

PORTALS



David Chappell

10th Anniversary Print Edition

Spring 2014

PORTALS

Literary and Arts Magazine
10th Anniversary Print Edition

Senior Editor

Rhonda Franklin

Editors

Kerrie Holian

Gary Hurley

Kevin Knight

Gena McKinley

Christine Massey

Mandy Murfee

Cover photo by

David Chappell

Long Way to the Top

CFCC Portals Magazine

wishes to extend appreciation to the CFCC Student Government Association, the CFCC Foundation, the CFCC Arts and Sciences Division, Jill Lahnstein and the English Department, and Louise McColl for their continued support of this project.

A special thank you to Action Printing for printing our 2014 issue of *Portals*, to the *Portals* Celebration committee, to our faculty and staff judges, and to Ben Billingsley, Brandon Guthrie, Jennifer Mace, Lesley Richardson, and Ashley Shivar

Portals is a publication of
Cape Fear Community College
student, faculty, and staff writers and artists, published by
Cape Fear Community College
411 North Front Street
Wilmington, NC 28401
(910) 362-7238
Email -- portals@mail.cfcc.edu
Website – www.cfcc.edu/portals
Facebook Page – *CFCC Portals Magazine*

Portals submissions are selected by student, faculty, and staff judges based on creative merit. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors.

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Table of Contents

<i>Margo Williams, Ten Years of Opening Doors</i>	6
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Poetry

<i>Albert Trego, A Peasant Dish</i>	Louise McColl Award	8
<i>Petra Costa, One Month in Troy</i>	1st Place	14
<i>Evan Timpy, Cold Beer</i>	2nd Place	69
<i>Sharon Demas, Night Terrors</i>	3rd Place	32
<i>Jason Stewart, The Flute</i>		19
<i>Kaneisha De Vega, A Poor Girl's Definition of Poverty</i> . .		21
<i>Christian Godwin, Birth of Homunculus</i>		22
<i>Mark Rose, The Mountain</i>		45
<i>Lesley Richardson, Harvest Night</i>		46
<i>Julia Connell, Elegy for Mama Sveta</i>		54
<i>Dylan Hardee, Meals for the Sensible</i>		68
<i>Jamie Bell, Teeth Like Papercuts</i>		71
<i>Haley Heath, Manhattan</i>		72
<i>Shelley G. Keenan, Laguna en Guatavita y Rio Guadalajara</i> .		76
<i>Delaney Duke, A Story</i>		78

Fiction

<i>Joseph Tosches, The Last Doughnut</i>	1st Place	9
<i>Daniel Stewart, Insanity and Teenage Hubris</i>	2nd Place	24
<i>Nathaniel Carter, Hearing Through My Eyes</i>	3rd Place	41
<i>Jeff Call, The Valiant</i>	Faculty/Staff Award	58
<i>William Linn, All the Same Tonight</i>		34

Non-Fiction

<i>Hannah Smith, Tasting the Honey Stars</i>	1st Place	16
<i>Jessica Melton, Lost</i>	2nd Place	73
<i>Michelle Armanees, Glassy-Eyed</i>	3rd Place	47
<i>Ted Spring, The Turtle, the Rabbit, and Grandpa</i>	Faculty/Staff Award	65
<i>Lindsay Haney, Let Me Come Home</i>		55

Visual Art

<i>Blair Byrd, Seahive</i>	Art Prize.....	4
<i>David Chappell, Long Way to the Top</i>	Cover Art	
<i>Jerry Mann, Alluring</i>		15
<i>Shemekka Coleman, Young Beggar</i>		20
<i>Liz Harman, Life in Death</i>		23
<i>Brannigan Carter, Unreachable Door</i>		31
<i>Bethanne Tobey, Summer in London</i>		33
<i>Cara Harris, Faces I</i>		40
<i>Lillian Higgins, From Inside the Cave</i>		51
<i>Ashley Thompson, Two Owls in a Window</i>		52
<i>The Foxes and the Grapes</i>		53
<i>Brantley McKeithan, Angelique</i>		57
<i>Debbie Anisko, Jimmy's Portrait</i>		64
<i>Jim Criswell, Day's End</i>		67
<i>Michael Thomas, Three Heads Are Better</i>		70
<i>Othello York, 4xX=Art</i>		77
<i>Anna Mann, Urban Zen</i>		79



Blair Byrd
Seahive

Portals Celebrates Ten Years of Print Editions

Margo Williams

Ten Years of Opening Doors

Honestly, I didn't want to walk through the door. I knew it meant work and a lot of it. I knew it meant hauling home a bunch of submissions. I knew it meant editing the first galleys into the wee hours of the morning, and I knew too, it meant some students wouldn't make it through. I also knew it was just the beginning of prying open more and more doorways, which could only mean more challenges for both students and faculty, but that was ten years ago, and now I couldn't be happier.

In 2004, three talented and dedicated students, a now retired faculty member, D. Brantley, and I crowded into a small room in the English Department and pored over a stack of writing and art submissions. Many were poorly formatted and some were crudely crafted. We didn't have any money or any idea how we were going to find any, yet we were convinced that the students needed a forum where their voices could be heard. Where students could learn what it meant to be published, where inspiration and voice and hard work were validated.

That year *Portals Literary and Arts Magazine* was birthed and eventually we secured a mini-grant with the support of the foundation and the board of directors here at the college. Later, faculty member Gary Hurley, whom I couldn't have finished without, was brought in to create a computer layout, and over the years the magazine has expanded and been headed up under the direction of many talented English and Fine Arts faculty members. Too many to mention here, though under Meredith Merrill, cash prizes and monies from generous benefactors like Louise McColl came about. Later an expanded poetry vision was fulfilled under Jada Ach, and now under Rhonda Franklin, the magazine is reaching every department and every corner of both campuses. Ben Billingsley and Deborah Onâte and all the art instructors and art students have been a crucial component in the publication and many, many others

have selflessly given time to help teach, judge, submit and assist in the awards ceremonies. I applaud all of you, and you know who you are. Mostly, I applaud and congratulate the students who had the sheer guts to turn in a submission. The vision of now CFCC Portals Magazine is ever expanding. Judges volunteer from all departments, and students, staff, and faculty are encouraged to take part in the magazine. It's an important part of our institution's culture.

Proudly, I have witnessed previous students who were first published in Portals go on to become magazine editors, journalists, published poets, painters, photographers, teachers, and even best-selling novelists. I have seen some pursue work that has little to do with publication, yet many found the drive and motivation to pursue whatever concepts they first explored here at Cape Fear.

Before the satisfaction of publishing, however, comes something much more important. The flicker. The word. The image. It's the hard work of crafting something from nothing that is truly worthwhile. It requires sheer tenacity and following intuition. It requires a great passion and digging beneath rocky surface and, yes, it takes sorcery as well. And though publication is a deeply satisfying aspect of writing, I believe it is important to understand that what we create does not have less meaning if it never finds publication, and we should resist feeling we don't matter unless we publish, but what matters is the desire and the willingness and the work of walking through an unknown portal where imagination thrives.

Founding Editor Margo Williams holds an MFA from Emerson College. She also studied playwriting and set design at Harvard University and was an editorial intern at *The Atlantic Monthly Magazine*. Her publications appear in *Glimmer Train*, *The Southeast Review*, *Prick of the Spindle Magazine*, *Moonshine Review*, *Beacon Street Review*, *Behind the Scenes Magazine*, *Frostwriting* and local magazines *Encore* and *Salt*. Her work is anthologized in *The Big Picture*, and she is a produced playwright (*Snake Oil*: 2008). Margo was an Artist in Residence at Hambidge Center and Elsewhere Studios. Additionally, her poems "Blue Robe," "Caracas Morning" and "Even Snow White has Black Hair" have been created into performance pieces or short films.

Louise McColl Award—Best Overall Work

Albert Trego

A Peasant Dish

I kneaded the soft dough
and thought of Busia's¹ rough hands
leather-bound, curled from arthritis.
I mashed the potatoes,
which caked my nose with a dusty brown memory
and everything good about the old house.
I added the onions, chopped and uncooked
to wake one's palate with a sour crunch
and take them back to their Polack roots.
After I add the filling,
I fold the dough into crescent moons,
Exactly like the ones that the cow would always jump
(So I was told).
Now I am pan-frying these pierogi.
They shatter the ears with the same hiss
that echoed throughout Busia's house
coupled, always, with an enchanting Polish waltz.
And when I thrust my old brass fork
into this peasant dish,
I shall hail in my mother tongue:
"*Szwietnie.*"²

1 (*Boo-shah*) "Grandmother" in Polish

2 (*Shvyet-nyeh*) "Excellent"

The Last Doughnut

Dora Gibson parked her used and beaten 98' Saturn at the side of the George Washington Bridge. The lights of the city were bright behind her. She put her blinkers on. The cars zooming by will think she broke down. No one would look twice. No one will know. She sat there smoking a Virginia Slim cigarette, allowing the smoke to accumulate inside the vehicle without bothering to roll the windows down. The moon was almost full and no stars were in the sky. It was an indigo blanket polluted with unnatural light and smog. It was beautiful and it was fitting. She began to cry. Nobody loved her. Nobody could hear the screams ripping forth from her soul, how could they? She had grown numb of them herself. She swallowed them as two tears broke through and rolled down her cheeks. She once had a future she had looked forward to with her entire heart. Now, well, now she just wanted the present to end and the future not to come.

She was thirty four years old and more than four hundred pounds. Her birthday had been only two nights before. She celebrated it alone in her single bedroom apartment in Jersey; her birthday dinner was over a dozen White Castle hamburgers. Once she had been a dancer. She danced throughout her childhood and teens and had even danced professionally in some ballets at local theaters. That had been her dream and she had been so good. So fucking good. But, now nothing remained of her once flexible, athletic, and fit body. Now, she couldn't even touch her toes. The old Dora seemed like a different person completely, it seemed like another life. She knew it would now take her 10 minutes to stand up and squeeze out of her small, disheveled car and the thought of her living in this physical body another second, to remain trapped in hell, was a thought that would not be tolerated. Tonight she would liberate herself from this world. She didn't believe in Hell, she didn't know if Heaven was real or not, but she knew it sure wasn't to be found here and now.

She looked down. On the seat next to her was a box of doughnuts she had bought on her way the bridge. She had

purchased the doughnuts, six Boston crèmes, only half an hour before. These had always been her guilty pleasure food. In the past, she used to reward herself after every successful practice with one Boston crème doughnut. Now as she sat there in the cool silence of midnight only one doughnut remained. She sighed. Grunting she reached into her glove compartment and pulled out a long, red-beaded St. Francis Medallion. St. Francis, the patron saint of animals. Her mother had given it to her on the day of her first communion. She was glad both her parents were dead. They wouldn't feel the pain her death would bring. Looking at St Francis, surrounded by birds as he sits on a large rock, she wondered who would take care of her cat of eleven years, Morrissey. I guess it wouldn't matter. Somebody would take him and love him as much as she had. Laughing at herself sardonically, she painfully inched her way out of the dented, old Saturn wondering when her existence had become a joke. Once steady on her feet she circled the car and retrieved the final doughnut. In her right hand, clinched firmly and wrapped around her wrist, hung the St. Francis medallion gently swaying in the November breeze.

Dora gingerly made her way to the low-bridge railing. The water was a sheet of shining, black glass. It was a chilly night. She reached to the zipper of her teal sweat suit and yanked the white zipper closer to her neck. "Oh God," she whispered, her voice barely audible underneath the passing cars. Time danced on, as it always does, and she continued gazing downwards. She etched slowly closer and closer to the side until there was no room left to budge. She looked at her doughnut. She went to take a bite when she heard the sound of a car come to a creaking halt not far from where she stood. She looked behind her and saw a tall man in a business suit get out of a small white Prius.

"What are you fucking doing out here, Lady?" he called. His thick New York accented voice was loud yet soft and it carried well on the wind.

"Don't come anywhere near me. Do you hear me? Don't!" she yelled back. Wearily, she watched the stranger reach into his car and start furiously punching numbers into his cell phone.

“Don't do anything... please stop what you're doing! What have I done to you?” She began to cry. She looked at her St. Francis medallion. She tightened her grip on it. “Oh Jesus help me.”

Not long after, the man drove away and Dora started to violently shake. The cold was getting to her and her heart was beating loudly in her throat as she took a large bite from the Boston crème doughnut. Cars flashed by quickly, interrupting what had been strange quiet, sending currents of sharp wind through her body. In the far distance, like a banshee screaming out into the night, she listened to the wailing of sirens approaching. The first cop car arrived and came to a smooth and sudden stop and two heavy-set policemen ambled out of the parked vehicle, one bigger than the other. “Hey! Lady! What are you doing over there? Come here and talk to us” one cop said. He looked down.

“Too late. It's too late,” Dora yelled back in reply, her voice cracking, “I'm already eating the last doughnut!”

“There are more doughnuts,” the slightly skinnier cop retorted, “There's a world of doughnuts out there!” He swallowed hard and shook his head in frustration.

“That's my problem,” Dora screamed back, “That's my problem!”

“Help is coming, lady! Please wait a little while longer. Don't do something stupid.”

As the cop finished this desperate plea more police vehicles made their way to the scene. This made traffic going over the bridge come to almost a complete halt as the police at the scene started to setup a perimeter around Dora. Horns started filling the canvas of what used to be silence, mingling with the sirens as if they were competing against each other. This was what was stupid. Not her actions, not her desires. The police were putting out the last orange, reflective cone as a small yellow Volkswagen bug crept through and slowed down. A group of teenage boys were in the car and the windows were all rolled down. Very loud rap music was blaring from the speakers. “Hey fat lady,” one cruel, male voice proclaimed, chuckling coarsely over the giggling whispers inside the vehicle, “Jump!” The car then quickly sped off into the autumn evening, its music

trailing behind it. She had considered throwing the doughnut at the car. It wasn't worth it.

Dora wanted to jump. She didn't know why she hadn't yet.

A skinny, exhausted, and frail looking police negotiator hurriedly approached Dora. He was cautious and held a small walkie talkie in his right hand. He was wearing a bullet proof vest that was tight on his slender body. "Is there anything I can do, ma'am?" he said with true sincerity. "Is there anyone you want to call? What is your name?"

"There is nobody," she hissed back.

"That can't be true. There has to be someone. Listen, you're not alone. What's your name?"

"Yes, I really am. You don't know me."

"There is someone. I would like to know you. Tell me." he replied.

Dora sighed and looked up into the night sky. Was there someone? Where was God? Stars were beginning to show themselves now. They were just taking their time about it. Dora responded slowly, struggling to control the unsteadiness of her uneven voice, "Call my neighbor, and tell her to take care of Morrissey. My name is Dora and the address is 591 Avon Lane."

"Is Morrissey your husband, Lady? Won't he miss you?"

"Morrissey is my cat you skinny fucking pig! And yes, as a matter of fact, he will miss me! But, anything is better than dying alone and disgusting in my shit-hole apartment while my cat eats my face!"

The negotiator was startled and jumped back; clearly he had not expected such a violent outburst. Dora realized he just wanted to keep her talking.

"Why are you doing this... we can fix this, listen to me. My name is Jeff and-"

"There is no fixing this, Jeff! I'm on the last one, can't you see me? The last one."

"I do see you. I see a beautiful woman in pain. I can help you. Just please... listen."

"I'm in pain, huh? What gave that away? You're lying to me. Why would you lie to me?" Dora gasped for air and continued, "I don't want to be lied to."

"Dora, keep talking with me, we can get through this."

“You will get through this. I-”

“You will too.”

“I had a future once.”

“You still do, Dora,” the negotiator said.

She wasn't sure what was happening anymore. Was her entire existence on this planet meant to climax at this pivotal point in time? The wind was all that stirred as these two people gazed into each other's faces. This moment stretched on and spread delicately over this peculiar scene where time itself, albeit briefly, stalled in its never-ending conquest over reality. No sound, no voices, no thoughts; even the flickering lights of the city stood still. The wind alone with nothing-more than its unforgiving sting brought Dora back into the world.

Then she knew it was time. Enough waiting, she had caused too big of a scene already. The empty words of the police officers and negotiators fell upon deaf ears. What did they know? What did they care? The negotiator was still talking but she wasn't listening anymore. What more could Jeff say? She didn't care what he had to say. How could they possibly know how it feels? He sure as hell didn't with his skinny ass. The wind could send him flying over the rail. She shoved more of the doughnut into her mouth and chewed down hard. So good. Only one more bite to go. Dora held the last bite in front of her, her fingers shaking.

Without hesitation she dropped the doughnut over the bridge and watched it fall into the darkness, watched it fall until it disappeared from her vision. Is that what would happen to me? She took a deep breath and, with lungs full of ice, realized she knew what she had to do. She knew what must be done. She had known the whole time and only realized it then. She released her frozen grip on the St. Francis medallion, hearing it cling against the concrete ground. It was over. Her eyes met with the negotiator.

One Month in Troy

i.

This distance between us
is devouring my lungs.
I'm left here gasping,
trying to suture back together
all the broken nights-
the cigarette burns in my bed

Sheets.

ii.

I'm tracing love letters on my skin,
as my mouth rambles of hideous beauty
lurking in the shadows of mint leaves and roses,
where I formed my own Gods,
my own constellations
between the thorns in my

Teeth.

iii.

I swear it's you I see behind these eyelids-
wishing to see northern lights in the eyes of strangers.
There are dead leaves
sprouting from your amber spine;
you look like a Goddess standing there reading my skin
quiet and shameless, proud of the gaping hole in my

Chest.

iv.

There is a wolf lurking in my doorway;
our eyes hold breathless conversations as
dragons fly on swift wings to the tops of Glass Mountains
and secrets whisper through the stroke of my pen

into the awaiting lungs of strangers,
feeding them with words called dead

Fish.

v.

Reaching up with child-fingers,
eager to devour the sun;
your smile is the sweetest poison I've ever drunk,
so infecting as I asked you to lie to me;
speaking to me in God's tongue
of watercolor skies: you

Did.



Jerry Mann

Alluring

Tasting the Honey Stars

“Can’t catch me! Can’t catch me!” Holly always screamed, flashing across the yard in her white cotton undies. I wished I could catch her, but she was so much faster than me. She still is. Holly is still Little Lightning.

I can remember how the manicured lawn felt under my feet-- prickly, dense, sharp, and certainly too rough to roll in. But roll in it we did, all day, and we always walked bare foot. Holly’s grass was different than mine, when she lived in the Fox Run house. Her house was the best house out of all my friends’ houses, if only for the perfect yard and pretty garden, which had aloe and lavender in it. The garden was life. It was all colors: green, purple, blue, orange, red, and yellow. It gave us all we needed when we played our games, and we lived to play our games. Playing Indians was our favorite. In the middle of the garden there was even a well-worn, moldy hammock that we used as our teepee. The garden was perfect for us.

Holly has four other siblings, making the Brown family have five children in all. Five playmates that I constantly imagined as my fellow Indians. We divided ourselves into groups of three, making tribes. Holly was always the leader of her tribe, and she always picked Natalie, her senior by three years, and Dillon, who was the only boy. So I was consistently in the middle of the two extremes: Kari, older than me by five whole years and the most bossy, and Carly, younger than me by five whole years and the most annoying. We’d been playing Indians even before Carly was born.

~ ~ ~

I remember Holly and me being ecstatic when she arrived. “Now our tribes will be even, and it will be more fair,” Holly stated. We were five and peering into the crib after bedtime. I was humming to the new creature, our littlest Indian. Holly climbed into the crib and patted the baby’s head, murmuring, “Yes, I think you’ll do.”

~ ~ ~

We had the same names every time we played. Holly was always Little Lightning, Natalie was Pretty Deer, and Kari

was Wise Owl. It was hard choosing Dillon and Carly's name, when they joined in. It was resolved because Dillon insisted his name be Indiana Jones and we were too tired about the whole thing to argue. Carly was called Baby, because that's what she was. I chose Wildflower for myself, not because I was the pretty one or the sweetest child or even because I smelled good, but because I might just have been the wildest kid in the world, which made me special.

We always went to the River to gather our "food" and drink our water. Dillon had set up a swing rope to get across. I can still see him swinging in my dreams, dangling like a real-life Tarzan. The River was really just a creek, running through tan dirt between saplings. It was maybe six inches deep and a couple of feet across. It always warbled a happy song that sounded like picnics and peaches and something primal. We had made makeshift nets to catch fish and frogs and grass-baskets for gathering berries and roots. We used cups from the kitchen for water, because our leaf-bowls leaked terribly. After our spoils were taken to the teepee in the garden, we prepared a "feast".

~ ~ ~

By now it was so hot we had taken our clothes off and were in our undies. The sun would gradually make us red and our feet would start to bleed. "Little Lightning, I'm burning and it hurts," I would whine.

"So am I," she would sniffle out. "If we were in the same tribe we could help each other."

"Then let's start our own tribe," was always my answer.

We'd go break the leaves off the aloe plant and squeeze its juices all over one another until the burning went away. We'd wipe each other's feet and clean them with water, then smear aloe over that, too.

Kari would make us pretty earrings in the garden. Tree sap and lavender flowers combined together to make a colorful paste, which she would apply on our ears in dots and say, "Move your hair out of the way. Don't touch it for a whole hour, until it dries. Wildflower! I said don't touch!" Kari knew what she was doing; those earrings wouldn't come off for days.

~ ~ ~

Holly and I created our own language. How we understood each other, I'll never know. She would gibber

something and I would reply; we knew each other enough to get the meaning of it. It annoyed Kari to no end that she couldn't decode it. Natalie insisted it was a joke. But it was real Indian speech to me and Holly, and we knew they were just jealous.

One day, while having a conversation in our Indian speech, Holly's eyes got really big and her mouth opened into a slight "o".

"What's wrong?" I asked, converting back to English.

"I just thought of something," she contemplated. "What if we say something bad? Like in another language, but for real? Like if we curse in Chinese or something, but on accident?"

"So?" I wondered what she was getting at.

"Well, that's bad. We aren't supposed to say bad words, Mommy said so. So we should stop talking Indian speech, because it would make Mommy mad. We're only eight, so it's extra bad! And bad words are bad words, no matter what language they're in," was her answer.

Seemed logical to me.

~ ~ ~

We would play until we were absolutely exhausted. The day was filled with raids, tribe wars, face painting with crushed berries, and making baskets, tools, and jewelry. We went until we simply couldn't anymore, laughing and smiling; living all the way through.

The day would end, and we'd lie outside under the summer sky, breathing in the lavender air. The trees would rustle, and the frogs would sing old Indian songs. We'd always lay next to each other, holding hands, smoothing each other's hair, cuddling together like little Native children without a fire. We'd taste the honey stars and imagine the yard was a valley. We'd make believe there were snow-capped mountains all around us and plan for the coming harsh winter. And for a while, all six of us were trapped in the cosmic bubble of childhood, in love with the world and with one another.

Jason Stewart

The Flute

Another family celebration. Scent of garlic,
sizzling beef, perspiring glasses, *et cetera*.
Red tablecloth, white faux porcelain attended
the vague celebratory scene,
heralded by the *pop!*
of inbound parental inebriation.

Elements of discord wove into the proceedings:
inlaid cabinet doors over the fridge swung open
mystery brown smear running against its golden grain
moving out of sight.
This was long-term storage for the little-used
glassware; not often a champagne family.

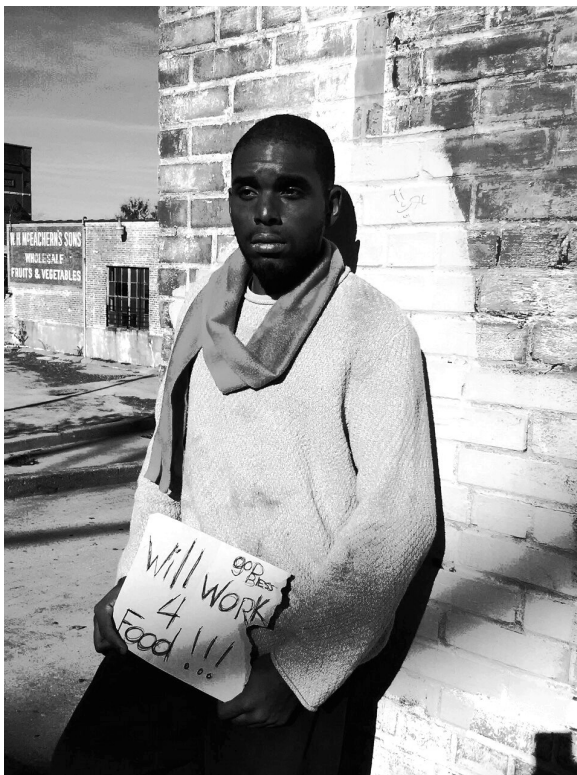
Inside it was dusty, dim, archeological.
Champagne flutes stood in sad memorial rows
beside the sad extinct lake of the punch bowl.
Who uses a punch bowl in this day and age?
It partially shielded our guest from view.

The tragic circumstances of the event
were wholly unknowable.
We found him inside the inverted cone
dusty, desiccated, infinitely sad.
He cast his patina of cadaver grease
just above the stem of the glass.

Had the mouse wished to play the flute,
some primitive verminous impulse
to engage in deadly metaphor? Probably not.
Probably he jumped and landed nose-down
frantic tail coiling uselessly above the rim
that no lips will ever touch again.

For weeks he had been there,
secretly lying in state in the midst

of the flurry of our ongoing lives...
yet divorced from it all,
enduring, mummified,
in transparent death.



Shemekka Coleman

Young Beggar

Kaneisha De Vega

A Poor Girl's Definition of Poverty

I wake up to a growling dog, my stomach.
What can I find to eat?
My refrigerator is an empty room.
I open my wallet to look for change
Nothing.
I ask for help, a beggar standing on the side of the road
I feel so ashamed.
“Why don’t you get a job?”
It echoes in my mind as I stand in my empty bedroom.
I continue to fill out job applications,
The managers pass through the papers as if I don’t exist.
I laugh as I hear how people say
“There’s nothing to eat at my house.”
Because I know the true meaning of “having nothing to eat.”
As I eat my dinner, I savor each bite
Because I don’t know about tomorrow.
I dream of where poverty has lost its power
A refrigerator filled with food
A garden covered with flowers
A mountain covered with bread
A river flowing with milk
Sandwiches as tall as towers
How beautiful it is to dream.

Christian Godwin

Birth of Homunculus

Moral compass now erupting,
Silent, inward, somewhat seeming
Like an ember, in the cold night, burning
Like a torch to light this darkness
This murky haze of ignorance we all live inside
Growing, steady, only quickening
In its movement towards the core of our being
And with our little ember we stumble onward
No sight but with our damaged compass
Through the days of misinformation, wandering
In a field with nineteen flowers, wilted, faded,
And dying in this grayish fog
This the long night, this the deep night
One step forward and three steps more towards nothing
Heaven smiling in its absence, in our blindness
Nothing but an empty space, silent, vacuous
And in this core we curl up sleeping,
Turning, like the earth upon its axis
Weeping for our long lost savior, sending images
Through the grayness, creating our own messiahs
Living like soulless golems, one thousand homunculi
Stand up, rise, and whisper to us
Tell us all the things we'd like to hear, but get us no closer
To the truth of our existence
A pillar of faith replaced by phantasms,
Of our own creation, to save us from this crisis,
A chrysalis, opening, releasing a distorted beauty,
The beast unfurls its wings, sending showers of damnation
And we will cover our faces, and cry, in shame
At this undoing, that we called on, and we will know
That it was us who birthed our end



Liz Harman

Life in Death

Insanity and Teenage Hubris

What do you think of when you hear the word, “Betrayal?” For some it could be a friend telling a secret. For others it could be someone specific like Edward Snowden or Benedict Arnold. It could be something more subtle or more overt. Someone you love dying unexpectedly can be seen, oddly, as a betrayal. They betrayed you by passing away without you having a chance to give them a proper goodbye. Whatever happens the feeling is always the same-- that icy grip on your heart and stomach.

I was fairly young when I felt that touch. The snowball of this betrayal now seems like such a silly way to begin. It starts, as teenage life usually does, with an argument. It was late one evening. To this day I’m not entirely sure what sparked that argument, but it was probably something stupid. It ended with a heated shouting match between my mother and me. She felt that I was too closed off, that I spent too much time on the computer and that my parents didn’t know who I was anymore because we never talked.

“Fine,” I shouted, “Do you *really* want to know?” Malice and teenage hatred dripped from every word, “Check your email tomorrow!” Then I slammed my door shut.

I lay there in my bedroom seething for a while until I finally got up. I was slightly more calm--bordering on detached--as I crept down the stairs, then the short hall, then through the kitchen on my way to the computer room. Logging into my AOL account, I looked around through my friends’ list to see if there was anyone there I could talk to. Maybe if there had been I wouldn’t have gone through with it. There was nobody there. I browsed through the Internet quickly and came to my LiveJournal. Sucking in air quickly to steel myself a little, I copied the link and dropped it into an email to both my parents.

In a few weeks I would come to realize how terrible of an idea that was.

The LiveJournal was an outlet to the storm that I felt in my life. Unpopular, nerdy, antisocial, smarter than I should’ve been but too stupid to know that I wasn’t as smart as I thought I

was, that website was my coping mechanism. That Journal was a noxious bog of terrible thoughts and feelings that had sought desperately for an outlet that I was unable to find in my day to day life. And I had just sent it to people that admitted, to my face, that they did not understand me.

I went to bed that night feeling pretty smug. They wanted to know about me, who I was and what I thought? There! Let them choke on it. Looking back on that decision now, I see it was not a moment of great forethought.

The next morning, in the manner of a teenager, I woke up having completely forgotten the fight. It was not immediate, so it was not important, naturally. Coming downstairs I saw that my father was still there, which was odd, but I didn't care. He had to have seen The Journal, but he didn't say anything. Things must have been all right; they saw, they must have understood.

There was a ring at the door. I checked the back door in the kitchen first, since that was where everyone came in. Nobody was there. Figuring it was some kind of postal delivery, I went to the front door, and when I opened it, I felt the room go cold around me.

Standing there, framed in the doorway, was a police officer, "Hello, son, is your father around?" The air was rushing past me now, flowing out of that open door.

"Yeah..." I croaked, "Let me get him." I turned around to call for him, but he was already there, stone-faced, standing in the hall at the bottom of the stairs, looking at me and the cop.

"We can do this one of two ways, son. It's up to you," the cop began to explain, his hand already reaching back for this cuffs. "You can come along willingly, or I can cuff you." This was no choice at all. Shock, confusion, and terror all waged a war in my brain. Like any good war, nobody won and my mind was left a barren field. All thought was halted. I was reduced to the mental capacity of a cow; docile and trusting even when being led to the slaughter.

"Can I at least get dressed?" I questioned, staring down at the pajamas I had just thrown on when I woke up.

"Yes, I'll be waiting at the bottom of the stairs. You've got five minutes."

With blood rushing through my ears, I stumbled up the stairs to my room. I changed into some summer clothing--shorts,

flip-flops and a t-shirt--then marched zombie-like back down the stairs.

I had never been in a police car before in my life. I was terrified out of my mind and utterly confused. I couldn't speak to ask questions, and when I cast that pleading look for an explanation at my father, he just stood there like a statute, implacable.

I was locked into the backseat, and the ride began. It was cold, like the ninth circle of Dante's Hell. The officer was like Lucifer, flapping his wings and blasting the vehicle with icy winds from the air conditioner. The vinyl seats creaked and squeaked at me while I fidgeted trying to get warm in that lost place.

The drive felt like forever, and I don't remember much. I was driven first to a hospital where a doctor sat down with my parents and me and explained to me that My Journal was what brought me there, "My journal? What do you mean?" I questioned. My brain had turned to its cattle-like state and was placidly munching grass witnessing everything with a wide-eyed detachment. I had come to the slaughter, but like the cow, I was too confused to understand just what was coming next. It was too much for me. The cop, the ride, the hospital, the doctor, and to find out that it was because of My Journal had me nearly catatonic. I was only a young teenager; this is stuff you only see in movies with Winona Ryder.

"They called children services. Some of the things you say here," the doctor waved around a printout of My Journal. "Some of them are pretty extreme."

I felt mute, ignored and wholly misunderstood. I tried to explain what I meant, that it was a vent... a coping mechanism, but it was still too close to Columbine, and nobody heard a word I said. The decision was made that I would be committed to Four Winds Mental Health Facility for observation. I was loaded into the back of an ambulance, strapped down and driven off upstate.

Events were happening around me so quickly. A normal teenager the night before was transformed into A Mental Patient. How could this have happened? My head spun and my stomach was doing a gymnastic set that would have made an Olympic athlete proud. Confused, scared, and alone, I had nearly shut down totally by the time I was officially committed.

The first night was terrifying. I had truly entered the Ninth Circle at that point. The Hospital was colder than the police car had been. When lights out was called, it was like being locked in a closet. To make matters worse, my roommate snored like a diesel truck. I got no sleep for two days until my mind began to claw its way back from the pasture.

I switched rooms the third night and met a young paranoid schizophrenic who oddly enough helped pull me back to reality.

I honestly don't remember his name at this point, so I will call him John. John had been there for a long time, longer than anyone else--mostly because of his condition, but also because he was "spirited." John had made several escape attempts, and though The Hospital was privately owned, they frowned upon escapees.

Because of John's attempts to escape, his street clothing had been taken away, and he lived, for the entire time that I was in there, in pajamas. He explained to me that the PJ's were to make him immediately identifiable during any search.

Like most people in The Hospital, the first question he asked was, "What are you here for?" When I explained that My Journal had landed me there, he nearly fell off the bed laughing.

When he was done, I asked him about why he was there. John explained that he was there because he used to think that there were recording devices in light fixtures and microphones in his teeth. "But I don't think that anymore," he hastened to explain to me, looking pointedly at a camera fixed in the ceiling of our bedroom.

From John I learned an important lesson of survival, both for physical survival and mental well-being: Fake it until you make it.

My final roommate at the facility was a young boy named Perfecto.

Perfecto was there for a short while, and we got along very well as roommates. I think he was there for a little over a week, maybe two, and was expecting a visit from his mother. She was going to be coming up from New York City to visit him, and he was really excited for the visit.

The day before she was supposed to come up, Perfecto received a call from his mother informing him that she had to

pick up an extra shift at her work and wouldn't be able to make the visit.

He returned to our room. Tears filling his eyes, he asked me to give him some space. Understanding, I left. I returned after a bit, figuring that he might need someone to talk to. I did not expect to find Perfecto hanging by his shoelaces from the mantle.

I asked him to stop. He looked at me, face turning purple, with the betrayal he felt shimmering in his bloodshot eyes. It wasn't a noose, and I didn't think that he would succeed, but I also didn't want to take the chance. I warned him that if he didn't stop I would have to get the counselors. He continued to stare at me, defiantly.

I sighed, left our room and walked up to the central desk in the dorms. "Perfecto's trying to hang himself," I said simply.

The counselor looked at the camera and rushed past me, speaking quickly over her radio as she ran. "Perfecto..." I muttered to myself. I knew that he had only made his situation worse. Whatever he was in for, he was now under a mandatory watch period for trying to commit suicide.

The counselors rescued Perfecto in time, of course. I stayed away from the room to give them space; when they had him cleared out, I waited a little longer. I avoided going into our bedroom for several hours after that; I just couldn't go in there. I asked around, trying to find out what normally happens to people in the event of attempted suicide. I was told to just wait; provided he was all right, Perfecto would be back soon enough. Even after it was time for bed, Perfecto hadn't been returned.

My tossing and turning that night was interrupted by voices outside of the room.

Our bedroom was right next to what the Hospital absurdly referred to as The Quiet Room. It was, in fact, a padded room. No corners. No windows. No metal. Sometimes there was a mattress on the floor for patients that couldn't be trusted to room with others. At that time it was occupied by a cutter and anorexic--Kristina, I think her name was.

"We need the room, Kris. Please come out," one of the counselors said politely.

Kristina refused to reply.

“Please, come out, Kristina. We need the quiet room for someone else. Go back up to your room.”

“No!” Kristina shouted.

“I’ve asked you twice now. We need this room for someone else. Kristina, get out or we will remove you.” The counselor’s voice had a sharp edge to it.

Again Kristina refused to respond.

I didn’t hear the call, but I knew what was going on. It’s part of the unofficial survival training when you go somewhere like that. You are told by the long-terms what to do and what not to do, who to speak to, and how to act. It was all about acting the right way to get out as quickly as you could. Kristina had violated a cardinal rule: Don’t resist. She was going to experience the thing that everyone learned to dread, regardless of personal experience--Code Orange.

I didn’t have to see it. What was about to happen to her had been described to me before in vivid detail by other patients--again, more of the unofficial survival training. When they tell you not to resist, they explained why the big rule was “Don’t resist.” A Code Orange was a constant fear of many patients. It didn’t matter if it was rare, but nobody wanted it to happen. Four very large men would come out, grab you, and hold you down while someone else gave an intramuscular injection of a very powerful sedative with a very long needle.

My mind, in the darkness, put together the images all by itself. The silence swallowed the night for a short while, the counselor occasionally asking if Kristina wanted to cooperate.

There was a scuffling sound. My imagination spun the image for me, and I figured it was Kristina moving to the far side of the room, away from the door, probably into a corner. “No!” She shouted, “I’ll come. I’ll come. It’s okay!” She had realized her mistake at this point, but it was far too late. She must have seen the four orderlies, and she knew what was coming now.

Their tread was muffled by the padding on the floor, the walls between the quiet room and my own, but I knew that there were four, very large men walking into her room by this point. The fifth was a doctor carrying a long needle filled with an anesthetic.

She just kept repeating “No! Please! No!” over and over again, getting louder and higher pitched. They moved cautiously,

I knew, because I'd heard stories of broken ribs, arms, legs, bites and scratches from Code Oranges. "Get her arm!" one of them called suddenly. Then there was a scuffle echoing around The Quiet Room.

Kristina was reduced to incoherent screams and shouts. The four men called orders to one another as they subdued her. "Turn her over," the doctor instructed, and there was a slam as the men turned the young girl over and held her down. I didn't need to see it, but I wished fervently that I couldn't hear it either.

She screamed even louder. The sound must have been deafening in The Quiet Room, because it echoed horribly in my own. She continued to scream for a short while, but her shouts were reduced in volume and intensity as the sedative took over. I heard the clank of a stretcher and they wheeled her out.

The counselor, calm, as if nothing had happened, returned with Perfecto several minutes later. "Do you need anything?" she asked him.

"Can I get an extra blanket and a pillow?" His words were slow; he didn't sound at all like the hyper little man he had been. He must have been drugged pretty heavily as well. The counselor agreed, returned with Perfecto's requests and left him to sleep it off. Considering the fact that he had attempted suicide only a few hours earlier, hearing him at all was welcome. Especially after hearing what had just happened to Kristina.

Before my time at The Hospital ended sometime later, Perfecto thanked me for helping him. We talked for a while about what he did and why he did it. We were going to keep in touch after we both got out, but like a lot of teenage passions, they were fleeting. I never heard from him, and I was too caught up on my own life to try and contact him.

I only knew John for a short time; when you reach a certain age you move out from where I was and go on to the adult facility. He taught me a great deal in that time, but after he left I never saw him again.

Kristina never talked about what happened, but I could see something had changed in her eyes. I always wanted to say... something, anything to her, but I could never work up the courage. I think back on it, even today, and wish I said *something* to her.

There are stages of grief, and we all know them, but what are the stages of a betrayal? For some, like me, it was being completely shut down with fear, anger, confusion, and any number of emotions that I couldn't even begin to describe at the time. John was betrayed by his own mind, trapped in delusions only partly controlled. Perfecto felt a betrayal by his mother and couldn't bear the weight of the emotions. Kristina was betrayed by the people that were supposed to treat her.

Sometimes you learn things from a betrayal, sometimes it just opens wounds that will never heal. Sometimes . . . it's a little bit of both.



Brannigan Carter

Unreachable Door

Night Terrors

In the deep stillness of the house
a creaking floor board betrays the night,
the child has nowhere to hide.

Screaming childish eyes open wide
to the feared darkness,
ears search the stillness.

Quiet shuffling footsteps
invade the eerie night,
the child hides beneath her covers.

Creaking rusty hinges of her
bedroom door announce his arrival,
in the darkness a monster lurks.

Afraid to scream or cry she moves
her head side to side in a no,
he has threatened to kill her mother.

Monstrous hairy hand clamps her mouth
as his other hand pins her to her bed,
sleeping bluebirds are secure in their nests.

He pushes her nightgown up,
bunching it around her tiny waist,
her favorite doll is named Sarah.

Her body screams in terror,
no sound escapes her mouth,
rusty hinges signal his departure



Bethanne Tobey

Summer in London

William Linn

All the Same Tonight

(Dedicated to Lee Ritenour)

In the big scheme of things, he didn't understand most of her displays at all. What was she doing in a commercial art program, and for that matter, how did they see to allow her to display these? Pencil sketches? Collages? Photographs? Several small oil paintings? In a commercial art program, a commercial art *competition*? He looked at the young woman sitting at a table amongst them, with the big "4" on the table to identify her from the other entrants. She would have no idea who he was, as he was given no special badge to alert anyone. The press would soon enough give him away, no doubt before he finished the room. But for the moment he was alone with her, just another ordinary visitor.

She was petite, and shapely under the bright white sweater and the blue jeans these young Americans wore like uniforms. But the stunning face! And her long, thick red hair spilling over her shoulders like some Greek goddess. He sidled up closer to her. He smiled and nodded. She saw him and smiled back, perfunctorily, still clearly ignorant of his identity, and how important might his smile be to her future. He came closer still – the creature had the most stunning green eyes he had ever seen, greener than his memory of his own mother's eyes, and now he saw a truly stunning smile. There was a sprinkling of freckles across her face and down her neck. He wondered how far down they went.

"I like your work," he told her, as a way to get closer still. "It is certainly different from the others, and unexpected."

"Thank you. Yes," she said, a little sadly, glancing over her shoulder before turning back to him. He watched an unpleasant display of emotion across her face, some very dark shadow and a pause before she continued. (*"I can take care of Dean Morgan for you," he had said to her, making a show of eyeing her up and down, "but you have to do something for me."*)

“Yes, I’ve made some sacrifices to display what I wanted to display, rather than what the school thought I should display.” Then the shadow passed, and he saw that bright smile return.

“This does not look like work done as a result of your training here.”

She noticed the unobtrusive, but still clearly English accent in his voice. It was a handsome face, with the smoky gray eyes, and the curly brown hair with a touch of gray at the sides. The suit and tie looked expensive. He wasn’t tall, but his face and manner seemed full of confidence. He had a friendly smile. Was he CMU faculty? She stood up to talk to the first person this evening to make a show of being interested enough in her work to actually talk to her.

“Well, most of it is my own, and most before I enrolled here. But my father didn’t know what else to do with me, so he sent me to the Institute. I tried Duquesne, but dropped out after two years.”

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed deeply while saying this, as he watched the play of emotions – the wrinkling of her brow, the clenching of her teeth – across that beautiful face. It was a face that itself could inspire an artist, he thought.

“I really don’t understand how I made it through the first two competitions,” she continued, “although I did make more of an effort then of displaying more of my commercial art.”

She talked to him as if he would know who or what was this “Duquesne,” but he could see a small pool of reporters now heading this way, and she would soon enough know who he was. He had only a minute more alone with her.

“What is your best piece?”

“Oh, well, my favorite is in the back. Here, let me show you.”

She actually took his hand in hers, the student unknowingly leading the master – a delightful irony that made him smile in spite of his efforts to appear polite but only distantly interested. She had a strong hand for a small woman. It felt full of confidence, he noted, as she led him to an easel behind her other work. But the strength he felt in her hand belied her voice and body language of discomfort at clearly being a misfit among the other contestants.

The reporters were almost on them. “Mr. White, Mr. White – a word with you, please!” She realized now that there was something special about this visitor, as opposed to the others, the various bored university supporters and faculty who came to the show to judge the contestants for themselves.

She stopped him in front of a stunning oil. He tuned out the rest of the room to take it in. It was good showmanship to the press to tune them out, to “study a work.” He knew this about them by now. It would only last a moment, he knew, this deference. But, as he expected, they stopped suddenly, hushed, and he was allowed to be lost in thought while examining her work.

It was a large five foot by four foot canvas. It was an oil painting of scenes from a circus. But the canvas was split into individual scenes, giving the picture a sense of a collage. She had – rather cleverly, he thought – overlaid or superimposed various scenes from a circus performance over the audience seated in a semi-circle opened for the viewer to see some individual faces.

There were all the requisite circus animals. There were the trapezists in one corner. There was a balloon and cotton candy vendor in another. There was a lion tamer and his scantily-clad assistant in another. There were the mesmerized faces of the children, and the faces of clowns. There were sad clowns, and happy clowns. There were many clowns, and they served to connect all the different parts of the picture into a unity.

It was certainly an odd composition for an oil painting, for a painter of any age. But it was simply beautiful as only an oil painting can be. All was done with painstaking care. Actually, it did lack spontaneity, as if that mattered in a painting that required such perfect timing and experience (and surely luck) to have taken so well. No cracking. No bleeding. She understood the techniques of painting with oil. And her subject matter showed marvelous choices and composition.

And color! Brilliant oranges and yellows, and shades between. . . . The red noses of the clowns The tiger’s face was a miracle. He stared at it closely. It looked like it would leap off the canvas at you, coiled, snarling, while sitting on its pedestal.

He took a step back, to take in the picture as a whole, still momentarily stunned at finding something so artistically mature at a student commercial art competition. The picture glowed, yet she had no special light source external to the picture itself. It was merely sitting on another ordinary easel, in an ordinary college auditorium. It was not merely the luxuriousness of oil itself as a paint medium, but the composition itself showed understanding of how color interacted with the subject matter and placement, how it augmented other colors in juxtaposition. The composition and colors together glowed with a vitality created by the artist's vision. It was wonderful – there was no other word for it. It was wonderful.

The Circus, she called it. But although the children's faces she individualized were heart-warming, and the tiger simply marvelous, the clowns captured most of his attention. Was this her real intent, or his misinterpretation of her intent? He scanned the painting again. They still seemed to be the true focus of the canvas. Clowns drew your eye from one corner to the next. What did "clown" mean to her?

Through the crowd of five or six news people now crowded around him, he called out to her, over them. "*The Circus*? Perhaps you should call it *Clowns*?" He waited patiently, so she would understand that he was truly asking a question, not merely making a comment.

"Do you think?" was her only answer. He knew it was all the answer he was going to get, now that she knew who he was. *Too bad.*

Her other paintings were unsigned. But this one she signed "CB" in a small, but lovely flowing cursive. He still didn't know her name. He quickly found her number in his bulletin. *Cassandra Bishop. My God, she really is named for a Greek goddess!*

She had stepped back to her chair when the press people first came up to surround him. He silently passed through them, again and again, making a show of being lost in deep thought – to show them he was unable, as yet, to talk to them. He wandered among her watercolors and the collages in her display area. Several of the other contestants had, by now, also left their own areas and started to follow him around.

A strong concept of texture, he thought, *and obviously, color*. He noted that her use of white space, particularly in her watercolors, seemed mature beyond her years.

Some of the pencil sketches were excellent, as well. She had an eye for capturing real emotion otherwise hidden in her subjects' faces. Some, however, were a bit overworked. She lacked confidence in knowing when she was actually finished. *A common problem among young artists*.

One sketch was obviously of herself: artist mocking himself! Not an original idea, but still an unusual one for someone so young. He took a close look at it – was she able to capture emotion in her *own* face? Yes, there was patience there, but determination as well. And “irony.” Did she recognize and capture the irony, the humor in doing her own face?

When he was finished viewing each of her exhibits, with the news people following him around like fleas, he again walked back to see *The Circus*. He decided the moment called for some showmanship. Stepping back from the picture, he forced the small entourage encircling him to back off and open up his view of the young student. When he could see her – and they could see that he could see her – he executed a slow half-bow in her direction, a broad smile in his own face, while nodding his head. It would be the picture some fast-witted cameraman captured to highlight the story of this competition on the back page of the Sunday Press newspaper magazine about “The Arts in Pittsburgh.”

It was her reaction to this public display of respect toward her that he replayed in his mind, again and again, flying home to Boston. It touched his heart in a way no one had touched it in many years. She reminded him of Julie, so earnest and so full of life, and reminding him of Julie reminded him how much he missed her.

As he came up from his bow, to look directly into her face, her hands came up to her mouth. It was a reflex – he was sure – to keep from crying out. Had he been close enough, he was also sure that he would have seen a moment those stunning green eyes welled up with tears before she again grasped control of herself in this otherwise contrived situation. He had bowed, publicly, in recognition of her “service” to her art, to that unfathomable obsession that artists have to capture forever a

moment in the mind's eye, or a moment of the heart, and for the first time – he was sure – she had the satisfaction of having it seen by someone who really, truly, understood that effort, and appreciated her success.

She clearly had real potential as an artist, but this was a finished piece. He looked at it again. He could see nothing to do to change it, to better it. How could he have ever expected to find someone with this kind of potential here?

He made the obligatory show of examining the rest of the room. Most of the other contestants were now congregated around The Goddess, looking excited and seeming to congratulate her, while she stood silent and motionless, seemingly stunned. But he had no questions for them in any case. Looking at pictures of futuristic furniture and fashions for clothing, and advertisements for products like the school kid commercial art he expected to find, he also worked at entertaining the press people with anecdotes about his appearances on the Johnny Carson show – about the things they *didn't* see going on behind the curtains of those shows. But most important he worked on the phraseology he would need to announce her as his winner when even these dim-witted reporters would have the sense to see that her displayed work was not “commercial art.” And sure enough – “Mr. White, do you really think the competition was fair with one person's entries clearly being of a different . . . *type* than all the others?”

He had a witty comment planned. He understood the game well, now. He couldn't tell them he didn't care a damned about this so-called competition, and that she didn't belong in a commercial arts program; that by some accident, or some power of will on her part (or some divine intervention?) she managed to show to him and any others able to understand that she did not. Would she benefit from a year in Carnegie Mellon's Art department? Perhaps. He really didn't know.

Maybe he should try to find out. Be that guest lecturer he thought about earlier. Yes, he could surely do that. Then he would see her again.

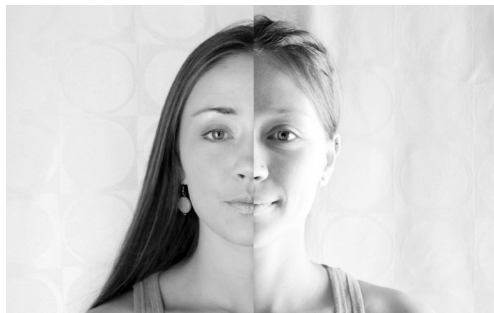
After dinner, comfortable in his hotel room, he thought about the picture again. The red noses and webbed feet. Childhood innocence. Painted-on happy and sad clown faces,

happy children and happy mother faces. He must ask her where the picture came from – its history of meaning to her. He would have a message delivered to her, and ask her just what did “clowns” mean to someone grown up, but still so young.

Later on the plane back to Boston, his nose pressed against the glass, he watched the bustle of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and all the empty farmland of Pennsylvania between them pass under him before the plane turned north. Wondering what all those lives in the crowded cities were like below him, while the farmland lulled him into quiet memories of his own childhood before the War and the Germans destroyed it, a sudden shaft of sunlight through the clouds jolted him into the memory of her hands reflexively going to her mouth. She had a wedding ring on – he could see the glint of it clearly now, in his mind’s eye, but had taken no note of it at the time. He consciously noted it only when he handed her the winner’s plaque, and the folder of scholarship paperwork, but then forgot about it. But now he was sure he had seen it first when he made a show of bowing to her.

“Cassandra. Cassandra . . . Bishop.” He said it out loud, but there was no one nearby in first class to hear him.

So, she was married. *What would he be like?* A woman this attractive, with this kind of determination, grit and talent – *just what kind of man would a young woman like this choose to marry? Surely a first marriage for someone this young. So a young man. So, just what would he be like?*



Cara Harris

Faces 1

Hearing Through My Eyes

I hear our door creak open, feel the sun begin to rise, smell Nurse Nan enter the room. Someone else accompanies her today. I wonder-

“We always begin our rounds about eight in the morning. She’s the first one.” I hear Nurse Nan’s slow and unsteady footsteps enter our room. “We’ll follow up on her again around three or so.”

I smell the sink come alive, taste the antibiotic soap swell throughout the air. “Okay Ms. Christine.” I hear the rise then fall of air, the jingling of metal. “Seventy-six over fifty-four.”

Another jingling sound resonates through the musty air. “Her pressure is always so low. Our last check will be around five, right before we go home.” I notice a pause, silence, the rattling of leaves, and the zigzagging and looping of scratches.

“She’s so pitiful,” I hear the tall nurse say to the other one. “She seems so pale. Does she have enough sunlight? Maybe I should raise the blinds for her.”

I can tell she just started today –the new, tall nurse. I need not eyes for this understanding. I hear the long strides of her footsteps; feel the trembling yet baritone sympathy in her voice. I smell that inexpensive fragrance she bought at the five-and-dime this past Friday –Black Friday. The splashes she dotted on her wrists this morning reek of a holiday special. Yes, all the new ones splash it on no differently. I taste her sincerity – occupational youth marks her. Her skin still holds all the grin without the bitter of repetition.

“Huh?” I feel Nurse Nan answer, dumbstruck –a toady tenderness, at best. “Oh,” a subsequent giggle -you do not have to see a giggle to know its nature. “It’s just a shrub. Family’s drop ‘em off here all the time.”

I hear Nurse Nan sniff –she suffers from severe allergies this morning; has, ever since I first felt the new of her civilities. You do not have to see to know that one suffers from allergies. You can smell the sickness on her breath... feel the suffering in

her rhythm ... taste the misery in her aura... hear the anger in her glare.

"It's so sad." I hear the sincerity in the tall one's voice; feel the tender vibration from her long struts as she approaches me. She moves deliberately. I can taste her confidence – uplifting and with candor.

"Try to be quiet," Nurse Nan mentions, her voice a croaking whisper. "Don't want to wake her."

"Oh, right." The tall one responds, looks over to the nearby bed. I feel the wind from her long blond hair as she turns. You do not have to see to feel the color of one's hair. The heat from light and moon shine no differently to those who have sensitive feelings. Another blessed with blindness, and she will tell you no differently. One need not eyes to recognize movement; one need only feel the winds dance across her limbs.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She has liver cancer."

"What's her name?"

"Ms. Christine Valderest Hughes."

"How old is she?"

"Sixty-three."

"Wow! Poor dear." The tall one looks down upon me. She comforts me with her smell -the smell of appreciation. I feel the warmth in the wind as she turns to me. Lusting for the innocence of her being, I shiver when her hair brushes again my right side. She uses coconut-melon; I know the fragrance well. All of the new ones possess a like predictability no differently.

"You are beautiful." I can taste her friendliness. Honey Dew strikes up the same appeal. The new may stay fresh a few weeks longer in this one. "Are you thirsty?"

Oh, God yes, I am. I am so parched from my roots, upwards. I can already smell the water; one can when water stands as the only dew she drinks.

A spring in Minnesota gave birth to it, I think. One might describe its quench as: a touch of humidity within a zest of mountain air or the cool which reaches into the roots of one's essence.

"There you go." I hear the beautiful mocking-bird-voice leave her mouth, and the taste of water springs life anew –I return to life once more.

“Okay,” I hear Grumpy say –this name given Nurse Nan: *Grumpy*. “Let’s go on to the next room.”

I feel the tenderness from the tall nurse brush against me once more. Silk could be no softer. The smell of her inexpensive perfume leaves with the wind that trails her. I know that she will soon be as frozen as the others will, but I truly did enjoy her company; if just for today.

Routine has a way of numbing the mind. You smell a certain aroma for a celery seed of minutes and forget that it is there. It is not until later that you realize the smell never left you, only its freshness did. But you, in turn, did leave it; did not realize that its feelings are as real as yours are. Did you stop to think that it may be hot or cold, thirsty or hungry, sick or injured... lonely, or afraid?

“What kind of bush is that anyway?” I hear the tall one as she forces the sun to set. My body quivers within the sun’s absence, and I droop with fear. You do not have to see to feel the darkness; that feeling accompanies one, if does no other.

“I’m not sure,” Nurse Nan answers, her voice now carrying more weight. I hear the vibration of her steps leaving. She would do well in the jungle. “Crepe Myrtle, I think.”

“Hmph,” The tall one says as she pulls the door to a close.

A piercing of sun still trickles through the crack. Thank God for new people. A new one never forces the sun to set completely. One always knows where the sun sits. Even though she may not be able to reach it, she can always feel it whether she can or cannot. “I’m going to have to get me one of those.”

I feel the two voices fade, smell the dead of silence, hear the stagnancy of the air, taste the loneliness of Ms. Christine as she sleeps to my side and from her weed wrap. I was once the family hope, the beauty that would bring Ms. Christine back into existence; yet, nothing aside of her children could heal her disease. One’s family can sprout the withered, or wither the sprout.

In the beginning, the family visited us daily. Then the visitation evolved into weeks...months... years... hardly-ever. As do the nurses that walk these halls daily, frost leapt upon

them. As did the freshness from my fronds, those which once brought a new hope to an otherwise desolate destiny, the Christine family faded into a distant memory of mechanics.

We now both lie in shade, awaiting our certain fate. We claim sisterhood, struggling to overcome insurmountable odds. And though on the norm, we lay here in thirst and hunger and loneliness, every now-and-again, a new tender heart will sprout into our midst. Soon after, a sprig of that new interest conquers our sickness and injury. The hope from her visitation overshadows our fear and loneliness. The outpouring of her compassion quenches our thirst and hunger. We may not retain eyes of which to see, but we can hear well; feel well; taste well; and smell well. We long for attention and affection.

Why can you not see that with your eyes? That, which we do not have, blesses you. No one cares of truth, I guess; only the perception of truth will sell one's soul.

Now, and in these final moments, I feel a tremble. The tall one and Nurse Nan approach our room, pause at our door. The door creaks open, and the tall one peeks in. I smell her fragrance again. Somehow, her demeanor rests askew. Nurse Nan's contamination has spread into her freshness; I no longer find the taste appealing. Thorns rise within her voice.

"I love that plant," I hear her say.

"Go ahead and take it," Nurse Nan responds. "The family is never here, and Ms. Christine never sees it. No one will ever miss it." I hear Nurse Nan chuckle, feel her insincerity. "Besides," I hear Nurse Nan sneer.

I am, "Only a plant."

Mark Rose

The Mountain House

unfocused eyes, the moon spitting images of itself
wrap your head around thus ma'am
rainbows reflect off the mica and into my iris
we collect and store in a mason jar
a long time coming, a year in the freezer
a six hour drive down I-40W, mazes up mountains
fortify the property, a boulder blocking the gate
descend into the basement to de-winterize

drive to the grocery store, we smile and swipe
succumb to the night, our eyes are wide
we attempt to eat while piecing together mica
the tables a mirror, gyrating in gasoline
we attempt to watch a movie, both weird each other out
we're awestruck by the constellations we fabricate
we burn our cigarettes to the cotton, and then some
we rinse and repeat and don't self-destruct

awaken in the morning crusty eyed and cotton mouthed
time to go home, resume the daily routines
cleansed of preconceptions, we can breathe
clean up the cabin, pack up the car, lid on the mica jar
the homeowner will never comprehend this getaway
the implications glossed-over in the generation gap

probably for the better

Lesley Richardson

Harvest Night

A young girl slinks up the ladder rungs,
her red lips blotted with dew. The moon
is on the rise, the thin ridge peeking over
the roof of the barn as she ducks inside.
A farmer tends his crops as the un-shucked
cobs conduct the stars. A man, nude,
slung over his chipped counter, takes
another swig of moonshine.

The first hint of fall rests on their tongues,
a cool, velvet sip of the yellowing moon.
They each take it in, swish it around, allow
just enough to trickle down the back of their throats.

Fall equals light. It shimmers over rows
of unraveling corn, feasts on productivity, love,
and lands in hearts, giving renewed hope
in the form of a healthy yield. Something rises
inside a personal equinox, a line that marks
new beginnings and is larger than it actually is,
an illusion that doesn't matter as long

as it makes us *feel*. The umber horizon

creates an internal burn, sounds off a *yee-hah*,
shatters a glass on the ceramic floor,
and a voice hums at the now full moon,
limbs arching toward the sky as a single
piece of corn is flung upwards, a sonata of gold.

Glassy-Eyed

I wasn't even in summer school, but my vocabulary increased that summer by one word....ALCOHOLIC. It was the summer before fifth grade. I was one of those kids that couldn't wait to play kickball²² down the street. On this particular day, as the game ended, my friends and I gathered to discuss what the next activity would be. I mentioned that my mom said we could come to my house and swim the rest of the day. We had a built-in pool complete with a slide and diving board and it became the place to hang out during the summer. But just at the mention of my mom, a boy named James asked me a question that rings through my memories to this day. He said, "You know your mom is an alcoholic, right?" I was a little confused, because at nine years old I'm not sure I even knew what that word meant. I looked at him with utter confusion and said, "Why? What do you mean?"

He answered with sarcasm in his voice and said, "She drinks all day long! No matter what time of day it is, there is a glass on the counter, by the sink, with vodka in it." I was now even more confused. How did he have such a specific location of a glass, and how did he know there was vodka in it. I don't remember seeing a glass every minute of every day on the counter, let alone knowing what was in it all the time. I felt my heart rate increase a bit, and I know my face was red with embarrassment. Suddenly I realized an alcoholic was someone that drank vodka every day, and it was something I was being humiliated about. I looked to the other kids for help. I waited for someone to say, "Gosh James, that wasn't very nice!" But it never came. They all just stood there staring at me. And after a few minutes of "No she's not, yes she is" back and forth with James, he followed up with one last sarcastic and demeaning blow, "Your mom gets drunk every day, she's an alcoholic!" I heard a couple of kids snicker, and when I tried to make eye contact with them, they put their heads down and tried to hide their laughter. I was so mad, I wanted to say something mean back to him. I wanted to call him ugly and make fun of him for having pimples all over his face. But I didn't. My emotions got

the best of me, and I started to cry. A million thoughts were running through my head at once. “How does he know so much about my mom? How does he know something I don’t know? And why is he being so mean when my mom is so nice?”

I was stunned and embarrassed and humiliated and sad all at once. All I knew to do at that moment was run home. And I did. The faster I ran the faster my tears fell. The sun never stopped shining, but suddenly everything in my world was dark. I felt the heat of the sun on my face. My tears burned my cheeks as they rolled down them. By the time I reached the garage I dragged my arm across my eyes and nose to dry the tears and not look so sad when I went inside.

I stepped into the kitchen and there was my mom as she always was; standing over the sink cleaning vegetables for another delicious meal she never failed to provide. She turned and looked in my direction when she heard the door open. I thought for a minute she would look different to me now, drunk perhaps. But she didn’t. Her hair was still perfectly in place, her red lipstick and eye makeup were flawless and her long, red polished fingernails were in perfect condition. She dropped the carrots into the water and dried her hands vigorously as she ran towards me. I know her anxiety over the sadness of my face when I walked in was being taken out on that towel. She rung her hands and rung her hands until she reached me. She pulled me to her stomach and I wrapped my arms around her and held on for dear life. Her back was to the sink, and I looked around her to get a glimpse of the counter before I spoke. And there it was, that glass on the counter just as the boy said. I looked at that glass like I had never looked at it before. I saw that drink there every day, but I guess I just never noticed it. It suddenly seemed like the first time I saw it. All of sudden I noticed everything about it. The small glass full of clear liquid, several pieces of nearly melted ice clinging to one another and a small piece of tattered lemon wedge floating on top. I couldn’t breathe. I gasped a mouthful of air and looked at my mom.

Suddenly, it wasn’t just a glass of liquid anymore. It defined my mother and how my friends looked at her and would see her from now on. She was so loving and so concerned. She put her hands around my head and gently pulled me close to her. She held me to her stomach and stroked my hair. She comforted

my pain before she even knew what was wrong. She was great at that. She always knew how to make me feel better. She loved me better than anyone could. For a minute I didn't care what happened down the street. I was sure if my mom was an alcoholic and if it was as bad as they made it sound, I knew it wouldn't make a difference. I knew it wouldn't change the way I loved her or how she loved me. Part of me was tempted to say nothing. My heart sunk as my mom cried out to me, "Baby, what is wrong? Why are you crying? Did someone hurt you?" That was a strange question at the time. Oh yes, someone hurt me alright but not in a way she would have ever suspected, I guess. My answer came in broken sentences to make room for the intermittent sniffles, as I said, "Mom, James said you were an alcoholic. He said you drink all day long." I felt her hold me tighter at that moment and held me for a minute before she spoke. Finally, she asked, "Why would he say that?" I responded "He said that glass is always on the counter and it's always filled with vodka."

Looking back now, imagining that was me, what do you say to your nine year old daughter that just said the words vodka and alcoholic? She seemed a little rattled but kept her composure when she said, "Honey, I'm not an alcoholic. That glass is filled with mostly water, and I never get drunk off of it." I wanted to interrogate her, I wanted an answer that would make sure James and the other kids were never able to accuse her of that again. But I didn't say another word. She looked me in the eyes and asked if I was all right. I said "I'm okay, Mom, are you okay?" She said with confidence and grace, "Sure, babe! Now go play, baby. No more tears."

I guess that very minute began her denial, but at my age I believed her. I believed everything she said because she was my mom and I loved her more than anything. In my eyes, that woman could do no wrong.

She encouraged me that day and made sure she didn't drink too much out of that glass. But from that day on, that glass on the counter became for me the focus of my days. I studied it. I monitored it; I made sure to catch a glimpse of it every time I walked through the kitchen. I spent the better part of my days glancing over at the counter to see how many times my mom filled that glass.

The days passed slowly but things went back to normal pretty quickly. It was only a few days before the kids met at my house again to swim. Even James came to swim. I actually let him hang out again like nothing happened. Maybe if we all pretended like it never happened then maybe it would be like it didn't. I guess we all let it go eventually, all of us but my mom.

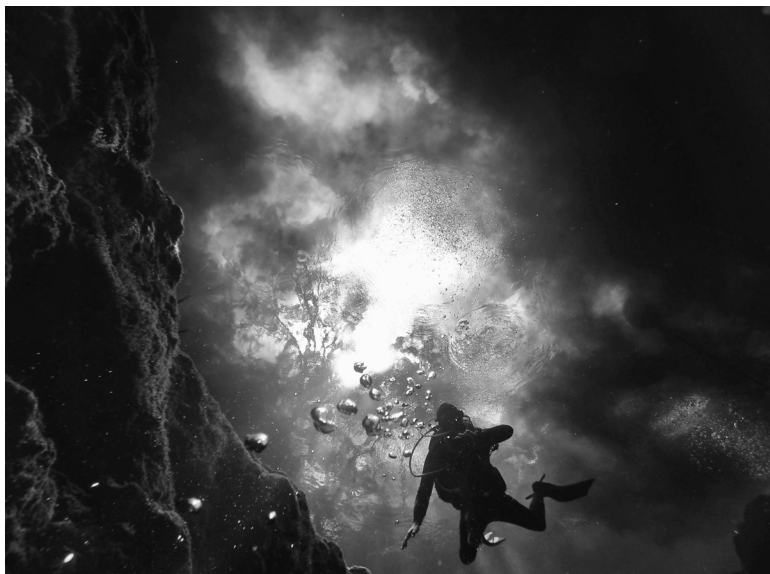
One afternoon when he stepped through the door, my mom stopped him. Then she did what I never thought I'd see. She asked that boy to taste her drink. I couldn't believe it. She handed him the glass and said, "Here, taste this, I want you to tell me what it tastes like." He seemed embarrassed and shocked, but he tasted it anyway. I held my breath the whole time it took him to raise the glass to his lips. He took a small sip, swallowed and made a no big deal face. He shrugged his shoulders and replied, "It tastes like water." My mom then insisted that it always tastes like that and she was not an alcoholic. He handed the glass back to her and looked a little sad. With shame in his voice he responded, "I'm sorry Mrs. A, I'm sorry I said that." She accepted his apology, and I motioned him to follow me outside to the backyard.

My mom was amazing. She was beautiful. And even in the face of humiliation her beauty and grace remained. She was where beauty went for encouragement. So instead of being angry or mean or banning that kid from our house she confronted him, accepted his apology and shared our home. After that day it was never mentioned again. That boy was very nice after that and never said anything to hurt me again.

Everyone finished out the summer like it never happened except for me. I continued to think about that glass on the counter all the time. I wanted to spend all my days in the kitchen just to see what would happen to it. Sometimes I even thought I would ask my mom how many times she filled it. But I didn't. I just looked at it, and gave it as much attention as one would a new puppy. When I woke up I couldn't wait to see if it was there. When I left the house I couldn't wait to get back home to see it again. It consumed me for a long time. I watched my mom closely and she never acted any different, drunk or otherwise

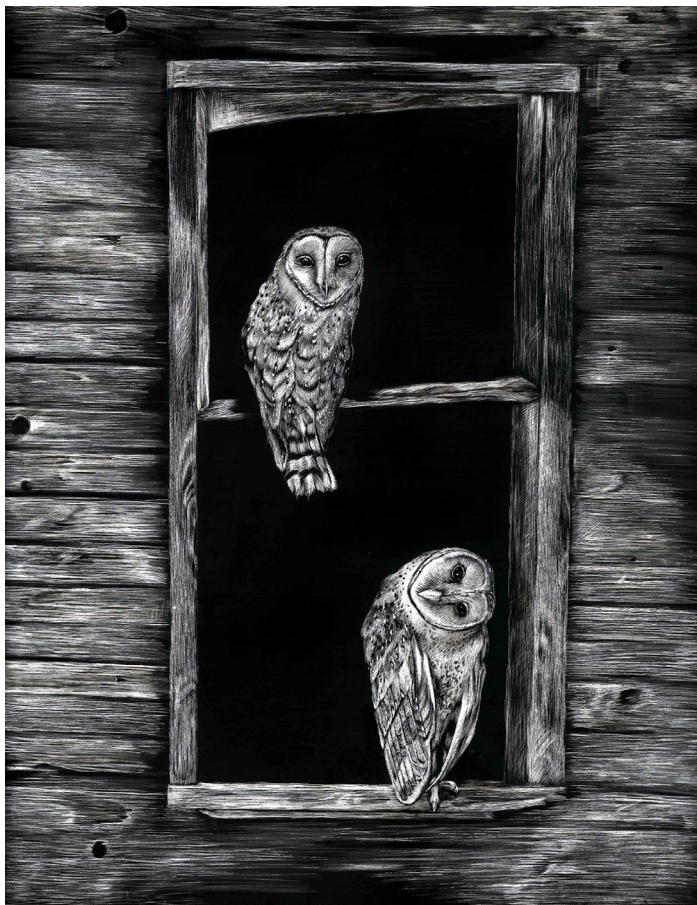
School was beginning soon. Fifth grade. I was so nervous to start elementary school again. I knew we would have

vocabulary tests and I worried the word “alcoholic” would be on that test and I would have to use it in a sentence; “My mom is an alcoholic.”



Lillian Higgins

From Inside the Cave



Ashley Thompson

Two Owls in a Window



Ashley Thompson

The Foxes and the Grapes

Julia Connell

Elegy for Mama Sveta

I imagine your long black hair
still and straight, leaning to the ground
silver streaked as the bars of the prison cell
black as the floor below as you hunch towards it.

I imagine you know it is your time
thinking about your mistakes while you are confined
counting the cigarettes smoked and the bottles consumed
and the children you have neglected.

In your last attempt at solace
you sum up coins and send spring fruit
to the orphanage where we have been put
where you imagine we are cared for.

You send oranges, green apples, purple grapes
to satiate our supple tastes.
I imagine that you smile as you think of us
gulping down the sweetness of your gift.

But we don't.
This is all we have of you,
so we savor, we hoard, we count
each grape stem, orange peel, and apple seed.

Soon it softens, eventually it rots
in the black wooden basket
the tip of the tongue memory vanishes,
but not enough to recall the taste.

Lindsay Haney

Let Me Come Home

The rain pattered against the metal of the roof, sliding down the windows as if the droplets were in a race to get to the bottom. I blinked and the tears that had been threatening to fall streamed down my face in a mimic of the droplets. I wiped the tears away with the back of my hand, but more just fell. I sniffled, taking a last swipe of my eyes, before crawling into the back seat of the car for another sleepless night. I pulled the small blanket up to my shoulders though the unbearable heat of the past summer was still lingering, closed my eyes tight and wrapped my arms around myself – the only thing that made me feel safe. Every little sound put me on edge. I double checked the locks on the doors and closed my eyes again, but sleep wouldn't come. The bright lights of the parking lot would make sure of that. The tears threatened to fall again and my thoughts ran wild. Would I ever get out of this place? What did I do to deserve all of this? Would I ever have a home again? What was home anymore? Home was not this – not this car, not the tears falling down my face, not this parking lot – that was for sure.

The common phrase says home is where the heart is. If one was to look the definition up in a Merriam-Webster dictionary, he/she would say home is the place where one lives permanently. So many definitions, but at that time I was sure I would never know of home again. Before, home was the place I went to every day after school was finished – my permanent residence. Little did I know, that place wouldn't be so permanent after all. It was my choice to leave – to pack up everything and leave Wilmington, North Carolina, in the rearview mirror of the '99 Buick Century and set out for California – but I didn't know of the hardships that would follow. I didn't know of how difficult it would be to afford a place in California and that I would have to return to my hometown of Wilmington. There's that word again – home. I also didn't know that that '99 Buick Century that had brought me back home – if I could call it that – would break down for the last time only a day after returning and I would have to rely on everybody except myself to help me get to where I might go.

Home: a simple word with so many definitions. Home: a word I never knew the meaning of. I'm brought back to that day – the day that everything on my shoulders finally got the best of me; that night I let the tears fall as the rain pattered on the metal roof of the car that became my place to stay. I thought of how my home could have possibly been this car. It was where I slept. It was not my home. People say home is where the heart is. If that was true, then it would reside in me, but I didn't think that was so true either. The heart is just an organ needed to survive, so it couldn't possibly be my home. Maybe I was taking the meaning too literal. I thought about that too. Where could my heart possibly be except for inside me? I thought of places it could be – the house I once lived in, the beach where I spent many summer days watching the waves, my favorite bookstore, even that pile of rocks I played on as a child though my parents had told my sisters and me not to – but none of those screamed home to me. I wouldn't care if I never returned to any of those places. They were only places.

The tears continued to fall and my sniffing was clouding over my thoughts, but I forced myself to continue thinking of what home truly meant. Home is not just where I lay my head. It is not just where I make my bed. It is not the roof above my head. Home was not, is not, a place. What home is – the meaning of home – is happiness. It's that smile upon my face when my father says something goofy – something only a father could find funny. It's the smell of honeysuckles signaling the summer months to come and the sweet taste of honey from their nectar. It's that feeling of complete fullness when my favorite song – the favorite song of the week, that is – blasts through my speakers and the words flow out of my mouth as if I had written the song myself. It's the words scribbled out in my notebook when an idea for a story suddenly comes to me. Home is my dog waiting to pounce on me when I visit my mother, despite my obvious displeasure of getting knocked over by an eighty-pound beast. It's walking down my favorite path and the smell of jasmine filling the warm air. It's the tears that fall down when I watch my favorite movie, *The Invisible*, because they're not tears of sadness. It's the thrill of doing something scary like getting on one of the big rides at an amusement park and then getting on it again. It's that feeling of contempt when I finish a drawing that

has seemed to have taken me five years, but it had really only been a few days. Home is happiness – that joy that comes from all of my favorite things. Home is not a place. It is not my residence. It is surely not this car.

So many definitions and I finally found my one. A few more tears fell from my blue eyes, but this time they were not tears of the world falling down on me; they were tears of happiness. A smile crept onto my face and a small laugh escaped my pale lips. All this time I was trying to find my home, but I was already there. I am home. Even when the world feels like it is out to get me, I am home. I am always home.



Brantley McKeithan

Angelique

The Valiant

The French countryside, viewed from my position along the broken wall of the abandoned farm house, was picturesque on this warm afternoon. I trained my eyes on the horizon where the golden wheat fields met the blue sky. This peace would be short-lived. In a rare display of affection, Sgt. Foster squeezed my shoulder. "We're in a tight fix, so keep a sharp eye, Private. We're low on ammo and supplies, but we're the last of Easy Company, and we have orders to hold this position at all costs." Then a Panzer crested the hill and rolled toward us bearing a white flag. "Hold your fire, Willets. Let's see what game these Krauts are playing."

The Wehrmacht major climbed down from the tank as its treads groaned to a stop. His manner exuded the arrogance of the would-be masters of the world. I waited to hear his harsh, Prussian accent as he addressed Sgt. Foster. "Howdy, Sheriff. Reckon you wasn't expecting to see us in town so soon."

"Who the hell are you?" asked Sgt. Foster.

"We're the Red Gulch Gang, meanest hombres in the West." Craig Rowley lowered his kickstand and leaned across the handle bars of his ten-speed Schwinn. Then Mark and Roger Rowley rode up to join him.

I hate the Rowleys, all three of them. They're bullies, and they always get their way. Here they were again, riding around on new ten-speed bikes and changing the rules. Cheating is the only way they can beat us. We lost the Battle of Gettysburg because the Rowleys changed it to the Battle of First Manassas right in the middle. I'd had it with them. "No way!" I yelled. "Not this time. You're supposed to be a German Panzer division."

Craig put on his T-shirt, which had been the flag of truce, and spat towards me. "Shut up, Pissy Pants. You're a second grader. You don't even belong here. "

Sheriff Foster spat back at Craig. "He's in our reading group, so I say he stays."

Then Mark Rowley piped up. "Fine, Pissy Pants can be your fat, little deputy."

Roger Rowley, their youngest, glared at me with his cold, grey eyes. "Tomorrow morning, there won't be no place for you to hide, Pissy Pants."

The Red Gulch Gang reared back on their horses and spurred the stallions away. "We're coming tomorrow, Sheriff," shouted Craig, "and Hell's riding with us!"

I climbed to the top bar of the jungle gym and hung there by my arms while Sheriff Foster did chin-ups. Off and on we'd held this jungle gym since Memorial Day. A couple of times the Rowleys had taken it away from us, like when they cheated at Civil War, but we had managed, sometimes with help from a few other kids, to keep the Rowleys at bay, away from our hill and jungle gym. We were off duty now, so I could address the sheriff by his nickname. "Frosty, I hate the Rowleys."

"I know." He chinned himself for about the twentieth time.

I let go and dropped to the ground. "And I'm not a pissy pants second grader."

"I know."

I really am not. It's summer, so I'm going into third grade, and the whole pissy pants thing is from those cheating Rowleys. I got moved up to Miss Miller's reading group in the afternoons, so I had recess when they did. Frosty picked me for his team, not even last. There were four other kids left. Then I caught a pass from Frosty. He threw the football so hard into my chest that my arms just wrapped around it automatically, and then I stumbled backwards past the teeter-totters to score the winning touchdown for one of the greatest endings in Super Bowl history. I was already on the ground when Craig and Mark jumped on me, held me down, and tickled me until I peed in my pants and almost cried.

They said it wasn't cheating because there's no rule against tickling in football. I checked at the library, and it's true: The NFL has no written rule against tickling. I'm just saying that if the Minnesota Vikings held down Franco Harris and tickled him until he peed in his pants and almost cried, some referee would throw a flag.

That was my first day at big kids' recess, and while everybody was laughing, Craig Rowley started making big sniffing noises and saying, "Eww, gross! It smells like pee!"

Frosty wasn't laughing. He just walked right up to Craig and asked, "Oh yeah? What's it smell like?" Then Frosty punched Craig and bloodied his nose. "I bet it smells like blood now, you sonofabitch." I threw my arms around Mark Rowley's legs before he could jump on Frosty, but then Miss Miller broke up the fight, and she marched all four of us to the principal's office.

My mom had to come to the office and bring me clean underwear and pants. Mr. Rowley came with a clean shirt for Craig, but Frosty's dad works nights and doesn't answer the phone. We all had to have a conference. Mr. Rowley acted like it was no big deal and said that sometimes little kids can get hurt unintentionally during games with bigger kids. He made his sons apologize for any misunderstanding, and they left. The principal said he wasn't sure about me being in the multi-grade reading group. The honor and privilege was maybe too much for a second grader, but since Miss Miller said I was advanced, I could stay as long as I didn't let boys like *Mr. Foster* become a bad influence. They called him *Mr. Foster*, just like he was a grown up, too. Anyway, my new friend was in the most trouble because he had thrown the first punch and had said a bad word. He had to stay after school and clean the erasers and blackboard. I stayed with him. That's when I thought up his nickname.

Miss Miller was out of the room, so Frosty took her letter opener and unlocked the top drawer of her desk. Then we could read our confidential files. He pulled out the big manila folders, and that's when I found out his first name was Herbert. "Herbert?"

"Yeah, Herbert Foster. What's it to you?"

I said it didn't matter to me, and he said it wasn't his fault. His grandpa died right before he was born, and his folks had made a promise. I said it was tough luck, but maybe he needed a nickname like Frosty.

"What? Like the snowman?"

"Well, no, not exactly, but Frosty because you're cool," and the name just stuck.

I opened my file marked Willets, Peter, Second Grade. Miss Miller had written "precocious" under the heading Language Skills and Retention. "What's that mean?" asked Frosty. I told him it was a fancy word for advanced. Then Frosty

pointed at the only word under the heading Social Skills, “endomorph.” I told him it was a fancy word for being pretty cool. “Seriously?” he asked. I told him it was a fancy word for being fat. Miss Miller was coming down the hall, so Frosty grabbed two erasers and headed toward the door. “Read mine,” he said leaving the room. As I read his chart, I heard him stalling Miss Miller in the hall asking whether she wanted him to clap the erasers long-ways together or if he should turn one at an angle and bang it sideways. She said it really didn’t matter, that they were clean enough, and it was time for us to go home. I put the files back in her drawer.

We took the long way home by Martin’s Grocery. I wanted an Orange Crush until Frosty told me we could make better burps with root beer, so we split a Stewart’s. We were almost to my house before he asked about his file. I’d found out that Frosty had been held back a grade and Miss Miller had written “MR” with a question mark under Language Skills and Retention. “She says you need to buckle down and try harder,” I told him.

Frosty gulped our root beer and let out an amazing burp. “Yeah, that’s what all my teachers say. You want to know something?” I said sure. “Don’t tell anyone, but when I try to read, the words and letters get all jumbled up.” Frosty swore me to secrecy because if the teachers ever find out he’s crazy, they’ll make him go to the hospital where the doctors will put jumper cables on his ears to shock his brain and he’ll have to live in a rubber room. I wanted to change the subject, so I asked him to guess what I knew. “What?”

“Miss Miller’s first name is ... Ida.”

“No way!” said Frosty.

“It’s true.” I sipped root beer as Frosty looked at me with newfound respect.

“So that’s why she’s a teacher,” he reasoned. “She wants people to call her Miss Miller, or Mrs. Whatever when she gets married, instead of Ida. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I looked in her check book. Miss Ida Miller lives at 342 Crestview Circle, Apartment 12-D, and she has thirty-eight dollars and seventeen cents in her account.”

Frosty rubbed the back of his neck. “That figures. Fat cat teachers are rolling in dough, and they get free coffee at school.”

We have to pay an extra nickel for chocolate milk at lunch, but usually the Rowleys will cut line and buy all of it. I just save my extra milk money so I can get an Orange Crush, or a root beer, every other day after school. Frosty punched me on the arm, not hard. "How come you're such a good reader?" he asked.

I told Frosty I didn't know why, but reading was easy for me. Whenever I read something, it just stays with me, and I look up words in the dictionary, sometimes just for fun. Frosty told me we'd better keep that a secret, too. He said if the government ever finds out how smart I am, they'll want to put my brain in a jar of alcohol to study it. "You really think they'd want my brain after I die?"

"I don't think the government would wait that long."

It's good to have a friend like Frosty looking out for me, and I hope Miss Miller keeps the reading group together next year. Maybe she'll let us change our team name. Miss Miller divided her reading group into teams, and she said we could pick a name. I suggested the Berserkers.

"The what?" asked Brenda Swanson.

I explained that Berserkers were medieval warriors who went crazy in battle and used broadswords and battleaxes to hack their enemies into a bloody pulp. "That's stupid," said Brenda. Craig Rowley said he thought it was awesome, but then Brenda said a second grader shouldn't name the team, and Craig agreed. Miss Miller came over and said maybe we should name our team after a bird, like the other teams did. Brenda thought that was a good idea.

"Well, what about a titmouse?" I asked. Both Frosty and Craig started snickering. Brenda folded her arms across her chest and said I wasn't being funny. "The plural is titmice." Craig and Frosty kept laughing and saying "titmice." Judy McIntyre said I was gross and immature. Miss Miller said we were the Robins.

It was just after eight o'clock in the morning when Frosty met me at our jungle gym. He looked like a little kid as he pulled a Radio Flyer wagon full of cardboard boxes from Ferguson's Appliance. Mr. Ferguson said Frosty and I can always come take away the boxes from his loading dock. Washer and dryer boxes make the best forts, and refrigerator boxes make the best bobsleds. We beat the East Germans by two

one-hundredths of a second to win gold medals in the last Olympics. Now, we set up these boxes for extra cover.

The heavy scent of dusty sweat lingered in the air. A tumbleweed rolled past the telegraph office down to the blacksmith's shop. Folks had locked their doors or had left town altogether. Sheriff Foster and I waited for the low-down, lily-livered, side-winding Red Gulch Gang. Then Craig rode slowly into town with the sun at his back. He was wearing a real cowboy hat! It was a real, honest-to-God ten-gallon hat like Hoss Cartwright wears on *Bonanza*. He halted his stallion. "Well now, Sheriff. I'm surprised you stayed."

Sheriff Foster stood tall and still, completely unafraid, waiting for the right moment to send the leader of the Red Gulch Gang straight to Boot Hill. "Where's them mangy brothers of yours?" That's right. Distract the outlaw. Make him think.

Craig dismounted and stood alone in the street, ready for the showdown. "Oh, I reckon they're making a little withdrawal from the bank about now. Don't you worry. I don't need help taking care of you and Deputy Pissy Pants."

"Damn your eyes!" I shouted. POW! POW! POW! I fired my cap pistol straight at him.

Craig stood there and laughed. "Ha! You missed."

"No way!" I yelled. Then a bullet slammed into the left side of my skull. The searing pain drove me to the ground. As my left hand covered the entry wound, I could feel my blood pouring out. "I'm hit! I can't feel my legs. Everything's getting ... dark, so ... cold ..."

Frosty dragged me behind the Maytag box and pulled my hand away from the gaping hole in my head. "You got shot by a BB."

"How much blood have I lost, like a gallon?"

Frosty said I had a red dot on my earlobe. I'd be okay. Craig and Roger had sneaked around on either side of us and set up crossfire. The Rowleys were cheating again, and we were sitting ducks. Frosty said he had to get to the wagon. He told me to sit tight and draw their fire, and then he was gone.

"Hey boys, the sheriff's running away!" I heard Craig shout. "Come on, Red Gulch Gang! Let's go kill us a deputy!" The meanest hombres in the West were closing in on me, a wounded lawman, out of ammo and without a horse. Who was I

kidding? I was a pissy pants second grader and didn't have a chance against the Rowleys. I couldn't run fast enough to escape, but maybe if I surrendered, they'd let me live.

Then I heard a whoosh and one of the Rowleys yell, "No fair!" Whoosh! I poked my head above the Maytag box and saw a fireball hit Craig's cowboy hat. Roger was smacking himself on the belly to put out his smoldering T-shirt, and Craig was stomping on his hat. I could see the big scorch mark right in the middle of its cream-colored brim. Frosty pointed the cardboard tube at Mark. Mark yelled for Frosty to stop because Roman candles were cheating. Frosty answered him with a fireball to the thigh. Mark shouldn't have been wearing cutoffs. The Rowleys were on their bikes and riding away when the last fireball fell short. Craig yelled, "You ruined my hat! I'm telling my dad!"

I was climbing up the jungle gym. "Go ahead," I called after them. "Tell him we apologize for any misunderstanding!"

Frosty climbed up with me. "I can get fireworks whenever I want. My uncle lives in South Carolina."

"Yee-haw!" I hollered and dropped to the ground.

The soil is mostly silicone on this uncharted planet, similar to the Martian terrain. The good news is the atmosphere has sufficient oxygen. The bad news is the stray asteroid severely damaged the *Sagittarius V*'s auxiliary booster engine. Star Commander Foster and I may be stuck here awhile. We've seen no signs of intelligent life, but the place could still be infested with Rowleys.



Debbi Anisko

Jimmy's Portrait

The Turtle, the Rabbit and Grandpa

I was four when my turtle died. It was one of those early fall mornings in upstate New York when you looked outside and you could see ice crystals glimmering and glistening in the morning light as the sun meandered upward. I remember opening the back door, stepping outside onto the porch and tiptoeing to the dishpan where I had made a home for my little ten-cent turtle I bought at Woolworths. I always fed my turtle in the morning, and the turtle was always eager to see the morsels of old insects dropped before his eyes and within smelling distance.

To my surprise, this morning was different. As I peered over the edge of the dishpan, my eyes opened wide as I spied an inch layer of ice that had formed in the dishpan, and there I found my turtle, frozen solid. I remember standing there at first, not being sure if my turtle was okay. I wanted my mom to heat up the pan on the stove to free the little critter, but I knew he was a goner already. I had tried to free him from the ice, and as I did, his head came off. My mom flushed the turtle down the toilet the same way she flushed old refrigerator food. Even then, I thought that being flushed down the john was a bit undignified. My brother's goldfish had made the same trip months ago after my brother found it floating atop his fish tank. I don't remember crying about the turtle, but I do remember being amazed that his head just came off. After all, I only touched it . . . I swear I only touched it. Even though the goldfish died first, I think that losing my turtle was my first real recollection of death, of the end of life.

A couple of years later, Rocco, my best friend, and I, found a dead rabbit, and we buried it. We dug that rabbit up two or three times a week just to make sure it was still there. We were Catholic, and I think we got mixed up somewhat thinking that after death you would rise up and go somewhere. We were just checking that rabbit to see if he had risen. I remember one day, about the third week, the rabbit was missing. We just looked at each other—mouths opened wide--and knew that rabbit had gone to heaven. We didn't then give much thought to the fact that Penny, our neighbor's dog, had accompanied us to the grave

site on several occasions. I think she carried out her own plans for the resurrection. I remember sharing at show and tell in our third first grade class about the rabbit, and I remember that our teacher sent Rocco and me to the nurse's office to get a shot. I thought that was really strange since we made sure that when we exhumed the rabbit each time, we were careful to grab it by its ears. Our parents had to come to school to see the principal, too. I think they all thought Rocco and I might die like that old rabbit. We didn't understand why they thought we might die, but, I remember, we were really scared.

Death seemed sort of simple to us then, especially since we had only been exposed to the passing of creatures. Things changed for us that following winter when one of the neighborhood friends was riding his sled and hit a tree. The ambulance came and so did his parents. We weren't sure if he was dead, but we never saw him sliding on the hill again. Someone put up signs that said danger. After that, most of us kids starting sledding over on Hamburg Street.

When I was eight, I came face to face with death. My grandfather was dying, and my parents took me and my two brothers into his room. We stood there watching and listening to him gasp for breath, and the sounds of rattling in his chest made me want to run. We just stood there, though, and I didn't know what to do or what to say. I was really afraid. I didn't know what would happen when a person died for sure. For the first time, I realized, I could die. I remember wanting my mom to hold me, but she was busy with my dad. They were making plans for grandpa. We stood outside the house while they loaded grandpa into the ambulance; it drove off, and he died.

A couple days later I saw my grandpa again, this time in his casket in the living room at my aunt's house. There were lots of flowers and strange tall lamp lights beside that casket, people were crying, he wasn't moving any, and people told my grandmother he looked good. I remember he didn't smell good when I had to go up to the casket and kneel and say a prayer with my brothers. I didn't know if my grandfather was really dead, so I was very careful to behave myself, just in case. If he was dead, I wanted to touch him to see if any parts fell off, sort of like my turtle, but I just couldn't. The next day we buried grandpa deep

in a hole at the cemetery, much too deep for me and Rocco to check on whether or not he had been resurrected. I guess we figured he would be.

Penny, our neighbor's dog watched the casket carefully as grandpa was lowered down. We heard people remark that the dog must have loved grandpa very much. I thought of the missing rabbit and made sure that Penny came home with us.



Jim Criswell

Day's End

Dylan Hardee

Meals for the Sensible

A palm-sized world fractures and
unzips over Hell.

The yellow star within free falls
onto the black event horizon.

A big bang and great pops
as it skitters across the cosmos,
hissing like a snake-headed cat
opening a city bus door.

Tendrils of flavor
knot the air,
contorting through your nose
to wrap around your brain
on the other side of the house.
The aroma of battle--
black fire and red steel--
pours warmth behind your eyes
until it runs over into your palate.

Two heaps of oblong pearls
topped by a slab of hot gold
on a platter of cool silver,
joined by a glass of rubies.

Whirls across your tongue
like trying to eat a summer cloud,
thick and hot and soft and fat.
The scrumptious pain
of saliva exploding from your tongue,
evicted to make room for more flavor.

Crisp skin that slides off the flesh
like a silk dress shrugged off your lover's shoulders,
and tastes just as salty as her
neck half an hour later.

Cold Beer

When I drink this
cold beer from the bottle
carbon dioxide escapes
to the midnight blue open
where I can dream again
among the lighter air.
I'd ferment ten thousand gallons
the steel factory all mine:
me and the yeast
obese and naked.

I'd thought this up before
from a sticky malt kitchen
before I knew how hard it was
to capture gas with bare hands.
Took the toasted brown wort
with citrus pine aromas
to my bathtub full of ice
where the temperature
of this dream
went as cool as the pot;
above me
the molecules
floating just out of reach.



Michael Thomas

Three Heads Are Better

Jamie Bell

Teeth Like Papercuts

We crawled like slugs through salted sand,
bound by stray ashes of past cremations.
The world weighed down:
two tons too heavy,
six times too much for us to carry.

I reached my hand out,
fingers grasping
like hungry Africa on a Tuesday morning —
still parched and starving and desperate
from the shadows of yesterday's misfortunes.

You stumbled blindly, hand clutching empty bottle;
words made shapes like circus animals
in the night's sky: "Is this the only way to die?"

I felt teardrops hit my flesh,
like ice melting and sliding and slithering across searing
surfaces —
I corrected you: "It is the only way to live."

Haley Heath

Manhattan

Maybe it was the lights,
or the cars,
or the chaos,
a carousel of existence,
and we were a statue of love
standing silent and still
by the Hudson.

Maybe it was the sky,
or the moon,
or the people,
those silhouettes of survival,
and we were a portrait of perfection
hanging silent and still
in the center.

I had two arms to hold you,
and two lips to kiss you,
and two eyes to know you,
and I was grateful,
and you were thankful.

And in between
you and me
there was a silence.
She picked us up
and there we were,
over the city, unheard,
existing as one.

Lost

Loss.

It's like losing something but not like losing a shoe, or your car keys, or that lucky guitar pick that was flung into the crowd at the Death Cab for Cutie concert. No, this loss is losing something that will never come back.

Loss.

Mother.

Loss.

It never gets easier. It gets harder. The more time passes the more I think and the more worried I feel I haven't found her. Found her? Refer back to the beginning, *losing something that will never come back*. That is, unless sometimes when you're alone, you're crazy. And during this crazy alone time you think that she's out there somewhere. Walking the busy streets of China, trying fashion of Milan, or drinking hot coffee in a flat in London. And then you think, I think, this isn't possible. She's gone. I stayed with her after she flat lined and felt the cool of her skin, watched her descend into the ground. I watch her go. I watched but I didn't *see*. Maybe she didn't go. Maybe I blinked and she got up and left. Maybe.

Maybe.

Loss.

Sometimes it creeps me up. In the darkness of my room, my partner asleep next to me, I feel another presence. Is it weird that I'm scared of her now? The woman who kissed my boo boos, made me laugh, and showered me with love, scares the living day lights out of me now that she is gone. Funny, I feel like bumping into her at a supermarket somewhere far from here would be amazing but my wide-eyed wonder at night seeing her is terrifying.

Terrifying.

Terrifying an adjective that doesn't seem like it belongs in the same sentence as that of my mother. But that's how I feel. Once I had a dream that I was sleeping. I could feel someone whispering in my ear. I opened my eyes and there she was. In a nightgown and she was whispering to me. "Open your eyes.

Open your eyes. Open your eyes.” She repeated. And they were open and I was scared and I felt like she wanted me to be scared. But.

That was a dream, a dream that had awakened me all shaking and *terrified*. When I’m awake during the day I don’t think too much about it and I am not scared. My mother never scared me before. I am not sure why her being dead scares me now. But, it’s not only her coming to me after she’s dead but wondering where she is in the unknown. I am not very religious but religious enough to believe something happens after death. But, *what?* Where do you go? Where did she go? If she wasn’t horseback riding on a farm in North Dakota then where was she now she was dead? What if she was alone or sad or both? I couldn’t handle that and the thought chills my bones and shakes my spine. The thought of her wondering in some middle Earth alone, or in heaven or wherever you go, just tears me to pieces. It’s so terrifying not knowing but, is knowing better? All of this considered doesn’t change the fact that I miss her.

Miss.

I *miss* her. It’s weird. So weird to miss her when in the twenty-three years I was alive before she died, we only spent at most six days apart. We talked every single day and I lived with her. When I did go away for the weekend or to hang out, I called and texted her constantly. She was my best friend. It made me feel warm and wanted and needed. I love her. Now that she’s gone I don’t feel like anyone will love me like that again. Not even my father because there is a bond a mother will share with child that no one can compare. They carry you around like their special buddy in a womb for nine months and when delivered they already know you better, longer, more intimately than anyone else ever can. And now I don’t have that. And it hurts. It aches.

Ache.

Sometimes I avoid thinking about her because if I do, I get stuck. I get stuck sitting at a green light, stuck in my own mind while someone is speaking to me, and stuck somewhere lost. I think of her face. I remember all the parts of her and I remember the nicknames she made for me, watching scary movies and the things she did to make me laugh. I think about confiding in her and I think about how alone I feel without her. And it hurts. It stings.

Scream

Sometimes I allow myself to get stuck so I can feel her again somehow. I just let myself hurt till I feel like I can't breathe because the screams are crawling up my throat. Screams that I once belled out by myself in a car and promised to never let out again. I have not screamed since she was dying. But sometimes, I feel like I want to. I feel like I could. Scream like I did when the doctor came in and told me she was brain dead. Scream like I did when the neurologist told me a week later nothing changed. Scream like I did the night before I took her off life support, alone in my car. Scream like I am *angry*.

Angry

I *am* angry and I would give anything to have even the worst of moments with her back just so I can look at her again. So we can get over it and hug and then watch a movie or gossip or laugh. I would give anything to take this ache right out my chest and throw it, hard and fast against the wall where it belongs. Because this pain, so severe against my heart, doesn't belong locked in my rib cage but in a cold, dark room.

I am not a room. I am a person. And I am hurting. I am hurting because she is lost. Lost.

Lost.

A Loss.

A loss too deep for words to be found at the bottom of the ocean, if there were an ocean that deep. There is no ocean that deep. So I just have this.

Shelly G. Keenan

Laguna en Guatavita y Rio Guadalajara

We tangled our way
Up the mountain to a place
I would not see again,
You slept.

Your mouth was open
I wished to close it with Spanish kisses
The sensuality of the dirt air
Rushing rough ride

The men so darkly men
The children, dirty and happy
The women, walking in front
Not afraid of cars so close

A year later...I'm there again
The river so rollicky
With its night time lull
To me as I lay

Awaiting the man with the sleepy mouth
Who will take me now
To where my fantasies carry me
Away to the place I live

Oh Guadalajara
Receiving me
And leaving me
Breathless

Oh please
Let this music
Play on
Till eternity



Othello York

4xX=Art

Delaney Duke

A Story

Inspired by Russell Edson

This is the street where my head lives. I stay in the house at the end of a cul-de-sac, where it is impossible to really get to the end. My desk is under a window; it looks out onto the street. Sometimes I ride my bicycle around and around. I do this to think clearly. When I think, I write stories.

I start writing a story about a girl who has magical powers. She fights evil and saves the world again and again. I stop writing when I realize I have only written her as me. I think am trying to make myself immortal or at least important.

I start a new story. I write about a girl who lives in London and is a secret agent. I abandon this story when I realize that I am only writing myself again. I really want to be made important.

I start a story. This time, there are werewolves and fights among friends. There is a girl with beautiful clothes who is beautifully brave. I stop when I realize that werewolves have been written about so many times. It's just, I am not like this girl; I am not beautifully brave.

I get on my bicycle. I start another story.



Anna Mann

Urban Zen

