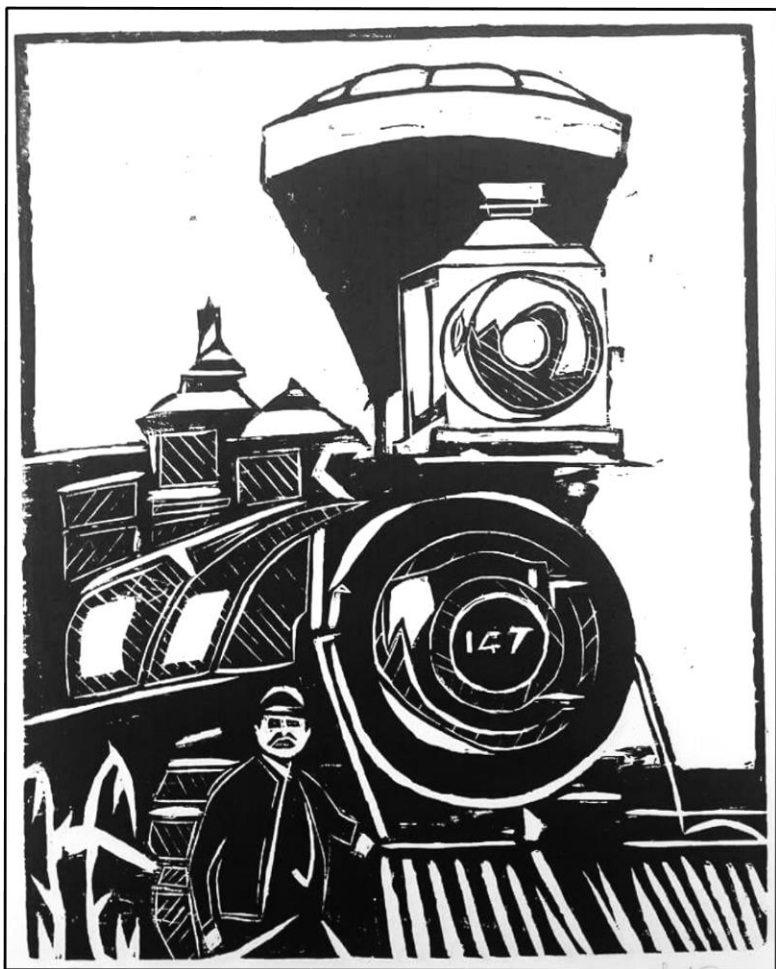


PORTALS



Spring 2017

PORTALS

Literary and Arts Magazine

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Train

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CFCC Portals Magazine

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Table of Contents

Non-Fiction

Lorna Niven	<i>Cigarettes, Sweat, and My Regret ..</i>	8
	Transom Award- Best Overall	
Kinga Baransky	<i>Mountain Man Blues</i>	1st Place..... 20
James Cummings	<i>Special</i>	13
Anne Logan	<i>Don't Cry</i>	60
Terri Misch	<i>The Ship and the Bottle</i>	73

Poetry

Melody Wolfe	<i>Home</i>	1st Place..... 32
Jean Jones	<i>From A Distance</i>	Faculty Award 19
Rebecca Daughtry	<i>Slow and Steady</i>	11
Tara Nobles	<i>A Minute in My Mind</i>	41
Suzanne Clark	<i>Like the Moon.....</i>	43
Jazzmin Yvonne		
Moore	<i>Disclaimer</i>	52
Ben Brier	<i>Cellular Activity</i>	66
Rebecca Odom	<i>Apathy: A Love Story</i>	67
Matthew Senter	<i>Steeled Hearts</i>	70
Marva Moss	<i>Fall Treasures!</i>	77
Alison Hegarty	<i>Mornings With You</i>	80
James Cummings	<i>In the Fall</i>	81
Allison King	<i>Battles</i>	83

Fiction

Amanda McMullen	<i>Monsters in the Attic</i>	1st Place 34
Meghan E. Cole	<i>Grim Things</i>	23
Htet Aung Shine	<i>A Late Halloween Tale: The</i>	
	<i>Miserable Creature</i>	45
Matthew Maffei	<i>Trimmed</i>	53

Visual Art

Kinga Baransky	<i>Bridge to Somewhere</i>	1st Place	7
Lillian Rogers	<i>Train</i>	Cover Art	
Christopher Ward	<i>Our Inner Pains Burn into Our Environment</i>		12
Terri Misch	<i>Matthew Mind Flight</i>		18
Kinga Baransky	<i>Mountain Man</i>		21
Arthur Green	<i>Untitled, 2016</i>		22
David Flores	<i>Cherry Bomb</i>		31
Zoey Batson	<i>Incense</i>		33
Lillian Rogers	<i>Elephant</i>		40
Javon Bullock	<i>Lady</i>		42
Ami Sanabria	<i>Lone Farm in Appalachia</i>		44
Jamie Wells	<i>Life Support</i>		59
Zoey Batson	<i>Sage</i>		65
Melody Wolfe	<i>Stonewall Jackson Reform School</i> .		69
Raime Cooper	<i>The Unknown</i>		71
Ashly Farley	<i>Growth</i>		72
Courtney			
Rivenbark	<i>Chariot</i>		76
Kyle Rouse	<i>Fall Light</i>		79
Lane Thompson	<i>Leaf</i>		82



Bridge to Somewhere

Kinga Baransky

1st Place Art

Cigarettes, Sweat, and My Regret

Lorna Niven

Transom Award

As the door opens to the facility's main gathering room, a flood of old cigarettes and fresh beads of sweat accumulate within the particles of dust as the women march across the room. I have only been volunteering here for about two weeks now; therefore, my virgin nose that has never experienced the intimacy of what comes with the odor of homelessness has not quite adapted to its newfound surroundings. As a woman approaches the desk, she asks for a tablet of aspirin, a fresh toothbrush and a tube of paste. Having to hold my breath while maintaining a smile, I hand her what she needs.

Before I began volunteering at Room in the Inn, a local women's homeless shelter in Asheville, N.C., I really didn't think my responsibilities would be that difficult: "You can help the women get what they need, help me with some paperwork and some simple housekeeping," the Director said. Unfortunately (and fortunately), I soon came to realize that my duties were much more complicated than what I had previously been told. While I was being introduced to the ladies in the program on my first day, I received looks of harsh judgment and had the distinct sense that I was not welcomed there. To be honest, I'm not sure I was. To them, I was just an ignorant, 18 year-old with no concept of what the real world really looked like. However, when I looked into the ladies' blank, yet secretly emotional eyes, I felt something pour out of them and into me.

One afternoon amidst the blistering heat of July, I noticed a woman come into the gathering room and immediately sit down in the corner. Not being one to seclude herself from the rest of the group, I knew that something was bothering her. Her forehead was drenched in sweat, her clothes were stained and torn, and her eyeball began to fester up a tear, ready to come crashing down at any second. Like I mentioned earlier, I had never been around such fragile, yet surprisingly strong, women before. Therefore, I took a deep breath and walked my insecure, naïve self over to the woman in the corner.

"May I sit with you?" I stuttered. I received no comment in return; therefore, I began to walk away.

“Wait, please sit with me, honey,” she finally added.

Without saying anything, I sat down next to her and smiled. After about two minutes of unbelievably uncomfortable silence, she just began to scream. That single teardrop that had been forming underneath her eyelashes had turned into a release of something she had obviously been holding onto for a long time. In all honesty, I am sitting here trying to form the words of how to articulate everything she told me that day -- and I can't. At least not in the way that she had told me.

The woman could tell that I was young and that I was just now beginning my journey through life. Without hesitation, the woman quickly grabbed my arm in a forceful, yet desperate manner, looked me square in the eye, and told me to never let a man control me or decide my fate for me.

“I promise,” I said to her.

“That’s not good enough!” she said with tears and snot flowing down her face -- the stench of cigarette smoke flowing out of her mouth and into my nose. “When I was your age I was weak and told myself that I needed a man in order to survive! So guess what?” she asked, “When my husband began to rape me, beat me, beat my kids! I let him. I knew I couldn’t stop him. I was too weak! Finally one day I had had enough and took the scorching pot of grits off of the stove and threw it at his face! And now, now I am single. Now I am homeless. Now I am alone. But you don’t have to be.”

At this point, everything that the woman had been holding onto for however long escaped. She had felt like she couldn’t talk to someone. Both of us now silent, overwhelmed, and shaking, began to hold hands. I didn’t know how to respond. To this day, I still do not know how to respond.

Most of us live in a society where we do not have to constantly worry about where we are going to sleep at night. Water and food is a common resource to us, but to others, it is a grand luxury. Every day at the shelter, I witnessed a group of women rolling cigarettes by hand to sell the next day downtown at the Town Square. To those women, each cigarette that was sold represented a step toward a fresh start. Those cigarettes were their livelihood, and besides the one day that I came into the shelter to find a woman upset, the women were typically smiling, singing, and thanking God for all that they did have,

opposed to all that they didn't. However, I complained this morning for not having enough time to buy my third cup of coffee before class.

My duties at the shelter proved to be so much more than just simple housekeeping and paperwork. I served as a shoulder. I served as an ear that could listen and a mouth that didn't have to respond. Little did they know, the women's duties to me were so much more than I had to offer them in return. Growing up, my mother and I were homeless. However, our path quickly changed as my mother received a job she had so eagerly wanted and worked to receive. That summer working at Room in the Inn, I saw what my life could have, and still could, look like. That summer, the program changed my life. That summer, the woman that smelled like cigarettes, sweat, and leaked teardrops changed my life. However, to this day, there is only one thing I regret about my summer volunteering at the shelter: I cannot remember her name. And for that, I am the poorest of them all.

Slow and Steady

Rebecca Daughtry

On a rainy summer evening
A young girl and her father
Driving on a damp and twisting road
Vast green woods on either side

His lips wrapped around a cigarette
Looking straight ahead at the narrow road
She looks out the window
Filled with fear

On a twist in the road
He stops the car
The girl frightened
Jumps in her seat

He gets out
She peers out the window with confusion
She sees a green turtle
Easing its way across the road

The turtle sure to get hit
He picks up the turtle
Gently places him in the woods
She sees all of this

She gets tears in her eyes
Making everything look like a blurry photograph
He showed genuine care for a small and helpless creature
Something he could never show his own daughter

It is a cruel fate
We can never pick our fathers



**Our Inner Pains Burn into Our Environment and Affect
Those Around Us**
Christopher Ward

Special

James Cummings

I can remember the first time I really saw the stars. Of course, I'd been seeing little points of light in the night sky for as long as I can remember, but on this particular occasion looking up became a new, unexpected and fiercely intense experience. I was in Las Vegas on business probably in the late 1990s, and I decided to do a little exploring in my rental car. For the first 15 minutes or so I was surrounded by the familiar gaudy dazzle of the Strip. On another trip to Vegas my daughter who was about 12 at the time summed up the essence of the place in one sentence. Gawking at the pyramids, and castles, and pirate ships, and Eiffel Towers, she said, "Las Vegas has a fake everything!" But the night I'm talking about now was a few years earlier. After the neon ruckus of the tourist district, I drove through what felt like the outskirts of any other city – a few strip malls, some nondescript commercial and industrial buildings and eventually some residential districts ranging from modest apartments to gated enclaves.

Eventually though, I drove out into nothing. Buildings became more dispersed and then absent and all the artificial glow of streetlights and houses and other traffic faded behind me. I pulled off the road to look around a bit and to get my bearings for the drive back to town, and that's when I noticed the sky. It was a clear, cool evening with no clouds and only a sliver of a moon. But most importantly with the car turned off there was no electric luminance to compete with the glory of the stars. Glory. Spectacle. Living rapture. No one phrase then or now could cover the sudden sense of heightened immediacy I felt.

The first thing I realized is that some stars have color. All my life stars had been white; some were brighter, some were dimmer, but all of them were white. Out in the desert on a clear night the first non-white star I had ever seen was clearly a pale shade of blue. Looking around I picked out a couple other blues and quite a few golds. I don't remember if I saw a lot of red stars, but I did see one. It wasn't just red; it was startling crimson. This, I thought, is what the sky actually looks like. I then realized that the lights that had always made me feel safe in the city had been sneak thieves depriving me of one of the

simple wonders of life on Earth. One other thing – out in the desert I realized for the first time what people mean when they describe stars as twinkling. What I had always thought of as the steady, constant light of the stars is anything but. Stars aren't points; they're more like positions where tiny flashes of brilliance are centered. "Twinkle, twinkle little star." I know what that means now.

In Las Vegas the lights of the Strip always raise my pulse and put a smile on my face. Out under the stars in the desert though, I sensed that after a few moments spent in the excitement of discovery my pulse didn't rise but settled. My breathing slowed; my pupils widened. The more I took in the sky, the more I felt like I was part of it and it was part of me. This was not just the sky; it was my sky. In a way it existed because I was there to perceive it. Each of the uncountable points of light in the sky represented a separate star or planet or galaxy that sent out a stream of photons thousands of thousands of lifetimes ago for the single purpose of impacting on my retina sending a message to my brain "You are part of all this and more." The universe, my universe, had paused to acknowledge me and at the same time to remind me that I was just a speck that wasn't here a cosmic moment ago and would be gone in a moment more.

Standing there beside a parked car in the desert I had an experience that I considered transcendent. I stepped out of my daily state of mind and reached a point of peaceful, quiet exaltation. But – and this is a crucial but -- at the same time, I was just a man standing by a parked car beside a desert road. Other cars passed by, and I assume none of the drivers or passengers were having a similar moment of communion with the infinite. There was nothing all that special about being in the desert; the specialness I felt was all internal. Whatever awe or peace or wonder or whatever I experienced was not a condition of the universe; it was a condition of my nervous system. In other words, the experience was physical, not metaphysical. The desert experience in Nevada was, of course, not my only encounter with a feeling of awe in the presence of the seemingly extraordinary.

I was in the delivery room for the birth of all three of my children, but I have the most vivid recollection of the first. There

had been billions of people in the world, but there was only one that I made. The pale, skinny, crying thing was not just mine; in a way, he was me born again.

Many years later standing at the bow of a cruise ship in the Caribbean, my wife and I spotted something gliding above the ocean about 25 yards away. It turned out to be the most amazing display of animal life I have seen before or since. Flying fish were popping out of the water ahead of the ship and sailing just above the surface of the water. Naturally, I had heard of flying fish, but I had always assumed they broke the surface, glided for a few yards and then dived again. What I saw, though, were individual fish who cruised through the air for maybe 20 to 30 seconds each. It was jaw dropping.

I am occasionally moved by skillfully rendered scenes in movies and on television. The scene in *West Side Story* in which Tony and Maria sing “Make of our hands one hand,” always at least chokes me up, and sometimes draws real tears. I felt similarly affected during an amateur Easter presentation at a church where a woman I knew had genuine tears of joy in her eyes as she acted out the scene of finding that Jesus had risen from the tomb.

A lightning storm viewed from a hilltop over downtown Dayton, Ohio. Martin Luther King’s “Dream” speech. Isolated pockets of storm damage seen in the hours after a major tornado. Feeling the naked flesh of a young woman’s body against my own for the first time. The “Defying Gravity” scene in *Wicked*. All of these things have struck me as being so outside the norm, so beyond the ordinary, that the power they had over me ventured into the supernatural. But once the emotion is stripped away – once my internal reactions to the stimuli are set aside – it’s clear that the stimuli themselves are perfectly normal and expected. There need not be anything magical or spiritual or supernatural or extraordinary behind them. Instead, there is something fundamental at work – a living thing perceiving occurrences in the world and reacting to them on an instinctive level as “meaningful.” A parent seeing an offspring for the first time should be overwhelmed with positive emotion because that infant represents that parent’s link to a future beyond death. Marveling at the appearance of a school of flying fish or at the damage from a storm speaks to the organism’s ability to see

opportunity and danger in the environment that surrounds it. Crying or laughing at a movie reveals the empathy that allows a social animal not only to observe the feelings of those around him but literally to feel those feelings and understand intimately what's going on with his neighbors. And finally, being gob-struck by an immense, intense sky is a natural reaction by a thinking being that has just been reminded that the universe is very, very, very, very, very big, and he is most definitely only a small speck in it.

Apparently, all human beings have these kinds of experiences -- the ones that feel separate from the everyday. In the moment, these experiences can feel so preternatural that one wants to put them in a different, special category. It doesn't seem right that love's first kiss should dwell on the same list of events as Tuesday's loading of the dishwasher. And all indications are that human beings have not only the capacity but the compulsion to create that second list -- the list of the extraordinary. There is something in our make-up that makes natural and unavoidable the division between the mundane and the "special." That mundane/special division throughout human history has tended to manifest itself in a way that leads to an innate understanding that experience is divided into two spheres -- the ordinary, routine, unremarkable sphere of repetitive neutral existence and the other sphere where the extraordinary, unique and startling reside. It's the place where the powerfully positive or negative or mysterious are interpreted as magical. But the truth is there are not two spheres. All reality is one; it's only our internal processing of reality that lends some experiences the aura of specialness. I'm not saying that awe is not a real thing; it clearly exists. But it does not exist outside our physical being. It is something that happens within our nervous systems, within our bodies in the presence of stimuli that seem to be important inside a particular moment. Romantic love is real, for example, but it's not about cherubs or eternity or gods or destiny or anything of the sort. It's about millennia of evolution tuning an organism to seek to form a reproductive pair bond with a suitable organism of the same type. It's about the physical (instincts and drives and hormones) exerting their pull within the framework of the social (conventions and restrictions and explanatory stories).

I believe in the miraculous, but I reject the magical. I perceive the universe as full of wonder because I'm the kind of thing that is predisposed to perceiving wonderfulness. There are forces at work that can't be readily understood at this time, but I have never felt the need to cast phantasms to account for or manipulate those forces. I think it's better to appreciate the awesome and the mysterious without trying to house them somewhere outside the normal world.



Matthew Mind Flight
Terri Misch

From A Distance

Jean Jones

Faculty Award

My son, not quite a blur, but moving fast,
fast on his scooter, and I'm walking as fast as I can,
taking great strides, pumping my arms,
breaking into a sweat,
just to keep up with my son on the scooter,
just to be with him,
a goal I hope to reach as he moves ahead of me
into the distance,
that younger self leaving that older self
to experience the world for himself,
and I, watching, smiling,
from a distance. . .

Mountain Man Blues

Kinga Baransky

1st Place Non-Fiction

While sipping coffee at an outdoor cafe in Bryson City, a haunting sound weaved its way across the street.

Coffee can wait.

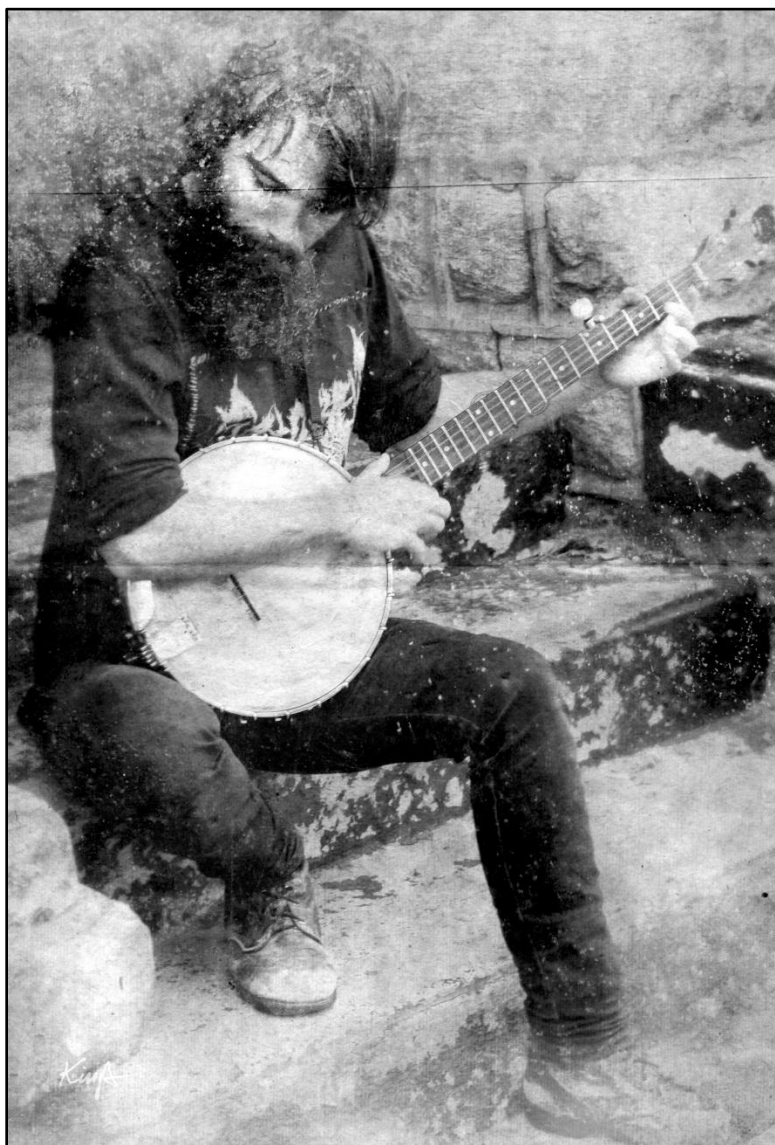
My friend and I walked towards the sound like moths to a light and came upon an unassuming and shy young man, sitting on a stoop with his banjo. I can relate to his uneasiness, his drive to create, yet his embarrassment at doing so.

"May I take your picture?" I asked. My friend winced at the request of this young mountain man.

He nodded yes.

I took his portrait and then any greenbacks I had left in my purse and put them in his hat. We stood there awhile in awe as he picked and produced his unscripted genius.

As we started back towards our coffee, he started to sing.



Mountain Man
Kinga Baransky



Untitled, 2016
Arthur Green

Grim Things

Meghan E. Cole

In an hour and forty-seven minutes, Chloe McCormack would die.

The reaper, who liked to be called Laug, settles into a nearby table with her freshly “given” latte, sifting a bit so her back avoids irritating the freshly attended ice blisters. A sadly common danger when you worked with newbie reapers. None of it is the kid’s fault, but it still hurt.

Laug bites down on her lip and lets whispers only she could hear force power to flow through her left eye, closing her right eye to cut off distractions. The eerie glow goes unnoticed by the cafe goers as it signals out her target. Poor thing is on a date, unaware these are her last moments of life. And she is wasting her time in this awful cafe.

Sea green walls, covered in various chalkboards and pictures make them look somewhat cluttered. Overstuffed couches and chairs surrounding a lit fireplace. In the furthest corner, not far from the coffee bar, is an old bookshelf only half-full and a sign displaying the “Take a book, leave a book!” policy. Chloe’s favorite barista is working behind the bar today, making foam art in the lattes to pay his way through school, his calligraphy skills decorating the various chalkboards.

At least Chloe was happy. Being a pretty redhead of only fourteen years, she’s young and new enough to find these kind of things fascinating. The girl is crafted by a loving family, and she’s got lakes full of dreams in those big green eyes. When Laug uses her good eye and looks into a different future, she can see Chloe in a lab coat accepting an award for some feat of genetic engineering. That smile she wore would never be born in this reality, of course, but it would’ve been beautiful.

Still...

Laug allows herself to feel a bit of pity for the girl. In truth, she shouldn’t even come for the girl’s soul until the last moments of life slip away. But the kid is one of those unforgiving souls, and she’d need extra effort to talk down.

Chloe fake laughs at an uncomfortable joke. The redhead shifts nervously in her seat; the date looks like it’s about to take a bad turn.

Laug's scarred hands twist around her spiced latte. An impatient finger taps rapidly at the cheap paper cup.

Kids these days aren't built for death the way she'd been at that age. Laug is by no means the oldest reaper out there, but she had been a child born of war. Laug had been younger than Chloe when she'd finished training in the arts of womanhood and was shuffled along to destroy the men of court. The girl had been caught between several battles by thirteen, and her fourteenth birthday was spent in the temple of the healing Goddess, letting the Priestess tend to wounds that left horrible scars.

Yes, she'd spent her life doing much worse than reaping.

Chloe's idea of a disaster was tripping in front of her crush or failing a test. The child wouldn't have the stomach for it. Hard enough for her to be here, now, with an awkward blind date.

The redhead angrily pushes her chair back, outraged from some inappropriate comment the boy pointlessly made and absolutely unwilling to stay any longer. She wraps her scarf tightly around her neck, grabs her bag, and marches out the cafe. The boy's calls fall on deaf ears.

Laug slides out of her seat and follows the girl, nabbing a sticky bun from a nearby table before she makes it out the door.

The people slip past the reaper like water through fingers. Laug munches on the sticky bun, scrunching her face in disgust when she tastes honey in the place of the maple syrup she'd expected. Drowning the remains of her latte almost doesn't wash away the disgusting taste, and she tosses the bun towards the nearest trash bin.

Chloe marches down the busy sidewalk, bulldozing her way through what remained of the crowd. It's dark out, and there are less and less people with every passing moment. Quite the dangerous situation for a teenage girl to find herself in. It wouldn't be long before this one found the spot where she will die.

Chloe crosses the street to avoid some dangerous alleyways, choosing to make her way through a park she'd grown up in. Normally, it might have been a wise choice, but not tonight.

Thirty-nine minutes until time of death. Twelve days until the body is found in the bottom of the nearby pond.

Chloe doesn't have time to scream. The stranger throws a meaty hand over her mouth and another around her waist. The box of pastries fall and are crushed under the weight of struggling. She tries, oh, she tries, but no amount of kicking and clawing can save her now. She's all alone now, and he's done this before. He has another victim in his basement at home; a boy he's training to be the perfect dog. He wants another one you see.

This guy won't get caught. Laug can already see it. He's not entirely human anymore, well on his way into becoming something else. It's hard to guess right now, but his soul is twisted in that awful way that only someone with new rot could manage. If you had to guess based on this guy's methods, though? Ghoul seemed like a safe bet.

Which means this isn't going to be pretty.

"You didn't have to be here," whispers her own hollowed voice. "You wanted to be here."

It is true.

She's honestly in a better place now, absolutely loves her job, but the memories are still bittersweet during the best of times. Most reapers move on after coming to terms with themselves, but Laug had seldom ever taken the beaten path.

Death had offered her true name back long ago, but she was content to stay. Death was actually a very loving presence, with gentle guiding hands. Though somewhat horrifying. Even when Death tried for a human form, there were too many hands, too many mouths, too many voices. They, Death that is, never remembered to wrinkle the skin...

The soon-to-be murderer is already growing tired of the struggling. Slowly, he is realizing how useless this attempt had become. He'll learn from this, but for now the more pragmatic path will be taken. A leg locks around her own kicking feet and trips her to the ground. Chloe makes a last desperate attempt to crawl away, but her murderer throws himself on top of her. Pinning the girl into place with his overbearing weight. His hands wrap themselves like vipers around her throat. He begins to squeeze, slamming her head against the ground with a vicious ferocity unfound within the likes of human spirit.

His ghastly and snarling face will, unfortunately, be the last thing Chloe sees before she suffocates.

It takes a moment for her spirit to form beside the reaper. The threads that once connected her body hang loosely from her small frame. The girl doesn't realize, at first, what's happened. She simply stares blankly into the distance. Clarity, however, reaches her once she takes in the sight of the murderer still beating her corpse against the ground.

"Hello there." The reaper tries for her attention, lacking anything better to say for the current situation. There was never a right way to deal with someone who'd been recently murdered, especially a child. "I'm Laug, Queen of Condors."

The new spirit turns her wild eyes towards the reaper. Disbelief paints her eerily pale face.

"Welcome..." The woman levels her gaze with the girl's. Empathy worked best for girls like Chloe, but the lead up was always hard no matter the experience. "...to the land of departure. I will be your guide."

Chloe, it seems, does not appreciate the effort. She whispers, at first, but her voice grows louder and more frantic as she repeats the word to herself. "No, no, *no*, *NO*!"

"There now." Laug tries, refraining from reaching out for the girl. Touching was horrible, and she knew from personal experience how awful it really was. "Don't cry child. There isn't a need."

"There isn't a need," the girl repeats, more to herself than the reaper. Her face dry only because the dead have no tears to shed. "No *need*."

"I was just *murdered*." She swings her arms wildly. Her murderer having finally stopped to take in the sight of his first real kill, his face holding a sort of fascinated reverence. The spirit pauses to take in the sight, but turns back to the reaper when she can bear no more. "And you think there 'isn't a need!'"

"I'm sorry." And she really is; she knew what it was like to be forcibly taken from the living world. Some days she could even still hear the distant soft words her traitor whispered as she sipped honey-sweet brew. Ghost tastes of honey are the sole reminder of her choking death. There's an empathy the reaper can feel for this girl, more than the girl would ever know. And

the reaper cannot convey with words alone just how deeply her grief runs for young girls ripped from life all too soon. "I really am."

"That," the reaper says and gestures towards the morbid scene, the murderer having lovingly picked up her corpse, "should never happen."

"Well," the girl snaps, "at least you're right about something. It shouldn't have happened."

"I know," the woman soothes, reaching to brush a stray strand of honey-blond hair that escaped her braid. "But it did, dear, and you have to accept that."

The redhead's eyes turned furious. "Accept it? *Accept it*. How the heck am I supposed to just accept it! I was just *murdered*."

"And your anger is justified," Laug treads carefully. One bad step and no one ended up happy. "And you deserve justice, but that is a task for the living. We are for rest."

"No." Chloe's angry whisper sounds heavy. She turns her eyes toward the now distant figure of her murderer, trying to sink her into the park's pond with a heavy rock rolled on her chest. "I want to stop him now."

"That is the path of monsters, child." She reaches a scarred hand over to gently place on her shoulder. "And we are not monsters."

"Then I'll just become a monster," the girl rages.

"No, sweetheart." She tries to soothe away the flames of the girl's rage. It would be easier to subdue a little girl than a wraith, after all. "We are made for better places. It is time to let go; to rest."

"What do *you* know," Chloe screeches, turning to beat angry fists against the reaper's chest. "What do you know? You don't understand. You don't know. I was murdered! I had a life! Friends! Family!"

"You still have those things." Laug rubs the girl's shaking shoulder. "Don't think of it as ending, dear, think of it as going abroad for a while. To a better place while you wait for them."

"A better place?" laughs the hysterical girl. "What? So there's a heaven or something? Is God going to forgive my sins and make me an angel?"

“There are many after lives.” Her good eye shines over the spirit; making the girl glow more eerily than before. “And you have a variety of options to choose from. You don’t have to make a decision right away; you are allowed to linger between worlds before your funeral. But you must make peace with your death first.”

“Peace.” Her voice is angrier than before. Dread spills over Laug when she realizes that the conversation wasn’t going to get any better. “The afterlife. Choices. You make it all sound sooooo nice and convenient.” Chloe meets her eyes with an angry glare and a snarl on her lips. “What did you say your name was again? Lug?”

“Laug. Queen of Condors.”

“Laug, Queen of Condors,” Chloe sneers. “What kind of stupid name is that anyway?”

“It was very popular in the seventh century,” Laug trails off. “Chloe wasn’t a popular name back then.”

The redhead snorts, but at least it was more in amusement than anger. “And what makes you the ‘Queen of Condors’? You married to the king or something?”

“It’s the name I was given.”

“Right.” The girl smacks the reaper’s arm off her shoulders “Well, Ms. Queen of Condors, I’m not a bird. So buzz off and stay out of my business.”

“I can’t do that,” the woman tries. “I can’t just leave you here.”

“Your family will meet you there.” Laug makes a gesture around herself, trying a last attempt to convince the girl. “Your grandfather has chosen a place.”

Chloe almost looks swayed, having loved her grandfather in life so dearly. For a small moment, Laug almost thinks she’s managed to convince the girl to rest. The reaper relaxes her shoulders and smiles at the girl, holding a welcoming hand out for her to take. “We can go see him if you want. Would you like that Chloe?”

The girl looks tempted, even reaching out to take the hand. But she quickly snatches her hand away, and her face morphs into something feral and wild. “Don’t talk about him, you liar!”

The girl's soul twists and poisons itself over. Red hair becomes thin and willowy grey, chunks of it falling to the ground. A once lovely face contorts into something eldritch and horrible. Teeth clatter to the ground with a sickly plopping sound. There's a shrill cry, like ice cracking in the strong winds. The wraith is born.

Laug steels her heart, letting the magic fade from her good eye. She pulls at the veil, tugging the string that connects her to Death. Death hears her, and with gentle whispers she feels flesh begin to bubble. Her arm burns, twisting pieces of flesh and giving way to reshaped bone as her veins begin to form the handle of her scythe. A silver blade swirls into existence from flesh not her own, forming from writhing black slime with too many fingers and too many eyes. The blade melts into her handle and lands in her rapidly healing hands.

The newborn cries, fleeing from the metal. It freezes the air around them, an icy vine stretching across what remained of the grass. The creature makes a feeble attempt to flee. Laug swings her leg and throws herself into it. The skin blisters when it touches the wraith, but it's pinned under her.

Missshapen claws feebly attempt to rip the reaper's flesh. She can feel the heat slowly ebbing away, absorbing into the wraith's twisted form. Laug purposefully drags the silver over its body, allowing it to burn. The skin gives a screaming sound and rivers of steam rise from its injuries, forcing her to keep the monster pinned. She forces the blade over the wraith's neck and pushes down with her leg strength.

There's a cracking sound. The wraith solidifies for a moment before cracks slowly creep over its entire body. Bits of ice fall away from it before the statue is too insubstantial to remain whole. Laug falls to the ground as the monster gives way.

For a moment, Laug is frozen in place. Weariness takes hold of her, and she takes a moment to just breathe.

"Well." She uses her tongue to crack away a large piece of partially melted ice from her mouth, causing it to bleed. "That was an absolute disaster."

The reaper stumbles toward where the murderer attempted to clean up after himself. Contempt was an easy emotion to feel when she looked at the man, especially when she

glanced at the blurred timeline hovering over his head. The numbers have already stopped twinkling downward.

“Hey.” Laug knows the man can’t really hear her, but she already feels better. “The other reapers are going to be unbearable jerks when they hear about this mess, so thanks for that.”

With that said, the woman leans onto her scythe and whispers to Death. A black mass grows from beneath her skin and envelops her, carrying her away from the dreadful place.

Death carries her to the void between worlds, letting his reaper sink into the vast darkness made from pieces of itself. She lets herself sink as well, hoping none of the other reapers find her.

“The soul is gone,” she tries to explain once the scythe starts to dissolve back inside her. “I turned her into a wraith. I’m sorry.”

Multiple unseen hands run through her hair. Some of them move to brush her face and neck. Two mouths whisper in both her ears, “*Irrelevant.*”

“I guess.” She tries to push away the phantom hands. “I mean, in a way, she might be better off.”

Death’s hands grip too hard for a moment. Laug’s mouth fills with a honey taste as her throat closes in and begins to choke. The smell of alcohol is thick enough to give her a migraine. “*If only...*”

“Stop it.”

“*If only...*”

“I said stop!” She forces her hands over her ears. Useless endeavor when the one talking lives within everything.

“*Wretched creature.*”

“I’m so sorry.” Laug feels the burning heat of death spread all over her body. “I won’t do it again. Just...just stop.”

Death’s grip softens, and his hands run all over her again. “*Lovely child. Lovely queen of mine.*”

Death holds her, as he does all of his children who choose to stay, but it’s little comfort when the face of a traitor is all she can see.

“...your own fault...” The traitor’s words burned into her, words she never really managed to let go. And, for a moment, she wonders if Death is trying to tell her something, as

if there was something she was supposed to *learn* from this that hadn't been beaten into her head a thousand times before.

Death whispers her name, but she doesn't hear it.



Cherry Bomb
David Flores

Home

Melody Wolfe

1st Place Poetry

This isn't our home because we spend our pay checks on power bills and rent.

This is our home because I have scrubbed the toilet with a toothbrush and bleach while I tried to clean up our mistakes from the night before.

And you moved the living room furniture four different times because it "didn't feel right," just like the four different times you told me you were afraid of commitment.

This isn't our home because it consists of fourteen posters, eighty one Polaroids, and three welcome mats;

Our home is built with the seven hundred and fifty five cups of coffee that we have sipped, and the thirty-nine episodes of the TV show that we watched because I was sick, so you let me pick.

This isn't our home just because we both signed a fucking piece of paper that states that this is our place of living.

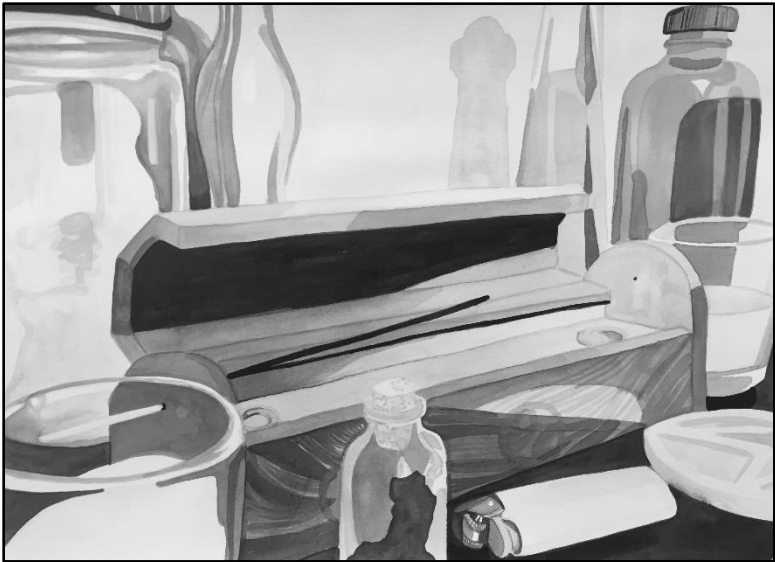
It's the six pairs of shoes that our puppy chewed, and the three window units we were so thankful for when our ac went out in the middle of July.

And the five, four, three, two...one wine glass that we have because dammit I'm so clumsy when I drink

It's the two toothbrushes that are side by side in the bathroom and I lost count of how many dishes I've washed or how many kisses you've left on my cheek.

Just like I lost count of how many times you've seen me cry, records we've bought, and fights that we've fought

I found a definition of the word that is not "home is where the heart is," but rather
home is where you are in harmony with your surroundings.
relaxed, comfortable, at ease.
I'm at home whenever I'm with you.
I'm in harmony
I'm at ease



Incense
Zoey Batson

Monsters in the Attic

Amanda McMullen

1st Place Fiction

She told me not to look in the attic because there were monsters up there that crept around the shadows in the middle of the night. They would whisper at the top of the stairs so that only she could hear them. And they would do this so that they could convince her to walk up the stairs so that they could grab her and eat her alive. It was a frightening thing to hear from a six year old, but my daughter really had quite an imagination.

“Daddy, Daddy!”

I spotted her standing at the edge of the hallway. Emily was in her pink and white bunny pajamas, holding onto her little arms as tight as she could. She was shivering, and it wasn’t from the cold. She must have had another bad dream.

“Emily, do you know what time it is?”

“The monsters are back! They’re trying to get me to go up there again.”

I let out a groan and rubbed my left temple to try and soothe the headache I was getting. It was late, and this had been the third time tonight that she had brought up this subject. I would honestly give anything to have her just go to sleep.

For as long as I could remember, my wife and I had been hearing this “monster talk” from our little Emily. I’ve always had memories of Emily running into our room in the middle of the night to tell us about the monsters living in the attic. One night, in particular, was about two months ago. She ran into my bedroom about an hour past her bedtime, crying and begging me to make the monsters go away. As I wiped the tears off of her red cheeks and dried the snot dripping from her freckle-covered nose, she told me of the horrible stories that her imagination had created.

She revealed intricate details of the way they frightened her, and how they could disguise their voices to make them sound like people that she knew. She told me that they did this to any human who would fall for their tricks, and when they could get close enough to the humans they were after, they would reveal themselves as the horrible monsters that they are. Ever since that night, she hadn’t been able to stop talking about them.

In her head, these monsters are shadowy figures that are as thin as paper. They need to eat humans in order to keep on living, but they know that humans will never approach them in their true form. So they take on the shadows, hoping that we will just keep walking directly into the darkness until we can't see an inch in front of our faces. And when we become completely surrounded in darkness, they strike. Really, it was quite a thing to make up for a little girl.

I was always too old to believe in stories about monsters. Even as a child, I felt like I was too mature for such trivial things. Monsters were little things that tip-toed around the edges of your subconscious. They lived in the minds of children, and only grew stronger in one's imagination. I was too smart to believe that such things could exist. When I was younger, I had read that the greatest fear is a fear of the unknown, so I forced myself to encounter anything that startled me. If there was a sound, I would investigate. My daughter was the opposite. She was so quick to believe in the unknown, and that the unknown should remain as such. She must get it from her mother.

I knew it was time to be the "stern father" that I have never been able to be. I crossed my arms across my chest and gave her a stern look. In return, she pulled on her long brown hair and shifted from left to right. Then her soft brown eyes grew wide and her little face puffed out. She always looks like her mother whenever she is making this face.

"They're really there! I mean it!"

"Come on now, Emily." I breathed out and headed towards her. Picking her up in my arms, I let her lean on me as I walked down the hall towards our attic staircase. To be honest, with the poor lighting in the hallway, it made the entire staircase look like a scene from a horror movie. Each step creaked as my foot landed on it. Emily's tiny little arms wrapped around my neck, and when we reached the top of the stairs, her face sunk into my shoulder.

"Look around sweetheart. There's nothing scary in here."

That wasn't entirely true. My wife was a packrat, and this became a frequent nightmare to contain. She kept everything in boxes piled up all around the attic room, and once every month, she would pace around the attic in the middle of the

night, moving things around to “balance” it out. I was sure that this was the cause of Emily’s fear. She must be hearing her mother talking and pacing around in the attic so much that it happens even in her sleep. And she relates it to monsters because she is a scared girl with an active imagination. Who can blame her? I noticed her peering around the room from the corner of my eye. She furrowed her brow, remaining unconvinced that the room around her was harmless.

“They were here.”

“They aren’t real, sweetheart.”

“No, they are real.”

“You’re just hearing things, Emily.”

I began moving back downstairs towards her bedroom. When I reached her room, I set her down and eased her along past her toys and into her bed. The wind outside was picking up, and it was making her window rattle. Another logical explanation for what she could have been hearing. When she crawled on top of her mattress, I pulled the blankets out from underneath her.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you read in story books, honey.” I said as I tucked her in.

“But daddy, I saw them. I know they’re up there.”

“Monsters don’t exist, sweetheart. Now, what I want is for you to get some sleep, and I don’t want to hear about this anymore, ok?”

I knew that Emily was trying to be brave, but I noticed the quiver of her lower lip and took note of the heavy sigh that whistled through the gap in her front teeth. It was fine if she wanted to be upset with me as long as the monster talk would stop. She was getting too old for that kind of nonsense. Hell, I was getting too old for that kind of nonsense. It wasn’t like she hadn’t done this before.

I brushed some of her long brown hair out of her face and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Then I reached over her to grab her favorite stuffed animal, an old beagle that was missing half of its left ear, and tucked it gently under her arm.

“I promise you, Emily. There is nothing in this house that will ever try to hurt you. Not while me and Rover are here to protect you.”

Emily hugged the dog as tight as she could and closed her soft, brown eyes.

“Ok, Daddy.” She didn’t sound convinced, but after spending half the day playing, she was too tired to keep her little eyes open.

“Good night, kiddo.”

I turned off the light beside her bed. Making my way through the maze of stuffed animals, old figurines, and “pillow forts” that had not been picked up, I stepped out of her room and began to close the door until it was cracked. She was still a little afraid of the dark, and her nightlight broke about an hour ago, so it was too late to run to the store for another one. Emily would be all right for one night without it.

I walked down the dimly lit hall and into my small kitchen. The floor was cold against my bare feet, but there was going to be nothing that would warm me up faster than a nice hot cup of coffee. I searched through the cabinets of my kitchen and grabbed my favorite coffee mug. It was the one that my wife had bought for me on our anniversary right after Emily was born. On the cup, there was the cliché quote that said “world’s best dad.” But years of scrubbing the remains of bitter coffee stains inside and out of the cup had scraped off some of the “a” so that it now read as “World’s best dud.”

I brushed my thumb against the letters in the cup remembering the way my wife had laughed when she discovered it the other day. It was hard running a house without her around. She was at her parents’ house because her mother had fallen recently, and I needed to show her that our kid wasn’t going to be emotionally scarred for life if she left us alone for longer than one afternoon. Well, I couldn’t do that on an empty stomach. As I headed to the coffee pot, I brewed a fresh cup for myself. Then after filling it up, I headed towards the couch in the living room. Once I sat down, I grabbed the book that I had been trying to read since before putting Emily to bed. And as I opened the book, the only thing that I could think about was getting to that next chapter.

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!”

Yes, right on cue. Emily always needed me the exact moment that I sat down. You could almost set your clock to her

consistency. I let out a very low groan and forced myself to get out of the chair.

“Emmiiiiillyyyyy.” To be honest, the emphasis on each syllable seemed a little unnecessary, but I knew that she only cared about my timely arrival and wouldn’t hear much past the first syllable of her name.

“Daddy, daddy, daddy!”

“I’m coming. Hold your horses!” My voice didn’t seem to reach out loud enough for her. She was still calling my name even when I got into the hallway. I reached her door and went to push it open.

“Daddy!”

It was coming from the left. I frowned and looked directly to the attic stairs. Hearing her voice from the top of the stairs, she reluctantly continued to say “daddy” over and over....without even a moment’s hesitation.

Chills ran up my spine as I moved away from her bedroom door. Taking one step towards the staircase, I took this opportunity to stay quiet and listen. Then I heard the small patter of feet coming from the top of the stairs. They were loud enough to be a child’s. I let out a very low sigh and shook my head. *Oh, Emily had tiptoed up the stairs and was playing some stupid game.* I headed to the bottom of the staircase and peered up the stairs. I could see her shadow at the very top step. She was probably just out of view.

“Honey, it is bed time.” I called up to her then waited for her to come running down the stairs. She knew better than to play games for too long. I mean...when her mother was around to discipline her, she knew better. I guess I always had that lack of discipline when it came to raising my daughter. Maybe that’s why I was always the one who had to check for monsters. I was always the one humoring her.

I heard a pitter patter of footsteps and quickly started up the stairs and began to feel a little angry that she wasn’t listening to me. I know that I was the “pushover parent,” but she needed to learn to listen to me when I was talking to her. “I’m going to count to five and if you’re not in bed by the time I am done, I won’t pick you up any ice cream at the store tomorrow.” I almost reached the top of the stairs when I heard rustling from behind me. Turning around, I saw her creeping out of her bedroom.

“I’m already in bed.” She was looking up at me with a tired look on her face. And as I stared into that little face, I felt a fear that was undeniable for the first time in my life. For once, the instinct of discovering what was really going on was so far from my thoughts that I couldn’t force myself to move. I stood there like an idiot, feeling afraid. Looking up into the hallway, the sound of footsteps had disappeared, as well as them calling out for me.

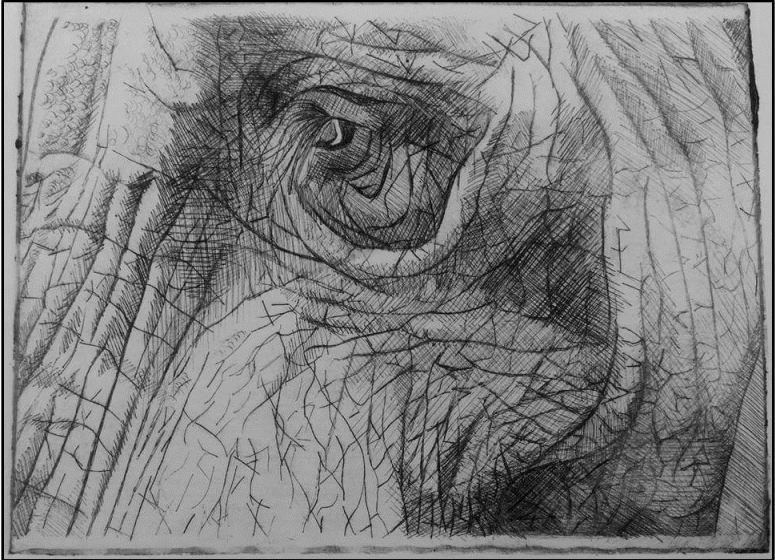
“Emily....Did you call for me just a second ago?”

My daughter shook her head and let out a tiny yawn. She was asleep. I must have woken her up when I was walking up the stairs. But then...who was at the top? My logical side convinced me that I was only hearing things. It had been a long day, and I hadn’t slept much in the past week. While saying that over and over again in my head, I stumbled down the stairs and walked over to her bedroom, pushing her back into the room.

“You go on back to bed. Here, let me tuck you in again.”

She crawled back into her small bed, and I pulled the blanket up to her jawline. Then, with a very heavy thud, I sat down on the floor beside her. The idea of monsters was fresh in my mind now, and as much as I tried to convince myself that it was all just a part of my imagination, I couldn’t deny that I saw something. I stayed with her all night. The noises calmed down, though I could still feel the presence of whatever it was out there. I couldn’t explain it to myself in a way that made sense...but I believed her.

By morning, it all felt like a dream. I went up to the attic and checked everywhere out of fear, paranoia. There was nothing to be seen or heard. But I couldn’t deny that there was this feeling inside of me that told me to believe. All the logic in the world couldn’t prepare me for this. There are monsters in the attic.



Elephant
Lillian Rogers

A Minute in My Mind

Tara Nobles

To pretend that my life isn't what it is,
that would be madness. Pointless is the Devil...
surrounding me, drowning me daily.
Pulling and pushing to claw at the surface
as if only leave a scratch, but never catching my breath
in time to save my disconsolate, disembodied mind.
I feel my body cracking. Fragile as glass half resting
on the counter top. A wicked cat with no remorse
pushes me off. I shatter into a million pieces, my tears,
the glue which sticks me back together. I'm fine, I repeat.

The Devil, fear's Master. Anxiety has struck again.
Its sword leads with blind eyes to greet my neck.
My head topples off of my shoulders.
It usually does. I carry it carefully in my
trembling hands. This is normal, this is reality.
Casual teen, born an angel, tormented by demons.
Expected to act one way, yet always falling out of place.
No love was lost when cautious friends
deserted a corpse's body. A severed head is too
much for them I guess. Can't they see how I carry
the heavy burden of a perturbed skull? "No."
Many chose to retreat, few remained.
Anxiety: a bloody war mixed with rage
and angst. Seldom do people make it out alive.

I can't help but to smile. Oh but a sweet
relief it is to smile in times like these. Pure and free.
But smiles are rarely allowed by the Demon. Shame.
Oh how You mess with my head...
Mad as a Hatter, You say? Oh who else darling?
Yes, I am the proverbial Alice; porcelain and pure,
listening to no one, making my own path
created of mayhem. Mistake? Maybe..
I can see a light. A happier life. All I
have to do is stretch my fingers. "I can make it!"...

“Missing me yet?” He calls out, callous and cold.
Hope disintegrates within my reach. “I’ll continue
to try, to reach, to dream...”

I have been broken,
torn apart, mended together again.
But I... I am invincible.



Lady
Javon Bullock

Like the Moon

Suzanne Clark

My heart, for you, waxes and wanes
swells with tides, aches and pains
drops to my stomach, curls up in my womb
fills my lungs till there is no more room

...slacks away, hiding to recharge the sky
whispering in your wake, from a whimper to a cry
days spent watching, waiting hoping
nights blend into mornings, sunrise eloping

closer, touching, meeting on wet grass
earth reaching for influence, moon gives her a firm grasp
leading, dancing for a full week
speeding, sparkling, reaching our peak

closing and opening slowly as a lotus
rarely as moonflower, common as crocus
twenty eight days is over much too soon
my heart blooms under you
exactly
like the moon



Lone Farm in Appalachia
Ami Sanabria

A Late Halloween Tale: The Miserable Creature

Htet Aung Shine

My psychologist said that I should write down the events that so disturbed me to make sense of them, perhaps to even come to an understanding of them. Well, taking her advice, I have resolved myself to compose and submit this article for *Portals* of a peculiar incident that haunts my dreams and dulls my senses whenever I ponder upon it. Readers, beware! The severity of the most unnatural observation I experienced regressed my poor brain to a childish stammer and slur of speech. If any of you are so faint of mind, then I must plead that you quit this article now before the mere description of my horrible experience renders your mind mad as it has mine. Oh, as I ponder how to articulate what I saw into words, I always feel sensations similar to the shivering touch of Death's skeletal finger slowly sliding down my spine, but I will persevere. I will cast this chilling hell from my spine so help me God!

My story begins in the shadows of a late, humid Sunday night. I was walking home after evening church service since the distance between the two buildings lies not all that far apart, and my origin to destination is linked only by a singular road. My preacher had delivered a mean sermon on the attributes of hell described in the New Testament, and with that imagery in my head, I had foolishly decided to brave the street to my house... alone. You see, I am a recluse of the highest caliber. A quiet man, I am the type of church goer that you would see at the far edge of the pews, unsociable, and abhorring fellowship. Thus, I had no fellowship in my nightly walks from the church to home, nor did I accept any offers to drive me home. At the time, this predicament didn't pose a problem. I knew the street. From my childhood to current adulthood, I knew every building, stop sign, street sign, and bit of pavement that presented itself on this very street. I knew the layout of the street on which I walked. Yet, there is always something strangely terrifying about walking alone in the middle of the night; such vulnerability in such an isolated place draws forth man's innate nature for self-preservation; a friend in my profession as an author says that the

imagination goes wild with the mysterious and clouded darkness that descends on this street.

The environment didn't help either. Ominous, looming clouds seemed to have taken place where the stars would typically show themselves. Readers, can you imagine the darkness? No celestial lamps lighted the way. No divine light to keep me from going astray. I felt as if I had entered a house covered in smoke, choking me with this bloody humidity. The trees didn't help either. The smoky fog rendered an effect on the pine trees, looming over the houses, taking upon silhouettes of gigantic creatures enjoined, as if these trees were tall, powerful demons overlooking men abandoned by God. There was no wind tonight, so any slight indication of movement on these giant demonic trees was enough cause to be startled, save whatever noise uttered by its natural inhabitants. The only source of security I could find on this street was the stationary man-made street lamps positioned linearly across the street. The bright light emitted from these bulbs cleared some of the darkness and paved my way forward to my destination in this midnight travel though I regret to say that this beloved security came at the most hellish cost. Sometimes, the light would fail in its duty and frighten my already poor senses. Sometimes, the street lamps would play some juvenile game of flickering off and on. However, the worst of my fears that these street lamps caused was the reflection and contrast of beams onto the shadowy, smoky darkness, further amplifying a sort of Victorian, lonely night.

It was in this shadowy, smoky night I saw what seemed to be a speck under the sixth street lamp away from me (for in the telling of this observation, I was positioned at the right side of the long, serpentine road). A speck, this thing was, like a black enlarged dot of a punctuation or an i. When I had adjusted my pupil to make more optical sense of the speck, the sixth street lamp gasped its final breath and extinguished its light, effectively blurring the speck into the shadowy environment. My first thought, as understandably common to the human imagination faced with potential danger, labeled the speck a hellish hound, or a coyote. My second more reasonable thought, though, immediately caught up with my first, and I tried to soothe my mind with reason. I rationalized that the speck was merely some harmless animal, maybe a cat let loose, or a dog looking for

scraps, as this was common where I lived. *Yes, I thought, that speck was that and nothing more.*

However, as if timed by these exact words, the speck returned under the fifth street lamp, changed. The speck had transformed into what seemed to be a miniature human body as it got closer. Though I could not make sense of what its appendages were doing, I noticed that it stood on its hind legs and its movement seemed erratic, as if it was drunk or confused. The speed at which this man moved was quite maddening. Like a blur, he moved to another location. There was no cognitive pattern to its movement; in fact, it contradicted itself. The creature would speedily sway right, then dash to the left, jut forward, then push itself back; all the while sporadically twirling and spinning. Yet the creature was still moving down the road, as if these strange movements had not hampered its concrete trail. Thus with these unnatural movements, the creature escaped from the fifth street lamp and disappeared into the obscure night. By now, questions had outdone answers. *Why was it moving so sporadically, so unnaturally confused? There was no way that thing was an animal; animals are not that tall. There are no bears in the region I'm sure of it, yet nothing can stand on its hind legs and have that much control in its movements like that creature had. Maybe it's a man.* It was then that my Christian heart settled in and suggested that I help whatever it was. *Maybe he, or she-for it did take a form of a human body now that I recollect-is drunk and needs a guide or a protector; maybe he or she is just some kid who got lost and is scared, desperately trying to find home.* But then, to my horror, it could also be a burglar trying to find a target, or a rapist escaping its recent atrocity... or a murderer hunting its newest prey.

Suddenly, I saw it emerge from the shadows and into the light of the fourth street lamp. The sudden, violent appearance of the thing had startled me to where I had unconsciously moved backward in repulsion. It had limbs: arms and legs, like you and me, a torso, a head, a skin-colored shirt and pants, and so I deduced the thing to be undoubtedly a fellow man; I say man because it had a physique of the male gender outlined through the shirt. On closer inspection, I found the man flailed his arm about over his head as if one swatting away a swarm of bees that has descended, but there were no bees surrounding this man, yet

he swatted the air with the same raving zeal. His legs performed their duty without logical direction as the man ran a random course. Sometimes the legs would stop, and the body would then spin its insane rotation before the legs shook violently, buckled down, and bent in such disgusting ways. His knee went concave and convex. His head shook violently, so violently,

shaking left to right; ears shifting and conjoining the shoulders. The head rolled, rotating downward only to snap back up into the piercing street lamp. At this action, the bulb burst and shrouded the man in the darkness once again. Drugs, I thought. Nothing can make a man so unnatural, so chaotic in motion than the influence of drugs. It was at this moment I realized I had left myself exposed under my own street lamp and urgently fixed this dreadful error. I stepped out of the beams and hid behind an oak tree that sat alongside the street lamp to the right of the sidewalk. My dear readers, I shudder to think that on that night I had cloaked myself in the very same darkness the strange man adored.

The man then suddenly appeared under the third street lamp.

I clipped my mouth with my hands as to prevent a scream, for, standing to the opposite of this hellish road, I could see the man... no, no human being could contort and convulse as that thing... that creature did. First, to my disgust, my previous assumption that the man wore clothes were incorrect; that skin colored shirt and pants were truly his own naked skin. Next, to my horror, the psychotic-looking man/creature/ thing made such movement as if it was dancing! However, this dance was neither a waltz accompanied by elegance, nor any popular dances of my time. No, this was the waltz of a madman, a dance without a purpose. His arms flailed to swat away those imaginary bees, then dropping, then stretching, then bending with such unnatural speed and position that I vomited the contents of my stomach to the side of the oak tree at the sight of this disgusting disregard for anatomy. The arms, my readers, the arms twisted and twirled as if the body had forsaken joints! After each wild dance, its legs painfully stretched out and stamped on the pavement, then slowly dragged its lively body forward. The torso also bent, stomach thrusting forward and spine in a perfect 90-degree angle. He then proceeded to rotate upon the pelvic girdle, only to

snap back in a lateral position. His wrist flickered and rotated. His head, now more visible, viciously ticked left and right like the hands of a furious grandfather clock. Furthermore, the head would cock so far back that I swore, my dear readers, I swore I saw what looked like a bone poking from its neck! I winced in pain, for the ear seemed able to touch the armpit, followed by the arm swatting overhead only for the head to snap quickly over to the other side. The top of his head was now horizontal to his shoulder. Mind you, reader, this all happened with such an abnormal speed that the other grotesque positions this monster undertook are but a blur in my memory. Suddenly, his head snapped back to his spine so aggressively that I silently gagged in my hiding spot, barely able to look, yet I pressed on.

Briefly did the creature stare into the light in an upward position, his arms still madly flailing upward grinding and smacking against each other. His head leaned back with such flexibility that I could see the top of his head making contact with the sacrum, when suddenly it fell back down to bury the chin on its breast. Then with the same demonic speed, it twisted its head horizontally to blankly stare at me.

I could not tell if our eyes met, for I moved, as fast as the creature convulsed, away from the thing's sight and hid my entire frame behind the oak tree. I'd be lying to say I breathed hard, for after the spectacle of this dancing creature, then its sudden fixation at my location, I dared not whistle any air out of my lungs, lest the thing possess super hearing. Three words raced through my mind, "*He found me! He found me!*" I prayed fervently to not let this monstrous creation find me. Now, either my prayer was answered, or I was emboldened as a trapped prey would be. I peeked across the trunk to find the horrifying thing no longer there. Still, I dared not breathe as harshly as I had.

I knew soon it would appear under the second street lamp, but this one gave off a weaker emission than the other four. The light from this lamp flickered on and off, and it was in this flickering that the thing made its appearance. Its arms energetically convulsed over its head like a dead man shocked repeatedly to life. I could now see the fidgeting fingers that twitched as if they had lives of their own. His legs still carried the spastic body as if laboring to carry such madness, now only with the toes as spastic as the fingers, sometimes clipping

themselves on the pavement and being stepped on by the sole of the foot. Its torso still twisted and spun ever so grotesquely. Now, it was at this distance, hiding on the other side of the street behind an oak tree, that I could make sense of the creature's countenance. Albeit, I cannot fully give an accurate description due to the damn flickering lights, but I could recall the creature's countenance to that of a man condemned to be tortured in hell. Similar to those soulless creatures that were once men until condemned to be separated from God, now roaming the barren, black, burning landscape of hell, pictures of them found in Buddhist temples, monasteries, or Catholic churches. You know, those naked things that run away from demons who spear, dismember, or boil them alive as they run onto spiked trees, into cooking pots, lakes of fire, or wherever they can find shelter. Upon staring at this creature's face, all those pictures of the soulless sufferers flooded back to me, and, for the purpose of this writing, this is the only comparative description I can give of what I saw. On this specific creature, I saw unbearable suffering or agitation in the thing's face. Its forehead drenched with sweat, to which I hypothesize to be the result of its nonstop, unnatural movement on this humid night. Its eyes wept as if the tiresome pain of continual movement seemed no longer bearable, as if it wished to stop but could not. Due to the nonstop tears, its eyes were bloodshot, rapidly moving in their sockets. However, what caught my petrified gaze was how wide its mouth opened to bare yellowish, red teeth that gnashed and ground in misery and pain.

Zap! And the creature is coated within the darkness, then zip! The creature reappears in a more hideous and horrendous pose. Zap! The street lamp relieved its final breath, and the monster was coated in darkness forever. This would be the last time I ever saw the miserable creature, for at this moment--after being distracted by the suffering countenance of this creature--I failed to notice the first street lamp parallel to my own had extinguished its light too early. With my vision blocked, and my other senses heightened, I... I heard the sounds this monster made. Oh forgive me my dear readers, for I dare not recollect the very sounds that have been the main tormentor of my dreams. Oh God, why is it, when this ugly creature was so close to me, that the bloody lights must perish, leaving me with the most frightening monster, the terrified mind? If I could put a face, a

body to the sounds I heard, crackling and cackling, my mind would not run to horrifying assumptions. The sounds, the moans. It was too much, and my senses were too good, for the sound this creature made grew more audible as it got nearer... and nearer to that first street lamp, growing louder... and louder! *Has it heard me? Was it crossing the street, or why else would the sound grow louder? Was it coming for me? What is it going to do to me? Why is the bush rustling? Why do I hear heavy breathing? In the name of God, help me! Help me!* At last, with my plea, the noise slowly faded away. The popping joints, the cracking bones, the sound of flesh flapping against each other, the moaning slowly died down. I can only assume the miserable thing had continued its course down the other side of the street. *So it didn't notice me after all*, I thought. Finally, the dying sound had become muted, and with that, my heightened senses plummeted down to an exhaustive state, so exhaustive, in fact, that I found my eyes slowly drooping down, and I entered a darkness of my own.

I had fallen asleep, and I was awoken by a slobbering dog licking my face and the mutt's owner shaking my right shoulder. I'll spare the formalities and explanations, as my 3000-word limit is coming near, but after a disappointing inquiry about a naked man, the dog owner and I ran down the street to find black soot on the pavement. The man went on a rant about environmental stuff, but I didn't listen. I knew what stood on that spot, that blackish hue of hell's colors. I imagine that hell must've opened up, releasing its fires to color that exact spot. I imagined the hands of Satan's angels grabbing the ankle of the miserable victim who leaked out into the human world, and dragging their poor victim back to their God-forsaken place. Of course, I thought, this is all in my imagination.

Disclaimer

Jazzmin Yvonne Moore

After my false imprisonment (for wire fraud) I felt the need to continue my calling as a matchmaker and start The Long Term Relationship, Personal Advertisement Company (LTR/PA), in order to provide quality matchmaking services to those caught up in the penal system. And being a life time employee of the business of love, it is my civic duty to help my fellow detainees find their perfect match, and not that one-night-stand/fly-by-night type of love, but the type that ends with true love's first kiss. Yes, there are others, who "claim" to have created this (pseudo-)science, which is able to match their customers to their potential soul-mate, only after completing an overly complicated questionnaire... a questionnaire that uses mathematical equations to quantify intimacy, desire, and infatuation. But I am here, as the resident expert in the underappreciated art of Personal Advertisements, but to also begin a movement that will dismantle online dating sites. ONE PAYING MEMBER AT A TIME! Because millions have wandered the barren deserts of dating sites, and traveled blindly into the wilderness of unproven relationship questionnaires that profess validity. LOVE cannot be boiled down to its purest form and analyzed with some scientific gibberish. These dating sites' controversial stats and statistics are used to lure unsuspecting (lonely, desperate, depressed, and horny) individuals into the arms of the serial rapist. Believe me when I say that I'm not in the business of leading naïve women (and/or men) down the road that veers off onto the path, that stops at the gate, that leads to the front doors, that opens to the foyer, that gives way to the stairs, that descends into the depths, that opens up into a dungeon, that holds the scattered remains of those who died a horrible death known as a broken heart. NO! I won't let it happen to me again or to you either, uninformed reader. I am not here to con you. I am here to offer free advice as a specialist, and not any ole advice, but tried and true advice on finding your one-true ball and chain.

Trimmed

Matthew Maffei

His father's raspy voice thundered through the wall. The distinct Jersey accent Max knew too well. Too well to hate, and too loud to be ignored.

His father yelled again. This time, Max heard his name muffled through the wall. He put his book down and stood from his bed and opened the door.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the bathroom." His father's voice echoed from the master bedroom from the long hallway. "I need your help in here."

Max turned around to his room and looked inside. He closed the door and walked toward the master bedroom at the end of the long hallway.

In the bathroom, his father was standing shirtless looking at his shaven face in the mirror over the sink. He had as much hair on his back as he did on his chest and his stomach. Max could hardly see the skin beneath it. His father's six-pack went nearly unnoticed.

"What do you need?" Max said.

"A trim."

"You want me to—"

"Yes," said his father. "I want you to trim this hair off. Get over here."

Max entered the bathroom slowly. He took the clippers from his father who then raised an eyebrow at Max.

"I've never done this before, dad."

"Well, I've never needed you to."

"But you do now?" Max said. He looked up at his father's reflection in the mirror.

His father's eyes had been looking at him as if he were watching Max the whole time. "Yes," he said.

Max looked down at the clippers in his hand.

He looked up again.

"Why now?"

His father breathed in through his nose and then let out through his nose. The sound of air that passed through his nostrils echoed in the bathroom.

“Because,” his father said, “I need you to.”

“But you’ve never asked me to do this before. And it looks like you’ve never trimmed any hair on your body until now. So it just seems like something important has come up.”

“Max,” his father whined. “I need this, no questions asked. You think you can do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Here,” his father said. He pointed to the clipper. “All you have to do is push this button to turn them on. This side touches the skin. Got it?”

“Yeah. I got it,” Max said. “How can you let it grow out so much?”

“It’s been a while, Max.”

“But don’t you feel gross?” Max said. He began to trim and lumps of hair landed on the tile. “I mean, having this fur on you? I wouldn’t even call it hair at this point.”

“I feel fine with it. It’s your mother who doesn’t like it.”

“Mom?” Max said. “You’ve talked to mom?”

“Yes, Max.” His father said. He lowered his head as if resting his chin on his chest. He sighed. “I’ve talked to her. In fact,” his father paused, “I’m seeing her tonight.”

“You’re seeing mom tonight? How come I haven’t talked to her?”

He turned around to face his son. “She wants to come back,” he said. “That’s why I’m seeing her tonight. We’re going to Rue 49. That place we took you for your fourteenth birthday. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. Place was fancy.”

“It’s her favorite,” his father said. “I’m taking her for a good time. I need to show her I can be a true gentleman again. Like how I was when we first met. The man I used to be. Who she fell in love with.” His father turned back to the mirror and looked down at the sink. “I need to be that man again, Max.”

“So, all of this is for her, then?”

“It’s all for her, Max. She deserves a clean man.”

“And what do you deserve? A wife that leaves you when things get bad? She could leave you again. Leave us again. Her trust went out the door when she did.”

His father stood there for a minute and didn’t say anything. Max kept on trimming.

“You’re a smart kid,” his father said. “You know where you get that from?”

“No.”

“You get it from your mother.”

“Oh,” Max said. “I guess I wouldn’t know that.”

“You need her back in this house, Max. You just don’t know it yet.”

By the time Max finished it was dark outside. He went back to his room and sat on his bed. The book he left was sitting by the pillow. He tried to pick up from where he had left off but he couldn’t focus on the words anymore.

In the master bedroom, Aldo fastened his tie. Then he laced his shoes. On the table beside the bed was a picture of him and Elsie. They were young then. Looking into each other’s eyes. Arms wrapped around each other’s sides. It was night in the picture. The city behind them glared.

He stared at the picture often. Thought of how he changed from that time. Before, they were living in the city. He worked day shift as a doorman in a swanky apartment building. She practiced acupuncture. Made a good living at it too and was able to pay off that school debt. They went out and drank cocktails and martinis; they went dancing at nightclubs, too. They even learned to salsa. This is what he remembered when he looked at that picture. The freedom they had. The city. When drinking was fun and dancing was exciting.

They lived together in a little apartment uptown. It was affordable back then and near Central Park. She’d cook for him. He’d massage her neck and her back. And her feet too. One night they stayed in. They drank chamomile tea with a splash of whiskey and watched TV on the couch. He held her with his arm around her shoulder and she rested her head on his chest. They watched Animal Planet on the Discovery channel. Lions in their pride. The narrator went on explaining their social behavior of affection. When lions rested they seemed to enjoy touching and rubbing each other. Cuddling. They licked and purred during this. One of the male lions approached the resting ones and one of the alpha male stood up and roared and pissed to mark his territory.

Elsie lifted her head and looked at Aldo for a second before she rested again.

“I’m still up,” he said. “Are you?”

“I’m up,” she said.

“What are you thinking?”

“About us,” she said. Then she said, “Aldo,” in a soft voice.

He waited for her to finish but she never did.

“What is it, Elle?”

She sat up and reached for her tea and took a sip. Then she looked at him and touched his thigh. “I want a family,” she said. “I want our own little pride. Like the lions.”

“Elsie,” he said. He reached for his tea. “We can’t raise a family here.”

“I know,” she said. Then with a higher pitch she said, “We can move upstate. Or New Jersey.”

“Yes. We could do that,” he said. “But we’ve got a good thing going here. Don’t you think? I mean, we could stay here for a couple more years. Two years maybe. And keep saving money.” He put down his tea on the table and looked back at her. “It’s going to be a big change for us both. Moving. Finding new jobs. Then having money to raise our baby. I think it would be best to wait until we move out of the city before we try having children. Don’t you think?”

Elsie didn’t move for about a minute. Then she sat back and watched the TV.

Aldo sat back too and watched the TV. Then he put his hand over hers, which still lay rested on his thigh. A lion cub licked a small wound on the shoulder of the alpha male. Aldo looked at Elsie and she back at him. He leaned in and kissed her on the lips and they made love there on the couch.

As he looked at her across the white-clothed table he thought of all the times they fucked. From what he could remember, at least. The old times, and the more recent.

She sipped her Merlot and then she looked at him. He was leaned forward as if giving her his full attention.

“It’s really great to see you,” he said.

“It’s good to see you too, Al,”

“Elsie,” he began. “I’m sorry. For everything. This past year has changed me. I’m ready to be the husband you deserve. A loyal, loving husband.”

“What’s changed, Aldo?” She leaned forward to match his attentiveness. The small candle flickered between them.

Then Aldo leaned back into his chair.

“Everything has changed,” he said. “Being in that house with Max...I see you in him.”

He grabbed his whiskey glass but didn’t sip from it.

“Don’t you think the time I’ve spent alone with our son has given me the change I needed?” He sipped his whiskey and said, “Our relationship is better than it’s ever been.”

He put his glass back on the table and waited for her to respond.

“Ours isn’t better than ever,” she said. “Mine and yours is the worst it’s ever been. Can you handle repairing our relationship while keeping up with Max getting older and having to change the way we are as parents?”

Then Aldo leaned forward.

“Can you handle that, Elsie?”

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Why wouldn’t I? You know, he isn’t your biggest fan right now.”

“I’m his mother, Aldo,” she said. She relaxed herself in her chair and grabbed her wine glass.

Aldo studied her as she looked around the dining room at the other patrons and she held her wine close.

“Remember when we came here for his fourteenth?” he said.

She brought her eyes back to him.

“Of course I do,” she said.

“We sat in that booth over by the window.”

“He wanted to watch the people walk by,” she said.

Then she smiled and her eyes began to water. She leaned herself on the table again and said, “I miss him so much, Al.”

“I know,” he said. He leaned in to her. “Come home, Elle. Come home.”

“How is he supposed to respect me? To love me anymore?”

“Because you’re his mother,” he said.

Elsie straightened her back and wiped a falling tear with her napkin.

“Tell me why you did it, Aldo.”

Then Aldo leaned back too. He remembered the day he slept with the woman whose name he now forgot. Met her in Barnes and Noble on a Wednesday afternoon. Something he could do being a writer with a wife making what she did and a son in school. He just couldn't deny the chemistry they had as they talked about their favorite Dean Koontz novels.

“It doesn't matter anymore,” he said.

“It does matter! How can you say that?”

He leaned forward and gave her that look like she was the only thing that mattered. “No one in my life have I met has the love I have for you. Elle, come home. Please.”

Elsie looked straight back into his eyes. She was leaned back in her chair.

“Should we order another drink?” she said.



Life Support
Jamie Wells

Don't Cry

Anne Logan

I remember that I was still a young girl of twelve years old... That morning, Dad, Ethan and Ben, my two younger brothers, climbed into the red Chevy truck and rode down the stone covered driveway, headed for the nearby town. From the porch, I watched my two brothers jumping up and down in the truck cab on their way out. As the truck was disappearing in the distance, I still remember how the bright sunlight was fading to dark. Black clouds were moving in fast and heavy rain clouds threatened to pour down. When the truck was out of sight, I returned my focus to dusting the old oak writing desk, enjoying the pine scent of my cleaning solution.

Two hours later, I glanced up from the hallway floor that I'd been mopping to the old grandfather clock. Has it really been two hours since my father left? Suddenly, I heard the back porch door swing open and a man panting heavily. Why do I have a bad feeling in my gut? It feels like someone punched me in my stomach?

I jumped to my feet as I heard a breathless voice coming from the porch. "Ow...en...Owen..." It was Rick's voice, our farm employee, screaming, "He fell out in the play house. I don't know...what to do! Owen was..."

I gasped as I saw Rick barge into the farmhouse, carrying Owen, unresponsive, into the kitchen. I looked in disbelief at my pale younger brother. What's wrong? Is he injured?

Mom's blood curdling scream rang in my ears. "Go get Mary, now!" she screamed to me. Instantly, I began to race the half mile to Mary's home as fast as my little legs could run. I was terrified like a mouse being chased by a hungry cat, and my heart was pounding out of my chest. As I sprinted down the dirt road, my thoughts were racing as well. What was happening? Everything was fine! Dad, Ethan and Ben went shopping for groceries. Rick was mowing the lawn. Owen was playing with his toys in the playhouse as Claire was dressing her dolls. I was cleaning. Mom was preparing our lunch. What could possibly have happened? What's wrong with Owen? Can't I run faster?

While I was racing down the dirt road to Mary's home, a

white car pulled up alongside me. The driver, dressed in a white shirt, motioned me to stop.

Maybe he can help me! Out of breath, I stopped and managed to say, “What do you need, sir?” This better be quick!

“Who are you?” the blue-eyed gentleman asked, softly.

There’s no time for this! “I’m Owen’s sister and he needs help now! Do you need directions or something else? I need to get to Mary now,” I yelled out impatiently.

“I’m going to Mary’s home,” he answered, calmly.

“That’s where I’m going now! I must hurry. My little brother is in trouble!” Sweat was pouring down my back, and I was feeling dizzy from the rush of emotions coursing through my body.

“He is in an excellent peaceful place now. Jump in, Kate Louise,” he said as he opened the passenger door for me.

Owen was “in an excellent peaceful place”? What was he talking about? Somehow, I looked at the man without any fear. I am not allowed to get into a stranger’s car! But Owen needs me! The sense of urgency within me pushed me to ignore this basic safety lesson I’d learned, and I ran around the car and slid into the passenger’s seat. Wait...How does this man even know my name? I shouldn’t worry about it – maybe he’s a friend of the family. It’s a free ride and Owen was in trouble!

Within seconds, we arrived in Mary’s driveway. “I’ll turn my car around. Everything will be all right. Owen is safe with God,” explained the man. What is he implying? Is my brother no longer with us? I pushed the thought out of my mind. How could he know, anyway? His aura was so soothing that I sensed I could face anything; his blissful presence felt angelic. I hopped out of the car and rushed to Mary’s front door.

I banged frantically on her door with my fists, calling out her name. I turned around to check on the man who had driven me and caught a glimpse of his white car disappearing into thin air in front of my eyes. I was at a loss for words. Could I be dreaming? Am I seeing things? Is this real? What just happened?

“What’s wrong, Kate?” asked Mary when she opened the door as I turned to face her. She appeared to be reading the distress on my face.

I snapped back into the urgency at hand. “Mom ...” I

managed to say as my eyes began to well up with tears. “Mom wants you to come immediately!” I felt my little legs weaken; I leaned onto her door frame to prevent them from shaking.

“Why?” Mary said in confusion.

“Something has happened to O...” My lips began to quiver. “...Owen!” I managed to blurt out. She grabbed her purse, we jumped into her gray station wagon and sped up the dirt road to the farm house. I scanned the road and driveway for the white car of the man who had given me a ride. Was he real? Am I hallucinating? He must have been an angel! But he can’t possibly know what’s wrong with Owen. Will I be able to find him again?

“What happened to Owen?” asked Mary in a panic, shocking me back to reality.

I shook my head. “I ...I... I don’t know.” I stuttered, unable to properly form a sentence. My eyes were filled with tears, but I didn’t cry. “Rick carried Owen in from the playhouse. He looked so pale.” I said as we turned into my driveway.

Without another word, we jumped out of the car and ran into the farm house. Rick was packing in the kitchen. That’s when I heard Mom’s cries. I walked further into the back of the kitchen and saw Mom shaking my little brother. “Owen, wake up! Wake up!” she screamed, sobbing over his unconscious body. Owen didn’t respond to Mom’s voice or her shaking his body. Her big tears were falling upon his little body.

Mary stepped forward in her confidence step. “Rick, carry Owen to my car. Ava, grab your purse! You and I are going to the clinic now. Kate Louise, please take care of your sister,” she directed.

Following Mary’s orders, Mom grabbed her purse, jumped into Mary’s car and dropped her purse to the floor. At Superman’s speed, Rick laid Owen into Mom’s arms as I looked helplessly at my unrecognizable youngest brother. Why are his eyes closed? Why isn’t his chest rising? Is Owen breathing?! Mom was kissing Owen as her tears were falling upon his ashen face. Mary closed her car door, started up the engine and they sped down the highway.

Frozen with fear, I remember looking at Rick hoping to get some sort of reassurance. He shrugged his shoulders and walked off to the barn. Devastated, I ran into the house to find

Claire. She was still playing with her dolls and was completely unaware of the situation. What do I do? How am I supposed to help? What should I do? Terrified, I walked back to the living room, paced back and forth, hoping of this nightmare would end. Dear God, please take care of Owen. What is wrong? What has happened? I don't understand. As I waited for anyone to come back with an update, it felt as if time stood still. Feeling completely helpless, I began to sob uncontrollably on the living room floor.

Two hours later, Mom returned home with Dad, Ethan and Ben. Their bloodshot eyes were sunken, and they did not say a word as they entered the kitchen. I felt a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. My mouth went dry.

I looked at Mom, trying to catch her eyes. "Where is Owen?" I managed to ask her in a whisper.

Mom didn't look at me. She was pressing the back of her hand over her lips and in a muffled voice, she said, "Kate Louise, Ben, Ethan and Claire, please come into the living room."

My eyes began to burn. I felt sick to my stomach. What has happened? Where is Owen? What is going on? Why are we going into the living room? We only go to the living room if we have guests or special occasions like Christmas! The pressure was building up in my chest and I had trouble breathing. We sat quietly in the living room as I scanned Ethan's and Ben's pale faces for any hints about what had happened to Owen. Do they know anything? I changed my scrutiny to Mom and Dad who both looked lifeless.

Then, as in slow motion, Dad's lips parted as if he was trying to get the courage to say something. He adjusted his position in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, as though he was trying to compose himself. In an unfamiliar trembling quiet voice, he pronounced, "Owen has gone to heaven."

No! I must have misheard. No. This can't be possible. "What do you mean, Dad?" I asked, gulping loudly.

My mother took Dad's hand in hers and answered slowly, "He is with Grandmother." I felt empty as her words sunk in my heart. A huge wave of sadness overpowered me, and I began to sob on the couch. My little sister, Claire, held on to me tightly as our tears and cries filled our home. Inconsolably

crying, I got up and walked over to Mom wanting one of her loving hugs and kisses. She looked at me sternly and scolded me, “Do not cry those crocodile tears. Owen was not suffering and we will need to prepare for his funeral.” Her cold response felt like she had smacked my face. All I had wanted was reassurance and love. I sat back down on the couch, letting my tears stream down my face, but forcing myself to make not one sound of my grief. I realized that day that I would have to hide my feelings. From that moment on, Mom shut down emotionally, for she never again showed any of her emotions, fears or frustrations.

A few weeks later, when I was out with Dad in the barn doing our usual evening milking routine, I decided I would ask him about Owen’s death. The milking machines were clanking loudly and Dad was standing by what he called our ‘Future Door,’ where he would stand when he wanted to share his wisdom. I joined him at the door, feeling the fresh wintery wind upon my rosy red cheeks and watching the fall leaves dance in the air before touching the wet ground. I whispered, “Dad, can we talk about Owen’s death?”

Dad turned to face me. He looked at me through his foggy glasses and quietly responded, “Yes.”

I cautiously cleared my throat and asked, “Why did Owen have to die?”

We stood in silence for a few minutes that felt like hours. Dad studied my face and finally said, “I’m not sure why Owen died. I only know that I should have died instead. He had so much more living to do.”

An odd clanking noise from one of the milking machines disturbed our conversation. Dad went to remove the noisy machine and poured the steamy milk into two pails. As I had been trained previously, I carried the milk pails to the cooler immediately. When I returned, my father had started the feeding our cows. I guess this isn’t the best time to talk about Owen. Dad didn’t bring up the topic of Owen’s death again that evening.



Sage
Zoey Batson

Cellular Activity

Ben Brier

The buzz was
not an audible noise.
Primarily, it was felt in the infrastructure of her skull
and her eye sockets.

Paralyzed of her own volition, she was
not in need of assistance.
Through an HD LCD screen, the girl feasted on
the Blue Light.

Clear, Penetrating, Enrapturing.
The intricate blue glow filled the pupils,
depriving them of natural refulgence
and killing them.

She got straight A's.
She captained the tennis team,
but no creative breath
whispered in her ear.

Instead, tubular nonsense filled her auricle.
It longed for, but was deprived of anything real.
Imagination, to her,
was unthinkable.

Reams of friends occupied her time,
yet her closest companion was her slave, her master.
Her palm was its controller and will doer.
The cellphone absorbed her mind.

Apathy: A Love Story

Rebecca Odom

You are like a lover, demanding
Yet withholding.
And I wonder,
How can something be so quiet
yet so bold?

On a couch, complacent and intertwined,
That is us.
That is our paradisiacal island on which we stay for hours,
Like castaways who fear rescue because
No one will understand them better than the silence.

Floating.
Melting.
Molding until we don't know where our skin ends and the fabric
begins,
Until day and night morph into one unit of time,
Broken up by the burden of necessity.

I tell you of childhood dreams as If I am speaking of another
person,
And you tell me that is because I am.
I tell you the sun is too bright,
And you tell me to step away from the window.
I tell you I want to breathe,
And you tell me the air does not want me.

You tell me all the reasons I should not go.
You say, no, no, do not touch the light.
They cannot love you like I can.
They will leave you with pretty words and meager
dissatisfactions, but
I will fill you with such a great nothingness, vast and dazzling,
Until you are brimming.
Until you are an ocean in and of itself that you can get lost in.
You are like a handless lover,

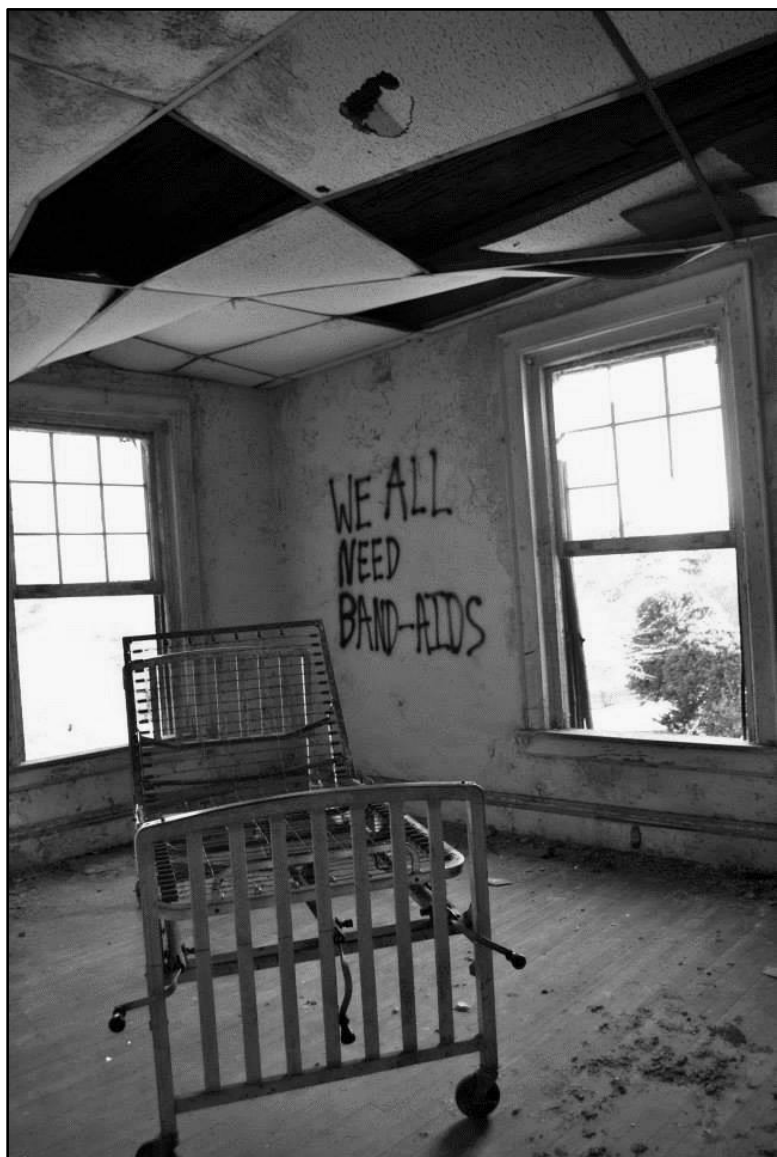
Bruising to the touch, hitting in all the places that do not meet
the eye,
Only speaking to say, please do not go.
So I stay.
I stay because this is all you will ever ask of me.
The only condition to your affection is my possession.
Like an untouched bride on her wedding night,
Shaky yet certain,
I give you everything as offerings of my loyalty.

My tongue,
Hands,
Heart,
I cut them out with the blade of fear as if they are simply
collateral damage.
I drop them at your feet, and you smile at my wreckage,
Smile at my vacancy.

Because I am your flower,
Plucked, worthless and withered,
Absorbing nothing, and stripped of my every idiosyncrasy.
I am simply a carcass of better times.

And you, you are my prison guard.
My best friend,
My worst enemy,
And my lethal lover.

You are every failure I will never have,
Every mirror I will ever pass,
And I realize,
It is not you who needs me,
But I who need you.



Stonewall Jackson Reform School
Melody Wolfe

Steeled Hearts

Matthew Senter

Men in uniforms
they are no longer people.
Men with steeled hearts
wait, ready for the signal.

Clustered together in their mud homes,
hands grip wood and steel.
Brothers to the last,
they fight for their homeland.

Shells land with strange emissions,
everyone knows the action.
Masks cover men's faces,
they wait for the signal.

One looks over the edge,
spellbinding landscape takes his breath.
Then the bullet,
he dies next to his brothers.

Not the first man lost,
the others still ready.
Officer speaks of glory,
they wait for the signal.

Thoughts keep them ready,
an end to the conflict means life once more.
The war must end to see mothers again,
the signal is given.

Boots slip in deep mud,
not a place for living things.
Forward onto the field of death,
inspired to meet their end.

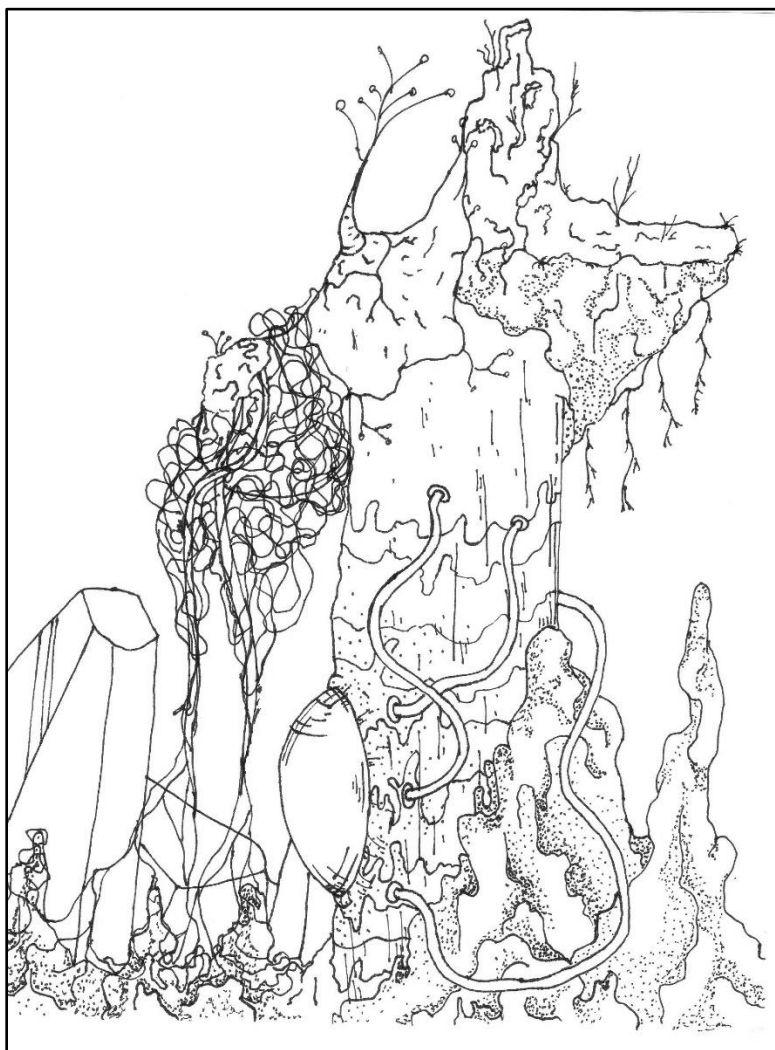
No ground taken that day,
brothers experience death side by side.

Men live in hell,
death comes second they realize.

Bodies removed from holes,
they lay their brothers to rest.
Hands grip wood and steel,
they wait for the signal.



The Unknown
Raime Cooper



Growth
Ashly Farley

The Ship and the Bottle

Terri Misch

Not too far back in my story, most mornings found me shaking and trembling. My stomach was in knots as I anxiously willed the minute hand on my watch to quicken the pace towards 0730. It was my ritualistic countdown until I could be reunited with my love. I rechecked my mental list, partially to keep my secret, but mostly to kill the final minutes. The list was the same as the morning before: brush teeth; tame fuzzy hair; change disheveled clothes—again; collect gum and douse perfume to mask a smell reminiscent of a distillery (after the party dissipated and the boisterous strangers went home to sleep it off); employ sunglasses to hide the bags under my bloodshot eyes; check and double-check for my I.D. card. I allowed my hand and my head to be comforted by the paper and coins in my pocket. I tightly grasped the money for the two Four Locos. This was enough to get me through until I went to the grocery or drugstore for more happiness birthed from a cask. Helpless and hopeless, I was making a vain attempt to weather the storm of my life. I saw everything around me with a distorted perspective: through the bottom of my wine glass. I had taken wine as my lover, yet I was married to the sea. I concealed my love affair in drawers, closets, sports bottles, and within myself for many years. My bottle was pretty standard most days. Barefoot Chardonnay with a twist off cap so that I didn't need a corkscrew and I could cap it on the go. I only drank white wine, for merlot was a tattletale upon my teeth. If I was in public before 1100, then it was mimosas with pineapple juice; if it was evening then I would surely supplement my chardonnay with Crown and gingers, but I always came home to my wine.

One of the things that deepened my affinity for Barefoot was that the winery donates a portion of its proceeds towards ocean stewardship and conservation efforts. You see, I was madly in love with the ocean; I still am. I have always taken great pleasure in forcing the dynamic movement of tubal opalescent blues and greens into silent rest upon canvas, with the aid of my paintbrushes—my extended appendages. Whether under the sun or under the magnification of a microscope, I loved to study and ponder aquatic things in all their magnificent

glory. Saline dreams flowed through my mind often, while the water beckoned me to come submerge myself in its soul-cleansing and restorative beauty. I wrote about, thought about, and dreamt about my watery home. That is, until I began to drown and could not hide the frayed ends of my life as they began to unravel. When I was drinking, my toes barely touched the water. Instead of passing time watching waves, I studied my watch in agony.

Like one of those perfect little ships in a bottle, impossibly frozen and contained and yearning for the salt air and playful crash against its bow, I was trapped. Many mornings I glared at the bottle. Full of anger, I saw myself inside, asking myself how did I get here and how would I ever escape through the narrow exit to freedom? I remember wondering wholeheartedly how that small bottle could command such power over me, at once running and ruining my life. Even more so, I wondered why I could not bear to terminate this relationship built upon self-destructive obsession.

Sobriety has not been easy, nor has the ability to have patience and perseverance. At times, it feels as if the bitter winds are unrelentingly blowing against me. But the difference today is that I have purpose.

I put my finger on the date December 31, 2015. That's when I chose my word: *vessel*. I decided a couple months prior to get sober, to make a real go of it. During the holidays, a friend had given me a book, titled *My One Word*, by Mike Ashcraft. The challenge was simple. In lieu of superfluous New Year's Eve resolutions—and the superfluous guilt that comes along with breaking them, the objective was to choose one word that carries personal meaning, on which to focus for the next twelve months. This word should permeate life, by way of visual reminders, contemplation, and action. Ashcraft lets us in on a seldom-recognized truth: "You don't need a gym membership or more will power, a new organizational system or a financial planner to make the changes you desire this year as *much* as you need clarity and sustained focus over time." Change in relation to character is the goal. It should also embody a vision for the future.

The word *vessel* is defined as "a craft for traveling on water, now usually one larger than an ordinary rowboat; a ship or

boat” (“Vessel” *Dictionary.com*). The term *vessel* also carries another meaning: “a hollow container, esp. one used to hold liquid, such as a bowl or cask” (“Vessel” *Oxford*). There is a story that I always keep in mind, the story of the cracked vessel. Feeling broken and useless, a clay vessel feels substandard compared to the perfection of the other whole and desirable pots. One morning, a water bearer came to fetch water in the cracked vessel, and the vessel asked her why she used the imperfect container. She pointed to all the flourishing wildflowers, growing and thriving along the path that she took every morning. She explained that because of the vessel’s imperfection and cracked exterior, the water it leaked along the way ensured sustenance to the wildflowers (Macaulay). I am a cracked vessel being filled one purposeful drop at a time.

I find purpose through my course of study in school. After stepping outside of my former glass prison, I recognize importance in the opportunity to utilize my life for the greater good of all, through defending and protecting water quality. With the knowledge I gain in the Marine Science and Technology program, I hope to carry a message concerning the plight of our oceans and take a stand for that which I love—the ocean, and all it embodies. I am a vessel set sail upon the waves of hope and determination, with focused intent upon continual growth and positive change. Without the fluid foundation that holds me up and sustains my passion, I would be fragile and empty, with a cork in my mouth, my voice unable to be heard. Drifting aimlessly in life, another shell of a person amidst the voiceless.

No longer does a bottle define me. Like the transformation of water into wine, my personal transformation of wine bottle into water vessel is just as miraculous and keeps me filled with gratitude. This transformation is not of my doing, but that of a power greater than myself, the same power that sets waves into motion and that which makes cleansing rains fall and washes everything anew. I am a Vessel.



Chariot
Courtney Rivenbark

Fall Treasures!

Marva Moss

Slowly, the season of fall
nestles into our lives.
Temperatures cool.
Grassy lawns and yards turn brown.

Sounds of insect orchestras
become almost silent.
Soon that silence will be filled
with the hoots of owls.

Leaves of the sweet shrub bushes –
the favorite plants of the whole yard,
become beautiful yellow masses!
Nature at its best!

Two young maples withhold
their reddish-orange leaves.
They wait to bring down
the final curtain of fall's colors!

Tiny, red trumpet-like flowers
are entwined in the weeds
of a small field
where pumpkins once grew.

These flowers are like little magnets
on sunny mornings, as they attract small,
yellow, butterflies floating, diving,
and soaring from one red trumpet to another.

On the north end of that field,
flocks of noisy birds
stop to rest in the tallest oaks,
sweet gums, cherry, or maple trees.

The birds search
among the weeds of the field,

for seeds of wild flowers,
and perhaps a butterfly or two.

Fall is the season for walks
through carpets of crunchy leaves,
or catching sight of a lighted jack-o-lantern
wearing its wide-toothed smile in the moonlight.

It is taking long drives or walks,
seeking perfect displays of colorful foliage
near streams, hillsides,
or along pathways.

In this season of beauty,
yellow mums give outlines to our lawns.
They welcome families and friends
at gatherings, or holiday celebrations.

Storage of these fall memories –
sights and sounds
of this treasured season
set the stage - giving welcome to winter.



Fall Light
Kyle Rouse

Mornings with You

Alison Hegarty

Sunrise...

barely.

Soft breeze breaking through the trees, and I think of you.

I think of mornings with you.

Coffee filled mornings, companied with your carefree attitude
were always my favorite.

Late to first period, because you came over and we
fell back asleep.

The sun is up now, but you are no longer with me.

I miss our mornings together,

but I no longer long for them,

as I am content with the feeling the soft breeze brings me.

My mornings are better, without you...

barely.

In the Fall

James Cummings

In June I'd sit and watch you as you dreamed
You were content; at least that's how it seemed
Now you're often restless in the night
Your toss and turn and rise before it's light

The summer days are waning
And please, I'm not complaining
I just would like to know once and for all
Some loves last through the winter
While others crack and splinter
Are you still gonna be here in the fall?

We started out so easy in the spring
Each day was like a song that we could sing
Now you're asking, "Should I stay or go?"
I'm wondering if you already know

As days are getting shorter
We're heading for the border
Of some dark place I don't know what to call
Eyes are coming open
Words can now be spoken
"Will we still be together in the fall?"

I thought we'd be forever for a while
I thought I saw a future in your smile
But no two journeys ever are the same
Affairs can pass away like summer rain

Summer days are fading
And failures are cascading
It's time for both of us to stand up tall
Don't think of it as quitting
It's more like just admitting
We probably won't make it through the fall

Leaves have started turning

Soon raked up piles are burning
I look at you; your face is like a wall
For whatever reason
Some love just lasts a season
And I don't plan to stay here for the fall



Leaf
Lane Thompson

Battles

Allison King

The shadows in the corner call my name.
I look at the paper and feel thorns pierce my brain.
What if I fail?
Who will I become if I can't grasp aces?
I feel as if I'm being hung over a high rise.
I'm falling, and I know I will never excel.

But still, I pick up my pen.
It moves in steady rhythm,
and my memories scream at me to circle all that I know.
I will not fail,
and one day I will be everything I've ever dreamed.

The hisses spit in my sweaty face.
A sickening, sinking feeling twists the pit of my stomach.
What if I fail?
Who will I become if I don't make the goal?
I feel like a humiliated, caged circus animal.
I'm straining, and I know that one day my psyche will dissolve.

But still, I take the shot.
It soars straight, and up goes the score.
My muscles say to practice harder tomorrow.
I will not fail,
and one day I will be my best.

Agony, and fatigue lace my body.
Claws of pain clamp tight around my throat.
What if I fail?
I will never grasp nostalgia if I can't beat this.
I feel like a boxer in a ring fighting against my own skin.
I'm knocked out, and I know I will never have a life.

But still, I lift my body from its bed in the morning.
I walk through my existence with a smile on my face.
No one can tell that I'm being ripped apart on the inside.
I will not fail,

and one day I will be free.

Every day is a battle.

The choice between the coward and warrior inside my bones.

It's a cloak that only I can put on.

Somedays I shatter,

but today I am invincible.

I will not fail.