

PORTALS

Literary and Arts Magazine

Senior Editor

Rhonda Franklin

Student Editors

Jacob Ingle

Jeremy James

Jason Maraveyas

Blaine Pugh

Cover photo by



Kinga Baransky

Neuron Forest

CFCC Portals Magazine

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(910) 362-7238

Email -- portalsmag@gmail.com
Website – www.cfcc.edu/portals
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Jahns Chavez
Flower Black and White

Matthew Maffei
Beloved Monsters

I looked at her and noticed her blue eyes and her thick waist that complimented her fat ass, which her baggy jeans could never outline. I knew she could fight. Hell, she had the body for it, the attitude was there, and the anger, I know now, was boiling inside that mind of hers.

Being in a fight was normal for us in middle school. One time my friend Jim got his ribs broken over a bench. It was the worst one I'd seen. But it was typical farmland public school behavior of pubescent angst and rage fueled by romance, friendship and bad parenting.

Theresa stood there a moment, her massive shoulders suffocated her neck; she got closer to me, her potbelly bulged against my stomach, then she whispered in my ear. "I'll protect you."

Shit. I didn't know what to say. I appreciated it, but did that make me her bitch? My stomach hurt me all of a sudden—I wanted to bend my body to fix the pain. I didn't move a muscle except for when my hands trembled, and then sweat dripped down my face and my pits were soaked. I could feel the moisture running down my back and into the crack of my ass.

But I should have realized then that I was already subservient to her.

"Look, Theresa, you're great and everything," I said, "but I'm just not into you like that." Wait. Does she like me like me? Who am I to say that to her?

She finished chewing her chicken sandwich and lifted her chin to let the food run down her throat. She said, "Are you kidding? I'm not trying to be your girlfriend, Kyle." She laughed, bits of food flung from her teeth.

"It's just—I need to be sure."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

For a moment, I said nothing. I tore at the chocolate milk carton on the table and watched Theresa get the condescending you're-an-idiot look on her face, and when she was ignoring the uncomfortable, I said, "Jessica."

"Jessica? Jessica what?"

"Is my girlfriend," I said. A test, I thought.

“Aw, well that’s good for you, Kyle,” she said, waving her sandwich, gesturing in a condescending way that made me angry, and it made me want to take the sandwich from her and smear the chicken patty across her face. “Kyle,” she said, “listen. If you need any advice—you know—on how to be a good boyfriend, just ask.”

Suddenly the lights were blinding me, the lunchroom chatter scalded my ears, and the anxiousness pressed down on me like a truckload of cement. “Thanks, Theresa,” I said.

Failed, I thought.

I should have known I was no good for her. She’d never want someone who didn’t know what to do with a football or their fists in a fight.

And it was at recess when I saw Theresa on the football field emasculating the other boys, even Steve, as she ran through them on her way to the end zone. Steve was sweating over the game, trying his best to amaze Theresa, even flexing his muscles every now and then. But she would look at me and call my name across the yard and make fun of me for reading during recess. Then I noticed Steve staring at me in anguished misery. My stomach dropped. I had never seen that look before.

The whistle blew and the students gathered on the blacktop, forming alphabetical lines for each homeroom. And in the chaos, Steve approached me. His statue figure looked down over me, his chest popped from his white tank top, hairs busted from his armpits, and his muscles were flexed already.

“You stay away from Theresa,” he said, pushing his finger into my chest.

The words “Don’t touch me,” shot from my lips like my primal instincts were taking over and I smacked his hand away from my body.

“What’re you gonna do, tell on me?”

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I said, still not believing the words coming from my mouth.

“I seen you with her,” Steve said.

“She likes me, Steve. Deal with it.”

Then I hit the pavement. The sound of the punch, flesh against flesh, bone versus bone, vibrated across the schoolyard and the kids around us cursed, invoking the fight. They had been waiting all day for this.

Steve grinned and, looking down at me, wiped the blood with his t-shirt.

When I tilted my head toward the crowd I saw Theresa staring at me—her eyes like razors. What can she do? What does she care? But then she steamed in, doused in sweat, her shirt clinging to her like a post coital bed sheet. “What’s the matter with you?” she said. And Steve, still wiping the blood off, his eyebrows forced together with unforgiving intentions and desperate sadness, looked at her. “You’re an asshole,” she said. She pounded her fist into his chest then smacked him across the face. Then the teachers approached, Mr. Rudman being one of them. His hairbrush mustache is the last thing I remember after he grabbed Steve under the bicep and picked me up by the same.

Soon I was sunk into the cheap leather hospital bed in the nurse’s office. The white lights beamed from above as if God had opened the heavens for me to see. Screw you, God. My head pounded with the ache of concussion, my face too sensitive to touch or even blink. I lifted myself from the bed, swung my feet to the floor and saw Principle Carroll, a bald man at six feet four and built like an action movie star but without the handsome face. He was sitting in a chair, his forearms pressed against his thighs, and bent over in anticipation like an interrogator waiting for his suspect.

“The nurse said you’re fine,” he said, his collar unfastened and his necktie undone. He looked to the ground, opened his eyes for an instant, sighed and closed them again. “She said you’re slightly concussed. You need to stay awake, okay?” He raised his eyes from the floor and gazed out the window on the cheerless afternoon landscape, the yellow buses pulled in from the street now. “I’m sorry this happened,” he said. “Steve doesn’t have the best life at home. It’s a shame—this area is so broken. I’ve seen too many kids come through here feeling without a purpose, nothing making them feel sane except the use of their fists.” He stood up, put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You’re a good kid, Kyle. Keep the icepack on your face,” and walked out of the room.

Nurse Quinn was in her office, separate from the first aid room, and was blocked by windows covered with news articles and other seemingly important papers. Then a knock on the

office window from the hallway and Theresa was standing outside looking at me. I could see the peach fuzz on her lip from the sweat, and her shirt was still wet.

I opened the door just enough for me to smell the b.o. that came from her pits. Without saying anything she hit the door hard like a stretcher rushing to the emergency room, and she grabbed my hand and pulled me from the office.

All at once we were running through the empty halls. Class was in session. "Wait! Stop!" I shouted. I pulled my hand away and freed it from her grip. "What are you doing?"

"Come on!" she said, "We don't have time." She grabbed my wrist and took me outside. Then I stopped again. The smell of foliage reminded me of something—my father I'd nearly forgotten—camping in the Pine Barrens. His "talks" were coming back to me, *Don't ignore what's right in front of you.*

My sweat was dripping. But I smiled, opened my eyes and looked at Theresa, her back as damp as a bathing suit, and her teddy bear figure looked comforting. Feeling liberated from the stress of surviving the last day of eighth grade—a zero fighting streak until now—I grabbed her waist and kissed her.

Pulling back, she licked her lips and said, "I should smack you right now." She grabbed my hand again and took me behind a dumpster on the side of the front schoolyard. Then the bell rang, and not five minutes later the students came pouring out through the doors, and there was Steve, his dumb head turning every which way looking for Theresa, and she knew it.

"Is that why we're hiding?" I asked.

"Get back," she said, pulling me by the shoulder.

I kissed her again, a long one, wet, and yet elementary. "Bye Theresa," I said, and approached Steve.

"I'm sorry, Steve. Theresa isn't interested in me. I should have—"

And then *deja vu*. But no teachers were around this time. Steve was on my chest, his fists pummeling my face, beating it into a pulp. Time stopped. I would have blacked out if one more punch came, but then I experienced something that was unforgettable.

He was off me and on the ground now. I can still hear his screams and see the image of blood dripping from Theresa's

mouth; she spat out the ripped cartilage and wiped the blood off her mouth with her sleeve.

When I saw Theresa standing over me, I felt dead. “I told you I would protect you,” she said.

Steve had fainted.

The buses were lined alongside the curb, and I heard the end-of-school excitement of my classmates as they boarded. Some of them crowded around us. Some of them threw up their lunch and some took pictures. The images went viral by the end of the day.

In the end no one did get what they wanted, and Theresa disappeared after that. To this day I don’t know where she is now. But I won’t try finding her either.

Stephen Roark

Life, Is Like a Puzzle

The drive from Wilmington, NC to my grandparents' home in Weaverville, NC is approximately three hundred and ninety-five miles and takes, on average, about six hours. The night my grandmother passed away, I drove it in less than four and a half, hoping to arrive in time to see her once more before she died.

Unfortunately, it was not fast enough.

My desperate midnight ride ended with me being the first family member to arrive at my grandparents' home, hours ahead of those that followed. I parked and waited outside until 6am. I thought my grandfather could use some time alone, so I sat in my car and tried to rest from driving through the night. When I finally knocked and entered their, now his, home what I found was not the strong, self-assured, rock of a man I had known my entire life but a man clearly, and understandably, stricken with grief and sorrow.

My grandfather was not a large man. Trim and solid, he had the appearance of being frail or weak; however, such was not the case. In fact, he could work harder and longer than anyone I have ever met. I never saw him sick or otherwise under the weather, and he always seemed able to rise to any physical challenge. Despite all of this, he seemed to have no strength to call upon, or force of will to offer in defiance of the crushing feelings of anguish that now weighed down upon him. Each movement he made appeared to take every ounce of strength and focus he could muster, and as he took his seat I saw, for the first time, my grandfather slouch. He collapsed in his chair, his entire body moaning a sigh of relief that the effort of motion was now over. Sitting with his head hung low and his shoulders rolled forward, he stared blankly at the breakfast before him. His meal consisted of a sliced banana, a handful of grapes, assorted nuts, toast with jelly and a glass of orange juice. I could tell that this was a meal prepared more out of habit than any desire to eat by the way he would pick up one item only to put it down without taking a bite. He periodically rolled his grapes from one side of the plate to the other, and his hand trembled with each unsure movement. It was clear that it took the concerted effort of every

muscle and brain cell to perform even the rudimentary task of grasping food. My grandfather was never one to show emotion and long ago mastered the art of keeping his feelings to himself unless he wanted to make them known. This skill, however, had now abandoned him and his face began to show clear signs of the sadness he was feeling. His eyes were red and swollen from the tears he could no longer hold back, and his lips quivered with every word he attempted to speak. His cheeks were flushed with varying hues of red as he fought through the onslaught of emotions attacking his soul. He looked like a child lost in the woods, desperately trying to remember the way home.

I could feel the grief and suffering rolling from his body like the waves of heat that arise from black asphalt baking in summer sun. I remember being overwhelmed by my own inadequacy to offer him any comfort beyond simply being there in the room with him. We sat together in silence, talking little, if at all. This was not at all an unusual condition for him and me. He had always thought children should be seen and not heard; even though I was in my thirties the silence between us still felt proper, the status quo. The only other thing on the table was a puzzle my grandmother had been working on before she was admitted into hospice. The last year of her life had been spent in another fight against cancer. Refusing to undergo chemotherapy again she instead chose to remain home, facing the disease on her own terms. So as we sat together in silence, I began to casually assemble random bits of her puzzle.

My grandparents were both tidy and orderly people, and I remember thinking it was odd that he would leave the puzzle out, but I guess he hoped she would recover and return home to finish it. It was not a very large puzzle, only a few hundred pieces or so, and I was not consciously aware of what the image even was. The outer edge had already been put together, and I was simply adding on to the isolated segments of the middle that my grandmother had already begun to piece together. As I did, small details started to emerge, and I was able to make out the features of the image. There was a rocky shoreline, caressed by still waters, which bore the distinct markings of having weathered all the ferocity the ocean could muster. In the center a structure was beginning to take shape that I determined to be a lighthouse. It was accompanied by two colonial style homes, and

the sky showed the first hints of dusk with clouds colored in pinks and purples.

As dawn gave way to early morning, I traveled with him to the mortuary where we made the arrangements for transporting my grandmother to Vermont. They had purchased adjoining plots there years earlier. "If you're good," she frequently told the family, "when you die, you get to go to Vermont." But as we worked out the details of my grandmother's funeral, my mind kept wandering back to the unfinished puzzle, and I became more determined than ever to see it finished.

My grandmother had always loved jigsaw puzzles. I have an endless reservoir of enshrined, cherished memories associated with watching and helping her assemble her puzzles. It would be in this task that I first learned all undertakings, no matter how small, require patient planning and cognitive volition if one is to have the chance of success. As with all things she did, there was a system to be followed. The reconstitution of these fractured images required adherence to that system. Even though it lay dormant and obfuscated, having been hacked into hundreds of odd-shaped little pieces by some unseen entity, who surely disassembled it solely for her and me to be able to test our restorative powers, it was a beast that could only be slain by following the rules.

It was blasphemy to simply dump the pieces onto the table and haphazardly begin. The mere appearance of thinking it would result in immediate chastisement and possible dismissal from the project all together. Instead, pieces were collected into the lid that had the large, finished image on it. The other half of the box was placed on the table, open side up. The pieces were then sorted into three piles; corner pieces, end pieces and middle pieces.

The corners were the most treasured. Though it was more to keep me out of the way, once they were found it was my job to keep an eye on them while she finished the sorting. The middle pieces were transferred into the other half of the box. End pieces were neatly segregated into the center of the table. The top of the box would then be stood up to serve as the blueprint for our construction project. The corners were then laid out

according to their probable location, and the task of assembling the outer edge of the puzzle began. Once complete, a system existed that was as equally regimented for sorting, grouping and isolating the middle pieces. As far as she was concerned, this process counted as preparation only. “Doing” the puzzle only commenced upon completion of this preparatory work.

She seemed to favor landscapes that included some type of rustic building or two. It would be years before I came to realize that the enjoyment she found in this particular pastime had absolutely nothing to do with the puzzle itself, the image it contained or spending time with her grandson. However, I have no doubt these factors contributed greatly to her fondness of puzzles. What I think she truly relished was bringing order to chaos.

My grandmother had a firm belief in a proper, and therefore necessary, way of doing things. That belief extended far beyond the confines of simple puzzle formation. There were rules and regulations that covered everything from baking to appropriate topics of conversation. She would crochet for hours on end. She turned random spools of yarn into everything from sweaters and afghans to slippers and mittens. Every grandchild, at some point, would receive one or more of these handmade treasures. As with her baking recipes, she followed the patterns precisely, save when she “knew better” of course.

My grandmother often “knew better” when it came to her family as well. She did not hesitate when we were straying too far afield from what she deemed as “proper.” Top on her list of cardinal sins against propriety was anything other than quiet contemplation in church. Transgressors were rewarded with a swift and highly effectual pinch, which was her default method of punishment when she did not have other, more paddle-like means available to her. It was not as though she was some malevolent tyrant, ruling over our every decision and action with cruel and stern contempt, but rather that she gave her best in all things she did and expected the same from everyone she met.

Few things incurred her wrath as vehemently or as quickly as what she considered being “smart” or making “wise” comments. My grandmother was a stickler for proper speech and pronunciation. I can still clearly hear her staunch disapproval of my use of the word “hey” as a proper greeting. I was reminded

many times that, "Hay is for horses." I could not have been much older than six or seven when, on one such occasion, I replied, "Grandma, not if you spell it right!" Despite my firm assertions, I was unable to convince her of my sincerity.

Proper attire was also another sore subject, and she prided herself on looking her best. I cannot recall one instance of my grandmother ever being fashionably out of place. I do not have one memory of her not being perfectly assembled in both ensemble and manners, no matter the occasion. I sincerely believe that were I able to gather together the combined memories of my entire family and flip through them like a digitized photo album, I would be unable to locate a single instance that revealed even so much as a single hair of hers out of place. As devoted to decorum as she was, I do not think anything else quite sums up the nature of my grandmother more than her home.

You can tell a great deal about a person by their home. Looking back on the three homes my grandmother lived in over the years I cannot help but see her personality on display.

The inside and outside of grandmother's home was, by any standard, exceptionally orderly. My grandparents worked diligently in the yard and on the house itself. If there was a weed growing anywhere on the property its destruction was assured. If paint chipped off a door or shutter, the blight was tended to with the same urgency one would expect to see in a hospital emergency room. Leaves were raked religiously, pine cones removed immediately, and the porches swept daily. Nothing, either in the yard or on the exterior itself, was permitted to exist except by specific intent and design.

Her attention to lawn care and detail was not reserved for just her home alone. I can vividly recall her bent over picking weeds in my parents' yard. I can see her now in blue shorts and a white tank top, smoking her Camel non-filters, bent at the waist, zigzagging through the yard pulling up whatever plant she deemed did not belong. "You have to get your hands in the dirt and get the root," she would say, "otherwise it will just grow back, and you'll just be doing it again."

Home interiors were no exception to my grandmother's ever-watchful eye. Her interior design seemed centered around an unspoken "Law of Necessity." If she did not need it, or if it

did not serve some purpose, then she wouldn't have anything to do with it. This is not to say that the inside of her house was some utilitarian shrine to minimization. Rather, each item, decorative or functional, served a specific and exact purpose. As such, they all had a specific and exact place where they belonged.

My mother is a constant re-arranger of furniture; in contrast, I cannot recall one instance where my grandmother's furniture was not in the same place it was when last I visited. Every room of her home seemed to exist in a perpetual state of immaculacy. This was especially true of the kitchen. Dirty dishes were dealt with directly following a meal, surviving only the length of time it took to clean them, dry them and put them away. I never saw a dirty floor, an unkempt bathroom or a rug that did not appear freshly vacuumed. The normal areas of a home where one would expect to find a bit of clutter or disarray, like a garage or a basement, were beyond organized. The junk draw was anything but junky.

My grandfather was as naturally predisposed to order as my grandmother was. Had he not been, she surely would have wasted little time whipping him into shape. Any personal space or work area he had was kept in a pristine fashion the likes of which would turn the most meticulous museum curator green with envy.

Growing up I never knew of how turbulent the lives of my grandparents were before they met; they separately had to overcome trials and tribulations that would break most people. From an abusive, alcoholic first husband to surviving World War II as the navigator on a bomber they faced more than their fair share of adversity. Despite it all, they managed to find in each other the kind of love and fulfillment that most will never experience in this world.

When my grandfather and I returned from the mortuary we sat again at the dining room table where I began my crusade to finish my grandmother's puzzle. I glanced up from time to time to see my grandfather quietly sitting in the kitchen. As I did, I began to realize that the man I had known my entire life no longer existed. This was a new man before me, and he would never be the same again. Singer and songwriter Paul Simon once

wrote, “Losing love, is like a window in your heart. And everybody sees you’re blown apart.” I can think of no better words to describe the man I saw before me. He would never recover from the loss of my grandmother. His reason for living had gone away from him, and no one who knew him could deny that fact.

We all grieve in our own way, and as family members began to arrive that fact was more than evident. For my part, the mourning of grandmother was unique. I had her puzzle. The closer I came to finishing it, the closer I came to bringing closure to her life and her loss. Moreover, I think I was simply taking on a problem I was better equipped to solve. I knew there was nothing I could say or do that could begin to resemble the shattered pieces of my grandfather’s soul. However, the puzzle was different; the puzzle was something I could repair. It gave me something to do at a time when there was nothing else that could be done. I also thought that my grandmother would have wanted it finished; she had always detested leaving things undone. So, as my grandfather sat wrestling with how to reassemble the pieces of his internal puzzle that had been contorted and scattered to oblivion, I busied myself with the far more manageable external pieces of my grandmother’s last puzzle.

It is amazing how often our lives can mirror simple things like a puzzle. We are given an assortment of pieces that we move and twist about. We generally know what the image should look like when we are done but it is up to us to properly assemble it. In the end, the person we become is defined by the picture those pieces form. I finished the last puzzle my grandmother worked on. It now hangs from my bedroom wall—glued together, matted and framed. I cannot help but appreciate the symbolism of the lighthouse inside that picture, keeping a watchful and protective eye over the waters of my life: a simple but powerful tribute to both my grandparents’ lives, their love for one another and the family left behind.

Victoria Drake
The Color Orange

Orange.

His favorite color.

Or at least it used to be,

I wouldn't know now.

Orange.

What a hateful color.

Not because of the burnt hue,

or the awful way it washes me out,

or how much it so obviously wants to be red.

Orange.

The intolerable color.

You'd think I'd at least bear it,

with Autumn being my favorite season.

Yet every time I see a jack-o-lantern's toothy smile,

it's as if that stupid grin is taunting me.

Every time those leaves crunch under my boots,

all I can think of are the times before,

before he left.

Orange.

Hell fills that color.

When he would take me camping on the weekends,

I'd lose count of how many empty cans,

would pile by the crackling fire.

Not that I cared much,

he seemed happier with...

well, we agreed to tell mom it was just Mountain Dew.

Orange.

What a repetitive color.

When he'd stick me in a corner of his friend's house,

with my favorite stack of books,

while he had lines of sugar to accompany the Mountain Dew.

When he'd let me work alongside him in his garage,

with my hot pink Barbie Jeep,

while he talked to the neighbor's pretty wife a bit too close.

When he'd drive me home in his green pickup truck,

with the radio blasting old rock music,

while he swerved back and forth at two in the morning.

Orange.
It's just a color.
Probably isn't even his favorite anymore.
I know better than anyone,
at how fast he loses interest in things.



Ivey Blair
Yellow

Lesley Richardson

Cut With the Kitchen Knife:

Hoch's View from a Bilge Pump on a High-Rise

*"DADA speaks with you, it is everything, it envelops everything,
it belongs to every religion, can be neither victory or defeat,
it lives in space and not in time."* ~ Francis Picabia

Hoch snips her photomontage with a sharp tongue.

Da means *yes* in Slavonic. Or does *dada* mean
hobbyhorse in French? She is Germanic, no face,

no nonsense woman wired to her white hair.

She means *no*, but can't make up her mind, decide
where the line divides itself between life and art,

hetero and homo-sexuality. This is where she lives,
in her own collage of the in-between, trying to make
a stand for something, just not knowing what, stuck

hanging on the edge of her own blank map until
suddenly, her husband pulls her up from the lip
of a building, screws her onto the port side into

a bilge pump where she overlooks her own city,
mismatching faces and bodies, gender – men's heads
on babies' bodies, machines and humans – gears

polluting eyes. Greta Garbo straddles Kathe Kollwitz
in an alley below, both in striped pant suits twirling
cigars between five fingers like a baton, all the while

discussing how to best take advantage of men with red
feather boas and finally it all makes sense to her, this
illogical façade of senselessness, women using the ideals

of beauty to outsmart men, smog annihilating industry
and all the generals involved in the creation, the need
for *dada* to consume her, the urgency in which she desires

to spread the word to artistic and materialistic consumers
that it is okay to be in the middle, in space, unsure
of liking men or women, industry or nature. She unscrews

herself, finally decides to reject her “good girl” image,
and creates illogical cut-outs from other art forms,
even though hers will never quite measure up, but isn’t

that the point? She is done with perfection, never quite
had it anyway. *Dada* is her new religion. Til Brugman,
her ex-female lover, preached – *never perform in a female*

masquerade: and more poetically, *never darken your eyes
with the devil just to parade around in non-clicking heels*.
She resolves to claim back not only her masculinity, but

also cooking, confidence, and anxiety, and her desire to create
the ridiculous. She slices all things she likes and dislikes
from the city below and imposes them, one at a time, in her own

space filled with everything, all her idiosyncrasies that prove
the world is a blank rooftop packed with pointless possibility.



Henry McCarthy
Cave

Fall Away

Alcohol. The cause of and solution to all life's problems. Alcohol. A colorless volatile flammable liquid that is the intoxicating constituent of wine, beer, spirits, and other drinks and is also used as an industrial solvent and as fuel. After the first drink your body reacts with a faster heartbeat and breathing, you feel warm. You feel, taste, and see less acutely, but you can still function. You feel more relaxed, find it easier to strike up a conversation. And then...you feel like another drink. If you keep drinking, the numbing effect will intensify. You'll begin to lose your senses, think you can do things beyond your ability, and you'll either become extremely happy or extremely irritable.

But it wasn't working. Every time Daniel closed his eyes he still saw the vision of her, particularly the photo that clung to the inner lining of his wallet of when he was a baby wrapped tightly in a blue blanket in the arms of a woman he didn't recognize – but someone his mother was very fond of – and his mother looking down at him. It was one of few pictures that had been taken of him and his mother. It was one of few pictures he couldn't find himself able to get rid of. But that didn't mean he wanted to think about it. It was after midnight, ending the day he had dreaded since he first heard the commercials come over the radio – Mother's Day – and beginning an even worse day for him now, his mother's birthday.

Before, he would wake up much earlier than everyone else, making sure the chef prepared all of her favorites for breakfast, laying out a bouquet of orchids – her favorites – on the dining room table. Then he would take a seat in front of the piano and play her favorite song until she came down the stairs. But that was over now and he didn't want to think about those memories. And so he drank. A hopeless wish that the alcohol would wash away the pain. That was its purpose after all, wasn't it?

But it wasn't working. It seemed that everyone forced him into remembrance until he couldn't stand it anymore and left them all. If only for the moment. But with every flash came another memory. Which only led to another drink. And another. Until all the lights blurred together and he could only see the

details of the girl in front of him when she was pressed into him. Daniel didn't know her name. It was lost in the beating flooding his head and the multicolor lights dancing in his eyes. Or perhaps she never said. He couldn't be sure, though he was certain he wouldn't want to see her again. But he kept her close for safe measure, snaking an arm around her waist until his hand could press firmly into the small of her back for fear that if she slipped away so would the guard on his memories. For the moment they were kept at bay.

And then fingers were laced around those pressing into her back and before he knew it she was leading him back to the bar. And they were taking shots. The familiar burn sent warmth coursing through his body, but it wasn't enough. At the bar, the music didn't seem quite as loud and the lights seemed distant and the girl that was keeping him grounded had slipped from his grasp in favor of another drink. So came the flashes. He was taken back to her first birthday he could remember. Daniel was five. His dad had been caring then, wanting nothing more than to please Catherine with gifts especially those from Daniel himself. He let Daniel pick out jewelry he felt fit his mother well, let him design a card to be made into a real one, and even hired someone to teach him a simple song on the p—

“You want some?”

The girl. She knocks him from his thoughts bringing his vision to the sight of her looking at him expectantly, only a second, and then she's bending over the counter, a finger pressed over her right nostril, a makeshift straw in her other. He shakes his head – no. He hasn't gotten to that level. And so he takes another drink. But it wasn't working and he knows it. He tries for something stronger – absinthe. It doesn't work. He's taken back to a few years ago. Daniel wakes up early, placing Catherine's birthday breakfast on a tray, along with something special and serves her breakfast in bed. His father is gone, some trip he doesn't know where. His mother sees the present first – a plane ticket to Nottingham. She was always talking of going back there, but she always used Daniel as an excuse to not. She leaves the following day. Not long after her return the doctor finds the cancer.

“You sure you don't want some?”

A momentary lapse of judgment. Daniel asks what it is, but the moment the answer passes her lips, it's lost on his ears. He only hears, "It'll make you feel good. It'll make you forget why you're here." And that's enough. He holds his hand out for the straw and she prepares him a line.

Everything is forgotten. The beat seems to slow with the flashing of lights, no longer causing a pain in his head, and he's taken by her hand once more to be led back to the dance floor. She presses her body tightly against him, back against chest, and she doesn't protest when one of his hands wraps around her petite waist and under her shirt. Daniel doesn't realize he's doing it, he doesn't realize anything. He feels numb. The memories cease to exist, the feelings of pain dissolve into nothingness. He's finally free. It's finally working.



Andi Southern
Human Nature

Sarah Baez
Battleborn

I waited at my post in the sweltering heat for them to show up, and when they did not, I knew she was in prison or dead. They were Najirah and Wid. They both had deep green eyes, olive skin and beautiful, wild hair that was hidden by their hijabs. Najirah had a wealthy husband so her hijab had a beautiful pattern which framed her face and made her eyes seem deep and mysterious. She wore a thick, black cloak over her clothes, called an abaya. Wid was sweet and quiet. Her smile was wide and bright and you could see the happiness in her eyes. Wid was innocent and young. Her youth was disrupted by reality and the environment she was enslaved to. Wid was born in battle. She was not missed when the city was invaded by terrorists. Najirah and Wid's home had been destroyed in an explosion and Wid lost her arm from the elbow down. She kept her sleeve fastened to the back of her shirt with a safety pin. They were a sweet and caring pair but physically scarred. Nearly everything and everyone in Ar Ramadi had been touched by the violent acts of the war there.

Najirah and Wid came to my post everyday so I could search them for bombs, contraband, or weapons of any kind. The nature of my duty made me conduct these searches on them—my friends. Najirah's intuition told her that these searches were the best way to keep her city, and more importantly, her daughter as safe as possible. Najirah worked for the governor of Ar Ramadi, Iraq as a dentist. The governor had appointed her to the duty of helping victims from the war. Medical and dental care was a way for him to repay the civilians that had been harmed, in any way, by an act of terrorism. Najirah was part of his master plan to rebuild trust in the government. She had to come through my post every morning. Najirah's English, albeit broken, was nearly perfect with the hint of a British accent. We greeted each other. "As-salaam 'alaykum." I would begin with my hand over my chest as a sign of respect. She would reply, "Wa'alaykum salaam." Her hand would also cover her chest and she would drop it softly to her side. She and I would often greet one another in Arabic and spend the rest of

the day speaking in English. Najirah understood most of what was being said and was quickly learning English.

Najirah often spoke of their future. She would wait at my post until the governor called for her. We would have conversations involving recipes, traditions, children, henna and all things feminine. Najirah had a family recipe for chicken. She would spend the evening roasting her chicken in a metal barrel that was halfway buried under the earth. She would cover the opening with a blanket and let the tastes rally and create an aroma that invaded her house. She would add homemade pickles, lettuce and sliced tomatoes. Fresh pita bread and a sauce that could be drizzled over the food would sit on the plate for use. Najirah would make me a plate a few times a week with her chicken. Their daily visits were my life bread, and I learned to have a profound respect for Najirah and the work she did. She was passionate and educated. This was unique to her as an Iraqi woman. She spoke of opening her own dentistry office in Washington D.C. She truly had a servant's heart.

I worked with the head of the Ar Ramadi Police Department, Major Hakeem. He guarded my post while I conducted intimate searches on women. He was a tall man and built like a bear. He wore a dark red beret and always smoked Virginia Slim cigarettes while he drank his chai tea, as this was his morning ritual. A man from the governor's center was sent to bring him chai tea. It came in a small tea cup that was filled halfway with sugar. He would sip it as he smoked and talked on his telephone. Once Major Hakeem was finished, he would wave for a guard to take his cup and then he would step out of his post gate and slide his sunglasses onto over his eyes. He would walk toward me with a sharp sneer on his lips. His thick mustache would move up and down as he spoke. "Do you have trouble? American girl, if they give you trouble, let Major Hakeem know. I take care of situation," he would say. Then, he would turn and march away, indignantly. He was a brute of a man, and he meant business. His close surveillance of my post made me nervous. He could hear every word I was saying.

Major Hakeem seemed to take particular interest in what Najirah and I would talk about. Najirah did not sit in the shadows. Her voice seemed to carry throughout my post. This would always pique his interest. He would listen more intently

when she was in my company. Najirah's desire for freedom and her current suppression could be considered treason, which was a crime so horrible, it could imprison her and even have her executed. The Ar Ramadi government took offenses this large very seriously. Big Brother always had his ear on the door leading into my post. Major Hakeem reported directly to the governor and his counsel every discussion that took place within earshot of him. Often, he would go out of his way to eavesdrop on what was happening at my post.

The laws were very strict regarding women and how they were to behave. Men could have several wives at once as long as they were all treated the same. They were usually true to their word, and most of the women were given the same amount of abuse and intolerance equally. Najirah's life was dismal and she needed a way out. Najirah would say that she was going to escape from her hell with Wid and come to America for freedom. She detested her husband and his many wives. I began to hope for her freedom nearly as much as she did.

As the dialogue grew from small talk into affectionate conversation, I felt as though we were being watched. More and more often, Major Hakeem would draw near my post or send a guard from his cavalry to look over me. Najirah and I would exchange glances and quickly shift the conversation. The threat of being caught talking about Najirah and Wid leaving Iraq became more and more imminent. The danger was real. I had not understood the hazards of being an Iraqi woman. I had always heard but never witnessed the actual act of the police plucking someone out of society and tossing them behind bars for something so small. To me, it did not seem realistic.

Najirah told me that she had earned her own money from the governor and that her husband was unaware of how much she made. So, Najirah hid it from him. She and Wid could be in America in a year or so. I am not sure of the details of their escape plan, but Najirah was intelligent and had spent years developing her route to freedom. Her excitement grew nearly as quickly as Major Hakeem's suspicion of her treachery.

As dawn broke one morning, I stood waiting at my post. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I stared at the hazy blacktop waiting for their two figures to break the horizon. The sun was beating down on my neck and sweat dripped from my chin. I

looked at the buildings that were in disrepair. The front walls had been blasted off of some of the buildings by bombs, and bullet holes scarred the face of everything that was left standing. The damage reminded me of Wid. I looked at the road they should be traveling and checked my watch. I waited anxiously and decided to give her a few more minutes. These minutes seemed to pass ever so slowly. As sweat welled up in the palms of my hands, I took my gloves off and shook them out. My hands were trembling. I pulled on my hot leather gloves and clenched my fists to calm my nerves. I tried to remain calm and professional. I needed to. The clock ticked on my watch and I could almost hear the sound.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Najirah and Wid did not come. I told myself to wait for one more minute.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I could feel the seconds pass on my watch. They beat my wrist with their incessant thumping, reminding me to just open the gate. The seconds wanted me to give in. I felt the absence of my two friends. I knew, in the back of my mind, that they were not coming. Anxiety swelled in my body, and I wanted to keep waiting. Major Hakeem was checking his watch too. He knew that at that second, I would figure out that they would not come today, or ever again.

I could not stall anymore. It was time to open the gate to the civilians. I turned and waved the first woman in to be searched as Major Hakeem watched over us. He seemed pleased as he held his small cup of tea. He lit his cigarette and put his sunglasses on his face and turned away from me.

To spite him, I held on to hope. I prayed that Najirah and Wid were just late. I was trying to cling to them and will them back to the Governor's Center. My eyes quickly looked over the woman in front of me. I asked her to remove her hijab and lift her abaya. "Open your bags," I demanded. I let her pass through. I stepped outside once again to look for them and to motion the next woman in. I turned and looked at Major Hakeem. He looked at me as if he was a victor. I stepped back inside my post. Again, I quickly searched the woman. Then, another woman. Major Hakeem did not falter in his duty. My faith in his authority was traded for disrespect. I searched dozens of women and with each

woman, my hope faded. I wanted to see Najirah's face under the next hijab, but her face was replaced by another woman's. Then, I grasped that Najirah and Wid were not coming. My desire proved too weak to match the truth and ultimately, their demise.

A lump built in my throat and my eyes started to burn. I had misunderstood reality for Najirah and Wid. The shock wore off and guilt settled deep into my body. Tears started to sting my face. Their persecution now rested on my conscience. Inside, I honored Najirah's bravery but mourned for the loss of my friend and her daughter. I was in disbelief that they would not be coming anymore. I was heartbroken, and I was the cause of their fate.

After hours of standing in the hot sun, it was time to close my post. Major Hakeem and his guards had left early. I was relieved. I did not want to hear the roar of his righteous laughter or smell his breath, which wreaked of stale cigarettes. I was alone, so I took a moment to look around. Najirah and Wid's presence lingered in the corner of the room on their chairs. I could almost taste the fresh plate of food that Najirah had carefully made for me time after time. I was still breathing the same air they breathed. I did not want to leave. The reality was starting to set in. They were gone forever. Wherever they were, it was worse than any hell they, or I, could have imagined.

The tears came raining down my cheeks and filled my hands as I held my face. I tried to gather myself and my emotions. I attempted to be strong. The truth was screaming at me. They were not coming back and their home was now a cinder block room that was locked up tight. Or even worse: they had been executed. I could not contain the crying at this point and I started sobbing. The deep cry that made my lungs want to burst was growing stronger. I fell to the floor as the terror filled my mind. My Marines could not see me like this. I had to stop crying. I breathed and let the tears fall until I had the courage to leave Najirah and Wid behind in my post. I was not ready to say goodbye to them.

Finally, I pulled myself together. I looked at my watch one last time. The hours had passed, and I had no choice now. I had to go back to my lonely room. I picked myself up off of the dusty floor of my post. I slid my gloves back on my tear soaked

hands. I grabbed the keys to my post and slowly locked it. I was locking in the ghosts and memories of Najirah and Wid.

Once I began to understand that Najirah and Wid were not coming, my post was meaningless. I felt as though I would see their faces and know they were okay, but I was disappointed, and it made my stomach hurt and face feel hot. I did not protect them. Najirah and Wid were battleborn and lived their lives in a state of worry and brokenness. Our friendship was forged during war. They would die in a state of fear. They will be there forever. My head forced my heart to accept that Najirah and Wid would never leave Iraq.

Now, the beautiful and damaged girls visit me in my sleep and during my time alone. Najirah and Wid stay locked away until I am forced to recall them. I am compelled to remember the details of their faces that are etched into my mind. Najirah and Wid left a mark on me just as war had left its mark on them. I have become a new person that was created out of shattered pieces of my former self.

These are my battle scars. They are the shadows that haunt my nights.

Jeremy Gamble

West on 280

The chain of the garage door cranks and lifts the heavy aluminum
The truck idles and I wait,
Sunlight over my shoulder shines into the musty enclosure and
A yellow moth flies out into the afternoon sun.
I remember thinking about the forms of escape.
One time I sped down Route 280.
The highway snakes underneath the concrete of Newark and
Irvington
Forgotten highway project equipment littering the
broken median,
Covered with jagged crumbling cracks and dead weeds
Blackened by rubbing sidewalls and deep exhaust
Concrete walls on both sides
No shoulder.
I travel as fast as traffic will allow.
When you travel west on Route 280 you eventually rise up
From the urban valley and bleed out into rocky hillsides,
Trees hanging over cliffs and roots sticking out collecting litter
fifteen feet up.
I hit the first upward slope at eighty and saw police cars
Under an overpass just before Northfield Avenue.
Sun bounced off my dash just as it bounced off the white
Caprices and Crowns in front of me
Closer I saw the figures there
Backs to me, facing a grey Olds
Parked awkwardly up the slope of the underpass at a crooked angle
The two door kind with that sharp line of the back windshield
With long rectangle headlights
reflecting red in my eyes.
The rising hills of Route 280 require you to leadfoot the pedal
To maintain your pace up the slope.
I increased the pressure on the gas

And as I approached the group straightened up
Stood still
All right angles
And fired on the oddly parked Olds
Sounds like stepping on packing bubbles
Five quick puffs of smoke
As I travel past
I remember thinking about the forms of escape
And how momentum has nothing to do with distance.



Arthur Green
Angel Wings

Seth Wiggs

In Praise of Death Valley (And Her Mesquite Dunes)

Silence, serene and lulling,
No-one can waken me here,
There is no scent and no sound,
I am left to look with eyes,

Endless, beige expanse of sand,
Over your dunes, I can view
For miles, the few clouds they paint
Crisp pictures on your mountainside,

Warmth, the cloud painting is glazed,
Baked in the same blazoned kiln
As me, this place, like the void,
Is death.
But there *is* a key difference.

Light, it is warmth, joy, and peace.
A fine place to close up the book.



Benjamin Crum
Stay Isolated

Jeremy Gamble
Cassette Recorder

Why choose the hallway to record your voice?
Feel the creaking wood under your feet,
Soft in certain spots and you know the tricks
To make the best squeaks.

The quiet one might know these things
From walking around the house by himself
Holding a mirror's face up towards the ceiling
Wondering how it is to be away, how it must be to walk up there.

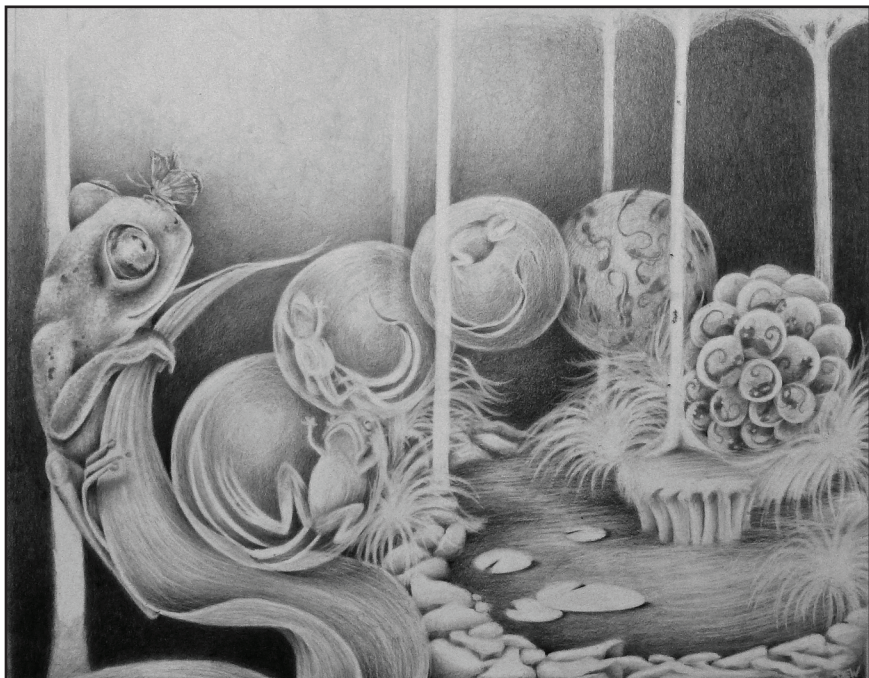
I know the home upside down,
Cannot recall the color of the walls
Yellow maybe,
But the ceiling was white.

The smell of acetate tape and electronics,
Black plastic with painted metal accent.
The smell of aluminum and batteries.
Rectangle box and rolling mechanism in small hands.

There were shadows in the hallway,
The legs of others maybe, me at knee level.
It was bedtime.
Feel the cotton and elastic of a pajama top against my wrists.

The sounds and sensations on the fingers of depressing buttons
and plastic clicks are always interesting.
Pressing both buttons at the same time to record has a specific
excitement.
The hiss coming from the silver speaker perforated with little holes
Time to speak.

I do not know what was said, what I said
Only the shock of my own voice played back to me
Is that how I really sound?
How many times have I asked that question since?



Devon Woodrum
Tree Frog

Angela Colon
Old Dave King

It starts with an old guitar and a hot, lazy night. The steel strings scratch against practiced fingertips, their calloused curves sliding down the neck and snapping tight to incite a stinging trill that lingers in the humid southern air. There it hangs aloft and dangles, bouncing softly in its pitch before tumbling down the stairs of scales and smacking to a stop. Old Dave King slaps the strings of his weathered Triolian guitar again, and she belts a slow, low moan.

“Now that’s some fire right there. That’s power!” Glen Morgan lets out a hearty laugh, his hands beating rhythmically into the arms of the faded blue rocking chair. His coal black eyes laugh, too; they gleam with amusement and drink as he rocks slowly in his seat. But Old Dave King doesn’t see this. Old Dave King’s eyes are shut and sheltered somewhere else on some other day.

He’d never seen eyes like that before. They sparkled in the sunlight they caught from underneath a canopy of thick lashes. Shrewd eyes, rimmed with black and gold. Quick and playful. Dark legs sticking out from under her yellow summer dress; she was a wild flower. Young Dave King knew he wanted nothing more than to hear her voice. He’d told her that he’d wanted to know what an angel sounded like. She’d told him to step in front of a car and find out.

“Now that part sounded too happy there. It didn’t work with the rest of the song.” Glen’s displeasure ruptures the dream, and Old Dave King’s eyebrows raise up with the corners of his mouth as he wakes.

“Oh. You think so? Well, then. We’ll just have to change that, then, won’t we?” He brings his boot-tip down in a steady tap and twists at the tuning knobs, setting her voice into minor and his hands slip back down and begin.

Donna Joanne King was used goods and no one would want her again. She’d given her life to a worthless man

and there was no going back on deals with time. She was wilting and trapped behind glass and plaster, a machine of manufacture, making beds, browsing markets, mending small dresses and stockings for her only girl. Her hands were white and tight on the Sunday shirt plunged in a solution of suds. Her knuckles looked distant and rubber to her, bobbing there. A foreign face cried at her from below the murk and whispered a resolution. "I am through," she promised, "I am through!"

He had never seen eyes like that before. They were too wide, wild, and wet. The pearls of teeth gnashed and brayed, and Dave King was reminded of a barn he'd worked a summer at when he was a boy. He thought of a thoroughbred that had gone mad one day in the hundred-some degree weather. He thought of the froth flying from its lips and the hooves rearing above his dirty face. He thought of those wide, wild eyes, wet with blood and the loud blast of the 12 gauge. He thought of bodies and grief. He thought of loss. Dave King held the hand of his four-year-old daughter and looked into down into her eyes – wide, wet, and worried. His leg shielded her from the scene behind the door, which he closed with his free hand. "And momma?" she asked, making for the handle. Dave King held gently, removed her small hand from the brass handle. He took a knee and brought her close and whispered a resolution. "I'm here, baby. Don't worry. Daddy's here."

"That part always gives me chills. I don't know why. It's how you play it, you know? It's something you do there. It's good; it's good," Glen starts to sway a little with every gesture. He catches himself mid-bob and props his back against the wicker rocker. He brings the can of tepid brew back to his lips for a moment more before he asks, "How's your baby girl, Natalie, by the way? She call you up for the holidays yet?"

"Oh no, not yet, but she's busy with school and all, so." Old Dave King sets into an easy smile and shrugs.

“Oh, well, you know she’ll probably be callin’ up sometime this weekend, then. That’s a good girl you got, Dave. Now, Darnell! Haven’t heard squat from his lazy ass!” Glen coughs roughly, from his lungs, and hacks a glob of mess off into the grass beside him. “Don’t expect to, neither. I haven’t seen so much as a hair from that boy since he took off -- when was it, now?”

“Five years ago, I think.”

“No. Wait, yes. Yes, that’s right. Five years ago. Not a thing,” Glen frowns and crunches the empty beer can into his palm. “Your little girl, though, you saw her last year, right? She came up for Thanksgiving?”

“Yes she did!”

“Yeah, see? I remember because she brought that twiggy fellow with her.”

“Mhmm.”

“Damn, they grow up fast.”

“Mhmm.”

It takes a moment for Old Dave King to recognize the song that his hands have been playing for him while he spoke. It’s an old saccharine tune -- soft, familiar and sweet. Effortless. He’d sat outside the delivery ward in the waiting room, with the Triolian strapped around him. The melody had come along with the baby’s first breath: Natalie’s song. Even as new as she was to the world, Dave’s little Natalie would dance when he played it for her. Her legs would kick and buck, her round chubby face lighting up with toothless smiles. His baby girl. And then at age five, when she’d finally decided that songs needed words, she wrote some lyrics for her daddy to sing. He is warm with the memory, and her small voice pipes up to trill in his ear from a time long ago. Dave quietly hums along with her.

“That was a beautiful wedding,” Glen starts talking again before the song’s words can erupt from Dave’s mouth. He has a new beer in his hand, and he stares at Old Dave King expectantly, brows raised and mouth puckered. Old Dave King thinks it’s a bad face; it makes Glen look like a gossipy duck. It reminds him of Bernice, the large woman who plays Bingo from next door. He can feel his face forming itself into an expression not unlike Glen’s before he answers simply, “Yes it was.”

“He’s a good man. He’ll take good care of her.” Glen’s head is hanging back limply and his eyes are glazed and hazy like the air around him now. “Our babies going off to make other babies now. Don’t need our old asses anymore! Hahaha! No they don’t.” Glen laughs into the opening of his beer, and the sound is hollowed and muffled, like the place where Old Dave King stands in his mind.

He’s never seen her look so happy. He’s in a fine fresh suit, sewn to fit. He can smell the summer on the scent of flowers. The bouquet Natalie holds is gorgeous, with petals as ivory as the gown she wears and her smile. She’s giddy, Old Dave can tell, because he can hardly see her eyes from where he’s standing. They’re capsized crescents all aglow and he notices that she’s ever so slightly swaying. Twiggy is laughing with her through his gaze. Old Dave King finds that he’s been laughing, too. But the pastor speaks to him then, and Old Dave fumbles to remember the only part he’s been given in this whole affair.

“Who gives this woman to be wed?” the preacher man asks and Old Dave feels the prickle of a hundred staring eyes on his scalp. He slips off the thatched, grey, scaly cap from his head and clutches it to his chest, lips working at words that won’t come. It’s only after she looks at him, with a face he’d keep forever, that he nods,

“I do, sir.” And then his turn is finished. Old Dave King slips down into the shadow of a pew and wonders at how empty his hands feel.

On the porch, Old Dave King looks thoughtful for a moment. His hands become still and the only sound is the hum of the single yellow bulb above them and the tinkering sporadic taps from a fly trying to break inside. He looks past the cracks between the slats of weathered wood on the porch.

“I’m a’ go ahead and head on out or I’m gonna regret it more later. You take care now, Dave.” Glen stands and extends a hand before carefully sidestepping off the porch and disappearing behind the corner. Old Dave King sits alone with

his Triolian, watching the fly and the bulb above. Finally, with a sigh, he stands and shuffles to the rear screen door.

Inside his house, Dave's eyes flicker to the phone and wait for a blinking red message light, but the phone sits dark tonight. It's been dark for a while now, Dave thinks, and presses a button just to make sure. "You have zero messages." Dave's head is heavy; the quiet feels loud. Outside, he can still hear the tapping of the fly. Its erratic noise drives him away, and he finds himself in his restroom. There's tapping here, too, though. Droplets steadily drip from the spigot, and Old Dave King sighs. He'd left his tools there, nested in the corner by the tub, for when he got around to it again, but that day hadn't seem to come around yet. The drips were small, at least.

He turns to the man on the wall beside him and looks hard. "Oh man," he laughs. "Where'd you come from, geezer?" The broad grin fades from his face, and Old Dave King stares at a downtrodden man. This was a man with blues in his soul, the birthplace of beauty and pain and songs in the summer sun. A man who'd lived too long while bleeding. His only light, he'd given away not too long ago, and now there were only those songs left to walk with him along his way. The blues had left scars along his mouth and beside his eyes. It must have stressed him some, too, since his once black hair had been replaced by cotton white. His road was narrowing now, Dave was sure. "Whoah-oh, Lord-eh, I've traveled so long, so long, hmmm..." He sings himself to the living room again where the silent phone sits. Nothing is waiting for Old Dave King as he rests on his dusty brown recliner, but his hand finds Triolian's neck and he pulls her up and into his lap. "Just one more for the night, sweetie."

It ends with an old man sitting in an empty room, playing songs to the walls and the face in all the pictures. He bobs his head steady in sync with the tips of his boots. Outside a fly taps against a flickering bulb one last time before it falls to the ground rigid and lifeless. But Old Dave King doesn't see this, his eyes are shut and sheltered somewhere else on some other day.

This story is dedicated to the lonely who suffer in silence. May we never forget them.



Lindsay Haney
Swift Elegance

Sherri Robinson

Summers with Mimi and Pappy

Tow-headed, rambunctious, and endowed with the curiosity of at least a dozen cats, my memories of summers with my grandparents on the Pungo River are now fifty-year-old remembrances that I treasure. Each year, I counted down the days until summer arrived to deliver me to a world of crab pots, swimming at sunrise, diving from the grandest wooden pier, and paddling around on rafts I was certain rivaled Edward Teach's Queen Anne's Revenge. I ran wild and free through the small vineyard on Mimi and Pappy's property, suffering the bellyaches of having eaten too many scuppernongs and deftly trying my grandmother's patience in attempting to teach me bridge. I remember my grandfather, Pappy, allowing me to join him in his Falcon Coupe listening to the election returns on the radio in 1964 and having him explain to me that AuH₂O meant Goldwater and me believing that new-found knowledge endowed me to somehow become President of The United States.

Looking back, I realize what I most loved about those days was the security I felt in the embrace of absolute, unconditional love. Although I engineered many a mishap, my sense of learning was set afire. There are many anecdotes worth sharing but three stand above the rest.

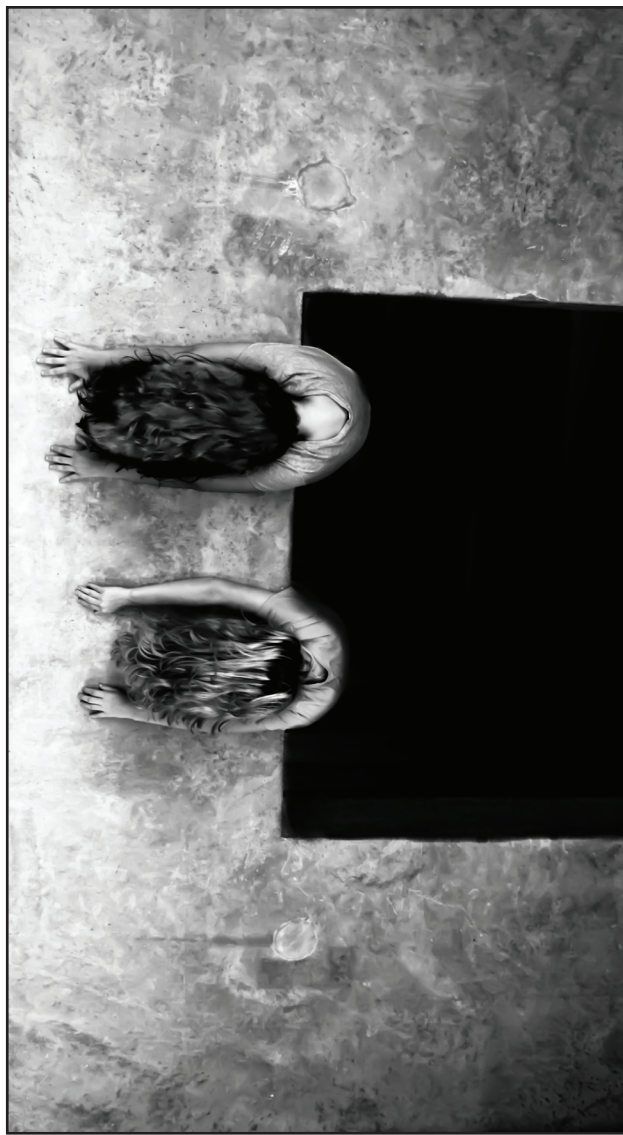
Being the first grandchild and the only girl, it is an understatement to describe me as having been spoiled. A small motor scooter, the ones that placed two tires about the size of those on the lawnmowers of the day under a tiny frame with a flat seat and handlebars powered by the single stroke Briggs & Stratton motor that powered the lawnmower, was generously acquired for me by my grandfather. He instructed me to navigate it just as I did my bicycle, telling me the pedaling would be done by the motor propelling me faster or slower depending on how far forward I turned the throttle on the right handlebar. Pronouncing myself ready, I took off for a circle around the yard. Coming off of my fourth turn, I had the brilliant idea to drive it down the pier to the water. Apparently, I had not paid attention to how the braking system worked and launched myself and the mini-scooter into the Pungo River. Properly scaring the

bejesus out of my Grandfather, I was elated and wanted to do it again, not realizing my maiden voyage was the scooter's last.

After sufficiently pouting about the scooter not being replaced, a Shetland pony arrived which I learned could swim but was not at all excited about galloping down the pier to do so. He and I came to terms and met the water at the shore but only after I had been launched, head first, over his shoulder when he abruptly stopped at the pier's end. This pony, I imaginatively named "Lil Fella," was my constant companion much to his distress, for I discovered if I fed him more scuppernongs, my belly hurt less. I also won the battle of letting him sleep in my room, having conceded to relocate from the second floor to the first. Did I mention spoiled in relation to my summers with Mimi and Pappy?

It wasn't all fun and games though. My tonsils had to be removed, and I refused the operation unless someone was going to have it with me. I was cajoled with promises of all of the jello and ice cream I wanted, but, I, without a sweet tooth, was a hard sell. The guarantee of a brand new trampoline did the trick. These people were geniuses in the art of childrearing, at least, in my opinion. Picture my grandparents jumping up and down on that trampoline to take my mind off of my throat. I still can.

Those summers, I missed my Mama and Daddy every time I remembered to; I miss all four of them now. I only hope they know how very much I do.



Ivey Blair
Black Hole

Suzanne Clark

admiration

In a world without restrictions upon love
when you ask what's wrong I'd tell you that
I want you to love me unashamedly, lustfully, completely, right
now
call out from work to call out my name.
let the morning light halo around my hair and encircle your
rough fingers round my face
kiss the laugh lines and peck every freckle
the twinging of my loins suggests that we make love and make
life.

the perfect world allows love that is big enough to be shared
to have a family and grow it as big as you can;
a thrill; to imagine our lineage making waves 10 years from now,
thriving
your loving look expands my heart. it is a spark that creates new
life.

in the flat world that we live in, I've never seen your arms bare
a peek of hair suggests we'd be fine to swing in trees together
monkeys of the same odd laughing burping tribe
seeking, emitting the signal of desire and of life!

Allison King
Mirror Image

If you looked up the word “rapacious” in the dictionary, I guarantee you would find a picture of Dexter Edgar Stoker, a 37-year-old business man who was the exact definition of the word. There was a rumor that he was born with all of his greedy, assailing, preying, and demanding nature, while others said he picked up each menacing attribute as he went along. No matter how he obtained his vicious personality, he had it all the same. He was totally void of mercy and kindness; on the contrary, he credited his stern, callous ways for his success. Mr. Stoker’s rapaciousness was his dearest friend.

On this Tuesday morning, September 13, 1960, Dexter Edgar Stoker was sitting behind his enormous desk inside his even more enormous office, drinking his coffee, black as usual. He was dressed in his perfectly pressed suit and tie. His black hair was slicked back without a hair out of place. The only thing about his appearance that he left undone was his five o’clock shadowed beard. He let it slip just enough to ricochet off of his mischievously villainous, black eyes, which matched the color of his soul, to give him a sinister edge that shouted he was ready to wreak havoc on anyone who dared challenged him, without him saying a word.

Dexter Edgar Stoker had a particular sense of pride. One that suspected he was above the need of giving and receiving of ordinary man’s kindness. On this Tuesday he would find out that kindness was worth more than all the money he could fill in his bank account.

The morning went on as usual, with Dexter barking orders to his employees, who obeyed like loyal dogs to their master. Stoker was an excellent trainer; his favorite tactic was fear, and he liked to see his dogs obey as much as they liked keeping their situation. At half past ten, he told his beautiful assistant, with his sly, charmed voice, to usher in one of his canines.

Stoker was compelled to hire Matthias Eaton a few months back. Eaton was a man of likeness to Stoker in age, style, and career. He was moving up fast in the business world, and Stoker couldn’t deny he had great talent. Stoker was the best

businessman in the city and he liked his reigning title. That's why he snatched up the skilled Eaton without a second thought, for Stoker was a venomously jealous man, and he wasn't going to let someone with a little talent climb over him on the nostalgic ladder of success. Besides, he was convinced Eaton was too soft and honest to ever be as great as him.

Stoker needed another dog, and today would be Eaton's first real test at Stoker's business. Soon Eaton was standing in his office. Stoker's request was less than legal and doused in dishonesty. He liked to see a mirror image of himself in his best men, and if you didn't conform to that image, you would face consequences that made you wish you would have simply changed your face. Stoker never had anyone refuse to do his errands, until this Tuesday morning.

Yes, Stoker's and Eaton's facts and backgrounds were very much the same, but their convictions and values couldn't have been more opposite. Matthias Eaton was a genuine man of honesty and fairness. He believed that right was right, and wrong was wrong, no matter who you were and no matter the circumstances. The sound of someone refusing him was so foreign to Stoker that he could only give Eaton a hard stare for a moment. He intimidatingly asked him to repeat his response, daring him to say again what he thought he heard, but Eaton wasn't afraid and the answer was the same. "No." Stoker's black-as-night eyes stared at his rebelling dog with warning. He talked in slow, menacing words telling Eaton that if he didn't do this for him, he was fired and could forget about ever getting another job in the field. Still, Eaton was steadfast and his answer was left unchanged.

Stoker fired him in a swift, authoritative motion. He was making an example of Matthias Eaton, who would never get a job in the business world as long as he was breathing. Stoker held no shame in his mid-morning deed; in fact, he applauded himself with a job most flawlessly done. He always knew he would have to keep Eaton from excelling either by keeping him locked away in a moderate job or ruin his name. Stoker found the second choice to be all the more fun, and enjoyed the amusement the day had already brought.

By the time it was noon, Stoker had forgotten all about Mr. Eaton and was thinking nothing but greedy, power-hungry

thoughts. He was oblivious of the world when a voice jolted him back.

"Dexter."

Stoker looked up to find the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen standing in his office doorway. Stoker quickly devoted all of his attention on the gorgeous female staring back at him. She was a tall, striking presence to behold. Her white pumps gave her the extra height in a classy, elegant way, and the prestige just climbed after that. She was wearing a smart dress suit that was a spotless white. Her light blond hair was pulled back in a tight, no-nonsense bun and her fair, angelic face was filled with so much natural beauty it almost took his breath away, and that was hard to do. Her blue eyes looked at him with perfect clarity. Stoker was keenly curious.

"Dexter?" He said standing up. "I don't remember us ever meeting, and I know I wouldn't have forgotten."

"We haven't met Dexter, but I've been watching you for quite some time."

He raised his eyebrows in a devilish way. "Have you now?"

"Yes, and what I've seen from you has been nothing but rapaciousness."

Stoker shrugged. It was nothing he didn't already know. "Maybe we have met after all."

Her eyes turned hard as ice. "You are a corrupt, horrible man. Your heart is black."

He withered his brow at her. "You seem so attached to my less honorable attributes."

"You have no honorable attributes. You deserve comeuppance."

He laughed at her mockingly. "Comeuppance?"

"Yes, you have lived only for yourself, stepping over and burying anyone to reach your so-called success."

"So-called? Are you sure you know who I am? I'm Dexter Edgar Stoker; I'm the richest man as far as the eye can see, and I own this city. What else would that be called but success?"

The mysterious woman's icy eyes melted to a pitied look. "I'd call it everything, but success. I was sent to give you one last chance. You, without a shroud of kindness in your bones

and blood, will have to find someone who will hold out a hand of kindness towards you before the stroke of 3 o' clock this afternoon. If you succeed, you will be given a second chance."

Stoker looked at her with a comical stare. He wasn't afraid of this woman. He figured she was just some mad fool. "That's all the time in the world. These people worship me. I can have anything I want, all I have to do is ask," he said, laughing in her face.

"But they won't be worshipping you. I'm taking away all your prestige, and all of your fortunes. You will be a stranger to them, and I can assure you that when you beg for kindness, they will be less than eager to oblige."

Stoker was waiting for the woman to exclaim that this was a crazy joke. But she stood there with a pursed lip and a sober face. Her seriousness made Stoker cut another disbelieving smile at her absurdity. "So I just have to find someone to show me kindness before 3:00 and my soul will be spared?" She split her lips into a smile, to his surprise, but instead of comical it was a wicked smile made when one knew something the other didn't. Then, Stoker started to feel dizzy and distorted. The woman became out of focus as she spun into nothingness. At 12:30 a.m., Dexter Edgar Stoker dropped to his floor, knocked out into the blank blackness. When he awoke, he found his situation most changed.

He was lying on a dirty street corner. When he stood up, he found his suit to be cheap and ripped up, and his shoes had holes in them. He brushed back his messy hair, and looked around the empty street that held not a soul in sight. "Hey, what's the big idea?" he asked half to himself and half to the wind. His mind raced back to that woman. Did she knock me out, and drag me to this abandoned street corner? "Just wait until I find that woman! She'll be sorry she ever walked into my building, or my city for that matter."

He stomped to the next street corner with his blood boiling. The street was one of the busiest in town, but Stoker was too hot to notice. He didn't take three steps before he ran into the back of someone. "Hey!" the voice said angrily, turning around quickly to fuss him out. Stoker was about to give the man some cheek too, but the sight of the man made Stoker's words run dry. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and his black eyes

became as big as saucers. He couldn't find the words to tell the man what he thought about him because the man was him. Stoker was looking at his own reflection, but with the lack of a mirror. "What are you, blind?" his other self questioned. Stoker wasn't able to speak. "Ah, so you're dumb too?" His other self grabbed him roughly by the collar of his neck. "Well, I hope you're not deaf rummy, 'cause I'm only going to say this once. You do that again and you won't be walking next time," shoving Stoker right off his feet. Stoker went down hard as his image huffed away.

He stood up in a quick bewildered motion as he noticed the other people, and he could not believe his eyes. Everyone looked like him. Walking down the sidewalk, driving the cabs, working in the shops, were all beings with his face. "What's going on?" he said out loud. Stoker was used to an answer, but all he got was a silent response. Was this some kind of dream? He pinched his arm, like a child trying to wake himself up from a nightmare. Even though he pinched his skin until it broke and bled, he didn't wake up. He ran to a shop window to see that he still looked the same. He was most certainly Dexter Edgar Stoker. He looked at the reflections of the other Dexters behind him, walking and driving through the streets. He found them to have the same slick, raven hair, unfeeling, black eyes, shadowed beard, villainous, comical expression, and stride that shouted they owned all that they walked upon. All of them were most defiantly Dexter Edgar Stoker, and they were the only beings in the city. Stoker placed his hand on his forehead, as the realization of what the woman in white had said. He looked up quickly at the clock tower displaying 1:15. Stoker, all of a sudden, feared condemnation, and his breath became shallow as he realized her threat was legitimate.

He spent the last minutes of his free life agonizingly trying to find someone to aid his needs. His first attempt was when he found himself exceedingly hungry, and as poor as his apparel implied. He went to a diner and asked the identical-faced owner if he could spare him something to eat. He was thrown out. He went into another restaurant, but was met with the same result. He went into a dive, asking for only a glass of water for his parched tongue, but seeing the state of him, his other self

instead made a spectacle of him and every one of his faces laughed at him as that Dexter said they didn't serve to rummies.

The outside had grown cold, and the wind cut like a knife through his thin, shredded jacket. He asked for any form of kindness any one of him could give, but he was either ignored, mocked, or shoved, literally, off by all of them. None could spare a dime, even though he knew they had more in their bank account than they would ever need. Nobody offered him their coat, even though they had a closet full. There was no help for his gnawing stomach even though theirs were full. No relief for his sandpaper lips even though theirs were moist. The only thing the Dexters ever gave was a hateful attitude that said his breath wasn't worth saving. Dexter Edgar Stoker wouldn't even give out kindness to himself.

The exhausted Stoker looked up at the clock tower displaying 2:50. He shouted in despair. He was going to pay today for all his past deeds. "Ten minutes Dexter." He turned to see the mysterious woman cloaked in white.

"Don't you see?" he yelled. "There's no hope for me!"

"You shouldn't have expected differently. Not once in your adult life have you reached out to a soul and given them a true hand of kindness. You have given nothing but a graceless hand. Now you get a taste of what's it's like to be at the other end. You should feel elated Dexter; you always wanted everyone to be a mirror image of you."

"I don't want that anymore."

"There is one who might help you."

"Who?" Stoker said quickly in mad desperation.

"Behind you, on the street corner."

Stoker turned his head eager for a possible hope, but when he saw the face his heart sunk, and his pride flared. The man on the street corner wasn't him, but Matthias Eaton. Stoker turned to the woman, giving her an angry face. "I can't do that!"

"Mathias is your only way to a second chance. It's either him or condemnation."

Stoker looked back at the man with a different face on the sidewalk. 2:55. He had time for nothing else. Yet, even in his desperation his heels felt cemented into the walkway. How could he ever bring himself to ask this man, who was beneath him, for a slab of kindness? He was bigger than this; he didn't need

kindness. That was what Dexter Stoker of Tuesday morning would say, but he wasn't that Dexter Stoker anymore. It was afternoon, and he was quite changed. He had seen himself as he really was. Without his money, business, and tailored suit, he was nothing more than a heartless man with a black soul. 2:56. He didn't want to die like this, with nothing but a big, dishonest business to show for his life. So against everything engrained in him, he broke free and made his way towards Eaton. Mathias was buying a paper, completely unaware of all the Dexter's walking around him. When he finally saw Stoker, he was shocked. He never in all his life ever thought he'd see the man of the city in such a state. "Mr. Stoker, what happened to you?"

Stoker looked down in shame. He realized that he couldn't ask this man for kindness. He didn't deserve it. "I've lost everything." He paused and said something he had never spoken to anyone. "I-I'm sorry Matthias. What I did to you was wrong. I hate the man I've been."

Compassion and mercy flooded Eaton's eyes. "What do you need, Mr. Stoker? I'll help you in any way I can."

Stoker looked up at him wide-eyed and confused. "You'd help me? After what I did to you?"

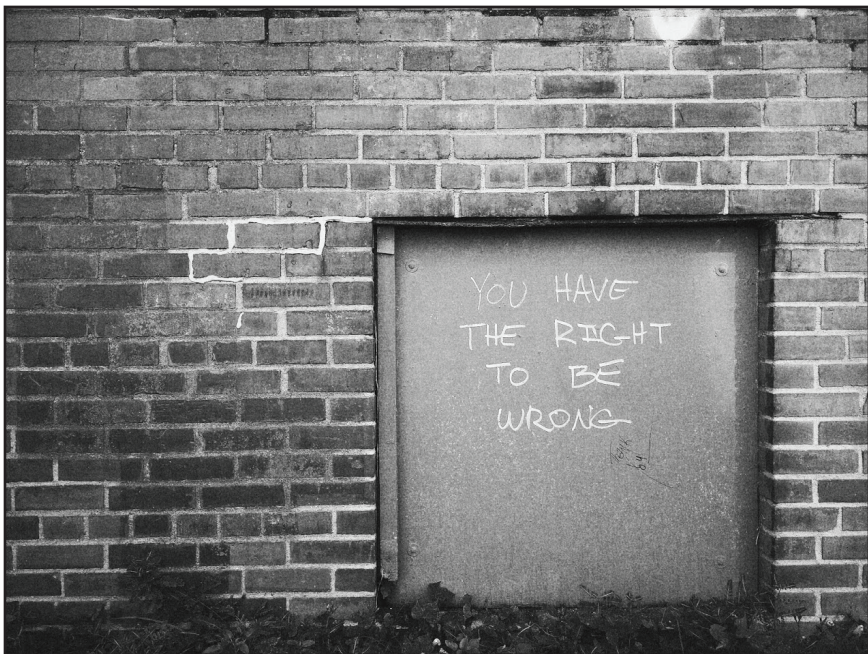
Eaton nodded. "We all deserve a second chance." He held his hand out with generosity to Stoker. Then, the clock struck three, and all the Dexter Edgar Stokers faded away.

Stoker instantly found himself back behind his enormous desk inside his office. He saw that outside his glass-walled office that everything was just as it had been. His dogs, that were looking more human to him now, were bustling about doing all that he had ordered. In the mist of all the morning rush, he saw Matthias in the middle of it, unaware, that he had just saved Stoker's black soul with an act of pure kindness. Standing in the doorway was the woman in white, looking at him with a genuine smile. "Second chance, Dexter." And then she disappeared right before his eyes.

The realization of a second chance hit him with so much elation that he shouted with relieved joy to the top of his lungs with a pure smile upon his face, leaving all of his employees wondering what on earth had happened to Mr. Stoker. But that was just the beginning of his change.

Dexter Edgar Stoker, a man with a black soul, changed because he was given a not-so-simple act of kindness. A man, whose second chance became a second life for him. He became the opposite of rapacious in every aspect of his life.

The angel in white was sent down from heaven to visit those with rapacious souls and give them a chance at redemption. Most are not as fortunate as Stoker. Those who let their pride consume them find their second chance wasted, and comeuppance comes upon them. She still visits souls on earth today, and she will until it dissolves into nothing but snow. Maybe she is visiting someone this very morning. Let us hope it's not you to whom she's bringing a mirror image.



Waleed Jarrad
Unconventional Teacher

Robert Brennan

Love at First Sight

I never believed in “love at first sight.” Then it happened. I was taken completely off-guard. The first time I saw him, I was drawn to him. “Him.” That was what was odd, too. I like women. Always have. Hell, I had fallen in love with a woman at least once a year for the last twenty years. Never works out well, but there you go. Now...him. Not my usual type. This was odd. For the first time in my life, I definitely had feelings for a male. He was good-looking, young, bold, fearless even. All the characteristics that go along with a young age.

Soon after I met him, he moved into my house. Living together requires rules, and I have had my share of roommates over the years. I know how it works. Everyone living together needs to learn to compromise. Again, this was a struggle I usually won with the women I brought home, but this time I was the one forced to give in. I typically ended up letting him do what he wanted when he wanted it. That’s not to say he got to be an asshole about it. He just knew what he wanted when he wanted it. He was definitely an alpha male. For example, he started sharing my bed. I mean that literally. He took up more and more space until sometimes I was forced to shove him over. As for everything else, I couldn’t really tell him what to do. He would usually not listen. That’s not to say he didn’t care about me. If I really felt strongly about something, he could give in. I just had to tell him how important it was for me. On the positive side, those times when I did get angry and yell at him, he might have an attitude about it for a bit, but then within a little while he would forget about it. I will say this for him; he wasn’t the type to hold a grudge.

As time went on our relationship grew. It was no longer a battle to see who was in charge, it had morphed into a partnership of equals. We were inseparable. We went everywhere together. No matter how busy I was with work, I always made sure we had time together. We spent so much time together that it felt like we could read each other’s minds. I knew what he wanted without having to be told, and he knew what I

wanted. Like the times I was sick, he would come lie down with me and keep me company, even if he wanted to go out somewhere. Those were times he would put aside his wants to take care of me.

We had over ten years together. I had the good fortune to realize while we were together that I was in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime relationship. It's funny. I'm a pessimist. I come from New Jersey; you can't come from New Jersey and not be a pessimist. And as such, I knew it would end someday, but in the meantime I was determined to enjoy the life we had together. People would see us walking side by side at the park, at the store, at the beach, and I could tell they knew we had something special. I had come to trust him with my life and he trusted me with his. I would have taken a bullet for him. I know he would have died to save me.

Then the disease came. It was slow at first. A degenerative nerve condition. It started with his left foot. Then it worked its insidious way through his body. I watched as his powerful body aged quickly. Where he could at one time easily outrun me, I saw it become harder and harder for him to run. Then he could only walk, then finally he couldn't walk without support. As his condition worsened, our relationship changed. Where we had once been equals, now I had become a care-giver for him. There were times I knew he was ashamed because his body failed him, and I would have to take care of all of the mundane functions that one often takes for granted when one is healthy.

I was with him the day he died. I started to cry. As I did, he leaned over to me and kissed me as if to say "Everything is going to be all right." I knew it wouldn't. I watched as he slowly fell asleep. Then at 8:35 in the morning last May, his heart stopped. So did mine. I stayed with him in the room for about 15 minutes. I saw death change the features of his face as his muscles relaxed. I realized that he was gone. All that remained was the shell his spirit had walked around in. I kissed him, then got up and left the room.

As I walked out to my car, something struck me. I was twelve when my father died. I remember at the funeral my mother kissed my father good-bye. In one of those weird situations, I remember thinking it was strange that my mother kissed a dead body, even if it was my father. I never understood it until that moment. When I kissed Caesar good-bye, I realized that I was saying good-bye to the spirit and not the body. I mourned his loss for a long time. It took me months to realize that he's not really gone. They say that as long as someone remembers you, you're not truly gone. Ask anyone who knows me well at all, if you talk to me for more than five minutes, I will most likely work Caesar into the conversation. When people tell me he must have been a great dog, I tell them he was the best relationship I ever had.



Chris Maupin
Fishing Pier

Lesley Richardson
Neruda's Lifeline

“While I'm writing, I'm far away; and when I come back, I've gone.” ~Pablo Neruda

*Everything is so alive,
that I can be alive.*
Linden leaves tremble
in the breeze and cotton
blossoms hang on the laundry
line to be pressed, lips
sewed together.
The typewriter dozes
in the sun-lit corner
as she stares at red
seeds of fire bursting
with life – taps her finger
on the beside table
to the rhythm
of the neighbor's blues.
She rehearses her new line
of inspiration over
and over again. *Everything
is so alive, that I can be alive.*
There is a moon
blossoming as quickly
as the sun sets, receding
light that looks in
at itself. Reflection is
the truest life, the sinking
darkness of ourselves.

Patrick Tyner

Odessa, my love

Odessa
life, laughter, love
so bright and beautiful,
let your warm light out shine
the violence that has come to you,
from across your border lines.

Your laughter and humor
set to your soft candle lit nights....
have warmed my heart
when my emotions would fight,
to drive me away from you.

The opalescent pearl of the Black Sea
has been marred and tarnished by
Russia's hunger for power.
Your baskets of soft fresh bread
have been made to fill that hunger.

The violence
that came to overtake you
was thrust upon your streets
by those who don't truly understand
or love your beauty
but instead would coldly exploit you
for their own selfish pleasures.

Bon fires that line your streets
leave our hearts cold with the stench of smoldering rubber
from the searing heat the screams in your ears
"You are not your own!"

How can I enjoy the tantalizing
smell of your sweet pachainias and waffelies
over the thick arid black smoke
that hangs like a stench, a plague
over your once joyful streets.

Or walk the stones
that have been cobbled
together into your walking streets
that invite us into your mesmerizing beauty
which have been pulled up and hurled
at those that love you
to their pain

Those same inviting streets
that were filled with
the pop..pop.....pop of fireworks
every New Year's eve,
are over run with
men with guns that
pop your children
until they are dead.

and the warm cocktails we have shared
as of late
have been the heat of Molotov
spilling from bottles thrown
as they serve you.

Stand strong and stay true
to the Ukraine's fields of gold and skies of blue.

Stand out on the steps
looking out to your beautiful sea
and wave goodbye to Russia
as they turn back to flee
back to their homeland
so stoic and cold...

Help us save and restore
our love with your wit and charm
as we enjoy the soft candlelit nights
that warm our hearts.



Sherry Jones
On Qui Reve

Jeff Call
Idunno

We won the first game of the World Series behind Frosty's shut-out pitching and his three home runs. We lost Game Two yesterday because of my poetry. Frosty is our MVP. He has a batting average of .890, an ERA of 1.24, and his fielding percentage is a perfect 1.000. Frosty says I'm important, too. I play extra deep right field, and I'm team statistician. Pitching and hitting win championships, but my poem could cost us the title.

Yesterday, Frosty and I were called to the office by Mr. DeWeiner, our new principal. At our first day assembly he seemed nice. He even said he wanted to put the "Pal in principal." As we sat outside the office, Frosty told me to keep quiet. He'd do the talking because principals get special FBI training to interrogate kids. "They'll lie and trick you. Don't say anything."

I silently thought of our offenses. Frosty had two cherry bombs, a book of matches, and a *Playboy* centerfold stashed in his locker, but that stuff was small time. I was looking at federal charges. I still can't do a pull-up, so I faked being sick last Tuesday and missed the Presidential Physical Fitness Test. I haven't been arrested yet, but Frosty says I'm definitely on Nixon's Enemies List.

The secretary said to go in. Mr. DeWeiner sat in his black leather chair behind his desk, and Miss Miller was leaning against the window sill. We sat in two little chairs. Mr. DeWeiner put on his horn rimmed glasses. "Well now, what have we here? Herbert Foster and Peter Willets, Gordon Elementary's answer to Butch and Sundance. Lose that smile, Mr. Willets! It's not a compliment. You know why you two are here?"

"You tell me and we'll both know."

"Can it, Mr. Foster!" We were in real trouble because he called us *Mister*. "Mr. Willets, what can you tell me about graffiti?"

I stared at my shoes and remembered Frosty's warning. "Idunno."

“You don’t know?” Mr. DeWeiner leaned over his desk. “You’re the youngest student in Miss Miller’s reading group. She says you have precocious verbal skills. A straight-A student and all you can say is, ‘I don’t know?’”

“Idunno.”

He kept pressing. “I expect more from you, Mr. Willets. Your pal here is in the sixth grade and already been held back twice. He’s a real loser. Why else does he hang around a third grader like you? You think he’s your friend, or does he just want to get you in trouble, too?”

“Idunno.”

Frosty tried to help. “Graffiti? Is that the funky pasta they serve with mystery meat?” I looked up to see Frosty smile.

Mr. DeWeiner chopped his hand at his own chin. “I’ve had it up to here with you, Mr. Foster!”

Frosty shot back. “You got nothing on us. There’s no evidence. We don’t know anything about graffiti, so let us go, dead wiener.”

“What was that?”

“Mr. DeWeiner, sir.” Frosty stood up to leave.

Miss Miller was crying and dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “Principal DeWeiner, don’t blame the boys. It’s really my fault.” Miss Miller was taking the rap to keep us out of trouble.

Mr. DeWeiner took a deep breath. “If that’s true, Miss Miller, you’re fired. Pity, you were such a good teacher.”

“I understand.” Miss Miller choked back her tears. “I never should have taught my reading group haiku. The Japanese will be very angry. The ancient masters never intended their noble poetry to be used in malicious ways.”

“Wait a minute,” I blurted out. “Miss Miller, you’re innocent. *There once was a girl from Schenectady*. It’s not haiku. It’s a limerick. Please don’t cry. The Irish won’t care.”

Frosty collapsed in the chair like he’d been shot. Those FBI trainers sure know their stuff.

Mr. DeWeiner made us stay after school and clean the bathrooms with Mr. Stewart. We were supposed to sand off the graffiti and repaint the bathroom stall, but Mr. Stewart just laughed and said, “Shoot.” Except when Mr. Stewart says it, he sounds at first like he’s going to say the other, bad word. “Sheee-yoot.” Mr. Stewart sprayed the poem, and the ink ran.

“Can we go now?” I asked. Mr. Stewart said he had orders to keep us until 4:30. He told us to scrub the urinals. I told Mr. Stewart only I should stay since Miss Miller tricked me into confessing.

Mr. Stewart laughed. “Sheee-yoot! You were busted from the get-go. Frosty’s the only kid tall enough to reach that high, and you’re the only person in this school who can spell ‘Schenectady.’”

Frosty said we would have gotten away with it, but I ran my mouth. He said I was too loquacious and needed to be more taciturn. We’d been studying vocabulary words.

“Sheee-yoot! That ain’t his only problem.”

“Oh,” Frosty nodded. “You mean how he’s in love with Miss Miller?”

I am not in love with Miss Miller. She’s a teacher and she’s ugly and she’s stupid and I hate her. I told them so, too.

“Yeah, you hate her.” Frosty flushed his urinal. “You pretend to need help with a big word, so Miss Miller kneels by your desk, and you can smell her honey hair and stare into her blue eyes.”

“That shows how much you know. Miss Miller’s hair smells like apple blossoms, and her eyes are green, with little golden flecks.”

“Sheee-yoot! Frosty, you’re right. That boy is loquacious. Anyhow, she ain’t Miss Miller much longer.”

I don’t care if Miss Miller gets married. Let her ruin her life. She’s a teacher and she’s ugly and she’s stupid and I hate her. I asked Mr. Stewart again if he would please let Frosty go early because he’s our most valuable player. Frosty said I was important, too. I always get on base, but that’s just because Craig Rowley always hits me with a fastball when I’m up to bat. Frosty said since I’m the first little kid to play baseball with the big kids, of course they’re going to pick on me.

“Now I know how Jackie Robinson felt.”

“Yeah,” Mr. Stewart laughed. “You’re just exactly like Jackie Robinson.”

I told Mr. Stewart I knew I wasn’t exactly like Jackie Robinson. He usually played second base, and I play extra deep right field.

Frosty hissed at me, “Dumb ass! Mr. Stewart is black.”

I told Mr. Stewart I was sorry. I forgot. I didn't mean to sound prejudiced.

Mr. Stewart just said, "No sweat, slide me some skin." I slapped the palm of his hand. Mr. Stewart has huge hands, and his palms are the color of old parchment paper. He said he couldn't let either of us go until 4:30, or it would be his ass. After the bathroom, we cleaned the gym. While Frosty and I swept the floor, Mr. Stewart got out the basketballs. He beat Frosty in three games of HORSE, and he taught me to bounce --- I mean dribble --- a basketball with only one hand. I have to practice keeping my head up and not watching the ball. Mr. Stewart says I'm really good at setting a pick. I stand still and let a defender run into me. It's a God-given talent. People have been running into me all my life. Our team lost Game Two of the World Series, but we had a fun afternoon with Mr. Stewart.

So the critical Game Three was this afternoon, and we sat outside DeWeiner's office, again. This time he just opened his door and yelled, "You two report to Room 311!" I'd never been to the third floor. I was scared. I didn't believe the paddling machine rumors, and I assumed medieval torture devices were kept in the basement. Frosty said no matter what, I should stay taciturn.

We found a skinny door marked 311 beside the girls' bathroom. Frosty knocked, and a lady said to come in. The tiny room had soft lights and a dozen house plants. Posters of oceans and mountains covered the walls. The lady wore a white lab coat and big glasses and sat behind a small metal desk. Her brown hair was up in a bun with four pencils sticking out. She was old, older than Miss Miller, maybe thirty. "You boys must be Herbert and Peter, my three o'clock. Please, have a seat." We looked around, but there wasn't any furniture. "Just anywhere." Frosty shrugged his shoulders and sat on a big pillow. I sat on a red bean bag chair. Actually, I was more IN the bean bag chair. I sank down and couldn't get my butt under me. I quit struggling and stared at the white tile ceiling. "My name is Dr. Karen, and you can remember that because I'm always CARIN' about you." She laughed. We didn't. "Now boys, I'm a child psychologist and a school therapist. You know what that means?"

"You work for the government?" asked Frosty.

I twisted my torso and strained my neck to make eye contact with Frosty. “She means she’s not a psychiatrist. She didn’t go to medical school.”

Frosty pointed at Dr. Karen. “You can’t operate on our brains.”

Dr. Karen said she just wanted to talk. She babbled on about feelings and communicating and dialoging. She said we could tell her anything that was bothering us and she’d keep it secret, and her office was a safe place where we could talk about how we felt or what we did. She said we could trust her. Frosty says whenever grown-ups say, “You can trust me,” they’re lying.

“Well, I ...” Frosty began, then stopped. I couldn’t believe he would trust Dr. Karen. She encouraged Frosty. He stammered and grimaced. “I ... I farted.” We laughed. She didn’t.

Dr. Karen wrote in her little book and said, “Hmm, I see.”

“Hmm,” I said. “I smell.” We laughed again. She didn’t.

“Herbert, I think we’re done today. You may go.”

Frosty jumped up and ran. “Peter, I still have some concerns, so please stay.”

Like I had a choice. I was trapped in the bean bag chair like a turtle on his back. I propped up my head with my elbow to see Dr. Karen. She had a folder marked “Willetts: Concerns.” First, we talked about my reading test score, seventy-five. That was average for a sixth grader and excellent for a third grader, so it looked like I should stay in Miss Miller’s reading group. “You can’t argue with test results, Dr. Karen.” She was concerned that I missed every fourth question, and only every fourth question. She wondered if I could explain that coincidence. “Idunno.” She asked if maybe I missed every fourth question on purpose so I would stay at a sixth-grade level. “Idunno.” Dr. Karen said I should always do my best and not worry about testing out of Miss Miller’s reading group because Gordon Elementary didn’t have anywhere else to put me.

Her next concern was my letter to the Board of Education.

“It was signed ‘Anonymous Student.’ How do you know I wrote it?”

“How do you know it was signed ‘Anonymous Student’?”

“Idunno.”

Dr. Karen took my letter from the folder. Why did I accuse Miss Miller of malfeasance and dereliction of duty? It was all in the letter. Three Fridays ago, Miss Miller cut class short by fifteen minutes for a party. The other students ate cupcakes and met her fiancé. The girls looked at her engagement ring, and the other boys all talked to this guy who is going to be a hockey coach at the local college. (By the way, hockey is the last thing that college needs, and don’t think the Board of Regents isn’t going to hear about it.)

“What did you do during the party?”

“Miss Miller didn’t provide any healthy snacks, so I finished reading *A Separate Peace*.”

Dr. Karen wrote something. “Peter, let’s be honest. You don’t look like a boy who would turn down a cupcake. How did the party make you feel?”

“Idunno.”

“Peter, how do feel about Miss Miller?”

I told her. “Miss Miller is a teacher and she’s ugly and she’s stupid and I hate her.” Dr. Karen said she didn’t want to write in her notes that I hate Miss Miller, and asked if I could think of another word to better describe my feelings. “Abhor, despise, detest. Take your pick.” She wrote down something.

Then she wanted to talk about the creative writing project. Last week Miss Miller said she was going to publish an anthology of her reading group’s work. School judges were to pick the very best, and that author would receive a trophy and read his, or her, work at a school assembly next Friday. I asked Dr. Karen if she was a judge. She said she was, and then she asked if I could guess her concern.

“The trophy isn’t big enough for Brenda Swanson?”

“The winner is confidential.”

I told Dr. Karen to get real. Brenda always wins because she’s a girl and they always let girls win. I said I bet Brenda wrote another stupid girl poem about rainbows and unicorns.

“Be that as it may, it’s a lovely poem.”

I told Dr. Karen I could not attend Brenda's reading because of my dentist appointment, so please extend my congratulations and regrets.

"Peter, we had a tie."

"Really?" I struggled and sat up in the bean bag chair.

Dr. Karen said the judges decided two authors deserved to win, and they would each get a trophy. The second winner was a boy who had written a short story full of drama and adventure. It was still a big secret, but she would trust me. I said my mom could reschedule my appointment. "I'm very happy to hear that, Peter. I know Herbert will appreciate your support."

"Frosty won?"

"Yes. Herbert wrote 'Bad Day at Red Gulch,' a western." She took off her glasses and chewed a temple tip. "A sheriff stands alone against a gang of outlaws. It's full of male bravado, but the sheriff has a sad, heroic loneliness about him."

"Stands alone?" I slid down again. "No deputy?"

She put on her glasses. "I don't remember any deputy." Then she took out my story from the folder. She pulled a pencil from her bun and started marking on my manuscript. "What's this title?"

I explained it was a combination of *zombie* and *Zamboni*, "Zombioni." Where did I get the idea for a Zamboni machine possessed by the devil? I explained it wasn't *the devil*, it was just *a devil*. She wrote in her book and frowned. I told her I could make it a poltergeist before the story was published. She told me they weren't publishing my story because of other concerns. I told her all the spelling was right.

"It's not that." Dr. Karen skimmed through my story. "Here: *Zombioni roared and shook as the hockey coach was trapped beneath its powerful blades. The hockey coach's fiancée stared in horror. Zombioni chewed the mangled corpse into a million bloody pieces and spewed them around the rink.* See my concern, Peter?"

I thought I understood. Since I was dealing with the supernatural already, I shouldn't exaggerate. "I'll be specific. Say, eighty-two bloody pieces?" She said the whole story was a concern and asked me why I wrote it in the first place. "Idunno."

"Peter, do you want to know what I think?"

I lay back in the bean bag chair. “Sure. You’re the doctor, sort of.”

She yammered on until our time was up, finally. I rocked side-to-side and rolled onto the floor. She said next week we’d dialogue more about feelings. So what? I missed the game.

The World Series ended in a tie, one game each. Craig Rowley crowded the plate, so Frosty threw him some chin music, high and tight. Craig charged the mound, and it turned into a bench-clearing brawl. I missed the fight. Mr. Rowley and some other grown-ups said we can’t play World Series anymore. Baseball season is over.

Best friends don’t keep secrets. I told Frosty his story won. He told me that there was a deputy in his story who got wounded. The deputy was taciturn and didn’t even cry. I told him “Zombioni” was too macabre for publication. Frosty said I should submit my poem, but “Hockey Coach’s Elegy” is a work in progress. I can’t find a good rhyme for “disemboweled.”



Henry McCarthy
Gaia

Mason Crawford

Birth Name

it is probably beautiful
to those who have not had it hurled at them
like an insult.
names
are uniquely, stupidly human,
as love is;
one limiting,
the other
freeing.
insufferably pretentious
or deadly
honest?

Sandy Grymes
Days of Spring

I woke to
the crisp mist of morning,
frostbitten breath reminded me,
I loathe the cold.

In this weather
everything is frigid,
shattered shards of spring
still visible in the painted glass
of the rose petals.

Fallen leaves
kindle the flame,
pine bark cascades
the horizon, bright then
fades like the long
days of summer.

If I could spark
a fire, warm the chill
of unyielding depression,
light the torches
of my winter tomb,
like the rose, I could
thrive in the birth
of spring, ignorant
to the life that dies
a little every day.



Patrick Tyner
Sunflower