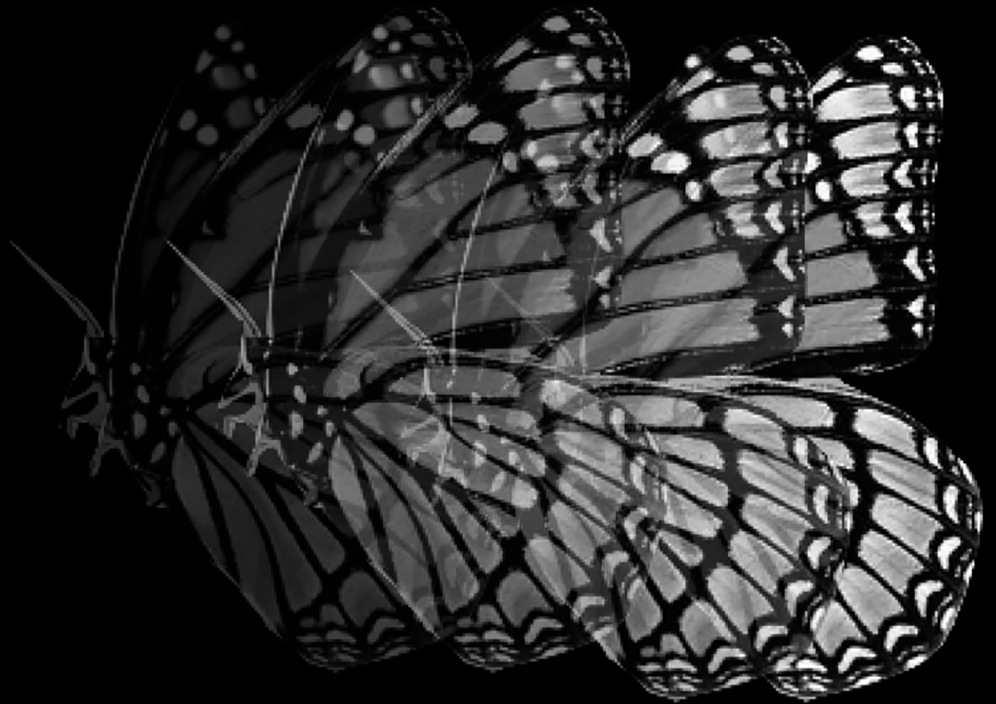


# Euphemism 12.2

*A Journal of the Creative Arts*



*Spring 2017*

# Euphemism 12.2

*A Journal of the Creative Arts*

Euphemism is edited by undergraduate and graduate students at Illinois State University. We accept innovative poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, visual art, spoken word, experimental sound and video projects, and original music from ISU students and from any and all writers, singers, musicians, artists, and filmmakers who send submissions. We welcome all lovers of words, sounds, ideas, images, and creativity. Our goal is to publish writers and artists at varied points in their careers.

Euphemism has a prestigious history as ISU's literary journal. Formerly known as *Druid's Cave* and *The Triangle*, The ISU Department of English has published a growing number of exciting and innovative creative genres over the last decades. The current editorial board honors our past editors, writers, and artists and hopes to continue the strong tradition of creative expression at ISU.

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# Letter from the Editor

Kara Hamilton

From poems about mending and letting go of people and pasts that deeply affect us, to photographs that capture nostalgia for eras long gone, the writers and artists featured in *Euphemism* 12.2 made testament to life's dilemmas that are inevitable, but ones that can be dealt with through honest expression and reconciliation. It is clear that creating these works of art is a way for many to come to terms with troubling hardships, as well as personal achievements. I am proud to say that this journal has created a community amongst writers and artists where they can share these experiences with an audience who understands them.

Working on this issue of *Euphemism* has been nothing short of an astounding, rewarding experience. But I likely would have floundered in this position (that I added on top of a full course load, two jobs, and a failing sleep schedule) if it weren't for the wonderful staff and patient faculty advisors that devoted countless hours to building this issue. I greatly appreciate each member of the staff for being absolutely amazing and dedicated to reading over two hundred submissions, attending numerous review sessions, and helping with the production process. I also need to thank several faculty members in the Department of English who were instrumental in the creation of this issue: our faculty advisor Jeremy Hurley for all of his guidance, Dr. Steve Halle and Professor Holms Troelstrup for their advice and answers to our often endless questions, and Dr. Jim Kalmbach for his technical expertise and training. I appreciate each one of you.

Finally, thank you to all who bravely submitted their creative works this semester. It's been an honor to read each piece and to include those that truly add to the goals of this journal; it would not exist without you.

With that, please enjoy the spring 2017 edition of *Euphemism*!

Kara E. Hamilton

# Euphemism Staff Spring 2017

**Editor-in-Chief:** Kara Hamilton

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This issue is dedicated to Dr. Elizabeth Hatmaker. From 2005 to 2016, Elizabeth was the faculty advisor for *Euphemism*. She constantly emphasized the importance of the student literary community and strived to create a journal that represented all voices. She will be remembered as an inspiration for many students and for all future issues of *Euphemism*.







# The Hip Bone's Connected to the...

*Britt Kotiw*

## **Part One:**

“Osteochondritis Dissecans.”

He smiled, though his lips were pressed together so tightly and his eyes were filled with such pity that it felt more like a substitute for a Hallmark sympathy card than a warm assurance.

My mother passed out in the chair next to my exam table even though, she had no idea what any of it meant.

The doctor had to wait for her to come to before he could tell us that Osteochondritis Dissecans is a rare joint condition whereby a variable amount of bone and its adjacent cartilage loses its blood supply resulting in bone death and it was important to discuss the next step. I sat there hardly listening to this stranger explain to my mother that he was going to slice open her only daughter's knee and drill holes into her femur bone.

*The cause of osteochondritis dissecans is unknown. Symptoms include joint pain, stiffness, locking of the joint, and an ongoing feeling of sadness, hopelessness, anxiousness, restlessness, and emptiness.*

**Part Two:**

Three years and thirty holes in my dead femur bone later, the symptoms hadn't dissipated.

"Let's try something different," said the doctor. I nodded my head in agreement because I was eighteen years old and had collectively spent more than one of those eighteen years on crutches. The deadening of bone in my leg was not only not getting better, but it was spreading like a bad rumor in a middle school classroom. The cartilage, the only job of which was to protect my femur, had completely detached from the medial femoral condyle.

"We need to remove that cartilage," he said. So he did.

*Post-surgical care included physical therapy, follow-up appointments, icing the damaged area, abuse of prescription pain killers, and spending plenty of time with my good friend—self pity.*

### **Part Three:**

My femur was an accident-prone kid riding a bicycle for the first time without a helmet. In other words: dangerously unpredictable.

Dr. Brian Cole of Rush Orthopedics was my last-ditch effort at living a pain free life. He was the best; weeks of research confirmed it. He was the head orthopedic physician for the Chicago Bulls and the Chicago White Sox. He was a rock star.

“Osteochondral Allograft Transplantation.”

“It’s not as scary as it sounds, Britt, I promise,” Dr. Brian Cole said with strong eye contact, a genuine smile, and his hand resting on the construction site that was my knee. “We need to get you on the transplant list. Then, we wait.”

The SparkNotes version of an Osteochondral Allograft Transplantation is that the surgeon cuts out (only some of) the bad parts of my femur and replaces it with a matching chunk of a fresh cadaver’s femur. They call it a bone plug.

After an increase of my beloved intravenous cocktail, I was wheeled down to the operating room. In a state of haze, all I remember was the brightness and the coldness and Dr. Brian Cole looking down at me.

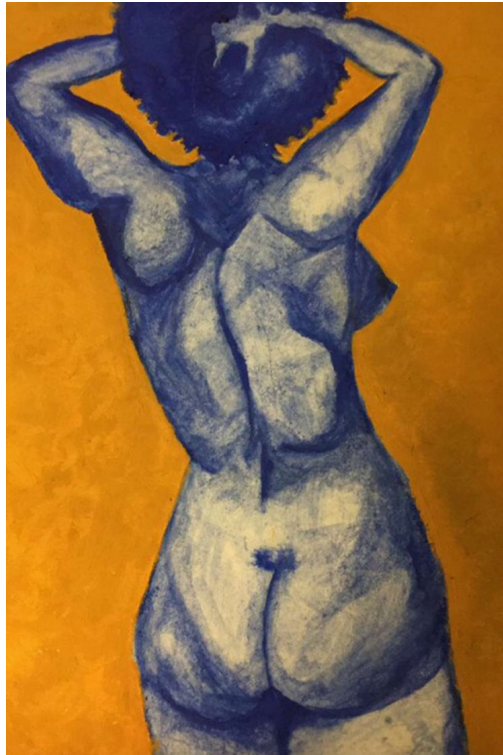
“Now count backwards from 10 for me, Britt.”

“Ten, nine, eight, sev...”

*Post-operation instructions included using crutches for six months, attending physical therapy three times each week for one year, and gradually getting used to walking without wincing.*

# Breathe

*Haley Jackson*



# elegy for a coat hanger

*Maddie Blackwell*

women  
a drop in the bucket

the bottom of consciousness  
a blister, the blank canvas  
the weary tread

tasting wire  
feeding into

a mouth

seated and sure  
a mouth

at the bottom  
of consciousness

hanging coats  
in corners of rooms  
removing hats  
scarves

like nooses

like open mouths

women in a circle  
we stand in a throat  
waiting for an open mouth  
everything

open

tasting teeth  
looking inward  
the center  
like a sunspot

putting coats back on  
still warm from a body  
slack

reassembling knots  
and recovering

heads with hats

# Infant Infinities

*Laura Eades*

the first spacebirth is followed closely  
by the first spacesuicide.

scientists puzzle  
over the spacesuit that hid a tiny universe,  
at the lightyears a woman will travel  
to escape a man.

we all sigh once vitals are stable.  
if she dies we will mourn,  
our kite string severed.

they name the first earthalien  
Ever.

the space-age miracle  
triumphantly passes from  
cosmonaut to astronaut, all in awe

she never cries, haunted by dreams of deep space.

we make altars.  
street corners choke on teddy bears, candy,  
other things she'll never know.



motherless and drifting,  
electric galaxies take notice

her sisters collapse  
from their celestial perches, angular  
alien angels eager to glimpse  
the new earthlife.

she is our ward but the constellations are closer.  
we wipe the stardust from our eyes  
and keep looking up.

the girl from outer space  
is lifted to a window.  
her impartial halogen eyes  
survey the intergalactic starscape,  
one spacedot the same as any other.

Ever yawns.

# suspended animation

*Seth Davison*



# Cerulean.

*Emily Bauer*

For a reason I can't identify, I am sitting up in my bed. The clock on my phone reads 4:36 in the morning, proving that I should not be awake. Yet, here I am with not an ounce of exhaustion.

I look down at my legs and follow their direction, and across from me, I meet eyes with myself in my closet sized mirror. My silhouette cuts stronger than my real self. Not that I know who or what that is anyway. It's bolder than I claim myself to be.

Slowly seeping in through the slivers of my blinds are the to-come six a.m. crawlies. They're sounds from mouths unlike our own. They aren't supposed to come for about an hour from now, but I know they're here early. Tiptoeing. Easing. The air I am enveloped in is saturated by the purple that what's-her-face wears on her lips, and the blue crayon color we can never remember how to truly pronounce. What is it again?

I am thinking about the monstrosity of nothing. Nothing bothersome erupting and tickling the mushes of my mind that would explain this encounter with the crawlies and crayon colors. Nothing exciting is to come that I would be anticipating.

But I am here. I graze here for awhile and use the time to look around me, though I can't see anything, really. Not moving too many muscles, either. I can hear my heart trying to get my attention, but I pay no mind to it. It's not forgetting to do its job this time. My belly is still filled with my remorseful midnight snack, and the fragments and scraps of how you made me feel yesterday. It reminds me of a baby. Unaware and ignorant. Fresh.

Still nothing. But I won't waste this time.

The ends of my eyelashes begin to high five, and the pokey needles begin to enter my toes from hanging over the bed for too long. I swing my legs back underneath my Ikea comforter covered in flowers I wish I could grow myself. I wish I could grow myself.

# San Francisco in Technicolor

*Zach Karlovitz*



# Shower

*James Croal Jackson*

hot water  
counterclockwise remember you  
twisted the faucet knob

grow old  
take scissors to your hair

steam naked                      forget  
   the mirror

shampoo foams  
in your tangles  
                 in the drain

# Indifferent

*Robert Beveridge*

We know nothing

after all these years  
drenched in other people's  
seas of knowledge

we're still dry

the trees  
in the black hills  
are nothing more  
than smoldering piles of ash

the devout  
pick through the remains  
look for splinters  
of the one true cross

but find instead  
a few drops  
of water fouled with ashes

# Anxiety

*Haley Prokaski*



# Timeline of a Messy Mind

*Nikki Monroe*

I'm in sixth grade, staring out the dingy bus window, waiting for the bus driver to finally take us home. I press my cheek to the window and the sun's warmth stings my face. I jam my headphones into my ears to block out all the noise and I'm left only with the buzzing in my brain. For the first time, I think of suicide. While my mind wanders, my fingers nervously sneak up the edges of my denim shorts and gently trace the newly scabbed over ruby slits. I close my eyes and try to focus on the music instead of the static in my mind, when I feel a tugging at my skin, followed immediately by the sensation of liquid spilling across my leg. One of the deeper cuts had torn back open, dripping blood from my leg that already gathered in a pool on the bus seat. Frantic, I press the edge of my shorts against the open wound and hold it there. Eventually, the bleeding stops and my heart settles back into my chest. Until I notice another kid staring at me.

It's my freshman year of high school and I don't feel a thing anymore. The anger, the sadness, the emptiness held within my ribcage for years suddenly collapse and numbness is the only viable feeling to replace it. I spend my days floating through school, trying hard to smile at the right times and convince people that I'm actually listening to anything they're saying. At home I sit on my floor and stare at the homework fanned out in front of me and I so desperately want to do it. I want to read something and learn, but everything just looks like scribbles on a page and my mind is never quiet enough for me to focus. My thoughts are louder than they've ever been tonight. I grab a razor blade, hoping that pain will dull the noise long enough to allow me to escape my own head, but I'm left only with streaks of blood and tears to match. I'm screaming my lungs out, unable to make a sound. And eventually all the noise in my head starts to make sense. I walk to the medicine cabinet and grab a variety of pill bottles and sample as many as my body allows me to swallow.

It's the day after I tried to kill myself and being alive is suddenly even harder than it used to



be. The guilt is a boulder on my chest and my friends are so nervous and I don't like the look in their eyes when they talk to me and I don't want anyone to worry and I thought I hated myself before but oh God, now I hear my mom crying when she thinks I'm asleep and I can't even breathe anymore without someone asking if I'm okay. Today, I make a therapist appointment.

It's my freshman year of college. I'm excited to be in a new place, to begin this new chapter of my life. I love my roommate and my classes, but sometimes when I'm in my dorm alone I sit on my bed and cry. There's never a tangible reason for it, I just do. When we go out on the weekends, I drink more than my friends do. They think it's funny that I drink until I blackout so I laugh at it, too. The stories I hear about myself make me feel like an idiot, but if everyone thinks I'm having fun they won't stop to ask me how I'm doing. My mental breakdowns get harder to cover up and eventually I come clean with myself. Today, I start taking anti-depressants.

It's my senior year of college and I'd be lying if I said that it's been an easy road. But I haven't cut in two years and haven't attempted suicide since. There are still days where I avoid spending time with my friends and too often I can't get out of my own head, but I'm 22 years old, about to graduate college, and I'm alive.

# little fang, little fang

*Seth Davison*



# Synonyms for Quarter Life Crisis

*Alexis Adams*

1. we marked our territory with wads of chewing gum pressed stiff beneath the kitchen table  
to muffle the noise of these prayers that end in question marks  
and sound more like philosophies than benedictions  
(which never quite feels the same  
as the tenderness of finite resolution,  
but i'll take what i can get)

2. hallucinogens tremendously improve the taste of frozen tv dinners,  
but waking up alone on a box spring mattress  
at 4 o'clock in the afternoon  
soaked in rank sweat and saturated in sadness  
still aches just the same

3. last night  
i searched for the meaning of life  
in the cavernous folds of queen mab's warm underbelly  
bought a 5-dollar box of press-on nails  
and scraped the backs of my fingertips along a spinning record  
till the music just sounded like cable static

# I Told Someone

*Shelbi Sarver*

Tears drop from your rosy cheeks,  
Onto an expressionless face,  
As you utter your hundredth slurred apology.

“I’m sorry,” loses its edge  
When masked with the scent of hops  
And the taste of guilt on your lips.

You don’t remember it happening  
The next day, I describe it to you.  
You beg me not to tell anyone.

# Molded Memories

*Anonymous*

Momma,  
I share your eyes  
I have your hair  
And your skin matches mine.

When your hand struck me  
I tasted blood in my mouth,  
I echoed your whimper  
from the memories we share

I always blamed myself  
instead of faulting you for the harm  
inflicted onto me

My teeth were gritted,  
rage and sorrow  
blend in your pupil's reflection

Momma,  
We do not tread the same path  
You burned out like a match,  
but I will burn like a forest fire  
Forgive me for not following your footsteps

# Snow in November

Kayla Jane Jeffers

I stood on the back steps of my dorm, taking in a deep breath of the frozen air. God, I really didn't want to do this. Any of this. This last week before finals, taking my first college final exams of my entire life, interacting with the girls on my floor. None of it.

But mostly what was about to come. The walk from East Campus to Stevenson was short, it always was. There was no delaying it.

No delaying having to explain to the first of three professors that I had to miss class right before finals. No delaying having to explain *why* if they pressed. No delaying having to tell an instructor that, "*Hey, yeah, so I know finals are next week, and we have a bunch of projects due this week. But yeah, on Wednesday I won't be here. I'll be at a funeral. For one of my best friends.*"

There wasn't an easy way to say any of that.

Almost everyone on campus who knew me, who *actually* knew me, knew. I guess that's one of the great things about social media. Everyone will know.

But everyone will *know*. Coming back from Thanksgiving break, the first and only break during fall semester, and your friends being a mix of happiness to see you, but then remembering. And then the pity starts.

And they all just wanted to talk about it.

Maybe I didn't want to talk about how it felt to find out that one of your best friends died in a car crash the day before Thanksgiving. That I had seen her the previous Saturday, and told her I would see her again before I left, and that I *didn't*.

Maybe I didn't want to talk about how I got the Facebook notification for her last Facebook status. How it was about how the high school's musical would be *Grease*. How she used three exclamation points.

Maybe I didn't want to talk about how even in my dreams the next night she was dead, and that brief moment of clarity—that moment I had always thought was fake—before it all came

rushing back. How I got another Facebook notification from her, and for the briefest second I thought the day before had all been a dream; but it ended up being an automatic update from an app.

Maybe I just didn't want to talk. Maybe I just wanted to exist.

I didn't want to post in the Facebook group that was made the night she died, "Fly With The Angels Sweet Emily." Because what was the point? I didn't believe any of that. All of those people who *believe* get some type of comfort in thinking she's up in heaven somewhere, looking down on all of us.

But I didn't get that.

The first floor of Stevenson was always reflective of the weather, filled with leaves in the fall, humid and hot in the summer, freezing cold and soaking wet from the snow. The stairs were covered with the gross gray slush that was creeping to slip anyone up. Hundreds of people were in this building, and my entire life had fallen apart and no one knew. But I had to tell someone, to who I was just a name on a roster, another paper to grade, a seat that was filled.

The second floor of Stevenson was warmer, the artificial heat a welcome to my exposed skin, seeping into the layers of my peacoat. My heart beat faster, the anxiety bursting through my veins and chest.

Only three of my classes would be affected by the funeral, I was still going to my first class on Wednesday. Still had to pretend that I was okay, that I wasn't breaking apart before boarding a train to go home for a funeral. For one of my best friends, who was barely seventeen, not even half way through her senior year of high school, hadn't even announced which college she was going to, who had her entire life before her.

My instructor walked in.

*Here goes nothing.*





# Breakers

*Allison Madura*

Beach baby bottled in  
sea glass clear and green,

It's the old tired strings  
that match waves and play on  
through the night  
making more stones, calling to the gulls,  
“Come, sing her to sleep!”

In '84 the sand was softer and  
the mornings were warmer this deep into  
summer—  
sunning themselves despite  
12 feet of water, tiny ridges sparkle  
in soundless rebellion.

I swam so far, the sea drank  
me slow and rocked against the shore  
so that I hardly felt it beating broken  
bottles smaller and softer than before.

Beach baby bottled in  
sea glass clear and green,  
making something kinder of

this coast, calling to the gulls,

“Come, sing her to sleep!”

# Glass

*Allison Maretti*

Rinse and repeat. The same thing as yesterday, just a different shade of eyeshadow. Maybe she'd add some sparkle today to make up for the lack of life in her eyes. Haven't you heard makeup is a woman's war paint? No...maybe it's more of a mask. She hides her dark circles with concealer. No need for people to realize just how tired she always is. Doesn't forget to hide her waterline, hide how irritated her eyes are from crying. If they ask, she says it's allergies. Perfection all tied together with eyeliner.

Well, she tries to be perfect. But sometimes she's Atlas. It's the others like her that understand what she's doing—throwing on this façade. It's a boulder, and biology didn't give her large enough shoulders. Lift with your legs, not your back. It's like she's the leading actress in a play, she performs this role to a T. She does what is expected of her. They understand. They always do, and they pretend she's okay. Because *she's* pretending to be okay. So no, she's not hungry. She doesn't need to eat lunch today. She doesn't have the time and she doesn't need those extra calories. She weighs too much as it is. Stress eating, she'd rather it be bored eating. At least then she could say she has free time. She's wearing lipstick. A colored-cream punishment awaits her if she does eat. Red lipstick stains skin something terrible if you don't know how to wear it. And that would just make her look stupid in her after-lunch meeting.

Stressed? Oh no, she's not stressed. She's just busy. She can handle it. Why should she show you where the stitches are holding her seams together? She's still learning to sew. Just one more thing on her list, you know how it is. A woman's work is never done. The expectations get higher, but the glass ceiling doesn't. The architect must have been an idiot.

She keeps walking and standing, even though her feet hurt. The red heels that match her lips are killer in more way than one. She'd wear blue, but then people ask her why she's sad. Humans judge emotions by color rather than expression. No, red is confident. Chin up. Smile. Good morning. Click down the hallway. They might be painful, but they do make a satisfying

clicking sound. Leg day pays off, especially when she wears a skirt. If makeup is her issued tactical face paint, then her heels are her weapons, and her suit is her armor. Business bitch. Is that what it's called now? She doesn't really care. She just needs to look strong, act strong, and maybe she'll be able to survive the storm when the glass breaks above her. The meetings make her nervous, and she clenches her hands into fists to stop herself from biting her nails. They might not notice expressions, but body language is a book they'll have read. She knows, she read the book too. It's a bestseller in the business world.

She wonders, idly, if the paint won't wear off before the glass breaks. Or maybe she'll run out. The demolition keeps getting pushed back. Years, sometimes. The people above her don't want to renovate. But she can see the cracks. Maybe the people on the floor above her will jump too hard one day and it'll crash down without the construction workers' help. But until then, another coat of lipstick. Sometimes her smile feels garish, like the Black Dahlia's, so she just wears a different color the next day. She found that purple is close enough to blue to let the others like her know she's not feeling confident. Like a secret code between them—a little bit of fun on an otherwise dreary day. Perhaps monotonous is a better word. After all, it is just rinse and repeat for her by now. It's not like her job changes as often as other peoples' do, even if she *is* qualified. You'd think that'd reduce the weight of that boulder you're holding, Atlas. But it's like the ceiling's too low. Sometimes her workload scratches it.

Sometimes she feels like a magician's assistant, locked into a transparent box. She can see the people outside, but they can't hear her screaming as the water rises up towards her nose. Instead of opening the lid and helping her out, the magician unlatches the side and she falls to the floor. Or maybe it was a ladder she fell from. Did the rung break, or was it cut? She shouldn't have had lunch Tuesday. Either way, it's a long way to that glass ceiling from the floor, and her elbows hurt from the impact. Hopefully nothing is broken but her pride. She'll cry out that pain in the shower when she's not wearing her mask, or her armor, when her weapons are secure in her closet. She has many pairs of those: butterfly blades, Jeffery Campbell, dirks, David Tate. No wakazashi though. Those are expensive, like Christian Dior. And when is she ever going to

need Okinawan steel? She's only on the frontlines. Everyone like her is. Maybe that's why she's always running on empty. She's always checking her tactical paint too.

Sun Tzu said to never turn your back to your enemy. But... she has to. Backing out of a business meeting like a kid in a dodgeball match would be too awkward. So she walks out, head high and back straight, ready to leave the building with the glass ceiling, and go home. She'll lock her door, and retire from the frontlines for the night. The weapons are put away first, and then her armor. She saves the face paint for last, comparing her kabuki-like mask to the emotions on her real face. She'll cry those out in the shower, and by tomorrow she'll be back to fight.

# mending: a list of sensations

*Sophie Gimble*

the drop in your stomach as you fall down, down, down.

heavy eyelids after a long day. a warm bed. your legs floating in a pool. sun warmed hair.

the stillness in a conversation after admitting a secret that terrifies you.

the boom in your chest when a firework goes off. the scratch, stretch, burn of a tattoo. reading a line in book as if it was written for you. a long hug. laughing until you cry.

watching things happen with no control over it.

falling asleep to the sound of a grandfather clock. the breeze on your face after it rained all night. new, clean sheets on bare legs. someone braiding your hair.

taking a shower in the dark.

emptiness in your stomach from the lack of food and feelings.

forcing out slow, hard breaths to calm yourself down.

relief of a pain passing, fading.

safety in their arms, curling around you tighter while you sleep. your chest swelling the first time someone genuinely says they love you. the scrape of a lost voice in the back of your throat. walking downstairs at eight in the morning to people already waiting for you in the kitchen, quiet, sipping coffee, smiling when they see you.

a halted breath from reading stories that hit too close to home. hot anger, never leaving, always choking you, always settled on your shoulders.

getting under warm blankets in a cold room. the bubble of a laugh coming to the surface that you know you won't be able to hold back. fingers carding through your hair. nodding off in a chair under a tree, the light dappled and the leaves whispering.

exhaustion setting in your bones after therapy. yet another attempt to heal yourself. crying without bothering to wipe the tears away, dropping from your face and leaving your skin ruddy.

hugging someone for what you know will be the last time for a long time (so you make it a tight one). little fingers wrapped around yours, pulling you to play. gentle morning kisses on your cheek, lips, forehead, neck, anywhere they can reach. staying up until four in the morning and watching the moon from your bedroom floor. the warmth in your stomach from hot cocoa. humidity clinging to your skin, the fan humming.

disconnect settling in your chest as you visit home.

colors bursting when they tell you why they love you. soreness in your throat as you realize that for now, this is enough. you are enough.

getting back up with scraped knees—

their smile against your shoulder.

shaky legs—

tingling in your fingers.

a bloody nose—

deep breaths after a good cry.

when you don't want to.

mending yourself together with knotted string.

getting back up.

# The Five Stages of Loss

*Kimberly Larsen*

## **Denial**

### **Los Angeles. 2817 Miles, 41 Hours Until Destination.**

I sat with my head pressed against the passenger side window and closed my eyes, letting myself bump against the cool glass.

“You feeling carsick?” Josh asked, his voice heavy with concern.

“Nope,” I answered back, his concern making me even more irritable than I already was.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, trying not to be smug but barely concealing the ‘I told you so’ from his voice.

I had spent the past month making it perfectly clear that I was not in the business of changing my mind—about moving, about leaving, about him. When we finally stopped arguing about it, I had thought he was finally ready to except that fact and move on. That was until he had this “great idea” last week.

“So, I have a great idea.” I had just taken my makeup off and was brushing my teeth when he appeared in the entrance to the bathroom and announced this.

I rinsed and spit. “What now?”

“I was thinking that it would make more sense for me to drive you to New York,” he said sagely, as if he were doing me the favor.

“Before you say no, think about it,” he said. “We can take shifts driving and you would save money because you wouldn’t have to stop at hotels.

I raised an eyebrow. “How are you going to get back if we take my car?”

“I can fly back,” he said, shrugging. I shot him a look and his eyes grew soft.

“Please Lex. Let me do this one last thing for you.”

So I let him. I tried to tell myself that I saw his concern as love, that I didn’t see his sympathy as pity, but I was never good at creating these illusions. Once the idea was in my head,



it grew roots, spreading down through my body like veins, until it took all of my willpower to fall asleep in the arms I once called home.

I knew that Josh's motives were not entirely as unselfish as he claimed. No one did anything in life for purely unselfish reasons. People volunteered to feel virtuous. People donated to feel righteous. Josh was driving me to New York to get me to change my mind.

And I was letting him, relishing in the eventual satisfaction of seeing his face when my answer was still no.

I told myself that I wasn't being cruel, not really. Josh had met me when we were both 18; freshman year floor mates. He met me when I was fresh and passionate and full of big plans and even bigger ideas. Affirmations whispered between explorative kisses—you are brilliant, you are crazy, you are beautiful.

But I was one girl in a sea of freshly minted idealists—every last one believing they were put on this Earth for the sole purpose of making their dreams come true.

Four years stretched out in front of me like an eternity, and I happily lost myself in the sunny haze of California—the languid comfort of a relationship. Josh's affirmations became commonplaces, and as we grew closer my dreams drifted further out of reach. I told myself I was biding my time, I was learning and growing, prepping myself for when my life was actually going to begin.

We have a habit of making these promises to ourselves—the ever scintillating new beginning. The New Years Resolution, the New Leaf, the Clean Break.

I had gotten comfortable living in a prequel. I needed to give the narrative I had always wanted an honest attempt before I lost all my nerve on a beach in California.

“Not even a little bit,” I said, not trying at all to keep the I told you so out of mine.

### **Anger**

#### **Colorado. 1786 Miles, 26 Hours Until Destination.**

I was driving now, well into my first shift. I tried to catch up on sleep when Josh was driving but I was too restless, and now I was keeping myself going with lots of caffeine and the

knowledge that reprieve waited on the other end of this car ride.

The silence in the car was deafening. I had been quick to shut down Josh's early attempts at conversation—suspicious of his motives. So I slept...or at least pretended to.

Right now, Josh wasn't sleeping either. He was bouncing one leg, and it was starting to get on my nerves. Both of our emotions were coming to a boiling point inside this car. If we continued on like this one of us was going to erupt.

"Want to listen to some music?" I suggested, breaking the silence. He snaked the aux cord from the council and plugged in his phone, an obnoxious beat pumping out of the speakers.

I stifled a groan...or at least I tried to. I really hated this song.

The song abruptly cut out as Josh shoved his phone back into his pocket and turned to stare out the window. His leg was bouncing again.

"What?" I snapped. I was more irritable than before and definitely more caffeinated.

"It's like I don't even know you anymore," he said bitterly. "Ever since you started all this crap I've been getting to know a whole other side of you."

I had never known Josh to be bitter. Coming to California and meeting Josh had been two tantamount moments in my life—I associated them both with sunshine and warmth and a carefree laziness that you wanted to wade into like a pool. But being bitter was something I was experienced in, and as California slowly started to dissipate my dreams I began to resent it. It just so happened that Josh got dragged along with it.

The night I told him my plans to move to New York, to move away from him, was the first time I had ever really seen him angry—really truly angry.

"Why," he demanded, softly at first.

"It's just what I need to do," I said, not ever really expecting him to understand. Josh had never been like me, with fire in my blood and flight in my bones, with the desperate desire to change, to be in constant motion, to *do* something.

"I just...don't...fucking...get it," he said, putting his head in his hands and grabbing fistfulls of his hair.

I stared at him evenly. It seemed like he would sit that way forever when suddenly he sprang up and swiped our half eaten dinner onto the floor, the dishes clattering to the ground, breaking the silence.

“Four years! I give you four years of my life and the best excuse you can give me is that it’s what you need to do? Well fuck that, that’s bullshit and you know it,” he said. I was still staring back at him, not letting my face betray any sort of emotion I might have had.

“Have fun in New York,” he said, walking to the bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

I cleaned the uneaten dinner off the floor that night, but I didn’t mind. For the first time I had seen Josh angry, and for the first time in a long time, I remembered what it was like to love him. Seeing him care about something—anything—so deeply, was almost enough to make me give him another chance, to make me stay.

But if me leaving was what it took to set fire to his blood, to make him care deeply about anything at all, then it was the last gift I would be able to give to him—fitting, considering who it was coming from.

I knew he would thank me for it eventually.

Josh was still bouncing his leg.

### **Bargaining**

#### **Iowa. 1,006 Miles, 15 Hours Until Destination.**

I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and once again registered the foreign landscape. Josh was back to driving and I had finally fallen asleep for the first time this trip. I shifted position, every inch of my body creaking in protest from being cramped up in this car for so long.

“Hey,” Josh said, glancing at me from behind the wheel. “Sleep ok?”

“As well as to be expected,” I replied, cracking my neck.

He smiled. “Yeah, I know what you mean,” he said. “My back has been killing me since I woke up and started driving again.”

“You volunteered to do this,” I snapped. I needed to get more coffee before I could entertain

the idea of a guilt trip detour.

"I know," he said softly. "I didn't mean it like that."

I didn't reply.

"Lex, listen. About New York..."

I sighed. I had known this was going to come up sooner or later but I had hoped we would at least be past Chicago first.

"Josh..." I began.

"No, Lex listen," he replied, his words coming out more and more frantically. "I know that you're unhappy, I can see that now, but you have to give me a chance here. I can fix it, we can try to make it better, do make things differently. And I understand you now. This whole New York thing has, it's...made me realize some stuff," he swallowed hard, and down went his pride. "I know there are things you want to do, but I want you to do them too, we can work through this. We can do them together, I swear I won't hold you back..."

It was amazing, what the human mind could selectively forget and remember when it was desperate enough. I had given Josh plenty of chances, whether he remembered them or not. Josh thought this was his last chance, but his last chance came and went over spring break.

We had ventured out to the beach that day, in an attempt to get out of the house and do something, while not actually doing anything at all. We laid out our towels perpendicular to each other, and I used his bare chest as a pillow while he absentmindedly stroked my hair.

"Josh," I ventured. I had been testing him a lot lately, without so much as coming out and directly asking him what I needed to know. The answer to what was stirring inside me. "What are we going to do after graduation?"

I felt him stretch out underneath me.

"You know Lex," he said, stifling a yawn. "I already have that research position locked down."

"That's what *you're* going to do," I said, approaching dangerous territory. "I asked what we were going to do."

He paused for a while, enough to delude me with hope for the fact that he was actually

considering this answer. Then he said,

“Well, my position has a really great salary, much better than most people could hope to get right out of school. Don’t worry about it, you know I’ll always take care of you,” he stroked my hair again. “We knew from the beginning that it would be a lot harder for you to get a job doing what you want. We can make it work.”

The thing was, it wasn’t that hard for me to get a job, but it would be a job that required going after, and I wasn’t going to stumble across it on a beach in California. The hard part was letting go.

He was a fish on a line, flailing, and I couldn’t watch him struggle anymore. I needed to cut him loose. I shook my head.

“No Josh,” I said sadly. “We can’t.”

### **Depression**

#### **Ohio. 563 Miles, 8 hours 45 Minutes Until Destination.**

We had not said a word to each other since Iowa. The tension existed in the car like a living person, a third passenger. All of our history together—our shared jokes, our memories—were suddenly taboo in front of this new third wheel.

My hands gripped the steering wheel. We had not tried music again since Colorado, and I was left alone with too many thoughts.

I glanced over at Josh sleeping, leaning his head against the side of the car, his mouth slightly open. Seeing him like this reminded me of the boy I fell in love with—open, vulnerable, curious to the world. I had thought that he was the perfect compliment to me, my perfect opposite. Every sharp edge I had, he softened, every time I worked myself up he brought me down to earth again. I was a helium balloon and he grounded me, he kept me tethered to the earth so I wouldn’t get lost in the clouds.

But those opposites were what bent the relationship until it snapped. I no longer wanted to be soft, or brought down, and instead of feeling grounded I felt restrained. I wanted to explore all the clouds had to offer.

The weeks before break I was irritable and tired. I was trying to fit myself into a life that wasn't the right shape or size, and I could wear it, but it never fit right, and I never looked quite myself. I was a zombie—going to class simply because I was so close to graduation, eating not because I found myself hungry, but because seeing Josh eat reminded me that it was time for dinner. I had no problem sleeping—I could sleep all day— but I was clearly not myself, and Josh was beginning to realize it.

Then spring break came and I knew I had a new purpose—researching. Where I wanted to go and who I wanted to be. I spent hours online, caffeine in hand to fight off the sleep I once desperately craved. Josh was relieved.

“I was starting to get worried there,” he joked. “Winter must have just been getting to you.” As if we had a winter here. As if every day wasn't just a gift from God that warranted nothing but unbridled happiness and tranquility. As if you were allowed to feel anything else at all.

“Or maybe you were cheating on me,” he joked again, desperate for me to laugh, for me to give him anything at all.

But I actually did find that one funny. I didn't cheat on Josh that winter, but in a way, I had been cheating on him then. I sat, locked away in the bedroom having a love affair with real estate in far away places, dreaming of plane tickets and rain and even snow. When I was with him, he was the furthest thing from my mind. My head was in the clouds, and he had no idea that I wasn't planning on coming back down to him.

So I drove on towards the clouds, wishing that I could live two lives. Wishing that the sky was a little smaller, or that Josh's rope was a little longer. Wishing that cutting those ties didn't have to be so damn hard.

### **Acceptance**

#### **New Jersey. 63 Miles, 1 Hour Until Destination.**

“Are you excited?” Josh asked me, although he didn't take his eyes off the road.

I didn't answer, I didn't trust myself to. I wasn't going to give my voice the opportunity to betray me, and I was far too stubborn to back down now.

As every mile ticked away my anxiety spiked. I had no clue what I was doing, not one fucking clue. I was about to throw away everything I had spent four years building—destroying everything so entirely that even the foundation would crack. I was about to rebuild my entire life and I felt like I had forgotten the blueprints back in L.A.

This car had become a liminal space. I had left behind everything I knew and understood but was not yet ready to replace it. I was existing in a state of limbo—a purgatory. A million possible new beginnings existed before me, but I wasn't quite close enough to reach out and grasp one. My entire reality existed within this car, with Josh. He was a crucial part of my current world, of this entire journey. As much as I thought I was ready to leave him behind, I couldn't quite shake him yet. He was still shaping me; he was still a part of who I was.

"I'm really glad you came with me."

There were a million different ways he could take this, so many of them wrong, but I knew he wouldn't. I reached across the council and took his hand.

"I don't know if this is what's best for me," I said honestly, letting all of my fears surface. "I just know that it's something that I have to do."

He nodded like he understood what I meant, but I doubted that. Josh had always aligned with what was best for him. His body and soul never let him stray from a logical path. When we first got together I had envied him for it. Everything seemed to come so easily to him, he always knew what he wanted, and I never seemed to know what to want. These past few weeks I thought that I resented him for it—that his need to be constant, to stay the same, was eventually going to slow me down until I became un-moveable, petrified.

"I may not understand why you have to do this, Lex," he said. "But I understand you."

Somehow, that was enough.

I leaned across the council and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you," I said. "For driving me. I needed all these miles to clear my head." "Yeah," he said, grinning lopsidedly. "Me too."

I had cut my string to Josh I was floating, and the path that we had once walked together,

seemingly vast and endless, was becoming smaller and smaller from my vantage point. One vein of many in the new landscape below me.

I had just needed a birds eye view to see all of the places I could go.



# Popsicles Hyacinth Leaf

*Stacy Maddox*



# Kindling Soul

*Alexis Foran*

I had a dream about you once  
Between crackling radio waves  
And arching backs of ocean crests.

Dream through minefields,  
Feel the storm well at your fingertips.  
An inverted soul  
Constantly whipping me.

I'll keep a dream journal of everything we've done.  
Bury your sore bones  
In my skin.  
Let them hibernate there  
Until they are whole again.

# Tired

*Haley Varnes*

We wandered wastelands of neon lights and climbed mountains of ice that never really touched our toes. We stared out the windshield at rolling hills of green and felt the breeze between the blades. This is where we came, where we felt safe. Far above the rest, where the sharp fingers of compulsion didn't stab, but caress. I felt the clouds as they disappeared from the sky and reappeared in my head, telling stories of the bullies who called them names and pointed, laughed. His hand was the leader of great nations and I clutched it as we flew from pavement to leaves, leaving everything behind with fear and crushed lighters. But not anymore.

Against my volition, my first two knuckles double tap the center console. He removes his elbow from its place of rest and muses which ancient Chinese dynasty Bob Dylan would have preferred. I already have the bowl to my lips before I feel his cold hands take it from my grasp. He is right, of course. Not tonight. The place below my heart opens and screams. My numb fingers grope their way around the dark car, pursing my partially packed cigarettes. A lighter is ablaze before me and I bind myself tightly in a blanket, suffocating the incessant hunger. I will never be happy again.

Countless phantoms swim behind my trembling eyelids: the small man behind the gas station counter every morning, eyes cast down, knowingly, at the blue veins pulsing over my hands as I forfeit another ten-dollar bill; a mother at the side of a hospital bed, eyes glistening with tears shed for her two children, both fighting for their lives; a young boy, lying weak and smiling, eyes crinkled at the corners.

Somewhere in the catacombs of my coat, my phone rattles my ribcage. The buzzing causes a new wave of tremors through my pathetic body. A hand is scorching my cheek and I let it sear through my skin, welcoming the agony. I have to do this, wage a mental war with a fleet of the tired and hungry.



I had been in the bathroom. Doors locked even though no one bothered checking any more. I released the belt from my arm. I laid my head against the cool porcelain toilet and let it frost the clouds between my ears. A while later, still detached and dazed, I heard my name faintly fill the hall outside. I opened the flimsy door. There he was, covered in his own vomit. Mystified, I watched his eyes roll back in his head as he collapsed to the floor. Snapping into a distorted role of mother and sister, I held his head in my quivering, unworthy hands. Dialing 911 was the easy part, muscle memory.

When I got to the hospital, our mother was waiting outside the cold, automatic doors. I couldn't understand why she was turned away until I watched the smoke ostensibly rise from the top of her head.

"Mom?" When she turned, her expression didn't change. She only stared at the ambulances arriving in the distance and offered me a cigarette from her pack. Three left. I lit it with miserable guilt. "He'll be alright this time," she said after a long pause. And I know it was meant to ease my feeling of shame but I felt nauseous. There couldn't be a next time and there shouldn't have been *this* time. I sat on the cold pavement, shivering under my layers. "I'm going in," and she was gone. I wrangled my phone from my pocket. I wanted to go in but I knew what was waiting for me in that cold room: a small voice from a smaller body.



"Those aren't for you, are they?" I dropped the bottle and fifty or so pills scattered across the floor. I hadn't known he was home from his appointment. Bending down to pick them up, I tried to hide my face from the hallowed figure of my brother.

"Holy shit, you scared the fuck out of me," I said. "I was just making sure they gave you the right ones this time, okay?" When I finally stood and looked in his face, it was obvious he already knew the implications of what he was about to say.

"I won't tell mom this time." He stared at his shoes as he went to lie down in his bed, hunching over his crutches. How can someone so weak handle so much?

"Let me help." As I bent to untie his shoes, hands still shaking, I pressed the pills into my

pocket. When I pulled the covers around his feeble shoulders, he was already asleep. That was the second of the many times he caught me, but the first time he didn't tell mom. Her crying kept me up later than usual that night.



I'll never forget when he was diagnosed, and the doctor couldn't tell how bad it was going to be, or how it would soon metastasize in his other leg bone. They said it would be an in-and-out procedure to remove the lump and he would be okay soon enough. I hadn't thought I had a problem then, but I knew I would practically have my own dispensary soon and that elated me.

My brother's cancer had truly, initially, caused me to feel joy. Once I realized where my thoughts had gone, I was revolted. I remember excusing myself, with a hand over my mouth, to the bathroom where I could safely take more with sink water. It washed away my guilt and I was flying again, straight from the depths of my self-doubt and hatred. Returning to my brother's side, I became the sister I was meant to be, telling him that there was nothing to worry about. That soon, we would all be well and happy again.



The look on his face that night, the hope, the trust, is what haunts me now. It is what causes the car to distribute ice from the vents and shatter the window, releasing the cold November air on my face. It is crushing. I lift nothing but my eyes to Dan sitting next to me.

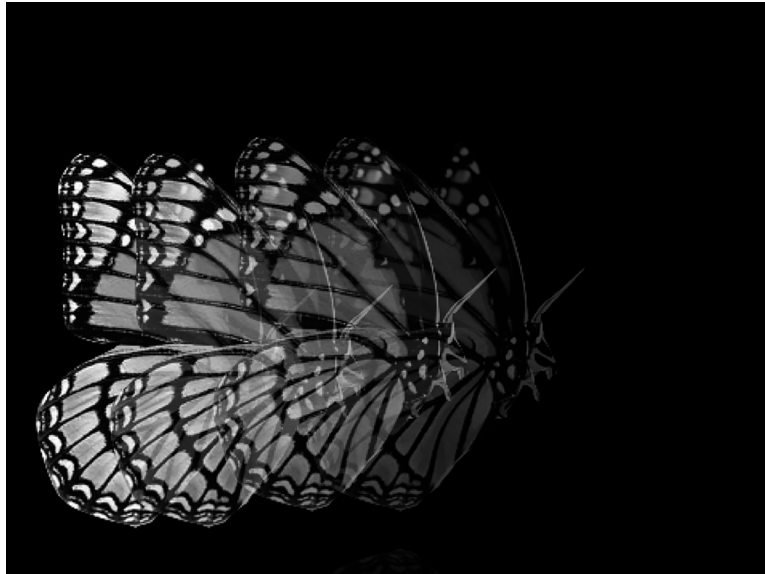
"Just so *he* goes away," I keep repeating, over and over to him, now groping at his pockets. He sees the pain, he feels it. I'm convinced it has spilled over the tops of my collarbones and seeps out of my jacket. I grasp at my damp, cold chest, wishing it would ease up, wishing the pain would have started slower, killed me slower, deservedly.

I am screaming now, piercing the delicate ecosystem of music and silence. All at once, I feel those familiar warm hands placing something into mine. I don't have the energy to even meet his gaze. I slouch back in the seat as he takes off my jacket.

"This is it," he says firmly, as he ties my arm off above the elbow. As warmth touches every corner of my body, I know he is right. This is it.

# Fading Monarch

*Mariah Bormann*



# “Were You Raped or Not?”

*Lauren Leady*

## **A Slam Poem**

“Were you raped or not?”

This question, this binary that pops up like my trauma counts only on if I was punctured.

The ripping and shedding of clothes.

I am a doll.

A Barbie.

The ability to change me into his image. Glass eyes shut tight willing to believe “This means he loves me, right?”

His fingerprints left burns all over my skin. The melting plastic smell in the air. All those years scrubbing my soft vinyl skin until I saw glistening white. My purity. I’m not a collector’s edition wrapped neatly sitting pretty on the shelf. I’m left scattered on a child’s playroom floor.

This question involving one end of the spectrum versus the other.

“Were you raped or not?”

It doesn’t count when I sat in a high school health class checking 7 of the 10 boxes that were signs of sexual abuse.

That one box left empty.

The absence of piercing me like a new diamond earring excludes me from the statistics.

“Were you raped or not?”

Because rape is the only form of sexual abuse. A masked man jumping out of the bushes at night. A woman wearing skimpy clothes. What about a neighbor coming over to visit? A girl with pajamas too scared to understand?

“Were you raped or not?”

My identity is a multiple-choice test.

I am an unanswered question.

I am a puzzle with misplaced pieces.

I am a false statement.

“Were you raped or not?”

The whispers.

Pleading.

Touching.

Forced to take my clothes off.

I melted away into an apathetic creature.

Hiding from everyone’s touch.

Jumping at every noise.

He never “entered” me.

“Were you raped or not?”

My brain burns at every thought of him as the flames grow to consume my whole body. I walk through the world radiating heat and light. Desire. The desire of freedom from the suffocating silence. Free from the constant choking on my own words.

But hungry flames are smothered by the constant reminder I was stabbed numerous times in every place except where it counts.

“Were you raped or not?”

The roaring blaze left ashes littering my esophagus. The ashes didn’t overlook a single corner or nook. The remnants cling to every atom covering me in a blurred dust.

“Were you raped or not?”

This question of penetration becomes your justification.

“Were you raped or not?”

My trauma is real.



# How to Fix Yourself, Fast!

*Julia Andersen*

## **A found poem from Briggs & Stratton's "TOP 5 MOWER TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS"**

It happens to the best of us: Suddenly  
a setback.  
Hours increasing the chances of a glitch.  
Some of the common forms of interruption:  
the starter rope is hard to pull,  
    seems stuck.  
A typical engine flywheel brake  
(hold down, release)  
dragging, clogged,  
    spark disengaged.  
Be sure to bring the bar all the way down.  
Hard surface. Turned off.  
Clear the underside  
then resume, give it another yank.  
Believe it or not, many experience this frustration,  
for one obvious reason: the gas tank  
is empty. Old gas can lead to problems starting.  
Drain your fuel tank, fill it  
with other possible causes:  
    loose, dirty or disconnected spark plug  
    dusty air filter

fuel not reaching the engine—  
You lose power in the middle of mowing.  
Ah, the source:  
    build up  
    debris  
Raise the cutting height  
Whoa! Your Mower is Smoking!  
    Dull, bent, loose  
    sharpen or replace  
Whoa! Your Mower is Smoking!  
    This might look a little scary,  
    the exhaust muffler tilted  
    to the lighter colored smoke, plus trouble  
    keeping your mower running  
it's time for a serious look by a professional

But first, a word: It happens  
to the best of us. Suddenly a setback, the starter rope  
hard to pull, the gas tank  
empty, dragging, clogged, spark  
disengaged.

# Attacked

*Cheyenne Haenitsch*

Wild and unrestrained, letting your instincts run rampant through your system, anger and panic rising in your throat and coming out in sharp words, in cries, whimpers, or possibly just choked words that barely make it out. Your only goal is to make it somewhere safe, comfy, familiar. Your mind goes all fuzzy, only a tunnel of panicked thoughts barrel through. The animal's only instinct is to be away from the threat.

Example. A raccoon stuck in the corner of your garage, terrified and hissing into the glare of your flashlight. The fear is obvious in its eyes, it bares its teeth and it scratches at the smooth cement floor as it tries, and ultimately fails to push itself further away from you. It doesn't register in your mind that this animal is terrified because you are just a seemingly giant, hairless, bipedal raccoon that is blinding it in the middle of the night. You are really only scared because this small omnivore is making strange sounds at you in the place that should only really be housing your means of transportation, be it bike, car, scooter, whatever.

Now switch roles. You are the raccoon. Your heart is pounding impossibly fast, adrenaline is flooding your system. You have bared your sharp canines and emitted a warning sound in an obvious sign of aggression to try and scare off the intruder. Who are they to be in your personal space? You were just trying to eat, to be warm, sleep, survive. Your brain is screaming at you to run, *RUN*, as fast as you can to safety. To your tree, or hole, garbage can, wherever you end up hunkering down for the night. But your body doesn't respond. All you do is scramble, pushing yourself back. Further and further into the corner where you are meeting your impending doom. Or... Well, it feels like that.

Switch again, you are sitting in the local Taco Bell with your friends, laughing and sharing about the interesting parts of your day, your most recent drunken mishaps, that one time that so-and-so accidentally spilled their drink on a random person when they were scooting past them in a crowded movie theater and somehow they are dating three years later, like some

shitty romcom. And it seems like there are a million topics a minute so you check your choice of social media to take a mini break, scrolling mindlessly through the posts. (*Election, election, election, Trump but with his mouth photoshopped as his eyes, baby, dog, baby, election.*) You feel the corner of your mouth pull up a little when your best friend from home sends you a snapchat of her making a (horrific) funny face with the caption “You’ve been doing so well, Honeybee! I love you!” To which you screenshot, then you click the button to lock your phone. *This is going well. Today has been pretty manageable. I should call my mo—* And that’s when your hand knocks your drink over and onto the floor, where the neon blue soda pools around your chair’s legs, a bit getting on your shoes and then you jolt, looking up and around. All eyes on you as you snatch up the napkins and throw them on the mess, the group starts giggling and then the kid across from you laughs and says something like “Classic you! You’ve always been a klutz!”

Then it snaps—

The small, sleeping animal inside of you wakes up and your shared heart picks up pace. The napkins are soaking up the liquid and your eyes might as well be burning holes through to the floor. You feel yourself smile, the animal bares its teeth, on defense and ready to run. The rest of the group chimes in, bringing up the times you’ve tripped, knocked something over, dropped something, stuttered, you name it. The corners of your mouth drop, your teeth still showing, it’s more of a grimace now. Hands shaking as you throw away the sopping wet napkins. You look at your nails and the animal flashes its own in defense. As you sit back down, their comments ring through your head. You shrink into your chair, trying to make yourself small and trying to get your way to safety.

No one seems to notice the way your breathing has increased and your face has lost all color. Your nails dig into your thighs, palms, arms, the table, trying to get a physical grip on reality. Your voice has left, you have no way to protest the looks and small laughs that are directed at you. Everything is getting faster and faster and spinning out of control, you try your hardest to keep your cool on the outside but there is nothing but a raging, terrified animal inside of you. A summer storm, a void. Everything and nothing at once. Your mind seems to keep going

and going but somehow seems to be playing a broken record that repeats *I don't fucking know* over and over.

*Okay, okay. I've got this. I can do this, I can just take deep breaths and then I can leave without explaining it to them. Don't look at me, don't look at me, don't look at me, don't look at me. I can explain later, if they ask. Just go, I can just say I need to go do homework that I didn't know about. Maybe I could say that I need to go clean my room? God, they won't bite that. My room is always clean. They aren't stupid. Just reach out, just tell them, just let them know what's happening. So many people struggle with anxiety disorders. Fuck. I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe. I have to grab my keys and go, I have to look calm so no one tries to stop me. I need to plan my route, I need to, I need to, I need to, I need to—*

Then a voice interrupts your thoughts, the whole table is staring at you. The person who started all of this looks confused and just says “Hey, man. Calm down, it was just a joke.”

# Tax This, Too

*Megan Nierenhausen*

And to me the definition of compromise  
was to let you pick anything and everything  
because anything you wanted, I wanted too.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is letting you cum first so I don't fall asleep and  
hurt your feelings because I *know* how much that hurts.  
And i'm trying here.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is taking my ring off before I finger fuck you.  
Because supposedly that's the only way to show I care.  
And i'm trying here.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is letting you date her while I'm waiting  
for you. Waiting for you, turning a blind eye.  
And i'm trying here.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is being introduced to all of your family but  
only as "just a friend."  
And i'm trying here.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is letting you go to the Fucking Prom with  
another goddamn person because i'm just "not there for you" enough.  
And I'm *still fucking trying here*.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is staying behind in the closet where you left me  
so you don't have to worry about what your boyfriend will say.

And to me the definition of compromise  
is trying while you're nowhere to be found.  
So why the hell am I still trying?

# All I See is You

*Emily Johnson*



(Click icon to view on *Euphemism*'s website)



# Wicker

*Haley Prokaski*



# The House Always Wins

*Caitlyn Hartman*

Greyson Paul tied a bandana around his head of dreadlocks and squared his shoulders.

His knee bounced hard enough to make his entire body jitter in place. Vermillion eyes flicked. A marble, sparkling with a fiery celestial pattern, whipped around the outside of a spinning wheel that was marked with twisted symbols. His fingers clenched in the loose fabric of his pants until his knuckles turned white.

“Ehh, ya’ lookin’ a lil’ green there, Grey,” the toady dealer gurgled, voice thick and bubbling in his wide mouth.

Greyson grimaced and bared his teeth in what might have been a smile. His nerves were bleeding out through his limbs and his jaw clenched. It was never a good idea to look nervous in the Palaces. The superstition was that the gods would sneer and take all of one’s luck away. Greyson stilled his knee. “Well Goard, my friend, I’m losing my mind, I’ve already lost my heart, and I have a bad feeling that I am about to lose all of my money,” he said before his eyes flicked down to the wheel again.

Someone cleared their throat just behind Greyson’s shoulder. “I do hope you mean all of my money, Mr. Paul.”

Greyson’s throat closed in what could only be described as utter panic. The blood, as well as the tinge of sickly green coloring drained from his cheeks, leaving him clammy and ashy. It took no shortage of self control to resist the urge to bolt over the spinning wheel and shoot across the smoky, crowded gaming floor to the exit. He forced himself to swallow and flattened his hands out on his thighs before spinning around on his stool and beaming in the face of Wallerstead Kayme, the Blue Palace’s Boss.

“Wallerstead! Fancy seeing you here, eh?”

“Indeed.” The Boss’s broad shoulders were squared and the top half of his squat, scarred face was shadowed by the wide brim of his hat. As Wallerstead Kayme folded his arms over

his barrelled chest and strained the fabric on his shoulders, two imposing figures flanked his sides. They were of the same height, had the same wide figures, stone-grey complexions, and featureless faces; his golems, the Stonewomen.

"I was under the impression," Wallerstead continued, "that you dragged yourself down here to clear your debt."

"Oh yeah! For sure, my man," Greyson said enthusiastically, scratching the stubble on his chin. "How was it you put it? 'Get me my money, clear up your debt, or that pretty boy of yours will be cleaning your brains off the walls?' Pretty sure that's how that conversation went. Nevertheless! I've got your money. With interest! In a minute," he babbled, stuffing his hands in the deep pockets of his pants to hide the fact that they were trembling. He turned his eye back to the wheel just as the fire opal marble began to slow. The skittering noise it made over the smoothed track of the wheel slowed time itself.

Greyson held his breath.

The two brutish Stonewomen close in on the table.

His eyes went wide, and behind him Wallerstead growled, "No fucking way."

The little marble ticked over the last section of the wheel before it fell into a slot that was marked with three entwined arrows. The mark matched one of three cards that was set in front of Greyson on the smooth surface of the gaming table. He leapt from his seat, knocking the stool over with a shout of triumph. "Yes fucking way, Wallerstead, my man!" he hooted, spinning and pulling the much larger man into an awkward hug. His heart was charging beneath his breast plate and he hoped that Wallerstead could not feel him shaking. The Boss looked significantly disgruntled and clicked his fingers together, signalling the Stonewomen to pull the other man off of him. He smoothed down his suit and squinted. Greyson was holding up his hands and grinning up at the Stonewomen, and once he was released, he turned to snatch the slip of paper that Goard passed over the table. Then, Wallerstead caught sight of the series of symbols scrawled across the slip.

"You bet all of it?" he roared, dragging Greyson back in front of him by the front of his

loose fitting vest. A purple vein had started to throb in the shadow of his temple and his eyes were all but bugging out of his sockets .

Chuckling and woozy off of his own success, Greyson unwrapped Wallerstead's fingers from his clothing and clapped his hand on the man's shoulder. "Well, yeah, some for you and some for me! But I'd say that hardly matters now, my friend! You have your money. With interest. Just like I promised," he chirped before taking off for the teller's cage. His grin was nearly mad as he passed the winnings slip beneath the cage that separated the skeletal teller from the rest of the floor. If she had an eyebrow, it would have arched when she examined the slip of paper. After some muttering, she slipped a sack under the cage's bars and Greyson snatched it up eagerly. It was heavy with foil bills, more than Greyson had ever held or seen at once.

Licking his lips, he reached in and ran his thumb over the edge of one of the bundles of money. His palm started to tingle. With this kind of money, he and Kal would never have to work again. The both of them would be able to vanish from this piss-and-shit city and never look back. That was not something he could do with the measly cut that Wallerstead would allow him.

Kal would never have to endure the touch of another grubby hand. Greyson shook the sack closed.

Wallerstead's cronies closed in, followed by the expectant Boss. They were going to take the whole bag, claiming the months of interest that had built on his shoulders, and all of Greyson's hard work would just be fed back into the Palace. He would be back in debt before the end of the next month. Of course, he knew that was no one's fault but his own, but that did not change the end result. He sucked in a breath and made his decision.

His hand plunged into his pocket and seized one of the many tied pouches that lined the inside. Jerking it free, he hurled it at the ground, and just before his fingers left the pouch he caught Wallerstead's eye. It was peculiar, Greyson thought. The look on Wallerstead's face. It was not angry, but seemed more resigned. The expression was swallowed by a cloud of violet smoke that bloomed from the pouch as soon as it hit the ground. Under that cover, Greyson turned on his heel and ran, sprinting for wide doors and flying out onto the street.

It was an explosion of activity in front of him. People were wheeling carts over the solid pavement, whizzing around larger wagons pulled by sleek serpentine reptiles he knew to be called Jakas. Motorized cars tore around the carts, people walked, and semi-hovering machines buzzed around everything else. A grin cracked over Greyson's mouth and he sprung forward a few steps before grabbing onto one of the Jaka carts. He shot away, just as the Stonewomen burst through the Palace's doors behind him. Their blank faces swallowed by the chaos as the cart bounced away.

Kal's tenement was not far. The Blue Palace was just on the outskirts of the red light district. Greyson only had to cling on the back of the cart for a few streets before he spied the rickety steps that lead up to Kal's loft. As Greyson climbed the steps that screeched and swayed, a perfect scene played out in front of his mind's eye.

There would be a look of surprise on Kal's fair face. Just imagining that made Greyson's fingers ache in yearning to touch the taut skin over his high cheekbone, or brush those thick curls away from those honey eyes. Once the surprise faded, Kal would probably get that look of disdain. The look when his brows knit together and made that small crease in the center of his forehead. Greyson always wanted to smooth it away with his thumb. He was grinning as he took the steps two at a time. Kal would probably demand that he leave and remind him of their earlier argument. Greyson drowned the memories of that vicious night with the thought of kissing Kal hard on the lips; crushing them with his own before dumping the foils out of the sack and telling Kal that he was taking him away from this slum of a city. The lines of constant worry and angst would smooth from Kal's pretty face, his slender shoulders would slump, and then Greyson would help him throw all of his things together and they would leave.

For good.

Greyson was beaming when he threw open the thin door.

"Kal!"

He faltered.

The sack slipped from his hand and flattened on the floor, spitting up a few foil slips where

they glittered dimly on the rotting floorboards.

A cool, hard hand closed over the back of Greyson's neck, then his hand was twisted up between his shoulder blades, forcing him down on his knees.

Kal screamed from behind the gag that had been tied over his mouth. Tears were welling in those large eyes. While the tears made Greyson's palms clammy, the sight of massive, stone hands pressing to either side of Kal's head made Greyson's blood turn to tar. The little stones of dread that settled in Greyson's stomach swelled to a molten clot of panic that thawed his froze limbs and made him thrash. It had been a mistake, he knew that now. The look on Wallerstead's face was not enraged because he had planned on Greyson trying to run. The man had thought of everything. The grip-vice like and vicious-bruised Greyson's arm and the back of his neck, but he did not still. Not even when he felt his shoulder pop free of its socket.

"No, no, no, no," he moaned, for that was all he could manage. Panic was making his throat close.

The Stonewomen held the two men fast. There was the steady thump of heavy footsteps ascending the outside steps and resonating through the grungy apartment. Greyson strained to look over his shoulder, but from the widening of Kal's eyes, he found that it was no longer necessary. He knew exactly who was climbing those stairs; whose shadow was looming in the doorway. Kal's terrified face twisted into a look of utter betrayal as his gaze focused on the shadow in the doorway and back to Greyson.

This was not how it was supposed to go.

Wallerstead Kayme's heavy voice rumbled and swelled to fill the whole room. He sounded tired; disappointed. "How many times has it been, Greyson? How many times have I had this discussion with you? Three times? Four? Five perhaps. See, it seems I've lost track." He stopped just behind him and thick fingers wove through the ropes of Greyson's hair, jerking back so that Wallerstead could lean down and hiss in his ear. "You cannot outsmart me. You cannot outthink me. And you cannot outrun me, Greyson Paul."

Kal's eyes hardened and narrowed, thinning to a vicious glare under which Greyson withered.

The expression of acidic regret, and perhaps a glimmer of hate hurt Greyson worse than any of Wallerstead's beatings, or even his currently dislocated shoulder. All he could do was plead for forgiveness with a look.

Behind him, Wallerstead Kayme nodded.

The stonewoman shifted her hands just slightly on either side of Kal's head before her hands came together. Between them, Kal's skull strained and then shattered. Blood and the pulp that had been his brain spattered over the floor and over the front of the creature, the bone shards scraping over the rough surface of her skin. When her hands came apart, Kal's body crumpled forward and a growing pool of blood reached out to Greyson, who screamed until his voice broke.

A raspy, hysterical moan built in Greyson's throat and he strained forward, but was still held back. Wallerstead sighed behind him and picked up the forgotten sack after sweeping a few of the escaped foils inside.

"Come, Greyson. I'm afraid your lesson isn't yet finished," he said flatly, motioning for the Stonewomen to follow.

# Gatorade

*Zoe Schmidt*

Time passes strangely in hospitals. Hours mean nothing. Sleep is sporadic—one sleeps for short intervals whenever it is possible, or whenever it is impossible to be awake. The lights are always on, bright and florescent. New ways to measure time have to be developed. I use the number of tubes and machines hooked up to you—less tubes mean more time has passed. I measure time in nurses, one shift merging to another. I measure it by changes to the cafeteria menu. I measure it by the bags under my eyes. I measure it by your increased levels of consciousness.

The first time I get to the hospital, Mom flies into your room. Dad is flying home from a business trip. I slowly stick the guest sticker onto my shirt, and ask the lady at the front desk where your nurse is. She flags him down, and I try to remember the mental list of questions I made.

The nurse is a tall, bald man with a well-trimmed beard and a tired but friendly face. I ask him if they pumped your stomach, and he informs me that people don't really do that anymore. I feel very small.

"How is he doing?" I ask next, because I suddenly realize it is the only question that matters.

"He's resting right now. We're monitoring his kidney and liver function, and at the moment everything is actually within normal limits, but that could change. It looks like he is going to live."

At that moment I swear my heart stops, because up until then, it had not occurred to me that there was a chance that you might die.

There is a lady in the corner of your room. She has bright red reading glasses and does Sudoku puzzles in her chair. Her nametag says that she is Gertrude, and that she is a Patient Sitter. She doesn't talk much, but the first few times you wake up she tells you where you are. You say you need to pee, and she says that you have a catheter in and it does that for you, but yes, it's going to feel like you need to pee. She explains this patiently, every time you stumble into consciousness, over and over again.

Outside your room, there's a bin. Every time I enter I put my purse in, and every time I



leave I pick it up and swing it over my shoulder.

I buy you a stuffed cat with a neon green Mohawk from the hospital gift shop.

“Is it okay to give this to him?” I ask the nurse when I return to the floor, holding it up.

“No,” she says. She is all business, but I think there is a touch of sympathy in her voice.

“You can’t bring anything into his room.”

The cat joins my purse in the bin.

At one point they stick a tube down your throat to check for scarring in your esophagus. I choose this time to go to the cafeteria. The food sticks in my throat as I swallow.

People keep talking about how tough you are, how well you are doing.

“Yes,” I agree. “He’s strong and he’s healthy. He quit track in high school, but he never stopped running.”

Your sedan stays in the Walmart parking lot for a while. Dad calls to make sure that it will not be towed. The nurse unlocks the locker in the corner of your room and Dad takes the keys out of one plastic bag. The locker also contains your wallet, your clothes, one empty bottle of Aspirin, a nearly empty bottle of pale Gatorade, your phone, and a crumpled sheet of paper.

Dad asks if I will come with him to drive your car back to our house.

“I haven’t driven that car before,” I tell him. “And I just got my license a few months ago. So...”

“It’s fine,” he says. He kisses my forehead as he leaves.

I expect everyone to be more excited when you wake up; when you really wake up, that is, instead of fluttering in and out of consciousness. Your lucidity stuns me, but because no one else reacts, I don’t either.

You cry a lot. Your eyes stay red. Mom sits on your bed and holds you tight. Dad stands nearby with a hand on her shoulder.

The patient sitter has to remind you that it is Sunday, and not Friday. You were asleep Friday and Saturday, in and out of consciousness, and you don’t remember much about those days. I wonder what that would be like, to just lose two days from your life. But then I remember that

you almost lost all the rest of the days, too.

I didn't notice that there was a TV in your room, but you point it out and ask for the clicker after you've been awake for a bit. You and I watch bad movies on the SyFy channel and joke about them. We joke about a lot of things, and I worry that people will think I'm not taking the situation seriously. Mom doesn't joke at all. I think Dad tries, wants to fit in with you and me, but it seems awkward. The patient sitter surprises me by having an excellent sense of humor.

At one point, a doctor comes in and asks how you are.

"A little better," you tell him. "But I feel like I'm about to fall apart, like I'm barely pieced together."

"Do you have a history of seizures?" the doctor asks. You tell him no and we all stare at him.

"I'll be right back," the doctor says, but I never see him again.

Months later, under florescent diner lights, a friend will make a joke about drinking bleach.

"My brother drank bleach," I will say. "He mixed it with lemon-lime Gatorade, which never made sense to me, because that's his least favorite flavor."

But there will be so much talking and laughter in the booth that no one will hear me.

# Bee

*Mariah Bormann*



# Gerunds and Friends

*John Davis*

Gerunds grooving, moving like masked men  
on fire, sparking like phosphorescent plankton,  
glowing, never slowing...*ing* is king is the ring  
in the wedding, kissing, hissing naughty-nothings,

cringing at the best man's toast roasting  
the groom whose moonskimming notions of love  
are wrinkled like his toes soaking in champagne.  
Present participles are charging after nouns

like grinning children waiting to jump  
on the backs of dads, gripping, grabbing,  
stabbing the air with their shouts, catching  
a glimpse of the sunset shrinking

the skyline outside, melting the world red.  
If we import past participles, then we  
can be calmed, cooled, courted, held, quelled.  
Folded like origami cranes, we spread

our wings, rise from our yoga mats. Spinning,  
we are rotating the earth. If we stop gazing  
at the women in Gauguin's paintings, how can  
we know they won't live?

# Last Call

*Allison Madura*

I can remember the last time I drank—  
got so dizzy  
started drawing  
scribbled something that  
looked a lot like your name and  
even then, when my brain  
is bubbles caught up in the ceiling fan, you stayed—  
like tinsel  
in the shag  
carpet tied  
around my toes when I forget  
my socks.  
I cannot forget laying  
in your living room  
on the floor  
of your bedroom  
'cause the sun was spilling in so  
we slept like cats in the puddle it left  
until it was cold  
again. I can't forget to add you  
to each poem, maybe  
my new love would like a turn  
a line  
a word

but I cannot love him—  
not the way I loved you  
can't get drunk enough to draw  
different scribbles, still dizzy  
and full of bubbles sitting  
in your living room—  
dark and  
waiting.

# LT North

*Haley Prokaski*



# Serial Stains

Emily Johnson

I shouldn't have come. I expected wide eyes and whispers, and I was right. I was wrong to think I could handle them. I can't say I'm used to all of this just yet, but I thought I was tough enough to attempt normality again. Being the daughter of Boone County's recently famed serial killer, I want nothing more than a normal life. Unfortunately, I know that's something I might never have again.

A month ago, my father James Green was arrested and charged with twenty counts of murder. We were inseparable until the feds busted through our front door on a foggy February morning. He didn't struggle, didn't even say goodbye. I actually think that was the worst part. That night mom flipped the channel from *The Rifleman*, the show we'd family binge-watch every Sunday, to *CNN*. From a bird's eye view we watched investigators unearth seven years of lies from a local abandoned mine.

Dear old dad is stuck rotting away in a prison cell while I'm out here rotting away on the inside. I don't think he's exactly "safe" in there, but it has to be a lot safer than out here. I don't just hate him for killing. I hate him for leaving us, for faking us out, and for his thoughtless parting gift: shame. He left so little and so much, all at once. When they took him away they took more than just my father. This past month I've lost friends, my dignity, and my mom too.

Neither of us had any clue about dad's favorite hobby, and when we found out she lost her sanity. Now our lives, like the bodies of the twenty people murdered, are in pieces. We aren't the guilty ones, yet we are treated as such.

I've been excused from school since the day he was arrested. I hated every second of being home, which is something I never thought possible. I used to adore my home and my family; my life was spotless. Everything's different now; no more popcorn and movie nights when we'd all snuggle up on the couch and watch the most ridiculous Sci-Fi movies we could find, no more softball games when my dad would round the bases with me on the outside of the



fence yelling his lungs dry, no more of dad's Sunday morning surprise pancakes, no more. The Greens are dead; they left with him. My mom was hysterical when it happened. She couldn't wrap her head around her beloved's guilt. I couldn't either, but some things are true and don't make sense. The first two weeks she wouldn't sleep, she'd play detective watching and reading every piece of news she could find in hopes that maybe the police were wrong, that maybe he wasn't so bad. Maybe he didn't kill those people. Maybe he didn't leave her. Us. I just couldn't watch the suffering anymore, I had to escape. So, I left. I'm beginning to believe that leaving's always a bad idea.

Returning to the scene might be even worse, especially in my case. My life here at Rosston High was beautifully basic. I appreciate it now more than ever. I was a straight B student, a softball player, and I had a few good friends. No drama. I came back to escape my reality, but this is just a building full of hallways and classrooms. They can't save me. If they were empty maybe they could. The problem is who, not what. People. They're always the problem. Maybe that's why my dad did what he did. People complicate, interrogate, and judge like they know everything about the person they're antagonizing. They know-it-all so well that they take on someone else's life, when it's not theirs to steal. Sometimes they don't even understand what they're doing. Kind of like when you're working on a math problem thinking you're doing everything right. You double-check everything. But when you get your homework back you see red, and wonder how you went wrong. That's people. We think we know when we don't. We like to know far too much. People also like to talk, especially high schoolers. Word has its way of sneaking around when there's only two hundred of us. Rosston, Indiana is home to no more than a thousand. In other words, the news is fresh; the prey is fresher.

I had a plan. Walk in. Eyes down. Open locker. Close locker. Shut them out. Lock locker. I breathe deep, turn around and begin my journey to first period trying to amuse myself with the fact that it was Psychology, the perfect place to figure out why.

This was the only moment I wished I lived in a bigger city. There'd be more people, but most of them probably wouldn't know my name. I know every soul here, and they know me.

They know everything, or at least they think they do.

“It’s not my fault he’s a devil. I didn’t kill those people!”

That’s what I want to scream at every face that simultaneously pities and guilt-trips me.

“But how did you not know?”

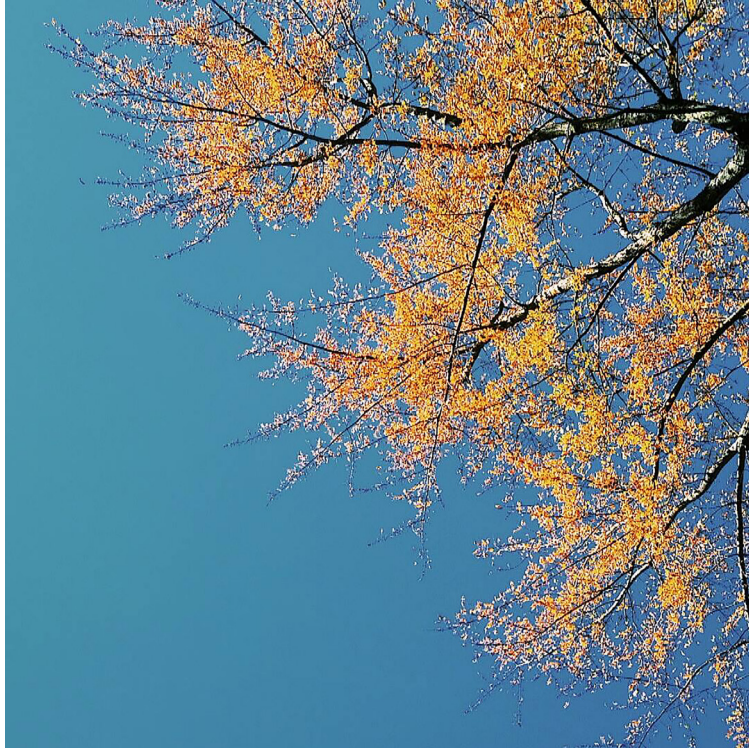
Their faces question me. I question me.

I don’t know. The obvious signs, were they there? Was I even paying attention?

It’s too late now. He’s never getting out, and I’ve made up my mind that I don’t ever want to see him again. Seeing him means seeing my dad. It would hurt too much. I want to separate the two, the loving father from the evil killer. I don’t think I can keep them apart. They’ve morphed into one body, someone I don’t even know. I’d much rather hate him from afar. I guess I’ll never know the reasons for it all. I may never understand how my mother and I never saw it coming. Maybe he was just a really good liar. Or maybe he was just really good at leaving, without a trace. But this time he didn’t clean up his mess. We’re still here.

# Under Pastel Skies

*Zach Karlovitz*



# Funeral

*Laura Eades*

this sweater looks like my dead cat,        hate  
the moment it curls on the floor,        hesitate  
looking at my dead grandmother,        drift  
outside the gravitational pull,        drown  
in the rearview mirror,        fragment  
into someone else,        hide  
behind the face of a clock,        my dead  
lie inside reflections,        fractured iridescence

# Infinitives

*John Davis*

Infinitives were made to praise the lost breath  
of joy, to outlive hoodlums, to groove  
between sax solos and blackberry pies

to praise the vernacular of the cab driver,  
who's driving you to your last waltz.  
To summon you to the simplicity of flowers

and flesh, to know the morning will bring bees  
to the valley of peach blossoms, to hear  
the argument between guitars and piano keys,

to mend our songs of anger, and to wax and wane  
with the Aquarian moon, to unlock our lips  
from false kisses is to live within the infinite.

# Contempt

Steve Jepson

“I was scheduled for fifteen minutes, and I’m  
going to use them all.” He  
said.

So they sat there for the remaining time  
in silence

\*\*\*

He had a nightmare.  
At least that’s what he said, but she *knew* better. It  
was three in the morning on a saturday. They had  
been going out for two years now, and it had  
become  
routine

\*\*\*

Clenching her fist into a tight ball; the struggle not  
to make her lip bleed  
between her teeth was **real**. The contempt  
she had for him at the moment  
was matched by the  
fire  
in her  
eyes

\*\*\*

He wanted to get married. She felt stupid  
in trying to fight it; after all

she knew—eitherway—that both their lives  
were bound to be boring endeavors

\*\*\*

Time was on his side, it was about the only  
thing he could count on. As well as, the moment to  
cease to be, just as his newfound feelings of regret

\*\*\*

He let her get the last word in. A true gentleman.  
It was, if only,  
the most definitive moment  
in her life,  
a Defiant, "No"

\*\*\*

His sole burned as he ran  
out of the clearing into the plains

He shouted into the night,  
as the silence fell around him

# The Inevitable

*Nehal Shah*

Every individual on this earth has a story, which is unique and is full of ups and downs. Every human faces hurdles and challenges in their lives. Every person gets their share of happiness and sadness. Today before I share my story I would like to thank God for all the challenges that he has sent my way because only and only because of these hurdles I have been able to improve myself and step up in my life and become the person I am today. I am grateful to my parents, teachers and friends who have always stood up for me when I needed them the most. Today when I look back at the short 18 years of my life, I look up proudly smiling and say that even though my life has been full of hurdles I have always been able to jump across them.

I was born an Albino with very poor vision, my parents back then worried that I may not be able to hold a pencil. As I grew up and started being physically a part of my society back in India, I found people staring at me and pointing at me and even screaming at me. At times treating me differently, ignoring me and mentally bullying me and at times some kids even physically bullied me. I have grown up like this. Even today while I am walking on the streets people point at me and whisper to their companions. It was really difficult being the centre of attraction everywhere. I asked my mom why did this happen to me, she simply replied that they stare at me because I am unique and that they are jealous as they can't be as cute as me. I felt really good on listening to this. She always had a way of making me feel better and supporting me, when I came home crying, she always had a new one to cheer me up. When I joined school it became really difficult for me to make friends as the other kids stayed away from me. Later my parents shifted me to one of the finest schools in my state, here I finally was able to discover myself and here I have made friends who are going to be with me for the rest of my life, there may be miles separating me from them but they will never leave my heart and some of them have been my friends for over 11 years now and I do miss them. All in all I had a rough childhood but as I grew up things started working out and even though it was



full of challenges I worked my way out and I enjoyed the time I could. My parents, friends and my teachers played a huge role in making my life an easier one.

The biggest hiccup in my life came just a few years ago in April 2013. The year I started my grade 10 was the start of a very dark phase for my family and me. That summer my mom was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia a.k.a one of the rarest forms of blood cancer. I will never forget the day the doctor confirmed our worst nightmares, at that time I was at my soccer practice, my coach called me out of the practice and told me that my driver is waiting for me outside the group to take me home at once and when I got home, I found my dad to be there, which was rare, as he is never back so early in the afternoon, His face revealed it all, it was a shock for me as I had never seen him cry before. My mom was frozen like a statue. In about half an hour all close friends of my family were at my place to see off my parents. I couldn't digest the fact that my mom had cancer. I tried my best to control my tears at least until they left. My parents were panicked, woebegone and completely tensed and I didn't want to give them another reason to worry but my tears betrayed me. The minute they left the premises, I could not control myself any longer, I ran away from the place which was my "house" now without her, my friends followed me but knew me well enough to keep their distance.

I couldn't bear to be away from my mother for over three months. I was very close to her, we shared a bond which was much more than just a child-mother relationship. She was my best friend and I told her each and everything. I being an only child was loved and pampered by her all the time, I was sure that this is going to be one of the most difficult times of my life.

I thought those three months would be the hardest three months of my life, I was unable to eat for a few days, I couldn't sleep, I was unable to focus on my studies or any other activities. I used to FaceTime my parents everyday but I was unable to see the state in which my mom was during the treatment. Once she was back everything started getting back to normal. We were back to our routine lives. I was now able to focus on studies once again. In fact I performed really well in my ICSE board examination (one of the most important examinations in India). I even got Nalanda Child of the year for 2013–14 which is one of the most prestigious and

once in a lifetime award and I received this honor on my mother's birthday, My parents were called up on the stage to present me this award and trophy and I couldn't possibly have been happier as it was my mother's dream of me getting such an award in my school-life. My parents could not have been any more proud of me.

What we didn't know was that all this was short-lived as in just another year my mom found herself back in the hospital. We visited the best doctors in the country who refused to be positive. We were heart-broken we couldn't do anything. Those 15 days were the worst days of my life, Seeing the person who means the most to you, unable to breathe, unable to sit up, losing the battle in the end my mom had given up but my dad who loved her unconditionally was by her side till the very last minute. My dad had sacrificed his everything to save her, he did all he could. I can't imagine how hard it would have been for him but he always tried to put up a straight face at least in front of her. In her final week we were praying to God of relieving her of all the pain and sufferings. God did listen to us and he ripped her out of our lives on the eve of 31st May. The doctors allowed us to be with her in her last hours. I couldn't look at her as she lay motionless on that hard ICU bed.

The minute the doctor declared her dead, all hell broke down I had a sinking feeling within me as if nothing is going to be better after this my dad wasn't able to control himself.

She was a great lady and no one will ever be able to replace her. Her loss was mourned by over a thousand people who came to pay their final tributes at the funeral and at the condolence meet.

After her death I wasn't able to eat, wasn't able to sleep, wasn't able to focus on anything. I was lost, I didn't talk much. Everything started to go back to normal, Dad was in a manageable state now, I too tried to appear normal but internally I was shattered. I was actually termed "medically depressed." I couldn't focus on my studies or any other activities. My grades kept on deteriorating. I had become completely hollow.

My dad took notice of this and he decided to talk to me. We were close but we haven't been able to connect or bond as neither he nor I had time for each other. We loved each other

deeply and were aware that now we two needed to bond better and hence we had started going out together and we had started taking time out from our busy schedules for each other. We had come much closer than we used to be. So dad talked to me and told me that I was all that he had left, he said that now we had to fulfill all of my mom's dreams. He made me realize that I was wasting my life away. Life is too short and I have seen it, I have always been told by my educators, friends, elders and My parents that I have great potential to do unbelievable things and I was born to be great. My Mom wanted me to be a good human and a person who is loved by everyone.

On the 12th of August 2015 which was my eighteenth birthday I told myself that enough is enough, Yes I have had a lifetime of miseries and Yes I have not been able to do justice to my capabilities. But from today onwards slowly but steadily I need to get out of this miserable world which I have created for myself. I have promised myself to never look back to take the bull by its horns and to make the most of my potential. I want my dad to look at me say, "I am proud of you, My Son!" I want my mom to look down me from the heavens and say, "That's my Boy!" From this day I am going to start the construction of my path towards a brighter future and I don't care if it takes time cause I know it's surely going to be ready. I am going to be prepared for life to pitch new hurdles at me and I will swing them out of the park for a home-run. I have promised myself to always have a smile on my face and thank life for the chances it has given me to prove myself.

I am happy to say that Today it has been almost been a year and a half since that 12th August and I have regained myself and it feels as if I have come back from the dead. I have become my old talkative and mischievous self, the extremely punctual person and I am now able to focus on my studies and other activities again. Today I am in the US in one of the highly ranked universities on my way to accomplish all the dreams my mom had for me, it has not been, I still have sleepless nights but I now have a goal in my life and I can get to any length to accomplish it. This path is still under construction but very soon this ramp will provide me with my take-off.

# CyberSwamp

*Zack Jones*



(Click icon to view on *Euphemism's* website)

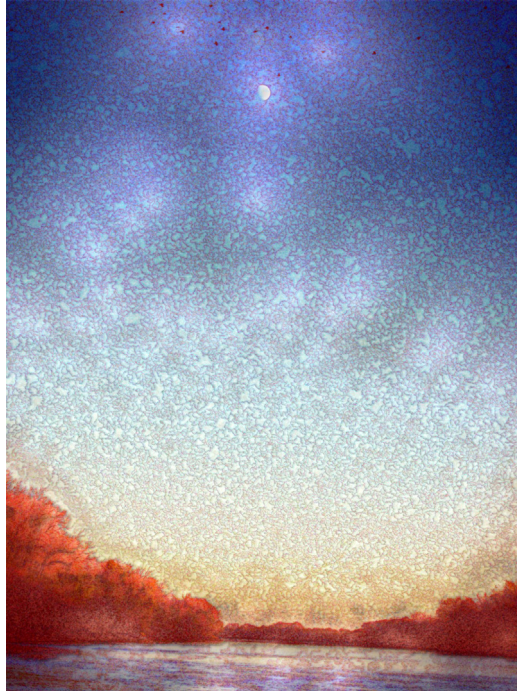
# A Blanket Metaphor

Craig Heyne

I constantly write and re-write suicide notes and love poems. I [redacted] to those I hurt, I [redacted] to those I know I will hurt most, and I [redacted] those who [redacted]. I have never once convinced myself I am capable of suicide or love, but I still prepare myself as if I could one day do it. *The preparation sometimes hinders the ability for it to happen.* I am just a [redacted]. I cannot show people certain parts of true sentences because that would require [redacted]; [redacted] I could only successfully show to a select group of individuals when in actuality, my paper and pen are my only selfless listeners. The day [redacted] [redacted] a close friend reached out to me [redacted]. She is no longer in my life. We [redacted] and that is normal for me. We were friends for four months. I do not think she knows she saved my life. Depending on the day [redacted]. Depending on the day I [redacted] [redacted]. Depending on the day this is poetic, this is rambling, this is truth.

# Moon Dance

*Stacy Maddox*



# The Predacious Coast

*Joseph S. Pete*

Pristine beachland and rolling dunes  
Stretching off to the horizon  
Punctuated only by hulking, rust-dappled steel mills, A  
noxious oil refinery belching a petrochemical haze, A  
coal-fired power plant so hoary as to be brick-hewn  
And a hyperboloid cooling tower  
One might mistake for steam-capped beaker in a high school laboratory.

Northwest Indiana's a weird place,  
A study in sharp contrasts  
Of unfettered wilds and unchecked commerce.

As a Congressman often sighed in his hallowed office,  
It's the only place in the world  
Where property costs less the closer you are to the water.

Lake Michigan is boundless, its scarf of dunes  
Nearly infinite in biological diversity.  
Susurruses rustle prairie grasses.  
Black oaks cast mottled shade in savannas.  
Peat moss mats flowering bogs.  
Seagulls linger like mall rats, and wetlands stew in their own juices.  
Lagoons ripple gently amid the towering sandy dunes.

Still, all those the glint-eyed Gilded Age industrialists could see  
Was an endless source of water to be exploited.  
All they could see in their flinty view was profit to be had.  
Generations lived with the consequences  
Long after they got theirs.



# I Don't Have a Title

*Haley Varnes*

There was a man. He was thin and I feared eye contact was inevitable. He was staring at me. Sweat began to accumulate in the creases of my palms. White knuckled, I sat clutching my scarf, for which it suddenly seemed too warm. I was internally incredulous to find that another human could slouch further in their seat than I. His fingers drummed a hurried tune on the seat beside his thighs. The beat found my ears before my eyes spotted the source and it buried its way through my ears and resonated off the inside curves of my skull. Acidic bile rose from my throat, just behind my heart. My eyes widened and I feared that my deep indifference toward him would be an obvious damper to his performance. I began to panic. I lurched from my seat at the first sign of slowing and stood directly in front of the door, which was, regrettably, ever closer to the incessant beating of the hollowed train seat and the deep, stressed breaths of the man. Reeling from the train, I began a steady pace, weaving through the sea of hands, noses, and arms, appendages with which my scarf could easily tangle. There were so many people; I decided that there was no chance of survival. I dwelled in that spot, the only living being proudly staring down death and just like that; my scarf was gone, swept by the current. I realized then how high the stakes were and hastily made my escape. Above ground, I realized my error was not in rushing to leave the man, but in getting on the train at all. I sat on the nearest bench to collect what parts of me remained. It was then, in my remorse, that the man appeared, holding a fold of cloth. I looked down at my lap, out over the lake, toward the shops and their anonymous patrons, but it was far too late. When he spoke, it was apparent his breath was escaping him at an alarming rate, matching my own. The corner of my lips twisted up but did not part and I said my words of gratitude. My eyes roved quickly past his, thankfully coming to a rest back on the water past the thick band of pavement. He hesitated and made his retreat.

# A World with No Color

*Elaine Hocker*

They want a world with no color.  
They only want one type,  
So they pull their guns on empty hands  
And say they feared for their life.

They want a world with no color,  
So they took away his breath  
I did not know I lived in a world  
Where color is punishable by death.

They want a world with no color,  
But they paint the sidewalks red.  
They pretend it's only chalk drawings  
And deny every word they said.

They want a world with no color,  
And even in the brightest light  
Who would have thought the darkest ones  
Were the people we call white?

# December 14, 2015

*Haley Hatton*

As my mind woke before my eyes, the warmth of the sun peeking through the window stimulated my nerves. I felt something not even my dreams could recognize. My eyes opened with ease, instead of dragging on like so many days prior. Each morning I would wake up with stones bound to my ankles and a darkness surrounding my mind. I would see no reason to be present, but on that cold December morning I saw the opposite; I saw the presence of life. I was alive.

For the first time in twenty years my senses were overwhelmed with the motivation to be alive. I could feel the silky sheets against my exposed, bare skin. I was real. I could see the dust particles bouncing through the sun's rays. I was aware. I could taste the morning breath on my tongue. I existed. I could hear the children's laughter echoing through the trees. I was present. My nose filled with the aroma of leftover hair product on my pillowcase. I was alive.

For years I had felt as though I was simply *there*, yet not *existing*. Life moved around me, but I had no impact, no purpose, and no reason. Even when I was there I could still envision myself slowly dissolving away piece by piece. If I had served no purpose, then why take up space? But this morning was different, this morning I *saw* myself in whole. I could imagine the broken pieces that made up my soul mending together instead of falling apart. I was alive.

The weight of an invisible cloak may be more burdensome than one might imagine. It was as though no one could see me and I produced not even a reflection. A dear friend within my head gave me the cloak as protection, but now I was starting to see it was the thing lacking purpose, not I. When I woke that morning the grueling pain that once rested on my shoulders had vanished. The cloak and I had traded places; it had disappeared and I had made an appearance. I was alive.

That morning I felt a sense of fondness and passion for myself that I had never experienced before. I ran my fingertips over my body and acknowledged the genuineness of my being. I felt real emotions. I occupied real space. I was a real person. A real person who awoke one morning and realized her life was worth much more than the poisonous lies the voices fed her. I wanted to be here. I was alive.

That morning-- the morning I lost the invisible cloak, felt the sun on my skin, felt the blood in my veins, and experienced the presence of life-- was my fresh start. That was the first morning I could ever truly recall waking up happy and craving more. That was the morning I had finally chosen life over death. That morning I was alive.

# End of an Era

*Katie Sall*



# In This, The Shortest Month

*Allison Madura*

She's going, going  
gone.

Someone catch the curling-ribbon tied  
to her shoes that's taking her away, away  
away!

Maybe out of sight, where the air is lighter,  
she'll breathe again.

When she drifts past the moon, she'll catch it  
between her thumb and finger and  
pinch it flat, laugh to herself and be  
still again, again  
again.

Static and shade where the waves don't cap  
out past the breakers the Pacific  
is stone.

On her way back, to some new beginning,  
she's going, going  
gone.

# Date Night

*Haley Prokaski*



# Mocking Train

*Caitlyn Hartman*

We're on a walk,  
by the train tracks.  
Empty beer bottles at our feet—  
full ones in our hands.

Here comes the train,  
screaming by, its vortex pulling  
our clothes tight against our  
skin.

The cars mock us with their  
Liberty; moving too quickly for  
us to mount, daring us to  
turn to pulp beneath their gleeful  
wheels.

It passes.

Leaving us to tilt our heads  
back and scream  
at the sky—  
because this is life  
and nothing will go  
Right—  
It's all we can do  
to listen—  
to the jeering whistles of  
The Train.



# Stay

*Alexis Adams*

you pen down the index to your biography before life even begins,  
work till your back breaks,  
buy a set of the finest crystalline drinking goblets money can buy,  
then pour yourself a shoe polish cocktail  
and leave me with an empty glass.  
“if you drink tonight, then so do i” i say  
i empty your glass to shine your shoes  
if you left tonight, then i’d leave too

# Married to Marilyn

*Sam T. Jensen*

I know what you're thinking. "Really, you were married to Marilyn Monroe?" Yep! It all happened so fast sometimes I don't believe it myself! But it definitely happened. It was 1960. I was working at the In & Out Burger in Pasadena, California. And she walked in—Norma Jean herself—Marilyn Monroe.

"Do you sell cheeseburgers?" She asked, only how Marilyn Monroe could. "We sure do!" I responded. "Gee," I asked, "aren't you Marilyn Monroe?" She said she was and that was good enough for me.

We started talking, turns out we had a lot in common. Favorite color was blue, favorite animal was a cat, and we even had the same middle name! Errol! You'd think getting to know a famous celebrity would be weird or off-putting but it was the 60s, man, everyone was just so mellow and cool.

We started dating, going to movie premieres together, she bought me a horse, things were getting pretty serious. Then one day after we had bad Chinese food, I thought, "what the heck?" and popped the question. She said yes. (She actually said "yes-a-mundo" which was an inside joke.)

Our wedding was ridiculous. Somehow she got Mickey Mantle, my favorite ballplayer, to be the best man! Oh boy, was he great about it too. He wrote a whole Irish limerick about Marilyn and me, I still quote it today.

I panicked because I didn't see the wedding cake, but then who comes in carrying it on his back? John F. Kennedy! The President of the United States! I thought he would be real uptight but he kept calling me "pal" and even played bridge with my aunt and uncle later that night.

For our honeymoon, we went to Spain. I told her I'd rather go to Milwaukee but we flipped a coin and she won. Later, I found out it was a joke nickel from a magic shop. Really never forgave her for this.

Anyway, it was wedded bliss. Until I had to call it off. I sat her down and explained that I had feelings for someone else. “Is it Donna from work?” she asked. I put my head down, “yes, it’s Donna from work.” Donna and I had been working the graveyard shift at In & Out and started joking how the curly fries looked like little people. One thing led to another and we made out by the shake machine.

Marilyn and I had something special. I will never forget our three and half weeks together. But like it says in the bible, “whatever man, things happen, good vibes, etc.”

# moon, sailing over water

*Seth Davison*



# The House at the End of the Lane

*Chloe Nowicki*

The air was breezy in the backyard of my lake cottage this summer, the red sun umbrella shook in the concrete stand and clanged against the wrought iron table. I swatted at a fly lazily, and my dad stepped from the back door of the cottage, careful to catch the screen door behind him with his foot, so it didn't slap against the weather warped frame. My dad was carrying his laptop and placed it down across the table from me to do some work. I reached for the black cherry hard lemonade on the table, and continued to read the silly romance book on my Kindle. The gentle sounds of waves hitting rock came drifting to the backyard, along with the rev of boat motors. The tops of the massive pine trees swayed in the wind, and a pair of chipmunks, chittered chasing each other around the yard. My phone dinged next to me on the table, and I responded to my best friend, making plans to see each other in Chicago the following weekend. My brother had taken our kayak out for the afternoon, my mom napped on the end of our pier, and my little dog Lucy snoozed under the shade of her lounger. It was early in the day, the heat hadn't really set in for the season, being late May, and there was a chill in the breeze despite the sun.

"Hm...That's strange." My dad muttered, and looked up at me.

"What?" I asked, putting down my phone to return to my Kindle.

"You know the Wurntz?" I shook my head. "They live at the swamp." I looked up.

"Oh, sure. In the yellow house?" My dad nodded, his eyes drifting back to his computer screen.

"They both died this weekend." I frowned.

"Oh, that's awful. Both of them this weekend? How old were they?" I couldn't picture the faces of Mr. or Mrs. Wurntz, but the back of an old man wearing suspenders picking an apple from his tree came into mind, if only a flickering memory most likely untrue.

"Ninety." My dad was still frowning at his computer, and scrolling up and down for the

site with the obituary.

“Well, at least they lived a long life.” It was all I could think of to say. My dad grunted, and he picked up his computer and brought it back into the house. I heard him call out to my mom on the other side of our small cottage.

I closed my eyes and wished a silent farewell to the couple, and thought about the swamp. The swamp was what my brother and I lovingly named the small, stagnant, overgrown channel that the Wurntz’ lived right next to. Their property touched about half of the channel, while the other side was owned by a prominent doctor down the shore. The swamp was at the very end of our street, a cul du sac of water next to a cul du sac of concrete in an almost yin yang juxtaposition.

A tree had grown sideways out of the shore of the muddy land and branches brushed the edge of the water. Logs peaked from the water’s surface and housed many a sunbathing turtle. The entirety of the swamp was full of tall lily pads and grasses closer to shore, making it impossible to bring any sort of boat with a motor through. The water could become stagnant at some points, but the churning of the mouth of the channel to the lake was enough to keep the water blue and bright. Signs of human neglect speckled the shoreline of the swamp, including a tire nearly swallowed by the mud, a smattering of beer cans, and a sprinkling of wrappers mingled amongst the flora. It smelled like hot decay and earth.

When we were young, and first discovered the swamp, my dad came to pick us up, only to find that we were on the Wurntz property. There was a fence dividing the two properties, and I had noticed that there was a group of frogs on branches that had fallen into the water. When Robby and I had gone to catch as many as we could, we found that the frogs were congregated and there seemed to be a trail of them leading to a small outcropping of ground with grasses and wild flowers. In the middle of the natural throne sat the biggest bullfrog we had ever seen. Roughly the size of a cantaloupe, it became a summer in pursuit of Frogzilla. When my dad found us on Mr. Wurntz’ docks stalking Frogzilla, Mr. Wurntz came out to speak to my dad.

My grandpa and Mr. Wurntz had been friends, and my dad grew up with their daughter.

Mr. Wurntz didn't particularly like us running around on his property, but because our families had at one point been friends, he allowed us to come and catch the little creatures. He didn't like us nosing around his apple, pear, and peach trees, but our natural curiosity and unabashed joy in being in the outdoors softened him up. I was especially interested in the fruit trees, and would check on them to make sure everything was still growing, completely taken by the thought that at the end of the summer they would have produce from their own yard. The peach tree didn't necessarily flourish, but the apple and pear trees always bore some sort of fruit by the end of the summer.

There was a span of about five summers where Robby and I would bring friends around the swamp to teach them to catch frogs, come watch mother snapping turtles lay their eggs in the grassy shore, and pick water lilies for our mom to weave into our sun kissed hair. Mr. Wurntz took the time to show my brother how to tie a hook to a fishing line, and allowed us to jump from the end of his pier if we had to get down in the smelly mud to reach for a wanton turtle. He was a kind old man, despite being generally cranky at our mere presence.

We hardly ever saw Mrs. Wurntz, except when she left her garage or pulled the windows closed. When we were young, she would sometimes come out onto her porch to glare at us, always in a striped short sleeved knit top and some sort of brightly colored pant. She seemed to have an endless supply of striped tops and functional capris. Their only rule was that we were not allowed on their property when they were gone, and so if Mrs. Wurntz was leaving in her huge gold Cadillac, she would call out to us if anyone was home or if it was time to leave.

My brother and I would ride our bikes or rollerblade carrying five gallon buckets and butterfly nets the mile and a half to the swamp in our bathing suits, and as soon as our feet touched the scratchy lawn we were in hunting mode. I would stalk out the mud, looking for a streak of brown or green different from the gray, point it out silently to my brother, and watch as he slowly came up behind the frog. His net would snap out just as the frog would jump, and we would spend hours scanning and capturing anything we could find. Frogs were the most common, turtles were more challenging but ultimately the most rewarding, and snakes were

the most difficult to find and catch. My brother could catch frogs with ease, and ultimately grew bored with them, preferring to catch turtles. Of course, any animal we caught during the day we would let go at night. My dad had told us too many stories of leaving frogs or turtles in buckets overnight, only to find the empty shells or a rogue leg the next morning.

Snakes were my specialty. If my brother or I caught a snake, I would spend time gaining its trust so by the time we came home I would have the snake wrapped around my fingers. The biggest snake I ever caught had to be something dangerous, though we never took the time to look up what it was. We had seen the snake sunning itself on one of the fallen logs, the turtles weary to get too close to it. Once in a while, it would wedge itself between the walkway and the aluminum siding in the water, and there would be a gap of mud it would slither between. I had jammed my butterfly net in that muddy gap to scoop up the snake, and it was so big and heavy that I had to hold the net or the pole would break. The snake was over four feet long, brown with gray diamonds on its back and one of the ugliest animals of all time. I had to use all of my arm strength to carry the sagging net. We were with our little neighbor Lauren, and because the trek was a bit far on her pink, training wheel clad bike, her dad came to pick us up in his shiny black BMW. When he saw the snake in my net, he would not let me into the car, mostly because the net was dripping with mud and swamp goo, but the way he was eyeballing the bag told me that snakes gave him the willies. I begged him to let me ride in the car home; I knew that if I had to walk the snake would become too heavy and I would let it go before scaring the snot out of my mom and aunts. So I came up with a solution. I held the butterfly net out the window as we drove home. As we passed by kids mouths dropped open at the sight of a huge snake trying to nose its way out of a butterfly net. The squeal of terror from my family and neighbors when I let it go in the cornfields behind our house is what I remember best when my mom retells the story.

Over the years, my brother and I outgrew the appeal and magic of the swamp, as each season brought new changes. The wild grasses overtook the majority of the water, and because there was more foliage there was less water being churned in. Some years there were so many frogs



that the chorus of mating calls created a separate symphony from the sounds of the lake, and other years not a single bullfrog croak could be heard. Snake charming became less important to me as I explored other career options. When puberty hit, we suddenly became too cool for mud and mosquito bites. Losing sandals to play with a baby turtle for an hour lost the appeal. Mr. Wurntz changed the lock on his fence when it seemed like we were too old to be catching frogs and collecting water lilies, and we lost half of our hunting ground.

The last time I was there, I was rollerblading for fun and had walked in the grass with my blades, twisting my ankle on an anthill. There was an eerie silence surrounding the swamp, which was strange because I had been listening to the buzz of cicadas. As soon as I was at the swamp, the sound seemed to vanish. Someone had abandoned a sinking rowboat on the far side of the swamp, and the grasses were so high I couldn't see the turtle logs. A thick curtain of humidity and mosquitoes hung around the smelly, grass choked swamp, so overgrown that the few feet of muddy shore that the frogs rested upon was completely gone. The water level was low, and the smell was too powerful to get close. I knew I would not return, at least not for the same reasons as before.

I opened my eyes, took a swig of lemonade, and returned to my book.

My parents left for home the next morning, and I enjoyed being by myself at the lake for a few days. I spent my mornings sunbathing, my afternoons reading and dreaming about one day being able to really live in a house like this. The cottage was built by my great grandfather in 1930, right on the edge of Diamond Lake. It's my favorite place in the world; the history of summers past seeps into every facet of our home. The lake has become a prime destination for rich Chicagoans and South Bend bigshots, so as the McMansions sprang up consistently during my dad's lifetime, our cottage remained the same. When I am at the lake, I am the most at peace. I went home for the weekend to slave away slinging biscuits and gravy at a certain old country store. The majority of my weekend home was planning when I would be able to return to the lake. I arrived on Sunday evening, after an eight hour shift and two and a half hours of driving. My dad was a few drinks in and had some surprising news.

“You know how the Wurntz’ passed away last weekend?”

“Yeah, so sad. But it is kind of romantic that they passed away on the same day, after over sixty years of marriage. There are cute little videos on Facebook with similar stories of decades old love not being able to be apart for long in the afterlife.” I fixed myself a plate of the grilled chicken and vegetables my dad had made for dinner. As I set my food on the table and settled in, my dad took a deep breath.

“Well...apparently their passing was a little more planned than coincidence.” I furrowed my brow and reached for the bottle of wine on the table. My dad was looking at the ice melt in his tumbler.

“What do you mean?” I asked. My dad continued to not look at me as he relayed the information.

Apparently, Mrs. Wurntz was not the same after her stroke. Her physical and mental health deteriorated, and Mr. Wurntz had been taking care of her for years. It had gotten to a place where she had terrible dementia, and hardly remembered those around her. Mr. Wurntz had gone to get a check-up, and discovered that he had late stage cancer, and that if he started treatment, there was only a small percent chance that he would survive. So he had written a letter to his children, leaving it on the desk in his study. He took his pistol and went up to the bedroom where Mrs. Wurntz was sleeping. He shot her in the head, laid down next to her, and shot himself. His family found them along with the note a day or so later. My dad leaned back in his chair.

My jaw fell open.

“How did you find out about them?”

“I made a few calls around the lake, old buddies, people who knew the family.” He rubbed his temple, and took a sip from his drink.

“They obviously didn’t include it in the obituary because saying they died on the same night automatically makes people assume that they were in love and that it happened naturally.” My dad nodded. “Wow...” I breathed, taking a sip from my own drink.

Every terrible thought surrounding their situation flashed through my mind. The kids

finding their parents dead in their room, but not only dead, their blood splattered on the sheets and walls. Cleaning up after that mess, and then having to hold a funeral for them both. Closed casket. Being Mr. Wurntz, wheezing and dying, and walking up the stairs to murder his sleeping wife. I wondered about Mrs. Wurntz, and whether or not she had known it was going to happen. When people have Alzheimer's or dementia, sometimes they are able to have moments of clarity where they remember the people around them, and are able to carry on a brief conversation before returning to their previous state of confusion. What if Mr. Wurntz had talked to Mrs. Wurntz during one of these moments of clarity and she had consented to his plan? Or if she was the one to suggest the plan in the first place? I wondered if the decision to murder his wife and then kill himself had been a tough one or not. I mean obviously it was a tough decision, but they *were* ninety. They lived a long, long life, and had been married for over sixty years. He had been her caretaker for years, after being married for so long and knowing her heart and soul, only to have her slowly forget about him and the life they had built together must have been maddening.

My dad was obviously shook up about what happened. He had known them for the majority of his life, had taken their daughter out on dates once in a while, and had mowed their lawn when they were on vacation. Because of their circumstances, it's hard to see this murder suicide as anything but a tragedy. I can't blame Mr. Wurntz for taking his own mortality into his hands, especially since he lived such a long life and was such a support to his wife for years. How can you be mad or hurt at someone for knowing that their quality of life is going to decline and taking measures to end suffering? From Mr. Wurntz' perspective, he was probably saving his family further suffering. They had seen their mother's health decline, and the toll it had taken on their father, maybe this tragedy was painful now, but would have ultimately saved them from further suffering later, when Mrs. Wurntz couldn't speak and Mr. Wurntz lay dying in a hospital bed.

I dreamt of the Wurntz' that night, and no matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't picture the faces of either of them. The dream was terrifying. It was as if the house had been opened for a dramatic play, and all of our neighbors from the lake and their families entered

the house and were given playbills. We stood in a semi-circle in his study, and watched as a faceless Mr. Wurtz went through the motions. He pulled the pistol from his drawer, wiping tears away from his blurred eyes. We followed as he gripped the stair rail, and sighed before making the slow ascent. We shushed each other as he creaked open the door to their bedroom, spilling a triangle of light onto their bed. Mrs. Wurntz slept with her mouth closed, peaceful in her striped nightgown. He pointed the gun, tears dribbled from his soft, rounded chin. When he pulled the trigger, I woke with a start.

I couldn't make myself walk to the end of the road this summer. I felt if I walked to the start of the road, leading down to the swamp, that the smell of rot and decay would drift to where I stood. That smell has become too haunting.

# Another Entry in My Epistolary Novel

*Richard King Perkins II*

These words are always written on the cheap;  
fifteen minutes is all I've got to work with

tops

so I pray for something unexpected  
to inspire me—

maybe a phrase like “the anti-crucible is my telos”  
or some other sort of nonsense  
which could unexpectedly lead me home.

What happens next is unexpected:

A guy gets hit by the downtown Metra train  
and now all of us morbid gapers  
are wondering if it was accidental or intentional.

Tomorrow, I'll stop for a few seconds

and look at the blood stain on the crosswalk  
and wonder how long it'll take  
for sun and rain to wash it clean.

It's a terrible memorial for a human life  
but it's over now.

Like I said: Seven minutes.

Cheap.

# When the Lights Go Out

Madison Klintworth

I awake with sweaty hands, forehead, legs, everything. My room is still dark, and the absence of light coming from the edges of my blinds tells me that it's still before sunrise. Much to my dismay, I turn towards my alarmingly bright clock: 4:47 am. I return my gaze to the ceiling with a grouchy expression. My mind begins racing for an explanation as to why I am awake, and why *I'm so sweaty. It's the middle of February.* I don't have to be awake for another few hours. Instead of trying to decipher my own mind, I turn over on my side and close my eyes. I might as well try to get in a couple more hours of sleep before I wake up for school.

That's when I hear my father's voice whispering not far down the hallway, "Hurry up, now. I need you to get dressed. We're leaving soon."

Once my mind registers as to what I just heard, I abandon all hopes of more sleep. Before my dad has time to leave my sister's room, I am standing next to him in the hallway.

"Dad? What's going on?" I ask in a shrill, childlike voice. It takes me aback; my normal voice is at least two octaves lower.

The dark must have hidden my arrival, because I sense my father jump back in surprise, only to relax once he notices me standing behind him. His breathing is quick, panicked. His lips are quivering slightly, the same way mine do after I cry. His hands can't seem to stay still. I feel my own thumbs twitch in response.

"I didn't see you there, Em. Did I wake you?" He asks me, a hand reaching out in the dark. It grasps my shoulder, to comfort me or himself I don't know.

"Yeah, I heard you whispering to Soph. Is everything okay?" I peer over my shoulder to see my younger sister arduously climbing out of her loft bed. Her face is sunken and hair matted from sleep. I would take a picture, but I can feel that it isn't the right time.

With his hand on my shoulder to guide me, my dad walks me back to my room and tells me to get dressed.

“I just got a call from the police. Vi’s been in an accident.”

I wait for him to tell me more, but he doesn’t. His face drained of all color when he told me that small amount of information, so I don’t think he could handle saying anything more. So, I don’t push for it, but instead does as he says.

My dad, not bothering to change out of his sweatpants and Bubba Gump t-shirt, waits for my sister and I in the kitchen. My mom took us to the closest Bubba Gump—2 and a half hours away—for my dad’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. That was two years ago, even though mom has only been gone a slim 9 months. Dad wears that shirt more than anything else he owns.

Once my sister and I get into the kitchen, my dad tells us he’ll explain more in the car. When I begin to reach for my backpack, my dad just shakes his head, pointing a thumb towards the car.

Normally, I would be excited about not going to school. Now, I would rather prefer going.

I climb into the passenger seat of my dad’s 2016 Nissan Versa, an impulse buy thanks to his sixth stage of grief: desire. My sister leans her head on the window in the back seat, presumably to fall asleep and block out the NPR lowly humming from the car speakers: “Negative Yelp reviews target Trump Organization. More and more users have been giving Trump’s hotels and restaurants one star—” Dad shuts off the radio and takes a few deep breaths before speaking.

“Vi stayed at a friend’s house last night so they could work on a group project. Well, instead she went to a party a few towns over. It got over really late, and she was too drunk to drive properly.” A pause. The car is so silent that I think I can hear my blood flowing in my veins. “She and a few others hit a truck head on. She should be in surgery now.”

Sophie and I stay quiet, not by choice. I want to say something, anything. For the second time in my life, I have no words that will make this situation better. The remainder of the car ride to the hospital is silent.

Hospitals aren’t foreign to me. My first trip to the hospital was when I was five and I got a fishing hook stuck through my hand. My second when my little sister, Sophie, was born. I was 7. I remember Violet and I fighting over who got to hold her first. She was two minutes older, she told me. That was always her go-to. Oldest gets to go first. I never argued. My third trip to



the hospital was when my mother was diagnosed with systemic sclerosis. Since then, I've been to the hospital so many times that I know where all the best vending machines are. When I walk through the familiar automatic doors, my body begins to ache with discomfort. I sit down in one of the waiting room chairs and attempt to clear my head of any and all bad thoughts. Soph takes a seat next to me, her face completely unreadable. My dad, on the other hand, looks like he might pass out any second now. He talks to the nurse at the front desk in a calm tone, but his hands are shaking more than an electric toothbrush, and his face paler than the toothpaste on it. If his wide eyes were any more blood shot, they might actually start bleeding.

"Hey, Emmett." I hear from beside me. I turn to see my sister looking up at me, only to turn away to wipe a few tears from her eyes.

"Soph, don't cry. Everyth—"

She cuts me off, "Don't say 'everything is going to be okay.' It's not. You of all people should know that."

She raises her feet up onto the chair and rests her head in between her knees. I do the same. "I was going to say 'everything happens for a reason,' but I doubt that will make you feel any better."

She blinks a few times, thinking about her response. "Nope, it doesn't."

My dad joins us in the waiting room a few minutes later looking slightly less pallid. I ask him if there is any news yet.

"She's still in surgery." He says.

"Still alive." Soph whispers to herself.

The next hour passes by in a blur. One minute I'm standing outside, waiting for a sunrise that never comes, and the next I'm riding the elevator up and down. The next thing I know, I'm staring at a clock that reads 6:18 am. I've returned to my chair in the waiting room next to Soph, who is now fast asleep. I feel a pang of jealousy as I watch her even, slow breathing, because I've already tried to fall asleep. Twice. I stand up and tell my dad I'm going to the bathroom. He nods faintly, not looking up from the Cosmo magazine he picked up from the end table.

I take the elevator to the third-floor bathroom; it's always clean and has fewer people. I walk in and immediately see a reflection of myself in the mirror above the sink. My own image prevents me from moving. My brown hair is almost entirely sticking up, and in random directions. My trembling hands are gripping the door to the point where I worry they might rip straight through it. Yet, my eyes are the most haunting. The piercing green mimics the color of my twin sisters'. As I stare at myself, I begin to *feel* her. I notice my breathing begin to shorten and quicken. My legs feel like they might no longer support the rest of my body. My eyes flick down to reassure myself that I'm still, in fact, standing. When I look back in the mirror, I'm no longer staring at my own reflection, but someone very similar.

I slam the bathroom door shut and rush to the stairwell so I can sob in silence.



Another hour has passed when we hear my dad's name being called from a nurse standing at the entryway to the ICU. Before I have a chance to look up from the stain at the floor that has occupied my mind for longer than I'd like to admit, my dad is halfway across the room. I frantically reach towards Sophie; she grasps my hand and I pull her towards my father. She kindly waits for us all to huddle around her before speaking.

"Violet is out of surgery and doing quite well. She suffered internal bleeding from the accident, as well as a punctured lung and a few broken ribs." She pauses, directing her gaze to my dad. "She's lucky to be alive." A collective half-sigh-half-sob escapes my father. I fight the urge to cry and instead grin down at Sophie, who returns my expression. The nurse informs us that we can visit her, and motions for us to follow her down the hallway.

As we make our way down the brightly-lit hallway, I begin to have a sense of *déjà vu*. I am transported to a different time in my mind, a time that I tried to forget countless times to forget before. Instead of Sophie's hand, I am gripping Vi's. We walked much slower, mostly because of what was waiting for us at the end of the hallway. Except it wasn't a single memory, it was many. One after another, this hallway flashes through my mind like a highway to hell.

We reach the end of the hallway, three doors down from where my memory took me. The

windows and doors are closed, so I can't see what waits for me on the other side. My mind threatens to take me back to all the same situations before, but a squeeze of my hand keeps me grounded. I look down to see Sophie smiling at me, as if she knew exactly what I was thinking.

Except, she does.

We both take a deep breath and follow our father into the room where a happier ending awaits.

# Giants

*Mariah Bormann*



# Of Heartland Hearths

*Laura Eades*

hazy humming neon cities'  
bleeding halos barely violate  
our midnights, day

time passes along the crawl  
of crosshatched country roads leading  
nowhere, everywhere

we throw breadcrumbs at the feet  
of our scarecrow-jesus  
question his broken grave, remember

when we're dead,  
we come home

late with thistles in our hair  
from abandoned places where  
we see ghosts in headlights, but

the ghosts we know are living,  
floating on the wheat-sweet wind,  
poisoning the air

# Door Skins

*Richard King Perkins II*

I press you against  
external door skins

our senescent whore skins

back alley kisses  
in scrabbling succession.

The scent of brick buildings  
lies hard upon us

ignited by the wine  
of dandelions and old fruit

holding traces  
of insensible epiphany

never to forget  
your generosity  
when I was fleetingly he.

I believe in love

and all other

bastard excitements;

the undeserved nights  
given rarely

which we cannot bear to keep  
or bury.

# Sergeant Hannah and the Patriots

Paul Lewellan

Hannah Welsh pulled into the last remaining parking space in the tiny gravel lot behind her apartment above a Thai restaurant on Main Street. The place smelled like basil and curry, but the rent was right, and it was clean. The owner, like Hannah, was a vet.

She patted the dashboard of her 1992 Nissan 300ZX. When she bought the black convertible with her enlistment bonus, it had 250,00 miles on it. It felt good to have the wheels back now that she was stateside, but with her new leg she had trouble with the clutch.

Hannah slid out of the car. She was still wearing the khaki slacks and orthopedic shoes she'd worn to class, but she'd taken off the cotton blouse. The black tank top underneath revealed her tattoos. On her left arm was a crossed rifle and bayonet with a skull overlay. On the skull was a heraldic shield in green and yellow with the number 793 in black. Underneath the shield was the word *Spartans*. On the part of her breasts exposed in the scoop of her top were the coils of a snake.

"I need to get the fuck away from college brats," she told the Z-car. "And I need a beer. Maybe two." All day she'd felt the pressure, *Maybe I don't belong on campus?* Going back to college to finish her degree had proven to be more daunting than she'd anticipated.

Hannah walked out of the alley and onto Main Street of Mount Union, observing the bars and scanning their clientele. She quickly passed over the bars catering to the university crowd: The Thirsty Beaver, Tipping the Cow, Daffy's Brew Pub. Her eyes paused at the Poison Toad, a storefront tavern painted with black and green swamp creatures. Standing the doorway were a half-dozen men in army fatigues.

Hannah was within seventy-five feet of the Toad when a deep blue BMW X5 pulled up. A thick-necked giant in a well-pressed, three-piece suit sprung from the driver's side. A second man stepped from the passenger side, nervously adjusting his tie while juggling the briefcase under his arm. He was wiry and fit, but clearly not part of the security detail. Finally, two people



emerged from the back: a young blonde female in a white linen suit and a forty-something male dressed in Armani. The waiting vets ushered in the visitors, leaving the Beamer illegally parked at the curb. Hannah paused, cautiously crossed the street, and followed them into the bar.

The patrons focused their attention on the celebrities, but an off-duty cop working security caught her eye. *Score!* she thought. She still could attract a man. The officer waited until she'd ordered a draft of jalapeño pepper ale before he came over to introduce himself.

"Welcome to the Poison Toad," he said. "I'm Ned Claypool." He stood grinning, hands on his hips. "You must have come for the beer. I doubt if you're here for the show."

Hannah shook her head. "What show?"

"Danton Young is in town. Got business at the college this week. Thought he'd slum it with the grunts tonight. Danton promised the boss he'd say a few words, plus Wally agreed to spring for a couple strippers."

"I don't know Danton Young."

"Really? Big man at Patriot Industries. Don't know what he's doing in this burgh. Something's up." Ned motioned to the other man. "The guy he's with, that's Wally. He's another bigwig with P.I. He's been here before. Has a taste for young and skanky. Has a daughter at the college. Buys folks a lot of drinks. A glad-hander."

Hannah observed the four newcomers. "And the young woman hanging on Danton's arm?"

"That's Misty Dawn Matheson, the reigning Miss Patriot League. The guys came to see her, not Danton. They jerk off to her calendar pretty much every night. No offense, ma'am."

"No offense taken, officer." Hannah took a deep drink of her beer, icy cold in a frosty mug. The sharp, crisp heat of the jalapeño chiles assaulted her senses. She sucked in the smell of male sweat, and drank in the sounds of Eric Church on the jukebox singing about cocaine kisses and caffeine love. "Nice place you got here."

By now Danton Young had removed his suit coat and rolled up his custom tailored shirt to reveal huge tanned biceps. He leaned over and said something privately to Misty, then drank a shot of twenty-year-old single malt scotch secured from under the bar, and took the stage. When

the jukebox was cut and the crowd was silenced, he smiled. He owned this crowd.

"In the Fourth Century, Constantine the Great had a dream. In his dream he saw a flag with a cross, and he heard the words, '*In hoc signo vinces*.'" The crowd listened intently, fueled by discounted pints and jingoistic fervor.

"The words *In hoc signo vinces* mean, 'under this sign, victory.' Under that banner in 312 A. D., Constantine gathered an army and defeated Maxentius's army of pagans at Mulvian Bridge." Misty Dawn Matheson handed him a pint of locally brewed Bent River Uncommon Stout. Danton paused dramatically for effect. He took a deep drink of the dark brown beer.

"Pay heed to Constantine's dream. Rise up against the modern day pagans. Raise our banner." Danton nodded to Misty, who pulled a cord that released the flag draped behind him. The giant ensign—a dark blue cross in a stark white circle on a blood red field—was met by wild drunken cheers

Hannah leaned over to Ned and commented, "Apparently he couldn't find a swastika."

Ned gripped her arm and leaned in to her. "Careful what you say. Not everyone in the place is as enlightened as you."

As the cheers subsided, Danton raised his glass to the flag. "To one white world!" He downed the rest of the pint, but grabbed another from Misty as the crowd picked up the chant, "One white world, one white world; one white world."

Hannah shook her head. "What world is he living in?"

"Couldn't agree with you more," said a male voice beside her. "Clearly delusional."

"I beg your pardon..." Hannah turned to see the guy Ned had called Wally standing beside her.

He motioned to Danton who was joyously alternating between drinking and chanting as the patrons of the bar surged toward him. "He obviously doesn't get out much."

"Beg your pardon...?"

"Danton thinks that because Jesus was white, everyone else should be, too."

"But Jesus wasn't..."

"It's a joke," Ned told Hannah. "Wally's a jokester."

"I'm not a big Danton fan, but I'm a company man. Since he doesn't know the territory, I offered to chaperone him on this trip. Plus, I bankrolled the fifty-cent drafts, the free nacho bar, and the strippers." Two lithe young women had joined Misty standing beside the small stage. He stuck out his hand to shake hers. "I'm Wally."

"Hannah."

"Hannah?" Wally tapped her right arm where black sergeant's stripes and a white skull were tattooed. "Maybe Sargent Hannah."

"Just Sarge."

"You have a last name?"

"I might." She glanced over to the stage. Danton motioned for the strippers and Misty to join him. Misty shook her head and continued nursing her beer beside a clique of admirers. The other two women raised their beers, chanted with the crowd, and stepped on stage.

They took positions on either side of Danton. Each put an arm around his waist, waved their drinks, and alternated between drinking and kissing him. The brunette chanted with the crowd, "One white world, one white world." The redhead was less enthusiastic. Danton grabbed her, locked her into a kiss, and began kneading her breast with his free hand. As he released her, he snarled into her ear, "Cheer louder, you little whore."

She let out a whoop as if she'd just won at the race track, and began chanting, "One white world; one white world!" When he nodded approval, she gulped down the rest of her beer to try to erase the taste of him from her mouth. Danton signaled for the crowd to quiet down.

"Men," he told them. "You all know why we're here. And you know what we're fighting for. We want to protect our race, our homeland, and most importantly, our women." He put his hands on the brunette's waist and lifted her up like she was weightless. He carried her across the stage, and set her down on the bar.

"This fine piece of Midwestern ass is why we're fighting." He slapped her on the butt. She smiled and shook her breasts and waved at the crowd. "Do you want some black bastard forcing

himself onto her, pawing her lily white breasts, and trying to taint the purity of our race?”

“No-o-o-o-o!” the crowd shouted. Cheering as she pranced on the bar.

“And this little firecracker here,” Danton said, lifting the redhead onto the table. She forced a smile, wiggled and waved to acknowledge the men. “You want some Arab trying to buy a piece of that pussy with his oil money?”

“No-o-o-o-o!”

“Well, neither do they. Show ’em what you think, girls.”

That was their cue. The strippers pulled off their tank tops revealing tiny white lace bras and large tattoos across their breasts. In red, white, and blue they read, “One white world.” The men went wild.

“Nice tats,” Hannah told Wally when the crowd died down and they could finally talk.

“My idea. They’re temporary. They’ll come off with the right solvent. Cost 300 extra, but I think they’re worth it.”

“Oh, definitely,” Ned told him.

“So now what happens?” Hannah asked.

“Danton will orate while the brunette gyrates on the bar, and when he thinks the crowd has just about climaxed, he’ll rip her bra off and throw it to them. If she’s smart, she’ll remove her jeans without being asked. Then he’ll drape the redhead in the Patriot flag and invite the fellas to come up and get their pictures taken with her. Misty will autograph her new Patriot League calendar. After Danton leaves, there will be a drawing. The brunette is the door prize.”

“And what about you, what are your plans?”

“Well,” he said cautiously, “that sort of depends on you.”

Hannah shook her head and gave him a disappointed look. “It’s not going to happen.”

“And why is that?”

“I’m not fond of the company you keep.”

“Pity,” Wally said, pulling some bills from his money clip. “Maybe another time.” He handed them to Ned. “Don’t let her get thirsty.” Wally walked away to join Misty at the bar.

“You screwed the pooch on that one. He could be very entertaining,” Ned told Hannah.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” she said. “He’s more dangerous than the big guy on the stage.” She picked up her backpack.

“Leaving so soon? Let me get you another drink.” He waved the bills Wally had given him. “I’m feeling very flush.”

“Plus the beers are 50 cents.” Hannah shook her head, and laughed at him. “No, Big Spender, I’ve got stuff to do. Still moving in. Schoolwork. You know,” although she suspected he didn’t. “I’ll take a rain check.”

“I’m here every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.”

“Good to know,” she called out as she left the Toad. Danton Young was getting ready to orate again and there wasn’t enough beer in the bar to wash the taste of that rhetoric down.

# Concrete Jungle

*Mariah Bormann*



# Benchmark

*Emily King*

It's not your fault that I always dress like I'm going to a funeral. My fists are caked with blood that isn't mine and my feet drag like a pair of junkyard dogs slinking through an alley for something to eat. You loved the idea of me, but you couldn't conceptualize the person I am—guts, tears, and fire. You said I was perfect. I laughed in your face.

A man with that kind of Odysseus charm could get away with anything. It's true that I never had to buy a tube of Maybelline concealer to mask my wounds like a sheet over a crime scene. Then again, you made sure no one could see the bruises you left behind. They appeared in subtle ways, spring buds rather than summer blooms pressed up against the glass. Isolation was the first to poke through the soil—or was it manipulation? I've tried to forget, but even Jesus wasn't allowed to hold my attention longer than you.

When I pried away, you clung tighter. You came with a pitchfork and matches to burn me alive and snuff out any flames that you didn't light. I remember your hands, harsh and greedy, sliding along the slope of my waist like I was one of your Batman comics and you just couldn't wait to fold all of my corners. Hot breaths broke against my neck. You whispered that my body was a church steeple and took my silence as an invitation to pray there.

After I left you, roses showed up on my doorstep each day for a week. My mother would fish them out of the trash and say all the wrong things, mistaking my tears for mourning. He loves you, honey, she said. It doesn't have to be this way. Her hand felt like sandpaper against my back while the roses glared at me from the windowsill. Their blood red blossoms would end up eaten by my garbage disposal.

A deluge of apologies could never suffice. I blocked your number; you bought a new phone. You told me my heart was black and swollen. I agreed, and blocked you again. My therapist told me I owed it to you; that you didn't hit me, so it wasn't real. I sent her number careening into the void.

Ticking clocks waxed and waned. I'm more tears than guts, more candle than fire, and my grief remains unchecked. Do I piece it together like a ship in a bottle? Do I auction it off to an interested party? Do I swallow it like a sword and pray it won't slice through my organs? Do I bleach it? Do I launder it? Do I hang it out to dry?

In the end, I cracked it open like hot bread and shared it with anyone who cared to taste it. The friends you once kept caged from me came back, piece by piece, like a swarm of monarchs returning home. They drained pressure from the swelling and pressed lips against my bruises. This was true love. This was my benchmark.

For I may have survived, but I had not been spared.



# The Desert Infinite

*Alexis Foran*

Don't leave me behind,  
Not like this.  
Take me with you into the desert expanse,  
Vast.  
Hallucinate with a tall cactus  
And my arms wrapped around your neck.  
Solitary company on the road  
And we can survive.

# Torn

*Haley Jackson*



# The Three Wishes

*Arthur Davis*

Jane Montgomery Rawlings lived on a farm in the rolling hills of Arkansas with her father and mother and undomesticated eight-year-old younger brother, George.

“I’m going out to pick daisies,” Jane said to her mother, and picked up a wicker cutting basket and the pruning scissors her grandma had only recently taught her how to use.

The wind blew a soft breeze and the sky was invariably blue with scattered, iridescent white clouds that constantly formed and reformed into interesting shapes so all the children could play at trying to identify them.

Grace watched her daughter traipse through the knee-high grass. Her bright yellow dress was a present from her father’s mother, just as the small, charming yellow house in which their family lived was inherited from Jane’s grandma.

Jane filled her basket halfway to the woven hoop of a handle by the time George spotted her. He raced down the stairs from his bedroom and out the back door.

As he approached Jane from behind, his mother came out and greeted Mrs. Jennings with a warm embrace. Mrs. Jennings had lost her son last year to pneumonia and often came to seek Grace’s advice. Many found a way to ask for a few moments of his mother’s insight.

George lifted his head over the tall grass and wildflowers that covered their farm in a kaleidoscope of colors. His grandma, the one who gave Jane that horrible dress, said their land was painted by God himself. George couldn’t understand why God would want to paint grass, trees or dirt.

George lifted his head up before pouncing, but something was wrong, or different. He lifted his head another few inches and caught the full circumference of the aberration that had formed over his sister’s head. It looked like a halo. The last time he’d seen a halo it was made of white speckled marble and hung over the saints in his church.

Except they were dead and Jane was alive, and as annoyingly perfect as ever.

“Will you stop *staring* at me,” Jane cried for the second time, hours later over dinner.

George couldn’t help himself. He had come to the conclusion that all saints were dead. That meant that his sister, horrible as she was, was going to die, and probably soon.

“Child, what is your problem?” his mother asked as his dinner plate went untouched.

“Nothing,” was all he could offer. He had watched her walk through the wavy pastures with the halo clearly visible over her head, like a bright yellow hat you could see through. His mother should be more worried about Jane becoming a piece of ugly marble than why her son hadn’t taken to his pork chops and a relentless mountain of vegetables.

The halo vanished as soon as she entered the house making George even more suspicious. His father came home, gave his mother a big hug and kiss, and got her to giggle with something he whispered in her ear. He swept up Jane in his big hands and bit her soft round cheek as if he was testing the ripeness of a late summer plum. Jane squealed and giggled just like her mom. Henry reminded George they were playing catch after supper.

George went into the bathroom, got up on the wooden stool his grandfather made so he could brush his teeth, and looked worriedly into the mirror. No halo.

George loved to play catch with his father, and wasn’t quite sure if mothers did that kind of thing. His father was great at it. He tossed him soft, high balls and fast, skittering grounders and all the while instructing and teasing him and applauding his every effort.

“Dear Lord, thank you for your bounty,” he said, beginning his prayers that night, though he was still uncertain what “bounty” was, although his mother insisted that God had given him so much of it. “And please don’t kill my sister and take her away. I know I do terrible things and everybody thinks she is so good and, I guess she really is but, well, that isn’t a reason to kill her and take her away and make mommy and dad unhappy.”

George’s knees hurt from resting on the thin rug at his bedside. The patch of worn sisal was all that covered the hardwood floor. He never understood why you had to be in pain to pray to God. It was almost as bad at church. Always praying and asking for forgiveness, even before he did anything wrong.

George didn't like the idea of the Almighty looking down on him as he hatched his schemes, terrorized classmates, and made it difficult, even he had to admit, for his parents. He struggled into bed with the weight of his tremulous conscience and the image of the halo that was about to claim his sister.

The next day was Thursday. The day of the week he and his father had set out for him to do the difficult chores, like sweeping out the barn, collecting the open feed sacks that lay about, checking the wire fence around the chicken coop for signs of predators, and cleaning the barn windows.

As he was oiling the hinges of the barn door, Jane came out with her flower basket and shears and made for the center of a field their father had let lay fallow. Peach Spray Roses, red and yellow Gerbera Daisies, and sheets of Sunflowers with their rich brown heart fringed with fingers of bright yellow blossomed everywhere in a sea of shimmering casts.

George wondered why he had never cut flowers. He knew his mother liked Stargazer Lilies. His father brought a bunch to her whenever he was in his "kissing" mood.

He wanted to tell his friends that God had chosen his sister. And if God had chosen Jane, maybe he had some advice on how he could improve his fastball.

His mother came out with two cold peaches and told him to bring one to Jane. George hefted both in his little hands. One was clearly larger and probably more juicy and delicious.

As he approached his sister, it was obvious that God had already spoken to her. The halo was firmly perched, bright, and clear as ever, a few inches over her head. He wanted to mention it to her, ask if she knew how it got there or what she did to deserve such a magnificent gift, or how he could get one for himself, when she turned. "You're not going to try and scare me today?"

George stopped a few feet away. "Why would I do that?"

"Because that's what you do," she said, spotting the fruit. "Is one for me?"

He offered her larger one.

Jane was quick to take a bite. Peach juice squirted over her cheeks and ran down her jaw. "Yummy."

George tried not to look up at the golden crest hovering over her head. "What are you cutting?"

"Oh," she beamed, "wildflowers, daises, carnations and look, Stargazer Lilies. Aren't they beautiful?"

George didn't understand the idea of cutting flowers only to bring them into their home, stuff them in a container filled with water, only to watch them wilt and die. Their home was filled with flowers set in old milk bottles, tin cups, dented flour-sifters, and hand-me-down chipped ceramic vases. "Nice."

"There you go again," she said. "What? Is my hair out of place? A bug 's on my shoulder? What?"

"Nothing."

"You're lying," she said drawing closer. "Now tell me what you're up to."

"You have a halo," he whispered. "I saw it yesterday."

"When you were trying to scare me?"

"I guess."

"Does frightening me make you feel better?"

Scaring and teasing and causing general unrest was simply what he did. Like his father went to work. That was it, he concluded. His father had his job in the city and George had his job too. Except he suddenly felt very bad about it, especially the way Jane had put it. She was so pretty he didn't really want her to die. "No."

"So please don't do it anymore. Okay?"

"Okay."

She gave him a quick kiss and went back to her cuttings.

What about the halo, he asked himself and slumped back to the barn. She must have the warmth radiating from its golden glow. He finished up and came into the house for lunch.

"What's wrong?" his mother asked.

His sister had a halo. "Nothing."

"That's not the face of a little boy with nothing on his mind."

"I'm not little!"

"Sorry. You 're right. Although that doesn't make your pathetic face any happier."

"Pathetic," was a word he had only recently learned. He knew it meant that he was sad, except in a different way. He wasn't sure any more if "pathetic" was good or bad, only that his sister had a halo and he didn't and, reluctantly accepting his true character and disposition, he probably never would.

"What's a bouquet?"

She turned thoughtfully. "A bunch of different flowers arranged in a very pretty way."

"Daddy gives you bouquets?" he asked, uncertain if he was saying the word right.

"Sometimes."

"Do you give him bouquets?" he asked, but before she could answer, George spoke from his fear. "Jane has a halo, you know."

His mother turned back to the counter and finished preparing two ham and cheeses sandwiches with plenty of mustard and a few pickles and set out both dishes on the wooden table that was the center of their small kitchen.

"Yes, I believe she does."

"No, she really has one," he said, thinking she hadn't heard him.

Jane came bounding in and dropped her basketful of flowers on the floor. George grabbed his sandwich. The halo had vanished. How clever and devious it was.

"Did you eat my pickles?"

While it was true that he had gulped down all his pickles, it was also true that she had somewhat less than their mother usually doled out. "I ate all the pickles and the extra sandwich Mommy made for us."

"Mama!" she cried.

"I only made one sandwich for each of you," Grace Rawlings said, coming back to separate them, "and divided what few pickles were left in the jar. Now, each of you, out of here, I need

the kitchen for a while.”

Jane smiled, stuck out her tongue at him, and took her plate out on the porch.

George concluded God was definitely not on his side today and followed her out. “How do you do it?”

Jane had been thinking that at least two other girls in school could skip rope better than she could. She was thinking that she needed a lot of practice if she was ever going to get that good. She was thinking that she was going to need someone to help her. “What?”

“Your halo. How do you make it disappear in the house and come alive in the sunlight?” George gobbled down the breadcrumbs on his plate. “Show me how you do it?”

“Not likely.”

“Please. I want one.”

“Not if you stood on your pointy head and hopped around the kitchen,” she said, giggling at the imagery.

“Well, Miss Smarty Pants, people who have haloes die when they’re really young and become marble saints. Didn’t you notice them in church or read them in the Bible?”

Jane nearly gagged on her sandwich.

“You’re going to die and turn to stone and all because you wouldn’t tell me how to get a halo.”

Then a thought occurred to her. “If saints die so young, why do you want a halo?”

“Girl saints die earlier than boy saints.” This was another necessary fabrication.

The stone statues in their parrish hall were nearly as tall as she was and beamed with the same radiant smile she often saw in the bathroom mirror. A tear trickled down her swollen, quivering cheek. For once in George’s loathsome life, he was telling the truth.

Her mother had already gone out back to begin canning her famous strawberry preserves. Jane let herself cry aloud for the first time since she could recall.

Enough friends and strangers came to her mother for advice. Jane tolerated the distraction, but this was different. Now she would be the focus of curiosity seekers and ridicule. It no longer mattered that she was whip smart in school, or could skip rope or cut the best flowers or sung



in the church choir. Nothing mattered. Her life was over.

Her father would be home in four hours. They would sit down to dinner after he played catch with George. Maybe that would be a good time to tell everyone that she was going to become a saint and turn into a marble statue. No matter. The announcement could wait a few hours or a few days, though probably no longer.

She reached up and felt the presence of her halo. She could almost picture the crest covering the top of her head and then walked down to the small brook that ran behind her house. She knelt down and saw the wondrous reflection that would take her to an early grave. At first, it frightened her. She had a world of questions but wasn't certain who to ask, or how they might answer.

"Janie," her mother called out from the back of the house.

"Over here, Mama," she answered.

Grace advanced down to the edge of the stream. "Why child, why are you standing with your eyes closed like you're frightened to death?"

Jane knew her mother was standing right in front of her, and somewhere out there was George, waiting like a vulture for her to die.

"I need you to help me with the labels, like last time. I think I strained my wrist or something."

Jane had put labels on 132 bottles of strawberry preserves only a week ago. It was fun and she was very careful they were centered and level. It was a job her mother would never entrust to George.

Jane jumped up on a kitchen stool next to her mother and began to moisten the labels on a soft pink sponge and carefully affix them to the small ornately curved bottles while her mother stirred the bright red froth that had been cooking for hours. The smell was rich, sweet, and so mouthwatering Jane got hungry so fast she forgot she had just finished lunch.

"Mama?" Jane began, after a dozen or so bottles had been labeled, "Do you see anything different about me today?"

"You mean your halo?"

"Then you know?" Jane asked, almost knocking over a bottle of preserves.

"Of course, sweetheart. Of course we know. Your father and I noticed it yesterday."

Jane quickly concluded that her parents were already preparing for her death. "And you're not frightened?"

"Why would we be frightened?"

A label curled and stuck between her fingers. "What about dying and becoming a saint?"

"Is that what you want? To become a saint?"

"Mama, I don't understand," Jane said, breaking down into deep, heart-wrenching sobs and falling into her mother's arms.

"It's just like I remembered."

Jane stopped sniffing. "You remembered?"

"Of course, sweetheart. I had one just like it, as did your grandmother and her mother before her. All the women in our family develop the yellow radiance that comes when it wants, and when it goes it leaves you changed forever. There's no explanation why, and it can only be seen by members of our family, thank Heaven. You can drive yourself quite mad trying to figure out where it came from."

Jane knew that her mother—both her parents—were so terribly old it was hard to imagine that they were once children, small ones at that. "You had one?"

"Even your very own ancient mother once was set aglow by one of those," she said wiping off her daughter's cheeks. "I never mentioned it to you for fear it would not come and you would be heartbroken. Just as heartbroken as you will be when it leaves."

"But why me?"

Grace had prepared her answer long ago. "Dear, you see some of our neighbors, friends who come here from time to time?"

"They're always here. And they're always sad."

"They're troubled. People have concerns, health, personal problems, and money sometimes

too. They come here to talk. Maybe get help or advice.”

“They always come to talk, and they all stay too long.”

“Yes. Sometimes that’s true, but not to help our friends and neighbors, all good people, would be a sin and not what we are about.”

When her mother finished the story of the tradition their family upheld, all Jane could ask was, “Then I’m not going to die?”

“My Lord child, why would you die?”

Jane took her time explaining. When she finished both women decided that the only apparition likely to be seen on the youngest of their family was horns and a long, red forked tail. “I have a sister, you know. Your aunt Louisa. I never had a brother, though I’m sure few have been so plagued by such deviltry.”

“He’s horrible.”

“He is who he is,” Grace said, trying to hide a grin from her distraught daughter, “and we love him for who he is.”

George was twice as smart as anyone in the county and infinitely more headstrong and incorrigible. Last year, she and Henry had gone to the school for guidance. They were told that George simply needed an outlet for his overactive imagination. “He’ll work himself out of it,” the assistant principal announced with surprising insight and sympathy. Grace and Henry Rawlings drove home agreeing they would probably strangle George long before he outgrew anything.

“I wish he would turn to marble,” Jane said, returning with some relief to the packet of labels.

“Sometimes George doesn’t understand the consequences of what he says.”

George had been occupying himself with a plan to build a tree house over the brook when his sister and mother approached. Soon Jane would be dead and he would be alone and get all the attention from all their doting relatives. He would visit her in the church where he was certain she would reappear as a beautiful little saint. He would tell her about what he was doing and about his toys and most especially how he had become such a feared pitcher.

“George, Jane said you noticed her halo.”

"Well, yes." he groaned silently.

"Did Jane mention that she could grant three wishes because of her halo and that she has given me one and your father one?"

"No." A wish?

"Well, she wants to give you the last of the three."

George could hardly believe his good fortune. A sister who could grant three wishes and than die and become a saint. "A real wish?"

"So she says."

"But you have until Dad comes home to make it."

"Why?"

"Because I 'm going to die in a few hours. I can feel it. So, you have until six o'clock to make up your mind. Mama already made her wish."

"Oh, what is it?" George asked eagerly.

"I can't tell you or it wouldn't come true. That's how wishes work," Grace Eugenia Rawlings said and walked back to the house.

"I want you to have my big bed, my toys, and the blue sweater you like. Take whatever you want and give the rest to the poor."

George was confused, and strangely distraught. He was never that certain she would die and turn into a marble saint. But apparently, he was right all along. She was going to be a saint. And, from what he'd read about saints, she was already behaving like one. "Okay."

"Mama said that they will probably rename the church and a few streets after me, and Mama and Daddy would even get a letter from the governor when I become a saint."

"Really?"

"I guess I'll be famous."

"Famous?"

"You know, like a celebrity. A famous movie star like Marilyn Monroe or sports star, only a lot bigger."

George had never heard of Marilyn Monroe and couldn't imagine anything more important than being a star athlete. "I see."

Jane reached up and touched her halo. "I have been chosen, George. I certainly have been chosen."

"I guess."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," he said, watching her go into the house.

Excited with the prospects at hand, George began his search for the perfect wish, first by imagining the most perfect tree house in all of Tennessee, then becoming the best pitcher in baseball. A star pitcher. *The* star pitcher. He would be known as the pitcher who single handedly led his team to a successful World Series by pitching two no-hitters and belting out a game-winning, walk-off home run in the last inning of the seventh game. That was it—a tall, powerful pitcher with a blinding fastball and an unhittable sinker!

He would miss Jane—her goodness and caring that came so naturally to her and so hard to him. George walked up to the front door and hesitated. He was about to lose his sister. He would never see her again.

Jane sat at the kitchen table reading an old copy of *Life* magazine while happily swinging her legs under the table. The story of the halo and how all the women of their family were gifted with this mark of spirituality warmed and brightened her insides as though she had swallowed a smile.

Her mother made sure to stress that it didn't necessarily make her better or smarter or different; it was merely a family gift, though Jane suspected there was more to the tale than her mother was prepared to reveal.

"Do you want to throw the ball around?"

George was surprised at his mother's suggestion. Throwing the ball was his father's job. "No. It's okay."

"Then how about going outside and helping Jane jump rope?"

"I don't jump rope."

"I know you don't, honey. I just thought it would be nice to give your sister a few last hours of happiness. You could tie the rope to the side of the barn and swing it round so she could jump. You can do that for her, can't you?"

"I guess," he said and followed Jane outside.

"Don't go fast in the beginning."

"Okay," George answered, now uncomfortable with the fact that his doomed sister had given him the wish of his life and he had hesitated to grant her a last request.

Jane paused, set her feet, and prepared to jump in, then cautiously eyed George for the possibility of his purposely letting go of the line.

After a dozen or so complete rotations, Jane hopped in and began jumping to the rhythm her brother had set. Her arms slowly slackened, her body relaxed, and she lifted herself off the ground with less and less effort. Slowly she rotated her body one way then back and each time waving to her baby brother in loving appreciation.

George was distressed at the brightness of her smile, the laugh and giggle that would slip out every so often as she became more comfortable with the movement.

She swirled, raised her hands over her head, and started singing songs that helped pace the rhythm. Her knees barely bent, her toes barely lifted an inch off the ground.

Grace stoop at the screen door, bursting with pride as her daughter and her golden halo bobbed about in the vortex.

"Want to join me?" Jane asked.

"No."

"Mama can take over for you. It's fun, but takes a lot of skill. You would be great at it."

George was suddenly not interested in jump rope, or at becoming the best pitcher ever. What he wanted now, much to his surprise, was to keep his sister alive. He wanted her to jump rope for the rest of her life and win every prize there was in the county.

"Mama," she pleaded, "can you help out for a while?"

Grace Rawlings walked over to George, gave him a kiss, and took hold of the rope from his small, serious hands. George moved away, still unsure as to what was expected of him.

"It's easy," Jane said, "On my signal, jump in, and bounce on your toes like this."

"Go ahead, honey," his mother suggested, while keeping an eye on her daughter's miraculous golden halo, "It's great exercise for when you run the bases."

When George realized it could help his base running, he focused all his energy and, on her signal, jumped into the center of the spinning rope.

Jane took her brother's hand and both moved around in the center while Grace glowed with pride. George got the movement immediately and felt the muscles in his legs give and take and ease into the springing motion. Jumping rope wasn't half as bad or sissy-ish as he thought it would be, and clung tightly to Jane's hands. It took strength, agility, and balance, which until now he'd never appreciated.

And all the while, the halo moved up and down and tilted as if the bright yellow crown had always been a part of his sister's body. He was so close now he could appreciate its beauty and majesty. He was no longer jealous or bitter that she had something he did not possess.

"I'm going to jump out." Jane said, "You stay in for a while."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because, I can't," he said, but it was already too late.

George was alone at the center of the spinning rope, and the center of attention of the two women he loved most. Slowly his mother picked up the pace and spun the rope faster. His movements became effortless. He spun around by himself, raised his hands over his head, and suddenly stopped jumping. Jane stopped applauding.

A melancholy had overtaken his spirit leaving him breathless. The rope clipped his ankles and came to rest in the dirt.

"I don't want you to die," George said, "I want you to stay alive. That's my wish."

Grace Rawlings heart nearly burst as her daughter clutched her hand. "You're wasting your

wish on me?" Jane asked.

"I can be the best pitcher there ever was without a magic wish, but I can't keep you alive without one. So I wish that you don't die. That's my wish," he said almost defiantly.

"Then she will live," Grace said to her children and bent down and embraced them warmly. "I have the two best children in all of Tennessee," which George quickly corrected to include the other forty-seven states.

It wasn't until the weather turned cold and Henry's crop lay fallow and both children were in the throes of preparing for Halloween that Jane Montgomery Rawlings' halo slowly disappeared, just as her mother's had and her grandmothers had before that. She watched sadly as each day passed and the glowing amber ring faded until all that remained was the little woman that had once been a little girl.

It was only then that George was lovingly reprimanded by his mother for taunting his sister with the cruel fabrication that she was going to die because of her halo, and why she had made up the tale of the three wishes hoping to show him the difference between kindness and selfishness.

George was still just as likely to get into trouble both at home and in school, where the assistant principal kept a keen eye on him. What Grace Rawlings believed had changed was her son's concern for those he loved.

By then George had already figured out there weren't really three wishes and that his sister and mother had put one over on him. And after all the tricks and pranks he played, not to mention those he never got caught instigating, it wasn't such a big deal.

And anyway, with the help of Janie, who turned out to be a first-rate catcher, George became the star pitcher of the fourth grade baseball team and genuinely greeted every day by embracing not only his parents, but also the sister he loved most of all.