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FOREWORD

Good literature, like good visual art, is nearly impossible to define. In both cases, we wonder how it speaks to us. We wonder what keeps us coming back time and time again. Believe it or not, the answer is not all that complicated. People are hesitant to show their emotions, to actually acknowledge how they feel. They shut themselves off, close their eyes, and pretend that everything is fine. They look at anything but what's in front of them. Literature destroys that barrier. Like visual art, it taps into our humanity, forces us to open our eyes and actually see things for what they really are. Put simply, art does not flinch.

Instead, it *reaches out with tiny savage hands* and grips our hearts, refusing to let go until we take in all it has to offer. The pieces included in the 89th volume of *Ivy Leaves* have not been selected for pretty language (although we have some) or for big-sounding proclamations (although we make some pretty big claims). Each piece has been selected for its ability to stare us in the eye and not blink. Literature, like visual art, recognizes we are all on a *train bound for some final stop*, exposes the dark side of faith, and illuminates the subtle abrasions that can generate doubt when what we want is hope. It confronts us with truth, shows us how difficult it can be to watch loved ones *soar like a plane* knowing they will inevitably crash.

Good literature asks hard questions. What would you be willing to do to save a life? What would you be willing to do to escape your past, to not let it determine your fate? What would you be willing to do to remain utterly content *twiddling fishhooks between your fingers* under the moon's watchful gaze? The answers may *burn all the way down*, but it is the work of literature, the work of art, to allow us to see things we've never seen before, to feel things we've never felt, and to experience things we've never even dreamed possible.

We are proud to present the 89th volume of *Ivy Leaves*; we are proud of good work that assaults the senses with simple truths. When confronted with them, remember not to blink. Not to balk. Not to flinch.



GIVE ME A RIVER

Genevieve Hamilton

Give me a river that I can plunge my teeth into,
a river that hurls me to my knees.
I want a river bristling with green—
a river bitter with mud.
Throw me into a river to brace against;
sink me in a river to curse.
Give me a river to baptize my days spent in pews;
let it sop up the crumbs of my prayers.
Make it roar through a rusted window in my chest,
cracking until my seams burst.
Just give me a river, or better still,
offer me up for its taking.



SIMPLE TRUTH

JT Warnock

you should have been there...

we bought two pints
and chicken pot pie
at Solas
on the corner of Exeter
and Boylston in Boston.

we talked, and we saw
simple truth in risen bread—
the invention of air was
in between filling and crust.

what happened then happens to us
if we look enough—not too much.



BETTER THAN NOTHING

J.E. Tankersley

I've been clinging to the shelves
in your apartment and
watching you cook dinner
from the blades of the ceiling fan.
Sometimes you sweep me
from the floor or wipe me
with a rag from the television screen.
I am with you in the car
as you sip your morning coffee
and at night when the tendrils
of your hair stitch themselves
into the fabrics. You kick me up
browsing romance at the video store
and again when you rifle through
the attic for an old photo album.
I am here and I am there—
minimized, odorless, silent.
But sometimes, even still,
while you are absent or
lying motionless, I clutch the fibers
of your laundry and breathe
the scent of your perfume.



ONE OF THOSE FISHING STORIES

Christopher Mauldin

She sat on a dock, twiddling a hook between
her fingertips,
a silhouette on a backdrop of black,
sketched abstractly by the lustered pinpricks
of a fading daytime.

She grasped the fishing pole that sat on her lap,
let go of the hook and watched,
watched,
watched as it flew up,

knocking against the star tips and star bits,
bouncing and bumping,
then catching and snagging,
tugging against them, and dropping,
as the stars swam away.



THE GOLDEN TICKET

J.E. Tankersley

Do you suppose that, on the dusty factory floor, when the plastic is molded into smoky black cylinders and caps, and the malleable tin or steel is pulled and stretched into springs, and the bubbling ink is pumped into opaque tubes, that each of these pieces was somehow predestined to become the Pilot G2 pen that would eventually fall into the hands of a *New York Times Best Seller*?

Perhaps, and I'd like this to be true, there's just such a pen right now—at this particular moment—sitting on a Walgreens, or Rite Aid, or K-Mart shelf, just waiting to be purchased by some such author so that its purpose can be fulfilled. It could be that the executives, or factory floor managers, or Magical Pen-Making Wizards are aware of this, sprinkling in whatever secret ingredient it is into the thick, boiling vats of ink, like Willy Wonka hiding the golden tickets in a few lucky bars of chocolate, transforming what would have been nothing other than a standard ballpoint pen into an instrument for writing the new American classic.

What if we, as writers, have to be so lucky as to purchase that special pen to write that golden first dialogue, that incomparable idea or outline? What if it's a lottery? What if, when we unbox that brand new G2, we unknowingly attain whatever it is that can bring us that much needed recognition—true achievement. Perchance that's how some, who seem so remarkably undeserving of their literary success make it big, sell millions, have movies made of their stories—while others, the ones who truly wrote something of revelation, beautiful and pristine like a brand new species taking its first breath, go completely without notice, with few, if any, readers, criticized as being nothing out of the ordinary.



LIKE PEOPLE CROSSING A STREET

Jordan Sears

We had been dating for two years, and even if it wasn't completely serious, we were completely involved. I followed Nora Vardon down to Sacramento where she continued her studies in botany, where even though it got cold, it still felt warm. I think she belonged in the heat of the day that I honestly wasn't cut out for. And even when she told me about her brother George losing a grip on reality, she still gained a foothold for a career, while all I had was being legally able to drink, which was something she knew of my family and something that I stayed away from most of time. Not that I was scared that I would end up like my uncles who fed themselves from the wet dumpsters behind B-Grade Seattle restaurants, but my parents made our home like a box that I was never allowed to open, and even if we never could hold a conversation because of that, I still thank them for it.

My relationship with Nora consisted of searching for new places to sleep with her and talking about what I thought about, which always ended with us trying to find out where my life needed to go. And she would pronounce my name, Orlando, with a heavy, unintelligible Spanish accent, and each time she said it, her smile turned up like the curve of a cat's back before the pounce, which I thought was, for a lack of a gentler word, sexy. And she continued pushing me to be something more, but not too much, because she knew that I would never get in her way. Her brother, George, had hit a permanent streak of involuntary insanities, and maybe Nora thought that she could be that way one day or maybe she wanted me to think that so that I wouldn't get too close.

Her work kept her busy most of the time, when she came home from moving soil through a greenhouse, the shower was the first thing she talked to; I always pretended that she was telling the shower her secrets as she rubbed the dirt from between her fingers, letting it slip away and slide down the drain. When she was working, I thought about my lack of drive or motivation. I had taken up tennis, and while that was enough for me, I played only strangers who were either prep school boys whose fathers pushed them or people like me, who looked to make an impact in some way, but ended up on the tennis court instead. But even if tennis wasn't the best option, I continued sweating and working part time jobs, not to appease Nora, but to show that even if I wasn't completely useful, I wasn't completely useless. Nora was what I had, her wavy brown hair that tucked behind her ears, her dark, but soft eyes that matched the ground she worked with, and the way her body curved and didn't push in under her ribs. And I always told her she was a rose, but that was the only flower I knew by name.

Nora had never met my parents, but I thought since I had met hers within the past year, that it might be time to visit mine. They lived on the outskirts of Seattle, in a decent home that didn't speak well or badly of them. My dad, followed the footsteps of his dad, and worked as a simple man's jeweler—nothing fake, but nothing glittered with diamonds either. My mother stayed at home, and did the normal things that a woman does at home—clean and rearrange the china that she got from her mother; I never once ate on those plates, but I can still see the design of blue, almost ink-like flowers

patterned along the edges of what seemed like ordinary white plates, but women will always take care of their work and hold onto what they have—at least in my life.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met a Nora before.” My mother was always sweet, even as she set the table. “Sounds lovely.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Smith,” Nora replied. “But I’ve always been curious as to how you came up with the name Or-land-do. He said that your family has a German background.” Nora told me beforehand that she had to ask. She also told she was going to drag my name out when she asked.

My mom smiled as if we weren’t looking. “Well, you see, Nora. When Mr. Smith and I got married, we took our honeymoon in Orlando.” She smiled as if she were proud of her embarrassment, or mine, “It made sense to us. Plus, it sounds exciting with such a normal last name. But don’t tell anyone.” Nora promised, but I knew how long that would last amongst her friends.

“Mother.” My tone felt sharper than I intended, but I wanted her to stop.

“Oh Orlando, it’s harmless. You should be glad to have such an interesting name. Someday you’ll get noticed for it. Someday you’ll apply for a job, and your name will stick out. They’ll say, ‘Orlando Smith, who could this be?’ You never know.”

My dad always worked late, which is why we ate dinner when the east coast was heading to bed. He was never one for conversation because if we weren’t talking about all his family’s problems or any problems, we weren’t talking—so we never spoke much. I mean, he did his job as a father to teach me the basics, to challenge myself, to watch out for the things that would bring me down like alcohol, greed, and whatever other things had destroyed his brothers, but I only took a hold of what I could accomplish now, which was watching out for everything. And I could never grow a beard like his, which he kept all year round to warm his face from the constant cold and drizzle.

He did talk to Nora that night though, but he didn’t say much, merely asked what she studied and what she wanted to do.

When we went to bed that night, my parents put us in my old room with a mattress on the floor for me, but of course Nora and I fit into my old twin bed. She laughed at my blank white walls and collection of green toy soldiers next to my stuffed animals, which to be fair, was more of a zoo than a tea party in my mind. My parents had a guest room, but always left it open in case one of my uncles needed a warm bed. My mom rarely washed the sheets though because the smell of bourbon stained them throughout—made them something that I could taste.

“Did you ever meet your uncles?” Nora watched the shadow that the fan cast against the ceiling.

“A few times, but my parents only let them stay when I was going to stay at a friend’s house.” I smiled. “So rarely at all.” She smiled back. “I remember their smell though. It was harsh, and smelled like the cough syrup that my mom would force down my throat every time I played too long in the rain.”

She rolled onto her side facing me and the window, and ran her fingers across my chest like people crossing a street. “Did they ever say anything to you?” She paused knowing that she needed to ask it in another way too. “You know, did they ever scare you?” Her fingers kept walking back and forth.

I took the silence in for a moment; I wasn’t thinking much because I already knew what I wanted to say, but it was one of those moments where you get to tell someone something that means more than what you usually have to say—something they want to hear. Something that makes you feel human in a world full of animals.

“I remember an uncle stumbling in one night right after dinner. Johnny, Uncle Johnny. I was only ten. I remember him towering over me while he mumbled at my parents. And for some reason, my parents left me alone with him in the kitchen for a few minutes. He just kept looking at me.”

“Well that’s a bit creepy.”

“Yeah, I know. But after a whole minute of him just looking at me, he just said something really strange to me. He said--” I paused as the heat, which my parents always kept on, creaked and died down. “He said, ‘Even though it makes your throat feel warm like a chimney after a fire, it only makes you realize how much the rest of you shivers.’”

“That’s a weird thing to say to a kid.”

I rolled my head over towards her. “It stuck with me.”

We spent the rest of the weekend visiting coffee shops, stores, and odd places where I half-expected to see Uncle Johnny hunkered down in a box telling me to make sure that I could always feel my fingertips. But he was never there, and Nora never looked down the alleyways.

During our last lunch in Seattle, my parents made small talk. They found a new used car for my dad. My mother considered buying new china to carry on in the family. But none of us seemed curious enough to find out if we had problems, but it’s probably because none of us did. And so Nora and I left. I drove her car back to Sacramento. She was asleep during most of the drive, her face pushed up against her forearm, but she was still pretty. The brights on her car kept me awake, and I thought about where we were going, and what my uncle had said. It had been a long time since I thought about what he said, and how even if he was drunk, and even if I wasn’t completely sure what he actually said, I knew it meant something.

She finished school, and I got better at tennis, and looked into pursuing something exciting like zoology, building cars or animation—all things that required more education than I had. But before I pursued any of those things, I lived my life with Nora as she talked about moving farther south to be able to get a job as a botanist. I pushed her to stay so we stayed, and she was a florist, and I was a sales associate at a local dealership. I knew that it would only be a matter of time before she would find a way south, and I would have to make a choice to stay or go; she always found a way to get done what she wanted to get done.

Eventually, she made her way to where it was warmer, and I stayed north of Sacramento, where sometimes it was warm, but it was mostly cold. I never saw her again after she left, and sure, it hurt at first, but I think she always knew that I would never become anything or anyone if she were around. So I started studying animals, and the way they behaved out in the wild—the way they adapted to blizzards and forest fires, and how this determined what species would pass away and which ones would survive. I took classes and read books, hoping to eventually become a researcher at a school nearby. And between tennis and living, I became confident in my knowledge on the subject. And I never touched alcohol, even on the nights when I thought about my uncle, and thought about Nora watching the streetlights outside my window interact with my ceiling. She was beautiful, but so was that moment, and it was something I was glad to have.

After two years of studying, I moved to the coast to look out for the falcons and other birds that lived along the cliffs. And it was a cold time of the year, and the wind was howling, and I could feel it pushing against my hat and into my ears. I had forgotten

my thicker gloves, and my binoculars had nearly frozen to the thin pair I was wearing. After eight hours of watching birds, I took my gloves off and saw the red fading away as my pale blue hands shook like they were yelling at me. I knew then what it was like to be numb, and to lose control of my hands as my body adapted to try and warm my heart. And as the blood was rushing from my limbs, the unnecessary parts, I realized that maybe in order to truly understand what it felt like to be warm—we have to live in a moment where we are cold. And maybe my uncle wanted to tell me that, maybe he wanted to warn me that sometimes people try too hard and become frozen, and in his case, lost. But I knew that when I got back in my car, I would be warm again, and my fingertips would come back to life, and my life would go on—which it did. But sometimes, I crave the feeling of losing touch with my hands and my feet, and even though I never do—there will always be a longing to touch something and never feel it.



A TUNE UNFAMILIAR

Christian Bare

A pressure on his chest, tentatively working its way up, brought Ozzie's slumber to an abrupt end. He peeled his eyelids open, the first rays of sunlight spilling through cracks in the blinds. Ozzie, unwilling to part from sleep's warm embrace, made to roll over. Tiny pinpricks penetrated the thin fabric of his t-shirt, spiraling him into a dimension somewhere between curious and irate. A pair of piercing blue eyes met his gaze.

"Jäger, really?" The morning grogginess subsided, and the feline's form came into full view. He mewed hopefully. "Go . . . away."

The cat reached out a furry white paw and planted it on Ozzie's mouth, a surefire sign that meant, "Shut up and feed me." Ozzie pushed himself up off the mattress, flung his sheets back, and pressed his bare feet against the icy floor. The warmth fled his body, leaving him to brave the drafty house on his own. Jäger leapt off the bed, landing silently beside Ozzie's feet. He wove in and out of Ozzie's legs again and again causing him to stop, start once more, stumble, and repeat the process, making the quick trip to the bathroom twenty times longer than it had to be.

Ozzie got to the sink and turned on the hot water before bending over to grab Jäger's bowl and a can of cat food, his spine giving a rapid *pop-pop-pop* as it acclimated to vertical life once more. Jäger had to be the pickiest cat known to man. Most creatures would be happy enough living in a dry house, getting free meals everyday. But no, he balked at the sight of food straight out of the can. Ozzie sat the bowl in the sink, letting the hot water warm the dish before grabbing an old spoon off the sink and scraping half the can into the bowl. He then proceeded to prepare a Fancy Feast pâté, stirring the hot water and cat food together. Ozzie plopped it down on the floor, and Jäger pounced on it, lapping up the lovely meat paste.

Ozzie, after a few pitiful swipes at wayward strands of hair sprouting from his head, meandered down the hallway and through the den. His father still sat in the recliner, stubble in serious need of attention, mouth open wide and snoring loud enough to rattle what few pictures decorated the room. The TV was blaring, an old episode of *Gunsmoke* coming on the Western Channel. James Arness looked out at Ozzie solemnly. He wondered if the life of a fictional US Marshal was all that it seemed to be. Everything looked very black and white after all. Ozzie cut the TV off. His father stirred momentarily, going through a brief period of snorting and hacking, before drifting away once more. Ozzie stifled a yawn of his own and moseyed on into the kitchen.

On the table sat a heap of pink pieces of paper alongside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. He paid little attention to the smoldering ruins of the battle the night before just as he had paid little attention to the battle itself. Same story, different day—his mother's shrill voice piercing what passed for peace, his father's low rumbling setting up barricades. It was something about bills stacking up and his father spending all his time either on business or tinkering with engine parts in the shop nearby. Then it was an attack on her garden, mocking her affection for mere plants, saying if she gave him a fraction of the attention she gave her garden that he might be able to put off some business every now and then. Always the same. Ozzie put on a pot of coffee more for

the smell than the taste. The wafting smell of fresh brew brought back memories of childhood, a time when life was better. He could see his mother in the kitchen humming and cutting up veggies from the garden outside as his father fried up bacon and sausage, taking a minute every now and then to peruse the Sports section for anything about football and NASCAR. Football and NASCAR, pignose and race cars, going fast and hitting hard. Always the same.

He walked to the front door to grab the paper for his old man. Maybe a warm cup of coffee and box scores could get him in a relatively good mood. Ozzie opened the front door, the kitty door swaying back and forth lazily, and took a moment to welcome the world and its splendor. He squinted in the sunlight, cursed the birds for chirping too loudly, and leaped back suddenly as revulsion took hold of him. Next to the newspaper, barely an inch away from his foot, was the back half of a rat, entrails threatening to spill out at the slightest nudge. The head and upper body were both gone of course, apparently proving themselves to be more delicious and nutritious than the lower half.

“Jäger, come on! Why? Why do you do this to me? For once, could you please *not* give a rat’s ass?”

It happened almost every morning. Ozzie would walk outside, and somewhere on the porch there would be half of a rat or some other rodent. Mole, squirrel, chipmunk, it didn’t matter. Even a yard bird would show up every now and then, feathers scattered about. But birds were a rarity, something out of the ordinary, a change-up to parental spats and rat guts. He looked around, dust devils occasionally gaining momentum before faltering and dying. Even the wind was too lazy to care.

“Well, at least that thing’s good for something.”

Ozzie jumped at the gravelly voice behind him. He turned to see his father towering over him. The smell of coffee must be powerful enough to rouse even the most stubborn of beasts. That or the rather undignified outburst at seven in the morning directed at a disemboweled rodent and an absentee cat.

“Should have got a dog. Every boy needs a dog,” His dad snorted. “Man’s best friend.” The old man harrumphed and a foul substance shot out of his mouth into a bush off the edge of the porch.

“Really, Dad?” Between all the snorting and grief about the dog that should have been, the circle of life seemed awfully small.

“Cats are worthless. They eat, sleep all day, and pull stunts like this.” He nodded in the direction of Jäger’s latest conquest.

“He found me! What was I supposed to do, leave him on the road? Who knows what would have happened to him. But he came to me. You can’t stand there and pretend like there’s not something else at work here.”

“Oh, don’t feed me that. There’s no way that furball sniffed you out intentionally.” He leaned over and scooped up the paper. “You make any coffee?” Ozzie nodded, and his father ambled off into the kitchen.

Ozzie followed though he had no will to fight. His father was sipping from a cup when Ozzie walked in, the newspaper spread out across the table. The man’s hair was thinning, but what little he had left was pitch black, not a grey hair in sight. His broad shoulders were hunched, his brow furrowed in deep concentration; he would look up only if Ozzie got too close. Ozzie poured himself some coffee and chose a seat across the table. He stared down into the mug, a dark and bitter place. Periodically he felt eyes watching him, observing him. He took a drink and turned his gaze out the window. The scorching liquid filled his mouth, a horrible biting flavor that left his eyes watering, his face flushed.

The truth was that he hated coffee. Straight black made him cringe, but adding creamer and sugar only left him with a slightly sweeter disappointment. There was no

covering up a bad taste, no way to disguise what lurked inside. Outside he saw a tree house perched in a sturdy oak, its massive gnarled branches proving to be a perfect foundation. The last time he'd even been in it, jeez, had to be ten years ago at least. Third grade, back when he still played pretend. He'd snuck into the den, his mother asleep in the bedroom and his father unconscious in the recliner. Arnold Schwarzenegger had been on the television, sunglasses hiding his eyes and a leather jacket straining against his massive torso. In his hands he gripped a sawed-off shotgun, blasting away cops in pursuit of Sarah Connor. After that night, Ozzie would climb into his tree house and imagine he was a robot sent back in time to consume the last Twinkie. His father had climbed up one day not long after in search of him, and he saw Ozzie walking with stiff arms and a borrowed pair of sunglasses muttering, "I'll be back" in his best Arnold accent.

"What the — what are you doing up here?" he'd asked, his eyes grey and hard.

"I'm a robot!" Ozzie had said proudly.

His father eyed him for a long time, looking him up and down. Scrutiny meant nothing to Ozzie at the time. Neither did shame. Still, he couldn't help but shift uncomfortably under his father's gaze. He motioned for Ozzie to follow him down, and he did so with a heavy heart. What had he done wrong? He hadn't stolen anything, broken anything. He'd just been in his tree house minding his own business. Maybe his dad just didn't like movies without Clint Eastwood or John Wayne.

"So, you like being a robot, huh?" his father asked once they found themselves back on solid ground.

Ozzie nodded uncertainly.

"Well, forget about that. I'm gonna turn you into a real gear head just like your old man. How does that sound?"

Before long, they were walking towards the shop, Dixon Automotive Repair, the family's main source of income. Until then, Ozzie had never been allowed inside. His mother had forbidden it, saying it was too dangerous for a boy his age. Of course his father had protested, claiming his own father had practically baptized him in grease and grime straight out of the womb. But that was back when his parents had been able to compromise.

Ozzie watched as his dad squatted and searched for a handhold or two underneath the massive door. Finding them, he let out a fearsome roar for dramatic effect and pulled the heavy garage door up. Tentatively Ozzie followed in his father's footsteps, caught in a delicate position: one of incredulity as well as foreboding, the belief that he still shouldn't be in there. His father placed a large hand on his frail shoulder and guided him forward. The smells of motor oil and gasoline burned his nose, but it was an intoxicating aroma. A car was on blocks, its tires propped up against the wall not far away. The hood was up, and before he could fully digest his new surroundings Ozzie felt the ground fall away beneath him. His father hoisted him up in the air and carried him closer to the car.

"You don't need to worry about robots. This right here, this is real life. This is what really matters, Ozzie."

That was when his tutorial began. He became an apprentice of sorts, learning the tools of the trade. His father held him in one arm while he pointed at certain parts in the engine, naming them off one by one for Ozzie. From that day forward he came in to learn and to help despite his mother's continued objections. As the years passed and his proficiency increased, he took on more and more responsibility. Most of his high school years had been spent in that shop. Like a surgeon, he spent countless hours tinkering with all the complex parts of an engine. His clothes were covered in grease, his arms bearing the occasional scrape, bruise, or burn.

This morning would be the same. He looked around to see his mother breezing into the kitchen. “Morning, Ozzie,” she said, kissing him on the cheek and snagging his cup of coffee.

She took a sip, made a face, and went straight for the sugar—passing by her husband without a word. Of course he didn’t even seem to notice. Face buried in the paper, he grumbled about the Panthers losing to the 49ers. His mother, clad in overalls, had a straw hat perched on her head. A pair of gloves dangled from one of the pockets. She added spoonful after spoonful of sugar to the coffee, tasting after each one until she finally achieved the desired balance. Smiling at Ozzie, she turned and walked out the back door. Jäger came trotting through, head turned up and nose in the air. His father was right about one thing. Cats did seem to carry themselves with a bit more arrogance than most creatures. Jäger gave chase to Ozzie’s mother, following her out into the backyard. Ozzie stood up as his father finally tore his eyes from the newspaper. There were bags underneath them, and something about his face was off. The old man was still healthy as a horse, strong as an ox, and stubborn as a mule, but he looked exhausted, positively weary.

“We’ve got a lot to do today, Ozzie,” he said in a low, even voice.

“Yeah? I was thinking about taking a personal day.”

His father did not smile. “I need you to build me some shelves in the shop. I got the wood. Just needs your touch.”

“Shelves? What’s wrong with the old ones? You’re the carpenter here anyway.”

“That’s the problem. Old ones are old. They need replacing every now and then. Same as parts in an engine. Those shelves are the same ones that have been in there since I bought the place years ago.”

Then his father mentioned something about some business he had to take care of, business that would apparently keep him away all day. The lumber was in the garage, and he expected the shelves to be built and the shop in shipshape upon his eventual return. With that he returned to the newspaper, and Ozzie knew that was as good as any formal dismissal. This business, though. His father had never been stupid enough to come back with lipstick on his face or shirt, but there was something happening out there. He might have been getting on in years, but Harold Dixon could be quite the charmer if he so desired. Most women nearby responded favorably to him anyway, just enough to make Ozzie uncomfortable whenever they took a trip into town together. He also gave discounts to any woman who dropped off a car for repair. Did it seem suspicious? Of course. Did Ozzie know for sure? Did his mother know for sure? No, not for sure. But at the same time, yes.

Western cedar, that was the timber his father had purchased. It was the same wood the tree house had been built out of. There was something special about the wood. There was a chemical in it that kept the wood from rotting. Even a century after being cut, Western cedar still holds up to the elements. Trees that don’t develop this chemical grow a hollow trunk and eventually die. Rosy wood with a magnificent fragrance—Ozzie couldn’t help but appreciate his father’s choice. Even the old man got something right every now and then.

In the backyard up against the side of the house that got the most direct sunlight, Carol Dixon had planted a garden after Ozzie’s first birthday. She tended to it regularly enough, but her attention turned to near obsession several years later. There were some flowers, a couple of ferns and rose bushes, but more important to her were all the vegetables. Carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, and every other planting season soy beans. They’re good for the soil after all, or so she had told Ozzie on a number of occasions.

Her hat protected the back of her neck from the sun as she sat perched on her knees weeding the garden. Ozzie’s tall, lean frame cast a long shadow. She turned around, holding up a gloved hand caked in dirt and muck to shield her eyes against the sun.

“Hey, honey,” she said, almost out of breath.

“Hard work?” he asked.

“Keeping all these plants alive? You better believe it is.” She gestured to a large pile of weeds to her left, their roots still clinging desperately to clumps of earth. “It’s like being on guard duty. You have to watch out or else these guys will strangle the life out of my poor precious veggies.”

Jäger came slinking out from behind a tomato plant, a mole’s lifeless form dangling from his mouth. “I see you have some help,” Ozzie said.

“And am I ever glad to have it.” She reached out and scratched Jäger behind the ear. Ozzie heard his muffled purring. “This is what really matters.”

She went back to the plants, back to the dirt. She moved in a mechanical fashion, ripping out weeds with the left hand, passing them to her right hand, and depositing them off to the side. She would inspect a rose bush, moving from top to bottom inspecting each bud, before moving on to the next one. Left to right. Left to right. Always the same.

“Why do you do this?” he asked.

“Hmm?” She never looked away, only moved on to a prized tomato plant tantalizingly close to ripening.

He wanted her to look at him, to stop for one second and think about what she was doing. This was stupid. Plants live and die on their own all the time. Why should she toil over them? What was the point? There wasn’t one. There was no rational explanation.

“Why is this what really matters? Every day you do the same thing. Why?”

She sat back for a second and glanced up at him, studying him intently as if noticing him for the first time. “Well now,” she said, drawing it out. “I suppose because it’s something to keep my hands busy.”

She nodded, satisfied with her answer, and picked up a spade nearby. Something swelled inside Ozzie, a white-hot ball of anger that sat scorching his gullet. He glared at her as she kept playing in the muck.

“It keeps your hands busy,” he said, voice quavering. “Really? That’s why you come out here all the time? To keep your hands busy?”

She had started humming a tune unfamiliar to him, digging and mucking, left to right, left to right. Always the same. The silence hung between them in the still humid air. He shook his head incredulously. This was how she contented herself. She was actually happy with this. She had chosen this life for herself, one of dirt, water, and photosynthesis. A life of distraction, something to keep her hands busy until she returned to the earth she worked daily. Rats, plants, grease, and gears—how could that ever be enough?

“Mom!”

“What, Ozzie?” she asked, finally facing him. She didn’t look like his mother anymore. The wrinkles around her eyes were more pronounced, her face sagged. “Your father has his shop.” Lois Dixon shrugged and turned her back on him. “And I have my beautiful garden.”

Ozzie heard the screen door bang shut. He glanced over his shoulder. Harold Dixon was strutting out of the house. Their eyes met. Harold held Ozzie’s gaze, made a hammering motion with one hand before pointing at the watch on his wrist. His hair was slicked to the side, shirt tucked in, shoes shining. All business. His mother was still wrist deep in the garden.



HARLAN HAS BEEN LEFT FOR DEAD

Jenna Branham

Harlan County, Kentucky has always been my favorite place in the entire world. For me, it is a literal take on “over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go.” Tucked behind the mist and fog, my grandparents’ home looks as if someone has stolen the most beautiful painting from God’s art gallery and purposefully hung it on display right there. The mountains thrust their way towards the heavens. The trees are fat with leaves and their branches remain stretched open, offering salutations. The wild flowers that flourish on the mountain’s side dance in the wind and whisper songs of those who are now under them. The creek runs cold, and its water provides a mystical life for the mountain. The night is illuminated with lightening bugs, making a path to escape from modernity. As a child, I truly believed that I was surrounded by an enchanted forest. That child no longer exists, and the once softly whispered stories of those mountains are now timeworn cries. The Harlan County I saw in my recent visit was lifeless and dull. Like a mother dog sucked dry, bearing nothing but ribs, this place is thirsty for recovery. A once thriving place, Harlan has been left for dead, now that the coal industry has abandoned it.

Though I told people I was making the trip to conduct research for a school project, I knew my main objective was to spend time with my grandparents. More specifically, I was in need of some banter with my grandfather. I love my grandmother unconditionally, and every second with her is time well spent, but the relationship I have with my grandfather is one of kindred spirits. Before my arrival, I told my grandparents that I wanted to do research for my project. Naturally, my grandpa was excited and developed an extensive itinerary for my visit. About four hours into our drive there, my mom and I switched places so I could sleep. Before I fell asleep, I called my grandparents to let them know where we were.

“Hello there, my darlin’.” I could hear the excitement in my grandpa’s voice.

“Hey, Pa, we just made it to Tennessee. I guess we will see y’all in a little while. What are you and Nanny doing?”

“We’re just sittin’ here watchin’ the news. Nan’s got a pulled pork dinner on the stove watin’ for yinz when ya get here. We already had us a bite of it, and it was de-licious.” He chuckled. His chuckle sounds more like a grunt.

“You mean you didn’t wait on me? Now, that is just rude.” I said that knowing I could get a rise out of him.

“Well, if I was always waiting on you and your momma to slow-poke-it up them mountains, I would starve.”

“I guess you can be forgiven. I’ll see you when we get there.”

He grunted and said, “After a while, crocodile.”

“See you later, alligator.” Sometimes it feels juvenile to say that at the age of 21, but it is a conditioned response. I cannot remember a time when we did not say it to each other.

When I first arrived at my grandparents’ house, I noticed the fat trees. Though they were still offering a warm welcome, they had a different story to tell me this time. This story would be filled with stories of loss and mourning. We got to their house around

nine that night, and in the Caldwell household, you are in bed at ten. After exchanging hugs and comments about how grown up I was, we all went to bed.

At the crack of dawn, when the sun was still wiping the sleep from her eyes, Pa barged into my room.

“Wake up, Queen of Sheba. Let’s go to town.” My grandpa’s deep raspy voice broke the silence of my dreams.

“What time is it?” I gasped.

It was 7 A.M., and judging by the lingering smell of coffee on his beard, he had been up for a few hours. I got dressed quickly and walked into the kitchen. He had warmed me up a BBQ sandwich and made me a cup of coffee. Their coffee maker is older than Methuselah. Taking 30 minutes to percolate, the coffee it makes is so strong it will make hair grow on your chest, according to my grandpa. I took a sip of the coffee and could feel it staining my teeth. Before I could take a bite of my sandwich, Pa told me to bring it to-go and get a move on.

The ride across Pine Mountain, the only way in and out of Bledsoe, was filled with songs by Willy Nelson and Merle Haggard. We did not say much to one another. I was too tired, and he was too busy humming. When we arrived in town, my jaw dropped at the sight in front of me. I saw buildings gutted, people with no shoes walking, tattered signs reading, “Coal keeps the lights on,” plastered on every building, makeshift cars, and much more. It truly looked like an episode of one of those popular apocalyptic shows that are so frequently recreated. Feeling empty and wrecked, I watched a child push an empty stroller along the sidewalk. This must have been an episode my grandpa had seen before, because he did not seem bothered by it.

“Ring of Fire” came on the radio, and without missing a beat, my grandpa mumbled every word. *Love is a burning thing, and it makes a fiery ring. Bound by wild desire, I fell into a ring of fire.* Picking at the stuffing bulging from the seats of my grandpa’s 77 Bronco, I could feel my face tighten and that tingling feeling you get in the bridge of your nose, when you know you are about to cry.

“Pa, what happened here?” I held back my tears.

“When the coal stopped, so did the people.” Pa gave me a glance and continued to hum “Ring of Fire” by Johnny Cash.

I knew that coal mining occupied the time of most men from Harlan, but I recently discovered it is much more than that. For Harlan, coal mining is a way of life. It was life. It was the hand from which the county fed. In eastern Kentucky alone, 4,000 miners have lost their jobs in the last 2 years (Estep). With the development of new technologies, manual labor is unnecessary (Mining Employment and Production Trends). Though the companies are being hit, it is the people that are suffering the most. Providing over 50,000 jobs in Kentucky in 1979, coal mining currently makes up only 1% of nonagricultural employment. Working for the coal mining companies since he was 16, my grandpa could understand the struggle. Though working the mines was tough, my grandpa described the Harlan he lived in as a much different place.

“It wasn’t always like this. When I was a young man, a few years before I started courting your Nanny, my buddies and I would drive up and down Main Street.” He got a glazed look over his eye. It looked like he was seeing it as it used to be instead of the wasteland it is now. “Cars would be bumper to bumper. Nothing like it is today.” He paused for a moment and seemed to be collecting his thoughts. “Now everyone is either looking for a hand out, on drugs, or worn out from working too hard.” I tried to wrap my head around how simple he made it sound, but we both knew it was much more complex than that. “Right there used to be the Belk and right there, at the end of the block, that is the restaurant where I met your Nanny.”

I was curious how different my grandpa’s experience was compared to my mother’s experience with Harlan. Later that evening, I asked her what it was like growing up

in Harlan County. She said, "Well, it was a big deal to get to go into Harlan. When they told us we were going to Harlan that meant we were going to town. Since we had to go across the mountain, we usually knew a few days before we were going. Dianne [my mother's sister] and I would walk up and down the mountain looking for pop bottles to sell. Each bottle was worth ten cents, and we always tried to get a dollar. I remember looking outside of the car windows and seeing women smoking tobacco out of corncob pipes. Men would have tobacco rolled in Prince Albert wrapping papers. We would always prank call people, asking them, 'Do you have Prince Albert in a can? Well you better let him out.'" I laughed along with my mother, but I pressed her on the more serious matter. "I just remember it being filled with people. Shops were open and people were happy. Nothing like it is today."

The government's recent intention to shut down coal-fired power plants due to environmental hazards has ruined the livelihood of these people (Kerpen). Now slaves to poverty, many try to seek other employment. Unless one wants to work at the local grocery store or go out of state in search of work, career options are limited. Education is also limited and opportunities are slim.

I spoke with a young woman who recently graduated from high school. She said, "If they are lucky, boys can get jobs working on strip mining jobs. If they are really lucky, they will get out of here."

"What do you want to do?" I asked her.

She looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language. "I guess I'll get married and have me a few babies." She said this with all seriousness.

I wanted to take hold of her shoulders and shake the complacency right out of her. After the rest of our conversation, I knew it was no good. She had some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, like that was the only option given to her.

The second day of my visit, my grandpa wanted to take me to the Benham, Kentucky's Coal Museum and Portal 31 in Lynch, Kentucky. Both places are small towns located inside of Harlan County. Pa was getting impatient with the rest of us, but he did not show it. Instead he kept following my grandma around the house.

"Come on now, girls, we need to get a move on." My grandpa was at the door putting his shoes on. The rest of us women were still running around my grandparent's house, throwing ourselves together.

"Now, Julius, wait just a minute. We'll be ready when we get ready." My grandma stood in the hallway with both hands on her hips. This is a trait all of the women in our family have inherited.

"Well, darlin', I just want us to get there on time." Their arguments are always one sided.

"We'll get there when we get there." That was her answer to everything.

When Nanny got good and ready, we headed a few miles north to Benham. Arriving at the Coal Museum, we were greeted by a massive block of coal. According to the plaque in front of it, it was a two ton block of coal, cut specifically for the museum (Kentucky Coal Mining Museum). We were the only ones touring the place, so I could explore freely without bothering anyone. The first exhibit I noticed was the exhibit for the coal camp hospitals. The instruments were practically ancient, and the dummy laying in the bed was unsettling. He had bandages wrapped around his head and both of his hands. The bandages were on nubs because his hands were missing. Nevertheless, it was creepy. I looked around the rest of the bottom floor of the museum and admired how well it was organized. It had pickaxes that had been used in 1912 as well as machines that had been used in the last 20 years. Before I could make it to the second floor, my grandpa told me we were going down to Portal 31.

After a five minute drive, we arrived at Portal 31. Before we could enter the mine, the guide had us sign waivers. Pa read his carefully. I read absolutely nothing and

signed the dotted line. As I approached the opening of the portal, I began to get nervous. My palms began to sweat, and I could feel the chill of the coalmine scratch its way through my jacket. The opening was the mouth, and the mine was the belly. I could not help but wonder how many men had walked into that mouth and never walked out.

Before entering the belly of the beast, I looked back at the road. Across the street from the mine, I noticed the withered houses. All of them were built just alike and in perfect rows. Like crops, they had all sprouted at once. Also like crops, all withered when the season changed. I noticed the huge building that didn't look like a building at all. Instead it looked like some sort of an apparition from an earlier time. It looked like at any moment it could make a liar out of me and disappear. I later found out that building was the hospital for the Lynch Coal Camp and some of the other surrounding coal camps. The windows on the building acted like eyes, greeting each one of its patients with hopelessness. One of the guides told me that when Lynch was at its height, the coal camp was populated with over 10,000 people. Lynch's population is now at a whopping 952 (City of Lynch, KDI). Just like the buildings, the people have also become apparitions.

When I turned around, people were walking into the mouth of the mine. The guide who walked us through Portal 31 looked like he was about my age. He couldn't have been any older than 25. However, the way he spoke and his limp made him seem much older. His name was Ray-Nathan, and he later told me that his leg was crushed when he was 19 years old during a strip mining accident. When everyone reached the conveyer cart, Ray-Nathan started the machine, and we began our trek into the mountain.

The conveyer belt shook and cranked its way down into the mine. The farther away from the sunlight we got, the closer to the past we became. Once we reached our first stop, Ray-Nathan turned the light on top of his helmet on. When he did, we saw an animatronic man holding a lamp and a pickaxe. If I were to see this in any other situation, I would have run for my life. However, I was intrigued. This was a character by the name of Jacob. Ray-Nathan went into great detail about how Jacob was an immigrant from Ireland and how there were many others like Jacob. Along with Irish, Lynch Coal Company housed 38 different nationalities (Johnson). Italian, Spanish, Czech, Welsh, Polish, Irish and Scottish were the most common nationalities in the area. He spoke briefly about the unsophisticated technology that was used during this time. Ray-Nathan concluded this story by saying that during this time, deaths were common amongst miners. Between the roof caving in and the use of dynamite, Portal 31 was always welcoming new employees.

We continued the rest of the tour this way. Ray-Nathan would tell us to look to the left or right, and we would see men from different eras that represented the people that worked in the mine. That was the worst part. These were figments and idealizations of the past. The real stories were stowed away inside of the walls of Big Black Mountain. After the mine tour was over, I set my sights on the ghostly buildings across the street. One of the other guides told me prior to the tour that nobody was allowed into the buildings. He clearly overestimated my ability to follow the rules. While he and my grandpa were exchanging old war stories, I seized my opportunity. I walked towards the houses that looked like abandoned crops. Before they became ruins, these buildings housed diverse individuals and provided shelter for the community. Over eight hundred houses were built in the Lynch Coal Camp, and for the most part, every house was unique (The Town & People). Each house was painted and trimmed in different colors except for the buildings that were built with concrete blocks. These buildings, which scarcely remain, were meant for official use only. Now, the two that are still standing are used for tour purposes. The interior of the houses were made with plaster, and with the exception of a few houses, there was running water and indoor plumbing.

Now, there was only one house that was still completely standing. Many of the roofs had sunken in, but for the most part the base boards were all that remained of the houses. The house that was still standing used to be painted white. Now it was a dull brown with white flakes sprinkled here and there. Many of the windows were no longer intact and were replaced by plywood. The only window I could see into was above the kitchen sink. I saw absolutely nothing. Torn up floor boards were the only thing that remained. I tried to imagine what it must have looked like. I squinted my eyes tight, trying to see the families that used to live in this house. I pressed my face so close against that window that my nose squished against the glass. I wanted to believe that these people existed. No matter how hard I tried, I only saw the damage done to this town. That house not only represents the lives that once lived in it but the county as a whole.

On the way back to my grandparents' house, I was filled with questions. I wanted to know what my grandpa did in the mines, I wanted to know about the people he had met, and I wanted to hear the stories he had to tell. When we finally made it back to their house, Pa went outside to his work shed. I followed him outside and waited for him to start the conversation. I could tell by the way he was fidgeting with his tools that he wanted to tell me something. He finally began to pour out his knowledge. Like many others, my grandpa had to quit school to help provide for his family.

My grandpa continued his story by saying that he got out of working inside by learning the trade of welding. "Learning how to weld was the only thing that prevented me from going down into the mines. I really believe that saved my life." I asked him about the men who died in the mines or who were injured from working in the mines. He looked at me for a moment and then looked back down at his tools. "Well, I never knew anyone that died while they were down in the mine, but I've had a few buddies that died because they had Black Lung." Black Lung, also called Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis, is a disease caused by coal dust. Medical professionals say that the lungs stiffen and the walls of the air sacs become inflamed (Pneumoconiosis). Basically, someone with Black Lung slowly suffocates to death.

"I have stage two Black Lung just from working around the mine." My grandpa said this in a matter-of-fact way. No emotional response at all. I could feel the tears swell up in my eyes and a large lump develop in my throat. "Now don't go around telling your momma that." I swallowed the lump that grew bigger by the second and looked up at the ceiling to avoid crying in front of my grandpa. He patted me on the back and walked back towards the house.

The rest of my visit was spent at my grandparents' house. I was unable to go back across Pine Mountain to explore the town further. Nevertheless, the images that I did see left a scarring mark on both my conscious and subconscious. The people that I saw and the stories that I heard will never be forgotten. My grandpa told me about the overwhelming drug culture that has developed since the mine shutdowns. "Instead of mining coal, young men have turned to mining meth to pay the bills." Modernity is wonderful, and industrialization leads to prosperity, but what happens when the industry leaves?

On the last night I stayed with my grandparents, I slept in the living room. Despite my efforts to go to sleep, I was kept awake by my grandfather's incessant coughing. It turns out that this is one of the symptoms of Black Lung Disease. When industry leaves, it leaves poverty and sickness, betrayals and disappointment. But it also leaves hope, hope predicated on memory and born along by that indomitable human spirit, mountain spirit. And when people think about the mountains, they think about autumn and radiant leaves and animals playing before resting for the winter—and warmth that is just a fireplace away. That too is a picture of Harlan County.

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THE FRONT YARD

Mitchell Dallas Herring

Brick steps, jagged edges protrude
with cemented indentions
that carry you to the grass,
where it's soft, much softer,
like a carpet.

Above your head,
you name clouds—cumulous,
whisker-ended seamless cirrus,
and stratus angrily rumbling
and looking back at you.
You inhale the scent
of the storm from minutes before.

To the right, the pump house
with its scratchy sandpaper roofing,
a perfect protective covering,
at least for the yard mice,
a local family.
Beyond the shelter,
an almost flooded ditch
with cattails, and crawfish swimming,
and snakes, at least your mother
says so. Water moccasins and rattlers,
she sometimes says both,
and you believe her.

The scent of a wet dog
moves through the neighborhood
west towards the other children
who mush their toes in the mud,
and tomorrow they're calling for rain.



SCRIBBLES

Jonathan Kurtz

I write a few notes—scribbles meant
to maintain the illusion of the diligent student.
My ears hum with a droning buzz,
the professor testing the confines
of the white board,
his prison or ours.

Textbook pages crinkle between my fingers
and I let my mind wander—
free to scale the sides of mountains,
plunge through the bellies of clouds,
and put footprints in the dust of moons.

The professor shakes the bars.
I hear but do not listen—
I have stepped outside.



DO BROWN COWS PRODUCE CHOCOLATE MILK?

Christopher Mauldin

I slipped on a rock by the ocean
and fell down below the surface,
sinking slowly past
seaweed and
school fish
to the
silted,
still,
below.

I sat swathed in the dusk
of a bottomed sea,
foaming from the cracks in my skin,
the dark places the water blithely pried into,
like fingers, wriggling and ripping outward.

Up

Up

Are octopi

and whales,

sharks

and jellyfish,

seahorses

frolicsome in a sunlit drape,
suspended like playthings from worn out
shoestrings—
I sat on the floor in silence.



DOMESTICATED DRAGON

Charlotte Stapp

The domesticated dragon stalks its prey,
crouching until his overfed stomach
drags along the linoleum floor.
I watch him from the corner of my eye—
needle-sharp claws and teeth,
yellow eyes bulging, alert and focused.
His tail whisks anxiously,
his back legs tense for the imminent attack.
As his fat, furry figure flashes towards
his prey, an unprotected foot,
I swoop him from the floor, lowering
him to a curled position on my lap.
I lay my hand on his side, warm
from the fire within his belly. But rather than
breathe a cindery breath, he resonates
a quiet purr of comfort and contentment,
and kneads his claws into the fabric
of my pajamas.



FALLING STARS

Allyson B. Vaughan

Lucy hovered in the air, pumping her legs so that if she jumped off the swings she might land in the sky. Alex sat on the bench watching her, a book idle in his lap. Midair, she kicked off her shoes at him, and they landed by his feet. He bent down and scooped them up, but he didn't know if he should make her put them back on. What danger was there in her not wearing shoes? Especially now. "Will you put your shoes on if I ask you to?" he said, waving the boots in the air. "Your feet shouldn't get cold."

"I don't need them anymore," she said, going higher than Alex was comfortable with. The swing set shook when she came down, and he stood up.

"Don't go so high, Lucy. You might fall off." Alex set the boots by the bench but kept on standing. He sometimes wondered if he was a worrier by nature or if he'd been conditioned in the past five years to be one. He hadn't worried when he broke his ankle and couldn't play tennis anymore, and he hadn't worried when he left for college a hundred miles away, but watching his little sister on a swing-set gave his heart something to murmur about. He wondered if he'd put enough sweaters on her or if she should be wearing another cap. The doctors said she should always wear a cap to keep the chills at bay. She looked cold. "Lucy, why don't you come off the swings and put your shoes on," he said, beckoning her with his hand. She stuck out a pale tongue and pumped her legs harder.

"Mom isn't here. You don't have to say things like 'put your shoes on'. It's annoying." She mocked his deep tone, provoking a rough cough. "I'm okay. Just a few more minutes," she said and stopped pushing so hard. Alex sighed, looking around the empty playground. They weren't supposed to be there at night, but Lucy had begged to be taken to the park, and no one was in the business of denying her as of late.

"Okay, a few more minutes. Then you can rest on the go-round." He walked closer, pacing on the sand. Sitting was impossible with her so high in the air. Alex liked to see Lucy laughing though, so he didn't stop her. He needed to remember the way she laughed. Lucy had been whispering to him for weeks, asking to be taken to the park. Now he understood why. If their mother had been there, Lucy wouldn't have gotten within two feet of the swing before she whisked her away to the bench. Alex thought there was no use in keeping a dying girl from living. She'd been sick for a long time, with brief, teasing moments of health. On her thirteenth birthday, just a few months ago, she'd asked Alex to blow out her candles for her. "Why?" he'd asked.

She'd looked to him, then to their mother, then to her nurses and said, "You can't expect me to waste my last breath on a bunch of trick candles, can you? I'm dying here." Mother's eyes had widened while the nurses shifted in their white sneakers. That had been the first time she'd let them all know she knew. "The living can't take a joke, Alex," she said. Their mother warned her to stop it, but Lucy kept on and pulled the beanie off her smooth, bare scalp. "You all keep saying *I'm dying*, so that makes you all *the living*." Mother began to cry and raced out of the room, and the nurses checked Lucy's monitors and left. Alex cut them both a piece of cake.

Alex could hear Lucy's breathing from where he stood and waved her off the swings. "Hey, let's take a break," he said. Lucy extended an upturned thumb and swung back and forth a few more times. She was grinning and counting aloud. "Lucy, stop." Shaking her head, she let go of the chains midair and catapulted herself off the swing. Her cries of glee caught in the wind and carried across the park like the brown leaves that crushed underneath Alex's feet.

"I'm flying," she said, and Alex ran as fast as he could. He caught her, her stomach smashing into his shoulder, face smacking into his lower back. His knees buckled and Alex went down. He grabbed Lucy's sweater and pulled her off him. Hugging her to him, he felt his heart pushing against his chest. She squirmed in his arms, but he couldn't let go. He had to make sure she was still there, that she wasn't so cold. Alex scanned her face for a nose bleed or a busted lip but found her all together, at least as much as he could see. On the outside she just looked like Lucy.

"Let me go, Alex."

"I can't," he said, his breath coming out all at once.

"You have to." His legs felt weak and he'd stopped blinking, his eyes frozen on the moment when her small body hung in the air. She'd looked for a second as if she would keep going and sail far over his head to someplace he could never find, but then she'd faltered and fallen back down to him. The knit fabric of her sweater caught in his mouth and he spat the lint out. "Don't spit on me," she said, slapping at his shoulder. She wiggled out of his arms and stepped back from him. On his knees they were at eye level, and he could see the shadows under her eyes, puffy and pink where the eyelashes had fallen out and the cracked lips. He knew Lucy didn't like it when people looked at her like that, like someone they might have known a long time ago. She looked away from him and went to sit on the go-round. Alex leaned forward, his hands splayed on his knees.

Lucy pulled her sinewy legs underneath her, tucking the feet into her sweater. Rusty and cracked like everything else, it shook even under her weight. "You gonna come push me or am I going to have to waste my lung capacity?" She adjusted her cap and waited for him to get up. When he did, the world spun and he felt it turning towards morning, to another day gone, and taking the two of them with it. There was no stopping it, just a quiet resolve that they'd lost another day. Alex then wondered if Atlas, the great orchestrator of the earth's turntable, ever felt bad for making people leave today for another tomorrow, dragging everyone towards the inevitable. He must know what's coming, but he still allows the world to keep going round and round. Didn't it stop for anyone? If Alex had that kind of weight on his shoulders, he would've dropped the world a long time ago for something with better benefits.

Alex didn't bother to brush the sand off his jeans. He came to stand by the go-round and took hold of one of the handle bars and gave it a push, starting the go-round off with a slow turn. Lucy circled around with the rusted contraption, making funny faces at him when she came back to face him. Humming, she closed her eyes and Alex pushed faster. It was something they used to do when they came here years ago. One of them would sit on the go-round with their eyes closed while the other pushed faster and faster. It made their stomachs drop and the sky spin. It almost made him smile to be there again, but with every turn he saw Lucy's face grow thinner and yellower until she wasn't there anymore, just a poor molding of his sister. He found a spot on the ground to stare at and waited for the image to go away.

When her eyes opened she fell backwards, and Alex let the go-round spin on its own for a while. His arms were tired. Lucy stared up at the sky and giggled. When Alex found he could look at her again, he stopped the go-round with the tip of his sneaker. They stayed quiet and let the wind talk for them. It seemed to have more to say, and anyway it could say things better than he could. Lucy was frowning at the sky and

he knew she'd gone to the place in her mind where no one could get in. He imagined she'd built it a long time ago, with a door only big enough for her to squeeze through. He fished around in his brain for anything that might make her come out of the quiet she'd fallen in, but he didn't know what to say. He felt like a stranger.

"Lisa is coming up next week for Thanksgiving," he said, the thought handing itself over just when he'd given up. He sat down next to Lucy and the go-round creaked, so he laid back to distribute his weight. The cold of the metal ate through his jacket and he shivered. He wondered how Lucy's teeth weren't cracked from chattering. He checked to see if she was shaking, but she was still and squinting up at the sky. Her gloved hands lay on her stomach, the fingers tapping to a song he couldn't hear. Lucy nodded but said nothing. He bumped her knee with his. "Come on, you like Lisa," he said. Lucy loved it when he brought Lisa to see her because she always watched horror movies with her and talked about things Alex didn't understand.

"Will you marry her?" Lucy turned her head to look at him, an expectant smile dripping off her face. "I think you should," she said.

Alex had to laugh, but not because marrying Lisa was funny to him or anything. He loved Lisa, but he wondered if loving someone was enough. Anyway, he didn't want to think about the future. "I think that you should put your shoes back on." From her spot on the go-round, Lucy narrowed her eyes at him. She jabbed him in the ribs with her finger and grinned wider when he yelped, her finger nail pricking him through his jacket. Again and again she poked at his ribs, until his eyes watered and his side ached, from laughter and admittedly a little pain. Alex threw his hands up and yielded. "Okay, okay, no shoes," he said, feeling a tightness in his chest.

Lucy's smile was broken in places that Alex didn't always see, but he did then. He knew she wanted to think that he and Lisa would get married, that their mother wouldn't keep her room exactly as it is now, that their father would decide he could handle a sick child and come back to them, that somehow she would not be forgotten but it wouldn't hurt anyone to think about her. He wondered if Lucy really believed all that, because he didn't. Lucy may hope life could go on without her, but he desperately wanted it not to.

Turning away from him, Lucy looked up at the stars. There were no clouds, just moonlight and treetops hovering above them. "I was thinking I could be one of them," she said.

"One of what?"

"A star, I want to be a star," she said and pointed to a spot by the moon. After a minute she dropped her arm and a soft smile floated across her face. "Don't you just want to take one out of the sky and hold it?"

"I like them where they are. They're meant to be up there," he said. Alex followed his sister's gaze into the sky and searched around for what she saw. All he found were balls of plasma, burning themselves out so people on earth would have something pretty to look at in the dark. He knew about stars; he'd taken an astronomy course his senior year. Every star's fate is determined by the mass it's born with. They collapse on themselves when they die, taking other stars in its nebula with them. He couldn't remember much more than that. "I've got a book on stars if you want to read it."

Lucy shook her head, "I know, I've read it before, but what if...I don't know, never mind," she said.

"No, what is it?"

"It's stupid, but I always thought that maybe our souls become stars when we die. Every person who has ever died is up there, and that's why there's so many of them. Wouldn't that make them so much better?" she exhaled and then breathed in deeply, so that the air could reach to the tips of her toes. She'd forgotten to breathe and took several gulps of air to make up for it. Alex tensed, ready to carry her to the car, but her breathing steadied.

"I don't know, Lucy," Alex said.

"So you're saying I couldn't be one?" Her voice was so small and tight, Alex turned his head to look at his sister. Her face was rigid, and a small, swollen blue vein popped out of her neck. For years people had turned away when they needed to cry, afraid that if they showed their own despair then Lucy would lose all hope, give up and speed the process along. Alex guessed that in the moments in which everyone else looked away, Lucy let her fear show. How often had he looked away? He couldn't count the times. The hand inside his chest squeezed harder and he felt his own eyes sting with hot tears. Alex, Lucy, their mother, none of them cried together. They just didn't. He knew his mother bit down on wash cloths in the bathroom with the water running the same way she knew he went out into the woods to chop wood and scream. Grief can make a person selfish, and even though he should've known, he hadn't noticed Lucy grieving in her own silent way.

He shook his head, "No, no, you can be a star." A tear rained down, melting down her cheek, and he knew she didn't believe him. "You're right, just look," he said, pointing up. He nudged her shoulder when she wouldn't look. "Go on, see? There's Cepheus, Hercules, and Orion. Cassiopeia is up there somewhere. Remember them, from the stories? You can be a star, I swear you can be. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Alex couldn't get the words out fast enough. Once, his ex-girlfriend told him words fought hard to get out of his mouth, and more often than not the worst ones made it out first. "That one kind of looks like Grandma," he said.

Lucy wiped her nose on the back of her glove and cleared her throat. "Which one?" "That fat one," Alex said. He thought that if their grandmother had become a star, the least the universe could have done was slim her out a bit.

Lucy bellowed, her voice echoing across the sand and grass to skip over the lake. If it had been spring, birds would've flown off the tree branches. Alex felt his phone buzz in his pocket and knew their mother had discovered their empty beds. He puffed air out of his cheeks, picturing the rage she would have when they walked through the door. Lucy wasn't supposed to go outside, not according to their mother. Looking over at his sister, weak and tired but smiling and alive, he didn't think he'd feel sorry when they got back. Lucy must've heard the buzzing too, because her laughter tapered and she asked, still smiling, "Does Mom know where we are?"

"She, uh, she is aware of our absence if that's the answer you're looking for." Alex sat up and saw in the distance a beam of light fanning through the tree trunks. "But she might not know the specifics," he said, standing. The go-round rocked from the change in weight, and Lucy grabbed one of the handle bars to keep on. Ignoring the light, he turned back to face his sister. She'd sat up too, but hadn't noticed the flashlights in the trees. Alex walked over to the bench and grabbed her shoes. He didn't order her to put them on but instead held them together in his hand. Lucy stared at the shoes.

"She's going to be really mad. You didn't have to take me here." Lucy's eyes flitted from his to the sand.

"I know I didn't, but..." he felt the words fighting to get out again, but Lucy beat him to it.

"Are those flashlights?" Lucy asked and jumped up. Alex turned to see that the beam of light had turned into two, accompanied by aggravated voices. Lucy took hold of Alex's hand and dragged him away from the go-round. It still turned slowly without them. "Are we allowed to be here?" Lucy walked on her heels, the cold sand burning her feet. Alex helped her along, forgetting he held her shoes in his hand.

"No, of course not, the park closes at eight," he said, and Lucy pinched his arm. "Hey, quit it."

Lucy rolled her eyes and shoved her brother. "I didn't know the park closed. Why did you bring me here if you knew?" Alex took her hand back and ushered her off the

playground toward the parking lot, shooting glances back at the wavering lights.

“You wanted to come here, so I brought you here,” he said, gauging how long it would take the feet on the other end of the flashlights to reach them before they made it to the car. “I wanted you to have fun.” His voice fell to a whisper, and Lucy straggled along behind him. She squeezed his hand and hung onto his arm. Alex hugged her to his side, and together they sped to the car. The wind picked up, the cold biting through their jackets and reddening their cheeks. It wouldn’t be long before the first snow fell and winter took everything.

It may have been their imaginations, but both swore they heard the voices call out for them to stop. In that moment they looked at each other, their widening eyes addressing the others with an unspoken order. *Run*. Together they took off, barreling across the pavement towards the car on the other side of the lot, screaming into the air. Alex’s eyes stung with unsolicited tears, but he smiled. He couldn’t help but think this would be the last time he and Lucy ran together. Thinking about it hurt. It hurt deep down inside of him, and he wanted to fall down, yelling and thrashing that none of it was fair. He didn’t want to take her back home or to the hospital. Not back to all of those collected faces and reassuring smiles that lied to her and him. Hope is what they always told them to have just before handing grief pamphlets to them, each brochure with its own method of coping with grief, sickness, and loss. Alex didn’t care about coping. He didn’t see why he had to cope with it. What could be wrong with feeling destroyed by losing someone?

None of those pamphlets knew a thing about hope or despair. They sure didn’t understand love. He’d like to know who wrote those things, and if they’d ever lost anyone and just how they had “coped” with it all. As far as Alex was concerned, hope and despair lived side by side. Neither could exist without the other, and he couldn’t just abandon all grief to hope. No, his only hope was that Lucy didn’t hurt and she had something to smile about. Alex’s chest hurt, so he knew Lucy’s must be, but when he looked at her she was grinning and she’d taken her cap off. The streetlights glared off the skin on her bare scalp, making it glow like warmth. She surprised him by breaking free of his grasp and running ahead of him. Extending her arms out, she flew like a plane to the car.

Alex let her go ahead of him, enjoying the sight of his little sister free and happy without the help of tubes and medicines, just well deserved, wild happiness. She reached the car and slapped the hood with her hands before throwing them up in the air with victory. Her chest rose and fell in rapid heaves, but there wasn’t any hurt in her face.



PALATABLE PANACEA

Cara Dillon

I love food the way people wish they loved their jobs. Even when I was a child, my parents had to choose hotels based on whether or not they provided breakfast because they didn't want to risk the chance that there wouldn't be food readily available when I awoke. "What's for breakfast?" I greeted my mother well before, "Good morning," because it wasn't good for either of us until I ate.

Clearly this isn't a need for food. Everyone has that. I like to think that I have an affair of the heart with food, not just the stomach. I'm like the musician who *feels* music, each note speaks tenderly to his soul, while other people just mindlessly whistle a tune. I plan trips around restaurants I can visit and bakeries I can sample. My last excursion to Charlotte, North Carolina, involved a two hour wait at a sushi restaurant, reminding myself for the one hundred and twenty minutes that this is the only place I could enjoy the fusion of burgers and sushi. I always order their bento box that comes with a sushi roll, a mini burger, sweet potato fries, edamame, and cucumbers pickled with chili sauce. I'm always overwhelmed when selecting which to enjoy first. Afterwards, I took a jaunt to the French bakery "Amelie's" whose macarons and salted caramel brownies are unmatched, but I was really in Charlotte to pick up my sister from the airport. Last week I baked an entire pan of brownies at midnight to satisfy a fierce chocolate craving. I scan and salivate over new recipes, like the lobster macaroni and cheese and those homemade spring rolls I still need to try, that I tuck into an online folder called, "Food for unbusy days."

Quite honestly, I found all of this normal until I began to discuss my love of food with unaffected eaters. I didn't realize some people just ate to consume, to satisfy their biological need for nourishment that they would just as well make a sandwich instead of driving hours for the perfect provender. When revealing my love for food to a friend, he told me, "If I didn't need to for survival, I would never eat." He could have told me that he tossed kittens into raging rivers on his days off, and I would have been equally appalled because there's so much more to food than minerals and vitamins.

In the fourth grade, I understood two things about food. I didn't recognize these truths consciously, but they were evident in my behavior. First, food was a valuable comforter. Every day that I came home from school, I walked in the front door and headed straight for the cookie jar. This understanding undoubtedly arose from the fact that neither home nor school gave me any sense of ease. My parent's marriage teetered on a precarious precipice. I hear that some parents disagree in hushed tones and inaudibly settle their problems out behind closed doors, but that wasn't my experience. Feuds erupted anywhere, the kitchen or den or car, but it didn't matter because walls or doors weren't enough to contain it anyway. The prospect of divorce wasn't calmly relayed to my sister and me in a somber meeting in the living room as I've seen it in the movies, but instead through the threats that circulated in the air of our home. That year their marriage was tenuously held together by considerations of the kids and the fear of the failure or the unknown and simultaneously pulled apart by shouting and spiteful assertions of selfishness venomously tossed back and forth. Arriving home after school

was like watching evening lottery numbers: you waited hopefully expectant that this time wouldn't end in dashed expectations. The silent response to, "When's dad getting home?" was as disappointing as only having one unmatched number.

School was no reprieve from this familial fluctuation. Our latest military-ordained move had landed me in another school full of foreign faces. I seesawed from wanting to be befriended and hoping not to be noticed at all, in fear that I would be too ordinary to warrant the friendship of those who already had hordes of witty and fascinating fourth-grade friends. Being a foot taller than my classmates didn't help in either area, especially the latter. My internal soundtrack repeated one of two things: "Don't say something dumb," or "Don't trip." You'd think that each of those students had cured cancer or world hunger or had at least spent the summer taming lions by the way they intimidated me. Days were spent navigating the familiar, stereotypical, but always perplexing dance of being new, like where to sit at lunch, if you should answer more or fewer questions in class, what to do at recess. Each of these unconscious decisions were actually made with the daunting awareness that each trifling choice shaped what the other twenty kids would say about the new kid. That's an easy way to exacerbate any nine-year-olds already swelling insecurities and fragile identity. Each moment, at school or among family, a droning, relentless beat attesting that people were unpredictable and relationships were sure to bring more worry than solace.

So, each afternoon, without exception, I chose four cookies from the belly of that white, goose-shaped jar. I would line all four cookies up on the arm of our plaid living room couch and enjoy them slowly throughout the duration of an afternoon of cartoons by myself. My mother consistently supplied this jar in accordance with my habit. Sometimes there were rainbow chocolate chip cookies that, despite their knock off M&M chocolate pieces, were perfectly crisp, but not so dry that they needed milk. Oreos were a frequent staple, of course, eaten plain cookie half first followed by the cream covered side. If it were near Christmas time, we had the limited release white chocolate covered Oreos that testified that being filled with cream wasn't enough for a cookie. They were usually too good for an afternoon snack, reserved for dessert with a big glass of milk, and too good to get mixed up with the other cookies, so they stayed in their nondescript white box in the pantry. The Keebler Fudge Shoppe cookies, the thin fudge stripe doughnut shaped ones that made your fingers equally fudgy if you didn't eat them quickly enough or the E.L. Fudge cookies, would taint those Oreos. The elf cookies were double stuffed with a half-inch of smooth chocolate cream and stamped on one side with various elf characters. The elf heads had to be eaten first on those, like animal crackers. It was the only humane way to do it.

In the case of a cookie disaster and an empty jar, there was still hope. I'd move to the separate Little Debbie jar. Zebra Cakes, marshmallow treats, Star Crunch cookies, Oatmeal Creme Pies, Swiss Rolls, those Cosmic Brownies I always wished tasted less like chocolate bricks, and Fancy Cakes, or their Christmas tree or heart-shaped holiday equivalent, filled this jar in rotation. I didn't understand people like my sister, who escaped from the family anxieties with loud music and a locked bedroom door, or the girl at school who never spoke to me but decided to dislike me anyway, but I knew what tasted good. Sometimes my mom would be in the kitchen cooking, but most often she was at some other end of the house and my father and sister wouldn't be home for a few more hours. For that hour or so after school, I sat alone on our green plaid couch, leaned against the armrest, enjoying the diversion of senseless cartoons and decadent sugary delights. That time was calm and unencumbered by the need to impress or console anyone else.

Thus, my life became, and still is, a give and take: giving myself over to the unpredictability of life in exchange for the steady relief of good food. Food gave me a

sense of control amongst the turbulence. If, as a kid, I couldn't choose how my family fit together, where we would live, or who my friends were, food would always be up to my discretion. This didn't make me a picky eater who refused food, but instead an avaricious one who tried everything. My parents' lack of food rules helped, too. For example, if there was a cake leftover from a celebration the night before, just add a glass of milk and it became breakfast the next day for my mother and I both. We'd pull out the clear cake stand from the fridge, foggy from the condensation, and set it before us on the bar. My mother would cut us both two large slices, and we'd eat cake, me in my pajamas and her in her robe, with our bare feet tangled around the legs of the bar stools. Somehow it never struck me as odd that we were eating for breakfast what had just been consumed as dessert the night before, as if the hour and the Care Bear plates, instead of the china, actually made it breakfast. Maybe that's because the sugary cereals I ate for breakfast weren't any healthier than a large slice of red velvet or German chocolate cake at eight in the morning.

Miguel de Cervantes came to the same conclusion about food that I did. He said, "All sorrows are less with bread." He and I could have enjoyed big plates full of pasta together. I prefer to say a little less formally, "Carbs taste like feelings." It's not like this behavior hasn't been nurtured. How do you soothe a crying baby who just received a shot at the doctor's office? You shove a shiny red sucker into his toothless mouth and allow sugar to ease the pain. How do you tend to a grieving family? You make them a dinner dish and yeast rolls, even if they're too distressed to eat. How do you solve a teenage girl's melodramatic meltdown? My father's attempted solution: fill her with Blizzards from Dairy Queen and let her drown her sorrows in soft-serve and Butterfingers. Every few months during my adolescence, some event, a fight with a friend, a thwarted crush, or anything that would give the whisper of, "You're not good enough," would propel me into a crying fit. Maybe he didn't know what to say or knew nothing could be said to ease the difficulty. Or, maybe I just had to stop crying to eat the ice cream so he could finally decipher what I was so upset about. We would go through the drive-through but sit in the parking lot, with my knees tucked up and feet on the glove box in the passenger seat. I'd plunge my red spoon into spoonful after spoonful of Butterfinger bars and ice cream, and he'd relish his large Reese's cup Blizzard until the sound of plastic spoon scraping the paper cup. I didn't realize then that he needed those as much, if not more, than I did.

Surprisingly, I never became a poster child for childhood obesity. The opposite was true. I didn't develop a weight problem; I developed a totally fanciful and romantic involvement with food. I delighted in eating deep fried Oreos that tasted like mini pancakes filled with warm chocolate creme, dusted with powdered sugar at the fair and the thick, sweet, crispy onion rings at Sonic, which I also found were fried in pancake batter. I only ate brownies if they were microwaved until gooey and topped with whipped cream. I filled our family's plain vanilla ice cream with fun-sized candy bars and M&Ms to improve upon it. Then, once I was old enough to drive, I scheduled my Saturdays around food: I met someone for an early breakfast, enjoyed coffee and a pastry with a friend around ten-thirty, went with my family to lunch at one, followed by another coffee or frozen yogurt date at three, dinner at seven and ice cream at nine. I was such a bean-pole, all limbs and handle-bar cheekbones, that I was enabled to enjoy all of the worst foods with no obvious repercussions.

Food swore to me a Hippocratic oath, that it would do no harm but seek to relieve any ails of life, and it was faithful. When I arrived home, there were sweets to greet me. Or, on Friday nights, my family ate pizza. That was the sort of thing you could remember at three o'clock and salivate over until the moment that the anticipation was over and a cheesy, greasy, fluffy-crusting piece of pizza was in your hands. Until I graduated high school, pizza remained the reward for enduring a whole week of holding it together.

The year of the inauguration of the cookie ritual was also the year I first tried barbeque pork ribs, and I loathed all the time I had lost before finding them. When my tenth birthday dinner arrived, Outback Steakhouse was my choice. The best thing about them might not even have been their taste, although they were quite good, but the fact that I could eat them in a way that fully expressed my enjoyment of them. That was the second thing I understood about food. It should be eaten with respect and gusto.

I didn't eat them gingerly, as a young girl, or really anyone, in public probably should. I could have handed my silverware back to the waiter when I ordered because I ate them with my hands and face. I was a twiggy blonde ten year old with a face covered in barbeque sauce, confident that this was the only way one could procure all of that tender meat from the bone. There's actually a picture of me from this first dinner, and I'm grinning from ear to ear, completely unaccompanied by shame. Those little moist towelettes they provided were laughable in the face of my robust consumption. Remnants had to be scrubbed from beneath my nails and even then, my hands still kept the scent of honey barbeque sauce. That's how I believe Saint Teresa of Avila looked, too, in the possibly apocryphal story of how she was caught devouring a chicken. The story goes that one of the nuns found her in the kitchen just demolishing a whole cooked chicken with her hands and face and confronting her disgust, the Saint said, "When I eat chicken, I eat chicken; when I pray, I pray." We would have made fast friends.

But eating with enthusiasm isn't a license to eat without any reverence. Years later, my sister would buy me these credit card sized packages of chocolate covered macadamia nuts. The milk chocolate surrounding them melted slowly just before you bit into the unostentatious macadamia nut. They were only sold at "For the Love of Chocolate," a chocolate store in Richmond, Virginia, that was packed with every chocolate and confection from wall to wall, so she bought them for me every holiday. Then, once when she visited, she saw I had three unopened bags and became upset, thinking I didn't like them. I didn't eat them. I savored them. They were like wartime rationed chocolate. I only allowed myself one. Two, if it were an incredibly bad day, but three of these marble sized confections was a gluttonous food binge. No day was so bad to earn three.

But I think it was really cooking that grew my admiration of food. It shouldn't be much of a surprise that in the middle of my college career and my first quarter-life crisis, I donned a white chef's coat and decided to go study food. I wasn't sure of much else besides my love for food at that point. My parents had sent me off in August after I graduated high school with the hopes I'd find some direction to replace my "Undecided" major. By the end of my first semester of college I had only two things figured out: my randomly assigned roommate was stealing from me when I was gone, and I missed baking more than I enjoyed learning about orangutans in anthropology or the endocrine system in biology. So, when my freshman year concluded, I enrolled in a culinary program in pursuit of a Baking and Pastry Certificate and began to take notes from slideshows about cookies and wrote papers about the proper care and handling of poultry instead.

In my baking methods class, the motley group of us, students ranging from eighteen to sixty-eight, began with a group of recipes at the beginning of the day and students swirled around the kitchen filled with industrial sized mixers and ovens until the maple tabletops were full of food that we stashed into bags to take home. I could look around and see exactly what the last eight hours of sweat and disciplined recipe following had wrought. My favorite day was the breads day. I toted home two full paper grocery bags of yeast rolls, French baguettes, ciabatta bread, sourdough loaves, herb focaccia, bagels, English muffins, and soft pretzels.

During that time, I thought about food even more often than before. I began to revel in the mechanics of food, like the new-found knowledge that bagels were boiled

to give them that amazing crust and soft center and steam was added to baguettes as they baked to do the same. Tropical fruits must be cooked before adding them to most recipes because their enzymes break down other foods, like natural meat tenderizers. That handy tip could have saved my sister's first batch of mango marshmallows. I learned how to tweak the ratios of sugar to butter to liquid in cookie recipes to adjust the softness or crispness. I discovered that food wasn't just a delightful art but a meticulous science, and this led me to a new gratitude. Like the biologist who admires the handiwork of skeletal structures or plant anatomy, I was mesmerized by the design of food.

Take cake for example. At the beginning of one class I took flour, which was straw-like stuff just growing out of the ground before, eggs, which actually hoped to be birds instead of dessert, butter and milk, straight from a cow's udders, then add sugar and some heat. Then, there was cake. Not straw-like, pre-bird, cow substance, sweetened thing. No uncertainty or trepidation about the result. It all became a fluffy, decadent cake every time, regardless of the state of the universe. I really can't think of any thought more wonderful or awe-inspiring. Maybe babies, but cakes don't cry, so cakes inspire a bit more awe. For some, it's sunsets and mountaintops that are wonder-inducing, but to each his own.

As my cooking classes prompted me to explore more and more recipes, I learned that cooking expresses a sense of hope. Those who lack hope for a beautiful, or at the very least edible, product are never the kinds of people who even begin a recipe. At the beginning of every class, I faced a list of recipes and barrels full of raw ingredients believing that at the end of the day, there'd be something more than that to show for all of the work, the meticulous measuring and timing and boiling. And that's hope against hope. Why should any cooking technique work out the way it does? I know that life is no science and in a single day, work could be a colossal disaster, the dog could get sick on the carpet, the air conditioner could freeze over and my boyfriend wouldn't return my calls and nothing I've done before seems to help. My past successes hold no application for current problems. But food is not that way. Food submits to simple cause and effect without the variables of emotions and past mistakes wreaking havoc on the result.

That's why it was so tragic when a recipe didn't work out the way it should. Hope is dashed and cooking becomes as uncertain as life. One particular cake fail put me on the floor in despair with my back against the oven. By the time my roommate came home, I had made it to the couch with my hand covering my eyes declaring, "It's hooooorrible." My reaction communicated that there were cake pieces covering everything, like a bakery IED had detonated, when it was only messy icing and sliding layers that sent me into a tizzy. She unsympathetically told me it was fine, because the cake was, but my hope and confidence in the predictability of food was not. With all of my study, I expected cooking to submit to my food knowledge, forgetting it was still a part of this world that's full of mystery and surprise.

Good food, regardless of working out every time or not, still does what I wish life, with its relentless and capricious demands, would do. When life inevitably throws you down, disappoints, and leaves you wanting more, good food whispers, "There's still something good here." Food can satisfy, at least for a little while. And if you can slake your appetite, maybe those other deeper longings, like love that doesn't fail you and a purpose among the disorder, will be satisfied, too. It's the best thing we have going in this world full of aches and pains and hurts. I'm convinced that onions were made to make you cry because they know you probably needed to anyway. Chocolate can't be a substitute for happiness, but it can help the brain and body remember what it is. Wine is no real escape from dealing with festering feelings, but it can smooth them out for just long enough to step back and reconsider quitting your job or texting your ex. But too much might inspire you to do just the opposite, which is the ironic thing about food.

There is such a fine line between satisfaction and regret, and food follows suit. Bad food choices carry a strange amount of guilt. When my food love turns from savoring to asking it to save me, I gluttonously demand something it won't provide. I can recall, at the end of a relationship, buying an entire gallon of Butter Pecan ice cream when I should have settled for the pint of Ben & Jerry's. I didn't eat the whole thing, but I put a decent dent into it by myself. It's odd how the very thing we need to survive is pitted against us. You never hear anyone experiencing guilt with any other necessity of life. *Oh, I really just drank way too much water today. I'm feeling so over-hydrated. You know, I shouldn't have taken those last two breaths. Nope. I should have stopped before those last two. They were too much.* But, when my enjoyment of the first piece of cake turns to a lust for the second piece or at the end of that all-you-can-eat chicken nugget night, you've devoured over fifty nuggets (not that I'm speaking from personal experience), you've found the company of self-loathing crashing your food affair. This might be mistaken as a lack of self-respect, but I think that's misplaced. Food binging is a lack of respect for the food. Any relationship devoid of respect fosters mistreatment and produces disappointment.

In addition to the daily demands of my final semester of classes, uncertainty following graduation has been looming over me like a pregnant rain cloud. Apprehension about my next unknown residence and fear that I'm not good enough feel no different at twenty-three than they did at ten, and I have a sneaking suspicion they will remain at sixty-three. The other night, after one of those days that feels like standing in the ocean breakers, when worries that I'll end up working at Starbucks forever or I'll have to eat nothing but ramen noodles for years kept bombarding me, I drove to my favorite taco shack alone. I ordered three el pastor tacos. They're so simple. They don't need all those fixings that the major burrito chains provide like Mexican Subway. Just meat, diced onions and cilantro come from the kitchen. Then, I dress each one with the house made sour cream and salsa, with a squeeze of fresh lime. There are no supersizes here. Each taco is barely bigger than a bagel and smaller than a dessert plate. I've always wanted to order a fourth, but it would ruin the previous three.

I closed together each side of the hand pressed corn tortilla of the first taco the way a person would dress into their favorite button up shirt, deliberately and with anticipation. I enjoyed each taco slowly, appreciating the texture of the tortilla, the spiced pork, the liveliness of the onions, the balance of the sour cream and the intensity of the salsa. Each element considerably played its part, hitting the high and low notes, creating grace and balance. I accompanied it with an agua fresca, the daily made fruit water. Those tacos were as good as a whole day spent in bed and much cheaper than therapy.



TOUGH TO SWALLOW

Jonathan Kurtz

Does he have to cry? Daniel thought, glancing at the one-way mirror and wondering if it annoyed the chief as much as it did him. This case had started small over two years ago when the first boy, Adam, went missing. Crying might have been excusable after that, but Daniel would never have been involved with it. After the body of the third missing boy turned up and Daniel *had* gotten involved, it was unexpected. Now that Daniel had spent over a year on the case and another three boys had gone missing, crying seemed downright inappropriate, which was why Daniel was so shocked to finally sit across the table from the culprit and be faced with...*this*.

Hand cuffed to the steel table, Willy shook violently, sobbing his eyes out, not looking at all like the hardened criminal Daniel had expected. Willy's round face shone with mucus and tears, matting down his too-long hair and the patchy beard shadowing his jaw. Daniel gritted his teeth and debated sending someone for tissues. The wet sound of snot returning to sinuses made him want to gag.

"Willy," he said, leaning forward. "We know it was you. This time, we have witnesses and photographic evidence. If you tell us what you did with Micah and the rest of the boys, everything will go much easier on you."

Willy's crying only intensified. He tried to say something, but Daniel couldn't make it out through the snorting and sniveling that filled the small room to bursting. Daniel shook his head in disgust and pushed back his chair to stand up. He had his hand on the doorknob when the waterworks cut off without warning, leaving an echoing silence.

"Leaving already, detective?" The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Daniel glanced over his shoulder to see Willy calmly wiping his face with a handkerchief, restraints lying empty on the table. Marcus moved from the corner, hand going to his baton.

"Wait!" Daniel stopped him with a hand. Marcus frowned but stepped back. Willy bared yellow teeth. Daniel took his seat, assuming an expression that had won him more than one poker game. "So you've decided to deal?"

Willy shrugged and folded his hands.

"Where's Micah?" Daniel asked.

"No game is that easy, detective," Willy said with a chuckle.

"With or without you, we're going to find Micah."

Willy raised his eyebrows. "But will it take too long without me? How long has it already been? A week? How much longer do you think he has?"

Daniel suppressed a curse with a feigned chuckle. "Willy—"

"I am not Willy. My name is Jack."

Daniel frowned. "Want to tell me what you mean by that?"

Willy tilted his head to the side and favored him with a small smile. "I'm Jack," he repeated. "Willy is sleeping. I'll be handling things from here." He leaned against the table, eyes flicking between Daniel and Marcus. "You're lucky it wasn't Jimmy. He doesn't like blacks very much. I don't imagine you'd like him either. He's rather racist. It's gotten us into trouble before."

Keeping his face smooth, Daniel opened his mouth to respond, but a whispered voice in his ear prompted him to stand and leave the room without a word.

“Can anyone explain to me what just happened?” he demanded, stepping into the observation room.

“You tell me,” the chief barked, turning away from the window. “Did you see anything in your investigation about mental illness?”

Daniel shook his head. “Nothing, not even a hint.”

The chief sighed wearily and gave his attention to the window. “We’re going to have to go through this from the start then... I’ll call the squints. See if they can send over a psychologist or something.” He shook his head. “What a mess.”

He looked tired, the wings of white at his temples appearing more unfurled than they had even a week ago. Daniel wondered how much longer it would be until he looked like this—as it was, he was already graying prematurely.

“I’ll go see if I can take care of some of this paperwork,” Daniel said. “I won’t be much use here until the squint has a go at him.”

Five minutes later, he slumped into his chair and glared bleakly at the pile of sheets in his inbox. Even as he watched, another paper materialized out of the slow river of people wandering between the clumps of desks and added to the tower. Daniel rubbed his eyes and pulled it toward him, muttering to himself. It seemed, in the force, every hour in the field generated at least three hours of homework. It hadn’t been like that in his previous job.

After a set of crashing planes changed the world forever, Daniel had started his first tour in Iraq, specializing in what his superiors had liked to call “Advanced Questioning.” Daniel never liked the way they said, “Advanced,” as if it was some sort of legitimate, intellectual career instead of the ugly reality of it, but he’d been rather good at the job, which was something people in high places noticed back then. Daniel had been reluctant to become as involved, but he had believed he was helping to save lives. That had been enough for him even though he only saw his wife three times in as many years and he’d been huddled in a foxhole on the other side of the world instead of at the hospital when his son, Jalen, was born eight years ago. Two years after that, a number of investigations left Daniel without a job and he hadn’t had to justify his absence anymore. Detective work wasn’t much like what he’d done before, but he couldn’t say he never looked back. For instance, at that moment he wished he still didn’t have to do paperwork, though he set to it all the same.

Some five hours later, Daniel answered the chief’s summons and wandered into the observation room, flexing his cramping hand. Willy, Jack, whoever he was, sat in the same position as he had when Daniel left, in deep discussion with the potbellied, balding little white man sitting across the table from him, occasionally tilting his head from one side to the other as if to music only he could hear. The fat man seemed animated, practically vibrating in place as he talked.

“Is that the squint?” Daniel asked.

“That’s Dr. Johnson,” the chief answered without looking away from the window. “Says we’re dealing with Dissociative Identity Disorder.”

“Multiple personalities. I figured.” Daniel rolled his eyes when he saw the doctor rub his voluminous tummy in slow circles. *Don’t show him your tells like that!* he wanted to scream. He’d always figured psychologists would be better about not showing their hands. “You really think tubby here can get us what we need?”

The chief turned toward him, gray eyes hard. “Let it go, son.”

Daniel looked away, staring at Jack. “You have to admit that this would be an appropriate situation for it.”

“There’s no appropriate situation for torture,” the chief said shortly.

Daniel didn't answer, thinking about all the young men he'd seen mangled by IEDs, boys who might have lived if he'd been allowed to ask more questions. He thought about Micah, the last boy that had gone missing, and listened to Jack evade, distract, and generally talk the doctor in circles. Daniel had never dealt with DID, though he had broken men like Jack before. When he was in Iraq, he could waterboard an insurgent for the information he wanted, and as a detective, he'd been frustrated numerous times by his inability to get information faster. His old job had been easier. Quicker. And, this time, more acceptable; there was a kid out there, maybe dying. Last time it had been to find a man and end him.

"With all due respect," he said to the chief, "I think you'd change your mind if you'd seen what I have."

"There aren't many men with the right to say that to me," the chief said with a chuckle. "Though I didn't call you here to argue ethics. I want you to go home. Get some rest."

"But—"

"You've been up for seventy hours straight. You're no use to anyone right now. Go home. Kiss the wife, hug the kid." He glanced over when Daniel didn't move. "That wasn't a suggestion."

Daniel opened the front door to his house and slipped inside as quietly as he could, slipping off his shoes so he didn't scuff the hardwood. Jessica hated that. He fumbled his way through the darkness, sucking in the divine smell lingering in the air. Turkey?

He flicked on the light to the kitchen and sighed. Pans and plates stacked high in the sink and utensils littered the counters in the veritable mess Jessica left only when she was mad about something. Daniel had seen quite a few messy kitchens, lately. Jessica had been patient with him when he'd served overseas, understanding his desire to protect his country, but having his feet on American soil apparently put an end to that. In their frequent fights over the last few years, Daniel had tried to make her understand that his desire to protect his country didn't end just because he was in the country, and it had seemed to work until his last case, when Daniel had spent an entire month tracking a serial killer across the country and had still been forced to look at another corpse. He'd been hoping for smiles and some kind of comfort when he'd returned home, but after he'd mentioned that Jalen looked a few inches taller than last he'd seen him, Jessica had locked him out of the bedroom. Daniel had developed an intimate relationship with the couch and dirty kitchens in the time since.

Wishing for something stronger, Daniel threw down the mouthful of cabernet left in the bottle on the counter and helped himself to a cold, congealing meal. He did his best to clean up a few of the dishes, but exhaustion got the better of him and he trudged up the stairs. On the way, he stopped at Jalen's room and peeked inside. Illuminated by the flickering light of his TV, Jalen was curled into a ball with his knees to chest, wide eyes intent on his cartoons.

"Shorty," Daniel asked, stepping inside. "What are you doing up?"

Jalen twitched and looked up. "Daddy!" he screamed, leaping into his waiting arms. "Did you catch the bad guy?"

"We got him," Daniel said, squeezing his son and dropping onto the bed. He ruffled Jalen's frizzy hair. "But we didn't find the kid yet."

"You'll find him," Jalen said with certainty. "You're the good guy."

Daniel didn't answer that. "Why are you up, shorty? It's past midnight."

"I was waiting for you," Jalen said, peering up at him, brown face open and innocent.

Daniel grinned. "So what are you watching?"

"The Justice League! Lex Luthor teamed up with the Joker and Captain Boomerang."

Daniel chuckled and watched in silence.

“Daddy, who’s your favorite superhero?”

“Not sure, shorty. I was never much of a comic guy. Don’t know much beyond Batman and Superman.”

“So pick one of them!”

“Batman, then.”

“Why?” Jalen stared at him, waiting.

Daniel thought for a moment. “Because he’s more like me and the boys. He doesn’t have powers and he’s definitely a bit crazy and messed up, but he uses that to take down the bad guys.”

“Are you messed up, Dad?”

Screaming and running water. Pleading and the scent of excrement and wet wool. Daniel gritted his teeth, forcing the memories down. “We all are, son.”

“But Superman can do anything! Batman is just a detective.”

“I’m a detective,” Daniel said, smiling.

Jalen threw his hands up. “But doesn’t that mean you can only find the bad guys after they do something? Superman can fly around and stop them before.”

“Even Superman can’t be everywhere at once.”

Jalen gave him a stubborn look. “He can do that better than Batman.”

Daniel laughed. “Good point, shorty.”

“But who’s your favorite?”

Daniel yawned. “I don’t know. I’ll think about it.” Jalen nodded sagely and watched Batman punch the Joker in the face. Daniel settled back into the bed and watched until the boy fell asleep. He smiled when Jalen snored. His smile faded when he thought of Jalen sitting in a darkness like this, but alone and shivering instead of sleeping in the warmth of his father’s arms.

“No father should have to think of that,” Daniel whispered, kissing Jalen’s forehead. “It’s still Batman, shorty. Real heroes can’t fly. They have to get their hands in the dirt.”

He tucked the boy into the blankets and joined the cold reception of his own bed.

Johnson looked even worse than Daniel felt. Wilted, even. Shadowed bags hung under his eyes and his wrinkles seemed deeper, like dark crevasses in his bristly cheeks. Daniel yawned and stepped up next to him, noting the chief’s absence. In the interrogation room, Jack looked the same as before.

“Get anything?” he asked the doctor after introducing himself.

“Oh, I’ve learned quite a bit.” Johnson’s enthusiasm seemed to have faded overnight. He scratched drowsily at his bald spot. “Unfortunately, nothing of Micah. Still, it’s a fascinating case. Jack’s a wily one, he is. Every time we bring up Micah, he just smiles and switches identities, and every time that happens, there’s usually some sort of scene or another. Crying, profanity, tantrums, etcetera, etcetera. The second everything calms down, he reemerges, and I can’t get anything out of him.”

“How many identities does he have?”

Johnson glanced at him. “I’ve spoken with at least six, though that might only be the tip of the iceberg. Many recorded cases of DID have ten or so, but there have been much higher numbers. Have you ever heard of Kim Noble, the artist?” Daniel shook his head. “Well, she has at least fourteen that paint, though she’s never had any training in it. She has quite a few more, possibly as many as 100. Nobody’s entirely sure.”

Daniel swore.

“Jack is definitely the protector in this bunch,” Johnson continued. “Though he’s peculiar for that role. Capable, yes, but some protectors can’t even speak; they just fight

whatever is threatening them. Jack, though seems to enjoy this.” He rubbed his stomach. “I did learn one thing; he’s a gamer. His verbiage uses an excess of competitive words, like ‘player,’ ‘game,’ ‘contest,’ and so on. I suspect he doesn’t consider me much of a player.”

“That’s not especially helpful.”

Johnson shrugged. “Neither is he.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Daniel said, snatching an earpiece off one of the desks. “You tell me your observations from in here. You game?”

“Yes, that may work,” Johnson said, giving him a peculiar look.

Jack looked up when Daniel entered the room and actually clapped his hands. “Ah, detective! I was beginning to think you had given up the contest. What a pleasure.”

“All mine, Jack-boy,” Daniel said, throwing himself into the chair and putting his feet up on the table. “I thought it was time we chatted again.”

Jack smiled and leaned back in his chair. He knew the game. “I agree. Tell me, where is it you served, Afghanistan? Iraq?”

“We weren’t talking about me. I wanted to hear about you.”

“Not a friendly chat then, I see. Iraq it is. I suspected as much.”

“Both, if you really want to know. But what about you? Where have you served?”

“Me?” Jack tilted his head. “Just here. It might be arrogant to say, but it feels like war at times, taking care of my family. They do make such messes.”

“Your family?”

Jack’s smile widened. “Yes, my family. Willy, Jimmy, Teresa, Sarah, Jacob, and the others. They are fools, every one, but they keep me entertained.”

“Why do you protect them, then?”

Jack laughed. “Haven’t you done awful things to protect your family?”

A coughing gurgle gone silent, a suddenly rigid, cooling body under his hands.

“I would,” Daniel answered without hesitation, shaking it off. *I have.*

Jack smiled. “I thought so. Though I enjoy my work, too. Do you yours?”

Daniel could think of a time when he’d been disgusted with the vomit and meaty thuds, with the way sand clung to any amount of blood, and the way his conscience steadily lost its voice from screaming. The smile when he’d found out where those POWs were held—that hadn’t bothered him until later.

“No.”

“Come now, detective,” Jack said, tilting his head. “Don’t lie to me.”

Daniel’s fingers itched to throw a hood over that face. “Sometimes,” he admitted.

“Does that scare you? Hurting others?”

“It used to,” he said quietly. In the corner, Marcus shifted his weight, looking uncomfortable.

Jack looked excited then, leaning forward. “Tell me, Daniel, do you think that makes us damned? Will God condemn us, though we did it all to protect our own?”

“I don’t believe in God,” Daniel said. He could still remember the shocked look on Jessica’s face when he told her he wouldn’t go to church with her anymore. He’d spent that night on the couch too. “If I did, then I’d have to accept the fact that I’m going to hell.”

Jack nodded. “I don’t believe either. I don’t want to go to hell.”

Daniel let his feet fall to the ground and crossed his arms. “Why would you? Go to hell, I mean.”

Jack opened his mouth, but then stopped, shaking his head with a smile. “That would be telling, detective. No, at this point I think I’ll play my cards close to the chest.”

“That’s a shame. I wanted to hear some of these war stories.”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.” Jack’s lips spread like the Cheshire cat’s. “What do you say, detective? Tit for tat?”

Daniel glanced at Marcus, but said nothing. Would they ever look at him the same

if they knew the details of what he'd done? What would Jalen do, knowing what his father really was?

Jack chuckled and leaned back. "Disappointing, but not unexpected."

Daniel tried not to grind his teeth.

"You realize that the terms of this deal are absolutely ridiculous, right?" Daniel said on the third day of the interrogation, trying to ignore his growing headache.

"No more ridiculous than leaving a child to die," Jack pointed out.

Daniel shook his head. "I can't make the families drop charges, and kidnapping is a federal crime to begin with. Even if Micah's family could accept that, I don't have the power to make it happen." *I'm not thrilled about the idea of you walking free either.*

"You think so? I don't doubt the latter, but the former?" Jack chuckled. "Is my punishment more important than little Micah's salvation?"

Daniel sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"Tell me, detective," Jack said. "Why is this particular game so important to you?"

"It's my job," Daniel answered. "You can't do what I do unless you take it seriously."

"That may be true, but that's not the reason," Jack said, slowly shaking his head.

"Is it that you have a son? Do you sympathize with little Micah's father?"

"I don't have a son," Daniel lied carefully.

"Do you picture him lying cold and hungry?" Jack went on. "Lying alone in the dark, crying for the father who won't come?"

Daniel realized his hands were shaking. "This conversation is over," he said, standing.

Jack smiled. "Point for me, detective. What's the score, do you think?"

Daniel slammed the door behind him.

"You look pale this morning, detective," Jack said as Daniel came into the room and dropped himself into the chair. "You really ought to take better care of yourself. How well do you expect to perform without any sleep?"

"Sometimes sleep doesn't seem that important," Daniel said in tired voice, rubbing at the temples that would not stop pulsing. In the past week, Daniel hadn't seen the back of his eyelids for longer than a few hours at a time, and that time lying on the couch. Avoiding home in favor of working on Jack for the first two days had provoked Jessica to bar him from the bedroom again. Daniel couldn't bring himself to regret his work, but it twisted his stomach that his son didn't even ask why his father was sleeping on the couch instead of his bed when he wandered down the stairs, looking for breakfast.

Jack smiled at him. "Like times when a small boy is dying in the dark?"

Daniel's knuckles cracked.

"Another point, I think," Jack said. "You're falling behind, detective."

Daniel braced his elbows on the table. "Look, Jack, it's been two weeks. Tell me this: is Micah even still alive?"

"Rather direct this morning, I see. I preferred the foreplay." He leaned forward. "Have you managed to achieve any of my conditions?"

"You know we haven't."

"I thought not," he said, leaning back in his chair again. "I will give you exactly as much as you've given me: nothing."

Daniel clenched his fists, the gray bodies of the two boys they'd found flashing through his head. He could still hear their families accusing him, "You're not doing your job!" He saw Jalen's trusting face.

Jack tilted his head, smiling at him. "You seem upset. What will you do, detective?"
What would be worse? Daniel thought. *Taking the information I know is here, or doing nothing?*

Daniel stood, motioning to Marcus. "Can I talk to you a moment?"

Marcus looked confused, but stepped through the door as Daniel held it open. Moving quickly, Daniel slammed the door, jammed his chair under the knob, and turned to look at Jack, who raised his eyebrows. As the door rattled, Daniel set his earpiece on the table and rolled up his sleeves.

Jack just smiled as Daniel advanced, neither of them listening to the shouting coming through the earpiece on the table.

"I'm not going to be able to see you for a few days, Jalen," Daniel said into the phone. "Yes, I know I haven't been around much. We'll talk about it when I see you...I know, shorty. I'm truly, truly sorry...No, I won't be home for a while." The guard tapped his watch, giving him an apologetic look. Daniel glared at him. "Listen, shorty, I have to go. I love you so much...Oh, and Jalen? You were right. Superman is better...Love you, son."

He hung up and stared at the tile floor, clenching his fists. The guard wasn't rough as he took his arm, but he still had a job to do. Daniel allowed himself to be led back to his cell, a small, bare room with a toilet, sink, and a bunk-bed. He sat on the bed and stared at his hands. He'd managed to wash the blood off, but it still felt like it was there. It always did.

"That's not the Daniel I know," the chief said, pulling up a chair on the other side of the bars. "I never saw Daniel looking this sorry for himself."

Daniel jumped to his feet. "Did you find him? Is he all right?"

The chief held up a hand, waving for him to sit. "Yeah, we have found him. He's in critical. Severe dehydration and all that. But they say he'll pull through."

"Thank God," Daniel said, collapsing into the bed. "Then it was worth it."

"Willy will recover too, if that matters at all," the chief said.

Daniel avoided his eyes.

"I disagree with what you did," the chief said, sitting. "It was wrong on a hundred different levels. But..."

Daniel sat up. "But what?"

"But the doctors said that if Micah had gone much longer without attention, he wouldn't have made it.

Daniel frowned. "Are you telling me that what I did was right?"

"Absolutely not," the chief said, pulling a flask from his jacket. "But it saved his life."

Daniel nodded "He thinks he won, you know. Jack. He thinks he proved I'm not any better than he is. But I knew that already." He shook his head. "People like me shouldn't exist."

"People like you shouldn't have to," the chief agreed, taking a sip.

"I thought you gave up drinking," Daniel said, indicating the flask.

"And I'll do it again," the chief said. "Want to hear something? Micah's parents wanted me to thank you. Not me. Not the rest of the force. Just you. Even knowing what you did." The chief took another swig before reaching through the bars to hand the flask to him. "This was yours, son. I hate what you did and you hate what you did, but it gave those parents their son back from the dead. We can celebrate that."

Daniel thought of Jalen, took the flask, and emptied it. It burned like fire all the way down.

THE BIG BLACK CAR

J.E. Tankersley

I heard the tires rolling
into the neighborhood
before I ever saw
the big black car
gleaming around the corner.
It came once for the neighbor's
aunt, and again for
an older man
from down the street.
But when it cut its wheels into
my driveway, I ran inside,
pulled the curtains.
The dogs still needed
feeding,
the floor was peppered
with dirty prints,
and the dishes sat
only half done,
thick in detergent.
I wanted to make
a call to my folks,
take a shower,
pack a bag—
but the phones
were dead,
the soap bottles
dry as a bone,
and the laundry
a dirty pile
in the hamper.
So I said goodbye
to the dogs, locked
the doors behind me,
and left a note that read:
“Sorry about the mess.”



MARLEE

Christopher Mauldin

My sister had a collection of marionettes
when she was younger
that she kept above my room
in the attic.

Ones in pink dresses
and blue dresses
and green, dangling from posts that were
screwed into the wall.

They stared downward
through the floorboards at me—
with carved smiles and tangled strings
that sat still in the daytime.

At night, I could hear them clacking,
like skeletons in the dark, waltzing in three-four
to the whippoorwill's song.



DRESSING FOR CHURCH

Jenna Branham

I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth.
My hair was washed
with trailer park mud—
hands cleaned with a can of Budweiser.
Dreams of leaving a single wide
with paper walls
disrupted
by skinned knees
and a hand-me-down Sunday dress.



ECHO HOLLOW [AN EXCERPT]

Cody Rabideau

The clearing at the end of Echo Hollow Road wasn't what he expected, and when Richard reached it he felt his breath catch in his lungs. His eyes widened in awe, and his mouth hung slightly agape. His hands rested loosely on the handlebars of the Schwinn like waterlogged gloves. The cold fabric of his jeans seemed to chaff his inner thighs even as he stood still, his left foot stuck to one of the pedals, and his right foot sinking slowly into mud. His chambray shirt was nearly see-through and small bundles of chest hair peeked out from the open collar like growing foliage.

The clearing was about thirty feet in diameter. The trees on either side of the road that created a natural canopy bore off to the left and right, coalescing in an almost perfect circle, one which Richard thought was more perfect than a man-made cul-de-sac. Men of course were imperfect, only clawing and grasping at perfection with greedy hands. But nature was different. And although Richard knew that if human interference in the forest was a viable explanation for this clearing, he wouldn't believe it. The trees almost hummed with life, and even in the beating rain their leaves glimmered and twitched like tiny, forlorn shields. The rain was more prominent in the clearing, and as Richard looked up towards the sky he could see jagged gray bits of clouds through the tree limbs like pieces of a foggy mirror. They weren't interwoven as neatly here in the clearing, and they allowed the rain to reach the ground in heavy puddles across the clearing. It hadn't been raining for long, but Richard could already see puddles running together, and soon the earth would be flooded with water and he wouldn't be able to cross it.

And standing adjacent to Richard, on the far side of the clearing—*on the far side of the universe*, Richard thought—was a disheveled homestead. The foundation was mostly intact, though it wasn't much more than a square plot of broken concrete that looked as if it had been jackhammered in many places by the beating rain and the icy grip of southern winters. The front steps—that Terrance had said were simple and made of wood—were gone, as Richard had assumed they would be. The only wall that still stood was the back wall. It ran twenty feet across the back of the foundation, rough-hewn like a blackened piece of meat. The wall was warped and it reminded Richard of a ribbon, flowing slowly, almost imperceptibly in the driving rain. The stairs that had once led up to the second level were almost burned away. What remained looked like a charred stack of ribs. At the top was a small landing that stretched towards the back wall, and twenty feet in the air was a solid wood beam that had once been the main center of support for the second floor. Richard stared at the beam with dreadful longing. There was a hole in the back wall that at one point would have been a window, perhaps lined with flowers on the outside. It was now a warped oval with jagged edges, like the maw of an animal, beckoning for Richard to come closer, to let his curiosity best him.

Richard shivered, peering through the patches of falling rain, his eyes fixed on the stairs. *Should I climb them? Will they support my weight? Why am I even here?* But the answers came easily, easily enough to make his stomach churn with foreboding

and revulsion, at both himself and the idea. He wasn't going crazy, but he had to come here to see how dark it really felt. To see if there was something here that made Terrance's father set fire to the building, though he felt sure there wouldn't be—because those kinds of things appear only to children. But there was *something* here, something like electricity hanging in the air that made Richard feel drawn to the building, something *familiar*. He looked at the beam. It stretched out across the second floor like a...like a...

Log. Like a log across a river.

The bike fell from Richard's hands and clattered into the mud with a squelching sound. Its wheels began to spin with the tiny noise of a ticking clock. Richard began to walk towards the house. Richard believed Sophie and Caroline. He believed that they had seen something or heard something or felt something in the shed. He believed Sophie because he had to believe her, it was part of his job as a parent. And there *was* something in that shed, wasn't there? Not a corporeal form of the boogeyman—which Richard knew they wouldn't find—but something worse, like Timothy's gun. Perhaps Sophie's intuition about the danger that *really* lurked in the shed caused a fabrication of her imagination. It was possible. The imagination, after all, was the true final frontier.

And now as Richard approached the foundation of the house he remembered what it was like to be a child and alone in the dark. His heart felt like a thick ball of ice in his chest. His breathing was labored and he could hear his nose whistling wildly with each inhale. His arms were going numb, spreading upwards from his fingertips, like blood poisoning. His legs would be numb soon too. He could feel the blood surging through the veins in his temples and it seemed that they could, they might, simply burst like an aneurysm, and the last thing he would see was the rain pouring over Echo Hollow Road, bleak and filled with shadows.

Richard froze with his right foot on the foundation. He looked around the house with his eyes wide and frightened. Darkness had descended around him; light, twirling gray had become the phantom realm of black thunderheads swooping and hollering above. The rain attacked the tops of the forest like a busted hose, and Richard could hear branches ripping with tenebrous glee and crashing to the earth like the sound of snapping bones. Richard's eyes fell onto the window leading out to the backside of the house and the forest behind it. Richard absently thought that the forest was infinite, just as when he was thirteen he assumed that the field stretched infinitely in all directions. The trees were tangled together like dreadlocked hair, and they glistened like black marble pillars in the storm. A deep violet light pulsed from between them, and Richard felt the blood rush out of his face. His skin grew feverish, and cold beads of sweat broke out on his brow.

Richard moved.

He took seven steps into the house and began to mount the stairs. He placed one foot tentatively on the bottom step, allowing it to support his weight if it could. When it didn't crumble beneath him, he moved up another. And then another.

Go home, Richard. You're not a kid anymore. You may be scared like a kid, but you're not a kid. You're not a kid.

Richard stood on the landing, the opened roof sticking up around him like the broken walls of a fallen kingdom, and he looked up into the bruised sky letting rain strike his face, making his eyes blink. He looked to his right at the beam. It was blackened with fire and worn with age, peeling in places that made it look like the spine of a dragon. The center of the beam was particularly thin, splintering, caving in on itself. The house was burned down almost seventy years ago, but this beam was still standing. It would support him. Surely.

Richard moved slowly, one foot sliding at a time, not looking anywhere but at the wall directly in front of him. No faceless man would appear this time. That was child's play, and Richard was not a child. But still his heart leaped, still he wondered. There was no way to know anything absolutely. As Richard neared the middle of the beam, he imagined Timothy standing on the far side of the beam, his eyes fixed on Richard, thinking about what it would be like if Richard fell. If he died. Richard wanted to stop, to turn back and forget that he'd ever come here, but then he thought of how Timothy would feel if Richard gave up. He would be satisfied, complacent. Richard could almost hear Timothy tittering in his ear, daring him, double-dog daring him to make it past the middle. Daring him to be a man.

And then his hands felt the cold, wet wall and he could breathe again. The wood hadn't snapped beneath his weight, and he had not slipped, and Timothy had not this time hesitated to save him. And then he heard something move behind him. A branch clattered in the trees, snapping with a clear and clean resonance over the falling rain. It seemed calculated, like someone had gripped the bark and pulled the branch to its breaking point. Richard tasted panic like liquid copper in his mouth, and he started back across the beam, moving quicker because he'd made it across once, and because his heart was ramming against his ribs, and his mind was suddenly alight with the idea that he shouldn't be here at all. That he needed to leave, that there was something in the woods and it was coming for him.

When his feet touched the landing in front of the stairs, the beam behind him cracked. He turned around in time to watch a piece of the beam break free from the whole structure and fall to the floor in a cloud of black dust. He saw trees moving behind the house when he looked back, their tops waving at him like gloved fingers. He couldn't have seen the trees shake and rattle like that, could he? It had to be the rain, or the wind. Richard started down the stairs. He heard something ruffling through the trees, shaking them and cracking twigs and branches as it moved through the forest. He jumped from the foundation and hit the ground with his legs already fanning back and forth like pendulums. His right shoe sank into the earth and mud ran up over his ankle to seep into his shoe. He saw the trees shake again. He heard the sound of breaking branches. Then he heard only the sound of his own heart against his chest and the falling rain. And then he ran.

He ran like a man on an adrenaline high. His feet burned, and his lungs felt like shredding paper bags. The bicycle was close now, perhaps only a few feet away. Richard pushed himself harder, pumping his arms like pistons, and driving his legs into the sodden ground. He felt the wind pick up around him, and the rain started to sting his eyes. He knew he couldn't last long; he could already feel his legs starting to wobble beneath the weight of his rain soaked clothes. When he reached the bicycle, he lifted it with both hands like a prize. Mud splashed over his hands and onto his shirt. The knees of his jeans were coated with muck and grass. He struggled to balance on the bike, and his backside throbbed. But that wasn't important. What was important was leaving. He barely registered the forest around him, and he tried not to think of how fast he would have to pedal to get away—or even if he *could* pedal fast enough to outrun whatever was behind him. He was only fully aware of how dark the trees were, and the ripe smell of rotted flesh that was wrapping around him like a cocoon. He turned his head briefly and saw something dark moving in the line of trees behind the house. He couldn't make it out but it was all he needed to see. He started pedaling as fast as he could, driving his feet in circles, moving the bike out of the muck and onto the semi-dry dirt underneath the canopy of trees. He didn't hear any more noises, save for the deep thudding of his own dark imagination, but Richard didn't look back because, in the end, Richard really did believe in monsters.

THE DARK SIDE OF FAITH

Cara Dillon

Doubt never invades or crashes my faith party in an obvious and expected way, like the arguments of an intelligent atheist or the philosophical pontifications of a well read agnostic. It's the subtle abrasion by difficult circumstances that, when multiplied by my factor of faith, turns out a product of doubt instead of hope.

One such season was seeded by the unexpected pregnancy and subsequent courthouse marriage of a faithful friend. We had lost touch for about six months until I began hearing from others that she, an unwed leader in the youth group, was pregnant and married. I told them they must be mistaken since the last time we spoke she shared her plans with me of oversees mission work and didn't even have a boyfriend. But once we met for coffee and she rose from the table to greet me, her over-reaching tee shirt confirmed the rumors. She explained that her now husband had told her he wasn't even able to have children and that a prophetic word from God about their future marriage would make their premarital indiscretions inconsequential. I wasn't shocked by her pregnancy, but by the way faith was wielded to steer her there. Despite the endorsement of his "prophecy" and their miracle child, I was less than trusting of this man, especially after we met. His first words to me, after my friend introduced us were, "God Bless you," with both hands clasped around mine to shake. I wanted to curtly assert that I hadn't sneezed, but I was too startled at the inconsistency of the whole equation. I was disturbed by the power of faith as it is wielded over the weak.

Those seeds of confusion were watered and fed by more faith abusers who declared rest as selfish, any feelings as untrustworthy, and discontent as disobedience. I spent three months working at a Christian summer camp serving the well-to-do families of the greater metro Houston area during their summer vacation. That environment was conditioned by staff members who equated spiritual fervor with ceaseless smiling. "Smiles a lot" was actually a graded category on our final evaluations. While tolerating such a monotone faith was difficult, what happened next was worst. The seeds of confusion about faith and forgeries disappeared, as circumstances changed and time went on, to leave behind sprouts of uncertainty growing into rooted plants of doubt, draining all the nutrients from my soil of faith. I was able to leave that environment, but I was unable to control the spread of its effects on my soul.

Contributing factors can be identified, but there's no procedure, like a faith autopsy, to definitively declare cause of doubt because doubt arises as much inside of us as it does from factors outside of us, and both are resistant to our control. As in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the narrator knows she is losing her mind, but she is unable to halt its progression. Had she been unaware of her own disintegration, I could easily write her off as senseless and absurd. But her lucidity amidst the turmoil forced me to accept that not only am I unable to control the tragedies that face me ahead, but I may not even be in complete control of my very self.

For me, doubt then ushered in the dark night of the soul, when faith felt as distant as whatever I wished for on my tenth birthday candles. Whatever it was was hopeful, fleeting, and if I were granted it now, it wouldn't be of any use because of how dramatically

my priorities and perspectives that have changed. I discovered that doubt is the ever-present shadow of faith. Whether we like it or not, as one tries to walk through life in faith, a shadow of doubt, darkness, and fear will tag along and maybe even grow. Mother Teresa once confessed, “When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven—there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.” As she disclosed to few others during her lifetime, this was the constant state of her soul in the midst of her ministry in India that only seemed to deepen as her life went on.

In my first season of darkness, friends would sit with me on my green damask printed couch and tell me not to worry because God had a plan. I knew that, and knew the same was true for Jesus, and the Bible gives us four accounts of how that painful plan worked out for him. Or, when my current concern was about something as shallow as money, the optimistic faithful would tell me, “God will take care of you,” but I didn’t see how homeless people fit into their affirmation. Those were the days when the Gospel tasted stale, like bread that’s been on the kitchen counter for a week. There was no sweetness, no freshness to its message. No joy or comfort in its consistency. It was a necessity kept because there wasn’t anything better to replace it. The dark night of the soul became an attempt to figure out both what I lost and where it was and wondering why I was so damn alone in the darkness.

Church was no reprieve for a lonely, thirsty soul, but a visit to a foreign land. My spiritual eyes were veiled and I could only view services filled with a language now unacceptable to my unspiritual ears with the distant examination and unwavering scrutiny of an anthropologist. Who were these people and why do they do these things? The singing and praying and baptisms of fellow believers didn’t usher me into the presence of God or propel me to meditate on His goodness. They only intensified the track of questioning in my mind that simply repeated, “What is going on here?”

There’s a scene in the movie *Hook* in which a grown-up Peter Pan, played by Robin Williams, returns to Neverland with the lost boys. Dinner is announced and they all sit at a large table filled with what Peter sees as empty bowls and dishes. But the boys are gorging themselves on this nothingness, taking spoonfuls and handfuls of air, chewing and declaring its deliciousness. They even serve themselves second helpings of invisible spoonfuls. But Peter sits there, bewildered, hungry, and at a loss for how to help himself to the meal. That’s what spiritual darkness feels like in church, like everyone else is feasting on food you can’t even see.

But, despite my sense of isolation, my eyes were opened to the pervasive presence of spiritual darkness through the heartfelt confessions of a number of young women at the summer camp we were working together. In a place that was so full of uninhibited fun and silliness, comical skits and professions of faith, girl after girl on staff confessed to me the heavy and dark burdens she carried of despondency and doubt. One revelation happened next to storage closets of Styrofoam cups and to-go boxes as she wept in frustration and another in hushed voices over deep wash sinks filled with dirty dishes and wrinkled hands and again, another disclosure occurred over cutting boards of cucumbers and tomatoes, but wasn’t mentioned again. Once it took place when I rode down flat Texas roads into the ceaseless horizon with a girl who just finished her sophomore year of college and again, another young woman opened up as we sat on a long bench facing a placid pond and her voice wavered as she spoke. Each prosaic setting revealed the girl’s desperation to just talk about it. They each admitted these struggles with a kind of shame and the affirmation that I was the only other person on staff who knew. I watched each of them shoulder this burden and still compel herself to hold a smile for the campers. Their concealment was the pragmatic answer to the task at hand. They each kept these heartaches hidden so they could continue to smile and strive.

Diving into these shadowy places takes time, time to rip open wounds and then slowly let them heal, but we honor busy Christians instead of deep ones. That's why we keep burying it down deep and covering it over with duties and tasks. We simply don't have time for this hard spirituality. Walking through the darkness feels like a waste of time if it keeps us from building spiritual resumes. I want to be perceived as sharing in the faithful foundation of the saints without the hard work of trudging through the darkness on my way to the light. If I showed others what a spiritual mess I was, they might tell me to take some time off and actually make me deal with what's going on inside. Or, even worse, they might tell me to keep on.

This fear of stepping away from religious activity reveals that I hope and even expect that my spiritual performance will earn God's presence and response. Especially as one who intends to make a vocation out of faith, if I were to show the cracks of hesitation and confusion, what would happen to the shiny religious veneer that people see? I admit it's largely fueled by my pride as well. I want others to see me as faithful, as strong, and as an example of faith.

But I'm also quick to run from difficult seasons because our Christian culture doesn't believe that pain and disappointment and sorrow are as normal and human and spiritual as joy and peace and happiness. To complicate matters further, our American perspective, that champions bootstrap pulling as a way of life, doesn't view sadness and uncertainty as just different emotions, but illnesses in need of diagnosis. I'm afraid of accepting dark times in this society that can sometimes mistake melancholy for mental illness. Another friend of mine went to a doctor during her first semester of college, an uneasy and tumultuous growing season, and her doctor promptly prescribed her an antidepressant. Afterward, she figured out that she didn't need a note from a transcription pad. She just needed to transfer to a different school. But no one advised her to see this season through, to allow her unease to unravel like a spool of thread until she found its end. She wasn't wisely counseled to receive these human emotions and seek to understand them, but to medicate them away.

Then, on top of that general distaste for the idea of melancholy inside and outside the church, add additional shame for actually feeling negative emotions from those extra other-worldly Christians. If Christ is not enough to make us happy all the time, we must just be too "worldly" and need to do more. I think this the most common response to dark seasons. Try harder. Be happier. Relax more. Pray more. Read more scripture. Have more faith. This is even worse nowadays with so many displaying their spiritual fervor on social media. All social media outlets seem to declare that everyone you know thinks you need to hear about what spiritual revelation they had in a blog post or fill your twitter-feed with Bible verses or show you a photo of their open Bible and coffee mug. It's really best just to avoid all of it, especially on Sundays. Then, in the "Spiritual Growth" area of the Christian bookstore, akin to the "Self-help" section, Joel Osteen smiles at me on the cover next to fifty or so other books that systematically outline how to have "Your Best Life Now" and I have to step back and wonder how it could ever be that simple.

I once saw a piece by artist Tracey Emin called *My Bed*. It was an installation of the setting in which she spent days depressed. Her bed was dirty with disheveled sheets and trash littering the floor surrounding the bed. The image stuck with me because I kept thinking what an act of courage it had to be to put on display your darkest hour. The piece was applauded by the art world, who are familiar with darkness are sorrow. I was impressed because she chose to reveal and use that darkness, something that's hard to do in church because such lack of certainty and conviction is often viewed as traitorous betrayal. Ellen Charry, writer and theologian, pinpointed the root of this phenomenon, stating, "On the view that God's goodness, knowledge, and power are absolute, shock and anger in the face of tragedy are unseemly because

they appear to doubt God. On a very strong belief in God's powerful goodness, what happens must be for our good, and we should rejoice gratefully, even if we are being punished. For such persons, lament is also precluded because it conveys a questioning of divine goodness" (Pembroke 55). Doubt and sorrow are no longer just emotions, but threats to faith.

Maybe we don't know what to do with our melancholy in church because emotions are often abused there. Think about the hellfire and brimstone fear used to create repentance or the "salvation chords" that the piano player magically begins playing as the pastor begins the altar call, or the guilt that's used to encourage church members to give more time or money or something. Or, the guilt used to scare teenagers out of having sex and the prayers that aren't prayed to persuade God but the parishioners. Church is like those heartbreaking ASPCA commercials for sickly animals with "In the Arms of an Angel" playing in the background.

And the social structure of the church keeps me pushing those feelings down deep, too. Potlucks are no place to begin discussing deep fears and doubts over mashed potatoes and macaroni salad. And that awkward three minutes when we all turn around in the pews and greet your neighbor is only long enough to smile and shake hands, not express any pain or uncertainty. I can't imagine the look on the elderly woman's face in the pew behind me, when she grab my hand, clasped by both of her cold, delicate hands and declares, "I'm so glad you're here," if I responded with, "My soul feels dark and I can't sense God and I feel like all of this is as real as a Comicon convention right now." Would she still be glad I was there, even offer to cry with me, or would she find my confession inappropriate? Or, if you frequent a less traditional church like I usually do, it's likely that you won't even shake hands with anyone, but you'll pass a door greeter or two who will again, smile and say, "Hello." But if I don't smile back, do they sense how I'm burdened down by the world, or just assume I'm rude and continue to welcome the masses? I wouldn't blame them for finding me rude or inappropriate because the alternative is just awkward. Just as I haven't learned how to share these things, none of us have been taught to hear them.

"Well, just tell her to do things she enjoys and tell her not to worry about it." That was my mother's advice to me regarding my friend's experience of depression and anxiety. "Mom, you can't do that," I tried to tell her. I had no idea how to explain to her that such advice wasn't an option, how it was just different from a friend who broke up with her boyfriend. You solved that with Ben&Jerry's. My friend was daily taking something much stronger. She told me she felt caught in this cycle: she had no desire for scripture reading or church going, wouldn't partake in either and then felt immense guilt for both her lack of desire and activity. While others advised my friend to hold on to things like schedules, consistent exercise, and religious activity as life preservers until she was plucked from the sea of darkness, I couldn't help but think she might be better off just stepping away for a time to understand her doubt instead of devising a timetable to make it go away. Likewise, I tried to be patient with my mom. She's of the generation and upbringing that didn't really deal with depression. The bible literalists of her generation worried more about dancing than they did mental illness. It makes sense though. With two parents who lived through the 1930's, depression had a very different meaning in my mother's home. So, like those before her, my mother was unable to teach me how to just patiently meet with doubt and disbelief and those experiencing them.

So, like Job's companions, we often attempt to offer shallow encouragement and instruction as salve instead of staying silent. It will get better. There's a greater plan. Think positively. This is for your good. God is sanctifying you through this. But Proverbs 25:20 says, "Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." The writer adequately describes

a person who gushes with hope and gladness to those in pain as awful, as the kind of person who would steal the covers off of you as you slumber on a cold morning. It's cold and very cruel.

Maybe that's why people outside the church find Christians difficult to relate to. We often offer only simplistic religious platitudes for your sadness, if we even acknowledge the pain at all—because real difficulty, especially if it is experienced personally, thrusts us back into the classic questioning of the problem of pain. As Christians, because of our eternal hope, we're easy targets for the lie that God just wants us to be happy here and now, until life offers a rebuttal. To suffer through difficulty with someone, we would have to dive headfirst into accepting that the health and wealth promises in exchange for payments and prayers really are lies, not just something we theologically disagree with, but a deception that we feel down to the bone because the uncertainty of life and the wickedness of man have confirmed it for us. We'd rather bake you a casserole than wrestle through that with you.

I can never figure out if those people with their anti-suffering slogans are simply unaffected by the world or unaware of it. It could just be my personal dislike of people who are always happy that makes all of these negative feelings so difficult to deal with. No one can be that happy all of the time. Regardless, the world is not that good. With the daily bombardment of news reports detailing tragedies in the East, corruption in the West, and unnumbered evidences of human depravity all over the world, how does such pretentious cheeriness thrive anywhere, especially the church that's filled with stumbling and recovering wrongdoers?

Christians often confess that one needn't clean him or herself up before coming before God, but we often mean so for tangible sins. You can bring God your alcoholism and your addiction, but what about despondency? I think when the church traded organs for drum sets and electric guitars in church we nixed all the songs in minor keys with the melodies that soothed longing, languishing souls. If darkness is a threat to faith and not natural to it, we must drown it out with celebration and praise alone. Churches may not say this from the pulpit, but it's being communicated nonetheless. Neil Pembroke writes, in *Pastoral Care In Worship: Liturgy And Psychology In Dialogue*, "It is not surprising, therefore, that most of our congregations fail to offer people an opportunity to lament. The psalms of lament hardly ever see the light of day. There is an unrelenting positive tonality in virtually all of our worship services. It doesn't seem to occur to many worship leaders that complaining to God and expressing anger have a central place in Christian liturgy" (Pembroke 46).

I think an over-realized eschatology is partially to blame. Yes, we overcome all things through Christ, even death, but this world we're in is still full of death and disappointment and all sorts of other awful things. Pastor Matt Chandler comments on Christians' attempts to declare now what has yet to be. He recalls, "I've heard preachers and pastors come out of 1 Corinthians 15 at funerals where it says, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" And I always want to go, "Right here! We're at a funeral. There's a body in a casket. The sting is right here" (Chandler). Despite the fact that there is a day that death will no longer claim any more captives, we're not there yet. And we don't need to pretend that we are. One day all tears will be wiped away, but we're not there yet, so our lives are free to reflect that reality.

Our view of spiritual superheroes has been inflated well beyond their humanity, too. Do we find Paul declaring his immanent death or his thorn in the flesh with callous indifference or difficulty? What on earth would churches have done with King David? He'd definitely be taken off the elder board because of his intense mood swings. How would we ever know his theology underneath all of his honest doubts and frank confessions? When Judas denied him and his friends abandoned him, did Jesus stoically declare, "Well, it's clearly all a part of God's plan," or did he hurt? Jesus' garden

experience is typically pinpointed as his most human moment of carrying pain. I agree that it is the moment he was most downcast, but not necessarily the most human moment of pain. It's not exactly something everyone will identify with and because of that, sometimes it seems like we can't be sad in the same way. Instead, I love the story of Lazarus in the gospel of John. Jesus' friend Lazarus, whom Jesus loves, dies. When Jesus heads toward the tomb where Lazarus was laid, he weeps. Then, Jesus raises Lazarus back to life after he had been dead for four days.

I've always loved Jesus' choice to weep. It isn't out of the ordinary until you realize that Jesus knew that he could and would bring Lazarus back to life and yet He cried with the mourners anyway. I don't think he did it just for their benefit, for their comfort. I think he did it because he was sad. He was human and he was sad that his friend had died because death isn't supposed to happen. Each tear declared, "This isn't how it should be." By embracing that pain, every tear protested the rightness of death and loss. His weeping was just as much a rebellion against the presence of evil on earth as Lazarus' subsequent healing was. Jesus knew better than everyone else that this wasn't how things were supposed to go. He is allowed to lament because pain, sorrow, darkness, death, and loss were never supposed to be a part of our lives.

I sense this same thing in the psalms of lament, a simultaneous heartache and trust of God. They begin with this gut-wrenching wrestling and almost accusatory questioning of God. "Why, God? Why, God?" they all inquire. This goes on for stanzas outlining their plight and their heartache. But then, many of them suddenly switch their song. Psalm 13 takes a screeching halt from its questioning to markedly declare, "But I trust in your unfailing love." I used to think this was the moment that God swooped in and saved the day, as if the Psalmist was penning his questions and petitions to God and all of the sudden, someone ran in to inform the writer at his desk that God had taken all the troubles away and so the remainder of the psalm changed.

But we know nothing about the outcome of the psalmist's situation. I only assume that the situation changed because the song does. So, what if nothing changed? One scholar notes, "There is nothing to suggest that the psalmist has dropped his protest against God's adverse disposition. Simultaneous with the psalmist's confession of present trust is his complaint of God's hiddenness" (Villanueva 68). What if the most comforting thing about this psalm is not that God swoops in and changed things, but that these declarations of doubt and trust are side by side, juxtaposed to vindicate our messy emotional and spiritual states? Perhaps we can tread the same line of faith and doubt, making devoted declarations of trust with parts of our hearts still lagging behind in the terrain of uncertainty.

Maybe that's the problem: once we get to this point we know God *can* save but then we realize, that sometimes God *doesn't*. It hurdles us back to the realization we had when we first surrendered: God is God and we are not. I wonder if this realization was as unsatisfying for Job as it can be for us. *Oh, despite all the pain and uncertainty you still expect me to trust you?* Maybe that's what Jesus was really thinking in the Garden, too.

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AS CARNIVORES

J.E. Tankersley

We slink through forests and fields on our tiptoes, scanning the brush and boughs for small mammals or avian life, and wince at the slightest snap of a twig. When we spot something, a little bunny or squirrel, we freeze up, tight as a knot, and wait until it takes a seat on a thin branch or fallen log. We hold our breaths before firing pieces of metal through the air at incredible speeds that slice through the breeze with a deafening roar. They pierce into the little thing's flesh and scatter the life out of its body and onto the roots behind it like a can of red spray-paint. And, with a sense of satisfaction, a pearly grin, we stuff the carcass into a bag and trudge back to our homes and families where we show off the deceased like a trophy. We tear off the fuzzy creature's fur and skin, cutting off its hands and feet before disemboweling it right there on the front lawn. We spray it off with a garden hose, soak it in saltwater for hours, and toss it onto a crackling fire of cinders where we burn its flesh until it's a nice, golden brown. If that wasn't enough, we tear it into pieces with metal claws and stuff those morsels into a damp, sticky hole full of thirty-something jagged bones and a wriggling coil of flesh that cuts and crushes and mulls them around until they're nothing more than a warm wad of meat paste. Then we suck it down a long, ribbed tube and let it plop and splash into a vat of hot acid.

But still, it's hard to argue with the results of a perfectly seared duck breast that's been boiled in its own fat and garnished with thyme.



THE PIT

J.E. Tankersley

In my front yard,
beneath the sloping boughs
of oak and maple,
I found a pit.

I started tossing in whatever
I could find—empty bottles
and cigarettes, old DVDs
and tube televisions. I would
count the seconds as they fell
before shattering on the bottom;
always the same, ten Mississippi—
a soft clatter.

I noticed my neighbors
standing by their pits and rolling
in their grills and cars, breaking off
the siding from their homes
and tossing it in.

And near my house,
in front of a small, wooden shack
with a water warped front door,
I saw a man scribbling
poems in a notepad,
tossing the leaves into his own pit.
And this one read:

“The Lion wanted a Lionheart,
while the Tinman would have settled
for a Lion’s heart—
and the Scarecrow would have never
thought of it that way.”



DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME

Laurie Epps

The fog rises off the pavement,
blinding, yet greeting the day and
engulfing my minivan.

Our cars stack up in the drop off line
much like bricks and mortar,
sending off our kids to school.

An elderly crossing guard
flags me into traffic.
I set off into the morning alone.



IT DIDN'T TAKE A KISS FROM A PRINCE

Margaret B. Hayes

It didn't take a kiss from a prince
to waken me this morning, and I
didn't see anything new in the mirror
on the wall but I'm curious about
this house. (I'm sure it's a house.)

Now life is not like a fairy tale but
in the imagination, one can become
a princess, a queen or a witch, and
I'm sure that inside this house
are three beds, one huge,
the other two, diminished in size,

and in the kitchen on the table, gingerbread
warm from the oven, door open,
and up the brick stairs on the right,
seven small beds with illegible names carved
on each one, and I wouldn't be surprised to see
a little girl dressed in red running up the steps,
basket in hand,
and lurking around the corner,
something that looks like a wolf.



A SPACE FOR NOTHING

Christopher Mauldin

In the window
of the little toy shop
sits a space for
nothing.

The children
play with one toy
and drop it for another,
running here, jumping there—
jumping, jumping—
but only the parents look at the
nothing.

The mom and dad listen
to a yesterday's whisper wrapped
around their tightly wound,
newly woven belt loops.

She sees her first doll,
worn and faded, and played with.
He sees his old army men,
the ones the dog got a hold of.
They stare at the nothing,
at the toys of their youth,
while the children
make noises behind them.



PUZZLE PRINTED BED SHEETS [AN EXCERPT]

Christopher Mauldin

“Care to tell me,” Benjamin began, “why you’re cooking...” He peered over the edge, down into the red, stainless steel pot sitting on the stovetop. “I’m sorry, what are you cooking?”

Allie batted a chunk of beef against the side of the pot with her spoon, onion bits and carrot slices catching between the two in the broth it all was simmering in. “It’s only a roast, Benjamin,” she said with a laugh. “It’s not all that fancy. Besides, don’t you think Mary and Matthew would appreciate something other than pizza or fast food?”

She was right; Benjamin knew it. It was special after all, and with the way Matthew and he had been getting along as of late, Benjamin was more than just a little excited for his brother.

“You’re right, you’re right.” Benjamin plucked a carrot out of the broth while it was still a little raw, sat down at the table, and bit it through with a snap. He watched the sun dip down, down below the wooden fenceposts lining their backyard. It was still bright enough to see the porch he’d built just this spring, the tree house he’d built with his sons last spring, and the last of the gopher mounds left until fall. He sat back, crunching down on the last of the carrot slice, peering out into the coming dark.

Fireflies were what Benjamin missed most about moving out west, though it wasn’t until he was here that he realized he missed them. This was about their time too, when the sun dipped down and the world was colored a soft toned sepia, when summer was encroaching on spring, when it was just close enough to be yearning for it, but not yet here, in the throes of heat, when it was not so quietly being wished away. It was a sweet time, a simple time, a favorite time for a younger Benjamin, when he’d scoop up fireflies in the neighbor’s yard with all the other neighborhood children.

The cul-de-sac he lived in once was all he’d known, the rounded-off end of a higher class neighborhood south of Charlotte. He grew up a proper southerner, or so he heard from the mothers next door. “—nothin’ like those rednecks and hillbillies everyone *thinks* we are.”

“I mean my gosh,” they’d say, “is that all we’re known for anymore?”

His mother was a beautiful woman, taller than most, who wore clothes that soothed the eyes with soft colors and the occasional polka dot. While the other women gleamed and sparkled, she sat back, simply, with her simple hair, clothes, and smile that were, after all, anything but simple.

He and his brother sat, those days, pressing their faces against the white, wooden dowels lining the staircase, listening to the talk coming from the living room. There was a wall between them and the women and there was an opening from the foyer to the room. Benjamin could see his mother from there, on the couch, sitting, smiling, hands folded in her lap, taking in the stories the women told.

His mother did little of the talking. Their house had become a sea for rumor of all sort, rushing in, never out, floating about with the other gossip, swirling and twirling, in a home that didn’t want it there.

Benjamin didn’t want it there.

No surprise, neither did his father.

His father was a suit man, a sharp dressed, crisp haired, suit man, and that's all Benjamin knew about him. He came and went, weeks at a time, staying for a day before leaving the next, saying a general hello to everyone before diving into some kind of work; Benjamin didn't know what.

His mom and dad fought about it, he knew that, in the evening after Benjamin went to bed. He laid awake in the gentle purple-green of a balloon nightlight, listening to the yelling turn to mumbling as it came up through the floorboards. He hopped out of bed, slinking up against the wall as he slid his way down the hallway, the stairs, to whatever room his parents were in. He never peeked. Matthew had taught him not to, so he sat back, in the shadow of a bookcase or under a table, held his breath when he couldn't hear, and listened.

One time, it was the kitchen, and he sat under a table.

"Bethany," his father started. Benjamin, with all the childlike, deep down, have-to-because-he's-my-dad respect he carried for his father, never liked the way he said his mother's name. It wasn't hard or hurtful, it wasn't loud and frightening. It was just...there, as if the words simply fell out of his mouth and sat there, in a take it or leave it sort of way. "Why do you invite those women over if you don't even like them?"

"I told you, Jacob," his mother said. The familiar clinking of glasses and plates shrouded her soft voice. "I *do* like them. They just—" She paused; the clinking stopped. Benjamin sat stiller. "Take some getting used to."

His father had a way of pacing. His brown leather shoes scuffing against the floor and his sigh, a long, drawn, rasped sigh, were enough to indicate that what she'd said had done something.

"Come off it, Bethany."

"What was that?"

"I said come off it. You know as well as I do all those women care about is—" Benjamin imagined his father counting off his fingers as he listed. "shopping, gossiping about their husbands and—"

"At least they can!"

She yelled it. And then there was silence.

An uncomfortable sitting silence broken by nothing.

"That's not fair."

"Why?"

"Why?" His father was louder. "Why? How about because I'm doing something important. That's more than any of those women or their husbands can say."

"They're doctors, Jacob. And business men, philanthropists. I'm a psychiatrist, for crying out loud. *I'm* doing something important. And so could you, if you were here. At the very least you could be a father to your sons, but how could you? You're always out, chasing fantasies like a child while I'm still here." She paused. "So yes, I entertain those women and their idiocies to just be—"

"Normal?" his father said.

She breathed out. "Yes. Normal."

A time passed. A time of nothing as far as Benjamin was concerned. They kept talking, but he didn't listen. He craned his neck, tucked his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and stared. At nothing, really, but he sat there, his parents voices drifting out from the opening, brushing against his face before sweeping off and away. The conversation was punctuated by the clink clank of dishes being set back in the cabinet, every sound waking up a sleeping, almost sleeping, Benjamin that sat, under the table in the hall, nodding back each time he woke up again.

When they came out, they hugged, tightly, as if it were their first hug. As if it were their last, and when they left, his father to his office and his mother to the bedroom,

Benjamin got up, wide stepping on the tip top of his toes back toward his room.

The foyer was a tapestry of light and dark. Rectangles of silvery moonlight stitched themselves into the floorboards, popping up among a medley of nighttime that grew darker as the light spots grew lighter. Benjamin stepped in the dark. Something sat back in the darkness, he knew, a monster, nothing human, watching for children stepping in the light, dragging them off through a hole in the hallway closet to a den five hundred feet below the house. He'd thought about it a lot when he laid awake at night.

He reached the bottom stair of the staircase, the landing at the top overflowing with blackness, spilling silently down the steps. Benjamin hadn't noticed how dark it was at the top until now. He stepped up hesitantly.

The groan the bottom step let out was low and leaning like he was, licking anxiety into his ears like a foreign whisper from the darkness.

He stopped, heart racing, one foot on the step, listening, looking, to see who was coming, if anyone at all, because surely someone had heard. But they didn't.

He stepped back. It groaned and again, no one had heard. So he stood there, waiting for someone to find him or the soft break of sunlight to fall through the windows in the morning, whichever came quicker.

Shuttering paper sounds came from the hallway. Benjamin peered out from the corner of the foyer to the cracked light from the door, slightly opened, at the end. It was the door to his father's office, a door he'd never been in that, to him, may as well have never existed. Page flipping fell out from the opening, quickening, frantically quickening, and concluded with a book slam, a silence, and another string of paper sounds. Benjamin crept on his toes, listening for the break in sound as a cue to stop, his left hand fingertips gliding along the white wall, pressing against it when he needed balance.

He pictured his father a spy once, when he was younger, a boxer, a fireman, an astronaut too. All at once. That's how little boys believe, but at nine years, he was too old to believe his father was anything so fantastical and the sound of shuffling paper reminded him of that.

His best friend's father was an accounts manager, or an accountant. Or a manager. Benjamin didn't remember, didn't know what it was and didn't care; it didn't sound all that interesting. And it wasn't. He brought his work home from time to time and in a wrinkled white shirt and tie, the man sat there, head resting on his palm or his knuckles, (he switched it up) flipping through a stack of papers on a desk in his office, while Benjamin and his friend played tag or some other obnoxiously loud little boy game in the living room.

Benjamin took pride in knowing his father was more exciting than that, even if he wasn't here, but at this point, he wasn't so sure his father was so interesting.

The air felt warm when Benjamin reached the door. Warmer than the hallway, a lot warmer, hot even, all of it coming out from the opening.

No more paper sounds, just pen scribbles and footsteps.

The door felt warm too as Benjamin pressed his palm against it, pushing it slowly to avoid a creak.

Now only footsteps.

What is he doing?

Louder footsteps.

How should I know?

The door opened inward, quickly, and his father, in a hurry, hurriedly tumbled right over his son.

The pain was quick, dull, at first, in his side, and warm, like a crescendo, rising up and stopping, right at the point of annoyance. His head hit hard when he fell back. Pointed pain radiated from the back to the center, branching off, then receding, collecting again at the back in aftershock. And that's when he began to cry.

[Continued on page 96]

NAOMI NAKAZATO

Written by Hunter Burton & Cody Rabideau

Photography by Julia Madden

Inside her studio, Naomi Nakazato moves quickly, pointing to each painting, transitioning from one thought to the other without finishing a sentence. With her trademark red hair swirling, she turns like a kaleidoscope, refocusing our attention on painting after painting of women, women like herself who are both Japanese and not, depicting a struggle with identity she knows well. Her parents, a white American mother and a Japanese father, spent only a few months in Japan when Naomi was a toddler, by which time children were already calling her a *gaijin*, a derogatory word meaning foreigner. “In Japan,” she says, “you’re either full Japanese, or you’re not at all, so you’re always trying to figure out what you are.” When her parents divorced, her father returned to Japan, while she, her mother, and her stepfather remained in D.C. Since then, she has visited her father and learned some Japanese, but she has also come to understand that language barriers are not the only barriers; there are cultural barriers in Japan too. However, amid the struggles and the ever-racing thoughts in her mind, she speaks in a calm, deep voice that says, “I’ve actually got everything under control.” It’s easy to understand how Naomi finds so much success as an artist.

Naomi’s fascination with art began when she was a child. The art of illustration, of putting pencil to paper or brush to canvas, mystified and engaged her early. At three years old, she constructed a fashion booklet filled with portraits and drawings that stemmed from a fascination with human subjects. At the age of four, living in D.C. with her mother, Naomi visited the Smithsonian and marveled at the Van Gogh exhibit. She took pages from the exhibit, snippets of Van Gogh’s work, and pasted them into a sketchbook so that she could recreate his works with small masterpieces of her own.

In nearly all of her work, Naomi chooses to depict people. When asked why, she said, “I’ve heard that portraiture allows artists to interact with subjects, even if the subject is not present when the work is created. I like to translate that into having the viewer interact with the subject on a deep, intimate level. In a way, my depiction of these people is an attempt to have communication between this one particular person, this subject,





“I consider myself an artist. And I think that’s more exciting and full of potential than looking at your identity through how other people would define you.”

and the audience.” In the paintings she shows us, Naomi reworks images from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, a French neoclassical painter who painted nudes, women, from a male perspective to expose the objectification and degradation of oriental women. In her own work, half-Japanese women are clothed as the aristocracy—elevated, individualized, and empowered. “In my paintings,” she says, “I’m trying to create this space where these people can exist and thrive and be who they are.”

Naomi finds inspiration in a lot of different ideas, emotions, and subjects, but what she says inspires her most is the pain of loss, the struggle with identity, and the idea of community in humans all over the world. On the subject of loss and identity, Naomi calls upon her own experiences: “I think, in some way, in the instance of my own dad leaving and my sort of loss of identity, I understand that suffering.” But she also believes that painting has helped her to regain her own identity: “Instead of being half Japanese, or Japanese, or American, I consider myself an artist. And I think that’s more exciting and full of potential than looking at your identity through how other people would define you.”

For Naomi Nakazato, art is not just a choice, but something that allows her to be herself, something that wakes her up in the middle of the night, kicking and screaming inside her head. Art transcends the boundaries of race and culture, exemplifying and addressing life in a new and often needed view. Through art, Naomi no longer feels the weight of racial identification because she is simply an artist—someone who looks at the world deeply with patience and tries to craft an image that does what all great art and literature are supposed to do: make you think.



NAOMI NAKAZATO

*Three oil paintings on cotton canvases
listed in order of appearance.*

REBECCA NAKAYAMA [AFTER THE MADAME MARIE MARCOTTE]

46.5 x 29.5 x 2 in.

JE [NE] SUIS [PAS] LA GRANDE ODALISQUE

15.5 x 12.25 x 2.75 in.

MIYA TSUDOME [AFTER ANTONIA]

45.5 x 31.5 x 2.75 in.







BLIND DIPTYCH

Conte & charcoal by Lydia Grace Turbeville



ENTANGLED, UNLEASHED

Oil, thread, & gold leaf on panel by Rachel Clark





CONTACT RANGE

Oil & gold leaf on panel by Rachel Clark



UNTITLED

Digital photography by Julia Madden



WHEN YOU KNOW SOMEONE
Digital photography by Julia Madden





THE RED PAINTING

Oil on canvas by Beth Bredeson



CONVERGE & HALCYON

Digital photography by Rebekah Rhoden





GLITTERATI II

Collage & ink by Rachel Clark



GLITTERATI IV

Collage & ink by Rachel Clark



WHO IS SHE?

Digital photography by Sarah Leugemors



OXYGEN

Digital photography by Rebekah Rhoden

J.E. TANKERSLEY

Written by Jonathan Kurtz & Jordan Sears

Photography by Julia Madden

Growing up in a small, single gas-station town like Six Mile, South Carolina forced Joshua Tankersley to create his own worlds. “It really sparked my imagination,” he says. Grinning, he sits down at a table overlooking Cater’s Lake (known as “The Duck Pond” to most Anderson students). “My favorite toys were actions figures, or pretty much anything I could manipulate into a story. I would pit my G.I. Joes against my Transformers, and when the Zoids came in they didn’t know which side to be on. They were like, ‘We’re piloted by humans, but look like the robots!’ They had a crisis of faith moment.”

Despite this predisposition to creativity, Josh didn’t get into writing until his first semester of college, when he took a course in nature writing and discovered a knack for the art. “I write mainly to entertain people,” Josh says, raising his voice over the orchestra of ducks paddling across the water. “I want to make people happy. That’s why I wanted to be a chef before, and that’s why I want to be a writer now.”

Returning to his habit of creating worlds, Josh has written two novels, both of which are still in the editing process. He’s currently looking for agents and publishers while studying at Anderson, where he is challenged to improve his writing skills. “Everyone is very supportive,” Josh says, nodding for emphasis. He mentions classmates and teachers who have pushed him to become a better writer. In particular, he talks about his family and wife, Shannon, who always encourage him to write and meet deadlines.

Josh also writes poetry, poetry that “rarely has anything to do with me,” he says, his expression serious. “I don’t want people to think about me, I want them to think of themselves. My poem, ‘This Train is Bound for Some Final Stop,’ is a really good example of that. I’ve talked to people with religious doubts, but I don’t have those same thoughts.” Josh has explored his own experiences, however, in several nonfiction pieces. For instance, “Head in the Clouds, Head in the Oven,” he says, “started off being about the fear of rejection in publication, but slowly evolved into being about the relationship between creativity and mental illness. It’s scary, realizing how easily that comes up as a writer. I wanted to face that fear. Writing is a good





"I don't want people to think about me, I want them to think of themselves."

way to deal with all those feelings." To Josh, writing is a method of catharsis, a way to purge the negative emotions and celebrate the good ones. If the irony of writing to purge himself of the fear of authors' inclination to insanity occurs to him, he doesn't mention it.

"Eating Poetry" by Mark Strand and "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost are Josh's favorite poems, the latter of which he can recite by heart. He proved it, standing to pace across the brown winter grass and kick aside a few pine cones, speaking in a deliberate, rhythmic cadence.

When it comes to fiction, Josh emphasizes the influence of James Dashner, the author of *The Maze Runner*. Dashner's books, Josh says, are what got him into reading, and when Josh first started writing, he found himself emulating Dashner, writing to the same young adult audience and imitating the way he builds suspense. Other inspirations include *Star Wars* (except for *The Phantom Menace*), *Lord of the Rings*, *Fight Club*, *Shaun of the Dead*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *28 Days Later*, and Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. "My favorite image, though," Josh says, "Is the view from Crowder's Mountain in North Carolina. Most of the hike up is gradual, but near the end, there are like a thousand steps leading up, and that's not an exaggeration. But once you're up there... you can see everything. You can watch the falcons fly in the thermals, see the horizon fade into a blue green. You can see the bend of the earth." That's something to write about.



[Continuation from page 69]

It started as a choke, hopped up in his chest, his throat, croaking out as warmth flowed up through his face. But when the tears came, he lost it. And he sat there, clutching the back of his head. In the dull lamplight, his father looked taller, sharper when the shadows shaved off the soft contours of his frame. Even in the dimness, Benjamin could see the red in his father's face and through his blurry vision, he could see his father was angry.

"What do you think you're doing?" Benjamin recognized the tone. Harsh and biting, like a bitter wind, burning and unsettling, like a searing heat; it was *his* tone. The tone Benjamin had grown up with and the only tone in which his father had ever addressed him or his brother.

He wished, as he pulled his knees in close, that his father would sit down beside him, rub his back, hug him like other fathers did, and tell him it would be okay. But he didn't. He stood there, instead, staring down, towering over Benjamin, and it was then that Benjamin felt further from his father than he ever had before.

Without another word, his father sent him back to bed, trudging through a darkness that no longer seemed so frightening and he laid there, hating his father in a way he felt was forever. The light from the moon fell on his legs in a soft silver, molding around the branch shadows that shuddered in the breeze. The house across the street, the Masons, he thought, left their outside lights on for their teenage son who, the other mothers said, "—is a delinquent, which he most likely wouldn't be, if it weren't for the lazy, single father he has." Something about a party, or firecrackers, or joyriding, with his delinquent friends, followed up with something about how his father was an artist. Benjamin, even then, knew he listened to the mothers too much.

And then, there was a light, just one, near the window, there, then gone, like an auric wink on a backdrop of black. And then nothing. For a moment. Benjamin hopped out of bed and crouched by the window, peering up over top of the windowsill.

And then he saw the light again.

And another, and another, popping up and fading back asynchronously. He never paid attention to the fireflies as much as he did on nights when his father was home. They flickered, lights in the darkness, swirling up in the gloom, before bursting out against it, and it all made Benjamin happy.

A loud clank against the pot brought Benjamin back to the present, sitting at the table in his kitchen.

"What is Matthew going to be doing?" asked Allie.

"He wouldn't tell me." Benjamin said, lifting himself from the chair. He picked up the place mats and silverware and laid them down on the table. "He said it was important and exciting. He sounded really excited, but he said I had to wait until he got here before he'd tell me what it was."

"Oh. I wonder what it is?" She lifted up the lid, looked down at the pot roast, and shut it again. "What did he do before?"

"Science, mainly. Lab work, teaching, research assignments, stuff like that. He never thought any of it was all that interesting though."

"Well," began Allie, wiping her hands with a towel, "maybe it's something completely different."

Two hours later, the doorbell rang.

Benjamin wasn't yet used to seeing his brother so often. When he was eighteen, Benjamin left for college in San Francisco, got a job in illustration there, left it for one in Portland, for one in Vancouver, before settling in Seattle. He went back home a few times, but he never saw Matthew. First it was college, then work, then family, and more work, but it wasn't until their mother passed and he went to the funeral that Benjamin saw Matthew again. They talked a bit, heard how the other was doing, how their wives and families were doing over a drink or six, and laughed. Laughed like they

did when they were children, deep and full and joyful, like they were best friends, like they were brothers, but when Benjamin left Charlotte, they spoke maybe twice. Matthew said it was busyness, with work and other things, but he wouldn't say what it was he was doing. A few months later, Benjamin stopped trying, and they hadn't spoken since.

"Benji!" Matthew exclaimed with outstretched arms. "You've lost weight. You look good." Benjamin was always the shorter brother, the stockier brother, and when they were kids, sneaking cookies from the kitchen, Benjamin gained weight; Matthew never did.

Matthew was tall, thin, like a wire, with a mop of brown curls on top of his head. He wore thick glasses that got him made fun of in school, but were sort of cool now, in a weird sort of way, and he always wore a jacket, woolly and scratchy, with lighter colored patches on the elbow. Benjamin wished, as he was hugging his brother, that, just once, he'd have worn something else.

"Thanks. I've been running some, eating better."

"Good for you." He was nodding, smiling, hands in his pockets. He was good at making uncomfortable silences even more uncomfortable.

"Thank you for inviting us for dinner," Mary chimed in. "We both love having family close by."

Mary was shorter, but not short, standing to Matthew's shoulder who was six foot and change. She had long black hair, soft eyes and a kind smile; it was always a wonder Matthew had gotten her.

"We met at Clemson actually," Mary replied when Benjamin asked, over dinner. "He and I were both taking a bioethics course and," She laughed, "and Matthew was arguing with the professor about...what was it?"

Matthew coughed on a mouthful of pot roast. "The state of prosthetics."

"Right! Prosthetics. And Matthew was—well, you tell them."

Matthew swallowed his water, rubbed his chest, and coughed to clear his throat. "Well," he began, scratchy and hoarse. He coughed again. "Well, until then, prosthetics had been cumbersome at best. A hand, I'm sure you guys know, could only close if you pressed a button or pulled a cable. Ben, you remember Mr. Green a few houses down when we were kids? His was like that."

"Sure. I remember."

"Anyway, later on they started redirecting the nerves to nearby muscles, using the electrical activity generated in that muscle to move the limb, blah blah blah, but it was basic. One way and rudimentary, until—" He paused. "They began interfacing directly with the central nervous system by way of biochips being inserted directly into the brain. I'm sure you both remember when this all started."

"I do," replied Allie. "I was in high school, I think, at the time. Every time I passed through the science hall, that's all I heard about."

"Exactly. It was a big deal back then. Still is, but we don't think about it much anymore. It's part of our society. Nine out of ten of us have some sort of something going on, even if all we have is an HM chip. Large stuff though, like bio-mechanical augmentation for the entire body is a business in and of itself and somewhat of a grey area some believe. My professor was one of them. He said that—what did he say? He said that we were dangerous enough as is, yeah that's it, and could do enough—no, *plenty* of damage with what we had available."

"I thought he was interesting," Mary said, smiling at Matthew, "the way he talked about this stuff. You have to admit, though, he wasn't far off, at least with the state of things now."

"Yeah, but he didn't know that at the time," Matthew said, taking a bite of potato and carrots. "He was just being crotchety."

From there they talked about their kids, their home, their neighbors, work. They told stories saved up about their trip to the grocery and all about the check engine light in

their car. There was a television show they talked about, and a movie, then another; all of it the most interesting small talk they could muster.

“So,” Benjamin began, “what did you want to tell us?” Allie set a bowl of ice cream in front of him. A big bowl of vanilla, one for Matthew too, where the ice cream was melted just enough to be wading in itself; Benjamin liked it that way. Mary helped Allie clean, dry, and put away dishes, talking about something on the other side of the kitchen.

“Oh, thank you. Um, well—” He dropped his spoon against the bowl. “Sorry. I, uh—I have a new job that I’m really excited about.”

“Really?” Benjamin said, surprised. He pursed his lips, lowered his brow, like he was thinking. Matthew was never one to be excited about the jobs he’d taken. Benjamin always imagined his brother did science because he was good at it, not because he liked it, that his life was a series of decisions set up to settle for what came easiest. “That’s great, Matt! What is it?”

“It really is.” He smiled. Like he was surprised, like he expected a worse reaction already. Or maybe, expected the reaction that was coming. “That’s actually why we moved up here in the first place. I’ve been working with them for a while now, that’s why I’ve been busy, but Seattle is...well, it’s kind of the center of it all.”

“The center of...what, exactly?”

Matthew took a breath in, looked over at Mary, who looked back at him, wide eyed and nervous. Benjamin followed Matthew’s gaze with his own.

“What?”

No answer.

“What is it?”

“It’s what Dad used to do,” he sighed. “Seattle is sort of the headquarters for the research he started when we were kids.”

“Excuse me?” Benjamin’s face fell flat in the absence of emotion. His hands sat in his lap, beneath the table, fidgeting restlessly against one another.

“Ben, it’s such a great opportunity. These men, who’re old friends of Dad’s, are brilliant and the work they’re doing—you have to see it.”

Benjamin sat silent for a moment, longer than a moment, staring up at his brother, down at the place mats, feeling the gaze of everyone laid out on his face in quiet expectation.

“Benjamin,” Allie started; she stopped when he got up from the table. Benjamin took steps across the kitchen to the door that led to hallway. His steps were there, thoughtful, calm, uneasy, existing in a state of dubious tranquility.

“Come with me,” he said to no one in particular, but Matthew stood up, Matthew alone, and followed his brother out the door.

Benjamin took hushed strides down the hallway, stepping on the newly vacuumed runner that laid out along it. He was...he didn’t know what he was. Angry? Upset? Confused? Hurt? He had no idea and no clear way of figuring it out himself. His mind was a squall, surging up like a wave, back and forth against the inside of his head. His body, a tensed cable contorted, wound up and agitated beneath the calm he put out. And no matter what he did, he couldn’t shake the feeling of his father, right there, ironically, because the man never was.

Benjamin glanced in at an open door off the side of the hallway. The little light there was fell on the face of a little boy, sleeping under sheets printed with puzzle pieces. He had soft brown curls like Benjamin did when he was younger, though Benjamin’s hair was straight now, and a round face like Allie’s, while Benjamin’s was an oval. The floor of his room was dotted with small toys and large toys, Lego pieces, dinosaurs, action figures and building blocks, pulled out of buckets, tipped out and over off the shelves they sat on. Benjamin smiled a little as he passed and jotted down in his head that he needed to remind Oliver to pick up his toys.

He opened the door across the hall. There was a desk, a book shelf, there were paintings too, some were Benjamin's, hanging off the wall above an easel. There were pots, and glass, pencils and paint brushes, art books and Christmas lights strung up from the ceiling. And in the middle of the desk, large and round, was a glass lens, about twelve inches across, snugly nestled up against the wood that enclosed it. Benjamin stepped in and walked to the desk; Matthew closed the door behind them.

They didn't speak at first. Benjamin faced the desk, staring off at an unfinished sketch he was doing of a street he'd seen in New York on vacation. The perfectionist in him said that the building on the left wasn't quite right and the nose of the person to the side was a bit crooked. Matthew, from behind him, shuffled in his pocket.

"Is that your HDU? In the middle there?" He pointed at the lens in the desk. Benjamin brought him in here to say something he'd not entirely figured out yet. "Yeah. Why?"

"I'd like to show you something."

Matthew laid a small drive on top of the desk and sat in the desk chair.

"On."

A whirring sound came from the center. A soft light fanned out from the lens. Transparent images with a pumpkin colored outline erupted from the desktop, twirling up toward the ceiling like a twister to the ground and objects and letters, billowing up around it, reached out, cascading over the edges of the desk. And then, there was a calm. The images, the shapes, the letters, all gathered into the shape of a sphere and from there, a login window broke off; the window floated up and sat in front of Matthew. He plugged the drive into the desk and began typing on nothing. Faint clicks and small squares lit up where his fingers stopped.

"Do you even know what Dad did when we were kids, Ben?"

Benjamin didn't. He never knew and didn't care. His mom probably would have told him if he'd asked, but he never really wanted to know. When he grew up and left and was out of the house, Benjamin wondered more, but still never asked, and when his mother died, he lost the chance altogether.

"How could I?" Benjamin said leaning back against the book shelf. "It wasn't like he was ever home."

"But do you know why?"

Selfishness, Benjamin thought. That was his best guess. It's what he always told himself when a thought floated up. After all, what else made a father leave his family?

Benjamin shook his head. "No. I don't."

Matthew stood up and spread out his arms. The sphere shattered. Files and folders and documents sped past them in a moment and stopped. The two were surrounded by all of it.

"Our Dad was a scientist," Matthew began, plucking files out of the air. "He wasn't good at art like you are, or music, or business, or working with his hands, but what he was good at, was being naturally curious." Matthew gestured his arms closed. The files gathered back, as fast as they came, into the shape they were in, slowly rotating like a planet, all of them, that is, except the ones he plucked out. "Until I was five and you were—I think you'd just been born, Dad worked as a research assistant in a lab Grandpa Sam was in charge of. As I'm sure you remember, Grandpa Sam was—"

"Horrible, I know."

"I was going to say difficult, but okay. Either way, they never got along, never worked well together and Dad was always looking for an out. Something...more interesting. Something better. Now, Dad had been friends with a man named Joseph Matisse." He flipped through a file in front of him. "Another research assistant who was fed up with Grandpa. Come to think of it, it'd be a shorter list to name the people who didn't have a problem with him." He paused. "If there were any."

"I'm sorry, Matt, but what does any of this have to do with anything? Dad hated Grandpa. So what? I don't care about what he did back then."

Matthew smiled. "I think you will, Benji." He dragged an image through air, over the desk.

It flickered in front of them, a wispy amalgam of smoke and pixels, or fog, or something, in place about a foot above the desk.

Benjamin placed his face in front of it, bent over, hands on knees, staring at it with a cat-like curiosity. "Help me out, Matthew. What am I looking at here?"

Matthew turned away from the desk and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"How much do you remember about the prosthetic rejections when the biochips were introduced?"

Matthew turned back. Benjamin stood up, glancing up at his brother and back to the image. "Not much. Just what I heard on the news."

"Which was?"

"I don't know, Matt." He scratched his head, looking up at his brother looking back at him. What did any of this have to do with this thing, or anything for that matter? "Something about the first recipients going through some sort of psychological trauma in response to the implant." He paused. Matthew kept quiet, kept looking at him. He wanted more. "I was in high school at the time. That's all I remember."

"Well, you're right. When the biochips were first introduced, there was a backlash in response to what happened. It was an exciting time, but when the first round was administered, some people got sick, others went insane. People died Ben, and no one believed it was a good idea anymore, even with all of the benefits. Grandpa Sam got in trouble because his team was responsible for developing an anti-rejection drug that could be administered along with the insertion of the chip and only needed to be given the one time. Just the once. Obviously that didn't work at the time. Come to find out that Dad had an idea as to why it didn't work and why there isn't a permanent solution now."

"Okay," Benjamin sighed, "why didn't it work?"

"Because, the biological complications of something imitating life being placed into something that is alive wasn't the problem. The problem was whether or not the body would accept something artificial like that."

Benjamin squinted his eyes, shook his head. He was confused. "Aren't both of those the same thing?"

"That's what I thought when I first came on. I didn't really understand until Dad explained and showed me all of this."

Dad. Benjamin felt a twinge in his heart when he heard the word on its own. The man wasn't his dad. Maybe he was Matthew's. But he wasn't his.

"Okay," Matthew began, pulling out pictures, documents, articles, hanging them all in the air and stepping back, "so, even though these biochips weren't commercially available until I was about twenty, and in college, Dad and the other people on Grandpa's team were, like I said, responsible for developing a prototypical drug for permanent augmentation acceptance."

"Yeah. But what was he doing during that fifteen year gap? The drug couldn't have taken that long to develop."

"But it did. And Grandpa kept on until it was released." Matthew pointed at the image. "Dad, on the other hand, left, because of this."

Benjamin ran his hands across his face, pulling the skin taut and letting go. He let out a breath. "What is it?"

Matthew closed his eyes, scrunched up his face like he was licking a lemon, like he was flinching before being hit. He let out a breath, a stifled laugh and said, "This is magic, Ben. Real, tangible, fairy-tale magic."

THE CARLS

Chanda Canup

The year my husband and I spent working at the Children's Home is a patch of memory my mind has worried thin; there are bare spots in places but the pattern is still there. Sometimes there are only shadows left of that time, and voices replace faces, and I can only remember the feeling of the place like hair standing on my neck—a sense of it all *having* been, which never leaves me. The pattern of the memory is still there. I come across the lines of it time and again, and I allow my fingers to trace that old, threadbare fabric, and the brush of it is always rough, which surprises me. You'd think these things would be softer after so long, but that isn't so.

The Children's Home stands with audacious certainty in the middle of nowhere. Just outside of Arlington, the Home scatters its various buildings around the gently sloping hills within its wide, white gate, and it is beautiful—that's a fact; I said so just as soon as I saw it. There are two brick columns that stand like sentries at the entrance, and you cross under this arch that is as old as Truman, and you feel like you have entered a truly peaceful sanctuary, just outside Arlington. It's impressive and purposeful, and you feel kind of noble when you think you're going to be a part of a place like that.

When we met the director of the campus, our new boss, I was sure he would give us a piece of candy at the end of our visit. The director's office was a bit like the principal's office, so it matters as to what exact reason you are there. I was glad we were there to serve the wayward and unfortunate; I sat up a little straighter because we were there to care for the wards of the State. We would be house parents, and this director would be our beloved mentor. I held my husband's hand, and our eyes were probably shining as the director told us about the orphaned and cast-off children, about their lack, and about the rare kind of generosity we were about to share. There was a twinkle in his eye as he pushed back in his leather chair, and then he rose, hand extended. "I can tell y'all are ready," he said, smiling now with all of his teeth. He was a vision in tailored wool tweed. "Let's go see the cottage." And when we did—when we went to see the 4,000 square foot *cottage*—because it was Christmas time there was already a real, live Christmas tree in the front room. It didn't have anything under it, but it was already decorated—it sparkled with angels and icicles and soft, fabricated snow, sprinkled over the branches by the people before.

I remember all of that vividly with no bald spots in the fabric. Just as I recall meeting our tall, professional, west-end of the campus houseparent supervisor, whose name was Quincy, and whose dark eyes were incredibly and unblinkingly earnest. I remember seeing our neighbors—who I now know were Diane and Trevor—out in their yard, playing frisbee with two boys—who I now know were Sam and Clint. Or it could have been Curt, I'm not sure.

Of all the kids that passed through the Home during our short tenure there, there are only a few others who I can recall without a picture to start with. And even then I have a hard time with names. It's funny, the way our brains pick out what they will hold onto. I can't say that the faces and names that I remember are my favorites or that there was some meaningful connection with any one of them. Kids at the Children's

Home were not like that—they were not available in that way. They were exactly like veterans can be: some were secluded and wary, while others would circle you dizzy with dramatic stories. But even the ones who talked were careful; they told you exactly what they planned to. And all of the kids seemed to pick their way through the days, always occupied at a distance that was far away from where you stood. And they were always watching, sometimes while you gave directions or asked *how was their day*—but always when you weren't looking. Like I said, I can't remember many faces or names, but just this general, pervading impression. I actually forget the kids sometimes for months, sometimes for *years*, but for some reason, on a day when I'm looking out my window, preoccupied and washing a coffee cup or a spoon, and not expecting it to happen, my diligent brain succeeds in finding an old loop of time. There it reconnects with the past—and the kids come back to me.

The Carl kids come to me exactly like that. In fact, I can almost see them snickering and disordered before me right now as I type: four urchin faces who were all ribs, knees, and elbows—four raised chins who were sharp as tacks. From the youngest to oldest, the Carls were two sisters, bookended by two brothers. They were four stair steps and four pairs of knobby knees in frayed blue jeans. They were a fixed, united front.

David was the youngest, and he was the Carl who lived in our cottage three days out of nine. We all lived on nine-day rotations: for six days the kids lived with one set of house parents in their real cottage home, and for three days they came to house parents like us—the weekend parents, the “relief.” On our exchange day, the boys from across the cul-de-sac brought their bags of clothes and socks and shoes, and they lined up just outside of our door in a line and waited for the girls we kept—the other half of our “relief”—to return to their own cottage. David was the smallest of his bunch—a group that did, incidentally, not include his older brother, Matt—and from the moment I saw the sprinkle of freckles running across his nose, I knew he would be one of the ones that stuck with me. He was a weasel, he was a rascal, and he had the kind of cowlick you had to respect—it was so dramatically opposed to every other hair on his head. I couldn't even bring myself to comb it down, and so, day after day, David Carl ran amuck all over our end of the Home's campus, rowdy as a coyote, that cowlick spouting defiance from the top of his head.

His brother and sisters were a colorful, motley bunch, a kaleidoscope of colors that turns in the sun. As I mentioned, they were all stubborn, but each performed his stubbornness in individual fashion. It is hard to really explain the Carl family, but here is a list of what I can tell you: Amanda was the chattering, bossy magpie; Lindsey was the one who liked best to draw little rabbit babies; Matt was the eldest, the cursingest, and the frankest; David, the one you know, was the little cowboy-sometimes-Batman. And there are a few other things you should probably know that were shared by all Carls: a lopsided, toothy grin; that mess of freckles over the bridge of the nose; that tell-tale cowlick; and a will that had all the properties of steel when they were threatened as a family.

The Carls were a unit; they were a little platoon, and any time one of them was singled out by one of the Adult Population, the others rallied and swooped into their rescue. The Carls were always breaking some rule or other, not completing some homework or other, and doling out mystery meat to some animal or other who crouched under the dinner table. So on many occasions, after punishment awarded inappropriate behavior, I watched the little family align against the Enemy and march across the campus in complete and somewhat comical formation, each little chin jutting towards the foremost, each cowlick waving like a warring flag. Their battle cry: “We're sick of this place!” I thought they did a good job with what they had.

Usually these little Carl episodes were addressed by Barbara, our resident social worker, whose humility dragged perpetually behind her like a train. I think Barbara was probably considered to be harmless by the kids, but I had my doubts. Most of the

time I tolerated her, indulged, but it was hard to take her large, blank eyes for too long, not to mention the tired, red lipstick she wore every day. It was hard for the kids to take her seriously, and to be Kind the way she wanted. It was hard to be Good, like she said, because a fight was trapped inside each one of those kids, and like a bird or a moth the fight was always batting inside of their ribcage, trying to get out. God knows, they could never be at rest, there was so much that had happened to them, and they needed to legitimize it...somehow. I understood this. And I used to wish one of them would kick Barbara in the shin during one of her long-suffering speeches about Responsibility and Duty to Our Fellow Man.

But there was this one Carl episode in particular, that stands out against the rest. It happened after we had been there for quite awhile, maybe halfway through our time there. And it was Lindsey Carl who was the offending and offended party that time—you could tell by the way Matthew Carl had her in tow as he tramped down the drive and into our cul-de-sac and then across our front lawn. I guess the grass had just been cut, because there were scratchy bits of it clinging to Matt's blue jean legs, and his face was shiny with perspiration. Lindsey's cowlick rose in particular glory that day as she spit on the gravel by our house, and it was clear they were headed for Amanda Carl's cottage first. I felt the corner of my mouth quiver up as I watched Mrs. Brumblelow, Amanda's very *decent* housemother, deposit herself at the entry of the house, and Lindsey let go of Matt's hand and stood kicking at the ground by the mailbox. But Matt was undaunted; he didn't even acknowledge Mrs. B. as he passed the mailbox and climbed the porch steps and shouted directives around the housemother to Amanda who must have been somewhere inside.

"Amanda, get your butt out here. We're leaving—right *now!*" That's probably what he said. I couldn't make out the syllables, but I could hear Mrs. B.'s shrill objection rise into the air as Amanda squeezed past her ample, pink-Cardiganed frame which attempted to block the doorway. Matt Carl, Lindsey Carl, and now Amanda Carl never looked back; they left Mrs. B. where she stood—the blush of her Cardigan draping limply over her sides and one pale hand faintly waving her disapproval. The three marched down the sidewalk and into the gravel and swung right around toward our cottage, marking their spot. I felt a brush against my elbow as David Carl came to stand beside me.

David and I stood there side by side, peering through the splintered view of our front door's cut glass, watching them. He thought his thoughts and I thought mine, and at one point I looked down to meet steady brown eyes. When I felt my eyebrows raise in question, he simply raised his little chin a notch higher and hunched his shoulders together in the tight, compact way of little kids. It seemed we were at an impasse—one that we held in silence during the brief interval it took Matthew Carl & Co. to traverse the yard. But when Matthew Carl raised his scrappy little fist to rap on the door and angled his neck to glare at me through the widest pane of glass he could find, I had come to a decision. I sighed and released the bolt.

General Carl grabbed the knob and swung the door outward in one, quick motion while he addressed his brother from the solemn height of 3'4". "Let's go, David. We're leaving," he said. Or something like that. I received a wolf-like gaze of firm distrust from the three Carls outside my door; it was clear that I had been pushed to the outside along with the rest of the Adult Population. I would lie to say that didn't bother me, but you must understand that things like trust seldom survive wars like the ones these kids had fought. I know that now. So I simply stood aside and allowed David to pass, and then I watched as the brown profile of faces met—brother to brother—in that dry patch of yard in the middle of summer. I stood there in my doorway, watching four pairs of hands join in silence and scabby legs break in unified stride over the slight grade of our hill. They were backlit by a falling sun. I watched their progress until they were out of sight.

And I desperately prayed that the hand of Providence might blind the ever-vigilant eyes of the staff when the troop passed under the windows of Central Office.

Like a reel of film in an old movie, it stops there. It really does, because although they came back, I don't know how it happened. I don't know, but it could be that Quincy was the one who intercepted the little family that afternoon—maybe while they were climbing over that beautiful white fence that divides the campus from the world. If he did, I know how he did it. He stood against the trunk of one of the elm trees just across the road until the first Carl placed a foot over the railing, and Quincy just strode up, solemn, placed one large hand on the shoulder, and looked down into the eyes of the Carl with just a hint of tragedy in his brown eyes. He was so earnest.

It could have been that Barbara didn't miss the progression of cowlicks that passed under her window at Central Office. This is likely because the office squats like a square, white bulldog right beside the entrance to the Home. It could have been that Barbara bolted up from her swivel chair in the middle of a Very Important meeting with a ward In Need of Firm but Gentle Correction. It could be that she ran down the hallways so fast, and flew down the steps so quickly, that she tripped a little and the heel of her shoe caught on the uneven step that's the third one down. This could have made the heel break off right there, so it could be that Barbara fell down, onto the concrete, and got a little run in her hose and a hole over one knee. And if this happened, it could be that her blank eyes had just one moment of something in them. I can't even picture that—the spark of something catching in the calm, brown eyes. It's easier to imagine that it would instead be the director—the one without the beard who never did give us a piece of candy—who was actually the one to see, to run out, panting in wool tweed, and catch up with the Carls on their march onward and upwards.

Of course, it could be that the kids actually made it out. I don't know this, but maybe they made it all the way down the driveway, past the Central Office windows and over the white fence and down the road halfway to the stop sign at the top of the hill before someone, faceless and official, passed the Carls in a Home van. And blew the horn. And stopped on the side of the road, got out, and stood with fisted hands on hips. They would stand there, sullen, until one of the smallest Carls got closer, and then they would simply thumb over to the open door of that white van, where every Carl would climb in, find a seat. Matthew Carl would have been the last.

But I don't really know what happened, and so my memory stops when I'm standing on the porch. There's a hole in the fabric, there's a blank past that spot, and so I have to stay. In fact, in some ways I still stand in that doorway because, like I said, I have returned to that place so many times that the fabric is worn thin. I can't seem to leave it; I often revisit the Carls and the wild outgrowth of those cowlicks, and I live right there at the Home again.

This happens especially in times when my own wars surface, when they open the ground before me into dark, ghastly trenches. Then I must stand, solemn, and consider the scars that bar my way. I strain to see across that void to the hard, immovable bank

that lies beyond—it is a callous hulk of ground which rises bright and good and composed against the failing light. It is beautiful, but it is unfair—it makes too great a demand. I cannot reach it anymore. Instead I am left to trace the jagged path of wounds that lie around me, to trace the frayed edges in my hands of what is left, of what has been, and the rough impression bristles against my touch. When I come to the very end of the fabric, where the pattern frays to nothing, and I am led again to the Home—there is nowhere else to go.

Then I see once again the tall, noble chapel that spirals up into the sky and the beautiful fence that divides the worlds. The shadowy jurisdiction of Central Office spreads over the buildings of my memory, places we lived in nine-day rotations—buildings that are scattered like sheep, like snow over an empty tree. I remember the blank, undisturbed, eyes, blinking slow and large. I see through the splintered pane. I feel the bird beat against the cage.

I stand on the porch and lean in hard against the memory. I press in further, until I am standing in that doorway in the middle of the summer, in front of a falling sun, watching the Carls form their ranks. They hold tightly to each other. Their sinewy arms link in protest. Their small shadows form an ambush against the storm of sunset.

And inside of me I am hushed by the strength clasped in those tiny, savage hands.



SUFFER THE CHILDREN

Hannah Baker

I.

Mary twisted her black hair up and off her shoulders and pressed her back into the wall. The plaster was always cool on her neck, even on the longest day of the Nazarene summer. With no one else in the small stone house, she lingered there, thieving away what might have been a productive afternoon and squandering it on nothing.

Laughter drifted in through the window and broke her peace; the local boys never stopped playing. Most of them were only a year younger than she was, eleven or twelve years old. She closed her eyes and wished to be one of them, flying through the streets, stopping only to tiptoe around a centurion. Maybe getting sighs or half-hearted scoldings from their mothers. Maybe.

She picked up the distaff, caked with carded wool, and the spindle, connected by the thinnest twisted thread. She liked making the spindle twirl, first twisting the bottom between her fingers, then watching as the weight of the disk-shaped whorl pulled it through the air. When the sun was low enough, she would hold it in front of the window and watch it dance in the light. She felt like an artist, allowing just enough wool into the spinning thread to make a perfect uniform line.

The light from the window grew brighter as she watched the wool wrap around itself. Strangely bright. Mary looked up and had to squint as the light grew, pouring into a shape. Her pulse quickened until she could hear no sound but the pounding in her ears, then ringing. A man made of gold, burning so brightly that a white haze hovered around every line of his body, stood before her. Nowhere to hide in the small stone house, Mary tried to scream and nothing came out.

No one could hear her. No one would save her.

II.

It is a summer night in South Carolina, 1998. The Girl, eight years old, lies awake in her day bed. It is a metal creation capable of morphing into the perfect couch for reading Nancy Drew reissues. You just tuck in the covers and rearrange the pillows. A small lamp is clipped onto the corner above her head for this very purpose.

That morning in her Sunday school class at the Friendly United Methodist Church, Mrs. Fellers read the story of Mary. An angel came to the Virgin Mother and said, "Be not afraid," and then, God put a baby in her belly. She was engaged, only thirteen years old. That is five years older than the Girl is right now. The minister talks a lot about Jesus coming back. It will probably be before the year 2000, he says, because this is when the world will end.

The Girl has never been more aware of her body. She now knows that like a ship, it can be pirated and steered somewhere else with her still inside. Her stomach could mutiny and swell at any moment. And what would she say to her parents, to her teachers? "*God impregnated me, just like Mary! He told me to name the baby Jesus.*"

That only works once. She remembered what happened when Christie had her baby. She was fourteen years old and an acolyte, and she hid the bump until she went into

labor on the bathroom floor. Her mother found her cradling the thing in the bathtub, umbilical cord still attached. Every member of the church had a different version of the story, and one had whispered that the father was a deacon. She came to the eleven o'clock service one Sunday, and everyone watched her out of the corner of their eyes like she was about to grab their purses and run. She was not a virgin mother, no, she was a wanton girl, on her way to becoming a disappointing woman.

III.

The Author is 23, chubbier than she's ever been, but not so fat as to be called such, at least to her face. She is on the verge of being a "real adult," a genre classified by the presence of employment, a degree, and a spouse. Her bangs are at an awkward length, but she made and kept a dentist appointment by herself this year, and that, it seems to her, is what matters.

She has never had an easy time falling asleep. Every action-packed REM cycle comes with a meandering prologue. It begins with a recap of daily events, eventually ambling its way around to crippling existential fear. Only after her mind has been exhausted by her own anxiety and terror does she fall asleep. Tonight, her rest is postponed by the Girl.

She wonders if taking a child that absorbs every word to church is a recipe for an anxiety disorder, or if taking an anxiety disordered child to church is like filling up a tank with gas. Any fuel would have sufficed for combustion; church just happens to be premium grade.

Had she truly believed, at age eight, that God might come to her, heralded by angels? Yes, she thinks, she had. No nights had been so terrifying as those nights, hiding from an all-seeing eye under a sheet. But they had not felt so long and dark as the nights when she decided there would be no virgin birth, because the Christ Child was just a boy made of X and Y, and God was only the voice you talk to inside your own head when you're lonely.

She wonders if it is possible to be truly sad again after you stop believing. Once you've had your heart broken by God, what can compare?

I.

Mary crouched against the wall, covering her head with her hands. She was waiting for death.

"Be not afraid."

The voice surrounded her. Was it a voice? It was closer to music. It sounded the way cool water tasted. She could feel it vibrating out of every wall.

"Blessed are you among women."

Blessed. She peeked over her knees. It was like looking into the sun. Abraham... Moses... Jehovah? Could she be in the presence of the Almighty—once a burning bush, now a burning man? Her body would not stop shaking.

"Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and you will call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest. The Lord God will give unto him the throne of his father, David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, Mary felt removed from her body, as though she were floating over the room watching the scene unfold. Like listening to a story from the Torah that happened to someone else. Her lips moved, and she was surprised when a voice escaped them.

"I don't understand. I have known no man."

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your cousin has conceived in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," she said. "May it be to me as you have said."

II.

The Girl pulls the covers to her chin and crosses her legs so that her right ankle is wrapped around her left, a contortion she believes will prevent an unplanned virgin pregnancy. She is aware of feeling both protected from the long reach of God and dubious about the effectiveness of her solution.

But she knows this will become part of her routine. Like walking step for step with whoever is in front of her in the hallway, it is an impulse she cannot resist. She doesn't step on cracks, her mother doesn't die. She crosses her legs at bedtime, the Holy Spirit doesn't impregnate her with the Christ Child.

The Girl can hear crickets outside her window. Only male crickets can chirp. This knowledge distresses her, and she grieves silently for all the music-less girl crickets in all the world.

She thinks of the women in the Bible. All the girls, never called by God to use their hands to build a boat or free his people, only to be faithful and pregnant with miraculous baby boys. It isn't fair. Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary.

Not me, too, Lord. Not me.

It isn't fair.

III.

Three A.M. and she is still awake. As soon as she looks at the clock, she begins the math. Four hours until the alarm goes off. Thirty minutes until sleep could possibly commence, if she's being realistic. And she is. Three hours and thirty minutes of sleep at best. She could wake up an hour later, but then she wouldn't have time for a shower, and her bangs are awkward enough without also sticking to her forehead.

She considers streaming a *This American Life* episode on her laptop and letting it lull her to sleep. Ira Glass' voice is Nyquil for people too nervous to abuse over-the-counter medications. But if the podcast is too interesting or if it takes a turn into the supernatural, she knows she will never sleep. After *And the Call was Coming from the Basement*, she had to turn a lamp on just to escape a feeling that every shadow was something waiting to pounce.

Ghosts scare her, though she does not believe in them, or in anything supernatural. Demons are even worse. A trailer for a movie about possession will make her afraid to be alone in the bathroom for a week, but that is not something she will mention.

The existence of her fear triggers another worry. Somewhere, deep down, she must believe demonic possession to be plausible. The Friendly United Methodist Church claimed some part of her brain early in development, and now she will never be able to root it out, not completely. Somewhere, somehow she still believes in a devil below and a God above, and this scares her most of all.

I.

The golden form faded to rays of light through the window, less and less bright until the room seemed darker than it had ever been. Mary wondered if it had been real. Unless she had succumbed to madness in a day, yes. She would have a child. And Joseph, would the light come to him as well? Or would she be cast to the streets, disgraced?

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. What would it feel like to be overshadowed by Jehovah? Mary decided it must hurt like a wedding night, but hoped it would be so painless she would not even know it had happened. Perhaps it was already done.

She twisted up her hair and pressed her neck back into the plaster. She thought about spinning the rest of the wool, but didn't budge. There was so little time left. How many moments would be only hers now? How long until she began to show? What would she tell her mother, her father?

Mary knew what would happen in the ninth month. In the ninth month women would go with the midwives, to squat above a hole in the ground and sweat and scream.

If you are blessed, everyone walks out alive. If you are truly blessed, you are a man.

II.

Another night, another ritual. They all have to be done over if she wakes up, and it's three A.M., and her eyes are open again. Pull up the sheets, cross your legs, put one beanie baby on either side of the pillow as protection from being possessed. *Please don't let a demon possess my dolls or my Beanie Babies, God.* But she keeps watch over them, making sure they haven't begun inching toward her. Yet.

The Girl is constantly praying: a few lines with each new or remembered fear as it forms. *Please don't make me have a baby, God.* She is a girl and knows what God does to girls and that the greatest favor He can give her is complete invisibility.

She wonders if her family is going on a vacation this summer. *Please let us go to Sea World, God, and not some place with roller coasters.* She knows that when they strap her into one of those big roller coaster snap traps, they won't press the bar down all the way, and when it turns upside down, she will be dangling out of her seat, both hands gripping the bar, then one, then *splat*.

Tomorrow in class, she will not be able to stay awake. When she blinks, her eyes will remain closed for longer and longer intervals. She will pinch herself, but then she will give in, and her head will sink down against her chest.

Mrs. Hill will notice, and she will make a joke, or maybe pop the desk and startle her awake. While everyone laughs, the girl will pray. *Make me invisible, God, please.*

III.

Still awake. Five A.M., two hours of sleep left, one and a half if she is being realistic. The Author has made the rookie mistake of thinking about God for more than a fleeting moment, and that makes her remember church. And the Girl.

After the service, the Girl would go to the room behind the sanctuary where all the acolytes put on their white robes and matching sashes, then took them off again. The material felt cheap like something from the Halloween store that popped up in the mall every September.

The Girl believed that after each acolyte lit a candle on the altar, God blew out the flames of their long, golden lighters. No one ever told her this. It was the natural assumption of absolute faith, and she never doubted this until she became an acolyte.

There is a switch, you see, on the base of the lighter. It is hidden by the small white hands of the small white acolytes, and all they do is flick it down in one swift motion. *Poof!* The wick is jerked back into the shaft, and the flame is gone.

The mothers of the church baked fresh bread for communion Sundays, always more loaves than the congregation could eat. The Girl would sneak back to the acolyte room and find them huddled over the baskets of bread. You can't throw away the body of Christ.

She would help them eat it, picking up piece after piece, long after she was full. And when it was gone, she would feel physically sick and spiritually super-juiced, like she had overdosed on multivitamins. She still craves that doughy sweet bread.

God is a pool in the back of her mind. She can go to it every once and a while; she can dip a finger or a toe. Any more and she will drown. Always.



WITH A TYPEWRITER

Christopher Mauldin

I kill people on paper—
the good ones with big dreams
I forget I made up.

It isn't their fault
they're so much like me.



BREAKFAST

J.E. Tankersley

The toaster toasts toast.
We still need butter and jam—
refrigerator.



TENEBOUS CLOUDS

Laurie Epps

Every day I am informed
I was born a worthless girl.
The brown belt with silver
buckle, hung from a nail
upon the wall.



LIKE ME

Margaret B. Hayes

It sits near the kitchen door,
this old clay jug.
Short of being perfect,
it has a broken spout
with a dip in it like a mouth
accustomed to smoking a pipe.
It sits firmly on its round bottom,
clearly knowing its place.
Comfortable in the corner,
quiet as any small wren,
it's a little like me,
being on the edge of things.
I love its solid shape, the sides
straight as a soldier at attention and
its gentle curves near the top
as if tender in nature, but
with a thick determined handle
which no doubt gives it a presence
I sometimes lack.
I take courage
from its simple presence,
its dogged, unyielding spirit,
created, the same as I,
from the soil of the earth,
just as easily shattered.



SOME KIND OF HOME [MEMOIR EXCERPT]

Jessica Rogers

This is neither a story of love and happiness nor of self-pity and hatred. It is not going to have a clean ending, and quite frankly I'm glad that I can't wrap my life up that easily. I have danced with the Devil a time or two, and I've blessed a few hearts—in both the most positive way and in true Southern style: well-aren't-you-a-dumb one? I'm a mess. My life is a mess. Actually, it's more like a roller coaster of clichéd ups and downs, but now, while I am high enough to see a smoother ride in front of me, I can still look back and see the twists, turns, drops, and rises that I have navigated so far. I have learned that, while my past is always going to be behind me, it is something that I can learn from. Parts of it may still be affecting my life today, but I have learned that the past doesn't need to have a death grip on me and my future, and slowly I am prying its fingers off of me.

When I was six, seven, eight, nine years old, every conversation with my mom was the same. On bended knee, she'd look me dead in the eyes and begin. "Okay, honey," she'd say, handing me some sort of object to hold, "we are going to go in here, and you just need to tell them that you just had a birthday and you got lots of these, and you don't need them. Ask if you can possibly return it." We would be standing in the parking lot of Wal-Mart, the parking lot of K-Mart, even in the parking lot of the LifeWay Christian Bookstore on Clemson Boulevard in Anderson, South Carolina, where I grew up. These stores were so large and had so many locations that it seemed logical to drive thirty-five miles to the big city of Greenville in order to steal from them, and then drive to the Anderson stores to return the merchandise.

As her little renegade, it was my job to fool the workers of these places into giving us money or store credit for whatever items Mom would have me returning. Dressed up with bouncy curls, big brown eyes, and a slight overbite, I would walk smiling into whatever store we happened to go to, straight up to the unsuspecting Customer Service worker, and put on my charm. *Um, hi! I just turned seven {six, eight...insert age here} two days ago and I got lots of these {insert item here} from different people. I smiled and said thank you, like I was taught to be polite, but I know I don't need them, and I would really like a book instead. Can I return this?* Store credit or cash in hand, we would go shop for things that we didn't really need but that made Mom feel nice to be able to buy.

For years, the cycle never changed: Mom's new reprobate of a husband, Shane, would enter the store before us, then Mama and I would walk into the store and head straight to the Customer Service counter. As rehearsed, I would look up at the person behind the counter and recite my much-praised speech. Afterwards, my mom and Shane would use their toddler, Justice, and his adorably large head to hide things underneath their shirts, taking turns holding him over the object they were hiding. Shane began wearing extremely large shirts, and with his long and shaggy hair sticking out from under his faded baseball cap, he looked like a bum. Mama very soon got

pregnant with Angel, and the belly, and later the baby, made things easier: a tiny camouflage can cover a multitude of sins. In fact, a sales clerk—or little girl with bright eyes and a hunger to please—might never see them at all.

While most mothers teach their seven or eight year-old children *It's not polite to yell/point/call names/lie*, my mother taught me how to steal and lie, and she saw nothing wrong with that. Something in her, I believe, told her that whatever she was saying was true or right or justified, and those were the values that she tried to instill in us. We never had the “normal” mother-child talks; we never had the sex talk or the talk about drugs, or alcohol, or religion, or boys, or personal problems. Instead, we talked about how to make it through by doing whatever we had to do, whatever illegal or crazy thing we could get away with.

In middle school, I was popular; I pretended like I had a good life and like everything the family did was normal. At school, I changed my entire persona. I was cool, I was smart and made good grades, and I had friends. People knew my name, and I liked it that way. My friends and I, rebellious children at heart, refused to ride the school bus because, we said, that's what the cool kids did. But I chose to walk home because I was ashamed of where we lived, and I'm not ashamed of that.

Our house, “The Dog House,” as it was called, sat in a small dip in the road in Belton, across the street from the Subway restaurant and right between the laundromat and the local feed and seed store. Mama thought it was the perfect location. She had always dreamed of doing something big, and she saw her opportunity in the abandoned dog groomer's shop. Mom decided to start her own business—a hot dog business—and she wanted to do so in this place.

“It's perfect!” she said, walking in. The walls were dirty beige, the carpet a mysteriously darker tan. But Mama glowed. “We could put the tables here,” she said, pointing to one side of the room. Half skipping toward what passed for a kitchen, she added, “We could have a bunch of hot sauce options for the customers sitting on the bar here.” The bar was where the cash registers sat for the groomers, so it worked how she wanted it, I suppose. The kitchen boasted a Pepsi product cooler that could serve as our mostly-empty refrigerator, but for the moment she was seeing a dilemma. “I don't want to serve Pepsi products,” she said. “I want Coke products.” She mused for a moment then brightened. “I bet if we told Coke what we were doing, they would *give* us a Coke cooler to start us off!”

The entire plan was ludicrous; we would never have the money to do these things that she was planning, and I was almost positive that putting a bed, five children, and two adults with a strong love of beer into the place and asking them to live there “while we work on it” was not going to be good for business. But within two weeks, Mama and Shane had filled the counter with hot sauce, as she suggested, and Mama even came up with a name for the place: The Dawg House. The slogan was very creative “Seven days without a hotdog makes one weak!!” Not very smart advertising, but then again, this was a place equipped to bathe dog butts and clip nails. Mom was unconcerned.

We ended up living there, never having a kitchen table for us, much less tables for customers. I don't recall ever having a hot dog in the place. I do recall that the only bathroom held nothing but a sink and a toilet, and the door continued to announce, “Employees Only.” I also recall the large back room with tiled walls and floors. That's where we showered; it held a small tub (big enough for a large dog) that sat on top of a three-foot stand, and a moveable shower head that must have been handy for washing dogs. We generally used the shower head and stood naked in the large, empty room, but sometimes I liked to climb into the tub and curl myself into a ball so I could relax in a

tiny tub of privacy. Each other area in the building was bare except for some trash here and there, and a torn mattress stuck into one small room for the children to share, toddlers to teenagers: me, Justice, Angel, and Shane's two boys, Brandon and Chris.



As I grew up, I played with things that glowed. I suppose most 90s children did. LiteBrites were big and they made a wonderful glow. This was back when children went outside to play with lightening bugs. But I ran around outside at dusk and into the night with glow sticks. I played with glow sticks a lot. I loved to see them shine in the dark; I loved to draw in the night air with them, even though the drawings never lasted. I was enthralled. I enjoyed the snapping sound that they made when you first broke them, and how the light seemed to spread from the middle out. And I discovered that the more places you break a glow stick, the brighter it shines. I saw my mom as a glow stick in a way. I like to see myself that way too. Chuck Palahniuk once said, "Your past is just a story, and once you realize this, it has no power over you." His quote inspired me to write about my past and, through writing, claim it. I have had a troubled past; everyone has, one way or another. I have overcome obstacles that many may never experience, and maybe I'm stronger for it. Sometimes I think I am. Sometimes I think I can see deeper into others than I think others do. Sometimes I can see how things affect people and why they think and act the ways they do. Sometimes I can feel all the broken places glowing, and I am blown away by that amazing light.



BABY LOVE

Anna Falardeau

I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle when I was four. I didn't understand why, I only knew I had seen my father kicking Mom and the little bump she had told me would be my baby brother. I knew that when he left the house and tried to take me with him, I had hidden and was found by a police officer, though I didn't know what suicide was or why he had done it. I didn't like my aunt and uncle's house, but I knew I couldn't leave it. Mom was in the hospital for months, sleeping, according to my aunt, in a coma she wasn't likely to come out of. She did, though. But even then, I couldn't see her.

Aunt Lisa said, "Mommy needs time alone. She's looking for a home for you and the new baby." But that was a lie. She wasn't alone. She was with Rory, her *friend*, and probably my baby brother's father. This knowledge kept me from asking to go home again; I didn't like how he smiled at me. Later, my aunt told me she had married him, and I asked to stay with her and my uncle.

Mom always sent me pretty things, nice little trinkets, when she thought of me, and I think if I had lived with her, life might have been better. Aunt Lisa and Uncle Dan never seemed to get over pitying me. They tried to give me whatever I wanted, or pretended to, but it was always what they imagined I wanted. No one ever asked me. They gave me Mom's old doll, but she was ugly with her spotted porcelain face and balding head from where too many people had brushed her hair. And her painted eyes didn't blink like the doll I wanted or like my new baby brother's eyes probably did. I didn't get to go see him, but they talked about him for hours like they never talked about me.

"A miracle he survived and is so healthy!" Grandma told us.

Aunt Lisa smiled. "He is a little miracle."

"Do I get to see him?" I wanted to see a miracle. I wondered if he would look different from a normal baby.

"Maybe soon." Aunt Lisa reached a hand back towards me and patted the air somewhere near my head. I wandered back to my room, grabbing a Little Debbie along the way to take back and eat in my closet. I didn't like eating in the kitchen. Aunt Lisa watched me out of the corner of her eye, her hand resting near a dishtowel, jerking occasionally towards it, ready to swoop down and wipe away a mess before it began. She'd smile with more teeth than lips when I was done and ask how preschool was that day and if I had made any friends.

I told her the same names every day and she smiled a bit wider and said, "That's nice."

Aunt Lisa stopped cleaning so much when I was six, and she had a baby, my cousin Karlie. She was prettier than my doll, though not very pretty. Aunt Lisa looked down at her with a smile I had never seen. "She's so beautiful." Uncle Dan nodded at me and stared at them both adoringly.

Grandma sat beside her. "All babies are miracles to their mothers. The miracle of life, right there." She slid a knobby finger under the tiny red-spotted hand.

Why was this baby a miracle, too? My brother survived my father's foot and I stayed hiding in the house when he tried to take me with him to drive into death.

But this baby? I didn't understand. "Can I hold her?"

"Not now, she's sleeping." Aunt Lisa didn't even look up.

"But you're holding her."

"No, Helen, you're not big enough to hold her." Aunt Lisa's eyes never left Karlie's face. Her tiny, scrunched up, red face with actual eyelids closed and real eyelashes that brushed her cheeks. I threw my doll at them, at her really, and it cracked against the floor a few feet in front of me with its head in two pieces. Uncle Dan took glued it back together, but now it was even uglier.

"You're too old to throw dolls, Helen! You're a big sister now; you need to act like a big girl." How was I not big enough and too big? No one here made sense.

I did my best to not see the new baby. Why she had everything that I did not—cute lacy dresses, Aunt Lisa's attention, and a pretty name—I couldn't figure out. I stayed in my room or sat in the back yard whenever I could. They let me, too. Grandma and Uncle Dan took turns watching me. Uncle Dan took me to my favorite restaurants and fast food places when he got off work and Grandma kept a constant supply of cookies and brownies on hand and read me stories in the afternoons when I came home tired from school.

They let me hate Karlie for as long as I wanted to; they shook their heads and whispered, "Poor," when they thought I was asleep. Poor thing, separated from her mother like this; poor dear, probably wants to see her baby brother; the poor darling just has trouble accepting changes like a new baby, what with all she's seen; poor little thing...Karlie made me poor to them. I hated her for that more than anything else.

They moved Karlie into my room when I was nine, and Aunt Lisa got a job. It's hard to hate the person you hold when the nightlight goes out and the creaks in the hallway don't sound like footsteps. Every night, I'd lie awake and listen for her little cooing snores to begin before allowing myself to sleep. If she wasn't afraid, I didn't need to be.

But there was still something about her. Some days when Aunt Lisa piled casserole on my plate while talking to Karlie, and Uncle Dan smiled at me sympathetically and tried to make small talk, I froze inside—like time stopped just long enough to make that moment a permanent part of me and Karlie. And when Karlie pushed a new toy under my nose that Aunt Lisa had brought back from the department store she worked in—even if it was a stupid toy—I hated her and it. I wanted her to hate it, too. Ripping paper off her crayons, pulling the eyelashes off her new blinking baby doll, and denting her ten-cent tin frog, I did everything I could to make her throw it away, but she never did. She just held each toy tighter.

They gave her cheap toys and said "Play with your cousin, darling," as if the dollar-store crayons and coloring books were really for both of us and would actually entertain me as well as her. Maybe that's why they never tried to give me these things, because they knew that I knew each toy was worthless. But the shabby little presents made Karlie happy, happier than they should have, and she'd come ask me to fill in half the princess picture or to sit and rock our dolls together—even though she knew I would ruin whatever she handed me, just a tiny bit.

She got her baby doll for her seventh birthday, and that night she stayed up in bed waiting for me. The moment I got my quilt settled over me, she said, "Tell us a story." She demanded it.

"Not now, Karlie. I'm tired."

"But Baby needs a story to sleep." She shoved her doll at me—it blinked as I shoved it back to her. "Please, Helen. She'll have nightmares if you don't tell her a story."

"It's just a stupid doll; it can't have nightmares."

She turned over, hugging the doll to her chest. I almost relented when I heard her gasp, probably crying, but I pulled the quilt over my head and slept. She woke me

up when she fell out of bed, thrashing about like she always did when she had bad dreams. “Helen,” she called to me, lying on the floor, “Helen, I’m hurt!”

Of course, she wasn’t or she would have been crying, but I picked her up and tucked her back into bed. “You’re fine, silly.” She sat her doll up on her pillow and looked at me expectantly. I had to laugh at her. “Fine, I’ll tell you a story.” I picked up my mother’s old doll and set it next to her new one. I stared at them: the lazy plastic eyelids slowly descending over the blue glass eyes on her doll while the eyes of mine stared out, faded brown ink blobs. “I killed him, my father. I tried to kill my mother, too. I came here because they thought I had killed her.” I saw Karlie’s eyes—sparkling shadows in the nightlight’s bare glow—looking at me with the same adoration that had always been there, but more now. Fear was with it. I didn’t know if I liked it, but I was tired of her always following me around. “It was the baby, my miracle little brother that did it. I forgot to make sure he was dead. He grew in Mom’s stomach, and when it came time for him to be born, he gave her life again so that he could come out. That’s why he’s a miracle. You’re like him, a miracle child.” I told her this because I didn’t want her waking me up with another nightmare or maybe because I didn’t want her afraid of me after all.

“How do you know?”

I remembered when they brought her home from the hospital and Aunt Lisa held her all the time, whether she was awake or asleep, and how Grandma and she looked down at the tiny red face in the hospital that didn’t become at all cute until weeks later. “Aunt Lisa and Grandma said you were.”

“Did I bring Mommy back to life?”

“No. I never tried to kill her.” I went to my own bed and jerked the nightlight out of the wall socket. “It’s too bright to sleep with,” I told her, but I didn’t really think it was. “Goodnight, Karlie.”

Every morning since the day she moved into my room until I was fourteen, I braided Karlie’s hair for school. I loved her soft brown hair. Mine was yellow like my father’s and impossible to brush. Even when Karlie got hold of some scissors and cut her hair off in a ragged line at her ears; it was still pretty. But I was more graceful. I was careful about that. When she grew and her arms and legs seemed to completely take over her body, I taught her how to walk so she didn’t look like a gorilla bumbling across the yard. It didn’t help much. She tripped everywhere, and I never did. But she was prettier.

When I reached high school, I stopped talking to her. I hated having her tripping along behind me, drawing constant attention to herself and the pretty braids that I had made, more than I had hated her toys and her doll. She still looked at me like I was perfect—the only one she looked up to and really loved, but I knew better. I saw it in the eyes of my aunt and uncle. She was better.

My junior year of high school, she started spending hours in our room while I sat in the kitchen doing homework. I listened at the door and heard her pacing back and forth, mumbling to herself. She didn’t follow me anymore, she didn’t want to sit and work on homework next to me. She had a secret, and for the first time, I didn’t know what it was. And then, she auditioned for the church Christmas pageant. She got the part of the angel; she had memorized Luke chapter 2. I didn’t audition. Of course, no one asked me to. But I could have if they had taken me. I could have been the angel.

Aunt Lisa got the angel wings from the church and had them dry cleaned and glued feathers into the bald spaces that had worn through over the years and sprayed glitter over them so that her daughter would “sparkle on stage.”

“Why does she get to be the angel?” I asked after Karlie had gone to bed happy.

“She auditioned, and you did not.” Grandma said.

“No one took me to the audition.”

“You didn’t ask to go.”

“I didn’t know when it was.” I hadn’t cared when it was. I preferred watching and never was good at memorization. How was I supposed to memorize a whole chapter of the Bible?

“We’ll take you next year,” Aunt Lisa promised.

“I’ll be too old next year. They never let anyone over eighteen be the angel. We all end up as shepherds singing, ‘Go Tell it on the Mountain.’ I hate that song.” I knew I was whining, but Karlie didn’t deserve those perfect white wings.

“Karlie already has the part.” Aunt Lisa looked at my grandmother, uncertain. She wasn’t going to let me take Karlie’s place.

“She can keep it, I just want to go up with her. She can say the verses and everything. I’ll be there to help if she forgets them.”

My grandmother nodded. “It would be fine except we don’t have another set of wings.”

“Won’t she get to wear them again another year?”

They looked at me for a moment. Grandma sighed. “Ah, poor dear, your mother should have done better. Of course you can be the angel this time.”

Karlie, for once, went all to pieces over what I’d done. “No you can’t! I did this. I earned this. Not you, you never did anything besides murder your parents! You can’t be an angel when you’re a killer. You can’t be!”

I stared at her, stunned. How could she still believe that? It had been years since I had told her that ridiculous story. Had she never thought about it logically—a four-year-old murdering her parents? I reached for her, but she moved away, so I patted her with my voice. “I’m not going to be the head angel, Karlie. You’re going to tell the story; everyone will see you. You will be beautiful. I’ll just be there to help.”

Christmas spirit or no, she wasn’t buying it. She ran inside, and I could hear her yelling, screaming, at Aunt Lisa. “You can’t let her be the angel. I auditioned! I deserve it! Why do you let her push you around? She killed her parents!”

I couldn’t believe she said that. It sounded crazy. When I heard her slam the door to our room, I went in to make peace with my aunt. “I think I had better go. I can live with Mother for awhile.”

Aunt Lisa looked like she’d been stabbed through the heart by a kitten. I could feel her struggling to make a hard decision. “Oh, Helen,” she said. “Oh, Helen.” It was heartbreaking in a way, but she did the right thing. She sent Karlie to live with Dan’s parents, just until, she said, arrangements could be made for me to move in with my mother.

Karlie never said goodbye.

I went to live with my mother, Rory, their two children, and my little brother Ben. He didn’t look any more like a miracle than Karlie did. But, the house was bigger, a lot bigger. I got my own bedroom and designer clothes. My mother said she was thrilled to see me and took me shopping every weekend for useless things like shoes I would only ever wear with this one matching shirt or earrings that hurt after a couple hours because they were so big. I graduated from a private school and got sent to college less than a year after I arrived there.

I didn’t see Karlie again until my wedding. I invited her—you know, bury the hatchet—but I was still amazed when she came. She was short and had more curves than I could ever hope for. Her hair was still in braids. She stumbled around me as if just the sight of me made her awkward, but when she was talking with someone else—her mother or Ben—she was normal, even beautiful.

I let her wear one of my dresses to the wedding, pleased to finally be the one with the nicer clothes. She and Aunt Lisa left before the end of the reception, left the dress with my mother, and drove all eleven hours home that night.

When my new husband and I went on a cruise for our first Christmas together, I found little dolls in the souvenir shops. Tiny plastic dolls with hula skirts and

floral wraps. I picked one up and let it rock side to side in my hand. It was clunky plastic, badly made; the eyelids would only half close. But I smiled.

“Would you like it?” Gregory asked me.

Would I like it? It was a stupid doll, the kind they have in souvenir shops the world over, but Gregory saw it differently, sweetly. “You can collect them,” he said, as if accumulation in itself added value. “They have different outfits for every port. You could have a scrapbook of dolls, you know, showing all the places you’ve been?”

“How lovely,” I said and kissed him. He bought one for every port.

I showed Karlie my collection when she came to visit a few years later when I was pregnant with my first daughter. Gregory had to be away on business, and she came to help out—family is family, after all—in case I went into labor early. She looked so grown up and so worn. She had married soon after I did and already had two little boys. She never went to college.

I held up the first doll Gregory bought me on our honeymoon. “A silly souvenir, but sweet,” I said. Then I unveiled the collection, all fourteen, in perfect condition, resting in a red velvet jewel case. “Aren’t they nice? Greg is probably shopping for a little *fräulein* right now.”

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “Your daughter will love them one day.”

“Oh, she can have her own dolls.”

Karlie nodded. “Yes,” she said and picked up the little Swiss girl, twisting her gold braids. “She’ll love these, though. Which reminds me!” She raced to the guest room and back with flaming cheeks as if she’d suddenly remembered where she was and why. “Look,” she said, “what I brought for you, for your soon-to-be-born daughter. Your first doll!”

And there it was: the doll I threw across the room, the doll with the cracked face that Uncle Dan had glued together like patchwork.

Karlie was all smiles. “You taught me how to braid hair with her.”

I didn’t go into labor early, but Karlie stayed until Karen was born. Then she went home to her children, and I mailed her one of my collectable dolls—her favorite one with the little blond braids and the smocked dress and the broken blinking eyelids that were always half-way closed.



BERGERON'S BOY

Courtney Couch

"Please come back inside, Mom! *Please* get out of the street!" Mom was waddling down the street in *most* of a gorilla suit, and I only say "most" because the head of the costume was tucked haphazardly under her right arm. I had watched in half-horror/half-amusement as she hid her red purse in the folds of the gorilla suit and loudly exclaimed, "Allistair, *Allistair*, I'm just gonna run to the store. I won't be long. Just want to pick up some 'get well soon' balloons for Hilary's boy."

Our neighbor's son, Jeremy, had somehow broken his arm, and Mom thought it would be hilarious to visit him in the hospital in a gorilla suit because I let him come over and watch *Planet of the Apes* once when he was younger. I didn't fight her too hard because I know how much Mom loves to mess with Hilary. I could almost picture Hil's horror. Mom's stringy hair, too-tanned skin, overall gauntness, and ridiculous behavior made her look anything but sane, and sometimes I worried it was hereditary. Mom came back later that afternoon and told me that everyone in the hospital acted like everything was normal, which, she said, "Really got away with me!" Of course it did. Hilary was at Jeremy's bedside asleep, and Jeremy was out cold, too, so Mom got a nurse to take a picture of her in the gorilla suit and balloons giving the camera a thumbs up next to Jeremy. Mom printed off the picture and slipped it through the mailbox slip at Hil's house.

At one point, Mom had been the darling of our little town. I found an old scrapbook under her bed once that had newspaper clippings, yellowing polaroids, and pressed flowers from her pageant days. Her escort in every photograph is the same boy, so I assume he's my father, but there's no way to be sure because Mom can never talk to me about him without bursting into peals of hollow laughter. Even when she catches her breath, she can't quite breathe enough to say anything, so I just stopped asking after a while. Mom's senior picture in her high school yearbook makes her skin look porcelain, as if she doesn't have pores. Every photo is black and white, but anyone can tell her lips were as red as a rose when that photo was taken. This particular page has smudges and crinkles on the edges, more than any other. Now, she looks like the 'After' picture on billboards that advertise against smoking, except it wasn't smoking that did it. Or alcohol. I can't really explain it in a way that makes sense, but her spirit is gone. Not her liveliness, because *trust me*, Bergeron Love will find a way to be the life of any party. But her soul, the part of her that truly cares for other people, comes and goes on a whim.

Mom's spirit had a way of distancing itself from her liveliness. No matter what she should have been *feeling*, her outrageousness wouldn't take a hit. Mom and Boyd first met during one of her more outrageous bursts of kleptomania in the Mall of America. Mom and I drove all the way to Minnesota because she was tired of harassing Kim's Boutique downtown. Boyd was a mall cop, and a sluggish one at that. He chased us all the way to the parking lot that day. We got away only because he had an asthma attack. By the time Boyd got out of the hospital a few hours later, Mom's conscience had returned to her, so he found a heap of stolen items on the hood of his car and a note that read: "Why don't you invest in cardio?"

When Mom and I returned to the mall the next day, he recognized us immediately and sternly escorted us to the food court—where he and Mom talked about nothing for an hour. When we finished eating, it was pretty apparent to the both of them—not so much to me—that he’d be coming back with us from Minnesota. They’ve been together ever since, which sounds pretty cliché, except for the fact that every time I heard them speak to each other, Boyd was either trying to talk Mom out of her next idea or apologizing to an innocent bystander who came between Mom and her punchline. Or yelling. They typically fought late at night when everyone in the neighborhood was fast asleep, or trying to be. But because Mom wanted others to hear her, she always found a way to take the fight outside. The more Boyd tried to defend himself against Mom’s wild accusations, the louder Mom would get until I, the inadvertent go-between, had to beg the both of them to go inside. If Boyd went inside, Mom would stay outside and keep yelling at him through the walls. Once she lost her voice entirely and croaked outside like a wounded animal or emphysema patient all night.

When it was time for me to apply for college, I was ready to go. Maybe Boyd was ready too. I don’t know, maybe not. He tried to get me to apply to colleges close by, but I had my heart set on colleges—big or small, secular or Jesuit—in Austin. I don’t know why I was so insistent on Austin, but I do know Mom keeps three ticket stubs in the scrapbook under her bed; two were to Austin and one was a return flight. I guess leaving home, hitting the highway, heading west young man and all of that, fills some people up with wistfulness or makes them worry about how the old people who reared them will ever survive with that empty bedroom in the house. It wasn’t that way for me. I guess mainly because I overheard Mom teaching Boyd how to say, “I love you,” the night before I was set to leave, and that seemed to settle something or be a sign. I didn’t burst into flames, so maybe some heat-seeking part in me was missing.

Once I moved to college, Mom got worse. Not ‘insane asylum’ worse, just ‘filling a void’ worse. Boyd couldn’t really be trusted to keep tabs on her anymore, so I started getting calls from Hilary. What a way to start the day, before your eyes are even open: your mom is stealing newspapers, your mom knocked down half a dozen bird feeders, your mom is generally disruptive, a nuisance to the neighborhood. Even Hilary’s boy Jeremy would give me a call every now and then to let me know what kind of trouble Mom was creating. He was a senior in high-school the year I’m talking about, and on his early-out days, Mom would swing by the school and pick him up before Hilary had a chance to get him. Was she trying to be helpful, trying to terrorize Hilary? Hard to say, but Mom always dropped him off at their house easy as you please, so when I got called in and had to tell her she couldn’t do that, she shrugged it off like everyone else had missed the boat on this one. And I can’t say she’s wrong, really. I mean, eventually, Hilary got so wound up that she’d take off from work to sit outside the school for an hour to beat Mom to the punch. Even still, Jeremy sometimes got in Mom’s car instead of Hilary’s. When I pressed her on it, she said, “He’s gonna be a tightwad like his mom if he’s not careful. And y’know what? A family can only really survive with one.” Her stories of picking up Jeremy from school somehow always reminded me of Mom’s small-sounding voice as she asked Boyd to love her.

One morning, Hilary called me to inform me that Mom had interrupted her morning shower by barging into the bathroom to talk about how they could start a program for ‘at risk’ youths. Hilary was upset, something about privacy and privates. Apparently Mom said something smart along the lines of “Grow up, Hil, we’re both women here. There’s nothing new to be seen,” or “You and I should join a nudist colony just to see how you’d handle it.” Hilary’s broader complaint, beyond the bald facts of the intrusion,

was that Mom didn't seem to get that boundaries fundamental to a civil society had been breached. Hil may have been right on that one. As I understand it, Mom felt like she got a 'maybe' to the nudist colony idea. In fact, the next night, Mom got plastered and showed up on Hilary's doorstep butt-naked. Hilary's son Jeremy called me from his room upstairs to let me know what was going on. He held the phone out at the top of his staircase so I could hear the conversation going on in the living room. I heard Hilary and the voice of another woman I didn't know saying what you might expect people to say to a middle-aged woman who shows up naked with a full head of steam about "youth today" and "community responsibility." In other words, they sounded pretty tentative. Mom swiftly changed the subject to what was on the television and how Boyd hated gore. There was a little bit of a fuss, and I couldn't tell what had happened, so Jeremy whispered into the phone that Mom had just seated herself on the couch and Hilary was threatening to call the authorities. Next thing I know, Jeremy's in the living room, too, with the phone tucked in his cargo-pants' pocket. The kid must have looked somber in that moment, because Mom started raving about how Jeremy was too serious—like me, *like Allistair*, and how he is embarrassed by his mom, *like Allistair*. "I know my son loved me, as well as he could," Mom wailed. "But now I might as well be dead to him for as much as I hear from him or see him. I don't think he even thinks about this old fart anymore."

Then Jeremy stepped up. "He does, too," he said. "He thinks about you." I felt the phone getting heavier in my palm, like the weight of gratitude, you know, or the heaviness of the moment. I suddenly wished someone would put an arm around her shoulders and offer to take her home.

Then she said, "*No one* is grateful for all that I did. All that I do. Not even my own son. Why do I give all that I do if no one gives me anything in return?"

"No one made you." Jeremy's voice was still and small.

No one called the cops, but Mom walked herself to jail anyhow and spent the night there in her birthday suit. They tried to make her wear a jumpsuit so she wouldn't freak out the drunk teenage girl in the cell with her, but Mom fought the clothes so hard they had to subdue her. Since mine was the only phone number she knew by heart, besides Hilary's, I made the long drive from Austin overnight. By the time I got to the prison, Hilary had bailed Mom out. I would like to think it's because the community was looking out for her, or that Boyd noticed Mom was missing, but I think Hilary just wanted to have the upper hand for once. Jeremy told me the whole ride home from jail, Mom wasn't even fazed by Hilary lording the money over her. Mom just turned around in her seat and asked Jeremy how his girlfriend was doing, which really shut Hil up because she had no idea Jeremy was even dating anyone. Hilary yelled at Mom and forbid Jeremy to talk to her. I spent the afternoon at home with Mom, trying to understand why she was upset at that of all things, and went back to Austin the next morning when Boyd got back from his late-shift. Boyd, exhausted from his long night at work, slowly climbed up the stairs and warned me as I passed him that "your mom looked half-asleep on her way out of the house last night. I'd keep an eye on her." I laughed to myself. *Awake*.

The last time I remember Mom being truly awake was before Boyd. It was spring, so daylight seemed brighter back then. Her touch-and-go soul seemed vibrant that morning. She woke me up early before school to watch the sunrise on the roof with her. She closed her eyes to soak up the warmth of the sun, so I did, too. I know most kids remember pancakes, loud music, and laughter, but this is what is mine. I remember warmth.

I was halfway through a biology class about a week later when Hilary called me on my cell. I let it go to voicemail. When I got out of class, I dialed my voicemail to find out what kind of craziness Mom had created for the neighborhood this time.

“Allistair, it’s Hil. ... I’m so sorry, sweetie, but you need to come back home for a few days. I don’t know how to tell you this, but your mom fell asleep in the tub. Well, no, she didn’t fall asleep. She passed on in the tub last night. She’s in a better place now. Anyway, Boyd is a real mess, and I can’t figure out where anything is in this house. Berge was never really great at—”

The voicemail cut off, but by then, I had another one. “Remember when Berge and Boyd would get into their *awful* arguments? I do, because you were their little peacekeeper, and you always found a way to get Berge to come back inside the house. You know, you could calm her down in a way no one else could. All you had to say was, ‘Please come back, Mom,’ and she’d be right as rain.”

Who doesn’t love the rain?



THE KING AND I

Jonathan Kurtz

A tawny shape slices the night,
racing across four lanes of asphalt,
a self-proclaimed king
wearing a crown of twelve points.
My hands tighten on the wheel.
Surely he will change his course.
Yellow light blazes across his face
and I meet his black eyes.
We share a moment, the king and I.
“I do not fear you,”
he says to me.
Flesh gives way to metal
with a rumble like thunder.
“The mirror is gone,”
is all I say, fists clenched,
knuckles showing bone.



HUNTING

J.E. Tankersley

We were two coon hounds
sifting through the forest
after a scent,
like a couple
of orange-vested hunters.
The waterfall of a bomb
ripped through the boughs
like the faraway
concussion of a rifle shot.
A limb splintered from
the trunk of a tree—
crashed against the roots
like the body
of a hunter being shot
through the chest.
And I was left,
standing on my head
with sycamores
growing from the sky,
like watching
a dear friend fall
in a hunting accident.



BLOOD AND TULIPS

Nichole Dorontich

The reflection in the mirror
is one I no longer recognize.

Blue and black
is all I see.
Copper and rust
linger on my lips.

Days pass.
Clues disappear.
Flowers are delivered—
white tulips freshly cut.

Their smell, once comforting
and sweet, now nauseates me.
Is this normal?
What we have? What he does?



MORE THAN ENOUGH

Yvonne Didway

Toni Scott Bloodlines: 2007.
Oil on canvas 28 x 22 x 1.

Slashing, swirling, drops of red
blue quivering, flowing.
White so thin, so mild,
soaking up the red heavy on my back.

If only the chains could break,
instead of my will,
or the promises of freedom.

More than broken bones,
torn flesh, and hunger.
More than beads of sweat,
brown skin, and *woman*.

Slowly at times, throbbing at others—
I am a heart that beats.



MORNING STAR RISING

Margaret L. Campbell

It was my first flight ever, and the excitement I had felt earlier that day had subsided into dull tiredness. I looked at my floral-patterned wristwatch: 1:00am. I had been unable to sleep; the unfamiliar motion of the plane jolted my eleven-year-old body and kept me from settling down. I decided to get up and stretch my legs, so I squeezed past my sleeping brothers and shuffled back towards the bathrooms.

They were all occupied. An elderly man was ahead of me in line, sitting down on the bump in the wall that housed the airplane's wheel. I felt foolish standing there in line while the rest of the plane slept, so I looked out the little window at the bumpy cloud-tops below. They were dull greyish-white, but so fluffy that I wanted to jump out of the plane and nestle my tired face into their soft embrace. Suddenly I saw a golden-pink glow begin to spread the horizon of the cloud-bank. I thought it was the sun at first, but I watched with bated breath the slow increase of rosy light, I realized that the fiery glow was smaller than the sun. I heard a quiet voice beside me:

"It's the morning star."

I looked around and saw that the old man was peering out the window from where he sat behind me. I did not say anything, but smiled, and he smiled back. We looked again out of the window as the light grew into a clear, flaming pinpoint that shot a bright fire across the downy carpet below. I gazed, intent on remembering, and watched the morning star break over the edge of the world.



WHEN FOREVER ENDS

Allyson Vaughan

Nellie peddled faster, squinting against the mist of rain that bit her skin as she rode her bike down Main Street. She liked the way her heart beat against her ribcage when she rode too fast. The street was quiet except for the sound of the rain and her breathing. It was just past six a.m. and the shops wouldn't open for another two hours. She was peddling against the wind, and the cold numbed the tips of her fingers. Nellie gripped the handlebars tighter, willing her hands to feel again. She rode past Ellen's bakery, where she'd worked last summer as a waitress, but didn't wave when Ellen stepped out and waved a hand to her. Nellie didn't feel like smiling any more than the sun felt like shining. The grey sky seemed to be a comfort to her, because she felt that it was nice that the universe seemed to understand the fact that Hazel was gone.

Nellie turned down the street to Hazel's house and slowed. She hadn't been down this street since the funeral four months ago. Everything looked the same and different at once. A voice in her head sang, "Go, and get out of here." Nellie stopped her bike and pushed backwards, ready to turn around. She couldn't look at that house, not without thinking of the police cars and the ambulance that had shrieked almost as loud as Mrs. Laurent's scream when they brought her daughter out. Nellie had watched with everyone else and she could still feel the way the warmth had drained from her when Mr. Laurent had seen her and shook his head before turning to wrap his wife in his arms. They'd climbed into the back of the ambulance and disappeared, leaving Nellie with the murmurs. She could still hear them. *She had a lot of behavioral issues. I heard she was pregnant and couldn't bear for them to find out. She just seemed so happy.* Nellie had thrown up on somebody's shoes.

Nellie was wheeling her bike around when the front door opened and Jason came out. It was too late to pretend she hadn't seen him, so she stopped and waited while he jogged down the steps. Nellie remembered the way he'd cried at the funeral. Silent, but louder than everyone else.

"Hey," he said, eyeing the front wheel of her bike turned away from the house. "Thanks for coming. I'm sorry I called so early."

Nellie nodded and looked down at his feet. He wore faded sneakers, almost worn to nothing. "It's fine, I couldn't sleep anyway," she said. They didn't say anything, but avoided each other's eyes. Nellie didn't know why he couldn't look at her, but she knew why she couldn't look at him. He and Hazel had the same eyes, and she didn't want to cry. He might take it personally if she broke down from looking at his face.

"Do you want to come inside? I can make coffee." He scratched the blonde whiskers sprouting on the tanned skin of his cheek. Hazel and Jason had the same coloring too. They could've been twins if they weren't three years apart.

"Won't it wake up your parents?" Nellie said. She didn't want to go inside, but she didn't want to keep being cold either. The mist was lightening up, but the cold seeped through her jacket.

"They're out of town. They're looking for a new house." Jason squinted against the sky, and Nellie wondered if he was trying just as hard as she was not to think about why.

“Okay, sure,” Nellie said, and followed him up to the house. Half way up the driveway, Jason took the handle bars from her and pushed the bike up the steep hill. They left it leaning against a rain gutter.

The inside of the house was warm and Nellie pushed her hood back. Jason had already started towards the kitchen and was fiddling with the coffee maker when she walked into the room. The kitchen was a soft cream and dimly lit. It made her feel safe and tired. She remembered making cookies with Hazel and her mom once, and the room had gotten so warm with the heat of the stove they’d fallen asleep at the table. The cookies were burnt when they woke up, and they’d fed them to Russell, their golden retriever. Nellie wanted to see Russell, but felt strange asking for him.

“Cream and sugar?”

Nellie said yes and sat down in the chair closest to the door. They were so silent that Nellie felt she was disappearing in plain sight. Jason would forget she was there and wonder why he held two coffee cups in his hands. He didn’t though, and he sat the mug in front of her and sat across from her at the table. They stared into their cups and let the steam rise. Nellie felt her body tighten and she picked up the mug and, tipping it back, took a giant swig of coffee. It burned and she was glad to feel some other kind of pain. She swallowed and coughed as it went down. Jason looked up and he glanced at the cup, then her reddening face. He frowned and ran his thumb down the handle of his own.

His silence was beginning to make her angry. Nellie crossed her arms and leaned back, waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t move or speak, she sighed and held the coffee cup tight in her hand, letting the heat warm her hand.

“Why did you call me?” she asked. Her voice felt small and she cleared her throat. Jason looked up at her through his eyelashes and then back into his coffee. Nellie wanted to smack the table and make him look.

“I don’t know.” He let go of his mug and leaned back. Nellie looked down at the long table at him.

“Me neither. That’s why I asked,” Nellie said. The coffee maker clicked and she focused on the blinking, green light. “You make terrible coffee, by the way.”

Jason almost laughed, but Nellie only twitched. “I know, I don’t normally drink coffee,” he said. He got up and dumped his coffee down the sink and motioned to take hers, but she didn’t want to let go of the warmth it gave her. “Suit yourself.”

Nellie wanted to ask if Hazel taught him, because she’d made terrible coffee too. “I saw that you got your book published, that’s great,” Nellie said. She’d almost forgotten he was a writer. “I bought a copy.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“I saw that you dedicated it to Hazel.” Nellie’s mouth felt strange as she formed her name, and realized she hadn’t said it in a long time. She regretted mentioning it when Jason’s jaw went rigid with the mention of her name. “Sorry,” she said.

He shook his head and leaned against the counter. “No, it’s fine. Yeah, I had it changed after everything. My publisher didn’t mind. I guess that’s why I called you. I just, I thought you might know…” His eyes began to water and he squeezed them shut. Nellie didn’t look away, because she couldn’t. “Sorry. I just wondered if she ever, you know, said anything to you,” he said.

“About why?” Nellie looked at the scar on her knuckle, the one she’d gotten punching Johnny Ackley in the fourth grade for making fun of Hazel for spilling milk on her pants and shouting that Hazel had wet herself. When Johnny had seen the blood and the tooth she’d knocked out, he’d fled from the playground and they’d hidden from their teacher in the plastic tunnel that led to the slide. She blinked away the memory and shook her head. “No, she didn’t. I mean, she acted weird sometimes, but then she seemed fine. Then, all of a sudden she was gone.”

Jason closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. Nellie waited and took a few of her own. "Okay." He turned around and looked out the window over the sink. He began moving dishes around, turning the faucet on to rinse day old plates. Nellie blinked and sat with her hands in her lap. She waited for him to say something, but when he didn't she got up and walked out of the kitchen. She couldn't take it anymore. Being in that house, not looking at Jason, the boxes they'd begun to pack sitting around. She was sure Hazel's room was the only one without anything packed, and that made her want to scream. She couldn't take Jason's weird silence or his terrible coffee.

Nellie flipped her hood up and opened the front door. She stopped with her hand on the doorknob when her eyes fell on a beam of the front porch. There were initials carved into them, N.O and H. L. Nellie O'Neil and Hazel Laurent. They'd carved it the night before they'd begun their senior year, just six months ago. Nellie remembered Hazel insisting they do it. They were sitting on the front porch drinking lemonade and talking about what they hoped would happen their senior year. Nellie wanted to make honor roll one last time and finally get up the nerve to ask Andrew Riley out. Hazel didn't know what, but she's said she wanted something big to happen.

"Let's carve our initials," Hazel said.

"What for?"

Hazel had rolled her head back and laughed. "Because, I want to and so everyone will always know I was here."

Nellie had laughed and said, "Where do you plan on going?"

Hazel frowned and reached into her bag, pulling out a pocket knife and flipping out a sharp, thin blade. She'd crawled on her knees, dirtying the white sundress she'd been wearing, and begun to carve her initials. Nellie watched and wondered about her friend. She tried to remember what song was playing on Hazel's iPod that night, because it suddenly felt important, but she couldn't remember. All she could remember was the way Hazel had looked when she finished carving her initials and how she'd run her fingertips over the letters. She was lost in the music of her mind and not even Nellie could get her to come out of it. Hazel always got lost in thought and Nellie sometimes feared she'd never find her way back. Finally, Hazel turned around and handed her the blade. "Here, you do it too."

Nellie had taken the pocket knife from Hazel and carved her initials and then she handed it back to her. Hazel smiled at their marks and flipped the blade back in place. Now, Nellie wished she'd never let Hazel find a way to leave a part of herself behind.

Jason had come out of the kitchen and Nellie could feel him standing behind her. "She carried it around with her, that pocket knife, you know. She used to bring it out when she got angry and play with it at the dinner table," he said, and Nellie closed her eyes. She didn't want to start crying because she didn't know if she could stop.

She wiped her nose on her sleeve and let go of the door handle. Jason reached from behind her and closed the door. Nellie moved away from him and went to sit on the couch. It was soft and worn, and Nellie liked to think that it was because people who'd sat there had felt too happy to move. "She used to fiddle with it under her desk at school. I tried to throw it away once, but she found it. I don't know why I did that, but I didn't like her having that thing." Nellie used to think it was some kind of comfort blanket, but it made her stomach hurt to think that Hazel was comforted by the sharpness of the blade.

Jason sat down in a sofa chair and leaned forward on his elbows. "Yeah, I tried too. You know, I wasn't done talking in there," he said.

"I was." Nellie didn't bother to push back her hood. "Why am I even here?" she asked.

"I asked you to come. You didn't have to." Jason's voice was hard. Nellie crossed her arms and wondered why she had. She'd been lying in bed, trying to squeeze all of the memories that kept coming back out of her mind. Why couldn't someone just take

all of them away? It hurt to remember, but she couldn't let go of the sweet sadness the memories brought either. They shifted like a slide show of photographs in her mind and she couldn't focus on one for too long. Nellie could see all of their lives in front of her at once and where Hazel's stopped. On a cold December evening with a silent plea to the universe that it would be quick. Quick for Hazel, forever for the rest of them.

"I know I didn't. I just felt like I had to," Nellie said. Jason looked at her and she could see the broken part of him screaming for someone to understand. She gazed around the living room. The wall-to-wall box shelves were bare and all the photos had been wrapped and hidden in the cardboard boxes. It wasn't the same living room she'd sat in countless times at sleepovers. The fireplace held only the cold ashes of a once burning fire, and the blinds had been shut to keep the world out. It was a skeleton of a home and everything in it was ashes and bone. She thought about how quiet it must be with Hazel's parents gone all the time and how Jason was the only thing with a heartbeat in it. Nellie understood what it was like being alone with nothing to think about but Hazel, and she knew why he'd really called her. "I haven't talked about her with anyone since it happened."

Jason's shoulders went slack and he finally collapsed against the back of the chair. "Me neither. I tried to talk to mom and dad about it, but they're trying to...I don't know, forget, I guess," he said. He took a look around the room and grimaced. "I just can't do that anymore. I need to know what happened to her, Nellie. That's why I called you. I need you to tell me about my sister."

Nellie stared at him and shook her head. "I think you knew her better than I did. She hid stuff from me all the time. She never said what she meant, I realize that now. I always thought you two were close," she said. It had taken Nellie two months to realize Hazel had kept herself from her. She would always do these dramatic things, like showing up on her doorstep at two in the morning and dragging her outside to look for comets or taking her to museums on a whim. She would go to the art displays on her own before she ever took Nellie to them. When she'd bring her, she'd sit her in front of a painting and try to get her to guess how it made Hazel feel.

Nellie remembered her showing her a painting of a little girl with an umbrella at her side, staring up into the rain. Hazel had gripped her arm tight and stared at her with an eagerness that had annoyed Nellie. "Look at it Nell, it's beautiful," she'd said. "Don't you get it?"

Nellie had tried to see whatever it was Hazel had found so enlightening. All she could think was that the girl had an umbrella and she wasn't using it. "No, not really," Nellie said, and Hazel had let go of her arm and gone to look at another painting. Nellie wished she'd tried harder to get it. Maybe if she had, Hazel wouldn't have felt that no one did.

"Hazel stayed locked in her room when she wasn't with you. I figured she wasn't like that with you." Jason reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a photograph, folded into fours and soft from handling. He extended it and Nellie took it. It was a photograph of Hazel standing by a river and frowning at the camera. "I think she took that herself with her tripod. Look at the date on the photograph," Jason said.

Nellie looked and saw that it was a week before she'd done it, before she'd taken that pocket knife and waited for someone to find her in the bathroom. Nellie shivered and set the photo on the coffee table, sliding it away from her. She felt the acid of the coffee rising back up her throat. She'd done so well too, at not thinking about it. "Why?" she asked, pinching the skin on her arm to keep from crying.

Jason blew air out of his nose, and she could see a flash of anger in his eyes. "Who knows why Hazel did anything. She left this on her bed for someone to find. I thought it was for me, because she took me there a couple of months before and wanted me to jump off a rock, into the river with her." Jason stared at the photograph but didn't

make a move to pick it back up. “I didn’t know what she wanted, but it wasn’t for me to jump in with her. I wish she’d said what she meant, but she didn’t. Then she went around talking about what she was going to do when she graduated and I just never thought...” he trailed off and began to cry. Nellie closed her eyes to fight back her own tears. If she couldn’t see how different everything was, then it was almost like nothing had changed.

She didn’t know who stopped first, but eventually they were staring at each other with puffy eyes and stuffed noses. Jason rubbed his eyes and tossed a box of tissues to her. When she’d dried her eyes, Nellie curled up into a ball in the corner of the couch. “She took me to the river too. She asked me to jump, and I did,” Nellie said.

Jason frowned at her, “She did? When?”

“A few days before,” Nellie said. “It was the last time we hung out.”

Hazel had led Nellie through the woods. On the way, she’d asked Nellie what she did to feel alive. “Do you ever just feel like you’ve got to do something crazy to feel anything?” she’d asked.

“I like to roll the windows down while my mom drives, close my eyes, and just breathe. It makes me feel calm. Is that what you mean?” Nellie had to race to keep up with Hazel, because she moved faster than anyone she knew. Hazel shook her head.

“No, I mean something *big*,” Hazel said.

“Like what?”

“Like, jumping off the rocks into the river,” she said, grinning.

Nellie knew Hazel well enough to know what was coming. They were close enough to the river now that Nellie could hear the rush of the water, and she imagined a great, black abyss ready to swallow them up. “No, no, no. I’m not doing that. I *can’t* do that.”

Hazel groaned and grabbed her hand. “But you have to. Come on, I’ve already done it once. It’s safe, I promise. Please, Please, Please. I just want you to know what it feels like,” she said. Hazel argued that it was too cold. “Oh, but that makes it so much better. It hurts, but it’ll feel good after a minute.”

Hazel dragged Nellie by the hand to the base of the rocks and looked up. They weren’t too high, and dark as the water was, it didn’t seem to have an overwhelming current. Nellie didn’t know why she finally agreed to do it. Maybe it was the way Hazel was looking at the water, the way she went up to it like an old friend and dipped her hand through the surface. Maybe Nellie wanted to finally understand what Hazel was trying to tell her, and afterwards she thought that she did. She had been so wrong. Nellie said that she would do it and Hazel had hugged her.

They’d scaled the rocks, scraping their knees on the way up. From the top, they could look down at the water’s surface. The sun came out from behind a cloud, and sunlight collected on the surface in tiny gems that bobbed with the movement of the water. Nellie felt the sun on her neck, and the world was quiet except for the breathing of the river. Nellie felt lighter and laughed, but Hazel looked at her with a strange expression of sadness mixed with relief. “I told you so,” she said.

Nellie nodded. “It’s beautiful.”

“I know. On the count of three?” Hazel said. Nellie grabbed her hand and they bent their knees. Nellie took a deep breath and gave a short scream. On the count of three they jumped. Nellie felt life soaring through her as they hovered above the water, and she was sure that was what Hazel wanted her to understand. They hit the water and when Nellie resurfaced she looked around for Hazel. When Hazel didn’t come up, Nellie began to panic.

“Hazel?” Nellie circled around, but the water’s surface was still except for the ripples she made. She felt her stomach sink and she cried out again and again for Hazel, but got nothing but the sound of the water. Nellie was about to dive back under when Hazel’s head popped up a few feet from hers. Nellie swam to her friend and punched

her shoulder. “What is the matter with you? I thought you were dead. Don’t do that again,” she said, and Hazel just blinked at her.

“Okay, sorry. I’m right here,” Hazel said. She swam to the shore and Nellie followed, still recovering from the halting fear she’d felt when Hazel hadn’t come back up. Nellie never saw her again.

Nellie told Jason how it felt to jump. “I thought she wanted me to understand how she was feeling, but I was wrong. I think we felt different things. I felt alive and I think she felt like it wasn’t enough to feel it only then,” Nellie said.

“I wish I had jumped with her. I didn’t even try to understand.”

“Jason, I don’t know if she wanted us to. Not really,” she said.

Outside the rain had begun to pick up again and Nellie pulled out her phone. It was almost eight o’clock and her mom and dad would be worried. She’d left a note, but she knew they were worried about her. They were keeping their eyes peeled for any signs that she might try what Hazel did, like suicide was contagious or something. Nellie wanted to tell them that she couldn’t leave behind what Hazel did, but that would require her to think about what Hazel had left. Jason saw her look at her phone. “If you have to leave that’s okay.”

“I can stay,” Nellie said, but she felt the weight of the house’s ghost’s bearing down on her and she didn’t know how much more she could take. Jason waved a hand at her.

“No, it’s fine.”

Nellie got up to leave. Jason followed her out onto the front porch and they stared at the rain coming down for a minute. “If you ever need me...” Nellie looked back at Jason. He was trying not to cry.

“Yeah sure,” he said, and reached out to give her a hug.

Once out of the house, she went to her bike. Steering it down the driveway, she jumped on and peddled. She wondered if it ever stopped hurting and if Hazel thought their pain would be as quick as hers was. Hazel used to insist that nothing ever really ended, and that life and despair and love went on endlessly. Love did, sure, but pain? Nellie didn’t know if she wanted to believe that this pain would always be with her.

She peddled faster.



RIVER OF HORSES

J.E. Tankersley

In the soft red glow
of a newborn sleep,
there is a river, stampeding—
all severe and harsh and thieving.
The water rips and torrents, tumbling
over itself like a thousand fleeing colts.
I'm holding something, always—
the arm of my wife—clutched tightly
by feverish hands.

Her feet sway over a cliff's edge,
flailing within the falls
like low hanging limbs in a flood.
She mouths words. They seem to read,
"We all float down to the Outer Banks."
It pulls at her dress, tugs at her hair,
slickening her slender fingers
which gleam beneath her silver rings.

Her flesh begins to melt
like a candle, the wax seeping through
the spaces in my grasp, pushing
its way into my fingerprints.
The water roars, parting her lips
and forcing its way down her pale throat—
I reach for her clothes, but they erode,
tearing apart like wet paper.

And then, always, my hands are empty—
she flips and tumbles, end over end, merging
with the herd of galloping rapids
that whip and snap like the sound
of a thousand breaking bones.



THE LADDER

Genevieve Hamilton

One evening I squeezed through
the missing teeth of my mother's fence,
and happened upon
a lady plump with petticoats
on the cobbled street
who took no notice of me.
Beneath her arm was a ladder,
and a pail of glue that glowed
wet in the moonlight.
My stiff shoes tripped and crunched,
so I slipped them in a mailbox
and padded close behind until
the packed stone softened
to woods too dark for eyes.

I hugged a tree trunk fat with age
and watched her glide
Until she stopped beneath the moon
to lean her ladder against the sky.
She hitched her skirts and began to climb,
the black buttons on her shoes peered like eyes.
From beneath her hat she drew a brush
flecked with white—
and plunged it deep into a pail.
She slapped the brush against the night
in wide, breathless strokes,
and glue dribbled down her arm.
From her depths of skirt
she plucked a fistful of paper stars
and one by one stuck them fast
to the sky.

With my mouth wide and pressed
against the spicy trunk,
I watched the world awash in brilliance
pouring from The Big Dipper,
while The Great Bear leaned against her hand.



THIS TRAIN IS BOUND FOR SOME FINAL STOP

J.E. Tankersley

Whether it's a few dozen virgins,
surrounded by apparitions with missing limbs
who can't purge the sound of ringing concussions, or
the Pearly Gates, hovering souls waiting patiently
to meet the man with the list, or
a paradise of bald men
who have reached Enlightenment and Extinction—
whether it's a burning room,
miles deep, or
a damp hole in the dirt where the worms
nip and pick at your cadaver—
eternity is a long time to spend, wishing
you had pressed your nose into the spine
of some other book.



THE JACKET

Cody Rabideau

His son reached the top of the hill first, and when he did, he pumped his fists into the sky, the wind pulling his jacket around him like a cape. They had been in a foot race, instigated by his son as a joke, but perpetuated by his own incessant need to push the boy. Sometimes he thought that his son was soft, and that made him uneasy. His jeans were neatly pressed, and he wore a lot of black; he wore a lot of jackets—hoodies he called them—even well into the summer when the southern sun shone like an inescapable ball of fire.

The race had started on Filmour Street, on the cracked and broken sidewalks that bled emerald weeds through open sores. His son challenged him when they were on their Friday walk in their neighborhood, and he had felt hot shame around his collar, as if he had already lost to his son. He accepted the challenge and dictated that the course would extend down Filmour onto a cobbled path that wound out of the neighborhood to a hill that rose up from the earth like a small mountain overlooking a sullen part of the Reedy River.

Then his son had taken off, shocking his father with unprecedented speed. His legs started to blur together into a fan of denim. His shoes clacked on the ground like tiny gunfire, and his jacket—oh the jacket—flapped out uncomfortably around his waist. He had started to chase his son then, letting the awe flow out of him like bitter waves. But he knew that the race was already lost. When he got to the cobblestone path, his chest already starting to hitch in harsh breaths, his son had disappeared into the trees.

Now his son was pumping his arms like Rocky, and he was staggering up the hill, a stitch in his side like a twisted dagger, and his lungs flaming, each breath adding fuel and bringing no relief. Sweat stood out in tiny, indignant beads on his face and arms and chest, and the kissing breeze of the autumn wind made him feel cold all over. He felt color draining from his face, and had the unmistakable feeling that his face had soured and turned green.

The first thing he saw when he reached his boy was the look of concern and fading ecstasy on his son's face. Then he pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket, lit it, and unbuttoned his shirt. He looked south, down the drop off and out over the river. It flowed in silence, cutting through the earth like a darkened scar. This far down on the Reedy meant that there was less sewage and chemical run off in the water, but he still didn't want his son to go and play in it, though he knew that he probably had already. His son wasn't disobedient; he was curious, and sometimes, he thought, that was worse.

The sun was nearly set, and it cast a rose light over the small valley. Beams of deep gold stole through the trees below like spotlights, and he could see specks of dust lingering in the light shafts like malign sprites.

"Where'd you learn to run like that, Jack," he said, eyes over bright in their sockets, looking out as the horizon began its shift from rose to purple.

"I don't know," Jack said. He felt his son looking up at him, questioning, seeking approval like a dog seeking dinner scraps. He felt pity, misplaced and heavy inside of him.

“Well, you didn’t learn it from me,” He said. He kept tracing the line of the river with his eyes, following it from where it disappeared in the tree line that headed towards downtown, and where it stretched out too far away from him to distinguish. He didn’t know where it went, but he guessed that it went toward Greer.

“My friends I guess,” Jack said. He was fidgeting next to him, his feet digging into the earth in small circles.

“Running from the cops?” It sounded crass, and painful to his ears, but he couldn’t look at his son to see how it was received.

“Running from you,” Jack said coolly.

He felt his cheeks flush red, and his face felt old and weathered like eroded marble. He could dish it out pretty well, and he had in the past, only when Jack had gotten out of line. He’d never beaten the boy, but they’d had a few times where things had been lost in translation, and he had to set the boy straight. That was a given portion of parenthood, perhaps the only rule set forth in the parent’s rulebook: help your child become the best that he can be. And that’s what he was doing. He couldn’t allow disobedience because that would foster other things, darker things that would make his son into a monster. And he had grown up with a monster—his own father had turned to the bottle at an early age, hoping to use it as a muse, but instead falling into its well hidden trap. *His* father had spent many nights inebriated by the family fire, watching it flicker and shoot spikes of orange up into the chimney, not moving, only thinking his horrible thoughts with his deranged mind. *He* had lived with a monster, and he didn’t want to fail as a father and create one of his own.

“You being smart, Jacky-boy?” He put his hand on his son’s shoulder, lightly, but with firm fingers. Jack wouldn’t look at him.

“No,” he said, distant, not amused, almost like a machine that had suddenly powered down.

“So you’re being honest then? Running from me?” He said, wriggling another cigarette from his pack.

Jack said nothing. He dug his teeth into his bottom lip, and looked down over the side of the hill.

He was watching the gears turn in his son’s head with interested eyes, hoping somehow that his son would say something to bring himself out of this hole he was digging. He didn’t want there to be any more miscommunication. He loved his son dearly, but he didn’t want his son to start crying. Jack had done that before, and never before had he been so angry. He had yelled in his son’s face, their noses almost touching, spit flying from his mouth and making Jack’s eyes wince. The tears came after he received a subpar grade in gym class his freshman year of high school. Sure, he had started in on Jack like a buzzard swooping onto a carcass, but he thought that Jack prepared to cry regardless of the situation. Jack seemed to think that it was his way out of things, that if he could cry enough and make his dad feel worse enough about what he’d done and what he wanted to do, then it would all be absolved. No harm. No foul.

“I was being smart,” Jack said. “It’s from baseball.”

“You don’t play baseball,” He said.

“I do. With my friends and a few kids I don’t know. In Simpsonville Park. We usually play eight on eight because that’s all we have.”

“Why are you always smart with me? I ask you a simple question, and you fly off the handle. Like *I’m* the bad guy. Like *I’m* the one that’s messing up here.”

“Can’t we just forget it? I had fun running with you.”

“Men don’t run from their problems, Jack. Men don’t just let things go. We can’t just let this go because it’s bigger than you think, but you’re just too young to understand.

I let this go, and I'm not doing my job as a father. I'm letting you disrespect me, and that doesn't fly. You can't talk to me that way."

Jack looked up at his father, his eyes swimming with tears, glistening against the bruised sky like forlorn diamonds. There was so much hurt in his son's eyes that he felt like falling down to his knees and hugging the boy. He felt shame in the form of a knot in his throat and an acrid taste on his palate. He could let it go, couldn't he? Just this once, just so that his son wouldn't cry, so that he wouldn't feel as if his insides were being scooped out with a melon baller. Didn't he owe that to his son? As his father?

And then Jack's face contorted, and he turned to walk down the hill.

Red flashed in front of his eyes, blossoming in disbelief and leaden anger. He had no intention of hurting his son when he came out here, none at all, but now, as his son started down the hill in a slow and mocking gait, he wanted to bludgeon the boy. His arm lashed out and snatched ahold of his son's right forearm. His nails dug into the cloth of his hoody, clamping like vice grips. Jack cried out in a strangled sputter, starting to wriggle his arm away from his father's grip.

He looked around quickly, not seeing anyone around, no one to intervene on a harmless discussion between father and son. The only house on the end of Filmour Street was a one story box-looking house. It was low and rectangular, paneled with white siding. They had hedges though, and he traced their breadth around the house with his eyes. They were more or less, alone.

"Don't you ever walk away from me when I'm talking to you," He said, looking slightly down at Jack. His son was still fighting, cords standing out on his neck, sweat beginning to drip down the tip of his nose.

"You can't do this to me," Jack said, panting, his voice cracking in mild panic. "Not any more. You can't do this."

"I can't do what, Jacky-boy?" He said, feeling his heart swell in his chest. "Obviously I can't have a conversation with my son where he doesn't disrespect me."

"I'm too old for this, dad. Stop. Please," Jack said, but his voice wasn't breaking. It had steadied, and he felt uneasy by what sounded like confidence in his son's voice. Jack sounded like he believed himself, that he was too old for whatever he was accusing his father of, and that nothing could happen to him.

"I'm your father, Jack," he said. "I know what's best for you."

"You don't know *anything*," Jack said, and he looked into his father's eyes with something more than menace. He couldn't place it, but it looked like his son hadn't just had enough with his father for right now, but that he had been done with his father for a long time.

"I think we're going home," he said, his voice cold and high and sweet. "I think you should sit in the chair and take a few moments to think about what you've said to me tonight."

"No," Jack said, his voice dropping to a low whisper, almost inaudible.

That was good. That was what he wanted. Now Jack understood the gravity of the situation, understood what happened when Jack disrespected his father.

"It's for your own good," he said, turning his head back toward the sunset. The sun was almost down, and the stars were beginning to peek their heads through the darkening sky.

"Dad, please, no," Jack said, his voice quick and stabbing. "Please, man, I'll be good. I promise. I am good. I was just having a bad night, dad. School sucked this week, and you know...I just...you didn't even tell me that I did good in our race."

"The chair is for your own good," he said, not turning back. His voice was cold but filling with pity. His head was starting to throb in regret, but he had crossed the threshold now and there was no turning back. He had to follow through with his

decisions, and he had to make sure that his son was a better man than he. “You learn in the chair. You learn a little bit about respect, and yourself. And about how much your mother and I do for you. You’ll miss dinner tonight, but if you don’t complain, you’ll get dinner later.”

He could feel the sweat on his son’s body, starting to soak into the cloth of his jacket. Jack wouldn’t stop trying to pull himself free, and with each passing moment, he could feel how Jack was starting to descend into full-blown panic and regret for his actions. That was the key facet of his doctrines, that his son should understand the consequences of his actions—such as disrespect toward elders.

When he turned back to face his son, his grip still tight on the boy’s forearm, Jack lashed out at him with a balled fist. It caught him by surprise, and Jack hit him in the right cheekbone, high enough to black out his vision for a second, and Jack ripped his arm free. He felt total shock for a moment, robbing him of his balance, and he staggered backward, pin wheeling his arms until he dropped onto his back with a hard thud. He heard the swish of his son’s pressed jeans as he began to tear away, and he snapped his eyes open. He felt a piece of cloth from his son’s jacket in his clamped fist, damp with warm, sticky blood. He stuffed it into the front pocket of his pants, smearing red up onto his fingers and over the side of his chinos.

The light was really fading now, and the moon was starting to glow in a weak crescent. The stars weren’t at their maximum brightness yet, and he could only see the shuffling outline of his son running down the hill. Anger stole over him, anger and a feeling of utter panic. It was panic that his son might come across someone else before he got to him, and Jack might tell someone about his father, make him out to be something that he wasn’t, and that could be bad for everyone involved. Jack’s mother would be irate, not to mention how low that would make him feel, to be beaten down that badly by his own son.

He tore off down the hill, the fire in his lungs starting again, and his opened shirt fanning out behind him like a cape. It was difficult to get down the hill, much more difficult than it was going up. The incline was steep toward the top, and he felt as though he had to stagger his steps so that he didn’t fall. But his son was already reaching the bottom, moving with agile, purposeful steps.

When Jack touched the bottom of the hill, barely visible in the shadow of the earth, he saw his son stop for a moment. Jack looked up at the cobbled path that led back to Filmour street, and then looked to his right at a foot-worn path that rounded the hill and followed the length of the Reedy out to where neither he or Jack had ever been. When Jack was young, too young to have learned how to disrespect his father or mother, he used to take his son out to this hill. Back then Jack had ridden on his shoulders instead of beating him in a foot race. Jack had marveled with all of the words he knew how to say when they came to the top, and not just the first time, but it seemed as though he noticed something new each time they came to the hill together. He liked the river a lot, and when Jack was only two, he kept clapping and pointing at the river from his father’s arms, fascinated and unable to explain it. That had been a good time. That was how he wanted to remember Jack—the little boy fascinated with the world’s expanse, noticing something new at every turn.

By the time he made it to the bottom of the hill, Jack had already taken the path by the river. He stole after him, pushing his body as hard as he could, pushing past the walls that he felt closing in around him and robbing him of breath. He could see Jack, still moving quickly, apparently undisturbed by the hill’s nasty decline.

The river sloshed to his left, and he had a sudden feeling of fear rise inside of him like black ice. He had his eyes fixed on his son as he pumped his legs beneath him, his lips pulled back in an unconscious snarl, and his head throbbing with the sound of

his son's confident and indignant voice. He thought he was too old for the chair, but what his son just couldn't understand was that punishment was a required portion of life. It was like training Pavlov's dog—conditioning. His son did something unsavory, something that was uncalled for—like disrespecting his father—and so he needed to be punished. The chair was just the most efficient way to do so.

His eye was starting to swell and throb with his heartbeat. He touched it lightly, feeling it sting against his face, and he wondered how he would tell anyone about it. He couldn't hide it from his wife, and he wouldn't be able to hide it at work. Not unless he used makeup and that was far out of the question. And Jack had done it to him. Jack struck him in the eye. Jack the boy who likes to wear tight, pressed jeans cuffed at the ankle, and over-large flannel t-shirts. The boy who doesn't like to compete at school, who doesn't care for gym class or for keeping his grades at a consistent level of excellence, but who apparently played pick-up baseball games with his friends and never told his father. Jack had struck him out of rage and out of fear. The idea that his son hated him crossed his mind, and he felt his chest grow tight for a second as he ran. But his son was just too young to understand why his father did the things that he did. He would know one day, when he too, became a father.

"Jacky-boy!" He called, panting and running. "*Jacky!*"

His son was getting farther away, dodging through brush and tree limbs while his father started to lag behind. He could only see the silhouette of Jack's head against the baleful glow of the moon, shimmering through the sparse trees with silvery shafts of light. The path was growing more wild as they moved along it, his son running like a ghost and his father trailing behind, fighting with the idea of letting his son go. But if he stopped chasing, then his son might never come back, and that would be worse than death. That would be like burying his boy six feet under and losing everything he had worked for since his son's birth. But another part of him wanted to stop running. Part of him wanted to just call it off, and turn back, and walk home defeated and exhausted, his head reeling with pain from his son's fist, and the sour throb of his shameful heart.

And part of him wanted to stop because he didn't know what to do with Jack if he caught him.



HEAD IN THE CLOUDS, HEAD IN THE OVEN

J.E. Tankersley

I've always been afraid of going insane. Even as a child I had an inherent fear, a paranoia eating at the back of my skull, telling me that something was off, that my brain wasn't working quite right, that I needed help. When I would climb into the worn leather seats of our old Volvo, I'd play through the questions that I wanted to ask to my mother, figure out the best, the most normal approach. I would watch the trees blur past, stare at the flat piles of what used to be animal flesh in the center of the road, inhale the second hand smoke of a Misty Light 120, and I'd look up at her. When I couldn't figure out the right words, I'd just lay it on the table.

"Am I crazy?" I would ask.

She would blink a few times, glance over at me, take another drag. "No, you're not," she'd say. "Why do you think that?" I could almost see her words forming in the pluming smoke.

"Just making sure," I'd reply, hardly above a whisper.

But it was the truth. I wanted confirmation about my well-being, like an engineer going through a nuclear power plant and making sure the levels were right, that the reactors weren't overheating—I didn't want to explode. But when she'd made it clear that I wasn't insane, I'd worry about other things. I'd ask if I had cancer, or a brain tumor, or if I would grow up to be paralyzed. But when I'd exhausted every medical term that I'd heard on the television, I'd move on to more obscure things, create my own cancers that could be infesting me.

I remember once asking her if I was a robot. I convinced myself that I could have been created in a lab somewhere, created for some unknown purpose, but was being raised by a normal family to teach me emotions and social norms, like a regular little boy. I imagined that I saw everything in a grid, with statistics and levels and a targeting system, and that if I listened closely enough, if I pressed my ear against my arm, I could hear the gears grinding where I bent it at the elbow. Maybe I was already crazy. My mother dismissed all of that, obviously. She complimented me on my imagination.

Now I'm older and fears have changed. I'm no longer scared of being a cyborg, having a mysterious disease or realizing that my body is riddled with cancer—I can go to the doctor if I need these fears calmed. Now I'm fearful of my wife finding me like Ernest Hemingway, a bottle of whiskey in my hand and a shotgun in my mouth. I'm afraid of my parents coming over for Thanksgiving only to discover me with my head stuffed in the back of the oven, my lungs full of gas and my eyes glazed over like Sylvia Plath (Devlin). I'm not afraid of dying, I'm afraid of being remembered for a suicide note, like Hunter S. Thompson. His read, "No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 More than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always.... No Fun—for anybody. You are getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax—This won't hurt (Devlin)."

These fears, these quaking thoughts that keep my eyes locked to the ceiling in the dark of night, they aren't the same as the worries I had as child. This paranoia is warranted, it's earned, it's scientifically rooted. Turns out, lucky us, that creative types

are irrefutably more likely to deal with mental illness. Though artists and photographers, sculptors and choreographers are only slightly more likely to go mad, the writers of the world are almost definitely bound for the loony bin. When you read things like, "Writers are 121% more likely to deal with bipolar disorder," or "Writers are 38% more likely to have anxiety," it suddenly makes sense that every writer you've ever loved (probably) was either a raging alcoholic, suicidal, or high out of their minds (Miller). But these things, the substance abuse and the suicidal thoughts, they're not the root of the issue. They're simply side effects, forms of coping that these authors use to distract themselves from the true problem or to escape it altogether.

The first time I saw my brother have an episode was almost a year after his diagnosis. He'd been labeled Bipolar and Schizoaffective. He would go through waves of mania, followed by days of severe depression where he just sat on the couch for hours. He didn't eat much then. He had hallucinations, heard voices, and saw people that weren't there. The first time he ever got admitted to the mental hospital, he thought there were cameras in his apartment. My mom and dad tried to explain it to me, but it wasn't the same as hearing it from his own mouth.

"He thinks that people are watching him," my dad said. This was before they told me that he had gone crazy, before I was really aware of what was wrong. All I knew was that he had been arrested for barreling down the highway on *my* motorcycle at two hundred miles per hour, and then somehow got placed in the hospital without having crashed. That didn't make sense to me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"When he came over this weekend, he was very...nervous. He was tapping his foot a lot, wringing his hands. We kept asking him what was wrong. After a while he started crying, told us that he was scared. He thinks he's being watched. He thinks that there are cameras in his apartment. That people are posting videos of him on the internet."

"Well are they?" I had furrowed my brow and crossed my arms at this point.

"He's," my mother hesitated, "*Very sick.*"

That's how she described it. "*Very sick.*" I accepted that at the time. I didn't want to push the matter or make it any harder than it already was. But, when I actually saw it happen, when I actually saw the lack of reason in his eyes, somehow the words very sick didn't quite cut it. I came home from college one night without telling my parents I was coming. When I walked through the kitchen door both of them were standing there, my dad leaning against the counter and my mom beside him with her face in her hands.

My dad cut his eyes towards me. He gave me a shallow shaking of the head, a sort of "Not now. This is bad. Don't say anything." I never asked which one it actually was. That's when I noticed my brother sitting at the dining room table. His face was flushed red, beads of sweat sliding down his temples, bouncing his knee up and down, and staring out the window. He took a shaky breath, wrung his hands. I glanced back and forth between him and my parents. My mother stared at the floor.

"You don't understand," my brother said. "It's not just one time. I've seen them everywhere. When I was driving down the road, I looked over to another car, and the woman turned her head and looked me dead in the eye. Then she did the same thing." He stared at my father, his face tight and serious. He covered one of his eyes with his palm. "They all do it. Everywhere I go it's the same thing. They all look at me and cover their eye. When I was in the grocery store, a woman stopped shopping, put her stuff down and looked at me and did it. I'd never seen her before in my life. But she covered her eye and then went back to shopping like it never happened. They all look at me and cover their eye. Everywhere I go it's the same thing."

My parents tried to convince him that these things weren't actually happening.

They told him that they believed that he thought this happened, but they had never seen it, that it didn't make any sense. He would say, "Exactly! It doesn't make any sense! You don't understand. They all look at me and cover their eye! Tell me how that makes any sense!"

Then he would start the story over, repeating the same few sentences over and over again, becoming more and more frustrated. It was as if he was trying to explain to us in detail the things that had happened but couldn't make it past those few sentences. Eventually, he started crying, running his hands up his cheeks and over his head before starting his story over again.

I became terrified that it ran in the family, that somehow I would be the next one to lose my mind. It was selfish to focus on myself like that, but I couldn't avoid it. That fear, mixed with the weight of dealing with a brother who had gone mad, what that did to the family, quickly developed into an anxiety disorder. Which means I'm already part of one of the statistics mentioned before; I'm *already sick*. As it turns out, creative types are also significantly more likely to have family members that are being treated for mental illness, which means I'm a part of those percentages as well (Staff). Those worries of becoming Hemingway or Plath seem far more logical after this. It's like I'm going down a check list. Oh, writers are more likely to have anxiety? Check. Writers are more likely to have family with mental illness? Check. How long will it be before I'm checking off that I've developed bipolar or that I'm one of the writers who's found dead? I mean, after all, the statistics prove that I'm fifty percent more likely to kill myself (Staff).

I really do find myself creating a checklist, one that seems to be filling up more rapidly than I'd like to admit. If it wasn't enough that I've already developed one mental illness or another, it turns out that eminent creators usually have "harsh early life experiences (such as social rejection, parental loss, or physical disability) and mental and emotional instability (Kaufman)." Check.

The bathroom door in the house that I grew up in was more like a window. My brother drank a lot during his teen years, experimented with most of the drugs that I can think of, and had a temper that would erupt at the drop of a hat. When he wasn't taking his aggression out on me (once he took an action figure of mine and lit it on fire, and another time he slammed my head into the ground and gave me a concussion), he punched the bathroom door. This left it with a large hole, about two feet wide in one spot. My father was rarely home—he worked out of town for the most part—and my mother was left to try and deal with a young man who was already showing the symptoms of being *very sick*, what would later be labeled "bipolar." At the time, we never even considered that he could be ill.

Perhaps we should have, though. It was clear, at least to me, that he must be disturbed in some way. Once, while my mother was at work, he brought my friend AJ and me into the living room. We were only nine or ten at the time, which made him almost sixteen. He and his friends had been drinking. The wafting stench of alcohol clung in the air like a film, and the dank smell of cat piss that marijuana produces was thick on their clothes. They surrounded us in the living room, ripped off our t-shirts, and told us to fight each other. They started passing around dollars, betting on which one of us would win. We shook our heads.

"No," I said. "We're not doing this. You're insane."

"Oh you're going to." He smirked. "Or you know what happens?"

They jumped on us. One of his friends held my arms, and another grabbed my legs. Two of his other friends did the same to AJ. Chris raised his hand high into the air and slapped it hard against my stomach, where a hand-shaped welt formed almost immediately. I cried out in pain.

“Pink belly!” He laughed. “I’m gonna do this until you two fight.”

Another boy was slapping AJ on his stomach, and I watched helplessly as a tear rolled down his cheek.

So we fought. We swung at each other, our fists colliding with each other’s flesh, our limbs wrapping around each other’s throats until we were bruised and bloody. We tackled each other to the ground, pretending to choke the other out while we rested. When they found out we were faking, they pulled us apart and threw us into each other again, calling us obscenities and taking swigs from red plastic cups.

But the tortures started earlier than that. They’re practically the only thing I remember from childhood. He used to throw me into my room, place a bowl-shaped papasan chair over me—and put my toy chest on top—of it like a cage. He left me there for hours. Once I remember this one clearly, he nearly convinced me to jump off the roof of our house with a “parachute” that he made from an old back pack, a tarp, and weed eater wire. I truly believed it would stop me from slamming into the ground. I remember inching my way towards the edge of the roof, several grocery bags in each hand, the tarp thumping in the wind behind me. If my mother had not come outside at that exact moment, I would probably still be in a wheelchair.

So it’s clear. I fall into these statistics. I’ve got my clipboard. I’m moving down the list and I’m checking off the terrible things that writers seem to go through. From my point of view, it seems like it’s only a matter of time before I become *very sick*, or before I’m found with my head in the oven or a shotgun in my mouth. But that’s not what I want for myself. I want to write well, enjoy a life of creating characters and adventures. That’s what I want, but I’m terrified of the side effects. Just as substance abuse is a side effect of mental illness, it seems that going insane is a repercussion of my chosen profession. I don’t want to be Jack London, drinking myself to death or pumping morphine into my veins (Devlin).

There’s a fine line between madness and genius, like a tightrope that’s pulled taut over a large expanse. On either side of the canyon is safety and sanity—a place where the majority of people spend their entire lives, a place of clear mind and sound body, a place where I would love to build a house and spend my days. But between each side, in that open breadth of air beneath the tightrope is lunacy—padded walls and strait jackets, bugs crawling beneath your skin, and brooding voices that whisper at you from the back of your skull. And unfortunately for creative types, the writers, painters, photographers, thinkers, and tinkerers of the world, we find ourselves somewhere in the middle, balancing ourselves upon that rope with a twenty-foot pole, being careful not to tilt too far to the left or right but always looking down at what’s below.

On my first day of kindergarten I was led into the room by my mother. I kissed her on the cheek and ran over to the other kids, who at the time were sitting on the floor in front of an old, white rocking chair. Beside it was this girl. She was cute. She had short, curly blonde hair, and a white dress that she twirled back and forth. I knew she had to be special in some way, because she got to sit in the teacher’s lap while the rest of us had to sit Indian style on the floor. Later I learned that her name was Hannah and that she had cancer. I didn’t know what that was at the time. When we colored in pictures, or tried to at least, or got to play with clay, Hannah danced around the room, spinning her dress and singing to herself. I didn’t like her very much. I didn’t understand why she got special treatment.

When she didn’t show up again after the first few weeks, I forgot about her. As an adult I understand now that this was the time when she went for chemotherapy. Near the end of that school year, I remember it because it interrupted our time to play with Play-Doh, which was always my favorite, everyone in the class ran to the door, including the teachers. I furrowed my brow, confused by the sudden movement, and wiped my hands clean. I pushed my way through the crowd to see what was happening.

They were clapping: Hannah and her parents were standing in the doorway. She had a rag on her head, a red silk bonnet with blue and yellow flowers, and her eyebrows were missing. When we locked eyes, she walked forward, wrapping her frail little limbs around my neck. I was surprised. I couldn't remember ever having spoken to her before. I didn't understand. She tightened her grip and turned her head towards my ear, whispering, "I missed you."

It didn't make any sense. Was she mistaking me for someone else? Was I supposed to remember her? Were we friends at some point? My brain was a storm of questions to which I had no answers. But the one question that I could hear over all the others, the one that I couldn't shake, was, "Why *me*? Why are they looking at *me* like that? Why was I the one standing in the center of the room, surrounded by kids and adults alike, all of whom seemed to be looking at *me* with sympathy?"

But now, after all these years, it makes sense. She wasn't hugging me because we were friends at some point and I had forgotten her, or because she was mistaking me for someone else. She was hugging me because we were the same. The others in the room seemed to understand it as well, even if I wouldn't for another fifteen years. They must've been able to sense it. Or maybe it was just that obvious. Or maybe they had conversations about it when I wasn't around. I wonder now if my mother had to have a meeting with the teacher before letting me join the class. I wonder if she had to explain that I was going to be different from the other students. When Hannah wrapped her arms around my neck, she was saying, "We're both different. We're both *very sick*."

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WEIGHTED BRANCHES

Jordan Sears

The snow continued falling, each flake dancing on its path from the sky to the ground. A child watched from the window, his small fingers pulling the blinds apart so that he could see the snow.

“Michael, are you excited to play in the snow?” As his grandmother leaned closer to look over his shoulder, he turned to face her with a wide grin. But she caught only a glimpse of him, his head quickly turning back towards the window.

Tree branches were set with white, and the snow looked so white and so smooth that, to Michael, it was heaven. He saw his grandparents once when he was six, two years ago. But his dad let him come up this week before school started—by himself. This was only his second day here.

“We can go out after lunch.” His grandmother walked towards the kitchen. The sound of cabinets opening and closing mixed in with the subdued howl of the wind moving through the weighted branches.

His eyes followed birds flying from naked branches to trees covered in dark green needles. His eight-year-old mind pictured all the things he could do in the snow. He could build a snowman, forts as tall as himself, and he could throw snowballs against the trees or maybe at his grandparents if they weren’t looking. He pictured how the snow felt. Maybe it was cold; maybe it would be soft like the many pillows that were on his bed upstairs. He knew that there was nothing like this in Florida where he and his dad lived.

Michael heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. He could hear his grandpa ask what time lunch was. He liked his grandparents from what he could remember. They gave him candy and let him sleep in a big bed. He was even allowed to roam around the house. In the basement, there were piles of old stuff like records, clothes, games, dolls, and things that he had never seen before.

“Michael, lunch is almost ready. Can you come help set the table?” Her voice sounded inviting—her inflection always ending on a high note.

“Yes ma’am.” He peered through the blinds one last time. He could feel the cold coming off the glass—his breath leaving a fog on the window.

“Can you help grandpa put the plates and silverware on the table?” Everything looked aged, delicate.

His grandpa smiled at him, and they gently put the china out onto the table. Michael looked out the dining room window, which was quite a large window. He couldn’t believe how much snow there was, but his grandparents didn’t seem to really notice. They were probably used to it.

She started to bring in vegetables and a broccoli and chicken casserole. Michael tried to keep his manners even if he was always wary of casserole, which was obvious from the slight grimace on his face.

“Don’t worry Michael. You’ll like it. Your dad liked it when he was your age,” she said, her words trying to soothe a boy’s picky habits.

“Trust me. It’s good.” His grandpa smiled at his wife, his skin wrinkling around

his eyes. Michael took a bite; kids were right when they said that their grandparents made good food.

A silence passed over the table as they began to eat and admire the snow falling outside the window. It wasn't a bad silence though. Michael enjoyed when things were quiet, and he imagined how quiet it was outside—how quietly the snow hit the ground.

His grandparents looked at each other, their smiles fading and their hands slowly resting on the table.

“Michael. When we went to bed last night, we heard something coming from your room.” His grandma sounded worried, but prepared. “And it sounded like you were crying.”

Michael thought they couldn't hear him last night. He knew that they knew though—that his mom passed away three months ago. He stared hard at the broccoli and nodded.

His grandma leaned over towards him and gently touched his hand. “Oh, Michael. I know it's hard. But everything will work out. You just have to trust your father.” His grandpa continued scraping his fork against the plate as she continued, “I'm sure your mom is watching over you right now.” Her smile matched the smile that Michael forced. He didn't want to think about his mom.

“We'll build a snowman,” his grandpa said, looking first at Michael, then to this wife. “After we finish eating.” His grandpa wore suspenders over his plaid shirts, and his thick glasses and bent posture gave away his condition. “I think we even have a carrot we can use for the nose.”

Everyone finished eating, and Michael helped his grandma carry the dishes into the kitchen. He started to notice the pictures that hung in every room of people that looked like his grandparents except younger. Some of the pictures included a boy that looked like him, but he guessed it was his dad.

His grandma noticed what he was looking at. “Your dad looked a lot like you when he was your age,” she chuckled. “He was quite a bit more rambunctious than you, though.” Michael smiled—half-knowing what that word meant.

“Hey, Michael.” Michael turned his head to see his grandpa standing in the doorway. “Let's go find some clothes so that you can play in the snow.” Michael wasn't prepared for the snow. Florida was warm, and his dad sent him here in such a rush that he forgot to pack any jackets. He followed his grandpa up the stairs, and they looked through the closet of one of the guest rooms, digging through quilts, old jackets and boots, and finally found some of his old clothes.

“These might fit you. Try them on.” His grandpa handed him an old, dark purple jacket, and black ski pants—both of which were quite puffy.

Michael put them on over the clothes, he was wearing. “They're big.”

“Rather them be big than small.” His grandpa patted down the sleeves of the jacket. “I think this will work. Let's see if we can find you some boots.”

His grandpa continued pushing through clothes, as Michael looked around the room. He saw more pictures of his dad and shelves full of old-looking books. He walked over towards the pictures, picking them up and setting them down.

“This room was your dad's room.” Michael looked over to see his grandpa holding a pair of small boots. He was coughing between his sentences. “We put all these pictures in here after he went to college.”

“What are all these books? Were they his?” Michael liked to read too.

“Yes, they were. He always liked reading.” His grandpa picked up a picture over on a stand by the window. “You might like this picture. This was after one of his high school football games. He was actually pretty good.” His voice heightened with a sense of pride. “He was good at a lot of things. And quite smart.”

“He never told me that he played football.” His dad always seemed to be too busy taking care of his mom to tell Michael about himself. The only time that his dad ever talked to him was to tell him why mom was sick—why cancer was such a bad thing.

“You should ask him about it.” His grandpa turned his attention to the boots. “Now, see if these fit. If they do, then I just need to find you some gloves, and we should be set to go outside.”

Michael tried on the boots as his grandpa walked away to get the gloves. The boots fit, and he stood up—pushing the air out of the puffy jacket and pants. He had never worn anything like this before. He jumped onto the bed making his clothes give off a sound that resembled the wind pushing against the house. Pillows shifted and the quilt on top of the bed wrinkled underneath his weight.

His grandpa laughed. “I see you’re enjoying the big jacket.” Michael had his arms and legs spread across the bed. He turned his head over to see his grandpa’s smile as he set the gloves down on the bed. “These should fit and should keep your hands dry. I’m going to get ready.”

“Okay, I’ll go downstairs.” Michael sat up and grabbed the gloves. He shifted off the bed and went down the stairs and towards the back door where he could see the backyard covered in snow. Next door, kids were playing outside with their parents, rolling snow into large balls.

“Looks like they’re making a snowman.” His grandma came over by the window. “You’ll need to let me know when you need the carrot. I also have a scarf and hat he could wear.”

“I’m ready when you are,” he said, smiling. He could hear his grandpa coming down the stairs, so he put on his gloves, and waited for his grandpa to open the door. The door opened, and they both stepped outside—immediately sinking a few inches into the snow. Michael looked up letting flakes hit his face. It felt like cold fingertips gently brushing his face. He then looked at the tracks they had left in the snow, smashing it down with each step. He could feel something that he hadn’t felt in a long time. He felt so happy that his smile began to hurt.

With that sudden burst of energy, Michael ran into the yard and slid into the snow. He moved his arms and legs back and forth, pushing the snow aside like a bulldozer.

“That’s called a snow angel,” his grandpa called to him. “Have you ever heard of that?” His grandpa came over and cut off Michael’s view of the sky.

“I know what angels are. They have wings, and they’re shiny. And they live in heaven.” Michael stared into the bluest sky ever and lay very still, with snow on his face—his cheeks turning red.

“Well, let me help you up so you can see it. You always want someone to help you up because you don’t want to ruin your angel.” His grandpa extended his arm, helping Michael to his feet. Michael looked down at the ground and saw the angel. It was simple, but he could tell that it was an angel. The wings were smaller than he pictured on an actual angel, but it looked like the type of angel that would be in his house around Christmas time when his mom was alive. One always sat on the top of their tree, but not this year.

“Do you want to make a snowman?” Michael was busy inside his own head as his grandpa spoke. “We could ask the nice family that lives next door. You would like them.” He gestured towards the young girl and her parents who were making a second snowman.

“Okay.” Michael followed his grandpa over towards the neighbors.

“Hey, Jack. This is my grandson, Michael. Would you all mind if we helped you make a snowman?”

“Of course.” Jack looked over towards Michael. “It’s nice to meet you. That’s my daughter, Sabrina. She can show you the ropes.” Michael nodded and smiled, and walked over towards the girl rolling snow.

The girl turned her head as Michael walked up to her. “Hi, my name’s Sabrina. What’s your name?”

“Michael. I’ve never made a snowman before.”

Sabrina looked around Michael over towards his grandpa. “Is that your grandpa? He’s nice.”

“Yeah. I’m just here for a week then I have to go back home.” Michael shook just a bit. He was starting to feel cold, and his fingers felt hot.

“By yourself? Where’s your mom and dad?” Her eyebrows slanted just a bit.

“My dad’s back home. We live in Florida.” Michael shifted his eyes as he spoke.

“What about your mom?” She was quick with her questions.

Michael bit his lip, but not hard enough to notice the pain. “She passed away three months ago.” That’s what he heard his dad say to people whenever they came over this past Christmas. They would give him presents and tell him they were sorry.

Sabrina apparently knew what that meant because she immediately knelt down to the ball of snow she had started. “You can help roll this one. This one needs to be the biggest because it’s going on the bottom.” She showed Michael how to gently roll it across the fresh snow so that it could become bigger and bigger. It kept snowing, and they spent the next hour making a snowman—carrot, scarf, eyes, and hat included. Michael’s hands were nearly numb, and he didn’t know how his skin felt like it was on fire when it was so cold outside. But he loved it. They threw snowballs at Sabrina’s dad, and he yelled out for help even though he didn’t need it.

Soon the sky became darker; the night came quickly during the winter season. Michael said goodbye to the neighbors and walked back with his grandpa. They stood at the doorway in the garage, and shook off the snow and took off their boots. The jackets and pants went into the laundry room, and they got ready for dinner.

“Did you have fun, Michael?” His grandma was stirring a pot of what smelled like chicken noodle soup.

“Yeah. Snow is awesome. I want to live up here.” He wanted to be able to touch it every day—to fall into it.

“It’s a bit too cold for me, but I’m glad you liked it.” She pointed toward the plates. “Would you set the table again for me?”

Michael set the table, and they sat down and ate. He could see through the window that night looked different here. The lights on the house reflected off of the snowflakes that continued to fall, and the ground reflected light back into the clouds. It looked cold to him, but the soup kept him warm. For the rest of the night, they sat near the fireplace, played games together, and talked about what Michael’s dad used to be like—how he always got good grades, how he would make the best throws, and how he and Michael’s mom met after one of his high school football games. Eventually, it came to be Michael’s bedtime, and he got ready for bed. He said goodnight to his grandparents and lay in the bed. The snow made the night bright, and he watched the snowfall from the window. Even though he wanted to cry, he didn’t. He got out of the bed and moved towards the window. He looked out over the backyard and could see the snowman over in the neighbor’s yard. And near a tree by his grandparent’s deck, he could see the snow angel he had made, but it wasn’t as smooth as before. He touched the window and felt a chill at the end of his fingers, but the rest of him still felt warm.





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