and started berating some other guest. I blinked. "Where did he go?" I inquired aloud.

"I'm right here," What's-his-name said appearing out of the crowd, and he slung an arm around me. My hand found his and held onto it. "Having a good time?" he asked then immediately started laughing riotously with a friend of his about something I'd missed.

"Yeah," I said absently.

He kept his arm around me for the duration of his conversation with his friends. Eventually, his arm slipped off as he told a story. I slipped away in search of a bathroom.

I traced a finger down a hallway to keep in line and found the

bathroom. I splashed water on my face and allowed the beads to tumble down my cheek and neck and finally stain my shirt. I watched the blue bleed darker, and I flustered when I saw another person in the reflection of the mirror. Pure mischief blazed in his eyes. The yellow of the bulbs faded; the light was casted, instead, from his bright hair, still reflecting red and blue. Mists of light seemed to fly around him. In the reflection, I watched arms wrap around my ribs and a sunflower sweep across my stomach. The glow fell onto me, and I witnessed my own hair and eyes brighten. My breath halted as I saw his head bend down to whisper in my ear; his eyes never left mine in the mirror. I flushed when his warm breath heated my jaw.

And he was gone from the mirror and indeed not behind me anymore. My blood rushed, and I choked on the heat building in my chest. I fell out of the bathroom, down the hall, through the living room and against a tree in the backyard.

“Feeling alright, dew-drop?”

The bark caught my clothing and held me up. He circled me.

“The gathering is rather dull, so tame compared to what I usually attend.” He stopped and turned full toward me. “Would you like to join me at my festival? I’m sure the other sprites will be in the field ‘til sunrise.”

My thoughts were still ordering themselves, and I could not reply.

“Jane.” He moved to stand right in front of me. “Will you leave with me?”

My heart lurched; I desperately grabbed his arms. The word “yes” scaling my throat and ripping from my mouth -
“Jane!”

My head whipped over my right shoulder toward the house.

“Hey! What are you doing?” What’s-his-name stood on the porch and laughed boisterously.

I didn’t turn back. My hands closed stony around the air; the warmth was less than a memory. My knees hit the ground and my back hunched. My voice echoed the stranger’s, “Come, darling. Oh, goodbye, goodbye.”

Overdose

Charlotte Stephens

I wish you could wake up,
but I know how your story ends.
Your once beautiful hair has lost its
shine, three inch black roots bleed into
the brassy, scraggly blonde. Your white
tank top hangs loosely on your skeletal frame,
mysterious stains its only decoration.

You're slumped over the table, one
crooked arm resting under your head, the
other stretched out in front of you.
Eyes closed, almost in the
sleep of the dead. The dark shadows
give away your secret- I know
you've been awake for days. No
longer glamorous, I see faint
traces of the white powder around your nose.

Pain; Or, the Fear of Progress

Shannon Pratt

Three hours. That was how long Tabatha had been sitting at the window, staring out into the gradually darkening street until it was a green-gray blur and her eyes stung. She remembered a time, a decade or so ago, before the street was paved; there had been glorious green Magnolia trees and glorious green kudzu—there had been green all around, and there had been life and breathing. But after the road was paved, the green died and was replaced by gray garbage trucks and cars whose windows had been busted out. Tabatha hated that road, and she hated change; she couldn't imagine how hard it had to be for her grandmother, who had seen 70 years worth of these unwelcomed changes.

It had been storming for hours, and Tabatha had been listening to the heavy rain pelt against the glass and watching the lightning streak across the murky sky. She sighed slightly, unaware of the fact that she was now idly scratching a bit of dirt off the window.

A sound of wood scraping against wood and a shrill voice wrested Tabatha from her reverie. "Tabby! Tabby, would you come out here? I need your help! In the kitchen—now!"

It was now completely dark. The voice that beckoned Tabatha sounded urgent, almost manic. But Tabatha, fully aware that her grandmother was prone to being over-dramatic, took her time in returning to consciousness. Yawning widely, she got up and made her way across the dark room, feeling around in the darkness so as not to bump in to anything. This was hardly necessary, as Tabatha, who had been residing in this room since she was six years old, knew every piece of furniture, every trinket, every irregularity in the old hardwood floor so well that she could navigate it from memory, without ever once looking around.

Finally, she found the door, and feeling the familiar curve of the brass doorknob, she wrenched it open. Warm, yellowish light spilled into the doorframe and Tabatha had to squint until her eyes adjusted. She passed through the den, and, as she did so, stopped to watch the television which had been left on the local news. Rich Littlefield, the station's "meteorologist" was shouting parts of the forecast, as if the cameraman was hard of hearing. "AND there's a-**BOUT** a 40 percent chance that this storm will **CONTINUE** on until **TO-night!** Well, **YOU** probably already know that, **RIGHT?! I MEAN—IT'S STORMING RIGHT NOW!** ALSO, I'm pretty **SURE** I just saw a **U-F-O-- JUST** now!"

Rich laughed heartily, stifled a burp, took a bow, and walked off screen. Tabatha was fairly sure the man was drunk. Or had been just been fired. Or both. Either way, it was the most entertaining weather forecast she had ever seen.

Tabatha walked through the white painted door of the kitchen and was greeted with the familiar smell of nectarines. In the kitchen, Tabatha found her grandmother moving the kitchen table across the floor, grunting as she did and whispering curse words under her breath—proper women, she always said, never let anyone hear them curse.

As she spastically heaved the heavy wooden table, she upset the assorted objects she had failed to remove from it—a jar of spicy mustard, Tabatha's binoculars she used for bird-watching, a box of toothpicks that hadn't been opened for a year, a battered-looking iPod (Tabatha gasped and instinctively reached for this as one powerful shove sent the iPod falling off the table), three pungent-smelling bars of green soap, and (Tabatha started) a broken old-fashioned chain watch.

Her grandfather had been a clockmaker. He spent forty years of his long life making, repairing, and tinkering with clocks and watches. Tabatha recalled that when she was very young, he told her that his mind, so long devoted to clockwork, was itself made up of churning gears and cogs. He had smiled, gripping the toothpick that was always in his mouth between his teeth, and winked, and she took this as a sign that she should smile and wink too. He had embraced her then, and she had buried her face in his sweater—the sweater that was like the one Mr. Rogers wore, the smell of which always reminded her vaguely of vanilla ice cream cones.

He wasn't buried in one of his sweaters. Instead, after the heart attack that proved fatal, they dressed him in a new black suit, which Tabatha thought made him look harsh, like a former banker and not the warm clockmaker who raised her. Tabatha's grandmother asked her to do the eulogy—it was too painful for her, she said. Tabatha, who was never much of a writer but always loved to read, instead read a poem by Emily Dickinson. And no one seemed to understand the pain behind "A Clock stopped-- Not the Mantel's --." But Tabatha understood it. And she cried, and her grandmother, who also understood, cried with her.

But the tears gradually left, and grandmother and granddaughter tried to mimic some version of their old life. Tabatha took to staring blankly and pondering for hours at a time, and her grandmother busied herself with little activities. She would clean things, paint things, or move things—knickknacks, pictures, furniture, and, as she did so, would find treasures to remind herself of times past. Change was not welcome, and she coped by carefully drawing objects from her past closer around her.

Now Tabatha, watching her grandmother moving the table full of seemingly mundane things, knew that the outside saw her grandmother as an old woman, grown slightly insane from her vast years. But she knew that aged

woman, still wearing the pearls she received on her wedding day and smelling always of flowers, was simply trying to grasp and bundle elusive memories—of days of girlish flirting and hiding love letters, of long, tender kisses under Magnolia trees, of toothpicks, of cogs and gears, of a life-long love that would only end by death, as promised in her vows.

Tabatha understood this desire. Thinking of that damned paved road and of tacky sweaters, Tabatha tried to show her understanding with a commiserating smile as she helped her move the table.

The Performance

Hannah Maltry

The stage lights shine brilliantly
as rosin clouds settle backstage.
Each dancer is frozen in her
pose, dressed in satin and velvet
attire tailored into the perfect fit.

Fifteen dancers in all spread
across the stage. Their height,
weight, even hair color is
coordinated. Each one
dedicated to their mission,
telling a story with their form.

The prima ballerina is in the foreground.
Her smile is genuine and bright.
Every muscle has been trained for
hours, each knowing exactly what to
do, they're all just waiting for the
music to start, anticipating that first beat.

But this picture, this picture
couldn't show the impending disaster.
Couldn't capture the crippling snap.
Couldn't predict the deadly slick spot.
Couldn't prevent the career ending slip.

I wish I could have seen my sister
then, when she didn't have to fake
her smiles. I wish I could have
seen the brilliance come to life,
I wish I could have heard the music
playing, seen her twirl across the
stage, but now all I have is this picture,
just one glimpse into her world.

Phantasm

Alicia Coleman

In the moments between twilight and daylight,
I find myself reaching out into the nothing.
For the ghost of you and where you once were.
My hands caress the air and feel your vapor.
Your scent hangs over the pillow and sheets,
Like some apparition that fades all too quickly.
In the steam of the shower I feel you there.
Under the spray, holding the soapy sponge,
Scrubbing me clean of my pain and loneliness.
As I brush my teeth and spit into the sink
I feel you behind me, whispering to me, “smile”.
I ready myself to head out for the rest of the day.
Your presence is there as I dress, apply makeup.
At the doorway I balk, as if waiting for a kiss.
I pull the door shut, turn the key and still you follow.
Grains of time tumble through the hourglass
Of the workday, so slowly that it’s painful.
Back in my room, I wait for that time when
Daylight becomes twilight then becomes starlight.
Once again, I can find you in my dreams.
Then the apparition of you becomes flesh,
And my loneliness dissipates the way I know
That you will disappear come the morning star.



Pillars

Keegan Campbell

SPRING 2011: 51

The Portrait

Bridget Grant

A gapped-tooth little girl
with a round pudgy face, big brown eyes
smiles wide at the camera,
showing off her deep dimples
piercing her plum shaped cheeks.
At the end of her two uneven pigtails
hang yellow and pink ribbons,
that compliments her fair complexion
and perfectly match her loosely fitted
yellow and pink lace trimmed dress.
Eyes glistening like water
under a moonlit sky
as a smile spreads from ear to ear,
she is innocent,
carefree,
and happy.
I remember her.

A feeble hand with thick veins
grasps the picture tightly
as tears decorate the portrait.
Her blood shot eyes study the picture
as her eyelids get lower.
Some tears trickle down
her dull, wrinkled face,
and others soaked into her lashes
that curls upward.

That night always plays
through her head like a horror film.
She seeing her daughter lying still
in that narrow dark alley.
Her naked frail body
in a pool of blood
and what was left of her yellow and pink dress
flung to the right of her,
next to her matching tattered ribbons.
That smile she always wore
to show off her gapped-tooth
and deep dimples, gone.
Those big brown eyes
closed tightly like a clinched fist.

I remember her.

years since
Hannah has been gone
mother still just holds the picture.
She was five then,
Today she would've been twenty four.
A graduate,
A mother,
A wife,
I don't remember her.

A Salute To My Soldier

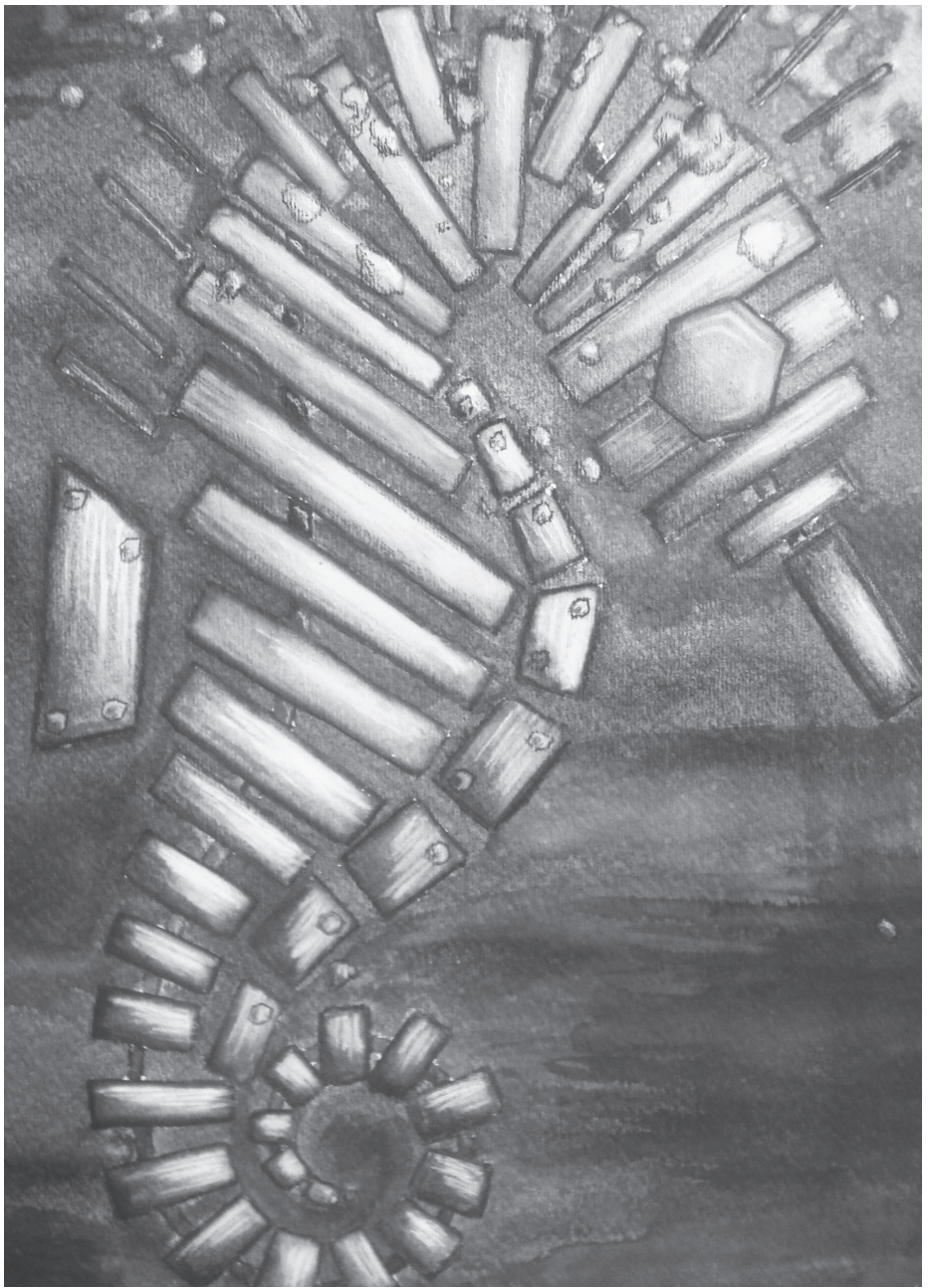
Shanquilla N. Alston

The oxygen mask covers your face
and tubes run up and down your arms,
the doctors say they will take you off the ventilator,
because it's your final request.

I stand at attention, by your bedside, head lowered
into my shoulders and blood-shot watery eyes.
I read your favorite scriptures,
from the little military bible with crumpled pages

I say a word of prayer, to tell you how much I care,
while I remove your dog tags from around your neck,
I assure you that everything will be just fine
as I stroke your hands back and forth,
and watch you as you continue to fight
You just lay there and sleep, in the small, dim room.

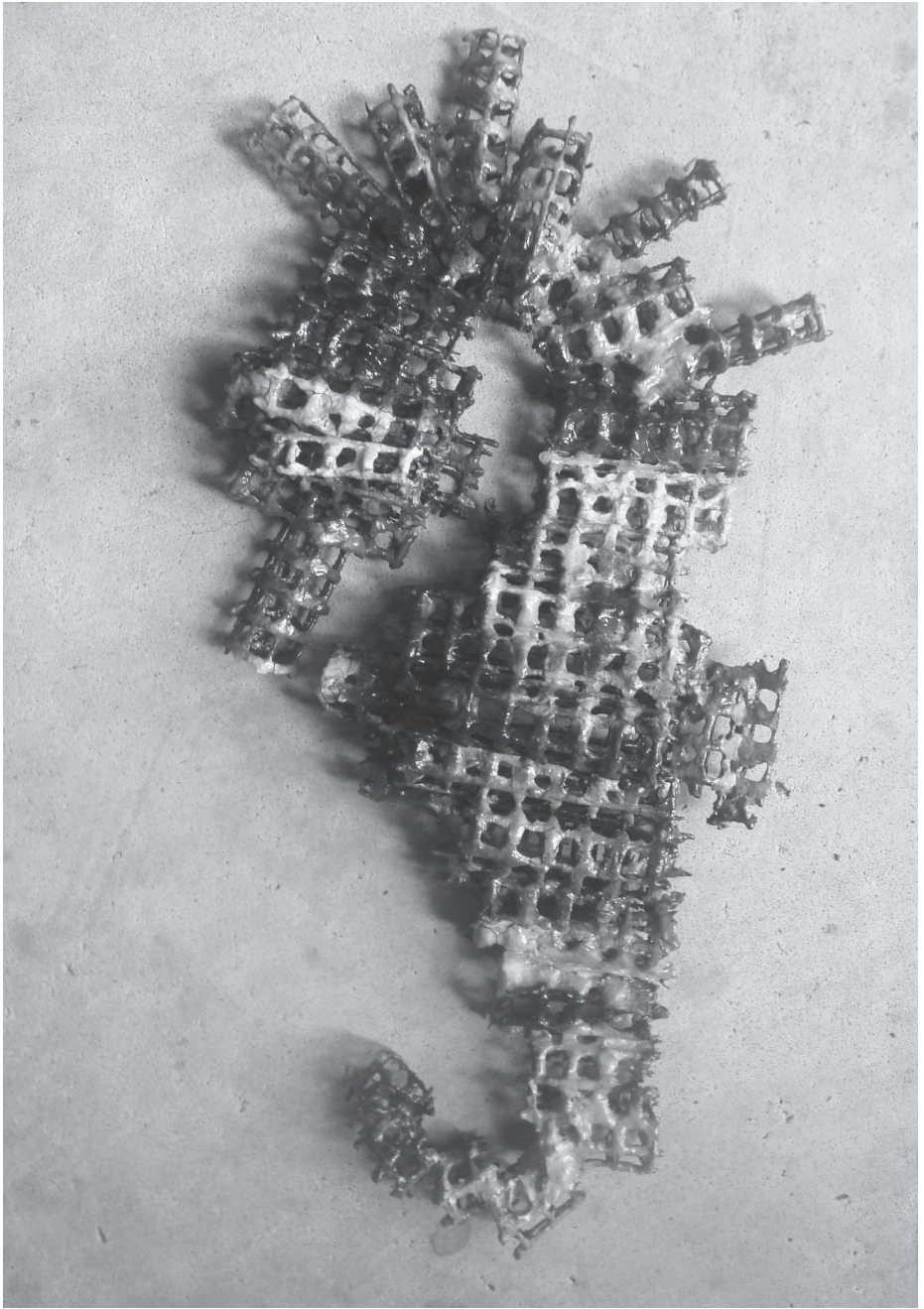
You are motionless, but your body is still warm,
and I can still smell the Old Spice when
I hug you for the last time, my Commander-in Chief,
My fingers grip around your index finger
as they pull the plug.



Seahorse #1

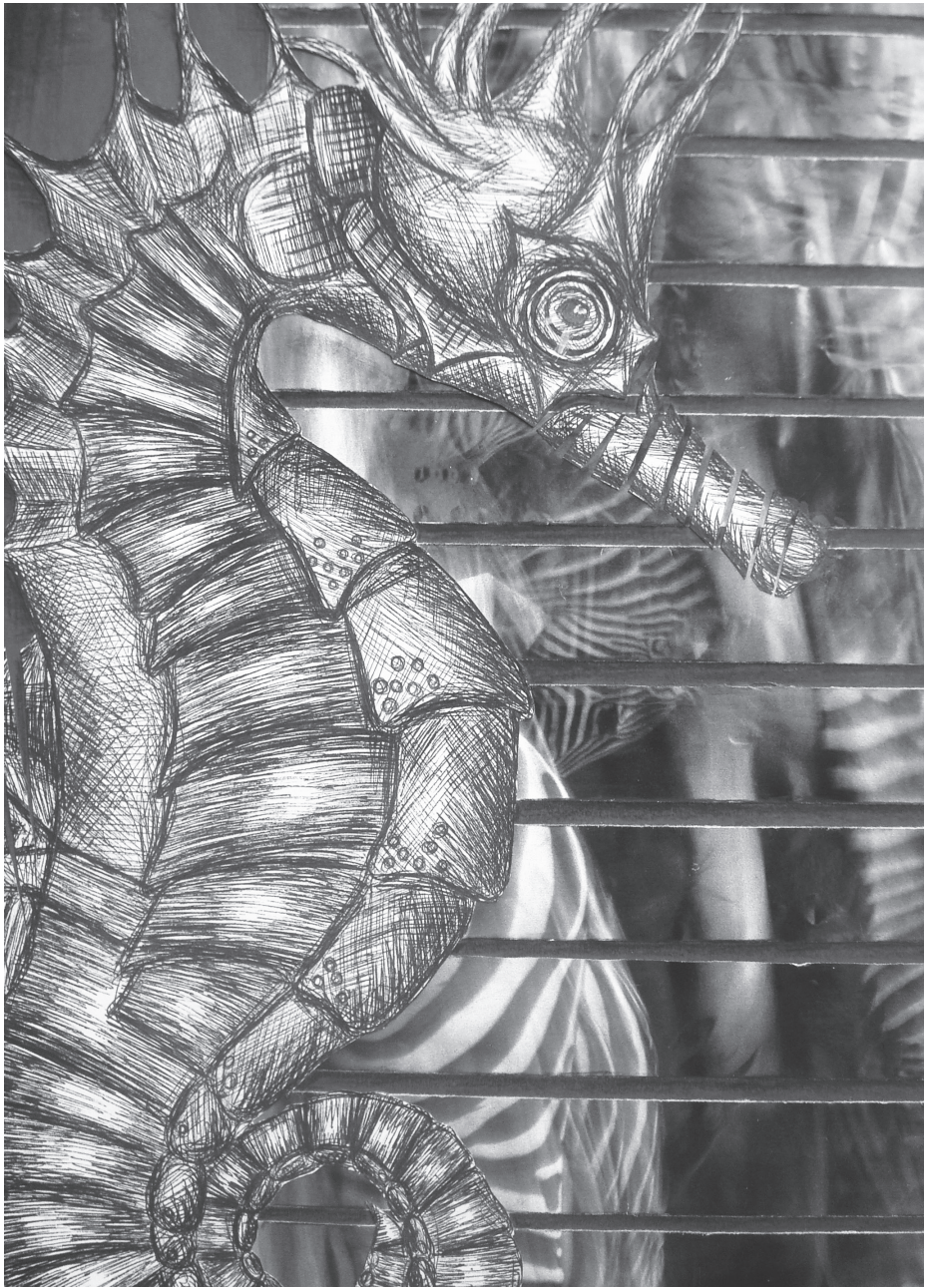
Adrianna Lovato

SPRING 2011: 55



Seahorse #2
Adrianna Lovato

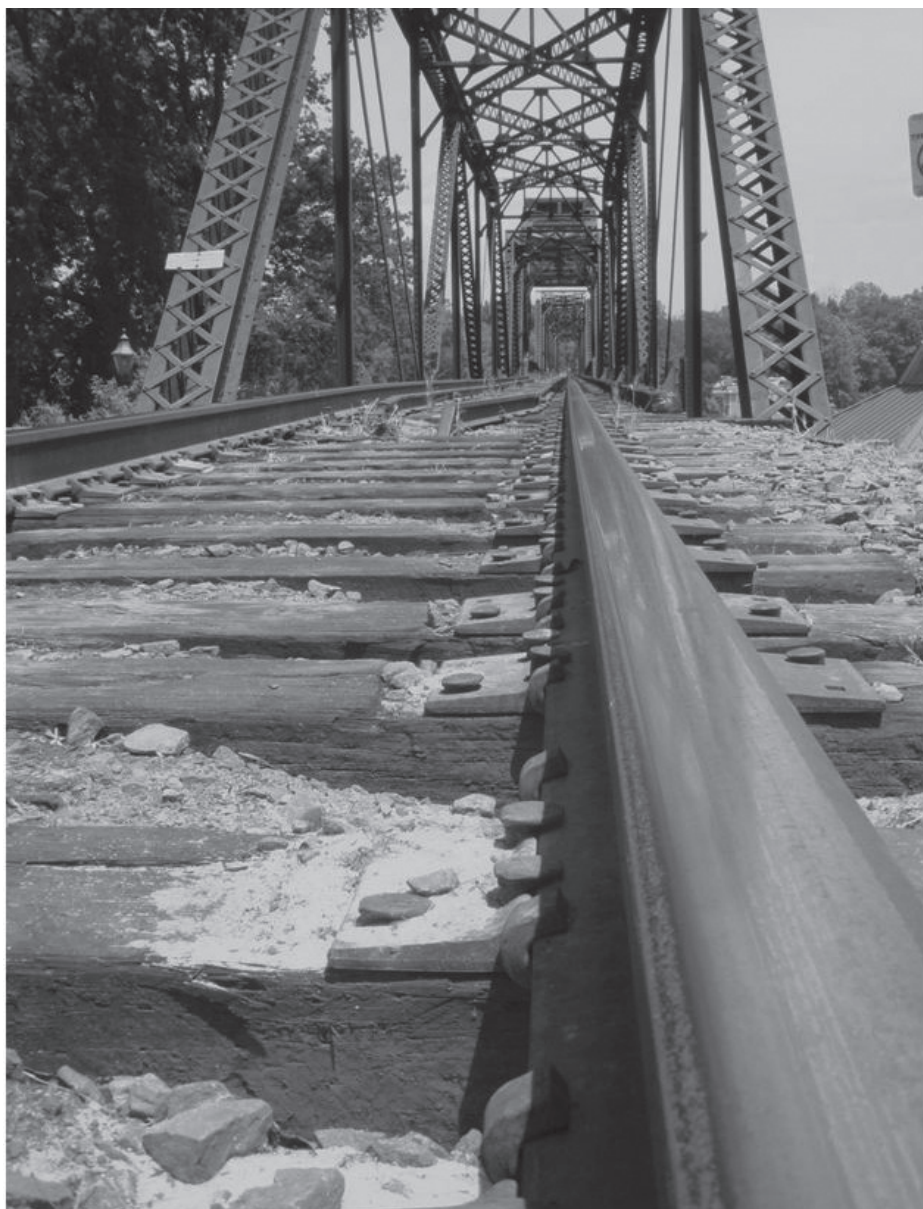
SIR: 56



Seahorse #3

Adrianna Lovato

SPRING 2011: 57



Tracks

Keegan Campbell

Tête-à-Tête

Shannon Pratt

Fallacy, you scarlet lady!
You play the coy mistress and
seduce the champions of hierarchy.
You achieve great feats of denial,
twisting reality, albeit intangibly,
and look away, oozing etiquette
from every pore, urging
me to call to mind the pleas of mercy
by a woman loosed.
How dare you, kinsman of that Great Deceiver?
How dare you gnarl the roots of faith and sever the
lineage to coherent musings gone by?

Would it then be I, sir, who induces this mistruth,
were I to connect phallicy with a similar word?

Three Shades of Red

Jessica Upchurch

She waltzes through life in three shades of red.

Her skirts mirror the ruby of scholars,
and fan about in a storm that is said
to be the tempest outshining the stars.

Detached joy lowers her lids; jewel eyes rest.

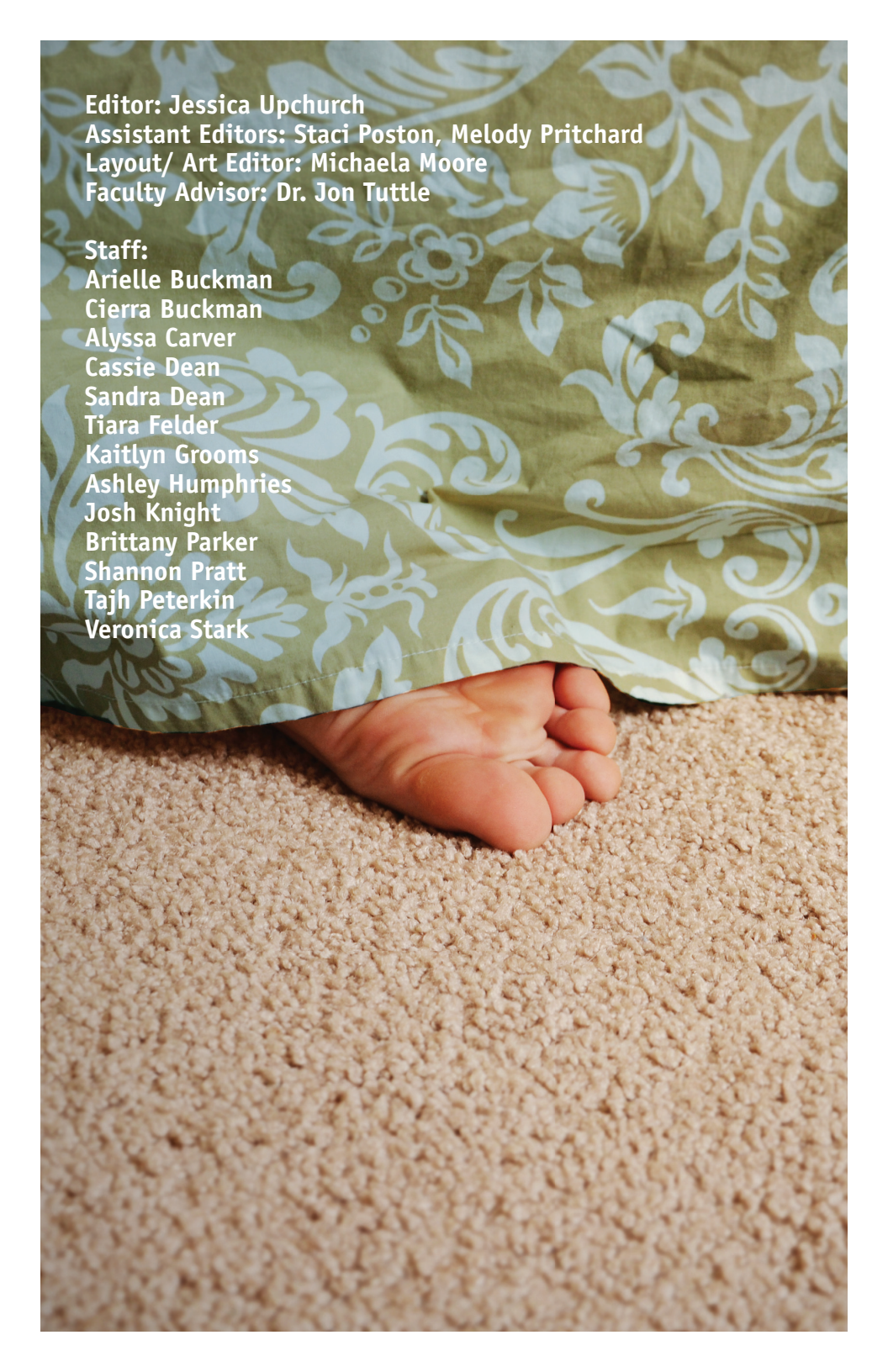
She smiles behind red that rests on her lips;
satin-stained and deep, they will quirk in jest,
or gasp with feeling afore fingertips.

Violent red clings to her heart and slinks
around her chest and races to thigh.

The lace holds a promise, every man thinks,
but it is a silky ploy with which they lie.

The revelers dance and drink their liquor;

Content, they join hands and watch her flicker.

The background of the entire page is a photograph. It shows a person's foot, specifically the sole and toes, peeking out from under a green skirt with a white floral and leaf pattern. The foot is resting on a light beige, textured carpet. The lighting is soft, and the overall tone is warm.

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