

PORTALS



Spring 2019

PORTALS

A Literary and Arts Magazine

Faculty Editor

Rhonda Franklin

Student Editors

Augusta Brown

Lily Crowder

Isabella Greco

Tori Maners

Cover image

Sax

Hope Brown

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411 North Front Street
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(910) 362-7238

Email -- portalsmag@gmail.com
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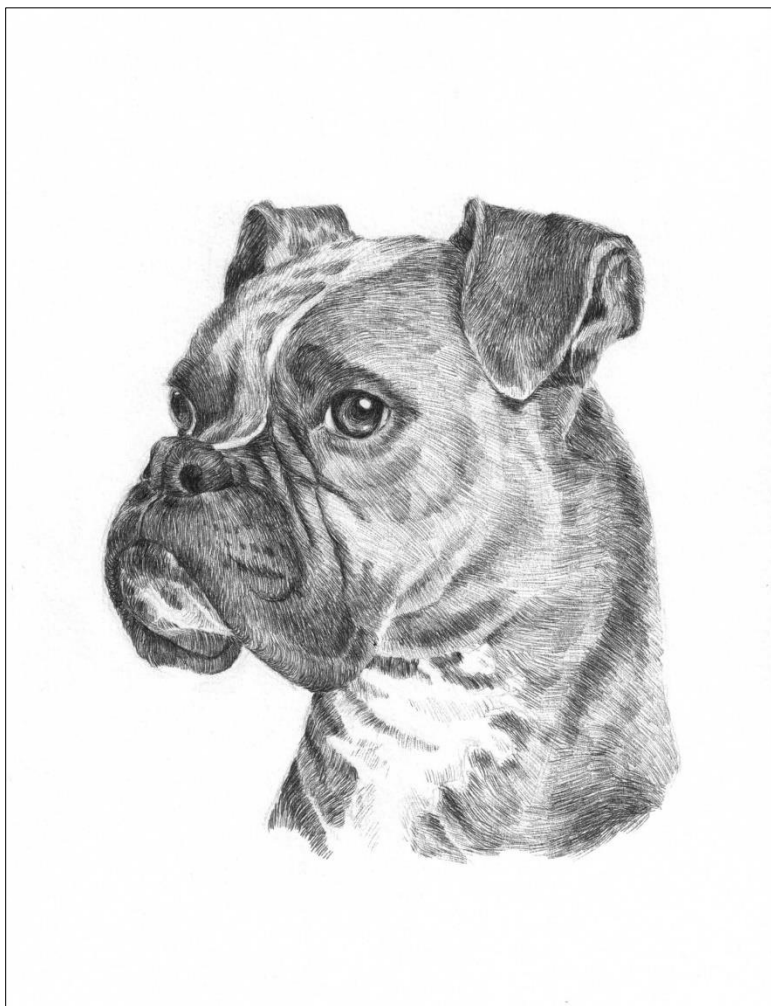
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Boxer
Anna Lawrence
Art Award

Sunshine
Anonymous
Transom Award
Best Overall

When I was thirteen years old, my dad died. The day I found out, I was on a family vacation in Disney World with my mom, stepdad, and my two little stepsisters. My mom told me to get out of the pool because she had to talk to me, and I remember I was so scared that I was in trouble, that my mom had found out that I convinced my little sister to sneak out of our campgrounds with me the night before and wander around the huge park without adults to tell us “no.” That is not what she talked to me about. I cannot remember what she said to me. For some reason, almost ten years later, the clearest thing about that memory is how scared I was that I had been caught sneaking out the night before.

My dad was a proud man. He could walk into any room and know that he was the smartest one there, and I’m not just saying that because he is my dad. Even now, every time someone talks to me about him, they always talk about how smart he was.

“You know, us Cosgroves are all pretty smart,” one of his brothers once told me, “But Peter, Peter was a genius.”

He was brilliant, and he knew it. However, being that intelligent and having that much awareness of it made him arrogant and proud, which, ultimately, led to his death. A heart attack might have been what killed him, but he died from the inability to seek help.

His early death rocked me to my core. I think about him every day. Some days, I’m mad at myself for not moving on already. “It’s been ten years,” I tell myself. “Just get over it.” There is no getting over something like that, though. I forget sometimes that not everyone walks through life feeling like this. People don’t have an acute awareness of our mortality or how fragile humans really are. They don’t hear a song on the radio and start crying because the only other way they ever heard that song before was in their father’s voice. When they fight with

their mom, they don't worry about losing her too and being alone in this world.

The thought of seeing my dad again, of spending three whole days with him, makes my heart feel like it's going to burst. I would do anything to hear his laugh and feel his arms around me, to hear his thinly veiled Irish accent say, "Darling, sweetheart, c-yu-tee-pie." I would be stunned, thrilled, and, I have a feeling, it would be similar to how I felt when he died; I probably wouldn't remember later how it felt, I would only remember what I was feeling right before it happened. All I would want to do on that first day is sit at the coffee shop he used to take me to when I was a child and talk to him. I would tell him about my brother's daughter, who was born only a few months after my dad died. I would tell him about my sister's daughter, whose birth caused my sister and me to start closing the rift that has always been between us. I would tell him that his father died a few years after him, but that his mother had kept scolding death and telling him, "Not yet," until a few months ago. I would tell him about how I took gap years before going to college and how I know that that is not how he saw my life going, but that I needed time to figure out who I was without my dad around. I would tell him that I stopped acting and that I'm planning on becoming a doctor. I would ask him to tell me more about himself and his life. I would listen as we sat there at the marble tables outside, his face flooded in sunshine and life.

My second day with him, we would go to his favorite place on earth: San Francisco. The last time we were there together (and that I was there at all) I was seven, too young to fully appreciate the city that shaped my father. He would show me around, take me to his old school, San Francisco State University. We would go to the beach and watch the sunlight bounce off the turquoise water. He would tell me how much has changed, how his city is almost unrecognizable to him. He would tell me about the people he used to know here, the life he had before I was even a thought. We would go to Muir Woods and walk around the giant redwoods that make up that ancient forest, the only beings I have ever seen tower over my father. We would end the day with dinner at the Fisherman's Warf, ordering fish and chips, knowing it isn't as good as it is back home.

The last day would be the hardest. We would go back to Ireland so he could see his family again. We wouldn't stay long; he moved away for a reason and wouldn't want to stay any longer than he felt necessary. We would see his siblings (all twelve of them that are left) and their families. My aunts and uncles would talk about how much I look like him. They would tell him that they see him in me, except I am much happier. They would tell him about people and events that I wouldn't know or know about. He would see how much Ireland has changed. How much more accepting it is, how the younger generations are trying to move forward and heal, how my cousins and I are learning Gaelic without fear of being hurt for our language, how we are trying to put the pieces of our country back together. He would see that there is still no sunshine.

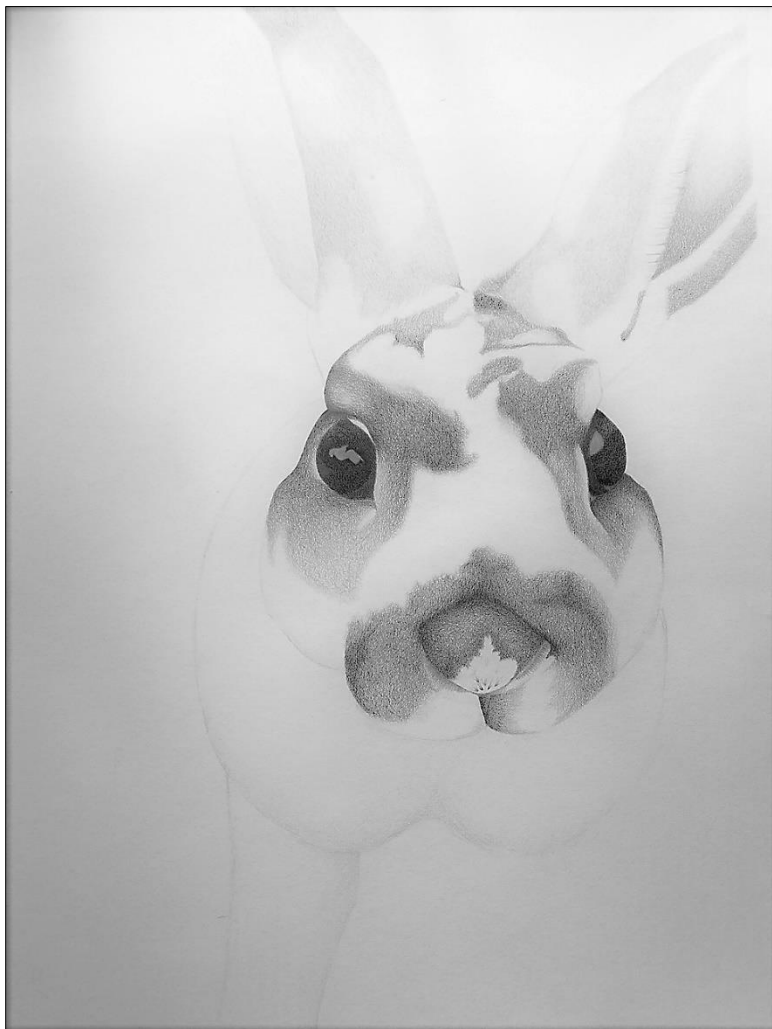
To end our three days, we would go to the second city that shaped him: New York City. He would show me around and I would tell him about a date I went on in New York City and how the guy got offended when I told him his city was small. In my defense, I had just come back from living in India and, comparatively, New York City is very small. My dad would laugh and tell me how glad he was I didn't get my mom's need to make everyone happy. I would tell him that I was glad I didn't get his need to make everyone mad. We would make jokes and talk about literature and history and new art. We would sit in Central Park, eating Chinese take-out, and watch the sunset. I would look at him, one last time, attempting to capture this moment to cherish as he looked over the city and his face glowed in the orange, setting sun and faded to purple, and then to black.

Waking up would be the most terrible thing in the world. The sun would shine through my window and I would lie in bed all day, not allowing the sun to look at my face. I would be broken, torn up. I would feel so grateful for those three days, but then I would spend the rest of my life searching for a way to get those days back, to do it all over again. I would be like an addict, I wouldn't have a life outside of trying to figure out when I could get my next hit, when I could see my dad again. I miss him so much, I can't do this, I can't go through this grieving process all over again. How could I survive this heartbreak twice? What have I done to deserve a punishment so severe that I must lose someone I love twice? Was the first time not enough? Did I not

grieve enough? Did I not cry and scream and wail and beg and plead enough?

As much as I want to see him again, I know it would not be a good thing. I am so grateful that the powers of the universe ignored me every time I begged to see my dad “just one more time.” It has taken me a lot of time and effort to get to where I am and to see him again would be like pressing the reset button on my grief.

I am my own constant reminder of him, as well as being everyone else’s. His siblings will always look at me and see something in me that reminds them of him. Some of them will say how much I look like him and someone will argue that I look nothing like him except for my hair, which will start a debate on what color my dad’s hair was when he was my age. My mom will never know how to talk about him with me and that part of our relationship will never recover, but any time I’m being difficult she’ll say, “That is 100% your father.” Every new person I meet won’t get to know my dad and won’t ever know who I am with my dad. I will always have unanswered questions. But I will always know that I was loved by him. I know I brought sunshine into his life and, despite how much I may want to change it, I know I will never see him again.



Bunny
McKalynn Barker

Lost
Kelsie Bennett
Poetry Award

an angel slides into a last row pew
she's fifteen minutes late
her wings are gashed, bloody,
and both of her haloes are smudged black beneath her eyes.
a circular burn screams from the shoulder of her leather jacket
browning, steaming,
from where the Devil put out his cigarette last night.

"Give up yourself to Him," says the Father
she knows she did.
saints cannot protect what is above them.

she rises with the Mass,
and the choirboys are so distant
she wouldn't have spotted her boy if not for the platinum blonde
that she used to have

when they fall back, she puts her elbows between her knees
clasps her hands, swans her neck
the voices in her head do not belong to any holy man
The Patron Saint of All That Is Lost
sits and prays for You.



2nd and Princess
Brantley McKeithan

Versions of Us

Kelsie Bennett

Fiction Award

They're laid out on the hood of Kara's grandfather's '67 Impala, the classic cherry red type that could hold its own in a car auction if its paint job wasn't so scratched and if Kara and Selene didn't spend every Saturday night slowly pressing dents into it. Selene is smoking slower than usual — the stars are really out tonight, and she wants to watch them wink before her grey cloud gets in the way. She doesn't know anything about constellations, but that doesn't change the fact that they're beautiful.

"I went to this lecture last week," Kara says, and Selene lolls her head to the side to watch the words come out in a puff of smoke. "About, like, the multiverse? I think it was for astronomy and astrophysics. Real interesting."

She sticks her cigarette back in her mouth after that, and Selene gets stuck staring at her, all long black hair and spindly limbs and rough edges, even though she knows Kara won't continue until Selene acknowledges what she's said. Kara's always got off-the-wall stuff like this on her mind; the new apartment she moved into last spring is right off of the Princeton campus, and she's constantly sneaking into lecture halls even though she isn't enrolled. Selene's tried to talk some sense into her before, telling her that if she's so interested in what these professors have to say she should just buck up and apply already, or at least look into a community college. The advice always goes ignored. It frustrates Selene, because Kara could do so much better than a barista job and open-mic nights. Deep down, though, she thinks she gets it — Kara just wants to know things for herself. She doesn't want to have to prove it to anyone else.

"Tell me about it, then," Selene says finally, since Kara is almost down to her cigarette's filter and making no moves towards grabbing a new one. Selene's own smoke is smoldering in the ashtray they'd brought out, forgotten.

"Turns out the multiverse and the universe are different things. Which I guess I should have expected, but." Kara finally wisens up and puts out her stub of a cigarette, and once the smoke dissipates, Selene has no choice but to look her in the eye.

“So the universe, in theory, means everything, right? But we don’t really use it that way. When we talk about the universe, we usually just mean the stuff that our Big Bang created. Because we’re narcissists, or whatever.”

“How do you remember all this?” Selene can’t help but ask. “Do you take notes at these things?”

“What? No.” Kara blinks at her, then seems to reconsider. “Sometimes I bring a notebook so it looks like I’m supposed to be there, but no, not usually. I don’t write anything down. It just sticks.”

“Right, sorry.” Selene doesn’t understand how Kara’s mind works, not in all the years since they’d met in high school and certainly not now. That’s probably how they’ve put up with each other for so long. “So, the multiverse?”

“The multiverse is a group of all those universes,” Kara says. “Like, everything our Big Bang made, and everything every other Big Bang made in every nook and cranny of space. And since it’s always getting bigger, the multiverse could basically be limitless.”

“That’s a lot of aliens.” Selene squints up at the stars. She imagines them moving like UFOs.

“Yeah, we talked about that.” Kara’s eyes are wide as she stares up, like she expects the sky to open up and swallow her whole. It’s incredible, how she never hides her wonder. “There could be aliens that look *just like us*. More likely than not, actually.”

“You’re talking about parallel universes.” Selene’s watched the Discovery Channel before, okay.

“Yeah.” Kara grins at her, and that alone sends a rush of satisfaction through Selene that makes her toes curl. “God, I love that idea. All those possibilities branching off of what we know? Off of each other? There could be so much out there, and the version we’re living is just one of the infinite sides of the dice.”

“Die. Singular,” Selene corrects automatically, then feels like a jerk. She looks away and reaches for her pack to distract herself. She’s less twitchy after she lights up and takes a drag. “You really think there are parallels of us?”

“Wouldn’t it be kind of self-centered if I didn’t?”

Kara is probably the first person ever to tie egotism and parallel universe theory together, and Selene takes a second to

listen to her own heartbeat in her ears, because God. Kara shouldn't still be fascinating after all this time. She *shouldn't*.

"The professor didn't talk about this at the lecture, but."

When their eyes meet again, there's something imploring in Kara's, and Selene recognizes the shift in her voice. This is the part where Kara runs out of facts and turns to her own mind instead, where she becomes vulnerable. This is the part where Selene gets to see the side of her that she bottles up until Saturday nights, all the thoughts she keeps close to her chest and under her pillow and tangled up in the wires of her own head. "I think there's something nihilistic to that. We could get struck by lightning and turn into superheroes and save the world here, but in the universe next door, we might be grocery baggers. Whatever we do, we're doing it differently somewhere else. So however this ends up, it doesn't really matter."

As soon as she's done talking, she looks a little lost, and Selene has to ball up the hem of her shirt in her fist to keep from reaching out and touching her. It's easier once the expression wipes clear, but the wisp of hair falling over her eye is still ridiculously tempting. Selene bites the inside of her cheek.

It takes her a minute to realize Kara is waiting for her to speak. She feels heat on the back of her neck and hopes her silence wasn't too obvious. "Yeah, that could be true."

She must not pull it off, or maybe Kara's known her too long. "You think it's bullshit."

"I guess I'm more of an optimist than you." Which is something Selene never thought she'd say. It's easier, though, sweeter on her tongue than what she really feels: that parallel universes or not, lightning-struck superheroes or not, what they have here matters. Selene doesn't know how it possibly *couldn't*, not with the toes of Kara's battered Converse swinging just out of reach of Selene's own and the way her eyes look like liquid gold in the light of Selene's cherry, not with the end-of-autumn breeze giving them goosebumps and how Kara is curled in on herself against it, almost post-coital.

This matters, whether Kara likes it or not. The other versions of them will just have to deal with it.

"If you could look through the mirror," Kara asks, "what do you think our parallels are doing?"

Selene's mind immediately flicks through a dozen different scenarios she can't fathom saying out loud. "Desk jobs, probably," she says, and hopes it won't get called out for the cover it is.

Kara lets out a little snort even though it was a bad joke, and Selene wonders, wildly, if there's any parallel version of herself that isn't as desperately in love. The thought makes her heart clench. It's not *fair*. It's just not fair.

Maybe there are versions of them where things went the right way. Versions where Kara dated boys in high school, and maybe Selene tried that out too, but they still went to prom together and made out in the backseat of this very Impala. Versions where they didn't even meet until they were thirty, but then it was love at first sight, and they got married in a tiny field in upstate New York and honeymooned in Paris. Versions where they were each other's girl-next-door, and then came knocking that sticky-sweet summer romance. Versions where Selene somehow plucked up the courage and said something years ago like she should have, instead of watching every guy come and go from Kara's life and knowing it's too late.

She doesn't even need that. She'd readily take a version where she never falls in the first place. So long as it stops her throat from going dry every time Kara so much as smiles.

She must be making a face, because Kara says, "What're you thinking about?"

"That it's fucking cold out," Selene answers, because she's never going to be brave. Not in this universe, not in the next. "Drive me home?"



The House by the Road
Karen Moody

My World
Denisi Walker
Nonfiction Award

Isn't it surprising how certain sounds can generate different emotional responses from different people and in certain cases extreme responses? Our emotional reactions to our senses are as unique as we are. One of my pet hates is the noise people make when they chew gum, and of course that's quite common as the sound of lips smacking together continually is infuriating to many. My husband on the other hand, absolutely cannot abide the screechy, squeaky sound of balloons being manipulated into animals or flowers or dinosaurs. It doesn't bother me in the slightest, but I will always remember a recent outing to a local restaurant...

"Good afternoon. Would you like a balloon?"

My son, Jack looked up with pure anticipation and excitement, which is in complete contrast to the pain my husband knew he was about to experience. He has told me in the past that the noise results in almost a physical and painful experience for him, so I know it took all his strength to resist punching the young man in the face. He was completely unaware of how much my husband hates balloons, but he was offering this service because yes, it puts a smile on children's faces and he was raising money for charity. Of course, both are very admirable reasons for playing with balloons on a Sunday afternoon, but as I glanced at my husband, I realized I needed to help.

"I'm so sorry, but I don't have any cash with me."

I saw the sparkle from Jack's eyes dissipate, and I felt a pang of guilt, but I realized I was telling the truth as I searched inside my purse. I caught my husband's eye and I could tell he was silently relieved.

"That's ok. I'll make this one for free. What would you like?" he said reassuringly to Jack, and they both smiled at each other.

"A bear, please."

My poor husband braced himself, and I realized he was holding his breath and clenching his fists. This was hidden to anyone else but me. It took just seconds for the young man to

turn a flaccid balloon into a bear, and I was truly impressed by the dexterity involved. I have attempted to do this myself, and of course only when my husband is away from home, but a poodle is all I can manage. Even that took many attempts and resulted in exploding balloons scattered like confetti never to realize their true potential. As he handed the balloon bear to Jack, he grabbed the balloon a little too enthusiastically and it let out a dreaded squeak which made my husband flinch instantly.

"Would you like one too?" The young man looked at my daughter.

"Oh no. No, thank you."

I noticed the brief tension in my husband evaporated quickly like air escaping a balloon. Luckily for him, our daughter considered herself much too grown up.

There are many more sounds I love than hate such as the distant horn of a train. It always brings particular emotions to the surface and makes me feel content. I instantly smile, and I do it without thinking. I find it comforting because it reminds me of my children. The Polar Express is one of their favorite Christmas stories, and we read it every year and watch the movie on Christmas Eve. This is accompanied with the obligatory hot chocolate served promptly at the start of the appropriate scene. It also reminds me of the mining town where I grew up in England as the railway track was only a few miles away from our home and I could see and hear the train clickety-clacking over the bridge just before I went to bed each night. The sound was soothing, and I easily drifted into sleep.

There is another sound I have always enjoyed hearing and look forward to. Every day except for Fridays my son Jack takes the bus home. I know that if I open the garage door at approximately 2:55 pm it will be closely followed by the familiar high-pitched squeal of the school bus. I love that sound in the afternoon because it means that any second, I will see my son's beaming smile as he races around the corner to greet me with his little arms trying to juggle his bag, books, ukulele and anything else he could have put inside his bag to make life easier but didn't!

"Jack! You can't possibly carry all those things," I always declare.

And he laughs every time and then hands everything over to me. I pretend to complain but I don't really mind. He then runs off towards the mailbox excited to see what surprises lie waiting. We follow the same script every day, and I never grow tired of it. The shriek of brakes probably irritates many, but it makes me happy.

Yesterday everything happened as it should. I opened the garage door and the calming screech of the school bus announced that Jack will be here. Any moment now. I knew it. Just like I know my daughter will text first and then call me because I haven't read her text fast enough. It was a certainty. There was no doubt. The sound I heard was instinctively followed by a smile from me. Just like Pavlov's dogs, I had been programmed to expect something happy. My happy. I remember thinking, as I walked down our cul-de-sac ready to hug him, that it was my secret that I was only letting him think he is independent by getting off the bus by himself because I am actually very close by so nothing can happen. Nothing. The sun was beaming and there were no clouds in the sky. The day was perfect. I mouthed hello and waved to a neighbor as he parked his truck in his drive and I continued to walk slowly towards the corner where I would see Jack, though I always hear him first since he has no volume control. God really should have seen that as a necessary accessory for children.

"Helloooo, Mommy!"

And then I see him running towards me.

But not today. Today he isn't there. There is nothing. Not even cars - only emptiness.

I hurry forward and almost questioningly say, "Jack?"

Did I really hear the bus? I was beginning to doubt myself. Perhaps it had been a truck and not the bus I'd heard or maybe it was a bus from the other elementary school nearby? Usually, Jack's bus arrives first and then the other bus follows about a minute or two later. I wasn't too concerned and decided to walk back around the corner so as not to upset his growing independence as his bus is quite obviously late. I look down and the smile that attempted to appear at the thought of my Jack growing up quickly faded. There on the ground is a bottle of water. I almost don't consider it, but the label catches my eye. It is the same brand we buy. I don't want to confirm the dread I am

feeling but there, quite clearly on the cap is my handwriting in permanent marker, "I love Jack."

I began writing his name on the caps when his kindergarten teacher asked parents to write names on all water bottles, which is understandable when children are constantly sneezing and coughing on one another and wiping their noses on their sleeves and sometimes wiping their boogers on others. I read something amusing and very true the other day, "You don't realize how annoying you are until you make a smaller version of yourself and spend most of the day arguing with them!" Children are essentially gross, but I never realized how much until we created our own little people, but honestly, I love the grossness. No wonder colds spread as quickly as I can spread peanut butter onto a slice of bread though! Not long after the teacher's request I decided to write "I love Jack" instead of just his name, and I have ever since. It is a habit, but it is one that I enjoy, and I didn't realize how much it actually meant to Jack until I was cleaning his room and decided some things had to go.

Removing items from a child's room is almost impossible when they are "trying" to help because everything is suddenly their favorite toy even though they forgot all about said toy for over a year! Even a crumpled piece of paper that has been hiding at the back of their closet is suddenly extremely important. The moment I try to put anything in the trash or charity pile when Jack especially is present, I inevitably hear a querulous,

"But Mommy. That's my favorite. I love it!"

So, the task becomes impossible and now I only tidy when my children are at school. It's so much easier and more efficient to do it alone.

Recently, I was going through some of his containers and throwing out pieces of paper and plastic that did not belong to anything and had no identity when I found a small plastic bag full of plastic bottle caps with "I love Jack" written on them. I felt a tear try to push its way to freedom and I gave it permission to leave and it happily ran down my cheek. Until that moment I didn't realize how important that one little habit was and that it meant as much to him as it did to me.

The sun sparkled through the bottle of water discarded on the ground, and it cast a rainbow onto the gravel, but I knew I

wasn't going find a crock of gold at the end of this one. I crouched down and inspected it more closely. Perhaps I was wrong, but no. It was my handwriting. It was the bottle I had placed in the holder of his bag this morning. I ran back to the main road where Jack's bus drops him off and looked frantically up and down, but the road was empty. There were no joggers. There were no cars. There was no one walking their dog. There was no Jack.

"Jack?"

"Jack! JACK! JACK!"

I don't remember how many times I called his name, but I do know I became louder and louder until I couldn't shout anymore. My throat hurt, and I needed to do more than simply shout. With utter despair, I realized that today of all days I had left my phone at home. I needed to call his bus driver. Perhaps this was all a horrible coincidence and Jack was still safe and sound on the bus surrounded by his friends. I knew that to panic before I knew all the facts was a waste of precious time. I ran towards the neighbor I had waved at earlier, and I felt myself pause in time as my eyes were drawn back to the bottle of water carelessly laying on the road. Abandoned.

"Jack's bottle is on the ground." I knew I wasn't making much sense. My neighbor quite rightly looked confused.

"His bottle is there, but he isn't. I heard the bus. Can you wait here just in case? I left my phone at home."

He nodded furiously, suddenly realizing and making more sense of my words than I knew I was conveying in my hopelessness. He motioned me on as I ran as fast as I could down our cul-de-sac, but I was stopped in my tracks by the familiar screeching of brakes and my neighbor shouting:

"Come back. It's ok!"

I turned to see my neighbor smile and Jack's confused face appeared in sight.

"It's ok. Come here, buddy."

There was Jack completely oblivious to any of the drama and anguish I had felt during the last five minutes. That's all it had been, but it had seemed as though my world had collapsed, and it had been days not minutes. In a short time, I had lived a world without Jack, desperately trying to understand why, but here he was once again with all of his belongings balanced

precariouly in his arms. Placing things inside his bag and wearing his coat would be too simple. It made me smile, and I could feel tears sting my eyes as I hurried towards him.

"Jack!" I smiled. "Give me those. I need to hug you!"

I squeezed him so hard he nearly popped like one of the many balloons I had burst trying to make balloon animals for him and his sister.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

"It's ok. I'll explain later. I'm just so happy to see you but please promise me you will never accidentally drop one of your bottles of water again!"

"Er, ok." He was still confused as I pointed to the bottle and we walked over to pick it up. That was the first time I touched it. I hadn't dared to before.



Beekeeper
Anna Lawrence

Math for English Majors

Colette Strassburg
Faculty/Staff Award

Our marriage counselor tells us
it takes two to tango and
only four syllables
to mutter a cordial, passing phrase.
"How was your day?"
"Would you like tea?"

She's not the one, however,
crunching numbers with
an uncommon denominator.
In *our* ledger, one syllable still equates desire,
and we are nine parts division.
Obtuse. Unequal. Fractional.

For us, it's easier to let
conversational opportunities
chuff and sputter.
We are city busses,
leaving Chicago at 6:00 a.m.,
whose doors, in obligation,
hiss open at empty stops.

When our monomial chatter
blends like owls into bark,
we speak in camouflage.
Tiny barbs disguised as backyard flowers.
You like Zinnias, so I plant Russian Sage
and marvel at the absolute value of bees.

Ode to the Insomniac

Brenna Gross

I'm not going to sleep
Just going to bed
Maybe think away
The thoughts inside my head

I want to make a change
But I do not know how
Because I cannot flip the world
When I'm upside down

I'm trapped under oceans
Bracing the waves
Shifting in currents
It's been like this for days

I cannot swim up
I can only swim down
Because I can't go anywhere
With my head spinning round

I just wish I could float
Not swim or sink
And just go back to
The way I used to think

Because I used to think sleep
Was important to me
But as I lie in my bed
There's one thing I see

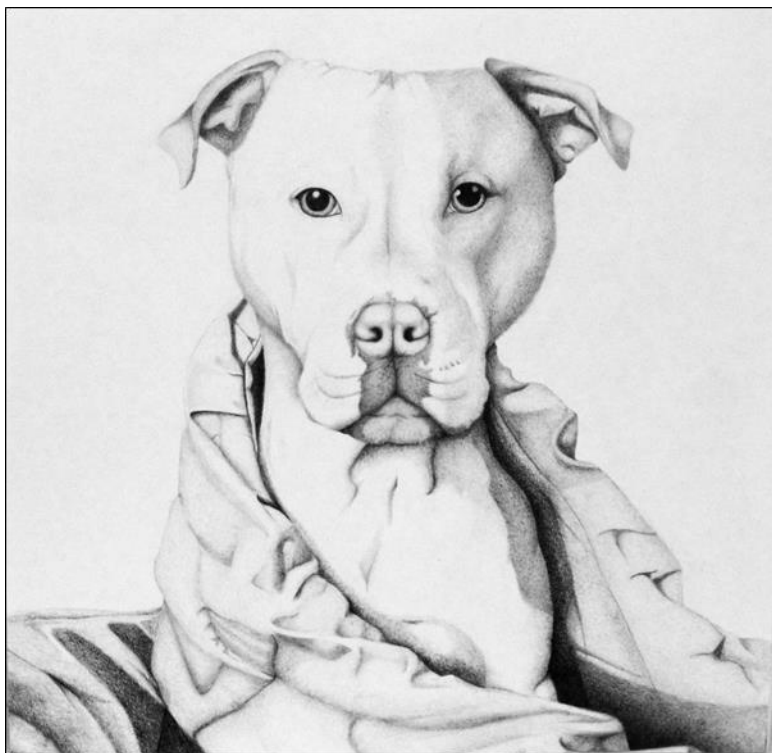
That I'm not good enough
I'm worthless and fake
And if my brain were a contest
Depression takes the cake

These thoughts keep me restless
Night through day and back

Which is why I write my thoughts
As an ode to the insomniac



Passage to Ohio
Hope Brown



Dog Portrait
McKalynn Barker

When We Fought the Gods

Robert G. DeMers

My cousin Tommy and I had no way of knowing life as we knew it would end. On this day our lives would change forever. Had we known the details of nature's plan in advance we would have been terrified, still we would not have been able to stop ourselves.

The rear of the house ceased ten feet above the open wheat fields, which stretched toward the horizon. My cousin and I stood at the porch rail watching the dark clouds growing toward us. The lightning flashed; we counted the seconds in between: one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two... at five the thunder boomed. The storm would be upon us in two minutes, three minutes at the most. We looked at each other and grinned, then turned and ran, catching air time as we cleared the far end of the porch at the front of the house. Without slowing our pace, we glanced up and down the road, sped across into the woods and up the hill. We leaped for the lowest branch of the huge maple tree that sat at the hill's peak. With careless abandon, we bounded to the slim branches near the top. Sixty feet in the air we cradled our sneakers in the crotches of the slender limbs and grasped the tapering branches above. From here we could see the water flowing past the island in the river behind us, the one we called our island, the island where we became Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, explorers of a lost world, and a multitude of other extraordinary characters who had set out upon many wondrous adventures.

Quickly our attention returned to the fields that lay beyond the house. It had started; the chest-high wheat swayed like ocean waves under the force of the wind. Our eyes were riveted upon the inescapable barrage of wind, rain and hail racing toward us; our faces beamed with excitement. Finally, we could no longer see the wheat fields as the wall of water and hail neared the house, and the great maple swayed in the prevailing wind.

We stood atop the mast of our ship as it fought to survive the ocean's onslaught. The bow was forced beneath a wave as Poseidon, in vain, tried to bury us in his aquatic tomb. Our mighty ship rebounded, tossing the ship's figurehead into

the air, while heaving the remnants of the ocean's might across the deck and washing it over the rails. The wind caught us on the port side dipping the rail into the churning waters. Then righting itself our ship threw the failed wave over the starboard side. Once again, our bow was forced into Davy Jones' keep, and once again, the powerful vessel proved unyielding, and unharmed by Poseidon's fury.

As we tossed and turned, swaying to the commands of nature's forces, we looked at each other and were reinforced by the look of exaltation on each other's faces. Suddenly, we were shrouded by the dark of night. We knew it was the work of the gods wanting us to cower in fear. However, the black sky, the wall of water and the hail that greeted us amidst thunder and lightning was no match for our resolve. We stood there, atop the mast of the mightiest ship in the world, challenging the gods, daring them to increase their wrath against what they must have considered the puny efforts of little men who dared attempt to equal their greatness.

We screamed oaths of allegiance to humankind and cursed the gods. The wind and hail battered us relentlessly, trying to bludgeon us from the mast. Our perches whipped, and dipped, swinging us one way then another. We held fast, laughing and screaming in triumph as we, in turn, were nearly wrenched from our perennial outpost. As their powers waned, we forced Zeus and Poseidon to retreat. Prometheus once again delivered us into the light of day.

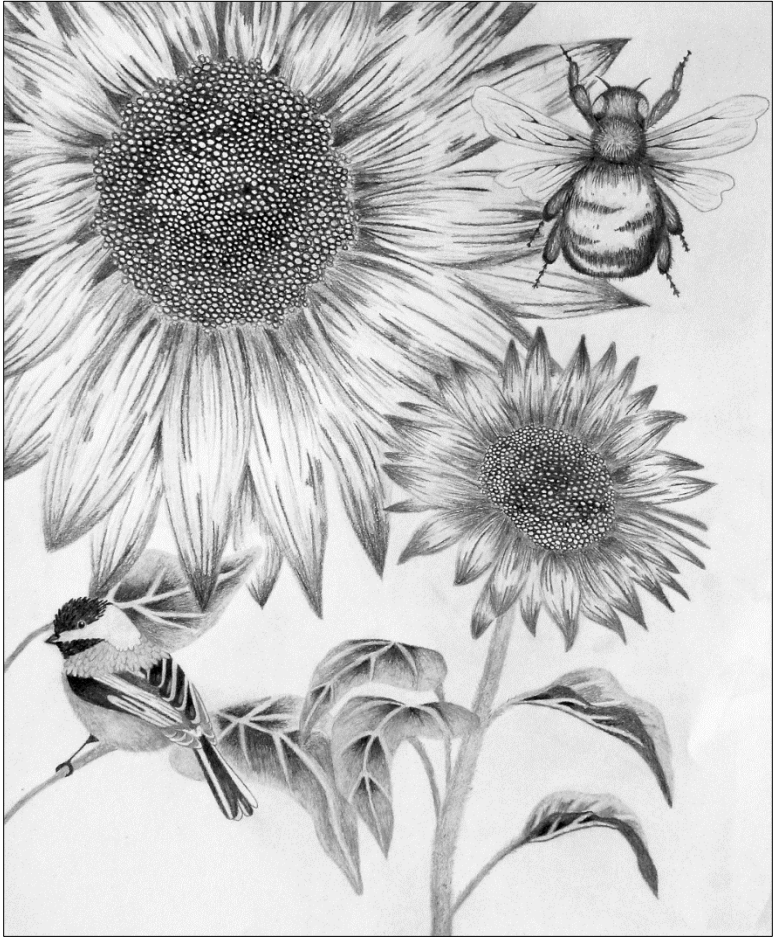
A gentle breeze swayed our treetop universe as we made plans for the following day. We decided to go fishing and take a hike along the railroad tracks to the next town, then catch a freight train back to king's hill, where the steep grade caused the train to slow and we could safely jump off. Our conversation strayed from bikes to the girls down the road; they didn't look that way last year. We talked about digging iron ore out of the hillside, then about Mary-Ellen and Kathy-Jo. Our conversation drifted to the island; maybe Mary and Kathy would like to go for a ride in our boat to check out our island.

We were twelve, by summer's end, thirteen. Our goals were immediate and childlike, and in the next moment we envisioned our adulthood. We played for an hour, and then discussed the pollution that was destroying the river. We were

unsure of our desires, wanting to do everything, but not knowing what or how. Dreams once shared became closely held secrets. Hopping railroad cars were supplanted by trips to the city, island adventures were replaced by two hours in the theater with Mary- Ellen and Kathy-Jo. Never again would we fight the gods.



Tongue Tied
Jack Estep



Bee
Lydia King

In Tenebra, Quiesco

Sean Crispi

Merciless, you devour all that lives
All souls vehemently resist your touch
In desperation, they hide from their end
How foolishly they flee from your presence
Inevitable is your cold embrace

For all of their distrust and all their fear,
There is magnanimous grace in your stride
Thine eyes shine upon the sufferance of life
Until your mercy intercedes life's wrongs,
Caged are the minds of all those who wander
Cessation, you provide relief to the weary
Through the tranquility of utter darkness,
You tender a rest superior

Through the bliss of insentience, you rescue
Unshackling the victims of animation,
You liberate all souls without failure
You are mercy incarnate, gifting freedom
In the peace assured to all that exists,
I shall find eternal reprieve from care
In the dark everlasting, shall I rest

Stop! Mom!

Kris Rafferty

I curl on my couch, bite my nails to the quick, and frown at the talking heads on the TV. During the day, this open concept area is large enough to serve a family of five, but it's dark outside, so I invite the news in and repel the family I seek to save. The area is dark, too, except where the TV's light sections me off from the rest of the living room, dining area and kitchen behind me...my bubble of light and anxiety.

I own the living room at night, because I am the information eater, the oyster building its pearl. Instead of a bed, I have my old, comfy couch. Over its lifetime, its cushion has formed to my shape as the cushion to my right has formed to my husband's shape. His empty depression is a nightly rebuke whose sting I mitigate with a vodka tonic. It scents the air and its clinking ice creates condensation that trickles down the glass's surface onto a coaster. I blot the cool water with a tissue and toss the sodden refuse onto the empty cushion that should have my husband on it. No one ever sits there at night anymore.

I sip, and water drips off the glass, streaming to my wrist and then onto my lap. I ignore its chill, as always, knowing my body's heat will temper it. The dampness will soon feel normal, but now it's unpleasant.

"Mom." My daughter's high, soft tone tickles the edge of my attention, but the talking heads captivate, so I hesitate to respond. "Mom." She steps into my peripheral vision, into my bubble, barely lit by the television's light.

"Hm?" I turn my head, but my eyes stay on the screen. She sighs, prompting me to focus on her expectation and see her. Not fully-formed—young, gangly—her beauty is untouched by challenge. Brows thick with pencil, eyelashes coated with mascara, her green eyes sparkle with clarity, reflecting an illusionary cognitive equity with me. I know it's me projecting onto eyes so like mine. She doesn't know what she doesn't know.

"Mom." Without a word, I've managed to annoy. She lifts one groomed brow and pretends to hide her annoyance. That annoys me. I'm also annoyed that a pundit onscreen is defending the indefensible, and the sum of my annoyances make

it impossible to remain in my bubble. My daughter purses her lips and lifts both brows as if she's not saying what she wants to say. Her message is received, and my brain cramps as I navigate the variety of booby traps she's conditioned me to navigate. On some level, I'm complicit, and proud. I know she needs to be ruthless to survive. Better she hones her skills in safety on me. I decide silence is the only safe response, so *I* purse my lips and lift *my* brows. It triggers her to abandon her pique.

"Lily wants me to stay after school with her tomorrow," she says.

"Huh." To say more is to answer an unasked question. iPhone in hand, her thumbs poised over its screen, I realize she's mid-conversation, much like I am mid-conversation with my pundits. I know she wants money and a chauffeur, which implies she wants to go unsupervised into the world. Unsafe. I want to say *no*, but told *no* too many times, a child will expect a *no*, be conditioned for a *no*, and then will stop asking, stop expecting, maybe even stop hoping. That habit doesn't stop when childhood ends, and I want to be a good parent, so I remain silent, giving myself time to find courage to say *yes*.

"Can I have money for Tropical Smoothie? And I'll need someone to pick me up around five," she says. I still want to say *no* but my fear is amorphous, created by a million *what ifs*. Insidious, it's there by cultural design, so I rebel.

"Sure. Daddy will get you the money." It's what he does. "I'll pick you up."

Her face lights up as she rewards the people on her group chat with her happiness; my rightful reward gifted to others. In the time it takes for me to compartmentalize my hurt, she finishes her conversation and then slips the phone into her back pocket. A quick pivot directs her to the kitchen as I grab my iPhone and text her father his assignment.

I hear the refrigerator door open, glance back at her, and see she's turned the kitchen light on, destroying my imaginary bubble. She pulls items from its shelves and then moves to the counter, now hidden by the kitchen's partition wall. Only then do I readjust myself on the couch, rewind the show, and then click the play button. Her noises siphon a tenth of my attention from the pundits' debate, so she's linked in real time to the thoughts

streaming through my mind with every argument, every counter argument spilling from the pundits' mouths.

I pause the show, disturbed by an intrusive thought. I turn my body to better see her in the kitchen. "Hey!" I say. My daughter, earbuds in place, glances up and removes them from her ears, smiling. She's still happy she's negotiated cash and a trip to Tropical Smoothie with her friends. "Promise me..." I glance at the paused television screen, focusing on its chryon. By the time I look back at her she knows what the pundits are debating. "Promise me you'll tell me if it happens. Don't wait decades like... Don't wait to report." My daughter's smile fades, soon replaced with a grim frown. She seems hurt, as if I've criticized her. I know she doesn't want to continue this new variation on a familiar conversation. Neither do I, but it would be parental malpractice not to.

"Stop! Mom!" Her face crinkles in pain as if a doctor has stuck her with a needle.

In my day, the talk began with *shout "fire," because women have been victimized in apartment hallways as they shout "help" to hesitant neighbors listening through closed doors. Act crazy, because that will ruin the rapist's fantasy. Pee your pants, because that will gross him out, and he won't want to rape you.* The advice seems dated. Even new technology, like nail polish that detects a drugged drink, seems inadequate, because perpetrators are inventive.

My daughter is tense, and seems poised to flee, but instead she reinserts her ear buds, lips pursed, brows lifted, and acts as if she is alone. Her behavior chastens me.

"Promise, please," I say. She gives up all pretense of ignoring me and glares.

"You always think I'm going to be raped."

One out of three women will be sexually assaulted in the United States in their lifetimes. I have two daughters. I've done the math. She steps out of my line of sight, behind the kitchen partition, and brings her food with her.

"Just promise me." I yell it loud enough to pierce whatever David Bowie song is blaring in her ears. She yells back *fine*, and I know I've done all I can. I know it's not enough. I turn back to the TV, adjust myself on the cushion, sop up more condensation and toss the debris onto my husband's side of the

couch before sipping more vodka tonic. It tastes bitter, making me wonder if it's been bitter all along.

I hit the button on the remote control, unfreezing the debate. They're talking about the veracity of a woman's thirty-odd year-old memory of sexual assault. The date is familiar. 1983. I graduated high school that year and have memories of my own sexual assault. I don't remember which class I was going to, or what the boy's name was, but I remember what I was wearing, his blond shoulder-length hair, his jeans, leather jacket, and that he was shorter than me. He was one of the students that spent his free period in the smoking area with his likeminded friends, so I'd never spoken to him prior to the assault, or since. I was a good girl. He laughed when I grabbed his offending hand, squeezing it, wanting to hurt, but not being strong enough to do him damage. Like he damaged me. He had a cruel smile for one so young, and it told me I wasn't the first girl he'd assaulted. I'd told no one, embarrassed, not wanting my humiliation circulated.

1983 was also the year my mother stopped me from enrolling in any of the four-year colleges that had accepted me. She'd feared for my safety, cried "poor," keeping silent about Pell grants and student loans. Instead, she'd enrolled me in a nearby uncredited school. It'd had security cameras. No campus. No boys. I spent 1983-84 in a secure building, walking between one class room and my dorm room down the hall. I was supervised by starched-suited women in nursing uniforms that might as well have been habits. We students joked that they "ate their young," but no one laughed. The following year, I secretly applied, and then transferred to an accredited college in Boston. That precipitated my first real fight with my mother, who declared I'd be raped in Boston. No one disagreed with her.

I'm doing my best not to repeat history. I don't want to discourage achievement in the name of safety, but I want my kids safe, so I frown at the television at night, stomach clenched, biting my nails, listening to pundits pretend the debate is about rape culture, when it's about whether rape culture matters. I sip, I bite, I sop up condensation, and toss sodden tissue onto my husband's side of the couch, barely noticing that I've created a routine, that I've created a new normal.

“Just promise if it happens you’ll tell me,” I say, though I don’t yell it this time, because the moment feels too much like whispering in a graveyard. I don’t think it’s too much to ask to be told. My family knows me. My daughter knows I’ll castrate the man that hurts her. In a world where sexual assault victims aren’t believed, aren’t avenged, I need my daughter to know I will met out justice denied her, but to say it aloud will scare her, so I remain silent, watching the screen...sipping, biting, tossing.

“*Damn.*” I pause the television again, only now seeing the corner I’ve painted myself into, and try as I might, I can’t see a way out of the trap. My daughter knows me, what I’ll do, and thus I am the *last* person she’ll tell. She’ll want to forget the humiliation, protect herself as she protects me. And thus the circle is complete. The trap. The same trap my mother navigated.

I unfreeze the TV, afraid to admit I’m helpless, desperate for these pundits and this debate to tell me I’m not. My husband walks into the room, and I want to tell him my horrible epiphany, but I see him glance between me and the TV. He pretends surprise, and then shows disappointment. I wait to see if he’ll verbalize this silent rebuke. He leaves without a word. They all want me to stop watching. I do, too, but only the news can tell me when it’s safe to stop watching.

The Realist
Brenna Gross

He was known as the realist- a sort of message man,
Between what we cannot see and things we think we can.
He tells the children prophecies of some foreseen deceit,
That a government will tell us lies and keep knowledge discreet.
“War is all around us,” the realist starts to shout.
“And we must be at constant war to keep any peace about.”
“Because peace is misleading: It has all too many sides,
And if we had to all agreed on one, there would surely be a
fight.”
“We fight for what we love, and we fight for what we know.
But no one possibly knows everything and there is proof to
show.”
“Not everyone knows hate, or the feeling of self-love,
And hardly anyone has ever seen our Earth from up above.”
The realist bows his head lowly saying: “Children, peace is war.
And if you want a perfect world, then it’s what you must fight
for.”



The Late Bus
Rhiannon See

Flight from Florence

Ethan Lee

Making a rude and obscene gesture, the balding fat swine in his late forties, early fifties stared me down menacingly as if to show that he was the better man. The better man would turn the other cheek, but we cannot all be saints. Only we sinners act on temptation and idle threats. This would become the most vivid memory of my flight from Florence. Hurricane Florence killed thirty-nine people indiscriminately in North Carolina. Luckily, I am not among the dead. Most of those that are dead made risky decisions to try and drive through floodwaters causing them to become trapped and drown. A majority of folks started to evacuate as soon as they heard Florence was swiftly approaching. My memory fails me, but if I can recall correctly, I chose to wait a few days before the storm was supposed to make landfall to evacuate. Despite having been subjected to a few hurricanes during the small amount of time I have been here on this Earth, this was the first time that I had ever fled from a storm and would most certainly be the last. I would soon find out that fleeing a hurricane is not always the best choice.

Preparing to leave was a troublesome task involving prioritizing what to take and leave behind. As my lovely girlfriend, Jessica, and I decided on what we should take, our beloved daughter, Elliana, bothered us with ear-piercing and successive cries. She was only 4 months old at the time, so her loud, ear-piercing cries were to be expected from a baby her age. Decisions were difficult as the more choices that are available the harder making a choice on what to bring and coming into agreement becomes. We live in a small two-bedroom apartment located on the ground level in downtown Wilmington. Afraid that some of our possessions would be destroyed in case our apartment was swamped in a deluge, we took what we could and left the rest in a fixed position on top of our bed. One of the things placed upon my bed was my desktop computer that I built myself. The desktop rests upon the bottom shelf of a glossy black, iron pipe computer desk of my own design complete with a drawer slide to rest my keyboard and mouse on. This beast of a computer boasts thirty-two gigabytes of random-access memory, three hard drives with one being a solid state, an eight core Intel

i7 4770k clocked at 3.5 gigahertz, and an MSI Nvidia 1080 TI liquid cooled graphics card. The computer desk was made from oak stair steps and black iron pipe which were all purchased from Lowes. I cut each section to exact measurements and then sanded, stained, and coated with polyurethane to ensure a smooth, sleek finish. The desk was designed to be at a precise ninety-degree angle so that when placed in the corner of any room, fits perfectly since all corners are at the same angle. Only the essentials were to be brought with us: toiletries, clothes, perishable food, and my laptop. Perishable food was placed in a sizeable, square blue cooler with a dimension of twelve by sixteen by nineteen inches packed with ice so as not to let the food spoil during the trip. Gathering our belongings and packing them into the car did not take as long as expected, only a few hours. Soon after preparations were in order, we were ready to embark on our voyage north to Virginia.

We left on a Wednesday. The drive to Virginia was not as bothersome as the drive back. There were few cars on the route leaving Wilmington as almost everyone had already left at this point. Compared to the normal energetic confusion, Wilmington, Surf City, Topsail, and Jacksonville were reminiscent of ghost towns from the 1800s. There was hardly anyone in sight except for a few courageous locals who dared to brave the storm.

We ended up staying at a hotel for only three days as I did not want to spend any more money than I had already, especially with family nearby. Not much can be said about our stay at the hotel other than there were few distractions and portions of homework were accomplished. This pleased me. After a three day stay at the hotel, we checked out on time as not to incur charges for an additional day, leaving the room in nearly the same condition as when we checked in.

At the behest of my Aunt Penny, we were granted lodging at her house for as long as we needed. I would not really call the residence her house or a house at all for that matter as she does not own the property, but instead pays rent to live there. The house is a modest two-bedroom duplex painted yellow on the outside with white walls on the inside. Inadequate room in the front yard shared by the other duplex made parking troublesome. Penny can be a mean and hateful drunk at times

and caring and compassionate at others, when not inebriated or hungover. Her face littered with rosy red splotches like pepperonis on a pizza and her hair a tangled interwoven wool blanket. Her appearance is most certainly due to years of alcohol abuse and a general disinterest in how the public perceives her image, probably also due from alcoholism. Ironically, despite working at the local liquor store, her beverage of choice a Natural Light beer.

Upon arriving at her residence, I felt a bit of happiness and excitement, although a small amount, at the thought of seeing my younger cousin Dalton, who I had not seen in a while. I rarely get to see him much since we live so far apart. Just like his mother, Dalton cares little for his appearance. Having not combed his hair or bathed in days, he had a disheveled look about him. Upon entering his room, I noticed clean clothes lying about in a pile on the dirty floor adding to his unkempt appearance whenever he would dress himself with the wrinkled garbs. Candy wrappers were strewn about everywhere giving me the impression that he was too lazy to clean up. The room was untidy to say the least. Dalton and I are similar in many ways, but in this regard, we are nothing alike. Living a dull, modest life, Dalton spends most of his days content with playing video games and not doing much else say for working a job as a cook, frying chicken at the local gas station. I have goals and ambitions whereas he chooses to live a life of debauchery. From time to time I am known to engage in a little decadence here and there and did so during my stay with Penny and Dalton in the form of a cold beer and a cigar. My drink of choice was Stella Artois or Stella for short. Stella is a tad more expensive than your traditional Bud Light. A Belgian beer crafted from a six-hundred-year-old recipe, Stella tastes exactly how the name sounds, exquisite. I had purchased the twelve pack of beer from the local Food Lion as that was the only place in town that sold Stella.

Once I arrived back at my Aunt Penny's place with the beer, Dalton was quick to request one saying, "Let me get a beer. That's all I care about." I obliged him saying, "By all means, help yourself, just don't drink them all. You can drink half. I got them for both of us to share." At first, we drank a few beers in the living room. I grasped the cold beer with my left hand and

raising the damp bottle to my mouth, took a hardy swig and set the bottle back down on the coffee table without using a coaster. The table was not mine and the house was already in shambles so what did I care. I could not possibly add to the state of disarray by simply leaving behind a wet ring on the inexpensive piece of furniture.

After a few beers, we headed into Dalton's room to play some video games on my laptop. Many a moon had passed since I had last played any video games so this was a nice change of pace from the constant grind of schoolwork and study. We ended up playing the latest installment from Namco, Tekken 7, a Japanese fighting game. Six beers deep, I became dog-tired. This was also due in part to the fact that I go to bed around ten o'clock and time was dragging on into the late hours of the night and early morning. Around 12:30 p.m. I retired to the bedroom where my girlfriend and child were fast asleep, noticing Dalton was still awake playing Tekken. Penny stayed up late every night drinking beers and chose to sleep on the couch and let us have her room. For as long as I can remember, both Dalton and Penny have always stayed up late and slept all day. Whenever I sleep past ten o'clock, I wake up with a sense of guilt. For this reason, I go to bed and wake up at reasonable hours.

The next day I arose to find Penny passed out on the couch and both she and Dalton were still asleep as expected. Trying not to make too much noise, Jessica fixed us breakfast. After our breakfast, we left to do some shopping. Upon our return, like clockwork, after thirty minutes, Dalton emerged from his dark, dank cave like a rat crawling out of a hole in the wall. Going through his daily ritual of caffeine, nicotine and competitive video games, he lit his first cigarette and fixed himself a strong pot of coffee. A long day of testing his might against invisible opponents across a vast network of fiber optic cables lay before him. He would go on to play games for the rest of the day. "DALTON!", his mother shrieks from the other room, surely to request of him some menial task that she could do herself, to which he responds with a great amount of disrespect and contempt for his mother, "Leave me the freak alone! I'm playing my freaking video games!"

After five grueling days, Jessica and I were ready to head back. Tired of being subjected to the highly unpleasant

condition in which the house was in, I called my mother to see if the roads were clear enough for us to drive back to Wilmington. My mother had stayed behind in Wilmington since she works as a Director of Nursing at a nursing home. Many of the residents are in dire straits and cannot move or breathe on their own without the use of expensive medical equipment, various machines and lifts, and breathing apparatus. Without these necessities the residents would remain immobilized, uncomfortable, suffocate, and perish. To add insult to injury, the cost would be too great to transport these residents. Unfortunately, the company my mother works for can be classified as a for-profit business just like most nursing homes. The only way they would have transported the residents would be if they were in imminent danger and evacuation was absolutely necessary to avoid having deaths and lawsuits on their hands. Most of the time when the elderly are transported in situations like these, some of them perish.

The journey back was a long and arduous one. Once we were on our way home, we had to take Interstate 95 all the way to Nashville, North Carolina and from there we took a detour around the flooded part of I-95 and made our way to Interstate 240. Once on I-240, we took another detour to Jacksonville and then hopped on Highway 17 to Surf City and Wilmington. All this was possible with the help of a somewhat unreliable app called Waze. Waze took us around the flood parts of I-95 until we got to I-240. From there we had to follow the detour signs taking us to Jacksonville. Instead of taking the detour, I chose to continue to trust the Waze app to avoid the two-hour detour as the app promised only a forty-minute drive. Waze ended up taking us down a country back road that was completely flooded, looking as if you would need a canoe to get across. I ended up going back the way we came until we reached the beginning of the detour and from there onwards, I followed.

Traffic was not that bad until we reached Jacksonville. At that point the traffic became ridiculous. Folks were growing impatient and cutting each other off without the slightest regard for their own safety or anyone else's. People were riding less than a car length apart from each other's bumpers. I was always told you should stay at least a car length apart for every ten miles per hour you are traveling. We almost had someone run into us

or cut us off several times. One of those times a truck with a disaster response decal on the sides and back thought he was privileged and took precedence over others. He literally almost ran into me as his lane was ending and he had merged into mine. He could not be patient and wait his turn. Jessica and Elliana were sitting in the back of the car. Had they not been with me, I surely would have let him run into me, causing the horde of traffic behind me to come to a screeching halt. The accident would have been entirely his fault and he would have been fired from his job for crashing a company vehicle. With our fuel light on, we were in a hurry to reach Wilmington, so we could refuel. I laid on the horn as he cut me off, narrowly missing the front of our car. When I laid on the horn, he stopped suddenly, rolled down the window, stuck his head out and flipped us the bird while making direct eye contact with me as if to intimidate. Needless to say, I was not intimidated. Instead, having become enraged, I profusely laid back on the horn. At this point I realized that sometimes the best thing to do would be to not buy into the hype of hurricane evacuation and just stay put unless evacuations are mandatory. After arriving back home, to my dismay I discovered our apartment had been completely flooded. This made me feel both comforted and upset at the same time. We should have never left but at the same time we should have never rented an apartment downtown. My precious computer and most of my possessions were destroyed in the flood. Thankfully my family was unharmed.



Mysterious Woman
Addie Jo Bannerman

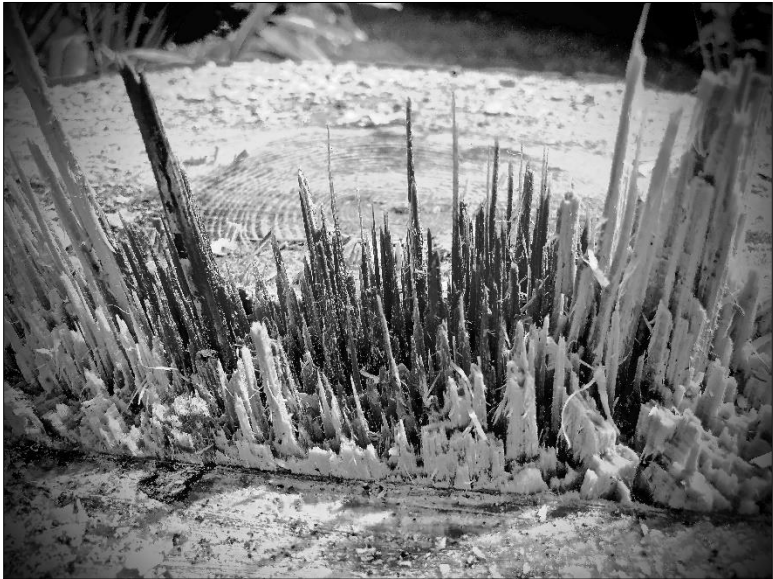
Nested
Colette Strassburg

There hasn't been any wild in our oats
for quite some time. I suspect it limped off,
when we were in our forties,
licked its wounds and regrouped
near the switchgrass.
Surely it's miles away by now,
thanking us for nothing.
For all the days when there wasn't
a blessed thing in need of doing.

For mornings in bed,
when baby green breezes,
blew the curtains in and out
like the opening and closing of a locket;
an intermittent invitation
to watch a wren carry twigs
and bits of twine to a nesting box.
The whole of us, sheltered under the delicate
white crinoline of the Dogwood.

For nights, when we didn't make ropes
of the sheets, moving in and around
each other's limbs like squirrels,
but lay, instead, with our toes touching,
listening to far away trains;

happy to have soaked up the day, like biscuits,
moon-eyed as the cat.



Tree Village
Kaylee Clark

Life
Kayla Dorsey

Put the bills in firemen's boots
and the pennies toward your gas.

Give to the ones who lost it all
and pray for this week's check to last.

Hold them close when you comfort them,
so they will never see your tears.

Stand beside the rejected ones
and raise your voice for all to hear.

Reach out one hand to pull them up
and the other to stave the sun.

Even if you cannot change the world,
you can change the world for one.



Flowers
Lydia King

Shotgun

Cassie Burnette

The rusty red pickup truck idled at the stoplight, its two passengers sitting patiently in the cabin. The driver, Tom, fiddled with the radio as his daughter, Abigail, stared at her phone through a pair of sunglasses. As the light turned green, Tom settled on a station and pulled the truck forward, one hand on the wheel and the other massaging his knee. Beside him Abby tensed with every bump on the road, one hand moving from her phone to the seat belt strapped tightly across her chest.

Tom knew he was on thin ice with his daughter. The fact that she had even agreed to ride with him instead of a cousin or aunt meant a lot to him. If he couldn't make things up to her in this ride, he knew that he may not get another chance to save whatever relationship he had left with her.

They drove in silence, the only sound filling the cabin being the songs from the radio. A few miles down the road a familiar tune starting coming through the speaker, Tom smiling as he reached to turn the volume up. Abby beat him to it, but it wasn't the volume she was changing. She turned the radio off, huffing as she looked back at her phone.

Tom glanced at her, confused. "Why'd you turn the radio off? I like that one."

"I didn't want to hear it." He could almost hear her eyes rolling behind those tinted lenses.

Frowning he looked between her and the empty road. "You don't even know that song, how could you be bothered by it?"

Looking up from the phone, Abby stared at her dad. "Jesus Take the Wheel? Literally, anybody with a brain has heard that song, Dad."

Tom rolled his own eyes looking back to the road. "Well good for anybody with a brain. I want to listen to the radio." Abby reached forward and turned the radio back on, quickly switching the station. Tom listened to the new station for a few minutes, trying to figure out if he knew the song or not. It sounded familiar, but just as he was about to decide he heard a snuffle beside him. Glancing over he saw Abby facing the window.

Hesitating a moment he spoke. "You, uh... You need a tissue, kiddo?"

"It's just allergies, I'm fine."

He nodded. "Ah, right. It is that time of the year. You know what they say, the crunch of leaves leads to a sneeze."

"Nobody says that Dad."

Tom laughed. "I say that!"

"Since when?"

"Since now! Completely original, and sounds catchy right?"

Abby sat in silence for a moment before letting out a breath. "Sure Dad."

Feeling satisfied Tom gestured towards the glovebox. "There's tissues in there if you want one." With a heavy sigh, Abby leaned forward, opening the compartment in front of her. Shifting through the years of junk that had accumulated in the small space, she froze.

"Oh my God," she gasped.

Tom frowned. "What is it, honey?" What could he have put in there that would warrant her gaping at the small space, as if it had just insulted her?

Reaching in, she pulled her hand back out, staring at her father. "Why is this in here?!" Glancing away from the road he felt his heart drop as he saw what was hanging limply in his daughter's hand. "You told Mom you got rid of this!" Every part of him screamed to take the gun out of her hand, but the fear of running off the road or missing was stronger.

Instead, he scowled, trying to speak in the most fatherly tone he could muster. "Abigail, put that down this instant." This, however, did not seem to be the right decision either.

His daughter laughed, turning herself towards Tom. "Oh no, you're not going to just sweep this under the rug. Why is this in here? You told Mom you were going to get rid of it!"

Frowning Tom looked between the road, his daughter, and the dust covered gun in her hand. "Abby, why do you even know about this? Those are conversations I had with your mother. Not you and her. Just her."

"Walls have ears, Dad."

Hearing the smugness in her voice he felt himself tense. "Abigail, put it back in the glovebox."

“No.”

“Yes!”

“Why should I?!” she demanded.

“Because I told you to!”

“And you told Mom you’d get rid of it, but clearly that didn’t happen.”

Tom groaned. “Abigail, you can’t just play around with that thing like it’s a toy. Put it back!”

“I’m not playing with it! And I will put it away. Once you tell me why you still have it,” she said defensively.

Tom glared at his daughter for a moment before looking to the road. “I kept it so if something ever happened I’d have it there to protect you and your mom. She told me she didn’t want it in the house, and the car isn’t in the house, so I never really lied.” Abigail stared at her father for a moment, Tom only able to look back at his own reflection in her dark sunglasses. Putting the gun back, she grabbed a fist full of old fast food napkins.

“Yeah well, you couldn’t really protect her with it when it mattered, could you.” Unbuckling, she crawled into the backseat.

“Wait, Abigail.” Tom’s protests were met with nothing but the click of her seatbelt as she settled into the back of the cabin. Realizing that this had been his last chance with his daughter and he was blowing it, he desperately looked around for anything that could help him fix the situation he’d gotten himself into. Eyes landing on a box of little orange candies he smiled, picking them up and giving the box a rattle.

“Hey, don’t get all upset! You want a Tic Tac?” Candy makes kids happy right? Even the older ones could usually be bought by something sweet.

Abigail looked up from her phone and frowned. “Do you have any idea how old those are? Are you trying to kill me, too?” Tom froze at her question. He was sure that she didn’t mean it, but the implications of her words hung in the air like a heavy blanket. The rest of their drive was quiet, the radio softly playing through the cabin.

As another unfamiliar song ended, Tom pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home he’d been driving back and forth from for the last week. Being the husband, it was obvious that he

would have to be very involved in the funeral planning, but the drive always felt so long and the building so morbid. Pulling the key out of the ignition, he didn't get a chance to say anything to his daughter as she jumped out of the car, running into the building. Sighing, he grabbed his coat and stepped out. Walking to the building he couldn't help but repeat Abigail's words. Of course, he hadn't meant to get into the crash, no one ever does. But weren't there so many things he could've done to stop it?

Stepping inside, the feeling of sadness could be felt pulsating through the room. Groups of the family had broken off to console each other. Some were dabbing at the corner of their eyes, while others stood in front of the slideshow of photos Tom had helped put together. They laughed and smiled as they recalled the moments the photos had been taken. Tom walked over himself, seeing a photo of his family come across the screen. His wife's and daughter's smiling faces stared at him through the screen, reminding him of better times.

As he watched the slideshow he gave nods and "thank you's" to family who walked over, giving their condolences.

"No one could've seen it coming."

"Such a terrible accident."

"A tragedy to see her life cut so short."

"We're here with you."

He could only bring himself to nod the longer he stood there, staring at his wife's face, her radiant smile shining through the screen like those headlights through the windshield. Was that the last thing she saw? Headlights as bright as her? Or maybe it was him, as he desperately tried to find a way to swerve out of the way of the oncoming car. Maybe it was their daughter in the back seat, who had been sleeping so soundly after a long day of family fun. Who would have guessed that it would end the way it did. Tom was pulled out of his thoughts by a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Looking over he saw a familiar wrinkled face. "Oh, hey Earl."

The man gave him a nod. "Hey, Tom. How you holding up?" It wasn't as much a greeting as a pleasantry. Earl and Tom had never gotten along well. Or at least, Earl had never liked Tom much. Tom couldn't help but feel guilt tighten its grip on him as he thought back to a night colored in gold and white. He

remembered promising Earl that he would protect the man's girl at all cost, even if it meant putting Tom's own life on the line. Now that promise was broken and would be buried six feet beneath them.

With a heavy sigh, Tom spoke. "I'll be all right, Earl."

"I was talking with Abby." The guilt started to turn to fear. The talk he'd been dreading was here, and the outcome of today was completely out of his hands.

"Have you? I'm sure she's happy to see everyone. Especially with what's happened."

Earl didn't pretend to not hear Tom's panic. "I'll be frank with you, Tom. She needs time to heal from this. And so do you. She wants to stay with me and the lady for a while, at least until school starts back up. I think it'd do the girl some good. Don't you, Tom?"

Earl was met with a sad nod. Tom couldn't bring himself to admit it, but they were right. What could he do for his daughter at a time like this? He'd tried on the way here, and that had only worsened the situation.

Patting Tom's shoulder again, Earl stared at the slideshow for a moment. "You did well on this Tom. Just take some time for yourself. Let us focus on Abigail." Left alone in front of the photos of his wife Tom watched as everyone spoke in their separate groups. Walking past them he went back outside, getting into his truck. Coat in his lap he looked around. Steering wheel. Tic Tacs. And finally, the glovebox.



Starry Serenity
Robert Carl

Days Gone By and Days to Bear

Sean Crispi

How long it's been since I have seen
More than a lifetime ago it now seems
A forest filled with the life of wild,
I have not gazed upon since I was a child

Or perhaps it was in elusive dreams
That I did see the river's gleam
Perhaps it was in lives of the past
That I did see the beautiful forest
The sights of the forest I adore
I wish I could see them once more

Made to suffer the dole of the urbane
From these miserable sights I disdain
The grey and obtrusive buildings abound,
Like a hideous tomb they doth surround
The air so polluted has become besmirched
At the mere sight of it my heart does lurch
From this oppression I wish to escape

How long it has been since I have heard
The cry of the songbird undisturbed
The gentle babbling of the brook,
A great bliss I did overlook

The wind whispering through the trees,
And the insistent murmur of the bees
The sounds of the forest I adore
I wish that I could hear them once more

Made to suffer the dole of the urbane
From its wretched clamor I disdain
Its ruckus is not a mere vexation,
Rather a source of great agitation
From the motor traffic rumble,
To the tumultuous bustle,
I cannot bear the chaotic ferment

For my sanity I do lament
From this oppression I wish to escape



Nature's Fireworks
Catherine McLoughlin

Miel Y Canela

Luis Mendoza

El sabor inolvidable que se imprimió como un tatuaje en mi piel.
Siguiendo me, y con cada paso torturando me mas y mas ...
hasta perder el sentido de mi existencia.

Encadenado en su olor hipnotizante, perdiendome en una
realidad que no me pertenecía.
En un mundo de Maravillas.

Quede enamorado y loco por la dulzura que me rodeaba y que
me atraía mas a ella ...
Lo que no podia creer, era la distancia a los labios de ella.
Tan cerca, pero al igual lejos de mi alcance.

Que me detuvo de ese momento perfecto?
No lo sabré.
Pero ahora lejos está ...

Lejos está el sabor acogedor, de Miel y Canela

Honey and Cinnamon

The unforgettable taste that was imprinted like a tattoo on my
skin.
Following me, and with each step torturing me more and more
... until I lose the sense of my existence.

Chained to its hypnotizing smell, losing myself in a reality that
did not belong to me...
In a world of Wonders.

Left crazy and in love for the sweetness that surrounded me and
attracted me more to her ...
What I could not believe, was the distance to her lips.
So close, but just as far from my reach.

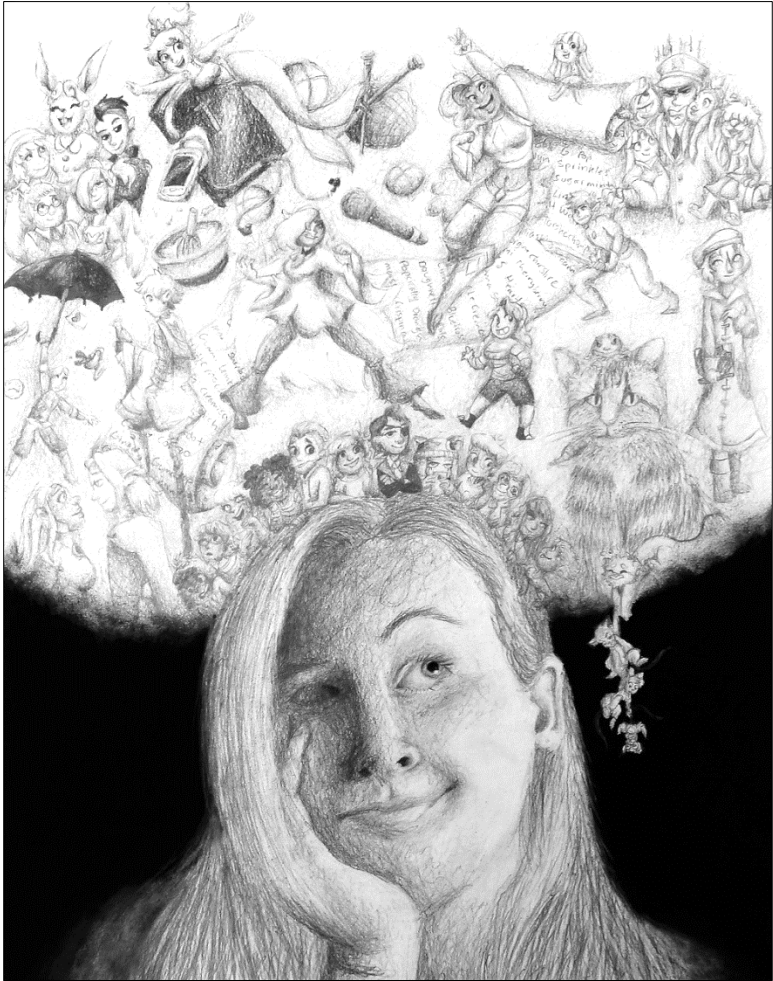
What stopped me from that perfect moment?
I will not know.

But now it's far away ...

Far away is the cozy flavor of Honey and Cinnamon.



She Said
Gabrielle Ackley



Imagination
Kasey Lewis

The Nature of the Thing

George Brown

The father hadn't even tried to follow her back into the delivery room. She didn't need to tell him not to. Instead he resigned himself to one of those barely humane waiting room chairs that are more like outlines of chairs with only the most cursory of cushioning. So far, over the course of the hours-long delivery, the father had made some curious observations about the state of the hospital waiting room. It was uncharacteristically empty for one, which seemed strange and unsettling to the father, but which he ultimately decided was fortunate for multiple reasons. The walls were an institutional beige, their most compelling feature being their lack of compelling features. The father discovered that if you stared intensely at the wall without blinking, or twitching, or really having any sort of interior thought, vague patterns would start to form that, if you concentrated on them for long enough, took on a character much like prison bars. The wall clock ticked with maddening regularity, synchronous with his heart's deadly-urgent knocking.

The new mother too had gathered a variety of knowledge up to this point in the delivery room. Such that it is entirely possible to vomit so hard, spaghetti comes out of your nose. That sadness and excitement are not mutually exclusive. That cranberry juice burns on the way back up. That dropping something on the floor meant it was gone forever. That you can tell medical professionals *no*. That *no* is a complete sentence. That it is permissible to fall out of love. That falling back in love is quite a bit dicier.

That it is entirely possible, at least for short intervals of intense trauma or stress, to be both claustrophobic and agoraphobic. That it is entirely *okay* to not love your child immediately. That it is not horrible or immoral to experience great relief the first time the nurses carry your child out of sight. That this relief is often accompanied by an immense sadness. That relief and sadness are often two sides of the same coin.

When the nurses had informed the mother that the necessary sponge bath and pediatric exam could either be performed in her presence, or in the nursery, she'd requested some much needed peace and quiet in the delivery room,

preferably with the lights off or at least dimmed if at all possible. While this didn't exactly constitute a direct answer for the nurses, both of them were very much empathetic towards the whole postpartum deliriousness, and promptly took the baby to the nursery without pushing for direct consent, leaving the mother to presumably engage in some deep and completely understandable decompressing.

Instead, as soon as the door latch clicked and the nurses muffled footsteps became indistinguishable, the new mother clamped her hand to her mouth to conceal the sounds of a sudden burst of tears. This state of affairs did not, on the whole, surprise her. While she was unable in the moment to articulate any sort of explanation as to her sudden breakdown, the feeling that encroached upon her was all too familiar. An old unwelcome friend creeping up again. Feeling might not be wholly appropriate, it was a state of being. It was a sort of ontological aching, a non-specific but overwhelming dread, a deep set self-loathing, so extreme and total that it was no longer just psychological, but physiological. It was the sensation of her entire body set on attacking her, as if some foreign entity had just manifested itself. It was as if body and mind desired to exact some sort of deep set revenge on the mother, or as if her body was trying to rattle some apology out of her that she simply did not know how to provide. It was the certainty of the soul, the certainty that this thing she'd always felt, at least as long as she'd been able to conceive of herself in any meaningful way, was something she would always feel.

This was something the mother had learned to live with for twenty years. Electroshock therapy, psychoanalysis, a whole slew of antidepressants with meaningless acronyms: SSRIs, SNRIs, TCAs, MAOIs. Her experiences at least afforded her a familiarity to the clinical environment of the delivery room. She was, in a way, connected to it. The wires and tubes, the EKG monitor, she was being slowly swallowed and embedded into the cold, detached void, which cared less to please or comfort, but instead suppressed, much like the paralysis of bad dreams.

What seemed most sinister to the mother was that these feelings were, at their core, inherently indescribable. They constituted an unbridgeable void between her and the world at large, wholly detached from a level of empathy that seemed

abundant, yet ignored, just beyond the divide. As such, she gave up long ago trying to articulate or draw out some semblance of understanding from others, though she would never admit to herself that that's precisely what it was, giving up. Rather, she told herself her refusal to ever entertain her afflictions out loud again stemmed from some abstract conviction that those she desired to confide in should be protected at all costs, an adamant silence justified by a certain truth she'd learned in a most painful way many years ago, that sometimes attempts to communicate can instead evoke.

As such, it wasn't the drunken late night returns, or the screaming matches that followed, or the painkiller abuse, or even the slow and subtle withdrawal of interest or passion or emotional openness over the past two years that kept the father out of the delivery room. While neither of the lovers could ever hope to explain to themselves fully what the reason was, the decision came without a word from either of them, the capital T truth of the matter was that whatever bond there is between lovers that allows them to be vulnerable, and open, and witness each other's vulnerable, open suffering, felt like it hadn't ever really existed between the two of them. It's an all too common story. A story that starts with stress; stress over prescriptions, stress over the neighbors, stress over the holidays, stress over your jobs, stress over the senior citizen of indiscernible sex driving their '89 Cadillac Deville at 35, generously, all the way through the 55 mph zone right in the middle of the 5 o'clock rush. Stress over the things inside yourselves you refuse to hear. Little idiosyncrasies you first loved about each other become targets of resentment. Ugly laughs seem less like laughter and more like ugliness. A comically poor sense of direction becomes less of an honest mistake and more of a personal attack on the other. And through it all, any and every attempt at an honest dialogue about these little aggressions falls of deaf ears, not out of true hate or lack of compassion, but because your egos have been straining with all their might to shield your ears from whatever it is going on below that now nothing can get in. At first these tensions are easily alleviated when one of you finally melts and cries deep into the arms of the other and, after the tears run dry, saying that there's really nothing wrong, sometimes life just gets to you, you know? And then things seem to get better,

at least for a time. The doctor gets that prescription filled, the shithead college boys renting out the house next door with their parents' money get evicted, the drive home is mysteriously free of any geriatrics. But somehow the two of you are more miserable than ever, except now you're grasping for things to blame it on, and the lack of explanation frustrates you even more, and then you come to realize that the act of grasping for explanations in the first place is so blatantly dishonest and just plain sad that you start to hate yourself for it. Deeply. Of course, you don't let each other in on what's been building inside lately. How could you? What is there to let in on? It feels post linguistic, a frothing mass of non-discrete emotions and concepts so removed from the world of interpersonal communication that even if you wanted to, any attempts to express the nature of the thing inside you would be totally incomprehensible. Even though the honest-to-God truth of the matter, that you both are totally blind to, is that it's not post linguistic, its pre. Only unable to be put into any semblance of a phrase because a fear has ensnared and handicapped you. A very real fear that any attempt to describe the nature of the thing to the other would not so much express as it would manifest it in the other. Or maybe they were afraid because on some level to do so would be to acknowledge what it is to really be human. The great irony here, and the other half of the honest-to-God truth being that this pain is already well understood, more or less identically, in the both of you.

So the hoarse-voiced shouting up the freeway gives way to resigned silences down inconceivably dark backroads, the takeout in the backseat turning cold. These drives became routine for the mother and father, so much so that even after the mother's water had broke, it was only her stifled moans from the backseat that broke the drive's silence. The fluorescent glow of the approaching hospital a pale beacon in the night that provided not so much shelter, but an illusion of respite from the unlit outside world, so convincingly total that it might as well have been shelter. The asthmatic huffing of the well-worn AC, the headlights of the car refusing to shine more than the meekest of beams, perhaps too out of fear.

Not once in that fever dream-like car ride, nor in the nine months prior, had the mother given an honest-to-God, no bullshit effort into naming her child. Any real psychological faculties,

any complex strength or courage she may have possessed to dream of a baby boy or baby girl, living in a modest little two bedroom house she'd earn and save for with the father, of the opportunity to watch their child grow up safe and free from that totally disabling and ultimately horrific nature of the very thing, that very feeling, that made this dream impossible, had died two years prior at her own hands. It was a stupid idea given to her by the Disease; the father was out of town and she was unemployed, which had given her three black days and two sleepless nights to writhe in bed, to pace the house and plan in complexly vivid detail with the Disease precisely how on that third night she would draw a bath, rip an empty page out of her diary to write her note, and swallow an entire bottle of store brand Ibuprofen bought from the pharmacy just that morning. It was that night that instilled in her, for the rest of her life, two certainties. The certainty of the soul that she would always feel this way, miserable, disgusted, grey, worthless, and always an agent on evocation in others. That, and a certainty of luck's ironic sense of humor, as the father-to-be had within the same hour made an unexpected early return to the house, and trudged with a bourbon fueled determination to the bathroom for a much needed piss, and, after his knocks fell unacknowledged on dying ears, had ultimately kicked down the hollow wooden door to the sight of she who would one day be the mother of his child, collapsed and fetal in a pall of her own bloody vomit. And the not-yet-father had collapsed right there into the puddle of blood and bile, arms outstretched in Christ-like martyrdom, and given to the ambivalent ether a howl far more beast than man.

The father had known the sensation of raw, unalloyed love once. Once, and as best he could tell, never again after that night. Even then he still wrestled with the question he did now, sitting with a sore, frozen tension in his chair: do we choose who we love? What if there was no choice? What if love was a demand of the human condition? What if the Holy Land came to the pilgrim? What if the sidewalk came to the jumper?

Maybe the temple did come to Mohammed, but maybe he had the choice to stay or to walk away. The father searched in vain to latch onto something benign to stifle the thoughts creeping up on him, yet everything he saw was infused with some painfully profound mark of the thing. He took in the sight

of the featureless walls, the unnaturally empty waiting room, the worn and wirey chairs that at one time or another held the anxious and unnerved souls of loved ones to births and suicides and everything in between. With a newfound reverence he took in the bland building as it was. Bare bones, utilitarian, single-entendre. He witnessed it without judgement. And out the sliding door to the side of the waiting room he went, down the concrete path the father traced those souls' steps out to the quaint little arboretum the hospital had installed precisely for these moments of medical emergency-induced epiphany. And for the first time in his whole life, the father closed his eyes, quieted his mind, and listened unconditionally.

The serenity of the last moments before dawn. The woodwind whistles of songbirds deep within the trees. The frantic scurrying of a small critter in the brush, giving the illusion of a far more menacing creature. The leonine roar of an unmuffled motorbike in the distance. The gentle rustling of limbs and leaves against one another, as if trying to calm one another. A paternal voice, perhaps his own hidden somewhere deep inside, spoke to the father: Listen. Read these. The lessons are here, should you choose to see them. Read these remarks as to what is true. Such that intense negligence and intense attention are two sides of the same coin. That songbirds who love their cage sing a different tune. That immense beauty requires immense sacrifice, and that this sacrifice does not guarantee an equal beauty. That love can save, but not on its own.

The determined scratching of a squirrel against the ground. A free bird's cry from overhead to hearken the sun's imminent arrival. The mystical experience of listening to nature with closed eyes. Open your eyes. Read these.

A newborn fast asleep in a cocoon-like swaddle. A shell of a man amongst the trees. A mother breathing the shallow shaky breaths that come after a long cry. Mascara ridden tears trickling and breaking into tributaries down her cheek, like little ash filled rivers. The sheer immensity of being. The world as it was, as it had been, and as it would unapologetically continue to be. Read these.



Transparent
Jessie Zheng

A Thanksgiving Story

Meredith Merrill

“It’s just tricky traveling in my wheelchair,” Dad explained over the phone this past summer, as we tossed around the idea again of getting everyone together for a Thanksgiving reunion to be held in North Carolina. It had been more than twenty-five years since all of the relatives on my father’s side of the family had gotten together for what used to be our annual Thanksgiving celebration. These Thanksgivings at Grandma’s were treasured times with my father, my grandparents, and the rest of the relatives who all lived twelve hours away after my mom divorced my father and moved my sisters and me to North Carolina when I was nine years old. Long before Dad was in his wheelchair.

We would gather at my grandparents’ home in Seneca Falls, New York: my dad, and my two sisters; my dad’s brother, Uncle Jim, and his three kids; sometimes “Aunt” Shirley, Jim’s long-time girlfriend; and Uncle Bert, the tallest by at least eight inches and oldest of my dad’s brothers and his three children; and Bert’s wife, Aunt Gloria, the only remaining aunt/spouse and in-tact marriage of the three brothers.

Also at Grandma’s Thanksgivings was Alice. She was hired every year to help Grandma with such jobs as retrieving the extra Waterford water goblets and wine glasses from the basement and getting the sterling silver serving platters and warming dishes and chaffers set up in what Grandma always referred to as the breakfast room, a room that we never actually ate breakfast in, situated between the kitchen and dining room. It served as the staging area for the entire Thanksgiving meal buffet. It was also where the full bar was set up for special occasions like Passover, Hanukkah, and Thanksgiving. The bar was stocked with Absolut Citron for my grandmother and whatever ingredients made the Manhattan’s that the other relatives were fond of, and there were olives and cherries, which the children all loved, and wine and champagne, which I and the other cousins were allowed to taste in any quantity we wanted by the time each was about sixteen years old. Beer was considered a brutish, unsophisticated beverage and was not offered or consumed in my grandparents’ home. Alice also helped with all

of the clean up, which consisted of washing an extraordinary amount of dishes, twice as many dishes as those in any typical home, since none of the meat and dairy products were permitted to be served on the same plates in my grandparents' strictly kosher home.

My grandparents' huge house consisted of three stories of formal and informal rooms, a fabulously mysterious basement and attic, expansive tiled bathrooms, a study, a playroom and an elaborate front entryway. Alongside the entryway was a slightly spiraled staircase with the most ornate wooden banister that I have ever seen. There were two sets of doors in that front entrance of the house, perfect for the older cousins to perform disappearing acts for the younger cousins, making themselves vanish between the sets of doors. The front room, decorated with French provincial furniture and gold accessories, was the main sitting room, which adjoined the dining room that comfortably sat twenty guests at Grandma's dining table. Asian vases and other exquisite decor, that frankly I would find tacky today, were sprinkled throughout that room and the entire house. I can't help but wonder now how my father ever would've managed to maneuver his wheelchair there.

Everything was so beautiful. Shiny. Expensive-looking. Especially compared to the small townhouse we now called home in Raleigh, North Carolina. What I used to remember most about these get-togethers was the plush lifestyle that took place within my grandparents' massive Victorian home, where my father and his brothers grew up. Yet, lately what I recall most is the sense of family there and how strong and healthy my father was during those times.

Thanksgiving remained my favorite of all the holidays, even though much of the magic had disappeared when Grandma died and that side of the family stopped getting together. Most of the cousins were in our twenties by then. I cherished those Thanksgiving memories and longed for my children to experience the family-filled, joyous, and elegant gatherings like I had. And to just get to know my dad, their grandfather better. To hear his wonderful stories.

About the time we stopped getting together for Thanksgiving, Dad and Uncle Jim had moved across the country to Las Vegas to live the retirement phase of their lives, a

Carefully executed plan between them that began when they both fell in love with Vegas while gallivanting together there in the 1960's and 70's. Years before my dad had to contemplate how to navigate his life from a wheelchair.

Dad's wheelchair is bulky and manual, operated mainly by my father's large feet or pushed by his twin brother, Uncle Jim, who has taken on the role of caregiver at age eighty-three to my father. Dad usually painstakingly moves the chair across the floor in a walking motion to propel himself forward at an unbelievably slow crawl. Even at his best health and mobility, before that knee surgery that went so wrong, he never moved very quickly. Dad's inability to simultaneously walk and talk had always been an area of endearment and jest among his friends and family since my dad loves to tell amazing stories and has been on the go all of his life. Dad's fascinating stories can range from his friendship with the first African American wrestler at Ohio Northern University, who went on to coach the gold medal winning US Olympic team, to Dad's days of earning money as a jazz saxophonist in New York City, while attending graduate school at Columbia University.

When the plan was confirmed to get everyone together this year for our Thanksgiving reunion, Dad and Uncle Jim began all of the preparations necessary to make the trip to North Carolina. Dad's first flight in his wheelchair. I decided I would bake homemade chocolate chip cookies and brownies for the occasion, Grandma's specialties. We all looked forward to her famous chip cookies and fudge brownies every Thanksgiving. Occasionally, at other times of the year, she would surprise us by mailing us those treats wrapped in wax paper held by masking tape, packaged in recycled Fannie Farmer candy boxes *just because*.

As Dad and I talked about the upcoming reunion, I detected a hint of defeat in his voice; I could feel the heaviness as he considered the tremendous effort it was going to take to make the trip. His concerns about being able to get in and out of vehicles, the bed at the hotel. Whether his wheelchair would fit through any of the doors of my sister's bathrooms. The burden all of it would put on his aging brother. Even though my dad has never been one to complain, I knew he was only half-kidding when he said with a forced laugh that he would have to wear two

diapers on the flight to Raleigh, knowing he would be unable to get out of his wheelchair to go to the bathroom the entire journey to North Carolina.

I can really only remember my dad coming to North Carolina a handful of times since we moved there in 1979, even though he was completely mobile then. He attended my sisters' Bat Mitzvahs (mine was in New York), each of our high school and college graduations, and my mother's funeral ten years ago, his most recent trip to North Carolina. And, he came to North Carolina one other time when I turned sixteen to present me with my first car, an impeccably clean 1974 AMC Concord automobile equipped with a top-notch stereo and powerful speakers and a full tank of gas. He had it waxed to perfection when he arrived at our house. I wondered where I would park it in our overcrowded complex parking lot.

He couldn't wait to show me the radio and tape player that "can record right off the radio if a song you like is playing and you want to record it," Dad said with the excitement he always gets when giving a gift, especially when it is an electronic gadget, which was usually purchased from his beloved Radio Shack. I tried to be grateful. Appreciative. He had fixed up this old car for *me* and brought it all the way from New York. I tried to hide my disappointment that it was such a clunky old car. He was so excited to present it to me and to show me all of the opportunity having that transportation would offer me.

So, a few weeks ago, when I was the first to respond to the email offering a free electric wheelchair, I was ecstatic and just knew my dad's quality of life was going to be tremendously improved as soon as I was able to deliver it to him at Thanksgiving. I thought about the irony of how thirty-five years earlier he had brought transportation to me.

The email from my coworker said, "Whoever has the ability to pick it up first from my storage unit can have it for free." The battery was long dead from two years of sitting in storage since his own mom passed, the original owner of the chair; otherwise, the expensive chair was in exceptional condition. I couldn't wait to get home and research everything about how to use it, so I would be ready to teach Dad all about it. As I scrubbed the grease off of the bottom of the electric chair and carefully wiped down the seat, back, head and arm rests so

the chair would look like new, I imagined my father in 1985 cleaning and preparing that AMC Concord to bring to me in North Carolina.

Once the chair was all cleaned up and ready to deliver, I am not sure what I was most excited for-- the hope and opportunities that the new wheelchair could provide my father, the reunion with Dad and the cousins, or the chance for my kids to be with their grandfather, hear his stories and make Thanksgiving memories.

I pictured my dad sitting in this new wheelchair, telling one of his stories to all of us at Thanksgiving, to my children, *his grandchildren*. I imagined him in his new chair back in Vegas, surrounded by a group of friends, maybe even telling one of his fabulous stories while on the move, finally able to “walk” and talk.

It was the day before Thanksgiving when I got the long voicemail from Dad thanking me for my troubles and all of getting him the electric wheelchair and that he would have to decline. I was disappointed that he didn’t see all of the possibilities that I saw for how this new chair could improve his quality of life. “It just sounds like dollar signs to me,” he said on his message and that it was too much to think about at his age, but he couldn’t wait to see me and his grandkids and the rest of the family.

We brought the electric wheelchair to Thanksgiving anyway hoping that once he got in it and saw, *felt* how much easier life could be he would surely bring it back with him to Las Vegas. I even called the airlines the day before to make sure he could bring both his manual wheelchair and his new electric chair on the flight home.

Although my husband was eventually able to coax my father into that chair to try it out in the driveway on the second day of our visit, Dad would only sit in it a few minutes. I was crushed when he quickly asked for help to get back into his manual chair, his mind still made up that he didn’t want or need the electric one. There was definitely no chance that he would be taking it back home with him.

When Dad returned inside the house seated back in his manual chair, he slowly and quietly scooted himself over to the table where the cousins and I were eating various cheeses and

crackers and other snacks, laughing and reminiscing about the days in that large Victorian home in Seneca Falls. I could hear the kids with their cousins in my sister's basement playing ping pong and air hockey, creating their own Thanksgiving memories. That's when my cousin Joanne called to her sister, "Liz, you have to try the brownies; they taste just like Grandma's."

My heart swelled hearing that, and I smiled, hopeful for more Thanksgiving reunions. For lasting memories my children will cherish. And in that moment, I forgot how disappointed I was that Dad would be returning to Vegas without the new chair.

You're Just a Girl

Kayla Dorsey

Rosy cheeks and sparkling eye—
won't be long until you cry.
You're just a girl.

Come play inside: house or school.
Boys will never think you're cool.
You're just a girl.

Get a grip and watch your tongue,
now your lessons have begun.
You're just a girl.

Wear the mask—your painted face.
Fake a smile with style and grace.
You're just a girl.

Do not try to hold your ground,
never dare to make a sound.
You're just a girl.

By now you should know your place.
Never bring a man disgrace.
You're just a girl.

Wolf whistle and that catcall—
every sound—you've heard it all.
You're just a girl.

Pull up the top of your shirt.
Tug down the hem of your skirt.
You're just a girl.

Grip the keys in either fist:
brass knuckles help to resist.
You're just a girl.

Their footsteps sound from behind.
Panic courses through your mind.
You're just a girl.

Your story is nothing new—
we will stand abreast with you.
You're every girl.

